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Yoshimura's Ghost: Essays on Rural Japan

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Yoshimuras' Ghost: Collected Essays on Rural

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In
Film, Theatre, and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

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Abstract

Yoshimura's Ghost: Essays on Rural Japan is a collection of six essays exploring the cultural phenomena and daily life of rural Japan. The collection represents my experiences of living as an educator, wife, and mother living in a post 9/11 world. Although not chronological, the essays flow episodically and illustrate examples of the social and cultural concepts that struck me as elements of otherness. Some of the essays in this collection examine the parallels between the exclusion and isolation I felt in Japan as compared to other marginalized groups. Several of the essays describe the culture of Japanese schooling, perhaps offering a perspective only accessible to a foreigner seeing the ways in which a centuries old culture, which is in many ways the most "modern" of any on the planet, absorbs and makes its own cultures from around the world.

Japan, Creative Nonfiction, Outsider, Motherhood,

Passing Through the *Torri*

Dr. Tamura's long legs fold into a kneeling position and fit snugly underneath the small table before us. He reaches over for the ceramic sake container.

"*Hai dozo*," he says and pours more sake into my cup. In his late forties, Dr. Tamura's face looks wrinkle-free and clean-shaven. His brownish-black hair hangs long at the collar.

Dressed in a red polo shirt and khaki slacks, he's got an attitude like he shot eighteen holes instead of performed an eight-hour surgery.

"*Domo arrigato*," I reply. The rice liquor burns my throat but I sip it anyway. Less than one month ago, I sat in a crash course on Japanese language and culture and listened as the consulate counseled us on the importance of accepting what is offered. "Always accept or you'll offend," became the response to any sticky situation.

"Pretty strong," I say, setting the cup down. I edge my finger over the lacquered wood table, and then place my hands in my lap.

Sake tastes medicinal. Served hot or cold, it doesn't calm my nerves like a gin and tonic would, but I am here in Japan to experience new things, even if it includes fermented rice drink being forced down my throat. I've got to keep up appearances. I'm the only English teacher for the town of Asahi Mura. During the day, I teach English at the junior high school. In the evenings, I teach Adult English classes. Now, I've got a side job teaching two surgeons conversational English.

Ironically, for the past few weeks that I've settled in Japan, I have not taught any classes yet. The junior high kids recently returned from summer break, and the adults are dealing with the rice harvest. Tonight the doctors are my first real English students. I am not sure what to expect. I'm a little nervous, since my experience with medical terms comes from watching television shows like *ER* and *General Hospital*.

"More," Dr. Tamura says. He isn't asking me a question. This is how people drink in Japan. Once a person sips, the other pours. This constant pour-drink-pour cycle drains me but I don't refuse. I don't want Dr. Tamura have the impression his new English teacher is rude. Our conversation sputters with stops and starts. Dr. Tamura speaks with an accent so thick that maybe the sake will help thin it out; either that or my ears will tune in so that rice is not lice.

After a couple rounds of pour-drink-pour, another man approaches our table. I assume he is my other student. Unlike Dr. Tamara, this new man's hair is thinning at the sides. He looks like he came from a medical conference with his gray summer suit and heavy-looking briefcase.

Since the Japanese don't shake hands, I bow deeply with my arms at my side and my back straight.

"*Hajiamaste*," the older doctor says and bows. "Welcome to Japan, my new English teacher. I am Dr. Kento," he says, then hands me his *meshi*, his business card.

I take his business card with both hands and examine it for an exaggerated minute as the consulate advised. Somehow staring at the card signals respect. There is no translation for this gesture in American culture. If I did this with one of my employers in Chicago, she might consider me slow, or worse yet, reconsider why she hired me in the first place. Here, this *I stare with care*, gesture translates into respect. I don't get it, but I stare down at Dr. Kento's *meshi* with as much sake-inspired care as I can muster. I am not even sure if the *kanji* characters spell out his name or address. The numbers on the telephone are off by two digits.

"*Hajiamaste*," I reply. "Nice to meet you."

Dr. Kento flips open a pack of cigarettes with the brand name PEACE, and lights one. The doctors order more sake. In front of me, a wide flat-screen Sony television flashes a baseball game. The pitcher throws a fastball. The batter hits and runs to first base.

Dr. Tamura brings an *edamame* up to his lips, puts the pod between his teeth, and pulls the three beans out of the pod. I do the same, but the green skin catches in my teeth. Trying to work it loose, I take a swing of my sake, which in turn motivates Dr. Tamura to pour me more.

"We wish for a teacher to help us in our medical profession," Dr. Kento begins.

"We specialize in the chest," Dr. Tamura replies, and thumps his red polo shirt.

"You mean the heart?" I gesture to mine and take a deep breath.

"The chest," Dr. Tamura says.

“The female chest,” Dr. Kento replies.

“The breasts,” I say, and without thinking cup my own B-sized ones.

The doctors nod their heads.

“You can say breasts. It won’t offend me. *Brreeaasstss*.”

“Breastusu,” both doctors repeat, like shy students in a sex-ed class.

“You might not want to say breast in everyday conversation, say with a stranger on the bus or something,” I explain. “Definitely don’t use the slang.”

The doctors looked confused. I take another sip of sake.

“I mean, don’t say titties or boobies.”

Dr. Tamura scratches his chin. Dr. Kento stamps out his butt.

“What I mean is there are words you use in different contexts. Chest is fine. Breast is good, too. The others leave out, if you know what I mean.”

The doctors nod as if they understand, but I have a feeling we will revisit the difference between breasts and titties at another time.

The conversation falls silent while the doctors pour more sake for each other. I am excluded from this drink round, so I glance at the flat screen again. The pitcher pitches and the batter bunts. Another player runs to second base. When I bring my attention back to the table, I notice a waitress arrive with a platter. On it is a long, fat fish with its head and tail attached. Its scales shine iridescent underneath the sushi bar lights. Its spooky, glassy eyes stare out at me, but its row of jagged teeth freak me out even more. I know some Japanese would

pay a grand for blowfish but this? *What's up with the fish?* Just as I am about to ask, the waitress removes a sharp knife from her apron and presents it to the doctors.

Dr. Kento says, "*Hai dozo*. Go ahead."

The waitress slices the fish's white fleshy belly down the middle as if she is one of the doctor's fellow surgeons. The grayish-green iridescent scales peel back to reveal red flesh. Fish guts, bones, blood, and goo pour out. The waitress carves out pieces of fish flesh and arranges them on the platter. When she finishes, she takes the remains and bows. The sight is disgusting. I feel like I am in a butcher shop. I swallow my cup of sake. Dr. Tamura refills it. Strings of the *edamame* stick to my gums. The sake makes my head swirl. I hope to God there will be more food served and it won't involve blood.

"This is *sashi* meat. It is best eaten when the fish is first caught. Right there on the boat in the middle of the sea you slice it open and eat it," Dr. Kento says, acting out slicing open the belly and eating the fish.

Then with his chopsticks he lifts up one piece of fish and puts it on a plate.

"Here at the sushi bar the whole fish is more for decoration than for *sashi*. He hands me a plate. "*Hai dozo*."

Hoping a conversation will distract the doctors and excuse me from eating *sashi* meat, I ask, "What kind of English class would you like?"

Dr. Kento drags on his cigarette and says, "We leave for a medical conference in Baltimore in three weeks. First few days of October."

Dr. Tamura sucks on his teeth and shakes his head.

“That gives you more or less a month to prepare. It will still be golfing weather—will you bring your clubs?”

“No pleasure on this trip,” says Dr. Kento.

“We listen to lectures,” Dr. Tamura says.

“Oh breasts in Baltimore. Love that b sound, huh?” I can feel myself speaking too fast. The sake inches up my throat. My head spins.

The doctors look at each other. Dr. Tamura says, “We prefer to learn basic conversation.”

“Basic sounds excellent to me,” I say and sip a little more sake.

Dr. Kento raises his eyes and looks at the television. His forehead wrinkles. He lights another cigarette. The table goes silent. I drink my sake and catch a glance at the television screen. Instead of the baseball game, it appears the channel has been switched to an action movie.

“Oh, so you like movies?” I ask, trying to bring Dr. Kento back into the conversation. I tap my fingers on the table to catch his attention.

“*Wakaranai*. I don’t understand,” Dr. Kento says. He shakes his head and sucks on his teeth as if to shake lose a sesame seed.

“That’s called an action movie,” I say, and point to the screen.

Dr. Tamura turns around and the three of us watch as a plane crashes into what looks like the New York skyline. “Action movies are different than comedies or romances.

Look, here comes a second plane. Do you like action movies?" I ask, hoping to engage them in conversation. The more the doctors speak tonight, the better I will be able to gauge their level of English. Even if the sake floats to my head, I ask the same question, but this time I speak slowly like I'm playing a nurse from daytime television soap opera *General Hospital*. "Doctors, do you like action movies?"

"*Wakaranai*. I don't understand," Dr. Kento repeats.

The sake comes back up my throat. I swallow it down with another swig.

The bartender raises the volume. The bar hushes. Everyone turns toward the screen. The scene repeats: one plane crashes into a skyscraper. Then a second plane dives into the other. Flames and smoke engulf the television screen.

Dr. Tamura nods. Dr. Kento lights another cigarette and exhales smoke around us like a fog. We sit and watch the television. Behind the Japanese newscasters, I think I hear an English newscaster say, "A plane crashed into the World Trade Center."

"Are they speaking English? Can you tell them to turn up the volume?" I ask.

Again the scene replays. One plane strikes the building. Flames shoot. A second plane dives. Half of the building collapses, then the other side. Flames and smoke and cries. No matter how loudly the Japanese newscasters translate over the English voices, they cannot block the high-pitched, eardrum-popping screams of bystanders running away from the burning buildings.

I knock my hand on the table to get the doctors' attention. "Volume, please."

The Japanese newscasters' chatter blocks out the English. All around the bar, it feels like everyone moves in slow motion or stops. Sake cups still. Chopsticks suspend in midair, a piece of shrimp or eel caught in between the wooden sticks.

"Turn up the volume."

I try to stand but my legs cramp from a sitting in a kneeling position. My head spins from sake. The *sashi* meat stinks. Dr. Kento's cigarette chokes me. I wobble towards the television screen. At the bottom of the television screen, I read, *Terrorists Attack the United States*. Sake jets out from the back of my throat, out my mouth and onto the front of my shirt.

Later that night, when I've vomited all the sake out of my system, I panic. My husband and one-year-old son are in Buenos Aires. I have been in Japan for two weeks. Next week, I expect their arrival. Each time I dial Fernando's cell, I get a voice message. *Where is my son? Where is my husband?* Each time I call my father, my grandmother, my brother, a busy signal roars in my ear. *Where is my family?* International calls fail. Cell phone towers collapse under the weight of thousands of people reaching out to their loved ones. All night long, NHK, the Japanese news service, replays the burning towers. I watch as I wait to hear news from my family.

Even after only a few weeks in Japan, I realize nothing it is what it seems. At first, something appears familiar, but then suddenly it is completely unexpected. Everything is slightly off. Sounds are not the same. The doorbell jingles like an ice cream truck. The washing machine beeps like a bike bell. Phones don't ring but play a melody. My phone plays Mozart's version of *A Little Night Music*. The piece plays and loops on my phone. At first I do not know what appliance the music comes from. I am so disoriented when Fernando does call that I almost miss the stupid melody that comes from my phone. "Oh my God! I've been so worried." The rush of static echoes in my ear. My knees weaken like an actress from a melodramatic Lifetime movie.

"We're fine. We're staying in Buenos Aires until we can leave. They aren't letting flights out. We'll be able to make it when our flight comes."

"Maybe we shouldn't be in Japan," I say, thinking these crashes might be an omen.

"The world is crazy. It has always been dangerous," Fernando says.

"It seems so unreal. The crash is on the news but everything's dubbed in Japanese so I don't know what's going on."

"Same in Buenos Aires, but you know how we Argentines love to think the drama is about us. The government sent some firefighters to New York. How much do you want to bet they start an *asado*!"

"Don't talk to me about steak! All there is to eat is fish guts," I say remembering the *sashi* meat at the sushi bar.

Fernando and I joke around to ease the tension. The truth is I can hear how scared he is and I know he can sense my anxiety. The reality of our situation is so fragile neither one wants to bring up the fact that thousands of miles separate us and a terrorist attack might turn into a war.

“Tell me about Japan,” he says. “Do our neighbors dress like geishas?”

“Not quite. I’ve yet to see even a kimono. Things aren’t what they seem. Something looks familiar, and then it is totally different. The other day I bought a bag of chips. I couldn’t open them. Then I looked down and saw a dotted line on the bag, telling me to open there. So I did and the bag opened. Weird stuff like that. Oh, and the flavors of chips here are seaweed, shrimp, and—get this—squid. Lots to get used to. But we’re here for adventure, right?”

“Adventure and love,” Fernando says.

“Travel and happiness,” I answer.

We continue talking for awhile. I tell Fernando how the weather is hot and how I go to the Sea of Japan to swim. The water is clear and big boulders litter the beach. Tiny sharp rocks jut out in the water. I tell him how I stepped on what looked like a sturdy rock but wasn’t and I fell. “Nico will love the sea,” I say. “Beautiful, but nothing like Lake Michigan.”

“What matters is that we will swim together in a sea we’ve only seen on a map,” Fernando replies. “It all sounds like a dream.”

“Wake up and get here soon,” I manage to say before the static interferes and I cannot hear his voice.

The idea of teaching seems unreal, but what am I going to do? Stay inside my apartment? Chain-smoke and watch NHK? I’ve done that and I’ve got a headache and I’m anxious. I ride my bike not even sure of how to get there. I’ve only been to Asahi Mura Junior High a couple of times. As I ride, each rice field looks the same. There is nothing that breaks up the green. I have not been here long enough to know the route or make points of reference. I pedal until the road ends. I’m about to turn around and go back to my apartment when a girl on a bike rides past me, wearing the school’s green uniform.

“Good evening!” she says and waves.

“Good morning,” I say and point to the sun.

The girl shrugs and keeps pedaling toward the mountains. I follow her for ten blocks and begin to think she is playing hooky until I see the roof of Junior High building. Rice fields hem in the school and the mountains hide it. Every adolescent in Asahi Mura passes through this white government-style structure that, from a distance, looks like a federal prison.

“See you later,” I call out to the girl, who bows and disappears into the crowd of uniform-clad students.

Entering Asahi Mura Junior High is a little like taking the stage: it requires a costume change. Inside the entrance of the school is the *genken*, where I take off my “outside shoes” and replace them with my “inside shoes.” Saito-sensei, the head of the English department and my boss gives me my “inside shoes”, which are a pair of black flats. Square-toed, *pleather*, and industrial, the shoes look like what the janitor might wear while he cleans the toilet. I call them my “man flats.”

Switching shoes might not seem like a big deal, but in fact it illustrates a critical cultural point. When it comes to the Japanese need to separate *in* from *out*, *us* from *them*, shoes are just the beginning. The Japanese love to categorize their world into those who belong and those who don't. The outside world represents public life. For the Japanese this means that to prove you belong to the group, you must show your best public side through agreeing with others and respecting hierarchical structures. Private feelings take a backseat to group harmony. The Japanese call this concept *giri*.

The opposite of *giri* becomes *ninjo*. *Ninjo* depicts the inside world of thoughts, emotions, and desires. *Giri* and *ninjo* are the backbone of Japanese society. The two concepts remain in conflict, as the Japanese struggle with group harmony versus individual gain. Even though it might sound complicated, this shoe change my fellow Japanese teachers perform every morning and afternoon is an example of how the Japanese reconcile the tension between *giri* and *ninjo*. For the new learners of Japanese society like myself, the key is never to be caught wearing “man flats” outside the building.

Once I cross through the *genken*, I walk down the hallway toward the teachers' room. It resembles a fancy main office. In reality, the school knocked down the walls between two large classrooms. Here is where all the teachers work. Unlike in Chicago, where I could hide out in my classroom and never see my fellow teachers except on the last day of school, the Japanese work together in plain sight of each other *all day, everyday*.

I am stationed with the third-year teachers, a location I realize means I'm with the seventh-grade teachers. Seventh grade in the Chicago or third year in Asahi Mura means I'm in a middle grade, a "whatever" grade. Our location puts us in an inferior position. I'm in arm's length of the loud-brewing coffee and steam-emitting *o-cha* makers. The most important teachers in the building, like Saito-sensei, my supervisor and co-teacher, sit closest to the door at the front of the room with a prime view of the going-ons of the teaching staff.

On my desk sits a stack of mini-essays with a note requesting my corrections. Glancing through a few, I notice Japanese students put the same spin on one of the lamest topics in any language: *What did you do on your summer vacation?* Most of the essays use off-the-chain wrong sentence structures. *We swims large float* reads one. I take a stab at a coherent translation. *We swim with floats. We swim in a pool.* I'm not sure. Reading so many egregious errors at such an early hour gives me a headache. A quick read shows most of the students swam in the Sea of Japan over the summer. Others hunted and hiked in the mountains. Some poor kids went to *juku*—a hyped-up summer school. Others worked

on their parents' rice fields. After reading a few more, I've had enough. I put my head down on my desk.

Who cares about these kids' summer vacations? What does it matter? Tears come to my eyes. Crazyes attacked my country. Thousands of miles separate me from my family. I'm stuck in the Siberia of the teachers' room. I squeeze my eyes shut. When I open them, Saito-sensei stands next to me. He holds an armload of papers.

He greets me with slight bow. "*Ohayo*. Good morning! New teacher needs to know new rules about how students behave," he says in a vaguely British accent.

"Rules?" I take the paper and set it down, not even bothering to look at it. "Okay. Thanks." I nod my head and look down at my papers, hoping he will go away if I ignore him.

Saito-sensei drums his fingers on my desk. He takes a deep breath. "We must meet with the principal."

The idea of working seems surreal to me. I haven't interacted much with the students since I got here, and now I have to see the principal. I try to think up an excuse, but Saito-sensei gives me no choice. He heads toward the principal's office, and I gather my things. I met the principal once when I arrived. A short guy, but a snappy dresser, when he bows I see a Gorbachev-size mole on his bald head.

"We are sorry for your country," the principal says. "It is a great sadness."

"Thank you," I stutter. I am not sure what to say. *What do I say?*

The principal nods, then delivers a long-winded speech, which is punctuated ever so often by Saito-sensei's "Ahhhh" and head nods.

"The principal says *mo* is like grief," Saito-sensei says. "We think it is better to take a week of no teaching. To help you process your country's loss."

When Saito-sensei finishes, the principal talks some more. This time Saito-sensei raises his eyebrows. He clears his throat. The principal scrunches his face, tilts his head to the side while Saito-sensei translates.

"Is everything well with your family?" he asks.

"My husband and son are in Buenos Aires. They come next week."

"Buenos Aires, *ne*?"

