

Benefits of Doubt

Sara Jane Affleck

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in English at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

February 2007

© Sara Jane Affleck, 2007



Library and
Archives Canada

Bibliothèque et
Archives Canada

Published Heritage
Branch

Direction du
Patrimoine de l'édition

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-28839-9

Our file Notre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-28839-9

NOTICE:

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

AVIS:

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.


Canada

Abstract

Benefits of Doubt

Sara Jane Affleck

The interplay between “self” and “other” is one of the predominant themes of this work of long fiction. The story’s two narrators, Hannah and Elinor, struggle with re-creation of self in a “foreign” context, that of teaching conversational English in contemporary Japan. For both women, this re-creation involves relationships occurring in many modes of social interaction: colleagues and students, friends, and romantic involvements. For Elinor, this self-re-creation primarily involves a pattern of successive short-term romances, often of a non-sexual nature, with other Westerners. At the root of Elinor’s apparent inability to commit is a deep-seated fear of rejection, and of losing herself in love. After much trial and error, she meets a man with whom she thinks she can be happy; despite her constant “otherness” as a Western woman in Japanese culture, she opts to stay, almost revelling in the bizarre status her very otherness affords. By contrast, Hannah—in order to forget failed loves—immerses herself in work, and rather passively accepts the identity that is thrust upon her in this new context. She too becomes involved with a man—a married Japanese man who is also a former student. This relationship is also non-sexual, though Hannah clearly would prefer otherwise. She struggles to overcome her desires and her attachments aided by the Buddhist study in which she rather superficially engages. But despite Hannah’s philosophical inquiries, and her passivity, she is unable to completely erase her “self” nor her desires.

Hannah

On my back, I am awake and aware, but I don't open my eyes yet. I want to come back into the room bit by bit. I don't want to miss something, some little detail, by leaping up and throwing myself into all the new tasks awaiting me in the next hour, in the next four, and tomorrow and the next day, and the next, and the next. I am here, now, and want to try to understand what exactly that means. Through my jet-lagged lids, I can tell the room is still bright, and that I haven't slept clear through to evening. The air is another thing: it smells different from the salty air I breathed at home, though this air too is heavy with humidity, and has its own particular smell. Close inspection—after I hefted my suitcase into the corner of the room and shut my door, got down on my hands and knees and sniffed—proved that what accounts for some of the smell is the brand-new dried-rice-straw mats that fit perfectly side by side in the floors of both bedrooms, eight in mine and six in my roommate's. *Tatami*. I whisper the word, eyes still shut.

I learned this word, *tatami*, and about fifty others, before leaving home: from the library book I decided not to return, and which two hours ago I set against the wall in the corner with the others I've brought; from Leighton, both from letters he sent me when he was here almost two years ago teaching in the public school system, as well as the three months we spent together just before I left; and even from the form Vista sent me after I applied for the job I have just arrived to do—and have no idea how to do yet, but presumably will, day after tomorrow at training. *Would you prefer, one of the forms asked, to have a western-style room, or a traditional Japanese-style room, with 'futon' and 'tatami'?* As Leighton and I lay on my bed one summer weekend afternoon, I looked up the word in the Japanese-English dictionary he'd given me for my birthday; he knew the word but wouldn't tell me, saying I'd be more likely to

remember it if I looked it up. Flipping through the 't' section, I said I'd choose the traditional Japanese style, whatever it entailed, even if this *tatami* thing turned out to be really uncomfortable, like some hard-as-concrete neck pillow, or something even uglier than 1970s shag. *Mmm, shag*, Leighton said in that faux-British accent he does sometimes, running his hand down my hip and then up my inner thigh, one corner of his mouth pulled up in a smile.

But I don't want to think about Leighton right now. It's funny that the person who started getting me interested in Buddhism should often be the reason I find myself drifting out of that ever-important present moment. But my reasons for not wanting to think about him have less to do with any desire to adhere to dogma than with a need to keep from dwelling on the way things ended between us.

I roll over onto my side, eyes still shut, and my hand smacks against the floor. The mat is coarse under my palm, I reach out a little farther and find the smoother texture of its silk-covered borders. I breathe in, the sweet, grassy smell familiar and almost a tonic to my excited-but-anxious waking mood. The tickle in the back of my nose brings back memories of the hayloft in my grandfather's barn, of the childhood summers spent up there with my brother and children from neighbouring farms, of building forts out of the bales no longer needed once all the dairy cows had been sold, of feeling the sharp, dry stalks under my palms and against my thin legs, ever clad in shorts. Of watching my brother's face become slightly red and puffy, of hearing him begin to sniffle almost before we'd managed to climb the ladder, of watching him rub his face and nose, miserable but not wanting to miss a thing.

But this too is pushing me out of the present and back into the past, though a less complicated part of it. I open my eyes. Blink. Breathe again. Glance at the dusty-green-tea walls and the golden *tatami*, at the fluorescent light fixture in the centre of

the room that looks like a circular space station, at the pale yellow curtains I'd had to pull against the afternoon sun; the curtains gently informed me in pink and green embroidered script: "Nature, a scene. Beautiful." I am in Japan, in a small town called Machigoma, lying on the floor on a futon that might pass for a slightly-puffier-than-average duvet in North America. I am farther from friends and family than I have ever been in my 28-year-old, fairly well-travelled life, and so far my curiosity is conquering my fear, my anticipation doing a half nelson on my anxiety. And I have two days before training in which to indulge that curiosity in any and every direction I choose.

A muffled yawn comes from the other bedroom. The walls are that thin. Robin, my new roommate, is also awake. Hearing her yawn makes me want to as well, but even the largest lungful of oxygen doesn't shake this lingering fuzziness. Less than four hours of sleep in a 24-hour period tends to create a little fuzz, not to mention the effects of the time difference. I push myself up from the floor and glance at my travel alarm clock. It reads 4:07. It would be 4:07 in eastern Canada too, but a.m., not p.m.. Regardless, I know I should get up and make some effort at pretending it really does feel like late afternoon, even if all I do is buy a few groceries and have dinner before going back to bed.

Robin coughs and says "Blimey." The word sounds funny coming from her. It seems to me the kind of word a middle-aged frequenter of grotty south London pubs would use, rather than a hip young girl in her very early twenties, just graduated from a posh college with a degree in Business Administration. I flip open my suitcase, rummage for my jeans, pull them on. Robin and I open our doors at exactly the same time.

"Blimey!" she says again, and throws her hand up to her chest. "You scared

the living heck out of me!” Her normally pale face drains completely of colour, and she looks even younger than she is.

“Sorry!” I laugh. “How was your nap?”

“Yeah, alright, I suppose. I could sleep tons more, but then I won’t be able to sleep tonight, so I made myself get up.”

“Yeah, same.” I yawn. “I was just thinking of going to the supermarket to get a few things. Want to come?”

“Yeah, could do.” She pauses. “Do you want to maybe walk up to the castle on the way to the supermarket, see what it’s like up there? Just for a bit, while it’s still daylight?”

“Sure. I could use the extra exercise.”

“Right, then. I’m just going to brush my teeth, so whenever you’re ready.”

And Robin clatters down the narrow staircase in her new, Vista-issue slippers, identical to mine in style and size. Mine, however, do not fit me, as they were bought for an average-sized Japanese woman and my feet, between 10 and 11 back home, are decidedly more man-size here.

Cash in hand—or in wallet, exchanged at a busy bank in Osaka yesterday morning—I wait for Robin on the pleather sofa. It’s bright yellow and curvilinear and just big enough for two, and I feel like I’m sitting in a convertible, and doorless, Volkswagen Beetle. I consider turning on the tv, just to satisfy a small part of my curiosity, but one look at the remote suggests I’ll have to give it more than a moment to figure it out. The ‘on’ button seems obvious enough; it’s red and at the top of the remote. The rest of the buttons’ function is indicated in Japanese only. But I’m really not much of a tv watcher anyway.

I get up and slide open the door to the closet under the stairs. There’s a small,

round navy-blue vacuum that looks somehow friendly or as though it would be happy to scoot around and do the vacuuming for you; a 3-pack of vacuum bags decorated with a smiling animal showing how to change the bag; a package of clothes pins decorated with a smiling animal; a white cord, and two packages of pink plastic hangers with a smiling animal demonstrating their many uses; an iron and ironing board with four-inch legs, covered in smiling-animal fabric; and a very small and very pink plastic laundry basket. I stand there, looking down at all the cutesy packages and implements that seem aimed at a collective of industrious and organized children, rather than a demographic of solitary and, I would expect, overworked housewives. I wonder where we're supposed to string up the cord. I slide the door closed again.

"Ready!" Robin calls from the front door.

In the *genkan*—foyer, another of my pre-learned words—we shove our shoes on, lock the door behind us and take the shortcut to the main street that Dave the head-office guy showed us in a fit of apparently uncharacteristic generosity when he gave us a "tour" of the apartment earlier today. The castle is visible above the houses and buildings on the other side of the street, its white-washed walls and dark tile roof looking, to my eyes, far from imposing. Perhaps it was when it was first built, but I honestly can't imagine anyone during the shogun era scared away by this cottage.

"Not much life in this town, is there?" says Robin as we work out a route through the back streets. It's true, the only sign of life we've yet encountered have been the tiny cars on the main road. Along this little street, there are a couple of parked cars and a flock of snooping pigeons. No humans. We pass a two-story house of weathered wood with a faded sign advertising *karaoke*, written in English and the only word I can read.

"But it's not yet rush hour, I guess? And what day is it again?"

“Er, it’s Thursday. No, it’s Friday. Yeah, Friday.” Robin laughs.

“Glad I’m not the only one,” I laugh with her. “So, Friday. Then off to Tokushima on Monday. Three days including travel time, and then we’ll start work next Thursday. What are your days off, again?”

“Wednesday and Thursday.”

“So, you’re not working til Friday, then.”

“I guess so.”

“That’ll be weird.”

“What will?”

“Well, hanging around an extra day by yourself. And weird for me because I’ll be starting without you. We’ve done practically everything else together since orientation.”

“Yeah,” Robin says noncommittally. I suppose she’s probably getting sick of the fact that Vista has scheduled us to do everything together. We arrived together, though not on the same plane; we were picked up at Kansai and took the express shuttle train to the hotel together; endured orientation and contract signing together; were escorted together by Marvin on a bullet train to Machigoma; we’ll do training together; we’re to work at the same school, and we share a two-bedroom duplex. Like conjoined twins, but with almost eight years’ difference in age. Maybe I’m getting a little tired of it as well. Maybe starting work first, free to make my own impression, will be something of a relief.

“Well, there it is,” I say. We’ve found our way to the street that circuits the castle, though from here, the west side, it’s not clear where the main entrance is. We weave our way through a parking lot, which ends with a gravel path that curves around the castle. Along the other side of the path, the castle hill, covered in dense

bushes and plants, rises steeply.

“Which way do you think should we go?” I ask.

“I say left. I’d bet money the main entrance is on that side,” Robin points to the harbour-side direction, towards the so-called downtown and the train station.

“Sure, let’s try.” If she’s wrong, we’ll just keep walking until we find something. Past the parking lot, now on our left, is a grassy area with decorative trees that look as though they’ve foliated straight out of Dr. Seuss, and a few large rocks strewn in artificial randomness, enclosed on two sides by a solid wooden fence. Beyond that the gravel path widens and leads to what must be the main gate. Robin crows with satisfaction. It is at least twenty feet high and thick as a tree from an old-growth forest, carved with insignia, a huge ring hanging from each door.

The gravel path is steeper to the right of the gate, rises to take us past a squat building with many windows, a veranda with a row of vending machines filled with a jaw-dropping assortment of drinks. Eventually we come to a set of massive stone stairs leading up the front of the first tier, buttressed by massive stones. Everything is slightly run-down, not to the point of being dangerous, but just neglected. Kind of like my grandfather’s old barn, when it housed nothing but hay.

“Ooh, look! You can see the harbour!” says Robin.

“Nice,” I say. But it’s really hazy over the water and the port, a lurking grey-mustard haze that can’t be a result of only the humidity.

“I’m starting to sweat!” she complains. I glance over as she flaps her t-shirt out from her stomach and back. There is a moustache of sweat beads above her upper lip, damp patches at her temples and forehead where her short brown hair clings. It is warm, for a mid-October evening. It’s rarely this warm past mid-September back home. I can’t help but wonder if she’s finding the exertion more difficult because she

smokes. Luckily, Vista's got a no-smoking policy in the apartments. And cleverly, the company opted to make it a clause in the contract, rather than just inform us in a memo or some such ineffectual document, received by all but ignored by those it is meant to target.

At the top of the stairs, the path continues around the side of the hill through a corridor of scrawny trees and shrubs. The terrain is much wilder than I would have expected. I read somewhere that most natural, or rather, natural-looking, places in Japan, such as parks and gardens, are very carefully cultivated to have that "natural" look. Meaning that a troop of careful gardeners, maintenance workers or monks—depending on the location of the garden or park—choreograph everything according to a preconceived idea of nature or "the natural". But this area, the scrub around the castle, looks as unkempt as anything I'd ever encountered back home, at least within city limits. But it's even as wild as the tangle of raspberry bushes and scrawny thistles behind my grandfather's barn.

Along the way to the top of the castle, Robin and I meet a few people, all Japanese, most middle-aged or older. Some stare at us and quickly look away, while others just stare. A few give a short nod in greeting before looking away, one or two murmur "*Konnichiwa*" as they pass, to which I respond. Robin says nothing, just smiles and squints at everyone, still sweating a bit. We reach one grassy plateau, and then another on the harbour-side. Gnarled trees with dark grey bark are evenly spaced around an old wooden wishing well.

"Let's make a wish!" shouts Robin and makes a run for the well, hopping like a little lamb over clumps of weeds. Perhaps the altitude has had a cooling effect on her body temperature; certainly it hasn't affected her personality. A middle-aged couple in identical sunhats turn and watch her run. I follow her, walking at my normal

pace, feeling the need to show that not all foreigners are so impulsive and boisterous.

We peer down. There's no water, no reflection beneath the metal safety grate, which has caught a few stray coins and bits of trash. The wells of the wall are illuminated to a depth of about seven or eight feet, and then everything smudges into darkness. The bottom could be right there, that smudge of darkness, or it could be another twenty feet down. I shiver.

"How deep do you suppose it is?" Robin whispers. She's bent over, head resting on folded hands resting on the edge of the well.

"Who knows, maybe ten, fifteen feet?"

"Naw, it's got to be deeper. I mean, if they really wanted it to have water, right, then they would have had to go down to street level and the moat, wouldn't they, when they were digging it?"

"Well, it probably collects some run-off when it rains."

"Mmm. Maybe," she says. But again, I can tell from the way she says it that she wants to believe her version, that the well runs all the way through the tiers of the hill to the level of the moat that surrounds the castle, that the metal safety grate has saved countless naughty or too-adventurous children from a tragic 250-foot fall. "I'll bet you anything you can't hear a coin hit the bottom," she says then, and digs in her purse. She comes out with a 1-yen coin. "Shh," she says, "listen." She drops the coin. It makes a feeble 'ping' against the grate before vanishing down into the well. We wait, bent over the side, ear down. I can hear the long grass around us rustling in the slight breeze, but nothing from below.

"Maybe the 1-yen coin is too light," I suggest. My first one, received yesterday after a purchase of a bottle of water and a rubbery sponge cake in cellophane, felt light as plastic. "Try a 5-yen coin, or maybe 10. Besides, did you

remember to make a wish?”

“*Shasta!* You’re right. I didn’t. I hope that’s not bad luck or something. I wonder if I can make two wishes on the next coin, as compensation.” She gets out her change purse again, finds a 5-yen coin. “Or maybe I can make five wishes with a 5-yen coin.”

“Better not push your luck,” I say, smiling.

“Okay, here goes again—” she screws up her face, eyes shut tight behind her glasses, cheeks puffed out, like a kid in front of the best birthday cake she’s ever seen. She opens her eyes again and flips the coin into the well. The ‘ping’ against the grate is louder this time, though not much, and again we bend over the side for a follow-up noise. Again, nothing. “*Shasta*, I knew it was really deep,” she says.

“*Shasta*”: I picture daisies growing at the bottom of the well, fertilized by centuries of rainwater run-off, and the fragments of junk food tossed in with their wrappers. Pure white daisies, not just the petals, but the centres and leaves and stems as well, sunlight unable to filter down to whatever depth the bottom is. “*Shasta*” is evidently one of her expletive replacements, along with the more traditionally British ones like blimey. I guess she just doesn’t swear. Fairly unusual for a younger person, not to swear. I’m reminded, suddenly, of the post-teen neo-puritans I met when travelling in the UK in my early 20s, just a little older than Robin is now. Only a year or two older than the kids I’d met, I couldn’t understand how they could be so entrenched in their religious beliefs and yet still claim to be rebels, going against the grain of society. I guess they thought that said something about society itself, that it had lost its morality, and that to have morals—or at least to have morals cultivated by an organized religion—*was* to stand apart from the majority. I didn’t object to their having their religious beliefs; what I ended up objecting to was the fact they started to

proselytize. Their morality came with a judgement, even though judgement was supposed to be reserved for God; and though I was, most of them agreed, a “good” person, because I hadn’t taken Jesus as my personal saviour I was either someone to be pitied, or to be educated towards a better way of living. But that was at least five years ago—six, actually, if I think about it. I brush off the thought that maybe Robin is cut from the same cloth and one day I’ll find myself in the awkward position of having to deal with her after we’ve had our religious differences conversation. Maybe her “shasta” is just a slang word now popular in England that I’m not familiar with.

“Well,” I say after a minute passes, with Robin scrutinizing the well, and me watching both her and the flow of people heading across our grassy plateau and back down the side of the hill. “Shall we continue?”

“Alright,” she says with some reluctance. I wonder what she’s wished for.

There is one final cement ramp and then we’re at the top. The castle sits on the north, harbour side; behind it is another plateau, this one sandy with a few trees along the stone wall border. A few visitors continue to mill about in the open space, or sit at one of the picnic tables under the trees. The castle, however, is closed for the day. We’ve just missed it, if I understand the sign correctly: open at 10, closed at 4:30. I peer up at it, the white-washed sides framed in dark wood practically blinding me in the last of the sun’s brightness.

We walk around the sandy plateau, taking in the view of the surrounding countryside. To the west, our new town spreads across the land until it butts against the rounded hills that range southward, become small in the distance along the south, and then curve back towards the coast in the east. The city and its environs are enclosed in this coastal valley, trapped in a U-shape of ancient volcanic hills, the castle the only thing to break the monotony of the valley’s flatness. All around, as on

the north side over the harbour and the Inland sea, the atmosphere is very hazy, dense with humidity and smog. My own shirt is beginning to cling to the small of my back, and I feel a drop of sweat tickle its way between my breasts.

“What should we do now?” Robin asks.

“Let’s sit down for a few minutes before we head back.” An older couple and their three adult children get up from a pic-nic table on the west side. Or maybe one of the younger men and the younger woman are not siblings but married. All of them do the stare-and-look-away thing as they pass. Robin takes one bench, and I the other.

“*Konnichiwa*,” says an old man, approaching our table with some hesitation, bowing his head and shoulders. At first I think he’s going to tell us he’s been waiting for the table and we should let him have it—not that I’d understand all that in Japanese. He’s wearing a golf shirt and a vest with boxy pockets, the kind worn fishing or camping, his hat a Tilley knockoff. His pants and shoes look more dressy, like office attire, not something one would wear on even a short hike in such heat.

“*Konnichiwa*,” I reply, bowing my head slightly, even though I’ve read that Westerners are not expected to. It’s hard, though, not to reflect such gestures when they’re made to you, especially if you understand what they mean. Robin also says “*Konnichiwa*,” though with less enthusiasm. She doesn’t bow.

The old man says something very quickly, none of which I recognize from my basic fifty words and phrases. He stops, maybe noting our confused expressions.

“*Ehto ne*. Ah, where? Where?” he repeats. “You come from where?”

“*Kanada*. I’m from *Kanada*.” I say, then try to remember the Japanese word for England. It’s not the English word adapted to Japanese pronunciation, as Canada is (but with no stress on the first syllable). I look in my bag for my phrasebook.

“She’s from England,” I say, flipping pages, and then the word comes to me. “*Kanojo*

wa, Igirisu,” I say, realizing I’m not speaking in a full sentence and that I probably sound to the old man like a pre-schooler or a particularly gifted primate: “She England.” Ah well, it’s humbling, and it’s all I’m capable of, so there’s no sense in feeling stupid yet.

“*Ah, so,*” says the man. “*Ah, so nan desu ka.*”

The three of us smile at each other, no one sure what to say next. The old man scratches his head, then speaks again. “Eh—*ehto, ne*. Why you visit Machigoma? Travel vacation?”

“No. Well, yes. But no.” I laugh. Robin rolls her eyes and smiles. Then she says, in a loud, slow voice, “We’re English teachers. We’re going to teach at Vista. Do you know Vista?”

The old man’s expression changes. “*Bista! Ah, so ka*. You are English teachers!” It seems true, what I’d read about the Japanese reverence for teachers and all kinds of learning. But there’s something else in his face and in his voice that I can’t quite name.

“Yes,” says Robin, “we are English teachers.”

There is another silence. The man pushes his hat up over his forehead, gropes in a pocket for something, which he takes out and flaps smartly twice—it’s a handkerchief—before mopping his forehead. I flip through my book again, find the phrase I want. “*Nagame wa, kirei desu,*” I say.

The old man looks at me and blinks. The sun dilates his pupils, he squints at us and says “*Nani? Ehto...*”

Maybe my pronunciation wasn’t very good. Or I left something out. I try again, wondering if I should just show him the phrase in my book. “*Nagame wa, kirei desu.*” I gesture towards the harbour, towards the dark hill islands dotting the Inland

Sea. “*Kirei desu.*” It’s beautiful, the view is beautiful. And it is; or would be, if not for the creeping grey-yellow smog. But of course even if I knew how, I wouldn’t say that.

“*Ah, so, ne!*” the man says. He smiles. He says something else I don’t understand.

“What’s he saying now?” Robin asks.

“Uhm, I don’t have any idea.”

The old man is waiting, an expectant look on his face. He must have asked another question.

“*Sumimasen,*” I say, remembering the word ‘excuse me’ from a lesson Leighton gave me long ago. Or what now seems like long ago. “*Sumimasen, wakarimasen deshita.*” Easily convincing me that apologizing for not understanding would come in handy during my first few weeks, Leighton had drilled me on the phrase endlessly, until the words had almost ceased to have any significance and became just a series of random sounds. I used to do the same thing with new words I encountered as a child in my reading. *Penitentiary, penitentiary, penitentiary. Obsolete, obsolete, obsolete.* Reading Nancy Drew books on the bamboo sofa in my grandmother’s back kitchen, sneaking up the steep stairs to the attic of their old farmhouse, freeze-dried flies prickly under my socks, to read the covers of old phonograph records and the crumbly pages of old Westerns and Romance novels. Zane Grey, Alice Adams, Victoria Holt. *Sardonic, sardonic, sardonic.*

“*Ehto, ne.* Sank you,” the old man says. “I hope, *eh-to*, I hope you like Japan.”

“Thanks very much,” says Robin. “That’s awfully kind of you.”

“Thank you. *Domo arigato,*” I say. “Have a good evening.” Maybe he’ll know the word evening. I hope my smile conveys all that needs to be said. The old man backs away, bowing slightly as before, and begins his descent.

“Well, that was nice, wasn’t it?” says Robin.

“Yes,” I say, thinking. Then I say it. “So, are you planning on taking Japanese lessons while you’re here?” I don’t mean to sound as though I’m judging, I don’t want to judge her, not everyone thinks of everything they might need to do before travelling, and even if you think of it, you might not have time.

“Dunno, I haven’t really thought about it.” Robin shrugs. The path switchbacks sharply and we have to step out of the way of a troupe of middle aged women.

“So far, it seems like a good idea to me, though. I mean, imagine if we knew more Japanese, we could’ve had a longer conversation with that old man. We would’ve understood everything he said. Or most of what he said, maybe.”

“Mmm, I suppose. Yeah, I guess I’ll find out about some lessons or something. But it’s not really a priority at the moment.”

“No?” I say. I begin to wonder if it is just the blind arrogance of youth—not that I’m so old myself—that allows her to be so cavalier. Perhaps there is too much of an edge of surprise in my voice, surprise edged with disdain, incredulity with judgement.

“No,” she says more emphatically. “I mean, first I just want to get all set up with work, and feel on top of what I’m doing in that regard. Then once I’m a little more settled into a routine, I’ve got a few other projects to work on.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?” I ask.

“Well,” says Robin, drawing a breath as another switchback throws us sharply left, “one of the reasons I came here has to do with spreading the good word.” She pauses. “You know, missionary work with the church.” I have to stop myself from saying “Oh my God”. Here we go again, I think, it’s just going to be like that. I must be on some course of karmic retribution dictating that every time I travel abroad I

have to deal with Jesus-impassioned British youngsters.

“Oh, I see” I muster. I’m as flustered as I was with the Japanese man.

“Yeah, so, once I find the church, I’ll be fairly involved in their activities, so I suppose I won’t have much time for learning Japanese.” Robin shrugs again.

“But, won’t most of the people in the church be Japanese? I mean, won’t you need some Japanese just to communicate properly with them?” But as I say this, two things cross my mind: one, that there is a vast subculture of Western born-again inhabiting the nooks and crannies of every little town all across Japan. The other is that she’ll say something like communication will occur in the universal Christian language of peace, love and goodwill.

“No matter,” she says, shrugging away that obstacle. “Though we do provide them with English bibles, they have Japanese translations as well, so whenever we refer to a verse, of course the numbers are the same. We can read it in English, and the Japanese can read it in Japanese.”

“Ah,” I say. “So, this church, it’s located in Machigoma?”

“Yeah, the leaders at my church back home in London gave me the address before I left. Now I just have to try and find it somehow, without a flippin’ map.”

We’ve reached the bottom of the stone stairs, stepped onto the wide yellow-sand path that meanders around the castle. A shriek suddenly pierces the air, then a dog howls, then another.

“Blimey!” Robin says. “What was that?”

“Before the dogs, you’ve got me.”

“So, anyways, I think I saw a shop from near the top of the stairs, in that sort of general direction.” Robin points south of where I think our apartment might be.

“Should we go back to the main road, and head south from there? It might be

easier than trying to find our way through all these twisty back streets.”

“But surely if we just keep going in that direction we’ll find it eventually.”

“I’d rather find it sooner than eventually,” I say. “I’d like to get back to the apartment before dark, actually.”

“I don’t think there’s anything to be scared of in this little town.”

I wonder if there’s an implied dig there, a delayed response to the conversation we had yesterday in Osaka about our respective hometowns. Perhaps she imagines herself to be far more cosmopolitan than I; a quaint city on the east coast of Canada does pale in comparison to one of Western civilization’s oldest cities. But nonetheless, I can’t help but think life experience counts for something. If you’ve been living at home with your parents since you were born, it doesn’t matter what city you’ve lived in. But maybe she means nothing by it. “No, it’s not that, it’s just I’d prefer to find my way home while it’s still light, and get started cooking before it’s too late.”

“But it’s only...” Robin looks at her watch, “five-thirty. We’ve loads of time. Or, we could even just stop and get something to eat somewhere, never mind the supermarket at all.” She looks at me hopefully.

“I’ll need stuff for the morning. And we need a few other household supplies. I noticed they’ve given us some stuff, but no dish or laundry detergent. And actually, I didn’t bring any towels with me, just to save space when I was packing, so... unless you don’t mind having a roommate who doesn’t bathe...” I smile at her.

“Alright,” she sighs, though I think good-naturedly. We turn right and head back for the parking lot and the route we came. We walk in silence for a minute. I wonder how far we will have to walk along this street before we reach the supermarket Robin thinks she saw. The street is busy, the vehicles streaming along so

much smaller than at home that their diminutive size gives me the impression they're moving faster than they are. Little white hatchbacks zip forward at intersections, white and grey sedans not much bigger, that I think I could leap-frog over them. Boxy, top-heavy trucks, also white, bustling along, contents unknown. On our right, directly bordering the sidewalk, are all manner of buildings the purpose and function of which are a complete and utter mystery to me. Cement blocks with geometric doors and windows, dark and glowering wooden shacks, some with signs in *kanji* written the traditional vertical way, others horizontal. I suppose this is what it is like to be a child, to be surrounded by places that have no legible function.

We've reached the supermarket. *Marunaka!* red neon letters shout at us. I pull the door open, hold it for an old woman just inside holding two large bags with plumes of leaves hanging out. Robin apparently thinks I'm holding it for her. She slips in and around the woman with the bags, who pauses and stares before stepping forward and through the doors. The woman bows her head slightly at me and hobbles towards one of the bicycles parked in front of the market's side window. Robin is now meandering through the produce section, and I consider letting her do her shopping on her own, letting her go back to the apartment on her own, hoping that by the time we run into each other again—probably as we cook dinner, fighting for space in the kitchen and one of the two small gas-fired burners on our tiny stove—we will be able to move on and not forget, but at least accept that we have very different purposes in being here. Even though, if pressed, and not too hard, I would have to say that I think she's wrong, that her intention is incredibly naïve, not to mention Euro-centric. I'm sure Leighton would agree with me. Maybe I'll write him a letter tonight, just before bed. Maybe I'll be able to forget what he said to me on the phone the day before I left, and what it really meant.

It's 8:00 p.m. and completely dark outside. I've eaten and immediately cleaned up the kitchen, orientation's stories of cockroaches scaring me into strict new standards of cleanliness. I've showered in the funny little plastic room with side-by-side shower stall and bathtub. And now I'm lying on my futon again, the smell of the *tatami* strong. Will I ever get used to it? Will the smell fade with time, as the mats take on my smell, or will they simply lose their own? The ceiling lamp's fluorescent ring hovers above me, a barely perceptible glow the only indication that one minute ago I was sitting upright on the futon, pen and notepaper in my hand, an envelope at my side. It's just occurred to me that only 48 hours ago I was saying goodbye to my parents at the airport, and that only 58 hours ago I was on the phone with Leighton, engaged in our last phone conversation. He told me, among other things, to call him on his birthday, we would speak again then. That's still weeks away. What will have changed by then? That phone call, 58 hours ago, did much to change what I thought was so sure, what I thought had clear, plain, undeniable meaning. That phone call was the swipe of a brush against a chalkboard. The remaining words were rendered nonsensical, and my stomach sank: *obsolete, obsolete, obsolete*. Without the anchor of the future to hold me down, the present suddenly seemed a roiling wind that lifted me off the ground, the phone pressed against my ear, the cord coiling around the door jamb, my last holds on my physical self. Leighton waited, patient but, I could tell, slightly irritated, until my voice bubbled up to the surface again from a sudden deluge of tears. I was through with providing hopeful scenarios: "Yes," I agreed, "a year is a long time. You're right, it's probably for the best."

I sat listening to the dial tone for about five minutes after he'd hung up. And you thought people only did that in soap operas, or in bad movies. I did it, sitting in the corner of my parents' dining room behind the pine hutch, the phone cord stretched around the door into the kitchen. My mother was pretending to have some pressing business in the pot cupboards, and I wished she would go out to the laundry room long enough for me to slip past and up the stairs to the bathroom. Ten minutes later, and maybe my splotchy face could be blamed on the hot water and the pummelling effects of the showerhead's spastic-fire-hose setting. But she didn't, and her soft, sympathetic face only made me feel worse.

If I must lie here, anxious and sleepless, there must be better things I could think about. The smell of *tatami*. The preponderance of grey bicycles. The alarming smog over the harbour. The black cone mountain to the east. The sound of dogs barking around the castle. The serve-yourself fish-counter at the *Marunaka*! The cost of a compact, globe-shaped watermelon (an astonishing fifty Canadian dollars). The green-tea walls of my room.

The flight attendant had served green tea on the plane. A tiny plastic cup steeped in front of me as I sat in my aisle seat, as the plane held us, in what always seems like suspended animation, somewhere over the gaping Pacific. Moving so fast, but feeling stock-still. And though I was trying not to speculate too much on the future, I couldn't help but think about the place, the city that would be my future home for a year or more. For the first part of the flight, until he moved to an empty seat beside his friend, I sat beside a young Japanese man who had been in Canada for three months learning English and seeing "the nature". "Where will you live in Japan?" he asked me, "What city?" "Machigoma. Do you know it?" I asked, smiling, the word having already taken on a disjointed significance to me, partly as a result of

my looking it up in the dictionary Leighton gave me. It amused me that the two parts of the word meant “town” and “sesame”, *machi* and *goma* respectively, though this would probably mean nothing in particular to the average Japanese person, unfamiliar with the ins and outs of Western culture. “Machigoma!?!” the young man said. “*Doko?* I mean—where, exactly?” “It’s on Shikoku, in Kagawa-ken,” I replied, citing part of the address Vista had sent me. “Shikoku. Kagawa-ken,” the young man mused. “Kagawa, yes, yes, I know Kagawa. It is very small, maybe the smallest prefecture. But sorry, I don’t know Machigoma.” He shrugged. “But maybe it is nice place,” he said, “Maybe you will like it.”

And that was my introduction to the self-effacing ambivalence of the average Japanese. At that point, my seatmate’s “maybe” had little effect on me: I was still heavily influenced by the pictures in my guide book, by images and information on websites, by postcards Leighton had sent from Japan, by the ink paintings and calligraphy I’d seen in museums, by the made-up mask of geisha pecking around in silken bulk on slab sandals, as ubiquitous in Western culture as tomb drawings of oval-eyed Egyptians. All this added up to a city that would offer the best of Japan: quaint traditions, urban architecture old and new, an appreciation of quiet space and nature, juxtaposed with contemporary conveniences such as high-speed trains, telecommunications, and—as I’d read in my guide book—such quirks as the boxes placed in toilet stalls so the more fastidious members of the population (all women, apparently) could mask each embarrassing tinkle and squeak. Machigoma, I naively thought, would be the perfect synthesis of every concept I held about Japan, past and present—even future, if I let myself think farther ahead than the first month of my contract. But at the same time, the name was an empty signifier: I could not picture its exact streets and corners, its buildings and people. I had no idea what its pace would

be, whether there was a fountain in the square, or a clock spire at city hall. The guidebook, I remember reading, stated there was a castle—but there was no picture, not even a little line drawing, and so my mind carried over notions of European fortresses with spires and flags and crenelated turrets. After today, I know exactly how I was wrong. And that I was incorrect in supposing my roommate would be closer to my age. And wrong in assuming that the city would be bigger than it is. And wrong that there would be so much new information to process that I wouldn't think at all about the past.

