

HARAJUKU SUNDAY

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For Makiko

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Part I

I.

It can begin anywhere. Soren comes up to me on the Keihin-Tohoku line home from work on a Thursday evening and at first I don't know who he is. All I notice is a figure in my peripheral vision standing up out of one of the traincar seats, approaching me, and in clear unaccented American English saying, "Ritchie? Ritchie, is that you?" Surprised by this unexpected greeting, I look over and realize that I do recognize the person. His name is...Soren. Right. Soren Soutern. Three weeks ago, he had put an advertisement on Tokyo Craigslist, offering to trade a box of English-language books for a packet of non-Japanese cigarettes. It's not easy for expats to get paperbacks and moreover, the whole ad had been funny, reading 'deliver me a pack of non-Japanese cigarettes and you have an entire cardboard box of recent books.' With all these earnest 'English lessons for 2500 yen' or 'Japanese girl seeks English language partner for foreign exchange' entries crowding up the listserv, the slightly sarcastic, seemingly ironic ad had to be investigated. Moreover, I had had, by chance, a whole carton of duty-free Sobranies lying around the apartment that I had picked up last visit stateside and never found anyone to gift to. So I called up the listed phone number, noted the unexpected address, and went later that day with the cigarettes and a tacky American-flag lighter added in purely as a bonus, and returned home that evening with a good-sized box of both cheap paperbacks and some quality college lit titles all in decent condition, definitely a good deal.

That day I had answered the advertisement, I had also found myself unexpectedly recognizing the other person. You see, when Soren opened the door to his Roppongi Hills apartment, the individual, perhaps in my mind's eye some spoiled university student living with his parents, maybe even a Japanese (they take on unusual English names sometimes; they think it's cool) is actually on the contrary a tallish, good-looking twenty-something foreigner, sandy-haired and trim, who I had definitely seen before in the Tokyo foreigner scene. Soren and I had actually not talked before. But he had a way of standing out from the crowd: wearing his always completely fashionable clothes, he was invariably seen with this unbelievably beautiful and tall Japanese girl, a gazelle-like figure who looked like she had stepped from the pages of a fashion magazine and carried herself knowing it. Soren and I had nodded to each other a few times at social events, the 'foreigner nod' you give to other foreigners when living abroad, but had never really spoken. It was part of the "rules of cool," of course; you knew dozens of people you never deigned to even exchange names with.

If Soren does not come up to me on the train now, three weeks after our trade of books for cigarettes, perhaps we are destined never to enter each other's lives. We will go our separate ways in the city of Tokyo, population twenty million, attend a handful of parties or get-togethers in common, perpetually recognize each other solely by appearance, and then move on to whatever it is we will do in the years to come. But Soren does come up to me, he does make that approach despite it being a minor violation of the rules of cool, and I do not call him out on it. Rather, I greet him friendly and ask how the cigarettes are working out.

"Fine, fine. But actually Ritchie, I'm kinda looking for something else."

"Uh, sure, what do you need?"

"Do you know where I can score some drugs?"

At this response, I feel like groaning aloud. This is exactly how quickly the twenty-four-year old gets to the point, and my first reaction is to wonder if I give off some sort of drug-vibe--if I don't in some strange way communicate without being aware of it, "hey, I'm clearly a lowlife drug dealer. Come up to me if you want to score." But that's absurd. I know for a fact that to all outside appearances I am the utterly conventional-looking twenty-one year old Tokyo foreigner expat that I am in truth. And if anything, I look a hundred times more conventional than your average expat because I try to avoid the strange Tokyo street fashions that some expats seem to adopt after living here for some time--usually only with indifferent success. At twenty-two, I'm rather indifferently conventional, a sort of Mugi and occasional Uniqlo-shopper, casually fashionable without being too perfectly in the now. Yet truth be told: I'm also sort of oddly wide-ranging in my choice of acquaintances. I've been in Japan for fourteen months now, and through a willingness to know all sorts of random people you encounter in the foreign scene, I can, unfortunately, actually get Soren what he wants. I'm not a drug dealer. I'm really not. But it's true, forty minutes later, I'm at Roppongi Hills climbing up the stairs to the main plaza with two pills of ecstasy—MDMA—hidden in an orange pill container in my messenger bag and a flicker of a smirk on my face. I'm smirking because it's Japan, because I am, well, officially, supplying drugs, and because the place is just ridiculous.

Soren's building, Roppongi Hills, you see, only just then finished, is the talk of all Tokyo. Built by the "visionary" Minoru Mori, the miniature "city within a city" Cosmopolitan Living Concept was this fantastically gigantic 'megaproject' that destroyed several entire neighborhoods to put in multi-billion dollar pod-shaped 'arcologies' of luxury housing, a hotel, entertainment facilities, and offices. From your sixteen thousand U.S. dollar a month apartment, you can take a number of escalators and moving sidewalks to your Merrill Lynch finance job, stop briefly at the organic fourth-floor supermarket, and then be sped up twenty stories to your private health club

overlooking some of the most stunning vantage points of Tokyo, all without ever having to expose yourself to all the pollution, street crime, and assorted other highly risky dangers of Japan's capital. So this is why I had earlier thought that the young man at the other end of the phone line had to be somebody living with his parents. What twenty-something could afford such a place? But as it is, Soren's father, a New York City commercial real estate and securities tycoon, purchased the apartment in the Towers straight out for use by his son and probably to recycle some cash whose origins weren't entirely clear. It's a sort of a ridiculously great sort of pad for a young guy to have, and though I'm not from a desperately poor background, I'm without being obvious about it, all eyes. Technically I should be intimidated. Technically, I should be so awed by the sheer amount of power that Soren's wealth implies that I should quake in my New Balance sneakers and run back to my downscale Ueno pad. But with the blase confidence inspired by the sort of division-less equality of expat life, I walk into Soren's apartment and plop down on his black leather couch where he had served me orange juice three weeks prior. I lean my head back to feel the full blast of the apartment's air-conditioning that I remembered as quite effective.

"So you got the stuff?" Soren asks, nervously.

"Yeah, dude. Got it all." I spill out the contents of the medicine vial onto his palm. He looks at the pills suspiciously.

"Where'd you get 'em from? How do you know that guy?"

"Relax. Friend of a friend named Big-T, he just mixed them in with some prescription pills last trip back from New York City."

"And how long has your friend known Big-T?"

"Only like two years, but he knows somebody who knew T from back home since elementary school. They're totally legit."

The answer seems to satisfy Soren. Looking almost plaintive, he gulps down a pill of E with a glass of ice water.

"Wow, in the middle of the day?" I say. "Oh my god. I thought you were going to use them at some party or something."

"Been too long, man--I really needed to score, it's just been that kind of week. What do I owe you?"

"Nothing, dude. I don't actually want to become a drug dealer—they're all yours on the house."

"Cool... thanks. I mean really."

We sit around his place waiting for the Ecstasy to kick in, and leaning back, I take in the interior decoration. There's this curious temporary feel about the decor, as if Soren's not quite psychologically deciding to settle in: lots of white space on the walls where art prints or posters should go, entire sections of wall-space completely empty. Pop Chinese kitsch—a little Chairman Mao figurine, a poster of revolutionary Chinese farm workers complete with inscrutable slogan—doesn't really fill up the place, but I do catch sight of the SubZero refrigerator, the Bang & Olufsen touch-pad stereo—I knew these things from magazine ads; it's my first time seeing the actual items.

"So, just curious man," I say, "you said when we swapped for the paperbacks that you recognized me. Was this true? You really know who I am? What do you know about me?"

"Yeah, dude, sure. I definitely seen you around the place Ritchie. You're like...well, one of the hipsters always hanging out, into some or another artistic b.s."

I laugh. "Really? I thought I was rather boring actually."

"No, dude man. Wasn't there some hot little blonde number hanging around you all the time? She your girlfriend?"

"Nah, she's just a friend. We were sitting next to each other on the same plane when we came over, and then we kept running into each other, so we keep in touch. But you know, I don't think we feel the slightest bit of any sort of chemistry with each other." I ask him in turn about his apparent girlfriend—the unbelievable modelesque "gazelle" girl that some of us have been talking over endlessly--but Soren smiles sheepishly.

"Actually Ayako and I are not really boyfriend-girlfriend either. She's still moping over some ex of hers, won't let me sleep with her."

"Oh my god," I say, "You realize you just disappointed the entire male gaijin population of Tokyo? Everyone thinks that girl is unbelievable."

"Yeah, she's something isn't she?"

"She's like this girl out of like some mists and samurai novel—not your typical tiny little J-cutie, all fluff, but somebody like...Tale of Genji, samurai and cherry blossoms or something. Ancient Japan. 'Cuz she's tall."

"Yeah well, she's just letting me sleep in bed with her, not a move further."

"That's it?"

"Yeah, Ritchie. I like, try to touch her when we're in bed, but she just moves away."

"That's really sad," I say laughing. "You share a bed with a girl night after night, but you don't actually get any play."

We sit there silently for a moment, thoughtful, and the afternoon atmosphere seems filled with a sense of foreboding. The immensity of the city sprawl hundreds of meters below the floor-to-ceiling windows is silent and unyielding, and for a moment one might almost characterize it as strangely oppressive. The sun is appreciably low in the sky and one can begin to see the blinking patterns of light that mark buildings on commercial drives as the changeover from daytime to evening begins. Then, the silence is suddenly interrupted by the shrill ring of the telephone, which Soren, sitting near to, reaches over and picks up. It's friends of his; they want to go for a ride. Soren sounds almost sheepish as he answers a series of rapid-fire questions, something to do with a BMW Z3 wrapped around a telephone pole, or actually just punched against a highway barrier, "no engine damage, dude, no engine damage--just sheet metal!" that's all, really. There's some mutual agreement being hammered out, and then he puts down the phone.

"Uh, Ritchie, you free tonight?"

"Yeah, what's up?"

"People hanging out. Let's go!" So we hustle, and take the elevator down and walk over to Roppongi-dori, where there's a white Infiniti SUV backing up traffic. Five minutes later, we're taking the onramp to the elevated expressways that shoot between the skyscrapers. I realize I recognize the driver, Takashi, too, a young Japanese dude who seems to know all the foreigners, everywhere, all the time. I say hello and he smiles back and everyone's already talking excitedly to each other. "Like we should totally share life stories and all because that's all we really have, each other," says somebody's dizzy chick. I put on sunglasses; I grin.

Yes, yes, yes, yes, it's because cars are rare, because the trains run so regularly and everything is so convenient that getting to drive around the city is an experience of itself. It's exactly that part of Tokyo near the river engineering works, where suddenly there's just sky on the break of evening that makes you feel that you've made the right decision and this is where you ought to be, the center of the universe, the cutting edge of the cutting edge. Paris? NYC? Those places are so last year! On a day of clouds or rain, Tokyo washes a clean, and everywhere, in everything large and small, the palpable influence of the foreign aesthetic, the Japan feel, infiltrates everything, so that there's art and potential in all things, a brief glance from a girl on the sidewalk, the seemingly flimsy architecture. You're at once in an ancient, ancient foreign country and this new plastic fantastically new metropolis, the center of so much action and desire. That evening, we end up in Aoyama.

"You know the bassist for Quality of Light?"

"Yeah. We went to college together. He's a good guy."

"No way, that's way cool."

Soren knows a hole-in-the-wall bar on a side street, someplace you'd only ever find out about if somebody took you there. We enter the place, and for the first few moments are just staring around at things: the entire interior is molded in white 60s plastic, with corresponding day-glo fixtures and a colorful, retro circle motif, lime and orange, repeated on the bar stools, wall decorations, and lights. Cibo Matto is blaring from wall-mounted speakers. "Man, this place is melting," somebody says, and we're laughing at something, though we don't know what. The hostess comes over and seats us at a booth.

"So, Takashi," I say, finding myself next to him, "what's been going on in your world?"

"Ahh, not much, Ritchie, same old same old. So many people coming, so many people leaving, my head spinning, you know?"

"Yeah, I understand the feeling exactly. Still, there are a few people who seem to just thrive here, hey?"

"Yeah, I guess a few. But then sometimes I feel when new kids come in, I just getting older."

"Don't worry, dude, you look about twenty years old."

"That's what people say. But Ritchie, I thirty now! So old!"

I chit-chat with one of the girls, the one who wants life stories, but she seems a bit spaced-out, just being like "wow" to everything and not seeming to quite grasp any responses, and then as a group we talk about where the most authentic Mexican food is in the city, though we all agree it's impossible to really get the stuff anywhere in Japan. This is a topic of massive importance to the foreigners of Tokyo, the subject of thousands of conversations and bitter feuds, but tonight Takashi's antsiness does not disappear, and then in what seems all of a sudden but is probably nothing of the sort, he gets a phone call and talks excitedly to whoever it is on the other end, and then has to leave, promises to meet up later that evening, and the girls, including the spacey one, decide they'd like to go for a spin as well, and suddenly all of a sudden it's back to just Soren and me, staring into our drinks as rock music blares. I'm not actually all that close to Takashi, I know him just as the 'foreigner-lover English speaker' but Soren apparently has some kind of prior relationship, and maybe as a side-effect of the Ecstasy, he seems troubled by some sort of social diss, some emotional intensification even if there's no basis in logic. Or maybe Soren actually does take it harder than most; maybe

he projects unruffled confidence so habitually it makes him actually much more full of doubt inside.

"Man, I think I'm about to have a breakdown."

"No, bad idea, about what? Just take a deep breath and calm down."

"No, I mean really man. I'm about to go." Suddenly he gets up and stalks off to the bathroom. When he comes back, there's the faint odor of vomit coming from him. "You wouldn't understand. There's some other stuff going on, and it's like I'm never going to get free of it. Anyway...that felt good," he says, and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "Just the drugs talking."

"Are you okay now?"

"Let me see."

A few minutes pass, and we hang out in the bar thinking our private thoughts. Things seem to settle, but then all over again, Soren feels claustrophobic—the walls are closing in, fast—and much worse this time. He needs to go; he really needs to get out of here. "C'mon Ritchie, help me out here man." We pay the check and leave. I look for a cab. Soren's pupils are dilated.

"It's kind of a waste," I say, after he tells me he wants to take a Prozac to shut down the MDMA. "Don't you know how hard it is to score good stuff?" But then, he is sweating and pale, maybe even green. He disappears again, this time for a convenient alley, and then returns. "Ok, let's get the cab."

This time, one is right there. We hustle the driver; we ride back to Roppongi, and then double-time all the way back up to Soren's twentieth-floor apartment. "Okay, okay," he says, after he sweeps dozens of vials out of the bathroom medicine cabinet, and finally—finally—finally—finds that Prozac, which he dry-swallows, gulping it down. Both of us collapse onto his black leather coach where we had started the evening, but with the view now of the city fully night.

"So you feel better now?"

"A thousand percent," he says, with eyes closed, and shudders. He's subdued, but it's only been a matter of seconds since he swallowed the Prozac, far too early for the SSRI to have had any impact. It's true what they say, I think, it is all in the mind.

"Were we sitting near an overpass, and then I went and took a piss at one point?"

"Right before we got the cab."

"Okay good, I was starting to think I hallucinated that."

For a few hot moments, I feel a flash of hatred. It's one thing if those who have more than you have greater strength of character. But I would never let myself get into this sort of state. As quickly as it comes, though, the feeling passes; I recognize the absurdity of the situation; I'm not going to get caught up in it. It's actually much later before I consider the possibility that the whole breakdown is an internal, drug-induced mind-game on Soren's part, a sort of emotional trick. He's lonely; he wants a male friend. This is his way of establishing grounds for me not to feel inferior in his presence, as so many others did.

In this way, begins Soren's and my friendship, a brief, breathless, high-octane, flighty sort of relationship that fuels itself precisely because so many come and go in that city. That summer I meet Soren, I have already been in Japan for more than an entire year, and probably met upwards of two hundred people, most of whom I end up meeting only once or twice again if ever. Such is the young gaijin expat reality. My Tokyo days, however, date from the beginning of knowing Soren, for it is only through him that the chaos and churn begin to fall into a recognizable pattern, and hence, one that can be exploited. You go to people's parties, but do not throw your own. You ask for favors, but manage to delay recompense. You mooch and prevail, because there is a brand new person to meet just around the corner or landing at Narita, and they are too dazed and confused at the rush of oncoming sensations, they are so young and naive and so easily fooled, all the intensely foreign and new exotic surroundings dazzling their senses, to understand what is happening, and they accept anything and everything as merely part of the experience. So long as you are relentlessly recognized as being in the know, the process is entirely sustainable. In this way Tokyo yields up to me. If my new engagement of the city is actually the one that is truly naïve and trivial, if I accept this external system as my own without proper skepticism, then this is only something inevitable, a completely foreseeable counter-season to the austerity of a working-class childhood and a university life on scholarship. In Japan, with Soren, with his flowing stream of acquaintances and connections, the onrushing flood-tide of people streaming through the city, and finally, yet most certainly not unimportantly, the apartment that becomes the solar center of a constellation of activity for a free-spending crowd of young undisciplined expats, I am reborn into a priest of restlessness and a prophet of those without code.

"Oh don't invite Julian, he's such a weirdo!" Soren is on his cell phone. "What?" A pause. "Oh it's his film that came out?" Pause. "Well I guess he has to be there then."

I sit at the kitchen counter, suppressing a grin and nursing a Fuzzy Navel. After his call ends, Soren comes over.

"Isn't there some way to have a party for somebody but not actually invite them?"

"Yeah, I definitely think so. Especially if it's like a birthday party, then you know, you can like bring out a cake, and instead of the person blowing out the candles, everyone can just do it."

"Say, there's an idea!" Soren considers for a moment. "Seriously though, what else do you know about what's going on? I'd really like to keep a mile away from Julian, he's this guy who's gone all weird from living here too long."

"Well, there's this new guy at work, Brad, and I promised to show him around. He said he knew some people visiting and I can find out what's up."

"He cool?"

"California surfer. Lemme make a call."

"OK."

So, I make the call. We are, however, disappointed. Half-a-dozen text messages and voice calls streaming across the great Kanto plain later, it's clear there's already too much momentum forming for at least starting off with the indie filmmaker's night out that his artsy friends have assembled together. We could try to get something else started in Shibuya maybe, playing on the seeds of an existing trio looking to get more time in J-pop sugarhigh central, but clearly the best choice is to at least start off the evening at Lush, and then we see what happens from there.

"Oh well, at least I can stay in Roppongi tonight," says Soren, looking at the bright side of things. "Oh wait, dry cleaning." Soren looks over at his Chairman Mao clock. "Ahhh! It's gonna close. Ritchie, do me a favor?" He's already racing out the door.

"Wha?"

"I gotta go pick up my dry cleaning, so go meet Ayako in front of Almond's? You guys all go over to Lush together, and I'll meet you guys there." Almond's coffeeshop is on the way. Arriving at the intersection, I spot Ayako immediately. As I wrote, she's tall and extraordinarily beautiful, and when she looks and smiles, my knees weaken just for a moment: it's like a sun shining. But I don't betray it. I smile back, and raise my hand in casual greeting.

"Yo, Ayako!"

"Hey Ritchie. My friends coming fifu-teen minutes."

"No problem. So how are things with you?"

"Great. Have we decided what we going to do yet?"

"Well, it looks like there's some filmmaker who just released a film and people want to go to his thing first, but then after that, I think it's pretty open."

"Cool. I like movie!"

Ayako's friends show up almost immediately thereafter. While cute, they don't quite eclipse the shining supernova that is Ayako Ishibashi, J-girl goddess. One might suspect they are almost chosen by Ayako to frame and complement her looks, two retainers who don't outshine the queen. But, perhaps as a consequence of being more down to earth, they are friendly and cool and speak decent English, and in half Japanese, half-English, we muddle through some cheerful small-talk as we walk over to Lush and people already streaming in, the indie black-clad artsy people who already have a table, and some group of somebody's friends also arriving as we arrive just as my cell phone buzzes to announce an incoming text. "WHERE U AT?" It's Brad. "COME ON OVER," I text back. "LUSH ON ROPPOGI-DORI."

The August heat hangs heavy on the street, and tonight, girls in kimono and sunglasses clop down the sidewalk in their wooden sandals, geta, giving a cultural edge to the general street sleaze that prevails. I sit back and order a gin and tonic and the girls get frozen margaritas. From the next table over: "Are you hunting tonight?" "The predator always hunts." Laughter. Hands waving at arriving friends.

"So I worry about Soren these days," comments Ayako, perhaps a trifle wistfully.

"Oh yeah?"

"Like he get in car accident, maybe living too much stress in life, it's not good."

"I'm sure it's just a phase. City life is kinda intense, I guess."

"Somebody needs to take care Soren. Somebody who really cares him."

"I think you're a great influence."

My words, however, don't seem to have any impact. Ayako continues to look a wistful, and she toys with the umbrella in her tropical drink. Our attention is then drawn to the artsy table, with the arrival of the night's man of the hour, the filmmaker Julian Hara.

"Hey Julian!" "The maestro arrives!" "Welcome!" The artsy types with their ironic 1950s glasses and hipster dress shirts welcome their friend with glad cries being full of themselves and pleased.

"You wanna go and congratulate the filmmaker?" I whisper over to Ayako.

"Okay." She says. "Let's go after he settles down."

For the moment before we go over, I study this figure of local fame and my impressions are less than completely favorable. Julian's thin as a reed, with a sort of neurotic look to his appearance and sallow skin. His fashion sense in terms of the torso is dead on—completely stylized Japanese UNIQLO sleek, but there's something weird about the way his head is perched on the whole deal, an out-of-place, nerdy, sallow speckled complexion off-putting lego-head on top of a thin torso that's otherwise pure Roppongi hipster. It's almost as if he can't quite shake off the person he really is, that the head is the real Julian, still Canadian geek but exposure to Japan (girlfriend?) has educated his fashion sense to the point of an up-to-date wardrobe, so that the body is neat hipster. Wiry black hair and ectomorph's build complete the impression of an art-school loser.

I think Julian gives a tiny flinch when he notices Ayako and me walking over to him. (Or is it that everyone inside at Lush, actually, gives a little but real, detectable reaction when I walk in with J-goddess in tow...)

"So, Julian, congratulations on the release of your film. I'll have to get a copy from you."

"Um, thank you. Um, it's underlying aesthetic truth to e-e-essential entropy of um, things, vision of p-p-post-apocalyptic Tokyo, um, being in now, s-s-subterranean truths."

I look for a second at the film-maker with the strangely nerdy head spouting off. "Uh, okay. Well, sounds like I can't miss it then."

Ayako beams at the nervous Julian. "I'll definitely check it out."

"Um, thank you." And there's a moment of awkwardness and then that's that.

Brad, my new colleague, arrives next. Unfortunately, he's going to turn out to be one of those people who can't stand the country for some reason and will return home to Playa del Rey within three months, but tonight, he outdoes himself. He shows up with his promised friends and they turn out to be three hot girls and this backpacking girl from Australia he met about five hours ago. We all pull up chairs around our table and start chattering away, as our waitress brings another round of iced drinks, wet with condensation from the summer heat.

Brad's backpacking friend: "Hey, so everyone just has to wear a uniform while they're in school?"

"Yeah, it's just the way it is in this country."

"But it's Saturday."

"Yeah, but they think it's stylish and flattering so they wear it even on weekends. And some schools still have Saturday morning sessions."

"No way, that's far out. This country is weird!"

It is easy to get caught up in the excitement of a new arrival and of course, our own time in-country is at this point measured in months. The conversation can be truly endless: all the spectacle and all the phenomena and all the theories, and the impact of the mass media telling us What Japan Is in all those convoluted ways everyone has, those theories that everyone starts making up when nine months living abroad turns you into some sort of cross-cultural studies expert. Without even realizing it, an hour or two passes into the evening when I go to the bathroom and I notice that Soren's arrived in a fresh new shirt just pressed from the cleaners.

"So there I was with the little aspiring actress girl and we were both getting pretty drunk, and then Miki, remember Miki?" His audience eases in closer to hear the story. "Miki had always liked me, but then she started licking me on my other cheek, and I was like, okay." We smile. "Then all of a sudden, Takashi-he hadn't said a word all evening, he was just being grumpy, suddenly has this, like spasm, this freakout, and he says, 'Solen alleady habu girlfliend! Solen alleady habu girlfriend!' And he just looked exactly like this little angry Japanese general, this little Tojo getting all heated." General laughter erupts. "I couldn't control myself. I laughed out my drink onto the table."

"That's Takashi. He's our little white-trash Japanese."

"Aw shut up, you're Euro-trash French, Devra."

"That I am. That I am."

"I hate Japanese men. One time I was sitting there peacefully on the train and an old guy whipped out his penis and started masturbating in front of me."

A general cringe.

"If you ask around, every Western girl in her twenties who's been here at least three months, and I mean every single one, has been either groped or stalked or flashed by some Japanese perv at some point."

I feel the need to intervene. "Yeah, but it's the safest country in the world for women to walk around at night. You can't say that about New York or London."

"You just don't understand. It was disgusting. I don't care if I can walk around at night if I'm not safe on the train in broad daylight."

"What did the other passengers do?" pipes in an girl.

"Nothing. That's it! They just pretended not to see what was going on."

The males present nod their sympathies. There may, however, be the faintest of amused smiles flickering on their faces for the briefest of deniable moments.

"I think Japanese guys are all gay. Or at least eighty percent. Come on, how else do you explain those little handbags some of them carry? The salon hair-does?"

"Oh no," says two or three people. "You're reading it all wrong... European men also..."

Julian and Soren meet later that evening. It's at least two or three in the morning, right before the film-maker and some of his friends call it a night, and only the real hard-core Roppongi crowd is staying on, the regulars of GASPanick, the downmarket club of last resort. Julian calls Soren "boy wonder" or "boy band" which is unexpected, but the timing is perfect, and it's just so unexpected out of the shy, neurotic nerd that for two seconds we're staring at him in incredulity before we erupt in laughter, we do have to give him absolute credit for it, Soren's smirk notwithstanding. And anyway, it's just Tokyo in the summer, no one can really hold anything against anyone, not when you're young and well-dressed and beautiful, and in this Japan just this once. Groups coalesce, merge, drift apart, and rejoin throughout the small numbered hours, our cell phones buzzing, our texts tripping back and forth across the space of a few hundred yards or across the city. One of the girls for reasons known only to her makes me take a pair of sneakers to her friend in another club, and I oblige because she's cute and somebody I've known for a full year now, which by Tokyo standards makes us old friends. The main body ends up going to Vanilla: it's just so in this summer, and we drift in and out of GASPanick and the other more pure-play meat market clubs, and finally some people mosey over to the Wall Street that has the underground dance floor. I end up watching a soccer game at a bar (live, it's daytime in Europe) with a German girl before saying "Auf Wiedersehen" and putting her on the correct train, or maybe that's some other night, all of these summer Tokyo weekends blend together in a seamless, tipsy succession, so many nights of listless drinking, chit-chat, smoking cigarettes, clubbing, casual flirtation, tipsy bumping into each other on the dance floor, tipsy accidental hand on the girl. But no actually, it was definitely that night, just one of those high summer nights, after so many hours of clubbing almost deafened from the music, leaving 811 you are surprised at how the sun has already begun to rise, you can see the day has already begun, and you can see over there, Tokyo Tower, silent, uncommenting, still, in the summer sky already lightening to day.

II.

Summer draws to a close. The hot, miasmic subtropical air begins to retreat from over Kanto, hurried along by breezes that have blown in from the great Asian mainland. As if by a painter's brush, oranges and umbers, reds and browns begin to sweep across the islands of Japan, seen on television news reports in passing, the colors first touching the mountain tops and then creeping southwards and into the lowlands below. In the streets of Tokyo, there is a complementary change as the first light jackets begin to appear on the people, and the girls of Tokyo slowly, reluctantly, abandon their miniskirts and t-shirts for longer apparel. Ayako finally leaves Soren, their relationship unconsummated, her still wistful, him barely noticing. Soren gets caught up at work and has to put in longer hours, and then that fades away, we return to partying. We have one final summer party at Oarai Beach in Ibaraki and make some desultory plans to get something going out to Kyoto, but nothing ever comes of it.

As promised to Julian the filmmaker, I grab a copy of his film. Melanie, his girlfriend and one of the main artsy girls, gladly gives me a copy in her energetic promotion of all things cultural and artistic. I do not regret watching it. The film is about two hours long, but in its way riveting: starting with this existentialist opening (working class Japanese guy ("Daiichi") being forced out to ride motorcycle away from his small Hokkaido town after being framed for a crime, decrepit dirt-road bridge collapsing as metaphor for complete break with youth), the story follows the protagonist as he makes contact with and is slowly accepted by Tokyo gang. Tokyo gang is shown to being squeezed by economic pressures and a rival out-of-town gang moving in, ultimately leading to leader of Tokyo gang being killed. There's some esoteric exchange of public posturing/ritual insults with the other gang, and then young junior foreign (Australian) member of gang decides to go for kill against enemy leader in violation of yakuza code (and perhaps as positioning for leadership of gang). But in surprise twist, former girlfriend of the Tokyo gang's leader, herself member, turns on the young upstart, (out of national solidarity? protection of gangster code?) and the gang, now utterly without hope, reduced in number its forces turning in on itself, starts to run amok with the film in its jump-cut, blaring-rock music conclusion leaving you no doubt that they're all going to be wiped out, one-by-one.

It's such a bleak, pessimistic work. I walk around for a few days in a sort of daze. Even a second or third viewing later, I still get drained watching the thing, that's how perfectly tuned the work is. But despite my best efforts, Soren refuses to watch.

"Screw him, man, that guy's bad news."

"I think it'd be cool just to know what it's about so you'll understand when people talk about it."

"Thanks, but not thanks."

So winter passes, and then spring arrives with its season of endless rain, and our carefree life in Japan's capital continues. With an actual corporate job, however mindless, I'm one notch above the NOVA drones and "eikaiwa tutors" and earn just sufficient to keep up with Soren's lifestyle of living by whim. I live for the day, and my credit card balance is incrementally growing. But there's no particular reason to stop.

"So just out of curiosity, dude, why does Julian annoy you so much, anyway?"

Soren looks thoughtful. "Ritchie, the guy would be a nobody back home. He probably was, and the problem is that when people like him arrive in Japan, it's like they suddenly get to be somebody, and it gives normal people a bad name."

"The charisma man effect," I offer, blowing out cigarette smoke.

"Yeah, exactly! You have these thousands of people who are essentially McDonalds fry clerks back home, but as soon as they arrive here, they're immediately rock-stars or 'film-makers' because the girls here think they're really cool. Give me a break. And the effect of that is that when you get somebody like me, genuinely an item back home, who actually was a figure in London or in New..." But by now I am tuning Soren out, even if nodding sympathetically in pretend interest. And by the time we forcefully bang open the sliding door and troop back in, I notice, for the first time, that there's a sort of Soren-smell to the apartment, a sort of masculine, leathery stink. The thought occurs to me that this has something to do with why three or four girls vomited at his last party.

"Anyway, I do have something for us tonight, something you'd be interested in." Soren says, stretching as he walks across the clothing-strewn living room.

"Eh?"

"Some Brazilian girl's dad is having a reception at the American Club. Big trade deal closed with the Nipponese. Lots of businesspeople, way-o."

"So why the American Club?"

"No clue."

We've just gotten off a huge party, the apartment isn't even fully cleaned up yet, and there'll have to be a sayonara night for a couple people leaving soon. Soren's birthday is coming up in mid-August, and that will only cap off another hot summer of consecutive all nighters, another killer season. So for tonight, this Brazilian thing's a good event:

something low-key, relaxing, requiring absolutely no preparation. We laze around with a Playstation for a while, and then get changed to go. Expectations are met--the trade reception turns out to be a bunch of middle-aged people, pot-bellied middle-aged middle-managers trying to tell bad jokes (e.g. "I work for DHL. Do you know what DHL stands for?" "No." "Delayed, Held-up, Or Lost") or smirking at dirty stories ("Do you know what the H in DHL did with his money?") Yet the food is decent; the Americana furniture a pleasant change of pace. I suck on a rib while a black U.S. federal trade official goes off on "most favored trading status."

"... mutually beneficial to all three of our great countries, yet energizing synergies all over the world. Free trade is the foundation for any true global-wide specialization of economies, the fundamental foundation for societies that have free-speech and freedom of thought. So..."

It's odd: there's really reason for me to pay special attention, but for some reason I find myself paying close attention to the speaker. He seems stuffed full of theories and intellectual arguments, yet is strangely hypnotic at the same time such that I can't quite dismiss him. There's something tremendously earnest about the man, as if he believes he is the cutting edge of historical forces, that he is being driven along a holy mission, possessing so much vitality that his ideas will renew America, a volcanic force inside of him bursting to get out, yet somehow, ineffably, fundamentally flawed. Somehow completely missing some major, unspoken point that everyone else understands. When I crack one of the bones with an audible snap, some old dowager at the table throws me a dirty look. But I don't care.

"Oh man, check this out." Soren hands me his cell. "STUCK IN TRAFFIC" reads the display.

"So no Girl from Ipanema tonight?" I ask.

"Guess not."

"Well let's at least load up on champagne, hey?" We ditch the table and make for the drinks.

At the drink table, we discover there is one person our age present tonight, a half-black Louisiana girl with intensely green eyes. She's wearing a skirt that's about five inches long.

"Hello. Dominique LeFauve." She offers her hand

"Soren Soutern."

"Ritchie Ufuo. So I hope you're not too bored by tonight?"

Dominique laughs. "Call the ambulance."

The three of us find a quiet corridor where we can compare notes and in short order establish our situations. Having completed a year at Bryn Mawr, Dominique's now taking a year off and spending it in the most exotic of the comfortable foreign countries. Tonight's speaker, the trade official with his relentless paean free trade, free trade, free trade is actually her father, a senior political commissioner with the American consulate here. Japan has intrigued Dominique since childhood, "it's so futuristic here. I think they're ahead of us by twenty years," and though she doesn't really speak any Japanese, she's eager to learn. She'd love to be shown around. Dominique flirts with us both, a little tipsy on champagne, and it's enjoyable, but is there the undertone of something suppressed? "I will expect to hear further from you gentlemen," she says, at the end of an evening, two hands on each of our shoulders. Dominique LeFauve, 19.

In the heat of the summer that begins to slither in and then grip tenaciously to Tokyo Special Metropolitan District, in one first wave of heat that seems almost luminous, the rules of a lazy, timeless game become implicitly recognized by all parties. Soren and I are casual rivals; Dominique is the prize, and although Soren has the apartment, the cash, and the circle of sycophants, I am not even all that interested in the girl, I am trying to win her just so Soren can't, Soren who has everything else in life. I take Dominique around the city, showing her Harajuku and Shibuya first, and then Roppongi, Shimokitazawa, Odaiba, Ebisu, and the Ueno area. And here I have certain advantages, a genuine street-level knowledge of things and perhaps a slightly wider circle of acquaintances. There is a pleasure in this, in being the knowledgeable guide to a girl discovering a city, the one in the know, complete with anecdote and insider's insight. After a long afternoon with sweat on your brow, it is a good thing to have a beer with a pretty girl, a girl who attracts attention from onlooking men. My lips brush hers on Tokyo Tower observation deck; she sighs and says something about Japan as dreamland, a future in now, and I accept this as common ground. If there are moments of unaccountable weirdness, a strange, conflicting feeling sometimes of desire and repulsion, (we have coffee this one time, and she has some sort of fit, almost inviting me to push her around verbally, to dominate her on a psychological level if we're going to have any conversation at all, pushy submissive, people are looking) there are also good, fine, pleasant times as well, the Tokyo aquarium, the day at Venusfort and Decks in Odaiba, where we drop coins into the penny arcade and play video games side-by-side, as carefree as grade school kids. Everyone else in the city becomes a sort of scenery, useful merely for how they provide a picturesque setting to the progress of things, which is a slow, intentionally deliberate and pleasurable process. For Dominique, she is playing around with two guys she calls "really handsome" without being too serious, playing them against each other. I'm not sure exactly of the depth of her involvement

with Soren, of course--there are plenty of times as well when we hang out in our comfortable three. He does at one point make some inquiries and decides to share with me what he's found out. Tyrell, an old friend, on the phone, scoffs at the suggestion that Dominique is "taking a year off from Bryn Mawr to travel." He is evasive; he alludes to something that happened at a Lower Merion Country Club, but he refuses to commit to any one version of events. All he leaves us with at the end of the phone call is, "Dominique LeFauve spent seventeen years being a perfect little Catholic schoolgirl from a rich little Southern family, and then one day she woke up and decided to f-ck Satan."

