

Kōrogi

On his second day in Japan, Cricket moved into the dormitory at Kansai Gakuin. The school had supplied a taxicab from the first night's hotel to the school, a sleek black Nissan that deposited him at the dormitory gate with his luggage before gliding away. The driver, Cricket noticed, had worn white cotton gloves as if to avoid contagion with the passengers. Now he was alone.

He looked around at the landscape, taking in the double row of ginkgo trees flanked by pounded earth, the high, shingled walls that seemed to hold in the very air of the place. The sun entered at the oblique angle of nine a.m., but a late-summer haze restricted it to dappled images on the far wall. No breeze stirred the foliage. The faintest scent of lemon came from the nearby buildings, which rose only a few stories before slanting into blue-slate roofs. Each element of the scene was natural enough, but together appeared stylized, Japanese. It was like the hotel last night, a Best Western knock-off that could have been plunked down in the middle of the American midwest except for one or two details that were off, such as the cloth slippers at the threshold, or the cramped dimensions of the room widened by room-service courtesy that bordered on the obsequious.

Hefting his new vinyl suitcase and battered typewriter case, he moved toward the entrance, marked by a wooden door with a leather pull instead of a knob. Before he could knock, an old woman in a severe gray skirt and white blouse swung open the door. Her head was small even for her short form, a tidy bun of black hair perched over her pinched features. She smiled and looked down at his feet. "Shoes...please," she said in halting English, pointing at the rack of slippers before the interior matting. Cricket understood and laboriously unlaced his American shoes, thinking he'd better buy some loafers. Slipping on a light blue pair embossed "KG," he padded after the old woman, who whirled around to introduce herself. "My name...Ogawa Tsuchiko. You--your name, please?"

"Cricket. Cricket Collins."

"Cricket, ah...English?"

"No." He corrected himself. "*Iie. Watashi wa Amerikan desu.*" He suspected it wasn't proper Japanese, but the only way he could improve was by trying. Since yesterday, he'd been cribbing from a ridiculous phrase-book which told tourists how to get to the railroad station and how to ask when the bus left. Now he availed himself of one of the book's more useful phrases: "*O-benjo wa, doko desu ka?*"

Ogawa-san broke into a surprised laugh. "Ah, speak very good...Japanese. *O-benjo!*" She led him down the hall, where he had his first confrontation with Japanese toilets, porcelain troughs set right into the tiled floor. She pointed to the sink and showed him the soap, which

gave off the same mild lemony odor he'd smelled outdoors. "Wash-ie," she pronounced. Then she turned on the faucet to show him what water was.

She was going to show him how to use the toilet, but he resisted with a firm "*Nai*." As he squatted precariously over the trough, shifting this way and that, he had a sudden vision of Ogawa-san pointing to the toilet paper and urging him, "Wipe-ie." Cricket had been in Japan just over a day, but he was already confronting the attitude that anyone who doesn't understand the language must also not know the function of simple objects.

Ogawa-san was waiting politely for him outside the bathroom. "Room now," she insisted, bent over by the weight of his book-heavy suitcase.

"I'll take that--uh, *watashi wa*...carry."

He tried to take the suitcase, but she shook her head. "*Iie, iie*." She was wiry and determined. They plodded down a long corridor with a magnificent wall-hanging at the end, a bold, black display of calligraphy on a field of gold. With its various fan-tailed limbs, it looked like an image of speed slowed to eternity. Near the end of the hall, Ogawa-san carefully lowered his suitcase onto the threshold and fished a key from her skirt pocket. "Open," she demonstrated, and Cricket nodded his head violently to prevent her from also demonstrating "close."

The room was narrow, but it had a raised bed, a molded fiber-board desk, and a long closet. It also had a wall-fan, which Ogawa-san demonstrated for him. "Off." She pressed a square red button.

"And 'on.'" He intercepted her words by pressing the green button himself, filling the room with a soft, whirring sound.

Ogawa-san clucked her tongue, expressing surprise that a *gaijin*, and a young *gaijin* at that, should understand the mysteries of an Oriental electric fan. "*Ikutsu desu ka? How...old?*"

Ikutsu happened to be one of the few words he understood, and he wished she hadn't translated for him, since he wanted to show her he knew what it meant. "*Ikutsu? Watashi wa ni-ju-ni*." Twenty-two. There was no Japanese he knew for "wise beyond my years," even if she got the joke, and he couldn't mime it, so he left it at that.

She nodded and pointed to the fan. "Fan. Off...ten o'clock." She mimed a person asleep. "Understand...you?"

"*Hai*." With a fixed smile, he ushered her out the door. He knew when he was being mothered, and he didn't like it.

In another moment, Ogawa-san was back again. "Towel. Showah now? You showah?"

Cricket never showered more than once a day, a ritual performed in the morning after a brief constitutional. He'd had no walk for two days, the lack of exercise contributing to his

edginess. Anyway, he'd already hastily showered and shaved at the airport hotel before being picked up. "Ah...*ato de*." Through some miracle of recall, he employed the Japanese phrase for "later."

But Ogawa-san was not so easily dissuaded. She held out the towel and pointed to his slippers, abandoned by the open door like shed animal skins. "Showah...now."

So Cricket followed her diminutive figure all the way to the tiled room down the hall, where he took his second shower of the day. Redolent of lemon soap, he padded back to his room in the blue-and-white *yukata* she had provided for him. This time he shut and locked the door.

Cricket already entertained doubts about visiting an unknown country to perform a function about which he knew little. His teaching experience was confined to some tutoring he'd done between his sophomore and junior years. But the guilt he felt was for his Japanese students, about his effect on them. Now he wondered about the effect Japan would have on *him*. "Oh, it'll just take an adjustment," he said to the *yukata* in the voice he used to reassure himself.