I nod. I have had to explain my husband's nationality about as many times as I have to bow a day—constantly. The thought of talking about how we speak both English and Spanish in our home and that our son is bilingual makes me seize up inside.

"*Hitan* is like grief. Your sadness," Saito-sensei translates. "Maybe it would be better if you have a week off from Asahi Mura Junior High to settle yourself before your husband and baby son come."

Unable to read the linguistic cues, I am not sure what Saito-sensei means by telling me these different Japanese words for grief. I sense that the principal is extending me a kindness that I am uncertain how to fully appreciate. What I am certain of is that I am off

work until my family arrives, which makes contemplating whether or not *mo* is different than *hitan* something to think about later. Way, way later.

The principal and Saito-sensei bow to each other, and suddenly the conversation abruptly ends before I can say thank you or even ask if I will be docked for the days I am not here. I go back to my desk and gather my books and pens. My “man-flats” squeak down the hallway. Just as I am about to open the exit door, and take my inside shoes out, I stop and remember where I am.

When I am not watching NHK’s version of CNN or waiting for Fernando’s phone calls, I study Japanese. I look up the word the word *mo*. I find it refers both to the funeral rites, the burial, and traditions associated with death but not to an individual’s inner feelings of sadness. *Mo* means a country’s way of grieving. Interestingly, the Japanese use the word when they talk about the atomic bombs that obliterated Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Hitan, on the other hand, is the Japanese term that loosely follows the English word grief definition, loss an individual may feel. But not exactly. *Hitan* is the verb. Grammatically, it cannot stand-alone. It needs an infinitive next to it in order to complete the sentence and make meaning. Therefore when Japanese use *hitan* they mean individual feeling of grief associated with loss of an object, not emotional devastation of losing a person. Reading further, I find that after the atomic bombs, the Japanese didn’t have any language in their culture to describe such horror on an individual level, so they had to create new one, a

hybrid of destruction and emotional devastation. Writers introducing Western psychological ideas have translated grief as *guri-fu*, the intense sadness and loss felt on both a public and private level for a person. After learning these words, I wonder what new words come from the aftermath of destruction. I wonder after 9/11, will Americans create a new language to talk about collective terror and grief and loss.

The following week, Fernando calls with the time of his flight to Tokyo.

“We arrive on September nineteenth. Buenos Aires to Tokyo.”

“Thank God,” I say, sensing that having Fernando and Nico with me, life will return to normal. “I will meet you at the airport and the three of us will take the bullet train to Asahi Mura.”

“Should I bring anything?”

“*Dulce de leche*, maybe. The caramel here tastes like squid.”

“I never travel without it!” Fernando says. He has packed two cans of the caramel syrup.

“Do you think Nico will be okay to travel? It’s a long flight. I’m worried.”

“Don’t worry,” Fernando says. “He’ll be fine. We’ll all be fine.”

But I do worry. I worry whether we made a good choice in coming to Japan. I worry that Asahi Mura is too different from Chicago, and that we might not find a balance. When

the worry gets to be too much, I turn off the television and look out the window. There are a thousand shades of green in Asahi Mura. The pine is darker than the evergreen. The rice paddies are a shade lighter than the new buds on the tealeaves. Green grows everywhere.

My apartment faces the Miomote River. The mountain water rushes over the river rocks and heads out to the Sea of Japan. In the distance children play in the water. They splash and wade. A mother calls her children to the shore. If this were before the terrorist attacks, the sound of children in the Miomote River would be idyllic. I'd plan when Fernando and Nico would come to have a picnic there. We'd spread out our blanket in a neat square. Our son would edge toward the water, rock in hand to throw in and ripple the water. I'd pull him back before he tipped in. Fernando would tell him how the salmon swim upstream to spawn. The three of us would listen to the hum and rush of river water.

But I can't. The Miomote River is not Lake Michigan. The landscape around me sprawls rural and sparse, not like the urban grittiness of Chicago. Rice paddies cram every open space. Without church steeples with steel crosses to break up the blue of the skyline, the sky rolls endless. A cherry-red *torri*, a wooden marker that looks like an upside-down goalpost dots the fields. *Torri*, Buddhists claim, are sacred places. Anyone who passes through them enters into a sanctuary. I eye the *torri* by the edge of the Miomote River. The red contrasts with the bright green rice paddies like *giri* contrasts with *ninjo*, *mo* with *hitan*, "outside shoes" with "inside shoes." In this land of contrasts, I am like the ash on the

television screen, caught in the air, suspended in flight. But I want to be the *torri*. I want to step through its wooden red poles and stand on sacred ground.

Let us pass, the three of us through the *torri*, I pray.

Gatsby Man Hair: Understanding *Ijime*

Two teachers slump over their desks, wiped out.

“Hair. Always hair,” Tanaka-sensei moans.

“Forget the hair! It’s battle of the hemlines,” whines Kazumi-sensei, opening an energy drink and chugging it down.

My Japanese colleagues’ complaints about uniform violations are unending.

Overhearing snatches of their grievances, it would seem the entire school wears Kabuki costumes instead of the standard Asahi Mura Junior High uniform. The truth is, less than three percent of students are in violation. A few older girls wear large loose socks instead of knee-highs. Some braver girls shorten their skirts by folding them at the waist. A handful of boys wear their trousers about their hips. One or two forget their ties, and one keeps his shirt unbuttoned. These infractions come from a small selection of students, yet they wreak havoc on the teachers’ workload. Teachers constantly thumb through the rulebook, write up detentions, and send notes home.

“*Mukashii, ne*. Too much work,” they sigh, and heave themselves off their chairs and into their classes.

The uniform at Asahi Mura Junior High is straightforward. Boys wear a military-style uniform with a white shirt, a black jacket, and black pants. Girls’ uniforms include a gray pleated skirt, a black jacket, and a white blouse. While walking to and from school, most

students wear brightly colored caps, so drivers won't sideswipe them when they talk on their cell. On gym days, everyone dresses in rice-paddy-green, unisex jogging suits, including the teacher. The gym uniform has the logo of Asahi Mura, a setting sun in the mountains stitched on the pullover's chest pocket.

On the surface, uniform policy and infractions at Asahi Mura Junior High seem similar to those in Chicago Public Schools. Both school districts prohibit clothing with tears or holes, exposure of undergarments, and anything that appears obscene or unsafe. Despite the difference in geography, uniforms are uniforms. Skin exposure signals a big no-no. However, when I taught at Chicago Public Schools I paid more attention to a stabbing in the bathroom than a uniform infraction unless the stabber in the bathroom wore gang colors. Schools deemed "colors" zero tolerance. Anyone caught wearing them looked forward to suspension. To make sure teachers new to urban education recognized that red and black meant Gangsta D's and not a fashion faux pas, the Chicago Police Gang Unit came in and explained the current trends in hood fashion so that teachers understood that those brightly colored "friendship" bracelets really represented gang-affiliations.

In Asahi Mura Junior High, there are no gangs, and most students group together not for juvenile delinquency but because that's the "Japanese Way". Those students who strike out on their own are normally the rule breakers. There is a stigma against them. Teachers label students who disregard the uniform rules as low-level subverters of authority. Repeat offenders may break more serious rules, such as destroying school

property or harming others.

Although there seems to be no direct correlation between uniforms and academics, there is a link between uniforms and school community. Uniforms instill a feeling of school spirit, school pride, and social acceptance. I've seen students wear the school uniforms on the weekend. When compared to designer clothes and name-brand basketball shoes, school uniforms are also a cost-effective solution. Uniform critics often note the superficial sameness, glossing over deeply rooted social and academic problems, while opening the door to endless litigation over opt-out provisions, parental and student rights. Despite the criticism on both ends, most agree, a uniform remains a complex beast of burden.

For every student out of uniform, there is one teacher who relishes the shakedown and bust of a violator. In Chicago, it was the unforgettable Mrs. Hayes. Armed with a yardstick, she stood out in the parking lot, whether it snowed or gusted or hailed, measuring the length of a girl's skirt, making sure it fell right below the knee. At Asahi Mura Junior High, the ringleader of the uniform squad is Saito-sensei.

"The uniform is difficult, *murakashi, ne?*" Saito-sensei complains, leaning on my desk. He wears a red jogging suit that swishes when he moves.

Today Saito-sensei hands me another dos and don'ts uniform list. Each and every detail, from the summer uniform's cotton socks, to the winter's wool sweaters, he has noted and color-coded, dated, and translated.

“So many rules, so little time,” I mumble, setting the paper aside and returning to prepare our co-English lessons.

“Jennifer-sensei,” Saito-sensei begins again in his wheezy voice with hints of a London accent. His tobacco-stained fingers tap out each word on my desk. “The uniform [tap, tap] is the heart of the school [tap, tap, tap].”

I sigh. I nod.

“There are other rules, too. Not just uniform, but hair,” Saito-sensei continues. “*Hai, dozo.*” He hands me a can of what looks like spray paint.

“What’s this?” I ask, turning the can over. On the front, a picture of a dapper Japanese man with a toothy grin peeks out under jet-black hair raked to the side. In bold neon yellow letters: GATSBY MAN. “Is this supposed to be a joke?”

“It is a can of hair dye,” he explains. “Japanese hair is black. No other color. *Kuro.*”

“*Nani ga?*” I ask, thinking I have misunderstood. “What?”

“*Hai, Jennifer-sensei.* All students must wear the uniform correctly, including their hair color.”

“So you spray them?” I wonder if that is even legal, if I am again missing something in translation. “*Honto ne?* Really? You spray this in a kid’s hair?” I act out spraying with my own hair, sound effects and all. Saito-sensei looks confused. I am about to ask him if he expects me to spray the students who are in hair color violation.

“It is the ‘Japanese Way’,” he says, stuffing his hands in his pocket.

Unable to resist, I roll my eyes. Any time I ask a direct question, Saito-sensei frowns, fidgets uncomfortably, and, perhaps unable to respond directly, shrugs off the answer as being “the Japanese Way”. Translation: I have stepped into the cultural divide where no bridge will be built. *Gaijin*, outsiders like me cannot understand complex Japanese customs, so it is better to accept the given answer than to offend with further questioning. So far, “the Japanese Way” has explained why boys and girls do not interact together in after-school clubs, why there must be more Japanese than English spoken in an English-language classroom, and why female teachers serve male teachers cups of tea during the breaks.

“What’s the big deal with hair?” I blurt out. “How can hair be ‘the Japanese Way’?”

Saito-sensei’s hands flutter out of his pockets. He begins to tap his fingers on my desk, staring at the ceiling.

“What I mean,” I stammer, “is that hair, in Chicago, remains student choice.” From gothic shag to the punk-rock Mohawk to the preppy bob, hair determines the friends a student sits with during lunch, the style of clothes he or she wears. Some Chicago students refuse to come to school if it’s on a bad hair day, I explain. Saito-sensei shrugs as, if what I’ve said was passing wind.

“Japanese hair is black. Students who dye their hair other colors are not part of the group. Japanese are group people. That is why it is ‘the Japanese Way’.”

Although I realize that wearing gang colors in Chicago Public Schools may be the cultural equivalent of uniform infractions for the Japanese, since both represent a

subculture, but *hair*?

“All right,” I say. “What happens if you aren’t part of the group?”

Saito-sensei sighs, like he does when we play *Preposition Bingo*.

“Japanese students need to be a part of the group,” he offers finally. “All teachers are required to have a can. You may choose not to use it.” He bows.

I bow back.

“See you tonight at the *enkai*,” he says and leaves to smoke his umpteenth cigarette.

“Sure thing,” I say, putting the GASTSBY MAN can in my bottom desk drawer.

Uniforms are the least of my worries. Accent, grammar, and fluency are my main purpose. Three days a week and one day for training teachers in new methods of teaching English are about all I can manage. The Asahi Mura Board of Education hired me, and even though technically I am an employee of the school during those days, my interactions with the students are meant to encourage speaking English. Uniform patrol and its long list of “dos and don’ts” halt the language flow.

In the last three months, this is the sixteenth list of student infringements Saito-sensei has doled out. At the rate I receive these papers, I suspect all his insistence on regulations points to redundancy, if not the ridiculous. Where in all these rules can students feel free enough to learn a foreign language? If society demands a proper way to dress or proper hair color, then how can a student strike out on his or her own? It takes trust to learn, not fear. Some students need to feel confident enough to speak English. Trying things out is all

part of learning. Parroting a phrase, like *Hello, how are you?* limits students if they don't try it on their own in a new situation. Blunders are part of the process, and if there is little opportunity for them, then what about me? If Asahi Mura Junior High's environment is so controlled, under which ruler do I teach?

Although Saito-sensei is considered my superior, he acts more like an emperor with his demands. Our work relationship is a delicate balance and one that poses many challenges. We live on opposite ends of the cultural divide. He is an older, conservative male who speaks British English. I am a younger, liberal female who speaks American English. My familiarity with education is urban, while his is rural. We do not share a similar teaching philosophy. I believe in student-centered lessons; Saito-sensei prefers the lecture format. Most of Saito-sensei's lessons are traditional grammar-based translation exercises in which the students have little practice speaking; mine seem like birthday parties with games, like *adjective hot potato* and *disco dancing verbs*. The purpose of my job is in part, to change his methods so that students can speak as well as read and write. On paper at least, our goal is to have his students talk ninety percent of the time and him ten percent. Most of the activities we have done have caused Saito-sensei to excuse himself from the classroom. Students having fun while learning is something Saito-sensei considers a waste of time.

Through the practice of requesting British teachers from the Japanese Department of Education for the Advancement of Teaching English, Saito-sensei retained his fluency. Year

after year, he deepened his Anglophile adoration and kept up with the Queen's English. Now this year Saito-sensei seems to consider the Board of Education decision to hire me, an American, an act of treason. Although he does not reject my suggestions, and he does not expect me to offer him a cup of *o-cha* as he does the Japanese female teachers, I get the feeling that he feels getting English teaching tips from a woman, much less an American *gaijin*, worthless.

The truth is I am reluctant to work with him. It unnerves me how he drums his fingers on my desk and demands attention to rules. His insistence on "the Japanese Way" frays my nerves. His crazy suggestion of spraying students who show up to school with different colored hair freaks me out. I am beginning to resent him.

Later that night, when I join the teachers of Asahi Mura Junior High at the bi-monthly *enkai* or drinking party, I avoid sitting near Saito-sensei. I plunk down next to two teachers who sit directly opposite from me in the teachers' room. I watch a sea of new colleagues chat, drink sake, and slurp up soba noodles. The female teachers kneel before small tables, and each time a glass goes empty, someone pours another. Everyone seems to enjoy the evening and each other's company. They welcome me as best as they can, but still I feel like an outsider.

An hour into the *enkai*, Saito-sensei strolls over to talk with me.

"Many people are curious about your husband and son," he says. His speech slurred

from several cups of sake. “But family members do not attend the *enkai*.”

“Really, why not?” I ask, taking a bite of sushi.

“It is a school rule. The *enkai* is a school function. Your husband is housewife.”

The sushi sticks in my throat. I take a sip of sake to wash it down.

“Homemaker,” I reply. “My husband is a homemaker.”

Saito-sensei looks confused.

“Your husband wears the skirt and you wear the pants,” he says, lighting a cigarette.

“Maybe we’re both wear them,” I say, realizing that he has misunderstood the cliché, men wear the pants in the family.

I try to explain to him that couples in the States work out different childcare arrangements. I offer examples of husbands working part-time and wives full-time. As parents, I explain, we care for our child together. While we are in Asahi Mura, I am the full-time worker while my husband writes a novel. He also takes care of our one-year-old son. *Housewife* is a term people no longer use.

“*Wakarimasu*. I understand,” he says and bows.

I sense he doesn’t understand, especially when he excuses himself while we are still talking. Puzzled, I watch him walk off, lopsided from too much sake.

Soon a waiter hauls in a karaoke machine and the teachers erupt in cheers. Within a few minutes, someone moonwalks. Watching the math teachers do the wave doesn’t make me feel any better. In fact, the reality of working in a small town school, in a country with a

language and culture I barely grasp, suddenly rushes over me, making me uneasy. *Have I misjudged my own ambitions to further myself as an educator?* That old fear, the panic of the unknown, wells up in me. Aren't I supposed to follow the rules? Back in Chicago, everyone I know had a baby, bought a house, settled down into mid-level jobs. They follow some unwritten code expected of them, a code that, as a wife, mother, and teacher I am disobeying by being in Japan.

I watch Saito-sensei grab the microphone and start up a John Denver song.

You are here, I think for better or worse.

The next day at Asahi Mura Junior High, Saito-sensei is absent. At first I think maybe it is because of all the sake he drank, but then Hatsumi-sensei, a female teacher in her late fifties, comes over to my desk. Although I do not know her well, she is the only female colleague who refuses to serve her male counterparts tea.

"Saito-sensei asked me to help you. He is talking with officials at the Board of Education," she says. In her hand, she holds an ink brush and a student paper. She adds a kanji character to a student's paper and then blows on the ink dry.

"Do you know what happened with Yoshimura's son?" she asks.

"Not really," I say.

Hatsumi-sensei's mouth pulls into a straight line. "Oh," she says, switching to Japanese. "Let me tell you."

Six months before I started my contract, in January 2001, Ashai Mura Junior High suffered a tragedy with broad implications, bringing national television cameras to the small mountain town. The tragedy involved Yoshimura's son, also named Yoshimura. Yoshimura, the father, had been a clerk at the Board of Education for the town for nearly twenty years. His son, Yoshimura Jr., a twelve-year-old boy who attended Asahi Mura Junior High, committed suicide, some suspected, in response to sustained and intense bullying. According to the grandmother's statement to police, he attended a soccer practice where his teammates hazed him for being a weak goalie. He left the practice before it ended, went home, ate dinner with his grandmother, and then excused himself to study. Later that evening, when the grandmother went to check on him, she found he had hanged himself, still in his soccer uniform. While the investigating details of young Yoshimura's bullying, the local school district produced a report that cited the student's English fluency as probable cause. Yoshimura had visited New York City nearly every summer with his father, and had a superior grasp of the language compared to his classmates—although he received average grades in other classes. By virtue of being a standout English speaker, Yoshimura attracted attention, which in turn attracted jealousy. Because he spoke with an American different accent and not the preferred British at Asahi Mura, there was a naturally available attempt to undercut his ability of which he, in truth, had reason to be proud.

The suicide was reported to suggest a rise in rural areas of *ijime* (as school bullying is called in Japan), and the tragedy implicated the school and the town. Many adolescents

suffer from *ijime*. It is a nationwide problem. What constitutes bullying includes verbal threats, ridicule and/or name calling, hiding property, shunning, and “silent treatment” by the group, meddling, physical violence, and coercion to obtain money. Students who don’t comply are often bullied.

Since conformity is the basis of Japanese society, students at Asahi Mura Junior High who break the order appear to be possible threats to the balance of the school. However, if the rules are sometimes too excessive, for instance, students are not allowed to dye their hair, their frustration results in their being bullied.

