

## Part 7

“The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country. The earth lay white under the night sky... Leaning far out the window, the girl called to the stationmaster as though he were a great distance away.”

-Yasunari Kawabata, “Snow Country”

*Watashi wa, anata no eigo no sensei desu.*

“I am your English teacher,” Japan, 1989

**A**s the plane approached Narita International Airport for landing in Tokyo, slightly blown at an angle by the cold wind, my eyes locked on the green rice fields surrounding the airport. I had not slept in 48 hours. Fortunately, an American girl on the plane told me what I needed to do to get money exchanged and transport into town. As I entered the terminal, there was no one to assist international travelers. All the signs were in kanji, and there was an unfamiliar quiet, like entering a room where everything is silver, the furniture, the signs, and the people. As I arrived to the main entrance, swarms of polite people patiently waited to receive their business contacts and loved ones, and no

one seemed to notice my presence. It occurred to me on the flight that I would be in Tokyo for training and then move to Yokohama to begin work. I had packed completely in reverse during my anxious and intoxicated effort to pack. A trim security officer paced slowly around me with amusement and disbelief as I opened the massive luggage housing one year of underwear, novels, and toiletries and began to place the entire contents of the bag around me, on the pristine airport floor, in a semicircle. That may be the first time in history that someone unpacked and repacked a suitcase in the middle of the floor of the Narita International Airport, and certainly it had never been done by a Japanese.

As we made our way to Tokyo, my eyes tried to differentiate the uncountable tones of gray, in the sky, the architecture, and my feelings of fatigue. The start of my new life in Japan was not joyous. It wasn't magical or beautiful. I felt an underlying sense of fear. I felt foreign, as if I were entering the future reality of the planet. Multinational companies have branded humanity by way of products and consumer habits, and individuality had been replaced. The buildings were as unique as the citizens, multitudes of slight variations of the same. The monotony of the similar boxy rectangular shapes, with the occasional differences in material choices, were well hidden by bold, large screaming neon signs sporting loud kanji, pictograms hawking commercial products, banks, security companies, and department stores. The city did not appear to be historic, or modern, or constructed on a grid. At first glance, it was an organic amalgamation with three driving shapes: people, seven-story buildings, and signs. It did not resemble the four Akira Kurosawa films that I watched prior to coming to Japan. It was not bonsai-filled gardens

and temples surrounded by koi ponds, with elegant geisha clacking down the sidewalk. I found it extremely difficult to see any remains of the samurai from the bus window.

I thought about the images of Japan from my childhood. My first encounter was a mother-of-pearl inlaid table of Mt. Fuji in Verlie's formal living room. Any understanding of the Japanese language or people was derived from old World War II films in which the Japanese were depicted as vicious little "yappy warriors" with round spectacles, slightly hunched shoulders, and the proclivity of men to bark out every word. The women all looked like cherry blossoms that had wantonly fallen to the grounds of a lovely manicured teahouse, as graceful as any ballerina, and as soft-spoken as an adoring mother putting her child to sleep. In the company of men, without provocation, the geisha began playing the samisen esoterically to seduce her enraptured male audience. Then there was a vague memory of Japan hosting the 1964 Olympics. However, for me, the real Japanese cultural piece de resistance occurred when I was eight years old, and it was in the person of a chef at a Japanese steak house. He dazzled me by clanging his hyperactive knife-edge against a spatula, which in turn launched my shrimp impressively in the air in a perfect trajectory to land delicately on my plate. It was like culinary Cirque du Soleil.

When I was preparing to move to Japan, and telling everyone about my big adventure, suddenly every fourth person I talked to—or their father or their cousin or their friend—had been to Japan. The collective response from the old guys who were stationed there in The Big One or who had gone for R&R during the Korean conflict or the Vietnam War

was a slight nostalgic smile. They would say things like, “Oh, *konichi wa* or *mushi mushi*” (“good day” or “hello” on the phone). No one really tried or was able to explain the experience or the people or the culture. You could see them rewinding and playing back video images in their head, but they usually offered only a few abstract comments. The recent visitors could comment only on the expense of things, “Man, one orange is \$6, and a scotch cost me \$12 in a bar.”

When we arrived to my accommodations, Asian Center Hotel, I was amused to see an ocean of western shoes stuffed into little open compartments, with at least 20 pairs of available slippers facing the front desk waiting for the next guest to fill them. I stuffed my size 8.5 foot into the size 6 unisex slipper, with my heel hanging over the back edge, and walked to the front desk. My company, Interac, Ltd., had made the arrangements, and the hotel staff seemed accustomed to weary foreign travelers. Once in my room, I laughed because the suitcase filled half of the living area. The bed reminded me of one in a child’s room, and the bathroom tub and toilet were within inches of touching.

The room was decorated in a monochrome green. My mind and body felt like they were falling into themselves. I couldn’t think about food or adventure after traveling 24 hours with no sleep. As I lay on the hard single bed trying to watch Japanese television, I began to think about the possibility of earthquakes. I watched bank commercials with silly animated characters that all looked alike, singing songs with childlike graphics supporting the message, and hyper skinny men with slicked back hair almost lick the camera saying, “DAI-JOBE-BVU,” extending their arms with intense vigor to make the

victory sign while holding a bottle of some kind of snake oil. Then there appeared the occasional Hollywood movie star boldly facing the camera, smiling, and saying some idiotic thing in English or a word or two in Japanese. My eyes were so heavy. I was so tired, but my brain would not stop racing. I finally began to melt into the coarse white sheets, thinking about Astrid and hoping this wasn't going to be a mistake.

### **Neverland**

The next day, after being offered miso soup, rice, fish, salad, and green tea for breakfast, I reported to the main corporate offices of Interac for training. All of the managerial staff was British, the clear majority of the teachers were from the United States, and a smaller number were from Canada, Australia, and England. The goal at headquarters was for them to make teachers out of us in three days. None of us had been teachers previously. None of us were accredited ESL (English as a second language) teachers. All of us had degrees from universities and no real life direction. The fact that we did not speak Japanese was regarded as favorable, because the students were forced to communicate in English with their teachers. The average Japanese English teacher in Japan could not speak English with any degree of fluency.

After they inspired us to enact their tried-and-true teaching methods of creating a “context” for the student to use the language and to “build” on what they learned, we were given a crash course in Japanese etiquette. You NEVER wear your shoes inside. Always wear the slippers provided for guests. For God's sake, don't forget to change slippers when going to the bathroom—wear the plastic “toilet slippers.” NEVER be late

to your client. If you are late, you must apologize to your salesman and to your client and make up the time you missed on your own. The only language they taught us were two magical words, the only two expressions necessary for modern life in Japan: *Gomannasai* (I am sorry) and *Sumimasen* (Excuse me). Then they taught us how to bathe. NEVER get into a hot tub of water without cleaning yourself first. One must sit on a small stool, lather, scrub, and spray off the soap first, and then you can enter the hot tub water.

After training, we got the weekend off to see Tokyo. I tried to adjust my rhythm to match the oceanic flow of Japan's citizens moving through the incredibly populated streets, holding tightly to my newly purchased Japanese umbrella to combat the wind and rain from my first monsoon. The people were kind and seemed very willing to help me find my way. For a city of 12 million, there is a tremendous sense of everything running smoothly. From the plane, it all appeared to be cement and neon, but as I moved through the city, I found many pockets of personality. Immediately, it was obvious that food is important to the Japanese and the offerings are everywhere. There were no street names in Japan. That mandated that navigation be a visual experience and required one to develop excellent landmark memory skills. A trails of breadcrumbs was out of the question. I naturally began to mentally film my surroundings as I moved through Tokyo.

I visited the National Gallery and saw the armor and swords of the samurai behind thick glass. I meandered through Ginza, the "fashionable shopping area," with blocks of very large department stores and absolutely no architectural interest. The one truly fascinating offer was in the basement of the large stores. They have a kind of food bazaar, with

women singing out their products with the cultural life force of 10,000 years.

“*Trashaimase...dozo*” (welcome, please...), inviting me to try the finest *mochi* or dried octopus or *gyoza*. There were legions of young office workers spending their hard-earned yen on the very expensive trendy clothing of the moment. I noticed that the shoes on my feet, for which I paid \$150 back home, cost \$450 in Japan. Shopping was more like an Olympic sport in that country.