The summer passes in sweet succession and then August arrives. Up north, the air is already crisp, as crisp as the cheerful gleam in Soren's eye, as he plans out the delicious details of his 25th. If there is one talent this individual can be said to have, if there is one area in which he must be recognized as a past master, his skills superlative, it is in the art of throwing a truly legendary party. And in this activity, Soren is energized and on a mission; he walks around all day his phone buzzing, working out the details of who will be there and who must be shut-out, who will help him organize and bring bottles and arrange for trays for appetizers, and what exactly the perfect time and date is among the hundred immediate acquaintances and three hundred friends of friends, taking full account of all the news and up-to-the-minute changing plans of the immediate preceding days. We have known each other for a full year now and out of our synergy, we have built up something great.

"And yo, Ritchie, sorry to break your heart, but I've been hearing your girlfriend is seeing another guy."

"Uh, okay, Soren, whatever you say," I call back, opening up a cardboard box of Absolut.

By now Soren has figured out it wasn't going to happen between him and Dominique, but she and I are not quite a number, either. Soren's messing around with me, displaying a mock resentment that perhaps serves to clear the air. Yet I stop what I'm doing, trying to figure out what his devious mind has come up with this time. "So who's she seeing?"

"Wait, I thought she's not your girlfriend? What do you mean, 'who's she's seeing?' Why would you care? Why is this any of your business."

"Stop being a tool, Soren. This isn't amateur night."

Soren would play it out longer, maybe even for multiple days, but he's just located this legendary Brazilian caterer, this aunt-figure who deals completely exclusively with fellow Brazilians. Soren had to find a go-between, but he's going to get otherwise

unobtainable food, a legendary master of unattainable culinary traditions working exclusively for the Brazilian community, for his party and he needs to confirm it's going to absolutely go through. Thus he lets me in on what's he's heard straightaway, "Shan, dude. Chinese Shan."

I laugh. I mean, I literally laugh out loud. Of all possibilities, this is the most ridiculous. Tom, Bernie, Rick, Herrera, I could list a thousand names of people who might have the slightest of possibilities. But Shan is a fresh-off-the-boat Mainland Chinese poor as dirt university student with a bad hair-cut and ill-fitting clothes. He barely even registers as a proper expat; he's a scholarship student. If he paid the slightest attention to MTV, then maybe in ten years, he'll be remotely hip enough to even talk to a girl. But this is clearly just a weak joke. "Shan?! Chinese Shan? That guy is a fricking coolie!"

Soren retorts, "Reliable sources. Anyway, I will provide details as soon as I bring back the food!"

I dismiss Soren's story from my mind within moments of his leaving. Despite two years of being exposed to metropolitan sophistication, Shan not just dresses funny, but his pathetic attempts to unleash cool American slang just end up turning into a train-wreck (E.g., "Where you at, my homies representing?") and some real American is just looking at him like, "oh my god, that's just terrible." Shan, is in short, decidedly the most uncool and ridiculous of potential contenders for even a passable let alone an exotically hot American girl, and he has absolutely no chance for a chick like Dominique or any other American girl for that matter. I return to my Fruits magazine, to looking aghast at strangely dressed Japanese subculture-types, but am interrupted not long thereafter by the arrival of the first partygoers.

"Yo, yo, yo, let's get this party started! Ritchie, represent!" It's Herrera. The evening kicks off with Herrera and Max and the rest of the boys tumbling in. They're a little rougher around the edges, a bit urban, but they're absolutely the best sort of people with whom to start a party. And fair to say, Herrera's entire L.A. group is supposed to show up that night, something like twenty people taking a group vacation together, the possibilities are endless.

"The obaasan then gives us a bill for four mahn! We were like, what the hell?" Some prune-faced izakaya owner had gypped the crew cold-facedly. It ended with them skipping the tab and fleeing into the uncaring night. More people start to stream in.

"Do you think we can go up to Sendai? Oh, I want to go to Niseko this season dude."

"He said Lexington Queen was way cooler, but you know, I've never been there..."

"Laney's been doing boatloads of drugs lately. She better stop or..."

The party has begun.

Alcohol begins to flow. I have an ice-cold Heineken in my hand, and I'm catching up with people from around the scene when Soren gets back, this time with two delivery boys carrying the much-anticipated Brazilian food, the holy grail. It's an outrageous success; people are instantly surrounding the food grabbing for plastic forks and paper plates. Beef, pork, chicken barbeque; appetizers, no two alike, that are folded dumplings of meat and beans and spices; black beans and rice; iced cocktail mix—everything just has this glow of freshness and savor that you just can't get in Japanese cuisine. The stuff really is unbelievable; we are literally salivating over what we have been missing. People are drinking, smoking, chatting with each other, getting introduced. Soren dims the lights, and now the swarm of people becomes relentless.

"Oh, hey Dominique! Thought you said you might not..."

I notice when Dominique walks in. We make eye contact, but then she looks away. Green eyes. Soren is standing near the door, so he hugs her, they cheek-kiss, and I don't feel any special need to go welcome her. Her elevator ride also had all of Herrera's Puerto Rican crowd who had as promised were visiting Japan; actually the entire entourage needs to use two elevators, and they're flooding in, they're all dressed up to go clubbing, uniquely Latino and clubkid and glam. They end up enclaving in an entire bedroom, Soren's spare room, and now we have easily one hundred fifty people in one, if somewhat large, apartment. White-hot intensity. The volume is deafening. I take a breather in Soren's bedroom, and he's there too, cuddling with two girls who are obviously quite drunk.

"Hey, Ritchie, how's it going dawg? Meet the two Melinda's!"

"It's Alinda," corrects one of the girls.

"Whatever. Toyota brought them here, they're in Japan for a week!"

One of the girls has her own private stash of marijuana, and she rolls up a joint, which people pass around while listening to rock music. And then, maybe because of the marijuana smoke in the air or maybe just because there's been so much going on out and about these days, Soren and I fall to talking, and the girls get bored; they're just not interested in politics and What It All Means. They try to cut in a few times, and then give up, have their own private discussion, some intense clarification of What We Think about some third girl, not present. The cacophony of party noise floods in, then, as somebody—Herrera--comes by to pay his respects, followed not too long afterwards by Tucker, one of Soren's old friends, a club promoter. Time stands absolutely still; one's concentration is completely focused. I want to ask about Soren's new job

responsibilities, how he feels about turning into the Man. But he denies it; everything I know about him is just wrong; it's a media/branding company, they're Left. The four of us are just going back-and-forth. We come to agree to that we just have to disagree, Herrera and I are bright young idealists, and there's nothing that will crack Soren and Tucker's essential cynicism. Night of the Wolfeans, tho' it's already been done. "Party like it's the last party you'll ever have." And then we go out to the main room.

Irish car bombs, shot-glasses of whiskey dropped into pints of Guinness and gulped down and crazy good gin and tonics made with real Bombay Sapphire, amidst a table of people standing around trying to make a competition out of drinking. Vodka jello shots. Vodka and tonic. Fuzzy Navels. Tequila Sunrises. I underestimate the alcohol's strength. The party is now reaching a peak, as many people packed into one apartment as possible, it being impossible to get anywhere except by squeezing through, body by body. Soren steals a pair of bongo drums from one of his friends and starts beating them, high as a kite. He is chanting out rhythmically, improvising some kind of strangely skillful reggae chant. Some girl with glitter on her cheeks is trying to speak something into my ear, but I can barely hear her, the music is too loud. It's something about Toyota's internship program that plucks little interns out of Oklahoma and brings them to big bad Japan. And outside, the cityscape of Tokyo is spread out like a carpet of stars, glimmering and flashing, the hustle of commerce on the main thoroughways, the steady constellations of dwelling places and office towers.

It may be 3am or so when I decide to take another breather, this time finding an unoccupied room, lighting up a cigarette, and sprawling back on a couch. Herrera's group says they want to go out to 911 and GasPanic, the clubs they read about in their guidebooks. I'm thinking about the merits of tagging along when the door opens and Dominique walks in.

"Hello, stranger," she says.

I pause for a second, but decide I'll play along. "Thought you were ignoring me."

She seems surprised. "Why would you think that?"

"Oh, I don't know. Haven't been returning texts or phone calls lately."

"No way. Sorry about that." She walks over to the couch, sits down next to me, and a second later, my lips are on hers, we're all over each other. After about five minutes, we pull apart, catching our breath on opposite ends of the couch.

"So, how have you been Ritchie?" she asks. "I can't believe you haven't been calling."

I give a little laugh. "Oh, just the way things have been. You know a total party boy like me...."

We smile, heaving apart on the couch and catching our breaths. Things are going to turn out okay. But right at this moment, Shan walks in, and within moments comes over, and with completely machismo, sits next to and starts to cuddle with Dominique. So I'm like thinking inside, "wow, it's true!" Dominique makes some resistance, looking at me for a fearful second, but doesn't really stop the dude. I look over and say, "you make me feel sad." And the strangest expression crosses Dominique's face, she looks as terrified as if I had threatened her very life. I walk out the door.

The party outside is starting to fade. The Puerto Ricans leave en masse to pursue the club night they're after; they call up a limousine to be complete rock stars. But there's still one last, most diehard cohort of drunkards left. Soren, having somehow acquired a Hawaiian luau, decides he's just going to completely dig up every last supply he has and just clean out the stash while we play some poker. A cigarette dangles from his lips. He brings out some cards and whiskey and we start to playing.

"So whatever anybody wants, just take it, and thank you." There's a pile of pills, MDMA, ketamine, anti-depressants that can be ground up and snorted, and little bits and pieces of every other Class A substance scattered on the dining room table. "Totally clean it out if you really feeling it."

"Trying to get us under the influence so you can take money from us?"

"Ha-ha."

"Your deal."

Soren and Tucker and two of the girls and I play for about an hour as the last people either join in briefly or head out, bidding their farewells and giving their thanks or compliments. Finally, the game gets down to just Soren and me, dueling over a big pile of chips, and the two girls passed out on the couch, who we drape with some blankets out of chivalric spirit. And I've completely forgotten Shan and Dominique until they stumble out of a room, clothes disheveled. Despite the complete end-of-night fatigue and influence of drugs, Soren throws me a meaningful look, and not being easily out-cooled, I shrug, and invite them to pull up seats, we'll let them play in. Shan declines and says he has to go home, speaking in his weird sibilant Chinese accent that he doesn't know how to play, but Dominique, surprisingly, Dominique tells us to deal her in. She and Shan kiss, and then he walks out the door. We shuffle the deck and begin. It's three of us now.

"I raise."

"Show me what you got."

The chips stack up and the cards get tossed around.

"Your deal."

"River card is..."

"Ah whatever." I lose a few hands and then make a stand. Chips starts to flow from Dominique to Soren, and then I luck on a few plays. We're half-an-hour in when I decide to play a conversational bluff. I'm down to about a fifth of the chips, we let Dominique stay alive even though she's really out several times, and Soren has almost won this game. It's now five in the morning possibly; we're exhausted and maybe one or more of us is drugged out; we're all at least half drunk and the sky is beginning to lighten on one fringe.

"So I have a confession to make, guys." I say, and look at the two meaningfully.

Soren smirks. "Whats'it, Ritchie?"

"You know, it's actually really hard to penetrate groups like these?"

"Penetrate?"

"Yeah, like major drug circles, everybody knows each other and everybody takes the same stuff, so the cops can't really break in."

"So what?"

"Well actually guys," I pause and stare at both Dominique and Soren eye to eye, holding pocket eights that haven't panned out. "what I'm saying is that I work for the FBI. You guys are this really difficult drug circle to penetrate and I'm a narc sent to penetrate your ring so I can arrest you."

Soren is now smiling broadly. "Well you're too late, 'cuz I just snorted my last line of cocaine you son of a b..." But he is interrupted by Dominique's strangled cry as she jumps up, scattering the chips, and running into the bathroom to throw the last of the pile of pills Soren has down the toilet, before running out of the apartment, slamming the door. Soren and I look at each other for about two seconds, thinking "what the hell?," before he runs after her and now everything is silent. I feel the passage of time, five minutes. Ten. All alone in the deserted apartment.

Finally Soren comes back, but not meeting me in eye.

"Ritchie, I think it's time for you to leave."

"What? What's going on? Why are you saying that?"

"Ritchie, I'd like you to leave the apartment now."

"Soren, we've been friends for a year now. What are you saying? I'm not really an FBI agent, dude, that's just a joke so I could psych you out of the last hand."

"Ritchie, for the last time, leave my apartment right now." His lips are firmly set.

I give him the finger. And then he walks me out and closes the door behind me.

III.

This is the absurdity of my situation. I'm standing in the elevator foyer on the twenty-second story of Roppongi Hills staring at a door that's just been slammed, feeling a sort of rage. Of course I am contemptuous at Dominique, who cannot handle her drugs; and Shan, ridiculous coolie Shan, is not even worth contempt; but Soren, Soren who I have talked down from midnight alcoholic crises; Soren who I have supported on too-drunk-to-walk, taxis refusing to take us four a.m. treks home all the way from Shibuya; Soren, who in truth I have argued with a dozen times before, countless screamfests that break out by 3pm and are fully resolved by the third round of drinks that evening but this one feels entirely different, I know this one is really one that's completely different in character, about Soren I feel a genuine and explosive rage, a complete sense of betrayal and wrath. Yet, strangely, or maybe just because all intense emotions inspire their opposites, I experience simultaneously a curious feeling of guilt, almost that I have indeed done something wrong.

Three days later: "Soren, hey Soren are you there? This is Ritchie. I am not a freakin' FBI agent. If I were, I would have arrested your ass years ago. Besides, you have seen me do just about every controlled substance under the sun. How the hell is that going to hold up in court? I honestly don't care if you never talk to me again, but anyway this is the third message I'm leaving for you. My iPod is lying on your kitchen counter. It has an entire library of songs, fully paid for. I would like it back. You don't have to give it back to me in person. You don't have to drop it off in my workplace. Just leave it with your doorman and let me know, I will walk over and pick it up myself. Don't be a tool."

A few days later:

"Soren, it's been a week now. I need that iPod. A personal music player made by Apple, Inc., white metal about the size of a deck of cards lying just to the right of your kitchen sink, probably still plugged-in. Maybe you'd be so kind as to return it to me. Like today. Drop it off at your apartment front desk or just put it in the mail with a little bubble-wrap around it. I'm sure it'll get to me just fine. I'm asking very nicely."

Two weeks:

"Soren, this is the last time I'm going to call. You made me leave your apartment and you did not give me the opportunity to recover a valuable electronic device from your kitchen counter. To be specific, a three-hundred-dollar piece of equipment and one that costs a lot more to replace here in Tokyo. I don't even know if I can get an English-language one here. So come up with the goods or write me a nice fat check. I'm

not going to back down from this, because what you're doing is called 'theft.' Got that? 'Theft.' This is Ritchie Ufuo, it's the twenty-third of August at 3pm, and I expect a response or I will pursue all legal means to recover my property."

Something finally clicks, though perhaps not necessarily because of my message. Soren emails me back finally to claim that he had put my iPod in my vestibule mailbox in my very apartment building, in fact the very next day after that crazy night, but I check that thing every day and it definitely wasn't there the day after the party nor is it there now. The mailbox is this little green metal thing, completely unsecured. Anybody could have taken the MP3 player. I kick up another fuss by text message and voicemail, insisting that he at least partially reimburse me, and finally he agrees to hand over 5000 yen, less than \$50, and I am just so exhausted and weary of it all that I consent to the tiny, purely symbolic sum of money that really in truth is far less than is fair. And maybe I let a little hint of threat enter this dispute, knowing that rich partyboys living off family money have just a bit more to lose than university grads two years out of college. We meet at a coffeeshop, perhaps both motivated in part to size each other up. Neither of us have to acknowledge that our friendship is over, that now is the time for cold politeness.

"So have you heard anything?"

"Not really; there were some cop cars hanging around my apartment last week, but I'm not sure they were there for me."

Soren looks thoughtful. "I heard Shan got arrested. Seems he pulled a knife on Dominique later that night."

"Shan?" This is a completely unexpected development. "I told you that guy's a weirdo. You seem to keep a real high quality of friend around, don't you."

"OK; well here's your five thousand yen." He turns abruptly and leaves, his untouched coffee steaming away on the table.

My reference to the cop cars is not made up. On the evening of the fourth day after the party, I spent a quiet evening at the Lion's Head pub in Ebisu, eating fish and chips and watching a judo match on the big-screen television with the rest of the regulars. I turned in early, saying goodbye to Tom at the bar, and walk back up the short hill to the Yamanote-line station, my nerves perhaps eighty percent of the way to being calmed down after that strange, intense night.

Shinjuku is between Ebisu and Setagaya. At the main west Tokyo station, I needed to switch trains, and I stopped by a bookstore that I've stopped by a hundred times before to browse some of their English-language titles. I was examining a TIME magazine cover on mad cow disease when I noticed, of all people, Dominique walking in,

this time accompanied by a grotesquely obese expat who we had mocked before together, a guy who is so fat that his ankle actually just broke—no fall down the stairs, no trip on an unseen crack in the sidewalk--just a failure of the ankle bones in protest of the four hundred pounds they weren't designed to carry around. There was this odd moment of silence as neither of us acknowledge each other's presence, but internally, I'm thinking, "Pathetic. Is this who you're associating with now? Especially after you're the one who led the round of insults against this guy?" Maybe I even had the slightest urge to just boldly walk forward, extending my hand and saying, "Hi, Dominique! Calmed down a bit now?" But some instinct of self-preservation restrained me, and they left, almost definitely after having noticed me, pausing a bit, and then making a decision, and I, after a few minutes deciding I'm not going to pick up a copy of "Charisma Man: the First Year," rejoined the crowds and the noise in the station proper.

It took me about another forty minutes to get home, counting a brief stop at my neighborhood grocer's for milk. Right when I make the final turn to my street, however, what I saw were two police cars, lights spinning, parked directly in front of my apartment building. I couldn't help but wonder if for some bizarre reason, they're there for me. Without really making it a conscious decision, I decided I'll visit the neighborhood bar, a tiny little Japanese 'izakaya' pub run by the "Chief," an old Japanese man who used to run a bar in Yokosuka and who thus manages a surprising English. Two or three hours later, after having downed a trio of Kirins and my little plastic shopping bag of milk now room temperature, I decide to call it a night for the second time that evening, and this time, when I turn the corner to my apartment, the street is deserted.

This mysterious little incident leaves me once more hyped up, paranoid, and unresolved, so it's almost a relief to get a message on my answering machine a few days after I meet up with Soren:

"Hi Richard Ufuo. This is Tom Fannet from the U.S. Embassy Tokyo. I'm the chief of security here, and my job is to ensure the safety of all U.S. nationals in a foreign country, including you. I was hoping you might be willing to come in and have a little chat. This is purely, 100% voluntary. We've heard there's been some sort of incident involving threats to a U.S. national, and we hope you might help us tell us what you know. Again, you certainly don't have to come in if you don't want.... "

I don't remember the exact wording Fannet uses. But despite his repeated bland assurances that my cooperation is completely voluntarily, he and I both know perfectly well that I don't really have a choice in the thing, not after police cars, not after rumors of Chinese boyfriends pulling out knives. So the next day in the afternoon I get permission from my boss to run some errands, and I hop over to Akasaka.

Receptionist: "Hi, can I help you?"

"Yes, my name is Ritchie Ufuo, I received a call from Tom Fannet to come in and speak."

The woman looks bored. "Uh, yes, let me see if he's available."

Hurried talking and back and forth, hand over the handset despite the two inches of plexiglass. Then the little panel in the window slides open.

"Mr. Ufuo? Mr. Ufuo did you say? He'll be right out."

"Now aren't you impressed that I can just walk in and get Tom Fannet."

"You wouldn't believe it."

Fannet comes out and welcomes me inside the secured area of the embassy in a big, generous cop-like sort of way. He turns out to be a balding middle-aged man with a mustache and a New York accent. We go down the hallway to his office, a fairly decent sized one, piled high with paperwork, and with the walls covered in various certificates and accolades. There's a picture of him shaking hands with President Clinton and a window that looks out into the embassy parking-lot. With a noncommittal expression, he begins.

"So, Ritchie, thanks so much for stopping by. Some tea or coffee maybe?"

"Coffee would be great."

The security chief presses a button on his phone and has some coffee sent in. We make some small talk, and when I describe my job at the company as involving a constant brokering of relationships between the risk-averse Japanese management and the revolutionary possibilities opened by new IT coding, he does seem genuinely interested. But there's also this detectable moment when he switches over to talk business; his entire posture in his chair changes.

"So Ritchie, our meeting today is in many ways completely unnecessary, but I wanted there to be open and honest communication. I don't want you to feel that you aren't a part of the process."

"Okay."

"If you're feeling uncomfortable about certain developments, I do want you to know that your rights and prerogative are respected, and nobody is being allowed to just make claims that are accepted without due consideration for your assessment about things."

"Sir, is this about the police cars in my neighborhood a few days ago?"

Fannet raises an eyebrow, keeping his cards very close.

"You saw police cars?"

"Japanese police vehicles right in front of my apartment."

"But nothing happened, right? Nobody's booked you or accused you for anything."

"I don't need even blue lights."

Fannet continues to look me in the eye. Maybe just because I don't really have any aces up my sleeve, I accept the gambit.

"Look, Mr. Fannet, let's skip the bluffing: I live in Kita-Shinjuku. To get there, I need to pass through Shinjuku Station. I stop into the station bookstore almost every week. The bookstore owner will back me up. I mean, go get the station camera if you don't believe me, because she's not saying that I actually approached her, is she?"

Fannet looks out the window. His heaps and heaps of papers on his desk each topped by dark binders. The New York accent now seem to intensify ever so slightly.

"Ritchie, there are relationships involved which bring their own agendas... "

"But you need to rely on actual evidence. If I run into Dominique by complete coincidence and I don't touch a hair on her head, then how does that all add up to bringing the cavalry out?"

A slightly mollifying voice: "You may have heard that a Chinese national has been arrested..."

"So I've heard. But if he pulled out a knife out on somebody, of course he needs to be charged on those charges."

Fannet nods his head. "Look here, there's no need to worry. Anyway, we understand Mr. Le is of foreign citizenship, so we can't really comment on the situation. We are in full communication with the Chinese embassy about the situation..."

I look Fannet in the eye as he launches into his bureaucratic newspeak and catch a glimmer of an unspoken message in the way his eyes don't leave my face. Do not associate with Shan, for if you do so, you do so at your own peril. Our conversation resumes, and Fannet stonewalls as before, but for my part, and I believe I am not calculating in doing so, merely one individual backed up in a corner, I believe I communicate in return that I will not be a patsy for unfounded charges and that even if I am not wealthy or infinitely connected, I am not helpless, there is not nobody back home who would back me up. I will not be subject to charges and false accusations.

"So what happened, dude? I heard Shan went psycho at Soren's party and pulled out a knife, people were terrified and running out of the place. I've always said that dude is bad news."

It's Herrera who's the first to get to me, and though he's gleeful and laughing and demanding to know What Happened, I make him tell me about his night first, that wild party of Latinos who filled up an entire limousine, laughing and calling out and waving taken-off t-shirts at the uptight Japanese populace. "Well, we hit up Vanilla and we totally partied out all day. Good times. Now as for Shan? He really pull out a knife?"

"Dude, I don't know anything about Shan. From what I saw, I thought he was already gone. If he did pull a knife out, though, I agree he does need to go to jail. That's totally uncool—you can't do that."

Herrera cocks his eyebrow. "And you know Soren's completely disappeared."

"Disappeared? Like he's missing? I just saw him a week ago!"

"Well you're one of the few. He left a message on his voicemail saying he needed to take a little vacation, and then later, it was just changed to saying he needs to focus on work and thanks everyone for turning out. People tried to call his company but the operator won't let them through, and you know, you can't just bother somebody at work for personal life stuff. So nobody can reach him."

"Wow that's weird," I say, thinking it so. "How about the girl? Any news on Dominique?"

Herrera almost looks scared. "Nothing, man. You know her father's the senior trade commissioner for US-Japan relations? He's a big shot in the Republican Party, some guy who's going to actually run the whole thing one day. And Dominique's a psycho girl. Basically if she came up to you putting a gun to her own head, crying she's going to kill herself, you're the one who's going to end up shot somehow, god knows how."

Later, it seems to no small part Soren's over-reaction to things, or perhaps what is really a not signalled premeditated life decision to withdraw from the social scene and get serious about work, has its part in exacerbating events as they unfold. When I first met him, he was in some sort of disgrace. My entry into his life inspires one last run in the sun, but he had always been planning to buckle down. It just had to happen this way. His abrupt departure from the social scene, which throws certain comments and tones of voice of especially the last six months in new perspective, turns what might be a private affair into some important, secretive Big Thing that becomes the primary subject matter for all young Tokyo. I don't even in good faith hold the end of our friendship against him, as it was grounded in a superficiality and spontaneity that would have

eventually doomed it if not that year, then quite possibly the next. But if Soren doesn't go completely hermit, if he doesn't completely undergo a 180 degree reversal from life-of-the-party to far-off-seen individual, if Soren simply throws a small dinner party or something just to show his face, maybe people are far less likely to get excited, maybe people won't be saying things like "did you hear about the murder?" "Isn't it true there's some crazy stalker Chinese guy who's targeting all Americans?" "Have you heard of some twisted sex game going on in Roppongi Hills and the girl nailed three guys?"

Unfortunately for Shan, he's picked perhaps the worst possible time for getting charged with flashing a knife at an American girl. Only nine months prior, an American girl by the name of Dolores Blair who worked at a hostess bar was killed by her old boyfriend from back home, her body discovered in an alley by trash collectors the next day. The resulting uproar was covered in the international press. So, Dominique on arrival at the embassy that night, we are only months later to discover, is not saying, "Oh, I hung out with this lowlife Chinese dude and he pulled a knife on me," but crying and repeating hysterically "This is another Blair, This is another Blair, This is another Blair, he's trying to kill me, he's trying to kill me, he's trying to kill me, somebody protect me from the crazy stalker" in her statements to the embassy security staff. Lurid news coverage carried by the foreign press had been putting pressure on Japan for six months to reform its "soapland" culture, and no matter what the local police do, they find themselves under criticism, making them a bit more jumpy and sensitive to foreign demands than usual. And third, but I feel real, the suicide of Blair's killer, the weird army drop-out social-recluse, has left a strange feeling of a lack of resolution, a sort of challenge to our collective foreigner's society. We want our criminals to grovel on the stand, begging for mercy and striving their hardest for one sweet more moment of life, only to be ruthlessly punished by the collective judgment of the community. This gives you closure: this makes you say, it's true--criminals are all cowards in the end, this lets you sleep comfortably at night. But for Blair's killer to kill himself too? Somehow this lacks closure. Closure I tell you.

"So, Oh My God, What the Hell Happened at the Party?"

By the fourth time I go over the story, I'm beginning to slightly feel the absurdity of the situation, but this time, it's a big crowd, the first really general audience since Soren's birthday, a random encounter on the street that turns out to be running into a bunch of people out for Italian food. All eyes are on me.

"So there's this Chinese dude, Shan, right? Apparently he pulled out a knife out on Dominique after some kind of argument. But it must have happened a few days after the party."

The girl who first queries me gets a sort of puzzled look.

"But what happened to Soren? Why did he suddenly disappear? Is he even still in Japan?"

"So I hear. Still going to work everyday, not like it's hard since it's all in the same building. But I think he just decided that he's had enough of partying."

"Wow, that's so sudden. Weird. Really weird."

It's here and events similar to these that I begin to get my first lessons in what really defines a human being. I watch, unreacting but burning in cynicism, as people who have drunk deeply at Soren's parties, girls who have fluttered about him cooing and tossing their hair, guys who have knocked beer steins with him and called him "mate," now deprived of the free and flowing alcohol, the apartment open at all hours of the day and night, are the quickest to turn on the missing party-boy, competing to see who could come up with the cleverest put-downs on the absent figure. Old Soren would have been all over the scene like a starving bulldog on a meaty bone, ripping out the one-liners and setting up the one-two kills of anyone stupid enough to challenge the existing order. But instead, radiating out of the Hills Residence is just...silence. So it's fashionable now to go on the offensive, secure in the knowledge there won't be payback.

"Hey do you guys remember when he crashed his brand new car just two miles out of the showroom? Talk about a dork, can't even drive straight."

"Yeah I heard he was telling everybody he was sleeping with Shannon, but she says it was him who tried to hit on her when he was drunk, and it wasn't even sexy, just annoying."

"And jeez wasn't it weird how he kept that Chinese dude around, like stuffed in his closet just for when he needed him..."

"Yeah, like some below-the-stairs retard cousin he's pull out when he wanted to offend people. I can totally see that dude pulling a knife on somebody." And then the conversation turns to all sorts of stories from the era before I knew him; weird moments everyone now begins to recall. "So Soren's father had contributed great sums to a school and Soren went to a banquet they threw as a representative. Shan is there as one of the beneficiaries of the scholarships that are funded by the donated cash, dressed up and wheeled out for the night to explain in awkward English how grateful they are for the support. At the dinner table, the two hit it off."

"No way, you guys got it all wrong. It's three a.m. on a late Friday night, and Soren has just slept with some flaky little Paris Hilton-wannabe who has starred in a number of low-budget Hollywood flicks and has come to Tokyo in some misguided belief that if she's at least somebody in Hollywood, in Tokyo she's a goddess from the heavens. The girl is passed-out drunk, completely zonked-out high on cocaine, and barely coherent if

awoken. When Soren orders some Chinese food and the delivery boy arrives, the possibility of a ridiculously amusing prank occurs to him. For 50000 yen cash, the delivery boy is convinced to undress and spend the night in that bed. When the starlet awakes the next morning, what she discovers is that her vaguely-remembered night of a handsome young finance playboy was apparently in reality involved a barely-literate Chinese food delivery boy and of course she's so mortified and so terrified Soren will tell everyone that now she's his slave. And that delivery boy is Shan!"

The most likely story is just the simplest. Shan and Soren just met. It could have been on the street, in some park, or some random casual acquaintance. Soren did have kind of a thing for China; I sometimes saw him with a study book practicing the strange-sounding language. And you might wonder what could a buck-toothed Chinese Waseda scholarship boy from a literally stench-ridden village have in common with a spoiled American playboy? But that was exactly it: they were entirely compatible. When Soren went just a little too far, when he had some girl ready to be completely outraged at who he was, he could always bring Shan out of whatever little box he stored him in, and be like, "Look, this is the alternative. Do you notice the complete lack of desire to please or attract women? The 100% lack of fashion sense or taste in music, ability in clever conversation? Be grateful you're in the company of a guy who at least opens doors for you!" And that would be usually enough; that would shut up most girls.

So maybe it might be said Shan is outside his league. He's hanging out with people a bit more socially sophisticated than him. He's a first generation Chinese guy studying science at a prestigious Japanese university trying to handle an American girl most guys would have trouble trying to keep on an even keel. You can't skip generations like that--it's you who goes to the West on a scholarship, your son who goes to medical school, and the third generation, the Americanized generation, that finally dates American girls, smokes pot, and complains cleverly about society. Maybe Shan is just trying to skip ahead too much time too quickly. In any case, one day we hear about the police finally coming for him, formal charges have been filed by the U.S. Embassy. Another day my cell phone rings, and its some new girl demanding to know the latest news. And I'm like, "Not entirely sure, but I'll do my best to update; something's just so strange about the whole thing..."

"You think? I think everyone just thinks that guy is a psycho."

"Shan wanted to play the Game, he wanted to go straight from the rice paddy to being a big city player. A guy like that has got to be intense to begin with, but when he can't just seem to grasp the strategy of doing absolutely nothing at all..."

"If you're going to visit him in jail, just don't forget to invite me. I've never been to a jail."

And separately: “Shan, you need to understand this. This is far more at stake here than just getting a criminal record. If you're convicted of a felony, you lose your visa, you lose your scholarship, you lose everything you and your parents have been working for for years. Just admit you had a knife, trust the police will let you off with a warning, and get on with your life already, it's not a serious crime.”

“Ritchie, I did not pull knife on Dominique ReyFoorve. I did not pull knife on Dominique. She is crazy girl.”

Yet throughout these strange unsettled three weeks, the biggest engine of my cynicism is one of the smallest girls, Lydia, a little chipmunk-faced girl who comes over to join us, and who I watch literally switch positions in mid-sentence as she realizes which way the wind is blowing after spending a week out of town and being out of the loop. One second she's talking about how cool Soren is for getting a gang in to Vanilla ahead of the crowd; the next, she's agreeing how uncool his parties were, how bored she was all the times she was there. You think in life you have seen it all, but then you realize just how tenuous some people really are, just how little they're really getting it. And though I am on edge, though getting called into to embassies to be grilled by hard-looking security personnel has me a little generally freaked out, I know I can ride this out; I know nobody has anything on me that will cause me to be anything less than what I am.

IV.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to say what the major contributing factors are to the crisis of that mad, terrible summer. The simple passage of age reveals that youth, burning with passion and dreams for what they will do with their lives, inevitably clash with each other with a terrible force that comes from mere inexperience. But more simply speaking, it is not the wild crazy riots erupting in China on the anniversary of some wartime atrocity nor the “Tokyo prep school scandal” of the donor clashing with the established teacher at Tokyo's top international school that sets the mood for things: rather, it is simply the terrible, oppressive heat.

That year is a scorcher. In June comes two one hundred degree days; July has a week of them. August never drops below ninety, and then the heat just kept going. September's temperatures are those of a typical summer's July, and there was no cool and refreshing breeze until the very last day of October, Halloween, when the heat finally broke into an autumn that came fully seven weeks late. With this intense, solar radiance pouring into the urban heat island of Tokyo, all reflective surfaces miniature suns, and the humidity and temperature skyrocketing, the almost palpable waves of heat flowing through concrete walls and intervening trees to hold you in its insufferable grasp, meltingly hot, it is no wonder that the situation is fully primed for an explosive cataclysm. Melting melting melting. We are melting into agonizing heat. That inescapable heat—against which weak Japanese air conditioning units can barely keep up—is like a primeval force, a hated enemy that one meets at every corner. You go left, heat. You go right, heat. Every second stretches into agony, sweat pours from every pore, yet the heat is inescapable. Shimmering and simmering and slithering in broad waves, the heat engulfs one; the heat floods one. You can't think straight. One hundred ten degrees and rising, feeling nothing shy of one hundred fifty.

“Hey boys and girls, do you like to learn English?!”

There is a kind of male personality, not terribly cool, not terribly smart, but bright enough in its own way to specialize in an intellectual niche of its own, that is attracted to Japan and Japan alone. These kinds of Japanophile boys, and they aren't really fully men, let's be fair, are usually all right to deal with if they have a bit of boyscout in them or an easy-going temperament, but some for whatever reason of personality or background, find themselves caught up in the bizarre uniquely unique mix of Japanese identity such that they become almost a parody of themselves; if they are political without being canny; if they are just macho enough to understand what they aren't but not so macho as to avoid being an English teacher in the first place, well then they turn into a sort of nerdy Japanophile artificially cheerful about teaching middle-school kids English, at worst wearing an American flag bow-tie and perpetual glued-on smile,

“English is fun,” “English is easy,” “let's all learn English today,” the famous so-called 'English language monkey' or 'backpacker punk on a lark' getting his two thousand a month.

In the normal passage of things, these people would always inhabit the niche they do, living out their days in Japan with Dumiko their pregnant thirty-six year old Japanese girlfriend, their half-breed children, and their semi-impooverished existence giving way to a life drear and utterly hopeless in some forgotten road-end of lost Japan. What sets the situation into motion, however, is the arrival of Soren a few years prior and his wild, alpha-male partyboy ways, his loud and continual contempt of these “Genki [=Perpetual Cheerful] English Teacher Monkeys,” and the simmering social outrage that I had detected as early as our first meeting, now, finally, can have its way.