The imagination, fuelled by a random assimilation of images and information, can sometimes be a terrible thing. The passive imagination can wake us in the middle of the night, squeezing dry screams from our throats; or it can nudge us into early-morning warmth, aroused and pleased that there is someone with whom to share the acts so recently summoned by the sleeping brain. And there is the active imagination, the one that allows us to have another sort of dream and try to realize it, the one that fills us with longing for what we don't have (perhaps the Japanese are right in their stoic ambivalence—maybe future things will be good, but let's assume equally that they might not be), and makes us believe that there is some perfect version of our lives and ourselves just waiting for us to walk towards, and greet, and hold hands with, and live with happily ever after. It was apparently this version of my own imagination that allowed me to think that Leighton was really in love with me.

Elinor

No one looks up when I walk into the teacher's room with my hands dripping wet. Not one of the nine people bent over files and flipping through books, not a single one! Ah, well, perhaps it's too early, they're still half asleep, it's only 8:45. Or maybe everyone's hung-over, or they couldn't find a coffee vending machine on the way to work. But how likely is that—I saw three on one street alone before I even reached the centre of town. But maybe, as a newby, I'm more aware of little changes in my environment—everything still so new, everything I pass on the route I practiced yesterday when I got back from training, using that map Head Office Mike almost forgot to give me. Eight days ago—the time has flown past. It's the newness of everything that makes time go by. I love it, all this newness. So many things to see, so much to keep me from thinking about home.

At the third coffee machine, I stopped and slipped 120 yen into the coin feeder, checking the coins carefully for their amounts. At the top of the machine was a display window with a row of black and brown and beige sample cans, though a couple were bright red, blue with green swirls, and pink, even. Most were printed with a few English words, but "White Heavenly," "Diablo Dark," "Extra Dark Blendy," "Super Milky Mix" told me nothing beyond the obvious as to how their contents might be different. I randomly selected, deciding that I would, over the coming mornings, perform a test and try them all, or at least as many as it took before I found *Mine*. Or one that was at least drinkable. The usual tumble of aluminium, and brekkie was in my hands. But it was ice cold! And the coffee—"Darkly Mellow Plus"—was strong as espresso and sweet as golden syrup. After two sips, I poured the treacly remains into an open cement drainage ditch, looking in vain along the busy street for a recycling bin. I ended up carrying the sticky can all the bloody way to the school.

That made for an awkward introduction to the school's Japanese office staff, my hand too sticky to shake, my request for a recycling bin met with puzzled smiles, then giggles once I was finally understood. I didn't see why such a request might be so bloody amusing, but better the giggles than the cold frown of the fourth member of staff, who emerged from behind a small partition. The other three stifled their giggles. The serious one stiffly held out a tiny plastic cylinder with a swinging flap in the lid. This tiny trash bin—not for recycling, but for your regular, all-purpose waste—repelled my attempt at disposal with a disdainful wag, and more coffee dripped out onto my hand as I tried to catch the can before it hit the carpeted floor. The giggly staff giggled again, free hands used to cover widened mouths. The unsmiling staff member took the can between her delicately manicured thumb and index, and smoothly slipped it in. She then introduced herself as Michiko, Assistant Manager, and named the other three women so quickly that it was my turn to giggle. “I’m terribly sorry,” I said, “it’s not your names, it’s just that it’s going to take me some time to remember.” An urge to put my own hand in front of my mouth, I felt myself blushing. And I don’t usually blush. The last time I remember blushing was about a year ago after Eighth-form Parent-Teacher Meet Day: a male colleague made a comment about my lengthy meeting with the attractive and newly-single father of a student in my art class. I told myself I blushed out of anger, unable to think of a suitably scathing response on the spot, but the effect of the blush had been the same. My student’s father was attractive, but I’d not considered anything beyond whether or not to apply fresh lipstick, as I had for many other meetings. Jamie and I had still been together at that point, and nothing would have made me cheat on him, though apparently, Jamie wasn’t thinking along the same lines. But never mind him. Because of that blush, the colleague was inspired to continue his harassment, and gradually it

escalated beyond private joke to personal vendetta. It was part of the reason I'd resigned and applied for a job in Japan. I never thought I'd be the kind of woman who wouldn't be able to brush off something like that, or else put a stop to it. But around the same time, the thing with Jamie happened. One blow too many to my emotional bullet-proof vest. But again, never mind him.

"Excuse me, can you tell me where the washroom is?" I asked Michiko, who had turned back to her computer. I was careful to enunciate well, as I had no idea how good her English was.

"At the back on the left, past the classrooms. I'm sure you'll be able to spot it right away," she said, her accent flawless, not looking away from her work.

"Right. Thank you," I said. Michiko's coldness was nothing like the smiling concern of the assistant manager at the school where I did training last week. Maybe she's interpreted my giggling as an insult. Well, how, then, was I supposed to interpret her co-worker's giggles? Or for that matter, her frowning indifference?

I rinsed the sugary coffee off my hands before noticing there was nothing to dry them with, not even toilet tissue, though at least it did look like that was usually supplied. But my luck, the roll was empty. I shook my hands over the sink, and wondered if I should just stand there shaking like a dog until they were dry on their own. But now, standing in the teacher's room, still dripping a tad, I clear my throat and address my preoccupied co-workers: "Er, can anyone tell me why it is there's no towel in the washroom?"

A tall, gaunt man with a receding hairline and a compensatory moustache and goatee looks up from his files. "Oh, you must be..." he draws a finger along his moustache, "...ah, the latest addition to the Vista troops... ah, Elinor, isn't it? From Australia? Poor Melinda's replacement," he says, finally lurching in my direction

with his hand extended. I identify his accent as British, somewhere south, I reckon.

"I'm Reginald—well, they call me Reggie, it's easier for them to pronounce."

Why on earth would the other teachers have a problem with his name? And then I realize he must be talking about the students. I nod at Reggie's extended hand. "Sorry, mine are damp—no towels, right?" I hold them up, though really they're almost dry by now. "So, 'replacement'," I say, "you make it sound like I'm a spare part, a few minor adjustments and the machine will be running good as new." I try for a laugh. The corners of Reggie's mouth barely twitch. I guess one shouldn't refer to one's new place of employ as a machine, even if nothing negative was intended.

Another teacher, a shortish man with sharp features and chin-length light-brown hair, turns from a file cabinet and says, "But that is exactly what he's talking about, my dear neophyte—you are merely another component in the vast machinery that is the Vista enterprise."

"Well! Nice to meet you, too!" I laugh again. His eyes make me think of the Gold Coast, pale sand beaches, crisp blue water, fluffy white clouds on distant horizons. His accent tells me he might have actually been there a time or two.

"Russ," says Reggie, "do try to be nice to the new teacher." Russ makes a face, opens another drawer and pulls out more files. But I can see that one corner of his mouth is turned up.

"So, as is customary, you have a free period first up," Reggie says to me, "We don't want to throw you right into the pool with the sharks without a wee bit of preparation. Yes, yes, you've had your swimming lessons," Reggie chuckles, and this time I am the one unable to reciprocate, "but you don't want to jump right into the deep end, heh-heh. Heh. So, your first period is free, in order that you may plan your lessons, and become familiar with all the fantastic materials that so many of your

predecessors—I mean—no, that’s right, isn’t it? It doesn’t have to mean that somebody died, right? Anyway, all the fantastic, er, materials that your now departed co-workers—no no, that’s worse. Oh, blast. Just look through that box over there and check out the stuff hanging on the wall. If you have a spare moment, not now of course, but in the upcoming weeks, we’d appreciate anything you could add to it. Right. So, I’ll be here for the first period as well, if you have any questions, though I’ll be in and out as I have demo lessons scheduled. But never you mind just yet what a demo lesson is. Anyway, they may not show up. And I also have to meet briefly with Michiko. Have you met Michiko? Yes? And the other staff? Good. But I digress. The schedule is always posted here,” Reggie leads me to a large corkboard above one of the wide file cabinets. The schedule consists of six sheets of paper taped together, four teachers’ names across the top of each.

“This many don’t all work at the same time, do they?” I marvel. The room is barely functional with nine people, never mind 24.

“No, no,” says Reggie, “there are three shifts, and as you can see some of these teachers have only 4 periods, during the late afternoon rush-hour, so to speak. They’re the part-timers. And some aren’t actually scheduled to teach any lessons at all today, or at least not here. So, then, this is you...” he jabs a green pen at the board, scrapes it down the vertical column under my name, “and as you probably know from training, the files are numbered and separated by level. The 7s are here and here, please adhere to the colour-coding, you see the little coloured dot here, just by the students’ names? Yes?” he pulls open a drawer, shows the red dots in one section, the green in another, “and the 6s there,” he points, “and 5s and above over there. If you can’t find a file, someone may’ve already pulled it, students often take several classes running, so check one of these boxes if a number’s not in the drawers. Right, but I

guess a lot of that was probably already covered at training. So. Any questions?"

Reggie's expression suggests he will be surprised if I do.

"No, not yet anyway," I concede. "Thanks very much." At least he is somewhat friendlier than Michiko, even if he sounds as though he's been through all this a million times before, and that I could be, if not an actual piece of machinery, then a faceless blob whose only identity is to fill the shoes of another faceless blob. A "departed" one. But perhaps anonymity is just what I'm looking for, at least to start with. It will make a pleasant shift from what I've left behind.

I begin to scan the lessons listed under my name, noting file numbers and levels. I pull files, grab teachers' books, and take everything to the narrow tables that extend along two sides of the room. My first class is a group of three in level 7A. Three, I already know from training, is a difficult number: pair work can only be done if the teacher takes one of the students, which means more time talking and being "on" and less time to give to all students equally. I sigh, pick a lesson, work up a brief plan with some drills, and move on to the next lesson.

The bell chimes, signalling that ten minutes remain until the first lesson begins. It has a different tone than the one at the school where I trained. A couple more teachers fly through the door, frantically grab files and start planning. A tall man with an anaemic pallor hollers in an American accent, "Who the fuck's moved the TOEIC tapes again?" He slams a book on a file cabinet. "Every time I got a TOEIC lesson, somebody's fucked with the tapes. You," he points at me, "you got 'em?"

"No, of course not. I haven't been trained to teach TOEIC yet," I say. I glance at Reggie, at Russ, for signs that this guy is just taking the piss. But they're bent over their files again, intent on ignoring the belligerent cowboy. From outside the door, over the walls of the teachers' room—there's a three-foot gap between the walls and

the ceiling—comes the sound of fussing children, and a pulsing squeak, like that of a rubber toy being chewed by a dog with an unnatural sense of rhythm.

“Well, who the fuck’s got them, then?”

“Calm down, Del. I put the tapes where they’re supposed to be, in their case in the box behind the books,” Reggie says, “and please, I know you’re unconcerned now that you’ve only a week left, but if you must swear, try not to do so loudly enough for the students to hear you. Especially the children—wouldn’t it be ironic if they learned to repeat nothing from their Kinder lesson this morning, but instead went home chanting—” Reggie lowers his voice, “—fuck, fuck, fuck?” I glance at Russ again. He doesn’t look up, but the corners of his mouth are twitching.

“Yes, let’s do it for the children,” says Russ. He approaches me, his arms full of files, a couple of picture books and two baskets full of crayons. “So, incidentally, the reason there’s no towel is that public washrooms in Japan rarely have them. Not that that’s an especially logical explanation. Everyone carries little packets of tissues around in their pockets or bags. Maybe when you were in Osaka, you were handed some, with advertising printed on the side? No? There’s often someone passing them out on the street. Though don’t be too careless with your free tissues, because lots of public washrooms don’t have toilet paper either, and you’ll want to keep a couple on hand for that eventuality as well. Personally, I think the school doesn’t have towels just because they’re cheap-ass bastards.” He gives me a lopsided smile. I blink and smile, still not sure how to take him.

“Russ,” says Reggie, glaring.

“Have fun planning, and good luck with your first lesson,” Russ says to me. “Tsugumu is a real piece of work.” The door closes behind him just as the bell begins to chime again. I look through my files for Tsugumu. There’s no mug shot, but the

comments say plenty: “Tsugumu’s vocabulary has improved of late. It is unfortunate, however, that many of the words he has added to his repertoire are from X-rated American films”, and “Tsugumu said nothing today—nothing in English,” and “Tsugumu refused to participate in listen and repeat drills. Again.”

As the bell nears the end of its rote chiming, the rest of the teachers groan and gather files, scramble through the door tucking in shirts and readjusting ties and skirts. The bell trills its last. I stare at the closed door, waiting for their frantic, frustrated energy to dissipate. Forty odd minutes, and that will be me.

And just seven-and-a-half hours later, it feels like I’ve already been here several days, weeks even, teaching, or trying to, timing my every word to the dictates of the lesson format laid out at training, each lesson somehow both dragging on and zipping by. Only one day, only eight lesson periods—the first not even taught, I remind myself. All over now, done. I realize then that I’m staring at an open file, unable to think of a coherent comment to write about the student’s progress. Or glaring lack thereof. Chiaki, I think, Chiaki was... somewhat reticent and difficult to hear, but produced several full and grammatically correct sentences. Nah, too dry, too pedagogical. Chiaki needs...to be less self-conscious of her badly-maintained teeth and try opening her mouth more often during all parts of the lesson. Well, obviously I can’t write that. How about: Chiaki used the lesson’s grammar well, but needs to repeat it for strength and confidence. Her vocabulary is limited and she should be encouraged to expand it, perhaps with warm-up games targeting particular gaps. I write the comment in a hand that passes for legible, jot numbers between one and five

in the column to the right to summarize Chiaki's strengths and weaknesses.

"You're a fast learner," says a voice behind me. It's Russ.

"Oh, should I write that?" I ask.

"No, I meant you," he says. "Already putting the sort of prefab comments most people don't start using until after a couple of months."

"I'm not sure I should take that as a compliment," I say, smiling. "But, you do have a point. I used to be a junior-high-school teacher, so for the kids' report cards I had to find ways to hide the more negative things in pretty language."

"Pretty, is it—I'd call it empty." There's that smile again, that dimple.

"Well, I suppose it's that too."

"So how was your first day, all in all—tolerable? Even with Tsugumu?"

"Ah, yeah, it was not bad all things considered. And actually, Tsugumu did a no-show, so it was just these two demure university students who barely looked up from their books until I got them talking about 'Brado Pitto.' Then I never heard so much giggling in all my life. And you?"

"Well, it wasn't my first day, was it. Carbon copy of yesterday, the day before, and the day before that, with minor variations." Russ's face never seems to lose that wry smile. "Fancy coming with us to get a bevy?"

"Who's 'us'?"

"Oh I see, you're the picky sort. The sort who asks the host of parties what their guest list is, right?" His mouth turns up just a little farther again.

I laugh. "No, actually, I don't much care, just that it seems everyone else has left, so I thought maybe you had an imaginary friend or something."

"Yeah, well, she's not available this evening. Seriously, though, most of them have already gone ahead to the bar, but several other teachers who weren't working

today will be there too—it's actually a good-bye party for Melinda. Did you meet her?"

"No. You mean the one leaving under mysterious circumstances? I think her stuff was still in the apartment when I arrived, but it disappeared day before yesterday. Well, I don't know exactly when, sometime while I was away at training. And what's this bar?"

"Oh, I see. You also ask the host what they're serving for dinner, and if you don't like it you politely decline? Never mind that there might be some scandal associated with the event."

I laugh again, feel a bit of colour rise to my cheeks but this time not from embarrassment. "Yeah, I reckon you've caught me out on that one. I'll only go to parties where they serve the finest of French champagne and Russian caviar."

Russ lifts one of his eyebrows, still smiling. "The bar is called Lolo Wahine's. It's not too far from here, actually. The guy who owns it is great, we go there a lot."

"Lolo *whatsit's*? I thought the Japanese didn't use 'L'."

"It's not Japanese, it's Hawaiian. 'Lolo' means crazy."

"And the other word?"

Russ pauses. "'Wahine.' Means woman."

"'Crazy Woman's' bar? Charming."

"Don't take it the wrong way," Russ smiles, "it's actually the name of a wave on the coast of Maui. Fifty feet or more, and that's during calm weather."

"So, I guess you surf."

"You bet. Any self-respecting man from Narabeen has to surf. Craig does too. We've both been to Hawaii, just once so far. But you wouldn't believe the waves." Is it just my imagination, or do his eyes look bluer at the mere mention of water? "You

ever surfed?” he asks me.

“Nope. Closest I get to deep water is a bottle of Perrier. I can swim pretty well, but only in safe, calm pools where I can touch the bottom or at least see it. Who’s Craig?”

“Another of us from Oz, and my roommate. He teaches at the other school, up in Yu-Mi Town. You’ll meet him at the bar. That is, if you’re coming....”

“Yeah, alright, I suppose one beer wouldn’t kill me.”

“So, you’ve never had Japanese beer, then.”

“Oh, that good, is it?”

“Well, it’s alright, but nothing like the brews from home. You done there, shall we head out? The staff will want to close up soon.”

“Sure.” I put the last of my files away and grab my bag. Russ is out the door before I can get to it. Out front, Michiko is still parked at her desk, staring into her computer screen.

“Bye, Michiko! Bye, Tomomi. *Oyasu, ne?*” Russ waves.

“Bye-bye, Russ-san, *oyasu!*” says Tomomi, smiling and waving, “Bye-bye, new teacher!” Michiko waves distractedly, but doesn’t look up.

“Bye-bye,” I say. “What’s ‘*oyasu*’ mean?” Russ holds the front door open for me and we step into the shopping arcade. He leads me towards the right, and we dodge a few last-minute shoppers, mainly schoolgirls in their eensy uniforms, and housewives toting sacks of veg. And tipsy salary-men on grey bicycles.

“It’s an abbreviation of ‘*oyasuminasai*,’ which means ‘good-night,’ sort of. Well, really, it’s more the good-night you say to someone as they’re heading off to sleep. Not the good-night you would say to someone as they leave the office. But the staff sometimes like to make things a little more familiar between themselves and the

teachers. Some of the teachers. And some of the staff, I should add.”

“‘*Oyasu.*’ So, then, is Michiko always like that?”

“Like what? A cold and officious bitch?”

“Ooh, that’s a bit harsh, isn’t it?”

“I bet you were thinking it, even if you never would’ve said it.”

“Well, she wasn’t particularly friendly this morning, and I noticed just now that we might as well have been janitorial, for all the notice she gave us.”

“She would have treated janitorial with more respect,” Russ says. “But only if they were Japanese. She hates foreigners.”

“I’m sorry, she what?”

“You heard me.”

“Well, yes, but I guess I can’t believe...I mean, has she actually said that, or are you just inferring?”

“Yes, she has, actually. Craig and I got her talking one night we’d managed to convince her to have a drink with us.” Russ puts his hands in his pockets and looks straight ahead as our steps echo in the rapidly-emptying hall of the shopping arcade. Shopkeepers are pulling down their aluminium screens across their windows, drawing gates across their doors. “But I honestly don’t think it was just the drink talking.”

“I can’t believe she’d admit it,” I begin, looking at him, wondering why he’s avoiding eye contact. “I mean, here she is, working in a context where she has no choice but to deal with foreigners—it just doesn’t seem like a wise thing, to come right out and say you basically hate a large portion of the people with whom you work, and with whom, one might suppose, you ought to get along, or at least avoid insulting. And there’s another thing, then: why would she choose to work in a place where she has to deal with us, if she loathes us? There must be thousands of

secretarial jobs out there that wouldn't involve working closely with foreigners."

"She's not a secretary, she's the assistant manager. And there aren't that many assistant manager jobs out there, or at least not for women. So that's probably part of what pisses her off: she resents the fact that only in this weird little sector can she rise to the top. Or as close to the top as women are ever allowed in Japan. And incidentally, the word for foreigner in Japanese is '*gaijin*'. The more polite form is '*gaikokujin*'. But you're more likely to have heard the former."

"Yeah, I've heard both, actually. Renee told me, but I'm sure I heard them before that. A friend of mine taught in Japan a few years ago, back when it was still hugely profitable."

"As opposed to little better than your average entry-level job in sales back home, not including commission?"

"I wouldn't know about sales jobs. But what I do know is that this friend used to brag about how much money she was sending home, around the time that I was spending all my extra cash on my studies and supporting my mother when she was sick. I remember thinking at the time what I wouldn't give to just be able to pick up and travel, and make that much bloody money at the same time."

Russ is silent, still staring ahead, hands in pockets. I wonder if I'm boring him.

"Sorry," I say, "I don't mean to go on. So, is this bar far from my apartment? Oh, well, I guess you wouldn't necessarily know, now, would you?" I laugh.

"Actually, Renee's your roommate, so I know exactly where you live. And that's where we're heading now."

"Oh?" I wonder if he and Renee have slept together, and that's how he knows. But the idea of them in bed together is utterly incongruous, Renee's top-heavy form pinned down to her multi-layered futon by Russ's lean hips: it would be like a

scrawny doll trying to climb on top of a large teddy bear. I almost shudder, able to imagine the Mike Kelly-esque scenario much more clearly than I'd like.

"Yes, Craig and I, and this loud-mouthed arse named Winston—not the one you met this morning, but yet another—are roomies, and we live exactly one floor up from you and Renee in the same sorry, crumbling excuse for a building."

I am somewhat relieved. That he knows where I live because he lives upstairs. Not that that precludes the possibility that he and Renee have slept together. Mainly, I just don't want to have to deal with the sounds of my roommate screwing from the other side of the living room on a regular basis. The doors are far from soundproof, the walls so thin it wouldn't surprise me if you could see light pass through them, just like those paper screens the Japanese used to have. Though for all I know, Renee does have a boyfriend, maybe some other teacher, or a Japanese man. But the latter seems even more incongruous than the prospect of her coupling with Russ. "You're on the fifth? Is there a gaping chasm of a crack in your hallway as well?"

"Oh, you've noticed those cracks, have you? Well, actually, your floor seems to have borne the brunt of the last earthquake. Ours has just a hairline fracture in the wall across from the elevator. Which no one ever uses, really, by the way, just so you know, any questions?" Russ waggles his eyebrows just as Reggie had that morning. I laugh again. "But seriously," he continues, "a girl was stuck in there for a few hours once, some wee thing who got home from her job at a snack bar around three in the morning and was discovered at 5:30 by a salary-man on his way to work. He wasn't actually going to use the elevator, mind—he just heard her banging on the inside of the door. The emergency phone was disconnected after the last typhoon, the line somehow caught fire and fried, and no one bothered to come round and fix it. So finally the landlord just took the bloody thing out. Maybe he figured that if it was out

of sight, no one would complain about it anymore. As far as I'm concerned, he might as well take out the whole elevator. But he'd probably not fill in the shaft, just block it off with tape or something."

"They took out the phone? Are you serious?"

"Yep. When we get there, have a look. Just make sure the doors don't close behind you."

"Oh, stop. Last week, when I arrived, Mike was going to take me up in the elevator. There must be some building code, it can't be allowed to fall into such disrepair without there being some kind of, I dunno, measure, policy...?"

"My dear Elinor, you have so much to learn."

"Oh, I don't doubt that. But how can one—or maybe in this case, four—buildings be allowed to literally fall to pieces while plenty of others are in perfectly good shape? And in the same neighbourhood?"

"Have you not heard of the concept of slumlords? I assume they have such a thing in Sydney?"

"Well, of course, but this is Japan."

"Yes, yes, this is Japan. The slumlords here are the same as anywhere else."

"But I thought the Japanese were so clean, so careful, so regimented and policy-oriented about everything."

"As I said—"

"I have a lot to learn, I know."

"Mmm." Russ gives me a sideways look I'm not sure how to take, and I wonder just how hard it will be to learn more about him. He seems to prefer probing me than revealing anything about himself. He stops us at a busy intersection. "So, where to from here?" he asks.

“You’re asking me?”

“But of course, you’ve got to figure out the route sooner or later, might as well be now.”

“Well,” I start, and get out Mike’s map. “It’s...” I look up, “It’s...over there, I think, isn’t it?” I recognize none of the surroundings from my walk this morning. And the sun has gone down below the apartment buildings to the west, so things look different than they did under bright morning light. And truth be told, I have a terrible sense of direction.

“Elinor, Elinor...” Russ sighs. That smile.

“Damn,” I say, “damn this learning curve.” I laugh. Is it my imagination, or does Russ then ever-so-slightly narrow the gap between us as we walk, so that our arms brush once or twice? It’s flattering, but I’m not sure it would be a good idea, on either of our parts, to give in to any kind of attraction. And anyway, I don’t find him so attractive, physically—he’s a bit shorter than I am, and I’ve always just been mates with guys who’re shorter than I am. And his features are a bit too sharp. And so is his sense of humour.

“Come on, then,” he says, turning away. A second later I realize we’re half a block away from the apartment building. He puts his hands back in his pockets and quickens his pace so he’s walking just ahead of me, rounding past the big blue dumpsters next to the parking lot three steps before I do. And so it seems I’ve read the map, and probably other things, completely wrong.

Hannah

I've lost weight. The black pants are slack around my waist, rest on my hips, pucker around the slope of my ass. I stand sideways, turn so I have to look back over my shoulder at myself, turn again so I'm facing the mirror. No angle hides the fact that ten pounds, give or take a few breakfasts, have somehow vanished; maybe it's happened from the bounding rate of a heart palpitating from increased stress. New things have always tended to put me a little on edge, send my nervous system into parasympathetic overdrive. Or was it sympathetic—that psychology elective seems decades away, rather than just a year or so.

Back in Halifax, at the end of the summer, I'd cheated, taken the pants out of the bag where I was keeping all my new "working in Japan" clothes, slipped them on and cut off the tags. Then, only two months ago, they'd fit well over my hips and aerobically-rounded ass, hooked and buttoned snugly just under my navel, which occasionally showed in the gap between the pants and the tank-top I wore the night I took Leighton out to dinner at one of the town's two high-end restaurants. It was a goodbye dinner, more or less, though I preferred to call it an early birthday dinner, a sort of pay back for the dinner he'd splurged on for my birthday a few weeks before, at the other high-end restaurant, the one where local television celebrities and millionaires took their daily medallions of tenderloin in layers of buttery puff pastry, their Atlantic salmon steaks stacked in layers of filigree crêpe with maple and fig glaze. I wanted to do something as outrageous for him, pretend that my summer job income was permitting me to live higher on the hog than my student budget had permitted. It was better to celebrate his birthday than say goodbye—we were still in party mode, not yet thinking about what life would be like in ten days when he packed up the last of his things and moved from the room, the house, the city where he'd

spent the last four years of his life, the last three and a half months with me. In fact, during those months, most evenings were occupied with dining out—we tried every sushi restaurant in town. And after, hours in either his bed or mine, tucking into each other with even more enthusiasm than we'd devoured our meals.

I tuck my shirt into the pants. It helps somewhat. But there's still enough room at the hips for Jennifer Lopez to wiggle in beside me and take up the slack, based on the rear-view of her I saw last week, on a tv commercial for some new Japanese make of car. But what can I do—a pile of laundry languishes in my closet, and I can't wear a skirt because I haven't shaved my legs in days; the bristles will stick out of the pantyhose my contract stipulates I must wear. I pull at the waistband, as though it's elastic and will snap back snug when I let go. Maybe I should start eating something more than six pieces of sushi and a salad for lunch. But that's all I seem to have time for. Sometimes, I don't even finish the salad.

Robin's in her room, furiously ironing, door open and stupid pop music blasting—New Kids on the Block or whatever that new one is, the Kids on the Corner, The Backstreet Boys, whatever. The one so many young female students like: “My favourite bands is SMAP and za Backstreet Boys. Because zey ah cute.” At least it's not because they think the “Boys” are so talented. But just another reason why everyone loves Robin—she's not only perky and fun, something she never is at home, I've noticed, but she likes the same crappy pop music as most of her students do. Maybe they make each other feel safe.

But back to the pants. Normally, I don't care particularly what I wear. I'm not out to impress the students, or my fellow teachers. There's only one male, and the other women seem not to care about work clothes beyond adhering to the dress code in our contracts. And even if I wanted to, there's no way I could compete with the

perfectly matched and perfectly-fitting ensembles of the Japanese staff. Junko's suits, though the lines of the lapels, sleeves and hems are cut with a straight and narrow hand and definitely show she's boss, are nonetheless delicate enough that Audrey Hepburn, had she been an overworked and underpaid school manager, could not have looked any better. Sayuri has probably never been seen in flat shoes—not since cram school at least—and Harumi's scarf, a different one every day, always matches her lipstick and nail polish.

But tonight, Saturday night, I'm heading off to a party after work. And so I feel a little more attention to my appearance is in order; it's one thing to give up all hope when the competition consists of perfectly proportioned Japanese women with unlimited clothing budgets, but maybe I still stand a chance against the large and lumpy *gaijin* girls. It is a good-bye party for a teacher I've never met at one of the two schools in the city. "Come, come, Hannah-san!," Philippa said, urging me to meet her and her roommate and fellow New Zealander, Sunny, there after work. "You should get out of this dumpy town for once and join in the fun. You know, meet a few people." She winked. I've always thought people who wink are kind of odd, to be honest. That wink often represents some kind of private joke just you and the winker are supposed to share. But at least half the time, I'm apparently not in on the joke, and I stand there dazed, wondering what it is I'm supposed to know, and if there's any way I can fake my way through it, or if I should just ask and air the stink of my ignorance. But then I think that it's hardly my fault if I can't understand what people mean by squinting up one of their eyes, smirking sagely, and popping that eye back open, and then perhaps barking a rough sort of laugh. I had a chemistry teacher in high school who used to do just that, actually. He thought I knew about the flagon of whiskey he kept in the bottom drawer of his desk; and though I did know of it, having

seen it one day when he was rummaging for some normal teacherly item, I had no idea his winks and lunch-room non sequiturs about the “elixir of the gods” were in reference to his whisky and not to my carton of skim. My high school was in a town surrounded by dairy farms. What else was I supposed to think?

So, this party: the reason why I’m taking more concern this morning about my attire. I look in the small 8 ½ x 11 mirror I’ve bought and set on the top of my Vista-provided plastic chest of drawers. No. Not this shirt. It is too stiff, too officey. I tear it off and put on a softer blouse of white linen. I’ll have to bring a sweater, it’s getting a little cool even here in the evenings for light fabrics. But I feel a little more party-ready in this than in that blue thing with starched collar and cuffs.

If I don’t leave now, I’m going to miss the damn bus.

The train leaves Sakaide station and clatters eastward into the hills. The name of the next station is announced, the only word in the conductor’s raspy message I can understand. Outside the windows it’s nearly dark, the thinnest wedges of orange sky between the hills to the west. There is no seasonal time change here, not jumping forward in the Spring, no easing back in Autumn in an effort to “save” daylight. The Japanese evidently have no desire to mess with the seasonal alterations in the earth’s tilt. I wonder if it’s because it matters little when daylight occurs, as most of them spend so little time out in it, but instead closed in artificially-lit offices, filtered air suctioned in from the roof, tinted or screened windows cutting off most of the sun’s cheery glare. Whether the sun rises at 5 or at 6 doesn’t matter, I suppose, to a person already at work or commuting to it. But it feels funny to me, somehow, though I know

that if I were back home, the time would've changed and it would've been dark long before now. I glance at my watch. It's twenty past six.

Robin's sitting across from me, riding backwards and oblivious to anything outside the train, or even beyond the tiny screen into which she's peering. On her lunch break today, she dashed across the parking lot to the phone shop and bought a cell phone and some kind of long-distance package, and is now pressing buttons and making the gadget beep and sing and dance and vibrate. I suspect her oblivion towards me is largely constructed, and not purely a result of her being so absorbed in her phone. And I feel fairly sure it's because I insisted we catch the last bus from the mall to downtown, rather than get the staff to call us a cab. From the parking spot just in front of the school, to the intersection of the two main streets, a cab ride costs ¥2,200. About thirty bucks Canadian. I pointed out to Robin that considering the price of drinks in Japan, a number of which we would probably consume later at the bar, we ought to consider the economic rather the convenience factor. She sighed and rolled her eyes, knowing that if I wasn't going to share the cab ride then she'd have to pay the whole sum herself. Apparently even young women without large student loans to pay off have to think about expenses sometimes.

It's fine with me if she doesn't want to talk, actually. She can ignore me the whole ride to Takomitsu. I've got the map to the bar where the party's happening, a map someone drew for Philippa when she was a newby teacher and needed directions to everything spelled out in pictures as well. I roll my eyes out the window at the rainbow lights of the pachinko parlours and "Love" motels.

It didn't take me long to decide that Philippa is my favourite of the teachers at our school. She has that charming New Zealand accent, is about 35, was married for a few years. She's generally pretty vague about the details of the marriage. And of

course, the fact that Philippa and I have the same days off means that we've been able to spend more time together, and so I know her better than anyone else here. But I think the main thing I like about her is her positive energy, a quality markedly lacking in Mel, our so-called supervisor, a pudgy, pale-face adenoidal paper-pusher from the Midwestern USA. But never mind about him—I'll just get angry thinking about the stupid things he's said in the past month, and there's no point in allowing someone else's stupidity to affect my mood. He's not here, now, so why let it affect you, Leighton would say if he were here. And he'd smile in that patient, all-accepting way, and touch my arm and squeeze it, and maybe lean in and give me a kiss.

I am not, however, going to tell Leighton anything. I sent him a letter over two weeks ago, and he hasn't responded yet. I will not write again until he's written back, however long it takes. But maybe I'm expecting too much. Two weeks isn't a long time, really: one week for a letter to get there, another for the reply to reach me. I guess what I was hoping for, though, was that he would have written to me on his own terms, not just in response to a letter I wrote to him. I always feel like the initiator. Of everything except the break-up, that is. I wonder if he even wants to be "friends"—or if that was just the usual dumper's euphemism for "maybe we'll keep in touch the odd time until it's painfully obvious we have nothing in common any more, especially since we haven't had sex for more than a month."

There was, certainly, that: sex.

