

# POPULAR HITS OF THE SHOWA ERA



A NOVEL

**RYU MURAKAMI**



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*Audition*



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# RYU MURAKAMI

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Translated by Ralph McCarthy

W. W. NORTON & COMPANY    NEW YORK • LONDON



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Murakami, Ryu, 1952–  
[Showa kayo daizenshu. English]  
Popular hits of the Showa era / Ryu Murakami;  
translated by Ralph McCarthy.

p. cm.

“Originally published in Japanese as *Shôwa kayô daizenshû*”

ISBN: 978-0-393-34037-2

I. Title.

PL856.U696S4913 2011

895.6'35—dc22

201003110

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.  
500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110

[www.wwnorton.com](http://www.wwnorton.com)

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd.  
Castle House, 75/76 Wells Street, London W1T 3QT



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# Season of Love

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## I

*Ishihara* had had a feeling, ever since the party the night before, that something like this was going to happen. That he alone had had this feeling was decidedly not because he was more intelligent than the others, or more skillful at analyzing situations, or psychic or anything. *Ishihara* had a tendency to burst into mindless and uncontrollable laughter at random moments, and it was a tendency he shared with all the other members of the group. The only difference was that in the interval between one bout of laughter and the next, into his head alone some sort of image—if not an actual idea—would occasionally pop.

The party had begun as usual at seven in the evening, and more or less everyone had been there—*Ishihara*, *Nobue*, *Yano*, *Sugiyama*, *Kato*, and *Sugioka*. “More or less” because no one was keeping track, but in fact the six of them constituted everyone. They assembled as always at *Nobue*’s apartment in Chofu City, on the western edge of Greater Tokyo. Each of them brought food or drink in a plastic bag or paper sack or, in one case, an old-school *furoshiki* wrapping cloth. *Yano* was the one with the *furoshiki*. He also wore his prized Leica M6 on a strap around his neck.

“Check it out, I saw *Karinaka Rie*—the adult video actress?—at this street fair in Shinjuku the other day, and I took a bunch of pictures of her, but would you believe it? None of ’em turned out. I don’t know why. I mean, I don’t get it. Why would that happen? I’ve thought about it and thought about it, but...”

Stroking the Leica with his right index finger, *Yano* expanded upon this mystery at some length, but, typically enough, none of the others responded or reacted in any way. These gatherings didn’t have the atmosphere one normally associates with the word “party.” *Nobue*’s apartment, just north of Chofu Station, was in an old two-story wood-frame-and-stucco building with a sizable parking lot at the rear. The six members of the group generally assembled here on a Saturday evening, but the gatherings had no clear purpose, and one hesitates even to call the participants “friends,” since they lacked any common goals or interests. *Nobue* and *Ishihara* had been classmates in high school; *Yano* had met *Ishihara* in the computer section of a bookstore, where they’d exchanged remarks about the new Macintosh being this or that and then, having nothing better to do, meandered off to a coffee shop and sat facing each other for a couple of hours, neither of them talking much but each coming to the general conclusion that the other was a person rather like himself, the upshot of which was that they swapped phone numbers and became comrades of sorts; *Sugiyama*, the only one over thirty, had met *Yano* while temping at a construction site out near Chiba; *Kato* was a sort of underling or sidekick of *Sugiyama*’s; and *Sugioka* knew *Nobue* somehow or other.

*Nobue* was the one who’d originally suggested a party. It had now been about a year since the first time they’d assembled at his apartment. No preparations of any sort had been made for that first gathering, and no one brought anything to eat or drink. They’d all been to parties before, of course, but it had never occurred to any of them to think about how to host one or prepare for one, much less to live the life of one. There were only five of them at the first party—*Nobue*, *Ishihara*, *Yano*, *Sugiyama*, and



Kato. Kato, having lost a brief rock-paper-scissors showdown, was sent out to the vending machine down the street to purchase a sackful of One Cup Sake drinks, and when he returned they all sat around quietly sipping from the little glass containers. Every now and then one of them would burst into mindless laughter or relate in a fragmented way some personal anecdote, fully cognizant of the fact that no one else was listening, and after some five hours of this the party just sort of evaporated.

