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SEASONS IN THE EAST
Stories of Modern Japan

presented by

John Hanson Roegner

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of the requirements for

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SEASONS IN THE EAST
Stories of Modern Japan
By
John Hanson Roegner

A THESIS
Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

1991

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ABSTRACT

SEASONS IN THE EAST

Stories of Modern Japan

By

John Hanson Roegner

The Orient's mystical allure has always seduced Western consciousness. There is something in the East that draws us, some promise of spiritual fulfillment, and each year thousands make their way to the Japanese islands to find it. Many of these people see Japan's enduring traditions as an anomaly in the Modern Era, a bastion of special, essential knowledge carefully guarded for millennia.

These are stories about Westerners in harmony and in conflict with fantastically foreign people and places, stories concerned with knowing and not knowing, with growth, with defeat, with the experience of the East.

FOR MY MOTHER AND MY FATHER

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Albert Drake
for his valuable help and understanding.

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SUM

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A Small Matter of Measurements

Somewhere I read this:

Not long after the Portuguese dropped anchor off the port city of Kobe, Japanese men, for the first time, became concerned about the length of their penises. "The barbarians may be bigger, des ne," they would assure themselves and very carefully explain to their women, "but we are harder."

I

I've been told the only way to really know Japan and the Japanese is to boil oneself communally in their traditional hot bath, the onsen, and so one early autumn morning we drove west from Kyoto through the sharp, green mountains toward the sea. My host was a new student, Katsu, twenty-eight, a chubby chemist a few years older than me. I had been in Japan teaching English for half a year and knew well the art of taking advantage of Japanese hospitality: I was happy to let him pay for the tolls and the gas (Katsu seemed politely puzzled) though we'd verbally agreed to split the cost of the overnight at the onsen on the coast.

We followed the cliffs, sometimes stopping for the view. The Noto Peninsula points into the Sea of Japan and is a shattered, rocky place. Volcanic fires heat the same stone-lined pools of mineral rich water that Samurai warriors once used to bathe and heal their wounds.

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town, paid the obscene price for a bottle of Suntory whiskey and drove up the hill and pulled into the parking lot of the Ryokan, the country inn. It was an old wooden inn set into a rocky hill shaded by pines. A tiny lady in a whispering blue kimono and wearing geta, wooden shoes on little stilts, gave us cotton robes and wash cloths and hurried us into our room. The floor was made of woven straw mats. We left our shoes in the well by the door.

I walked to the window and saw, where the cliff dropped away, a small slice of the sea. There was an afternoon mist floating down through the forest of pines.

"A (dlink)?" asked Katsu. He had the top off the whiskey and was pouring a glass. He set the bottle on the table and watched me with a quiet, almost formal expectation.

"Absolutely," I said. I picked up the bottle and filled his glass.

Katsu smiled. "The man who pours his own (dlink) is a (dlunkard)," he quoted the saying. "What should we (dlink) to?" His English was good but he had the common Japanese difficulty with l's and r's.

"I don't know, to getting nicely baked."

"Cooked," he said, taking me literally, "cooked, a yudedako."

I did not understand the word.

"A boiled octopus," he explained. "You turn red, see? In the hot-bath. Like a cooked octopus." He grinned. His

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"To yudedako, then," I said. "Compari!"

"Compari, Stuart-san!" Katsu toasted and we clicked and tipped. "Wait until you have the dinner," Katsu said wiping his mouth. "Onsen dinners are (berry) famous. There is a great selection of dishes."

"Good, I'm starved." I refilled his glass and set the bottle down on the low table. We had another round.

"But, Stuart-san, (fust) we should try hot bath. It is (berry) good before the famous dinner. You must change into yukata." He pointed to the cloth robes the old woman had given us.

"Great," I said. "Ready when you are." I went over and picked up the stuff. I took off my shirt and was dropping my pants when I felt Katsu staring at me. I felt it though I was facing the wall. I turned around and he was staring at me, all right. I didn't like the look on his face. I had the suspicion something unfortunate was about to happen. There was going to be some awful misunderstanding.

"Hey. What are you looking at?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said quickly. He looked away. Then he looked back. He licked his lips, deciding something. "That is," he began slowly, with much embarrassment, "you're not...not a...gay American?"

I just about burst out laughing. "No!" I said. I thought he was probably just nervous about sharing a room

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"No!" he said, "not me," and he gave a strained nervous chuckle. "I thought maybe...I don't know, maybe you were."

"And I thought maybe you were. Just for a second. But you're not. Right?"

"No."

"Good. Well. We'd better have another drink then."

"Hai." He seemed relieved and after a few drinks, we dressed without discomfort.

We left the room and walked down the hall. The place seemed pretty empty. We went through a doorway and a hanging red cloth banner. Now I could smell the onsen, a faintly metallic wisp of sulfur and warm wetness.

Katsu picked up a little plastic stool and handed it to me. "You sit on this and wash," he explained.

We went downstairs into the shower room, putting our robes in a numbered basket. There were shower heads set into the tiled wall a foot and a half from the floor. There were men under them, squatting on tiny stools, lathering themselves up. Steam clouds drifted through the room. There was the patter of water. Everything down here looked modern, though above, the inn looked very old.

No one seemed to notice me. We sat sat down. I turned the shower on, then I took the bar of soap and washed myself.

"You have to (rleally) do it," Katsu said. He was scrubbing himself with the wash cloth. His hair was

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smothered in soap. His whole body was covered with it. He was scrubbing himself as if he what he really wanted to do was take off layers of skin. I looked around. The other men were doing the same. But now they had noticed me and they were curious. They were peeking at my crotch. I felt a little like a strange and possibly dangerous zoo animal.

Katsu said: "(Rlinse) off, then we go to first pool. Make (berry) certain all the soap is off." We left our stools by the wall and stepped into the water. It wasn't too hot; it was relaxing. After a while, I followed Katsu to a much hotter pool. I could feel people watching me as I walked, and I heard them talking but I could not understand exactly what they said.

After the hot water, we jumped into an icy plunge pool that nearly stopped my heart. We went back to the hot pools and did the whole thing again and again. The heat and the cold seemed to make us drunker. Katsu kept laughing.

"Your English is deteriorating," I said. "Getting worse."

"I am getting (dwunker), Stuart-san," he said.
"(Dwunkest). Ha ha."

"You're turning red, too."

He looked at himself. His chubby skin was scarlet. "I'm red octopus!" he shouted. It was funny that he seemed so serious. The water plastered down his hair. "Yudedako!" He pointed at me. "Yudedako!" His eyes were wide. "You too!" It was true. I was a boiled octopus.

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There was a pool we hadn't gone in. "What's that one?" I asked.

"It's for (berry)...strong bodies," Katsu said. "It has electric current in it...through it."

"You're joking," I said. I put my finger in the water and felt a real jolt. I couldn't believe anyone would get into it voluntarily. It seemed crazy anyone would soak in a pool plugged into a socket.

"It's good for your heart," Katsu said.

This I seriously doubted.

"Should we try the open-air pool?" Through a window, I could see steam rising outside from what looked like a small lake. A delicate garden of carefully placed trees and rocks surrounded the waters. It all looked very inviting.

"After dinner," Katsu said. "We should be having soon, too. We should finish here for now."

We back to the room. My skin tingled under the soft cotton robe. While we were gone, they had set the long low table. There were tiny brown ceramic dishes with fish and colorful vegetables on them. Some things looked like they were wrapped in seaweed. Little burners heated other dishes. There were some cold crab legs that looked plump and delicious. I was pretty hungry.

A young kimonoed woman knocked and entered, bowing deeply, saying "Sumimasen, sumimasen (excuse me, excuse me)." Katsu spoke sternly to her, and bowing again, she left. "I ordered some beer," he said grinning, "and a little

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sake, O. K.? Katsu had these pudgy cheeks. They puffed when he spoke.

"Yeah," I said. "Let's eat already."

"Now," said Katsu with delight, "this is a local fish, (berry) delicious and this is unagi, sea eel, and this, ah-ummm, yes, this is...."

We had dinner. Each dish was like eating a tiny piece of art. The waitress brought lots of Ashahi beer. Katsu was no longer so formal and we had gotten to the point where it was all right to pour your own glass. He seemed to be having quite a time. He was telling jokes I couldn't understand and laughing so that his chubbiness shook happily in the folds of his robe. The beer was cold and refreshing after the heat of the baths.

After dinner, Katsu lit up Marlboros and we smoked with the balcony window open. We could smell the sea as the sun dropped away.

"Well," he said, reclining with a cigarette in his mouth and sipping from a glass of whiskey on ice, "what **YOU**...do you...think of Japanese hot bath?"

"I think it's pretty great."

He smiled and then became serious, as though thinking through some complex chemical equation. "We Japanese come for reasons, Stuart-san. It is said the waters cure many sicknesses. All sicknesses. But there is also a philosophy of the onsen. It is a place where people can forget, where they can...can revive, that is it, they can revive

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"I don't know. How would you?"

He was silent a moment. "I would say peaceful. That's it. Peaceful. And I'll show you." He dabbed out his cigarette and

stood up. "Ready for rotemburo, open-aired bath?"

"Sure. Lead the way."

Downstairs, we went through the scrubbing ritual again. Dripping and holding a cloth square over our nakedness, we walked outside and followed a little path to the edge of the pool. A raked stone garden, its white pebbles smooth and milky, swirled around trees and rocks and bright green moss. There was no one around. The air was cool above the waters, and sinking into the heat felt absolutely marvelous, like casting off everything worth getting rid of.

It was the very beginning of autumn, and the tiny five pointed leaves of Momisa, the Japanese Maple, fluttered down to the steaming pool, where they curled. I could just see, up the slope of the hill, how the groomed garden cleverly blended away into natural forest. A rocky cliff rose above the level of the trees and beyond was the depth of the sky. A pale, heavy moon drifted gently in the coming night.

Katsu splashed and sighed. "Peaceful, des ne," he said lazily. "But we need more whiskey."

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Late that evening, after Katsu had passed out, I returned alone to the pool. The air was cold and the moon, now small and sharp and high above, silvered the tops of the trees and the rocks. There was a soft glow on the pebbles in the garden. There were long shadows in the forest.

I had just settled into the waters when I realized I was not alone. There was someone else enjoying the night. He emerged from the dark end of the pool, a middle-aged Japanese, probably a business man on vacation, and he swam clumsily toward the place where I rested.

"Ah, so des ne," he said grinning and pointing. "Gaijin des." Gaijin means anyone not Japanese; it is really their way of marking outsiders. I smiled back at him and he moved closer. He was pretty scrawny and when he grinned I saw his teeth were bad. There were brown stains from smoking and the tops of his teeth, where they met his gums, were rotten nearly through. He had little bristles on his chin. He looked drunk.

"American-jin deska?" he asked grinning, showing those teeth.

"Hai," I said. "Watashi wa American-jin des. (Yes, I'm American)."

"Ohhhaahh," he said grinning, pointing. "American-jin des, so des ne." Then he said a lot of things I couldn't

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understand. He slurred his words. He seemed strange and I was sure he was drunk. He kept moving closer and I could smell his breath. I never wanted to smell anything like it again. Like rotten fish soaked in tequila.

He looked around at the pool, the trees, the stars, and made some remark, I supposed, that was in praise of night time bathing. I said "hai" and he looked at me even more strangely. His eyes were cloudy.

"Anata wa okii deska?" he asked grinning. I knew what he asked but I did not understand what he meant.

"Okii deska?" he asked again, laying his hand on my shoulder. Am I big, I thought. What the hell.

"Eeva," I said. "No."

He said something else and fluttered his hand. He wanted me to stand up.

"Eeva," I said. "Witashi wa okii masen (I'm not tall)." I thought: what the hell's this guy want anyway?

He motioned for me to stand. O. K., I'll stand. I stood up with the cloth covering me and his eyes dropped to the cloth and he smiled oddly.

"Okii deskaaaa?" he said again, "Are you big?" and he pointed at the cloth. So it was this measurement thing, I thought. To show him that there was really no difference, I pulled away the cloth, feeling pretty stupid standing in the pool late at night with a drunk guy grinning at my crotch. Then he tried to reach for me and I knew he wanted something entirely different.

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I knocked away his hand, scowled at him, and floated to another end of the pool.

He followed with those teeth riding just above the water and I thought: this is sick. He glided up next to me and it seemed for a moment he was going to apologize that it had all been some drunken mistake but then he tried to reach for me again under the water.

I punched him hard in the arm and his little head shook. I got out of the pool, dripping, and snarled down at him: "Anata wa buta des (You are a pig)." That seemed to sober him up some and he started screaming curses at me. He was pretty upset.

"Thanks for ruining my bath, Bozo," I said in English. I walked back up the moonlit path. I could hear him shouting "Gaijin" this and that, really ugly stuff, but now that I was out of the pool it all seemed pretty funny.

In the room, it was dark, and I did not want to wake Katsu. I could hear him snoring. He seemed like he was a lot of fun and I thought we would probably be good friends. I wanted to tell him what happened in the pool and explain how silly all of this American-Japanese comparison nonsense was. Instead I went to sleep.

III

In the morning when I awoke a young girl was setting the table. The whisky bottle, empty on the straw mat,

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pointed ominously at my head. I had a little cold from being in the water so much, but when I smelled what we were having for breakfast, I felt even worse. There was something in a heated dish that curdled in that awful smell: old fish rot.

I saw Katsu stir and sit up on his futon. His hair was sticking out like the branches of a tree and he clutched a blanket around his waist.

"What is that?" I said. "What is that smell?"

Katsu tried to lick his lips but they looked dry. He sniffed. "That," he cleared his throat, "is a kind of fish custard."

"How can you eat this stuff for breakfast?" I demanded.

"You kidding?" he said contemptuously. "I never eat that." "What then?"

"Rice Krispies, we eat Rice Krispies," he said pronouncing his r's correctly for the first time, as if I were a stupid, hopeless gaijin who would really never understand a single thing about Japan. Then he went back to sleep.

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The Night Temple

Allyson Moore came to Kyoto nine months ago with the man she had planned to marry. All that was finished now. It was the classic shock. She had arrived home from work at the college unexpectedly early; Nick was in bed, actually, on the futon, with a whisper-thin Japanese beauty of nineteen or twenty. Allyson was brutally surprised. For hours afterward she walked alone through the evening hills in a sort of horrified daze.

Allyson Moore was not superstitious, she believed the fates and the furies were merely products of Greek imagination, and yet at first she thought she had done something to deserve this tragedy. Later she realized Nick was just a jerk. She made him move out. Unfortunately, most of things in the tiny apartment were his, such as the stereo, the short Japanese table they sat cross-legged around when they ate or played backgammon, the irritating old cuckoo clock and even the dishes. The futon they bought together but Allyson insisted he take it.

That was three weeks ago. Now the apartment was empty. Autumn bloomed full in the hills and the air had an October excitement, a promise of sweaters and windy-leaved days.

Allyson kept herself busy. She did research on Japanese swords for an American professor at Kyoto

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Japanese swords for an American professor at Kyoto University. She was considered a promising scholar and she was working towards publication. The thing was, she really loved the old swords. Their intrinsic duality was fascinating: beautiful works of art that functioned as precision instruments of death. Of course, now they were harmless museum pieces. But sometimes she wondered about them. A sword in a glass case was as sad as an airplane that never flew.

She kept busy but she was lonely at night. She had made the mistake of having the same friends as Nick, that is to say, making Nick's friends her friends, and most of them had sided with him. The only one she really liked anyway was Stuart Ryder. He was still nice to her even after she kicked Nick out of the apartment. She wondered if he might come out for a drink tonight. She dialed his number but on the eighth ring she hung up.

Allyson's apartment had a small balcony that looked over the Eastern Mountains of Kyoto and she slid open the screen door. Above Mt. Rokujo, there was a moon that silvered everything, a cliché moon that bathed the streets and cooled the roofs of the houses and the apartments. Somewhere in the hills the sound of bells drifted. She was strangely excited; she really wanted to do something.

Allyson had lovely brown eyes that were like cognac by the firelight but her mouth had a sad downward line to it and boys often interpreted this as evidence of snottiness.

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She had kind of thick eyebrows but she thought that was O.K.: they drew attention to her eyes. Her hair was wheat-gold and incredibly full and silky when she wanted it to be. Usually, though, she just pulled it back with a colorful skrunchy and let it ride along on her shoulders in a loose, pretty clump. She was petite but sweetly curvy and if she wanted to, she could get another guy like...THAT!...she snapped her fingers.

But she didn't want anybody right now, she was sick of the whole business and she was beginning to wonder how long she would go on in Kyoto. Then she flushed with anger, thinking why the hell should she leave? Nick was the ass. But she was lonely tonight.

Without any firm plans, she put on her red CB wind breaker, locked her door and went down the outside stairs to the street. It was a clean night. The wooden village stores along her street were closed and dark. Somewhere a train rankled the tracks and she heard laughter scatter from a Robatayaki, an eating and drinking bar that businessmen filled after work.

She threaded aimlessly up the narrowing streets. The homes had stone walls and hidden gardens and she glowed briefly in the squares of house light that fell across her way. She saw people in them, families watching T.V., sitting on tatami mats, sitting around tables. And her family--her life with Nick, was nothing--over. She shook her head--she wouldn't think about it. She wished Stuart--

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anyone--was with her. She just felt like talking.

Allyson turned a corner and noticed, tucked against a house, one of the marvels of Japanese technology: a vending machine. It was twenty feet long and served everything from beer and ice cream to hot soup. She wanted the beer. She fed it bills and selected a mini-keg--a full quart--why not? Whenever she bought beer from machines she smiled, imagining them in the States--how impossible!--every Friday night hoards of teenagers would knock the beer out of them with baseball bats.

Allyson went beneath an enormous wooden gate and she knew she was near a temple. Now the city fell away. There were no lights, only stars that flared above the hills. The slope of the road became steeper and the trees broadened with darkness. She stopped for a moment, pulled the plastic plug from the beer, and drank.

It was quiet and lonely. She shivered. She felt strange tonight. She was not frightened, that wasn't it: crime in Japan was practically non existent. It was more like...a tingling, an odd excitement. Well, she had felt it all evening. She took another deep swig.

Ahead, Allyson caught a glimpse of a sweeping roof-line. She knew Tofukuji temple was close by. This might be Sennyuji, but had she really walked that far? She didn't think so. There were so many temples it was hard to keep them straight.

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before her, a smooth plain of white gravel spread out like flowing milk under the moon. God it was bright! She could read a book if she wanted to. She held out her hand and a shadow stretched across the pebbles. She set the beer down, turned her back to the moon and tried a raunchy belly dance. Her Allyson-shadow mimicked her moves. She laughed, feeling a bit silly, took another drink and looked for a place to sit.

The old temple reclined elegantly in a far corner of the garden. She liked the up-curved corners of the roof--they were wings that might shortly lift into the darkness of the sky. She laughed at this--really, she was getting too poetic. Or maybe too drunk? She laughed again.

She sat on the mossy bank with her feet gently scraping over the stones. Long shadows and quiet eddies of moon-glow delicately merged into rivers around the temple. She lifted the beer for another drink when she saw the movement.

