

# Cicadas

P.E. Rowe

One of the most humiliating moments of my entire life was in the winter of 1999 on the 107<sup>th</sup> floor of the World Trade Center in Manhattan. I had been dating Aaron Venheull since my sophomore year at Dartmouth. When he graduated the previous May, he'd taken a job at Goldman Sachs and was already making a ridiculous amount of money – so much so, that I didn't think anything of it when he took me to Windows on the World for dinner. We got all dressed up like we were going to the prom, and everything was fantastic, the food, the view, the feeling I was living as the star of my own movie. I thought it was all in good fun.

After dinner, we walked around the observation floor. It was too cold to go up to the roof. We were looking south toward Jersey and the Statue of Liberty, and I was thinking about the meal we'd just eaten, thinking that the cost of it could've fed a large third-world family for an entire month. That's when he did it, in front of all those people. He got down on one knee, and I was so shocked I didn't know how to respond. He should have seen the look on my face. He should have stopped and played it off like it was a joke, but he wasn't going to stop until he'd said the words. The ring was already out and sparkling for everyone to see.

"Aaron," I whispered. "Please, get up."

I reached down to try and pull him up by his armpits, but instead he caught my hand, and my heart was in my throat. All those people staring at us, anticipating, expecting something – probably that I'd wipe a tear or two from my eyes and say, "Aaron, I love you. Yes, honey. Yes!" All I could think of was how humiliating it was going to be for

me, and just the ungodly, uncomfortable, awkward pain he would be in the moment I said no.

I looked down at him, and he was probably saying beautiful things about me he'd rehearsed twenty times in the mirror, but I didn't hear a single word. I could see the expectation in his eyes, so I looked at his hands instead, and I looked at the shimmering gaudiness of the ring, and then I looked at his cufflinks — they were gold, monogrammed, and shining even in the dim yellow light of the concourse.

"We have to ride the elevator back down together," I said after he'd uttered the words, and I have no idea why I said that.

"Of course we do," he said, and that was the first time I saw any doubt in his eyes the entire two years we'd been together. "Elizabeth?"

"I can't," I said. I did start wiping tears from my eyes.

And the energy of all those onlookers as I pulled my hand away. Didn't they all want to clap and cheer instead of gasp. Didn't they all want to kiss their date on the cheek.

I'd grown up in Connecticut, so I knew. New York is a huge place, but it's not big. Everyone there has many circles, and many of those circles cross. I knew so many people from Dartmouth in Manhattan and so did Aaron. The idea of taking the job I'd interviewed for was paralyzing. I'd have to see him all the time. How many nights would I have to watch a different beautiful girl leaning into his chest in her 3-inch heels, caressing his arm and reaching inside the cuff of his tailored suit-coat to finger his cufflinks? It would be easier to go elsewhere — as far away as I could possibly go.

I decided that I wanted an adventure – scratch that – lots of adventures, all of them extraordinary.

The following week when I got back to Hanover, I decided to go to Dartmouth’s winter job fair to see if there might be some answer to where in the world I could go to get away. Almost all the recruiters were from New York or Boston – and Boston, well that’s just a really tiny version of New York. I was about to leave the conference room when the cutest little Japanese woman started talking to me in a thick accent. I was admiring how carefully she was speaking, as though each word were of the utmost importance. She said “the Jet-o program-u” so many times that I just had to find out what it was. She told me I didn’t have to speak a word of Japanese to be an English teacher.

I wanted to be in Tokyo. On the application, where you list your top three preferences I listed Tokyo, Tokyo, and Tokyo. I got Kakegawa. I convinced myself that I couldn’t be all that disappointed. For me, every single Japanese city was just a name on a map anyway, some imaginary place, a stereotypical envisioning of something absurd concocted from books and movies. I convinced myself there would be lots of cute little Asian men in tennis shoes wearing visors and taking photographs. Kakegawa could be beautiful.

I flew to Osaka, and then to the airport in Shizuoka, where a program coordinator drove me to my new apartment on the southern side of Shizuoka City. He wore a gray suit and his name was Carl. He was Canadian. Everything had been arranged. But I told Carl that I thought I was in the wrong city.

“They’ll tell you all about it at orientation tomorrow,” Carl assured me. “Kakegawa is very close. You hop on the *densha* at the *eki*.”

“The what and the what?”

“The *eki* is the station, and the *densha* is the train. You might want to start learning some basic words, Elizabeth. There aren’t any expats in Kakegawa, and very few people speak English. That’s why you’re here, after all.”

“I suppose so,” I said.

“You may also want to reconsider introducing yourself as Elizabeth.”

“Can they not say it?”

“No, that’s asking a lot. But if you introduce yourself as Liz, you’ll get something that sounds like Lizzu or Reezzu, depending on how much English they’ve spoken.”

“Lizzu?”

“Best case scenario,” he said.

“What do they call you, Carl?”

“Karo San. It sounds kinda badass, but it means Mr. Furnace.”

My apartment was tiny and spartan. Carl told me I couldn’t wear my shoes because of the tatami, which, he explained, was the straw floor in my bedroom. I tried not to let my face show any disappointment, but it was the worst apartment I had ever seen. The moment Carl closed the door and left me was one of the loneliest moments of my life. I felt utterly alone. The only important thing I’d learned on the ride from the airport was that in addition to being totally hopeless with the Japanese language, I was also illiterate now too. Every sign had told me this.

A Japanese woman named Noriko came to take me to orientation the following morning. She brought me an umbrella as a gift and complimented me on my shoes. She was sweet, and she acted very impressed at lunch when I used my chopsticks. "We call them *hashi*," she told me. She also gave me my first advice on learning to read, telling me that the Japanese language had three alphabets and that foreigners should only try to learn two.

In three weeks' time, I had settled into my apartment and my school, and I was already getting comfortable with my new routine. I didn't have any friends, though, and I was coming to grips with some very uncomfortable realities about being a blonde American girl in Japan. There were some peculiar sexual things going on that I couldn't quite understand. I noticed the first sign of this in the way the schoolgirls dressed. They wore these sailor outfits that had to have been designed by a pedophile. I was always thinking that if one of these girls wore their school uniform to a high school in Connecticut they'd get sent home for dressing like a stripper. The only things they were missing were the five-inch heels and hooker makeup. I couldn't take my eyes off these giggling girls' legs. Eventually, I would realize what they were giggling about all the time: it was me.

I imagine that a movie star in Hollywood gets gawked at and followed around a lot. But at least there's always that question, "Is that? Could be. She sure looks like so-and-so." In Shizuoka there was no mistaking me. It didn't matter what my name was; I was pretty, foreign, young, and

blonde. I might as well have been all the movie stars rolled into one. I'd had a few guys stare at me before—in the hallway in high school, at Dartmouth, at the gym—but I'd never seen a guy stop dead in his tracks on the sidewalk across the street; jump into the air to get a better look at me; and then turn in the exact opposite direction in order to chase me down. It would happen at least four times a day.

