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HEAVEN

TO

STAIRWAYS TO HEAVEN

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STAIR

Rome's Ups and Downs

KAGOSHIMA PREFECTURE

Land of the Giants

LITERATURE

The Seven Hundred Dollar
Chimichanga

The Seven Hundred Dollar Chimichanga

Fiction by **Kristen Ghodsee**

Illustration by **Gregory Myers**

The Japanese waitress refilled their glasses with water and asked politely in nervous English if they would like anything else.

“Just the bill, please,” said Corey, checking his watch. They had an afternoon meeting that started at two o’clock.

“What time is it?” said Kate.

“One fifteen.”

This was Kate’s first official OJET conference since being elected to the National Council, and she was overjoyed to finally be in the capital. As a representative of foreign English teachers in Kyushu, Kate would have the chance to visit Tokyo three more times to discuss work and life-style related problems with the upper echelons of the Japanese government bureaucracy, a task whose futility she was yet to become aware of.

But more than any glorified sense of importance she could have gleaned from the meetings, Kate was just happy to have the chance to come to the big city. She lived in a very small community in southern Japan. Her university in the U.S. had had more students than her village had residents. For Kate, it was just good to be back in civilization again.

The waitress brought the bill, and Corey, another Council member, began the mathematical gymnastics it required to divide a check up by eleven people.

Kate was basking in the ecstasy of having consumed a cheese and pinto bean double chimichanga with extra jalepeños and real sour cream. It was a well known fact that most Americans living in Japan suffered from what was commonly referred to as AMFDS, or Acute Mexican Food Deficiency Syndrome. After several months without their carne asada, frijoles refritos, and guacamole, some Americans were known to display embarrassing symptoms of withdrawal. At social events where Mexican cuisine was even fleetingly mentioned, the more severe cases tended to foam at the mouth and babble incoherently about their last Mexican meal.

Even Kate had spent hours of her free time trying to approximate the flour tortilla with Japanese ingredients. She

had recently transformed her kitchen into an experimental laboratory attempting to determine whether Japanese horse radish had the same chemical properties as salsa picante. She often met tacos in her dreams and cursed her alarm clock with words when it roused her from them.

And although her current fix was going to run her in the neighborhood of thirty dollars, a good ten times the price she would have paid at home, Kate decided it was worth every yen. There were some addictions that were such a pleasure to submit to. Besides, OJET was paying for it.

Kate had been given enough money to pay for all of the Council’s hotel rooms, meals and travel expenses. When Corey had completed his calculations, Kate reached into her bag to find the envelope of cash she was supposed to divide up among them.

It was gone.

She felt around in her bag again. There was close to 70,000 yen, or seven hundred dollars, in that envelope. It had to be there.

It wasn’t.

There are times when things go wrong and you are in a large group of people with whom your relationship is solely professional. It may be something as trivial as a ladder in your stockings or as serious as a call on your cellular phone from your husband telling you that he has met a woman fifteen pounds lighter than you and is running away with her to Puerto Rico. In these unfortunate circumstances, it is usually prudent to politely excuse yourself, smilingly telling your colleagues that you will return shortly, retire to the ladies room, and proceed to have your nervous breakdown there. For Kate, however, this was not one of those times.

“OH MY GOD, WHERE’S THE EXPENSES MONEY?”

All the members of the OJET National Council dove under the table and began to search the floor frantically. Dishes were then cleared with amazing dexterity as the contents of Kate’s purse were artlessly dumped on the table. There were sun-



glasses, keys, and postcards, tubes of lipstick, a wallet and a bottle of clear nail polish. There was a CD in a bag from Pillar Records, a new Mystique eyeshadow still in the box, and a small pink vial of eyedrops. There were pens and mechanical pencils, a note pad with doodles of smiley faces and ill-written Chinese ideographs, and a few sticks of Black Jack, the "super combination cyber-tech" chewing gum (In Japan, even the gum is technologically advanced). But there was no envelope.

Kate shook her head. This could not be happening.

"Check in your wallet. Maybe you put it in there."