Who knew that Redd (English language monkey extraordinaire) would feel such self-hatred and know in some small way that everything Soren said had a point? Who could have told that Julian grew up all his days in Witchita dreaming of all the easy Japanese girls who would drop into his lap and of his clever little intellectual niche he could finally parlay into some kind of cool only to be a half-failed filmmaker? The only thing we knew is that there were these types of individuals, and that for them, Japan was Supposed to Have Been the way they thought it was going to be. But here was the same prep school jock and football hero taunting them as at home, and apparently getting all the girls. Here they find Soren, still cool, still unreachable, still getting all the girls. For them, Soren was the root of all evil, and now, finally, the day of the nerds has come; the hour of the revenge of the geeks has arrived, and they can strike back with all of their repressed fury, so confident and powerful as they choose to do so on the Internet.

"WHOS THE HOTSHOT NOW, COWBOY???"

I remember distinctly the first moment when I hear of the nerdboys' opening salvo. The reason why is because ever since the fiasco with the police cars and Fannet calling me into the embassy, I am walking on eggshells and terrified that any moment, Japanese police will rush out of siren-screeching vehicles and apprehend me for some unknown crime that I haven't committed. Just as I felt a strange surge of guilt after Dominique ran out of the apartment, I feel somehow unsettled and wrong, as if I had done something wrong, as if I'm missing something important. How did Shan find Dominique again? Where are all these accusations and charges coming from? What is this talk of a coffee that Shan denies so eloquently by pointing out that he's never had coffee at all? It is with a shiver of terror that I read the first thread on the online bulletin board where the nerdboys are organizing against Soren; the wording and anonymous posters' names seem almost to allude to me.

“So what REALLY happened on that day...”

“Rockstar rockstar rockstar. Drugs? Or knife-wavers?”

“And oh, I hope I don't crash my car again...”

Because the posts and log-in names are ambiguous, for no less than six hours I feel this incredible wave of terror that everyone is turning on me, and that for some reason, everyone thinks I've committed some kind of crime. I find myself logging on and using an anonymous Internet handle (just as the commentators are all anonymous), trying to speak obliquely to cover myself, when in fact, actually, everyone is talking about something completely different; for some strange, bizarre reason, everyone is actually turning on Soren. The accepted rumor is that Soren has committed some kind of crime. Apparently, everyone thinks he's pulled a knife or something, and nobody is at this point even talking about Shan, who is the one who is in fact accused by police.

Soren doesn't have to say anything. He has in fact been reclusive for several weeks now, and of course online accusations don't add up to criminal charges. But what is great about him; and this is a beautiful moment; what is truly awesome about this individual, such that everyone will remember it for years to come, is that Soren, slowly figuring out that the majority of people believe that he is the one charged with a crime, instead of denying things, decides to pretend to completely admit doing it. He decides that he doesn't actually give a rat's ass about Internet nerds typing furiously online and he's going to pretend he actually did the crime!

“Yo S*O*R*E*Nstyle here. I know you've all been hearing static lately about me layin the law down on one of my bitches. But don't get your panties in a twirl; this is just the price of the game—don't hate tha player, hate tha game. I know haters gotta hate, but South Side Crew don't take bones from NEone. If a jigga' makin his way in the world, u all gotta get to the SIDE if you can't STEP UP!!!! --SORENs*T*Y*L*E”

For no less than two minutes I sit there looking at the bulletin board post agog, physically unable to move a muscle in my body, as almost everyone else who sees is, thinking up and discarding all the dozens of theories of what might be going on (somebody impersonating Soren, Soren having flipped, one of the nerdboys writing something earlier that was misinterpreted, etc.) before realizing exactly, precisely what Soren is doing—and how inspired it truly is. Soren, sitting in his lonely tower and feeling in a perverse mood, has decided purely out of utter and overwhelming contempt for the nerdboys and Beta-male Witchita Japanophile English teacher monkeys with American flag bowties, to lie right through his teeth and claim to be the one who assaulted Dominique. He is doing this because he is totally safe—in truth, there are no police charges that he is the one--so in this zone of freedom offered by the Internet (and this is one final factor in all this; the technologies are just so new and poorly understood, this is around the turn of the century), Soren can come off a thousand times more brash and insouciant than even the Great Persona he projects in real life

Redd: "Soren, you need to shut up, right now. Everyone is really pissed off at the way you act, coming to this country and giving everyone a bad name like we're all here to just hit on Japanese girls. Your actions are completely unprofessional and now you appear to be admitting to have committed acts of violence against a fellow expat. Take a moment to consider the ramifications of your actions and how it affects how foreigners are treated in this culture."

Redd, poor simple Redd unsophisticated and proud of his teaching certification, five feet seven and one hundred ten pounds, so excruciatingly aware of just who he is, naively and unthinkingly blunders into warfare tricked by the simplest of strategems.

"Dude, maybe everybody doesn't want to become a genki English teacher dipshit. Some of us actually know how to act around girls, and actually can pick up in countries other than Japan. And don't think every girl who coos and says how cool you are actually believes it, you stupid McDonald's fry clerk."

"Soren, your behavior is exactly in line with the serious legal charges that have been levied against you. Your behavior time and again has caused concern to many people, not just me. When you behave in this fashion, all of us have to pay the price in the impact to our reputation and indeed, our treatment by the people so kindly hosting us in this nation. If you have indeed assaulted someone in your apartment, I strongly encourage you to turn yourself into the police and confess your crimes. Maybe in this way you can at least to some degree ameliorate the impact of your actions."

"Listen you stupid A.L.T. You are not even a teacher let alone the lawyer you think you are. I have no idea why you think you are regarded as some kind of professional, when all you are is just another backpacking punk-on-a-lark who's discovered a clever way to make a half-way decent salary without too much effort. Go back to being a tape-recorder: all you are is a trained monkey who speaks when and only when the Japanese teacher allows you to." (etc.)

In the first few weeks of the Great Expat Cyberwar, it seems that the nerdboy/anti-Soren coalition is going to win. Soren has made one critical misstep—posting originally under a recognizable log-in, (S*O*R*E*Nstyle) he assumes that everyone else that steps in will pay the same courtesy. Instead, his log-in is immediately under assault by seemingly dozens, even hundreds of separate people, but who may in fact only be just an obsessive, dedicated cadre of the loser coalition generating multiple accounts. Or, of course, it may not be; there are, actually, literally scores of people that Soren has offended or insulted in some way over the previous two years, and some of these people, having gotten wind of the unfolding crisis, log-in just once or twice to put in a bad word against Soren. The first thread, the one on which Soren first clashes with Redd, is just six or seven people with a total of seventy or eighty page views. In two weeks time, page views for threads involving Soren and Redd are totalling over two hundred, on average,

and by the end of the month, as soon as either party (or their closest allies) post something, immediate emails are being flashed around Tokyo, and the thread is immediately viewed upwards of seven or eight hundred times within a matter of hours. The snowballing is self-evident and the drama has five hundred people enraptured the first week; pushing five thousand by week two. Then people (always anonymous, quite possibly sock-puppets of Redd or Julian) start putting up pictures of Soren—a car crash they claim is his and Photoshopped Soren heads on monkeys or other absurd situations, sometimes half a dozen or more a day, such that the entire site goes down and has to be reinstalled due to sheer bandwidth consumption. Coalitions war on each other, dissolve, reorganize, start up anew. It seems every single weirdo and nutcase in Tokyo, every little weird guy with a psychological tic, comes out of the woodwork to point out various flaws or outrages committed by Soren or his gang, every wrapped-up nutjob or freakcase, every loser and weirdo. And this is true; this isn't hyperbole; I actually see some of these people shortly later, and it's like every mental defective, Tourette's syndrome weirdo, and mental hiccup in Tokyo is out. These are people who couldn't pull in a Parisian brothel! And even I am drawn into this battle, not quite an ally of Soren, but certainly a clarifier of the worst charges; I think my stature within the expat community rises because I do my part to put out some of the easier-to-put-out fires; I am to some degree a person of moderation and diplomacy, despite the initial awkwardness when I thought people were accusing me.

Redd: "The problem with Americans is that they think they can just barge into anywhere and start taking over. What's true for foreign policy is true for individuals. As an Australian, I know there are certain culture differences that each country respects and obeys that American people just can't..."

There are certain generalized topics—international politics, religion, sexual mores—that draw in just about everybody and whose page counts and viewer numbers exceed even the usual Soren vs. Redd sniping. In these battles, the line between the two sides becomes blurred, such that instead of AB vs. CD, it's A vs. BCD or ABC vs. D and many one-time posters. There are even these extremely rare times when Soren and Redd actually agree on something or at least find a common ground on which to respectfully disagree. It becomes this regular thing; this habit of our days to jump online once a day during lunchtime or at a coffeebreak, on some weekend afternoon between other responsibilities and see what fresh outrages have erupted, and everyone jumps in; I mean really everyone. Julian the filmmaker makes it his specialty to write ambiguous posts that at first sight aren't what they really are. Trashy fast-talking ditzy American girls post off-topic remarks, completely missing the point. But it is at the same time that I begin to learn what genuine hatred is, because Redd, despite all voluminous posting, is not really offering up actionable critiques of our old gang, things we have done, or organizations in the world that appear in the news. Rather, his rage is really a function of the fact that he really is a loser and does not have any particular skill, quality, or

achievement that he can be proud of. I think he knows who he is; I think he feels a considerable amount of self-hatred at the person he has become: a late twenties middle-school assistant language teacher making eleven hundred yen an hour to grade his thirteen-year-old students and the mannerisms, put down by the tenured Japanese teaching staff, lectured on his teaching style, and with the artificial personality of a forcibly and perpetually cheerful “Hey boys and girls!” English assistant that he has been for so many years. This itself, of course, is not truly contemptible. What is contemptible is that what his writings show is that he really wants everyone else in the world to be like this too. He wants a world in which there are no achievers, no excellence, no urban sophisticates or dangerous sex appeal. No crazy parties and drama that leaves you almost spending the night in jail. Everyone will become a lower-middle class Ozzie expat with a fat girlfriend. And when he starts attacking me; when he makes these outrageous claims about things I have said or done at parties that he wasn't even invited to, I feel my teeth grit; I feel myself go on edge.

By the third month of the Cyberwar, mid-October, the student government types—Tokyo's Coordinators for International Relations, decide to step in. Ours is not actually the only crisis unfolding that overwhelming, suffocatingly hot summer. Some random American girl who ends up staying in Japan for only four months has some fit of hysteria and claims a Japanese or Chinese was waiting for her on her balcony.

"I came home... and he was standing there right at the balcony. It was him! That Chinese guy who pulled out a knife on Dominique!"

I can never quite understand where the believability factor kicks in, but the community being what it is, rumors again start to circulate. “Soren's friend” Shan (who ironically is actually the only person charged by the police; Soren is completely behind any claims he is under investigation or has committed any crimes) is now everywhere, is seemingly lurking behind every park tree and inside every trash can, ready to leap out and slash innocent girls newly arrived to Japan. With all that sentiment in the air, impetus for the “Town Hall meeting” comes from two individuals Liam, a genial Tokyo City international affairs coordinator (overseeing the young foreigner community in Tokyo) from Dublin, and Melanie, the artsy printmaker and design fanatic who's going out with Julian. (Julian, who by the way abuses his powers as volunteer website manager for the official Tokyo bulletin board to hack into accounts on the main expat bulletin board.) Liam and Melanie between the two actually have enough pull to notify all aggrieved parties, including the socially-absent Soren as well as Redd himself. So the emails go out, and on a Friday evening we assemble at the international affairs office in Ebisu city.

"So I'd just like to start this off by thanking everyone who took the time to come out tonight. I know that there were a lot of fun things you could be doing and that everyone

had other plans and places to go this evening, but the fact that you would all come out shows how much you value the community and how much you care about the extended family that we really are.

"Now I've been asked to deal with the matter of personal safety first—I've had a conversation with the security office at the U.S. Embassy..."

(Does Melanie throw me a quick glance here?)

"...and they have reassured me that nobody's safety is in peril. There were some charges involving an individual menacing with a knife, but the matter seems to be simply a domestic dispute and the person charged with the crimes is being handled by the Japanese police. There is no reason for anyone here to feel that they are going to be personally targeted or threatened."

A voice calls out from the back of the room. "But how about my friend Judy? She had an entire laundry load disappear off her outside clothesline last Thursday. The people here are perverts."

Melanie looks up, ever so slightly, in frustration. "Look, we live in a city of twelve million people. In every major city of the world..."

"No, no, no, what we're trying to say is that people don't feel safe here. There's something wrong with Japan."

The room dissolves into a bunch of separate arguments and competing yells, but Melanie is able to restore order again.

"People, please, this is not the forum in which we discuss the totality of Japan. We just need to deal with some of the wilder of the rumors going around, realize that we're all here for each other, and share whatever it is information that we do have. Now if you need to talk one-on-one with me later, if you're not comfortable with this free-for-all public forum, that's fine too. We can't order any two people to talk." Redd and Soren sit in opposite corners of the room, glowering. "I'll be here all tonight, and I'm ready to talk about whatever issues you're facing, even if it's just a matter of you wondering how you can get cable and Internet hooked up. Now right now, I think Liam wanted to talk about another issue facing us?"

"Thank you, Melanie." The cheerful Irishman gets up and faces the dining tables. "Now as some of you have heard, there's been a number of incidents online in which people have been posting personal information and private photographs in a public setting." Soren's face twists; some things have crossed the line. "We know that there is a lot of frustration out there, and there have been things going on in the past that weren't always the correct way to act, but... some people are feeling that certain things

being said are out-of-hand and possibly even against the laws here in this country. We all know that regulations differ from country to country and customs are always greatly different, but I thought that was exactly why we came here. Tolerance; respect for others; understanding—there is no nationality that has a monopoly on any of these."

"How about basic free speech?"

There's an anonymous cat-call from somewhere in the back.

"Friends, let's not argue principles but examine feelings and look for solutions. If a person can write something online, that doesn't mean they should."

"That's exactly the problem Liam! There are people who would never say something face to face, but they're putting it on the bulletin board because they can get away with it."

I find myself agreeing. More voices erupt.

"How about the Death List Shan wrote? People are genuinely concerned about their safety!"

Soren smirks. Finally average individuals are realizing that he is not the one who is being accused of any crime. Liam shrugs. "I do not know anything about this. What is strange is that everybody seems to know somebody who knows somebody who's heard of it, but nobody's ever actually personally seen or heard anything like that from out of him themselves. In any case, just like Melanie, if you need to talk to somebody in private, you can come talk to me, and I hope we can all come together as a community and not panic out on everybody all the time. Especially if you're just arrived, I am sorry if you feel like you are entering a vortex, things are not usually like this." Liam sitting down near me and looking flustered, comments, "Man, people don't know the half of things."

"Certain people are using the situation for their own ends," whispers one of the other CIRs.

"There was a time, you know, when you had to have a master's in Japanese or something to be able to work here, you had more of a stake, it wasn't just party as hard as I can for two years and get out."

"Some people think it was a little strange for a girl to just have her panties flying around in the sunshine on a first floor balcony and then get mad when they disappear. Has anybody actually seen this prowler of hers?"

"What are you trying to say? That she's to blame for the sex crime?!"

"After the Blair thing, you know, we must err on the side of safety. I don't want to see that happen on my time here. I would feel responsible."

"You're a misogynist! You don't understand what..."

The meeting goes on in its plodding, bureaucratic way, although the real conflict, the one between Soren and Redd is on everyone's mind. We all maintain this polite fiction that recycling separation, residency registration, and embassy notifications are what we all assembled to learn about. But finally the meeting ends, and Liam announces that there will be people going to the local restaurant to have dinner and drinks for anyone who wishes, and lo and behold, both Redd and Soren in their separate groups join this general procession, though with definite distance between them. The evening air, hot and muggy, is just another one of those crazy prolonged heat wave nights that we still don't know the end of, but the walk to the restaurant is not far, and here we begin to eat and drink, noticing, of course, when Soren walks by and finally sits down next to Soren to launch the face-to-face confrontation so delayed and inevitable.

"Hi Redd. How are you doing?"

"Hi Soren, how professional of you to come out tonight."

"Well I certainly wouldn't miss the chance to hear your opinions said to my face for once..."

Soren's wit does not desert him. For two hours they argue, matching each other drink for drink, and some stay and some go, but the hours on the clock pass by into the small hours of the morning. Redd is beginning to get confused. Julian swims in and out, insulting Soren and then walking off, too chicken to sit down and hear a retort. Finally, at three a.m., and a reliable witness reports there might be a gleam in his eye, Soren goes off to buy beers for everybody at the table, except Redd, and this is entirely calculated; this is just one final calculated gesture of somebody who is definitely very drunk directed at somebody he has already left in a smoking heap that night; and finally, Redd erupts, he's totally lost control, he swings his arms wildly and knocks Soren's stein of beer over, spilling liquid all over.

"See, I told you! I told you everyone! That guy is a psycho!" yells Soren. And his victory is complete; Redd, as a result of this wild arm-swinging, is now going to be characterized as a beer-stein throwing, truly violent psycho drunkard alcoholic. Redd is screaming and out of control, and his face is completely red, and Julian's girlfriend Melanie finally intervenes; she comes over to soothe him and take him off, and it's just Soren's gang left; his friends from finance; neutral parties, Soren has finally won on the field of actual battle, his victory known to all. I am pleased. Sipping down my free beer,

I reflect on the justice of things; the fact that little sniveling Internet twerps really don't have it in the end.

“Freakin' homosexuals,” mutters Soren, swaying and drunk beyond belief. This is the last I see him, going off, barely able to walk, his friend of eighteen months or so, but a person with whom he will not again associate, as all our destinies are to come, looking back at me with blurry unfocused eyes. Actually the night ends with Soren in disgrace as well, blind drunk, being taken to the local lock-up by the police and apparently some ill-considered digs against homosexuals added to the list of Soren's offenses by square Redd allies, even if Redd's claim to moral authority is destroyed that night. Redd's position always rested on that he was a professional and a teacher and mature, and with everyone now knowing that he is a violent beer-stein thrower, he is eventually to be hounded out of Japan, but somebody in Julian's crowd leaps to the forefront of the anti-Soren brigade, claiming to be "traumatized" by things said at an even in which he wasn't even present and then proceeds to start a blog dedicated exclusively to Soren, post after post, sighting after sighting, and this is really curious, this is really something special, this is strangely obsessive in its own way. And so finally Soren does retreat again from the scene, this time for good, this time even from online defense, and all the weirdoes and people with strange little psychological tics can run free, enjoying their brief little heyday in the sun, the victory dance of the losers and geeks and weirdoes over the fallen god, believing themselves equals because they are the only ones who remain.

V.

There's no one moment when I realize I have become the sole survivor and heir to a kingdom. No official transfer ceremony, no coronation, not even a specific event marks my accession to a position precarious yet refined, a strange and unintended outcome to the collision of massive forces in the night, great battleships that have unleashed titanic broadsides against each other, leaving the smoke and dust slowly clearing to reveal only the tiniest of frigates, the smallest of corvettes, still mightily chugging onward as its larger counterparts have sprung great leaks and are settling, slowly, into the fathomless sea. Rather, there is simply this one Saturday morning when my phone starts ringing—and doesn't stop—a succession of people who not only want to know the latest happenings, but are also looking to plan and undertake new get-togethers and social occasions of their own. I have become the mediator and communicator of plans; the fount of life and activity, the alpha dog of Tokyo if by fate and not design.

"So yeah, we can crash at Mayumi's parents' place, and Jon will be packing some tents just in case everything falls through. If worst comes to worst, there is a sort of time-share place that will let us have rooms for 150, you know 1.5 mahn, that'll be fine."

Buzz on the telephone; Tucker's question.

"Yeah, no problem. Just as long as you have a grill and keep it away from trees or whatever."

Confirmatory and conclusatory buzz.

"Great, thanks, good stuff. See you in a bit."

It is the third weekend of October, the final gasp of that crazy summer that never ends. It is still warm enough to go to the beach, it is still hot enough indeed that a trip to Kamakura, two hours south of Tokyo, a half-thought out excursion that becomes the immediate It event from anyone who hears about it; and at 10am that morning, it seems the phone won't stop buzzing from last minute additions, not Jon, a somewhat awkward software engineer who was planning on celebrating his birthday with a beach picnic with Japanese colleagues; not Tucker, the old Soren faithful who now falls into my orbit; not Maggie, who just wants updates on Shan—which at that moment I presently lack. Not until forty minutes later am I able to rise out of bed out of bed to prepare breakfast and pack the cooler full of ice in my Ueno apartment, but I am already being to sense the social lay of things, the lie of the land.

"So I'm trying to go up to Iwaki last month, but I think we miss the right stop--turns out there's another foreigner on the train with me, little blonde girl who I end up talking

to, name of Charis. Just arrived here in Japan, third week, finishing orientation in Tokyo before her group gets assigned to wherever. But she'll be living in Kanagawa."

By the time we get on the highway to Kamakura, Tucker is explaining to me his prior weekend as we both wear sunglasses and stare out into the well-trafficked, but not jammed up roadway. The windows are down and the fresh air is breezing in.

"And so she'll be coming out today?"

"Yeah. She and her whole group I think."

"Cool, cool, good stuff."

We enter a tunnel with the highway noise-reflecting walls suddenly giving way to a first view of the sea, and the effect is of leaving behind Japan and coming into a tropical paradise. The sun almost seems to leap up in intensity, and the building architecture seems suddenly changed, resorty and universally terraced, subtropical foliage pushing up against the street itself. The dazzling light on the sea is not quite eclipsed by the almost pure white of the sand. Simultaneously: "Ahhh!"

It takes about twenty minutes for us to find the surfer girl, Mayumi's, place, a little beach-style house tucked away two blocks inland from Enoshima. She's in, already dressed in her wetsuit for surfing, and we greet her and her friends cheerily before making our way to the water to stake out a spot. Crowds from all over begin to pile in, and it isn't long before Tokyo acquaintances start showing up, in couples or small groups, our knot of towels on the warm sand spreading out now to thirty or forty meters, and everyone a hive of activity, slopping on greasy sunscreen, passing out beers, catching up with people you haven't seen in weeks.

"Hello... hello... hello..." Brad has lost half a centimeter of thumb in an accident with a paper cutter; Satoko has just returned from north Japan. An ultralight buzzes in the Indian summer air, the pilot easing out against a stiff shore breeze and then circling back inland. But without much ado, we jump out into the water to swim and play, and then back to the sand to bake in the hot sun. Only after lunch, a quick raid of coolers packed in trunks and the local convenience store, do the new NOVA teachers arrive, at first from a distance, a group of more foreigners who by their cupped hands and beeline for us, are merely clearly people from our group.

"Oh wait, Ritchie, this is the group I was telling you about. Just arrived in country, working for NOVA, and going through orientation together."

Tucker goes out to greet the new arrivals, about six in number, three guys and three girls, one of whom is the small blonde Charis. We introduce ourselves.

"So you've going to be based in Fukushima?"

"Yeah, know anything?"

"Hear there's good skiing."

"But far from Tokyo."

"You can bullet-train it in two hours."

It's strange; there's no reason for her to distinctly remember my name, but after the initial sitdown on the beach while everyone is getting to know each other, exchanging names, details, Charis comes over and sits down next to me, she definitely picks me out among the people already here as the person she wishes to talk to.

"So Ritchie, you've been here two years now?"

"Yeah, thereabouts. How long you staying?"

"Maybe a year or two tops. This country is just the first step, but your hand is still getting held here. I want to go out to China or Thailand next."

"Wow, that's cool." We continue to talk for the next hour or so, watching people come and go, tossing around a frisbee or forming pair or triples to talk to young Japanese. Through the shade of sunglasses, I perceive the strange familiarity of Charis' posture; a weird ease with each other that cannot be simulated. If I were to make a human being have perfect conversational responses, they would probably be exactly everything Charis says, a display of adventure, femininity, and dazzling good 'cute-girl' looks. She's Texan, Republican, and Christian, but aside from that, or maybe precisely because of that, she's totally confident, carefree, and distinctly flirtatious, the moment comes when she clearly is making some kind of move, though I smile, and keep my cool. Some of the group decides to make a beer run; we'll tag along, but she'll walk with me, a traffic light will separate us from the others, and we'll let the gang go on ahead and follow just a block behind.

"They have these little love hotels here in Tokyo, right?" comments Charis, looking at an example of garish beach architecture. "For eighty bucks you get a place with groovy 60s furniture and flashing disco lights?"

"I think some are like that. Or you can get a cowboy theme if that's what you want. Bunch right in Shibuya, all clustered on one hill."

"I want to go to a love hotel sometime."

I look back at Charis with wide eyes until she realizes what she said.

"I mean," she says, blushing, "I just want to see what they look like."

High-noon passes into afternoon, and we throw around a frisbee in the surf, we bake in the sun, we talk to pretty Japanese girls with sunbleached hair and dark tans. Jon's group, conservatively attired, almost awkward, yet never ridiculous, sit on their formally laid out beach towels and smile politely at attempts to talk to them; some of us who know him play this little game of pretending we're all here on account of him, and the uptight natives don't react as if anything is out of the ordinary; all you can detect is a sense of distinct Japanese conservatism. A few more people dribble in even as our group dwindles, the sun starts to swing to the other side of the sky, and a beautiful sunset begins, achingly slow into the warm late summer waters.

"So what do you think of the Japanese judicial system?" asks somebody, and the crowd begins to fall into separate knots of conversations, heatedly debating the fairness of the Japanese judicial system, referring in particular to an English backpacker allegedly found with a suitcase full of pills. Erik, who has a law degree, explicates some bizarre peculiarities of the Japanese system and we listen intently. But, as the sun continues its descent, our conversation returns to more simple-minded things.

"Hey, dude, imagine if like the rest of the world disappeared and we all had to be stuck on this beach forever, kill wild pigs and just try to survive. Wouldn't that be awesome?"

I glance over at the surfer dude who brings this up and listen as the conversation unfolds.

Charis: "If the whole world disappeared and we were in a survival situation, I know there are some people I'd have to take out."

"Whoa, really? Like who?"

Charis smirks. "I don't have anybody in particular in mind. But some people impose themselves on others in a way that's harmless so long as we're all in a functioning society, but in a desperate survival situation, would be a liability none of us could afford."

"Wow, intense. I figure as long as I got good ganja and good surf, party's on."

It is the last weekend of a hyper summer. This summer changes our lives, and many people, too many, have been sucked into its maelstrom logic. But yet the seeds of the future are here as well; I remember, actually, now, that little Emma first shows us here, her easy-going irony something really nice and funny. John, Sue, Mack, Michelle, Tanya; if this isn't their first time out, it's one of the earliest, in a sunlit space our paths to cross, carrying with it the promise of future great things. No more crisis! No more

mad excursions of the heart! Somewhere unconsciously my hands and Charis meet, as the sun finally sinks into the blaze of water, all eyes seaward.

Off to the side, conversation: "It's not so much the facts, if these even exist, as your attitude towards them. Are expats people who just can't fit in at home, or are they the explorers of the world? Why do we heroize Christopher Columbus, but not want to hear too much about our friend backpacking from Timbuktu to Thailand?"

"I met a girl who said travelers and non-travelers just can't be friends. If you're sitting in an office back home waiting for the next promotion to come in three years, the last thing you want to hear about is your friend climbing Machu Picchu."

"But the thing is that nobody ever heard of a traveler just ending up at home, a complete wreck and regretting ever taking off. It bothers people that other people don't see the value of trying to become physically rich, when experiences are what count."

Night begins its slow takeover. We are down to a mere two dozen now; the thought of a beach fire is expressed but doesn't quite get underway. "Plans for October..." "Career back home..." "Why do the Japanese do..." Snippets of conversation and longer, more involved ones, as darkness finally sets in. To the right, hundreds of meters away, a pier juts out into the surf, and just barely, shadowy figures, night fisherman, can be seen, extending lines carefully.

"Dare me to go skinny-dip?"

Charis.

"Oh, no, you wouldn't." But a low murmur turns into a group cry as Charis gets up and starts walking to the surf, turning her head to smirk once, and then peeling off layer by layer. Her bum is perfect; tight and firm.

"Go Charis! Go Charis!"

We watch her, a pale figure, paddling out into the surf, and it's clear that the fishermen, now all facing our direction, have figured out what is going on.

"Somebody else!"

Taking up the challenge, a half-minute later I go out to join her and the group is once again cheering.

"Hey Charis!"

"Hey Ritchie!"

"Nice water!"

“Yeah, it's awesome.”

“Paddle out more?”

“You bet.”

...

“Think they'll join us?”

“Give 'em a minute or two.”

“Yeah.”

Charis and I do not become girlfriend-boyfriend—or at least, not right away. She is, after all, still a devout Christian and her work placement, to Fukushima, prevents the possibility of seeing each other on more than a biweekly basis. The next actual situation confronting me is the reality that although Redd is already on his way out and Julian, without the original impetus, is reduced to needling and occasionally sarcastic remarks online, my situation is actually quite precarious. A turnover of new Japan arrivals is getting adjusted to Japan, and I am known to have been associated in some way with the old disgraced regime; if I do nothing but stand still, I will just be a person of poor reputation, possibly even involved with the criminal Shan, the drug-user Dominique, the disgraced Soren.

My solution to this predicament is simple. I can't do anything about Internet or real life rumor mongering, and there will always be a faint taint of some negative association, but if I engage the newcomers and improve their lives, I will at least not be in the same total disgrace that Soren is in and in any case my ability to deal with the vague and undefined threats like Dominique and her over-protective father will only be improved. As it turns out, a simple defense measure turns out to overwhelmingly successful to an almost offense degree.

“So we'll go to Ageha but we'll get there by all packing into one train?”

“Why don't we just pre-game and take the long way around?”

“You mean, actually on the commuter train?”

“Yeah exactly.”

A spur of the moment decision to get to a Halloween club night becomes what is now annually celebrated in Tokyo as the “Yamanote Halloween Train.” Packing a commuter train car in silly Halloween costumes, we cause such a ruckus and manage to

drink so much alcohol that the story hits the evening news. Expats in Japan still commemorate this one crazy night out, although I understand the police are now on the watch for this behavior. November, right before the snow hits, we have a Tokyo scavenger hunt, one that takes twenty or so teams, some as big as a dozen people, racing around the city and confusing the natives with their strange costumes and get-ups. December means "remainders" events going on, the typical "internationalization" get-togethers that bring demure Japanese women in their mid-20s, Christmas parties and then the great Japanese New Year, consecutive days of continual Golden Week partying. Finally, the long winter months are broken up with ski trips, more casual weekends at the Lion's Head or Kita-Setagaya, before spring finally peeks its faint pink nose into the atmosphere, a giant blind mole with a smile on its face, hesitant, snuffling forward, scraping away against the frozen ground of winter.

I remember the autumn of that year has an immensity of sky; an intense blueness that follows all of that oppressive heat. I remember winter is by comparison completely mundane; snow flakes and scarves; the slush melting in the great blue city of Tokyo. In the market streets or amid the unrelenting, yet ever so civilized crowds, one becomes almost hypnotized, fundamentally moved in some esoteric way, questioning one's very assumptions on human nature, modernity, Westernness. Seen from an elevated train, the varied neighborhoods of Tokyo pass by, frozen moments of children playing a ball game, locked into their destinies, light sparkling off glittering crystal skyscrapers, still lives in memory, implicit in promise in experience, a quality impossible to capture in text. Yet this is also the period when I become a native Tokyo-ite. One day I find myself walking through Shinjuku Station, and suddenly—gestalt—the pattern of the entire city-block sized labyrinth of tunnels and passageways falls into place. Then, finding myself looking at a subway map, I realize that I'm not looking at the various paths and extensions as a tourist would—curious at the breadth and reach, looking for familiar landmarks—but as a city-dweller, simply looking for the quickest connection to a necessary destination. I have gone native. And against this backdrop, this unity of self and environment, a special girl who takes the train into the city twice a month for a relationship that doesn't quite have a name, I have become the mediator of situation.

“Uh, Ritchie? Mr. Ritchie, sir? There's someone who claims to know you personally?”

By spring of the year after the great crisis, I have become sufficiently dominant in young Tokyo's social scene that I hold regular court in Eden, which is pretty much the top club of the hour that year. An individual wishing to see me must pass not one, but two layers of inspection just to receive an audience—the bouncer at the velvet rope to the VIP room first, and then, second, my closest lieutenants who themselves with a mere dismissive look can cause an entire roomful of partygoers to erupt into laughter at some futile attempt to “break in.” It is therefore highly surprising, even shocking, when an

apparently dirt-poor unfashionable Japanese guy somehow manages to get himself brought into the chamber of leisure and savoir faire on a high Friday night.

“I'm sorry, but he claims to know you personally and was able to tell me your phone number—just says he just got out of jail and doesn't even have the cash to call.”

My eyes widen as I recognize Shan. In the perversity of the moment and the supreme boredom of the early evening, I throw caution to the wind and smile wickedly. “Okay, let's see what he wants.”

In the dark blue mood-lighted room, I receive Shan on two black leather cushioned sofa-seats as around me, my lieutenants peek out of the corner of their eye in genuine shock and curiosity. Elegant women in black cocktail dresses look bored and sip pink cocktails; the ambient music is of old-school trance/house; and I find myself in a deliciously perverse mood.

“So, Shan Le, what can I do for you?”

“Ritchie, uh, Ritchie, please you have to help me.”

“Calm down, calm down. What is the problem?”

“Dominique. She is crazy girl. She keeps telling police that I pull a knife on her. They put me in jail. I had to stand in one place for two days. People get tortured. No talking. It's terrible situation. Terrible.”

I raise one eyebrow. “Really Shan? I find that hard to believe. I really don't think a modern developed country like Japan tortures its prisoners. Maybe you just got in a fight.”

“No, Ritchie, please. I'm begging you. It's terrible in Japanese jail. They have different jail for Chinese person. No visa; no paperwork; I had to do factory work sixteen hours day. Hell on earth.”

“Well Shan, that sounds like a character building experience. But I don't see what it has to do with anything I can do.”

“I just got out of jail. Waseda won't let me into dorm; I don't have my clothes, my things, no money. I just need place to stay. And maybe paperwork for lawyer. Help me please. I do anything.”

With the full certainty that anything I can do for Shan is a slap in the face for the dog Dominique, I signal to a friend to come over, and his arrangements—starting with just being able to crash on the tatami floor of somebody we know in Minowa, are made.

It starts with a half-starved, beaten, possibly hallucinating impoverished Chinese ex-Waseda student showing up in my majestic surroundings and proceeds from there over the course of about nine more months in that remarkable city that once defined an empire. The time is around the turn of the century; the city is a city of twelve million; and the fashions that adorn the girls walking around will show up in New York the following year.

“Okay, Shan, let's start from the beginning. How exactly did you get in this mess?”

The Chinese boy takes a deep breath. He has washed up and rested for two days, and he looks a little less pitiful. But his weight is still down and he has developed a nervous tic in his left cheek.

“So...I am sitting there peacefully in my dormitory room studying when suddenly four Japanese police officers, wearing full riot gear outfit and carrying big black sticks march in. I jump up; I am terror-fied. They say that I have pulled knife on Dominique; that Dominique is victim of crime. But this is lie!”

I exchange glances with Tucker, loyal lieutenant, who looks carefully back.

“So these people arrest you and charge you with assault and battery for no reason at all? They do it just because they don't like you?”

“Yeah, Dominique is crazy girl! She just like cause trouble!”

“Have you ever hung out with her? Maybe you just were carrying a knife once and she saw it and panicked?”

“No. I just know her through when she at same party. I never even be in same room with her alone.”

“Not even once.”

Shan breathes in and out again heavily. “Okay. There is one time when I go to her apartment.”

We settle back. It is good to hear the truth.

“I lend Dominique a magazine. And I am reading Maxim magazine, the section where readers can send in jokes to get \$500. And I remember reading the same joke in an old issue. So I call up Dominique to get the magazine back.”

