

TANBO (Rice Fields)

by Barry Crisp

Bright lights, undamaged vending machines, clean subway stations and the perfect transport schedules. Walking fashion advertisements fitting into social groups within a modern constructed culture. Put the Kaka out and let the money come rolling in is what my boss always says to me. The problem is, if you're not creating anything then you might as well just die. Yes, this is the city where even men have mirrors in their handbags just to assure themselves they're still worth something. Watching the Hachiko boys and the Omotesando girls is entertainment enough if you're looking for a great night out. 'Catch me if you can' is the perfect byname for Tokyo city.

'Just be you Shouzu, nothing more and nothing less ne.'

'Un, I am trying! That's why I wear jeans and a shirt.'

'A pink shirt ne, Shouzu.' Mei giggles and loosens the cap of a green tea bottle bringing the rim to her firm cherry blossom lips. Her eyes focused on a young lady in her early twenties wearing a tight lavender office suite standing beside the sparkling steel train door. At the start of working with the Shizonaku Company I always dressed stylish both in and out of work.

'Time consuming fashion isn't it Mei!'

'Everybody looks like a fashion doll from the shop windows, if they froze for a second I wouldn't be able to tell whether they're human.' We laugh causing a few passengers to look our way.

'Shouzu-kun, you should try house cleaning!'

'E, Why?'

'It's very therapeutic!'

'You sound like a house wife, Mei.' She shrugs her shoulders and looks away, frowning. The train pulls into Chiba city central where a crowd of ample schoolgirls greets us. I resist from looking at their smooth tanned skin and seductive short skirts. I face forward and look at Mei's back as she skips off to the ticket gate in her denim jeans and green blouse. The station as always, hosts a sea of time scheduled zombies whizzing around, but still it's nowhere near as crowded as Shinjuku, Tokyo station. After lunch in SOGO department store, we board the train for Yotsukaido.

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Unlike Tokyo, Yotsukaido in the suburbs of Chiba is a place that never changes; everything stays the same from the local faces to the local shops. I always look forward to meeting my parents, mainly because of mum's home cooked food and dad's collection of sake. Mei and I wait for the bus outside Yotsukaido station. The sky has grown dark but the summer air remains warm. A small

McDonalds located on the corner to our left is empty as usual. A plump girl wearing a cayenne coloured uniform stands smiling as if greeting an imaginary god. We both have returned to Yotsukaido for the Obon Matsuri summer festival as we do every year. An old green bus pulls up to the curb and its doors open.

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My bedroom remains the same, nothing moved, nothing cleaned. I open the window to let in the echoing sound of the cicadas. I clean the desk and slap the futon to get rid of the summer dust. I turn on the hi-fi and plug in my headphones, and fall asleep inhaling the smell of mum's steamed rice hanging in the air.

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I wake up to a violent vibration on my bed. First thoughts; it's an earthquake, but the flashing light beside my leg outlines my chrome mobile. I pick it up and press the multicoloured illuminated telephone icon to hear Mei's voice on the other end.

'Shouzu, were you sleeping?'

'Err, no. What time is it?'

'It's two am.'

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing, just wanted to hear your voice! Do you remember how we first met?' Hear my voice I wondered

alarmingly. Mei saying such a thing was way out of context.

'Yes, it was summer time at the beginning of our secondary school years.'

That day I had taken the long way home by walking along the rice fields. Mei was dressed in her navy blue and white school uniform chasing dragonflies so freely in the centre of the mass green fields. I stood and watched captivated by her air of freedom. She noticed I was watching and motioned me to come to her, and I did without hesitation. She said to me 'close your eyes and listen.' Beads of sweat dripped down my arm under the oppressing heat. I kept one eye half open and remember seeing the crimson clouds climb over the electric cables as the birds flapped their wings, skipping through the trees. Dragonflies chased each other gliding effortlessly over the top of the rice fields. The sound of the cicadas and other insects ran through my whole body absorbing and purifying me. Never had the rice fields appeared so beautiful to me until that moment. It's sharp green freshness still remains with me now.

'What did I say to you that day?'

'You said the insects communicate in a world without barriers.' And it was also at that moment she asked me to be her brother because she didn't have a real one.

'I want a normal life Shouzu, and I want to have children soon.' The word soon struck me off guard. Was she indicating that I should enter inside her and give her children?

'Children? But you're only twenty-three!'

'I know, but I want a child more than anything. I feel incomplete right now. I don't want to be a middle aged mother.'

I couldn't believe what I was hearing, but I knew that Mei was serious. I could somehow understand Mei's confusion surfacing from under her intense breathing. She began to cry intensely over the phone. I could hear her gripping the handset. Eventually her waterfall of emotions turned into quiet sniffs of awkward silence.

'Shouzu, thanks for listening!'

'Un.'

'I'm glad we had this chat! See ya tomorrow afternoon ne.' She put the phone down and left me sitting with a slice of cold air chasing through me.

