

The **M**anga ● **A**rtist ● ●●

By

James Roth

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... James Roth's, "The Manga Artist," is steady, controlled – it's like the story's hands don't tremble.*

I think what I mean to say is that this story feels like what I imagine a Japanese pace works at.

Takumi is an artist. I don't know enough about Japanese culture to classify him, but he wears glasses he doesn't need, purposefully rumples his collar, and only wears frayed jeans. He's curated his own appearance rather than be himself, or, maybe, that is the point. One day, he meets, becomes enamored with the concept of a woman (Aiko) that he meets on the street, and, in turn, needs to find her again.

What follows is for you to read.

*I remember reading Haruki Murakami's *The Elephant Vanishes* and being astounded by a writer who was basically a Japanese Nabokov but preferred Dostoevsky. (It's like how are you that good that you not only write beautifully in your own language but can translate your own books, if you feel like, and you know more about the Russians and butterflies than me...c'mon.) I think that Roth is able to ply with those writerly allusions here rather nicely, and/or, if I was to pick a comparable contemporary Japanese writer, Murakami would be the only one I could say with certainty that I have read and can see within in this piece (I'm sure there are plenty of other great Japanese writers). There is focus on the environment and the way in which your surroundings reflect an overall mood, there is the socially maligned artist, and a feeling that, as you read, you're moving slowly through a forest while it snows.*

There is an aimlessness with an agency at work here. Part love story, part Japanese underbelly, as you travel through the guts of this story's plot you really feel as if you're pleasantly drifting rather than being coordinated by a writer, a well-crafted lull.

Enjoy.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

His mind wandered, and he found himself thinking of her husband, locked up in his cold Abashiri prison cell in northern Hokkaido. He must have thought of Aiko's body every night, and perhaps regretted that his obligations to his boss to kill whomever he'd been asked to kill and then turn himself into the police--a stoic samurai obligation to sacrifice himself for his boss--had deprived him of her pleasures. That kind of thinking was out of place in an all too modern Japan. Maybe he had come to realize that now that he'd had time to think about what he'd done. He'd come to realize that Japan's multinational corporations now served as *daimyos* and company presidents as feudal lords.

They went to the bed. It was round, like a sumo ring, and had sheets covered with prints of hot air balloons.

The Manga Artist

By James Roth

On a warm day in early March, at a few minutes past one in the afternoon, Takumi Miyata left his studio loft and walked down the street to Family Mart, a Japanese convenience store, to buy his usual lunch, a cup of instant *soba* noodles. His loft was in the center of town near Koichi Castle. The location served him well, allowing him to go for contemplative walks in the park surrounding the castle grounds and, if he needed to take a train to Osaka to meet with clients to discuss a project he was working on, be at the station in less than ten minutes.

He was presently illustrating a sex education book for prepubescent girls, a project he rather enjoyed, as he took the topic very seriously. There had recently been an increase in teenage pregnancies in Shikoku, considered by many Japanese to be a remote, even backward area. Chlamydia was also becoming all too common. Girls needed to be sexually aware, while at the same time learning that sex was one of life's more enjoyable pleasures, if not the most enjoyable, Takumi thought. Their introduction to it should not be one that put them off sex for the rest of their lives.

"How's work?" the cashier asked. She was a middle-aged woman who had a round, maternal face and was always cheerful. She often asked about his jobs.

"It's fine," he said. He was a bit of a celebrity in Kochi and took some smug satisfaction in being one.

"See you next week," she said. "I'm off for a few days. My husband and I are going to an *onsen*."

"Wonderful," he said. "I'd like to have the time to take a holiday, but, you know, my work is so popular these days."

Standing behind him was a woman who was near his age, waiting to pay for a couple of Meiji white chocolate bars and a can of heated Boss Premium Black coffee.