"Hallo, Hallo!" they'd shout at me from the opposite sidewalk. "Nice-a to meet-a you. So nice-a to meet-a you." Then they'd shadow me across the street until they came to a crosswalk and run across the street, hoping to speak English with me, touch me, or both.

At first, I didn't know what to do. They wanted to shake my hand, learn my name, feel my blonde hair, touch my skin. It was as if my whiteness somehow short-circuited the part of the brain that governed their famous Japanese stoicism. When I talked to a Scottish girl I met on the train, she told me, "Ignore all of them, luv. And walk fast."

It was all a bit shocking. I'd done some research before coming. Japan was the second safest country in the world to Singapore. All of the guidebooks said that a woman could walk alone at night almost anywhere without anything to fear. The authors must have all been men.

In my honeymoon phase, I considered it an inconvenience, something I would adjust to. After all, they weren't after me. They were after something different, the idea of me. None of them were chasing a person.

A little over a month into my stay in Shizuoka, I got out of class late and missed my train back from Kakegawa. By the time I got to the *eki* (train station), it was a twenty-minute wait for the local. It was still hot, so I sought refuge

from the evening sun behind a large sign displaying the schedule in Japanese. I still couldn't read a word of it.

A cute little old Japanese man eating an ice cream cone approached me. He said, "You-a berry pretty," and he smiled at me. I smiled back and said thank you. He asked me if he could shake my hand, so I nodded and said "Hai." And I offered him my hand. He latched on with a grip so tight I couldn't pull back, and before I knew what had happened, this cat-like perverted old creep had smeared ice cream up the length of my bare arm and was proceeding to lick it off. I was too flabbergasted to even resist. "Hen" was the Japanese word for that. It means strange.

Until I ran into that old ice cream guy, I'd had a minimal level of tolerance for all these random Japanese guys running up and accosting me. I'd even allowed some of them to shake my hand or touch my hair. I didn't really get it yet, but I was starting to. Japanese men are perverts, I thought, and you should never shake a pervert's hand. That ice cream licker was the last stranger I'd ever let touch me – willingly at least.

Some weeks later, I got out of school really late, forcing me to catch the evening express train. It was rush hour and the train was packed. Per school dress code, I was wearing a skirt, and I was always conscious of it. I'd heard that a lot of girls in Tokyo were getting photographed in some pretty despicable ways on the subway. Even though I didn't think anything like that would happen to me in Shizuoka, I always tried to get a seat.

When the packed express train pulled up, I debated turning around and finding a place to eat dinner in Kakegawa, but I was exhausted, so I got on. It took quite a bit of effort to slither my way to the back of the car so I could stand with my back against the wall. All those packed New York subway cars had trained me for something.

As always, I noticed a few men leering at me, and by now it had become part of the background of my life in Japan. Everywhere I went, children would stare at me and girls would call me *kirei* (beautiful). *Sugoi* (wow!) was something I heard every time I changed scenery. So I didn't notice the guy as being any different from all the others. There were probably four or five other young guys staring at me at the exact same way anyhow.

When the doors opened at Shimada, I turned sideways to allow a man standing beside me to get to the door. I turned for maybe half a second. I felt a pressure around my neck, and didn't even realize it was a man's arm until I tried to pull away. He pulled me tight to his chest from behind and put his hand between my legs. I screamed the instant I realized what he was doing. I could feel him pulling on my underwear, trying to sneak his fingers inside.

Even after I screamed no one did anything. I could see the faces of the other men on the train, smiling like kids thieving from a cookie jar, like it was that trivial.

"*Tashkete!*" (help me) I yelled, hoping that someone would, but they didn't help; they were all watching and I could feel his fingers worming their way under as I struggled to get free.



*“Yamero! Yamero! Dame dai yo!”* (Stop it! Stop it! That’s horrible!) A woman shouted at the man.

*“Baby, baby,”* the creep laughed in my ear.

Then I heard his head hit the plastic wall of the train. It was like an explosion. I heard it again two more times, and the pressure around my neck was gone.

I felt this huge but quiet physical presence pull the offender up and drag him to the other side of the train car. I was shaking. I didn’t even know how to process what had just happened to me. I was just shaking, and I backed up against the wall again, holding down my skirt with both hands. I left my little red purse on the floor where I’d dropped it. All those men were still leering at me, some of them smiling as if it had been their fingers.

I noticed that in the commotion, a ring of space had formed around me in the packed train car, as though all of those men who’d wanted to touch me moments earlier now found me untouchable.

*“Daijobu?”* (Are you okay?) The woman who’d shouted asked me.

I only knew one thing: nothing about this was okay, least of all me.

The first person to breach that circular gap around the untouchable American girl was my rescuer. For a Japanese, he was enormous. He was six-foot-two and young, really young. I thought that I recognized his face, but I couldn’t place it. There was something different about it. He reached down and picked up my purse, offering it to me, but I couldn’t take my hands off my skirt. Stepping beside

me, he lowered the small purse and held it in his right hand as if it were his own.

He took great effort to say, "Nobody hit-a you. Okay?"

I didn't know how to answer, so I shook my head no. Between that and my eyes, he could tell I was freaking out, and fifty pair of eyes were still fixated on me, some of them laughing, the rest of them leering. He saw this and turned around to face them, shouting something in Japanese loud and fast that began with "*Mina San*," (everyone) and ended with "*-nai!*" (do not!) After a few seconds, people began to look away.

He introduced himself as Shunsuke, and said, "Pa-reeze call-eh, *watashi - ano -*"

"Me," I suggested.

"*Hai*," he said. "Call-eh me Shue."

I took his hand and squeezed it.

"*Arigato, Shue. Hajimemashite.*" (Thank you, Shue. It's a pleasure to meet you.)

I held his hand, and we didn't say anything until we got to my stop at Abekawa. I could tell it wasn't his stop, but I tugged on his hand and I knew he would follow me. When we got off the train I said, "*Onaka sui-ta. Tabemasho kudasai.*" (I'm hungry [I wasn't]. Let's eat together please.)

What I wanted to say was, "I am scared and lonely, and you are the only person in Japan who can make me feel safe."

Sometimes the language barrier was a beautiful thing. On a date in America you can say all of the most basic things in a matter of seconds. Then what? Then you have to think

of things to talk about. I knew a month of pidgin Japanese, and Shue knew high school English like I'd known high school French. It took so long for us to learn the basic stuff about each other that two hours seemed like ten minutes.

