

GORDON BYRON

On Wings of Icarus Sample
Chapter pdg

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Contents

1 The Gang

1

The Gang

Next day Kuki and Aoi showed up at the school in fresh-pressed white shirts and blue and red skirts eager to see what their friends looked like in their natural state of economic enterprise. They smiled at the receptionist while inquiring about Paul and Sandy's whereabouts before seating themselves inconspicuously in the corner, chatting amongst themselves, giggling and whispering to each other as they watched students going in and out of doors and rushing down long corridors to classrooms. The activity was exhilarating and reminded them of being back at school which was sadly lacking in their daily lives now. They missed it all.

"Hey!" Paul came outside and welcomed them with a bow, reaching out his hands to lift theirs like an invitation to dance. "So glad you guys came! I was worried you might not as I said to Sandy."

"Kuki! Aoi! Hey gals! You're here!" Sandy burst out of her office pumping her arms up and down in celebration of their arrival. "Let us finish up a few things and we'll be out in a flash. OK?"

The “gals” nodded and sat down with their backs super straight in anticipated excitement and hands folded across their laps. They saw a group of girls leaving one of the classrooms, staring and pointing at them, wondering. Kuki and Aoi smiled back and the girls came over and greeted them with an exuberant, “Hello”.

“Nice to meet you. You look familiar to me,” one of the girls ventured with a great deal of enthusiasm.

“I don’t know where you’ve seen me,” Aoi cocked her head to one side.

“Do you have a sister named Takako? She used to work at the restaurant next to our school. She talked about you all the time because she was so proud of your school achievements.”

“Yes, she’s working in Sapporo now. She graduated before me and she’s working there as a biologist.”

The girl clapped upon hearing this, “That’s wonderful. I hope she’s happy at her job. She was always so nice to us and the food was delicious!”

“Nice to meet a friend of my sister. Would you like to contact her again? I can give you her information.”

“I would indeed! I have family in Sapporo and could go see her on my vacation.”

“Here,” Aoi handed her phone to the girl with her sister’s social media data on display.

“Thank you. See you later. We’re heading to lunch and I wanted to come over and meet you because I’ve heard so much about you.”

“What’s your name?”

“Kasumi,” bowing and reaching out a delicate hand to receive hers, “Will you come to lunch with us?”

“I guess it’s alright if Sandy and Paul don’t mind.”

The teachers in question came out of their offices at exactly the same moment and walked up on the group. “There are more people here now,” Paul observed with a slight smile.

“Yes, this girl knows my sister and they want to join us for lunch,” Aoi explained with her head tilted toward them.

“Great and awesome! She’s one of our best students by the way, in fact this entire group is top-notch and all the teachers love them.”

“That’s not true,” Kasumi lowered her head in defiance of praise, “We’re just regular students like everyone else trying to do our best in class. School’s important to us.”

The other girls nodded their heads, wearing tight, thin smiles and hunching down subtly in a charming gesture of humility. They waited for the others to lead the way as Aoi and Kuki got up and blended in with the girls as a tight-knit little group, preparing to engage in a full-on bonding session now that the big/ little sister relationship had been established among them.

They headed to Paul and Sandy’s favorite noodle shop which wasn’t overly busy as luck would have it and they were able to find an empty table near the back wall. As the only guy in the group Paul became keenly aware of the girls talking fast and furiously about female issues and interests he had no special comment on and, under the circumstances, thought it best to stop and listen. Speaking only when asked his opinion on some particular subject so as not to offend any sensibilities or appear out of his depth.

“Your sister used to tell us lots of funny stories when we went to the restaurant everyday. Cheering us up when we were stressed out from schoolwork or lonely and worried about being away from home,” Kasumi reflected back with her plump cheeks rising.

“She was exactly the same when I was growing up. Whenever bad things would happen to me or I felt sad about life she’d make me feel better immediately. It was nice having a sister I could depend on to lift my spirits anytime I needed it,” Aoi reflected back on a particular image of her sister standing over her with hands on hips and a wildly silly grin.

“We’ll definitely visit her when we go to Sapporo again. It’s a nice city with lots of cool things to do anyway.”

“Yeah, I enjoyed growing up there and my sister returned a year ago to be with my mom and dad,” Aoi explained while looking at the girls with a feeble smile.

“You’re lucky. I’ve only been there once and hope to go back sometime because the people and city always give me good memories.”

They heard a group of people talking in English and turned to see some of the other teachers from the school entering the restaurant. It was Victor, Janet and Matt who mentioned they’d be coming over after finishing their classes. They greeted the group and sat down at a table next to theirs.

“Our favorite place in the area and what a huge group we have today! It’s a party in the middle of the day!” Janet announced with a big grin and relaxed demeanor. “Nice to see the gang’s all here.”

“Hey Janet girl, how were your classes today?” Sandy moved a bit closer and leaned in to her as she spoke. “We’ve already ordered so you can get yours whenever you like.”

“That’s just what I’ll do after a quick rest.”

“Hi Sandy, Paul and everyone,” Victor greeted the group in obvious delight at all the pretty girls around. “Nice to meet you ladies too, I’m Victor.”

“Kasumi...and this is Jane, Mei and Aya.” The girls bowed

and smiled with a slight giggle that indicated he'd passed the physical appearance test with flying colors.

"Pleasure..." bowing and reaching out his hand to shake theirs, "...this is Janet and Matt. We work with Paul and Sandy."

"Oh! Very nice. They seem like smart and interesting people."

"They're super smart and good at managing people too. Best teacher managers on earth in my opinion!" Victor smiled at them. "They've helped me become a better teacher and adjust to life in Japan better than I could've expected."

"Where are you from?" Kasumi focused intensely on his gaze.

"California...Los Angeles..."

"Cool! I've always wanted to go there but I'll have to wait till after I graduate."

Janet spoke up, "Victor and Matt, do you want the same as usual or something different for a change? I can order for all of us."

"Yep, that's fine," Matt moved his chair closer to the table next to Janet's chair. Victor nodded and glanced back at Kasumi. "What about you? Are you girls at university around here?"

"We just got accepted to Tokyo International and we'll be attending when the new year begins in the fall."

"That's our university!" Aoi belted out in a rare blast of enthusiasm. "We just graduated from there!"

"Really? What did you think of the school? Did you like the teachers there?" Kasumi's unblinking stare and open mouth, revealing a highly-attuned and intrigued state.

"One of the best experiences of my life and I loved everything about it," Aoi glanced at Kuki to see if there was anything to add.

"Good! I'm sure we'll love it too then."

Their food was delivered to the table and a few minutes later

Janet returned with the other teachers' food. Group diving in and loud slurping began in earnest and everyone smiled at the fact of being together and enjoying an uplifting social moment that started so inauspiciously.

"What have you guys been up to lately?" Paul glanced over the other table. "Sandy's been telling me we need to hang out more. Seems like we haven't done enough together in her opinion."

"I was thinking the same thing myself," Janet chuckled awkwardly, "Perhaps we've been reluctant to cross the work/leisure barrier up to this point."

"You're right about that. People fear others will look at them differently if they do something out of character outside work," Paul smiled with a glance up in thought. "Funny we all have work personalities and real life personalities, isn't it?"

"We're trained that way. At work we have one persona and in our normal lives we have another one."

"True and it's certainly strange we divide ourselves that way. Scary actually now that I think about it," Paul's mouth stretched across his face, dreading the thought. "So what do you think about us hanging out more frequently?"

"Definitely. I've been pretty busy lately which is why I haven't asked you first but since you've beaten me to the punch it'd be great hanging out with you as I always enjoy our conversations at the office and you're a genuinely likable person as well. Not fake like some others."

"Likewise but we don't really have any fake or bad people at the school, do we? It's a great environment overall, isn't it?" Paul pointed out while stuffing noodles in his mouth and slurping them vigorously.

"Best environment ever in the best country on earth as far as I'm concerned! Japan is awesome!"

“Yep, what about next weekend? You, me, Sandy, Kuki, Aoi, Matt and Victor can all explore the city and have lunch and even dinner together if you like. We can spend the whole day together! That’s what our group usually does...” Paul was hopeful she’d come along because he felt incredibly at ease in Janet’s presence. The pulse of her manner and graceful movements comforted him and softened hard edges on his mind.

“What do you guys normally get up to?” focusing on him.

“Mostly we make public nuisances of ourselves...walking around parks, shopping malls, drinking beer and spending too much money. Occasionally we head up to the mountains and get lost in the splendor and wonder of nature. Little things like that essentially,” Paul waxed lyrical without intention because recent experience got the better of him.

“You know I haven’t left my apartment much since I’ve been here? It’s going on five months now and I feel I’ve been saving myself for some grand journey or adventure that never transpires. Don’t know what I’m waiting for to be totally honest,” smiling bashfully at her own folly and foible.

“It’ll be fun to hang out with you and the gang. We need to get our own tight little group going is my thought. I told Sandy I was reluctant to hang out with a bunch of people because I thought it might spoil things but now that I think about it the good times might actually be improved by adding a few more members. Could be a new chapter in our social lives so to speak!”

“Pretty dramatic but who knows? It’ll be fun in any case because everyone here is likable, interesting and great to chat with,” looking at the Japanese girls grinning, laughing and touching each other in a familiar way.

Janet, Matt and Victor dug into their food like people who hadn't eaten anything all day, making Paul laugh at how desperately and mortally they attacked it like wild animals. The food was good but it wasn't *that* good! Paul laughed again.

"We must look funny but none of us had breakfast this morning due to early classes and we usually eat together but weren't able to do so today. That's why we're like ravenous wolves now," dividing her time between eating, slurping and talking.

"Go right ahead and don't let me stop you. Today's your busiest day of the week if memory serves me right. I was responsible for making up your schedule so I should know," laughing at the thought.

"Big lunch group here today. Who are the others?" Janet gazed at Kuki, Aoi and the other girls.

"Kuki and Aoi are close friends of ours. We met them when we first arrived and we've been practically inseparable ever since. We hang out all the time and they're absolutely wonderful people to be honest. The other girls just happen to know Aoi's sister," Paul beamed, recanting recent news with enthusiasm as everything in life seemed purposeful and important to him. "You'll get to know them soon enough if you hang out with us."

"They're both so beautiful," Janet's eyes rested on Kuki and Aoi for a moment before shifting back to her bowl. "They look like cool girls to hang out with."

"Kuki...Aoi...I'd like you to meet some of my co-workers. This is Janet, Matt and Victor..." Paul pointed to each one in turn, ...and this is Kuki and Aoi," to the others. Everyone initiated greetings by bowing or shaking hands to signify an instant bond between them.

"Kuki and Aoi just graduated from university and will be

heading off to get their master's degrees soon. They're very smart girls and loads of laughs to be around," Sandy squeezed Aoi's arm who was sitting next to Kasumi, her new friend and confidant from the looks of things.

"I wish you all the luck," Janet smiled at them, "It's going to be an incredible experience for both of you since university years are the best social years of your life. It's all downhill from there so enjoy it now," laughing in a silly way.

"We love it..." Aoi looked into her eyes with mouth open, "...and we're looking forward to our new school wherever that may be."

"You guys will have no problem getting into a top school. You have nothing at all to worry about," Sandy put her arm around Aoi and squeezed her shoulder.

Victor seemed particularly interested in Kasumi and the other girls, staring at them as if he couldn't control the direction of his gaze. They were extremely pretty girls with pinned up hairstyles, ruffled blouses and flawless skin; perfect in every way. No one could doubt that but Victor was struck by the love bug and lost all awareness of his actions.

"It's interesting listening to you ladies..." sitting up straight with his back arched; apparently trying to appear more normal and respectable in their eyes. He gaped at them in a sort of trance which was slightly embarrassing but also humorous in another way.

"Thank you, Victor!" Kasumi was tickled by the excited attention.

By contrast, Victor was thrilled she remembered his name, "You have so much knowledge about music and movies and the way you talk about them makes me want to know more." (Which was true but anything she said made him feel that way).

“What are you studying?”

“Biology,” with a quick nod.

“Interesting, that subject was always very difficult for me so you must be very smart.”

She seemed embarrassed by the compliment and stayed silent but smiled weakly at his look of admiration for being so unusually pretty and intelligent. She turned to her friends as if hoping they’d say something—anything—to clear the air and distract from her own discomfort.

Sandy swooped in to the rescue, “What do you want to do in the future?” with her eyes fixed on Kasumi’s, encouraging her to open up more.

“Study microbiology and work in a lab on cures for diseases,” she confessed with a fresh brightness in her eyes like a flickering TV screen refreshing itself.

“That’s even more interesting,” Victor’s excitement increased about meeting this fresh-faced beauty. “Cures for diseases? You’ll be a hero someday!” he blurted out comically silly without trying to be.

“I sure hope so,” she giggled as her face softened and she relaxed at the same time.

“Me too, Kasumi, but I don’t think you’ll have any trouble succeeding or finding what you’re looking for.”

The others at the tables just looked and listened to Victor and Kasumi forming bonds and nurturing something along the lines of intimacy. Smiling or suppressing smiles while glancing at each other with quickened, knowing expressions.

“Are you Japanese?” Kasumi looked Victor up and down, making a kind of silent assessment of his appearance and dating potential. Though it might not go any further than that, it was to be expected in any encounter between men and women.

“Yes, from Los Angeles but I do speak Japanese.”

“You do? That’s great. Dare ga anata ni nihongo o hanasu yō ni oshiemashita ka?”

“Ryōshin wa watashi ni nihongo o hanasu yō ni oshiete kuremashita.”

She clapped her hands like a seal and grinned widely after hearing this. “Anata wa nihongo o totemo jōzu ni hanashimasu!”

“Thank you,” Victor bowed slightly. “My Japanese skills are good because my parents have been teaching me since I was a child but my accent still throws off some Japanese people. Sounds too American I think.”

“I can understand you very well.”

“Thank you. That makes me feel better because I feel stupid when people say they can’t understand me.”

“Don’t worry, the accent will come. You haven’t been here long enough,” she assured him with firm lips and a direct stare. “A little change here and there in the way you say words and you’ll sound like a native speaker.”

Victor absorbed the way her words came across to him, trying to determine if the reaction was positive or not. “I certainly hope so with your help and others. What do you like to do by the way?”

“Oh, different things...mostly shopping, reading novels and going to the movies with my friends,” she sighed. “What about you?”

“Me? Sports and video games in general...and music?” referring back to what she was discussing earlier.

“I love music and especially girl singing groups with lots of fast, active dancing,” her eyes lit up and her head moved back and forth to a distant beat, mimicking the actions of a dance routine she’d watched recently on TV.

Victor chuckled at how cute it was, “Nice...and I’ll bet you’re a great dancer yourself. You look very slim and strong which means you probably exercise a lot.” Referring to her firm arms and shoulders in addition to the formidable way she sat up straight.

“I’ve done school gymnastics for four straight years so I guess I am. The training puts a lot of strain on my body and gets me in good shape at the same time.”

“Yes, and that’s impressive with everything else you’ve got going on. Gymnastics is one of the toughest sports in the world as far as I know.”

“Maybe only ballet and martial arts are equally as difficult.”

“Well folks...,” Paul announced suddenly, looking at his watch, “...it’s that time again, duty calls back at the office. Been a pleasure meeting you all for lunch,” to Kuki, Aoi and their newly formed friendships. Suddenly realizing he might be crushing Victor’s dream of getting together with Kasumi, he glanced at Sandy with a “knowing look” and got up slowly and quietly so as not to upset the proceedings.

Sandy hugged Aoi and Kuki, “Are you going to stick around for a while after we leave? You can if you want.”

“No, we’re going back to see the office again. You can join us too if you’re heading back there,” to Kasumi and the other girls.

They nodded excitedly at the unexpected invitation and began reaching into the purses to pay the bill which they did without argument from the others. When they arrived back at the office Paul gave the Japanese girls a tour of the conference room and adjacent offices, ending at the lunchroom for coffee and donuts.

“Your office is so beautiful and the conference room is very modern and simply enormous! How many people can fit in

here?” Kuki glanced around with her mouth open and eyes wide as possible.

“Fifty people,” Paul grinned proudly.

Kasumi, Jane, Mei and Aya tagged along with Paul and Sandy even though they were 100% familiar with the surroundings already. Wanting to spend as much time as possible with Kuki and Aoi who they became strongly attached to quickly and easily. They seemed to share a common outlook and body of interests so it became practically effortless for all of them.

“I gave a presentation in here last week...,” Aya announced as they stood at the front row looking out over long tables, “...it was about Henry David Thoreau. I discussed how he lived in the forest and attempted to get back to nature and the essentials of life.”

“That was so good. He’s an interesting character,” Kasumi grinned widely, “I really enjoyed that.”

“I think I made a mistake when I said his beliefs were very similar to Hinduism though. Some Hindus studied and adopted his beliefs and I confused the two things. It wasn’t a big mistake but I wasn’t certain about some of the information I read.”

“You did a fabulous job and no one noticed,” Mei, a shorter girl with a wide mouth and large eyes consoled her, standing in front of Kasumi with her hands clasped in front of her in a controlled fashion.

They walked around the perimeter of the conference room before the girls had to return home to study for upcoming exams. Paul and Sandy said their goodbyes to Kuki, Aoi and the other girls in the reception area who planned to accompany each other to the train station. It was a thrilling and sad parting on many levels. Paul, Sandy, Victor, Matt and Janet went back to work after Kasumi slipped Victor her contact information

and bowed bashfully to him and the others, glancing at her friends for either support or criticism.

Sandy's smile faded slowly after they left, relating to her co-workers, "This weekend we'll get together and do something. Maybe go to Mount Takao again if nature's the thing that floats your boat. Was an amazing experience last weekend I can assure you."

"Whatever you want. I'm open for anything," Janet ran her fingers through her hair, touching it up diligently as she listened closely and glanced at the other teachers to gauge their reactions.

"I don't normally do much on weekends but definitely feel the need to get out more," Matt, the older teacher, confirmed his membership in the club and was more than glad someone finally asked him to do something.

"Awesome!" Paul put his arm around him and squeezed him closer.

"We'll try to get Kasumi to come along too..." Sandy smirked slyly at Victor with twinkling eyes, "...although it's not ideal being with a large group when you'd rather be alone but you have to start somewhere."

