

Relativity

by Mark Pritchard

Although he was an American, Dean liked to take baths.

He did it the Japanese way. You were supposed to fill the tub with hot water, then squat on the bathroom floor and clean yourself thoroughly using the shower hose, before stepping clean into the tub. The bathtub, full of steaming hot water, was to his immediate left; the toilet, directly in front. Somehow there was a sink wedged in between the toilet and the tub, and a small floor area by the door. There he squatted, one elbow braced on the tub edge, and washed himself.

When he finished, he put himself into the hot water. Japanese tubs, at least the kind in these prefab apartment bathrooms, were deep, but short. You could sit cross-legged in an awkward way; Dean's legs were short enough. God knows what his friend John did -- John who bragged of actually taking a bath in his apartment with Keiko, his Japanese girlfriend.

Dean had a Japanese girlfriend, too -- or at least one had been designated for him. Her name was Seiko, and she worked side by side with Keiko in a bank. This pairing of him and Seiko had happened more or less automatically once he'd gotten to know John, who was teaching at the same English conversation school. John had a lover, the lover had a friend; it was imperative that the friend, Seiko, not be left out.

Dean and Seiko had been introduced to each other at the samba festival at the Wonder Mall. John brought him there only a few weeks after Dean's arrival in Japan. John brought it up by saying casually, "There's some kind of samba thing down at the Wonder Mall if you want to go," and then on the way over, "Did I tell you my girlfriend might be there?" before meeting the two young women, who had obviously come there to meet them.

When they were introduced, Seiko said "Hi," loudly, and vigorously shook hands, determined not to play the shy one. She was Dean's size, about 24, and had a long sheaf of dark brown hair,

waved in a fashionable perm. The four of them spent the afternoon in the outdoor plaza watching different groups of Japanese youths do approximations of South American dance, and parted promptly at 5:00. On the way back to the neighborhood where they both lived, John said, "She doesn't have a boyfriend."

"Oh, really," Dean said. "Somehow I got the idea that that was the point of the afternoon."

"I think she liked you," John went on. "Pretty good looking, don't you think?"

"Sure," Dean agreed. "She's beautiful."

"Beautiful hair," John pointed out. "Nice legs, I'll bet."

"Right. Well, what's next?" asked Dean. He felt obliged to let John show off his expertise, acquired in a stay of 18 months. "There is something that's next, right?"

"You call her up," John explained. "You go out on double dates with me and Keiko. In a few weeks you can kiss her, but not in public, never in front of a bunch of people, because it's too embarrassing, you know. Especially from a gaijin, a foreigner, because people stare at us all the time anyway. By then you can tell if she's into it at all, and probably you can fuck her."

"Why 'probably'?" Dean asked.

John grimaced. "Well, probably, you know. It's what they expect from us. They think American men know all about sex, and since it's true, we can just take advantage of it. But then you should expect to go through a certain amount of subterfuge."

"Like what?"

"About her family, of course. She lives with her family, just like all good unmarried Japanese girls."

"Even now? They live with their parents? I thought they'd been to college."

"They have, but just because they have a degree and a job doesn't mean they're like American girls. It's considered shameful for a young woman to live by herself. So she has to be able to tell her parents she's with Keiko."

"And Keiko has to be able to say she's with Seiko. I get it."

"Just pretend it's 1958," John smiled blithely. "We are the men. They are the girls. They live with their parents and are Very Good Girls, but one-on-one it's no holds barred. Believe me, the first time I did it with Keiko, we went back to my apartment. She'd come by a couple of times before when we were on our way to something, a thing we had tickets for... And this time we didn't have tickets, we'd gone to see the cherry blossoms, and she took a seat on the tatami very demurely and asked something like, 'Do you have any brothers and sisters?'"

"Uh-huh, question number 14," Dean nodded, joking about the stock phrases their students always seemed to have on hand.

"I just kissed her, and she kissed back as she had in the past, and then I just said, 'Take off your clothes.'"

"Subtle."

"And she did it -- started out very shy, right, but never paused. After a few times she just dropped all that shamefaced stuff and now we just do it."

"How long did it take for her to drop the shyness?"

"Well, a couple of times."

"You mean after you'd done it several times in the following weeks?"

"Not weeks -- maybe three."

"And this started when?" Dean shouted as the bus accelerated up the hill away from the center of town toward their neighborhood.

"About six months ago. But lately, well..." John shrugged and looked at the houses passing by.

"What?"

"It seems every time we get together, Seiko is there. She just started working in Keiko's department a few months ago and now they're always together."

"You mean Keiko's using it as an excuse not to sleep with you?"

