

Chapter 3
At Miyazaki Station
from
The Pagoda Diaries

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It's warm. But it's raining. Not the long endless rain of a winter in Oregon, where you were born and raised, but a fierce break of warm rain and lightning that had just burst forth from the hot and humid, grey afternoon as you were disembarking. Then, just as suddenly, it stops and the sun comes out again. The air is rich with the smell of lightning. The smell of ions. The smell of salt. The smell of the sea. The air is thick. It's surprisingly heavy.

Japan is a long country north to south. The main islands alone cover roughly the same range in latitude as the continental United States. People forget that. Miyazaki is at the same latitude as Tijuana. It's south of Casablanca, south of Tel Aviv, south of El Paso, Texas, south of Savannah, Georgia. It is almost tropical here. Palm trees line the railroad tracks as you leave the airport, sunshine glistening off the broad wetness of their deep green fronds.

This, for several decades, was the honeymoon capital of Japan. That was after the war, during those years before Japanese began to travel abroad in hoards. It was the fifties, sixties and seventies. In the eighties, during the years of the economic bubble, the honeymoon capital of Japan was Hawaii. Those are the years that gave rise to the term "Narita *rikon*." Narita, of course, is the name of Japan's major airport, the only one in use at that time for flights to Hawaii or much of anyplace else outside of East Asia, and *rikon* means divorce. These were the go-go years when everybody was going abroad. Then honeymooners were getting divorced the minute they got back home. And nobody was coming to Miyazaki anymore.

And they continued not coming for years.

Only recently have tourists started coming to Miyazaki again. But they come now, not for honeymoons, but to get a glimpse of the new governor of Miyazaki Prefecture—a guy named Higashikokubaru Hideo, which is almost impossible to say. It's one of the most unusual names in the country. It's not as unusual here as yours is, of course, but there are only about 60 Higashikokubarus in the entire country, and it would be almost

impossible to read, too, even for a Japanese person, except that he's so famous everybody has already learned how to read his name correctly. It used to be Sonomanma Higashi, which means "East As It Is". He used that name until he went into politics. He was a comedian, a TV personality and a movie star. He's kind of like the Japanese Arnold Schwarzenegger, but without the muscles or the accent. In fact, maybe it's wiser to call him the Japanese Ronald Reagan, but without the monkey.

On the other hand, anyone who Googles him on the Internet may well come across a photo of Higashikokubaru in his pre-gubernatorial days, dressed in a monkey suit with big orange ears. Indeed, leading off a scandalous story about 1.5 million yen in hush money the 50 year old governor had recently paid to a gorgeous twenty-something-year-old he'd been secretly dating, the headline in one English language paper read, "Still Monkeying Around."

But make no mistake. This guy's no fool. He's a guy who could well grab the reigns of the entire federal government, such as they are. He may well become Prime Minister someday, and it may not take him long. Never mind that Japan changes Prime Ministers faster than you change your underwear—a lot faster, in fact, since there have been 15 Prime Ministers in the 20 years that you've been here, but you haven't changed your underwear once. You stopped wearing underwear altogether when you were 17. But never mind that either. With Higashikokubaru, it could be *Bedtime with Bongo* all over again, but in Japanese.

You love this country. Anything can happen here. And it does.

But you're being unfair. Higashikokubaru is a bright and seemingly honest man. Never mind the obvious incongruity between the words bright and politician, not to mention the words honest and politician, especially in Japan. He appears, so far at least, to be a politician cut from a new and unusual mold. He's an avid handball player, a serious marathon runner, and the author of a book titled *How to reach the peak of life at 60*, which is something he seems perfectly destined to do.

In order to prepare himself for politics, he quit comedy in his early forties and entered one of Japan's elite universities. And now, though he is often recruited by the LDP to run for national office, he seems truly dedicated to the people of Miyazaki. He's an Independent and a liberal reformer of the kind Japan rarely sees. In Miyazaki, he governs one of Japan's most remote and poorest prefectures. Also, one of its most traditionally conservative, not to mention one of its most corrupt—in fact the fellow that Higashikokubaru replaced as governor had so revolted the local population by the end of his reign that he was forced to resign, and is currently on trial for election rigging.