That evening, I went to the famous hip nightlife spot in Roppongi. I wanted to go to a dance bar and was directed to a ten-story building. Every floor had a different club scene. As I entered the club on the tenth floor, I was slapped with the bass beat and swing of a staccato rhythm as Young MC was singing, “Ok, smarty go a party...chick walks by you want to sex her, instead you stand against the wall like Poindexter...just bust a move.” Rap was hot in Tokyo. I paid 4,000 yen to enter, about \$35, and was given drink tickets. The club was packed. I swerved my way to the packed bar and then to a barstool and watched the crowd swell and swelter. The club was mainly a mix of African-American military personnel and young Japanese girls. The Japanese guys dancing looked like they were trying to live out what they had seen on last night’s American music videos. They danced like they were intellectually trying to master something visually complicated, void of any cultural understanding. The American military guys were happy to be off base and free to take a little *Keiko* to the “love hotel” down the street, pay for the room by the hour, and if he was lucky the Hello Kitty S&M room might be available. One of the two girls next to me asked if I was from “Engrand.” After trying to communicate over the blaring music and finding it nearly impossible, I was quickly bored. She asked me if I

was gay. As the music drove harder into our bodies and the lyrics popped and locked urgent anger across the crowd, four very large American guys jumped up on the booming speakers, took their shirts off and began chanting at the top of their lungs, “Take the shit off and dance.” I felt lonely and missed Astrid.

### **“I Will Do My Best”**

Monday morning I went to my branch office in Yokohama. It was a very easy 45-minute train ride, but because everything was in Japanese, I was super anxious about missing my station. I looked like a dog trying to jump out of a car window at every stop. The conductor, not doubt insanely bored with announcing the stations over and over again, had adopted a bizarre alter ego that sounded like a cross between Zsa Zsa Gabor and Golim from *The Hobbit*, queerly announcing, “Kanni, Kanni desu.”

At Kanni station, I walked a few blocks to my office. Ms. Takemura, the person in charge of all scheduling for the teachers, greeted me. She was like a dorm mother, confidante, complaint desk attendant, and planner rolled into one flat-chested young lady with a China-doll haircut and braces on her teeth. That further emphasized her staccato manner of speaking and gently turning the letter L into a faint R sound: “Wercome- to- Japan-Rane. This- is -David, the -head -teacher, and -this is Mori -the saresman -that wirl take you -to Hitachi tonight -to begin your crass.”

David took the new arrivals to open our bank account at the Mitsubishi Bank, excitedly explaining that *Mitsu* means the numeral 3, and *bishi* means diamonds. My first



realization that this country is not set up to accommodate foreigners was the fact that we did not have a personal *hanko*, or family name, signature stamp. The bank would allow us to use a Western signature but not without some paperwork.

I was finally released to find lunch for myself. I had to find a restaurant that had pictures of the food so I could simply point. I finally found a noodle shop that was lined with “salary men,” as they were called, corporate businessmen, and the woman behind the counter said, “*Irashimase, kochira wa dozo,*” extending her arm to direct me to the only available seat. As I tried to get comfortable on the small round stool, my eyes began to run the length of the noodle bar. Every man was hunched over his bowl, stabbing the bowls with chopsticks, pulling a mound of piping hot noodles to his mouth, and then sucking in with a gale-strength slurping sound with precision and speed. Not one man in the joint was talking or resting, just a continuous sucking sound until the bowl was finished. I started laughing uncontrollably. All those years of uneasily eating spaghetti in front of others, fearing that I would make an unforgivable and embarrassing slurp faux pas, and now I was free to let it rip.

When I got back to the office, other teachers were arriving to prepare for their evening classes. Everyone seemed nice, but no one was going out of his or her way to spend time getting to know me. There was a very fast tempo. The first person to spend time helping me was David, the head teacher from Wales, England. He was a large, oafish sort of fellow with the habit of saying, “Right,” and clasping his hands together, as if to say “Let’s get started.” David’s near fantastic challenge was to turn me into a teacher by my

already scheduled 5:30 p.m. class. I looked at the teaching resources area and tried to select a “fun activity” to begin with, and what “lesson” I would teach. I thumbed through the textbook, “Hello, Mr. Tanaka. How was your flight?” “It was very nice, thank you.” “Is this your first trip to the United States?” “No, I have been to our factory in Norman, Oklahoma.” I tried not to laugh out loud, made my selections, and created a teaching plan for the class. I was then instructed to accompany Morisan, the salesman, to Ebina station for my first class at Hitachi.

Little did I know that the strenuous attempt to communicate with salesman Morisan on the 45-minute train ride to Ebina station would characterize almost every bloody conversation that I had with my students for the next three years. It was like a West Texas cotton farmer trying to find common ground with a physics student from Beijing. Always the same questions, “Oh, *Rane-san*, can you eat Japanese food? Do you rike sports? Can you drink sake? Do you rike Japanese girls? Can you sing *karoeke*?” When we exhausted the usual exchanges, with both parties fatigued in round one, silence usually followed. Japanese are very comfortable living in silence. If you want to make Americans go terminally insane, make them sit quietly looking at one another without any conversation. As Morisan and I fell silent, I noticed field after field of rice. The rice fields seemed to be an intimate part of the cityscape, even as we moved farther outside of Yokohama. At Ebina station, we poured out with the other commuters into the cold wind, pushing my overcoat flat against my suit and causing me to look down at Mori’s shoes to follow him to the client, through a large rice field.

After a brisk 20-minute walk, we arrived to the Ebina Hitachi's mainframe computer division. The front gate guard in uniform made a crisp salute to Mori, who bowed respectfully, explaining that he was bringing the *eigo no sensei*, the English teacher, to teach his class. They gave me a visitors badge and saluted me, and we hurried to the front door. Inside were rows of lockers to exchange shoes with the all-important slippers. I then clacked down the silent hall to the rooms where I would teach. Mori explained that I would have four students, one-on-one classes, for 30 minutes each. As he left me alone, with a Cheshire grin he said, "*Ganbatte ne,*" and left. I had no idea what that meant, but I deduced something like good luck. My first student would arrive any moment. Was I prepared? What can I teach them in 30 minutes?

Mori called the students "freshman," new company employees who had recently graduated from the university and were being trained in departments where they had been placed. It was about the company's needs, not the employee's. They were given affordable company housing and the opportunity to have a career with Hitachi. They would, as all the other 300,000 employees had, work with complete dedication for the benefit and welfare of the group. They would learn English if their boss told them they must. They would accept positions in other cities or countries if the *bucho*, manager, said they must, even if it meant visiting the family only two times in the year. They would feel the absolute necessity to exert all of their life force to accomplish their goals and do their absolute best. "*Ganbarimasu,*" they say as their stomach muscles contract, their gaze affirms a sharp urgent downward bow to assure their superior that they are serious and committed... "I will do my best." For this, they are assured a lifetime of employment. By

30, they will move into management and have the opportunity to afford their own home and begin a family. Their wife will then apply all of her efforts to the education of their child. After the normal school regimen, the mother will take them to *Juku*, or “cram school,” to add further academic advantage to prepare for the all-important college entrance exam. I had just read that an entire family committed suicide by putting a hose from their exhaust into the car cab because the child failed the entrance exam.

My first student entered as if she would be instructed by a foreign television personality. Her name was Keiko. Unaccustomed to speaking English slowly or in a scripted manner and because she was younger than me, I said, “Hey, how’s it going?” Keiko tried to answer, flushing red, and immediately covered her mouth and looked away, giggling and saying, “*Sumimasen*” (Excuse me). It wasn’t like I had said, “Hey, Keiko, why don’t we climb under the conference table and do it.”

I tried again, this time imagining I was a voice-over talent on the language cassettes, “Hello, Keiko, how are you?” Then she perked up and immediately responded, “Oh, I am fine, thank you.” I went on, “Was work hard today?” Silence... “Ahh...*are...non tendaro*...so, worku was vely difficurt today,” she stuttered. No word in Japanese ends in a hard consonant, so the Japanese constantly added vowel sounds to the end of words. Work became *worku*. Keiko, even though she had probably graduated from the Harvard or Yale equivalent in Japan with an engineering degree, was a “nice girl” and would feign humility and shame, exuding a little girl-like energy. “Do you have any hobbies?” I asked. “I rike shoppingu,” she said with excitement in her eyes. The 30 minutes passed,

and by the end of the class I felt as if I had been dancing with a partner who had no rhythm and stepped on my feet the whole time.

My next student, Taro, sported a nice tailored blue suit, white shirt, and striped tie. The style was very conservative, but his youthfulness, trim physique, and spiky shiny black hair made him appear fresh. He sat down with the confidence of a top-rate pachinko player, ready to learn. He twirled his pen impressively across his fingers, while he was thinking of an answer, like a Dallas Cowboy cheerleader twirling a baton. He communicated like he was doing verbal math equations, solving the problem all in his head, with pure reason. There was no sign of fun, no personal insight or pleasure, just another part of a lifetime of problem-solving.

He had brought a stack of dot matrix printer pages with DOS computer code and me he had been on the Internet with other U.S. engineers at universities. The Internet was not available to the average person in 1989. He asked me to explain what certain words and phrases meant. As I read the first Internet communications from the global participants, I was struck by the fact that never in the history of mankind had we been able to communicate so instantaneously with the world, but the language I read horrified me. “Fuck you...Jap...” It was sophomoric name-calling and posturing, not what I had hoped the Internet would allow, an exchange of knowledge and lofty ideas made possible by the new super digital highway.