"No, but I think she feels responsible for Seiko. Like if Seiko's not getting any, it's bad manners for her to do it."

"And that's where I come in," Dean concluded.

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, man," John retorted, sounding like he was only half joking. "Pretend it's 1958."

The four of them proceeded to go on three double dates. They went bowling; they played billiards. Finally, they went out of town on the train, an hour away to a locally famous shrine town.

After walking around the shrine and the adjacent park for an hour and eating a picnic lunch Keiko and Seiko had lugged along -- an impressive picnic, with seven or eight different dishes, each in its plastic container -- John and Keiko had gone off into the trees for a couple of hours while Dean gamely flirted with Seiko.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?" he asked.

"Yes, I have one older sister and one little sister," she answered dutifully. "We are each three years apart."

"What does your older sister do?"

"Do?"

"What's her job?"

"She is married," Seiko smiled. "And my little sister attends at Tohoku University."

"What's she studying?"

"English," Seiko said. She had been leaning on her elbow, but sat up abruptly and began braiding her long chestnut hair. "She is the President of the English Club."

"The English Club?"

"Mmm. We join many clubs in college -- Surfing Club, Good Citizen Club. I was in Hiking Club and Physics Club."

"Physics! Were you studying Physics?"

"No, it's just my interest. My father is professor of Physics. He teaches me at home. With experiments."

"Really? What kind of experiments?" He suddenly realized that now, with her hands busy in her hair, was the perfect time to kiss her. But mindful of John's admonition against displays of affection that were too public (God knows where John and Keiko were doing it at this moment), he looked over at the other picnickers. Someone in another party had noticed his presence, and several were staring

unabashedly back at him. He quickly turned back to Seiko, and then she finished braiding and the moment was past.

"We have a pool table," she said. "Perhaps it's rare in Japan to have a pool table at home, but it was a present from the American colleague of my father. So my father taught me vectors by making balls collide." She clashed her hands together and apart.

"I see."

"Then we studied aircraft and rocket science with small models."

"Wow," Dean laughed. "So what kind of experiments did you do in the Physics Club in college?"

Seiko laughed so loudly that Dean was startled. Then she politely covered her mouth with her hand but could not stop laughing.

"That must have been a great experiment," Dean commented, which only made her laugh harder.

"Physics Club activities were mostly study and social, not experimental," she said finally. She began matching plastic lids to their containers. "Because it seemed to us that winter days were long, we joked that we were like a space traveler in Einstein's theory of relativity. Time was passing without our knowing of it. We felt young while the world grew old." She smiled wryly. "Perhaps we were naive."

"You know, I never really understood that theory," Dean said, leaning closer to her.

"Relativity? Mm, I can explain."

She put a plastic container on one side of the blanket and picked up a pencil. "Here is the earth and here is your rocket ship," she began.

For a few moments they were close to each other on the blanket, Seiko moving bowls and pencils in sweeping arcs. Then, so subtly he was unaware of it, she gradually pulled away and straightened up. One minute later, John and Keiko appeared from an unexpected direction. "We lost our way," Keiko explained, giggling.

John looked pleasantly stunned. "You know what happened out there?" he asked on the train home. The women were sitting a few rows away in the only other available seat. Over the noise of the

train, Dean could hear Seiko repeating his words, "That must have been a great experiment," and the two of them cracking up.

"We found a spot away from everyone, up on the hill," John said, "and we lie down and she's sucking me. Then she plops down on her back and says 'Now fuck me.' I love that."

"You taught her to say it, though," Dean pointed out.

"I still love it. And then I find out I didn't bring any rubbers. Did I ever tell you this -- when we first started sleeping together she asked me about AIDS -- they're all terrified of foreigners because of AIDS -- so I promised always to do it with a condom and I made her promise to always to it with a condom. And now I don't have any, and she's saying 'Please fuck me.'"

"Uh huh," Dean said, turning red. He could hardly claim not to enjoy the titillating details of John's sex life, but it also embarrassed him and made him feel slightly ashamed of himself, like getting tipsy on wine you thought was cheap. "So what did you do then, Pygmalion?"

"I fucked her in the ass." Even John felt compelled to whisper this.

"Oh yes?" Dean said mildly, turning a deeper red. "How did you manage that?"

John bent down conspiratorially and totally unnecessarily. "It was her idea."

"Oh, bullshit!" Dean exclaimed. A couple of young boys standing near them broke into gales of laughter and started punching each other on the arm. "'Oh bullshit,'" they repeated to each other.

John looked up at them, then turned back to Dean. "It's true."

"Well," Dean said. He chewed over a plausible reaction to John's story. "What am I supposed to say, 'Way to go'?"

