

The turn of the millennium was near in Minato City. It was August then, the time of year you realized time was running out. The woman woke up to the faint fumble of construction. Stretching her arms out, she looked around the apartment. Her husband was lying next to her, a thin cotton sheet covering his body. For a second, she thought she had killed him, maybe with sleeping pills or rat poison, something that would leave no physical trace. Something that suggests suicide. But that made no sense. He had arrived home when she was deep asleep. Lying to his left was his sister, and to her left her husband, sprawled out across two futons; a third one couldn't fit. Traces of her husband's day were strewn across the room. His backpack for school, his backpack for work, Japanese grammar books with crossed-out sections, etc. Today she didn't feel like cleaning up, they could deal with it the next day; something wasn't right when she woke up. She felt nausea wash over her, her stomach stirred; she felt bloated and disgusting. It annoyed her to work when she didn't feel beautiful.

To her, Kabukicho was the most human place in Tokyo, it was seedy and greasy and alive. At night the LED lights lit up the streets and carved out shadowy alleyways. Here, the nation of Japan flushed away polite facades and displayed everything that was impossible in daylight. On the streets here you see drag queens in stripper heels standing next to teenage girls selling the services of other teenage girls. She felt at home here, it reminded her of the night market where she grew up. People were ready to sell their lives at that place to make a few bucks.

It has been five years since they arrived at the ports of Kagoshima on a fishing boat, sunburnt, hungry, and delirious for a promised future. Then to a safe house in Fukuoka, where they ate for the first time in 5 days. Then into the back of a lorry container for the night, where sweat and other excrement condensed on the walls and pooled at their legs.

Finally, they arrived in Tokyo, almost wishing they never came. But it took 500,000 yuan to get them here and there was no time to think nor to lament their fate. She thought of her mother-in-law, popo, her cherubic face, plump and rosy. You must go, you can do it, and nothing bad will happen. Popo never said anything of the sort to her when she dropped out. Nor did Popo say anything when she married her son. She didn't understand what popo meant, but it comforted her.

It was about 7 pm when she reached Club Casablanca. The club was Middle Eastern-themed, per its name. But when they say Middle Eastern, they mean Turkish. The interiors were decorated like a rundown hookah lounge. On the main floor, large, round dark wood tables were flanked by crushed velvet couches. Each sitting section was semi-separated by shoulder-height mirrors with intricate gold trim. The whole space was lit amber and mosaic lamps hung from the ceiling, splattering pockets of colored light across the carpeted floor. The woman didn't agree with all the design choices, which looked garish. But she liked to walk through the front entrance to get to the dressing room, to get a lay of the land.

Kanno and Fumiko were already there, having finished their front-of-house shifts, cleaning and preparing hand towels. They were in their early twenties and two of the newest hires. They came from another club. Club Yumi, where they worked as touts but attracted many loyal customers of their own. She said good evening and they echoed back. They were putting on foundation and chatting away. They talked about such things as Erika's overgrown roots that didn't blend with her blond hair, and Harumi's bulimia which left a stench in the bathroom. If you were early you get to choose the nicer outfits, today she was glad she was early. She picked out the strappy black dress, it was rayon and was scrunched up at the sides so the pudgy part of her lower stomach would be concealed within the folds.

“Mina-chan, that dress looks good on you” Fumiko quipped, “Akane is going to get mad at you for wearing it, it’s her favorite.” The girls giggled.

“Maybe she should lose a few pounds so she can fit in the other dresses,” she replied, unpacking her makeup bag.

They roared with laughter, having gotten their fix of the day. There was a pecking order for the girls at the club. At the end of every month, everyone’s sales numbers would be ranked and displayed on a board near the entrance. To her the rankings were a relief, it tells everyone what to do. If you’re a manager, you talk to the high-ranking girls. If you’re a new hire you talk to the lower-ranked girls. But eventually, everyone gets drunk and picks their favorites. The owner of the club, usually female, is the most powerful and respected. She was referred to mama-san. Her presence would signal the start of her shift. Mama-san told the woman early on that she would not be popular because she was Chinese and therefore of a lower class. But that was okay. Many men preferred that and found Japanese girls haughty. Mama-san told her that she should never pretend to be anything different, anything more than lower class. The customers could tell, the other hostesses could tell, and she would be very tired. Despite this Mama-san made her pick up a Japanese name anyway—Mina.

Around 9 pm Mama-san and the higher-ranked hostesses arrived. Soon after the regular customers started strolling in. The first guests were regulars, the project managers from a regional mining conglomerate. The five of them visited last Thursday, two senior managers, two assistant managers, and one engineer, all in formal suits, aged 30—60. And there was another man neither none of the hostesses had seen before. The woman observed him closely, it was good to size up the men who came in here and figure out how to tactically get

them to spend money without being overbearing. It's a real art. She had put the customers in two broad categories.

