

Dave's Rave

No. 6

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S'happenin', y'all?

What's been going on? Lots!

Again, the customary apologies for not being more communicative. It seems I type tons of e-mail these days, but never seem to get around to writing to those who aren't connected. E-mail is fast, cheap and global, so those of you who have been thinking about getting hooked up, I urge you to do so! I don't know why, but it seems so much harder to write something on paper and mail it.

Family in Hawaii

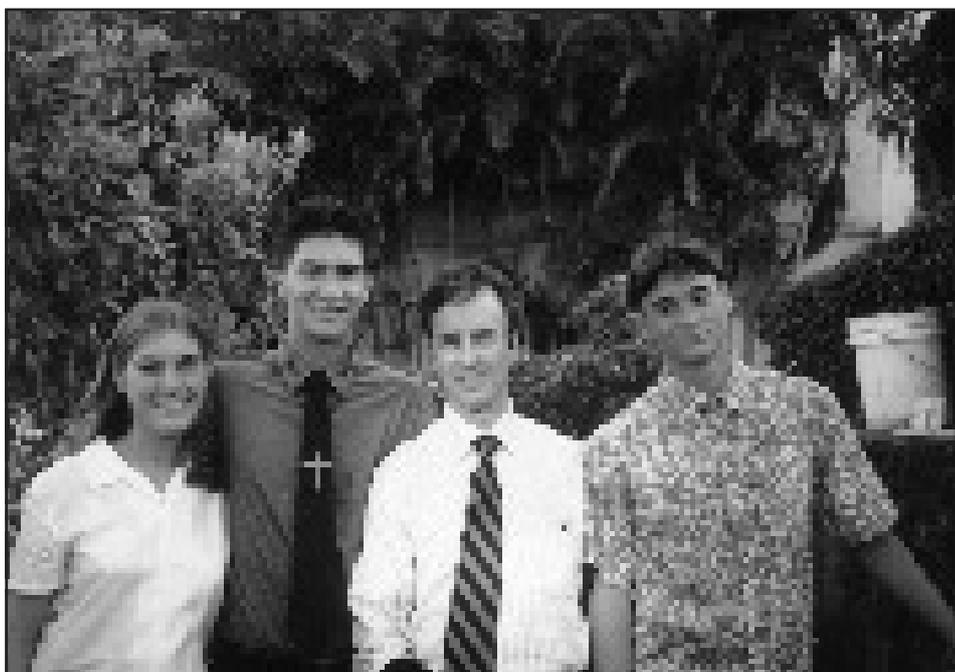
So, I guess I have to go all the way back to May to get you caught up. That's when mom, my sisters and I met in Honolulu for my nephew Keahi's graduation from high school. I had a really good time—it had been a long time since my mom, sisters and nephews were all in the same place. Even though Waikiki is such a popular tourist destination, it was still beautiful and fun. Sharon rented a van, so we were able to take trips around the island, to Sealife Park, etc. My nephew seems to have made it successfully into manhood. (At well over 6 feet, I'm already looking up to him!)

Old friend; new roommate

Not long after I got back from Hawaii, I accepted a friend's invitation to be her new roommate. I met Carmen about six years ago when she came to visit a friend who was also living in Friendship House—the "gaijin (foreigner) house" I crashed at for three years in southeast Tokyo. Carmen, originally from Hong Kong, is a very charming and likable person, and we became friends right away.

She visited Japan again a few years later and then moved here last year after she got a sales job at the English school. She's since changed jobs and now works as a headhunter, which is tough, since it's entirely on commission.

Eventually she met and moved in with Joseph, her boyfriend from Canada who had been here about six years working as an English teacher at Berlitz, which is probably the most respected English school here. He'd decided that at age 35 he'd had enough of Japan and wanted to move back to Toronto while he was still young enough to start a new career. However, I know he'd saved close to a million



Chrissy, graduate Keahi, me and Noah were all smiles after Keahi's baccalaureate service in May. When I was young I used to be big and strong like my nephews. Then I shriveled up.

dollars, so maybe after reaching that goal he decided he could leave!