Now that same local population gives Higashikokubaru an approval rating of nearly 91%, which he appears to have genuinely earned. Never mind that, like George W. Bush, who currently has an approval rating of around 3% or something, Higashikokubaru, too has been arrested. In his case it was for taking part in a fight between a bunch of comedians and a bunch of journalists, in a scene that sounds like it could have only come from a Marx Brothers movie.

Higashikokubaru worked in a comedy group with Japan's most famous and least funny comedian, an unattractive fellow named Beat Takeshi—yes, all Japanese comedians have these silly made up names. The other thing they all have in common is they aren't funny. But maybe that's a different issue. And anyway, when Mr. Beat felt that a certain scandal sheet had been badgering a young woman he was involved with, he went to the office of the publication to discuss the situation. He took his entire comedy group. One insult, apparently led to another, and soon enough they were all beating each other with umbrellas and the like. Beat Takeshi was sentenced to six months, not in the slammer, but under something like house arrest. He wasn't allowed to work. Higashikokubaru, for his part, was let off with a reprimand.

And never mind that Higashikokubaru's been divorced twice. The second time was from his actress wife of sixteen years. That happened after he'd got involved in at least two seedy and public affairs with other women. Never mind, either, that he's been questioned by the police for soliciting sex with a sixteen year old, and don't mention the twenty-something sweetie he gave the 1.5 million yen. At least, don't mention her again.

The fact is he's done a good job and the people down here love him. At one point his disapproval rating was under 2%. During his first 16 months in office some 400,000 tourists visited the capitol building in Miyazaki. That's over 800 a day. And still, they come by the bus-loads. They total at least as many as have visited the area's several famous, but more traditional, tourist destinations during that same period—those places where all those honeymooners used to go. They go to the capitol building even knowing there's little chance of actually getting a glimpse of the famous governor. Instead, they line up to take photos of each other posing happily with a life-size cardboard cutout of him. On many days more than a thousand of these photos are taken, and on August 14, 2007 some 5,550 tourists stopped by the Miyazaki capital building.

In September three restaurant workers showed up, and one of them, a 42 year old man, took photos of the other two, women of 36 and 24, on the capitol lawn, naked as the palm trees that flanked them. They posted these photos on their homepage where they eventually came to the attention of Miyazaki's finest, and in January of 2008 all three

were arrested.

And what did the former comedian, Governor Sonomanma, have to say about this? "It's outrageous! They have destroyed the Miyazaki boom."

But of course, they hadn't. If anything, they'd boosted it. These women weren't slouches, either. In fact, one of them had been an anchorwoman on a local TV station. And let's be honest, what harm can a couple of naked women possibly do outside the Governor's office building? It's the naked women inside it that tend to cause the problems. Just ask the Clintons. But all that Clinton nonsense happened in right wing Christian America where half the population has a stick up its ass. In right wing poly-unreligious Japan, nobody really cares.

And what about all those other scandals?

The sixteen year old? No problem. Higashikokubaru admitted it freely, using the same defense Jack Nicholson used in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* — "she told me she was eighteen" — an argument, which, in this country, works. Or at least it did for him. You probably couldn't get away with it. But that's a different matter. And the twenty-something sweetie with the 1.5 million yen, the one you weren't going to mention again? Face it. You just can't get this out of your mind you jealous and petty bastard! You're a typical male. You hate it when anybody but you is getting any feminine attention. From a scientific perspective, of course, you understand this very human phenomenon. Science has a very good explanation for it in fact. And scientifically speaking, the explanation is this: you're a shitheel. Anyway, back to this woman; the governor freely confessed in this matter as well. "I do know the woman," he told the press, "but when I contacted her she said she just wanted to be left in peace." She wasn't left in peace, of course. The press hounded her like dogs hound a coon in a tree. But nobody bothered the governor about it again. At least he was left in peace.