He left the store and stopped to admire a new model 150cc Honda motorcycle. It was very minimalist, a style that had become very popular in the past few years with university students and other young people who just wanted a pair of wheels to get around town. The muffler was under the cylinder block. The tires were disproportionately wide, so that the bike could be ridden over sand, even snow. The seat was about the size of a sandal, thin, and as hard as a board. There was only one instrument, a speedometer/odometer that was connected to the front wheel by a cable, all very simple and old school, this motorcycle.

A black skull helmet, the bare minimum to be legal, was atop the mirror. The helmet was marked in the back with a white chrysanthemum; in the center of the flower was a red circle, the rising sun. Takumi couldn't help but admire the simplicity, and the distinctiveness, of the design.

The woman came out of the shop eating one of the chocolate bars, the can of coffee in the other hand.

"The bike's mine," she said.

Takumi hadn't expected a girl to be riding a motorcycle like this. They usually chose scooters with big seats as comfort for their butts, scooters that had leg protectors and electric starters. These scooters came with a hook just under the handlebars, on which they could hang the strap of a handbag.

"You have good taste," Takumi said.

She studied him.

Takumi always wanted to present himself as an owlish intellectual, even if he was taller than the average Japanese man, around one hundred and eighty centimeters, and muscular, to his displeasure. He was now and then remorseful, if not frustrated and perhaps even angry, that he had not achieved the promise of the talent he knew he had, to be regarded as an artist, not just as a manga illustrator, even if the money was good. And so to make up for this inadequacy in his life he tried to look the part of an artist. He wore round, bottle-cap glasses, though his eyesight was fine. His hair was always tousled, and his T-shirts, which he wore beneath an open-collared shirt, were smeared with pencil lead. The collared shirt, he made sure, was rumpled. His jeans—and he always wore jeans—were ragged at the hems.

"I like your shirt," the girl said, "the dirty one." She finished eating the bar of chocolate, took a sip of coffee, and unwrapped the other. "Want some?" she asked.

"If you don't mind," he said.

She held out the chocolate, and he broke off a piece.

"You must live nearby," she said, looking at his bowl of steaming *soba* noodles.

"Over there, near the park. It's where my studio is. And my loft." He was puzzled that she didn't know who he was.

"Intriguing," she said.

That was a peculiar response, intriguing.

They stood there eating the chocolate, now and then glancing at the pines in the nearby park. The cherry tree blossoms would fill the park in the next week or two. *Hanami*, cherry blossom viewing, was a time of celebration. The park would be filled with picnickers

who had come with trays of sushi and bottles of sake, beer, and *shochu*. They would set up karaoke stands, and drunks would bellow out songs that he could hear from his studio.

Takumi was proud to be Japanese, but he'd had enough of the drunken behavior of so many of his countrymen, who, after a day of drinking, puked in the gutters of squalid alleys. It was shameful, undignified behavior, contrary to the spirit of bushido. Even the owners of love hotels now and then turned away these drunks, fearing that they would leave the room smelling like puke. What they paid for two hours of rolling around on a bed with a girl who was often just as drunk was less than the cost to have the carpet steam-cleaned.

"You're an artist," the girl said.

He was flattered. No one in Koichi referred to him as an artist. Who was she? "Yes," he said.

She stared at him. Her stare seemed to strip him naked. Few women had had that effect on him. And he liked the feeling.

He said, "Sometimes I'm forced to do manga to pay the bills." He told her about his current project.

"Very responsible," she said. "I wish I'd known."

He resisted asking her about her sexual history. He'd save that question for another day.

"I've never seen you at this shop," he said.

"Do you do security work, too, to help pay the bills?" She smiled.

She was, indeed, tough, the new generation. She crumpled up the wrapper of the chocolate bar and threw it away in a bin and offered him a Lucky Strike.

"Thank you," he said. He was trying to quit smoking but didn't want to put her off, have her think he was less than a true artist. That, too, cigarette smoking, was a necessary part of presenting himself as a serious artist, even if more and more Japanese were finding smoking offensive, and there were fewer and fewer coffeehouses open-collared for it.

She lit her Lucky Strike with a butane torch, what a jeweler might use. The blue flame was three or four centimeters long. She took a few drags, before clamping the cigarette into an alligator clip device she had rigged to the handlebar of the motorcycle. She finished the can of Boss coffee and put it away in the bin marked "cans."

