

RICHARD JOHNSTON

Dry Sockets

The Kuroshima Fisherman didn't say a word—not even to Hana, who was Japanese. He just nodded when she placed three bottles of Kirin lager and a 500-yen coin in front of him on the table. When I began to say “pleased to meet you” in Japanese, Hana kicked me.

Eventually, the baseball game that had been playing on a half-century-old Hitachi radio went to commercial. The Kuroshima Fisherman leaned back, looked at Hana with his one good eye, and said, “Domo.”

Pocketing the coin with his left hand, he picked up one of the beer bottles with his right, wedged it into the socket where his other eye had been, and cracked it open. He leaned to the side, shook his head, and dropped the cap into a five-gallon bucket.

After he had opened the other two bottles in the same fashion, he handed one to Hana to give to me, and then he gave one to Hana. He didn't say “Kampai” before he started drinking. Hana and I followed his lead.

When the baseball game came back on—the Tokyo Giants were playing their biggest rivals, the Hanshin Tigers—the Kuroshima Fisherman leaned forwards and closed his eye. I nudged Hana and pointed to the bucket. It was nearly three-quarters full with caps.

The Kuroshima Fisherman was a local legend, and Hana and I had traveled an hour by train and then another two hours by public ferry to see him. Hana's father had taken her to Kuroshima when she was seven. It was why, she thought, she had become a nurse. She said I couldn't leave Japan without seeing him, but what I think she meant was that I couldn't leave her.

The Kuroshima Fisherman—his name was Itabashi, but no one ever called him that—was eighty years old and had been fishing for nearly all of them. Born on an island where he would later die, he had left only three times: once, in 1940, to get married; a second time, in 1942, to fight the Americans; and a final time, in 1992, to throw out the first pitch at a Giants game and open a beer for the Japanese prime minister.

He had lost his right eye to an American bayonet on one of those little islands in the Pacific famous for its bloody battles. He spent some time in a hospital, was discharged, and then continued to fight until the war's end, when he returned to Kuroshima to resume his life as a fisherman.

It is a matter of speculation when he began opening beer bottles with his eye socket, and why. Had someone dared him? His wife, maybe, or a rival fisherman? No one knows. (His wife died in 1987.) The only thing anyone knew for sure, according to a feature produced by a local television station that I watched with Hana's family, and which she translated for me, was that by 1955 or 1956 people were coming from all over the prefecture to offer him beers. Every day, around four or five in the afternoon, a handful of people—and dozens on weekends and on holidays—would begin gathering on Kuroshima's tiny dock. After he came back from the bay, the Kuroshima Fisherman would put his catch in an icebox for the morning ferry to the market in Sendai. Then, he would carefully spread his ancient nets to dry. At last he'd take a seat in a small cane chair, tune the radio, which was always on, and receive his visitors.

On the last ferry back to the mainland, I told Hana I'd never seen anything like it. "Can you imagine?" I asked her. "You'd drink for free forever. I bet you'd even pick a woman up every now and then."

Hana frowned and offered a potato chip to one of the big seabirds tracking the ferry. They were so used to people they'd take food from your fingers.

"Hana, I'm only saying that's not a bad deal if you're going to lose an eye."

Hana was an emergency room nurse, but there were kinds of gore she just couldn't handle. She actually fainted during that fight scene in the second part of *Kill Bill* when Beatrix Kiddo plucks out Elle Driver's one good eye, drops it to the ground, and steps on it. I had to fan her awake the way I'd seen teachers do during murderous, one-hour assemblies in stifling gymnasiums.

Hana tossed a potato chip over the side of the ferry. A seabird dove for it and caught it just before it hit the water.

When the ferry docked, Hana didn't move.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

“You’re leaving in three days. Why did you joke about other women? I don’t understand.”

In 2002, exactly a decade after the Kuroshima Fisherman’s trip to Tokyo, I took a job teaching English in Japan. I had been living in England for three years working on a doctorate in Modernist poetry, and my funding had dried up. I probably could have finished in another year, but the loans involved were massive. The truth is I was bored. A friend who was leaving China thought she could get me her job teaching American culture at Beijing University, but Masaharu, a pitcher on my expat baseball team, asked why I wanted to move to China when I could make far more money in Japan and not risk developing lung cancer.

At the going-away party my teammates threw for me, I got drunk and swore a blood-oath not to return to the United States until George W. Bush was out of office.

