Four: Foreign Affairs

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In the Edo-Tokyo Museum, I cross over the Nihonbashi Bridge, the famous bridge that was the terminus of the Tōkaidō highway, the road between Edo and Kyoto, the bridge from which the Japanese measured distances. But the bridge I cross over is the replica of the original wooden bridge.

From the bridge, I can see all the museum exhibits, displaying the history of Tokyo, below. I spot a thirtysomething Japanese man who leads a Western man who seems a bit older through the displays of old Japan. They stop in front of the model of the long-ago-destroyed Edo Castle. The gaijin lightly rests his palm on the lower back of his Japanese guide. He leans toward his companion and says something into his ear before they move on to another exhibit.

Following the couple through the museum, I wonder if I might find a Japanese man who shares my interests as much as Ian. What might it be like to have someone who could intimately guide me through this still-unfamiliar culture?
Brenda came to Japan to learn and write about her mother’s Okinawan roots. She arrived with her girlfriend. A month later the relationship was over. She went to Okinawa but felt restricted by her Okinawan relatives. Back in Tokyo, Brenda stopped at a “live house,” a small music venue. She was the only gaijin. She sat at the bar, wanting to practice her Japanese. But everyone at the bar wanted to practice speaking English.

Brenda noticed a band setting up to play. Specifically, she noticed a skinny, long-haired Japanese guy.

“When I first saw him, I knew he was going to be my husband,” she tells me.

“Young husband? I thought you came to Japan with a woman.”

“I did. But that’s what I thought when I first saw him,” she offers as an explanation. “I sat at the bar for the band’s first set and practiced my introductory lines in Japanese. He didn’t look like the type who spoke much English.”

Between sets, Brenda introduced herself to the skinny band member with the long black hair.

“Did you tell him he was going to be your husband?”

“I told him I liked his playing. He said he’d talk to me after they stopped playing for the night.”

I am impressed with Brenda being able to communicate with a non-English-speaking Japanese, something I can’t imagine doing myself.

After the band stopped playing, while the band members packed up their stuff, Brenda waited at the bar. Taka—that was her future husband’s name—finally came over.

Way after midnight, Taka walked Brenda to her apartment. At the small gate in front of the path that leads to both of our apartments, Taka said good night.

“He didn’t even kiss me. Even though we exchanged meishi, I thought I’d never see him again.”
Only later did Brenda learn that Taka didn’t go with her into her apartment that night because she hadn’t asked. Or so he told her when they began seeing each other regularly.

Brenda continues her tales of Taka by telling me how he never introduces her to any of his friends, he always calls to say he is on his way to see her, and he always shows up hours later.

“I spend most of my nights waiting for him. He always shows up. But I never know when.”

Let’s get out of here and get some food,” Allan says, ushering me off my GB stool, through the bar, and into the narrow Nichôme streets. He leads me to a chain restaurant. “I come here for waffles,” Allan says. He translates the different flavors. We order.

Sitting across from him, I notice Allan doesn’t look so good. The ruddy face I remember is pale. He looks as if he hasn’t slept well.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Last night I saw Yoshihiro for the first time in over seven years.”

Of course, having met Allan only once before, and very briefly, I have no idea who Yoshihiro is.

“I met Yoshihiro at a small Nichôme bar. I was in Tokyo teaching—I’ve been teaching off and on in Tokyo for what must be twenty years now. I was married at the time. I was new to Japan, knew little Japanese. Yoshihiro knew little English. But he showed me his Tokyo. He had a fondness for cemeteries. Once, he took me to Aoyama Cemetery, and when we left he asked if I’d seen the *bakemono* on his shoulder. Yoshihiro always saw *bakemono*—it can’t be translated into English so we just say *ghosts*. Yoshihiro was the most un-Western person I had ever known. But somehow, despite our different cultures, we developed an intimacy—a common space.”

“Was Yoshihiro the first man you were with?”

Allan vigorously nods his head.
“What about your wife?”

“When I returned to Australia, it was a difficult divorce.” Allan looks down and pauses. I notice his right hand is shaking. “After Yoshihiro’s mother died, he came to Australia with his calligraphy materials and a small worn suitcase bound with rope. For years we shuttled back and forth from Melbourne to my frequent teaching stints in Tokyo. But I never realized, until it was too late, that Yoshihiro wanted me to sponsor him for permanent residency in Australia. Gradually, our visits, letters, and telephone calls dwindled, and then there was a long silence.”

Allan pauses, then continues, “I visited Tokyo a couple of times, but my meetings with Yoshihiro were always hasty. We spent one night together, which was incredibly tender but also a kind of farewell. He told me I would always be his special friend.”

Allan stops as if contemplating the phrase he just said.

“I was teaching in Kobe during the 1995 earthquake. I was ill with the pneumonia that swept through Kobe and had no way to get to or communicate with Tokyo. Finally, a week after the earthquake, I was able to return to Tokyo. I met with Yoshihiro at one of our favorite restaurants. I had been through so much, needed his physical attention, and was so happy to see him. He sat across from me holding a small lacquer box. He opened the box and handed me money. ‘What’s this for?’ I asked him. ‘It’s from my ancestral inheritance from my mother. Please use it to spend the night in a comfortable hotel.’”

Allan’s head is raised. He looks past me.

“Here was my lover of over thirteen years telling me to spend the night of our reunion—I had been so sick and wanted to be with him—in a hotel. I stared at him and when I could stare no longer, I got up, left the money on the table, and walked out of the restaurant. I didn’t see him again until last night.”

Allan still doesn’t look at me. “Feeling sick in Kobe was the first sign that I had cancer. I never heard from Yoshihiro. When I was sick in the hospital back in Australia, I would see Yoshihiro across the room watching me.”
“What did you say to each other last night when you saw him?”