We sat on the floor with our legs crossed at an *izakaya* (drinking restaurant). Shue drank soda while I drank beer. When I told him I needed alcohol (*alcoholu*), he said, "*Wakata.*" (I understand.) Mostly we fumbled half-correct words, laughed and looked into each other's eyes. We ate sushi, fried chicken, and *okonomiyaki* (cabbage omelette). I held his hand even after he told me he was *ju-shichi* (seventeen) and a *gakusei* (student). I liked the way he said Lizzu. He told me he was a very good baseball player and had practiced kendo from when he was a child. Most of that I learned from gestures. Then I remembered where I knew his face from. Some mornings he would ride the train to Kakegawa to go to school. I didn't recognize him at first that evening because he wasn't wearing his school uniform. I remembered seeing him a few times before and thinking that he looked cute in his uniform. He had always been too shy to look at me. I couldn't figure out how to tell him all of this.

When dinner was over and Shue told me in his own way that he had to go home, I gave him my *keitai bango* (cell-phone number) and asked for his. He seemed a little uncomfortable even after holding my hand all evening. I told him that I was an English teacher and that I would like to help him learn English. He gave me his number and said, "Pa-reeze corr-u me, Lizzu."

"*Ii desu! Eigo wa konpicci deshta,*" I said (That's good! English was perfect).

When I went home that night I got out the giant Japanese dictionary my mother had given me as a going away present. I worked out exactly what I would say to Shue when I called him the following day. I wanted to ask him to ride the train with me so I would feel safe, and I wanted to teach him English in return. It was very hard to make myself understood to him over the phone, but we were able to meet for tea, and we understood each other then.

He made great progress in the first few weeks. Shue already knew a surprising amount of written English from school, but he'd never had much chance to practice speaking it. I used a lot of the lesson plans from my school when we sat at Starbucks or sometimes at a restaurant for dinner. He taught me a lot of Japanese as well. We still laughed like a couple of crushing high school kids and looked into each other's eyes blushing. He didn't hold my hand again until a month later when I kissed him and taught him what it felt like to make love to a woman. I thought I could feel that he had such a kind heart. So gentle.

Shue helped me learn to love Japan. Even though he was so young, he was so big that no one bothered me when I was with him. On the train we sat together, and when there were no seats, he would walk over to somebody—a salaryman or a male student—he'd order them to get up so the lady could sit. They always got up fast and bowed many times to me. Shue would stand in front of me like a bodyguard while I sat behind him. Sometimes I'd reach out and touch the back of his knee where he was ticklish. But he would never even crack a smile when he was on duty

protecting me; he was always stone faced, like one of the Queen's guards. He started spiking his hair and wearing aviator sunglasses. Even the yakuza boys must have thought he was cool.

Shue took me to places I never would have gone with other *gai-jin* (foreigners). We took the bus to the Nihon-daira shrine, a Buddhist monastery high in the mountains in an ancient forest. We climbed stone steps and admired the sloping angles of the red-tiled roofs. He wouldn't let me kiss him unless no one was looking.

"Are you embarrassed?" I asked him in English.

"No," he answered. "Un-a-worthy to be so lucky—*wakanai* (I don't know)."

"I don't understand," I said.

"*Pi-peru* (people) think me too lucky."

"I'm lucky too," I told him.

Then we went inside to look at the katanas and the samurai armor. I learned about the history of the samurai in Shizuoka Prefecture.

I came to love the sound of the Japanese language. It was one of the most wonderful things. I learned to understand just enough that I didn't have to hear it when I didn't want to, yet I could understand it if I focused. I could go into a restaurant and tune out. I didn't have to hear the housewife being condescending to the waitress or the old man cursing the wayward youth of modern Japan. It was like listening to the birds in the park fade into the background on a spring morning—this salaryman was a blue jay, and the schoolgirl was a chickadee.

At times, though, it could work the other way. There were so few foreigners in Shizuoka that perhaps only one in a hundred Japanese could understand an English conversation among us *gai-jin* (foreigners). If you didn't constantly remind yourself of the possibility of that one English speaker, though, you could say some things you'd otherwise never think of uttering in public. That was how I met the Nova girls.

I was on the train, wearing a shawl over my blonde hair, as I'd taken to doing in public when I wasn't with Shue. I was facing backwards, so between that and the shawl, the girls didn't notice me. They came in from the middle door at Shimada and sat down a few seats behind me, continuing a conversation they must have been having on the train platform. My head was leaning against the glass and the hum of the rails was keeping time from Kakegawa to home. I couldn't help but hear every word because it was English.

"It wasn't a car. It was a lorry," I heard an English girl say. "It's a big difference."

"What's that, like a horse carriage or something?" I heard a girl with an American accent joke.

"Londoners don't ride around in horse carriages, anymore, Jen," the Aussie girl said. "They ride around in black cabs driven by Punjabi men who smell of incense."

"Laura!" the English girl said. "That's a bit racist don't you think?"

"Well yeah, it is. But it's true."

"But if it's not a car then, what's a lorry?" the American girl asked.

“It’s like a big truck, you know. For carrying cargo and freight and whatnot on the motorway. What do you call them in America?”

“Tractor trailers.”

“That’s a stupid name,” the English girl said.

“Wait, Poppy, you had sex in the back of some random tractor trailer?”

“It wasn’t random, and it was a *lorry*. And not in the back, the front part. It was parked in the Tesco’s for like three days and the door was open. It was right there and I was only sixteen, and it was with my boyfriend. It was kinda like the danger of it too, you know?”

“That is totally random,” the second Australian girl said. “I’d never shagg anyone in a vehicle I didn’t have the keys to.”

“Uh-huh, *skibbei* (dirty-sexy),” the first Aussie agreed.

“What about you then, Jen? What’s yours?” Poppy said.

“It’s really bad.”

“Go on then. We all did,” Poppy said.

“My junior year – third year to all of you –”

“We know,” the first Aussie said. “We watch the telly. Quit stalling.”

“I got really drunk on spring break in Cabo and had sex with a guy I met the same afternoon.”

“Okay now, that’s well disgusting and all, but *where* was it? It was the worst place, not the worst bloke,” Poppy said.

“It was in the bathroom of a McDonalds near the beach. I was so drunk I barely even remember it.”

There was a communal eruption from the other three girls and the last thing I heard was Poppy saying, “Dear God, my sweet child, please tell me he used a condom.”

There was quiet for a few seconds, and because I couldn't see them, I guessed that Jen just shook her head or shrugged or something, because the first Aussie girl blurted out, "You have herpes. Oh, Jesus, Jennifer, I think you have herpes."

"I don't have herpes!"

I noticed several stern Japanese faces sitting opposite me taking notice of the girls behind me. Some of the passengers shot accusatory looks at me as though I was somehow responsible for their conversation. I wondered how much they could be understanding.