I met Hana my first week in Japan. She was still in nursing school and finishing an internship at her old high school, where the organization that hired me had placed me. We started dating a few weeks later.

Nearly all the Western men I met in Japan had moved there to meet a Japanese woman, and they all liked the same type—straight hair, white coats, and knee-length boots. Hana had wavy hair and wore blue jeans and tennis shoes. She loved sports. She had played softball in high school and once pitched a no-hitter. Date-nights typically began at one of Sendai’s indoor batting cages and ended at a karaoke bar.

My apartment near Kawaramachi Station was small, but I think Hana would have moved in if I had asked her. I nearly did, too. I had never lived with anyone before.

Midway through my second year of teaching, though, I decided not to renew my contract. Hana cried when I told her, but I think she understood. She knew I couldn’t live in Japan forever, teaching English and coaching high-school baseball. It’s hard being a foreigner anywhere, but it’s especially difficult in Japan. In Japan, you’ll always be a foreigner. You could forget your language and dye your hair black, and it wouldn’t make a damn bit of difference.

It was Hana who suggested moving with me to America.

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea,” I told Hana. After all, we’d only known each other for eighteen months. Hana’s English wasn’t bad—it was better than my smattering of Japanese—but talking with her I often felt we weren’t getting down past the topsoil.

And even if we’d been certain it was love, could Hana work in America? Would her license transfer over? If not, what would she do in the meantime?

Would she get homesick, like me?

When Hana said anything could work if your heart was fixed on it, I laughed. “Hana, what movie did you hear that in?”

She left my apartment when I said that.

“But Hana,” I said to her later that night on the phone. “What if it doesn’t work? Have you thought about that? Have you even considered it? What would you do then?”

“Find someone else,” she said.

When Hana asked what we should do for our last weekend together, I said I wanted to visit all our favorite places. That meant Matsushima and a town in the mountains west of Sendai called Akiu. Stretched out along the Natori River, Akiu was famous for its hot springs.

From Matsushima there was a public ferry to all the fishing villages in the bay. I wasn’t keen on going to Kuroshima, but Hana had convinced a colleague to switch days with her so she could take Thursday off, too. That way we could spend Thursday and Friday nights in Matsushima, meet the fisherman she’d been talking about on Friday, and still have time to revisit the Zuigangi Temple on Saturday morning before driving to Akiu for two nights.

My flight to Atlanta departed on Monday.

Early Friday evening after returning from Kuroshima, Hana and I took a cab from the pier to the three-hundred-year-old ryokan we’d decided to splurge on. It was one of the handful of places in Matsushima that hadn’t been destroyed during the war.

Dinner was waiting for us under covered dishes on a low table.

“Did we miss dinner?” I said.

“What time did you tell them?”

“I thought I said eight.”

Hana looked at me skeptically.

“Hana, I know how to count.”

I wanted to bathe again after dinner, since it was a clear, cool night and the inn had a couple of those outdoor tubs one could reserve by the hour. We took a little sake with us and bathed under the stars. We didn’t talk much. I didn’t think we should try to talk.

Later that night, Hana started telling me about how her grandfather had fought in the war. I had always wondered about that but never asked.

My landlord once told me that his first memory was of two B-29s brooding in an ashen sky. Miyagi Prefecture is nearly two and a half hours north of Tokyo by bullet train, but since Sendai was a major shipping port, the whole place was firebombed. 95% of the city was obliterated.

I was nearly asleep when Hana began telling me about how her grandfather was on patrol this one night in the Philippines.

“Where in the Philippines?” I said. Hana was always choosing the wrong moments to say what was on her mind. It didn’t matter what time it was. It’s like she didn’t have a clock. At the time I attributed it to her being an emergency room nurse.

Hana said she couldn’t remember the island’s name. She said her grandfather was patrolling the place, just as he’d done every night for half a year, when he suddenly found himself standing six feet away from an American soldier who was also on patrol. The soldier was nearly six feet tall and black—the first black person he’d ever seen outside a movie—but he looked, Hana’s grandfather had told her, even more scared than he was.

They both had their rifles out, bayonets affixed, and they stood looking at each other for a long time.

“What do you mean, a long time?” I asked Hana. I was awake now, but I didn’t want to be. I was wanting to get an early start in the morning. “How long are we talking about?”

“I don’t know,” Hana said. “Minutes. Lots of minutes.”

And then, just as suddenly as they had met, this giant, nameless, black American soldier had lowered his weapon, shook his head as though he were trying to forget something, and walked right past Hana’s grandfather and disappeared into the trees.

