Japanese Pond

School, Family, Work and Social Life

by Murray Gunn

PROLOGUE

序章 **(jo-shou)**

"So, how was it?"

The first twenty times I heard it, I considered the question. Recently returned from a year of living in Japan, I was bursting to tell my friends what it was like to live with a Japanese family, to go to a Japanese school. In my head, I ran through the ensuing conversation, but could never manage to find a starting point.

Should I tell them about the food and the way each person in the family had their own personal bowl, tea mug, and chopsticks? Or perhaps I could open with the school system and that the teachers, not the students, moved between classes. "I had the best time of my life," might have been a good introduction, leading into a discussion of the summer break I spent with my first girlfriend, Yukiko. But that was only part of the picture. I also wanted to say, "I had the worst time of my life," and tell them of my loneliness after falling out with my host family.

I ran through a hundred possibilities, and tried some of them, but then I'd see their eyes glaze over. For a three-word question, they wanted a three-word answer.

"It was great," I'd say, and they'd quickly move on to tell me about the game they watched on the weekend.

They were frogs, I thought, taking a Japanese proverb a little more literally than it's meant. '*i no naka no kawazu taikai wo shirazu*,' a frog in a pond doesn't know the ocean, is the equivalent of the saying 'like an osterich with its head in the sand.' The frog spends most of its life in one pond, never looking outside or wondering what is out there. A frog that lives in a pond can't conceive of a world beyond the banks and any attempt to educate it is wasted effort.

I stayed in Australia for seven more years, but I was obsessed by the experience. Conversation would turn to music and I'd recall the clamour of the Japanese attempts at rock, and the sight of a school uniform would conjure images of the days I wore a school blazer together with slippers.

Every time I went to the movies I remembered standing up in the theatre because there weren't enough seats. The stream of memories couldn't be dammed by the indifference the frogs showed and something would spill over into every conversation. "When I was in Japan…" took on the same cliché status as "When I was your age…"

Australia became too confining and I had difficulty relating to most people. Their talk of cars, nightclubs and local problems bored me as much as my talk of unknown places did them. My closest friends, Damion and Jemma, were fellow explorers from the exchange program. They'd been through similar experiences and could talk about exotic places, cultures and what else the world might hold.

When I'd been for a job interview with my company, they asked me where I saw myself in five years, and without hesitation I answered, "in Japan." With a little pushing on my part, they finally gave me a transfer to the Asian headquarters in Kobe. I packed my dreams and a few Australian CDs and left to experience the life of a Japanese *sarariiman* – an office worker. It was time to try another pond.

MARCH 98 - TRANSFER

転勤 **(ten-kin)**

From my hotel, I looked out on an extensive array of blue roofs. They weren't a happy symbol, huddled together like a concentration camp while the meagre possessions of the occupants spilled into the alleys between. Each shack, I'd learned on a business trip the year before, housed a family who'd lost their home in the earthquake in January '95. Even with all the construction in the city, three years on there were still plenty of vacant patches in the cityscape – patches that held the memories of a normal life for hundreds of families. But it wasn't a lack of housing that kept these people here. Nor, I'm told, was it fear of collapsing apartment blocks. They chose to live in the shacks because they were rent-free and the families didn't want to risk the cost of a real flat, or *apaato* as they're called in Japan, with the sluggish economy. Whichever reason was true, the mood in Japan in 1998 was depressing, and the scene before me more so, but I couldn't feel it. I was back. I was home.

I tore myself from the window and, suffused with joy, rushed through my morning routine and across the road into the Japan Headquarters. I was here on a 'look-see' to determine if I could live here and was willing to take a permanent assignment. My mission was to manage the voice and video services for the Japan branch, and to cut costs by eliminating all the incumbent vendors the Japanese were too polite to remove. I figured I'd better start practising my act as the big bad *gaijin* –literally, outside person – by pretending I didn't speak any Japanese, and my first victim was the interpreter hired to get me through the commando health check in the local hospital.

"Mr. Gunn? Hello, my name is Nakano," she said extending her hand. She was middle aged – possibly in her forties, but it's always difficult to tell with Japanese – with a large mole on her top lip. "Please call me Nakano-san." Nakano would be her surname, I knew, and the –*san* an honorific like 'Mr.' or 'Mrs.' but unisex. She used it now to start teaching me some of the forms, but otherwise a Japanese person would never use it after their own name.

"Hello Nakano-san. It's nice to meet you," I said awkwardly, never comfortable with *aisatsu*, introductions, and worried that I might have bowed – the normal greeting in Japan.

"Please wait a moment. I have to check something." She spoke with the fluency in English that I hoped I'd soon have in Japanese. I waited while she called up to Nakajima-san, her contact in Human Resources, to tell her she'd found me and to check whether there was anything else scheduled for me that day.

"How long have you been learning Japanese?" she asked as she turned back and lead me out of the building.

How did she know? "Why do you ask that?"

"Well, you obviously understood everything I just said, and your pronunciation of my name was perfect. When did you start learning?"

I realised then I'd never be able to pull off the big, bad *gaijin* act. My passion for learning the language and understanding the culture would betray me. "I learnt my first words when I was three," I said in Japanese.

"*sugoi*!" Amazing. "Why so young?"

"My parents travelled a lot before they had children and when they settled down they missed the opportunity to meet so many interesting people, so they built up the Australian branch of a home-stay organisation called Servas. Ever since I can remember we had a traveller staying at our place almost every week." I knew I was rambling, but it wasn't often that the topic came up and I was enjoying it. "I'd come home from school each day not knowing who would be there. Dinner time was like a holiday. We never had much need for television. Anyway, right at the beginning, just as I was starting to speak well enough to hold a conversation, we had two Japanese guests in the one year – Yuki and Yoshi."

"It seems they made an impression on you."

"They did. They spent a lot of time teaching me *origami* and other parts of the Japanese culture and even a few words. I loved hearing about all these exotic countries from the other guests after that, but Japan has always been special. All my friends wanted to be pilots or doctors or whatever, but I just wanted to go to Japan."

"So when did you start learning formally?"

"When I was in third grade. There was a Japanese girl in my class. Her father came out as an exchange teacher and brought the family. I got her number and begged my mother to ask him to teach me. He was excited that someone so young would take that initiative, so once a week I'd go back to their place after school and learn how to say '*kore wa pen desu.*' This is a pen.

She laughed and threw me back the Japanised English version, "*zisu izu a pen*." It's the first English sentence that all Japanese people learn.

"It was like learning a secret code. In those days, Japanese wasn't common in schools and my mother had to fight to get me into the one school in the area that taught it. Now, of course, it's taught in almost every Australian school."

"But you must have been to Japan before. Your accent is so good."

"Well, my parents encouraged me by hosting one exchange student for at least a couple of weeks each year. But, yes, I came twice on exchange and once more on a business trip last year. The first exchange was in the Christmas holidays after year ten, but the highlight of my life was when I came back for a year of school when I was eighteen."

I always called myself a cultural schizophrenic because I slipped easily between the two cultures. While many of my friends had trouble adjusting to life back in their home countries, the sight of Sydney Harbour from the plane was enough to ground me in Australia again.

"I think that my accent was much better then. It sounds awful now, but I'm not sure if that's because I'm out of practice or because my ear has improved and I can hear all my mistakes."

"Don't worry. It's fine, and you'll get plenty of practice. How long will you stay in Japan?"

My assignment was permanent, but I planned to move on after a couple of years. I didn't feel comfortable saying that, though. "Who knows? Maybe some pretty Japanese girl will trap me here forever." Nakano-san smiled knowingly. Obviously I wouldn't be the first to be 'trapped.'

We arrived at the hospital, which turned out to be only a few minutes walk from the office. "After you," she said, pointing at the door. I walked through then stopped, a mix of wonder and terror slackening my jaw.

I'd been to a Japanese hospital before, but I had been too delirious to have any clear memory of the experience. What I saw now was somewhere between a doctor's waiting room and a car insurance office. The seating was straight out of the waiting room, but I could see that they'd

applied the Japanese brand of efficiency to the process of getting well. Japanese efficiency is always directed at getting the masses through the system as fast as possible, often at the expense of the individual. The reception was divided into six sections, all with a number dominating the wall behind.

Nakano-san knew the drill and marched me up to counter four, then handed my papers over to the nurse. Looking at her, I remembered my earlier visit and realised that it hadn't been the fever or drugs that made me see pixies. The nurse was dressed entirely in soft pink from slippers to cap – probably intended to achieve some calming effect. She gave Nakano-san a list of steps in the process and a small beaker.

"Room 93 for a height / weight check," said Nakano-san, reading the list. "Room 141 for a blood test, room 87 for an x-ray, 45 for a cardiograph, and 189 for eyes and ears check, but first…" She handed me the beaker and pointed the way to the men's room.

I filled up the container and battled to stop the flow before I got the sides wet, then looked around, confused. I'd forgotten to ask where to take it and I didn't like the idea of carrying an open beaker, nearly overflowing with urine, through a crowded room to where Nakano-san waited. Right next to where I was standing, still at the urinal, I spotted a window at groin height. In the obscure 'form before function' way of the Japanese, this was obviously meant to increase privacy. I'd seen the same in a love hotel, a hotel that charges by the hour, and I made the same mistake now as I had there. I bent down to look through. The girl on the other side gasped, and if I hadn't been so embarrassed, I might have been offended that my face shocked her when the sight of my naked loins wasn't worth a reaction. But the thought didn't occur to me as I ran out and, red faced, joined the next line.

I made it through the rest of the morning almost without issue. They squashed me down to a more acceptable 181cm instead of the 183 or 185cm that 6'1" normally equates to. They all expressed awe at my ability to read the bottom line of the chart. I managed not to faint at the sight of my own blood being drawn into the sort of syringe I thought they only used for cows. But I freaked at the x-ray. The equipment was probably quite normal, but they actually strapped me to the backboard like some Frankenstein experiment. My pulse lurched even higher when the 4 technicians ran out of the room before activating the machine from the adjacent control room. It

must pack an awful punch, and I imagined my entrails melting under the intense beam of x-rays. My Japanese colleagues never understood my fear of having an x-ray and seemed to delight in getting at least one each year during the company's mandatory health checks. I put up with these mandatory checks, which always said I was healthy, but refused to let them x-ray me again.

Once the whole process was done, we went to line 2, handed in the report and were told to take a seat. My name would be called to arrange payment, which was, of course, at another counter. Finally, after three hours I was released with instructions to return after 4pm to pick up the certificate.

Over the next few days, I was taken through the whole induction process, most of which was just paperwork, but I was struck by the complexity of the salary system. The company has an elaborate formula to determine the salary of each person based on their function, their level, their tenure at that level, and their performance vs. others that fit the previous categories. It's complex, but understandable. In Japan, I was lost.

"chotto chigau," not exactly, said the grey-clad girl opposite me for the fourth time, too polite to say "No, you idiot!" Nakajima-san, who had been Nakano-san's contact on the first day, might initially have been happy to discover that I spoke Japanese so she wouldn't have to explain it all in English, but that was fleeting. "The company will only pay the middle range of your rent. If your rent is below that range, you have to pay it all yourself. If it's above the range, you pay the first part and the last part yourself."

"OK. I think I get it." The complexity was frustrating, and I had no way of comparing the package to what I had been earning in Australia. I had to understand the rent deposits with their refundable and non-refundable components, the transportation allowance, and social security that only pays out after twenty-five years. And then there was the *gaijin* allowance to pay for foreign newspapers and phone calls home. Yet it was why I had come – to experience the discomfort, to learn about the different ways Japanese people do things. And I had to admit that I was enjoying pushing some of the frustration back on Nakajima-san. "So the rent is only paid twelve times, but the *gaijin* allowance is paid eighteen times, right?"

"No. The *gaijin* allowance is only based on a twelve month year."

“But not the salary?” I managed to hide my grin by concentrating on copying the crossed arms and tilted head gesture Japanese use to indicate thinking.

“No, the salary is paid on an 18.1 month year – the normal twelve months, then a three month bonus in June and December.”

“That’s eighteen months. Didn’t you say 18.1 months?”

“Yes. In December, we’re paid a little bit extra to cover the expenses of New Year.” New Year is the big family event in Japan where presents of cash are given to children. “You can use it to buy Christmas presents.”

May 98 – Home

家 (ie)

I had mixed emotions when I moved into my *apaato* at the end of May. Over the last couple of months I'd learnt that a home is more than a room with a collection of possessions. It's more even than the memories of those favourite objects gathered over the years, though that was one reason I was excited to be moving in to my own place. I'd been without those comforts since I'd packed up my life in Australia in early April and, after living in hotels for a month each in Sydney and Kobe, I was desperate for my Def FX and Not Drowning Waving CDs, my own comfortable pillow, and some more clothes. More importantly though, having a home would define my lifestyle. Once I knew where I was living I could search the area for activities and make friends with the neighbours.

But as I stood in the empty apartment, I wondered how I would cope in such a small space. At 48 square metres, it was not much more than half the size of any flat I'd lived in in Australia. Even on my previous trips, the families I'd lived with had large houses and although I'd seen the sizes of flats in the city centres, it had somehow been one of those things that happen to other people. It was a shock to find that this was the biggest I could afford even here in the slums. A 2LDK, they called it – 2 bedrooms with a room that served as living room, dining room and kitchen. I never had to look further than a metre and a half to see a wall and I began to wonder how claustrophobic a caged monkey must feel. I could fill the space with my equivalent of trees to play in, but the walls would always be there, pushing in. I'd told Inoue-san, one of the secretaries on my floor at the office, how I felt and her reaction had shamed me.

"*zeitaku*," she'd exclaimed – that's extravagant. "A whole Japanese family could live in that space. Why do you need something so big?" I explained that space wasn't something that most people in Australia worried about – that we had plenty of it and expected our homes to be places we could retreat to. Australians aren't compact people and we like to sprawl.

"But you're in Japan now. I thought you wanted to experience the Japanese life." She was

right. I'd even refused to speak English to any of my colleagues, though it took weeks before they gave up and spoke to me in Japanese. "Our homes aren't retreats. They're somewhere to sleep. Many people even bathe in public baths because they don't have an *ofuro*, a bath, at home. You've got to be prepared to compromise."

As far as I was concerned, 2LDK *was* a compromise.

"Don't worry," she said on seeing my face fall. "You'll learn to use the space more efficiently. Japanese people are experts at that."

Now I looked out from my narrow balcony, at an ugly network of power cables stretching across a bleak city. Down the hill to my right would be the ocean, though I couldn't see it for the buildings. To my left, I could see the green stretch of hills collectively known as Rokko-san – Mt. Rokko. They loomed over the city, providing a navigational aid to tourists – uphill is always North – and a reminder that there is colour in the world.

I worried about the removalists finding my place. The Japanese don't use street names except for major city roads. They use a system of numbered blocks within a named area, and give directions from the nearest named intersection. It's cumbersome even for Japanese and I'd spent twenty minutes with a taxi driver looking for my building – distinctively tiled in brown, like an inside-out bathroom – when I came that morning. We'd finally discovered a *koban*, a police box, almost hidden by a construction site and asked them for directions.

The removalists had done their homework though, and soon the removal truck pulled up in the street below and I watched as two small men got out. It was a physical metaphor for Inoue-san's words. I'd seen my things get loaded into the huge removal truck in Sydney, each piece crying its ownership of the space. There was no room left for anything else. "This is my space," we say, "and I'll use it as I please." In Japan, those same items filled a small crate on a flatbed truck. Inside, everything would be neatly laid out, interlocking. "This is our space," say the Japanese. "We're lucky to have it, and if we use it wisely, we might be able to keep it. We won't disturb anyone else." I had a lot to learn.

I went back inside, smacking my head on each of the low doorways, and was still rubbing it as I greeted them at the *genkan* – the entrance, where outside shoes are removed. Whereas the rest of

the floor is raised, the *genkan* is at the same level as the walkway to my front door and is considered outside in many respects. In a traditional house, a visitor might come in the front door and call to the occupants from the *genkan*, but to step up without being invited would be intruding. I invited the removalists in and watched as they slipped off their shoes in mid stride despite the seven-foot tall bookcases and heavy speakers they carried. In less than two hours, they'd unpacked everything and left me to acquaint myself with my new home.

Today was a rare respite from *tsuyu* – four to six weeks of constant drizzle in June – which had arrived early this year, and the sun was burning its way into every corner of the house. Japan is the land of the early rising sun, and I knew it would wake me at four every morning until I managed to buy curtains which, along with lights and stove, were considered personal items rather than being part of the flat. Since I had to carry everything back from town by hand, I only bought one light that week and moved it between rooms as I needed it –carrying a flaming torch around my tiny castle.

Once I'd exhausted myself in setting up, and felt the walls pressing in on me again, I took a break and went out for dinner and dancing with Nimmi and Helen. It was my plan to avoid *gaijin* in favour of finding Japanese friends, but Nimmi was irresistible. I'd met the two English teachers at an international music festival on my second weekend in the country and Nimmi quickly became the centre of my life in Japan. She was the most stunning woman I've ever seen, with dark skin, an eternal grin and deep eyes hidden behind a sweep of black hair. My chest tightened whenever I watched her move, and I couldn't get enough of her English accent, delivered in sultry tones, often with a sexually charged wit. Beneath this lurked an intelligence and compassion that made her a goddess in my eyes. I'd made a particularly lame effort at starting conversation after seeing her pulled out of the crowd to dance on stage at the festival, but she'd forgiven me and invited me to join her and her friend for dinner.

That was when I'd first noticed Helen, who was a complete contrast to Nimmi – looking, acting and swearing like a brickie. Other than both being Australian, the only thing Helen and I had in common was a bent towards sarcastic humour, but invariably one of us would push it too far and fists would be drawn.

They showed me some of the *gaijin* hangouts – like a restaurant called Mother Moon that served fresh salads, unobtainable in Japanese restaurants, and pubs like the Dubliners, which had western music and a dance floor.

It was to this pub we went on the night I moved in, but I ended up alone with Helen for an hour before Nimmi arrived. After some small talk about the unbearable humidity, silence reigned. Then this brickie got out her sledgehammer and let fly.

"You know that Nimmi's engaged, don't you."

'Not again,' I thought. For the last five years, every woman I'd been interested in turned out to be attached. Why had I believed my goddess would be otherwise? With the calm of long practice I asked, "Where's her fiancé?"

"Back in England. He was out here a month ago. You just missed him. He's a great guy."

Of course. He'd have to be, but that just made it worse. Intuition told me that Nimmi was running away from marriage and my hope told me I might be able to convince her to stay in Japan. I'd even be happy to share my flat. And after hearing where she lived, I had no doubt she'd prefer that to her own.

"It's so small that the kitchen is just a sink and a hotplate tucked into the *genkan*, and my bed is on a platform hung over the living room," she said when she arrived. Her loft-style flat was the sort of place that Inoue-san had thought was suitable for me.

I stared at her in sympathetic horror. "Do you have to use a public bath, then?"

"No, thank god, but my bathroom is so small you could shit, shower and shave from the one seat. And the walls are so thin that some nights I can't sleep with the moans of the girl next door and whoever she's brought home."

I laughed and pressed my palms together, then in a poor imitation of a monk said, "what happen beyond wall not real. Student must build wall around senses. Only then will she be happy." Japanese people somehow managed to ignore the sounds from their neighbours.

"Zen doesn't work when you really want those sounds to be inside your walls. Anyway, I've only got two more months to put up with it." Two months! How could I convince her to stay in such a short time?

Over the following weeks I became used to the walls around me, gradually improving the layout of my flat and replacing items like my couch that were just too big for a Japanese home. Each day I would come home and inhale the fresh hay smell of the rice straw *tatami* mats. That smell was one of the reasons I wanted at least one Japanese style room. It gave a reality to what had only been a dream for so long.

During those weeks, I also waited for the neighbours to drop by for *aisatsu* as they would have in Australia, sometimes even bearing a cake in welcome, but they never did. Instead, I was visited by people selling *futon*, *kotatsu* – a heated table – and even an NHK man demanding that I pay to register my TV to receive the government station, which I had no interest in watching. One evening I was standing out on the balcony escaping the walls. A car sped up the street and screeched to a halt right below me. The driver got out and ran to the front of our building, so when my intercom rang I assumed the worst. 'There must be a fire in the building, or he's from the agent and there's a big problem.' I let him in and he ran up the three flights, into my flat and pointed at the vent above the stove, ranting something in Japanese too fast for me to follow.

"Can you fix it," I ventured, though I was no longer sure he was from the agent. Another long burst of Japanese but I still only managed to catch a few words.

"Are you selling something," I asked, and the tirade began again. It took fifteen minutes before the man gave me a simple '*hai*,' yes, and I showed him the door. I vowed never to answer the door in Japanese again and my English usually got rid of them, until one day when a persistent couple refused to be deterred.

"Do you speak Japanese?" asked the female voice hesitantly, once the male voice had given up.

No, I told them.

"Please… open."

Definitely not. Go away. Switching to my best impersonation of broken Japanese, I said, "I no speak Japanese."

There was a long, whospered exchange and finally another attempt at an English sentence. The only word I caught was 'upstairs.' I wondered then if whomever lived upstairs had locked themselves out and was trying to get in the security door, but I decided to go down and see, rather

than risk letting more hawkers into the building. When I opened my own door, they were standing there, not at street level as I'd assumed.

"*haroo*," they said bowing. "We upstairs…. today. Very nice meet you." Then it struck me that I'd seen a removal truck outside earlier.

"Oh, no. I'm so sorry. I actually do speak Japanese but I thought you were trying to sell me something," I said, and explained the story in their own language. Bowing deeply, I apologised for my extreme rudeness and begged their forgiveness. '*sumimasen*.'

Their relief was visible when I started speaking in Japanese, and the smiles grew wider at the story. "We brought you a gift. *onegai shimasu*" The last is a general request for a future favour or forbearance for an error not yet committed. As I took the proffered box of laundry detergent, I realised that I'd missed my opportunity to meet the neighbours properly when I moved in. The initiative should have been mine, not theirs. Perhaps that's why my next-door neighbour only ever scowled at me, and not because my music was too loud as I'd feared.

Francois, a friend from work, later told me that he'd had a similar confusion when one day he came home to find a box of detergent in front of his door with a Japanese message. The only bit he understood was 'flat 6,' and assuming a wrong delivery, he'd placed it in front of the correct door. The next day it was back, this time with an additional card, probably apologising for Francois' mistake, including the English word 'FROM' before the flat number.

Nothing in my previous trips or all my studies of Japan had prepared me for the reality of living as a Japanese person starting out in the workforce. Could I still call myself culturally schizophrenic? I was beginning to realise that the next couple of years would test me as surely as if I knew nothing about the country.

June 98 - Crime

犯罪 **(han-zai)**

Japan is a safe country. Women and children walk unlit streets at night, confident that there won't be anyone with a knife or a gun lurking. Each day, thousands of *mama chari* – mums' bikes with a ladies frame and a basket on the front that are used by everyone, even *sarariiman* – are left outside train stations and shopping centres with only a small bar poking between the spokes for security. More expensive bikes, such as mountain bikes and racers, are targets for thieves, but as long as they're chained up properly, it's generally not a problem. On the other hand, umbrellas seem to be considered universal property. On rainy days, umbrella racks in the entrance of department stores are full as it's impolite to carry a sharp wet umbrella into a crowded space where it's likely to annoy people and damage goods. Respectable ladies come out of the store, go to pick up their umbrella, then spying a nicer one a bit further down the rack, take that instead.

Japanese read violent *manga*, comics, on the train, but violent crimes are almost unheard of. Even housewives can be seen reading *manga* with rape, but sex crimes are also rare. The *yakuza* are often touted as 'the Japanese mafia,' but as well as their gambling and prostitution rackets, they're involved in legal enterprises that benefit the public, like real estate and hospitals. The hand towels that are offered on arrival in every restaurant are reputedly a *yakuza* endeavour – adding honour to the extortion. They play a role as the modern *samurai* of Japan with a rigid hierarchy and a strict code of honour. Most Japanese I spoke to would avoid them in the street, but believe that they keep crime down by dealing with riffraff.

Francois' boss lived a couple of houses away from the head of the largest *gumi*, team or organisation, in Japan, and everyone told him it's the safest place to live – not because of the token police car parked permanently outside his house, but because no one would dare commit a crime so near one of the most powerful and dangerous men in the country.

But like everywhere in the world, bubbles of unrest are beginning to surface. One of them burst near me in my second month in Kobe.

I was woken at two o'clock on a hot Sunday morning in early June by Nimmi and Helen, calling from a *koban*.

"A police station? What happened? Are you all right?"

"I'll tell you when we see you. We need a place to stay tonight," said Nimmi.

When they buzzed my intercom, she was struggling to keep the humour in her voice. "Are you decent?"

Nimmi knew how I felt about her, and that seemed to give her even more reason to banter. "Not yet," I said, playing along. Then I realised it was true, and reached for a shirt, cursing the humidity.

"Then we're coming up."

Nimmi was dressed in a slinky black dress, more gorgeous than I'd ever seen her, despite the weak smile. I showed them in, offered them a drink and we settled on the floor. Nimmi told the story, her wringing hands giving the lie to her resigned tone. Helen didn't even try to cover her frustration and the few times she opened her mouth were to snap at me.

"We were at the Dubliner's," said Nimmi.

They'd been celebrating Helen's last weekend in Japan and I would've joined them if I hadn't been stuck in the office all weekend. I'd been there for fifteen hours the day before, Saturday, upgrading our voice mail system, and had to be back at eight in the morning.

"I was taking lots of pictures with my new camera. I guess we were pretty obvious about it, not thinking that anyone would steal in Japan, and I left it in my bag in the corner while I was dancing."

I started to sweat, thinking of Nimmi on the dance floor. "So some guy stole the camera?"

"He took the whole bag. I went to get the camera after a couple of songs and it was gone. Helen and I ran outside straight away, and actually saw the guy going through the bag in his car."

"Shit. Did you get his number plate?"

"There wasn't time to think about that. He almost ran over us getting away." She paused to collect herself. "The strange part is that I'm sure he was Japanese. Anyway, we found an *omawarisan* on the way back to the station."

This title for a policeman translates roughly as Mr. Wanderer.

"What did the police say?"

"Fuckin' cops were useless," said Helen.

"They weren't much help," Nimmi agreed. "It's the same everywhere. They take a statement then tell you that you probably won't get it back."

"You could always try the *yakuza*," I said, only half joking. "They'd probably find it for you. Were your keys in the bag?"

"No kidding," said Helen, glaring. "Why else would we be staying here?" I wished I could have left her outside.

"Yes," said Nimmi, with a soothing look to Helen. "But that's not all. Helen's plane ticket and my purse were also in there. The bastard has my house key *and* my address."

"He might be there now. Do you want to go and make sure everything's ok?"

"How? I can't get in. And anyway, there's nothing valuable there. Nothing except my pure self."

The comment invited a retort, but I could only look on in concern, thinking of how vulnerable she'd be until she got her locks changed.

"Can I use your phone? I need to cancel my credit cards."

"Sure. And I'll get you some sheets, Helen." I set up the spare bed and started back to my own. "Nimmi, I'll be waiting for you."

She gave me a smile that promised everything, but then said, "You'll be waiting all night."

"Well, if you'd really rather sleep with Helen... Oh, you're welcome to use the stereo, if that helps."

"Thanks. Now fuck off so we can get some sleep."

I finally had Nimmi in my flat, and she was going to be sharing a bed with someone who took no joy in the situation.

I woke at six to find Helen snoring on the bed and Nimmi still curled around my phone. I made a quick breakfast and sat down beside her. She stretched enticingly and her smile sent my pulse racing. If only I could wake up to that every morning.

"Did you sleep?"

"No. Not really. I came in to talk to you, but you were out cold. I figured you needed the sleep."

"I did, but I'd rather have been talking to you. The hard part's done. I'll probably just be

babysitting the vendor today." I left them with the spare key, went to work and met up with them again that evening for Helen's farewell dinner. She was in a much better mood then, having sorted out her plane ticket, but I was still glad to see her go. It left a gap in Nimmi's life that I was happy to fill.

Nimmi would call me to chat when she got home most evenings – whenever she wasn't expecting a call from her fiancé – and on her days off, we'd have dinner in town. A few weeks after the event, the rain let up for a long enough to inspire us to get out. We took to the mountains behind Kobe in search of cooler air.

"I woke up three times last night when the wind rattled the door. I've put the carving knife next to the bed for tonight. My God, what is *that*?"

I thought she was looking at a wall of concrete damming a dry riverbed. Then I saw what she did – three grilles covering a strange spill gate. The centre grille extended well below the others.

"It's a gigantic phallus. Surely that's no accident. But it's pointing the wrong way," she grinned at me.

My eyes were drawn to Nimmi's shirt, clinging invitingly to her body, wet from sweat and the earlier *tsuyu* rain. Her innuendo was a little too tempting, right then, so rather than join in, I forced my thoughts back to her fears. "You've got my number on speed dial, right? Just call me if anything happens."

"You're so brave when you think it might get you an invitation to stay the night," she teased.

I bit. "That's not true!" My stomach twisted – it was half true. "I would have offered the same to anyone, even Helen." At least that was wholly true – or would have been if she'd lived nearby.

"I know, and I appreciate it," she said, serious again. "I'm even scared walking home now. I used to just be disgusted by the drunken men who flash themselves at *gaijin* women, but –"

I cut her off. "They what?" I knew about *chikan*, men on trains who grope women, using the press of passengers to hide their actions, but that usually only happened in Tokyo.

"Didn't you know? Some of them even masturbate in front of you…. Like we'd be turned on. At least they don't usually touch people, but the other night, someone did touch me. I was walking

back from the station and this guy started following me. I walked faster and so did he. When I got close to my house I started running, but he caught me on the steps and grabbed my legs." She shuddered.

"It wasn't the guy who stole your bag, was it?"

"No. I'm sure it wasn't, but that doesn't make me feel any better. And then there's all that stuff on the news now. Japan just doesn't feel so safe any more."

"You mean the insurance fraud?" Everyone in the office was talking about it. A woman who worked at a life insurance company was arrested after being the recipient of three or four claims. It seemed she had never met any of the deceased and speculation was that she'd arranged the murders after forging the papers.

Gruesome incidents like that are still rare in Japan, making headlines for months, but they do occur. The last had been the subway gassing by the Ohm cult, and before that, just after I arrived in Nagoya for school, the news was of a girl killed for being late. She was running to get through the gate before it closed and the teacher, seeing her, pushed harder – a challenge to run faster. She fell. Her head landed on the track and the heavy gate crushed her skull. Perhaps it was all a big mistake, but at the school assembly that morning, the principal told everyone that it wouldn't have happened if she hadn't been late. He probably made everyone run twenty laps of the soccer field as punishment for her lapse.

The event wasn't seen as *hanzai* – a crime. There was no trial. Discipline was solely the responsibility of schools and both the teacher and the principal were doing their jobs. The government supported them and the girl's family mourned quietly.

It was six weeks before Nimmi's landlord finally arranged another lock for her. He seemed oblivious to the fear that was now a major part of her life. He probably saw it as another inconvenience of having a *gaijin* rent his flat. I'd found, when looking for my own place, that some landlords specified 'no *gaijin*,' even if the same place had 'pets allowed.' The reason, I was told when I enquired, was that *gaijin* don't know how to treat a Japanese flat. We put nails in the walls and make too much noise. I couldn't imagine an Australian landlord being able to specify 'no Japanese' because they flood the bathroom every time they take a bath.

One night, while the old locks were still in place, I was pulled out of dreams of phone systems to hear my own phone ringing. Fearing Nimmi's knife was being put to use, I was up and pulling on clothes even as I picked up the phone.

"Hi Murray!"

'Not Nimmi,' I thought as I fought the surging adrenaline. Then I recognised the voice of Jemma, an old Australian friend from the exchange. She was living in Japan again, too. "Shit, you scared me. What's up?"

"I'm at *karaoke* with some friends and we're trying to remember who sang 'Unchained Melody' in Ghost. You always know music stuff."

"The Righteous Brothers." I slammed down the phone.

It was two hours before my pulse slowed to normal, and the next day I stumbled to work bleary-eyed, for the first time arriving after everyone else. At least Nimmi was safe.

JULY 98 - FESTIVAL

お祭り **(o-matsu-ri)**

The third Monday of July is Ocean Day, and I was blessed with a long weekend. My hours had been building steadily since I'd arrived, and I was often required to work weekends – you can't upgrade a phone or voice-mail system while people are using them. This was a rare chance to take a break and I'd heard that there was a festival downtown. Kobe is a port city, and the majority of the population of the prefecture lives within three kilometres of the water, herded by the mountains to the north, so Ocean Day has a special significance here. The festival goes for four days, but the highlight is a parade on Ocean Day itself.

Nimmi had to work, so I was looking for a way to distract myself and a festival would do the job perfectly. I ventured down around noon and watched them setting up. *tsuyu* had ended, and with the rain went the only way to stay cool outdoors. Thermometers would be locked between 32 and 36 degrees until mid October. Night brought darkness but no respite from the heat or humidity. I'd taken to leaving a door open at each end of the flat and lying in the drafty corridor at night – the only way I could get cool enough to sleep. Being a *gaijin* had some advantages though, and I was wearing shorts, which would be taboo for Japanese people in town. The few people on the streets at this time were dressed in thick construction clothes, building a stage in the park, or more casually in jeans and t-shirts, starting gas stoves and unloading food into the white canvas stalls. They'd closed off Flower Road for the event. It was the main street and one of the few in Kobe large enough to have a name.

I looked around for something to do until things got started and spied some hot-air balloons in the distance. Heading that way, I passed an American girl who said 'Hi,' and looked at me expectantly.

There are a large number of *gaijin* in Kobe, but it's always a shock when you bump into one. Whenever it does happen, there are three likely reactions that each person could take – a desperate

attempt at conversation, a primal battle for territory, or feigned blindness. This girl obviously belonged to the first group, which probably made her an English teacher who didn't speak Japanese. I belonged to the last. I grunted a reply and kept walking.

Approaching the balloons, I could see that they were each about seven metres tall – four miniature planets complete with oceans, clouds and on one, continents. Suspended at the waist from each, a girl of perhaps eighteen years practised flying motions – swooping, gliding and somersaulting in her harness. They would be the finalé to the parade, I was sure.

After an hour of sitting mesmerised, I made my way back to Flower Road and bumped into the American girl again, wearing the same expectant smile. She was slim, with long blonde hair – a vague description that matched a number of English teachers I'd met. Perhaps I did know her. I decided to embarrass myself, swallowing before delivering what seemed like a pick-up line.

"I'm sorry, but do I know you?"

She laughed. "I don't think so. I just arrived in Japan yesterday. I'm Lisa, from the United States."

"Yes. I recognised the accent." She didn't pick the irony in my tone.

I introduced myself as MAG, using my initials as a nickname. It had taken off at work in Australia and I carried it over here because I can't stand the way American's at work pronounce 'Murray' (moo-ray) and the equivalent in Japan is a girl's name. It had become embarrassing during my year of school here.

Lisa joined me as I walked back to the parade, which was about to start. It would be mostly school groups by the look of the lines stretching down the road. There were still not many people about, and we had a good view of the front class, patiently waiting for their cue to march out. They must have been in their first year of school – about five years old – all immaculately dressed. The girls wore sailor suits in navy blue with matching skirts; the boys jet-black collarless suits with jackets buttoned up hard under their chins. I couldn't help smiling at the sight of such uniform neatness on top of a variety of running shoes, which were the only personalised item they could have.

"Oh! They're so cute! Is that their school uniform?"

I bit back a sarcastic reply and admitted that it was.

As calm as they were in waiting, I was ready to throw my hands over my ears when they began to play – I'd often heard the screaming, banging cacophony of kids in Australia trying to play in a band. Japanese children are much more restrained though, and when they played, walking along behind their teacher in neat lines, they kept in time and the tune was evident.

We watched about fifty classes as the crowds built. My favourite was a group playing *taiko* and they impressed Lisa as well.

"Wow. What are those drums?"

I explained that *taiko* was both the name of the drum and of the music. "They've got lots of different sizes and shapes to give different sounds – some as small as a hubcap and some with a circumference like the wheels on a monster truck."

"It sounds incredible! It's like there's only one drummer." One of the ways that *taiko* stands out from ordinary drumming is the discipline of the team. Even with thirty people in a band, the beats are perfectly synchronised.

The other big difference is the visual effect. Some people were sharing the same drum, and some had access to multiple drums so they moved between and around them in a dance. Each person was waving their arms in a pattern, hitting the skin, edge and side of the drum to create even more variety of tones. I'd had the opportunity to play on one of the enormous drums at a camp on the exchange program, and I remembered it as one of the highlights of the year. We were all partying around a bonfire where a local *taiko* group had performed for us, then were invited to try it ourselves. It was propped on an angle so the man-tall face rose from chest height. In each hand, I'd held sticks a foot long and thick enough that my hands could only just grip them, and swung them overhead. The booming bass sound echoed around the mountains and threatened to blow out the bonfire. It brings a smile to my face every time I remember that beat, and on this occasion the kids were grinning just as broadly.

"*atsui*," I muttered, wiping sweat from my brow.

"What's that?"

It was only then that I realised I'd spoken Japanese. "I said it's hot."

The crowd was building and the heat growing more intense. I'd find out that this was quiet compared to other festivals, such as the Gion *matsuri* named for the host neighbourhood, where

every street is like the front row at the Crowded House farewell concert, but I was uncomfortable even at this level.

"I'm going to get lunch," I said, hoping she'd stay watching the parade.

"Great! I'm starving."

On the way to the food stalls we passed a woman dressed in traditional costume handing out *uchiwa*, a plastic fan used at festivals, and Lisa greedily took one. "There's writing on it. What does it say?"

"It's just advertising for a radio station."

Lisa began waving the fan at her face absently, while looking back at the woman who'd given it to her. "I love those dresses. What are they called, again – *kimono*?"

"Those are called *yukata*." Didn't she know anything? I explained that *yukata* are summer *kimono*, with only one layer of material, but they're still extremely hot. The woman must be sweating a shower by now. The raised wooden shoes are *geta*. Most women only wear traditional dress for festivals or weddings, but there are a couple of times when it's expected even for men, like in November for *shichi-go-san*, 'seven-five-three,' when children of those ages go to the temple to pray for good fortune. Then on *seijin-no-hi*, coming of age day, everyone turning twenty in that year goes to a temple to celebrate. And occasionally, some older women, clinging to their past, still wear them just to go to the shops.

We found the section of park set aside for food, which is the same at festivals everywhere: greasy, sugary and dependent on sauce to cover the taste.

"Ooh. What's that?"

"*takoyaki*. Fried octopus balls."

Lisa's expression told me my mistake.

"I mean, they're bits of octopus in batter, fried into spheres."

"You're so funny," she said, touching my arm, "but I don't think I want those. What else is there?" I quickly moved on to the next stall, where the attendant wore a *happi*, a short *yukata* for festival staff.

He was selling *okonomiyaki*, a mixture of flour, water, egg and cabbage cooked into a kind of pizza with a variety of toppings. "That's what I want," said Lisa and I rushed off to the next stall,

ruthlessly leaving her alone to deal with the attendant who was asking in Japanese what combination of beef, pork, octopus and squid she wanted.

The next stall turned out to be *yakisoba* – fried noodles coated in a delicious barbeque style sauce – and I ordered it, savouring the few moments of peace.

"Would you like a drink?" asked the serving girl as she put the noodles in a plastic container, closed it with a rubber band and slipped in a pair of disposable chopsticks.

The selection of drinks in Japan is astonishing – as are some of the names, like the sports drink 'Pocari Sweat,' which tastes as the name suggests – and about fifty new flavours are released each summer, of which two or three sell well enough to stay in the market. But it's not the soft drinks that stand out at a festival – it's the beer and *sake*.

"Did you see that little girl drinking beer?" asked Lisa, ending my solitude.

"Yeah. What about it?"

"Isn't that strange? She's only about five and she's drinking beer." Lisa's look demanded that I find it strange too, and after thinking about it, I did. In Australia it's illegal to sell alcohol in a public place and definitely not to people under age.

"I guess it is, but it's normal here. She's just carrying it back for her father. I've seen kids drinking much stronger stuff at Japanese weddings, though."

We found a couple of spare steps in the amphitheatre and as we sat down, a middle-aged man sitting just in front looked around, growled something at us, and squeezed his way through to another empty space five people away.

"What did he say?"

I had to admit that I didn't know. Old people have very strong dialects and even Takeshi, my host brother, had sometimes needed his mother, Okaasan, to translate when he spoke to his grandmother. "But it's obvious he wasn't happy about us sitting near him." I'd heard stories, but it had never happened to me before. Apparently when *gaijin* sit down on trains, the people either side of them will get up and move away.

"It's happened to me a few times already. What are they afraid of?"

"I really don't know, but it reeks of racism."

I was told, a few months later, that it wasn't racism, but rather a way of saving face. English is

mandatory at Japanese schools, but like everything else they learn, it's by rote. With no chance to practise speaking themselves, their written English is incredible, but they freeze up if a *gaijin* speaks to them. Just the thought of being spoken to and not being able to answer filled them with dread. To have their lack demonstrated in front of a train full of people was terrifying, even if those onlookers couldn't speak English either. So rather than risk being shamed, they would move away. I guess I can take it as a compliment that I looked so comfortable – that no one was worried about me speaking English to them – but it still galled to see it happen to others.

While we sat and chatted, a more experienced *taiko* group came into the amphitheatre and took my mind off the man's expression.

"*atsui*," said Lisa, blowing on her food.

I grimaced. In copying my earlier expression, she'd unwittingly got the right word. The Japanese consider hot weather and hot to touch as two different concepts. They have different *kanji*, Chinese characters, but happen to be pronounced the same way. Correcting her misconception would have been petty, and not being able to correct her was frustrating in my current mood.

Lisa waved her fan madly and I now regretted my rebellion against wasted plastic. The real crowds had formed, raising the temperature a few degrees, but it seemed Lisa was only fanning other people's body heat at her face anyway. At least, that's what I told myself.

"So what's this festival for, anyway?" asked Lisa.

"Ocean Day."

"What's that about?"

I'd never thought to ask and sometimes it's more fun to guess why things happen. Quite often the outsider has a better perspective for understanding – not having 'always done it that way.' In this case the options were limited. It was likely a celebration representing their gratitude to the oceans. Japan's an island and traditionally the only flesh they ate was from the sea. But it could also be a festival to appease the god of the sea so he won't send them any typhoons or tidal waves. Not knowing the true answer, I snapped, "Why do you care? It's just a chance for a day off!"

We got up and wandered past some of the activities. In Australia, I'd have expected to see people stuffing ping-pong balls down the throats of clowns or trying to knock down weighted drink cans, but the highlight of Japanese festivals is catching goldfish from a kiddies' pool. It doesn't

sound difficult, but try catching fish with a piece of wet paper. For three hundred yen, you got a thin piece of paper stretched over a plastic frame and as much time as you needed. A good fisherman could scoop up about ten fish before the paper tore, but for most two or three was a good session. Each person carried away a bag containing the fish they caught, which presumably died within a few days. We walked on.

"Where do we put our trash?" Lisa asked, holding up the remains of her lunch.

Despite the crowds, there was very little rubbish on the street. The Japanese invented a computing concept called 'fuzzy logic', and it seems to me that the term is appropriate for their society. The powers-that-be decided to combat overflowing garbage bins by removing them from the streets altogether – and it worked. Whereas in Australia, most people would resort to leaving their rubbish in a side street or dark corner, the Japanese calmly pack up all their rubbish and carry it home with them. I gave ours to the stall that sold me the *yakisoba* and let them take care of it.

"What's that grey thing up there?" I asked, mostly to myself. Lisa followed as I went to look. My curiosity was misplaced. It turned out to be a portable urinal shaped in a large cone, with space for three men around its circumference. It stood on the edge of the street, but it wasn't to be the strangest scenario I faced relating to toilets.

The parade was more of the same, so I ducked home for a few hours to escape Lisa. Finally, at about six o'clock when it began to get dark, I headed back, past the construction site, to Flower Road to see the balloons. I was early and had to suffer my hormone levels being raised by hundreds of Brazilian women shaking themselves at me, patches of cloth hiding little as they sambaed by. These women must have flown over for the event because I've never seen so many Latinos in Kobe before or since.

"Hi MAG," said a voice I'd been avoiding. "I didn't think you were coming back. Aren't they amazing?"

By this stage it was getting dark, and the hot-air balloons were lit by the fires within. Underneath, the girls were now wearing thin flowing gowns that looked like they'd be transparent in daylight, but gave them an ethereal presence in the twilight.

"They look like nymphs," I told Lisa. "Like spirits of water, forest, fire and…"

"Bananas,' she giggled.

Leaving her behind, I followed the nymphs all the way along the course, joining them in the freedom of three dimensions. They achieved before my eyes a grace I couldn't emulate in all my dreams of flying. If this is how the Japanese celebrate, I was looking forward to many more festivals.

August 98 – Alone

寂しい (sami-shi-i)

“It will take you at least six months to settle in and most people get homesick in that time. Don’t come back until you’re through it or you’ll have to start all over again.”

I'd laughed off my boss' advice. Homesickness was something that happened to other people, I thought. Somehow I'd forgotten my experiences in Nagoya, all those years ago.

The first six months with my host family had been ideal. I spent six days a week at school, improving my language skills and experiencing the life of a Japanese student, but without the pressures. Each evening I went home and talked for hours with my host parents about cultural differences. Otousan had even left work early to join these discussions. We always copied the familiar terms our host siblings used for our host parents and *otousan* means ‘father.’ Mother is *okaasan*. I also had a younger host brother called Takeshi and a younger host sister called Akiko. And Massak, the Siberian Husky rounded out the household.

Each weekend, one member of the family would demand my time. My host parents loved the mountains, so we'd pack a picnic, put the dog in the car and head out for a short trek. Akiko showed me around the local area, particularly the department stores. Takeshi asked me to kick the ball at him so he could practise goal keeping. I was overloaded with cultural differences, but I was too active to think about them.

Then about halfway through the year I suddenly lost my novelty status and was left alone to watch the comings and goings of each family member, busy living their normal life. Otousan worked. Takeshi played soccer and went to *juku*, cram school. Akiko had a part time job. Even Okaasan worked part time as an illustrator. And Massak wasn’t much company.

The lack of attention meant I'd been free to live a normal student’s life, but it wasn't enough. I didn't need to study so I had too much time to dwell on the little annoyances, like the old-fashioned grammar they were teaching in English class, and that the same people were on every TV channel. I became angry at my hosts for my loneliness, but it was a confused emotion, covering despair and all hidden behind a mask of self-confidence and satisfaction.

When I met Yukiko through another exchange student, my idle time filled up again but my

problems were just beginning. We spent a lot of time together going to movies, restaurants and museums and just sitting in parks talking. This didn't go down well at home and Okaasan declared that I was using them as a hotel – as if any of her own children were ever there. Nor did she seem to agree that it was as important to experience the romantic side of the culture as any other part.

I'd often gone home from seeing Yukiko to find Okaasan crying.

"You were kissing her," she screamed at me one night.

I never worked out how she knew, but obviously the traditional respect for privacy didn't apply to *gaijin*. I'm sure Otousan didn't understand the reason for her hostility, but he supported her and that was that. I wasn't allowed to receive calls from Yukiko or even to mention her name at home.