He unpacked his toilet kit, clothes, and books, placing every item in a neat little niche that seemed provided for the purpose. Despite its small size, the room turned out to be a marvel of built-in shelves and cupboards, and he spent some time putting all his possessions in order. The flat desk drawer held all his writing paraphernalia, from a package of putty-like typewriter-key cleaner to a bottle of White Out and a hundred sheets of bond paper. His red plastic Seiko travel-clock, made in Japan but bought in America to bring to Osaka, fit right on the window sill. The Agatha Christie novel, still unfinished, stood to the side of three short-story anthologies, Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, and a paperback dictionary. His clothing took up a pitifully small space, so he amused himself by suspending his socks and underwear from hangers. He had just sat down on his bed when he heard the doorknob turning.

Of course, the door was locked. He got up leisurely and walked over to the entrance. When he opened the door, he saw Ogawa-san's worried face. "No...lock, please." She made an "opening" gesture with a twist of one gnarled hand.

"*Hai*." It wasn't worth arguing about, though he'd have to stand up for his rights sooner or later. In any event, the purpose of Ogawa-san's return was innocuous. She had placed a black laquered tea tray by his door and wanted him to know it was there. In the white porcelain teapot was *o-cha*, the green tea that he hadn't quite gotten used to yet, but it was welcome at eleven o'clock. He finished one cup under surveillance and made a gesture of enjoyment. "*Yoi*. Good."

But Ogawa-san was still bothered by something. Pulling him slightly by the sleeve, she sat him down on the bed and explained when he had to eat his meals. "If no eat," she pointed at her breast, "please tell."

Cricket smiled and nodded, inwardly annoyed at another of his freedoms cut off. He'd intended to skip lunch most days, since he never ate much around noontime. He thought of

telling her that right then, but realized that he'd better make it to the first meal, at least. Time to look at shops and lay out a walking route later. Before she left him again, she led him to where the cafeteria was and reminded him twice when he was to come. "Twelve...not forget."

"*Hai, hai.*" He nodded vigorously to show comprehension, but the tolerant look on Ogawa-san's face showed she knew how absent-minded foreigners were. As if to support her assertion, when he returned to his room, he fell into a jet-lag doze for over an hour. Suddenly Ogawa-san was in his room, tapping him on the shoulder.

"You eat...please." He tried to shake off his haziness as she led him down the corridor towards the cafeteria. What bothered him most was that she obviously hadn't bothered to knock first.

At lunch, Cricket met about fifty of the students at Kansai Gakuin, a name they all shortened--affectionately or derisively--to Kanga. Most of the young men had black hair so well-combed it was lustrous. All of them had brown eyes which looked curiously at the newcomer. The women were all quite pretty: *flower-like* was the term he would use in his notebook journal, and *delicate* in his first letter to Peter Inoue back home. Ogawa-san led him to the front of a table where almost everyone had finished eating and pronounced what was obviously a short introduction. She scurried away for a moment, and he was left to the tender mercies of his soon-to-be students.

One of the young men was nosed forward, the way a crowd produces its leader. "My name is...Nomura. Yasuro Nomura. Your name...Collins-san?"

Cricket nodded, smiling. "*Watashi wa--*"

"Please. Speak English. Slowly, please."

Cricket smiled and nodded. He was going to like it here, he could tell. With the faintly supercilious air of a teacher, he started a conversation with Yasuro, while the other students watched in fascination. The details, almost invariant for all future introductions, concerned Cricket's full name, his age, the number of people in his family, and what his purpose was in coming to Japan. He tried to think of a way to turn the questions back onto Yasuro, but that seemed impertinent. He was the stranger, after all.

Still, he looked for a way to disrupt the conventions. When Ogawa-san returned a moment later carrying an oblong tray with two sandwiches on it, he grandly got up and used his Japanese knowledge to the fullest extent. "*Nihon tabemono, kudasai.*" Ogawa-san looked doubtful again, but Yasuro spoke a few rapid sentences to her in Japanese, and she retreated with the tray.

"I tell her, you likes...same we eat. Okay?"

"Okay." One day he'd have to ask Yasuro just what the students thought of Ogawa-san. In the meantime, he astonished everyone by eating broiled fish and rice with the practiced ease

of someone who spent a good deal of time in Chinese restaurants. It was his first victory over an alien culture. Soon after he finished, the students excused themselves and hurriedly left.

"Sorry, late," murmured Yasuro over his shoulder, and Cricket realized with a start that they'd all been waiting for him out of politeness. He was just digesting this compliment when Ogawa-san came back to collect his tray. Her pursed lips opened in an *O* of surprise.

"You like Japan food! Very, very good."

He nodded, expecting that now, somehow, he would be shown greater respect. In fact, the only change was that from then on she always served him Japanese fare, from miso soup to *chawan mushi*, a delicate seafood custard. She continued to call for him at lunchtime, and for the first few days she ushered him back to his room after every meal.

During Cricket's first class, the inevitable question about his first name surfaced. "Please." One of the students raised his hand. "Cricket--English name, isn't it?" He swung a phantom cricket bat. "Game with ball?"

Cricket was used to fielding questions like this, and he politely explained that his parents had named him after an insect rather than a game. That always got a good laugh. It got one now, rows of bright young Japanese men and women tittering politely and jotting down in their notebooks, most probably, the difference between *cricket* and *cricket*. A woman in the third row murmured politely that the insect cricket was *kōrogi*, and Cricket mentally filed the word for future reference.

The class proceeded smoothly with a round-the-room conversation, which began with names and might have ended with number of family members if Cricket hadn't hurriedly improvised more questions.

"Junichiro Sasaki..."

"I am Jun, yes." A teenaged boy in a yellow vest smiled toothily. "Or Pro."

"Really?" Cricket's eyes widened. "What kind of pro?"