Near the temple, yes, something had moved. She fought an impulse to run. Visitors were allowed to walk the grounds in the day, but at night? On top of everything else, she did not want to be arrested.

There, again. She saw a man in a kimono hurrying around the shadows of the temple. A priest? He was carrying something in his arms, a bundle of dark silk. It took her a moment to realize what it was. She knew exactly. A sword wrapped in silk. More curious than afraid, she simply sat and watched.

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The man was secretive but purposeful, as though he were evading an unseen enemy. He used the shadows of the temple for cover, then he struck out across the stones, fast as a crab, to the deep tree shadows. His eyes searched the grounds to be sure the way was clear. Suddenly, to Allyson's horror, he turned and ran directly towards her. She stood up to speak, to say 'good evening' or maybe 'I'm sorry, I'm lost,' but the man went right past without a word or even a look. His head was shaved Samurai-style and dressed with the traditional topknot. He was so close she could clearly see the crests on his kimono and the tassels that jiggled from the end of the wrapped sword. He leapt up onto the bank and noiselessly slipped through a tight cluster of bushes. Fascinated, she followed.

He was crouching in a moon-lit clearing, almost hidden behind a large boulder. She could see him on his knees. He had a short knife and he was methodically slicing a hole in the soft, mossy ground. He made the hole just large enough for the sword. Then he opened the silk as though to take one last look. The long sword was in its black lacquer case. Beside it, Allyson could see a companion dagger, the short sword, in an identical case. The man carefully folded and smoothed the silk closed. He lifted the swords above his head for a moment in a curious way, then he lay them into the hole. He covered them and patted down the moss. Taking his knife, he quickly cut a triangular notch in the base of the nearest tree. He stood up, spun to look

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fiercely at Allyson, to look fiercely through her, and then he turned and melted into the darkness.

She didn't move for perhaps thirty full seconds. Then she was off, running wildly, she was through the gate and down the streets. She ran all the way home without stopping. She locked her door, sat down, then stood, then paced. She opened the screen door and stepped outside. After a second she came back in and plopped onto her new futon. She tried to calm down, to make her breathing normal. But the look in his eyes kept coming back to her. Terrible, she thought. Like he wanted to carve me up.

Should she call the police? But he hadn't really threatened her and, well, she was trespassing. She decided there probably wasn't much she could do. At least she was safe. She laughed, thinking 'that was the strangest damn thing....' She shrugged, got a beer out of the fridge, found a trashy novel and started to read. Bored after a few pages, she turned off the light.

She wished she could sleep but something was bothering her. Her eyes traveled the ceiling. A bit of moon rippled softly across a section of her tatami mat. She pictured the man in the garden, the way he ran at her, then past her. Something was very wrong about that. Suddenly she became very frightened. It was his shadow, she thought. That was it. He ran right by me and he didn't have a shadow.

In the morning she could barely wait to call Stuart.

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When his gravelly voice came through the phone she was already speaking excitedly.

"Stu. Listen. I saw something last night. Something really weird and I need to talk to you. Can you meet me up at Higashiojo and Schichiyo?

"Allyson? Is that you?" She could tell she woke him up. She looked at her watch and thought 'uh-oh.' It was 7:30. His voice sounded mildly irritated.

"Stu. I'm sorry. I didn't realize it was so early."

"Where?"

"Near the Park Hotel. It's only three bus stops from your house."

"O.K., O.K., but why?"

"I'll tell you when you get here."

"Are you all right? You sound funny."

"Pl-l-lease, Stuart! Just come. I'll be there at ten-thirty."

"Fine. I'll be there at twelve."

"Stuart, I'm telling you, this is really important."

"Allyson, give me a break, O. K.? I got stuff to do. I'll see you there at twelve. Seriously. I can't get away before that."

She was early. The sun warmed her bench and she kicked at a traffic pole with her Birkenstock sandals. She wore a loose, bulky rag-wool sweater and had to constantly push its sleeves up her slender arms. When buses came by the stop,

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she stood to see if Stuart would get off. Finally he did. He jumped down the steps with a war-whoop. She broke into a smile. Stuart Ryder was a good looking guy. She'd always thought so. She suddenly wondered if there was a chance, now that Nick was history...well, maybe, who knows? Anyway, she was glad to see him.

"Allyson!" he kissed her neatly.

"Hi, Stuart. Thanks for meeting me."

"O.K., you look great and all, but of course I expected that." He grinned. One of his teeth was chipped. She noticed his hands moved restlessly while he talked. Those hands seemed musical to her, and interesting. "Now what's the deal? You woke my ass outta bed; this better be good."

She gave him a playful little slap. "Come on, get a sense of adventure. I want to show you something and it just better still be there."

They started up toward the temple, retracing the night's route, and Allyson explained what she had done and seen. When she got to the part about the man's shadow, though, she suddenly decided to skip over it. She wasn't really sure what it meant anyway; maybe she'd just imagined it and well, she didn't want Stuart to think she was completely crazy.

"So we've got a sword buried under a tree marked with a triangle? Buried next to an old boulder? Treasure Island, right? We dig it up and we sell it. Make a million. Then we go on a long trip to Thailand and India and live like

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Allyson laughed at the thought.

"You're the expert," Stuart continued, "any idea how old the thing is, how much it's worth?"

"I'd give it to a museum," Allyson said dryly.

"Well, O.K.," Stuart said. She could tell he was excited. "But I know you. The thought at least crossed your mind. How much?"

She tilted her head and slipped her hair around and down over her right breast. Her fingers smoothed out little knots. "Well, this doesn't make a bit of make sense, but ...first I saw the crests on the guy's kimono, right? Three linked paulownia leaves in a circle. I recognized the mon, the family seal, of the Tokugawa clan. That's the shogunate family that ended a couple hundred years of feudal civil war and united Japan under military rule, O.K.? In 1600. 1600! Why would he be wearing that kimono now? Then there are the swords. I saw them when he opened the square of silk? The sword scabbards were black lacquer and they had the same gold Tokugawa mon inlays. If they're real, I mean my God, they're priceless."

"So why bury them?"

"Who knows? But the temples around here are very old. They've got all kinds of incredible things lying around in storage. Maybe he's some nutty priest and he stole 'em."

"If he had, you really think you'd be standing here? He couldn't afford to let you go."

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She shrugged. "Who knows? But Stu, if I did find a sword like that, identified it as Tokugawa Ieyasu's or even one of his sons and I published a description, I'd...I'd be...."

"Famous?" Stuart grinned again.

She blushed, embarrassed. "Well, it'd help my career, that's for sure."

They passed the vending machine and she pointed it out. "O.K., we're close now. That's where I got the mini-keg."

"Ahh--ha." Stuart grinned suggestively.

Allyson laughed. "On our way back, maybe with the sword." She let her thick eyebrows bob playfully. "We'll celebrate." They walked under the wooden gate and started up the paved slope. Then her smile wavered.

"What is it?" Stuart said.

"Well...that's weird...it's not right...."

"What isn't right?"

She was looking at the end of the paved street. Everything looked the same up until the wall, a solid wall where the second gate was supposed to be. But the road continued around, as though miraculously diverted during the night, and a few hundred yards further on, she saw what looked like a different entrance to the temple. She was confused.

She stopped, frowned, and looked back down the street to be sure this was the way she had come. The vending machine confirmed it. While Stuart watched, she walked up

to the wall and inspected it, almost looking for seams that would prove fresh work blocked the way she had come last night. But the wall was obviously old, very old. She turned to him, bewildered.

"What?" he asked.

"I don't know. I'm pretty sure this is where I went into the temple last night."

"Here? What do you mean? You climbed over the wall?"

She shrugged. "I must...I don't know. I feel a little disoriented. I guess I must have gone in...down there, at that entrance."

"O.K., well, let's check it out."

They hurried down the street and went in through the gate. Allyson's head felt suddenly strange and she experienced first a crippling deflation, then something close to panic. Her mouth felt dry. She made herself keep walking.

There were two large temples and a squat five-roofed pagoda just inside the gate. Maple leaves, curled red from the sun, brightened the tiny pond they fell in. There was a stone field, all right, but it was rigidly cut into the shape of a rectangle. Last night's garden, Allyson knew, was a different style entirely, it seemed to flow organically inside the irregular shape of the mossy bank. She should know, damn it--she sat on it. Where was that bank now? What were these two temples doing here? The pagoda? And the pond? This was not the right place.

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Allyson became aware of heat; she peeled off her sweater.

They walked the perimeter of the stone field in silence. Tourists chattered quietly around them, snapping pictures, admiring the trees and the way the sun fell through them.

Finally Stuart spoke. "So? The sword. Think you remember where our stupid priest buried it?"

"Oh, I don't know!" she cried. "This somehow...this isn't the right place. I know that sounds crazy...it was all different last night. But I mean know we're at the right place, I know I walked up this way. But...shit! Now I'm so confused. I feel so stupid." She stamped her foot disgustedly and rubbed her face. Then she dropped her hands by her side and stared at nothing.

Stuart watched her awhile. Then he said "Well, Al, maybe it's something else."

"Hmm? What do you mean something else?"

"Well, you look sorta tired and stuff and...you know. What happened between you and Nick might have...everyone knows what you've been going through."

"What's this got to do with Nick? And what do you mean 'everyone knows?' What business is it of anyone else?"

"No one's, no one's. I'm just saying that maybe you're a little worked up from it, that's all."

"Look, Stu, Nick hurt me all right, so what, I won't deny it. But it doesn't bother me at all. I'm over that now."

"That's just what I'm saying. Maybe you're not over it, maybe you're...projecting...all of that emotion into...uh...seeing things...like this guy with the kimono. I mean Al, a samurai in the 1990's? It just doesn't happen."

"Well, Mr. Ryder. Who the hell made you an amateur psychologist? I know what I saw and I am not crazy or hallucinating or anything else. I saw exactly what I said I did. I just can't explain it right now. Maybe we're at the wrong temple or something."

"But isn't it equally possible," Stuart began, "that you imagined you saw those things. That temple at night, the bright moon, shadows everywhere. Hell, I'd see things myself. And you were drinking."

Allyson's lip tightened. "Oh for Christ's sake, Stuart. I thought you were my friend."

"I am your friend. That's why I'm worried about you." He kicked at the pebbles, then cleared his throat. "Another thing. Nick asked me to talk to you. He wants you to know he's really sorry about what happened and he wants to talk to you. See you."

"Forget it, Stuart. Nobody can pull that shit on me and then expect to make up."

"But he wants to. He really misses you. And it might be good for you."

"If you're going to play middle man for Nick, then there's no way you can be my friend too. If you're not

going to help me, then, I just don't know what to say. Look, you know me. I'm not nuts. Something weird happened here last night and I'm going to find out what it was. If you don't want to help, fine." She turned and walked to the gate. Then she swung around and faced him. "And you can tell Nick to go to hell!" She started down the street and turned again. Now she was angry. "And I am not imagining things. I saw what I said I saw."

Then she was gone. Stuart blew a soft whistle, clapped his musical hands for no good reason, and looked around. The stunned Japanese tourists were politely pretending they hadn't listened to every word.

Allyson spent the rest of the day at the university. Her office overlooked a noisy quad that reminded her a little of Cornell. It was hard to believe she had graduated a year ago. Dr. Wagner had suggested she might want to come and work for him in Kyoto. She grabbed the chance and was happy when Nick said he wouldn't mind putting off grad school for a year to see the East with her.

Everything seemed fine until three weeks ago. She wondered how she could have missed with Nick what must have been obvious signs. After what happened last night, maybe she had to agree that Stuart was partly right. Maybe she was upset, a little, without even knowing it...she wasn't crazy and she wasn't seeing things, but a man with no shadow, well, it was possible, at night, in a creepy place,

that she had imagined that much of it.

There was a long table against one wall where she examined the swords that she catalogued for professor Wagner. Three swords had been donated to the school a few days before and she was busy disassembling them for inspection. She popped off the bronze fuchi, the end cap, from the first one and removed the ornate handle. These wooden handles were always covered with knotty ray skin that provided excellent grip. Next she slipped off the tsuba, or iron hand guard. Tsuba came in an astonishing number of styles that reflected the various schools of the smiths that made them. They could be elaborate or simple, but many contained the crests of the one person the samurai had sworn to give up his life for: his lord. This tsuba was circular and featured two dragons entwined around a bamboo grove. It was not signed, but turning it in her hands, she felt certain, without even checking the books, that it was from the Sunagawa school. She mentally dated it 1750.

Tsuba were important and often beautiful, but they paled beside the swords themselves. This one was magnificent. She measured it at 62 c.m., about average length. She ran her hand down the blade and over the grooves. Many people erroneously imagined these were blood grooves that enabled swordsmen to pull the blade more easily from the victim's wound. Actually, the grooves lessened the weight of the katana, or single blade sword, giving it greater striking ability. This was necessary because the

katana was a slashing weapon, very different from the European foil that was designed to perforate the body. The katana was wielded with two hands, and the method was as simple as it was direct: hack your opponent in two.

Just how effective they could be was sometimes recorded along with the maker's name, school and date on the tang, or rough metal mounting section of the sword. Allyson never failed to get a shiver when she thought of it: the smith would test the sword's quality out on living men--criminals, usually. She remembered translating the characters on one tang: two and one half men. That meant it had cut completely through three men standing together like slicing paper with a razor. Well, almost completely through three. Coasting her finger down the cutting edge, she had pictured their last moments, huddled together, awaiting the tremendous swing of the blade that would sever their bone and muscle and organs with incredible ease. How horrible! And yet fascinating.

Now she checked the tang on the new sword. She was just starting to translate the characters when Dr. Wagner poked his head in. "Allyson, you'll never believe this, my little billy goat," he said, "but I've finally wrangled one of those invitations after damn near nine years of begging." Dr. Wagner was always excited about something, and as usual, Allyson had no idea what he was talking about.

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Allyson laughed, as she did whenever he adopted his stereotypical Japanese accent. "Oh, right," she remembered. "The imperial treasure room in Nara."

"Kee-rect!" Dr. Wagner exclaimed. "One's invitation has got to come from the damned Imperial Household itself. Every fall, for two weeks only, they unseal the old building (and I mean old, the thing has survived twelve centuries of war intact) and they let a bunch of us geezers stick our noses into musty chests full of armor and saddles and rotting kimonos and...guess what else?"

"Swords!" said Allyson.

"Swords indeed, you clever monkey. Not just any swords, either. They've got Emperor Shumo's, for one."

"That's so exciting."

"Absolutely. Now. What have got here?" He walked over to the table and picked up the sword guard Allyson had removed. Then he lifted the sword and studied the tang. "Hmmm," he said after a minute, "probably Sunagawa school, mid eighteenth century." Allyson felt a little thrill that she had correctly identified and dated the sword.

"No flaws immediately discernable, " Dr. Wagner continued slowly, automatically, "...black rust on tang would seem to corroborate a 200 to 400 year age range...."

"Dr. Wagner," Allyson said, choosing her words carefully, "have you ever had the opportunity to examine any

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"Hmmm? You mean the first Tokugawa? Ieyasu, the Shogun?"

"That's right."

"Well. There are only a few authenticated sets of Tokugawa clan katana and wakizashi, long and short swords, in existence. I've seen them on exhibit but have never actually examined any. Why?"

"How would you be able to...authenticate...his swords, the shogun's, beyond a shadow of a doubt if a set just arrived here...anonymously?"

Dr. Wagner rolled his eyes comically, as if to say 'don't we wish.' What he said was "it would be very difficult to prove without some kind of documentation."

"Even if the swords had the paulownia leaf mon on them?"

"That would help, but remember, the Ashikaga and other clans used the paulownia leaf motif as well as the Tokugawa."

"Oh," Allyson said. "Right. I should have remembered that."

When she got home from the university in the late afternoon her answering machine had a message from Stuart on it: "I found something out about what you saw last night that might, well, make some sense. Be sure and give me a jingle as soon as you get in."

She dialed his number. "Stu. What have you got?"

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Stuart sounded excited again. "Well, you made me feel kinda bad today, thank you very much. I'm sorry about what I said. So. I made a couple phone calls to some friends and they gave me the number of an apprentice priest at your temple. Nice guy, actually went to school at Lafayette in Pennsylvania, speaks great English. Well, trying to be super casual, I told him I was writing an article and asked him if anything strange ever happened up there and he said 'what do you mean by strange?' and so I said do temple artifacts ever get stolen and he said 'thefts are pretty rare now, but sure, over the centuries, there were lots of wars in Kyoto when priests took up arms against each other and looted and burned religious retreats.'

"Basically, he told me temples then were almost feudal war camps that owed allegiance to a daimyo, right?, the vassals of the emperor. But the daimyo were always at war with one another in their attempt to curry favor with the emperor.

"So I asked him if his temple ever owed allegiance to any daimyo and he said yeah, his temple was sacked in 1614 because it supported Tokugawa Ieyasu in his final bid for absolute power. Right then I thought bingo, this is pretty strange. It's at least possible the swords you said you saw had a good reason for being up there."

Allyson felt warm relief. "What else did he say?"

"That he knew quite a lot about the history of the place and if I wanted to, I could speak with him in person.

He evidently thought I was quite the reporter. Actually, he was pretty friendly."

"Maybe he just wants to practice his English."

"Hey! Give me a break, all right?"

Allyson laughed. "Just kidding. Did he say when we could meet him?"

"We?"

"Damn right, we!"

This time Stuart laughed. "He's got some kind of duty this evening, sweeping the grounds or something. If you want, I'll call him and tell him we're coming. He said we could meet him there at eight."

Allyson and Stuart made their way back to the temple a little before eight. The falling sun colored the eastern hills with warm hues and long shadows moved through the streets. An udon man, with bowls of soup stacked five high on one arm, weaved expertly through the early evening crowd. "It's incredible," Stuart said, "they never drop them."

When they got to the gate, a young-looking Japanese priest in a dark kimono was waiting. He wore round tortoise shell glasses and carried himself with quiet composure. He bowed formally, then shook Stuart's hand.

"Hello, you must be Mr. Ryder."

"Hi, Toshihiro. Toshihiro, this is my friend Allyson Moore. She's a scholar at Kyoto University."

"Hello Ms. Moore, I'm very pleased to meet you."

"Just call me Allyson. Your English is perfect, Toshihiro."

"Thank you very much. We Japanese study English for many years in school, but I had the opportunity to live in America and go to one of your colleges. I really loved it." Toshihiro almost seemed to blush at this personal disclosure. He added quickly: "Would you like a tour of the temple grounds?"

"Thanks, that'd be great," Stuart said. Inside, it was quiet and empty. The five-tiered pagoda cast a long shadow across the field of stones. They stopped for a moment by the small pond. Brilliant carp cruised beneath the last bars of sun that gently wavered across the surface. Toshihiro took a bag of feed pellets from a wooden box and gave it to Allyson. She threw fistfuls in, and the carp rose open-mouthed to thrash the water, a miniature shark frenzy.

The unsettling sensation that she was in the wrong place, the wrong place but the right place, was with her again. It was damn depressing. She crossed arms over her bulky sweater, hugging herself.

Toshihiro said "What is your interest at Kyoto University?"

"My interest?"

