

HARAJUKU SUNDAY

By S. Michael Choi

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For Makiko

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Part I

I.

It can begin anywhere. Soren comes up to me on the Keihin-Tohoku line home from work on a Thursday evening and at first I don't know who he is. All I notice is a figure in my peripheral vision standing up out of one of the traincar seats, approaching me, and in clear unaccented American English saying, "Ritchie? Ritchie, is that you?" Surprised by this unexpected greeting, I look over and realize that I do recognize the person. His name is...Soren. Right. Soren Soutern. Three weeks ago, he had put an advertisement on Tokyo Craigslist, offering to trade a box of English-language books for a packet of non-Japanese cigarettes. It's not easy for expats to get paperbacks and moreover, the whole ad had been funny, reading 'deliver me a pack of non-Japanese cigarettes and you have an entire cardboard box of recent books.' With all these earnest 'English lessons for 2500 yen' or 'Japanese girl seeks English language partner for foreign exchange' entries crowding up the listserv, the slightly sarcastic, seemingly ironic ad had to be investigated. Moreover, I had had, by chance, a whole carton of duty-free Sobranies lying around the apartment that I had picked up last visit stateside and never found anyone to gift to. So I called up the listed phone number, noted the unexpected address, and went later that day with the cigarettes and a tacky American-flag lighter added in purely as a bonus, and returned home that evening with a good-sized box of both cheap paperbacks and some quality college lit titles all in decent condition, definitely a good deal.

That day I had answered the advertisement, I had also found myself unexpectedly recognizing the other person. You see, when Soren opened the door to his Roppongi Hills apartment, the individual, perhaps in my mind's eye some spoiled university student living with his parents, maybe even a Japanese (they take on unusual English names sometimes; they think it's cool) is actually on the contrary a tallish, good-looking twenty-something foreigner, sandy-haired and trim, who I had definitely seen before in the Tokyo foreigner scene. Soren and I had actually not talked before. But he had a way of standing out from the crowd: wearing his always completely fashionable clothes, he was invariably seen with this unbelievably beautiful and tall Japanese girl, a gazelle-like figure who looked like she had stepped from the pages of a fashion magazine and carried herself knowing it. Soren and I had nodded to each other a few times at social events, the 'foreigner nod' you give to other foreigners when living abroad, but had never really spoken. It was part of the "rules of cool," of course; you knew dozens of people you never deigned to even exchange names with.

If Soren does not come up to me on the train now, three weeks after our trade of books for cigarettes, perhaps we are destined never to enter each other's lives. We will go our separate ways in the city of Tokyo, population twenty million, attend a handful of parties or get-togethers in common, perpetually recognize each other solely by appearance, and then move on to whatever it is we will do in the years to come. But Soren does come up to me, he does make that approach despite it being a minor violation of the rules of cool, and I do not call him out on it. Rather, I greet him friendly and ask how the cigarettes are working out.

"Fine, fine. But actually Ritchie, I'm kinda looking for something else."

"Uh, sure, what do you need?"

"Do you know where I can score some drugs?"

At this response, I feel like groaning aloud. This is exactly how quickly the twenty-four-year old gets to the point, and my first reaction is to wonder if I give off some sort of drug-vibe--if I don't in some strange way communicate without being aware of it, "hey, I'm clearly a lowlife drug dealer. Come up to me if you want to score." But that's absurd. I know for a fact that to all outside appearances I am the utterly conventional-looking twenty-one year old Tokyo foreigner expat that I am in truth. And if anything, I look a hundred times more conventional than your average expat because I try to avoid the strange Tokyo street fashions that some expats seem to adopt after living here for some time--usually only with indifferent success. At twenty-two, I'm rather indifferently conventional, a sort of Mugi and occasional Uniqlo-shopper, casually fashionable without being too perfectly in the now. Yet truth be told: I'm also sort of oddly wide-ranging in my choice of acquaintances. I've been in Japan for fourteen months now, and through a willingness to know all sorts of random people you encounter in the foreign scene, I can, unfortunately, actually get Soren what he wants. I'm not a drug dealer. I'm really not. But it's true, forty minutes later, I'm at Roppongi Hills climbing up the stairs to the main plaza with two pills of ecstasy—MDMA—hidden in an orange pill container in my messenger bag and a flicker of a smirk on my face. I'm smirking because it's Japan, because I am, well, officially, supplying drugs, and because the place is just ridiculous.