He drew on the Lucky Strike. It was all he could manage not to cough.

They continued to study the other. An awkward silence settled between them. He wondered if she was waiting for an invitation to accompany him back to his studio. He would welcome the opportunity to spend the afternoon with her on a futon, in the northern

light of his studio. Her hair was shoulder-length, set in tight curls, as if she'd recently had a perm. Her complexion was dark, almost olive. She was wearing a suede leather jacket, the kind sold in American specialty shops for an outrageous price. It had strips of leather hanging from the sleeves that would flutter in the wind when she rode her bike. Her jeans were faded, fashionably ragged over the thigh.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Aiko," she said.

"As in 'love child'?" He wrote out the character for love in Japanese on the palm of his hand with a finger: 愛.

"Don't get any ideas," she said.

She took the Lucky Strike from the alligator clip. Takumi noticed her nails. They were a bit long, decorated with fake jewels, all a different color, blues, whites, greens, and reds. He couldn't stop himself from imagining her digging those nails into his back, drawing a little blood.

"I must be going," she said abruptly and blew smoke in his face. She mounted the motorcycle, kick-started it, strapped on the helmet, tucked the cigarette back into the clip, and sped off, leaving him there, enjoying one lasting look at that chrysanthemum decal on the back of her helmet. And then he wondered about what had just happened, all that conversation leading up to nothing. They hadn't even exchanged phone numbers. Then he thought, Kochi is a small town. I'll track her down.

He went over to the park and found a bench near the moat and ate his *soba* noodles, thinking of the upcoming *hanami* parties, when the park would be like a carnival. He knew that Kazutoyo Yamaguchi, the feudal lord of Tosa, the name for Kochi during the Edo period, would not have approved of their behavior. Takumi often thought that Japan was in decline, in submission to, of all countries, China, whose people were even more slovenly. The men spat constantly, announcing each heave of saliva with a roar, and both the men and women ate with their heads resting on the palm of a hand, their elbows on a tabletop, as their jaws mashed together like a locust's. Takumi's father, if he'd seen him eat that way, would have popped him on the top of the head with the ends of his chopsticks. And deservedly so.

Takumi wished he'd been born two hundred years earlier, when he might have been able to earn a living by making woodcut prints of kabuki actors. He would spend his evenings in a Yoshiwara brothel, Tokyo's largest and most famous red-light district, seeking respite from the day's work. But, well, there was no use thinking that way. Those days were gone forever, only recounted from time to time in movies. He stood up, dumped

the empty plastic bowl into a bin, and headed for his studio.

#

Two weeks later he had tracked Aiko down through his network of friends. She had a small shop, South Sea Jewelry, a block away from the Sakamoto Ryoma Museum. Aiko's motorcycle was parked at the curb.

Takumi had thought about arranging a chance meeting on the street or in a shop but ruled it out. She'd see right through that guise. The direct approach was best. Deceit was the seed that led to an inevitable quick end to a love affair, one lie followed by another and another until neither of them knew what the truth was.

Her shop was between Quasimodo's Pastry Shop and Stilettos: Shoes for Show. Rent in the neighborhood was high; specialty shops like hers were all small and cozy. Her shop was only slightly wider than the door. In the window were turquoise earrings, pearl necklaces, opal bracelets, and various body piercings, all a bit nontraditional, some of the stones set in stainless steel, giving them a stark, fearless quality, and others in warm, exotic hardwoods. (Or was the hardwood fake made of acrylic? In Japan, it was so difficult to distinguish between what was real and what was not. The acrylic food displays in the windows of restaurants often looked more appetizing than what was served.)

Takumi opened the door and walked in confidently. Aiko was sitting at a worktable behind a display counter, a jeweler's loupe stuck to her right eye. She had been holding a butane torch but shut it off and put it on the worktable when she saw Takumi. She popped out the jeweler's loupe and set it down too. She stood.

"What took you so long?" she said.