Even sitting on a lounge chair in the backyard of his rental house flipping through magazines, the cool smoothness of my dress virtually removed every time he glanced over to share something he was reading, or to listen to me read aloud to him. Even walking to work at 5:45 in the morning, dew damp on my sneakers, his hand in mine, mine in his as we arrived at the café's back door. Even hunching on the back

stoop of my semi-basement flat, nudging his knees and thighs as I waited for him to finish his cigarette, or as we shared the occasional one. Watching his deft fingers prepare a meal, tickling strips of peppers as he lined them up to be diced, caressing salad greens as he washed them and dried them and laid them in a bowl, as he undressed squares of bitter chocolate in preparation of a mousse, taking off his glasses so they wouldn't be spattered with warm cream and melted chocolate, his hazel eyes naked with desire. All of it was sex. But there was more to it than that.

I hear Robin sigh. She's looking out the window. "How in the bloomin' heck are we supposed to know where we are?" she complains.

"Does it matter? We won't get there any faster if we know," I say, smiling. She does not smile back. "Anyway, I think we're just over half-way there. Just before the curve in the tracks that brings the train back along the coast, just before the city's outskirts," I say, remembering from day-off trips with Philippa.

Robin sighs again, and goes back to her phone. If she's this much fun at the party, she's sure to make the new friends she's been pining for.

I look out the window again. There is not much to see. The sheet of darkness over the land is almost entire, but for the occasional pin-point perforations of street lamps, or the curtain-shrouded glow from the windows of houses and apartments near the tracks. The highways and roads, pathways of moving headlights. All else, darkness. The train curves towards the coast as I expected it would, and the black, heavy presence of the sea fills in the windows on my left. Far in the distance, the wavering lights of a town on the mainland, Honshu, itself an island. But I'm hardly conscious of the fact I'm living on an island. I could be in the centre of Tokyo and feel no less isolated.

"We're almost there," I tell Robin.

“Oh, right,” she says, not looking up from her phone.

With the map Philippa gave me, a photocopy of one made for her, I manage to get myself and Robin to the bar where the party is. Only once did I overshoot the mark, walking us along the main shopping street a little too far, having to retrace a block or so until I found the right side-street. Ten extra minutes of walking was apparently almost more than Robin could bear; she sighed and dragged her heels and smoked and sighed, never once asking to see the map nor offering to do a better job of orienteering. It’s much easier to criticize leadership than to be a leader, though, isn’t it. I wonder if she bothered to vote in her country’s last election.

On the map, “Lolo Wahine’s” is written in green pen in Philippa’s large, clear hand. Just ahead, about a dozen signs hang from the terraces of the first few floors of a six- or seven-storey building. One of them announces, in *romaji*: “Lolo Wahine’s”. “What does that mean?” I asked Philippa when she gave me the map, “It’s not Japanese, is it?” She replied: “I have no idea,” with that bemused expression she gets on her face when she would laugh if only she weren’t so irritated—usually, by the fact there’s something she doesn’t yet know about this country. I’m starting to know that feeling well.

Robin lags behind, as though she doesn’t want us to be seen arriving together. Suit yourself, I think, and begin climbing the stairs to the second floor. “Hey, Robin, how’s it going?” bellows a large forty-something *gaijin* man as I pass. ‘Hey Robin’? How does this guy know her? Apparently on her own days off, she’s got her a life after all. Who knew, from the way she’s been sighing and draping herself over the yellow punch-buggy sofa these past few Thursdays and Fridays, there in the mornings when I’d leave for work, and still there late in the evenings when I’d return, as though she’d not budged all day. Except, hopefully, to go outside for a cigarette, rather than

slide the back door open and hope the draft were enough to clear the smoke before I got home. Laundry hanging on the cord, shirts and pants strung between the curtain rod and the coat closet the only indication she'd moved all day. But apparently in between loads of laundry, she'd managed to find time to meet a few people after all. That she hasn't told me somehow irritates me, that she'd prefer to ply me for pity by pretending she's all alone and friendless.

There's a crowd on the second-floor terrace, people crammed into the stairwell and snaking along the cement balcony towards a door that is dark and obviously not open for business. At the top of the first set of stairs is a brightly-lit, wide-open door, above it another sign stating "Lolo Wahine's" in blocky letters painted in yellow and sky-blue on an old surfboard. I don't recognize any of the dozen or so *gaijin* hanging around outside the door. I smile and push my way through, smile and say excuse me, smile and hold my breath.

"Hannah-san!" I hear Philippa. I can't see her. "Over here, at the bar!" She waves and I spot her, though she's backlit and her face in shadow.

"Hey!" she says as I join her at the bar. It's also an old surfboard, embellished with old driftwood sanded down to a flat surface. "So, you found it! And you didn't arrive much later than Sunny and I," she says, checking her watch.

"No?" I say, surprised. "It seemed like it was taking forever." I roll my eyes.

"Ah-hah," Philippa says, "and where is that roommate of yours?"

"She was just behind me, outside, but must have stopped to chat with this big guy who reeked of smoke and booze. They seemed to know each other."

"Must be Winston. Older? Porn-stache?"

I laugh. "Yep. Loud, too, did I mention."

"Winston, all right. I'm sure you'll meet him eventually, though I would

recommend delaying that eventuality as long as possible.”

“Oh? Aside from the boozey, smokey odor and the volume of his voice, has he got other flaws?”

“Let’s just say he’s got a way about him. A way that women would best avoid.” Philippa makes her bemused-and-disgusted face. “He’s a lifer,” she adds. By now I’ve learned what this means: the particular variety of *gaijin* who has found a niche in Japan, often due to some quirk of personality that didn’t permit him to fit in, succeed, or otherwise make it back home. But somehow, in Japan, this quirk is tolerated—to some degree, at least, as most Japanese wouldn’t know the difference between a foreigner’s quirk and what might constitute normal behaviour—though the more of us that come here, the more I imagine they’re learning. “Lifers” stay for years, extending what was first understood as a one-year escape into several, adding one year, and then another, and another. Until returning becomes almost impossible.

“What’ll you have?” Philippa asks. “First one’s on me.”

“What are you having?” I ask, peering at her glass.

“Gin & Tonic,” she says, “though here they leave out the ‘and’.”

“Sounds good,” I say.

“Oy, Junya-san! ‘*Jeen-toe-nee-koo futatsu o-kudasai*,’” she hollers good-naturedly at the bartender.

“*Kahmeengu rah-eet aah-pu*,” says the bartender, smiling. It takes me a couple of seconds for the words to mean anything, and then I suddenly realize he’s said ‘Coming right up,’ in English. Perhaps I can blame it on his lovely smile, his tousled dark hair, rounded dark eyes. Very cute. But about half a foot shorter than I am, and probably several years younger. He’d never be interested.

Leighton was an inch or two shorter than I am. That didn’t seem to matter to

either of us, least of all in bed. But even as I'm thinking this, an image, a feeling, intrudes, of seeing him at the airport when he picked me up for my deliberately-extended layover before my final departure to Japan. I approached the sliding glass doors between the corridor from the plane and the domestic arrivals waiting area, scanning the crowd for his spectacled face. I couldn't see him, at first—several large women in bright saris waving and crying were at the front lines of the army of family members battling for a first glimpse of loved ones. And then, there he was, wearing a small white t-shirt and grey chinos, the t-shirt making him look even more boyish, lean academic arms bent at the elbow, hands burrowed into his pockets—containing marbles? Frogs? String?—his recently-trimmed hair shorter than I'd ever seen it and contributing to the overall effect that he'd been an extra in *Stand By Me*. Oh, that's right, he *is* younger, I'd thought, even if only by four years. I *am* older. And taller. And probably heavier. And I'd felt the weight not only of my body, but of the curious glances of the regimen of sari-clothed mamas as they watched me take my lover in my arms, arms that were longer and heavier than his. He commented later on the expression that he saw in my face: he'd thought I was going to tell him it was over then. Which is funny, all things considered. What we had over the summer seemed somehow decontextualized, there in the airport lounge with a thousand strangers and dusty plants and luggage trolleys. But I ignored this, and allowed myself to be embraced, and to be ushered into a cab and kissed and petted all the way downtown to his attic apartment, where we fucked madly for two hours and then napped. I woke up to find him quickly closing an email and turning off his computer. On his face was an expression I can still only describe as guilty. He apologized for getting up before me, and said he hoped he hadn't wakened me by turning on the computer. No, don't be silly, I said, then wanting to assume that was the cause of the expression. It was

fleeting, as such expressions are, and he was beside me again, and kissing me, and telling me about where he'd planned to take me for dinner, and what he'd do to me again when we got back, and that he was so happy I'd be there a full week. But there was something in that look that I can't forget, because there was something in it that can't be fully explained by merely turning on a computer while someone's sleeping the deep sleep of the sexually satisfied. I still hope it has nothing to do with something he said later, about how an ex- had recently gotten in touch with him by email, and that they'd been corresponding for a couple of weeks. He'd thought he'd never hear from her again, he said. And I wondered, just for an instant, before his kisses again destroyed my capacity to make further deductions.

I watch the bartender's fingers as they pinch wedges of lime on the rims of two tall glasses. His fingers are like Leighton's.

"Bottoms up, Philly," says a sleepy-looking blue-eyed guy with long wavy blond hair, in an Australian accent.

"Cheers, Craig," says Philippa, then turns to me and raises her glass.

"*Kampai!*" she says to me.

"*Kampai,*" I say back. Leighton taught me the Japanese toast in the summer, over one of our many sushi dinners.

"Hey, *Junya*, I'll have another *Asahi* when you get the chance," says this blond Craig guy.

"*Hai, Ku-rey-gu-san,*" says the bartender, whose name is apparently Junior. I wonder if it's a nickname the teachers have bestowed upon him. It's kind of pejorative. I wonder if "Junior" knows what his nickname means in English.

"Hi, you must be one of the new teachers," says Craig. "I'm Craig, Takomitsu Yu-Mi Town Vista, at your service. You'll be paying us a visit next month for your

Kids' Training." He smiles and winks one of his blue eyes. Another winker. Maybe it's a habit even more prevalent in the Antipodes than in North America or Britain.

"Hi, I'm Hannah. Same school as Philippa. Um, as you probably know," I say, feeling like a bit of an idiot. He's not really my type, though good-looking—the kind of good looks that are maybe just a little too pretty for a boy, but that nonetheless make me feel a little tongue-tied. "Will you be giving the Kids' Training?" I ask, and take a confidence-inducing sip of my drink.

"Oh, no, not me. That privilege will be Johanna's. But don't worry, she's nice. She'll make it easy for ya." He winks again and takes a swig of his beer. Tendrils of hair fall from his tightly-t-shirted shoulders. "So, what do ya think of the bar?"

"Yeah, it's nice. I haven't really seen much of it yet, though." I drink about half of my 'gin-tonic.'

"Well, let's remedy that pronto," says Philippa, and grabs my arm. "Let's get you introduced to a few more people before we have to dash off and catch the last train." She pulls me through a crowd of *gaijin* and a few astonished-looking Japanese. "Melinda! There you are!" Philippa stops at a large table near the back of the bar, where a wholesome-faced young woman has been waving and smiling at us.

"Hey, Philly! Long time no see!" Melinda gets up and hugs Philippa, then drags a couple of chairs from another table without asking whether they were occupied, and Philippa and I sit down. Another woman is sitting with Melinda. She has long hair and a thin face and looks more than a little tired. She barely summons a smile when Melinda introduces her as Elinor. "She's my replacement part," says Melinda, laughing, "she arrived about a week ago, and just returned from training this morning."

"Did you do training in Tokushima as well?" I ask. Elinor nods. "Where are

you from?”

“Sydney,” she says. “Australia,” she adds.

“Oh, cool. I’ve wanted to go there ever since I did a project on it in grade four,” I say, again feeling stupid. “And you’ve really been here a week?”

“Yep. Eight days, technically. You?”

“It’ll be two months Monday after next.”

“I see. And how is it all going?” Elinor stirs her dark amber drink. The plastic swizzle stick has a surfboard at the end of it.

“It’s funny,” I say, “but I’m starting to feel like I’m seeing different things with each eye.” Elinor looks a bit puzzled and perhaps a bit sorry she asked. “What I mean,” I say, making it up as I go along, “is that on one hand, everything is starting to feel like routine: I have my work schedule, my jogs around the castle in the morning, my boring dinners after work. I know where the supermarket is, I can find a place that sells film for my camera, and with a little work, I can even find what I need at the drugstore. But then on the other hand, I have no idea what I’m doing here or why, and I’ve never felt like a bigger freak in all my life.” I smile.

Elinor gives a little laugh. “Yeah, I guess I know what you mean. That’s kind of how I felt when I was in India.”

“Oh, how long were you there?”

“About six months.”

“Wow. India. It must be so different from here,” I say, feeling really lame again.

“Yep,” says Elinor again. She sips her drink. Maybe she doesn’t want to talk about it.

“And when were you there?”

“About three years ago.” She sips her drink again, glances around the room.

I take the hint. “And what were you doing in Sydney before you came here?”

“Teaching junior high school and trying to maintain my sanity in the face of a pathetically under-funded school system, not to mention malicious gossip concerning my alleged affair with a student’s father.” She offers a half, and very rueful, smile.

“Well, that’s certainly more information than I was expecting,” I say. She smiles, a real one this time. “Welcome to Japan, destination for all *gaijin* running away from some kind of bullshit back home,” I say, and I raise my glass. She lifts hers, and we drink.

“Actually, I’ll second that,” she says, raising her glass again, and again we drink. We put our glasses down and laugh at the same instant.

“So, what are you running away from?” she asks.

“An uncertain future and a huge student debt,” I say. “And, stupidly, the love of my life.”

“Ha,” says Elinor, taking another sip. “How long were you together?”

“Well, about three and a half months.”

“Yeah, well, another two and a bit, and you would have been on the rocks, just like my drink. Better to have left it when it was going well. It’ll give you nicer memories for the long run.” She raises her glass and her eyebrow.

“Mmm,” I say, not wanting to acknowledge that possibility, in spite of the fact that my past experience, prior to Leighton—limited though it might have been in some ways—had shown that to be generally true. “Maybe. But nonetheless.”

“Nonetheless, it’s still painful.”

“Yep,” I say, pronouncing it like she does without intending to.

“Just you wait, you’ll meet a nice Japanese boy and you’ll forget all about old

whatsisname,” Elinor smiles.

“Leighton. His name was Leighton,” I say quietly, just as Philippa reappears at my elbow.

“How’s it going, ladies? Who needs another drink?” Phillipa asks.

“Yeah, could do,” says Elinor, swirling the small, slippery bits of ice remaining in her glass.

“Yeah, but let me get this one,” I say. “Another ‘*jeen-toe-nee-koo*’ for you, Philippa? Elinor?”

“Oh, whisky and soda. Thanks very much.”

I grab my wallet and make my way through the by-now rather drunken *gaijin* filling the bar. The surf music seems louder now, and for the first time I notice a large-screen tv hanging from the ceiling in the corner of the room, showing footage of surfing competitions. The waves are huge. Colossal. Skinny wet-suited boys cling to wafer-thin boards with their toes, resembling some species of amphibian swept a little too far out of its natural habitat. I get in line at the end of the bar behind three or four others waving *ichi-man-en* bills. In Canadian dollars, that would be about a hundred and twenty bucks, certainly more than I’ve got on me at the moment. Seeing it’ll be a while before I’m served, Junior the only bartender, I turn around and scan the crowd. Sunny is standing with a woman I don’t recognize, with long grey and black hair. Robin has made it inside, and is chatting with a young guy in a suit at least two sizes too big for him. And then I see Craig of the wavy blond locks talking to a guy just a little bit shorter, with brown hair cut to his jaw, and a face less perfect and ‘pretty’ but somehow more intriguing. Longer nose, smaller eyes, a gap between two of his teeth that shows when he laughs at something Craig says. He doesn’t laugh long, and there’s a look on his face that I can’t describe. Something reckless, or as though

hiding something hurt.

“Hey, you’re next,” says the big loud guy who knows Robin. If he reeked of booze before, now he’s a walking advertisement for rehab. Barely walking. I can tell he’s seeing about three of me. He grabs my elbow and pushes me closer to the bar.

“Hurry up and order.”

“Nice to meet you too,” I say under my breath, pulling my arm away from him and trying not to breathe too deeply.

“*Hai!*” says Junior. He is cute. His hair looks soft. He’s wearing a big cotton shirt with some tiki pattern on it in turquoise, white, beige and yellow.

“Um, yes, two ‘*jeen-toe-nee-koos*,’” I say, trying my best to imitate Philippa’s pronunciation, holding up two fingers, “and, um, one whisky and soda,” I say holding up one finger on the other hand. I smile, feel my face blush, but is it out of embarrassment that I can’t order in Japanese, or because Junior is cute? I vaguely remember the counting words Philippa used, but they don’t come to mind precisely enough now, when I need them. I glance over my shoulder, looking to see if she’s close by; three drinks will be awkward to carry back to the table by myself. But she’s disappeared. Elinor is on the other side of the room, talking to someone I can’t see, who must be sitting down and is obscured by a tired-looking man and woman still in their work clothes (or so I assume: she’s dressed pretty much as I am, and he’s wearing a pin-stripe suit). Then the someone Elinor is talking to stands up, and I feel a funny lurch when I see it’s Craig’s shorter friend. He leans in to say something right into Elinor’s ear, close enough, I imagine, to feel her hair against his face, close enough to smell her herbal shampoo, her spicy perfume, the bittersweet funk of her earwax, if she’s not bothered to clean her ears out lately. She smiles, shakes her head, and he smiles and shrugs and walks away.

“*Hai, ‘jeen-toe-nee-koo’ futatsu, ‘wee-soo-kee-so-da’ hitotsu,*” says Junior.

“*Arigato,*” I say, and suddenly remember a phrase from the tape I listened to all summer: “*Ikura desu ka?*”

“*San-sen-roppyaku-en desu, onegai shimasu,*” says Junior, smiling.

I have to think for a minute how much that is. Thirteen plus six—nineteen, in total—meaning, I suppose, one thousand, nine hundred yen—and I start to count out the bills, thinking it’s odd the gin-tonics are a bit more than the whisky soda. Must be the slice of lime Junior so dexterously places on the edge of the glass.

“No, no, that won’t be enough,” says Loud Guy at my elbow, and another gust of fermented breath passes over me. “He said *three* thousand *six* hundred yen.”

Junior nods. “*So desu, ne.*”

“Oh, sorry.” I hand over two more thousand-yen bills. Unless someone else buys me a drink, that’s it for me. I’ve got no more cash, and the banks and ATMs would be closed by now, even if I were inclined to rush out and withdraw more of my precious first pay cheque. Twelve hundred yen per drink, that’s about fifteen, sixteen dollars Canadian. I breathe deeply—but not too deeply, Loud Guy is still at my elbow—and smile at Junior. He gives me four hundred-yen coins in return.

“*Arigato gozaimasu,*” says Junior, nodding once. “Sank you.”

I smile and blush and nod back at Junior. “Are we supposed to tip?” I dare to ask Loud Guy.

“Nope. That’s why the price is inflated.”

“Oh. Well, that’s so much, at least.”

He grunts, then hollers his order at Junior, who is still smiling impassively.

I place the three glasses in a triangle formation, wrap my fingers around them and hope I can get them to their destinations before the condensation gets too

slippery. Elinor is where she was a moment before, and now Philippa and Craig are with her. It's so crowded, I really begin to have my doubts I'll make it over there with all three drinks intact. Another elbow nudge, and I feel cold gin slip over my fingers. A rear bump, and some whisky slops into the gin.

"Need a hand with those?" says a voice beside me. Before I look, I know whose it is. It suits him perfectly, throaty but mellow.

"That would be great," I say, trying not to bat my eyelashes as I turn to look into eyes that are pale blue and ever so slightly squinty. He smiles and takes the whisky. It's at the front, but I wonder if he knows what she's been drinking. "Thanks, I was really afraid I was going to drop one," I say, wondering if it had come to that, which one I would have let go first. Probably the whisky.

"So, you are Hannah and you come from Canada," says Craig's friend.

"Yes, that's right." I'm now self-conscious of my prissy linen blouse and billowing pants. And the fact that I must be at least three inches taller than he is.

"Yep. Not too many secrets in this bunch of luses." He has a dimple at the corner of his mouth when he smiles that way. I turn my head forward again.

"Well, there are evidently a few secrets left."

"Oh, yeah? Such as?"

"Well, such as, I don't yet know your name."

"Well, that's no secret. Ask anyone."

"Everyone here knows you?" I say. "But, I'm not asking everyone—I'm asking you."

He smiles that smile again, but straight ahead, not at me. "It's Russ."

"Hi Russ. Lovely to meet you. Or have you rescue me, or rather rescue one of the drinks."

"No worries," he says. It sounds like "na-ow warries". He must be Australian as well. But I don't ask because we've reached Elinor and Philippa.

"Ooh, ta," says Elinor as Russ hands her the whisky soda. Maybe she asked him get it from me, and that's how he knew to take it. I look to see if their hands touch as she takes it. Just barely, but no special look passes between them. But once she's taken the drink and looked back at Philippa, I think he passes his eyes over her torso, from shoulders and red tank top, to hips well-wrapped in dark blue denim.

"Well, *kampai* once again," says Philippa. "Oh, Russ, where's your drink?"

"Dunno. I left it on a table somewhere a while ago. I'm sure someone else's finished it by now."

"Probably Winston," says Elinor.

"Who's he?" I ask.

"You know, that big guy," says Philippa.

"Big Loud Guy?" I ask.

"My roommate," says Russ.

"And Craig's," says Elinor.

"Well, Craig's my roommate, too, really."

"Well, aren't we technical," says Elinor, laughing.

"Well, it's true. We're talking about me, aren't we; and Craig's not here, so there again we're not talking about him, we're talking about me, because I am here. Right?" Russ smiles at Elinor, that dimple showing.

"Fine, have it your way, we're talking about you," she laughs.

"Oh, would you two look at yourselves," says Philippa, "and anyway, we were actually talking about Winston. Though to be honest, I'd rather that line of conversation came to an end as well."

“Here, here,” says Elinor and takes a drink.

“Perhaps I will take my leave of you ladies and go in search of another drink,” says Russ, nodding.

“Right, see you later,” says Elinor, laughing again. “Isn’t he funny. I just met him today, but I feel like I’ve known him years.”

“Yes,” says Philippa. It sounds like ‘yiss’, “He can be funny, alright.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing more than what it sounds like. He’s funny. Humorous.”

“And?” Elinor presses.

“Nothing. Just that...”

“What?”

“He’s not always so...well, he’s funny on the outside, and...”

“A bit sad and messed up on the inside,” I say.

“Yes, that’s sort of it,” says Philippa.

Elinor looks at me. “Just a feeling I had when I first saw him across the room,” I explain. “I don’t know why really, just an expression I caught on his face as he was talking to Craig.”

“Oh.” Elinor looks a bit irritated, or maybe disappointed.

“Yeah, he has his moments...” Philippa says, “For example, last winter sometime—and this is common knowledge now, it’s not like I’m revealing any secrets, here” she says, and I think of what Russ said to me as we were carrying the drinks, “I think it was the beginning of February, Russ disappeared for a couple of days. He didn’t tell anyone where he went. Craig looked for him everywhere, all their usual haunts, and was about to call the police and report him officially missing, but then he showed up here, and Junior”—Philippa says it with that cute accent too,

'joon-ya'”—called Craig. He came down and asked him what the hell he thought he was doing, and so on. Russ basically just said that he gets like that sometimes, but he was very sorry and he would make up for lost work time—he'd only missed two days of work, but Craig had to make excuses, call head office, work overtime one of the days to cover for him. To make up for that, Russ said he'd work as much overtime as he could and do shift-swaps for anyone who'd had to cover for him. 'Well, that pretty much puts you in my debt for the next month, then,' Craig said. After that, Russ seemed to be pretty much okay for a while, though Craig could tell he wasn't quite the way he was before, during his first six months. But he could never get out of Russ what had sent him AWOL like that. Craig assumed it had something to do with family back home, or maybe a girl, but no matter how subtle he tried to be, or how overt either, Russ was mum."

"Hmm," says Elinor. "And since then, has he run off?"

"No. Well, he took a last-minute vacation in Thailand last month, but with another teacher, and had to call in 'sick' one of the days because he couldn't find anyone to shift-swap with him. But other than that, no."

"Hmm," says Elinor again. "Funny." She downs the remains of her whisky soda, swirls the ice. I wonder if she's thinking, like I am, whether that other teacher was male or female.

"Yeah, funny. Like I said," says Philippa.

"Another drink, then?" Elinor sets her glass down on a ledge made of old wood. "On me, this time?"

"Oh, thanks, but I don't know," I say. I can feel the two I've had already. No dinner, dehydration and drink: the perfect Saturday night ménage-a-trois. If only I weren't working at 10:00 tomorrow morning.

“Oh, come on,” says Philippa, “have another. There’s an hour to go before the last train. Just enough time for last call, followed by a mad and slightly unsteady dash to the station.”

“Well, alright. Sure, why not.”

After Elinor has gone off for the drinks, Philippa says, “She seems nice, doesn’t she. Yet another Australian to disprove my theory that all Australians are either stuck-up bitches or useless wankers.” She laughs.

“Isn’t that a bit harsh?”

“Well, there’s a bit of a rivalry between our two nations. Probably not so different from the one that I’ve heard exists between yours and America.”

“The United States, you mean. ‘America’ refers to the entirety of the two continents, North and South. Or at least it should.”

“See what I mean?” she laughs again.

“But I don’t necessarily think ALL Americans are—”

“Mmm, so you’ve never said, not once in your life, ‘Americans are blankity-blank’? Or, ‘Those Americans are so bleepin’ bleep’? Or...?”

“Well, okay, I couldn’t say that I haven’t, at some time, made a comment along those lines... but at the same time, I know that when I say that, that I’m generalizing and that not all Americans would fall into whatever nasty category I’m talking about at a given moment...”

“Well, there you go. But seriously, meeting Elinor and Russ and Craig has given me hope. Which I seriously need after having Eileen as a roommate.” Eileen was one of Philippa’s favourite subjects when I first arrived; Eileen had just left, gone back to Melbourne, and left quite a mess both literally, in their apartment, and emotionally, in terms of how she had treated people. Philippa kvetched about it for a

couple of weeks, but then when it seemed clear that Vista wasn't immediately going to send a new roommate, she and Sunny relaxed into a different pace and she more or less forgot about Eileen.

Elinor returns with the drinks, and promptly leaves again. Philippa raises her eyebrow, and says, "Maybe I was too hopeful."

"I wouldn't take it personally. It's a party, people are supposed to mingle."

"Yes, I suppose you're right. Well, how was your day, then? Did Our Illustrious Leader make any gaffs after Sunny and I left?"

She's referring to Mel, our supervisor, who prefers sitting on his ass in the teacher's room reading the newspaper to doing anything that might be called work. She has lost all respect for him, the moniker nothing but ironic.

"Ah, what did he say," I think back, "he told staff that either you or I could fill in for him if one of his TOEIC students booked a lesson on his days off. I told him I would prefer to have the training for it first, and he just laughed. 'Training' he said, 'you don't need training. I'll show you what to do tonight after work.' And I told him I had to leave right after work because of the party, and that anyway I'd still rather wait for the training. And that Sayuri told me Kids' Training was a priority, and that was scheduled for next month. He just rolled his eyes and turned the page of his newspaper."

"Why, that idiot. I've already told him I don't know how many times that I want TOEIC training, and he's said that there wasn't any need for another teacher to have those skills. And now he's suddenly all keen for it, probably because he's getting bored and wants to have more time to sit and read his bloody paper. I ought to write to the Area Manager and tell him what's really going on around here."

Part of me likes Philippa's militant streak, and part of me feels she's getting

all bent out of shape about nothing. This is about the third time she's said she ought to call the Area Manager about some lapse in the AT's supervising skills. Nothing came of her previous efforts, and I can't help but wonder if she really believes anything will change this time either.

"Oh my god, what time is it?" Philippa digs in her jeans pocket for her watch. I take another sip of my gin-tonic. "We have about twenty-five minutes before the last train. We should start rounding up the troops," she says. "I'll get Sunny organized, you find Robin and see if she's coming. Why don't we meet just outside on the terrace in five."

"Sure," I say, thinking there's nothing I'd rather do less than hunt Robin down. But I begin to make a circuit of the bar, peering around heads and bodies and chairs and bags to see if she's sitting with anyone. I check the washroom, but there's just one small blonde woman in there, leaning over the sink and looking rather like a gasoline puddle under the fluorescent lights. "Have you seen a young woman, 21 or so, with short brown hair, glasses, and a tiny little nose come in here? She was wearing a blue shirt and grey pants, I think. Has a British accent." The blond shakes her head, then leans back over the sink as though the motion had induced a fresh wave of nausea. "Right, thanks," I say and hurry out. I almost run smack into Winston, an "argh" of surprise escaping my constricted throat. His eyes are bloodshot and viscous, look as though they've just been taken out of a jar of formaldehyde and pushed sloppily into his sockets. "I mean, hi. So, thanks for the tip about the money, there, earlier," I tell him. He says nothing. Maybe he's breathing too hard to speak, from the exertion of walking on level terrain after smoking more than a pack of cigarettes in the past couple hours, not to mention carrying around all that weight. "So, anyway, do you remember this young woman...named Robin...I think you spoke to her at the

beginning of the evening? When she and I first arrived?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure," he drawls, "cute little pipsqueak. Yeah, I bummed a smoke off her."

"Yeah, well, anyway, have you seen her recently? Like in the past half hour or so?"

"You looking for her?"

I pause. "Uh, yeah. She's my roommate, and I was just wondering if she wanted to grab the last train with us, or find somewhere to crash in town for the night." I can't honestly imagine her doing the latter.

"Uh, no. No, haven't seen her. Not since that smoke. But if you see her, why don't you tell her she's welcome to crash at our place if she wants."

"Right. Okay, thanks," I say.

"You know, maybe it's just the light, but your blouse is kinda see-through," he says, staring at my chest.

"Mmm, thanks for the fashion tip," I say, crossing my arms and turning away, "see you."

"And I see you, too," he says, and lurches into the men's room.

Jesus. I guess Philippa wasn't joking. Who else was Robin talking to? There was that youngster in the too-big suit, but I don't see him anywhere either. It's hard to see anything, really, there's so much smoke wafting through the bar. I decide to just grab my bag and sweater and head for the door. The first table Philippa and I joined, where Melinda and Elinor were sitting, is now occupied by Craig, Russ, Elinor and a guy I've never met. My sweater and bag, as luck would have it, are draped over the arm of the chair Russ is in.

"Sorry to interrupt, but I left my bag and sweater on one of these chairs," I

say. "Um, I think it's just there," I point behind Russ.

"Oh, this?" he says, and grabs them.

"Yeah, thanks," I say, reaching out as he stands up and hands them to me. He gives me a cursory glance and sits back down.

"Are you off, then?" asks Elinor.

"Yeah, got to catch the last train. Work tomorrow."

"Too bad. If you weren't working, you could stay at my place for the night. Or the morning, depending on how late we ended up out." She laughs.

"Thanks, nice of you to offer. Maybe next time."

"Absolutely. Well, see you," she says.

Craig looks up and smiles and says, "Bye, nice meeting you."

"Yes, you too," I say. Russ says nothing, looks into his drink and looks at Craig. He taps Craig on the arm and leans in a bit to speak, just as I sling my bag over my shoulder and take my leave. Well. Whatever to you, too.

Philippa and Sunny are outside on the terrace, but no Robin.

"You didn't see her either?" I ask.

"Nope. Someone said she might have already left." Philippa says.

"Huh. Well she might have told one of us she wasn't planning on staying."

"Well, let's go," says Sunny. "If we miss the train, taking a cab back is just not an option. Never mind that all of us have probably spent every last cent on drink."

"Make that every last paltry yen," says Philippa. We laugh, but without much sincerity.

All the shops in the arcade have been carefully barricaded by metal doors, bars or screens. It's a wind tunnel, chill and damp. Litter scuttles along the tile floors of the halls, cello-foil wrappers and paper cups and the green plastic grass from sushi

bento boxes, receipts and plastic bags from convenience stores, and pink pom-poms from some schoolgirl's socks or ponytail elastic. The ephemera of a busy Saturday in a small Japanese city.

The train arrives two minutes after we do, pulling slowly towards the station and letting out a handful of weary businessmen. There are a few other young partiers on the platform, but the three of us end up with a train car to ourselves.

"Don't let me fall asleep," says Sunny, collapsing onto one of the maroon velvet double seats.

Instead, we're all rather giddy and lively on the way back. Perhaps it's because we're alone on the train car, no one around to pass judgement on us, or that we're still a bit drunk and more than a bit tired, and we've managed to have what might pass for a fun evening if we don't think about it too hard.

"What if we left poor Robin in the washroom, or passed out somewhere under a table?" says Philippa.

"I doubt it—and I did check the washroom just before I went outside," I tell her. "I ran into Big Loud Guy," I add.

"Bad luck," says Philippa. "Did you ask how it is that he and Robin are acquainted?"

"Nope. All he said was he bummed a smoke from her and hadn't seen her since."

"What if he's lying to hide the fact that they have some kind of rendezvous later on?" says Sunny sleepily.

"I think she'd be the one to hide that. He'd probably like to let everybody know," I say, "and besides, he was in no condition for a rendezvous with anything besides, well, the toilet and then a nap on the nearest hoseable surface."

“Ewww,” says Sunny, wrinkling her nose.

“Oh, he is rather vile, isn’t he,” says Philippa. “You stay away from him, Hannah. He’s not a nice man. To be honest with you, I don’t know how the people in Takomitsu tolerate some of his shit.”

Do I want to hear about this? All it will take is an indifferent “Oh yeah?” and I know she’ll talk. Maybe I’m making Philippa out to be some kind of gossip, but I don’t think she is. Or means to be. She doesn’t gossip about everyone, only people whom she considers have done something amiss, suspect, or downright reprehensible. But I guess most gossip begins with judging another’s behaviour and validating that judgment by getting a second person to agree.

“Oh yeah?” I say. “What’s he ever done besides drink and smoke too much and make lecherous comments? In other words, behave like pretty much any guy at any bar I’ve ever been to late at night?”

“Oh, has he already started that on you?” Sunny asks. “Usually he’ll wait ’til the second or third party before he thinks he stands a chance. Maybe he’s getting more desperate.”