Soren's building, Roppongi Hills, you see, only just then finished, is the talk of all Tokyo. Built by the "visionary" Minoru Mori, the miniature "city within a city" Cosmopolitan Living Concept was this fantastically gigantic 'megaproject' that destroyed several entire neighborhoods to put in multi-billion dollar pod-shaped 'arcologies' of luxury housing, a hotel, entertainment facilities, and offices. From your sixteen thousand U.S. dollar a month apartment, you can take a number of escalators and moving sidewalks to your Merrill Lynch finance job, stop briefly at the organic fourth-floor supermarket, and then be sped up twenty stories to your private health club

overlooking some of the most stunning vantage points of Tokyo, all without ever having to expose yourself to all the pollution, street crime, and assorted other highly risky dangers of Japan's capital. So this is why I had earlier thought that the young man at the other end of the phone line had to be somebody living with his parents. What twenty-something could afford such a place? But as it is, Soren's father, a New York City commercial real estate and securities tycoon, purchased the apartment in the Towers straight out for use by his son and probably to recycle some cash whose origins weren't entirely clear. It's a sort of a ridiculously great sort of pad for a young guy to have, and though I'm not from a desperately poor background, I'm without being obvious about it, all eyes. Technically I should be intimidated. Technically, I should be so awed by the sheer amount of power that Soren's wealth implies that I should quake in my New Balance sneakers and run back to my downscale Ueno pad. But with the blase confidence inspired by the sort of division-less equality of expat life, I walk into Soren's apartment and plop down on his black leather couch where he had served me orange juice three weeks prior. I lean my head back to feel the full blast of the apartment's air-conditioning that I remembered as quite effective.

"So you got the stuff?" Soren asks, nervously.

"Yeah, dude. Got it all." I spill out the contents of the medicine vial onto his palm. He looks at the pills suspiciously.

"Where'd you get 'em from? How do you know that guy?"

"Relax. Friend of a friend named Big-T, he just mixed them in with some prescription pills last trip back from New York City."

"And how long has your friend known Big-T?"

"Only like two years, but he knows somebody who knew T from back home since elementary school. They're totally legit."

The answer seems to satisfy Soren. Looking almost plaintive, he gulps down a pill of E with a glass of ice water.

"Wow, in the middle of the day?" I say. "Oh my god. I thought you were going to use them at some party or something."

"Been too long, man--I really needed to score, it's just been that kind of week. What do I owe you?"

"Nothing, dude. I don't actually want to become a drug dealer—they're all yours on the house."

"Cool... thanks. I mean really."

We sit around his place waiting for the Ecstasy to kick in, and leaning back, I take in the interior decoration. There's this curious temporary feel about the decor, as if Soren's not quite psychologically deciding to settle in: lots of white space on the walls where art prints or posters should go, entire sections of wall-space completely empty. Pop Chinese kitsch—a little Chairman Mao figurine, a poster of revolutionary Chinese farm workers complete with inscrutable slogan—doesn't really fill up the place, but I do catch sight of the SubZero refrigerator, the Bang & Olufsen touch-pad stereo—I knew these things from magazine ads; it's my first time seeing the actual items.

"So, just curious man," I say, "you said when we swapped for the paperbacks that you recognized me. Was this true? You really know who I am? What do you know about me?"

"Yeah, dude, sure. I definitely seen you around the place Ritchie. You're like...well, one of the hipsters always hanging out, into some or another artistic b.s."

I laugh. "Really? I thought I was rather boring actually."

"No, dude man. Wasn't there some hot little blonde number hanging around you all the time? She your girlfriend?"

"Nah, she's just a friend. We were sitting next to each other on the same plane when we came over, and then we kept running into each other, so we keep in touch. But you know, I don't think we feel the slightest bit of any sort of chemistry with each other." I ask him in turn about his apparent girlfriend—the unbelievable modelesque "gazelle" girl that some of us have been talking over endlessly--but Soren smiles sheepishly.

"Actually Ayako and I are not really boyfriend-girlfriend either. She's still moping over some ex of hers, won't let me sleep with her."

"Oh my god," I say, "You realize you just disappointed the entire male gaijin population of Tokyo? Everyone thinks that girl is unbelievable."

"Yeah, she's something isn't she?"

"She's like this girl out of like some mists and samurai novel—not your typical tiny little J-cutie, all fluff, but somebody like...Tale of Genji, samurai and cherry blossoms or something. Ancient Japan. 'Cuz she's tall."