"Why is she so upset?" I asked Yukiko one evening as we sat in the Central Park.

"It sounds like she's jealous. I can understand that," she said as she snuggled close. The situation bothered her too, but it seemed that nothing could be done about it.

The final blow had come a few months before I was due to leave, after a visit to a love hotel. It was the only time we went, but Okaasan knew immediately. Out of fear for Yukiko, I denied it. Okaasan called Yukiko's parents and they laughed at the suggestion, so she confronted me again, with Otousan, demanding that I tell them 'the truth.' I was going home soon anyway, so I didn't care what they thought about me, but the scandal could have forced Yukiko's school to expel her. My fear might have been unwarranted, but at the time the authority of schools to instil and exact discipline was absolute and I had no doubt that Okaasan would tell the school. Finally, they agreed to stop bothering Yukiko if I would apologise for lying. Hating them for forcing me to lie in the first place – we hadn't done anything that many other senior high school students weren't doing, and certainly nothing illegal – I apologised. They kept their word, but it was more difficult for me to see Yukiko after that and we parted ways. I've never forgiven my host parents.

Of the twenty-three exchange students in Nagoya, sixteen changed host family at about the six-month mark, due to similar personality clashes and feelings of disconnectedness.

I didn't last as long in Kobe. Just three months after I arrived, I started the slide when Helen returned to Japan for a couple of days en route to China. We hung out on both evenings but I had nothing to talk to her about. She certainly didn't want to hear that Nimmi and I had been spending

so much time with each other. She'd been jealous even when the three of us were together. I tried to joke with her, but it always fell flat. And then after I got home from the second evening, just as I fell asleep, the phone rang.

"You cunt," she screamed at me through sobs. "How dare you treat me that way? I've had enough of your sarcastic crap, you bastard." The tirade continued for five minutes while I sat stunned.

"What are you talking about?" I yelled into the gap when it finally came. "The first thing you ever said to me… everything you've ever said to me… was sarcastic." She interrupted me with another tirade that didn't make any more sense than the first and, too tired to argue, I slammed down the phone. The episode got to me though, and I was still shaking the next evening at the Dubliners, when I asked Nimmi what the outburst had been all about.

"You treat Helen differently to the way you treat me."

"Well, she treats me differently to the way you do. I'm just reacting."

"Why can't you be yourself?"

"I am."

"Well, neither of us likes the person you are to Helen. She was making an effort to stop the sarcasm and you just kept dishing it out."

"Helen's always sarcastic."

"She's not. She hasn't said a sarcastic word since she got back. You just weren't paying attention."

Her tone was affectionate, if exasperated, but I needed more and I could tell she was almost as upset as me. "I'm sorry. I know it can't have been easy on you either." I reached out to put my hand on hers and saw her eyes light up. In that instant, my spirits soared. Two months had come and gone and she was still here – the excuse was that her school hadn't found a replacement yet. And if she would let me touch her in public, here in her favourite pub, I was well on the way to convincing her to stay. I began to stroke her fingers as I thought of what I could say to extend this moment, but I missed the opportunity. Her eyes glazed over and wandered to the dance floor. "Yes, I'd love to dance," she said, her smile distant. "Thank you."

It was the only time I saw the sparkle. Over the following weeks, she turned cold. Was she

torn between her fiancée and me or was it simply the incident with Helen that upset her? My world fell into shadow as she became harder to catch.

In Nagoya, I'd felt the same despair enveloping me, but now it seemed that the entire city was out to ruin my life. The air had no right to be so humid in this lung-burning heat, train doors closed on me, and the concrete slabs of the footpaths shifted as I walked, trying to trip me up. Even the beaches were a threat.

The company volleyball club, the only place I'd found untainted by *gaijin* – other *gaijin* – organised a barbecue at the beach and I was looking forward to being able to swim, eat good food and get to know the other members. In my mind, I saw our group sitting under a tree in a park. There would be a strip of white sand between us and the ocean, barely visible between all the pretty girls sun-baking. We would set up a volleyball court in the shade and have a light game after scoffing down a meal. I just wasn't ready for the reality of a Japanese beach.

We put the barbecue in the sun, the shade of the only tree having been stolen by other revellers. Behind us was a ten foot concrete wall, designed to slow *tsunami*. Around us, a lumpy white expanse was dotted with barbecues and disappointingly short of bikinis. And in front, the ocean. Worst of all, there were two other *gaijin* there and I couldn't avoid talking to them. Both Francois, a French wall of muscle, and John, a polite, well-travelled Indian, had worked in Tokyo for a year or two before finding positions in Kobe. I hated them immediately. They were intruding in the only place I'd found without *gaijin*. Didn't they realise that I'd come all this way to immerse myself in the culture? I was so lost in my own depression that I didn't consider that they were likely thinking the same thing about me, and broke away from them as soon as I could.

"Anyone for a swim?" I asked, stripping down to my shorts.

"You can't swim here," said one of the girls, disgust clear on her face.

"Why not?"

"The water's dirty."

It looked clean enough to me, so I made my way down to the shore, the burning sand claiming flakes of skin from the soles of my feet. She was right. Up close it was tinted brown and the lapping ripples left dark foam on the sand. I felt myself copying her expression and rushed back to the others, quickly donning shoes to protect the remnants of my feet.

The fire – sticks fed onto blazing chunks of napalm – was now ready for the food. The girls transferred bite-sized pieces of pork, beef, squid, octopus, asparagus, onions and, bizarrely, even Pringles to the grill.

One of them passed around paper bowls. "Here, put some sauce in this and take whatever you want when it's ready."

Fifteen minutes later I was ready to growl at everyone. I had a cup and a bowl balanced precariously in one hand and wielded chopsticks in the other. I was hot, hungry and frustrated. "That one's mine. Leave it alone." I swatted away another tentative probe at what I considered my piece.

"What are you doing? It'll burn."

They were all baffled at my taste for well-done meat, grabbing each piece after a light searing, and made me fend for every bite.

"So MAG-san, have you ever seen a kangaroo?" asked one of the girls behind me. In the politest tone I could manage, I explained that kangaroos hopped through my parent's farm. Of course I'd seen a bloody kangaroo. When I turned back, my carefully guarded piece had vanished. Everyone laughed. This was classed as Japanese humour and I never understood it. Right then, all I wanted was to be with Australian friends on an Australian beach, having an Australian barbie. I'd even have been prepared to play cricket.

I needed to get out of this slump and it seemed the best way was to build a stronger relationship with my colleagues, so I held a party late in August. My department in Australia had been very close, often gathering in the office to joke and share a cake and getting together on weekends for a drink or party. So far, I hadn't found that in Japan. There was no natural gathering area at the office and everyone was too busy looking busy. I would find no improvement outside, either.

There were over one hundred people in the IT department and I invited them all, sure that at least twenty would turn up. Still a crush for my *apaato*, but as long as the balcony held, it'd be OK. I gave everyone a couple of weeks notice and told them to come at around seven or eight. No one responded, but I didn't really expect them to. On the day, I rushed home to ferry beer, *sake*, chips, dips, chocolate and Japanese crackers the hundred metres from the supermarket to my flat. I poured

myself a Black Russian and waited. I poured another at about eight and waited. It was almost nine before the first and only person showed up – a forty-year-old woman.

"Hi, Hiroko. Where's everyone else?"

"If they're not here yet, they're probably not coming. Lots of people were still working when I left."

"Why? There weren't any big issues today. And if they're not going to come, why didn't they tell me?"

"Maybe because we don't usually invite colleagues to our homes. They're too small for big groups, and with the number of people you invited, I guess everyone thought there wouldn't be enough room."

She looked around curiously. "Why were you sitting in the dark?"

"My eyes really hurt. It's these fluorescent lights, apparently." I'd taken to wearing sunglasses at my desk or sitting in a dark meeting room to work. In the evenings, I'd sit with the lights out, unable to read or watch TV. I'd been to an eye doctor who diagnosed my eyes as in perfect health, but warned me to stay away from the *chira-chira* flicker of fluorescents. It wasn't easy. Japanese prefer their cold white light and I hadn't yet found fittings for standard bulbs.

"Oh, yes. I've heard that *gaijin* blue eyes are weak."

Conversation petered out and we dissolved the party after little more than an hour. I looked around at the unopened bags of chips and chocolate and wondered how long it would take me to get through all those snacks alone. Alone. Lonely. *samishii*. It seemed ironic in a country so crammed with people. But then that density is the cause. 'Student must build wall around senses,' I thought, remembering giving Nimmi the same advice. But what did those walls, built of language and thoughts, really hide? Was every Japanese person as lonely as I felt right then? I might have tried asking, but I only had mind for my own plight.

I was more lonely than I'd ever been. I was working long hard days, I had no real Japanese friends, and Nimmi hadn't responded to any of my calls for a couple of weeks. The night following the party, I went around, worried she might be sick, but she wasn't home. Like a lost puppy, I stood outside her train station for hours each night waiting for her to come out. She didn't.

It wasn't the first time I'd had love spurned, but now, in the emotional abyss, my reaction was

intense. My whole life was pain and I had no one to share it with. My friends and family could have made things better with a smile, had I been able to cry on their shoulders, but I'd abandoned them for this world. In a last attempt to dispel the depression, I wrote Nimmi a letter.

'…You've been my only friend since I arrived in Japan. I don't know why you're not responding to me, but it hurts deeply. If you continue to ignore me, I think the only way I can stay sane is to cut you entirely out of my life. To forget you've ever been…'

The letter wasn't meant to be delivered. I knew that would be the worst thing I could do. But I found myself standing in front of her mailbox, pushing it through the slot and wondered what had come over me. I'd never get it out, but nor could I bring myself to wait around until whenever it was she finally returned. She never called again. I tried to act as I'd promised in my letter.

My loneliness was complete.

September 98 - Sport

(su-po-o-tsu)

In September of 98 many of the people in my department had arranged a social occasion.

"Baseball? Baseball's boring!" The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. To me, baseball was like cricket with a second dimension – not a big improvement – but I wasn't about to turn down any invitations from colleagues at the moment.

"You've got to come. If the Bay Stars win it'll be incredible." This put an interesting twist into the event. It almost sounded like the fanatical supporters wanted their home team, the Tigers, to lose. I didn't want to miss this.

I wasn't very keen on sports in Japan, aside from martial arts. They didn't seem to understand the concept of playing sports for fun. These sportsman were professionals, not in the Australian sense of being paid to go to training a couple of nights a week and playing 20 games each year, but in the sense that it really is their job. Every day, even out of season, they'll be at the nets hitting, pitching or catching hundreds of balls or doing rigorous fitness training, and in season, they seem to play six days each week. Where was the fun in that?

I'd had more than a taste of the Japanese style of sports during my school days. My schedule included four separate hours of P.E. and each carried a single sport through the entire year, which was a shock after the casual style in Australia. There we switched sports every few weeks and we were expected to learn the rules during the game and skills weren't taught at all. Here, the first lesson of table tennis wasn't over until every person in the class could bounce the ball on their bat one hundred times without losing control. We had our own table at home in Australia and I'd been reasonably good, so when we eventually started practising serves, I hit my opponent's ball back to him.

"That's not allowed!" he'd hissed, looking around in panic. "If the *sensei* sees you do that we'll both be doing push-ups for the rest of the lesson." *Sensei* means teacher and carries a lot of respect in Japan. "You've got to catch the ball and serve it back to me."

"But I know how to play table tennis. It's much quicker for me to hit it back to you than to serve it again."

"You don't understand. You're not allowed to know how to return yet." I looked around and saw that Andoh-san, a prefecture champion, was catching the ball each time, as well. He could've taught the *sensei* how to play, but here he was going through the basics with endless patience, obeying every instruction the *sensei* gave.

The other lessons – tennis, European handball and soccer – had been the same, but I found worse when I joined the basketball club. School clubs, *bukatsu*, are an important part of the Japanese culture. They offer a rare escape from study and provide a forum for developing bonds that last for life, while still allowing the teachers to instil a sense of discipline and team spirit. My first shock came when I was pushed back to train with the first years.

"But I'm in second year, why can't I train with you?" I asked my classmate.

"This is your first year in the basketball club so you must train with the other beginners."

I'd hardly been a beginner. We played often in Australia, socially, and I was a pretty good shot – even if I couldn't dribble without losing the ball. These first years couldn't even get a ball through the ring. Together, we spent two hours every afternoon – six days a week, including school holidays – practising. We'd start with half an hour of running training – forwards, backwards, side step, diagonally, and knight's move – then half an hour of passing practice, half an hour of shooting and half an hour dribbling and stealing practice. Meanwhile, my classmate's group had completed their practice in under an hour and were playing games the rest of the session.

"Stop dreaming! You've got to concentrate," my partner said. I'd been watching the second years playing their game.

"But this is so boring. When do we get to play a game?" It was already five months into the year.

"When the *sensei* says we're ready." His scowl, echoed by the others within hearing, had said quite clearly that it wasn't going to happen any time soon with the way I was playing. By then they were all able to steal the ball from me without even trying, could pass the ball without looking at the recipient and some were almost slam dunking, despite being half my height. I rarely even managed to get a ball in the basket any more. It had stopped being fun and I didn't care to try.

I'd watched the bonds form between all the first years, each supporting the others through the stages of clumsiness and mistakes to the competence they had now. "*naishuu*," short for 'nice shoot,' echoed around the stadium along with the sound of backs being slapped, but was almost never directed at me. They'd all laugh together, enjoying the training and each other's company. They'd included me at first, but with boredom my skill, and their interest in me, dropped. I saw that the best thing for everyone would be for me to leave the club. Then they'd be able to play the game and I could put my time towards something I enjoyed.

That experience had coloured my feelings towards sports in Japan so much that I was actually dreading the baseball game despite the promise of mixed loyalties, but all thoughts of the seriousness of Japanese sports fled when I entered the choreographed carnival in the stadium. Our stand was a mass of black and yellow, the Tiger's colours, and other stands were either the same, or filled with people in the Bay Star's blue and white. Every single person was joining in and someone had brought a spare black and yellow bat with the Tiger's logo for me so I wouldn't feel left out.

Everyone sat quietly, but I could feel an energy in the crowd, and when each team came out that energy erupted from the whole stadium. I don't just mean the people supporting that team – I mean the *whole* stadium. A chant started. It wasn't the disorganised rabble calling out a mix of 'Go the Tigers!" and "Oi Oi Oi," that I'd expect in Australia. Japanese chants are organised. There was a bloke at the front of the stadium, turned to face the crowd, wearing a Tiger's happy coat and cap. He held two Tiger's bats over his head and clapped them together in a rhythm I've never heard before, but instantly every Tiger's follower was beating out the same rhythm and I was joining in. The game began.

"*izaikanya moetatsu daichini sa yagi hiroshi ga shouri wo mezashite*" went the chant when Yagi came out to bat. "Let's go! On the burning ground, Yagi Hiroshi goes for a win!" The tigers were up first and each player had their own chant. They scored. The crowd was on its feet, a fifty thousand headed beast roaring its approval with another special chant, beating bats and blowing horns in perfect time. The conductor's grin was mirrored on every face in the crowd.

Side away and another chant. The Bay Stars went into bat. They scored too. Again our stand was on its feet with a different chant - one that encouraged the pitcher. Grins, just as big as when the Tigers scored. This went on. Chants, rhythms and horns for every occasion – striking out,

loaded bases, side away – all orchestrated by a cheerleader who was hardly watching the game.

It came down to the last innings. The Tigers were down by one. They needed two to win, but they were out without scoring. They'd lost. My stand became even louder. The Tigers had played well. They were at the bottom of the table, but that didn't matter. I stood up, ready to leave, but was pushed back into my seat. "We can't leave yet." Both sides tried their best until the Bay Stars were out and the crowd chanted more loudly than ever. I wanted to put my hands over my ears. Kuwa-chan stopped me from picking up my stuff again.

"It's not over yet. We have to cheer the teams." I stayed. The teams did a lap of the stadium, each stopping in front of our stand to look at us proudly. Everyone was on their feet for each team. The chanting seemed unending. Balloons were released. Fireworks went off overhead. A stage was brought onto the field and an official waited for the teams to line up and the crowd to go quiet before speaking. Kuwa-chan explained some of the background to what he was saying.

"This is a special day. The Bay Stars have won enough points to win the whole competition."

"But there are still a few more weeks left, aren't there?" She tried to explain the scoring system but I didn't get it – I wasn't really interested.

"What's important is that today they won. They haven't won the league for thirty years. This is a historic day and everyone is very excited to be here." I could see that much. I still don't like the game, but I've re-evaluated my opinion of Sports in Japan. The Japanese are true sportsman.

Oct 98 – Team Building

チーム結合 **(chi-i-mu-ketsu-gou)**

As I've intimated, my company wasn't a traditional Japanese company in many respects. The women weren't forced to serve tea, or dragged off to a love hotel at lunch time; the managers sat near the window and worked as late as their employees; and I didn't see much sign of them drinking after work. The last is a crucial part of the Japanese culture. It could even be argued that it is the glue that holds the whole structure together. All the pressures of study, of working long hours, of doing what the boss tells you to and no more, of never seeing your family, and of never complaining generate enormous stress. Drinking after work acts as the valve to release that pressure. It is here that they can vent their frustrations and strengthen their relationships.

Almost nightly, in a traditional Japanese company, the team would head for an *izakaya*, a *sake* house, for a few hours of beer, *sake*, and the Japanese equivalent of *tapas*. My favourite of these was Hiikiya, just next to Sannomiya Hankyuu station, with a door only 4 feet high. I often take guests there for the experience. As we duck through, the girl at the register shouts, "*Irasshaimase*!" (welcome), and is echoed by ten more staff behind the bar and on the floor taking orders. "How many people?" she asks, or perhaps 'how many names' is a better translation of the polite form of the question. When we respond, the shout goes out again, "Seven names," echoed around the restaurant until a response comes back. "Up the stairs please, and please put your shoes in the lockers," she finishes quickly, noticing my guests about to step up the stairs in their dirty street shoes. We put our shoes into separate lockers, removing the slotted wooden block that acts as a key and are follow the calls of waiters who guide us through the labyrinth to our table. Small groups may choose to sit at the bar, but more often they will have a low table in a room with a couple of other such groups. Each person has their own cushion on the floor where they sit cross-legged, but if we're lucky we may be able to sit normally with our feet in a pit below the table.

While we settle ourselves, a waiter or waitress appears to take our drinks orders. Not being a

beer drinker, and not wanting to start with straight *sake*, I usually take the apple or lime flavoured *shuuhai*, and being familiar with the menu immediately launch into a list of the food I like. "*asparabeecon, daikon sarada, yakitori – naizoo janai yatsu ni shite kudasai – yakisoba, sashimi moriawase o kudasai*." Asparagus and bacon rolls, giant radish salad, chicken shishkebabs – not the liver please – fried noodles, and a plate of mixed *sashimi* please. I order the last for guests, who usually want to try raw fish, and I'm usually game to eat some too, smothered in *wasabi*, a green radish mustard that clears the sinuses in microseconds. The beer arrives in jugfuls, and the food in mouthfuls. When we run out of either, we mimic the Japanese at the next table and scream out "*sumimasen*" to attract the waiter's attention. Laurent's got a good bellow for this and the rest of us shrink into our cushions while he grins maniacally.

As the beer flows, the normally reserved salarymen begin to laugh and shout. Eventually, they may get serious and argumentative, even cry. The *tatemae* (outward face) is dropped, and *honne* (true self) is released. A subordinate may insult his manager, complaining about work conditions, poor decisions, or may share problems with personal life. There is no loss of face, so important to Japanese, even in modern Japan. All is forgiven. The manager accepts that this is alcohol talking. Once they sober up, the event never even happened, but the bond is stronger between the whole team.

Forms are always followed though. No matter how unhappy the subordinate is with his manager, or how serious the argument between two team mates, each will fill the other's glass when it becomes empty. It is impolite to allow someone to fill their own glass. If there is a woman there, even in my team, she will be compelled to take on the task of server, even getting up to walk the length of the table to fill the glass of one of the men. I never got used to this custom and often caught on to hints too late, when my neighbour was already filling his own glass. Coming from a culture where you fill your own glass, I found myself being drunk into a stupor many nights because I didn't know how to refuse a cup. Even the thimbles sized sake mugs add up.

"No thank you," I'd say, covering my mug with my hand, then licking off the sake that they'd tried to pour anyway, "I've had enough." They'd put down the jug, and we'd go on talking, but two minutes later, I'd look down and my mug would be brimming again. I'd drink, and the routine would be repeated. This is even during my school year, when I was under age and would drink only

at weddings or in someone's house, but I'd still feel guilty about leaving a full mug when I departed. Finally someone told me that you should turn your mug upside down to indicate you'd had enough.

Our team didn't often go out in this way, except for occasions when someone was leaving, but there was an official event for this purpose. Once a year, each department would have a 'company trip' in which the whole department would go away for a night of drinking, eating, and entertainment. This year, I was on the organising committee. There were five of us, all with international experience and keen to make this year different from the usual hotel or *ryokan* (Japanese inn), drinking and team skits. It began well, with the idea of getting off the mainland, to stay in cabins on Awaji, a nearby island, and party around a bonfire. I started to make suggestions of team building activities, Australian style, taking a bush walk or having an Australian style BBQ, but these were quickly put down. "That's not the way we do it in Japan," I was told. I countered with the argument that we were trying to make this different, but to no avail. Eventually, they decided that the cabin and bonfire idea was too difficult and arranged a night in the Osaka Hilton with skits and drinking.

One Friday evening in October, we left work early and made our way into Osaka to set up. The eighty or so other participants followed at about 6pm. It all started with a French dinner in the hotel's restaurant, then we headed for a conference room where, after a couple of whiskies, Zhang-san and I would MC the entertainment, in the style of *manzai*. Japanese don't have jokes of the "Three men walk into a bar" kind, and definitely no punch lines. Instead, their stand-up comedy is the interaction of two comedians, one being the straight man, and heavily reliant on puns and slapstick for generating laughs. I never did understand the humour, so I don't know how close we came to the real thing, but we got points for trying. The acts varied, some teams having practised daily for the past few weeks, others just bringing a few props from home and making it up on the night. One group did a foreign dance, stepping over sticks in a manner reminiscent of the game of elastics girls used to play at school. Another group sang a song and another set up a mock TV game show. While each was on, the rest of the department sat back with their beer, sake and whiskey, and laughed and clapped equally to each. Only one act stood out. The executives were all taught a different tongue twister by each of their secretaries and were brought on stage to repeat them at increasing speeds. The Japanese laughed just as hard whether in recognition of their success or

failure at saying it correctly, delighted that they were even trying.

I was too nervous over my role as MC to really enjoy the skits and I didn't understand how they were meant to bring the team together. It wasn't until later that I realised that the bonding came during the effort of preparing for the skits. My own team had members off sick or travelling during most of the preparation time, so there was no such bonding for us.

When all this finished around midnight, everyone was free to go off in their own groups to get drunk. While the executives went off to a nearby English pub, and the lower level managers tried to lose the women so they could go to see a strip show (which turned out to be of transsexuals), our group went off for a boring night of clubbing, not returning until about 4am. At nine, I was one of only six people who got up for the wine tasting course we'd arranged, then most people went home. The organising committee, and a few friends that didn't have family to return to, decided to use the remaining money to go ten-pin bowling.

Bowling is an experience itself in Japan. I remember the first time I walked into a bowling alley, being confronted with lane 50. In Australia, a typical centre would hold 24 lanes, so my jaw hung low as I looked in both directions and realised that I was right in the middle. Even in the crowded spaces of Japan, they always managed to fit 100 lanes – in some cases, as in Kobe, by spreading the centre over two levels. The others got their shoes from a machine while I asked at the counter if they had any 28.5s – Japanese shoes are sized in centimetres. We selected our balls from the racks – colour coded by weight – and began punching in our details on the console, which is very similar everywhere in the world. The rules are also the same, but to differentiate themselves technologically, Japanese centres have video screens above the console so the other players can see the expression on the face of the player, and get a close up of the ball as it slams into the skittles. It then shows you which skittles remain standing and may even suggest a path to knock the rest down. If you're good enough to get a spare, you'll be rewarded with a rabbit giving the victory sign. You'll get a rolling jackpot screen for a strike, and if you're unlucky enough to get a split, the rabbit will poke out its tongue and make a face. All still hung over, we didn't see many of these special displays.

We had one of these company trips each year and none of them had the same bonding value that I felt at similar events in Australia, but that may have been a cultural difference. I was sick the

second year and wanted to stay at home, but Konishi-san was adamant that everyone be there, so I made the effort. We went to a small village on the Japan Sea to eat crab. Being the only one in the team that didn't eat seafood, I was put at the end of the table where the waitresses could make condescending comments while serving me under cooked beef. No one made an effort to speak to me, and I didn't have the energy to try myself, so I sat there, unable to eat and feeling less a part of the team than at any time during my stay.

October is the season of *taifuu*, typhoons, and one of these hit Kobe late in the month. The reaction of Japanese people seems melodramatic to me. In Nagoya, we would eagerly watch the news to see if school would be cancelled that day. It never was, but my host brother and sister told me it had happened numerous times in the past. We'd all been tracking this typhoon on the internet for days as it hit the Philippines head on, then headied north east to skim Okinawa and on towards Osaka. We were expecting to be evacuated this time, and the building PA announced a warning around noon. "The typhoon will hit Kobe at about 3pm. Be prepared to leave urgently in the next couple of hours. Stay tuned for further information." There was a nervous energy in the air, and most of the people on my floor stalked around like cats with arched backs and fur standing up on their necks. I could almost feel the lashing tails of my colleagues.

Another announcement came at about 2pm. "We have decided that it's safer for everyone to remain in the building until the typhoon has blown over. If you have children to pick up, please leave immediately. Otherwise, please stay in building. Do not pass go. Do not collect $200. It should be safe to leave by 8pm." Part of me, the part that likes thunderstorms and hiking in the rain, would like to say that it was a wild experience. Unfortunately, all I can say is that the building shook enough to make some turn green and the rain left horizontal streaks on the windows. I've cycled in worse, and only felt a minor annoyance. I can understand planes being grounded, and the *shinkansen*, bullet train, stopping where it stands, but why keep us locked in the building, and why stop the Rokko Liner? That automated train onto the island had bumpers on the side and guard rails half way up the carriage? Pictures on TV show Cyclone Tracy- like destruction in Okinawa, but the typhoon had all but blown itself out by the time it hit Kobe. I never saw a worse typhoon first-hand, and I had no concern about taking a break and walking out in the rain to get some money out of the bank in this one. The only problem was walking down sixteen flights of stairs because they'd

disabled the lifts.

Nov 98 – Martial Arts

武道 **(bu-dou)**

When I gave up the basketball club at school, I put all my energy into martial arts, which I'd been enjoying for a few months already. My host mother had found a small *doujou* near home where two *sensei* taught a style invented by their father, combining *aikidou* and other martial arts with a few of his own moves. The senior *sensei* demonstrated the power of the style to me on the first night by placing a hand on my chest and nudging. I was lifted off my feet and crashed into the floorboards a good two metres back from where I'd stood. Had I braced myself, I might have landed on the fake *tatami* gym mats that covered most of the floor, but I hadn't expected such power. For days after, my ribcage clicked as I breathed.

I'd done kung fu for a few years in Australia, so I wasn't starting from scratch, but that force was beyond my reach.

"How do you get such power?" I asked the *sensei* during one of my first lessons.

"It comes from your *jishin*."

"Where's that?"

He smiled and patted his protruding belly, which got a laugh from the other students. "*jishin*," he repeated.

I assumed this meant something like 'centre of gravity,' but when I looked it up I found it meant, with different *kanji*, either 'self confidence' or 'earthquake.' Over the months I learnt that I should try to draw on my *jishin* to create a *jishin* when I hit the target. It was the sort of play on words that the Japanese love.

The theory was vague and very difficult to put into practice, but I managed a few times – usually when I wasn't trying. I was often paired up with the senior student and went through the motions, each placing a hand on the other's chest and nudging. Occasionally, while I was doing the nudging, I'd look around to see how others were doing. When I looked back, my partner would be

crumpled on the floor, one eye squeezed shut. "My turn for a rest now," he'd say through clenched teeth, clutching at his chest.

I tried to convince some of my classmates to join me. I thought that almost everyone in Japan did some kind of martial arts, even if they weren't all Jackie Chan. When I started talking about my lessons at school though, it became apparent that the notion was as absurd as the idea that all Australians surf.

"That sounds really tough, said Mizuno-san. "Why do you do it?"

"Tough?" I said, surprised. "Well it can hurt, but it's great fun. Why don't you come and try it?"

"Me? No way! I might be killed."

"Come on. You've done martial arts before, right?"

"No. I'm quite happy with basketball."

It had been the same with everyone in the class. Even the footballers were scared. The closest any of them came was someone whose brother had been in the *juudou bukatsu*.

So I went on my own twice a week and got a reputation for dedication. As the only *gaijin* in the class, and the only student to turn up for every lesson, I was a novelty and soon the junior *sensei* was taking me aside for individual lessons and pushing me into demonstrations. One day he called the class together and walked around, asking everyone if they thought they could break the board he was holding. The answers varied, with cocky beginners saying yes and seniors saying no. And then he was in front of me with a different question.

"How *many* do you think you can break?"

"Umm… probably none," I whispered. Where was this going?

"Up! Come out here." I was put in front of the class and told to use my *jishin* to break it. "Breath the way I showed you. Shout as you hit. Don't aim to break the board. Aim for my stomach behind it."

I closed my eyes and gathered my *jishin*, imagining my fist passing through the board like paper. The class was silent but I could feel their support and their confidence in me. I opened my eyes and made a couple of slow test punches to feel where the wood was, then hit hard, aiming… beyond. There was a brief pressure on my knuckles, then nothing. The snap echoed through the

room. 'Like paper,' I thought.

"Now try two." The same. I tested the boards later to make sure they weren't balsa, but they were real. "We're having a demonstration next month and I want you to break three boards. Can you do that?"

"Yes, I'm sure I can," I replied easily, my *jishin* strong. But it wasn't to be. I'm shy in large groups and couldn't shout in front of the audience. My *jishin* was shattered and so were my knuckles, now dripping blood. I wouldn't get another chance until my last month.

"You should take the test for an *obi*, before you leave," I was told. *Obi* means belt and the colour indicates the level of skill, black being the highest. "Black is probably beyond you, but you can try for brown if you like." Brown is only a step below black and far above what I thought I was worth. I'd seen the ordeal one of the brown belts had gone through to earn his *obi*, and wasn't sure I could handle it, but it was a great opportunity so I took the challenge.

Among other tests, I had to fight each member of the class, and everyone had turned up to see the *gaijin* take the test. Fights here were real, but because I'd be fighting fifteen people in turn, they gave us gloves. I had to wear heavy boxing gloves while everyone else had light sparring gloves – their hits hurt while mine were softened. Kicks were full force on both sides. I didn't need to defeat them all – just put up a good fight until the *sensei* was satisfied and called time. I was doing well. Too well it seemed. As I moved on to the eighth person, the *sensei* stood behind me.

"Aren't those gloves heavy? Your arms must feel tired. Look, I can see your arms drooping. You can't keep your guard up with gloves that heavy." I tried to forget that I could speak Japanese, but that didn't work. My guard dropped and I took a blow to the head, and in fifty other places besides. I was winded, covered in bruises, and my ears were ringing, but I kept on and eventually the line was empty.

The final test was to break a slab of concrete with a side kick. It was only four centimetres thick, I told myself. It probably wasn't reinforced with steel like the others I'd seen the *sensei* break. They wouldn't do that to me. *Jishin*. Breathe. Shout. Like paper. *Jishin*. I wasn't focusing properly and on my third attempt, the *sensei* stopped me.

"It seems the brown *obi* is a bit too high for you. If you can't break this, then you'll have to try for blue."

"Back off!" Normally such disrespect would have gotten me twenty knuckle push-ups, or perhaps even expulsion, but this time it was the reaction he was looking for. I closed my eyes, formed the image, opened them, pulled my leg up into position, knifed the edge of my foot, and threw it at the slab. My foot went through – like paper. I was a brown belt!

Since Nimmi had left I'd been trying to join a club of some sort – rock-climbing, hiking, even cycling clubs – but no matter how many emails or voice mails I left for the organisers, I never got a response. Finally someone told me about an *aikidou doujou* in Kobe and I joined immediately.

The way they taught was different to anything I'd done in Australia or Japan. After the stretches and warm up exercises, I was used to the class breaking up by level and the more experienced students working on the complex moves while the beginners practised the basics. Here, the whole class did the same thing with a single quick a demonstration of the move to be done.

After the first demonstration, I found a man kneeling beside me with his head touching the mat. He wore *hakama*, divided military pants, that could only be worn by black belts. All around the room, people were pairing up and bowing to each other. I quickly dropped to my knees and bowed back. "*onegaishimasu*." The demonstration had been too quick for me, so I needed to look to others to see what attack I was meant to be making. A straight punch to the throat, it seemed. I did so and the black belt grabbed my hand and twisted – just so. I found myself flat on my back. He did it again slowly, then gave me a turn. I stepped out of the way of his punch, grabbing his arm as I moved. I twisted, but it remained resolutely in place. There was nothing I could do to budge him. It was all in the leverage and pressure points and they would take time to learn.

Before I could have a second attempt, we were called back for a new exercise. I bowed to my partner again, and watched another blur of movement by the *sensei*. This time, I found myself paired up with a white belt, a beginner, and we both stood lost, trying to work out what was happening around us.

"Don't watch," said the *sensei* when he came to show us. "Feel." He demonstrated the move slowly. The first time I kept my eyes open, but the second time, I tried shutting them. "If you can feel the other person – where they are, how they move – you'll always be a step ahead of them." I got a sense of how a blind person might find their other senses becoming more attuned. Without

the benefit of sight, I began to notice the muscles and bones of my opponent and feel where to put my fingers for the greatest leverage. When I played the victim, it was like a darkened roller coaster – Magic Mountain – never knowing when I was going to be propelled to the ground.

There were plenty of *gaijin* in this class and afterwards one of the women came to say hi. I'd ignored her the whole class, still looking for Japanese friends, but she quickly got my attention.

"Hi, I'm Kate," she said, melodiously, in a mild Canadian accent. She was born in South Africa, and had been packed off to boarding school at just eight years old. "I studied law at university as well as Chinese – I'd always been interested in China and wanted to move there. Unfortunately, I couldn't get a visa, so I came to Japan instead."

"It's not really the same."

"No, but I loved martial arts, which you can do here too." A smile and a nod at the *doujou* acknowledged that the statement was superfluous. "And I once trained with Kodo."

"*sugoi*," I said, automatically.

"You know them?"

"The famous *taiko* group? Of course!"

She shared my grin. "Well, that was enough to catch my attention, so I moved here eight years ago."

Kate was fascinating. And pretty, though I hadn't noticed at first. It seemed there was no end to her experiences and I wanted to hear them all. Here was a girl with whom the concept 'forever after' and 'till death do us part' actually sounded fun. I couldn't be so lucky. She must have a boyfriend or…

"I'm moving back to Canada next week," she said, giving me another chance to practise calm in the face of disappointment. "Anyway, what did you think of the class?"

"I feel like I spent most of it on my knees. I've never trained anywhere that's so formal. I must have knelt and bowed eighty times."

"Yeah, it is formal, but at least it's not like in the movies where everyone lines up in neat rows. It's just respectful. I think it's fun."

We shared email addresses and she left, but I took heart. I might not have Nimmi, or even Kate, but the encounter made me realise that there were fascinating women everywhere. It was the

promise I needed to help me forget Nimmi.

Dec 98 – Money

お金 **(o-kane)**

We took Jeff, an American colleague in Japan on business, out on a Friday night in December. There was no real plan and we ended up at an *izakaya* called Tanuki. Conversation moved back and forth between the project Jeff was working on and where we would go after dinner. Most suggestions were for places to drink, but then someone suggested *pachinko*.

"What's *pachinko*?" asked Jeff.

My colleagues spoke over the top of each other trying to explain.

"It's the Japanese equivalent of a pokie," I said when they quieted.

"A what?"

"A poker machine."

"Man, you ossies do have your own language doncha."

I let the condescending tone and the mispronunciation of 'Aussies' slide and said to the rest of the group, "I've never played *pachinko* either." It had always amazed me that the Japanese played so much though, so I was curious. I'd even seen businessmen lined up on a Sunday morning – their only day off – waiting for the centre to open, presumably to get their favourite machine.

"Never?" The whole table was shocked. "Right. We'll do that then." Hiraki-san, my boss, called for the bill.

"How much do I owe?" asked Jeff when the bill arrived. Hiraki-san checked the total, divided by the number of people and told us it was 2900 yen each. "What's that in US dollars?"

"It's whatever you'd like it to be," I said quickly, hoping not to get into this discussion. He was on expenses anyway.

"What do you mean? You don't worry about exchange rates?"

"I wouldn't know where to start if I did." He looked at me blankly and I gave in. "Look, an apple costs 150 yen, right? Trust me – the small ones are about that. So that was about two dollars

fifty Australian when I moved here. Now it's probably about three dollars, and it'll be different when I go back to visit and different again when I move home. I don't think that any one of those has more meaning than the others"

"OK. I see why that's a problem, but surely you know what it is roughly."

"Yes. Take two zeros off and you have a rough comparison to the US dollar and double that and you have it in Australian dollars. But that just makes it worse." Once I was started, I found it difficult to stop.

"How?"

"The prices are scary. How many three-dollar apples would *you* buy? Prices have become like the Berlin Wall to me. I can see freedom on the other side. If I could get over that wall – if I managed to stop comparing prices to Australia – I could go hiking whenever I wanted. I could do some activity every evening and drink as much as I wanted every weekend. I'd love to go to the pool each week, but even with the company membership it costs 500 yen. That's somewhere between eight and twelve dollars Australian, when it used to cost me one dollar at home."

"How do you manage to live here, then? At those prices, you must be broke."

"No, because I'm earning yen. Actually, my savings in Japan are more than my gross salary was in Australia so the Wall should be meaningless, but it's a real psychological barrier. I've tried thinking of things in terms of percentage of salary, but do I count that before or after tax, because that changes everything. Japanese tax is under twenty percent compared to almost fifty in Australia. Another idea I had was to compare how much I'm prepared to carry in my wallet, but even that's affected by the culture."

"How do you mean?"

I pointed at the pile of notes on the table. Most people had thrown out a 5000-yen note. And some were putting away wallets that folded into cubes, they were crammed so full of notes. "This is a cash society. Everyone pays in cash, but you need to carry a lot of it. When I was at school here, even the automatic teller machines shut at four o'clock. I had to take a day off school if I wanted to withdraw money. It's better now, but not much – not considering shops are all open until at least seven. Most ATMs shut by six and it costs extra if you use one that stays open late.

"And being such a safe country, no one's really worried about getting mugged. Last month, I

closed a bank account because I was fed up at being charged for new cards when the plastic crumbled. It was two weeks before I could get to my other bank to deposit the money, and I carried 800,000 yen around during that time." I grinned, remembering how at first I'd stuffed a pile of notes in each pocket of my trousers and each pocket of my bag, but grew less and less concerned until eventually I just kept it all in my bag. "In Australia, I would have been in a panic at carrying more than one thousand dollars, but this was about sixteen thousand and I was only mildly uncomfortable." I withdrew 50,000 yen every time I went to the bank in Japan – about ten times what I had in Australia.

I threw my own five thousand yen note on the pile. "The locals are used to the prices. Five hundred yen is cheap for a swim at the pool because they'd pay more without company membership."

"OK. I get that, but if it's not really that much to them, why are salaries so high?"

"You forget the price of housing over here. Most people spend their whole lives saving up for a small apartment. It's part of the reason for the salary structure. The twelve monthly pays are for their daily life and the six-month bonus is for savings, kept separate so they don't spend it. I don't plan to buy a place in Japan, so I should be able to use that money for enjoying life, but all I see is that Wall."

Jeff threw his American Express card on the pile. I caught the breaths of my colleagues, drawn in through teeth, but I doubt Jeff heard it or recognised it as a sign of discomfort. It's normal for everyone to pay separately and Japanese restaurants are quite happy to accommodate that, but face came into the equation at an event like this. Normally we'd all throw in a larger amount to show that we didn't care about the cost, then one person would gather all the money and pay at the register. He'd get change in smaller pieces and, so that he wouldn't look like he was making a profit, he'd divvy it out fairly among the others.

"Don't worry," said Ogura-san diplomatically to the oblivious *gaijin*. "We'll ask for yours separately."

At the counter there was a problem though. We did our bit, then I waited for Jeff while the others went outside. "She says they don't accept American Express. But they've got a VISA sign in the window. Do you have that?" Jeff handed over his VISA card.

"I'm sorry," said the cashier. "We don't accept that card either."

"What? You must take it," I blurted, acting like an uncivilised *gaijin* myself. "You've got the sign in the window."

"I'm sorry. We accept the VISA card with Tanuki's logo on it." Credit cards were only just taking off in Japan and they didn't understand them. Every department store was selling their own and now restaurants too, and they'd only accept the ones they sold. It's easy to understand why my colleagues had such fat wallets if they had a credit card for every department store or restaurant they went to. I knew they also carried around credit card sized discount cards for those restaurants and shops too. It probably only saved them 1000 yen each month. Form before function.

Jeff paid in cash and put a tip down on the counter. The sound of breath through teeth was louder this time and I quickly grabbed the money as I followed Jeff out.

"You don't leave a tip in Japan."

"But their service was excellent. You Ossies don't understand what service is."

"We do, but it's included in the cost," I said, rising to the bait. "It's much less hassle and in my experience, you get better service all around. The Japanese have the right idea. To them, a tip is an insult. It says, 'I'm better than you.' Those people are paid for what they do, just like the hotel bellboy and the woman in the lift in the department store. They've got a job and they're proud to do it well. They don't need your charity." I stalked ahead to give myself time to calm down.

Our destination was obvious – *pachinko* centres are always caged in neon lights – so I stopped when I reached it. Nagoya has the highest number of machines per capita in Japan and their centres were like giant warehouses, stretching hundreds of metres on each side, but Kobe is more moderate and the centres were often located on various floors of a narrow building. Ours was on the second and third floors of a building overlooking Flower Road. When the doors opened, I was almost barrelled over by the noise and smoke. I felt the need to escape myself, once they'd closed – it was like standing in the smoke stack of a ball bearing factory. Jeff was paired up with Hiraki-san and I with Ogura-san. The rest went off on their own. We walked down to the back of the floor where Ogura-san passed one thousand yen to the lady behind a counter and motioned me to do the same. In return, she gave us each a tray full of ball bearings the size of small marbles.

We chose seats in front a couple of adjacent machines and I tried to chew a hole through the

smoke so I could see mine properly. It was something like the vertical pinball machine we played with as kids, but with a face about 50cm square. The toy has a spring-loaded hammer that launches the ball into the playing area, but all this had was a dial. I watched as Ogura-san got started, tipping his balls into a catch tray, then did the same, adding to the noise already battering at my ears. He turned the dial and the balls shot up the side, curved around the top, then fell, bouncing off obstacles on the way down, some falling into holes higher up.

"Some holes are worth more than others." Ogura-san had to shout so I could hear him over the noise. Balls were spilling into the catch tray from his wins, but not fast enough to keep up with those he was shooting out. "One of them opens that one in the centre. It's worth heaps."

I had a go and soon got a feel for the angle I needed to turn the dial for different powers of launch. I found the right hole by accident and the centre opened up. "I got it. I got it." Ogura-san was out of balls and turned to watch me. I adjusted the dial so the balls fell into the centre hole then jammed my finger in the edge of the dial so it couldn't move. Balls were pouring into my catch tray.

"Stop. You've got to empty your tray." It was difficult to let go, and I began to understand the addiction some people have to gambling. But then, it didn't quite seem like gambling.

"It's actually a game of skill, isn't it?"

"Hmm. Yes, a bit. But the balls don't always fall the same way, so there's some element of chance, and they adjust the machines each night so that some machines have a better chance of winning."

I'd emptied my tray and had another go while Ogura-san went to get more balls. My luck, or my skill, was out. I couldn't find the way to open the centre hole.

"Come on. Everyone's leaving."

"No. Not yet. I know I can get it again."

Ogura-san laughed. "You can come back tomorrow." He began emptying my tray and I had to stop or allow all my winnings to spill over the floor. As it was, I had about the same number of balls as I had at the start. Ogura-san had lost all his. I followed him back to the counter where the woman gave me a soft toy in exchange for the tray.

"Hey, I don't want that. I want my money back."

"That would make this gambling. It's illegal," he chided.

“Shit. So I’ve just lost a thousand yen, even though I won?”

“Calm down. You’ll get it back.” We joined the others – Hiraki-san was holding a soft toy bigger than mine – and went downstairs and out the back to where a small window sat open, barely showing the stomach of the attendant. Hiraki-san handed her the toy and she gave him three thousand yen for it. “There’s always a way around everything,” Ogura-san said, grinning.

JAN 99 – MEETINGS

集会 **(shuu-kai)**

The meeting had started over an hour before and I walked into a room hot with tension and temper.

"Yes. Our system can recognise the caller's number," said the Sales Manager for Wireless Japan.

"No it can't. Not unless the caller is also using one of the wireless phones internally," corrected the technician sitting next to him. The Sales Manager flushed, humiliated at being corrected in such an important meeting. His humiliation was doubled by the fact that it was a subordinate doing the correcting. I'd never seen anyone lose face before, or seen two people from the same company disagree.

"Why doesn't it?" asked Nemanja, the global manager for voice technologies in my company. "That's a basic feature of the system." He had no idea of the damage he was doing with his European confrontational style.

"Our system is fully capable of doing so," said the Sales Manager after consulting with his technician, "but American Phones' system doesn't support it in the wireless environment." This sort of finger pointing had never happened before. What happened to the harmony we'd built? The 'let's work through this together' attitude was gone. I sensed it was too late to save this meeting and I would lose my vendor's respect if I tried to correct my superior, so I sat back to let Nemanja do his worst. I would need that respect to repair the rift he was now creating in my team. Silence can be a very effective tool in Japanese meetings, and I used the opportunity to consider what Nemanja had done wrong and how I could get the project back on track.

Soon after I arrived in Japan, I'd been asked to upgrade the phone system at Akashi, our local manufacturing site. I'd spent four months researching the options and made a recommendation in November. Traditionally, the Japanese branch of our company used a Japanese phone system

because neither European Phones nor American Phones, our global standard vendors had broken into the Japanese market. That changed in 1998, when American Phones managed to get their equipment legalised, and this was one of the reasons I'd been brought over. Left to themselves, my Japanese peers would default to the Japanese system again, but I'd proven I understood the value of standards – using the same system globally – to enable enhanced features and reduce effort to support them all. But the first thing I noticed in my investigations was that the reasons for standardising weren't valid here. They were mostly for networked systems, but for cost reasons I was about to disconnect the system from the corporate network. Additionally, the features wouldn't be useful in the Japanese culture.

Looking further, I found that American Phones only had a partial solution. To enable wireless phones, I'd have to buy a second system from Wireless Japan that wasn't integrated. This meant many standard features didn't work either, we'd need two support groups, both of which were over two hours away, and an upgrade would require a system redesign. On the other hand, the Japanese system was fully integrated, easily upgraded, had local support and was half the price. So much for being the big bad *gaijin*. I submitted my recommendation for the Japanese system.