"*Pachi-puro*." Jun's fingers twitched. "I am good at pachinko." The class giggled, and that enabled Cricket to ask all the students their nicknames and hobbies. Everyone had at least one of each, without exception, as if assigned from birth. Yasuro's hobby was seeing American movies, his nickname Romeo. The woman behind Yasuro explained that she "liked to put on fashion." From time to time Cricket would gently correct someone's pronunciation or choice of words.

That was all they expected of him, really, or so he'd been told. Last year's English teacher, talking with him briefly over the phone before he left, had described what it would be like. "Most of them have been studying English since first-year junior high. They can read and write pretty well. It's their conversation that needs help. So they want you to talk with them."

The idea was seductively simple, though he resolved to have a definite subject and plan for the next meeting. Already he was sorting American culture into teachable categories: music, food, education, street crime.

At the end of the class, Yasuro, obviously a superior student, waited for him in the corridor. "Please, if I can do something for you, talk to me." He told Cricket his room number in the dormitory, which Cricket promptly forgot. In the coming days, he received numerous such offers, but in the end he acted on none of them. He wasn't exactly being anti-social. Outside the authority of his class, he was discovering in himself a reticence that was almost Japanese.

During his second week, he began to explore Mikage, the well-scrubbed town that housed the college. Compact as it was, it harbored a labyrinthine complexity that was hard to penetrate. A typically narrow street would turn off into an even smaller thoroughfare, branching into two paved footpaths around a clump of storefronts, ending in a back alley with a little door inset at the end. At the local market, the pickle-vender offered him a tendril of seaweed in brine, soaking in green piles alongside the undersea blue of eggplant pickles, the long yellow legs of *takuan* or white-radish pickle, and pink shrunken turnips like anemones. By contrast, the tofu seller was a study in white, straining his bean curd through silk or cotton into blocks and submerging them in flowing water. "*Irasshai!*" they would cry, the traditional merchant's welcome. The fishmonger in his yellow boots, the fruit-seller with her carefully arranged baskets--they were all delighted to see him, though at times he felt like a mere curiosity. Mikage didn't have many foreigners, it seemed.

His Japanese was improving just from constant exposure to native speakers. In the meantime, he could always point. Still, he always brought his Sanseido pocket English-Japanese dictionary with him as a precaution, fearful of getting involved in some situation demanding complex vocabulary. One incident with the local butcher, resulting in the purchase of half a kilo of ground beef, he didn't want to repeat. "*Miru dake*," Yasuro counseled him when he asked. "Say *miru dake*--'just looking.'" Cricket gave the meat to Ogawa-san, who treated it as a present, bowed deeply, and came back an hour later with a box of five elegant tea cakes. The *quid pro quo* mentality annoyed him, but he ate the cakes anyway.

On his fourth day of walking around, he discovered the railway station, where over a hundred bicycles were jammed into the racks. A few looked as if they'd been abandoned. "Oh yes, many left behind," Yasuro told him airily, giving him the courage to wheel away one of the rustier models for his own use. It was a one-speed red clunker with bent fenders, still serviceable, with the incongruous name of Sky Lancer. From then on, he bicycled all over, and increased his radius of known territory from one mile to over five. Not only were the shops and sights fascinating, but being away from his room also meant time apart from Ogawa-san, who was beginning to figure in his dreams. As in life, she had a habit of simply appearing without warning in her old-woman's hunch, carrying that determined dignity. He could never think of her by her first name, Tsuchiko, or even her last name alone. In his mind, the unbudgeable honorific was part of her presence: Ogawa-san.

Every night at ten o'clock, she would come into his room in a kimono and slippers to tell him that the fan must be turned off. When he tried to keep it on longer because the night was hot

despite encroaching autumn, she somehow knew and came back to shut it off. After that, she operated a master shut-off from another floor that rendered his switch useless. Now when she came at ten o'clock to inform him that the fan was to go off, he felt like using her frail figure as a battering ram against the inactive fan.

She wanted him to shower at night, but he'd resisted on that point at least. He took a shower whenever he came back from bicycling, and since Ogawa-san apparently didn't possess the means to shut off the water, he was safe on that count. From time to time, when most of the students were taking a hot bath at night, she would sorrowfully pick up his towel and ask, "Showah, bath please?" but he would wave his hand and say, "*Iie*," a cross between "no" and "not at all." It was enormously gratifying to say "*Iie*" to Ogawa-san, even if only on a trivial matter.

Of course, they were all trivial matters. It was simply the whole situation that had become unbearable. Whenever Ogawa-san saw him preparing to bicycle somewhere, she insisted he tell her where he was going and for how long. When he finally left, she tugged at his shirt and told him to "be careful, no." He learned to say, "*mochiron*," or "of course," and the more Japanese he learned, the more admiring she was. Nonetheless, he was a *gaijin*, a foreigner or "outside-person." As such, he had to be protected from the vicissitudes of daily life. Sourly, Cricket wondered just what his predecessor at the college had been like, whether he had been at all infantile and so given Ogawa-san her views on Americans. Were prejudices like Ogawa-san's endemic to her species?

One day, glancing through some of his papers, he realized that she was rearranging the items on his desk, and he grew furious. The old bitch! Did she treat all the dormitory residents this way? The next day after class, he asked Yasuro about it.

"Ah, Ogawa-san...she is kind, but..." (here, Yasuro used a word not in Cricket's pocket dictionary). Yasuro whipped out his own dictionary, considerably thicker than Cricket's, and flipped through the pages. When he finally found what he wanted, he pointed: "This word, maybe."

He pointed to a short string of *kanji*, after which was printed, "protective; maternal."

"Exactly." Cricket was pleased that someone else had Ogawa-san's number. "Does Ogawa-san behave that way to you? To other students?"

Yasuro shook his head, a bit puzzled. "Not so much. Perhaps you, because you--"

"Because I'm a *gaijin*, you mean."