"Yeah well, she's just letting me sleep in bed with her, not a move further."

"That's it?"

"Yeah, Ritchie. I like, try to touch her when we're in bed, but she just moves away."

"That's really sad," I say laughing. "You share a bed with a girl night after night, but you don't actually get any play."

We sit there silently for a moment, thoughtful, and the afternoon atmosphere seems filled with a sense of foreboding. The immensity of the city sprawl hundreds of meters below the floor-to-ceiling windows is silent and unyielding, and for a moment one might almost characterize it as strangely oppressive. The sun is appreciably low in the sky and one can begin to see the blinking patterns of light that mark buildings on commercial drives as the changeover from daytime to evening begins. Then, the silence is suddenly interrupted by the shrill ring of the telephone, which Soren, sitting near to, reaches over and picks up. It's friends of his; they want to go for a ride. Soren sounds almost sheepish as he answers a series of rapid-fire questions, something to do with a BMW Z3 wrapped around a telephone pole, or actually just punched against a highway barrier, "no engine damage, dude, no engine damage--just sheet metal!" that's all, really. There's some mutual agreement being hammered out, and then he puts down the phone.

"Uh, Ritchie, you free tonight?"

"Yeah, what's up?"

"People hanging out. Let's go!" So we hustle, and take the elevator down and walk over to Roppongi-dori, where there's a white Infiniti SUV backing up traffic. Five minutes later, we're taking the onramp to the elevated expressways that shoot between the skyscrapers. I realize I recognize the driver, Takashi, too, a young Japanese dude who seems to know all the foreigners, everywhere, all the time. I say hello and he smiles back and everyone's already talking excitedly to each other. "Like we should totally share life stories and all because that's all we really have, each other," says somebody's dizzy chick. I put on sunglasses; I grin.

Yes, yes, yes, yes, it's because cars are rare, because the trains run so regularly and everything is so convenient that getting to drive around the city is an experience of itself. It's exactly that part of Tokyo near the river engineering works, where suddenly there's just sky on the break of evening that makes you feel that you've made the right decision and this is where you ought to be, the center of the universe, the cutting edge of the cutting edge. Paris? NYC? Those places are so last year! On a day of clouds or rain, Tokyo washes a clean, and everywhere, in everything large and small, the palpable influence of the foreign aesthetic, the Japan feel, infiltrates everything, so that there's art and potential in all things, a brief glance from a girl on the sidewalk, the seemingly flimsy architecture. You're at once in an ancient, ancient foreign country and this new plastic fantastically new metropolis, the center of so much action and desire. That evening, we end up in Aoyama.

"You know the bassist for Quality of Light?"

"Yeah. We went to college together. He's a good guy."

"No way, that's way cool."

Soren knows a hole-in-the-wall bar on a side street, someplace you'd only ever find out about if somebody took you there. We enter the place, and for the first few moments are just staring around at things: the entire interior is molded in white 60s plastic, with corresponding day-glo fixtures and a colorful, retro circle motif, lime and orange, repeated on the bar stools, wall decorations, and lights. *Cibo Matto* is blaring from wall-mounted speakers. "Man, this place is melting," somebody says, and we're laughing at something, though we don't know what. The hostess comes over and seats us at a booth.

"So, Takashi," I say, finding myself next to him, "what's been going on in your world?"

"Ahh, not much, Ritchie, same old same old. So many people coming, so many people leaving, my head spinning, you know?"

"Yeah, I understand the feeling exactly. Still, there are a few people who seem to just thrive here, hey?"

"Yeah, I guess a few. But then sometimes I feel when new kids come in, I just getting older."

"Don't worry, dude, you look about twenty years old."

"That's what people say. But Ritchie, I thirty now! So old!"

I chit-chat with one of the girls, the one who wants life stories, but she seems a bit spaced-out, just being like "wow" to everything and not seeming to quite grasp any responses, and then as a group we talk about where the most authentic Mexican food is in the city, though we all agree it's impossible to really get the stuff anywhere in Japan. This is a topic of massive importance to the foreigners of Tokyo, the subject of thousands of conversations and bitter feuds, but tonight Takashi's antsiness does not disappear, and then in what seems all of a sudden but is probably nothing of the sort, he gets a phone call and talks excitedly to whoever it is on the other end, and then has to leave, promises to meet up later that evening, and the girls, including the spacey one, decide they'd like to go for a spin as well, and suddenly all of a sudden it's back to just Soren and me, staring into our drinks as rock music blares. I'm not actually all that close to Takashi, I know him just as the 'foreigner-lover English speaker' but Soren apparently has some kind of prior relationship, and maybe as a side-effect of the Ecstasy, he seems troubled by some sort of social diss, some emotional intensification even if there's no basis in logic. Or maybe Soren actually does take it harder than most; maybe

he projects unruffled confidence so habitually it makes him actually much more full of doubt inside.