Not until the fourth time they gathered had the parties begun to take shape. There was a full moon that night. Sugiyama had brought an armful of karaoke laser discs, and though no one in the group could sing, a few of them hummed along tentatively. They were humming to one of the tracks when a light went on in the window of an apartment across the parking lot, and there, clearly visible from where they sat, a young woman with very long legs and an unbelievable body was in the act of disrobing. Sipping at their sake in awed silence, all six of them watched, along with the full moon, as this modest striptease unfolded. The young woman with the unbelievable body was immediately elevated to the status of everyone's special idol, and the karaoke set (which had apparently conjured her up) to that of a miracle machine more worthy of reverence than even their precious computer. Karaoke became an essential element of each party from that night on, and they all began memorizing lyrics and timidly attempting to sing. Months went by, however, without the young woman with the unbelievable body making a return appearance. It was at the sixth party, when she'd failed to materialize for the second consecutive time, that Nobue proposed the post-party ritual that was to become such an important part of their lives. For someone in this group to come up with and propose an idea, and for the others to actually listen to it, consider it, voice their opinions, come to a consensus, and act upon it, was an unprecedented event—an event of historical significance to rival the moment seven or eight million years ago when some ancestor of human beings first stood upright and blundered forward on two feet.

The evolution of the parties had been slow but inexorable. At the third party, Ishihara had arrived bearing *eihire* (dried stingray fin), *kusamochi* (mugwort rice cakes), and *piisen* (peanuts mixed with tiny rice crackers), and from then on everyone began bringing things to eat or drink. At the ninth party a small wave of panic had swept the room when Sugioka showed up not with the usual dry snacks like stingray fin or peanuts or chocolate but a packaged macaroni salad of the sort sold in delicatessens and supermarkets. Nobue took one look at the macaroni salad and, after the inevitable bout of spasmodic laughter, set out plates and forks for all. One could have searched each individual brain cell in Nobue's head—and everyone else's, for that matter—without finding so much as a hint that the concept of providing others with eating utensils would ever occur, but it had, and it was a deeply moving moment. Sugioka, who'd bought the macaroni salad at a butcher's shop just down the road near his own apartment, actually misted up on seeing his purchase cause such excitement and wield such unexpected influence. At the tenth party, it was Yano's turn to stir the others to their depths by bringing six portions of Nagasaki Chanmen, an instant noodle dish that required only the addition of boiling water. Such astonishing mutations in the nature of the parties were, Nobue and Ishihara and the others all believed, directly attributable to karaoke; and the scale of the all-important post-party ritual continued to expand.

It was during the party on the second Saturday of June, the sort of muggy rainy-season evening when air, underclothes, and feelings all reach saturation point, that Ishihara became aware of the unwonted anxiety taking shape inside him.

Unfamiliarity with anxiety was something all members of this group had in common. In other ways, however, they couldn't have been less alike. All but a couple of them were from different parts of the country, and their social backgrounds and economic circumstances varied considerably. Complicating matters further was the fact that you couldn't have judged who was what simply by looking at them. Whereas Nobue, for example, looked as if he might be a scion of old money, he was

in fact the third son of a day laborer in the *mikan* orchards of Shizuoka; whereas Yano, when viewed from a certain light and from a certain angle, might have passed for someone who'd graduated from an elite university, he had in fact once been addicted to the toxic and long-unfashionable toluene, the fumes of which he had inhaled on a daily basis with high school friends, all of whom came down with debilitating nerve disorders as a result, while Yano himself, hardy though slight, maintained his health but was caught huffing the stuff on one of his rare visits to school and summarily expelled, which meant that he was officially a middle school graduate; and whereas Sugiyama, for example, to judge from his lugubrious face and sickly complexion, might have been on the verge of slitting his own wrists, he in fact tended to burst into laughter even more frequently and unexpectedly than the others to the extent that even they sometimes looked at him askance. These young men, in other words, represented a variety of types, but one thing they had in common was that they'd all given up on committing positively to anything in life. This was not their fault, however. The blame lay with a certain ubiquitous spirit of the times, transmitted to them by their respective mothers. And perhaps it goes without saying that this "spirit of the times" was in fact an oppressive value system based primarily upon the absolute certainty that nothing in this world was ever going to change.