“Thanks a lot,” I say, laughing.

“No, I mean, he’s desperate enough that he can’t even censor himself when he first meets a new girl. You know.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I say. “I think it was because he was exceptionally drunk. He probably won’t even remember what he said.”

“No, you can be sure of that,” says Philippa. “Well, you can count yourself lucky that you weren’t more drunk yourself.”

“Well, it’s unlikely I’ll ever be much more drunk than this the whole time I’m here, considering the price of drinks.”

“Yes, well,” Philippa says, with a wave of her hand, “you can buy cheap alcohol in the supermarkets, and the ma and pa corner liquor shops. Parties at home can find you stone drunk and passed out in the corner with someone’s fat, greasy paws up your skirt.”

I look at her for a second. “Do you mean...? Whose skirt? Another teacher?”

“No, actually, a former student. Twenty-one years old, thrilled to be invited to a *gaijin* party. He never would’ve tried something like that on a Western woman.”

Philippa crosses her arms over her chest, scowling.

“Has he done something like that often?”

“No, just the once. Or at least that’s all we’ve witnessed.” Philippa exhales a disgusted breath.

“We’ve all done things we’re not proud of after a night of hard boozing,” says Sunny. “I reckon he learned his lesson after that one.”

“I wouldn’t put money on it,” Philippa says. “But never mind. Anyway, we’re almost home.”

Home. Machigoma. My little two storey apartment. My sulky roommate. I do feel a little stab of panic that maybe she’s not made it back home after all, but is wandering the shopping arcade smoking and feeling tragic and friendless. Blaming me for my un-Christian behaviour, that I didn’t go chasing after her the second she disappeared from the bar, to beg her to stay or at least to hand her the map and tell her to have a safe trip back. But she probably would have said, “oh, thanks very much but I don’t need your map, I’ll be alright,” and then have gotten lost and been able to revel in martyrdom. Now who’s being judgmental, I tell myself, and she’s not done anything nearly as bad as Winston. I sigh and stand as the unseen conductor announces our stop, “*Machigoma, Machigoma desu.*”

Sunny and Philippa turn right and head towards their house, and I continue up the main street alone. There is absolutely no one out, no one walking or riding a bicycle along the sidewalk or the road. The red lanterns still glow outside the little *yakitori* joint, the teenage counter attendants at the Mini-Stop convenience store still lit by fluorescent lights. But other than that, I could be the sole survivor of a zombie movie, fleeing home before the zombies regroup and find me too.

Taking the shortcut through the neighbour's arched trellis—nothing's growing on it this time of year—I see that Robin's light is on. So she did get home. Fine. I unlock the door and keep it from falling shut with a heavy bang, as it does on its own. I tiptoe across the cool, dark *genkan* floor, slide the kitchen door open, flip on the lights: no cockroaches, thank god. A wonder, though, for the kitchen smells of old vegetables and the heavy sick-sweet of meat beginning to go off. It's not my turn to take out the garbage. I shut the light off and make my way through the living room in the dark, around the corner to my right and up the cool, dark stairs. My room still smells of dried rice grass, though I don't think it's as strong as before. Or maybe I'm just getting used to it.

My foot brushes something as I step across the wooden threshold. Something scuttles dryly across the *tatami*, stops. I lift my feet higher as I walk towards the centre of the room to reach for the pull string of the overhead light. I blink in the sudden white-green glow, and turn to see what I almost stepped on. Near the door is an envelope, soft beige with a black pattern around the edges, and kicked towards my futon, a post card. Robin must have taken in the mail—I forget that it is delivered on Saturdays here—and set mine just inside my door, as she sometimes does. The picture on the postcard is of the Sahara Desert, two men astride camels and draped in fabric, the words "Greetings from Toronto" in white along the bottom. I turn it over quickly,

thinking it might be from Leighton, but immediately recognize my mother's thin, slanted hand. She tells me she and Dad were passing through on their way to visit my uncle, Dad's brother, and she saw this post card and thought it was funny, and she hopes things are going well for me. Evidently, she doesn't realize there are other postcards out there, identical but for one word: "Greetings from Vancouver", "Greetings from Halifax," and so on. The letter, then. It's face down, but when I bend over to pick it up I see Leighton's address written on the flap, his large, awkward script restrained to fit in the small space provided by the Art Deco frame. I shred the end of it and tug on the pages within.

"Dear Hannah," it says, the pages also beige with black Art Deco border, "I received your letter a while ago, and have just been too busy with my new classes and settling into the new apartment and neighbourhood to respond as I've wanted to, and as your fine letter merits."

Content aside, I feel like I've just gotten a missive from a tweedy, bespectacled relative, rather than a letter from a recent ex-lover. This sounds nothing like the Leighton whose voice is so familiar, so warm and down-to-earth, sometimes teasing, sometimes heavy with desire. This is nothing like his tone. Though he's very well-spoken and rarely uses slang except in particular contexts, he doesn't normally sound like he's just stepped out of a BBC mini-series based on a 19th century novel.

"Classes continue to be very exciting, and I have to say that it is a pleasant change from the summer's relaxed pace, intellectually speaking."

Is he referring to the fact that he spent most of the summer with me, rather than studying? Does he think I contributed to the intellectual slowness of his summer? Is he suggesting he thinks I'm not as smart as he is? Not the first time I've wondered this, as he once made a comment about my program of study not being as rigorous or

challenging as his. Of course it's not, I replied, Education is meant to have a practical aspect, whereas Philosophy and English Literature can be as self-indulgently intellectual as a person would like them to be. I wanted to tell him I could have studied either of his majors, and though I might not have done quite as well as he did—when we graduated, he won a huge, prestigious fellowship—but I would have done well enough. And that I wondered if he didn't believe me capable of becoming anything more than a dull teacher. But that would have sounded defensive. So I'd explained I was choosing to be a teacher, because I wanted to do something useful with my life. I'd already spent a couple of wasted, self-indulgent years studying literature—not the exact words I used to describe it to him—and it was time, I felt, to do something that would not only provide me with a secure income, but would contribute more concretely, perhaps lastingly, to society. Or so my ideals went, and still go, for the most part. But perhaps Leighton is an even bigger intellectual snob than I had previously thought. The difference in our intended careers, and in his perception of my abilities, probably had a lot to do with his wanting to break things off, for once and for all, the day before I left. But I continue reading the letter.

“By this, I don't mean to suggest that the time we spent together contributed to this relaxed intellectual pace, at least not in any negative way. Of course, we did our fair share of relaxing together. Rather, I simply mean I have missed the structure that classes provide my intellectual investigations.”

Well, maybe I'm just a little paranoid. But honestly, who does he think he's writing to? I'm not a member of his seminar class, analyzing his paper critically for flow of argument, for logic. I frown and continue.

“The seminar about the symbolic representations of sexuality in early 18th-century poetry continues to intrigue me the most. I have a paper to deliver week after

next, and so have been spending considerable time in the library researching and reading and so on. The library here, as you know, is spectacular—so much better than the one in Halifax.”

Well, that explained the tone; he was probably eating, sleeping and breathing 18th-century diction. He goes on to mention that he’s been back to the restaurant where we ate lunch every day the week I visited him at the end of August, and how he thinks of me every time he orders the *focaccia* with sun-dried tomatoes and *chèvre*. And that the waitress we had is still there, the one whose perky breasts we admired, and how amazed we were that she could work an entire shift braless, the weather—still hot and humid, 34° even in the shade—certainly not the cause of her mini-marshmallow nipples distending the fabric of her tank top. He was considerably more fascinated by this than I was. And he described a new restaurant he’d been to, and how last weekend he’d gone for a “lengthy stroll” in the Kensington Market and found a kosher cheese shop, where he’d bought some cream cheese, which went perfectly with his morning bagels he always bought at the shop around the corner. And how the downstairs neighbours had had to get rid of the kitten, because it kept escaping and the last time it did, it was hit by a car; not badly injured at all, but it had scared one of the girls and she decided she couldn’t handle the stress of taking care of something, something that could die. I roll my eyes thinking about the two girls. Both were models, supposedly, and did nothing but party, try to find modelling contracts, and play with the cat. Their music was always blasting; fortunately the ceiling/floor between the 2nd and 3rd storey apartments was relatively soundproof. It doesn’t surprise me they’d have to give the cat away. It was badly cared for even with their best of intentions. Leighton told them he’d look after it one evening soon after they got it, when it was still a mewling ball of fur and tiny teeth and claws. We played with

it on his bed one evening, Leighton pinching fleas off the kitten's head and back, petting it until it fell asleep; he tucked a fold of his blanket over the kitten, continuing to stroke its forehead. I remember wondering what he'd be like with a baby, though then I had no intention of ever having one. We'd actually discussed this, once, very early in the affair, before I'd really fallen for him. I'd said I'd rather adopt. Oh, he'd said, are you going to be one of those people who adopt little brown babies from foreign countries? I decided to interpret his tone as teasing, and so I said, yes, maybe I would adopt a 'little brown foreign baby' that had been orphaned, but it might just as easily be a little whatever-coloured baby from Canada. He smiled, as though he felt sorry for me, and said that someday he would like to have children, but they would absolutely have to be his own. Later on, once I was in love, I remember thinking that if we stayed together, trying to keep the relationship going long distance for a year or more, that eventually I would change his mind. Or, that we could adopt one and have one of our own as well. But it seemed like nothing more than passing fancy at that point, the kind of idle thought you have when a proposition is placed in front of you, to consider for the first time, and you have no reason to think it either will or won't happen. It's only when you're told that it's never going to happen that you suddenly find you want nothing more than for it to happen. But there's no point in dwelling, I tell myself, and turn the page.

"All of this small talk is getting me nowhere," his cursive declares, looking a little larger, looser than before. "I have been delaying writing for reasons I would rather not explain, but yet I feel I must explain. All the things I've just written feel like lies, because I know I'm hiding something." My heart trips and falls, rolls and picks up speed, my tongue becomes a sponge, my mouth dry and rigid. "Only when I have told you will these other things have any right to meaning. And so," he writes,

“though I suppose it will be something you don’t want to hear—though perhaps I’m flattering myself too much—I must tell you. Last weekend, my ex-girlfriend, about whom I told you before, came for a visit. She wanted to check out the university, mainly, and she was planning on staying with another friend, so all we’d planned originally was to get together for lunch or a drink or something before she had to head back to Windsor.”

All we’d planned originally, I repeat to myself, All we’d planned originally.

Fuck. Fuck fuck. The little fucker. He doesn’t have to say another word. But I can’t stop myself from reading the rest. Out of morbid curiosity; or pathetically, the possibility that I’m wrong. Please, let me be wrong.

“We did go for a drink, early in the evening that Saturday after she’d met up with another friend and done some shopping. We didn’t go to a bar you and I had gone to, though, so not to worry.”

What’s that supposed to mean, I think, turning another page, why would he think that would reassure me? Why would he need to reassure me? I ask, but I already know, he doesn’t even have to explain, I already know. I should have considered the likelihood three, four weeks ago when I hadn’t heard from him. I already know. And the email secrecy now makes so much sense, I can’t believe I didn’t see it coming, the clouds gathering at the horizon the day he left Halifax. I can’t believe I didn’t see this, but of course I wouldn’t have. I didn’t want to.

“We had two drinks each, that was all, and then I asked if she wanted to come back to my place, just to see it, because she had been asking me about what rents were like in my area, and what kind of apartment it was possible to get for the price. She asked if I had any more alcohol in the apartment, and there was still some of that whisky we bought in August. I’m sorry, but we drank it, not all of it, but we had a

shot or two. And then we ended up in my room, and we made out, and we almost but didn't have sex, and then she stayed overnight. In my bed. We didn't have sex, but almost everything else. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, but I can't NOT tell you. I didn't come, if that's any consolation."

A funny coughing choke issues from in my throat, the sound shatters in the air, I don't know if I'm about to sob or to laugh. He *didn't come*. Oh, well then, it wasn't anything to worry about, no problem. And especially because it wasn't intended, this almost-but-not-sex that he had, well of course he didn't come, then. It's too much. I probably won't tell him, but the only consolation I am taking is that the kind of person who would feel the need to inform me of this is not only insensitive, but immature. I guess it serves me right for getting involved with someone younger. And it serves me right for falling in love. I should know better by now. Why did he have to tell me that, why did he have to include the details? All I needed to know is that he and his ex-spent the night together. What they did is none of my business. Did he tell me this just to hurt me? What could he possibly have been thinking?

"As I believe I told you when you came to visit me, she'd just emailed me out of the blue. We hadn't spoken in more than two years. At first I was suspicious, and sent back only the tersest of replies. She kept writing, though, and getting more and more friendly with each email; I did as well, and we got quite the little banter going."

"Fuck you, Leighton," I say out loud, not caring if Robin can hear me through our thin walls. My hands shake, from the effort of repressing the urge to ball up his stupid letter and throw it out the window, watch it land in the sandy muck of the backyard, and watch and wait until it rains and the ink is blurred and the paper starts to mould and the cockroaches come and masticate the archival fibres of his bourgeois notepaper into oblivion, and watch and wait a little longer, an eternity if I have to, as

the cockroaches choke and die from his words. "Fuck you, Leighton, fuck you and fuck you again," I whisper. "Why this confession? You're not Catholic, but a lapsed Jew with Buddhist inclinations. *Fuck* you, Leighton."

I've never claimed to be a real Buddhist, I can lack compassion and forgiveness as much as I like. Maybe once I've done a meditation retreat in a temple, I'll be able to ignore my base emotional impulses and become a better person, but for now, I will stuff the pages of his letter back into their envelope and entomb it with a curse under a pile of notebooks and magazines in the corner of my room. And I will throw my clothes into a heap in front of my closet, and use my pyjamas to dry my eyes as I put them on, and I will lie down and pretend that if I entomb myself under enough blankets and pillows I'll be invisible, I won't really exist, and therefore I won't feel any pain. I gouge my fingernails into my palm, I press the pillow over my face, I wrap the duvet around myself so I'm like a silkworm in its own tightly-spun cocoon. But nothing makes me go away. I'm still here, and I still know what I know, and he's still done what he's done, and I've still done what I've done. And as upset and hurt as I am, I also feel a sense of relief that obviously, he doesn't know what I've done. And that now we're even. And that I'm crying as much from my own guilt as from how he's made me feel.

Usually we desire what we can't have, and it makes us miserable thinking of the hole in our lives that results from not having, or seeing no means to getting, what we want. Envy, covetousness, desire, a rose by any other name... no matter which religious or philosophical doctrine you follow, it all boils down to the same thing:

misery, suffering. Some call envy a sin, and strive to eliminate it for fear of going to hell when they die; others believe desire must be eliminated to reduce or end their suffering here on earth.

The flipside scenario is rarely named. You might say it's part of the same beast, a part less visible, the function of which is more mysterious—its parallel human body part might be the spleen, or maybe the appendix. The flipside being that, from time to time, we find ourselves wanting not to have something we already have. It's still a want, a desire, yes; but it is not a pining for the absent, an ache of emptiness. Instead, it is more closely tied to regret, this wishing for absence.

In the morning, when I wake up, I have two more things I don't want: the memory of Leighton's news, and a very sore throat and inflamed sinuses. At first I suppose it's only because of the way I'd spent the night—first inhaling a metric ton of second-hand smoke, then giving my tear ducts a good workout—but by the fifth period of teaching, it's clear I am not well. My forehead is hot, but I feel cold to the core. Even Mel looks at me with a modicum of concern, and suggests I take the last period off. The classes can be rearranged, he says, students of different levels can be put together if they have to. I thank him, nasally, and say it'd be much appreciated. He says, naw, don't thank me, I just don't want to catch your cold. And he laughs like he's never heard anything funnier. I smile thinly, but want to gob into his thermos of tea, sneeze all over his Daily Yomiuri crossword puzzle, hack into my hand and then ask to borrow his pen. But I don't. I'm too tired, my fever creeping up and shaking the desire to act out of my brain.

The staff calls me a cab early, and I sink into the back seat, giving my address. The driver mutters something and shakes his head. At the corner where the drivers usually lets all of us off, he doesn't stop, and doesn't turn left, as I expect. Instead, he

waits for the red to change in the centre lane, the one with the straight arrow painted on the asphalt. I try to remember the word for left.

“*Sumimasen*,” I say, “*migi desu. Migi, onegaishimasu*.” I gesture with my hand, just in case I’ve picked the wrong word.

The driver mutters and shakes his head, glances in the rear view mirror, but decides to ignore me when the light turns green. He drives straight through the intersection, past a block of low wooden houses with dark tile roofs, and turns right at the first main street. He’s taking me to Philippa’s and Sunny’s house.

“*Sumimasen*,” I say, “*chotto chigaimasu...*” hesitating to use the word the staff taught me for something that is either wrong or different, depending on the context. “*Kore wa, Jōsei-cho ja nai*.” I realize I’m speaking very informally, and perhaps that’s why he’s not listening; perhaps I’m insulting him and he’s choosing not to hear me. He stops the car in front of Philippa’s and Sunny’s door, their outside light causing the gate to cast a shadow across the car. I can’t believe he brought me here. I’m too stunned to get out, I don’t want to get out, I want him to take me to my address, not leave me here to walk the six blocks back to my place. “*Kore wa, Jōsei-cho ja nai*,” I say again, frustration making me sound angry. If I weren’t sick, it might be funny that he can’t tell the difference between me and Sunny or Philippa, and he thinks from cab rides past—the ones they took together before Robin and I arrived—that this is where I live. There’s no way I can explain, I know, and so I take 2,200 yen from my wallet and hand it to him, not waiting for my 50 yen in change, and get out of the car and slam the door. As I walk away from the house, the driver rolls his window down and says something to me. I can’t hear him, but wouldn’t understand even if I could. I start to walk through the darkened streets, past the phone-booth-sized temple at the corner of two of the narrowest streets I’ve ever seen, incense

wafting up from several thin sticks that light the Buddha icon's face with a pale orange glow, pulling my thin coat around my waist, wanting only to get back into bed and shut out the world again.

Elinor

I'm standing in front of the bathroom sink, have been for a few minutes, in something of a daze. To simply say 'work' is enough explanation for anyone who's ever had this job; for anyone else, the thought of having to explain tires me beyond my ability to string coherent syllables together, and rather than the enthralling activity in which I am currently engaged, I would doubtless end up sitting in the space between the washing machine and the wall, humming, as Renee's sagging nylons and DD bras drip down upon my empty head. The enthralling activity in question is counting the bottles hulking on the corner of counter space at the back of the sink, and in the plastic frame of shelves around the mirror: three fat plastic ones and several, let me see, six little glass ones. There are two wizened bars of soap languishing in the metal dish screwed to the wall, looking as though they've lived through the longest drought the Outback has seen. And somehow there are five toothbrushes in the stand, though it's still just Renee and I living here—though rumour has it they're going to send another live one next month, to keep up with increasing student demand. Melinda must've left her toothbrush behind, but I can't account for the other two, DNA analysis the only means of determining their provenance at this point. And it looks like Melinda left some of her hair behind as well, trailing along the tile towards the shower like snakes in the dirt. My hair is long and light brown, Renee's long and black, these little blonde squiggles could only be Melinda's, though I don't remember her hair being quite so curly, or so blond.

So the bathroom, then, has't been cleaned in over a month, not since Melinda left. I wonder if I ought to suggest to Renee we make up a schedule. I'd forgotten about the petty details of living with roommates—in Sydney I'd not had one since I got a full-time position. Three years is more than enough time to get set in one's ways, and I know I can be a tad particular at best. Funny I'm only noticing all this mess now, after a month. Must've been the newness of everything else, all those lovely distractions that have been making me feel like I'm on some kind of odd vacation, up until this week at least, up until yesterday, really, when after lunch I looked at my schedule and saw that Michiko had written in a change, her neat hand in her favourite purple marker, and that for the third time since last Tuesday I was to teach a one-on-one lesson with Tsugumu. A one-on-one, not—I refuse to comply with Vista rhetoric—a “Man-to-Man” lesson. The first time I saw ‘MxM’ written on the schedule, I crossed it out and put in ‘1x1.’ Reggie raised his eyebrows at me, and Russ teased me for days, and I've only done it twice again, when Russ wasn't working; but the point, I think, was made even if it hasn't gone any farther, hasn't made it to the bureau-bots at Head Office. I do a face at myself in the mirror and put my hair up, turn on the hot water in the shower, which is obviously suffering from neglect as well. My finger, after I run it along the tile, comes away coated in grey, dry-sticky scum.

There's a knock at the front door. I turn off the water, wait. Another knock, sounding hollow and metallic. “Renee? You getting that? I'm in the shower,” I call. Not strictly true, I haven't even undressed yet, and probably she can hear that the water's not running. But at this time of night, there are only about three people I'd want to talk to, and that's probably being optimistic. Besides, it might be the slightly pervy old man from down the hall. Last time he dropped by, I was alone. I opened the

door to see a short, sweaty man with white wicks of hair standing up from his spotted skull. He breathed in deeply before announcing "I have a heart condition". I panicked, thought he was trying to tell me he was having a heart attack, had no idea what to do, but thought I should at least invite him in and make him comfortable if he were going to breathe his last in my vicinity. I had to listen to him repeat it as I led him to the sofa, where I sat him down and went to get a glass of water, wondering if I should call the hospital, was 911 the universal number for emergency? Would they be able to speak English? Would I have to put the old man on the line and hope that he still had enough breath left to explain himself? Why hadn't he called them from his own apartment? Was his wife at the market, buying the catch of the day? Did he have a wife? I sat down on the sofa beside him and held the glass of water up to his lips. He took a sip, said once again "I have a heart condition", and with a lascivious grin patted my knee. "Heh, heh," he said then as I sat, stunned, holding the water. "My English good, ne?" And his hand crept up my thigh, and then I remembered Melinda warning Renee and me to watch out for an older guy in the building with some kind of fetish for Western women, who liked to misuse phrases he'd learned on his weekly NHK English radio show. Not that he was really dangerous, I realized, slapping his hand and taking his water glass away. At this, he laughed, but also got up from the sofa and shuffled to the door as though he knew—and well he better have—that that was the end of his line. It certainly wasn't his heart that had any kind of condition.

"Yeah, yeah," I hear now as Renee's heavy step emerges into the hall.

I wait, listening, before turning the water back on. My curiosity gets the better of me sometimes.

"How's she going, Renee?" says Craig's voice. I take the elastic out of my hair, give my head a shake, wishing the colour were either a sure blonde or definitive

dark, rather than this runny caramel.

“Oh, hi Craig,” says Renee in her honeyed voice. “Come on in. What’s up?”

“Well, Russ and I were just wondering if you two lovely ladies would care to join us in a little adventure.” I check for smudged eye make-up, gunk between my teeth. I press my thin lips together, lick them, smile. Rub little circles over my cheeks.

“Oh, yeah? What have you got in mind?” asks Renee.

I open the door. “Oh, hiya, Craig.”

“Hey, mate. Did you catch what I said to your gorgeous roommate here?”

Renee giggles. Rather than roll my eyes, I clench my teeth and ask rhetorically, “Through these paper walls?”

“So, then, you up for something?”

“Like Renee said, what’re you thinking of?”

“Well, I’m sure you’ve heard about the phenomenon of public bathing…”

“No fuckin’ way,” says Renee, “you’re not going to catch me in a public bath house.”

“Now, now, there’s no need for profanities—a simple ‘no thank you’ will do,” Craig wags a finger at her. “But are you sure? Russ and I have been several times, it’s quite nice, actually.”

“Uh-uh, no way.” Renee crosses her arms over her double dees.

“I tell ya, you don’t know what you’re missing. It’s good family fun. Elinor, you up for a little splish-splash?”

“Well, I don’t know. It’s getting kind of late. But maybe.”

“I thought you just had a shower,” says Renee.

“Actually, I was just about to get in the shower,” I say. She smirks.

“Aw, come on,” says Craig, “it’s not even 10:00 yet. It’s not like you’ve got to

get up early tomorrow, is it? Aren't you working the later shift tomorrow?"

"Yeah, well. How does this public bath thing work, anyway? Is there a separate bathing area for men and women?"

"Yes, yes, don't you worry about that," Craig says.

"Well, that's no fun, then, is it? I'll be bathing all by myself while you and Russ have a grand old time together with all the men."

"I'm afraid this is just a family bath, Elinor, if you want something a little more progressive, you'll have to find one of those fancy *onsens* off in the remote mountains of Tohoku or wherever, some place that permits co-ed bathing in a steamy hot spring," Craig winks at me.

"So you're saying I have to hang out with a bunch of old women, who're probably going to point and laugh at my funny, pale little *gaijin* fanny, without anyone to defend me?"

"Yup, that's what he's saying," says Renee. "Well, have fun, you two. The VCR and Josh Harnett's sexy eyes await me."

"You're not going to watch that again, are you?" I ask.

"So what if I am? What's wrong with it?"

"Watch what?" asks Craig.

"*Pearl Harbour*," I tell him. "I mean, of all the movies to watch in Japan." I try to sound like I'm teasing Renee, but we've been through this before.

"Maybe you can talk about it with your students tomorrow in Rap Session," says Craig. "As an American, I'm sure you could offer them further insight. Maybe you'll get 'em talking, for once." He winks at me again.

"Ha ha, very funny, Craig. As a matter of fact, some of my students have told me they love this movie," says Renee, stomping back into the living room. "And, you

know?" she calls over the sounds of the previews, "not all Americans are assholes. Not all of us think we're so goddam perfect, you know."

"Renee, love, I was just having a bit of fun with you," says Craig, leaning around the doorframe. "Please don't take offense."

"Yuh-huh, whatever," she says, leaning into the sofa, remote in hand, pillow clutched over her belly.

He looks at me and does a face. "Well, how about it, Elinor? You game?"

"Yeah, alright, what the hell," I laugh. "What do I need?"

And ten minutes later the three of us are walking down the darkened street, me between Craig and Russ, chatting like old mates. The smell of chlorine wafts over a cement wall, there's a quiet bustle of bodies at the corner.

"This?" I ask, peering around. "*This is it?*" I've passed this unassuming concrete chunk of a building many times during my walks to and from work, but after the first day or two had ceased to wonder what its purpose might be.

"Yup," says Russ.

"But it looks like a cross between a post office and a public swimming pool. How positively unglamorous," I say as we walk through the doors and past a small, staring boy who gets a light smack on the head from his frowning mother.

"My dear Elinor, what were you expecting?" Russ asks.

"Well, something a little more flash than this, I guess. I mean, everything's tiled in beige, we could be in the bathrooms at the Holiday Inn, or the bloody YMCA. It's not remotely traditional looking."

"Well, like home, almost anything built after the war kind of looks like this...but probably you should be glad it's modern," says Russ, "I imagine the older places are fairly run down by now, you know, moulding walls, leaking roofs, same

stinky bathing water since the Edo period....”

“That’s disgusting.”

“Once in a lifetime opportunity to get up close and personal with a samurai.

Or at least a samurai’s 100-year-old dandruff and sweat.”

“You’re terrible,” I tell Russ. Sometimes he’s like a little boy, trying to get my attention by turning my stomach.

We get in line. “You didn’t tell me there was a charge to get in,” I accuse.

“It’s a nominal fee, Elinor. But if you’re a little short, this one’s on me,” says Craig.

“How much is it, anyway?” I rummage in my bag, but I’m almost certain I left my wallet in the apartment. I might have a couple 100-yen coins jingling around somewhere, but even that’s doubtful.

“No, really, it’s alright, I’ll get it.” Craig smiles. I stop rummaging.

“It’s 300 yen,” says Russ, and counts out six 100-yen coins into his hand, slides them under the plastic window of the admission booth as he says something in Japanese to the person within.

“Hey, now, I said I’d get hers,” Craig says.

“All talk and no action,” says Russ, handing me a key attached to a pink safety pin, and a white hand-size towel.

“Boys, don’t argue over it,” I laugh, “if you must both pay for something, then Craig, you can buy me a can of Asahi on the way home.”

“Ah, Elinor, you’ve such a great mind. Always one step ahead of the rest of us.” He winks. Russ rolls his eyes. I laugh.

“And the women’s change room would be...?”

“Thattaway,” says Russ, pointing.

“And I’m supposed to emerge naked, that is, entirely without clothes, as Botticelli’s Venus, into the bath room, er, the room with the bath, am I not?” Though if I think about it, Cabanel’s Venus might be more apt, what with all the cavorting cupids. Botticelli’s Venus was blessedly alone. But perhaps the sight of a naked *gajin* will not cause as much of a stir as I suppose.

“Yes, that’s correct,” says Russ. “That is the general method by which one bathes and becomes clean. Long-standing tradition—even those aforementioned filthy samurai had to remove their clothes once in a while.”

“Smart-ass,” I say and whack his arm. “So what do I do with this key, attached as it is to a safety pin? Am I supposed to have a spare piercing with which I can conveniently hang it, while I splash about and play with my rubber duckie?”

“Now, there’ll be none of that here, miss,” says Craig. “Don’t you know that in Japan there’s a 50,000-yen fine for playing with your rubber duckie in public?”

“Pin it to your towel,” says Russ. “Just be careful how you dry yourself off, or you *will* end up with a new piercing.”

“Don’t forget,” adds Craig, “you have to scrub off in the shower area before getting into the bath. *Kitenai, yo.*”

“Right. Which means?”

“Dirty,” says Russ and disappears into the men’s change-room. Craig gives me a smile and a salute, and disappears behind his friend.

The women’s is fairly empty, but a couple of older women give me the once-over when I walk in. One of them actually nods before turning back to rubbing her hair with the scant towel. I look around for a private changing cubicle, but unless I want to strip in the toilet stall, I’m obliged to be out in the open for the whole process. I can’t help but furtively glance at my fellow strippers, and am somewhat surprised to

realize that the tiny, lean bodies of the young Japanese women I've seen and met become these billowing, sagging, pinched and buckled vessels of flesh. With their crowns of dyed-black meringue hair, their short, squat bodies, their puggy noses and squinty tired eyes, these women are like a sisterhood of hedgehogs, shorn and naked ones, who have no problems padding around in front of each other. And evidently, as I make my way into the next room, who have no problems scrubbing off and hosing down their hidden bits in front of each other. I suppose I've got no choice but to follow their lead, though my chest feels small and tight even contemplating it as I stand waiting for a shower station. I don't want to stare as the row of four women have a go at cleaning themselves, backs all hunched over cat-like as they squat on little wooden stools, legs spread, hoses aimed. I wonder if the Water-Pik, as with so many other technological conveniences, first became popular in this country.

Presumably, it wouldn't be used in public for any purpose other than cleaning, no matter how acceptable it is to be naked—at least in this context. But I'm sure there's some truth to what the boys said about rubber duckies. Silly boys. I wonder if my wiggly little gut feelings are on the money, and they really are having a bit of a competition over me, or if they're just spazzing around. According to Renee, Craig's got a girl back in Melbourne anyway. A 'sort-of' girlfriend, whom he supposedly broke up with when he was last home, but who keeps emailing and calling him, and whose emails and calls he often responds to. And about whom he laments to Russ, in front of Renee and other people, apparently, that he wishes she would just be a grown-up and accept that he might be here for a while, perhaps quite a while, longer yet. Doesn't exactly sound like true love to me. But what do I know.

Someone shoves me in the arm. I turn around. A short hedgehog in thick glasses is grinning at me and pointing in the direction of the shower. I drop my key,

which I've not yet attached to my so-called towel, and we bend together to pick it up. As I straighten, holding out my hand for what the hedgehog has managed, in her closer proximity to the ground, to get first, I realize I've just flashed my entire backside to my fellow bathers. "*Arigato*," I say to the hedgehog, grateful there's at least one person in the room who's not had an intimate view of my *gaijin* bottom.

Somehow I get through the shower, dampening my towel only slightly when it falls off the hook and lands on the edge of a wet footprint. I have no idea what to do with it now, but see that several women have taken their wee towels into the bath, and are using them to mop the sweat off their brows. I approach the bath and ease in. It's bloody wanking hot. If I were a tea-bag I might be right at home, but as I'm not, I worry my skin will soften too much, even cook and slip off me as I step out, like a blanched tomato ready to be pureed for sauce. In the very least I'll be the colour of one for a good hour after. The boys will no doubt have something to say about that.

Russ and Craig, I almost breathe their names out loud, as though it would cool me down. As though it would *cool* me down. I feel sweat running down my scalp, pouring in rivulets from my hairline and temples. If only they weren't quite so inseparable, it's practically becoming hard to tell them apart and remember what one or the other has said or done. But I think Russ's sarcasm is wearing a bit thin. As well as his crass sense of humour. Craig isn't moody, he's much more good-natured, everything dealt with in good humour; he makes it all into a laugh, a harmless laugh. No mean spirit, no judgement, no sneering. Probably why he was promoted to AT and Russ wasn't, though they've been here the same length of time. Maybe that's why Russ has been so pissy lately, his way of dealing with not getting the promotion, not winning. Maybe—though really, I'd rather not think it's the case— it's why they seem to be falling over each other to get in my favour: Craig, because he feels he's on

a winning streak and wants whatever he can get his hands on, while Russ may be aiming for some kind of consolation prize. Never thought of myself in those terms before. Who ever knows what's going through guys' heads, though, really.

My heart is pounding, my veins throbbing, I can't stand the bath any longer. I make my way back to the ladder. Moving slowly through this heat makes me sweat all the more. I must look a sight, and I could use another shower now. But probably that isn't done: One just emerges from the bath and swabs off the sweat, puts one's dirty clothes back on. I could have brought another pair of underwear, if I'd been thinking about anything besides the possibility of getting naked with two attractive young men, if not in the same room. Though how clean can one possibly be, after having shared this simmering sea of exfoliated protoplasm with god knows how many other women since the water was last changed or filtered, even if more recently than the Edo era. I know it can't be much worse than a swimming pool, but somehow the temperature of the water—41°C, by the thermometer attached to the steps—makes it seem so much more a potential health hazard. And before I even got into the water, my unclean *gaijin* bottom sat on the same wooden stool as countless other women's. I wonder if either of my knowledgeable boys has any info about the STD rates in Japan, or whether they're spread in public baths. Here's hoping my paranoia is unfounded.

