

A Preference for Native Tongue

It's her last night in Tokyo, her last night with Junichiro, and although they have promised to see each other again, somewhere, sometime very soon, Elsa knows this probably won't be the case, and she thinks Jun knows this, too. Maybe that is why the evening is infused with such delicious melancholy, a well of yearning and nostalgia—false as it may be—that makes it hard to swallow, nearly bringing tears whenever one of them dislodges the blandest statement.

“The train is very crowded today,” Jun says to her, and they almost crumble.

They are riding the Yamanote Line to Meguro, to a *tonkatsu* restaurant called Tonki. They've decided not to do anything particularly special tonight—well, with one exception—thinking it will be more meaningful to do what they've always done. It's the summer of 1982, the year of the Falklands War, the U.S. embargo of Libya, Israel's invasion of Lebanon, the deaths of John Belushi and John Cheever. The latter has affected Jun greatly. He loves Cheever's short stories. He is finishing his junior year studying literature at Todai—Tokyo University—and dreams of a career translating American fiction. For a few months this winter, Jun took private lessons with Elsa,

who has spent the past year after college teaching conversational English at one of Tokyo's many *eikaiwa* schools.

As always, there is a wait at Tonki's, but they don't mind. It's all part of the experience. While they are in line outside, a waiter takes their orders—both opting for the *hirekatsu teishoku*, of course—and once they are inside the door, they sit among the chairs against the walls and happily watch the cooks working in the open kitchen. It's a wonderful bit of theater. The men rapidly bread and dip the pork no less than three times in batter, then deep-fry the cutlets in two different pots of oil, all with maniacal precision and the most profound solemnity. When Elsa and Jun are seated at the counter, they're served cold beers and peanuts, and, in less than a minute, their orders come—the *tonkatsu* and sauce and *miso*, the pickles and rice and shredded cabbage, the last two of which may be replenished at will. The *tonkatsu* is heavenly, crunchy on the outside, moist inside, so good they can't slow down to savor the meal, eating and eating. Still ravenous, they look at each other, laugh, and order an extra outlet.

From Tonki's, they get back on the Yamanote Line for two stops to Harajuku, then meander down Omotesando-dori to walk off the meal. It's a stifling summer night—oh, the humidity. Within a block, Elsa's shirt is damp, and Jun is sweating rather heavily in his suit jacket, a Kawabuko knockoff. He's dressed in all black, as is *au courant*, making him a member of the so-dubbed *karasu-zoku*. The crow tribe. The jacket has upside-down pockets, sleeves that extend past his fingers, and looks as if it has been turned inside-out, frayed seams exposed. Needless to say, Jun—in contrast to

Elsa, with her practical Midwestern tastes—is quite the fashion plate. He keeps tugging her to windows of boutiques along the boulevard.

Finally they make it to Minami-Aoyama, down a narrow alley that leads to a cramped, steep staircase, at the bottom of which is their favorite bar, North Beach. It's a funky neo-beatnik place modeled after Vesuvio's in San Francisco. Years later, Elsa will go to the real Vesuvio's with her first husband and see how close an approximation this bar is, down to the shambling wood chairs and café tables, the memorabilia and curios, the murals of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Bob Kaufman, even the sign from Jack Kerouac Alley that reads "Beware pickpockets and loose women." And, of course, they have the drink here, Vesuvio's famous Jack Kerouac drink, tequila and rum mixed with orange and cranberry juice. Jun asks the waiter for two Jack Kerouacs after they find a table near the back, and then they relax in the air-conditioned dimness and talk, fingers twined.

"Tell me what you're going to do with your life," Elsa says.

"I am going to have many, many adventures," Jun says, and he vows that he will go to Harvard and get his doctorate and become friends with many writers, and then will live in the Village, where he will translate books, traveling frequently to Europe, occasionally accompanying authors to Tokyo on their tours. "What I like about American literature," Jun has told Elsa, "is that it is subversive. Japanese literature cannot be so subversive."

Now, in the bar, over the Coltrane playing on the turntable, he says expansively, "I will bring the infection of American books to the Japanese people!"

At first, Elsa—still the teacher—thinks “infection” is a malapropism, but then she reconsiders. It’s the perfect word, a clever if unintended metaphor.

“Tell me what you will do,” Jun says.

Elsa has so many plans. She is a humble, big-boned Swedish girl from Minnesota. Her father is a pharmacist, her mother works in an insurance office. Her brother manages conferences at a hotel. One sister is a housewife, the other fields calls at a mail-order company. Yet Elsa’s parents, former campaign workers for Hubert Humphrey, have instilled in all their children a respect for public service, a passion for progressive, humanistic values, and Elsa will be going to the University of Minnesota for her law degree in two months. She wants to become a civil rights attorney. She wants to argue discrimination cases in front of the Supreme Court. She wants to help pass the Equal Rights Amendment.

“I will bring the infection of equality to the American people,” she tells Jun, to which he raises his clenched fist into the air and says, “*Ganbatte!*”

“When we are fifty,” he tells her, “we will meet and have an affair.”

“I’ll be fat.”

“No, you will not.”

They are a little drunk when they leave the bar. Elsa remembers her camera. She has taken so few photos in her year in Tokyo. Originally she wanted to go to Morocco, or Turkey, or India, somewhere truly exotic, but her parents worried for her safety, and her cousin, who once taught at the same *eikaiwa* school, reassured them that Tokyo, if anything, was safe. A little too safe, Elsa reflects, not challenging her comfort levels

much, although maybe this is specious hindsight, a form of braggadocio. After all, before Japan, her only excursions outside the U.S. were family trips across the border to Canada.