If these six young men had anything else in common it was something rather difficult to explain except perhaps as a certain kind of strength on what we might call the cellular level. And this strength is what gave all of them, even in the absence of any good jokes or clever puns or amusing incidents, the ability to laugh to a more or less abnormal degree.

It wasn't as if they would laugh together, mind you. They laughed individually, at completely different moments, and not necessarily about anything in particular. Each laughed in his own distinctive way, but in each case the laughter was loud, uncontrollable, and spasmodic, like sneezes or hiccups. An impartial observer would have noticed that at any given moment at least one of the six would be laughing—that by the time the laughter of one had subsided, that of another would have begun, which is in effect to say that the laughs never ceased—but the same observer would not have had the impression that anyone was actually having fun. Perhaps for these young men, all born in the latter half of the Showa Era, the connection between fun and laughter had simply never been made.

Such, then, was the atmosphere of the party at which Ishihara began to experience his anxiety foreboding. The night wore on as always. A few members of the group recounted incidents from their own lives while nobody listened and a continuous, idiotic cackling echoed off the walls; but even when it was time to begin practicing their rock-paper-scissors technique, Ishihara's anxiety lingered. The track to the theme song for tonight's ritual, Pinky & the Killers' "Season of Love," played softly over the speakers, and everyone started trying to approximate the main vocal, each imagining himself in the role of the lovely and charming Pinky.

## II

**Ishihara** was startled by how tangible the anxiety was inside him. He'd never experienced anything like this before. He was certain it wasn't simply a matter of his having suddenly uncovered a dread that had always been there. No, this was definitely something new. It was shaped like a fetus. And just as a fetus in the later stages of pregnancy kicks the walls of the womb to assert its own existence, the anxiety fetus was sending Ishihara an eerie, wavelike signal that seemed to say, *Don't even think about forgetting I'm here!* The signal disrupted and weakened his heartbeat intermittently and caused the image of a tiny, undeveloped human being, its back curled forward and a cord extending from its navel like an unspooling fire hose, to blink on and off in his mind. He tried again and again to distract himself by laughing idiotically. His laughter was so droolingly mindless, in fact, and so explosive

that the others began to wonder if he hadn't lost his wits, and Nobue whispered to Yano, "If he goes any weirder, we'll take him somewhere and dump him, okay?"

Yano, who had long harbored an ambition to abandon something, experienced a little thrill at these words and unconsciously tightened his grip on the Leica M6. He had purchased the Leica from a man with a glass eye at a little camera shop in Hong Kong, where he'd gone on an employee excursion organized by the company he worked for and advertised as a *gurumei tsuaa* ("gourmet tour"), which to his surprise turned out to mean that they were to wander around as a group, eating at different restaurants. The Leica wasn't his first camera, of course—for years he had carried an Olympus Pen given him by his father—but only recently had it dawned on him that the reason he was devoted to photography wasn't because he particularly enjoyed capturing an image in a frame but because pointing the lens at an object and snapping the shutter was a way of virtually abandoning that object. Photography therefore provided a certain degree of catharsis for Yano, but he would have preferred to abandon an actual "thing"—or, if at all possible, an actual "person."