Some social critics seem to think that Japanese society itself is to blame for *ijime*. The homogeneity of Japanese society carries over to schools, something I am beginning to realize with the uniform policies. Students tend to consider that being similar to each other is a virtue. A group provides a sense of safety. Many students are terrified of being different and fear alienation. They attempt to be like one another; otherwise, they will be considered deviants. As a teacher, I notice, it is not unusual for students to become panicky when they are asked to speak individually in English class. They prefer group work and shy away from spotlight speeches. The students’ need for group reassurance is at the forefront of almost everything that is done at school, from serving school lunches, to the morning meeting seating arrangements in the gym. Those students who refuse to participate in school activities are isolated and ignored. Most often they hide in the infirmary until the final bells

rings.

Yoshimura, the father, requested a public apology from the town for the bullying that might have added to his son's extreme distress. The town refused. A public apology would be worse than financial ruin for the town. It would mean public humiliation and shame. While remaining in his job as clerk for the town's Board of Education, Yoshimura brought a civil suit against the town. In the negotiations, he requested a female teacher from America, not a male from the United Kingdom. His request indirectly implicated Saito-sensei's involvement in his role as English teacher and coach to Yoshimura's son. The town agreed to Yoshimura's request, and I was hired as Asahi Mura's English teacher.

When Hatsumi-sensei finishes telling me the details, we refill our cups of tea.

"Hai dozo," she says, and pours me some.

"Thank you," I say and we wander back toward at my desk. I open the drawer and see the spray can of GATSBY MAN on my desk.

"Ahhh," Hatsumi-sensei says seeing the can. "Saito-sensei's rules are always present, ne?"

I pick up the can and shake it. "Is it true that Japanese hair is kuro no other color but black?"

Hatsumi-sensei nods, "Yes. All Japanese hair is black," she says, and to prove her point, touches her short bobbed, black hair.

Then she bows and goes back to her desk. Our conversation is over, I guess.

Holding the can in my hand, I glance around the teacher's room and see long, short, medium-length hair. I see Farrah Fawcett waves, shaggy bobs, and crew cuts. What I notice is that none of the teachers—male or female—have dyed hair. No highlights, no blondes, no deeper brown tones. Everyone has black hair, Japanese hair.

I wonder, does having black hair make one student more Japanese than another? *Can one be less Japanese with highlights?* I touch my own hair and think how much room my L'Oréal hair took up in my suitcase.

"How do I know if they have Ash Blonde?" I snapped when my husband complained that I was stealing too much space. "I'm not going gray over there."

I turn the can of GATSBY MAN spray in my hand and try to decipher the copy on the back. The *kanji* is too small. I only make out in *katakana* "*free hair*." What does free have to do with hair, if hair has to be a certain color? Better yet, why is the product's name GATSBY MAN? It is surely a reference to Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*, I think, taking the cap off. How ironic that one of the most well recognized literary characters known for alternating his own identity is on the can of black hairspray being used to spray Japanese middle school students who are seeking new identities.

I remember when I taught *The Great Gatsby*, a required novel for Chicago Public Schools. What drew my students to Gatsby draws readers again and again: invention. What teenager does not fancy it? Who doesn't want to create their own identity? Certainly, if Jay Gatsby was good for something, it was the idea of telling millions of teenagers that they

could reinvent themselves.

I remember that year, to engage my students, I wrote a quote from the novel on the board:

So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end.

One student, who barely made it to class and when he did said little, raised his hand and offered, "Invention is all we got."

Maybe, too, in Japan, the invention of perfect black hair is all they have to keep out any foreign influence and retain group status. Possibly the need for black hair is a protective measure against the rebel individual. Understandably, in the United States, gangs or any group really threatens the individual, perhaps in Japan, the opposite is true. The individual threatens the group, even if it is hair. Yet no matter what culture teenagers live in, they want what adults prohibit.

I put the GATSBY MAN in my desk drawer and prepare my papers for the day's class. Protective measures, I think, sometimes push away a chance at discovery, and so as I travel through the hallway to my classroom, I check out hair. Many girls wear their hair long and in ponytails. They show off hair bows and Hello Kitty barrettes. Their bangs fall into their eyes. Some girls have hair bobs; others flaunt the popular shag. Boys are allowed to wear their hair short, which still leaves room for invention. They add gel and spike it up. Hair, at least in terms of style, seems individual.

During the class that Saito-sensei and I teach together, I decide to play my own version of Simon Says since Saito-sensei is absent. In this new version, I pick a student and use him or her as Simon. When I say, *Kari-sans says, Hair* and point to her hair, I watch as all twenty of my students point to their hair. *Kari-san says, Ponytail*, and I gather up her hair. The students play along. As I move on to another student, I realize my intention: I am teaching language to specify distinction. Now the students have the words to name own their individuality, something that may threaten the group. Perhaps I am crossing a line. But maybe through learning the terms as a group, the students can recognize their uniqueness, even if they all have the same hair color. It's something Yoshimura's son might have known he could not share.

Buzzed in the Land of Genki

After teaching school in Chicago, the nature of working in a Japanese school comes as nothing new, including carrying everything that will be required for each class from room to room. My colleagues shove an office's worth of supplies and devices into a bag to use from one period to the next. Most of the items that I notice teachers carrying at Asahi Mura Junior High are the same typical items found in every developed country where the presence of adequate school supplies is taken for granted. The staplers and laptops are no different. Even those items that do reflect a Japanese spin on an educational item—the *kanji* paper so much nicer than American wide- or college-ruled notebook paper; the handheld computers that the school district in Asahi Mura provides for attendance—are variations of the same. They are interesting to me, but not surprising or alarming. But, in my second month of school, I start noticing an item present on every teacher's desk that does surprise and alarm me: the several empty, small, elegant bottles neatly arranged to appear like a private stash of airplane cocktail bottles.

Ranging in size, but never larger than a can of soda, these usually elegant glass bottles and some aluminum cans grab my eye with bright lettering and bold, vague promises. *Kanji* or *Katakana* script scrolls across the top of each, boast dramatic results in the bright red color of a *torii* column or the muted yellow of an autumn oak. What many of

the labels directly claim to provide, and all imply in one way or another, is a healthy jolt of can-do attitude, called *genki* by the Japanese. *Genki*, I soon come to learn, is found not only in these convenience store energy-boosters, but also in daily conversation.

“*Genki desu ka?*” people ask routinely. “Are you happy?”—and energized and confident, and whatever else is implied in this Japanese word with no exact English translation? I come to think over time that maybe the best way to think of it, after seeing a few colleagues undertake some demonstrations of the presence of *genki*, is hyperactive, but without the stigma.

Teachers are not alone in their thirst to be *genki*. From the bent-over *obachan* grandmothers, to *salariman* office drones, everyone seems to slug down some sort of feel-good drink. Sold in mini-mart display cases, from behind vending machine plastic windows, and on grocery stores shelves, these pick-me-ups are everywhere. One day, I try to see how far I can go after leaving the school before seeing an advertisement for a *genki* drink. I make it half a block to a bus shelter. By the turnoff for the highway nearest our home, a billboard displays a smiling woman in a *geisha*-style getup, slurping down a can of *genki*. By the train station, another ad shows an older couple enjoying a packaged *genki* beverage in a green park. By the river, a third billboard depicts a group of men slugging back a *genki* cold one while relaxing in an *onsen*. From these advertisements around Asahi Mura village, an outsider might think that paradise awaits inside these bottles; then again an outsider might wonder, as I begin to, whether there is a problem with *genki* addiction, hiding out of

view, spawned by this mysterious secret sauce. *What is in this stuff?*

“*le, ne . . .* Changes my whole life,” brags Saito-sensei one morning when I catch him opening his third can before ten o’clock. He chugs down the liquid, like a basketball player at the free throw line assured of success by having practiced the motion to the point of unconscious fluidity. His Adam’s apple bobs while his feet tap. When he finishes, he squishes up his face as if performing the part of the ritual that says “aftertaste,” lets out a long “ahhhh” followed by a substantial belch, and dunks the can in the wastepaper basket. I gather from how Saito-sensei bounds off to his next class that with him there is an instant *genki* effect. How much is an act, and how much is genuine herbal or chemical good feeling, it’s impossible to say. But there is no denying that Saito’s gait knows *genki*.

When I hear his squeaky shoes drift out of earshot, I fish out the can and study it. Against a light brown background, the label reads “Inner *Genki*” in *kanji*. Surrounding the “Inner *Genki*” is one of Japan’s favorite symbols of change, a *sakura*, cherry blossom. I bring the can to my nose and sniff. It smells sugary like the *Anpanman* candies I buy for my one-year-old son, Nico. *Anpanman* is sort of a Japanese Elmo-like character, found on all sorts of products targeted at children, including the candies Nico loves that depict cartoon character’s face in the center of a square candy. When my son sucks on one, *Anpanman*’s face melts onto his tongue like a sugar tattoo. When I smell Saito-sensei’s can, I realize

how similar the smell is to Nico's kisses after a trip to the corner store. The idea does not leave me feeling *genki*.

Taking a second whiff, Saito-sensei's sweet smelling miracle drink also contains an odor that I recognize from a Chicago apartment building I used to live in: a hallway smell that stinks like boiled cauliflower. The fusion of the two smells—candy and boiled vegetables—fills my nose. I wonder if the combination is an intentional, market-research ploy to convey both fun and austerity at once. Or, maybe I am reading too much into this, and there's just no way to cover the roots and herbs (and experimental diet pills that pack the true punch) without resorting to sugar, the best masking agent around. Whatever the intent, the stuff makes teachers zoom around the school building in a way that makes the teachers I have worked with U.S. and Latin America seem, if not calm, definitely a few notches down on the hyperactivity scale.

Could this beverage really be seriously spiked? I think about Saito's generally intense bearing, and weigh his revved-up behavior alongside the conspicuous consumption of the *genki* drinks at Asahi Mura Junior High. Am I witnessing something akin to the exaggeratedly drunken behavior college students sometimes exhibit—before they actually get drunk? *Look, I'm playing along, letting this concoction we're all drinking lower my inhibitions the way any laid back person would!* Only in this school setting, the act goes the other way; it's a chance for my colleagues to show how dedicated they are to the important job of shaping Japan's youth. Compared to the energy drinks I have seen in the U.S.—

products that promise a set of stamina—there is definitely something a little highbrow in Japan’s *genki* drinks. This isn’t a little speed to push on through the last hundred miles to Cleveland, it occurs to me, but instead a white-collar beverage to boot professional dedication. Along with this thought comes the question: Am I going to be judged according to whether or not I get *genki*?

Drinking, be it these *genki* drinks or the endless cup of sake, seems to be my colleagues’ favorite pastime. In the countryside, there is little else to do besides work in the family’s rice field or fish squid in the ocean. Even though there are jobs both on land and at sea, these hold no interest for most young people, who take off for Tokyo as soon as they reach twenty, the age of majority in Japan. Asahi Mura’s older generations stay behind, and through decades of agricultural and maritime work, the community-building pastime of being buzzed together cements the social fabric.

In fact, for the teachers at Asahi Mura Junior High, drinking is the first activity on the social calendar. A quarter of my monthly paycheck goes for the bi-weekly *enkai*, essentially mandatory faculty drinking parties, which, although they are a cut above the average happy hour in terms of overall swankiness, still are little pricier than I like. On the surface, the purpose of an *enkai* is for the teachers to connect, regroup, and forge bonds, but, after attending a few of the parties, they start to feel like another thin excuse to chug-a-lug.

At each *enkai*, the script is the same. Male teachers get smashed, while female teachers dutifully pour more sake into the men's empty cups. Dinner is served within in forty minutes of arrival; forty minutes later, a waiter hauls in a karaoke machine and hauls away the dirty dishes. From there on, the karaoke machine becomes the center of the party. The Japanese prefer to skip the silly American, "Are you going to sing tonight?" stage of a karaoke gathering, because, oh yeah, they are going to sing all right. For the next two hours, most of the male *sensei* line up to belt out broken English renditions of John Denver or Michael Jackson, probably the two most requested singers, while the female teachers bob their heads to the beat. Finally, the principal calls his faculty into a circle for a formal bow, which signals the party's end.

After I have been to about six-months worth of *enkai*. No one, as far as I have noticed, has ever skipped one, so I am not quite sure how to duck out of one, and one night I am approached by the school's vice-principal at the small table where I am sitting with two of the history teachers. With an ebi tempura halfway to my mouth, I notice him staring at my empty sake glass for an extended period, with a glance that doesn't notice, but *conveys* noticing its emptiness. He does not wait for a female teacher to pour sake in my cup. Instead, he does it himself.

"*Hai, dozo*," he says. When I take a sip and set down the glass, he pours some more. Again, I take a sip. This pour-and-sip routine continues for a while, until I put my hand over the cup, signaling enough sake for the moment.

“Sake is too strong for me,” I offer lamely, picking up an *edamame*, and thinking to myself that a little more food at the *enkai* would make me better able to throw some more sake back.

The vice principal bows so deeply I see the dandruff on his scalp. As he rises, his hands smooth the blazer of his burgundy three-piece suit, and he smiles at me. This is his last year at Asahi Mura Junior High, and from the way he pours the sake, I gather all of the *enkais* will be filled with celebration.

“Jennifer-sensei, do you like to drink?” he asks, reaching for another tempura. This time he pops a fried sweet potato in his mouth.

“*Sumimasen, nai ga?*” I ask, fumbling with my chopsticks. “Excuse me, what?”

“*Nanika nomimasu ka?*” he repeats. “Do you like to drink?”

Do I like to drink? If I answer yes, will he think his new English teacher is a lush? If I answer no, will he consider me a prude, leaving me exiled to the table with Hanka-sensei, the only teacher who does not drink alcohol and thus gets treated, well, hardly at all, banished to the corner at every get-together, nursing a grapefruit juice and talking to no one?

“Umm,” I stutter, trying to pick up a piece of *unagi* with my chopsticks. Last weekend I sampled several different types of sake, falling in love with *umeshu*, the sweet tangy sake

infused with plums. "I am an occasional drinker," I allow, but thinking of human resources protocol back home, I hasten to add, "but never, ever on the job."

Responding to what I think is a neatly balanced answer, representing both sides of the American work-play dichotomy implied in many a Friday afternoon happy hour toast, the vice principal looks ill. He grimaces, scratches his head, and closes his eyes as if in a daze. I think back to my former job at Chicago Public Schools. I never drank with my fellow teachers at a formal event. Even at Christmas parties and retirement celebrations, people passed on the Bud and headed for the Italian beef. Some teachers would go to happy hours, but the school never took money out of my paycheck to spend directly at a South Side Irish Bar. Questions from a school administrator about whether an employee liked to drink meant that a teacher had been suspected of showing up to work drunk, and that the school nurse was waiting around the corner for a little routine, implied-consent blood work. Now in Japan, my vice principal seems to be asking if I like to drink, or love to drink, and I can see from the reaction that I must have mustered a little too much enthusiasm.

"More sake, please," I say, realizing now I really might need a drink. "*Onegaishimasu.*"

The vice principal frowns as if there is a sour smell. He glances around and waves over Saito-sensei, who sits across the room with his posse of smokers. Within seconds, Saito-sensei sits down at my table. The vice principal pours him sake.

"*Hai, dozo,*" the vice principal says just as he did for him. When Saito-sensei finishes

his swig, the vice principal offers him more. Saito pauses and lights a cigarette then he offers the vice principal one. A smoke cloud forms around us.

“*Hai, dozo.*” The vice principal pours more sake in Saito-sensei’s cup then asks him to translate. While the vice principal speaks, I notice how different the two men are. The vice principal has been at Asahi Mura Junior High for four years. This is his fifth and final year. Next year, Monboshō, the Japanese Ministry of Education, will transfer him to another school. Teachers and students know him as the gentle administrator. He smiles at students while other teachers scowl, and he often spends his lunch eating with the three special education students because they make him octopus dumplings.

Saito-sensei, on the other hand, is the stern disciplinarian at the school, a position not without a few contenders at Asahi Mura Junior High. As Head of the English department and a rigid teacher, Saito invariably adheres to all school rules and uses his free time to smoke and grade papers in the faculty smoking room, marking errors with a satisfied smirk. During our shared English classes, he wears a permanent scowl, that, for me, is a little out of step with a what language teacher’s goal should be. Rather than seeming happy when students demonstrate ability to communicate using new vocabulary, he appears to be in a state of perpetual worry about how new words might be combined for subversive effect.

Tonight, I see that a couple of sakes change his mood. At the *enkai*, Saito-sensei seems to lighten up, whooping it up and holding court with the smokers, a tribe of which I

have been and off-and-on member, but usually decides to skip at these gatherings, largely because of Saito's centrality to it.

"Jennifer-sensei," Saito-sensei begins. "The vice-principal says it is healthy to drink with friends. But please help yourself to ocha and coffee in the teachers' room."

"*Nani ga?*" I ask trying to understand the missing links in translation. "What does that mean?"

Saito-sensei repeats himself, and as he does Hanka-sensei, the only non-drinker on the faculty, suddenly appears at my table. After awkward moments of bowing and looking at the sake bottle in the center of the table—without pouring any from it—the vice principal and Saito-sensei vanish from the table and reconnect with the smokers across the room. Hanka-sensei purses her lips, and drinks from her juice watered-down with melted ice in the slow deliberate sips of a cat lapping up milk. I get the impression that booze might have been a problem for her when she begins the conversation about North American culture by asking about the role the organization Alcoholics Anonymous plays in it. I quickly realize two things. First, any attempt to clarify what I mean about my drinking habits is sure to come across as an even more pathetic form of denial than it otherwise would. Secondly, Hanka-sensei isn't going to be pouring me any of that delicious plum-infused sake anytime soon.

As the evening drones on, the actors of Asahi Mura Junior High play their familiar roles. Male teachers get smashed, while the female teachers keep pouring. An hour before

the party's end, the waiter drags in a karaoke machine. Inebriated and off-key, a younger teacher, named Ishida-sensei, dubbed as the faculty "Karaoke King-o" starts off a set with Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean." Teachers shimmy in their seats, and like the rest of the teachers, I check out Ishida-sensei's moves. He is in his first year at Asahi Mura Junior High and not shy about drinking. All the teachers refer to him as *dokushin* or the bachelor. Some of the older female teachers bring plates of food for him and wait on him like a pet.

When Ishida half twirls and croons the last few lines of "not my lover," the vice principal joins in with his own moonwalk. Female teachers clap like schoolgirls. Male teachers cheer and whistle, as if the King of Pop and his sidekick have added a Japanese mountain village date to the world tour. Even Saito-sensei seems to get his groove. It is a tough act to follow, but after a few more sips of sake, Saito gets up to mouth his version of "Country Road." Then he partners up with Ishida-sensei to sing "Ebony and Ivory," a number which right from the start makes my night when, in a moment of irony, they rock-paper-scissors to see whose Ebony and Ivory: Stevie didn't have his rock covered by Paul's paper to learn that he'd be singing the ebony part.