"Man, I think I'm about to have a breakdown."

"No, bad idea, about what? Just take a deep breath and calm down."

"No, I mean really man. I'm about to go." Suddenly he gets up and stalks off to the bathroom. When he comes back, there's the faint odor of vomit coming from him. "You wouldn't understand. There's some other stuff going on, and it's like I'm never going to get free of it. Anyway...that felt good," he says, and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "Just the drugs talking."

"Are you okay now?"

"Let me see."

A few minutes pass, and we hang out in the bar thinking our private thoughts. Things seem to settle, but then all over again, Soren feels claustrophobic—the walls are closing in, fast—and much worse this time. He needs to go; he really needs to get out of here. "C'mon Ritchie, help me out here man." We pay the check and leave. I look for a cab. Soren's pupils are dilated.

"It's kind of a waste," I say, after he tells me he wants to take a Prozac to shut down the MDMA. "Don't you know how hard it is to score good stuff?" But then, he is sweating and pale, maybe even green. He disappears again, this time for a convenient alley, and then returns. "Ok, let's get the cab."

This time, one is right there. We hustle the driver; we ride back to Roppongi, and then double-time all the way back up to Soren's twentieth-floor apartment. "Okay, okay," he says, after he sweeps dozens of vials out of the bathroom medicine cabinet, and finally—finally—finally—finds that Prozac, which he dry-swallows, gulping it down. Both of us collapse onto his black leather coach where we had started the evening, but with the view now of the city fully night.

"So you feel better now?"

"A thousand percent," he says, with eyes closed, and shudders. He's subdued, but it's only been a matter of seconds since he swallowed the Prozac, far too early for the SSRI to have had any impact. It's true what they say, I think, it is all in the mind.

"Were we sitting near an overpass, and then I went and took a piss at one point?"

"Right before we got the cab."

"Okay good, I was starting to think I hallucinated that."

For a few hot moments, I feel a flash of hatred. It's one thing if those who have more than you have greater strength of character. But I would never let myself get into this sort of state. As quickly as it comes, though, the feeling passes; I recognize the absurdity of the situation; I'm not going to get caught up in it. It's actually much later before I consider the possibility that the whole breakdown is an internal, drug-induced mind-game on Soren's part, a sort of emotional trick. He's lonely; he wants a male friend. This is his way of establishing grounds for me not to feel inferior in his presence, as so many others did.

In this way, begins Soren's and my friendship, a brief, breathless, high-octane, flighty sort of relationship that fuels itself precisely because so many come and go in that city. That summer I meet Soren, I have already been in Japan for more than an entire year, and probably met upwards of two hundred people, most of whom I end up meeting only once or twice again if ever. Such is the young gaijin expat reality. My Tokyo days, however, date from the beginning of knowing Soren, for it is only through him that the chaos and churn begin to fall into a recognizable pattern, and hence, one that can be exploited. You go to people's parties, but do not throw your own. You ask for favors, but manage to delay recompense. You mooch and prevail, because there is a brand new person to meet just around the corner or landing at Narita, and they are too dazed and confused at the rush of oncoming sensations, they are so young and naive and so easily fooled, all the intensely foreign and new exotic surroundings dazzling their senses, to understand what is happening, and they accept anything and everything as merely part of the experience. So long as you are relentlessly recognized as being in the know, the process is entirely sustainable. In this way Tokyo yields up to me. If my new engagement of the city is actually the one that is truly naïve and trivial, if I accept this external system as my own without proper skepticism, then this is only something inevitable, a completely foreseeable counter-season to the austerity of a working-class childhood and a university life on scholarship. In Japan, with Soren, with his flowing stream of acquaintances and connections, the onrushing flood-tide of people streaming through the city, and finally, yet most certainly not unimportantly, the apartment that becomes the solar center of a constellation of activity for a free-spending crowd of young undisciplined expats, I am reborn into a priest of restlessness and a prophet of those without code.

