

Ukiyo

by Donna Storey

It begins respectably enough.

My longtime colleague and friend, Yutaka Yamaguchi, invites me to dinner at one of Kyoto's oldest restaurants. We're celebrating. He's published his second Tanizaki volume, I just got tenure. Along the way I lost a husband, too. Work kept me so frantic this past year it took a month to notice he'd moved out.

My goal this summer, I tell Yutaka, is to rediscover pleasure. Not in books or dreams—I've had plenty of that—but in something I can savor, something I can hold in my hand. The real thing.

For the moment I've found it. We have a table on the terrace to catch the river breeze. The evening sky stretches over us, a bolt of violet silk fading to silver. Young waiters murmur excuses as they bring course after course: slices of sea bream and fluffy, snow-white conger sailing on a miniature boat of ice, eggplant and broiled river eel, wisps of ivory-colored noodles in chilled soy broth.

Yutaka pours more cold saké into my cup, a small work of art in itself with frothy air bubbles suspended like jewels in the depths of the thick glass. "What other pleasures shall we rediscover tonight? We're in the right part of town for it."

"I don't know. How about one of those image clubs where I can play company president and screw my 'secretary' on the desk? Or maybe a soapland. How much would it cost to have two or three naked woman soap me up with their bodies?" The saké is clearly taking effect.

He laughs.

“Gion is for men,” I remind him. “Rich men.”

“Perhaps, but foreign women are the ‘third sex.’ Legend has it you possess magic powers.”

It’s true enough my status as honorary male has come in handy in my profession, but I never considered matters of the flesh. I feel a surge of warmth between my thighs as if a cock is dangling there, thick and florid. The sensation is oddly exciting.

“No magic I know can turn me into a gentleman profligate. Not even for one night.”

Yutaka smiles.

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We drift through the canyons of the pleasure district. Signs for bars and clubs twine up dark glass buildings like neon ivy. Two college boys hold up a friend, his body sagging like martyred Saint Sebastian, his chin glistening with vomit. A gray-haired man and a young woman in an office lady’s uniform hurry down a side street toward a blinking lavender sign for a rent-by-the-hour hotel.

Suddenly the sky shrinks and blushes. I’m inside a tiny room. Everything is red, the ceiling, the floor, the banquettes, the leather-upholstered bar. Only the mirrors on the walls lend a silvery glint to the infinite reflections of red. A man in a shirtsleeves with a loosened tie sits at a table near the entrance, his face ruddy with drink. Two young women, one thin and feline, the other with a round, luminous face, lounge on either side of him.

It’s a hostess bar, the classic choice for the evening’s “second party”—if I were a man.

A handsome middle-aged woman in kimono walks out from behind the bar to greet us. Yutaka introduces me as his colleague from a prominent American university. Her eyes flicker with new respect. In an instant I've changed from foreign girlfriend into a member of that inscrutable subspecies—the third sex.

Bowing, she gestures to an empty table. A tuxedoed waiter brings out a tray with ice, mineral water, and a bottle of Chivas wearing a silver necklace on its glass shoulders printed with the name "Yamaguchi."

The moon-faced woman slinks over from the other table and introduces herself as Kazumi. Her modest silk dress only accentuates her curves. I've glimpsed my share of female flesh in the public baths here, but never anything so lush. In spite of myself, I imagine her kneeling before one of those low faucets, her heavy breasts dangling like cones of white wisteria tinted dark rose at the tips.

I blink and swallow hard.

As Kazumi busies herself mixing us whisky-and-waters, she chides Yutaka for not visiting her in so many months. Who else can recommend good books to her? Then she turns her sloe eyes to me, the honorable American professor. How young I look for a lady of such marvelous accomplishment; how perfectly my summer dress becomes my fair complexion. Her low, husky voice makes my skin tingle as if I'm being stroked with a piece of velvet. It's a long time since I've been courted. I admire her skill, but I don't believe a word she says. Even though I'm not the one paying.

My eyes wander to the next table where the slender, cat-like hostess is doing something strange. She is touching herself—first her ears, then her eyes, nostrils, mouth—and counting. "Eight," she says, tracing a small, coy circle where her dress creases in her lap. She

pauses, eyes narrowed, as if struggling against the urge to pleasure herself then and there, but she shifts her weight to one haunch and trails her finger around to the cleft of her ass.