The first group is brash, confident, and off-putting. But as the night goes on you begin to feel relieved by their chattiness. These are usually the older customers or those hosting clientele of their own. These types are well-liked by most hostesses. These men understood the rules of the club. They have wives they love or a family to hold together and understand that it is wise to separate home and work. They would say it's just business. And the hostesses would say my pleasure. They know you're faking it and they're faking it too. Sometimes it was sublime, like actors and actresses in a play, in perfect harmony. These are the men who end up crying into your shoulder at the end of the night. When they let their guard down the women feel powerful and the men feel seen.

There's another group that the woman sees more and more. Shy young guys, reserved, prude even. They act like they don't know how they ended up at in the middle of a hostess club in the red-light district. They act like they don't want to touch you. They act like they respect you. They think their pitifulness makes them entitled to more attention and affection. They don't think they deserve your service but feel entitled to it anyway. These men are the real troublemakers, the seething cheapskates. Usually, we spot them early and pass them off to newer girls who don't know better and who will learn.

She wondered which category this new man fell into. Nothing about him was distinguishable from any other salaryman in his 30s. He was well groomed, with a pack of cigarettes peeking from his shirt pocket. His suit, unbuttoned, looked as if it was freshly pressed. There was a slight curl to his longish hair and it laid gently across his forehead.

The woman, along with Kanno and Fumiko greet the six men at their table. They first asked if they wanted new girls as they had served them last week. The girls were relieved when

they said yes. Usually, if a customer sees you twice in a row, they become yours to keep, meaning they can't switch to new girls. This raises the hostess's rank at the club and her reputation, so to speak.

The most senior manager stood up, he had already had a few drinks at dinner and was swaying with every movement. He raised his hand in toast.

"And today, please welcome our guest, transferring from Nakano, Mister Jung." He gestured at everyone to cheer while he downed his drink.

The girls gave their best look of excitement and clapped. "Welcome to the club Mister Jung!"

She took this chance to slip into the empty seat next to the man. New customers are always exciting, and they usually spend the most.

"Hello. I'm Mina. You can call me Mimi if you like. You are Mister Jung?" She said as she laid out a pair of coasters and glasses before them.

"I'm Ju-hwan, Jung Juhwan." He reached out his hand to shake hers.

"Ehhhhh, Mister Juhwan, are you Korean? You know, your Japanese is very good for a Korean."

She was trying to break the ice. He looked her in the eye and frowned.

"Yes, I lived here when I was young. Your Japanese is very good as well."

She laughed, "If you're working here, why didn't you pick a Japanese name? You're putting yourself at a disadvantage."

"They can tell that I'm not Japanese, just like I can tell you're not Japanese, I think it's deceitful." The man had looked away from her now and was staring at his fingers.

"Oh, how honorable," she teased, "is it your first time here? Let's get you some drinks."

She picked up the menu, placed it on his lap, and began flipping.

"Oh, you should get our Martini Espresso, Mama-san used to be a professional barista and it's our best-selling drink."

The man snatched the menu and nearly slammed it on the desk.

"I'm sorry, but I need to excuse myself, I need to use the bathroom". The man stood up swiftly and gestured to the table, before taking off.

She wasn't sure if he had offended the man. It seemed she needed more time to decide which characterization he fell under. It's common for first-timers to not be accustomed to the attention, they just need to get a few drinks in. He seemed to her like a normal person, but she wondered if he was really in the toilet, urinating. The rest of the table was turned away from her, chattering happily. The other men had ordered a bottle of champagne and some wine and did not seem to notice the absence of their new colleague. The girls didn't look at her either, they were too busy laughing. So, she looked up at the ceiling and focused on one of the lamps. When she has time to daydream like this, she starts thinking about many things. Things like love, and her future.

Suppose she drove her car into the Pacific Ocean, right off the coast of Chiba. It's a real tragedy, the whole town is shocked, and the fire brigade is called. But what they don't know is that she's planned it. She has burned the papers, and she has burned her passport. She escaped before the car became fully submerged. They'll come and tow out the car with a big yellow crane only to find nobody inside. She had drowned. They'll hold a funeral and the few people that attend will mourn deeply. By the time a funeral is arranged, she would probably be halfway across the Pacific, maybe near Hawaii, who knows. She'll swim and swim until her whole body aches, but she keeps swimming until she reaches a shore. And there she builds a wooden hut, which she'll make her home.

The woman smiles, breaking her eyes from the lamp. She sees Mama-san coming towards the table, gesturing her towards the counter. She excused herself. The man was at the counter.

"Mina, Mister Jung has requested a private table with you, would you like to go with him?"

She was confused, private tables cost about her monthly salary. Customers request this for hostesses they've seen for years. She shot a look to Mama-san, the kind women in uncomfortable situations shoot to each other. Mama-san returned her glance briefly with a look that said, nothing bad will happen.

