

From JO-CHAN : A Work-in-Progress

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JO-CHAN の世界

— 日米文化の軋轢 —

シシン・アレクサンダー

Chapter One : Jo-chan Arrives

With the first cherry blossoms in the small provincial city of Suteyama, a short stocky woman with a wide face like a five sided apple arrived at the city's only high school shortly past seven on the morning of April first. She was riding an old battered black 250 cc motorcycle which misfired and shot evil fumes that rose into the cherry trees and mixed with their delicate odors. She killed the engine, parked the monster, took off her helmet (the sort which is only adequate for motorscooters) and shook out her hair. The bangs of her Dutch Boy hairdo disappeared behind her huge globular glasses with thick violet plastic frames. She wore a shiny black imitation leather jacket, a yellow scarf around her neck, a pink blouse, tucked inside an orange knit sweater, lavender courots, lizard green stockings and floral patterned cloth boots with white zippers. Sitting on the seat, criss-crossed with black and grey electrical tape, she fished a compact case out of her jacket, opened it, looked at herself in the little mirror and then powered her cheeks. As a woman who had worn only old blue jeans and work shirts and had never used makeup before, she felt uncomfortable, unnatural and silly. That she actually did look silly did not occur to her as she was virtually color blind and innocent of fashion. Her cousins, who lived in a light pink stucco house in Nagoya, had selected her wardrobe for her in one hasty but vigorous shopping spree. They, both college freshmen, were good hearted young women but suffered from typical Nagoya tastes, which tend toward the gaudy.

Pupils in their black uniforms and identical black school bags were walking their bicycles up the hill, to go to the rehearsal for the opening ceremony in the gym where the principal would drill them for the hundredth time on how they should rise and bow and sit. Each bicycle was identical in make, model and color, as specified by the school regulations. (They were only available at Suteyama-ya department store, owned by Yasuhiro Hyosubogawa, the mayor's younger brother.)

"Oh look at her! Look at her!" several whispered to their friends. "Is she the new teacher?"

The young woman in her bright clothes was most conspicuous from even ten meters, standing as she was on the school's hill, pruned of all but officially approved trees and bushes,

and against the grey cement rectangular buildings.

"You fools! Of course she's the new teacher — the new English teacher. That's Jo-chan," their friends rejoined in normal voices. They were too far away for the young woman to hear them.

"Jo-chan" was Hiroko Kato, age 28, a life-long resident of Nagoya until now. She did not knowingly go by the nickname Jo-chan and she would learn of it only months after teaching at Suteyama High School. Standing next to her terrible motorcycle, which dripped oil from unseen cracks, she had no idea that gossip about her hand preceeded her to this dull and isolated provincial city months before her arrival.

Suteyama-shi was as culturally barren as the moon. It had neither hot springs, nor historical landmarks, nor significant local craft or food to its credit, nor had it ever produced so much as a minor literary or political figure. The ancient castle of the Lord Suteyama had long ago rotted to the foundations and these had been bulldozed to make way for an apartment complex (owned by Fujita Hyosubogawa, second cousin to the mayor.) Gossip, then, was Suteyama's chief (and only) cultural asset.

The story that preceeded Jo-chan, after passing through the lungs of Suteyama's denizens several times over, went something like this: She was the only daughter of an old established and rich Nagoya family. She had gone to a famous women's college in Tokyo and then had actually gone to live in the United States, in Los Angeles, where she had been to Disneyland and received a Masters from a university almost as great as Todai. No less than The Great King Maker — the same powerful political entity who had routed a Bullet Train line through Suteyama and arranged for several Hikari expresses to stop there... had had a hand in a getting her the job at the high school. As this story went around and around, taking on a brighter hue and a more defined, albeit twisted form, like some kind of primordial stellar goo, her nickname began to take shape. First she was called O-jo-sama, meaning a woman of excellent breeding. (This was said more with jealous sarcasm than respect.) Then she became the more simple O-jo-san. Finally, when her alledged history had become intimately familiar to everyone, her nicename became informal: Jo-chan.

Jo-chan's alledged history changed somewhat depending on speaker and audience (passing through the entertainment district, for instance, she emerged trailing a string of heartbroken lovers) but it was generally agreed that her years abroad had given her strange ideas and stranger habits. Therefore, when the pupils saw her that April morning they knew who she was and they were not surprised.