"I think, yes. Maybe, if you want, I tell Ogawa-san--"

"*Kekko desu*. No thank you." It was Cricket's turn to shake his head. "I fight my own wars. I'll make her understand somehow." When he walked back to his room, he found that

Ogawa-san had changed his sheets again and left the usual tea tray by the foot of his bed. Damn that woman! he thought, even as he poured himself a cup.

Maternal, he snorted. His mother, an active woman who'd often been out shopping when he got home from school, had never been like that--or had she? An organizer of large dinner parties that didn't include children, a voracious magazine reader who didn't like being disturbed--but she made hot chocolate for him when he fell off his sled. *My little Crick*, she smiled, and kissed him three times in the middle of his forehead. She picked him up when she was wearing her expensive black evening gown and waltzed him around the room, humming "You are the cream in my coffee." He hadn't entertained such memories in years. Ridiculous, he thought, how a dislocation in space--some 12,000 miles--can move someone back in time. He sat down at his desk, pushed everything aside, and began to work on his next lesson plan.

After a month at Kanga, his daily life settled into a routine. He woke up at seven every morning, ate breakfast at seven-thirty, and then bicycled somewhere, anywhere, as long as it took him away from the dormitory for a while. After he came back, he would take a shower, write in his journal, then prepare his lesson for that afternoon. These days he was teaching short stories from a fat anthology of twentieth-century American fiction. Schooled in reading English since junior high, his students found the stories easy enough to get through. Talking about them was another matter, and Cricket often had to begin the discussions with elaborate lead-in questions. The results were often disappointing:

"Tell me, Kenzo, what did you think of the narrator in 'The Fall of the House of Usher'?"

"Very good."

Socializing with the faculty at Kanga proved equally disappointing. Apart from a welcoming party at the start of the semester, where names and faces passed in a blur of *sake* and polite speeches, he'd been left mostly alone. At the departmental office where he checked in every week, he came to know only the secretaries, who veered between painfully polite and giggly. From time to time, a few students would ask him out for lunch, but they mainly reiterated the small talk developed in class, and he felt as awkward as an off-duty cop walking his beat. After these occasions, they all bowed and hurried away. He didn't want to be an obligation, and since he couldn't exactly repay their hospitality, he tended to shy away from further invitations.

If Cricket had time before lunch, he would type letters to acquaintances back home, including those who had no right to hear from him--mostly descriptions of what he saw on his bike rides. Few wrote back, as if the distance from America to Japan were far greater than the other way around. Most of them, he learned, were busy making money. The Eighties, an entrepreneurially-minded friend of his wrote, were going to be mega-big financially. Cricket took the hint that this friend would soon become too important to write letters. Stock options, corporate law--it was all so distant from his little room on the other side of the planet. One sporadic but faithful correspondent turned out to be Peter, who was getting ready to start medical school at NYU. As a *sansei*, a third-generation Japanese-American, but with a midwest upbringing, he was a curious mix. Compared to Cricket, he was simultaneously more

knowledgeable and less informed about matters Japanese. He inquired earnestly--he was a very earnest type--about everything from sumo wrestling to the condition of the Osaka subway system. "Tell me," he ended one letter poignantly, "are there still geisha girls around?" Unfortunately, Cricket didn't get out much, apart from his daily bike ride, and was ill equipped to answer most of these questions. "It is all an inscrutable mystery," he took to writing back half-jocularly.

He found himself becoming a claustrophiliac, retreating more and more to the semi-private spaces around the school: the insufficient library with its five study carrels, the alcove at the end of the long corridor from which hung the calligraphic scroll. Yasuro had deciphered it for him one rainy afternoon: "*Heiwa*--it means 'harmony.'"

"But there are two characters, no?" Though he still couldn't read or write, Cricket had gotten to the stage where he recognized how the language looked.

"Yes," admitted Yasuro. "That first character, it means 'flat.' The second means 'peace.'"

When he was feeling particularly edgy after another Ogawa-san ordeal, he would go to stare at the two characters until he felt peaceful again, or sometimes just flat.

In the late afternoons, he read some of the classic novels he'd always wanted to get to: *Moby Dick*, *Vanity Fair*. He even found time to study Japanese from a little paperback called *Learn Japanese Today!* He also thought of taking up some art like *chado*, the Japanese tea ceremony, but felt he needed to know more of the language first. The same was true of his writing: at this stage, his journal entries were mostly jottings about Japanese culture, from abacuses to zen. "From the countable to the infinite," he scribbled, feeling clever for a change.

From time to time, he thought of the person he'd met on the plane coming over, Matthew Harrison--Harrington, something like that. He'd never seen him again and told himself it didn't matter, yet occasionally he had questions that Matthew might be able to answer, mostly about the status of *gaijin*. More often, Matthew was the shadowy Other, the person he needed to measure his own progress--sometimes, like the Cheshire Cat, reduced to just his sardonic smile. But Cricket didn't know how to look him up, and Matthew H. became a gap, an unaccounted-for detail.

Once on his bicycle he thought he saw Matthew rounding the corner toward the pickle-seller's, but it turned out to be a false sighting. Maybe he'd gone back to the U.S. by now. Was there really a Matthew, he began to wonder, or had he dreamed the whole scene on the plane? What did it matter if he wasn't around, anyway?--sort of like Berkeley's idea of a table when no one was present to see it. So why did Matthew persist in his not-being-there? He'd just consigned the blond memory to his mental OUT box when he passed a tea shop along one of the narrowest streets in Mikage, with barely room for his handlebars. And there Matthew was, his long frame bent over a teacup, framed by the tinted glass window of the shop. He was alone, reading a book--just as Cricket remembered him. He didn't look up.

Cricket got off his Sky Lancer, parking it awkwardly in the adjacent alley. The awkwardness traveled with him as he mounted the steps to the tea shop. "*Hajimemashite*." No, that was for introductions. "Hi, remember me?" Now how would he render that into Japanese? "Look at me, how much I've learned"--that was what he really wanted to say.