A strange old tale had recently been revived in popular novels and films about a man who, in accordance with the rules of the social group in which he lives must leave his aged mother to die on a desolate mountaintop. It was a story that would surely have caused any self-respecting immigrant, refugee or descendant of slaves to gag in disgust, but it was the stuff of Yano's deepest aspirations. Not only he could be given a chance to abandon something of tremendous importance to him—to dump it as if it were no longer needed in his life! He often reflected that if he were a woman, all he'd have to do was get pregnant, give birth to the baby, and abandon it; and it had even occurred to him that if he dressed up in drag and left a Cabbage Patch Kid somewhere he might be able to experience a similar sort of sensation, though he was restrained by the fear that if he went that far he might never find his way back. *I am, after all, a man, for better or worse*, he would mutter, and resign himself once again to waiting for a gender-appropriate opportunity to appear.

Ishihara, after fraying everyone's nerves with his astonishing cachinnations, finally settled down and began practicing rock-paper-scissors, as the others were already doing. The rock-paper-scissors contest was what one might call the prelude to the all-important ritual, and though it goes without saying that rock-paper-scissors isn't the sort of thing you can actually practice, each in his own particular way was convinced that he was doing exactly that. Nobue, for example, was loudly blustering that "Yano always starts out with rock, right? And with Sugiyama it's always paper, right?"—though of course no one was listening. Yano stared at his own hand, studying the shape of each rock, paper, and scissors he formed. He was particularly concerned with his scissors and kept adjusting the angle between the index and middle fingers, muttering to himself as he did so: "When two lines of the same length describe an angle of elevation, the trigonometric function of the corresponding isosceles triangle must differ depending upon whether you're talking Euclidean or non-Euclidean, so, um..." Sugioka was pitting his right hand against his left and plaintively asking "Which do you think is the real me?"—but needless to say no one paid any attention. Kato was trying to read his own left palm, believing as he did in the theory that vibrations produced by one opponent's mood could cause a delicate alteration in the pattern of lines there: "If the lifeline twitches—even a tiny bit—it means the enemy's coming with paper, see?" Sugiyama was rubbing his right palm with a chunk of ice. "After all," he mumbled, "even your balls get tougher if you ice 'em." Ishihara held his right hand on top of his head and was making rocks and scissors and announcing "Rock!" or "Scissors!" as he did so. "How come I always know which one I'm going to choose," he wondered aloud, "and no one else does?"

Tonight, in addition to One Cup Sake, they were drinking beer and wine. As for cuisine, beer jerky took the starring role. There was also macaroni salad—that begetter of a new era—not to mention various dry snacks, but none of these could compete with the headliner in terms of aroma and

sheer visual appeal. The beef jerky had been supplied by Kato, who worked for a small importer of foodstuffs. Kato subsisted almost entirely on his company's products, but it had never before occurred to him that the things he ate every day could lend pomp to a party. His main staple was giant corn from Peru, though when he wanted meat he would grab a package of this same beef jerky—produced by the American firm Tengu—and rehydrate the strips by boiling them in water à la sukiyaki. When he sensed that his body needed veggies he would open a can of apricots preserved in syrup—a product of the People's Republic of China—never for a moment doubting that the apricot was a vegetable. He'd brought the beef jerky on this particular evening thinking only that it might mildly please the others, but in fact it was a sensation. When he casually plopped the four packages of Tengu teriyaki style down on the tatami mats of Nobue's apartment, a rare hush fell over the room. It wasn't that none of them had ever eaten beef jerky before. But the excess energy that they themselves knew led to what to do with helped lend an otherworldly glow to this austere food product, so redolent of the frontier spirit. None of them said a word, but with an intensity that might have made an impartial observer wonder how they would react to something like stone crab, they began tearing the jerky into shreds and wolfing it down.

Complemented with wine from Yamanashi and Portugal, the beef jerky had rapidly disappeared. Ishihara had ceased laughing like an idiot; and preparations for the rock-paper-scissors showdown were in full swing. But just as they were about to start the actual competition, Nobue made a discovery that turned their entire world upside down.