When the students were within appropriate bowing distance, they bowed. Jo-chan, who had just unstrapped her battered old leather briefcase from the motorcycle's rusted rear carrier, returned the bow stiffly and a little too deeply. The pupils were all curious about this strange new teacher, but either good manners or abject terror prevented them from showing their curiosity. They nonchalantly walked on until they figured they were out of

earshot. Then they exploded into giggles and braying laughter and chattering speculations about their new teacher. It would be impossible for the principal to completely quiet them for several minutes after he took the podium at seven-thirty. All this was not lost on Jo-chan, who, though she would be blind as a mole without her glasses (which gave her a slightly fish-eyed view of the world), had excellent ears. She was not offended. Though Jo-chan had never taught in any public school — **because** her father was a high school principal and mother a high school teacher and many of her relatives were either teachers or school administrators — she had taught part time at a number cram schools, language schools and even a university of last resort in between dish-washing, janitoring, and waitressing. Thus she had long ago assumed that children and adolescents were little beasts who abused strangers or anyone showing the least sign of weakness and had learned to tune them out when they became beastly. Only after they had lost their energies for further beastliness would her brain tune back and she would instantly take command. Her calm marveled people; there was something frightening in her manner, though she was never known to raise her voice. Of this power, Jo-chan was oblivious. She was not a worldly woman.

The last minute rehearsal was why the pupils were there early. Jo-chan had arrived early simply because she did not want to be late. Coming from Nagoya only a few days before, she did not know where the school was exactly. Before her the official announcement of her employment she had been to this prefecture only twice: once for the written examination and once again for the interview examination with the Board of Education. She had bought the motorcycle the night before on an impulse, after missing the bus back to the little house she was renting in the middle of a rice field way outside the city center. She had spent almost all of what remained of her savings and the little money she had gotten from selling her old motorcycle in Nagoya to the junkman.

Jo-chan was the first teacher there and since her appointment with the principal was not until eight, she took out from her brief case a copy of Joyce's **Ulysses**, which she bought second hand in Nagoya, and looked for a place where she could sit and read. She found a concrete bench under the regulation cherry trees. She had read the older version as a graduate student. This was the new corrected version. She became so absorbed that she became oblivious to time and would have missed her appointment if the alarm in her wrist watch had not gone off.

Jo-chan put her book away into the old battered briefcase and went into what seemed to her to be the main concret rectangle. Instinctively Jo-chan knew that the principal's office would be on the ground floor and close to the exit. Downstairs there was only one door made of wood, of luminous mahogany, and it had a brass plaque glued to it with rubber cement. Without bothering to read the plaque, which in exquisite kanji, like sumie brush-strokes, announced that Kakoe Mizuda was the Principal, Jo-chan knocked on the door. She heard nothing from inside for almost a half minute. Then she thought she heard the rattle

of glass against glass and the sliding of wooden drawers.

"Come in!" issued a scratchy voice trying to sound authoritative.

The principal, a short man with hair greased back and a breath like rotten eggs that have been doused with mint, did not rise from his glowing black walnut desk as Jo-chan approached him, trudging on the deep-pile blue carpet. She was not looking at the principal but at the paintings on the wood panelled walls. Were they really originals by the wonderful and great Roku Hatori? She had known the painter as child. She remembered now how she would stray over to his little wooden house by the hill in Nagoya's Motoyama ward on which Hachimangu Shrine stood. A thin old man who never spoke louder than a whisper, Hatori, it was said, would welcome a stranger who came to his door as heartily as an old friend. The near-sighted and color-blind child Jo-chan had been always welcomed, whether he had students or not, a model or not; even if he was splashed with paint and had to climb down from the wooden step ladder he used when painting one of his giant canvases. He had her favorite bean curd candy in the refrigerator and he would always give her drawing paper and a set of drawing pencils of graduated hardness...

The principal opened his mouth and the rotten egg smell leaped out. But before he could speak, Jo-chan gave him a deep formal bow. Still sitting, he returned the deep bow and his double chin went to the polished surface of his desk. Jo-chan noted the extreme order of the desk, which meant that the principal did little work behind it.

Now the principal rose and Jo-chan bowed again, just slightly. He did not return the bow. His pallid face formed a cultivated sneer as he attempted to fix his cold red rimmed eyes on hers without looking up and stared into her ample bosom. Jo-chan obligingly sagged and his eyes swam before her heavy lenses.

"You are Miss Kato, I presume," he said stiffly. "How dare you come dressed like that! Because your Master's entitles you to a first class teachers's licence, do you think you can put on airs, make sport of this school? Do you? Do you? You are still on your six month training period don't forget. But you might not even last that, if you dress this way Miss Kato!"

Jo-chan, who had no taste in clothes, was quite bewildered by the principal's anger. She nearly turned and walked out to return to her old difficult yet happy life in Nagoya. But she remembered how happy her parents had been when she had finally given in to their pleas that she become a teacher and gotten this post, then imagined how sad they would be if she returned jobless after just a day. She kept mum as the principal ranted.

"I'll have no outlandish colors in this school. This is a school, not a theater; do you understand that Miss Kato? And no makeup. I forbid makeup. I won't have my women teachers wearing makeup. Think just because you lived in America you can promote your foreign habits on this school, do you? Do you? This is a Japanese school — a very Japanese school! If you do not understand that, you are not worthy of being a teacher, Miss

Kato. A very Japanese school. We sing Kimigayo and fly the Hinomaru in this school and we don't let the Teachers' Union in! Oh no! Join the union you are transferred to the remotest hamlet in the prefecture for the rest of your career! We are a Japanese school, Miss Kato, a Japanese school. We follow our supervisors' orders with a smile and without thought! We are diligent and we sacrifice ourselves for the Emperor!"