"How are things between you and Seiko?" John asked.

"Oh, I almost kissed her there in the park, but didn't quite make it."

"'Almost kissed her'! This is like the fifth date, isn't it?"

"Third, actually."

“What do you think this is, church camp? Nobody's chaperoning you. You better get a move on,” John urged.

“Uh-huh.”

“Just go for it,” John insisted.

“Why?” Dean said, feeling annoyed. “What if I don't? Maybe she's just not attracted to me, did you ever think of that?”

John shrugged. “What does that have to do with it? This isn't some college town, the chicks aren't liberated. They just fuck. They don't know that they're not supposed to like it.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Dean demanded. “You think that's what feminism amounts to, that girls learn not to like sex? Where the hell did you go to college, Mississippi?”

John rolled his eyes. “Look, you're trying to apply your American liberal values to a situation where they're totally out of place, that's all. It's like missionaries coming in and making the natives wear clothes, it's pointless.” John looked over toward their companions. “Maybe you're just looking for an excuse not to do it.”

“Why should I look for excuses?”

“You tell me. But don't get pissed at me, I'm just trying to do you a favor.”

“I'm pissed at you because of your stupid comment.”

“Okay, go ahead, wise guy, theorize. Tell me why it's ‘not nice’ to take somebody who wants it. See where it gets you,” John said, throwing up his hands. “I'm through helping you.”

“Fine,” Dean said huffily. He looked over at the women; they were glancing down at the floor. Seiko looked at him for a moment and then down again. We've embarrassed them by arguing in public, Dean guessed. When they got back to the city, they all said lame goodbyes to one another, and after the girls had gone off toward their connecting train, he and John left the station through separate exits.

Dean headed over to the river, against the flow of shoppers who were heading to the station on their way home, carrying paper bags from the Wonder Mall. A bright red Coca-Cola truck was making its way toward the station too. As Dean passed it, he saw to his

amazement that a huge television screen, playing Coca-Cola commercials, made up one entire side of the truck. Speakers blared the soundtrack climaxing in the national Coca-Cola slogan, which like many slogans was in ersatz English: "I Feel Coke."

When he got to the river, Dean turned onto the shoreline jogging path. Annoying that John was so smug and presumptuous, pushing Seiko on him; but Seiko was attractive, and if she really wanted to have sex, it was probably ridiculous to let his scruples -- which he really had adopted during his college years -- stand in the way. But what was John really suggesting? What did "forcing" sex on someone amount to, anyway? He had no real idea, all Dean's experience had been so consensual: kisses in living rooms leading into sex without even talking about it, effortless as sliding down a gentle hill on a sled, you risked nothing and you could see exactly where you were going. No hint of "conquest" or "scoring" or other foreign concepts he'd only read about, never discussed in a locker room or wherever you talked about it with other "men"...

Suddenly everything seemed to have quotation marks around it. He felt like he was losing the difference between reality and experiences he'd only read about in magazines. John was right, he was over-theorizing. But he didn't have any experience, at least not enough of the right kind of experience, to take the place of the theories.

Anxiety enveloped Dean like a net. He started running down the path along the river to escape the feeling of being trapped in his head. He pounded his feet on the dirt, he deliberately whooshed his breath in and out, in order to distract himself. But he only succeeded in becoming more self-conscious because people were staring at him, a foreigner in blue jeans, pounding along while carrying a plastic bag with picnic leftovers.

He ran out of breath after a hundred yards, stopped under a bridge and sat down against a concrete abutment. Looking out across the river, he saw the same Coca-Cola truck -- or maybe there was more than one, a frightening idea -- go blaring down the road on the other shore. The sun had set, and in the darkening light, the

gigantic picture on the truck's side was easily visible -- high school girls in uniform, young women in kimono, aerobic dancers, secretaries, all drinking and feeling Coke. As if in agreement, a huge neon Coke sign atop a building a couple of miles away suddenly exploded to life. And then neon signs atop all the buildings around came on rapidly -- the Japanese all having somehow agreed on the right time to turn on electric signs. Dean burst out laughing at the thought that there was a consensus, in this society, even on that. A trio of junior high boys running by in green school sweat suits -- they were training in uniform even on Saturday -- were startled by Dean's outburst and one of them actually fell over. Laughing and apologizing, Dean got up to help him, but the boys ran away in panic.

