

MEMOIRS OF A GAIJIN



BY PASCALE CRANE

Memoirs of a Gaijin

Geoffrey Sonnabend's "Cone of Obliscence" illustration that appears on page 15 is reproduced with permission from The Museum of Jurassic Technology.

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*To all residents of Liberty House: past,
present, future and in spirit.*

Introduction

I wrote "Memoirs of a Gaijin" a long time ago, after living in Tokyo for two years. These stories are roughly based on my time there, but I've embellished a bit and changed a lot of the whos and wheres and hows. Looking at it now, I imagine that anyone reading it must think that all I did was hang out with other foreigners and spend all of my time in bars and nightclubs. That's not how it was. I worked with Japanese people, navigated my way through the mundane tasks of daily life in a strange city with a language I didn't speak, even had a Japanese boyfriend for a while. While I can't say I became integrated into Japanese culture, or got to know it nearly as well as I would have liked, I did get to love it, and still do. Maybe it's because I didn't go deep enough to see its dark underbelly. If so, then I'm fine with loving the illusion. There is certainly enough dark reality in the world without my going looking for more, and if I can find a beautiful fantasy to admire and long for, why shouldn't I?

...but that's not what this book is about.

Most of my time in Japan was spent working. In fact I don't think I've ever worked so much in my life. "Liberty House" and the people who lived there, were my respite from that. They - and the gritty, seedy bars of Tokyo - were my only refuge from long hours of seemingly endless pressure and stress. Maybe

one day I will write a book about the things that make me love Japan - the physical beauty that seems to be everywhere, the care and respect people show, the heightened sensitivity that you can almost feel just below the surface of the faces you see in your office, on the street, in the subway...

But this is not that book. This is a book about Cultural Nomads, the spaces they inhabit, and the fleeting camaraderie they share. It is about the excitement of living in a strange land, of always feeling that you're on the edge of something tremendous, where the colors are brighter, the pain is deeper and the ecstasy is sweeter. It is about being wide awake in a world that is new.

Pascale Crane
9 June, 2009

Shiraz

I first came to Liberty House in September. I had arrived in Tokyo with no work visa and no contacts, certain that I would land on my feet and begin immediately making money teaching English and correcting the silly mistakes we all loved to see on Japanese packaging. I had seen other Gaijin houses, and was relieved the moment I walked in the door. There was a tacky bronze Buddha sitting on a shelf near the entryway, and the floor was littered with shoes and slippers. There were things hanging on the walls - I didn't notice what they were at the time, but later I would recognize the framed watercolor of cartoon animals having a picnic, and the hanging calendar in the kitchen with pictures of Mt. Fuji and branches of cherry blossoms.

Mainly what I noticed was that the place didn't have that pathetic feeling so many of the other places had - like there were holes letting the wind blow through the walls, because no-one ever stayed long enough to bother fixing them.

I moved into the room just off the kitchen on the third floor. It was three tatami-mats large and had a big window that looked out over the bicycles below. A thick, plum-colored futon set was folded up neatly against the wall, and the perfect rectangle

of shiny wooden floorboards was cleaner than anything I had ever seen.

I returned to Liberty house after a particularly excruciating day of pounding the pavements. The last woman who had interviewed me for an editing job had cautioned very sternly against deliberately inserting amusing slang or nonsensical turns of phrase in the technical manuals. Apparently this was a problem that plagued the English translation industry in Japan and I assured her that, enticing as it may be, I would not yield to that particular temptation. I didn't realize what a hot day it was until I got home. I went up to the roof. The sky was so clear as evening set in. I went over to the aluminum railing and leaned up against it, looking out as far as I could see. The sky was sharp - cornflower blue, fading into a warm pale yellow just behind the University clock tower. The lines between sky and object were impossibly clear. TV antennae stood out against it like sharp black spidery silhouettes with the pale yellow sky edging down behind them.

It was as if, for these few minutes when the sun had gone but the light in the sky remained, all of the city stood still, just long enough for a person to walk out on top of their house, above all the noise, and be reminded that the tiny cramped noisy space they are in is part of a bigger space that spreads out forever, and that all the while you are stressed and rushed and hating it, this wide open silent sky is still above you.

Behind me, a pink nylon cord stretched from one end of the railing up to a nail sticking out of the makeshift roof covering one corner of the roof. Other people's laundry flapped in the warm wind.

"One day," I thought, "that gas station sign will mean something to me. That yellow stucco building will bring back memories." I laughed to myself at the prospect.



Not long after I moved in, I was standing in the kitchen one evening, heating up a half a squash in the microwave. The door slid open with a loud grinding sound, and Shiraz walked in.

"Oh hello," she said, "I think I've seen you around. I'm Shiraz."

"Hi," I said, "I'm Brazil."

"That's an interesting name," said Shiraz, "just moved in?"

"Yep, last week," I said.

"Oh, right."

Shiraz was chocolate-dark, with long black hair and bravely sculpted features. Her eyes and mouth made her look like a Punjabi Diana Ross, but her nose and cheekbones were more striking than that. She flung her slender body around like a rag doll, and made a point of dressing casually. She was leaning up against the metal sink board, waiting for me to take my squash out of the microwave. Then she went over and put in her freeze-dried rice and packaged curry.

"So how long you here for?" her accent was London-ish.

"I'm not really sure," I said.

I wasn't. I could be there six months, or a year, or two years, or only another ten weeks, if the Japanese Immigration authorities decided they had had enough of me.

"Ri-ight" said Shiraz, as if I had just told her something so fascinating she would be sure to go and think about it later. The door made that sound again, and Nuri walked in.

"Hullo everybody!" he announced. "Guess what I've got!"

Shiraz put her finger up to her lips and rolled her eyes upwards.

"Uh...let's see...freeze dried rice??"

Nuri feigned shock. "How'd you guess??"

He turned to me. "Hello, don't think I've met you. I'm Nuri."

He stuck out his hand. I took it and introduced myself.

Later on, Shiraz asked me what I did on the weekends.

"Nothing so far," I said.

"Oh, we should go out!" Shiraz said, "I can show you lots of places."

We agreed to meet on Friday night, in the kitchen, around 9:30.

Friday night came and went, and no Shiraz. On Sunday, I ran into her coming into the kitchen as she was going out.

"Oh there you are! Listen, I'm so sorry about the other night! It's just that some friends and I went out straight after work, and I had no way to contact you."

"No problem," I said.

"Well listen, some of us are thinking of going out next Friday - if you want to join us."

"Yeah, definitely."

"OK, well look, we'll be leaving from here at around 9:00, so I'll come up and meet you here then, alright?"

"Sure, see you then."

"Great."



I got home early on Friday night, took a shower and changed into clothes to go out in. Then I unrolled my futon, put on some music, and lay down. At a quarter to nine, I got up, brushed my hair and put on some makeup. Then I lay down again.

At nine fifteen, I got up and opened the door. My room opened up out onto the kitchen. I looked out. The kitchen was empty. I stepped into my slippers, and walked out into the hallway. Silence. I turned and went back to my room. "Oh well," I thought, "she'll show up or she won't." At round 9:45, there was a knock on the door. I opened it, and there as Shiraz, looking disheveled and a little forlorn.

Shiraz looked up at me.

"Hi," she said, flinging her hands a bit, "listen, I know we said we were going to go out tonight, but...well, Adam - this guy I've been seeing - he's just left today..."

"That's why her eyes look like that," I thought.

"...and I just really don't feel like going out - thought I might by now, but, I really just need some time to myself..." she looked at me.

"Oh, yeah, of course," I said. I wanted to wrap my arms around her and hold her. Instead, I reached over and touched her on the shoulder. "Yeah, we'll do it some other time. Don't worry about it."

I made arrangements with Shiraz to go to Juliana's, a disco where women got in free on Friday nights. Men had to pay Y5,000.

Next Friday. Definitely.



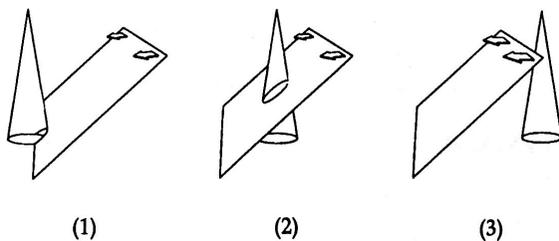
Half a century ago, an obscure physicist named Geoffrey Sonnabend produced a hypothesis about forgetting and remembering.

In a vain attempt to thwart the reality of time's passage, says Sonnabend, we have fabricated something that we call "memory." At best, says Sonnabend, memory can only be an illusion - an illusion we create in order to hold on to an experience that has come and gone.

Sonnabend illustrates his point with what he calls the "Cone of Obliscence." This cone is constantly being sliced by various sections of "Planes of Experience," coming at it from different angles, and striking at different parts of the cone.

The point at which the plane's Obverse Experience Boundary, or "leading edge," first comes in contact with the cone is what we call "being involved in an experience." (Fig. 1.)

Once the plane's Obverse Experience Boundary has passed completely through the cone (fig. B), we say that we "remember" the experience. And once the Perverse Boundary - the "trailing edge" of the plane - has completely passed through the cone, we say that the experience has been "forgotten." (Fig. 3.)



- (1) being involved in an experience
- (2) remembering an experience
- (3) having forgotten an experience.

Depending on the angle of the plane, and where it strikes, these Planes of Experience segments have varying degrees of impact on the cone. A section of a plane striking the tip, for example, at an angle of 90 degrees would have very little impact, while a plane striking near the base at a 45 degree angle would have a much greater impact, as it would move through a much larger portion of the cone.

Once the Perverse Experience Boundary has left the cone, however, says Sonnabend, the experience is gone forever. Even a real "memory" true to the experience is not possible. All that is possible is a fabrication of the incident, created by our imagination, and limited by how we would like it to have been, and by what we are capable of understanding of the experience.

"We, amnesiacs all," says Sonnabend, "condemned to live in an eternally fleeting present, have created the most elaborate of human constructions, memory, to buffer ourselves against the intolerable knowledge of the irreversible passage of time."



We went out that Friday. We took the Yamanote line to some station and changed trains. For a while, we were up on an elevated track, and we could look down and see Tokyo rolling by, in the shadows and light of the evening.

By the time we got there, the shadows had taken over. We hailed a cab for the three blocks or so to Juliana's ("I'm not quite sure where it is," Shiraz had said, "so we're probably better off getting a taxi.")

Juliana's was throbbing with Japanese secretaries ("Office Ladies") dressed in skimpy shorts and halter tops, and brandishing feather fans and feather boas. There were hardly any men, it seemed. The dance floor was surrounded by a sort of stage, which was filled with feathers, fringe, and moving body parts. Shiraz and I climbed up, in our black leggings, man's silk shirt, grunge dress with lots of buttons, and heavy black shoes, and started to dance. We were surrounded on all sides by Office Ladies letting down their hair - not so much dancing as bouncing and swaying. They would hold their arms up in the air and bounce their hips back and forth, the same movement regardless of the music. Shiraz turned to face me and shrugged, her arms outstretched in a gesture of "Why Not?", and I laughed.

Later, we went and found a table and Shiraz ordered some beers. A cuddly looking, shaggy-haired computer geek named Dennis sat opposite us. He had a big nose and a nice face.

"You know, I can tell you're from New York," he said, looking at my outfit. I had on black leggings and a black turtleneck T-shirt and a black jacket. My hair was pulled up in a twist. "Going out means dressing in black, right?"

"Yeah, sort of," I laughed.

We ordered more beers.

"You know, when you flip your hair when you're dancing?" he asked Shiraz. She smiled. "I find that really attractive." Shiraz looked at me. I looked at Shiraz.

I went out on the dance floor. I was in the middle of a group of about five from the table. Shiraz was dancing with Dennis, and she spun around, flipping her hair. She looked at me just then, and I spun around and flipped my hair at her. Shiraz smiled her big smile, and flipped her hair back at me. I flipped. Shiraz flipped. We were dancing.

A guy came up and interrupted us. He asked Shiraz for her phone number.

"Hey! She's mine!" I said, pulling her towards me.

"Yeah, I'm hers!" Shiraz put her arms around me, and frowned at him.

He looked dumbfounded, but bent on his mission, continued. "Well... can I have both your numbers then?"

I looked at him, looked at Shiraz, and said "no."



Several weeks later, a group of us from the house went out. At some point in the evening, I saw Shiraz on the other side of the table. She was wrapped around a tall skinny Asian guy, and she was kissing him. I made my way over to them and looked at him. I looked at her. I shouted:

"Shiraz!" She looked up from her kiss.

"Shiraz! He's not even cute!" She shrugged sheepishly. I screamed again. My throat was feeling sore.

"He's not even cute! He's not even cute!!" I grabbed the guy's arm and pulled him away from Shiraz. She gave up and slinked off.

The guy just stood there, and I patted his shoulder.

Later, she came up to me, barely able to stand on her own, and flopped against me.

"Oh Brazil," she gasped, "I'm soooooooooo drunk."

She closed her eyes and leaned her head on my chest, putting her arms around me. I put my arms around her and held her, swaying back and forth. She lifted her head and put her face in my neck. I kissed her on the neck, and she hugged me.

I looked up and saw Jody looking at us from over by the bar. I pulled my face away from Shiraz's neck, and we stepped apart.

The next thing I remembered was dragging myself from a taxi to the front door of Liberty House, pulling my shoes off and kicking them into a corner, screaming "Shiraz!" up the stairs, and crashing through the door into my room.

The next morning, Jody was sitting at the kitchen table when I came out of my room.

"How are you this morning Petal?" she asked me.

"HMMMMMMMMFFFFF," I pondered, "alright I guess."

"I was just telling Sally here how you stole Shiraz's man from her last night," she said.

"Rescued her from him you mean," I said.

"Well, didn't look that way to me!" She laughed, turning to Sally, "here she was, screaming at the top of her lungs to Shiraz, 'he's not even cute!'," and five minutes later she's got her tongue down his throat!"

"What?"

"Yeah, don't deny it!"

"Jody, I didn't touch him! He wasn't even cute!"

"Brazil, everyone saw...and then later on, she's got him outside on the pavement and she's yelling at him about Tibet!"

This part I vaguely remembered. Something about how everyone in Tibet was going to die and it was all because he had tried to start a fight with my friend Erik, who was standing behind me trying to apologize for something.



It was cherry blossom time, and for a few weeks, all of Tokyo was bathed in pale pink.

Everywhere you went, trees were drooping with white and pink blossoms. By the end of the first week, the spring breezes blew petals into your face and out into the street. Nothing was immune. Drab gray and blue Hondas had their back windows speckled with them. Serious-looking businessmen had to wave their hands in front of their faces to keep the petals from flying into their eyes.

Starting in the afternoons, people would go and sit under the cherry trees, spreading blankets and food and sake and beer. Men in blue and gray suits sat with their pants cuffs riding up on their shins, drinking and giggling under the blossoms.

Down by the river, near Liberty House, the walkway is lined with cherry trees on both sides. On one side, they string up pale pink paper lanterns, and people sit out there until after

midnight, drinking beer out of giant kegs and singing along with their boom boxes and portable karaoke machines.

We all went down there early one evening.

Shiraz was walking next to me.

"What do you think would happen," she asked me looking up in front of us to where Zeljko and Nuri were walking, "if we asked some guy if he wanted to sleep with both of us?"

"Excuse me??" I turned and stared at her.

"Yeah," she turned to me, "I bet we could do it...seduce some handsome gentleman together..."

I laughed. The cherry branches were swaying back and forth in a slight breeze.

"Well," I said, "I think any guy in his right mind would be crazy to say no..."

"There you go," she said, "now we've just got to pick our prey..." she stopped, looking up ahead.

There were some young Japanese partying under the trees up ahead of us. They saw us and jumped up, shouting and thrusting beer into our hands. Then they started chanting and gesturing for us to drink - everyone but the winner had their cups filled again.

Shiraz clinked her paper cup against mine, and drank it down.

Off to my side, Stephanie's eyes were wide open. She was already drunk, and she stood there, laughing with the Japanese surfer, and holding on to Olga, as she waited for the young man to fill her cup. She turned to me, saw me looking at her, and she laughed, falling forward, her cheeks glowing. She raised her cup in the air, to me. I raised mine back.

Shiraz reached up from where she was sitting on the ground and pulled me down by the arm. I had just said something to her, and now she was saying something to me.

She flopped over, laughing. Then she sat up, her eyes beery, her neck scrawny and her head looking way too big for her body. She looked at me for a good beat, and then burst into laughter again.

"You can't mean it!"

"What?" I said, taken aback.

"You want me to ask Zeljko if he wants to sleep with both of us?!?"

"Well that's not quite what I said..."

"Ih tis!"

"No!" I said, "I only said if you were to ask him if he wanted to sleep with both of, he would say yes...I mean, you brought it up!"

"Well what's the difference?"

"Between what?"

"Between what you said and what I said?"

"Well, I wasn't actually proposing something..."

"Well why not???" She burst into laughter again.

"Oh come on, he's...you know, he's one of us..."

"Alright, it'll have to be a stranger then."

"No, that's not what I meant...just...well, let's just keep our eyes open and see what materializes...I mean, it doesn't have to happen..."

She looked at me, biting her lip, a mischievous smile brewing.

"No, but don't you think...well, I think it would be an adventure...it would be a shame to miss out on it, don't you think?"

I smiled. "Yeah, yeah, it would."

"So, I'll keep my eyes open."

"Me too. And we're going out next Friday, right?"

"Right."



A few days later, Shiraz was standing at the sink in the kitchen, a catlike smile just about to burst out of her. I walked in, took a squash out of the refrigerator, and started to cut it up.

"Hi," I said.

"Guess what I've done!" Shiraz exploded.

"What?" I asked.

"No, go on, guess!"

"I don't know, tell me."

"Oh!" She flailed her hands about. I guessed she had been drinking.

"Oh alright then," she paused, and then burst out with "I went and snogged Mark Four!!"

I couldn't immediately place Mark Four. I knew that there were several Marks in Shiraz's life at the moment, and that they had all descended upon her at once, so she had given them numbers, so as to be able to keep track of them. But I wasn't sure which one was number Four. Shiraz reminded me that he was the one who taught with her at Nova.

"Oh, and I didn't even want to really," she said. "Do you know what I mean? It just kind of...happened..." Her hands went flying. "Oh Brazil, I'm such a tart...I just couldn't control myself...oh! Do you know what that's like?" I laughed.