"Good work," came the response from Nemanja. "A well researched and documented recommendation. Please accept the American Phones proposal." I was distraught. This made the project twice as complex and suggested a future of double work in contracts, maintenance, and myriad other problems, but I had my orders so I pulled the project team together and began work. First was American Phones, headed up by a young American account manager, Bill. He had a similar background to me, but not as long a history in Japan, so his Japanese wasn't as good – he regularly made basic faux pas such as adding 'san' to his own name – but it was better than most *gaijin* and he understood the intricacies of working with Japanese people. Since they were getting the money and this was their gateway into our whole Asia organisation, they had a major interest in the project. Not so the other vendors.

Japan Installations, Wireless Japan, Japan Carrier and Voice Mail Inc., the chosen installer, the wireless phone vendor, the public phone carrier and the voice mail vendor respectively, had little to gain in the long term. The last two gave their time graciously despite not getting any money from the project at all.

I was already amicable with Japan Carrier and Voice Mail Inc. and, in the previous three meetings with all five vendors, I'd done well in building a relationship with the other three. More importantly, I was happy that all five were working well together. In Japan, as in most Asian countries, relationships are essential to doing business. The first meeting is for *aisatsu*, greetings. Similarly, at the beginning of the year, vendors would visit their customers to wish them a happy new year and request a continued relationship in the coming year. I'd already had a visit from each of my account managers.

Following meetings mainly consisted of pleasantries and convoluted – respectful and humble – language, while the zones of responsibility were mapped out and relationships strengthened. Bill and I sat back and watched for the most part, jumping in with our own polite comments, meaningful silences and occasionally nudging the conversation back on track like uncultured *gaijin*. By the end of December we had the overall design in place, had signed the contracts for implementation in May, and were starting to talk details. In early January I was informed that Nemanja was coming to check on progress and impress upon the vendors the importance of this work. I was proud of the progress we'd made and felt happy to share it personally, but he insisted on seeing the vendors. His European attitude and style was the worst setback my project could have faced.

Firstly, I had to get four of these vendors to come down from Tokyo, a five-hour trip on various forms of public transport, with only a few day's notice. The fact that we had no real need to meet wasn't a problem because of the importance of relationships and if a key manager was coming to Kobe, they wanted to do *aisatsu* as well. So they adjusted their schedules and came down for the day – all except Bill, who hadn't yet returned from Christmas in the US. Then, after we'd put them out so much, Nemanja did the unforgivable. He was late. I stood in the snow for two hours waiting to meet him at the appointed time and place but he, it turns out, had slept in and was having a leisurely breakfast at the hotel. While I tried to track him down and started calling the vendors to delay the meeting and to make arrangements for them to be made comfortable after their long trip, Nemanja made his own way to the plant. I was still back in Kobe, over an hour away, when I tracked him down. By the time I arrived, Nemanja had started the meeting with no one to temper his un-Japanese style.

A meeting with new members will invariably begin with what I call the *meishi* dance. *meishi*

are business cards that every Japanese adult carries to share with people they meet. Every person carries a dedicated case to keep them in mint condition. Mine was in black leather with my initials stamped in one corner. Two groups meeting will line up in opposite directions around the room and walk past each other. At each new person, the two will bow and introduce themselves – name, company and position – while proffering the *meishi*. They will take the other person's *meishi* in both hands and admire the quality of the card, cooing over titles or charismatic *kanji* of the name. They will then carefully add it to their collection and move on to the next person like a progressive dance. Finally, when everyone has met each other, they will sit down and arrange all the *meishi* in front of them, mapping people at the table, so they can quickly refer to the card when they need to.

Nemanja had probably pulled his business cards out of his wallet, dog-eared and dirty. He may have shown disrespect by writing on the *meishi* he received, so he could remember their names in English. Perhaps he'd even shoved them carelessly back into his wallet and never looked at them again. Undoubtedly, he'd jumped straight into business discussion rather than trying to build the relationship with small talk. He would not have apologised for his tardiness, thanked them for the effort they'd made to be here, asked about their journey or discussed the weather.

Once Nemanja left, I had to rebuild the team. I immediately scheduled a trip to Tokyo to apologise to each vendor and begin again. During my visit to Japan Installations, I was impressed anew at the respect Japanese people show their guests. I was also very embarrassed. It seems that they hadn't generated any bad feelings towards me, or perhaps my prompt trip to visit them was enough to balance the previous meeting, but they gave me a full three-seat lounge to myself. One of my counterparts took the less comfortable chair opposite and the other dragged over a stool. I looked at the vacant cushioned seats beside me bewildered. This treatment wasn't out of fear I might speak English - it was merely respect shown a guest, but it made me uncomfortable. When the General Manager came in for *aisatsu*, and we had done the *meishi* dance, my account manager gave up his seat to stand in the corner. I looked again at the empty seats beside me, but was too polite to suggest that he sit there. I was left to speak to this unfamiliar old man with whom I had only a tenuous business connection. In desperation I used the only Japanese humour I knew, making a play on my name as I handed over my *meishi*. It's written マリーガン in the script reserved for foreign words, and is easily mistaken for the more common マーガリン, which means margarine. They all

laughed heartily.

"You have a good understanding of Japanese humour," said the General Manager. It was the sort of empty compliment that Japanese offer as *tatemae,* the outward face, but I felt that everyone in the room, respected my attempts. This company was back in the game and, one by one, the others joined too. It would be all right.

I liked to think that I had the whole working relationship deal down pat, but the following year, my colleague from Purchasing drew me aside before a meeting.

"It embarrasses me that you sit on that side of the table every time." At each meeting, I would walk to the far side of the table, squeezing along the wall and stepping carefully over the cables draped between the wall and the table, to the most uncomfortable seat.

"What do you mean?" I asked. I always give them the accessible seats, which also have the view. Where would you prefer I sit them?"

"In Japan, the customer is always offered the seat facing the door. It shows respect." Thinking about it later, I realized that this was a cultural remnant from *samurai* times when the guest would want to see who was coming through the door so he could be ready to defend himself if necessary. That was why I'd been offered the full three-seat lounge in Tokyo – so I wouldn't be uncomfortable at being surrounded by enemies in their territory. Now I blush with shame to think of all the times I offered my guests the view over Osaka Bay instead of the view of the white door, with its flaking paint. I felt happy from then on, watching these men stumble over dangling cables to face the door, while I sat easily enjoying the scenery. This was a true win-win situation made possible by disparate cultures.

FEB 99 – EQUALITY

平等 **(byou-dou)**

"Happy Valentine's Day, MAG."

I turned to see the twenty girls from my department crowding my desk and proffering a box of chocolates. I don't usually eat chocolate, but it would've been rude to refuse so I chose one and, after a suitably gracious 'thank you', put it on my desk to give away later.

"Ogura-san," they said, as they moved to the next desk. "Happy Valentine's Day."

On my first trip, I'd been surprised to find the tradition here, but the shops and department stores had locked on to the commercial possibilities sometime so long ago that it's part of the culture now. Red decorations adorn department stores, and cake shops stock up on chocolate hearts. There are differences in the tradition though, and the first comes from adapting the idea to the Japanese version of equality.

I'm sure I'm not the only person who's never received a Valentine's Day Card. I'm not the only one who, the next day, either had to admit it, or concoct a story of some secret admirer and make it sound so hot that I couldn't show anyone. In the west, that's something you deal with. Everyone's different. Some people get six cards and some of us get none. I'm not bitter about it. But in a society where the team is all-important and no one wants to stand out – where loss of face accumulates over a lifetime – never getting a Valentine's card could be cause for suicide. And no one in a team wants to lose someone to such a senseless cause, so they make sure that everyone gets chocolate.

At work it seemed to be taken lightly, with the women all chipping in to buy a box to share among all the men, but at school it had been quite a serious event – though I arrived in the country too late to be a part of it. Every girl had given an individually wrapped chocolate to every boy in the class, and it was usually personally handmade with a handmade tag. This egalitarianism was typical of

interactions in Japan.

Each month in the Home Room class, set aside for team building, we'd chosen new seats for the coming month. Mizuno-san drew a picture of the classroom on the blackboard, with all forty seats numbered. Shinohara-san walked around the room with a bagful of numbered pieces of paper. Each person would draw one, then move to the corresponding seat. The process ensured that everyone had the opportunity to interact with as many other people as possible. Left to their own devices, the room would have been split down the middle by gender, probably with nerds at the front and jocks at the back. Ironically, the effect of this forced mingling was diluted by placing each seat at least a foot away from all those around, as if every day had been exam day.

Following the forming of teams for the barbeque, I found a similar process was required to assign seats on the bus. Just getting on the bus and sitting somewhere wouldn't be fair, they said. The quiet people would always end up sitting together, never getting a chance to join the revelry down the back. To avoid this, the class schemed a couple of weeks in advance. I watched, bewildered, as they debated about the best way to make it fair. Not at all concerned about who I sat next to – the pretty girl, the fat bloke, and the loud ones of both sexes were all part of the culture and had something to teach me – I put my head down to *kanji* study and looked up occasionally to see how they were progressing. I noticed that many others in the class didn't seem to take much interest either. It seemed to be the egotists who were going to all this effort to make sure that the quiet ones had a chance to sit amongst the noise and I wondered if perhaps the nerds were just showing *tatemae*, trying not to look too pleased (or too upset) that they could (or would have to) sit near the rugby team. However they felt, Hayashi-sensei was encouraging this as another lesson in team building.

They eventually closed the debate and moved on to a vote and then finally, as the hour drew to a close, I was dragged into a game of *jan ken hoi* and I assumed that it was over.

Tables were pushed aside and all twenty boys stood in a circle to shout "*jan ken hoi*," thrusting out our choices on the last syllable. The girls did the same on the other side of the room. Only Hayashi-san and I showed scissors while an odd number of boys had shown rock and paper respectively, so we were pushed aside while they played on.

"Where do I sit," I asked Hayashi-san.

"We haven't decided yet."

"What? What's this all about then?" I asked, waving a hand at the pandemonium.

"We've decided how we're going to make the decision."

"But the class is almost over. When will the decision be made? Are we just going to choose our own seats after all?"

"No," he said, horrified. "That would be chaos. In Home Room next week, we'll draw a picture of the bus on the blackboard and everyone'll pair up. You're with me. Then each pair will draw a number out of a hat."

"Ah, I see," I said. "Then the number will match a number on the picture and we'll know where to sit – just like choosing seats in the classroom."

"*chotto chigau*. That would be too rigid for this. It's meant to be a fun day. Once all the numbers are drawn, the pair with number one will choose their seat. Then the pair with number two will choose theirs, and so on until everyone has a seat."

"OK," I said, not seeing how that was any less rigid. "That shouldn't take too long."

"No. We should be finished within thirty minutes. Then we can do the same for the return trip."

Another difference in the Japanese version of Valentine's Day is that it's always a one-way flow from the women to the men. The same shops and department stores that saw the possibilities of such an occasion, had thought 'Why have one meaningless (I'm not bitter, honestly) commercial festive occasion, when you can have two?' And so White Day was born. One month later, on March 14, every man must return the favour to each of the women who'd given him chocolate on Valentine's Day. But whereas the women give milk or dark chocolate, the men give white chocolate. At school, this meant one each to all the girls in the class – always bought, unless their mothers made them on their behalf.

Again, at work it was more casual, with the men pooling money for a box of white chocolate for the women.

After work, I went into town to meet Sachiko. We'd met at *aikidou* and started dating soon after.

Once I'd opened myself up to the idea of someone other than Nimmi, I met interesting girls everywhere. Sachiko had spent time in the US and besides *aikidou*, she played tennis and practised *ikebana*, flower arranging. She carried her tall frame gracefully, and it had become a struggle to focus on the forms when she was around.

"Don't Japanese people ever use Valentine's Day for romantic giving?"

"We do, but you wouldn't give anything special to someone that wasn't your boyfriend. What if he didn't like you? That would be so humiliating."

"I guess that answers it for the other way around too. It would be humiliating for the man to give chocolates to a woman he likes if she hadn't given him anything"

"Right. It would also humiliate her, because she didn't anticipate the gift. It would be too late to return the favour."

"So, what did you get for me?"

"Me? You should be giving *me* a gift," she said. "You don't even like chocolate."

"Me give you a gift? Why?"

"Because that's your western custom." To make the point, she walked me to the most expensive department store in town and waited until I bought her a box.

I almost went to kiss her as I handed it over, but then remembered that Japanese don't show such affection in public. I settled for a grin instead. "Well, that gets me out of White Day."

"No way. I'll be expecting white chocolate from you, then."

"But White Day isn't a western tradition."

"We're in Japan now. You have to follow our customs."

Mar 99 – Sex

H (etchi)

I'd always known that the Japanese had a strange attitude to sex, but even I was shocked the day that Massak got married. Massak was my host family's Siberian Husky, and when my family began talking about his impending 'marriage,' I thought I was mishearing them. At least, I did until I came home from school to find a female Husky in the yard. Suddenly realising what was about to happen, I snuck up to my room and busied myself with *kanji* study, but my host parents wanted to use this as a biology lesson and I was dragged out to watch. Takeshi was at soccer training and Akiko was at her part time job, and my host parents were adamant that one of the kids be present for the ceremony.

"Do you think they'll know what to do?" asked the owner of the bitch as the two dogs circled each other, sniffing.

"Don't worry. Massak will know," my host father said proudly. Right on cue, Massak made a dash and threw a leg over his bride. She yelped loudly. Otousan ran in to lift Massak's tail, and declared, "It's in."

Okaasan grabbed my arm and started chattering about how interesting it all was. The next door neighbours had gathered on their balcony to watch. I waved to them as an excuse to look away from the dogs, but they ignored me, intent on the spectacle. My eyes were drawn back when the yelping took on a new level of pain. Massak had somehow turned around so that the dogs stood tail to tail, yet they were obviously still joined. I had to admit that this was getting interesting. There was a second step to 'doggie style' that I didn't know about. Slowly, the yelps grew softer and less frequent until, after about five minutes, Massak pulled away and went for a lie down and Otousan lit up a cigarette.

Takeshi came down the next morning while I was having breakfast. "Did you see Massak get married, yesterday?" I grunted a yes. "Cool. What was it like?"

"Are you talking about the wedding?" asked Yukiko when she came down. "I wish I could have seen it."

'Sex-crazed,' I thought. 'They're all sex-crazed.'

It's impossible to spend a day in Japan and not have that same thought. Affection isn't shown in public – even within the family – but the sex industry is everywhere and you can't walk far around town without having it thrust at you. Men, and occasionally even women, read *manga* on the train. Sex shops advertise their wares on the main street and love hotels abound in the back streets. At first, I felt a need to protect the women I dated from this side of their own culture, but I didn't do a very good job.

"Where are the towels?" asked Sachiko, looking into the kitchen of my *apaato*. She was off to shower while I created one of my ad hoc westernised versions of a Japanese meal.

"They're in the closet at about my eye level." I picked up a packet of fresh *yakisoba* and was about to open them when I remembered what else was on that shelf. "It's OK," I called out, as casually as I could in the circumstances. "I'll get one for you." But she was there first.

"What are these?" Sachiko was pulling down a stash of *etchi* magazines. *etchi* is the Japanese pronunciation of the English letter 'H,' which represents a couple having sex – two lovers joined by an erection.

My interest in all aspects of culture gave me the perfect excuse to have them, though I guess a more honest researcher wouldn't have them hidden away. I'd been introduced to the world of Japanese erotica during my stay in Saga twelve years before – initially to the sketched form. One of the host-mothers was taking four of us to a museum and, while waiting at the rendezvous point, I'd dashed into a bookshop to pick up a comic for reading practice. Like most bookstores in Japan, this one was half taken over by adult books and movies. I'd studiously avoided these and picked up JUMP, a famous children's comic. Then as I moved up to the counter to pay, I noticed YOUNG JUMP further along the rack and, reasoning this would be more at my level, I bought it instead. I was wrong.

On the way to the museum, sitting beside the driver and with three Australian girls in the back, I opened my new purchase. On the first page was a schoolgirl, looking at a boy and imagining what he was doing to her, quite graphically. On the next page, she did the same when looking at another boy, and again on the third page. By the fourth, she'd decided to take matters into her own hands, as it were, and headed to the girl's toilets. But a girlfriend came up behind her, just as she

was entering the cubicle, and slid her hands round her waist and under her skirt. I suddenly remembered where I was and slammed the *manga* shut, but that just got the girls' attention.

"What was that?"

"Um, nothing. Just a comic I bought before we met today."

"Oh. It must be one of *those* comics. Show us."

Guiltily, I'd handed it over and let them peruse it, wondering what the woman driving thought. She didn't appear to notice, or perhaps she thought it was funny that we'd be excited over something so mundane.

"They're, um, for cultural study," I said of the magazines that Sachiko was now holding. She laughed at that. A delightful sound when it wasn't hidden behind a shy hand and this was no time for *her* to be shy.

"*nande hazukashii*?" Why are you embarrassed? "It just means you're healthy." She stood on her toes to look for more. "They're all Japanese. Don't you have any *gaijin* ones? I hear they're very different."

It's true. The Japanese have a law that no pubic hair may be shown, which takes away from the whole point of the industry. Even *manga* are drawn with the pubic region whited out – like a burst of sunlight emanating from between the legs. A friend was dating a girl whose job it was to scratch the obscene areas out of every magazine coming through customs. And for this enormous task, her tool of trade was… a pin. I never met the girl, though I always wondered what kind of person would take such a job. And what sort of a career path it provided. Would she graduate from Playboy to Penthouse to Hustler?

These days though, most Japanese men's magazines take no notice of this law, and convenience stores, living up to their name, display racks of Japanese magazines with blatant covers next to their doctored American counterparts – as though Japanese hair is less offensive. Nor are the escort services concerned with decency and every day I'd come home to another flyer in my letterbox. What a great culture, I thought, that delivers free porn daily.

In Japan, adult movies always had the good bits cut out, though in my opinion even the director's cut would've been less erotically exciting than western versions. A large number seemed to be of schoolgirls and rape, and I couldn't justify either of those to myself, even under the pretext

of cultural research, but I'd bought a couple of DVDs, fascinated by the use of DVD features – multiple angles and interactive 'storylines.' Sachiko wanted to see one, and after she'd coaxed me through my misgivings, we were watching a man in a doctor's coat standing beside a beautiful woman, naked but for a circle of pixelation stretching from hip to hip. There was no attempt to hide the sex in a story – the doctor proceeded to measure every part of the woman's sexual anatomy before deciding that he had better things he could use this willing body for. The entire picture was soon a blur of pink and black pixels as the camera zoomed in on the action, but the effort was all on his part. I'd often heard of the prowess of Japanese women as lovers, but my experiences didn't justify it and neither did the actresses in the videos. The woman only moved in response to commands – 'open your mouth' 'lie on your back/stomach,' 'hold this.'

Shower and dinner were both soon forgotten and in the darkness Sachiko's disconcerting sounds of pleasure mingled with those on the video. Western women have delightful 'When Harry met Sally'-like whispers and moans, but the equivalent sounds from a Japanese woman are closer to the whimpers and yelps I'd heard when Massak got married. My friends told me of their own difficulty adjusting to the noises of their girlfriends.

The passive willingness was mirrored off screen too, and I have to say that it's refreshing to have a partner that's always ready. But I wanted more than a 'here's my body – use it as you will," attitude. Perhaps Japanese men did too. Another Japanese girl I dated told me that her male friends admitted to using professionals even when they had a girlfriend. "The professionals offer a different level of pleasure, they say. And I've been told that I could have been a professional," she said proudly.

Over the following weeks, Sachiko enlightened me on many areas of Japanese sexuality. "Have you ever been to a love hotel," she asked one evening as we were heading to bed.

"No," I lied, the response automatic after my school days. "I mean, yes." Most of what I knew was hearsay, from the experiences of other *gaijin* on the exchange. Of course, few of us admitted to them personally. It was a time of experimentation – all of us in our late teens – and I can't imagine that many managed to avoid the temptation. One Australian girl told me that she got 'sick of it' while she was there because 'Japanese guys are too small and unimaginative,' so it seems I'm not the only one questioning their reputation. I know other girls who went to a love hotel

together, just out of curiosity, and were chased away by the staff because homosexuality wasn't tolerated. I never asked, but since I heard the same story of different hotels, I assume it was law rather than hotel policy.

Some friends had a knack of picking out love hotels from among the real hotels, but the only way I could differentiate them was to look at the prices – if it charged by the hour, it was a love hotel. The styles varied enormously – some offering a variety of rooms for the discerning client. Some had huge hot tubs or vibrating beds. Some were high-tech and some quaint. One in Nagoya, I was told, had a bondage wheel. The only one I ever saw was very ordinary, with a bed and a bath. Between my lack of experience, Yukiko's passiveness and my constant need to check that her yelps were of pleasure, that visit wasn't a delightful experience and I had no desire to repeat it.

"I'm glad," Sachiko told me. "I would've gone with you, but I don't like them. It's much nicer at home." No argument there. In love hotels, the time pressure eliminated any chance of romance or foreplay such as we were enjoying now, hands wandering over backs and under shirts. At least, mine were wandering. Sachiko, as always, was content to lie there passively. Like all Japanese women, the only condition for her willingness was total darkness.

"Why do you have so many love hotels?"

She waved her arm around the room we were lying in. "You're lucky to have all this space. My whole family sleeps in a room this big."

'Of course,' I thought. I'd been lucky to have always had a room of my own in Japan, but it was considered *zeitaku* by most people.

"My parents would never have had a chance for sexual pleasure with my brother in the room, so I must have been conceived in a love hotel."

I hugged her close. She'd said it matter-of-factly, but it was hardly a romantic notion and I couldn't imagine I'd be so blasé in her place. "I thought it was just for lunch breaks."

"You mean office ladies?" Office ladies were traditionally young, single females in search of a husband and stories abound of managers who take these women to love hotels in their lunch hour. "You don't know the half of it. In traditional Japanese companies, the company trip is often to somewhere like Thailand so the men can bond in a strip club and be satisfied by beautiful foreign women. It's the company's reward to them for working so hard."

"But don't the wives get upset?"

"Of course, but it's expected, so they pack the condoms for their husbands and wish them a good time... Well, maybe they don't actually wish them a good time."

It took a few moments for the words to sink in. "The wives pack the condoms?"

"Well, you can hardly expect the man to pack his bags properly."

"Does this still go on?"

"It's less common now, but it does still happen. The really sad part is that it means the wives are rarely satisfied. We have a very low rate of child molesting in Japan compared to other countries, but it's usually boys who are molested by their mothers. Sometimes the mothers claim that their sons are stressed from all the study, and that they're just helping to relieve that stress."

I couldn't stop the shudder. Suddenly Okaasan's jealousy over Yukiko took on a whole new meaning and I didn't want to follow that train of thought. Instead, I brought my thoughts firmly back to the gorgeous woman lying beside me.

I let my hands wander down her body and under the elastic of her underwear. "Have you ever sold your used underwear?" I teased. I thought the question would finally shock her, but I was mistaken.

"No, and I don't think any of my friends have either, but apparently it's becoming worse. Girls used to do that to save up for something particular – like nice clothes or a car – but now they're selling themselves for a ride to school."

"You mean sell their underwear?"

"Maybe, but the papers have published survey results that say some girls hitch up their skirts during the ride, so the driver can see their panties, and some even give sexual favours. Speaking of sexual favours," she said, "are we just going to talk all night?"

Sachiko had been waiting for a working visa to the US, which finally came through, so we said our sad farewells and I turned elsewhere for insight into the Japanese attitude to sex. One question that bugged me for a while was how women felt about having nudity so visible all around them – magazines in the convenience stores, *manga* on the train, sex shops on the street, and flyers in their mailbox. The answer probably lies in an experience I had when visiting Michiko, an old friend in Nagoya. She'd taken me to a dinner party held by one of her friends who had a large

picture of a naked woman on his wall. It wasn't pixelated, and it wasn't particularly tasteful. I asked Michiko how she felt about such displays. She didn't respond and, thinking she hadn't heard me, I asked again. When she didn't answer me the second time, I realised that I had my answer.

Apr 99 – Flower Viewing

花見 **(hana-mi)**

I was delighted to leave home one morning and see pale buds on the stark trees lining the street. They'd been bare all winter – not a leaf, flower or fruit to give life to the dark branches. Every year, for only two or three weeks in early April, these trees blossom and this would be my first chance to see them through the whole process – from blossom to fall. I had arranged to free up all my weekends so I could join the countrywide party. All I had to do now was wait for the first bud to open.

Work had been piling up since Christmas – the phone system replacement at Akashi was now less than a month away and Y2K was approaching fast. I had to gather vendor guarantees for every system – that they'd operate normally into the new millennium – and then test each one anyway. Any system that failed would then need to be upgraded, replaced or eliminated so I had little time left. I worked at least eleven hours each day and was testing every weekend.

But it wasn't just a single flower that blossomed on that first day of hanami – the whole street was lit with pink and white petals, glowing in the sunlight. I tripped over every crack in the footpath on the way to the station, unable to tear my eyes away from the first sign of natural colour I'd seen in months. I arrived at the office at eight as usual, alone until my colleagues started trickling in after nine.

"*mita? sakura ga saita*," said each person as they came in, tones reverent. Did you see? The cherry flowers blossomed. All day, the office buzzed with a peculiar mix of anticipation, serenity and excitement, and wandering around the city that evening, I felt the same atmosphere on every street. It was easy to get caught up in that mood. In my head, I saw colour sweeping the country from the south. In less than three weeks, it would all be gone. I was determined to enjoy the time fully.

The first event was a barbeque organised by Haneda-san, the young, lanky captain of the

volleyball club. Remembering the last time I'd joined them, I prepared for this one by eating all morning. That way, I could last until everyone else had eaten their fill before cooking my meat – right through. We met at Haneda-san's flat and carried everything across the road to a local park – raised a couple of metres from the road, and already full of groups relaxing. His plump but pretty wife, also called Haneda-san since Japanese people use the surname, was carrying a pile of plastic blankets, which she laid out on the cold ground and we set out the feast. We'd all soon eaten our fill and stretched out on the blankets under the trees.

"Gunn-san," said Haneda-san as she slipped off her shoes. "How are you finding Japan?"

"The hours are too long. Japanese people work too hard."

"You get used to it. And it's easier if you have a girlfriend," she said slyly. "Are you still single?"

"Um, yes," I answered, certain I knew where this was going. Meetings arranged by a matchmaker, called *omiai*, were a normal custom in Japan.

"Why? Don't you like Japanese girls?"

"Of course. I see beautiful girls every day, but I guess I just haven't met the right one," I said, but thought 'Japanese girls are too subservient and they yelp in bed.' I wanted Japanese friends, but I'd tried the Japanese girlfriend thing and I preferred someone with a bit more individuality. Sachiko had spent enough time overseas to have that, but I hadn't told many people about her.

"I'm sure we could find you someone. *ne anata*." Couldn't we dear. Her husband threw me a sympathetic glance. "What about Sakakibara-san from my singing class?"

I tuned out the ensuing conversation and took the time to look around the park. Japanese parks are plucked clean of any grass to avoid the effort of mowing it, so the backdrop was one of dirt ground, dark brown tree branches and grey buildings beyond – only the cherry blossoms lining the perimeter added colour to the scene. I lay back and looked up at the sky. It provided a canvas of deep blue, on which an artist had dabbed a dense pattern of pale splotches.

"Let's go for a walk," said Haneda-san, in an effort to distract his wife from naming more potential mates for me.

Almost every street in Kobe is lined with *sakura* and I think we walked for hours – every turn presenting us with another foaming sea spilling onto the road. As the sun dropped low, I

remembered another invitation and rushed off to meet some friends at Ashiyagawa, often called the Beverly Hills of Japan. A river, the '*gawa*' in the name, cut a channel from the mountains south to the sea. It was lined with *sakura* atop sides concreted to stop erosion and the base, usually dry but for a meandering stream, was covered in thick grass. Today, that grass was beaten down by tightly packed revellers basking in the twilit glitter of petals. I rushed up and down the three-kilometre length of the river, looking for John and the others.

I'd started spending time with the *gaijin* group after a conversation with Damion, one of my best friends who had more experience in Japan than me. "They're all people like us," he told me.

"Yes, but I haven't come all this way to hang out with *gaijin*."

"Come on. They've all given up their lives in their home countries to experience a new culture. You try to find people like that at home. Why would you avoid them just because you're in Japan?"

"Because I don't want to speak English while I'm here. I want to live a Japanese life. If I start spending time with *gaijin*, I'll be like the ethnic groups in Sydney that refuse to take on the Australian culture."

Damion paused before answering. "How big did you say your flat was?"

He was right. "You've got a point. I'm not exactly living like a Japanese now, am I."

"When I was studying at Keio University, most of my friends were *gaijin*. They're all trying to find their way in Japan as much as you are. Support them when they need it, and they'll support you when it's your turn. If you're all trying to break into the Japanese culture, you'll make it."

It was true. I decided to join John at Rizta, a bar next to the office, with some of the *gaijin* community and I found their company delightful. Many of them had recently transferred, and those that had been in Japan a while were new to Kobe. I may have had more experience in Japan than any of them, but they were all more settled than me. They'd even brought along a few of the Japanese friends they'd already made – kindred spirits who liked to learn about different cultures and would jump at the chance to live overseas. It was a wonderfully multicultural group and spending time with them opened my world again.

They were somewhere in the crowds flooding the riverbed, but after an hour of searching, I gave up and headed home. I'd see them the following weekend at Inoue-san's place.

It was raining that next weekend so Inoue-san suggested we party in her small flat. Rather than having a barbeque, we bought *bentou*, packed lunches, from the local convenience store and ate a cold picnic on her LDK floor. We poured *sake* for each other, shouted '*kampai*' in toast and began chatting. I sat against the inside wall so I could see the *sakura* petals pasted against the window, and told John about the barbeque he'd missed.

"Haneda-san's wife was trying to play matchmaker again. I was the only *gaijin* there this time, so I was the target."

"Well, you never know. Spring is in the air," he said, grinning at my discomfort – he was usually the victim.

"What are you two chatting about, over there?" asked Inoue-san.

"MAG's just saying that he's lonely without a girlfriend," said John, warding off my elbows.

"Oh really?" said Inoue-san, playing along. "I have a few friends I'm sure you'd like, MAG-san. Shall I introduce you?"

Discussions of a likely match went on for the next half hour and I could only play along until everyone got bored and started talking about plans for a trip to Korea.

Rain can spell the end for *hanami* and I walked home over a carpet of wet petals, but the next day dawned as pink as any before with bursting trees providing me a guard of honour on the way to the station. And they were still there the following weekend when Lisa invited me to a barbeque with her English teacher friends. It was set higher in the hills in a large park beside a river, and we had it all to ourselves. She'd also invited Hiro, one of her students, and some of his friends. Masaya and Masako were both attractive girls – one tall and slim with long glossy hair, the other shorter but voluptuous, both quick to smile – and it wasn't long before the matchmaking began.

We all grabbed a plate of meat – cooked and placed on a serving table, western style – slipped off our shoes and sat on one of the plastic blankets. "*atsui*," said Lisa when she took her first bite. She was really trying hard to use the words she knew, and was fearless in striking up a conversation with anyone she met. In restaurants, she'd start talking to the surprised people around her and when she asked what they were eating, whole tables passed their food over for her to try. It was no surprise that she was the one to open the conversation with Hiro's friends. "Are you Hiro's

girlfriend?" she asked Masaya, who'd sat closest to him.

"No," said Masaya, looking appalled. "I'm single."

"Did you hear that MAG? Masaya's single. She's pretty enough to stop you moping about Nimmi."

"I'm not moping," I threw back. "I haven't thought about Nimmi in… hours at least."

"*nani*?" asked Masako. What? Neither of them spoke English well.

"I was just saying that MAG's single," said Lisa. "*hitori*."

"*dokushin*," Hiro corrected. *hitori* means 'one person.'

"*a*, *chansu da*," said Masaya and Masako at the same time. We've got a chance. It wasn't necessarily an expression of interest – I'd heard the same any time one single person came across another single person of the opposite sex. I threw my plate down and rushed off to join a group playing soccer before the conversation could get any further. It was kind of funny at first, but quickly became tedious and soon everyone would be asking me if I thought they were pretty. In this case I could honestly answer 'yes', but I hated giving an answer because it was expected rather than because I believed it. Too many times I'd been asked the same when I thought the girl in question plain or *busu*, ugly.

I heard someone exclaim, "*kutsu haiteinai*," behind me. He's not wearing shoes. There. That'll put them off for a while. If I went barefoot outside, I'd have nothing to take off when I went inside and no Japanese woman could abide the thought of dirt being carried into the house. I'd just demonstrated what a poor husband I'd make. It had been almost a year since I'd gone outside barefoot and I'd forgotten what pleasure I found in having the dirt beneath my feet. I squeezed it between my toes and forgot about matchmaking.

As we played, a strong breeze picked up and petals began to flutter among us, like tiny butterflys. With the warming weather, the petals' holds on their host branches were tenuous so the wind brought us a confetti shower that lasted a few hours. By the time the sun went down, the trees were bare but for a few green buds, and the ground was awash in petals. I looked around me, and charged with many glasses of *sake*, found poetry in the setting. It occurred to me how perfectly the *sakura* represents the country. Stark, fleeting beauty was everywhere – in the gorgeous red temples tucked between two ugly grey buildings, in a single piece of green (plastic) added to an otherwise

colourless packed lunch, in the small decorated alcove in each home used as a shrine to ancestors – but it was most obvious in this natural phenomenon. Despite their mediocrity when green and their dull appearance in winter, Japanese streets are lined with these trees – all for the two weeks that they light up the cities. These thoughts warmed me as the wind blew, the sun set, and the party went on into the night.

May 99 – Customer Service

顧客管理 **(ko-kyaku-kan-ri)**

"Captain on the bridge." The words weren't actually spoken, but I could hear echoes of them whenever I approached. Every technician would stop what he was doing and stand ready, as if waiting for new orders.

"Don't let me interrupt. Continue what you were doing." No movement. "Hasegawa-san, I just wanted to see how things are going." Hasegawa-san was the project manager from Japan Installations, assigned to switch the Akashi phone system over.

"Everything's on track," he replied. "We're just putting the earthquake bolts in now." The technicians all gathered close, nodding gravely. Since the Great Hanshin earthquake of 95, companies were very careful about bolting heavy equipment to the ground.

"Really? It doesn't look like anything's happening right now," I wanted to say, but managed to hold it back. "Great. Well. I won't keep you any longer."

I returned to the desk I'd commandeered for the week and moped. As long as everything continued to go well, I was just there to baby sit. Meanwhile, all my friends were off getting a tour of Korea, guided by a Korean member of the *gaijin* group. And the rest of my colleagues were off doing family things. It was Golden Week.

After a few years, Japanese *sarariiman* are legally entitled to twenty holidays annually, but their attitude is different to ours. "I'm a bad employee," Ogura-san had told me one day. "I take all my holidays every year." A 'good' employee would feel guilty about leaving their team and wouldn't take more than a week off, no matter how many days they were entitled to – even for their honeymoon. Instead, the Japanese are big on public holidays, so that the whole company can take their breaks at the same time. They celebrate some fifteen in all – four of them at the beginning of May.

midori no hi, *kempou kinenbi*, *kokumin no kyuujitsu* and *kodomo no hi* pile on top of each

other to create what's known as Golden Week. The first, Green Day, was originally Emperor Showa's birthday, but since his death in 1989 it's become a celebration of nature. Constitution Day is when the post-war constitution was put into effect in 1947. People's Holiday or Between Day is a recent addition to create a continuous holiday period. And the last, Children's Day, is mostly a celebration of boys in the family, and tube kites painted like carp are flown from the house – one for each son – to symbolise health and strength.

Even factories that run continuously for months will shut down during this period, which made Golden Week a perfect time to replace the phone system at Akashi. And so I found myself at work while all my friends and colleagues were at play. To make matters worse, I was nervous about this project and the attention it was getting from management. I couldn't even use progress checks as a distraction. If they stopped every time I went near, we'd never complete the cutover on time. Their habit of stopping work became even more frustrating when the issues began, midway through the first day.

"We've got a problem getting the wireless system and the main system talking to each other." This was just the sort of problem I'd been dreading when I made my recommendation for the other vendor. So why were they all just standing around when I came down? I wanted to scream at them to get working.

"OK. Let me know when you have some progress. *onegaishimasu*."

As I was leaving, I grabbed Mizutani-san, the voice mail vendor, and took him around the corner. We'd worked together many times and knew each other well. I could be direct with him. "What's going on? Why do they stop working every time I come in sight?"

"They're showing you respect. You're the customer," he said, equally baffled that I was asking.

"But they'll never get anything done if they stop all the time."

"Japanese customers don't usually check up on the work as often as you," he said, more through inference than direct words. He was obviously trying hard not to offend me.

I wasn't comfortable being out of touch. If there were issues, I wanted to be involved in choosing which to work on first and finding solutions to those. And watching the technicians was usually a great opportunity to learn more about the new system. After a few attempts, I found a

compromise.

"Mizutani-san," I called, sticking my head around the corner. He was usually standing outside the room that contained the phone system, so he was easily reachable. "Can you ask Hasegawa-san to come out here?" There, we could talk in private. I got my update, gave input into the list of issues, and told him of culture in Australia. He probably went back in to the room and gathered his technicians around. "Listen up. The customer is a *gaijin* with strange customs. He doesn't want respect. He wants you to ignore him." I could almost hear the gasps.

When I came in the second morning, they kept working even when I walked into the room, though I caught some whispers. "Are we on track, Hasegawa-san?"

"Yes, Gunn-san. A few of the technicians worked all night to fix most of the issues," he said proudly. I looked around and saw a few sets of red eyes. This wasn't good.

"Tell them to get some rest. I don't want them doing sloppy work because they're too tired to think straight." The request confused him. This crazy customer wanted everyone to work to resolve all the issues, but he wanted them to rest as well. Whatever he thought, I didn't win that argument. I'm sure the head technician didn't get more than a couple of hours sleep over the five days, and it worried me deeply. What if he wired the power the wrong way due to lack of concentration? He could easily fry himself that way.

By the end of the five days, the schedule was tight and even I would have stayed the entire night. In the morning, seven hundred people would arrive for work and there weren't any phones on desks yet. I wanted to help, but there was no way they were going to let the customer distribute phones, so I went home to sleep.

This reverence for the customer was taken to extremes. The assistant account manager for NTT was a young woman, slender and always immaculately dressed. I'd gone out to greet her on the third day when she was bringing a heavy piece of measuring equipment to help investigate an issue. She could barely lift it and the dust coating the machine would leave a mark on her suit, so I'd offered to carry it for her – it couldn't damage the torn jeans I was wearing. Her reaction was of deep embarrassment, almost offended that I'd asked. I was the customer and I couldn't be expected to do anything that might be classed as work.

We almost didn't finish the cutover in time. The last phones were being placed on desks as

the plant's workers arrived the following morning. We still had issues – some that would take weeks to resolve – but everyone could make and receive calls and use their voice mail. I stayed at the plant throughout May to ensure everyone knew how to use their phones properly and to tie up those remaining issues.

On one occasion, I called Japan Installations with a problem and found that they'd applied the Japanese principle of 'form before function' to customer service as well. "All eight phones on the one card have the same problem, but no others do," I told them. It was clear that the card was the problem. "Please bring a replacement card." An Australian company would send one person with the card and a car full of other spare parts in case I was wrong. Japan Installations sent four people and no parts.

"Why are there so many people?" I asked one of my colleagues at the factory.

"It's custom in Japan. They're showing you that they consider you an important customer and want to assure you that they're doing everything they can to fix the problem."

"All I need is that card." I growled. "I could replace it myself in five minutes."

I went with the vendor to see what they did. One technician opened the system and began checking the insides. The other three stood nearby, trying to look helpful.

"Ah," said the technician who was bent over the system. "There seems to be a faulty card."

JUN 99 – MUSIC

音楽 **(on-gaku)**

I didn't even have a cassette player until I was sixteen, but since then music has been a big part of my life. The stereo is always on whenever I'm home and awake so one of the criteria I had when choosing a flat was that the construction would allow me to turn music up without bothering my neighbours. Most of my music was Australian, but when walking home from *aikido* each week, I'd see a poster of a pretty young Japanese woman leaning over an acoustic guitar and a name I couldn't read. I was intrigued. What would the music be like? My experience to date hadn't been good.

On my exchange, five exchange students were invited to attend a singing contest. It sounded interesting and we were all looking forward to it – until we were on our way there.

"So, what are you going to be singing?" asked our chaperone.

"We're just going to watch," we replied over the top of each other.

"No. You're the opening act. Didn't anyone tell you?"

We all looked at each other in panic, then started shouting, "I can't sing," "you're joking," and "no one told us." But it had all been arranged, so we quickly practised the four-line 'Kookaburra' song and independently decided that we weren't going to enjoy this at all.

We laughed our way through the simple song, messing up most of the words and butchering the tune. The audience clapped politely and the host made a generous comment about our singing ability and the enlightening song as we rushed off stage. What followed was, to my ears, even worse. Traditional Japanese singing is called *enka* and this essential part of a *geisha's* repertoire is still considered an art form among the older members of society, but it's an acquired taste. To my untrained ears their yodel was a goldfish trying to warble like a magpie. We sat through three songs, realised it wasn't going to get any better, and left. As ambassadors for our country, we were failures, but we were young and this torture wasn't why we'd come to Japan.

Surely the younger generation played something more modern, I thought, so I asked each of my classmates which radio station they listened to for good Japanese music. "Oh, you don't want to listen to Japanese music," said Hayashi-san. "Try 86.7. They play American Top 40." Eventually I heard the school bands play and stopped asking about Japanese music. They made the Sex Pistols sound like Beethoven. As I heard more, I became convinced that Japanese musical talent compared to Caucasians in the way that Caucasians can be compared to Africans. They just seemed to lack any sense of rhythm.

Then I discovered *taiko* and realised that they have extraordinary rhythm. And in time, I'd learn to appreciate the warbling – a little. And now this girl in the poster – would her music be better? I found a radio station that played a mix of foreign and Japanese pop, J-pop. Much of the Japanese music was ordinary, but one song stood out – a sweet voice accompanied only by a piano. I tried for months to catch the name of song or singer, but the DJ usually announced three songs together, sometimes before and sometimes after they were played. It was beyond my capacity to keep track of the sets well enough to pull out the right name. I soon gave up trying.

Once the rain and humidity of *tsuyu* had returned, Inoue-san told me that her younger brother was in a band and that they had a gig at a local concert hall called 'Chicken George.' She, Hiroko and a few other girls from the office were going to see them and I was invited along. Of course, I accepted.

"Great. He'll be so excited to have a *gaijin* in the audience. We'll leave at six."

We set off into the rain under an awning of umbrellas, and when we headed straight to Chicken George, I protested. "Wait. Aren't we getting dinner first? I need food."

"We want to get good seats," said Hiroko. "Don't worry. There's food inside."

Food turned out to be a small plate of hors d'oeuvres that was part of the 3,500 yen entrance fee. No matter how I calculated it, this was more than it cost me to see U2 in the Sydney Entertainment Centre, and it was to see an unknown local band in a converted warehouse.

There were tables about halfway back from the stage and we sat at one of these. When the first band came on at about seven thirty, Inoue-san started squeaking, "there he is – the bass player." The crowd moved towards the stage, but without cramming into a mosh pit. This crowd showed

self-control. Going to the front was obviously something you were expected to do at concerts, but that didn't mean you stopped respecting the people around you. Our group remained seated and prepared to be entertained. We were.

The music was tight with strong tunes and the band had presence. It was all original music, in a style somewhere between the Clouds and Powderfinger, with a Jagger-esque lead singer. Every few songs, he'd tell a story. I couldn't follow much of it – I gathered it was about their attempts to become famous and occasionally about how the next song came about – but the audience loved it and I couldn't help but join the laughter.

They finished around nine and Inoue-san and the others got ready to leave. "Wait," I said. "Aren't we staying for the main act?" Concerts in Sydney generally had two or three bands, with the main one not starting until after ten o'clock.

"Khasi *was* the main act. Come on. Let's get some dinner."

Trying to avoid the humidity, we jumped into the first restaurant we found – a *raamen* shop. I'm not the biggest fan of *raamen* but there's no arguing with its almost universal appeal as the food to have after a big night out. The huge bowl full of noodles is usually available with pork, seafood, vegetables, garlic and flavourings in much the same way as a pizza – if you can imagine a pizza soup.

The concert inspired me to look for more Japanese music and the first step was to find out who both the girl in the poster and the song on the radio were. I made a copy of the song and asked Ogura-san, since I knew he listened to the same station.

"That's Ganaha Mina," he said immediately. "She's got a radio show called 'Music Freaks' on every Tuesday night at 10pm."

'Today's Tuesday,' I thought. 'I can hear more of her songs tonight.'

I stopped at HMV on the way home to buy her latest album. The cover was of the same pretty young girl bent over an acoustic guitar. My search was over. That night I listened excitedly to the two-hour show on Music Freaks. Ganahami-chan – as she was affectionately known by her fans – bubbled as she spoke, her voice draping itself over me like the cooling spray of *tsuyu* rain. She presented some of her music and a selection of her favourite songs by friends and other artists. We

shared a similar taste in music and I was looking forward to listening to her every week.

"I have some sad news," she said at the end of the show. "Next week will be my last show. I've been doing this for a year. It was a difficult decision for me, but it's time to let someone else have a turn." I couldn't believe it. She'd done this for a year and I'd only catch two shows. "You can join me for a live concert though, at Tenri University next month. It's a sort of rehearsal for the coming tour." I took her up on the offer.

While waiting for the weeks to pass I settled, music-wise, for the routine that the *gaijin* group had fallen into. On Friday afternoon, I made a point of leaving the office by six and snuck into Rizta, the bar next to the office. It was a classy place, with pool tables and walls dressed in burgundy. Francois and I would play pool while chilling out with a drink and listening to the jazz cable radio station that played continuously. Once the rest of the group managed to free themselves from work, usually about seven, we'd head into town for dinner, then to Ryan's for a drink with the rowdy expat crowd. Finally, at around 11pm, we'd move up the hill to Nasca, a Peruvian restaurant / nightclub that was owned and managed by the family of a friend. Sometime after ten, they moved the tables out of the way and started playing Salsa music. There was always someone there to give us some tips on Latin dancing and plenty of willing dance partners.

At last, the day of the concert came. Lisa joined me and we were the only *gaijin* in a sea of a few thousand black heads. It was held in the auditorium, all seated. I felt very out of place for half an hour, sitting at the back of the hall with a bunch of kids, but when the band came on, I forgot about that. They started with '*sayonara no hi*,' Goodbye Day, a song bouncing with percussion that brought the audience to their feet - figuratively. There was enough energy coursing through the crowd to start a riot in Australia, but the Japanese sat obediently in the seats, which wouldn't have been provided if they wanted people to stand up, right? At least that was the logic I assumed they used.

The performance was perfect. They stopped twice to show just how perfect it was. On the first occasion, Ganahami-chan played a wrong note – not that I could pick it – and stopped to bow humble apologies before starting the song again from the beginning. The second was a setup by the drummer. He stopped playing mid-song and the rest of the band gradually petered out, turning to see what was going on.