It was after midnight, and we were lying together on Hana’s futon. I could still smell the cedar on her skin from the old tub where we had bathed.

I drew Hana a little closer to me. How could I not, after a story like that.

“It’s strange,” Hana said to me. “I dream about it many times. About my grandfather meeting the American soldier.”

“How is that strange?” I asked.

“Grandfather never did. He never dreamed, he told me. But I dream about it many times, and it happened before my father was born.”

“Sometimes,” Hana said after I’d almost fallen asleep, “sometimes, I think it’s because something is trying to tell me I shouldn’t be here. That my grandfather and the American were supposed to kill each other. That my father and I were never meant to be born.”

“None of us was *meant* to be born,” I said to Hana. We had left both sets of sliding doors to the ryokan’s courtyard open, and a cool breeze from Matsushima Bay filled the room. “The only reason I was born is because my parents had this huge fight after my mom discovered my dad had gone hunting after promising to stop. They had sex afterwards to make up.”

“Make up?”

“You know, to make things better. To make things right again.”

“And here we are,” Hana said in the dark, “you and me together, in Matsushima, in Japan—in *Nihon*—and you could be anywhere else, or nowhere else, and I could be anywhere else, too, or nowhere else at all.”

And she was right, I guess, but what’s the point of thinking about that sort of thing?

After I told Hana I wasn’t renewing my contract, we talked a few times about marrying, but the conversation never went anywhere. I convinced myself that I was afraid for her sake that things wouldn’t work out. And this was no doubt partly the case. What you have to understand is that Japanese women can’t simply marry an American, move away, get divorced, go home, and start all over again. It’s more complicated for them. They get tainted, in a way.

But I was afraid for my sake, too. I said I couldn’t be the cause of her mistake, even when she asked me, our last night together, to make it for her. I said I didn’t want that on my conscience.

For the next few months, Hana and I exchanged letters, and we talked on the phone when her schedule at the hospital and the thirteen-hour time difference permitted it. And I was seriously planning to visit her over New Year’s or in the spring. Tickets weren’t cheap, but I’d make it work.

If there’s a single word in English that can describe Hana’s letters, I don’t know what it is. They were careful—no, more than careful. If Hana misspelled a word, she wouldn’t use White-Out. She’d rewrite the word on the same kind of paper, cut it out, and paste it on top of the errant word.

Hana’s letters also contained extensive marginalia: “Can this be used as a transitive verb?” “Do people in America still use this expression?” “In Japanese, *baka*, the closest word to ‘idiot,’ combines the characters for ‘horse’ and ‘deer.’”

Her enclosures were priceless. When the city government launched a campaign combatting athletes’ foot, she sent me some of its literature. In Japan, people will speak freely about constipation or a flare-up of oral herpes, but if your gym finds out you have

a case of athlete's foot, it can bar you from working out until you have a doctor's note stating you're cured.

It was Hana who had the decency to end us. She called me one night after work. It was eight in the morning my time when the phone at my dad's house rang. There were hospital sounds in the background. "Can you hear me, dear?" She fumbled the words, but I knew what was happening.

That was in October of 2004.

Hana left Sendai a few years later. She lives in Sapporo now, on Hokkaido, with some doctor she met on a skiing trip in Nagoya. She has two little girls, too—twins.

The Kuroshima Fisherman is presumed to have died after a tsunami struck the island a few minutes after the Fukushima earthquake. I guess no one saw it coming or had time to make it to the little temple at the top of the island.

The water destroyed everything on Kuroshima, Hana told me in a postcard letting me know that her family, who still lived in Sendai, were safe. Matsushima and its temple were mostly spared.

No one lives on Kuroshima now. Someday, maybe in a hundred years, a scuba diver is going to find a five-gallon drum filled to the brim with bottle caps and wonder how on Earth to account for it.

The front of the postcard Hana sent me was a shot of the Sapporo brewery—not the one on Hokkaido or the original one in Natori, near Sendai, but the one in La Crosse, Wisconsin. A girl in a bathing suit and one of those preposterous Japanese corporate mascots are saying "Welcome" in big cartoon letters.

I don't think I'll ever come as close to marrying someone as I did with Hana. And the sad thing is I really believed I was trying to protect her by not taking the leap.

Unless you have sat in one of those old-style tubs in a Japanese onsen, it's impossible to imagine just how soft, even velvet-like, planks of cedar can become.

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