

## *Why Don't You Write Something Japanese*

Ivan is blond-headed and blue-eyed and obsessed with the Orient. He is proud to know the differences among Asian cultures. He tells me the Chinese government is corrupt and Koreans have wide faces. He tells me about Vietnamese food and Indonesian Muslims before backtracking on the Koreans—their faces are broad, not wide. The Japanese, he says, are badass.

We are both aspiring writers, and he tells me in today's complicated social climate readers are sensitive to cultural appropriation, and I must exploit my bona fide pedigree and write something Japanese. He says I was lucky to be born Japanese, although the concept of luck is admittedly more Chinese than Japanese.

He longs to feast on those delicious Japanese narratives—samurai and ninjas, passive-aggressive daughters, passive-aggressive mothers. Mochi-pounding and sake-lifting on New Year's Day, small families with big grievances, prayers for hungry ghosts and green-skirted river monsters. The problem is, however, if I do write a Japanese story, he won't find any of these things and he'll blame me for his disappointment. He'll wonder why he didn't read that story about the Jewish tattoo artist instead. She took a tough stance with a needle; what profound things he might have learned. But no, he chose to read my story about a Japanese girl, and she's barely Japanese. She's barely even anything at all.

Write something Japanese, write something Japanese. It becomes a mantra, and not in a good way. It is hounding and obsessive, like an itch or that terrible feeling in your leg that makes you want to jump out of your skin. "Restless Leg Syndrome," it's called, as if the copywriter in charge of ailments was on vacation that day.

One morning we're having coffee at Pann's Diner and Ivan is telling me how much he dislikes my latest story. It's about a white suburban lawyer suffering from ennui and nostalgia who Ubers to the city every day, where he pines after a teenaged receptionist with an exuberant smile and a copper toe ring that is slowly turning her skin blue. He tells me the plot is marginally humorous but doesn't affect him in a heartfelt way; plus the story, like all my stories, rejects my heritage as an author. He tells me I have a bad case of the Cheevers and my shtick is getting old.

In order to throw the conversation I change the subject to the upcoming weekend, but I make the tactical error of mentioning I'm attending autumn *Higan* service at my Buddhist temple. It'll be the first time in years because I'm a bad Buddhist just like I'm a bad writer of stories and sometimes even a bad friend. Of course Ivan asks to come along to help "experience the event through a Japanese lens," but I'm reluctant. As the only white person there, Ivan will cause a splash. Everyone will fawn over him and cause him embarrassment and cause me embarrassment by association.

But what kind of person refuses to bring a friend to church? So we go to the temple and we sit in small chairs at a small table in the reception room and we wait for the rest of the congregation to arrive. It's early and it's quiet and I must confess there is an undeniably Japanese mood here—a kind of cozy sterility, like warm towels fresh out of the dryer. The foyer opens up to a light-washed sanctuary three stories high, with a ceiling made entirely of glass and steel, where the sun streams down on exposed concrete and bent-wood pews. The temple is designed by a protégée of Frank Gehry, and it defies tradition in a brazen manner. The ministers compensate by filling every space with the accoutrements of Japan: ikebana arrangements of twigs and dendrobium, gold scrolls and incense, and on the table between Ivan and me a tray of sencha in squat cups cast in the rugged Bizen style of the Yamanashi prefecture.

Ivan, ever vigilant, points like an inquisitive birdwatcher at three bronze statues in a corner of the room.

"Who are those guys?" he asks.

I tell him the first is *Amitabha*, the Buddha who refused Nirvana until all humans were saved; the second is *Kannon-sama*, the goddess of mercy and compassion; the third statue—short, plain, grinning—is *Ojizo-sama*. He's the bodhisattva who cares for the souls of dead children.

"Wow," Ivan says.

There is a small burst of activity at the front door and the head minister's gentle exclamations of *obisashiburi-desu* and *oiso-gashii-naka arigato-gozaimashita* waft down the hall to us. I hear him ask some newly-arrived worshipers if they'd like some tea, which they decline to great fanfare, and soon they are standing at the door of the reception room to introduce themselves.