"Did you get checked for AIDS and stuff?" Poppy said.

"I don't have AIDS, you guys, Jesus."

"Well how do you know if you haven't got tested? I can't believe you let a stranger – like – Ah!"

"I've had blood tests since then. I think my doctor would've told me if I had AIDS, and it was the only time I ever –"

"You still have herpes," the Aussie said.

"I don't have herpes, Laura. I think I'd know by now if I had herpes. It was over three years ago."

"You know that like over three quarters of people who have herpes never even have symptoms," Poppy asked. "So how many random – to use your word – how many *random* Japanese blokes have you shagged and given herpes to, Jenny?"

"Oh, seriously, I don't have herpes."

I could see out the window that we were approaching my stop. I was hoping to get up without facing them and walk out the back door unnoticed. But as I got up, I couldn't look back without giving myself away, so I didn't



look. I walked off the train at Abekawa station, figuring the girls would stay on till the main station in Shizuoka City. But unbeknownst to me, they got off as well. As I made the turn halfway down the ramp to the street, they all saw my face.

Poppy froze in horror, pointed at me, and shouted to the other three, "Ah!"

I ran off, sprinting through the crosswalk and down the alleyway on the far side of the intersection. My apartment was very close to the station, so I didn't want them to see me go in.

When I got inside, I knew exactly where I was going, because I was thinking about it the whole time the girls were talking, wishing that my mother had gotten me a more portable dictionary. I was like ninety-percent sure of it the whole time the girls were having that very loud, public, sexual conversation. I kicked off my shoes, rushed over to the dictionary, and opened it to 'H', certain that I knew what the Japanese word for herpes was. I moved my finger down the page until I found it. I was right. The Japanese word for herpes was herpes.

Laura introduced herself when she bumped into me at a Starbucks a few days later.

"It was really embarrassing in the moment, ya know. The shock of the thing. But then we all realized who you were, and it was okay."

"Who I am?" I asked her. "Who am I?"

"You're the blonde American Jet teacher who's shagging the schoolboy."

“What?” I said. “Who says that?”

“Oh don’t be coy, dear. You can’t seriously think you can do something like that and not have every *gai-jin* in the city know about it. There are like twenty of us and you’re the pretty blonde one. And besides, I’ve seen you with that boy. He’s all right.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“So how is he?” Laura asked.

“How is he?”

“You know? Is he good?”

I was a little taken aback by how forward she was, but as she explained later, Laura was Australian – she couldn’t help it.

“He’s young, but he’s more of a man than any man I’ve ever known,” was what I said, eliciting a cheeky smile from her.

“Well, all right then,” Laura said, touching her plastic iced coffee cup to my paper one. “You should come out with us sometime. We Nova girls know how to party.”

Nova was the largest chain of for-profit English schools in Japan. They brought in hundreds of *gai-jin* a year to teach absurdly overpriced English lessons to the general public. For foreigners, it was an easy gateway into the country, but it didn’t succeed in teaching many people good English. The turnover rate for Nova teachers was off the charts, so most of the Nova people didn’t take themselves too seriously. My girls were good fun. Over the course of the fall and winter I went out with them as regularly as I stayed in with Shue.

I finally felt like I was having adventures instead of just being lost in this foreign world. The girls and I climbed Mt. Fuji in September, went snowboarding in Nagano in January, and were planning a big trip to Kyoto for April. Poppy said there would be lots of cherry blossoms. I became more and more certain that I'd done the right thing with my life. Every now and again, this thought would pop into my mind: Me, hanging onto Aaron Venheull's arm as I flashed that gaudy diamond all over the Upper West Side. It made me shudder.

The girls and I used to go out every Saturday to the *izakaya* (drinking restaurant) for *nomi hodai* (all you can drink). The restaurant manager used to keep a table for us near the window so the people in the street would see us and come inside. Men would stop in their tracks, knock on the glass, and gesture to us in the middle of our dinner. The response from us would be anything from totally ignoring all of them to loud profanity and vulgar gestures, depending on how close Laura was to the window.

One night the topic of my shawl came up.

"The scarf makes you look like a Muslim," Poppy said. "I'm not saying that's good or bad, just—"

"An old woman," Katy, the quieter of the two Aussies, said. "You look more like a little old woman from behind."

"Oh, thanks. That makes me feel great."

"But it's clever, that. I think it makes you look more like a spy though," Laura said, "but only when you wear sunglasses as well."

"It works," I said. "I haven't caused a car crash in over three months."

"It's the hair," Laura said.

“That hair,” Poppy said. “You’re so impossibly blonde, it’s fucking beautiful.”

I’d come to learn that Poppy was overtly bi-sexual, and she would often encourage all of us to dip our toes in those waters.

“I reckon if you really wanted to do something about it you could dye it black,” Katy said.

“Oh, God no, please don’t ever,” Poppy said. “That would be a crime against humanity.”

“I’m not suggesting it,” Katy said. “Just that it would be a whole lot less conspicuous. And when it’s summer, are you really going to walk around with a head covering when it’s forty degrees outside (a hundred degrees Fahrenheit)?”

“I did last summer,” I said. “It wasn’t that bad.”

“Anyway, Poppy,” Katy said, “how would you like to walk around attracting every single perverted bloke in the city to come and grope you. Liz’s hair—I hate to say it, Liz—but it’s like a walking advert hoarding (billboard) inviting *skibbei* (dirty) blokes to come grab her.”

“You mean like every Japanese guy,” Jen said.

“I agree with Poppy,” Laura said. “You shouldn’t dye it. It’s too pretty.”

“Thank you,” Poppy said.

“I wasn’t going to dye it,” I said. “I like my hair.”

“God, if I looked like you, Liz, and I had that hair,” Poppy said, “whenever I touched myself it would be to a picture of myself.”

“It’s called a mirror, Poppy,” Jen said.

“Right,” Poppy said. “Even better.”

After dinner and *nomi hodai* (all you can drink) was over, I usually met up with Shue at my apartment. The Nova girls usually spent the rest of their Saturday nights drinking until every bar was closed and then shagging any decent-looking Japanese guy still standing. There weren't ever many of them standing after a night of drinking with those girls. I'd learned fast not to try.

I remember an afternoon shortly after the girls and I returned from Kyoto. Shue and I were lying in my futon on the floor, and he started asking me what my plans were. In a flash, I was approaching the end of my one-year contract with Jet. They too had been pestering me to commit to staying in Kakegawa for another year. Shue had been accepted to two universities, one in Shizuoka and one in Tokyo. He thought it might be fun for us to be in Tokyo together and was asking if Jet could transfer me there.

"*Hai*," I said. "If I ask them, they could. I don't know if I want to move to Tokyo though."

"*Nan de?*" (Why not) he asked.