A few days later you sit down at the counter of a fish shop in Kagoshima, some 200 kilometers from here, and order broiled mackerel with *daikon* salad. You get to choose the particular mackerel you like from among a host of the ugly things lying in a big vat of ice between the counter where you sit and the open kitchen where a guy in a white smock cooks it. There are oysters, scallops, clams, muscles, abalone, squid, mackerel, sea bream, salmon, snapper, saury, and a host of other fish that you couldn't name to save your life. Not in either language. It's all fresh, beautiful and perfectly appetizing, glistening in the ice. You order a beer and strike up a conversation with a couple sitting nearest you there.

Well, technically speaking, they are the ones who strike up the conversation with you. You never strike up conversations with anybody. Japan is not necessarily a place where people enter into relaxed conversations with strangers easily, especially not when the stranger is a huge white guy lurking about on his own, wearing a head of hair like a lion's mane and a goofy shirt. Not to mention goofy shoes. You accept that. You figure if people want to talk with you, they'll somehow indicate that they do. And until they do, you're afraid to talk to strangers.

These two prove to be polite and kind, like most people here, and unlike most people here, they're easy to visit with. They don't put up that barrier between you and them, invisible but palpable, that so many Japanese hold at the ready all of the time. Also, they don't litter their speech with meaningless interjections of English.

You find that the man lives in a small apartment in Kagoshima where he works for a cell phone company. He's a *tanshinfunin*. He's been sent by his company to work at a branch office away from home, live in a hovel that he's untrained to and most likely unable to keep clean, see his family once a week if he's lucky, and drink a lot. The wife lives in the family home in Miyazaki. They tell you that they're still in love. They don't have children. They meet every weekend. She goes to Kagoshima one weekend and he comes home to Miyazaki the next. They tell you that they're happy. They feel lucky that they're able to live so close to one another.

The wife, it so happens, works for Governor Higashikokubaru. She sees him at least once a week when he's in Miyazaki, which isn't all that often, according to her. She tells you that she likes him personally, that he's very nice, and that he's a lot funnier in person than he ever was on TV. This won't impress you very much, since he was never very funny on TV, but you'll be glad to hear he's a nice guy. Most comedians here leave you with the impression that they aren't.

Maybe that's because so much Japanese humor is out and out mean. It revolves around two things and two things only: the comic making an ass of himself or the comic humiliating, abusing and bullying some one else. And by this you don't mean saying silly things about people who aren't present, the way American talk show hosts David Letterman and Jay Leno do. You mean physically beating somebody in diapers or something equally depressing—somebody who is very real and present on the stage or in the studio—and hitting him with huge rubber hammers every time he answers a question wrong. And this will go on till finally the poor abused fellow falls into a vat of live fish or something equally unpleasant. It's all in good fun, of course, and everybody here loves it, but unless you happen to have grown up in Japan, or unless you're a

sadistic asshole yourself, Japanese comedy isn't funny. It's depressing. It's mean.

This is not to suggest that Japanese don't have a quick or subtle sense of humor. They do. It's their comedians who don't. With very few exceptions, they're boorish if not out right brutish and cruel.

In 1997, to give one example, a Japanese comic was arrested while performing before an audience of 3,000 in Turkey. He was accused of doing handstands on stage. Naked. With a stick protruding from his rectum. And with 3000 witnesses, he could hardly deny it. According to newspaper reports in Japan, though, he couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. He was quoted as saying *kore ha ore no gei da*. "This is my art!" And why wouldn't he think so? He'd been getting paid to do such things over here for 20 years. By then he probably felt like he'd gotten pretty good at it—making an ass of himself, that is. And he's still at it.

This man's name is Egashira 2:50—another meaningless made up moniker—and to be fair to the Japanese viewing public, they have several times voted him the most annoying *talento* in Japan. Also, to be fair to 2:50, he is by all accounts a very nice and gentle man when the cameras aren't running. The problem is, you never see him when the cameras aren't running.

Later that same year an equally unfunny comic team called Ninety Nine invited 100 non-Japanese guests from ten countries to watch seven Japanese comics vie for title of *Gaijin Kingu*. They wanted to see which Japanese comic could make a non-Japanese audience laugh the hardest. None did. In fact, most of the audience walked out before all the acts had finished. The first were the Italians, who called it quits when act number three, Egashira 2:50, jumped up on the American table after hollering at them to "shut up," sexually harassed a blonde women there, drank from their pitcher of water then spit the water out all over the Italians.