At exactly fifteen minutes to eleven, the principal gathers all the teachers into a circle. Most of the male teachers wobble over. Some have tied their ties around their heads like middle aged samurais, a move I think one probably would not see among junior partners trying to conceal inebriation at an American holiday party. The principal, himself unsteady on his feet, calls the end of the *enkai* by bowing to his faculty.

“Bonsai, Ashai Mura Chugaku!” he bellows and bows again.

“Bonsai,” we reply in unison and bow back to him.

Within minutes, the room clears. Some teachers pile into cars, others jam into taxis.

Sober, I bike home to my house. By eleven o’clock on the dot, I am kissing Fernando who is on his computer with glass of red wine by his side.

“Feel like a drink?” he asks, holding up the half empty bottle.

“Yeah,” I say and he hands me a glass.

I take the bottle and pour the wine. In a singsong voice, I say “*Hai dozo*.”

Fernando rolls his eyes and drains his glass. “They’re Japanese. You don’t have to be.”

Returning home from school one day later that week, I am again invited into the apartment of my downstairs neighbor, Natsuko, the local health drink home-saleswoman. If getting drunk on sake is a favorite pastime of Asahi Mura teachers, slugging back health drinks is her even more dutifully undertaken endeavor. Health drinks are her world. When the last of her children left for Tokyo, she began selling products from the Shaklee company, founded and headquartered in California, and now a trans-Pacific marketer of “natural nutrition”. The three times Natsuko has invited me into her apartment, she has

brought up the fact that her hard work selling Shaklee products door-to-door won her the coveted title of biggest seller, an honor which came with an all-inclusive trip to Disneyland. Whenever there is a lull in our conversation, Natsuko-san likes to repeat Shaklee's global tag line, "Outside green. Inside clean," as if returning to the familiar mantra will magically energize her language skills.

When I pass her door, she hears my footsteps and peers out holding up a glass and says, "*Ohayo!* I have a new shipment of Shaklee. You would like to try Shaklee Shake?"

Entering her apartment, I breathe in the earthy smells that emit from jars of health products she hocks to neighborhood *shufu*, or housewives. Out of courtesy, I slug the green liquid down. Shaklee tastes like spinach and Earth, green and gritty.

"*Oishii*, delicious," I reply politely.

Natsuko's smile widens. "*Oishii, ne,*" she affirms, and drinks a whole glass without coming up for air. I imagine Natsuko on a late night cable show inviting a body builder to provide a testimonial about his life as a runt before drinking from the body-altering fountain of Shaklee International Health drinks.

"What's inside? I ask.

Natsuko takes down the can and glides her fingernails under the ingredients listed on the can. Some of the miracle-roots that I recognize are there, ginseng and ginkgo along

with the predicable sugar and caffeine. Also, royal jelly, guarana, garlic and echinachea appear, but after these there is a list of characters in small script I do not recognize.

Although I had not previously been inclined, at the end of this visit with Natsuko, I end up making an impulse purchase of Shaklee. The next morning, assembling a bag lunch for school, I throw one of the drinks in, not realizing that this action—equally accidental to my “Booze? Love it! But never at school...” comment—will have equally unintended effects, this time positive, on my reputation.

After the *enaki*, no one at school sits around and talks about their drunken escapades, forgotten are the bragging stories or outrageous tales of the *enkai*. Instead everyone stays mum, a fact I have failed to realize is that the entire subject is verboten during school hours. I learn my lesson trying to forge a bond during lunch with Saito-sensei by congratulating him on his John Denver singing talents.

Stuttering in shock that any behavior from the faculty party would be mentioned, Saito-sensei looks down at his shoes, shrugs and says, “*Enaki* is not in school business, Jennifer-sensei. It is for after school only.”

One of the awkward moments that I am becoming so used to begins to unfold, until Saito-sensei glances down and notices the Shaklee in front of me. School business might hinder any mention of what faculty members got up to at an event with alcohol, but from the conversation that follows, I see that discussion of the benefits of Shaklee or other health

drinks is more than allowed. I ask Saito to about some of the ingredients I am unfamiliar with and nod as I pretend to understand the explanations. Saito either doesn't realize, or doesn't care that I am only feigning comprehension. Lacking a common vocabulary to classify the mysterious herbs and their supposed effects, I am reminded of a time I tried to explain to my Argentine mother-in-law what was inside of Cheez Whiz.

I had been telling myself since putting my foot in my mouth at the *enaki* that my fellow teachers weren't dissecting my drinking habits amongst themselves. It was just a misunderstanding, nothing to worry about obsessively. A few hours after lunch, I realized that what I drank was indeed a subject of interest when Ishida, the Michael Jackson singer, waves me over to his desk. I understand that he has talked to Saito-sensei and learned of my conversion to a Shaklee-drinker. He wants to make a pitch for his drink of choice—or rather his drinks of choice. Empties litter his desk, perhaps ten bottles and cans in different sizes and colors representing a decent selection from what I have noticed for sale in the local shops.

Ishida opens another, pours some in a cup for me to try, and gulps down the rest of the can. "Much better than Shaklee," he informs me.

"What are these?" I ask, thinking not just of the cup he has given me, but also of the entire array of drinks.

"Those," he laughs, "are little miracles." Ishida wipes his lips with the back of his hand,

lets out a tiny burp, and then stretches his arms over his head, bracing himself against the miraculous.

“What do they do?” I ask, sniffing from the bottle most recently emptied to see if I can catch the fumes. It smells like orange, sugar, and chemicals, different from Saito’s drink. I take a sip.

“Everyone drinks them to be *genki*,” Ishida tells me. “And for balance and restoring, like a cure for hangovers.”

I weigh the question, and can’t resist. “Do you have a hangover?” I ask raising my eyebrows.

Ishida-sense stretches and replies, “*Genki* is ‘the Japanese Way’.”

I hadn’t yet considered his first translation of *genki* as “hangover cure.” Maybe he wanted to put things in terms of what he thought an Illinois woman looking for A.A. meetings would understand. But then, I think that I am just beginning to understand the landscape of Japanese beverage additions. For a moment, I wonder if I am failing to see the full extent of meanings that people attach to their beverage choices at home, finding a Japanese peculiarity where maybe there is universality I’ve never perceived because I’m immersed in it. Am I the 1920’s anthropologist finding people in Asia drinking the Other Cola?

I’m not sure if it’s Ishida’s drink or not, but quickly I come to my senses. Sure, drinks

are central to any culture's identity, but this cultural characteristic is amplified in modern Japanese marketing. As I sit and try several of the brands Ishida recommends, it occurs to me that I am making an enormous decision: which beverage I want to be associated with. It becomes clear that for Ishida, drinking Shaklee in public is equivalent to mixing your Metamucil at the counter of a diner. You might have seen an older person do it once, but you really aren't going for that look yourself. He introduces me to the cool, younger professional slice of the market as we try a number of his favorites.

Near our apartment is a small, one-room mom-and-pop store, with the name KON embossed on the awning. The owners, the Kons are a friendly couple. I stop by the shop most days for something, usually diapers in the morning, milk and *senbei*, the salty Japanese rice crackers, my son loves them in the afternoon. Aside from being close, Mr. and Mrs. Kon are also more willing to engage in small talk. Mr. Kon knows my name and offers my son free Anpanman candies. The couple practices various dialogues from their daughter's 1970's English grammar book. I am never exactly sure what is going to come from their mouths, but Mrs. Kon appears pleased when I say something close to the familiar reply her line is meant to elicit:

"What is the weather forecast today?" Mr. Kon asks, repeating his memorized part.

"There is a cloudy sky with a chance of rain," Mrs. Kon says with a smile.

“You may need an umbrella,” I suggest to expectant faces, but from the quizzical looks, I realize umbrella is not part of this dialogue. Maybe we are supposed to cancel our picnic? Switching to Japanese, I say that I have come looking for health drinks.

“Health drinks! *Aso ka!*” Mrs. Kon says, as though the fountain of *genki* could fall out of the sky into any conversation, scripted or not. He points to the display cases, and I begin to survey a wide and strange variety of vitamin drinks. They all include a list of promised effects tailored to a particular customer, but one thing all the marketing groups agree on is the need for *genki*. *Genki* is offered in combination with Exotic Life, or Gentle Soul, or Kindness and Heart Courage, or Courage alone when you don’t want the drag of Kindness. None has *genki* alone, but none lacks it in some combination.

I gather together what seems like a reasonable sampler pack for a *genki* novice and head to the cash register. Mr. Kon comments on some choices, but doesn’t seem to judge any selections. I am a little surprised when I see the total and realize that I am spending three times or more than I usually would for an afternoon visit.

“Will I be *genki*?” I ask, wanting to allay any buyer’s remorse later on.

“Don’t we look *genki*?” Mrs. Kon calls out, giggling a little with her hand covering her mouth.

“We work every day. We drink every day. They aid. And they aid you, too!” Mr. Kon says, grabbing a broom and sweeping away imaginary dust—dust that will never settle on a

genki shopkeeper and his wife.

On the way home, I pop open one of the drinks. Mist rises up from the carbonation, and when I take a sip, tangy and sweet bubbles fizz on my tongue, sweet like a candy, but medicinal like cough syrup. The drink does not reek of rotten vegetables or have a metallic aftertaste. I stop on the sidewalk for another sip and catch a glimpse of the sun setting over the mountains. The clouds hang in the sky, and a gentle breeze blows in my face. This beverage produces an invigorating zing, balanced with a bit of Zen acceptance to simply be with what is—that or at least a bitching placebo effect. It may just be what it claims, harmony plus *genki*.

Hello Kitty Wears Prada:
Teenage Prostitution in Rural Japan

One spring evening in the town of Asahi Mura, I watch two of my students spread out on the sidewalk in front of Lawson's, a twenty-four hour convenience store located across from the train station. It is a Saturday night and not yet nine o'clock, but most of this village, nestled in Japan's far corner of Honshu Island, is ready for bed. The night is crisp and a faint hint of cherry blossoms fills the air.

The girl on the left wears a Gucci T-shirt with psychedelic butterfly decals. Her name is Hasami. At fifteen years old, Hasami is the mastermind behind tonight's adventure.

Standing next to her with her black hair clipped up in a Burberry's barrette is her accomplice and best friend of the same age, Yumi. The girls both sport brown Fendi bags with right-side-up and upside down Fs stitched together that match their black DKNY jeans and compliment their Prada shoes. Chanel pink lipstick glosses their small mouths. Dior sapphire blue eye shadow sparkles on their lids. At first glance, they're *kawaii*, which means cute. Upon further observation, they're more than cute. They're like an edgy, sexed-up *Hello Kitty kawaii*.

The girls fiddle with their cell phones, punching buttons and laughing. When Hasami's cell finally rings, it plays a song by the hip new band, *Dragon Ashe*. The tune is called *That's Life*. It's a rap-love combo, half in Japanese and half English, moaning about not letting life

get you down. This is a perfect theme song for these girls. Life never seems to get them down. They're too cute to be bothered, too giggly to notice.

Hasami whips open her cell phone for the second time and whispers, *moshe, moshe*. A few minutes later, a four-door white Honda arrives. The driver appears to be a man twice their age. He parks by the curb and flips on the hazard lights. Yumi heads over toward the car.

"*Hai, ne*. All good," she yells over her shoulder.

Hasami marks down the time and date in her cell phone's digital calendar. Then they disappear into the backseat of the Honda down the street and into the late night of Asahi Mura's shadowy underground.

Riding my bike back to my shoebox-sized apartment, I realize that I've seen these girls jump into strange cars eleven times in the eight months I've been living here. The scene seems so ordinary; it is easy to misjudge it. There is nothing unusual about two teenagers hopping into a car looking for fun. What does seem suspicious are the gifts that the girls show me after their adventures. These are not your ordinary love trinkets. No, Hasami and Yumi receive big-ticket items like Gucci bags, Dior perfume, and Rolex watches.

The next day at Asahi Mura Junior High, I ask what the girls do with the men.

Hasami mutters, "We talk. Hang out." She flicks her hair and examines her split ends.

"Drink coffee. Just having fun," Yumi explains, pulling up her white, school uniform knee socks.

"If talking gets you a Prada purse and sipping coffee Cartier earnings," I start, looking at them now doodling in their notebooks, "then what do your mothers think?"

The girls shrug their shoulders.

"We do our chores. We respect our parents. We're goody two-shoes," they say, shutting their notebooks, and waving goodbye to me.

In a strange way, they are right. Hasami and Yumi aren't calling attention to themselves.

They are conscientious and good-natured girls. They plan to attend university and love their parents. In school, they have persuaded me that seeing *Brad-o Pitt-o* on screen in *Ocean's 11* is a great approach to understanding American culture. They exhibit no outward signs of delinquency. They obey the school uniform policy, don't dye their hair, and love to play on their cell phones. In a sense, they are like any typical Japanese teenager filled with confusion and angst on the inside, worrying about academic placement, club activities, and fashion.

I'm sure the girls tell their mothers they are studying. I know both girls' parents. They work full time and care for their own aging parents. I doubt if anyone checks out the girls' story. Why should they? The girls do not draw attention to themselves. There appears to be no real concern about their wellbeing. Of course, a mother might raise eyebrows at new designer purses or a father might do a double take on expensive designer watches, but no one dares to take the next step, confrontation and confirmation. These girls are just having fun, right?

In truth, what Hasami and Yumi “do” is not exclusive to the rural parts of Japan, although it is much more widespread in the countryside. In fact, it is a phenomenon occurring all across Japan, from the big cities to the *inaka* villages. The Japanese call Hasami’s and Yumi’s behavior *enjokosai*, which means “compensated dating”. It is a polite word that has become synonymous with a hush-hush, twisted style of teenage prostitution.

Enjokosai is nothing like the horror stories of chained-up, Cambodian girl prostitutes.

Blowjobs don't happen in back alleys. These girls don't hustle on the streets with pimp-sans lurking in the shadows. The girls aren't poor, nor are they “village scamps”, chain-smoking behind buildings.

On the contrary, *enjokosai* (like everything else in Japan, from electrically heated toilets to MP3 players the size of an aspirin) relies on technology to maintain discretion. In fact, carrying a cell phone to class is the only school rule I have seen Hasami and Yumi break. They conceal their tiny cell phones, not even the size of a makeup compact, in their pencil cases, a place no teacher would imagine finding a device that catapults the girls into adventure with a scarlet “A”.

Cell phones are the key to their operations, helping them arrange “encounters” with older, often married, men. Cell phones have the added bonus of keeping the “dates” on the down low. Hasami and Yumi list their cell phone numbers on a web page specifically geared to matchmaking. These web sites are called *deai-kei*. Once the girls file their cell phone numbers with a network, they sit back and wait for customers to call, which they do, in great

numbers. The record of messages Hasami and Yumi have shown me would make Heidi Fleiss think she had been running a bakery. Number after number shows men seeking young girls for dates, dinner, and *more*.

"It's easy," Hasami confides. "Sometimes I put on all my *chara-chara*, flirty stuff.

Other times I do what me and Yumi call, the *kawaii bimbo* look."

Kawaii bimbo in Japanese means a cute (*kawaii*) and poor (*bimbo*) look. To achieve the cute, poor girl look, the girls use their three-year-old Prada bags and dress down. It sounds like the perfect match, cashing in on their *kawaii*. Show the men you're cute, but poor, and wait for them to buy you new things.

"Does it work?" I ask.

"You like my new bracelet?" Yumi replies.

I check out the Tiffany silver heart-shaped bracelet dangling from her tiny wrist. Although the newspapers and financial agencies claim Japan's economy is in the dumpster, somehow, somewhere, men have enough money to shower these young girls with gifts.

During the 1990s, *enjokosai* became a hot topic in the media. Most Japanese, who had no idea what really happened at the convenience store by the train station, suddenly became inundated with teen interviews, polls, and flash-trash talk shows. Opinions were diverse and scattered. Some seemed to see *enjokosai* in a more benign light. They reasoned that since most Japanese girls and boys don't have much opportunity to interact, except during school

hours or at club practices, *enjokosai* was a means for girls to discover themselves in a romantic situation. It signaled a sweet transaction, a passage through adolescence into adulthood, an encounter that taught young girls how to have mature relationships, and hone their conversational skills with the opposite sex.

Others understood *enjokosai* as exemplifying the superficiality of Japanese relationships.

Young, immature girls went through the motions, *acting*, as it were. Yet they never underwent genuine emotions, but instead demonstrated the emptiness of romantic relationships and the need to find something to curb loneliness. *Enjokosai* created fraudulent feelings of self-worth by providing the young women with highly sought-after and expensive name brands.

“So why do you do it?” I ask, biting into my *wasabi* hamburger.

The three of us are at a restaurant called *Gusto*. It serves American-style cuisine tailored for Japanese taste buds. The girls pick at their French fries sprinkled with dried fish flakes and giggle with their mouths full.

“So we can get these,” Yumi says, holding up this season’s Prada bag.

“You can get a job. Buy them yourself,” I offer. The girls stare at their fries and dip them in ketchup, chewing slowly, and, I hope, consider my suggestion.

“*Il kamo*,” Hasami replies. “It’s cool.” She points to her Fendi purse. “It’s who we are.”

“You’re not name brands,” I say.

The girls screw up their faces, as if to advise me that I've missed their point entirely. Maybe I have. Maybe owning coveted name brands is their way to assert themselves. They start to size up every girl who passes by our table. "Kiso. Gross," Yumi says, and points a French fry in the direction of a group of younger girls wearing last year's clothes and carrying the Japanese version of Wal-Mart purses.

Mamoru Fukutomi, a psychology professor at Tokyo Gakugei University, is one of the leaders researching this phenomenon. The Asian Women's Fund, one of the biggest women's organizations in Japan, asked him to conduct a survey about *enjokosai*. Fukutomi randomly chose 960 schoolgirls for his poll but only sixty-three percent responded. Twenty-three percent of the girls, who had "experienced" *enjokosai*, said they had sex. Another twenty-three percent engaged in sexual activities other than intercourse (for example, kissing or oral sex). Forty-eight percent said they merely talked or had drinks with their dates.

When asked why they had encounters with older men, the girls responded that they wanted money and thought it caused no problems with anyone else. They did it for fun, thinking they could quit at any time. One girl claimed she wanted stimulation. Another felt lonely. Another let it happen without much thought, while another said she needed to blow off some steam.

But the most intriguing answer Fukutomi found was that girls who “experience” *enjokosai*, and feel no qualms about it, tend to be susceptible to the media and to their peers. He suggested that the girls may be indifferent towards their future and fear getting old. These girls may understand that their role as student has a brand-name quality to it.

During an *o-cha* break at Asahi Mura Junior High, I ask a veteran teacher what she thinks.