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In the morning I went for a stroll and enjoyed several conversations with the locals and felt relaxed for the first time since moving to Tokyo. I bought some fruits from the department store and was shocked at how expensive they had become. I then sat at a local park for lunch and watched the children play, reminiscing on my

childhood days, which flicked past too rapidly to appreciate. A mother played with her two children for over an hour without showing signs of tiredness. Does having children give you more energy I wondered. They certainly give you more direction and reason to live, I guess.

I attended the afternoon Mikoshi carrying festival, and even though the Mikoshi is a miniature model of a shrine, it's very heavy nevertheless, as the shoulder bruise still remains weeks after. Mei was supposed to meet me there but said she was busy and would meet me later. I watched as children and adults pulled along the decorated Dashi floats singing, playing the flute, and beating the drums loudly. Every now and then they would halt at a sponsor's house and lift up the Mikoshi at least three times to show appreciation. Neighbours would rush out their houses splashing buckets of water over everybody. People offered food and drinks, which were all supplied by the local residents. And even though my dad is in his late fifties he still drags me with him to carry the Mikoshi and get soaked by waves of water. His childlike simper always makes me weak to reservation. My mum always watches from a distance so as to not to get wet.

I arrive to find Mei waiting by the gates to the local park where the evening summer festival is held every year. She greets me with a wide smile and offers me a bean paste cake. She's even prettier tonight with her wavy jet-black hair tied back showing off her sweet little ear lobes that don't stray far from her face.

'You OK, Mei?'

'Un! I'm hungry, let's eat.'

We merge into the crowd with hundreds of excited people. This afternoon's Mikoshi sits in the far corner under a white tent finely lit by lanterns scribbled with sponsorship names, which stretch around the whole park. We walk past a crowd of children eating barbecued chicken, lifting up their weird masks to take a bite. Food stalls circle around the big brightly lit stage. The groups of Taiko drummers are exceptionally talented this year, each member taking their turn to beat while the crowd dressed in summer kimonos dances around slowly in a traditional dance manner. From time to time people shout 'rassera rassera rasse rasse rassera' and jump around in joy. I follow Mei to one of the chicken stalls. The smell of meat drifts in the air as children chase each other around with new toys. We buy some yakitori and sit to watch a group of dancers performing the So-ran Bushi fishing dance amazingly. After the performance the lights go out and everybody looks to the heavens. The flashes

light up the night sky with loud bangs. I catch glimpses of Mei's bright-multicoloured cheeks. After the fireworks we join in with the dancing and enjoy the festivities until to the last minute.

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A breeze cuts through the warm midnight air as I stop to look up at the sky, catching sight of a shooting star. The crickets sing continuously. Mei steps closer to me and presses her warm breasts gently against my chest. My heart begins to throb. I look down at her soft and lightly tanned bulging skin restraining myself. I gently pull her head back by her hair and look into her eyes. My penis pressed against her leg erects. She smiles at me.

'Tonight was fun wasn't it Shouzu?'

'Yes, it was great!'

'Kiss me Shouzu. I want to feel you!'

'But... are you sure?'

'I don't want to feel incomplete anymore.'

I pull away. She looks down at the ground and says nothing.

'I'm sorry Mei, I don't want to spoil our friendship.'

'Iie, don't be sorry... I think I drank too much sake that's all!'

She puts on a brave face and holds my hand. 'I will see you tomorrow at the station,' she says with a tearful

voice. I lead her to the doorstep and watch as she slowly steps into the house, closing the door with her back towards to me.

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I wait for Mei outside Yotsukaido station next to the police booth. She arrives twenty minutes late wearing a red flowered blue dress. She waves at me holding two bottles of milk coffee, her favourite. She hands one to me, along with a rice ball.

'I thought you might be hungry since you hardly ever eat lunch!'

'Thank you! Sorry about yesterday.'

'Its been forgotten Shouzu. I'm sorry also!'

We climb the escalators and head towards the platform to catch the rapid train straight into Tokyo. Whether it's crowded or not everybody stands in an orderly line at the stations. Mei looks around constantly as if waiting for something or someone to pop out from one of the corners. As stated by the cute TV weather girl, today is the hottest of the summer so far. The train arrives and we board. I watch as a European father and his Japanese mixed-raced son play with each other looking out the window. The father seems so free and happy. His son looks at me smiling, and so I wave at him and say 'hello' in English. They get off at Chiba city

central. I look at the boy's tiny fingers and big round eyes.

'Mixed-raced babies are beautiful!'

'Sou ne, Shouzu-kun.'

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After lunch in Shibuya we take a walk to Harajuku, popping into some of the shops, then onto Takeshita street.

'It's amazing isn't it Mei?'

'What is?'

'Every fashion style imaginable can be found on this street.'

'Yeah, Western, Japanese, trendy, funky, cosplay... everything!' Her eyes light up in excitement.