Tucker cuts in. “So you are reading Maxim magazine and you see a joke repeated. So this is important, this is just a outrage calling out to the heavens for redress that you must, you simply must go confirm this injustice by going to get the magazine back from Dominique.”

The comment flies over Shan's head, but I exchange a quick glance of mirth with Tucker.

“Yes, but this is only time. And I never bring knife.”

“Have you ever kissed Dominique, Shan?”

“No, never.”

Apparently so much time has passed and the experience of a Japanese jail has been so traumatic, that Shan doesn't even remember any more that he kissed Dominique in my presence. But he is apparently so involved in his lie, the myth that he doesn't even know Dominique all that well, that he responds automatically and with a straight face. Now it's my turn to sigh.

“Well, Shan, you know what? We'll see what we can do. But you do have to get your own place and find your own job. The ideal is for you to return to your studies, but if Waseda has kicked you out, that's that. Have you considered transferring to a Chinese university?”

“No. That is impossible. I will not go back to China.”

“Okay. But then if you would rather be a working person here rather than a university student in China, I think you have to commit to finding work commensurate with a high school degree. You have to work in a restaurant or something; I'm sure I know somebody who can help you.”

Suddenly tears are brimming in Shan's eyes. “How did this happen, Litchie? I was getting top grades in Waseda University. I always getting top marks.”

I do sympathize. “I don't know. I almost feel like I am missing one important piece, that it's staring me right in front of my eyes. But I don't have unlimited resources, Shan. Money comes from somewhere.”

Tucker agrees to help Shan with his one final request—to get a letter sent out to some British NGO that Shan found on the Internet—a non-profit committed to helping reform the Japanese legal system. It doesn't sound promising, but we're certainly not going to get that involved in Shan's problems—not with him lying through his teeth at people who gave him a place to stay, and not after we've seen some documents the Embassy has dug up about Shan stealing from his employer and installing illegal-access software on Waseda lab computers. He seems really rough-edged; really uncouth. And he did have a knife, somebody remembers—some U.S. Marine combat knife that he purchased on the Internet. God knows where it went.

Shan gets out of jail—his first stint—roughly in May or June. Things now start to get far more complicated than before Shan does clearly go to jail, but given the efficiency with which everything is run in the country, as well as the politics of Sino-Japanese politics, it's hard to imagine that he is actually tortured (as he claims) or that he endures prison violence in a country known for its ritualized displays of form rather than street-level thuggery. What's clear is that from the beginning point, it's going to be a battle of unequals. Shan is one simple half-coolie Chinese scholarship student; Commissioner Charles Henry Monroe LeFauve is the senior trade commissioner in the Division of International Trade, United States Embassy in Tokyo. The outcome is never in doubt—it's just things are going to be a little complex.

Fresh out of jail, head shaven, an ugly scar on his cheek (“I cut it shaving.”), Shan Le leaps into action with all the restless energy of an over-talented under-prepared university student. The letter—several letters—go out to various non-profit groups, political officials, semi-tangentially related random organizations (a scam human-cloning company; two or three diploma mills), and somehow out of this Shan hits pay-dirt. Jury Trial, a British NGO of unknown background, decides to jump in; they already have an office in downtown Tokyo.

“Did you know that 99% of people arrested by Japanese police are convicted, and that after one hundred forty years after exposure to modern jurisprudence, Japan still doesn't have a trial-by-one's-peers criminal court system?”

Shan's mail-a-lawyer, the London-trained barrister and smartly-cut corporate-attired individual with a mad, crazed gleam in her eye on a Thursday afternoon after Shan convinces me to attend his first meeting with the group starts lecturing me on Jury Trial's position. (He thinks he will have greater prestige with a Westerner accompanying him to his meeting. Jury Trial itself is nonplussed, neither positive nor negative.)

“Simon Arner, a UK citizen, was convicted and sentenced to 38-years in prison because somebody hid a satchel of ecstasy pills in his luggage upon his arrival in Narita. A young promising university graduate who loses the rest of his life because he can't even provide evidence in his defense to a group of fair-minded, community-oriented citizens!”

I don't know if I will ever understand these single-minded, single-issued crusaders who seem so absolutely certain about their one fixed idea that they approach it with such maniacal enthusiasm. Jury Trial also has another lawyer on staff, an older Jewish gentlemen with rheumy eyes and arthritic; he makes cynical little remarks and cracks jokes about Shan but otherwise remains silent; he is a social observer.

“Shan, tell us what happened with this woman. Why is she coming after you?”

“You should see the university! They come in with four police officers, each carrying kendo stick! It is humiliation! In front of all my dormitory mates!”

“That isn’t the question. What is your explanation for Dominique’s behavior?”

“Dominique is hating me! She is liar and criminal!”

This is the problem. This is the problem. For all his bluster, all his yelling and screaming, Shan is completely unable to come up with an explanation for why Dominique is behaving the way she is, whereas the other side is able to come up with if not compelling, at least consistent, series of events; they are able to come up with a story that even if unprovable and relying on hearsay, assigns motivations to all parties involved. Claim: Shan and Dominique had coffee together. Claim: Shan and Dominique were going out. Claim: Shan pulled a knife out on Dominique. Fact: Dominique showed up crying and hysterical at the embassy. Who can poke a hole in this story? And so the lawyers meet; they nod their heads; all sides trade point for point, but theirs is the firmer narrative. Shan is a dork, beyond dorkiness. If he just says, 'look I pulled out a knife,' it's 30 days, maybe a letter in a file. People at Waseda are even trying to help him. But he's pig-headed, stubborn. He offers no explanation why Dominique would make up charges against him, although insists and insists and insists that she's making up everything out of whole cloth. LeFauve brings out “Rihanna Paciano,” a three-hundred pound pock-marked monstrosity, dispatched from Washington as special “Gender Affairs Officer” directly from the State Department.

“It’s simple, actually. Shan is a degenerate, primitive, Neanderthal male, one who hands out with notorious womanizers and alleged drug-users; he wanted Dominique LeFauve, his advances were rejected, and so he pulled out a knife. This is criminal behavior. He is clearly a near rapist!”

“Shan, did you date Dominique LeFauve? Did you go to a café with her?”

“No, I never do such thing. This is impossible. I don’t even drink coffee!”

Silence fills the conference room.

“Shan, your point is not a refutation of Dominique’s claim. It’s like somebody says, ‘I saw Shan at McDonald’s last week.’ And you respond, ‘But I don’t even eat hamburgers!’ Okay, maybe you don’t. Maybe you went there to eat salad. And maybe you went to a café to drink tea. Don’t bring up irrelevancies!”

“Dominique LeFauve is convicted drug-trafficker. I have the photocopy of her past!”

Paciano straightens in her seat. “This is protected information! Irrelevant to topic at hand and protected by generally regarded principles of victim shield laws.”

“Victim? Victim? Who is victim? She is only accuser!”

“Okay; okay, we will use this terminology.”

The meeting dissolves into cacophony. All sides are arguing at cross-purposes; all sides are fixed and rigid in their thinking, with bulging eyes and single-issue hot buttons. And the meeting, a one last attempt at compromise, is the last one they ever have; from here on out the process is entirely acrimonious. Now I know what human garbage is! From a women's college in Oregon direct to the halls of power in Washington D.C., with a completely gender-obsessed crazed feminist three-hundred pound view of the world, Paciano calls me in to try to intimidate me, but I stonewall her, too; she gets less out of me than even Fannet.

“You better watch your back! We're taking this guy down. Maybe we'll burn you too!”

"Do your worst Paciano. Nobody's charging me with anything."

"We can change that lickety split, Ritchie! Dominique's actually said some interesting things about you, too!"

What monsters! Maybe Shan could have pulled it off. Maybe had he been willing to work the system with a little more sophistication, he could have shot holes a mile wide in Dominique's story, cast doubt on her confused and internally-inconsistent version of events, (take a look, anybody can see them) but the die is cast. If there's some wavering at the diplomatic mission about how to play the cards, with Shan's complete intransigence and his completely hostile approach to genuine compromise-finding, there is finally a hardening of sentiment, and the Chinese Embassy, never more than mildly concerned (and sending a representative only because Shan is, after all, a Waseda student), finally signals they will not stand behind their citizen; he too apparently loses favor with them, sending an email in which he accidentally appends a file of his plans to wreak “woe and justice” on the LeFauve clan; this doesn't go over well with the polite mandarins of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Waseda student or not. The tide begins to turn against Shan; Jury Trial brings me in.

“Okay, this is the plan. We need to bring out Dominique's prior arrest. We need to press hard for a complete dismissal of charges based on absolute lack of evidence. We can't afford to lose even one administrative point.”

“So we'll sign the first memorandum on separation of the two; standard boilerplate.”

The British lawyer looks at me curiously.

“This is all for you, though, isn't it? You don't need to be involved anymore, nobody's calling you to the stand.”

“Yeah, yeah. See you later.”

Shan comes out to the hallway to see me off. “You go enjoy your day?”

“Oh no, now LeFauve wants me to testify at his lawyer’s office.”

All at once he is tense; his shoulders are immediately locked into position and he stares at me with steely eyes.

“Joking! I can’t stand them!”

“No joke like that.”

The paperwork, signed almost off-handedly, proves to be critical in the end. Buried in the boilerplate is a provision that Shan not visit complainant’s “school or workplace.” But Dominique is taking Japanese classes at Waseda for two bloody weeks; he becomes guilty as charged that very evening, when he returns to his dorm. Sixty day sentence.

Much has been written about Shan, Dominique—but LeFauve senior, although as maniacal and pig-headed as the rest, isn’t entirely a demonic figure. Actually given paranoia about future events, I do a lot of digging into his past, and his story is not without justifiable pathos; he, too, will be burned and cut to pieces, and the tragedy of it is only that it had to happen abroad; he couldn’t function in the only where he could. Quick summary? Think: Catholic upbringing, only Black over-intellectual in the Republican machine; just a beautiful Japan-only specialist variant of it; a potential to get somewhere in the party or in government, but it has to be kicked out here; it has to go to war this year.

“We need to launch a total war here! We need total shock and awe! This is my only daughter! This is my baby!”

I download an old video off the Internet of LeFauve just to better understand the man, and I almost feel sorry for him. I almost understand this purely intellectual view of the world, this frustrated intellectual growing up in Arlington, Black intellectual in a racist system, to become a beautifully incompetent competent, right on the verge of being the embodiment of party values, but always, inevitably, outside, right-wing values but intellectualized neocon version of it rather than quiet conservative. If only human beings ran like computer systems, he would be a great leader; he would be able to intellectualize everything into a perfection of sorts. But LeFauve is a tragic figure, too, doomed to maniacally follow things to their mutually destructive conclusion even if compromise would leave everyone better off. So, then: neither side can win. Shan is right on the verge of going over to a full conviction when he drums up his own activist support; Japan's lack of a jury system is looking bad in international terms; LeFauve has

enough pull to keep getting Shan in jail on little bureaucratic reasons, but never enough to do anything but enrage him and inspire him further to defend his case. Meanwhile, our group of foreigners is facing its own minor problems; we get assets like Joe the tallish basketball player with his silky voice, little Emma is getting a soccer tourney put together, good things are happening too, but on the other hand a Canadian monstrosity (a pale version of Paciano?) is sending me cranky emails because she doesn't get advance notice of social events.

“Um, I don't have to email you? I don't owe you anything?” I text back. But she doesn't seem to get the point. Finally I have to have her politely removed from a private party she wasn't invited to, which creates an awkward moment, but drives home the importance of immediately discouraging unpleasant people from talking to me. Now I understand your sentiments, Soren!

"Do not come to my apartment if you weigh four hundred pounds. Thank you everyone."

As the conflict wears on, my relationship with Charis continues apace. After months of courtship, she in a half-tipsy mood has another one of her Freudian slips where she suggests sleeping with me, but this time I think her values are about to change. Christianity can't quite put a finger on the way the Japanese act; despite hundreds of years of contact, less than 2% of Japanese adhere to the religion. So the experience of living in rural Fukushima is good for Charis; it broadens her understanding of the world, and if all goes to plan, she'll sleep with me in a month or two: of this, I am sure. Yet even if it doesn't happen, those are great days; magic moments. Romance, baby! We are Tokyo's darlings when we walk into the expensive restaurant or exclusive club; she is so beautiful people turn and stare, and I get jealous or approving looks from men. Yet perhaps it is also true that our situation—my situation-- is also slowly but inexorably beginning to slip. In the race of time versus aging, acquisition versus expenditure, there are people who ever so slightly seem to be pulling away; the prices just keep on rising and sometimes I saw fashionable groups of people who almost approach my own in terms of greatness. My empire, never fully mine, is collapsing. An outside observer might almost suggest that I am merely living the residual greatness of the Soren 'monarchy' as much as I might claim my people are producing their own genuine novelty. Difficult to say. In any case, I might pleasantly go to seed; I might enjoy every moment of the long ride down, but things can never be so simple...

LeFauve: “Okay, the facts are simple. We have a very violent, very primitive, very aggressive terroristic-threat making Chinese thug, and we have a civilized, elite university American young lady on the other. Obviously Shan Le is a little out of his league here, doesn't quite know how to treat women. We have papers here, one, two, three. Work at the school library: fired for adding 10000 yen cash balance to his library

account. Work at the school computer center: fired for adding illegitimate remote access software to a university mainframe. Said to have been fined for an illegally modified airgun three years ago—firearms, please, firearms. Criminal, thug, unable to follow the rules.”

“Well...”

“Why exactly are you defending this guy? This is a pure breakdown of good and evil...”

I disagree, but only keep a non-committal look. LeFauve sighs; leans back in his chair.

“Ritchie, look you are in over your head. I can't afford to let a public event spiral out of control. This is my daughter. My only precious daughter. A girl far away from home. Try to develop a sense of chivalry.”

“I have some problems with the behavior of Dominique. Actually, she's done some weird things...”

“Most people don't totally agree with each other. This is human politics.”

“No, I am talking about something a little more fundamental. There are basic human norms of how we should treat each other, and your daughter is a little strange...”

Actually I am not entirely not with sympathy for the father. His story is one of being a self-made individual, a builder of empires, a wordsmith, a lawyer. But too much has happened; events have now spun me farther than I can hope to retreat from, and I do not know at this point that Dominique was friends with the murdered hostess girl; I don't know about years of psychological counseling, about the fabulous problems of the rich and directionless and all their lies and allegiances and hidden alliances. I just feel this overwhelming hatred towards somebody who has done me petty wrong.

“Okay, fine, listen, Ritchie. Maybe you do have some kind of point. I can make amends. I need you on the team. You certainly don't make all that much at Energia. You like the good life; you like clubs; you like cash. Things... can be arranged.”

I hear LeFauve very clearly. Acres of future territory stretch before me; the pure cusp of the moment.

"You're talking perjury."

"I am talking about putting a convicted criminal, a dangerous terroristic thug behind bars. I am talking about protecting my daughter."

“I'm sorry. I can't testify to things I haven't seen.”

“You will be punished.”

Dominique is nutty beyond all belief; she is nutty in that self-destructive way genuinely nutty people are. Actually I was the one who aggressively insulted her at a cafe; who knows how she conflated it with Shan. Who knows why.

VI.

Of course in retrospect it's easy to say, "how foolish! what idiocy! of course you should have known that tangling with a senior government official would be complete suicide." What this forgets, however, is that once a process has begun, it is difficult to see the escape doors, viz., "the tiger has been mounted, now ride it all the way through." I walk out of Astor into a drizzly Tokyo street, my heart pounding, my senses out of tune, and it seems that those who watch me go do so with a certain cool curiosity. Yet in my pocket, or so I believe, I still have dangerous cards -- a Texan girl, social status, links to all sorts of shady characters, and the pure, raw optimism of someone who has accomplished major scores. Forget sexual conquests, beautiful women, fast cars, private accesses, all the public status symbols that hurt others so much more when the displayer is young and handsome. Soren is gone. I am prince of twenty-something Tokyo. What thrills the heart is to watch an entire weekend unfold, all the component parts flying in from all directions, and to be entirely in charge of the process, the power-broker who decides ultimate outcomes, subject only to the basic physical limitation that nobody can monopolize everything or be everywhere at every time, and here Tucker, ever loyal lieutenant and club promoter extraordinaire, reveals unexpected potential.

"Well, okay Tucker, this is the situation. Japan is a pretty hard country to read, but if you do it right, I think it can be really rewarding. There's a lot of people who come here and then leave embittered, but the key to remember is that Japanese are not Americans. You can't just barge around the place being obtuse and talkative--you have to watch carefully, and then act, and then you can really thrive." Tucker gives me his complete attention, nodding his head. "You see an awful lot of people leave here every year."

"But maybe some people just want to be here for a year or two?" he asks.

"Well, okay, there's that. But I think the value really comes when you learn something from the inside out, rather than just jet here for cocktail hour, take a bunch of snapshots in front of Mount Fuji and in happi coats, and then blast back to DePauw. Learn to play the game."

The American nods.

This is my agenda. The last few weeks have actually been fairly dismal; I have actually a bit of a queasy feeling in my stomach because despite best efforts, the situation isn't improving. Perhaps in reality it's just a matter of luck and timing, but I'm looking for a definite score; I want that milestone that will pull me, and the gang, out of its rainy season doldrums. And this is the thing--Tucker, though scraggly, thinner, and

just less overall charming than Soren, can be an interesting player in his own right, a true asset to the gang. If he is willing to learn, if he humbles himself, I will teach him. He'll get good things; his position in Japan will immeasurably improve.

“So I guess my first question for you is, why are you here? What's bringing you to Japan?”

“Well, actually I've been here before.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, but only visiting when I was in university. My older brother was working here, and man, those were the glory days.”

“How so?”

“Well, he was in finance, see? So he had this huge apartment in Roppongi-chome, we had a wrap-around balcony, and man we got babes.”

“Nice.”

“It was unfreakinbeliveable.”

“So you want to go back to those days?”

“Hell yeah.”

“Okay. Let's rock and roll.”

Sometimes you meet someone, and you just know that you are going to be hanging out with them for a while; not forever, but for a good, substantial piece of time, and then when it ends, it won't be unsatisfying or necessarily to your disadvantage. The rainy season, 'tsuyu,' is changing over to first fall—and at no time do I think that we were going to become friends for life. But maybe that is the beauty of it; that is why everything can just go as it does without ever looking back.

Tucker is speaking excitedly to me, leaning forward on the chaise longue and posturing as a supplicant. "Did you know that the decolonization of Asia began with the Japanese takeover of Vietnam? The Vietnamese had never before seen white men following Asian orders, but the Japanese just went in there and raped loads of French girls. They don't talk about it in history books because it's been totally hushed up.”

“Yeah?”

“And a British officer defected right before Singapore. Perfect family background, perfect education, no disciplinary problems in the past. But he decided of his own free

will that the Japanese side was the morally superior side. Totally covered up. This is what history is really like!"

Tucker—a paranoid conspiracy theorist with a strong streak of resentment against his father, father's father, and grandfather's father, all Marine officers. They were imperialists--but what he resented was not that they had whined about the "white man's burden" while breeding a string of half-castes in the slums, but that they were unable to keep it up--that he had been left, so to speak, holding the bag, crushed with the weight of historical guilt without any of the rewards of empire. And so he drank--to an incredible degree--he got older; he was only twenty-six but his skin had the beat up appearance of a thirty-five year old and he chased after the very lowest quality of woman; he played for the very lowest stakes. And this--of course--made our friendship easy. "C'mon mate, c'mon mate, c'mon mate!" With dismayed faces the courtiers (whose reactions are now completely predictable, whose jokes are obvious, whose responses in any given situation are preordained to the fourth or fifth degree) watch as the prince is taken out of the court by an ill-mannered rogue, so disheveled, unattractive, and poorly-dressed as to be beneath contempt, and the prince is happy! The prince is actually genuinely cheerful! Few have seen such expressions of genuine unadulterated joy, ear-to-ear smiling! Passing parked Jaguars and Range Rovers, we get into--of all things--an illegally parked beat up old white cube car, and tear off through night traffic Tokyo streets in some parody of a previous white car, a previous night racing through the nameless beat of the city.

"Okay, first we're going to hit 811, then we're going to hit Motown, then we gonna hit GASPanick!"

Tucker is hunched over the steering wheel, finding holes in swift traffic. These are the very lowest of the low, the dens of the absolute bottom-feeders, places worth only a half-hour or bemused hour or two in other lifetimes, but one has to start somewhere, of course.

"Okay Tucker. Let me explain this place to you. This is still early, so that's why people aren't here, but that line of military hair-cut guys will be sitting on their 600 yen beers all night. They want to score. Next month they might be in Timbuktu, so there's no next week, and there's no three months from now. Over there, we have an old Asia hand--girl looks kinda young, probably from Thailand or Cambodia; he's just here to show off, have some fun watching the whole show. Over there we got a mix of less dramatic players-- maybe they'll score, maybe they won't, maybe you'll see real sophistication pop out, but we'll need to go to Eden to see..."

Already, however, with the launch of music, Tucker is out ("Eden?! That place is for snobs!"), and his target of choice is a PVC-boot-wearing 40-year old Japanese divorcee,

a used-up, fat disgusting excuse for a human being whose very proximity makes me retch a little in my throat. It takes me half an hour to recover.

"Tucker! Tucker! What are you doing? That woman is absolutely wretched!"

"Hey mate! Old girls need love too!"

And that is it. That is exactly it. He is completely irrepressible. He doesn't care at all that onlookers are wearing expressions of shock and contempt. He doesn't care that if he looks in the mirror, he'll see a twenty-six year old who just needs to get his act together; he might actually be able to make something of his life. What he has, instead, is zest: pure, unadulterated love of the game, dancing and prancing, jumping and jittering, hands flying to and fro, unself-conscious, singing along to the music when he knows the words with wild abandon. However degenerate his form of the game, his is an indomitable will to get the score tonight. We are perfect because we go after different things. Here, this place, now: this is the only reality, this is the only freedom, and ephemeral nineteen year olds who walk in are forever lost to his grasp. Freedom--freedom--freedom: American great essential quality communicating in a straight-line pure and unbroken like a bolt of lightning through his family line. And I surrender to this will, you see; I ignore the oddness that his car keys are "lost" when I want to go get my jacket (he knows this is a ploy to leave; he wants me here, a friend assists him), I ignore the weirdness of our being unable to leave the club at two, three in the morning as the music blasts on and streams of after-after-afterparty goers replenish the ranks. Eye-contact, dance move, smile or frown; signal interest, signal decline. The throb of music is the only underscore to continuing and increasing drunkenness, the outer senses failing, the refinement passing away, reduction to the absolute lowest denominator. Tiredness gives way to weariness and weariness gives way to total fatigue. But after total fatigue, there is even another level, an exhaustion so complete, so moral, that one reverts to a more primitive personality, a complete surrender to the music.

"Dude! Dude! Dude! You are freakin' awesome! Where did you learn to dance. Those Russian hostesses are in freakin' awe!"

Eden is now so far away. My hands lay down unknown archaeologies of rhythm; they uncover civilizations that have risen and fallen in millennia of inborn memory, and on these, I build a superstructure that is at once ancient yet new. Around me swirl an entire archipelago of Russian hostesses who have streamed in for their hour to party. Tatiana. Olga. Natasha. Ekaterina. Girls from forgotten Siberian factory cities making 3000 yen an hour base pouring drinks to Japanese businessmen. The club is a dark womb, a black cave of flashing lights and laser lines, and I am a god of dance, creator and destroyer of worlds. Such beauty; such raw intense drunken communion, whiff of a joint, 600 beats per minute, blonde hair, blue eyes. Half-friends and semi-

acquaintances stream in; in the outside street alley a few words and hard-to-find goods are exchanged. But then it's back inside the club; warm and dry.

"So who are you going for?"

"I don't know maybe that one."

"Don't let the American whale snag you."

It is that weekend; or it is another one, that I find myself following a text message through Saturday afternoon to Tucker's car, parked conveniently just north of the Roppongi crossing, to stumble bleary eyed into the passenger seat and doze away a somewhat sunlit afternoon. Intimations of a faint communion with eternity had existed before; like the city as a girl peeking at you from behind a fan from some long-ago forgotten initial day to streetscenes, frozen, in which the sunlight passes through the spray of water to prism beautifully into a kaleidoscope of colors. Now, finally, however, I understand. Time has finally frozen. Grabbing a pocket Nikon, I snap a picture of a perfect afternoon's subdued light, this moment never to exist again, this moment never to be recovered.

"Where is this going? Where is this going?"

Tucker has no answer. But I can see, as clearly as if from a tall vista, how inevitable everything that is to come, how inevitable it was everything that led up to this moment, as trapped as Tucker is in his fate, as trapped as I am in the prison that I have made of my own making, the prison that I have now come to reject as worthless and ragged, as pointless as torn and used clothing. Already from here: the keeping score; Tucker to offer additional rides in his car, the drive up to Moka, a walking away in winter-time, feet stepping on snow making the most awful of possible sounds. He knows he is in decline. He knows that our friendship is based on absolute tenuousness. We will throw rocks from tetrapod breakwaters into the uncaring Japanese sea, we will break beer bottles in midnight streets, and this is just the same as Sunday afternoons but everything is just a facsimile of the things we used to do.

"I am curious, Tucker, how many girls have you slept with? How many girls have you bedded?"

Suddenly on the defensive, he leans back and tries to pretend he hasn't heard.

"Come on, mate. Be a pal. I'm just curious."

Tucker lights a cigarette. A tiny voice. "A bit over two hundred. I've lost count."

"Wow. Holy cow. That is an amazing number. Any virgins?"

"Well... well..."

"Well..."

"Well of course a lot of girls are going to tell you they're virgins."

"No, Tucker. I think some of them were. Can't you tell? If they bleed..."

"Aw, every girl is going to pretend she's a virgin."

"Number, Tucker. Number. And how old was the youngest?"

"Maybe almost ten. And the youngest girl was when I was a teenager, we were both nineteen so there."

I sit there, in that parked car, on that Saturday afternoon that we are both merely waiting to pass so that we can resume night-time adventures, and I feel the very non-linearity of time, how its grainier and quantized rather than a smooth flowing stream. The entire future, open to me like a stage with its curtains already open, shocks me into a clear and perfect realization. Tucker and I are good friends. We have become each other's 'person of main contact,' the fundamental baseline company of choice even as we continue to associate—of course—with a variety of people. As winter sets in—the long, cold, deep winter that will bring the purity of snow—we will slowly become aware—inevitably—of the economy of our friendship. He will impose on me, using my apartment as his crashpad of choice; I will force him to let me drive because of his constant state of one or another intoxication; I will pass through rain-damp Tokyo streets, gazing with wonder upon the aesthetics of construction sites, and we will slowly—slowly—ease to a breaking of relations. This, without question, is inevitable. But as doomed as this friendship is; as impossible to stop that moment of final accounting, when a certain carefully negotiated sum of money will change hands across an bar table, nevertheless we will enjoy our moment in the sun.

"Hey Ritchie, I was thinking we should do something different tonight."

Laidback and looking at his cell phone, Tucker talks to me off-handedly.

"What's that?"

"Well looks like some buddies of mine are going to be at some art gallery. We can probably check it out, maybe meet some chicks."

"Ritchie, I am curious, though. What's brought you to Japan? Why are you here?"

I breathe out.

"Well. Long story."

“No rush.”

“I first came here when I was nineteen. I saved up pocket money from my part-time job, and as soon as I could, I went out west by rail-pass. Then, as I was bouncing around Los Angeles, this email arrived in my inbox—it was for a flight special to Kyoto, only \$350 round-trip. I checked my bank balance; I realized I could do it, so I hopped on the flight.”

“And you liked it?”

“I think it changed my whole outlook on things. Kinda poetic in a way, too, that it was Kyoto first; all red lanterns and wet paving stones, temples and Gion. I did manage to get out to Tokyo, and there I even got a little culture-sick, just hemmed in by too many dyed-hair Yankee types, but even that was incredible you know.”

“And now you've decided to move here?”

“This country is just beautiful, you know. It's like they do everything in the most beautiful way possible; not the best or most efficient way, but the way that's going to surround themselves with aesthetic things.”

“Mmm, I don't know about that.”

VI.

“Ritchie, show up at Shibuya crossing at eight p.m. Saturday. I want money back.”

It does seem fitting to note here that as if he wasn't involved in enough drama, Shan had somehow also in the mix of things managed to get himself hit by a Japan Self-Defense Force truck. There are a lot of ironies, here, of course. But the long and the short of it is he is going to be paid a yen thirty million settlement, or almost 300,000 US for his two month stay in hospital and the reconstructive surgery on his legs. Or so he had me believe. Actually the final recompense is only 16,000 US, and much of that is already earmarked for the hospital and administrative fees. Be not quick to scoff at my naivety. I do not know or like Shan enough to investigate what he is doing, and three hundred thousand doesn't sound unreasonable considering the factors involved, especially the sensitivity of military vehicles hitting foreigners so widely reported in East Asian news. But Shan is able to use a sworn promise, hand in the air, pledge to the blood commitment, of providing 10% of settlement to me in return for my support of him in order to encourage my group's support of him during his period of trial. He even buys a few tailor-made shirts and spends some money on expensive drinks to show substance to his stories. The truth does come out eventually, in a curious way, but in the meantime, he's in jail, he's out; I'm visiting; I'm being caught up in events and unable to get funds to him; everything is to and fro.

“Ritchie I want full accounting of money entrusted to you and a refund of anything you haven't spent.”

The sound of his voice on that unexpected phone call does send a chill down my back. But stupidly, he doesn't even show up to his promised appointment; and it is only weeks later that he finally manages to hunt me down, at which point I bare my teeth to him and show no sympathy whatsoever as he explains where's he been for the last few months.

“There was an administrative error. They arrested me, but somebody broke into the records office and set fire to the building. So the police had no record of why I was being held, and they thought I was an illegal alien. They kept me on Sado-shima for four months until they figured out what had happened.”

“Sado-shima? Isn't that the old place where they exiled people?”

“Mmm.”

And Shan is actually being honest, for once; there was indeed a fire set by a deranged criminal that resulted in his extended incarceration; LeFauve for all his influence is almost certainly not behind this.

“Well what did you do? How was it?”

“They kept me out in fields doing carpentry work. It's been goddamn cold.”

“Well, I sympathize.”

“As for the money...”

As for the money, a fifth, which isn't unreasonable at all, disappeared in the handover from Eric to me, and more than a half we had to pay out to keep his stuff from being evicted from his apartment. After all, he just disappears all of a sudden after telling us that we need to look after his stuff for just a month, so one month drags to two, and two drags to three before we realize we have to cut the rate of spending and move everything to self-storage or we'll drain his bank account in two months. That is also a big waste of time and effort, not to forget all the intangibles of incurring U.S. Embassy wrath for assisting public enemy #1—who can put a price tag on that?

“As for the money, I'm wondering why you need it back at all? You promised 10% of the settlement, do you remember? So that would be three million yen.”

“10%? 10%? Do you have paper record of that?”

He looks at me with a look of scorn, but what Shan doesn't realize is that I have one more card than he does.

“No, but as you're smiling, I think you remember exactly well. So why do you need four hundred thousand yen back when you're the one who's supposed to be forking over three million?”

“It's a matter of principle, dog. Hand over full fifteen hundred thousand, and I'll give you what I promised.”

But Charis had already played one last card. It's almost bizarre that is the Christian girl, the girl of absolute morals, who suggested we wade through all his legal paperwork when he transferred his goods from his apartment to self-storage. But feminine deviousness trumps absolutism. “LE-SAMA, HERE IS RECEIPT FOR FINAL PAYMENT OF 1.5 MILLION YEN FOR THE INCIDENT TAKING PLACE IN TAKABASHI INVOLVING MINISTRY...” And we looked at each other in the musty storage building; this told us what we need to know.

Shan does eventually get not quite US \$5,000 back, which is more than fair; I only later remember the cell phone bill, the other incidentals involved that mean he has taken a very convoluted process to get back a difference of several hundred dollars, an amount he surely would have paid in filing fees considering all the legal rigmarole it takes him to do what he does, not to forget he still owed me the 10% even of \$15,000 if not \$300,000. Yet I suppose he gets some satisfaction out of finally making bureaucracy work for him, and I suppose in a sense he is pleased to finally have a high-hand on me, to watch me squirm and cough up cash in process that leaves him with a sense of power. More details spill out-- Dominique's drug-trafficking conviction (drugs hidden in a convenient pocket), Dominique's psychotic breakdown at the country club leaving one very frightened Chinese (!) male hiding in a bathroom (rumors?), Dominique's apparent charge at one point that it was I, actually, who pulled a knife on her. But finally, all things said, the real thing that needs to be recorded is something that nobody with a name points out.

“And did you see nothing suspicious with the timing of it all? That he gets accused so strangely coincidental with some other expressed incident?”

“No. Not until years, years later, and only after fiascoes of my own.”

But the quiet nagging voices are easily silenced and that criminal Shan is sent on his way.

This has been an account in neat and organized form of things that were all happening simultaneously and far more messy, emotionally-trying, and indeed victimizing than as can be expressed in linear form. I am sorry, of course, Tucker, for leaving you holding the bag like that, and yes yes yes Julian is that famous auteur who later went on to produce so-and-so movie but is currently curating \$6 shows in Bowery. But then, all that being said, there is still that other major occupation of our lives, or simply our occupation, and this is of course at least two thirds of our energies, almost half our waking hours—it is really rather far too charming and amusing to pretend that one jets off to Japan, spends all of one's waking hours going to one or another amusing party or bar or club; that this is all of our lives or even just the meaningful part. I loved Japan, of course. What I didn't tell Tucker was that even the dyed-hair swarms of Roppongi that made me physically ill so many years ago also managed to inflict something psychological onto my view of the world. Of course I had known that the Japanese were odd; of course I had known that their cheap bleach-job youth were the trash of Asia. But it had never occurred to me so personally, hit so close to home, that there were aesthetic answers to things; that all of the contradictions of life could be answered in so insouciant a fashion.

Confession: in America I am nothing. A graduate of a medium-ranked Pennsylvania university, I can hope to work in a cloth-covered cubicle as a junior programmer at some semi-known company. The girls ignore me; my days are banal; and everything is just absolutely predictable to the nth degree, I have failed even in the timing of my birth, having missed the dot-com bubble that made people just two years older millionaires doing exactly the same major. Japan. I walk down the street, and girls giggle. My very presence in a subway car makes girls toy with their hair, and if I say something in English, I am instantly 'cool' and 'international.' But, even beyond this, even beyond the foreigner cool and all the assorted fringe benefits, detectable even in the most simplistic products or classical works of art, is a faint, tremulous, almost undetectable pathos of things, an indistinct undertone that only the most refined senses can pick up. Like a siren song, the country calls me, and when a salary offer from a company in Tokyo arrives, without a glance backwards I pack my bags and leave. My new company is a clean, bright, happy place overlooking the Dentsu plaza in Shimbashi, and I have the prestigious corner seat; I am the conquering American hero brought in to take our team to the very top of the rankings. And this I do, for a year, a golden year, operating in an archaic and stripped-down version of software that is totally obsolete in the U.S.

“Tell your friend that he's very rude.”

Had I known then what I knew just months later; had I had some inkling or prior warning about past history at the company or even just an especially perceptive and friendly ally from the domestic side, I would have been able, at the time of the initial assault, to have quickly turned the tables on the factory foreman and disarmed all onlookers instantly, preventing the internecine struggle that followed, and that left both of our influences hopelessly diminished. But at the time, I am completely focused on my battle with LeFauve; Charis, of all people, has taken this week to show up at my workplace with a prepared lunch, drawings gasps from assembled onlookers; and as people point out—even my stride is different; even my very walk has a combative and dominant edge, the purposeful roll of a fighter and brawler.

“That guy, you know, this is the first time he's ever talked to me in my eleven months here. I don't even know his name!”

“Mmm. Maybe that's part of the problem?”

For a second I look at my Japanese friend and remember the old saying-- you think you have a Japanese friend, until he enters a Japanese setting and you discover he's somebody else entirely. “You're taking his side?”