Victor laughed uncomfortably, feeling more vulnerable than he wanted in front of his workmates at school. He brushed it off because nothing much seemed to phase him, not at least that anyone could tell from his absolute calm most of the time.

"She's a very pretty thing, isn't she? I'm not normally attracted to Japanese girls but she's close to perfect," eyes growing wider and reflecting in the light.

"Beauty and brains. A dangerous combination, Vic," Sandy took him in with special and sharp interest.

"Time for work kiddos," Paul pointed at the clock, trying to

fulfill his managerial duties in a non-authoritative and pleasant way. He gave Sandy a kiss on the cheek and they all parted ways for their respective duties and stations.

After work, Paul and Sandy met at the reception area to catch the train home with Sandy looking a bit wearier than Paul. He was still energized from the last class with stimulating students asking even more stimulating questions and a teenage girl who ogled him with a puppyish crush.

“Why are you looking so chipper this evening?” Sandy frowned with a hanging question on her face.

“My last class was a great one. I was teaching physics to my P4s and they weren’t only interested in the subject but asked very insightful questions. I even got a chance to draw a few well-received diagrams and do a quick demonstration of gravitation forces.”

“Sounds like a real party!” chuckling at his abundant enthusiasm.

“It was, even got a chance to perform some calculations on the board so it was like heaven on earth basically,” laughing at himself. “You know I’m a closet physics geek!”

“Yeah, you’re crazy like that, aren’t you?”

“That I am, milady,” hurrying down the stairs and picking up his steps to catch the next train so as not to wait too long.

When they got home the building owner was downstairs to meet them. “Hello, I’m sorry to tell you this, but there was a water leak and I had to turn it off while they do repairs.”

“How long will it be?” Sandy’s face turned instantly sour because her first act was to take a shower when she got home.

“I don’t know. Not long...one hour, maybe two,” pulling his overcoat firmly over his shoulders and shrugging.

“Thanks for telling us,” Paul put his hand at the small of her

back and coaxed her forward slightly because he could see she was upset.

“No problem. They’re working on it now, shouldn’t be long young folks.”

“Thanks again,” Paul pushed her forward with a bit more force because he was worried she might say something unpleasant beyond her control. He knew how much she needed that shower at the end of a day to refresh and renew.

“OK, that’s enough now, stop pushing me!” terribly irritated but trying to control herself and Paul’s attempt to calm her down wasn’t helping.

“It’s not the end of the world, San”

“I know, it’s just when you’re counting on something and expecting it to relieve a bit of pressure it irks the hell out of me. I’ll be alright in a few minutes. Means we can’t wash our hands or make anything to eat either,” as it started to sink in for Paul too, getting him incensed.

“Who’s upset now?” she grinned at him.

“I know, now maybe you’ll help me to calm down.”

We should go out to dinner to take our minds off the fact our apartment is handicapped and can’t perform up to snuff now.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea! What’s the point of suffering here and not being able to make anything?” face lighting up and softening a bit.

He grabbed his wallet and keys and they headed to the elevator. Down to their favorite noodle shop and the steaming pots of soup with clouds covering their faces as they wandered inside. Their host was a short, feisty Japanese lady who worked a giant ladle like a conductor’s wand while dancing around cooking implements with the grace of a music box dancer. A special place with lots of fond memories and the food was even

better than the spectacle they enjoyed.

“When life gives you lemons, eh?”

“Yep!” she giggled carelessly, “No doubt about that. Makes me wonder why we don’t come here more often just to get out of the house.”

“Pure laziness on our part and not wanting to move after work would be my guess.”

“I’ll go along with that...”

They slurped the salty and tangy soup mixture which slid down their throats with a fluffy soft landing into their bellies. Sandy meanwhile sucked the noodles into her mouth slowly as they slapped against her face which Paul found incredibly funny, smirking and chuckling at her antics. She tore into the boiled pork like a stray cat that hadn’t eaten in weeks, not so much from overwhelming hunger but the simple fact that it tasted so good. Paul glanced around the room as Sandy’s face stuffing slowed down a bit and she began looking queasy with trembling lips.

“Ugh! I don’t feel so good,” she complained to him.

“Maybe you ate too fast.”

“It’s so delicious I couldn’t help myself.”

“Your face is turning red,” watching her cheeks fill with air before she let out a long sigh. “Want to go home and lay down?”

“I’ll be alright in a minute.”

“Sure you don’t wanna lay down?”

“Give me a minute, will ya?”

Paul stared into her eyes and watched them sink to the back of her head in silent surrender to her stomach’s queasiness. Her lids got heavy and covered about half of her lifeless eyes. She leaned back against the chair with her arms resting at her sides and her neck limp under her head.

“Hey! You don’t look so good, San.”

“I’m OK...it’ll pass. Like you said, must’ve eaten too fast.”

“Take as long as you need to get back to normal. I’ll get a glass of water in the meantime...maybe you need something to get the digestion moving.”

“Thanks...” after handing her a glass she fumbled to get to her lips.

“Let me help you,” pushing it up from the bottom to prevent it from slipping out of her hand.

“Wonder if it isn’t food poisoning or something?” staring at the woman behind the cooking pot and trying to determine if something was out of whack in her manner or the utensils in the area.

“Doubt it, we’ve never had that problem before.” Paul was aghast! It was sacrilege to even suggest such a thing about their favorite noodle shop! The lady of the shop was a princess among women and it was utterly unthinkable to imagine her doing anything wrong ever. Even in her most challenging moments with full tables in the middle of rush hour she maintained a cool head and perfect cooking etiquette (never spilling a drop at her station or the tables).

“No, we haven’t and even though I’m not feeling any better, thanks for trying to cheer me up and being so understanding. Probably just take my stomach some time to settle after eating way too fast. Nothing too serious when all’s said and done.” Resting her head on his shoulder and gazing down at the yellow tablecloth with moist, sad eyes. There was still no strength in her body and she seemed all too willing to lean on his relative vigor which was unusual being the independent woman she was well-known for being.

“Maybe we should go home so you can lay on the sofa and

watch TV while I help you complete your daily work tasks. Sound alright with you?"

"I have to write a presentation on the American Revolution for one of my classes because my students voted in favor of hearing more about it. A 30 minute presentation is what I need with slides and references. If you don't mind helping me with all the boring details of putting it all together..." tilting her head up from a still vulnerable position to meet his gaze.

He held her around the waist as they left the restaurant with the shop lady frowning and asking what was wrong. Coming out from behind the prep area and looking Sandy up and down as if she were her own daughter and even once touching her forehead and rubbing her cheeks as if performing a medical exam or something.

"She OK? What happened to her?"

"I don't know," Paul looked at Sandy and back at the woman. "She must have eaten her food too quickly and now she's got a stomach ache."

"Ooooooh!...feel so bad for her. I hope she be OK soon. Feel so bad for her..." the lady frowned even more deeply in profound concern for her welfare. Placing her arm around Sandy's waist to support her while offering her own brand of womanly care and concern.

"I'll take her home and lay her down for a while. If she doesn't feel better in an hour or so we'll go to a doctor."

"That's good idea," the lady brushed Sandy's hair out of her face and placed a hand at her back. "She be OK soon I hope!"

Paul helped her out the door and propped her up on the elevator walls on the way to the 17th floor. "You're worrying me a bit now. I hope it isn't serious, whatever it is."

"Don't say that. You're gonna jinx me now. I'm holding firm

to the belief it's nothing more than fast eating and I'll be OK shortly."

"You will, so don't worry about that. If it was anything serious I think you'd know it right away. You're very body aware and I trust your instincts on those matters," looking into her eyes with unwavering and unblinking conviction.

He pulled her arms off his shoulders and gently laid her on the sofa before collecting a pillow from the bedroom for her head. He also took off her shoes and put them off to the side under the armrests. Stretching out her legs and adjusting her head so she was supremely comfortable in that position which she nestled into in grand style, surrendering to the royal treatment and smiling up at him.

"There you go princess...with all that I'm sure you'll recover in a jiffy!" chuckling at her feline grin.

"If this doesn't work, nothing will!" switching on the TV and pointing at the desk drawer where her notes were for the presentation she was giving next week. "Sure you don't mind helping me out?"

"Of course not. I've got nothing to do as far as after work duties tonight and I want to make sure you knock their socks off and get voted teacher of the year this time around," grinning again at her helpless composure.

"You're irreplaceable Pauly but I think you already know that," eyes flickering and twinkling in the overhead lights.

Paul brought over a binder containing a few folders and began laying them out on the table for Sandy to pick and choose what she wanted. Staring at her for cues while trying to decipher if his methodology appealed to her as he thought it should. He wanted to make things as easy as possible on her without triggering her frail sensibilities at the vulnerable state she was

in. Sandy glanced things over and began rearranging sheets with one hand as she maintained a relaxed position throughout the endeavor, spotting items that were more important and setting them off to one side.

“This stack is the stuff we need to reference first?” Paul asked with his hand on the pile she’d separated from the others.

“Yes, I’ve highlighted the important stuff I need to start outlining,” she winced, looking down at her stomach which was still bothering her.

“Let me grab the laptop so you can dictate to me while I compose the outline. Sound like a plan?”

“Perfect!” she blurted out excitedly, “This’ll take a lot of pressure off me because I’ve been concerned about finishing on time.”

Once Paul was set up and ready to go, he peered at Sandy and waited for her to sort through the papers for opening topics and introductory passages. Watching as she circled a few key paragraphs and scratched her head in thought while arriving at some definite conclusions about the order she wanted things to occur in the composition.

“I think I’ll lead off with the grievances expressed by the Founding Fathers about the laws they objected to overall. The reasons why they felt they needed to rebel against King George...that’s the one under the one your finger’s on now.”

“Yes, I remember that from history class. The colonies wanted to be self-determining and decide their own fate but were obviously only colonies so it wasn’t permitted by the king...” Paul lifted his gaze in reflection and peered around the room before resting them back on the paper in Sandy’s hand, “...I also remember the Boston Tea Party obviously and the death of Crispus Attucks who was of mixed descent or something,

killed in the Boston Massacre of 1770. I remember my history teacher talking about it at length!”

“The Boston Massacre is actually a good place to start but I need to go into the reasons for it and what led up to it first. I’m still unclear on all the details. Can you run through them with me?” she batted her eyes twice in appeal to his sympathy.

“Of course. I need a refresher on the details of the Revolution anyway. I’m still an American and should know all this stuff by heart, shouldn’t I?”

She laughed at him. “Are we? Seems like we’re turning more Japanese everyday, I really think so.”

“You didn’t just make subtle reference to that old Vapors song, did you?”

“No, it was all in your head,” she giggled evasively, “I was just pointing out that we seem to be becoming less American the longer we stick around. I hardly remember who I was before we came here.”

He smiled and kissed her on the head, “Me too.”

“It’s definitely a good thing since Americans have terrible manners a lot of the time and an even worse attitude toward life in many cases.”

“Sadly true. Anyway...let’s get down to business since bashing America won’t solve anything however justified it might be.”

“It says here the cause of the Boston Massacre was British troops were stationed in Massachusetts Bay to support the authority of the English crown and legislation from the Parliament at a time when neither were popular with colonists. Colonists were insulting and throwing things at the troops which incited the shooting. It all started when a mob collected around one sentry post and started threatening the soldiers but in the end only five colonists were killed. So technically it

wasn't a massacre strictly speaking even though it was certainly tragic," Paul summarized while grazing over the information quickly.

"It was blown out of proportion by Patriots like Paul Revere and Sam Adams to foment dissent against the British in the colonies, right? That's why they tried to promote it as a massacre when technically it wasn't?" Sandy stared at the paper as though straining to read it herself.

"Yes, that looks about right from what it says down here at the bottom. Paul Revere even made an engraving based on the event. Probably the same one most of us have seen in history books," Paul rubbed his chin in thought.

Paul composed as Sandy took up the pile and jumped from sheet to sheet with expert precision. Remembering parts and pieces of each article she wanted to inject here and there to make it flow and progress the way she envisioned it. After an hour or so, she perked up without being aware of the change and realized she was hungry and ready for a late night snack.

"Are you serious? We're almost finished but I guess you're feeling much better now and not only from the fact we've completed so much today. Good to see you've recovered so quickly though. Guess we can nix the hospital idea at this point."

"Absolutely!" as she began slapping together a sandwich and pouring a glass of lemonade in simple celebration.

"Wow, looks good, can I order a glass too and a sandie from Sandy? Seems like a genius idea right now."

She poured lemonade and began making a chicken and cucumber sandwich with mayonnaise for him, same as hers.

"Thanks babe. Hits the spot indeed!"

"Think I'll be ready for bed after this. It's been a ridiculously long day and my energy level has dropped to all-time lows even

after the short burst post recovering.”

“I hear that and nothing sounds more appealing than bed after a long, boring history lesson. Don’t even think I have energy enough to sleep with you tonight, so don’t ask!” he smirked at her.

“Are you kidding? You always have energy for that! I know you all too well and you can’t fool me,” lips curling up at the sides of her mouth.

“You do and it’s scary but truthfully I don’t think I could even manage it tonight. That’s how done in I am...” eyes softening and meeting hers directly.

“No worries. We don’t have to do it every night, do we?”

“Morning?”

“You know I don’t like morning sex,” sighing and frowning at him.

“Come on! Make an exception just this once...,” he chuckled awkwardly.

“Maybe...we’ll see...depends...”

“On what?”

“How I feel in the morning after sleeping.”

“That’s fair enough but don’t complain when I do my best to woo you into it.”

She smirked as her head fell back on the pillow with her eyes partially closed. Nodding in and out of consciousness with a look of complete serenity and a faint smile stretched across her face. She plowed her face deeper into the pillow and surrendered to exhaustion before Paul kissed her on the forehead and followed her quickly to slumberland.

Next morning Paul woke up first as usual and entered the bathroom to begin his morning routine as quietly as possible. His vision was still blurry in the morning fog and he struggled

with the blade in his hand while shaving himself. Fortunately, he only cut himself a little without any major injury before tossing water on his face to remove the shaving cream.

“Ooooooh...,” he heard Sandy groan in the other room and lifted his head up out of the towel with raised eyebrows. Combing his hair and entering the room with a strong sense of worry on his face. “What’s wrong, babe?”

“Don’t feel good again.”

“You’re *kidding!* What is it now?”

“Nausea...my stomach feels queasy and I want to throw up,” getting up slowly and running to the bathroom.

Something suddenly dawned on Paul and his mind froze in fear. He didn’t want to ask the obvious question but felt it necessary under the circumstances: “Babe, have you missed any of your periods lately?”

He heard her retching over the toilet bowl and felt glad she was unable to answer right away as terrified as he was of the truth. Entering the bathroom and watching as she finished puking with a red face and watery bloodshot eyes that made him feel even worse than she did at that point. He helped her to her feet as she placed her hands in front of her stomach with her mouth hanging open and little specks of vomit on her chin. He placed her in front of the sink and helped her wash her face while getting out the toothbrush for her to get rid of the rank breath she’d surely have.

“Take your time, babe. Do you feel like having breakfast or is that out of the question at this point?” Still holding onto her back while waiting for her to be able to hold herself up on her own.

“Don’t know yet...gimme a minute. I don’t want to go to work without eating because my stomach might start growling

in the middle of classes. On the other hand, don't want to be puking all day because something didn't agree with me. It's a toss up at this point." She fixed her hair the best she could before tying it above her head and jumping in the shower.

"I'll make you something in case you want to eat later. No sense wasting time cooking twice or we'll be late for work," Paul suggested and left her on her own with a concerned glance back at her entering the shower.

"I'll try to hurry so you can shower after me while you cook."

He chuckled dismissively, "Don't worry about that. Just try to get yourself back to feeling normal first so you can face the day."

She smiled at the sentiment even though her face was turned away from him. "Will do, captain! I'm on it!"

When she appeared in the kitchen she looked noticeably refreshed and her face had returned to a natural and appealing color again. Her actions were lively and she sat down with a thud on the chair, peering out the window.

"OK?" Paul ventured lightly. "You look much better now."

"Thanks, I certainly feel much better and am hungry beyond belief too! My appetite's returned with a vengeance..." She started by scooping up a couple eggs and toast from the plates Paul laid out and grabbed a banana to complete the ritual morning sustenance.

"Wow! You really have recovered nicely. Nice to see the change of state so soon. Be back in a sec...we're running a bit behind so it'll have to be a quick shower for me."

He rushed off to the bedroom to remove his clothes and select a shirt and slacks for the day, laying them out carefully on the bed beforehand. The water felt good on his back and he washed up quickly without thinking about anything except

making every minute count. He really hated being late because making excuses felt silly and it was so easy to prevent generally speaking. Problem with rushing though was he tended to do clumsy things like soaping up so quickly he got soap in his eyes and had to waste time washing it out. Rushing too often causes mistakes and he had to stick to a manageable and productive pace to avoid all that.

When he entered the kitchen again Sandy was already dressed in a white blouse and gray skirt with her hair made up perfectly. Paul's eyes shot to the top of his head in surprise at how quickly she was able to move and get things done when she needed to. She had already prepared two flasks of coffee and the right amount of sugar and milk, handing him one as they made their way out the door.

"We make quite the efficient little team here in Japan, don't we? We'd never be able to do this back home, would we? This environment inspires us to be super versions of ourselves," she grinned proudly while shutting the door.

Paul laughed at this as the elevator reached the ground floor and they shoved through scores of people onto the street and the even more crowded train station. They hurried quickly onto the train and grabbed a pole position next to the automatic doors.

"Whew! Made it! Exhilarating just getting in sync with the flow of people and a place to stand, ain't it? Sometimes I feel like I'm gonna get crushed," Sandy frowned with the corners of her mouth turned down.

"Sandy, there's something I need to ask you but I'm a bit afraid of the answer...have you skipped any of your times of the month?" Paul looked directly into her eyes while swaying back and forth with the train's movement, stiffening his frame

in preparation for the answer.

Sandy was also struck with fear all of sudden. Widening her gaze and startled by the question because it's something she hadn't considered before. Was Paul actually asking what she thought he was asking? Couldn't be...could it?

"Not yet," she said as confidently as possible but thinking back wondered if that was the case. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Paul didn't reply but kept his gaze fixed on her like every word out of her mouth was the most important she'd ever utter. He stroked her arm and coaxed her to jog her memory a bit longer to get to the truth.

