Five

Bubbling Water

I was twelve when I stayed up late every night to watch the Sapporo Winter Olympics on television. I watched the ABC broadcast until the last credits rolled. After John Denver sang the “Yokoso Sapporo” song, I finally allowed myself to sleep. Now, decades later, I am on my way to see Mike for Yuki Matsuri. At Sapporo’s Chitose Airport, there are “Yokoso Japan” signs, part of a new tourist ad campaign to welcome visitors.

I meet Toni, Mike’s Australian co-teacher and friend at Sapporo Station. It is Saturday and Mike is working; Toni is on a more typical weekends-off teaching schedule. She has Mike’s keys. After lunch she’ll escort me to Mike’s apartment.

Once again all my insecurities rise to the surface. For some reason I’ve convinced myself that Mike doesn’t really want me to visit him in Sapporo. If actual facts might combat my insecurity, what Toni is telling me over lunch should put to rest my ridiculous anxiety.

“He talks about you all the time. Kenny this, Kenny that. At school, when we go out for drinks after work,” she says in her thick Australian accent. “I’ve been here for five years and I can’t find myself a man.”
What I first notice about the Sapporo streets are the piles of packed snow on which we’re walking. When we turn left at the first corner, then right down a smaller street, the piles of snow get increasingly higher. We stop in front of what I assume is Mike’s building—Sunshine Shiroishi (why are so many buildings in Japan named Sunshine?). A narrow path chiseled out of two densely packed piles of snow leads into the building.

I thank Toni for meeting me with Mike’s keys and showing me the way to his apartment. “My pleasure, darling,” she says. “I’ll see you soon.”

Mike’s apartment is big by Japanese standards, especially in comparison to my Tokyo room. Along the entrance hallway is a laundry room with a sink, which leads into the shower and bath. At the end of the hallway, to the left is a well-stocked kitchen with many pots and pans hanging on the wall, and a full-sized refrigerator, much bigger than my not-even-waist-high Tokyo refrigerator.

To the right the apartment opens up into a living room. I peek out onto the small snow-packed terrace. I remember Mike telling me that he keeps the heat on only in his bedroom; in the living room he uses a traditional kotatsu, a heater placed underneath the low table surrounded by a few cushioned floor chairs.

I open the sliding door to Mike’s bedroom. Mike’s bed is filled with plush Tiggers. He hasn’t told me about this. I smile. I rest among the Tiggers on Mike’s bed, where I imagine he has talked with me on his cell phone every night since we first met. I breathe in Mike’s by-now-familiar smell.

I meet Mike after work. We head to Susukino, the lively Sapporo nightlife district. We go to a noodle shop and order a Sapporo specialty: bata-kan ramen.

We look down at our steaming-hot bowls of noodles. On top of the delectably looking noodles is yellow corn and just-as-yellow butter.

“Butter corn,” we both say at the same time, enjoying the Japanese attempt at the replication of English words.
After eating, we zip up our winter jackets and go to see this year’s Yuki Matsuri. Blocks and blocks of the city park are filled with a variety of ice and snow sculptures. The sculptures range from my height to arena-size, from famous celebrities to animals real and imagined. I’m delighted to see Pikachu, my totem Pokémon, as well as Winnie-the-Pooh and his friends from the Christopher Robin forest.

“I guess you’ve met the Tiggers.” Mike smiles his slightly goofy smile.

We watch the small children play in the ice maze and rush down the ice slides. I think about the enormous effort made at creating these enjoyable ice objects, which, after a few weeks, will be hauled away. Are they allowed to dissolve naturally or are they destroyed?

Our time together in Sapporo is filled with a perfect mixture of fun, both in and out of bed. We go out with Mike’s boisterous friends. Watching them unwind after a week of teaching reminds me not only of my first stay in Japan but also that Mike and his friends are fifteen or more years younger than I am.

Though I’m still waiting for the result of my last T-cell test, my worries about my health mostly stay in the background. Mike makes sure I remember to take my nightly dose of Coumadin. I acknowledge my anxiety about starting the antiretrovirals when Ian brings them.

During our conversations, Mike and I take our first tentative steps toward talking about the future. We talk about the possibility of my staying on and teaching in Tokyo after my Fulbright; Mike talks of asking for a transfer to teach in Tokyo so we can be together. We talk about how best to use Mike’s remaining vacation days so we can see each other as much as possible during the coming months. Mike plans to accompany me on a trip to Tono, home of much Japanese folklore.

We go to the oddly named Daruma to eat jinguskan (pronounced Genghis Khan). This Sapporo tradition is flame-grilled lamb. We
know we’ve found the right place when we see the red lantern and the grimacing, bald Genghis Khan, as well as a sizable line outside.

Once inside, my glasses immediately fog up. Clearing my glasses reveals a very cozy, as in very small, very friendly, very old place. There are about twenty-five stools around a three-sided counter. Behind the counter are three elderly women with bandanas tied around their heads. It looks as if the women are as old as the mutton grime; decades and decades of barbecue stain the walls. As we devour the lamb, Mike and I keep nodding to each other with each bite, agreeing that this food is absolutely delicious.

After our feast we head to the building that houses all of Sapporo’s gay bars. The bar Mike takes me to is only slightly larger than my room in Tokyo.

No sooner have we sat down at the bar than the bartender says, “Jinguskan tabe mashita ka?”

Even I understand what the bartender has asked. He wants to know if we enjoyed the jinguskan we just ate. We’re both embarrassed as we realize our clothes smell like the walls of Daruma.