Tak grimaces; a look of pain crosses his head. “It's like this—Japanese society is a bit more focused on age and a bit more patriarchal than you might realize...”

But I'm already shutting my ears to this kind of talk; I hang them all with the same cord.

“All right, I don't have time to deal with small dicked losers with inferiority complexes. We have an entire series of products to roll out in six months, and the team had best fall in.”

Energia K.K. divides fairly predictably into two camps on either my or the foreman's side, or rather, most of the people seem to have some or other inclination although a noticeable minority remain aloof. As Tak says, Japanese culture still places a premium on the opinion of elders; the foreman is forty-five or older, and I am a freshly-minted university grad. But on the other hand, we are a new media technology company; our floor is filled with talents and design specialists, and these give me a little wink or nod, or otherwise indicate that they need a programming specialist more than a washed-up middle-aged son of an electrician. But then: Shimamura. And it takes me not months, but years to understand his play in this evolving little drama of ours.

“Ah, Ritchie-san. You think we will achieve good results next year?”

“Yes, sir, most definitely! We're all going to do our best, and totally wipe out the competition! Let's all do our very best, 'cuz I think we have a really cracker-jack outfit!”

“Ritchie! Ritchie! Shut the hell up!”

The last comment, of course, is the foreman's. I don't even remember until years later that it is Shimamura who brought on this moment; actually at the moment the most striking and painful realization is the entire room has fallen into silence. The entire company is watching at the end of the year banquet as the foreman stares at me with undisguised malice. I compose my face.

“Yes, sir, understood, and thank you sir.”

And conversation resumes.

Man fights against nature, against fellow man, against society, family, nations, reality itself. In the race to divide the pie, certain pieces will go to some individuals; others will seize portions that differ slightly from what they expected, even at times more so than they ever deserved. But conflict in the workplace; the war that takes place in so controlled and polite a setting, is always all that more vicious because the stakes are real.

"Okay this is the problem with foreman. If he had a problem with me, why didn't he come up to me one-on-one and explain what his gripe was. I take issue with the fact that he was talking to me for the first time--for the very first time--only when my friend is visiting the company, causing me to lose face with my friend, and that he is starting

the battle only when he is surrounded by two of his friends. Talk about your total pussy!"

My conversation partner, another expat from a different division of the company, nods sympathetically.

"And his team! They don't even hold eye contact with me when we pass in the hall. This is basically your definition of total passive-aggressivity, 'snipe from afar' loser and weaklings are tigers when it's battle at a distance, but completely fall apart face to face! I have things at stake here, too. My IT specialty is only useful to three or four corporations in the world. I can't back off because one pencil-dicked washed-up loser can't manage his own insecurities. What an absolute worthless piece of garbage."

As war breaks out, management and assorted big-picture types race to put out the fire, knowing the potential for open conflict to spread, infect the organization, and bring operations to a stand-still. But as time passes, the dawning realization is that trying to push the two of us together; trying to effect a friendship between the foreman and me, does only more harm rather than good.

"Look Ritchie. Try to look at things from the foreman's point of view. He's a forty-five year old factory labor chief who will never earn more than four-point-five million yen a year. All his life he's wanted a desk in the headquarters, and now he finally gets one, only to immediately run into the hot-shot foreigner talent, brought in at a widely known cool six million a year. You're young; you have a beautiful girlfriend; all the Japanese girls coo at you on the street. Of course he's going to hate you!"

"I understand this. I sympathize with this. But here, just take a look at this winter ski trip list... Sugiyama Daiichi, Nakayama Tomoko, Takahashi Yuuta.. and then, 'RIICHI.' It's like I get to be some parody of a human being; they walk around mockingly saying 'Riichi' 'Riichi' 'Riichi' like I'm some kind of TV entertainment talk show host while they get to be the real human beings."

"That pisses me off, too. More than I care to admit."

It lasts for months. I begin to get on guard, looking for fresh outrages; I know I'm causing stress to the foreman as well, but he has the advantage of numbers, and he is required, by his job, to frequently visit the actual factories; I never know when or where he will turn up. But finally I begin to slip; it's just too much to handle all at once. Sometimes good happens, and sometimes bad, but the trend is down-down-down. It becomes impossible to work; to think straight; and my results are slipping. But finally, finally, I begin to get leverage against the foreman.

Winter hits that year with a special, crazed intensity. Just as conflict has been simmering for months before finally erupting into the open, so it seems that previous overly-warm years have been storing up some reservoir of cold weather that now breaks upon us with a strength and ferocity that is untold. A gigantic blizzard, a veritable winter hurricane, blasts into Kanto, snowing for days straight and bringing the city to an absolute standstill. But the snowhounds; the powder-freaks and winter sportsmen-- these are all giving little winks to each other, and despite all ongoing dialectics; despite the march of schedules and timetables and software release dates, this too is a private reality; a shared understanding against the debacles of the day.

"Shan, I have no desire to hang out with you, but allow me to counsel you this far. You are handling the case completely wrong. I think Waseda would even have backed you up from the start had you just denied her charges without denying that you were in a relationship with her. Your story holds no water, and so you have no credibility."

"Oh yeah, big words now, Mr. Spectator! You know everything about law. Amazing you didn't solve my case already."

"Look the idea is not to save yourself; your own reputation is clearly nonexistent. You have to dig up dirt on Dominique herself."

The battle goes on, November, December, January. Finally January Shan is sent to court for the final hearing, and I'm not there; I only learn later through other means, the trial begins and Shan confronts a subdued, distant Dominique in the courtroom, and all charges are dropped. However, once more there is a technicality. Shan has not been in university sufficiently to be a "full-time student;" he has violated the terms of his visa, even though being found innocent of everything. With his head hanging low and thoughts of the eternal sea, he is led away in chains and LeFauve sneers in victory, his white teeth conspicuous on his dark brown face. At work, my white-hot intensity conflict with the foreman results in no progress and both of us are disgraced in a sense; me for fighting the working man, the foreman for fighting a twenty-four year old, but I am the one on a non-protected contract. Let there be one cautionary voice in my head. Let there be an advisor at this one point in the drama to put a restraining hand on my shoulder, saying 'caution, caution.' But there is no such thing. There is only the absolute zest of the 'video-game existence.' Every moment is pregnant with meaning; every decision is enripened with possibility, every random encounter is another chance to turn things around.

"Hi, you must be new to Tokyo? My name's Ritchie Ufuo. I work with events and the foreigner scene here. Here's my business card. We're doing a ski trip next month."

"Hello, you're with the AEON group? I run a foreigner ski club. This is our flyer."

“Could you post this ski trip flyer in your break room? Thanks...”

Who is this strange person, infinitely active, infinitely restless, infinitely energetic bouncing across Tokyo that last, final winter that decides everything? In recollection he seems scarcely me, somebody else, a caricature of a human being, so absolutely certain the next moment is the most important one, so absolutely convinced of the righteousness of his cause. He is brilliant, this Other Me. He is so close to being totally satisfied—but only the next moment count; only the next win, the next social victory, the next score of a ticket sold to a ski trip. I know it is me in truth. Even living that person, I am aware of a certain divergence of reality—and Charis, as well, trying to put the brakes on something, succeeding only in seeing the moment of perfect closure pass, only to sadly walk away, only to know how beautiful things are—if only they can be contained. But even the self-aware monster is self-knowingly charging ahead. The breakdown at work is just the final proximate cause; there is no more stopping things now.

“How many you sold?”

“Forty.”

“Great. I unloaded thirty-three so far.”

“We going to reach two hundred.”

We are all of us—Soren, Tucker, me, maybe even Charis—superficial, immature, childish, perhaps even worthless people. Our superficial interactions reveal a life of total ease, one in which all problems are solved for us, and nothing really important can break through. But even this being the case, I can't help but record that mad, bad winter. It's mad and it's bad, and things are really blowing up now and I can't really be expected to destroy my life, reach some overwhelming poverty just to record genuinely deep things, am I? This is me. Hate me. Love me. Forget me. I don't care. I am jumping around Tokyo selling ski trip tickets, and I am conferencing with Tucker, and I am the center of young Tokyo, take it or leave it. I didn't ask to be born, and I didn't ask for such overwhelming comfort and ease in my life. I was born to it. Everyone had to collapse so I could inherit. So I make the most of what I have, and despise the ugly, the poor, the diseased and infirm, because they do not belong to my circle, and if I don't pull off this ski-trip, LeFauve will win; I will be swept away.

“One hundred ten tickets. Net fifty bucks each, we will clear five grand.”

“Not bad. But we can do better.”

Let me burn into this paper how awesome we are. Let me write my name across the stars, Ritchie Ufuo, Tokyo events promoter, Tucker Black, club kid and sunglasses-wearer. We are so unbelievably cool that we do not even know your name.

“How is the thing against the foreman going?”

“He tried again to slap me down; end of year party. Went nowhere.”

“Small dick!”

“Typical Jap!”

I know you do not like me. I know that I had a certain measure of good will that I have now exhausted, coming off superficial, trivial, pointless to exist. But I cannot lie about these conversations; I cannot record deep things as having been discussed when all we do is pose and blow smoke in other people’s eyes. I go from party to party; I am welcomed in thirty different apartment buildings merely by name. But that is all there is in this life, and your miseries and commonplace career moves; your feeble attempts to gain leverage when economies do not yield profits so easily do not impress me. I am me. I am God. I am Ritchie Ufu.

“So you just arrived Japan? You’re living in Chiba? Ah, god you gotta get out of this place.”

“No, I like literature. I just want to read, not really party all the time in the city.”

“Baby you can’t last in that place. It’s nowhere!”

Everything that is to come in young twenty-something foreigner Tokyo gets built that winter. On the ashes of the foundation of the old Soren empire, I built a superstructure that takes Tucker to his highest degree, that integrates all the various currents of six thousand people who count into a perfect, beautiful whole. Maybe you know somebody who lives here during this time and doesn’t know me. But probably that person doesn’t count. Maybe you think this is all superficial childishness. Yes, this claim holds true.

“Dude, how about talking about things that count? How about this world full of inequities and unfairness? How about reform and making the world a better place?”

“Give me a freakin’ break!”

Don’t hate; don’t judge. Realize that everything you enjoyed your time there came from me; that either me or somebody right reporting to me built it up. The freakin’ paperback exchange—sheesh—that was launched after a lazy Saturday coffee near Inokashiro. Yet the war is breaking apart at work; other-Ritchie comes home, sometimes fists clenched in rage, sometimes waking up at night with teeth gritting. All these passive passive passive Japanese, playing little games of pretending to be friendly and then slipping away. Offering fake little smiles and sarcastic bows, but hating the foreigner, hating especially the foreigner whose girlfriend shows up to work, hands out

homecooked sweets. The smallest dicked, most insecure males in the world, the weakest least-liked of all the world's nationalities. Japanese losers. I hate them.

Finally the weekend of the company trip opens up with absolute clarity, a clear blue winter sky of limitless visibility; had the sky not been blue, it surely would have been a diamond carpet of stars stretching to the ends of the galaxy. Yet here already we are assembling at Shibuya station; already the cars of our caravan are lining up, and in the pleased relaxed anticipation of maximum physical exertion, we hang out, waiting for the full arrival, self-consciously cool in ski goggles and sunglasses.

"So, ready?"

"Yeah, let's go."

"Uh, Nagai-kun, let me ride in your car..."

We meet up in Shibuya on an early Saturday morning, the sun not quite up, and late night clubbers wasted and drunk stumbling to the main station to await the first train. As the morning fully breaks, our group assembles, and we load up the vehicles with our baggage, sunglasses on in crescendoing light, before finding the expressway and heading north to Tohoku. Our destination for the night is Fukushima, about halfway up to the real far north, but good enough to get real snow. To each side, the city falls away. At first, it's just a matter of each conglomeration of tall buildings becoming less impressive and more far between, but by Inoshiro there are rice paddies to the roadsides and large green fields separating waterways and park walkways, distant elevated tracks the Shinkansen to Morioka. Then finally it's genuine countryside: undeveloped land and the foothills of mountains—forested ridges that surround a highway that ascends inexorably to higher elevations. And here, like a shock, nature hits, like a blow to one's chest, a complete reversal of values; shocking tree movement, shocking sunlight between hillsides, such intense sensation that I feel as if I am a two-dimensional drawing, as unreal as a cinematic separation layer of meaning. Snow falling from a leaden sky! Mountains that rise up to meet us, tower up, into which we plunge! The incredible brilliance of sunlight glittering from an inland lake! Maybe it is because I have spent the last six years in the city, nature is almost tangible, frangible, almost a fist in my throat. Nobody else, however, seems to notice, and fearful of coming off as crazy, I keep my silence. And the driver, Imai, turns on the traffic radio; he is a bit concerned about being able to get physically back, but as for turning back, this won't happen; we won't let it. It isn't until we pass through a mountain pass that all of a sudden the wind shifts and we are immediately, irrecoverably bombarded with snow. The effect is of a total blizzard. The massive scale of the white-out is so intense, in fact, that out of concern our driver turns on the traffic radio, but of course the true powder-hounds in our caravan will hear nothing of turning back; this is unbelievably positive news for them as we are already two hundred kilometers out of the city. A heavy density of snow

falling against a gray-white cloud sky with oncoming traffic providing headlights subdued by the weather and evergreen trees covered with blankets of this and previous snowfall. The roads are covered to the depth of four to six inches and traffic slows to 60 kph pace, evenly spaced out on the mountain highway.

“But at least it's going to be brilliant.”

“Un-freakin' believable.”

We pile out of the buses; Tucker and I organize the foreigners and associated Japanese so everybody knows what is going on.

“Okay, come here; that is where you get your lift ticket. That is our lodge...”

I catch sight of some beautiful Japanese girls; I take note of the breathtaking scenery. But then I pull away from the group. I am a much better snowboarder and this trip, this trip, I have no feeling of sociality in my heart. It's really falling apart now, and I need to renew myself with pure sport.. Somewhere, elevation 4000m, the sight lines are totally open, the heart thrills at the grand vistas that unfold from ridge unto undulating ridge, a veritable sea of mountains stretching as far as the eye can see. And this also—the crystalline perfection of winter air, the hoarfrost, the icy damp of snow crystals that have worked their way between jacket and ski pants. “A dagger in the heart” one writes of cute lost blonde girls small as a button; “a knife down one's throat”—the sensation of countryside opening up before one as one leaves the city—all of its history and baggage—behind; the pain that is so deep, so fundamental, that one is incapacitated and speechless—such terminology can only be reserved for communion with nature, so terrible, so unforgiving, against which our measures of human lives are so frail.

Is there any other way it would happen? The storm hits me at the top of Flattern Peak 2, and here is total white-out; here is visibility two point five meters. Siberia! Stalingrad! The nightmares of winterbound soldiers thousands of kilometers from home. Only indistinct shapes can be seen in the distance; the ropeways mark the path to trails, but whether one returns to the main gate, whether one skis deeper into the park—this is unknown. I am susceptible, of course, to the glorification of the inaccessible and luxuriant where words else fail. Do we read Hemingway because the trauma of senseless slaughter has given him highest wisdom? Or are we voyeurs (and not even so much as our parents' parents' generation) to bohemian Paris, Duisburg limousines, the Crillon, laughing rotund Greek counts both superior and beneath us? These thoughts race through the mind of a snow-bound skier, though practicality returns with the strapping of boot to board, inches off the cliff wall. And then, with heart pounding, to leap off; to jump into the void, and be consumed instantly with the immediate task of meeting the onrush of terrain with a skilled and practiced eye. A sloosh here, and a slash there; a long slide down one gentle incline to fishtail against the

sudden approach of tall fir-trees. And then suddenly air where ground is expected; an only subconscious noting of a buried flagline; one is off-piste now, one is off-piste now, the snow is two feet deep and utterly ungroomed. Losing velocity is equal to suicide.

[Okay this is what happened. I have already lost. They came over to me at workplace (and of course a they, no Japanese person ever dares confront an American one-on-one) and told me I wouldn't be here next year.]

In pure powder, one is weightless. There are over thirty commonly used words to describe various types of snow, but the best, the very best, is champagne—a frothy light nothingness that melts beneath one's skis, that offers minimal resistance yet effortless support. To crash into a bank of champagne is to sink into a perfect pillow of utterly ethereal fluff. In World War II an Allied pilot fell six miles from the sky and landed in a bank of champagne—he survived, whereas any other surface then known to man would have spelled instant death. Flip-turn, flip-turn, flip-turn. In a cloud bank now, I slide through acres of champagne without the slightest expenditure of energy, sense of time, or sensation of gravity. This goes on for seeming eternity. But as quickly as it begins, the trees are now starting to creep in close, we're out of the fog now to noticeably lower terrain, and finally, in a little valley with a melting stream at the bottom, I slush out of snowboardable terrain to collapse, exhausted, into a convenient bank, and seek to take my bearings, knowing a long trek now awaits, if only that much, to return simply to the place I began.

[I wouldn't weep before them. It was all going to happen anyway. I did great work. Towards the end when I was sensing the movement, I went from sixty hours a week to seventy. But I had disturbed the 'wa,' the Japanese harmony. It was simply unseemly to have a twenty-something pushing around a middle-aged man. And the apparent police record; all the rumors of outside trouble—these didn't help.]

Is this all metaphor? Maybe. Maybe I'm writing this just for you, maybe I can't stop. But I know the tears, then, are real, the salt water blur behind complete opaque gold-mirrored lenses of my ski goggles, and the central, central pain, a pain like a sensation of freezing—although I am not cold—that burns to the very core. This is the end; this is the end. Winter is here. In my heart had been borne a hatred so intense that my face became a smiling mask. This isn't "Fear and Trembling;" this isn't about grudges or vendettas or counterstrikes delivered decades later. Rather everything happened the only way it could have happened, and I knew who was behind it, and it was only hours before I returned to the lodge, the sky already evening and twinkling with stars, and trip-mates worried but relieved at my safe return, but everyone already gossiping I'm not going to be renewed on contract next year.

[All those English teachers on their programs; their ready-made friends; their two thousand a month. How fortunate they are and not even knowing who did everything for

them. And me and my savings and built-up infrastructure, and relationships that all depended on continual high salary (how could I maintain ties with the clubs if I didn't have two thou in discretionary spending a month at the very least?)]

This is it. I have become TOO COOL. I look at people's faces now and see only the possibility of profit or loss. My skiing has become so good I can't even hang out with the ordinaries anymore; I can't bother to hang out with the crowd. And even Tucker is falling behind as I become an eater of pure light and a drinker of mere energy. I will lose my job. But who cares? I will cease all contact with everyone else, but what to matter? The dizzying faces of other human beings, agents of a LeFauve who is actually doing nothing; the workplace conflicts that make us too aesthetically or intellectually outraged to even bother with this thing called reality; I am now infinitely beyond the reach of any other human being, and I can't be bothered with your commonplace concerns. The crash is coming. The crash is coming. Like a dizzying ride down a mountainside of pure, pure snow, I know that I have exceeded all safety boundaries years or eons ago, and the city is conquered, supplicant, legs spread and yielding before my sarcastic, unaccepting, coldly assessing eye. Goodbye Charis! You leave after I yell at you in a fit of rage, calling you a whore. Goodbye Tucker! Your mercilessly bottom-line personality annoys me, and I don't need you as much as you need me. Goodbye Shan! You are destined to be judged by the merciless policies of the Tokyo Metropolitan Criminal Court and deported back to Chinkyland. We should have had deep conversations. We should have talked about Life and Despair and Fate and History, but face it, we're all too well-off and beautiful to really ever care. I wish I could be deep. I wish I didn't have to spit in your eye laughing manically all the way to the bottom.

That night, the last night in Fukushima, my eyes suddenly open in the darkened room, and I am instantly awake. In the dim light from underneath the door to the hallway, I can tell that nothing is amiss, but I rise up anyway. It's as if something other than the fully conscious decision-making part of my brain is deciding something. Intellectually, I rationalize that I want to take one last dip in the rotemburo, the outdoors bath, so long as I have the opportunity, and I do gather up the materials for this task and then ever-so-gingerly open the door. The hallway is quiet. There might be the faintest of buzzes from the fluorescent lights that line the hallway, but otherwise the silence is only broken by the occasional creaking noises of the wooden building. Through dim corridors and down the stairs I walk and then approach the door to the outdoor bath. Once again the antechamber is unoccupied. I grab one of the plastic hampers to toss my clothing in, and wearing nothing but a friendship bracelet on one wrist, walk outdoors into a cold winter night.

My feet curl about the stones set into the ground, and I make my way to the pool. As I dip into the water, it engulfs me in viscous warmth. Then I am submerged, and then I am bubbling air out of my nostrils as I surface a good ways out towards the far edge of the pool. I look up at the sky and my breath is taken away. A trillion little flakes of snow are falling from the sky, and an owl's low hoot provides the only possible counter-point. The scene is of utter tranquility.

--Beautiful, ne?

The female voice, though low and controlled, startles me, but when I turn in the water, it's none other than Tomoko, without a stitch of clothing and completely non-chalant. She has a thin, slender body, with large almost aureole-less nipples on the barest bulge of breasts and her sex covered by a neatly trimmed thatch of dark hair. Somehow I keep my eyes locked with hers.

--Tomoko, what are you doing up?

--I guess same thing you are, hmm.

A sudden splash of water alerts to the presence of the other two girls as well.

--Eiko. Shiori! I'm sorry, I didn't mean to intrude.

--You're not intruding.

I look back. There's no wavering.

--Well okay.

--Don't even talk.

--But I'm sinking to the bottom of society. Why is this happening?

--Don't worry.

Not sex. Actually we know each other so well that I know that there isn't even a possibility of it. Eiko draws her long wet hair out of the water, Shiori measures hers with a turned forearm, and with a mock bringing together of two fingers, Tomoko gives me the most curious of all possible smiles. And there are thousands of flickering moments passing through my head; so much, so much that cannot be expressed but expressed simultaneously. Paciano was the primary victim. She is a victim and unable to control herself. We are all addicted to soft and easy pleasures, and I am superficial, incapable of expressing deep suffering, a mock partyboy who only through luck had his day in the sun. I collapse but am still miles above the ordinary surface of the universe. Death is final, and the hostess girl was just trying to make a living. A Marine dies in

Ikebukero. This is about I who is you or me, or no one absolutely at all. And I am in the category now of the gently-treated friend, and no possibility of love exists if ever it did.

HARAJUKU SUNDAY

SECTION II

VII.

When I was a teenager, I believed in Catholicism but not in Redemption, not in an afterlife. All of the rules but none of the rewards. What pathological creature would claim this system of belief: that one should suppress desire and forego pleasures, without the compensation that doing so would lead to a future reward? Only the type that believed pain was the natural state of the universe. Nietzsche: "If you stare too long into the abyss, it will start to stare back at you." The abyss started to stare back at me that day, in the low-slung, sleazy light of Hisako's apartment, distorted by chemicals. The abyss was the burnt residue of heroin in metal cans, the haze that came across us, sinking us into timelessness, and the hunger for more that always came. "No wait," I said, in hour twenty-three of a near-sleepless weekend, and pushed for an interruption in our downward spiral. We toked instead; or took pills. There are the psychotherapeutic claims made about it. I never "rolled" myself, felt that oft-reported giddiness or euphoria. I merely understood. The Japanese fear this stuff. Their entire cultural edifice is built on command and control. Smoke up, madchen: (we did).

"Etchi shitai?" she asked. Do you wanna do it? OK, I replied. And I removed her clothing, piece by piece until her thin adolescent body lay on the sheets bare and nude. She never moved a muscle to help us: she lay perfectly still, and suffered me to move her limbs. I thrust myself upon her: under drugs we lasted for three hours and both cried out. Thus an entire weekend could pass, lost in our dream world. When hunger came, we checked first if it were light, and walked out for fast food or Yoshinoya. Shibuya, under chemicals, seemed more glossy and normal. Everybody streamed about: they had their agendas.

"Look, don't you wanna stop?" I would say this six or seven times. "Yamenai"

Why do we think sex degrading for a girl? I am no original artist of this question. There are those who don't, true, but the consensus is otherwise general. I felt she had sacrificed no purity for our love; I was the pure one. The thought itself compelled me across her body and onto her face. I thought hostile and degrading thoughts even in the act of love. I wanted to inject through action my scorn and contempt into her mind and thoughts as my body injected into hers. But this was impossible-this was childish thinking. And then, late on Sunday, the clock hands would march inexorably towards the last train, and I would be left, in passing lights, to ponder the meaning of life on a train heading north out of Tokyo.

I don't know if I would have "sunk," so to speak, into drug use if not for meeting Hisako. But with her ready supply (she traded her body for drugs, I'm sure) of a virtual pharmacopia, she kept me on heroin until I was a regular. Life became easier: I smiled more to my colleagues, never even thought about the environment of fear and loathing I had inspired through my own behavior, and I discovered new avenues for introspection. The first MDMA trip is like a door opening: you understand your own traumas. Every drug experience after that, once you have sliced open your glistening sac of mind-flesh, puts you on a firmer platform. You become more powerful than the uninitiate. With drugs, the very levels of your consciousness become separated. Those of weak character or timidity become frightened at this point, and have been known to have "bad trips." Hisako, after one very extended hash session, had one of these. They turn to those they need, and beg the protection of physical arms. Those who have lived through fire have no worries: they indulge in their psychopathy, the understanding that at the base of it all, we are not our personalities, we are not our voice, we are not our unvoiced thoughts. We are simply the thread of the Will. Having achieved this wisdom, decades of human experience are crossed in hours. Suddenly, we are hundreds of years old in our young bodies. And our abilities to manipulate less tutored brains becomes intense.

Sometime in late winter I had asked Narumi on a date. She was thirty and beautiful. But in my mind was only the desire to punish: between the loss of Chie and the early hostility to Hisa, I was playing for cultural stakes. I advanced: the knight avec fleur. I kept silent, as the joker laughed. Over the course of five days, I worked, in perfect honor, and at the right interval, sent over my number. She enjoyed every second of it; she lapped it up; her friend, at the end, withdrew uncertainly. When we met, I had taken a long voyage to go there. Her next chess move was including our ostensible group of friends. Joker was present: he changed the venue from the desired foreign to standard Japanese. I could barely touch the food. Narumi blushed, and played the bashful bride. Joker worked into me. I invited some other friends since it was going to be a group occasion. In the end, easy-going Trevor called her Naru-chan and got her phone number. None of this was outside the rules. But we were thinking the same thoughts, and when the moment was right, I had enjoyed my fill and backed away. I remember her face, torn up in sadness. Joker was not subdued, asking insistently what was wrong. Later I saw him, and finally he, too, had shut up. One thirty year old woman and one late thirty man: recognized experts in their field, fluent in English, yet I at twenty-three walked away with the sweet satisfaction; I was the teacher. In my defense, I played this game only to demonstrate that I knew the culture better than those who claimed to know me. But this knowledge did not save me from the relentless silence of the disapproving group, and I fell deeper into sickness.

For Hisako, the levers of control were ever more readily available because of her youth and complete decadence. By the time I first met her (October), she had become adept, through trial and error, at exactly how much push she could give one of her

victims. Middle-management was her target of choice: men in their late thirties or forties, men who had families and reputations to uphold. She was careful to take only what she could: she was a tax. In the end, she overplayed one hand and accepted the consequences. And this hidden brutality I deplore.

For my part, I am guilty, too, of course, but all I can report is that I met her on the way down, and "she seduced me." (All molesters say this.) In the new clear light, I made the choice to move on: I endured. I pondered, for less than a second, withdrawal. Breakthrough finally occurred only with continued drug use. I broke through mimetic consciousness, to inhabit others as more living and ideal than in reality; more powerful in their control over representation than even me. Planning out the scenario, I thought it would go this way: instead it went that, and demanded only minor future revision. They will invent new DSM categories for this; new philosophies must be constructed. But having returned now to the present-day, we have no choice but to spin back again.

"Send me shooting into that murky stream." What brilliance in adolescence. I wonder what has become of him: the poet of our teenage years. My own work, still competent, seems so much more immature. I hint at the dream of sex; he breaks through to the nihilism beyond. After sex with Hisa, there's nothing left to experience: I have done it all. All that remains is pure biological imperative: platonic forms of a young girl's body on primitive consciousness. This I abuse, insofar as pain itself is more than mere sensation.

"Send me shooting into that murky stream." This was childhood: a murky stream of undeveloped impressions. Examine the five-year old, her thoughts unformed; responding simply to kindness and laughter; she does not know of exploitation. With Hisa, I could only perform because she was a whore. There is no way I could deflower a young girl child short of being a faunlet of my own. But our investigations reveal this goes on all the time. Others are deeper into the darkness. It is a wonder all has not already been lost.

"Send me shooting into that murky stream." It calls me yet again, and so I plunge.

Beginnings: on a clear cold September day a 747 plunges out of the leaden sky and lands at a rice-paddy airport. Everything is hushed and controlled: the people walk about with robotic precision, bowing in perfect servility. One is deeply impressed. The red carpet is brought out; the dignitaries, now local, make their speeches which we puzzle over, and do not know what to expect. Although everyone's experience is the same, everyone's situation is different. Or so they say. Actually it's with identical puzzlement that manic 72 hours pass, yet for a few individuals our faces are met with some amount of trepidation. We're known: our pictures posted on the Internet, the

reputation of our six-week long battle with the anonymous authorities in Japan well-established. Yet engrossed in our own contests of will, we believe in the philosophy: "the tiger has been mounted; now ride it all the way through." This philosophy is later proven incorrect, but we don't know this yet. I don't know about the importance of a fourteen hour flight with a person whispering in your ear their anxieties. A soldier charged with cowardice in Iraq reported a similar factor to be of major importance. I do know that the inchoate anger is natural: it's the stuff of aggression and mammoth-chasing for the tribal good. We citizens of the empires idolize this quality, this masculinity. We would have been great officers in Roman times, and put many barbarians to the blade. But here in queasy silence and anonymous replies, the struggle between foreigner and foreigner takes on an edge of violence and genuine hatred we cannot direct towards our masters. Entire friendships are closed off, at minimum; the banal instincts of killing are given throttled-channel, and blood is almost always almost shed, (yawn).

This relationship does not obtain with our cousins, the Japanese. Indeed, plunging into full love with one of them can occur in minutes, once you have accepted that you will live and sleep with somebody with whom you cannot speak. So, on that February when we first met, there were no need for needful questions: we simply began. I remember it well: the morning spent exploring the shopping palaces, the fine Japanese refinement of the American institution. Yukiko apparently did not get my text, or she kept me at the useful distance she preferred. I was half an hour early in any case; Hisa came over and stood next to and under me. I declined to budge. Through a hand gesture and the opening of her middle-school schoolbag to reveal condoms and cash, she in broad light proposed a financial exchange. I was mistrustful, of course, in ten minutes we were leaving together. She knew the way. In Yokohama's sleazy red-light district, certain proprietors made it their business not to know their clientele's names. The places were cheap: 4000 yen for two hours, and like everything else in Japan, cleaner that you could ever imagine.

Did I have problems with performance that first time? Of course: she was only my second girl. But yet I completed the act, thinking of Alisa. She was businesslike, standoffish, and professional. She observed without emotion as I stared with hunger upon her body. She performed her tasks of ablution as if trained. And she did, upon request, leave her cell phone number, and I met her again the following weekend.

The second time, and the third, fourth, fifth, and twelfth, were easier. Indeed, by occasion six, I had lost any sort of inhibitions, and gone over to the offense. I pinned her arms down as Alisa had liked; I fucked her without mercy. She was surprised at first, made some squealing noise, and then surrendered. It was an act of pillage and rape, one young man of a tribe having his way with the discarded female of another who was slowly dying of starvation. I bought her uniforms and came onto them. I came onto her hair and shot myself over her face. I tied her up and left her there while I went out for a

smoke. I returned, recharged, inflicted violence upon her, and entered her yielding flesh again. She was pathetic; my heart thrilled.

Most of the time, though, I let things develop in their languid way, and then I became her weekend companion. She had no more need for endless new toys since I kept her company during what used to be her dark hours. We watched videos together; I introduced her to Bjork and Smashing Pumpkins. How many people can you sit with for two hours listening to one song on repeat play? In those hours we were just orphans of the storm. Literally, also: both of our fathers were dead in childhood. Her only advantage on me, eight years her senior and her utmost social and academic superior, was the total control over life and death she held because she was always ready, on any day or hour, to leave existence. And when an individual reaches this stage, then you do whatever she fundamentally asks, because you enjoy her company, because you are lonely, and because death is final. So yes, I, too, am complicit, for insofar as I have a free will, I chose that path, time and again, bought the ticket, made the journey, rang that doorbell. I slid with her, except to the end, and that is not even certainly certain to not be not yet. I paid for her sincerity with my own, and put my life on the counter in exchange for hers.

A clear cool autumn day, so sunshiny one is half-blinded; so crisp, one pulls one's windbreaker closer around one. The brilliant light of an autumn sky with a 60s temperature crisp but not cold. Coming down the street overpass stairs near our apartment, the one built in the 1970s, slightly cheap architecture, she catches me by surprise. In that moment she is somehow vulnerable yet confident: a smile is just about to erupt across her face, but in that half-second before she sees me the emotion is unmistakably of little girl lost.

-Ritchie! Ritchie! Ritchie-kun!

It is not a question of perfect balance or an idealized form; it is the knowledge that things are transient, that this beautifully perfectly well-made girl is in love but that garish exaggeration of details or explicit self-expression is unthinkable. Everything is just on the cusp.

-So, any information on the guy?

-He's a senior official at the Ministry of Finance. Married, two kids.

-Jun SHIBUYA, reads out Hisako from a screen. Okay, Ministry of Finance, 38 wow, looks so much younger. Todai, married, two kids, older one a girl fourteen, son ten. Department chief. We did it! We did it!

Details across a blue LCD computer screen; lines of data marching upward as the cursor scrolls down. We get to work.

-Oh, pardon me sir, how rude of me. This is yours, though, maybe? Maybe ten million? Phone number is in there.

A deliberate bump on a Tokyo street.

-Do you think he lost it or something?

-What is taking so long?

-Freakin' annoying!

-Maybe we didn't write the email correctly?

-Maybe it's the wrong guy?

-Maybe he needs time to get the money?

You can do the craziest things and still feel utterly banal; we watch television; we watch the clouds skidding across the sky; birds wheeling in formation outside a coffeeshop on a cold crisp day.

-Ah forget about it. If he doesn't answer in two weeks, we'll repeat the drop-off.

But silence doesn't mean inactivity. It's us who are burned; there's been a flurry of activity, we just didn't see it--until all of a sudden we see it.

(Snow, imaginary snow, falls from the Tokyo sky. Everybody is walking about oblivious; it is amazing they do not see the ash and bone.)

This is not a drug moment of cohesion, the coherent fundamental structure suddenly appearing to one in no special moment after so many samplings of detail. Rather, what is going on is a video still, an artificial suspension of the flow of time to mark the absolute peak of things inherent in the moment before complete reversal. In a still-frame frozen time moment, a young man sitting on the tatami leaning over, a girl at her computer, and all the apartment that surrounds them, perfect, motionless, unmoving time, even if such a thing is impossible in real life, the killers poised right outside the door, and one can almost imagine the projector whirring, the film flapping because a splice has come undone and a single frame is stuck in picture. There are parallels here; metaphors; metonymy, but what is key is not literary trick but memory in

place, corrosion of time. In the bureau in the girl's room, there is a vanity with scattered cosmetics, paper shoeboxes, clothes strewn about, a wall decoration of a giant lotus, a sculpture of a Buddha, and heaps and heaps of fashion magazines, literally hundreds and hundreds of copies of Cawaii and Popteen, dating back to god knows when, dog-eared and much folded over. In the beginning, her possessions consisted of less; a temporary lived in place in the original Yokohama flat that seemed "just temporary moved-in to." Here in Ginza, the decor of our new place is somehow that of a dusky rose, with old patterned blanket sheets and inherited furniture that that reflects the taste of a long gone grandmother, an amalgamation of the original flat, new possessions acquired from the interstitial period, new Western tastes. An old carpet. Yet she is unconscious of the dissonance, her head facing the computer screen and blued with the CRT light, she is concentrating intently on what is a business matter.

