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OUR LIVES | WHEN EAST MARRIES WEST

The junkie and his fix

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“Weird,” he says. “Give me something weird.”

The menu boasts both fish sperm and *odorigui* — small fish you chew while they’re alive. But such food is not on his wish list. At least not anymore.

My dinner friend has lived here for years. Years, he says — with his left eye twitching — of diminishing returns.

“I fell in love with Japan because it was so bizarre. Giant penis festivals! Schoolgirls in sailor’s suits! Game contestants chugging Tabasco sauce! I felt like I was mainlining nuttiness. I got addicted. And each day brought a new high.”

His left eye stops twitching and begins to vibrate.

“But now after all these years I’m weirded out. Nothing here seems wacky anymore. I need a new fix and I can’t find one.”

Meaning?

“The thrill is gone. Yet I’m hooked! I need Japan to be crazy again and I need it now!”

So here I am, trying to convince him that Japan is still peculiar. An odd endeavor all by itself.

“Why not go to one of those animation coffee shops. Where the waitresses wear frilly aprons. Only frilly aprons.”

“You think I haven’t done that? Why, I’ve got a whole closet of frilly aprons of my own. I wore one at breakfast.”

“Okaaay. How about one of those nude festivals?”

He shakes his head. “I’ve been to so many nude festivals I get them all mixed up. And then this year I showed up to view the cherries in a loincloth. Weird, yes, but no one noticed. The cherries were in better form.”

“Then . . . go join a AKB48 fan club with some dirty old men.”

He opens his wallet and displays his membership card.

“Buy a teacup dog and dress it up like Betty Boop.”

And with his wallet open, he shows me photos of “Fifi.” First as Betty Boop and then as Justin Bieber.

“Cross-dressing my dog used to be delightful.” His eye is blinking like a strobe light. “But that’s yesterday’s high. How about today!?”

I pull all the stops. “Get a group of train nerds to cover their fingers with locomotive nail art and then pose in front of Mickey Mouse while making the peace sign.”

He strokes his chin. The eye calms.

“And then have everyone eat *natto*-packed buns bought from vending machines. After having them all bow and offer five-minute self-introductions.”

“No, no. It sounded OK for a moment. But I’ve done something similar with Hello Kitty.”

“It’s just no good,” he goes on. “Everything that was once so strange is now commonplace. I sleep on futon, eat at a *kotatsu* and take *o-furo* like I was born and raised here. The quirky Japan I once loved is gone! Oh wherefore art thou, Romeo!”

He stiffens. “Everything that’s to be done has been done. Why, it’s almost like I was back in Minnesota. Sometimes when I close my eyes . . .” And he tries, only the left eyelid jumps up and down like a jackhammer. “I mix the calls of the Tokyo crows with those of the loons on Fish Hook Lake.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” I say.

“Depends how you feel about loons.”

“No, it means you’ve settled down. You have two homes now, not one. Two places you can be comfortable in.”

“Can’t you see! I want to be *uncomfortable*! I want to ride the roller coaster of cultural surprise! I want Japanese adventure! Not Japanese been-there, done-that!”

And, he tells me, it cuts both ways.

“Japanese want fresh foreigners too. People used to laugh at me and call me ‘*henna gaijin*.’ But now I’m not as entertaining. I can speak their language and read cultural nuances. They want someone who will pratfall through life here just like I used to do. Japan is fond of youthful slapstick and me . . . I’m all slapped out.”

“Maybe you should move on,” I tell him. “I mean, this cannot be the only weird place. Try France. Or Belgium.”

“But Japan is the source of my addiction! Will a chocoholic get high on marmalade? No. My heart lies here, not in Flanders Fields.”

A conviction that allows only one course . . .

“I’ve got to keep pushing the envelope on weird! To boldly go where no gaijin has ever gone before!” His left eye pulses with agreement.

The waiter asks our order.

“Do you have anything out of the ordinary? Like jellyfish brains? Or crab lips?”

The waiter stares. And shakes his head.

“OK. I’ll take the strangest thing you’ve got. Something no one ever orders.”

My turn. The entire menu makes me squeamish. I feel like a sandwich. Not typical fare at a sushi shop.

But the waiter brightens. “Sure. We can do that. Tuna fish on toast with wasabi and ketchup. Coming up!”

My friend stares at me. Both eyes are now hot beacons of envy.

“I hate you,” he hisses. “Oh how I hate you.”

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