### **And Your Little Dog Too**

Before the next student arrived, I decided to go the bathroom. There was an eerie silence as I walked down the long hall. I changed slippers and noticed a long row of sinks followed by a long row of urinals and beyond a long row of stalls. I walked 30 yards across the clean, tiled perfectly silent room to the stall in the farthest corner and released a sigh of relief to discover a Western-style toilet. At my hotel, I had to take my entire suit off to use the Japanese toilet, which is flat and parallel to the ground and used by squatting. I did not have long before the next student arrived. The toilet seat was raised on this ergonomic wonder, and there was an electronic control panel built to the side, with at least 15 settings, all in kanji, none of which I could read, except the brand, Toto.

When it was time to leave the Wizard of Oz toilet, I assumed the largest button would logically be the “flush” button. I pushed and nothing happened. I pushed the next button and waited, and a blow dryer began to send warm air upward to my bottom. I pushed a third button, and the silence was broken by the sound of something happening. It was not a roaring flush. Instead, the sound of an unknown robotic event was in progress.

Something was happening, and it sounded hydraulic. Suddenly, a cold and powerful jet stream of water was spraying directly at my bottom. I was so startled I let out a loud Texas-sized scream, jumped to my feet with my slacks hanging around my ankles and dodged the hefty stream just as it hit the stall door. I furiously pushed every remaining button to find the “off” button. I began in my panic to imagine a Hitachi employee finding me at that precise moment of peril, and it made me laugh even harder. Finally, I decided to slam the toilet seat down to give myself more time to push the buttons, and there it was... the traditional “flush handle,” which made me laugh so hard I cried,

standing in front of the Toto toilet attacker, with a wet face and bottom yet undefeated. Once recovered, I made my way back to class to resume my duties as *eigo no sensei*.

### **Always an Outsider**

Having survived my first day of teaching, it was time to find housing in Yokohama. My company put me in touch with an agency that specialized in finding housing for foreigners. It was nearly impossible to rent an apartment without my company “sponsoring” it. The Japanese did not like renting to *gaijin* (foreigners). Further, they required two months *reikin* or “key money” (a gift to the landlord for leasing you the place) plus four months rent as deposit, and most apartments at that time did not come with any appliances, heating, or air conditioning.

To get started, I rented a room in a “mansion,” as they called apartment buildings, for \$700 a month. My room was about 4 feet by 10 feet and had no closet. It came with a single futon and a small writing table. It also came with a 23-year old Canadian girl named Kathryn, who seemed to be struggling for her own identity and independence, and a good-hearted 27-year-old Irish lad named Justin, who read James Joyce’s *Ulysses* for sport, drank, said “For fuck’s sake” every conversation, complained about everything (except the Irish “jumper” his mother sent him when it got cold), loved Sumo, and tried to really understand the Japanese culture.

As winter took hold, I began to build my life in Japan. I had never cooked. I was accustomed to eating every meal out. I was trying to pull myself out of credit card debt,

and everything was very expensive. So, I began use the all-important rice-maker and top the Japanese sticky rice with packaged curry dinners from the local convenience store. I began to feel less terrified of the subway routes. I learned how to make international phone calls using a calling card and how to call Astrid at the train station phone box late at night, in the freezing cold, so I could say good morning to her in Austin, Texas. The old guy at the convenience store who sold me the phone cards would drink in the evening, as did most of the men in Japan. One night I asked for a \$10 phone card, but when I got to the phone box and inserted the card I realized that he had mistakenly given me a \$100 phone card. I didn't want him to think badly of me so I immediately returned to pay him the difference. He was not behind the counter when I arrived. A young male clerk politely tried to help me. The only pronoun I knew was *kare*, or "him." I was trying to communicate by talking and using pantomime, trying to convey to the young man that "him," the other guy, sold me the wrong card. He looked totally perplexed and then walked up an aisle, I assumed, to get the old man. He stopped quickly and pointed to a product on the shelf saying, "*Kore wa curry desu*" ("That is curry," pronounced *kare*). I thanked him, bought the curry, and left the store defeated.

I began to get a sense of what my life would be in a Japan. In the morning, I would eat curry rice and run to the train station, fearing being late, ride two hours to the client, teach a couple of hours and then be off until the evening classes. I drank gobs of canned hot *kohi*, coffee, from vending machines on the way to my clients, and stopped on the way home at the same vending machine for a Kirin beer and Japanese cigarettes, "Mild 7," which they pronounced "Mild-o 7." I jogged every day around a small park with 5 to 10



children screaming and chasing me, pointing and spastically chanting, “*Gaijin...gaijin...honto ni gaijin desu ne*” (“Foreigner...foreigner...wow, it’s really a foreigner”). I began to connect with the other teachers and learn their life stories. The more I lived in Japan, the more I needed that office “check-in” and the opportunity to speak English quickly and without thought. I began to worry less about when they were going to tap me on the shoulder and fire me and began to really try to teach my Japanese corporate students. While I was on company soil, I was a respected *sensei*, teacher. When I left the *kaisha* and entered the street, I was undeniably and categorically a *gaijin*, an outsider.

Astrid had not written anything other than spotty cryptic postcards. For Christmas, she sent a near empty bag of tortilla chips that arrived smashed into tiny mosaic corn tears. I later learned that she thought it was romantic because that was the last thing we shared together, but she didn’t tell me that so I felt crumpled as the bag that arrived. I poured a troubadour’s passion into reams of paper professing my love, how she was missed, why I loved her, how I loved her—and still I received nothing. When we did speak late at night in the freezing cold at the train station, we seemed to always end in some kind of fight. I was constantly frustrated. I wanted more, and she could not give it. I asked her to join me in Japan. If she didn’t like it, I would pay for her flight home. Her parents would not approve, but she could tell them that we had separate apartments. She finally announced that she would come in the spring in time for the cherry blossoms.

I hurriedly began to prepare for her arrival. I needed to move. I couldn’t receive her in my current housing. While I loved my roommates, there had been some activities that

Astrid would have vehemently opposed. Justin was homesick and had resorted to coming home and drinking beer, cursing at every Japanese person on TV, shouting at the television, “Fucking wankers, look at that shite, putting that girl’s arse on the tellie and using a pointer to ‘rate her’ like she’s a fuckin piece of meat, what a fuckin bunch of cunts.” Justin had attended Trinity College in Dublin, spoke Gaelic, French, and Japanese well, and inhaled literature, but he had been in Japan a couple of years and the inevitable had occurred, “*Gaijin* syndrome.” It seemed to affect 90 percent of all foreign residents eventually, that special moment when you realized that you were being discriminated against, that you were an outsider and always would be no matter how much you study, understand, and try to integrate. For most visitors, that is the first time they have experienced prejudice and racism.

Kathryn couldn’t see herself as an elementary school art teacher in Victoria, Canada. Her adoring parents wanted her to come home to live near them, teach, and have kids. I knew that wouldn’t happen anytime soon when she woke me one night by tapping on my *shoji* screen. In the background stood a solid mass of 6-foot-4 black sailor, visible only by his white hat and big smile. “Lane, do you have any condoms?” she asked, tipsy and tippy-toeing. Shortly after that, she met a nice Japanese guy on a train platform. Then she began to come home with “gifts.” She said that he offered her a job. All she had to do was deliver envelopes. She learned soon enough that he was in the Yakuza, the Japanese Mafia, and was having her followed. At every train station, someone was watching her on the platform or following her. She talked to Ms. Takemura about it at work, and they decided to include the police, who advised her to leave Japan immediately.

I moved to an apartment in Tokyo. It was 6 *tatami* mats. That was the way Japanese judged the square feet of their homes, by woven straw flooring made into thick, heavy rectangles with a green decorative trim, basically 3 feet by 6 feet. It had a tiny kitchenette and bathroom with a big pink pay phone that took many 10-yen coins to operate. The apartment building was on the side of river with huge cement banks and no water, wedged between a can factory and a construction machinery parking lot. There were no sidewalks leading up to the apartment, requiring that one walk partially in the street (difficult when it rained), a 25-minute walk from the train station. However, it was fully furnished and that included a TV, a VCR, an air converter that both cooled and heated, and an extra “loft” for sleeping. My face was so close to the ceiling while sleeping that I became fixated nightly on the repercussions in the likely event of an earthquake. For this, I paid \$1,400 per month. But I was so excited to have my own apartment in Tokyo, to receive Astrid.

On January 22, 1990, I watched the *American Music Awards* alone in my *apato*. For two months I had inhaled Japanese culture. Every moment was dedicated to trying to understand and integrate myself to work, protocol, social manners, and survival. I had never really paid attention the music awards back home, but tonight I would watch something in English from the United States. It was at this point that I realized something very important. In spite of my interest in the world, my desire to connect with all of humanity and all cultures in a loving and accepting way, I was an American. I had been socialized a certain way and taught a certain global perspective and religious belief. It

was the entire removal of my culture that helped me to see it within myself, to feel it, to understand it, good and bad. Above all that night, it was experiencing the depth of feelings that the performers shared as they exploded on stage with energy and passion that moved me. I think I cried during every performance and felt such a love for my country, followed by the sad thought that nobody has higher highs and a lower low, relatively and culturally speaking, operating simultaneously. Americans fight really hard to be “seen” and to “succeed.” In Japan, they work really hard to fit in, be the same, and benefit the group, not the individual.