"Yes, the kind of work you do."

"Oh, I do research on katana for an American professor. Mostly I just prepare swords for museums and that sort of

thing."

"She's being modest," Stuart said. "She's an expert on everything there is to know about Japanese swords and she's practically in charge of arranging sales and trades to museums in the states."

"Oh, Stuart."

"How fascinating," Toshihiro said, but he was unable to keep the surprise out of his voice. Allyson knew most Japanese men scoffed at the thought of women exercising competence in positions of power. It was unthinkable in Japan.

"In fact," Stuart continued, "Allyson would be interested in seeing any swords you might have at your temple here."

They stopped walking. Allyson gave Stuart an exasperated look. In Japan, requests, especially of strangers, were made in a round-about, circular manner that ensured both parties leeway to back out or agree without embarrassment. Stuart was unforgivably blunt.

"Well," Toshihiro said with reluctance, "yes, we have swords here, but...."

"I'm sorry," said Allyson. "What Stuart meant was, is there anything you can tell me about a special kind of sword that your temple might have. A Tokugawa sword."

"Ah, so des ne, a Tokugawa sword, I see. So that is why you asked me on the phone, Stuart. On behalf of Ms. Moore." Allyson listened for anger in his voice and was

glad when she didn't hear any. "Well, I can tell you our swords are very old but not so old as Tokugawa. I believe the oldest we have is early 19th century. I am sorry I cannot help you."

"Oh, of course," said Allyson, feeling both silly and depressed.

"But," Toshihiro said, "I am quite certain our temple once had Tokugawa clan swords."

Allyson almost jumped. "What do you mean?"

"There is a temple legend."

"What legend?"

"It is interesting. Supposedly, in 1614, the year of the final battle for Osaka Castle, one of Tokugawa Ieyasu's special...body guards, I suppose you would say, brought to our temple a set of Ieyasu's personal effects to keep safe in case he should need them. I thought at first this was only a myth the old ones tell, you see, but in my studies of the temple literature I have come across a description of swords, armor and other personal effects--horse trappings and such, that would seem to corroborate the story."

"What happened to them?" Allyson and Stuart spoke at the same time.

"Our temple was attacked by a group of priests loyal to Hideyori, Ieyasu's opponent, and the temple buildings were burned to the ground. Many priests were killed and temple treasures desecrated."

"That's all?" asked Stuart.

"Not quite. According to my teacher, a priest entrusted with Ieyasu's swords managed to hide them somewhere on the temple grounds just before the attack. Unfortunately, this priest was slain. The swords were never recovered."

"Never recovered..." Allyson repeated.

Toshihiro nodded. "You alone can appreciate, Allyson, the enormous responsibility and honor connected with guarding a lord's personal katana and wakizashi. Losing them would be a great shame. And so it was, apparently, for this priest.

Toshihiro licked his lips. "Now, this is the strange part; you may laugh if you wish. I certainly have trouble believing it myself but I suppose you could say it is part of Japanese folklore. It is said on certain nights over the long years the spirit of this priest has been seen searching for his lost swords, hoping to bring them to his master Ieyasu."

Both Allyson and Stuart stared at each other. Allyson felt a tingle along the back of her neck.

"You're joking," Stuart said.

"Of course it is only a myth, what you would call a...ghost story." He stood with his hands tucked delicately in the folds of his dark kimono.

"Of course," said Allyson weakly. Her head felt strange. A ghost story.

"Allyson...", Stuart began.

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Allyson put her hand up. "Wait a second, Stu." To Toshihiro she said: "It happened here, right here, at these temples, this pogoda?"

Toshihiro appeared puzzled for a moment. "Here...? Oh, no, not right here. The temples you see are relatively new. They were built in 1738, the pagoda some years afterward. The story of the priest took place at the old temple site. All the buildings there were razed during the attack and never rebuilt."

"Old site?" Allyson said. "What old site? Where?"

Toshihiro frowned. He looked slowly around. Allyson followed his gaze. The sun was almost gone. Soon night would close. She could tell he was deciding whether or not she was worth his time. She felt certain if she left now, she would not get a second chance. She turned back to him, determined. "Listen, Toshihiro," she said, "now you've got to take me there. It's very important to the research of, of uhh, of Cornell University, an Ivy League school in America. Please understand. It could also be very significant for the preservation of Japanese culture, too." She didn't know what she was saying and she didn't care, so long as Toshihiro brought her to the site.

Toshihiro hesitated. It was obvious to Allyson he wasn't accustomed to any kind of aggression from women. He even took a step backwards. "Toshihiro, look, there may very well be an archeological find of incredible importance here at your temple. I'm qualified to make that

determination. All I ask is that you bring me to see the place where the temples were burned."

Hai, very well," he said, slightly confused. "It is not far."

"Thank you," Allyson said primly.

Now it was twilight. They walked quickly in the gathering stillness. Birds darted silently above and vanished in trees that looked like fairyland sculptures. Allyson was nervous. She meant what she had just said to Toshihiro but the whole thing, when she even just thought about it, was so preposterous that if it hadn't happened to her, she really would think she was nuts. She was supposed to be a scientist, damn it! She wasn't trained to chase three hundred year old ghosts through gardens. She was suddenly very angry with herself. Was she drunk that night? Did she just imagine the whole thing? No. The coincidences were too strange. Toshihiro's story matched too closely with her own experience. But then again, wasn't it possible she had picked the legend up from somewhere else? She must have read thousands of journals having to do with swords during her undergraduate years. She read them even now. There were often attempts to cross reference oral or written accounts with actual physical evidence. She couldn't rule out the chance that she'd simply filed a particularly interesting story away in her head. She hated to admit it, but like Stuart had said, maybe she was just emotionally overcharged from her break up with Nick. Now she'd probably

make a fool of herself and have to apologize to Stuart and Toshihiro for wasting their time.

They walked by the smooth, dark surface of a pond. A soft path rolled on through a bamboo forest, a place of spider web shadows and odd, dropping noises. When they finally left it, they found themselves on the spongy mat of a mossy bank. The bank enclosed open space.

Suddenly, Allyson put her hand to her mouth and she let her fingers slide across her chin and down her throat. The anxiety of last day fell away. She wasn't crazy. She could see her empty mini-keg lying on the opposite edge of the bank where she had dropped it the night before. "Here," she said. "It's here, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes, you're right." Toshihiro stopped and looked at her. "How did you know, Miss Moore?"

"I know," she said. It was the same but not the same. The night temple was gone and before them was a field of short, dry summer weeds that sprouted through sparse white pebbles. But the outline of the ancient garden was clear. The same indistinct, undulating pattern that she had seen before. It was all there last night, a dream from another century. Except, she almost laughed, the beer keg made it real. It was proof that she was here when she saw the priest with the swords. "Tell me, Toshihiro," she said excitedly, "was there once another entrance to your temple? There, to the west?" She pointed to the perimeter wall in the twilight distance.

Toshihiro laughed. "I see you have done your research carefully. Yes, for many years the entrance was there. It was destroyed after the attack. A decision was made to relocate the gate to its present site."

Allyson picked up a small round stone and with wild yelp of exhilaration, she winged it across the dead field and into the trees where she knew the swords were buried. It was crazy and it went against everything she thought she once believed, but she knew the swords would be there. She knew it.

"Come on, Stuart!" she cried, taking him by the hand. She pulled him down the bank and made him run. She kicked at the white pebbles like a little girl and plumes of dust rose on the still air. Toshihiro stepped carefully down the bank and followed then to the other side, to the trees.

It was darker in the grove and difficult to see. After ten minutes of examining the trunks of trees for the triangular sword mark, Allyson was getting frustrated. Three or four times now, she had gone back out to the bank to try to get her bearings, to try to remember exactly where the kimoned priest had entered the trees. She was sure this was the right place. Then she realized how three hundred years of growth and decay could alter the appearance of a forest. What was the life span of a tree? Weren't they all different? She had heard of trees living three hundred years, even longer, but what were the chances that her tree had survived? It had probably died and rotted long ago,

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taking its incredible clue with it. She would have to return with a metal detector to find anything. But after dragging Toshihiro out here so unprofessionally, without any evidence whatsoever, she knew she would never get permission from the temple to conduct a thorough search. The whole thing seemed hopeless again, and she felt tired and weak.

"Come on and have a seat," Stuart said. He was leaning against a large rock. His hand patted a flat place for her to sit. Toshihiro was standing a few feet away, patiently watching them. She knew in a moment he would ask them to leave and then the whole silly story would be over. Except that she didn't think her imagination would ever let her rest.

Sighing, she walked over to the rock and sat next to Stuart. The forest seemed to close on them. "Well," Stuart said. "Sorry, Al, but...." He patted the boulder with his musical hand. She hypnotically watched his fingers tap a rhythm. It was somehow comforting to watch his hands.

"Wait a minute!" Allyson shouted, jumping off the boulder. "Just wait a minute. God, I'm so stupid. It's right here. This is the boulder he hid behind. This is it! It's got to be."

"What?" called Toshihiro.

"Here?" said Stuart.

"Yes! Yes! Right here." She raced around the boulder, practically tripping over herself. "So, let's see. He was crouched down about here...." She pointed to the

soft forest floor. "And...." She got down on her hands and knees and crawled forward toward a thick tree. "Annnnnd, he must have started digging....about...here!"

The tree in front of her was massive and thick. She instinctively let her eyes float up the trunk. About forty feet above her, bands of the dying sun broke through the leafy canopy and flooded over the bark of the trees. She could see something up there. A black mark, stretched and puckered. Stretched by growth and time and weather. Yet it still held the vague outline of a hastily cut triangle.

"I was right!" Allyson said. "Look, the triangle mark. Of course, how stupid can I be? It would have risen as the tree grew taller. But there it is, all right. It's true. It's all true!"

"What is true?" Toshihiro asked. "What are you talking about? What is there?"

"The swords!" both Allyson and Stuart yelled, laughing.

In a moment, they were digging into the soft soil with their hands, laughing, throwing clumps behind them like dogs. Caught up in the excitement, Toshihiro couldn't stop himself from joining them.

"Tokugawa's lost swords," Allyson explained. "They're buried here. Here! I'm absolutely certain of it!"

But she could hardly believe it herself. Not even when she had pulled a dirty silk bulk from the earth and placed it carefully on the rock. Not when she had opened what had been folded shut three hundred years before on a desperate

night of fire and death. She couldn't believe it, even when she saw the black lacquer cases resting together, remarkably undamaged after their long journey through time.

But when she lifted the long sword above her head in a curiously stylized way, grasped the ray skin handle, and brought Tokugawa Ieyasu's gleaming silver blade out again into the nighttime world, she believed.



The January Game

You can hardly believe it has come to this, but here you are, slinking along the Osaka wharf at dawn on a mission doctors of the criminal mind would follow with great interest. Your plan is foolproof--you're crazy, of course, but not enough to be tried for murder in Japan. Still, the realization that you are actually initiating steps rewound and played a million times over in your dreams forces an unwelcome little intrusion of sanity. Stop now, a voice gently urges, you don't belong in Japan, take the plane home, see your family again, work things out.

But you have come too far to turn back. You are going to make an important morning purchase as planned.

Already the boats are unloading their cargo and a bidding ritual has begun. You decide these frenzied men are immune to winter. In the frozen blue light, they seem to relish haggling over the quality of huge tuna corpses bound for expensive restaurants in the cities. There is oriental shouting and the sound of sawing as tunas are packed for transport.

You are here for a different kind of fish. You find it in a cluttered alley that has the sinister look of a movie set from the thirties where the hero barely escapes getting shanghaied by devils with Fu Manchu mustaches. Ordinarily

you would like this movie analogy, you often see yourself acting out roles that seem to be written by someone else, except now you realize you are not the hero but one of the devils. You are even wearing a phoney mustache.

The fish you buy is, appropriately, one of the ugliest you have ever seen. It is the Japanese puffer, known, when eaten, as a bizarre delicacy called fugu. It lies spiked and shriveled with a few others in a tray on ice, its eyes smoked with death. The fish lady does not appear to have any concerns selling it to you--she might, the chefs that serve fugu must complete years of training and obtain a special license. Maybe she simply doesn't care if a gaijin stupidly kills himself with her merchandise. Until you met Kamiya, you honestly felt as though most Japanese regarded you as an odd curiosity, a strange barbarian whose only value was your ability to teach English, the universal language of success. In any case, you do not believe this fish lady will remember you.

You have transferred your package to a plastic bag thoughtfully brought along from one of the underground clothing shops in Ueno. You know you will appear to be just another inconspicuous customer in this land of eternal consumption. It is now 5:45 and you board the express to Kyoto where you have lived for the last year. On the right, you glide by the soft morning outline of Osaka Castle. You remember registering disappointment when you discovered it had been rebuilt with prefab cement, not wood and stone,

after the war. Much of Japan reminds you of Disney World.

Looking around your car, you are pleased to see your few fellow passengers are mostly night time travelers-- businessmen in three piece suits who were too drunk to make their last trains home. They are all passed out. One has splattered his tie and the front of his shirt with what looks like dried yellow plastic imbedded with shrimp. His head bobs with the sway of the train. He may well be the reason you found this car so empty. You're very glad you can't smell him. You pull your Tigers baseball cap down further over your eyes for the fifty-two minutes it takes to get to your station.

In your shallow sleep you see Kamiya as she was the first evening she crossed the floor of the night club to introduce herself to you. She wore black in the spring. She had a gentle elegance that would forever after characterize your highest ideal of the Eastern woman. You loved the natural confidence in the movements of her hands and mouth. What was surprising was her eagerness to be with you.

"You look like movie star," she said with a charming difficulty between her l's and r's.

"Oh, come on, really," you had said, although secretly you were flattered. "Which one," you couldn't help asking.

"A young Lee Marvin, my favorite actor in the world."

Lee Marvin? You could not tell if she was serious. Still, something in her cunning determination to give you

all of her attention suggested she was. You could not keep your eyes off each other, and you found yourselves laughing at simply nothing at all much of that first perfect evening you were together.

There were many evenings after that. Days too, spent wandering among the temples or going for long drives in the Arashiyama mountains that ringed Kyoto to the west. You saw her nearly ever day. You were ludicrously happy. You couldn't resist showing her off to all of your friends and fellow teachers. Their shameless envy made you feel important.

Then late in the summer, you made what you now realize falls under the heading of "A Modest Proposal." It was August 16, the Buddhist festival night of Diamonji. Great character-shaped bonfires were lit in the dark mountains to guide home the spirits of the dead and taking her hand, you asked her to marry you. You did not get the response you had anticipated. She burst out crying, and between much coughing and tear wiping and carrying on you gathered the Problem was not merely a cold war between East-West relations. You wished it was only a matter of diplomacy.

No, you learned she had fallen for one of the friends You had showed her off to, in fact, your best friend.

You wake within two stops of your station and rearrange Your sagging mustache. Although you are certain buying the fugu in Osaka rather than Kyoto was a wise precaution, you now feel the mustache was a flight of exuberance. At the

time you got the thing, though, it appealed to your sense of theatrics. You tear it off your lip and stuff it in your pocket.

A massive billboard cruises by the window. You cannot tell what the product being sold is, but the five-foot face that sells it, a slightly stupid looking blue-eyed western model, implores you to 'Live the Life Free, Happy go-Luck, Super Style.' It is in English, like so many Japanese advertisements. You know gaijin models are the staple sexy sales gimmick here, but you wonder, not for the first time, just what the Japanese infatuation with America means. Western movies are big business. Anything with New York on it may as well be put in the living room shrine. James Dean and Marilyn Monroe are deities. You hope Kamiya's interest in you was not generated by this blatant Anglo worship. You hope you were more than last month's American flavor. The fact that she has thrown you over for another American does not reassure you.

The train pulls into the station and you shuffle down the aisle on your way to the doors. The tie-splattered shrimp man sleeps on, oblivious to disgusted stares. No one is looking at the moment, though, so you carefully place your baseball cap crookedly on his head. He will think it is a gift from the gaijin baseball god of Detroit.

Outside it is cold. You turn your lapels against your face and bury your chin in your neck. Wet snow, black from traffic, slithers in the gutter. The sky is gray although

the sun peeks a little through a soft underbelly of clouds swelling just above the mountains. You are not far from your apartment on Jujo-dori street and you walk along in the cold, thinking of Kamiya again and now Tim, who stole her away from you.

Many months have passed since the summer and he thinks you have forgiven him. He tells you he did not mean anything to happen, but he couldn't help his feelings toward Kamiya the moment he was introduced. He was hit by lightning, he marveled in his cliché, although that is probably how you would describe your first sight of her. You imagine them together often, you imagine his mouth eagerly gliding along the smooth blades of her hips. She loved this. You hear her little bird-like urgings, her sharp cries. You see them moving together, pounding, panting, all the while her eyes glazed with pleasure. You imagine her doing everything with him she once did with you.

Tim thinks you have forgiven him but the rage you felt last summer has not dissipated, you have only succeeded in re-channeling it. You are very good at hiding your feelings. There are no better grounds for revenge than betrayal and you have made this long morning journey in order to exact it.

You walk up the stairs to where you live above the food store. The Japanese use an English word to describe this type of apartment: mansion. It's smaller than a room in the Holiday Inn. It has a bathroom that is molded entirely

from one piece of plastic; when you shower, water runs to the center of the floor and finds a drain. But the balcony makes it cool in the summer and every day there is the view of the Yamashina mountains.

You take the puffer out of its bag and unwrap it. While you slice it open, you think over the months that have passed since Kamiya left you. All of your friends have drifted away, puzzled by the change in your personality. Your last good one, Stuart Ryder, cannot understand why you refuse to return his calls. It's difficult to admit, but you realize you have lost the continuity of days and nights. You would never have guessed another person could so completely determine the state of your well-being. You have tried to console yourself with the usual platitudes: You'll get over her, there are many fish in the sea; but you have come to understand that only once in a man's life, the woman meant for him briefly passes within reach. The agony of the last few months has proven that you are unwilling to let her go. By eliminating Tim, you rationalize, you will be there to help her through the tragic crisis. It is an old plan, but a sound one. She will turn to you for support. After a suitable mourning period, things will naturally run their course. She will be yours again.

You open the fish in search of its liver. This is the poison that fugu chefs are taught to avoid. Something like an average of fifteen people die every year from careless chefs. The interesting thing is, even the safe flesh of the

puffer is slightly toxic. It numbs the tongue, a kind of flirtation with the eternal.

You chop the liver into tiny bits and take a glass vial out of the cabinet. With the edge of the knife, you scrape liver into the vial. You put the vial back in the cabinet, re-wrap the fish, and throw it in the garbage. Later, you will bring the evidence to the dump, properly disposing of it.

Now you lay back on your futon and think ahead to the evening. You have arranged to meet Tim at a small fugu restaurant on a back street in Kyoto. A wonderful calm rushes over you when you realize it will all be over soon. You know Tim's drinking habits well, you are counting on the fact that he has a weak bladder. When he goes to the bathroom it will be a simple thing to sprinkle his plate with poison. You will even comfort him during his last moments.