Shiraz went home for a few weeks soon afterwards. She came by to leave some things for me to watch for her, since she wouldn't be coming back to Liberty House when she returned. She left her umbrella, and a long mirror, and her miniature cactus named Harry. Even though I knew she would be coming back, the wind still swept through me. I put on some music and lay down.

Bruce was on fire. Before, he used to pull me back to a time when I lived near the ocean and spent one night climbing up a sheer cliff from the beach and walking four miles into the next town. Now he pulled me back to Shiraz.

Sonnabend doesn't talk about the holes left by the planes after they slice through the Cone of Obliscence. Sometimes, as a section of plane leaves, it goes so quickly that it pulls a little bit of the cone with it as it flies away. Other times, a plane slices through so powerfully that the top of the cone is left hanging helplessly in the air, bisected from its bottom half, with the

wind just sweeping right through the middle until it closes up again.

I was afraid of being alone, but it was also juicy to me. Even before anyone actually left, I was looking forward to that thirsty emptiness, having someone to miss.

Sometimes I wondered whether I was addicted to these gaping holes people kept slashing in me. Whether this was the only way I could really feel life - to be split wide open by someone tearing themselves from me, and then I could feel who they were, by the hole they left.

I think I craved this emptiness because it was the only way I had of knowing that anyone had ever been inside of me.



Shiraz came back, and we went out dancing a few more times. But I was going out with some guy, and she was spending a lot of time with her new friends, now that she was no longer living at Liberty House.

The last time I saw her, she was stumbling into me, leaning on one of my shoulders and grabbing onto the other one.

"I need your expert advice!" She said, closing her eyes.

"About...?"

"About... him!" She pointed wildly, her eyes still closed, but pointing towards the Japanese guy she had been dancing with.

"What about him?"

"Well..." she opened her eyes, and took a moment to focus them on mine. "I think I might... like him," she said.

"This isn't going to interfere with our plan is it?"

"Oh! I don't know!" She closed her eyes again, crumpling against my shoulder.

"Well," I said, "I'll check him out, but remember you do have a prior commitment."

"Yes!" She said, standing up straight and opening her eyes wide.

"Go dance with him, I'll come and check him out."

"Brilliant!" She turned on her heel and, lifting her arms into the air, was squeezed back into the crowd.

He had long hair, just past his shoulders, and was very genki looking. He was wearing a mesh T-shirt, and his shoulders and neck were sleek and well-toned. He had a wide smile and his face was well-muscled. He smiled at me when he caught me looking at him, and he tapped Shiraz on the shoulder. She turned and looked at me, then laughed.

"I'm going now," I said to her.

"OK," she said. "Do you have a verdict?"

"Yeah," I said, "it's O.K." I nodded my head in approval. She smiled broadly and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"I'll see you later," I said.

"Alright," She said from around his neck, "see you!"

Olga

On Tuesday, I was coming up the stairs, and a new lodger was coming down. I had heard something about an IFC cultural exchange program person. This must be her, I thought. She was tall and slender, with short blond hair, curly at the ends, and pale pink skin and pale eyelashes. She had a strong, confident jaw, and she looked me straight in the eyes as she came down the stairs towards me.

I was debating whether or not to say hello, when the girl stuck out her hand and introduced herself.

"Hello, I'm Olga," she said.

I was immediately on my guard. Anyone who introduced themselves this readily was probably into communal living and everyone cleaning up after themselves, and she probably did her laundry by hand. She said she was from Sweden, and that scared me too. Who could tell? She might want to put the whole house on some kind of welfare scheme. I took the girl's hand, and introduced myself.

The next time I saw her was the night before I had to leave for Hong Kong, around eleven o'clock. I slid open the kitchen door. The room was filled with people, and the kitchen table was littered with beer bottles and ashtrays. There were no empty seats, so I stood at the sink and fixed myself some rice at the stove.

Stephanie smiled and said hi. When Stephanie smiled, her cheeks got very cuddly looking, and she looked like she was saying "Cheese!"

I said hi. Stephanie asked me how my day had been.

"Crazed," I said. I told her I had to get up at six the next morning to leave for my visa run to Hong Kong.

"Oh, are we going to keep you up?" Stephanie asked.

"No, I sleep with earplugs. I never hear anything."

"OK, if you're sure." I nodded.

Stephanie turned to the group. "Hey guys, let's play a game!"

Everyone pretended they hadn't heard her.

"Come on, it'll be fun," she wasn't going to give up.

A couple of people turned to listen to her. "Come on," she said one last time, "we're going to play a game." The room was nearly silent now.

"OK, here's how it goes. Everybody has a sign. It can be anything. No words though. Just something visual. OK? So my sign will be this," she tugged on her ear. "Olga, what's your sign?" Olga made a fist and hit the bottom of her chin with it. "OK, Nuri, what about you?"

"I'm a Libra," Said Nuri proudly.

"No, Nuri, come on...make a sign."

"OK, How about...this?" Nuri hit his forehead with both hands.
"Ouch, that hurts! Here, how about...this..." Nuri stuck his finger up his nose.

"Great!" said Stephanie. "OK, now the game is, we go around in a circle once, and everybody does their sign. Brazil, are you playing?"

"Yeah, OK."

"OK, you have to have a sign."

I thought for a moment, and then scratched my cheek.

"OK, great. Now - how the game works..."

We spent the next hour or so trying to remember each other's signs. There were maybe twelve of us altogether, with some people leaving and new ones coming in. You had to make someone else's sign, and whoever's sign you made had to then make someone else's sign, and they had to make someone else's, and when someone made your sign and you didn't respond quickly enough, you had to drink.

After several rounds, I thought of something.

"Has anyone ever played Truth or Dare?" I asked.

"Hey! Great idea!" said Stephanie. "What do you think Olga?"

"I'm not really sure how you play..."

"That's OK, Brazil, you can explain it..."

I started to say that I didn't really know how to play either, I had just seen the Madonna movie, and it looked like fun, but a big

guy named Dave, who had perpetually half-closed eyelids and the beginnings of a beer belly, interrupted.

"Oh yeah, I know how to play..."

"Great!" said Stephanie, "Is everyone in?"

Jody went first, and chose dare. She had to stand on her chair and sing the Australian national anthem. Then it was Dave's turn. Stephanie dared him to go out to the window in the hallway, take off his pants, and yell out the window at the top of his lungs "Stephanie is an amazing sex goddess!"

Dave went out into the hallway and closed the door. A few moments later, the door opened again, and Dave handed someone his pants. Dave slid the window open, and shouted "Stephanie is an amazing...um...goddess thingy." He came back in, and then it was Al's turn to pick someone. He chose Zeljko. Zeljko chose Truth.

"Do you have a hairy bum?" asked Al.

"Oh God!" Shiraz spat beer into the air.

Zeljko contemplated the question for a moment, then said "ah-hhh...yis. Yis I do. I do have a hairy bum."

"Prove it!" Someone shouted.

"No," said Stephanie, "he chose Truth. He doesn't have to do anything."

Shiraz asked next. She chose Stephanie.

"Stephanie," Shiraz looked cunningly over at her victim, "have you ever fantasized about having sex with another woman?"

Stephanie considered the question and said "I'd have to say...no. I haven't ever fantasized about having sex with another woman."

"But she had to think about it!" Said Dave.

"I have!" Said Al.

"Oh shut up."

Annabel, from the Philippines, got the next question. No-one was choosing Dare anymore.

"When was the first time you masturbated?"

Annabel just sat there.

"Sorry?" She said.

Someone explained it to her. Annabel was silent, and a little red.

"Never," she said.

"Oh come on!"

"No - never."

"Haven't you wanted to?"

"No."

"I don't believe her."

Annabel didn't say anything.

"I do," someone said.

The room was silent for a moment, and then it was Doug's turn to ask.

Doug asked Stephanie what the worst thing was that had ever happened to her in a relationship. Stephanie dropped her head,

muttered something to herself from under a sheet of long blond hair, and then looked up again. She looked around the table, and then smiled nervously, biting her lip.

"OK, let me preface this by saying that I think I may be a little unusual. I'm 23 years old, and I've really only had one serious relationship." No-one said anything, so she continued.

"So what happened was, I'd been going out with this guy for about two months, and then we finally slept together. He was the first guy I had ever slept with.

"So anyway, we had been together for, what, almost a year and a half. We did everything together, had a great time together...great sex...and then suddenly, he just stops calling me, and he won't return my calls. I can't get ahold of him. So I'm starting to go crazy, I don't know what's going on, and after about two weeks of this, I call him and he answers the phone, so I ask him what's going on. He was kind of nervous, and said he couldn't talk...and I started, like screaming uncontrollably, and then he says he's going out with someone else now.

"What I remember," she said, looking down at the table, lost in her memory, "was this half-pint carton of milk, and the hands on my alarm clock. I think the thing was, time had slowed down so much it almost stopped. Those days when I was trying to get ahold of him...I would look at the clock every 30 seconds at some points, looking to see how long it had been since I last tried calling. It was a nightmare. It felt like I was trying to see how long I could hold my breath, and I just kept looking at that clock. It was torture... each time I looked, I knew it would only be like 40 seconds, or a minute if I was really strong...I thought I would never make it to the next minute...but somehow the hours went by. And then the milk carton was when I finally did get ahold of him. That's what I happened to be looking at when he said he was... going out with her...I was probably just looking around the room, and my eyes happened to be on the milk carton for a split second...but that was the second when he said it...and time just froze, and burned that image into my mind

forever. I'll always remember that stupid milk carton. It just made me feel sick for the longest time."

"What did you say to him?"

"I didn't say anything then. I was too stunned. Then, later, I ran into him on campus, and he wouldn't even look at me. Right before I left to come out here, he called me up, and asked if we could get together before I left. So we met for coffee, and he said he just wanted to...bury the hatchet, you know? Could we just shake hands and make up?"

She laughed.

"I just said 'whatever.'"

She stopped for a moment.

"I don't know, what can you say to that? I guess he wanted to clear his own conscience or something, but for me it was...it was just over."

The next question was for Zeljko.

"What sexual position do you like best?"

Zeljko laughed.

"Doggie style," he said, "I think all men do."

I went downstairs to the beer machine. It was closed, and all the little red lights in front of the beer cans blinked happily at me. "Shit" I said, to the night. I looked at my watch. It was nearly 2:00 am.

When I got back upstairs, Al was talking about his old girlfriend in London, where he was from.

"She came from a very traditional Indian family," he said. We were together for six months before we decided to have sex.

We went down to Family Planning together and everything. And then when we finally did it, it was... incredible..." His brown cheeks glowed, and his eyes were alight, looking around the room. "I can't even describe it," he said, "it was just incredible."

Dave asked Olga to describe the best sexual experience she had ever had.

"Well," she said, "I've only ever slept with one person."

"No way!" Dave was incredulous.

"Yep," Stephanie answered for her roommate.

"I have been having the same boyfriend now for six years," said Olga.

"And you've never been with anyone else?"

"Nope."

"Well," said Dave, "then tell us about your best sexual experience with him."

Olga drew herself up very slightly. The muscles around her mouth clamped a little tighter. She looked around her.

"Go on," said Dave.

"I prefer not to," she said, "can't I do a Dare instead?"

"Aw come on! That's not how you play!"

"Come on, just this once," said Stephanie.

"No way, then everyone will get out of it!" said Al.

"Hang on," said Dave, "I'm the one who asked it, so I get to say. And I say she can do a dare."

"Thank you," said Olga.

Dave laughed an evil laugh, "you haven't heard the dare yet!"

Olga sighed.

"Alright," said Dave, "You've got to tell us the color of the underwear you're wearing right now..."

"But..."

"Or," he continued, "if you're not wearing any, you've got to go get the last pair of underwear you wore, and show them to us."

Olga looked at Stephanie. Stephanie looked at Olga.

"OK," said Olga, "I'll be right back."

"I'll go with her," said Stephanie.

"It takes two people to find a pair of underwear?" asked Dave.

"Relax," said Zeljko, "They're girls."

After several minutes, Olga and Stephanie emerged at the kitchen door. "Ready?" asked Olga.

"Oh come on!"

Olga pulled from behind her a pair of white panties with blue flowers on them, and a ketchup-stained Kotex in the crotch. She immediately turned red, and Stephanie dragged her into the kitchen.

Everyone was laughing.

"Good on you!" said Jody.

"I have to admit, that went beyond the call of duty," said Dave, reaching over and shaking Olga's hand.

"Yeah, Olga's like that," said Stephanie.

It was nearly four am, and people started to drift off. Doug stood up and picked up a few beer bottles. Nuri scraped his chair back, stood up and stretched. Dave belched.

"Goodnight everyone," said Doug.

"Hey, goodnight," said Stephanie as she stood up groggily and headed for the door.

I opened the door to my room, turned on the light and started to pack.



Olga and I got up late one morning, and went to the public baths. We walked down the street to the sento two blocks away, carrying our plastic baskets of soap, and our towels. Once we were inside, time stood still. People spoke, but their low voices were drowned out by the rush of water. We scrubbed ourselves clean, and then scrubbed ourselves again, and then again, until parts of our bodies were red.

We watched the Japanese bodies around us. Some were young and firm, others sagged beyond imagination. I wondered if my breasts would one day become paper-thin and hang down to my navel, if my "damn fine ass" would shrink, and tuck itself in, as if sucking itself up inside me. And where did they get those ghastly scars?

We stood up and walked over to one of the tubs. I lowered myself in slowly, watching my limbs go under the water, watching

as if they were someone else's, and I couldn't feel the scalding heat. Olga gave a shiver as she sunk in. She looked over at me and grimaced. We each sat with our backs up against the jets, and were lulled into a place with no time and no pain. We sat there like that, watching the Japanese women bathe the same body part over and over again, the woman closest to the tubs rinsing her hair and twisting it around, rinsing and twisting, rinsing and twisting, the same movement repeated endlessly. We watched the slippery blue tiles on the walls, and the electronic digital sign that hung between the men's and the women's baths, running red and orange Kanji messages over and over and over. Then, in another moment, the heat was back, and we both wanted to get out and go rinse off under cooler water.

Olga stuck her feet into the basin, filled with cool water from the tap. I filled mine with water as cold as I could get it, and then stuck my face in it. I lifted my eyes out, and then opened them, looking into the water. "This is a place I could just be forever," I said to Olga. "You know?" I looked up at our infinite reflections in the rows of steam-covered mirrors. One set of infinite Olgas laughed and nodded their heads.

The smell of soap filled the air. Voices bounced infrequently off the tiles, too low to be heard clearly. We didn't even hear the rush of water anymore, it was everywhere.

We came back from the baths and went up to the third floor. I opened the door to the kitchen, and we went in. It was empty, except for Doug and Stephanie who sat at the table playing cards. Stephanie looked up.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," she said. "Did you guys hear about Al?"

"No, what?"

"He's been arrested," said Doug.

"No way!" said Olga, her eyes wide and her mouth hanging open, her skin still bright pink from the bath. She looked to Stephanie. Stephanie nodded, as she shuffled the cards.

"He got really drunk last night, and he ran out to Lawsons, and he stole a pizza," said Doug. "He got away with the pizza, but then he went back to get more cheese, and the cashier had called the cops by then, so they grabbed him."

"Yeah," said Stephanie, "he was yelling at them..."

"Oh yeah!" said Doug, "and then he spat on them and said he was gay and had AIDS!"

The door slid open again, and Jody walked in. She looked around the room at all of us.

"What's happened?" She asked.

"Al's been arrested!" Said Olga.

"They found out that he had overstayed his visa," said Stephanie, "and they took him to the detention center."

"Nuri heard them come in last night, to get his things out of his room," said Doug, "he said they were really nasty."

Olga and I decided to go and visit him at the detention center a few days later.

We met at Edogawabashi station.

"Do you mind if we wait for Zeljko?" She asked, "I called him at work and asked if he wanted to come." I said sure.

Twenty minutes later, I was getting impatient.

"Are you sure he knows which station to come to?" I asked.

"Yes, I gave him the directions on the phone...I don't know...he may have been delayed at work..."

Another train pulled in, and we craned our necks looking up and down the platform, as people rushed past us getting off the train.

"There he is!" Said Olga, pointing down the track. She ran up and kissed him. He put his hand lightly on the small of her back and kissed her on the cheek.

"Sorry I'm late," he said.

Inside it was the color of rotting walls, and a heavy gray silence filled the building. We all filled in applications, and handed them in.

"Your passports?"

"Ah, I didn't bring mine," said Zeljko.

"I'm sorry, you can't go in without showing your passport."

Zeljko turned away from the counter, "Jesus!" He said.

"Come on," said Olga, stroking his shoulders, "don't make a problem. It will only make trouble for Al, right? Come on."

"Yeah, yeah, alright," he said.

Zeljko waited with us until our names were called. He didn't say much, just nodded or said "hmmmm" when Olga asked him something.

Olga talked a lot. She kept saying to Zeljko wasn't he glad he didn't make trouble, now we would get to go in and see Al? And she would reach over and pat him on the leg.

"You'll get to come back later in the week, and you can see him then," she said, rubbing his leg with one hand.

"Mmm-hmmm..." he said.

I thought he might explode at any minute.

Finally, Olga and I got in to see Al. We said good-bye to Zeljko, and went in. They took our packages of cookies, and the letters we had brought from some of the people at Liberty House, and put them off to the side.

"He will get them later," they told us.

They took us to a little booth with chairs at a counter, and a wall of glass dividing the counter in half. A guard brought Al into the other side of the booth.

"Welcome to the New Otani Hotel," said Al cheerily, "we're undergoing a little renovation now, but we hope your stay won't be disrupted!"

He looked like he had lost weight. He had shaved what little hair he had off his head, and had started to grow a beard. His white teeth stood out like a skeleton's against his muddy brown skin. He cracked a few more jokes, nervously looking to the guard by his side. He was talking very quickly, and we realized that he wasn't giving us much of a chance to say anything.

"You know, it's actually rather embarrassing to have so many people visiting me all the time," he said, "it's not necessary you know. I mean I really appreciate it, and I can't believe all of you have been so considerate, but it's really not necessary."

Later, after he was back in the UK, he called and spoke to some of us on the phone. He told us he had been beaten when he was in the detention center.

"It's so funny," said Olga, as we walked back to the train station. "One day he is crashing through the cabinet in the kitchen, and

we are all laughing at what a fool he is, and then the next day, he is being kicked out of the country."

"So what are you going to tell your boyfriend about Zeljko?" I asked her before we got onto different trains.