She sucks air through her teeth, and turns her head to the side. I have seen the gesture many times. It seems to be used when hard questions are asked or when a negative answer is about to be given.

"They are young. They think buy. But they are the price tags," she sighs.

My colleagues *care* for their students. Care translates into doing whatever is needed for the students' well being. Often, the teachers work until 10 o'clock at night. Yet, suggesting that the teachers hide out on the streets in order to witness “pickups” is not viewed as their responsibility. The teachers seem to think if there is no *visible* trouble, then why look for it?

Almost daily, as a *gaijin*, an outsider in Japan, I hear the saying *deru kugi wa utareru*, the nail that sticks up gets hammered down. It is a sentiment branded into every Japanese mind. No one wants to risk his or her career on teen adventures that may or may not be dangerous. No one wants to make someone else uncomfortable with his or her suspicions. If there is no actual evidence, then make no waves.

“What about the men?” I ask, hoping not to offend her. There seems to be minimal finger pointing at them. Are they considered innocent bystanders, lonely and wanting company, I wonder? Why is *enjokosai* regarded as teenage prostitution, and not pedophilia?

“It is so complicated. *Muszukashi, ne?* The men are lonely. They don't go to their wives. Who are these men? You can't tell.”

And my colleague is right. Mail carrier, shopkeeper, mayor, police officer, sushi chef—these men could be anyone. They could be sneaking off to have a coffee on a *date*, or they may just be with their daughter. Any man walking down the street with a young girl could be involved in *enjokosai*. You can't tell. There are no outward signs of physical affection between the couple, so it is impossible to determine what is actually happening.

“So young, *ne?*” she sighs again.

“Do you think they have sex with the men?”

She shakes her head. “This is not about sex. It's about illusion. The men want to have a young girl talk with them. The girls want to be prized by a man who gives them gifts.”

“So it's an equal trade?”

The teacher laughs and shrugs her shoulders. “Maybe it is ‘the Japanese Way’.”

Stopping *enjokosai* remains a challenging task. Fukutomi suggests that to prohibit girls from prostituting themselves, one must teach them that men and women are equal. He believes that Japanese society must begin to respect and value young women. This will not be

trouble-free in my village. As it is now, my women colleagues serve the male teachers tea first, and then prepare for their classes. Married women with children inevitably stay home. In some circles, a woman not kneeling properly is considered offensive behavior and with so many generations still residing under one roof, it makes sense to believe that overindulging on *sake* is a popular pastime.

But a few years ago, the Asahi Mura's Board of Education implemented sex education classes. They also devised a plan where third and fourth year students test out different careers for a day, and this year, during the last three months of the school year, the principal sent out evaluations to gauge what the teachers know about *enjokosai*. I surmised, from the mounds of paperwork and the endless rounds of meetings, that some of the teachers recognized that a few of their female students might be caught up in *enjokosai*. I gathered from their frowns and upturned hands that they sensed no way to stop it.

Shoganai. What can you do?

Maybe it would be different if these girls weren't from middle class homes, expressed guilt, and acted rebelliously. Then they would be easily identifiable. Maybe if the men weren't operating under the guise of the accepted thinking that a man need not go straight home after work, or if couples showed public affection, it would be straightforward. But it's not. "I don't have x-ray eyes," claims one teacher.

When a sensational case of *enjokosai* erupts, the majority of Japanese people blame the girls. Society considers the girls to be law-breakers. The girls asked for it and deserved any possible physical harm. They dressed sleazy. They solicited dates with older men. They engaged in sexual acts for money, not for love.

None of the other teachers I speak with perceive the girls as victims.

“Victim?” One of the bolder teachers scowls, “Can't you make out black from white?”

Before I came to Asahi Mura, the town experienced a horrific case of *enjokosai*. Written about in all the local newspapers, the incident ended up shaming the village. Even Hasami and Yumi, so enamored of the rap music of *Dragon Ashe* and the smell of recently purchased clothes don't like to think about it, especially when their first date is with someone new.

According to Hasami and Yumi, one troubled girl became involved in *enjokosai* but she couldn't keep herself together. She had a summer “fling” with a thirty-eight-year-old man. Originally from a town two hours away, no one knew him. He seemed good looking, a big spender, and moved slowly. Slow enough so that when he did ask for sexual favors, the girl didn't say no. When he wanted a threesome, he got it. If he wanted to watch as she masturbated, fine. If he wanted to have anal sex, he did. By that November, the girl had a confirmed diagnosis of an STD, a pregnancy scare, and a black eye. The man disappeared, and she ran away to Tokyo because she had shamed her family and her community.

This girl's case is what you would expect, if you think teen prostitution should come with expectations. She earned poor grades, and stayed on the fringes of academic and social life. She did not intend to stick around the village. Her teachers, my colleagues, labeled her *guhan*, meaning prone to criminal acts. Everyone—teachers, parents, and neighbors—seemed troubled by the girl's situation. They had worked hard to bring her back into the fold. When she wouldn't comply, they felt on some level she had asked for it. Hadn't she? She was a nail that stuck up, waiting for a hammer to strike her down.

"That other one, she didn't have a DKNY bag," Hasami says.

"*Baka. Baka.* Stupid. We do a fun date," Yumi adds.

"*She's a loose goose,*" the girls say together in a fit of giggles.

"Yeah, you got it," I answer, wondering how they can retain the silliest English phrase, and not discern the message of the girl that came before them.

At the next English class, I hand out a short story by Joyce Carol Oates, *Where are You Going, Where Have You Been?* Most American girls read it in high school or in their first year of college. It is a story that I think Hasami and Yumi might find compelling. The main character, Connie, is a fifteen-year-old, boy-crazy, innocent girl. She is attracted to a stranger, a "boy" whom she glimpses in a parking lot. She goes to meet him, and the next day the "boy" turns out to be a grown man. He arrives at her home and kidnaps, rapes, and

inevitably kills her. It is a harsh story of teenage miscalculation, a brutal vignette that demonstrates how young girls don't think of strange men as dangerous.

"Read this story to yourself," I inform the class. "Mark the words you don't know, and look them up in the dictionary."

This is a focused reading assignment done without discussion. I want the girls to shape their own views before they pay attention to others. I want them to judge for themselves. The students uncap their pink highlighters and open their notebooks. They begin to read. The room grows silent. I hear the class down the hall calling out mathematical equations. I sit quietly and observe the faces of my students as they struggle over the new words. I wonder how much they retain, and if they gain insights into their own lives. I hope that as they read, Oates' words create meaning for them.

Before the bell rings, I instruct them to write in their journals. Write about what you think of the story, I tell them again, as they file out of the room. Hasami and Yumi are the last ones to leave.

"What did you think?"

"Poor Connie-san, unlucky *ne*. I thought Alfred-san was bad from the start," Yumi says. She clutches her books to her chest.

"So baka, *ne*. Many stupid Connie girls like that in America?" Hasami asks, brushing back a stray strand of black hair behind her ear.

"Yeah," I say, "too many girls like Connie in the world. So sad, so much wasted *ne*."

Hasami and Yumi chatter on. They tug on my black sweater and ask me which designer clothes I wear. They believe me when I use a fake French accent, and say *Target*.

When *enjokosai* changes from compensated dating to date rape, girls can turn to the police. There are laws against rape and sex with a minor. Strict and severe punishment is handed out for those found guilty. Sexual abuse lawyers in Japan enjoy a high rate of conviction when the victim comes forward, but victims in Japan rarely talk. According to a report by the United Nations' Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, there is a strong public sentiment that sexual abuse is a shameful experience for the victim, and in turn her family. Thus, it should not be discussed publicly. Therefore, it is certain that child sexual abuse is very much underreported, and little is known about the issue among the Japanese public. In other words, the girls become victims twice over. They are victims of sexual abuse, and of silence.

Hasami and Yumi don't think about rape. They don't consider that the car they get into might not take them where they want to go. They don't believe a man might carry a knife, force them, beat them, or use them.

"How about you try to trust yourselves? You're strong young women. Forget showing off name brands. Could you do that?" I ask. "Trust yourself?"

The girls shrug their shoulders. They are sick of me nagging them. Instead, Hasami pulls out a package for me. Although I thought I shouldn't open it in front of them, they urge me on.

“Go on,” they beg.

I open the package. Inside are two flat, black rocks smoothed out from the Sea of Japan's waves. A couple months back, the three of us found them when we walked along the coast, talking about the importance of being who you are, and not what others want you to be.

There is also a handful of rice from their families' rice fields. We had planted the shoots together, and wore no brand name jeans while doing so. The gift is their attempt to show me a side of them that I have failed to realize. They are changing, slowly, and at their own pace. No matter how many conflicts arise while figuring out who they are, eventually *enjokosai* will fade. But it will be for them to decide when, not me.

Families on the Fringe:

Complexities of the *Ie*

When late July arrives with a heat wave and nearly constant blue skies, every man, woman and child in Asahi Mura heads down to the seashore. Waiting for them, open for business, are the local branch members of the *yakuza*, what is sometimes referred to in the Western media as the “Japanese mafia”. In Tokyo and other large cities the *yakuza* does, I suppose, carry itself with something like the wise-guy swagger and intimidation of American gangsters. Here in Asahi Mura, where the local *yakuza* run the *yakisoba* houses, beer gardens and raft rental stands, they have more the look of small time wannabes, or gangster pledges having to go through a not-so-trying hazing ritual in an idyllic seaside resort. The lowest *yakuza* on the totem pole seem to be the guys pushing *kakikori* carts, selling shaved-ice with flavored syrup like snowcones sold at baseball games back in the States.

I would not have noticed the *yakuza* presence if it were not for the music that they play over the loudspeakers by the coast. It is only about a 20-minute bike ride from our apartment to the beach. I head that way for a little fresh-air during the week when the beaches are not so crowded. One day, as I approach the beachfront buildings which house changing rooms, lifeguard offices and green tea vending machines, I almost fall off my bike

when I hear some Japanese punk start to blare out from the speakers. I wouldn't be opposed to it at any time or in every situation, but in this dreamy setting, I feel like an angst-ridden teenager cranked up some *Twisted Sister* while his parents stand and contemplate the Grand Canyon.

Looking around, I see that the music is grating on the nerves of the other weekday afternoon beachgoers as well. Sitting on a bench near the path I am biking along, an *obasan*—grandmother—cringes, and a *shufu*—housewife—grits her teeth in even more disguised annoyance.

"Every summer they come," says the *obasan*, dressed for sun protection in long pants, a long sleeve shirt, and a wide brimmed hat.

"It would be all right if they could play more relaxing music," the *shufu* mumbles and then stands, rolling up her pants legs and going to retrieve a child who has wandered past ankle high water. When she comes back, she looks over the beach and sits down. From inside the small office that controls the beachfront audio system, designed for the serious job of announcing tsunami warnings, two young guys emerge wearing tank-tops that reveal some impressive shoulder tattoos. As the word *yakuza* flashes in my mind and my jaw hangs open in fascination, the edges of the *shufu's* lips curl up in a grimace that could be mistaken for a reaction to a bad smell.

"They are all over," she continues, and if it were not for her child floating out farther into the deep, I might have heard more.

Nevertheless, I wonder how much more she would have been willing to say. This is Japan after all, and discontent tends to be subtle. Complaints are highly coded in a way that I am still new at unraveling. Direct criticism seems to embarrass people on both the giving and receiving end. Moreover, coming from Chicago and having a perception of criminal organizations shaped by oceans of movie representations of the Godfather Parts I, II, and III, and few drops of personal experience, I think that people are always tight-lipped about gangsters. Now that I know where to find an outpost of the Japanese secret society, one of my guide books says “always” stays hidden to foreigners—and in my little out-of-the-way town of coastal Japan no less, I know I will be back to investigate.

On my next bike ride, I notice that, besides the music, what really gets the sunbathers’ dander up are the announcements that interrupt the dreadful music. The *yakuza* guys love to get on the horn, and for the more serious-minded Japanese “civilians” at the beach, for whom community responsibility is a paramount value, hearing the municipal loudspeakers used for juvenile ball-breaking is like nails on a chalkboard. On a Wednesday afternoon, for example, the loudspeaker squeals with the announcement: “Hiko-san, get up here and fix the toilet.”

While pretending not to, everyone on the beach scans the area to find the negligent toilet cleaner. He turns out to be the guy floating ten meters out in the surf on a pink raft with his girlfriend, who is now laughing her head off. Hiko jumps quickly off the raft, landing his

girlfriend in the water, and runs up to the pavilion. The girlfriend has stopped laughing now, and takes the raft back to the rental station. By the time she has settled down with a towel to lay on the beach, Hiko returns to find her in a less jovial mood. Until the announcement comes, “Hiko-san, you forgot to wash under your fingernails! Return for proper hygiene.”

On the weekends when there are more people around, there is tighter control and a lot less tomfoolery. The hotels around the beach place a subtle pressure on these hooligans. The *yakuza* may rule the summer weekdays, but summer weekends are when the hotels net their gains in a region where winter tourism at the inland mountains dominates. These eight weeks of sandy beaches and sunny skies keep hotels, like Dream Hotel and Senami Spa afloat before the snow renders their guest rooms vacant. To sweeten the attraction for the *yakuza* staff, some hotels offer free, private *onsens*, or thermal baths, since the *yakuza*'s tattoos prohibit them from entering most communal baths. Some struggling hotels go so far as offering blocks of rooms to *yakuza* bosses to then dole out to younger apprentices who will then work the menial summer jobs. In exchange, the resort owners want a little light music on weekends, soft, *genki* melodies like the ones the families hum.

A regular beachgoer or hotel owner never talks to or argues with the *yakuza*, even the minor ding-a-lings who rule the loud speakers and the food court. Understanding this severe ostracization of the *yakuza*, at first, is the key that I am missing in trying to understand how the Japanese deal with their criminal class. The unwillingness to talk to, or even openly look at the *yakuza*, is not so much a product of intimidation and fear, as I initially expect it to be.

Maybe these scare tactics play a part of bullying with some of the big shots in Tokyo, but with these scrawny noodle sellers, flip-flop purveyors and provincial DJs, intimidation isn't their strong suit. People avert their eyes not in the hopes that they will go unnoticed and not be singled out for confrontation by the *yakuza*; rather, they look away in order to stress the alienation of those who flaunt Japan's generally rigidly observed social conventions.

"Regular" families accept that these two-bit gangsters are part of the scenery, like broken glass in a parking lot; they simply choose to ignore them.

Although the respectable Japanese public is estranged from the *yakuza*, the *yakuza* plays an important role in the nation's wider society. The NHK, national news station, and *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper are always reporting some money laundering scheme or sweetheart real estate deal betraying nefarious connections between government, corporations, and *yakuza*. While it is not the bozo on the loudspeaker at the beach masterminding these transactions, the presence of young cut-ups does explain something about society's ambivalence toward the *yakuza*.

In Japan, the juvenile justice system is a fraction of that which exists in the U.S., and in the absence of large juvenile halls, the *yakuza* are seen to fulfill an important function. Let the adult gangsters deal with the juvenile troublemakers. If these punks are going to do nothing productive, at least let them learn some manners from a segment of the older generation no matter how corrupt, even if they are slicing off fingers Omerta style. Thus, the deal seems to be that the *yakuza* get a certain amount of space to train their lieutenants,

with the caveat that summer weekends at the beach, when families want to float on neon colored rafts, eat *yakisoba* and down ice-cold Asahi Super Dry beers, are inviolable.

Still, every time I come to the beach, just for fun I try my best to pick out the shot-callers. At first, my task seems simple enough. Working from what I remember of the Michael Douglas movie *Black Rain*, which finds two New York cops going to Tokyo to battle the *yakuza*, and from renting old Japanese detective movies at the *Jusco*, I think I should spot the real McCoy decked out in a black zoot suit. His body should be inked in tattoos, one of his fingers sliced off for disappointing the boss, and he should grunt instead of talk. He will have slicked back hair, a stare that is mean as hell, and of course be handy with a *tantō*, the sharp dagger, which *yakuza* are known to brandish.

Disappointingly, my stereotype is not very much in evidence at the beach. Of course, I realize that I would never troll northern New Jersey looking for the *Sopranos* cast, or expect to find John Wayne-style cowboys populating the plains. Still, now that I realize that there are *yakuza* in these hills, I want them to be a little more stylized than these yo-yo's with peroxide blonde mullets or mohawks and sometimes severe acne.

However, in my quest to spot the *yakuza*, I instead get a first row seat to observe the normal Japanese families that their recruits are cast out from. Until the U.S. occupation of Japan at the end of World War II, Japanese law did not recognize individuals as individuals, but rather as members of a hierarchical family unit, called an *ie*. In theory, the *ie* consists of

all family members harmoniously fulfilling their duties. The *ojiisan*, grandfather (or eldest male at least), carts the umbrellas, the towels, and the coolers. The *obaasaan*, grandmother (or ranking female), carries the picnic baskets, and the two *kodomos* or children drag all beach junk that they sell in a store along the promenade.

These Japanese families enjoy regimented days at the beach, arriving early and staying for several hours, but never the whole day, unlike *yakuza* teenagers who have shirked family responsibility and, therefore, enjoy greater freedom—but at a price.

So when I meet the first bona fide *Yakuza*, I don't see it coming. In fact, seeing is part of the problem. I don't see the cigarette he throws on the sidewalk, and he doesn't see me coming until I step on it with my barefoot and shout.

"Jesus Christ," I bellow and hop on one foot. "What the..." My face contorts in pain. My eyes bulge. My tongue lags.

The man who threw the cigarette at first does nothing but watch me. His brows knot together with worry, but then he must realize my burn is nothing serious and starts to laugh. I guess he is laughing at my oversized gestures, ones I have done before to teach second graders *fear*, *shock*, and *pain*. His laugh grows and becomes so loud that I stop jumping and begin to laugh myself. The situation isn't funny, and my foot still hurts but, either way, both of us are laughing together now. This is no "normal" Japanese family man, I realize. A regular Japanese would be bowing and *suimemasen*-ing profusely. A "normal" Japanese person would not laugh until tears stream out of his eyes. Maybe he is *Yakuza*, I think.

My first clue comes when he shows me where I can ice my burn behind his *yakisoba* hut. Handing me a bucket of ice he says, “You’re not the first *gaijin* I’ve met.” He has known many, and many of them have been women, he tells me with a grin, checking out my bathing suit. But I am not his type, and we both know it. I’ve got a body that has not quite bounced back after a baby. Plus, I wear no ankle bracelets and I’m married. To him I am a curiosity, a diversion of the day, an *eigo no sensei*, an English teacher. For me, talking with him might prove my guidebook wrong. Plus, I fantasize for a moment, it never hurts to have a *yakuza* to call upon if needed, no matter if he is just a *yakisoba* grill master pretending to be in the big time.

“Call me Mister Red,” he says over his shoulder and brings me inside his place of operation. He uses the English translation for his name.

