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Kagoshima from The Pagoda Diaries

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Okay. You need to get this straight from the beginning. You're an asshole. Everybody says so. And everybody can't be wrong. Everybody says that too—that everybody can't be wrong. But you're not so sure. It's a difficult issue. It seems to you like a lot of times everybody is wrong.

This may not be one of those times, though.

You certainly have issues. You're jaded. You've been in one place for too long. And it's probably the wrong place. Most places are, after all. But anyway, finally you're moving. Maybe it's a bit of a late move, but better late than never. That's another thing everybody says. Every journey starts with the first step. They say that too.

Maybe everybody just says too much.

Whatever.

The first thing you do is hurt your foot. That's the start of your journey. That's your first step. And it isn't a good one.

You're stumbling to get off the plane at Kagoshima airport and suddenly a shot of pain rises from your foot like you're walking on fire. Following the crowd of passengers along the aisle toward the exit, you've got your pack slung over a shoulder and your camera bag hanging free in your hand, heavy as a temple bell. You've barely got your feet stuffed into your silly walking shoes, and before you've taken your second step you feel a sharp pain rising herky-jerky from the two smaller toes on your left foot, running up into your calf. Then two more steps and it arrives, like a lick of flame, at the middle of your thigh. You feel like you're being burned at the stake. You're in pain.

After all your planning, all your reading, all your research. After all the time and energy you've already committed to this project. After all your expectations, anticipations, hopes and dreams. Now this? You're not even out of the airplane yet, and already you can hardly walk. This is a disaster. It's going to ruin your trip.

Fuck a duck.

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You got in a fight with a guy on the plane earlier and it took all your energy. Life is exhausting, especially on airplanes, and there was nothing to do but close your eyes. You fell asleep. When you woke up your foot hurt. You're the only person you know who can hurt himself doing nothing.

You're the only person you know who can hurt himself sleeping. People die in their sleep all the time, of course, and with any luck you'll be one of them. Just not right away, you're hoping. You have too many things left to do. And the first of those is to limp clumsily off this airplane. You move forward cautiously, favoring your left foot, and wincing with each step, gradually picking up the pace.

Then you ram smack dab into somebody's back. Shuffling painfully forward, walking uncomfortably on your heels, which you've yet to get settled into your silly walking shoes, and, looking down in wonder and disgust at your size 34 feet, you plow into the back of some sorry son of a salary man.

You had taken your shoes off before falling asleep, and now only your toes are firmly in them—ridiculous platypus like slip-on things, soled with some modern cookie-cutter substance that promises to be slip-proof, water-proof, and most of all fashion-proof. They're supposedly made for walking and you've bought them recently because walking is exactly what you expect to be doing a lot of these next few weeks. Now this! With shoes half on and half off, and pain roaring forth from the smallest toes of your left foot all the way up to your balls, you're not walking at all, but scurrying. And you scurry smack into the back of this unfortunate fellow. You blindside him. You sandbag him. You damn near knock him over. And wouldn't you know it? He's the same damn salary man you were fighting with earlier on the airplane.

He has been calmly minding his own business now, however, waiting patiently like everybody else to get off the plane, and you rear end him like he's your cellmate in prison. Your silly shoe comes flying foolishly off. You plant your toes heavily on the floor to regain your balance. Another burst of flame comes racing up your leg. You want to scream.

The salary man somehow regains his balance without falling down. He looks over his shoulder at you calmly, then he quietly bends over to pick up your dreary footwear. He looks at you sadly, apologizes and hands you your shoe, somehow able to keep a straight face. He doesn't comment on how unusually large it is, or how utterly goofy. Instead, he says, "Sorry." Then seeing the pain in your expression he adds, "Okay?"

This may be all the English he knows. This and "you," which is the one English word he employed in your earlier debate, and that to be honest, was more of a soliloquy

on your part than any kind of a discussion involving him, much less an actual debate.

"Sorry. Okay?"

And the most frustrating thing is, he doesn't even appear to hold a grudge about the berating you gave him earlier. Either he's completely forgiven you, or he's completely forgotten, or more likely, any public display in Japan being a cumbersome embarrassment to everybody involved, he's pretending it never happened.

Now you feel embarrassed. It's a crowded country. People bang shoulders all the time, but nothing like this ever happens. Except when people do it on purpose, of course. That used to happen a lot. It became kind of a fad here for a while among young guys. Walking down the street in small groups they would walk directly toward a *gaijin* and bump right into him. It was good clean fun for them, and they'd all get a big laugh out of it, apologizing and pretending it was an accident, then joking together like they were the funniest people on the planet. Harmless, sure, but you never learned to appreciate the humor in it.

Over the course of two or three years around the turn of the century this happened to you about a dozen times. You eventually learned to stop in your tracks when you saw a suspicious group coming, and just wait them out. Invariably, when you did that, they would swerve away. And eventually the fad passed, thank goodness. And now, in the absence of that peculiar behavior, one rarely sees collisions here like the one you've just caused. It seems almost miraculous in view of the enormous number of people out and about in this country, but it's true.

You have to be careful. With all your mass you can be frightening, if not down right dangerous, at any velocity. Now you've bashed into this guy from out of the blue. He never even saw you till you'd all but bowled him over. You're a six foot four inch behemoth. That's 193 centimeters. And you weigh 90 kilograms—nearly 200 pounds.

The guy didn't have a chance. Yet he apologizes to you. Never mind that just a short time ago you were cussing him up one side and down the other. Never mind that you'd called him a "racist ass."

"Sorry. Okay?"

What a culture.

You love this country.

In your own country you would have been the one apologizing. In fact, in your country you would have been apologizing like a congressman caught in a cat house, and he'd probably end up suing you anyway. But here you only bow your head a couple of times in the Japanese way, and utter the most basic Japanese word for excuse me. This

is enough. The man wants nothing to do with you, which fact, of course, you've known since you first sat down beside him on the airplane about an hour and a half ago. He just wants to go his own way, and so do you. But your foot hurts, and it's difficult to go your own way, or any way whatsoever, for that matter.

It's difficult, for right now, just to stand there. But even as you do, the mysterious pain in your toes begins to subside, and it's almost gone by the time you actually exit the plane.

That was weird. You wonder what that was. You sit down on a bench and rub your toes. You put your shoe on firmly. You head out.

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You hate to fly.

It's not because you're afraid, though, of course, you are afraid, but the reason you hate it is because you're too damn big. That's why you love the exit row. You'll do almost anything to sit there. And the first thing you have to do is ask. They just don't assign exit rows seats to people who don't request them. There are physical requirements, after all. They won't give you an exit row seat till they see you.

The exit row seats are the only ones that you can both sit in comfortably and comfortably pay for. But these seats go to the customers who request them, and there's always somebody else who has reserved them way before you've even decided to buy a ticket. But this time you were able to get an exit row seat without any real fuss. You were lucky.

The salary man you just bumped into was sitting there comfortably next to the window when you sat down beside him—sitting there smugly even. His legs stretched out and a magazine in his lap like he was lounging on the deck of a luxury liner. With his salt and pepper Rhett Butler mustache, his wrinkled chin on a square face, and his thin grey hair greased back, maybe he was 170 cm tall. Maybe less. He was wearing a cheap grey suit, a little too tight for him, possibly trying to capture the slim and sleek European look that's in style these days, but not quite getting it right, possibly because of the polyester.

You could almost feel him wince when you sat down beside him—his luxury liner had suddenly become the Yamato-maru, headed right for the bottom of the ocean, and as soon as the doors on the airplane were closed he called a flight attendant over and asked her if he could change seats.

It's not like you really cared whether he sat there or not. In fact, you didn't

want him to sit next to you any more than he wanted to sit there. More room for you and so on. But that doesn't mean you didn't notice when he got up and moved. You're very sensitive about these things. You always notice when somebody runs away from you.

You got up right behind the Rhett Butler guy, and with the stewardess glaring over your shoulder, mouth agape, you said loud enough for everybody in the immediate vicinity to hear, "What's your problem mister? As you and I and this stewardess right here behind me all know, you requested that seat. Now why don't you want it? You looked perfectly content sitting there till I sat down. Reading your magazine. Happy. What? Is there something wrong with me? Did I do something to offend you? I can't imagine what it was. All I did was sit there. I didn't even say a word to you. What? Don't you want to sit by a *gaijin*? What are you afraid of? Do I stink? Do you think I'm going to steal your wallet? I know we *gaijin* are all criminals and what not. You can't be too careful, right? But it's a goddamn airplane. How am I possibly going to steal your wallet and get away with it on an airplane? Oh, that's not it? What? I know! You're afraid some of these perfect strangers here are going to think you're actually traveling with me. You can't have that, can you? It might ruin your image, right? You don't want any of these other people to think you aren't a perfectly normal Japanese! You don't want to be associated with a *gaijin*! Right?"

You'd just said the G word three times. Fuck a duck.

The guy said, "Your Japanese is very good," as if that had anything to do with anything.

Fuck another duck!

And anyway, "your Japanese is very good" doesn't mean what it sounds like it means. In Japanese, "your Japanese is very good," means that you've just made a mistake. And the more vigorously and the more often you hear "your Japanese is very good," the worse you're probably doing. If the person is actually smiling when he says it, most likely he didn't understand a word you were saying.

You ignored that. You know your Japanese falls apart when you're angry. It's a foreign language for you, after all. But you also know he understood you. Your Japanese isn't perfect. But it's perfectly comprehensible.

You said, "Well, don't worry, because now everybody on the plane understands that you and this big *gaijin* aren't together. They all know you're a perfectly normal and healthy Japanese person. They also know you're a racist ass with a little dick."

The G word again. But, okay, you didn't actually say that little dick part.

Though only because you didn't want to get kicked off the airplane. The little dick thing is a big insult here. Nobody would ever say it. Except, of course, possibly you. But then again, you're a *gaijin*. Nobody cares what you say. Nobody cares what you think. That didn't stop you from thinking it though, and after all, it's the thought that counts. Though granted, it would have been hitting below the belt to say so. The Stewardess was tugging at your shirt and saying, "Please sit down. It's time for everybody to take his seat. Please sit down."

You said, "You're incredible! I've had Japanese people get up and move away from me on the subway, on the bus, on the train, in movie theatres, at restaurants, at the donut shop, at Starbucks. I've had them actually run away from me on the street. I've had them turn and walk away from me in mid sentence. I've had them interrupt me about a million times, waving a dismissive hand in my face like a horse waving his tail at a horse fly. I've had Japanese people do almost any rude thing one can imagine simply to avoid having to deal with me on normal human terms, but this is the first time I've ever had anybody move away from me on an airplane, where seats are actually assigned. You requested that seat, you asshole! You're the most insensitive fucking racist I've ever met in my life."

Okay, you didn't really say fucking either, but only because the Japanese language doesn't allow for that word in normal ranting and raving. Fucking, in Japanese isn't an expression of anger. Rather, it's more an expression of fun and joy. Daily doses of benign discrimination like this guy's aside, the attitude toward sex here is one of the things you love about this country.

He said, "*kanjigai*" which means roughly that you misunderstand the true feeling of the situation. Then he said "you" which is doubtless the only English word he could bring to mind in this situation—under attack by an enormous *gaijin*, and all. "*Kanjigai* you."

"You misunderstand the situation." But you didn't misunderstand it. And you don't. You understand the situation here better than he does. He doesn't want to be associated with you. He's afraid of what people will think.

The stewardess said, "Please sit down. It's time for everybody to take his seat."

You said, "jerk!" Not to the stewardess, of course, but to the salary man. And for anybody interested in coming to Japan sometime, the Japanese word for jerk is *aho*. But to be honest, one rarely hears that word here, either except jokingly among friends. Japanese people just don't talk to each other that way. They're too polite.

It's all a conundrum. The Japanese are so polite, so gentle, so non-

confrontational, yet this guy has just given up the best seat in economy class just because he doesn't want to sit by a *gaijin*. A huge and unattractive *gaijin*, granted, but still . . . This kind of thing happens here every day, day in and day out, without end, and it doesn't even occur to this fellow, nor to any of the others who do this kind of thing, that you may find it offensive. They don't think it's offensive. It's certainly not their intention to be rude, or to be hurtful. Rather, they think it's only natural. It's perfectly normal, culturally appropriate behavior. They're not trying to be rude. They will go out of their way to be polite, bowing and saying excuse me, even as they run away from you. They seem to think that by avoiding you at all costs, they're doing you a favor. A kindness. The thinking seems to be, since they feel so uncomfortable in your presence, you must surely feel uncomfortable in theirs. Or something like that. All you know for sure is what you've heard from hundreds of these people—they were only trying to be kind.

Now, this is the big, overwhelming, all-consuming, mystery here. How can an entire nation of 127.5 million individuals feel such overpowering discomfort in the presence of one uniquely unspectacular foreigner, and treat him so rudely on the one hand, yet be so polite and kind to him on the other.

It would be one thing if these people were all the type of arrogant Japanese chauvinists that everybody in the world has met one or two of, as they travel abroad, noisy, obnoxious and rude, but those people are the exception here, rather than the rule. In Japan, most Japanese are gentle, polite and kind. Like most people everywhere, they mean no harm. Yet they do these things. You don't even try any longer to understand it.

Well, actually, you do try. You just don't succeed.

This is an inside outside society, as everybody knows. And you're a *gaijin*. This word is written with two characters. The first means outside. The second means person. Simple enough. You're an outside person. You're the ultimate outsider. So why shouldn't you expect to be treated like one? The very notion that you might want to be treated like everybody else in the immediate area doesn't make sense to a Japanese person. It's not because of what you are that they feel uncomfortable around you. Rather, it's because of what you're not. You're not Japanese. If you can't see that, you must be out of your mind. Japanese and non-Japanese are two different things. If you can't grasp that simple basic fact, you misunderstand the true feeling of the situation.

And in the sense of fairness you should mention that this guy was far from the most insensitive racist you've ever seen in your life. You were exaggerating there, because that distinction would go to a neo-Nazi skin head you encountered on a street

corner in downtown Portland, Oregon, across from Pioneer Park, whom you heard spewing deliberate hateful bile about the integrity of the races, as if "race" is even a meaningful word. This happened in 1988, about a month before you came to Japan. The guy was about 200 cm tall and 110 kg. His face was painted half white and half black. He was handing out flyers and speaking calmly and clearly, but in a loud voice, with conviction more than passion. He even sounded educated, except for the stupidity of what he was saying: White is good; black is bad.