For Valentine’s Day we go to Noboribetsu to stay at an onsen with thirty different baths overlooking a steaming lunar-like landscape created by an ancient volcanic eruption.

After the hour-and-a-half train ride, we walk up the small main street of the town. It begins to snow. I run a bit ahead, and when I turn around, it seems as if Mike, carrying our two-days’ worth of luggage against the wind, is in the midst of one of the famous ukiyo-e woodblock prints of a snowy day on the Tōkaidō highway.

The woman who takes us to our room says something about the yukata. She takes one of the yukata neatly folded on the low table with her. Very quickly she returns. She displays another yukata she has brought with her.
“Ah, arigato gozaimashita,” I say, bowing slightly. I thank her for realizing the yukata in the room would be too long for me. The new one is smaller and should fit me better. I tell Mike about the elderly Japanese woman who, at the onsen almost three and a half years ago, taught me to adapt the yukata so I wouldn’t trip or accidentally expose myself naked to passersby.

Mike is delighted at our tatami-matted room. His apartment is Western style. He has never stayed in a tatami-matted room before.

Over the course of the afternoon, we try all thirty baths. There is an outdoor rotemburo, which becomes Mike’s favorite. Sitting in the indescribably hot bath in the well-below-freezing outdoors is something neither of us have yet experienced. Icicles form on the small washcloth-like white towel that is traditionally placed on one’s head when bathing at an onsen.

A group of young boys runs in and out of the hot water into the snow piled on the side of the bath. The boys bring snow back with them into the bath. The snow immediately melts in the scalding water.

Back inside, I enter a tepid circular bath filled with constantly replenishing bubbles. “I must find out what’s in the water that does this,” I tell Mike. “It feels as if I’m in a Doris Day movie.”

“You look like you’re on one of those crazy Japanese game shows.” Mike provides what is perhaps a more precise description: the inane TV programs in which bizarre and brightly costumed contestants are forced to run through all kinds of ridiculous obstacles on a prefab set designed in 1970s retro style.

All I know is that I can’t remember laughing so much or being so happy as I am now with Mike. He watches me as he sits beneath a waterfall of hot water. That’s the bath that awaits me as soon as I’m finished frolicking in the Doris Day bath filled with effervescent, endless bubbles.

Just a few years ago, I wouldn’t have been able to enjoy the time as much as I have the past week. I would have let the gnawing uncertainty
about my health override everything else. Is this because of Mike? Or because I’m now older? Is it because of Japan?

Years ago, at the start of yet another relationship with a man who lived in a different place than I did, I began to be concerned that this was somehow a bad pattern that I created for myself.

As I told this to a friend, he laughed.

“Why are you laughing?” I asked.

“You travel all the time and are rarely home. Of course you’re going to meet men who live in places you don’t live.”

So, it wasn’t a bad thing after all. Still, it made the relationships, especially at the beginning, with all the comings and goings, all the reunions and good-byes, more difficult, more fraught.

Now, returning to Tokyo, I think about what is ahead for me. Will any of this ever get any easier over time?

I read “A Portrait of Shunkin,” Tanizaki’s famous story about a samisen player who becomes blind as a young girl. Shunkin has an often-tortured relationship with Sasuke, her merchant family’s apprentice. Despite Shunkin’s cruel treatment of Sasuke, the two become secret lovers.

The story, and their relationship, takes a dramatic turn. While Shunkin sleeps, someone—we do not know who (is it Sasuke himself?)—throws boiling water at her face. Her face is badly scarred. Shunkin does not want anyone to see her.

Sasuke blinds himself, not only so Shunkin will allow him to be with her but also to remember Shunkin always as the beautiful woman he knew. He preserves his “imperishable ideal” of her beauty: Shunkin’s exquisite white face, “as it had looked until only two months ago.” Her face “hovered before him in a circle of dim light, like the radiant halo of the Buddha.”

Is this the Japanese antithesis to mono no aware, an attempt, however fruitless, to freeze a moment in time, to halt time itself, to keep beauty, and our love of beauty—and love itself—from slipping away?
That night Mike sends me a text message a bit earlier than usual. The message tells me to call him as soon as possible. As soon as I’m back in my room, I call.

“My father died.”

“You’re kidding.”

“He died in the morning of a heart attack. I’m trying to get a ticket back home tomorrow or the day after.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“I don’t know. Probably three weeks. I have to use my remaining vacation time. I won’t be able to travel with you to Tōno next month.”

“Don’t worry about that. I wish I could go back to Canada with you.”

“I know you can’t do that. You have your health stuff to deal with and Ian is coming over.”

“If you’re flying through Narita, I can meet you if you have time between planes. How are you?”

“After crying in the shower for an hour, I’ve been playing computer games all night.”

“I wish I was with you.”

“Just having you to talk to helps.”

When we get off the phone, I feel useless. But he’s right. With my needing to start the antiretrovirals, which Ian will bring with him next week, there’s no way I can accompany him back to Canada.

Somehow, while being separated over five thousand miles by continents and oceans, I’m going to have to find a way to support Mike through this at the same time as dealing with whatever the medications might throw my way.

That night I call Mike again before I go to sleep. And I call him the next morning, and in the afternoon. We talk again that night, and the next day I meet him for a quick lunch during his layover at Narita.

“I love you,” I say just before he has to go to the departure gate.

“I love you, too,” he says before disappearing beyond the security check and immigration doors.
As I stare at the closed door, I know if it wasn’t for my health I would be on the other side of those doors. I would be going to Canada with him.

Alone on my way back from the airport, I panic. As irrational as the thought may be, I feel as if, somehow, I have brought death unexpectedly into Mike’s life.