

## The Brassrail Shitkicker's Bar

I experienced another one of those sudden sober-ups one Japanese evening in the home of Sakura, a hostess who was curiously a tad bigger than most of the delicate hostesses I usually chose. I was deep into the fourth year of my weighty Navy enlistment, deep into the resignation that I was stuck in a time and place I had no control over, deep into my own rhythm of drunken blurs in night clubs. If the ship was in a port, I was in a bar. The Vietnam War could wait.

I no longer needed the companionship of friends for safety, for sharing or for validation. I was self-validated. I was a solo player at twenty-one years old. I had wrapped myself in layers and layers of self-pity so cleverly I'd forgotten I'd done it. I no longer needed to search the bars for a girl who reminded me of home. Almost anyone would do. I'd forgotten what home was like.

On this night, I'd been in the same bar since three that afternoon. I'd randomly chosen a bar, any bar, from the dozens on the strip outside the Yokosuka Shipyard where we docked. I picked the one I felt had the most moronic name as I passed by, The Brassrail Shitkicker's Bar. It was a name that denoted country music, music I had come to avoid because of its association with the men I'd met on the ship who were from the Deep South. To me, that meant uneducated, Confederate-flag waving shitkickers. I wanted to wallow in the music, the clientele. I wanted to sit there and feel superior while I drank progressively stronger gin-tonics as the sun went down.

I'd gone through several hostesses already. One would come to my booth and predictably

ask if I wanted company. I'd accept, buy her a drink and not talk. I wasn't a novice. I'd listen as the hostess would try to be cordial, asking all the familiar questions about where I was from, do I have a girlfriend, how old am I, what ship am I from. I'd sometimes not answer at all, sometimes answer with a lie, "I come from Texas," or sometimes I'd answer in calculated despair, "What do you care?" or "My girlfriend died." I'd give my superior grin and wait to see how the hostess would deal with it.

Some of them didn't notice my lack of interest, maybe because of the language gap. Some recognized my attitude and stayed on anyway, because a drink is a drink and a commission is a commission. Others tolerated me through one drink and then moved on. It didn't matter to me if I was being an asshole. I had nothing to lose.

And now, at seven o'clock, along comes Sakura, taking up the baton. She arrived at the same moment I sensed more booze would put me under for the night. And if I couldn't drink anymore, according to my well-honed timetable, it was time for sex. She was in the right place at the right time.

She sat down in the empty seat next to me.

"I'm Sakura. Want some company?"

I skipped the formalities of an icebreaker social drink and got to the point:

"You wanna leave with me?"

"Will you buy me a drink?"

"Nope, no. I don't wanna sit here anymore. Will you leave with me or should I find someone else?"

"I'll be right back."

Off she went. My head nodded a few times as if it were too heavy for my neck to hold up.

Sakura reappeared. “Ten dollars for the bar. Ten dollars for me.”

“Okay,” I said, knowing full well money was going to be the deciding factor.

I did the best I could at unraveling a twenty-dollar bill from the rest of my stash. It wasn't easy. I had to stand up to get the crumpled wad out of my tight pocket. As I did, I noticed how tall she was—almost my height, unusual for a Japanese girl. She was big-boned and a little older than most of the girls who worked this job. Definitely not someone I'd call cute. I dropped into self-pity: *I don't give a shit. Who cares? Life sucks.* More of a feeling than actual words in my head.

I put my trust in her. Not because I trusted her, but because I had to. I followed her into the city streets, walking with a crazy stagger and a permanent squinty grin that was half genuine drunkenness and half calculated show. I wanted her and everyone else to know *I was drunk as hell*—but still cool and not bound by sentimental attachments to friends, lovers or family back home.

I didn't ask her where we were going, though I wondered. I'd find out soon enough. If it turned out to be an expensive hotel room, I'd pay the tab. If it were to be an outdoor number, fine. If I were to find myself in a bare filthy dive with a bed, fine.

As we left the city lights and headed into the neighborhoods, I pushed aside the fear coming over me. No hotels here. I no longer needed to put on the drunken show, because there was no one on those dark streets to see it and Sakura already knew my story. So I dropped it and walked the best I could. She had to slow down every thirty seconds so I could catch up.