The next day was Monday, and their schedules were such that he didn't run into John all day. Usually after work on Monday he went over to John's to watch "Major League Baseball Hour," in which an edited version of a stateside game was shown, but instead Dean stayed home and tried without much success to tune in something audible on the small shortwave radio he'd bought. At first it had been fun to try to catch the English-language broadcasts of Radio Pyongyang or Radio Australia, but after a while it just got too difficult. Without John to hang out with, the evening stretched out endlessly. He wrote two letters, became hungry and went out to the Seven Eleven for some microwave pizza (it was possible in Japan, even hard to avoid sometimes, to adopt a lifestyle typical of an American college student).

If he couldn't hang out with John, he felt he would certainly like to call on Seiko, for the companionship even if he had no intention of being pushed into sleeping with her. But he didn't even have her phone number -- the dates had always been arranged through John and Keiko -- and he had no idea what to say, in the few words of Japanese he possessed, to whomever answered the phone.

John was in the teacher's room at school Tuesday morning when Dean came in just before noon. He was reading the *International Herald Tribune* with his feet up on his desk. "Look at this," John

said. "Some guy in Paris did an art project, he spent a whole year going up to people and asking them how much money they made. And he kept getting in trouble, people kept punching him. Finally he asked some Mafia guy and the guy's bodyguards put him in the hospital."

"I guess it's really true about how rude Parisians are," Dean replied. John seemed affable, not worried about the argument on the train. "So," Dean said vaguely.

John cleared his throat. "Me and Keiko are going out of town this weekend."

Dean was surprised. It was one thing to do it on a date, it was another to pretend you could actually be open about it. "You're going out of town together?" he echoed.

"It's a club," John grinned.

"What club? The Gaijin Boyfriend Club?"

"No, her old college hiking club. They go twice a year. They're going to spend the night at a youth hostel."

"Where do you come in?"

"Oh, I'll tag along. Apparently lots of people use it as a way to get their girlfriends off away from their parents."

"Sounds like a lot of trouble to go to just to have sex," Dean said.

"It's not just to have sex, it's to sleep together for once. You realize we've never even spent the night together? How can we, when she lives with her parents?"

"They don't let you sleep together in youth hostels," Dean pointed out. "At least not the ones I stayed at in Europe. I'm not really sure, but I think that applies to youth hostels everywhere."

"Look, cut the sour grapes," John said with a big smile. "You don't want to get involved with Seiko, fine. But don't begrudge me my fun."

"Okay, so don't rub my nose in it."

Ten second pause.

"Actually I'm supposed to invite you," John said. "Seiko's coming too."

"Oh, really," Dean answered. So he was supposed to accept the whole thing at face value -- the improbable trip, the idea that "Seiko is coming too" and what that temptation was supposed to represent to Dean -- all because John wanted to get laid.

Yet he was also afraid of missing the opportunity, and the remainder of his two-year contract stretched before him.

"Okay," Dean said, as if preparing to take some medicine, "Tell me the plan."

On Saturday morning, they met at the train station and took a train south across the rice fields to the mountains. Keiko and Seiko and the rest of the "club" had gone up the night before. The tracks began to follow a river up a rapidly narrowing valley. John and Dean got off at a small town and went outside the train station to wait for a bus. Sitting on a bench in the sun, the two foreigners were a point of interest for every passer-by.

"Tell me again," Dean said, "what kind of place this is we're going to."

"It's some kind of resort. Not what we would mean by the word; more like a tourist recreation area. One of these mountains is a famous extinct volcano and there are some famous lakes that are supposed to have many colors. I'm not quite sure what that means. All I could get from Keiko is that they were called the Five-Colored Lakes."

"So it's like a national park," Dean suggested.

"I don't know. Their idea of recreation is different from ours. Have you seen a tour group yet? They go around on buses and when they stop, a guide leads them around, and she's carrying this little flag, and your group follows your flag. There's no branching off to do what you want, you have to stay with the group. Or you don't have to, of course, but they just do. By the way, I'll tell you something funny. In Japanese, they use the same word for 'extinct volcano' and 'transvestite'."

"Really? That's pretty funny. What's the word?"

"I forget. But it's true."

The bus arrived, and they got on and rode for forty-five minutes. It was after noon when they arrived at their stop, a large roadside shelter with a number of bus maps and schedules, as if sightseers came from many directions to this point. Then John led them up the road another hundred meters and turned down a side road. "Have you been here before?" Dean asked.

"No," John confessed. "But the directions were pretty clear. I'm looking for an inn called Hamamatsu -- that's a name with really common characters, 'beach' and 'pine tree' -- and there it is right there," John said triumphantly, pointing to a weathered plastic sign hanging in front of a nondescript house.

They went into the foyer. It was evident that the place was some kind of public lodging, because of the signs tacked about and the rack of slippers for guests.