There are slight misgivings, though, that you wish you could banish from your mind. For example, Tim was your first friend in Japan. You worked together at the same language school in Osaka. You liked him. He helped you get private tutoring jobs. You make a good chunk of your monthly wages from them. Tim helped you find your apartment. One of the interests you share is Japanese food. Together you combed the restaurants of Osaka and Kyoto, sampling takoyaki, octopus, soba, cold buckwheat noodles, ebi odori, shrimp brought to the table still twitching from

the tank. Those were excellent times. Your mutual love of food initially gave you the idea for this perfect crime and you knew Tim could not refuse this most daring of dishes. Japanese food was one of the the reasons you became friends; it seemed an appropriate way of ending your relationship.

The day passes quickly and night comes. You slip the vial into your pocket and leave your apartment. You arrive at the fugu bar early. Like most Japanese restaurants, this one specializes in only one dish. There is a painted sign above the door: a puffer fish with a smiling face childishly beckons customers. You wonder if victims remember that smile as the poison slowly switches off their important organs.

You enter. You are thrilled to see the room is almost empty. This will make things much easier. The hostess greets you, calling out a loud irasshaimasse! and you inform her you are expecting someone else to join you. You order an American beer, take a seat opposite the door and wait for him.

You are a little shocked to see Tim when he comes into the restaurant. It has been months since you last met and he has lost weight. His hair is dull and needs cutting. There is something listless in the way he carries himself. You expected to see him robust, cocky, flushed with the aura of Kamiya and her love. Instead, he seems out of it, beaten. His handsome face is pale and his lips tremble slightly. You promised yourself you would have no mercy

when the time came to finally remove this irritant from your life, but now you cannot help but feel concern at his appearance.

You rise when he makes his way to the table. "Tim, what's happened to you? You sick or something?"

"Nothing, nothing's wrong. It's great to see you again. Been too damn long." You shake hands as you sit. He seems tired but manages a weak smile. "A beer would be great right about now, buddy."

"Sure thing." You order Budweisers as he pulls the chopsticks out of their paper sleeve and plays aimlessly with them. "Compari," he says when he gets his beer. You lift your glasses and click them together. He smiles with a kind of hurt wince, as though he were stifling great pain for your benefit alone. You do not like the way things are going.

When the waitress comes to the table, you order the plate of fugu without conviction.

"Well, old man," Tim says quietly. "We're finally trying fugu, food of heroes. I re-read a haiku when you called before. Listen to this:

fugu and poetry
last night, we laughed together.
Today, I bury you.

Sweet, don't you think? Only in Japan would people be crazy enough to eat poison fish for fun."

You are uncomfortable with his clairvoyance. "Well, you say, "Here's to fugu," you say lifting your glass again.

"And crazy Japanese women."

Tim coughs, spraying the table with beer. His whole body shakes in a coughing fit. You get up and slap his back. He seems to be on the verge of crying.

"Look, Tim, something's wrong. What's the matter with you?"

His face trembles. "Oh god, it's Kamiya," he says unloading himself. His elbows are on the table; he's rubbing his face. "God did I love her. Enough to marry. Well, she's getting married, all right. But to someone else!" He breaks into a coughing, sobbing mess. You are aware that the hostess is watching him lose control.

"Come on Tim," you say. "Here, get a hold of yourself."

"She said she could never marry a gaijin, don't you see? Her parents wouldn't allow it. She said she was just curious to know what foreigners were like. That's why she dated us. She never intended anything serious. She was even laughing about it. It was all a game to her!"

At that moment you realize you too have been playing a game all along, a January game in which you methodically plan the murder of your enemy and win the woman of your dreams. But it is only a game, a mental exorcism designed to banish your distress, your bitterness. You never intended to cash in your chips. And there is no enemy, you tell yourself, only a rather pitiful friend who is suffering even more than you did.

"If I had known what this was like," Tim says, "I swear, I never would have let myself get swept away with her. I wouldn't have. You've got to believe me. It was like some kind of crazy madness."

"All right," you say, "don't worry, buddy, I believe you. Let's get some more beer, O. K.? We'll talk. Sumimasen!" you call to the hostess, "Nippon beru, doso, Budweiser."

"Hai, doso," she says, and hurries to get them.

"I'm going to the can," you tell Tim. The vial in your pocket has made you feel paranoid. You want to flush it down the toilet. As you rise from the table, the hostess calls out a greeting toward the door. You automatically look to see who is coming in. You are surprised and slowly take your seat again.

"She's here," you tell Tim urgently. "Kammy's here at the restaurant."

Tim just manages to stop himself from whipping his head around. "Shit! I told her we were meeting for dinner. I don't want to see her. No way. Not now." You first watch Kamiya as she spots you, smiles and heads toward the table, then you watch Tim frantically wipe his eyes to try to hide his tears. You don't think he's going to make it.

"Hello boys," Kamiya purrs softly. It comes out as 'hey-ro.' But she's got this smoky voice. There is something so alluring in her walk that you feel the old attraction immediately. You have forgotten how very

beautiful she really is. Christ, she's sexy!

She sits without being asked. Her perfume nails you. You see her engagement ring, a big fiery rock. She is waving it in the air for everyone to notice. She speaks rapidly, decisively, to the hostess. "A Meyers and O.J.," she says to you with a supremely bored sigh, "I do so love them." The love sounds like 'wuv.' You notice a New Age crystal dangles between the thick, black ridges of her leather biker jacket. You wonder where the hell she picked up this bit of trendy affectation.

"So, how are my favorite boys doing, hmmm?" You do not appreciate this new attitude at all. She is like a victorious general inspecting the haggard troops of the defeated army. She is enjoying herself superbly. Tim has been unable to make eye contact. His head lists to one side and his tongue keeps passing over his lips as though they're as cracked and dry as the moon.

"Well," she says to you, wagging her finger cheerfully, "you're certainly not being very friendly."

"It's just that I haven't seen you in a long time, Kammy," you murmur stupidly.

The fugu arrives. Delicate salmon colored wafers of fish are arranged in the form of a heron crossing a stream. Some kind of vegetable makes the eye. It looks too good to eat.

"Fugu!" Kamiya says, clapping her hands in delight. You hand pick up your chopsticks and circle them above the

plate. You realize the whole mystique of eating this fish has been ruined. You shove a piece in your mouth and chew it. It tastes like any other sushi you've had. Tim mechanically eats. Kammy searches the corners of the restaurant as if she finds your company an unpleasant necessity.

"Aren't you going to say anything, Tim?" she asks looking straight at you. Tim is silent. Her drink arrives with another set of chopsticks. "Do you mind?" she says but she is already eating, poking at the eye of the heron. "Fugu. Delicious, isn't it?" Then, with the same blase tone: "Hasn't Tim told you yet I'm getting married? Do you want to hear about it?" Her cruelty appalls you. You drink in silence, getting angry.

Tim coughs. You turn to look at him. He is violently hacking. You think something must be stuck in his throat. You get up from the table and run around to his side. His face is red. You slap his back.

Then Kammy coughs. Both of them are coughing now so that the hostess casts a worried look across the bar. Tim can't stop but it's suddenly clear he's only crying again, uncontrollably, sobbing and coughing.

Kammy looks worse. She's gagging. Veins pop around her neck and sprout on her forehead. You slap her back now. Kammy's eyes are getting bigger and bigger, darker by the minute. She looks scared. All at once you realize she's poisoned. How horrible! She's going to die right in front

of you!

You slap her back hard. A huge piece of the vegetable eye shoots from her mouth and splatters Tim's hand. Disgusted, Tim flings it back and catches Kammy across the nose. Both cut the coughing. For maybe thirty seconds they stare at each other, pure hate. Then, shaking, Kamiya rises from her chair, knocking it to the floor. A bottle of beer skids off her hip, soaking her in the most embarrassing place possible. The piece of vegetable falls from her nose and tumbles a little trail of slime down the front of her white shirt. It drapes her New Age crystal and stays there. How ludicrous she looks! And she knows it. Tim's laughing now, laughing harder than he was crying. It's a terrific show! Kamiya opens her mouth to say something nasty but there's only this little wounded gurgle of frustration. Finally, her face contorts into a grimacing mask, she stamps her feet, and bolts from the restaurant.

"Well," Tim says when he's forced himself quiet, "I'm feeling much better now. Much better."

"I thought she was poisoned for a second," you say.

"A damn shame she wasn't, don't you think?"

"You still hungry?"

"A little. But I think I've had quite enough of this fuqu shit."

"Relax," you hear yourself say wisely, holding up your Budweiser, "think of all the hops and barley sealed up in this little bottle. Think of the vitamins packed into each

delicately golden grain. There's a sandwich in every beer. Drink enough of these, why, you might never have to eat again."

"An intelligent idea," Tim says grinning, "Why don't we just drink the rest of our dinner then?"

The Drum of Heaven

Joyce came to my apartment above the pottery shop one night with a bottle of Meyers rum. I let her in and she seemed sort of too glad to see me, which is kind of strange to say because at the time I didn't know her well enough to tell if that was the way she greeted everyone she met. Later she asked to take a shower. I guess I should have figured what was coming but I mean how the hell was I supposed to know she wanted to get me into bed? Joyce was like fifteen years older and married.

And why a shower, anyway? It was damn cold out that night and the last thing you'd think anybody'd want to do is drip wet all around my apartment. It was always really cold in Kyoto during the winter.

It was cold but on the street, at night, you could hear the potato man singing "ya-ki-mo, ya-ki-mo," long into the frozen night and the old ladies would go out into the street and buy the gorgeous, buttery, baked sweet potatoes that he sold coal-hot from his small cart. Every night the potato man's singing was like a softly unwinding watch that told you it was time to sleep and remember what summer would be like when it was warm again.

But now summer was still a long way off and I had Joyce in my apartment with a bottle of rum, her nose red from the

cold, snow dusting the heavy folds of the weird winter jacket that she said came from Nepal, holding up the bottle and smiling uncomfortably with a look somewhere between sex and tears.

"Meyers is your favorite, isn't it?" she asked.

I agreed that it was.

"I knew it. That last time at Rub-A-Dub you ordered it and you said then it was your favorite. You drank three or four of them, I think, and then you said that."

Rub-A-Dub was mostly a foreign bar, meaning us, the foreigners, hung out there. Kyoto was small enough so that you got to know a lot of the people around but I'd only met Joyce and her husband a few times before. They had a big party at their home in the hills below Mt. Rokujo and we all had a pretty good time. Still, I couldn't remember giving Joyce my address.

She was nervous holding the bottle just inside the small kitchen and I didn't know what to say so we sort of gravitated into the living room with its six shiny tatami mat rectangles.

She went on: "Since I met you I've had it a few times and I really like it, the way it relaxes you, not at all like vodka and certainly not like tequila, which makes you kinda crazy, I mean this stuff makes you feel really mellow, you know?" She laughed a silly, charming laugh for no reason at all and then added: "You seem so mature for a twenty-four year old. And God, really, you're still just a baby, you know? I think I could get to like you!"

I was embarrassed at this sudden outburst, embarrassed for her, which is the worst kind of embarrassment there is. I said "I've got O.J. in the fridge; let's have some drinks."

"And I thought you'd never get around to making them." She sort of batted her eyes and smiled like she was being super coy and sophisticated.

I took the bottle, went into the tiny kitchen and opened the refrigerator. I looked back into the room and Joyce was studying my Grateful Dead poster on the wall like she was in a museum or something. An elbow was locked into one of her hands and the other hand was spread over her face and stroking her chin.

Joyce wasn't too pretty. You could tell she kind of knew that too, and tried to act real cosmo and sophisticated and wore wild clothes to make up for it. Her hair was a reddish blond and might have been pretty if she hadn't hacked it short like a boy. She had a kind of light bulb for a nose, round with little lumps on the bridge like the part that screws into the socket. Her eyebrows were so wispy-thin you almost couldn't see them and that made her whole face seem smooth and open and sort of dumb looking. But she wasn't dumb. Not at all. Somehow, it seemed to me like she realized she was homely at a very early age and knew she'd have to be smart and tricky to get the things other girls got with their good looks.

Like her husband Pokey. I don't even know his real name.

We called him Pokey. I guess he was a pretty good looking guy and a lot of people wondered how Joyce ever landed him. It wasn't much of a mystery to me. I could tell the first time I saw them together that she spoiled him. She put up with stuff that most women would never deal with. She cut his hair, did his laundry, cooked his food and allowed him to sleep with other women and I found out even boys whenever he wanted to. I didn't know any of this until the night she came to me with the bottle of Meyers but anyone with eyes could tell she was close to some kind of breaking point.

I got the O.J. out of the fridge and made two strong drinks. Meyers turns O.J. a lovely muddy brown and it's a good drink to order at a bar you've never been to before because you can always tell how heavy a hand the bartender has just by the color.

I brought them into the room and Joyce was staring out the sliding door window at the sullen winter view of Kyoto. She turned with this kind of sexy movie look that would have been comical if I couldn't tell she was so damn serious.

I handed her drink and she took a deep sip and then she asked me: "Is it all right if I take a shower?" A shower! In the middle of winter and she didn't even know me! Well, I couldn't think of anything to say. Her lips were trembling, but she was trying to be blase like she just discretely asked to use the toilet or something. I wondered if maybe she'd been drinking before she popped by. I decided she probably had been. So I just said fine, O.K., go right

ahead.

"You're sure you don't mind?"

"Nah, not at all. Absolutely not. I think there's a clean towel hanging on the door."

"Oh, great, thanks so much, Stuart," she said and walked slowly towards the bathroom, letting her jacket slip off her body like honey while sort of merging her eyes soulfully with mine until she pulled the door behind her so sharply it banged.

I took a few sips, bent down to turn on the tape box and thought: what the fuck is she doing in my shower? I put in The Red Hot Chili Peppers but remembered to keep it low. The guy next door used to pound on the wall and bark guttural Japanese when I cranked music too loud. I took another sip and opened the sliding glass window.

It was snowing in the mountains. I could see the dark glide of snow, like a sheet of tarnished metal, when the moon slipped out from behind the clouds. It was comfortable and exciting to stand inside in the warmth while the snow showered the temples and the city. It made me feel suddenly happy to be in Japan, in my snug apartment with only a touch of cold on my face, knowing tomorrow I would have work that I really liked, thinking that soon I would have enough money saved to take a trip to the north island, Hokaido, where I had never been, and where the land was supposed to be smoke-blue in the winter time, open, wild and uncrowded. Japan wasn't bad in the

winter. Every season wherever you were had something to offer, and I decided to enjoy winter for what it was and not think about spring until it came around again on its own.

I was just stepping out over the threshold to really feel the night when behind me I heard Joyce's coquettish voice: "Stuart, you know you're going to catch cold if you go out there. You don't want to be cold, do you?"

I turned around. Joyce had my towel tied low over her small breasts and her hair was brushed straight back off her head so that it looked like she was sticking her face out the window of a moving car. Her cheeks and her light bulb nose were mottled and flushed from the heat of the water. Her eyes seemed glazed. Now I was sure she was drunk.

She was leaning with one pale arm raised against the door frame. Her other hand held a drink that sweated in its glass.

"Come on back in," she said huskily.

I knew what was coming next and I dreaded it. I shut the glass door, went quickly into the room, sat on the tatami mat and slipped my feet under the blanket of the winter table. The table had a heater built into it and the blanket draped down to the floor and trapped the warmth in. I gulped my rum before noticing she had turned the lights low.

Joyce took a clumsy, theatrical step towards me, roughly loosened the towel where it was tied across her breasts, and let it drop.

She kept herself in good shape. Her small breasts were firm and sharp and I couldn't stop my eyes from traveling

along the taut lines of her stomach to the triangle, softly red and inviting in the dim light, and down the curves of her thighs to her calves that looked sweetly chiseled with slender muscle.

She stumbled as she crossed the space between us and said in a pathetically timid voice that somehow managed to ripple with desire: "I really think we should make love now, Stuart, don't you?"

There is something unfortunate about an older woman's nervous attempts at seduction. Still, if I wasn't afraid she was cracking to pieces in front of me, I might have taken up her offer. Instead I took her hand, sat her next to me and said "I don't really think this is such a great idea, do you, Joyce?"

Her lips actually quivered, she breathed out deeply and I felt terrible.

"Don't you want me?" she asked tearfully. "No, don't answer that; I didn't think so. God, I'm making such a fool of myself." She focused on the dark corners of the room as though she wished she could escape to them.

"You're not making a fool of yourself," I tried to assure her. "What's wrong? I mean it's pretty obvious something's bothering you. I don't know you too well but I can sure tell that much."

She looked at me with an intense sadness and I realized for the first time that her eyes were very beautiful. They held something in them, an almost desperate appeal, that made

her seem somehow tiny, like a trapped, wounded forest creature.

I stood, walked over to the dropped towel and picked it up. I came back and handed it to her. She rose slowly, looking at me the whole time with those sorrowfully beautiful eyes, wrapped the towel around her with dignity, and went into the bathroom. When she came back, a few long minutes later, she was wearing her clothes.

"Stuart, I'm really very sorry to bother you," she said with a kind of composed formality, "I'd better just leave now."

"No, don't," I said. "Why don't we just sit a minute, finish off these drinks?"

She looked at me, trying to make up her mind, so I handed her a drink and then she sat like an obedient child (which is how I like to think of her now, sitting there at the warming table as though she were apologizing for spilling chocolate milk) and she seemed relieved to be able to sit without worrying about her game of seduction. I flipped the tape and put something mellow on.

We drank nearly the whole bottle that night. She started telling me about her husband, she said, because there was no one else she could talk to. Pokey, she had discovered after years of marriage, of faithful dotage, of cutting hair and cooking dinners, was impossible to live with.

"I'm not enough for him any more," she said quietly. "He's got...people that he stays with. I found out a few

months ago some of them are men. Boys, really. He'll just tell me he's not going to be home for a few days, and that's that. I don't see him for a week. I hate him for it, knowing what he's doing while I sit home all alone. Or maybe it's worse knowing what he is doing."

So that's why she was here. She was trying to get back at her husband by sleeping with me. Still, I could see how that drove her. "That's rough as hell," I said.

She nodded thoughtfully and then she turned those eyes on me again. "It makes me feel dirty, later, when I'm with him, you know, in bed, fucking him. Knowing he fucks boys. Wondering if he's different with them. Wondering what that's like."

I nodded. The shower, as strange as it seemed at first, suddenly made sense. It must have been some sort of compulsive cleansing, a way of physically ridding herself of Pokey.

She said: "And I feel so trapped. He does anything he wants, he doesn't care or even think about the way he's humiliating me. I know all our friends talk like I'm this poor, homely cheated-on wife. They laugh at me and I hate it. I hate the whole thing. And there's nothing I can do about it."

"It's none of my business but if it's that bad, why don't you leave him?"

"Ha! You really have no idea, do you? It's not done here. Wives are goddamn slaves in Japan. Only a few years ago, they actually walked two steps behind their husbands."

"But you're an American citizen," I protested.

"Not when you live here. It's different. They expect things from you when you've been in their country for so many years. Especially when you're married to someone like Pokey. He knows so many people." She laughed unpleasantly.