"Oh don't invite Julian, he's such a weirdo!" Soren is on his cell phone. "What?" A pause. "Oh it's his film that came out?" Pause. "Well I guess he has to be there then."

I sit at the kitchen counter, suppressing a grin and nursing a Fuzzy Navel. After his call ends, Soren comes over.

"Isn't there some way to have a party for somebody but not actually invite them?"

"Yeah, I definitely think so. Especially if it's like a birthday party, then you know, you can like bring out a cake, and instead of the person blowing out the candles, everyone can just do it."

"Say, there's an idea!" Soren considers for a moment. "Seriously though, what else do you know about what's going on? I'd really like to keep a mile away from Julian, he's this guy who's gone all weird from living here too long."

"Well, there's this new guy at work, Brad, and I promised to show him around. He said he knew some people visiting and I can find out what's up."

"He cool?"

"California surfer. Lemme make a call."

"OK."

So, I make the call. We are, however, disappointed. Half-a-dozen text messages and voice calls streaming across the great Kanto plain later, it's clear there's already too much momentum forming for at least starting off with the indie filmmaker's night out that his artsy friends have assembled together. We could try to get something else started in Shibuya maybe, playing on the seeds of an existing trio looking to get more time in J-pop sugarhigh central, but clearly the best choice is to at least start off the evening at Lush, and then we see what happens from there.

"Oh well, at least I can stay in Roppongi tonight," says Soren, looking at the bright side of things. "Oh wait, dry cleaning." Soren looks over at his Chairman Mao clock. "Ahhh! It's gonna close. Ritchie, do me a favor?" He's already racing out the door.

"Wha?"

"I gotta go pick up my dry cleaning, so go meet Ayako in front of Almond's? You guys all go over to Lush together, and I'll meet you guys there." Almond's coffeeshop is on the way. Arriving at the intersection, I spot Ayako immediately. As I wrote, she's tall and extraordinarily beautiful, and when she looks and smiles, my knees weaken just for a moment: it's like a sun shining. But I don't betray it. I smile back, and raise my hand in casual greeting.

"Yo, Ayako!"

"Hey Ritchie. My friends coming fifu-teen minutes."

"No problem. So how are things with you?"

"Great. Have we decided what we going to do yet?"

"Well, it looks like there's some filmmaker who just released a film and people want to go to his thing first, but then after that, I think it's pretty open."

"Cool. I like movie!"

Ayako's friends show up almost immediately thereafter. While cute, they don't quite eclipse the shining supernova that is Ayako Ishibashi, J-girl goddess. One might suspect they are almost chosen by Ayako to frame and complement her looks, two retainers who don't outshine the queen. But, perhaps as a consequence of being more down to earth, they are friendly and cool and speak decent English, and in half Japanese, half-English, we muddle through some cheerful small-talk as we walk over to Lush and people already streaming in, the indie black-clad artsy people who already have a table, and some group of somebody's friends also arriving as we arrive just as my cell phone buzzes to announce an incoming text. "WHERE U AT?" It's Brad. "COME ON OVER," I text back. "LUSH ON ROPPOGI-DORI."

The August heat hangs heavy on the street, and tonight, girls in kimono and sunglasses clop down the sidewalk in their wooden sandals, geta, giving a cultural edge to the general street sleaze that prevails. I sit back and order a gin and tonic and the girls get frozen margaritas. From the next table over: "Are you hunting tonight?" "The predator always hunts." Laughter. Hands waving at arriving friends.

"So I worry about Soren these days," comments Ayako, perhaps a trifle wistfully.

"Oh yeah?"

"Like he get in car accident, maybe living too much stress in life, it's not good."

"I'm sure it's just a phase. City life is kinda intense, I guess."

"Somebody needs to take care Soren. Somebody who really cares him."

"I think you're a great influence."

My words, however, don't seem to have any impact. Ayako continues to look a wistful, and she toys with the umbrella in her tropical drink. Our attention is then drawn to the artsy table, with the arrival of the night's man of the hour, the filmmaker Julian Hara.

"Hey Julian!" "The maestro arrives!" "Welcome!" The artsy types with their ironic 1950s glasses and hipster dress shirts welcome their friend with glad cries being full of themselves and pleased.

"You wanna go and congratulate the filmmaker?" I whisper over to Ayako.