At my office, they began to call me “Mr. *Genki*,” happy or energetic. While my personality was totally *baka*, foolish or stupid, by Japanese standards, they seemed to regard me as positive and filled with *gombate* energy and attributed any personal oddity to my being foreign. There seemed to be a collective consciousness and intrinsic willingness to explain all mishaps and differences simply by saying to one another “*gaijin desu kara ne*,” or it’s because they are foreigners, right? Not this guy is strange because he is selfish and self-centered and seems to exhibit potentially dangerous social behavior... Oh, no, it is because he is a foreigner!

### **Foreigners in Love**

After the cherry blossoms fell, Astrid arrived. On the second day, while we were on the train showing her around, she said, “Where is my ring?”

“What ring?” I responded.

“My engagement ring. I’m not going to live in Japan as your whore or your mistress.”

We had fought on the phone before she arrived. I never knew what she was really thinking or feeling unless she was fighting or slapping me. Now she was asking me for a ring. My carefree life in Japan just got very complicated. She was afraid to interview for a job. She was afraid to go out of the apartment on her own. She was uncomfortable getting things she needed. People didn’t treat her well. People stared at her on the trains. The apartment was too small. She was cold.

I learned that my company branch *bucho*, manager, was moving his family to a larger place, and he offered Astrid and me his old place. It was considered a big apartment, 13 *tatami* mats, with a view of Mt. Fuji (if you leaned over the balcony and it was a super clear day). When I arrived to see it, I noticed the *tatami* mat flooring was worn and had not been replaced, as was the usual custom. The cooking area was dirty and the exhaust fan was covered with brown tar-like cooking grease. The apartment had no appliances, including lights. The bedroom was large enough for a futon only. However, it was affordable, large, and only a 15-minute walk to the train station. The company sponsored the apartment so we could rent a “real apartment,” as millions of other young Japanese who brought their exhausted bodies home to rest. We now would live in Hadano exactly 1.5 hours from my office in Yokohama and 1.5 hours from Tokyo, one way.

I had to work on our appointed moving day and couldn’t get to the apartment until late afternoon. Two friends from work volunteered to help us move on the train. While they

managed the huge suitcases, I carried the single futon that I had found in the “*gomi* pile.” (Japanese do not resell or give anything to charity. Instead, once per month they take unwanted furniture, appliances, futons, and clothing and throw them out on the street to be picked up. Since most foreigners stayed only one year, it was a great source of discount shopping even for the most discriminating consumers. It is hard to pass up a perfectly functional TV and stereo system when you don’t have one.) What I didn’t know is that Japanese passengers regarded this as comparable to moving a dirty mattress and all your possessions on a bus in the States. Further, we used empty seats for items during what was now the height of rush hour, with the trains filled over capacity.

Our first purchase was a lamp for light. Since the closet had no rod to hang our clothing, we hung our suits and clothes around the edges of the sliding doors frame. Home, sweet home. The concept of “fixing someplace up” for Astrid was as foreign as living in Japan, and she began to cry when she realized what her life would really be like in Japan.

Our first experience as a couple in Hadano, was going to the futon store. We spoke no Japanese, and they spoke no English. After a most humorous mime-to-purchase, and a young neighbor girl’s being dragged in from down the street to use her English, we were the proud owners of a double futon. The only hitch was that they did not deliver. As the sun was setting quickly and the cool mountain air began to swiftly search for people to chill, the owner looked at us in dismay. Without words, he gave the foreign peasants and the new futon a ride home. He insisted on helping us up the stairs. Once inside, he

seemed to be panicked by our lack of essentials. We smiled and used the only expression we knew repeatedly, *arigato*, thank you, *arigato*, and bowed with true gratitude.

Hadano was a small village absorbed by Tokyo-Yokohama urban sprawl. The addition of a Hitachi computer division and the desire for parents to buy affordable housing fueled Hadano's growth. On the railway map it is identified as Hatano and is on the Okakyu train line, a green line that runs from Shinjuku in Tokyo to Odawara. This subway was the lifeline for our connection to and from friends, home, work, and entertainment, the place we began and ended our days, stuffed into a small boxcar with people who do not want you to stand, sit, or live beside them.

As the passengers struggle to enter and find a comfortable place to sit, you learn how to enter the train doors flanked by others, locked shoulder to shoulder like you are in a rugby charge, slowly squeezing in and then running, as if you are walking, to the only available seats, in the unlikely event that there are any free. In the Prime Minister's address that year he identified the five goals that would make Japan a "lifestyle super power." The one that made me laugh the loudest was to reduce train overcrowding from 200 percent to 180 percent over capacity. That would take half the fun out of travel for the old men perverts, or *chikon*, who like to grope the young girls on the train (watching as their faces turn red and they simply put their head down in shame and say nothing). Not to mention trying to read a book aimed directly above your head with your eyes distracted from a dizzying number of ads for \$100,000 weddings, home loans, and new cars while someone beside you sneezes, farts, or burps in your tiny pocket of breathable air space.

After six months of cold war, Astrid and I began our tumultuous, tempestuous engagement. The sense of fun and adventure quickly became hard work and routine. On top of twenty hours of commuting per week back and forth to clients, plus work, I had to be the friend, lover, brother, father, and care taker for a high-maintenance passive-aggressive brat who had never worked at age 26. The only subject that really gave her pleasure was talking about her family and the coffee and palm plantations. It seemed to define her, give her purpose and self-esteem. When we went out socially with other foreigners, I would be so excited to have someone to joke with, to talk to about many subjects and compare notes on living in Japan. At the end of what I thought was a great evening, the moment we left the group she would begin in on me, “Why do you talk so much? Why are you so loud? You shouldn’t use this language or you should not have done that.” My heart would deflate, and I could feel the fabric of my feelings being cut like thick wool with big heavy shears. The fighting never seemed to stop.

In the mornings, I had to wake up early and immediately fill the huge bathtub with water. In the time it took to fill, I prepared the rice maker for breakfast by rinsing the rice three times to remove the cloudy starch, I turned on the ancient gas space heater, and I made instant coffee. Then I would turn the heater on to heat the tub water, which took 20 minutes. If I was running late, I had to bathe in cold water. I stood on the cold pastel green plastic floor in the bathing room, took the small bucket with a handle, and dipped deeply to the bottom of the tub to retrieve the hotter water to pour over my head and body. I lathered my body with soap and then continued spooning out the hot water to



rinse. Finally, I submerged myself into the deep tub and closed my eyes, surrendering to the hot water like a boiled frog. Then I would realize the time, quickly put on my suit, ask Astrid about her schedule, and run to the train station 15 minutes away.

Depending on the day, I usually jumped on a bus to teach my Hitachi managers. Riding the bus was like transporting the dead. There was no laughter, no energy, no fun, just the rumbling starts and stops and hydraulic dance of the bus's movement, sloshing me one way and then another. Once at Hitachi, I entered the world of the *keisha*, a controlled surreal environment. As I hurried up to the guard, he gave me a crisp salute and "*ohio gozaimasu*" (good morning), and up the circular driveway I charged to the main door as a battalion of uniformed workers performed exercises on the front lawn beside a large sign that read, "Jump 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Spirit 21." Inside, I quickly put on my slippers and raced upstairs to the conference room. A lovely girl wearing a pink suit gently greeted me with, "*Ohio goziamasu*," as if Disney himself had cast her as the fawn princess. She appeared carrying a coffee tray and graciously offered to serve me. My first manager of the morning, "Jack" Ishizuka, came in eager to discuss how fiber optics are used in computer networking and the various configurations, HUB and circular, and how the optic signals were transmitted by laser beam codes, decoded into binary numbers for electronic transmissions. My workday was beginning.

After my class, I went to my office in Yokohama and talked to the other teachers, got teaching materials, learned about new client assignments, and took my Japanese language class offered by my company. Then I would leave and explore new areas of town. In spite of all the visual differences of the city, for all the extraordinary variations of the fabulous

food offerings, one thing remained absolute the same, the people. I studied everything I could get my hands on to understand those people. The Japanese did not culturally communicate like the rest of the world. Why? They began as cave dwelling people around 30,000 B.C. They had no writing system or formal religion until the Chinese Buddhist monks brought it to the island in 650 A.D. The Japanese simply stuck their language onto the Chinese symbols, and Buddhism was successfully integrated with the Japanese Shinto religion. They believed that there was no single divinity or god. Instead there were “*kami*,” small gods in everything: the spirits of deceased ancestors, emperors, prominent military figures and important animals (such as tiger and fox), waterfalls, forests, distinctive rocks, rivers, and so forth. *Kami* did not have a concrete physical manifestation.