"I'm just going to tell him," she sighed, pursing her lips together. "What else can I do?"



Olga was leaving in less than a week. Stephanie would leave soon after. Stephanie and Olga had started drinking that afternoon on the trains coming home. After 3:00 pm, no-one could distinguish one group of alcoholic fumes from another on the Tokyo subways, and no-one gave them a second glance. Olga had been using the same train ticket all day, and she wanted to see how long she could get away with using it.

They had a party in her room, everyone sitting around the kotatsu - the table with a heater underneath that you plugged in in the winter, threw a quilt over the whole table and sat and did your homework or whatever there - eating pretzels and drinking mysterious mixed drinks.

After most of the people had left, Stephanie and I were still there, talking about what she would do after she left Japan.

"You can't go!" I said. "We're going to miss you so much...and you know you haven't been here long enough!"

"I know," she said, "but I really want to do this grad school program... I don't know...I feel like I've bitten onto something I'll never be able to let go of now...I'll never be satisfied just staying in one place. You know?"

"Yeah," I said. "You'll be back."

Olga came into the room then, and collapsed near Stephanie.

"Hey! Are you alright?" Stephanie stroked Olga's head. Olga lay there, her eyes closed, and shook her head.

"Can you sit up?"

Olga shook her head, and clutched Stephanie's leg.

"O.K.," Stephanie stroked Olga's head some more. "Do you need to throw up?"

"No." Olga managed to utter. She struggled to pull herself up. "Stephanie, what am I going to do?"

Stephanie just sighed, and pulled Olga to her chest, saying nothing.

"I just wanted to try something new...I just wanted to have a wild time and have fun...and now..."

"I know..."

"I'm so afraid...I just wanted some excitement... some freedom... Stephanie, I can't go back to Karl...I can't go back to him, but I can't stay here...I have nowhere to go..."

"Don't be silly," said Stephanie, stroking Olga's hair, "you'll go home, meet someone else, everything will work out..."

"Maybe someday in the future," said Olga, "but not now... now it is killing me!"

Stephanie held Olga to her, and looked over at me. Even she was at a loss now.

"...He doesn't know me..." Olga emitted from Stephanie's shoulder. "...He doesn't even know me anymore...I don't have anything...I'm going to die!"

"You're not going to die," said Stephanie.

Olga moaned, and tried to stand up quickly, like she suddenly had to throw up. But instead of standing, she fell forward, her full weight landing across Stephanie.

"Olga!" Stephanie started to shake her, "Brazil, she's passed out! Help!" I rushed over and we laid her out on the floor. She was breathing, so we just sat there with her, for what seemed like a long time, and then picked her up and carried her to her bed and covered her up.

Dancing

I was walking to the subway station, when I heard a voice call out behind me.

"Hello," the accent was thick Australian.

"Hi," I said, after turning around. He was a young, good-looking guy, with dark hair, a big nose and a goatee, with big Italian-looking eyes a little close together, and he wore a nice suit and tie.

"I saw you at Liberty House," he said, "I just moved in there."

"Oh yeah," I said, "where are you from?"

"Sydney," he said.

"What are you doing here?"

"Ah, I work for a computer company, you know? Computer engineering?" I nodded. "And what do you do?" I told him and he nodded.

I was a little relieved to see that we were approaching the subway station. He seemed like a nice enough guy, but not someone I really had a lot in common with. I looked at his eyes. There was no real connection behind the smile. I figured he was probably really into sports, and drinking, and lots of sex with cute Asian girls.

"What's your name?"

I told him.

"That's an unusual name isn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess so," I wasn't in the mood to tell the whole story behind it. "What about you?"

"Zeljko."

"What kind of name is that?" I asked.

"Croatian," he answered, "my family's Croatian, but I grew up in Australia."

A couple of nights later, I was just getting out of the shower, when I heard Zeljko's voice in the stairs. He was talking to Olga and her roommate Stephanie, who had just arrived, on the stairs.

I immediately pictured Stephanie, in her teal blue and purple Patagonia parka, stopping at the doorway of the kitchen, just to look in and say hi. She had long, straight blond hair, like a Barbie doll's, and a fresh, open face with eyes that grabbed you - bright and sparkly, lined with mascara and a smear of blue eye-shadow. She looked like she belonged on a ski slope or a surf-board - or maybe an outdoorsy beer commercial.

Stephanie was saying to Zeljko that she had been to Australia and really liked it.

"Ah, we should git together sometime."

"Yeah, that'd be great!"

"Hey, a bunch of us are going out to hear some band tonight. Why don't you come along?"

I tensed up. "Great," I said to myself, "she's not even here two days and already she's grabbing up the only attractive guy here." Then I reminded myself that I wasn't attracted to him. What a weird thing jealousy is, I thought. I wondered how many men I had ended up with just because I was afraid someone else was going to.

I finished drying myself off, and opened the door, releasing clouds of steam into the now-empty hallway. I climbed the stairs to the third floor.

Outside the train station, there were Pachinko parlors, and a donut shop, and we could see the faces of fortune tellers lit up in the dark by the lanterns on their tables on the sidewalk.

"I predict..." said Zeljko, to a pretty fortune teller at one of the tables, "...that you will fuck me tonight!" She put her hand over her mouth and giggled.

The club was downstairs, dark, low-sunk and roomy, with lots of tables and a long bar. There was a space at one end of the floor for the band, and space around that for dancing. The place was packed with Americans, Europeans, Japanese, Filipinos, Iranians, Indians...and there was a sign on the wall with a caricature of a policeman, pointing his oversized finger out at the crowd. The words on the poster warned that foreigners were required to carry their passports or Alien Registration cards with them at all times. The poster listed heavy fines and possible de-

tention for noncompliance, and warned that trafficking in drugs was illegal and carried heavy penalties.

We went in and staked out a long table for ourselves and started ordering beers.

After a few rounds of beer, the band came on, and some of the group went up to the dance floor. I walked out onto the floor cautiously.

Memories of high school assaulted me from all directions. I had never danced all through high school, or even in college. I had always been petrified of all those people who could dance, who looked good, who weren't fat, and knew what was going on. I was so terrified of being seen by them, of their laughing at my pathetic attempts at movement, that I never even tried. Even so, just standing on the dance floor was petrifying enough.

Even now I could feel the fear - being on a floor surrounded by pulsating bodies, music pounding against my heart, pulling at me, wanting to lift me up. And me, just standing there. Not knowing what to do, wishing I could melt into the floor, or just sidle off inconspicuously, weaving myself through the crowd so no-one would notice.

I still felt that tension, the movement all around me, the pulsing lights, and the rhythm, and the tension of being the only still object in that flood of energy - and it all came crashing up against me and banged right off me again - I could feel my body tensing up against the strain.

This time, I told myself, it would be OK. There was no-one from high school here. I stood there, motionless for a moment, long enough to feel that tension, and the terror of being the only one not moving to the music, and then, after I had felt that, and let it feel me, I started to move.

I let the music creep into me and tell me what to do. I could feel it glowing just above my stomach. I held onto it, wrapped

myself around it, and let it carry me. If it wanted to lift me up, I would fly - and I knew I didn't need to worry about falling down.

I was in my own world now, dancing alone, and feeling the rhythm pulsing through me, powerfully, slowly. I noticed it was a different rhythm from what everyone else around me was doing.

I floated like this for a while, and then I noticed someone dancing jerkily next to me. Just then, I found myself thrown off my rhythm. I had become annoyed. I looked around. There were too many people in my space and having to defend it took my attention off the rhythm.

I whirled around, hoping to have some space in the spot I whirled to, but was faced by a couple jerking quickly back and forth. I steamed, spun back slowly to where I had been, and settled into a smaller rhythm, trying to avoid the flying limbs all around me.

All of a sudden, someone bumped into me from behind and came crashing forward, crouched down and strutting like Mick Jagger in his rooster walk, flapping his elbows and crowing like a deranged bird. That was it. I was pissed off.

I recognized him as Zeljko. He was down on the floor with his arms up in the air now, in too-tight jeans and a white T-shirt, and hair slicked up like a greaser, with sideburns that made him look like Elvis. Still down in a crouch, he spun around, hitting someone in the leg. People started to move back, making a little more space around him. He didn't even seem to notice. He jumped up from his rooster crouch and whooped out loud. People pretended to ignore him, and kept on dancing. He looked tough, in his Elvis hairdo and biker goatee.

He also looked a little lost. Like me, he was dancing in his own world, and he didn't seem to notice the crowd of people, or the growing space around him, or the nasty looks he was getting.

He strutted around in a circle, a big grin on his face, sticking his chest out, looking from side to side.

He was dancing up close to the stage, which was on the same level as the dance floor, and once or twice he bounced into the mike stand. The band members politely bounced him back, but he never stopped bouncing. Never missed a bounce.

I was peeved. I had lost my old rhythm, and was now just dancing with the crowd. I just wanted to dance, and this guy was taking up all the space. Still, obnoxious as he was, he was from my house, and I felt an urge to stay next to him, to be there in case someone got more peeved at him than I was. I settled into the rhythm of the crowd.

All of a sudden the music stopped and the lights came up. Someone was shouting in the middle of the dance floor, and someone else had blood on his shirt. Shiraz was nearby and she grabbed my hand. "Zeljko," she said. The two of us stood there, searching the crowd desperately. We pushed through the crowd, still holding hands, to where one group of guys was holding back another group.

"What happened?" I asked one of the guys who was standing there.

"Some asshole!" he said, "he was looking for a fight."

We caught a glimpse of Zeljko heading towards the door. There was blood running down the side of his face. Someone nearby said he had tried to grab someone else's girlfriend.

The rest of the group decided to leave then too. We walked to the station in the cold air, no-one wanting to say that the evening had been ruined. Shiraz asked where Zeljko was.

"Nuri's walking around with him," said Doug. "They should meet us at the station."

We got to the train station about twenty minutes before the last train. Everyone sat on the platform and shivered. I sat on a bench next to Shiraz.

"God, Brazil, you're so attractive!" said Shiraz.

I laughed, "yeah."

"Sweating like a pig as you are," laughed Shiraz.

"Hey! There's Nuri and Zeljko!" shouted Doug. "Hey! They're getting on the wrong train! Hey! You guys!"

He waved and shouted at the platform opposite. "Hey! That's the wrong train! Come on over here! Hurry up before you miss it!"

There was time to spare before the train left, and when Nuri and Zeljko got to the platform, Zeljko paced around waiting for the train, near where Shiraz and I sat. I watched him without looking him directly in the face. I was embarrassed for him, and a little afraid - not quite sure what made him fight. He walked past our bench, but didn't look at us either. His long-lashed and slightly glazy eyes were not on the platform, but were somewhere out past the train station, out past Tokyo.

I will never forget the look on his face that night. A nasty cut grazed his cheekbone just below the eye. His lips were pressed together in silence. His body made its bruised and sweaty presence felt up and down the platform, but his eyes just looked slowly far, far away.



"What is the worst thing that a woman has ever done to you?"

Zeljko sucked in his cigarette audibly before answering.

"Ah...the worst thing...ok...I was involved with this woman, and we'd been going out for a couple of years. She was quite a bit older than me. I was really serious about it, yeah?"

"She was living in Europe for a while, at the time, and I went out there to be with her...after a couple of weeks, I find out she's been seeing some other guy. So when I ask her about it, she basically says 'yeah, and you can fuck off', so I did."

He took another drag on his cigarette, "so, basically, all that time when I thought we were together, I thought she was just with me, she was lying to me the whole time."

I looked over at Zeljko. From the side, he did look like Elvis - his cheeks were high and chubby when he smiled, and his lips were slung open when he was waiting for someone to finish speaking.

"Do you think you'll ever trust anyone again?" asked Stephanie.

He turned around and looked at her, as if he hadn't realized anyone was listening until just then. He held her gaze for a moment.

"I don't know," he said.

Someone asked about prostitution.

Shiraz said the only difference between men and women was that men had to pay for cheap sex.

Al said that sex was a sacred act.

I said sometimes it was and sometimes it wasn't.

"So you're a tart then?"

"Sometimes," I said.

I started to go out on my own at night. I would go to Roppongi mainly, and stay out until three in the morning, come home and crash and then either get up at eight for work, or sleep in until eleven on Sundays, and then go take a bath at the neighborhood sento.

I learned something about dancing when I went out by myself. I learned that the most important part about dancing is those few, long moments before you actually start to move. When you stand absolutely still, or maybe just start to move - off rhythm, slower than the others, if there are any others - it is those moments when you are required to look like a fool, while you stand there waiting to find your own rhythm - waiting until you really do hear the music, until you hear what you hear, and not what everyone else is dancing to. It is in those moments, when you know that everyone else is watching you, thinking you're stupid, thinking you don't know how to dance - that you have your only chance to really hear the music - your only chance to ever dance at all.

I also learned that there is nothing more frightening to others than someone standing there, moving to the wrong rhythm, knowing that everyone can see them, knowing that they are off, and doing it anyway.

I thumped down the stairs in my slippers, hurrying to get to work. I turned the corner on the landing, and then jumped back.

"Oh, hi!" I said, my heart pounding from the shock.

Zeljko was coming around the corner, a white towel wrapped around his middle, and steam rising from his chest. I stepped backwards and into the Japanese zither that stood against the wall on the landing. A loud "Ziiiing" echoed up and down the stairway. He smiled.

"How ya doin?"

"Alright," I said, looking down at the zither, and then back up at him. His shoulders and chest seemed bigger without clothes on, and I noticed the hair that covered his chest ran all the way down to his towel. "Late for work," I said.

He stepped past me, and continued up the stairs.

"See ya later."

"Yeah, see you."



It was Shiraz's birthday. Everyone from the house was meeting at the Penguin Bar in Shibuya, at 9:00. I got off work that night at around 10:30. I hurried to the bar, and found the table the group had staked out. I saw Shiraz and Nuri and Doug sitting at one end of the long table. Shiraz wore a long-sleeved black sweater and round silver earrings. Her eyes were wildly bright and her mouth tauntingly amused at whatever Nuri was saying. I went to that end of the table and crawled over the railing and sat across from Shiraz. She smiled and immediately handed me a bottle of beer.

Soon, Doug got up to go settle the bill. I realized I hadn't paid anything, and got up.

"Hang on," I said to Shiraz, "I'll be right back."

I went up to the front of the restaurant, where Doug and Jody and Sally and a couple of the others were talking with the man behind the counter.

"Look," said Doug, sounding as if he had already explained this several times, "here's our total bill, and here's how much we've

already paid. This," he showed the guy the money in his hand, "is what we owe you."

"No," said the man, "you pay this," he pointed to the bill.

Doug turned away from him in frustration.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"He's saying that we never gave him any money earlier, and that's bullshit, a bunch of people put in their money and I brought it to him, and then I went back for the rest of it, and now he's saying he never saw the first money."

"Is he the one you gave it to?"

"No, I don't even remember who the guy was. But they've got it here somewhere."

I went over to the man behind the counter, who was sitting very still and looking straight ahead.

"Doug, how much do we owe?" I asked.

"Here," he said, showing me the bill, "This much is already paid, and what we owe is this," he handed me a pile of bills. I handed it to the man.

"This is what we owe you, this is all we are paying," I said.

"I will call the police," the man said. I grabbed the bills out of his hands.

"Here, let me try," said Jody. She went up to the man and said something in Japanese to him. He answered. She continued.

Some of the group walked past them, to the elevators, and went down. Zeljko came up to the group near the counter and asked what was going on. Doug told him.

"Where's the asshole?" demanded Zeljko.

"Relax," said Doug, "Jody's handling it."

"Hey man," said Zeljko, moving up to the counter, "what's going on, hey?" The man grew even more still, and clamped his mouth closed, and I suddenly realized that this was about to get much worse.

I stepped up to Zeljko. I pushed him in the chest, and then leaned up to his ear. "Pretend we're fighting," I said to him, pushing him again. He didn't say anything, but turned away from the man at the counter, and let me push at him. I pushed against his chest, walking towards him, pushing him away from the scene.

"Hey!" I yelled at him, stomping the floor with my heels, "knock it off!" I pushed him towards the elevator. The door was open, and there were already some people in it. "Hey!" I yelled one more time and shoved Zeljko into the elevator, and the door closed.

Inside the elevator, I fell back against the wall and breathed out loud. I looked at Zeljko.

He turned and looked at me out of the corner of his eye. "You're pretty strong," he said, still puffing. I laughed.

We all took taxis to Roppongi. Everyone walked into Gas Panic club together, and the next thing I knew, I felt the beat of powerful music. I spun around, hitting someone, and started to dance.

"Wheeeeeee-ooooo!!!!!!" The sound came from behind me.

My head whipped around and my body followed. Zeljko stood there, grinning an evil grin and letting out another whoop.

"Yeeeeeeaaaaaaahhhhhhh!!!!!!"

It was the last thing I heard.

I spun around and around and around, grabbed a pole and spun around that, and spun some more. Then I was next to Zeljko. Mick Jagger was pounding away a beat, and Zeljko was pounding the floor, letting out another whoop. I spun around behind him and let out a high-pitched whoop too. I spun again and was by his side, pounding the floor with him.

I danced away from him. He followed. He reached out for me, I spun out of reach and laughed. He turned away. So did I. We both turned back to each other at the same instant. He whooped.

There was a lot of space on the dance floor, I noticed after a while. Spinning around once, I caught a glimpse of a woman's face, standing there looking on. I thought I saw fear. I remembered how people had stood and watched Zeljko as he danced like a madman in Live In Buddy's. I spun twice, landing next to Zeljko. I pushed at him. He turned towards me, still dancing. I looked him in the eyes. He laughed and grabbed my hand. I spun around immediately, towards him, and then away.

The entire room was ours. I flew, amazed at myself that I had not yet fallen. Zeljko jumped and ground. I shook. Zeljko rolled.

Somehow, we all moved from Gas Panic Club to Gas Panic Bar, which was much smaller and grungier. Zeljko and I danced around the metal table in the middle of the floor.

I slammed my bottle down on the metal table with a crash, and spun around. Zeljko slammed his down. I spun back, and slammed mine again.

I spun in circles behind him, coming around in front just as he spun away. I could feel him behind me, and reached back with

my hands just as he reached forward with his. He pulled me towards him and twirled me around.



The next morning, I found a large purple blotch on my right leg - another one on my thigh, and some smaller ones on other parts of my body. "Jesus!" I exclaimed.

I ran into Zeljko later that day, and told him I had found mysterious bruises all over my body. He didn't remember me crashing into anything.

