

Excerpt from Chapter 4: Bi-Polar Bear Hug

Working at two schools for two weeks at a time means every other Monday morning I arrive at a school after a two-week absence and walk into the office like I belong there because I do. But, aside from the English teachers and a few select others, the staff generally need a time-out to adjust to having a foreigner in their midst. Some act as if they're surprised to see me again. To these people, I'll always be that "special guest" Yamada tried to label me as no matter how long I stay in Japan. Some even take it a step further and start at my appearance as if they thought I were some gaijin who'd fallen off the tour bus and just wandered into their office off the street.

It never fails.

So you can imagine my relief when I reached my desk next to Kawaguchi-sensei's and she said, "Loco-sensei, you look like hell! Didn't you sleep last night?"

I could have kissed her.

Nothing truly says good morning here in Japan like someone saying or doing something decidedly un-Japanese, meaning free of awkwardness, overextended courtesies, and platitudes. It's so humanizing it feels like a hug.

"What do you think?" I replied, shaking my head. "He was at it again!"

I used to blame my roommate for my sleepless appearance sometimes, in lieu of telling the truth. I was up half the night writing about what I had spent half the day doing. Namely, I talked about my adventures with these amazing kids, and how I manage not to despise the adults that spawned them.

Then I winked, suggesting that I had some juicy tidbits to share with her later over a cup of coffee at Starbucks or a couple of beers at a bar after work, as we'd do from time to time.

My roommate at the time a German cat, Aryan through and through, with those master race traits that most J-girls get all hot and moist over was not the kind of guy to turn away a pretty face. He reminded me of how I used to be when I first landed here. He used to have a stream of girls flowing in and out of our house at all hours of the night, and he'd do them all, and do them well, with reckless abandon. The thin wall between our rooms was never even a consideration. Or maybe he was trying to impress me black guys being stereotypically known for sexual prowess and whatnot. Or, perhaps he was some

kind of audio exhibitionist who got off on the fact that he knew he might be overheard. I never could get a read on that guy.

Moreover, my being an American and having been inundated with dark Nazi stereotypes and ridiculous German tropes for my entire life it was hard not to think of the evil Amon Goeth or those goofy gulag sergeants on Hogan's Heroes when listening to a citizen of Deutschland speak, let alone his grunts and cries of passion when ravaging Japanese groupies.

So, occasionally, I 'd give Kawaguchi one of those stories. Sometimes, it was on the up-and-up, and sometimes just for entertainment purposes. She loved to hear decadent stories of westerners that confirmed her too-embedded-to-dislodge presumptions about non-Japanese living in Japan. She didn 't have many thank God but it would be impossible, in my experience, to be Japanese and not have any.

One of these ideas, a humorous one, at least for me, was that foreign guys come here and stay here because they believe Japanese girls are easy and unburdened by so-called Western morality. " But, the funny thing is, " she told me once or twice when she was being generous with her theories, " what you guys don't know is that these girls are usually outcasts from any semblance of respectable Japanese society." I remember the first time she'd told me that. I just stared at her, waiting for the punchline, resisting the urge to laugh and say, "And? As if ... "

The atmosphere in the office that day was different. It was kind of somber and tense, more so than usual, so I just knew something was awry.

" What 's going on? " I asked Kawaguchi, nodding at the room. She did her thing when she wants to unload some office secret on me, where she looks around, leans in, and speaks in hushed tones.

" One of the first-year students brought a knife to school on Friday, and "

" Who? Let me guess: Matsui-kun? Satou-kun? " I guess I should have been more surprised, but I wasn 't.

" No, no, no. It was a girl! "

" Really? " Now that was surprising.

There was only one girl in the entire school who I could even imagine doing something like that. She was a first-year student by the name of Mika. I had already pegged Matsui and Satou as future yakuza from the first week of school, and I had pretty much done the same for her, as well not as a future yakuza, though. I imagined one of the prerequisites of becoming a yakuza would be some indication of mental stability. Mika had yet to display, at least to my satisfaction, that she knew the difference between right and wrong, good and bad, or even between " teacher " and " toy " . She was *out* there.

So I had written her off as a total whack job.

“ Don ’ t tell me Mika-chan ... ”

“ Who else? ”

“ Did she stab a student? ”

“ No, no, no. ”

“ She didn ’ t stab a teacher? ”

“ What? No! ” she said, looking astonished at my suspicions, which were apparently beyond the scope of conceivable for her. “ Of course she didn't. She just showed it to a student.”

“ Showed it? ”

I was picturing Mika showing a butcher knife to one of her classmate's throats and laughing hysterically the way she had when she kicked me in the ass the day we first met, establishing at least for me that her Happy Meal was shy of fries.

“ What the *hell* is your problem?” I'd yelled at her that day, totally uncharacteristic of me. But she didn't know nor did she give a fuck about my characteristics. She'd made a sad face like a clown or a pantomime does and then abruptly burst into wild laughter while jumping around and pointing at me. Then she made like she was going to kick me in the balls, actually looking at them and pointing. So, what did I do? I tried to gaijin her ass into submission something that had a pretty high success rate with some of the unruly kids. I brandished my “ I'm an unpredictable black foreigner and I don't play by Japanese rules! *I will hurt you real bad* if you even *think* about lifting that foot, you crazy little fuck” glare.

Her foot missed my nuts by inches. It actually grazed my zipper.

She didn ’ t even hesitate. If I hadn ’ t leapt back, we both would have needed hospitalization.

“ Ha, ha, ha, ha, Loco-sensei is an idiot! ” She hollered in Japanese. Other students from her homeroom were watching this with looks of pity and fear on their faces.

I remember thinking, “Oh my God! What fresh hell is this?”

While Matsui and Satou had the run of the other first-year class, Mika ran hers, and apparently she ran the homeroom teacher, the very prissy chichi foofoo Okawa-sensei, too.

Okawa-sensei was sitting across the aisle from us and looking very distressed indeed.

“ Ohayou gozaimasu (good morning), ” I whispered in her direction.

She waved and flashed the same smile she always does like Miss Japan at the airport waving hello to her Japanese supporters upon returning to Tokyo after winning

first runner up in the Miss Universe contest after losing to a black Miss France mortification smoldering behind her green-tea-stained teeth.

I noticed that that bitch, Takahashi-sensei, who was seated next to her, was watching me. Maybe she was wondering if I knew that she had given me some “ needs improvement ” marks on her review of my performance simply because I couldn ’ t do what she was being paid to do and I was told explicitly not to do discipline her kids. I tossed a grin in her general direction. She smiled cheerily in return. Just one big happy family, we were.