

Dave's Rave

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Herro Again Flom Asia!



Dear Blaine, Brian, Chikako, Clyde, Dan, Darren, David, Donna, Dorothy, Doug, Dweezil, Ellen, Elsie, Gary, Glen, Greg, Joe, Julie, Karen, Keahi, Keith, Kevin, Kim, Kirsten, Laura, Laurel, Lily, Lisa, Lord Fizbin, Lynn, Marianne, Napaporn, Noah, Phyl, Reg, Sandy, Sharon, Shuko, Shouting Elk, Steven, Theresa, Throckmorton, Tomoko, William, and Zara of Thamar,

Howdy, howdy, howdy (and praise Buddha)!

It's been one heck of a year in the country where the only thing they could think of to put on the flag was a big, red dot. In March I'll have been in Dotland for eight years. My verdict? I spend a lot of time hating the uptight conformity. There are, undeniably, things I like as well. But hey, why dwell on the positive? So, in the words of Gautama, "life sucks" (paraphrase). What else is new?

Thailand, take three



Recently though, it sucked in a rather delightful way, as I *sabotaged** my company and took one month off to go to Thailand, which is the near-perfect antidote to Dotland fever.

OK, a positive aspect of being considered subhuman here is that they don't flinch too hard when I do radical things like ask for a long vacation. (Or, urinate directly into a toilet, for that matter ["what needless concentration!"]).

While I traveled I kept a log with the idea of typing it up and firing it off to everyone, as in the past. Who knows, I still might. For now, here's the abbreviated version:

It was nice, but the weather was so-so.

* The English word "sabotage" was specially imported into Japanese to ensure that *salarimen* (another loanword) never even consider taking a normal length vacation. To do so would be to indefensibly weaken your company (no matter how many redundant workers they have capable of filling in), to the relentless competition; where, of course, no one is allowed to take real vacations either.



Mom and I were all smiles when I went to see her last March in Phoenix. Most folks are real friendly out there, but the guy who took this shot for us seemed to be in a hell of a hurry to leave.

Oh, I guess I could add that the first ten days were the highlight, as they included the best weather, my intro diving course, and what's now the bittersweet memory of yet another love that wasn't meant to be.

Scuba dooby doo



Some friends from Tokyo told me they enjoyed taking a Self Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus course on Ko Tao island, off the southeast coast, so I figured

I'd go see what that was all about. It took fifteen hours to get there by minibus and boat from Bangkok.

I vacillated while acclimating for the first three days on the island, then, overhearing a new class had started, joined in the next day. (The first day of the five-day program was just for assigning equipment anyway.)

The course was very professional, as only a very small percentage of students drown.

(Just kidding.)

The whole thing focused on safety. The first dive involved our standing in a circle in neck-deep water with our gear on (three students and two instructors), then dropping to our knees on the sand. That way if anyone panics all you have to do is stand up! Every day there was a video, lecture and test in the morning, two dives in the afternoon, then chapters to read at night, so it was fairly intense.

A little time was allotted each day for just cruising around to look at all the fish, coral and other fascinating sea life. At these times I started to feel quite at home down there. As obvious as it sounds, it really is "another world"—quite different from the snorkeling I'd done.

I had a little difficulty equalizing ("popping") my ears on descent the first few days and, as happens to some people, air trapped beneath old filings in my teeth caused some discomfort as well. In both cases, though, I only had to pause during descent until air worked its way into the spaces.

On the final day we made two dives; one to sixteen and another to eighteen meters. After the basic course was over, I was hoping to do some "fun dives" and then perhaps enter the advanced program, but alas, the weather took a turn for the worse the next day, and all diving was temporarily suspended.

I hung around a few more days, reading and playing my guitar (I did two free shows for the other travelers), then decided to shove off for neighboring Ko Pha Ngan island for four days, then Ko Samui for another four before heading back to Bangkok. The economy on Ko Samui is about five times what it was when I was there seven years ago, because of the foreign tourists. It's still nice, but the best beaches are way overdeveloped now.

"But wait a minute," you're probably asking. "What about 'the bittersweet memory of yet another love that wasn't meant to be' part?" Well, since you asked...her name was Camila; a twenty-eight-year-old Swedish diving instructor from Bali, on vacation to Ko Tao where she learned and also taught for one year with her husband.

If you read that last bit carefully again, you'll come across the main obstacle in our torrid love affair (well, it was torrid for me). Philosophically speaking (isn't philosophy handy sometimes?), I guess I should just be glad to have met someone so beautiful, friendly and delightfully adorable (sob, whimper, gush).

Let's move on.

Music



The bar I was playing at once a week, Maggie's Revenge, closed last January. Lucky for Tokyo, a much cooler bar sprang up around the same time to take its place. Equally oddly named (yes, those were juxtaposed adverbs), What the Dickens is Dotland's biggest and best British pub.** Anyhow, I've been tinkled pink to have the opportunity of inflicting my one man show on unsuspecting Guinness quaffers there. Though I've only appeared there once or twice a month, the afterglow almost carries me between gigs, as 100 to 150 adoring fans (or, Westerners with nothing better to do) regularly fill the place every night of the week.