The head minister is five-foot-five with a stubbly head and a beachball paunch and his compact, jolly frame is draped in a gossamer robe the color of lab-created emeralds. A middle-aged Japanese couple stands behind him, their bodies bent in purgatorial half-bows. She has a smiling white Hokkaido face; her husband trails behind, courteous but sullen in a papery gray suit.

"This is Karen," the minister says. I get up with the same awkward half-bow and shake hands. "And this," he continues, "is her best friend Ivan." His diction is clipped and deliberate—*Best Friend*. Ivan. The guests say "ah" and nod at Ivan and bow and bow as if he's Scandinavian royalty.

Then the mood shifts and the room seems to hold its breath as the minister pulls his sleeve back and holds his stiff palm out to me as if in formal presentation, explaining to the couple in Japanese that my late grandfather was one of the first missionaries to come to California in the early 20th century and that there isn't a minister alive in Los Angeles who does not know of him, a man of extraordinary humility and grace. Then he turns to me and says with joy: "Very famous."

Ivan gives me side eyes. We sit through the service and join the congregation for bento lunches, and when we're getting ready to leave he gives in and asks what I'm famous for.

"Not me," I say. "My grandfather."

"Who? I didn't know you had a grandfather."

"Everybody has a grandfather," I say. "Some even have two."

"Maybe you can write about him."

"He's not Haruki Murakami famous," I say.

"Still," Ivan says.

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It is six p.m. and class is starting.

We have a complicated relationship with our adult education writing seminar, Ivan and me. His problem is he likes to write about ideas instead of things and uses his stories as a pulpit for his existential philosophies. My problem is my stories are heavy on structure but light on emotion. Our classmates tell us regularly that such habits turn readers off. But we enjoy creative writing so we press on.

Ivan's twelve-page story "Platform" is up for discussion tonight. It's about a stockbroker who wanders through an unnamed metropolis stealing cigarettes from homeless men. But it is really a story about a stockbroker who wanders through an unnamed metropolis stealing cigarettes from homeless men *because he is confused about his place in society*. Sometimes he beats them up and leaves them to bleed in dark corners of train stations. Other times he gives them a quarter for their trouble. Every night he goes home to his wife who bakes him delicious casseroles for dinner, and he never says a word about the cigarettes or his violent crimes. The story suggests the homeless men are black, but Ivan never tells you outright. He's afraid of making waves.

Class is held in the basement of Melnitz Hall at UCLA in a stuffy windowless room that smells like whatever's in the trash. Tonight it's onions and ham and the smell alone sends a queasy knot roping through my intestines. I clench my toes to keep from passing gas. Our teacher, Bishop, looks around at the ten of us and shows us his curiously square teeth. "Smells funky, huh?" He gets up from his desk and grabs the trash can and puts it just outside the door like it's a misbehaving dog. When he comes back, he claps his hands together to indicate it's showtime. Time to talk about Ivan's story; no more dicking around. I realize I'm not gassy because of the smell of the ham. I'm gassy because I'm nervous for Ivan.

Dr. Wina, our resident OBGYN, kicks things off. He's published a series of children's books on infectious diseases in his home country of Nigeria, and this modest accomplishment affords him a disproportionate amount of respect in the classroom. He is small and officious and it's a bad sign when he's the first to comment on your work.

"In this story nothing happens," Dr. Wina declares.

"I think it does," I say. "It's about a stockbroker trying to find his place in society."

Dr. Wina screws his face into a pinwheel; it is dramatic and over the top. A couple of people snicker into their manuscripts. Things go downhill from there.

The pocket of gas in my stomach squeezes into something sinister and black, a cancerous knot.

"The stockbroker is angry and lost," I say. "He lashes out from a place of uncertainty. And then he hates himself even more for it. But he doesn't know how to stop."

Dr. Wina tips his round head on the axis of his neck. "That is interesting. But you are reading into something that is not yet on the page."

"I see it on the page," I say.

Bishop steps in like I'm a child that needs calming. I find this offensive and embarrassing and I don't know which is worse.

"Karen, your points are not mutually exclusive. The stock-broker is lost and alone, but the story's not doing the work to make him come alive."