"Are you suggesting I should get a pregnancy test?" swaying side to side with the train's motion too and, when they arrived at the station, moved slowly toward the door glancing back at him with a frown. She took hold of his arm after realizing what he was asking might be true and needing something to prop her up.

"What do you think? Does the thought scare you?"

"Not really...it would make me happy but...*Wow!*...what an absolute change in our lives!" the furrows in her brow grew deeper and her eyes exploded with a look of profound terror.

"Wouldn't be the worst thing in the world, would it? You did say you had nausea this morning and you were sick last night too." Pointing out the obvious without exactly enjoying the direction of his own thoughts.

"It's certainly possible and maybe I'll go get a test after work but only if you go with me. Don't know if there are any clinics close by but I'll ask around the other teachers to see if anyone knows anything."

"Or just check on your phone so as not to arouse any

suspicions about the reasons for your going. Don't want to start the office gossip train rolling just yet, do we? Never know what might happen," Paul pursed his lips and made a clicking sound as a sort of warning to himself.

"That's true, but they're going to find out eventually anyway, right?" she countered with hands on hips.

"What if it's not true? It'll get 'em started speculating unnecessarily."

The possibility of Sandy's pregnancy hung over their heads all day and both found it difficult to focus on the myriad mental tasks demanding their attention. Passing each other in the hall, their eyes locked in non-verbal communication which took the form of worrying over the possible and unknown. At lunch, they sat with the other teachers trying to act normal and casual while feeling a giant weight over both of them they attempted to push to the back of their minds.

"My first class was out of control but in a good way," Janet explained with goofy grin, "The kids started talking about sex and the boys and girls began making comments about who was the hottest in class. It got really intense and embarrassing at one point and I ended up having to yell at them to calm down."

"Teenagers that like talking about sex? That's a real shocker!" Paul met her grin with a clownish frown, feigning seriousness on the topic. "That *never* happens, does it?"

"It shouldn't happen even though they've got hormones in abundance. Gets really out of control quickly," reflecting back upon the incident. "The girls get offended and ashamed easily and things can escalate from there quickly."

"Boys are less shy talking about sex? That's another real shocker!" Paul assessed the situation with a fine-toothed comb in his opinion.

“You guys want some of my noodles and pork? Don’t think I can finish it all because I got a double order this time.” Janet slid the bowl across the table in front of the other teachers who started to poke around the dish tentatively at first.

“It’s good,” Sandy slurped without any concern for ladylike etiquette.

“We’re having the annual party this weekend at school. Did you get the memo? All the kids and parents will be there,” Matt glanced around with a question on his face. “There’s slated to be around 200-250 people at least.”

“What? I didn’t read about this...,” Janet sipped cola with a question on her face, “...I take it it’s mandatory for us to be there. Saturday, right?”

“*Yes* and *yes* to mandatory and Saturday, meaning none of us can get out of it unless we’re mortally-wounded and in traction. I’m OK with it since the school hasn’t asked us once to show up on weekends all year long. Other schools have their teachers coming in on Saturdays once or twice a month for one reason or another,” Matt pointed out with a satisfied look and lips locked in conviction.

“What will we be doing?” Sandy stopped with the fork halfway to her face and one eye cocked in attention.

“I think we’re just there to keep the kids company and talk to the parents who want to meet us and assess whether or not we’re good influences on their sons and daughters or something,” Matt focused on Sandy while glancing at the others from time to time.

“Which means they’re going to find out all our darkest secrets, that we’re bad teachers and bad influences on their kids. Maybe we should call in sick,” Janet chuckled at herself.

“We should just shut up and not say anything. That’s the only

way we'll survive the event," Matt formed a silly child's face with wide eyes.

"We'll be alright, we're all great teachers and we'll make a great impression I'm sure. There's a reason the director keeps us around and he's the top in his field," Paul pointed out with a frown.

"I'm looking forward to it actually. I like meeting parents because they're often so grateful and praise you a lot," Janet relayed unreservedly, glancing off in the distance.

"Cancel our plans for this weekend then folks unless you guys want to get together on Sunday? That's always a possibility," Sandy stated with a hopeful tone.

"Hey! That's not a bad idea," Janet withdrew in thought.

"Think about it, you don't have to commit to anything now. Some people like to do nothing on Sunday and lord knows I certainly feel that way sometimes."

"That's true but doing nothing all day seems to give me the blues..." Janet shared openly with a long face, "...especially since I'm all alone in a foreign country and not especially attracted to most of the men around."

"We definitely need to get you out and about, mingling and fraternizing like a movie star. We all need to be more active socially since we're in Japan and need to live like there's no tomorrow!"

Janet laughed at this, "You sound just like a self-help book." Unable to suppress a wide grin with the corners of her mouth upturned slightly.

"Some of those books have helped me a lot, I have to admit, especially through tough times in life. They're not all corny and Pollyannic you know," Sandy rose in defense of all things that inspired her when the chips were down.

“I think the same way, self-help can be very effective if you pick and choose wisely.”

When Sandy finished her lunch she started to feel a bit queasy again and wondered if she shouldn't go to the doctor immediately because it seemed to be happening so frequently. She gulped the water and tea in front of her in an attempt to dilute the effect and tried to put on a bold face for the others.

“Sandy?” Janet laid her hand on hers. “You alright?” Noticing her slackened face and hunched shoulders.

Paul also noticed the change and placed his hand at her back which he began rubbing gently to bolster her confidence and improve her mood. It got her to sit up straighter and even brightened her features a bit. Sandy grabbed her stomach and stroked her face with a weary expression, looking like she was about to throw up and drank a bit more tea in the hope the feeling would pass. It worked.

“I'll be alright in a moment. I haven't been feeling myself lately but I'm already starting to recover after having another cup of tea.” The color of her face actually returned to a normal hue of olive pink and she smiled feebly.

“Well, should we go back? It's about that time and we have to set a good example for the students by not being late ourselves, right?” Paul supported Sandy as she stood up and went to the counter to pay the bill for all of them. He then placed his hand gently at the low of her back and coaxed her forward slightly.

“Don't worry about me guys, just been feeling strange lately,” glancing up at Paul with a secret message that she was just as worried as he was about what they'd discussed earlier but needed to be sure. Paul returned the look with a penetrating, “I know exactly what you mean,” back.

After work, Paul escorted Sandy to a clinic two subway stops

from the school in the other direction from their home. He cleared his mind of all worries so as not to alarm Sandy or create any more anxiety than necessary and, when they entered the clinic, Sandy was handed some forms to fill out all in Japanese. She struggled with some of it and Paul tried to help her out the best he could. Together they were able to piece everything together along with some visual cues from the boxes and the order of the questions and answers.

When she was finished, she handed the form back to the receptionist and was called in to meet the doctor after ten minutes. Entering an office with pale white walls and blue trim that blended harmoniously with a lot of scientific instruments, an empty table top and freestanding medical equipment all around the office. Paul sheepishly entered the room after Sandy because he wasn't sure he was allowed in there during the procedure but wanted to offer his support and get the results as quickly as possible. He also didn't want to sit in the outer office in suspense going crazy. The doctor had his back turned when they entered and didn't turn around for several minutes as he wrote something down on a clipboard. When he was finished he hung it up on the wall and turned around without smiling, appearing deep in thought about something before crossing the room to check the data on one of his medical devices.

He rubbed his chin in thought, "Hmmm..." before gradually noticing the nervous and stiff couple in the room awaiting instructions.

"Good evening, I'm Dr. Takahashi, take a seat and I'll be with you in a moment." He quickly left the room through a back door and didn't return for another ten minutes at which point he asked Sandy to take off her clothes to perform the procedure.

"Your name?"

“Hello, I’m Sandy Masters and this is my husband, Paul.”

“What makes you think you’re pregnant? Have any symptoms?”

“I’ve been feeling sick and queasy in the morning and at different times during the day.”

“What about today?”

“Today too...a few hours ago.”

“OK, it’s simple and easy enough to perform a pregnancy test but I won’t get the results for a few hours. Our lab is a little bit backed up right now.” He began performing a routine exam on her first: blood pressure, heart rate, etc. before getting down to the business at hand. Sandy sat down on the bed after taking off her clothes and allowed the doctor to do his duty before standing up and putting them back on. She felt a bit awkward and embarrassed but the male doctor was professional and quite matter of fact about the whole thing which made it seem natural.

“Leave your number with the receptionist and she’ll call you with the results in a few hours, OK?” scribbling notes on the same clipboard and entering her data into the computer. Then he placed his hand on Sandy’s shoulder and led her to the door with Paul following both of them.

“Don’t worry, whatever the result, you’ll be happy. That’s the way I always tell people to look at it,” he smiled widely and warmly and Sandy’s fears were actually alleviated for the time being. She thanked him and Paul nodded as they left through the front door onto the busy street.

“What do you think? He seemed like a really nice guy and it’s all covered under the insurance which is great.” Paul did his best to comfort her.

“Nice having medical insurance for once, isn’t it? We don’t

have to worry about being bankrupted whenever we get injured or require routine services,” still holding onto her stomach as though a baby was already kicking in there.

“Exactly...or avoiding going to the doctor in the first place because we know it’s gonna cost too much...at the same time worrying about not getting checked out so things get even worse.” Stretching his lips across his face in fear of the thought and relieved he hadn’t suffered too much under the circumstances.

“What do we do in the meantime to keep our minds off the results? We may not find out till tomorrow or the next day, is what I’m thinking.” Sandy clutched his hand and pierced his gaze like someone hanging onto every subtle response. They walked down a crowded street without noticing anyone or anything before spotting a park nearby and stopping to sit down and think about things. Paul stared into the fountain at the center of a ring of trees and benches, letting his mind drift wherever it wanted to go which tended to thoughts of being old and placid with two or three full-grown children standing in front of him, strong and sharp-minded, successful and happy, calling him dad and making him proud of himself.

“What do you think the chances are?” Sandy watched him staring into the fountain and divined his thoughts about being a future dad. “Are you still frightened?”

“I think you’re pregnant and no it doesn’t frighten me at all. We always knew we were gonna have children and think how exciting the news will be for our parents back home!”

“It’ll keep the office gossip going full steam ahead for weeks to come, that’s for sure! Fuel for the social fire...,” she giggled as the first thought in her head.

“I’m actually looking forward to it. It’s the logical progression

in taking our relationship to the next level of intimacy and responsibility. Gives it more meaning and adds a new dimension to our marriage, don't you think?"

"Don't know yet. Still haven't fully digested it as a reality. I'll have to see how I feel when we actually get the results. We should've used protection if we didn't want this to happen because it's like playing roulette when you don't," she groaned.

"You won't be happy if it's positive?"

"Not sure..." looking down at the ground and squeezing his hand as though she were about to fall off a cliff psychologically speaking.

"Sex doesn't exist in a vacuum and it's not all about pleasure for pleasure's sake like most people seem to believe. All you have to do is forget to use protection to be slapped across the face by reality," Paul pressed his lips together tightly.

"That's an odd way of looking at it. What do you mean by that? Obviously, I know you like sex from the way you're always climbing on top of me but now you're saying there's a higher purpose for it?" Sandy frowned with a faraway look as though stricken by it.

"What I mean is that the purpose of sex is for people to have children, right? Sex feels good because nature has a plan apart from the way we feel. The pleasure is actually nature's lure for us to have children." Paul seemed very satisfied with his wisdom and insight on the subject (as he saw it) and wore a sage-like expression.

"I guess I can see what you mean but people don't always want children when they have sex," staring at him full in the face now.

"And in order for us to prevent having children we need to take precautions to prevent nature taking its course, right?"

“Yes, I get that. So, what’s your point?” getting a bit impatient with him now.

“Guess what I’m trying to say is that people shouldn’t separate making babies from the sexual act as people so often do these days. Most people, especially young people, think about sex only for pleasure then when they do it without protection, they’re shocked when a girl gets pregnant.”

“It’s almost like they forget about the pitfalls in pursuit of pleasure, isn’t it?” Sandy followed his reasoning and was fully onboard.

“Nature’s plan is in opposition to man’s plan in this case.”

“You’re right. Strange point you’re trying to make but I get it.”

“The point is just that people need to be aware that children are not to be forgotten in the pursuit of sexual pleasure. Even if you use protection, it can happen to you!” Paul was quick to point out.

“Now that we’ve sorted out the philosophy of sex, what are your thoughts about becoming a father?” Taking both hands in hers and gazing at the same fountain Paul was staring at a few moments earlier.

“I don’t know, ask me after we get the results,” he chuckled without trying to be clever, “It’s all just theory at this point but I believe I’ll enjoy being a father.”

“It’ll make us grow up quickly, that’s for sure! Not that I think we have many bad habits to get rid of to set the right example as parents,” sounding supremely confident they’d be good models for children.

“We cleaned up our acts long before becoming parents so we’ll be ready when and if the time comes. Nice way to look at it, Sandy, you’ve given me confidence to face this with the

right attitude!”

“Fabulous, I’ve done my duty as spouse and possible mother then,” grinning and kissing him on the forehead.

“I’m actually looking forward to being a dad and think you’ll be a great mother too. You’ve got a lot to offer children from your performance in the classroom. You certainly have a way with them a lot of teachers don’t.”

“I am quite popular, have to admit, and parents tend to love me too,” she smiled and bounced in her seat with joy and encouragement.

“Sounds like you’re OK with the idea already and since you’ve been getting sick a lot lately, I’d say the likelihood is pretty high you’re pregnant. It’s a good thing we’re both starting to adjust to the fact.” Paul firmed his jaw and looked directly at her with an unflinching gaze.

“I’m actually starting to look forward to it now. I hope the answer is “yes” because it’ll be entertaining to see you in the role of father. That’ll be the cutest thing in the world and make me fall in love with you all over again.”

“Let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves or we’re going to be disappointed if the answer’s “no”.

“So, I guess abortion’s off the table?” Paul floated as an afterthought with a cynical smile. “There’s always that option if we’re not ready to become parents yet. If it’s positive and freaks us out too much...”

“I could never do that...kill a baby that’s part of us both? I think I’d regret it the rest of my life!”

“I know, I was just floating it as a possibility, putting it out there so to speak. I don’t think I could do that to a child either because I’d never be able to get it out of my mind. Thinking about what my child might look like and be like would torment

me the rest of my life too,” glancing down at her stomach as if to apologize for even considering such a thing.

“OK, now that we got that out of the way let’s start thinking about how we’re going to deal since it’s most likely to happen. How is this gonna change our lives and what’s the best way to begin getting ready now?” Paul put his arm over her shoulder and pulled her close as a symbol this was something they would face together without fear.

“This really changes everything, doesn’t it?”

“Not only that, it’ll change everything about us personally. No way we can stay who we are now when facing an entirely new role and phase of life. I mean being a mom and dad is definitely a rite of passage,” she shuddered in his arms as he squeezed her close with the intent of making her feel stronger in that knowledge.

“For the better hopefully,” Paul smacked his lips together.

“I’m sure it will, we’re already better people than we’ve ever been before thanks to Japan giving us the right frame of mind.”

“All we have to do now is step into our new roles gradually and not be too hasty about it. It also means we can’t drink and party as much as we used to. You have to take care of yourself for the sake of the baby and I’ll support you as much as I can in the effort,” Paul assured her with a kiss on the cheek and shoulder.

Paul stood up because he felt an excited energy pulsing through his body due to the subject matter, lifting her up gently as though she was already a pregnant mom, cradling her around the waist and brushing the hair out of her face. He squeezed the side of her body in a possessive way as if his future lay within and what a brilliant feeling it was too! Already smiling like a proud father while gazing at other families in the park in envy

of their upstanding and respectable composure.

“Being a father is gonna turn me into a conservative personality. Might even become a Christian!” Paul chuckled at the odd random thought.

“I always knew you had it in you. You were always a bit more straightlaced and uptight than the rest of our crowd of friends. I sensed you weren’t a liberal even way back then,” she smiled with a reflectively furrowed brow.

“Now we’ll have to agree on how to raise a child and what things we want to teach him or her. It’s important to have some sort of idea what values and ideas we want a child to experience and grow up with, don’t you think?” Looking directly ahead of him at another couple with two children who seemed pretty casual with the responsibility he was taking so seriously.

“It is but we’ll figure it out as we go along as I’m sure a lot of parents do. It’s not like we need to make a twenty year plan upfront before we even know if it’s game on in the first place.”

“Kind of jumping the gun a bit, aren’t I?” laughing at himself, “I’m completely obsessed with preparing for the future more than ever since coming to Japan.”

“Can’t be too careful when it comes to getting mentally prepared for major life changes, that much I can agree with. We’re going to have to at least prepare for a major shift in head space and the sooner we tackle that obstacle the better. The rest of the material life changes will take care of themselves if we remain open to their influence and how they alter our personalities and perspectives on things.”

“You’re right about that. How did you get so smart anyway? It’s the personal psychological and role shift aspect we need to be thinking about now, not all the particulars about how to raise a child and what sorts of values to fill him or her with,

right?” shifting his gaze from left to right as they crossed onto a busy walking path with strollers and old people walking past.

“Look at that older couple. Aren’t they adorable?” Sandy couldn’t help pointing out as the couple shuffled passed hunched over, holding onto each for support.

“That’ll be us someday if we make it that long. It’s a marathon feat these days making it to old age with a partner, isn’t it?”

“Not that many do it. Used to be the norm but these days...” she trailed off while clutching onto his arm more tightly.

“People are so selfish and have no stamina or resilience when it comes to sticking together through thick and thin I guess. Do you think *we* have it?” he asked in all seriousness because he wasn’t sure himself.

“Good question since we’re both part of a generation that breaks things off at the drop of a hat after one or two arguments or disagreements,” staring at the older couple with greater intent and hoping some of their resolve rubbed off on them.

“Argument and disagreement are part of the negotiation process of becoming a couple,” Paul stated out of nowhere (he wasn’t sure where).

“A lot of people shy away from conflict in relationships when it’s a natural and normal phenomenon signifying the way couples resolve their differences and arrive at appropriate compromises between the extremes of their personal wants and needs. When people hide things from each other and refuse to express what they’re actually feeling in order to make a relationship work they don’t arrive at that much-needed common ground.”

