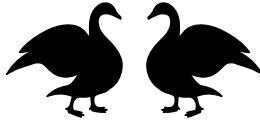


THE NATANT POET



When Ayako awoke that morning next to her husband, Finn, in their cramped Hollywood apartment and saw the red splatter on his t-shirt, she was reminded of the spaghetti sauce she'd thrown against him and the wall the previous evening. He'd asked would she mind if he went alone to a movie. This was after he explained that he'd accepted a job as a video editor in Fargo, North Dakota. Standing at the stove, she dipped a scoop and flung it.

She looked at Finn's form in bed. He looked like a tuna roll. Rather than wake him, she moved to the window. The sun was just rising, and she wanted to create a poem in her head.

*The satellite dish
Blocks the rising silent sun
And stares into the void.*

Poems relaxed her. So did thinking of herself as a poet—better than seeing herself as a waitress. She had trained in Toyko to teach poetry, and now this. But wasn't this a hell of a lot better than life with her first husband, who had abandoned Kelly and her in Kentucky? Then Ayako and Kelly had moved farther west to Los Angeles, where there were more Japanese people, and Ayako found a waitressing job at a Japanese restaurant, Asahi Ramen, where she'd met Finn—as different as anyone she'd known. He was who she'd wanted. But North Dakota?

She was pulling on her bra when she heard, "You're beautiful." Finn was grinning. "All your swimming looks good on you."

“I know what you’re doing.”

“What?”

“Being nice.”

“Isn’t that what life’s about?”

“I don’t know what it’s about.”

“It’s a new day,” he said in his cheery voice. “Let’s enjoy it.”

That was enough of that. Wearing just her bra and panties, she pushed into the bathroom where she could be alone for at least a few minutes. She wasn’t sure she could take his optimism right now.

On the toilet, she realized Finn perhaps didn’t understand her needs. Americans liked to talk. She should talk—better than flinging sauce. She flushed, washed her hands, and returned to the bedroom.

“I like Los Angeles,” she announced.

“You hate it. You always complain.”

“That’s called venting.”

He laughed. “I told you that word. So you believe it? You’re venting?”

“Why can’t we stay here?”

“Because we need money. Because the cost of living here is too high. Because you said if I found a great job anywhere, you’d move.”

She clenched her teeth. She had said that. She just didn’t think there were such jobs outside of Los Angeles. “How about if you look for another job for another week?”

“That would mean saying no to Prairie Public Broadcasting and the great money. And it’s cheap to live in North Dakota.”

“What if I said I’d rather die than go to North Dakota?”

“You know you don’t mean that.” He patted the bed. “Come here. Let’s snuggle and talk about this.”

She knew what that meant. They’d hold each other, then his gentle hands would undo her bra, and then, well. “Okay,” she said. “But no talking.” She could use a little loving.

After they made love—after-anger sex was always the best—they cuddled with Finn behind her and his giant arm with his delicate video-editing fingers curled against her.

*A warm cave of flesh
Cups my backside and Finn purrs
That Dakota rocks.*

She spoke. "I'm sorry about last night. I am sorry about my anger. I will try better."

"So we can go to North Dakota?"

"I didn't say that."

"Will you think about it?"

"Sure."

"Fit in another swim today. It always relaxes you."

Maybe it would. She didn't need him telling her so. "North Dakota? I still don't know where it is." She hadn't taken her citizenship test yet, so she didn't know the fifty states.

"In the middle of America toward the top, near Minnesota. You saw that funny movie, *Fargo*."

"Isn't North Dakota flat and cold?"

"Not in the summer—then it's warm and hilly."

"And what am I supposed to do there?"

"They have restaurants. They need waitresses."

"Asian?" she said, hearing her own strong accent.

"Sure. Or you can learn to be an accountant. That's what you want, right?"

"I want to teach poetry."

"That's not realistic. Americans don't understand poems. They don't want their kids to understand them, either."

"Haiku is easy to get—same with tanka and death poems."

"Death poems? No way. Americans don't like death. In fact, Congress is going to pass a bill to get rid of death."

She smiled. "Okay, so I will learn numbers." Accounting was stable. Moving to a place that no one had heard of wasn't. Then again, until she moved to Kentucky, she hadn't known much about the state, either, beyond the Toyota plant and Kentucky Fried Chicken. "What about Kelly?" she said.

"They have first grade there. She can start in the fall. Kids adapt."

Kelly was her six-year-old daughter from her previous marriage. She'd left Japan with Shuichi, a respected physicist, when he had landed a major job at the University of Kentucky. They had to move across the world. She'd had to learn English and a whole new life. Soon he wanted sex doggie style. Everything was strange. He'd then fallen in love with a redheaded coed named Kelly—this was after they had named their own daughter Kelly at his suggestion—and he left them. Now would there be pretty young women at Prairie Public Broadcasting?

Later, as she drove Kelly to school, Ayako glanced at her daughter in the mirror. She was short but looked tall in the back seat in her red-and-blue uniform.

“Finn says I can have a dog in North Dakota,” Kelly said.

“He’s bribing you.”

“That’s okay. I want a terrier.”

“Why can’t I get what I want?” Ayako said.

“What do you want?”

“Tums.” Her stomach gurgled; she needed the confusion to stop.

After she’d dropped Kelly off at the private school in the Valley, she found herself sitting in her car on the street for nearly an hour, watching parrots gather in a large eucalyptus tree, cawing their horrible caws. Both things, parrots and eucalyptus, were not native to the area. They’d seemed to adapt. She kept thinking, however, about how she’d talked her brother into coming over. He died in a freak accident at a warehouse in Kentucky. Then his wife died in a car accident on the way home from the funeral. Their blood was on her hands.

At noon, Ayako wheeled her shopping cart around Vons and came to the yogurt section. She faced colors in funny-shaped containers—enough to hammer the insensate into feeling. She felt a tingle.

*Some say that Yoplait is healthy,
but if you don't care,
then what is it?*

She avoided the curdled milk products and picked up instead a packet of Bays English muffins. It was one way to absorb more English. She also liked the word “muffins.”

*I'd like to stuff him
Full of muffins and make him
Be a waiter once.*

She plopped the Bays into the basket. When she’d met Finn, he said he loved everything Japanese. He got along so well with Kelly, too, that after a few months, they moved in together. One household was cheaper than two. True, Ayako had urged Finn to look for better jobs. Working freelance on one low-budget movie or another didn’t make it, not after they’d married and were a family. Why was he always so sure of things?

In the afternoon, before she slipped into her Speedo and dashed to the lap pool, Ayako found the atlas. North Dakota appeared rectangular. Minnesota, on the other hand, looked like a teakettle with a spout and knob top.

Why couldn't they move there?

She found herself crying. It was as if two giant hands squeezed her. The atlas shrugged. No amount of green tea would help. Only swimming might comfort. The pool drew her like the promise of starlight. The one great thing about their apartment was the pool.

Outside, the sun, like a former husband, gave her no warmth. She found herself shivering, even though the air was quite warm. No one was there. She stared at the sign: "No Lifeguard on Duty. Absolutely No Diving."

She must take control. Finn could do things. So could she. She moved by the stairs and dropped her towel. She would run and dive and compose the best poem of the day. She stared at the blue water and the concrete between her and the pool. The pool was edged with tan tile that had a lip.

*My first step is short
But firm. I run more surely
Now, fast and feeling*

Feeling what? She had more words. The poem must go longer. There are longer poems.

Free, but I must go faster.

Yes, true.

The edge is oily and—

She felt herself slip. Her feet jutted out from her. The hard lip beckoned. Her head would surely crash. She had one more syllable:

Oh!