I could never understand why women stay with men they no longer love, and then I realized she still did love him, despite what she said about him and despite all the sordid things. Maybe she even liked being tormented. She would never leave him and I felt a disgust, not a moral disgust or superiority but revulsion and fear, yes a fear that living with someone you both hated and at the same time loved was the hideous trap that most people everywhere had somehow managed to sew themselves into. I thought my conception of marrying, of living together with someone, of loving even, suddenly, utterly obsolete. It was as though coming up for air in a dark pool, you found out (to your horror) that there was no surface to break, no air at all, ever. I decided to quickly change the subject. "If you don't mind me asking, what's Pokey do?"

I remembered the party and their old, well-kept house and its beautiful stone garden. I remembered thinking it was an incredibly nice place for foreigners to live and how lucky they were (I thought) and now I wondered again what it would take to own a house like that in Japan.

"Pool sticks," she said with a soft chuckle.

"Hmm?"

"He imports pool sticks. From the Philippines. The labor's very cheap."

"Really."

"Oh, yes. Pokey's made himself into the gaijin pool stick king of Kyoto. He's sort of minor celebrity, the Japanese proof that Americans can make it in Japan. But you know it wasn't very easy. When he first started, they all ganged up on him."

"'They?'"

"All of his competitors. The other guys in the business. You see, even though they all hated each other, they hated Americans more. So they ganged up on him and drove us out of business. It happened twice. Pokey wanted to pack up and go on home. But I thought we could make it if only we stuck it out. And you know we did. We learned to speak Japanese fluently and we learned their markets. They respect us now. They even like us. It's funny about the Japanese."

"And thinking back, you know, that was the most exciting time, working together here to build up the business as though nothing else mattered."

Joyce smiled for a moment, remembering. "Besides, I had nothing to go home to. Did I tell you we're from Bay City, Michigan? If you've been there, you know what I mean." Then she laughed, a suddenly happy, girlish laugh. "No, home was definitely out of the question. Once you've lived in a foreign culture and felt the internal...movement of the place, well, you get hooked. I don't regret a moment here. I just

love waking up every morning to the freshness of it all--the people, the things to see, I never tire of it. I haven't been back home for more than...my God, it's been more than ten years now."

I realized how completely she had changed from only an hour before and I was very confused. Pokey and Joyce seemed so much older, but older in a crazy way. I listened to her steady, meaningless murmur ramble on and on about Pokey and how happy they had been before and I saw at last she hoped with everything she had that they would be happy again. She may have even believed they would be. The whole thing seemed impossibly mysterious to me.

I made more drinks; Joyce lit a candle and put it on the table. The winter wind rattled the sliding glass door. I handed her a fresh drink and walked up to the door and slid it open. The candle flickered orange light and shadows in my small room.

"Beautiful out, isn't it?" I mumbled more to myself than to Joyce. I stepped out onto the little balcony that was crusted with old snow and a light swelling of fresh snow. It was sharply cold on my bare feet. There was my chair and some old bonsai pots and other things, indistinct shapes, muffled in a coat of snow, waiting for spring.

I felt Joyce come up behind me but she stayed in the doorway.

"It must be difficult to live with someone like Pokey," I said, not really knowing why I was bringing it up again.

Maybe it was simply because it was all so inexplicable to me. "I mean the way he treats you," I went on. "The uncertainty of the whole thing. Never knowing. It all seems so fragmentary, so ephemeral." I realized I must have sounded idiotic. Well, I was pretty drunk.

But Joyce simply sighed. "Oh, you get used to it. We all make compromises when we get older, you'll see soon enough."

We watched the play of the wind and the snow. After a while, I felt Joyce kiss me lightly and I turned, surprised.

"Don't worry," she said, her hand on my shoulder. "I'm just leaving." She was smiling. "Thanks for talking with me. I really needed it. I hope we can be friends, and that you won't mind me stopping in sometimes."

I watched her sad, sincere eyes. We might be friends, I thought, but I would be her friend against her husband. I didn't like the idea of being her conspirator. I didn't like the idea of being forced into a small part of her little drama with her unfaithful husband. "It was fun," I lied. "Swing by whenever you feel like it. Thanks for bringing over the Meyers."

"You're welcome."

I made no move to leave the balcony, not even realizing I was being rude. Or perhaps I did realize it.

"I'll let myself out," Joyce said. "But don't stand in the cold too long, you'll get sick."

"I won't," I said.

After she left, I closed the sliding door and was alone

on the balcony. It was very late and everything was absolutely still except for the silky motion of the falling snow. I tried to trace the way I usually walked up into the mountains where the great temples were but it was dark and too hard for my eyes to follow the streets.

Then I heard the rich sound of a temple bell drift down to the city, steady and persistent as a heart beat. I closed my eyes and imagined a priest in his dark kimono out in the night snow, standing solemnly beneath the curved wooden roof of an open-air bell house, drawing back the huge, hanging wooden mallet and striking the bronze bell again and again as though he were beating a war drum in an ageless rhythm that soared to some pure land far above the heavy clouds. And the thought that the sound of the bell would forever dissolve itself into the night's restless winter enormity finally made me feel, for once, part of something great and complete and lasting.

The Ugly Spring Cherry Shock

Alan Keeler lifted his head. An explosive flood of dizziness, sudden and overwhelming, came charging into his skull. Smelling his breath, he felt his stomach and bowels sputter uncontrollably. Gagging, coughing, he leaned over and thought he was going to puke into a little stone drain where blurred, pinkish-white shapes were drowning.

It took minutes to register that he was lying soaked to his bones in a wet street with cherry blossoms plastered to his face and he had absolutely no idea where he was or how to get home. It was even impossible to decide which direction to start walking.

Alan sat up, too quickly, and his brains shifted like ballast in his head. He squinted around. It was a cold, early spring morning and mist marbled the little blue-roofed Japanese houses and their pine gardens and the morning was silent and strange and finally completely unreal in the mist. From rows of wet-bark cherry trees, blossoms steadily dropped along the street. He was covered with them. He never realized blossoms fell away from their trees the moment they bloomed.

Alan leaned over again and dry heaved. He was sure he was poisoned; he thought he was going to die. How absurd to die alone and drunk in the rain on a foreign street beneath the silent dropping of cherry blossoms.

He touched his face and realized it was cut. He'd taken a header somewhere. He felt a mushy lump just above his eyebrow and his fingers came away with blood on them. He let his chin bounce on his collar bone and he looked down at his limp tie. It was stretched and ruined. He was puzzled by his shirt. Why was it ripped and blood spackled? His knees winked through holes in his pants and he was actually missing a shoe. The foot was skinned and filthy. What was he doing in this street, in the middle of nowhere? He couldn't remember a thing. And then he did remember. At first there were only dim fragments but they grew steadily into grinning images of shame.

He had been at a party thrown by the owner of the English language school where he was going to teach on a trial basis. If he did well, he understood the position would be permanent. Alan's college friend Stuart Ryder had been teaching in Kyoto for a year, long enough to arrange the job while Alan was still in the states. Alan had arrived only yesterday, rumpled and jet-lagged from the tedious flight. He had barely dropped off his bags when Stuart told him to get ready for a party:

"You're lucky to meet the boss," Stuart said. "Mike Sakura's a pretty decent guy. He went to school in the States. Just be yourself," Stuart had assured him, "and hey--don't look so worried, you'll make a great impression."

"I'm not worried," he had said, "I'm dead tired."

Supposedly it was very rare for foreigners to be

invited into the homes of the Japanese. They took a bewildering series of trains deep into the sprawling suburbs of Osaka, and when they finally arrived, there were interesting people from all over, from New Zealand and Europe and India and everyone had a sort of avante-garde, ex-patriate, world weary charm. Alan felt intimidated. He decided the best thing to be was as outgoing and as friendly as possible.

Introduced quickly around, Alan received almost affectedly disinterested hellos and head nods. Mr. Sakura was young-looking and he drank whiskey. Alan asked for one too, hoping it would make him seem sophisticated. He wanted to be witty and interesting, but he was nervous and drained his drinks compulsively. Before he knew it, the alcohol was talking for him.

He lectured an antique dealer from England on the inequalities of hereditary rule and poked the guy's chest to underscore each point. He cornered a pretty Australian woman with some slurred babble about the right of American nuclear ships to dock in Sydney harbor and then he playfully joked about sleeping with her. She was shocked and turned away. He was loud. He cracked crude jokes. He was argumentative, abrasive; he was convinced everyone wanted his opinion.

And then: tripping over the low table carefully set with tiny, clever dishes of shabu shabu and seafood and glasses of beer and sake. He remembered trying to help

clean up. Instead he dropped a stack of expensive looking handmade ceramics, breaking them. He stained the tatami mat floor with a spilled drink. He seemed to recall walking into a door. The messes he made, his half-baked apologies.

Later, with a swaggering hostility, he challenged Mr. Sakura to a drinking contest. They had to cut him off. He ruined the party. The last shadowy thing he could remember was something completely unlike him: he had tried, jokingly, to grab the breasts of...who was it? The hostess? It didn't matter. Christ, he hated himself. There was no point in thinking about it anymore.

Alan struggled to his feet. He was soaked and his wet hair dumped across his eyes. He started to walk but his right knee didn't seem to work anymore. He felt slow, lifeless. His foot was cold and puckered. He needed water. When he swallowed, his throat felt like there was a rusty razor in it.

The sun fell through the fog to the street in strange translucent pools and as he watched, the mist slowly folded away. He tried to figure out where he was but he had no idea how far he had come from the party. He didn't remember leaving. The house had to be somewhere nearby...but now they all looked the same. He wouldn't know it even if he saw it. Anyway, he was far too ashamed of himself show up at their door.

He was lost. He desperately tried to remember the walk from the station to the house but everything about the night

was impossibly vague. Only the houses, the streets and the gardens took on a brutal, unforgiving sharpness. He thought he heard a train far away and headed without conviction toward the sound.

At last he understood he was in serious trouble. He knew very little Japanese. He was utterly alone in a foreign country. Yesterday he had a home and a job and a certainty of things to come and now, now he was a fragile thread cut away from everything predictable.

The cold had worked its way inside him and he was a shivering mess. He had lost his Brooks Brothers jacket somewhere. With sudden panic, he slapped the pockets of his soiled khakis, afraid he had lost his wallet too. He almost cried when he found it. At least he had credit cards and with them he could get money.

Then another thought hit him. Stu's number! Was he too stupid to write it down? He pulled out his wallet and thank God, yes, tucked between his Discover card and his Visa, was a shred of paper with a number. Things were looking up.

It was important to get to a station, to find a phone. He turned off the residential street and found a wide boulevard where cars were hurrying to work. He tucked his sloppy shirt in and straightened his tie but it was no use. He knew he looked ridiculous. To the Japanese he probably looked crazy.

He was thinking about hitch-hiking when a bright sporty car slowed down, passed him and stopped. Alan hobbled up to it. A young Japanese rolled the window down a sliver. He looked as though he wanted to be friendly but also very careful about what he was getting himself into. "What is happen to you?" he said. "You American?"

"Please," Alan said. "Please. I need to find the train station."

"You go to hospital?"

"No, if you could please, please just put me on the train back to Kyoto." He croaked out the words.

"Ah, so des ne, Kyoto." The young man nodded his head but did not seem to understand. For a moment he simply stared at Alan's face with interest. Finally he said: "You have berry bad...." The kid brushed his hand over his own cheek and pointed to his forehead. "You no want hospital?"

"No! No hospital. Station. Train station. Toot toot." Like every American abroad, Alan thought baby talk would make himself better understood.

"But I think you looka hurt. But O.K., please to get in. Doso."

Alan opened the door and slipped into the sporty bucket seat. It was warm in the car and The Rolling Stones' latest album softly filled his ears. Alan felt a wild happiness. He felt as though he'd been rescued from drowning. He was so grateful he almost cried.

The car smoothly accelerated into the fast morning traffic and they began weaving through other commuters. Evidently, Alan's driver was concerned with making a good impression. Alan studied him. He had a spikey punk haircut and slick clothes and his collar was buttoned up all the way to the top. He concentrated on the road but couldn't help taking quick puzzled looks at his passenger.

"What a happen to you?" he finally said. "You in a fight? You looka bad."

"Oh, I've had a bad time...I'm sick. I'm...." Alan didn't want to talk about the night. "Thank you so much for picking me up."

Alan caught himself in the rearview mirror. The deep, ugly cut on his cheek might actually need stiches. It was crusted with blood. His lip was only scratched but the gray lump on his forehead made the whole right side of his face lopsided. He already had a huge black eye and he felt sluggish and dizzy. He looked like hell and he could only blame himself.

He wondered again what had actually happened. A fight? He didn't think so. He could just remember being led out of the house but after that, blackness. It was somehow terrible, daunting, to realize he would probably never know. There would always be this string of missing hours cut from his memory like a sinister operation. Then...something returned. He remembered it was late, very late. He was

running and falling, running from someone. There was a little man in a black kimono and laughter. A horrible little man. Alan kept falling on his face, getting up again, running. It seemed important to keep getting up again.

That was all. The rest was gone. An alcoholic lobotomy.

The Japanese kid turned to him and smiled. "I have never met American before."

"Well, I'm American all right." I'm your first? Alan thought. How do you like them?

"California. McDonald's. Jack Nickolas." The young man grinned proudly.

"Right, O. K., sure." Alan was thinking of other things. He was wondering why he ever decided to come to Japan.

They traveled in silence for a few minutes. Alan noticed his driver seemed suddenly quiet. He wondered if he wasn't measuring up to some image the kid had pulled from a movie and then he decided that under the circumstances, that was damn understandable. "Look," he said. "I'm sure you're curious about America and stuff and I'm sorry I'm not talking a whole lot. It's just that I feel really terrible today. Is there anything you'd like to ask me?"

The Japanese breathed out in relief. "Hai, please. Where is your..." he pointed to Alan's feet. "Where is your

shoe?"

The young man dropped him at a station and explained which trains to take back to Kyoto. Alan could call Stuart again for directions back to the house. He boarded the train and collapsed on the seat.

Alan carefully moved his hair back away from his bruised forehead and watched the concrete towns and the rice fields and the sharp emerald hills cruise smoothly past the windows. Was it really possible he'd been in Japan less the twenty-four hours? It was difficult, now, to understand the sense of...how could he put it?...the absolute euphoria that he had felt only yesterday.

He had walked briefly through the city before taking the train to Stuart's and everything he saw was new and mysterious and incredibly engaging. Osaka was a sprawling gray jumble of confusing noise but that was no matter--it had undeniable energy and sudden secret spots of beauty. Temples were hidden within secret bamboo curtains or even nestled between modern buildings. Azaleas and other spring flowers flourished in careful gardens. Bright orange shinto shrines were tucked into quiet corners and people clapped in front of them to awaken the god that was sleeping inside.

He remembered a massive Torii gate that guarded the entrance to an almost sensually luxurious park. Children giggled and called him "gaijin," foreigner, and the women were elegantly silent and watchful and with their cool

lustrous eyes and hair, darkly beautiful. Everyone was friendly and people went out of their way to explain directions and sights to him.

Alan felt lifted with the thought that he was gaining keys to culture, keys to people. For once he would live something great rather than merely read about something great. It was the difference between knowing and merely thinking you knew. He imagined himself learning things, lessons, that would stay with him for the rest of his life. Then, looking around in the park with the children laughing, everything seemed fresh and imminently attainable.

And now. How could he have done this to himself? He let his head flop into his hands and rock with the sway of the train. He tried not to think. But the ugly images of the night returned. He wanted to squeeze them out, destroy them. He was cautiously touching his cheek with a tentative drowsiness when he felt the stares.

His eyes swung quickly around the car. As if by arrangement, the women in the train had quietly gathered their children around them and moved away. They were staring at him with a palpable hostility.

He opened his mouth, wanting to say he'd had an accident, that he knew he looked terrible, but really, he was friendly and harmless, a college graduate from a nice family. He wanted to shout all of this but nothing came out because at that moment, he understood, in one of those rare,

absolutely crystalline glimpses into human motivation, that the mothers were instinctively protecting their children from him.

In an instant, he saw himself as a freak, a monster that frightened children. The women looked at him as though at any moment he might tear the limbs off little their babies. He knew what the deformed know and what it meant to be distrusted, hated even, on sight. It was a terrible, numbing realization. The fact they were all of a different race made it even more shocking, more ostracizing.

And when the people slowly turned their backs, he was pathetically grateful.

It was a long ride to Kyoto. At the station, Alan took out the number from his wallet with a shaking hand and dialed.

Stuart answered. "Alan! Where the hell you been? I've been pretty damn worried."

"Look, I'm in trouble, okay? I...I've had an accident. Really bad, too. Jesus, I'm all smashed up." After the train, the stares, it was all he could do to keep his voice from cracking.

"Where are you?"

"Kyoto Station. I just got here," he added Pointlessly.

"O. K., stay there. I'll come get you. Give me fifteen minutes."

"Thanks a hell of a lot, Stu," Alan said.

Alan was sitting alone on a bench when Stuart found him. "Holy shit," Stuart said, "this is one for the books." He laughed, shaking his head in disbelief. "Where the hell's your shoe?"

"Not now, Stu, come on. I need some fucking aspirin."

"What happened? We looked everywhere. You get hit by a bus or something?"

"I know it sounds stupid but...I can't really remember."

"Can't remember?" Geoff frowned. "Wow. That's bad."

"I know, I know."

"You took off and we couldn't find you anywhere. I was hoping you picked someone up. You know you were pretty wasted last night."

"Don't you think I know that!"

"O.K., take it easy. Let's get out of here already."

They walked out of the station. The sun seemed to burn Alan's eyes.

Stuart laughed. "I've never seen anyone plow through a rice paper door. How's your face?"

"Oh, how the hell do I know? It hurts."

Geoff laughed good naturedly. "Don't worry, you'll be fine."

They walked on through the narrow, bricked streets.

Stu said "Listen, I've got to go to work. I'll just drop you off. There's stuff to eat if you're hungry. Tylenol is in the bathroom."

"Okay but do something for me? Ask about, well, about the job."

Stuart's look said 'you must be joking.'

"I mean, I just want to know if I've completely ruined my chances or what."

"Well, Al, I mean seriously, Mike Sakura was not too impressed with the way you acted. You must know that. To tell you the truth, I was pretty embarrassed for you. You've got to be more careful when you booze. You were hitting on the girls like, well, you were really obnoxious. You can't act that way here."

"Don't lecture me, Stu. I remember carrying you home a hundred times at school."

"Yeah, well, were not in college anymore, are we pal?"

Alan shuddered, knowing Stuart was right. "So the job is pretty much out, is that it?"

"O.K., the Japanese give a lot of leeway for drinking and all but I don't know...." Stuart raised his eyebrows sympathetically.

"I didn't think so," Alan said quickly and swallowed. "I'm sorry if I screwed anything up for you."

"Listen, don't worry about it. There are plenty of teaching jobs in Osaka. Once you get back on your

feet...you can start looking. Don't worry, you can stay with me as long as you need to."

Alan breathed out and closed his eyes tightly.

They stopped in front of an apartment that opened over a small, pleasant park. O.K.," Stuart said handing over a set of keys, "I should be back around nine tonight."

"Thanks for everything, Alan said sheepishly.