Now, he was a real asshole!

Never mind what you said about yourself earlier. That was simple, vane posturing. When it comes to being an asshole, you don't even compare to a shit dispenser like that guy, no matter what people say. He was completely fucked up. And being the only guy in the vicinity anywhere close to his size, you stepped up and told him so. You told him he needed to get professional help. There were several people gathered around the guy, glaring at him in disgust. Most of them were black. Family people. Women out shopping. Black women with kids The whites had just shaken their heads and kept on going. Who wants to get involved in a go nowhere situation like that, after all?

You mean who besides you? You're always ready to engage.

So in that way, everybody is correct. You are an asshole. Nonetheless, the crowd there clapped and hollered when you told the guy he needed help.

That still remains the only personal ovation you've ever received in your life. It was for calling a lousy racist jerk a lousy racist jerk. But that's a different story, from a different time and a different place. Never mind that even now, in 2008, on almost any weekend in the big cities one can encounter people in Japan driving around in big black busses with dark windows, proudly spewing anti-foreigner spiel and revering the doomed Imperial system. That's hard to take too, of course, but one never actually meets these people. They hide in their busses, behind their dark windows. And though it's no true consolation, you are not especially the target of this right wing wrath. Rather it's the Koreans and the Chinese who have been living here, sometimes for generations, whom those people hate.

Anyway, on the plane today, there wasn't anybody clapping for you. Most of the other passengers weren't even looking at you. Or at least they were pretending not to look.

The stewardess tugged at your shirt again, begging you really, in very polite Japanese to sit down, and *shikata-ga-nai*, you finally decided. There was nothing you could do anyway. You sat back down in your exit row seat by yourself to sulk. The

salary man said "*kanjigai*" again. "You misunderstand the true feeling of the situation," except that this time he wasn't addressing you. He was addressing all the other people in the vicinity who were politely pretending not to have noticed any ruckus whatsoever.

And this is the guy you've just plowed into like a truck into a mailbox.

Fuck a duck!

He picks up your shoe and hands it to you. "Sorry. Okay?"

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It's warm, but it's raining. Not the long endless rain of a winter in Oregon where you grew up, but a fierce break of warm rain and lightening that had just burst forth from the hot and humid, grey afternoon as you were disembarking—about the same time you rear-ended the salary man, in fact. Then, just as suddenly it stops and the sun comes out again. The air is rich with the smell of lightening. The smell of ions. The smell of salt. The smell of the sea. The air is thick. It's surprisingly heavy.

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Japan is a long country north to south. Even excluding Okinawa and the southern islands, as well as the islands north of Hokkaido, it covers almost the same range in latitude as the continental United States. Kagoshima is at the same latitude as Ensenada, It's south of El Paso, Texas, south of San Diego.

It is almost tropical here. Palm trees line the highway as you leave the airport, sunshine glistening off the broad wetness of the deep green fronds, and you watch them quietly from the bus.

This is the southern most city on Japan's four main islands, and for that reason a perfect place to start this long trip. Yet in one major way it's not the best place to begin. This trip has been your dream. It started out as a half-cocked notion. It grew into an interesting plan. Now suddenly it feels like a very big project. Maybe for you, in fact, it's too big.

There are 123 three-storied pagodas and 74—very soon to be 75—five-storied pagodas in Japan, not to mention an odd six-storied pagoda, a seven-storied pagoda, a nine-storied pagoda, a 13 storied pagoda, and at least a hundred two-storied pagodas known generally as *tahoto*, which roughly translates to "treasure tower." There are some ten or so miniature pagodas, and several hundred stone pagodas, as well. And if the ridiculous pain in your foot doesn't stop you, it's your intention on this trip to visit 108 of these, starting here and ending in Hokkaido where there is an ungodly structure

in the shape of a huge pagoda, but is, in fact, a working hotel. You might even stay there. Who knows?

As an inconvenient point of fact, however, there aren't any pagodas here in Kagoshima.

In fact, pagodas aside, there are relatively few Buddhist temples in Kagoshima whatsoever. There were more in the past, but this area, having been at the forefront of the 1868 revolution, was among Japan's most diligent prefectures when it came to implementing the Imperial order to dismantle all Buddhist institutions.

Now, the Japanese don't themselves call this revolution a revolution, and thereby neither does anybody else in the world. It's known here as the *Meiji Ishin* and worldwide as the Meiji Restoration, *ishin* meaning restoration of something old and worn. It consists of two characters. The first of them is rarely used. It originally meant simply "this." It's primary meaning now is "rope" though it isn't the character that's commonly used for rope, as in Japanese S&M stories, for example, but it is pronounced the same. It's alternately pronounced the same as the word for connect or bind together, and indeed it sometimes carries that meaning. It's used in the words for maintenance and for fiber. The second of the two characters is considerably more common and it means new. The word itself, *ishin*, is taken from an ancient Chinese poem and was usurped in the 19th century just for this purpose. It was a political sound bite. It was first used in Japanese as a call for military conscripts. The term *Meiji Ishin* was coined after the actual fact of the revolution.

Now the word is used in the sense of restoring authority or power, whether in government, bureaucracy or business, to a former position. Not for the restoration of land or buildings. It's a well-known word, naturally, because of this one specific context, but not otherwise commonly used. *Meiji*, of course, is the name of the emperor to whom this authority was returned, and the name of the period over which he reigned. It translates literally to Bright Rule.

But it's not as if authority had been taken away from this emperor earlier. Indeed, in Japan, the person of the emperor had lost any genuine political authority some 1200 hundred years earlier, and since then had only intermittently and briefly had any involvement whatsoever in actually governing anything, the last time being around 1330 with Emperor Godaigo. But with this and a few other exceptions, all real power had been in the hands of military governors since Taira Kiyomori in 1159. Before that, for several hundred years it had been in the hands of the all powerful Fujiwara family. So for what happened in 1868, you think revolution would surely be the right word.

Your opinion on this matter differs from the opinions of far more learned authorities on the subject though. Professor Ivan Morris says "It's largely a question of how we define the term; but since the Restoration did not significantly alter the system of property holding we can hardly regard it as revolutionary in the full modern sense of the word." His opinion echoes that of Professor W. G. Beasley who, with Marius Jansen, remains one of the quintessential gurus on the subject. Beasley says, "This is because what happened in Japan lacked the avowed social purpose that gives the 'great' revolutions of history a certain common character." In your opinion, however, if one takes the word "avowed" out of the professor's statement, it loses all meaning, for you think it's not avowal that matters in this case, but outcome. Even Morris seems to agree with you on this point—and disagree with himself. Eight pages after the above quote regarding the system of property holding, he writes "These measures dealt a painful blow to the samurai class and resulted in widespread poverty."

The samurai class had been leaches on society for hundreds of years, sponsoring nothing but jealousy, pride, deceit, corruption, battle, bloodshed, disruption, intimidation, submission and fear. Their sudden disenfranchisement in 1868 certainly was a revolution. Changes were rapid, widespread and immense.

It was a revolution just as complicated, just as complex, just as convoluted and just as chaotic as the one in France, much more so than the one in America. The entire fabric of the nation was changed. Indeed, before the revolution Japan was not even a nation, really. It was more like a confederacy of states, each looking out for its own interests vis-à-vis not only the Tokugawa shogunate, but their neighbors as well, and almost nobody trusted anybody. There was no central army before the revolution. There was no central navy. The closest thing to a national foreign policy was a vigilant coast watch. Any foreign ship near the Japanese shore would be immediately reported and rapidly repulsed. The extent of Japanese foreign policy was simply to keep all foreigners out. That was the "avowed social policy" that Professor Beasley finds missing. It was to keep the barbarians at the gate. That was what the revolution was all about. But revolution isn't a word that reverberates well in the Japanese ear now, and it wasn't a word that served the purposes of the Japanese rebels then.

Restoration of political authority to the emperor, on the other hand—these are words that served that purpose well. People were as easily manipulated by simple, stupid slogans then as they are now, and the catch phrase was "Reverence of the emperor; Ousting of the foreigners." In actual fact, though, the movement had little to do with the emperor and everything to do with keeping foreigners out of Japan. Had there

been no foreigners in Japan there would have been no revolution. Looking beyond all the convolutions and complications, all the frenzy and fuss, in the end it's as simple as that. The avowed purpose was to get the foreigners out and keep them out. At issue was how best to do it.

The Tokugawa shogunate collapsed because it had proved incapable of doing that. The nominal winners of the revolution, the Emperor and his supporters, would prove incapable of it as well. The Imperial court was incompetent. They hadn't wielded power or fielded an army in a thousand years. They were hapless, and slogans aside, the de facto winners of the revolution were not the Imperial court, but the lower level samurai who would end up controlling the new government. The Emperor would remain a figurehead just as he had been.

And for those who are wondering how such a long catch phrase as "Reverence of the emperor; Ousting of the foreigners" could possibly catch on with an entire populace, the original Japanese version of this cumbersome English translation was one simple four character word, *sonno joi*. And it worked. In *The Last Samurai*, a detailed and carefully researched biography of Saigo upon which a ridicalous Hollywood movie, also called *The Last Samurai* would be very loosely based, author Mark Ravina writes: "The emotional force of *sonno joi* thought was enormous. Like radical Islamic fundamentalism in our day, it seemed to answer deep-seated grievances and humiliations with a visionary, if vague, promise of purity and vengeance. The irrationality of *sonno joi* rhetoric was part of its appeal." And, "Driven by their passionate sense of righteousness and their utter obliviousness to hard facts, *sonno joi* radicals brought chaos and mayhem to Japanese politics."

These young loyalists clung to the Imperial court as the only hope of unifying the country against the barbarians. They believed that foreigners in Japan constituted a pollution of the "land of the Gods." Almost everybody believed this.

Ito Hirobumi would become the first Prime Minister of Japan, as well as the fifth, seventh, and tenth. He is still remembered as one of Japan's greatest politicians. Every Japanese person knows his name like every American knows Abraham Lincoln's. His face was on the 1000 yen note from 1963 till 1984. He was one of those *sonno joi* radicals. He said much later "if one thinks logically of the things [that happened then] they are impossible to understand . . . but emotionally, it had to be that way."

And the emperor was revered, if not actually given much genuine power, at least not for long. But the other half of the agenda remained a work in progress, as the foreigners weren't thoroughly ousted till around 1940. And everybody knows how that

turned out.

Because finally, cruelly and sadly, taking a long-term view of history, that is how the revolution ended. It ended in senseless death and brutal defeat. It ended in human shadows scorched onto sidewalks. It ended in mushroom clouds. It ended in flames.

One of Japan's premier historians today, Iriye Akira, has written that Japanese foreign policy at the time of the restoration was "but a context in which domestic rivalries were carried out." And in fact, before they were even finished spilling Japanese blood on Japanese soil, the Japanese had already begun expansionist ventures into Ezo, Korea, and Taiwan. A military mission to Taiwan in 1874 had forced the Chinese into conceding full control of Okinawa to Japan. The king of Okinawa was thereupon dispatched to Japan where he immediately disappeared from the public record. This exhibition to Taiwan had cost the Japanese 573 lives, all but 12 of which were lost to tropical disease. Japan's overseas wars had begun even before her domestic ones had finished.

At any rate, with the return of authority to the emperor in 1868 came a contemporaneous restoration of the traditional religion over which that august being would be called a god. He was believed to be a descendant of the sun goddess, Amaterasu, who plays a major role in Japan's ancient creation myths.

In 1868 it was ordered that Shinto, the traditional religion of Amaterasu and the Emperor, be reestablished as the national religion and that Buddhist temples be dismantled. That order was carried out to a greater or lesser degree throughout the country, and Kagoshima was one of the two main prefectures where the degree was greater rather than lesser. And this steadfastness in carrying out the Shinto order explains the paucity of Buddhist temples here.

There was a reason for that steadfast diligence though. Kagoshima—then known as Satsuma—along with Choshu, which lay on the western end of Honshu, on the shore of the Japan Sea, roughly where Yamaguchi prefecture now exists, was the driving force of the 1868 revolution in the first place. Some of the biggest actors on the revolutionary stage and in the Meiji government that followed, as well as in the Meiji army and navy, were from Kagoshima, and now there is a detailed museum of the Meiji Restoration in Kagoshima, not far from the waterfront. You'll go there soon.

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So, if it's pagodas you're into, and if there aren't any pagodas in Kagoshima,

then what are you doing here, one might ask, and that's a good question. But you have a good answer. You came here to see a girl named Emi.

You met her the first time you came to Kagoshima, about a year ago. She was sitting with two of her friends in the very small no smoking section of a *gaijin* bar called Big Ben around 22:30 on a Friday night when you came in, tired and sore.

And here you mean sore in the 1950s Hollywood, Humphrey Bogart and Jimmy Stewart sense of the word. You were angry. You'd been refused service at a local bar, and though this has happened to you countless times since you arrived in Japan, it hadn't happened in the past several years, if only because you'd learned to discern those establishments that will tolerate you from those that won't. And to be honest, not to mention fair, these days the vast majority of places will in fact tolerate you. Many will even welcome you gladly.

And under different circumstances, this place would have tolerated you too, maybe even welcomed you. Those circumstances being if you were in the company of Japanese people whom, it is assumed, would keep you from causing trouble, or else, being alone, they weren't so crowded that they couldn't seat you off in a corner by yourself where you couldn't possibly bother anybody. You knew this already, of course, and the young man who escorted you out the door confirmed it for you. "Come back when we aren't busy," he said.

But they were nearly full. The only seat available was at the counter between a couple of Japanese cuties. And this wasn't about to happen! No Japanese man in his right mind is going to seat a *gaijin* out on his own between two innocent Japanese women. It just doesn't make sense.

And let's face it. This is the way of the world. It could happen anywhere, and surely it does happen everywhere. But that doesn't mean you have to like it.

You gave the manager hell.

In fact, you're a bit of a hell giver when it comes to things like this. If something seems wrong to you, you say so. So at the end of the day, you're back where you started. You'r an asshole. Because how to win friends and influence people, it ain't.