Putting my clothes back on, still sweating a fair bit, I realize the boys and I should have arranged to reconvene at a certain time. Not that the bathing process allows for wearing a watch. I wonder if they've been waiting, or if they're still in the bath, or if they might've already left. But they wouldn't leave—though I suppose if they have, I could find my way back without them, it's really not far from the apartment. Fact is, I'd rather not have to go alone. But Craig is there, standing inside the front door. He looks up and smiles. "Hey, Elinor, how's she going?"

“You didn’t tell me it would be so hot. I think I’m going to need a litre of water before we even think of getting that beer.” I hand my key back in to the attendant in the booth. “*Arigato.*” I’m getting pretty good at saying that word, I should soon be ready to move on to another one.

“Yeah, but it’s good for ya, El, sweat out all those toxins. From the last time you drank too much beer.”

“Now, when would that be? I never drink too much beer.”

He smiles. I ask if Russ will be much longer.

“He’s gone already, said he wanted to run to the shop on the way home.”

“What’s open this hour?” I say, looking at my watch. It’s almost 11:00, the bath must be closing very soon.

“The *conbini* down near the pier, I guess. I didn’t ask.”

“Is he coming back here or shall we go?”

“He said he’d see us back at the flats.”

“Right, then, let’s go.” I take Craig’s arm, just in a chummy sort of way, and we head back along the dark and very quiet streets to our lovely ocean-front luxury tower. He comes along the open corridor on the fourth and brings me to my door. Voices come from inside, and as I swing the door open, it’s clear Russ has already arrived and is chatting merrily with Renee, who’s laughing extravagantly at whatever he’s just said. Craig and I kick off our shoes and slide open the kitchen door. He’s plied her with beer, there are a couple empties on the table already and two more in their hands. Well, that accounts for the laughter.

“Hey, guys,” says Renee, the tail end of a chuckle warbling her voice.

“Hello,” I say. They’re on the sofa, and fairly cozy. It’s not a large sofa, granted, but there’s more space at each end than they’ve left between them. “You

made good time,” I tell Russ, “or else Craig and I are very slow.”

He says nothing. Renee’s laughter fades. “Have a beer,” she says. “There’s more in the fridge.”

“Cheers. Maybe I will,” I say, and I take two out. “Craig?”

“Yeah, cheers,” he says and pops the tab.

“How was your bath?” Russ asks.

“Who, me or Elinor?”

“Whoever.”

“Same as yours,” says Craig. “Hot, relaxing.”

I say nothing, open my beer and take a drink.

“Elinor?” Russ says.

“Yes?”

“How. Was. Your. Bath.”

“You needn’t say it like that, Russ, my IQ is higher than the temperature of the bath. It was fine. Sixteen or seventeen Japanese grandmothers are now well acquainted with my arse and my propensity for dropping keys. Why do you ask?”

“Just wondered. Your first and all.”

“It was just fine, thanks.” I drink the rest of my beer, set the can on the table with the other empties.

“Slow down, there, Elinor,” says Craig, touching my arm.

“Actually, I’ve come to a screeching halt. That’s it for me.” The beer’s already giving me a buzz. I realize I should have some water, replenish what I lost at the bath, but head for the bathroom to brush my teeth. There’s no glass by the sink. I consider emptying out one of the shampoo bottles, but just slurp as much from the faucet as I have patience to drink. Back in the living room, Craig’s parked himself on the floor in

front of the portable stereo he loaned me, playing DJ while Russ and Renee continue to find each other the most hilarious things in the world.

“Goodnight,” I say.

“Oh, night-night, Elinor,” Renee drawls, her long dark hair sprawling across the sofa and onto Russ’ shoulder. “Have a good sleep.”

“Ta. As a matter of fact, I’d sleep much better if you would keep the volume down on the stereo.”

“Oh, sure thing, El,” says Craig, and agreeable as ever, he turns it down.

I have to slide my door across with a bit more force than it normally requires, and I wonder if it was stuck and look down to see if anything was caught in the runner, see that nothing was, and it’s not until I’m undressing—for the second time that night, third actually, if you count shedding my work clothes hours ago—throwing my clothes across the room at my closet door that I realize I’m angry. Fuming. And I’m not even entirely sure why. My hair is still wet, I towel it off with a less-than-fresh one from my laundry pile, damned if I have to go back out there again. I lie down, still fuming, cross my arms over my chest, frowning, I feel like a parody of myself, but I can’t stop. “What’s up with her?” I hear Renee say, and I’m almost on my feet again, to haul that door back open and tell her what she can do with her laughter and her heaving double dees. But I know I’m just being irrational, and so I get up and look out the window through the green netting at the buildings and yards on the other side of the street, but it’s too dark. And beyond that, just a map of feeble street lamps and the distant neon glow of downtown. Just outside my window are the remnants of tomato plants Melinda had tried to grow. There’s a watering can by the wall, and I catch myself wondering if there’s still water in it. And that’s finally what makes me feel more pathetic than perhaps I ever have in my life, and I decide I’ve either got to

go back out there for a big glass of water, or stay in here and allow dehydration to put me out of my misery for once and for all.

More laughter from the other side of the cardboard wall and I throw myself to my futon, deciding death by dessication is by far the better of the two options. At least then I won't have to report for duty tomorrow in the Vista army. But I'm sure what'll happen is that I'll wake with a vibrating, vertiginous splitter and still have to go to work—wilful dehydration, however severe, not sufficient cause for calling sick to Head Office in Osaka. They'd assume, as they are reputed always to do, that my dehydration was caused by over-consumption of alcohol. I'd hardly call one beer over-consumption. But never mind. To them, the difference between cholera and a head cold is nil: they still have to call every employee on their list who's declared a desire to do last-minute overtime. I'm on that list. I wonder if they'd be stupid enough to call me to fill in for myself—Head Office's right and left hands less coordinated than most. And again I worry that I really ought to just get up and have some water. But I don't, not right away, waiting until the stereo's turned off, and I've heard the boys head back upstairs and Renee flush and run water and slide her own door across on its tracks. Then, I venture forth, tip-toeing, and in the dark find a clean glass, fill it, drink. Back in my room, I'm no longer angry, instead feel let down, suppose it's because I've had to face the fact yet again that I am a stubborn idiot who'd rather die than stand down, than appear weak in front of others. If only I could explain to myself why I was so angry earlier. Perhaps it'll come to me in a dream.

After work the next evening, scanning the classrooms as I head for the teachers' room, I'm surprised that Russ is not among those gathering up his files and

trailing behind the students, or shoving to get through a bottle-neck of the more sociable ones. He's not in the teachers' room either, just Winston, Reggie and Katherine, whom I've finally figured out is Reggie's girlfriend. I guess Russ is mad, or saw I was mad last night and now wants to avoid me. Can you blame him, really? I'd want to avoid me too, and though I'm no longer mad, I haven't yet put my finger on why I was. Guess I'll be walking home by myself, for the first time since I started working here. At least I know the route now.

I'm surprised again when I've just given the top drawer of the file cabinet a good shove. Craig's voice cuts through the silence like a beam of sunshine through an attic room. I feel the motes spinning around inside, making me dizzy.

"Hiya, Michiko, how's she going?"

"Oh, *Ku-raay-gu-san! genki, yo!*" and then Michiko giggles, a sound I thought I'd never hear. So much for her no-nonsense, ambitious working-woman persona: at the end of the day, confront her with a handsome man from Oz and she's atwitter, just like the rest of us. I can't decide if it's somehow reassuring she's human after all, or if I should be disappointed that her weakness happens to be the same as mine. Both generally and specifically. Men, generally, and Craig specifically.

I stand by the file cabinet for a second, wondering what I can innocently overhear. But Craig asks Michiko something in Japanese, and she replies in Japanese, and I'm thwarted. I leave the teachers' room, jacket and bag in hand.

"Hey, there she is," Craig says.

"He was just looking for you," says Michiko, frown back in place.

"Oh," I say, confused. I guess I'd thought that since he came here so late, he'd been looking for her. Or for Russ, which would make more sense.

"You're the last one here? Doing overtime for the Man?" Craig says.

“Just seemed to have more files than usual tonight,” I say. “What are you up to? Don’t you usually take the tram home from Yu-Mi Town?”

“Yeah, well tonight I decided to get off at the Tenmaiya and walk.”

“Any particular reason?” I wish as I say this that I’m not saying it. It sounds too forced, too “fishing”, but for what I’m not sure.

“Just thought I’d round up whoever was still here for a big mess of *yaki-unagi*,” Craig says. “You ready? Bye Michiko-san.” She waves from her computer.

“*Yaki-what?*”

“*Yaki-unagi*. It’s grilled eel, on the lightest and fluffiest bed of rice you’d ever hope to have tickle your gullet.”

“Eel! You’ve got to be joking!” I shiver.

“Naw, El, I’m dead serious.” He does a face and I laugh.

“Well, I don’t know, you might be out of luck,” I say, “there’s just me and I’m not, as you can see, particularly enthusiastic about the prospect of eating a greasy water snake, no matter how long it’s spent on the barbie.”

“Come on, El, it’s really good, it’s all crunchy salty-sweet with *shoyu* and *mirin*, super yummiie. Look, they’ve got other stuff on the menu—order something else and I’ll have eel. You can try some of mine, and then you’ll know for next time if you want to order one for yourself. But I bet you will. In fact, I’d be willing to be the entire total of my last overtime shift that you will absolutely adore this *yaki-unagi*.”

“So, that’s it, you just came around to see who was up for eel?”

Craig turns and gives me a one-eyed look, the other squinted shut—it’s not a wink—trying to read me. Good on him if he can, I have no idea what I’m getting at myself. Or maybe I just don’t want to think about how obvious it might really be.

“Well, no, Elinor, that’s not it, that’s not the only thing.” He clears his throat

and in that second I wonder...If maybe, in spite of his ex in Melbourne, and if he's going to say so now, or if he'll wait and say something, or do something, by the end of the meal. And then I suppose I'm probably wrong again. Or at least that even thinking this, having the audacity to think this, is sure to keep it from being true. And that maybe I've not even really wanted him to have any particular feelings for me, not til now. Maybe not even now. But that I'd be flattered and it would help the time pass. He clears his throat again.

"Well, first of all, it looks like I'll be transferring down to the Honko school in about a month. I'd thought I was going to be AT at Yu-Mi for another few months at least, but Katherine's going to Sakaide to replace whasisname who's going back to London in a few weeks. Reg is staying here, but they'll still need someone to replace Kath. Michiko already knows this, of course, the staff always know stuff years in advance of the lowly teachers, so I thought I'd just let a couple of you know and see what you thought about it."

"Well, that's great, you'll be a little closer to downtown, and to where you live. And of course it'll be great to work with you. To be honest, things were getting a little tense with Reg and Kath, if you know what I mean."

"Mmm, well, it's only natural that a couple would feel the strain of working together and living together at the best of times, but working and living in a foreign country presents a whole different set of challenges to anyone, never mind a couple, yeah?"

"Yes, sure." And then I wonder if this is his way of saying he doesn't want to get involved, because it would cause conflict at work. "Have you told Russ?" I ask.

"Yeah, he's known for a few days. I wasn't sure how he'd react, because of course he applied for the AT position as well, and didn't get it, and the reason they

gave him was that they wanted him to stay at Honko, rather than transfer to Yu-Mi. That was obviously just a line they were giving him, to cover whatever the real reason was. But Vista is nothing if not full of lines—but you didn’t hear this from me, of course. So, Russ: yeah, I was worried he’d have some resentment towards me because of all this, but he seems okay with it. Well, more or less. I mean, I think last night, there was a bit of tension, but then I wondered if maybe something was going on with you too, El. You seemed good guns up until we got back to the apartment, and then—I don’t know, maybe it was just me, but...”

We’ve stopped at the first main intersection leading out of the shopping arcade. A couple of teens in punk clothes and hair-dos stream past, separating us, and I’m allowed a brief reprieve to come up with something to say. “Yeah, well, I’m just a little moody, that’s all. Last night, I just didn’t feel like sitting there listening to Renee again. Don’t get me wrong, she’s lovely, but... well, sometimes she’s just a bit.... Well.... do you know what I mean?”

“Yeah, mate. Housemates, even when they’re great, still get up your nose sometimes.”

“Yes. And these apartments don’t allow for much distance, do they?” A cross between a laugh and a sigh escapes my lips, as I think about how many times I’ve considered sleeping on the balcony, or in the bathroom, just to feel a bit farther away from the hub of the apartment. And there’s just the two of us in it, so far. “Speaking of situations that are sometimes too close for comfort, you and Russ’ll be working and living together, once you’ve transferred. How’s that going to work, d’ya think?”

“You make it sound like we’re married, like Reg and Kath.”

“Are they actually married?” There’s always something you don’t know.

“Yup.”

“But they don’t wear rings, do they?” I’d looked; I guess I’m always looking. Not that I’d ever had any interest in Reg.

“Reg wears his on his index finger, and Kath wears hers on a chain round her neck, so you can’t usually see it.”

“What on earth for?”

“I’ve no idea, you should ask them.” We’re on the other side of the street now, and Craig slows in front of a small shop, an indigo- and white-patterned curtain with a split down the middle hangs in the doorway. The air smells strongly of barbequed fishy something, with a burnt-sugar bouquet. “Well, here we are. Mmm, get a whiff of that, El, how can you not feel your appetite take a leap?”

I have to concede it does smell good, but I’m not about to be won over just by the smell. My father and brother used to go eel-catching in the summers behind my granny’s house in Oonaboondi, would bring home buckets full of long, fat eels and expect my mother and me to clean and cook them. I did, once, when I was thirteen, and that was enough. Couldn’t bear to eat them after peeling open their rough, glistening skin, seeing that layer of blue-white fat and rope of spinal tissue, bone. I’m not usually so squeamish. “Have they got salad? Maybe just plain rice?”

“You’ll change your mind, I guarantee it. After you, El,” says Craig, holding half of the curtain to the side. I don’t really want to be the first to enter, but I duck under and step inside. At first it’s darker than my granny’s cellar at midnight, and I stop. Craig bumps into me. I giggle. “Sorry,” he says.

A bowing waiter greets us and leads us farther into the dim room. My eyes begin to adjust, but still it seems dark. The waiter leaves us at a booth with a five-foot-high wall made of wood stained nearly black—why the place is so dark, perhaps. The narrow door to the booth has its own indigo and white curtain, which he holds

aside for us. I take the seat at the back, Craig sits across. The waiter hands us small menus and promptly disappears. There's a small gas lamp on the table, spreading a soft, warm light across the table, also the same dark-stained wood as the walls.

"It's all in Japanese!" I cry, flipping menu pages.

"How is your Japanese coming, anyways, Elinor?" Craig smiles.

"Oh, brilliant. Why, just the other day at lunch, I discussed with our Michiko the possibility of the Japanese labour party's winning the next election. She suggested that hell would freeze over first, while I said stranger things had happened in world politics, and cited the example of the last municipal election in Sydney."

"Hardly *world* politics, is it, El."

"Well, as I'm sure you well know, I had no such discussion in the first place. Let me see..." I pretend to think deeply, "No, my Japanese remains as it was when I first arrived: '*arigato*,' '*sumimasen*,' '*dozo*,' – for which I have Russ to thank – and '*gomenasai*' to round things off nicely. Because you just never know when you might have to apologize, especially as a foreigner."

"Well, you know, El, there's a sort of community centre not too far from the apartment that offers cheap Japanese lessons. A lot of the teachers go there, at least to start off with. The next session's probably starting soon, or maybe it's already started, you should check it out ASAP. Russ'n I'll give you the specs, get you all set up." He smiles, holding my gaze for a moment, then looks down at the menu.

"Sounds good. But meanwhile," I say, as the waiter ducks back under the curtain, keeping his head bowed, "you're going to have to order for me. Please be gentle, I don't want anything I can't chew." I shut my menu and hand it to the waiter.

"Why don't I just order us a few dishes, you can take from whatever looks good to you. Alright?"

"I guess I have no choice but to trust you," I say, smiling at him across the glow of the lamp.

"You can trust me, El, no worries." He smiles at me again, closes his menu and has to be asked by the still-waiting waiter if we're ready to order. Which he does ask in English, though stilted and nervous.

I don't know how our conversation, Craig's comments in particular, might be understood by other people, but I can't help thinking maybe I'm not imagining just a little bit of serious flirtation. Does the waiter see something in it, does he think maybe, as he stands there eyes averted but taking everything in, that Craig and I are together, in a more than sharing-an-after-work-meal sort of way? But again, I must keep myself from jumping to any conclusions, dire or delightful, and so I let the evening end as it will, with the two of us enjoying the meal, with me actually trying the eel and finding that I loved it—though at first, of course, having to keep up appearances I didn't. And with us practically closing the restaurant, lingering until the waiter came twice to ask if we wanted anything else, and with Craig paying for the whole meal in spite of my protests. And with us walking back to the apartment around midnight, along quiet streets lit by the moon, and when I shiver—it is November, and getting cooler every day—and Craig putting his arm over my shoulders and asking if I want his jacket. And with his leaving me at the fourth floor with a "Cheers, Elinor, I had a great time," and tucking a strand of my hair behind my ear as he draws away, and with me smiling and walking down the open hall to my door and unlocking it, and closing it gently behind me, making sure that even the slightest metallic ring does not sound out and alert Renee my arrival, later than usual and without a prior word as to why. And with my breathing a sigh of relief when I hear nothing, and going to bed with his face in my mind, as though still lit by the glow of the lamp in the *yaki-eel* restaurant. And

letting myself, in the freedom of the darkness, no one looking, my own eyes shut so I'm not even looking at myself, and letting myself imagine that after tucking my hair behind my ear he leaned close to kiss me. And so on, and so on, to its utterly illogical conclusion. I'm sure nothing more needs to be said, though plenty could be imagined.

Hannah

"And what would you do, Miki, if you were an astronaut exploring Mars?" I ask, mustering a smile of encouragement.

Miki looks down at the textbook and bats her eyelashes. The three other students are politely still. "Ah, I would try to – no, no – I would take pillow and cover—?"

"A pillow and a blanket..."

"And blanket. Because I would want comfortable sleep on return to here."

"Ah, yes, you would probably be very tired from working so hard on Mars. Very good, Miki. And how about you, uh, Hiro?" I look from the blushing but pleased Miki down to the stack of files in front of me to check the new student's name, and then up at the end of the table. There is something about him that throughout the lesson has been making me want to hold my breath and pretend to be invisible, an energy coming off him that says 'teacher beware.' It's the element of unpredictability, I think: the fear that he's not afraid of saying anything, and that the lesson will not go exactly according to my carefully-made plans. I am still at the stage, just four months after training, where I need the security of predictability in the classroom. Everything else seems to be so random—never knowing if you'll find what you need at the supermarket, never knowing if someone behind the counter at a shop or a bank will be

able to understand what you want or will run away in fear, never knowing if you will meet with friendly nods or hostile stares as you walk down the street—that I need to find consistency somewhere.

At the end of the table, Hiro grins, the fluorescent overheads reflecting white stars off his black eyes. He grins at me a little longer than I would like, because it makes me wonder what he's going to say when he opens his mouth. Just as long as he doesn't turn out to be worse than that other shit-disturber, what was his name, Shoji, Shijo, I never remember. I try to smile my blank, indifferent yet encouraging, teacher smile, and blink a few times, as though blinking is a defense against his grin, would sweep it away.

“Actually, I would open restaurant, no, ... bakery. Yes, bakery.” He is still grinning, and flipping the pages of his textbook at the lower right corner. He has long fingers, lean but strong, perfect oval nails.

“You would open a bakery?” We've been trained to repeat in question form what the students say when they have made an error, the question, disguised as confirmation, actually intended to correct. It rarely has the desired effect, as the students usually blunder on and repeat not your correction, but exactly what they said a moment before.

“Yes, I would bake cookies on the rocks, on the hot red rocks of the Mars planet.” He grins more widely, and I am unable to keep my own from spreading across my face. “Because you know,” he continues, “the Mars is red, so it is so hot, hot like oven, and you can bake cookies, maybe cakes, on these rocks. And I would, ah, sale these cookies for other astronauts and then maybe people on a space station on the Mars.” He grins again, runs his long fingers through his hair, which has been dyed a red-brown. My gaze follows his hand up to his hair and back down to his lap,

where the fingers of one hand began to massage the palm of the other.

“You would sell the cookies. To astronauts and to people on a space station,” I repeat, even though he hasn’t really made a mistake. “Well, Hiro, that’s a very, um, original answer. Great. Just remember that we don’t—” but at that moment, the electric bell chimes, signalling the end of the last lesson of the evening, and I miss my opportunity to tell him that the definite article is not used with proper nouns. He is closest to the door, and is first out of the room. By the time I make it to the staff room door at the front of the school, he has already disappeared.

“So, how was your lesson, Hannah-san?” says Phillipa.

“Why do you ask, *Feereep*-san?” I say.

“Oh, you know, just making filling-out-the-file conversation.” She flips through her stack of student files and sorts them, puckers her lips and whistles something tuneless.

“Sure, Phil, I know that look. What’s on your mind.”

“Well, now that you mention it, I did notice you had the new student...”

“Who, Hiro?”

“That’s the one,” she says.

“He’s not really new, though, is he?” I open his file. It’s stuffed with several report sheets marked with the hurriedly-scrawled comments of several unknown teachers, and in the last filled-in space, Philippa’s round, primary-school-teacher hand: ‘Very good fluency and vocabulary. Needs to work on articles and pronunciation of past tense regular verbs. Refreshingly creative responses.’ To the upper right corner of the file folder is stapled a tiny photograph of Hiro, unsmiling, his hair longer and streaked with a lighter red-brown than it is now. He’s got a thin face, a pouty lower lip, and a high forehead. And those eyes, even in the tiny picture,

irises round and dark as a view through the wrong end of a telescope pointed at the night sky.

“Well no, he’s not new to our school. He transferred from Takamatsu last week, I think Ryoko said.”

“Ah.”

“Bit of a live one, ne?”

“Mmm. Yes, well. Funny. Certainly not afraid to speak.”

“Refreshing change from the others.”

“Yes, so you’ve noted,” I say, putting his file away. “But the others—really, most of them are not all that bad, they’re just shy or lack confidence.” Phillipa gives me another look. “No, really. I know they’re frustrating, but few of them if any are doing it on purpose. Anyway, there’s a kind of comforting predictability in their reticence, sometimes.”

“Och, well, you can have them. I’ll take Hiro any day,” says Philippa. “I much prefer someone who’s willing to take a risk, or who’s not afraid to look stupid, even, once in a while.” She gives me one of her winks, and we grab our coats and head to the front of the school where Sunny, a taxi, and an impassive, uniformed driver are waiting.

During the ride back downtown, Phillipa chats with Sunny about what they will make for dinner. I am silent, stare out the window at the darkened streets, only partly listening to their conversation. The cab takes us along the usual route, first the semi-rural area, old run-down houses and now-barren rice fields, through to a more residential section, the houses a little bigger, newer and more Western-looking, and then the area along the highway heading east where there is little sign of life aside from fast-food chain restaurants and pachinko gaming parlours. After nine at night,

the only illumination this far from downtown comes from the flashing rainbow neon of these pachinko parlours, and the broad billboards advertising the “Love” motels along the highway. Houses are mostly dark, curtains pulled, the residents having already gone to bed; the streets rarely have lamps except along major routes. Shops were shut long ago. There is something lonely and a bit frightening about this landscape, dark and barren, lifeless, but for impersonal signs of human activity, but much of that activity does not reveal the best side of humanity: mindless gambling and spending of money, illicit and probably adulterous sex. I imagine a long-suffering salary-man venting his frustrations at not being promoted, trying his luck at pachinko, and should he be lucky enough to win a small sum of money, cruising around outside a cram-school late at night, and bribing a hapless yet crafty school-girl to accompany him to a love hotel, where he convinces her to relinquish her now rather less than laundry-fresh panties for his olfactory delectation. The taxi passes another hotel, where the flashing pink and purple neon reveals that there are three cars in the parking lot; two adulterous affairs, and one salary-man-school girl combo, I decide. It’s seedy, sordid, sad—perhaps I’ve read too much, and listened to too many rumours and *gaijin* urban legends about Japan. But last week, Elinor showed me a photo Russ took of a vending machine in Tokyo filled with sealed bags, each one containing the worn underwear of a different school girl—two pictures, really, one of the entire machine, and another in close up through the display window. Fortunately, the view wasn’t close enough to see to what extent the underwear had been worn. I guess some things are, when it comes to sex, best left to the imagination. Mine seems to be working overtime. Or perhaps I’m just projecting my own feelings. Not that I’m feeling seedy, nor sordid, exactly. Though now and then, I take out Leighton’s letter again and torture myself with it, with the hurt and with the guilt. But then I’ve never been good

with winter—even here, where the temperature rarely dips below zero.

Philippa is still talking about food. I try to pay attention and get out of my slightly soiled melancholy. She's just announced a craving for a gingery pumpkin soup she makes, and is now going through the recipe. I wonder what I have in my own fridge, if I should have bought some vegetables at the supermarket on my break. There is that rice, I remember, left from yesterday, and I can always make *miso* soup with green onions. Sticky, white rice; starch and empty calories. Lunch was a couple of *onigiri*, rice balls, one stuffed with grilled salmon, the other, marinated kelp, both of which I have developed an obsession with. And a can of tomato juice that tasted slightly of fish as well. It's probably not just my bad posture that is making the waistband of my grey work pants feel a little tight. I can hardly remember when I used to eat something besides rice, or spaghetti, or the big white glutinous *udon* noodles famous in this prefecture. Or the big crusty white buns filled with cheese sold at the supermarket near the school. Whole wheat, beans, lentils as distant a memory now as Leighton, as sex. The absence of whole foods is making me fat and slack, the absence of sex is making me cynical and depressed. Though I know it's not just its absence, but how that absence came to be. But never mind.

The cab stops at the corner where it always does, about half way between Philippa's and Sunny's house and my apartment. They wave and cross as the light changes. I jaywalk after a sleek black car with darkened windows passes, stereo vibrating, a red light in the rear window pulsating in time to the bass. My first Japanese pimp-mobile—I wonder what the word is for that in Japanese. Probably '*peem-pu mo-bee-ru*'. The smell of *yakitori*, grilled chicken skewers, drifts from the tiny pub just past the corner. The only other beacon of activity is the Mini-Stop convenience store, its fluorescent lights bright as a stadium. I slow my stride,

thinking, maybe I should get a salad, imagining the round plastic bowl filled with lettuce, radish and seaweed, the thin, fishy dressing in its flaccid plastic pouch. I peer in the door from across the parking lot, see a crowd of teenagers around the counter, and keep on walking. It's bad enough when the place is empty and I have only to deal with the overly-solicitous counter staff who always stare at me wide-eyed, almost fearfully as though I concealed a gun under my coat, or would suddenly start grabbing things off the shelves and stuffing them under my coat. Or as though I would suddenly fling my coat to the ground and start gyrating in time to the J-pop music playing flatly from the two little desktop speakers perched on top of the hot-dog and dumpling steamer. Or maybe they are just surprised at the few words of Japanese I manage in the brief transaction. In any case, I decide I'm not in the mood for dealing with it.

Home, I open the door, and can tell even in the dark that the *genkan* is unblemished by even one white envelope or postcard. I close and lock the door, off with my hated work shoes, I step up onto the cold floor and into my house slippers, slide the kitchen door across as slowly and quietly as I can and reach around for the light switch. Nothing scuttles across the floor, nothing disappears under the counter or into a corner. Taking out the garbage every morning is apparently helping the cockroach situation—less of a problem now that Robin has found alternate accommodations. Everyone knows she's moved in with one of the part-time staff members' family, the youngest staff member whose hysterical giggles are often loud enough to distract students from their lessons; but the official version is "oh, just a friend I met downtown." Maybe Robin wants us to assume that some kind soul from the church has taken pity on her, befriended her since the rest of us have seemed disinclined to do so. Ever since Robin first informed me she'd be moving out,

Philippa has been angry about it, citing it as yet another example of Vista's hypocrisy—we're not supposed to be social with the students, but it's perfectly all right for some of the teachers to become close friends with some of the staff members, so long as it's not really obvious, or talked about openly. I've ceased to care, however: Robin can live with whomever she chooses, so long as it's not me.

I climb upstairs to my room to change into something more comfortable, which translates into a t-shirt and my loose, if no longer so gaping, corduroys, and come back down and grab the t v remote off the sofa, and switch it on for background noise as I prepared dinner. Cold rice in a bowl, tofu straight out of the package rather than boiled as it is apparently supposed to be, before it's diced for the *miso* soup. White *miso*, is that for summer or winter? I can never remember what the staff tell me, all their little lunch-time random comments meant to be helpful but pretty much going through one overwhelmed ear and out the other. It sometimes makes me feel as though I have a doll with a pull string, who never repeats the same phrase more than once. But the purpose of a child's having a doll that repeats things is so that the child eventually learns the phrases, or the animal noises or the alphabet, if the child is very young and the toy in some configuration other than a doll. But how can anyone be expected to really hold on to so much information, when it's only heard once? I cut up a few carrot sticks, half a thin Japanese cucumber, rinse a few cherry tomatoes.

I take my meal to the sofa and flop, as best as I can on an object that was clearly not designed with its apparent purpose fully in mind. It vaguely resembles a sofa, but in fact it is a large yellow shelf, or in fact something that has not gone through its final stages of production. Probably why Vista purchased so many of them, no doubt at a discount—Philippa and Sunny have one, and so do Elinor and Renee. Now seated, I am finally aware of my fatigue, but it is more mental than

physical. I'd not expected teaching to be this much of an energy drain. The three channels offer their usual fare. The latest episode of a serial *dorama*, starring the lead singer of some j-pop group, comprehensible only because the contexts, and the expressions on the faces of the actors, are much the same as those in soap operas back home: romance, marriage and birth, adultery, car accidents and other sorts of random tragedy, betrayal, and reconciliation before yet another betrayal. The ten-o'clock news, translated haltingly into English, always gives me the impression I am learning something about Japan. But I'm getting tired of hearing about the sinking of the research ship off Hawaii, even though I side with the Japanese on whose fault it was (the Americans', the Americans', the Americans'). Or, finally, I could watch a food-eating game-show. This is the strangest thing on tv, as far as I can tell. Or at least to me it is, but the audience certainly loves it. Tonight, there is a skinny young man, probably named Ryuji or Kenji, halfway down a table loaded with bowls of ramen noodles. To his right, the bowls are empty. To his left, the bowls still steam. Ryuji, let's say, stands round-shouldered over a bowl, slurping noodles, gulping them without swallowing, forcing them in with his disposable chopsticks. The noodles wiggle just before they disappear into his mouth. Can he even be breathing? I stare at the screen, aware that my own soup has grown cold. A clock ticks down in the lower left of the screen, he has 23 seconds to finish the bowls to his left. He slams another bowl down, picks up another. Three bowls left, 13 seconds. The studio audience goes wild. Two bowls, 8 seconds. Another bowl slams down. His chin is wet, a noodle is stuck to the front of his shirt. He barely finishes the second last bowl as the clock reaches zero, and bells sound, sirens pierce the eardrums of all watching in the studio, lights flash, the camera zooms in and out from Ruiji's (or Hiro's) damp face. The host of the show runs across the studio and grabs the winning contestant around the

shoulders, and hands him a handkerchief. Good timing, for poor Ruiji swoons a little, eyes half closed. The host urges him to walk a few steps and accept his prize – he has consumed three more bowls than the other contestant. A lovely young woman in a very short skirt and huge boots tippy-toes across the floor holding his prize: a silver scooter helmet with designer logos painted all over it. Ryuji takes it with both hands and nods, *domo, domo arigato*. But abruptly he stops nodding and turns the helmet over and leans into it, and cameras cut and pan the audience. Some of the audience members looked shocked or amused, some of the women cover their faces with their hands and cower in their boyfriends' shoulders.

"Gross," I say out loud. I switch off the tv, put my bowl of soup on the floor beside the sofa. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch sight of the cigarette burn at the end of the sofa Robin made. She confessed it to me before I saw it, though the day it happened the smell of burnt synthetic fabric could not be disguised by the floral air freshener she'd sprayed around the apartment. Perhaps that's why she'd confessed, though I would have spotted it eventually. Trying to make an excuse for smoking in the apartment, she explained that in fact she'd technically obeyed the clause in the contract, as she'd dragged the sofa over to the back door, and had actually been sitting on the end of it with most of her body outside, feet hanging off the end and dangling over the weeds around the clothes-drying gizmo that god-knew-who had planted in the soil. I said, whatever, it didn't matter, just so long as she was willing to take responsibility for it when Vista inspected the apartment after she moved out. Oh, sure, sure, she said, continuing with her industrious but ill-timed scrubbing of the kitchen floor (she'd been off all day, but had evidently decided that she ought to clean the floor just ten minutes before I was to arrive home). But, I have the sneaking suspicion that she said nothing of it to Head Office when she informed them that she'd be

moving out of staff accommodations. I stick my baby finger in the hole, feel the hard edge of melted leatherette pinch my skin. I remember wondering once or twice what karmic debt I was repaying by being forced to endure her sulky company. I suppose that for having such an uncharitable thought, I've just accrued further debt for my next life. Or maybe I'll get what's coming to me in this life—an idea I am just as, if not more, inclined to believe in, rather than the true Buddhist precept of karma.

Without the tv on, the apartment is still and silent, what I imagine it must be like in department stores or office buildings after all the staff have gone home and the lights shut off. From maybe four or five blocks away, a dog expresses its disapproval at being left outside, or perhaps it is merely making a comment on the boredom of its existence. If this karma thing really does happen, then I might wonder what I did in a past life to bring me here, to a culture where I don't belong, to a place where nothing is familiar and where I'm starting to feel like a stranger to myself, and to a mental-emotional place where I know that someone I loved may never have loved me, though he said he did often enough those three months we were together; and who might have cheated on me, had the opportunity arisen before I left. For all I know, the opportunity did present itself, but I suppose I ought to believe him when he says that nothing happened between him and his ex until after he and I broke up. But then karma might explain that as well, and my theory of karma perhaps holds truer in this case than the Buddhists'.