Feudal Japan began in 1185 and ended in 1600. The powerful lords established a tremendously rigid class system that forced its citizens into total social subjugation. Four hundred years later, one can still see the effects in contemporary Japan. When you meet someone, you say “*Yoroshiku onegaishimasu*,” please favor me. When you give a gift, one might first comment that it is a boring thing, “*Tsumarinai mono desu*,” but I lift it up to you. A two hundred year period of isolation ended on July 14, 1853, when Commodore Perry of the United States met the Imperial commissioners at Yokohama and negotiated open trade to the West. The Emperor sent delegates to Europe and the United States to report on the industrial revolution. The delegates returned with the stinging report that Japan was falling behind the progress of the world with the *bushi* society (samurai way of the sword). The first economic miracle occurred when the feudal

families like *Mitsubishi* transformed their feudal holdings into manufacturing. The labor force left the rice fields to participate in civil engineering, the beginning of electronics, and the great Western modernization of the Meiji era. This led to regional hegemony, wars, and the ultimate collapse of the Emperor as the direct descendant of God in 1947.

The United States controlled Japan until 1952 and rebuilt the nation as a “little brother,” sending people like W. Edwards Deming to teach them how to improve the quality of manufacturing and to reduce expenses while increasing productivity and market share. A number of Japanese manufacturers applied his techniques with utter conviction and experienced theretofore unheard-of levels of product quality and record productivity. The improved quality combined with the lowered cost created new international demand for Japanese products that allowed the thunderous growth and success.

The more I learned about Japan culture and history, the more it hurt when old drunk guys gave me the “put up your dukes” stance on the train platforms, or when I entered an elevator with a young mother and her baby and she had a look of terror on her face. I tried to comfort her by complimenting her baby, “*Aka chan wa kowai desu ne.*” That made her look even more horrified and uncomfortable. When the door reached the ground floor and opened, she bolted out quickly, disappearing into the train station crowd. I meant to say, your baby is so cute, or *kawaii*, but I said *kowai*, your baby is so scary! Or once when I sat quietly reading a book on the train, wearing a suit for work, and a rare seat opened up beside me and the new passengers rushed in to capture the one vacant seat, saw me, and turned, preferring to stand rather than sit next to a *gaijin*.

The more I understood our differences and tried to integrate and respect their culture, the more the word “*gaijin*” began to feel like the word “nigger.” When I asked my students about the Japanese behavior, it always ended in the same manner, “We Japanese are the same. We are an island country.”

“Oh, you mean like England, New Zealand, or Australia,” I would spit back.

If they didn’t like the fact that I was finding something undesirable about their culture, they would say, “We don’t have racism like you do in the United States.”

I would respond with, “No, not like us exactly. I hear that in Japan you have the *burakumin* or *eta*.” That was the “untouchable class” historically. They did the dirtiest jobs, like slaughter animals and deal with the dead. They were not permitted to live in the villages but were made to live outside. Outside was the worst fate, to be expelled from your village, to be cast out.

*Gaijin* meant outsider. Hitachi, when I arrived, had a secret Human Resources mandate that nobody with a family name that was *eta* could be hired. When the students were really arrogant and I was very clear that they were challenging me, I simply informed them that I had read recently how the Japanese soldiers in the South Pacific actually ate the Australian prisoners, a la *sashimi*, during a tough battle during WWII.

As my anxiety level rose daily, Astrid and I built our relationship based on two key ingredients: willfulness and arguing. Usually, Astrid would wake up and somehow within five minutes, we would argue about something. I would word her to death, a human Gatling gun of dialogue, and she would prey on my insecurities. I had always shared my true feelings with her, and therefore always felt vulnerable. During fights, she would revisit those areas, and smash her fingers into my chest bones, until she could grab my heart and squeeze it until she held it in her hand, beating and bloody just as her Mayan forefathers had done for sacrifice. One morning I was running late to work, and she did not want me to leave without concluding an argument. I explained I couldn't be late and we would continue the discussion later. She said, "Lane, if you leave this house, I will cut up everyone of your suits and all your clothes." I tried to rationalize her behavior away as stress, the knowledge that Japan was hard for her. I would simply love her more, and she would change. I would try harder to understand the Japanese, and they would change.

### **Are You a Communist?**

That Christmas, we went to Tapachula, Chiapas, in Mexico to visit Astrid's family, and for me to formally ask for her hand in marriage. I went from a *gaijin* in Japan to a *gringo* in Mexico. Her father greeted us at the gate of their city residence, pulled Astrid aside curtly, and asked why I was with her. She replied, "I would be nice to him, Daddy. He just may be your new son-in-law." With that, Don Everardo graciously invited me into his home. He had been outside on the patio talking with an old friend. Within minutes, both gentlemen began to investigate Astrid's boyfriend. I was silently praying that my Spanish skills would hold up to my Mexican inquisitors about my perspective on politics and global macroeconomics. After approximately 30 minutes I was asked if I was a

*comunista*, because I was speaking in favor of educating the workers and providing better opportunities for the Mexican people. “*No, soy humanista*,” I responded, and it became pretty clear that Don Everardo was not amused or impressed with his daughter’s taste in men.

Don Everardo seemed to feel better about me when, as we made our way upward into the mountains to go to the coffee farm and the 4-wheel drive had a flat tire, I immediately found a large rock to put behind the tires, rolled up my sleeves, and helped him change the tire. Don Everardo gave me a peculiar look as if to say, “Maybe, just maybe I have underestimated this *gringo* schoolboy.” Once we arrived to plantation Santa Elena, my heart was stopped by the beauty of the towering shade trees and views of the Pacific. Don Everardo offered to take me on a tour of the plantation and explain the process of growing and preparing the coffee bean for export.

As we walked down the narrow bougainvillea-laden paths, we came to the workers, *dormitories*. It was explained to me that they brought up to 3,000 Guatemalan workers illegally over the border to pick coffee beans because the Mexicans didn’t want to do the backbreaking work. The men, women, and children worked in hot, humid conditions with huge sacks strapped to their forehead, picking by hand the bright red coffee beans for \$3 per day. When I asked why the dormitory floors were dirt and they slept on hard wooden bunk beds, he said, “Oh, the conditions here are better than where they live in Guatemala.”

When we arrived to the large dining area, I saw huge pots on a stove and an industrial tortilla maker. “What do you serve them to eat?” I asked. “*Tortillas y frijoles*,” he said. “That’s all?” “Yes, we tried to introduce protein to their diets in the time of my father, and it was too rich for their systems.” He enthusiastically switched the conversation to his latest project of which he seemed very proud. The workers’ latrines would now convert their excrement to generate electricity for the farm. I remember sarcastically thinking, “Perhaps you could devise a way to hook them all up to respirators while they sleep, and extract air from their lungs to oxygenate the soil.”

Soon, we went to visit some of Astrid’s other family members’ plantations on nearby hillsides. One aunt had married a very successful German Spaniard. They had beautiful offspring. Their daughter had golden blond hair and Mediterranean blue eyes, and the son looked exactly like the boy in the Picasso poster that I bought for my first college room. We then went to visit the aunt and uncle who had a huge three-story retreat on a private beachfront. The architecture looked like a cross between a beach house designed by Spanish architect Antoni Gaudí and artist M.C. Escher, with a slight overriding Moroccan influence. The aunt was delightful and seemed to be the only family member on the father’s side that had a true spiritual thoughtfulness. Her husband was a Chilean philosophy professor whom she met during the 1960s while at school in Germany. There was a noticeable difference between the siblings who were educated in Europe, and Don Everardo, who stayed to help his father run the plantations after his eldest brother died in an accident.

The family preferred me to speak Spanish and were amazingly patient with my attempt to conduct stimulating conversations with approximated grammar, nearly correct pronunciation (that at times caused one member to laugh out loud), and syntax and meter that can best be described as Español a la John Coltrane. Everyone, of course, except Astrid. In Japan, she refused to speak in Spanish and told me that I didn't speak well, *demasiado común*, too common. With her family, she expected me to converse only in correct and polite Spanish and offered very little help in translation, leaving her poor aunt in charge of trying to make everyone understand my elaborate diatribes about our lives in Japan. It made being with her family, for everyone, uneasy at all times.

Many things were made clearer by our visit to Mexico. Astrid's sister, Lisette, who loved painting and the arts and had a keen interest in all things social, was held under the authoritative thumb of Don Everardo, who viewed the arts as irrelevant to his life and therefore irrelevant to Lisette's life. She recently had become a television anchorwoman for the local TV station, and it seemed to secretly give him great delight to see his daughter speak about national politics and international affairs. But at dinner he singularly guided the subjects and frequently added his thought about what was *lógico* or *absurdo*. The women were immediately hushed into looking down into their plates. He was a five-foot-seven Mexican silverback gorilla. I was not impressed with his family leadership skills, but I gave him the respect and consideration I felt appropriate when I got on my knees to express my love for Astrid on Christmas Eve. I was trying desperately not to stumble in Spanish as I asked, "*El permiso para casarse a su hija*. As I began to cry, the family seemed vaguely amused, as though they were watching a scene from a *telenovela*. Now officially engaged, and fully sated with regional delicacies, and very



clear about the family drama and dysfunction that characterized Astrid's family, we returned to our chaotic work lives in Japan.