“Honest communication is key, isn’t it? Our generation hides so much from each other and ourselves on a personal level which is the primary problem as far as I can see. We don’t

understand anything about mental health and this probably explains why we're so screwed up as a collective," Paul was thinking of Alex in particular as he mentioned this. "Some people actually revel in being the most screwed up people on earth and think it's cool!"

"People do talk about being crazy like it's a good thing these days, don't they? Even when it's actually true and they genuinely need counseling and meds to solve their problems, but it's certainly not a joke when people who truly need help brag about their condition like it's something to be proud of!"

"Sad, ain't it?"

"Tragic beyond belief!"

"We know better and we're stronger than most so we'll not only be great parents but more successful at being happy than them. It's inevitable the way I see it. We've learned so much and grown so quickly since my accidental encounter with Mrs. Halston and getting married and coming to Japan that we're unrecognizable from what we were a few short years ago," Paul's jaw firmed up and his features tightened in complete assurance of what he was saying.

"We're good and ready to face this parenting challenge head on, is that what you're saying?"

"In a roundabout way—*Yes!*—ready as we'll ever be!" Paul gazed down at her stomach again as they found themselves following behind the elderly couple who were holding hands and stepping a bit more lively in front of them.

"As ready as anyone ever is or can be..." she replied with equal confidence in what she was saying; glancing from trees and lapping pond at the park center to the couple who moved at a vibrant pace and kept a fair bit ahead of them. Maybe it was having each other that kept them healthy and not any particular

exercise program or strict diet she couldn't help thinking. Paul had certainly improved her mental state after being a miserable drunk for so many years which gave her the whimsical desire to follow them around all day and even introduce herself to ask about the eternal secrets of life and relationship bliss in general.

"What time do you want to go home, mom?" Paul chuckled to himself.

"Whenever you want, grandpa!" smirking at him.

"Wow, that's a new beginning too. Can you imagine being grandparents someday? Talk about a rite of passage and milestone!"

"We don't even know for sure we'll be parents yet and you're already talking about becoming grandparents?" she scoffed and frowned. Looking ahead at the couple with even greater intensity. "But I guess it's bound to happen and something I'd be happy to experience *someday* but not today. Who wouldn't be happy with their children having children?"

"Cynical people who obsess over age and titles too much, that's who!" Paul grinned and clicked his tongue several times.

"Guess there's nothing left to do but keep cool and wait. We've already covered every topic in my head regarding the potential change to our lives and lifestyles. What else is there left to talk about?" looking down at her feet stepping one in front of the other. "The couple in front of us...we've been following them for almost twenty minutes, studying every move they make it seems. What are we trying to get out of them, anyway?" she fretted, wringing her hands together and thinking about how it would feel with a baby inside her.

"Guidance, advice, consultation, a positive example from watching and observing their every action," Paul surmised wisely. "The older generation are a treasure trove of wisdom

we're taught to ignore because popular media portrays them all as senile and foolish or something."

"Everything concerning age and maturity is viewed in a negative light these days and all images relating to the subject are negative and ruthlessly mocking. Wonder why?"

"Probably because some people don't want the younger generation learning from the older generation and changing the course of their lives like Mrs. Halston did to mine. They instead want blind loyalty to the ideology of leftism or progressivism, worship of youth culture or something like that," clutching his fists and thinking how Mrs. Halston could be mocked and insulted by these people and how people back home most likely treated her on occasion.

"I really want to go up and talk to them," Sandy said while staring at their old school crisp, sharp and meticulously well-appointed choice of clothes; admiring them on that basis alone. "Do you think we should approach them, would you mind that?"

"I'd be a little embarrassed to be honest."

"We could learn a lot and they might actually be happy to talk with some young folks because they don't get many opportunities. Could be a real thrill for them!" Sandy pointed out to him.

"I don't know Sandy, sounds like kind of a stretch to me."

"Oh, come on!" grabbing him by the arm and pulling him forward aggressively, causing him to almost fall over as he resisted her with a rag doll reluctance.

When they were right behind the couple Sandy glanced at him with a tight, nervous little smile as though uncertain how to proceed then raised her brows and dropped them sharply with a "here goes nothing" motion before moving around quickly in front of the old woman.

“Hello, how are you?” she ventured in English; assuming they spoke the language and might appreciate the opportunity to practice. She bowed in front of the elderly woman and smiled at her startled face after she recoiled a bit from Sandy’s sugary sweetness. “Hope I didn’t scare you. My husband and I just wanted to say “hello” and talk with you if you don’t mind...”

The couple gaped blankly for a moment and Sandy and Paul wondered if they spoke any English at all. They tried conversing in English first because many Japanese appreciated the opportunity to practice with any foreigner and oftentimes this generated positive reactions and laid the groundwork for spontaneously animated conversations. Which in turn triggered amiable and helpful reactions because foreigners generally needed assistance overseas.

Paul also bowed and the older woman warmed to the abundance of formality and respect shown by the two strangers. Moving a bit closer and bowing too before reaching out her hand and grabbing Sandy’s with fervent gentleness, stroking the back of it. She smiled feebly with a lot of pleasant and eager lines on her face showing she was more than pleased to make their acquaintance. Young people rarely ever approached them in public but avoided them as a general code of conduct.

“I speak English,” the older woman said with wide eyes twinkling noticeably. “Where are you from?”

“The USA...,” Sandy murmured delicately as some Japanese people (and many other nationalities) didn’t have the most positive attitude toward their country, “...we’re living and teaching in Japan.

The woman’s smile grew wider and she glanced at her husband who had come closer and was checking out Paul’s clothes and shoes. “You look like a nice young couple. How do

you like living in Japan?”

“We absolutely love it!” Sandy glanced at Paul for confirmation. “It’s such a wonderful and welcome change from the United States that in all honesty we’ve considered staying here the rest of our lives.”

“We were in America more than ten years ago because our daughter lives there with her American husband now. She’s living in New York and absolutely loves it there!” the woman shared with a clear fondness for the union.

“What did you think about America? Did you like it?” Paul gazed at the man who was also smiling at this point and shook Paul’s hand while squeezing his shoulder in a chummy way Paul warmed up to instantly. Seemed so fatherly unlike his own dad which struck him as odd coming from a complete stranger.

“America feels like a second home to us. We want to go back and visit our daughter soon because New York is a wonderful city with so many things to see,” she reflected back with a direct gaze at both of them.

“I’m so glad to hear that. That means a lot that you enjoyed my country because we really love Japan too.”

“Really? What do you like about it?” lifting her brow and focusing on Sandy’s every minute change in expression.

“So far...everything! The people and culture, the high-tech gadgets and innovation around every turn...the students we teach who are so friendly and eager to learn...”

“Don’t forget the most important thing: the language. It’s beautiful to hear and very challenging to learn at the same time, Sandy! We’ve become very familiar in two years and refuse to leave until we’re completely fluent,” Paul stretched his lips across his face in total conviction.

“No one else in the world speaks Japanese...,” the older man

warned them, "...it's only useful in Japan."

"That's good enough for us. We plan on making this our second home if not our first one," Paul smiled hopefully as if seeking the couple's acceptance as part of their culture.

"The reason we approached you is because we wanted to ask you some questions. We hope you don't mind us interrupting your evening walk like this," Sandy lowered her head in a figurative bow.

"Of course not, we're always happy to speak with young people like yourselves. We don't get many chances because we don't meet many," the woman explained with eyes flashing brighter than her smile at this point. "What's your name, young lady?"

"Sandy and this is my husband, Paul. We're about to become parents—*maybe*—and wanted to talk to someone with more experience than us for any advice they can offer."

The older woman raised her hands to the sides of her cheeks and gazed at Sandy like a miracle had been performed right before her very eyes, taking in Sandy from head to toe as if she herself *was* that miracle. She stood speechless for what seemed an eternity because she of all people understood this meant the best and most important turning point in one's life.

"You are *so* fortunate and this will change your life in so many incredible ways," was the first thing out of her mouth. Barely able to contain her excitement and shaking with the feeling. "Children are a gift from heaven that will turn you into a different and better person than you ever thought possible."

"Well, that's good to hear!" Paul began trembling with excitement and anticipation too. Unable to believe they were doing this and that it hadn't led to the most exceedingly awkward moment for all of them.

“Mother and father will be the most important role you’ll ever take on and occupies top priority above everything else in life,” she continued like an oracle dishing out worldly wisdom effortlessly. “When will you know for sure?”

“We’ve just come from the doctor’s office and are waiting for the final results now,” Paul’s lips clamped down tightly.

“Oh, that’s one of the greatest moments too! Waiting for the answer and not knowing if you’re entering that critical phase of life. So thrilling!” basking in her own similar experience all those years ago.

“We were just talking about how being parents will change our lives and transform us into different people than before but also think we’re ready for those challenges and changes. How did children change your life?”

“Everything changes...” she said without any reservation, “...mostly for the better and a lot of hard work. You become more of a whole human being due to them and discover who you are as a result of their development.”

“Wow, that’s amazing!” Sandy looked directly into her eyes, “We’ll become different people and change profoundly from the inside out too. Certainly encouraging and I’m looking forward to the changes in myself.”

“They’re very subtle and turn you into a person of great depth over time. Especially when you see your children growing into people you’re proud to have developed into independent human beings,” gazing at her husband who looped his arm through hers and pulled her closer.

“What’s your daughter doing in America?” Paul asked with an irrepressible grin, dividing his gaze between them and Sandy.

“She’s a corporate business analyst and her husband a systems analyst for a technology company. They live in Westchester,

New York very close to the city. Doing very well for themselves with two children in fact,” her eyes beamed and cheeks puffed up like hen showing off her chicks to the world.

“Amazing! That’s a beautiful area and it sounds like you raised her smartly, well-adjusted and primed for success in society!”

“She loves America but misses Japan a lot and will come to visit us at Christmas time. We’d love to know if you’re really pregnant and will give you our contact information so you can tell us for sure. I’m more than happy to give you some advice in the future, especially on how to cope.” The woman looked at her husband to see if he had any objections who seemed doubtful at first but softened his severe features after witnessing her eagerness.

“That’d be wonderful because we’ll definitely need advice from older and more experienced people like yourselves. We’re so concerned and overwhelmed by the thought of becoming parents at this point and don’t want to do anything stupid right from the start. Any help would be greatly appreciated,” Sandy brimmed with excitement and gratitude; unable to believe their luck at what started out as an inauspicious approach to a few strangers. It was as magical as their luck with the Halstons and brought similarly positive sensations to light, making her wonder if getting to know older people wasn’t an unqualified good in life.

“We’re more than happy to help the younger generation in any way we can. It’s something we don’t get much opportunity to do.”

“That’s great...Mrs...I’m sorry what’s your name?”

“I’m Shiori and this is my husband, Heizo. We’re incredibly pleased to meet you too.” Embracing them both before moving aside for her husband to do the same.

“Paul and myself were uncertain about approaching you initially and did so strictly on a whim but now we’re glad we did. Not sure you wouldn’t be offended and run away from us,” Sandy chuckled at the embarrassing admission.

“What else would you like to ask us?” Shiori slid easily into the role of motherly figure and teacher to this sprightly young couple at the crossroads of major changes and challenges.

They sat on some benches at the far corner of the park near a patch of thin, steeply leaning trees arranged in an arc-like fashion where Paul and Sandy let the elder folks choose their seats first and sat down wherever was left.

“Lovely spot, isn’t it?”

“Yes, do you live around here?” Paul stared at the shimmering high-rise condos and apartments all around the busy residential neighborhood.

“Yes, five minutes from here. We come here every evening for a walk and a bit of fresh air but never meet anyone...”

“Well, we’re glad to be the first!” Paul glanced at Sandy with an excited smile while bouncing his heels up and down at the same time.

“It’s been enjoyable talking with you too and you’re welcome to ask us anything you like,” the woman’s grin never left her face.

“I don’t even know what to ask anymore. Maybe you can tell us about your experiences with your first child and we can learn from that. OK with you?” Sandy sat eagerly with her hands clasped on her lap with her face tilted toward the woman.

“Hmmm...let me think...like you we were scared and uncertain when Sukura was born and I remember being nervous beyond belief but I recall myself more than my husband. When I first saw her cute little face in the hospital I forgot all about

that and simply adored and loved her more than anything in the world,” eyes growing wider with her brow moving up and down as she reflected on the vivid image. “Her eyes weren’t very clear and she struggled to see me because babies sometimes have trouble focusing on things but not always.”

Paul and Sandy sat up straight and listened closely, clasping their hands together on their laps captively. Glancing back and forth between the man and woman and becoming curious about the husband’s point of view because they wanted a preview of Paul’s potential reactions.

“This is great stuff,” Sandy sat up even straighter and leaned in more intently.

“When we took her home she cried most nights until about four weeks later probably because of the sudden change of location. She had adjusted to the hospital environment and coming home frightened her that long. Also, we had to get used to feeding her at the right times of day and night and figuring out what she wanted whenever she cried.”

“Babies cry for different reasons and you have to figure out why they’re crying?” Sandy further explained what she was referring to.

“Exactly!”

“Make a note of that, Paul...,” she chuckled, “...the basics of baby maintenance.”

Paul laughed at her, “Babies are generally high maintenance anyway so I guess that makes sense.”

“Let’s just pray ours isn’t one that cries all night!”

“Most babies do cry at night so you should take turns feeding and changing the baby’s diapers so you don’t fight over who does it every time,” the elder man wisely advised them.

“We never need to fight over anything to do with the baby

but should do everything possible to work together as a team instead. A baby presents an opportunity to combine forces and put all personal differences aside,” Paul attempted to be equally as insightful.

“That would be nice in theory but in reality it’s hard to get out of bed at 4 am to deal with a crying baby and naturally you’d want someone else to do it,” Sandy felt the need to bring him back to reality.

“You two will be fine,” Shiori smiled at them. “You seem like strong people and are willing to do whatever it takes to succeed as a couple.”

“That’s very important, isn’t it? People have to be willing to put the couple before their own personal wishes in order to make it work. Lots of people get into relationships thinking they should when their true nature tells them they ought to be alone. These are generally people who find it difficult enough taking care of themselves. It can be heartbreaking for those who get together with people like that and they’re usually men,” Heizo frowned with lips stretched across his face soberly.

“That’s a good point. I know people like that and used to be one myself,” Paul reflected back on his early college days, “The lone wolf syndrome of wanting to be alone is a romantic image a lot of men buy into these days. Jumping from one woman to the next without sticking to any long-term is a twisted ideal men are taught to emulate and brag about.”

“True...,” Heizo agreed, “...even in my day that was the model to follow. Some men resist that image and have good relationships besides, ignoring signs from the wider society and following their own internal voice instead.”

“Are you talking about yourself?” Paul wondered as he watched the features on the old man’s face transform from

thoughtful to happy and sad. Smiling at the idea of the old man being a wild and crazy youngster at some point in his life.

“I was a much different person when I was young as most people are,” his face blank and personal thoughts inscrutable on that assertion.

“I hope I have good memories like yours when I get on in age,” Paul gazed into Heizo’s eyes while clasping his hands more tightly.

“You’ll have better ones than me in this liberal age,” he projected.

“Maybe too liberal for my taste.”

“The first few months of the baby’s life you’ll learn so much about raising an infant and yourselves as a maturing couple. Seeing yourself personally and each other in a completely different light as the baby becomes a mirror making you look deep within your souls and figuring out who you are while determining what raising a child means and what it needs to survive,” Heizo continued with a gaze that darkened and intensified with each leap deeper into memory.

“It’s very primal and instinctual,” Sandy sounded excited at the prospect, “Taking care of children makes you aware of fundamental drives and hidden inner qualities you didn’t know you had I guess.” A thought that came out of nowhere straight to her lips.

“That’s very true and taking care of a helpless being part of you both is an experience with such profound psychological effects you can’t even begin to imagine until you’re actually involved in the situation,” Shiori glanced down at her hands and stretched her fingers out as she relayed this information.

“I can certainly understand that.”

“You’re both very helpful and I don’t feel so scared of facing

this responsibility if it does come true,” Sandy gazed at Paul with her face downcast bashfully.

“The biggest change to your lives will be how you view yourselves and each other. Please try to remember that. Everything you know about your own life experiences and how you view your place in the world will change. You’ll also have to adjust to different roles in your personal lives and society too.”

“You mean not only do you see yourself and your spouse in a completely different way but society also views you differently?” Sandy hung on her every word with her head tilted up and toward her curiously. “That’s what you mean by everything changes?”

“All of your behavior changes without you realizing it. Your role as mom and dad will take front and center as primary and most important and the world views you as more mature and responsible which is a good thing in many cases. Not all parents are that way of course but that’s the way most people see it,” she went on without fail at shotgun speed (completely in her element now).

Sandy and Paul looked as though the knowledge being dropped on them was reverberating through their bodies like tuning forks hit with all the right frequencies to achieve the right pitch. Wave after wave of realization washed over them and their eyes opened wide and remained that way for twenty minutes at a time. Sandy’s mouth dropped open and she gaped at the couple with an expression which changed seamlessly from smiling warmly to listening intently.

“We should exchange information because it’s getting late now and we have to rise up early for an event at work tomorrow. You probably want to go home too and I feel like we’re keeping

you here,” Paul interrupted because Sandy found it impossible to tear herself away from them. He sensed that clearly by her attitude.

“We can sit and talk with you two all night long. You’re very interesting people,” Shiori stared into their eyes before glancing back at her husband for confirmation of the sentiment.

“I can assure you it’s been an invaluable experience for us,” Sandy confirmed with a glance back at her man too. “It’s given us a real world understanding of what it’s like to raise a child in the first stages of shock, fear and adjustment.” Sandy exhaled as an indication of her relief.

“Yeah, now I’m actually hoping to become a father just to experience those personal changes within myself which I view as a fascinating life perspective switch and maturity development program from the impressions you’ve given me today...,” Standing up straight and lifting this chin.

“It certainly will be and that’s the right attitude to have,” Heizo put his hand on Paul’s shoulder.

Next morning they woke up after a rough sleep of approximately equal dreams and nightmares based on all the potential life upheavals on the horizon for both of them. Sandy got up first and made breakfast for both of them, filling up the coffeemaker after placing a new filter under it before starting to cook. It was a bit difficult at first because she hadn’t slept well due to nagging thoughts in her head but managed to tackle the demanding motor skills with freshly-woken vigor. She noticed a few message alerts on her phone as she glanced at it on the table like an executioner ready to terminate her carefree existence and happiness forever. Resisting the urge to read them because she wanted to get the news at the same time as Paul in order to have their first reactions together and perhaps

even initiate a conversation that would benefit them both and allay any remaining fears or insecurities over it.