No one seemed to be minding the store, so there was no welcoming "*Irasshai!*" Luckily, Matthew noticed his entrance. He inclined his head briefly, Japanese style, as if he'd been waiting for Cricket to show up. "Hello," he pronounced carefully. "You're--"

"Cricket Collins," supplied Cricket helpfully.

"That's right. I remember the name. We sat next to each other on the plane." Matthew didn't snap his book shut, but at least his attention was directed toward him. "So how's Japan treating you?"

In his imagined reunions with Matthew, Cricket had trotted out all his accomplishments, from teaching and writing to studying Japanese. But now, faced with that wan, ironic smile, he shrugged. "Oh, I can't complain."

"Of course not. It's forbidden."

Cricket laughed, realizing with annoyance as he did so that his old chuckle had somehow been transformed into a polite titter.

"Are you still studying the language?" asked Matthew, as if reading his mind. "Your laugh has become Nipponic."

"Maybe I picked it up from my students." He shrugged. "They learn from me. Why shouldn't I learn from them?"

"Good," replied Matthew, somewhat obscurely. "What else do you do besides teach?"

Cricket looked at Matthew's book, but from his angle couldn't make out what it was. "The same as you, I guess. Read a lot, write some. I'm going to start tea ceremony lessons one of these days. Maybe join an aikido class."

"I'm sure you will. That's the pattern." Suddenly Matthew looked absolutely weary, with runnels in his face like a statue left out too long in the rain. "Listen, I've got to go now." And with that he shut his book and stood up. Cricket could now see what the volume was: a collection by Ambrose Bierce.

Once again he felt at a disadvantage, but what could he do? He was thinking up a rude rejoinder when Matthew surprised him. Instead of a perfunctory nod, he reached out to put a hand on Cricket's shoulder. "Look, be careful," he said. "I mean, take care of yourself." And with that, he left. At this point the proprietress, a squat woman who looked as if she'd just arisen from a nap, emerged from behind an alcove to ask tartly if she could help him. Reciting an apology, Cricket bowed and departed. Of course, Matthew was nowhere to be seen.

He tried to put the meeting out of his mind, but instead he kept replaying parts of the insufficient conversation. In a way Matthew reminded him of his father, whom he had tried for years to impress and then tried to hurt, not that he would ever consciously admit to either impulse. In any event, Matthew was gone again, as inaccessible as before. When Cricket rode past the same spot the next week, even the tea shop seemed to have disappeared.

Meanwhile, as one of his students had put it in class, life kept living. Unused to the amount of free time on his hands, Cricket unconsciously ordered his habits as a kind of spell against boredom. Even as a child, he'd been encouraged by his mother to pursue solitary but organized hobbies like stamp-collecting. Now he read two novels a week and wrote enough letters home to arouse suspicion whether everything was really going as well as he described. But he'd never been that close to his father, whose legalistic wrangling always made him feel as if he were arguing a losing case. Japan had been a questionable venture, opined Mr. Collins, in his precise, squared-off script. Sooner or later Cricket would realize that he was wasting his time and come back home to start a career. He no longer insisted on law school but urged his son to pursue "a real vocation, not just some temp job abroad." Cricket found his father much easier to deal with from afar, expending two sentences to rebut every one of his father's. For some reason, neither thought to pick up a phone to cross the intercontinental divide. This was the patented Collins style of emotional non-avoidance. From time to time, Cricket realized just how alone he was--though he'd always been that way, sort of.

The one social aspect he missed was the company of women and the flirting that goes on even in the most casual of discussions. These days, he had his eyes set on a twenty-year-old student in his class named Kyoko Sakai, who had legs like calipers and a beautifully shy smile. The trouble was, she was so shy that Cricket couldn't even start a conversation with her. When a comment produced so much as a giggle, she clapped her hand over her mouth. Still, he had faith in his staying power. He had the time to persevere.

He also had the time to plot minor insurrections against Ogawa-san, though most had to be discarded for impracticality. He couldn't possibly poison her food or tie her up in the *benjo*, even if he'd wanted to. In his more reflective moments, he realized that Ogawa-san was just being solicitous, but the irritation remained like a crick in his neck. He could always tell when she had been in his room: his slippers would be leaning against the wardrobe at an acute angle, the items on his desk arranged in neat piles. She changed his sheets twice a week, though Cricket found out from Yasuro that once a week was usual.

"I think she like you." Yasuro was eyeing Cricket with amusement as Cricket vented his rage on an imaginary Ogawa-san. "Last teacher, he...not so easy. Made big mess." His delicate fingers described a roll of untidy bedclothes. He placed a hand on Cricket's unyielding shoulder. "*Daijōbu*--don't worry. Take time. Ogawa-san learn."

You mean give way, thought Cricket, but he wasn't sure who'd concede first.

He needed to discuss this problem with someone more articulate than Yasuro. It wasn't that Yasuro was unintelligent--Cricket would never equate fluency with intelligence, as Ogawa-

san did--but maybe another Westerner would show a more sensitive ear. No other Americans taught at Kanga, but there was one Englishman whom for some reason Cricket had never seen. Mr. Knye was his name, and Cricket tracked him down one day after class. His unnumbered office was at the end of a winding corridor which seemed to have no other purpose than leading up to that room.

"Hello, my name's Cricket Collins," he announced as he knocked to enter. "I'm one of the other English instructors here--I don't know why I never met you."

Mr. Knye, seated at his desk in a tweed jacket with patched elbows, harrumphed a reply. He put down his pipe, an ugly meerschaum with a cracked bowl. "Yes, maybe an oversight. What did you say your name was--Cricket?" Knye regarded him with subtle disdain. "Strange name for an American, eh?"