Here's what happened: You'd spent about an hour walking around looking for just the right place to eat—this is your habit when you go to a new city. You're a huge guy, but a small eater, and you don't want to waste a rare feeling of hunger on a bad meal. So you walk around, look in windows, peek in doorways, read menus, observe people going in and coming out. You make a careful decision about where you're going to have your evening meal, and in the process, you learn a lot about the city you're in.

Everybody has his own habits when it comes to eating. These are yours. And on this day you settled on a cool looking place called Haraiso.

It's a very modern version of the traditional Japanese *izakaya*. This word is written with three Japanese *kanji*. The first one, *i*, means to be. The second, *zaka*, means *sake*, which everybody knows is Japanese rice wine. And the third one, *ya*, means shop, as in a drinking shop. So this is a very modern version of a traditional Japanese tavern. The walls, on the outside, are painted orange and covered with old advertisements from the early post war period. There was an *anime* character-like robot standing in front of a wood frame window and other cartoon like characters on the name board above the door. The overall effect was a uniquely Japanese combination of the quaint and the cute. It looked interesting, the menu looked good, and there wasn't much else that looked inviting anyway, so you opened the door and walked on in. A young guy came promptly up and asked very politely, "how many people in your party?" As if the answer wasn't depressingly obvious.

"*Hitori desu*." I'm alone.

"*Hai*." He politely proceeded to walk you toward the open seat. No problem. Not till the stick-up-his-ass manager saw what was happening, that is, and then all hell broke loose.

Well, okay, you exaggerate. It wasn't that bad. This is Japan, after all. Nothing is ever that bad, and all hell never breaks loose. That's because everybody's calm and polite, even when they're being xenophobic, racist, ridiculous and mean.

The manager looked like a kid in a karate class, the way he came charging up to you, decked out in black with a black apron, his arms crossed in front of his face like a secret *ninja* killer, and the young fellow escorting you to the open seat at the counter between the two cuties just about wet himself. He could see his entire future in the Japanese hospitality industry flying out the window, like a cigarette butt onto the street. He stopped dead in his tracks. And come to think of it, he's lucky you didn't plow into him too. But you stopped just in time to avoid another collision, and took a moment to get a grasp of the facts. You were being kicked out!

Rejected again.

Your life here has been a long series of rejections. You should be used to it by now.

But you aren't. Rejection is not an easy thing to get used to. Human beings—indeed all living things—seem to have a mechanism that rejects rejection. Rejection is death. And life is murder.

Though it used to happen more often, it's a little bit out of the ordinary in 21st century Japan for a *gaijin* to be out and out refused a seat in a regular tavern-style restaurant like this, and this hadn't happened to you since about 1999. But Kagoshima, after all, is a backwater, and here at Haraiso it was happening again, like a flashback. Like a bad drug. Like a bad dream revisited. Everybody knows that one dream he's had over and over again. This is it. Some guy bearing down on you like you're a rat in the kitchen and he's the cat. You engage. You scream out loud in your sleep. The scream wakes you up and you're already standing. You're sweating. Your arms are up and your hands are out. You're defending yourself.

The young guy who'd met you at the door was perfectly willing, at first, to find you a seat, and now a meter and a half from a seemingly perfect arrangement, the manager was running at you, crossing his arms furiously in front of his face.

This gesture, the arms crossed in front of the face, though a bit out of fashion these days, is more or less equivalent to waving a cross in front of a werewolf, and you've seen it countless times since you arrived in Japan. Essentially, it means NO!

"*Soko wa dame!*" the manager said, not to you, but to the young, fellow seating you. This means "Not there!" and the way he said it sounded very much like a mother who'd just caught her child taking a shit on the sofa. "Not there! Not there!"

"So, what's the problem?" you asked, though, of course, you knew better. You'd already figured out what the problem was. First, you're a *gaijin*. And second, you were alone. In Japan nobody but a regular customer will walk into anything but a Denny's style family restaurant, a coffee shop, or a McDonalds alone. In fact, nobody does very much of anything alone here, and anybody who walks into a restaurant like this all by himself is apt to get looked at like he's robbing a bank. And he's apt to end up sitting somewhere off in a corner alone. This could easily happen even if he wasn't a *gaijin*. But you are a *gaijin*, and there was no seat off in the corner out of sight, just the one at the counter between two girls. "Why not there?" you asked.

"There's no room."

"Of course there's room. If there wasn't room you wouldn't have a chair there?

"There's a bag on the chair." He said this as if bags were immovable objects.

You looked again and said, "No there isn't." The woman had just moved it.

"*Soko wa dame*," he said. "Not there." And that was the final word. At least he thought it was. But you're stubborn. You said, "I'll wait." In fact, waiting is not uncommon at Japanese *izakayas*, and often there's a row of seats near the door, either inside or outside, just for that purpose. And, as a matter of fact, there was a bench just

outside the door of this place.

"We have reservations," the manager said. And just then a group of four Japanese people came in. "How many?" the young waiter who'd just about wet himself asked them.

"Four."

"Is upstairs okay?"

"Yes, upstairs is fine."

And now you were angry. "You have an upstairs?" you asked, indignant.

"It's full," the manager said.

"It wasn't full when I came in, though, was it? You just sat four people up there."

"They had a reservation."

"No they didn't. Nobody asked them if they had a reservation when they came in and nobody asked their names. You're a liar!"

"There was a table for four people upstairs but no seat for one."

"There's a seat for one right here," you said, pointing to the one you'd nearly been seated at a moment before. "And another one right over there." A man was just leaving.

"*Soko wa dame*." Now he was crossing his hands in front of his face again. The young guy came back from upstairs and started speaking incomprehensible English to you, as if that would somehow help. This happens a lot. You're still hanging around long after any sensible person would have got the hint and left, so somebody decides that putting it all into English will clear everything up for you. Never mind that it's usually somebody who can't even speak English. It's not what he says that matters, anyway, it's the fact that he's saying it in English. Well, he thinks it's English, anyway. Maybe. It isn't Japanese, and that's the main thing. It serves the paramount purpose of the immediate moment, which is to show that you are different from everybody else and must therefore be treated differently. Never mind that you don't feel different. It doesn't matter how you feel. It doesn't matter what you think. Even when the words aren't intelligible the message is clear,

You're an outsider here.

"English?" you said. "You want to speak English?" How about this for English, then?" and suddenly you changed to English yourself and said, "You're all a bunch of assholes! How do you like that English?"

The young guy looked at you like you were from Pluto. "Me?" he said, and

following you out the door he changed back to Japanese. "We have *gaijin* in here all the time. Come back when we aren't so busy."

Oh sure. Like that going to happen.

Well, actually, that is going to happen. You'll go there again in a little over a year from now. It will be quiet. There will be a different manager. You'll be seated at the counter—one seat removed from the only other customers there, two young and lively girls. You'll have a lovely time. The food will be great. Scallops in butter, asparagus wrapped in bacon and a tofu salad with spinach, which like much Japanese food, will taste much better than it sounds. And you'll fall in love with the new waitress, a twenty-year old girl named Yukari, as pretty and sweet as the early morning sun. She'll walk outside with you after you've eaten and take a photo of you sitting on the bench in front of the robot. She'll smile. She'll wave goodbye when you leave. She'll make you wish you were 22 again. Indeed, she'll make you feel like you are. But that will be in the future. And what will it prove? Maybe nothing. Nothing more than how happiness in Japan is now, as it always has been, at the whim of whatever asshole happens to be in the vicinity. Bullies rule here. They always have. And that, more than anything, is the sad fact of this country. Bullies are everywhere in the world. And everywhere in the world there are moral notions in place for stopping them.

Everywhere but here that is.

And yes, the kid who showed you to the door at Haraiso in his awful English that day did use the word *gaijin*. Everybody here uses it. It's a pejorative. It's not officially allowed on TV, on the radio, or in the newspaper. But any foreigner who comes here will hear the word thirty times a day. In fact, you use the word yourself. It's an ugly habit. You wouldn't call a black person a nigger. You wouldn't call a Mexican person a spic. And you wouldn't call a Japanese person a jap or a nip. How did you ever learn to call yourself a *gaijin*?

You're not a *gaijin*. You're a person. But you live in a country that divides people into two simple groups. One is Japanese. The other isn't. What can you do?

Learn to call yourself something else. That's one thing you can do. You can call yourself a *ningen* for example—a person, You don't suppose presidential candidate Barack Obama, for example, calls himself a nigger. Or a spade. Or a coon. Or a jigaboo. Why do you call yourself a *gaijin*? Why do you let others call you that? Because there's nothing you can do to stop it, you suppose.

Anyway here comes the most interesting thing about this whole mundane story, at least from your point of view: The guy who said this is what's known in

Japanese as *haafu*. That means he's half Japanese. It doesn't matter what the other half is. All these people of mixed race, if one parent is Japanese, are called *haafu*. The other half could just as well be Martian. It wouldn't matter. The same word would apply. It's only the Japanese half that matters.

The other half of his particular guy was black. His father was an American serviceman whom he'd never met in his life. He told you this. "I've been discriminated against my whole life," he said. "I'm black. What do you have to complain about?"

"What do I have to complain about?" you mimicked. "I'm hungry! I need a beer!. That's what I have to complain about." But you smiled. You laid your hand on his shoulder. It wasn't him you were angry at. He was just doing his job. He was a handsome young man caught in the crosshairs of a society that didn't know what to do with him. It wasn't him you were upset about. Rather, it was the whole situation that had you upset, nervous, angry, depressed, self-loathing, and loathing of Japan.

And that's the mood you were in when you walked into the English Pub Big Ben, where you felt more or less certain you'd be more or less welcome. And 100% certain that, for better or for worse, everybody you encountered would speak English to you. And there's where you met Emi.

Now you're at Kagoshima Station with about four hours to kill before you'll meet her again in front of a big department store in the Tenmonkan area, which also happens to be where your hotel is.

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With 605 thousand people, Kagoshima is the 22nd largest city in Japan. It's the same size as Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Boston Massachusetts, El Paso, Texas. It doesn't feel as big as any of those cities, but it is. To an American like you, no Japanese cities feel as big as they are. Tokyo feels smaller than New York but it isn't. Osaka feels smaller than Chicago but it isn't. Nagoya feels smaller than Houston, but it isn't. And Kagoshima feels smaller than Boston. But it isn't.

One of the reasons you think Japanese cities feel smaller than they are is because there are fewer tall buildings, and when you first arrived here in May of 1988, except for in Tokyo, there were almost none. The tallest structure in the heart of Nagoya, for example, was the TV Tower, and the tallest structure in Kagoshima even now is the Ferris wheel on top of Kagoshima Station. It rises 91 meters above the ground. This is one of a bazillion Ferris wheels in Japan. Some day you're going to get an exact count. It could be a bazillion and one. The landscape is littered with them.

Maybe you'll give this one a ride later on. But the day is still young, so you put your bags in a locker and head off to the Meiji Restoration Museum. It's not far away, and normally you would walk, but with the mysterious pain you have just suffered in your foot, you decide to take the streetcar.

Kagoshima is one of the ten major Japanese cities that still have a significant streetcar system. The others are Kumamoto, Nagasaki, Matsuyama, Kochi, Okayama, Hiroshima, Toyama, Hakodate and Sapporo, and surely they are part of what gives these cities each a special complexion, and makes them among your favorites in Japan. All of them except Toyama, Hakodate and Sapporo are in the West. Three are on Kyushu, two are on Shikoku, two are on Hokkaido, and except for Hiroshima and Okayama, they are all off the main Bullet Train lines and they're all remote. Streetcars have completely disappeared from Kobe, Osaka, Kyoto, Nagoya, Tokyo, and Sendai. These cities all have subways.

Subways suck.

Even in Nagoya where you live, and where there is a relatively nice subway system, you prefer to walk whenever you can. You walk at least an hour every day in Nagoya, and that's just to get to and from work. Never mind that you also have to ride the train an hour each way, and change trains at least once, sometimes twice. It sounds like a nightmare now that you put it in writing, but it's a fairly typical commute here, and the walking part isn't bad at all.

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There was an Englishman, Alan Booth, who made his reputation walking. He took long, boring walks along the back roads of Japan and writing short, boring books about them. His first walk began at the northern tip of Hokkaido and finished at Cape Sata, on the southern tip of Kyushu, not far from here. The title of the book is, not surprisingly, *The Roads to Sata*. It was a 3,200 kilometer walk along the length of the country that one critic would later dismiss as "the world's longest pub crawl," which it may well have been, but that can only be to the author's credit, and therein, indeed, lies the book's only significant charm in your opinion.

In the introduction to that book Booth rejects the notion that he is writing about "the Japanese." He says, "I have tried to avoid generalizations, particularly 'the Japanese.' 'The Japanese' are 120,000,000 people, ranging in age from 0 to 119, in geographical location across 21 degrees of latitude and 23 degrees of longitude, and in profession from emperor to urban guerrilla. This book is about my encounters with

some twelve hundred businessmen, farmers, grandmothers, fishermen, housewives, shopkeepers, schoolchildren, soldiers, policemen, monks, priests, tourists, journalists, professors, laborers, maids, waiters, carpenters, teachers, innkeepers, potters, hostesses, professional wrestlers, government officials, hermits, drunks, and tramps."

Then he proceeded to write 280 pages about the weather—much of which, to his credit, he described beautifully—and about how well he thinks he speaks Japanese. Or rather, how well he thought he spoke it, because he's dead now, but at the time of his journey he'd been here for seven years. Yet to hear him tell it, one would think that above and beyond speaking the standard language perfectly, he spoke every dialect the country has to offer. It isn't possible. Adults can study a foreign language for a lifetime and never speak it as well as he claimed to speak Japanese. He claimed to be perfect, or at least that's the impression he tried to leave, and rereading him recently was rather off-putting for you because you know how Japanese tend to feel about white people who speak their language, as well as how strongly, how rudely, and sometimes even how violently they react to it, since you do yourself more or less speak Japanese.