"Shh. Sssshhhh," said the drummer, looking around. "Someone's phone's ringing. Oh, it's mine." He grabbed his mobile from a bag near the drums. "*moshi moshi*," he said, the typical 'hello' used only when answering the phone. By then the rest of the band was laughing, as were the crowd. "Sorry. I'm actually on stage right now. We're playing at Tenri University." The crowd roared. "Can I call you back later? It's embarrassing." Ganahami-chan was on the floor, red-faced and mouthing something that looked like, "Oh my god." The drummer hung up and they struggled through the song again, Ganahami-chan messing up most of the words with laughter.

It was a break with tradition, probably done only because it was a low-key university concert and their only chance for some spontaneous fun. Or perhaps it was done to give the students permission to break tradition themselves and some people in the audience got out of their seats and started clapping to the music. It was the closest they'd come to dancing at a concert.

Jul 99 – Trek

山登り **(yama-nobori)**

I'd grown up with the motto 'be prepared,' so I was extremely worried about the group before me. Once again, it seemed they'd gone in for form before function. Each of the ten people were decked out in North Face shirts and mont-bell – a high quality Japanese brand – pants and packs, but their packs were tiny. I was guilty of joining them in wearing the latest hiking watch that also measures temperature, altitude and compass direction, but at least I could use it to read a map and roughly forecast the weather. Only two of this group were regular hikers – or trekkers, as they prefer to call themselves – and half the others had never been before. I didn't have much confidence in the 'experienced' pair, either. Nakajima-san from HR, who helped me through my transfer, seemed more beauty queen than outdoorswoman. And Ogura-san from my team had come back from Australia complaining that the rangers wouldn't let him do a six-day walk because he didn't have a tent or sleeping bag. Surely that's common sense.

It was now six in the morning. We'd spent the night on the train, caught taxis up to the start of the walk, watched the sun come up, done *aisatsu* to make sure we all knew each other, and followed Nakajima-san through stretches and warm-up exercises. As I put on my pack, most of the group started laughing.

"Why is your pack so big?" Hiroko asked me. This was only her second time hiking.

"Why are yours all so small?" I retorted.

"We have our raincoats, a change of clothes and lunch. That's all we need. What do you have in your pack?"

"Tent, sleeping bag, food, cooker, spare clothes, first aid kit, twine, compass…"

Everyone laughed. "Why are you carrying so much? We're not going up Everest."

I took Ogura-san aside to voice my concerns, not wanting to shame him in front of everyone else. As we walked off, a new batch of taxis arrived. Between us, the new group and the people

there before us, there were about fifty bodies. "Ogura-san, none of these people have shelter or warmth. There won't be enough room for everyone in the hut. It's dangerous to go up like this."

"Don't worry," he said. I watched a drop of sweat bead on his brow and run down his nose. Perhaps it was just the heat – even with the cloud cover and the two thousand metre altitude, it was almost thirty degrees – but it made me uncomfortable. "This is the way we do it in Japan." He turned and lead the group up the trail. I had no choice but to follow.

"So, what do you think of the mountains in Japan," asked Nakajima-san. She'd hung behind as well. "You don't have mountains this high, in Australia, do you?"

"No, and nothing this steep either, but I'm used to them now from walking up the mountains in Kobe."

"Did you know that Japanese mountains have an incline is at just the angle for climbing one hundred metres every fifteen minutes?"

"What? Exactly?"

"Yes. You can check it on your watch."

She was right. Two hours later I checked my watch again and found that we'd climbed eight hundred metres. "So," I said. "Even the geography follows the rules in Japan."

She laughed. "Ah. I think it's lunch time." Ahead of us, our weary group were taking off their packs and pulling out their convenience store lunches of bread or *onigiri* – rice packed into triangles – all with their own choice of filling. Ogura-san came to sit with me as I pulled mine out. I was having curry bread, with the curry baked inside the dough.

"This is Mt. Fuji lookout. It's too cloudy to see anything today, but we might be lucky tomorrow."

I looked through the gap in the trees – the only sizeable gap I'd seen so far. Despite its reputation for being crowded and technological, the majority of the country is still wooded, saved by the fact that it's too steep to be liveable. There was nothing to see, so my thoughts returned to my concern. "Ogura-san, I'm worried. You saw how many people there were on the walk up. Where are we all going to sleep?"

"Would you quit worrying. We'll sleep in the hut."

For the rest of the lunch I sat quietly, considering. I'm not usually so pessimistic but I grew

up hiking every second weekend and we never went away without assuming that every bit of planning we'd done was wrong. We took at least three meals more than we needed, took winter sleeping bags for hiking in summer and snow gear for hiking in winter, although it never snowed where we went. I'd spent sleepless nights on the cold hard floor of huts and more often slept comfortably in a tent because my group wasn't in the first twenty to arrive at the hut, or preferably because there weren't any huts in the area. Even in my school days in Japan, my classmates had enough sense to take proper equipment.

Four of us had gone to the mountains for a single night during the summer holidays, and camped beside a stream. We'd taken our own food but ended up walking the kilometre to the nearest convenience store, which is never far away – even in the mountains.

We splashed around in the icy stream, went fishing in a nearby trout farm, where fish were so dense that the fun was in trying to get the bait in the water *without* catching one, and sat round a campfire in the evening. I clearly remember that we used tents and sleeping bags because the highlight of the trip was taking down the tents in the morning. I'd suggested a fairly boring practical joke, with wild results.

"Let's take down the tent now," I whispered.

"But Mizuno-san is still getting changed," said Hayashi-san.

"Yes, I know. It'll be fun."

"But he's still in there."

"That's the point." I was still getting blank stares. It wasn't that they were against the idea. They just thought I didn't understand the order of doing things, so I started taking it down myself.

"Hey!" came the cry from inside, as Mizuno-san thrashed about. Every person around me was roaring with laughter at the sight. While the cries for help went on, my friends laughed so hard they couldn't stand up and Hayashi-san rolled on the ground, legs beating out his merriment on the dirt. Afterwards they told me it was the best laugh they'd had in years, and kept referring back to the event for months.

"We'll be fine," Ogura-san said, breaking me out of my reverie. He was squeezing Hiroko's pack

into his.

"Thank you, Ogura-san." Hiroko watched on, humbly. "You're too kind. I could just go back down by myself. Really."

"Nonsense. We're almost there. You won't want to miss the view from Tsubakuro-san." The Japanese word for mountain is *yama*, and mountain names are usually suffixed with this, such as '*inu-yama*,' but big or famous mountains are considered as people and get the *–san* suffix. One of the easiest ways to pick a person who doesn't speak Japanese well is by the way they say '*fuji-yama*' instead of '*fuji-san*.' Our destination, Tsubakuro-san, was high enough to earn the honour. "I hope you haven't got anything in here that isn't essential. I'd hate to be carrying a teddy bear up a mountain."

"How do you feel about a Discman and ten CDs?" she quipped. "No, don't worry. I've only brought the essentials."

He didn't laugh. "Here, take your water bottle," he said and pointed to an almost dry creek. "That water's fresh. You might as well top it up."

I wandered over with Hiroko to fill up my own water bottle while the others started walking. "Why's the water so low? The rainy season's only just ended." I didn't really expect her to know.

"It's probably dammed somewhere further up. They usually are. It's meant to help the environment. Come on, we'll lose the others." The idea that drying up creeks was good for the environment was new to me. I added it to my list of things to follow up on, though I would be almost at the end of my stay before I got any insight.

Shortly afterwards, we stopped at a food station, where many walkers were slurping on *raamen* and a man was selling watermelon outside. My anxiety increased when I realised that there were over a hundred people there, presumably all on their way up. Then we stopped again for a last rest just short of the summit, where the clouds were breaking up. We'd be on top of them soon. I looked out through the increasingly regular gaps for a few minutes, then turned back to the group. Every single girl was holding up a small mirror and applying make-up. I couldn't stop myself from voicing my horror.

"What are you doing? We're at the top of a mountain – three thousand metres above civilisation. Who's going to see you? I thought you were only carrying essentials."

"This is essential," Nakajima-san said, offended by my reaction. "We can't be seen at the hut without make-up, and the sun is bad for our skin." If I'd been the one carrying the extra pack, I would've thrown it at them, but Ogura-san seemed unconcerned by it. Over the years, I came to expect it as well.

Japan is a very humid country and gets a lot of rainfall, so we were walking through dense, green foliage, which made the sight at the top more spectacular. The trees opened out onto a barren, rocky ridgeline. The valley beyond was lush, but the tree line stopped halfway up the next mountain, leaving the top covered in the grey and white of rock and snow. Our ridge was lower so the trees came almost to the top, and the rock was broken only by small tufts of flora. Looking along it, I was reminded of the saddle-worn back of an old horse.

"There's our hut, to the left," Nakajima-san said. I looked, and realised why nobody was carrying as much as me. The 'hut' was huge, covering a good five hundred square metres.

"See!" Ogura-san slapped my shoulder as he walked past. His grin was bigger than the hut. This was his revenge for my condescension after his failed trip to Australia. "This is the way we do it in Japan."

I pulled out my map again and looked at the words '*yamagoya*.' The three *kanji* symbolise the words mountain, small and room respectively, and translate as 'mountain hut.' "You call that a small room? That's a resort."

"Yeah. You should see the big ones." I'm sure he was joking, but I may just have never seen the biggest huts.

As we walked along the ridge, we passed a spot that was set aside for camping – it wasn't permitted anywhere else near the hut, it seemed – but that was already full, so I was forced to move on with the others. We stopped outside to buy a drink and take in the view, then went to find our sleeping place. Checking in as if it really was a resort, we indicated who wanted dinner, breakfast and a packed lunch, and were directed to our allotted beds. We made our way through the maze of rooms and I saw that every room was laid out with Japanese *futon* mattresses and fresh bedding. I couldn't count how many rooms or beds there were, but someone had read in the brochure that it housed around six hundred.

We dumped our gear, and went out to scramble over the rocks to the peak of Tsubakuro-san,

only a few hundred metres distant. As we passed the 'tufts' I mentioned earlier, I was struck anew at how the Japanese environment so defines their sense of beauty. In the middle of large expanses of dull grey rock, pockets of green reigned, supporting a single flower. We watched the sun go down, tinting the rocks orange, before making our way back to the hut.

Dinner was some traditional style seafood with lots of squishy overcooked vegetables, so I chose to cook my own camp food, and sat out in the rapidly decreasing temperatures, hugging my cooker for warmth, while the rest of the group sat in a heated restaurant on the other side of a pane of glass. Once dinner was over, about twenty people came outside to sit with the strange *gaijin* and we sat talking as the light faded. After the obligatory compliments of my expertise in Japanese and at using chopsticks, we started talking about how the youth of Japan don't take advantage of the nature that surrounds them. The hut wasn't full, but of the four hundred or so trekkers there, our group seemed to be the only people under fifty. Personally, I wasn't so amazed that the young people didn't trek, as at the fact that the old people did. Some of them must have been close to eighty and even without carrying a tent and sleeping bag it was a hard climb. I hope that when I'm that age, I still find enough energy to get into the mountains regularly.

We shared the *futon*, two people to each, and shared the room with another group. I barely slept all night for the snoring all around me. Being the closest one to the external wall, I was also quite cold, and was glad when the morning came. Ogura-san, Nakajima-san and I had planned to get up at 4am to walk along to the next peak on the ridge, but rain had started thudding on the tin roof and we decided it was more pleasant to listen to than to walk in. When we finally got up, I sat in the rain to have breakfast, while the others were on the other side of that window making faces at me.

My bowl was unwashed from dinner because the water in the mountains is so precious, and because hikers care enough about the environment that they don't want to pollute it with food scraps and detergent. Instead, they wet a bit of paper towel, sometimes toilet paper, and wiped the bowl clean, then store the dirty paper in a bag in their rucksack. It gave my cereal a meaty taste, but not polluting the mountains with detergent was a good idea so, once the reasoning was explained to me, I decided not to wash my bowls or utensils either.

It was time to leave, and everyone pulled out their mont-bell raincoats and pants in matching

bright pink, yellow, purple or blue. They even had matching covers for their packs. I didn't think they'd appreciate me telling them that they looked like a bunch of Benetton condoms, so I stifled my laughter as we started down the hill. Ogura-san was leading, and had assigned us all positions in the line. Nakajima-san mainly stayed at the back with me.

"What's the big deal about making me walk at the back?" I asked her. "It's really uncomfortable when everyone is so slow. I feel like I'm walking on other people's feet the whole time."

"That's exactly the point. If we let you go first, you'd go rushing off down the mountain and we'd spend the whole time trying to regroup. What did you think I was doing on the way up yesterday? I was watching to see how fast people walk so we could put the slow people at the front and the fast people at the back."

"It's better being spread out. You get to see more." Always being in such a large huddle takes away from the experience of nature, except that you sometimes get a close view of it slapping into your face as the person in front pushes past a rogue branch barring the track.

"You forget that we have bears, here. I don't think you want to experience *them* at close range." She pushed past me to check that everyone else was managing the downhill.

There was no view of Mt. Fuji on the return trip either, so we pushed on back to the car park and *onsen*. "The best thing about walking," Ogura-san told me as he slid into the hot spring, "is the bath at the end."

I sat on the edge, dipping a toe in. Looking up at the snow capped mountains, I thought, 'he's probably right, if I could just get in the bloody thing without burning myself.'

Aug 99 – Return of the Dead

お盆 (o-bon)

Japan Rail and the tollway companies love August. Like Golden Week, it's a time that many companies shut down operations and the whole country goes travelling. Each person heads back to their hometown to visit their grandparents – the dead ones – and for one week in the middle of August, the countryside is dotted with lanterns to guide the spirits home.

Our office remained open and I stayed in Kobe during the celebrations, but I went to an *obon* festival one night with Lisa and John. It was held in *meriken paaku*, an open concreted area on the edge of the bay – I believe the name represents a mishearing of the word 'American.' We arrived just before dusk when the sun's searing heat had departed leaving only the hot, humid air to deal with.

"What's happening over there?" John asked as we passed a table with some sort of official standing behind it. "Those people are signing up for something. Maybe we need to register to do this dance thing."

"I don't think so. Everyone's free to join the *bon odori*," I said, speaking from the experience I'd had in Nagoya. "It's more likely to be a petition like they have in front of my station." Some mornings I had to barge past a man with a megaphone trying to drum up support for some cause or other. As far as I could figure, it was usually for a new airport in Kobe. As I spoke, we rounded the corner into the festival area and I heard a familiar drumming sound.

"*taiko*," said Lisa. "Let's go. I love this." She rushed on ahead.

The group sat on a low stage, all in their late teens and very skilled. They were in uniform, but a girl at the front was clearly the leader. The sleeveless tunic showed off well-defined muscles as she beat away at the drums for almost an hour, her grin never slipping. By the time they'd finished, the park was getting full and we were hungry.

"It looks like they've got international food," said Lisa. "This is a cool festival." There were

so many stalls that it took us half an hour investigating. I finally chose Nasi Goreng, a spicy Indonesian rice dish that I'd been missing since I arrived in Japan. The others were more adventurous, selecting dishes from Africa and South America. While we sat and ate, a band was setting up in a tower like the sound booth at a large outdoor concert but vibrant with red paint and covered with lanterns.

Lisa started talking to the people around us. "*komban ha.* Lisa *desu. matsuri ga suki desu.*" Good evening, I'm Lisa. I like festivals. Our neighbours giggled and told her she spoke wonderful Japanese.

I lost track of the conversation when the band started playing.

"Oh, god no. It's *enka*."

"It's, um… interesting," said John. "The music's not bad, but that singing's awful."

"I kind of like it," said Lisa. "It's like one person singing two songs. Hey, MAG, John, do you want to try some of this kebab? It's delicious." She'd been asking the Japanese people what they were eating, and once again, they'd fallen over themselves to offer her a taste.

"No thanks. I can't eat all their food."

"But it's rude not to accept, isn't it?"

"Yes, but you've put them in an awkward position, too. Japanese people feel compelled to give you something if you say you like it." I'd found myself in many embarrassing positions when, on first entering someone's house, I told them 'I like your Heian Era vase' or 'I like your original *samurai* sword.' Eventually, I found that I could meet the requirements for politeness, without incurring a debt, by saying something like 'you have good taste.' It was always safer to be abstract.

I turned to the Japanese to apologise for Lisa's rudeness, but they were obviously charmed by her. It became clear that their interest was solely in the pretty girl who was struggling with their language and they barely listened to me. I turned back to talk to John, only joining Lisa's conversation when one of them needed something translated.

Eventually the singing finished and I heard the familiar *bon odori* tune so we headed back to the music area. Hundreds of elderly women were streaming around the corner in matching blue and white *yukata*, dancing the special dance reserved for this occasion. I think of the *bon odori* as the Japanese version of the bus stop, though it's steps aren't even that complicated. The group flowed

into the park and around the music stand, making a donut about eight people deep. Their steps were always forward, heel to toe, so the dance was probably designed to be done while wearing *geta*, the wooden thongs, and most of the movement comes from the torso, which twists exaggeratedly with each step, dragging the elbows with it. Heads stay looking forward and hands don't move far from their central position, just above faces. No one out of the uniform was joining in.

"I thought you said we could join too," said John. "That was the whole point of coming."

"I know. I've never seen the dance so organised before. It's disappointing."

The performers continued for almost an hour before taking a break. Then one of the musicians announced the highlight of the night, a *bon odori* competition for *gaijin*.

"Great. Now it's our turn," said Lisa when I interpreted. But a large group of *gaijin* then appeared, all wearing the same *yukata* bearing a number pinned on the front. In small groups, they marched up on to the stage we'd seen the *taiko* group play on earlier, and were paired up with one of the performers to teach them the steps. John went up to talk to one of the *gaijin* waiting his turn.

"That desk out the front *was* for signing up," he said when he returned. "I told you."

"I'm sorry. We should have checked it out."

"He also said that they get the *yukata* free. Do you know how much those things cost?"

This piqued my interest. They started at tens of thousands of yen. But the best I could offer was, "we can always try next year."

Eventually the contestants had all had a turn and the judging was done. Each person came forward in turn to receive the crowd's applause and the judge chose the winner based on the volume of that applause. We followed the performers out and headed back to the station.

There was more to the festival than we saw though, as I found out when talking to a friend later that week. I snuck out of the office one evening for a break before helping a customer with an evening videoconference. Work was piling up even more. Once the Akashi project was over, I'd picked up two new projects, started planning for the bigger job of replacing the phone system in our office and expanded the videoconferencing service from five systems to thirty. Most people still weren't comfortable with the technology and whenever an executive had a call with the US in the evenings, I was asked to stay back to help. On such occasions, I'd often go to Rizta for a drink and a game of pool if there was anyone to play with. That temptation was even stronger now that Miki

had taken over as manager.

Miki was a woman a couple of years older than me with classic Japanese looks and a flirtatious style that had the place busier than ever. We quickly became friends and started seeing each other outside Rizta.

"I brought you a present," she said as she was making my Black Russian. She'd been back to Nagasaki, her hometown in Kyuushuu, for the festival. "It's nothing much, but…"

"Really? Did you get something for all your customers?" I asked as I took the drink. It's traditional for Japanese people to bring *omiyage*, presents, back from a trip as an apology to family and colleagues that they weren't the ones to go.

"Just the special ones." I couldn't help but respond to her smirk. She ducked behind the kitchen screen to her bag then came to sit next to me.

"I'm sorry. It's not even wrapped. I'm not being very Japanese, but I didn't think you'd mind. Here."

"Not at all." It was a small book of fairy tales from Kyuushuu, in large print with pictures – something I could read easily. "This is great. Thank you," I said, then gave her a sly grin. "Will you read it to me as I'm falling asleep?"

"Just name the night," she said, laughing as she leaned against me.

I was never sure if her interest was real, so I changed the topic back to her trip, asking her how they celebrated *obon* in Nagasaki.

"We all got dressed up in *yukata* and danced around a bonfire. There were thousands of people ducking in and out of the dance all night and everyone got drunk on *sake* and *shuuhai*. I wish you could have been there. The *hanabi* were spectacular." *hanabi* means fireworks and translates poetically as 'fire flowers.'

"Well, invite me next year."

"We don't have to wait a whole year to make fireworks." I smiled back, but let the invitation pass. She was like this with all the customers. Well, almost like this. "And we did our own fireworks as well. My family bought a huge package before we went and we let them all off on the festival night. Have you ever done fireworks in Japan?"

"Yeah. We did it for *obon* when I was at school."

I told her how my class had all gathered at a park out of the city for the occasion.

It was a ramshackle park with trees and shrubs and no clear paths – nothing like the plucked dirt of neighbourhood parks. The sun sets early in Japan – even in summer, because of its position at the east of the time zone and the lack of a time change – so by seven we'd finished the barbeque and were breaking out the fireworks. I was mildly surprised because they'd been banned in Australia for years, but then the Japanese aren't as experimental as we are. They don't try to let them off in their hands or aim them at other people.

Once it had become really dark, we all sat down and people took turns telling ghost stories. I did my best to keep up while my classmates all murmured "*kowai*." It's scary.

"What was that?" I asked Hayashi-san, who was sitting next to me. His chubby features looked slightly menacing in the flickering firelight. "He punched the demon?"

"No. He threw the apple at it." The word for punch and throw are the same.

We both jumped when the whole class erupted screaming. "What? What happened?"

"I don't know," he said, frustration plain on his face. "I missed the punch line while I was explaining to you. Oh, we're starting the bravery test now."

After *jan ken hoi* I was paired with Mizuno-san and followed him away from the group, along rough paths, dodging branches that flicked back into my face and listening to the others roaming around us.

"Shit," I shouted as I scraped my shin on a knee-high rock. They were everywhere. "What are we doing here, anyway?"

Mizuno-san was too far in front to hear me. We'd changed direction and were circling around the park when he ran headlong into another pair as he rounded a tree. All three let out a yell of fright then rushed off into the bush again. By the time I caught up, Mizuno-san had bumped into another pair and the process started again. I couldn't believe this tough basketball player and confident class president was acting so cowardly.

After about half an hour, everyone had gathered together to determine who'd been the bravest.

"I think it was Gunn-san," said Shinohara-san, the other class president. "I never heard him scream at all. Nothing scared him." Everyone agreed. "Then Gunn-san gets the bravery award."

Through the cheers, I asked Mizuno-san what there was to be scared of. "I don't get it. We're in a nice park with lots of friends and we could hear where everyone was. What's scary?"

"Didn't you know? This is a cemetery, and now all the ancestors have come back to earth."

Suddenly the dark shapes around me, previously rocks and trees, became gravestones and tentacled ghosts. A cold chill ran up my back and I moved closer into the huddled group. I'd just won a bravery contest through ignorance, but perhaps that's all bravery really is.

Miki was laughing. "Oh, I know that you're brave. You're just being modest." Another empty Japanese compliment.

"Yeah, well. What else happened? What's special about the Nagasaki festival?"

"It's not so particular to Nagasaki, but it finishes with lanterns to guide the spirits back to the underworld. Many people buy a lantern from one of the festival stalls and we put them in the river to float out to sea. The water was really calm, so they floated for miles and the ocean was covered in flickering lights. It was like looking down on a city at night."

'Or like looking into her sparkling eyes,' I thought.

Sep 99 – Journey

旅行 **(ryo-kou)**

"Oh, thank goodness." My mother breathed a sigh of relief when she stepped aboard the *shinkansen* – the bullet train. It was the first time she'd been cool since she and Dad arrived in Japan three days before. They'd spent that time wandering up the mountain and looking in shop windows. I was working for two of those days – still madly testing systems for Y2K – but Miki had covered me, taking them to a Japanese castle and gardens. She and I were still just friends, but the relationship had been developing and promised a lot. Dad fell for her immediately and told me so regularly. The feeling was mutual, it seemed, and each evening when I talked to Miki on the phone, I'd hear just how handsome my father supposedly is. This trip to Hiroshima seemed a good way to split them up.

While Dad and I watched the scenery gliding by, Mum looked through her guidebook. "Murray, I want to get an *ekiben*." The word is made up of *eki* for station and *bentou* for packed lunch. "It says here that they offer some of the best food in Japan. I find that fascinating. Train food is usually disgusting – I guess they don't need to make it good when everyone's so hungry – but here they use it as a chance to show off the local specialties."

I wondered what use I'd be as a guide if she kept getting information from the books. "You should see the Japanese guidebooks, Mum," I said, suddenly realising that I could offer a different perspective. "Food is a big part of the travel experience for them. It's not the main reason for choosing where they go for holidays, but once they've decided, the first thing they do is look up the specialties of the area. Less than half of their guidebooks are about the sights, and maybe a bit on customs if they're going overseas, but half the book is on food and the best places to eat.

"Nagoya has *kishimen*, a kind of flat noodle, and *manjuu*, which are small cakes filled with sweet beans. And Hiroshima is famous for a version of *okonimayaki*." I explained about the omelette / pizza that Lisa had eaten at the Ocean Day festival. "They call it *hiroshima-yaki*. It's

made in layers rather than mixing the ingredients. I like the Osaka version better, though. It doesn't fall apart while you're eating it."

"So how do the Japanese choose where to go?" Dad asked, before Mum could talk more about food. "We even saw them at the castle. They pulled up in a tour bus, ran around, took lots of photos and rushed off again. I thought that was just the way they acted in Australia."

"No, no. That's the way most of them prefer to travel. You've got to remember that they don't get much time off. It's pretty tough for them to get even a week away, so they want to pack as much in as they can."

"It looks exhausting," said Mum. "All that rushing around."

"Exactly. That's why they're generally so demanding. It's meant to be a relaxing time – the only chance they get to relax in the year – and they're paying a lot of money for the trip, so they want to be pampered. They expect to have doors opened for them, to have meals ready before they've ordered, and they don't want to have to struggle with a foreign language."

Dad pulled out his camera to snap a picture of the traditional houses we were passing, and then laughed. "I suppose we can't say much about them taking pictures all the time, either. Now that we've got a digital camera and can delete any photos we don't want, we're taking pictures of everything too."

"Anyway, we've got a couple of hours," I said. "What else is news from home?" We spent the rest of the two-hour trip talking about Brady and Stephanie, my brother and sister. Brady was topping the sales charts in whatever industry he was working in at the time, and it was good to hear that the rebel was pulling his life together. Steph, who has Downs Syndrome that keeps her mentally immature, had moved up near my parents, but without a job to occupy her time she was eating too much. I'd grown apart from both of them, and all the stories seemed to be about people from books.

When the train pulled into the station and we got through the gates, we headed straight for the *ekiben* stalls. They sell them on the platform too, but it's usually a bit more expensive. Mum spent almost half an hour investigating the options before deciding on an *ekiben* of salmon with some special sauce, squishy vegetables and rice.

"Oh, stop pulling faces, you too. I'm not going to share it with you anyway."

Dad and I decided to go for something less fishy and both had *karee raisu*, Japanese curry and rice, which an Indian would describe as a McDonald's version of the real thing, but it's very filling and tasty enough.

We put our bags in the coin lockers provided at the station and headed straight off to Peace Memorial Park, the site of the bombing, to eat our recent purchases. While I looked on in distaste, Mum devoured her salmon only stopping occasionally to exclaim 'yum,' or 'scrumptious.'

After lunch, we walked over to a large monument on the edge of the park, around which were strewn tens of thousands of carefully folded paper cranes – a symbol of hope in Japan. The story of Sakado is known around the world. It's the true story of a young girl who, dying of Leukaemia, believed she would be cured if she folded one thousand paper cranes. She failed, but the story inspired the nation, and every day new cranes are added. On that day, a group of Japanese people were singing songs of peace at the site and Dad joined them to sing 'We shall overcome.' They welcomed him and probably felt that having a *gaijin* in the group gave their cause more strength. He stepped away at the end of the song with tears in his eyes.

"You look like you're glad you came." I was relieved. For all his professed enjoyment of what he'd done, he seemed happier watching my DVDs at home. But I knew this was special to him. He still remembered the day the bomb dropped – on his fourth birthday – even if he didn't understand it at the time.

"Yes. I feel like I've atoned for a guilt I didn't know I was carrying."

Japanese are known for ignoring their part in the war and while many criticise this, I think their dedication to peace is reparation enough. Why blame a nation for the acts of their parents and grandparents? I would go so far as to say that their lack of acknowledgement comes from pride, and deservedly so. Honour and pride are the basis of the *samurai* code, and yes, by our standards, they did horrific things during the war. But they weren't the ones that unleashed the worst weapon the world has ever seen. If they had, they wouldn't have done it in such a cowardly – by their standards – manner. Instead, they took their honour, and what was left of their pride, and embraced peace in a way that no other first world country has. With every passing day, every war they don't interfere in, they are atoning for their past acts. The museum, which this park is built to house, doesn't recognise their part in the war either. There is no blame, no excuse. The message is strong. 'Don't

let it happen again.'

We came out of the museum hours later, emotionally drained and ready for the hotel. Our *ryokan*, Japanese inn, was near the centre of town and looked like any hotel from the outside, but inside it was essentially a Japanese house. I made sure my parents took off their shoes before stepping up into the lobby. One of the staff shuffled over to greet us and offer slippers. She looked a bit disgruntled when I refused, but quickly covered that with a smile. I've tried to follow this custom, but Japanese slippers are made for smaller feet and I can only last twenty minutes with the back edge digging into my heel bone before I start limping, and it's not fun to be limping on both legs.

"It's beautiful," said Mum when we entered the room, taking slippers off to walk on the *tatami* mats. Paper doors separated the *genkan* from the main room, which was laid out with a small coffee table and floor chairs. A scroll of calligraphy hung over a vase of arranged flowers in an alcove in one corner and on the table sat a thermos and a set of ornate mugs for *ocha*, Japanese tea.

"But where do we sleep?"

"Our *futon* are here somewhere." I closed the doors behind me, leaving us surrounded by paper walls, and searched for the other sliding door. I found one, but it covered a window looking onto a plain grey wall. My second attempt was better, opening into a deep cupboard holding four *futon*. "Here they are. The staff will set them up for us later. Right now, I want a bath." There were eight sets of towels and hotel *yukata* arranged discretely in one corner and I quickly changed into the *yukata* while my parents unpacked.

"Are you coming?" They looked confused, and I explained that *ryokan* had public baths and that they could come with me, or go separately, but there would always be other people there.

"Oh. Do we have to wear those robes?"

"You can wear whatever you like, as long as you're covered, but take two towels."

Dad looked at the towels in shock. "I'm going to need four. They're tiny." Each towel was the size of a hand towel.

"Actually, only one is for drying yourself. The other is for hiding behind in the bathroom. Just consider yourself lucky to have one to yourself. My host family used to share the one towel.

With water so hot, you don't really need much."

The sexes are separated so I gave Mum her instructions on how not to offend anyone and led Dad into the Men's bath. We undressed in the outer room, leaving our belongings on a shelf, and went into the main area, covering ourselves with the towel. There were about ten people of various ages already in the room – some washing themselves at taps around the walls, some already in the large *ofuru*, bath, at the back.

"We wash ourselves first, right?" Dad sat down on a stool in front of one of the taps and looked over to see what the natives were doing. One of the old men grinned toothily at him and said something in an accent too thick for me to understand.

"I'm sorry. My father doesn't speak Japanese," I said, choosing my own stool a few seats away from everyone else – no one sat right next to each other if there was space. The old man carried on chattering regardless, occasionally waving his hand at the bucket Dad was holding, or something nearby. His tone was friendly so I assumed he was giving directions. Dad laughed and told the man, "I have no idea what you're saying, but thanks for the advice."

We washed ourselves, tipping buckets of scalding water over our bodies, soaping down, then rinsing in the same scalding water. Finally we were clean enough for the *ofuro* and slipped into the water.

"It's hot," said Dad, his expression adding true feeling to the understatement. We'd chosen the tepid end, but progress was still by inches, taking five minutes to fully immerse ourselves, while the Japanese slipped in easily with contented sighs.

"I'm done," I said, after just three minutes. I was starting to get dizzy.

By the time we towelled off, dressed and met up with Mum in the room, it was time for dinner. We went to the restaurant and chose our seats on the floor. The staff immediately brought out our trays of food and pointed to the communal rice and tea at the centre of the table. *ryokan* don't have menus – everyone gets the same meal.

"Great. Fish and squishy vegetables." There is so much good food in Japan, but *ryokan* always choose the worst of it, in my opinion. Mum loved it.

When we returned to the room, the table and chairs had been neatly stacked in the corner and three *futon* were laid out on the floor. It had been a long day and we all fell asleep straight away.

The next day, we wandered around Hiroshima, while Mum looked in every shop window.

I ducked into one shop to buy a couple of boxes of locally produced biscuits. "They're for *omiyage*. Whenever Japanese people travel, they take back small presents for their family, colleagues and friends that weren't able to go with them."

"So, who are these for?"

"Colleagues." They heard the unspoken 'and.'

"And Miki," they finished together.

When it came time for them to leave, Miki joined me in taking them to the bus stop in Osaka.

"See you at Christmas," Mum said confidently as she got on the bus to the airport. "I can't wait to have the family all together again." Little did either of us know that I'd have my plans for the first trip home shattered by Y2K.

Miki fidgeted all the way back to Kobe. "What's wrong?" I asked, taking her hand. She gripped mine tightly.

"We need to talk." This sounded ominous and I invited her back to my place so we could talk privately, and it all came out.

"I think I've been leading you on," she said, bursting into tears. "I've got a boyfriend already." The story was all too familiar to me now, but this had a twist. She wasn't really happy with him. "He's as scary as the *yakuza*." And where did that leave me? Did she want rescuing? What would a *yakuza* do if he found his girlfriend had been seeing someone else? Were we going to end up diced into little pieces, or whatever the Japanese version of concrete boots was? I didn't say much while this all came out, or even afterwards. What was there to say?

"I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you," she said. "I've got lots of friends that would like you. If you like, I can send one of them to you each night."

Oct 99 – Seasons

季節 **(ki-setsu)**

Snowmen fit the reality of Christmas in Australia about as well as a water fight does in Europe. Climate and the seasons affect culture – even reflect it. In Japan, the weather follows the rules. When the proverbial butterfly flaps its wings in Brazil, causing a typhoon in China and its neighbouring countries, the Japanese have had three months warning. The weather bureau has checked their calendar and decided that the typhoon could be slipped in between the 35-degree muggy day on October 13 and the 35-degree muggy day on October 15.

When I arrived in Japan a year ago, it was only May, but the rainy season, not scheduled until June, had arrived already. There was an air of concern in the streets. Every conversation I overheard questioned the state of the world.

"The rain's come early this year. It must be global warming."

"It's that Prime Minister of ours. First he let the economy slip, and now it's the weather."

"The gods are angry with us."

I understood. In Australia, if the forecast was for rain, I'd confidently leave without an umbrella, but in Japan the forecast was given in accurate three-hour segments. If the rain arrived at ten when it was scheduled to arrive at eleven, then society was crumbling. 'What next?' I found myself wondering. 'Will the trains start running late?' Even the weather bureau had felt the need to apologise for the inconvenience. When the rainy season came on time again this year, the nation breathed a collective sigh of relief.

I'd been introduced to the precision of Japanese weather during my year at school by a climactic downpour.

"*tsuyu* is over," I said to Hayashi-san in late June.

"No. It will rain once more today and then it's over."

I looked outside again. Nagoya was extremely polluted, but I could tell the sun was out from the shadows the building left on the concrete below. "You must be joking. There's not a cloud in the sky."

"There will be. Just wait."

It was a Saturday so classes finished at one o'clock and sure enough, the sky grew angry and began to pelt us with heavy drops as I was walking out to get my bike. This wasn't the delicate rain of *tsuyu*. It was prelude to a violent storm.

"Come back inside," Hayashi-san urged. "It will be over soon,".

"It's only two minutes to home. I should be able to make it before the storm hits." I grabbed my bike and dashed home. Just as I walked into the *genkan*, looking like I'd swam the 1500m fully clothed, the rain stopped. 'No wonder the sky is never blue,' I remember thinking. 'It's just the ceiling of a massive climate controlled warehouse.

With the rain goes the only relief from the tortuous heat – even in the air-conditioned office, the temperature at my window desk climbed to thirty degrees each afternoon – but the city wakes up for summer. Festivals pop up all over the country, some coinciding with national celebrations; others organised by neighbourhoods to enjoy the summer. People fill the beaches, parks and rivers for barbeques and many travel to the Japan Sea for a swim. Outside my window, I listen to young children playing in the back streets each night until well after midnight.

My favourite part of summer is the food. Besides the barbeques, a number of special dishes become available in restaurants. At Sojibou, which specialised in a type of noodles called *soba*, I could order *zarusoba* only in summer. Rather than being served in a bowl of soup, *zarusoba* were served cold on a bamboo tray, to be dipped in a cold sauce before eating. For added flavour, they also provided a fresh *wasabi* root and a grater so you could add it to your taste. My taste was for enough to give my nose a good scrubbing.

I'm cursed with a permanently dripping nose from allergies to dust, milk, herbs and probably seafood and squishy vegetables. In Japan, it's considered rude to blow your nose in public, and downright disgusting to put a dirty tissue or handkerchief back in your pocket. So for months I ran to the bathroom every ten minutes to mop up the puddle on my lip, but eventually gave in and

honked my snoz at my desk. After all, I reasoned, Ogura-san spent his day hacking up the same fur ball and swallowing it again, and nobody complained about him. If he was allowed to gross out the *gaijin* with disgusting Japanese habits, then I would do my part to return the favour.

Towards the end of summer, typhoons form near the Philippines and rush up through tropical Asia to peter out around Japan. Of the twenty or thirty that start each year, only a few make it to Kobe. Even less made it to Nagoya, much to the disappointment of Akiko and Takeshi. On mornings when typhoons were expected, my host siblings would eagerly watch the TV, waiting for an announcement that school had been cancelled. It never was while I was there.

Personally, I still loved typhoons anyway, because they carried all the pollution and humidity away, leaving the air crisp and the sky blue for a day.

Winter starts at the beginning of November, after the typhoons have blown themselves out. The transition between seasons isn't as gradual as it is in Australia. The bureau turns down the heat on November 1 and turns it back up on April 15.

"When is this heat going to end?" I asked Mizuno-san, wiping sweat from my forehead.

"On Thursday," he told me, seriously.

"Yeah, right." I'd forgotten about the ceremonial end to the rainy season and the accuracy of the weather forecasts.

"It's true. We have to wear our winter uniform starting Thursday. Every school in Nagoya changes on that day."

"Why? What's so special about Thursday?"

"That's when winter starts."

I sweated even more just thinking about wearing the winter uniform in that heat. They'd be cleaning a Murray-shaped puddle from the floor beneath my desk. But again, true to their word, the weather changed. On Thursday, I was sitting in the classroom dressed in a thick white shirt with a heavy suit – trousers and a blazer since my school had abandoned the traditional military coats – and shivering despite the windows being shut tight.

I had the same experience every year I was in Japan. One night, I'd be walking home at midnight,

sweating in a short sleeved shirt, and a few days later I'd be grabbing my coat when we went out for lunch. The opposite happened in April. There were only ever about two weeks of the year that could be called comfortable, the rest being cold, hot or wet.

Each year, when the cold hit, we'd grab our coats and head into the mountains to enjoy the colours of the leaves. Platforms in Kyoto were crowded with people hopeful to catch a train into the hills north of the city, but the wait was often hours long. It's always worth it though, to walk on carpets of red and orange, turned to fire by the sunlight filtering through the leaves that still bravely clung to their twigs.

The country hibernates once the leaves fall. Inoue-san, for example, refused to go out after work because she couldn't enjoy herself when it was so cold. Most people sit inside with the heaters on, and their feet spread out under a *kotatsu*. These heated tables have a quilt skirt and a family will usually sit under them to chat or watch TV each evening.

It's at this time that the famous surgical masks appear en masse and I'd like to clear up a misunderstanding most of us have. These masks aren't because of pollution, and they're not even worn from fear of catching a cold. They're worn purely out of consideration for others – the people wearing the masks already have a cold and are trying not to spread it.

In April, the weather warms up and the plum flowers come out, followed shortly by the cherry blossoms. People leave their heated homes briefly for romantic walks and group picnics. I have to admit that I lied a bit about being purely out of consideration for others. Once spring comes, people start wearing them to combat hay fever. Since so much of Japan is forested, for a few weeks in May the cities are carpeted in pollen.

Then the rain starts and the cycle begins again.

I reflected on this as I joined my colleagues around Ogura-san's desk, looking at the satellite photos of an approaching typhoon. Talk was that it was big enough to cancel school and work for, though I no longer believed that myth. Still, I'd followed the news for a few days, watching cyclone-Tracey-like destruction in Taiwan and Okinawa as it passed.

"Typhoon number twenty-three is expected to hit Kobe at around three o'clock. Please make preparations to leave on further instruction." The announcement over the PA caused a mixture of delight and fear – one for the time off; the other for the weather to come. I could only be excited.

This would be my first time in a real typhoon – or what I thought of a real one, anyway. The others I'd been in had seemed milder than the storms that hit Sydney in January. We followed the progress for hours, listening keenly for permission to leave. It didn't come.

"Typhoon twenty-three is expected to hit within the next hour. If you have children to take care of, please leave immediately. Otherwise, for your safety, please remain in the building until the typhoon has passed. We expect that to be at about seven o'clock."

I was disappointed. That meant I was to be stuck in the building while the adventure was out there. The wind built over the next couple of hours, and rain blurred the scenery outside. My colleagues held their stomach every time they saw my water jug sloshing on the desk as the building swayed. It had little effect on me. The building was designed to sway so that it wouldn't break in an earthquake, so it wasn't anything to be concerned about.

Perhaps it was a morbid thought, but I wanted to experience a real typhoon – to feel the fear that made my colleagues walk around with their backs arched and tails lashing. I could understand the *shinkansen* stopping, and the office lifts, even the planes being grounded, but why stop work or cancel school? The fear seemed superstitious, like that of people who don't use the phone during a storm in Sydney because of stories of people killed when lightning hits the wires. There must be a basis to this fear, but no one was able to tell me what it was. I decided to go out into the typhoon to see what the fuss was about.

Rokko Island doesn't have much in the way of shelter from the south. These winds could show me their full force as I stood in the River Mall, outside the office. The ponds were rough with ripples from heavy drops hitting the surface and the wind would have blown any umbrella inside out. But there were no trees falling over. No flying cows. I screamed my defiance at the wind. "Is that all you've got? For a natural disaster, you're pathetic." If I thought that would inspire the storm to a new frenzy, I was mistaken. But the typhoon was taking its effect. My clothes were soaked through and the wind – cold after the heat of summer – was freezing it to my skin. I retreated back into the building where I dried off considerably during the sixteen-floor climb to my desk.

The typhoon moved on and the next day dawned crisp and blue.

Nov 99 – Language

言葉 (koto-ba)

sassoku, *sekkaku*, *sokkuri*, *hakkiri*. I poured over the adverbs in a sample exam in preparation for the Japanese Proficiency Test. There was a definite pattern that differentiated them from other Japanese words – three syllables with a double consonant on the second. Or by the Japanese way of measuring, four characters with the second indicating a doubling of the following consonant. It was a pattern, but how was I ever meant to remember which was which when they were so alike? When translated to English, they often didn't even look like adverbs. *sassoku* could be 'immediately,' and *hakkiri* could be 'clearly' or 'precisely.' Even *sokkuri* had the required 'ly' if you said he looks 'exactly like' you. But *sekkaku* defies all attempts at being moulded in English. Followed by the word for 'came', it would say 'you went to so much effort to come all this way,' and preceding the word for 'made,' it would mean 'you went to so much effort to make it.'

The others sample questions weren't any easier. Japanese is full of onomatopoeia and it wasn't difficult to remember words like *saa-saa* or *zaa-zaa*, the sound of rain falling lightly or heavily, respectively. Dogs are often called *wan-wan*. Now, it's not easy for most of us to get this connection, but you have to recall that Japanese have little space, so they usually go in for small dogs of the yapping sort. If you also know that the *n* sound stops in the throat like an unspoken 'ng,' then you can work out that the Japanese *wan-wan* sounds something like the 'wow' in bow-wow. It gets difficult with words like *chira-chira*, that I can only remember because in this case its 'flicker' caused a month of agony to my eyes. I once saw a game show where Japanese experts attempted to guess the correct usage for a list of onomatopoeia. I didn't take notes on the day to get any of the really difficult ones, but flicking through the dictionary, I found *zoro-zoro*, which represents the way people stream off a bus at a major stop.

I had more luck with the various levels of politeness because I came in contact with it almost every day, though I didn't know it well enough to use it. In theory, I should have been respectful to

my boss, humble to my vendors and colloquial with my colleagues, but I generally stuck with the plain forms. No one ever expected more from a *gaijin*, and just showing that I knew I wasn't speaking properly was appropriately humble in most cases. These levels of language, along with the gender specific forms have always been tricky. Many a *gaijin*, including myself has inadvertently learnt the feminine forms because the host mother is the only person who really has time to talk to them. It can be extremely embarrassing to realise you're using the feminine form when you're in a male bonding session at an *izakaya*. Rather than making everything clearer, the higher forms help to create ambiguity in any conversation. Consider the word *irassharu*, which can mean 'come,' 'go,' or 'be.' The sentence '*ie ni irassharu*' could be interpreted as 'she's going home', 'she's coming home,' or 'she's at home.'

"Why is this so much harder than last time?" I asked my *sensei*. I'd done the level 2 exam during my year of school and had scraped through without ever seeing anything like adverbs, onomatopoeia or having to worry about the formal and humble forms. I'd decided to take the same test again as a warm up before the level 1 exam, but soon realised that I had little chance of even passing the level 2 again. "Surely the language didn't get more difficult while I was away."

She laughed. "No, it didn't, but more people started learning Japanese and too many people were passing the high levels. Chinese students are a particular problem because they could guess most of the answers from the *kanji*. But then they'd start university and couldn't understand anything." The level 1 exam was a requirement to studying in a Japanese university. "So they added more things that can't be guessed just with the *kanji*."

"They'd have been better off adding an oral test. I could have passed easily, then."

"Yes, but could you have read a textbook?"

It was a fair comment. The Japanese education system relied very little on the teachers' ability and heavily on the students' reading ability. I could read books meant for a twelve-year-old, but had only minor success with newspapers and textbooks. Mind you, I wasn't particularly interested. I began to realise that the test wasn't important to me. University had been in my plan many years ago, but then I got a transfer with the company. Now I had nothing to prove. I knew my Japanese was good. I knew because I did all my business in Japanese, with very few misunderstandings. I also knew because people had stopped telling me my Japanese was good.

I was in a private lesson with Ishii-sensei in the room set aside for *gaijin*. It was the most comfortable room in the school, with big soft seats covered in red velvet and full length windows. I was meant to be reading a primary school novel, but had finished it at home, so I started a conversation instead. "Hans' Japanese is really good, isn't it?" Hans was another exchange student who'd been living in the countryside. He'd joined my class for a week on a sort of mini-exchange to give him a taste of city life.

"It's not as good as yours," she said. I took this as just another empty compliment, but after a few moments I realised she was serious.

"What do you mean? He knows twice as many *kanji* as me. He can almost read a newspaper. And he's got a huge vocabulary."