Mister Red starts to grill another batch of *yakisoba*. When it is ready, he hands me a bowl free of charge, then serves two families who have plunked themselves down in his flimsy beach shack-restaurant. The restaurant is like Mister Red, seasonal and well worn. His fellow workers and he have made the place unique with an open view of the sea but protected from the wind and shaded from the sun. The noodle hut can fit a few large families or several intimate couples. Customers must remove the sand before they come inside, a task Mister Red has made possible by setting up a water hose by the entrance. On the floor, to my surprise are *tatame* mats. Everything looks legit, despite the beach being the fourth wall and Mister Red running it.

“How did you get that name, *Mister Red*?” I ask him, then suck up some of the noodles he serves me. They taste delicious with just the right amount of soy sauce seasoning and grilling, tender green peppers mixed with onions and sliced carrots and a few morsels of meat.

“Long story,” he says and nods his head in the direction of the families eating. “I’ll tell you later.”

“Hey Mister Red, when do you close down?” I ask, also glancing at the families around us. He gets the message.

“We close at sunset. You’ll hear us on the loud speaker,” he says, grinning a little.

Getting to know Mister Red during the daytime when all these restaurant-goers are famished from the sun and the water is not going to work. Mister Red is all business, and his customers are all eyes. I notice they slurp their noodles quickly, then when they ask for more and the second plate comes, they watch for the clue that Mister Red might be *yakuza*: his tattoos. Ornate and plentiful, they peak out from his white long sleeved shirt he has buttoned half way up. Although I cannot get a full glimpse of them, I can make out dolphins leaping through waves, a sea lion nuzzling her calf, and waves crashing into rocks. On his right arm are *kanji* characters I do not recognize. Near his neck is a mountain and *sakura*. Tattoos are considered a sign of the *yakuza*, and from the number of tattoos on Mister Red, it is clear he does not mind the association. He only goes through the motions of hiding his tattoos, wearing clothes that could conceal them if they were stiffly worn as they might be at

a more formal restaurant. He knows that his customers are eager to catch a glimpse of this taboo artwork, and he is clearly not embarrassed by it. I would be proud of it, too. Mister Red looks like a hipster tourism brochure, not *Shinto* temple, but a more modern emblem of the country.

“See you at sunset then,” I say and get up and walk over to my shoes.

Leaving the beach, I see families float in the water and laze under umbrellas. In the distance, I can make out the edges of Sado island, an island that hundreds of years ago the government used as a penitentiary during Samurai times, but now has a whole village of fishermen watching cable television on squid boats. When I turn away from the sea, the mountains loom in the background. I can make out the town’s radio tower next to the old ruins of Asahi Mura Castle.

Before I get on my bike, I look back at Mister Red. Another cigarette dangles out of his mouth, and he is flipping more *yakisoba*. Within minutes, a whole new herd of hungry people has crammed into a low table. What makes Mister Red so interesting, I think, is how he seems to straddle two worlds, the old and the new. He lives on the outskirts of Japanese society, accepted but shunned. Exactly how he lives, I am unsure; maybe the noodle job is a front, like some of the Chicago mobsters I have read about back home who work day jobs in delis or bakeries. Pedaling back to my apartment, the sea breeze hits my face. I inhale and think, tonight when the loudspeakers shut down, I’ll know.

Later that night, in the beach parking lot there are hardly any automobiles, except a tiny K-car and one of the especially small Japanese minivans. On the promenade, a few store lights flicker. When I look at the beach, a distant bonfire glows, and a few kids spin lighted sparklers around in the dark. Out on the sea, the squid boats shine bright lights over the waters. Asahi Mura Beach is mostly deserted.

I walk over to Mister Red's *yakisoba* hut, which is boarded up with the signs and umbrellas taken inside. Only the glow and hum of the vending machine flash alive. Then out of the shadows as in the B-grade, Japanese detective movies I've been watching, Mister Red appears, the glow from his cigarette appearing before the outline of his face. In his hand, he holds an Asahi Super Dry beer. After some small talk, Mister Red and I take a seat on a stone bench in front of the sea. He dives right into a conversation I never dreamed I would have with a Japanese person, let alone a man with *yakuza* connections, responsible for crimes as big as my imagination and as small as the burn blister on my foot.

"There are so many types of people in Japan," he begins and twists his hands together, as if wringing out a wet towel. "All of us fit together and stand on this land. Some of us know each other and some of us don't," Mister Red says.

The white long-sleeved shirt he wore during the day that covered up some of his tattoos is off. In its place he wears a jogging suit jacket and a pair of clean shorts. From the faint light of the lamppost, I see his eyes are bloodshot after a hard day's at work.

"Where are you then?" I ask and take a swig of the beer he has offered me, a large

can of Asahi Super Dry. “Where do you stand?”

All joking aside, I see he wants to get into a serious conversation with me, and I don’t know why. I guess that maybe, deep down, he is like all Japanese and wants to show the good side of his country. Perhaps it is because I am an English teacher and he wants to practice conversation skills with me. Then, I realize that we are similar at least in one respect: we are both outsiders to the mainstream *Ie*-centered Japanese culture that surrounds us. He may not have a lot of people to actually speak with him much. I decide to stay with the frank conversation. Maybe we will learn from each other. Who knows maybe this exchange will help us later.

“What’s your background?” I ask offering him cigarette.

He takes the cigarette and smells the tobacco.

“American?”

I nod my head. He lights the cigarette and lets it hang from his lower lip. Then he takes a long drag. I can see his face working out an answer suitable for *gaijin* to understand.

“Background means background. It means doing work to keep order. Not like the cops but different. You know set up in a place, work it, and leave. Background means moving places. It means, I don’t know,” he says and lets out a sigh.

“Do you like your work?” I ask, lighting up a cigarette for myself. I think maybe the questions are too personal and may overstep, but I’d like to get some juicy information.

Mister Red does not seem to mind. He seems like this is his chance to share with a stranger

he will never see again, though it is difficult for him to pull his answers together in a conversation of blended English and Japanese.

“Loved it at first. Who wouldn’t? I was kid who ran wild. Got some structure. Got to play. Got to see something besides Kobe.”

“*Asoka, ne?* – No regrets?” I ask and try to cajole Mister Red into revealing some adventure.

“Well, things change,” he says and then blows a smoke ring.

“Wow, what kind of change?” I ask shifting my weight on the stone bench, so I can see him clearly. For a few seconds I imagine Mister Red’s change had to do with him being a head honcho in the *yakuza*. A rising star wheeling and dealing with other gangsters and gamblers, he got caught up in the mix, hit a bad turn, and was punished by being sent to grill up *yakisoba* and be a camp counselor for young *yakuza* in an out of the way beach town, all his glamour and guns stripped away to barbeque tongs and flip-flops.

Instead he says, “I had a kid. She’s twelve years old. She’s going to be in high school soon, and, well, you know how it is.”

I cough beer out of my nose. Fatherhood changed this wannabe thug? No deals in the back alley just late night diapers! I couldn’t have asked for a better cliché if I wanted one.

“Wow. Really? *Honto ne?*”

“*Honto ne*. My daughter set me straight. You know how it is with kids. They don’t care about what you give them, just that you’re there. Do you have any kids?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a toddler son who is learning Japanese words faster than English ones.”

He nods. “They’re smart aren’t they.”

“Real cute,” I say thinking of how to swing this back to his fatherhood moment. “Do you take care of your daughter?”

“No. My mother raises her since her mom’s gone. Took off and followed the white line, *ne*,” he says and makes a snorting nose.

“Natsui-chan is all mine,” he continues. “Most of the time she lives with my mother. At least in the summer she can come down for a week to be at the beach with me and her grandmother. The Sea Dream Hotel gives us a deal, so we all stay there. It would be hard if I raised her, but I guess you have already figured that one since you live here. You know how it is for people like us.”

I do know how it is for children who have marginalized parents, like Fernando and me. Children do suffer because Japanese society shuns their moms and dads, and in doing so separates the children, too. Some of the parents I know work at jobs “normal” Japanese refuse. Take for instance, Otaki-chan’s father. He is a Nikkei, a Japanese citizen who was born and raised in the largest Japanese ex-pat community in the world, in Brazil, but returned to Japan for economic reasons. He works at the bon-bon factory, the only place that would hire him when he came back. They gave him the nightshift, too. There are the Philippine women Marta and Lucia, students with me in our Japanese language class. They

are here on work visas and run a roadside snack shops by the highway, a job most Japanese believe is synonymous with prostitution. Now before me is a small time, noodle grilling *yakuza* father. Each parent, including me, is an example of an outsider. In a way, we all live on the fringes, the margins of life eking by with our limited roles and our limited interactions with the rest of the population. They teeter on both sides, no side totally accepting them as their own. As for me, I am just an outsider looking in for a few years.

Still, I know how Mister Red feels when he says people here are group people, and those outside of the group are lost. In a way, I know what it is like to be shunned by the Japanese. I've experienced the sting of isolation. Sometimes at the beach mothers pull their children away from my son. Once at a public pool, I slid down a slide with my son in my lap and when we reached, the bottom, all of the families vanished for another pool. Knowing I am always on the outside is lonely. It feels like I am under a microscope, trapped between two slides. Yet, I can't imagine being Japanese and rejected by my own people and what it does to a person to be constantly ignored.

"This work is seasonal," he says, interrupting my train of thought. "In a month I will be down south in Kyushu, doing something else. Natsui-chan will go back to my mother in Kobe. There is where Natsui-chan can grow. Ever been there? Before the earthquake, it was beautiful. It is where I'd like to settle down, but settling down is difficult."

On the water the bright lights twinkle from the squid boats. A few teenagers drift by us, arms and hands linked together.

“What do you know about home stays outside Japan?” Mister Red says, breaking the silence between us.

“A good exchange. You get a glimpse of a different culture. I don’t know. It depends on which country your daughter chooses for her home visit,” I offer.

“I want my kid on one of those when she is older. English can get her a good job, right?” he asks me. His voice is void of the tough guy Mister Red routine. He is just a father, and like all fathers he wants the best for his child, better than what he has for himself.

“Yeah, sure,” I say. “She can begin in a few years. I think they start as young as 16. If you give me your address in Kobe, I can send you information. Does it matter which country?” I ask.

“America,” he says then stretches his arm above his head and yawns.

“Really? Not British?”

“Yankee doodle dandy American. You’re more open than the others,” he says.

“Not sure about that one, Mister Red,” I say thinking of all the groups who are excluded and marginalized in the United States.

“*Arrigato gozaimasu*,” he says with new formality and pulls out of his pocket, a wallet takes out a *meshi*, a business card. Then he writes his address *romaji* and adds his mother’s name.

“Here is the address,” he says, and he stands up and bows. Our conversation has ended.

“Wait,” I say, “you never told me why they call you Mister Red.”

But he doesn't seem ready to tell me the story. Maybe being called Mister Red became part of the attitude, the mask he reveals to the public, not this private side he showed me. Mister Red is not who he really is and whatever the real story is that gave him the name no longer matters.

“Just send the stuff if you remember,” he mumbles and gives another quick bow and disappears into the night.

Decoding Megumi: A Modern Story of Murahachibu

A third-year student slouches in the doorway of the teacher's room at Asahi Mura Junior High waiting for the school nurse. The girl has a blackish-blue eye and eight small stitches under her left eyebrow. As the teachers go in and out carrying textbooks and papers, they must cross paths with her. Some nod as they pass, but the majority ignore her and go about their business without even acknowledging her cut and bruise. The girl's name is Megumi. She is a slow student, a shy teenager who rarely speaks. Since last October, Megumi has stopped attending classes and, like today, waits for the school nurse so she can sit in the *hoken shitsu*, the school's infirmary, until the final bell. Sometimes when I teach the students in the *hoken shitsu*, Megumi watches English MTV videos with the rest of us. Mostly she stares into space or hugs a green notebook to her chest. What she writes inside of those covers, nobody knows. She doesn't trust anyone enough to show them, and because she always comes in late or sick, offering little or no explanation, few teachers try to reach her. The attitude the teachers have toward Megumi intrigues me. On the whole, my Japanese colleagues are the most dedicated educators I have ever met. They work long hours, and even on late nights and weekends, their focus remains on Asahi Mura Junior High. Yet Megumi seems not to

trouble them. On the surface the attitude of my colleagues seem to suggest that she isn't their problem and they aren't hers.

Megumi's erratic behavior and her scrapes and bruises suggest abuse. I wonder, despite the geographical borders, if it isn't within our duties as teachers to notify authorities. What's really going on here with Megumi? Is it an act, or is she in danger? I speculate as one of my fellow Asahi Mura Junior High teachers, Takahashi-sensei catches my eye.

He whispers to me, "Megumi lacks love." He shakes his head the way you would if you didn't win the lottery or you missed the bus. *Oh well*, his body seems to express, but his language reveals something much weightier, much more philosophical than a shrug.

Amae. That's the word Takahashi-sensei uses. It is a curious term, and one difficult to translate into English. There is no exact word for it. Roughly, it means the desire to depend on the love and patience of others, and in turn have tolerance for them. *Amae* arises from feelings of helplessness and implies that everyone needs to have the possibility of *amae* in their lives in order to know the difference between other and self. In the English translation, *amae* sounds like a variation of codependency. Relationships built on a continual whirl of give and oblige. If I depend on your love, you will tolerate me. Very interesting, I think, but how does *amae* justify ignoring an abused student? "Megumi comes from a different family," Takahashi-sensei continues. He sucks his teeth, doing the Japanese gesture for *this is difficult*.

Takahashi-sensei tells me that Megumi fell down. He claps his hands together to emphasize the intensity of her fall. Megumi's injuries look too substantial for a fall, no matter how fierce.

"How?" I press.

"When?" I push.

"I don't know," he mumbles.

But he does know; he doesn't know how to tell me. I sense our conversation borders on one that will ultimately end with Takahashi-sensei explaining that Megumi's situation is another example of the "Japanese Way", meaning no outsider like myself will even begin to grasp, let alone comprehend its meaning.

Takahashi-sensei opens his mouth and then quickly shuts it when the first-period bell rings. He jumps up, grabs his plastic basket filled with teaching materials, and heads out the door. I know Takahashi-sensei well. He has come to my house for dinner. We played golf during the summer. His daughter and my son attend the same nursery school. He is an honest man, but I think Megumi is too "troubled" for him to talk about, especially here in the teacher's room where all the teachers' desks are lined up next to each other, and the principal perches in the front of the room.

Takahashi-sensei doesn't turn around when I call out, "Let's talk later."

In the *hoken shitsu*, the school nurse inspects Megumi's bandages while other students lounge on the couch in the corner. Healthy sleep fills their faces. These students are some of the most unique students in Asahi Mura Junior High. They rebel against the uniform requirements with their spiky dyed hair, baggie uniform pants, and earrings dangling from their ears. They are completely atypical Japanese junior high school students. They relish in giving their own opinions and ideas. I come to the *hoken shitsu* three times a month with bribes of English video games and pictures of motorcycles in exchange for English conversation. Most of the students are boys, and they want me to tell them how the blondes really look in California.

Two of them call out, *Ohay-o Jennifer-sensei!* The nurse bows to me, and then goes back to her struggle with Megumi's bandages.

"Are you okay?" I ask, catching Megumi's hand for a second before she pulls away.

"She says nothing," the nurse replies, and it is true. Megumi lets nothing slip. We go around like this until the nurse bows and disappears with Megumi in hand. One of the students, Aki, squints at me.

"Jennifer-sensei, do blondes really have more fun, *du-da?*"

"No, *dude*, brunettes. What happened to Megumi?"

Aki punches the air like a boxer. "What is a burn-net?" he mutters.

"Are you for real?" I ask. Then I pick up a strand of my hair and say the word *brunette* slowly.

“Yeah, I’m real.” Aki yawns. He stretches his arms above his head. “Megumi-chan lives in my neighborhood. Everyone say her father is a drunk-y drunk.”

“Did Megumi tell the teachers what happened?”

Aki gives me a look that says, *Obvious isn’t it, gaijin du-da?* Then he shuts his eyes and fakes a snore.

It isn’t obvious to me. Seeing Megumi withdrawn and everyone noticing it but not saying anything makes me reconsider all I know about interacting with young people. Only once in my teaching career did I ever report abuse. The student was fifteen and pregnant. At first, her grades suddenly dropped, then her attendance became spotty. I thought her problems stemmed from her pregnancy, but she told me she was homeless.

“My mother kicked me out. Now I’ve got nowhere to go,” she cried, teary-eyed.

“What about food and clothes?” I asked, taken in by her story.

“My mother takes my government checks. I don’t got nothin’,” she sobbed.

Being a young and inexperienced teacher, I did not think to investigate more on my own. I took my student at her word that she was homeless and her mother stole her money. I reported the allegations to Department of Child and Family Services. Within a week, I found myself sitting across from the mother and daughter—dumbfounded by the true story. At the meeting, the girl confessed she refused to listen to her mother’s rules about curfew. Her boyfriend snuck in and slept over. In a fit of anger, the mother dumped her daughter’s belongings on the street. She swore if her daughter did not follow the

rules, she'd live on the streets. The girl moved in with her boyfriend. The boyfriend lived in an unstable environment, and so when the girl came to school she complained of being tired and hungry.

Alerting the Department of Child and Family Services made matters worse between my student and her mother. They fought until the social worker decided that this appeared to be not a case of negligence and abuse, but of a girl thinking *she was grown*. In a couple of weeks, the girl moved back in with her mother and all was forgotten. Although the incident turned out to be nothing more than a young girl not being able to handle curfew, I learned my lesson.

"Check out the facts. Go to where the student lives. Try to get as much information as you can before you make a call," my principal warned me.

Not wanting to make the same mistake twice, this time I investigate Megumi's life. Up on the third floor of the school is an attic-like room where all the duplicate files are stored. It is a mess. Old Taiko drums for summer performances are stacked up on one side next to old origami cranes. Cobwebs line the windowsill. There is no central heating or kerosene heaters, and my teeth chatter as my hands stiffen. I dig through the box, flipping up file after file until I reach one marked *Watanabe, Megumi*. Inside, it says her grades remained average, dropping once in third grade and then again in junior high. Someone penciled a side note on last year's report. It is a kanji character. I can hardly make it out, but I sense it means death. In the last pages of her file, I stumble

on newspaper clippings about an accident that happened two years ago. I read the article a few times, trying to absorb its meaning while making sure my Japanese is correct.

The article says when Megumi's parents were out hauling logs, an accident happened. Megumi's father overloaded the crane he had operated. One log slipped out of its jaws and fell on top of Megumi's mother, crushing her to death. Aside from Megumi's father, the only other person who lives in the house is her elderly grandmother who suffers from dementia.

Like Takahashi-sensei said, hers is a troubled family. Megumi has a sad story but not an uncommon one. Many people from Asahi Mura die in freak accidents in the mountains or at the sea in squid boats. Many children are beaten and abused here. The question is, what makes everyone ignore Megumi?