I find myself nodding like an obedient jerk while others jump in. Mostly it's about how the characters are thin, how the stock-broker is hateful, how there's too much violence, it's uncomfortable but it must be said that maybe the story at its core is just plain racist. My face warms and I put my hands under the table so no one can see them trembling. Every time I open my mouth to say something, somebody else speaks and I'm too scared to jump back in. I'm afraid to look at Ivan but I can feel him next to me. I can feel his heat.

When everyone is done demolishing his story, Ivan and I go out into the moonlit quad for a smoke. He quit a month ago but he's dying for a fix and who can blame him after that Xerxes-style massacre. I pat down my jacket and find my pack of American Spirit Blacks, shake two out and hand him one, filter-side up.

"You can bum a smoke," I say, producing a lighter out of my jeans pocket. "Just don't beat the crap out of me, hah."

Ivan snatches the Bic out of my hand and lights his cigarette with a hiss of the striker wheel. He takes a long drag, squinting into the lamplight and filtering smoke through his teeth like a dragon. He watches the smoke haze out into the darkness and holds the Bic out to me at the end of his arm. I light my own smoke. Ivan looks annoyed as he peels a little piece of tobacco from his lip.

"I would never say this in public," he says, "but my work would be viewed through a far more generous lens if I were a POC. Feel me?"

"What's a POC?"

"A person of color, what's wrong with you? Anyway, it's like, what, I can't make a social statement because I'm not the right color? What kind of shit is that?"

"It's some kind of shit," I say, taking a hard drag that makes my head light up and flutter like old neon. "Fuck that shit."

Ivan holds his cigarette by the tips of his fingers and turns it to inspect the glowing lava of the cherry. “I’ll be honest—I just don’t get you. Why not capitalize on your ethnicity? You could do such good work, work that’s appreciated in the classroom. Don’t think of it as selling out, or touting your race for personal gain. Think of it like writing from a place of pride, from a place of giving your people a voice.”

He points his cigarette at me to emphasize his point. “It’s like you’ve got the Hope Diamond right in your hands, and instead of showing it off you sock it away in a museum.”

“The Hope Diamond *is* socked away in a museum,” I say. “The Smithsonian.”

“Exactly,” he says.

“I love your story,” I say, hoping to change the subject. I ash my cigarette on the brick walkway.

“Yeah?” Ivan says. His voice sounds frosted with defeat. “Well. That’s nice. But they were right. The story’s not working on a visceral level yet. It’s a non-starter, if I’m honest.”

“The POV could use some tightening,” I say. “But ‘Platform’ deserves to be read.” Calling the story by its title feels good, like I’m willing his work into legitimacy and, by some weird extension, doing the same for myself and for every story ever written. It feels like a pious act, a prayer.

“I appreciate it at any rate,” Ivan says.

He glances at his watch and takes an aggressive pull from his cigarette as if he’s angry with it. He blows the smoke out of his mouth with a *hooo* sound and then he says, as if it’s the first time he’s ever thought of it: “Karen. Why don’t you write something Japanese?”

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The next night, because I have a story due to Bishop and nothing in the hopper, I decide to write something Japanese. I take it on as a personal challenge. I sit in my apartment eating home-made kale chips and drinking Stone IPA and surfing *Flavorwire* and *The New Yorker* and *Vice* before switching back to Microsoft Word to stare at my blank document. Nothing comes. I consider phoning Ivan for ideas, but I don’t like talking on the phone, and texting will eat up hours of my time. Besides, let’s be real—Ivan is an

inspiration, but only in an ironic way. He has no idea what it's like to be Japanese.

Problem is, neither do I. I know a few words and a little about Buddha and the internment camps in World War II, but none of this has anything to do with me, a thirty-year-old Californian working in the energy sector with no Asian, let alone Japanese, friends.

The most legitimate Japanese subject I can think of is my so-called famous grandfather with whom I had a deep connection, so the attendant emotion is a potential bonus. His spirit lives inside my heart like a little bird. He was tall for a Japanese man, and his face was long and tan and freckled on account of his distant Ainu heritage. When my parents were out late he would put me to bed and in his crackly tenor sing a song from his early childhood growing up in the Akita Prefecture. It was called "Aka Tombo," his mother's go-to song. He would sing away, his voice popping from old age, patting my shoulder until I fell asleep.