We ended up in her apartment, alone; I was relieved. No more walking, no complications. Just

sex with someone new. *Fuck the rest of the world and its stupid rules.*

"Sit for a minute, right there, please," Sakura said in perfect English, pointing to the edge of the bed which dominated her studio apartment. She started picking up clothes from the floor and from a chair and lobbing them into a closet that had paper screens with birds painted on them for doors. She hadn't planned on company. Strange.

I started taking off my clothes. Socks first, having already left our shoes at the door by Japanese custom and etiquette. Sakura scurried over and sat next to me. She watched for a moment and then started to help me. As she took off my Navy scarf, I felt welcome, like a guest. This wasn't the usual way with the other hostesses I'd met. I was in her home and she was being hospitable. I relaxed a notch and sank into the unexpected warmth. She helped guide my shirt over my head when I got stuck in the sleeves, having almost no motor coordination left.

I started to unbutton her blouse, exactly as if we were on a fun date.

"No," she said, grabbing my hand to stop me.

I was puzzled by this snag and was in no way prepared for the enormity of what was to come.

"I don't want you to see my body," she said reaching past me in an intimate way to switch off the only lamp that was on. The streetlights kept the room from going totally dark.

I heard the rustle of Sakura removing her blouse.

"I want the lights on. I wanna see you," I whined. I was annoyed at the interrupted flow.

"I am ashamed of my body," she said quietly but clearly.

"Ashamed? No. You have a nice body. I wanna see it."

She hesitated. "You do not understand."

"Yes, I do. I like your body," I ventured, disingenuous to the bone. I wanted to get on

with it.

She reached past me again, intimately in the dark, and clicked on the lamp. “I have burns on my body. It is ugly.”

“Burn? You have a burn?” I didn’t care about a burn and was about to tell her so. In the dim light, I couldn’t see any burns.

“My whole body is burnt. I was a baby when the atomic bomb exploded on Nagasaki in the war. Both my parents died.”

Now I was dead sober. It was a wake-up call. Reveille. Bugle.

I fell into silence, fearing she may want to kill me or hurt me as some ghastly form of retaliation. I was vulnerable. Alone behind locked doors, in a neighborhood only she knew, with no one else on the entire planet knowing where I was.

I summoned the courage to look into her eyes. She was sitting calmly, humbly. Instinct took over. I was no shrink, but her soft demeanor told me she had no intention of harming me. She *was* ashamed of her body and probably of her whole self.

I wondered if Sakura realized I was a baby boomer, if she did the math and figured my father could have participated in the war against Japan.

“I’m so sorry,” popped out of my mouth, no filters, no posturing. “I apologize.”

“Why do you apologize? You did nothing.”

“I apologize for my country.” For some reason, I started speaking in formal English, in the same way as she. “As an American, I apologize for what we did to you,” as if I were the President of the United States making a formal announcement.

Sakura stared at me.

A tear formed in her eye, dribbled down her face. I felt like crying, not sure why. Maybe

because she was crying. My face became contorted as I prevented outright sobbing, but I couldn't stop the tears. She was real, she was selling her burnt body, she grew up without parents, she was crying.

My fun date had just gone south.

We hugged, a long and tight thirty-second embrace that ended as abruptly as it'd started. She slid her tight skirt off her hips and placed it on a chair.

As she began to lift her slip, I gazed at her face. I nodded toward the lamp with my head.

“No,” she said. “It is okay that you see me.” She placed her slip neatly on the bed.

I was still undressing when she finished. She sat motionless on the edge of the bed now, like a cat. A completely naked cat. I stopped when I got to my shorts. I couldn't fully reveal myself yet.

I wanted her to know my sympathy was sincere. I started kissing her—her face, her neck, her shoulders. Then breasts, belly. Grotesque scars. Nuclear heat.

I slid off the bed and onto the floor as I gently nudged her thighs apart, kissing, kissing. Pink and brown mottled skin. Closed my eyes as I prepared myself mentally to go down on her. I wanted to give the Nagasaki bomb victim an orgasm—to vaporize my guilt, perhaps her suffering.

Then I felt her hands—both of them—on my head. The touch was gentle, but stopping me. I'd never tried oral sex with a hostess—but tonight it was a matter of international diplomacy.

*She didn't want this?*

“I have the clap,” she said.

I dug deep for some honesty of my own.

“I don’t care,” I said. “I probably have it, too.”

END