"True, but that's not important if we can't understand what he says." She quickly pointed out that his accent wasn't bad, but mine was perfect. I'd put a lot of effort into it, so I was gratified to hear that I'd chosen the right focus. "You may not know as many words as he does, but I don't need to concentrate when I listen to you. And you're always able to explain everything clearly, even if you don't know the exact word to say it quickly."

"So it's really a good idea for anyone learning Japanese to start with the writing." South Americans find it easiest to learn Japanese because, aside from the 'd,' the sounds are the same as South American Spanish. Australians also have an advantage because the five Japanese vowels are in our set of vowel sounds – あ as the 'u' in cut, い as the 'i' in pit, う as the 'u' in put, え as the 'e' in pet, and お as the 'o' in pot – and our consonants are similar. The only one that causes us trouble is the 'r' sound which is the Spanish 'r,' made by flicking your tongue against the roof of your mouth like the 'd' it resembles. But instead of flicking it near the teeth, flick it inside the dome.

Having said all that, even Australians aren't going to be able to speak Japanese well if they keep reading it in Roman script. The temptation to pronounce 'a' as in pat, to use our 'r,' or to join two separate vowels into a diphthong is too strong. And we'll always put an accent on one of the syllables to make it sound more English, where true Japanese is spoken in machine gun patter with no emphasis at all. The combination of these effects makes us sound like a Japanese version of Sylvester Stallone.

There are other distractions if you use Roman script as well, such as the lack of spaces, capital letters or an 's' to indicate a plural. The Japanese scripts make it easy to differentiate words without the spaces we use, and capital letters don't add any value. In English we have a few words that we don't pluralise with an 's' – sheep, fish – but the Japanese only have a few that they do. As in English, it's clear from the context.

"They should at least start by learning *hiragana*," she said, meaning the simplest character set made up of syllables – a consonant paired up with a vowel, or a vowel alone. "Yes. Everyone should learn *hiragana* first. *kanji* isn't so important, though."

"I disagree. Once you've made a start in the grammar, you need some *kanji* to flesh out your vocabulary. It saves so much time in trying to learn new words by rote. You can just make them up."

"You can't just make up words," the *sensei* protested. "We'd never understand you."

"Well, not really make them up, but guess. I think I truly understand about sixty percent of what I hear. I guess at another twenty or thirty percent, and the rest usually isn't important. Take the holiday we just had, for example. Someone told me it was *kempou kinenbi*, but I didn't know any of those words. I had to ask what *kempou* meant, but I could guess that *kinenbi* was made up of 記念 'for memory' and 日 'day.'" I wrote on the whiteboard as I spoke. "And when I was filling out a form for the speech contest, they asked my address three times" One of my proudest moments was placing fourth in a Japanese speech contest for *gaijin* who'd been in Japan for up to eight times as long as me. "I knew the character for same, 同, and the character for above, 上, so I just used those together, 同上, to say 'as above' and got it right."

"You're thinking like a Japanese already," she joked. "You don't need me to teach you."

One of the things I love about Japanese, is that it's like a lego set. All the pieces fit together in any way you want. Typically, the subject goes first and the verb goes last, but it's common to break even this guideline. To change the tense of the sentence, you only need to modify the verb. One extension turns it to past tense, another negates the entire sentence, and another makes it a wish. You can then string them together so that 'go' becomes 'didn't want to go.' There are rules for how this is done, but compared to other languages, they're remarkably simple and unlike Spanish, for example, there are very few exceptions.

Another thing I love about learning Japanese is that it provides insights into the history of the culture and the thinking process of the people. "You can always teach me about the history of the words."

"What do you mean?"

I picked up the marker again and began drawing. "Like this one 名 that could be pronounced *mei* or *myou* depending on the word it's in – and that's just the Chinese readings. But the Chinese would only use something like *mei*."

"Ah. I think I can answer that one. For many centuries, Japanese scholars went to China to study and they brought back new words all the time, which we incorporated into Japanese. We kept the pronunciation the same, but the Chinese language evolved and they started pronouncing it a different way, so we brought back new words with the same *kanji* but different sounds."

"That makes sense. I guess something like that could have happened with *atsui*."

"I don't follow."

"Look at these symbols. 熱 and 暑. They're both pronounced *atsui* and both mean hot. Why are they written differently?"

"Because they have different meanings. The first one is hot to touch and the second is for weather."

"Yes, but why are they pronounced the same, then? I'm guessing that the Japanese originally had one word for both, but there was no way of writing it. Then these scholars came back from China with two symbols, each covering part of the meaning you had. The words that contained these *kanji*, like 高熱, fever, and 残暑, late summer heat, were incorporated into the language and people came to see them as different meanings."

"You could be right. You'd have to ask a true linguist."

Unfortunately, I've never met any, but I remain convinced that I'm right. And even if I'm not, it keeps things interesting and makes it easier to learn the language. I love looking at *kanji* and seeing how they're constructed. 鯨, the symbol for whale, is made up of two parts – the left is 'fish' and the right is 'capital' – indicating that it's the most significant fish. 海老, the word for prawn or shrimp, is made up of two symbols meaning 'ocean' and 'old man,' and it's easy to see these shrivelled up creatures as old men of the sea.

Perhaps the most frustrating thing about Japanese is that fact that any part of the sentence that's already known or considered common knowledge is left out. We do this in English too. If someone asks, 'where did Mike go?' we wouldn't answer 'Mike went to the pool.' We'd just say, 'to the pool.' But the Japanese have had a lifetime of talking around facts and understanding what is implied, and we *gaijin* are often left behind. I came home from school early one afternoon so that I could go to the bank. Even so, I was running late. My host mother greeted me as I came in.

"The bank shuts at four o'clock, so…" Then she wandered into the kitchen.

I looked at my watch. It was already fifteen minutes to. Was she telling me I was too late? I followed her into the kitchen to hear the rest of her sentence.

When she saw me, she repeated again, "shuts at four o'clock, so…"

Totally confused now, I followed her into her study. She realised I was following her and, with exasperation creeping into her voice, said again, "shuts at four o'clock, so…"

"So…?"

"So," she shouted, "hurry up!"

Dec 99 – Food

食べ物 **(ta-be-mono)**

The woman looked at me in shock. "A kilogram of beef in one piece? I'm very sorry. I don't know where you'd find that. Let me check with the other staff."

I'd gone to my local supermarket, knowing they wouldn't have what I wanted, but hoping that they'd send me somewhere that might. The woman exchanged giggles, hidden politely behind hands, with the other staff. "I'm sorry," she said, when she returned. "You might try the *shoutengai*." These shopping streets traditionally have a roof spanning between the buildings on either side, and every shop specialises. It's not simply that you'll find a butcher, a bakery and a grocery store next to each other as you would in Australia. Here, I had a poultry shop, a beef shop, a pork shop, and one each for fruit, vegetables, bread, tofu, rice, and each type of noodle. Interspersed with them were shops selling furniture, cakes, souvenirs, TVs, and even a bathhouse for people living in older apartments that didn't have baths. I walked along this street every morning to go to the station, and every evening, I'd come home the same way, always fascinated by the sight.

Now, I walked past the man polishing a giant apple worth 400 yen and past the man rearranging carrots – in bundles of three – in the vegetable store. I stopped at a fruit shop with an old lady snoring at the back. The lady in the tofu shop came over to wake her up while I looked at the day's selection.

"Oh, excuse me. I didn't see you there. You must shout next time. What would you like today? Some crunchy apples, right? We're almost out, but I have some out the back that I kept for you. It's 550 yen for four."

"Thanks. I'll take those," I said, knowing that even stock hidden out the back was going to be better than the average apple found in Australia. "And those two bananas second from the front, please." I'd tried collecting my own fruit rather than making her walk, but she always waved me

away, so I watched as she shuffled over with her back hunched to pick each item up and put them all into plastic bags. When the whole process was through, she went into her usual spiel, bowing as much as her back would allow.

"*arigatou gozaimashita. itsumo osewa ni nariamasu.*" Her daughter, who'd been out the back, rushed out to join in, bowing deeply. "Thank you so much. You're always so kind to us."

Almost every day I did the same, stopping at the fruit shop, but usually going to the supermarket for everything else, to buy the ingredients for the night's dinner. I often wondered whether the groceries were sold individually – or at least, in very small numbers – because everyone shopped every day, or if it was the other way around. Either way, shopping daily was now the norm, and each shop did their best to make the few pieces they had look inviting, from polishing each item to using UV lighting to give them a glow. Unfortunately, this means you have to be very careful what you eat. Japanese people even peel grapes for fear of poisoning.

The other problem with buying food in such small, perfect sets is that the cost is very high – often twice the cost of eating out. Restaurants probably get discounts for buying in bulk and not demanding perfection. I'd have eaten out every day if restaurants had included more vegetables in their dishes. When tourists tell you how expensive it is to eat in Japan, it's because they're eating in hotels or other prominent restaurants on the main street.

Finally, I made my way over to the beef shop, where I had recently found that my belief that beef prices had fallen in the last ten years was wrong. The sign said 900 yen, but it wasn't per kilogram as I'd hoped. Nine hundred yen bought only 100g of bite-sized slices. They didn't have anything uncut and didn't know where I could get any.

The supermarket next to the office said they could arrange it for me, but it wouldn't be ready for two more days. I needed it tomorrow. In desperation, I started asking around the office. Finally I got lucky.

"My mother has a friend who's a butcher," said Inoue-san. "Her shop is just near where you live. What do you want a kilo of beef for anyway?"

"A Christmas celebration. I want to cook an Australian roast for some friends."

"That's going to cost you a fortune."

"I know, but I have that Christmas bonus to use and I need to do something to compensate

myself for staying in Japan over New Year."

I'd worked very hard over the last eight months to ensure that all my systems were compliant with the 4-digit year format that was necessary for continued operation into 2000. Jemma and Damion were both going back to Sydney for New Year. Damion had moved to Tokyo in July, but I'd only seen him once since then. I'd only seen Jemma once in the last four years and we'd both been invited to join Damion's family on their yacht to watch the fireworks from Sydney Harbour. It would be my first trip back to Australia and I had it all planned – a week with my parents for Christmas and a week with friends over the New Year. I was ready to book my tickets when I got the bad news. Far from letting me leave, they were bringing in additional experts to work shifts with Ogura-san and I. The company had decided that telecommunications was the biggest concern for Y2K and since Kobe was one of our largest sites, it needed special attention. No matter that I'd gotten guarantees from every vendor for every piece of equipment. No matter that I'd already changed the dates on every system and ensured they would work. No matter that I'd upgraded or replaced every item that may have caused a problem. I would have to stay in Kobe to work from 4am to 1pm every day, living in the hotel across the road from work so I could be in the office within twenty minutes even off-shift.

If I had to be in Japan at Christmas, I was determined to enjoy it, and splurging on a slab of meat seemed as good a way as any. Inoue-san called her mother's friend and made the arrangements.

I went to have a look the next day and was shown a beautiful, if rather fatty piece of meat. The best beef in Japan is known as Kobe Beef, even though it's no longer raised in Kobe, and each cow is fed beer and massaged to marble the meat with lines of fat. Mizutani-san, my voice mail vendor, had joked that it was losing popularity because Japanese men now preferred to have their beef, beer and massages separately. It was a surprisingly western style of Japanese humour, but he did speak English fluently, so perhaps it wasn't Japanese humour after all.

"This is Hanako." The butcher showed me a certificate of quality with a photo of a cow like any other. "The meat is cut from the rump on the left side." This time, she held up a chart of a dissected cow.

I wanted to say, 'Really? What were her hobbies? Did she have any brothers or sisters?' I

don't know why anyone would want to know exactly what they were eating. Wasn't that the point of slicing the meat and packing it in Styrofoam trays? It's not such a shock to me though, because my parents have generally got one of their calves stored in the freezer whenever I visit.

"How much?" I asked instead, cringing.

She told me the price per hundred grams, then put it through her abacus to multiply by 10, then decided to give me a discount for buying in bulk. "Thirteen thousand yen."

I could buy a DVD player for that. Still, it was to be a special occasion, so I paid up.

A kilo wasn't going to be enough for eight people, but it was all I could fit in my oven. To cover the rest, Masako and Masaya offered to cook *nabe*, a kind of Japanese fondue. They arrived early to set up, bringing Lisa with them.

"We've got to buy the ingredients," said one of the girls. I still hadn't managed to remember which was 'ya' and which was 'ko.' "We'll be back soon."

"I'll come with you. According to Mum, I just leave this in the oven for a couple of hours, so I have time to kill, and I'm interested to see what ingredients you buy in case I have the energy to cook it myself, one day."

As we wandered through the supermarket, Masaya/ko explained, "*nabe* is a winter dish that's cooked on the table in front of everyone. It's named after the wide saucepan we cook it in. You place the saucepan on a burner, then fill it with water or *sake*, depending on the type. Once it's hot, you put in some thinly sliced meat, tofu and vegetables," she'd said, picking up a Chinese cabbage and waving it at us before adding it to the basket. Next to her, Masaya/ko picked up a few packets of noodles and added them to the basket.

I love going through supermarkets in new countries because you find so many interesting things and learn a lot about the people. If you ever travel, look for a man in a supermarket muttering, "look at the size of those dogs" or "all they sell is chilli?" It will be me. In Japan, my mutters were of "so many tentacles!" and "they call that a vegetable? It looks like a sponge." When I first arrived, I spent a couple of days looking around the supermarkets, wondering at the Dewey system used to group the items – what thought process goes into placing noodles next to cabbage. Now I had a good working theory. They were grouped according to the meals they were used in.

Back at home, the roast turned out perfectly, and was ready minutes before John, Hiro,

Francois and his new girlfriend, Sae, arrived. Strange as it was to be eating the beef alone, everyone agreed it was the best beef they'd ever had in Japan and a few asked for the recipe. By the time we were done, the girls had the *nabe* ready to go.

We made two *nabe* that night – one standard, with water and beef stock, and a *kimuchi nabe*, with Korean chilli cabbage. Other famous versions include *sukiyaki* and *shabu-shabu*. The former is cooked in *sake* and dipped in a lightly beaten raw egg before eating. The latter has meat sliced so finely it cooks with a few swishes through the water. It's named for the swishing sound.

One of the girls had used a pair of long cooking chopsticks to add some of each ingredient to the pot. As it cooked, we picked out what we wanted, dipped it in our own sauce bowl and ate it.

"You use the same chopsticks to pick out the food as you put in your mouth?" asked Lisa, looking in horror at the way everyone was eating. "What if someone has a cold?"

"We're all friends, so it doesn't really matter," replied one of the girls, "but sometimes if a person knows they have a cold, they'll use the fat end of the chopsticks to transfer the food from the *nabe* to their bowl, then eat from the thin end."

It was another of those dichotomies so common in Japan, I reflected. They don't kiss their partner, but sharing body fluids with strangers through sex and *nabe* is normal.

Near the end, we'd added the noodles. "They soak up all the flavours of everything else and are a delicious way to finish the meal." Masaya was right. Or it might have been Masako.

And finally, the party was over. John, Lisa and Francois would catch planes home over the next few days, and I would move into the Sheraton.

"Enjoy the New Year, MAG," said Lisa. "I'm sure there won't be too much for you to do."

"That's exactly what I'm worried about," I said. I was terribly certain that I'd be sitting in the office for a week with nothing to distract me from thoughts of New Year on Sydney Harbour.

Jan 00 – New Year

お正月 **(o-shou-gatsu)**

"What's for dinner? Do we get a pig on a spit?" I tried to make my voice jovial, but failed miserably. I really didn't want to be in the office on New Year's Eve.

"Close. Here." I caught the packet that Ogura-san threw. Some of the others were already eating. Looking around, I was glad of the company. All together, there were seven of us spending the *shougatsu*, New Year, break in the office, and everyone had gathered for the initial test.

"Curry rice. Even better." I managed to keep my smile in place. "Do we get one or two pieces of meat in this?" After a couple of blasts in the microwave, I sat staring at the brown slop. Normally I loved curry rice, but a part of me was determined not to enjoy the evening, or any part of the next few days. I was a victim of my own industry's push for recognition and higher salaries. I had no doubt that Y2K could be an issue, but we'd done everything we could and I was just as confident that I had a week of no work to look forward to. Worse, I couldn't see how the market could provide enough work for IT consultants after Y2K. With so many people joining the game, we were setting ourselves up for lower salaries and unemployment – quite the opposite of the goal.

Still, I'm a pragmatist and a small voice told me that the game had started – that I had no choice but to be here this week, so I might as well make the most of it. I joined the others in a meeting room where they'd set up a TV to watch the New Year specials. I'd done the same with my host family on both exchanges – it seemed everyone in the country did – sitting under the heated *kotatsu* while a news presenter reviewed the big stories for the year. They usually covered a story on the emperor as well as touching on crime, celebrity weddings, and even some international news, but I've never been interested in what most people call news and usually let it wash over me. Finally, I was totally bored and went to start up my PC to browse the web for some Australian music that I wouldn't be able to buy here – my own version of masochism.

"MAG-san," called Hiraki-san from the meeting room. "They're showing the Sydney

fireworks." It was 10pm in Kobe, but Sydney was two hours ahead. They were already in the new year.

"I don't want to watch it." I knew I was being sulky, but I felt I had every right to be. Picking up the phone, I dialled Damion's number, and got a message saying the international lines were busy. Of course, every company with a branch in Sydney would be calling in for a status check. Forty minutes later, I finally got through and the fireworks were still going.

"Murray! You should be here. They've put on a brilliant show this year – the best I've seen."

"Yeah, thanks."

He picked up my tone and changed tack. "But it's not all great. The harbour is really crowded and the wind's cold."

"If you're trying to cheer me up, it's not working."

He laughed. "OK. Jemma wants to speak to you." Jemma wasn't going to give me false cheering. She gasped as soon as she took the phone.

"Oh, Murray. You should see this. They just set the Harbour Bridge on fire."

I ran into the meeting room. The feed came from a helicopter hovering over the harbour. A waterfall of golden fire flowed from the Bridge to the harbour a hundred metres below. More than ever, I wanted to be with them. The Harbour Bridge is just a hunk of metal, but seeing this aerial view was too much like landing in Sydney after a long trip. My chest clenched as I looked at it – a false homecoming to taunt me. I made polite conversation for a couple more minutes, then hung up gratefully.

A bit more than an hour later, the seven of us were gathered around a PC, watching the world clock tick over. We started the countdown for the Japanese New Year.

"Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one." We all looked at each other, but there was nothing to celebrate and no one to kiss. "Test time," we mumbled in unison.

Each of us began logging on to our various systems to check they were working properly. It was routine by now. We'd done this a few times for each system and knew full well that they'd work.

"*hanabi*," cried Ogura-san, and we all rushed to the window to watch. They were held at *meriken paaku*, a few kilometres off, and looked about as big as a coin held at arms length from

here. Fireworks were a part of New Year in Japan too, but I'd usually seen them on TV, and as soon as they finished, the family would rush off to ring in the new year, literally.

In Nagoya, my host family had taken me to a local temple and, because everyone in the country is doing the same thing, ended up in a queue an hour long just to get through the gates. Many of the women were dressed in beautiful *kimono*. The men were in business suits. With the traditional respect for privacy, there wasn't much interaction between the groups in line, but we met Jemma and Kat there with their host families so I spent the time catching up with them. Their last week had been similar to mine.

"And it was as though Christmas never even happened," said Jemma. "There were no decorations in the stores at all."

"I know. I even went to school on Christmas Day," I told them. "When I came home, Okaasan got out a Santa cake. That was the first time I realised what day it was."

"I knew," said Kat. "There was no way I was going to let them send me to school, but sitting at home was probably worse. It was too quiet. It's the most homesick I've ever been."

Once inside the temple, we'd followed the line of people around to cleanse ourselves at a carved stone trough. I watched my host family carefully, then copied them, picking up a long handled ladle and filling it from the stream flowing into the trough. After pouring a little over each hand, I took a sip and went to spit it out.

"Not in the trough," Akiko warned. Shocked at her urgency, I took a step back to spit into the drain. I certainly didn't want to incur the wrath of any gods.

"Gross," said Kat, but did the same, whatever she thought of spitting and of sipping from the same cup as everyone else.

Further on was the real point of coming to the temple. In the middle of a small courtyard stood a thick wooden frame supporting a green iron bell. It was huge – at least four feet tall and almost as wide at the bottom. The gong was a thick limb suspended at each end by wrist-thick rope, and each person was pulling it back gently a couple of times, before letting it fall against the bell.

"Let's see what sort of sound it can make," I said to Takeshi. "The gods probably can't even hear the chime with the delicate taps everyone's giving it."

"OK. You go first and we'll see who can make the loudest gong."

When my turn came, I swung the gong back hard, but Akiko rushed in to catch it before it could swing forward. I looked at her panicked expression as she fought against the weight.

"That's not a good idea," she said, breathless. Around me, everyone had their hands up to cover their ears. Takeshi was laughing, oblivious to the lecture Otousan was giving him. My host parents must have thought that he'd put me up to it. The gods knew it was me and weren't impressed. My wish for some food to stave off my hunger – a reasonable wish, it seemed to me – was not granted. Perhaps I was meant to wish for world peace.

In the office, after a few minutes of the fireworks, we all decided that testing was more interesting and went back to work. Calls started coming in from our contacts in the factories to say that everything was fine and we laughed at the ludicrousness of it all. Nothing was going to fail. We were wasting our time.

"I've got one," called Tim, an American contractor who did all the technical work for PC projects. We ran over to see what the problem was. The company used the same few models of PCs all over the world. If one failed, they all would and it would cost a fortune to replace them all

"Where'd you find that?" asked Hiraki-san. "Are we still using them?"

Tim's grin was huge. "No, but I knew we wouldn't have any problems, so I kept an old one in the store room for the occasion." At least someone was having fun.

Thankfully, Hiraki-san decided that there wasn't much risk of issues and cancelled the idea of working shifts, so I went back to the hotel to get some sleep. I woke remembering the New Year's Day ritual in Japan.

The morning after the bell incident, I'd come down to breakfast with a growling stomach. There had been no food since dinner the night before and I'd spent most of the night awake. Normally, I'd have made myself cereal and toast, but I found the table laid out with *setchi ryouri*. In front of each place was the usual personal *ocha* mug, for tea, matching rice bowl, and a personal set of chopsticks. We had the same each night for dinner, but instead of ten small dishes in the centre of the table, there was now a lacquered red box in front of each seat. When everyone was there, we opened our

boxes and I saw it was divided into compartments, each with a different food. It looked beautiful. But it didn't look edible. In each compartment was some squishy vegetable or undercooked fish – every one symbolising good fortune for a particular aspect of life in the coming year: career, love, health, education. My appetite left me immediately, but I dutifully tried each mushy piece of horror, doing my best not to make a face, and promptly went back to my room to sleep until lunch.

Lunch, with the extended family, turned out to be the same thing.

"Aren't you eating?" asked my host grandmother in a concerned voice.

"I'm not hungry." It was true in a way. I wasn't hungry enough to eat *setchi ryouri* again. I'm sure I offended them, but I would have gagged if I tried to eat anything then.

"Oh, you must eat. You're so skinny." In this, Japanese grandmothers are no different to western grandmothers – you could eat a six course meal in front of them and they'd worry you don't eat enough.

When everyone had finally finished eating, it was time for another tradition. All of the adults began handing *otoshidama* to the children, including me. These are small colourful envelopes, but I'd never heard of them before. I started to open one and saw – something – in *ojiisan's* expression change. *ojiisan* means grandfather. Akiko saved me again, though she was more interested in saving face for her grandfather than me.

"It's rude to open presents in front of everyone. You'd best wait until later."

I wanted to say that it didn't look like a present. Surely it was just a note. But instead, I played the game.

"Don't get too excited," said *ojiisan*. "It's nothing, really."

"I'm sure it's wonderful." I wasn't actually sure of anything at all, but these words were all part of the game.

When they finally left, I raced up to my room to satisfy my curiosity. Carefully sliding my finger under the seals so as not to ruin the paper – everything is kept in Japan, even if it would be rude to reuse it – I slid out the contents. Between the three envelopes I'd received, there was 20,000 yen – enough to get me through the coming months.

Now, of course, that wouldn't last me two days. Well, it would while I was living on company

expenses – the only benefit I saw in the situation. I realised that my stomach was rumbling and hurried over to catch up with the others in the office.

I found a few of them still there from the previous night, and a couple of others had come in to check on their systems that were deemed less critical. Each of them was holding a familiar red lacquered box with compartments of food.

"Hi MAG-san," said Hiroko. "There's one for you in the kitchen."

My stomach churned at the sight. "Is there any curry rice left?"

Feb 00 – Novelty

新案物 **(shin-an-butsu)**

"I was so confident," Damion told me when he came to visit in February. It was the first time I'd seen him in months and he was looking haggard. Things had become so bad that he'd started seeing a counsellor. "I'd helped the Japanese branch bridge that cultural gap with the U.S. branch and both sides seemed very happy with my work."

There's a joke that highlights the difference in expectations between the two nations. An American company orders a thousand computers from a Japanese company, specifying that they will accept five defects per thousand. When the shipment arrives, they find a note attached. 'Here are the thousand PCs you ordered. We don't understand your purpose, but we've included five defective parts as requested.'

Of course, there are more serious holes to fall into when neither side understands the other's colloquial expressions or negotiating tactics. A westerner might see promise in a 'maybe' from a Japanese and try for days to get to a yes, when that 'maybe' in fact represents an adamant 'no.' But if anyone could work through those issues, it's Damion.

He didn't become interested in Japan until much later than me, and when we were on the exchange my Japanese was sufficiently better than his that I had managed to pass the level 2 proficiency exam while he didn't, but by this time he had studied Japanese at school and university and worked in Japan, had a degree in Japanese, and had always shared flats with Japanese people. He could even read a Japanese newspaper. It was difficult for my competitive nature to admit, but his skill in the language and knowledge of the culture far surpassed my own.

"They must have been happy with you if they offered you this assignment. What happened?"

"It's like I'm just a symbol of my boss' power now. All the Japanese are sick of reporting to westerners. It makes them feel inferior, I guess. Anyway, my boss told everyone that he had the most international team in the company because he had a westerner reporting to him."

gaijin are still a novelty in Japan. It's normal for kids on the street to start calling out when they see a Caucasian. "*gaijin da. haroo. haroo. zisu izu a pen.*" It's a *gaijin*. Hello. Hello. This is a pen. It's even common for adults to respond with this last sentence when you ask them if they speak English. We'd both been the centre of attention at school, and Damion described his treatment as somewhere between hospitality and being a new pet.

It shouldn't stop him being a valuable member of the team, though. "So? You know you're good at your job. Why let that bother you?"

"Because I realised that neither side was telling me everything, and both sides were demanding information that the other wouldn't give, then getting upset at me for not being able to get it. I felt more like a barrier than a conduit. My team told me – well, you know, they made it clear by ignoring me in meetings – that I wasn't there to participate in any discussions when we met customers. I was just there to give them an international air of prestige."

"I wish I could help you," I said, "but my position's different. The good thing about being the customer is that they can't disregard me, and I know enough about telecommunications to pick up on anything they're not telling me." Damion had degrees in Japanese and Economics, not in the computers his team was trying to sell.

"There's more. I changed jobs."

"I remember. That was just a few months after you arrived."

"Yeah, well it started all over again. The new boss kept telling everyone that *he* now had the most international team. I knew I had to prove myself again, so I asked as many questions as I could, learnt as much about the product as I could, and then I started adding my own thoughts into the translations. I tried to supply the information the other side wanted."

"That's great if you can manage it."

"I did, and both sides started respecting me again. I even got access to upper management and started to act like a valuable member of the team. But it was false, you know. I'm not an expert. I didn't really know if what I was telling them was true. What if I got something wrong and it screwed up the system? It could cost the company millions, or billions. It was a paradox. My status was getting better, but my self-confidence fell more than ever."

"Is that when you started seeing a counsellor? Or did Kei come first?" Kei was a young,

intelligent, beautiful (his words, but I agree with them) Japanese woman who'd graduated from university in the U.S. She was having the same problems – there to give an international flavour, but for all her skills she was essentially a tea lady.

"It was about the same time, really. At first, we tried to avoid each other, not wanting to compound our problems or reputations, but we had so much in common, especially now that her parents are living in Sydney."

"And now you can't leave." It felt good to smile. The conversation was draining me. For all the differences in our roles and in our situations, we were both stuck and I could feel our conversation spiralling down. No wonder he was seeing a counsellor. Perhaps I should see one too. I swatted away that thought as easily as I did those of giving up and going home. They arose occasionally, but if I can be faulted for commitment, it's that I don't know when it's time to quit.

I'd been working eleven-hour days for over a year, including public holidays. I'd lost a bunch of vacation days because I hadn't been able to use them, and there was no end in sight. I was managing five projects on top of daily support, and three of them were coming to their peaks in the next few months. 'If I could just make it through those,' I thought, then realised that I would only find more work straight away.

"No. I can't leave now. You've got to come and meet her, Murray. She's fantastic – beautiful enough to be a model and we really understand each other."

Kei quit the company soon after and found a more meaningful job with less pay. Damion stayed on to be with her.

When he went back to Tokyo, I started thinking and decided that I needed the break. It was time to give up, even if only for a short time, or I'd end up needing to see a counsellor, too. I really wanted to join the 'Big Ride,' a cycling tour held in New South Wales each year. For the millennium event, they'd chosen to take two weeks instead of the usual one and to ride from Tweed Heads to Sydney. Tweed Heads is the northernmost town on the NSW coast which made the ride almost 1200km. I asked for three weeks off in March and April to attend and received it despite the bad timing. I remember sitting at lunch with my boss, his boss, and his boss' boss, and the upper manager commenting as much to Hiraki-san.

"You're going to let him go now? But the cutover for our phone system is in Golden Week,

just a few weeks later."

After the Akashi fiasco, I had managed to convince our global management that we were better sticking with the Japanese vendor for the core of this system. I'd taken every precaution, even asking the vendor to allow the project manager to be on site with us since January so he knew the issues well before-hand. This had to work.

Hiraki-san looked at me. "He needs a break. He's done a good job of preparing everything. There shouldn't be any problem."

I don't know if he believed it, but I think that they all saw it in my eyes. If I wasn't allowed this break, I wouldn't be there for the cutover anyway.

Mar 00 – Reverse Culture Shock

帰国カルチャーショック **(ki-koku-ka-ru-cha-a-sh-o-k-ku)**

I desperately searched the clouds through the plane window as we circled Sydney. Most of us have had the experience of waiting for something for so long that it didn't seem real when it was actually happening. That feeling was on me now and I needed to see the Harbour Bridge and Opera House to ground me in the Australian part of my life. Whenever I'd come back from Japan before, my heart had leaped at the sight of Sydney Harbour, then I'd slipped back into life at home without any of the shock that others talk of. At those times, it had seemed that Japan was just a dream – albeit a very real and detailed one. But today, Sydney was blanketed in a white haze and I could barely make out the shoreline from the visible fragments. We landed without ever catching sight of anything that was undeniably Australian.

The airport itself wasn't any better. Rather than the large halls and glass-walled corridors I was used to, I walked along tunnels of scaffolding interrupted by signs saying, 'Kingsford Smith Airport is being renovated in preparation for the Olympic Games. We apologise for the inconvenience.' I bowed my way through customs and followed other signs to the taxis.

"Where to?" The driver had a thick Greek accent.

"Um.. Berowra, please." I didn't really have any idea where that was. My parents had moved to the country during my last year of university and I was going to stay with Marian and JP, two old friends. They'd recently bought a house in Berowra, a suburb on the edge of Sydney that I hadn't even heard of before they moved there.

"Where are you from?" asked the driver.

"I'm Australian."

"Really? You don't sound like it." This might have been insulting, coming from a man who sounded like the spoof of a fruit shop owner, but I knew he was right. Growing up around so many foreigners, I'd never had a strong accent, and I'd worked to reduce it even further so my Asian

colleagues could understand me. "How's this?" I said, blocking my nose and putting an extra twang on my vowels.

He laughed and tried to do the same. "Now I believe you."

"What road is this?" We were on a highway I'd never seen before even though I'd spent years living in the area.

"This is the Eastern Distributor. It takes us right through the city without traffic lights. How long have you been away?"

"Only two years." The word 'only' was losing meaning by the minute. I still hadn't seen anything I recognised.

Marian and JP were waiting when I arrived. Both were born in Australia, but to English fathers and European mothers. JP's slightly olive skin and down-turned nose hinted at his Greek mother's heritage while Marian's paler skin and careless hair reflected her Dutch mother's.

"G'day mate," said JP. "Welcome home."

Home. Really? I looked around. This unfamiliar house could have been anywhere. "Hi. It's good to be back." The words were a formality. I wasn't 'back' at all.

That night they held a barbeque and invited a few friends around. I felt strange to be sitting in conversation a few metres away from the grill. Part of me itched to be up grabbing my own slices of beef and octopus as they cooked. "Here you go, Murray. Guest of honour gets the first piece."

I looked at the slab of steak on the plate JP held. It was an inch thick and bigger than the roast I'd cooked at Christmas for eight people.

"Can I have a quarter of that?"

JP's shoulder's sagged. "But I thought that would be what you'd miss the most. We had a barbeque especially for you." He continued to sulk as he replaced it with the smallest steak on the grill – still three times as much as I could eat – then added a chicken breast and some sausages.

Before I'd gone away, I was known for eating more than anyone else, but the change in diet seems to require a change in biology, and when I arrived in Japan, it wasn't the chopsticks that made it difficult to finish a meal – the quantity of rice was unmanageable. That soon changed and I could now keep up with all my Japanese colleagues and friends, but back in Australia, I was struggling with the amount of food. I had no chance of keeping up with these people that had seemed to eat so

lightly before I left. Cutlery turned out to be a problem too. I was OK with the meat, but had forgotten how to handle a salad. It was natural with chopsticks to pick up anything and take a bite out of it. Somehow that seemed rude with a knife and fork, so I found myself frustrated by the need to swap the fork from my left hand, while cutting meat, to my right for scooping mashed potato. And bits of lettuce and tomato constantly fell off the fork before I could get them in my mouth. My friends had all finished eating before I was halfway through.

"Have you got any Pringles, Marian? They're great barbequed." She looked at me without comprehension. "You know. Pringles. The potato chips. You put them on the grill and.."

"You're mad."

The next day was a Monday and my friends all had to work, so I took myself off to Circular Quay to look at the Harbour from ground level, but it doesn't have the same 'homecoming' effect from down there. I saw the Bridge and the Opera House, but before that sight could settle, I turned a little further to where the Botanical Gardens should have been. They were gone. In place of that gorgeous strip of green running along the water's edge to the Opera House was an ugly building, thirty stories high and featureless but for the strips of windows. Marian told me they call it 'the Toaster' for its resemblance to a toast rack. As apartment buildings and retail space it must bring in a fortune – looking out over the Gardens and the Harbour mouth on one side, and over the Quay and the Bridge on the other – but how could anyone have been allowed to ruin the city this way, especially with the Olympics coming? Maybe the Council reasoned that tourist dollars were going to come in no matter what, so it didn't matter that our beautiful city had a big pimple on it's nose.

I decided to walk up George Street to the Town Hall – a popular meeting place. Surely they couldn't have changed that. From the opposite side of the street, I looked up at the old building, standing tall in full stone glory, but something was wrong. It didn't tug at my heart the way I'd expected. Then I realised that I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen the whole thing. It had been under construction for as long as I could remember, and the lack of scaffolding made it unfamiliar.

This wasn't how it was meant to go. When you get homesick, you should be able to cure it by going home. This was the opposite. I hadn't actually been homesick until I got here, and now that I was I could find no release.

Perhaps music would help. I headed down to Red Eye Records, one of my favourite shops because it has a section devoted to Australian artists. I started flicking through them. Michael Thomas. 'But he was with Weddings Parties Anything. What happened to them,' I wondered. 'And David Bridie. He was with My Friend the Chocolate Cake. Don't tell me they've broken up.' Worse – though I guess it's normally the point of going to a music shop – was the list of bands I hadn't heard of. Killing Heidi. The Idea of North. Alex Lloyd. It seemed I no longer knew the Australian music scene, either.

"Excuse me. We're closing in ten minutes. If you're going to buy something, please do so now."

I looked at my watch. Twenty past five. I'd been there hours longer than I thought, but still… I tried to remember back to the times before I'd left. Had the shops always shut so early? Home was drifting further and further away.

Japanese travellers have this problem too, of course – often worse. Many go to university in the US and become used to the individuality and social freedom there, then can't cope with being stifled when they go back to Japan. For the woman who's American friends are going on to high paying, exciting jobs, it's particularly difficult to find herself reduced to office lady, getting tea for her male colleagues.

One problem that can hit hardest because it's so unexpected is the struggle with the language.

During my school days in Nagoya I spoke only Japanese – aside from a few rare occasions with fellow exchange students – and when I came home, it was an effort to speak English. My mother had passed me the phone on that first afternoon. "It's Nana."

I'd stood there holding the phone for over a minute, trying to work out what to say. Everyone in Japan says '*moshi-moshi*,' a greeting used only on the phone, and in Australia my family had always answered by saying our phone number, but that seemed silly when I already knew who it was. I held the phone to my chest. "Mum, what do I say?"

She looked at me in wonder for a couple of seconds before bursting out laughing. "Just say 'hello,' you fool."

The following night I'd been invited to a dinner party by Sean, my best friend at the time.

There were about ten people there and always three conversations going on at once. Even before dinner was served my eyelids were drooping from the effort of following a single thread of conversation. Only when I was the focus of attention could I manage to keep the pace to a manageable speed. Someone asked me about martial arts and I told them of my *shuudoo* training and the way the others in my class had been scared to do any martial arts themselves.

"Everyone was wrestling in the hotel room on the school trip though. But they wouldn't let me join in. As soon as I tried, they all jumped back up against the wall."

The whole table went quiet and everyone looked at me. What had I said?

"I didn't know you were like *that*, Murray," said Sean. It had taken a few more seconds to remember that the phrase 'backs against the wall' was used when you were worried someone nearby might be gay, and then I went truly red. Through embarrassment and fatigue, I had to leave before I'd taken more than a few bites.

The lack of a language problem this time was a small win though, and didn't really lift my experience during that week in Sydney. My belief that I was a cultural schizophrenic now seemed ludicrous. The two weeks I spent cycling down the coast weren't much better. I stopped in at Port Macquarie and met up with the family. I'd spoken to Mum and Dad every couple of weeks since I moved to Japan, and aside from being more relaxed, I'd never really noticed a change, even when they came to visit me last year. But here, in a familiar setting, I suddenly realised that their hair had turned grey and their faces had more lines. They'd become old in the last couple of years. It was worse with other family members. My brother had always been a rebel – a huge contrast to my overachieving – but now he was taking control of his life. I found I had less idea of how to talk to the new Brady than I did to the old one. And I'd lost touch with my sister too. She has Down Syndrome, which keeps her mental age young while her body grows old. Every time I talked to her, I found myself in a loop containing only two questions. "How are you?" and "How's Japan?" She could hold a normal conversation with everyone else, but I'd forgotten how to break her out of the loop.

There were familiarities as well, but it's the differences that stood out. My family were now all strangers. Some people might see this as a reason to return home – to make sure they didn't miss

anything else. I just wanted to run away, back to my other home. The plane couldn't take off fast enough.

Apr 00 – School

学校 **(gak-kou)**

Nagoya relieved my homesickness in a way that Sydney couldn't. In two years, Sydney had become unrecognisable, but in ten years, Nagoya hadn't changed. I stepped out of the central station to see its twisted cone monument and my breath left me. This was where I had met the other exchange students on the few occasions we got together. Right below this was where I'd always met Yukiko on our trysts. The road to the right lead to Sakae, the social centre of town, where we'd sat in the park, gone to nightclubs and dined in cheap restaurants. 'Breathe,' I reminded myself.

I was there to upgrade their voice mail system, but had arrived early so I could visit my old neighbourhood. The subway and bus to school were just as *natsukashii* – a word that doesn't translate well, but I'll settle for 'nostalgic.' It's used whenever some trigger – the sight of a monument, the sound of someone's voice, the smell of a certain flower, or the name of a favourite book – sends you reeling back to times past. I suddenly found myself wearing the navy school uniform – trousers and blazer since my school had abandoned the military coat – with the school pin fastened to my collar and the running shoes we'd worn in public. I'd actually lived close to the school, so I was going in the wrong direction for this time of day, but the feeling was strong.

I got off the bus and looked up at the school. Was it more worn than when I'd been there? I decided that it was. It had been almost new then, but it was starting to take on the ancient air of most Japanese schools, which wasn't surprising since the students were the only cleaners the school had. Each Friday we'd stacked up the desks and chairs, then swept the floor and washed the windows and once each term our class was responsible for cleaning the toilets and the teacher's room.

The gate stood open and I wondered if I'd ever seen it open during school hours before. It was two lanes wide, made of steel a hand-span thick and ran on rubber wheels, guided by a single rail line, set flush into the concrete driveway. I shuddered, imagining how easily it could crush a skull.

Was it now left open to avoid an incident similar to the one in Kobe all those years ago?

In my school days I would have gone to the right, and swapped my outdoor shoes for my slippers as I stepped up into the school. The unused pair would be stored in my own shoe locker. Today I went left and into the reception, using the plastic slippers provided by the school for guests.

"Excuse me. Does Ishii-san still teach here?"

"I'm sorry. I don't recognise the name."

I was tempted to try the nickname the students used, and the thought brought back an image of my first day at the school.

I was in the auditorium with *okaasan*, sitting in the first year section while we were introduced to the school. As the speeches droned on, I began to look around the crowd. It was mostly a monotony of student's navy suits and skirts. Only on the sides was the pattern broken. The teachers sat dressed in neat casual attire, looking imperiously at the massed students. Then I saw a woman with a head overly large for her small body and stared rudely, unable to take my eyes away. Her eyes met mine and I smiled nervously before looking away. Had she caught my stare? Was she offended?

As one of the two exchange students starting this year, I was called up to introduce myself to the school – the first of many speeches I'd make in Japanese. I hate speaking in front of large groups in any language, but I managed to mask my nervousness by pretending to struggle with Japanese. I told them briefly of my family, school background, hobbies and of how I was looking forward to learning about Japanese culture in the coming year and received a polite applause as I stepped down.

Once the formalities were over, the large headed teacher made her way over to me. I began to panic. I'd offended a teacher in my first couple of hours. That didn't bode well for the rest of the year.

"Hello. I'm Ishii. I'm your teacher."

There was my way out. "Hello Ishii *sensei*. I thought it might have been you, but I wasn't sure."

"Come on. I'll show you the classroom." As we walked off, I realised that I'd been holding

my breath and let it out quietly. My classroom was on the top floor, the fifth counted in the American way. There I met the rest of the class and Ishii-sensei introduced herself before ensuring that everyone was organised.

"Most of you know me, but for those that don't, I'm Ishii. I've been teaching for four years, all at Meito." She went on for a couple of minutes, but one sentence stood out to me. "My nickname is *tamago*." It seemed that the rest of the class thought this was quite natural, and even called her *tamago sensei* in less formal times, but I was never comfortable with the name. *tamago* means 'egg,' and was clearly a reference to her head.

I couldn't say it to the receptionist either, so I tried names of other teachers.

"Itou-sensei? Tsuji-sensei? Yes? Tsuji-sensei is here? Can I see him?" Tsuji-sensei was the coordinator for exchange students and he'd once visited me in Sydney. It would be good to see him again.

"Yes. Please feel free to find your own way."

I went upstairs and into the enormous room that held the desks for every teacher in the school. They didn't have much better conditions than the students – worse if you counted the fact that it was quite common for students to wander in with questions.

"Tsuji-sensei is off today," I was told. "Is there someone else you could talk to?"

I explained that I'd been a student there in 1990 and was looking for my teachers.

"Ishii-sensei, huh? And she's got a large head. Hmmm. That might be Shibuya-sensei. She's been here a while." He directed me to a desk in the middle of the room and asked me to sit. "She'll be back in a few minutes, when this class finishes."

While I waited, I looked over the desk. Much like all the others, it was simple – three-feet wide with a couple of drawers. A mug with a drip of coffee solidified on one side weighed down papers scattered messily over the top. A Big Ben chime indicated the end of the class and I turned away from the desk – feeling like a student again and worried I might be caught cheating.

A woman with a familiar face walked up the narrow isle between the desks and motioned me to stay seated. "You're fine. I just need a couple of papers and I'll get out of your way." She'd assumed I was waiting for another teacher.

"No, Ishii-sensei, I came to see you."

She looked at me again. "Gunn-san? Is that you?" She immediately pulled up one of the other chairs and we began to catch up on the past ten years. She'd been married for five years and now had two children. Most of the other teachers had left since I'd been there, but students occasionally came to visit her.

"It's the best reward a teacher can have, when one of her students comes back." Her eyes were teary as she spoke. "And you've come such a long way."

"Actually, I've only come from Kobe." I told her about the job and my new life. "So much has changed. Especially here, " I said, looking up at a couple of students waiting to talk to another teacher. The boy had hair halfway down his back, and the girl wore eye-shadow and lipstick. "That would never have been allowed when I was here."

"Yes, it's terrible," she said, half joking. "Students have become much more difficult to control. But I think it's better than having all the stress that they used to have."

"Is it really better? You still hear about suicides and people dying from stress related diseases all the time. I never saw it when I was at school here." Ishii-sensei nodded to agree that Meito had never been as bad as other schools. "But I've seen it since I came back. One of my colleagues, a new employee, cracked before he actually started adding any value to the company. I'd be in vendor meetings with him, discussing important projects and he'd start laughing, or asking me what food I liked. The company doctor diagnosed him as 'completely broken' and convinced him to quit the company and look for less stressful work."

"That probably saved his life. Many *sarariiman* just don't wake up one morning because they've died from stress."

"I know. It's scary. And I wonder if allowing students to wear earrings is enough to relieve that stress."

"There's a lot of talk about reducing the school week to five days. I don't know if that will fix the problem, though. It really all starts with the battle to get a good job."

To get a high-paying job in a good company, it was necessary to have graduated from a top university – the better the university, the better the chance of a good job. But students had to apply for each university separately and undergo strenuous exams for each. Parents tried to ensure their

children had the best chance at a good university, but that required getting them into a good senior high school, which would only take them if they had good grades, which meant that they had to have gone to a good junior high school. The chain continued right down to pre-school, which meant that there was no real time for play once a child was about three-years old. The irony was that in university, all the pressure disappeared. It was considered the time for students to party – a chance to live that lost childhood – before settling into the strict life of a *sarariiman*. It never seemed to worry people that their doctors and engineers hadn't attended classes.

Meito might not have had a high reputation, but my classmates hadn't given up. Each evening they'd gone to hours of *juku* – tutorials to prepare them for exams in each subject. It's a major failing, in my opinion, that the Japanese system teaches students to pass exams, rather than providing them with knowledge. Teachers stand at the blackboard and dispense processes and data like a robot. There's little emphasis on practice or creativity.

I remember getting a maths paper back one day with a red tick on one question. A tick means failure in the Japanese system, but I'd always been good at maths and knew that my answer was correct. I marched up to the teacher to dispute the mark. It was a three-line derivation of the first principles of calculus and he agreed with every step, but still refused to mark it correct.

"It's not the way we do it in Japan," he said, and there was no budging him.