Cricket mentioned the unhappy origin of his name, but got hardly a smile. When he explained his predicament with Ogawa-san, all he got was a vague "Well, why don't you talk to the lady?"

"You know," continued Knye, warming to his subject, "I've noticed you Americans often don't adapt very well to other cultures. Try to meet her halfway, I mean." He added something about the habits imperialism breeds, and Cricket heard the voice of a Britisher with a curiously warped sense of history. There was also something strange about his accent that Cricket couldn't identify, as he let the man speak on and on.

Cricket finally lost his patience. "Do you live in the dormitories?"

Knye spread his hands, slightly offended. "Oh, no, definitely not. I have a flat in town. Been here for over twelve years."

Suddenly, Cricket realized the oddity in Knye's speech. He spoke English with a slight Japanese inflection: the *r*'s were curled under his tongue, the *th*'s blending into a subtle hiss. After years of speaking mainly to Japanese, his language had merged with their own. Inadvertently, Knye had done a good job of meeting the Japanese halfway. Cricket wondered whether the man was aware of his inflection, but decided against pointing it out to him. "I enjoyed meeting you," he told Knye, who clearly wanted to get back to his paperwork.

"*Dō itashi--ah*, don't mention it," Knye corrected himself in mid-phrase. As Cricket left him, he was re-lighting his pipe and looking through a manuscript of some sort.

Because of his visit with Knye and a subsequent cup of coffee in a tea shop, Cricket was ten minutes late for dinner. Ogawa-san had spread plastic wrap over his tray and left it on the table. The other students were nearly finished, but they watched the tray with interest, as if it guaranteed Cricket's eventual presence. Kyoko was there, he noticed when he arrived, sitting next to Yasuro. They smiled and bobbed their heads toward him in unison, as if both were threaded on the same string of courtesy.

He fought down a pang of jealousy. It wasn't as if Kyoko were his property, after all. For a moment, he envied Yasuro's adept handling of Japanese. Though Cricket improved each week, he was still confined to the realm of simple questions and answers. Of course, Yasuro *was* Japanese.

Still, being a *gaijin* had certain advantages. The most obvious one was that Japanese women took an interest in him. Kyoko, in fact, interrupted her conversation with Yasuro to ask Cricket, "How are you today?" She watched admiringly as he wielded his chopsticks over a bamboo trencher of *udon*, the fat slippery noodles that reminded him of white worms. He encouraged her broken English by asking her how she spent her day and casually correcting one or two of her frequent mistakes. He was just about to ask her what she was doing tomorrow when Ogawa-san came up behind them. She spoke a few sentences to Yasuro and Kyoko, who giggled a bit. Then she took up a post beside Cricket and waited for him to finish eating.

"What did she say?" Cricket whispered furiously to Yasuro. "What was so funny?"

"Oh, Cricket, it is...hard to say. Maybe no word in English. But mostly...she say, time for your bath."

Cricket swore softly to himself, and when Ogawa-san tugged gently at his sleeve, he jerked back. "*Watashi wa kodomo ja arimasen.*" It was his own improvisation: "I am not a child." He couldn't tell whether Ogawa-san understood him. In any event, she put on a near-toothless smile and led him down the corridor he knew quite well, showed him for the fiftieth time the lemon soap and the spigot he must use beforehand, and then left him to bathe in peace.

He had to do something about that woman. She was making life impossible.

He came to this conclusion in the overheated *furo-ba*--why did the Japanese take their baths so hot?--while looking at his submerged white body. Against the blue tiles of the square bathtub, he looked like some pale aquatic creature. And why did everyone have to soap and rinse off *before* entering the water? He fingered the island-shaped birthmark on his left buttock, almost like a brown stain. The Japanese were such nuts about cleanliness. The first time he had taken a bath, Ogawa-san had clearly wanted to preside over the proceedings, but he had objected strongly, enough to give her the worried pout that he often saw in his dreams. Some Japanese were so germ-conscious that they wore surgical masks over their faces to prevent getting someone else's cold--or was that to avoid giving someone else *their* cold? In any event, Ogawa-san's fussing was more disturbingly personal than that.

Once, when he was doing his laundry in the tiny washing machine on the second floor, and in his underwear because all his pants were in the wash, she trudged by in her only other type of dress, a functional kimono. When she saw him that way, his disproportionately long legs and big feet made her face split in an amused smile, the expression he had come to know well. Before the smile, though, he thought he'd detected a certain absorption in her look, as if she were undressing him further, and he had felt like snatching a pair of sudsy trousers from the wash to cover himself. Now, seeing his dark brown eyes reflected in the surface of the water, he wondered whether Ogawa-san was sexually attracted to him.

The idea of the stump-legged old woman in love with anyone or anything was unreal to him. Her interest was more studious than lustful--it was hard to pin down, but whatever it was, it interfered with everything he did or wanted to do. If he ever got lucky with Kyoko, for instance, Ogawa-san would undoubtedly be in the room, ready with post-coital disinfectant. It was--*unsupportable* was the word he was looking for. (Lately, he had been groping for an occasional term in English. He hoped he wasn't on his way to becoming another Mr. Knye, and he practiced his elocution in the mirror from time to time.) Unsupportable, yes.

The heat of the bath eased the stiffness in his neck even as he half-resisted. He lay back against the tiling and flipped rings of water with his thumbs, dreaming up private revolutions.

The first item he stole was a pair of slippers from the rack that Ogawa-san had shown him the first day. The act was mostly unpremeditated: no one else was in the foyer when he wandered by, and the next moment he had the slippers tucked under his belt. He hardly needed an extra pair, but the theft itself made him feel better. The thought of Ogawa-san confronting an unaccountable loss in her dormitory greatly appealed to him. Even if the slippers weren't missed, he had committed an act of defiance.

He wrapped them in a bag and hid it in his unused suitcase. At night, he thought of the purloined slippers and grinned into the darkness.