It seemed an eternity since they'd last seen a light in the window of the room across the parking lot. That light was on now, and through the lace curtains they could make out the silhouette of the woman with the unbelievable body. Sugiyama instantly grew so tense that he squeaked and probably would have gibbered had he not bitten his own left hand. The woman with the unbelievable body was brushing her long hair, and now she casually tossed it back over her shoulders with two or three graceful flicks of her fingers. That was enough to elicit a commotion of sighs and exclamations from Nobue and the others, and Ishihara went so far as to mutter, "Anyone mind if I jerk off?" He wasn't the only one who was thinking of masturbation, but even as the woman undid the buttons on her blouse, the sublime aura of inviolability she radiated through the curtains prevented them from putting any such thoughts into action. The blouse slid off, the lines of her shoulders and back were revealed, and as she began to wriggle out of her skirt, tears welled up in Yano's and Sugioka's and Kato's eyes. "This must be what it's like to see a UFO, or the earth from the space shuttle," Nobue murmured, and everyone nodded breathlessly. The woman shrugged out of her slip and unhooked her brassiere, and then her silhouette disappeared from view.

"Shower time!" shouted Ishihara, and the other five responded almost in unison, like the chorus in a grade-school play:

*That's right! That's right! It's shower time!*

"She's going to take a shower now!"

*A shower now!*

"A nice, hot, steamy, sexy shower now!"

*Shower now!*

"The shower is a miracle!"

*A miracle! A miracle!*

"From all those, like, little pinholes in that weird-shaped thing..."

*Weird-shaped thing...*

"Hot water shoots out—just think of it!"

*Just think of it!*

"It's got to be a miracle!"

*It is! It is a miracle!*

~~It was only by vigorously chanting this odd sort of call-and-response that the six of them~~ managed to master the excitement bubbling up from deep inside. They now breathed a collective sigh and sat back to finish off the wine and beer, basking in the afterglow of perfect happiness.

And then, at last, the rock-paper-scissors contest began.

The theme song for the evening's ritual, as has been noted, was "Season of Love." Instead of the usual "*Jan-ken-pon*," therefore, you had to count off saying, "Jan-ken-PINKY!"

Nobue was the first to be eliminated, and he collapsed on the tatami mats and thrashed about in despair and frustration. According to the rules, he must now serve as the driver for the night. Sugiyama tossed him the keys, and he slunk outside to warm up the HiAce's engine.

The ultimate victory went to Ishihara. On conquering his final opponent, he leapt into the air shouting, "I did it!"—and the moment he uttered these words, the anxiety returned in the form of a chilling question: *Is it really all right to be this happy?*

As it turned out, of course, Ishihara's anxiety knew exactly what it was talking about.

### III

**Because** this evening's song was to be "Season of Love," it was necessary to determine only first place (lead singer), last place (driver), and fifth place (engineer/roadie). Naturally, if the theme song had been something by Uchiyamada Hiroshi & Cool Five or Danny Iida & Paradise King or the Three Funkys or Three Graces, it would have called for a different ranking system altogether.

Ishihara was so thrilled to have garnered first place that he squealed and began to perform the dance the others called "The Ishihara." The incomprehensible anxiety was still at work, but it had occurred to him that if he moved his body maybe everything would work itself out. There is a rodent known as the tremuggia that makes its home in the Kalahari Desert and looks like a cross between a chipmunk and a rat, and though there's no reason to believe that Ishihara was aware of the fact, the dance of his closely resembled that creature's mating ritual. He bent his knees slightly, stuck out his hindquarters, held his wrists limply at chest level, and bobbed up and down while emitting a distinctive cry: *Kuun! Kuun! Kuun!*

*They* all carried their things to the HiAce step van and climbed aboard. Yano, who had been the second to be eliminated, took an inventory of the equipment, and when he gave the thumbs-up, Nobue steered the HiAce out to the street and accelerated. In tense anticipation of the ritual, all of the passengers were muttering to themselves—mostly about the brief striptease they'd just watched the woman with the unbelievable body perform. In the dark rear of the van, Sugiyama had narrowed his already narrowed eyes until they seemed to form a single line behind his glasses. "That was amazing, amazing," he mumbled. "Amazing, it was." Kato was tenderly touching the spot on the back of his head where the hair was thinning. "Well, that was a shocker," he muttered, "but the real test still lies ahead." It was doubtful if even he knew what that was supposed to mean.