My classmates would be so exhausted from the hours of *juku* followed by hours of self-study that they'd regularly fall asleep in class. One boy had mastered the appearance of working – head down with his pen scratching away at the notebook – while he slept.

They could get away with this for a surprising amount of time. Unlike in Australia, in Asian countries, the students usually stay in the same room and the teachers move around. It was an awkward system that forced the entire class to take the same subjects and at the same pace. In Australia, I'd chosen to study subjects as diverse as languages and technical drawing, but these students couldn't hope for that freedom. Occasionally, there was a chance to move to another room for some classes – biology, sports or English laboratory, set up with tapes and headsets. At those times, we occasionally had to wake up a sleeping classmate.

It wasn't long before the reminiscing came to an end. "I've got to get to the next class," said Ishii / Shibuya-sensei when Big Ben chimed again. "It's been great to see you again. Please come

back to visit when you come to Nagoya next time."

I never did go back, mostly because of my host family. After visiting the school, I went to see them, thinking to push the hate behind me, but after a mere thirty minutes, I was panicked by their invitation to stay for dinner. The rage over their unreasonable treatment of Yukiko was still strong and I made hasty excuses and ran to the bus stop, never to set foot in Nagoya again. Some memories are just too painful.

May 00 – Fashion

流行 **(ryuu-kou)**

"You have reached the IT Help Desk. For English, press 1. *nihongo wo hanashitai kata wa 2 ban*."

I recognised the voice as Nakano-san's and in my opinion they couldn't have chosen one less friendly. In fact, her natural voice was probably quite pleasant, but it was the fashion in Japan for women to speak in a pitch designed to make dogs go mad. Some of the Japanese managers had their secretaries record their voicemail messages because, they said, it sounded more professional.

The phenomenon is common. I'd see a singer on TV belting out a tune with some wrenching bass notes, but when she came over to the host to be interviewed, she'd put on a squeaky voice that threatened to blow out my tweeters. Many girls will switch automatically to that voice to answer the phone, and I always had to laugh at the way Akiko's voice raised an octave mid sentence if the phone rang while she was talking.

I sighed and put down the phone. I had no right to tell the Help Desk who's voice to use in the message, but I couldn't help feeling that they were ruining all the good work I'd done on the phone system. This time, the cutover had gone flawlessly. We'd been working on the final touches for months. Every possible problem had been identified and an appropriate action plan documented for each. I'd refused to listen to the vendor's assurances that it could be done in one day – I'd heard that before – and made them commit to having everyone there for five days. In the end, none of it was necessary. Due to an ingenious trick of double wiring, the cutover was complete in just over an hour. We'd stretched out testing for another five hours and the help desk messages were the last.

There was no real reason to come back for the rest of the week, except that all my friends had gone travelling for Golden Week and I'd committed to being in the office. I negotiated with myself and came up with a compromise – I'd come in for a few hours each morning to do a few more tests and make sure no system alarms were flashing, then take a half day off.

Catching the train back to town on the second afternoon, I noticed a lone schoolgirl fixing her

socks. She was probably coming back from *bukatsu* which ran the entire year, even through the week of public holidays. Her calves were covered in a fluffy white material called *ruuso sokusu*, or 'loose socks.' Despite their marshmallow appearance, they are in fact just thick white socks with all the elastic plucked. I always wondered how they did it. Well, first I wondered why a girl would wear something that made her calves look larger than her thighs. But then I'd wonder how they got the socks to stay up at all without the elastic.

Today I got my answer as I watched her pull the socks down, plump them out nicely, then apply a liberal coat of glue stick in a ring below her knee before pulling the sock up again. She then did the same for the other leg, but apparently they didn't match because she studied them for half a minute, then repeated the process. She did this three times during the ten-minute journey into town, seemingly oblivious of her audience, or perhaps acting up to it.

The train arrived at Sannomiya and as I got off I wondered why I'd never seen any of these girls fixing their socks before. Perhaps I did today because there'd only been the two of us in the carriage, or perhaps because I was thinking about Japanese fashion. Whatever the reason, I began to look around me at the different people in town.

On the street, I found myself in a sea of *kogyaru*, a word made up from the Japanese for small or young and the Japanese pronunciation of 'gal.' The most noticeable feature of these girls, usually senior high school or university students, are their high boots. A closer inspection reveals that their boots are nothing more than a lycra upper stitched onto a high heeled sole. I watched them totter around on these, never more than a loose stone away from a broken ankle, until my back muscles were knotted from tense anticipation. They wore very short skirts – I'd seen the same even in winter – expensive blouses, a dark tan and bright makeup. Like every other woman in Japan, their eyebrows are plucked and pencilled to China doll perfection. Hanging over their shoulders were Louis Vitton handbags containing the latest mobile phones. Whenever a phone rang, in a personalised melody, they all reached into their bags to check if it was theirs. Then the lucky girls answered in a nasal tone with the latest Kansai slang. It was all so plastic.

I looked down at myself and wondered if I was being overly critical. They were chic in their Kansai-enne way, and I've never been one to care about my look. It was one of the benefits of being a *gaijin*, that I could do what I wanted and look as I wanted and I would always be cool. I felt no

need to dress up for work while I was the only one in the office, so I was in my comfortable clothes – a Def FX t-shirt and Not Drowning Waving shorts, worn at least once a week since I'd bought them at the respective concerts three or four years before. Neither did I go in for the bright red sneakers that were taking off here. Instead, I'd bought brilliant white joggers and stopped off at the park on the way home to rub dirt into them, like a dog after a bath. My round blue-green eyes, my height, my pallid white skin, and my 'tall nose' – which apparently refers to the depth of the bridge – ensured that I would be handsome to the Japanese even if I wore stubbies and thongs.

Still, I could make a small effort. On impulse, I stepped into a department store and found the menswear floor. At least, the sign said men's casual wear and there were no skirts or dresses in sight. Like any male, I don't like asking for help, so I wandered the floor for half an hour, trying to spot something that I'd actually wear. The jeans rack was full of dangly zip pulls, the shirts were too floral and the jumpers covered in Hello Kitty pictures. I left in disgust, content with my comfortable years-old concert clothes.

I walked home via the construction site, where they were still digging up the road for the tunnel exit. The rugged faces of the workmen had become familiar, but it was their uniform I noticed this time – a thick cotton shirt with matching trousers that ballooned out around the ankles and were held in place by elastic seams. Standing here, on the side of the road, they looked safe enough, but I'd seen the same on building construction sites. Surely those balloons would catch on hammers left lying around, knocking them onto those working below, or on nails, tripping up the wearer and sending them to a death worthy of mention in the Darwin Awards.

That evening I turned on the TV – something of a rare occurrence for me – and by coincidence happened across a program on young people's fashion. In a style that was part documentary, part game show, they'd picked on a couple of badly dressed teens for a makeover. He was a *yankii*, the Japanese idea of an American, with wild, bleached hair, an earring, a nose ring and an eye ring, torn black shirt and black leather pants. She was a *yamamba*, a witch, with hair bleached almost white, a fake tan and white eye shadow and white lipstick, also dressed all in black, and with a collection of rings covering each finger. Their accents and slang were so thick that I could barely catch a word, but their body language gave everything away. They were a couple who had agreed, perhaps on some sort of dare, to undergo this transition, and each was shivering with

anxiety over how their partner would react to the finished product. In separate parts of town, each had their hair dyed black and smart clothes tailored to show off their natural physiques and colourings. His rings were removed, as were most of hers, and she had a professional makeup job to highlight her features. The change was remarkable and, despite their misgivings, the eyes of each lit up when they saw the other, unable to hide their delight at the new image.

No experience of fashion in Japan is complete without a brush with *bousouzoku*, and they rounded up my week by revving their bikes up and down my street for hours on Sunday evening. Dressed in leather motorcycle gear, they could be any biker but their rebellion includes not wearing a helmet. Since most aren't keen to be recognised, they choose to wrap a towel around their face instead. And perhaps that describes Japanese fashion – concealed, conformist rebellion. By the time they've finished university, every one of these young people will be dressed in respectable corporate attire.

Jun 00 – Overwork Death

過労死 **(ka-rou-shi)**

My right shoulder was badly bruised. For the third time this morning, I'd just smacked it into a doorway as I walked between rooms in my flat. 'What's going on?' I wondered. 'I'm not usually this clumsy. My body's not usually so heavy. Could I be sick?' A quick internal scan showed no other symptoms though – no runny or blocked nose, no stomach upset, no headache. I went into the bathroom to look in the mirror, on the off chance something showed up in my eyes. Whack! This time it was my left shoulder, and hard enough to match the right, pain for pain, bruise for bruise. I massaged my shoulder as I looked in the mirror. 'I look OK. A little pallid, but that's normal. Eyes are clear. Still baggy, but they've been that way for the last six months. Well, I can't do much about that now. I'm late for work.' I finished dressing and rushed outside.

At the bottom of the steps, I suddenly realised that I'd forgotten to lock my door, so I trudged my way back up, only to find that the door was, in fact, properly locked. 'That's strange. I don't recall locking it.' The trip to work blurred in a monotony of heavy steps and half remembered train carriages. I waved at the girls at reception and got a giggle in return, then headed up to my desk on the seventeenth floor.

"Hi MAG-san."

"Hi, um…" 'What is her name again?' She was helping me out with the rapidly growing videoconferencing service. That girl whose squeaky voice they'd used for the Help Desk message.

She waited a couple of minutes while I set up my laptop, then asked, "where did you put the videoconference unit that we have to send up to the Sendai office?"

"Oh. I was configuring that yesterday. I…" My head went blank. There was no dramatic Hollywood lurch, blurring of people or feeling of lost time. 'I? I what? Why's Nakano-san looking at me like she just asked me a question? Maybe that's what I was doing – answering her question.' "I'm sorry. What did you ask?"

"Are you OK?"

"Yes, I'm fine, just…" 'Just what? Just tired? Fatigue doesn't explain short term memory loss or such clumsiness.'

Ten minutes later, Inoue-san dropped a paper on my desk and asked me for something in Japanese. I watched her mouth move and recognised the sounds, but they were meaningless. "I'm sorry. I didn't understand. Can you say that again?"

Inoue-san looked at me in shock, then repeated the request. I stared at her for half a minute while I fed each word through the interpreter and forced them into place. "You forgot to sign your expense report. Can you do it now?"

'What's wrong with me? I shouldn't have to translate such a simple sentence. I haven't needed to do that since a couple of weeks after I arrived. I can normally think in Japanese. Can't I? Wait a minute. What language am I thinking in now? English, yes, English. What's the Japanese word for…' My eyes fell on the glass on my desk. 'What's the Japanese word for glass? I have no idea. Is this how that new bloke – whatshisname – felt when the doctor declared him completely broken?' Panic began to take hold. 'Am I about to go over the edge, too? I've got to get out of here now.'

I threw my laptop back into my desk and locked it. "Nakano-san, I'm not feeling well. I'm going to take a couple of days off." Each step towards the door was a struggle.

"But we've got three new systems to install."

"I'm sure you can manage," I said over my shoulder. "If not, they'll have to wait until I get back."

I didn't want to tell her, or anyone else, what I feared. Many Japanese businessmen die each year from *karoushi*, a disease, if I can call it that, which translates literally as 'excessive work death.' There's usually no warning – like a horse that's run to death, they just fail to wake up one day.

The culture demands a lot of its people – long days, six days a week and constant progression up the school or career ladder. For the past year and a half I'd been working at least eleven hours each day, including many weekends, most public holidays and I'd occasionally worked through the night. The weather didn't help either. It had been the best Japanese spring I could remember – with

two months of clear skies, and mild temperatures – but not even the weatherman can beat the humidity. The weight of water in the air kept my hair slick against my scalp and my shirt pasted to my back. I felt the need for gills just to breathe. I staggered home, decreasingly aware of my steps and route. Autopilot had taken over. Once home, I pointed the fan at a patch of floor in front of the stereo, put a calming CD on repeat and just lay there for two days.

I tried to keep my mind blank, but any amateur meditator knows how difficult that is. At first, thoughts of the stupidity of working so hard rushed around inside my head. 'Why do I work so hard? The company isn't a cause I believe in and it's not as if I need the money. I don't have anything to spend it on. I guess the Japanese do, though. They all have to save up for outrageously expensive flats. That's why they stay at work so late – even if they're only pretending to be busy.'

Around me, the room darkened and thoughts continued to pile up. 'Maybe if I got out of the city more. But it costs so much. So, I do need money. Well, not really, but I might feel more comfortable about paying the higher prices. So if I just started filling in the time sheets again. But they're so stressful.'

The government has acknowledged the problem of stress related deaths and has taken some steps to discourage overwork. I knew of two policies in effect, but both were incomplete and poorly thought out. 'The time sheet doesn't need to be so difficult. If it was just a matter of entering the time I started work and the time I stopped work, I'd probably do it without thinking. But I have to take into account all these forced rest periods.' The ten minutes before start time, one hour at lunch, half an hour after the first ten hours worked and half an hour before 10pm are 'rest time.' 'As if anyone stops working during that time. It would just mean I'd have to stay later to get the work done, so it's more like free labour for the company. It took twenty minutes just to fill the form out each day and I always felt more stressed afterwards, especially at the end of the month when I saw that I'd worked 120 hours of overtime.' After a few months I'd settled for filling in the standard hours. 'How's that meant to reduce *karoushi*?' I wondered.

Some time during this internal dialogue, it had become light again. Unless it was still getting dark and I'd just imagined the night. I couldn't really remember. 'The other policy is better, but they're so slow at enforcing it.' The other policy was to encourage companies to reduce the official working week. 'Even ten years ago, Otousan was working eleven days each fortnight.' He was a

public servant, and one of the first to cut back. 'Everyone could see how much more relaxed he was after a two-day weekend and the chance to get out into the countryside. Surely it's common sense. So why are there still companies that have six-day weeks? Probably because the government isn't pushing very hard. Like not getting days off in lieu of public holidays that fall on a Saturday.' If a public holiday fell on a Sunday, everyone got Monday off, just as we would in Australia. But if it fell on a Saturday, it was lost. The logic was that many companies still worked on Saturday so most people were getting a day off already. 'If that logic carries on, they'll still be working six-day weeks ten years from now.

'Still, that's probably easier on the rest of the family.' I was dimly aware of myself chuckling in the real world. 'A traditional *sarariiman* probably wouldn't know what to do with himself if he had two days off.' The company is his life. He has little in the way of holidays, few friends outside the office and barely knows his own family. 'He'd either spend it at *pachinko* or lie around the house, getting in the way of everyone else.

'Well, I know what to do with my time outside work. Everyone's been telling me I should write a book about my experiences in Japan. I think it's time. From now on, I'm not going to work past six o'clock, and I'm going to take all my holidays. That means dropping responsibility for phone systems. Good. I never liked it anyway. But why just holidays. I could take a year off, or even quit, and go to live in South America for a while. That would give me time to write, to learn Spanish, dance Salsa, learn to play the guitar. But not just yet. I've got enough money to buy a flat in Australia now. I'll keep that money and save up until next June for the year off. I can go to South America at Christmas to look for somewhere to base myself.'

That decided, I felt a lot better. I became aware of my surroundings again. The music was still playing, the fan still going, and I was still sweating. But now the sun was dawning on a new day, a new life. I staggered to my feet, walked weakly into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. 'My eyes are still baggy, but I don't look quite so pallid. That's a good sign.' My stomach rumbled. 'And that's another.' I had a leisurely breakfast before I looked at my watch and realised that it was already two days later. I was due back at work.

Hiraki-san was surprisingly supportive when I asked him to find someone else to take over the phone systems. I didn't tell him about my near breakdown, but the whimper in my voice and barely

checked tears had to have given it away. So too had the request for our one-to-one meeting to be held in private rather than at his desk in the middle of the floor. He told me of the restructuring that was occurring and how he was going to be the Asian owner for phone systems, so it was a blow to lose me, but that he'd already recommended me to lead the Asia cluster for conferencing. It was a kind of promotion since the leaders of the other clusters were all a level above me.

Over the next year, I found my capacity for work dramatically reduced. I'm sure that it was only my relative distance from the culture that allowed me to recognise the problem and take a step back. A Japanese person may have continued to work hard until it was too late – to avoid the shame letting the team down. That slip could be fatal.

Jul 00 – Night of Sevens

七夕 (tanabata)

"I need more women." I'd said the first stupid thing that came into my head, hoping it would break the silence. In accordance with Japanese custom, there was a division between employees and contractors that even rubbed off on *gaijin*, and this was the first time I'd joined the contractors for lunch. We all got along well in the office but there'd been an uncomfortable silence as I sat down amongst them today. My words had the desired effect. Looking up from my *bentou*, I saw all the men making a sign to ward off evil in their respective religions. The women were just laughing.

"*More* women?" asked Tim, trying not to choke on his food.

"Well, more than none. One would be perfect."

"Be careful what you wish for," said Nanako-san. "You might just get it – to the exact wording. Anyway, what happened to that Russian ambassador."

"You mean Irina. She was an Estonian diplomat, not a Russian ambassador, and we only had one week together. Four months ago." She'd been in Japan for one month to learn about the Japanese economy and, as usual, I'd met her just as she was about to leave. We still kept in touch, but neither of us was going to try to make a long-distance relationship out of a weeklong affair.

"Still, you might want those words back. It's *tanabata*, you know. Strange things happen at this time of year."

Vega and Altair meet in the sky each year on the seventh of July and Chinese mythology turns them into a goddess and her forbidden lover, a shepherd, who manage a tryst on this night. In Japanese, the night of sevens, 七夕 – the seventh day of the seventh month, written ７月７日 – is a celebration of romance in *tanabata*, the Star Festival.

"When did you get into astrology? You don't really believe that stuff, do you?" I couldn't help thinking of my experience during my year of school, though.

Akiko wanted to go to a special party with her boyfriend to celebrate the occasion. In a rash move Okaasan would come to rue, she told Akiko she could go as long as I went with her. Since it was a party for couples, that meant finding me a date. Akiko knew I was attracted to both Michiko and Mana, a couple Jemma's school friends that I'd met a few times, so one day when I was on the phone to Mana, arranging another outing for us all, Akiko snatched the phone and asked her to come to the party with me. To my delight, she accepted and plans were made.

On the day though, just as we were about to leave, the phone rang and Akiko answered it. When she joined us in the car and we were on our way, I asked her who had called.

"Oh, that was Mana," she said casually.

"Was there a problem?"

"She can't make it tonight." The comment, dropped so carelessly, hit me like Vega falling out of the sky.

"What do you mean she can't make it? How can I go to a *tanabata* party without a date?"

"It's OK. She's arranged for a classmate to come instead." I started to relax. Michiko was just as pretty and fun to be with. "Someone you've never met apparently."

Vega hit me again. "It's a blind date?" I'd never had a blind date and had no desire to start now.

"Yes. Don't be so shocked. It's common in Japan."

There was nothing I could do. It was all arranged and we were on our way. Yukiko also turned out to be cute and fun, but I wasn't in the best mood and it took me a while to warm to her.

She wasn't shy in the way so many Japanese are. "In Australia, it's not strange to put your arm around a girl is it?" she asked, sitting close.

"No, it's not," I replied and did so, hesitantly. Yukiko snuggled in.

The party was set in a small auditorium, tiered so we could see the stage, and each step wide enough to hold dinner tables for two. It was decorated with large yellow stars and moons that glowed in the dim lighting, probably supported by UV lights. While the fifteen couples ate dinner, a couple came out and entertained us with a dance representing the story of the meeting of Vega and Altair on this very night.

Shokujou – Vega to us – the Goddess of Weaving, was so busy weaving garments for the

Emperor of Heaven that she took no time for herself. To reduce her loneliness, the Emperor married her to Aquila – we know him as Altair – a herdsman on the other side of the Milky Way. They fell in love and Shokujou neglected her weaving. The Emperor became angry and banned them from meeting, but they still manage once each year, on the seventh of July, when the Emperor is away from the palace listening to Buddhist scriptures.

The dance came to an end and it was time for some games to demonstrate how good we were as couples. For each game a number was drawn out of a box and the couple sitting at the corresponding table was brought out on stage to undergo rigorous questioning about each other, or to perform some embarrassing physical act, the peak being actually kissing on stage in front of everyone else. Akiko and Kenji drew that number and rushed out on stage amid applause – all smiles until they discovered their fate. Kenji recovered quickly though, and turning to Akiko, planted a kiss on her lips and held it for a few seconds. She was not so comfortable though, and I vividly recall her arms locked in rigor mortis, fingers splayed, and wearing an expression of horror. As soon as it was over, she shuffled back to their table to the chorus of cheers from us, their judges.

"*hazukashii*," Akiko whispered to herself as she sat down. I'm so embarrassed.

Finally it was our turn, but Yukiko and I wouldn't be humiliated alone. We were among four couples on stage and the game was to see how well each woman knew her partner. The men stood in line while the women were walked along, blindfolded, to feel each face. Even though Yukiko and I had only met hours earlier, it would be easy because I definitely didn't have Japanese features and all she needed to do was find the tall boy with a narrow face and tall nose. The other three women moved along the line and correctly picked their partner, and then it was Yukiko's turn. They made me hunch down and the man beside me tried to make his face thin, pulling his lips back in an attempt to push his nose out. Even I was laughing at the result – until she chose him. We were the only couple in the whole place that failed their test, and we had the easiest one. We were dragged out to explain that we'd only just met and there was really no romance between us at all.

"But I saw you sitting very close up the back, and you had your arm around her."

"Yes, well…." Thankfully, the MC let it drop with little more embarrassment.

Despite the humiliation and the disappointment at it not being Michiko or Mana, I did have fun, and Yukiko joined the exchange students when we went to see the *sumou* the following week.

A few nights later, I found myself calling to invite her to a movie. She accepted and we agreed on Ghost.

It was my first time in a Japanese theatre and there was a lot to be surprised about. For a start, the price of the ticket covered the entire day for a particular room. Ghost was playing alternately with Pretty Woman and some people would sit all day to watch them repeatedly. We bought a couple of soft drinks and a bucket of popcorn and made our way into the theatre. I went through the doors, turned to go around the light-proofing barrier and then walked straight into someone's back. I tried to push my way past, but wherever I turned there were more people. When my eyes adjusted to the light, I could see that every seat was filled and I was looking down on a crowd of heads standing at the back of the hall. They had spilled around the side walls as well, about five people deep at every spot.

"Why are there so many people here?"

"It's a popular movie," Yukiko replied. What I could see of her expression was confused. "Did you think we'd get a seat?"

"Well, yes. Isn't this a fire hazard? In Australia, no one's allowed to stand. The fire department would get upset."

"You mean, you get a seat *every* time?" She used a tone of awe I'm keeping in case someone tells me I'm on the best-seller list.

The way theatres are run in Japan now is almost identical to the way they are all over the world and everyone gets a seat, but they've had to raise the price to eighteen hundred yen to cover the costs.

Not far into the movie, I slurped the last of my Fanta and had to ask Yukiko where I'd find a bin to dump the cup. "Just hang on to it. There'll be bins when we leave. And so I stood for two hours, holding a paper cup, and checking every ten minutes to ask Yukiko if she was OK – if she could see. In true Japanese style, she assured me she was fine and that she could see well enough, which meant not at all. By the time the film was nearing the end I'd decided that I wanted to see her again, on a regular basis if possible. That invitation wasn't something I'd had much chance to practice – not in my head, not to a real, live girl, and certainly not in Japanese. I let my instincts take over and felt myself reaching over to take her rubbish as well, then cursed myself as I had to

juggle two cups and a popcorn bucket. In amongst that, my vocal cords got themselves organised and pulled the strings on my lips. "Would you be my girlfriend?" It was pretty lame, but it conveyed, as concisely as possible, exactly what I wanted it to.

Yukiko looked at me in surprise, then shyly, and finally with a smile. "Yes." And so this became the first of many trips to the theatre – on some of which, we actually got a seat – as well as walks in parks, visits to museums and long talks. My time with Yukiko was to be the highlight of that year in Japan, yet it would also trigger the rift with my host family and all the problems that brought. Strange things could happen at the Star Festival.

On Monday, a couple of weeks later, I was sitting down to lunch with the contractors again, and I was dreading the discussion I knew would come up.

"So, MAG, did you find *more* women?" Looking at her grin, I could have believed that Nanako-san was the goddess of mischief.

I cleared my throat while I got my voice back. "Yes. I did, actually."

Nanako-san giggled. "I knew it. Spill."

I tried to collect my thoughts, but it was no good. There were too many to collect. "The weekend before last, I was away with the hiking club. One of the girls, Kayo, was someone I hadn't met before. She… well, by the last day, Monday, I'd decided that I wanted to see her again."

"That's one." Tim was keeping count.

"On Tuesday morning, one of the girls from the volleyball club was on the train. What is it with Japanese people that they have to act like school kids? Anyway, she told me that her friend liked me and asked if I'd have lunch with her."

"That's two."

"On Wednesday, I had lunch with Kate – a girl I met at *aikidou*. She'd come back from Canada for a visit. There was no chance of romance there, I'm sure, but she added to my confusion."

"That's three." Tim kept counting as I listed off names, and the laughs got louder.

"And on Sunday, I went to a barbeque and met a gorgeous girl called Risa and swapped numbers with her. So you can keep that smug grin on your face. A week ago, there were no women

in my life, and in the last seven days I've found seven. Your bloody festival of sevens has screwed me right up."

"So what are you going to do? Which one will you pick?"

"Are you kidding? With seven women to sort out? I'm going to do what any sane man would do in these circumstances. I'm going to get on the next plane out of here. South America was starting to look even better.

Aug 00 – Mt Fuji

富士山 **(fu-ji-san)**

The girls were fussing about us, retying our *obi*, sashes, where we hadn't done a good enough job. They'd all changed in a separate room, but since we needed help to dress into *yukata*, the blokes were all in Francois' living room on full display. I was wearing a simple blue and black striped *yukata* that Francois had given me when he outgrew it. Delighted at being able to get their hands on semi-naked *gaijin* men, the Japanese girls were taking their time to perfect every detail. Already dressed for the festival, the *gaijin* girls sat back to watch the show and take photos.

"Why don't you come to Fuji-san with us, MAG?" asked Lisa. "It'll be fun."

"Because I agree with the saying." Around me, the Japanese all nodded their agreement, but Lisa looked blank. "They say, 'it's a wise man that climbs Mt Fuji once and a fool that climbs it twice.' You'll see what I mean when you get there."

Francois' *obi* was at last tied to satisfaction, so he grabbed his replica *katana*, sword, stuck it in his belt and did a passable impression of a *samurai* voice that got all the girls giggling. Finally, John and I were ready and the group hit the town. The Kobe *hanabi*, fireworks, were on tonight and there were people in *yukata* everywhere, but we attracted all the attention. Not just because we were *gaijin* wearing Japanese traditional costume in public. Our inability to walk in the raised thongs of wood or straw had us laughing louder than the clacking of the trains running nearby. The worst part for us, though, was the soggy heat that made our *yukata* stick to our bodies in the most uncomfortable places.

"Is Mt. Fuji really going to be that bad?" Lisa tried again as we squeezed into a spot in *meriken paaku*, forcing the crowd to shuffle out of the way.

"No. You'll love it. Trust me. But I don't want to ruin my memory of it."

Some of the Japanese girls had gone off and soon arrived with a picnic of fried noodles, pork dumplings called *gyoza*, *okonomiyaki*, *takoyaki*, beer, *sake*, and *shuuhai*. As soon as everyone had a

drink, we all began toasting each other, raising our cups and shouting "*kampai*." Lisa pretended to sulk and turned away from me, but pretty soon she was using her broken Japanese to drag the people around us into our party. Francois began loudly voicing his opinions on various subjects, from the Japanese economy to the state of the church in Europe. Being French, they may not have been his opinions – just opposite to whoever had raised each topic – and he'd never done anything quietly. John and I had given up trying to calm him down when a boom drowned out even his voice. The first cracker had been launched about fifty metres from us, and the crowd immediately hushed, readying 'oohs' and 'aahs' for the explosions of colour above us.

I've been spoilt. Japanese fireworks have always been of such a high standard that, when I was at school here, even the local village displays had surpassed every experience I'd had in Australia. But the Sydney fireworks are now among the best in the world and the Kobe version seemed average by comparison. Yet the atmosphere was worth the trip each year. For half an hour, the crowd sighed in synchronised appreciation as golden twisters shot up from the ground and green showers fell from the sky. We'd sit silently during pauses while the organisers waited for the smoke to clear, then jump together when the next blast ripped through us. There's no better time or place to feel a part of the Japanese society. Their expressions of delight were a song and even *gaijin* know the words. And today, correctly dressed in traditional costume, we looked the part as well.

A couple of weeks later, I had lunch with Lisa, keen to hear how the trip went.

"I didn't make it to the top."

"Why? What happened?"

"It was all cloudy and I was just too tired. I stupidly carried every piece of that damn camera up." She'd recently inherited her father's SLR camera, complete with a number of lenses, and was teaching herself to use it. "I didn't realise it would be so heavy."

"Oh. That's a shame. And I was going to put you in my book. I'll have to do another flashback now."

"You can still write about what happened, can't you? I did get most of the way, and John made it to the top."

The story that unfolded was somewhat different from my experience, but with the highlights

still the same. They'd taken a bus tour that let them off at the usual fifth marker – Japanese break the major trails into ten sections by height above sea level – around midnight and they'd followed the flag-waving guide up the mountain. The schedule meant that the plodders didn't get any breaks and the need to keep together meant that the sprinters were held back. It hadn't been a pleasant experience for anyone, but contrary to my own trip, they'd been walking among trees most of the way up. Near the top, they'd stopped for a meal and a snooze in a hut – a smaller version of the ones I stayed in with the hiking club – for an hour before heading on to the peak. It was there that Lisa decided to stop and wait for the others to pick her up on the way down.

John's experience of sunrise from the top of Japan was just as mine had been and he'd taken a number of photos capturing an optical illusion that I'd thought was a private hallucination when I'd seen it ten years before.

The Japanese revere their highest mountain, which spears out of the surrounding flatlands near the coastline west of Tokyo. For most of the year, it hides in cloud, but when this creature deigns to appear, the sight is spectacular. Its conical form changes costume with the seasons and as we approached in summer, lucky enough to catch it on a clear day, it had chosen a lush green base fading through a rough brown as it narrowed to the ever-present white crop at the peak. Kat and I had joined my host parents for the journey, and we both had our faces pressed against the car window as the mountain loomed closer.

Otousan had climbed it before and he'd planned the schedule to give us the best experience. We parked the car at the fourth marker to get out, stretch and rest until midnight. Roads only went to the fifth marker, but here we were close enough to drive the last stretch comfortably, yet away from the busloads of tourists. I dozed until nearly midnight, then woke to find Otousan cooking us a camp dinner on a gas burner. We ate quickly, then drove up to the end of the road.

"Are you sure you won't come with us?" I asked Otousan.

"Yes, I'm sure. We have a saying in Japan. 'It's a wise man that climbs Mt. Fuji once and a fool that climbs it twice.' Go on. You'll love it. Trust me." I had no idea that I'd be repeating those same words ten years later.

Kat, Okaasan and I joined the line of people beginning the trek up. Officially, the climbing

season is July and August, and in those two months over two hundred thousand people make the trek. That's nearly four thousand each day and most of them start around midnight so they arrive at the top for sunrise. With the path roped off, it's really like standing in a queue all the way to the top. Kat didn't have the physique of a climber, but she surprised me – queue-jumping regularly and walking almost as fast as I normally would have. With the queues to keep me in line, I was happy to slow my pace slightly to match Kat, and Okaasan eagerly took the opportunity to race ahead of me for once.

As we walked, we surveyed the landscape. Looking up at the mountain of volcanic rubble and the irregular line of people fading to ants near the top, I couldn't help but think that it was ugliest walk I'd ever done. Up close, Mt Fuji has none of the majesty it does in the pictures.

Near the top, at about the ninth marker, I had to stop for a while. We were almost 3500m above sea level – 1000m higher than I'd ever been - and I stumbled a couple of times. It seemed that the reduced oxygen could affect even fit hikers at this altitude. Kat wasn't bothered. It was just after two o'clock. The prescribed climbing time is four and a half hours, but we would cut that down significantly. Once I'd given myself enough time to acclimatise to the altitude, we started up again and arrived at the top to find three unwelcome surprises. The first was a biting wind, whipping across the volcanic crater and going straight through the four layers I hurriedly put on. Second, clouds were rushing in from the north to cover the plains below us. And last, Okaasan was waiting to taunt me for my tardiness.

"I beat you. I beat you. Where have you been? I've been here for at least half an hour." Two and a half hours. I was impressed. She must have really pushed herself.

"Well, we're not as fit as you," I said, hoping that she'd shut up if I conceded the win, "and I had to stop because I got dizzy."

"You got dizzy? Oh, you're so weak. Wait until I tell Otousan" She paused to wait for a reaction that I refused to give. "Anyway, I'm going to get a good spot for the sunrise."

We watched her run off to the east side of the crater, then looked around for a rock to use for shelter from the wind.

"Is she always like that," asked Kat as we huddled together behind a stone. "She's so childish."

"Yes. I've seen her act like a forty year old a few times, but mostly she's like a younger sister."

"She's totally different to my host mother. She runs our house like it's a hotel. Everything's so precise. There's not a spec of dust in the place. Dinner's like a banquet each night. I feel like I should check in at reception when I come home from school each day."

We passed another hour and a half talking about our host families until we heard expectant sighs from the direction Okaasan had gone. It didn't take us long to reach the crowd and we made it just in time to join the applause as the sun rose. The clouds now surrounded the mountain from horizon to horizon, like a vast foaming ocean with only our island providing safety. To the east, as soon as the sun peaked out over the real horizon, its rays burnt their way through the layers of cloud, giving the impression that it was rising in the middle of the ocean. It actually appeared that there were clouds behind the sun, and it was this view that John managed to capture so beautifully in his photos. Despite the sub-zero temperatures and wind-chill, I removed my jacket to bask in the glory of this superb sunrise. I felt like a god, and understood completely the place this mountain holds in the hearts of its people.

We made even better time on the way down, with Okaasan rushing off to tell Otousan that she'd beaten us both up and down. I was then subjected to taunts all the way back to Nagoya. It hardly bothered me, though. I understood what Otousan had said. As ugly as the walk up had been, it was worth it to feel the power of nature, standing at the top of the world in the land of the rising sun. Doing it a second time would turn the memory to something commercial, like a postcard bought at a cheap souvenir stand.

My other reward came the next morning when I descended the stairs to find Okaasan groaning in the kitchen. "Don't say anything," she warned me, as she hobbled from the sink to the stove, knees locked and keeping one hand on the bench to support herself.

Suddenly feeling the need to pay her back in some small amount for the taunts, I thanked her warmly for taking me to Mt Fuji. "It was a magic experience. I feel so alive." I danced a little jig and jumped up, clicking my heels together.

Sep 00 – Police

警察 **(kei-satsu)**

Marian burst into my room, waking me abruptly.

"Murray. There's an accident. Quick. It looks bad."

She, JP and Dave – all friends from university – had come to visit for two weeks, taking advantage of the great prices the airlines were offering to fill empty seats. The Olympics were on and everyone was going *to* Sydney, not leaving.

It took a minute for me to shake sleep enough to work out what was going on. I followed Marian out onto the balcony and looked down at the SUV on its side in the street below. I hadn't heard it despite the fact that every door and window in my flat was open to let the air flow through. I'm a morning person, and generally go to bed at around ten each night. At that stage, the trucks selling hot sweet potatoes, or *mochi*, sticky rice, are still doing their rounds, speakers blaring. They're the Japanese equivalent of an ice cream van, but rather than music you get a screechy voice droning on in semblance of song. "*warabiiiiiiiii mochi*." The neighbourhood children, who were all between 3 and 7 years old, are often up until one o'clock, playing in the street outside my window, confident in their safety. Then the *bousouzoku* start revving their engines as loudly as they can. They disappear quickly whenever the police turn up, never getting caught, but otherwise they can spend five minutes making their way down a two hundred metre long street. I often dreamed of seeing their faces when they found out how much it would cost to replace the burnt out clutch.

Almost every night, at about three in the morning, an ambulance would careen down my street with sirens blaring. They didn't care that everyone was trying to sleep, that there weren't any cars on the road, or that the traffic lights were green. They wanted to make sure we all knew that they were awake and doing an important job, but I'd have been just as happy if they'd sent me a letter. My first hours awake, between five and six thirty were the only peaceful hours of the day. I'd learnt to block out all the noises of the street, so it wasn't surprising that I'd missed the sound of the crash.

In the street below, a young man was running hard uphill, laughing as he went.

"Where are JP and Dave?" I asked, panic starting to well. The scene was out of place in the Japan that I knew and I imagined the worst.

"They've already gone down to help. Hurry. They'll need you too."

"Shit." Two familiar black crops of hair – one with a long ponytail and one short curls – rushed onto the street towards the van. "JP, Dave, leave it alone. Get back up here. Now," I shouted. They looked up at me, incredulous.

Dave writes: *I was sleeping pretty soundly, being the first sleep in Japan and tired from the plane trip still, when there was this god-awful sound of screeching and a big crash. Woken, and feeling rather groggy, I was wondering if I had imagined all this, when I heard a Japanese man's voice screaming a stream of unintelligible words. This made me go and see what was happening from the balcony. I saw a four-wheel-drive lying on its side. I saw this Japanese man running around like a chook with its head cut off. I saw some street sign bent over so it was almost touching the ground. This man eventually found a bar of some sort and began trying to smash the front windscreen in. I thought that someone was trapped inside, so I mentioned to JP (who was awake and observing too) that we should head down to see if we could help out. JP was down first as I'd struggled to put my shoes on. When I eventually made it down, JP was heading back as he was told by Murray from the balcony not to get involved. There was no one in the car anyway. This Japanese man, who was dressed all in black, had disappeared and there was nothing left but the 4wd lying on its side, now with its rear hatch open. Apparently this guy had opened the back, taken a few things and run off. Somehow, I'm glad I didn't meet the guy.*

They ran back inside and joined us on the balcony. I was ready to throw myself inside if the rest of the movie scene occurred and the car exploded in a ball of fire.

"What happened?" Dave asked. "Why didn't you want us to help?"

"This is Japan," I explained. "People drive like maniacs, but they don't drive fast – at least not in the cities." Even on the highways, Japanese don't drive over the speed limit. All cars are equipped with an irritating chime that tells the driver when they've exceeded 100km/h, which is the

maximum speed allowed on any toll way. "This wasn't a normal driver. It was a stolen car. The man running up the street proved that." It had only been a guess on my part, but the sight was unusual enough for me to suspect it wasn't an honest crash. I also had a vague suspicion that the man was *yakuza* or – since I doubt they'd be so incompetent – a would-be *yakuza*.

"We could still have helped," said JP. "It doesn't matter if they're a thief. The police can take care of that once they're safe."

"Do you see any Japanese people running to help?" There were a few on their balconies looking down at the scene, but none inclined to get close.

"Well, at least we should call the police."

"They're on their way. Any of these people can give them the message more quickly, and more accurately, than I can. I don't even know what number to call." Sure enough, the police arrived as I was speaking. "There's a police box every few hundred metres in Japan. They're never far away, and always quick to arrive." The second car pulled up, all black, lights on the roof, and white writing down the side advertising their authority and behind it, a motorcycle. I keep hearing about the California Highway Patrol style *shirobaiku*, literally 'white bike' that the police are famous for, but I've never seen one. Usually they ride what look to me like black postman's bikes. Apparently the *shirobaiku* are only used on the highways to pull over speeding cars. Perhaps they'd catch some of the *bousouzoku* if they used them in the cities

"What harm could there be in trying to help? Why doesn't anyone get involved?"

"No one got involved because everyone guessed it was a joy ride, and they probably all saw the culprits running away too. I don't get involved because I'm a *gaijin*. As far as I know, you're innocent until proven guilty in Japan too, but you're always an illegal immigrant until proven otherwise.

"A man I once met told me how he'd witnessed a robbery in Japan and called the police. Breaking and entering is unheard of here, so it's likely that he saw some people legally moving furniture, but when the police arrived, they didn't even check. They just asked him what right he had to call them and demanded to see his 'Alien Registration' card. *Gaijin* will generally get away with traffic offences because the cops don't speak English, but making them go out of their way to visit you is a sure way of getting their attention."

I had in fact been an illegal immigrant for a few weeks by this time, since I'd forgotten to renew my visa. The company normally warned us when the time was approaching, but they'd lost their files and I'd forgotten when it was due. When I took my passport to HR to ask them which of the two dates on the stamps was the one I had to worry about, they screamed that it was overdue and went into a panic of activity. One of the criteria to getting my visa renewed now was writing an official letter of apology to the government for the lapse. Meanwhile, I was lying low and wouldn't even cross against the lights. There was a very minor intersection on the way to work, through which only a hundred cars or so would pass each day, and twice a week there would be a policeman, called an *omawarisan* – Mr. Wanderer – standing on the corner, apparently watching for drivers not wearing seatbelts. My guilt complex kicked in every time I walked past those traffic lights.

"The only interaction I want with the police is when they come to check that I still live in this flat, which only happens every couple of years, or when I ask them for directions."

Police boxes, *kouban*, are spread regularly over the city to help people find the address they're looking for. Each *kouban* has a map on its wall detailing every block and every building in its precinct, which might only cover twenty blocks. Even taxis rely on the local *kouban* to help them find pickup points.

"I guess this is another episode for the book, huh?" said JP.

"Yep. I can't leave this one out."

"Well, I hope it's the last one while we're here," said Marian. "I don't want anything more like this." JP and Dave quickly agreed.

Oct 00 – Earthquake

地震 (ji-shin)

Fear gripped me before I realised what was happening – or perhaps *because* I didn't realise what was happening. The building jumped from side to side. My chair banged against the desk. My jug spilled water into a puddle that crept towards my laptop. People around me began screaming and diving under desks. I knew I should follow their example – they'd been through the Great Hanshin earthquake of '95 and should know what to do – but I was rooted to the spot. Fear held me, but so did excitement. *This* was the feeling I'd wanted in the typhoon.

'Besides,' another part of me said, 'a desk isn't going to protect me from anything but the roof falling in.' But with thirteen floors falling on top of me, pushing me down another seventeen, it would hardly make a difference. So I opened a new email and began writing to the distribution I had for my letters home.

> "If you actyally get this, you'll know that I'm sade. I'm in the middle of an earthquake that's strong enough to shake the seventrrnth floor of a rubber building. All my collesgues are cowering under their desks, finally all screamed out. The rippkes in the pomd outside have bedome waves. With the force of rhe motion, it's diggicult to type. I hope everything's IK in the computer roon, but there's no point in vhecking until it's over. This is an amazinf experience, but once is emough. I'll write mire later."

The building wasn't really rubber, of course, but it was designed for moving with earthquakes, rather than breaking up like pile of Jenga blocks.

That *jishin*, earthquake, on Friday the 6th of October was the first that I'd really had a chance to experience. There'd been a number while I was in Japan, but I hadn't noticed any that happened

while I was awake. When they occurred while I was asleep I only had time to roll away from my stereo cabinet – in case my TV took a dive of its shelf – before it was over. This one had the building shaking and waves lapping in the pond outside for over ten minutes, though apparently the *jishin* was only a few seconds long.

Once it was over, we went in to check the equipment in the computer room. Most of it had been bolted to the concrete floor against just such an event and remained in place, if somewhat sheepishly as though it had tried to move despite the bolts.

"Looks like it's all OK," said Ogura-san. "I was sure we'd find everything on its side again."

"We were lucky," I said, then remembered what I'd seen underneath the false flooring. "What about the real floor, though?" After the quake in '95, the company had evacuated it for over a year while inspections were done and repairs made. During that time, they rented space in a number of buildings in Osaka so that business could operate as usual. That they managed to get networks connected and processes back in place in the space of days is testament to the calibre of people I was working with. Rumour has it that so many buildings were damaged in that earthquake that the government had been forced to lower their standards that dictated which buildings would be demolished and which be declared safe.

On a number of occasions I'd pulled up the false floor to run cables and had seen the extensive cracks in the concrete on each level. From the time it took for the building to pass inspections, I can only assume that ours was one of those that failed the first inspection, but passed the re-evaluation.

"I wouldn't worry too much about the building," said Ogura-san. "It withstood one big *jishin* already, and the inspectors used a pretty big safety margin before allowing a building to be used again." The evidence supported this idea. Everything and everyone seemed to be in tact. "I'm more worried about my flat. Who knows what state that's going to be in."

I hadn't given it a thought until he mentioned it. My flat had been built since the last *jishin* and probably had to meet even stricter standards. It was my stereo cabinet that worried me, towering almost to the ceiling and ready to tip everything onto the floor. I'd been careful to place all the heavy items as low as possible and could only hope that I'd done it well enough to survive the rough treatment. That night, Lisa, John and I were going on a trip to Kanazawa directly from

the office, so I wouldn't get a chance to check until I got back on Monday evening.

I suddenly realised that we might not be able to go on our holiday. Buildings weren't the only structures that were damaged in *jishin*. I'd been to the earthquake museum on Flower Road and seen videos of the Great Hanshin earthquake where trains were derailed and overpasses fell on their sides. Miki once told me of being with a lover when it happened and having to walk, crying, five kilometres to her home as the sun rose on a chaos of wrecked buildings, crushed cars, deep potholes and bleeding people – all the way not knowing the fate of her family. The museum's pictures of collapsed overpasses and derailed trains show the horror that extended far beyond what Miki saw.

Besides the blue roofed shacks I'd seen on arrival, there were a couple of permanent reminders of the *jishin* around town. Where once Kobe's water supply had been the best in Japan, cracked pipes now let in enough dirt to make it one of the worst. And cats ruled the city, descended from pets but now homeless and breeding fast.

Lisa and I met early that afternoon, fighting for a train to Osaka, where we'd meet John and catch a *shinkansen* to Kanazawa. Miraculously, the Rokko Liner that took me on a towering bridge back to where she waited was unharmed, but when Lisa and I entered the station and fought our way through crowds to the platform, we found the displays indicating the next train were blank. After two years in Japan, this felt like a sign that the world was ending. I'd done a test one day, while waiting for a friend in a subway, and the door closed on one train exactly four minutes after the doors on the previous train did – two minutes in peak hour – and the doors line up at the same place on the platform, to the centimetre. This seemed incredible to me at the time, coming from a culture where I'd curse a train for being 'early' when it arrived only ten minutes late. Now, I was used to the exacting regularity of trains and had forgotten how to deal with the unknown.

"Excuse me," I said to the platform attendant, desperate to get his attention before the other eighty clamouring people, "when is the next train?"

"One should arrive in a few minutes."

"Will it go to Osaka?"

"I humbly apologise. I don't know. But I don't know where any of them will go, so you'd be best to get on and then try to get off if you hear that it's going somewhere else."

What kind of advice was that? Well, come to think of it, it's the kind we'd get in Australia on a Friday evening when our line is closed for track work.

"What'd he say?" asked Lisa, who was grabbing my arm to make sure we didn't get separated. "Is this our train?" It was pulling into the station as she spoke.