"Are you sure this is a youth hostel?" Dean asked. "I didn't see one of those logos."

"Oh, it's something," John said vaguely. He shouted something in Japanese. "That means 'Is anybody home?'"

An old woman dressed in muted grey and blue colors came out of a side door and gestured, with bows and smiles, that they might enter. John told her his name.

"Hai, hai," she nodded, clearly expecting no other foreigners. They left their shoes in the entryway and, flapping about in slippers, were shown upstairs to an empty room. "The girls have cleared the way for us," John said.

"But where are their things?" Dean asked.

"Oh, they're around here somewhere."

"John," Dean said, "This is just a big setup, isn't it? This isn't a youth hostel, it's some kind of hotel."

"Well, sure, it's just a regular inn, a minshuku."

"And this bullshit about the hiking club... "

"No, no, that's not bullshit. They really did come here with their hiking club. That's where they are now, they're hiking. And the hiking club is staying at the youth hostel up the road a ways. You

were right, you can't sleep together at a hostel. So we're staying here."

"Then what did you need me for?" Dean demanded. "Why not just rent the room and fuck your girlfriend and leave me out of it?"

"Look, you don't get it," John said roughly. "Keiko and Seiko are friends, they have to do everything together. If Keiko goes off without her, it's a breach in their friendship or something. Also it makes Seiko look bad."

"Then why don't you just fuck both of them?" Dean said.

"They don't do that. Listen, I'm tired of your bitching and your wimpy compunctions about sex. I've set this whole thing up and you happen to benefit from it. Now if for some stupid reason you don't like the idea, then you can play cards with her or teach her English or watch TV all night, I don't care. But if Keiko comes in here with me and you don't let Seiko in there, you know what happens? She loses face. She'll probably commit suicide."

"That's ridiculous," Dean said.

"What do you know about it? You don't know how these people think. All weekend long their buddies have seen them giggling about their American boyfriends, and now if it turns out Keiko has one and Seiko doesn't, Seiko's going to look like an idiot. She's going to be the butt of the whole joke. But sure, go along with your middle-class morality! Be a jerk."

"This doesn't even have anything to do with me," Dean cried.

"Keep your voice down."

"You arranged this whole thing without my knowledge. Now you tell me that it's up to me to keep up appearances."

"What is your problem?" John pleaded, throwing up his hands. "Seiko is a fox! She's a beautiful girl and all she wants to do is fuck an American. And don't act so innocent. Don't tell me you didn't realize what I was up to when you agreed to come along on this."

Dean sat down on a floor pillow and sighed. "Okay. I did."

"So what are you complaining about? God, why did you come to Japan at all if you're not going to take advantage of the culture?"

Dean found nothing to say to that.

"You're not so fucking superior," John said.

Dean looked up at him. "You're not so nice, either, are you?"

They stared at each other for a moment. "So fucking what," John said with finality. "I'm going downstairs to wash up. Then we'll go to meet them." He stood looking down at Dean for a moment longer, then turned and left the room.

Dean followed John downstairs to a washroom where they washed their faces side by side at a long sink with three faucets. Then they went to the foyer, put their shoes on, and walked through the village and back to the road. On the other side, down a shady lane with orchards on both sides, they found the youth hostel. Tagging along after John was like trudging along after his mother after receiving a scolding, but Dean found no alternative.

They found the group, twelve girls and four boys, and went to lunch at a nearby restaurant. Dean was startled at the number of 24-year-old people who still got together to unite their old college club, but on second thought, he was grateful that the group was so large; it would be unnecessary for them to be on stage all the time, as foreigners in Japan so often were.

After lunch they proceeded to the Five-Colored Lakes. They walked through a parking lot full of buses, then through an area of booths selling food and souvenirs, before reaching the crowded shores of the lake. Dean saw the tour groups that John had predicted, scores of people plodding cheerfully behind an erect young female guide.

Seiko was walking beside Dean. "They are all from the same company," she said, indicating one of the tour groups.

"What do you mean? All the people on the tour?"

"Yes, they are colleagues. It's 'company travel'."

"You mean they're taking a trip with their co-workers?" Dean asked. "Why?"

Seiko looked perplexed. "It's company travel. It's for recreation and, eh, getting along with all."

"Do you have company travel at your bank?"

"Yes, two times a year. We went skiing in last February."

"I see." Ahead of him, John was walking with Keiko. They were holding hands, which surprised Dean, and he thought he might be expected to do so too. He glanced at Seiko, who unexpectedly scampered ahead.

"Take a picture," she suggested. She thrust her camera into the hands of someone else in the group, and motioned for Dean to join her and John and Keiko. They maneuvered into position, and as they brushed each other, John hissed at Dean, "Put your arm around her."