This is Ginza, the richest part of Tokyo. We ended up here. How do two youngsters live there? It is a question that hangs in the minds of many of the fellow apartment dwellers, but decorum prevents coinhabitants any direct inquiries, the stern faces masks as they trundle into the elevator every morning to go off to their jobs at the Ministries or the banks. It is happiness of a sorts, divorced as it from any notion of progress, change, or evolution. We can say that hundreds of thousands of people at least wanted to live in this place; perhaps hundreds of thousands were not willing to do the things required or to wait the lifetimes of patience involved; we can say that in addition to temporary literary conceits, the people inside are also timeless, mindless of the future, of consequences, that they are living in existential despair. But is this really true? Academic terminology can contain no such fleeting, transient moments, resisting analysis, interpretation. The precarious balance is so infinitesimally small in duration, even to look at it is to disturb the balance and miss the point. Maybe it didn't. Say that the girl is defined by her love of pop fashion culture ever so occasionally dipping into French haute couture (foreign influence? Self-driven? East meets West? A progression of taste?). Say the boy is foreign, bleached brown hair hanging loosely over his forehead in locks, some sort of Mediterranean European, too thin to be American, he looks almost Japanese. DVDs are strewn across the room, most pirated, but the surrender to this lifestyle evident in even more cheap metropolitan youth fashions, a half-assed clash of cultures, an unsettled youthful ferment of thousands of things but no one thing, undeveloped. The kitchen shows signs of being used, persistent grease stains the boy leaves on the wooden in-set counters that the girl decries, but there are also piles of delivered food, luxury, a tiny alcove, every square foot of cabinet space stuffed with plates, cutlery, dry food. Samsung microwave, Mitsubishi range-unit, toaster, set of Porsche knives, absolutely packed cabinets of Italian pasta, imported olives. The square footage is necessarily small, but the land location is so utterly perfect because it is the innermost of many concentric circles. Thousands wish to live here, one can. The rice mats are sweet to the smell; the walls are clean and well-kept, and the building is a rare

architectural gem in a block that verges from the pre-war stone to the modern forgettable. Pre-war. Tokyo, the center of everything. Tokyo, where dreams died. Tokyo, where all the rest could be forgotten, a new self emerging from the old.

The corridor door open to a small entrance hall; this is always unnaturally hot without explanation (hot water pipes were routed nearby). Two more brown wooden doors open to a dining room dominated by a white-tile table that was not quite a perfect fit for the room, which being centrally located, open to the two bedrooms and the kitchen. This being a re-modeled building affecting 'Western' touches, two white columns open to the second bedroom, which was originally a living room but now the boy's part of the apartment and two steps down, [only in some past decade would they waste space so extravagantly as this], today including a more measured collection of items, a television, a DVD player, bookshelves of DVDs, a futon, a laptop, and very low warmed table. Piles of paperbacks and an own collection of laundry hampers and clothes outfits. Without its own closet, wooden furniture not quite up to the task are pressed into service, but the room retains a sense of its original purpose, made up for by the fact that the small balcony was accessible from this room. Wooden parquet floors covered by expensive rugs. Casement windows completed the 'pre-war' feel; this gave the sense of 1920s elegance so lacking in modern apartment design. The rug is of a Persian design; the overall decade balance is 70s pushing back to pre-war pre-war.

In this hush that is like a person holding one's breath, one can almost imagine the individuals somehow still breathing even though time is stopped, somehow still faintly swaying back and forth as if holding perfectly still rather than actually trapped in frozen time. Perhaps the faint sound of a distant ambulance is caught in this frozen moment. (What is the sound of sound in one moment of time? A continuing buzz or nothing at all?) Two closets open out from the main room; one the 'fish' closet for a mysterious smell that is never quite strong enough to attach itself to the clothes; the other the 'security' closet, with double bolt-locks, an aftermath of the previous inhabitant, an Eastern European diplomat.

Every single item in the apartment has a story; everything is connected to everything else. From the scuba fins representing a few desultory attempts at that hobby, to the life jacket that was actually used for a few Tokyo Bay excursions, to paintings and tapestries and expensive Oriental rugs and rice mats assembled in the motley yet consistent fashion ensuing from random acquisition but ready willingness to discard, syncretism of East and West, the DVD collection, the plants that were watered exclusively by the girl, history, family lineage, and social and economic connections to the city at large were present, and as a culmination of so many desires, some jumble is inevitable. Histories radiate from so many objects, yet defy quick capture of things. On substructures new structures are built; on those structures, yet new superstructures arise. So it is here, where a crystal Swarovski dish is once used as a puppy's drinking

water dish. So it is here, discarded golf clubs suggest a half-pursued hobby. The clash of cultures and histories is integral; one cannot understand these inhabitants without some reference to a fold-away futon, a couch covered in sheets inherited from childhood, but these again are pointless to the main line sequence.

It is a beautiful place, this Ginza apartment. In all the manifest unfairness of the world, hundreds of millions lived without even a ghost of a chance of ever living here. If we are defined by our domiciles, if we say we come from a place and of a place, that apartment defined a section of life, a half-flicker of a flame that blew out faster than can be said and would in other hands be the foundation for an entire understanding of man. It didn't matter that we lived here for only two years. So much useless money was spent; human potential was not developed, and a ready supply of cash and the little medallions and tokens of frivolous purchases are like useless trinkets, tokens of a social structure seemingly impossible to penetrate for reasons of provenance. Outside the door the assassins crouch. In a split second, the assault, swift, complete, devastating, indefensible will begin. Sixteen million dollar apartments; a fantastic collision of youth and money. Either by itself is unremarkable. So have I come here, and wherefore from this place?

VIII.

I meet Hisako when I was twenty-two and we end up going out six years in total, roughly two each in Yokohama, her original place; Kitakata in the north of Japan, and then Ginza, where we ended up, reaching such a culmination of position and environment as has been commented, but the road there is the story worth recounting; the twists and turns are what in the end constitute the journey itself. There is first the first year: and corrosion of time has already set in, I want to write about midnight kisses on an east side promenade, but who to care, who to recount as if past history when all other things have swept them away, leaving everything else discarded sweeps of memory? It is in our third year together I propose to Hisako that we go up north and what is motivating this is a sort of stupidity, a naïve, immature, childish view of the world that entails such ideas as “moral redemption” and “reform.” Unsophisticated, naïve, I impose a Christian Western value system; I decide that we are to go north to escape the city and set in motion an interregnum of a year, a pointless exercise in time.

"Look why don't we go north, escape this city, start something up there."

Hisako knits her brows, looks cross and thinks it's a stupid idea, but things are listless, things are restless, and this idea is a fixation of mind; under such singularity of purpose, driftlessness cannot resist. I am driven by a sense of proportion and childhood values; a somehow clear distinction between right and wrong.

-There is nothing up there. Why do you think I left?

"I don't know. It's just that we have to try something new; something about the way things are is wrong."

I had first come to Japan the year after my freshman year of college. I checked my email one day in Los Angeles Central Library while backpacking in America's West and found a last-minute offer from Northwest Airlines, three hundred dollars and change to Japan for a week.. When I touched down, Kansai Airport, I made my directly to Kyoto, where I booked the cheapest place in my backpacker's guidebook and by now it was nightfall, the red lanterns on Kawabata-dori were out, a light mist was falling. It was perfect that the evening's blush hid the modern buildings, such that it possible for a moment to believe that one had somehow been transported into the 16th century and come across a mysterious, magical city as a first discoverer. Kyoto, even by daylight, was a rare, sunlit place. Certainly, there were cars in a hurried horn-bleeting traffic-jam that day or the trains did glide into and trundle off from stations just like they did in the West; what was different was the odd perfection of the place, the hush and still of the people, the precise feeling of everyone holding their breath for something miraculous

about to happen the very next moment. The Tokyo hotel movie captures it. You are jet-lagged, stunned, culture-shocked, horrified, mocked, and reverently worshipped all at once.

For the next three years of college, I worked at my part-time job and saved up every penny for summer and winter holidays with one single purpose: to spend every spare penny, every spare week to fly to Japan, sometimes for \$250 or \$400, relying on frequent flyer miles, crazy airfares that appeared for a day or less, travel right after a notorious plane crash, etc. Compared to the utter banality and utter predictability of blonde social Pennsylvania, where so much money earned you such a carefully calculated amount of pleasure or positional improvement, Japan was the answer to everything. Its silence; its restraint; its somehow slightly offset vibe: every moment felt like the verge of something incredible; every nook and cranny offered some rare possibility and exotic foreignness impossible to find in conventional life. One crazy mid-winter expedition took me all the way to Wakkanai, where snow fell continuously and the white breath from my exhalations could not obscure the perfect snow-buried northernity of a seaside port-town village. I rode out as far as Kanazawa, where a few hours overlap in schedule permitted not enough time to actually see the place before the rapid train went back to Tokyo, a third best garden. I backpacked out to Beppu and Nara and Morioka and Sapporo, and everywhere quaint little village people or sophisticated city dwellers treated me with kindness or disdain, but it was all the same thing, everyone was small and well put-together, the trains ran on time, the hostel beds were cheap, and turning a corner, you could come across two girls who giggled before clasping each others' hands and running away together looking back at you, everything 4/5th scale; everything seeming to be made just for you, polished, perfected, new.

From the almost molten sea off that little traveled branch line from Akita to Kanazawa, the close-knit valleys of north Japan, Tazawako, Towadako, unbelievable vistas of Nagano prefecture, the downtown life of Ueno, Harajuku on Sundays the only possible place for the peculiarity of a particular gap in time, to Nikko, Karuizawa, Takamatsu, and Osaka/Kyoto metropolitan complex, I knew this country as I knew the back of my hand. Hidden mountainside temples gave way to vistas across incredibly wide valleys; the sun declining on an afternoon's rice paddies was completely sunk by the time the cities stirred to life, a plateau on which children stretched before long-distance runs, playgrounds, tea plantations, forested hills. With this sort of background, I romanticize Kitakata as the perfect antidote to the dishonesties of the city. It is here we will build anew.

Winter's first snowflakes are falling when we pack up a white kei car in a parking lot of gravel near Ueno, brown-cartons of so many useless possessions, a completely filled

vehicle, snowflakes so abnormally large. In that moment before our big move, there is the expectation heavy and hanging in the air of a great responsibility and a time of trial ahead. In the passenger seat, Hisako sits, eighteen, checking her lipstick with her careless black hair tossed idly back behind her ear. I get into the car; I start it. Hours of a national route 1 snow-bound and countryside exerting itself finally gives way by evening to a dusty valleytown forgotten by time. It doesn't take long to find the apartment arranged weeks before by telephone; the first impression is of disappointment, a slapboard shack of four stories, on the second of which we have one railroad flat.

That night, I take a walk around the neighborhood to get my bearings. In this dark, dark utterly silent night there is just wasteland. Even blasted earth would in some ways been more desirable, if only for the interruption of pitch darkness. The skies had cleared by the time we reached the place and gotten the key from the superannuated landlord, revealing a night sky that was somehow completely inky blank. Kitakata: a first impression, inky nothingness.

In the first night's darkness, electricity not even hooked up yet, we snuggle up together under a wool blanket and the world seems entirely still. Here is a gravel parking lot to match the one in the city we have left; here is a town set in a valley that the traditional character of the people had left untouched by the national railroad, leaving things unchanged since that dusty day in the 15th century when the town had been founded. The next town over got the railroad; it developed into a fair-sized city. Kitakata remained terraced farming plantations and small. It was one valley, the opening end of which had a rusting metal broadcast tower, pod-shaped and oddly oblong as a sole concession to modernity. Our apartment is located about a third of the way deep into the valley, right at the meridians of power-lines and mountainside stream, a deep and tremulous location. That earth throbs that very night, the deep and buried shock too deep to send dishes crashing to the floor; we awake and stir, ascertain no imminent peril, and then sleep again, without dream.

I have some dazed and semi-psychedelic vision of wise and beatific farm-people smiling at passerbys from the fields as they go about their daily lives; the reality instead is of a town high in elevation and sufficiently north that winter is six months of the year. The snow falls; the snow falls; the snow falls some more, and winter has begun. The weeks pass with a sudden adjustment of time. From Tokyo's frenetic pace we are suddenly faced with long hours of solitude.

“Eto, I think the colored ponds here are most famous part. Springs of water that ran through rock and are blue or red or green.”

“We should go.”

“And we should decorate this room with more color. No window, no light. Maybe we need buy lamp.”

“Let's do that. We'll use our next paycheck for a refrigerator; the one after that for all the decoration we can get.”

Silence hits like a bombshell, a sudden aching realization that life in the city is a perpetual stimulation; once you leave, there is only oneself to deal with. The small railroad flat slowly takes on the shape of home, becoming decorated in small and larger ways. I take a tiny moment of pleasure in the way Hisako puts her furoshiki washcloth, blue, folded on the rack; even in this defective specimen of the race, a certain control and form, a way of doing things.

“So you guys are moving here, you want to live in Kitakata?”

Eri Hasegawa, our one friend.

“Yeah, we think we've had enough of Tokyo for a while. Want to try to build a life, just get back to the countryside.”

“But you are not farmer. You have nothing to keep you here.”

“That's kinda the point.”

Hasegawa, twenty-two, is only here because she will inherit her family's place, a silk-dyeing concern that has been in the family for six generations. Located on the outskirts of the city, the small wooden-building houses a factory of sorts that uses modern technology to replicate old techniques. But the professional aspect of the family makes Hasegawa concerned about trade realities.

“You can teach English.”

“Ugh.”

“Maybe dispatch position. You stay in headquarters, send the teachers to their jobs, use walkie-talkie to make sure everyone is going to the right place.”

“Okay, I will look into it.”

She changes the topic.

"Look here, 7-11 gives you two points for every meal you buy, and you paste them here to get 80 points, but in a month's time, there's really only enough to get almost enough for the free dish set."

"So what?"

"But that's exactly it. If we can bring together every single person in the town to pool their points rather than try to hit the target independently than we can collect enough points to get a free dish set and not have everyone waste their 60 points."

7-11 is just the start--there are hundreds of companies handing out meaningless point schemes, but she seems to understand the weakness of each.

"Okay, so let's all help out. And we'll post things on websites to assemble the points."

Weeks later, her apartment is full of the October dish set.

"But now what?"

"Now we sell..."

So here we turn our energies to researching and participating in as many consumer-affinity programs as possible and a half-baked hobby turns into a preoccupation--though only to the degree that it entertains.

"But we still have... oh, seven hundred sixty eight dish sets."

"The electronic goods one is actually the best. If we can just hit the next target...they're giving out trips to Thailand."

Six months working in a restaurant for the old man, technically 800 yen an hour but in reality much less; six months spending that carefully hoarded money on Thai islands: this is the reality of the part-timer driven new economy. So we have Eri and Hisako, smiling girls in bikinis on a crystal-blue Thai beach, means to at least learn of the existence of other foreigners; characters in what drama that does exist.

Here is space to speak of the monumentality of days. Tokyo's hectic pace recedes, recedes, recedes, and all there is left is the sound of wind whistling through mountain cedar and the snow that drifts down by September and then remains on the ground in some form or another until March. December's utterly frigid grip on the valley leaves drifts of ten or fifteen feet, and people can only be seen as bulk asexual shapes in the white, struggling to make progress on ice and frost-rimmed roads. I take the dispatch job. Due to lack of any previous experience or certification and because Kitakata is such a rustic place to live, I do end up teaching in the end, almost half the days at least, sent to thirty different primary and middle-schools in the area, some as small as one classroom on a rotating basis and devoid of any normal teacher prerogatives or position. In a small rustic kerosene-smelling office, I grab black radios with mittened thumbs and try to coordinate the movement of two-score contractors across five or six mountains valleys, radio reception utterly non-existent. The one consolation is that because some of the assigned workplaces are so distant, travel takes me across the most obscure

winding country roads up to distant nooks and crannies of the mountain range and seeing the countryside as few get to see it; the tiniest of small-holdings struggling to exist in the rockiest of hidden valleys. It is low prestige, everyone living in Kitakata is low status, but drearily of the life, the place, the perspective, one loses the sense of perspective. Hisako busied herself with home decoration and then her restaurant job. Once I see a Brazilian girl, light skinned, at the train station, in school uniform, but I never see her again and coffee and motor oil and smoke. In the evening I return to our apartment, and it is still kerosene and rock and the low light of a single bulb amidst the wind-howling valley pass.

Foreigners come and go. Job opportunities are quite weak and the ambitions of most seem so limited; to save up money, to buy an English franchise of one's own; to go home and try to find a "real job." But reality is Saturday night poker games, dinner parties obsessed over and planned out to minute detail; long hikes through the surrounding countryside. It is worth it because of Hisako. Hisako and just Hisako. Five three, black haired, a slightly awkward chin. I put my lips on her shoulder and she shivers. She is deliberately wearing a white sailor's blouse with blue neckerchief collar: a garment that still fits her eighteen-year old frame. A certain assumed pose that was the only reasonable response to things. Society that grows more and more obsessed with ever younger girls. To the onlooker, a friendly greeting, an untrue assessment, a pat on the back, a disciplinary session-circle match, Hisako lying back on a table, Hisako fetishized and dolled-up. She is a cranky in disposition, she has some tendency towards mood swings, and she is a natural submissive in a society that takes this quality to its utmost degree in its women, but whether all of this adds up to anything disproving the preeminent role of chance in life, I don't know. Her quality is of lacking quality, a mediocre fate dissolving into a less than mediocre outcome, the desire for something unique precisely motivating the decline itself.

"I was an only child..."

Speak ecstatic shiverence upon that yielding body, though our circumstances are straitened, and we live in a barely habitable LDK. In one dusty corner, I find photographs of prewar military exercises, schoolboys training in the snow. In another, wood carving marks date to the eighteenth century: it is 1941 now or 1921. Upon this blasted geography I superimpose my own history; Hisako in pretended indifference works away on a sketch, I creep upon her onto her.

"We can go to Fuji-rock next year. Or Aomori."

Hasegawa's giddy enthusiasm drops down a notch after she gets to know us better. We have plans; we have dreams and ambitions.

"Cosmo-K will sell DVD 500 yen only. 500 yen stores have everything you need."

Chinese-made goods streaming into the countryside, sold for 500 or even 100 yen; prices slowly climbing down, unemployment not a concern.

“Take a picture of me; check out the store, the magazine, the ‘gravure’ shot.”

Exactly the thing about her is that she has little personality to begin with: one imposes something on her. Your dream, your fantasy, your half-remembered memory. I grab the camera; I shoot. Photographer is linked to subject of the photo; the relationship is a social relationship itself. There is something frail about her; in our first years she is often sick, but still of course there is some kind of vitality here, we can't just talk about trees and highways and decaying cities and wrap it up all like this; modernity. Click: girl amidst dead trees. Hisako is a girl who could have been pretty ordinary; she could have been wistful Mrs. Watanabe in a concrete grey apartment complex, she could have been Shibuya AX dancing away in Ebisu. But then, maybe this isn't even true, the birth rate goes down and down. In some sort of half-way snuggling down bedding meeting of young lovers whispers, one's younger sister is getting married, but although Toru is only a high school graduate, he has a lifetime employment job, he can provide for the family. Click: girl in pink dress. Confessions are a meeting of mind; the bright winter sun is a foil to conversation I cannot understand nor even try to understand, the confidences of a sisterhood closed to men.

There is a certain memory of Hisako that occurred when she was in sixth grade, about to be pulled into the ‘yanqui’ (delinquent girl) life and all the teachers surrounded her in a group discipline session that was her last chance to be straight and narrow. At the risk of collapsing into some sort of perverted Shinjuku-studio imagery, the idea of many men surrounding one thirteen year old girl being what it is, this memory holds so firmly because it was Hisako's true last chance to stick it out to the normal and bourgeois, for the factory-job lifestyle that entailed, the apartment that I eventually forced her back to (ironic), but of course under her name, her impetus, and the dream that was her destiny regardless.

Her mother, naturally, doted on her, but as she grew up I guess it was impossible to control that wild child, a single mother with few economic possibilities of her own. What occurred was that lack of sibling drama she could never really understand others. The world was something that happened to her; she selected from her options. Second, her father, before he died, was Soka Gakkai; he brought the whole family into the group. It's a new modern religion that isn't quite cult and isn't quite mainstream. Society was sufficiently well attuned that it wasn't made a huge deal of, but the disconnect with mainstream values was the beginnings of estrangement from the cultural norm. Among all the characteristics that flowed through a youthful personality, there is distinctly a streak of narcissism. But even this was within bounds; there is no pathology, there is no

simplistic answer that left you doomed. Patty Hearst pointed guns at police officers and lived to tell the tale; Leila Khalid was the sole survivor of an El-Al hijacking. Our Western female antiheroes are people of action. But in the minefields, the poor and dispossessed marched towards paradise; canapes and champagne are consumed at the Paris Air Show; the divide between the Third and the First Worlds is uncrossable. I walk about the city and fail to attain enlightenment or even some Tom Cruise-version of the Japanese countryside as refuge and retreat. The grandmothers of Kitakata are so old, their skin almost seems to exude dust. Big piled up stacks of daikon lay at the shop, searching for a hopeful buyer, blue plastic tarps and bamboo-frame construction, the thin, almost imperceptible fabric covered what attempts there were to put up new buildings, and at the town edge, the land slopes down to a river that is already too polluted to swim in, and the effluence of sixty thousand souls makes it genuinely reek. Yet the road behind the main strip: here parking spaces can be found; the shocked faces of townspeople hide behind metal doors, and geography has once again triumphed; fate interceded only insofar as the absence of happening could itself be defined as a happening.

Hisako tells me early on that she had a "bad personality," and I come to understand this, I come to see what she is talking about, all though that is a simplification as well. It was just somewhere early enough the idea of Japan as exoticism had been implanted, and everything else was cheap and humdrum by comparison. Greek culture is culturally related to Japanese, and there is something possible here connecting the strands of mother-love, Oedipal complexes and primordial father conflicts, primitive mythology imposing itself on our decision-making, but that, after all, is so-much philosophical claptrap: we are here. None of this works without understanding her. There is no more family here for her. My half-assed personality can't cope with all this cheapness, we furnish the apartment in plastics and hundred yen store manufactured goods; the old culture is lost, therefore; the old ways are swept aside by the new. American, crass, suburban, I resented what came out of my own culture: I am just the only one willing to admit it. The old hags at the cosmo mart or iida k do not even acknowledge her presence. Tokyo's hectic ceaseless beat gives away to utterly silent winter nights and the cold crisp mountain air. The thought will come, this was, after all, proper and normal. It is the normal way of living. It is the city that was abnormal and psychosis inducing. So proper here to leave space for the cry of the baked yam seller wending his way through summer nights, the wordless camaraderie of people hiking together on cold February weekends, and the change of the seasons to even springtime's raw molting awakening of the earth, moist, birthing, insolent as life. In rude health the power of the mountain itself could be heard, and no symbolist or analyst can decipher it.

"Maybe we should take a boat out on the lake."

Here in snow-bound Kitakata valley I eke out a one-and-a-half thousand a month existence on dispatch work proud of a paycheck I earn myself, proud of a sort of parody of middle-class existence, not unaware of the parodic prospects of this characterization (here, now); now unaware of the thin underlying tendencies here recorded; an abomination in my own mind. Weekends with Eri; mountain-climbing trips; walks through ancient forests; vistas from incredibly high. Stimulation is so intense in these modern times that we have to resort to superlative; it seems truly apocalyptic these mountain ranges stretching away as far as the eye could see; it seems the end of the world.

“See we rent the boat here; we can take it out as far as that island, or maybe just a bit further.”

Something is degenerating the whole time as the months pass, I collect my pay in my bank account every month, slowly start accumulating cheap plastic goods in that prefab apartment. It is not the glad cries of children I do not know nor the mind-stultifying tasks of resentful countryside Japanese managers. Aleks is off to Alaska; Tomas opens up a café. Little by little the domicile becomes home.

“Let's boat out to the island; to the far shore; the water is sweet.”

One cannot 'escape' human society, one cannot 'drop out' of life and run away from the flow of time. There is the main sequence of events and then ancillary ones, foundering listless directionless one is easy prey for any adventurer or casual wanderer. But this is just possessive metaphor again, falsehoods, dream sequences and representations of representations. If none of it mattered, then what of high speed car races through dark Japanese nights, near shattering accidents, screaming shouting cutlery and cookingware thrown against the wall.

[Say if you really loved her, you would have married her; one can't possess a person, this is what we all learn our teenage years mostly, and what happened in the end...]

“It is beautiful, the line of the cloud above the circular lake.”

Or...'of course if you leave Tokyo, you lose your way, you no longer have definition in your life.'

It is I who encouraged the cranky and antisocial Hisako to go out and reengage with her hometown, welcoming Eri, the young twenty-something Japanese of that small town into our lives and broader social circles to come. Hisako says she sleeps with Tak's friend Jun just out of a sense of sympathy, and this is something about historical tradition as well.

But she does, or she doesn't; it doesn't matter anyway; Kitakata, the white snow-capped mountains so distant and now never to be reached, my life as metaphor, the town of utter natural perfection.

The white birch forests, the cedar, the pine; the view of those mountains is like a dagger to the heart, and we grow deeper for interaction with disappearing nature. Hisako, so fragile, so pointless, when returned to her natural environment, somehow begins to conform more deeply with the values of the traditional town. In time I begin to find her indistinguishable from the classical ideal; her clothing, her gait, her personal style become rustified, and she is beautiful amidst all that natural splendor.

At the end of the valley where it spreads out to the flatlands below the main road of the city meets the national highway and the bullet train line. Here as if in monument to the construction, there is an old rusting TV tower, a 1960s creation that looked futuristic and modern at the time of construction but now is charmingly quaint. Instead of being bold, minimal and evanescent, the techniques and construction style are so over-designed that the shape is that of a nub or squat peak rather than the ephemeral spire the designer it hoped it to be—or that modern methods now produce. With metal that has been zined and is thus stolid rather than radiant; dull rather than gleaming, the nub sits there, squat, uncommenting, easily forgotten. I am writing not out of nostalgia for some 70s school architecture, the Japanese high school we all went to. Rather it is a question of geomancy and alchemy, forgotten sciences of a more superstitious time. I circle the nub, I expend my energies in circumambulation. I walk over and over to the nub and think about it.

This is the only possible vista into a place that defies easy characterization. I put aside part of my paycheck; I accumulate things. There is some kind of charm in this innocence, this boyish way of believing that a pile of sand on top of another will eventually result in a fully habitable castle. But if Kitakata deserves something, it is this: this life is not unlivable. Hisako is wrong about this. It is totally possible to make the sunlit afternoon of a summer Sunday become the totality of a way of life. It is not that I am trying to live in some sixteenth century version of existence. It is that this country life has its own consolations. The sweet water of the caldera lake, Tazawako, is ever so much sweet to the spirit than all the neon dayglo of Shibuya or Ebisu. Those rainbow-colored kids know nothing of differentiations between rouge and ochre or even bark. And even afterwards, even after things are impossible, I am still intent on living here.

“So you want to live here for the rest of your life.”

“...”

“Eight hundred yen an hour, thirty thousand saved by the end of the month if we cut out all unnecessary expenses.”

Her mouth moves; she is animated, flushed.

“This dusty town; this minimal life.”

From the far shore, we can see Towada-ko, the perfect circular caldera lake, an extinct volcano filled up with rain.

This is it. This is the full summation of two years spent in the far north, a futile escape from a city that was going to dominate every other moment, every other waking thought of an entire twenties of one life. If I have to spell out narrative, Eri eventually married her boyfriend, the American who wished to become Japanese. Tak and Shino are still together, older, about to inherit the izakaya. I think the boys on the basketball team are still friends, and the city itself has shrunken slightly in population, a candidate to be merged with neighboring towns. The most striking detail is maybe 100 yen DVDs at the 100 yen store; you accumulate a collection, you sink into suburban ennui.

IX.

We wanted to escape her; we tried to escape her, but Tokyo would not let her children flee so easily. And if we had had a homecoming to the mountain villages of north Japan, we now have a homecoming back to the city we were part of, for we are city people, we are urbanites, and we have no choice but to listen to that siren call. If moving to the northern town is an epic journey, an odyssey, now there is the absolute monumentality of that horribly large sky, that drive down south south south to Tokyo that means an entire book can be written just about that one highway that slowly wound its way into the metropolis proper, the rest stop, the mountains lowering lowering and of all that grief, all that sorrow, all that epoch-ending feel of one's life symbolized and thrown into harsh relief by how that huge, majestic sky closed in, how now the buildings like ocean liners rose up from the line of the land and then engulfed one, until here, yes, no more fields could be seen, and here, now, local urban conurbations were thick enough that huge video screens pasted on the walls of intersections buildings sold products and brands to the turgent crowd. Homecoming.

We travel that road, now, with monumental sorrow. We are failures now. There is no denying it. Underneath everything, underneath all that irrepressible emotion, the stark truth of our having been completely defeated by the countryside, at fleeing back to the non-linearity of city life, all of this forces itself into realization, and we know now that the clock is ticking; no matter how much we deny it, everything is now on a downward spiral. With the quickness that comes from rapid underpricing (and this is where slow, conservative banks make their profits; humans are impulsive and the bankers are patient), we sell out the Kitakata house, threw away piles of a prior life, and fit whatever is portable and necessary into my now five-year old kei-car and drive it back to Tokyo, yes Tokyo where we have already arranged a lease on a place in the Ginza. This is evolution, yes; from a downtown Yokohama LDK to a 2 bedroom Ginza flat? It has to be the richest place now; there are no more brakes, flying without radar. One can say we were moving up in the world if not for the fact that now everything is different, now like a drug-addict relapsing after a period of sobriety, there is now no check on our behavior; we live as if there is absolutely no next year at all, and we are back now and we are back so we cash out a hundred thou and put a down-payment, it's going to be Ginza or nowhere else at all.

“We’ll move to Ginza, yes?”

“Yes.”

“You want to work again in Shinjuku? You have your friends at the hostess club?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll get anything we want? No limitations on expense?”

“None at all...”

Luxury beef far more expensive than Kobe beef: Matsusaka beef prepared from hand-raised black Japanese cows fed beers and sprayed with shochu melted in one's mouth with all the consistency of an expensive tuna. In Ginza there is one boutique just down the street that specialized in deliveries on this, and walking down two or three streets, one finds all the world's best of the best in stores two hundred years old or ten, delivering by bicycle courier to all the local buildings, and if one had a ready hand with the wallet, there was absolutely nothing--truly absolutely nothing--that could not be sent directly to the doorstep wrapped in brown paper and oftentimes still wiggling or alive, including from literally the other side of the world Maine lobsters, African spiny crabs, plantains, strawberries, boutique melons (the famous \$500 watermelons of one particular town in countryside Japan), total artisanal perfection.

There is very little in the world that defies description, but suffice to say that the upper 1% of the upper 1% of items belongs to this region of rarefied adjective, and a crisp, absolutely delicate Riesling with a three-pound lobster air-packed and still smelling of salt-water as it healthily attacks a lettuce leaf you feed it is one of the rare pleasures of life. We eat this; we eat gold flakes sprinkled on a deep-red tuna (and the tuna today is just a simulacrum of the tuna available just ten years ago); we have rare filet mignon and French ham and obscure cheeses from Vermont or Montpelier, oysters shucked fresh, centuries old brandies and cognacs, top-line brut champagne, and vegetables that were practically grown individually. On this foundation of a completely exorbitant diet, we turn to only tailor-made clothes, Saks Fifth Avenue haute couture and European fashions, first-class Green tickets when we traveled, the most expensive possible rental cars when we drove, best hotels, Egyptian cotton sheets, everything hand-delivered, everything customized, maid-service, Savile Row tailors, Charvet ties, diamond cufflinks, G6 charters to Niseko, time-share on a 32' boat in Tokyo Bay, VIP tours to Art Basel-represented dealers, a level of difference only communicable as the velvety soft smoothness of premium artisanal ice cream to vending machine soft-serve. If you have a minor Dali on your wall, that is the difference of a single-edition Gerhard Richter signed and dated.

Three or four months after our return as I have sunk into this comfortable and drowsy drug-filled life I run into Melanie--the artist girl from years past, the only one of the old crowd who hadn't jumped all over me, who wasn't throwing me out into outcast wastelands simply because they were jealous of previous status. She stands there in the

evening twilight, alone and looking almost forlorn; a lily amidst the crowds. We are in Ueno, the east side of Tokyo, the downtown, utilitarian side where the airport trains terminate and the weekend markets spill out onto the pavement. To the right, the Yamanote train trundles along on its overpass, below which the last, most hopeful vendors are closing their stores. To the left, the dated building-front, the one that looks like it's from the 1950s, faces out from Ueno Park displaying its preprogrammed patterns of light. It's Sunday evening, and it's Melanie; sarong, hair ornament, luggage, all suggest a return just then from Southeast Asia.

"Oh, Ritchie, Ritchie Ufo!" Her eyes widen.

We are right on the cusp of things, and all Melanie has to do is turn away in non-recognition or indifference. Five years have passed, disgrace, bad reputation, social and professional ruin, not knowing whether newly introduced peoples' standoffishness just the low-key norm or a product of LeFauve; never getting recognition from people who have benefited so greatly from my generosity. Disgrace, dishonor, and a lost job, Melanie never to judge or to criticize; Melanie never to make demands in undue reciprocation; Melanie never to take advantage of the situation to take but never return, never to turn her back until it was I who withdraw, not wanting to drag her down with me as I sink into the deepest of despair. But finally so much time has passed and everything is so past, everything is so ancient history, and it's just us standing there in the soft Tokyo evening, me suggesting we go to a nearby izakaya, and she assenting, and it's just fine fine fine, everything can just begin again anew.

"Oh my God! Melanie! Holy cow this is a random encounter! How have you been? What have you been up to?"

"Let's have dinner!"

She motions over to a nearby restaurant.

"So how was your vacation? Somewhere interesting?" I ask after we have entered and been settled down into a booth.

"Oh, Vietnam was beautiful, lush, verdant. I think I still have sand in my backpack, the seas are so turquoise and the beaches so coral pink..."

Melanie fairly glows, seeming relaxed and tanned and radiant even in the dim light of the smoky restaurant. The waitress coming over, also, gives the tiniest of detectable reactions, bowled over by some sort of indescribable energy flowing out of the recent returnee.

"A lot of beach time, then?" I ask, after we have accepted menus.

"Never enough. But if you go just a hundred yards into the jungle, suddenly you're surrounded by lush, verdant, untouched jungle. You have to go!"

"Sometime."

"Anyway..."

"Anyway, yes...God how do we begin. What has been going on in your life?"

"Aww sheesh. Yeah it has been forever. Well...Carla is gone, so are Erik and Jose. A whole new group. I think you knew Lee?"

"Yes, he was one of your program? The art group?"

"Yes. He got a scholarship back home in the U.S. And what happened to Shan, anyway?"

"LeFauve got him in the end. His visa was bad after Shan wasn't able to enroll in classes for six months, and one day the immigration police just show up and pack him away."

"But he wasn't enrolling in classes because he was kept getting thrown in jail."

"Exactly."

"Somehow it doesn't seem right."

Melanie blows out smoke, thoughtful, and I love her for this. "And your friend Soren? Did he turn out all right?"

"He's still here in Tokyo, but just keeps to his job and a new crowd. I think I saw him once at an ALT soccer tournament, but he didn't say anything and neither did I."

"Time changes everything..." She looks wistful, lost, little-girlish. I want to sink into her endless brown eyes.

"How about Julian? Still here? You two still..."

She nods, and looks off into the distance. "But there's lots going on. Do you remember little Nera? She's been producing these wonderful super-size graphic novels that are getting collectible and she'll be opening her own booth at Comiket. Our little studio is taking off, as well—we're finally going to be finishing up our formal gallery. We're going to have our own little museum! These are big times for Aoyama!"

"Wow, that's totally cool. When is the opening?"

"Next summer officially, but things keep getting delayed. But anyway, you'll have to come by the studios. And wait, not this weekend, but the next, we're having some artists from Kyoto visiting, and we'll probably have a party to welcome them Friday evening. So swing by two weekends—you have to get into things, Ritchie. People miss you."