"I was just trying to see how many times I could get you to spin around!" He said.



I was on one side of the narrow metal table, and Zeljko was on the other, when the right music came on. Zeljko raised his arms in the air, looking down at the floor and let out a yell. It grabbed me in the belly, and I keeled over, letting out a sharp high-pitched yelp. I jumped up and spun against the table. Zeljko danced slowly, with a tension that pulled at me. He danced away from me and then suddenly spun around to face me. I danced backwards, away from him, holding the tension, holding him from the other end of the table. When I got to the end of the table, I spun around, as he did, at the other end.

He danced slowly, his head down, but looking slightly up, at me, biting his lip and grinning. Then he would spin around, looking at no-one and nothing at all, and then he would be back again.

At the other end of the room, three men stood against the wall. One of them was watching me. I caught his eye and twirled around. Zeljko went to the bathroom, and I kept on dancing. The man came forward. He was in his forties, stocky, Spanish-looking. I kept dancing at my end of the table, looking up occasionally to make sure he was watching.

Zeljko came out of the bathroom.

"You ready to go?" I asked.

"Yeah, if you are."

I nodded my head. Zeljko walked out ahead of me. As we passed by the men, I reached over and touched the man's shoulder good-bye. He smiled.

Zeljko walked by a pretty Japanese girl on the way out, grabbed the edge of her skirt, and flipped it up. I shoved him in the shoulder, and out the door.



He would stand there, bobbing his head to the music, being cool, nodding from one side of the room to the other, hiding a grin. I would look at him and he would raise his eyebrows, I would nod at him with the music, and he would nod back. I would look away, and then start to dance around him, like a bird in a teasing mating ritual, never looking at him, and after a while of standing there in his greased-back hair, smiling, he would respond, bobbing his head up and down, and then slowly moving around in his own bird's mating-dance circle.



Gas Panic looks like this: red and black all over. Black walls with white graffiti, chipped red paint on the tables and bar, red ceiling and ducts, red pipes getting in the way everywhere. A metal table right in the middle of the dance floor. There is black gooey stuff on the floor that gets on your things if you leave them there. And white gooey stuff on the bathroom walls. There are tables up against the far wall - the wall where everyone has written their names. Zeljko's was in the corner somewhere.

There is broken glass on the floor, and it smashes and rings as it gets kicked around the room. It is dark, and muddy, and dirty, and you can do anything there.

Sweat flows steadily and slowly down my face and back. The room is hot now, and I can feel the heat between everyone I look at: The Iranians clustered in the back corner watching the Japanese girls standing in groups watching the western men, the Australian rugby players falling over themselves near the bar, Carla and Jody down at the other end of the bar, talking to American sailors. I dance, and sweat. I dance for the Iranians - and the Arabs - and the Croatians, and anyone who has ever been kicked out of a country. For Al, for me, for Zeljko, for Olga, for Zeljko and Olga, who will never see each other again, for Massoud, for everyone who lives oceans away from their families for people who don't speak the language, for people who don't understand. For Shiraz, for Nuri, for Carla when I can't stand her - for everyone I've ever hated. For our landlord, for the jerk Iranian with the bleached blond hair and the obscenely tight pants on his skinny legs, who molested the girl he was dancing with until she ran out of the bar, and then he helped me up onto the table. For anyone who's ever thought they might have AIDS and were afraid to tell anyone else - for the sacred and the profane.

Doug and Nuri are there, dancing at one end of the metal table. Zeljko is there, and Erik. On the other side of the table, I am there, and so is Shiraz. The room is packed. Men with crew cuts are starting to take their shirts off.

Someone pushes up against Zeljko. He pushes back. Someone else turns around. I push through some people to the guy standing closest to Zeljko.

"Come on," I say, "everyone's drunk, don't make a big deal out of it."

He looked at me, and then at his buddy.

He was nodding, "Yeah, everyone's drunk."

He asked me if I had a cigarette. I didn't, but I went and found one for him.

I moved away from the crowd, and was dancing on my own near Shiraz and Nuri. I looked over at Zeljko. I looked away, and then looked back again. There were dark blotches across the front of his shirt. He wasn't dancing, but just stood there, bobbing his head to the music, checking out the scene. I went over to him.

"Zeljko, what's that on your shirt?" I asked.

"What? What're you talking about?" He looked down at me as I felt his shirt and picked up his hand. There was a long gash across his palm.

"You're bleeding!" I yelled at him.

"It's nothing! I can't even feel it!"

"Come on!" I turned him around and started to push him towards the door.

"Where're you taking me? It's fine, I'm telling you! There's nothing wrong!"

I shouted across the bar that someone was bleeding, did they have anything for it. The bartender pointed me towards the door and said there would be bandages down by the cash register.

The man at the cash register tried to hand a fistful of Band-Aids to Zeljko, but he pushed them away. I pushed him out the door, and picked up his hand. I lifted my beer bottle and poured beer on the wound.

"Ah! What's all the fuss for! It's just a cut!"

"It's a nasty cut! Here!" I gave him his hand back, and went back inside. I asked for those Band-Aids, and came out again with a stack of them.

"Aw, come on! Those are Pussy Bind-ides!"

"Yeah, and you're going to put them on."

"Aw, what are they going to do? Pussy Bind-ides!!" He let me take his hand back, and I dried it off on his shirt, and started to put the Pussy Bind-ides on it.

"They're going to keep you from getting AIDS when someone else bleeds on you in there is what they're going to do!" I shouted, pushing him affectionately.

"You're starting to worry me!" He said.

I laughed and pushed him again, "what are you worried about?"

"Your lips!" he said.

I laughed again, leaning up to his ear.

"Come on," one of us said, "let's go back in."

I turned to go back in the door, and Zeljko grabbed my arm, pulling her back. He pulled my forearm up to his mouth and kissed it, leaving a tattoo of blood near my wrist.

I looked at him, and then in the same moment, reached for his arm, bent down and kissed it hard, where he had kissed mine.

"Alright," he said, and we went inside.



Zeljko called me up one weekend. I was sitting in my room reading when he called. He asked if I wanted to go out and do something, and I said sure. I had to do some stuff at the house first though. We agreed to meet in front of Almond's at 6:30.

I got there at a quarter to seven. I walked quickly towards the clock in front of Almonds. He was sitting there, in black jeans and white T-shirt.

"Sorry I'm late!"

"No worries," he said, getting up.

"Where to?"

"Dunno, what do you think?"

"I don't know what's good at this hour."

We walked by Gas Panic, but it wasn't open yet.

"How about Henry Africa's?" I said, "I've never been there, but it's supposed to be good."

We went up the stairs to the bar. We were the only ones there, and sat down at a table in a corner.

Zeljko turned his head around at an awkward angle to read the jukebox selection on the wall at their table.

"Got any requests?"

"Let me see what they've got," I leaned over and looked at the list.

"Shit!" I said, "I feel old!"

"Why?"

"Look, they've got UB40 under 'oldies'! I don't even recognize any of the 'Top 40's'!"

Zeljko laughed.

Our drinks came, and we talked for a while.

Zeljko was looking down at the table. "You know," he said, looking up at me, "you're the best person to dance with."

"No, you are," I said.

"Alright, fair enough," He said.

He lit a cigarette, and squinted at me sideways. "You know, I don't care what I look like, I don't care what anyone thinks, I just dance. You're the same way I think."

I nodded.

"You can't afford to," I said, "you can't spend your time worrying about looking stupid. I mean, we could get kicked out of the country next week - or die in an earthquake. Nobody really knows how long they're going to be here."

"That's the truth," he said, "anyone who thinks they do is just fooling themselves."

We went to Gas Panic later on, after it had opened and started to fill up. We sat at the bar. Zeljko asked if I wanted a Tequila shot.

"No," I said, "I don't mix my drinks anymore."

He laughed, "learnt the hard way, eh?"

I laughed, "yep. I get past a certain point, and I know I've done something wrong, but it's too late to do anything about it."

He nodded, "yeah, I can tell when you get past that point."

"How?"

"Your...hand movements get bigger...you gesture a lot more...you know...you flip your hair around like that..."

I grinned sheepishly.

He told me about Croatia. He had been a small child when his family left, but he had gone back to visit, and he still had relatives there.

"I've given money for them to buy arms you know," he said.
"My uncles are still over there - if they asked me to go fight, I'd do it."

"Why?"

"Ah, you know..." he turned his head away, and back again, "Croats are like Pit-bulls, you know? Those dogs that are bred to fight? It's in our blood..."

I had to laugh. His long Roman nose did make him look a little like a Pit-bull. I asked him what there was to fight about, and he told me about the Adriatic Sea, and how Croatia had been invaded over and over again, that everyone wanted that patch of the Adriatic, and they had it. They had had it for centuries,

and they would keep fighting anyone who tried to take it from them.

Zeljko stood there, leaning back, listening to the music. "You know how you'll be in a place, right? And then just one song comes on, and it just gets you going?"

I nodded my head vigorously, "yep!"

"And from then on, its hot!"

"Yeah, they can play anything after that, and its great."

"Shall we?"

An Affair

The man with the beard got up and walked over to me. He handed me the bank statement envelope, now covered with scribbling.

"I wrote my work number and my home number," he said, "you can call me anytime. Call me at one in the morning, and tell me about some guy you're falling in love with...I'll talk you out of it."

I laughed and took the envelope.

"I'll go now, so you can be with your friends," he said. He leaned over and kissed me lightly on the lips. His beard was soft and musky, like a wild and unwashed animal. I said I would call him.

I looked down at the envelope. "I think I know what life is about," read the scribbles, "I don't know what I would say or do if I met someone equal to my ability to enjoy this situation,

but I promise it would be very interesting. Call me and I will explain this letter."

I looked up. He was back at the end of the bar with that group of people. I put the envelope back into my bag.



The next few weeks were bathed in warm sunshine. Time slowed down, and I saw everything in fine detail - young Japanese couples shopping in Shinjuku, the steaming plastic display of grilled meat out in front of the Yakitori place on my way home from work. For the first time ever, I just felt like everything was going to be alright.

Peter showed me a picture of himself once, before he had a beard. His mouth was way too wide for his face, as if someone had plastered an oversized grin on him as a little kid, to make up for something.

He had left home when he was nine.

"My mom was in a really bad marriage," he said, "he used to beat her, he used to beat me. I don't know why she stayed. One day, I just pulled a ripcord. Went to live in a town nearby."

"What did you do?"

"I lived in a stable," he laughed. "I worked with the racehorses, and slept in the stable at night. I was a jockey for a while."

"So you didn't go to school?"

"Oh yeah, the people I worked for made sure I went to school."

"And they didn't try to send you back to your family?"

"Oh no, they pretty much knew what the situation was."

"Did your parents try to get you back?"

"No...well, he wasn't my real dad you know...I never knew my real dad...and my mom knew I was better off, so she didn't try to stop me," he laughed again, "even the cops in the town I lived in were cool. They'd catch me driving to school..."

"Driving to school?"

"Yeah, I learned to drive when I was nine. It was the only way I could get to school. Anyway, they'd stop me, and then they'd see it was me, and they'd just wave me on...as long as I didn't have anyone else in the car it was cool."

He told me once about the time he had been in prison in Saudi Arabia, where he had been working.

"When I got arrested, I had no idea what was going on," he said, "now I realize the guy was actually trying to protect me, trying to get me off the hook. I was walking outside my hotel, I'd had a few drinks, and he was trying to get me to go back to my hotel. But the more he tried, the more pissed off I got, until finally he had no choice but to arrest me."

"They never told me how long I was in for. I thought I could be there for years. As it turns out, I had a 90-day sentence, and my company and the Embassy were able to commute it and get me out after 28 days."

I felt a strange sense of belonging with him. It had never occurred to me that all this time I had been moving from country to country, pulling ripcords, never feeling fully at home anywhere, that there might be other people doing the same thing. Maybe we never would find a place that was home. Maybe the thing to do was to find other people out here doing the same thing, and we would be each others' home.

He didn't know what his ancestry was. I asked him once and he said he wasn't sure.

"You don't know?"

He shrugged, "like I said, I never knew my dad, and my mom never really told me much about him. My mom was English and Irish, but I don't know what he was."

He looked over at me. If he had been kidding, there was no way I would have known it.

"Here, feel this," he said, touching his beard. I reached over and felt it. It was softer than it looked - but I already knew that.

"My dad had soft hair," he said, "that's all my mom ever told me about him. He had soft hair. I think he may have been Scottish, but I don't know. All I know for sure is his hair was soft."



We started off early one Sunday. We piled his Land Rover full of beer and potato chips, and turned on the CDs loud - Aaron Neville until noon. We drove towards the mountains.

We were stuck in traffic on one stretch of the highway for a good half hour. I leaned over and stroked his back, leaning up to him and kissing him. He leaned over and kissed me back, then noticed the rearview mirror "uh oh, we're going to cause an accident," he said.

"OK, I'll behave myself."

"No! Don't!" He kissed me again, and then drove forward about six feet.

He said that women had all the power. He wished he were a woman so he could go out to a club and have guys falling all over him wanting to have sex with him.

I didn't tell him that wasn't what we wanted.

We finally got up to the mountain, drove on winding roads over gaping precipices and a river below. We drove upwards until I started to get dizzy with the image of towering pine trees coming towards me, turning, coming again, turning, coming towards me, turning and turning and turning. Finally, thousands of feet later, we stopped at a tourist center, a big log building with souvenir shops and a ski lift that went even further up the mountain.

He drove to the farthest corner of the parking lot, and got out. I opened my door and swung down - then reeled back up, squealing loudly and pulling the door closed behind me with a slam that made the whole van shudder. Below my feet was a straight drop of about 60 feet ending in certain impaling by pine. I had seen this through the iron grating we were perched upon, part of what felt like a very precarious parking structure jutting out of the side of the mountain.

"You're going to kill me when you get out, right?" I could hear Peter laughing behind me.

I cautiously opened the door again, feeling the Rover sway slightly as I did. I slowly stepped out, one leg and then the other, wanting to have something to hang onto, reached over for the railing, and holding just that, shut the door with a slam as the whole grating shook.

Outside of the van, everything was enveloped in silence. It stretched out so far - not just over the mountain we were on, but over a whole range of mountains and valleys as far as I could see. There was crisp pine in the air, and I heard a tiny solitary bird call from miles away.

This powerful silence lapped at me, pulling me, and I stepped into it. Peter was still there, I heard him speak, but I was listening to the silence. It told us to go up the mountain, and so I took his hand and we walked over to the tourist shop and bought tickets for the ski lift.

I sat on the wooden plank that slowly carried me up the side of the mountain, and watched as the trees below us waved slowly back and forth in the mist.

We got off and stood at the top. There was a wooden pole with a speaker at the top, and bird sounds coming out of the speaker. Peter nudged me and pointed to the speaker. We both laughed.

Even he had stopped speaking by now. I don't know if he heard the silence or not, but at least he didn't try to talk over it.

It was cold. The wind blew into my neck and waist. Peter looked warm, in his blue down parka, and wooly beard. He wrapped himself around me and we stood there for a while. Then something made me turn around. I looked over my shoulder and saw a path leading into the woods. The trees were swaying a little, in the wind, but their trunks were commandingly sturdy, and they called me to come to them. I turned fully around, taking Peter's hand, and then turned back to him, looking him briefly in the eye. He followed me up the path.

My eyes, ears and nose were all wide open. I heard, saw and smelled everything - I heard noises a split second before they happened - twigs snapping, branches rustling in the wind, real birds calling out - I could even see the trees moving behind us when the wind came through.

We were out of breath when we got to the top of the hill. In between our huffing and puffing, Peter said "let's go up to the shrine." I looked at where he was pointing, and saw an old wooden shrine with dark grey stone foxes standing up in front

of it. There were red paper lanterns at the entrance. We walked towards it.

We went around behind the shrine and leaned up against the stone foundation. As our breathing subsided, the silence grew overpowering - like a tremendous heartbeat. The noise of the trees was everywhere. I breathed in, and the air was sharp. I looked up, and the trees were swaying gently back and forth, pulling me towards them.

I turned and looked at Peter. His cheeks were red, from the walk, and the cold. He was still breathing hard, and steam puffed out of his nose and mouth. His locks of reddish-brown hair were smooth with sweat at the base.

He looked at me and gave a great puff - Then he turned into me, putting his hands on my waist, and kissed me gently on the lips.

I had become something else - quivering, alone, and terrified, but with my eyes wide open so I wouldn't miss anything. He came towards me, and I jumped, gasping, making a guttural noise in my throat. He said something soft and muffled. I swung my head around and into his neck.

The trees lifted me up.

Peter kissed me. I reached up and stroked his hair, sniffing his neck. I brushed my cheek against his beard, and breathed it in. He leaned into me, and I buried my face in him. He kissed my neck and my head lifted in the air. My body was trembling, and I held on to his shoulders. He picked me up and sat me down on the shrine wall, and put his hands under my sweater. I reached up for the collar of his jacket and clung to it, looking in his eyes.

I looked up - the trees were swaying gently back and forth, pulling me towards them.

I leaned up and bit him gently on the lip, then again, and again, taking small bites. Still hanging onto him, I pushed his head back with my head, so I could get at his throat.

The trees were pulling at me, telling me to get this man down on the ground. My eyes were like a wild animal's - I could see him, and I could see the trees, but nothing else would have made any sense. I kept taking bites of his neck - I was breathing quickly now, hungry, growling a little when he didn't move quickly enough. I think he said something, but I couldn't hear it.

His hand was inside my shorts, and he stroked the inside of my thigh. I clawed at his sweater, breathing in a panic. I hung onto his shoulder. He put one hand behind my neck, and another behind my leg.

I writhed in his hands, and all the blood pounded to my lips. He moaned, and I shrieked. He sighed in my ear, and I bit his.

Suddenly he pulled away from me and I was jolted back into time. I could hear voices nearby. I steadied myself against his arm, and he pulled his clothes back into place. I just stood there, swaying back and forth, breathing with the trees, unable to move.



A couple of weeks later, it hit.

"Oh shit," I said to myself in the middle of grading an exam. I put down my pencil and looked out the window. The sky was clear blue, and black birds dove and swept wildly in the air.

"God damn it," I said.

There was no getting around it, though. I would have to do it. The sooner the better.

"Doug, you're a guy," I said that evening. Doug was stirring pasta over one of the burners. He turned around to face me.

"Yeah... sometimes..." he said cautiously, "unless it means opening something."