Dean obediently did so, and they posed with the lake in the background, the photographer exclaiming, "Say 'cheezu'!"

* * *

That night after dinner, as a raucous party at the youth hostel broke up, Seiko and Keiko excused themselves and John drew Dean aside. "They're going upstairs to get their things," John said. "When they come back down, I'll go off with Keiko. We'll take the room next to the one they put you and me in this morning. Now don't wimp out."

"Sure, Coach," Dean said sarcastically.

"I forgot to mention one thing," John went on. "You probably should ask her, of course, but just about all Japanese girls are on the pill."

"I see. Anything else?"

"Yeah, do whatever you want. Go for it. This is Babes in Toyland. God, look at this," he said as Dean turned away, "you're blushing. Listen, you aren't a virgin, are you? Do you know what you're getting into?"

"Aw, shut up," Dean said. He reviewed his plans to leave alone early the next morning. John could say he was sick, and the hell with him.

Keiko and Seiko came downstairs as the rest of the group at the table drifted away, and John got up to meet Keiko. They left, Keiko wagging her fingers, bye-bye. Seiko sat down at the table across from Dean and smiled.

Dean sighed. "Seiko," he said, "Can I ask you a personal question? Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No, I don't," she said promptly. "Do you have a girlfriend?"

"No, I don't."

"Not in America?"

"No," he answered. "I broke up with my girlfriend, which is one reason I wanted to leave America and come to Japan."

"Were you very sad?" she asked, looking solemn.

"Yes," he said. He realized that this was not quite the conversation that led into seduction. "So," he said, "would you like to take a walk?"

They strolled slowly down the road toward the lake. The night made Dean feel safer. It was just him and this pretty, apparently amenable woman, with sex on her agenda, according to John. Dean's doubt and irritation began to evaporate; he decided to stop worrying why he was doing this. Attraction was enough for tonight.

The lakeshore looked deserted. A moon was rising behind the mountain, it was picturesque. They walked on the path along the shore into deep shadow and stood for a moment. Then they looked at each other and awkwardly kissed. Dean felt tentative, he experimentally flicked Seiko's lips with his tongue. She replied in kind. He pushed his tongue a little deeper; she copied his movement. He took her face in his hands and drew it close, taking her lower lip between his teeth and biting gently. She did the same for his upper lip.

They pulled apart and Seiko looked down, her face plunged into shadow. Dean stared at her. Was this how it would be, her responding to each of his initiatives in kind, waiting patiently for him to take the next step, showing little reaction or encouragement? Or perhaps the lakeside was still too public for her.

He took her hand and led her wordlessly away from the lake, through the parking lot and up the road to his inn. Entering, he expected somehow to hear John and Keiko's cries of lust rending the night air, but all was silent. Even in his room, which was empty as John had promised, Dean couldn't hear any sounds from next door.

The innkeeper had laid out two futons for himself and John, or whoever. Dean wondered what John had said to the woman to procure another room; probably it was no big deal; he told himself to stop thinking about John.

Seiko was standing patiently in the middle of the room. He drew her to him and kissed her again. Was she more responsive, was she acting nervous? He ran his right hand through her hair as they stood there; that, at least, was something he'd been dying to do, feel that gorgeous mane. But the action seemed to confuse her, she drew away. Maybe she didn't want her hair messed up.

"Seiko, I've always thought your hair is very beautiful," Dean explained.

She grinned in embarrassment and said "Thank you," self-consciously sweeping it back over her shoulders. "I think you are beautiful too," she said unexpectedly.

"Thank you," Dean said. All right, now. He kissed her again and then began unbuttoning her blouse. She permitted it and in a moment was standing shirtless in front of him. He remembered what John had told him. Sitting down on the futon, he said, "Take your pants off."

She did so efficiently, and came over in her panties to him. He reached up for her hand and drew her down and they lay kissing for awhile. She still wasn't acting turned on, but he didn't know what to expect. John hadn't briefed him on this; maybe John didn't think it was important for one's partner to be turned on. Maybe he just did it to them in some cheerfully brutal American way no matter how they responded.

They stopped kissing and Dean looked at Seiko. He had an overwhelming urge to talk to her, just so she'd say something that would tell him she was more than just willing. He also was wondering what she thought of the situation.

"Well, here we are," he said.

"Mm," she responded neutrally.

He decided to take a gently kidding approach. "Can I ask you a question? You're a good Japanese girl, aren't you?"

She chuckled. "Are you asking, have I done this before?"

"No, no," Dean said hurriedly.

"And you?"