And by more or less, you mean a little more less than more. You've studied the language for twenty years, but one really needs to grow up in a language to speak it fluently. Any linguist knows this. And any linguist who has lived and worked in Japan for any amount of time knows that Japan is a special place, where in many ways, for a Westerner, it's easier to get by if he doesn't speak Japanese well. And maybe because of that odd phenomenon, the country is full of Westerners who are getting by wonderfully, can't form a proper sentence in Japanese, yet remain under the illusion that they speak the language perfectly. Most of these guys can barely speak it at all. They sound like birds asking for crackers, and Alan Booth, the guy who wrote this book, sounds like he was, at least at that time in his career, just one more of those almost intolerable "look mom, I'm speaking Japanese!" guys. And like most of those guys, he probably really wasn't. In spite of his obvious ability to communicate, from the perspective of any of the nearly 1200 Japanese people he encountered on that trip, what he was speaking almost certainly wasn't Japanese, but a nearly random selection of Japanese sounding words spoken in English.

Also, from that same Japanese perspective, what you speak isn't Japanese either, because from the Japanese point of view it isn't a relative issue. Do you speak Japanese is a yes or no question. And grammar, syntax, and structure aside, for anybody with a non-native accent, the answer is no. Like Alan Booth, you don't.

Unlike Alan Booth, however, you recognize that nations do have national

ideologies, you believe those ideologies can be generalized, you know the Japanese are perfectly willing to generalize about themselves, maybe more than most peoples, and you are willing to make generalizations about "the Japanese." And first among those generalizations is that they have a national complex about English, about Japanese, and about language itself that floats on the national conscience like an oil spill on the ocean.

Japanese try to speak English to you because they abhor the fact that you aren't speaking it. They are so ill at ease with the fact that you speak Japanese that they *need* you to speak English. They will try to speak English in order to manipulate you into speaking it. It matters not that they don't themselves know how to speak English. Their objective is not to communicate. Rather it is to *not* communicate. Not in Japanese. You are not allowed to speak Japanese! You have a small, white, circular scar on the ball of your left cheek. This is where a Japanese man tried to stick a cigarette in your eye. He did this for no greater reason than because you refused to speak English with him. This happened in 1990. It was a long time ago. But the scar is still there. And yes, this sounds insane. Surely it sounds like a lie. But it isn't a lie. It is only one of many such stories you can tell. You probably will in fact tell them. As polite and as kind as Japanese are to visitors, when it comes to language issues, the entire 127.5 million seem to be out of their minds.

Of course, they aren't though, and this man wasn't either. He was drunk. But he was normal. He was a normal Japanese man with a normal Japanese ideology. He believed that the Japanese language was for Japanese-looking people and the English language was for everybody else, especially people who look like you. And this is a notion he was violently dedicated to. Consider institutionalized slavery. Consider the Ku Klux Klan. Consider the final solution. Consider the killing fields. Consider racial cleansing. Consider all the tribal bloodshed in Rwanda. Consider even the incessant wars your own country engages in with peoples all over the world who don't share their capitalistic ideology. Consider 9-11. Compared to these ideological absurdities run amuck, a poke in the face with a burning cigarette is hardly worth a second thought. It is nonetheless a manifestation of ideology, however.

You're not the only one who believes this. Professor Roy Andrew Miller wrote a book about it. The name of the book is *Japan's Modern Myth; the Language and Beyond*. It's not an especially easy book. But the jacket liner is relatively accessible, and you'll begin by quoting briefly from that:

"What is the 'myth of the Japanese Language'? Simply stated, it is the mass of theories and misconceptions that the Japanese have built up around their own

language. The 'myth' has developed from the tendency of the Japanese to associate their language with their culture at large—indeed with their entire national identity. Thus the peculiarities of the language—its strengths and weaknesses and its relation to the broader questions of racial and cultural identity—have become for them characteristics of their own personalities. In order to understand the Japanese people then, it is necessary to examine their view of the language they speak."

It is necessary to examine their view of the language they speak? What does that mean? It means they actually *have* a view of the language they speak. You speak English. In fact, you're quite proficient at it. You even teach it. And because you teach it, you have amassed a reasonable amount of knowledge about it. But you don't have a *view* of it. You know facts about it. You understand it. You don't hold any specific opinions about it. It's just a language. You use it to communicate. It's a tool, no more no less. Yet, Professor Miller asserts that Japanese is far more than that to Japanese people. And you, for one, believe him.

American kids go to school. They study English. The name of the class wherein English is taught is English. Japanese kids go to school. They study Japanese. The Japanese word for Japanese is *nihongo* as many people know. But the name of the class wherein Japanese kids study Japanese is not *nihongo*. It's *kokugo*. This translates directly as "the national language." *Koku* means country and *go* means language or words. The country's language. The association between the language and the nation is intimate. It's inseparable. It's taught to children from the moment they enter school, which happens, by the way, when they're two.

Suzuki Takao is a Japanese sociolinguist. Among the books he's published are *The Japanese Language and Foreign Languages, 1990; Why Japanese Are Bad at English*, 1999; *Japan, Its Language and the People*, 2001; *Why Japanese Cannot Be Patriotic*, 2005. All of these titles are translations, but in English he also published a tract titled *Reflections on Japanese Language and Culture* in 1987. In *Japan's Modern Myth* Professor Miller quotes from a speech that he made in 1978: "To be a Japanese, at the same time that it means being a member of the Japanese race, also means speaking the Japanese language."

Suzuki is one of the few Japanese you are aware of who recognizes the complex mix of feelings the Japanese generally hold about their language while other people of the world—excluding the French, of course—have no feelings about their languages whatsoever. The mere question, "How do you feel about English?" would cause the average American certain pause, you think. A blank stare. A furrowed brow. A quizzical

tilt of the head. Because the average American doesn't have any feelings about English whatsoever.

When it comes to Japanese however, Suzuki recognizes a feeling among most Japanese people that "foreigners properly ought not to understand Japanese at all." The Japanese that Suzuki uses to make this statement, however, is not done justice by this translation. In the original Japanese there is a moral connotation, translated here as "properly," which makes the very act of a foreigner using Japanese proficiently an unnatural one, an unethical one, an immoral one. The word in question here *is hazu*. The sentence is, *gaikokujin ni ha Nihongo ga wakaru hazu ga nai*.

Suzuki speaks of an "overall love hate relationship between Japanese society and its language in general," though it's Miller you are quoting now. Further, Suzuki tries to relate this "love hate relationship" to the tendency of the Japanese to feel repulsed by white people who use their language. He may be right. He may be wrong. But at least he recognizes the tendency.

Professor Miller goes into some detail about the way Japanese regard white people who speak their language. His main points have to do with his belief, and yours, that Japanese purposefully and perpetually confuse language and race. He says:

"That the foreigner in question may very well have gone to the trouble of learning to speak the language for no more sinister motive than the simple and quite uncomplicated wish to communicate with Japanese individuals—and particularly that he or she may not harbor even the smallest intent or desire to become a Japanese or in any other way invade the Japanese racial entity—never seems to occur to these same people, so threatened do they feel when confronted by a Japanese-speaking, Japanese-understanding, or, worst of all, Japanese-reading-and-writing foreigner."

This is a phenomenon that was recorded as much as a hundred years ago by Basil Hall Chamberlain who wrote " . . . seeing that you speak Japanese, they will wag their heads and smile condescendingly, and admit to each other that you are really quite intelligent, —much as we might do in the presence of the learned pig or an ape of somewhat unusual attainments."

Professor Miller has coined a maxim, which he dubs "The Law of Inverse Returns." And he sums it up this way:

" . . . the better you get at the language the less credit you are given for your accomplishments; the more fluently you speak it, the less your hard won skills will do for you in the way of making friends and impressing people. But by the same token (and this is what makes it an "inverse law"), the less you can do with the language, the more

you will be praised and encouraged by Japanese society in general and by your Japanese friends in particular."

He says, "The white foreigner who learns a few words of the Japanese language may easily be forgiven for gaining the impression that he has mastered the entire language in a matter of minutes." You suspect that Alan Booth was just one of these white foreigners. He was under the impression that he had mastered the language. Yet he never mentioned any of this in any of his work. Probably, his Japanese wasn't at the level where he would notice this phenomenon.

Yours is, and you do notice it. You observe it every day—this Law of Inverse Returns.

You're not a particularly astute observer of daily weather patterns, though, a sad but sure fact that will surely detract from the pleasure of the current account, at least for Alan Booth fans. Because Alan Booth sure knew how to describe a cloud. And an ugly, rainy day. And a gleam of sunshine breaking through a limpid, black sky. On the first page of *The Roads to Sata* he writes "It was late June so most of Japan was dripping and gray—the rainy season was at its height. But Hokkaido, the northern most of Japan's four main islands, was crackling under a heat wave." He continues in that vein for 280 pages. It's all very beautiful, really. But aside from the changing temperament of the weather, he says very little in that book about Japan. About the Japanese he says next to nothing, as promised. And of the twelve hundred people he encountered on his trip, he claims to like exactly three.

His second book, however, *Looking for the Lost,* is less about him, less about his linguistic competencies, less about the weather, more about Japan, and more about the Japanese. And accordingly his second book is much more interesting, at least to your own sensibilities.

In it he follows routes that are one way or another renowned in Japanese history. One of those routes, and the one that gave rise to Booth's best work, unless possibly one reads from the perspective of a weatherman, began in Nobeoka, on the Pacific coast of Kyushu, in Miyazaki Prefecture, where you'll be in a few days yourself. It ended right here on the hills behind Kagoshima on September 24, 1877. This was the route of Saigo Takamori's final retreat after his failed rebellion against the brand new Meiji government, a government that he himself had helped to establish.

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Japan has a history that's longer and richer than most Americans can

conceptualize. At the time of the Meiji Restoration the American Civil war had just ended.

The feudal Japanese regime that was brought down by the Meiji Restoration, the Tokugawa Shogunate, which every educated person in the world has heard of, was still in midlife at the time of the American Revolution. It had been established, with one huge and bloody battle near the geographical center of Japan, some 1,000 kilometers from here, on a single rainy day in the fall of the year 1600.

This was before almost anything that American school kids study in their national history courses had happened. It was before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, if Plymouth Rock is indeed where the Pilgrims actually landed, and in fact, it was before any European had even set eyes on Cape Cod. It was before the Jamestown colony in Virginia. It was before there was a single black slave in any part of the world that would become the USA. Or any white woman, either.

It was before Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* and before Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote*. It was while Queen Elizabeth I was still alive. It was while Galileo was still teaching at Padua, while Johannes Kepler was still working for Tycho Bryhe. It was while the Confucian Scholar Li Zhi was still in a Ming Dynasty prison for making the very anti-Confucian suggestion that women may be as intelligent as men.

From the Japanese perspective though, all of this was just the other day. Though not necessarily ancient by world standards, their historical record was nonetheless already 900 years old when the Tokugawa regime began, and nearly 1200 years old when the Meiji Restoration brought it to an end.

The consequence of this long history, then, is that every Japanese school kid has to learn some fifty names at least as well as American kids learn George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Elvis Presley. And few of those names reside higher in the Japanese pantheon than Saigo Takamori's.

And pantheon is indeed the correct word here, for not fourteen months after his death he was established as a Japanese god, or *kami*, at the Nanshu Shrine, which stands now on the mountain where he died, During the first fifty years after his apotheosis thousands of pilgrims would visit this shrine. He would also become a Buddha. There are contemporary prints of Saigo in the repose of a reclining Buddha, decked out in his Imperial Army uniform and weighted down with more gold emulates than any mortal man could possibly shoulder. These prints were very popular items. They circulated throughout Japan like Elvis posters would in a later era at American high schools. And for years after Saigo died, rumors and suggestions that he really

hadn't died remained, themselves, alive and well. He was like Elvis in that way, too. He was everywhere. He had escaped to India, he had escaped to China, he had escaped to Russia. He was regrouping, recruiting, preparing for his triumphant return. All was not lost. He was going to come back and save the Japanese day. Finally, he was going to run the foreigners out of the land of the gods. Though in an interesting paradox, he was apparently going to do this with a group of newly recruited foreigners—those Indians, those Chinese, those Russians! It was just a matter of time. The future was bright.

So was his star.

He had gone to Mars.

No shit. People believed that.

His image had been perceived on that planetary body even as he lived, during the time of his doomed rebellion, and in Japan for a considerable while Mars was known as "the Saigo star."

During his lifetime, he was bigger than life. He was known and admired by the commoner classes, important *daimyo*, and officials of the Imperial Court, but most of all he was revered by those of his own class, the lower-level samurai. By the thousands they came to him. They were ready and willing to give up their lives for him. This realization both shocked and amused him. "By as early as 1863," writes Mark Ravina, "he saw his fame as both inspiring and ridiculous."

That fame wouldn't be lost on him, though.

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Upon leaving the Meiji government in 1873, disgusted at their extravagance, their lack of virtue, their self-importance, their duplicity, their lack of concern for the lower classes, their insistence upon building a railroad, their liberal foreign policy, their ballroom dancing, and most importantly, their refusal to send him to Korea, where historians have yet to figure out for sure what he had hoped to accomplish, except possibly to be assassinated—a ridiculously meaningless but dramatic death appears to have been one of his goals in life, and possibly the only one that he actually accomplished—he returned to Kagoshima where he established and financed a system of military schools for the thousands of young soldiers who had left the Meiji Army with him. It was the students of these schools who would begin the 1877 Satsuma Revolt, This would end in their own deaths as well as Saigo's. He would finally get what he wanted.

In one of your university classes you were taught that the Meiji Restoration

was one of only two revolutions in world history to have been carried out in the absence of violence. And like so much else that you learned in college, this turned out to be wrong. All told, before the fighting finally stopped, here in Kagoshima, with the defeat of Saigo's final 370 raggedy dressed and poorly armed rebels futilely advancing against some 30,000 Imperial troops with Gatling guns, more men were killed in actual battle during the years of the Meiji Restoration than in the entirety of the American Revolution.

As with everything else in Japanese history, estimates vary, but it seems likely that some 13,000 of Saigo's rebels died and another 22,000 were wounded during the nine months of the uprising. The government suffered maybe half as many killed and half as many wounded.