Enough of this, I tell myself, and push myself off the sofa. Thinking of the last time a cockroach invaded the kitchen is the only thing to make me wash the dishes; I sure don't feel like it. I leave the dishes to drip dry, and decide I should just go to bed and read. The question is, as it often is, whether to read fiction, read more about Japan, or try and get through a little bit more of my Japanese language text. I sit and

stare at my small assortment of books, and stare and think and stare and stare and realize I don't have the concentration for reading, certainly not if I can't even make up my mind what to read. I kick off my slippers—which I wear in my bedroom even though I've read that one is not supposed to wear slippers on *tatami* mats, as they will wear out faster. The mats, not the slippers. But my socks slip easily on the tightly woven rice straw—once I nearly fell as I carried my futon to the French window to air it. And so I prefer to sacrifice the longevity of Vista property for the sake of my own.

Since my mind seems rather empty of thoughts already, I wonder if now might be a good time to practice meditating. I still have Leighton's little guide on how to participate in a Zen Buddhist meditation retreat, the little black book with yellow red and blue on the cover, a photo of a serene terracotta Buddha, eyes closed, back straight, arms and legs open, but his face suggesting that at the core, he is impervious to hurt, invulnerable, a perfect example of the desirability of transcendence. And therefore, a perfect irony.

The southeast corner of my room had tentatively become my meditation nook—as I had few belongings with me, so few I could generally keep that entire third of the floor space bare. Only once was the floor covered, when I'd spread out some recently developed photos, along with some *hyaku-en* shop origami paper, for the purposes of deciding which ones would make it into my photo scrapbook. Elinor had gotten me into the project. One day after Japanese class we went to the stationery shop on the way back to her apartment, where we started the first few pages of her book; as I didn't have any photos of my own with me, I just gave her advice on where to put the photos and which squares of patterned origami paper would look best with which images. At home, for a couple of weeks, I worked on it every night after work, but when I'd done five or six pages—of a flower show I'd seen in Osaka, and of the

castle in Takomitsu—I kind of lost interest in the project, and decided that the scraps of paper and envelopes of photos were doing nothing but collecting dust and reminding me that there were just some projects I could never quite complete.

I've put nothing up on the walls in that corner, so that I can sit free of external distractions. Meditating under the harsh glare of the fluorescent light is not ideal, but it does help to keep me awake. Internal distractions are another thing entirely, though. It is the random mental clutter that does far more to keep one from attaining a perfect state of non-attachment than any posters, photos, receipts or magazine covers could ever do.

I change out of my corduroys and into my khaki karate pants. Well, they're not really karate pants—that's what Leighton called them because of the style and cut. They're soft brushed cotton and comfortable enough that they don't add to the problem of my legs falling asleep after fifteen minutes of trying to sit in full lotus. Actually, I haven't managed to sit in full lotus for longer than five. Maybe it's my ankles, they're just not flexible enough, or maybe I've gained just enough weight that the pads of fat on my inner thighs push my ankles into awkward, circulation-blocking angles, veins crumpling into hairpin turns and causing jams of blood flow. I plug in my space heater on low, and then put on my favourite grey sweater, the lambswool one with the hood, because there's a bit of a draft coming in the window and it might get chilly even with the heater on, and then not only will my feet and quite probably my calves fall asleep, but they'll also be like the slabs of frozen fish that you can buy in bulk at the *Marunaka*. I know that if I were to go on a retreat at some monastery somewhere, maybe the one that published Leighton's manual, I would have to sit on a cold floor, in an unheated room, wearing less, and if my back so much as slumped a quarter of an inch, a helpful monk would come along and whack me back into proper

posture with his bamboo back-whacking stick. I'm making it easier for myself, but to be honest, I can't see how being cold and worrying about developing a kidney infection can be conducive to letting go of materiality. Or whatever it is we're supposed to let go of in our quest for enlightenment.

I sit, cross my right ankle over my left, tuck my toes into the crack formed by my calf and thigh. I lay my hands on my knees, palm up, and press my thumbs to my middle fingers. I inhale deeply and exhale again. And again, straighten my back.

I went with Leighton once to an information meeting at the Shambhala Centre in Halifax. An older man with startled eyes gave a talk on Buddhism and what it had done for him since he'd joined over twenty years before. Then a young woman, whom I thought I recognized from one of my classes at the university talked about meditation techniques and fielded questions from the attendees. I don't remember much about the whole experience, as Leighton and I were still in the initial throes of sexual tension, but one thing I somehow managed to retain was that the goal of meditation was not to "empty" one's mind, as that was pretty much impossible—it's always thinking about something. At first it would be difficult, the young woman cautioned, but all we should try to do at first was to allow thoughts to come into our minds and allow them to pass again, that we were to try not to dwell on them. Feelings, thoughts, images, let them rise and then let them fall again. Do not cling to these feelings, but acknowledge them and then let them go. Do not allow thoughts to trap you, but have them and push them away as they form. Images can come but they cannot stay. It seemed to me at the time that this was interesting, and feasible. It was perhaps not asking too much of one's brain. However, I didn't go home and try it, so I didn't then know how challenging it might actually be. Not until a month or so ago, when I got out Leighton's book and gave it all a go.

So perhaps that's what I should be doing now. The face of the young woman who answered questions about meditation, short brown hair and clear skin, she reminded me of a childhood friend, but now it occurs to me that she was one of the teaching assistants of the second-year required course in the English program; she'd not been mine—I'd been stuck with the tall, shrill blonde—so perhaps that's why I didn't make the connection then. I don't remember her name. I let her go. And I remember Leighton taking my hand as we sat side by side in the meditation room at the Shambhala Centre, his warm hands and the soft pads of his fingers and thumb massaging mine, a firm insistent pressure that suggested he couldn't wait for the meeting to be over so we could walk back to his place—it was closer—and climb the stairs to his room and fall onto his bed and let the breeze blowing in through his skylight window cool the sweat on our summer-damp bodies. I let this image go. But not entirely. I remember his face whenever he took off his glasses and leaned in to kiss me, his blue eyes larger, his face somehow younger and sort of androgynous without them. I liked his glasses, I remember telling him one day that I thought they suited him, that he looked good in them. He seemed happy to hear that, almost grateful. I was a little puzzled, and touched, that my opinion should mean so much to him. But who knows what he was really thinking. I'd never thought that he was particularly concerned about how he looked, his confidence always seemed to transcend common vanity. He was sure enough of his intelligence that he had no need for the trivial reassurances that I'd always seemed to crave, that most women have to hear: "You're gorgeous," "You look really good today," "Ooh, nice jeans," "Your skin is so soft," "You're so hot in that shirt," "What colour are your eyes anyway, they're such an unusual colour," "Your hands are so lovely you could be a hand model," and even from someone you've just met, someone to whom you are showing

your apartment because you said you'd do your landlord a favour and try to arrange a sublettor, a comment like, "I have to confess that yesterday when I was following you through the apartment I was wondering what your ass would look like stepping out of the shower." Sometimes those unexpected ones can be the best. My ass, I'd thought with surprise. It had never exactly been, in my opinion, my best feature. Leighton had never said anything about it one way or the other, as he was a self-professed leg-man from the beginning. A breed that in my experience is suffering from a serious decline in population, in this era of women stuffing their chests fuller than Thanksgiving turkeys. But no one had ever said anything about my ass before, so I was capable of nothing more than a rather dim-witted silence when Grant, the potential sublettor, smiled at me over the cup of coffee I'd just made for him. Oh, I'm sorry, he said, I guess that was kind of inappropriate. No, no, I said, I was just surprised, that's all. I smiled. Actually, it's rather appropriate, considering that fifteen minutes or so ago, you had your finger in it. He laughed. Did you like it? It seemed like maybe you were a little surprised about that too. Well, maybe a little—no one ever did that before. It was his turn to be surprised. Really? No one? Not even...? No, I replied, not even Leighton. We did plenty of other things, but he never did that. Wow, Grant said. I find that hard to believe. I haven't actually slept with that many guys, I said. Most of them have been pretty vanilla, I guess. Vanilla? Grant laughed, I mean, it's not like what I did is so out of the ordinary, really, all possible things considered. No, I guess not, I said, well, actually, I probably have no idea. And I laughed too. We laughed together, a kind of uneasy, questioning laugh. And then he had to say it again, staring intently into my eyes as he had the night before, when we'd met at a bar for a drink: So, the thing that I can't understand is if things are so great between the two of you—barring the fact that he's in Toronto and you're about to go off to a foreign country for an

undetermined period of time—and if you think he’s such a great guy, why would you want to, well, be with me? I had no more answer to that question than I had the night before, when our conversation mostly consisted of what seemed like his attempts to convince me not to spend the night with him, and my waffling between thinking that if I did, it either hardly mattered, or I would never be able to forgive myself. You mean, why would I want to cheat on him? I asked, taking another fortifying sip of coffee. I didn’t say it quite that way, Grant said, but yes, technically I suppose it’s closer to the truth, isn’t it? And I wondered if he were asking me out of his own common vanity, because he wanted me to say something like: well, Leighton is great and I love him and all, but the instant I heard your voice over the phone when you called about the sublet, I knew I would have to sleep with you. But instead, I asked Grant a question: so, what do you think the odds are? The odds? he said, hesitating, perhaps waiting for elaboration. Yes, I said, the odds that Leighton and I will be able to sustain a super-long distance relationship for a year. Um, you asked me that last night, he said. I did? I asked. I didn’t remember asking. You asked me as we were jaywalking in front of that taxi, he said, just before we got to the Commons. Shit, I totally do not remember. I didn’t have that much to drink, did I? Mmm, Grant said, and finished his coffee, about the same as I had. You were together how long, again? he asked. Well, actually, we’re still together, in a manner of speaking, I said, as we haven’t talked about whether we’ll end it or not. Anyway, we started seeing each other at the end of April. And it’s now, what, mid-September. So, four months, but one of them already has been long-distance, Grant calculated. And do you think you have a lot in common? Yes, I said. Well, a few things at least, like the fact that we both like jogging, and literature, and the same old movies, and sexually we’re very compatible. Uh-huh, said Grant, and what about your ages? How do you know there’s

a difference in our ages, I said, unless I told you and forgot that too. No, you're right, but you didn't have to, he said, you already told me how old you are, and I knew from who Leighton was hanging out with at that hockey party we went to—I told you about that, didn't I?—that he was probably about ten years younger than I was. So? What about the age difference? Well, twenty-four is still pretty young, he said, and I know, from personal experience, that no guy at twenty-four is going to want to be tied for much longer than a month to a girl he can't fuck. I clenched my jaw. See, I don't think you really want my opinion on this and that's why you don't remember asking me last night, he said. No, no, I was probably just half asleep or something, I do want to know what you think. Well, he said, then if you want the odds, I'd have to say they're not that good. And I think you already know this too, or you wouldn't have even thought of asking me. And that that's largely how you're justifying what we did together last night. I raised my right eyebrow for a millisecond, and nodded slightly. I guess there must have been another expression on my face I couldn't account for, because he said, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound harsh or whatever, but it's just that when people ask me for my opinion, I generally feel that I should be as truthful as possible. I nodded again, and said, yeah, yeah, of course, I mean, that's what I wanted to hear. I mean, that I wanted to hear the truth. I tried to smile. Aww, who am I to know, he said, you might just have something really good and really strong and you'll figure out a way to make it work over the year, and maybe, like he told you he wants to, he will go to Japan to visit you over the holidays, and that will make the time go faster and before you know it you'll be back in Canada and you can figure out where to go from there. Mmm, I said. Maybe. Anyway, thanks for suggesting how I should bet my money, and sorry again I didn't have any milk for your coffee, I added. Hey, kid, don't worry about it, he said, and stood up, taking my cue that it was time for him

to leave. He put on his shoes and tucked his long arms into the sleeves of his jacket. Well, if you want to get together again for a drink or whatever, before you go, he said. Yeah, well, I have your number, you have mine, yadda yadda, I said. Yadda yadda, he said back, shaking his head. You're funny. So are you, I said, opening the door. Bye, he said, and I watched his shoes climb the stairs and walk through the back yard and do an awkward turn at the gate, nearly tripping over each other. I've never found what they say about proportions to have any grounding in reality.

Reality. Me, here, in my room with one side of my ass red-hot toasting in the warmth of the space heater, the other side of me goose-bumped and bloodless. Twitching muscle in my right shoulder. Right foot asleep, or at least dozing. Mind no less cluttered. My jaw clenches, and I slowly ease my right foot off my left leg, draw it out in front of me and let it go. It falls to the *tatami* with a dead thud. I lie back, carefully pushing the space heater away towards the middle of the room. Just what I'd need, one of the bare electrical elements to come into contact with the dry, fire-friendly fibres of the mats.

Here in my quiet room, miles from the life I knew before I came here, it's hard to believe that what came before is real, or at least that my version of my life really happened. That it wasn't just a movie, from which I remember a few telling details. Or more like, an assemblage of scenes spliced from every movie I've ever seen. A photo album with buttons to push with accompanying voiced-over stories and dialogues.

So after tonight's session, clearly I still haven't got the hang of meditating. I find it impossible not to fix on one scene and relive it as many times as I need to in order to understand it. This thing with Grant, I wonder if I'll ever understand my own motivations, why I would have done it, why I feel so little shame, considering. Or

why I would have felt such outrage, such hurt, at Leighton's sharing the fact that he hooked up with someone so soon after I left, why I would have accused him of never loving me, if he were able to consider sleeping with someone else so quickly. But they say that what we most despise in ourselves is what we first find fault with in others. Perhaps that's all there is to it in this case.

The thought of dragging myself downstairs to the icy bathroom does not inspire me. At least now that Robin's gone, I use her bedroom space heater to melt the air a little before I get undressed and turn the water on, but it takes a few minutes and I don't feel like waiting. I turn off the heater in my room anyway, grab my towel from the tiny hook I nailed inside my closet door (the apartment had come equipped with only one rack, which Robin had claimed—leaving my towel in the bathroom is one habit I seem not to be able to get into), and down I go.

I haven't given Hiro much thought since I first saw him, and to be honest, I'm not sure if I'm happy or not to see his name on my schedule again a couple of days later: another evening class, this time second to last, with one other student. They've never met before and so I force them to begin by introducing themselves.

"Hello, nice to meet you, my name is Hiro, I am new student at Machigoma. Before, I was student in Takomitsu Yu-Mi School. I live in Zentsuji, and I work in Ondan Town in factory. I am floor manager."

"Ah, sorry, what kind of factory?" asks the other student.

"It is a kind of fish factory. Not exactly fish, what do you say, is small, pink, have leg..." he makes a curling motion with his index finger.

“Shrimp,” I say.

“Yes, shrimps. There are any shrimps come from near Nio.”

“You like your job?”

“Do you...?” I prompt.

“Ah, sorry. Do you like your job?”

“It is okay. But—” he shakes his head, “it really smell bad. So, you know, that is why I have to put new clothes when I come to English lesson.” The other student laughs. Hiro is dressed casually, in Birkenstocks, jeans and a loose shirt, when other students show up in the early evening hours still attired in suits and uniforms. “And you?” Hiro says to the other student. “Please tell me about your job.”

The lesson passes quickly. For the segments usually so tedious and done by rote, Hiro comes up with something to make me and the other student laugh. For the repeat drills, he mimics the voices of the speakers in the taped conversation; for the conjugation drills he finishes my prompts with incongruous, though nearly grammatically correct, answers. (“She will be going...”, “Tomorrow, she will be going to the doctor for medicine because her job makes her crazy.” “They will be taking...”: “They will be taking their dog on their next vacation in Hawaii because dog is champion surfer.”) For the role-play, he is only too happy to ad lib both parts when the other student runs out of steam.

“Dude, you look pleased,” says Philippa as I enter the teacher’s room after class. “Hiro again, ne?”

“Mmm. He’s certainly good for a few laughs, as the saying goes.”

“You know what?” she says, inching closer to me as we fill out our files on top of the largest file cabinet. “I found out he and Craig used to hang out a bit. Hiro wanted to buy Craig’s old surf board.”

“Really?” Craig, the blonde Australian it’s pretty clear Elinor’s in love with. Those lucky teachers in Takomitsu, where the AT s, and apparently the staff as well, are willing to look the other way when it comes to teacher-student interaction outside the classroom ‘safe zone.’ “He surfs?” I imagined Hiro in a wetsuit, carrying a board across white sand, lean but muscular, well-defined thighs and upper arms.

“He went surfing in Kochi with Craig and Russ last summer.”

“Hmm. Good for him. Them.”

“And something else—Ryoko was telling me his wife has called the school at least once.”

“Oh, yeah?” I don’t remember noticing a wedding ring, but then this tradition was less common among Japanese than Westerners. “He seems young to be married, doesn’t he?” I say.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought too, but apparently he’s around your age. Not that I mean you’re not young,” she cackles. “So, apparently, a couple of weeks ago, he’d scheduled a lot of lessons but wasn’t showing up... the wife was hoping he would be here, but didn’t really expect him to be.”

I was unaware of Hiro’s truancy. If a student’s name doesn’t appear on my schedule, I rarely look at anyone else’s to see who is attending class and who isn’t. The bell sounds the return to the classrooms, and I have no more time to think about what Philippa is implying with her comments about Hiro and his worried wife.

The next day, I have an unexpected one-to-one lesson with Hiro when the other student scheduled calls to cancel. Our textbooks lie open but unread on the desk

for the entire forty-minute period.

“So, have you travelled outside of Japan?” I ask him. I try not to stare at him too intently, and when I do look at him, I keep that bland teacher smile on my face.

“I went to Europe twice.”

“Where exactly in Europe?”

“Well, first time was a tour of five countries in ten days. Very Japanese style, ne?” He flashes his grin again, and I laugh, because it’s what I was thinking. “Ah, where I went... I went to France, Spain, and Dutch—”

“Germany.”

“So, so—German. Germany. And Oranda.”

“Oranda?”

“Yes, you know, in north of Europe. Country of tulips.”

“Oh, Holland. The Netherlands.”

“Holland. So, second time was with my wife in Italy for two weeks.”

“Two weeks, how nice. That’s a long vacation. So, can you speak Italian?”

“Yes, little. I studied before the trip. But now I don’t use, so I forget.”

“Yes, that’s normal. But don’t you practice a little with your wife?”

“No, she hates to speak other language. When we were in Italy, I talk to hotel man, I order food in the restaurant, and ask for direction. She refuse to say even ‘*grazie*’ or ‘*bon giorno*’.”

“She refused,” I say, stressing the ‘d’, “Well, maybe she felt shy.”

“No, she is just... in this case, very Japanese.”

“Why did you go to Italy?”

“Actually, I love Italy, you know. I love Italian food, and people, and language, and trees and mountains, and wine, and women. Haha, but don’t say to my

wife.”

“Which cities did you visit?” I ask.

“Roma, Firenze, many more, I forget. Every place was so beautiful.”

“And when did you go there?”

“That was...I think five years ago.”

“And recently, you haven’t travelled anywhere?”

“No, now we have two small children. One is baby. So, is not easy to travel.

Now, I must work—no time for vacation in Hawaii.” That grin again. He still seems too young to be married and have two little kids.

“Do you think most Japanese people are obsessed with their work?”

“‘Obsessed? What means ‘obsessed’?”

“Well, a person who is obsessed with something maybe likes it too much. Or can’t stop thinking about it. For example, my friend in Canada is obsessed with *anime*. She watches *anime* all the time, and buys DVDs and collects posters and other souvenirs from her favourite *anime*.”

“Ah, really?”

“Yes, it’s true,” I lie, “In fact, one room in her house is filled with nothing but *anime* souvenirs. She especially likes *My Neighbour Totoro*.” It’s true that I have a friend who likes anime, and who has seen *Totoro*, but no one I know either has her own house or has filled any of her rooms with anything besides second-hand furniture.

“*Tonari no Totoro*? Is this very popular in Canada? Do many people know *Totoro*? I am surprised.” Hiro wrinkles his forehead.

“Mmm—not very popular. But some people love it.”

“But, it is child movie.”

“Yes, but many adults in Japan like Mickey Mouse and Pooh Bear, no?”

“Ah, true,” he laughs. “My wife, she likes Donarudo Duck. She has small thing of this duck on her phone. I think it is ridiculous.” From his gestures, I know what he means: that his wife has a toy Donald attached to her cell antenna, a trend to which every cool young woman, even out here in the boonies, must subscribe. When he stops laughing, he continues to smile, and look at me with those dark brown eyes. I look down at his file, under the teacher’s book, and I wonder what I will write in it when the lesson is over. *Hiro worked on fluency today, and on practicing previously learned vocabulary. He needs to work on articles and possessives.*

“Well,” I say, clearing my throat, “many adults in Canada and the United States also like Mickey Mouse. It’s universal, isn’t it.”

“Ah, like Universal Studios,” Hiro says.

“Oh, have you been there?” I ask. There is one in Osaka.

“Yes, my wife wanted to go.”

“And what did you think?”

“It was, what the word, horrible? Terrible?”

“Yes, both are correct,” I say.

“Oh, you have been there too?” he asks.

“No, no,” I laugh, “I mean you got both words correct.”

“Oh. So, you haven’t been? Good, I recommend to you not go there. It is big waste of time.”

“Really? Why?” I would never have dreamed of going anyway, but I want to hear him explain why he doesn’t like it.

“You must stand in the line for hours before you see the attraction. And then the attraction. So disappointed. Disappointing. *Jaws*, you know, the movie? Maybe it

is little scary, this attraction, you take boat in small water and suddenly big shark head come up with music. But then you see everything look plastic. Not so real look. No real, ah, what you say, red stuff.”

“Blood.”

“Yes, yes, blood. Sound like ‘flood’, not ‘food’.”

“Yes, good memory.” He learned this in a previous lesson.

“Of course, no real blood, that is good thing!” He laughs. “But also, Universal Studios is very expensive! I think it is preferable to go to nice restaurant in Osaka, or maybe to *izakaya* and get lot of beer and food and enjoy talking time with friends. No to go to not real place that is real place of other not real place.” He laughs again. “You know, I mean the movies, it is not real.”

“Mmm, yes, I understand. An *izakaya*—that is a real place. And your friends, they are real people.” All *izakaya* still seem a bit surreal to me, but the fact that I can barely order in Japanese probably has a lot to do with it. Luckily, as in all places serving food, the menu has full-colour pictures.

“Yes, yes, you exactly understand me. Yes. Have a time with friends, not *Tah-mee-ney-tah*.” He laughs. The bell begins to chime. “‘Asta la bista, babee,’” he laughs again. “Ah, so terrible movie. But maybe funny.” He gathers his books.

“Well, Hiro, good work today.”

“It was not work, it was pleasure,” he says. “Bye, Hannah-san. Someday, I will tell you the story of your name.”

“My name?”

“Yes, name meaning in Japanese.”

“Or, I can go home and look it up in my dictionary.”

“Yes. But maybe your dictionary does not have it. So, I will tell you if you

cannot find.”

“Okay. Bye, Hiro.” He leaves the classroom and zips down the hall to the front of the school. I take a deep breath and hold it before I pick up my books, exhale slowly as I walk down the hall, hoping that by the time I get to the teacher’s room, the flush will have faded from my cheeks.

Spring comes out of nowhere in the early part of March. It feels more like Canadian May. Outside the bus windows, little green things are beginning to sprout in the rice fields and on the distant mountains, and although I know the little green things in the fields are weeds and not shoots of rice, it is heartening. At work, Hiro’s name alone in the first time block is also encouraging. The afternoon is looking better and better.

“How she is going, mate?” he asks, grinning, as we settle into the smallest goldfish bowl of a classroom.

I laugh. “Great. And you? ‘How’s she going?’”

“Nah-ree, dude! Totary nah-ree!”

It takes me a second to realize he’s trying to say ‘gnarly.’ I smile. “Have you been sneaking off to Takamatsu for lessons with Craig?”

“Ah, yes. Maybe two times. Ah, sorry, ‘sneaking’? What means ‘sneaking’?”

“What does ‘sneaking’ mean?” I model, then explain: “It means doing something in secret, not necessarily because it’s bad, but maybe because you don’t want anyone to know. You can also use the adjective, ‘sneaky’. For example: Hiro is a sneaky person. He didn’t tell his Machigoma teachers that he has been taking extra

lessons at another school. So, they believe—incorrectly—that he is improving because of their hard work.” I tease, smiling as I watch him make sense of my explanation.

“Ah, so. Sneaking. Yes, sometimes I can be sneaking.” He grins, those dark eyes crinkling a little at the corners.

“Sneaky,” I correct.

“So, sneaky. How about sneakers?”

“No, no connection. Well, not really.”

“Anyway, Hannah-sensei,” he says, “so, next month I will start new job.”

“Oh yeah? Well, you’ll be happy to leave the shrimp factory, I imagine.”

“Ah, yes. For sure. No more uniform. So, I will need to buy a suits.”

“Some suits, or a couple of suits.”

“So, so. Maybe two, or three. Because, I will work for insurance, ah...”

“Agency?”

“Maybe. For house and live, you know.”

“Yes, so, you will sell life insurance, and property insurance.”

“Yes, maybe. I think so. Maybe.” I suppose his lack of conviction comes from not being sure that I’ve provided the words he wants, rather than from not being sure about the functions of his job. I’ve seen it before: they don’t want to admit to a mistake, because that would be a loss of face for them, and they’re too polite to say that perhaps you’ve made a mistake, because that would be a loss of face for you. ‘Maybe’ is full of largesse, a word that pillows both interlocutors in generous layers of benefit of doubt.

“And where is the job? In Ondan?” For a second I feel a stab of something I can only describe as fear, that he will have to move, perhaps as far away as Tokyo. Or

even just across the Seito Bridge to Okayama. I think he mentioned once before that that's where his parents, or maybe his wife's parents, live. But it might as well be as far away as Tokyo.

"Job is located every place in Kagawa prefecture. I will drive a lot."

"Ah, so. I mean, I see." He smiles at my slip.

"So, my new boss say he will not pay for continue English lessons."

"Oh, really? He says he won't pay?" I wonder if Hiro will continue to take lessons on his own. But probably not, with a wife and two little kids to provide for. Vista is expensive. Philippa told me a lot of students take out a loan to pay for their lessons.

"Yes, so, I must finish my lessons soon. After that, I am not...ah, I will not have a time to study."

"Oh, that's too bad. You were really beginning to improve a lot." Well, he's staying in Kagawa, but he'll not be coming to Vista any more. Disappointment pours into my chest, weighs down my insides, and I feel all sloshy and heavy. But I try not to let it show. "Well, maybe you can continue studying outside the school. Maybe you can find someone to practice with you." I am thinking of Craig.

"Yes, maybe," he grins again. There's that maybe again.

And I am, with little success, trying not to think of me.

Elinor

It's not yet 10:00 a.m. Japanese class begins in less than fifteen minutes, but we've opted to skip it: Phillipa, Hannah, still recovering from her flu. Russ. Craig and I. We've managed to assemble at the shuttle stop by the train station, we've piled onto the shuttle and filled out our identification forms—in case the boat should sink and

our bodies be lost between Takomitsu and Kobe—and we’ve boarded the “Jumbo Ferry” that will take us to Kobe and the “Luminaria” Lights Festival. Our little gang of gaijin has claimed a space in the passenger lounge, which is entirely without chairs, and consists only of large *tatami* mats divided by rows of knee-high lockers that do not have locks. Some of us have visited the bar, which oddly enough does have chairs—one would think that there would be advantages to getting drunk in a room without furniture as opposed to one with, but who am I to question the logic of Japanese designers? And some of us have slept on the floor (Hannah, who, so far as I know, hasn’t stirred since we left Tako). And some of us have ventured outside into the snappy December air to watch the cement-encrusted hills of Honshu drift past.

Craig and I have managed to sneak away from Russ and Phillipa once again. We’ve not done it so many times that they’d think anything of it. Or so I presume. But in front of everyone, things are still the same as they’ve always been between Craig and I, nothing more than the usual harmless flirtation. As Renee said last week, I flirt with everyone, even her, sometimes. But when we’re entirely alone, Craig and I, it’s a different matter altogether, I’m sure of it. Just now, for example, he’s pointing out some landmark on the shore, and he takes my arm so I don’t lean out dangerously far. And he holds it for a moment or two. And then when I can’t see what he’s pointing at, moves so his face is right next to mine, and points with his arm around me. I can feel warmth from his cheek, his ear, as though his heart were pumping blood for both of us. He doesn’t have to lean in so close, but he does. Partly that’s just Craig, I know. And now his hand is resting on my shoulder, and he’s moved his face just slightly away, but only an inch or two, still close enough that I can still smell the minty gum on his breath, the gum he spit out into the can by the door when we came outside. Gum gets in the way of speaking, sometimes, and other things couples might do when

standing rather close together. And I suppose that to the Japanese tourists, and the sleepy salary-men shuffling along the deck behind us, that we must look like a couple. Maybe like we're in love.

I think about turning my head, my cheek against his stubbly one, the tip of my cold nose resting against his, and I think about what would happen next, about the kiss, our eyes half closed in anticipation. We haven't yet kissed. I say yet, as though it's inevitable. But just for a second, in my mind I see nothing but our faces pressed together like I am outside my own body, as though I'm observing a scene from my favourite film, one I've watched so many times I've finally gone from identifying with the lead characters to assuming their roles. But I don't turn my head, and he doesn't turn his, and our bodies hold their positions, playing the roles of happy *gaijin* tourists enjoying the view and an old-fashioned romantic moment. But to me, though, it's not so simple. And surely it's not for him either. But I don't know for sure and it's driving me round the bend.

"Well, I think we'd better go back inside," Craig says then. "As soon as the ferry passes that funny red tower, you know you're about fifteen minutes from port." He slides his hand down to rest it on the small of my back, I can feel its warmth even through my wool pea coat. Then it slides right off, and it's like it was never there. Craig starts walking back to the door at the other end of the deck. He doesn't look back to see if I'm coming until he's about to go round the corner, where he stops and looks at me. I stay there, resting against the railing a few more seconds, just staring down at the grey water. Whenever I peer down at the water from the lofty decks of a boat, I've always had this urge to throw something, anything, overboard. But my bag—fortunately—is back in the rest area, and I have nothing but what I'm wearing, which I know I would be foolish to relinquish to a whim and the waves.

“You coming, El?” Craig shouts over the wind and the ripping sound of the ferry moving through the water.

I stand, still leaning, and shake my head. Then I smile, and he smiles, and I push myself away from the railing, and by the time I reach the door he’s got his hands in his pockets and his chin in the air, staring out to sea again.

All of us return to our *tatami* spot and gather our things. The imminent landing hasn’t been announced, but somehow everyone knows, as though humans do still retain some instinct, and we can all just feel the boat getting closer to shore. That we haven’t been fully socially conditioned, that we haven’t yet lost our ability to sense things and become nothing but brains existing only to self-analyze, is somewhat reassuring. But this group realization that we’re approaching the port of Kobe means there’s a crowd massing by the only exit door. People are filling up the stairwell. Not a line, but literally filling it as though they were jelly-beans being crammed into a jar for a contest—guess the closest number and win.

“This can’t be safe,” I say to Craig, Hannah and Phillipa as we join the crowd. “Imagine, if the boat crashes into port, the stairwell will just fill up with water and—”

“Pleasant thoughts, Elinor,” says Phillipa.

“Come this way, guys, I know of another exit,” says Craig, grabbing my arm, but also Phillipa’s. I can’t help but wish he were just taking me, not only by the arm, but to wherever he’s going. He leads all of us to a back stairwell from within the bar, which is now deserted but reeks of the smoke of the bored salary-men who sat here the whole voyage. It seems that only a dozen other people know about the back stairwell, including Russ and the two couples.

“Well, here we all are,” I say, laughing to hide my annoyance.

“So, is everyone here?” Craig asks. “Right, then. I have a suggestion to make.

I say that once we've found our way into the city centre that we split up for a while," says Craig. It's like he can read my mind. "If we want to. But I would imagine that we don't all want to do the same things, right? So, let's say, split up for three hours, maybe regroup for dinner and then get over to the starting point of the '*Roo-mee-nah-ree-eh*'."

"Hey, Russ has disappeared," says Hannah. But she says it so softly no one but me hears her, and I pretend not to. Russ, wherever he went at the last minute, is fully capable of taking care of himself. She doesn't say it again, and no one else seems to notice. Anyway, I'm sure he'll see us once we're all on land and walking towards the downtown. How could he not, a group of fair-haired *gaijin* stuck together at the hip like some beast with one mind, surrounded by sombrely dressed commuters. The thought passes through my mind how it is that Hannah's the only one to have noticed Russ's absence, and I wonder just how closely she's been keeping tabs on him. But then I remember she slept the whole trip.

A red light over the door at the bottom of the stairwell turns green, and the door swings open. Below us in the stairwell, the six or so dark heads, nestled in their soft wool scarves, surge through. We follow at a safe distance, down the staircase, across the gangplank and onto the pier. Just beyond the taxi stand where most of the other passengers are now competing for a ride, a sign with an arrow points us away from the water and towards the downtown area, but beyond that it seems we're on our own. None of us has a detailed map, but Craig has been here twice before and takes the lead, working out a path from memory. Like a boy-scout leader, he stands at intersections waiting for everyone, looks over his shoulders as we ascend a cement embankment under storeys-high cement overpasses, encourages us that it isn't much farther when a few of us silently lag behind. It's windy down by the water, wintry,

though the temperature must be above zero. We pass several bus stops, but none of us has a clue where we might end up if we took one, even Craig can't read the little maps posted on the bus stop signs. And so we continue, uphill with that wind at our backs. If that wind doesn't die down by tonight, we'll be smart to buy extra clothes for our visit to the Luminaria.

Finally, Craig stops at a busy street divided by a median with thin trees still clenching their withered leaves, and here the city begins to take on its shape. Dense lunch-hour traffic, harried salary-men, office towers, a shopping area humming with moneyed, stylish women, banks on practically every corner. But it's as though we're in a little bubble, some force-field of invisibility surrounding us, no one gives us so much as a sideways glance, and I almost don't want our little group to split up. In pairs, separated, we'll be that much more invisible. What's to stop us then from disappearing completely? That's one of the funny things about being here: you can be an oddity, feel like a freak of nature and stand out like the proverbial sore thumb, and yet at the same time be completely unremarkable.

As it turns out, all of us want to head for China Town. I guess Craig's description while we rode the shuttle this morning sold it. And so we trek along the street, camouflaged by our freakishness, past more shops and more people, and more white cars and trucks, until we reach another wide north-south street, on the other side of which is a huge red archway with two pristine white lions baring their teeth. The narrow lane beyond is even more crowded, if possible, and our group is quickly split up, whether we want it to be or not. Craig and I are still side-by-side, and I wonder if I could take his arm with the excuse that I don't want to get separated. I make do, for now, with the thought that I'll be able to see his blue knit hat and bright hair through the crowd no matter how far ahead he gets. And with the thought that, away from the

rest of the group, we can do anything we please.