"No prob. But listen, take a shower or something." He smiled. "You really reek of booze."

Alan left his one shoe in the well inside the door. He went into the tatami mat room where his bags were and it seemed like months since he last saw them. He stripped off his clothes, almost losing balance when he got out of his pants. He put on a pair of fresh boxer shorts. He unpacked his kit and pulled out his toothbrush. Then he went into the bathroom and urinated. He found a bottle of Tylenol, gulped down four and drank from the faucet until he was full.

He stood in front of the mirror and gingerly washed his face. When the blood came away he could see the damage clearly. He would probably scar. Ashamed of himself, he slapped the mirror and then pressed his fingers to his temple to try and stop the pounding in his head. He carefully brushed his teeth and went back into the room.

Outside the window, growing from the gardens of the neighbor's homes, he could see cherry blossom trees. The

white petals fluttered to the ground. He wondered how long the damn things would keep dropping. He wanted to see healthy green leaves, the sign that summer was coming. He felt sure he would be all right by the summer. He shut the window, unrolled his futon and crawled onto it. He was very stiff and in pain and it took him a long time to fall asleep.

Bonsai Thief

During the first warm nights of May, Randall Pym, age 28, found himself stealing bonsai trees again. Randall knew all the wealthy streets in Kyoto and he would hoist his heavy little body over fences and stone walls and drift alone through the tranquil, shadowy gardens where the miniature trees flowered in their dusky urns. Barky, twisted maples and pines had an eerie likeness to age-bent human figures and Randall often lingered for hours caressing the buds and the tiny, wizened branches. A few of the trees bloomed wildly at night, giving off scents far sweeter than anything he had ever smelled and sometimes, haunted by a peculiar longing, Randall would get on his hands and knees and dart his tongue along the smooth edge of the glazed dish and into the moist, mossy soil. On these nights he almost always ended up furiously masturbating, spilling himself onto the trunks of the trees, splattering the soil they grew from.

At any moment someone might look out their window and discover him there in the moonlight. But no one ever had. And since he imagined himself as a connoisseur of bonsai trees, an expert, he only vaguely acknowledged the fact that breaking the law in a foreign country could have severe repercussions. And Randall preferred to completely ignore analyzing the bizarre attraction these trees held over him. A long time ago, he had decided everyone had their own

perversions and he was no more deviant than anyone else.

His apartment was the usual claustrophobic Japanese living space, but it was overflowing with stolen bonsai plants. He had more than thirty of them arranged on the tatami mat floor or sunning out on his balcony and the mingling smells of black pine, Hinoki cypress and flowering azalea were delightful.

Randall didn't like to think of himself as a common thief, the idea was repugnant to him, and he was careful to tell friends who visited that his students brought the trees as gifts. When students came for English lessons, he reversed himself: now they were gifts from friends.

He knew some had their suspicions, especially the Japanese students.

"How very pretty," they might say. "Bonsai are difficult to keep so beautifully."

"Thank you. You know I really enjoy caring for them."

"They look so professional; they are so expensive to buy. And you keep getting new ones."

Randall wondered if this could be a sly accusation. Everyone knew that an English teacher, after all, was not a rich man.

Some would ask "My father has bonsai. Where did you buy such perfect trees?"

And Randall would answer vaguely "Oh, friends get them for me; they know how much I like them."

Randall was aware this was a lame answer. All the

trees' ceramic containers had the unmistakable look of long, outdoor wear. They didn't seem as though they were recently purchased from a store. They looked exactly like what they were: old pots from someone else's garden. But since no one had accused him outright, Randall felt safe. Secretly, he even delighted in the lying game. Not only did the trees make him appear more popular, more eccentric, with either his students or his friends, but the same sexual impulse that drove him to steal was complimented by his ability to later lie with a casual, even pleasant face. The whole system of identifying, stalking, stealing and later lying was enormously intoxicating.

It was probably inevitable that Randall would run into trouble. This is the way it happened.

One afternoon, Randall was serving green tea to his teaching colleague Stuart Ryder. Stuart mentioned something he had read in the Asahi Times, an article about a rash of bicycle thefts in the Gion entertainment district, two train stops from where Randall lived.

"I'm sure they're just drunk college students," Stuart said. "You know, fraternity pranksters, that kind of thing." The sharp angles of Stuart's face were touched by light that came in through the sliding window.

"It's possible some of the thefts can be accounted for by drunk students," Randall said, setting down his cup and crossing his plump legs on the straw mat floor. "But don't be so sure about the rest. There could more to it than you

might think."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, take the ideal thief. He's a very special sort of person. I would almost venture that he's a different animal entirely from the usual sort you meet on the street."

"I don't get you. Thieves that rip off bicycles do it to sell them later for profit. If you're saying a thief is cunning by nature, fine, okay, but beyond that, I don't find much appealing about him."

The sausage-like fingers of Randall's hands patiently intertwined, forming a soft steeple on his lap. "I'll grant you there are common thieves, and yes, I agree, they aren't very interesting. But there's a higher category of thief. This one steals for the same reason a painter paints or a sculpture finds himself drawn each evening to the block of marble in his work shed. It's a compulsive need. A need that can't be denied. And my analogy isn't at all inappropriate. The thief I'm thinking of visualizes his work as a kind of art too, the art of stealing, if you will."

"Bullshit, Randall. The thief you're talking about doesn't produce anything. All artists produce something. Your thief just takes stuff from one location and puts it in another. Stuff that isn't his."

"My answer is that there are intangible arts, arts that don't necessarily produce anything. The art of conversation, for example. Or thinkers who don't write

anything. That these people have attained great skill is unquestionable. And isn't art fine skill? Simply because my thief works at night and alone doesn't mean he isn't a master. Think of the preparation and the challenges, the special problems each new theft presents! Also, take into consideration the fact that my thief doesn't sell the objects he steals. He may take works of art, for example, with no other end than to enjoy them in the seclusion of his own home."

Randall couldn't help giving his own collection a satisfied glance. He stole only the best specimens, and these might easily be a hundred years old. The trunk must have the classic bend, giving it the appearance of great age, of a lifetime of battling the elements. Also important was the tree's relationship to the ceramic dish it grew in. There were many different dish styles, rectangular, oval, ornate or simple, but all were designed to achieve the illusion of an actual landscape in nature. This union, the weathered, age-bent tree and its mottled dish filled with a bumpy, mossy soil took years of training to reach what Randall thought of as a kind of spiritual perfection. The trees were symbols of endurance, of triumph against adversity.

Randall remembered again the moment, now years in his past, when he first came across a book of bonsai. His childhood had been a terrible and endless parade of humiliation and loneliness and the pictures of the tiny

Japanese trees spoke to him with an eloquence that he alone understood. He had felt as tormented and as dwarfed as the branches and trunks of the trees. His own body was as ugly as a bonsai, disgusting, incapable of love. And in his strangled attempts to somehow love himself, he discovered his strange attraction for the trees. They excited him in a way that women, who invariably rejected and mocked him, could not. No, the trees were there for him always, like one of those blow up dolls advertised in dirty magazines. Of course Randall would never allow himself to conceptualize his need for bonsai in such base terms, his was a higher plane than mere lust and yet, even now, just thinking about them, he was forced to cover the sudden swelling in his pants with one of fat hands.

Stuart didn't seem to notice. "Your thief sounds pretty dangerous to me," he said. "Like some kind of a psycho."

The look in Randall's eyes turned to a watery anger. "No, no. Not dangerous. My thief is discriminating. He would never steal, for example, from a friend. That's where he would draw the line."

Stuart laughed. "How the hell do you know so much about it? I can almost believe you're talking about yourself! Sometimes I wonder why I hang out with you."

"My answer to that is simple. We've all stolen something in our lives, even if the last time we did was when we were children. By all means, deny it if you want

to. What one knows in one's cheating heart and what one says are two entirely different things!" Randall's voice had risen suddenly to a quivering pitch and he now tried to control himself. "Actually, it's not at all difficult to imagine what it would be like to steal, professionally that is. Once you've done it as a child," he added quietly.

"Well, don't ask me," Stuart said. Robbers may be romantic in your book. Try selling that to guys who've had their shit ripped off. Anyway, the paper said something about the police cracking down on those college kids. I doubt we'll hear about stolen bicycles much longer."

Randall snorted. "Bicycles. Child's play. Anyone could pedal a bike home. No one ever even locks them up around here. A real thief could do that a hundred times without getting caught."

"O. K., O. K., whatever." Stuart stood up to leave. "I'm off. Got any plans tonight?"

"Tonight? No, not really. You?"

"Oh, I'll probably swing by Rub-A-Dub later on. Feel up to it?"

"What time are you going to be there?"

"After eleven. I've got some some work to do between now and then."

"Fine. Probably see you there."

That evening Randall took the local towards Gion. Beside the tracks, the Kamo river ran smooth and dark,

enclosed within its filthy cement banks. Randall watched the tile roofs of homes glitter by in the street lights. The closer he got to Gion, the more traditional the buildings became. It was the entertainment district and many places were designed to look like old Japan. Most of the fine restaurants were in Gion. Private bars occupied floors above shops and there were geisha girls, he knew, closed away with their whispery kimonos in the silent rooms along dark streets.

The train bumped and swayed. Lost with the window-sweep of strange buildings and people, Randall wondered again what it was that drew him to Japan. He could never adequately explain, even to himself. For one thing, it was impossible to ever feel at home in Japan. The Japanese did that to you. They were always eager enough to learn English, but the moment you tried to practice Japanese, they looked at you as though you were articulating obscenities. Randall remembered going to a sushi bar with a friend who spoke polished, absolutely flawless Japanese. This was a small bar on a back street run by a grim, sweaty, thick-necked man, and when Randall's friend placed the order in Japanese so perfect it must have sounded like English with a Cambridge accent, the barman barked back at them, making no attempt to conceal his disgust. "Eh, gaijin? Wat you wanta? Eh? Speaka English, gaijin. No try Japanese."

It was then that Randall realized the place of foreigners in Japan. When a gaijin was fluent, it meant he

had lived long enough in Japan to understand the rules. And the rules were simple: foreigners were barbarians, lower even than the dirtiest peasant or criminal. Gaijin served a purpose: to educate Japanese in the language of the world, which, only by chance and bad luck, happened to be English. Gaijin could remain in Japan as long as there were Japanese to teach. Soon, however, it was understood, Japanese would master English and there would be no more need for gaijin language teachers. Randall had little doubt that on that day, all work visas would be revoked. It was depressing thinking such thoughts. But he knew they were true.

Soon the train slowed and coasted into the station. The doors opened and Randall went through to the street.

Gion was busy in the spring night and Randall remembered it was Friday. The Japanese flitted like dark, interesting sparrows through the shops and the cafes. He crossed a stone bridge. There were fishermen below with bamboo rods casting into the water. In a restaurant's large, bright windows, he could see families and couples sitting cross-legged at low tables. Along the Kamo river, tiny paper lanterns glowed red, blue and yellow like twilight flowers. Somewhere beneath the bridge, an old man was singing.

He turned right and headed up Kawamarachi street, looking for Rub-A-Dub. It was always hard to find because he was often drunk before he got there, and he was always drunk after he left. Stairs leading below some kind of

tourist shop seemed familiar. He took them. Halfway down he heard the reggae pulse. It was Rub-A-Dub, lovely dark, a tiny basement fire trap, with its shanty style tin roof built awkwardly above the bar, its potent tropical drinks and the island music that vibrated seductively from an expensive reel to reel stereo system.

The room was cramped with a tight swaying mass of Japanese who were pretending, for the night, to be dancing Rastafarians. Many of them had Jamaican style shirts and caps. Two or three had twisted their hair into dreadlocks. Randall often denounced the Japanese ability to mimic other cultures as a sign of their utter lack of individuality. "Ridiculous," he said loudly enough for the dancers to hear, "Absolutely perverse."

Stuart pushed through the crowd to meet him. "Holy shit," Stuart said. "You're actually early."

"Yes. I needed a drink."

"Well, what'll you have? I'll get the first round."

"You know well enough. Meyers and O.J. with a splash of pineapple."

"Right, O.K., your usual," Stuart said.

"Just look at them," Randall said pointing to the dancers. "Their fervent need to copy everything is absolutely preposterous. No, it's insane. They remind me of a disturbed ant nest."

Stuart shrugged and went to get the drinks. Randall listened to Jimmy Cliff croon the lyrics "Many rivers to

cro-o-oss, and I can't seem to find, my way over." He watched the dancers in the green shadows move more slowly now, hoping rhythmically to bring a reggae expression to the words with their bodies. Randall wanted to laugh at them. Always assimilating other cultures. How typical of the Japanese. He looked around without enthusiasm. There weren't any interesting people. There hardly ever were. He spotted only a few gaijin and no one that he recognized.

Stuart brought the rum and Randall took a deep drink, letting the dark Meyers swirl on his tongue before swallowing. Such a pleasant taste! He took another. Meyers was his favorite.

"So," Stuart started good-naturedly, "see any thieves in this bunch?"

Someone, a Japanese, waved to Randall from the crowd but he couldn't tell who it was. "Thieves?" he said. "No, not here. Actually these people are what you might call the sheep the thief steals from."

"Randall, you're starting to worry me. I never knew you were so into the politics of stealing."

A very pretty Japanese girl walked through them, yawning. Randall scowled at her. "All I'm saying is there are thieves and then there are thieves. It's just something to consider. When you think about it, like every profession, like everything else for that matter, there's a hierarchy, a sort of class structure. Ever see *It Takes A Thief* or that famous flick with Cary Grant as the cat

burglar? That's what I'm talking about. Class. Almost like an aristocracy of the robber world." Randall laughed a natural, hearty laugh and finished off his drink, the ice cubes knocking against his teeth as he drained the glass. "Let's get another round of these," he said, walking with his chubby sway up to the bar.

Three and a half hours later he stumbled drunkenly towards home. He had missed the last train and was unable to find a taxi. Now he was forced to walk the mile or so back to his apartment. The streets were gloomy. The closed doors and the darkened windows of the wooden houses he passed seemed to him shuttered and oppressive. Through the black alleys, he could see the Kamo river off to his right. There was a soft moon-glint on the water but everything was silent and the river looked sluggish and eerie. "Disgusting soup of slop," he muttered. The knowledge that he was living in an utterly alien land came again forcefully to his mind; he sometimes forgot how strange and different Japan really was from everything he had ever known.

His feet hurt. He hated to walk. Even small distances brought a thin line of sweat under his puffy chin. He felt his underarms let loose prickly drops that needled the fleshy cottage cheese folds of his hips. He cursed himself for missing the train. He really had to stop drinking so much, if only to cut down on exactly this kind of late night buffoonery.

Ahead, under a solitary cone of light, Randall noticed a large bicycle with glittering silver wheels leaning up against what looked like a warehouse. It was a delivery bike, from the look of it, the kind noodle men use. Randall snickered when he remembered the afternoon's talk about drunken fraternity boys who preyed on precisely these kinds of bicycles and drove them around until they were caught. How childish.

As a rule, Randall detested any sort of physical labor. He took trains everywhere. But walking was far worse than riding. Maybe a little late night borrowing wasn't so childish after all. What was the point in walking home when a ride presented itself?

He crept along in the shadows of a building, his fat fingers tentatively tracing the wall. He knew he'd have no trouble taking it. They never locked things in Japan. Everyone trusted everyone else. He clumsily mounted the bicycle and for a moment he was brightly illuminated beneath the street light. Then he pedaled off, wobbling down the street.

After a few hundred yards, he got the feel of the stiff handle bars and the heavy, sturdy frame and he glided happily past faceless windows and doors. He was very pleased with his ingenuity. It had been years since he had ridden a bicycle and he felt a wild freedom. He pedaled hard and then coasted as long as possible, swerving just a little. Once, he let his thick legs swing straight out and

away in an expression of joy.

He was utterly unprepared, then, when he rounded a curve in the street and nearly ran over two policemen on foot patrol. They shone their lights in his face and shouted for him to stop. Randall, unused to the brakes and very surprised, skidded badly. His foot slipped off one of the pedals and the handle bars jerked out of his hands. He tumbled. The bicycle clattered to the street. Randall gave a short, agonized screech when he felt his plump knees tear open on the pavement. Then the lights were in his eyes again and he felt his arms being lifted. They were helping him up, asking him questions. Randall didn't understand. He was in a daze. He frantically shook his head. He wanted to escape; he considered running. But he knew at once he would never get away. He was still too drunk.

One of the policemen, a skinny guy with sharp, fox-like features, was talking into a walkie-talkie. Randall heard the word "gaijin" over and over. That was him. He was the gaijin.

"American jin-deska?" the skinny officer asked him.

"Are you American?"

"Hai," Randall answered.

"Ah, Gaijin," the officer said, "you have passport? Gaijin card?"

Randall shook his head violently. He never carried those things. He looked down at his bleeding knees. He wanted the officers to see them. Maybe they'd take pity and

let him go.

"Where you get?" the skinny officer pointed to the bicycle. The other officer had picked it up and was checking it, Randall supposed, for registration numbers. The cops were dressed in crisp, dark uniforms. They reminded him of gestapo suits. Randall felt something bubble and burn in his intestines. He wondered if he was about to shake to pieces.

"Where?" the officer demanded. Randall could only shake his head in disbelief. He would like to have toughed out the skinny, fox-faced cop and told him whatever he felt like doing was his business but he was too miserable to do anything but softly whimper. Of course they know I stole it, Randall thought. No one but idiotic noodle men ride those things.

The skinny cop watched him for a moment, pursed his lips and spoke briefly and rapidly to the other officer, who laughed. Then he used the walkie-talkie again. He heard "gaijin" a few more times.

Randall fought the impulse to run. He was trapped. His mind wandered, hoping to detach itself from his body and scurry away down one of the alleys to freedom. Noticing the houses on the street for the first time, he felt a shudder. There were bonsai trees lined up on a high wall in the half shadows caused by street lamps. He had been on this street before. He was certain of it. He had stolen a plant, a little sushi kaido, a crab apple with charming pink

blossoms, not three weeks ago from the house behind the other officer and the bicycle. He had not had the time to...release...himself, not that night, because he had heard voices from the house and he was afraid of being seen. But he had wanted to, very, very badly.

Was there any way at all, he tried to reason, that the cops....could they...possibly suspect him for the bonsai crimes? He dismissed the idea immediately as paranoid. Still, why did they keep using the walkie-talkies? Were they cross checking reports, notices? Was there a warrant out for a gaijin matching his description? He squeezed his fingers together nervously. No, he told himself. Don't over react. They couldn't possibly know anything. I was far too careful. Wasn't I?

"Okay, gaijin, you come with us now," the skinny officer said, turning to Randall. "You come." There was nothing friendly in his tone. Randall followed meekly, experiencing a vague premonition of disaster he supposed cattle feel when led away to the slaughter house. He couldn't believe what was happening to him.

They seemed to walk for miles and Randall's knees hurt him terribly. He was perspiring again, this time as much from fear as from exertion. The skinny officer walked next to Randall and the other policeman wheeled the bicycle along a few steps behind. Their flashlights played over the pavement and the shrouded homes. Every once in a while they spoke to each other. Otherwise, the night was unnaturally

quiet and Randall realized Japan had never seemed more depressing, more sinister.