"Okay." She says. "Let's go after he settles down."

For the moment before we go over, I study this figure of local fame and my impressions are less than completely favorable. Julian's thin as a reed, with a sort of neurotic look to his appearance and sallow skin. His fashion sense in terms of the torso is dead on—completely stylized Japanese UNIQLO sleek, but there's something weird about the way his head is perched on the whole deal, an out-of-place, nerdy, sallow speckled complexion off-putting lego-head on top of a thin torso that's otherwise pure Roppongi hipster. It's almost as if he can't quite shake off the person he really is, that the head is the real Julian, still Canadian geek but exposure to Japan (girlfriend?) has educated his fashion sense to the point of an up-to-date wardrobe, so that the body is neat hipster. Wiry black hair and ectomorph's build complete the impression of an art-school loser.

I think Julian gives a tiny flinch when he notices Ayako and me walking over to him. (Or is it that everyone inside at Lush, actually, gives a little but real, detectable reaction when I walk in with J-goddess in tow...)

"So, Julian, congratulations on the release of your film. I'll have to get a copy from you."

"Um, thank you. Um, it's underlying aesthetic truth to e-e-essential entropy of um, things, vision of p-p-post-apocalyptic Tokyo, um, being in now, s-s-subterranean truths."

I look for a second at the film-maker with the strangely nerdy head spouting off. "Uh, okay. Well, sounds like I can't miss it then."

Ayako beams at the nervous Julian. "I'll definitely check it out."

"Um, thank you." And there's a moment of awkwardness and then that's that.

Brad, my new colleague, arrives next. Unfortunately, he's going to turn out to be one of those people who can't stand the country for some reason and will return home to Playa del Rey within three months, but tonight, he outdoes himself. He shows up with his promised friends and they turn out to be three hot girls and this backpacking girl from Australia he met about five hours ago. We all pull up chairs around our table and start chattering away, as our waitress brings another round of iced drinks, wet with condensation from the summer heat.

Brad's backpacking friend: "Hey, so everyone just has to wear a uniform while they're in school?"

"Yeah, it's just the way it is in this country."

"But it's Saturday."

"Yeah, but they think it's stylish and flattering so they wear it even on weekends. And some schools still have Saturday morning sessions."

"No way, that's far out. This country is weird!"

It is easy to get caught up in the excitement of a new arrival and of course, our own time in-country is at this point measured in months. The conversation can be truly endless: all the spectacle and all the phenomena and all the theories, and the impact of the mass media telling us What Japan Is in all those convoluted ways everyone has, those theories that everyone starts making up when nine months living abroad turns you into some sort of cross-cultural studies expert. Without even realizing it, an hour or two passes into the evening when I go to the bathroom and I notice that Soren's arrived in a fresh new shirt just pressed from the cleaners.

"So there I was with the little aspiring actress girl and we were both getting pretty drunk, and then Miki, remember Miki?" His audience eases in closer to hear the story. "Miki had always liked me, but then she started licking me on my other cheek, and I was like, okay." We smile. "Then all of a sudden, Takashi-he hadn't said a word all evening, he was just being grumpy, suddenly has this, like spasm, this freakout, and he says, 'Solen alleady habu girlfliend! Solen alleady habu girlfriend!' And he just looked exactly like this little angry Japanese general, this little Tojo getting all heated." General laughter erupts. "I couldn't control myself. I laughed out my drink onto the table."

"That's Takashi. He's our little white-trash Japanese."

"Aw shut up, you're Euro-trash French, Devra."

"That I am. That I am."

"I hate Japanese men. One time I was sitting there peacefully on the train and an old guy whipped out his penis and started masturbating in front of me."

A general cringe.

"If you ask around, every Western girl in her twenties who's been here at least three months, and I mean every single one, has been either groped or stalked or flashed by some Japanese perv at some point."

I feel the need to intervene. "Yeah, but it's the safest country in the world for women to walk around at night. You can't say that about New York or London."

"You just don't understand. It was disgusting. I don't care if I can walk around at night if I'm not safe on the train in broad daylight."

"What did the other passengers do?" pipes in an girl.

"Nothing. That's it! They just pretended not to see what was going on."

The males present nod their sympathies. There may, however, be the faintest of amused smiles flickering on their faces for the briefest of deniable moments.

"I think Japanese guys are all gay. Or at least eighty percent. Come on, how else do you explain those little handbags some of them carry? The salon hair-does?"