Kate opened the wallet and found just two 1,000 yen bills.

"No, I'm sure I left the travel money in the envelope," she said.

"Did you have it when you left the hotel?" one Council member asked.

"Did you change purses this morning?"

"When was the last time you saw it?"

"Did you buy anything this morning?"

"Think of every place you've been today."

Kate rewound her brain tapes and remembered paying the hotel bill. She recalled that she had put the money in her bag when she left the lobby. Their meetings started at two, giving her the morning off. She had calculated that each member would get about 6,000 yen for their miscellaneous expenses. Kate had planned to do some shopping around Ikebukuro before meeting the other Council members for lunch. But between nine o'clock when she left the Princess Hotel and twelve o'clock when she had arrived at the Mexican restaurant, Kate had been in no fewer than a dozen places.

"I was shopping all morning," she said. "I could have left it anywhere."

"Where did you buy things? You probably left it somewhere where you bought something."

Kate, like many women of her age and stable financial means, was what is clinically known as an obsessive-compulsive shopper. Men were hunters, Kate reasoned, and women were collectors, and what was shopping if it was not a evolutionarily advanced form of collecting? Thousands of generations of human women from before the last ice age had insured the survival of the species by their selfless dedication to scouring the terrain and gathering food, sharp stones, fire wood and other basic necessities of life. Nature had been naturally selecting women for their gathering abilities for millennia. Kate, and other women like her, were the fine-tuned descendants of those tireless prehistoric matrons. Subsequently, there was more satisfaction in purchasing a pair of Paola Rinaldi stack-heeled mules on sale for half price than in any other hobby in the world.

But what that meant in the current situation was that Kate had bought something at almost every store she had been into. She had started with a donut and coffee at a little bakery. She moved on to Pillar where she had bought Bob Dylan's *Desire*. Then came the eyeshadow at the Mystique counter in the Shobu Department Store, and then the eyedrops in a pharmacy. She had stopped for postcards at the subway station, and purchased two new purple felt tip pens in a stationery store. Later, she'd got the chewing gum at a kiosk, and just before coming to the restaurant she had splurged on a crim-

son scrunchie, a pony-tail holder, that perfectly matched her blazer in an accessories shop.

That was eight stores. In some of them Kate had paid out of the envelope and in others she had paid out of her wallet. There was no system to the way she spent money, she had probably just grabbed the first cash receptacle her hand came into contact with when she put it in her bag.

Kate buried her face in her hands.

"I'm never going to find it."

"Don't be silly," one of the women at the table said. "You have forty-five minutes before the meeting. Retrace your steps and go back to those places. This is Japan. 'OJET' is written on the envelope. They will keep it for you."

"It's true," another Council member said. "If you go back right away, they will probably have it."

"Go now. I'll take care of the bill and you can meet us at two," said Corey.

Although Kate was feeling disheartened, she agreed there was a chance. People were remarkably honest in Japan. Kate had lost a few things before and she had always gotten them back.

"Okay," she said, shoving her possessions roughly into her bag. "I'll meet you guys at two."

She checked under the table one last time, and dashed out of the restaurant.

The first place she checked was the accessory shop. She ran up to the counter, and spoke her best Japanese.

"My envelope. My name written. Forgotten thing." Kate could not recall the Japanese word for lost. "Inside is money. About 70,000 yen. About an hour ago. Here. Does it exist?"

The women looked at her with concern, and checked around the counter. She said something to another woman in Japanese, then she shook her head with a sad look on her face. She explained that they had not found anything.

Domo arigato gozaimasu, Kate said, and rushed out.

Kate's mind was reeling. "God, I'm so stupid. How could I lose seven hundred dollars? I've been in Japan too long."

In America, it was a strange but certain truth that the only



members of society allowed to deal with large amounts of cash were bank employees, prostitutes, and drug dealers. The West was the land of credit cards and personal checking accounts. To carry cash was an invitation to be mugged or at least to risk being thought of as a prostitute or a drug dealer. The chances of casually misplacing seven hundred dollars at home was next to nil. You would have to be phenomenally stupid or spectacularly rich to do something as idiotic as that.