During lunch period, Takahashi-sensei and I go to the conference room to decide what we will do for the upcoming trip to Kyoto. This trip happens every year without fail, and although I am a new teacher here, it falls on my shoulders to arrange parts of the curriculum that relate to English. Takahashi-sensei is in charge of booking the tours, arranging hotels, and buying the *shikansen* tickets.

Both of us have brought an armful of paperwork into the room. Takahashi-sensei hands me a list of students, and I pass him three distinct permission slips for

transportation, sickness, and behavior. While he scans them, I glance down on his sheet. The trip is for third-year students. There are fifty-four of them, but Takahashi-sensei has only fifty-three names on the list. I go over them, and almost instantly, I recognize whose name is missing.

“Why isn’t Megumi’s name on the list?”

Takahashi-sensei gives me a blank stare. He chooses his words carefully.

“She is weak. Maybe Megumi won’t feel comfortable with so many students,” he offers.

“I heard about her mother,” I say, noticing that his face doesn’t change.

“Ahh,” he says. This is another custom of the Japanese I am still learning—all information, bad or good, is received in the same, calm, tone: “Ahh.”

“What happened?”

Takahashi-sensei sighs again. He gets nervous, taps his pencil on the table, and peeps at the door. His tongue makes a few false starts, and then discloses something I could not even imagine.

“Maybe her mother’s accident wasn’t really an accident. Many, many rumors. No one saw the accident. People think Watanabe-san was a difficult man before, and now he is even worse. No police charges. Just accident,” he confides.

“But still, Megumi has bruises and cuts. Do you suspect abuse?”

Again, Takahashi-sensei sighs and under his breath mutters something I cannot make out, then returns to checking over the permission slips. Like many times before, I decide not to push Takahashi-sensei but to seek out my own answers.

Later, when I return to the school's infirmary, I ask Aki how it is possible that no one lifted a finger to help Megumi.

"She is a loner. No one likes her. No friends. No nothing. I can't explain it," Aki mutters. He looks out the window at the countryside of Asahi Mura, where pines and oaks tower beneath a blue sky.

Asahi Mura is the village of the mountain sunset. *Asahi* means mountain sunset. *Mura* means village. Often praised by outsider urban dwellers from Tokyo for rice planting, mountain climbing, and picking juicy persimmons, in reality, Asahi Mura is a no-man's land for the young—especially young girls.

"Wait. She'll have to wait or get married," Aki says.

"Wait for what?" I ask.

Aki rolls his eyes and shrugs. "Until people forget, I guess."

People don't forget, even though it seems that the teachers do, especially when no one has seen Megumi at all for the past month.

"Where is she?" I ask.

“She isn’t feeling well,” the nurse replies.

When I ask about her illness and when she is coming back, I am met with blank stares and bowing heads. No seems to know any of the answers. How is it even thinkable that in a land where even the rice paddies have *kami*-spirits to protect them, a beat-up girl has no one?

I decide to look up Megumi’s address in the student directory. She lives in a speck of a neighborhood where wild bears and monkeys scamper down the mountain and steal the salmon drying out in the sun. On the drive to her house, the mountain roads narrow at the curves and the miniature farmhouses stack up next to each other like toys. Beyond them, snow covers the rice fields. The snow glare is blinding.

Megumi’s neighborhood is isolated and traditional. People of Asahi Mura may have discarded their kimonos for western clothes, but the custom that governed Japan for centuries has sustaining resilience. Megumi’s house is a basic light brown wood with no frills. The house is no different from the others that line her curvy street, except that the blinds are shut. I park my car near an old frostbitten cherry tree and stumble through the snow.

At her front door, I ring the bell and call out with the politest Japanese I can muster. “*O jama shimasu*. I’m sorry to bother you!”

There is no answer. I wait a few minutes and then wander to the side. An old woman hangs up long *diakons*, tubular radishes as long as her forearms. On her head is

a knitted wool hat that covers her face, only a few wisps of gray escape and frame her face. Her body is stooped over from decades bending to plant rice.

I tell the old woman I am Megumi's teacher. She seems surprised. I am not sure if it is because I say I am a teacher, or because I may be the first female *gaijin* she has met.

After several bows and niceties, she says she is Megumi's grandmother. The she stands silent, waiting for me to begin. I ask her where Megumi is. She tells me she is sleeping and folds her hand together and rests them on top of her head.

"Will Megumi come to school tomorrow?"

The grandmother bows. She grabs a strand of my hair. "Your hair is like orange maple-leaf, leaf, flutter-flutter," she mutters. The she lets it go, bows, and leaves me standing alone in the snow.

In a book on village customs, I read that until recently, the Japanese hamlet acted as a cooperative entity. Its member households performed communal religious rites and exchanged mutual aid and labor, particularly for the purpose of rice production. Cutting firewood in the communal forests without permission or revealing illegal or shameful village actions to the police or outsiders, townspeople considered wrong, and if the charges were valid, *murahachibu* or village ostracism resulted.

Murahachibu is an old concept that is less important now that people are finding work in the cities and leaving the rice fields, but its roots are deep.

Unspoken codes of conduct are still active, and a modern form of *murahachibu* remains, especially in Megumi's case. Neighbors disliked her father before the accident, and even more for beating his daughter, disgracing himself, and being violent. Moreover, the rumors circulated, suggesting that he murdered his wife and made up the story that her death was an accident. Because of that, the Watanabes are loners, abandoned by their neighborhood. They have broken too many emotional taboos. They are too much of a problem. They cannot be straightened out. The family's drama did not strike pity in their neighbors but revulsion. Any interactions with the family may bring shame on the person who tries to help, so the community as a whole avoids them, ignores them, and does not support them.

A few weeks later, Megumi shows up to school with no explanation and takes her spot in the nurse's room. Each time I come for English class, I try to speak with her, try to uncover something, shake something loose. I show her pictures of Chicago. I draw her planets in space and play some Buddy Guy's Blues. I ask to see her notebook, bribe her with chocolate, but she doesn't respond. She just sits there.

Then one day when the snow is brutal and rushing down from the sky, something changes in me. The school bell clears out all the students. The bus begins its slow drive through the twisting mountain roads. Through the snow, I can make out the bright red of the tiny *torri* near the edge of the woods. My eyes glance over the snow-covered

landscape, then back to the empty schoolyard. I spot Megumi. She stops at the edge of the lot, close to the curb. Her shoulders hunch as she inches her way home. A pink Hello Kitty scarf crosses around her neck.

When I see Megumi, I do not see someone caught up in two social concepts—*amae*, the dependency on others for love and *murahachibu*, emotional ostracism from those who could love her—but a friendless girl with a messed up family stuck in a small town with nowhere to go. Ignoring her is wrong. Her situation is dangerous and sad. By doing nothing, I am as blameworthy as her neighbors are who don't open their doors to her, teachers who pass her in the hallway and don't even acknowledge her. Part of my duty as a teacher is to see what a student can become—for better or worse. I recognize Megumi is a deeply troubled girl. However, I am an observer, a foreigner, and a hired hand in Asahi Mura. In two years, I will leave. Who am I to interfere with customs that are not my own? Who am I to cast blame in community that does not involve me?

A deep shame rises in me. If this were Chicago, would I walk away? Would I let a girl be ignored and beaten because of some social construction, some label? What invisible social attitudes have I accepted since coming to teach in Japan that would pressure me to act so differently?

I look up at Megumi again. She is minuscule against the mountains on the horizon with the snow falling. Don't turn the other way, I think, then I run to catch up with her before we both fade away.

Love in Snow Country

Once a month for the past two years, my family and I have driven to the English language library in Asahi Mura. On this snowy cold Tuesday in the middle of January, I am alone. The bag of library books sits in the trunk of my car, ready to return. The English-language library is darkly lit, but when I enter I can make out the librarian, Hatsumi-san. She perches behind the circulation desk amid piles of files and books, as slender as the shelves around her.

“*Konichiwa*, Jennifer-sensei.” she says in welcome. Her black hair sways, as she digs through a stack of books.

“I have a book for your *Nico-chan*,” she calls out. “Do you know it?”

I open the touch-and-feel book. *Pat the Bunny. Feel Daddy’s scratchy beard. Put on Mommy’s ring.* We had a copy at home, but already my son’s tiny fingers wore our copy bare.

“*Pat the Bunny, kawaii, ne?* So cute, huh?” she coos.

“Adorable” I say, forcing a smile. “*Domo Arrigato.*”

News travels fast through Asahi Mura, especially news about an English teacher with a family. Foreigners like us cause people to whisper and gossip. If Hasami-san does not know it now, soon everyone will tell it. *The gaijin family has split apart.* It is true. Two weeks ago, Fernando and Nico left Japan for Argentina. In three months, I will join them.

I tuck the children's book underneath my arm and head to the stacks. In the small fiction section, the shelves are mixed with Western and Japanese authors. My fingers skip over the spines until I stop on a tattered translation of Kawabata's novel, *Snow Country*.

Taking it from the shelf, I recall that Kawabata wrote about the area of Japan I live in. The Japanese call it *Yukiguni*, snow country, because the land has the most snowfall in the entire archipelago. Freezing winds rage across from Siberia, amass moisture over the Japan Sea, and spew it as snow when it strikes the mountains, leaving as much as fifteen feet at times. The location is a skier's delight, but life in *Yukiguni* for those not merely popping in for a ski week is often isolated and hemmed in by the elements.

I flip a few pages of the book and read the first lines.

The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country. The earth lay white under the night sky.

The image of the tunnel pulls me in—I know it well, like a landmark of my marriage in Japan. The tunnel is on the *Joetsu Shinkansen* train line between Tokyo and Niigata, about an hour before our stop at Asahi Mura coming from Tokyo. Fourteen days ago, Fernando, Nico and I passed that way when we took the three-hour train ride to Narita International Airport outside of Tokyo. When the train approached the mouth of the tunnel, a gaping blackness loomed in front of us and on either side. The mountains closed us in; I shut my eyes. When I opened them, the train sped through the entrance, and suddenly, the car darkened. Only dim emergency lights lit up the floors. The windows reflected the light, like a

fun house mirror. Our faces turned ghostly and disfigured. Frightened, my son grabbed on to my wool collar, and let out a small cry. His head nuzzled against my shoulder. When the train emerged, daylight filled the compartment and our faces returned, composed and set. I rested my forehead against the window. A small oval of steam fogged the pane as if to block out what was before me. Miles after the tunnel, the snow lessened, until the white gave way to apartment buildings and telephone wires, neon lights and skyscrapers. By the time we reached airport, the snow had vanished to a gray slush.

Now in the library, I take the novel *Snow Country* to check out. Hatsumi-san nods her head at my choice.

“Kawabata *ne*,” she says. Her reading glasses slip to the tip of her nose as she glances down to record the loan and due date.

“*Mukashii, ne is Yukiguni*. Too alone. Too much snow,” she says and shrugs her shoulders. “*Hai dozo*.” She hands me the book, and bows. “Come back and tell me what you think of Kawabata. Come before my daughter gets married *Western style*.”

“*Western style*?” I ask, and set *Pat the Bunny* down on the counter.

“*Hai ne!* White wedding dress and cake. A love match.”

I feel a lump in my throat. “Very nice. Congratulations,” I say as I head for the door. I keep walking. My snow boots squeak down the empty hallway.

Hatsumi-san calls out, “You forgot *Pat the Bunny, ne*.”

A push of the door and a gust of frigid wind stings my wet cheeks. Only then do I

realize I am crying.

On the drive back to my apartment, the storm brews. A white whirlwind thrashes against the windshield. The wiper blades are useless. Yellow highway lines disappear. A trail of cars steers me through curves and corners of mountain roads. Headlights dim. Hazard lights glow and vanish.

I pull into my parking spot and cut the engine. My palms are as white as the snow around me. My fingers ache from gripping the wheel, and I finally acknowledge the thought that I have kept at a distance throughout the drive: that if something were to happen to me, my family is thousands of miles across the Pacific. I gather my bag, and *Snow Country* slips out. I pick it up and glance at the cover. Two people battle through sideways blowing snow, but instead of going towards town, they travel in the opposite direction, trudging up a mountain. One follows the other. Snow buries most of the landscape, surrounding them, making them appear tiny and insignificant against the white canvas. Not a person is in sight to help them. No light welcomes them. No steaming, hot *o-cha* warms them.

I understand perfectly.

Snow yesterday. Snow today. Snow tomorrow. As January slips into February, the monochrome white causes me to crave color. But flashes of color, like memories of my son, come only in fragments. My son's voice on the telephone flickers with static, granting me one clear moment to make out *mommy*. Icicles, as long and as thick as *Kendo* swords,

dangle off the black-shingled roofs of old country houses. When the pale yellow sun shines, the ice snaps and sounds like firecrackers when it splinters. At night I sit at the *kotatsu*, a small, low table with a heater in the middle and a blanket to warm legs. I draw pictures of barrel-bellied *yukidarumas*, Japanese snowmen, with black top hats and bright orange carrots for noses. I seal these in an envelope to send my son who plays on the other side of the world underneath an Argentine sun.

At Asahi Mura Junior High, I watch students play in the snow. Snowsuits of emerald, tangerine, and crimson dot the white like jewels. They bundle up in boots, gloves, scarves, mittens, and hats, so that they toddle and sometimes tip over into piles of snow. Older ones sled down massive snowy hills that reach the roof of the school building. Boys pitch snowballs like baseballs, hard and fast. Girls dig makeshift snow houses and huddle together to share secrets. A couple of the younger students eat snow from the ground, and later when a flurry kicks up, they stick out their tongues to catch a flake or two. The snow-eaters remind me of my son, Nico. I imagine him, his head tilted back and his little mouth open. The white melts on his pink tongue, like peppermint candy. I wrap my arms around me to shake off the chill. *What have I done by staying here to finish out a contract, leaving my son without his mother? What if, when I return and I bend to pick him up, he fails to recognize me?*

The bell sounds through the loud speaker, bringing me back. Within minutes all the

students line up according to their homerooms. I mix in with Saito-sensei's class. Red-cheeked and snow-dusted, the two snow-eaters grab another bite, as they pass me.

"*Yuki oishii, ne.* Snow are yummy," they chime, holding out a handful.

"*Is yummy,*" I say, and accept their offering.

After school that day, I head back to my apartment. While I am grabbing a sweater, I find a picture of the moon I drew for Nico. The moon is bright, full, and pale white like a bowl of milk. The drawing makes me think about how two weeks ago Fernando packed his suitcases. I handed him a cassette for Nico. I recorded my voice reading, *Good Night Moon*. Each night after Nico's bath, we read that book, and each night, he clapped at the ending.

"Again," he begged, pointing to the half moon on the cover.

Good night mush. Good night to the old lady saying hush. Good night stars everywhere.

I gave the cassette to Fernando.

"Nico will listen to it every night," Fernando promised, tucking the cassette into his carry-on.

"What happens if he forgets what the words mean? Will good night become *buenas noches*, old lady change to *vieja*?"

"He won't," Fernando said. He set his hands on his hip.

"Don't forget," I said. "Every page in English."

“We will only be separated—I mean, apart—for three months, not three years.”

“If Nico forgets, you’re to blame.”

“Go back to work,” Fernando sighed and zipped up his bag. “See if your students remember their English.”

Later that evening, the phone sounds in the middle of night and wakes me from a dream about the school ski trip. I am alone at the summit of a mountain. All the other student skiers zigzag down. The empty chairlift inches away. The snow paralyzes my legs and traps my skis. I try to break free with my arms, but the digging only makes the snow suck me under.

Fernando’s voice sputters with static of an overseas call.

The dream evaporates.

“¿Cómo estás?” he begins. A simple question that I think about answering in Spanish, before opting to steer the conversation to English. I have spent all day communicating in Japanese and don’t want to find myself searching for a Spanish phrase to speak into a telephone in the middle of the night.

“How is Nico?” I ask, shaking the sleep from my voice.

“Playing with his cousins at the beach. Being spoiled by his grandparents,” he says, also switching to English. “He misses you.” The *you* ricochets in my ear and throbs in my chest. What wife accepts her husband leaving, thinking things would be the same when

they meet again? What mother lets her child go?

“Yeah,” I say.

A long silence creeps in between us. My kitchen clock ticks. Static and sounds of his mother’s kitchen fill in what we cannot say.

“I went to Dr. Sosa,” Fernando says. “He prescribed therapy sessions twice a week. Lots of hours talking, but it doesn’t help. What works is running.”

“You could have run here in Asahi Mura. The Board of Education gave us a free membership to the health club in town,” I say, remembering how he preferred to soak in the *onsen*, the public bath where the hot water left his skin raw and red.

“It is not the same, Jen,” he says.

“What’s the difference? If running helps in Argentina, it should help in Japan. Belonging is relative. The point is you don’t want it to work.”

We don’t know each other anymore, but what we do know is that we want to blame each other for the problems between us.

“What about us?” he manages to ask. His voice so quiet at first I seem not to hear him.

I let the phone static die down before I say, “Let me speak with Nico awhile.”

I cradle the phone to my ear as if it is his tiny body, and once I begin to hear Nico on the other end, I hum a lullaby. Long after Fernando mutters goodbye, I keep holding the phone.

Late in February, I continue to read *Snow Country*. Shimamura, the main character, is a wealthy married man from Tokyo. He falls in love with an illusion of *Yukiguni*. I don't blame him. The winter landscape stuns me with its silence. Snow looms everywhere, and a person from the city, unfamiliar with its ability to isolate, can be easily charmed by its quaintness.

I understand the character's desire to fall in love with the idea of a new place and the yearning to let go of urban life for something slower paced, centered on nature, and simple living. After years of hustle in Buenos Aires and a cramped Chicago apartment, we hungered for open spaces and fresh air. Fernando and I wanted to create a world of our own, like the dreamy illusion Shimamura falls in love with in the *Yukiguni*. The newness of life in the small town of Asahi Mura charmed us. Its Japanese customs and traditions entranced us, luring us in to think we belonged. We had a chance to glimpse at what we naively considered a forgotten world with kimonoed ladies and kodo drums.

We knew our roles, too—even if we had planned them naively. Fernando would write during the day, finishing his novel. I would teach English to school children and farmers. Together, we would raise our son amid the safety and comfort of both parents. We hadn't figured how these roles would play out when I started coming home drained from trying to operate in a Japanese school all day and Fernando had spent the day trying to craft Spanish prose that sounded authentic, despite being written half a world away and in probably the most contrasting climate we could have chosen to live in as a married couple.

Nothing is ever what it seems not in life and not as the plot progresses in *Snow*

Country. The main characters, Shimamura and Komako, try to love across boundaries of region and class, and love brings them together, but ultimately cannot keep them from drifting apart.