"Oh no," says two or three people. "You're reading it all wrong... European men also..."

Julian and Soren meet later that evening. It's at least two or three in the morning, right before the film-maker and some of his friends call it a night, and only the real hard-core Roppongi crowd is staying on, the regulars of GASPanick, the downmarket club of last resort. Julian calls Soren "boy wonder" or "boy band" which is unexpected, but the timing is perfect, and it's just so unexpected out of the shy, neurotic nerd that for two seconds we're staring at him in incredulity before we erupt in laughter, we do have to give him absolute credit for it, Soren's smirk notwithstanding. And anyway, it's just Tokyo in the summer, no one can really hold anything against anyone, not when you're young and well-dressed and beautiful, and in this Japan just this once. Groups coalesce, merge, drift apart, and rejoin throughout the small numbered hours, our cell phones buzzing, our texts tripping back and forth across the space of a few hundred yards or across the city. One of the girls for reasons known only to her makes me take a pair of sneakers to her friend in another club, and I oblige because she's cute and somebody I've known for a full year now, which by Tokyo standards makes us old friends. The main body ends up going to Vanilla: it's just so in this summer, and we drift in and out of GASPanick and the other more pure-play meat market clubs, and finally some people mosey over to the Wall Street that has the underground dance floor. I end up watching a soccer game at a bar (live, it's daytime in Europe) with a German girl before saying "Auf Wiedersehen" and putting her on the correct train, or maybe that's some other night, all of these summer Tokyo weekends blend together in a seamless, tipsy succession, so many nights of listless drinking, chit-chat, smoking cigarettes, clubbing, casual flirtation, tipsy bumping into each other on the dance floor, tipsy accidental hand on the girl. But no actually, it was definitely that night, just one of those high summer nights, after so many hours of clubbing almost deafened from the music, leaving 811 you are surprised at how the sun has already begun to rise, you can see the day has already begun, and you can see over there, Tokyo Tower, silent, uncommenting, still, in the summer sky already lightening to day.

II.

Summer draws to a close. The hot, miasmic subtropical air begins to retreat from over Kanto, hurried along by breezes that have blown in from the great Asian mainland. As if by a painter's brush, oranges and umbers, reds and browns begin to sweep across the islands of Japan, seen on television news reports in passing, the colors first touching the mountain tops and then creeping southwards and into the lowlands below. In the streets of Tokyo, there is a complementary change as the first light jackets begin to appear on the people, and the girls of Tokyo slowly, reluctantly, abandon their miniskirts and t-shirts for longer apparel. Ayako finally leaves Soren, their relationship unconsummated, her still wistful, him barely noticing. Soren gets caught up at work and has to put in longer hours, and then that fades away, we return to partying. We have one final summer party at Oarai Beach in Ibaraki and make some desultory plans to get something going out to Kyoto, but nothing ever comes of it.

As promised to Julian the filmmaker, I grab a copy of his film. Melanie, his girlfriend and one of the main artsy girls, gladly gives me a copy in her energetic promotion of all things cultural and artistic. I do not regret watching it. The film is about two hours long, but in its way riveting: starting with this existentialist opening (working class Japanese guy ("Daiichi") being forced out to ride motorcycle away from his small Hokkaido town after being framed for a crime, decrepit dirt-road bridge collapsing as metaphor for complete break with youth), the story follows the protagonist as he makes contact with and is slowly accepted by Tokyo gang. Tokyo gang is shown to being squeezed by economic pressures and a rival out-of-town gang moving in, ultimately leading to leader of Tokyo gang being killed. There's some esoteric exchange of public posturing/ritual insults with the other gang, and then young junior foreign (Australian) member of gang decides to go for kill against enemy leader in violation of yakuza code (and perhaps as positioning for leadership of gang). But in surprise twist, former girlfriend of the Tokyo gang's leader, herself member, turns on the young upstart, (out of national solidarity? protection of gangster code?) and the gang, now utterly without hope, reduced in number its forces turning in on itself, starts to run amok with the film in its jump-cut, blaring-rock music conclusion leaving you no doubt that they're all going to be wiped out, one-by-one.

It's such a bleak, pessimistic work. I walk around for a few days in a sort of daze. Even a second or third viewing later, I still get drained watching the thing, that's how perfectly tuned the work is. But despite my best efforts, Soren refuses to watch.

"Screw him, man, that guy's bad news."

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