“Nine.” I hear the word *ana*: hole, orifice.

If I were that man, I think, I’d touch her now.
But he only stares, his face flushing scarlet.

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Back out on the street, we float through the summer night. The sky is black satin, embroidered with points of silver thread. Eleven-thirty and it’s still warm, so warm it’s hard to tell where the night air ends and my body begins.

“That hostess was lying through her teeth,” I tease Yutaka. “Only a man would be fool enough to believe it.”

“Carolyn, you’re resisting.”

“Maybe a pink salon would do the trick? Some throbbing music, a quick handjob from a stranger in the dark?” To my surprise, I’m half-serious. I’ve always wondered about those places, with the flashing photo galleries of women in tawdry lingerie and the gangster barkers calling out to men’s crudest, most desperate desires.

“It’s a bit early for such extreme measures.” Yutaka claps me on the shoulder. “I think we need another drink. A little liquid courage?”

He leads me down a narrow side street. Glass and neon turn to weathered lattice doors illuminated by plump red lanterns. The oily, bittersweet fragrance yakitori hangs in the air. As we move deeper into the maze of alleyways, even the walls vanish. In a haze of

cigarette smoke, we pass gaming parlors, noodle stands, and tiny pharmacies hawking vitality drinks and condoms for every blood type. The stylish young women of Gion proper have suddenly grown older, their bodies thickened by childbirth, their smiles flashing gold. The men, grizzled and bent over mahjong tables, might have been frozen in place for fifty years. A final turn and Yutaka ducks under a blue curtain into a tiny bar, no different from its neighbors.

"Irasshaimase!" The aproned proprietess glances up from the low wooden bar. Her harried expression melts into genuine pleasure. *"Yamaguchi sensei. Ohisashiburi desu ne!"*

Her smile enfolds me, pulls me in. Any friend of Yutaka's is a friend of hers.

All six seats at the bar are occupied by middle-aged salarymen, some grinning, others soulful depending on number of drinks they've consumed, but there's space in a tatami alcove tucked beside the bar. The mama-san sets a plate of cold soybean pods between us and returns with two tall glasses of chuhai, a cocktail of sweet potato liquor that goes down as easy as lemonade.

I catch myself studying my friend across the table: lean, high cheek bones; fine, leather-grained lines around his eyes; elegant fingers, the color of old parchment. Catholic girl that I am, it's no stretch to make him into a confessor after a *chuhai* or two.

"Everyone thinks it's easy being an academic. You teach a few classes a week, have the summers off. What a joke. I haven't had a break from work since I started grad school. Jason never got it."

Yutaka murmurs that his wife, too, can be less than understanding at times. We're talking in English, the natural language of complaint.

Of course it only got worse when Jason's dot-com company went

belly-up. I was at the computer all day and most of the night, racing to finish the revisions of my book so I could have my contract in hand for the tenure committee. At first I scheduled regular breaks in the evening to be with him, but if I tried to get romantic, he'd snarl something about being tired. Then, when I was back at work, he'd creep into the study and start massaging my shoulders. I'd shrug his hands away—I had no time for games--and he'd go off to mope. But one day last fall he didn't go away. He only pressed down harder, kneading my muscles with brisk, defiant strokes. I was surprised how good it felt. After a minute or two, I closed my eyes and relaxed into it. Soon I felt a hand moving down my chest, undoing the top buttons of my shirt.

I asked him what he was doing. As if I didn't know.

Hush, he murmured into my neck. He pulled my shirt down over my shoulders and yanked up my camisole. The cool air licked my nipples.

Open your eyes, he said. Watch me play with your tits.

I winced, but did as I was told, gazing down at his big tanned hands squeezing my flesh. They looked foreign—a stranger's hands—but, oddly enough, I liked that. My chest was already speckled with flowery pink blotches of arousal.

Does the Japanese scholar like to have her nipples pinched?

I bit back a moan.

I think you do. Look at the way you're rocking your hips. Is it possible Madame Professor might have other things on her mind right now than work?