The melodrama makes me wretch, in the way that even sublime art will do when what it represents is too close to what you're living. It's not my melodrama, despite its parallels, and it makes me wonder: Is what Fernando and I have been going through our own pathetic imitation of a love story every young couple thinks they will overcome? When the novelty of being young parents on an overseas adventure in Japan wore off, we found ourselves isolated and disconnected, constantly comparing ourselves to a people so different from us. We never found perspective.

Now with distance between us it is even harder. Each word takes on more meaning. A simple sentence like, *I belong here* translates to *I don't belong with you*.

I close the book and ready for bed. My fingers trace over the frozen window. Before I sleep, I remember I have 40 days left in *Yukiguni*.

When March begins, the snow continues, each day bringing more snow. My teaching at Asahi Mura Junior High bores my students and *me*. All my *disco verbs* and *Jeopardy!* adjectives games have been replaced with cut-and-dried translation exercises. Even Saito-sensei, my co-teacher and the traditional instruction stalwart of the English department,

notices my mood, even if he prefers the pedagogical shift.

“You like to ski, Jennifer-sensei?” he asks me between classes.

I roll my eyes, remembering last September when Saito-sensei asked me if I liked fresh fish, and I ended up being a chaperone on a mountain river trip. I don’t answer him for a few seconds. He scratches his collar. Wool makes him itch. I know he wishes he could wear his red tracksuits he wears in summer, spring, and fall, but it is too cold.

“Just been down a Midwestern bunny slope,” I answer, looking down at the stack of student papers I need to grade, thinking how much further behind a ski trip would set me.

“Maybe you will enjoy skiing with our students,” he says. His stubby fingers hand me the minutes from the most recent teacher’s faculty meeting. I catch a whiff of smoke and his breakfast of *natto*, fermented soybeans. Taking a glance at the paper, I notice his cramped child-like writing. A ski trip is planned in two weeks at a ski resort a couple towns away.

“Do you know the Japanese proverb *ame futte chi katamaru*?”

“*Nani ga*? What?” I ask. I shake my head. *Did he just say after the rain, the earth hardens?* Saito-sensei always says the strangest things. I often wonder if he makes them up to poke fun at my poor Japanese.

Saito-sensei shrugs. His shoulders lift, then come down into a pile of bulky wool “You’ll find out. See you on the slopes,” he says, and walks away to smoke yet another cigarette before our English class starts.

When the snowfall breaks in the second week of March, the reprieve gives way to a night sky bursting with stars. I hike to my Japanese class instead of driving. Our class meets at Masami's house. On the road, snow banks crop up, making an obstacle course between the pavement and the snow piles. I feel like the figures on the cover of *Snow Country*, tiny and insignificant. I pass the bright red *torii*, grateful for its shock of sacred color. On the way, I see only a few open stores. People crowd into the *Somen-ya*, noodle shop. From its steamed windows, a group of *salariman* slurps the long noodles from bowls of hot broth. Past the shops comes Masami's street. Her house needs repair. Paint peels on the outer walls.

"Lucky you. It is just the two of us," Masami says, seeing my appearance after trudging through the snow. She is elegantly dressed in a burgundy pant suit. A string of pearls hugs her neck.

In a few minutes, I settle into my seat at her kitchen table, and watch Masami take out a substantial slice of cake.

"I might have eaten this lovely dessert alone." She hands me the china plate and smiles.

"As you know, in Japanese we have two tenses, present and past," she begins, a little cake crumb at the corner of her mouth.

I drag my fork against the frosting. "Then how do you know the future?"

"It is implied within the conversation," Masami says, pouring *o-cha* into my cup. "*Hai*,

dozo.”

The mixture of the bitter green tea and the butter cake with cream frosting is the perfect match of East meets West. Each bite slides down my throats easily.

“And what’s implied is often stronger than what is there,” Masami says.

Masami furls her eyebrows and looks down at her manicured hands. On her left hand is her simple gold wedding band. Her fingers fiddle with it. She takes it off gently, setting it next to her pile of teaching books.

Our relationship has developed into more of a friendship than the strict teacher-student arrangement she has with most of her students. Over the two years we have spent together, we have become close friends, largely on the basis of our both being outsiders to Asahi Mura society. I am a *gaijin* foreigner; she is from Tokyo. Both of us have complicated marriages.

Masami knows the truth about my marriage. She knows how difficult living in Japan was for Fernando. She witnessed his frequent bad moods, when he would disappear if company visited. She ignored his stubborn refusal to respect such basic Japanese customs as bowing and taking off one’s shoes before entering a house. She helped write my resignation letter to the Board of Education and helped negotiate ending my contract gracefully and quickly in April instead of August. When Fernando and Nico left, she comforted me with homemade *nabe* stew. But underneath her care, I suspect she thinks what everyone must: *Why didn’t Fernando just stick it out for three months? Why didn’t I*

leave with them?

“Marriage is *mushakasi, ne*. The Doctor never thinks of me as a teacher,” she says, referring to her husband. “Not once has he asked me about my pupils.”

The Doctor owns a small clinic in the back of their house. They have been married and lived in Asahi Mura for twenty years.

“Ours is not a love marriage, not like yours,” she begins. Absentmindedly, she twists a piece of her grey and black hair between her fingers.

I pour us more *o-cha*.

“Ours is *Omiai*.”

Masami takes a sip of her tea. She lets the tea settle into her small mouth then swallows. “My problem is I love to learn.”

She had matriculated in pharmacology at the University in Tokyo. While women her age had married and gave birth, Masami had cruised the Tokyo jazz scene.

“But I am *hitorikko*,” she says. “Being an only child comes with many duties.”

Masami pauses and then says, “While I played jazz, my parents hired a *nakodo* – matchmaker who serves as a go-between between parents and potential spouses.”

I pour her more tea and take a forkful of my cake.

“The things he knew about me!” Masami says, shaking her head so that her hair covers half her face. “Not even I knew them.”

The *nakodo* investigated everything about Masami and her family, including her

educational achievements, socio-economic status, and family connections. The first and only match the *nakodo* suggested was with Dr. Kobayahshi, a man fifteen years her senior. He owned a thriving clinic and several pieces of land in the small town of Asahi Mura, in the prefecture of Niigata-ken, a distance considered unbearably long and too isolated by most people living in Tokyo.

“My mother accepted the doctor’s proposal. She told me I could use my pharmacology degree and be a good wife and mother.”

Adapting to married life in Snow Country was miserable. Her Tokyo ways isolated her and prevented her from making friends, and brought scorn from her neighbors. Without her books or her jazz, Masami grew depressed. Soon she discovered the reason why the Doctor needed a match outside of Asahi Mura. There was another woman—her mother-in-law. The pious woman castigated Masami for every small infraction, berating her for boiling weak *somen* noodle and beating her for leaving a lone weed in the garden. She refused to allow her to work in the clinic alongside her husband.

“What wife works for her husband? Not in Asahi Mura!”

Living in the *Yukiguni* was too much for Masami and within two years she had a nervous breakdown.

“Too much snow,” she sighs and pulls a wool blanket over her legs.

Cooking, cleaning, and learning to cultivate bonsai trees filled the hours. When the house was quiet, she studied English, a language that became her secret lifeline to the

outside world. By the time she was proficient, her mother-in-law fell and broke her neck after suffering a stroke. Masami played the piano at the funeral.

“It was then I threw myself into the teaching Japanese to English visitors.”

She slips the ring back on her finger.

“Marriage is *muzkashii*, ne,” I sigh. “Too difficult.”

“Not as difficult as Japanese,” she says and points to my notebook “We waste too much time chatting nonsense. Begin, verb work.”

Back in August, we wanted to make things work. Fernando wrote more during the morning. He started *Kendo* in the afternoon. In the evening, we ate all together, slurping cold *somen* noodles. The weather bothered him. The humidity soaked him in sweat, and an itchy rash spread all over his shoulders and stomach. Sometimes, he had headaches from the bright sun.

“¡*Qué calor!* I don’t think Buenos Aires is ever this hot,” he complained.

“¡*Insoportable!*”

He stripped down to his underwear, tossing his clothes in a pile.

“Oh, I think I like you hot,” I teased him, taking off my shirt.

Then as if to dare me on, he snapped the elastic band of his boxers, and said, “*Hai, dozo.*”

“Domo arigato,” I replied, laughing and bowing like a geisha.

Then he reached his hand to me, and his arms pulled my body close to him. Off balance, we tumbled towards the floor, as gracelessly as two rocks thrown in the river. Even in the frigid air, his smooth skin was warm as he pressed up against me. Whatever gap between us, whatever anger, or blame or resentment we felt was gone from our bodies.

Hearing us, Nico stirred from his sleep. Soon he began to cry. The moment between us was lost to legs and arms untangling. We pulled away from each other, and into our separate worlds. I quieted the baby. Fernando slept.

Summer turned to autumn and we became like the bare branches outside, scratching at the windowpane. Only our son brought us together with his cries of wet diapers and laughter when playing with *Hotwheels* or *Anpanman*. Meals around our small table became unbearable. All the food tasted like fish. Fernando took to eating dishes of pasta or white bread and butter with a bottle of wine alone. When I put Nico to bed and turned in myself, he stayed up late on his computer, connecting to chatrooms all across Argentina. Since Fernando was not able to get up before mid-afternoon, I began to drive our son to nursery school and pick him up after work. I played with Nico, cooked dinner, and made apologies to anyone Fernando offended with his moods. Having to cover for Fernando's homesickness gave me little time to cope with my own sense of being frequently lost in a Japanese workplace myself.

Only once in November did Fernando seem to resemble his old self. His mother sent

a package from Argentina. She filled it with *maté* and *dulce de leche*, and postcards of Buenos Aires. He tacked them on the wall by his computer. A racy tango dancer twirled in San Telmo. A couple strolled past the candy-colored buildings of La Boca. Two *gauchos* roasted a cow in the pampas. The care package worked until he drank the last of the *mate* and polished off the *dulce de leche* and by accident, Nico tore up one of the postcards.

“Let’s leave Japan. Let’s go,” he insisted.

“I can’t break my contract.” I said. “I’m doing everything here. Can’t you help me out?” I said.

“I hate it here. Always being alone. Bowing and smiling. I feel like a dancing monkey,” he argued. “Come on, this place isn’t us.”

“Just stick it out.” I begged.

“*Todo es una mierda*. I can’t write. I never sleep. And now snow.”

“Who’s going to pay for this? How will we pay the bills or our tickets back? We can leave when you get a job,” I argued.

By the time I accompanied Fernando and Nico to the airport to fly back to Argentina, we were nothing like the brave couple who had first arrived in the country, ready to take on any new adventure and raise our child in a foreign land. Those dreams of his writing his novel, my teaching, and our raising our son vanished into a daily routine of excruciating sameness rather than wild adventure.

When Fernando started packing his bags, I finally agreed to cut the contracts short,

but it did little good. Brick by brick a wall had been built up between us. Our marriage caught up between the bricks and mortar.

Dealing with the Japanese Board of Education proved to be difficult, even with my friend Masami's help. The principal asked me to reconsider, then agreed to allow me to leave, but refused to pay for our plane tickets home. They would pay my salary up until the day I left in April when school ended for spring break. This was a good compromise for a bad situation. We would leave three months early, without problems.

Thinking I had arranged a compromise that would ease the situation, bringing the light at the end of the tunnel closer, I was crushed that night when Fernando refused the agreement.

"Not one day more," he said, pouring another glass of wine. "You stay. This is your job."

"This is our marriage. You don't pick up and leave because you have to take off your shoes at the front door or bow at the grocery store clerk when he gives you change," I said, walking to the sink and rinsing off the dinner dishes.

"I'm tired of trying, Jen. I'm tired of sticking out and being watched," he said.

"What about Nico? How do you expect me to work and take care of the baby?" I said.

"My mother said she would help us. She sent me the tickets yesterday."

"Now your mother is in the middle of all of this?" I said. "What's next?"

Fernando shook his head.

“You don’t listen,” he said. “You catch bits and pieces but it never adds up.”

We agreed to separate for three months. I would work. He would take the baby to Buenos Aires, and his mother would take care of them.

Later, if we could, we would work out what came next.

The last week of March, there is enough snow so that when the day of the Asahi Mura Junior High ski trip arrives, I try and stay in the background. Students prepare. Some decorate the halls with brightly colored posters and signs for each class. Others wax their skis. A few argue which slope is the fastest. Even the teachers drop their guard and join in the excitement.

Saito-sensei brings in a pair of skis and leans them on my desk.

“For you,” he says. “Boots, too.”

I look at the skis, so long and slender. I can’t imagine myself on them.

“I don’t know, Saito-sensei. The snow is too much for me.”

Saito-sensei taps his fingers on the skis.

“I could break a leg,” I protest weakly, before deciding that arguing with Saito-sensei so early in the morning isn’t worth it. I try and change the subject.

“What does *ame futte chi katamaru* mean?”

Saito-sensei’s face grows serious, as it does when he is about to lecture me on a student rule I have forgotten to uphold.

“Perhaps it means after difficulty comes strength,” he says, and then he does something he has never done before. He pats my shoulder. His small gesture speaks louder than any words ever spoken between us. *“Ikimasu-yo, ne? You go?”*

“Hai. Ikimasu-yo.” I say, and pick up the ski and the boots, and follow him out to the parking lot where the buses wait for us.

On the bus, Saito-sensei puts me in charge of three frail students, Chiori, Atsuko, and Kari who, like me, are shy and nervous about the slopes. All three wear Hello Kitty pink ski jackets. Chiori sits next to me.

“Jennifer-sensei, I do not like to ski. Do you?” she asks, pulling pink ski cap over her ears.

I shake my head. “Not really.”

The bus lurches from side to side as we climb up the mountains to the resort. Snow is like love, I think, looking out the window to the snow capped mountains. It’s tricky to keep your balance walking through either one. Both can blind you to the things you most need to see. If the sun shines on snow or on love, the eyes blind temporarily. Somehow, our blindness let us believe that for a few flashing seconds, love in snow country belonged to us. When our eyes settled into the light, we saw a vast white canvas with no direction towards home.

“Jennifer-sensei,” Chiori says shaking my shoulder, “Are you space outing?”

“Nani ga? What?” I ask, laughing. “‘Spacing out’ you mean? Yeah, I was thinking

about all this snow. What do you think of it?" I zip up my ski jacket and pull on my hat.

"*Yuki?* Snow is white," Chiori says in her broken English. "But white is not always a good color for us. In Asahi Mura, too much white means, life indoors."

"But here we are outside at the mountain," I say.

She gives me a puzzled look.

"Time to ski," I say as we pull into the parking lot.

Bounding off the bus, students line up according to homeroom. Saito-sensei carries his clipboard and directs everyone where to stand. Within a couple of minutes, the groups head up to put on their skis and go to the chairlifts. The three girls stand by my side, playing a game of *junken po* to decide who will go down the slope first.

"*Ishho de go,*" Atsuko says.

Her hand forms in a rock. Chiori's hand makes a scissors. Kari's is a flat like a piece of paper.

"Again," I hear Chiori say.

I looked over at Saito-sensei. He nods and points to my skis, and then rushes to catch up with his homeroom.

The slopes are in one direction, and we walk the other. The path leads us to a small opening. The three girls chatter to each other about school and boys. I follow behind them, looking at their small shaped boot prints in the snow, thinking about how they remind me of my son's footprints.

Then the line suddenly stops.

“Oh, look,” the girls say and points down to the small lake where the lodge has arranged benches and made a makeshift amphitheatre.

“What is it?” I ask.

“*Western style, ne,*” says Chiori, taking out her cell phone to snap a shot.

“*Segoy! Cool!*” the girls say and point to the bride’s veil.

A couple stands together. The woman wears a western bride’s gown and red ski jacket. Her veil flaps in the wind. From the distance, I make out that her bouquet is filled with white flowers, perhaps lilies flown in from Tokyo. The groom is dressed in a black suit and blue ski jacket. A corsage sticks out from his coat. It is a cold day, but not bitterly cold or snowing a lot. The blue skies shine clean and clear.

Who gets married in the snow? I wonder. Maybe this is the librarian, Hatsumi-san’s daughter. I look around at the guests dressed in elegant clothes under ski jackets and boots. I don’t see her.

“Shall we go closer?” I ask.

The girls nod. Together we walk towards the ceremony close enough to catch the bride and groom kiss. The small crowd erupts in a cheer of clapping.

The girls, now suddenly embarrassed, stop and turn around.

I think of my Japanese teacher Masami. I wonder what she would say if she saw this young couple in a love marriage in the *Yukiguni*. I imagine she’d say, “Where’s the cake?”

They are going to need a lot of sweetness to melt this snow.”

After nights of frosted windows, instant ramen, and overseas telephone calls that twist with anger and accusation, I finish *Snow Country*. The two lovers, Komako and Shimamura return from a walk in the mountains. The snow melts into April’s spring buds.

“You’re a good girl,” Shimura says affectionately.

Then later, he says, “You’re a good woman.”

And within Kawabata’s quick, clean dialogue, Komako understands Shimamura has used her.

“A good woman? What do you mean by a good woman?” she says.

Though she asks the question, she does not wait for the answer. Her question, and even his self-assuring comment that elicits it, show that the complexities of the world in which they must live have insinuated themselves into their love. The early period of blinding love, when they could hardly see anything but each other, was perhaps sure to end; in any case, it has. Shimamura will not return back to the hot-spring resort. Winter changes to spring. Her dream of being loved by him is over, as is his love for her.

Once the snow melts, recognition comes.

In the second week of April, the snow lessens. Blizzards are gone. Light flurries flare up then fade. Little by little, the land thaws. The propane for my *kotatsu* runs out, so I lay in

bed under bundled blankets. When the phone rings, I don't pick it up. I realize that perhaps there was a part of me that chose to stay in Japan to prolong our marriage, instead of dealing with the inevitable. Whatever needs settling can wait until I reach Buenos Aires in another two weeks.

Before I leave, I return to the English Library. A few readers assemble on benches on the outside lawn still covered with snow. The day is clear. The sun shines boldly in the sky. The Kawabata book is three weeks past due. I have been avoiding the librarian, not wanting to tell her the truth about why I didn't need to take home *Pat the Bunny*. Now, I push open the library door, ready to make amends. Yet, I don't find her. In her usual spot sits a college girl from Tokyo fiddling with her cell phone and popping her gum.

"Is the librarian here?" I ask.

"Nope," the girl says, hardly raising her blue eyes. "Something about an emergency with her daughter."

The shelves look bare and sloppy. Some of the chairs are missing from the tables. It looks like Hatsumi-san has been gone awhile.

"Wasn't her daughter getting married?" I ask.

The girl shrugs. "All I know is she took some time off. I didn't hear about a wedding."

"Can you give her this book," I say. I slide it over to the counter.

The girl stretches picks it up.

"Oh, *Snow Country*," she says, tapping her manicured nail on the cover. "I heard this

was a love story, right?" She opens the cover and eyes the due date.

"Yeah," I say. "Or it could just be a novel about snow."

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