As is often the case though, it's hard to keep a good thing quiet. Recently it seems like the place is overrun with stockbrokers, Japanese and other types of geeks. Plus, so many musicians want to play there that the owner actually has the nerve not to pester me to keep my schedule open for him. Can't you believe it? I actually have to ask him if I can play there! Some people.

Other musician friends come in and jam occasionally, which is great (except when they want to take all the solos).

Another couple of pickers in town arranged for an internationally known folk-blues-Celtic fingerpicking/slide guitarist to come over and put on two shows at the What the Dickens bar. His name was Martin Simpson (no relation to Bart or O.J.). I went to the second show and enjoyed it a lot.

That was about the only thing I did this year in the way of special entertainment. Of course there was lots of ordinary entertainment like videos at home, dinners out with friends and watching *salarimen* regurgitate on train platforms.

Oh, I almost totally forgot (if I'd only tried harder!)....

High school friend Bill Taylor, who was over here building houses, introduced me to the one and only Jimmy Angel, an aging rocker from the fifties. Sorry Jimmy, but the phrase that most immediately comes to mind is "washed up." Jimmy brought out his fat book of memorabilia full of news clippings of himself thirty years ago with various record executives and backup musicians to stars like Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis in order to talk me into playing guitar in his band. Now over sixty, he somehow manages to survive in Japan doing any gig he can find. After a jam the night I met him at the Tokyo British Club, we had one rehearsal, then our first (and last) gig at a bar in Ginza. Even though Jimmy had a new wig and Elvis-style getup (courtesy of his loud but well-connected German manageress), the band still reeked. Literally: for the veteran bassist (toured with Earth, Wind and Fire; Fifth Dimension; Bee Gees) drank everything in sight. And the drummer (who Jimmy had to help carry his drum set on the subway), couldn't remember a single tempo.

Janome



I remember when I was little, the neighbors used to ask me what I wanted to be when

I grew up. "How 'bout a fireman...or an insurance adjuster," they asked, and were always surprised when I explained I wanted "to edit household appliance manuals, preferably of the non-kitchen variety." Well, I've been living my dream at the sewing machine company for seven years now, and let me tell ya, it's everything I'd hoped for.

They increased my hours to sixteen per week this year which helped me to save a little more. Also, I started working at the factory and the research center, besides my regular post at the head office. The new locations are an extra hour or so away on the train, so I spend a significant amount of time sitting, reading, bracing for stops and trying not to be too bothered by the robot-like expressions of the other passengers.

They even got a Macintosh for me to play with, so I got to do fun things like add a narration to an interactive CD ROM and build Janome's English home page. For those of you with modems, you can check it out at: www2.gol.com/users/janome01/

Though I thought it would never happen, the guys at Janome pulled out a miracle and the company actually broke even this last year. As you may know, they lost several hundred million dollars through extortion six years ago. By selling off several prime pieces of real estate and giving the nod to hundreds of employees, they managed to save the business. Though I don't feel too attached to the place, I can't help admiring their determination.

** And, it has the dubious distinction of being located in a former branch of the *Aum* Supreme Truth cult, blamed with last year's poison gas attack on Tokyo's subways.



Ellen and I were all smiles when she came to see me last June in Tokyo. We hit all the major attractions in town and even spent some time at a hot spring in the mountains. Here we are at grounds of Shinagawa Aquarium near my apartment. (It's nothing to write home about, so I deleted it.)

Ready for this week's docu-drama? OK, it's...

—Diaper Time—

A while back I mentioned an "ongoing fiasco" in the office centering around a certain female worker. Though I hesitated relating the tale (because it's one of the ugliest things I've ever been involved in), it happened long enough ago that I guess I can tell it now. Still, if you prefer brighter topics, I advise you to skip to "The Future" on the back page.

A little more than two years ago, four unusually pretty secretaries were hired in the International Business Department at the head office, where I worked two or three times a week. I mean, I felt sorry for the other *office ladies*, as they call them here, because they couldn't compete with the new additions.

It didn't take much brilliance to figure out why they'd been hired. There were two factors, mainly. One was that, with the burst of Japan's bubble economy, for probably the first time in many years there was a glut of workers. Because of this, employers could take their pick of the year's crop of university and junior college grads. Since men did the hiring, the successful candidates were of course those who fulfilled the main criteria for Japanese women: beauty and subservience.

There was another reason why the fresh, young debutantes had been called aboard, however. In this land of unspoken rules, one states that all self-respecting *salarimen* are to be married by age thirty. As it happened, seven or eight of the young executives (in our room of forty or so), had as yet to tie the knot, and a few were beyond their twenties. As most Japanese find their future spouses at work, it seemed obvious these four were meant to be fodder for the marriage mill.