"That's not what I mean," he protested. Now that he was this close, he was afraid of blowing it. "I mean, are you doing what you want by being here with me?"

"What I want?" she echoed. She looked at him with an enigmatic expression, perhaps of disbelief.

"Because -- because this whole situation seems kind of contrived to me," he blurted. "Do you know what that means?"

"Like being actors. You mean we are acting our roles."

"Yes, that's right," he said with relief.

She glanced down, smiling. "It's Japanese way," she said. "Many times, we do something that is appropriate, even if it is not our desire. Buddhist people say we have a fate. We must live our role. I'm sorry, it's hard for me to explain in English."

"I understand," he said. "So do you want to be here with me?"

She looked up at him and nodded slowly. "I like you. And to be frank, I am curious about Americans."

He laughed. "I guess I'm kind of curious, too."

"And now, maybe, I'll show you one of our Physics Club experiments." She began to unbutton his shirt.

The whole time they made love, Dean was wondering, what's happening? How much of this does she desire? Is she really just doing it because Keiko does it? Is the way she's touching me something that John taught Keiko? Maybe what's really happening is that John's fucking me. John teaches Keiko who tells Seiko who does it to me. Seems like a lot of trouble to go to.

Only the next morning, when they awoke to a cloudy, cool fall day, when Seiko moved next to him and embraced him and said, "I feel very good and happy," did he really believe in her. They remained next to each other in bed, she put her hand down to feel his growing erection, and then rolled on top of him and slid it inside her in one motion. He held her shoulders as she rocked quickly to an orgasm and collapsed on top of him.

Finally they left the room. Now there were other appearances to keep up; now that he wanted to touch her in public and hold her hand, he couldn't. John and Keiko were already downstairs finishing breakfast. Dean submitted to John's grin and pointed comments about how healthy and hale the fall air was. Keiko said something about how they should take a trip in a few weeks to see the fall leaves in Kanazawa.

They rejoined the group and went back to the city on the bus and train all together. Dean now took pleasure in sitting next to Seiko, with John and Keiko several rows away; the two of them talked quietly, and Dean enjoyed it hugely when she went to sleep for a while on his shoulder, notwithstanding the stares of everyone else in the car. At the station, they surprised John by jumping into a taxi. They kissed deliriously one more time under the gaze of the taxi driver. Once he had dropped off Seiko, it seemed to Dean that the taxi driver was highly offended, but he didn't care.

Once again it was Tuesday before he saw John at the office. John came into the teacher's room while Dean was on the phone talking to another teacher at the school's head office in another city. When he hung up he asked John a few questions about a project the head office had asked him to do.

Finally John said, "Look, if you want to talk to me about last weekend, go ahead."

Dean sat still a moment. "What do you want?" he asked. "A certificate of appreciation? The lurid details?"

John smiled wickedly. "I'll probably hear it all from Keiko anyway."

Dean glared at him for a moment. "You know, I'll tell you one thing. While we were doing it, all I was wondering was how much of what she was doing was something you make Keiko do."

John laughed shortly. "Interesting idea," he said. He stood up and turned toward the window, looking out across the street. "You know what they say about being cultural missionaries. Maybe those techniques will spread throughout Japan."

"Never mind," Dean said wearily. "Just let me ask you one thing. I understand the whole concept of Keiko and Seiko being friends, and

Seiko not being left out, and that that was the point of this whole thing, but what I want to know is, why do you have to be so goddamn crude? You could have accomplished what you did without putting all that pressure on me and calling me a wimp and being so fucking nasty. Why do you do that? Can't you just be a little discreet?"

For the first time, John looked genuinely angry. "Oh, I'm crude. Who do you think you are, Miss Manners? You fuck in some kind of snob way and not like everybody else? I've said it before, I think you're caught up in a bunch of effete values that have nothing to do with living here. It's the biggest bullshit in the world for you to act like you're more considerate to women and all that crap, when you stick it in the same hole as everybody else."

"You probably stayed here because you can't handle women in the U.S.," Dean shouted. "They don't put up with your caveman act, so you come here and take advantage of people who don't know the difference."

"Oh, excuse me. Your shit don't stink, is that it? I'll bet while you were fucking, you were wondering how to come without getting her cunt wet. Yeah, sure, you're really nice, as if anybody gives a fuck. See where it gets you."

"You said that before. It got me plenty," Dean said, then stopped, appalled at himself. "Fuck, here I am arguing with you. Forget it," he said, getting up.

"Oh, you lowered yourself, big fucking deal," John yelled after him. "You admitted that you got some pussy. Way to go, Charlie! Way to go! Next time take some pictures, hah?"