She could hear Paul stirring in the bedroom which made her worry a bit because it meant the moment of truth was coming closer every second. She knew the first question out of his mouth would be about the pregnancy test so bowed her head and averted her eyes from the bedroom where she heard him stretching and yawning loudly.

“Sandy? Where are you?” his scratchy and crackling voice called out to her as he opened the bathroom cabinet to retrieve his razor to shave. “Wow, that wasn’t a peaceful sleep last night, was it? More like a tossing and turning battle to get the most comfortable position without success!”

She didn’t answer and pretended not to hear. Clanging the pans and plates loudly enough to mask the sound. She cracked a couple eggs and watched as they spread across the pan which reminded her of her own ovaries oddly enough. Scraping the pan with unnecessary intensity and thinking she felt something moving around in her stomach at the same time but was probably just her imagination. At least she hoped it was...or did she? She smiled at her own indecision and her initial reaction was countered by thoughts of her holding up a baby boy (it had to be a boy!) with a little white stroller at her feet and friends and family all around smiling. She cherished that image a lot more than the first one of being on a birthing table in pain or waddling around like a duck eight months pregnant.

She started in on the toast and bagels next and everything was prepared and ready by the time Paul emerged from the bedroom with his hair slicked back and gelled like a barber from the 1920s. This made her smile as she thought he was

doing his best, consciously or unconsciously, to appear the perfect father figure. Not wanting to let on that she recognized this fact and going on about her business setting up the table while acting oblivious to everything else.

“Good morning,” Paul kissed her on the cheek like a much older man might do in an old black and white film. She had to smile at this too because it was just *so* adorable!

“Are you hungry? I think I made quite a bit more food than necessary but it’ll certainly give us a chance to build up our strength for the day ahead. Are you ready for work?”

“Work? It’s Saturday, did you forget?” he laughed at her. “We only have to go in for a couple hours to meet the parents and socialize while indulging in free food and entertainment.”

“You mean long speeches about the school’s mission and progress?” She laughed back at him. “That’s what you consider entertainment?”

“You got me there but I’m hoping the food will be fabulous at least. The school’s functions should have some of the best food in Japan if their commitment to excellence has any bearing on it.”

“It’s a good thing you’re around to keep me straight,” she confessed outright, “I was getting ready to dash off like a rabbit when I’ve got all the time in the world to just relax this morning. Ahhhhh...” nestling back into the chair and slumping down.

“Feeling better? I think it’s gonna be a fun day today. We’ll get praised for being the great teachers and animal handlers we are keeping their brats in line while hobnobbing with Tokyo’s elite parentage.”

“Doesn’t sound so bad when you put it that way,” relishing the image.

“Also a good opportunity to get together with the other

teachers at the school and never ceases to amaze me that we don't spend more time with them. Every time we get together the mood is energetic and uplifting to say the least," Paul's eyes lit up with all the social possibilities in Japan.

"Hey! Now that's a great idea! Let's see if we can coax them into making an entire night of it but the only problem is we'll be in dress clothes so we might want to come home and change or we could simply resolve to doing the town in our Saturday best," staring into her coffee cup with a multitude of thoughts.

"Or we could bring jeans and t-shirts along and change at the office," Paul with the flash of inspiration.

"But what about the others? They may want to do the same so we'll have to wait for them while they go home and change."

"Simple, let's message them before they get to the office. If they're onboard then they can bring their own clothes too. Sound good?"

"You're a genius, Paul! You really do think of everything at times!" Bubbling praise while balancing a chunk of fried egg on a fork.

"That's why you married me, cookie! I'm the real thing baby!" chuckling and dismissing the compliment out of hand.

Sandy instantly directed her attention to the phone after recalling the message alert from the doctor. Yes, it was positive and she caught her breath since she'd completely forgotten about it; flipping the phone around after opening it and putting it up to Paul's face. He squinted to read it and froze for a prolonged period of time with food still in his mouth. Suspending his chewing as his eyes rose up to meet hers with a blank stare like he'd been hit in the face with a mallet and both sitting still for a moment looking at each other and down at the splay of food in front of them, feeling as if they were screaming

down a bottomless pit with blurred sidewalls streaking past at lightning speed.

Paul started chewing and swallowing first as Sandy held onto her slice of toast like a sole grip on reality. He avoided looking directly at her because he couldn't face her in her new role and status yet: she was no longer the free and easy young girl he knew but an older and more mature maternal figure. This intimidated Paul and made her seem distant, inaccessible and lofty. In the past few minutes she had transformed into something he had to view and treat in a completely different light. Fear crept into his thoughts about how their relationship and interaction would change as a result of this as he watched her start eating again and seemed to notice her features becoming more stern and tight; falling effortlessly into the maternal role. Her face was no longer slackened, loose, jiggly and goofy as it formerly was and this also intimidated him as he could see her becoming more like his own mother.

"You OK?" he ventured while looking down at the table before glancing up at her quickly. "You look like you've been run over by a freight train or something." He didn't know whether it was the right thing to say but what was? What *were* the right words under the circumstances?

"Think I have and actually thought I'd be mentally prepared to deal with this but now that it's actually happened I'm experiencing a new set of emotions every second. Feel like I'm going crazy inside or something." She bit into the toast and a little smack of butter remained on her lip. Paul thought this very funny and wanted to laugh out loud but resisted the impulse because she was in such a vulnerable state and on the verge of franticness as her face appeared intense and defensive.

"Paul...I'm lightheaded...how do I cope with this? I feel like

my entire world is changing and it's overwhelming me."

"What can I do to help? Your face concerns me to be honest..."

"Sorry. I feel like I'm about to explode or am already exploding inside. Can't believe this is happening now that it is," her mouth twisting painfully and crookedly which made his brows shoot up sharply. "Just hold onto me now, will you?"

He didn't need any encouragement in that regard even though he feared her now in the vaunted primal role of mother. She wasn't the same person anymore and even though this was starting to excite and fascinate him was still a faint feeling overshadowed by the much stronger sensation of her heightened status.

"Feeling better?" cradling her close and kissing the top of her head. He moved his hand down her belly to see if he could feel anything kicking in there but felt silly after realizing there wouldn't be any at this early stage of the game. "It won't actually become real to us till we tell our parents. What do you think?"

"Doesn't feel like it'll ever be, does it?"

"It does and doesn't. In one way it's more real than anything I've ever experienced in my life and my stomach feels like there's a lead anvil inside and in another it hasn't fully dawned on me how much this changes everything."

"Changes you at the very core of yourself and what priorities you have internally and that's the most difficult thing to adjust to at first." She nestled against him and let her body fall limp in his arms.

"The internal change is profound and thorough, isn't it? It's like there's a construction project going on in your soul turning you into something you're not yet prepared to become."

"We'll adjust to it eventually but first have to get used to the initial shock and allow the secondary and tertiary shocks

to wash over us in waves. It will, you know, because all life-changing shocks have aftershocks just like earthquakes in the soul and spirit," she determined wisely and thoughtfully.

"Tertiary? Aftershocks? Didn't realize you were such an earthly philosopher, Sandy Pants!"

"Becoming a mother makes a girl that way." Looking down at her hands and fanning out her fingers before drumming them on the table.

"How many hours before we have to be at the parents meeting? It starts at 12:00, right?"

"Think so, but we should show up an hour early or so to help set things up, get things organized and generally be on the scene in support of whatever's necessary or whoever comes in before the main event."

"We have a position to uphold, don't we? Have to make a good showing of it," she smirked with guarded satisfaction at the thought.

"We're managers now. Big wigs and movers and shakers in Japanese society and those are the responsibilities we must accept now," Paul explained in a jaunty and humorous tone.

She frowned at his silly characterization of their occupational importance because she took it a lot more seriously than he did.

"What do you think? Should we break the news to the other teachers? It doesn't become real until we tell someone else," scanning her face for any subtle change in emotion.

"Have to bite the bullet sooner or later, don't we? They'll need to know eventually and there's no use trying to hide it from them. It's nothing to be ashamed of or conceal from people anyway." Her face stiffened as she looked at him.

"Exactly and straight to the point! Better to get it over with so we can start adjusting to our new roles and be interesting to

see how other people treat us now that we're parents. Wonder if it'll be a major shift?"

"As long as they don't treat me like I'm old. That I would hate."

"They'd just be acknowledging your obvious maturity and higher social status," Paul smirked at her. "You're a mom now, kiddo. Face the music!"

"OK, smartass, you win. We might as well let everyone know as soon as possible which will make it more real to us as you astutely point out."

"It'll be a bold first step into parenthood," Paul assured her with a faint smile that seemed to fade in a cloud of uncertainty.

They got ready as quickly as possible based on the premise they had a profoundly new and vital purpose in mind that extended well beyond themselves. Their steps were more lively and organized than before and geared toward the goal of getting the most done in the shortest span of time. Subsequently, time itself became something they were instantly more aware of and happy to embrace as an ally. Sandy stared at Paul brushing his hair and viewed him as a strong, virile figure rather than a bad boy doing everything possible to prove his manhood through extreme and irresponsible actions.

"I already feel like I'm going through some great transformation," she observed while applying her makeup carefully and sparingly. Her goal no longer to make herself as pretty as possible but a model of motherhood to the rest of the world.

"What do you mean?" glancing at her as though she held some secrets he wasn't privy to but she was.

"I don't know...I'm not a girl anymore but one hundred percent woman and there's no turning back for me now. Nothing can ever change that for the rest of my life," as he

stared into her eyes with a sadly reflective smile.

“Guess that goes for me too. I feel like all the boyish stuff has gone out the window and every action I take in the future has to be meaningful and true for the child and myself,” face drooping as he felt some core internal skin shedding inside him.

“Funny, isn’t it? Now we’re like bona fide members of society and humanity for the first time and not merely loose young cannons unleashed on the world to do as much damage as possible. Our role has changed to upholding the values of the society around us instead of doing everything possible to undermine and defy them.” She shared while rubbing her cheek with blush.

“We’re both facing lots of emotions and internal changes that’ll keep developing for a long time to come. Maybe as long as it takes until the child is old enough to leave home. I wonder if that’s what all parents go through?” Coming up behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders and squeezing gently.

“Probably depends on the parents. We’ll be alright no matter what happens but in terms of character and emotional state I think we’re ready to handle it. We’ve dealt with all the life changes so far quite gracefully in my opinion.” He assured her while brushing his fingers through her hair.

“We’re worrying way too much, is that what you’re saying?”

“We’re a lot better than we think we are...especially as a team because we make each other stronger,” he grinned confidently and kissed the top of her head again.

“OK, I’m ready. Thanks for the vote of confidence.” She stood up and hugged him slightly hunched over.

At the office, Sandy glided around the room with the widest smile on her face, chatting lively and effortlessly with parents, making silly faces at the children and teasing them as they ran

around the base of her feet. She was totally in her element and answered all questions put to her by parents openly and directly and when other teachers appeared nervous or struggling under the pressure, she slid over and helped them out. Janet especially seemed to be overwhelmed by it all and wasn't fond of events like this in the first place. Sandy stood beside her and gave detailed accounts of students' progress, behavior and every other little thing she could offer to leave parents smiling and satisfied.

"Thanks, Sandy. I was really getting a grilling from the mother of one of my worst students. She was trying to place the blame on me why her son wasn't getting better grades and was even suggesting I need to improve my teaching methods. Genuinely thought I was going to explode since the kid is a completely undisciplined brat!" Janet's face turned red and she glanced side-to-side to see if anyone could hear her.

"Discipline begins at home and it's likely something they're teaching or not teaching him causing his bad behavior. Don't worry about it because it's not our problem but hers at the end of the day. That being said, we need to be diplomatic no matter whose fault it is." Sandy's face glowed brightly and her cheeks pumped lively as she relayed this info to the thoroughly stressed teacher. Janet seemed to notice the change in her and couldn't help wondering what the reason was. Her eyes rose up and she studied Sandy as though taking in a different person.

"That's very true. You seem so happy today. I wasn't expecting you to be such a *force majeure* at the parents' meeting today! I'm sure the director will be happy because you're leaving all the parents with a glowing impression and a smile." Janet's raised eyebrows didn't fall a bit as she took in Sandy again and again in recurring cycles.

“You’re impressing the hell out of everyone including myself,” Victor came over after catching Janet’s last remark.

“I feel on top of the world today. Don’t know why...well, that’s not exactly true, I do know why but can’t tell you yet. Not *here* and not *now*. What are you guys doing later? Are you onboard with having a little afterparty celebration as we mentioned earlier? Did you bring a change of clothes?” She glanced around at their faces with a hopefulness that was almost pleading.

“I did...” Janet volunteered, “...but what’s this all about? You’re not leaving us for a better job, are you?”

“Yeah, I think the director’s worried about that happening because you two are becoming more popular than him with the corporate administration.”

“What better job? This is the best one we’re likely to find at any salary. Besides, we’re already settled in and love our daily routine.”

“It’s a great routine, isn’t it?” Janet assured her, “This place feels like home away from home for me too.”

“I agree wholeheartedly with that. I’ve talked with several teachers at other schools and we have nothing like the drama and conflicts with staff and other teachers they do. We’re very, very lucky at this school,” Victor’s smile revealed a supreme satisfaction with the situation like a mirror reflecting back on himself.

“We have some big news to share with you when we get together later on,” Sandy notified them all with wide eyes and a cheeks puffy with barely containable excitement.

“What is it? Now you’ve got me all in stitches,” Janet stared directly into her eyes with lips hanging loosely on every word.

“Can’t say anything yet even though I’m torturing you a bit,”

Sandy smiled with her head tilted to one side and stroking Janet's arm in a supportive way. "We've only got two hours left so work the room and eat some more awesome food. You'll know in a few hours what the great secret is."

"They're leaving us," Victor rubbed his eyes and pretended to sob out loud; crunching on a cracker.

Sandy went over and put her arm around his shoulder with a tight squeeze. "I just said we're not leaving. Do you think I'd lie to you about something like that?" in all seriousness, frowning a little.

"You want the truth?" he smirked.

"Of course not because I know what you'll say."

"Do you?"

"Can't wait a while longer?"

"I'm just kidding you. Be back later, there's a parent who's been waiting a long time to speak to me so this heated debate will have to be continued." Victor was off with a quick nod and a fancier step than Fred Astaire.

"He's such a character, isn't he? The kids love him though," Janet shared a toothy grin with Sandy.

"Speaking of that, I need to get back in the thick of it and mingle with the guests before they get the notion I'm avoiding them. Don't want to lose my status as the friendliest administrator at the entire school who makes parents feel like they're part of the process." Sandy glanced around at all the people milling around with a worried look and hurried off. When the event was over and the guests gradually made their way to the door in smaller and smaller groups, Paul stood bowing and shaking hands with a smile on his face that stuck and remained there like a permanent fixture. Enjoying every minute of the social opportunities therein and seeking to please

everyone because he was more pleased to be among them than they were with him.

“Paul, you’re having way too much fun with this and seem to be interacting with more enthusiasm than ever before.” Sandy’s brows rose up and she stared into his eyes with a question.

“I even see children in a different light without trying because something has shifted in me. They’re no longer just theoretical objects other people have I can keep at a distance,” he confessed candidly (surprising even himself).

“They’re always unpredictable and keep you on your toes, don’t they? We can’t act like they’re something that won’t touch us after business hours anymore, right? Is that kind of how you see it?”

“Exactly.”

Matt appeared next to Paul from the bathroom as he was performing his goodbye rituals at the door as part of his duties, overhearing what they were talking about and looking puzzled, “What’s different about the kids?” Nodding to one of the parents on the way out.

“The kids? They never change,” Paul assured him, “We were discussing our own attitudes toward them changing.”

“For better or worse? Lots of teachers get cynical on kids after working with them too long so better watch out or it might happen to you!” Matt warned with a furrowed brow that showed he was concerned it might happen to him.

“Hasn’t happened to you yet and you’ve got more experience than any of the rest of us here,” Paul revealed which seemed to deepen the concern on Matt’s face.

“Better not!” Sandy relayed in the hope it wouldn’t happen to her as she avoided showing too much on her face.

“Me too,” Paul winked at her and bowed at the last few parents

exiting through the front door. “Well, folks we did it! We managed to make the school look a child’s paradise on earth, keeping all the mama and papa bears happy!” Paul clapped and rubbed his hands together as though dusting them off.

“Let’s change and get the hell out of here folks,” Paul glanced around at their faces. “First I’m gonna check if the director’s got any feedback or remarks about our performance today. Wish me luck!” Kissing Sandy on the cheek and passing her a cryptic look to prepare for the big announcement.

The others scurried off to retrieve their backpacks and pop in the bathroom to remove their dress clothes and into something more fitting for wild and wooly adventures throughout the streets of Tokyo. All excited from the stimulation of intense, high-pressure social activity of juggling families and children in a work setting. A situation requiring them to project an image of reliability and responsibility to everyone in attendance throughout the day. Now, thankfully, that pressure was off and the need to cut loose came on like a rush of water.

“What do you guys want to eat and do you want it to be cheap or expensive? That’s the burning question we all now face,” Paul frowned comically, pretending it to be a monumental decision.

“I’m easy,” Janet’s eyes popped open equally as comically.

“Me too,” Matt was the only serious one.

“I guess it’s up to us to take the reins regarding the cheap or expensive food question,” Sandy glanced at Paul just back from the director’s office with feigned worry on her lips.

“Let’s go on the cheap...,” Janet helped out, “...payday’s still a couple weeks away and we need to save money if we plan on staying out late tonight or venturing out on a long excursion tomorrow. We’re still getting together on Sunday, aren’t we?”

“Of course. We haven’t forgotten our pledge to become

more intimate with the coworkers we've neglected for so long. Definitely sticking to *that* promise as we need to build stronger relationships with those closest to us."

Paul had an incredibly large grin on his face and a lively step after joining them. Apparently the latest word from the director was nothing but positive news and he'd praised them to the rafters.