Fuck a duck.

Japan's number one comic, Beat Takeshi has said that Japanese think foreigners are funny. To prove it he hosted a show called *koko ga hen da yo nihonjin* and generally translated as *Strange Habits of the Japanese*, though what it was about, of course, was the strange habits of foreigners. The show consisted of 50 Japanese debating 50 non-Japanese about less than serious topics that touched on Japan. It featured a few *gaijin* who could speak Japanese quite well, including the extremely fat and very popular Konishiki from Hawaii, who was reportedly too fat to wipe his own ass during his heyday as a professional sumo wrestler here, but most of the non-Japanese participants spoke Japanese just well enough to keep up, if that. They didn't appear to have been

chosen for their ability to contribute substance to the debate, but for their flamboyance in their native costumes and their willingness to scream at other participants. Most episodes ended with the non-Japanese all yelling at one another and the Japanese participants nodding their approval, while host Beat Takeshi and his assistant, the current governor of Miyazaki Prefecture, Sonomama Higashi beat a *gaijin* or two over the head with a huge plastic hammer. The show was a giant hit here. It ran for four and a half years.

Personally you hated the show, and you weren't the only one. It received its fair share of indignation from Japan's very small foreign community who generally saw in its "us versus them" format nothing more than a continuation of Japan's omnipresent xenophobia.

Still, you can't recall ever speaking with a Japanese person who saw the show as racist. Part of this may simply be because Japanese don't accept that there is any racism in Japan. They don't know what racism is, but they understand that it's a bad thing, and since it's a bad thing they're pretty sure it doesn't exist here. That's what they've been told over and over again, and they believe it. So even when they see racism, as they did every week with *koko ga hen da yo nihonjin*, they don't recognize it for what it is.

But you think a larger reason lies in the nature of Japanese comedy— and this was a comedy show, even if the non-Japanese participants didn't seem aware of that fact. It was hosted by Japan's top comedian, after all, Beat Takeshi. And Japanese comedy is mean. Beat Takeshi is mean.

Wm. Penn is the nom de plume of one of Japan's long time foreign residents. In other words, her pen name is Penn. You can't resist noting that. She's lived here since 1973. She writes a TV column for one of Japan's English language newspapers, and she wrote one of the most surprisingly telling and thoroughly entertaining books you've read about Japan. It's called *The Couch Potato's Guide to Japan: Inside the World of Japanese TV*. It's her account of 20 grueling years in front of a Japanese TV set, and it's the source of much of what you write here. The book is so alarming that it's easy to overlook the fact that at its heart it is more than just TV. It's a valuable study in Japanese sociology.

You hate TV. Not just Japanese TV. You hate all TV. But for ten years, while you were still diligently studying Japanese, you watched TV everyday. It's important to practice listening when studying a foreign language, and you considered this a necessary discipline. In retrospect, though, however necessary, it was more torture than discipline, and the truth is you can hardly stand to spend 20 minutes in front of a TV now, much

less 20 years. You don't know how Wm. Penn did it.

You don't even have a TV, and the only time you ever see one is when you stop at a coffee shop. It's hard to find a family run little coffee joint here that doesn't have a TV set screaming at you. TV is everywhere here.

At any rate, Ms. Penn is generally an admirer of Beat Takeshi, and yet she wrote "In the late 1980s and early 1990s his humor often seemed to push the broadcasting limits and many of his gags and skits appeared dangerous, cruel and nasty." Everybody gets abused on his shows. It doesn't matter who they are or where they're from. There is no sense of political correctness in Japanese comedy. Anything goes—cruelty, bullying, racism, toilet humor, and a naked guy hopping around with a stick up his poop shoot.

To the Japanese public what you saw as unnecessary fuel for racist fires was only TV being TV. It was only comedy being comedy. And as Mr. Beat himself has said, Japanese think foreigners are funny. In June of 2000—and you can't resist pointing out the obvious here; it was the 21st century already—Beat Takeshi sent out a request to all his viewers. According to Ms. Penn, "it asked viewers who were aware of any *uwasa no gaiokujin* in their vicinity to report the details to Takeshi by postcard forthwith." He was looking for as many of the "foreigners everybody's gossiping about" as he could round up. Supposedly, he was only in search of a few more zany foreigners to appear on his show and make idiots of themselves, but the possible implications are frightening. In any Western nation this request would be unthinkable. It would probably be illegal too. Not here. Here nobody gives this kind of discrimination a second thought. Nobody here even sees this as discrimination. Nobody but you, that is.