### **The *Gaijin***

Entering my second year in Japan, I began to change rapidly. I felt like I saw too much. I was no longer excused by saying *sumimasen*, excuse me, or my behavior explained away by being a *gaijin*. As I became more apparent as one who lived in Japan, rather than visited, the Japanese behavior toward me changed. There was something about being back with our families that made me feel like, "Who in the hell do these people think they are. You live like roaches compared to me and my family. How dare you treat me like a second class citizen?" Slowly I began to develop "white rage," and I understood perfectly well what African Americans had tolerated for the past 400 years in the United States. I knew what it felt like to be "one of the good ones, smart ones, and curious about their sexuality." Men routinely looked at my penis, hoping to see a huge penis like what they had seen in American porno movies brought back illegally by company workers living abroad. They were both attracted and repelled by my presence.

One day, I went to buy heating oil for our only heater. Most families simply put their red plastic containers outside the door every week, and the local rice purveyors who also delivered the fuel would exchange the red containers for full containers of kerosene. I approached three local rice shops to buy gas, and they all refused. Astrid was really getting cold at night, and it felt like a basic human requirement to survive the winter. I was really angry. Finally, I asked my friend Jun to come with me and represent my needs. The both of us were in suits with our *meshi*, business cards, out and bowing respectfully,

and still the first several refused. They all said, “*gaijin desu kara ne,*” because he is a foreigner. Finally, we found a woman who initially denied our plea. Jun asked her why. She said, “trust.” I pulled about \$400 cash out of my pocket and said perhaps that would help her “trust” me for several months. She agreed and we never had a problem. I had never been denied a basic need or anything in my life because I was of a certain race. It was very instructive.

My company began to give me the advanced company manager students with their most prestigious clients. I worked with senior managers from Hitachi, Toshiba, Bridgestone, Tomen Oil Company, Makino Frice, Fuji X, Nikko, and more. These men had been in the company for upward of 20 years and had realized the full advantage of their positions. They owned homes, had children in private schools, took European vacations, and continued their English studies to apply to their work at international conferences, living abroad, or to use in technical meetings. Those were the men who we read about in the *Kanagawa Shimbun* newspaper who fell victim to *karoshi*, death from overworking. Those men were the cultural and social engines in Japan upon which all things depended.

The salary men, as they are called, took me to the finest restaurants in Tokyo and surrounding areas. They took me fishing on the company boats. They took me to the private company clubs, where the Japanese hostess gently addressed me as “Rane *chan,*” a suffix used only for adored children, as they touched my thigh and gave me chopsticks to eat light delicacies. The salary men invited me to their homes to meet their families and dine. They invited me to their company retreats. They took me to their favorite sushi-

yas and yaki-tori restaurants. They taught me about Japanese culture, tradition, and history. They represented the most successful businessmen in the country. They had attended the finest schools in Japan. They brought me gifts, poured me beer and sake (a man never serves himself; he is served by the other man), and told me stories about their lives. I began to love and respect those men individually for their dignity, kindness, and hard work and simultaneously hate their rigid monoculture society. Americans don't seem to realize that what makes us truly great is our cultural diversity and the contributions not from a singular gene pool but from the world.

I began to feel like I was trapped in a documentary that I did not want to direct. I observed every detail of my surroundings and found it difficult to tune out the overwhelming droning feeling that filled me up when I was away from my students. There is a kind of silent death on the trains and buses as the workers were taken from the comfort of their futons to the all-important *keisha*. Trains became my view into the lives of my neighbors. Children with their mothers, removing their shoes so they can look out the window, older women in beautiful ceremonial Kimono heading toward a traditional tea ceremony, loud school girls gawking and squealing in synchronized excitement, “Haaaaaa so desu na...bye bye...ja mata.” The schoolboys, in their black serious coats, slapped their friends on the head, saying “*baka*” (idiot), like we pushed and shoved. The always enchanting manner in which other Americans avoided you at all costs. You became an absolute threat to their need to be having the most exotic experience; they would be the special one, not you. I found myself beginning to fight back.

Once, a loud group of schoolboys was picking on another boy on the train, really being hateful to him. I grabbed one of them and screamed, “*Dame da yo...baka yaro!*” (Don’t you even try it, you fucking little idiot!) All of my frustrations and pain intensified in my eyes, and they knew that this *gaijin* was about to kick their asses. The Japanese were masters at minding their own business. No one seemed to care. Maybe they were afraid. They saw everything and nothing at the same time. They did not express themselves in language but instead through their eyes. You would find their feelings of disgust, wonder, interest, repulsion, and love in the way they looked at you or did not look at you.

I took interest in Japanese national politics. Strangely, living there and working for a Japanese company and paid in yen made me feel more aligned with their social and political issues, and their concerns felt like mine. A delegation of Korean women came to Japan to demand an apology for being made to have sex with Japanese soldiers during WWII. They were called “comfort women.” The Prime Minister of Japan visited China and the Chinese people were very disappointed in the vague language of acknowledgement, and no direct apology, for the responsibility of the Nanking Massacre in China by the Japanese army, which reportedly killed more than 100,000 women, children, and civilian men. Of course, we Americans have our own uncelebrated history, like when during a presidential visit from President Bush in January 1992, at a formal dinner in Japan, President Bush became ill and vomited on the Prime Minister of Japan and then fainted. I did feel, however, that our president was, for the first time ever, representing my feelings in the moment.

August 29, 1992, I married Astrid in Japan at the Hadano Municipal Government Building. About 12 of our closest friends (not one whom I have seen or talked to since) joined us for the ceremony that constituted a short bus ride to the building, waiting 20 minutes for a female officer to officiate the marriage certificate, which really involved only a few minutes of paperwork and a short speech that I did not understand. After a translator declared us legally married, we exchanged a tepid kiss to seal the deal and made our way to Hadano's finest French restaurant. Astrid looked like she was in shock, and I just kept joking and drinking, feeling like I did the first time I had sex. "Is this what love feels like?" Then we had a party at our 12-*tatami* mat *apato*, open to everyone who we worked with at Interac. We decided to have our spiritual ceremony in Mexico, and a large party in Texas to follow. I don't remember feeling joy or peace.

My feeling of being an outsider within myself, my family, my country, Japan, and now my marriage continued to make me angrier person, and I didn't realize it until the nap. One Sunday late afternoon Astrid and I decided to take a nap. As we gently found sleep, I was summoned back by an eerie little girl's voice crying. It was a child in pain. I couldn't hear the words, just the repetition of her pleading and her pain. I tried to fully gain consciousness to gauge where the crying was coming from, if at all. It sounded like my neighbors, whom I did not know. I thought, I should help her, and then I realized I was a *gaijin* and people would think the worse. Further, I didn't speak Japanese well enough to understand what she might tell me. It went on another 10 minutes. I got up to see what I could see. As I approached the sliding glass door to the back balcony, the little girl's pleading amplified. The sun was setting, and it was getting cold. I looked over the

dividing wall of our shared balcony and saw the little girl (I had seen her only once in more than a year), barefoot and crying. Her face was pushed against the glass door sobbing, “*Okasan, gomenaisai,*” Mother, I’m sorry, repeating that over and over.

Anger shot through me like crack cocaine, and all my instincts agreed that this was child abuse and I intended to stop it immediately. I banged on the door like G.I. Joe on steroids. The soft-spoken mother answered the door in a ceremonially subservient manner, hurriedly saying “*Hai, sumimasen*” (Yes, excuse me). I threw every Japanese noun and adjective that I could think of at her to compositely indicate that this was absolutely unacceptable and abusive and that she was a horrible creature for pitching her daughter on the balcony in the cold for 30 minutes. When her face had visibly twisted and writhed in the thought of possibly having to fist fight with the *gaijin*, I made my way downstairs to our neighbor Gaby, a Bolivian housewife who married a Japanese man and spoke Japanese fluently. I banged on her door and said, “*Diga este vecina de bruja que en mi país esto es malos tratos a niños y yo llamaré a la policía.*” (Tell this witch neighbor that in my country, this is child abuse and I am going to call the police.) Gaby ran up the stairs and tried to find out what was happening, diplomatically with tremendous trepidation. It was explained that the mother was simply punishing the child. Putting the child outside was the punishment. Not the cold lonely patio, but outside. There was nothing worse in Japanese culture. She was showing her what it felt like to be a *gaijin*, an outsider.

