Years Later

It was her last night in Tokyo, her last night with Junichiro, and although they had promised to see each other again, somewhere, sometime very soon, Emily knew this probably wouldn't be the case, and she thought Jun knew this, too. Maybe that was why the evening was infused with such delicious melancholy, a well of yearning and nostalgia —false as it may have been—that made it hard to swallow, nearly bringing tears whenever one of them dislodged the blandest statement.

"The train is very crowded today," Jun said to her, and they almost crumbled.

They were riding the Yamanote Line to Meguro, to a tonkatsu restaurant called Tonki's. They had decided not to do anything particularly special tonight—well, with one exception—thinking it would be more meaningful to do what they'd always done. It was the summer of 1982, the year of the Falklands War, the US embargo of Libya, Israel's invasion of Lebanon, the deaths of John Belushi and John Cheever. The latter had affected Jun greatly. He loved Cheever's short stories. He was finishing his junior year studying literature at Tokyo University, and dreamed of a career translating American

fiction. For a few months this winter, Jun had taken private lessons with Emily, who had spent the past year after college teaching at one of Tokyo's many conversational English schools.

As always, there was a wait at Tonki's, but they didn't mind. It was all part of the experience. While they were in line outside, a waiter took their orders, and once they were inside the door, they sat among the chairs against the walls and happily watched the cooks working in the open kitchen. It was a wonderful bit of theater. The men rapidly breaded and dipped the pork cutlets with maniacal precision and the most profound solemnity. When Emily and Jun were seated at the counter, they were served cold beers and peanuts, and, in less than a minute, their orders came—the tonkatsu and sauce and miso soup, the pickles and rice and shredded cabbage. The tonkatsu was heavenly, crunchy on the outside, moist inside, so good they couldn't slow down to savor the meal, eating and eating. Still ravenous, they looked at each other, laughed, and ordered an extra cutlet.

From Tonki's, they got back on the Yamanote Line for two stops to Harajuku, then meandered down Omotesando-dori to walk off the meal. It was a stifling summer night—oh, the humidity. Within a block, Emily's shirt was damp, and Jun was sweating rather heavily in his suit jacket, a Kawabuko knockoff. He was dressed in all black. The jacket had upside-down pockets, sleeves that extended past his fingers, and looked as if it had been turned inside-out, frayed seams exposed. Needless to say, Jun—in contrast to Emily, with her practical suburban tastes—was quite the fashion plate. He kept tugging her to windows of boutiques along the boulevard.

Finally they made it to Minami-Aoyama, down a narrow alley that led to a cramped, steep staircase, at the bottom of which was their favorite bar, North Beach. It was a funky neo-beatnik place modeled after Vesuvio's in San Francisco. Years later, Emily would go to the real Vesuvio's with her first husband and see how close an approximation this bar was, down to the worn 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 read "Beware pickpockets and loose women." And, of course, they had the drink here, Vesuvio's famous Jack Kerouac drink, tequila and rum mixed with orange and cranberry juice. Jun asked the waiter for two Jack Kerouacs after they found a table near the back, and then they relaxed in the air-conditioned dimness and talked, fingers twined.

"Tell me what you're going to do with your life," Emily said.

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

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

At first, Emily—still the teacher—thought "infection" was a malapropism, but then she reconsidered. It was the perfect word, a clever if unintended metaphor.

“Tell me what you will do,” Jun said.

Emily had so many plans. She was a humble, big-boned, second-generation Korean American from Fairfax, Virginia. Her father was a pharmacist, her mother worked in an insurance office. Her brother managed conferences at a hotel. One sister was a housewife, the other fielded calls at a mail-order company. Yet Emily’s parents, former campaign workers for Bobby Kennedy, had instilled in all their children a respect for public service, a passion for progressive, humanistic values, and Emily would be going to the University of Minnesota for her law degree in two months. She wanted to become a civil rights attorney. She wanted to argue discrimination cases in front of the Supreme Court. She wanted to help pass the Equal Rights Amendment.

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

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

“I’ll be fat,” she said.

“No,” he said. “Never.”

They were a little drunk when they left the bar. Emily remembered her camera. She had taken so few photos in her year in Tokyo. Originally, after graduating from George Mason University, she had wanted to go to Morocco, or Turkey, or India, somewhere truly exotic, but her parents worried for her safety, and her cousin, who had once taught at the same school, reassured them that Tokyo, if anything, was safe, in spite of the historical enmity between Japan and Korea. A little too safe, Emily reflected, not challenging her comfort levels much, although maybe this was specious hindsight, a form

of braggadocio. After all, before Japan, her only excursions outside the US had been family trips to Canada.

She got Jun to pose on Aoyama-dori and snapped a shot with the flash, after which he pretended to have been blinded, shuffling toward her with outstretched arms.