Piloted by Nobue, the HiAce crossed the Tama River, sped past Yomiuri Land, entered the Tomei Expressway at the Kawasaki Interchange, and veered down the Odawara-Atsugi Road to Ninomiya where it exited via the Seisho Bypass and finally rolled to a stop at a deserted spot by the coast that Yano and Kato had discovered. Last-place Nobue was sent to appraise the location by staking out a spot on the beach for a full twenty minutes, as stipulated by the guidelines. He had to make sure the

place really was deserted. Once, a vacant lot Yano had found on a warehouse-lined street along Tokyo Bay turned out to be the occasional site of some sort of illicit transactions, and they'd been attacked by a pair of youths on motorcycles who smashed the windows of their van. Nobue and Ishihara and the others all hated that sort of thing. It wasn't violence that they disliked, mind you. Sugiyama had been studying karate and kick-boxing since middle school and had a habit of going off on opponents who were clearly capable of pounding him into the ground, as a result of which he'd had his skull fractured on four separate occasions; Yano had inadvertently joined a fascist youth organization when he was eighteen and as part of his training had hunted field mice with a crossbow in the remote mountains of Nagano; Nobue and Ishihara had both scored a number of knockouts in drunken brawls—although admittedly, only when given the chance to attack unsuspecting opponents from behind; Sugioka, who owned a collection of more than a hundred edged weapons ranging from box cutters to Japanese swords, always carried one or two blades and was forever stabbing walls and tree trunks and leather sacks stuffed with sawdust, and when especially piqued had even been known to slash to ribbons the shiny skin of used blow-up dolls; and Kato suffered a chronic, obsessive delusion that sooner or later he would murder—slowly and methodically—an infant or toddler or some other weak and defenseless being, and had come recently to believe that the only way to rid himself of this obsession was to go ahead and act it out. No, it wasn't violence they disliked: it was contact with strangers. What the young men feared and hated more than anything else was being spoken to by people they hadn't met or having to explain themselves to people they didn't know.

"It's just like Kato said, not a soul around. A stray dog wandered by with a fish head in his mouth, but I threw a rock at him. Aimed right at his balls, but I missed, but he ran away anyway."

The other five greeted Nobue's announcement with a cheer that sounded more like a collective moan, then grabbed their things and piled out of the van. Nobue and Yano, peons for the night, had to carry all the heavy equipment: spools of thick extension cord, the 3CCD Hi8 video camera and tripod, the five-hundred-watt pinspots and their stands, a gargantuan boom-box, Bose speakers, and a set of Sennheiser microphones. They huffed and wheezed as they lugged everything down the narrow concrete steps to the beach, while Ishihara and the others changed into their costumes: flared velvet pantaloons, patent-leather shoes, frilled silk shirts, cummerbunds, bow ties, and tuxedo jackets with velvet lapels, followed by the top hats, false mustaches, black canes, and white gloves—for the other that is. Ishihara alone applied bright red lipstick, false eyelashes, and a Cleopatra-style wig, tittering maniacally as he did so: *Hee hee hee hee hee hee hee hee!* Finally, decked out exactly as Pinky & the Killers had been back in the day, the performers strode down to the beach and stood there facing the sea and the tiny lights of fishing boats far offshore. Ishihara stepped forward and raised his little finger as he took the mike and cooed, "Ready, baby." Yano, off to one side, turned on the pinspots, and the intro to "Season of Love" came blasting out of the Bose 501 speaker system and echoing across the dark sea and sky. When the first line of the lyric—*I just can't seem to forget*—reverberated toward the waves in Ishihara's nausea-inducing voice, all the crabs on the beach scuttled simultaneously into their holes. As for Ishihara himself, he actually *was* able to forget—at least during the time he was singing—the anxiety growing inside him.