The final few rebels spent the night of September 23 in caves and dugouts on Shiroyama drinking sake, dancing sword dances, playing the biwa and writing poems with Saigo, until, of course, they had to start dodging shells from five battle ships and some 100 artillery pieces at 4:00 in the morning. They had been under siege for three weeks. They were outnumbered 60 to one. They had no artillery, few guns, no ammunition and no chance. The short fight would end with a futile and meaningless *banzai* charge two hours later. Some sources say as few as 40 sword-wielding rebels were still alive for the final charge. All together, 157 Samurai were mowed down that morning, including Saigo himself. His grave remains there on the hill where he died. Surrounding it are the graves of 748 others. Most of them had been his students and his friends. One of them was only 14 years old. Another source says two were as young as 13. Saigo's own son, aged sixteen, was one of the few survivors, though he did lose a leg in the battle. He'd go on to be appointed Mayor of Kyoto in later years. This was in recognition of his father's service to his country. Never mind the bloody and mindless revolution he'd led against it.

And never mind that other sources say no rebels survived the battle at all. This is a common theme in Japanese history. And history everywhere you suppose. Lots of sources are wrong.

And the biwa, for those who don't know, is a traditional Japanese stringed instrument, currently way out of style, but played quite commonly in those days, though only by women except in this area. In this area the biwa was considered manly, and every samurai worth his Satsuma salt knew how to play it, and had in fact practiced it most of his life.

This is part of the reason Satsuma was considered the gay domain, as in

homosexual, not as in lively, and part of why homosexuality would become known throughout Japan as the "Satsuma habit."

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Satsuma had always been different from the rest of Japan. It was remote, in the first instance. Satsuma and Osumi on the southern tip of Kyushu had, in the year 800, become the last provinces of traditional Japan to be incorporated into the national tax roles. And by traditional Japan, for those who don't know, you mean those parts that exclude Okinawa and Hokkaido. Also, it's important to note, for the sake of accuracy, that vast areas of the two northern most provinces on Honshu, Dewa and Mutsu, would remain wild and free of Japanese control for another 300 years, but nonetheless, those two northern provinces themselves were on the tax roles before the two in southern Kyushu.

Satsuma was larger than most domains. With 760,000 people in 1870, it was the fourth most populous domain in Japan. It was also the second richest. And, with one possible but insignificant exception, it had remained under control of a single ruling family for longer than any other domain in Japan. Through the entire feudal period Satsuma was able to maintain greater hegemony over it's regional neighbors than any other domain in Japan.

Though the Tokugawa shogunate had maintained minimal international contacts and limited trade at Nagasaki, Satsuma was one of only three independent domains allowed intercourse with any part of the outside world. That was via the Ryukyu Islands—Okinawa—which Satsuma laid claim to in 1609 after a three day war, even while China continued to claim the island chain as a vassal state. The Satsuma Domain kept a consulate of sorts there. They also kept the islanders heavily taxed and thoroughly suppressed. But when the Chinese sent an official mission, about once a year, the Japanese just packed up their things and moved out of town. It was a perfect arrangement for everybody, except of course, for the native Ryukyu Islanders, and it led to considerable indirect trade with China.

Also, the Satsuma people spoke a dialect of Japanese that was, and still is, completely incomprehensible to anybody who didn't grow up there. Most Americans are aware that the US Army used Navajo Indians as radio operators during World War II so that, speaking their native language to one another, they wouldn't be understood by any enemy who might happen to pick them up. It was the perfect code, and linguistically, a thoroughly complete one.

Another ridiculous Hollywood movie came out about this not long ago. The movie was called *Windtalkers*. It was stupid. But it was based on fact. And another fact is that during WWII the Imperial Japanese Army used Kagoshima soldiers speaking their native dialect for the same purpose. Another perfect code. And maybe the Japanese should have used it more often, because the Americans cracked their other code not long after the war started. But that's a different matter.

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At the Meiji Restoration Museum an employee wants to put a silly railroad hat on your head and take your photo. So why not? Never mind that the hat's way too small and that with hair thick as a lion's mane down to your shoulders and wearing a checkered blue shirt you're going to look as if you belong on the cover of the Sgt. Pepper's album. Who cares? Nobody will ever see this photo but her and you. And you don't care what she thinks if she doesn't care what you do.

"Where do you want to stand?" she asks.

"Over here," you say, and lead her by the hand to the coolest display in the museum, Saigo Takamori's long winter underwear, which he probably also wore in the summer under the military uniform that he wore throughout his campaigns. It's not that there is anything special about the underwear, except for their extraordinary size. At 180 cm and 109 kg, Saigo was huge for a Japanese of his day. He was bigger than life in more ways than one!

The underwear are thick white cotton things that covered the great man from ankle to neck to wrist, and surely they were only available to the elite few at the time, though nowadays one can see them on any of several million old fellows at almost any public bath, and occasionally even sitting in front of a ramshackle house on a summer evening, or even walking down the street of a little hamlet in the back country. For that matter, one can see it on the narrow back streets of Nagoya, Osaka or Tokyo if he knows where to go look. But then again, why would one want to?

The museum attendant is so embarrassed she's reluctant to take the photo. "Hey, it's your museum," you say. "And you asked."

She stomps her foot and wrinkles her forehead, presses her lips together, sticks up her nose. But she also takes the photo.

You love this country.

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Kagoshima Prefecture, or Satsuma Domain as it was called during Saigo Takamori's time, was an odd place. It was conservative on the one hand and on the other hand possibly Japan's most progressive domain, largely because of its connections with China and trade via the Ryukyus—there was even a small community of a hundred or so Ryukyu Islanders living in the city of Kagoshima—but also because of its brilliant and forward looking young *daimyo*, Shimazu Nariakira, the 28th successive Shimazu family lord of Satsuma Domain. By all accounts he was both physically imposing and extraordinarily intelligent. His mother was one of the few educated Japanese women of her day and she actively taught Nariakira the standard Chinese classics at an early age. His grandfather, who had his own collection of western items including weapons, clocks, telescopes, microscopes, musical instruments and several books, at a time when these things were extremely rare in Japan, taught Nariakira to respect Western learning, or Dutch learning, as it was called during the feudal period. Both Nariakira and his grandfather were able to write Roman letters, and Nariakira sometimes used them to write secret memos and messages. When he was 17 his grandfather had even introduced him to a Dutch doctor at the trading factory where the Dutch were kept isolated on a small island in Nagasaki harbor. In an era when "ousting the foreigner" was part and parcel of the primary mandate, this made him one of the few Japanese to have actually ever met one.

Nariakira was named heir to the Satsuma Domain when he was three years old, and his entire childhood was spent in purposeful preparation for ruling Satsuma, Japan's most independent domain. Essentially, he was raised to be a king, and in fact, in 1867, nine years after Nariakira had died, Satsuma sent a delegation to the International Exhibition in Paris that claimed to represent not Japan but the Kingdom of Satsuma and the Ryukyus. By this time, of course, the shogunate was in free fall and there wasn't much they could do about Satsuma's assertions, but it shows the long time mind set in Satsuma, and the position Nariakira was brought up to assume. He was raised in Edo, which is the old name for Tokyo, as everybody knows, and he was on good terms with many important leaders in the Tokugawa shogunate as well as in other major domains. He was well-positioned on the national scene. Great and powerful men had genuine respect for him, and they seem to have liked him.

There was only one problem. His own father, the current lord of the land, didn't care for him very much. He may have loved him when he was three, but by 1849 he was 40 and no longer in his father's good graces. His father's top financial adviser couldn't stand him. They—the father and his adviser—tried to isolate him from Satsuma

politics and promote the son of a mistress, Nariakira's half brother, as the next heir. This half brother's name was Hisamitsu, for anybody whose interested in the details, and he would eventually become the last de-facto ruler of Satsuma, but not till after Nariakira's death. Many of the Satsuma samurai were unbothered by this attempt to promote Hisamitus ahead of Nariakira who was too liberal for them, too progressive, and like the grandfather with the western clock collection, not considered careful enough with the domain's money. And besides, Nariakira hadn't even set foot in the domain he was raised to rule till he was 26 years old. He was nothing but a city slicker. He didn't even speak the local dialect, and speaking standard Japanese, he had an accent. This is universally a bad thing in Japan. It's the clear mark of an outsider. You should know.

Anyway, those samurai were perfectly willing to serve Nariakira's half brother instead of Nariakira. And most of those who weren't willing were removed. During the course of this power struggle between Nariakira and his father, some 50 of Nariakira's supporters and aids were banished, killed, or graciously invited to cut their stomachs open with a dagger.

Eventually Nariakira prevailed, but only by calling on his highly-placed contacts in the shogunate. Disgusted at the father's brutality as much as his duplicity in trying to pass over his natural heir, the shogunate called him to Edo and eloquently presented him with a lovely tea set as a retirement present. The father took the hint and that was that. Nariakira became the 28th Lord of Satsuma.

But nobody can rule an entire domain by himself, and with his top 50 retainers unavailable, Nariakira needed some help. Thus, Saigo Takamori.

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Shimazu Nariakira was the first Japanese to own a camera, though it didn't come with instructions. It was possibly even broken when he acquired it, and his retainers couldn't get it to work for several years. Still, a photo of the daimyo taken in 1857 is considered the oldest Japanese daguerreotype in existence. It was lost for 100 years in a Kagoshima warehouse where it miraculously survived the bombings of WWII. It was discovered there in 1975 and now it's on display at another Kagoshima Museum. It's been designated an Important Cultural Property by the Japanese government. It's hardly what anybody would call a good photo, however, though it's certainly more interesting than the goofy one the attendant here has just taken of you.

Saigo himself, it appears, was never photographed. Nor did he ever sit for a portrait. All the many images of him are made from memory. They invariably show him

a bullet headed man with bug out eyes and a big belly. Alan Booth, the long distance hiker, called the statue of Saigo that stands on the grounds of the Kagoshima Art Museum "blunt" and "dunce-like".

Ivan Morris, who in his captivating study, *The Nobility of Failure: Tragic Heroes in the History of Japan*, several times calls the burly Saigo "obese" and "corpulent," also tells us that as a child he was considered "slow witted." But he says, "The man's charisma was evident to all who met him . . . Saigo's peculiar charm depended on the combination of a mighty physique and an apparently open, radiant, human quality, a simple, almost childlike enjoyment of the moment, and an immediate, earthy humor. Unlike most great men of his time, he was direct and natural with his equals, gentle, considerate and forbearing towards his inferiors." And one must keep in mind that in Saigo's place and time there truly was a developed notion of superior and inferior that permeated society. That's what the entire social structure was based on. And to a large degree, that's what the Meiji Restoration was all about. It's what Saigo's revolt was all about, too—the inequalities of the social order.

In *Personality in Japanese History*, Craig and Shivley call Saigo "the most potent personality in Japanese history."

When the British diplomat, interpreter, and gifted diarist, Earnest Satow, met Saigo for the second time in Kobe on January 11, 1867 he wrote of him, "After exchanging the usual compliments, I began to feel rather at a loss, the man looked so stolid, and would not make conversation. But he had an eye that sparkled like a big black diamond, and his smile, when he spoke was so friendly."

The first time the two had met, Saigo was going by a different name, Shimazu Saichu, and Satow writes that Saigo "laughed heartily when I reminded him of this alias." But in fact, Saigo is known to have gone by at least eight different names in his lifetime, all of them perfectly legal. This was not at all uncommon for samurai at the time. They would change their names at any meaningful change in their situations, for example when they turned seven, then again at about fifteen when they got their haircut in that singularly peculiar samurai style with the front of the pate shaved bald and the hair on the back of it tied up like the tail feathers on a stark black rooster. Everybody in the world is familiar with this, of course. It was all the rage among Japan's samurai, and almost everybody else, for about 1000 years.

Saigo Takamori, as he is known to history, is in fact the name he took on the occasion of his own haircut, but the name he used at his second meeting with Earnest Satow was not the one he is known by today, but the one he assumed at the age of

seven, Saigo Kichinosuke.

He also used various pen names, some of them simultaneously. And as a child he had at least two nicknames. One was *Omedame*, which means Big Eyeball, and the other was *Udo*, which according to both Ivan Morris and Alan Booth means Big Gawk. According to your own dictionary *udo* is a plant of the ginseng family, cultivated for it's edible roots, and to call somebody a big *udo* tree is to call him a big but useless person. So maybe this was Saigo as a child. Big and useless. There's little hard evidence.

Another big mover in the revolutionary events of that time, upon first meeting Saigo, reported back to his immediate superior that the adult Saigo was "a real character. If you speak softly, he replies in kind, and if you make more noise, he roars in reply." This man's name was Sakamoto Ryoma. The man to whom he reported this piece of information was Katsu Kaishu. Though both of these men went by various names during their lifetimes as well, these are the names by which they are known to every Japanese person who ever went to jr. high school. These names both appear in every Japanese history text, and they're worth mentioning here because both are likely to appear later on in this account as well.

It was Katsu who would convince Saigo in 1864 that the shogun's position vis-à-vis the foreign threat was untenable, that the shogunate was damaged beyond repair, and that the only way to keep foreigners out of Japan was to overthrow the shogunate entirely. He was serving as head of the shogun's navy when he did this, and his arguments set Saigo on a whole new political course. His concern would no longer be Satsuma alone against all comers, but one of cooperation among domains to oust the shogun and unite against the foreigners.

Saigo would call Katsu "smarter than anyone I know."

And when the rebels had reached agreement with the shogunate for a transfer of power to the imperial court, it was Katsu again who, in 1868, convinced Saigo to accept the shogun's terms, arguing against a needles war among Japanese when foreigners remained to be dealt with. And had Katsu not managed to convine Saigo of this, surely the revolution would have been much bloodier than it was.

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Saigo was born a humble and poverty stricken samurai in a dirty and dilapidated little home in a neighborhood full of such homes, not far from a path called Cat Shit Alley. He was the oldest son of a samurai with only a small stipend. His father worked in the tax office where Saigo too would soon work. There were as many as

16 people living in the Saigo household at some points in his life. His younger brother gathered firewood and sold it to other samurai households to help make ends meet. For a long period of time, Saigo's family lived on borrowed money.

Estimates for the samurai population of Japan are, first of all, only estimates. Before the end of the 19th century only peasants were counted in the national census. Samurai were above the indignity of having their noses counted. But the estimate for Saigo's time stands at about 1.8 million samurai in all of Japan. With a total population of 30 million, an estimated six percent of the population made up the samurai classes, though here again numbers vary. You've read as high as ten percent and as low as two. But in Satsuma domain, no matter how it's counted, the numbers were much higher, Ivan Morris says that forty percent of Satsuma's and possibly seventy percent of the city of Kagoshima's population was samurai and their families. There wasn't enough work for anybody to do. And there wasn't enough of a stipend, either. By 1848 Saigo and his father had borrowed a huge sum of money—200 yen; it won't even buy a cup of green tea now—and gone into farming. This is a debt Saigo would not be able to repay till 1872, five years before he would die.