"No," I said, "I'm not after your muscles."

"O.K.," he said, "then in that case I guess I can be a guy."

"Well here's the thing," I said, "I'm going out with this guy, and I really like him, and...I just don't know if he likes me that much...I mean, I know he likes me, but I don't know if he's...you know, serious."

"Hmmm..." said Doug, "have you talked with him about it?"

"Well that's just it," I said, "I don't know how to bring it up."

"Yeah, that's a tough one..."

"I don't want to scare him away..."

"Yeah..."

"But I can't stand not knowing...not knowing if he's seeing someone else...or if he would if he could..."

"Yeah..."

"What would you do?"

"Well, if I were a woman, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"Well...I'd probably just come out and ask him about it...I mean, if you really can't live with the uncertainty..."

"I can't."

"Then I'd just bring it up. Just ask him straight. Ask him what he wants. You know, tell him how you feel...any guy who's worth anything has got to respect that, even if he doesn't feel the same way."

"Yeah...I just wish there were some way of doing it without...you know, sounding like I'm pressuring him...you know, without scaring him away."

"Yeah, well maybe there's not. It's a risk you've got to take."

I ran into Zeljko on the way out to the pay phone on the corner. He was in the hallway, waiting for a phone call from his ex-girlfriend in England.

"How ya doin?" he asked.

I told him.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Yeah, maybe, after I make the call," I said. "How are you?"

"Ah, pretty crappy...the usual..." he pointed at the phone, "I should get a call tonight."

I nodded, said I'd be back, and went outside.

Out on the night street, visions flashed through my mind of a stocky bearded man with a wide grin and sparkling eyes, who needed a woman to laugh with, and to go with out into the wilderness, to be together at the mercy of the elements. So did visions of a stocky bearded man who just liked to laugh.

The edge of the Earth looked like a phone booth on a dark empty sidewalk as I approached it.

I went inside and put my notebook down. I got out some coins and put them on top of the phone. I leaned up against the glass and took a breath. "Shit," I said to myself. I didn't want to do this. But if he didn't want what I wanted, then I had to know. And I had to cut the bond the instant I knew. Like a Samurai - cut off the whole head in one stroke. No wavering. I picked up the handset and put the coins in.

"Brazil, hi"

"Hi."

"What's up?"

"Do you have a minute to talk?"

"Sure, I've got lots of minutes."

"Um... I need to talk to you... it's about something kind of serious."

"Uh-huh..."

"I don't really know how to start..."

"Mmm-hmm..."

"Um, I'm starting to go into ripcord mode..."

"You mean leaving Japan?"

"No..." I practically wailed, "um...I really like you...and I want to get to know you better..."

There was a pause.

"Well, I guess I've spent a lot of time not letting people get to know me. I don't really let anyone get close anymore."

"I know, neither do I...I'm getting sick of it..."

"Well, you know I don't know what to say..."

"Do you want me to get close to you?"

"Well that's a pretty blunt question."

"Mmm-hmm."

"Well, you know, I like you and all, and I have a really good time with you, but we have only known each other for a few weeks and all..."

There was another pause. "I guess, after trying to make serious relationships work for so long, and never having it work, I pretty much decided I don't want that."

"Oh," I said.

"Is that alright?"

"Anything's alright, as long as you're honest about it."

"Well, I'm pretty honest about that."

"Yep."

"You sound kind of angry," he said.

"No...not at you...no, I'm not angry." I said.

"Ok," he said.

"Ok," I said, raising my sword, "Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

I saw him hanging up the phone and going back to his TV show, distracted for a few moments, and then laughing at the stupid sitcom one-liners.

I saw him spending the rest of his life laughing like that. I saw him showing some other woman the bike trails along the river and asking her if she wanted to go sometime; telling her about the scars on his torso; showing her where the towels were. And then another. And another. One of them had shoulder-length blonde hair, another was Japanese, and another was a redhead.

I walked by the second floor kitchen and looked in at Jody.

"Brazil, what happened?" Jody jumped up and followed me upstairs. The third floor kitchen was lit only by the TV set and Zeljko sat at the table. He looked up at me.

"Another one bites the dust," I said, sitting down.

I told them both what had happened.

"It's not fair," I said, "I barely even got to know him."

"Chin up," said Zeljko, "there's still something to live for, right?"

I thought. "I'm not sure," I said.

"Come on," he said, "what are you passionate about? Give me two things you're passionate about."

I thought again.

"The ocean," I said, "and dancing."

"There you go," said Zeljko.

"There's still Roppongi," I said.

"There's still Roppongi."

"It sucks though."

"No it doesn't," he said, "life doesn't suck."

"No, not life, just this."

"Oh, yeah," he said. "Well, there's still Roppongi."

Massoud

"I HATE white! I HATE black!" Massoud reported from the end of the kitchen table one night, "I LAAAV...what is RIGHT!" He slammed his fist down on the fake wood table.

From the side he looks like an Egyptian hieroglyph. His nose is a flat hook, and his mouth a straight line. His eyes are dark and look straight into you when he speaks, and his hair is pulled back in a kitchen worker's ponytail.

He sits in one of the wooden chairs in the kitchen, rocking back on the back legs, leaning against the wall. Soon, he will fall asleep and come crashing to the ground, awake, startled, as if this had never happened before (instead of every night), pick himself up and smile sheepishly while everyone laughs. He will laugh too, and then will say "shat up!" and then he will light a cigarette.

Taxi-Driver-Tom asked him once how many nights he sleeps in his room. Massoud answered two hours a week.

We made fun of him for wanting to listen to Neil Diamond. He laughed with us and then asked why. Someone tried to explain to him that nobody actually listened to Neil Diamond, but he was not swayed.



Zeljko and Dave's band was playing at a little club in Takadanobaba. Everyone from the house went. It was a Christian mission office during the day, and there were Bibles all over the room. A makeshift bar had been set up near the door, and there were religious posters scattered about the walls,

I got a beer, and went over to Andrew, the architect who was just out of school and working with one of Japan's greatest architects. Andrew had just been refused entry into Japan because the Immigration officers didn't believe he had a job and was applying for a visa. He had to fly all the way back to New York and try getting in again. He got in this time, and was standing near the band setup waiting for them to start.

"Hi," I said, "I heard you got kicked out!"

"Yeah," Andrew drawled, "it pisses me off. They wouldn't even let me make a phone call! Had to fly all the way back to New York!"

"Japan is all about spaces," Andrew had said once, gesturing way out in front of him, his eyes rolling wildly around the room. "Everything has just the right amount of space around it. It's the space that allows you to see the thing. If you look at Japanese architecture...no, that's too obvious...look at the way they set the table...look at how things are displayed in

stores...look at the way people walk down the street, there's always the right distance between people. Shit, look at the way the stones are scattered in the river, or the way the tree branches spread out - it's not just what humans have done...it's everywhere...it's fucking eerie!"

The lights went down, and Dave, Zeljko and the drummer stepped onto the small stage.

There were some chairs set up along one wall, and the Japanese girls who had come were sitting in them. For the first part of the evening, they swayed back and forth and clapped to the music, which I thought was an odd accompaniment to "Start Me Up" and "Wild Thing." Later on, they abandoned the chairs and stood in groups around the room.

Massoud had been standing near the bar. Suddenly, he pushed forward into the small space in front of the band. His head was down, and he flailed his arms around him. He bent his knees, splaying his legs, and lifted his head up. His eyes looked straight ahead, his mouth was a straight line, open only enough to breathe. He jumped up and came crashing down, jumped up again, and then went down to the floor, in a Russian squat, kicking out his legs, with his hands down on the floor to support himself.

Then he sat down and spun around and was up again. He lifted his head to the sky, panting. His whole body was shaking, and he flung his legs and arms, as if trying to throw them off his body. His head was tilted back, and his mouth opened up into a wide grin, as if he could see something up there the rest of us couldn't. When the music stopped, he stood there for a moment, frozen as he had danced, and then stumbled backwards, caught himself, and turned back to the crowd.

The room was silent, and then suddenly exploded in cheers and applause. Andrew the architect grabbed a beer from the bar, walked up to Massoud and handed it to him. Massoud took

it. Andrew stuck out his hand, and shook Massoud's hand. Massoud said "thank you," between breaths.

"My man!" said Andrew.

The band was starting to pack up, and people were starting to drift back to the house. I left with Nuri and Jody.

When we got to the top of the stairs, we saw two policemen asking to see Alien Registration cards.

"Oh what Bullshit!" Said Jody, "come on!" She led us around the policemen before they had a chance to stop us.

From across the street, we looked back. Massoud stood there as the police went through his things, searching his pockets and his bag. "They think he's got drugs," said Jody. They asked Andrew for his Registration card. He showed it, and they waved him on.

"Should we stay?" Asked Nuri.

"No, we can't do anything," she said. "Ah, he'll be alright, Dave and Zeljko are still there." The police waved more people on, still scouring Massoud.

"The bastards," said Jody, "come on then."



Zeljko dressed up for his twenty-fourth birthday. He wore a black T-shirt and tight black jeans and a black vest under his black leather jacket. Someone had given him a big white button that said something in Japanese, and he pinned it to his vest. His hair was greased back slicker than usual, and his face was bright, his lips cherry-red like he had been standing out in the cold. He looked like the "Joker" from Batman when he grinned.

Zeljko beckoned Shiraz over and she leaned up to him. He whispered something to her and she pulled away, laughing. A little later, she pulled me aside and said she'd just been propositioned by Zeljko.

"Really!" I said, "you going to go for it?"

"Well..." she said, "he said he wants both of us."

"I see," I said, raising my eyebrows, and walked away.

Massoud stood near the bathroom door, watching me, a frown on his face. He beckoned me over.

I came over and he looked in my eyes, his mouth clamped shut and his forehead furrowed.

"I don't like...what Zeljko says. He says he wants to touch you and touch Shiraz."

"Zeljko is good," I said, "Zeljko is your friend."

"Mmmmm...I don't like it. Is that good. Is that good."

We went to Roppongi after the party, and danced at Gas Panic Bar. There was Zeljko, me and Massoud, in a triangle around the table, with a fire in the middle.

Massoud's knees were bent and he threw his arms up in the air as if to fend off an attacker - first to one side, then the other, opening his mouth in a gasp of surprise each time.

We had something in common, I realized, me and Zeljko and Massoud - it was the way we danced. We did it all the way, whatever the music told us to do, not what anyone else said, even if it looked crazy. And we knew that each of us would do anything for one of the others.

Massoud got up on the table, in the middle of the fire. He shook his whole body, bouncing from one foot to the other, and

then sat down on the table and splayed his legs up in the air. He jumped up again, and teetered backwards. Zeljko reached up and steadied him, and he threw his hands out in the air and crossed his feet and sat down again, kicking his legs up in the air.

He jumped up again, and really fell off the table this time. Zeljko picked him up off the floor, and tried to hold him back from getting back on the table, but he twisted out of Zeljko's grip and was up again. Zeljko looked at me and shook his head.

One of the guys from the bar had come over by now and was reaching up to grab Massoud. "Oh no," I thought. The bar man had no idea what he was putting his hands on. He was bigger than Massoud though, and was able to lift him from the table, cradling him in his arms like a child.

Once on the ground, Massoud wanted to get back onto the table. The man from the bar held him back, and in an instant, Massoud's limbs were flying all around and nothing could restrain him.

Someone got hit. Someone else grabbed Massoud from behind and started pushing him to the door. They got to the wall, and Massoud struggled to break free, pinning the guy to the wall. I ran over to Massoud and grabbed his shoulders, pushing him down to the floor.

He was panting heavily and his eyes were closed. His nostrils flared open and closed, and sweat trickled down his face.

"Massoud," I said to him, "are you OK?"

His eyes still closed, he nodded his head up and down.

"OK," I said, "we're going outside, come on now." He nodded and said OK, and let me help him up.

He opened his eyes, and I led him towards the door, my arm around his back.

He saw someone's face, and spun around, ready to go for him. "No!" I said, "come on!" I pulled him towards the door.

Just then, a Japanese guy with long hair and an American Indian nose grabbed Massoud, getting him in a head-grip, and moved him towards the door. I could see Massoud wire up again, and he struggled to get out of the guy's grip.

"No!" I screamed at the guy, "let go of him!" He kept his grip.

I reached over and grabbed a hunk of the guy's long hair, pulling it as hard as I could.

"Let go!" I screamed. "He's not doing anything! We're leaving!"

"Let go my hair!" The guy screamed. I pulled harder.

"Let him go!" The guy's grip relaxed and Massoud struggled free. I pushed my way through the crowd and out the door after him.

When I got outside, Massoud was lying on the ground, his legs wrapped tightly around the middle of the bar man who had first pulled him off the table. They lay on the curb in a death grip, with several people crouched over them, and the man's long blond hair in Massoud's tight fists. The man's face was distorted in pain.

"Jesus!" He was saying, his face in the pavement.

Zeljko was leaning over them, talking to Massoud.

"Hey, come on man, let up... come on... Massoud... enough's enough... come on..."

Massoud's eyes were clenched shut, and his nostrils were flaring again, every muscle in his body tight, and even if his eyes had been open, he wouldn't have seen any of us.

I stood there not knowing what to do. The guy whose hair I had pulled came out and shoved me in the shoulder. I realized he was a lot bigger than me.

"Hey, that hurt!" He said to me.

"He wasn't doing anything!" I said, "you didn't need to grab him!"

Suddenly, there was movement on the pavement. The bar man screamed as Massoud's grip tightened.

"Ow, Jesus!" He screamed, not to Massoud.

I knelt down by Massoud and put my face on his chest. I said his name over and over again. I could feel his heart beating against my cheek, and I kept on saying it until it got in, and I felt his muscles loosen a little.

As soon as they did, the man was up on his feet, panting, saying "Jesus Christ!" and running inside.

Zeljko helped Massoud up, and they both walked down the street. I turned back to the door and saw the blond man coming out again, with a baseball bat.

I ran towards Massoud and Zeljko. "Run!" I yelled, "he's got a baseball bat!"

Zeljko looked back, and kept walking Massoud towards a side street.

"We'll be alright," he said, putting his arm around Massoud's shoulder and walking slowly away.

We walked up some stairs and sat Massoud down at the top. I sat down next to him, and Zeljko stood just below us looking up at Massoud.

"Never!" Said Massoud after he had caught his breath, "NEVER in my country does a man HIT to another man in the face!"

He stopped, to breathe heavily for a moment. "HOW can he do such a thing?? I will KILL him!! FUCK to him!!!" Massoud slammed his fist into his palm.

Zeljko stood there, still breathing hard, nodding his head slightly.

"You want to go back there and fight them?" He asked Massoud.

"I will KILL to him!"

"Alright, let's go!" Said Zeljko, "let's go back and fight the whole place - come on!" He reached down for Massoud's hand. Massoud waved him away.

"Alright, then knock it off! Come on, let's go home!"

Massoud looked around him.

"I do not have my bag," he said, looking up at Zeljko.

"Alright, I'll go back and get your bag," said Zeljko. He turned where he was and hurried down the steps.

Erik and Philippe had followed us to the stairs, and they stood there now, at a short distance.

"WHY do some person do such a thing to another person?"
Asked Massoud again.

"Why would some person HIT..." he slammed his fist into his palm, "...to another person's FACE? Do you understand it?"

"Yes," I said.

"You do?!?" He looked at me in shock, "please tell me. Why?"

"Because they're drunk," I said.

He nodded his head and said nothing.

Zeljko came back with Massoud's bag and my bag. He handed mine to me.

"Alright," he said to Massoud, "you ready to go?"

Massoud was staring straight in front of him. "I cannot understand it... I cannot let another man HIT to my face for no reason..."

"Aw come on Massoud! You know you hit them pretty good too..."

Massoud looked up.

"You definitely had the upper hand in there Massoud," said Zeljko, "I'd say you gave out a lot more than you took."

"I did?"

"Yeah you did! You had that guy pinned to the ground outside...we couldn't get you off him..."

Massoud laughed slightly.

"Come on man," said Zeljko, "it's my birthday. I don't want to stand out here all night. Let's just go."

Massoud sat there for a moment, and then stood up and said "alright," and walked down the stairs with Zeljko.

Zeljko

I was walking down the street towards Motown, and I heard live music. I went to see what it was and saw a couple of guys standing on the corner across the street. Then I looked again - Zeljko and Dave. I walked up to them.

"Hi," I said. There was no-one else around, just people walking by, and Zeljko was looking out into the street, his arms tense, holding the guitar, biting his lip in concentration.

He said hi, I asked him how long they'd been out there, he said about an hour, and then I said I was going into Motown, I'd see him later. Later on he walked in and came up to me at the bar where I was talking with some American executives.

"Hi," I said, "you done already?"

"No, just taking a break," he said, "hey listen, I want to have a talk with you about something."

"Alright," I said.

"Not now, but when you've got time," he said.

"Sure," I said, and he went back outside.

"Oh shit," I thought, "what can that be?" I thought maybe he was going to tell me he was falling in love with me or something, and I started working out what I would say to let him down gently.

God, don't let this get ruined, I thought, we have such a great time together.

"We don't have enough in common," I would tell him, "I think we're great friends, but we just aren't meant to be lovers. It's just not there."

Jody and Carla were leaving. They came up and said good-bye, and Jody asked me, "hey, what's going on with you and Zeljko?"

"Nothing," I said, "I just love dancing with him, and we're good friends."



I went down to Zeljko's room and knocked on the door. He pulled it open, standing there in his white T-shirt and cutoffs.

"You said you wanted to talk?"

"Yih, come on in," he pulled the door open for me to walk in.

I stepped into his cramped room, and sat down at the edge of his futon. He sat on the floor next to me. In the tiny room, his body seemed to take up all the space, and I was suddenly nervous, not sure what to say.

"There's been a lot of talk around, you know?" He said, looking at me. I turned my head from the posters on his wall to his face.

"Yeah?"

"About you and me. You know, people are saying stuff...I just didn't want you hearing something from someone else and getting the wrong idea."

I nodded.

"You know, I really respect you, and I really value your friendship."

I nodded.

"That time when I called you up to go out...it was just to go out, you know, nothing else,"

"I know," I said.

"I just didn't want you hearing things, you know, and thinking I was using you...you know, to get back at Carla or something."

"No," I said, "I know you're not like that."

I asked him if anything was still going on with him and Carla, and he said no. I told him Jody had asked what was going on between us, and I told her nothing. I hadn't heard anything other than that.