The three turned down a long maze of dark streets lined with blank windows. They passed a little shinto shrine tucked between two buildings. Randall wished he could crawl inside and hide. Maybe die.

Finally, ahead, Randall saw a solitary light shining down across cement steps. The steps led up to a weathered, crumbling gray structure. The skinny officer pointed to it and nodded vigorously. "O.K., O.K.," he said.

There was a large policeman waiting against the wall of the building. Randall could see the little blaze of his cigarette. He guessed he was at a precinct. The reality of his predicament struck home. I'm being arrested, he thought. Dragged down to the station for booking! It was horrible, unbelievable. Again Randall drastically considered bolting. But the large man had detached himself from the wall and was heading toward them with a confidence that made Randall very afraid. Any drunkenness he might have felt before immediately evaporated.

"You, gaijin," the big man said with a tight smile. He was impossibly large for a Japanese. He stood above Randall and glowered. "Where did you steal this from, gaijin?" His English was guttural and he spoke it like he was telling a dirty joke, but Randall understood the meaning. The audacity! The confidence. They know I've stolen it. They're not even going to waste time with pleasantries.

They're treating me like a crook already.

They led him up the steps and into a dismally bureaucratic clam-broth colored room. They sat him on a chair. The incriminating bicycle was wheeled in and set up against a wall next to him. He didn't want to look at it. Another officer came into the room with a clip board and seemed to be checking for clues to its owner.

The big officer settled into a creaky chair behind a table. His face was huge, dark and imposing. His large hands moved slowly over folders stacked on the desk. "Now," he said. "I ask you again. Where did you steal this bicycle from?" Randall withered under the officer's gaze. Beneath the table, his fat little legs shook. And then he did something that came naturally to him: he lied.

"I found it," he said.

"Found it? What do you mean by 'found it?'"

"In the river." Randall let his head flop. He wanted to seem as drunk as possible. "I know it was stupid but I've had too much to drink, and, well, I was walking home and I saw it there thrown into the river and, uh, well, I fished it out rode it."

Randall had often seen bicycles in the river. He knew they were stolen and then dumped by drunk fraternity brothers. He quickly reasoned he wouldn't seem as guilty if he pulled an already stolen bicycle from the river. He was just picking up something that was lying around. Yes, he was foolish and drunk, how could they say he was a thief if

he stuck to his story? It was a sound plan. He began to feel better in spite of himself.

The big officer said nothing for thirty seconds. His dark eyes merely searched Randall's frightened ones. "You found it in river?" he asked, finally.

"Yes, yes, I found it in the river."

More silence. Randall could hear the other officers talking behind him. He heard "gaijin" again and again. The cop looked at him unpleasantly. "Where is your gaijin card? You are required to carry at all times. Why do you not?" He lit a cigarette and blew the smoke across the table into Randall's face.

"I--usually do. Tonight, I just forgot."

"When you enter Japan it is made very clear to you that gaijin cards are required of all aliens."

"I'm sorry, I...."

"Where in river you find bicycle?" he asked harshly.

Randall tried to act drunk. "I--I can't remember very well. Somewhere between Gion and that place where they...stopped me." Randall looked down at his knees, remembering his spill. He was ridiculous, absurd. But now he had to think himself out of this jam. "It was in the river," he continued plaintively, "I swear, and I was drunk coming home and I saw it down there. I didn't want to just leave it there, I wanted to rescue it and bring it home. And fix it up."

The officer turned his eyes to the bicycle. Randall

turned too, knowing it didn't look at all as though it had been in any river. The officer pulled a large district map from his desk drawer. "Show me." Randall hadn't expected this. He scanned the map, found the train stops, located Gion. He let his eyes flutter. "I--I don't really know. Somewhere between here and there, I would guess. I'm drunk so I...can't really tell you for sure." His hand waved vaguely over an area that he hoped covered a mile or so.

The big officer glowered with disgust. "And where do you live?" he asked.

"Gojo-dori."

"Hmm. Gojo-dori." He spoke rapidly to the other officers, then he turned back to Randall. "Let me see some kind of identification. I already know you have broken the law by losing your gaijin card. Do not disappoint me again."

Randall took out his wallet and handed over his American license. The officer looked it over carefully. Randall wanted to act submissive, cooperative.

"Why do you drink so much?" the officer asked.

Randall was startled and then annoyed by the question. Were they baiting with him? Who did they think they were, anyway? But what he said was: "I--I almost never drink. That's why I'm so sick now, why I did this stupid thing. Usually I'm never drunk. I wouldn't ever do anything like this if I wasn't."

"Hmm," the large policeman grunted. It sounded like a

disapproval. "What you doing in Japan?"

"I teach. I teach English."

"Where?"

"In Osaka."

"Where in Osaka? The name of the school." Randall realized he was in trouble. He didn't want to tell them anything if he couldn't help it but if he lied and they caught him....

He told them. "Nichibei English Service. "Are they your guarantor?"

"My guaran...what?" Randall tried to act puzzled but he knew what they meant. His head reeled, looking for some way out. Every gaijin who lived in Japan had a 'guarantor,' a Japanese citizen who claimed responsibility for him. Usually a gaijin's guarantor was his employer. At Nichibei, Mike Sakura, the owner of the school, acted as guarantor for all the teachers.

"Yes, yes, your guarantor," the officer pressed contemptuously. Randall looked at his tormentor across the desk and tried to keep any traces of resentment off his face. How odious, Randall thought, and impossibly fat. But his arms were big and cruel. His face was long and brutish, like a baboon's. Randall could tell this fat, horrible man was enjoying the interrogation.

"Well? Who is you guarantor?"

"Uh, the owner of the school."

"Name?"

"Mike Sakura, Nichibei English service. He's my guarantor."

"He's the one? Good. You will have to call him, you know."

Randall felt his insides droop. The last thing in the world he wanted to do was tell this grotesque cop where and who he worked for. He had no doubt that the Japanese bureaucracy, with its infinite foresight, had anticipated just this situation: humiliating a gaijin by making him call his protector as though he were a child calling home. And yet, he was guilty, wasn't he? He was a thief. A thief of the most common type. And he'd been caught.

Suddenly he felt a terrible squeeze of fear. What if...with the evidence of the bicycle sitting across from him...what if...here in Japan, that was enough, somehow...to search his home? He was a gaijin--in all probability he had no rights at all. He tried to keep the corners of his mouth from twitching and failed. What if they went to his apartment and found the bonsai trees? What if they demanded receipts? Could they know he was the one who had been stealing them? It was horrible to imagine they would finally solve the case because he'd been drunk and stupid enough to rip off a silly old noodle bicycle. What shitty luck! It might even make the papers. He'd be paraded around, laughed at. With an exhausted resignation, Randall realized he would probably go to jail. His head whirled with the awful possibilities.

And there, grinning across the table, leering, was the fat cop, the Big Cop, the Big disgusting Cop. Randall loathed him. Big Cop's teeth were clacking together, forming words in English he had no right to make. He was saying something: "...number of the school in Osaka...."

"What?" Randall demanded.

"What is number of the school in Osaka?"

"No. No, I don't know that."

"What is number of the owner of the school?"

"I wouldn't know that at all."

Big Cop spoke sharply to another officer who then leafed through a phone book. He lit a cigarette and simply stared, with his black, lifeless eyes, until Randall felt he was being devoured by them. After a minute, the officer had found the number. Big cop leaned over the desk. "We will speak to your guarantor, and then we will allow you to speak with him." He pulled the phone into the center of the desk.

"You're...what? Calling him now? At this hour?"

Randall looked at his watch. It was nearly three. "You're calling him now?"

Big cop smiled in his terrible way. "Of course. We must be sure you are what you say."

The number was dialed and Big Cop spoke into the phone with a calm, even voice. Every few seconds, Big Cop looked over at Randall and nodded slightly, wisely, as if Mike Sakura, on the other end of the phone, were meticulously confirming all his suspicions as to the basic worthlessness

of American gaijin. Finally he said "Sakura-san would like to speak with you now." He handed over the phone.

"Uh, hello, Mike?" Randall said sheepishly.

"Tell me, Randall, please. What is going on? I am at a loss to understand. I almost can't believe it. The officer tells me you are drunk, that you stole a bicycle."

Randall tried to picture Mike Sakura in his home, sleepy but still young-looking and successful, with the brown stains between his lower teeth from smoking too much and working too hard, and Randall felt ashamed and terrible for waking him up with this ridiculous story of stupidity. Mike, with his good English learned at Arizona State, and his concerned and careful manner at the school. Randall felt lousy.

"Mike, the thing is, it's all so absurd. I had too much to drink, like an idiot, and I found this bicycle in the river and I drove it home and they stopped me. It sounds pathetic, I know, the whole thing's just unbelievable. But that's the truth. I found the stupid thing. I didn't steal it. But I don't think they believe me." Even now, Randall found it necessary to lie. But he didn't feel smart doing it. He felt humiliated.

"O. K., listen. It's not a big deal. People, mostly kids, Randall, steal bikes all the time around Gion and ride them. They are not going to do anything as long as I can assure them that you will not try something like this again. In addition, you are a gaijin, and that makes it a little

more difficult to...to punish you. I have told them you are a reliable teacher and that I would keep an eye on you but, well, I simply wouldn't have expected something like this from you. I'm naturally very disappointed, Randall."

"God yes, Mike! I know you must be. And I can't believe I did it and had them call you this late and wake you up for this stupid reason."

"Don't worry about that. Go home now and get some sleep. Please."

"Thanks, Mike, I'll try. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"O.K., now good night."

Randall handed the phone over and Big Cop spoke into it for a few more minutes. Then he hung up.

"So," Big Cop said, "Sakura-san has told me you are good teacher. That Japanese students like you. Well, I will tell you something about Japanese. You are guest here. You have been asked to teach English to Japanese, but we can ask you to leave at anytime. You are here to provide service to Japanese people, nothing else. Now you have committed crime and I could make you leave if I chose to. You would not be allowed to come to Japan again."

Randall realized he was supposed to grovel, to beg and humiliate himself before this fat slug and that afterwards he would be allowed to go home. So he did, he told them he was foolish and dumb, he was drunk and wrong to take anything that didn't belong to him, that America hadn't taught him even one half the respect that every Japanese

child knew and it seemed to go on for an hour and he had never felt so ashamed in all his life.

Finally, Big Cop leaned across the desk again as though he intended to smother Randall. "And one more thing, gaijin. You have been caught breaking law in my district. Now you my responsibility. This upsets me. Your face upsets me. Do not give me reason ever to see you again. Ever. You understand?"

Randall nodded vigorously.

"You may leave now."

The walk home was tiring and painful, both mentally and physically. Randall's head was throbbing and he was very hungry. He was exhausted but relieved. At least he was free. Still, he worried that Mike would tell the rest of the school and it would get around that he was a thief. He couldn't bear that sort of scandal. He prayed Mike wouldn't say anything about it.

Walking on, he saw it was deserted along the streets and there were stars above the silent homes. It had been an awful night. He shivered, trying to put it all out of his mind.

When he reached his block, his eyes caught sudden movement up the street. He had just barely noticed an officer jerk his head back behind the corner of a building. Randall felt his heart blast into tachycardia. They followed me, he thought, and they're going to search my room after all. The stupid bonsai trees! They'll find them.

They'll find them and I'll get carted off to jail for real this time!

Breathing hard, trying to keep himself from running, he crossed the street. He strained his eyes in order to see where the officer was without making himself obvious. He resisted the urge to look wildly about for other cops. Sweat poured from his body. He made himself mount the stairs to his apartment with an excruciating slowness. He fit the key into the lock all the while expecting to hear Big Cop shouting "Gaijin! This is police!" from somewhere below.

He opened the door, stepped in and closed it quickly behind him. The smell of the bonsai trees hit him like a baseball bat. He had to get rid of them before they broke in the door.

He moved quickly for such a fat little man. He flicked on the kitchen light, yanked a garbage bag from the cabinet and flew into the living room, grabbing the trunks of trees, snapping them, stuffing them into the bag. Ceramic dishes scattered to the floor. Soil fell everywhere. He snatched up an Aka Matsu, a red pine with sticky branches. Its weathered trunk and its soft sculptured needles, patiently pruned for nearly a hundred years, were broken to twigs in two seconds and jammed into the bag. He destroyed a flowering Wisteria. Purple petals fluttered across the straw tatami mat. A dogwood went next and now small yellow flowers littered the floor. Then he was outside, on the

balcony. One by one the ancient trees disappeared. Sweat poured from Randall's forehead and stained his shirt. The snapping, crunching, breaking went on for five minutes.

When the last tree was stuffed away, his hands were shaking. He left the bag on the balcony, went back into the apartment and found the broom. He swept the tatami mat furiously, moving the pile of soil and petals and needles to one corner. He brushed them into a pan and dumped them in the garbage under the sink. He ran through the room, collecting the ceramic dishes. He brought them to the balcony and placed them in the bag with the trees.

He was breathing hard, dripping wet. He looked around to be sure he hadn't missed anything. He sighed deeply and smiled. Everything was fine. The evidence was gone. Almost gone, he corrected himself. He went back out to the balcony and picked up the bag. It was heavy. The dishes clinked softly.

He opened the front door a crack. Everything was silent. He decided to first leave the bag inside and look around to be sure the police weren't waiting for him. He walked down the hall and halfway down the cement stairs, hoping every second they weren't crouched behind each next turn. He looked out over the street. There were two foot patrolmen down on the corner. One of them was speaking into a walkie-talkie. Then he saw Big Cop cross the street and Randall's heart exploded with fear again. How much time did he have before they broke down the door? A minute? Two?

He could distinctly hear Big Cop's voice and then his laugh. It was horrible. He couldn't face that laugh, that mocking baboon mask, ever again. He couldn't stand the humiliation.

He ducked back up the stairs to his room, picked up the bag, and scurried to the balcony. Even though he was only three stories up, the view of the drop into darkness made him dizzy. He squeezed his eyes together. Couldn't he just throw the bag? No. He couldn't risk having it land in one of the small cement yards below his apartment. The dishes would shatter. There would be noise; no, it was impossible, he couldn't allow it.

He realized he had to climb down. He groaned, cursed his stupidity for the fifteenth time, swung a fat leg over the rail, and started his descent. With the bag swinging across his back, pulling him to the right, then to the left, it was a miracle he didn't break his neck. He was panting when he dropped the last three feet to the yard and rolled across the cement. Somehow none of the dishes broke.

He was up quickly, speeding for the block wall that enclosed the yard. He pulled the bag over his shoulder. Almost tripping, he flung himself up onto a table and straddled the wall, looking, for a moment, like a grotesque parody of Santa Claus. He dropped to the other side and crept into the very first alley he could find. It was too dark to see anything. He picked his way along until he plowed into a large metal drum that turned out to be a dumpster reeking of fish. He lifted the cover and gently

placed the bag inside. He reversed direction and felt his way over odd, squishy, smelly things until he made it out to the sidewalk.

Randall emerged from the alley wearing his most innocent face and was just relaxing when the electronic squawk of a siren sent his heart into orbit again. An ambulance flew by and pulled over down the block where he had seen Big Cop and his men. For Christ's sake! Now he understood. They weren't after him. Someone probably had some sort of accident and Big Cop was investigating. Hadn't Big Cop said this was his district?

Randall tried to let his pulse deflate to normal. He turned onto a narrow, house-lined street, feeling at last that he was absolutely free. Almost immediately the old arrogance flared up again. Despicable Nazis, he thought. How dare they subject my heart to such lunacy. I should go straight to the embassy this moment and report them all.

His defiance gave way to jubilation. He was impressed with himself again. The police were insect-minded. He had easily outwitted them. He felt triumphant and wanted to jump with happiness. He started to skip a little jig and instantly felt a sharpness in his legs. "Owww!" he yelled. He sagged against a wall and carefully touched his knees. There was fresh blood beneath the knotty scabs. "See! I need medical attention," he protested. Then he laughed. So he would have battle scars from this night. That was fine. He'd come out on top, hadn't he? Of course. Could anyone

ever have doubted it?

His knees forgotten, Randall pushed off from the wall and started along the quiet street. A house across from him slowly materialized out of the darkness and something deliciously familiar beside the door caught his eye. It was a bonsai, large and gracefully twisted, with long gnarled branches and tiny flowering pink blossoms that he could smell from five feet away. He stood before it, deeply inhaling as he moved his fingers over the branches and the blossoms.

It was intoxicating, mesmerizing, to feel such exquisite formations. Such beauty. Such perfection. He was suddenly, insistently aroused. Without thinking, he tugged open his pants and pushed them down around his shoes. Blubber jiggled as he pulled himself free. His chubby fist squeezed his penis, moving it back and forth. He worked himself slowly at first, then with abandon, finally with oblivion. His whole body shook and his breathing turned hoarse and loud. A strangled animal-cry rose from his throat. His mind surged in a thrilling, mounting wave of triumph and beauty. He wanted to scream the perfect thoughts spinning like a kaleidoscope in his head: So pretty! So pretty! I love myself! I love myself!

Then flashlights fell over him and there was a shout of surprise. He felt everything wither at once. The unmistakable boom of Big Cop's voice filled the night behind

him: "Gaijin! What you think you do there? Gaijin!

Answer me. Now!"



Asian Fever

It was a warm evening and after work I went on to the crowded little bar at the end of Shichiyo street for something to drink. Schichiyo throbbed with sharp voices and neon reds and blues. Businessmen hurried from the train that had just fled the station and the bright McDonald's on the corner, looking oddly familiar, was packed with Japanese teenagers. The face of an American cover girl plastered across a billboard smiled down with high fashion contempt.

It was good to remember at the end of the street was Sanjusangendo, the nine hundred year old temple where they hold the archery contest. I knew, too, the hills above the city were sprinkled with shrines and ancient gardens and it was really in the hills that things seemed forever changeless.

I passed Sanjusangendo, silent and darkly powerful behind its high walls and near this was the bar that I often went to after work. Breckenshire was there, at his regular table under the window and when he saw me come in, he waved me over.

"Sit down and have yourself a beer, Stuart," Breckenshire said. "I'm going to treat you, my young American friend, to yet another of my dirty little chillers. And I know you'll appreciate this one. It's not simply the

usual case of cheap, juicy lust."

There were empty ceramic dishes and splotches of food and sauce on his table. There were half a dozen sake bottles. Breckenshire was an Oxford man and was always eating and drinking. I never knew anyone who liked to eat as much as he did, although he was so tall and so gaunt you could see his skeleton poking out. It was also too bad he liked to eat so much--he had really lousy table manners. Usually this kind of thing wouldn't bother me but Breckenshire splashed food into his mouth, on his clothes, all over the place. It was like sitting in a slaughter house. I couldn't eat with him and enjoy myself, although he always told good stories about gaijin getting into trouble in Japan. They were a kind of malicious specialty, these stories. He called them his 'chillers.' I was glad he had finished eating though.

I sat down and the waiter came. I said "Ippon beru, Asahi," and when he went off to get my beer, Breckenshire leaned eagerly in and asked "Do you happen to remember a Larry Knox from Sydney? Been working at Nichibei on and off for a half year or so?"