"Paul looks happy so the feedback must've been good," Sandy smirked with a little giggle. "Haven't seen a smile like that in ages."

"You might never again..." he fired back, "...and now would be the perfect time to request a bonus because the boss is ecstatic about our performance today."

"Raises for everyone because the boss is in good spirits today!" Janet blurted out while jumping up and down and dancing in a circle.

"You wish!" Sandy punched her arm and gazed down the hall toward the director's office with a smile. "That being said, might not be the worst time in the world to ask for a raise. We haven't had one this year."

"It's automatic, remember guys? We get a 5% raise each year without asking. If you want to be greedy and ask for more, up to you, but we're already earning more than most teachers in Tokyo...this being one of the top schools in the city."

"With that, let's get out of here immediately instead of hanging around here all day. There's Matt...c'mon bro, we're all waiting on you."

Matt came down the hall with his work clothes in his hands trying to stuff them into a duffel bag before stowing them away in a classroom locker. He appeared again pulling his pants up, grinning and nodding at them.

“Alright, let’s do it!”

“You’re a rock star, Matt. Your wavy hair looks like you belong in an 80s metal band or something. How do you do it?” Victor asked with a quick brush through his own hair.

“What?”

“Manage to look so damn good at your age?” Victor’s tone was sharp and obvious with jealousy and admiration combined.

“Japanese diet I guess. Eating right and not too much at any one time more than likely,” Matt said without bragging but merely stating facts.

“Good genetics would be my assessment.”

Matt chuckled at this, “It’s my youthful attitude and working with children that keeps a spring in my step and a smile on my face!”

“Yeah, nothing like the little folks to keep you on your toes adopting a fresh outlook on a minute-by-minute basis,” Janet determined with a smile somewhere between laughter and tears.

They all filed out the door and down the stairs in perfect lockstep like a tight-knit group in sync both mentally and physically. Strolling in complete unity down the sidewalk and forcing everyone else out of the way (completely unaware of the inconvenience they were causing); on a different plane of experience so to speak after facing the barrage of parents with eagerness and enthusiasm and total commitment to the task at hand. Now it was time to cut loose from all the pressure of the past few hours and solidify their bonds as comrades-in-arms. Most likely christened in alcohol.

“Noodles...that’s what I feel like eating now but I almost always feel that way since coming to Japan,” Sandy confessed at the head of the group. Feeling it her right to give group

directions as the self-appointed mother hen/ den mother now.

“Depends what kind of noodles but I’m extremely fond of Japanese broth more than anything else to be honest. Japanese perform some real magic with soup broth that’s the stuff of legend!” Paul added, wondering if anyone else felt the same.

“Let’s start out at Harajuku today. It’s been a long time since we’ve been there and strikes me as a good place to begin the journey.”

“Harajuku? That place is nuts! Crowded beyond belief...” Janet’s eyes widened as if just the thought alone overwhelmed her.

“It’d be a nice change after spending all afternoon with parents and entertaining their kids. Maybe it’s just me,” Sandy glanced at the subway station entrance, realizing that they had to make a decision soon.

“It’s far,” Paul pointed out.

“OK by me. I could do with a long train ride now to get as far away from the school as possible. Prolonged movement would be a much-needed mental escape from the past four hours.”

“Good point,” the others agreed verbally or otherwise, “Can’t argue about that.”

The train rocked Matt and Janet to sleep as they sat together beside an older couple who didn’t mind being leaned on as luck would have it. They actually thought it was funny and realized the two were exhausted from the drooping mouths that so obviously gave them away. Other riders on the train stared at the group of travelers who seemed to be more sure of their purpose than everyone else around them. Eager, energetic with a definite focused energy that was hard to ignore. What was it about them?

“Let’s get off at the next stop,” Sandy shook the two bench

bums awake. “You guys alright? Apparently the day took a greater toll on you than expected.”

They awoke with startled and sleepy expressions. Abruptly jolted into awareness with upright backs and necks, glancing left to right in fear.

“Wow, are we there already?” were the first words out of Janet’s mouth.

“Yes! Let’s hurry up before the doors close!” Sandy pulled her up followed by Matt dragging his feet in a hazy consciousness.

“I didn’t realize how sleepy meeting and greeting parents could make a person.” Matt scratched the back of his neck and turned his head around as though trying to relieve a muscle spasm.

They skipped up the stairs alongside a vast crowd trying to stay grouped together but managed to lose Victor in a mesmerized state at all the action around him. He was overly excited about exploring the famed district in Tokyo after viewing some pictures of the exotic and extravagant fashion styles on his phone. He walked around in confusion and worry while glancing around at all the people passing by before deciding the others were probably waiting for him at the exit.

“This is strange,” he said to himself after not spotting them anywhere near the doors. “Why wouldn’t they wait for me here?” He moved off to the side to get out of the way and peered around even more intently before attempting to send them a text message. At first he avoided removing his phone from the backpack since it was too inconvenient to take off with tons of people passing by. After ten minutes his concern grew like a giant stone in his gut with no clear way of resolving the situation. Suddenly he felt a tap on his shoulder and turned around to see Paul frowning and glaring at his watch.

“What the heck happened to you, Vic? We thought you met a hot girl and eloped or something,” chuckling at the thought of that actually happening. Sandy appeared a few seconds later, also frowning at the fright and shock Victor caused them all.

“You alright? Where did you wander off to?” she grabbed him by the back of the arm and pulled him forward forcefully.

Victor’s face was like a child’s after being slapped and shaken into obedience by his parents as he was dragged forward between Paul and Sandy. They seemed to be driven by an overwhelming desire to keep him under their wing and under watchful eyes for the rest of the day since he might stray from them again.

“You guys are really upset over this,” Victor chuckled awkwardly to himself, “I got lost because I was noticing all the people and the beautiful new station just built. I’m not stupid or prone to wandering around aimlessly like an old man or anything. You guys are seriously overreacting to this situation. Relax and let go of me. You’re making me feel like a charity case with Down’s Syndrome or something!”

“I didn’t want to say anything but...,” Matt giggled at the characterization while implying it was appropriate.

Victor chuckled with a droopy face and spacey stare like a mentally absent person, leaning into the criticism with an amusing flair. Paul lightened up a bit and released him at the same time Sandy decided it was a good idea to do the same.

The shockingly colorful attire of the guys and girls in Harajuku district was something to behold as the teachers’ heads jetted to-and-fro with gaping stares. Some girls had pink, purple or black cake-painted hair with a variety of accessories on them and their clothes too. Others wore multiple layers of quirky shirts and coats with spotted scarves or furry boots that

made them look like hip cavewomen or something and heaps of neon-colored makeup were displayed on the faces of girls and boys alike. It was even clownish in some regards without being altogether unappealing or ridiculous, even with the party-style hats some of them wore on their heads. In most cases edgy-artistic and flashy-trashy without being outlandish or overly off-putting.

“A feast for the eyes!” Janet blared out at high volume with her head moving around on a swivel base. “All the hipsters in Japan are here!”

This made Paul chuckle, “Hipsters in force and on parade! What could be better than that?”

“They’re really into it, aren’t they? Pretty cool,” Sandy walked by a group of girls dressed in something she described as “cosplay” or Japanese manga style.

“Some of these people don’t even look real, they’re like cartoon characters!” Victor singled out one particular girl with glistening white hair and black makeup accents. Goth in appearance, wearing a sexy skirt with a slit up her right leg. She had black and white striped socks and thick soled shoes that made a clunking sound when she walked. “Look at that one!”

“She’s one of my favorites so far!” Paul confessed with an admiring look. “I love the goth look on women to be honest and even used to be into that sorta music in high school.”

“You dressed that way too?” Janet looked him up and down, imagining him in black with white face paint.

“I’m ashamed to admit it but yes...” staring at the girl who looked like one of his early girlfriends, “...I was a mix of punk rocker and goth all rolled into one. Things were slightly more ambiguous in those days.” Trying to give them some image of

what he used to look like without disgracing himself too much.

Sandy had to smile at this, "Wish I could've seen you at that time. Would've been a precious image to know how you've transformed over the years."

"I'm glad you didn't because I'd have a lot to live down now," Paul felt a wave of relief wash over him.

"I'll bet you were cute," she giggled, trying to imagine him with spiky hair and a corpse-like Misfits face.

"I'd be right at home in this neighborhood if I still looked like that. Let's walk a bit farther and get something to eat. I'm ridiculously hungry at this point."

"That was a long train ride, wasn't it?"

"Felt my stomach grumbling the entire time but the train's movement helped to mask the feeling at least," Paul glanced down the road to see what selections were available among the rainbow sights and sounds assaulting him from all directions. Women dressed in manga attire were everywhere with kaleidoscopic lights on marquees and ceilings in tandem with neon and pulsing strobe lights. These sorts of trendy eateries were adjacent to more traditional, understated places with simple wood accents and subdued earthen tones.

"Gonna be hard to find something basic like noodles and pork around here," Paul frowned in deep worry while focusing on one particular place with a mirrored disco ball and flashing strobes out front. The music was throbbing out loud bass tones that reverberated down the street behind girls with rainbow-colored hair all dancing in pink and white baby doll dresses.

"I see something, any objections to street food? Let's go on the cheap like we planned, right?" Sandy reminded Paul of their pledge.

"I love cheap, you know that," Paul smirked and glanced

at the others for their reaction. Everyone nodded and Janet even grabbed Sandy's arm and pulled her forward with a high-stepping maneuver.

A few of the colorful cosplay girls said "hello" as they passed by strictly because they were foreigners, speaking in English as Sandy replied back as warmly as possible in Japanese. At first the girls raised their brows and placed their hands in front of their mouths in complete surprise, then smiled widely and shifted their weight from one leg to the other in semi-dancing fashion. Actually the motion was more like the side-to-side swivel of an animated doll. Sandy waved at first before walking over to hug each of them in turn. The girls giggled and touched her shoulder as she walked away from them.

"Sandy's making new friends with the hipster crowd today," Paul grinned with all the slyness of subtle mockery.

"Those girls are so cool. I love this place already," as the sights and sounds of the place overwhelmed her senses and penetrated her soul in a sense.

"We're never gonna get anything to eat at this rate," Paul complained with a frown at Matt whose face was haggard from hunger.

"Stop complaining so much. We're on our way now."

They stopped at a little street stall next to one of the louder restaurants and clubs in the district with a little woman working furiously behind a steaming pot, balancing bowls and chopsticks in both hands like a premier maestro street juggler on parade. She looked up as they approached and pointed at the things she was cooking as if they wouldn't understand Japanese. Janet pointed first and ordered in Japanese before sitting at the pop up table and chairs off to the side of an entrance to a particularly loud restaurant. People walked by and glanced at

the group of foreigners sitting outside, taking their bowls to the table and wondering why they didn't go to regular restaurants since foreigners were perceived to have lots of money on the main.

"Delicious!" Matt blurted out after taking a long drawn out slurp which was pure heaven on earth to him. "But I guess anything would taste that way after consuming only snacks all day long."

Sandy finished hers first and let out a long sigh indicating she was more hungry than Matt but less vociferous about it. She sipped the broth and went back for another round because it was just *that* good and she was just *that* hungry.

"Sandy seems unusually hungry today," Janet observed her ordering and asking for additional meat and vegetables to be added to the second one.

"She's got good reason," Paul hinted while looking directly into her eyes and back down at his bowl again so as not to give too much away.

"Oh yeah? Why's that? Is she pregnant or something?" Janet laughed absurdly at the thought.

Paul froze for a moment and looked fearfully at Sandy because he didn't want to let the cat out of the bag too soon. He stayed silent without taking his eyes off her, who thankfully returned quickly to the table and relieved him of the responsibility of being the first to reveal the news. He dropped his head while avoiding Janet's gaze.

"Is *that* it?" Janet treaded lightly without taking her eyes off Paul first then Sandy. She figured it best not to press the issue too far since it was obviously a sensitive one and could elicit the wrong reaction if approached indelicately.

"Sandy, Janet wants to know something. She's just asked why

you appear so hungry today?” Paul’s eyes flicked up to hers then Janet’s.

“What do you want to know, Janet? Why I’m such a pig?” she laughed more than necessary under the circumstances.

“Well...,” Janet looked to Victor for support, “...you did say you had something to tell us,” as the throbbing dance music behind them drowned out the last few words.

“I do. I’m pregnant!” bouncing up and down in her chair and cupping her hands together in a gesture of excitement. “We found out this morning!”

Janet stood up and bent down to hug her. “Oh Sandy! That’s *wonderful*! What great news and something we’ll have to celebrate today. That’ll be the theme of the day and we can do it in the form of a baby shower!”

“Ok...,” Sandy frowned in confusion, “...but baby showers generally don’t occur until the baby comes right?”

“We can make our rules!” Janet defended her idea, “We’re in Japan now and can celebrate the baby’s arrival before it comes.” Laughing and hugging her again before smiling at the others at the table for support.

“I think it’s OK to bend the rules a bit since we’ve just received such incredible news,” Victor assured them with a tight smile. He also stood up and hugged Sandy and Paul while gazing at them both with a penetrating stare because his opinions of them had forever changed.

“I’m OK with that,” Sandy stuffed a bunch of noodles into her mouth before pushing a few back in that went rogue down her chin.

“You certainly have the appetite of a pregnant woman,” Paul was quick to point out and realized he’d have to be a bit more lenient toward her going forward. “Won’t be long before she’ll

be getting up at 3 am and eating yogurt and pickles.”

“That’ll be tonight,” Sandy warned him with a smirking grin, “Better watch out.”

“I’ll make sure to use earplugs and shut the door,” he smirked back with a touche attitude.

“I’ll wake you up and stuff your face with it, not allowing you to sleep one hour,” with hands on hips and a serious frown.

“They’re acting like mom and dad already, aren’t they?” Victor glanced back and forth at them, chuckling to himself.

“Leave her alone, she can eat whatever she wants because she’s eating for two now,” Janet came to her rescue and frowned at the insensitive male comments. “Cut her some slack. Oh! This is so exciting! Our first baby at school!”

“It’s crazy, isn’t it?” Matt smiled while staring at Sandy with a doting and probing gaze that enveloped her in visual velvet. “Children are such good news and really do bring joy into the world.”

“You have two kids yourself, don’t you Matt? I seem to remember you saying something about that when we first met.”

“I do and they’re all grown up and fiercely independent now.”

“There’s a prime resource for us,” Paul pointed out to her.

“Right under our noses,” Sandy was stunned by their luck of having someone like him at their fingertips.

“Sandy’s gonna be asking you a shit ton of questions, Matt. Better get ready for that because it’s coming!” Paul grinned as she gazed at Matt with her mouth still hanging open.

“I’m OK with that. I have a lot of experience to draw from, good, bad and ugly and I’m more than willing to share it with anyone willing to listen. If you gain anything from me to make your lives easier, I’ll feel like I’ve served a valuable purpose in life.”

“Great! You can definitely advise us since we’re both terrified and lacking experience on the child-rearing front. At least Paul is...” she chuckled at him.

“You’ll have to change my diapers too because I’m already peeing my pants over the entire prospect of becoming a father! I’m sure there’ll be lots of times I’ll feel overwhelmed by the new role thrown at me,” Paul frowned with an amusingly frightened look like he feared the thought more than anything else.

“Change them yourself baby boy!” Sandy yelled before grinning at the startled look on his face.

They all laughed at her seriousness and sudden screech that echoed throughout the restaurant; finishing their food after digging in with an immense hunger following the hors d’oeuvres and odd snacks they had to survive on for hours at the parents’ event. Nothing substantial enough to carry them through the afternoon but they managed anyway with grumbling stomachs like the noble, intrepid souls they were.

“I’ll be happy to give you any advice I can offer,” Matt assured her with a serious, fatherly look and deep furrows.

“We’ll consider you a permanent and invaluable resource then,” Sandy fired back with tremendous gratitude.

“It’ll be *our* baby, meaning the school’s,” Paul decided on an odd note and inscrutable, almost blank look. “Since it’s the first baby anyone’s had at the school as far as I know everyone will have a hand in raising him or her and we need help in picking out a name too. What do you guys think?”

“I have no idea. I hadn’t even thought of that,” Sandy glanced at Paul with obvious perplexity on her face.

“We’ll have to pick two names because I don’t want to know what the gender is until it’s born. I would rather it be a complete surprise to us,” Paul remarked in complete confidence.

“You don’t want an ultrasound?” like Paul had committed some mortal sin with that remark. “Everyone does it to at least view the health of the baby.”

“Still, that being said, I’d rather not know. Lots of people wait until after the birth to find out or at least they used to. Why not?”

“You don’t think it’s more important to check the health of the baby and make sure everything’s alright?” Sandy was excited with worry now. “You don’t want to know that?”

“There are other ways to check the health of the baby without knowing the gender. I just think the suspense will be thrilling not knowing,” Paul countered with brows raised and a twisted grin.

“I’ll have to think about it but maybe you’re right. It might be suspenseful and make things interesting right up till the last moment. You’re starting to convince me now and your parents did that, right?” watching every reaction on his face to see if memory served her right.

“My dad didn’t want to know because he was worried it might be a girl which would’ve depressed him throughout the term. Model parent, no?” Paul scoffed with cynical lines appearing at the corners of his mouth.

“Your dad’s alright, he’s just been through a lot in life, isn’t that what you told me once? He had a poor and deprived childhood and his father was an alcoholic. In one of your more sympathetic moments you explained that to me.”

“He has had a hard life but that doesn’t excuse all the things he’s done to me or my mom over the years. If he wasn’t so bitter about things and needing to dominate people all the time I might feel more sympathy for him but he’s such a complete asshole.”

“You’re pretty bitter about it yourself so let’s not dwell on that now.” Grabbing hold of his arm and rubbing it vigorously to make him feel good and change the subject. “Okay, let’s wait until the birth to find out the baby’s gender, keeping with the family tradition on your side at least.”

“Great! It’ll be a Sherlock Holmes mystery to the finish line! Thanks babe!” crushing her in his arms.

“Remember, you owe me big time because it’s going to be awfully suspenseful to the last day which I’m not good at dealing with. I’m only doing it to keep you happy,” her eyes darting back-and-forth, up-and-down at his facial expressions.