She poses Jun on Aoyama-dori and snaps a shot with the flash, after which he pretends to have been blinded, shuffling toward her with outstretched arms.

They catch the subway at Omotesando for the short ride to Akasaka and walk up the hill to Palace Wales. Jun lives at home, and Elsa has been staying at a *gaijin* house in Suginami, so this love hotel is an indulgence of privacy. Palace Wales indeed looks like a British castle on the outside, but inside they have their pick of themes. In the lobby, they examine the lighted panel of room photos, and after careful consideration they press the two-hour “rest” button for Sunset Strip, an homage to art deco. In the room, it’s all pastels and black marble. There are zebra-patterned velvet wing chairs and George Nelson bubble lamps, spelter sculptures of women and gazelles, lacquered wood screens. A reproduction of Tamara de Lempicka’s *Sleeping Woman* hangs over the bed, and the glass-blocked bathroom features a huge claw-footed tub, which, despite its faux-antiquity, incorporates hidden pressure jets.

They get into the tub, and, facing one another, they do things beneath the surface with their feet, smirking. When they dry each other off with the hotel’s plush towels, Elsa admires Jun’s body. He’s her first Japanese lover, her first lover ever, in fact, who is not white. Except for his head and the profusion of coarse, straight strands in his armpits and on his genitals, he is completely hairless, his skin smooth and unblemished, paler than her own. His body is muscular but without definition, without

shape or protrusion, thin and rectilinear, an unearthly, exquisite plank. He has only one distinguishing mark, a birthmark that looks like an indigo inkblot on his lower back. Jun has told her it's called a Mongolian blue spot, common among Asian babies. The spots, which can resemble bruises, usually shrink and disappear by adolescence, but Jun's never quite did, leaving a vestige the size of a nickel. Many years from now, this information will prove useful to Elsa. A Korean client will take her baby to the hospital because of a fever, and a callow intern will summon child protection services after seeing the blue spots, thinking Elsa's client has been abusing the baby.

They sprawl onto the French bed, which has scalloped head- and footboards made of burr walnut. There's no mirror on the ceiling, thank God, with which the hotel equips most of its rooms, but as Elsa and Jun begin to make love, they discover, to their shock and hilarity, that their room is rigged with lasers that shoot over the bed when one of them moans.

"Turn it off, turn it off!" Elsa laughs as Jun scampers about, looking for the sensor switch.

"*Kuso,*" Jun swears, starting to lose his erection. He locates the control console and says, "*Hayaku, hayaku,*"—hurry, hurry—and, grinning, leaps back onto the bed.

Years and years later, Elsa will find the photograph of Jun on Aoyama-dori that night, grinning at the camera. Because of the flash and his black clothes, he will be disembodied, only his face and right hand, raised in a victory sign, visible. She will, of course, wonder what has become of him then. They will have stopped writing to each other long ago. She will know that he studied for a brief time at the University of

Texas, and though he enjoyed the music scene in Austin and was popular with the girls, he felt dislocated. He will have moved back to Tokyo and found a job at a publishing company, albeit not involving literature, and then quit and begun working in advertising for the fashion industry, and that will be the last Elsa hears of Jun.

He scoots down on the bed for what she likes best. He has a special technique that dements her. After repeated inquiries, he revealed what he does down there. With his tongue, he is lightly tracing the *hiragana* and *kanji* characters that comprise the translated opening for *The Great Gatsby*: “In my younger and more vulnerable years...”

There is so much that Elsa doesn't know yet. She does not know she will never leave the Twin Cities. She does not know about her father's Alzheimer's or her best friend's son being blown apart by a rocket-propelled grenade or her sister's car getting T-boned by a drunk driver and leaving her a paraplegic. She does not know about the mindless infidelities and small heartaches and everyday betrayals—ordinary tragedies that abuse and ravage one's faith, yet constitute a life. She will never file an appellate brief or work for the A.C.L.U. or the Southern Poverty Law Center. She will be an attorney, part-time, for a small nonprofit legal aid center in Minneapolis and specialize in immigration law, most of her clients Hmong, Laotian, Somali, Mexican, and Russian. It will be noble, important work, but a drudgery in many ways, processing applications for green cards, work permits, deportation stays, asylum claims. She will marry and divorce twice. First a public defender (African American), then a photojournalist (Chicano), with whom she'll have one son each. During the second

birth, she will nearly hemorrhage out, and then two months later will almost die again because of a missed piece of placenta. They will tell her that, because of the scars in her uterus, she will never be able to conceive again, which will make her pregnancy with twins eight years later a bit of a surprise. She will not marry the girls' father, an ESL teacher (Japanese American), skittish about the institution, but will live with him, reasonably happy, hoping she is doing some good, doing her part, however small it might be. But occasionally, although she will try not to, she will be struck more by what she hasn't done than what she has. She will forget sometimes that she also knows about love, the virtue of patience and forgiveness, and about joy, the pleasure of being with those closest to her, family, friends, comrades, these beautiful children no one ever believes are hers, picnicking with them alongside Lake Harriet on a warm, clear, breezy day, hearing their easy laughter, the reassurance of their safety.

Jun senses where she is and presses a little faster, harder. She wants it to last forever, this feeling—youth, time, glory, everything still before her, waiting, her extraordinary life—but she feels it rolling over her and gives in to it.

“Oh, that was good,” she says. “That was so good.”