Still, she wants to get out of Japan and join him there, so she's applied for a Canadian visa. There's a good chance she'll be granted one, too. It's far easier to immigrate to Canada than to the U.S., and applicants have a better chance if they are fluent in English and have studied in Canada or the U.S. Since Carmen went to college in San Francisco and Hawaii, she can probably get in. Next spring she should hear the verdict, at which point she'd move out and I could go on living here by myself, get another roommate or whatever.

The move from the Omori/Oimachi area to her place in Kameido on the other side of Tokyo was a pain in the *oshiri* (Japanese for you know what). I rented a 2-ton truck and six friends helped me move. I've got so much stuff, we could hardly believe it: 3 computers, 2 large monitors and a TV, 4 guitars, 3 guitar amps, 8 boxes of books.... It took a month to get completely moved in! We took five 50-minute trips across crowded Tokyo that day. Two weeks later I had a party for those who helped me, but it was mainly the guy upstairs (who helped the most) and his friends who made it.

By the way, his name is Okano-san, and he's quite an unusual Japanese man. In brief, here's what I've surmised of his story. He protested Japan's support of the U.S. in the Vietnam war when he was in college, and was arrested three times. Because of this, no "respectable" company

here would give him a job. Though he's dallied in things like giving kayak lessons, he basically doesn't work, but seems to be doing fine (he apparently comes from a rich family). Recently he flew to Naru just for fun. (That's a tiny island near the equator in the Pacific; the world's smallest country!)

My new apartment is almost twice as big as my last place. It's on the sixth floor of a medium-size building and faces a river, albeit a polluted one with corrugated metal embankments. The apartment is mostly one large room, with a high ceiling and hardwood flooring (a bit unusual here). Since it's a corner unit with many windows, it's very bright. One end of the room can be partitioned off with sliding doors to make a small bedroom. This is Carmen's domain, and since she doesn't eat breakfast, I don't even hear her when she slips out in the morning.

So here's a new twist in my otherwise unconventional life: I'm living platonically with a female friend, and it's the closest thing to marriage I may ever experience! A few times a week we eat meals together—often nice dinners with wine, cheese and pasta; and on weekends we often ride bikes to the park and play Frisbee together. Many evenings we watch her favorite anchorman, Peter Jennings, on the recorded ABC news and have long talks about world issues and all the other things happening in our daily routine.

Honestly, it's a big change for me. I like it a lot, yet it's disappointing that I haven't been able to create this comfortable a relationship with a woman which included the physical side, as well.

A yen saved is worth two in the bush

In my quest to dominate the world of software and computers (at least the software and computers in my apartment), I've found yet another use for these atoms and bits—investing! No doubt some of you have heard of, or done this yourselves. It's pretty easy once you get it all set up. Most of the brokerages have opened web sites that make it easy to blo... er, I mean, invest your money via the Internet.

One thing I've learned from reading *The Only Investment Guide You'll Ever Need* (by Andrew Tobias) is that there are very few "expert stock pickers" who can actually get better results than the overall average of the stock market. Because of this, some funds now exist that basically invest in every company on the stock exchange, so that when the stock market goes up, you make money, and when it goes down, you lose money. History shows that its good planning to invest in the stock market in a safe way if you ever want to have enough money to buy Geritol when you're over the hill. So, I've put a little money in one of these "tracking" or "index" funds. (Just one of the things you get into when you're over 40 and losing hair, I guess.)

E-mail females

Another thing I've been exploring while getting a "screen tan" from my computer monitor is the modern electronic relationship. I put an ad in a local English publication under Friendship&Interests looking for women who were into "psychology, politics, meditation" etc., and asked them to send me e-mail. A few Japanese women responded, but their poor English ability made it hard to communicate with them. Then a woman living in Belgium (that's in Europe, for the geographically challenged), responded, saying she had been in Tokyo recently and saw my ad in the Tokyo Classified. She turned out to be quite an interesting e-pal. She was born in the States, grew up in Ireland, went to college in Japan and is now a part time opera singer!