Well, you and Ms. Wm. Penn.

On the night of the *Gaijin Kingu* competition, the act that followed Egashira 2:50 was a fellow made up as *Africa Man*, with a big curly wig and an unusually large bone in his nose. Wm. Penn writes, "He did not appear to be going over well with the African contingent of dapper gentlemen in what looked like Armani suits." After this act, even more guests got up and walked out, and needless to say, *Africa Man* didn't advance to become *Gaijin Kingu*. Act number seven won the *Gaijin Kingu* honor with an imitation of American pop star Michael Jackson. He was the last comic to perform, and Penn writes, "it was hard to tell whether they (the non-Japanese audience) were clapping for him or just in relief that this evening was over."

There is a vaudeville feeling in much of Japanese comedy, with any number of front-man side-man teams. One of these, Cocorico, has built its reputation on Tanaka Naoki's imitations of *gaijin*. In particular, he imitates *gaijin* speaking broken and

bumbling Japanese. There's nothing new in this. The hilarity of non-Japanese people speaking Japanese has been a staple of Japanese TV for as long for as there has been Japanese TV.

There has been a small community of political refugees from Turkey here in Japan since just after World War I. In the early years of Japanese TV, foreigners speaking bumbling Japanese were often played by members of this community, who were by this time, of course, all native speakers of Japanese. They had to be taught to speak it poorly. And to earn a living these "foreign" actors had to do little but give barely intelligible answers to such important questions as "can you eat Japanese pickles?"

"Yes."

"Hen na gaijin."

Uproarious laughter.

Hen na gaijin, in its most literal translation, means "strange foreigner." The term appears to have finally died, thank goodness, but what it really meant is something more like "inappropriate foreigner," as it didn't necessarily apply to foreigners engaging in unfamiliar customs of their own. Foreigners were free to engage in heir own national customs as much as they wanted. A real *hen na gaijin* was a foreigner caught engaging in what were considered strictly Japanese customs. Things like eating Japanese pickles, and so on.

All this good humor was based, of course, on the entrenched notion that the Japanese are very different from non-Japanese. The focus was never on the many similarities among all peoples, but on the few differences. It's the differences, in fact, that were deemed most important, and the biggest difference between Japanese and non-Japanese was not pickle eating ability but language, and the only good foreigner was one who couldn't form a correct sentence in Japanese.

On October 14, 1996 News Station, a very popular news program on TV-Asahi, was doing a spot on the Maharajah Burger, a lamb burger that McDonalds was introducing in India. They segued from there to an interview with the owner of an Indian restaurant in Tokyo who eloquently explained that some Indians do actually eat beef. And that became the source of the problem—not the beef, but this Indian man's eloquence in Japanese. When the cameras came back live to Kume Hiroshi, the anchorman in the studio, his first remark to the gorgeous babe beside him was "*shikashi, gaijin wa nihongo ga katakoto no hō ga ii yo ne.*" It's better if foreigners speak in broken Japanese, don't you think?

And maybe this off hand comment is nothing to get your balls in a knot over, but

here's the thing: Kume Hiroshi wasn't a comic. He was one of the most respected voices on Japanese TV. He was the Japanese answer to Walter Cronkite. Twenty million viewers tuned into his show every night. Twenty million and one counting you. And his voice was the voice of Japan. His opinion was everybody's opinion. What he thought about foreigners was what everybody thought. They shouldn't speak Japanese.

The woman to whom he addressed the remark didn't reply. A foreigner living in Hokkaido, however, did. He called the station and complained. The person he talked to at TV-Asahi didn't seem to be taking him very seriously. No surprise there, of course, and that was the end of it. Except that the person in Hokkaido was a blogger, and the details of his experience with TV-Asahi soon made the rounds among foreigners interested in learning Japanese. Ten years later, the archive of that blog somehow came to Kume's attention, and in 2006, two years after he'd left News Station, Kume wrote a letter of apology to that blogger in Hokkaido. It was brief but heartfelt and sympathetic. It ended, "However, after a good think about this, I realize that this is a pretty rude thing to say. I'm thinking about how this reflects the narrow viewpoint of someone with an island mentality."