'Are you ok today Mei?'

'Yeah, I just sometimes feel like Tokyo is changing me into someone I don't want to be. Everybody here looks like lost souls.' She says staring at a young girl dressed in gothic clothes and inked in dark colours.

'I want to visit London this Christmas. Why don't you come with me Mei?'

'Really! But why London?'

'Just something different.'

'Sounds like a nice idea ne!' She looks around licking her lips like a dog waiting for treats. 'Let's go and get some ice cream.'

'Sure!'

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'It's arrived!' Mei clutches my arm, pulling me to the side to let the passengers off, and then drags me onto the train to grab a seat.

'Lucky we got a seat ne!'

I reply with a smile. As she rests her head on my shoulder, strands of her hair falls from behind her left ear. Mei is tall and curvy, but usually hides her seductive body under layers of tops and a pair of baggy jeans. It makes me feel comfortable ne she always claims.

'You've been a bit tense since lunch Shouzu.'

'Un, maybe!'

'What's wrong?'

'Iie, nothing.'

'Hey! I'm your best friend, ne!'

'Un.'

'So wake me up at the next stop.' She laughs.

'Sleeping again!'

The train pulls out from the underground of Omotesando station. I place my shoulder bag on top of my lap to hide my rapidly erecting penis as she shifts and presses her body against mine. A passenger opposite softly pokes the lady seated next to him in an attempt to wake her up, but she continues to bob backwards and forwards with her head firmly cemented on his shoulder.

The train is decorated with colour blinding advertisements in every direction. A teenager stands gazing out the window looking at the tall buildings flicker past while another reads a comic book. The train stops and the sleeping lady seated opposite wakes up calmly and gets off without an apology. The man used as a pillow glances at her as the train begins to move. Mei and I chuckle, avoiding any eye contact with him.

'Ne Shouzu-kun, do you know Cokiyu?'

'What's that?'

'She makes ambient music!'

'I see.'

'I feel like I am breaking away from society when I listen to Cokiyu. Her voice fills my body with fresh energy.'

'I am not into music that much!'

'You're not into much of anything Shouzu.'

'But I do like Nightmare.'

'Eeee, visual kei band ne?'

'Un, that's right!'

'I see. I wonder if you're really ok!'

'Ee, why?'

'No reason.'

A lady in her forties boards the train at the next stop and stands in front of me, bringing her curved valley into direct line with my face. I can see the

indent of where her thighs meet as she straightens her tight beige rayon dress. I look up and she smiles at me, her round face scattered with beauty spots reminds me of flies trapped in a lamp. I can feel Mei's eyes pinpointing me like a cruise missile; it's my cue to turn my head. The train moves and stops again moments later.

'Come on, we have to get off here and change.' Mei pulls at my arm gently and motions me to get off. The passengers outside of the train step to one side to let everybody off before boarding. I no longer see faces, just colours at Tokyo's stations. We walk to the opposite platform and away from the smoker's corner. The ground has already dried after the morning's downpour. The thick summer humidity is like constantly having your body shoved into a sauna. When you're a child it doesn't bother you, but as an adult you question each passing season. I step forward onto the thick yellow line and listen to the cicada's sing as the sun dances between the clouds casting a gentle glimmer of light onto the tracks.

'When are you going to get your hair cut Shouzu?'

'Never!' I laugh.

'Baaaaaaaaka!' She pulls my hair.

'Doesn't it ever bother you Mei?'

'What?'

'Trains always come on time?'

'Sometimes ne! Apparently a typhoon is heading towards us this evening. I wonder if it will take me with it?'

'Huh?'

'Ah, you're always daydreaming Shouzu!'

'Sorry!'

'You should sleep more ok!'

'Un, I should.' Seeing her disappointment I initiate conversation. 'So, What will you do tomorrow Mei?'

'Hmmm, ano ne. I think I will have a long sleep!'

'Sounds nice!'

'Un!' She smiles and steps to the side. Her brown eyes sparkle as she looks at me with her peach painted lips shut tight. The familiar warning beep begins to sound throughout the platform to let the waiting passengers know that a bullet train will be passing by and not stopping. I turn to look at the oncoming train.

'Thank you for everything Shouzu!' Mei kisses my cheek, but I pretend not to feel it. A faint scream of a woman and a thumping sound echo under the roaring of the bullet train as it passes by. I turn sharply to look at the woman. She is in her early forties and gripping the hand of a child so tightly the young boy looks as if he's about to cry. I look around the platform to find people staring at me with shocked expressions.

'Mei, what happened?' I ask as I turn back round, but she's not there. I look in every direction but can't see her. My heart begins to hammer and I grow dizzy. I stumble to the side as I catch sight of a wide patch of what appears to be blood splattered against the wall across the tracks.

'Mei?' I shout. A station attendant in blue comes rushing over and grabs onto me before I drop to the floor.

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