I glanced at the computer. The lines of text trembled and blurred.

Let me help you out of these pants, Professor.

I tilted my ass up to make it easier for him. Leaving my jeans and panties dangling around one ankle, he slid his hands between my knees and spread my legs wide, then wider still until they hung over the sides of the chair. He started to strum my clit, that much he could still do just right, and I bucked against his hand, whimpering as my tender asshole rubbed against the scratchy fabric of the chair seat.

Jason clicked his tongue. My, my, what would the tenure committee think if they saw you now, squirming around in your own pussy juice?

Fuck me.

I'm sorry, I didn't hear you, Professor. Let's have a nice loud voice so the students napping in the back row can hear.

Fuck me, you bastard. Forget the kids in back row, my shouting probably woke the neighbors two blocks away.

Jason reached down and fumbled with his zipper. His cock sprang out, an angry red baton. He lifted me to my feet and positioned me against the horizontal filing cabinet. We often used to do it standing up in the early days, me on tiptoe, Jason crouching a bit to get it in. I loved the sensation of his dick moving in and out, pressing up against my clit. I felt like I was flying. This time was different, though. Rougher. The denim of his jeans chafed against my tender pubes and each thrust knocked my ass cheeks against the cabinet drawer. We weren't making love, he was punishing me, spanking me with a chilly, rattling metal hand, but I wasn't a helpless little girl, I was fighting back, grinding into him, soaring up higher, a witch on her broomstick. I came before he did, shrieking sweet victory.

It was the last time he ever touched me.

Will I ever have sex again?

“You’re a very attractive woman, Carolyn.”

I jump guiltily, but Yutaka’s face holds nothing but mild concern. I must have been drifting off, mumbling to myself in drunken reverie. Ukiyo, the floating world, that’s what they call it in Japan. Dreams and sex and sorrow all mixed up together. If I did say it all out loud, Yutaka’s friend enough to forget in the morning.

I lean toward him. “You see, Yu-kun, it’s not working. I’m still a woman. Even if I just want a little comfort, the warmth of another body beside me, I have to find the right guy who loves and respects me and fits it at the department’s wine and cheese parties. I have to follow the goddam rules.”

“There are no rules here,” Yutaka whispers back. His eyes twinkle.

I know a dare when I hear one. There it is again, that strange, tugging warmth between my legs. I go to smooth my skirt, but stop, suddenly, afraid of what I will find.

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A cell phone call and a taxi ride later, we’re sitting on cushions in a well-appointed zashiki. Yutaka sips cold saké. I nurse a glass of barley tea. The place doesn’t look like a brothel. We could be guests in any traditional inn with tasteful pretensions, except for the fact my heart is pounding in my throat.

The shoji door opens with a whisper. A young woman kneels on the glossy straw matting and bows low, first to me, then Yutaka.

She is lovely.

“This young lady will perform a traditional dance for us,” Yutaka explains. “Her name is Ohisa.”

I bite back a smile. Ohisa is the name of a character in a Tanizaki novel, an old man’s doll-like mistress, who, even in 1928, was a relic of the past. We’ve both published articles on her, mine a feminist reading of her submissive behavior as theater, masking a deeper rebellion. In private, on lazy afternoons, I’m less politically correct. I sometimes pretend I’m spying on her and the old man as he forces her to act out arcane sexual practices from erotic prints; beneath her dainty protests, I know she enjoys it.

And now she sits before us in the flesh.

The wizened grandma in the corner strikes up a geisha love song on her samisen. Ohisa rises to her feet. By some trick of the hand, her red sash slithers to the tatami, a gaudy, sleepy snake. Her summer kimono follows, pooling at her feet in ripples of midnight blue cotton and morning glories. What’s left: Ohisa in a robe of nearly transparent silk that hugs her slender hips, her small round breasts. The nipples, a pale tender pink, poke through the thin cloth.

This is no ordinary dance.

My face grows hot, my hands throb and twitch in my lap. Has it finally happened? Am I seeing with a man’s eyes?