*Red dragonfly at twilight  
remember when I first saw you?  
When she carried me on her back  
picking mulberries  
with her basket, in the autumn fields  
or was it a dream?  
She left and moved far away  
saying she would write letters  
that never came.  
Red dragonfly at sunset  
I see you waiting  
motionless on the reeds.*

It looks pretty maudlin, in English, "a soppy trope," Dr. Wina would say, but at the time it made my chest clamp up. I would close my eyes as he sang and I'd picture the ruby gloss of the dragonfly's armor, sinking back into the flames of the evening sky, red on red, everything burning into loving oblivion. And his hand, patting like a heartbeat.

My grandfather died when I was nine. He was a kendo master and retired Buddhist minister who moved into my childhood

home in Arcadia after my grandma's funeral. My grandfather made me forget I was unpopular and had no friends in grade school. We would play card games on the floor of the TV room, like War and Fish and Pinochle, and at the end of the game he would lift his buttcheek and fart if I lost, because it made me laugh. But his origin story is not one of scatology and horseplay. His parents died of consumption when he was five and the Buddhist temple was the only place that would take him in. So the orphanage put him on a train halfway across the country. He cried in his little seat for the entire fifteen-hour ride while the faint image of his mother's face looked back at him from the window. After high school he moved to Visalia as a *kaikyoshi*, a Buddhist missionary, on account of the influx of Japanese farmers to Central California. Later he majored in East Asian Studies at UC San Diego, and after marrying my grandma he earned his Ph.D. in theology from the College of William and Mary. I remember he enjoyed eating fried fish, especially the eyeballs, which he sucked like hard candy.

Some of these details seem legitimately Japanese, such as the Buddhism and the kendo and the migrant farmers. Also the fish eyes. I feel this is more than enough to go on, so I lay down some words.

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"This story's too Japanese," says Ivan. We are at Pann's Diner eating chocolate waffles and drinking burnt coffee. Ivan sits across from me in the booth with my manuscript to the side of his food. The title page is decorated with three brown rings where he accidentally set his coffee mug down on it three times.

That he is taking it upon himself to judge what is and isn't Japanese makes me slightly ill at ease, but it's so absurd I don't get angry. Besides, there is an element of truth to his criticism.

"It's too on-the-nose," he says, "like a lot of your writing, frankly."

"So what put you over the edge?" I say. "Was it the geisha girl? Or the ninjas?"

Ivan doesn't think this is funny. "You have to dig deep into what makes Japanese people Japanese on the inside. You're too focused on the silly outer trappings of being Japanese. Think in

terms of code. Think in terms of fortitude. You know? Honor.”

“So, like, samurai,” I say. “But without the actual samurai.”

Ivan takes a sip of coffee and gives me a flat look over his mug. When he’s done sipping he sets it back down on my pages.

“If you don’t take your writing seriously,” he says, “no one will.”

After that day at Pann’s I make myself unavailable whenever Ivan calls. I send him a text to let him know I’m okay, just busy writing. I also tell him I’m a little under the weather, which I am, in that my stomach has been in knots over finishing this story, honoring my grandfather, and making sure I’m not over- or under-reaching in my role as a vessel of cultural wisdom. To be honest, I want more than anything to just let the cherry blossoms fall where they may. But it is a bumpy ride for many reasons, not the least of which is every time I sit down to write I find myself sidetracked by the last days of my grandfather’s life. These memories leave me inert and contemplative, but not in a writerly, haiku-composing way.

Toward the end, he suffered a series of strokes that rendered him aphasic and moody and immobile. The powers that be at UCLA Santa Monica gave him his own private room at no extra cost. They said we were lucky it was available, but I had a feeling they deferred to him as a man of the cloth—jewel-toned silks, not vestment brocade, but still—the nurses and doctors and orderlies looked on my grandfather as if he were a messenger of God among ignorant men. It had something to do with the way he carried himself, even after the strokes, like he could hear the music of angels and see the gilded trees of Elysium, as if the secrets of the galaxies were flowing through his increasingly frail body.