"Maybe..."

We eat, and after dinner, I pick up the tab, shrugging off her protests.

Actually almost everyone is gone, but the once small artist's group is now getting massive funding, and the appointed evening, my feet—of their own accord—find their way to Aoyama and the invitation that is given casually in optimism for future things. The magic that first encounter is still flowing, stronger, as I approach the studio itself. I feel distinctly the quality of that evening sky—luminescent so that the earth is lost in relative darkness, and the soft feathering of streetlights on Omote-sando gives a sort of dizzying effect, assisted simply by red lanterns and the warmly lit but dimly seen interiors of passage-side buildings. From Harajuku Station, I walk down the Champs-Elysees of Omote-sando, and then am plunged into the back alleys and side streets of the art district. Thousands of miles away from home and possibly the only English-speaker in hundreds of yards. Yet still immersed in a business society. Passerbys pay me no mind, hurrying off to their art galleries and coffee dates, stylish, chic, and debonair. Somewhere, some far-a-where wheels of commerce are turning and factory lines are busy, but here is the beautiful world, the castle borne aloft. Small establishments of unknown purpose pass by, and then, a telephone pole sign allows me to narrow in on the precise address. But, making an incorrect turn, I first see Aoyama Studio from a reverse viewpoint, with one missing block on a concrete wall allowing me to spy, unseen, onto a rear workshop. Here, framed by a rectangle of warm light, is Melanie, eyebrows knitted as she prepares a canvas. For perhaps ten minutes I pause there, watching as she carefully and thoroughly paints a layer of gesso on the unprimed canvas, spreading the material evenly and smoothly. Between sips of green tea from a bottle, I look at her, five minutes stretching to ten, and then I gather up my bag and walk around to the building entrance.

Aoyama Studio, from the outside, does not betray its purpose. It's a brown-wooden building with a stacked-log facade ornamented solely by a pale back-lit sign illustrated with the "Blue" and "Mountain" Chinese characters and "Studios" spelled out in calligraphy katakana. Up and down the streets are similar buildings, low-traffic and private-purpose establishments. But only tonight, here, the place to be; music.

"But getting back to Netta's car-r-r-r-r/"

I remember going there but not too far-r-r-r-r/"

The immediate interior is still traditional with tokonoma, genkan, the Japanese style entranceway, but a staircase lit by a single bare bulb with an open door leads to a basement the young artists have appropriated for themselves, the walls scribbled with colorful spraypaint. Loud alt-rock music blares up from the basement, to which I trundle down, awkward and hesitant, yet conscious of the rules of sophistication. There's a cooler full of beers in one corner of the light-strand lit interior packed with fashionable young Tokyo-ites and hipsters. I recognize nobody; nobody seems to recognize me. Settling into a convenient corner, I listen to the live music, and then run into Herrera, the guy from New York, who I have not seen in years.

"Oh hey, what's up man? Cool band tonight."

"Yeah pretty good. You still spraypainting?"

Herrera takes a gulp from his cold beer. "Yeah, man totally. They were talking about giving me a scholarship to university in New York, but I didn't want to commit four years of my life."

"NYC? And you said no?"

"Hard to explain, bro. It was like, I could spend four years of my life preparing for something else, or I could just put on the backpack and actually live life."

"You'll have to show me some of your work, sometime."

"See some right there." And he points to the wall.

Herrera shows me a section of the wall he's done, and I find myself impressed, and tell him so, and he brings me over to another street art-friend of his who does photography-paint street-art hybrids, and who as we approach I realize is speaking to Julian. It's gratifying that Julian gives a little flinch when he turns around and recognizes me. It's as if his subconscious brain is aware that he was completely out of line during the whole Soren fiasco and that I would be justified in punching him right then and there. But Herrera is already introducing his buddy, completely oblivious of what is going on, and I refrain from causing a scene. Instead, I meet this friend of both Antony, who is also, incidentally, depicted on a number of photographs framed on the wall lolling about naked on a bed, and we clink beers and talk about his art.

"So the agency is talking about using me on some prints ads, maybe some CM work," says Antony.

"Modelling."

"A lot of people do at least a little for pocket cash, but the real question is whether you can get steady work. I actually might do something tomorrow. I probably shouldn't drink too much."

The band breaks out into what I later learn is their signature single and there's a roar from the crowd that prevents conversation from continuing. We drink our beers and do not react to the passing by of a videographer, who with his large shoulder camera and lamp sweeps by, panning the audience, or the uniquely attired "artistes" inhabiting this party space. I like the music, but then I catch sight of Melanie across the room, so I clap my hand on the back of Herrera and his friend and tell them I'll catch them later, which they seem to be able to hear.

"Hey, Melanie, Melanie!" I manage to catch her right before she's about to ascend the stairs again, with her clipboard in one hand and her usual look of worry. When she recognizes me, she looks relieved.

"Ritchie, was trying to reach you. Look we have a problem—the people visiting from Kyoto? They got lost, and they're only just passing by Yokohama. When they get in, they'll need at least one extra place to crash—aren't you in Shinjuku?"

"Oh sure, Melanie, no problem at all. Did they have a chance to eat?"

"A couple of us might be going out to a Shirokiya; we'll see what happens when they get here."

"Okay. Don't forget to cut loose, it's your time to relax too!"

She smiles suddenly, abundantly affectionately. "No worries, Ritchie, I'm having a great time."

I rejoin the crowd and find some other people to talk to, but before I know it, the new arrivals are thirty minutes out and Melanie is looking for me again. "And have you seen Julian? People who haven't had a chance to had dinner want to go to Shirokiya now."

"Yeah, he's definitely around."

We round up a good-sized crowd, including Melanie and Julian, and head out to the Shirokiya, where we are lucky to land a table that somebody cancelled on. As the plates, heaped generously with noodles and salads and prepared meats, arrive, we hear about the driving error that resulted in the arrivals' going in circles for four hours, an encounter with a deranged hitchhiker at a rest stop, and then, with ice-cold steins of beer, we welcome their safe arrival nonetheless. At my end of the table, the conversation turns to Julian's films.

"So Ju-ree-an, yuu are making new film," says one of the Kyoto guys.

Julian looks sullen. "No, I'm taking a little break."

"But everry-body love 'Bleak of Dawn.'"

He shrugs. The Kyoto-ites smile, perhaps mostly out of embarrassment, but don't press the issue. "We are rooking forward your nextu film."

"Thank you. I'll be sure to send out an email when I put something together."

By the end of all-you-can-eat, most of the new arrivals as well as a few of the Tokyo crowd including Melanie are just ready to crash. But one of the Kyoto girls, a little tiny Japanese girl about 5'1" is game to hit the town, and so she, Julian, and I exchange text messages from Herrera's friend Antony, the model, and we agree to go to SugarHigh in Shibuya. Melanie, unfortunately, is totally exhausted and needs to go crash at her apartment. "But what about people crashing for the night? You're sure you're okay with three people?" I ask Melanie, as we all find our way outside the restaurant.

"Yeah, I just texted some people still at the studio and looks like we have three or four people passed out there, so looks like there's no worries after all."

"Peace."

"And you have my number if anything turns up."

"Definitely. And thanks for the invitation, Melanie. It's a great night."

"Thanks." She goes over to Julian. "Night, Julian. Don't forget about the packing tomorrow."

"Good night, Melanie." They kiss. She goes down to the subway just as Antony shows up from the studio party.

"So what was the thinking behind SugarHigh, anyway?" I ask, as we cross over to our side of the subway.

"Well, there's a hip-hop floor and a pop/trance floor so you can listen to whatever you want," replies Antony, who holds himself, unconsciously, in a type of pose.

"There are cheap places to sleep there as well," says Julian, who's already skipping down the steps.

"Ok, sounds good." In silence, we enter the subway station, and one of the last trains of the night shuttles into the station. We board.

The carriage is clean and controlled. It's almost hospital-like, an aseptic atmosphere in the subway as we quietly are hurtled onwards, and our fellow passengers, this late night Friday (or rather very early Saturday morning) are similarly quiet. The trip, in any case, is quite short, and soon we pull into Shibuya Station, where, conversely, heavy crowds are waiting to board the last trains of the night. All trains end by 1am, so there's that crazy, hopeless moment when you arrive in Shibuya or Roppongi station at 1am, and you're committed—the crowds and crowds are going home, but you and your pals will be here until 5am unless you find some love hotel, pay seventy U.S. for a taxi, or discover someplace in which to sleep. All crowds are heading homewards; we push against the dominant flow, amidst the crowds of variously dyed hair and exotic fringe subculture-types to find our way to SugarHigh up almost the way to Dogen-zaka, the love hotel hill. Here, "Fred, yo Fred," says Antony to the bouncer and we are let in for 2000 yen a head. As promised the second floor is all trance and pop, and the third all hip-hop; we tumble into the second and grab space around the bar, getting a first round of drinks down as we fight the first wave of sleepiness.

At the bar, I find myself rationalizing the all-nighter mostly out of camaraderie. To my right, an Irish English teacher, a two-year vet, talks to me a bit about his wife and life, and I have to listen to Julian telling me in a drunken haze that "you'll never be an artist as you haven't really suffered," and now something comes off a bit annoying about Antony's complaints. It almost seems like every foreigner in the country is either in honeymoon-lala phase or in terminal decline, and Antony is in the latter. "I'm definitely going downhill," he recognizes, in drunken candor, and talks about wanting to go run off to Dubai, where easy money is making things ridiculous. He decides to outside for a cigarette, then, and we take turns keeping him company outside when he says he wants fresh air, until the point where says we can go back in. Otherwise, we're just drinking and chit-chatting and occasionally going out onto the dance-floor, where Japanese b-boys show off well-practiced moves.

"Come on, let's dance," says some random foreigner girl, and we go out and jump around a bit to the beat. The night tears on, and by four or so, it's down to just Antony and me from Aoyama and the last remnants of the crowd. Or so I think. Sitting on the steps now myself, I am too drunk to react especially when Julian and the small Japanese girl (Eiko, was it?) turns out to be here after all, or rather, just on the way out, coming down the steps. I am not too drunk to mildly notice that it's unnecessary for Julian to say whatever it is he says, but something that indicates I should clearly just sit there, which is my intent in any case, or something about finding a cab for the girl. "See you later," I say, and he nods, and they're off. I smoke a cigarette and return back to the club, and within the hour, the staff is turning on the lights and saying, "Thank you very much!"

The music dies. We stand around blinking at each other in the sudden light and then look for our bags. Antony sees me and comes over. "Did you see Julian?" I say something noncommittal. Antony looks thoughtful, and then says, "I think he went home with the Japanese girl."

"Oh yeah, something like that. I think he said he was going to find her a cab or something, I don't quite remember."

"Think he went home with the Japanese girl," repeats Antony, still looking thoughtful, and I shrug, and we walk over to Shibuya Station but part ways once inside.

Four or five days after the night the Kyoto cohort visits, I'm standing on the platform in Shinjuku Station when Melanie and Julian and two Japanese friends come skipping down the steps on the next-over platform. Melanie sees me and says "Hey there Ritchie!" The group starts walking over closer to a corresponding area nearer me.

"Hey there Melanie! Hey Julian!" I say, waving.

At this moment, Julian looks surprised, but friendly asks "Where are you going, Ritchie?" and I respond, "Over to Kinokuniya to get my culture fix." Perhaps my voice trails off at the end. The smile on Julian's face definitely does.

"Um, what's that, Ritchie?"

In that instant half-second of reaction, I keep up my smile, although I'm wondering whether the slang "culture fix" is the problem. "Kinokuniya, you know the bookstore, I'm making a joke that I need a fix of English language culture like a junkie needing a fix ..."

The smile on Julian's face is definitely gone, and as if by cue, Melanie becomes subdued, and the two Japanese, dressed out in hiking gear, one a dyke-ish looking girl, the other a non-descript boy, remain silent. For about fifteen seconds we stand there silent and awkward, until a train pulls into my platform, and through some fortunate coincidence, a coworker of mine happens to be right there on the car I'm about to board and he greets me friendly, which serves, I suppose to establish for the record that I'm not the one acting weird. In any case, the next day at work I find myself at my desk trying to puzzle out what exactly occurred, but it's all beyond explanation. Maybe in this way the ice between me and the 'auteur' is broken, even if neither of us wish to ever become friends; maybe in this way it's back to being a normal person again, a certain unknown cost settled and finally laid to rest.

X.

They want me to come back, you know. They want me to be a part of this world and with my deep pockets, my ability to pick up an entire evening's tab or even just buy outright some outrageously poor painting (and this though I am twenty-six!), a part of my heart has been closed now, and I will never throw myself into anything wholeheartedly again; I will never be carried away and lost to a fever of emotion, smitten and disregarding of consequences. What I will do is solely in that channeled and moated part of self, I can still see the crystalline beauty of things; I can still perceive the tragic necessity of it all.

"Ritchie, why are you talking like this? You're twenty-five years old and you look like an eighteen-year old! You're younger than the average age of the Fellowship holders!"

I nod my head and smile; I speak in low tones.

"See you've come from all corners of the world; you're being paid to 'produce art' through the idealism of some rich Japanese foundation."

"Yes..."

"But you yourselves are the work of art. Ironically all of you are rich—at least middle-class—Americans and Canadians... New Zealanders. You want all your life to be artists, but by definition, you are too young and too innocent to produce really deep art. All everyone is doing is producing minor works of beauty, without that tragic sadness that is necessary to produce truly deep art. But as a result of the path you are following, eventually you will fall further and further behind your classmates who are pursuing professional careers—and finally, at the end of your life, you will have reached genuine lamentation and the ability to produce truly moving art."

Melanie smiles, faintly; most of the rest seem to at least somewhat agree with what is said, although there are looks of resentment.

"I consider my film a genuine exploration of the Blair case, because I think a lot has not truly been explored. I think the truth has been suppressed."

"But it's still a rich kid's take on a working class situation, see?"

"I'm not so wealthy as you think I am."

Like walking into a summer evening in the glorified perfection of small-town America, there is a buzz of happiness in this place, a profound sense of peace and future hope that I recognize for what it is because my heart is so filled with transience and loss.

There is nothing remarkable about living in Ginza. There is nothing remarkable about being twenty-four years old. There is nothing remarkable about having a blackmailing hostess girlfriend or to support people even if you're twenty-four if you have the money, however ill-gotten. What is strange, bizarre, psychology-wrecking is to have all of these things simultaneously. Tossing over trash cans in a group walking around Tokyo in the evening, the intervening police come to address not me (financier, non-Fellowship holder), but one of the older potters, apparently in his thirties and older looking still from outdoors work. "Excuse me sir, aren't you supposed to have your group under control?" I ghost in and out of the studio; I observe with profound understanding that every single person present is doomed.

"This is my art-rock project, Ritchie."

"It's good." (doomed)

"Check out my wood carvings, Ritchie."

"Nice." (doomed)

"Do you think maybe we can do found-art/installation art, mixed-media?"

(Doomed.)

"Okay, but what of you, Ritchie? What is your art, your glorification into permanence?"

I want to talk about half-moment and semi-memories. I am not a Fellowship holder; I am not subsidized into art. But there is that moment—click—when a sudden geography of one city block falls into place, and this is a moment invested with meaning. Of the seven hundred rock groups playing west Tokyo, maybe one, possibly none will last another five years. We will learn the name of that one, but the six hundred ninety nine others will become insurance salesmen and housewives, that is the numerical tragedy that itself invites a sense of profound defeat and pessimism. Why can't people be satisfied with drear lives from the beginning? If they could, so much effort need not be wasted.

"So make a work about it. Create a film."

"That itself is a wasted effort."

Three years pass in this fashion. Hisako's features become more settled, womanly. I work in my indifferent job and the topography of our apartment becomes altered; I begin to sleep in the guest bedroom. The fragrant rosemary tinge of a pot roast—that is a Sunday's effort. In afternoon's sunlight, Julian, welcome in our apartment, resting from

a hard weekend's filming, nursing a beer. Lowing light, a clink of dishes from the neighboring flat.

"I understand what you are saying, Ritchie, but I think you are missing the larger point."

"That being?"

"That the creation of art is not itself is not necessarily about success. In the end, I don't really care if Shibuya Gray becomes commercially successful; I just want people to understand what happened. That there were consequences. That a member of our own group could be led to die."

"And kill..."

"But that's just what the media sold it. Jim was also a victim."

"An unpopular stance."

"But true."

"I'm a bit more of mixed feelings."

Jim, that Marine who drifted into the Fellowship so many long and haunted years ago, was a killer. This cannot be denied. But he was also cheap, of bad background, and unable eventually to find solace even in what possibilities existed with the friendship of the Aoyama Fellows.

"Julian, if you feel so sorry for Jim, maybe you're making the wrong film? Film in Texas, show the dustiness of his past life; show how he was always forced into one career or another until he ended up in Tokyo and took his own life and that of his hooker girlfriend."

"Possibly. Possibly there's far more in the moment of the now, with all past history merely implied."

Hisako cheated on me in north Japan, and we have reached a new compromise state. She is back to hostessing; her earnings are enormous, and she will peak in about five years. There is in one sense an expiration date on our relationship, then; you cannot get used to a certain way of living and then suddenly scale back when the income drops off. The crash, when it comes, will be sudden and dramatic—unless; unless, that is, there is one chance, and one chance only. It is time to set into motion certain projects of my own.

"Information! I have cash."

"Ritchie! Ritchie Ufuo! I thought you had left Japan?!"

“Think again. There is information I need, and I am willing to pay.”

“Oh God. This.”

Two hundred foreigners brought over once a year on two-year Fellowships; thirteen million USD a year total administration costs plus the eighty-million dollar gallery under construction (now in its eighth year, yes, but still taller and taller every month.). Where is the money coming from?

“Okay, so it’s the Moriyama family. Toshio is the last descendent, and he’s spending the family inheritance on what he sees most important—East/West artistic exchange.”

“Thirteen million a year important?”

“Yeah. Basically. These people are on a completely different level than us.”

“Vulnerabilities?”

“One of the cousins, who might otherwise stand to inherit, is doing everything left and right to stop Toshio, but unfortunately, the laws are quite clear. As rightful heir to the fortune, Toshio—or Roshi-sensei as everyone calls him—can do whatever he wants.”

“Any other exploits?”

“Well...there is one matter...”

LeFauve, the old Republican commissioner and source of all evil in earlier dramas, now a rising star in national politics. Always bureaucratically powerful but cash poor, has sealed an unholy alliance with a real estate broker in Japan, cash for favors, and US support behind a popular real-estate ownership initiative proposed in the Diet. The idea is to raise middle-class ownership of land, but the means by which to accomplish this—low interest loans—plays directly into the broker’s hands.

There is one, perverse, complicated, planned-out way to interfere—and I will set it into motion purely for the asinine chance value of it. Broker will be at the gala dinner; with a known weakness for attractive women, Hisako is a chance to gain leverage into the situation—destroy Fauve, involve all other individuals into a complicated drama, and lay bare hearts for all to see. The question is of timing—and information gathering, and that is what unfolds as it does.

The argument against real estate loan reform is that debt is a sort of ongoing and rising collective addiction. Moreover, once it becomes accepted to take on a real estate loan after college, the price itself of real estate begins to rise, because more people are now in the market to get this desirable thing in the first place. The collective rise of what

is once a small time affair (in the aftermath of World War II, plots in Shinjuku went for just a few years' wages) benefits both the holders of that existing wealth and the group that finances society's purchase of the same. With billions at stake, all other forces' hands are tied except mine. Mine will be the hurricane of chaos that blows right into the heart of things, and carries away everything for a slimmest of all possible chances.

“How does it involve baseball players?”

“The brother of the current World Baseball Classic MVP owes an old club promoter friend of mine a favor. I have just enough pull—and I mean I'm exhausting all old favors—to get him there; this makes my table the center of action that night; that pulls in the broker; he gets introduced to Hisako, and then I broker terms to LeFauve, probably to include complete withdrawal from political life.”

“And this is all for...”

“Face it; everyone we know is smallest of all possible beans.”

None of them can see it. None of them are willing to face facts simply as they are. Caught up in the lie of their own creation, they define themselves as “artists,” but fail to understand their own incapability. It's not just a matter of actual talent—although this is a valid concern as well. Nor is it simply something about situation (though again this applies rather strongly in certain situations). It's about the choice they made being exceedingly common—they just being too simple to understand this. One walks into a beer garden in Queens, New York City, and sees hundreds of hipsters from Oklahoma wearing chops and ironic nerd-rock glasses. Um, this itself is an affectation? Doing so won't generate genuine originality?

“You're making a film about a murder because your own life itself lacks that drama. You were born wealthy, now you are on a rich kids' junket, and all of this is insulating you from life itself. If you really want to make a film, how about living in a squat for ten years? Then you'll see it all.”

“Who are you to say anything? Aren't you living off a girl?”

“The difference is that I make no pretense to be an artist. I understand that social trends, numerical odds are unfolding in a certain way. My girlfriend is a hostess; she blackmails upper-middle class Japanese for financial support. Things will peak in five years, and then there will be a sudden crash. If I can pull off a larger score of blackmail, we'll be set. These politicians; these donors and benefactors—they are the ones who control all of society. You take your three million, you don't be greedy, and then everything is set.”

“Your plan has a one-in-a-million chance of success. And anyway, you’ve read me totally wrong. My father is a carpenter, my mother a housewife. We grow up dirt-poor. Being an artist is a choice about how to live life itself. And the murder itself is important, because you know it’s about the chance of youth itself. It’s about promise and hope, and the loss of that hope. I guess a conniver and manipulator like yourself can’t see what ordinary people think about; but then you were always good at profiting from every social situation, weren’t you Ritchie.”

“I am just a social realist, and I’ve paid my dues as they needed to be paid. Many thousands benefited from what I did, and all I ever asked for was the basic price of admission.”

“Take your head out of your own backside for a minute and look at the situation for ordinary folk. We were transformed by the murder. None of us had the same life afterwards, and the truth has to come out.”

Julian, the perpetual film student, now in his eighth year on private Fellowship, top most circle of the Fulbrighters, the JET programmers, and then the next levels afterwards of private gigs, backpackers on three month contracts. He lectures me about the practice of life, and then goes off to film with a cynical group of reluctant part-time actors. The film is eighty percent complete. He is engaged in film practice for incidentals as well; the drama with pretty actresses; the play with younger people. I smoke a cigarette and don’t care as he leaves; I lay in plans for the main chance.

Melanie, failure in the art world. Already showing signs of becoming middle-aged, her accent changing, the Taos godmother who shepherds young artists but does nothing original of her own. Also tragically collapsing into irrelevance. But yes Julian is right. There is authenticity in the earlier story. Maybe I should look at Blair, Jim. I suppose they were pathetic in their own way, but right next to the edge of genuine hand-to-mouth, wow, strange, artistic personalities as well! There must be intensity in just the way the sun looks after three months of basic training at Parris Island. Those jarheads, grunts, so much less than normal civilians on one hand, so much more on another; who will record their stories? Who to record their feelings? But that impenetrable world resists an outsider’s touch as well; one has to live; only the insider knows how one’s arm looks after a battle, the mere thrill of continued life, a gift.

I can write only about my own days and ways. I am a weaponsmaster. My weapon is a 5’3” Japanese girl, top name of her club, top personality of Shinjuku, Japan. Our earnings are 130,000 USD a year and we live in Ginza. Managing her defective personality is a full-time job, and I will direct this perfect sex-weapon right into the heart of the US-Japanese Establishment. A prime minister’s career will be ruined, and that is the desirable outcome. But aside from this, there is indeed the simple beauty of days and ways. Walking around for six months in the lead up, there is a deadly swagger

to my gait. People stop and look at me on the street, even in ego-centric Ginza. The world itself is bending to my twenty-something will. And I, too, record that which is recorded.

Beauty. A quality existing side-by-side with certain forms of quantity. Beauty. A Mercedes S600 piloted through dark Japanese streets, one's girl driven to exclusive mountainside resorts. Beauty. A quality of certain deadliness blown out of one's core through aesthetic practice, through a desire to kill. "Utsukushii"—the collective voice of Japan staring back at me, the only American they bother talking to. I don't have a MP7 locked and loaded in the boot of the car, but it's as if I did, it's as if everyone knows that I am practicing and practicing and practicing, years now as the Gallery keeps getting delayed delayed delayed for that one-in-a-million shot, the kill-team swooping in on the political faction, an actual ordinary person about to play politics with the lives of millions. Me? You? How could this happen? How could all forces converge in this way? It's absurdity is all; I couldn't have planned it better had I actually planned. But bridges are crossed, highway miles are left behind, and silent girlfriend remains silent, our relationship deepening to perfect individuation, the representation of forces behind us, left behind, but never forgotten unforgiving night.

"All I wanted was ever to get out of this place!"

Julian wants to film about Jim, the Marine whose killing of his hostess girlfriend (an American) sets into motion all other events. I point out that there is some process of self-consumption going on here; the program is now starting to write about itself since the Fellowship extended a grant to Jim, and so instead of breaching new art, it's all self-contained Matroshka dolls, it's all art about artists themselves. But he is convinced that thousands must be invested, dozens of lives must be dedicated to producing this film, and his research is the last, poignant argument.

"The whole point of filming Jim/Alissa is that people like that don't have a voice. Jim was an orphan; he was adopted by a Marine officer and brought up to be a Marine. Alissa was a girl at his same military academy; after an act of political corruption by the superintendent and the town mayor, she took off for California, but the love affair brought them back together. Japan is the perfect setting because the decadence of Shinjuku life is the precise foil to Alleghany innocence. Everything is for sale, and extinction is the only possible outcome."

"But in the end he's just a killer who couldn't cut it as an artist; he could have walked off somewhere and left everyone alone; instead he has to take Alissa with him."

"Maybe Alissa wanted to die."

“Maybe all victims secretly wish to be victimized by their assailants. Maybe if you get shot by a sniper tomorrow, we’ll say you secretly knew you were going to be killed and make a memorial art work for you.”

“Facile; murderer and victim knew each other.”

“And the media just needs a quick story.”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Twenty black-clad assistants, a 16mm camera on rails, the admiring glances of the passerbys. This is coolness, of a sorts, an admiration public and expressed; the youthful foreigners being the epitome of cool. I admit I like the attention; I feel a part of the group. It’s just I don’t believe in the story. Film-making, film-making, film-making, when will Julian’s film be complete?

“The blue of the sky; a plane flying across; the dream of air cadets; the blue of Alissa’s eye.”

“How tired you are after basic; a Marine in Japan, lost.”

“The world five minutes from now; an alternate Japan, VWs and 60s neo-retro.”

“Aesthetic as concept itself, the film the makes itself without intervening filmer.”

“All of our lives affected by this; nobody ever to come up with a better story than the one already in our midst.”

“And that is it; that too is it.”

There are certain people, I think, who understand what is going on, or at least preserve enough inner cynicism to realize that nobody—Julian, myself, Melanie, the other Aoyama Fellows—will ever make it big. In the end there is another possibility—the retreat into craft or folk rather than urban and hip—and in the ensuing months some go down this route. Even Melanie starts with some comic/cute style Shibuya drawings but at the Comiket her work is passed over and doesn’t sell. I’m not sure exactly why; it is good; it may just be simply a matter of too much supply of such, not enough demand.

As the months pass, the opportunity only grows more fantastically perfect. Baseball is huge in Japan; I have a direct relative of the country’s current Koshien MVP under subordination. One shot on the broker, the key power-structure node whose fall will bring down LeFauve, decide the politics of Japan for twenty years. My weapon: a Hisako.

XI.

In the weeks leading up to the Aoyama Gala, the atmosphere is one of festive excitement. Since it is the twentieth anniversary; since the permanent gallery opening represents an investment of a rumored eighty million U.S. equivalent, the decision is made to bring up the arrival date of the new cycle's Fellows and extend the contract of the currents', bringing together nearly two hundred of the program participants, along with a not inconsiderable number of donors, benefactors, alumni, staff, associated interested parties, native artists, special guests and so on; this will be the social event of Tokyo philanthropy that year—representatives from minor branches of the Imperial Family itself are rumored to be considering attendance.

It seems every week brought another planeload of arrivals, fresh-faced early twenty-somethings from every corner of the world, bright-eyed, goggle-eyed with wonder, filled with the enthusiasm and vigor of new arrivals in Japan. Aoyama Studio itself is transformed: the Galleria next door is still covered in blue construction tarp, its crystal and metal architecture carefully hidden from site, but in the studio, every last nook and corner was packed with luggage and boxes. The dorms are at capacity; portfolios and installation art had to be stored in hallways and corridors, brown wrapping paper torn open as works were processed; the smell of turpentine, sawdust, oil paint everywhere.

“All right! Everyone get a move on! Let's get the show on the road!”

At the center of all this tumult is Gustav from Sweden. His presence is obvious, the young blonde carrying around a megaphone and issuing mock orders, the merry 'Prangstgrup' with which he surrounds himself the source of constant rumors and story-making. In contrast to the extended film tradition in which Julian works, Gustav is famous for his "Three Minute Samurai" clips, mock Japanese sword-and-ninja videos, one of which has reached two hundred thousand views on YouTube. The two, of course, hate each other.

So much goes on, so many flagrant "artistic temperaments" meet that drama, I suppose, is inevitable, but I feel distant from it; I feel a distinct sense of remove. I am not a Fellow myself, of course, and actually I am not all that much older than the average (twenty-four or twenty-five? but some as old as sixty...), but it all feels so familiar now; it all seems like just the same thing over and over. In the weeks leading up to the Gala launch itself, the artists hold 'events,' spontaneous artistic gatherings like taking over a pedestrian tunnel, putting up paintings, drinking wine, and then disappearing within the space of two hours. VIPs and dignitaries are escorted through the studio proper; with plain, unassuming manners but elegant refinement, they anonymously pass through the building, leaving behind a wave of curiosity and wonder.

“I’m a professional actress! I don’t need this! I can go modeling and CM work here in Tokyo!”

Julian loses his primary actress about three months before the gala, a high-strung half-Asian girl from New York City, and everyone says this is when his real decline begins, this is when he has to cut corners, make compromises, and produce something out of existing footage because there’s simply not enough time to re-do things. Sympathies do exist for this particular problem; not everyone is on the actress’s side.

“Yet the point can still be made that she’s still an interesting person in her own right. It takes courage to invest six months of life into an art film...”

“I heard she’s really rich; that her parents tried to get her into respectable professions but she kept having fiascos. Sexual harassment suit at the law-firm and then she was considering marriage to two different men, one had a HBS MBA and the other...”

The actress isn’t so important, I suppose. Neither are, I guess, the rumors of Julian’s decline—the alleged bottles of urine stacking up in his dorm room as he scrambles to edit his work; the hours he may have spent in the G-CANS storm system. Maybe he really does go a little nutty; maybe it’s just the wire speaking, adolescent drama springing into existence and washing away in the next rain. Gustav’s group has energy; numbers; but the output, three minute films, isn’t exportable to a gallery launch. Julian has invested years of his life in the group; but he may think he owns it; he may be a little too obsessed with his commitment to things.

“So we’re just sitting there in the car minding our own business...”

(A flurry of giggles informs me this is not the whole truth.)

“Can we trust him?”

“Yeah, Ritchie’s cool...”

“But maybe Julian wants...”

“It’s common knowledge...”

“Guys, you can just tell me. What’s up? I was like, gone for two weeks, and it’s like everything’s fallen to pieces.”

“OK OK. So we were filming a bit all weekend and on Sunday afternoon we decide to take a break.”

Now Gustav speaks up, in his slightly breathless, edge-of-laughter sort of way. “Well I light up a joint to share with everyone.”

The kids all laugh.

“We're sitting there hiding a spliff in the car taking a break in some quiet little neighborhood.”

“Well it's because Gustav decides to take a photograph of people...”

“No, no it's because we're just hanging out there, a bunch of foreign kids in a white Japanese car...”

“It's because what? What's because what? Guys, you're telling me the story all out of order.”

“Well basically, a bunch of cops starts walking and biking past us. Not like literally right past us, but in the T of the T-intersection we're facing.”

“So Gustav gets all paranoid.”

“Oh shut up, I saved us all.”

“No, Gustav starts yelling that we have to get our asses out of there 'cuz we're going to get busted.”

“And we can't lose our visas, you know...”

“My mother would kill me...”

“Fortunately, I'm a good driver.”

“Yeah! We almost hit a bicyclist!”

“Almost. And then Gustav is panicking, and a cop sees us, 'cuz we're right in front of the neighborhood post, one of those koban things, you know? We like drive right to it and almost run over a cyclist.”

“Please... we just had to brake hard is all.”

“And the cop tells us to pull over.”

“Gustav is like, 'hit the accelerator!' 'hit the accelerator!' but there's, like, seven cars in front of us. So I can't hit the accelerator. He's being a nutjob! Actually what happens is that I save the day, 'cuz I pretend like I'm pulling over, but I'm just slowing down until the light changes...”

(etc.)

What's clear what happened is that he and his film crew are almost arrested by the police, with their license plate almost certainly noted, and everything apparently can be hushed up, except, of course, this is art school, so actually everybody internal knows before the sun has set twice. Even, apparently, Julian finally gets wind of it, and, being the law-and-order type that he is within his own organization, he pushes for Gustav to be let go.

“Julian marches into the administrative office at Aoyama Studios, and if it had been any other person, any other employee there except the new girl, Shiori-”

“She's such a sweetie.”

“Any other girl than Shiori, probably he could have gotten what he wanted completed. Instead, Shiori, being new to Aoyama, decides to actually look up the rules on how to handle this sort of situation and she discovers--”

The crowd excitedly presses closer.

“That Julian is not actually a member of Aoyama!”

At this news, I am shocked. “Wha--?”

“No, exactly. He was on the Fellowship twelve years ago, but technically, he shouldn't even be addressing any formal meetings of any kind.”

“But I thought he basically ran the thing?”

“Yeah, he does, but it's all informal. Totally based on his relationship with Roshi-sensei. And Roshi-sensei's daughter has actually started handling more of the administration lately, so she's going to start enforcing rules a bit more strictly.”

I clear my throat. “You know, I'm not without some bitterness about this development.”

“Why not?” The crowd is generally surprised.

“Well a few years ago, before you guys arrived, Julian basically turned this entire organization against me, and I thought that he actually had some right to because he was the senior person here. But now it seems that he shouldn't even be part of the organization at all.”

Gustav makes a contemptuous expression and nods. “See this is exactly what I'm saying about Julian. He just does all this rude stuff to people and they accept it because they think he's the genius or the boss. We just have to say no whenever he orders anything.”

Other stories come out, apparently some karaoke fiasco where somebody is trying to input in their song, and Julian forcibly stops them. Sentiment against the overly-controlling director is quite evident.

“Ritchie,” says Gustav, “why are you even hanging out with him? He lost his actress, he lost his film, I heard Melanie is leaving him. There's no point in hanging out with this loser.”

“Well...”

“You can hang out with my crew. We have a lot of fun.”

The kids nod in agreement.

“Well, it sounds very tempting....”

"Ladies and gentlemen, patrons of art, generous benefactors, assembled guests. Twenty years ago today Murayama Roshi-sensei had a vision. In a Japan that had just recently 'learned to say no,' Roshi-sensei realized that the relationship between the re-emerged world power and the outside world could go in one of two directions. Either Japan would continue to develop its independent identity and emerge as an alternative to the Soviet-U.S. dialectic of the time, or it could engage the world that it was inextricably a part of and enrich and enliven the culture, expression, and knowledge of that world, not as a political power, but as a cultural entity, a treasure-chest and aesthetic partner to all the varied family of the world. He wanted the latter and founded the Aoyama Fellowship, Japan's answer to the UK's Rhodes Scholarship, the U.S.'s Fulbright program, Comintern's International Youth Congress and so on, but the first--and only--program that sought art as a means of international communication and a building block for peace.