After a few weeks she told me that she'd be coming to Tokyo with her stepfather to assist him in his consulting business (she's fluent in Japanese). She had sent me a tiny picture of herself, which was obviously taken in a professional studio. It looked like she was about 28 years old, quite "waifish" and pretty.

When the day came to meet her, I was nervous. It turned out she is not 28 but 38 and a rather large (though not huge) woman. So, I didn't feel as intimidated as I imagined I might. We had a nice dinner together at a Cajun restaurant in trendy Harajuku. She said she was nervous and apologized, but talked my ear off nonstop anyway. When I asked her to calm down, she did better, but I learned there's a lot that doesn't come across in e-mail!

Another e-mail relationship has been a little different. A local Macintosh user's group, called Ringo (it means apple in Japanese), has an electronic bulletin board system (BBS), which the members use to send messages back and forth. There are few women among the two hundred members, but when I advertised some items I wanted to get rid of after moving, Lisa Hoshi showed an interest in my black leather coat.

Lisa is married to a Japanese man, but she's a lot of fun anyway. Though it has seemed a bit weird at times, we've had a pretty engaging e-mail relationship since we first met and have been out to dinner a few times. This is new territory for me, but she has several male friends and her husband seems not to mind. (Yes, it's also Platonic.)

Bali ho!

I like to get out of Nippon every six months, if possible. Since it's now about time, I've been considering where to go. Carmen tried to get me to consider Italy, since she was there a few years ago and fell in love with the place. I would like to go, since I've never been to southern Europe, but even if I stay in inexpensive hostels and don't get too extravagant, it would still be a lot more expensive than Asia.

So, since I now have enough frequent flier miles for a free flight in Asia, I've decided to go to Bali in Indonesia. Everyone I've talked to who's been there has really enjoyed it, and since a vacation to me is a time to relax, another tropical beach sounds great. The culture is supposed to be extremely rich and colorful—coexisting well with the tourist trade.

You may have heard that due to a shortage of rain this year, Indonesia and Malaysia have had a large number of forest fires which have polluted the air over the whole region, even as far north as Thailand. Word is, though, that Bali, in the south, hasn't been effected. And another advantage for travelers to many Asian countries now is that since their economies are down, our dollars (or yen) go much further than just six months ago. So, if all goes well, I could be in for a maximum of R&R for a minimum amount of cash.

On the work front

I've now been working at Janome for over 8 years, so it's by far the longest job I've had. For the past couple years it's been 16 hours a week (plus occasional extra hours). I suppose that's one of the reasons I've been able to do it for this long—it's not so many hours per week that I get sick of it, and it leaves lots of time to do other things. They've been gradually assigning me to more important tasks, so that I feel I play a fairly crucial role in the company lately.



Multimedia madness

I spent most of the month of August in front of my computer, trying to figure out how to make an interactive CD-ROM about Janome's new Desktop Robot product. Though I did some work on it at the company, I did most of it on my setup at home. I didn't charge the company for my outside time though, since I saw it more as an opportunity to learn a new skill.

It was fun, frustrating and hard work all at the same time. I learned a lot about how to prepare photos for a multimedia presentation and did everything myself (except take the original photos). It includes a menu screen for navigating to the various "slides" which display the different features of the machine. Each slide has some animated text with my voice doing narration, and some even have my original music playing in the background. I had to practice "burning" a multiplatform CD (for both Mac and IBM) on a friend's machine before handing it over to an outside company for mass production. They only pressed 100 to start, which they will hand out at trade shows and sell to distributors for promotional purposes.