Takumi went to the counter, drawing close enough to her to take in the musky perfume she was wearing. He fantasized about grabbing her, pulling her toward him, and biting her on the neck.

"I was busy," he said.

"Liar. I like that in a man. Have any plans for *hanami*?"

"You can't be serious? Being around a bunch of drunks? No, thank you."

She took from a shelf a paperback manga book and set it down in front of Takumi. It was one book in a series of his, a soft-porn manga about an Ultimate Fight Club fighter and one of the girls who walks around on the ring, holding up a number on a sign, indicating the number of the following round. "She should have had a boyfriend, another fighter, a hired killer," Aiko said, "to add to the tension of the story. What tension is there if the girl is only a body? Just sex."

"That's what men want," Takumi said, "not character development."

Aiko pointed at a photograph hanging from a wall. It had been taken on the beach of a country other than Japan, or perhaps Okinawa. There were palm trees in the background. On the white sand Aiko was kneeling, dressed in a yellow *yukata*. Around her were twelve or fifteen others, most of them men.

"The film crew," she said.

Takumi looked at her, then back at the photograph, then at her again, then back at the photograph. The photograph had been taken long ago, perhaps as many as ten years before. He blurted out, "I know you."

She smiled. "Thank you."

"You were great! What happened?"

"It's a tough life," she said, "shooting for maybe ten hours a day. It's not all fucking, you know. And I got married. But Bali was wonderful! I'd love to go back. That's my dream."

"Married?"

"That's him there," she said. She pointed at a man in the photograph who was kneeling next to her. He had a yakuza brush-cut hairstyle. "He's in prison now," she said, "up in Abashiri. He killed a member of the Namikawa-kai one night in Osaka on orders from his boss." She grinned wryly, then said, "We went to a love hotel afterward, as a way of saying goodbye before he turned himself in to the police."

Now that, Takumi thought, is bushido. He's Japanese. He asked, "When's he getting out?"

"We've lost touch."

Takumi knew that the parole minimum for a man convicted of murder was ten years, if he behaved himself. "What are you doing for lunch?" he asked.

"Not eating instant soba," she said.

"I know of a curry house nearby," he said.

"Everyone knows it," she said.

"Then let's go, if it's fine with you?"

Aiko locked up her shop, and they headed for The Kuroshio Curry House, only a few blocks away. Aiko was wearing her leather jacket, and when a spring breeze came up the leather strands hanging from the sleeves fluttered like the banners of a *koi no bori* on Children's Day.

"That's a beautiful jacket," Takumi said.

"Thank you. Hideo gave it to me."

"Your husband?"

"I filed for divorce long ago. Don't trouble yourself with him," she said. "He's not getting out any time soon."

They came to the curry house. Takumi flipped up the *noren* that hung across the entrance, and they went inside. It was crowded with businessmen in suits. A few of them took notice of her when she entered. It would have been unnatural for a man who was a man not to take notice of her. Many, if not most of the men, probably knew of her past and were possibly envious of him. He enjoyed that feeling of their envy. Aiko had the thickest, shiniest black hair, cut ever so precisely and sharply over her shoulders, the way, perhaps, that she designed jewelry, and there were those wonderful curls. An opal earring now and then showed through the strands of her lovely black hair.

He and Aiko found a booth on the tatami. A young waitress came to them.

Aiko said, "Pumpkin curry, please."

"*Tonkatsu* for me."

The waitress nodded her head and dashed off to the master, who was standing behind the cedar counter, to give him the orders.

The top two buttons of Aiko's white blouse were unbuttoned. A hint of lace showed. Beneath the lace, Takumi imagined two dark and hard nipples, what he had seen in her videos.

Aiko said, "You're an odd one, taking a woman to lunch who was married to a yakuza thug."

"He's in prison, you said. What's to worry?"

"Right," she said. "He's locked up."

"Must be cold as the North Pole up there."

"I suppose. But Hokkaido is beautiful."

"For sure," Takumi said.

"He's the one who talked me into doing those movies, you know."

