

When we got home, my daughter insisted on ringing my mother again. I had forgotten that my mother could play a harmonica. I had bought my daughter one for her birthday years before, and the two of them played their harmonicas into the phone for a long time that evening.

Mt. Fuji

ERIKA KROUSE

The summer before my senior year, I got a job at a Japanese hospital. We had moved to Tokyo when I was thirteen, and I was now seventeen. I still didn't know if we were leaving, or if I would get to stay in the country and graduate. They never told us much in advance. When people asked if I was a military brat, I said, "No, just a brat," or "Yes. The Corporate Military, IBM." My father had started working for them back when they were a typewriter company, and they had moved us every few years since I was born. It's a tribute to my inner child that I still tell these dumb jokes, and a tribute to my upbringing that there are still boxes I don't bother to unpack, friends I don't bother to make.

The visa for my hospital job had taken four months to get, and the job paid 2,080 yen per day. At exchange rates back then, my salary equaled a whopping \$1.62 an hour. I couldn't complain, though—I was paid the same wages as the nurses. The nurses lived there in the hospital, pulling double shifts, eating cafeteria food and then collapsing in tiny cots next to foot lockers. I worked at St. Luke's International Hospital, but back then, I was the only international thing there.

My first day, it was raining. I splashed up to the tan building with silty water dripping from the letters on the front door. It took some time to find my way around the big building to the wing where I would be working. A pretty nurse with bad teeth named Akiko introduced me to all the nurses, doctors, and patients. Nobody spoke any English at all. I bowed up and down about fifty times,

like a seesaw. Naturally squeamish, I kept ducking into the bathroom throughout the day to lean my faint head against the cool walls, trying to ignore the smell of rubbing alcohol and imminent demise. In Japan, people go to hospitals to die, and there were patients who lived there for years, but only if they were lucky.

Akiko-san cheerfully taught me how to make beds. This, it seemed, was my purpose. I learned how to peel the sheets off the mattress without touching the stains (blood, urine, diarrhea, occasionally semen), make hospital corners, and then tuck the new sheets in so tightly you could bounce a coin on the surface. Sometimes I did this while the patient was still on the bed, and a nurse rolled them over to the side that was sufficiently tight so I could smooth out the other side. It was important not to have any wrinkles, or I would give the patients bedsores, Akiko warned me. I pulled so hard on the sheets that my hands ached. I had lived in Japan long enough to understand that it is an island far too crowded to allow for mistakes.

Distributing meals was my second duty. Fortunately, each patient's tray was labeled, so I didn't have to memorize allergies or food constraints. Unfortunately, they were labeled in Japanese. Not the easy, phonetic alphabets, either—they were in Kanji, those weird Chinese characters that look like someone dropped a bunch of pickup sticks. I frantically tried to memorize characters, but usually ended up pestering Akiko every mealtime—"Whose?" I asked, and she would tell me, "Ah, Takahashi-san. Inoue-san. Watanabe-san."

My third and last duty was to escort the patients to X-rays, to the bathroom if they were able, or up and down the hallway for walks. This is how I became friends with Sato-san, a sixty-eight-year-old lady with hair always immaculately secured by bobby pins into a high, poufy bun. She clutched my arm hard on strolls down the gray corridor, her fingers like talons, Shiseido makeup flaking from her wrinkles. Sato-san had a son that she wanted me to marry, she said. She showed me a magazine spread of a traditional Tokyo house, impeccably decorated. "*Watashi no uchi desu,*" she said—*This*

is my home—and she and I were both quiet as we wondered in two languages if she would ever get to live there again.

Suzuki-san was another friend. He was a man in his eighties, and I never understood why he was there in the first place. I never knew any of their ailments. Neither did they—Japanese doctors don't tell you if you're dying, or why. Mr. Suzuki was the healthiest sick person I had ever seen. He bounced in his bed and made sharp gestures with knotted, old arms. He always asked me how I was with a loud, slow "*O Genki Desuka?*" whenever I gave him his breakfast (it seems that the practice of speaking slowly and loudly to foreigners is universal). Suzuki-san had taped a picture of Mt. Fuji next to his bed, and I kept him company while he ate his meal and told me about climbing the mountain eleven times. Relatives snuck him liquor, and when he got drunk, he sang old songs in a loud, quavering voice, waking up the other patients. Sometimes he stuck his face in mine, put his thumbs and forefingers above and below his eyelids, and then pulled his eyes wide open, to mimic my Western eyes. In response, I pulled my eyes into slants in the corners, and he laughed hysterically. He had never seen that before.