"*Wakanai*," (I don't know) I answered. "I just don't think I want to move."

"Okay," he said.

"Why do you ask?" I said, leaning over to look at his face. He was looking at the ceiling, and I started to run my fingers through his thick black hair just above his ear.

"*Nan demonai*," (It's nothing) he said. "*Wasulete*." (Forget it)

"I don't know. I haven't thought about it yet."

"*Daijobu*," (it's okay) he said. "I am only thinking. Next-a year *dakara* (because of)."

"I can't," I said. "*Muzukashi* (it's difficult), Shue. I haven't thought about it."

"Not so difficult-o for me, Lizzu."

"*Chu shite*," (kiss me) I said.

"Don't pu-ray with me."

"I'm not playing with you, Shunsuke. Kiss me."

"I'm being serious-o," he said, and I kissed him on the cheek.

He pulled away and looked up at me. I could see he was aggravated, so I apologized.

"I'll be serious I said. So?"

"*Sah*, I want to ask-a you."

"*Nani*?" (What?)

"Your boyfirendo—"

"Nakamura Shunsuke," I said, sitting up beside him. "You are my boyfirendo."

"You unda-stand, *Lizzu Chan* (cute little Lizzu). Don't pu-ray games with me," Shue said. "*Nani* – Why you not marry him-u?"

I took his hand and sat for a few seconds beside him. "*Honto*?" (Seriously?) I asked.

Now he was looking up at me. He gave my hand a gentle tug. I looked away, resting my hand on Shue's chest.

"He called me a few weeks before he asked, and I didn't really understand how serious he was about the things he was saying. He told me that he'd met many girls in New York, but that none of them was like me. He called me a 'keeper.'"

"*Nani sore*?" (What the heck is that?)

“Oh, it’s like a – I don’t know. It’s like the type of person you want to marry, but it also means like to possess something, you keep it. *Wakata?*” (You understand?)

“*Hai, demo* (yes, but) – is so bad thing?”

“I didn’t want to be kept by someone. I didn’t want to feel like I needed him. *Wakata?*”

He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, looking back at the ceiling. “So you come to Japan because break both-a heart?”

“*Wakanai,*” (I don’t know) I said. “*Muzukashi ne.*” (It’s difficult to say)

“We have proverb, *ano* – maybe itsu not true proverb. Maybe only my father say – *ano*, because he is docteru. *Nan da ke.*” (I don’t know)

“You Japanese love your proverbs.”

“*So des-u,*” (this is true) he said. “*Demo, nan to imasu* (but how do you say) – when some-one break-u – *ano,*” he pointed to his arm and mimicked the cracking of a stick with his hands, making a snapping noise. “*Ho ne.*”

“When you break a bone?”

“*Hai. So. Demo,* to fix-u the bone?”

“A cast,” and I mimicked a doctor wrapping plaster around my forearm.

“But, only for short time, before *hospituru* (hospital).”

“Like a splint? When somebody ties like a stick to your arm to keep it from moving?”

“*Hai, so, so. Spu-rinto?* Can use as verb-u?”

“*Hai.* Like the doctor splinted my arm.”

“*Hai,* so the proverb-u would be something like: the splinted bone must be tie down.”

“I’ve never heard that.”

"So ka. You unda-stand?"

"No, *wakanai*."

"*Hai*, so. It mean like, if you get hurt, you must be protected, keep in safe place, so to heal proper. *Wakata*?"

"*Hai*, *wakata*."

"So, Lizzu Chan, is Shizuoka City a safe place for broken heart?"

I leaned back down and kissed his chest. "*Wakanai*," I nestled my head between his arm and shoulder. "It's a good proverb, though. I like it."

"*Mata* (also), for woman, I think the bo-ne – bone?"

"*Hai*, bone."

"The bone should be tie down – *ano*," he paused and reached beside the futon with his left hand where my panties were sitting on the floor next to the mattress. He started running the lace frills between his thumb and forefinger. "*Nani kore*?" (What's this?)

"With lace?"

"*Lei-su*? *Hai*. The bone should be tie down with *lei-su*."

He smiled and wrapped the lace panties around my wrist. "*Sah, ii desu*," (there, it's good) he laughed, then rolled on top of me, kissing my neck and earlobe. He touched me with such tenderness. We stayed in bed for a few more hours, napped, showered and then I took him out to dinner.

After the Nova girls and I got back from Kyoto, I told my boss at Jet that I would be happy to stay on without a contract until I decided what I was going to do. They told me that it was unusual, but they allowed me to do it



because their recruiting numbers were down, and they would've had trouble replacing me.

All of the cherry blossoms were off the trees, and the leaves were out. The entire countryside took on a whole new shade of green from the train window. Countless tiers of green tea bushes ran up the hillsides in ordered hedgerows. I had to marvel at the exactness of it, each space between rows perfectly measured along the slopes of so many wild, jagged mountains. Symmetry from chaos.

On my ride home one evening, I was sipping green tea from a bottle when I had the sudden realization that I felt like I was going home – not to an apartment I stayed at, but to my place. I felt like I belonged. I'd even developed a level of comfort with all the *skibbei* Japanese men running up to me on the street. My proficiency with the language was such that I could usually shout them back. I'd acquired enough useful phrases to shame most of them into abandoning the chase: nothing motivates a Japanese more than the threat of public shame.

One afternoon, I'd gotten off work early and decided to go shopping in the mall near the city center. The Shizuoka mall was this five-story three-dimensional maze beside the train station. It had taken months for me to learn to navigate its tunnels and escalators and walkways. I could usually go there without too many people bothering me, as the line of sight was never too long. I could duck into stores and make myself inconspicuous very easily.

I walked around peacefully for most of the afternoon, browsing mostly, but I bought some lipstick and eyeliner. I realized when I was speaking to the saleswomen that I was almost fully proficient in Japanese. I was thinking in

the Japanese language now, mostly like a child, but it was still full expression of my needs, thoughts, and desires, most of which were that basic much of the time anyway.

A man approached me, and my feet were tired from walking. I was ready to go home. I could see the look on his face, that stupid look of shock and excitement. I wasn't going to take it anymore. I was too tired.

When he said, "So nice-a to meet-a you!" I asked him in Japanese if he really wanted to meet me. Of course he smiled wide and said yes, and he told me how wonderful my Japanese was (*Sugoi!* he said). I asked him if he wanted to take me to dinner and his eyes got wider. I told him I was an American girl and I wanted a cheeseburger, but not McDonald's. He took me to a place I'd never been before called Cherry Beans. The girls had short skirts and striped shirts and blurted out a few well-practiced kitschy English phrases after anyone ordered. But the burgers were the best I'd ever had in Japan.