He shook his head, looking around his tiny room overflowing with dirty laundry and CDs. "You know, it's pretty pathetic when people are talking about MY life, you know? Pretty sad if they don't have anything better to talk about than what I'm up to."

I laughed. We talked about stuff for a while and then I left.



Something big was coming at me. I could feel it, like a big steel building with an edge to it, coming straight at me, that would split me open, and I needed to be ready for it. "I need to clear my mind," I said to myself, "stop the noise in my brain. I need to be an open space, so that I am ready to do whatever is needed when this thing hits. So I am not crushed by it, and so I don't miss out on it."



"Why do you come to Japan so many times?"

"I have friends here."

"Japanese friends?"

"Some Japanese, some foreigners."

The woman at the counter looked at me sideways, and beckoned over an officer from the glass enclosure on the other side of the immigration booths.

I was led away to an office at the other end of the hall. The officer opened the door, and pointed me to the little room at the end of the hallway.

"You wait in there."

I went in and sat down. There were about six other people in the room, some Peruvians, and a very beautiful young Asian woman with a much less attractive Asian man, looking as if she couldn't see the other people in the room.

Finally, after over an hour, I was called in to one of the offices.

"Why do you come to Japan so many times?"

"I have friends here. I travel around the country and stay with them."

"Where do you get your money?"

"I've saved up from when I was working at home."

"I am afraid we will not let you come into Japan this time. Where do you want to go to?"

"Hong Kong."

He nodded to one of the men behind me, who led me out of the office.

"Next flight is in the morning," said the man. "You will have to pay for a hotel."

"Fine."

"...and you will have to have a guard overnight. You will have to pay for that, too."

"How much?"

"About US\$400."

"And what if I don't pay?"

"...ah...just a moment please..."

He walked back to the office and consulted with the official who had decided my fate. The official looked down at the floor, and then squinted his whole face up, and shook his head. The man nodded and came back to me. I never heard anything more about the \$400.

"If you share a room, it will be less expensive," the man said. "Would you be willing to share a room with this woman?" He pointed to the attractive Asian woman sitting in the room where I had been interviewed. She was pouting slightly, and was not saying anything.

"Sure," I said.

"She is Japanese, but is an American citizen," he said.

He walked into the room and spoke to the young woman. She pretended she had not heard him. He spoke again, and she turned her head to face him. He pointed to me, she glanced over, and her facial muscles tightened. He turned and walked over to me, and she crossed her arms, turning back to ignore the interviewing officer.

"I'm sorry," said the man, "she does not want to share a room with you."

"I'm crushed."

"Excuse me?"

"That's OK," I said, "thank you for asking."

They showed me to my room, and I went in. I immediately went over to the phone, and tried to dial out. There was no tone. I went outside, to one of the officers.

"I need to use a phone," I said.

"Downstairs," he said. I looked towards the elevators.

"Downstairs?"

"Yes."

I was waiting for him to get up and follow me down, but he just sat in his chair. I shrugged and walked over to the elevators.

"Good thing I didn't pay for him," I thought on the way down the elevator.

I went over to the pay phone, and dialed Liberty House.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Doug?"

"Yeah, who's that? Brazil?"

"Yep. Um...I'm calling from a hotel near the airport... I'm being kicked out of Japan."

"No way!"

"Yep. They're putting me on the next flight to Hong Kong, it leaves in the morning, so I'm staying here overnight."

"Oh shit! What are you going to do?"

"I'll try coming back in again, from Hong Kong, but I'm going to wait a couple days."

"Oh shit - so you're not going to be here for Jody's party?"

"Doesn't look like it."

"Oh no - well look, if you need anyone to send you anything, or do anything for you, you know..."

"Yeah, I probably won't, you know, I'm sure I'll get back in, but thanks."

"Wow. Hey, do you want to talk to anyone else?"

I talked to Carla, and Jody, told them what had happened, and said sorry for missing the party. Then I asked if I could talk to Zeljko.

"Hello?"

"Zeljko, hi it's Brazil."

"Hi, hey, what's going on?"

"I'm getting kicked out of the country!"

"Shit! What for?"

"For not having enough Japanese friends, I guess."

"Shit, that sucks. Hey, where are you now?"

"I'm at this junky little hotel near the airport."

"Aw, hey, so does this mean you won't be at Jody's party?"

"Yep, looks like it."

"Aw...well who'm I going to dance with then?"

"I don't know!"

"Ah shit! Hey, do you want me to come out there?"

"Yeah! That would be great!"

"Alright, let me get a pen..."

I filled the bathtub with hot water, and undressed. I scrubbed and showered, and then sat in the tub and soaked. After about two hours, my phone rang. It was Zeljko, calling from a train station somewhere between Waseda and Narita. He said he'd be here in about an hour and did I want anything.

"Yeah, why don't you grab some beers?"

"OK, See you in a bit then."

It was nearly 2:00 am when he got there.

"Are you going to stay until they come for me?"

"Of course. I stay to the end," he said, looking up at me from the other bed, "I'm good to the bitter end."

By 5:00, we were both getting tired. I lay down on one bed, and he lay down on the other. We kept talking. He looked over at me, and patted the bed next to him. I came over and lay down there, next to him.

At a quarter to seven, I got up and got dressed. The guards were supposed to come for me at seven. At seven fifteen, I opened the door and looked out. There was no-one there, so I shrugged and came back in. Zeljko was rubbing his eyes and sitting up. A few minutes later, there was a knock at the door, and I opened it. I put my suitcases outside, and someone took them. I went back over to Zeljko.

"Thanks for coming out here," I said.

"Ah yeah," he said.

One of the guards came back into the room.

"I've got to go," I said.

I leaned down and hugged him good-bye. He put his hand on my hip and hugged me from the bed where he sat.

"Good-bye."

"Bye."



Four days later, I came back into Japan. They didn't even ask me any questions. I saw Doug and Zeljko on the second floor, and went up to them.

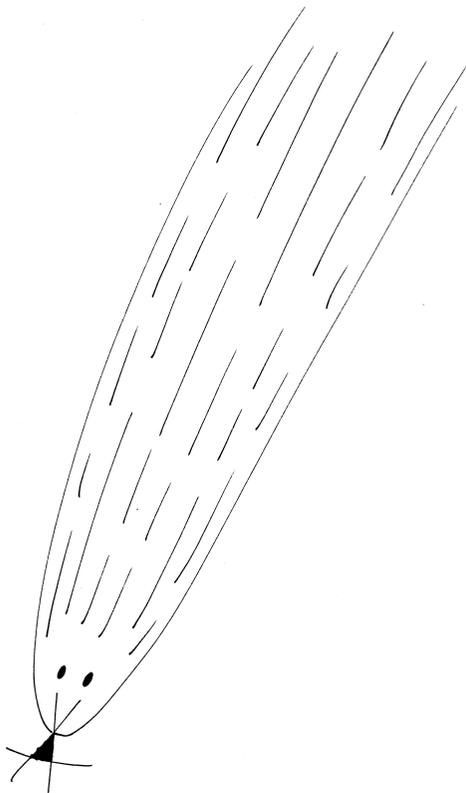
"Hey, you're back!" Said Doug.

"Yep, I got in."

I hugged Zeljko, and he squeezed my hand.



I woke up the next morning and I drew myself with my hair on fire:



I craved Peter to talk to. I laughed. He had told me to call him at one am to talk about some guy I was falling in love with, and now that he was the one person I wanted to talk to, I couldn't. I remembered walking up and down the Yakitori alleyways in Shinjuku on a Sunday afternoon, and something ripped at my heart.

I opened the window and took a deep breath of air. Outside, the sky was so sharp. So clear you could see anything in it. Something pulled at all of the energy in my body, pulled at my heart and at my stomach, and I let it pull it out of me. "Go on, pull another piece out," I thought, as I felt it whooshing out of me. I was empty now.

Suddenly, I found myself assaulted by images coming from all around me - the stucco wall across from my window, the twisted limbs of my bonsai tree, the sunlight through the bright green leaves in the garden below the kitchen, and the tiny perfect oranges hanging from the branches of that tree - I was assaulted by beauty, like a split-open eye, split wide open, with this eternal gasp running through me - the whoosh of all the things moving through me and then gone.

Something magnificent and terrible was about to happen - or was already happening - something that would never happen again, and I had to be awake for it.



Zeljko and I were at Gas Panic, it was a weeknight, so it wasn't too packed. We were dancing around the table to the Gypsy Kings and the Rolling Stones. There was a man sitting at the corner of the bar watching us. He had a wool cap on, and looked very gentle, like an angel. I went up to get us more drinks at some point, and he asked where I was from. I told

him, and he told me he was from Boston, but was living in Spain now. He was a flautist with a Flamenco troupe.

"Really?" I said, "That's really cool."

He nodded. I asked him if he could show me how to dance Flamenco, and he said no, but he could show me how to clap and step. I said that was cool. Then he turned around and looked at Zeljko, dancing over by the table.

"Are you two in love?" He asked.

I laughed. I looked at Zeljko in his black leather jacket and sideburns, spinning around on the floor by himself, and I answered "I don't know."

Our drinks came, and I turned to the flautist - his name was Terry - and told him to hang on a minute.

I took the beers over to Zeljko and handed him one.

"Do you mind if I dance with that guy for a while?" I asked him.

"No!" he said, taking the beer and moving over to the bar, "It'll give me a chance to rest up."

I went back over to Terry and we went onto the dance floor. He showed me how to clap in time, and then how to step. It was all a lot more difficult than it looked. After a while, I went to sit down at one of the tables by the wall and he went back to the bar.

After a while, Terry came over to me.

"You know what your friend just said to me?" He asked.

"No, what?"

"I was asking him about you, and he told me I could 'go ahead and fuck the bitch'."

I looked over at Zeljko's back, hunched over his beer.

Zeljko got up from the bar and picked up his jacket, started to walk towards the door.

"I've got to go," I said, reaching for my jacket.

"OK," he said.

"Bye," I said.

"Bye," he said. "Oh and by the way, you don't not know if you're in love. You either are or you aren't. If you're in love, you know it."

I stopped and turned back to him.

"You're right," I said to him. I knew I wasn't in love with Zeljko. I didn't know what this was, but it wasn't love.

I walked outside, and could see Zeljko just down the street. He was standing there, his back to me, looking around deciding which way to go. Then he shrugged his jacket up around his neck, turned and started walking towards the latrine at the end of the road.

I followed him, about two paces behind. He looked like something out of the Fifties in his tight blue jeans, swaggering down the road. When he went inside the latrine, I sat down on the little cement wall that surrounded an island of grass just outside. I sat there until he came out. I think he was surprised to see me. He laughed, and sat down next to me and then lay back onto the grass.



We were dancing, all of us, and then more of us came in, and someone got Coronas for everyone. With everyone there, I was floating on air. I didn't even think about the music, or what I was doing, how I was dancing. I was just floating, and jumping and flying, dancing out of control, with no effort at all, in my leopard-skin pants.

I had finished my beer, and was looking around, thinking I didn't stand much of a chance of getting one of the round I had just ordered. I was about to go up and order another one, when a bottle appeared in my hand.

"Cheers!" Said Doug.

And then Zeljko was buying Tequila shots for everyone. And he looked at me across the table. I smiled and shook my head.

"You know what that does to me!" I screamed over the din.

He smiled back, and I said "Yeah, alright."

I licked my hand, and after everyone else had taken their salt, I dumped the bowl over my hand and raised my glass. I slammed it down on the table as my eyeballs went on fire and spun around in their sockets, and Zeljko and I both yelled.

Zeljko was on the other side of the table. My arms were in the air, and I was in ecstasy. He leaned across the table, in between the legs of the people dancing on top. I leaned across too, and then pulled back. He leaned across, on the other side of the legs, and I leaned over too.

"Your place or mine?" He said.

"Mine."

He kissed me on the neck. I kissed him on his.

"Not yet though," I said, "I want to dance some more first. In an hour?"

He nodded.

And I danced, floating in the electric glow of having my tribe there with me, of knowing the people I was dancing with, of having this golden energy all around me, lifting me up. And then, after what seemed like only minutes, he was at my side again.

"Shall we go?"

I stopped and looked at him, I nodded. "Let me get my things."

I turned back to the tables along the wall and searched in the pile for my jacket and my bag, found them, and turned back to him. I felt him kiss me, his tongue lightly in my mouth, and then we walked out.

Then we were in the back seat of a taxi. We looked at each other, and he kissed me again. Only this time, it was one of those kisses that sucks your breath away, and I fell back a little. I steadied myself against his jeans, and then put my head on his black leather jacket and white T-shirt, my hand on his jeans, and his hand in my hair. I closed my eyes, and could smell leather. We rode home like that.

"Nah, you can get it next time," he said when I reached for my wallet. Outside of the taxi, I took his hands and we kissed again.

"Are you drunk?" he asked.

"A little," I said, gesturing wildly.

"Ah, I won't take advantage of you then," he said.

"Don't even think about it," I said, leaning into him and kissing him again.

He picked me up in my leopard-skin pants and sat me down on the hood of a car parked by the house. I think I squealed. He kissed me some more, caressing my sweater. Then we went inside.



He looked at me the next morning, sprawled out on the pillow.

"You look really relaxed," he said.

I smiled. I didn't know what I looked like.

"Hey, we really got that place rocking last night, didn't we?"

"Yeah," I smiled, "yeah, we did."



That night, I came home to the second floor kitchen, where he was sitting, with Doug and some of the others.

I sat down in the folding chair in front of him.

"How ya doing?" He asked.

"Alright."

Tom was half asleep, his head resting up against the wall. He jerked up.

"Did you say something?" He asked Doug.

"I didn't say anything," said Doug, "maybe the wall was whispering to you."

"The walls weren't whispering last night, I'll tell you that much!" Said Jody.

I could feel my cheeks sizzle.

"Wow!" Said Doug, after she had left room, "someone just broke one of the cardinal rules of Liberty House!"

"Yep," I said, and didn't say anything else.

"You know? What people want to do is their own business. As long as they're not hurting anyone else..."

"Maybe Jody's got sensitive ears?" I said.

Doug laughed.

After Doug left, I stood up and turned to Zeljko.

"I've got something of yours, if you want to come get it," I said.

"Whenever you're ready," he said, standing up. I nodded, and he followed me upstairs.

I gave him back his sock that he had left in my room the last night. He left it there again that night.

"You wear me out," he said, several hours later, "you dance too much, and then...you wear me out."

I laughed, "you wear me out too. We wear each other out."



Two nights later, I came upstairs from taking a shower. He was in the third floor kitchen, with his back to the door. I brushed by him as I walked to my door. When I came out again, I sat in the circle and opened a beer. Someone asked him to get his guitar, and he did. He played "Wild Thing." I had never really watched him play up close before. The air was yellow, and his hands and shoulders moved like I dance. And the sounds were right, and he looked humble. His face was soft and quiet, like a Madonna and Child.

It was just as I was starting to get confident. Just after I had looked over at him, and he looked up at me, and we nodded at each other with the music, and smiled. It was just after that that Carla came into the room and sat down next to him. She said something to him, and touched his leg, and then leaned in towards him to say something else.

I looked over at him, the smile wiped off my face. I was sure something registered over there, and I told myself to relax, he wasn't interested in her.

The next thing I knew, he was picking up his guitar and they were both walking out of the room.



The traffic workers light up the night streets with their cheery conical jack-O-lanterns, all in a string down the road, lining whatever construction work is being staged. I've been here long enough that the bright orange glow in the streets is comforting.

The blinking yellow of one of the trucks filled the back of the taxi, on and off, on and off, while my taxi was waiting for the light to turn.

Nobody could dance tonight. Including me. What a nightmare. A room filled with men who wanted me to smile. Don't they know what a serious thing dancing is?

Someone asked "what are you looking for?" I guess I looked like I was looking for something.

The taxi had stopped again. We sat in front of another line of Jack-O-lantern cones, and yellow strips of plastic, waiting to be waved on by the legions of traffic workers in their white-gloved hands.

What a strange time, I thought, looking up at the big black night outside. I lay back into the oversized seat back, no longer watching to make sure the driver was going the right way. I turned my head and looked out the window at the lights flying around the taxi and over my head. I was hurting and empty and frustrated, and just trying to sit still long enough for the truth to stop spinning around and around my walls and come to settle in the center.

He said he had had his fortune told a few nights before we slept together. He had pulled his lucky number - 13 - which is death in Tarot. He thought it meant the death of his relationship with his ex-girlfriend in Australia. Then, the night before, he had had a dream. A steer's skull, with horns, was spinning around and around in a circle, and then it came flying straight at him and hit him right between the eyes.

I wonder if it was me. I hope it was.



His sock was still in my room. I knotted it up and threw it out the window. That almost felt good, so I picked up a plate I had been burning a candle on, and threw that out the window. The

splattering of glass on the cement below was satisfying. I went out into the kitchen in search of more crockery.

I went out alone that Saturday. I was walking up to Motown when I saw Massoud, standing just below the steps. I said hi.

"Have you seen Zeljko?" He asked. I said I hadn't.

"He was in a fight," said Massoud. My heart started to race. "He said he was coming here, to Motown, but I have not seen him."

I said I would keep an eye out for him, and went inside.

A while later, Shiraz showed up, and we danced together. Then I saw him coming towards us. He looked at me, and I looked back, giving nothing. I turned away and danced by myself.

We shared a taxi home, and Shiraz went straight inside. Zeljko and I walked to Lawsons.

"You've really got the shits for me, don't you?" He asked. "I can tell the way you looked at me."

I looked at him and didn't say anything.

Then I said "I hear you got in a fight tonight."

"Yeah."

"Where'd you get hit?"

"Right here," he pointed to his cheek, just below his eye.

I looked at it. "I'll remember that," I said.

I got orange juice at Lawsons, and stood outside drinking it until he came out. Then we walked to the House. When we got inside, I turned to him.

"You're really an asshole, you know that?" I said.

He turned around and faced me.

"What brings you to that conclusion?"

I just looked at him, and then went upstairs.

A while later there was a knock at my door. I opened it, and saw Doug standing there.

"Hi," he said, "can I come in?"

"Sure."

"Look, I know you're upset, I just saw Zeljko...I don't know if you want to talk..."

"Yeah," I said, "I do."

"He was pretty upset," said Doug, "he said 'she called me an asshole.' He didn't even know why."

I sighed.

"You don't have to say if you don't want to..."

"No..." I didn't know where to start.