The smell of grilling food soon gets my stomach going, and I remember leaving a bowl of yoghurt and sliced banana on the counter as I rushed to get ready. In front of every shop a man or woman stands with a hot plate or grill or specially-made pan with individual hollows, some in the shape of fish or kittens. All of them are calling out, yelling, in words I wouldn't be able to understand even if I could, all the voices blending into one along the street, beckoning us to stop and taste.

"You hungry, El?" Craig asks, grabbing my arm. "Let's head over there, see what they have." And again, the warmth of his hand, through his glove and through my coat. Or am I just imagining it?

At the first stall, we try a deep-fried dumpling, stuffed with vegetables and meat. The second offers another deep-fried blob, which the dimpled granny behind the table says is a "*ku-ro-ket-to*". Craig says this means "croquette", made of potato and maybe fish, just like the ones we've had at Asian Junk Food, but in different shapes. The crowd pushes us along, and we let ourselves drift, making no effort to determine our own path through, and anyway we have no particular destination. Craig, I suppose, knows what's ahead, but he seems content to drift as well, and so we cling to each other like shipwrecked man to driftwood in a current. The crowd thins towards the end of the main street, and we are nudged in the direction of a side street, one not blocked by a food table. A shop not too far along has a collection of bright things hanging outside its open door—lanterns, balloons and kites, shirts and dresses swinging from hangers, wind-chimes sounding aimless tune.

"Let's go over there!" I say to Craig.

"Sure, El, whatever you like," he says. And we dodge a pod of Chinese grannies laden with carry-bags sprouting vegetables.

The shop is tiny, most of the merchandise hangs outside for a reason. And up close, most of the stuff is of rather poor quality and not so beautiful after all. On shelves inside, there are souvenirs, playing cards printed with pandas, plastic pandas and panda erasers, plastic stands supporting polyester flags in miniature, notebooks with the thinnest, cheapest paper imaginable. But there are some funny things too: figurines of chairman Mao, Mao t-shirts, Mao coffee mugs. I'm not sure, really, why I should find these things so funny. Perhaps it's the idea that an infamous—at least to the Western world—leader should find his way onto banal souvenirs in a foreign country. I can't imagine our prime minister on a mug, with his double chin hanging out above his dark suit and bright necktie. Maybe Rupert Murdoch. But not the Prime Minister.

"This would look good on you," says Craig. I look over and he's holding up a tiny red dress, in a Chinese style, with the short collar and the diagonal swath of buttons. "It's actually silk."

"That would never fit me," I tell him. "Look at it, it was made for a child." I point out the tiny red purse attached to the tag. I wonder if he's serious, does he really think this would look good on me? What sort of impression does he have of me? The dress is nice, but there's something a bit alarming about its size and its style, something that suggests 12-year-old child prostitute. The purse is barely large enough for a tube of lipstick, a condom and a wad of bills.

"Are you sure, El? I mean, the Chinese are smaller, generally..." he trails off and looks at the shop clerk. He says something in Japanese. She nods and comes out from behind the counter to rummage in a pile of cellophane-wrapped things in a box just inside the open door. She pulls something out and says something. Craig replies, then asks me, "What size are you?"

“What do you mean, what size are you? I’m not trying one of those things on. Anyway, they probably don’t make them that big.”

“Oh, come on, El. You’re small enough to fit into this one. But she says they have women’s sizes too. What do you wear?”

I sigh. “Depends on the shop, or whether we’re talking Oz sizes or American.”

“Well, Aussie small, medium, or large?”

“I don’t know. Medium?”

“Are you sure? Don’t you think small would fit?”

“These are Chinese women’s sizes, remember.”

“Okie-dokie, then,” and he says something else to the woman. She rustles through cellophane again, grunting, and comes up with a package that she brings back to the counter and slices open with a pen knife. She makes a big production out of slipping the dress from the cellophane and shaking it—as though that would be enough to banish all the wrinkles in the thin silk. She picks a black thread off the collar and holds the dress up, smiling. “*Dozo*,” she says to me. This dress is also small, and short. It won’t fall any farther than the tops of my knees, I’m sure.

“Oh, Craig, this is silly.”

“Go on, El, try it. I’d like to see you in it.” I look at him for a second, wondering what he means. The ambiguity of this whole thing is going to be the end of me, sooner than later.

I look around for a changeroom, but see nothing. The shop woman guesses and waves at a black curtain just to the side of the counter, then waddles over a couple of steps and pulls it aside, sets the dress down on a stool inside, reaches down to turn on a small space heater in the far corner. It’s dark inside, and there’s no mirror. I’ll have to come out to see what it looks like myself, aside from Craig’s wanting to see it.

I sigh again and pull the curtain across again. It's freezing in the changeroom in spite of the space heater, and there's a damp smell of cardboard and mothballs. I take off my mittens, coat, scarf, and wonder if I can leave my pants on as I pull off my t-shirt and jumper, if the dress will fit over the extra bulk of the belt loops. I undo the zip on the back of the dress, and try to slip it over my head. It's tight, but it goes over my shoulders and I wiggle it down past my breasts. The pants have to go, the dress is tight, a second skin. Under the cool silk, my thighs and ass erupt in goose bumps, and I shiver. I pull aside the curtain.

"Well, here it is," I say, "the little red dress and me in it."

The shop woman beams and nods, waving me over to the thin strip of mirror in front of the cash. Craig turns from the display of Mao kitsch. He smiles, but not before I manage to catch the look in his eye as he takes in the fact that the dress is not the same one-dimensional entity that it was in the shop woman's hands. "You've left on your hat and socks," he says, "but, you know, this could be the next big look in all the fashion magazines."

"You try on an eensy weensy dress in this temperature and see if you wouldn't leave on your long underwear," I say, laughing, turning to get a sideways view of myself. "Zip me up?"

"Sure," says Craig, taking off his gloves, and I feel his warm breath on the back of my neck, feel one hand press against my back while the other tugs upwards. This time the warmth is not imagined, the silk is thin enough.

"It looks good, Elinor."

"You don't think it's too tight?" I inhale and suck in my stomach, ripples of silk vanish, then come back when I let out my breath.

"Naw, it's just right." He stands and smiles at me.

I look in the mirror again and wonder if he's looking only at my breasts and ignoring how too-tight it is everywhere else. I glance at his face. His eyes blink and then he smiles. I have no idea where he was looking. "Well, guess I'd better take it off," I say jumping up and down a little, "I'm not getting any warmer out here."

Five minutes later I come out of the little changeroom, back in my winter wear. "*Arigato*," I say, shaking my head as I give the dress to the shop woman. She nods and smiles and begins to fold it up again.

"Don't you want it?" says Craig.

"Naw, it is a bit too small, I think. I tried bending over in the change closet, and nearly split the zipper. And besides, where would I ever wear it?"

"I don't know, I'm sure you could think of something."

"Well, I'm sure if I ever think of something, then I'll be able to find another dress somewhere." Like in any China Town, anywhere in the world.

"If you're sure you don't want it," Craig says.

I look at him for a minute. Why the pressure for this stupid dress? Does he want me to get it and wear it around the apartment for him when Renee's not home? Is he out of his tree? "I'm sure," I say. "Let's go, I'm getting really hungry."

We're half way along the narrow street before I realize we should have turned the other way to get back to the main street, the red one with all the lanterns and food stalls. "Hey," I say, laughing, and stop dead in the middle of the pavement.

"Hey," says Craig softly, and he stops too, turning to face me. He looks at me, brushes a strand of hair away from my face with his gloved fingers, then takes the glove off and touches my cheek. "Hey," he says again, and kisses me.

At first, I'm too surprised to react. And then my reaction is only physical and we're both full-on making out, in the middle of this side street, the shop woman

standing in the doorway of her shop watching us, for all I know, men in the alley hauling trash out the back of their restaurants leering at us before they go back inside to fry more noodles. But for the moment, I don't care. I have my hands around his face, his neck, his back, his arms, not thinking about much of anything except how much I want to fall to the ground and see what else we get up to. But this is hardly the place.

A honking horn gradually insinuates itself between us, then angry shouts break us apart. "We're in the way," I say, and drag Craig with me to the side of the street, out of the path of a small blue delivery truck. We have to press against the wall, the street is so narrow. The driver continues to honk and yell as the truck passes, in its wake the smell of fish and diesel. Craig's looking at me, his blue eyes blank, the pupils dilated, that stupid look guys always get when the proportion of blood going to their brains has been upset, when they're thinking about one thing only and can't willingly think of anything else until that one thing has been taken care of. He leans in to kiss me again. I respond, but make it a kiss of closure—we can't stand here all afternoon with our tongues in each other's mouths. As much as I want this, we can't be here, so I pull away and make myself be the voice of reason.

"Hey," I say, smiling. Craig blinks a couple of times, smiling back.

"Well, Elinor," he says, and pauses. I wait. "Maybe we should go and get something else to eat after all."

"Mmm, yes, why don't we." And though I know it's a good idea, I'm a little disappointed he hasn't got anything else to say for himself. He touches my cheek one last time before putting his hands back in his gloves and readjusting his rucksack, and we head back to the main street and in search of a restaurant.

We take a chance on the first restaurant we come across. It's neither a

complete dive, nor one of those fancy pink-tableclothed places where the menu has generic dishes suitable for palates unaccustomed to mystery vegetables and too much spice. It's comfortable, and fairly cheap, and we get a table by the window overlooking the street. That look has faded from Craig's eyes, and we smile awkwardly and look out the window and unfold our napkins out of their swan-shapes, refold them into wrinkled lumps. I'm grateful when the waiter brings the menus and pours water.

"What do you like, El? Fancy anything spicy? Do you like sweet and sour?"

Funny how when your mind is on something else, anything that's said can take on another meaning. "Er, pretty much anything," I say, and then wonder how that will sound to him if his mind is on two tracks like mine is. "But maybe today, something simple...something with chicken...there's always something with chicken and cashews, isn't there?" I flip pages.

"Do want to share?" Craig asks. "We each choose something and try the other's?"

"Sure," I say, still trying—not very successfully—to keep my mind on food alone. "Unless you're going for something with tofu. I'm well sick of tofu."

"No worries there, El," he says.

We order, and while waiting have some of the most stilted conversation I've ever had with anyone. Never mind with someone whom I used to have such an easy way with, and so recently. My tongue is tied, I'm thinking too much about what just happened, I'm thinking about what he might be thinking about, I'm thinking, thinking, thinking and I can't speak to save my life, how will I manage to hold chopsticks and put food in my mouth and swallow, if my brain and tongue can't coordinate for the simple act of speaking?

“So, you’ll never guess what Renee was telling me last night after work. We were half watching another of the stupid videos her friend keeps sending her from America, and we were bored, so we started talking about guys.” I pause, a nervous giggle coming out more like a hiccup. I take a sip of water. Craig’s looking at me, his swan napkin strangled in one hand. I preferred the stupid expression he had on his face before, after we kissed. And thinking about that makes me feel self-conscious again all over again. “She confessed that she’s got a crush on a student.” I start piling cashew chicken on my plate, steamed rice, and whatever beefy thing Craig’s ordered. I look up at him, but he’s concentrating on his food. “But I won’t tell you who. It’s probably better if you don’t know, because then if Renee is ever working on your shift, you’ll have to worry all the more about scheduling. So, it’s better left a secret. Don’t you think?” I ask. My cheeks are on fire.

“Well, Elinor,” he says around a mouthful of beef, “I don’t know. Even just telling me that is kind of, well, telling, isn’t it? It’s not a secret anymore, even if I don’t know his name.” He takes some water, clears his throat. “I kind of wish you hadn’t said anything at all, because it compromises me in my position as Assistant Trainer.”

“Oh, come on, don’t pull seniority on me, don’t bring work into this,” I say.

“But it is about work, if a student’s involved,” he says.

“Yes, but I told you as my friend, not as my boss.”

“How is that different, when it comes to a piece of information about work?”

“Oh, so you’re saying that for anything concerning work, you’re automatically my boss and not my friend? Is that it?” I stab at a piece of chicken with my chopsticks.

“No, no Elinor, that’s not what I’m saying at all.” He puts down his

chopsticks. “And you know as well as I do that almost all of us, at both schools in Takomitsu, look the other way when students and teachers hang out. I’m no saint in that regard either. Everyone—except Mr. Area Manager, and even there, I imagine he has his ways of finding things out—knows that Russ and I have gone surfing with a couple of students, and more than once. I can’t think of a single teacher who hasn’t met with a student outside the school. I think it’s a ridiculous thing to expect, to be quite honest with you, that the very people we get to know well while we’re here are, from the get-go, off-limits. Russ was saying that his friend, a lawyer, reckons it’s against our human rights. And that if we had the wherewithal, we could sue Vista. But I don’t really think it would be necessary to go that far. Almost every AT thinks the policy is bollocks and would do little to enforce it.”

“But what about what happened with Melinda? Fired for being caught with a student? Sent home before the completion of her contract, no warning, nothing?”

“Yes, well, that was more to do with teacher politics than with any real desire to uphold Vista law, so to speak.”

“And what about the staff, then? How kindly would Michiko the *gaijin*-hater feel about interracial friendship? Or romance?”

“Staff don’t have as much power as you might think, when all’s said and done. How Michiko feels about us is not necessarily viewed in a positive light by her superiors, either. Or not the more enlightened ones. Or even the ones who only care about the bottom line and the fact that the demand for foreign language lessons continues to increase by ten percent every year.”

“Well, all I’m saying is, I’m not sure we shouldn’t be concerned about Renee, and what might happen if she pursues this student. We all know that she’s no shrinking violet. And I’m not sure we can trust all the ATs. For that matter, maybe we

can't be sure we can really trust you." I'm still stabbing at that chicken.

"Look, what is this really about, El? To be perfectly honest with you, I couldn't care less if she has a crush on a student, as long as it doesn't interfere with her doing her job. And besides, she's always on the evening shift, so strictly speaking, it's not even my concern, is it—Reg would be the one to deal with it. So don't worry, El, I'm not going to blow your cover—or Renee's and by extension yours. And I was joking when I said that bit about being AT. I mean, of course I'm your friend, and Renee's friend, before anything else. But it's true that in some situations, I'm going to have to think a bit differently now. But you know I'm always going to be on your side, all the teachers' sides, no matter what. So come on, stop worrying that pretty head of yours. Of course you can trust me."

"Oh," I say, frowning. That piece of chicken with the stab wound gets another volley of abuse from chopsticks held by a left hand that has taken on a life of its own. I feel like shit, somehow. That I've made Craig have to say it's okay to trust him. And that I wonder if I can feel trust him. With things unrelated to work. "Sorry." I say.

Craig smiles, takes up his own chopsticks again. "So, what is this really about, El? You're not usually so defensive. Is it work? Have you been doing too many shift-swaps lately?"

"No, it's not work, it's nothing. I don't know," I say, and stuff the stabbed chicken in my mouth.

"How is that chicken, anyway?"

I chew and swallow with difficulty, though the chicken's been perforated so many times it ought to go down easily. "Why ask me?" I laugh, "You've got some."

"Yes, but what do *you* think of it, Elinor. I really want your expert opinion on this here Cashew Chicken with mixed veg, see, because usually I get Mu Shu Pork

and so I haven't got the experience to back up any claims about some new-fangled chicken dish."

I look up, ready with a defensive comment again, but the look in his eye, combined with the American drawl he's taken on, gets me to giggling instead. He smiles, and then I feel like everything's going to be all right. I just wish there was a way to make that feeling last.

"Is it really true about Renee?" he asks then.

"Yes—why would I make something like that up?"

"Oh, I dunno, maybe... oh, never mind. As a joke, I guess. Russ's habit of taking the piss seems to be going around lately."

"Well, not me. I'm deadly serious." I try to make a stern face, but just trying to hold it gets me giggling again after a seconds. The waiter comes to ask in Japanese if everything is okay. Or feel safe in assuming—that's what waiters always ask when they come to the table with nothing in their hands and leave taking nothing with them. "Really, if you think about this, isn't it weird?" I say slowly to Craig. "We're in Japan, but what are we doing? Eating lunch in a Chinese restaurant in China Town in one of Japan's bigger cities. And the waiter speaks Japanese, but probably can barely muddle his way through a couple of words in English."

"Yes, but that's no different than a waiter in Sydney perhaps recently arrived from China who speaks English pretty well but hasn't got more than a word of Japanese. And anyway, how do you know the waiter isn't Japanese?"

"Well, that could be true, but then that's part of what I mean," I say, merely poking at the chicken now. "I mean, don't you think it's strange that we—all of us here today—didn't really think twice about what part of the city we wanted to see? China Town! Why not something Japanese, something to help us gain a greater

appreciation for the culture we're in? I mean, why didn't we stay in the shopping district, try on *kimono* and *geta* and find a restaurant serving Kōbe beef? Or go to the earthquake museum and find out more about why they started this Luminaria thingy? But no! Instead, we all drag our sorry, unadventurous arses to China Town, for crying out loud."

Craig smiles, but he says "I'd hardly say we're pathetic and unadventurous simply because we decided to visit China Town instead of something 'Japanese.'" He waves his hand at the room, saying, "You could argue that this is as Japanese as anything else we might have chosen to see. At any rate, in terms of modern Japan, post-isolationist Japan. All this is Japan, isn't it? Just like our presence here, now: we're becoming a part of Japan, we're influencing the culture and how it operates. Just look at words from English that have snuck into common usage. A student I had last week wrote out the word '*ko-myu-ni-ke-shun*' in *katakana*, but when I pressed her for the Japanese translation, she couldn't for the life of her remember the word."

Craig scrapes the rest of the Cashew Chicken onto my plate. "Here, you finish this. And anyway, I have a theory about why we all decided to come to China Town, and I don't think we need to beat ourselves up for having done so, for having a need to do so. I think we all wanted to have an experience we could feel was at least somewhat familiar. All of us have been to China Town at home, and cities practically all over the world have Chinese quarters."

"Especially cities like Beijing and Shanghai," I say.

"Oh, haha. But seriously, El. In a way, being in China Town is, in a way, like being at home—it makes us think of the China Towns in our home cities, and if we closed our eyes we might almost believe that on the other side of that red gate we walked through was a regular old Western street with larger cars—not that I'm saying

that's a good thing—and crowds of people speaking English and going to work in the morning and going to pubs after work and loading up the roof-rack with surf gear on the weekends. Or whatever else it is they load onto their roof-racks in America and Canada. Skis, I guess. You know what I mean, Elinor? After all, you could have put up a word of protest when we got off the ferry, couldn't you? But you were just as eager as everyone else was to come here. And I think that's why."

"Maybe you're right. I couldn't say you're wrong." What I also couldn't say—because I didn't want him to know—was that I'd come here because he wanted to, and I would've gone anywhere he was planning to go. It makes me sound weak, I know, but maybe my attraction to him is rooted in the same thing he claims governed our desire to come to China Town today: the need for something familiar, some reminder of home and a part of myself that is sometimes hard to see here, or gets lost amidst all the re-labelling and reinvention that goes on. The Japanese think you're one thing, and then every foreigner you meet says you're yet another, and another. And to add to the confusion, you yourself find it convenient to change your own idea of yourself from day to day, to embellish what you started out with when you arrived. Like if you don't actively do something to make 'more' of yourself, you will by default become 'less'. I'd have to confess that there's nothing particularly new in self-reinvention—several times since adolescence, I've stripped myself down and pasted on something completely new. Here, though, the process is on fast-forward, every day something happens that causes to you call yourself into question, something happens and you react as you never expected you'd ever react, and you have to wonder if there is anything to the notion that personality, character, is something inherent, or something that only changes very slowly over a great deal of time. A lifetime, say. Instead, sometimes I feel like a paper doll, one flimsy outfit giving way for another,

with a prettier pattern, or a flouncier skirt. New and improved for every occasion.

“You ready for tea?” Craig says. The waiter’s standing there with a pot.

“Oh, sorry! Daydreaming. Yes, thanks.” I turn over my cup.

Outside the window, above the shops and restaurants across the street, the sky in the west has begun fading to peach and grey, though it’s still a dingy blue in the east. No clouds. It’ll be a clear night, stars everywhere. That is, it would be, if the Luminaria weren’t happening. If we weren’t in the city, and if Japan weren’t, from space, one of the brightest countries on the entire planet. I think about the last time I saw a “night” photo of Earth taken from space, by a satellite, or maybe by astronauts on one of those NASA shuttles or something. And how in black and white, with all the little dots of light representing the city centres making each continent and even many countries recognizable, the photo could have been a map of stars itself, if not for all the wide black swaths of the oceans. If I could see a star right now, I might indulge myself in a wish, though I wouldn’t expect it to come true. Maybe I should take up reading tea-leaves. I hear that the Japanese do it too. Maybe I could take lessons in tea-leaf reading.

“Elinor?”

“Yeah. Sorry.”

“Shall we go?”

“Yeah.”

Craig and I are not ten feet away from the restaurant when we run into Hannah and Philippa. The four of us amble back down the main street through the thinning crowd and the vendors now packing up their food stalls, to the red gate where we were to meet. There is no sign of Russ. We wait for him a half hour past our

designated meeting time, at which point the sun has fully set and the sky is dark—though not dark enough to see stars. Even on a regular night, in a city this bright, it's doubtful the stars would be visible anyway. Craig says we should just head for the starting point of the Luminaria, that Russ knows where it is and maybe we'll run into him there.

But it quickly becomes clear that running into anyone we know will be next to impossible. At a point that seems miles from the first Luminaria gate—the only one lit at this point, as they're waiting until 8:00 to turn all of them on—people are filling the street, leaving considerate gaps at intersections so cars will still be able to pass. I suspect that even if there weren't a cop or two at each corner, wearing long navy coats and waving orange and white glow-in-the-dark batons, people would still leave these gaps. Japan is clearly a car culture; but also the socially-ingrained consideration for others would dictate the mass effort—and a mass effort would be required in a crowd this size—to come to a dead halt every time the light changes. Our little group hesitates at an intersection, though the light is green, but the cop points his baton and waves us across. We stop on the opposite corner—trying to move much farther ahead is pointless. We are surrounded by people shorter than ourselves, talking, laughing, holding hands, hoisting small children on their shoulders, pressing out text-messages on their cell phones, winding their scarves a little tighter, shrugging deeper into their coats, smiling or merely blandly observing as they wait. It's the collective picture of perfect civil obedience: absolutely no pushing and shoving, people are close together but there's still more than enough room to breath, to rummage in oversize handbags, to shift from foot to foot to stay warm. No one speaks too loudly, no one tries to bully his or her way through closer to the starting point, no one even bumps into anyone else. Is this what marathon competitors feel like as they take their places before the

race, or is this what cattle feel like as they're being led to slaughter? An excited passivity in the face of an impending event, the result of which is not entirely known, but holds a threat? For that's how I feel, in spite of the crowd's obedience, that something bad could happen, that once the clock strikes eight, the crowd will immediately respond with a frenzied rush towards the red-and-gold-lighted gate, and we'll be trampled, pulverized under ten thousand pairs of fine leather shoes. The morning would see us swept up by the city maintenance workers, as though we were nothing more than cellophane or paper, deposited in a dumpster, and hauled away in a truck and incinerated. When I say 'us', I mean we five *gaijin*. Then I entertain myself with a scene in which Craig saves us all from certain-death-by-eager-throng: having some kind of prescience about what is to come, he hears the seconds counting down to eight and herds us together, telling us to join hands and make for the sidewalk and then the nearest side-street, and not to let go of each other no matter what. (Of course, he takes my hand first.) And just as we reach the side-street, the second our sneakered feet take us round the corner, a bell sounds and the crowd surges forward, and we look back to see this tide of heads begin its forward flow towards the Luminaria, now pushing, now shoving, now letting loose what had been so carefully contained only minutes before. And then, of course, because we're all so grateful he's saved us, we rush at him to hug him or give him a kiss. And of course, I'm last and he lets me kiss him the longest, and we're still kissing as the rest of our group clutch at each other and move a little farther away from the mindless tumult on the main street.

Someone nudges my arm. "Hey, it's just a couple minutes before 8:00," says Philippa, grinning. "Get ready to start walking."

"I just hope no one trips," I say, distilling my paranoia and fantasy into something that could actually happen.

“Oh, can you imagine?” says Philippa.

Hannah shudders and makes a face. “Oh, don’t even say that. If you went down, you probably wouldn’t come back up.”

“Or there’d be some kind of domino effect,” says Philippa.

“Hush, now, you three,” says Craig, “such fear-mongering will not be tolerated. We are here to have fun.”

“But seriously, though, it could happen!” I say. “There’s no way you could stop the forward momentum of a crowd this big.”

“Sure you could,” he says, “and anyway, if you tripped, people would probably just go around you.”

“As if!” says Philippa. “Everyone would be looking way ahead at the bloody lights, and even the person right behind you wouldn’t notice you’d fallen until he stepped on your head, or tripped over your arm and landed on top of you.”

“Well, then, eventually enough people would pile up and there’d be a visible mountain, and then the police would move in and set up some kind of barricade.”

“Meanwhile, you suffocate under all the Louis Vuitton and Chanel, and they send you home on the next container ship packed in ice,” says Russ, appearing behind me.

“Where the hell were you all day, mate? We reckoned you’d fallen off the pier and drowned.”

“Please, can we stop having such morbid conversations?” I say.

“Hey, guys, it’s thirty seconds to 8:00,” says Hannah.

“On your marks, get set...” says Craig.

And ahead, behind that first lit gate, the rest of the Luminaria comes on, gate after gate after gate of red, green, blue and gold lights pushing back into space. The

effect is of a solid arch extending along over the street, as though a doorless cathedral had suddenly appeared in the middle of the city, or maybe a fairy-tale palace inhabited by lightning bugs. From here, it's hard to see how widely spaced the gates are, or how long the whole thing is. Once we start to move, there's no stopping. But the crowd proceeds very slowly, as polite and unhurried as it was when all fifty thousand of us were just waiting. But it's still an odd sensation, to be moving along the street, essentially locked in by the thousands of people in front and behind, unable to stop, unable to move closer to the centre or farther to the side, held in the web of faces and bodies as though this and this alone is your place. The pace doesn't alter, like everyone knows just how fast to walk. There's something disturbing about it, in spite of the calm. Just ahead to my right, I see Hannah wobble a bit, and she takes a step to the side to try and stabilize, and for a second I feel a leap of worry in my stomach—though at the speed we're moving she's unlikely to be trampled upon. I watch her for a minute. She's lost a lot of weight since I first met her, being sick last week probably didn't help much. I hope she doesn't faint.

It seems like forever before we reach the first gate. Our group of *gaijin* has separated somewhat in however long it's taken us to get here. It's hard to tell, time has become irrelevant, ticking past at a rate out of proportion to our movement. Maybe unconcerned if anyone sees us, or because he knows everyone's focus is on the light show, Craig takes my left arm, draws me closer to him. Can't say as I much mind, but it gets me to thinking again. What are we doing? Is this just something to pass the time? Should I be asking questions?

"Here we go, Elinor," he says, giving my arm a squeeze. And we pass through the first gate, craning our necks to take in the height and breadth of the structure supporting the lights. The pace we're walking is very suggestive of a wedding march,

and I can't help but think of what it would be like to be walking along the aisle of some great church in Sydney, arm in arm, with two hundred beaming relatives on either side. Oh, Elinor, my mother would say, I always knew you'd find happiness one day, and she'd dab at the tears streaming down her smiling cheeks. And as much as I've always held her in some contempt for counting on me, needing me, to do this, to succeed in the area that she considers the greatest failure of her life, her marriage, there's a part of me—however small—that would take pleasure in making her happy. But I know that's not the only thing about uniting myself forever to someone I loved that would bring me pleasure. So, am I under the impression that I love him? Or is it just that we're here, together, and when it gets right down to it, there aren't a whole lot of choices? Stop thinking, Elinor, turn off your brain for god's sake and enjoy this.

Beyond the last of the arches, there is a smaller and less impressive circle of structures erected in what seems like a sand pit. Craig and I, still arm in arm, make our way over. The ground isn't sand, but just bare earth, hard compacted, the grass—if there was any to start with—worn away with the passing of so many feet. Hannah and Philippa are standing at the other side. As we head towards them, a small group of Japanese moving out of our way, Craig lets go of my arm. So, that's how it is, for real, then. I paste a smile on my face for Hannah's and Philippa's benefit.

"Howdy," says Philippa, "so, what did you think of all that?"

"Same as last year, but enjoyable," says Craig.

"I'm starving!" I say.

"How can you be hungry after all that Cashew Chicken you ate earlier?"

"I don't know, I just am. Maybe because I can smell something cooking. Can't you? Oh, I wonder what it is!"

"Well, there ought to be an area around here with food tents, just like at every

festival,” says Craig.

“Do they have Kōbe beef? I really want to try it.”

Craig gives me a look. Is it meant to be teasing? Chastising? The look of a lover, or an older brother? Or of a lover who is suddenly critical of something he once encouraged? “What?” I say. “Why not? I might never get another chance.”

“True enough,” he says, “if you’re only planning on staying one year.”

“Even if I decide to stay longer, I might never make it back to Kōbe.” Here we go, having a spat again. Maybe we’ll have to talk about this, about what’s happened, on the ride back to Takomitsu. But not here, now, in front of Hannah and Philippa, and Russ.

Elinor

What better way to celebrate my six-month anniversary in Japan than to accompany my horny roommate to Amigo’s Bar for a night of drinking and other forms of debauchery? It’s her birthday, as well. And spring is more than in the air, it’s popping up from the ground in phallic blossoms, it’s pooling on leaves and blades of grass like dew, it’s wafting in from the harbour and from farther parts unknown and settling over everything in a fine mist, it’s gotten into my blood and is making my skin absolutely prickle with anticipation. Surely spring will have a hell of a lot more to say for itself than winter ever thought of murmuring under its wretched, desperate breath. No more men! I say—that’s my motto for the coming months. Unless they’re strutting around on a stage lit up like it’s 1979, wearing nothing but tight, sequined leopard-print g-strings, spilling *hyaku-man-en* bills out their fronts, and perfectly waxed,

tanned and pretty. But please: no blonds, especially with long curly hair and blue eyes. Fortunately, so Renee tells me—she’s been something of a regular in the past month—the “amigos” of Amigo’s Bar are, more often than not, Latino men with short dark hair and eyes the colour of mole sauce. So I should be safe from any unwelcome associations. I put in my dangly rhinestone earrings, discouraging my brain from remembering that the last time I wore them was the evening last month when Craig announced he was thinking of proposing to his on-again-off-again girlfriend back home in Oz.

“Aren’t you ready yet?” Renee hollers from her room, over the music.

“Give me a break, I got home later than you,” I holler back, trying to reach my back zip, peering into the bathroom mirror. There’s still an inch to go, but I can’t get it. “Renee? Can you help me with my zip?”

“Sure, hon,” she yells, “but can you come here? I don’t want to leave this thing plugged in if I leave the room, but it’s not heated up enough yet. These damn *tatami* mats, that’s all I need is to set ’em on fire.” I head for her bedroom. She’s sitting on the edge of her futon, pulling on a pair of over-the-knee stockings, there’s a curling iron resting on the edge of the windowsill, the weight of the cord looking as though it will pull the whole works down onto several bras piled on the *tatami* below.

“Wouldn’t it be safer to clear some of the stuff off your lovely Vista plastic dresser set, and put the iron there to heat up?” I suggest, repressing the urge to run over and move the bras out of the way.

“Yeah. That would take too much effort, though, wouldn’t it. It’s fine up there, so long as I’m in the room.” She takes my shoulders and turns me around and does up the zip. “There you are, hon.” She winks at me and turns to her closet. “Which dress, this here one, with the ribbon, or this other one, with the sheer panel across the back?”

I like the ribbon one, because of the waist detail, but I'm kinda leaning towards this one here."

"Do you have a camisole to wear under it?"

"What, you think I need one?"

"Well, I don't know. Maybe you wouldn't back home, or in Oz. But here..."

Renee makes a disparaging noise. "You're forgetting what sort of club we're going to, hon. I mean, I know there's a dress code, but all they say is no jeans, no t-shirts, and no exposed breasts or crotches. That leaves it pretty wide open."

"Yeah, I suppose," I lamely agree. "So, how much longer before you're ready, do you reckon?"

"Oh, say, half an hour? I just have to put the dress on and do my hair," she says, "but we have plenty of time—things don't really get going there 'til around ten anyway."

"Okay. Well, I'm ready, so maybe I'll slip out for a bit, go to the corner for a can of beer or something."

"You and your beer," says Renee, shaking her head.

I'm not sure it's beer I want, though. Maybe I just don't want to sit around and watch Renee curl her hair and finish tarting herself up. I grab a sweater and let the metal door clang shut behind me, at the stairwell resist the temptation to go up instead of down. As I walk through the parking lot, I hold myself steady, refusing to turn around and look up at the fifth floor to see if their lights are on. At the street, past the dumpsters, I stop, realizing I don't know what to do, why I came out here. I look down towards the row of vending machines, their fluorescent lights spilling onto the street, bubbles of lighter grey pavement at their feet, a haze of new spring leaves reaching out from someone's yard above them. The street in the other direction, lit by

the apartment building next door, leads to the harbour. But before that, though, is the outdoor community pool. I've been literally counting the days until it opens for the season. Even though I know there are eleven to go, I go over and check the sign again. Not that I can read it anyway—Russ had to decipher it for me one evening after work.

When I'm just across the street from the pool, I can hear water lapping. I'm too far away from the harbour, so it must be the pool—they've finally filled it. I hurry across the street. I don't know why I've become so obsessed with this pool. Maybe it's just a reminder of home—like China Town—a place where my expectations can be fulfilled easily and without the usual socio-cultural dancing and manoeuvring that seems perpetually necessary here. A pool is for swimming in, maybe jumping or diving into on occasion, and for lying beside: end of story. You pay the token admission fee, go in and change into your swimsuit, stand under the shower for a minute and there you are, same process all around the world. None of this freakish undressing and soaping down in front of hundreds of curious eyes, like at the public baths. No, just plain, simple, and predictable routine.

