

The cage I've left, the one I'm in

I had two hours to write a French essay while Hiro was away in Brighton, teaching at the Japanese school. I couldn't even start it. Maybe it was all the questions I'd bottled up about Hiro and instead I had to interrogate a character in a book. I didn't want to think about his problems. Just write anything, I said to myself, but other questions bubbled up regardless. *Why don't you like Australian culture? Are Australian women different from Japanese women? Can you fail at love?* All things I'd never thought about before. I fronted up at his door, worried, distracted. He was disarming with his attentive smile. 'You can study in my room if you like,' he said.

He sat me at his desk and adjusted the chair, then showed me how to lock the door if I went out. His room was on the ground floor of the men's wing at Deakin Hall. Through the curtained door I could see the shapes of people walking past. My room was more secluded, upstairs facing a carpark.

I was wearing his jumper, a navy blue one that gave off a slight salty smell. It drooped off my shoulders and over my hands, making me feel like a little girl for a moment. I twirled in front of him. Stopped. Ta da! I felt reckless under his thoughtful gaze. He pursed his lips.

'You got white polka dot scarf? That look really good I think'.

Surprised, I scooted upstairs and came back, breathless, afraid he might have had to go. *Don't be too eager*, a voice inside said. But the door was open, he was in his socks about to shoehorn his feet into casual shoes. He placed the scarf round my shoulders and tied it in a loose knot, leaving my throat bare. Then he lifted my long hair over it and stepped back. I stood stock still, the touch of his fingers still humming on my skin.

'Nice fashion,' he said, looking me up and down, and then he was gone.

I sat back in his chair, amazed at the lack of clutter in his room. Covers drawn up on his bed, no clothes or papers underfoot. Not even a book on his desk. Just a bottle of whisky and two glasses.

'Take a sip,' he'd laughed the first time, as I wrinkled my nose at the smell. No-one I knew drank whisky, not even my parents. I hated the taste of course, preferred beer. At least it was cheap and you could buy jugs of it at the local pub, a short drive away. But Hiro didn't like pubs or parties in share houses.

'Everyone just stand around and get drunk,' he'd shrugged. 'No fun.' So I hadn't been to either for a while.

I looked around the room: wooden speakers at either side of the window, burgundy dressing-gown hanging on the back of the door. Was everyone this tidy in Japan? I couldn't see anything of *him*. I just want to know what makes him tick, I said to myself. Even after going out with him for a month, I wasn't quite at my ease.

I crossed the room and sat on his bed. There was a stack of Japanese paperbacks on the bedhead. I fanned the pages, wondering if there were any notes inside. Not one. I piled them back and looked under the bed.

The box had official looking forms in manilla envelopes, probably from the time he first came here, a year ago. Underneath were ordinary letters addressed to Hiro. I pulled one out and breathed in a faint trace of scent from the thin, crackly paper. It was covered in a Japanese script like bird's nests in a line with here and there a stick or a couple of twigs spinning off. After a year in the Japanese department I could just read printed texts, but this handwriting was different. It rushed to the end of the line with a tiny circle or a dash. The more lines I couldn't read, the less I wanted to fold it up in its envelope and put the box back under the bed. I held the letter out for a moment and then dived into the box for more.

There were no recognizable dates or addresses. He had kept all these letters and I couldn't read the writing on a single one of them. I felt bad looking and bad not finding anything. I was about to stop when I caught a glimpse of something red, a sun hat, and pulled out a photo of a young Japanese woman.

Not a pretty face, I said to myself carefully, but I didn't feel any better. Her hair and eyes were almost hidden under the brim of the hat. She was laughing, her legs turned to one side, pale skin, T-shirt and shorts. Not a swimmer. Not that day. He was leaning towards her, his face turned to the camera, holding a smile without opening his lips. Cute I would call it. Something he could turn on at the last minute. Of course, after he'd set the timer and run back to kneel at her side. *OK. Cheese.*

I crouched beside the bed with a new feeling like a cage settling in my cramped arms and legs. I didn't care about the French lady he'd mentioned once, or the older married woman in South Yarra, but a Japanese woman made me uneasy. I imagined them making sushi together, popping swirls of seaweed into each other's mouths. I could lose him.

Don't get all emotional. I could hear Dad's careful, emphatic voice as if he were here beside me. I glanced at the photo again. Had Hiro done that for me? No. So what? He'd driven me to Chinatown for Japanese food supplies every other week. Cooked noodles for me in his Birko. He'd even taken me fishing down the coast.