A little background info before proceeding:

I'd previously received strong nonverbal cues concerning how I, as the only foreigner in the company, was expected to behave around the female employees. (As anyone who's been to Japan knows, the natives go to great lengths not to state anything directly.) *Office ladies* past and present had also clearly understood the potential consequences of acting too friendly toward the *gaijin* (me).

So I was rather surprised when I was asked to work on a translation with Miss Kawashima, who was perhaps the fairest of them all. At the end of the second day, I asked her if she liked Mexican food, and if so, would she like to join me for some. We arranged to meet outside the company the following week. With hindsight, my only mistake was not asking her to keep mum about it.

A few minutes later she came back to my desk with another of the new-hires and asked if the other one could come along. Since, in my experience, this would have turned it into an utterly predictable "group social ritual" and free English lesson, I said, "No. And let's forget the whole thing."

About five minutes later I looked up and saw Kawashima-san at her desk with her head in her hands, as if her life was over. Though it astounded me, it seemed she had "lost face" in a big way.

The fallout

My coworkers had been relatively civil and cordial up till then. For at least the next twelve months however, no one in the department spoke to me or looked at me unless it was absolutely necessary.

In what was intended, I believe, to be our mutual punishment, she was assigned to the desk directly opposite mine for one year. We sat about five feet apart, facing each other, for the eight hours a week I was there. She did her best to demonstrate to the others how utterly insignificant, if not downright loathsome, I was to her—all nonverbally, of course. Only through this act of penance did she have any hope of being accepted back into the fold.

Though it was infuriating at times, I couldn't help thinking of the line in the Streisand song about adults "acting more like children than children." I also remembered the hefty wage they were paying me for relatively

WELL ALRIGHT...

ZEN!

One of the best ways to describe what happens when you meditate is to think of those "snow globes" they have at Christmas. If you shake one up real hard, well that's how our minds are, living in this frantic world. Thoughts, images, ideas are all floating around in our heads, making it hard to think.

In Zen meditation, you don't have to try to stop thinking; instead, just sit quietly and allow your thoughts to stop by themselves. (Just don't use the time to plan your next vacation, dig?)

Master Shunryu Suzuki said, "To give your sheep or cow a large, spacious meadow is the way to control him." If you maintain a straight, alert posture for 15 or 30 minutes regularly, the dust will begin to settle in your mind, allowing you to clearly see what's there.



Yours truly,
Grasshopper

simple work. And after all, it was only four hours twice a week. I decided to play their little game and not give them the pleasure of my resignation, which I imagine many were hoping for.

Unforgiven

A year after our scene I was asked to work at other locations all but once a week, and Kawashima-san was moved a few desks away. Now, more than two years later, a few of the women will occasionally look at me, if I happen to walk close enough to them. Workers out at the factory and the R&D center are about as friendly as the people downtown used to be before the implosion. Though my Japanese is still so-so, I overheard them one day snickering about how no one at the head office says hello to me anymore. When asked, they admitted that's what they'd been talking about. (That was the only overt confirmation that anything had happened at all.)

Last week, after more than two years at Janome, Miss Kawashima left to join another company. While she did her best to toe the line after the incident, her efforts were in vain. To the others, her indiscreet overtures with an outsider, no matter how brief, had betrayed irredeemable flaws.

It is common knowledge here that, if a woman is known to have been involved with another worker and that relationship fails, no one else within the organization will have anything to do with her. She is used goods. The fact that we never had any relationship makes little difference.

Maybe, if her new colleagues don't catch wind of her reputation, she will have a chance in her new clan. It's possible, though, that her new Japanese colleagues, with their indigenous hypersensitivity, may perceive a history behind the "innocent flower" role she'll try to resume. The very fact of her leaving her original firm will make her suspect.

Afterthoughts

And what did I get from the experience? Mostly, confirmation that the citizens of this country—especially the

men—are the most insecure, sickest people I know of. Though this may sound racist, it isn't really, for Japanese who are raised in the West grow up to be as free thinking and thoughtful as you or I. It's not the race that's warped, it's the culture.***

The Future

In order to have the option of leaving Japan, here's what I'm working on: investing in land or a house. I'm looking at the Seattle area now, but that could change. Though there's a lot I like about the N.W., the prospect of returning to all that rain and gloom (after so many years away from it) is a bit chilling. A guy I know here has purchased some rental houses in both Florida and California, near the sun. The disadvantage there would be that I don't know the area as well. I may want a place with room enough for me to stay, in case I decide to come back to the States. Anyhow, if I could get a small stake in real estate it could give me a goal and more incentive to save.

I also like tropical islands, and have discovered that one could probably make enough money to get by, in Thailand for example.

Mata, ne****

Some English speakers you meet here will just about talk your ear off, since it's not often they get a chance to speak to someone who understands everything they say. I guess I'm the same way. Other stuff about my online life and samples of funny Japanese English will have to wait until another time.

Oh yeah. Have a wonderful '97 and remember to meditate before bed. *It really works!*