From the house near Cat Shit Alley Saigo could surely have seen Sakurajima, the active volcano that looms over Kagoshima harbor, but he moved to another neighborhood, and another house, equally dilapidated, in 1855 when he was 28. The Cat Shit house burned down along with 90% of the entire city in 1878 during the bombardment the Imperial forces directed at Saigo's small band throughout the ridiculous and wasteful three-week siege. In how many modern wars, you have to wonder, has the enemy been destroyed all the way down to the birthplace of the opposing commander?

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In 1854, Saigo was working as a clerk in the local tax office, a competent but low-level functionary of 26. Then, seemingly out of the blue, he was promoted to "lord's assistant" and subsequently the lord, Nariakira of photograph fame, called on him to become his personal "gardener." Later he was promoted to "birdkeeper." It doesn't sound like much, maybe, because the humble titles of these positions ignore the importance of direct and easy access to the daimyo that came with them, and the freedom of movement their utter lack of ceremony allowed. In actuality he was Nariakira's messenger. He could go anywhere and do anything for his lord without attracting a lot of attention.

It seems reasonable to assume that Saigo must have done something to attract the attention of Nariakira, however, for there's no other way to explain his sudden and unexpected advancement, but historians have yet to find any certain record of what it may have been. Nobody seems sure how or why he appeared on the political scene out of nowhere like that, but with not much more to put on his resume than the simple fact that he was capable, loyal, and alive when so many others were dead, he was launched on a career that would take him to the pinnacle of national politics. He would become a top confidant of the Satsuma *daimyo*, head of the Satsuma army of samurai, then de facto commander of the revolutionary army that would overthrow the Tokugawa shogunate. Eventually, he'd command the Imperial Bodyguard, and become the Grand Marshal of the new nation's first unified army, as well as Chief Counselor of State. And during a period of nearly two years, while many of the other political bigwigs of the revolution were abroad on a research and discovery mission, he would serve as the most powerful person in the entire government.

Then, against that very government he had been the leader of, he would head the biggest and bloodiest military action Japan had seen in some 250 years.

Shimazu Nariakira was born and bred for greatness, but there is nothing in Saigo's background that would seem to have prepared him for where his life was about to take him, and there was nothing to suggest that he might make any mark whatsoever on the history of his country. Basically, as near as anybody can tell for sure, he was just a nice, loyal, and trustworthy fellow with a reputation for simplicity and honesty. He liked to fish with friends or take his dogs out hunting, wearing straw sandals he'd made himself. Indeed he sounds like a boy scout, which fact, naturally, makes for good legend, like George Washington cutting down the cherry tree, but in the cutthroat world of realpolitik, then like now, this is not the type of person one would expect to succeed.

But then again, you suppose, he didn't succeed. He may be deified now. And he may have at least a spiritually symbolic presence on Mars. But the fact remains that his real career here on earth ended with him lying in the dirt between the mutilated bodies of his two best friends, his severed head rolling around somewhere in the vicinity of his shoulders.

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Satsuma was the first place where Europeans, or Southern Barbarians as they were called at the time, are known to have set foot in Japan. These were two Portuguese traders traveling on a Chinese ship that drifted up, off course, broken and

lost, on the small island of Tanegashima, some 30 km from the Satsuma mainland, in 1543. This is where the Japanese space center is situated today, but then it was a remote stop on the trade route between Kagoshima and the Ryukyu Islands. It was the largest of a twelve island group that made up the farthest southern outpost of traditional Yamato Japan. Everything south of there was culturally Ryukyuan, everything north, Japanese.

Tanegashima was a sub-fief of Satsuma and the ruling family there, also named Tanegashima, claimed to be part of the once powerful Taira clan. Tradition has it that the first Tanegashima lord was the great-grandson of Taira no Kiyomori. He was spared the wrath of Minamoto no Yoritomo after the latter's spectacular defeat of the Taira family, and subsequently adopted by Hojo Tokimasa, the true father of Hojo Masako, Miyamoto no Yoritomo's wife, who, along with her father, became the most powerful person in Japan upon Yoritomo's death. None of this mumbo jumbo of foreign names makes sense to anybody unfamiliar with Japanese history, you realize, but any Japanese junior high school kid understands it perfectly. All of these names are among the fifty or so they learn in school.

Some authorities, including former Ambassador to Japan, Edwin Reischauer, list an earlier date for the first arrival of Europeans here—1541, though it's not widely credited—and there are other dates for the introduction of European firearms as well. They go all the way back to 1466.

It's unlikely that the Japanese were completely unaware of firearms before 1543. Surely they had been used against Japanese pirates along the southern shores of China before that date, and some had probably been stolen by those pirates as well. Also, it seems likely that a number of Ryukyu Island traders had been present at Malacca in 1511 when the Portuguese used firearms to seize that port. But 1543 is the earliest date we know for sure that firearms appeared in Japan. Neither pirates nor traders, after all, are known for keeping detailed historical records the way government bureaucrats do. And it's not impossible that firearms were introduced into other parts of Japan around this same time as well, but beyond any doubt, this is where they became institutionalized. And this institutionalization of Western firearms, though temporary, would prove to be one of the biggest events in Japanese history.

The guy with the most gun-power, of course, wins the most wars. Everybody knows this. And that guy would turn out to be Hideyoshi, whom everybody with any interest in Japan whatsoever has heard of. His eventual mass of gun power would lead directly to the unification of the country, and indirectly to the establishment of

the Tokugawa shogunate, which would go on to rule Japan for 265 years, till finally overthrown by Saigo and his ilk in 1868.

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The names of the two barbarians who washed ashore on Tanegashima in 1543 are not known with any certainty. Historians have discovered eight candidate names for the two positions, but one of these names, Fernao Mendes Pinto, they believe to be a fabrication—one created by Mendez Pinto himself.

In fact, fabrication is exactly what Mendez Pinto was best at—fabrication, exaggeration, and an over-developed imagination. C. R. Boxer, the quintessential historian for that century in Southeast Asia and Japan, referred to him as "a liar of the first magnitude" and wrote, "Pinto's lies, though harmless, were colossal." It is true, however, that Pinto spent some 21 years in the East as a Portuguese merchant and adventurer, and it is true that, upon his return to Lisbon, he sat down to write a full 227 chapters about all of the adventures he'd had there. Never mind that he hadn't actually had most of those adventures.

This work wasn't published till 1614, some 30 years after Pinto's death, but it's known that a first draft was available as early as 1569. And, though unreliable as history, much of what he related is known to be true and much more of it is clearly based on true incidents he'd apparently heard second or third or fourth hand, then most probably embellished yet again. And one of his embellishments was to put himself among the first Europeans to set foot in Japan. Indeed, he claims to have come here four times. He didn't. But there's at least a grain of truth in all his lies, and it seems certain that he did indeed come here at least once, probably in the summer of 1556.

Surely the thing that set Pinto apart from the other European seamen and merchants of his day, though, was not his lying, but his literacy. His written Portuguese was reportedly excellent, and he could tell a good story. The entire tome has been translated into English by Rebecca C. Catz, among others. It's titled *The Travels of Mendez Pinto*. One should regard it as fiction—one of the world's earliest novels, in fact. If indeed it was completed by 1580, as it seems to have been—Mendez died in 1583—then it predates Don Quixote in the cannon of Western fiction by 25 years.

The only catch, according to Olaf G. Liden, the author of *Tanegashima: the Arrival of Europe in Japan*, from where you take much of this information, is that Mendez Pinto himself seems to have believed what he wrote, "always referring to Almighty Lord and Devine Providence".

Who knows?

It does appear certain, anyway, that these two Portuguese merchants—actually, Mendes Pinto says there were three, including himself—brought the first European firearms of record to Japan, and that they sold two arquebuses to the lord of the island for the astronomical sum of 1000 *taels* of gold each, whatever a *tael* was. Or maybe it was *taels* of silver. Once again, accounts differ. Silver seems more likely to you, but who knows? Some Japanese accounts even say that these Portuguese traders gave the guns to the Tanegashima lord. It seems unlikely that they would have done so willingly, however. They were, after all, traders and merchants.

It's certain anyway that within a few months Tanegashima blacksmiths were making these weapons themselves, and historians do know the name of the Japanese blacksmith who first accomplished that task.

Legend says that, unable to make a certain screw to fit into the base of the gun-barrel, this blacksmith, being too poor to otherwise pay for it, traded his 16 year old daughter, Wakasa, to the Portuguese ship captain for that important piece of knowledge. But the captain didn't know anything about the guns except for how to load them and fire them so, as the story goes, he took the girl as his wife and returned a year later with a Portuguese blacksmith who could teach the Japanese blacksmith how to make and fit the screw. Then, once the Portuguese captain had fulfilled his side of the deal, the beautiful Wakasa, who, according to this version of the story, had returned with the ship on this second trip, faked her death on the island, and escaped her awful fate that way.

Were it true, this would constitute the first "international marriage" between a Japanese and a European, but the whole story seems unlikely. First, the captain of the ship was almost certainly Chinese. It was a Chinese ship, after all. Secondly, the story doesn't appear in the literature till 150 years after the fact. Third, it's known that guns were already being manufactured on Tanegashima before the time when the captain supposedly returned with the blacksmith. In fact, it's believed that one of the original arquebuses had already been presented to the shogun in Edo by this time. And fourth, Mendez Pinto says nothing about it, and given any rumor or thread of truth from which to fabricate, it's almost certain he would have done so. But nonetheless, it's part of the local legend.

There's a statue of this beautiful Wakasa at the main harbor on Tanegashima, holding an arquebus in her arms like a baby. A park there bears her name—Wakasa-*koen*. And in 1909 a stone monument was raised near where the Chinese ship washed ashore with the European passengers. The inscription says In Memory of Loyalty and

Filial Piety. Local tradition has it, according to Olaf G. Lidin, that she lived "the most miserable life that was ever lived."

And assuming the story isn't true, what one has to conclude is that the Japanese blacksmith who reverse engineered these guns was able to do it without outside help, and personally, you find that story much more impressive. The Japanese, even on the periphery of isolated and supposedly backward, feudal Japan, were the very Japanese we know today—quick to learn, quick to adopt, quick to adapt, quick to incorporate, and quick to improve. By the end of the sixteenth century Japan would be the most heavily armed country in the world.

Japanese firearms were soon selling throughout the land, and a mere seventy years after their first appearance here, in fact, a good arquebus could be bought in Japan for as little as two *taels*, whatever a *tael* was, again. And it seems fairly certain, at least to you, that this Tanegashima lord, if indeed he had paid 1000 taels each for the two firearms, watching prices plummet like this, year after year, must have somewhere along the way begun to feel a little bit like he'd got screwed.

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Kagoshima is where the first Christian missionary to set up in Japan landed. This was Saint Francis Xavier, whom everybody knows. He called the Japanese "his delight." In his first letter from Kagoshima to Goa he wrote, "They are the best race yet discovered, and among non-Christians their match will not easily be found."

This area, Satsuma, is also where the last Christian missionary to enter Japan for some 150 years would land, quite foolishly in your opinion, some ninety years after the earlier arrivals had been expelled by a 1617 order of the shogunate. Those faithful who didn't get the message and leave the country then, when they had a chance, were systematically killed. The luckier ones were simply beheaded. Many, though, were crucified on a cross, hung by their heels over a hole in the ground filled with fecal matter, thrown into the boiling pits of Kyushu's volcanic onsens, or burned alive. When dealing with the Europeans, do as the Europeans do, is apparently what the shogun was thinking.

Anyway, the last of the illegal missionaries was a Sicilian who arrived on a ship from the Philippines in 1708. He asked to be let off the ship on Yakushima, a small island quite near the Satsuma mainland, where he was arrested as soon as he set his suitcase down. He spent the rest of his short miserable life in an Edo prison, proselytizing to his jailers. And he died six years later in a hole in the ground, apparently still praising the

glories of God. All of this, again, is according to the long distance hiker, Alan Booth, who met a couple of Franciscan priests in southern Kyushu along the route of Saigo's last march, as he walked it. They told him the story over beers.

This hapless martyr's name was Sidotti, and you yourself can't help but wonder if, in his heart of hearts, he didn't harbor a different opinion of the Japanese than Saint Francis Xavier had, in the end.

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In Saigo's time, with so many jobless, and essentially useless, samurai to support, Satsuma Domain had one of Japan's most underdeveloped systems of agriculture and one of its most oppressive tax systems. Peasants comprised nearly 80 percent of Japan's total population, and everywhere they led lives unfit for an ox. In fact, those few peasants lucky enough to possess an ox almost always had to share a house with it. That was the situation throughout Japan when Saigo was born, and in Satsuma where, according to Mark Ravina, 480,000 peasants had to support 170,000 samurai, it was even worse. If these numbers are correct, fully 26% of the population was samurai. That number is smaller than the forty percent Morris relates, but it's still huge. And the samurai were legally and structurally entitled to live off a rice stipend provided by the government of the domain, and that stipend had to be produced by the peasants.

It wasn't a system that worked well for anybody. It was simply untenable. The land was poor. The farmers couldn't grow enough rice. They weren't allowed to consume enough of what they did grow to keep themselves anything more than just barely alive, and the government couldn't, without literally starving them to death, take enough rice from them to pay all the samurai their full stipends, either.

Also, in most parts of Japan during this period the samurai kept themselves to the castle towns and left the peasants to fend for themselves as long as they somehow got their taxes in. But in Satsuma, with samurai running around like maggots on a corpse, they were in the countryside as well, swaggering, posturing, meddling, and lording over everything. They had forts and fortresses all over the domain. They were everywhere.