“And I want you to know how much I appreciate that. Suspense is good from my perspective, especially when it comes to bringing new life into the world. It’s one of the most important moments of our lives but it’ll be better if it’s more like the old days before ultrasound when people didn’t have the ability to know such things beforehand. Why spoil the surprise due to intrusive modern technology?” Paul began waxing lyrical but was perhaps taking it a bit too far.

Sandy had to laugh at his enthusiasm, “That’s quite an argument, although you might be overreaching a bit, don’t you think?” The others seemed to agree with Sandy because they frowned at Paul with gaping mouths, hoping he wasn’t serious.

“Two names is what we need folks...and good ones so let’s get started since everyone seems to be finished with their meal and can talk without displaying what’s in their mouths to the world. Come on guys, time to brainstorm for a boy and girl! That’ll add to the suspense and get everyone involved in the process,” Paul glanced around at their faces for agreement.

“That’s something personal between us, silly,” Sandy chided him with a slight pout and head tilted down in disapproval.

“Yeah, but it’ll be more interactive and inclusive to have our friends help us in choosing a name, don’t you think? Maybe they have better ideas than we do. What’s the harm? Nothing in my opinion.” Paul’s mouth stretched across his face and his eyes were sharp and serious.

“Wow, you’re hitting me with your best shots today, Pat Benatar,” Sandy complained only half-seriously. “I don’t know what to say in opposition to that.”

“Good,” Paul turned to the others. “Well, let’s have it. Any ideas, guys?”

“Maxwell if it’s a boy and Alicia if it’s a girl,” Victor blurted out instantly before taking a sip of tea freely available on the table.

Sandy raised her eyes in thought before letting them rest at a point on the wall behind them. “I don’t like Maxwell but Alicia’s not bad. Anyone else?” Starting to warm up to the idea of her friends helping them decide.

“Maxwell’s not bad but it’s kind of an older generation name, isn’t it? Not a huge fan of Alicia...sounds “grandmotherly” to me,” Paul decided with a thin grin.

“Percy, James or Darren if it’s a boy and Mallory, Sheena or Vicky if it’s a girl,” Matt suggested with extensive experience on the subject.

This made Sandy think and think hard. All the names sounded interesting in their own right even though Sandy didn’t think she agreed with most of them. She studied Matt’s face and could see he’d put a lot of thought into naming his own children so they would not only like their own names, since they’d carry them throughout their lives and would define them in a sense, but also so they wouldn’t be teased, mocked or called nasty names as a result.

“Matt does have some pretty good ideas and I’ll have to think about them. Alright, who’s next? Janet, what’s your take?”

Janet appeared worried because she valued Sandy’s opinion and thought her a comrade-at-arms in a foreign land so stepped lightly into the fold, “Mary, Betty or Greta if it’s a girl and Paul, Lionel or Timothy if it’s a boy.”

“Ooooooh...,” Paul chortled enthusiastically, “...Janet’s sticking with the classics and I like that!”

“What’s in a name?” coming to her own defense, “Only something to distinguish us from other people and not very much at that.”

“You mean because so many others have the same name as us?” Paul fished for clarification.

“Exactly. Unless you name your child something really out of the ordinary and then there’s a very good chance they’ll be made fun of in school because children rarely like standing out from the crowd.”

“At least not in a bad way, right?” Sandy helped her out because she agreed with her line of thinking.

“I think you missed the fact that Janet mentioned “Paul” as a potential boy’s name, proposing the idea of naming the child after ourselves. That would naturally lead to naming the child “Sandy” if it’s a girl,” he smacked his lips and seemed quite satisfied with himself.

Sandy’s eyes opened much wider and her gaze fixed directly on Paul. Paul didn’t say anything immediately after because his idea opened up doors and pathways in his thoughts he hadn’t considered before. Naming the children after themselves seemed eminently personal and profoundly intimate and seemed to tie the children to parents in ways that giving them different names didn’t or couldn’t. It felt supernatural and

spiritual, spooking Paul to his core because a child with his own name was like cloning himself or watching himself in a mirror for the rest of his life.

“Paul?” Sandy turned worried at his expression.

“I think it’s a good idea...,” blasting through a series of inner obstacles to speech.

“You do?” Sandy’s eyes grew wider and honed in on him.

“Well...yeah...I mean why not? You like your own name, don’t you? It’s served you well throughout your life and personally I think it’s a beautiful name.”

“Reminds you of the beach, does it?” chuckling at her own retort.

“Maybe...,” laughing in necessary relief, “...it’s a place I love to go so why not?” Cracking a beaming grin to remove the spell cast over them like a net.

“We don’t have to decide right now but that’s certainly not a bad idea. A duplicate of one of us with the same designation... but which one will it be?” smiling devilishly.

“That’s a good point. We’ll both be wondering who will carry on our namesake, adding to the tension and suspense up to the last minute. I’m not fully convinced we should name the child after ourselves but I like the idea of a competition between us that’ll likely increase the thrill,” Sandy bounced up and down in her seat as this thought replaced a sense of foreboding.

“Well guys we should go walk around a bit since we’ve all finished our meals and the starvation crisis has for the moment been averted,” Victor glanced around at them with a quick nod at the door because he felt they were getting too lazy and comfortable.

They attacked the streets with renewed vim and vigor after finally ingesting some substantive sustenance that aptly thrust

them into the sights, sounds and colors of magical Harajuku. Yes, what an incredible place it was too: so many young girls (and even some of the guys) dressed in the most intricate and neon/kaleidoscopic array of attire anywhere in Tokyo. At least it seemed that way as they walked among the lithe, crazy and disaffected youth that vibrant district had to offer. There was certainly no other place like it in the area (or on earth perhaps) they started to realize as they watched the odd sights shift and transform from crazy to crazier right before their eyes. That being said, it opened their eyes to a whole new world of costume-inspired fashion donned by an incredibly plucky group of folks.

“The students here put such exceptional detail and individual personal touches into their clothing and the little accents they adopt are impressive to say the least,” Janet bubbled effusively with her head darting back and forth at everything around her and every odd character in every imaginable pose. “This place is super cool and I could spend all day taking in the variety of dress-up styles and strange mannerisms of these eccentric characters.”

“It’s a side of Japan you never expect to see. They take their fashion very seriously around here without a doubt. Almost like a religion,” Sandy pointed out with her finger raised to her lips whimsically.

“Which is refreshing in a crazy kind of way.”

“Let’s mingle with them and make the most of it. I absolutely love this place!” Janet further explained as she skipped up to a group of youngsters smoking cigarettes in their bright purple, pink and yellow hair and crooked elbows, flair and flourish in spades. One girl with yellow hair and red, black and white hair pins swayed her head back and forth as Janet approached them.

“Hello, you guys look stunning!” was the first thing out of Janet’s mouth. “I mean where do you get your ideas for these cool costumes?”

The girl looked at her with a faint smile and gazed directly into her eyes with a probing stare. She was a teenager and looked up to Janet almost immediately, striking the girl as a responsible and dignified person who could be taken at her word.

“Nice to meet you. What a wonderful thing to say! A lot of people think we’re crazy, silly people and dismiss us because we’re young. They treat us like children,” the girl confided in Janet whose face turned blank as she didn’t realize anyone could view these creative youth that way.

“That surprises me. You guys look amazing and I would follow you if I could get away with it but can’t because of work.”

“I’m working as a fashion designer part-time. An intern at a company in Tokyo,” she explained as Janet’s eyes grew wider while taking in every word with undivided attention.

“Really? I’m sure you’re good at what you do from the way you dress!” Janet admired her pink and purple striped skirt with baby doll shoulder accents and ruffles close to her neck. She also had on furry white boots with brown and orange hearts near the top. “You’re so cool-looking,” Janet bubbled like a schoolgirl because she was truly jealous the girl had a lifestyle that allowed her to get away with such bold fashion choices.

“I like the way you dress too. Sometimes I like to dress normally and I’m not always flashy and extravagant,” the girl explained while glancing at her friends who were starting to take an interest in their conversation and circled around them.

“You don’t want the same look all the time, do you? It’s good to have some variety, isn’t it?” as Sandy, Paul, Matt and Victor

came over to see what was taking so long. Victor seemed to take a special interest in what was happening because he found the girls attractive and appeared to have a cosplay fetish too.

“Hello, I’m Victor. Nice to meet you all.” Smiling so widely the bottom of his face seemed twice as thick as the top of his head. “This place has the most amazing-looking people I’ve seen anywhere in Tokyo. Think I’ll have to come here more often now that I know it exists.”

“I’m Sakura...,” the tall girl replied, “...and these are my friends. We love to dress up and come here to share fashion ideas with other girls. We don’t live here but it’s our favorite part of Tokyo.”

“From what I’ve heard it’s pretty expensive to live in this part of Tokyo. One of the most expensive in the city I guess,” looking at her dress and trying to imagine the thin curvy features underneath without being too obvious about it.

“Pleased to meet you. We have some boys who like to dress up too but not as many as the girls. What do you think of them? Would you like to be one of them?” Sakura giggled with a sly grin and close examination of his clothes.

“I don’t know. I might be willing to try if I had the right guidance and direction on how to do it. As you can tell, I’m not much of a fashion expert,” brushing his hand down the length of his body.

“I think you look great. Not flashy or attention-grabbing but nice nevertheless,” Sakura assured him with a dismissive take on his concern. “It’s not necessary for everyone to be as wild as we are or we wouldn’t stand out from the crowd.”

“Good point. If we all looked the same no one would be different.”

“Not all people want this if it’s not their personality.”

“That’s very true. I would even go so far as to say most people

avoid being different but want to blend in as much as possible and remain unnoticeable,” Janet reflected on the issue.

“Especially in Japan. We’re considered freaks in our society because of the way we dress and how we act because we’re so conservative here. That’s one thing that creates a lot of pressure on us but is exciting to oppose at the same time,” the girl’s face looked worried and she frowned with a lock of glistening hair falling down her forehead.

“I can imagine since Japanese society doesn’t make allowances for people who are different. It’s very much about social conformity which is sometimes good because it keeps society in order and organized but at other times can be stifling and suffocating.”

“That’s true. It’s both good and bad at the same time. Societies where no one conforms, people don’t work together toward common causes and society breaks down and becomes chaotic. I can see it from both sides...positive and negative,” looking directly into Janet’s face before glancing up at people passing by.

“You’re your own person and inject beauty into the world just by being who you are! So stunning and amazing to see for anyone who glimpses you!” Janet smiled and hooked her arm through Sakura’s while walking over to her friends. “My name’s Janet by the way and these are my friends. We caught the train to this unique neighborhood because we heard it was like no other place in Tokyo.”

“It is very cool...” Sakura stared at her closest friend in the group, “...a place where we can do what we want and people compete to see who can dress in the most beautiful and flashy clothes.”

“You should have a competition and I’ll be part of it!” Janet

giggled, looking around them. “You make me want to come here and join your little group. This place is so colorful and vibrant unlike most places in Tokyo or anywhere in the world for that matter!”

“I couldn’t imagine Janet dressed up like the girls around here. That would be a sight to behold,” Victor smiled and gave his own little punchy titter. “Actually, you’d probably look pretty hot.”

“You think so?” Janet shifted her body into a model’s pose, leaning to one side with her left leg crooked up toward her knee.

“Absolutely! I still can’t believe you haven’t found a boyfriend here yet, Janet. You’re a very cute girl and you’ve got an easygoing personality too,” Victor pointed out with his brow deeply furrowed and head tilted toward her.

“One of the great mysteries of the universe, Victor!” Janet tapped her chin with her forefinger. “Most Western guys want Japanese girls because they’re so beautiful and I can’t compete with that.”

“You? Noooooo....! *Stop it!* A beautiful girl is a beautiful girl no matter what nationality,” Victor dismissed her legitimate concerns. “Seems to me you could get a good man anywhere in the world.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Vic! That means a lot. Based on what you’ve said maybe I’d have a better time attracting a man if I dressed up like one of the girls around here since maybe that’s what my ideal man’s looking for,” striking a different pose with her left arm on her hip and right leg bent toward her left knee.

“Could be but I doubt it. You look fabulous enough in regular and ordinary street clothes. Brings out your unique qualities

in my book because you have a radiance that shows perfectly when not overshadowed by distractions.”

“I don’t know how to take that,” she chuckled awkwardly.

“Take ‘em any way you can get ‘em!” Paul laughed at his own reaction to their conversation.

Janet frowned at Paul before looking back at Victor and over at Sakura because she wasn’t ready for any humor with regard to her personal situation. Life wasn’t ideal and definitely needed a change but she wasn’t sure how to do it.

“Janet, don’t worry, you’ll find someone good eventually. Lots of Western girls do in Japan and I believe you will in due course too. Like Victor said, there’s no reason you shouldn’t because you’re really cute and have a great personality.”

“Thanks, guys, guess I’ll keep believing and hoping against hope I’ll finally meet someone worthwhile. I’ve never had very much luck with relationships anyway, even back home where some of my boyfriends cheated on me.” Looking down at her feet before raising her gaze again.

“Relationships are a rocky road for almost everyone,” Paul observed while searching her face and hoping to comfort her. “Don’t know many people who’ve had an easy time when it comes to that. Remember Alex?” looking at Sandy.

“Who could forget?”

“He’s the most miserable person of all and dates a different girl every week because some girl broke his heart at age 10 or 11 from what he told me when he was drunk one time.”

“Drunk sincerity?” Sandy laughed at the thought.

“Yes, that was the only time he ever mentioned it and I haven’t heard a word about it since.”

“Anyway, we can’t let our past control who we are at present. We’ve simply got to find ways to leave it all behind us,” Sandy

gazed directly at Janet with narrowly focused eyes.

“She’s right,” Sakura agreed as the girls beside her nodded in agreement. “There are lots of people who would rather see us dead than do anything to help us. Bad people tend to influence us more than good in my experience.”

“That’s because we let them dig deeper into our psyches and leave longer-lasting impressions. If we deal with the hurt and injury they cause us and let ourselves heal from the inside we become stronger,” Sandy intimated to everyone’s surprise.

Paul looked at her with wide eyes and a hanging jawline, “Wow! Sandy...*very* profound! Pregnancy is turning my Sandy Pants into the Oracle at Delphi and it looks like I’ve married into major wisdom and insight!” chuckling at her.

Sandy slapped him on the shoulder, frowning, “Don’t make fun of me! That took a lot of serious consideration on my part. My brain hurts now!” she smirked at him.

“Don’t listen to him...” Janet pouted much too seriously, “... he’s a man and all they do is put us down for being who we are. They’re always making fun of us.”

“I’m not actually...I really think being a mother will turn her into a more thoughtful person who’ll teach me things for the rest of my life. Women have different insights and understanding of life that men can listen to and learn from. That’s one of the benefits of long-term relationships: learning from each other’s unique take on the world. Men and women alone don’t avail themselves of that and have too many “edges” that need to be sawed off their personalities before they become socially graceful I guess.” Paul glanced at Sandy’s belly as if the answer lay somewhere in there.

“Wow, Paul, that was *also* very profound,” Matt patted him on the shoulder before glancing back at Sakura at the girls.

“Parenthood’s having a positive effect on you already,” Victor agreed with Matt’s assessment, widening his eyes in admiration at their rapid transformation.

Sakura couldn’t help smiling at the way they interacted with each other, “Are you two married? You make a very nice couple if you don’t mind me saying.”

“Yes,” Sandy walked up and hugged her. Taking in the bright yellow paste in her hair, matching clothes with cute hair accents and warmed up to her instantly. Her hand caressed the ruffles on Sakura’s shoulder and brushed the side of her torso under the arms to get a sense of the fit and fabric.

“Like my outfit?” Sakura ventured with a big grin at Sandy’s appraisal of her carefully planned attire.

“I do. Do you make your own clothes? You must since I don’t see anything like it in stores.” Rubbing the white ruffles around her neck that encircled it delicately and blossomed out like a large flower with her neck as the stem.

“You guys want to walk with us?” Matt suggested after noticing Victor becoming fascinated with Sakura and hoping to tickle his fancy a bit and watch him get animated around the girls. It was truly entertaining seeing him in his element with the ladies because he turned into a totally different person.

“Sure,” Sakura looked back at the other girls because she felt impolite speaking for all of them. “You guys want to walk around with our new friends? It’ll be fun and interesting to accompany them I think.” The girls nodded and lined up behind and on both sides of her waiting for everyone to get moving.

“My friends think I’m the craziest and most eccentric one in our group by the way. I dare to go where the rest of them refuse to in terms of dress, attitude and behavior. I don’t drink or do drugs like some people in this district but I say whatever I want

and do whatever I want.”

“Maybe that’s why you don’t need drugs or alcohol...” Paul intimated with eyes and brows brought together at a tight point, “...people often need substances to liberate themselves from personal obstacles or emotions holding them back from expressing who they really are. If you can do it naturally, maybe you don’t need them.”

“That may be true, I don’t know,” she glanced at him briefly before looking around at people passing the opposite direction.

“Are you a student, Sakura?” Janet asked with her head tilted down at the ground which had some interesting brown bricks that caught her eye. “You seem very intelligent which makes me think you must be studying something.”

“I dropped out of college to pursue fashion design. I’m now in school to work on that. Not university.”

“We’re fashion designers,” one of the other girls mentioned; a short and cute girl with shoulder-length hair cut across the bottom at a sharp angle. She had red pasty cake hair covering half her face and a black gown with tons of colorful buttons (mostly of arrows pointing in different directions).

“I’m Niko,” bowing to them.

“I’d certainly buy clothes from you because I absolutely love making a splash with what I put on at times. It gives strangers something to talk about and I love that aspect about it,” Sandy examined the girl’s outfit more closely and liked it more and more with each passing second.

“Someday we hope to be famous and have our clothes on display in all the major cities and fashion shows. Next month we’ll attend Tokyo Fashion Week and get some new ideas while making connections to build our network in the industry.”

“Amazing! Maybe I can go with you if you don’t mind!” Sandy

jumped up and down with her hands cupped in front of her chest. "Never been to a real live fashion show before, only seen them on TV."

"Of course you can! We get free passes from the school and can invite as many friends as we want. You'll meet some amazing characters and see some cutting-edge fashion if you go with us," the girl explained with a hand on Sandy's arm.

"I'm sure I will and that's basically what I'm looking forward to," Sandy jumped up and down a second time with her shoulders bunched together.