In Japan, however, things were different. Cash was the accepted medium of exchange and many people had never heard of personal checks. Most small stores did not accept credit cards. Kate remembered back when she had received her first month's salary. Instead of the standard paycheck she was used to, she had been handed a plain brown envelope with a wad of twenty 10,000 yen bills or about two thousand dollars in cash.

Kate had nearly gone into prolonged catatonic shock as she considered the task of transferring the money from the office in her school to her Japanese bank a whole two kilometers away. Kate did not have a car. What eventually followed was an operation worthy of James Bond where Kate had placed the bills in a plastic bag and taped the money around her abdomen. At the appointed hour, with the theme from "Mission: Impossible" echoing in her head, she left the school and walked to the bank, furtively looking over her shoulder every twenty meters. She took detour after detour walking down the busiest streets of her little village so that she would not be left alone in some deserted alleyway. When she reached the bank she coyly sneaked into the toilet and removed the money from the bag, transferring it to a place between the pages of a book. She had waited an endless fifteen minutes pretending to read the book before the teller had called her number and she had relieved herself of the troublesome burden of her salary.

But that was then. Kate soon grew out of her cash paranoia. She learned that Japanese Automatic Teller Machines closed at six o'clock on weekdays and were not open at all on Sundays. She got tired of always running out of money. Her cash carrying habit had started with one or two 10,000 yen bills on the weekends and worked its way up to her whole paycheck. In Japan, carrying one or two thousand dollars in cash was N.B.D., "no big deal". No one was going to steal it from you, and things were so expensive that it usually came in handy. It was easy to get careless.

"God, I am an imbecile," Kate thought. "What is the Council going to think of me if I can't find this money? They might think I stole it. They are never going to trust me again."

Kate walked into Pillar Records. She searched on the floor in front of the counter and tried to remember whether she had used the envelope or the wallet. She recognized the man behind the counter where she had bought the CD.

"Excuse me. About an hour ago. Bob Dylan CD I bought. Envelope I had. Normal envelope. But now forgotten thing. Inside there was money. Does it exist?"

The clerk shook his head and explained that nobody had turned anything in. Kate sighed. She checked her watch and saw that she had thirty five minutes left before the meeting started. She could not be late. It would give the Japanese

bureaucrats a bad impression of the National Council. The hotel where the meetings were going to be held was not far, but she had very little time.

She tried the bakery and the kiosk next but with no luck. Then she ran into the subway and asked the women where she had bought the post cards. The woman said she had not seen anything, but that if anyone had picked it up they might have turned it in to the lost and found. Kate got hurried directions to the office. She related her tale once more to the subway man in her broken Japanese.

"Brown envelope?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, explaining that her name was written in katakana, the Japanese script used for foreign words, on the front of it.

"Maybe it exists. Little waiting, please," he said, and went into the office.

The envelope that Kate had been given her travel money in was a standard Japanese envelope. In the West envelopes were usually rectangles opening on one of the longer sides. In Japan, however, envelopes opened on one of the short sides and functioned like a pouch. Letters and money had to slide in and out of them. And instead of being white, they were all a kind of brownish-tan color with no adhesive on the flap to close them.

The man in the lost and found office brought out a small box and opened the lid. Inside, there were about fifty brownish-tan envelopes that all looked exactly the same.

Both Kate and the man grabbed a handful of envelopes each and began flipping through them to read the writing on the front. Most of the envelopes had writing in kanji and it would be easy to distinguish them from the katakana in which 'OJET' had been written. After five minutes of frantic searching neither of them had found the envelope.

"I'm sorry," the man said.

"Excuse me. You were a great help. Thank you," Kate replied, bowing to the man and maneuvering her way through the crowds.