Saigo's own father was at least nominally a full samurai. In general terms, that meant he was entitled to ride a horse, though he probably didn't have one. It also meant that he could strike dead any lower level samurai—one without horse privileges—with near impunity. All he would need to do is convince his superiors, after the fact, that the underling had insulted him in some acceptably egregious way, and of course the

only testimony required for this would be his own. But with the samurai noted for their impeccable honesty, loyalty, integrity, and so on, you're pretty sure this system was never abused. Well, no. In fact the system was abused on a regular basis. But lest one wants to feel a degree of sympathy for this lower class of samurai, he shouldn't. Either class could slice a lowly peasant in half upon a casual whim. It was perfectly legal. Nobody would have to convince anybody of anything. No questions were asked.

Satsuma also had one of Japan's strictest border patrols. One of the reasons for this was, of course, all of the peasants trying to sneak out because they couldn't afford to stay and pay taxes. And needless to say, they didn't particularly want to get cut in half either. But, in the absence of very special circumstances, for a peasant to leave any domain was strictly forbidden throughout the feudal period. The occasional peasant may have had an ox, but no matter how poorly things were working out where he was, he didn't have the right to load the ox up with the family loom and move up to Osaka, Nagoya, or Edo, like he does today. There was no such thing as a fresh start in feudal Japan. Not for anybody, really, but not for the lowly peasant particularly. He was part of the ground he grew up on.

Another reason for the strict border patrol is, with all those samurai, the domain had to put them to work doing something.

But the main reason was simply that, its progressive *daimyo*, its foreign community of Ryukyu Islanders, its ongoing trade with China, and its long, if distant, history with westerners not withstanding, like everywhere else in Japan, Satsuma was thoroughly xenophobic. They wanted to know exactly who was entering the domain, and why and when. Everybody was a foreigner, if he wasn't a Satsuma man. That means if he wasn't a Satsuma samurai. A Satsuma peasant, of course, was nothing, and if he did try to escape the domain, he sure didn't take the highway. He didn't take his ox, either.

With so many samurai, and all of them naturally armed, Satsuma was heavily militaristic. When Japan was invaded by the Mongols in 1274, in fact, it was a Satsuma lord who was called to lead the defense of Hakata Bay. In Hideyoshi's assaults of Korea in the 1590s, again, a large part of the fighting was done by Satsuma samurai. They were the rear guard. They covered the retreat as the war was winding down. And in the interim, they'd fought with almost every other domain on Kyushu, and at one time controlled most of the island, before being finally pushed back to the Satsuma borders by Hideyoshi himself.

Though it doesn't set them apart from any other of Japan's many domains, nor from any other part of the world generally for that matter, this was part of a

long history of ruthless expansionism Satsuma had perpetrated towards its neighbors, especially the Amami islanders whom they taxed to the point of insufferable misery. Even the Satsuma peasants had it better than the islanders did. Even the Ryukyu peasants did.

After Satsuma claimed suzerainty over the Ryukyu Islands in 1609, both China and Satsuma had decided to nominally allow them to keep their independence. Nobody did any such favors for the Amami Islanders. Satsuma absorbed them into the domain, then taxed and levied them so heavily they were left with nothing to be independent over anyway, save the hunger and misery wrought by a sugar based economy, much like that of European dominated sugar colonies in the Caribbean, and its attendant system of slavery. By Saigo's time, all the island's elite landholders and officials were slave holders. Nearly a third of the island's populace were slaves. The misery in Amami during the almost 300 years the islands were ruled by Satsuma and the Shimazu clan was so overwhelming in its brutality that it still lingered in the collective memory of the Islanders as late as the 1950s.

Indeed, this misery is something Saigo knew very well. Twice in his life he was exiled to islands in the Amami chain, between Okinawa and Satsuma.

The first time was in 1858. He was a wanted man. In what would become known to historians, and to jr. high school students, as the Ansei Purge, the Shogunate was actively doing away with its enemies, both assumed and real, and Saigo had managed to become one of the assumed ones.

The story is not clear, and the parts that do seem clear are complicated. Konoe Tadahiro was Minister of the Left. This means he was one of the main advisors to the Emperor. He was the main Satsuma ally at court. He was a direct descendant of the once all-powerful Fujiwara clan. He would also be a direct ancestor of Konoe Fumimaro who would serve as Prime Minister of Japan three times during the years leading up to WWII, and of Konoe Tadateru who is currently head of the Japanese Red Cross. He was related to the Shimazu clan by marriage. The 13th Tokugawa shogun, epiletic, sickly, and weak from the beginning had just died, and Saigo wanted to use his own influence to support Satsuma's choice of Hitotsubayashi Keiki as the next shogun. Gessho was a monk at the abbey at Kiyomizudera in Kyoto, now one of the most beautiful temples in the nation, and surely the most famous. He was a poet, and not directly involved in politics. He was the perfect courier for correspondence between Saigo and Konoe. He maintained a residence at Tofukuji, another lovely temple in Kyoto, which housed the graves of many Satsuma retainers. Saigo had met Gessho at Tofukuji. Gessho had

met Konoe Tadahiro at Kiyomizudera, where rested many Konoe family graves. Thus, Gessho was in a good position to carry messages between the two men. That's all that's known for sure. However, the suspicion was that the three had been engaged in machinations to bring the rulers of Satsuma together with the imperial court in an attempt to overthrow the current shogun—a suspicion that the shogunate could only frown upon, and both Gessho and Saigo ended up on the shogun's hit list, though in fact Saigo was not at this time yet anti-shogunate in his political views. That would come later. In 1858 he was only pro-Satsuma, extremely loyal to Nariakira, and anti-foreigner, like everybody else.

Gessho's political views are uncertain. He was a poet, and according to Ravina, "he was not an outspoken imperial loyalist." Other sources say that he was. At any rate, Saigo fled to Satsuma, and he took Gessho with him. The Domain welcomed Saigo. The monk, however, they weren't so sure about. He was an outsider, after all. They refused to turn him over to the shogunate, but also refused to protect him. This infuriated Saigo. But his lord, Nariakira, too had died, and Saigo was powerless.

With Gessho, the monk, he failed at a double suicide attempt. The details are sketchy. Either they jumped from a boat as it was carrying them across Kagoshima Bay, or they jumped from a cliff once they had successfully crossed. Either way, they were pulled by friends and retainers from the depths of the sea, arms still wrapped around each other, both very close to death. But maybe you should call this a half failed double suicide attempt because the monk friend indeed died in the end, and Saigo didn't. But as soon as he recovered, he was banished by his own domain to the distant island of Amami Oshima. This was because, historically never friendly with the shogunate, the Satsuma domain didn't want to give up one of their own, but at the same time, they didn't want to get caught by the shogunate harboring a wanted man, either. They continued to allow him his samurai stipend, but for official purposes, they declared that he had died in the ocean that day with the monk, and claimed that they hadn't been able to recover his body.

The two men, before their plunge, had written death poems in the traditional samurai manner. In one of the poems written by the priest, which is still preserved, he expresses joy at being able to die for the emperor. Never mind that no sane Western mind could possibly rationalize his own needless suicide as beneficial to an emperor 1000 kilometers away whom he'd never met and who most likely didn't know that he was even alive, much less in the act of dying. In the normal course of human interaction, this notion strikes you as absurd. And you can't help remarking that this poem was written

on a scrap of toilet paper.

Saigo had fallen from the heights of the Satsuma political scene, to the nadir of official death. This would turn out to be better, and considerably less permanent, than actual death, but for the time being, he was despondent and miserable. He would write from Amami Oshima, "The feeling is utterly awful and I have even come to regret having survived."

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When Saigo was banished to the Amami Island chain they had been officially a part of Satsuma for some 250 years, but socially and culturally they were still part of the Ryukyus, With different religious beliefs, different customs, and different ideas of beauty, they were much more similar to Okinawa than to Kakoshima, and Saigo, forever a Japanese chauvinist, referred to the Amami Islanders with their odd religious practices, their ashen makeup and their abundant tattoos as "hairy Chinese."

At the same time he was stricken by their pitiable condition and disgusted by the way his own Satsuma Domain had treated them. In his first letter home he wrote, "The daily life of the islanders seems honestly unendurable. It's worse than the treatment of the islanders of Ezo. I'm astonishied by the bitterness of their lives. I didn't think there could be such hardship." And he would soon write his friends in Kagoshima, "It's painful to see the extent of tyranny here," and "I'm astonished by the bitterness of their lives."

An earlier envoy from Satsuma had reported in 1777 "there isn't a home on the island where I would want to even sit and wash my feet. . . Today I suddenly understood the depths of human anguish. My heart was so heavy it was difficult to even walk."

Saigo would be on Amami Oshima for nearly four years and, initially keeping to himself on the outskirts of the small harbor town there, he slowly but surely integrated himself into island life. Having given up on ever being returned to "life" as he'd known it, he began a small school there, teaching the Chinese classics to island children who, by all accounts, came to love him. He also took a beautiful island wife, though a "hairy Chinese," and with her he would have two children. Eventually he would bring his son to Kagoshima, making a rebel of him, and though later in life he would express regret that he hadn't spent more time with his family, speaking fondly of his time on Amami Oshima—at one point he even talked of eventually retiring there—as for his "hairy Chinese" wife, she always remained an embarrassment to him. He called her

"the woman who serves me." There is no record of him ever writing or talking of her to any of his friends while on the island. Only later would he write with fondness of his family and his life on Oshima. He would never make any effort to bring her into samurai civilization. In the words of Mark Ravina "She was an overseas indiscretion, not suitable for the metropole." After leaving Amami Oshima he only saw her twice, and then only briefly. He wouldn't allow her to visit him.

It doesn't seem to have struck Saigo as odd that, already a scholar steeped in the tradition of the Chinese classics, and truly reverent of Chinese learning—indeed, it was this very Chinese scholarship that he taught to the island children—he still thought and spoke of the Chinese in a way that was highly pejorative. He doesn't appear to have recognized in this either dichotomy or irony. The Chinese tradition of learning and the great Chinese classics learned by every man of the ruling classes had become something quite Japanese; The Chinese themselves, as individual human beings, never would nor could become anything but hairy and lowly Chinese.

Also, in spite of the pity and sympathy Saigo felt for the islanders, and the disdain he felt for the Satsuma government over the way the islanders were treated, it's important to note that, once elevated again to a position of almost supreme power in the new national government, he did nothing whatsoever that we are aware of to help relieve the Amami Islanders of their misery.

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Saigo's second banishment to the Amami islands in the middle of 1862 was not to protect him from a shogunate that wanted to find him and punish him. In fact, by this time shogunal authority had waned to such a degree that they had very little authority in Satsuma Domain, or any of the other outside domains, either. Rather this banishment was carried out by his own Satsuma ruler—the successor to Saigo's beloved Nariakira—because now it was this man who wanted to punish Saigo.

Nariakira had died in the middle of 1858, likely poisoned by his enemies. Most of Nariakira's children had died before the age of six, amid growing accusations of sorcery and the casting of evil spells on behalf of the nemesis half brother's mother, and historians consider it quite possible that these children were poisoned too. At any rate, his only heir was a two year-old son who could not possibly, of course, be an effective *daimyo*. Never mind that politicians throughout history have regularly acted like two-year olds. Few of them actually were. So upon recognizing that he would soon die, Nariakira summoned his father, the retired *daimyo* with the fancy tea set, and instructed

him to choose the next daimyo from between the same half brother who had been the cause of so much trouble earlier, Hisamitsu, and that half brother's son. This was the best he could do. Power had to somehow stay in the family, after all. It was hereditary. And it's quite possible too that, with nobody to trust, Nariakira had rejected the notion of making his own son the next *daimyo* simply to save the boy's life.

The retired father selected the half brother's son to succeed Nariakira, but real power, as per Japanese tradition, reverted to the father and the half brother, Hisamitsu, who would rule in the name of Hisamitsu's young son.

Saigo, who had been so loyal to Nariakira, loathed the half brother, Hisamitsu. And Hisamitu distrusted Saigo. It was Hisamitus who'd sent Saigo to Amami Oshima in the first place, though recognizing his abilities, if reluctantly. And still being the domain's most knowledgeable and well connected retainer on national and imperial affairs, though officially dead, Saigo was kept informed of loyalist politics and continued to exert influence on the affairs of Satsuma loyalists.

Then, in an otherworld-like reversal of fortune, Hisamitsu recalled Saigo from Amami Oshima back into the service of the domain. Saigo's friends had convinced Hisamitus that Saigo's experience and connections with members of both the Imperial court and members of the shogunal government were vital to the domains well being in these troubled times. This only shows how rapidly the political situation was changing. Yesterday's enemies had become today's friends.

But samurai have to serve their lords. They have to follow orders—that's what being a Samurai was all about—but Saigo, somehow, managed not to. Hisamitsu sent Saigo on a tour of Kyushu to gauge the mood of samurai in the other Kyushu domains. Then he was to wait for Hisamitsu and his retinue at Shimonoseki, from where they would proceed to Kyoto together. Saigo failed to do this. He got caught up in the excitement of independent samurai—*ronin*—from all over Japan who'd come to group around him under the banner of the times—Reverence for the Emperor; Ousting of the Foreigners. Saigo became all but intoxicated with the surprising respect these men showered upon him. His legend had become bigger than he was.

In a moment of folly he agreed to lead these samurai to Kyoto. In short, he fucked up. Without waiting for Hisamitsu, he took a fast boat to Osaka, then on to Kyoto. There too, he met with countless samurai and restless *ronin*. They were the sort of people "with whom I would like to die in battle," he would write. These were men with passion, but no plan, and though he knew better, Saigo fell in with them. In fact, he fell in at the front of the line, and it's worth noting that this is the exact same sort of fuck

up that would lead to the 1877 rebellion and his own senseless death on the hills behind Kagoshima. Don't make the same mistake twice, they advise, but apparently nobody advised Saigo of this.

Anyway, these samurai and *ronin* had come to think of Saigo as their savior. He had, after all, been officially dead. And now, there he was, alive and well and bigger than life. They worshipped him. And Saigo, for his part, was deeply impressed by their passion and their ardent belief in their cause, which was, of course, ousting the foreign menace. Never mind that a mere two years later, when their movement did turn violent, he would dismiss them as mere "hooligans."

There's no evidence to suggest that either Saigo or the samurai who clamored around him had any intentions but to serve the Satsuma domain, and no evidence that Saigo did anything in Kyoto disloyal to his lord. But orders are orders, and he'd disobeyed one. It should go without saying that leading an army of independent samurai to the capital would make just about any *daimyo* suspicious. Never mind that this particular *daimyo* didn't like Saigo anyway, if only because of his strong connections to the late Nariakira.