I distinctly remember sitting at his bedside late one night; I was too young to visit but a mean old Filipino nurse named Aquinas would sneak me in to see him on Fridays.

“Your grandfather very, very good man,” he said, as if he were scolding me.

Aquinas wiped a web of drool from my grandfather’s chin and my grandfather raised his bony hand, painfully, laboriously, a half-inch from the bed. His eyes were watery and troubled.

“Is he hurting?” I said.

Aquinas looked at me, and then at my grandfather, and his puckered face relaxed. “Karen. This is not pain. Grace, honey, this is grace. *Tsk tsk*. Your grandfather thanking me for taking care of

him. *Tok.*”

My grandfather’s gaze twitched over to me and his mouth opened, the wet plum of his tongue moving inside. A rasp escaped his lips and Aquinas leaned in to hear.

“Say again, sensei, say again,” Aquinas said.

My grandfather made a hoarse, splintered noise, and the nurse stood up and cocked his head at me.

“Iko, he says, ‘Karen is iko.’ What is that?”

“*Ii-ko*,” I said. “It means ‘good child.’”

On his last night, we were getting ready for bed when we got the call that we’d better get down to the hospital fast, my grandfather’s had another stroke. So my brother and I pile into my mother’s Volvo and she drives like gangbusters down the 210 to the 134 to the 2 to the 5 to the 110 to the 10 until we’re on the edge of Santa Monica and moments from his bedside. We’re pulling off the freeway at Cloverfield when I see it: a fireball the size of a child’s lost balloon. It’s rushing across the sky, away from the city, in the direction of the San Gabriel foothills where we live. “*Ojüchan’s* gone,” I say. I’m convinced he’s going back home to look for us and I wonder, shouldn’t we turn around so he won’t be all alone, looking for us in an empty house? But my mother keeps driving. When we get to his hospital room no one is surprised he’s dead. His eyes are closed and his skin hangs on him like a garment. He was always skinny but now that he is dead his skeleton is more obvious to the eye. In that moment it also becomes obvious that my grandfather is skin and muscle and bone and hair and that’s what he’s always been, nothing much has changed. What’s more, so are we all—skin, muscle, bone—and if I were able to bend time and see the universe I could watch all of us live and die in the same way, one day here, one day not, in a cycle of impartial gain and loss.

When I take my story to my writing class everyone senses it is heavily autobiographical and shows me a kind of unearned respect, and I understand for the first time how Dr. Wina must feel. To be honest I don’t love it, all the kowtowing. Ivan doesn’t talk much but he is obliquely supportive throughout the critique. There are some kind words and some criticisms and I take meticulous notes for future revisions. When Bishop asks whether anyone has a final thought, Dr. Wina raises his hand.

“Much respect, Karen,” he says. “This story is full of cultural detail, which I admire. A wise man with a powerful kendo stroke

who dies desiccated in a hospital room and journeys to Nirvana. But somehow, the story seems to be missing something very crucial. For me, it is lacking heart. For a story about the death of a loved one, the narrative feels cold as ice.”

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“Now I understand,” says Ivan after class, “the problem of writing something Japanese. Not everybody’s problem with it. But your unique problem with it.”

We are sitting in the darkness of the empty quad, but neither of us has cigarettes so we’re just sitting on the steps hugging our arms around our bodies to keep out the cold.

“It’s pretty incredible,” I say. “You’re like a savant of all things Japanese.”

I immediately regret my tone. But Ivan is undeterred.

“The problem is this: Being Japanese for you is like being white for me and a lot of other people. It’s, like, too vanilla. You don’t know what to do with it. You don’t know where to go with it. Because you’re just you.”

“True,” I say.

“Maybe you should just forget about all this Japanese stuff,” he says.

“Ugh,” I say.

“Seriously,” Ivan says. “Get back to basics. Reset. What’s the most important thing about your grandfather dying? Not the most Japanese thing, but the most important thing. The heart . . . you know? Like Wina says.”