### **I Think I’m Turning Japanese**

After two and a half years, I no longer needed the subway map to move easily through Tokyo on my 2-hour journey, one way, where I preferred to get my hair cut. I had once visited a local barber and I felt like Magic Johnson walking into a white barbershop in Savannah, Georgia. Japanese people all have straight black hair, except the *Yakuza* members, who wear “punch perms” (permanents), silk shirts, golf pants, and white patent leather shoes with full body tattoos. The barber unlucky enough to have the *gaijin* in his chair sort of smirked as if to say, “What do I do with this curly stuff?” He put a big rubber ring around my neck that looked like heavy plastic costume Egyptian jewelry and began to cup his left hand over my head like a toilet plunger, and hit the left hand with the right, creating a human hand jackhammer, which he used to massage my head prior to cutting, no charge. I tried to ease the tension before he began cutting by joking with him that the plastic ring looked like a condom, simply by pointing and saying, “Condom.” At first he looked incredulous. After a moment, he began laughing as he realized that I fully intended to say condom, at which time every man in the barbershop began to laugh uncontrollably. It was the worst haircut of my life.

So I preferred the four hours in transportation time to Tokyo to have the skills of an international salon stylist. Plus, my Tokyo salon, Peek-a-boo, and surrounding area was entertainment enough. Just watching 12 million people move through narrow spaces clad in urban emotional Teflon all with the same goal: produce, consume, and keep going—*ganbatte*. Of course, there were the real unsung heroes of Japan on nearby Harajuku Street and Yoyogi Park, where groups of teens gathered to express their rebellious

splendor as punk rock singers and Elvis impersonators, sluggishly slurring, “You ain’t no-ing but houn dog, clying ar da time.”

One day I went to my favorite Japanese fast food restaurant to have a Moss Burger. The pictures of all the offerings are displayed behind the counter. I ordered my usual *chic-kin buga, toe, po-ta-toe*, but that day I was having a tomato attack and asked for the addition of a tomato to my chicken burger. The counter girl, with the obligatory breathy child’s voice, said that the *chic-kin buga* did not come with tomato and pointed to the picture. Beside the portrait of my order, 10 other burgers proudly sported tomatoes. I politely said, “*Wakarimasu yo,*” I understand, and pointed out that, in fact, tomato was available in the restaurant and I would happily pay any price. She sucked air into her downwardly turning face, with a small crowd waiting behind me at the counter, the unofficial Japanese for “It ain’t gonna happen, buddy,” and painfully muttered *gomennazai*, I’m sorry. At that point I was determined, resolute, to get a fucking slice of tomato and requested to see the manager.

After explaining my problem, with 24 tapping shoes behind me, he excruciatingly politely offered the idea that it was impossible to offer me an additional tomato because the cash register was not programmed to add a slice of tomato. I pulled approximately \$200 out of my pocket and slapped it on the counter, “*Tomato wa, tabetai dai yo, dai job desu ka?*” I want to eat a tomato, damn it, is that a problem? “*Gomennazai,*” I’m sorry, he said, looking down in pain. I knew that he would have to kill himself after his shift if he gave me a tomato, and at that point I accepted defeat. That is a small example of doing business with Japanese. During the negotiation phase of our talks, all is fair and open for



discussion. Once the rules are laid out, there will be no changes or heads will roll, as they did with Chinese and Australian prisoners during World War II.

Astrid continued to feel underappreciated and unhappy living in Japan. My feeling of being suffocated by Japanese cultural mores was miraculously lifted when Astrid and I decided it was time to return to the United States. My employer agreed to give us six-month contracts, rather than the standard one year. With a termination date on the calendar, I began to mentally insulate myself from my hurt feelings of always being an outsider, by thinking arrogant self-gratulatory thoughts like, “You guys have to live in this shit, and I am just a visitor. I’m going home.” That seemed to give me a great deal of energy and reprieve from the day-to-day emotional challenges. One stroke of good fortune was that for my final contract, my company gave me only advanced manager clients and a great work schedule that gave me a lot of extra time. One day, the phone rang and an older woman with a Castilian accent began to speak to me in Spanish. She explained that she was a Catholic missionary who arrived in 1952 to Hadano, which was heavily bombed during the World War II. She knew of an elderly couple who wanted to learn English, both dentists, named Mr. and Mrs. Takahashi, and their friend Mrs. Mitsugi, a retired teacher. Was I available to teach private classes? We negotiated a time for me to meet them and my fee, and I arrived between my morning and evening clients classes at Hitachi to begin teaching.

I was at once struck by the quality and size of their home. I had been invited to many of my manager clients’ homes for dinner and had a good sense of how contemporary

Japanese corporate employees lived, comfortably but humbly, by American standards. I had visited a student's 100-year-old traditional family home on the western seaboard, but this place was different. When I rang the bell, a woman answered the door, obviously a domestic helper, gave me a deep ceremonial bow, and ushered me into a small reception room. Inside, I found a rich display of art, obviously from their many international travels. Soon after my arrival, Mr. and Mrs. Takahashi entered. He was in a wheelchair and she was helping him graciously while trying to make me feel welcome. Mr. Takahashi was a thin and distinguished man with an obviously gentle spirit and lively eyes, and she was a sturdy full-figured woman who exuded intelligence and a commanding take-charge energy.

I remember speaking more Japanese than English on our first meeting. I immediately liked them both. I had on occasion taken on private classes for extra income, a group of women at the YWCA, one of whose husband worked for the famous film director Akira Kurazawa and a young sociology professor aspiring for a visiting professor post at Harvard University (that required him to improve his English skills for the required language competency exam), but this felt different. This felt like a very rare opportunity to meet Japanese people molded by the values of prewar Japan, pre-world war Japan.

Meanwhile, while working at Bridgestone, I had an interesting observation. The company paired me with a manager's class that had men who ranged from more than 60 years old to those in their late twenties. The older men exhibited something that I did not see in the younger. They had an extraordinary pride and commitment to their work. They were old

enough to have seen their cities and villages in flames, as American bombers targeted mainland Japan in WWII. They witnessed the Emperor Hirohito become mortal for the first time in history, in August of 1945. The Japanese citizens were previously not allowed to even look directly at the Emperor, as it was believed that he was a direct descendent of *Kamisama*, God.

With a population just under half that of the U.S., living on an island smaller than the state of Montana, with only 16 percent of the land being arable, the postwar generation had to pull together to rebuild its cities, infrastructure, factories, and schools. The companies insisted on a work ethic built on duty and personal sacrifice in order to benefit the whole. The new generations arriving after the 1964 Olympics, however, had never seen their country with a standing army, only a rising GNP. They, unlike any generation before them, had the opportunity to travel and live abroad in Canada, Australia, Great Britain, or the United States and came home with new ideas. The old guard held fiercely to the idea of the group and the imperative of harmony. If one stood out as too independent or nonproductive, the nail that sticks out gets pounded down, as they say. One of the corporate punishments was to put less productive workers by the window as a punishment and a symbol of their being outside the group and daydreamers.

### ***Gambatte Lanesan***

One evening Astrid and I were invited to see Japan's premiere Taiko drummers, Kodo, from the Japanese island of Sado. I found the history of the drum interesting. Taiko drums are carved from a single tree trunk and range in size from very small to an enormous. As with most things brought to Japan during antiquity, the drums first arrived

from China, and the Japanese modified them and played them to fit a different cultural significance. Initially, the drums were used on the battlefield to scare the enemy and later used in villages to warn others of danger and to announce harvests.

A man named Za Ondekoza founded the first taiko ensemble, Tagayasu Den, in 1969. His intent was to make taiko more than just entertainment; instead he saw it as a way of life. He intentionally selected young people from rural areas across Japan so that they would not have had strong previous influences from an urban perspective. The students were held to a very rigorous training regime that typically consisted of marathon running and communal living. A small faction of the group split and formed Kodo.

As the 20 or so drummers entered the stage silently, the energy changed in the room from flabby and asleep to tight and electric. The muscular lean drummers held formation, flexing their arms into a pre-playing position, allowing them time to connect with the spirit of the drum. Then the oldest member of the group took air deeply into his lungs and contracted his stomach, revealing line after line of muscle, and from the depths of his soul growled “*ouii*,” and Kodo began to play. Each member instantly found the rhythm and the spirit of the next, connecting in syncopated rhythms and rests, as oxygen particles might find one another in a breeze.

The drumming soon began to guide the audience in a kind of meditation. It felt like a link to the collective consciousness. Somehow the playing was a nonverbal explanation of the past one thousand years of Japanese history. And while the young players held

impressive youthful physiques, it was the oldest member of the group who played the largest drum and held the intent, spirit, and wisdom of the group, the beat. He held large simple wooden sticks and maintained an exact rhythm that built upon itself as if someone's hand was on the dial of an amplifier, gradually turning up the intensity of the volume. As he exerted his force, the room fell captive to his hypnotic energy. All eyes and all people in the room connected with his chi, his life force, and as he became one with each beat, each breath, and each audience member, my anger left me and I joined his spirit. In a spellbinding minute, three years of anger and misunderstanding left my heart.