"Don't apologize. You were great!"

"I was a hit, I admit. So, what did you do when you were watching me perform?" She laughed.

"You know better," he said.

She had the most confident, defiant eyes, black and impenetrable, that gave little away, and she knew it. That was one of the unexpected things that made her so desirable. The other was known: her body, those well-defined hips, those firm breasts, those long, muscular legs. And there were those sharp nails as well. He couldn't stop himself from imagining the pain they would bring him as she drew them across his back, the way she'd

done in one of her movies. It must have all been fake in that movie, but, even so, it had aroused him.

The waitress brought them their curries.

"*Itadakimasu*," Aiko said.

"*Dozo*."

They ate.

A few minutes later Aiko laid her spoon down and said, "We should go to the park for *hanami*. I haven't been since Hideo turned himself in. I'd like to get my life back on track, you understand, even with all the drunks there, do what normal people do."

"If that's what you'd like," Takumi said, "Then let's plan on it."

They continued on eating in silence, eyeing the other over their dishes. Takumi tried to control himself but couldn't. He thought that drinking water might put an end to the problem. He called to the waitress, "More water, please!"

The waitress came to their table and filled his glass.

"She's cute," Aiko said.

"Master Noguchi always hires the cute ones."

Aiko laid her spoon down again and said, "Thirsty?"

"Not really."

"Maybe you have an itch you can't scratch?"

Takumi stared back at her. He'd never known a woman who was so direct. But then, he'd never met a woman like her. And he was certain that he never would again, definitely not in rural Kochi.

"You haven't been in Kochi long," he said.

"More than a year."

"Where were you before coming here?"

"Matsuyama," she said, "and before that Okayama and Osaka."

"You move around a lot."

"Sometimes my reputation catches up with me. Men can be a problem."

"Sorry to hear that."

"About that itch," she said.

"The Moonbeam is right down the street," he said.

She smiled. "You speak as if you're a frequent visitor."

"I've spent some time there," he said.

#

"Which room do you prefer?" he asked.

"That one," she said. A slideshow of the available rooms was running across an LED screen.

"Have you ever been in that one?" she asked. She had pointed at a room that was decorated in a hot air balloon motif. Ropes attached to the basket were attached to the ceiling. A hot air balloon basket was in one corner of the room, serving as a sofa before a large screen TV.

"It'll be like we're floating across the sky," Takumi said.

"It's always that way, even on a futon, when it's good," she said, and smiled.

They went around the wall that concealed the entrance and entered a small, dark lobby. Takumi slipped a ten thousand yen note under a slot in an opaque pane of glass, said, "Room nine," and received seven thousand yen in change, along with a magnetic door card.

"Discount rate," Aiko said. "Not yet rush hour."

They walked down the dark, carpeted hallway to the room and went inside. It was just as it had been advertised in the slideshow. The basket for a balloon was in a corner, in front of the TV. Near the TV was the door to the bath.

Takumi took Aiko in his arms and kissed her. He bit her neck.

"You Dracula!" she screeched. "Stop it! They'll be time for that. Let's bathe first."

They went to the bathroom, a traditional Japanese one with stools and a tile floor and a large bath for two. The tub was made of cedar. The water was blue and smelled faintly of lavender.

"Like a real *onsen*," Aiko said. "Perfect!"

Takumi wasn't interested in the bath, or the lavender smell; he was unbuttoning her blouse. He got it off and began to work on her jeans, pulling them down off her hips, and wadded-up there she was standing before him, smiling, in her white bra and white panties, both made whiter by her olive skin.

He should have expected the tattoo, if that was the right word for it, because that word, tattoo, seemed to him to be too simple for what he saw. Her body was covered in blooming chrysanthemum petals. She was a mural. Takumi couldn't stop himself from admiring that mural, how detailed it was. He stood back a few steps and looked at it, as if he were in a museum studying a painting by a renaissance master, and, doing so, he felt that his work as a manga illustrator was that of a child in comparison.

"You don't like it?" she said. It was the first hint she'd shown in which she lacked confidence in herself.