I reach into my bag and pull out my sketchpad, full of amateur renderings of a fox shrine tucked beside a tofu shop, a corner of the iris garden at the Heian Shrine. I draw quickly, the curves of her buttock and shoulder, a faint shading of aureola. The kind of sexy picture a voyeur who thinks he has talent might dash off as a souvenir. But I also see what few men would in the proud tilt of her

chin, the precision of her gestures. Ohisa—or whatever her real name is—is an artist.

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When the dance is over, Yutaka stands, flashes me a smile and disappears. The samisen player leaves, too, but not before she removes the screen in the corner to reveal a futon, the top quilt folded back in invitation. A small brigade of sex toys stands ready by the pillow, all for a lady's pleasure. Images flash into my head, cartoon obscenities. Ohisa trussed up in the dildo harness, her vein-brocaded rubber tool bobbing with each wanton thrust. Or myself, the mad professor, leering over her supine form, a vibrator wand buzzing in each hand.

I catch Ohisa's eye. We both look away. Right now this room is a foreign land to us both.

Flustered, I push the drawing toward her. My offering for putting up with Yutaka's absurd joke.

Ohisa studies the picture. She looks up at me again. Then she smiles.

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It is Ohisa's idea to pose for me. She vamps, makes silly faces. We giggle like girls at a slumber party. I find, to my surprise, I'm having a very good time. Of course for her it might be nothing more than an act, a canny reading of a novice customer's mood. She's a professional woman. Like me.

At last she kneels on the bed with her back to me, her head turned in profile. Connoisseurs claim no vision is more erotic: the contrast of pale, slender neck and rich black hair.

It's my best sketch yet.

"Very nice," she murmurs.

It is now I allow myself one indulgence. I touch her. Lightly on the shoulder, then again on her cool, smooth hair. I mean to stop here--and give her what I hope is an easy night's work--but for what she does. She sighs. A sound of such melancholy yearning, I feel it in my own body, an ache like hunger, but lower. Suddenly I want to comfort her, give her something, even if it's selfish. I wrap my arms around her and pull her back against me. She doesn't resist.

"May I touch your breasts?" My voice is strange, deeper.

"Please," she whispers. Her chest rises in quick, shallow breaths.

In the cups of my palms, her skin is padded satin. I circle the nipples with my fingertips, feel tiny goose bumps rise. Once, as if by accident, I brush the stiffened tips.

She sighs again. The sound makes my fingers sing like electric wire. I understand it now, how a man can get so hot and bothered just by touching a woman.

My hand skates down the curve of her belly.

"May I" I want to say "play with your pussy," but the proper words escape me.

She seems to understand. She parts the robe, drops her legs open.

The hair down there is slightly damp as if she's fresh from a bath.

"How do you make yourself feel good when you're alone?" I'm

fumbling for words, absurdly polite. “Teach me. Please.”

Obediently she guides my finger to a soft hollow just to the right of her springy little clit. As I strum, I flick her nipple with the pad of my thumb, the way I do when I masturbate. She moans. I drink it all in, the slurpy kiss of finger on pussy, the spice-and-seawater smell of her. Or is it me? Rubbing her in her secret place is enough to make my own cunt drool like an old drunk. My skirt is hiked up to my waist and I’m pushing myself against her ass and she squirms back and we’re riding together on a wet spot as wide as the ocean, floating in that place where only sex can take you. No rules. No boundaries. Only pleasure.

Suddenly Ohisa’s body goes rigid. “*Iku, iku wa.*” The Japanese don’t come, they “go,” but I need no translation as she sways in my embrace, mewling and shuddering. I hold her until her breath is even and soft.

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The curbside door of the taxi opens as if by magic. I slide in, lean back, glide through the summer night. The whine of an *enka* ballad drifts from the radio.

Heedless of the white-gloved driver, I bring my fingers to my nose. In novels and floating world prints the journey from pleasure back to ordinary life is the time of contemplation. The lies I’ll tell Yutaka. The way I’ll remember her pussy, soft as wet rose petals, when I bring myself off later in my bed. A touch of teenage-boy glee—*I made a girl come!*— though I know I didn’t touch Ohisa in the way that counts.

I take a long, slow breath. A woman’s pleasure. The perfume those libertines of olden days ruined their fortunes to possess. I have it right here in my hand. The real thing.