I finally connected with someone in Japan. I finally understood. I finally understood all my corporate students saying, "*Ganbatte Lanesan.*" It was for us, all of us, to see and understand the goal and then to commit to the pursuit of obtaining it with all of one's effort, energy, and force: integrated mind, body, and spirit. The drum was simply a metaphor for something much greater, a way of life that aspires to and respects the harmony of the group, inspired by the harmony observed in nature, not the personal conquest for the individual. The only problem with this for me was that they were not my group. They had not found a way to allow others into their group. I was not trying to understand my enemy; I was trying to connect with our humanity, the human group.

The Spanish nun called and said that the Takahashis would like to invite Astrid and me to have sushi at their home and that she would come to offer any assistance in translating.

When we arrived the same woman who answered the door when I visited for our lessons received us in her usual ceremonial somber manner. Unlike my routine visits, this time we were slowly guided to the interior of the home, where she opened two large *shoji*

doors to announce our arrival. Our hosts and the Spanish nun were seated in front of a beautiful assortment of food. More impressive even than the perfectly balanced and presented sushi and sashimi was the actual décor of the room. It was rare to see the average company manager's home have any real sense of interior design, and most homes were an odd assortment of electronics, functional furniture for the family, and photographs for decorative art. It dawned on me that the room was full of precious antiquities from the samurai age, including authentic *samurai katana* swords and full armor.

Once I recovered from the splendor and returned to the party, participating in the obligatory ritual of niceties, I asked the nun in Spanish if the furnishings were authentic. They seemed finer than what I had seen in the museum in Tokyo. She became super animated in Spanish and bragged like a chatty high school gossip about how important the Takahashi family was and how wealthy. I began laughing uncontrollably, because both Mr. and Mrs. Takahashi remained absolutely straight-faced and calm as this woman of God excitedly went on and on in Spanish about how important and wealthy they were.

***Sorosoro Shitsuree Shimasu***

**“It’s almost time for me to go.”**

I continued to flourish with my diverse group of clients. One day I felt sad, realizing that my clients were so embedded in their company responsibilities and therefore insulated socially that they could never possibly meet any of the interesting men I knew from all the various companies. Japanese society did not encourage socializing outside of your “group.” I had an idea to create a cross-industry manager’s workshop and excitedly

proposed the idea to my company. That was simply too outside the box, not on the current sales menu, and they said no. I said fine, I would organize it on my own and offer it for free.

My friend Jack at Hitachi thought it was a good idea and secured the Hitachi retreat near Mt. Fuji. I invited managers from all my companies and to my surprise had about 14 senior managers interested. On February 6, 1993, I held the first ever cross-industry English workshop. The managers came from the automotive industry, computer manufacturing, heavy industrial and manufacturing, oil refining, software development, city government, global energy, and construction. Participants were encouraged to be candid, honest, and expressive. They were to select a topic to present, such as “The effects of the economy on the computer industry,” “Problems your company faces,” and “Should Japan have another standing army.” Later we would have a round-robin discussion, “Communication and trade problems with foreign countries and cross-cultural understanding.”

After several beers and a fine dinner, we sat in our *yukata* robes and spoke freely. I had never been in the company of Japanese men who did not know one another. To experience them sincerely opening up, honestly and with personal passion to communicate, in English, was breathtaking. I heard their passion, their fears, their concerns, and I was so honored that day to be present. In my own small way, I knew that I had created something truly special that day for those men, as they had for me so many times, and I did not feel like a *gaijin*—I felt complete.

Kimea Mitsugi, the friend of the Takahashi's from my English class, invited Astrid and me to dinner. She would soon turn 80. She was as gentle of spirit as bamboo blowing in the breeze and had very kind eyes. When we arrived to her 100-year-old home she received us in the old traditional way, curling her legs under her body and bringing her face parallel to the ground, giving a full bow until reaching the *tatami* mat, showing ultimate respect and courtesy. She guided us to a casual family room and offered us beer to drink. She had sushi delivered, and it was delicious. We drank beer and laughed, she trying to speak English and I trying to speak Japanese. The difficulty did not bother her. She sat with her usual shining eyes and content smile.

I knew from class that her husband left her very young to care for her small child, but I did not know why. I tried to ask her as carefully as I could, and she politely avoided the subject. Japanese do not ask personal questions. I thought I would go for the *gaijin* exclusion clause and ask again. The third beer made me more determined, and I asked directly. She explained with great trepidation and an English-Japanese dictionary in her small hands that he was killed in WWII. He died when he was 33 years old. I was sitting in her home, the very place that she would have learned that day that Americans killed her beloved. Her husband and I were the same age. *Mitsugisan* showed me the majesty and beauty of love, the power of compassion and forgiveness; I was stunned by her dignity and grace. I was filled with love, and I knew that I could no longer hate the Japanese.

Soon it was time to return to the United States. Mr. Takahashi's health was failing. He



tried to listen to our class from his day bed downstairs, but it became too difficult. Before he stopped participating altogether, he said he had something for me. He gave me old Japanese currency no longer in circulation, a one thousand and a ten thousand yen note. He said he would never forget my kindness. I was speechless. Then, Mrs. Takahashi asked if I had been to see *Kabuki* in Tokyo. I said no, but that I had really wanted to. It was very difficult for foreigners to buy tickets that did not cause altitude sickness. Big Japanese companies tended to buy season tickets for their executives, and that removed all of the desirable seats for foreign visitors. She apologized repeatedly that she and Mr. Takahashi were too old to accompany us, but she would have tickets waiting for us at will call—just give them her name. We fumbled with the dictionary, and she pointed to a word in Japanese that indicated a kind of ownership in the famous Kabukiza Theater in Ginza. I couldn't understand, but I thanked her profusely.

When Astrid and I arrived to the theater, we awkwardly made our way to the will-call window, and when I said, "*Takahashi onegaishimasu,*" the women's eyes strained, and she gave me a very queer look and quickly passed the tickets through the glass. As we made our way to the top of the entrance steps, the usher glanced at our ticket and pulled his head back slightly, pointing the opposite direction of the incoming swarm of people. The next usher to receive us offered the same incredulous look. As we were taken up a back staircase, I began to sense that we were entering a very different experience. We stopped in front of closed doors and were invited to remove our shoes. When the doors were opened for us my heart stopped beating as my vision filled with hundreds of Japanese theatergoers staring at us. I had the sense that the entire Japanese audience asked themselves the same question at the same time, "Why are those *gaijin* seated in the

Imperial box seats?”

We were facing the *hanamichi*, or the “flower road” gangway, which the actors used to enter the theatre through the audience. The lights dimmed and wooden blocks clacked together to announce beginning of the play, followed by the esoteric picking of the *shamisen*. The stage was flooded with light, color, and texture as the actors took the stage, with audience members excitedly calling their *yago*, or clan, name. The stylized movements of the *onnagata* mesmerized me, as the men playing women’s roles scooted coquettishly across the floor. The young child on stage offered an eerie innocence in contrast to the harsh brutality of the warriors and nobles when they punished forbidden young lovers from different classes by sending them away to die in the freezing snowy landscape outside their village.

In spite of the exquisite finery of the costumes and the grand nature of the theater, I began to think about the origin of kabuki in the red house district of Osaka in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The merchant class, beneath the samurai, or warrior class, cultivated kabuki as an artistic means to express their emotions under the rigid class and social conditions of the time. Originally, young women walked the *hanamichi*, and the samurai found that useful for shopping for sexual partners. In 1629 the authorities forbade woman in kabuki, thus the birth of the *onnagata*. Men were forced to wear heavy white makeup to perform, clown white. I thought of the time more than 10 years earlier, that I had worn clown white and performed on stage. I realized how far I had come since then, since I arrived to Japan.

When I arrived home one evening, Mrs. Mitsugi had climbed up our steep stairs to our

apartment and left a potted plant. In Japan, one did not give cut flowers but rather a potted plant because it did not die as readily as cut flowers. She was encouraging me to take root and stay in Japan. I was filled with emotion. I arrived to Japan so insecure and self-doubting, and even though I had been filled with rage about being different, it was the first time in my life that I found a moment of peace, a place that I felt normal, that I fit in and had made a contribution. I wanted Japan to open its arms and love me, because I did not love myself. I wanted to feel that I was a special person, having a unique life experiences, and I met others looking for the same thing. I experienced complete social rejection and racial discrimination, contrasted by extraordinary acts of human kindness. I had learned to look within. I had learned to be tolerant, patient, and quiet. Even though the lessons were hard, I had arrived as a confused little boy and I felt that I was leaving a man. I walked the last time in front of the fishmongers store, and as the lovely woman did every time I passed, she shouted out, "*Itte rasshai*" (So long; go and come back.) I turned and warmly responded, "*Itte mairimasu,*" So long; I'm going and coming back.