There was also Yumiko-chan. It was easy to guess why she was there. Only nineteen, she often wore a pink flowered shower cap over her bald head, while her long, black wig hung from a steel bedpost like a forgotten pet. She giggled and spoke in an infantile voice, even more babyish than other Japanese girls her age. She hadn't left the hospital in years, not for a minute. Yumiko's bed was strewn with about a million stuffed animals, and I had to remove them one by one when I changed the sheets for her.

Yumiko-chan told me that she had a boyfriend. She showed me a framed picture of a gorgeous Japanese teenager, with a sharp chin and lazy, sexy eyes. When I looked closer, I could see that she had torn it out of a teen idol magazine. But I still let her tell me all about him, and how he was going to lift her out of her hospital bed, marry her, and take her away to France. The reason he didn't visit, she said, was that it was too painful for him, seeing her so sick.

I had an imaginary boyfriend, too. His name was Sam—he

went to my school, and I had never spoken to him. Sam wore a leather Members Only jacket and checkered Vans. He drove a motorcycle. He had bad skin and a curly Isro that gave his head a mushroom shape. Sam was the drummer in a bad high school band, and drumsticks usually poked out of the back pocket of his black jeans. He wouldn't even look at me. I could hardly blame him—I was so ugly that the fattest boy in school invited me to the junior prom. When I said no, he said he only asked me because he felt sorry for me.

One of my sacred possessions was a trigonometry test Sam had failed and thrown out. My friend had stolen it for me out of the trash. He had scored an even 50 percent. I studied how he wrote his 7s, his up-and-down handwriting as he wrote "I don't know!" on the blank lines. Sitting on Yumiko-chan's bed, I showed her the math test, and we sighed over it together. He was lost, like me, a stranger. Alone. Neither of us had any idea how to solve for X.

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Out of every place I ever lived, Japan was my favorite. I fell in love with the sweet-potato trucks and their canned songs blaring out of tinny loudspeakers, the yakitori stands with strips of marinated chicken roasting on sticks, the Siberian winter winds, and the hot, soggy summers that soaked your clothes in sweat the minute you stepped outside. There is no hot like Asian hot. I went dancing in clubs ("discos") that served me free sloe gin fizzes and rum 'n Cokes. I drank pink and purple beer from the vending machines down my street that sold condoms, women's panties (used), or liquor in plastic bottles shaped like robots. The first time I got drunk was on canned piña coladas, and then I threw it all up in the parking lot of my apartment building. I went to Pachinko parlors and American movies with Japanese subtitles. My friends and I used to find our way onto *Roppongi* rooftops and see how far down the block we could run, jumping from roof to roof, way up above the flashing street. Once, we climbed about fifteen floors to the top of a building. Out of breath, we looked up to see a *yakuza* with tattoos and a machine gun lounging against a red door. He silently, lazily

pointed the gun at us. We slid and fell back down the fifteen stories, feeling lucky, and unlucky, and somehow left out of something important.

I spent hours every day on Tokyo's clean subways and trains packed with Japanese businessmen stuffed into suits, smelling vaguely of fish and heated milk. There was one point where the train became elevated, and Mt. Fuji popped into view—theoretically, that is. In actuality, it hid. Over four years, I only actually saw Mt. Fuji a few times, even though it was so close. Usually a scrim of clogged air hung before it, in varying stages of opacity. But each time Mt. Fuji showed its pale face behind its wispy fan of clouds and smog, the train passengers murmured, *Fuji-san! Fuji-san!* Everyone crowded to the windows to peer at the volcano, separate from all the other mountains, rising like a ghost in its white dress.

Too ugly to be noticed at home, I was sometimes stared at even in Tokyo, the biggest metropolitan area in the world. A foreigner, I was exotic by association, despite my physical appearance—thick, owly glasses with plastic frames, long monkey arms that poked too far out of the cuffs of my sweaters, my teeth encrusted in thick, gray braces that magically collected food even when I hadn't eaten any. I was so skinny, I bent like a green twig. Back in America, a boy in my homeroom used to ask, "What's the difference between Erika's chest and Kansas?" The punch line was, "Nothing." But in Tokyo, I was an oddity, like a giraffe in Times Square, or a sunset at noon. Or the lone peak of Mt. Fuji. Something strange, and therefore, beautiful.