They caught the subway at Omotesando for the short ride to Akasaka and walked up the hill to Palace Wales. Jun lived at home, and Emily had been staying at a gaijin house in Suginami, so this love hotel was an indulgence of privacy. Palace Wales indeed looked like a Welsh castle on the outside, but inside they had their pick of themes. In the lobby, they examined the lighted panel of room photos, and after careful consideration they pressed the button for Sunset Strip, an homage to art deco. In the room, it was all pastels and black marble. There were zebra-patterned wing chairs and George Nelson bubble lamps, and the bathroom featured a huge claw-footed tub, which, despite its faux-antiquity, incorporated hidden pressure jets.

They got into the tub, and, facing one another, did things beneath the surface with their feet, smirking. When they dried each other off with the hotel's plush towels, Emily admired Jun's body. He was her first Japanese lover, her first lover ever, in fact, who was not white—a bias that now shamed her. Except for Jun's head and the profusion of coarse, straight strands in his armpits and on his genitals, he was completely hairless, his skin smooth and unblemished, paler than her own. His body was muscular but without definition, without shape or protrusion, thin and rectilinear, an unearthly, exquisite plank. He had only one distinguishing mark, a birthmark that looked like an indigo inkblot on his lower back. Jun had told her it was called a Mongolian blue spot, common among

Asian babies, something she had not known. The spots, which could resemble bruises, usually shrank and disappeared by adolescence, but Jun's never quite did, leaving a vestige the size of a nickel. Many years from now, this information would prove useful to Emily. A Korean client would take her baby to the hospital because of a fever, and a callow intern would summon child protection services after seeing the blue spots, thinking Emily's client had been abusing the baby.

They sprawled onto the French bed, which had scalloped head- and footboards made of burr walnut. There was no mirror on the ceiling, thank God, with which the hotel equipped most of its rooms, but as Emily and Jun began to make love, they discovered, to their shock and hilarity, that the room was rigged with lasers that shot over the bed when one of them moaned.

"Turn it off, turn it off!" Emily laughed as Jun scampered about, looking for the sensor switch.

"Kuso," Jun swore, starting to lose his erection. He located the control console and said, *"Hayaku, hayaku,"*—hurry, hurry—and leapt back onto the bed.

Years and years later, Emily would find the photograph of Jun on Aoyama-dori that night, grinning at the camera. Because of the flash and his black clothes, he would be disembodied, only his face and right hand, raised in a victory sign, visible. She would, of course, wonder what had become of him then. They would have stopped writing to each other long ago. She would know that he had studied for a brief time at the University of Texas, and though he'd enjoyed the music scene in Austin and was popular with the girls, he had felt dislocated. He would 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 would be the last Emily would hear of Jun.

He scooted down on the bed for what she liked best. He had a special technique that demented her. After repeated inquiries, he revealed what he was doing down there. With his tongue, he was lightly tracing the hiragana and kanji characters that comprised the translated opening for *The Great Gatsby:* "In my younger and more vulnerable years…"

There was so much that Emily didn't know yet. She did not know that she would go to the Twin Cities for law school and never leave. She did not know about her father's Parkinson's or her best friend's son being blown apart by an IED or her sister's car getting T-boned by a drunk driver and leaving her a paraplegic. She did not know about the mindless infidelities and small heartaches and everyday betrayals—ordinary tragedies that abused and ravaged one's faith, yet constituted a life. She would never file an appellate brief or work for the ACLU or the Southern Poverty Law Center. She would be an attorney, part-time, for a small legal aid center in Minneapolis and specialize in immigration law, most of her clients Hmong, Laotian, Somali, Korean, and Mexican. It would be noble, important work, but so often tedious, processing applications for green cards, work permits, deportation stays, asylum claims.

Her commitment to multiculturalism and social justice would extend to her choice in lovers. She would marry and divorce twice. First a public defender (African American), then a photojournalist (Chicano), with whom she would have one son each. During the second birth, she would nearly hemorrhage out, and then two months later would almost die again because of a missed piece of placenta. They would tell her that,

because of the scars in her uterus, she would never be able to conceive again, which would make her pregnancy with a daughter eight years later a surprise. She would not marry the girl's father, an ESL teacher (Bengali American), skittish about the institution, but would live with him, reasonably happy, hoping she was doing some good, doing her part, however small it might be. But occasionally, although she would try not to, she would be struck more by what she hadn't done than what she had. She would forget sometimes that she also knew 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 mixed-blooded children people often assumed could not be hers, picnicking with them alongside Lake Nokomis on a warm, clear, breezy day, hearing their easy laughter, the reassurance of their safety.

Jun sensed where she was and pressed a little faster, harder. She wanted it to last forever, this feeling—youth, time, glory, everything still before her, waiting, her extraordinary life—but she felt it rolling over her and gave in to it.

"Oh, that was good," she said. "That was so good."