The first thing I said to him—and the whole conversation was in Japanese because his English was terrible—I said, "First, this is the only time I will ever speak to you. I'm not going to sleep with you. I'm not going to let you touch me or shake my hand or feel my hair. I'm not going to tell you where I live or give you my phone number. We're going to eat our cheeseburgers and I'm going to tell you about myself, then you're going to answer my questions, and we will leave and never see each other again. Do you understand?"

His face got serious, because he could tell that I needed something from him, something real. I think it was the first moment he considered the possibility that I was actually a

person. “*Hai*,” he said. “*Daijobu. Takinori Shunsuke desu.*” (Yes, my name is Takinori Shunsuke.)

I unloaded. I told him about everything – the fact that I needed to wear a scarf to go outside without causing car accidents, the fact that I was accosted by men like him at least three times a day, the fact that I had to date a hulk of a six-foot-two seventeen-year-old so no one would try to put their fingers in my underwear; I told him about the actual time one creep did put his fingers in my underwear, and how that made me feel; I told him about the old man with the ice cream who licked me – everything. By the end of it, he couldn’t even raise his eyes to the level of the table, they were fixed in his lap. Both his elbows were on the table, and his fingers were wrenched into his graying salaryman’s haircut. He looked piteous.

“Words cannot express my shame,” he began, and he went on like that for a minute or two straight, just telling me how deeply he had dishonored himself. I had to interrupt him, even though he protested and insisted on finishing his apology.

“I need you to tell me why,” I insisted. “Why do Japanese men think they can treat me like this? Why is this acceptable?”

The shape of his face changed, and he raised his eyes to the table, but never looked at me.

After several seconds of deep contemplation he said, “I think maybe it’s a calculation. Maybe so many men like me get up every day, walk down the same street every day, take the same bus every day, go to work the same job every day. All our lives, nothing changes. People – same. Places – same. Then something beautiful and different

comes onto the same street that we have never seen there before – on no other day. Like if an *ahodori* (I didn't know) came down from the sky, you would know that it was a special day and you must recognize it, because one side there are all these days, thousands and thousands; and on other side there is just this one chance to see something special."

"What is an *ahodori*?" I asked.

Now he lifted his eyes toward me, but not his head, "It is like a big white bird, a sea bird. Giant."

"Ah, so," I said. "An albatross, we call it."

And he lowered his eyes as he continued, "Perhaps I think it is like if you were on a trip in India and you were so lucky to see a tiger. You might want to take a picture or find any way to savor such a special thing. But so rarely would we, in all the excitement of the moment, stop to consider the feelings of the tiger."

"I'm not a tiger, though, Takinori San."

"*Wakata*," he said. "No you are not. You are a very formidable woman."

I had finished my cheeseburger and Takinori San had finished his explanation, so I said, "If it will ease your burden, I would hear every word of your apology and keep it with me in my heart."

I don't know how long it took, probably three more minutes. He apologized for the shame he had brought on his family, his ancestors – everyone. Then he apologized on behalf of everyone else, the men of Shizuoka, the people of Japan. He said many words I didn't understand, but I understood every bit of their meaning.

When he was finished, we got up from the table together and didn't shake hands. I placed both hands together in front of me and bowed low, saying, "*Domo arigato gozaimashita.*" I knew of no way to thank a person more deeply or formally in Japanese.

Takinori San bowed lower and walked out of the restaurant behind me, having never touched the food in front of him. On the street, we drifted into different directions through the crowd and I never saw Takinori San again.

If anything, the moment I had with Takinori made me even more deeply conflicted. This righteous anger had been building for so long that it felt good to have released it, if only to one person. I also felt deeply ashamed for so fiercely focusing the anger I had toward all of these men onto one person. I carried that weight around for some time—just the feeling that Takinori San was out there carrying all this shame for the rest of them. There was no way to spread it around justly though.

It paralyzed me. I didn't know how to react when men continued to accost me. In some ways that release just filled a reservoir for more frustration to rush in all at once.

It was summer now, and I wanted more than anything to be able to walk to the park in a sundress with my hair out, smelling flowers and lying on the grass. I had a rare weekday off from work and decided to do it anyway. There was a park nearby to my apartment, but I had been wanting to see Sumpu Park, the ancient seat of the

overlords of the Prefecture. It was a twenty-minute walk that was relatively uneventful.

I arrived at the park early that afternoon. I wasn't there for more than a minute before I got a text from Shue. He wanted to meet me as soon as he could get up from Kakegawa. He was out of school, but was visiting with his mother. He told me he'd meet me outside the castle in an hour or so.

I walked around the perimeter of the castle taking a few pictures of the monolithic white walls and the sloping curves of the red-tiled roof. From the path outside the castle, you could look down into the moat where scores of plump orange carp moved through the calm dark water with a slow, easy will. From the island inside the ancient moat, the city seemed a strange conglomeration of concrete and glass. Here there was green and serenity, and just a stone's throw across the water, there was this frenetic civilization born out of this former seat of shogun power. It was impossible to reconcile modern Shizuoka City with this park's reverent beauty and the castle's resonant energy. I felt a strong pull to immerse myself in the castle's timeless space.

I approached the entrance. As I got near, I heard children—lots of exuberant little Japanese voices echoing off the walls, the stone pavement, and the massive wooden rafters. The enormous gate stood open, welcoming now the masses it was designed to exclude in ancient days.

*"Sugoi!"* I heard the voice of a little girl say. *"Sugoi kirei yo!"*

From the moment that first little girl caught sight of me it was all over. Within seconds I had a swarm of school-

children hovering around me smiling, laughing, touching, and trying to catch my attention. I felt like the empress of this old castle with a throng of adoring little subjects following my every step. The teachers were so shocked by my presence that they made no effort to intervene. At one point they stopped everyone to gather and take a group picture with me. They insisted I take a picture with my camera too. I learned that there were two schools, one from Okabe-cho and the other from Fujinomi. They were small towns where probably none of these students had ever seen a white person, much less a blonde.

They touched my skin, one of the boys saying in Japanese, "Wow, it's so soft, just like my mother's skin." One of the little girls started singing – or it seemed like it was singing, the way little Japanese girls so often talk – she said, "*Kirei, kirei, kirei, enzeru mitai yo, mitai yo!*" (Wow, she looks like a beautiful beautiful beautiful angel, she looks like.) The others began to echo her little song. They didn't ask me my name, but just kept calling me "*Enzeru, Enzeru,*" as they were trying to get my attention. I told them over and over in Japanese, maybe twenty or thirty times, "Please. I am not an angel. I am an American girl."

They had come on a field trip to learn about the history of Shizuoka Prefecture, the castle and the park, the armor of the samurai, the katanas, the art and the architecture. They were touching my hair over and over again. Petting it. It was hard not to smile at such unbridled surprise and joy, but it was overwhelming. I took a few pictures of the castle's interior and retreated across the footbridge to the street on the far side of the moat.