"They're all our train. Let's see if we can get on." It wasn't to be. Don't believe what you hear about Japanese always being polite and orderly. Every person in the crowd was pushing as hard as us – all trying to get home to check their loved ones and possessions – and dominating all were the *obatarion*. These old ladies, named by mixing *obaasan*, the Japanese for grandmother, with the English word 'battalion,' are fearsome creatures with powerful elbows at groin height that they use to their every advantage. The surging crowd brought us close enough for me to get my first sight of white-gloved station attendants, pushing the stragglers onto the train as the doors closed. This was a sight normally reserved for Tokyo and the main lines in Osaka at peak hour and I'd never been close to either. It had seemed rather silly to go all the way to Osaka on a day off just to get pushed onto a train, particularly since it would make it that much more difficult for the people who really had to be there. I was delighted, now, to have the chance to experience the cliché in a context that had personal meaning.

That train pulled out, and when the next pulled in twenty minutes later, those gloved hands were in our backs, pushing firmly, and the doors scraped closed on my shoulder. "MAG, I can't breathe," said Lisa, only half in jest. We were jammed so tightly into the carriage that I couldn't see my bright blue bag, held at my knees.

"Just be glad you're not surrounded by *chikan*," I said, referring to the men who grope women on crowded trains.

"Thanks. You're very reassuring."

"Don't worry. It'll be over soon," I replied optimistically, as we pulled into another station.

"How soon?" Before I had the chance to respond, we spilled out onto the platform. There was only time to take one deep breath before the crush was back and we were pushed into the middle of the carriage. If it was the wrong train, we wouldn't be able to get off now.

Thankfully, it was the right one and we got to Osaka in time to meet John and catch the *shinkansen* that was running on schedule. For the rest of the long weekend, my thoughts were on

the *jishin* and the impact it would have on the city. In '95, the government was trapped in its own bureaucracy and took weeks to provide any significant aide. By the time they got their act together, I'm told, the people of Kobe had food channels established, temporary housing for those who'd lost their homes and reconstruction work was underway. The real heroes were the *yakuza*, the Japanese mafia who, with their strong organisation and strict code of honour, had taken immediate action to send in food trucks and sheds for the homeless.

I later found out that this recent *jishin* was an M7.3 – a decimal point higher on the logarithmic scale than the Great Hanshin earthquake – yet the damage was barely visible once I returned to Kobe a few days later. Even in Kyoto, closer to the epicentre, the damage wasn't so great and it barely made world news. Perhaps only global seismologists and a few people that received my email were aware that it had happened at all, which makes me think that the Japanese have learnt a lot about preparing for *jishin* in the last ten years.

At home, my flat was almost as I'd left it. The stereo cabinet stood proudly against the wall, and the kitchen drawers were all shut properly. Only the porcelain frog on my phone stand that had jumped a few inches gave credit to my memory. Outside, a cat screeched loudly.

Nov 00 – Toilet

トイレ **(to-i-re)**

Wordlessly, Kayo and I locked up our bikes and hurried off towards the sign indicating toilets. Over the last three hours, I'd drunk a couple of litres of water and my bladder was fit to bursting when I recalled the minefield of embarrassment that Japanese toilets present. I could have taken a leak on the side of the road somewhere without causing too much of a ruckus – taxi drivers do it all the time – but it seemed totally inappropriate in the circumstances. Kayo was the first of the seven girls I'd met during that disastrous festival of sevens.

Besides being beautiful – mostly to do with her enormous smile, but assisted by an hourglass figure, so rare in this land of waifs, and glossy black hair cut to frame a face of clear skin and almond eyes – besides being beautiful, Kayo was active, adventurous and well-travelled. She'd been born in Canada, but moved back to Japan before her earliest memories. Since then, she'd become fluent in English and travelled around the world on business, befriending every person she met. She climbed mountains, cycled, snorkled and was a tennis champion. Although she'd pulled out a mirror at the top of the mountain with the others, it was only to put on sunscreen and she was as comfortable in hippy pants as in a party dress. Best of all, when I arrived at her place to help carry her bike downstairs for the trip, I'd immediately felt at home. Her flat was of similar design to mine and decorated in the same Spartan style. While there were obvious feminine touches – in the sunflower motif on the cloth draping the floor couch and on postcards pinned to walls, and in romantic pictures of couples on the walls of her *tatami* room – they weren't so overwhelming that I was itching to leave. This was a woman to whom I'd feel comfortable saying, 'you can decorate our home any way you like.'

I was determined to impress her, or at least not to make a fool of myself, and silently began to panic, wondering what surprise these toilets held in store. Like many Asian countries, Japanese toilets are traditionally a long pit, which you squat over to make your ablutions. These days, they're

usually made of porcelain and have a hood at the front for men to aim at, but they still carry the name *benjou* – place of use – which has become the slang term for toilets, like 'dunny,' and they're often found in mountain huts, *ryokan* and old houses. I don't mind them too much as I have no trouble sitting on my feet, but most westerners fall over when they try to put their feet flat on the floor while squatting. For girls in skirts it's apparently even more tricky. Visitors quickly understand the tradition of changing slippers for a plastic pair dedicated to toilets when faced with a *benjou* – we men are not known for our ability to aim, even with a target like the hood, and the flush mechanism tends to wash the floor as well. There are other watch-outs for foreigners, though.

My first experience of toilets in Japan came in the first ten minutes after getting off the plane thirteen years before. The nine-hour plane trip had been one long party and had I'd been too distracted to worry about calls of nature, but now I hurried to the gents, up to the urinals and stood looking at the wall for a few minutes. Finally relieved, I turned away from the urinal and found myself looking through a window at the viewing balcony of the airport. In my rush, I hadn't noticed the window or the crowd of people watching planes taking off. Surely they could see me too, if they turned around.

It had been the same story when I came back for the yearlong exchange two years later. I rushed off the plane and into the toilets in Nagoya airport, taking enough time only to check there was no window onto the balcony before relaxing my cramped muscles. Congratulating myself on having the presence of mind to check for windows, I turned to see the steady flow of people on the concourse reflected in the large mirror above the basins. Once again, they could see – if not as much as before – more than I wanted them to.

I became more vigilant after that, emptying my bladder whenever I found a urinal in a closed room, to avoid being caught in these situations, but I had a big surprise waiting for me at school. The urinals were along the wall perpendicular to the corridor, with the door in the corner beside them. Standing there, I could see the girls in classroom opposite and if they didn't look intentionally, they couldn't help but see me as they left.

"Don't stand so far back. Everyone can see you." Hayashi-san seemed to think that I was unaware of the situation, despite my red face. "Look. Stand close like we do." The others

almost put their entire groin inside the urinal, which is fine if you're five feet tall, but these were individual porcelain affairs with sides and a roof, and positioned for Japanese men.

"If I try that, I'll be peeing on the flush button," I said. They chuckled, but it was clear that I had to put in the effort.

Over time, I developed my own style, standing with my feet apart a few inches back and bending my knees. From there, I could arch my back for balance and push my groin into the urinal as my classmates did. After some practice, I managed to relax only my bladder muscles while keeping every other muscle in my body focused on retaining this position of contortion. My classmates were polite enough not to laugh, and I was confident that the girls averted their eyes whenever they left the room so as not to see anything that would make them giggle.

But my humiliation wasn't over. In the middle of the year, at the camp where I'd had a chance to play the *taiko* drum, the toilet block was outdoors and only had one urinal, which was right next to the door. On the last afternoon, I was relieving myself before the long bus trip home when I realised that a girl was standing beside me. I turned my head to see that it was Chieko, one of the girls in my team for the camp activities, and she was looking directly at my face, not appearing in the least bit shy.

"Gunn-san, can you write your address in my book? I'm collecting everyone's."

"I… I'm… I'm busy right now."

"That's OK. I'll wait." And she did, not even turning away.

By the end of that year, I'd become used to the whole scenario and didn't think too much about it when I moved to Kobe for work, so it gave me a good laugh to see someone else going through the same issues then. When JP, Marian and Dave came to visit, I took them to Kiyomizu, my favourite of the famous temples. We walked down the hill to where the holy water was. I ducked into the toilet block at the bottom of the hill and Dave also decided that he'd better take the opportunity before the long walk back to the station. Once inside though, he balked at the long window above the urinals, facing back up the hill.

"What's wrong?" I asked, when I joined him back outside.

"I don't want everyone to see my face when I'm taking a piss," he said, outraged. "What

kind of country is this, where every call of nature is a public event?"

Kayo had called me up a couple of times, looking for a cycling partner, and we finally arranged this trip around Biwako, Japan's largest lake. We'd cover one hundred kilometres, most of its circumference, in two days, taking time to stop off at famous local restaurants and temples. This stop was a temple that promised plenty of *momiji*, autumn leaves, but first we both had bladders to relieve. I followed Kayo along the path to the toilet block and froze when I saw what awaited me. Suddenly, Dave's complaints weren't so funny. It was a unisex toilet block and the girls wouldn't appreciate me joining the line for the cubicles, so I was forced to use the urinals. I stood there, doing my contortionist technique, trying to ignore the fact that a girl I wanted to impress was standing only a metre from me. Worse, the experience embarrassed me to dryness and I began to shake with the effort of holding the posture. I can only wonder how all the Japanese around managed not to laugh.

Kayo never said anything about the performance. When she joined me back outside, we fell into the routine of politely admiring the brilliant reds, oranges and yellows of maple leaves and standing solemnly to have our photos taken. That done, we got back on our bikes and rode on to the next restaurant, and then to our hotel. The bathroom there turned out to be a plastic module of the 'shit, shower and shave' variety and after a day of eating, I was keen to do the first. I sat there, with the basin pressing into my thigh and my feet in the tub, the roof still only a foot above my head, and looked for the flush button. It was on the opposite wall, within easy reach and clearly marked. Once done, I pressed it, but to no effect. I tried again, with no better result. 'OK,' I thought, 'it's time to panic. If I didn't totally humiliate myself already today, this will clinch it. How can I get out of this one?' I washed my hands and thought about it as I sat there. I could just tell her the toilet was broken and call the front desk to fix it while we went out for dinner. But it had worked for her. I'd heard the flush. She was bound to come in and test it, seeing… smelling…. 'Oh well. There's nothing for it.' I stood up to leave and smashed my head on the low roof. When I stopped cursing, I realised that the toilet was flushing. The bloody thing had a weight sensor on it – for what purpose, I'll never know.

But then, modern Japanese toilets are always equipped with wonderful and often unnecessary gadgets. The one in my flat is an exception. It's a simple unit with the brilliant addition of a small basin in the top of the tank. When you flush, the fresh water flows out a tap above the basin and then drains into the tank, ready to be used in the next flush. I can wash my hands in this water rather than wasting another batch in a separate basin. Other toilets, like the one at John's flat, are extremely high-tech. I was always wary of using his because the heated seat gives it that freshly used feeling. Then there's the bidet with full controls of temperature and pressure – even an oscillator – and the same for the dryer so that you don't actually need to get your hands dirty at all. One additional feature freaked John out, though.

"I was sitting there peacefully after coming home from work in my first week," he'd told me. "I was trying all the controls, as you do – including that remote control for flushing – and I saw that button with a musical note on it. Naturally I thought it piped the cable radio into the toilet, so I pressed it, but nothing happened. I figured it was broken, so I made a mental note to call that guy that sits at the entrance. He's probably just a guard, but he's been pretty helpful when I need something fixed. Anyway, I sat there, playing with a few of the other controls, and there was a knock on the door. Not my front door. The toilet door! The button was an alarm that rings in that office at the entrance and the guy had let himself into my flat, thinking that I was in trouble in my toilet."

Another gadget was invented for McDonalds but has taken off around the country. Faced with a growing water bill, one of the burger outlets did some research and found that their female customers were embarrassed about the sounds they made when using the facilities and were flushing to drown them out. McDonalds saved a lot of money by installing a button in each cubicle that plays the sound of a toilet being flushed, providing technological cover for the sounds of nature. Unfortunately, I never got to see this invention because although it's now popular around the country in women's toilets, men are still expected to make every use a public performance.

The most useless of all gadgets that I've yet come across is in Damion's new flat. Built in 2003, the building displays all the latest in technology and Damion and Kei are the proud owners of a toilet whose seat automatically lifts up and down. Now there's no need to even touch the toilet, and another few years should see a device that undresses you so you can have the whole experience

hands-free.

Dec 00 – Date

付き合い **(tsu-ki-a-i)**

Today was the day. At exactly nine o'clock, I buzzed Kayo from the entrance to her building, telling myself that I didn't need to be nervous – at least, not just yet. Three of us were going out for the day, but in the evening I planned to take her to dinner and try to get some romance into our friendship.

Kayo had failed to respond to any look, touch or hint that I'd given. It wasn't as though she was trying to put me off or was unsure herself. She just seemed to have no idea that I was interested. It was consistent with my other experiences in Japan, and the only way I ever found through it was to say it directly, almost as they do on TV. Japanese dramas are filled with scenes of lovelorn women watching their chosen man walk away while they wrestle with their emotions. Eventually, they burst and shout the words, "*suki da*" – I like you – sometimes followed by the full phrase, "*anata no koto ga suki da*." This was a favourite phrase among the exchange students because one literal translation is the graphic 'I like your thing.' A better translation would be 'I like things about you,' but that still lacks flair. My favourite in the book of 101 Japanese pickup lines translates as 'would you have coffee with me, watching the sunrise?' though I've been told that it's for amateurs. An old guy I met in a bar said that all a master needs to say is '*dou yaro*?' 'How 'bout it?' That strikes me as unlikely given the usual way of meeting a partner in Japan – at an *omiai* or *goukon*.

omiai is the first step towards an arranged marriage, where the couple meet for the first time. *goukon* is a party with an equal number of boys and girls. It's usually hosted by a couple who want to help their friends find a partner, and is still very common today. A number of TV shows mix this idea with reality TV to make a dating game show where each person is interviewed at various stages throughout the party to see who they're most interested in. These traditions have kept dating in the realm of words, which could explain why Japanese girls don't seem to respond to non-verbal cues. But then, even words can go astray. As I got on the bus to leave at the end of my stay in Nagoya,

Yukiko had given me a diary she'd been keeping of our time together. In it, I learned that she didn't realise I'd asked her out until about three months later. She assumed that I'd made a mistake in Japanese and thought I was just saying that I wanted to be friends. No wonder she'd shied away every time I'd tried to kiss her during those months.

"Hello," said Kayo's voice through the intercom.

"Hi Kayo. It's MAG."

"I'm not ready yet. Come in." The door clicked open and I went into the building's entrance, which was nothing more than a space for the lift and the letterboxes. I got in the lift, which then opened up to the outside on the living floors and I walked along the 7th floor balcony in the cold wind to Kayo's flat. Three times I rang the doorbell, and once I heard her voice, indistinct in the wind, but she didn't open the door. I crouched down behind the balcony wall, shivering and growing angrier by the minute.

"What are you doing up here?" she asked when she finally came out, obviously just as angry as I was. "Why did you keep ringing the bell?

"You said to come in. Why didn't you open the door?"

"Because you shouldn't be here! How will it look if I have a man in my house?"

"I've been in your house before."

"That was when I invited you in to help me carry my bike."

"But you allowed me to stay for a drink. How is this different?"

"Because then I wasn't expecting another person to show up." She later explained how the family of a Japanese man would hire a private investigator to check into the background of his fiancé and instances such as this would be enough to shed doubt on her quality as a potential wife.

"But you opened the door. Wasn't I meant to come in?"

"You were meant to stay in the entrance below so you wouldn't get cold." I recalled the small entrance. There was nowhere to sit, or even to stand if it came to that, and it was just as cold as outside.

I tried to calm my anger, telling myself it was just another cultural difference. "In my country," I explained in a calmer tone, "that would be considered very rude. It's rude for a man to be early or late, but it's normal for a woman to keep him waiting when he arrives. Even if her house

is a huge mess, she'll just apologise, move a pile of books off the lounge and offer him a seat while she finishes getting ready." By this time we were leaving the entrance and her friend was in his car, waiting patiently. He knew the rules.

Getting her alone that evening turned out to be very difficult. The friend wanted to drive me home, and I suspected his interest in Kayo was similar to mine. "Let him drop you home, then come back. I'll wait for you at the station," Kayo said when I told her I wanted to see her tonight, suggesting that she hadn't been so clueless as to my interest after all.

I did so and we searched for a restaurant. Strangely, after all our meals together, now when I most wanted to show her how well we matched, we couldn't find a restaurant that served anything we'd both eat. She wanted all the squishy delicacies and I wanted something plain – something that I could get down while my stomach churned. We finally settled on a *yakitori* place and ordered a number of dishes.

"This is my courage," I said, placing an envelope on the table and sliding it towards her. Everything I wanted to say was written inside. If I didn't say it, she'd read it all anyway, and it would just make me feel like a coward. She sat, listening quietly, while I told her that I liked her for the way I felt when I was with her, for being beautiful rather than cute, for her love of sports, for the way I felt comfortable in her flat. I told her of my discomfort in saying all this when I had no idea how she felt. As I spoke, I remembered the cultural clash we'd had that morning and told her that if she would go out with me, there'd be more of that, but I was confident we could work through it. I tried not to let my thoughts dwell on the fact that she liked to eat strange things and spend hours talking about it, while for me, aside from Nasi Goreng and Doner Kebabs, food was just something I ate to give me the energy to enjoy life. I was already nervous enough without highlighting issues. Her expression gave me no hint as to what she was thinking and spilling my heart like that made it feel like a marriage proposal.

She stayed quiet, smiling, for many minutes after I babbled myself out of thoughts. I couldn't tell if she was just happy at the compliment, or if she was happy that I'd asked her out. "At this stage of my life," she said, finally, "I wouldn't want to date someone if I didn't think it would lead to marriage."

My throat tightened as my proposal analogy gained realism. Kayo was thirty, so her concerns were valid. She was well past marriageable age for a Japanese woman. "I guessed you would feel that way, and I've thought about it. I can't make any guarantees, but if we can get through the cultural barriers, I think it will go that far."

She fell silent for a few minutes. "I've also had another offer." My thoughts immediately jumped to the friend who'd given us a lift today. No wonder he didn't want to leave me alone with her. And perhaps she wasn't past the marriageable age after all.

We talked late into the night about hopes and dreams and plans for the future and finally, when pressed for an answer, she told me she'd think about it. I slunk off home, having no idea what the answer would be.

"So, you finally asked her out," said Sae. "Well done."

We were in RIZTA, the bar next to the office and I was playing Pool with Francois. Sae, his girlfriend, had come to have a drink and hear the gossip. I leaned my cue against the wall and sat down, watching Francois choose his ball.

"Yes. But it's been a week and she still hasn't given me an answer. We've been out twice since then, so I suppose it's a good sign, but I really don't know what she's thinking."

Francois was leaning over the table, one eye lining up the four ball through thick lenses, the other squeezed shut. His tongue flopped out of his mouth as he concentrated. "*kowai kao*," said Sae. Scary face. "It's normal for her not to show her true feelings." *honne* and *tatemae* again. "She needs to keep her pride." That rankled. I'd thrown mine on the floor to ask her out, and she was taking care to protect hers. Women!

Francois missed his shot, the scary face not helping his aim, and I lined up the thirteen, but my mind wasn't on the game and I missed too.

"Why for so long?" I asked, back in the seat. "Even if two of us expressed interest, surely her heart will give her an immediate answer."

"I did the same when Francois asked me out, though only for three days. Even if a girl really wants a boy to ask her out and does everything she can to make him notice her, she needs to make him wait for an answer. This gives her pride."

"I asked her out when I did because I wanted to know before I go away for Christmas." I was leaving in a few days to spend three weeks in South America. The plan was still to look for a place to base myself while I wrote this book, but if her answer was yes, then I'd stay in Japan, so I could just have a holiday on this trip. "If she doesn't answer soon, I'll have to wait another three weeks."

Francois nudged me. "Your turn."

In the last hours before my flight, I had lunch with Kayo and pressed her for an answer again.

"We'll see when you get back from South America. You might feel differently then."

JAN 01 – SNOW

雪 (yuki)

It snowed in Sydney once. Not that I actually saw it. It was a few streets over from where I was rehearsing for a stage show in my school days. A few people who weren't staying at the site had arrived exclaiming that they'd just driven through snow to get there. Of course, we didn't believe them – it never snows in Sydney – until it was reported on the news that evening.

Even after all my years in Japan, I've never gotten over the thrill of seeing white specks floating down from the sky or blanketing footpaths, cars and rooves. Waking up to a world of white a couple of times a year brought a fairytale delight to my day, even if my boots slipped all the way to the station. That was the feeling I had on the evening I landed back in Japan, at an airport covered in snow. It boded well for my meeting with Kayo. I rushed through customs and the baggage claim, intent on getting home as fast as possible. In the one phone call I'd had with her while I was away, she promised to give me an answer the first night I got back.

My delight was short-lived, though. The buses weren't running to Kobe.

"I'm very sorry," the lady at the ticket machine told me. "There's too much snow so the roads are closed. I'm so sorry. You'll have to take the train instead. So sorry."

Dejected, I made for the trains, knowing it would take me an hour longer to get home through Osaka. An hour more before I could talk to Kayo or it might even be too late to see her tonight. Thinking to recover that time, I dug out my mobile phone and called her from the train. She was eating with friends in a restaurant near my flat. "I can come to your place once we've finished, if you like."

That barely gave me enough time to get home and unpacked, but the sooner, the better, I thought. Her taxi driver managed to find my address OK, and I'd soon settled her at my floor table with a warm drink. Not wanting to be far away from her any longer, I took a seat at a side of the table adjacent to hers.

"So, will you answer me now?"

"Slow down," she said, forcing a laugh. "Tell me about South America first."

I told her the basics – that I'd been to Bolivia and Peru, found my Spanish lacking, walked the Inca trail, and met a number of interesting fellow travellers.

"Are the Latin women as beautiful as everyone says?"

I began to wonder if that's why she'd delayed her answer. Was she either giving me the chance to enjoy Latino girls before making a commitment, or was it a test? I wasn't sure, but I only had one answer.

"Do you think I noticed? I couldn't get you out of my mind. I didn't even look." Well, maybe at some of the posters. The Latinos use sex to sell everything from car parts to laundry detergent, but I didn't think that admitting I'd felt the urge to bathe myself in the latest fabric softener or grease a carburettor would help my case, so I kept it to myself. "Will you please just answer me?"

She went quiet again for just long enough to make me expect further deferral, but then answered, "yes."

I lunged across the table corner and grabbed her in a hug, shouting, "that's wonderful." Suddenly realising that this wasn't very Japanese behaviour, I backed off and just looked at her, grinning. She looked bewildered at the intensity of my reaction, but was obviously pleased.

"Oh," I said, jumping up. "I got you a present. I hope it's your size." She was soon pulling on an alpaca jumper while I gave her a more detailed account of the trip – still not mentioning the advertising.

"It fits perfectly," she said, smiling. "You chose a good colour, too."

I couldn't work out if she was simply giving me the standard empty compliment or if she really liked it. "Um, I have a request." She looked at me uncertainly. "We've already talked about how if we do this, we're going to do everything we can to make it work, expecting that it will lead to marriage."

"Yes. Of course. There wouldn't be any point, otherwise."

"Well, I want to understand who you really are before we get to the marriage part."

"What do you mean?"

"My friends who've married Japanese women say that they change after marriage. When

they're just a girlfriend, they're submissive – always doing what they're told and leaving decisions up to the man – but afterwards, they become dragons – dominating the man in everything. I don't want a submissive girlfriend, and I'd much rather find out who you are before marriage."

"Oh, don't worry about that," she said in a tone that made it clear she was ready to take control immediately. "I don't intend to become submissive, ever." She was true to her word.

Her first decisive action was to plan our next holiday, later in January. I turned up at her house on the Saturday morning of the week before. Kayo came to the door wearing jeans and the Alpaca jumper I'd given her. "*ohayo*," she said, and kissed me warmly. Good morning.

"*ohayo*." I picked her up and swung her around a couple of times. "I've missed you this week." In the way of Japanese, Kayo had decided that we should keep our relationship quiet, though I'm sure that our suddenly ignoring each other in the lobby was a clear sign to anyone that knew us.

"I've missed you too." Her shy smile warmed my blood, but she had other plans. "Come on. We're running out of time."

"Where are we going?"

"I'm going to buy a snowboard and you're going to carry it for me."

A couple of hours later, we were in a ski shop in Osaka where Kayo was looking at various boards. The shop assistant was very knowledgeable and helpful, explaining how long the board should be, what shape she'd need for downhill as opposed to freestyle, and the benefits of 'step-in' bindings. Typical of the Japanese though, even the expert put form before function.

"What colour is your skiwear?"

"Red and orange."

"Right. You'll want this red board then."

"That's shorter than you said it should be for her," I complained. "What do you have in her size?"

I stopped quickly at Kayo's look, and the salesman looked pleased. Colour was more important and this board would look great with her outfit. Bindings and boots were chosen to match the rest and I was pleased to see that these, at least, fit the functional recommendations the shop assistant

had given. Finally, she was made to stand on the board while measurements were taken and then the bindings were attached. The process had taken most of the day.

A week later, we made our way to the station for a night train to Nagano. I had a rucksack on my back and a snowboard under each arm. A few days after Kayo bought hers, I did the calculations and found that if I rented for three weeks, I might as well have bought my own board. So one evening, I made my way back to the same shop and argued with them about what equipment I needed. "Forget the colour of my skiwear. It goes with anything." Luckily, Kayo approved of the blue board and yellow bindings I chose. I might have been boarding alone if I'd completely ignored their colour recommendations.

The train was specially set up for skiers with racks in the vestibule, but had obviously been designed before snowboarding became popular and the racks were too small for our boards. I was worried I'd have to sleep with them, but we managed to tie them to the side of the racks and went into the cabin. Unlike Australian sleeper trains, which have compartments with seats and bunks that fold down perpendicular to the carriage, this train had only bunks – laid out along each side, parallel to the carriage. I had no option but to lie down in my assigned bunk, and promptly fell asleep. We arrived at our destination at dawn, after one change of trains in the early hours of the morning.

Our home for the week was a *ryokan*, run by friends of Kayo's, with western style beds and tables and chairs for meals. In the style of other *ryokan* though, there was only one menu, so Kayo ate all my fish and spared me some of the less squishy stuff from her plate. If the chef was offended, he never let on.

Once I'd been introduced to everyone, we made the five-minute walk to the slopes and arranged lift tickets. Never having skied in Australia, it's difficult for me to compare, but I was impressed with the technology in this resort. The lift pass was a magnetic tag that you left in your hip pocket. Kayo showed me how to lean into the sensor as I went past so that I needn't slow the flow of traffic. The experts didn't stop, coming off the slope at speed and passing through the lift barriers with barely a shift of their hips. Most impressive was the fact that the three-day pass didn't need to be used on consecutive days, meaning that every lift barrier must be tied back to a central computer that logs which days you've used the tag and checks whether you're entitled to use it today – all in

the time it takes for a skier to go half a metre.

I picked up snowboarding quite easily, having spent my school years on a skateboard. The only tricky part was that on a skateboard, you turn with the front foot, while on a snowboard, you turn with the back. Until I learnt that, I spent my share of time on the ground, but by the end of the day I was carving easily down the practice slopes. 'Tomorrow,' I thought, 'I'll be able to go up to the top with Kayo.' She'd stayed patiently with me all day, and I didn't want to hold her back any more.

That evening, we were sitting around the fire with her friends. "So, how is MAG on a snowboard?" asked one of the girls.

"He's OK, but he rides it like a skateboard."

I looked at her in horror. My girlfriend was humiliating me in front of new friends. I was sure that she'd be impressed at how quickly I was picking it up, and happy that we could go to the more interesting places the next day.

"Well, you do," she said, when she saw my look. "You keep trying to turn the front of the board instead of the back."

I remained silent for the rest of the night, while they talked. Once back in the room, though, I brought it up again. "How can you be so cruel? I thought you'd encourage me, not embarrass me."

"You have too much pride." That was the first time, but I heard those words so often that I could say them before she did.

The next day, we ventured to the fresh powder at the top, where it feels more like surfing than skiing. Unfortunately, that meant I had to make my way back down the icy roads in the afternoon, and I soon realised that while these may be marked 'easy' on the map, the map had been designed for skiers. There's no grip for a snowboard on thin ice and I was constantly falling over, breaking off bits of my coccyx. I rounded a corner to find Kayo sitting on the uphill side of the road.

"There you are," she said, as though she'd been waiting for an hour, though I was sure she'd been having as much trouble as me. I turned to make some witty reply that was never heard. Suddenly realising I was heading straight for the edge of the road, I tried to fall over. There was an orange rope guardrail. I slid under it. My board was perpendicular to the cliff. The only friction I

had to stop me was the nose of the board. If I tried that, I'd end up boarding backwards down the cliff. My life might have flashed before my eyes then, but all I saw were visions of a giant snowball and me inside. The one chance I had was to spin around so that the edge of the board was in the snow. Somehow I managed it. I dug the edge, both hands and even my head into the snow.

I slid to a stop and, after getting my breath, looked up to see a small face peering over the top of the cliff. I'd fallen only about six or seven metres down an almost vertical hillside. Looking down, I saw a barrier about twenty metres below, then nothing for hundreds of metres. I stayed motionless, thinking that if I tried to get a better grip, I might just end up pushing myself off again. Before I could squeak 'help,' I realised that someone was coming down after me. Another boarder who'd seen me go over had quickly stepped out of his bindings, propped his board and come to help.

I walked the rest of the way down the road, stopping to watch some less fortunate victim being toed behind a snow bike on a stretcher. That was enough to convince me to take the next day off.

On the fourth day, I wasn't doing much better, and Kayo tried to give me some tips during the lift rides. "You need to put more weight on your front foot."

"That doesn't make any sense," I said, knowing I wasn't even giving her a chance. My biggest problem was that the accident had shaken my confidence and I was frustrated by watching her scream down the slopes fearlessly. There was probably something in her suggestions if I would only listen.

"Fine. I won't try to help you improve, then." So she didn't try and I didn't improve.

Until the last day, when we went to a different ski area, a bit further off. My lack of confidence had been tied to the area that I'd fallen in, and in this new arena I got it back. Here, I careened down the hill as fast as any of the best boarders, weaving in and out of skiers, and whooping my joy to the world.

"Finally, I can keep up with you," I said to Kayo when she'd caught me at the bottom.

"You have too much pride."

Feb 01 – Wedding

結婚式 **(kek-kon-shiki)**

"No, I'm not going with you," said Kayo. "Don't be silly."

"What's silly? Damion and Kei are getting married. Jemma will be there too. I want you to meet them all." Jemma had been living in the UK and the US for a few years, so it was very rare for the three of us to get together any more.

"I'm not going to go all the way to Hawaii to sit in a hotel while you go to a wedding." Many Japanese couples were getting married in Hawaii these days to avoid the drama and cost of a Japanese style wedding. Damion and Kei were doing it to allow both families to attend without travelling so far. It made even more sense while Kei's parents were living in Melbourne and the couple in Tokyo. Still, I was surprised at Kayo's idea of sitting in a hotel during the wedding. These cultural misunderstandings turned up often, but that's the fun of living in a different country.

"You're not going to sit in the hotel room. You're going to come to the wedding with me."

"What? I don't know either of them. Why would they want me there?"

"They'd want you there because you're my partner. It's normal in Australia for guests to bring their partner. I'll feel strange if you don't come."

"Oh." Her mouth remained fixed in a 'O' for a few seconds, then broadened into a smile. "Hawaii, you say?"

It's not easy to arrange a wedding from another country, so Damion and Kei ended up with a package deal, designed for Japanese. It was plastic but beautiful in its precision, timed so that the sun sank into the Pacific ocean as the couple made their vows. The minister, chosen more for his resonant voice than any spiritual capacity, made them wave their hands in a Hawaiian surfing salute before directing us out into the sunset for some rice throwing.

The reception was held in a small restaurant with a large glass wall. From where we sat, the

sky faded from red to black behind the newlyweds. I was delighted to find that Kayo, looking stunning in an emerald gown, got on very well with Jemma.

"I never got to see a Japanese wedding," said Jemma. "What are they like?"

"I'm not surprised. Only the close family is invited to the actual wedding." We'd been through this discussion after the earlier confusion. The day must be chosen carefully to ensure luck for the relationship. Japanese are highly superstitious – or at least, they follow customs that are – and refuse to get married in April since it's the fourth month and four is the number of death. Similarly, they try to choose the day of *taian*, great safety or peace, which comes once in every cycle of six days. Other days in the cycle vary in meaning and appropriateness for weddings and births, but *butsumetsu*, Bhudda's death, is always avoided.

"Sometimes it's held at home in front of the shrine alcove, but it's usually still held at a proper shrine. First, the priest purifies the couple, and these days, the groom reads words of commitment, like the vows that Damion and Kei said." Apparently the bride's commitment is taken for granted. There's also an exchange of rings, which shows how much western culture has already made its way into Japan. The couple then make offerings to the gods of twigs from the sacred *takaki* tree, an evergreen from the tea family with deep roots in Japanese mythology.

"Finally, they drink from three flat sake cups, which symbolise love, beauty and prosperity. The bride and the groom both take three sips from each, passing the cup to each other between each sip to strengthen the bond between them. Then the sake is offered to their families to include them in the bond."

"It sounds beautiful," said Jemma. "I wish I could see it myself."

"Oh, it is beautiful, but more couples are skipping it and going direct to the city hall to just sign the legal documents."

"That's sad. No ceremony or party at all?"

Kayo laughed. "They'd never get away without having a *hiroen*."

I jumped into the conversation. "That's the first, formal, party after the ceremony. I was lucky enough to be invited to one."

It was Kayo's turn to look surprised again. "How did you get invited to a *hiroen*? They're pretty exclusive, too."

"My host sister's boyfriend got me the invitation. He was a good friend of the groom."

I hadn't really noticed Kenji at the Star Party, but I took more notice on this occasion. He was to be my guide and I'd have to follow his instructions carefully to avoid embarrassing him, Akiko and myself, or even worse, the bridal couple. Kenji was a tall chiselled young man with the slicked back hair popular at the time, and arrived at our house dressed in a business suit. Akiko planned to wear a sparkling blue dress, so I chose my dinner suit, glad that I wouldn't be taking it home unworn. On the drive to the hotel, Kenji explained that the wedding was for one of his best friends who was very interested in western culture, so he was happy for the chance to show an Australian what a Japanese *hiroen* is like. However, it was unusual for anyone who didn't know either of the couple to attend, so I should make myself as invisible as possible throughout the event. I'd forgotten this by the time I invited Kayo to Damion's wedding.

Kenji and Akiko each added an envelope to a pile at the entrance to the banquet hall and waved me past.

"We give the couple money as a wedding present. It's so much easier than giving a present that they might have to return or throw away and they can use it to buy new furniture or to pay off the house, or for the honeymoon."

I couldn't help but feel guilty. I had no gift and was running out of the little money I'd brought with me.

"Don't worry," said Akiko. "You're not expected to give anything, but Okaasan added a bit on your behalf anyway."

So my debt to the family increased, but that was one I could never repay. I pushed the thought aside and looked around the hall. There must have been two hundred people milling about in small groups. Children were running around, obviously delighted to see their relatives again. All the men and boys wore business suits, most of the women were in elegant western dresses and older ladies and girls wore *kimono*. "Which is the couple?"

"They don't come until everyone else has arrived." As if on cue, the groom entered the room in a commanding short, white *kimono* with *hakama*, a divided martial skirt, covering his legs. The bride followed in a white *kimono* decorated with flowers and fruit. Her *obi* was a wide floral red

sash – red and white being happy colours in Japan. They made a short lap of the hall before sitting in the only chairs. We all remained standing while a man representing both families stood on a stage at the side of the room and introduced the bride and groom, giving some details of their family and career backgrounds. Once this was over, the couple were lead to a barrel of *sake* and given a large wooden hammer. They broke the seal, then used a bamboo ladle to scoop *sake* into square wooden containers. While we clapped, they drank from these then left the room again.

"Where are they going?"

"You'll see. Just enjoy the show."

As soon as they'd gone, the party began. People began heading for the food tables where they loaded some of the myriad hors d'oeuvres of *sushi*, raw fish, *teriyaki* chicken and more into dainty arrangements on paper plates. Others, including many children, dived straight into the *sake*, downing cup after cup. Aware of my instructions to stay out of the way, I followed quietly behind Kenji and Akiko to get a plateful of chicken, then moved to the back of the hall to watch the proceedings. Everyone stood as they ate, there being no chairs or dining tables. Suddenly I heard the horrible goldfish warbling of *enka* and turned to see an old man on the stage singing. As we ate, a procession of guests took turns to play instruments, dance or sing, occasionally modern pop songs, but more usually the traditional *enka*. I was suddenly glad for being invisible, not wanting to be asked to perform something in front of this strange crowd – or any crowd, for that matter.

The bridal couple made another appearance in a different set of *kimono* and took the stage. To my delight, they'd chosen to perform *taiko*, both beating the same drum and I'm sure that they had practised many months for the event. Even more inspiring were their expressions, showing that they enjoyed the playing as much as the attention. They left again – and more guests took their turn on the stage – but eventually returned for the final time, now wearing western bridal gown and tux.

While they sat and had something to eat, we were put through a number of speeches by the groom's family and a manager from his company. The bride then stood to read a letter to her family – a parting thankyou before she went off to join a new family. Unfortunately, it was too formal for me to follow, but many of the drunk guests had to wipe away tears from the beauty of her words. The bride herself managed to keep dry eyes despite the emotion in her voice. The couple then took a bunch of flowers to her parents and another to his – a gesture of respect and appreciation.

The *hiroen* now over, the couple stood near the door to personally thank each guest as they left. We were all presented with an ornate box.

"What's in this?" I asked Kenji as we walked back to his car. He shushed me immediately, making me realise that I'd made the same mistake as at New Year. Presents aren't meant to be opened or discussed around the giver in case your reaction shames them. Once we were in the car, though, Kenji felt it safe to explain.

"Usually they'll hold something sweet, and in total, there should be three, five of seven items since those are lucky numbers. I opened mine and looked at the chocolates inside.

"They mustn't like me. I've got six chocolates."

Akiko giggled at my indiscretion. "The seventh item is the container itself," she told me, showing me once again, how much I had to learn about Japanese culture.

"It all sounds so amazing, but then Japanese follow the same pattern as us, really – ceremony then party."

"Not quite," I said. "They have more parties after that."

Kayo broke in. "MAG's going to a *nijikai* when we get back."

Jemma attemped to translate. "Second gathering?"

"Yep. It turns out that two of my team mates have been going out secretly and they're getting married later this month, too."

The reception was coming to an end, so we escorted Damion and Kei to their limousine and wished them a wonderful honeymoon. Then the rest of us went back to our beach house and had a couple of days enjoying the Hawaiian ocean.

Inoue-san was dressed in an elegant peach-pink coloured floral *kimono* with flowers in her hair. Her new husband, Ogura-san, was wearing a more austere black and white version. They made their way around the tables as we ate, chatter and laughter filling the restaurant. Once everyone had eaten their fill, a group of organisers lead by Nakano-san stood out the front, all wearing silly wigs in bright colours.

"It's time for the activities," said Nakano-san. "First, we're going to blindfold Inoue-san."

Once they'd done so, they waved two of us up the front and sat us down on chairs either side of Ogura-san, giving us thick markers and some paper.

"Now, Inoue-san, we're going to ask three men some questions and from their answers, you have to guess which one is your husband. Got it?" Inoue-san nodded that she did. "OK. First question. What is your favourite hobby? You have one minute to write your answers."

We'd been asked to prepare a few days earlier, and when choosing my answer, I recalled the humiliation I'd suffered at the Star Party when Yukiko didn't recognise me, so I chose something easy – too easy, as I found out.

"OK. Person number one says that their hobby is rock climbing."

"That's MAG-san!"

"Don't guess too quickly," said Nakano-san. "You might be wrong."

"It's MAG-san," she said again, confidently.

"If you say so. Person number two says that their hobby is trekking. And person number three says that their hobby is drawing." Inoue-san was quiet. "Do you know which one your husband is?"

"I'm pretty sure, but let's keep going so I can be certain."

They asked us a couple more questions. "Who is your favourite actress?" and "When was the last time you went dancing?" We answered each and Inoue-san was given a minute to make her guess.

"It's person number two."

"Are you sure?" asked the host, stalling for time as Ogura-san and I swapped places.

"Yes. I'm sure."

"OK. Take off your blindfold and see for yourself." She did so and broke into a squeal.

"That's a lie. You tricked me!"

Ogura-san went over to admit the deception as raucous laughter echoed around the hall and died down.

We played a couple more games designed to humiliate the newlyweds, then finished with a dare. One person shouted out "kiss," and soon everyone was chanting, "kiss, kiss, kiss." The normally extraverted Inoue-san dropped to the floor, legs splayed and feet beside her hips in the

Japanese fashion, her face buried in the *tatami*. When she stood, coaxed by her husband, she shook dramatically and it was difficult to tell if she was truly nervous or just playing to the crowd. The tension built as they leaned in and Inoue-san pulled away, screaming "*hazukashii*." I'm embarrassed. After a number of balked attempts, she finally leaned in all the way so that their lips met for a microsecond before she jumped away, bouncing around the hall shouting "*hazukashii*, *hazukashii*." The guests all cheered their appreciation of her sacrifice.

That brought the evening to a close and the couple stood by the door to thank everyone as we left, giving each person a small bag of Japanese sweets.

"MAG-san," said Hiraki-san once we were outside. "You're not going home already, are you?"

"Why? Is there something else happening after this?"

"Yes, we're going to have a *sanjikai*."

I translated quickly. "Third party? That's not part of the tradition is it?"

"It is tonight."

Inoue-san was known to be a party animal and I felt sorry for Ogura-san who might have to wait a few days for the anticipated pleasures of the wedding night.

Mar 01 – Pride

自慢 **(ji-man)**

"Hey," I said as I went through Kayo's CD collection. "You've got two copies of Whitney Housten's album."

"I know. If I give you one, would you put it in your CD player?" The question isn't as stupid as it sounds. I'd bought a 200-disc player so that I could put most of the cases in storage, gaining a bit more space in my cramped flat. I'd chosen to put my 187 Australian CDs in it, and to keep my 54 foreign discs on the shelf to play in my DVD player.

"No. I'd put it on the shelf with all the other foreign CDs."

"How do you think that makes me feel?"

I looked at her. "Why would it make you feel anything? Why do you care how I organise my CDs?"

"You have too much pride."

I finally snapped. I'd listened to those words almost every day since we'd started going out. "What has my pride got to do with this? Are you looking for things to argue about?" I stormed out of her flat, but as I pushed past her, I saw Kayo already going back to her book.

I took it as a good sign that we argued. My previous relationships had all ended at the first argument, whether that was after one month or six. The fact that we argued – well, actually, the fact that we usually made up by the end of the day – was promising because it showed we were both committed. But I was getting very tired of arguing about trivialities. Thoughts of all our arguments rattled around my head all day. She called me proud if I noticed an Australian band playing in some store. She called me proud if I mentioned that Australia had won the rugby again. I was proud if I talked about the harshness of the Australian climate and my convict ancestors that had tamed it, or the Aboriginal people who lived easily in even desert conditions. I was proud if I wanted to lead when we danced. I was proud if I made a joke at someone else's expense. I was proud if I laughed

at myself. I was proud if I laughed at an absurd idea that came to mind in any situation. Pretty soon, I was proud if I even tried to make her laugh.

I couldn't understand her hang-up on pride. Were the Japanese so different to Westerners in this respect? If anything, I decided, they were more proud. Even more patriotic, which is what she often meant when she used the word. The concept of *honne* and *tatemae* is rooted in pride, as is the idea of saving face. It's carried through from their *samurai* days when pride was so strong that death was better than shame. You only have to turn on the TV to see it. Every morning, Kayo would watch shows crying the virtue of Japanese cuisine, the brilliance or bizarreness of Japanese fashion, or the elegance of Japanese architecture. There was also a plethora of *samurai* and period dramas celebrating Japanese history. More shows were dedicated to Japanese pop idols, and J-Pop – they even gave their music its own genre – took up more than half of any music store.

When the Olympics were on, Japan only broadcast the events that they'd participated in. The coverage was full of *juudou* and diving, but lacked the other swimming events that Australia excelled in. The only track event I saw covered was the women's marathon when Michiko Takahashi got gold. I think their patriotism is great. Takahashi-san beat the best in the world at an event that doesn't favour the Japanese and even I'm proud of her, but the exclusivity can be taken to extremes. In 2002 they hosted the World Cup Soccer, but only broadcast the matches that Japan played in.

Pride is the factor that makes it impossible for a *gaijin* to really integrate into Japan. Most Japanese take pride in having a *gaijin* friend, but we're usually seen as a kind of pet – a mascot. We're proof that the Japanese are superior because we make mistakes and fail to understand the Japanese culture. But *gaijin* that can show that they do understand – as I managed to achieve occasionally – are feared. We understand the language and culture of two countries, which most Japanese will never manage, so we serve only to shame the Japanese and they avoid us.

Ironically, I thought, the very first time I heard that accusation, 'you have too much pride,' was caused by Kayo's pride, not mine. The Japanese take pride in humbleness, deprecating themselves, their work and their possessions, which includes partners. She was showing her pride in me by being confident enough to put me down in front of her friends. For my part, it wasn't that I'm proud that made it so hard to bear, but that I lack the required self-confidence. If I'd been sure

that Kayo was happy with my progress on the snowboard, or that her friends wouldn't attribute any value to the comment, I wouldn't have cared what she said. In hindsight, I can see that she was probably so pleased that in order to have something humble to say, she'd had to latch onto the one problem I'd voiced myself. But the Japanese keep their true feelings so wrapped up that you can never believe what you see.

Somehow, in all the thinking I did on that day, I managed to forget about the way she'd kept me waiting for weeks for an answer – all because it gave her pride. It's probably good that I did, or I might not have been so calm and ready to talk when I returned to her flat that evening.

"I'm sorry." My mouth fell open in shock that it was her that spoke the words, and just as soon as I'd walked through the door. "I should have given you the background, first. One of my colleagues said that you told her you were planning to move back to Australia. I was hurt that you were making decisions on where we'd live without consulting me." I followed her to the floor couch and sat beside her.

"A decision? I remember the conversation. He asked me if I ever planned to return to Australia. What was I meant to tell him? You won't even let me tell him that we're going out. Obviously he knows, though, or he wouldn't have said anything to you." Kayo sat quietly, apologetic.

"I gave him the same answer as I give everyone. That I expect I will go back to Australia one day, when I've finished seeing the world. But while we're together, any decision on where we live is going to be mutual. Haven't we spent enough time discussing that already?" I wanted to move to South America or Europe next. Kayo wanted to go to North America or Europe, so we were both trying for assignments in Europe.

"Yes," she said shyly. "I don't know why I took it so seriously. I guess when I see how attached you are to Australia, I wonder how we're ever going to work out together."

"Ah, so that's why the CD question triggered this. Look," I said, pulling her face close. "I said that when we're living together, I'm happy for you to arrange the place as you see fit. If that includes how we organise *our* CDs, then that's fine."

"But you won't change it now?"

"No. Not when I'm the only one who uses the stereo much. Besides," I said, laughing. "Would you be able to find the CD in the 200-disc player?" Kayo's face began to cloud over – the price of joking again. "Look, the sound quality isn't great anyway. I was planning to throw it out as soon as we leave Japan."