So how about that!

The times they are a changing. And the word "*gaijin*" is no longer used on Japanese TV. So how about that, too! Never mind that it's used everywhere else. Even your students call you a *gaijin* still. That's what you are too them.

It's frustrating.

Times are changing, but slowly. It took ten years, after all, for this man in Hokkaido to get his apology, and by that time he'd become a well known but controversial activist here fighting discrimination against foreigners. Born and raised in Ohio, he'd also become a naturalized Japanese citizen, if an angry one. His Japanese name is Debito Arudou and he too has an occasional column in one of Japan's English language newspapers. His two big fights to date have been against the exclusion of foreigners, including one of his daughters, at an *onsen* in Hokkaido, and the sale at a national convenience store chain of an over the counter publication in 2007 called "*Gaijin Hanzai Ura Fairu.*" *The Secret Files of Crime by Foreigners*—a little booklet that, among other things, calls Tokyo a "city torn apart by evil foreigners."

This is a common perception here. Ishihara Shintaro, the current governor of Tokyo, says that foreigners are to blame for the perception that Tokyo has become more dangerous. He's been quoted as saying, "Roppongi is now virtually a foreign neighborhood. Africans -- I don't mean African Americans -- who don't speak English are

there doing who knows what. The situation needs to be improved.” Never mind that the perception he refers to doesn’t match the reality. Though the crime rate is indeed rising here, disregarding visa violations by foreigners, which neither the government nor the media bother to do, the absolute crime rate for non-Japanese in Japan is considerably lower than the crime rate for Japanese. In 2003 the overall crime rate in Japan was 2,185 per 100,000 people, but only 2,120 per 100,000 among foreigners. Excluding visa offences, the rate was only 1,570 per 100,000 foreigners. These are statistics that won’t be found in *The Secret Files of Crime by Foreigners*. They won’t be found in any of the regular Japanese newspapers, either.

Of course, comparing crime rates among different ethnic groups in any country is a tricky business, rife with danger and ripe for abuse. There are lies, damn lies and statistics, after all, and the full picture of Japan’s growing crime rate vis-à-vis its growing population of non-Japanese nationals is difficult to find anywhere. But in 2007, according to *Wa-pedia*, the real crime rate in Japan, which includes only “crimes” and excludes “offenses” —those defined as victimless crimes such as traffic violations, drug use, and, of course, visa violations—of the nine countries most represented in Japan, the Chinese have the highest crime rate at 0.428%. The Brazilians are second at 0.351%. And the Japanese themselves are third at 0.291%.

The Koreans, who make up the largest non-Japanese population here, are a low seventh at 0.24%. The Brits are eighth. And the Americans, at 0.16%, have the lowest crime rate in Japan.

In other words, the crime rate among Japanese in Japan is almost 20 times greater than the crime rate among Americans here. And that’s what you want to tell every Japanese person who slides away from you on the subway. That’s what you want to tell every Japanese person who’s reluctant to sit beside you at a coffee shop. And that’s what you should have coolly and calmly told the salary man who got up and moved away from you on the plane this morning, instead of getting angry, though it probably wouldn’t have changed anything.

This Debito Arudou is often disparaged here by foreigners and Japanese alike. Even his former wife disparages him and his methods. Nonetheless, however one feels about his loudmouth style, he did succeed in both of these causes. It took some time, but the *onsen* in Hokkaido that rejected his daughter has been ordered to admit foreigners, and the largest chain of convenience stores selling *the Secret Files* has stopped.

And Kume Hiroshi’s attitude of ten years ago—the entire nation’s attitude back then, really, and the attitude of most Japanese even now—more or less explains why

you never try to strike up a conversation here. You don't speak *katakoto* like you should. You speak in sentences. And because you do, you're afraid of the way Japanese people will react to you. You're afraid they'll be mean to you.