I followed the water along the street, looking down at the mottled, orange-and-white carp. There were trees lining the interior of the moat, encircling the park in a screen of foliage I'd never seen within Shizuoka City before. A car honked its horn at me and slowed. I walked past it before the driver had the chance to get his window down.

On a side street, I spotted a sleepy little park with maybe ten or so trees. From a distance, it looked like I could hide there without being bothered. As I approached, I began to understand why no one was sitting in the park. I could hear cicadas. In all that expanse of greenery in Sumpu Park, I'd only heard a few cicadas, but in this small space there had to be thousands. I sat on a bench in the middle of these ten trees as the thousands of cicadas vibrated. The noise was deafening and escaped any kind of characterization I could conjure. I could see the cicadas crawling all over the trees, like little crayfish, buzzing collectively with the force of a jet engine.

I blocked my ears and listened to the loud, dull hum. Closing my eyes, I sat for minutes, out of the sun, away from people, the whole world humming. I started to feel my white skin pulsating with millions of tiny waves. Then I remembered that Shue would probably be there soon.

I met him a few minutes later on the sidewalk by the moat. I didn't want to go back near the castle. We stood for a while looking at the water, talking. I asked him how long the carp live.

*"Wakanai. Nan de?"* (I don't know; why do you ask?)



"I was just wondering," I said, speaking without thinking first. "If I came back to Japan in ten years, would any of these same fish still be alive?"

He didn't say anything, and as soon as I'd said it, I wished I hadn't. I'd never mentioned that the possibility of leaving Japan had ever entered my mind. There was silence for almost a whole minute, save for the passing of a couple cars and the hum of the cicadas far in the background.

Finally, he asked me what I did that day. I told him about the schoolchildren in the castle, the way they had swarmed around me and the things they'd said. I told him that it made me uncomfortable being compared to an angel.

"You do look-a like *kirei angeru, dakara.*" (beautiful angel, because)

"Stop it, Shue. Don't call me that."

He looked surprised and didn't say anything, but he didn't apologize. I decided to change the subject.

"I sat in the park over there for a while too," I said. "There are thousands of cicadas there. I can't describe what they sound like. I've never heard anything like that in America."

"Sound like summer," Shue said. "Everyone says so."

"They're such strange creatures," I said. "Everything about them is so foreign—the way they look, the sound. I learned from one of my students that cicadas hatch out of the ground. Like aliens or something."

Shue started laughing.

"Arien?" he said. "You arien, Lizzu Chan. That-a you too."

"What did you just say?"

"Is not this word?" he said, miffed by my agitation. "So, we use same word as English, I think. When a Japanese move to America he is arien until he can become citizen, and in Japan you are also arien. *So ka?*"

I shook my head at him. I couldn't believe he'd use that word to describe me after he'd kissed me and held me in his arms.

"Is that what you think of me, Shunsuke? That I'm just a foreigner, an alien?"

"Lizzu Chan, *nani?*" he said. "Not what I say. Government of Japan say so."

"So it must be true then?"

He smiled and joked, "Lizzu Chan, *Arien Angeru. Manga no hiro desu.*" (Cute little Lizzu the Alien Angel, comic book hero.)

I hit him the chest, and I felt like a child striking someone so much bigger. I walked away, and Shue followed me.

"*Nani?*" (What?) "*Na-ani?*"

"Don't follow me!" I said. "I don't want to talk to you."

"Lizzu? *Nan de?*"

I opted for a professional, because I'd never done it in my life. I picked a quiet salon on the corner of the third floor in the Shizuoka mall. There was an older woman working on a Japanese housewife who appeared to be in her thirties. The unoccupied hairdresser seemed a little older than I was.

I said it in perfect Japanese and she answered me back, "*Coleru? Hairaito? Yes-u?*"

I said it again, and this was another thing that drove me crazy, because I knew I'd said it correctly. They saw my face and my hair and assumed I must be wrong.

"I don't want highlights, and I don't want streaks of color," I said as the girl took me by the wrist and pointed to pictures of pink, red, or blue accents in a book. "Please. Make my hair look like yours."

The older hairdresser turned around and looked at me, saying openly in Japanese, "I think she must be crazy or something. Or maybe a criminal trying to disguise herself."

She must have also thought I couldn't understand, which was baffling because I was standing right in front of her speaking their language.

"I am not crazy, and I am certainly not a criminal. I just want to be able to walk in a crowd without standing out. Please. Please do me this service."

The girl paused for a moment, considering it. She reached up to touch the hair. Out of instinct, I stepped away from her. I had to stop myself, and she slowed her hand, bringing it forward more gently, like a nurse about to give a shot to a child. She touched my hair ever so delicately, and she looked at it with such longing eyes.

"I cannot do it," she answered me in Japanese.

I bowed and I begged; I told her that she would be doing me a great favor. I told her that if she didn't do it, I would just buy hair dye from the drug store and would do a bad job. I told her I wanted someone skilled to make me look more Japanese. I said *onegai shimasu* too many times to count.

She said, “We Japanese revere great beauty. To ask me to erase something so beautiful and natural – my heart will be very heavy.”

“You will be doing me a great service—to make me more at peace. Please.” I placed my hand over my heart.

Finally, she capitulated and seated me in the chair, placing both hands on my shoulders as she looked down on my hair from behind.

I saw the eyes of the other customer glance over from time to time. I saw the older hairdresser look over often and shake her head. Not another word was spoken while I was in the chair. It felt like a funeral in that small shop as my hairdresser brushed in black dye and folded sheets of foil into my hair to layer in different dark shades of brown. Every so often when she let out a sigh, I could feel the warmth from her breath on my neck. I could hardly bear to look in the mirror after a few minutes. As my head got darker and darker, I had to close my eyes. I felt her gentle hands taking up thin bunches of my long hair, brushing with the greatest intent, as though she were painting a mountain landscape one perfect tree at a time. I had to have been there for over an hour. I almost fell asleep.

“*Sah*, okay,” she finally said, placing her hand on my forearm.

When I opened my eyes she said, “*Gomen nasai*,” (I’m so sorry) and placed her hands on my shoulders again.

I had to hold my breath to keep from gasping, but I couldn’t keep the initial look of shock off my face. She’d done an impeccable job, but I hardly recognized myself. I hated it. “*Arigato*,” I whispered as she took off the apron. “*Ii desu*.” (It’s good.)

The housewife was gone by then, so the older hairdresser was sitting in one of the chairs waiting for customers. She said, "It will take time, pretty girl, but it will grow back just as beautiful if you like."

"Hai," I said. "So desu."

The young hairdresser told me how much, and I paid her, saying, "*Domo arigato gozaimashita.*"

She bowed, and I bowed, and I dared not linger or look in the mirror.