"It's a work of art," he said.

"All the yakuza girls go to this artist in Osaka."

"But you didn't have it in your movies?"

"I got it after I retired, sort of a way of joining the yakuza gang."

"How long did it take?"

"Six months or so for the front." She turned around. On her back were two Japanese cranes in a courtship ritual, captured in a strutting position in which their beaks were pointing upward, meeting at the base of her neck. "Another six months or so for this one," she said.

"I feel privileged," he said.

He reached out and drew an index finger along the lines of the chrysanthemum petals, then the lines of the cranes.

"That tickles," she said.

"Don't put on an act now, feigning girlish shyness."

He pulled off his shirt and tossed it outside the bathroom, onto the hemp carpet. She got the belt on his jeans undone and pulled them down off his legs. He stepped out of them. She folded them up and put them away on a shelf. He couldn't stop himself from thinking of the movies she had made—how many were there, three, maybe?—and the night she had spent in a love hotel with her killer husband. They must have had a nice go at it before he turned himself in to the police.

Takumi took a sponge and began to wash her back, admiring the detailed work of the tattoo, the perspective, the exactness of the two cranes, as if they were copies of the other, folded out to perfection like origami. And there were the chrysanthemum petals as well, that were like a belt around her waist. They grew as if into a vine up to her firm breasts.

His mind wandered, and he found himself thinking of her husband, locked up in his cold Abashiri prison cell in northern Hokkaido. He must have thought of Aiko's body every night, and perhaps regretted that his obligations to his boss to kill whomever he'd been asked to kill and then turn himself in—a stoic samurai obligation to sacrifice himself for his boss—had deprived him of her pleasures. That kind of thinking was out of place in an all too modern Japan. Maybe he had come to realize all this now that he'd had time to reflect on what he'd done for his boss. Takumi had come to realize that Japan's multinational corporations now served as *daimyos* and company presidents as feudal lords.

They went to the bed. It was round, like a sumo ring, and had sheets covered with prints of hot air balloons.

#

That evening they had dinner at a *yakiniku* restaurant before retiring to his loft. It was cluttered with drawings, drafts of the illustrations he'd been working on for the girls' sex education book, and littered with coffee cans, dirty T-shirts, and empty *soba* cups. Off to one side was his futon and a wadded-up quilt.

"I see you live the life of an irresponsible artist," Aiko said. She looked into the kitchen. There was an electric hot water pot and a Tiger rice maker. The sink was cluttered with dishes. "Very cozy," she added. The loft had a series of north-facing windows, through which there was a view of the castle, lit up in the early spring night. "A welcome distraction from this rat's nest you live in," Aiko said of the view of Koichi Castle.

"I'm an artistic rat," he said.

"I hope you've spent some time away from this disgusting place?" she said.

"I was in San Francisco once for a manga convention, but I prefer my futon to a hotel bed."

"We just spent the afternoon on a bed," Aiko said.

"They're fine for that purpose," Takumi said. "I can't get any leverage when I'm on a futon, and tatami burns my knees."

"It wouldn't if the girl were on top."

"Later," he said.

They sat on the tatami and drank Mansion of Dreams sake while looking at the castle lit up in the park. It was one of the few castles in Japan that hadn't been burned to the ground by another daimyo or a B-29 raid that dropped incendiaries.

"Seeing that castle makes me proud to be Japanese," Takumi said. He set his sake cup down on a cherry wood tray.

"Now you're properly drunk," Aiko said. She put a Lucky Strike to her lips and lit it with the butane lighter. "We should go to Bali or Lombok, stay in a bamboo cottage on the water, hearing the waves at night lulling us to sleep. We can go for swims in the mornings. Better than any damn castle. I fantasize about living someplace warm, where I don't have to wear a jacket or bra."

"You wouldn't be you without that jacket. A bra? This is Japan."

"I'd rather burn them both and run off to someplace exotic."

"You should be proud to be Japanese."

"Running off won't make me less Japanese."