"You're both really good friends of mine," he said, "it makes me really happy to see you guys having a good time together...I'd really hate for there to be bad blood between you..."

"Here's the thing," I said, "I just don't understand how you can sleep with a friend and then just act like it's a one night stand."

Doug nodded. "What did you think would happen? I mean, were you expecting a serious relationship?"

"I didn't think," I said. "I didn't think anything."

Doug thought for a moment. "Well, I don't think it was just a one night stand for him. I mean, he may not say it...you know, he's kind of macho, and the way he was raised and all...he doesn't always say what he's feeling, but I know he feels a lot. And I know he really values your friendship."

Doug looked away for a moment.

"You know, he told me that you were the only woman he was ever friends with."

I looked up.

"Once I asked if there was anything going on between you two, and he said no, that you were really good friends. He said that you were the first woman he could just have a really good time with and just be friends, and he didn't want to screw that up."

I just sat there.

"Looks like we screwed it up," I said looking at him.

He sighed. "I probably shouldn't be telling you this..."

I looked up at him. "Yes you should - what?"

"...last week, he was looking for you...and he was asking if I had seen you and I said no, I told him you were probably working late." I nodded.

"Anyway, he said 'I don't understand it, why hasn't she called me? She's got my number, I don't have hers!'"

"I don't have his number," I said. My voice felt weak.

"So he was wondering why you didn't get in touch with him..."

"And I was wondering where the hell he was..."

I looked down at the floor.

"Weren't we supposed to have gone through all this shit in High School?" I asked.

"Yeah," said Doug.

"Why can't people just be together and be happy?" I asked him, "What's so fucking hard about that?"



We were both kneeling. I dropped my head to his chest and stomach, and my lips brushed against his skin. I put my cheek against his belly, I kissed his neck.

Earlier, he had writhed and moaned, while I kissed his torso as he lay on my mat. The slightest touch set him off. I remember being on top of him, and being a breath away from ecstasy, so close, so lost in the ether, so swept away into a cloud, a dream, swimming in my head...

Later that night, he lay behind me, cradling my breasts in his hand, stroking them.

Later that week, I threw dishes out the window, listening to them crash on the cement below, and against the house next door. I set fire to letters in my room, enjoying the adrenaline that rushed through my veins when the flames leapt out of control, feeling a release when the dish I burned them in snapped in two under the heat. Feeling my heart still pounding as I opened the window to get rid of the smoke, and I picked up the pieces of smudged china and threw them out the window.



A man with a sweet smile tried to hold me tonight. He said he liked me, but when he said it, his face went all gooey, and his eyes started to run down his face, and his sad eyes tried to look into mine. I teased him and taunted him. I danced and he couldn't. He tried to slow dance with me, taking my hands. I pulled them back quickly, snapping them into the air. He took hold of them again. I tensed up, my hands turned to claws - they didn't bite, and didn't pull back, only curled up in a grip of rage and disgust, frozen in the air, waiting for the cue to snap.

I pushed him away and he asked me why. I laughed. He asked me "has someone screwed you over?"

I just stood and looked at him.

The tears came gushing out of my face.

He held me then and I stood there shaking, letting him hold me, but not letting him inside.

He gave me his number, and asked me to call him. I told him I might, but that I probably wouldn't. I said "If I don't call you tomorrow, then I'll never call you ever."

We stopped on the sidewalk. I had to walk up to Roppongi crossing, to catch a cab, and he had to go back the other way, back to a bar he'd left something in. He asked me to come with him, and I said no, I needed to get home. I needed to catch a cab. And all the while, I was staring madly at the ambulance headed in the other direction, headed towards Gas Panic. I started to breathe like an animal, pinned to that ambulance, desperate to know who it was going to pick up - desperate to be in there with him. I swallowed.

"What are you looking at?" He asked me. "You're too intense, you're always staring at people."

I laughed. All I could think of to say to him was "you can't even dance." I didn't say anything, but shook my head, and ran toward the taxi cabs.



Once, I was lying on my back and he was stroking me, and I stopped smiling and I just needed to pull him into me. Suddenly I was touched at a place where someone could seriously enter me. He had grabbed me by the soul, and made the first step into me.

Did he really just think it was sex?



I went and knocked on his door.

"Yeah?"

"It's me, can I come in?"

"Me who?"

"Brazil. I want to talk to you."

"Ah...can you come back in five minutes?"

"Yeah, I'll be back."

I went up to my room, and a few minutes later there was a knock on my door.

He stood there in his torn T-shirt and cutoffs, smoking the end of a cigarette. I motioned him to come inside. He pointed to the cigarette. I shrugged. He came in.

He sat down on my floor. I sat down too.

"What's going on?" He asked. I looked at him.

"I don't get it," he said, shaking his head, "we're out dancing, we haven't seen each other in about a week, we've both been busy...then you call me an asshole...and now you want to talk..."

I looked at him, he looked like he had put on some weight. His legs were round and pink. I was suddenly stumped. I knew what I needed to say, but no words would come to me.

"I want to be with you," I said, finally.

He laughed and looked down at the floor. "So do I," he said, "I'm trying to figure out who that is."

I looked at him. "What do you want?" I asked.

He sighed, "I just want to be with someone I really care about, you know? Have a good time together..."

"We could do that."

"Yeah...I don't know, I mean I don't even know what I'm going to be doing five years down the road...or even next year...I don't know."

"I don't either."

"You know," he said, "we shouldn't even have to be talking about this, you know?"

I shrugged, "yeah, but we do - maybe we don't want the same thing. We've got to talk about it."

"But it's premature...I mean, we've only just had sex twice...the relationship's got to develop..."

"So what do you want to do?"

"Aw...I don't know...I'm just not ready to settle into something, you know? I need to be wild, you know?"

I nodded. Then I thought for a moment.

"You mean you want to fuck lots of people?"

"Well, yeah, if that's how you want to put it, yeah."

"God, I'm so tired of that."

"Yeah, well I've never really had a chance to be free - you know, I was in a relationship for five years, and I was faithful, I never had a chance to be wild."

I just looked at him.

"I'm just being honest," he said.

"I know you are. I'm glad you are."

"We can still be friends, right?"

"I don't know," I said, thinking, "I don't think so...it would just be a lie." I looked at him. "God this sucks." I looked down at the floor. "I'm going to have to find someone else to dance with," I said, "this really sucks."

"Do you want me to go?" He asked. I couldn't answer.

He stood up and put his hand on the doorknob. He looked down at me, like he was going to say something, and then turned and opened the door and walked out.



I saw him from behind on my way to work. I debated whether I would say hi, and then walked up to him awkwardly.

"Hi," I said.

He turned around. "Oh, hello," he said.

"I thought about what I said the other night..." I said, before he had a chance to say anything else, "...and I think we can probably be friends again...but...I just can't be around you for a few months or so."

As soon as the words were out, I regretted them, but it was too late. I saw his face shut down, and as I walked away, he called out after me: "Have a nice day!"



I sat in a taxi coated in a blur of rainwater - it made what was outside seem even more bright, more extraordinary, like when you cry and you see things so much more sharply through the tears on your eyes - the bright flesh toned babies hanging from a Christmas-wreathed pole in front of a department store - hanging in a circle in the sky, cherubs with holly sprigs, naked pink babies just hanging there in the sky.



I wrote a letter to him, trying to explain, and came home every night hoping for a response. None came.

Never had my room felt so empty and lonely. Never had Liberty House seemed so cold. With someone else living in it who I was afraid to run into on the stairway. Someone who at the same time, I desperately missed having around.



I was dancing with a black man from France.

"Tu danse bien," he said, "mais t'es un peu violente!"

I looked at him and shook my head.

"Tu n'as pas vu la violence." I said, smiling as I brought my bottle down on the table again with a crash.

It was horrible. I would try to dance, but then there would be a song we would have danced to, and suddenly my ears would be pricked, listening for him to walk in, my eyes trained on another world. I am an animal again, sniffing for his scent, and all around me disappears, only the hunt for the missing one. Like a wild animal that catches a scent of its mate in the woods, but can't see him. When I hear just one note, anything that reminds me of him, I'm off. And nothing better get in the way.

"I need to be wild."

Wild. You don't know the meaning of the word. Wild isn't running from one thing to another. Wild is where you give everything you've got, your heart and soul to your partner, and dance to the death. That's wild.



So many ambulances lately. More and more in the past few days, they're everywhere I turn, and the sirens are always starting up in the distance. Then, tonight, riding home in the taxi, there was one right in front of me.

I had a dream. In it, Zeljko came up to my room. Only it didn't look like him. It looked like an adult David Pentzein, my best friend when I was little. He moved to California when I was eight, and I never stopped crying.

In my dream, he had to take an elevator up to my room, and there were lots of people waiting downstairs for him, Carla and some others, they were all dressed like Hippies. He was coming up to say that he was leaving with these people for California, and he was going tonight. I was stunned. How could he go so suddenly? Without even telling me until just now? I was filled with such despair, I felt powerless to stop him, or to make him understand how much it hurt.

I begged him to stay. He laughed and said he was going. I said "Please! Just fifteen minutes! Just let me be with you for fifteen minutes!" And he said OK.

And I held him, and I cried. I wrapped my arms around him and I felt his strong round chest muscle in my hand. And I cried from a pit in the bottom of my stomach.



The next night, I went down to the second floor kitchen. Doug was there, with Barbara and Charlotte. I sat down, and asked if he wanted to play a game of mancala.

"Not right now," he said, "I've got to pack."

I looked at him.

"You know Zeljko and I are moving out tomorrow?" He said.

"No, I didn't know that," my heart was pounding.

I excused myself after a few minutes, and went and knocked on his door. There was no answer. I went up to my room.

For the most part, planes of experience first strike cones by the Obverse Experience Boundary, or "leading edge" of the plane. In volume three of his work "Obliscence, Theories of Forgetting and the Problem of Matter", however, Sonnabend discusses in great detail planes in which the Perverse Experience Boundary actually leads the Obverse, as well as planes which, for whatever reason, first strike the part of the cone associated with memory, and later strike the part associated with experience.

Sonnabend asserts that such planes make up as much as three quarters of our experiences. Because of their nature, however, they go largely unnoticed, or are passed off as "premonition," "Deja Vu," or "forebodings."

I set the alarm for 6:00 am, and then again for 6:30 am.

"If you sleep through this," I said to myself, "then you're dead." Not as a threat, but as a statement of fact.

I missed the first alarm, and woke up on my own at 6:28 am. My heart was beating. I pulled on a sweater and my dirty jeans, and I went downstairs. I knocked on his door. There was no answer. I knocked again. Still no answer. I turned around, my slippers making an awful shuffling sound that echoed through the tiny hallway. I went upstairs and got some work, came back down and sat on the stairs, where he would have to pass me on the way to the shower.

I felt like a fool. I felt like one of those women who cling to the man who doesn't love them, who wait by their doorstep for them to come home, and beg them to be with them, beg for a few scraps of affection, even if it isn't meant.

I sat there on the cold linoleum steps with those hexagons carved into them and dirt in the cracks. I sat next to the huge iron doors, with institutional paint. I sat under the white plaster walls with feathers of paint falling off, and thin spiderweb cracks running up to the ceiling. I sat for maybe forty minutes.

Zeljko's neighbor came out. My heart was pounding when the door opened, and the keys jingled, and I thought "it would be even worse if it wasn't him, because then someone else would see me here." I sat there, and his neighbor walked by me, down the stairs in his thick white long johns. Several minutes later, he came up again with the smell of toothpaste and wet hair.

I waited.

I went into the kitchen and looked at the clock. 7:20. He would have to get up soon, unless he wasn't going to work. I went up-stairs and put away my work. I came back down again.

I knocked on his door. No answer. I leaned up against the wall. "Come on you asshole, don't do this to me!" I stood back and knocked again. No answer.

"Dammit!" I thought about turning around and going. I knocked one more time.

"Yeaahh?" His voice was muffled and sleepy.

I knocked again. "Yeah, come in."

I turned the doorknob and pushed the door open. It stuck against something - I looked in, it was jammed against the backpack Zeljko had packed and leaned up against the wall. I pushed harder, shoving the backpack to the side. I leaned in and grabbed the backpack, pulling it aside. Something loud fell from the door. Keys.

"Doug said you're moving out tomorrow," I said, "today, I mean."

"Yeah, we're moving out," he said.

A million things raced through my mind. "I wanted to say good-bye," I said.

"Yeah, well it's not like we're leaving, we'll just be one stop away," he said.

We were silent for a moment. Then I said "don't you have to go to work?"

"What time is it?" He asked, reaching over for his alarm clock. He looked at it, "in ten minutes, the alarm will go off," he said, putting it back down. "I was rather enjoying my sleep," he said, smiling.

He looked warm. He sat up in bed, and his body looked warm and soft under the black T-shirt. His face was warm too, flushed with sleep, and drowsy looking. He was so relaxed, like nothing could ever phase him. He could just sit there and let a person say what they needed to say, and he would listen, and it would be OK.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"Alright," he said, "yourself?"

"Good." I asked him about the place they were moving into.

"It's better than this place," he said. He asked what I'd been up to, and I said hanging out, working too much, the usual. I asked him and he said the same. He came forward, and said my hair looked straighter, had I just washed it? I said no, it must be the electricity in the air. It drags it down.

"So what brings you here?" He asked me.

"I just didn't want you leaving thinking we were on bad terms," I said.

"I didn't think we were on bad terms."

"You never talk to me."

"Ah, well, you never say anything to me."

"I wrote you a letter."

"Yeah, well, you know, I like to keep things personal, you know?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know," he sounded annoyed, "you don't need to write a letter to me...we can just talk. You don't need to be afraid of me you know, if you want to talk, you just come up and talk. You don't have to write something and stick it under my door. All you have to do is say hello."

I looked up at him.

"OK," I said, "hello."

He was silent.

I could feel my jaw starting to quiver, and I looked into his face. "I really miss you," I said.

He pressed his lips together and looked down, then up again.

"I can't stand not being friends with you," I said. I bit my lip to stop it quivering.

The alarm went off, blasting the tiny room with its sound. Zeljko reached back and turned it off.

He sat forward again.

"What do you want?" He asked gently, but in the way guys always ask "what do you want from me?" like you're trying to steal all their underpants or something.

"I just want to be friends again," I said, almost a lie.

"Just friends?"

I nodded.

"Yeah, well we can do that," he said, more energy in his voice now, sitting forward, "Yeah, I think we can definitely do that."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

We looked each other in the eyes.

"Are you mad at me?" I asked.

"No, I'm not mad, I just don't like this dragging on so long," he said.

"Oh," I said.

"I don't hold a grudge, you know," he said, "not for more than a couple of days. That's just how I am."

"I don't know," I said, "I've heard about you Croatians."

"What did you hear?" He asked, leaning forward.

"I hear you fight a lot."

"Oh, yeah, well..."

He asked if I was going back to Hong Kong, I said yes, next Tuesday.

"You really pushed your way in here, didn't you?" He said, looking at the toppled backpack.

"Well, you had all that stuff sitting there," I said, looking down at the green and purple nylon straps. I looked back up at him.

"Can we be friends after I get back?"

"Yeah, of course!"

I knew it would be alright to hug him.

I asked if I could call him, he said they didn't have a number yet, but he would call me.

"OK," I said, "I'll hunt you down if you don't."

He said I should come around a lot, if I didn't have a lot to do.

I said I always had a lot to do, but I would come around anyway.

I said I'd let him get back to sleep. I leaned across the foot of his futon and pulled him to me. I hugged him and he hugged me back, under his warm black T-shirt, and I kissed his neck and hugged him again and said good-bye.

I turned and opened the door again. Something else fell off the door. "Sorry for wrecking your room," I said. "No worries," he said.



I looked at the poster on my wall of the two dancers - they are two different animals, two different ways of dancing - but for a

few moments, they crash into each other, and he picks her up and twirls her around.



I walked by Daimaru Peacock on Aoyama Dori. The sky was cold and gray. I remembered the day of Nuri's birthday party, when Olga and I had sat on the bench outside, drinking fruit juice and eating the sweetbread we would later put icing on and call a cake.

All of a sudden, Olga came flooding back into me. I could see her horsey smile, her stubbornly closed lips, the pink tip of her nose, and her pale blue eyes framed by pale lashes. I could feel the boniness of her hand, and her cool fingers. I remembered playing Truth or Dare, when she told us about her boyfriend of six years. I remembered when I found out she was sleeping with Zeljko.

As I stood shivering on the pavement, looking up at those pale red tiles on the wall of the Peacock building, I wondered if she still wrote to Zeljko. I wondered if he had ever written to her, or if it had just been over when it was over.

Suddenly I knew why I was shivering. Olga had slashed through me. Zeljko was still slashing through. Others had slashed me and some had left holes - and I was the only one who would ever know that I had been slashed.

I could tell someone he had cut through me, and that I was still reeling, and he could laugh and call me a child, but I was the one who felt the slashes. No-one could ever take the truth of them away from me.

The shivering was because I could never know for sure if I had ever made any slashes in anyone else.

I would never be certain that I had made anyone feel anything, or that they had even known I was there. Only they could know that. I realized then that I could never know for certain whether I had existed for anyone else.

I would never really know if I had existed.

I stood there in the cold, wondering what I would say to Olga if/when I wrote back to her letter of several weeks ago. The thought of it filled me with a sadness for all of us: we had spent this time together, seen each other up close, and then just let each other drift away. We had had this wonderful opportunity, and had been content to just let it be and then let it go, and that even though we still lived on the same planet, we might never look each other up again.

Alone

It must have been 3:00 am. I was in a dream, being rocked to sleep by the gentle rumbling of my floor. Then I was bouncing against the floorboards, off-balance. I jumped up, adrenaline racing to my heart. It felt like someone was shaking the building at its foundation, trying to pull it free. I shot to my feet and opened the door, standing in the doorway. The room slowly stopped moving, and my heart stopped thumping a few seconds later. Within a few minutes, people started coming into the kitchen to see the reports on TV. Those who spoke Japanese translated for the others. The earthquake had struck outside of Tokyo, and had registered 4.0 at the epicenter. There was no footage yet. After seeing the same map with the same numbers superimposed on it, repeated several times, I went back into my room. I lay there, staring at the darkness, certain that I could feel the floor shaking again. At some point, huddled in my futon and ready to spring for the door, I finally fell asleep.