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One day, the old lady Sato-san had me paged. When I came to her door, there was a man there. He was sweating in his tight suit—the air-conditioning in the hospital didn't exactly work—and wore dirty glasses, almost as thick as mine. When I entered the room, he stood up. He pushed the hair out of his eyes, and bowed. I bowed back. Sato-san smiled and nodded. "My son," she said, waving a wrinkly hand at him. I bowed again.

Then the man took a deep breath and said, in English, "I am

Sato, and I am Satie.” I could tell he had practiced the sentence all the way there.

Satie? That didn’t seem like a Japanese name. “Satie?” I asked.

“No. Satie. *Sa-tie*.”

My mouth fell open. Thirty. He was saying, *I am thirty*. I couldn’t believe it. *Thirty?* This man was a fossil. An extinct species. His ancient, damp hand was still clutching mine. I wiggled it out of his grasp. Mrs. Sato nodded back and forth between us, as if already planning our wedding. Bowing again, I backed out of the room, then ran and hid at the nurse’s station. I couldn’t marry a thirty-year-old. I was seventeen. I was in *high school*.

After he left, Sato-san paged me again. “He likes you,” she said in a musical voice, and I smiled crookedly. “Next, I must talk to your mother,” she told me. I promised to bring her to the hospital so they could meet, because I didn’t yet have the language skills to refuse her.

Since nobody at the hospital knew more than a word or two of English, I spoke Japanese for eight hours a day. My Japanese improved dramatically, out of necessity. In a hospital, it’s important to understand certain things—“Get ice! Now!” or, “Mr. Kobayashi is allergic to miso.” I ate cafeteria lunches with Akiko-san, who practiced her English by sometimes slipping in the three words she knew—“okay,” “berry good-o,” and “Makudonaludo” (McDonald’s).

Within a month, I found myself cracking jokes, telling stories or understanding complicated medical conditions in Japanese, without knowing how I could do these things. It just happened, somewhere between my brain and my tongue. I retroactively tried to trace the linguistic threads on the subway going home, or lying in bed at night. But I never could figure out a grammar scheme or method. I just knew the words, the way a tongue knows a taste. When I went home, my family would suddenly look confused when I spoke at the dinner table, and my sister or brother would say, “Um, Erika, you’re speaking in Japanese again.” I shut my mouth, dumb. My own language had abandoned me, and I hadn’t even noticed.

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Only Japanese belong in Japan. I had friends who had lived there for most of their lives, but they were still *gaijin*—foreign persons. One of the teachers at my school applied for Japanese citizenship. He had lived there for over twenty years. He was fluent in Japanese—*pera pera*—and frequently slipped into Japanglish in his classes—“*Kono* answer okay, *demo* . . . you can do better, *ne?*” His education was in marine biology, a shared passion of the crown prince of Japan (now the emperor). Every Saturday morning, my teacher went to the crown prince’s palace to drink tea with the prince, play chess, and discuss marine biology. But even the future emperor didn’t have enough clout to help him. My teacher was denied citizenship. He wasn’t Japanese.

If he couldn’t immigrate, there was no hope for me, a pimply teenager. I knew I didn’t belong there. But I didn’t belong in my own country, either. A month and a half before I took my hospital job, Ronald Reagan had ordered the bombing of Tripoli, Libya, to retaliate for an explosion in a German nightclub frequented by U.S. servicemen. Instead of assassinating Khaddafi, the bombs killed his little daughter.

There was an immediate rash of terrorism against all American allies, which included peaceful Japan. A van of explosives was driven onto an American school outside of Tokyo. Just a half block from my house, an annex of the Canadian Embassy was bombed. Helicopters swarmed over my apartment like inquisitive bees. We couldn’t go to school for two weeks. We were warned not to go outside. The Soviet Union pointed one of their nuclear warheads at Tokyo. On cable, we cringed as we saw our countrymen cheering, their fists raised, talking about how great it was to blow up Arabs. My native country seemed like a big, cowardly bully, hiding behind its geographic bulk and letting its friends take the fall. When protesters grabbed me and asked me if I was American, I told them I was Canadian.