Kayo grinned again, and I pulled her into a kiss. This was the closest I'd ever come to winning an argument with a girl and I was determined to enjoy it.

Apr 01 – Sexist

男女差別 **(dan-jo-sa-betsu)**

"Guess what! I have something to tell you. Meet me in the cafeteria."

I knew immediately, from Francois' excited tone, what he was going to tell me, but I didn't spoil his surprise. I walked the two flights down to the cafeteria and waited until his big grin sat down across from me.

"I'm going to ask Sae to marry me."

"Going to? I expected you to tell me she'd already accepted."

"No, but we've talked about it enough that I know she will. I have a favour to ask you."

"Sure," I said hesitantly, not quite sure what I could do to help him propose.

"I want you to be my best man." I was shocked. We'd become good friends, but surely he had older friends back in France that deserved that honour more than me. He later explained that one of the main reasons for choosing me was that I was the longest standing of only three friends that also knew Sae well – a complexity I hadn't thought about for an international wedding.

"Of course. I accept. Thankyou." I started to think about what that meant. Wearing a suit. Standing at the front of the church. Making a speech! My stomach was churning already.

"When and where will it be?"

"I'll need to agree that with Sae, but I expect we'll have it in Golden Week next year, and I'd like to have it in France."

"That's great. I may even be living in Europe by then." I'd been told that there was a position available for me when Hiraki-san, my new manager, would let me go – about a year from now. Kayo was still looking.

"You need to help me find the ring before you go."

"No worries. Just let me know when you want to do it."

The following Saturday we wandered through Sentaagai, the *shoutengai* shopping street at Sannomiya.

"That one's nice," said Francois, in the first shop. "Ask him what kind of diamonds they are."

I asked the shopkeeper and translated back that they were yellow diamonds.

"Oh, Sae would never accept yellow diamonds. Let's keep looking."

Francois' comment highlighted the discrepancy between the general perception of inequality in Japanese society and the actuality. Chauvinism is only the visible surface in the Japanese culture. Outwardly, it's a very male dominated society where men work and women look after the home. In a traditional relationship, the women walk behind the men.

My father had seen an example of this at the station where he watched a man, seemingly oblivious of his wife, arrive on the platform and place his bags down. His wife stopped obediently beside him, but he picked up his bag and walked further on, then back to where they'd originally been. Uncomplaining, his wife trotted behind, out of sight. However, if my father had looked more closely, he would probably have seen that the man carried all the bags, or at least the heavy items, while she carried little. Underneath the chauvinist façade, there is another layer where the woman shows her power.

When I went to Hokkaido with Okaasan, I had been furious to find that she gave me the tent, stove and food to carry, while she took only a small bag containing her clothes. Moreover, she expected me to put up the tent, set up the stove and do most of the cooking. I was unaware of her expectations and, having a long history of leading hikes in Australia, I took control, giving her instructions to set up the stove while I put up the tent. She promptly burst into tears at my heartlessness. The man was expected to do all the work outside the home.

Kayo, who was quite well muscled, also expected me to carry as much of the heavy things as I could manage in all situations. I should say that she didn't expect it, because I was a foreigner with different customs, but she was training me fast and even shopping, I often found myself taking everything my bag would hold before letting her carry the few remaining items.

"Are you ready to deal with the layers of relationship that Japanese couples have?" I asked.

"Yes. We've talked about our roles a lot. Sae will keep working so it won't be so much layers as sharing. Sae will do the cooking and I'll do the dishes. We'll share the cleaning."

A Japanese man would never think about doing any housework. Even children aren't expected to assist. Each person has their role in a traditional family, but it's more about efficiency than chauvinism. The father earns the money to support the family, and as such is the undisputed head of the household - apparently. The children have to put all their effort into their schoolwork from a very early age to assure their future. It's the mother that allows the father to concentrate on his job and the children on their schoolwork by keeping the house clean and food on the table.

One of the most interesting aspects of this pecking order is demonstrated in the bath. The mother runs the bath – which she can now do from the kitchen with the push of a button – and the father goes first. The males of the family follow in order of age, then the other women, again in order of age. Finally the mother will get her turn once everyone else is in bed.

My host family in Nagoya wasn't so structured and if, for example, Otousan was watching TV, he'd offer the bath to the next in line. He'd even get his own breakfast on Sundays, and we'd all wash our own things up. In Saga, on my first exchange, my host family had been much more traditional and I wasn't even allowed to *look* into the kitchen.

I'd worked in an opal shop during my university days and we'd had some diamonds as well. It all started coming back to me as we wandered through the jewellery shops. Once I knew what Francois was looking for, I was able to point out the likely candidates without asking the shopkeepers. It still took most of the day though, and I found myself getting braver with my intrusions into their future.

"What about money?" This was the area with most depth of layers to my mind. On the surface, the man of the house controls everything. The money is his to use as he pleases – but that's just the first layer. A dedicated employee doesn't have time to visit the bank during open hours, so he can't control much. At the second layer,, he gives his payslip to his wife and she takes control, giving him an allowance for the week. She pays the bills, does the banking, gives the children money for their tuition and other activities and takes care of it all. If my father had seen the couple at the station earlier, he would have seen her paying for the tickets. According to articles I've read, there's a third layer beyond my experience, where the man makes the decisions about where the money goes, how it's invested, what his allowance is, and what she can spend on groceries. I suspect that another layer down you'd find that the husband doesn't have much idea of the value of

the food he eats, or the furnishings or school fees and the wife feeds it all to him for his official approval, but really has the control herself. And so it goes, deeper and deeper.

We'd walked back to one of the first shops we'd visited, and Francois pointed the chosen ring out to the shopkeeper, an elegant young woman. "Can I see that one again? Yes, that's it. I'll take it, thanks."

"Certainly, sir, and would you like us to adjust the size?"

Francois looked at me in a panic. "I didn't check what size her fingers are. Um. I think her ring finger would be about the same size as my little finger."

I looked at his huge hands. "Are you sure? I thought Sae's hands were smaller."

"You're right." He held up his little finger to the shopkeeper. "A bit smaller than that, please."

"Perhaps her hands are closer to my size," she said, holding hers out.

"No. A bit smaller than that."

The shopkeeper said that she'd have the ring adjusted and moved to the register. Francois turned back to me, finally able to answer my last question about money.

"Sae isn't interested in handling money, except to have a final check when we invest it."

I wondered how true that would be. Francois had a taste for *manga*, figurines and tacky ornaments. I couldn't see Sae allowing him to continue spending so much on gimmicks, and I was willing to place a bet on where the power would really lie.

May 01 – Cycling

自転車 **(ji-ten-sha)**

Kayo looked at me over the top of the hotplate sitting on her dining table. "Let's go somewhere for Golden Week."

I shifted my legs, which didn't take being folded for too long. "I don't know. This is the first time I've had Golden Week off since I came to Kobe so I want to do something, but everyone's travelling then. Even if we can get seats on a plane and rooms in a hotel, they'll be really expensive."

"I'm not saying we have to catch a plane. Let's go for a long bike ride."

I looked up from the bowl I was mixing for *okonomiyaki*. "That sounds like my kind of holiday." Kayo grinned and I remembered the last bike trip we'd taken – around Lake Biwa. The well-marked trail along wide lanes with their spectacular views was almost ideal. The only things missing was a few hills to give me a workout. But cycling isn't usually that good in Japan. "Do you have somewhere in mind? When Damion arranged one last year, it was a disaster."

"Let me do that," she said, reaching for the bowl. "You're not getting the lumps out. Where did you go then?"

"Along the coast between Shizuoka and Aichi-ken. It was like riding in the city all the way." Damion, Kei, Lisa and I had ridden for two days along what was labelled a bike path. This strip on the side of a narrow, but major, road was protected by concrete gutters just high enough to be a menace to pedals, but still low enough to allow the wind from passing trucks to blow us into the fields. The sixty kilometres should have taken us about four hours total, even with the inexperienced cyclists in the group, but it turned into an unpleasant five hours each day.

The mentality of cycling is different in Japan, too, and I had little patience for cyclists. Most people have *mamachari* – the ladies bikes with baskets on the front – just for getting to the station or shops and back. So cyclists have all the rights of pedestrians. They have all the rights of vehicles as

well, but most people stick to the footpaths. I'd been hit stepping out of a shop one day, and gained only mild satisfaction at the fact that the culprit fell off his bike and then had to bow an apology to me in the middle of town. More annoying were the *mama* who pushed their *chari* through crowded *shoutengai*, arrogantly ringing their bells in a command to let them past. I tried to lead by example and ride on the streets, but the drivers don't expect it and I was nearly run down on a number of occasions – once by a large truck.

I'd retreated from the cities and decided to only ride my bike up the mountain for exercise, but Japanese mountains aren't for the unfit. Even after doing that climb three times a week for a few years, I still used granny gear and had to stop every five minutes to rest. That didn't leave many places for a fun ride.

"What about going off Honshuu? I read about a new bike path going from Hiroshima over to Shikoku."

"But that's over the ocean."

"Exactly. It's called *shimanami kaidou*."

"Island waves – sea road. Very cute. I take it the wave means something like a sine wave – the shape of the road over the bridges."

"*pin pon*." The Japanese imitate the chimes of game shows to indicate an accurate or mistaken guess. A wrong guess would have gotten me a *buuu*.

"How far is it?"

"It's only eighty kilometres across the *shimanami* route, but we can ride around Shikoku for a few days as well. Should I look into it?"

"Sure. Can I invite Damion and Kei? They've been wanting to give their bikes a run too."

"Of course," said Kayo as she poured the mix onto the hotplate. "It'll be good to see them again."

We made some basic plans over dinner. Actually, Kayo made the plans, and I just nodded. As usual, there wasn't much left for me to do. I was just beginning to think this would be an evening without confrontation, when she threw me the toughest cultural spin ball I've ever had to face.

"I have to tell you something. My parents have set up an *omiai* for me next month." Her parents didn't know about me. She didn't want to tell them until I proposed and I wasn't ready for

that yet. Whenever they came to visit, she'd clean her place thoroughly, lest they find something of mine, or smell me. I've always been a hit with girl's parents and Kayo's attitude confused me. It made me feel like her parents hated me, and I hadn't even met them.

Being traditional parents, they were worried about their daughter not being married yet and were making their own arrangements. I knew I had to tread carefully here. Now I was trapped between parents that wanted their daughter married, Kayo's increasing desire for children and her unwillingness to let anyone know we were going out.

"Are you going to go?" I asked cautiously, trying not to sound too shocked, concerned, or possessive. That was my mistake.

"I think I will." My heart clenched. "They'd wonder why, if I refused."

"What will happen after you meet this guy?"

"If I like him, we'll get married."

My breath caught in my throat and I couldn't say anything more. My answer had been the wrong one. I found out later that she'd been hurt that I hadn't reacted jealously and assumed that it meant I didn't really care. I managed to clear that up before the event, and she cancelled, but the damage was done. From then on, it echoed through our arguments. Comments like "You don't really care" and "Why won't you tell your parents?" became increasingly common.

On the Wednesday evening before Golden Week, Kayo and I rode to the station and packed our bikes into their bags. Uncovered bikes aren't allowed on the trains, but once covered, they can be taken on any train for free, so it was a great way to get them out of the city. Changing from the local train to the *shinkansen* was a hassle, but it saved us about four hours on our trip to Onomichi, near Hiroshima, where Damion and Kei were waiting. They pointed out the hotel, but then told us that the bikes had a hotel all of their own. We wheeled them into an underground parking station where thousands of bikes were stacked two high, bought tickets and slotted them into the racks – Kayo's on the bottom bunk and mine on top. Then we headed off to find a restaurant that was still open.

The following morning dawned cloudy and blustery, but the sun sent its rays to spotlight the waves below and occasionally to show us the trail, so we had very little to complain about. The paths wound from sea level, through verdant scrubs, up to the bridges and their scenic vistas of the

writhing ocean and the dollops of land. I loved the uphill rides and the views from the top so I'd usually leave Damion and Kei puffing at the bottom and Kayo would drop away halfway up, leaving me to enjoy the view alone for about twenty minutes before they arrived. There were others on the path as well – a number of motor scooters that believed they had the same rights as cyclists, tooting me out of the way, and many fit, elderly people out for a joy ride. Some looked seventy, which probably meant they were closer to ninety.

On one hill, after I'd left the others behind, I looked back to see an old bloke catching up to me. It hit my pride – that cursed pride – and I put my head down to ride harder. A couple of minutes later, my legs burning, I looked back and he was still there. Beaten, I let him past and marvelled at his casual style, then realised it was too casual.

"Did you get a load of that?" asked Damion, as he joined me at the top of the bridge. He leaned over his handlebars while he caught his breath. "That old guy screamed past us without even puffing."

"I know. It took everything I had just to keep ahead of him. I don't think it was a normal bike though. Did you see the case around the chainring?"

"You reckon it was electric?"

"That's the only excuse I'm accepting. Must have been a hybrid though, because he was definitely pedalling." I saw a number of these bikes, but never found out how they worked. The environmentalist in me wanted to think that it was kinetic energy stored on the downhill, but it probably had a power socket hidden underneath. "A bike like that would go a long way to reducing traffic in Australian cities – if people could be convinced to leave their cars at home."

We always rode down together, enjoying the breeze in our faces and the thought that we'd put one more bridge behind us. The last bridge skipped more than ten kilometres over a few islands and put us down in Imabari on the north-western tip of Shikoku just as the sun was setting. We'd ridden eighty kilometres and had another ten to go before we reached the hotel, but we took the time to stop and watch the sun descend over Shikoku.

"Come on," said Kayo. "There's a restaurant around here that I want to try. They sell tiny *sushi* for ten yen each."

Jun 01 – Environment

環境 **(kan-kyou)**

The air was hot and heavy with the threat of *tsuyu* rain, the water cool and refreshing. Rock walls rose steeply on either side of us, and the river gently pushed us towards the rapids ahead. There was time enough to get back to the raft and prepare for those when we got closer. For now, the members of the hiking club were free to float in the clear, blue water, looking at the sky, the rocks and the sandy riverbed.

"So this is what a *kawa* is supposed to look like."

I turned to see Nakajima-san's wistful expression, and felt my own eyes brim.

"You know," she continued, "I always wanted to travel overseas, just to see a real river. I didn't realise we had one just a few hours from home."

We were in the mountains of Shikoku, fulfilling the dream of one of the group who'd always wanted to go rafting. An experienced Kiwi from the rafting company was leading the expedition and he sat in the raft now, keeping an eye on us all as we splashed and paddled. It wasn't the only river in Japan that looked like this. According to the Lonely Planet, there are three rivers that aren't dammed. But that leaves about thirty thousand that are, and most of those have concrete floors and walls to no obvious purpose. The young generation of Japanese have never seen rivers or mountains in their natural form.

There's probably sense in log steps and rope handrails on main trails to reduce erosion, but the Japanese often add concrete handrails to even the quietest back trails. These are moulded and painted to look like logs, but they still ruin the scenery and prove that you can never get completely away from civilisation in Japan. Worse are the huts and shops at the peaks and the dams cascading down valleys where there should be rivers. These are the battle scars of a nation that has fought its way from being an isolated feudal society to a global economic power in just a century. Where temples once huddled amongst *sakura* trees and castles loomed over forests, both are now dwarfed

by endless grey buildings.

One of my older colleagues told me of how, as a child, he'd run from his house in the hills near Kobe all the way to the ocean for a swim in the morning. Some forty years ago the area was all forest, he assured me. Now, the view from my balcony was obscured by a web of power cables. Each morning, on my way to the station, I had to dodge these wires when I crossed the street on a footbridge. The forests all around the coastline have been cleared for living space. Seventy percent of the country remains forested, but close to half of that is pine plantation, grafted onto the land in a patchwork of neat rows and wild forest as if the goal was to make every hill as ugly as the next.

I didn't know what to say to Nakajima-san. As beautiful as this river was, it was ordinary compared to what I'd grown up with. And the hum of an occasional car reminded me that in Japan you are never far from scars of mankind.

"How about we try that place under RIZTA?" said Haneda-san. "We haven't been there in over a year."

"We can't go there. MAG-san won't eat fish." Hiroko shouldn't have been the only one to remember this after three years of lunches.

I hated being a burden on other's eating habits – too often – so I quickly protested. "I'm sure they'll have something I can eat." My colleagues looked sceptical. "And if they don't I'll just have rice." The looks didn't change, so I took the initiative and started walking that way myself.

I chose a seat inside and picked up the menu, the others following soon after. "Hmmm. Only six dishes. Salmon, tuna,… Bugger." I looked up at the waitress who'd already taken the other's orders. "Do you have anything that isn't fish?" She looked thoughtful. "You know… chicken, pork…"

"The fourth one is *ebi*," she said. Prawns.

"Um. No, I mean like meat. Something that doesn't taste like fish."

"The last one tastes like steak. It's one of our specialties."

"Fine," I said. It was the best I'd get, and if it was too obviously seafood, I could just leave it. As she walked away, I asked Haneda-san to translate. "I don't recognise this *kanji*. It looks like 'capital fish.' What is it?"

"*kujira*."

"Whale? Of course." What other sea creature could you call capital? Then it sank in. "Whoa. No way. I'm not eating whale." I called the waitress back to ask her to hold the *kujira*.

"What's the matter?" asked Hiroko. "It really does taste like steak, you know."

"It's an endangered species. Your government has signed treaties to say that they wouldn't kill whales and yet you're eating it. You're hardly encouraging them to stop."

"The government only signed those because they were forced to," said Hiraki-san. "But it doesn't make any sense. There are too many whales and they're eating all our fish. If we don't reduce the number of whales, there won't be enough fish for us."

I bit back a response that perhaps it was the Japanese population that should be culled. The environment is just another area where the government seems to control what gets taught in schools and published in the media. In this case, I object.

"If there are so many, why do you have to go all the way to Australia to find them? Surely they can't be eating all the fish around Japan from way down there."

"Maybe not," said Haneda-san, "but we're only killing them for scientific purposes."

"And you call this scientific?" I was getting really upset now, inspired by Nakajima-san's regret over rivers. "Are you all contributing to some national survey on which species tastes the best?"

"You don't understand. Our people have a long history with whales. Our relationship is almost religious." Their arguments were inconsistent. I crossed my arms and leaned back in my chair to listen, my expression as sceptical as theirs had been earlier. "In *samurai* times, when even rice was scarce, whales gave enough meat for a village to survive for a month."

"And so this is how you repay them? You're determined to keep eating them until there aren't any left. Surely, if you really wanted to honour them, religiously, for the sacrifice they made to keep your ancestors alive, you'd let them live now. You just don't get it, do you? Your country is bent on ruining the environment, and you're all playing along." I picked up the chopsticks on the table. "Look, these are another example. How hard is it to wash chopsticks? And yet each of you must go through at least five sets of disposable chopsticks a week."

Everyone laughed. "So? They're just little bits of wood."

"Just little bits of wood and the paper sheath. But, what, two hundred and fifty million little sticks are used and thrown away each day. That must be over a thousand trees cut down every day, just to make chopsticks."

"Yes, but the trees are specially planted for that purpose."

"And they grow back quickly."

"Have you seen how much of your natural forest has been chopped away to make room for these chopstick trees? And these aren't your *sakura*, plum or maple trees. They don't turn pretty colours with the seasons. They stand out in this beautiful country as much as I do. And then you burn them."

That made them laugh again. "Yes. We burn them. So what? We have to get rid of them somehow. It's not like we can recycle them."

The whole Japanese recycling system was a farce from what I could see. It was just another example of 'form before function.' It gave the appearance of being considerate to the environment, and apparently that was enough. Bins on railway platforms and outside convenience stores were separated into paper, bottles / cans, and burnables. They probably did recycle bottles and cans, but I watched what happened to the rubbish outside my flat and the papers went into the same truck as the burnables. The most galling thing was that polystyrene trays were used as the example of what should go in the bins marked 'burnables'.

"You don't need to use so many disposable chopsticks in the first place. But all that stuff that you burn – all the foam trays and plastic bags – all that goes into the atmosphere and cuts a hole in the ozone layer."

Now they were really laughing. "As if our burning stuff here was the cause of the hole over Australia. You've probably got it the wrong way around. Maybe the fact that we burn so much and still have a strong ozone layer proves that burning helps it."

I had no more chance of winning that argument than I did of teaching the shopkeepers in my regular stores not to use one plastic bag per item. It was always a losing battle. Most Japanese don't seem to care, or aren't aware, that they're ruining their own country, let alone adding to global pollution.

The news isn't all bad. Japan has the best public transport system in the world, and people use

it. Whereas in most crowded cities, like Mumbai or Manila, the residents drive despite the traffic – cars coughing out more pollution than nearby heavy industry – most Japanese would prefer to leave their car at home. And then there are people like Nakajima-san, from the trekking club, who despair at the state of the environment. I can only hope that they'll have more success in raising the awareness of the rest of the nation than I did.

"Anyway," said Hiraki-san, "what about all those Christmas trees you throw away each year?"

Jul 01 – Unemployed

失業 **(shitsu-gyou)**

"I got offered a redundancy package today." We were sitting at Kayo's low dining table again, and her mask of *tatemae* was failing. Her lips turned down at the corners and her eyes looked a little damp. I recalled that this 'offer' wasn't an option in Japan. Our US counterparts could volunteer for a package, but in Japan, only targeted employees were eligible, in which case, it was just a less vicious way of saying 'you're fired.'

"I don't understand," I said. "After all the good work you've done in the last couple of years, why would they let you go?"

"It seems I've done too good a job. Now that I've trained people in each country to do what I do, they don't need me any more. They're disbanding our whole team."

We sat in silence, both understanding what this meant. Europe was now out of the picture. The company had decided to cut another nine thousand jobs on top of six thousand announced earlier in the year. The position Hiraki-san had lined up for me in Europe would no longer be available, and even if it was, there was no way Kayo could join me. She'd be unlikely to get a job by applying cold, and without the job there was no visa. The only possibility would be for us to marry and I wasn't going to do that until she was prepared to accept me as I was.

That meant we were stuck in Japan until we'd worked through our issues, but my patience with the country was wearing thin again. I was sick of living hunched over because the doorways, sinks, showers and desks were too low, I was sick of living in a shoebox, and I was sick of feeling guilty when I left the office at six o'clock. It would all have been much simpler if they'd offered *me* the package. I would no longer be able to stay in Japan, so I'd take off to South America and Kayo would follow or not. I could always get another job in Australia if writing didn't work out.

"It's so unfair," said Kayo, breaking the silence. "It's not my fault that the economy is bad at the moment."

"You've been with the same company for seven years. Maybe it was time to move on, anyway." I'd always said that I wouldn't work for the same company for more than five years. The only reason I'd stayed in this one for almost seven was that changing countries was better than changing companies.

"That's not the way it works in Japan. We've been brought up to be loyal to the company. It's like joining a new family, and we're supposed to be part of it for life. We work hard for the company and it looks after us."

That attitude was changing. When the bubble burst in the nineties, many companies and businesses were shut down, leaving people on the streets. Japanese employers had started to accept the new reality and were less loyal to their employees, but the employees hadn't lost their loyalty to the companies. It was a harsh reality for many people.

"You'll find another job. You know you're good at what you do. And it's better to be working for someone that values you."

"It might not be so easy. Unemployment is up to six percent at the moment. That's higher than it's ever been before."

"Six percent? That's fine. I don't ever remember unemployment levels in Australia being below ten percent."

"But you can get money from the government if you don't have a job, right?"

"Yes, but it's not much."

"It's enough to live on. In Japan we only get social insurance for up to three months."

"What? What about all that money they take out of our salary?"

"It's just insurance. Like when you pay car insurance and have an accident. You only get money at the beginning and it might be much less than what you've already paid."

"So that's why there are so many men living under bridges." Kayo looked about to cry and I hurriedly reassured her. "Look, that's not going to happen to you. You're going to find a job quickly. Until then, you've got family and friends to look after you." I would've offered my place, but I knew that she thought such a move would ruin her chance of finding a husband. Personally, I thought it could improve because we'd be more likely to work things out if we were living together, but my arguments didn't hold in the Japanese culture.

"You don't understand," she said, now with tears on her cheeks. "It's the shame of it. Those men under the bridges have family and friends too, but they're too ashamed to go home once they lose their jobs."

A thought came then, 'Japanese have too much pride,' but I pushed it away. Neither of us needed an argument now, and for the most part, I believed that Japanese pride was a good thing. For the rest – cases like this – I was prepared to accept that we had different cultures.

It occurred to me then, that the men I'd seen living in boxes under bridges, weren't slumming it as badly as the homeless in Australia, or other countries I've visited. Most had bikes and TVs, and some had microwave ovens. On further inspection, I realised that they'd teamed up to buy generators that powered two or three 'homes.' The camaraderie between these men was also surprising, even inspiring. They seemed to have more of a community spirit than any neighbours I'd seen in the city. Undoubtedly, they'd given each other more than laundry detergent when they'd 'moved in.' When I saw them chatting as they ate their *bentou* dinners and laughing together as they watched TV, I could almost imagine they were sitting in a cosy living room.

The image didn't fit my idea of homeless people at all, and I started asking acquaintances what was really going on. Apparently, most of these men manage to find work, but usually on construction sites. A blue-collar job wasn't enough to relieve the shame for a doctor, lawyer or engineer though, so they never went home again. They got their clothes cleaned at laundrettes and dry cleaners and washed in public *ofuro*. Some younger single men, I was told, actually choose to live this way while they're saving for a home. By not paying rent, they can steadily put away a fortune and get their own place more quickly.

I often found myself thinking that Japan has an 'over-employment' problem. Everywhere I looked in Japan, I saw people doing unnecessary jobs. Until recently, department stores employed young women to press the buttons in lifts for you. Service stations still have about five people descend on each vehicle that pulls in off the street. Together, the five will put as much precision into directing the driver to the pump as the ground crew directing a 747 to the gate. Then they'll attack the vehicle to wash windows, empty ashtrays, fill tyres, and of course, fill the petrol tank.

Government works are probably the worst offenders. Every evening, I walked past the tunnel construction site on my way back from the station. They'd been working on it since the day I moved

in, and three years later there was still nothing to see. It changed week to week, but it was the same month to month. They would alternately close different lanes and do something behind fences, then shift lanes and shift back again.

Four people stood on corners of the adjacent intersection directing traffic where there were already traffic lights doing the job. Each person held out a red baton, glowing at night, to stop cars in case they hadn't seen the red light. As I approached, the closest would rush over to show me where to walk – as if I couldn't see the signs and work out that I was meant to walk between the bars separating the footpath from the road on one side and construction site on the other. To make sure I realised their job was important, they'd bow to me as they indicated the way. Always nervous around people who humble themselves to me, I'd bow back and we'd go on bowing until I'd crested the hill, both of us gritting our teeth and thinking 'idiot.'

In the countryside, people were being similarly employed to dam rivers that didn't need damming, and perhaps that was the elusive purpose of these eyesores – to keep people employed. My pet hate was the idea of building an airport in Kobe when there was already one in Osaka that was underused, but that project had been given approval. It will be built off shore, which means landfilling a new island, and will take a decade to build. I imagine someone is going around right now, looking under bridges for unemployed bank managers and lawyers to do the work.

Aug 01 – Driving

運転 **(un-ten)**

"Hello again," said Hasebe-san, the interpreter. I'd met up with her because I'd heard that the company's interpreters managed to smooth the process of getting a license considerably. "How long has it been, now? Three years?"

"A bit more. Three very full years."

"Your Japanese must be very good by now."

"Oh, it is. I can say, 'this is a pen' like a true Japanese."

She laughed. "That's all you'll ever need to say. Do you have everything you need? Your Australian license? The official interpretation? Your passport? Good. You won't need me, then." She came in with me, anyway.

The driving centre reminded me of the hospital I visited at the beginning of my stay. There were an enormous number of windows and rooms for different transactions in the process. Today, I was starting at number eighteen, a back room where they interviewed me and verified my documents. It had taken weeks of effort to get this far. I was entitled to convert my Australian license directly into the Japanese equivalent, but the Australian version doesn't have the date of issue, so I had to obtain a record from the Australian police and have it translated as well. I handed everything to the bald man behind the desk.

"*hai*, *hai*," he murmured to himself as he checked it all against the Australian section of his manual. "Just a minute. This passport isn't the one you had at the time of getting your license."

"No. It's current."

"I need the previous one."

"I don't understand. You just need to see that I was in Australia for three months since getting my license, don't you? You can see from this passport that I was in Australia for three years before I moved to Japan. Seven, actually, but four of them on the old passport."

"No. We need to see that you were in Australia for the three months immediately after you obtained your license."

That stumped me. I couldn't do it. Even if I could find my old passport, it would show that I left for the year in Nagoya a couple of months after getting my full license. Did that prevent me from ever getting a Japanese license? The person who doesn't bother to get a passport until after they get their license would similarly be precluded. It wasn't logical. But then, Japanese processes rarely are.

He looked at Hasebe-san. "You should know better than to bring him here without the proper documentation. You're wasting my time."

She bowed her head humbly and apologised. Seeing that humility was my only chance, I hung my head and stayed silent. He looked at me again.

"Are you sure you don't have a copy of the previous passport?"

"Yes. I threw it away when it was cancelled. I'm sorry."

He was silent for a while as he looked through everything else again, then finally sighed. "I think I can make an exception, this time." He stamped a document and handed it to me, but we didn't get out until he'd given Hasebe-san a five-minute lecture on having everything ready before coming in future.

While she took the next person through the same process, I went on to another window to submit the stamped document, another to pay for the photo and then sat through a class on the procedure for getting our photos taken. By then, it was lunchtime. I'd been there four hours. When I agreed to get my license I'd been under the illusion that it would take about ten minutes, as it did in Australia. I had no idea that I'd spend weeks writing letters and making phone calls to arrange documents. Kayo had decided that I should get one in case we needed to drive somewhere for a holiday. Her argument was that it would be easier for me to exchange my license than for her to learn to drive. I had serious doubts about that now.

There were hundreds of us applying for licenses that day, and it took an hour to sort us into the correct order for the photos so we could be rushed through in twenty minutes. Then I found another window where I could pay for my license and waited another hour for my name to be called. The process took most of the day.

I was upset at the waste of my time, but John did me the favour of proving Kayo right. He had a Canadian driver's license, which he could have changed the way I did – if he paid all his parking tickets. That seemed an unnecessary cost to John, so he decided to take the full process. "After all," he said, "I can drive already. How hard can it be?"

The first problem was that he needed to clock up a number of hours at the expensive driving school. Next was in passing a written examination in either Japanese or bad English. He failed this twice because he simply didn't understand what the question was asking. Finally, he had to take a practical exam on the driving centre's course. This wasn't really a problem because he'd driven the course before, but having another student in the car as well as the examiner made him more nervous. Each person gets to sit in the back seat when the previous person takes the test so they get a feel for what they're expected to do. Once through the whole process, taking a total of six months, John never drove again to my knowledge. I think it would have put me off, too.

My chance to drive in Japan came when we went to Sadogashima, Sado island, with Damion and Kei. It's Kodo's home and every August they hold 'Earth Celebration,' a world music festival showcasing the bands they've met on their own tours. We'd booked late, so our hotel was at the other end of the island, which meant we needed to drive back from the concert each night. All my papers were in order so we got away from the rental place quickly and I found out what it's really like to drive in Japan.

Handling the gears, lights and wipers was easy, since the Japanese also drive on the left, despite being heavily influenced by the US in most international aspects of their culture. The problem was exiting the car park into a street narrow enough to be a one-way lane in Australia, with deep trenches on either side. They border every residential block in Japan like a castle moat, and the only chance two oncoming cars have of passing each other is at driveways where the gutters are covered by slabs of fitted concrete.

I pulled up at a set of traffic lights – red, yellow and blue lights laid horizontally – and waited until they turned blue, then began to pull out. Another car screamed across our path, horn tooting, and I remembered that traffic rules in Japan are considered more as guidelines than obligations. Nagoya is famed as the city with the highest rate of car accidents and I recall cowering in the back

seat on a number of occasions when Okaasan drove through lights up to thirty seconds after they'd turned red, or drove down the wrong side of the road rather than waiting for the traffic to move forty metres so she could turn right legally. I took the next few intersections carefully and finally we were out on the coastal road winding along gorgeous cliffs, looking out at an opalescent blue ocean. As soon as we came across a lookout, we stopped and got out for a walk.

I ruminated briefly on the ease of parking here. With most of populated Japan so crowded, parking stations tend to take advantage of air space as much as possible. Apartment blocks have parking stations that raise and lower to stack cars. Neighbourhood blocks share a small roped off parking area. In the cities, parking is often in tall, thin Ferris wheels. I wasn't going to get the chance to try one of these on Sado Island.

Damion and I left the girls behind on the walk down to the sand, as clean and inviting as an Australian beach.

"Did Kayo tell you my news?" She'd stayed with them the night before, after a job interview in Tokyo.

"She said you'd found a position in Belgium. Congratulations."

"Thanks. It was all very fast." The global owner for videoconferencing had decided to take a package and they wanted me to take his role, which gave me a great opportunity to learn new skills. If I'd stayed in Japan, it would have meant working the midnight shift every day so that I could communicate with all my contacts globally, but they also wanted me to move to Brussels so I could represent the team in Europe. It was the perfect match of company needs and personal desires. "I fly out on Tuesday to see if I like Brussels."

"Where does Kayo fit in this? She's confused."

"I'm confused too. I told her that she was welcome to join me, but to set expectations, I said I didn't think I'd be ready to propose in the next year, so she started applying for jobs in the US. I thought that was it, but the next day she kissed me like nothing had changed."

"Well, I think you guys better sort it out quickly."

The girls caught us up and we watched the waves lapping at the shore for a while before heading back to the car.

Damion and Kei decided to skip the concert on Monday, the final night, so they could go to visit Kei's grandmother who lived on the mainland nearby. Kayo, Damion and I waited in the car while Kei took the tickets into the concert office to find the buyers they'd lined up.

"I wonder what's taking her so long," said Damion. "They said they were waiting already."

"Maybe they're trying to rip her off," I laughed. The idea was ridiculous in Japan, but Damion was overprotective of his new wife. He opened the door to go in after her. "Where are you going? I was joking, Damion. No one's going to try to rip her off in Japan." Damion relaxed and closed the door.

"See," said Kayo. "No one thinks your jokes are funny." She turned to Damion. "He keeps telling me that I'm the only one that doesn't laugh. He always says that you laugh."

I exploded. This wasn't the humbling of one's own possessions. It was the old argument. "Enough," I shouted, red faced. "This isn't the time." Kayo flopped back against her seat, anger clear on her face, too.

Damion stayed quiet until Kei came back, and then only spoke to say goodbye when we dropped them at the ferry. The incident left me shaking, though I wasn't really sure why. As soon as I could, I left Kayo and climbed up a cliff to sit by myself for a while. Looking out at the sun sparkling on the ocean, I realised that the world held no beauty if I couldn't laugh. And I hadn't had a good laugh since we'd started dating. What I'd said to Damion wasn't particularly funny, but I wasn't sure I knew what a real joke was, any more.

When I came down and found Kayo again, I told her how I felt. It was over. We watched the concert together that evening, but the music lacked the usual energy for me. It's the only *taiko* concert I've ever seen without coming away feeling the rhythm in my every movement.

The next morning, we took the car back to the rental centre and were asked to fill it ourselves at the local petrol station. I hardly noticed the five teenagers shouting '*ourai*,' an imitation of the English 'all right,' as we moved into position. I stared straight ahead while they pulled the bowser down from the ceiling to fill the tank. I ignored the person asking if I wanted my ashtray emptied – none of us smoked anyway. I have no recollection of them checking the tyres, radiator or oil level. I tried not to think of how much it would hurt not to see Kayo again, or of what her future would hold. I fixed my thoughts on getting home to pack for my new life.

Oct 01 – Discipline

訓練 **(kun-ren)**

I spent September in the US, learning the new role, and in Brussels, falling in love with my new home. It appeared to be everything that I was missing in Japan – spacious, rural, and relaxed. They even had a humour that I recognised as once being mine. When I returned, I found myself looking at Japan objectively again, and wondering at its future. I stopped one morning on the footbridge, and leant on the railing in a gap between the hanging power cables. Below me was an intersection, busy with traffic from five roads. Knowing what was about to come, I watched as a hundred school children left the station and walked along the street, flooding onto the intersection without ever looking up at the lights, confident that the cars would stop for them. This happened every few minutes until the school bell rang, further up the hill.

I waited until the last group had gone past, then continued to the station for the rest of the journey to work. Most of the school children and *sarariiman* had made their way to their destinations by now, and the carriage was empty but for a few housewives and their kids. I watched the kids shouting and laughing as they ran up and down the carriage, and climbed over their mothers. They bumped into other passengers and ran on without stopping to apologise. It was the way children of any other culture would act, but it was very different from my experiences ten years earlier and from what you read in most books on Japan, where children sit serenely beside their mother, never crying or misbehaving.

Discipline in Japan was failing. This wasn't necessarily a bad thing. I'd seen too much damage done by Japanese discipline when I was subject to it. It was traditionally the responsibility of schools to instil discipline, while the home was a place to nurture and support the children. My school had been less strict than most, with none of the beatings that other exchange students reported witnessing. Just to be clear here, I'm talking about teachers – even principles – beating students. My host brother from the first exchange had his head shaved as the punishment for

smoking. A second occurrence might have given his teacher cause to use fists. Luckily, none of this went on at my school, but I saw the P.E. teachers using scare tactics to make the students try harder.

One rainy day, soccer was cancelled and we were taken into the gymnasium for a long stretching session. The *sensei* was getting frustrated with Hayashi-san – who was too fat to do any of the stretches properly – and offered to 'help' him on one. We were all told to kneel on the ground and lean back until we were lying down with our legs folded under us, or as near as we could get. With all my martial arts training I had little problem, so while my classmates all sweated and grunted at the pain, I watched what the *sensei* did.

He sat down behind Hayashi-san with his feet on the floor either side of my friend and his knees pointing upwards. Hayashi-san had his fingers splayed in an effort to extend his arms as he reached behind him for support. His back wasn't far off vertical, and I could see he was scared of leaning back further in case he couldn't support his own weight.

"Lean back," said the *sensei*. "My legs will support you."

Hayashi-san knew this teacher though. "No they won't. You'll move them and I'll fall."

"It's OK. You can lean back. I won't move them."

You can guess what happened. As soon as Hayashi-san took his weight off his arms and collapsed back, the *sensei* moved his legs out of the way. The rest of the class stayed quiet while Hayashi-san rolled on the ground screaming in pain.

On another day, in summer, the class was lined up beside the school swimming pool and I saw signs that the students were starting to rebel.

"Go on. Jump in," they hissed at me, encouraging me to disobey the *sensei*'s instructions.

"We haven't been given permission yet. He'll punish the whole class if I do."

"No, he won't. You'll be OK because you're a *gaijin*. You can pretend you didn't know."

That event had been after the girl had been killed when the school gate crushed her skull, and I'm certain that the death marked a turning point in the power of schools. It seemed that the students were no longer prepared to put up with the teacher's methods and perhaps society as a whole was starting to rebel. In researching the incident recently, I found out that the teacher in

question had resigned soon after. There had been no charges laid against him, but it wasn't clear from what I found whether it was purely personal guilt or pressure from the public. My visit to the school in 2000 showed a change in the education system since then, and a corresponding change in the Japanese youth.

Unfortunately, parents had no idea how to take up the slack that the schools left. I saw my own host parent's pathetic attempts at discipline on a number of occasions.

On one, I came home from school to find Okaasan waiting to proudly tell me that she'd taught Mauja – the result of Massak's 'marriage' – the meaning of the word 'no.'

"Look. He understands." She dragged the poor puppy into the living room to demonstrate. "No," she said in a firm tone, shaking her finger. "No!"

Mauja lowered his head and pulled his tail between his legs.

"See. He understands."

"But he hasn't done anything wrong. What's he going to think he's in trouble for? You're just confusing him."

My comments only confused Okaasan, and I picked Mauja up to reassure him that he wasn't really in trouble.

Later on, we were having a picnic in the mountains with the dogs sitting quietly nearby. Otousan was teasing Massak by holding out a biscuit and snatching it back before the dog could bite it. I felt sorry for Massak, so I grabbed one and threw it to him. The family was delighted to see him catch it in mid air. They'd never seen this done before and quickly made a game of it, all throwing biscuits to him.

"Maybe he can catch other stuff, too," said Akiko, and threw him a piece of bread.

It became a free-for-all and Massak jumped excitedly around, trying to get every piece. Mauja was too small to get anything except slops, but was having a great time snapping at Massak's heels. Suddenly, Massak yelped, spat out something he'd caught, and ran off to eat some grass, whimpering. Otousan was laughing hysterically.

"What did you give him?" I asked.

"A *remon*," he said, between gasps. A lemon.

If one lesson was enough to teach him, Massak will never play catch again.

I was also subject to their strange form of discipline. My host parents had set a curfew of ten thirty every evening and locked the door at that time, even if someone was still outside. On the one occasion that I came home five minutes late, worried at the scolding I might receive for being five minutes overdue, I found the house dead except for one light in Takeshi's window. I simply called up to him and he came down to open the door for me. Nothing was ever said of the incident.

Towards the end of my stay, I came home to find a tent set up in the empty block next door. "It's Takeshi's punishment," Okaasan told me, though not what the crime was. "He has to sleep outside for three nights."

'Cool,' I thought. 'Not much worry about curfews if you're sleeping in a tent.' It was set up quite comfortably with a *futon* and a cassette deck, but apparently Takeshi didn't like it. When I came home the following day, the tent was gone.

"He was too scared to stay outside," Okaasan said, laughing, "so he came inside at one o'clock this morning." Which meant that they'd left the door unlocked for him as well.

I'm glad to see that the schools aren't given so much freedom for physical discipline as they had ten years ago, but Japan is facing tough times and its future is in the hands of today's young. Surely there's a balance that will teach the kids enough self-discipline that they don't put themselves in danger and can push themselves to achieve something in life, but aren't so stressed that they commit suicide or die from working too hard. If they don't find that balance soon, I fear that Japan is in for bleaker times.

Nov 01 – Still Learning

習い続き **(nara-i-tsuzu-ki)**

Many years ago, some friends of mine met an English woman living in Thailand. She told them of how she'd been comfortable in her life in London. She'd had a good job, a charming fiancée, a nice house, and friends all around her. She was the proverbial frog in the pond. Then one of her friends had convinced her to join them on a trip to Thailand and the woman's world opened up. She was fascinated by the scenery and the way Thais lived – all so different from her homeland. She realised that there was a whole world out there that she didn't know about, so she broke up with her fiancée, sold her house, quit her job and moved to Thailand. She'd been there for ten years, and at the time she met my friends, she had a new fiancée, a new job, a new house and new friends. That frog had found a new pond.

It seems to me that she'd missed the point. She'd exchanged one pond for another.

Australia still pulses in my veins. I will probably settle there eventually. But first, I want to explore a few more ponds. Japan will also be a part of me. I'll take it with me wherever I go, and I know the world will look different through *sakura*-coloured lenses. As I wandered the city in my last days in Kobe, I reflected on my life here, starting with what I was glad to be leaving behind.

Prominent in my mind was the cost. I'd saved enough to buy a small house outright in Australia, but I hadn't enjoyed my life to its fullest. If I'd chosen to go swimming and rock climbing every week, hiking every month, and have three drinks instead of one when I went out, I'm sure I wouldn't have saved much at all. If I'd lived in a flat of a comfortable size, I would have been losing money.

I had a dent on my forehead from hitting doors too often, and my back was becoming permanently hunched. The workday was always long and stressful. I'd lost my detachment and the prominent chauvinist attitude bothered me, as did the greyness of the city and the effort required to leave it. I no longer enjoyed the feeling of being an outsider, and despite speaking the language,

understanding most of the customs and all my efforts to fit in, I had very few Japanese friends outside the company. Children still pointed me out in the street, shouting "*gaijin*." Even the relationship with a girl I cared about deeply failed because I was *gaijin* and we couldn't bridge the cultural gap. Perhaps worst of all was that I never understood the humour.

But then I also had some wonderful experiences. I came to understand the bureaucracy and hierarchy of Japanese companies, participated in many a *meishi* dance and learned the shame of giving the customer the seat with the view. I learned more about the way the language was built and why *atsui* and *atsui* both mean 'hot' and have the same pronunciation even though they're written differently. I had some very interesting relationships and came someway towards understanding the dichotomy of their fascination with sex and their shame of being seen naked. I ate everything but whale, enjoyed most of it and even learned to cook a few dishes. I saw inside a love hotel, although it was one without the videos, spa and bondage wheel. I found some local music I like, and don't find anything strange about concerts finishing in time for dinner.

I came to think of apples with a twelve centimetre diameter as normal. I saw the grandeur of the mountains. I lived in the cluttered cities and the sparse country towns. I skidded through snow to work and only a few months later sweated a puddle that would be next year's snowfall. I came to love the stark beauty of a single flower in a rock bed and had picnics just to stare at trees that flower only once a year.

I saw a variety of festivals, participating in some of the simple dances. I visited temples at New Year. I joined the *sarariiman* drinking evening, though toned down for an American company.

My life here was rich and the country seemed determined to make me regret leaving. I was drafting a letter – which would form the basis for this chapter – in my head one afternoon on the way into Sannomiya when, on boarding the train, I found that the driver had left the blind up between his compartment and ours. I'd never seen this before and spent the trip watching both the driver and the person standing beside him, who appeared to be a trainee. Every twenty seconds or so, the driver would raise his gloved right hand, making a gun beside his ear, then drop it down to shoot at some undefined target. I might have thought that he was doing it for fun, but the man next to him was only fractionally behind in doing the same thing. As I watched more closely, I thought I could see a pattern – they were doing it whenever they passed a numbered yellow sign on the side of

the track. After every third time or so, the driver would check his watch, run his finger down a schedule taped to his window and snap his finger at the air as if mentally checking an item off a list. This, I realised, was their method for keeping the train on schedule, and perhaps to keep the drivers awake.

I wondered if they'd opened the blind for my benefit. It was as if some higher power said "we'll make him realise he doesn't know everything about this country!" The train drivers weren't alone. It seemed that everyone wanted to get one last lesson in. People were correcting my Japanese more than they'd ever done when they thought I'd be around for a while. It was true. I didn't know everything and I hadn't done everything I wanted to. I couldn't read a newspaper. I hadn't been to Okinawa. I hadn't made as many Japanese friends as I'd have liked, and I hadn't reached black belt in any martial art.

But if there was much left to do in Japan, there were even more opportunities in another culture. My learning curve had slowed here. I could start that curve all over again in Belgium. Aside from the two-week visit in September, I had no direct experience of Europe, so it would be a greater challenge in many ways than my years in Japan. I'm expecting to enjoy Europe, with the larger living space, friendly people, new languages, better work / life balance, ease of travel and diversity of activities at a reasonable price. I'm expecting to find many new questions that I can make up answers to and some that are too strange to even manage fictional explanations.

And there lies the danger. To enter a new culture with expectations is to be disappointed when you find things are different. The biggest lesson I've learnt over the last three years, and the years at school in Japan, is that the best way to deal with a new world is to sit back and watch, participate where you can, but to always withhold judgement and enjoy the experience.

And now, it's time for this frog to jump into a new pond.