*The day after the ritual, that anxiety revealed what it was made of.*

The catalyst for it all was a badly hungover Sugioka. After backing up Ishihara on "Season of Love" more than forty times and walking the short distance home from Nobue's apartment, Sugioka remained too pumped up to sleep, so he chewed some oval sleeping tablets he'd bought from a pasty-faced girl while loafing about in Shibuya one day and washed them down with beer. This knocked him

out at last, but he woke at ten in the morning feeling as if his body were made of a particularly dense type of cement. He was irritable and grumpy, as anyone might be under such circumstances, and even part of him seemed in suspended animation except for the squirmy, itchy nerve that connected his lower parts—that is to say, his penis—directly to the corresponding section of his brain. Sugioka had experienced this sensation any number of times, but today it was incomparably worse than ever before, and he spent several long minutes wondering whether to watch an adult video and masturbate until the head of his organ was raw, or to pay a visit to the Pink Salon just outside the south exit of Chofu Station, or to seek satisfaction with Eriko, a blow-up doll to whom he still hadn't put the knife and who boasted, according to her brochure, Super-Tight Anal Sensation; until weighing the pros and cons of each alternative became such a great bleeding pain in and of itself that he sliced up a perfectly good buckwheat-husk pillow with the twenty-centimeter blade of his Swedish mountain commando knife and stalked out onto the streets of Chofu, squinting in the daylight. Having secured the knife between his belt and jeans, beneath his vinyl raincoat, he was walking along the narrow road behind the Ito Yokado superstore when he noticed a stocky woman in her late thirties—a typical, not to say stereotypical, “Auntie” or Oba-san—apparently on her way home from shopping. The Oba-san was wearing a gauzy vintage white dress and dangling plastic grocery bags stuffed with clams and egg tomatoes and celery and curry rolls and what have you. Sweat beaded her forehead and dampened her underarms, exuding a strange mixture of odors, and she walked with her ass sticking out. To Sugioka's bloodshot eyes, it looked as if that ass were saying, *DO ME*—or rather, the Japanese equivalent, *SHITE*. And in fact the wrinkles in the back of her dress seemed to spell out the word in hiragana:

し  
て

*So ya want me to do ya, do ya?* thought Sugioka, and quickened his pace until he was just behind the Oba-san and able to get a closer view. From the immediate rear, she was the most ludicrous-looking creature he'd ever seen. Up until then the most ludicrous-looking had been a hippopotamus that was emptying its bladder, a sight that had emblazoned itself on his memory during a childhood field trip to the zoo, but the Oba-san's calves bulged with red and blue veins and bristled with a number of stubbly black hairs. *Hideous*, thought Sugioka. When he was within perhaps fifty centimeters his nose detected the clams and he spotted several long, wiry hairs growing from a black mole on the back of the Oba-san's neck. *The poor thing!* he thought, and tears welled up in his eyes. He was still shuffling along half a step behind her when they came alongside a grade school athletic ground where several little boys were playing soccer, and just as a tall kid with the number 10 on his jersey scored a goal with a diving header, Sugioka gave a thrust of his hips to poke the Oba-san's ass with his foremost appendage.

The look on her face as she spun around.

Perspiration was melting her makeup, outrage dilated her nostrils, her badly penciled-in eyebrows twitched indignantly, and she appeared to be on the verge of spewing green foam. Sugioka didn't realize he was grinning; all he knew was that he had a hard-on like a tree. He thrust his hips forward a few more times, and the Oba-san began wailing like a fire-engine. “Aaooooooooooo! Pervert! Aaoooooooooooh! What do you think you're doing? I'll call for help!” Sugioka, disrespected by what seemed to him the lowest form of life on earth, now caught a powerful whiff of ripening clams wafting up from the Oba-san's lower regions. Seized with a nameless fear, he pulled out his commando knife, pressed the blade against the still-wailing siren of her throat, and sliced horizontally. Her neck opened as if it were a second mouth, and there was a whooshing sound followed immediately by a gusher of blood. Sugioka snickered to himself as he ran away. He glanced back ju

in time to see the Oba-san crumple to the pavement.

~~There was no one else on the street.~~

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