"Today, we have reached an important milestone in the fulfillment of that vision. Although the Soviet Union has collapsed and the U.S. has emerged as the world's sole superpower, today more than ever it is the medium of art; the manipulation of symbols; the study of semiotics and hermeneutics; structuralism, existentialism, post-modernism and intercultural understanding that dominate the intellectual life of our earth. In twenty years over a thousand young artists from the West and Eastern bloc and former Eastern-bloc nations have been invited to Japan to work side-by-side with Japanese masters and young artists, exchanging ideas, methodologies, visions, and forging bonds of friendship that extend far beyond the nation, and creating many lasting and meaningful works of art. During this time, moreover, countries have grown closer together and new bonds have been built between organizations, institutes, schools, and studios of many kinds.

"A great artist once said, 'true communication can only occur through the fiction of art.' Perhaps so. As an artist and film-maker myself, I am ever conscious of the ways in which film both distorts and accesses reality itself; I am conscious of the impact my decisions have and of the forces in immanent reality that have inspired and inflected my vision. The advice given to aspiring young film-makers is 'don't ever talk about your work!' [general laughter] But unfortunately, I don't have the luxury of following that rather excellent piece of advice: I am, after all, a scholar on Fellowship; and I am speaking to you today as a duty—a duty for the generous support the Fellowship has extended me; a duty for the honor of having my work be the centerpiece for the Gala launch, and a duty for the mentorship the Aoyama Fellowship has given to me through all these years.

"So today, I will speak first about 'Shibuya Grey,' my MFA thesis submission for the Gakuin School, and the movie you have just seen. Following these remarks I will review some of the history of the past twenty years of the Aoyama Fellowship, and I will end, briefly, with a set of further benchmarks and goals that we might achieve with your continued financial support. This—all of this—was only possible with your support and we are sitting here today in these superlative surroundings only because benefactors as yourself have understood the importance of art in human life and perpetuated its creation. Artistic output is an excruciating, painful, time- and resource-consuming process, so much must be invested for the creation of just one piece of work—this we all know—but its rewards are ultimately the advancement of civilization itself.

"Okay, may I have slide one please?"

"Let's start our discussion of the film by acknowledging the obvious. 'Shibuya Grey' is first and foremost a movie about the Amy Blair murder.

[audience gasps]

"All of us are of course familiar with the circumstances of Amy Dolores Blair, the first-year Aoyama Fellow of the seventh year of the program, a sculptor and aspiring potter, who was murdered by her boyfriend, a fellow Aoyama Fellow, during those early, unfamiliar years of the program. The criticism made about those early years, of course, still rings true today: that it was simply ludicrous to bring over a bunch of young artists and assume that somehow, magically, art would be produced; that the creation of art could somehow be 'purchased;' and we are all familiar the stories of the first few years: Fellows simply hanging out in cafes or even disappearing for weeks at a time to Thailand. Even the one legendary Fellow who simply never even showed up, but was paid his full grant on-time and in-full, quarterly installments arriving in his North American bank account never to be recovered.

"These criticisms, of course, were misguided. After the crisis of the Blair affair, we have grown beyond, far beyond that nadir to become one of the world's preeminent cultural exchange programs. But, I found myself, as the years passed, more and more interested in the Blair case not because I wanted to learn any more of the details (the media has been quite efficient with that responsibility), but because I wanted to know more about Jim Wolverham, who was, after all, also a Fellow, also one of our own. Slide two, please.

"Jim Wolverham, 26, was in many ways an unusual acceptance to the Aoyama Program. A little older than the average, he was nonetheless an accomplished graphic artist of his own right and his background, the years of service in the Marine Corps, the service in Operation Desert Storm, gave him experience and life knowledge that many young Aoyama fellows lacked. According to the conventional story, he was a troubled, dark soul, one inclined to morbidity and violence, and we have all seen the last unfinished comic he was working on; its images have been disseminated across the world. In my research with Jim's classmates of the time, however, I have heard only that he was a kind, gentle person, one who always had time to listen to a friend's problems and who could be counted on during times of genuine need. So which was he? Was Jim the nice boy who inexplicably, without any apparent warning sign, went berserk and killed his young girlfriend? Or was he a dark and evil individual, one who had been discharged from the Marines for unknown offenses, and who wore a mask of normality and meekness only to cover a foundational identity of psychopathic insanity?

"Slide three.

"I did not know Jim. I don't feel ashamed to admit this. We were Fellows together at the same time, but aside from some distant sightings, I never interacted with him; I never had a conversation with him, nor did I know, for that matter, Amy Blair. The obvious claim to make, of course, is that not having known him personally, I am now engaged in a sort of aesthetic exploitation: I am creating a work of art that plays upon feelings upon which I have no genuine claim. To this I reply: guilty as charged. I didn't actually know Jim; I didn't actually know Amy. But, as the beginning of the film makes clear, I was in the end affected by these events, and further, as we can see on the slide—all of us were. For some reason that I can't quite fathom even today, on that first day when the news spread through the dorm, I felt compelled to take a picture of the scene. I remember distinctly one of my classmates giving me a look of absolute horror; we were caught up in the moment, now was not the time for representation. But I did so, for whatever reason, and we can see here the impact of that Saturday; we can see why things would take so long to return to normal.

"Slide four.

"The next question of course is 'why change the characters? Why is Jim a Marine officer AWOL and Dolly a foreign hostess girl? Well, legal questions aside, I made this film this way in part to examine the particular interplay between genuine experience and the creation of art. All of us have already heard the rumors and stories about Jim's military experience; but none of that, really, concerns me. What I see when I look at the Aoyama Program is a large number of talented, idealistic overachievers and go-getters, people who have done great things already and will surely go on to do even greater. But, that being said, in a sense we are a disappointment; there have been internationally renowned graduates of the Fellows program and people who are quite appreciated in their field. But there still is no universally-known graduate; there still is no 'artist who revolutionized the world' former Aoyama Fellow, with some minor exceptions who are more a matter of degree and definition or of previous accomplishment predating their Aoyama years.

"Why is this?

"Well, much of this has to do with youth of course. A twenty-year old program is not going to generate a list of illustrious alumni in the same way that a school or institution existing for a hundred years or more might. For its size and scale, Aoyama has been quite impressive—accomplished even. But what this brings us back to us is that fundamental criticism made of our brave little endeavor: the fact that an Artistic Fellowship program is itself a contradiction in terms—we cannot build an artist; we cannot produce art on demand. An individual has to be born an artist—to some degree—and he or she must live first and then create—or all we have are the lineaments of the cage in which we imprison him; all he can do is paint the bars of his cage.

"It was for this reason that Jim Wolverham intrigued me. Unknown to me in person, in death his story became to me a fixation and an obsession. For years after my first work I brooded over his case, torturing myself to bring out draft after draft of unsuccessful treatments of the subject matter. It was only after a fateful encounter of my own—details which must alas remain private—that I realized that I had been going about the project in entirely the wrong way. There was never any reason to make the work true to life; Jim's story never had anything to do with Aoyama. What if I reimagined the story as taking place had the Fellowship never existed at all?

"It is for this reason, that Shibuya Grey begins in Naha Marine Corps base and opens with the glimpse of Mount Fuji. I am a visual artist, after all; I deal in images. Amy, as we now see her, is not the scholarship recipient and talented young potter, but the hostess girl who makes 3000 yen an hour pouring drinks to Japanese businessmen. Here, in short, is the perfect intersection of two worlds: the battle-weary young Marine officer; the Western girl fallen and Easternized. Add to this mix an understory of a past romance, and we have all the ingredients of tragedy; we have all the ingredients of art.

"Jim, of course, seeks to 'rescue' Amy. But is Jim not the one who is truly fallen? In flashbacks we see the story of his own life; the domineering father, the older brother's who deformed arm prevents him from carrying out his father's overwhelming obsession for his sons. But at the moment of truth—at the film's opening—this path is seen as not Jim's own, and the drive up to Tokyo is itself symbolic of a rejection of one's past, a complete break with history.

"Artistic output cannot be created by those who have not lived; those who have lived are not inclined to speak needlessly. Therein lies the crux. By abandoning the outside pretense of 'attempting to create art,' now we better understand Jim; now we see the story of his failure as the story of a individual who cannot escape his own circumstances; one who is, in a final sense, a victim of his own.

[The crowd stirs.]

"Ladies and gentlemen I know this is not a popular opinion. There is no question that Jim Wolverham was a murderer; we have no doubt that he committed a grave crime. What I was attempting to say with 'Shibuya Grey' was that if we look carefully at his circumstances, if we see what his father is on record as saying; his mother--

[Angry voices, once imperceptible, are now distinct. 'He was a murderer! There is never any excuse or explanation for homicide!']

"Ma'am, please. I beg only a little more of your time...

[At least several people get up to leave the gala. Julian is flustered, but attempts to continue.]

"As an artist and a creator, it is my duty to tell uncomfortable truths. The media has portrayed past events as a simple opposition of good and evil, but what this obscures is a certain darkness inside Amy herself, and a certain lightness inside the character of Jim Wolverham..."

[Hara is booed off the podium. With much embarrassment, the management takes over.]

He had retired, flustered, to the upstairs studio where I find him, going up there only to pick up my book bag. In fact, I don't even know he's in the room until he coughs, lightly, and I see the ever-present red ember of his cigarette; the little glow intensifying as he inhales.

"Oh, Julian! Oh my god, people are looking for you."

"Yeah, to hang me."

“Ah, no. I mean like Melanie and stuff. Nobody hates you.”

I think the reaction against Julian is so negative just because of how know-it-all-he-is, all the time. Even if he hadn't gone where he did, there still would have been an undercurrent of resentment; that strange curly-haired nerd head perched now on evening formal-wear, the bowtie untied and raggedy, but with none of the air of savoir faire it would have on anyone else.

“Well, Julian, I'm not a Fellow; I don't have a stake in any of this. But I guess the idea was for you to have done a fund-raising speech. And now half the donors are never speaking to Aoyama again!”

“They're going to fire me.”

“Wha-?”

“They're going to let me go. Shibuya told me five minutes ago.”

“No way!”

“Yeah. This is the last straw. After all the years I spent building up this place.”

“Well...”

“Well what?”

“Well I think this is not necessarily bad for your career.”

I return to my donors' table after that last conference with Julian, and I know the situation is already over. Everything in the end had come down to Hisako's choice in the matter, and although the broker is looking at her with a greedy eye, she is wearing a sarcastic expression and indicating by body language that she wishes to go. Obviously there is little need to play it out longer.

“Ritchie, Ritchie, Ritchie.”

“Mmm.”

“You invested several years of your life, you called in all remaining favors, and put all of your personal funds into one shot against the Establishment.”

“Yes.”

“But of course I'm not going to do this.”

“I suppose not.”

“Why? That was a total waste of three years’ of effort? Or actually in another sense, far more than three years since you called in all the assets of ten years.”

“Because I like the absurd?”

She shakes her head. Things will be over before even the five years’ duration I predicted.

The situation, in the end, presented even further layers of absurdity than already described. Somebody senior, very senior, was involved in a sexual harassment suit against the broker, a suit involving millions upon millions of dollars, and so all hands were tied even further than one might think possible. If Hisako had read the dossier; if she indeed had even been willing to read the dossier, we could have pulled things off far more lickety-split than can be dreamt of. The future of the current LDP government; the future of the US-Japanese alliance—all in the hands of a frivolous twenty-four year old Kabuki-cho hostess, my girlfriend; such is the subject of such extreme amusement that even the bodyguards, the social observers, the stafflings and researchers and underlings could not help but bump into each other, a comedy of errors, quantity being actually a drawback compared to such simplicity of effort. I didn’t revenge myself on LeFauve. It was all just a pose.

I will write a little more about Hisako before ending this delightful little piece. This—all this—isn’t literature, of course, for literature is the story of deep understanding and imposition of multiple wills on a tragically necessary plot line. But although this—all this—only constitutes some dimly half-felt tableaux of semi-memoirish understanding, what it also illustrates is our modern, selfish, individuated existence of pointless love games and ultimately futile strategizing resulting in no net change to the universe.

Hisako, passive, feminine, untalkative, dissolved into sluttishness as a direct reaction against her oppressive father. Eventually I came to be seen as part of the oppression and she slept again with someone else in Kitakata, putting up fake drama games and crying scenes to get us back to the Tokyo she adored and adored her back. I invested years of effort in a pointless threat exercise against the corridors of power because I thought it was absurd. And the artists, as recorded, were ultimately driven off as having no real talent and unable to produce on a limited scale.

There are acres upon acres of experience to be covered. The bukkake circle of middle school teachers trying to pull her back into normality offered perverse metaphor. I was high on MDMA, ketamine, THC, cocaine, methamphetamine when I first met her and knew in the secret corner of my heart that all else was just drama. Eventually I would have to stop; I too would be thrown into the dustbin of history, but Japan, high

on drugs, was finally understood. The B-25s were still flying; the bombs were still raining down! I was completely faithful to this sex worker and slut and that offered my sole chance for redemption, because now all females of Japan opened their sympathies to me, and even reduced to some poor skeletal remain, I could be adored for that sake alone, a pure undying love because of what it entailed, because of the economy of sex and how girls sympathize, always, with the underdog..

This was the moment to be remembered: a half-formed girl, possibly sixteen, closing the sliding door while kneeling down in deference. The old but polished sword, brought out of hiding, shown to a private audience. The kill teams raging across North Japan, existing only in my imagination, but also real, too, deadly and unforgiving. And hearts inflamed with beauty as something was brought into oneself and purified; refined; left as legacy for those that would follow. My Hisako, possessed, ravaged mercilessly, was mine for the time I had her, and held within her breast knowledge that was ancient and painfully gained. Compared to the loud, petulant, annoyed voices of Western girls, she was infinitely more feminine, graceful, unprepossessing and undemanding. Had she half a millimeter's difference in temperament, we could have made a success of our northish expedition; we could have turned Tawada Lake into a reason for existence itself, its pure waters drinkable, effervescent. But we didn't. So I record here the things that must be recorded, one last voyage into personality.

Silence is the only possible response to tyrannical outside personalities. Aesthetic study offers release from the impossibility of normal life. I myself am defective (detective?) but it is precisely this defect that is my greatest quality. I will commit no evil even when great profit is the reward. Our life is precisely what is going on right now, including this very moment.

If precise delineations of personality change are what constitute greatness in literature, then record here that under my management, Hisako was one of the top achievers for a brief spell of her life, before it all came to an end, before I sacrificed my own twenties for an absurdist, completely nihilist chance at the power-brokers. Julian could not be anything other than what he was, although he led and picked up rewards as they came. The tens of thousands in north Japan led lives as best as they could and in the play of things, there would also be opportunities for brief and spell-binding periods of happiness.

She is difficult to write about, my Hisako. Beginning to glow, in her peak of her early twenties, they say even the way she sits down is infinitely attractive. Such matters don't lend themselves easily to characterization. Rather what is going on is psychological, reductive. The intersection of two cultures can lead to a refinement of both.

"I am eating too much when I get stressed out, so I will closely monitor my diet habits."

Such is the line of thought as Hisako begins to peak.

“Under circumstances X, Y, and Z, undesirable A tends to happen, so better to watch closely Z when X and Y are unavoidable.”

Clinical, clear, logical.

“Alcohol is a cheap way to deal with trouble, better to spend money efficiently on the real fun.”

This is unfolding Shibuya, a couple in love: crowd upon crowd upon crowd, the blaring lights, the honking horns, the single on repeat play from loudspeakers. Karaoke unfolds onto miraculous visions of teens, twenty-somethings, the pleasure quarters, the innocence of life itself. “Oh god, watch out for the CD pushers.” The surveyors and Jesus-ists are obstacles to be avoided. But unfolding another Friday night, another 1/52.

“See what Japanese girls really want is a guy in his thirties, makes about six million a year in advertising, has his own flat and car, and just plays. Right? He just plays.”

“Hello, do you have time to sample this perfume?”

“No thanks.”

“See Ritchie, people think you don’t exert yourself in life. Why don’t you try a little harder at something?”

“Discount! Discount! Discount day at Yamanaka Pharmacy! All products on sale!”

“I think the reason why Jun is cool is because he’s just letting go. You know, nobody can really mess with him.”

“I like rough-edged guys better. No feminine types for me!”

“God. Did you see that guy with the blonde girlfriend. They’re such a cute couple!”

“He’s okay...”

“I kinda strangely like him even tho’ he’s such a weirdo!”

“Forget about him, let’s go clubbing; let’s go party; let’s go karaoke.”

“Cost 10000 yen. Twice what it should have...”

“Guess we should study a little for class tomorrow.”

“Ritchie is lucky because the thing he worships—Japanese girls—are right here on earth. See, Christians have to believe in some afterlife, and most other people worship invisible gods, but look, Ritchie’s gods are here on earth!”

“Hee hee!”

One of the advantages of a good vantage point is that you do get to see more than most. Maybe three hundred thousand are out tonight, and three thousand one night stands will be had. There is room for all. As she gets older, Hisako’s voice, strangely enough, becomes more childish. But there is an undercurrent of steel as well; a will that asserts itself first against herself and then against others.

“I don’t necessarily want to support Jun, but I do so because the alternative is worse. See, that’s what’s its about. Finesse..”

This is brilliant, her testimony to eternity, the Friday night with friends, the awesome potential of everything because it is the stir of things, rather than the brute logical flow, that generates all futures and all potentials. Victory doesn’t go to the planner or the meticulous scientist—it goes to the fool engaged in the moment, where even losses are converted to gains and all gains are noted for future reference. Drunk, English-speaking, I was a voyeur even where little teenage games unfolded, because I knew what they were saying, and I loved everything about it. Eri Hasegawa, she was a friend from the countryside; Satoko, what a delightful little girl she was from Tokyo. The girls had all the power in this society; they determined who won and lost. So I jumped in further and lost myself in a sea of twittering gossip. Hisako was not so absolutely bad at everything. In fashion she was at times original, creative, trend-forming. A magazine gave her a small stipend to come in once a month and discuss photographs. Her aim was not the infinite, but she understood that she had money, in a sense, and she kept track of expenses such that we did not sink into wild and crazy expenditure. The effort of first years is mere existence; after that, the need for complexity, adaptation, and dialectic. Here, now, amidst the fashionable crowds, mere princess of the moment. I built threat exercises against the LDP because it was funny. Come after me if you like, Long-Term, I got guns and explosives hidden in three hundred different locations in North Japan and people stashed away in every northern Japanese seaside village. It’s my territory now and if you ever want a war, we’re going to tear your bodies to pieces.

XII.

Drums were beating over the village on the valley floor, but nobody could hear them. Or rather--everybody could, but they knew them only as the rip of fireworks unaware of any premonition they foretold.

From the top of the valley ridgeline, where soccer pitches had been built for the express reason of holding regional tournaments, we wound our way down a long asphalt road that was somewhat kept up, keeping our sandals clear of sharp stones or other obstructions. An outside witness would have seen only a young couple in love, dressed for the festival that was scheduled for that summer night. This is set back now in Kitakata, the final summer before the return.

"So that's it, then?"

"Yes, that's it."

The decision had been made. Life in the village was now intolerable. But planning, return, all these things would be put off for later days, for today was the day of the summer festival, and it was pointless to occupy oneself with other thoughts. The smell of thistle and mountain herbs lay in the air; cicadas buzzing could not be drowned out by the occasional motor-noise of a passing car. The two held hands; the two were close with the closeness of years of association.

"You know--"

"What?"

"Uh... no, nothing."

Such a beautiful couple! By the time we reach the valley, early evening has given way to late, the sky is now darkened to deep blue. Walking amidst the crowds, nobody reacts that he is a foreigner, nobody gives more than one, or sometimes two glances at the summer yukata, the design popular that season and fitting him, who comes off a bit short in the West, somehow more Japanese-like. The concrete sidewalk gives way to an asphalt path amidst rice paddies, where frogs, crickets and late summer insects keep up a chorus, discernible beneath the chattering of the crowd and the increasing frequency of the fireworks, still being sent up one-at-a-time. Gerry--was it Gerry? Yes, he had been the one to put things together; in his half-energetic Midwestern way, he had sent around text messages, and the township's half-dozen foreigners had agreed to meet. Now festival booths begin appearing by the roadside, vendors crying out their hawker cries, fried noodles, flavored ice, okonomiyaki pancakes. The savory smells of oil, soy sauce, grilled sticks fill the air and stir our own hunger, we look over at each other at the same

time and stop before the yakitori grill, where the hawker nods and sets to work. It's nighttime. At that moment, a little boy races across the path with a sizzling firework, and the sudden pop is startling, but then we laugh, and I put my arm around Hisako, her warmth able to be felt through the cloth of the summer kimono. But now the sound of music reaching a higher tempo can be heard and we eat quickly to get to the main riverwalk in order to see the spectacle.

"Uh, Gerry? Gerry is that you?" But the voice on the phone is indecipherable. "Send a text."

The others--Eri Hasegawa, Tak--they are already buried too deep by the riverbank to get in. But working our way from one opening to the next, we are able to finally get to the parade already in progress and meet up with Gerry and his girlfriend, who smile in greeting, and we turn now to teams of men or women carrying portable shrines that must weigh several hundred pounds. The largest have as many as twenty or thirty carriers, with three or four separate sections of design that tower eight or nine feet of wooden construction atop brawn shoulders. Dyed-hair girls, though, have their own teams assembled, maybe on a smaller scale, but each one hunkering down the parade route being jerked to and fro even as the teams bounce their way forward is agitated in the same unpredictable motion and the crowd that surrounds the route is similarly engaged, beating on drums, blowing on flutes, drinking and talking loudly and cheering for especial favorites. Flaming wooden torches and festival lights keep the scene vibrant, warm, and full of energy, and Hisako's hand is clasped in mine, tight and warm.

"Ah, so what it is news?"

"Well, it looks like I got into a Master's program back in the States?"

"Oh wow, wonderful. So you're going?"

"Yes."

A quick glance at eyes.

"No more White Cat."

"No indeed."

Finally, the central shrines begin approaching, the really gigantic ones sponsored by the town temples. Some of these are giant enough to have people on top as well, and wearing kabuki masks they leer or chastise the public, warning all of the folly of life or reminding everyone that nothing is really known.

-Ha!

The shrine-bearers heave forward. A startle whips through the crowd.

"Oh hi!" Gerry greets one of his students, a thirteen year old with her parents. They exchange formalities. All the town is out tonight.

"We're thinking of moving back together."

"That sounds wonderful. Any other news?"

"May will be staying, Sonja probably not. I don't know about Rick."

The quiet life of foreigner English teachers unfolds.

-Ha!

Another jerk. The shrine is brought up two meters; it must be at least a ton.

"God that must be painful."

"No, I'm sure there's enough of them."

People buzz about, chit and chatter. To one side, a vendor has set up gold fish in plastic bins. It is just about possible to flick one out of the water with a paper spatula.

"The thing about this thing is that it's really when all the Japanese people can let down their hair. You know, you got company presidents right next to factory workers; teachers drinking beer while teenagers are trying to sneak off with somebody special."

-Ha!

Children run laughing and screaming; the feeling of excitement is palpable. The people are now all packed together as close as commuters on a rush-hour subway, but from our viewpoint atop a retaining wall, we can see the full motion of the crowd, the waves of loin-cloth clad men pressing forward to keep the shrines in motion, the religious fervor which fills the tableau with a sense of climactic urgency.

"How about you? What plans do you guys have?"

Hisako and I exchange glances.

"Well, we've been talking about going back to Tokyo?"

"Oh yeah?" Gerry does seem mildly interested. "Isn't that a step back?"

The path of the shrine bearers extends forward to the base of a small but steep hill. It seems almost unfair; unright that people should have to heave up a multi-ton

structure on their bare shoulders with only straw sandals on their feet. But that is the task of hundreds before them, and hundreds to come in years arriving.

-Ha!

"Well, actually, I think we're beginning to realize that we're city people. This whole thing about living in the country, it's kind of a joke, right?"

"No, I'm not so sure. I rather thought you were beginning to enjoy it."

I breathe out heavily. And here self identity itself seems to dissolve, it becomes impossible to conceive of anything within the framework of I or you or them, we are all pressed together in psychological unity, a deliberate elicitation of the mob instinct, enraptured in what is only a religious bliss. It would be a terrible act for anyone to slow down now, now there's really a mob, now there's really a mob, the mob is moving forward, the shrines are being pumped up and down, and loud ecstatic flute music and drum beating drives everyone forward, forward towards the hilltop temples where the portable shrines will be encased again.

-Ha!

[Hisako hated her father! He was an all right man for most of his life, but when he got old, he kept criticizing and criticizing her; there was never any room to be your own person in that household. Weakness, genetic or family upbringing, sliding down the family line.]

"This life-- you know, raves in one's young twenties, north of England or small town America. English teaching, eight hundred yen an hour, it's just... all this. All this."

-Ha!

[Sakura 2nd was a terrible, terrible middle school! Once all the teachers surrounded her because she kept on misbehaving. It had a reputation for all the dyed-haired rejects even for those thirteen year olds!]

"Well, sometimes I feel that way. I'm not totally sure whether grad school is going to really change anything in my life, though."

"I'm sure it will be fine."

[I never really loved her! It was just a rebound thing. But it went on and on and on...]

-Ha!

Something definitely does unhinge now, the crescendo itself begins to crescendo, and all the sixty thousand inhabitants of Kitakata must be on the street tonight. Forget gappei (town-consolidation); forget the labor troubles at the factory. One hundred twenty thousand eyes are on the shrine bearers, one of whom slips, eliciting sixty thousand gasps, but who then recovers, and the shrine is pushed up another ten meters.

"So what did you learn from all this? Was the countryside worth it?"

"Yeah of course. I mean, take even the hill. They say the temples are hundreds of years old; giant stone monoliths that have survived so many changes of government; so many revolutions and martyrs. Blood from one last band of samurai who resisted the introduction of guns is said to still stain the central shrine."

Now the load-bearers are mounting the steps; with a feeling only describable as agony, we watch in unity with the moment as the shrine trembles, as it trembles.

"So I guess we feel a sense of something bigger than ourselves. That maybe these traditions and old customs are really something worth preserving."

"Yes, maybe. What kind of grad school was it?"

"Oh international relations. Like training for the U.N. maybe."

I find myself privately wondering; I hear most positions go to Third Worlders these days.

"You will both go right away?"

"No, Chika's parents are sick. She has to minister to them. But she'll come over a year later it looks like."

"That sounds nice."

Everything has reached its final, ultimate point. The steps are mounted, blood is flowing from the shoulders of more than one shrine-bearer, but with the collective attention of an entire farming valley's inhabitants urging on the load-carriers, there can be no possibility of retreat now. Streams of sweat, streams of blood are pouring down the flesh of the muscled men, and every muscle is tense, every last ounce of strength is being channeled. And it almost does seem to be on the verge...

...of collapse. They really do seem like they will all collapse. But there is no return now! There is no retreat possible now! Everything that has been written is about the airless hopelessness of town life! Everything that has been written is about the airless hopelessness of expat English teachers in Japan and Asia-at-large! All their dreams were pointless in the end, for Julian never went anywhere with his film, and Melanie just got

older to disappear into Taos, a respected figure to a new generation of dreamers who would be doomed to sell-out or achieve only minor success, our art-major degrees were pointless in this IT-major's world, and even the IT majors were swept away by the trendlines, the economy collapsed, America collapsed, Western civilization collapsed, and tears and fears could not change a thing. Pointless love affairs gave away to passionless sex, it didn't matter five lovers or five hundred, everyone just got old, nobody married anymore, and entire districts were depopulated. Finally they mount. Finally they mount. The shrine bearers have ascended the peak, it is over, it is over!

-Ha!

Catharsis, as complete as tears running down one's cheeks; as complete as the feeling of removing a plug of sebum from a clogged up pore; I am heavy and fulfilled; all banalities have fallen away. I am nothing, a silly American amidst people who are thousands of years old in culture. And everything has finally come to an end.

If it took hours; if the town had anticipated the festival over the course of days, it now begins to unwind in a matter of an hour or two. From the absolute tension and collective dissolution of will, everyone now forms and dissolves off into pairs or small groups, to find a convenient patch of riverbank in which to finish off snacks and beer, or to make their way to the train or bus stations or car parking lots. They say next valley over it's all about fireworks. The main branch of the river goes through that one, and everyone collects on the riverbank to watch this one family that does only this, for a six hour show that gets televised on NHK. But here it's just daisy-cutters or sparklers, whirl-a-gigs and handheld fizzlers. Children run to and fro. The crowds re now going the opposite direction, still avoiding running children, onlookers who give a curious stare, girls in their kimono comparing each other's choices. The night is filled with the sounds of cars starting, motorcyclists revving their engines, the traffic lights buzzing as they do only here.

Hisako holds my hand. So much has been omitted. The press of words is like a pressure on my lips, the internal feeling of something inside bursting to get free. The artists and their film-making, the ambitions that were born and only went so far, or maybe what was really missing were the midnight car-rides. Living in the country maybe that's all you did, get into that vehicle and drive drive drive, six hours, eight, sometimes to end up in morning Morioka before turning around and retreating back home at a slower pace. It was an epic thing, yes; and the night with its rhythms had its own passion, it's own remembrances to be immortalized in some other convention. Here also, however, is a definite completion, for although our days and dreams were like this so, our successes were only as half-baked as we liked, still we went where we could with what we had, and all of this, dying away if it were, was still in some unknown sense the proper way of doing things. Gustav, the newbie to the film-program, eventually ended

up becoming Aoyama's shooting star. A not-too-tall but muscled Swede, he was perpetually cheerful and carried a megaphone as he went on to be a well-respected filmmaker. His little three-minute samurai flicks achieved 100,000 views on YouTube. Gangs of people went off or on to make a good living or be good at boating or to be mildly respectable in their own ways. Adventures were had in parked cars or in moving ones, police fled after film-makers got high and had their scenes. But everyone got their driver's licenses in the end. And here, this one thing, this limited and bounded love affair, it came to an end here, I suppose, but something else endured and everyone would go to where they were going anyway.

The countryside is slower. The salary measured out in differences of two point five or three thousand even would make little difference in final outcomes; the quiet girl ends up accumulating a small fortune; the one trying to go to advanced international studies comes back in the end and hides out of unnecessary shame.

Hisako, you know, was never so bad as they said; we were never so minor as might be assumed. Eight years passed, from her sixteen to twenty-four: this is just what we were. The flood waters would come rolling in; everything we had would be swept, swept away, but before it went, I would shed a bitter tear.

POST SCRIPT

Why call me at 4am, ringing the phones in turn, until I grunted, and stumbled out of bed to pick up a buzzing phone. Afterwards I couldn't fall back asleep and lay there with eyes pointed at the ceiling I couldn't see, working on the next draft, until sleep finally did come again, to wake up to a Japan of 6:30am, a February, a stillness. In the pre-dawn twilight what I remembered was my arm sweeping open the window curtain in the Shibuya hotel, the sudden motion catching the eye of a girl in a building across: the strung telephone wires, and how the architecture of that particular building, nested gray ferro-concrete boxes looking modern and shabby at once, framed both the window and her for that instant. Tokyo. And do you remember the first day in Frankfurt? When we walked into the hotel room on a high floor, the television was going, making me think we had been given a room that had already been assigned. But afterwards what I felt was the cold sterility of the place: the blueness of the light which made things seem clearer and harder and people more vague. Light flashing across wire-framed glasses, trains with plastics in primary colors, the smells of unfamiliar cleaning products, and brightly-lit shelves of explicit foreign language magazines. The streets and public trams had been clean and orderly. I walked forward heedless and put our luggage on the bed.

This feeling, this dissolution of progressing thought, this fugue, this drowsiness, this letting-go: it exists only in motion and change; it is a truth found only in transit. Some quoted philosopher undoubtedly said that we invent ourselves as travelers. But to go back further into memory, it is possible that childhood itself or even the heavy red lidlessness of prenatal existence where we sway to the rhythm of our mother's stride and know of nothing else is just this also. The elderly and the young, we can see, rock back and forth. Long car trips on highways thus simulate this blue timelessness, until, finally, our destination, the city, rises up out of the haze. And in that impossibility, that airlessness is the only place we can find ourselves, the only now and I.

Years have passed since those days; by my side now sleeps Ace, who I have dragged out to the north country, but who still doesn't get it; who still doesn't see the way the light glitters on the sea the train from Akita to Kanazawa. In pre-dawn early morning, she is cocooned in the rolled-out bedding we sleep in on tatami floors, her small blonde Englishness a foil to the banality of USA. I feel the wind gust in through cracks in the ancient dark wood timbers, I hear the sea roar in ceaselessly.

Who knows what it means? From childless loins, I achieve no immortality. Where is it going? I have no answer; have found no further point or agenda. They find her mannerisms charming; everyone says she's an ideal wife. Years have brought back stories: Melanie a forgotten artist disappearing into Taos. Julian, the one hit wonder.

And yet.....and yet it still feels all strangely otherworldly; a life not quite of this time. Tucker was not the subversive we thought him to be, and Gerry has done well in later years. Did Shan the Waseda scholarship boy die? He may have simply disappeared. Gustav still makes films, though the pranksters are a bit more aggressive now, hard-edged and political. Takashi still working and hanging out exclusively with foreigners; Herrera abandoning art to get into sailing.

Are we done? Redd is a nobody at a nobody job. Liam went back and forth; I think still in Japan. LeFauve pere a minor political figure. Shibuya, you know, was okay; he was okay. No one, I know, will recall that place down the T-intersection from Roppongi; all the old places are pretty much gone. We had gone to Sapporo, actually; its snowbound majesties will resound in memory. And driving through a half-forgotten Japanese town, I had known the cross-over of centuries; I had known these deserted streets, these covered arcades that seemed anything but the decade we lived in behind a black-tinted motorcycle mask, post-tsunami.

Afterwards, of course, nothing could be the same. The cataclysm, so profoundly troubling, so absolutely without cause, invited the destruction of all previous knowledge. And, immature, weak, we accepted the bargain; we got up and left the movie theatre though there was never really any reason to go. Moving forward, the filaments came forward; they extended their microphones and cameras like the probisci of insects, asking what we thought, and we affected dissonance, we wore a mask and made banal responses. I never knew Julian. I never got to know Melanie. But they were part of the gang: I know this now. And everything that followed, all those consequences like dominoes falling, happened exactly as they did..

“Where does it come from, evil?”

I don't know.

“How do we stop it? How can we make sure this can never happen again...”

We can't.

Maybe Julian's film was right. The midnight ascent to the corridors of power: the revenge shot against the senior government officials who think they are beyond the force of law itself. The mast from the sailing boat would rise; the city would be distantly seen from the bay, and everything would be salt-water, fluttering winds. Blinded by sun, I could not see any pattern in the pure digital static that ensued, the crowd moving, the smell in the air, the taste in one's mouth. I loved Hisako. Or no, I didn't. She was a drug-crazed vision or a perfect maiden of northern Japan. I was Julian or I was Jim. This was allegory, or this was all purely naturalistic; I am writing this, or you are reading it and finding within it layers never intended. But know. 6:30am, south of Akita, the shore still

ceaselessly rolling. Writing in one's head a voice that never ceases. Waking from a half-forgotten dream, there is only the sensation of illusion and elusive just-of-the-verge-of recall. It's cold. The wind comes in from cracks and ill-fitting joints. No future remains. If it is to be believed that I am sixty and life is over, let it be so. Totality cannot exist without this myth, even if the chart of one's future life is clear. Wisdom coming, as always, too late, revealed that doing nothing was the best possible choice.

They fell to pieces.

All possible sources of resentment dissolved into nothingness in the end, swept away forever. The one possible source of danger, the assassins' controllers, swept inside in the October revolution and the government of Japan fell, to be replaced by the workers' councils, the red-flagged proletariats and anarchists, the merchants of violence and death. (Dream-state) I was forgotten. My efforts came to naught. None of this really happened except in film. Yet something endured, merely for the sake of endurance, to record, to write down, to hope others would learn from the mistakes made.

In this possible nothingness upon nothingness the waves still roll in. Farmers' wives and fishermen's daughters; the poverty that went unremarked 'til now. I could live on twenty thousand a year and be happy. Nothing was accumulated and lack of offspring was a blessing. And yet the wind feels like something; it drafts in, it asks no quarter. Cold, unforgiving; a recollection. I had forgotten something, yes; I had missed the main chance. Otherworldly, implacable, waiting still for full and complete consummation, a girl's voice from beyond, something that I

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