I reach the chain-link fence and hook my fingers into the wires, peer though, see the surface of the pool move and glimmer under the one lamp that has been left on. The sound of lapping water is not just from the breeze lifting peaks and slapping them against the side of the pool, but because someone has climbed the fence and is now doing the front crawl. Perhaps it's a maintenance worker who finished cleaning and filling the pool, and then decided to test it out. But there's something familiar about the figure, the size, the form, the movements, though I've not seen anyone swimming since I arrived. I squint through the chain-link, trying to see as the figure passes directly under the lamp light if I know who it is. The figure stops halfway through a lap and treads water for a minute, does a few flippy tricks, and then scoots

over to the ladder at the side of the pool closest to me. Light hits the side of his face and I feel a jolt as I recognize Russ. He walks towards a pile of clothes and towel a couple of feet away from where I'm standing. I don't know what to do; if I say nothing, he might not see me, but he probably will and then I'll feel like an idiot because he'll think I've been standing here gawking at him for god knows how long and getting off on it or something.

"Russ?" I say, "Is that you?" I might as well take the offensive position and be the one to startle him.

"Jesus, Elinor, what are you doing here?" He finishes drying himself, wraps the towel around his waist and walks towards me.

"Well, I might ask you the same thing," I say, raising my eyebrow at him once he's close enough to see it, "in here, after dark, probably illegally. You're damn lucky I'm not a serious-minded Japanese police officer."

"Well, I should imagine what I'm doing is obvious enough," he says, the corner of his mouth turning up as it always does, "you know, getting wet, moving one's arms through the water, kicking now and then: in most circles, it's referred to as 'swimming', I believe."

"Now, no need for sarcasm, darling," I say.

"And you? What excuse do you have for lurking on a dark street watching an innocent young boy get undressed and frolic in the water?"

"Innocent, my arse," I say, laughing. "And how was I supposed to know that you'd be here, undressed or not? Anyway, I saw you get out of the pool, but not get in it, I've been here only a bit longer than the beginning of this inane conversation."

"You perverts have a sixth sense for these things," he says. "You could probably tell from all the way on the fourth floor that someone in the neighbourhood

was half naked.”

“Are you not wearing a swimming suit?” I ask, casting a glance over his bare torso, down which water is running from his dripping hair. I thought he’d been wearing something when he stepped out of the pool, some sort of gear—if not a Speedo then something similar.

“Well, since you asked...” Russ wags his eyebrows. “Tighty whiteys,” he says. “Or in this case, orangeys.” He lets down a corner of his towel to show me the waistband of his grundies.

“Right, thanks for that,” I say laughing and looking up at the vines that have started creeping across the top of the fence. He wraps the towel tighter.

“You did, as I recall, ask,” he says, flipping his hair back out of his eyes.

“Well?” he says then.

“‘Well’ what?” I ask.

“What are you doing here?”

“Oh, my daily inspection of the grounds, to make sure everything will be as I require on opening day. But here you are, sneaking in and ruining everything. I ought to slap a fine on you, or throw your arse in *gaijin* prison.”

“Or you could throw the fine in prison and slap my arse.” That smile again.

“Oh, very amusing. Very amusing, you are,” I say. “But seriously, I cannot wait until it opens, I don’t care if it’s raining the first day, I’m going to be in that pool. But aren’t you cold?” I ask. There’s a bit of a breeze from the harbour, and though spring in Japan is definitely mild mannered—it was almost twenty degrees this afternoon—there’s still a nip in the air at night.

“Elinor, the pool is heated. And furthermore, compared to oceans I’ve surfed in, and beaches I’ve stood upon, wet and wearied from surfing, this is nothing. But

you're right, I should get dressed and make my way back to the apartment." He pauses and looks at me for a second. "I was, however, planning to remove my rather soggy briefs, so unless you'd like a bit of a show, you might want to turn away for a moment."

"I will allow you that decency," I say, turning away and leaning my back against the fence. "Though it's a good warm-up for the evening's festivities, as it seems stripping is on the agenda tonight," I add over my shoulder.

"Elinor! I had no idea things were so desperate for you that you have to resort to working in a snack bar. You know, you really might consider cutting back on your beer consumption if you're finding your budget is a little tight. Or asking Reg for a few shifts of overtime."

"Oh, for crying out loud," I say, crossing my arms and wondering why it is that two people in the span of one hour have seen fit to comment on my drinking habits. Have I been drinking more than usual lately? Certainly, I haven't been slogging back any more than anyone else around here has. And there's absolutely no way I've been drinking more than either Russ or Renee. "That's not it at all, as you well know. Renee's taking me to Amigo's, sort of a combined birthday-anniversary sort of thing."

"Christ, Elinor, what do you want to go to a place like that for." His mood has switched in an instant from one of good-natured teasing to outright scorn. The fence wobbles behind my shoulders, and I hear Russ exhale heavily, his shoes squeak against the metal links. I lurch forward away from the fence, stand back and watch as he swings one leg over the top, finds a toe-hold, swings the other over and then jumps the rest of the way to the ground, towel and soggy briefs in hand. Show off.

"What do you mean anyway, a place like that?" I ask as we start walking back

to the building. "Tell me how Amigo's is any worse than those dens of sanctioned sin you and Craig and all the bloody boys have gone to. And what about *geisha* parlours? Let's not forget that longstanding and highly-valued tradition of privileged prostitution. Come on, Russ, don't give me any of that double standard bullshit. I'd've expected better than that of you, of all people I know here. Unless you've been here so long that you're starting to think like them, like the Japanese, or like those *gaijin* men who come here with their Western prejudices and latent sexism."

"Aw, Elinor, for Chrissake's, don't be so sensitive. Nor, I might add, so judgmental. But as a matter of fact, I do happen to think Amigo's is worse than the average snack bar." He pauses at the corner where a square of concrete cover has been removed from the gutter, and gives his underwear another squeeze out.

"Why? How is it worse?" I wonder if he'll just hang his underwear out on the balcony and wear it again when it's dried.

"Because I think it preys on poor lonely Western women who, for obvious reasons, can't get a Japanese boyfriend, and so have to resort to getting attention by going to what amounts to an escort service. In fact, Amigo's is not even that civilized."

"Oh, come on, Russ, Amigo's is not an escort service."

"Not on paper, no." He's tied his towel in a knot around his underwear and is throwing the whole lot up into the air and running forward a couple of steps to catch it. "Not on paper. But—well, I'll say no more. You'll see tonight, I guess. Or perhaps you'll come away as smitten with 'Jorge' or 'Italo' as Renee is with Sergio."

"Who's Sergio?"

"Hasn't she mentioned him yet? Well, be sure and ask her on your way there tonight, see what she has to say herself."

“She’ll figure out we’ve been talking, then.”

“Well, if she told me, I hardly think she’s trying to keep it secret. Not that I’m some loose-lipped sticky-beak—usually I’m the last to hear of the goings-on amongst our fine Vista colleagues, not to mention the last to talk.” We’ve reached the parking lot, passed the dumpsters, passed the rows of little white cars and the bicycle lock-up. High up in one of the buildings, someone’s laundry snaps on its balcony-strung line. Hardly even thinking, I look up at the fifth floor. The lights are off.

“He’s not home tonight, El,” Russ says, walking ahead of me towards the stairwell.

For a second, I’m too stunned to say anything. Then I run to catch up as he begins to mount the stairs. “Fuck you, Russ,” I call up to his heels as they disappear around the corner. “For all you know, I was looking up at my own damn apartment.”

“Goodnight, El, have a grand time with the *gaijin* gigolos,” comes his voice down the stairwell.

I feel like the goddamn rice cooker a student gave me—scalding hot, simmered nearly to dry, ready to either explode or switch off. I storm up the stairs behind him, not a rational thought in my head. I’m just rounding the corner at 4, and from 5 above I hear the sound of a metal door slamming shut. “Fuck you, Russ,” I say again under my breath, my ears and eyes burning. I want to slam shut our door, but I won’t give him the satisfaction of hearing it.

“What’s the matter, Elinor?” Renee says, hearing me curse again. She pokes her head out the bathroom door. “What took you so long anyway?”

“Oh, nothing,” I say through my teeth. “Nothing at all.”

“You didn’t run into Craig, did you, hon?” she asks.

“No, no, that would’ve been absolutely fine, you know, because Craig’s

incapable of changing his attitude towards anyone, no matter what they've done or said. He likes everyone equally, which almost suggests he doesn't really like anyone much at all." Renee barks a laugh as I grab a couple of squares of toilet paper and dab under my eyes, hoping not to smudge my mascara. I turn and look at her.

"You look great. Here, put some of this on." She holds out a bottle of her perfume, lifts my hair and drenches my neck. "Mmmm Killer."

"Is that the name of it?" I ask, rubbing my wrists on my neck to pick up the scent. It's pretty strong, but maybe it's because I don't usually wear perfume. This time, I figure what the hell. Might as well go all the way with this evening of sleaze.

"Ha! No, it's 'Obsession.' Calvin Klein."

"Oh. It's nice." A bit sweet, though. "Are you wearing it, too?"

"Naw, it wouldn't do for us to wear the same one. We have to have our own individual alluring scents for the boys to go wild over." She flounces out of the bathroom and back to her bedroom. "Lemme just grab my purse, and then we're outta here!"

Amigo's is in the west end of town, at the corner of a tiny side street bisected by the *Kotoden* tracks and a wider, busier street lined with second-hand and pawn shops and all manner of fast food joints. It's a blur of neon and grim faces as the cab speeds past, headlights reflecting off windows and eyes and orange and green panels on sneakers, and the metal clasps on handbags. There's a hint of amorality about everything, somehow, though it's not the same as the district closer to downtown where the snack bars are located. That area is more up-scale, with all the salary-men stumbling around, utterly sloshed on *sake* and unsatiated desires, and the "leisure"

men—urban cowboys?—strutting in their fancy Italian shoes and stovepipe pants, smoking expensive French cigarettes, their women perfectly made-up, in designer clothes, and in shoes so high they can barely walk and have to hold their male companions' arms. Here, people seem lean and hungry, looking for something instead of looking to be looked at. Here, there's a reckless feeling in the air, but at the same time there's less of a façade than elsewhere, in other places and situations, and in spite of a mild feeling of danger, the honesty comes as a welcome relief.

"It's just up there, at the corner," Renee bellows to the driver.

"Does he even speak English?" I ask.

"A little, I think. Besides, he's taken me here before, he'll probably remember."

"*Koko-ni?*" the driver asks, stopping at the kerb.

"*Hai, domo,*" says Renee, dipping into her purse.

"How much is it?" I ask, taking out my own wallet.

"Oh, same as always, but don't worry, I'll get it."

"But it's your birthday," I protest.

"So get me a drink for every month you've been here, and we'll call it a Happy one," she says, getting out of the cab. "*Domo arigato!*" she trills at the driver as she slams the door. He waves his white-gloved hand and drives away.

"Well, let's go, the night ain't getting any younger, sugar doll," Renee grabs my arm and leads me to the club. 'Amigo's' is in big silver letters on a black sign above the door. In fact, the whole building is black, made of panels of some shiny plasticky-looking reflective material, black as onyx. I wonder if they're like two-way mirrors, and the people inside can see us standing here looking up at the building. But I suppose there are more interesting things inside to look at.

Renee yanks open the door. I feel my breath catch in my throat. I don't know what I'm expecting, but there's nothing to see inside the first set of doors but a ticket wicket with a dark-haired, olive-skinned man with teeth so white they might as well be calcium tablets.

"Hello, Luis, *qué passa?*" Renee smiles.

"Ah, Renee, *Bellissima, qué passa, qué passa...*" Luis reveals more of his calcium tablets. One of them is coated in gold, a long shiny stalactite.

"*Bellissima?* Isn't that Italian?" Renee says. "Aren't you from Mexico?"

"Yes, that is true. You are a very smart lady, in addition to being so very beautiful," says Luis with a coy smile. "But I happen to know the word for 'beautiful' in more than ten languages."

"Oh, is that right?" says Renee, shifting her weight from one leg to the other so one hip juts out towards Luis. "Japanese, I suppose?"

"*Kirei-na,*" says Luis, winking.

"Wonderful. I'm sure that comes in very handy here. What about French?" Renee asks. I pull gently on her jacket sleeve.

"*Belle. Très belle.*"

"Ha ha. What about, mmm, Russian?" Renee says. I tug a little harder.

"Ah, oh, Ivan, he taught me that one last year, but I don't remember it, sorry. But I know Vietnamese—"

"Renee," I whisper, "to be honest, I've had enough of the language lesson. It reminds me too much of work."

"Oh, I'm sorry, El. Luis, Luis, tell me all the words for 'beautiful' another time. I'd like you to meet my friend and the most awesome of roommates, Elinor. She's from Australia."

“Australia! Well, that’s fantastic. I always wanted to see a kangaroo.”

“Is that your way of telling me I resemble one?” I ask.

Luis laughs, tablets glowing. “Ha ha, she is very funny, no?”

“Yes, she has her moments,” says Renee, glaring at me ever so slightly.

“And you are Luis, from Mexico,” I say. “And where exactly in Mexico?”

“Oh, is a small town. You will never have heard of it, I believe.”

“And what are you doing here in Takomitsu, besides working as the excellent doorman at Amigo’s?” I ask. Renee glares at me again more sternly over her shoulder.

“Well, as a matter of fact, I am the co-owner of Amigo’s. My partner is now away on business, and we are a little bit short staff, so here I am at door, doing what needs to be doing.” He grins again, gold tooth sparkling like disco ball above his head. I wish I had a gold tooth of my own, so that the process of stuffing my foot in my mouth might be an altogether more aesthetically appealing process.

“Well, how lovely. That’s great. I’ve always loved the entrepreneurial spirit, whatever form it takes,” I say stupidly. It’s not particularly true, and worse, it positively rings with condescension.

“Yes, yes,” he says. “So, you ladies would like to have an evening of unforgettable entertainment?” Luis asks, making the most of his entrepreneurial spirit. “Would you like the regular one-night membership, or the VIP membership?”

“Let’s go for the VIP,” says Renee before I can say billabong. “It is my birthday, after all,” she adds, using her very own entrepreneurial spirit. I’m sure she’s expecting some kind of discount. And she gets it, with a bat of those big brown doe eyes.

“We-ell, in that case, how about the V-VIP, but for you, I will offer for the same as the VIP,” says the mouth of teeth. “For you, and your special roommate.”

“Oh, Luis, you sure know how to treat a girl right. Doesn’t he, Elinor?” Renee smiles at me. I wonder if I’ve taken enough money out of the bank.

“So, that will be *ichi-man* each. Thank you very much, ladies,” says Luis, smiling a wide, close-lipped smile. That’s about a hundred and fifty Oz dollars. I try not to choke, though I feel I’ve just swallowed a few of his teeth. What does the V-VIP night really cost, then? But I should’ve expected as much, based on comparable prices at those snack bars. Drinks had better be damned cheap, or it’s going to be a long night. But it’s unlikely they will be.

Luis takes our bills and slides two black cards across the counter. There are five squares across the top, and a little perforated panel in the middle with a silhouette of a man’s head in white. “There are your V-VIP membership cards, ladies. Five drinks of your choice from our V-VIP menu, all night long. After midnight, you can lift the piece in the centre and this evening’s special Very Very Important Present will be revealed to you.” Luis winks and picks up a phone hanging on the wall just out of sight. He presses three buttons and waits. “Yes, hello, Sergio? Oh, is he there, could I speak with him, please?” Luis winks at Renee, who is positively squirming inside her little black dress. She turns and mouths “Sergio!” at me. I’ve forgotten to ask her about him, but I guess I’ll find out now, and maybe a more complete and honest story than anything she’d have told me in the cab. “Yes,” continues Luis, “Sergio? Could you please come to the front? There are some Very Very Important Princesses here you must take care of immediately.” He winks a third time. I’m beginning to wonder if he has an eye twitch. And if Renee’s having convulsions. “Thank you, Sergio.” Luis hangs up the phone. “He’ll be here shortly to escort you to your front-row seats.”

“Fantastic, thank you, Luis,” gushes Renee.

“Yes, wonderful,” I say with less enthusiasm. Front-row seats: I picture sweat-

drenched limbs, every depilated pore visible; I imagine the smell of cologne and sweat so powerful it's almost three-dimensional, wearing its own g-string and demanding its own tip; I see those g-strings sliding down said sweaty legs, or being torn off in one well-timed hip swivel and flick of the wrist, I see those g-strings being thrown into the crowd, and coming straight for my face. I have to stop myself from shuddering. But, at least, I assume Renee is sincere. I suppose she wouldn't keep coming back if she didn't actually like this place and what it has to offer.

A door to the right of Luis' booth flies open and a tanned man of average height and very black shiny hair hurtles into the room, arms wide. "Hello, Renee, my darling," he says. His teeth are the close relations of Luis', even whiter if possible, but it's probably just that his tan is darker.

"Sergio!" squeals Renee. She throws herself at him, they kiss the sides of each other's faces noisily. "Oh, I'm so happy you're working tonight!" She turns around and waves me over. "This is my good friend Elinor, Sergio. This is her first time coming to Amigo's."

"Oh, my favourite, an Amigo's virgin," he says with an Italian intonation. "What fun we will have deflowering her, ahh, Renee?" They laugh, and I half expect a camera to roll over on a dolly, a set director to appear with a tubes of glycerine and lube, and a fluffer already sporting latex gloves.

Sergio takes my elbow and Renee's and steers us through the door Luis has opened. He's still showing his big, gleaming incisors. Well, here we go, off to my ritual deflowering, which will apparently be accompanied by the cheesy Latin techno music blasting from speakers in the corridor. The door clicks shut behind us.

We climb a short set of stairs and come into a wide cabaret-style room, at one end of which is a stage curtained in black. Small round tables circled by tiny chairs

fill the floor space, except for a margin of space in front of the stage. The audience so far isn't very substantial, just three or four tables of silently drinking women, mostly foreigners, just one pair of mousy Caucasians doing the high-school two-step to the techno beats. But maybe, like ants at a picnic, the numbers will increase dramatically once the main course is unpacked. Sergio leads us to a table at the front. In the centre, there's a large plastic sign stating "reserved" in flowing white script on black, and again the silhouette of a man's head as on our V-VIP cards.

"Where's the bar?" I ask, thinking of those five boxes on the card.

"Hush, El, wait 'til the waiter gets here," says Renee, slipping off her jacket. The sheer panel in the back of her dress is hardly visible in this low light. And compared to a little white number one of the dancing bottle blondes has on, Renee's dress is tasteful enough to wear to a funeral. I can't look, the blonde is about to spill out of her dress, her laughter causing a tsunami of flesh to crest at the neckline.

"Well, ladies, I hope your evening is truly *terrifico*," says Sergio, his "Rs" rolling like a drum. He takes first Renee's and then my hand, both of which he raises to his lips for a delicate, teasing kiss.

"Thank you, Sergio," blinks Renee. "Are you around the rest of the evening?"

"Oh, yes, of course, darling, I will be here all night. Don't hesitate, if there is anything I can do for you. Anything." Sergio winks and waves as he makes his way through the round tables and into some dark corner or other. Renee sighs.

"You alright?" I ask.

"Huh?" Renee says, looking blinded.

"I said, you alright." I raise my eyebrow.

"Oh, yeah, great." She smiles.

"So, what's his function, exactly? Is he a stripper?"

“Elinor, they don’t like to be referred to as ‘strippers’—they say it’s too demeaning. Most of the boys call themselves ‘physical entertainers,’” Renee says, her face serious.

“Oh, my, I never would have dreamed they’d be such sensitive creatures,” I say. “Heh. ‘Physical entertainers.’ Yeah, I’ll just bet they are.”

“El, come on. Lighten up.” Renee takes her lip-gloss out of her purse and applies another honey-thick coat. “It’s all for fun—why don’t you just try and have some and just forget about all your troubles for a change.”

“‘All my troubles.’ Here I was, under the impression that I only had a couple of fairly minor ones! I guess I really do need that drink, then. Where’s that bloody waiter? Why couldn’t Sergio get our drinks? Oh, right, he’s a ‘physical entertainer’, not a waiter.” I don’t know what’s wrong with me, but I can’t hold back.

“Ugh, El, for the love of Mary, don’t make me wish I hadn’t brought you. I like coming here, and lately I’ve been coming here regularly. I don’t want you to spoil the reputation I’ve established. I’m reliable, I’m respectful. How would you like it if men started bad-mouthing a bunch of female strippers?”

“Don’t you mean female ‘physical entertainers’?” I say.

“Oh, Elinor, stop.”

“Call a spade a spade, I say. None of this euphemistic bullshit. We know what they are, they know what they are. Does the actual situation change, just because we use a different word? A ‘sanitation worker’ is still a garbage man, an ‘administrative assistant’ is still a secretary.” I take off my jacket and slip it over the back of one of the chairs and lean back heavily. “They’d better have swimming pools full of gin.”

“Well, you’re in luck, here’s the waiter.”

“That’s a start, anyway.” He looks like the bastard child of Luis and Sergio,

though smaller and less well-endowed in the tooth department. I order a double gin and tonic, Renee a glass of red. We wait, avoiding each other's eyes, listening to the Spanish techno pump on and on.

"So, what's eating you, anyway?" she finally asks.

"Oh, I don't know." I sigh. "I'm sorry. I just feel out of sorts for some reason."

"You never told me what happened when you went out on your walk. All you really said was that you didn't run into Craig. But I gather you ran into someone else?" she raises her eyebrows. "Was it Russ?"

"Who else would it be."

"Well, I don't know. Could have been Winston."

"Och, he's just repulsive, not upsetting."

"So, what happened, if you don't mind me asking."

The waiter arrives with our drinks, takes our V-VIP cards and punches two holes in mine, one in Renee's. I say nothing until he's out of earshot. "Well, nothing, really, I guess." I sigh, feeling foolish because it's as though I've just assumed all of Russ's loathing for this place without giving it the fair chance I told myself I'd give it. In fact, I was even kind of excited about going, until he pissed on my parade. "Well, I guess he just said a couple of things that made me a bit apprehensive about coming, but I didn't know what to say to you, how to bring it up."

"Like what? What did he say? Probably nothing I've not already heard, he gave me a lecture about coming here last week. Said I've been making it too much of a habit. Said I should be careful, that it's practically like gambling, and he'd hate to see me get hurt or something by it."

"Er, so, you're probably right, that he said nothing new to me." I hold up my glass. "Cheers, anyway. And Happy Birthday!" I smile.

“Cheers, whoo-hoo! Happy Birthday to me! Here’s to 28!!” Renee has a good sip of her wine and I drink about half my gin and tonic.

“But what else did he say?” Renee asks.

“Ah, well, just that he was disappointed I was coming. We kind of argued about how it’s evidently perfectly alright for him and Craig to go to snack bars, but that for you and I to come here was somehow a giant tear in the moral fabric of our little *gaijin* society.”

Renee laughs. “Yeah, but what would any society be without its double standards. And idealistic men like Russ as living proof of them.” She raises her glass again as though in silent toast. We laugh together, and drink again.

I inhale, let it out a little. “But, well...”

“What, he said something else?”

“Not exactly. I guess.” I swallow. “But, just for my own curiosity—how many times have you been here in the past couple weeks?”

“Four, maybe five times in the past month. Once a week or so. Why?”

“Well, it is a bit on the expensive side, wouldn’t you say?”

“You know, it’s really not that much more than going to one of those stupid *karaoke* joints downtown. Not the boxes along the highway. I mean the ones around the shopping arcade. If you think about it, by the time you pay the service charge for the *karaoke* and then fifteen bucks per drink, it sets you back about the same amount. And the men at those places, both the bartenders and the clientele, I’m sorry, but they aren’t even close to being as hot as the guys here. Just wait, Elinor—my god, if Sergio is up there tonight... I know, I know, up close, down here, he doesn’t really impress. But up there...” Renee waves a hand in front of her face, panting a little. “*Caliente! Por favor!*”

I laugh. "But..."

"But what?"

"Oh, never mind." I laugh again. "Let's just have a ridiculously good time tonight, and who cares about how much we spend. It's just one night, right?"

"Here's to that!" Renee raises her glass. "Bottoms up!"

We down our drinks. Renee hails the waiter again and orders another round. At this rate I'll be blotto before midnight, and tomorrow I won't be able to remember my special V-VIP prezzie thingy. The music changes, the lights dim, and Renee grabs my arm. I can't hear her now, over the music and a voice announcing in Japanese the first part of the show. I shrug and smile.

"Three guys, partial strip, ten minutes, get your money ready," she yells into my ear.

"Money? After what we've forked out to get in here?" I yell back. Evidently her Japanese is improving. Though I suspect it's context-specific—take her to the supermarket, she wouldn't be able to talk her way out of the veg section.

"You don't have to," she says. "Only if you really like what you see and you want everybody to know."

I laugh and shake my head. I can't see most of the women in the audience—save for the blonde tarts on the other side of the room. The Japanese women, I reckon, won't say a word. Renee, on the other hand—I'd wager a month's salary that she'll be up there, tits pressed against the stage, giving her best rodeo holler.

A spotlight hits the centre of the stage, where three men are posing: arms akimbo, legs spread, dressed in jeans, white t-shirts, work boots and gloves, and construction hats.

"Oh, they can't be serious," I say to Renee, "I mean, have you seen Japanese

construction workers? They wear little green coveralls, not jeans and t-shirts.”

“Shhh!” says Renee. “It’s American style, all part of the fantasy. Just go with it and stop analyzing!”

I sigh and sit back. The men move around, something I suppose less analytical people might call dancing. Bits of clothing are removed, one at a time. A glove. The other glove. The hardhat. The t-shirt. At this point, the tarts begin to lose all sense of decorum. I’ve never heard such screams. I laugh. Renee smacks my arm. They begin to undo the belts on their jeans. “How’re they gonna take the jeans off without taking the boots off first?” I say. My esses are coming out a little funny.

“Elinor, will you shut up?” Renee smiles. She stands up, whooping and clapping.

The buttons down the front of the jeans are undone to much hip swivelling. And then they’re torn off, the inner seams giving way so the jeans come off in one piece. Tanned, hairless, oil-slathered legs, six of them. And three pairs of fluorescent grundies, one green, one orange, one yellow. Renee whoops some more. Well, why not, they do have nice butts. Especially the one in orange. I finish my drink. The men finish their show. The lights blink to their swaggering exit, a fluorescent rainbow of lights and grundies.

“That was pretty good,” says Renee, “I think the one in the yellow was new.”

“How would you know? They looked the same to me, except for their underwear.”

“Elinor!”

“What?”

“Just because they’re all Latino and have dark hair and eyes doesn’t mean they’re indistinguishable.”

"I know that, Christ, Renee, I'm not racist. I just mean, in those stupid hats, hiding their eyes, and all buffed and greased up like that, really, we're not meant to tell them apart, are we. The underwear colours are just, I dunno, to remind us we're looking at a person up there, a human being, not an object. But then that becomes the focus, we see just the colour of the underwear, and think, Oh, that's Mr. Yellow with the large bulge, and there's Mr. Green over there with the slightly smaller bulge. You can't tell me you're sitting there thinking, Oh, Mr. Yellow's got lovely eyes, or Mr. Green's exquisite cheekbones are to die for. No, you're meant to focus on the underwear, and more specifically, the product within the underwear."

"Elinor!"

"Oh, as if you're shocked, of all people."

"No, I'm not shocked. Well, I'm maybe a little surprised, but only because I've never heard you talk this way before. I mean, 'bulge' this and 'product' that."

"Well, would you prefer that I used words like—"

"Elinor, never mind. Besides, the next show's coming on soon."

"Hooray."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, El, would you just let go?"

I chug back the rest of my second gin and tonic, want a third right away. I wonder how much it is for each additional drink beyond the five we get with our membership cards. I'm afraid to ask. Perhaps by the time I've had all five I'll have ceased to care.

The next show involves three new men dressed in sailor suits, each carrying a flag: one, the Russian, another, the American, and the third, the Canadian. If a person wasn't already aware, their antics are a clear demonstration that the Cold War is decidedly over. I wonder if the men really come from the countries they apparently

represent. The tarts don't seem to care. One of them shrieks "Yuri!" and clutches her chest. I glance at Renee. She's wiggling in time to the music, but isn't so wrapped up in the show that she can't wave the waiter over once again. The sailors end up in nothing but tight little briefs that match the flags they've been hoisting around. Oh, and their hats. Like some ridiculous subliminal message about safe sex.

And the show after that involves four, or is it five, men—I'm feeling the drinks in the back of my brain like the room's slanted and my skull's an old bucket half full of dirty water. Or, half empty—in this case, perhaps the pessimist's view is more apt. The men, however many, are dressed in black suits, each in a different colour shirt. Bright colours, but not fluorescents. Or maybe it's the disco lights. My eyes are starting to burn, and it's not just the cigarette smoke, because really, there isn't very much. Women who smoke are frowned upon in Japan, as it's considered crass, unlady-like. And so not many women do. Though they do, apparently, get rather drunk and cram themselves against the stage with fists-full of cash, screaming to get into the grundies of Alphonse or Geraldo.

The waiter brings my last drink. Renee tells me I have to fork over a tenner, as she's somehow managed to order me another double, and I've only one more free drink square on my card. I can't find my wallet at first, it's not in my bag, and I'm about ready to leap up and point fingers at anyone who looks the least bit dodgy, which means about 95% of the people in the room, but then I check my jacket and it's wedged into one of the little front pockets. I hand over the money, wondering why it is that for memorable occasions, milestones in our lives we want to commemorate or mark as special so we can remember them when we're old and too tired to hitch our fannies off our rockers, why is it that we do things we'd much rather forget, or drink so much that we're unable to remember anyway? It's a puzzle, like so much of human

behaviour.

“Ready for your gift?” Renee asks.

“I suppo—suppose so. You?”

“Oh, yeah, bring it on,” she says. How is she more sober than I am?

“So, how do we get this prezzie? Who gives it to us? Does some geezer stripper—I mean, entertainment person with a white beard, dressed in black boots and a red flannel g-string come out with a bag full?”

Renee snorts. “Haha, aren’t you cute.”

“Don’t you mean, ‘hoho’.”

“‘Ho’, alright, but ain’t nobody laughin’,” she says, laughing.

“Oooo, look who’s talking, Ms. I’ll-wear-my-shred-of-a-dress-and-my-fuck-me-heels,” I say, laughing.

“Ladies?” says the waiter.

“Oh, thanks, just set them right here. And, um, can you tell us, how many more shows there are?”

“Well, I think two. Including the grand finale, which tonight will be a reprise of the always popular ‘Olympics’ show.”

“Oh, that one. I’ve seen it a million times. What about the show before the finale?”

“I think it will be Yuri and Serg—”

“Sergio?” Renee leans forward.

“Ah, sorry, no: Sergei, the big Russian.” The waiter smiles apologetically as Renee nods. “Is there anything else I can do for you?” he asks.

“As a matter of fact, there is one little thing...” and Renee hands him our cards, the perforated centres already revealed.

And the next thing I know, I'm being urged to gather myself and the rest of my drink up, and hustled down a corridor and into a room that has its own smaller stage, against a red backdrop, with a black leather sofa and two matching arm chairs placed around it. Renee pushes me onto the sofa and flops down beside me.

"What are we in for, Renee?" I ask, wishing the red backdrop would stop fluttering. "Why don't they turn off that overhead fan, it's not that warm in here."

"What overhead fan?"

I look up. There is no overhead fan. "There's no overhead fan."

"I know."

"Then why's the curtain moving?"

"Because you're shit-faced."

"Right, thanks." I giggle. And I can't stop. Everything seems so stupid, now, the whole bloody situation of my life, being here in Japan and doing a job I've begun to loathe, convincing myself I was in love with Craig and that he was with me, just because he was nice to me, and because there weren't, to be honest, too many other options. Just because he had lovely blond hair and a placid temper. Just because he made me laugh. Just because I managed to convince myself that fate had thrown us together or some shite like that. Just because he kissed me, and told me he didn't know another girl like me anywhere.

That 'anywhere'—that should have been warning enough.

"Renee." I stop laughing, feeling more than a bit ill, now. "Craig is a fucker, isn't he."

She turns and looks at me, her big brown eyes sympathetic. She begins to stroke my hair. "Yes, Elinor, Craig is a fucker. A nice fucker who happens to be our boss."

"He's not really our boss, though. He's not the Area Manager."

"No, he's not the Area Manager."

"So, Carl is in fact our boss."

"Well, yes, Carl is our boss-boss. But Craig is also our boss."

"Fucker."

"Yes, El, he's a fucker."

"A nice fucker."

"Yes, El, a nice fucker."

"Renee, why does he have to be so fucking nice? The fucker."

"I know hon, it's okay. But he's nice in a very surface way. He may be nice, but he's not good. Here's a napkin. It's only a little damp, I didn't spill much of my drink on the way in. There you are, dry your eyes. He's a fucker, I know hon."

"Renee?"

"What, hon?"

"You still haven't told me what we're doing here."

"Teaching English and trying to sort out our lives, as far as I can figure."

I laugh and hiccup, the effect being that of a startled goose. "No, I mean here, in this room. In front of this hid-hic-hideous stage."

"Hush, now, don't insult the stage, it's not its fault. We're waiting for our gift. You know, from our VVVIP cards."

"Yes, Renee, but what's the prezzie, exactly?"

"You'll see, hon."

But as it turns out, I don't get to see very much. Two men come out on stage. One of them is Renee's favourite, the sensational Sergio. I know only because she says his name. They're already half undressed. They reek of cologne. It's too much

for me, up this close, the smell, the alcohol I've drunk, the fluttering curtain, the slumped position I'm sitting in, the smell, the absurdity. I'm laughing, but close, again, to tears as I propel myself up from the sofa and towards the first door I see.

"No, El, not that door!" says Renee. But it's too late, I've already opened it. And beyond, just to the right around a corner, are all the men not on stage, in various states of undress and stage-readiness. I laugh, and I fall forward to my knees, and then the floor takes me and I'm a human doorstop, sweating with laughter, my mouth going all watery. And then I know what's going to happen, whether I want it to or not: I roll over and heave at the olive-skinned feet of an 'entertainer,' who has no doubt come to shove my pathetic arse out the door. And then, gobs of sweat pouring down my back, my stomach aching, throat burning, head spinning, I thankfully pass out.