I promised myself that I would never, ever go back.

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The summer was waning. Our family still didn’t know whether we were staying or going. It wasn’t looking good. The eighties boom

was over, and the Asian economy was beginning to implode. Most of my friends had been sent back to the States. Nighttimes, I wove my way home between drunk businessmen and grim housewives, wondering if Sam was still in the darkening city. Every time I heard a motorcycle, I inspected the rider's shoes for checkered Vans.

The patients replaced my friends. Suzuki-san told me about his dead wife, and showed me pictures of himself as a younger man on Mt. Fuji with about a thousand other people. Yumiko-chan had gotten a new boyfriend from a different magazine, and was engaged again. Sato-san kept asking to meet my family, and for a copy of my birth certificate.

One day I came to work and the nurses were hysterically running around the hospital in their white Reeboks. They spoke rapidly in high-pitched voices, eyes red and noses running. It all seemed to center around one room, that of a patient named Ito-san, whom I had never seen conscious. The woman had been in a coma since before I arrived. I found Akiko and caught her arm. "What's happening?" I asked, and she looked at me, her lips trembling.

"Ito-san is dead," she said.

She seemed so upset, I patted her arm. "Did you know her very well?"

"No." She wiped her eyes with a little handkerchief. "She in a coma when she came here."

"Then why are you sad?" I asked.

"Because she is dead."

I shook my head. "I don't understand."

"In America, you don't get sad when a person dies?"

"Yes, of course," I said hurriedly, with my last shred of national pride. I remembered that for centuries, Japanese people believed that Westerners ate their children. "We get very sad, just like you. But mostly about people we knew well, people we will miss."

"I will never know Ito-san. She never spoke to me. It's sad to lose what you have," Akiko told me, blowing her nose. "But sometimes it's sadder to lose what you can never have."

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The news came through one evening. We were being transferred back to America. Even worse—New Jersey. I had never lived there, but I had heard the accent, and that was enough for me. I considered dropping out of high school, taking up a cot in the nurse's room, waiting out my time with Yumiko-chan and her wig. I understood Yumi then, a teenager with wild, romantic blood and nowhere to go.

I waited until the end of my last week to break the news to the patients. I baked cookies for everyone, but ingredients are different in Japan. The cookies didn't seem to cook, only dry out, and by the time I took them out of the oven, they were harder than biscotti. Still, I had to give some kind of *presento*, gifts being the currency of Japan, so I distributed the cookies to patients who couldn't chew them, all of them saying, "*Oishi, Erika-chan, demo katai!*" Delicious, Erika, but hard! They respectfully lay the cookies on their trays until I left shift, and then they threw them into their little wastebaskets.

I procrastinated seeing Sato-san until she had already paged me twice. I walked slowly down the hall and entered her room. Then, sitting next to her bed, I slipped the old lady a desiccated cookie and told her that I was going back to America. "America?" she asked, as if she had never heard of it. "Why?"

"To finish high school."

"But what about the marriage?" she asked.

I didn't know what to say. Sato-san's face hardened. Then she rolled over on her side, away from me. She let the cookie fall out of her hand to the floor.

I never promised to marry your son, I wanted to tell her. I'm just a kid. I am not thirty. But she closed her eyes against me.

Suzuki-san wasn't happy with me either, and yanked his arm away as I tried to escort him to the bathroom. "You're going to America, and I'm never leaving this hospital," he grumbled. He wouldn't let me push the trolley for his IV, and when he got to the bathroom door, the wheels caught on the ridge. He pulled at it twice, and it kept bumping backward, the IV swinging on its vine.

Then, suddenly, Suzuki-san swore and yanked his needle right

out of his arm. He walked into the bathroom alone, unfettered, like a man.

I went to the nurse's station and reported to Akiko what happened. Akiko shrieked and ran into the bathroom. She pulled him off the toilet and started slapping the inside of his elbow to bring up the vein. Suzuki-san hung his head, his pants pooled around his ankles, his penis drooping. By the time she got the IV back into his arm, his skin was as pale as rice paper. I felt terrible. Akiko-san brought him back to his bed, and he didn't get up again for the rest of my shift.