Meanwhile, his classes were showing definite signs of improvement. Jun the pachinko pro was lobbing new vocabulary at the rest of the class every meeting. The one student with a mustache, who sat behind Yasuro, no longer mangled all his verbs. Kyoko had stopped ending her sentences with "isn't it?" and had started ending them with an alluring smile. Now he was teaching the class the subtleties of where to place modifiers when used in a series. His text was Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. His class-hours weren't too heavy, he had just received a short note and a brusque check from his father, and he was thinking of buying himself a better bicycle. He even greeted Ogawa-san with a big hello in the hallway that morning. She laughed and bowed low.

But that night, as he was eating dinner with Kyoko amid a small group of admiring students, Yasuro mentioned Ogawa-san's name. "She say you have large..." here Yasuro flipped through his pocket-dictionary "...collection of...of magazine." Yasuro's diction grew suggestive. "Female magazine, isn't it?"

Cricket grew red, thinking of that harridan pawing through what lay under his desk-dictionary. Besides bringing over thirty assorted paperbacks from America, he had also brought a few *Playboy* magazines--"for emergencies," as he mentally tabbed them.

Better to come straight out with it. "Yes, I have some magazines," he told Yasuro breezily. "They're part of American culture. I'll lend them to you if you'd like."

Yasuro betrayed an almost adolescent eagerness. "Oh, yes. Yes, that is fine, thank you." Out of the corner of his eye, Cricket looked at Kyoko to see how she was taking all this, but she had blushed at the phrase "female magazine" and was looking away.

"What do you think of Ogawa-san's story?" He directed his question to Kyoko.

"Me, I cannot say. But Ogawa-san, she...*jama*, I think. Obstacle? Too strong?" It might have come across kinder if Kyoko had known more English, but Cricket got the point.

He went back to brood in his room. Ogawa-san had thoughtfully left a tea tray propping his door open. He kicked it aside and slammed the door behind him.

The next day, after he had finished teaching--and brought two issues of *Playboy* to Yasuro in a large brown paper bag--he took all the soap from the *furo-ba*. It was a childish act, done solely for its irritation value: "furor in the *furo-ba*" was how he thought of it. His take was seven lemon-yellow bars, half of which he dumped in a trashcan two miles away from the dormitory. Let Ogawa-san stew over that--and maybe he could booby-trap his desk so she wouldn't go through his things anymore.

He got on his bike and pedaled as far from the dormitory as he had ever been, over ten miles away. The suburbs merged with the country. The road turned into a narrower road, and the narrowed road turned into a path, which reached its natural conclusion in a trampling of grass which disappeared into the trees. The fan-shaped leaves of the ginkgos were larger than those of the ornamental flora at school. Here they formed a fertile green-yellow bower that arched in the breeze. Cricket got off his bicycle and walked into the woods, where the faint path ended in a tiny brook. The sound of *kōrogi*, like little rasping violins, came from some source invisibly near.

There was somebody by the brook. A small boy lay in the grass, his head on a rock, staring at a near-leafless bamboo stalk which swayed in the wind. Cricket shivered at the sight and sat down ten yards away on another rock. The boy looked up, but neither person said a word. For once, Cricket was glad of the rustling silence in place of deformed English. The boy was entirely absorbed in watching the bamboo, though Cricket imagined an odd affinity with him. An hour passed that way, the boy watching his personal vision and Cricket wondering whether he should leave. Eventually, as it was growing dark, Cricket picked himself up and walked back to his bicycle. He ate a late, quiet dinner and spent the rest of the evening in his room.

Ogawa-san made no mention of the missing soap, and Yasuro returned the magazines a day later with embarrassed thanks, as if overwhelmed by the abundance of sex. Unaccountably, Cricket felt homesick, and that night, he wrote a long letter to his Sofie, his all-too-brief girlfriend. She had taken him in, uplifted him, and humiliated him all in one week, and he would never forget the experience. At the moment, he felt tender toward her. "I wish you could come to Japan," he began. "I think you'd like it here--and besides, I miss you at night." In the morning, he ripped up the letter and scattered Ogawa-san's dried tea all down the hall. He entered his class in a state of resentment.

"Mr. Sasaki, the word is *told*, not *tell*. Past tense. You must speak proper English. I cannot correct your mistakes forever." He looked over their thoughtful faces and saw how ridiculous he was being, but he couldn't help himself. His loneliness masked itself as anger.

Kyoko saw him after class, and for once she made the first move. She touched his shoulder as if exploring a promontory. "Cricket-san...something wrong, *ne*?"

"No. Yes. I'm tired, that's all." He reached out for her hand. "Listen, do you want to go for a drink somewhere? Anywhere."

But Kyoko shook her head slightly, her eyes sympathetic. "I am sorry, but I meet someone else. Nomura-san."

Yasuro? He asked her to repeat the name, just to be sure. He nodded, and walked back to his room alone. What an odd relationship Yasuro and Kyoko must have, their intimacy completely submerged in public. Cricket, he thought, you indiscreet American. He decided to exile himself in his room.

In front of his door was the usual tea tray, and on a nearby table someone had left a lacquered pair of chopsticks. Not the double sticks of wood that split down the middle: these were polished a deep ebony, with a trace of inlay down the side. Almost without thinking, Cricket pocketed them. A few minutes later there was a knock at the door.

It was Ogawa-san, and he felt the chopsticks in his back pocket as if they protruded a foot above his head. Maybe they were her personal chopsticks, or maybe she had just seen him take them and was going to report him--to whom? Ogawa-san ran the place.

All she wanted, it turned out, was to ask whether he was feeling *byōki*, sick. He hadn't eaten any lunch, and she must have seen his tray. Now she held out an orange to him, saying in her familiar sing-song voice, "Eat, please. Get...better."