“He told me that he was irretrievably hurt by my rejection of his ancestral money. I told him that was not what I wanted—I wanted to spend the night with him, be held by him, to be loved by him, physically. He saw his gesture as a gift and sacrifice; I saw it as cold indifference. According to what he believed, he gave me what was most important to him, but it was not what I needed.”

Allan closes his eyes. His face contorts as if he feels, somewhere in his body, a sharp pain.

After a long pause, Allan opens his eyes. Looking directly at me, he says, “The thing is, when I was so sick in Australia, I don’t know if what I saw was a hallucination or his spirit, like the bakemono he often carried on his shoulder.”

I sit on my narrow bed.

I call Ian. No answer.

I look at the ticking clock: not yet ten o’clock. Still early enough to see who is at GB tonight.

At the bar, I pay the 500-yen cover charge, order ginger ale as my included-in-the-cover-charge drink, and make my way to the opposite corner, from where I can see the entire bar as well as all the men who enter.

I am on my second ginger ale when I notice a very attractive blue-suited Japanese guy, maybe in his early thirties, looking at me. When he sees me look at him, he smiles. I am never sure when someone is interested in me. I nod my head slightly and smile back before I quickly look away.

A middle-aged man who does not seem Japanese sits next to me. To distract myself from the attractive blue-suited Japanese guy, I ask the man sitting next to me where he is from.

“Venezuela. But I’ve lived in Japan for the past five years. I’m Rafael. Where are you from? What are you doing in Tokyo?”
Somewhere between my answer that I am a writer researching a book and his asking me how long I am going to be in Tokyo, I look at the very attractive blue-suited guy who earlier had been looking at me and notice that he is now talking to a gaijin who had sat himself next to him at the bar. He sees me looking at him and, once again, smiles.

“I’ll be here for six months,” I tell Rafael.

As I talk with Rafael, I notice the gaijin is now touching the neck of the very attractive guy who—how long has it been?—had looked at me.

*I guess nothing’s going to happen with him,* I think before realizing Rafael is waiting for my response to a question I did not hear. By the time the conversation with Rafael has run its course—he has to get home so he can be awake at work tomorrow—I realize the man who had been looking at me, as well as the gaijin who had been touching his neck, have left the bar. I am surprised by how disappointed I feel.

I check my keitai for the time: after midnight. I have probably missed the last train and will have to take a taxi to get home, which means I will have to remember the Japanese words—hidari is left, migi is right, or is it the other way around? I know massugu is straight ahead—I need to direct the taxi driver to my apartment. But even if I remember the words, will I remember the landmarks where the driver should turn?

I get down from my stool—always an interesting moment because, when seated, my disability isn’t noticeable—and make my way toward the door, up the stairs, and into the narrow streets of Nichôme.

On the street, in front of the bar, is the very attractive guy.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” he says, smiling.

Did he know I was disabled before I walked out of GB? I start to walk toward Shinjuku-dori, where I figure I can catch a taxi.

“Where are you going?”

“Back to my apartment, if I can remember how to get there. What happened to the guy who was touching your neck?”

“Oh, him, he’s French.” He laughs.

When we reach Shinjuku-dori, the attractive man draws me to him and kisses me.
Shinjuku-dori wa doko desu ka? As we kiss, the phrase I had practiced saying over and over again for months before departure, so I would remember how to ask where somewhere is, repeats in my head. I can’t believe that here I am, on Shinjuku-dori, kissing this very attractive Japanese man.

“I can’t take you to where I live,” he says. “It’s not prepared.”

Not prepared? What does that mean? I ask, “Where can we go? The trains have stopped and I’m not sure I know how to get back to my place by taxi.”

“There’s a love hotel.”

“A love hotel? Where?” I had read about Japan’s love hotels, the places where lovers, both illicit and otherwise, go since there is little privacy, or space, in most Japanese homes.

“Just above the bar.”

“That’s convenient.”

“Let me get some money. Stay here.”

Was this an excuse to make his exit? Did I too easily let his tongue into my mouth? Did he not like the way I returned his kiss? Standing in the neon-lit Shinjuku-dori, did he finally realize I am only five feet tall? I wait. Not only because I’m unsure how to get back to my apartment. I want to know if the very attractive man actually went to get money.

In a few minutes, he returns, takes my hand, and leads me back down the narrow street. Just past the stairs to GB, he takes me into the dark empty lobby of what I assume is the love hotel. Two prices—one for “Rest,” one for “Stay”—are listed in English.

“There’s nobody here,” I hear myself say.

“Don’t worry, she’ll come.”

And the front door of the hotel opens and a voice says, “Arigato gozaimashita,” which I know means thank you. I have accidentally stood on the carpet, which must activate the automatic door that is accompanied by what is by now a very familiar Japanese female computer voice. Then, a door near the front desk opens and out comes a small, hunched-over elderly Japanese woman pulling a metal pail with a mop in it.
The very attractive guy pays the woman and leads me into the elevator, to the third floor, and into a room that is garishly lit by a mysterious green light emanating from what might be a television or a fish tank with no fish or some kind of see-through refrigerator door.

I sit down on a chair across from the bed as the very attractive guy starts to undress.

“I’m Masa,” he says as he neatly folds and hangs up his clothes.

“Kenny,” I say and figure I should take off my clothes, as well.

Masa comes to me in his boxers and pulls me toward the bed. He starts kissing me and much sooner than expected, I am on my back and Masa is lowering himself onto me.

“We need a condom,” I tell him.

“Oh,” he says.

“I have one.”

He stays on top of me as I reach for my wallet.

“Wait a minute, I have to call downstairs.”

My very rudimentary Japanese allows me to catch something he says about 8:00 a.m. I realize Masa and I are not going to rest. We are going to stay the night at the love hotel.