It's the interface, stupid

Also this summer I was asked to help localize (i.e., translate) Janome's first piece of software for the home sewing market. The program works with Windows 95 (no Mac version planned) and allows you to scan hand drawn designs, then edit the colors, etc. on the computer and finally sew them as embroidery on one of Janome's computerized sewing machines. I found tons of screwed up English in the program as well as several bugs, so I was a vital member of the project team.

These meetings began with a roomful of computers all networked together, a few executives and several mechanical and electrical engineers. After a few days, it was reduced to just myself and a couple guys who would transfer the things I typed into the program. I don't want to think about how the product would have turned out with no English speaker, like myself, to insist things be more logical!

This project was also unique in that I got to speak a lot of Japanese, since most of the engineers at the R&D center aren't fluent in English. (Most of them are no longer afraid of foreigners, thank Buddha, as a result of my weekly English classes with them.) Heck, it was unique because I got to work with other people for a change! (I usually just sit by myself and do my editing work.) Happily, the product has been well received so far.

Manual labor

One day about 2 months ago, one superior came to me with an operation manual to edit, and asked how long I thought it would take. "Let's see, we've got about 3 pounds here," I joked, but told him it might be done by Friday evening. Well, it's now about 2 months later, and despite working an extra 6 hours a week on it, about 10 pages of the original 130 are still not finished. Suffice it to say, it's difficult going. It's an operation manual for a computerized pressing machine. And when I'm finished rewriting it, I'll probably know more about it than anyone else in the company!

Add the above to my normal duties naming English products, interpreting legal documents, writing correspondence to important clients (one to the president of Sears last spring) and there's no denying they're very dependent on me there.

It's still a reactionary, monochrome, illogical, racist, anal place to work, but hey, life ain't perfect. :-) Honestly, I

have no problem with the work, and it's often interesting. It's also quiet, stable and pays well.

Trimming the fat

Two weeks ago it was announced that Janome's domestic Japanese work force would be cut by one third (from 1500 to 1000) and the largest of three factories would be sold. They should get about \$50 million for the Koganei factory. The money will go toward retirement packages for some and will also be used to start separate companies to market and maintain products for the domestic market. (Most of the 500 who are cut from the current company will be transferred to these new entities, which will have to sink or swim on their own.)

You may recall that the company began to break even last year, having finally recovered from seven years in the red due to an underworld stock takeover. This latest move is an attempt to restore the domestic business department to profitability, as it's been dragging down the company for several years. With the dead weight cut away, it may become an entirely different place. (I'm not holding my breath, though.)

Back burner biz

Since I've been so busy working extra hours at Janome, I haven't been doing much Mac consulting—only when someone calls with something urgent. And though I usually enjoy it, there have been times when I spend so much time figuring out some client's problem that it's hardly worth what I charge. Then, I've been trying to leave time to study programming (a little Java and C) as well.

The last gig I played was with a throw-together band in April for a *gaijin* birthday party. I've been practicing finger-picking a bit, and have wanted to play around with a hard disk recording program I acquired, but haven't made it a priority.

Last butt knot leased

Yeah, I still get pretty frustrated having to ride the crowded, impersonal trains here. And there will always be things that tick me off and make me think "anywhere's got to be better than here." But the trains seems to be the worst of it, and lately I have a secret weapon: dark sunglasses and noise-canceling stereo headphones. If I just can't stand to hear the drunken *salarimen* babbling on the way home at night, I just get into my "cocoon" and get lost in a James Taylor Live CD or the latest Donald Fagan.

I still want to get out of here though. I'm working on it, but in the mean time, life ain't too bad. Autumn weather is fantastic, I get to eat out every day, I'm saving money, got a great roommate, Bali on the horizon.... Guess I should count my blessings.

Be well,

— Dave

**Please note my latest address,
phone number, etc.:**

**Dave Peterson
2-6-8-601 Kameido
Koto-ku, Tokyo 136
Japan**

Tel., fax, message: (81-3) 3637-8436

E-mail: dp@gol.com