I found myself being rocked awake more and more often by the earthquakes. The tremors would usually come at around 3 or 4 in the morning, and would last for several seconds. None were

as strong as the first one, and I didn't bother to get up for them. The first few times, I tensed up, alert, ready to head for the door if it got stronger, and then relaxed as I felt the steady rumbling subside.

As my fear disappeared, I started to feel the earthquakes more clearly. I would be lying there on my mat, when slowly, the floor would start to rumble. I would open my eyes, and focus on something inside me, under me, feeling for what it was. Usually it would get louder, and I could feel the ground underneath the building moving back and forth.

There would be a few moments when I was definitely in an earthquake - I felt everything under me shaking and rolling, and there was no getting away from it, nothing to jump onto that wasn't also moving, nowhere to get off. The Earth itself was shaking and I was stuck to it.

At these times, as I hugged the floor, I felt my heart was pulled by something deep under the ground, that the whole of Japan was moving and I was a part of it, that my heart pounded and rolled with the rolling of the Earth. And sometimes I thought that maybe it was the other way around - that the Earth moved with the pounding of my heart.

Then, there was the moment where I could no longer feel the Earth moving for sure. There was rolling and shaking, and my heart beating against the floor, but I wasn't sure whether it was the earthquake I felt or my heartbeat. And there would be a few seconds where I wondered if there had ever been an earthquake at all, because all I could feel was my heart, pounding against the floor, and yes it did rock me, and yes the room did throb.



Sometimes the colors outside were too bright, and the sunlight too brilliant. I would stand there, looking up Aoyama dori, at the golden haze flooding over all the buildings, and the glint off the Marlboro man riding high above the traffic and office blocks. I would look at the immense billows of sharply outlined gold and honey-colored clouds as the edge of the sun flooded the sky and the street, and it all looked so much bigger than anything I had ever had anything to do with.

Those clouds and that sunlight made the sprawling Tokyo streets and buildings look so small. I would be walking down the street, and suddenly for no reason, turn and look the other direction, and the light and sky would sweep through me like a blast from a rifle. I would be left there standing on the street, torn open, struck by wave after wave of blazing color, amazed that the cars just whizzed around me like clockwork, and didn't run into me in my stupor.

I came home from work one night. It was late and I was tired. A strange woman sat on the stoop of Liberty House, smoking a cigarette. I nodded at her, and stepped in. Then I stopped and turned around. She turned too, and looked up at me.

"Hi, I'm Carla," she said, sticking out her hand.

"I'm Brazil," I said, sticking out my hand. I looked at her again.

She sat on the stoop, her legs spread out as if marking her territory, leaning forward and smoking. Her blond hair was cropped close to her head, and her round eyes stood out like a doll's. She wore baggies with suspenders and a tight-fitting T-shirt underneath. Her accent was either Northern English or Scottish.

"You're Jody's friend," she said.

"Yeah, you know Jody?"

"Yep. I'm staying with her while I find a place to stay. I just arrived in Japan today."

"Where are you from?"

"Scotland," she said, "but I've been living in Thailand for the last six months. Hey, Jody and I are going out tonight, you want to come?"

"I'd really love to, but I'm exhausted. I just got off work, and I've got to get up again in eight hours."

"Oh come on, you're only young once! It'll be great!"

Just then Jody came clumping down the stairs, shouting Carla's name.

"Brazil, hi!" She said when she saw me, "are you coming out with us?"

There was a ring of fire between the three of us that night.

We stood in a triangle, at Motown, and made a toast.

"To friends," said Jody.

"Hey, I was going to say that!"

"Too bad, think of your own bloody toast."

"To a wild time," said Carla.

"To dancing your head off with friends," I said.

Carla looked around the front of the bar, where we were standing.

"Too bad there's not enough room here to dance," she said, moving around a little.

I laughed. "Yeah there is," I said. I lifted my arms up in the air, and started to dance with her. She put her arms up too, and

started dancing. We started to make our way out from the bar. She took my hands, still up in the air, and something else took control of my body. Spanish dance music came on, and we were suddenly out in the middle of the floor, dancing to it as if it were all we had done all of our lives. I moved in ways I knew my body wasn't capable of, but I didn't question it. I just kept dancing. She pulled my hands down, and I danced her down to the ground. She pushed her way back up with her hands and then did the same to me.

We were wild cats - She was a leopard, and I was a panther. We pounced and jumped, always catching the rhythm, always too fast for everyone else. And then we were vampires, prowling each other and snarling.

The room spun. We should have been dizzy, but the more we danced, the more adept we became, the wilder our moves grew, the faster we moved. At one point, we both realized that we had a lot of open space around us. She reached up in the sky with her hand and pointed her finger down to the floor, signaling me to twist down with her. Twisting low on the floor together, Carla leaned into me and said "look around." I looked. Up above us, people were having a good time, laughing, some were dancing... something was weird, though. Then I realized we were surrounded by women. There were no men in the crowd. That wasn't possible. Oh, yes, there they were. They were all at the bar. Some of them were watching us, but...

"The men are afraid!" Carla said, pushing me backwards, hard, and then grabbing my hand and pulling me up to my feet before I had a chance to fall. I pulled her back, spinning her around.

We danced that night until we had no more feeling in our bodies. We were not moving ourselves, something else was. We were like marionettes being pulled and maneuvered by hands much more skilled than we would ever be.

When we finally crawled home, the sky was already white. Jody gave the final directions to the cab driver and he pulled over to the curb with a mighty "hahiii!" The car shuddered a bit as it stopped, jolting us to our senses. We were all in the back, pressed up against the glass of the window, the vinyl of the seat, and each other.

In silence, we fumbled for change, handing it to Jody, who handed it to the driver. Out on the sidewalk, we all kind of stood there, shivering a bit, looking around, and up at the sky, certain that it wasn't supposed to look so clear at this hour. Unable to reconcile the coming dawn with our battered psyches, we decided that we should go into Lawsons Station and get some instant noodles or something to eat.

Inside, the buzz of the fluorescent lights welcomed us. I knew that same white light would fill the shop night and day, regardless of the light outside, a little Mini-store suspended in time. Rows of instant noodles of every variety, packaged curries, Pocari Sweat and other electrolyte drinks, little rice triangles wrapped in seaweed, packages of shredded cheese - everything you could ever want to sustain you. I felt strangely comforted by this, and I laughed.

Back outside again, I looked up at the sky turning white. They don't tell you that travel is dangerous, but it is. Several months from now, I thought, I will be sitting in my parents' back yard in California, watching the sky turn colors. It will turn white later in the morning, and turn cornflower later in the evening than it does here. And I will be wondering what everyone here is doing. If Zeljko is out at Roppongi, if everyone is standing in a big group with their jackets on, wondering where to go next, or walking down the street to the subway.

I won't be able to handle it, I thought, in a panic. I will be in California, knowing that my life is here...in the streets of Tokyo; in the road leading up to Liberty House on a Sunday afternoon after I've done my shopping but before I've done my laundry; in the smokey dark bars where they play Motown; in the

grungy yellow shower stall; on the freeway where I rode in Peter's van listening to the "Sliver" CD; in a taxi piled full of my friends at four a.m.

There are pieces of me all over the world, I realized, standing out on the sidewalk waiting for Jody and Carla in the silent white dawn. Sometimes I look up at the sky and long to pull them all back into me - to take one deep breath and have all the pieces come flooding back in so I will all be in one place.



I woke up the next morning and just lay there. I could hear someone coughing and hacking on the floor below.

"Tom! Stop smoking!" It was Jody's voice, shouting out the second floor window. "Stop smoking and the cough will go away!"

"How did you know it was me?"

"Because I could hear you. Now stop smoking and your cough will go away. I mean it - just put it down. You don't need it.

Tom was the Japanese taxi driver who worked nights and smoked days. One night, in a bar, I had been talking to a Japanese man, and I said something about the bartender - how he carried himself with so much dignity. He must be very interesting, I had said. The Japanese man said that most Japanese people would not associate with a bartender, because he was not part of normal society. He was a "night worker" like the taxi drivers.

"OK," said Tom, "I will." I didn't believe him. I had often come home late at night, before Tom went out, or early in the morning after he had come back, and he would be standing in the hall by the window, coughing his lungs up. Jody said one night

he was coughing up blood. But there he would be, lighting another cigarette as soon as the coughing subsided.

"Good on you Tom!" Shouted Jody. "Just stop for two or three days, the coughing will go away."

"OK," he said, "thank you for watching out for me."

I lay in bed a little longer. I looked at the poster on my wall of the two dancers flying in space. Soon I would get up and start to clean my room. I could hear Zeljko at the window below, beating on his quilt hung out the window. He would be wearing a torn white T-shirt and his hair wouldn't be brushed. Sometimes he would shout up to me, or I would call down to him.

I leaned over my futon and pulled the window open all the way. The sunlight streamed in, as if it had been waiting up against the clouded glass all this time. I crawled over to the wall and looked out. The windows outside looked Mediterranean with their black grills jutting out of white stucco walls, and the sun hitting it all equally with the same harshness that made everything sparkle, and everyone wince.

And there was Zeljko, leaning out his window and beating on his quilt. He looked up at me.

"How ya doin?" he called up.

"Alright," I answered.



He looked good in his torn white T-shirt and his jet-black hair and Roman profile. His dark feathery eyelashes and square

black sideburns. He looked Mediterranean too, I thought, Zeljko of Australia, born in Croatia, of the Adriatic sea.



Japan is a place to appreciate loneliness. I had been here just over one year now, and the fall leaves were beginning to change color again. It was nearly dusk, and I walked along the river after having spent the day in the house by myself.

There were red splotches scattered at intervals on the pavement, and gold flakes floated quickly downstream. Branches above me and across on the other bank reached out over the water, on fire with a red I remembered from my childhood.

I jumped up onto the ledge of the railing, and frightened a lone white stork that was just below that spot. It flew off in a diagonal line across the river, looking ridiculously delicate against the muddy water.

I walked along the path following the river, hidden behind the buildings, watching for the red splotches with veins, and felt a longing for someone to be next to me seeing what I saw, being touched by the scenery and the emptiness as I was.

This was what it was to be alone in a world of great beauty, I thought. I watched the gold flecks of leaf float down the river, and the bright orange fish bob up every once in a while to grab one. I watched the sparkles of the remaining dusk lighting up the water, and the branches fluttering on either side of the river.



My three months were up again, and I flew to Seoul. I sat in an almost empty pizza place in Itaewon, with red and white checkered tablecloths, and a juke box playing sappy music from the 70's. The streets outside the window were dark. Lifeless mannequins modeled stretch-velvet dresses glittering with sequins.

The waiters moved around the room, putting down silverware, and straightening the tablecloths. Every once in a while, a bell would ring when someone opened the door.

I was suddenly embarrassed to be there. One of the waiters brought me my pizza, and then my beer. I was glad no-one I knew would see me here. But I wished someone was here. I put my soggy umbrella on the chair next to mine.

Does it have to be so sad to be without one's mate, I wondered. I looked out the window at the water sliding down the glass. I had said I wanted to be an empty space, but did it have to be this empty? I looked down at my meal. Was eating pizza and drinking beer alone intrinsically pathetic?

This time, the Immigration officials only let me in for two weeks, and told me that if I tried coming in again I would be rejected. I sent most of my things to Hong Kong in case they were right, and I would carry the rest with me.

The night before I had to leave the country, I took a train to Shin-Osaka. My flight to Hong Kong left the next morning, from the brand-new Kansai airport in Osaka.

It was close to midnight when I checked into my hotel. I opened the mini-fridge, and managed to find what was probably some Vitamin C drink. I pulled back the blankets and lay down between the starchy white sheets. I lay there for a few minutes, then rolled over and set my alarm for 5:30 am.

I woke up a few hours later, certain I had already missed my train to Kansai. I looked at the clock: 5:20 am. I fell back onto my pillow, and waited for the alarm.

At 5:45 am, I rolled my suitcases out into the hall and shut the door to my room behind me. I was alone in the empty hallway. That's when it came back to me - the Twilight Zone, where the lady is in a hospital, and every night she wakes up at the same time, reaches over for a glass of water, the glass falls and breaks, she looks at the clock, it says 2:22, and then she gets up and starts to walk down the hallway to the elevator. Then, like someone who has never seen a horror movie, she gets into the elevator, takes it all the way down to the morgue, where she is greeted by a nurse flinging open the morgue doors, saying "room for one more!" (Of course, she does it all over again the next night.)

Anyway, we all know how it ends, and given that I had a plane to catch in a few hours, I was not amused with what my sleep-starved mind was coming up with for me.

"Just go to the elevator," I told myself, "get in, go down, check out, and that's it. If we get some nasty premonition about plane crashes, then we just won't go." I held my breath until the elevator doors opened downstairs.

Once outside, the Twilight Zone came back again. "It's not over yet," my mind said, "do you want to live or do you want to die?"

I let the question sink in. I looked up at the still gray sky - surprised that it wasn't light yet. I felt the unyielding hardness of the buildings towering over me, and of the cement under my feet, the coldness of the wind on my neck. "I want to live," I said.

A train was coming into the station up ahead. I could feel the ground shake as it roared in. The sidewalk under my feet was rumbling. And then shaking. My heart squealed, and I looked up. Above me, telephone poles and light posts were swaying

wildly back and forth in the early morning sky. Then all of the lights went out. The ground's flat surface heaved up and down beneath me in the dead silence.

I looked around, dropped my bags, and ran out into the middle of the street, jumping up on a traffic island. I wrapped my arms around myself, hanging onto the only stable thing I could find. My eyes lit up, and my face opened up into a smile, laughing at the joke whoever was doing this was making - there was nothing I could hang onto - the most I could do was stand here and cling to the center of the Earth as it rolled and shook wildly, with no idea where it would take me. I stood there, hugging the Earth below me, and for a few moments there was nothing but this wild ride. Nothing, not even my own body, only the whipping back and forth with whatever whipped the Earth.



"So where's the giant lizard?" Someone called out, and the silence was broken for a few moments by laughter.

Watching the footage on the TV they set up in the hotel lobby, we had been stunned into silence. Three of the other English speakers had been in the Bay area quake a few years earlier, but no-one had ever seen anything like the toppled miles of freeway, or the sections of neighborhood reduced to matchsticks as we watched from the hotel.

I had called Sue as soon as we knew the train lines were down.

"...What time is it?"

"Um...about seven thirty...so it's six thirty there...sorry..."

"Mmmmm...what's up?"

"Well...I'm not going to be in by one."

"No?"

"No. There's been a huge earthquake...the train lines are down, and I don't know how I'm going to get to the airport. I'll have to call you once I get there, and know which flight I'll be on."

"Shit!"

"Yeah, it's pretty bad...freeways are knocked over...whole neighborhoods are burned down."

"Shit! How are you doing?"

"I'm alright...I was outside when it happened..."

"Wow!"

"OK, I've got to go, there's a bunch of people waiting to use the phone."

"Alright...I guess I'll see you when I see you then."

"Yeah, see you."

On the television in Sue's living room, a Japanese woman was standing in front of a pile of rubble and timber and sobbing to the cameraman. I couldn't tell what she was saying, but her head and body moved up and down in short, controlled staccato, while her voice lifted high above her, grabbing listeners by the throat and shaking them to the core.

"So what do you do now?" Sue asked, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Who knows?" I said. "I'll apply for a working visa from here. If I don't get it... I don't know... maybe I'll go back to the states, maybe I'll stay in Hong Kong... maybe I'll go ride a horse around Mongolia for a few months."

She stood up and picked up her tea mug from the coffee table. "Well, I'll let you get some sleep," she said, "see you in the morning." She started towards her bedroom.

"Yeah," I said, "goodnight. Thanks for putting me up."

She went in and closed her door, and I was left alone on the floor of her sprawling living room, with the ceiling fan turning high above my head, making a gentle thumping sound that filled the room.

I lay awake for a while, listening to the slow thump and whir of the fan until I fell asleep.



I never did get back into Japan. My application for a working visa was turned down in Hong Kong, and when I tried coming in again on a tourist visa, through Okinawa airport, I was politely turned away.

I actually felt bad, putting the Okinawa Immigration officials in such an embarrassing position. They were almost apologetic, and one of them went and got an English translation of the visa codes, to help me find a way to come in again. When I went to make my bed in the airport's single departure lounge, the guards assigned to watch over me ran over and showed me how to pull two of the sets of chairs together to form a crib-like bed. Early the next morning, a woman in uniform came to me and asked if I wanted some tea.



Several months later, as I was getting ready to leave Hong Kong, I called Doug, to say good-bye.

"Hey, how are you doing?"

"Pretty good. I'm heading back to the States."

"Oh really - you've had enough of Asia?"

"Well, for now anyway, yeah...I want to see my family again, and I'm thinking of going to grad school, so..."

"Wow," he said, "it seems like you were just here...I don't know, it's weird to think you're leaving..."

"So how is everyone?" I asked.

"Well let's see...Shiraz was just over here the other night. We had a bunch of people over - she's still going out with that Japanese guy - Hyatt whatever. I haven't seen much of Jody lately, she's still with that surfer guy...Sally and Carla left for South America. They were going to go teach English there. Massoud lost his job again... Zeljko's gone..."

"Where's he?"

"He left Japan about two months ago - he said he was going to Croatia to see some relatives. No-one's heard from him though."

"Do you have his address in Australia?"

"No."

There was a pause, and I felt all the blood drain out of my body.

"What about you?" I asked. "How much longer are you going to stay?"

"I don't know," he said, "sometimes I just think I've been here too long and it's time to go back. But other times... I just don't know. I'm trying to save up some money now, so I can take a trip around Asia at least, before I go back. Who knows. I'll probably still be here a year from now."

After I put down the receiver, I felt a steel-gray emptiness washing through me - the kind of emptiness you feel when you look up and see someone flying off far up ahead and realize that you never even felt them leave your body.

I knew right then that nothing would ever be the same again. Even if I were to run into Carla someday, in some club, in some strange country, and they were playing great music, and we both danced like our lives depended on it - it would never be the same.

I just sat there on Sue's living room floor, surrounded by the bags I had packed for tomorrow morning's flight. The steel-gray emptiness pulled at me from far away, and made me thirsty. It helped to pull me to my feet.

"It's all gone," I said to myself, as I poured a glass of water at the kitchen sink.

I stood there, leaning against Sue's sink, feeling the steel gray tug that I now knew would never go away. The apartment was silent - there was no sound to mark the passage of time. Outside, behind the smudged concrete apartment blocks, the silvery-gray sky was starting to turn a smokey peach at the horizon.