In the outer office, Dean could tell that the secretary, Reiko, had heard every word. She looked extremely shocked as he walked out, and that was without understanding the colloquialisms. "Sorry Reiko," Dean muttered.

"That's okay," she said automatically. Fortunately none of Dean's students had arrived.

Dean went down to the coffee shop on the first floor and drank coffee for a few minutes. At this time of the day, the shop was full of

female shoppers on their way to and from stores and the train station, across the street. The noise of their chatter was impressive. Women in Japanese cities used their shopping expeditions as dates with their friends, since once the children and their husbands came home in the evening, they were rooted in the kitchen.

Another thing just like America in the Fifties. That comparison had come from John; Dean suddenly realized just how many of his impressions of Japan had come from John. Feeling revulsion, he decided he no longer wanted to absorb John's cultural interpretations. After that argument, it seemed unlikely anyway. There would be more opportunity for learning about things on his own.

But if John were right -- if the way to succeed in Japan was to act like the whole place was your plaything, to be exploited indefinitely -- Dean felt he'd never survive to the end of his job contract. He found prospect of playing the ugly American, simply because he could, revolting.

On the other hand, there was Seiko. She would make the year pleasant. But what would happen when the year was over? Could he leave for the States completely unencumbered, discarding her in the same way John would eventually discard Keiko? Or did their relationship -- until now, he hadn't really thought about it as such, again imitating John more than he'd realized -- really have a future? Could he fall in love with Seiko?

The more he thought about it, the more he realized he had unconsciously imitated John all along, despite his protestations, which he now realized amounted only to a difference in style. They did each want the same thing, a casual fuck -- otherwise he wouldn't have undertaken the sex at all without thinking of the implications. Suppose this girl expected to marry him and move back to the U.S. Why had he gone to bed with Seiko, other than that she was attractive and willing? He no longer could remember.

The coffee sloshed in his stomach as he stood and headed for the elevators. Riding up, he dreaded any further confrontation with John, but when he walked into the office, all he found was a nervous

Reiko. "You're late," she observed in a light voice that failed to hide her anxiety.

He headed straight for the classroom where his Advanced Beginner class was waiting -- several adults from various white-collar professions, including a doctor, an assistant museum director, a graphic designer, and a high school gym teacher, plus one precocious teenager.

"Well, what's new?" Dean asked them. They were the "advanced beginners" by virtue of their ability to respond to that colloquial question. After they had gamely told each other about recent events in their lives, Dean gave an edited version of his trip to the Five-Colored Lakes. Then he said, "I saw a group that was on 'company travel.' Do you go on company travel? Mr. Shizumi?" he nodded.

"Last year, members of my company went to Ozawa resort and enjoyed hot baths."

"My colleagues and I visited Tokyo Disneyland," put in Ms. Kibata, the museum official.

"My departo went to Hong Kong," boasted the doctor. Everyone was duly impressed.

"Do all 'members' of the department go on company travel?" Dean asked, using their word.

They looked at each other briefly, seemingly consulting by telepathy. "Yes, everyone goes," Mr. Shizumi said.

"Let's say I don't want to go," Dean argued. "Perhaps I don't want to go to the place the company has chosen. I've already been there."

"Perhaps everyone cannot agree on place, so the company must choose," Ms. Kibata explained.

"Well, say, you have special tickets. Madonna is giving a concert and the tickets were very expensive. You want to see Madonna. But your department is going to Ozawa for company travel. What do you do?"

Everyone smiled and shook their heads. "Very difficult," Mr. Obote grinned.

"What would you do?" Dean pressed.

"Maybe I give Madonna tickets to my friend, and I go with co-workers," Mr. Obote said. The other students nodded.

"Why?" Dean asked.

"Harmony is very important," Mr. Obote said. "Maybe more important than my want."

"If we don't go, my boss may think I am ungrateful," added Ms. Kibata.

"Mizumi, how about you?" Dean asked hopefully, turning to the teenager. "Do you do something you don't want to, just for harmony?"

Mizumi blushed. Sometimes, if she felt put on the spot, she simply refused to comment. Dean looked at her searchingly.

She looked down, then up. "I like Madonna," she answered, "but my boss would not understand. He wants me to go with others. He makes a plan for all, so all can enjoy. Maybe I will enjoy with others -- " she searched briefly for the phrase in a notebook -- "*as much as* enjoying Madonna."

The other students beamed at Mizumi's oration. A couple even applauded.

"Very good," Mr. Shizumi declared.

"So even if you don't want to do something, you do it if someone has made a plan for you?" Dean asked.

"Maybe so," Mr. Obote nodded. "It's Japanese way."