As I stepped into the mall, I put my shawl in my handbag. I don't think I'd ever felt as self-conscious in all my life, as though somehow everyone could tell what I'd done, that they were judging me for trying to be someone I was not. I tried to walk calmly, but as I walked, everyone's eyes still seemed to gravitate toward me. Everyone passing me from the other direction noticed my face instantly despite my new hair color. I tried not to notice, to look away.

I'd only made it a hundred yards from the hairdresser's before a young salaryman walking in the other direction noticed me and slowed. Then he stopped walking.

"Hallo," he said, waving his arm at me.

I tried to ignore him. I didn't look at him, but I could tell he'd begun to follow me. After another few steps he said, "Hallo, hallo, please to meet you."

I tried to keep walking, hoping he would just go away, but he didn't. The salaryman continued to follow, repeating hallo several more times loud enough that it was catching the attention of other onlookers who began to stare at me across the fluorescent concourse. Then the salaryman grabbed my arm.

*“Sawara-naide!”* (Don’t touch me!)

I balled up my fist and swung as hard as I could at him. He stepped out of the way and I missed, stumbling forward and almost dropping my handbag. Several people gasped. A few laughed at me.

*“Hotto-ite-kure!”* (Leave me alone!)

I could feel a year’s worth of pain and frustration welling up inside me as everyone stared. I turned away from the salaryman and I walked for as far as I could without showing any emotion. This time, he didn’t follow. When I couldn’t hold myself together any longer, I rushed to the bathroom. I opened the door and bolted inside. I was already crying, and when I saw myself—my new self—reflecting in the mirror, I let out a noise that was something between a cry of anguish and a cough.

I shut myself in a stall and sat on the toilet seat with my jeans still on. *“Kirai!”* I said. *“Dai kirai!”* (I hate it! I hate it so much!)

Then I sat there and cried so hard I could count the muscles between each of my ribs. All I could think about was the senselessness of a place where the word for beautiful (*kirei*) was almost the exact same word as hate (*kirai*). *“I just want to go home,”* I said in English. *“Please, let’s just go home, Elizabeth.”*

I stayed in my apartment for about a week without going out except for work or for groceries. I hadn’t talked to Shue since the day at the park. We texted every day, and every day he insisted on coming to see me. He told me he wanted to apologize for upsetting me, but it was clear he

didn't even understand what he'd done to upset me. He insisted on coming over anyway. He kept asking me to try and explain it to him. Finally, I relented. I didn't warn Shue about my hair. I'm not sure why. Perhaps I was testing him, but in hindsight, with all the regrets I have from my time in Japan, that one is the biggest. It was so unfair. I had been conscious of what I was going to do before I dyed it, and still the shock of that first look was difficult for *me* to bear.

As soon as I opened the door to my apartment Shue's eyes got wide and he gasped. He didn't utter a discernible word for over a minute. He stood there with his hands on his head, alternating between two different Japanese sounds of exasperated disbelief, the first something like: "EEHHHH?" The other was something like: "OWWA-AHHHH!"

I shrunk each time he made one of these noises. It was the only thing he seemed to see.

"Lizzu Chan," he said. "*Na-an de?*" (Why did you do this to yourself!)

I took him by the wrist and sat him down at my kitchen table. I told him that I wouldn't be renewing my contract, that I was leaving Japan. He asked me how soon, and I said three, maybe four weeks at the most—as soon as the Jet program could replace me and book my plane ticket.

Every inch of his long frame hunched over as his beautiful brown eyes began to shed tears. He buried his head in his hands. He said, "My heart *wa-ima*—I know heart-break also."

He said the following in Japanese so I could never possibly translate it accurately: "Even in Japanese, I do not have the force of expression to characterize this pain, but I

love you still, Lizzu. I wish I could have treated you with all of the care your beautiful heart deserves, but I am not so special.”

There was silence for far too long when he finished, and I had begun to cry with him, yet apart from him.

I said in English, “I am so sorry that I have hurt you, Shunsuke.”

After what seemed like an eternity of silence, Shue stood up, brought his entire frame erect, and bowed with as much precision as a soldier, “*Aishiteru. Arigato gozaimashita. Sayonara desu.*” (I love you. Thank you. Goodbye forever.)

I couldn’t watch him leave. I merely listened from my chair as his footsteps got closer to the door, and finally, I heard it open and then shut. I managed to stand for a few steps, until I was halfway across my bedroom. I dropped to my knees and I crawled into my futon. I wept into my pillow, thinking that it couldn’t feel any worse than this to be fettered in diamonds and tied down with lace. But these are the lessons you learn the hard way in the foolishness of youth, when the pull of independence and adventure is too much to resist.

My final four weeks in Japan were awful. The Nova girls did their best to lighten my spirits, but all they succeeded in doing was getting me drunk. There were ugly scenes, and long days of hangover and depression followed. Every minute I stayed in Shizuoka City I carried around with me the profoundest shame that I couldn’t begin to express or



understand. It was a weight that took years to fully fall away.

When I landed in New York, my parents were waiting to take me back home to Glastonbury. I'd warned them about the hair, and my mother had heard me crying as I told her. The only reaction I saw on their faces was one of joy to see me. My mother and father met me with a different kind of unconditional love, the sweet and easy kind; their kind of love lacked the Japanese intensity that cuts far deeper than my simple American spirit could grasp.

It was night when I got back, and it felt strange to be able to read all the signs—so foreign. I felt as though we were on the wrong side of the road.

The following morning, I got my pictures developed and made an appointment with my hairdresser Angela.

"Elizabeth?" she said when I walked in, "It looks like your hair might have culture shock."

"So," I said, catching myself before I said, '*desu yo, ne.*'

"Um-hmm," Angela said as she ushered me into her chair. "What would you like to do about it?"

As I put my purse between my legs, I took out the picture the schoolteacher taken at Sumpu Castle with all her schoolchildren. "Can you make me look like the girl in this picture?"

"Which one?" she said, smiling as she looked at all the Japanese children. "They're all so adorable."

"I was hoping you could make me look like the blonde one."

"That's a real pretty girl," Angela said, still admiring the picture. "Very beautiful."

She handed me back the picture and draped the apron over me, pulling up my hair as she wrapped the cloth gently around my neck.

“How do you say that in Japanese?” She asked. “Beautiful?”

“They say *kirei*,” I answered. (Beautiful)

Somewhere in a box of belongings, tucked in a corner of my parents' attic, behind my mother's Christmas decorations and the boxes and boxes of books, resides that picture from the castle. In that roll alone there were four pictures of Shunsuke. I imagine that some of those joyous children now have children of their own. I expect that every last trace of those cicadas has vanished from the earth and that all of the fish are now dead.