Also, politics are politics, and word got back to the Hisamitsu that Saigo held political notions different from Hisamitsu's own, and that indeed Saigo was acting against Satsuma's interest in Kyoto. This accusation was, by most accounts, not true, but in politics, as everybody knows, truths rarely matter. So once again Saigo was banished to the islands, only this time it wasn't the relatively sublime Amami Oshima, but a much smaller island, even more desperate, and still farther away. This was a place reserved for only the worst criminal offenders. It was one step short of a death sentence. In fact, it was a death sentence, just a very slow one, and by all rights Saigo should have died there. He was initially kept in a small cage like an animal. And in the end it was only the respect and admiration he earned from his jailor that would save him till, yet again, in the early part of 1864, he would be recalled to active duty and put immediately in charge of the entire Satsuma army. From exile on a windswept little island in the middle of the southern sea to General of the Army in a few short days. Such were these heady days of catastrophic change in the land of the rising sun.

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In the park at the base of Shirayama, just down the hill from the Kagoshima Prefecture Museum of Culture, in view of the dunce-like statue of Saigo, and gathered in the most meager excuse for shade, yet the only shade the park has to offer, you

encounter a group of some 20 students sitting shoulder to shoulder on a rock retainer wall listening to each other give speeches in English. You listen to two. They aren't bad. The theme appears to be introducing Kagoshima to foreigners. Just what you need. The first one you hear is a woman of about 35 speaking about Sakurajima. She's already half finished when you get close enough to hear her or to understand what's happening. You listen to the second speaker from beginning to end. He's about 25, and after a brief introduction he sings an old Kagoshima song, except that he's translated it into English. His voice, like his smile, is beautiful, It's a sandy baritone and even if the words are difficult to follow, the song charms you. You reset your camera to video and record the last stanza. Here's what he sings:

Walking along the beach in the bay
They made me remind someone in my young days
She no coming west, and dawning in the sea
The shining of the moon and the twinkling of the stars

Okay. Maybe something's lost in translation. But it doesn't need to be perfect. The overall effect is good. That's what matters. You really want to stay there for a while, listen to a couple more speeches, maybe even talk to some people. You really do want to. You really do. You're just afraid to. This is an English class, after all. And you're an English teacher. In fact, by all appearances, you're the sole native English speaker in attendance. It doesn't bode well for you. So with little to gain and no real time to lose giving out free English practice, you turn away with a wave as soon as the fellow's done singing. You proceed to the Museum. You're going to meet Emi in just over an hour.

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She's standing in front of a large department store in the heart of the Tenmonkan area, where the streetcar stops. Short. Petite. Short hair. Conservative. Gentle. Soft spoken. Sweet. Though you've only met once, you recognize her immediately. She's just finished work at a hospital. She's a pharmacist. She's wearing a white blouse and high water khakis. You get the feeling she has just changed out of the black skirt she almost certainly had to go to work in. It's probably in her handbag right now. And under the khakis you can't help but notice, she's still wearing nylons. In August. In all this heat.

You're wearing black cotton shorts, the Sgt. Pepper shirt, laughable shoes, and no socks. You're lugging your heavy bag on your shoulders like a potato farmer on his way to the county market, you've got your camera bag dangling in one hand, and you don't look like you and she should have anything to do with one another. Yet, side by side, you're walking.

She's made dinner reservations at a quiet *izakaya* not far from your hotel, and you wonder how she knew where you were staying. Did you tell her. You must have. But you don't remember. It may have been random. On the way to the restaurant you stop at the hotel long enough to check in. She waits for you in the lobby while you go up to put your things in your room. You wash your face and take a shit. You put on your other shirt.

You had suggested reservations at Haraiso, the place that had refused to seat you the last time you were here, the place you'd been escorted out of just before you met her, but she has more sense than you. Why ask for trouble? Rather ask for serenity. Avoid conflict. Stay out of the storm. Don't get involved where you need no involvement. In solitude is silence. In silence is peace.

Emi is sad, like so many people in Japan. Happiness here, strikes you so often as only a temporary, fleeting, illusionary toy of a thing, subject to break without notice, subject to change like the clouds in the sky or the waves in the sea. When you met her half a year ago she had just broken up with her Australian boyfriend. In fact, she'd told you frankly, she was at Big Ben that evening, down hearted, hoping to meet another foreigner, seeking a fresh start, looking to get over *him*.

You didn't pursue this line of conversation very thoroughly at the time because, first, of the three girls in her group she was sitting the farthest away from you, and second, she was telling you this in English, which is a language that irritates you often and bores you all the time anyway, and third, nothing irritates or bores you more than these sordid tales of eager young Japanese girls in love with foreign men, most of whom have nothing to sell themselves here except for the very fact that they are foreign, and many of whom are out and out ugly human beings. You've heard so many of these tales you think you could write a book about that. Fuck pagodas. And fuck all this traveling. You could write the *Love on the Fringes of Japanese Society Diaries*.

That first time, in fact, you hardly spoke with Emi directly. Rather you spoke with her friend who was sitting closest to you. Then upon leaving Big Ben you exchanged email addresses with the friend. The friend mailed you exactly once. You replied. Then your next mail from Kagoshima came not from the friend, but from Emi.

It was in perfect English.

Never mind that you're not at all the type of foreigner she'd been looking for that night at Big Ben. It turns out you're the one she found.

She said you're the first foreigner she's met who actually showed interested in her country. This seems odd on the surface of it, since it's her country, after all, where she's met all of these foreigners. And it begs the question, if they're not interested in Japan what on earth are they doing here, unless they're mere economic refugees, but having met so very few yourself over all these years who display any real interest in Japan, where they're living, you have to agree that she's probably on to something. Yet you can't help but wonder, is it because these people are innately as uninterested as they are uninteresting, or is it because all potential interest in matters of Japan and the Japanese have been systematically beaten out of them by the Japanese spirit of exclusion with which it's been received. This is another of the big unsolvable mysteries that haunt you here. Yet you said nothing to Emi about it then, and you'll say nothing now. You know very well that any suggestion in Japan that puts even the slightest hint of an onus on Japan or the Japanese will most often be poorly received.

Now Emi is back together with her Australian boyfriend, she tells you, except that he's in Australia and she's in Kagoshima. He came back here a month or so ago but got stopped at the Osaka International Airport by the immigration authorities. They wouldn't let him in the country because he didn't have enough money. The Osaka International Airport is some 900 km from Kagoshima and Emi couldn't go there right away. So instead, she sent 1,000,000 yen—roughly 10,000 US dollars—so that he could get admitted into the country. Then, even with her money, he never made it down to Kagoshima to see her. He stayed in Osaka and she took a Sunday flight up to spend half a day with him.

"What was he doing in Osaka for a month?" you ask her.

"He was looking for a job."

"What kind of job."

"Teaching English."

"Why didn't he come look for a job in Kagoshima?"

"He says there aren't any teaching jobs here."

"Did he find one in Osaka?"

"No."

"Well, English teachers are a dime a dozen," you say. You should know. And this boyfriend, apparently, isn't one anyway. In fact, it seems clear, he isn't much of

anything. No. You're being unfair. You're being harsh. In Australia, apparently, he's a skilled truck driver, though one with neither a truck of his own nor a job driving somebody else's.

Now he's back in Australia and she's been sending him money!

She's insane.

She's sent him some 200,000 yen, which isn't all that much money except in view of the fact that she'll never get it back. And, oh yes, he calls her about every other day and reverses the charges, so that's another 200,000 yen she owes her phone company. And she's just bought a ticket to Cairns. That's another 120,000 yen. Grand total, once one adds in the Osaka Airport allotment, is about 15,200 US dollars she's out over this guy, and that's not counting the cost of a week in Australia that lies in her future. Her grand plan in going there is to get back the money, and if he doesn't pay it back she's not going to marry him.

He's 35 years old. He doesn't have a career, or a job, or anything that he wants to do for a living. Except for the truck driving thing, you mean. He isn't educated, he doesn't have a marketable license or certificate that Emi knows of. He doesn't have a trade. He doesn't have any stability of experience, even in the sales or service industries. He doesn't have any money or any clear skills for obtaining any, unless one counts those skills he's displayed in bilking Emi out of her meager savings. And truck driving again. He sounds like a perfectly lousy catch of a husband. And Emi's an educated professional with good English ability and a skill set that he could theoretical milk for the rest of his life, or at least the rest of hers, in almost any country.

So in your opinion, that's the best thing that could possibly happen to her—give up on the roughly 15,200 US she's already invested, enjoy her week in Cairns, and come back poorer but wiser. When you tell her that she says, "Yeah, but I'm afraid he might kidnap me!"

"What!"

"I don't trust him."

"Then why are you going to see him."

"I want to find out for sure."

"Find out what for sure?"

"Find out if he loves me."

"He doesn't love you."

"But he calls me every day."

"Yes, but you pay for it."

"Isn't that normal in Western countries?"

"I don't know what's normal in Australia or anywhere else, but none of my American friends would do it."

"None of your friends would call their girlfriends?"

"Not if they didn't have enough money to pay for it."

"But he's the only person I've ever loved?"

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-nine. I'm worried about my future."

"Well, it sounds like you should be," you want to say, but instead you say, "Good luck with it. Have fun in Australia. I sure hope it goes well." It won't, but there isn't much else you can say. You've heard so many of these sad stories in the past 20 years. Fucking *gaijin*! It's no wonder you all have such a bad reputation here. And at this point, you're desperately groping for a change of subject. You order another beer and a tomato salad with mozzarella cheese..

"Will you go with me?" Emi asks.

"Go where?"

"Australia."

"To spend a week in Cairns with your boyfriend?"

"Just in case something happens," she says.

"No way."

But here's the thing: Emi is an otherwise intelligent, reasonable and lovely girl. She's curious and interested. She can converse about lots of things, and she speaks well. Her written English is very good, though this conversation is taking place in Japanese. She has told you that she learned English on the radio, but now you realize she learned a lot of it carrying on with this asshole from down under.

Fuck pagodas, again. You've decided to start writing your *Love on the Fringes of Japanese Society Diary*. Besides, that would almost certainly be more interesting. Who wants to read about pagodas when offered, instead, these kinds of things?

You leave the *izakaya* and walk around the neighborhood. This is the underbelly of Kagoshima. There are old shops, the entire length of their counters open to the street, selling ramen noodles or pieces of chicken fried over flame on a stick. These are lined up one after another, with only the occasional customers, sitting in groups of twos or threes, drunk, noisy. One shop especially catches your eye. It's on the ground floor of a two story wooden building. The upper floor is probably where the owner lives. There is grass growing on the thick clay tiles of the eve between the two

floors, and settled on the grass are four boxy air conditioners of different sizes. These are air conditioners of the Asian variety and few Americans are familiar with them. Yet to you this has become a familiar, if still appealing scene. It's the new and modern on top of the rustic, old, falling down, and dirty. These are the kinds of places you used to love. You still find them theoretically charming, and so often you long to join these drunk salary men for a casual beer and a laugh, but you know better. You've learned over the years that you aren't especially welcome at places like this. Though they'll probably seat you and serve you, nobody will sit and laugh with you. They're more likely to laugh at you instead. It doesn't matter. You have good company in Emi, and you've had enough to eat.

You turn into a second story place called Bar USA. It's advertising American Country Jazz Music and two hours of all you can drink for 2,000 yen, and curiosity once again gets the best of you. What the hell is American country jazz music? You're expecting The Cowboy Junkies, Joni Mitchell, or at least Counting Crows. It turns out to be Madonna singing a cover of Don McLean's American Pie. This is easily the worst version of a great song ever recorded. It's even worse than the rest of Madonna's repertoire. But what can you do?

Well, you can drink.

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Two hours later you stumble around a couple of corners towards the direction of your hotel. And there it is. A big neon sign on the left, red with a white border and big black letters, so close to the ground you could reach up and touch it: **Foods Bar FUCK Zero Position**. It's on the 4th floor and there's no way you're not going to go in.

"What does it mean?" Emi asks.

"Well, you know what food means, and you know what bar means, and of course you know what fuck means." Then you find yourself in a linguistic bind. There are a handful of Japanese words that mean position, just as there are a handful of differing applications for the same word in English. Your position in society, your position in line, your position on the basketball team, your political position, your position on a particular issue, the position you'll soon be taking out in Starbucks stock, the position of your computer on your desk, and the difficult position you so often find yourself in. And these are only the nouns, not including sexual position, because you've just discovered that you don't know how to say that in Japanese.

There aren't many words you had full mastery of in English going into the

eighth grade yet still don't know how to say in Japanese. This is one. Another is cocksucker, now that you think of it. And it occurs to you that there's a certain gap in your Japanese education. This is a sad, almost depressing discovery, which is also proving to be a bit embarrassing.

"I know what sexual positions are," Emi says in perfect English after your awkward attempt to explain it. "But which one is the zero position?"

That, you have to confess, you don't know either. But you love this country.

Foods Bar FUCK Zero Position turns out to be a dreary compact place with little in the way of lighting—big surprise—and no sign of a menu. There's nobody in there but a young bartender with hair almost as long as your own, but gelled up on his head like the topknot on a rooster, and roughly the same color. He doesn't know what zero position means either, you're relieved to hear, but he explains the origin of the bar's catchy name—the word for coitus in Japanese is *seiko*. This word you did know. So maybe all is not hopeless, after all. Then, the word for success in Japanese is also *seiko*, and though these two words consist of completely different characters, they are pronounced exactly the same. The owner of Foods Bar FUCK Zero Position, as it turns out, named his bar FUCK because he was hoping for a big success. This makes perfect sense, in a roundabout way, assuming his client base is both bilingual and clever. But there appear to be few of those types in Kagoshima, judging by the bar's complete lack of patrons.

"We tend to get busier between two and five in the morning," the bartender says. You look at the time on your phone. It's just after midnight. You're not optimistic. The one drink you have there is tall, strong, and cheap. You're willing to have another, but not Emi. She has to work in the morning.

Leaving, you say to her, now in English, "I didn't see much sign of any food in Foods bar FUCK, did you?

"No," she says, also in perfect English, "No fuck, either."

You love this country.