"Maybe you have a point," Takumi admitted

She laughed. "Have any clean sheets for that mat of rags you sleep on?"

#

They woke at around nine and had a Western breakfast of coffee, chestnut scones, and drinking yogurt mixed with raisins and almond granola. As they were eating, Aiko picked up her phone and sent a text message. She said, "A customer is coming by the shop this morning. I told her I'd be late. When do you usually get to work?"

Takumi set his coffee cup down. "Soon after breakfast," he said, "around ten."

Aiko was about to say something when the buzzer to Takumi's loft rang. "Probably the chairman of the neighborhood committee come to nag me about the recycling schedule," he said.

He went down three flights of stairs to the entrance but didn't see anyone. He thought now that perhaps a high school kid was playing a prank, going around the neighborhood ringing doorbells. He opened the door to take a look and, as he did, someone grabbed him by the throat. He saw now that it was a man with a brush-cut wearing dark glasses.

"Have a good time last night?" the man growled.

Takumi couldn't speak, the man's grip on his throat was so tight. He feared a vein on the side of his neck might burst.

The man turned Takumi around and was pushing him back up the stairs, one hand grasping his throat, the other holding his ass, when they came to a landing and turned a corner and were met by Aiko. She was standing a few steps above them, holding what looked like a child's plastic water pistol.

"You're mine," the man said, "and always will be."

"Let him go!" she screamed.

"He's that good?"

"Better than you ever were."

"More than ten years up there, freezing my balls off!"

"Let him go, I said!" She was pointing the toy pistol at him.

The man squeezed Takumi's throat. Takumi's eyes looked like they had popped out of his skull and were at the ends of two plastic straws, manga drawing style.

Just then Aiko pulled the trigger of the gun. A stream of some kind of liquid issued from it, brushing past Takumi's left ear, striking the man in the face. He began to shriek. He clasped both of his hands to his eyes, knocking off the glasses. Takumi stood there for a moment, gagging. The man bumped up against the sides of the stairwell, stumbled, and rolled down the steps, coming up against a wall, grasping his knees like a child as he groaned. Aiko said, "Get your passport!"

"What?" Takumi asked.

"Just get it, damn you! I know you've got one!"

Takumi ran up the stairs to his loft.

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In the afternoon of the following day they were at the Kansai International Airport, gate twenty-eight, waiting to board Garuda flight forty-six for Denpasar, Bali.

Takumi said, "Odd, you always carrying your passport with you."

"We've been over that too many times."

"Very odd."

"How's your throat?"

"Go to hell."

"I didn't know he'd been paroled."

"Why me?" he asked.

"We're both artists," she said. "And you're successful. You wouldn't believe the debts I've run up."

Takumi moaned.

"You were so cute. Your face was as red as an apple." Aiko grinned, touched his neck with the sharp point of one of those nails. Takumi couldn't help it, but the feeling was arousing. She saw that it was and stared at the lump in his crotch.

"Go to hell twice," he said.

She laughed.

"My neck has his fingerprints in it."

"I know how to aim," she said, "and your neck is only a little blue. Some places perhaps yellow. You'll recover."

He looked at her. He couldn't break himself away from those impenetrable black hole eyes. "Strange how those glasses of his didn't do him any good," he managed to say.

"We've been through that before. I've told you. I got him in the corner of the eye, right here." She put a black nail in the corner of Takumi's eye. "Then he made it worse for himself by putting his hands to his face."

"What was that stuff?"

"Homemade protection. I got the recipe off the internet."

She held out her hand, flexing her nails the way a cat might. "Do you still feel those scratches on your back?" she asked.

"I did like your movies," he said.

"Now you're with the real thing. No more whacking off. Tomorrow we'll be on the beach; a dream come true, life on a warm, sunny beach, a swim in the morning. A fuck in

the afternoon."

He let himself look at her breasts, her legs. She was wearing a pair of skinny jeans. The jeans showed off her slender legs, the ones that had wrapped around his waist and held him there.

"Bali isn't Mars," she said. "There's Wi-Fi, you know." She nudged him with an elbow.