“Maybe,” I say. I’m sure Ivan feels good about having imparted his wisdom, but I don’t think I’ll be going back to reset anything. The story’s going into my “OLD” folder, the folder of stuff I never revisit, the stuff I pretend never existed at all. It’s the place I send my millions of shameful compulsions to disappear into the void.

Ivan gives his knees a pat and gets up, flapping his hands at his rear end to rid himself of invisible dirt. There’s something about the hurriedness of his movements and his indifferent gaze that makes me feel as if I’m looking at a stranger.

“Ready to boogie?” he says.

“Nah,” I say. I tell him I’m going to hang for a bit, that it feels

good to sit with nothing but campus trees and the winter dark to keep me company. Sometimes when you're outside alone at night it feels like a shadow wraith might sneak up on you at any moment, jarring you back to life. I tell him I need that right now, to feel rattled, to feel my heartbeat.

"You're being weird again," he says. As I observe his business-as-usual grimace I have the brief but extraordinary sensation that I will never see him again. It settles in my gut, a kind of body knowledge. It's not literal—I *will* see him again, at Pann's Diner, in class, walking toward me and away from me against any number of urban backdrops—but somehow it feels like an existential, bottomless truth. I hold my hand up to tell him goodbye for now and he gives me a shrug like suit yourself and heads off toward the North Campus parking meters behind Schoenberg Hall. I watch his red Adidas jacket and orange running shoes like road-sign beacons as he walks away. He brightens under the occasional pool of lamplight and finally fades into the murky shadows of the Chinese fringe trees. I catch a glimpse of him near the parking meters but his shape is as fleeting and ambiguous as a stray cat chasing its tail.

The real reason I won't go back to find the heart of "The Last Stroke," my single attempt at writing Something Japanese, is not easily explained. I could try to justify my inaction to Ivan over coffee or I could mutter a few lame words in our next class meeting—that is, if someone asks—but in the end I'll just keep my mouth shut. My efforts to explain myself won't make any sense to anyone but me, and why suffer the tragedy of unsolicited advice from Ivan, and Dr. Wina, and everybody telling me how to fit the mysterious puzzle of my grandfather's death into the orderly structure of the short-story form? They'll ask me to add some things and remove others. They'll ask me to arrange the moving parts and to dig into the gristle of my past to produce something real, a memory that echoes and thumps like their idea of a classic taiko drum.

And to their disappointment, I might tell them this:

The thing I most remember happened the morning after my grandfather died. I went back to school because there wasn't anyone at home to keep an eye on me and anyhow I was frightened of the sadness that now lived in my grandfather's empty room. So my mom dropped me off at the guard gate of Woodbridge Elementary like any other Tuesday and I walked down the sloping front lawn toward the fourth-grade building. A group of kids was playing

jacks on the sidewalk outside the closed door of my classroom and another was gathered in the middle of the play yard under the frilly canopy of the rain tree. When I arrived, the kids from both groups — each and every one of them — stopped what they were doing to look up and stare at me. Then, one by one, they stood and made their approach. I was confused by my grandfather's sudden disappearance from the world and too suffocated by grief to wonder why all these kids were walking up to me out of the blue. No one had told them the news of my best friend's death — but they came anyway, for some unknown reason, as if they were really seeing me for the first time. Come play with us, they said, let's have fun. How are you, they said, we found a lizard. The sun rose over the gold minaret of our all-purpose auditorium and the striated clouds of winter spread like raw fleece across the sky. A bird of no consequence — not a raptor, not a songbird, but a simple bird with a simple, rocklike shape — fluttered in the air above the rain tree, balanced on a funnel of wind. The white-noise static of the younger children playing in the far fields drifted over to where I stood, paralyzed by sorrow and grateful for these children, my classmates, surrounding me from all directions as if we'd always been the best of friends.

My fellow writers might insist that none of these things is adequately Japanese. But the truth is immovable, and this is the memory that echoes through time to touch me in the dull whorl of adulthood. I can still hear them, the children and their sweet summons to come and play, their voices small and gentle, like a thousand little hands reaching out to me in kindness.