Connected to the station was the entrance to Shobu Department Store. Kate descended on the Mystique counter with all the anguish of a helpless foreigner. Kate was sure she had paid with her travel money here because Mystique in Japan was twice the price it was at home; she would not have had enough money in her wallet. The women said that they remembered her and the color of the eyeshadow she had purchased, but had not seen the envelope. Kate then recalled that she had tried on a pleated, Tsuyoshi tank top on the second floor. Maybe it had fallen out of her purse in the dressing room. She pounded her way up the escalator two steps at a time. The sales girl checked the dressing room and shook her head. Kate wanted to scream.

It was gone, she thought to herself, checking her watch. She had fifteen minutes, just about enough time to make it to the meeting place. Kate sighed. She decided she would make a quick dash into the pharmacy and then give the money up for lost. She smashed the base of her hand into her forehead.

"I am such a bonehead!" she said aloud.

Then, as she walked out of Shobu, she saw it in her mind.

Standing on the sidewalk like a pillar of hope, the phone box triggered the onslaught of memory in her mind. She had written the phone number of the Mexican restaurant on the envelope and had called to get directions.

There is a popular legend in the West that says if you follow a rainbow to its end you can find a fortune, most commonly represented as a pot of gold. Although no one that Kate knew personally had proven this theory, she was well aware that its antithesis was a tried and tested fact.

There was a peculiar phenomenon that occurred in phone booths all over the world. Somewhere in the volumes of knowledge of condensed matter physics there was written a universal law that defined the existence of certain temporal holes in the space-time continuum that sucked possessions from unwary individuals making telephone calls in public places. The hapless victims would place an object on top of the telephone unit. Within the following moments of brief communication, the temporal hole would open and swallow enough of the short term memory neurons in the victim's brain to completely erase any knowledge that the object had ever existed. The person would then leave the booth blissfully unaware of the tragedy that had occurred.

Kate's stomach sank. She had made that call more than two hours ago. Over a hundred people had probably used that phone. There was no way the money was still going to be there.

She slowly walked toward the memory-sucking phone box, her heart beating a prelude to disappointment. The chances were one in a million. There was no one inside the booth. She opened the door.

It was there.

"No way," Kate said, picking up the envelope to see if the money was still inside.

She counted six 10,000 yen and seven 1,000 yen bills.

"No way..." she repeated.

Kate stepped out, looking at the phone box in disbelief.

Standing a few meters away, a solitary figure caught Kate's

eye. An old Japanese man was anchored to the sidewalk while streams of busy people flowed past him on all sides. On his head he wore what looked to Kate like an upside-down, wooden salad bowl. His floor-length robe was made of a rough, tan cloth. In his left hand he held a long staff, and in his right hand he held a small, open box. He looked ridiculously out of place in front of Ikebukuro Station surrounded by department stores, taxis and over-rated, American fast food restaurants. But the Buddhist monk seemed completely at ease. As Kate watched him, she realized that his manner was as relaxed as if he were standing in the middle of the most peaceful garden in Japan.

She stepped back into the telephone booth, picking up the receiver as if she was going to make a call. From where she stood facing the phone, she could see the monk clearly through the glass. She wondered how many people had picked up the money and then put it down again.

Kate closed the door of the phone booth behind her, then walked toward the monk. She stopped in front of him and looked into his eyes. He did not smile or speak, but bowed his head slightly in greeting. His tanned face was kind and wise, his small eyes gentle. Kate bowed back. She felt herself breathe out deeply; the tension in her muscles evaporated. For a moment, the insanity of a city throbbing with twelve million people seemed to disappear.

Kate reached into the envelope and took out six 1,000 yen bills. She folded them. She placed them carefully in the monk's box. He bowed to her, mumbling some words of thanks and benediction in Japanese. Kate bowed again and spoke to him in English.

"I'd really love to talk to you, but I have a meeting I've got to get to."

The monk nodded his head, saying nothing.

Kate lifted her wrist, pointing to her watch.

"Late, I am," she said in Japanese.

The monk closed his eyes and opened them; he understood. ■

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c/o McDavis Associates, Inc.

5-22-5-403 Higashi-Gotanda,

Shinagawa-ku, Tokyo 141 Japan

FAX: (03) 3446-5002

EMAIL: mcdavis@gol.com

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