The couple at the restaurant in Kagoshima are cool, though. They don't care what language you speak or how you speak it. They share their *eda-mame* with you. Then they offer you a plate of *sashimi* with wasabi and soy sauce. You buy them glasses of *sake*. You tell them about a little *yakitori* shop in Miyazaki that you like. They find it amusing that you, a non-Japanese who lives all the way up in Nagoya, is telling them about a restaurant in Miyazaki where they both were born and raised. And this will be the only time either of them mentions anything whatsoever about the fact that you aren't Japanese, except, of course, to ask where you're from. But then, everybody asks where you're from, even other *gaijin* ask where you're from. You think this may be the one question in the world that everybody asks everybody when they first meet. Even you ask it. Where are you from?

"When is the governor going to run for national office?" you ask the woman, dipping another slice of raw fish in soy sauce and wasabi.

"I don't think he's going to," she tells you.

"Why not?"

"He likes being governor of Miyazaki too much," she says.

But she turns out to be wrong.

In 2011 Higashibarū will resign as governor of Miyazaki and run as an independent for governor of Tokyo.

He'll lose.

In fact, he'll lose to the same man who called Roppongi a "foreign neighborhood."

For years Miyazaki had been considered a "kingdom" of Japan's long ruling Liberal Democratic Party, which is neither liberal nor democratic, but when Higashikokubarū ran as an Independent in the special gubernatorial election to replace the criminal who preceded him, he handily defeated the LDP's hand selected candidate, but then again, so did the guy on the communist ticket who came in second, so . . .

Higashikokubarū ran as a reformer, and immediately upon election he became one. His first big success was saving the local chicken industry, and though it may sound less than significant, Miyazaki is the Arkansas of Japan, and this wasn't just peanuts. It wasn't chicken feed either. Poultry was one of the prefectures biggest industries. In fact, the prefecture is known nationally for two local chicken dishes, one of which is called

nanban chikin. What this translates to is Southern Barbarian Chicken. It's named after you. Well, you and your ilk, anyway. More specifically, it's named after the Portuguese who began landing in and around this part of Kyushu in the late 16th century. Never mind that the dish was first concocted not all that long ago at a restaurant in Miyazaki City that's still in business. It doesn't matter. The dish is delicious, though exceedingly simple—deep fried chicken, tartar sauce and lettuce.

There had been successive outbreaks of the now completely forgotten “bird flu” which was holding the entire world in the grip of fear at the time, early in 2008, and Higashikokubaru lent his personal charisma and his national fame, not to mention his notoriety, to the problem. He launched a personal PR campaign that by his own reckoning was worth 15.5 billion yen in free publicity to the prefecture. Further, he has allowed any and every local business that so desires to use his image in advertising campaigns for free. And they do it. One of the first things you notice when you arrive at Miyazaki Station is a life size cardboard cutout of the thin, handsome, bald headed governor holding a bento box in front of a lunch stand.

The other striking thing you notice is that everybody working there, railroad employees and shop workers alike, is dressed in flashy and inviting Hawaiian style shirts. It feels welcoming. The traditional Hawaiian shirt holds a warm spot in the Japanese heart—and in your own—though there's nothing traditionally Hawaiian about it really.

These are called aloha shirts here, and they originated, not with native Hawaiians, but with the wives and mothers of impoverished Japanese laborers on Hawaiian pineapple plantations. They were made from the beautifully patterned cloth of the colorful *kimonos* and *yukatas* these women had brought from their homes in Japan. It was that or nothing, because nobody could afford to buy a shirt to wear in the blazing island sun. And what has become a symbol of light hearted Hawaiian happiness and joy was truly born of what must have been deeply heartbreaking experiences for numbers of Japanese immigrant women, having to rip their *kimonos* apart to make shirts for the backs of the men they loved.

You love these shirts. In fact, you've got one in your pack right now. At the station you find your way to the nearest toilet and put it on. You feel good. You feel ready for Miyazaki. It's no honeymoon, of course—you don't even have a wife—but the rain has stopped, you have a Hawaiian shirt, and for the moment a Hawaiian shirt is all you need. There's a whole new pagoda to see.