"Forgive me, the Constitution says — —"

"You wish to be insubordinate from the second you walk in!" the principal screamed, fogging Jo-chan's glasses with his rancid breath.

As a teachers' child, she had met his type of public school principal before, though none quite as bad as him. A problem principal dumped into the the heart of the provinces, she thought. By his breath she guessed he was alcoholic and suffered from intestinal diseases, poor man. She recalled Mr. Deasey and hoof and mouth disease in **Ulysses**.

"Don't tell me about the Constitution! I'll Constitution you if you start talking about rights in this school. We are a very very Japanese school! Here we talk about responsibilities, Miss Kato. How did the Board of Education ever hire you?"

Suddenly a whiskey numbed nerve came to life and he remembered the story about Jo-chan and the Great King Maker and he obligingly sagged and gave her a smirky sort of reconciliatory smile.

Jo-chan, knowing nothing of the gossip about her, just assumed he had regained his reason after exhausting himself.

"Now then, if you just put your seal on this oath to uphold the rules and regulations of the school I'll give you your **jirei**. Fine. Yes. Thank you. You'll excuse my slight severity just then but I am concerned of how our dress affects the morals of our students. I'm sure you just didn't realize that customs are not the same here as in Nagoya and America," the Principal said.

He handed Jo-chan her **jirei**, which is a certificate that proves one is a full-time employee. They bowed deeply to each other.

"Now, you will forget my little outburst," the principal said, sagging a little more. "I'm afraid your attire caused — — well — — er — — a bit of a sensation at the rehearsal of our opening ceremony."

"Oh?" said Jo-chan. "That's why they acted that way after they saw me. I assumed that they were naturally ill behaved. That's a relief. My clothes... are they really that outlandish? I'll rectify the matter somehow before I see you again."

The principal's flaccid jaw began to quiver — — he'd been in the administrative end of education so long that he always assumed that anything anyone said to him was an insult in disguise — — but remembering the Great King Maker, who, if he could run a bullet train through Suteyama, could have him transferred to an island high school, tried keeping his composure. "Well, yes, indeed. Yes, I do imagine your clothes are all the rage in Amer-

ica.”

“That’s another thing I must explain,” Jo-chan said. “I never lived in America. I got my M. A. through correspondence.”

“You’re making fun of me!” the principal screamed, then gave a breathy, smelly laugh. “I mean — er.”

“My degree usually surprises people,” Jo-chan said blandly. “In America there are a few schools that offer non-residential bachelors and masters. So I could get a degree in America without ever leaving Japan. In fact, I’ve never been out of Japan in my life. Actually, I’ve hardly ever been out of Nagoya. I’ve been to Tokyo but once.”

“You have no B. A. from —” the principal the name of a famous women’s university in Tokyo.

“I? Oh, no! Where — I mean you perhaps confused my resume with someone else’s. I went two months to our prefectural university and, frankly, disliked it. But then I learned about non-residence programs in America. So I got my B. A. from Empire State College in New Jersey and my M. A. from Antioch.”

“Well — yes — I seem to recall now — oh of course,” the principal sputtered. He hadn’t read a new teacher’s resume in years. It was all that he could do to concentrate on what little official correspondence that came his way from the school board that was long exasperated by his incompetence but could do little except give him remote high schools and wait until his excessive drinking finished him off. “Yes — indeed. Sometimes my eyesight — well — I’m frightfully busy. Please be a good teacher, Miss Kato. Good day!” They bowed to each other and Jo-chan pledged that she would do her best.

The principal sat seething at his desk after Jo-chan left, thinking that somehow, he didn’t understand exactly how, Jo-chan had made small of him. True she had been more honest with him than any teacher in years and still maintained proper modesty. It was obvious she was good natured and seemed to bear him no ill. But this made him suspect her of hidden treachery all the more. He began devising ways of wrecking her career without offending the Great King Maker. Though the principal’s brain had long ago rotted out through excessive drinking it was still sharp as a knife when it came to destroying teachers whom he or the school board or the local Liberal Democratic Party chieftens didn’t like. He took the bottle of Old Parr (a present from the rich parents of a stupid child he had managed to get admitted to Suteyama High School though his entrance examination scores were hopeless) from the desk drawer and drank from it. He had been about to drink from it when Jo-chan had knocked. He had hastily popped into the drawer but his hands trembled too much to screw the cap back on. After screwing back the cap with hand that no longer shook, he put a handful of breath fresheners into his mouth.

Walking up the stairs, Jo-chan thought that a man who hung the wonderful Hatori’s paintings in his office couldn’t be all that bad.

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