They entered one of the private booths. It looks just like the tables on the main floor but partitioned by linen curtains, so if you scream someone will hear.

She slumped into the seat. Her nausea was getting worse and now she must deal with the seemingly most capricious man she's ever met.

“So, are you going to order any drinks?” She spoke with more edge than she expected.

“I’m sorry, but I needed to get away,” he gestured to the main floor. “I don’t want to be here. I’m going to leave soon. Again, I’m sorry.”

From the private table, she would have made about 100,000 yen in commissions, for no effort on her part. It troubled her that the man seemed to not want to bother her.

“That’s not going to work. What do you think it’ll look like if you leave now? Everyone, mama-san included, is going to think I gave you bad service and scared you off. My reputation at the club would tank. Do you hate your colleagues that much? You can’t leave.”

The man fell silent, then took a deep breath.

“Look, this room made you a lot of money right? You need to get me out.” The man gripped the edge of the table. His hooded eyes betrayed a look of desperation.

Her ears perked up, now he’s talking some sense,

“In China; your people are called wife beaters. Did you know that?”

“What? I’m not going to beat you.”

She laughed and looked up at the ceiling.

“Do you have a wife?”

“Yes.”

“Do you beat her?”

“No.”

His curt replies satisfied her.

“That’s good. We can take the staff exit to leave.”

They stood in the narrow alleyway, facing each other. Neither were sure of what to say or if they should part.

“Are you going home now Mister Jung?”

“Yes. Well, no. I don’t know.”

“I guess I’ll go now.”

“You should stay with me for a while. I don’t want you to go back and sit in that private room alone.” The man let out a breath again. “It’s not time for me to go yet, and I’d like your company.”

She thought about Mama-san firing her and smiled.

“Okay. Where shall we go?”

“There is a garden, we can walk. It’ll be about 20 minutes, but it’s my favorite place in Shinjuku.”

They strolled through Kabukicho, observing the residents of the night. It was not yet 11 pm and there were already dazed salarymen, on the verge of blackout, looking for their resting place. There was a scuffle between a Nigerian bouncer and some tourists, with a Japanese policeman watching on. Then a handful of teen boys hollered at them, trying to get them into their bar. The two laughed and discussed their favorite ice cream flavors, or what they missed about home.

After a turn, they arrived at a small enclave of greenery among the tightly packed buildings. There was an engraved stone arch at its entrance. She recognized the kanji “memorial park.” They entered and were greeted with a flower garden segmented into quadrants with a birdbath fountain in the middle. During the day it was a beautiful sight. The tulips would be blooming, and the fountain would be flowing, but they made do.

“Wow, it’s nice here!” She skipped around the man, brushing her hands on his shoulders.

Towards one end of the garden was a raised concrete step. At its very edge stood a plaque and a bust on a marble pedestal.

“Do you know who that man is?” He pointed at the bust.

He sounded serious. She wondered who was important enough to warrant a memorial in the middle of Shinjuku and shook her head.

“Koizumi Yakumo, he’s a Greek-Irish man who was a journalist. He lived in Dublin, then in New Orleans, where he wrote about murders for the local newspaper. He was a legend in his town. Then in the 1890s when he was 40 years old, he emigrated to Japan and never left. During his time, he translated Japanese works into English and wrote many historically priceless books about the Meiji Era. He was touted as the first few people to produce great insight into Japanese culture for the West.”

She wondered where he learned this.

“That’s nice that they built him a garden here.”

“Allegedly he drank himself to death,” he said and put his palms together, making a prayer.

He looked back up at her, “You know, you strike me as a girl who’ll take the longer route home so you can pass by a beautiful garden and look at the flowers.” Her stomach stirred again. She wanted to believe him. “You should come here in the morning, it’s nice.”

They laid down on the concrete slab, next to each other, before the bust.

“Why is the floor so warm? It’s a cold night. I might just fall asleep here.” She spread her arms out and held his hand.

“Because it’s concrete.”

“That doesn’t explain anything.”

“It has a high thermal mass. So, it absorbs heat from the sun in the morning and slowly releases the warmth at night when it's cooler. We are indirectly basking in the sun's rays right now.”

She closed her eyes.

She doesn't remember the rest of the night very well. At some point, he had to leave. She laid there on the concrete until it was no longer warm. At some point, she left as well. She went back to Casablanca. Turns out she wasn't fired. But her nausea got so bad started working as the barkeep instead. She got the man's number from Mama-san. She wished she had found out more about him. Things like why he was in Japan and why he knew so much about Koizumi Yakumo and where he had to go. Although she wasn't sure if knowing those things would have made a difference in how much she understood him, or the way she felt. She sent a lot of money back to China but never returned. And for a long time, she kept his number, but never called.

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