I looked around at his slippers, his whisky. This was his life. I'd made a small inroad into it, enough to sit in his room and search under his bed. I knew he was a few years older than me. But I had no idea how he felt, especially about love.

I didn't ask Hiro about the photo straightaway. I hoped he'd talk about her in the course of talking about something else. Or he'd come upon a face like hers unexpectedly and show indifference or longing. Most of all, I wanted him to reveal something of himself.

I gave up waiting. One day, when we were sitting on some rocks at Cape Schank, I asked him. Hiro was threading a worm onto a hook, his fingers making quick stitches in its flesh. The sea thumped the rocks and flicked spray into our faces. I held my breath. He squinted at the photo and then looked up at me.

'How much you want to know?'

I saw he couldn't care less about me looking through the box. He was that confident and also, I thought suddenly, wanted me to be searching after him.

I felt a rush of confidence too. 'Everything.'

'Um,' he said, 'last year. Just before I come to Halls of Residence. She like St Kilda beach.' He looked down at his rod and lifted it slightly. 'She was very plain, but rich you know. Her parents sent her on overseas trip. She love me, not like you.' He pulled a sad face.

'What do you mean?' I had to shout across the wind and a drumming in my chest.

'Most Japanese girl loving all the time. Thinking all the time how to look after. Not just *Hello. I'm fine. And you? Oh, good.*' He mimicked a high voice. Was that me? I didn't think so. 'Do own thing,' he added. 'This your way.'

'What,' I spoke quietly, 'do Japanese girls do?'

'Is feeling. How you talk, wear clothes. All affect how others feel. You wouldn't know.'

He wound the line in and looked at the hook, rethreading a part of the worm. What was he on about? He was so calm and reasonable that we hardly ever argued. I had a flash of memory: Mum in the kitchen, slamming the lids of the Aga before throwing dishes into the sink. It was something Dad had said, or not bothered to say. Not that they argued much, or not in my hearing. They were practical, farming people and Dad didn't do conversations about your day and my day. Mum did the talking: usually stories that darted here and there ending with a punchline, something to laugh at. Dad would sit back then. I understood from an early age that he was the one who had to be looked after.

But Hiro wasn't that kind of person, at least, I didn't think so. We seemed to circle each other as if he were playing with me. He stood up and flicked his line back and then forward in a wide arc. It fell with a *plink* into a hollow between the waves. I waited for him to sit down

on the rock. How to get him to talk about it? I chose the only way I knew: a blunt, yes or no question.

'Did *you* love her?'

'Of course,' he said, 'but not like always. She know that. So many girl like her in Japan. And she is not beautiful. But, she make me laugh. She have good feeling, you know?' He looked out to sea again. I waited, willing him to go on. It was the most he had ever said about love.

'Anyway,' he sighed, 'I can't marry housewife. She told me her parents make arranged marriage already, writing to her come back, you know? She will be good housewife. Plenty money. She told me in her last letter come to Osaka when husband away.' He laughed. 'She like me still. Don't worry', he said, looking at my face. 'I love you, I do, but . . .' He looked at my jumper and old jeans. 'Only if you get better clothes. Too . . . too . . .'

I laughed out loud. 'You mean you just want a well-dressed Westerner?'

'What's wrong with that?' he shot back.

Stuff that, I thought. And I wasn't going to be a housewife either. 'Is that what you think about love? Looking good?'

He was smiling now, pulling the line in again between his thumb and forefinger, letting it go. 'And good in bed too.'

I stayed silent, thinking of the twisted sheets on my bed after we'd made love. I'd been holding myself back, I knew, but from what? I had no idea what I was supposed to be feeling or doing. I was afraid he'd dump me if he knew. I forced my voice down low again. 'Do you have to be good too?'

He continued to look out to sea, pulling at his line again. I thought for a moment he hadn't heard.

'If you no like me,' he said suddenly, and then turned back to the sea and left his words hanging there. 'But,' he smiled, 'I think you do. You are so . . . anyway, loyal.'

I grabbed the word like a gift, a rescue line, wondering for a moment why I felt so relieved. *Loyalty*. And then I saw how suitable a word it was for a girlfriend, and a wife. I was hanging off his every word already. The thought deflated me for a moment. When I looked up he was watching me.

'I like your Aussie way,' he said. 'Honest feeling.'

Of course he knew. But his eyes were warm, serious. No cute-boy smiles. Not like that photo. How to get closer to him without revealing anything about myself.