"I'd like to go too..." Janet mentioned casually, "...I really love Japanese fashion and I might learn a few things about how to dress more in the style of the country I'm living in."

"Of course, but there won't be just Japanese fashion but styles from all over the world including France, Spain, Italy, America..."

"Guess fashion is international by its very nature. Should've realized that," Janet chuckled in embarrassment.

"We hope someday to be those creative people on stage with any luck," Sakura glanced up at the sky as if the answer lay up in the clouds.

"Do you hang out in this part of the city most of the time?" Janet asked with a flick of her wrist as she took in the bright shops and lively activity of people disappearing in and out of sight. "It's a special place and may very well become my favorite place in Tokyo!"

"Meaning you'll be spending a lot more time here now that we've discovered it?" Sandy winked at her comrade. "Think I'm feeling that vibe too!"

"All of us live outside the district because it's too expensive to live around here," Sakura noted with a nod at the other girls.

“Wow is all I can say about all the sights and sounds here!” Matt blurted out from behind them. He’d been trailing at a distance and looking through all the shop windows to see if there was anything that appealed to him. “I’m not much of a trendy or fashion aficionado but this place stimulates my senses like nothing else!”

“It does,” Janet stopped and walked beside him, glancing through the windows of clothing shops filled with hats and dresses in glitzy ritzy prints, books of all shapes and sizes and all manner of food that filled their noses with a desire to chomp everything in sight. Janet was particularly fascinated by a window display of triangular crepes with every topping imaginable: strawberries, chocolate, sweet cheese, etc.

“She’s died and gone to heaven!” Sandy approached and grabbed her arms from behind before hugging her. “Those do look truly incredibly tempting and as my pregnancy progresses I’ll probably crave every one of them.”

“You’re pregnant?” Niko charged up to her, “You don’t look it.” Visibly confused because she didn’t fit the image of a pregnant lady.

“I’m still in the first month. We just found out today,” Sandy’s eyes were moist with the thought and she turned serious.

“Congratulations!” Niko grabbed her hands and squeezed them. “That’s the most wonderful thing in the world! Japanese people don’t have enough children anymore which is really sad because I love children. We should be growing as a people and nation but we’re not.”

“Children are wonderful,” Sakura agreed as the other girls nodded. “You’re going to be such incredible parents and have a happy family in the future I predict. I can see that already because you’re a cute couple...perfect for each other.”

“Thank you,” Sandy frowned at what she saw in them that told her that but, more importantly, was she right?

“You really think so?” Paul fished for more assurances; looking slightly dubious.

“I do. I’ve seen lots of couples I didn’t think would work out and they usually don’t but you two have that *special* quality.”

“Thanks and I want you to know that means a lot to us, Sakura. You’re quite special yourself. Do you have a boyfriend?”

“Yes, he’s at work today but we’ll see each other later in the day.”

“I’m sure he’s happy with you because you’re so beautiful, smart and have tons of charisma!” Paul looked directly into her eyes to signal his 100% seriousness.

Sakura placed her hands together and stamped her feet excitedly after hearing this because she valued highly other couples’ opinions.

“No! I really don’t. I’m just a very friendly person who loves being around people from different countries.”

“What does your boyfriend do for work?” Janet asked with ear tilted toward her while peering ahead at the crowded streets to avoid bumping into anyone. There wasn’t a bit of open space anywhere to be seen. People lined the streets from end-to-end with walkways ribboning out here and there, becoming hilly toward the head of the road as passersby’s hands filled with bags and lots of them in many cases. Well-heeled shoppers satisfied their dream desires with atypical consumer goods in a unique area of Tokyo that offered a departure from the ordinary.

“He’s a geologist.”

“Very cool! Do you like shopping?” Sandy asked Sakura on a whim after noticing her gazing into clothing shops with prolonged stares. “You go out all the time to check out the latest

stuff being sold in stores?”

“I hate shopping,” Sakura confessed with a deep frown that made the lower half of her face turn to stone. “I only like creating things for other people but I don’t like going to shopping districts myself. It’s kind of strange.”

“That is strange but I guess I can understand that on a certain level. I really love shopping for just about anything but I don’t make things for people like you do. Maybe if I did I wouldn’t want to buy so much or something like that?” Sandy’s eyes blinked several times as if that made her think.

“I don’t know, could be true I guess. I only know I don’t like it but eating in restaurants and going to cafes with my friends I like a lot. There are so many cool and interesting places in Harajuku for young people to go out and enjoy themselves.” She pointed to one particular place with large plastic anime figures out front that moved their hands up and down at people as they passed.

“Do you want to eat something now? Are you hungry at all?”

“No! I’m so fat, I need to stop eating so much,” looking down at the ground.

Sandy and Janet’s eyes popped open. “Fat? *You?*” were the first words out of Janet’s mouth. “But you’re so slim, are you kidding me?”

“In Japan even a little bit is considered fat by most people. People are very aware of any weight gain at all,” Sakura explained with an overly serious gaze at them.

“Hmmm...well, I guess when there aren’t many fat people around even a little seems like a lot. Asian people are generally so slim compared to other countries,” Sandy reflected on the subject.

“Probably right about that...” she agreed, “...and we’re cer-

tainly not as big as people in Europe or America.”

“It’s better that way because you stay thinner and younger looking for a long time. In that way you’re very lucky genetically-speaking,” Janet pointed out with her eyes beaming brightly.

“Maybe so but we’re not as physically as strong as Westerners and sometimes I wish we were because that’s attractive in its own way as far as I’m concerned,” Sakura relayed openly.

“Are you attracted to Western men, Sakura?” Sandy searched her features as she glanced at a group of foreigners passing by laughing and colliding into each other with lax postures.

“Some of them are very good-looking but my current boyfriend is Japanese. I love all men and don’t discriminate based on racial characteristics. All races can be attractive in their own way.” She also looked at people passing by for examples to confirm what she was saying.

“Or bad looking,” Janet pointed out, thinking of herself which Sakura picked up on right away.

Her face went blank and her jaw dropped, “You’re very cute and I’m sure you get a lot of attention from men anywhere you go!” Looking around to see if anyone was staring at Janet at the time.

“People always tell me that but I don’t have a boyfriend now and haven’t for a long time. Maybe I’m too picky or independent. I’m not sure.”

“I can’t believe that. I know lots of Japanese guys who would be proud to have a cute Western girl like you,” Sakura assured her with lips stretched across her face and a slight frown. “The only way *you* could be alone is if you *want* to be.”

“You might be onto something there. Maybe I do in some way without realizing it because I can’t handle the pressure of

being in a relationship. Sometimes we don't know the stuff going on in the background that influences our personalities and behavior." Turning thoughtful and somber all of a sudden.

"Pretty heavy stuff..." Sandy scolded them, "...let's just say that whenever Janet's ready she'll find the love of her life as some of us have already been lucky enough to. Once you stop trying so hard you'll find what you're looking for, it seems to me."

"Maybe the real issue is I'm putting too much pressure on myself to find a man while resisting the impulse due to my fierce independence and aversion to the pressures of being in a relationship. I'm basically locked in mortal conflict with myself," Janet's eyes withdrew in thought.

"Marvelous self-analysis, Janet," Sandy studied her face closely, "Self-awareness is the key to a happy life."

"We're all in conflict with ourselves in some way..." Niko added her own take on the issue, "...what I mean is our emotions are always at war with the outside world and even practical reality in a sense. We also never know what's going to happen in the future and that adds to the anxiety about doing the right or wrong thing and making decisions we think might lead to success."

They all stopped and gaped at the short girl with the thousand yard stare beside them who wasn't even drunk. She fixed her hair and looked at her nails like a fashion-conscious female after uttering those profound insights as an object lesson (ironically) to the conflict they had been speaking about moments earlier.

"Everyone's so filled with profound insights today I feel like we've entered the philosopher and psychologist's convention or something. Seems like I've never been around such intelligent people at any point in my life if memory serves off the top

of my head. Americans never talk about anything but trivial and menial shit most of the time because they're afraid of being made fun of by other people. So refreshing to have conversations that dig deeper into human problems and the human condition overall," Matt blasted out to the general fray because he couldn't keep silent any longer. "I'm incredibly glad Sandy invited me now because I spend most of my time alone and unable to find any interesting people to talk to."

"Most people bore you to death, is that what you're saying?"

"Most people talk about the latest news events or topics they mainly see on TV. If I wanted to spend my time talking about everything I see on TV I'd just cut out the middleman and watch it instead."

"I know what you mean..." Paul recalled feeling a similar way in the past, "...I hate television and used to hate it even more how people restricted their conversations to subjects everyone's already heard a million times before. I have no interest in listening to that or responding in any way because it leaves me with nothing to say."

"That's called small talk, *Paul!* We can't talk about deep and profound subjects all the time with everyone we come across. People need to get to know each other before exposing their core beliefs to everyone around them indiscriminately. There's a social process that takes place of separating friends from enemies who'll understand where you're coming from and support you," Sandy upbraided him with an emotionally-charged frown.

"I realize you can't bare your heart and soul to everyone around you but I'm talking about people we've known for years back home we're still having shallow conversations with on a daily basis. It's almost like we never scratch the surface of who

they really are or what makes them tick. Decades later, after countless experiences and childhood memories with them we're still have boring conversations about the latest news events or whatever sports figures and movie stars are up to at the time," Paul complained with a severely distressed face.

"Except Myra, she's always been more deep and genuine than the rest of them, though I always rejected her friendship because she was smarter and more confident than me. Not only that, I thought she was a loser because she had bad luck with men. I was a real bitch when I was younger to be honest."

"When you were younger?" Paul's eyes popped open and his brows shot up clownishly.

"Shut up! You *know* I'm not like that any more! Certainly not perfect but not as bad as I used to be."

Paul devised a thin smirk as if to say, "I don't know..." then dropped the look when he saw she wasn't at all charmed or amused by his smartass attitude. He glimpsed her shyly as though worried she might get upset and take out her frustrations on him in her hypersensitive state of pregnancy.

He decided to change his approach slightly, "You're really *perfect* my love," in an old-fashioned dandy-like timbre (trying to butter her up a bit). "I mean you're perfect enough to influence me in a positive way daily."

"Oh sure! You're so happy to have me around you just can't stop telling me everyday, can you? I mean it's not like you don't tease me constantly, do you?" she frowned in a sudden burst of frustration not entirely directed at him. She was starting to feel nauseous again.

"What? If you told you all the time I guarantee you'd get sick of it. You're at least as much of a cynic and skeptic as I am in a different way and surely wouldn't want me sugarbushing you

all the time since it'd get on your nerves."

"You're probably right and I do appreciate the effort to make me feel loved and special but subtlety is the key and only on rare occasions so it feels unique, not like a duty or daily announcement from a loudspeaker," assailing him with the riot act for lovers and those who purported to be.

"OK, OK, but you should make amends with Myra as part of your atonement for all the cruel things you've done in your life you regret," Paul instructed her with a firm and unwavering gaze. "I was thinking we should invite her over for the birth and Christmas holiday as well. She's always been one of my favorite people in the world."

"Hey! Now that's a great idea, Paul! I'm onboard with that!"

"She and Alex are dating now, you know that?"

"What? You're joking, right?"

"No! It's one hundred percent true but you know what they say...opposites attract!" Paul looked down at their feet as they walked, feeling a bit sad about Myra and what they might've or could've had together. Imagining what life would've been like if he'd married her instead of Sandy.

"Christmas we *must* make an outstanding event for all of us..." Janet chimed in with a feline grin, "...we all have a lot to be thankful for being overseas with such a great group of friends and incredible support network behind us. I think it's destined to be the best holiday ever between the job, living in Japan and having all you guys to share the good times with!" casting out a beaming glow from her eyes.

"You're spot on about that," Sandy totally agreed, "All of us are going to have the best Christmas ever even though I'm reluctant to put too much pressure on ourselves or the holiday season itself. I still think it's gonna play out famously."

“I do too,” Janet walked over to give her a hug before hugging the other girls too. “Do you guys celebrate Christmas?”

“We celebrate most American and Western holidays but Christmas is my most favorite of all,” Sakura nodded while looking into her eyes. “Everything’s so beautifully decorated and I love giving presents to my friends too. Unlike every other time of the year I enjoy shopping when all the stores are full of people.”

“It’s thrilling, isn’t it? Just the atmosphere and buzz in the air is different from any other time of the year.” Sandy nearly burst into Christmas carols in the process.

“My family gives gifts to each other but we also go to shelters for abused and orphaned children to give out other gifts and talk to them in person. We get into the Christmas season because it’s all about helping others and remembering less fortunate people than us,” her dark eyes lit up as she glanced across the street at all the shops and people going in and out of doors.

“That’s wonderful. My family donates to charities but we don’t do anything active like yours does,” Sandy mused with a lowered gaze that gradually worked its way up to Sakura’s face again.

“My dad just complains about all the people, high prices and traffic. That’s the way he celebrates Christmas,” Paul volunteered with a slight hissing sound. “He’s more like the Grinch than someone who gets into the spiritual magic of it all.”

“Oh! He’s not that bad, Paul! Your dad’s always been so nice and kind to me. You have such a negative opinion of him but I think you’re a bit biased because you resent him so much.”

“For good reason. He’s bullied me all my life being the big ape that he is and sometimes I can’t even stand the sight of him,”

clenching his fists and tightening the muscles on his face in a painful grimace.

“I know but that’s only because he’s afraid of you. He feels like a failure at work and along with his financial situation he’s been unable to create a better life for you. Maybe you’ll see a change in him after you’ve shown how independent you are by living in Japan.” Encouraging him with her own take on the situation.

“Afraid of me? *Hah!*” even though he sensed she might be right he was unable to admit never having seen things that way before. “Hard for me to believe such a rockhead could be afraid of anything...even his own death!”

“Oh, stop it! You’re just being silly and he’s still your father!”

“I don’t get along very well with my dad either if it’s any compensation,” Matt offered as an aside to divert them from butting heads with each other anymore than necessary. He had the wisdom and insight to inject questions and comments at just the right time to facilitate better social relations in those around him.

“You know that me and my mom are the same way, always in competition to be the prettiest wherever we go and compete for the attention of men. She tries to look younger and sexier than me whenever we’re together,” Sandy hissed out in almost the same tone as Paul.

“She’s very attractive, your mom, especially for her age. I always see her in yoga pants and she’s in fabulous shape,” Paul had to admit since he recalled being aroused by her on several occasions (perhaps every time but refused to admit it to himself).

“She is and all my friends have commented on that but I hate being in competition with my mother like you hate being

in competition with your dad. Guess we both come from *extremely* dysfunctional homes,” Sandy’s face turned distressed with sudden temporary bags appearing under her eyes.

“Probably true, parents are supposed to be supportive and do their best to give us a good start in life but ours seem to be doing the exact opposite if you know what I mean. They’ve got mistaken ideas about the role of parenthood and possibly need a manual or something,” Paul chuckled with a painfully crooked mouth twist.

“I think we both turned out alright so not to worry because if we hadn’t gone through all that shit, we wouldn’t be the people we are now. That’s my own way of looking at it,” Paul lifted his head and firmed his jaw as he put the “right” spin on things.

“You guys are not only awesome individually but you make about the best couple I’ve ever seen,” Matt added his own valued wisdom to the fold.

“What do you think guys? Is it time to hit another part of Tokyo? Unless you guys want to stay here all night and hang out with this fabulous group of girls? I don’t mind either way,” Janet glanced around with wrinkled brow.

“That’s a good question. I’m having a great time just walking around this neighborhood but wouldn’t object to seeing something else so I guess I’m open for anything. Wonder if the girls would accompany us if we changed locations?” Victor added as he couldn’t stop looking at Sakura and Niko, wondering if either were interested in him.

“We wouldn’t feel at home any other place but this neighborhood. Everywhere else in Tokyo they stare at us too much and disapprove of how we look,” Niko tilted her head to one side sadly as though recalling past experiences.

“That’s a good point. This neighborhood is definitely unique

in being accepting of young, extravagant, creative types like yourselves. Most of the city is quite conservative so you girls would definitely stand out too much,” Janet looked at them again and smiled in admiration of their bravery and sense of style.

“We’ll come back to see you soon but first let’s exchange contact information so we can stay in touch. We definitely want to attend the Tokyo fashion show and even see if we can get the boys to come along. They could use some fashion sense from the looks of it, right?” Sandy chuckled with laugh lines appearing at the corners of her eyes.

“Hey! I resemble that remark!” Matt feigned offense with a comical pout while surveying his own attire with ostensible curiosity.

“Except for Matt. He’s the old guard among us and always dresses sharp as a tack. Just look at him...”

They took her advice and did exactly that, seeming impressed with what they saw because no one had any sign of doubt on their face. He wore a simple beige loose-fitting, casual, short-sleeved shirt with jeans held in place by a black alligator belt. His shirt was open at the collar (only two buttons) and he looked like the perfect figure from an old film when men were more “put together” in a sense.

“He’s not flashy but men don’t need to be unless they want to be. It isn’t necessary for them to attract attention to themselves like women do and oftentimes it’s much more sexy when they’re understated and subtly elegant.”

“That’s very true. Men who crave a lot of attention are generally gay which is OK too, but a different take on fashion and self-expression,” Janet chuckled as she noticed a few boys decked out in bright blue and red clothes with colored hair on a

bench nearby and thought it made the perfect example of what she was saying.

“Thank you for a wonderful time and we’ll definitely message you before the fashion show,” Janet bowed to Sakura, Niko and the others. “I don’t imagine the rest of our evening will be as fun or thoroughly enjoyable as this was but we’ll definitely give it a try anyway,” she smiled while bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet.

“You’re the best people we’ve met in a long time because, to be honest, we usually see the same people around here. It’s a thrill to talk with foreigners who appreciate us and treat us like real people with real lives,” Sakura hugged Janet and Sandy and bowed to the others.

“Been a major thrill to meet you too...*all of you!*” Sandy grabbed Niko and Sakura’s hands and held them in her own in an impromptu group bonding maneuver that made the girls smile. She then brought the other girls in and did the same until all their hands joined in a semicircle. It was an unusual and charming gesture of affection and intimacy.

“Thank you for a great time,” Paul bowed to the girls and shook hands with all of them with a smile that couldn’t and wouldn’t fade because a true connection had been made in the magical land of their adoption. “We’ll be back soon and will surely see you guys again!”