I did remember him. He was a sturdy-built sandy haired Australian, maybe thirty-five, with deep worry lines in his face. When he needed money, he showed up at Nichibei, the English language school where we all worked as teachers and he taught a few classes. It seemed like he was always in some kind of a crisis. "So what'd he do now?"

"Fell in love with one of his students, absolutely head over heels, madly obsessed. Asian Fever, that's what we call it."

"So? Sounds nice."

"Well, the short of it is, he's been deported. Kicked clear out of the country." Breckenshire sat back, the better to see how this zinger would hit me.

"You're kidding. Why?"

"It's already the buzz around the school. You know how Nichibei guarantees its teachers will behave themselves. They are not very pleased about all this."

"So what happened?"

Breckenshire's tongue shot across his lips. He paused for a moment while the waiter set my beer down. "Well, this student, Miyuki something-or-other, a charming girl and very attractive, happens to be the daughter of some big shot who owns close to half of Japan. Mr. Sanyo, for all I know. In any case, Knox was her teacher and it wasn't long before he was seeing her. It was all very secret. At first, anyway. You know what I mean."

I did know. At Nichibei, we taught students one-on-one in these little cubicles. It was an expensive school, and many of the students were the sons and daughters of wealthy Japanese. We were not expected to 'fraternize' with them. That's what it said in the Nichibei English teacher's handbook: 'fraternize.'

It was a fad then, and I believe it still is, to take

English classes from foreigners. But the students were not so much interested in English as they were in American rock and roll, California and Porsches and Mercedes. They were curious about anything that was imported. They were crazy about things from the West, and that included the teachers that worked at the school. Romances were common enough, but as I've said, they were frowned on by the administration. We weren't supposed to date our students.

"Right," Breckenshire continued. "Well, the girl, Miyuki, is nineteen. Knox must be nearly twice her age. I suppose she was curious about him; you know how curious Japanese girls can be." Breckenshire gave me a salacious grin. He was joking about the usual female speculation on the size of gaijin anatomy.

"For Christ's sake, maybe she just liked him, Breckenshire," I said.

"Why on earth would anyone like Knox?"

"Go on, what happened?"

"Well. I suppose it began innocently enough. They met in love hotels in Kyoto."

Love hotels. Discrete meeting places for cheating husbands and their mistresses, teenagers who can't wait for their parents to go on vacation, the casually curious. Separate entrances for men and women. Inside, heart shaped bubble baths, rotating beds with mirrors, that sort of thing.

"If she's so rich," I asked, "why not go to her

parents' summer cottage or whatever they've got?"

"You see that's the amusing trouble in this sordid little story. Her father absolutely forbade her to see any gaijin.

"Well," I said, thinking of the McDonald's and the American models and all the constant bombardment of Western culture, "no wonder she's intrigued. She has no choice. Take a look at all those damn advertisements telling them to be exactly like Westerners."

Breckenshire frowned. I could tell I merely sounded idiotic. "You know how the old boys can be," he said. "No mixing of the races, very big loss of face, shame the ancestors and all that rot. We're heathens to them, untouchables. Miyuki's father told her if she ever saw Western men she'd be disinherited. She couldn't take a chance on being recognized at any of the fine hotels in town, her father's somewhat famous you see, and she certainly couldn't risk bringing him to her own apartment. Knox's little hovel was out as well. He lives on a street full of gossipy old mama-sans who have nothing better to do than speculate on the comings and goings of a beautiful, rich-looking girl driving a Mercedes roadster around the neighborhood. They were damn well likely to call the school and inquire."

"Wait a minute. How do you know all this?"

"Have some faith," he whispered slyly from the corner of his mouth. "Knox told me the whole story just before he

left." Breckenshire tipped his sake down with a shaky hand. His fingers were so long they looked like spider legs holding the tiny sake cup.

"What happened next?"

"The predictable thing. Her father found out."

"How?"

"Someone saw them together. Apparently, the old man's got eyes and ears everywhere."

"So that ended it?"

"Not exactly. Of course, she told him it was impossible, they could no longer carry on. But by this time, Knox, you understand, had caught Asian Fever. It had nothing to do with her money. He was mad for her. And he began to do some very foolish, inexplicable things."

"Such as?"

Breckenshire picked something gray from between his teeth and wiped it on the table. "He kept coming to her apartment at all hours. First he left flowers and presents and touching little love notes. Later, when that didn't work, he was pounding on her door with 'Miyuki I love you, I need you' and all that. He wouldn't leave her alone. She called the police twice and they had to drag him off to the pokey. They told him to keep away from her. Miyuki's father threatened he'd get someone to break his legs. But it didn't do any good. The poor boy was besotted. Well, one day, he finally wiggled out all together. He stole a car, he actually stole a car and drove it to her father's

home where she was staying. He jumped out, got through the gate somehow and ran up to the house."

"He must be crazy."

"Well, yes. Crazy with the Fever. Anyway, he gets to the door but by now they've got wind of him. They send the family body guard after this appalling gaijin intruder. But you know Knox, a big fellow, he takes care of this ninja chap with a couple of Australian boxing punches, and the whole family's standing there in the door, the mother, the father, the youngest daughter and Miyuki, standing there shocked green while Knox, this insane gaijin, actually poses with his foot on the ninja like he's just conquered a wild bull or something, and then he rips open his shirt, and beats his hairy blond chest, screaming 'Miyuki, I love you, marry me, please! Come away with me, marry me!'"

"I can hardly believe it. It's a nightmare."

"Precisely," Breckenshire said. "The police come and they've got to subdue old Knox with sticks. They break his front tooth and beat him up badly. Well, of course, after this escapade, there's nothing to do but get rid of him. He's stolen a car, trespassed, assaulted a body guard. He's brought shame on dear old Nichibei English school for hiring such a lout in the the first place. And finally, of course, this wicked Australian has harrassed a young lady of reputable family to tears. His deportation papers were ready in a few hours."

"Incredible," I said. "At least Miyuki's finally free

of Knox."

"Not at all," Breckenshire laughed. "She changed her mind at the last minute and ran away with him."

Go East To Find Your Inner Country

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori
-- Horace

"So, Kelly," Stuart Ryder said to me, "what made you decide on Japan? I always like to hear people's reasons. Everybody seems to have some damn weird reason for leaving everything behind and coming here to live in the land of the rising yen." Stuart laughed. It was cool the way his eyes crinkled at their corners. "I think half of us are running from something," he said, "and the other half's running to something. You'll see--it's funny how people take up these causes--yoga, meditation, flower arrangement, stuff like like that."

Stuart was a new friend. He'd been teaching in Japan for something like two years. I'd just arrived and was hoping to break into teaching, too. Anyway, I'd heard that was about all they'd let you do here. We had just sat down at a little coffee bar and I was full of the new smells and the new noise and the warm, foreign strangeness of Osaka in summer.

"So why you?" he asked again. It seemed important for him to know.

I leaned back in my chair and decided Stuart would think I was crazy if I told him. I sure didn't want that.

I had feeling I would be spending time with him. I knew I was going to like him. But inside I was thinking, why Japan? Okay, because when I was still at school at Penn, I suspected Mogdahl, the guy down the hall, was a coward.

My landlady first got me thinking that, the crazy old bitch, although she was also pretty careful to tell me he paid his bills on time. Licking her fat sweaty lips, relishing the role of conspirator, she said: He's from Iraq, don't you know it honey, and I hear he probably should have served in that war, you know, the Iran-Iraq war, but he's been here five years already getting his masters and it looks like he'll be another five on his Ph.d. Convenient, don't 'cha think? Not that I care. It's just that he's strange, that one is, too timid, you know. I drove him to the mall once and he wouldn't let me go over forty. Got panicky, nervous. He's hiding something, you ask me. Then her gray oyster eyes wobbled like two warning fingers. But he pays his bills on time, young lady, she said to me, he pays his bills.

I pretty much paid my bills. I don't why I did. The windows stayed broken, the dishwasher didn't work and in the winter she let us freeze. I hated the idea of keeping her fat and happy while I froze. But anyway, it seemed to fit, about the guy down the hall.

He was pretty odd. He slept all day so I almost never saw him. Once, hearing his boots in the hall, I opened my door a sliver and framed him: a pathetic picture of a large

man stepping carefully along the corridor as though afraid of crushing ants. In the bathroom we shared, his toothbrush was old and the soggy bristles mushroomed out--a sure sign of sentimentality.

Sometimes, standing outside his door late in the night, fiddling with his keys, I thought I heard him weeping. What did he fear? Coward's dreams? And he drank--bottles of ouzo bloated his trash. I was pretty curious and I thought maybe my landlady was right. What was he hiding? His shame?

Thinking about shame bothered me. I had possibly been reading too much Horace for a class and was very interested in honor. I wanted to know certain things. I wanted to know how I'd act. I wanted to know if honor was doled out like cards at birth or whether you could somehow learn it, like learning to swim.

I wanted to know about him. About cowards. I was sure I would defend my country. It was a contract you made with yourself, a duty you understood. I believed it was fair that you owed the country you lived in something more than April taxes.

One Friday evening when I was sure he was home, I decided to knock on his door. I spent a long time in front of the mirror wondering how I should look. I read that Iraq had funny views about women. Then I thought yeah, but he's been in America six years. I decided to dress simply. I would be business-like, a neighbor offering a long overdue

welcome. I would bring ouzo even though I hated the stuff. I rehearsed what I would say while I slipped on a pair of khakis and pulled my hair back into a knot. A nice gray sweater, a little make-up, light lip-stick, no jewelry. Armed with the bottle of ouzo, I took one last look at myself and realized I seemed too business-like, too severe. I didn't want to look like a prosecutor. I was going to let down my hair but finally didn't. I selected some earrings instead, long looped and golden.

I knocked on his door and after a second I heard him shout who is! who is! and I said Kelly from down the hall and he said who? but didn't open the door. I said Kelly from down the hall and he said who? but this time I heard him shuffling around in there and then he opened the door.

I think he was very surprised to see me, or maybe he was surprised to see a woman. Who? he said. His eyes were dark and strong. Kelly, I said, I'm your neighbor and we share the bathroom. I understand you're from Iraq and I'm writing a paper on Baghdad, a travel article, and it would be just fantastic if I could talk to you about your lovely city and get some ideas about your favorite places to go there and besides, maybe you would like a little drink of ouzo, I happen to know it's your favorite, so I got a bottle. I like it too, would you like to share a toast with me? By the way, I'm Kelly, it's nice to meet you, what's your name? I gave him my killer smile.

I am not from Baghdad, he said gravely and for a moment

I was pretty sorry I had dreamt the whole thing up. He was large, really tall and dark haired, with thin lips and the traces of old white scars across his nose and above one eye and on his forehead. His shirt hung out over his pants, there was a big dumpling where his stomach was supposed to be, but the whole package wasn't too bad. He was actually sort of good looking.

He said I am from Ninava in Iraq, near mountains, far from Baghdad. He looked down at me. Then he smiled. But I have been many times to Baghdad. I am Mogdahl, Miss Kelly, please to come in? I forgot his name as soon as he said it. His voice was a whisper like water over rocks.

The room wasn't much. A huge poster of a Japanese rock garden was the only thing he'd hung on the wall. Text books overflowed the bookcase and were stacked up on the floor in piles.

He asked me to sit and so I plopped on his worn couch and set the ouzo on the low table in front of me. He said do you like ice? and I said sure and somewhere from the counter he brought two large paper cups with ice and water. I opened the bottle and handed it to him. When he poured the clear ouzo into the water, it turned milky, cloudy, dense. I had never seen that before; it was like some kind of alchemy.

So, he said. Baghdad. You wish to go? I sure do, I said, I've read all about it and I'd love to go there if it wasn't for the war and all. He said the war makes nothing,

you can travel there, they are no longer shelling Baghdad. I watched his eyes but they stayed guiltless. He lifted his cup. Here, to cheers. Cheers, I said.

I sipped the ouzo and didn't feel sick. It was a little like licorice. He said Mextecal, a good brand. Thank you so much for bringing it to drink. I am sorry not to meet you before this time, I have been very, very busy these weeks. I am preparing for defense of thesis. It is so hard, the work. Very busy. I said what do you study? and he said engineering, to make foundation for tall building. Oh, that's nice I said like an idiot.

Mogdahl leaned back in his chair and drank. He absently picked a book up from the floor and said do you like to read? This is good book. He handed it to me and I looked it over. It was called The Tiger's Cave by a Zen master named Hakuin.

A very good book, he said. It teaches discipline of mind. It teaches very real things. I myself would like to go very much to Japan someday. I believe there are many things I could learn there. He smiled and the white scars on his forehead wrinkled. His eyes were dark. But, he said. It is Baghdad you are interested in. I only hope I can help, it has been many years since I was home, you see. I have not been home since the war. Oh, I said pretty tactlessly, you were in the war? Yes, yes, he said softly.

Then, taking a deep drink, his eyes suddenly went somewhere far away. He mumbled God bless everyone, God

bless everyone. Then he stood up and went to the counter. He seemed to be trying to control himself.

Another drink? he asked. Sure, I said. He suddenly swung his head around, and looking at me, he said you cannot know what it was like. You cannot really know.

Something inside me understood then that this was the truth, that I should turn away and leave this man alone, that I had already gotten what I'd come for. There was an atmosphere about him that was elemental, frightening. I felt the old fear again, the time I was five, swimming alone in the deep part of the lake for the first time, and suddenly realizing I was too far out, and below me everything was dark and cold and unknowable. I should have left then. I should have left. Instead, as if I couldn't control my mouth, I asked him: what was it like? Will you tell me?

He brought the cups and stood over me. There was a light behind him, and his shadow fell across my chest. I couldn't see his face. He handed me the drink and I nearly drained it. I began to feel the ouzo creeping up behind me. I had a vague suspicion and then the absolute conviction that the ouzo was changing the room. I didn't feel confident anymore. I didn't feel in control. Somehow, I didn't care.

Funny thing is, he said, we were all waiting to come to America. Every day, we look in the mail. It is to see if we are accepted in American university. Once we are

accepted we leave the army. We come to America. We wait every day; waiting, you see, that was the worst.

I was five days without shower. At the front. It was very hot. All the time, shells falling. Shells falling! We stayed in a hole in mud with shells falling at once. Ba-waam! Ba-waam! all the time. You never knew when. You could not move. The shells came.

I could not stand it anymore. I thought I would go crazy waiting for shells. When I thought I really was crazy, my friend, very rich, he send telegram. He is very rich, he say he get us pass away from front. Three day pass! It is like from heaven. I say yes, of course. God of course! We are given passes, me and another guy with me, and we try to get where my rich friend is.

We walk. We cannot get ride. Trucks pass on the road, we try to get with them, no one picks us up. I can't believe how we walk! In the dust. The heat. It was crazy. We walk whole day, wasting the pass time. So we are tired. Unbelievable tired, you see? A nightmare. But we finally get to the place. It is quiet valley with hospital and small army many miles from the front and we are safe.

We meet my friend. He is one so gifted. He is very rich, educated, from good family. He has everything and he is so very kind. He says take showers and I have surprise for you. Miss Kelly, I never felt anything so good as that shower. I stayed in very long time and scrubbed away the war and breathed in the steam of the water. My rich friend

gave us clean things and we wore them soft against the skin.

Then he brings us to his tent and we smell the food. It is his surprise for us. We eat, oh! how we eat, Miss Kelly. Lamb dishes and rice and sweet curries with lots to drink. Delicious. My rich friend could get anything and he was very generous. We eat until we are full to stomach. Then we smoke, lying there on the pillows in his tent where it is cool.

We talk about things, mostly getting away, about leaving to go to America. I tell my rich friend that American university in Philadelphia, very good one, will not let me go because I did not fill something out right. So stupid! I tell him I send application back, and now I am waiting again. Always waiting. He tells me he is waiting but that he thinks he will get in soon. We drink toasts to that. Many drinks. Then we are quiet for a while, each of us, I know, thinking about leaving. No one wants to go back to the front. Then my rich friend tells us to stay and relax, that he has something to do, and that he will bring back another surprise for us. I tell him enough! Please enough! But he tells me quiet! I will be back with something special. I smile and hold up my hands, what could I do? He is so kind and smiling. So we sit back and the wind from the mountains freshens the tent.

I remember feeling so good and clean then, Miss Kelly. I was reaching for a fruit when I heard a sound like the wild roaring of a train and I knew it was the shells. There

was the ba-waam! ba-waam! ba-waam! and I was up running, running for the shelter. Pieces of the earth flew in my face and I fell and got up again and ran and I jumped into the dark of the shelter, all the time hearing the ba-waam! of the shells and I was feeling the earth shake and I was screaming.

I was in the door of the shelter and someone was blown up in front of me. He was holding his arm on. Holding it together. He begged me to help but I could not move. He begged me but I shut my eyes to scream. The shells were falling outside the shelter. My face was warm and I touched it. There was blood in my hands. I looked outside. Someone, a medic, came and took the begging man away, took him on his back. I could not believe anyone could go out into the shells.

Then it was quiet. The shells stopped. I heard a whistle. We were to form lines. To see who was left. We went out into the sun and many were dead. We made lines and they called off names. My rich friend was missing. We looked everywhere. We looked for two hours. Then we found him in the woods. He was not to run to woods. To the shelter, we were taught. To the shelter, not woods. But that was where we found him, cut in half, Miss Kelly. Do you know what the surprise was? The surprise he went to get us? Mickey Mouse dolls. He was holding two Mickey Mouse dolls.

Mogdahl had finished his drink and he was shaking when

he went to get another. I had had enough. I didn't know what to say, so I said to Mogdahl, I'm sorry.

He turned and said do you know what happened the next day?

I shook my head. I didn't want to hear anymore. But Mogdahl persisted. The next day, in the mail, came his letter. My rich friend was accepted to university. Only now he was blown up to bits in the woods. Mogdahl wavered above me. We are bones and flesh, Miss Kelly, he said. We go back to the earth. It is a great circle, like the rings in your ears. Only it is not so golden. My friends are all gone now, all gone back to the earth. When I saw them in the woods and the fields though, I can tell you, the earth did not want them.

I remember saying good-bye although I'm sure he didn't hear me. I left him with his bottle. His head was in hands and his fingers spread out over his white scars, as if that would cover and silence them. On my way out the door, I saw his stack of books again and for a moment, I looked closely at them. They were books on how to lay foundations in the sand. I imagined they would be deep, strong foundations. For buildings, for hospitals, for schools.

And sprinkled like little polished stones between these textbooks were Zen works--The Way of Zen; The Spirit of Zen; something by Abbot Obora; Soto Zen by Rosen Takashina. I looked up at the serene poster of the rock garden and suddenly understood Mogdahl's life now was a rigorous search

for simplicity. For some sort of pureness the war had destroyed. I wanted to be part of that search, to know what it meant to deny everything inessential; I wanted to learn from people who had lived in winter caves on scraps of fish and rice and studied books by candlelight into the hours of dawn. I wanted to know what these people had found. In that instant, closing Mogdahl's door slowly behind me, I decided to leave for Japan.

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