On my last day, I stopped in to check on Suzuki-san as soon as I came in that morning. The lights were out, and everyone else in the room whispered. Suzuki-san was still lying prone, breathing painfully. He was wearing a catheter and oxygen tubes. *I have killed this man*, I thought. Trying not to cry, I found Akiko, "Did I kill Suzuki-san?" No, no, she told me, but she was busy, and Japanese people are always polite.

The other patients didn't speak to me much that day. It was as if I had already left, were already a ghost. Even Yumiko-chan retreated into politeness, bowing and saying all the proper things, now that I was on the outside.

Before I left the hospital for the last time, Sato-san summoned me to her bedside. She looked at me for a long moment. "I told my son you were leaving Japan," she said. "I called him last night. He was"—then she used a word I had never heard before. I asked what it meant, and she thought for a second.

Then she spoke English to me, for the first time ever. She clasped her worn hands to her chest. "Heart-o," she said. Then she thrust them away, toward the floor by my feet. She looked me in the eye.

"Down," she said.

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Three days later, I was in America. After we landed, my parents drove a rental car to our new house that night. As we pulled into a dark driveway, I asked, "Is this it? Are we home?"

My family looked at me strangely, and I realized that I was doing it again, speaking in Japanese. Jet-lagged and heartbroken, I stumbled and stuttered, trying to find the words in English. I didn't know how to say it anymore. I didn't even know what language I was speaking, what the right word was for home.

The next day I had to get up for school. It was the first day of my senior year. Walking to the bus stop at the end of my street, I felt exhausted, stewed, like my flesh would drop off my bones.

An American girl was waiting there, my age. She was dressed in a tight black dress, like a hooker. I glanced down at my ballooning blouse and cutoffs and knew I had made a fashion error. She ignored me for a few minutes, kicking stones, so I did the same. Then she said something I didn't hear. "Excuse me?" I asked.

"Are you new?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Where are you from?" She pulled her gum out of her mouth in a long string.

"Tokyo," I told her.

The strand of gum broke and snapped back onto her chin. She peeled it off. Her smooth brows furrowed and she tilted her hair-sprayed head to one side. "Tokyo? As in . . . China?"

"No," I said. "Japan. Tokyo, Japan."

"Oh . . . Japan."

I nodded again.

The girl hesitated. Then she asked, "Like, Japan, the one in China?"

I was still jet-lagged. It was 10:30 at night, back home in Tokyo. The day I had just begun was over, there. Everyone in the hospital would be pulling up their covers and going to sleep. I thought of Yumiko, sleeping with her forlorn wig hanging from the bedpost. Sato-san, staring at the glossy magazine pictures of home before a nurse snapped out her light for her. And old Suzuki, his old finger on the Mt. Fuji calendar next to his bed, tracing the path up the smooth mountain by the reflected light of a streetlamp. The last time I saw him, he was struggling for breath, because of me. I

knew he wouldn't make it. Neither he nor I would ever see Fuji-san again. I looked at the wan sun, already risen in this near east, and felt tears starting. I told myself, *This is home now. Here.* But I knew I would never belong here, or anywhere else.

"Yeah," I said, trying to smile at the American girl. "The one in China."

Space Cadet

SEAN DOOLITTLE

I was always a bookworm, the kind of kid who stayed indoors on sunny days. By high school, I began to think I wanted to be a writer. Or possibly a concert saxophonist. Then came the movie *Lethal Weapon*, starring Mel Gibson and Danny Glover, and I decided I would become a cop.

Come on. The shootout at the Christmas tree lot? That part where Riggs takes out Endo the torture master? And then he straps on a submachine gun and takes off across the city—on foot!—to finally hand Gary Busey's ass to him in the mud. Right?

Saxophone? I started writing "plainclothes detective" on the vocation questionnaires issued by the guidance counselor. I had an answer to the "What are your plans after High School?" question.

"I'm going to be a cop. Homicide, probably. Maybe narco or vice."

It was 1988. I never chose the badge, the badge chose me. All our lives would change that summer.

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"When I was nineteen, I did a guy in Laos with a rifle shot at a thousand yards out, in high wind. Maybe eight or even ten guys in the world could have made that shot. It's the only thing I was ever good at."

—DETECTIVE SERGEANT MARTIN RIGGS

In the only Little League photo I remember, I look like one of the coaches. I literally towered over every other kid on the team. But my growth rate had far outstripped large motor coordination, and so I