Cricket might have been touched by the solicitude, but he chose to be annoyed instead. "*Ato de*," he said firmly, and laid the orange down on his desk. "*Watashi wa*..." he had forgotten the word, damn it "...not hungry." He pointed to his stomach and drew a balloon. Couldn't she ever leave him alone?

Apparently not. That evening, as if to make up for the uneaten orange, she led the protesting Cricket to the *furo-ba*, where she ran the water extra hot. If anyone else had subjected him to that kind of treatment, he would have thought of ten different ways to resist, but she seemed to exercise some strange hold over him. Also, despite her diminutive stature and foolish English, he knew she was an important woman. "Thirty years she run this dormitory," Yasuro had informed him. "She never make mistake." She could also probably have him tossed out, a thought that excited him whenever he considered his next theft.

He stole a set of teacups next, and the sash from Ogawa-san's own kimono, daringly plucked when it lay draped over a stool one day. Everything went into the suitcase in the closet.

He no longer had his gaze on Kyoko. He had recently met an English girl at a bookstore in Umeda, a brown-haired vision with green-blue eyes. The sheer novelty of the combination made him realize how immersed he had been. Her name was Jill, and she had asked him what a particular Japanese word meant when the dictionary was right at hand. He loved her waist-length brown hair and her Liverpool accent, which spoke to him of fish and chips and the Beatles. She was also teaching English, and he had promised to give her a call. He did call, and they went out a few times, and then he invited her to his room.

Ogawa-san wouldn't allow a woman in his room.

He stormed up and down the corridor, unable to move the disapproving figure in front of his door, while Jill stood slightly apart and said, "Listen, Cricket, maybe this is a bad idea. I'll just leave."

"No! She's been interfering ever since I got here!" He didn't care whether Ogawa-san understood what he said.

Jill came up to him. "You're a sweet boy, really, but you don't understand these old Japanese women. They never let go." She touched his cheek with a fingertip. Her hair grazed his shoulder. "Look, it isn't the end of the world. I'll give you a call. Okay?" And before he could come up with an answer, she was gone.

Ogawa-san gave him a short lecture in simple vocabulary, but he pretended he didn't understand any Japanese. He dreamed that night of laying waste to an entire army of Ogawa-sans with a sharpened ebony chopstick. For each corpse, he won an orange, which he sent home to his father, who ruled them admissible evidence. He awoke the next morning sated with vengeance, then remembered it was just a dream.

Outside it was raining hard, which meant that he couldn't go bicycling. The room was flooded with a grayness that wouldn't go away. He needed something to cheer him up. As he approached a turn in the downstairs corridor, into the women's section, he heard a transistor radio playing. He slowed his pace and poked his head around the corner to see who was listening.

It was a girl from his class who usually wore black-mesh stockings and a slipper. Now she was listening to a Japanese pop singer croon lyrics whose meaning Cricket couldn't catch. Her door was open, the music invading the hall. Whatever work she was doing at her desk gave her trouble, because soon she sighed, got up, and walked down the hall to the vending machines. A slipped thief, Cricket scuttled into her room and was out in a second with the radio under his arm.

He was just shoving it under his sweater when Ogawa-san appeared at the same corner where he had been watching.

In an unmistakable gesture, she held out her hand for the radio. Completely numb, Cricket handed it over, wondering what would happen to him. He saw himself sent home in disgrace, his term unfinished, his father both pleased and disgusted, the prospect of a job dim and

hopeless--all because of a stupid radio. Should he beg Ogawa-san to be lenient? Should he try to beat her up and run for it? Now she was lecturing him, though all he understood was the word *haji*, shame.

The girl returned with a Coke in her hand, surprised to see the two in the hall, and even more surprised to see Ogawa-san holding her radio. Ogawa-san turned toward her, but with a different expression. When the girl asked a question, Ogawa-san cut her off with a flurry of Japanese. She spoke so fast that Cricket caught none of it, but soon the girl was laughing, and Ogawa-san was also smiling. She patted Cricket on the head as if he were a little boy and made another reference he couldn't understand. Then she handed back the radio and, pulling his sleeve, walked Cricket back upstairs.

The sudden withdrawal from catastrophe kept him from talking. He let himself be led back to his room, grateful but confused. Why had she bothered saving him? What the hell had she said to the girl? Ogawa-san marched him to his door and motioned him inside.

"Bad boy. Bad." She shook her finger at him, looking so sad that he almost felt sorry for her rather than for himself. She drew back the sheets and motioned for him to take off his shirt and pants. She patted her breast, and suddenly he found the word he was looking for: *okaa-san*, mother. The word tasted bad in his mouth and he wanted to spit it out, but the it swelled up and constricted his throat. From the end of the bed, Ogawa-san watched him with stern, patient eyes.

She made him lie down as if he were sick, and in a while she brought him tea and a *sembei*, a rice-cracker. "Lesson, you know...cancel. Rest now. *Byōki*, sick." She shook her head obliquely, and Cricket had a vision of Ogawa-san forever ministering to him in his room, bringing him hot tea and rice as he languished there. She was wearing her faded gray skirt and looked formidable, encompassing everything around her. She knew he was a thief, and now he needed her protection.

When finally she left, he unwrapped the *sembei* from its paper. He wasn't going to eat it at first, but he hadn't had any breakfast, so he ended up making two bites of it and washing it down with green tea. He really did feel sick now, as if some virus had invaded his system. Afterwards, he walked over to the window and raised the blinds. It had stopped raining, and a steady wind was blowing the mist away. It was fifteen feet to the ground, a plausible distance to jump, but he was past that now. Slowly, he uncrumpled the *sembei* wrapper and let it fly out the window. It caught the stiff breeze like a sail, at first soaring upwards, then dipping and darting above the pavement. It was like an insect being driven by a human breath, pushed faster and faster by an invisible source. Cricket prayed silently, and it was almost half a minute before it hit the ground.