"You've told me. Maybe one hundred times. No. One hundred and one times."

"What's the difference if you work from Bali or Kochi? Covid changed the way your kind of work is done, but not mine."

Today they had been on a buying spree: beach shirts and tops, swimsuits, sandals, sunglasses, hats, snorkeling gear, zip-off at the knee hiking pants/cargo shorts.

But all that didn't matter to Takumi. What mattered to him was what was in a carry-on backpack resting on the floor beside him, his Apple MacBook Pro. All his work was on the hard drive. He'd had the good sense to grab the computer, stuff it into its bag, and take it along with him after snatching his passport from a desk drawer.

"We'll have a good life," Aiko said. "Stop worrying."

He had nothing to say. He'd heard that too many times from her for it to have much meaning. He felt that by leaving Japan he would be losing something inside him, perhaps, worst of all, inspiration to create work that was lasting and meaningful. He even thought he might miss those drunks in the park during *hanami*, an annual Japanese tradition.

Rather than saying anything—because there really was nothing more to say—he found himself admiring the design of the Kansai International Airport. This admiration for its design brought with it a sense of awe. The architect, Renzo Piano, had done a fine job with the arching steel buttresses. The translucent ceiling allowed for the terminal building to be bloom with natural light. through the wall of glass, there were views of Osaka Bay and, across the blue water of the bay, the green mountains of Wakayama prefecture. What did it matter that the artificial island the building was constructed on was sinking inexorably back into Osaka Bay? The sight of such a beautiful building had been worth the cost, whatever it had been. Politicians—and so many others—had little regard for beauty and its necessity for those who possessed the gift to recognize it.

He did indeed long to be a real artist and wondered if he could achieve that, working from Bali. Yes, it didn't really matter where he was, only that he got his work done. And, well, there was Aiko, too; sleeping with her was hardly something he should wallow in self-pity over. Many a man fantasized about running off to a tropical island with a former adult movie actress.

Three chimes, each one a higher pitch than the other, preceded an announcement: "Garuda flight forty-six ready for boarding. First to board, the elderly, pregnant women, and all others in need of assistance."

Takumi watched passenger jets gracefully land and take off. Few people, he was sure, paid attention to this exquisite ritual.

He thought of the beauty of Aiko's tattoos, Kochi's castle lit up on a clear night, Rinzo Piano's design of the terminal. So many people passed through life and saw none of this beauty.

The three chimes sounded again. "Garuda flight forty-six now ready for general boarding."

They walked over to the line that had formed. Takumi thought about his future life with Aiko. It had all started just because he was in the habit of eating instant *soba* noodles at the same Family Mart. He had to laugh to himself over that, it was so outrageous.

Two Indonesian flight attendants in batik uniforms greeted them, "Welcome aboard."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Considering the deluge of women's romance fiction that is out there, I thought, Why not some stories for literate men? No porn, of course, but something erotic, for sure, from a man's POV. I want to write a collection of such stories. Title: "Romance Gone Wrong." As for this story--I remember seeing a woman long back who came out of a convenience store in Sendai, Japan, where I was living, who was her own woman, rode a motorcycle, smoked, and wore a leather jacket, but was distinctly feminine, taking care with her hairstyle, nails, and jewelry. I was taken with her, but, well, hesitated . . . to my regret. She rode off. I never saw her again. I was left holding my spaghetti lunch. I placed the story in Kochi because, well, I like the place. I was first influenced by early Hemingway. Then some Faulkner and Fitzgerald, Capote, Stevenson, Jane Eyre, Chekhov, and Andre Dubus. As for Capote, his preface to "Handcarved Coffins," in which he states that writers, most of them, overwrite, struck me as profound. And then there are the other influences, Miles Davis's "Kind of Blue," the architect Louis Kahn's "Fort Worth Art Museum," and life in Japan, the austerity of some things, the kitsch of other things, the civility of the people, the exactness of it all. When a train is scheduled to depart at 09:03, it departs, 99% of the time, at 09:03.*

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