

The Udon Saga

The Musings and Meanderings of
Daumants Grants

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Dateline 17 Feb 1999

Life in the Big Udon

317 days till Ydo I Kare counting...

Work, work-work. Work. WORK WORK ORKwwwork.

Lunch – ahh! The choices at the canteen!

Shall it be the Hamburger Be Similar?

or the Pita Taco?

or the Spaghetti de Mare?

The Hamburger Be Similar (Burger BS, for short) is available every day. Bob Murphy swore it was a little bit of red meat (it looked light gray to me), with soy or something similar (there is that word again). But whatever it was, he claimed it tasted similar to a very breaded meatloaf. One more vindication for my vegetarianism.

The Pita Taco was a sealed half-moon of thin pastry with a 1/8” thick patty of mystery stuff hidden inside. It was mysterious in taste as well. I think that it contained other parts of the same Mare that was in the Burger BS and the spaghetti. No wonder they were called the mane courses. I caught myself pawing the dirt and counting several times when I went on the site.

In the afternoon, Greg, Fergus and I met with the Design Team from T2 [*Terminator 2 – the Ride*]. It's like playing poker, except that you rarely play with more than one card at a time, and every card is as wild as you can make it. The only rule is civility while maneuvering concealed weapons. It can be quite a lot of fun – unless you have to show your cards. The face to face meetings do have the unique advantage, in that intent and purpose can be explained much more readily than through the austerity of written and drawn documents. Not even a :-), or a ☺ or even a □□ can help.

We were asked to join them for a party at 6:00. We were somewhat leery, as the party on Monday evening was a barbecue held outdoors, standing up while snow was blowing around. Hey, but were gluttons for punishment – especially since we heard that Ogikubo wanted to go Karaoke-ing. Yeah. That's us. Sure. So, we show up at their trailer, for a “catered” affair in their canteen-muster room-meeting room-whatever. Chairs are along the four sides of the room, six tables (600x1200) as spaced in three rows of two in the middle, and three more tables are behind the chairs at the “front”. A plastic covered plastic platter sits on each table with a selection of canned beers. At two of the front tables are soft drinks, juices, sake, and whiskey. On the third front table are microphones and a dreaded karaoke device.

In attendance from USI was Ross, Greg and Myself. About 40 members of the Area 2 team round out the party. We lined up standing about the perimeter, while the head of the group made a welcoming “Kampai” to which we all hoisted our beers and “Kampai-ed”

back in unison. (Personally, I think we should have had more dress rehearsals.) Then everybody dashed for the tables. I, sensitive little vegan soul that I am, leisurely enjoyed the sliced cucumberlet dipped in a soy powder with rice vinegar “mustard”, which, along with lemon slices, was the only thing I could eat.

Using vast amounts of persuasive diplomacy, they forced upon me numerous cups of sake, which I for the sake of good will disposed of – orally. Also, six pizzas arrived. The toppings were undecipherable since they were covered by a film of melted cheese. I had a piece. I suspect it had some leftover Hamburger Be Similar tucked somewhere inside. Then I was caught in a quandary when I was told that what I thought was coagulated sediment in the bottom of my paper cup of sake was really gold leaf. Should I think it a terrible waste of gold as fodder for my digestive tract, or should I think it an abuse of alcoholic beverages – which are perfectly fine without it?

Upon hearing the sliding door shut, and realizing that we were on the cold and wintry side of it, I realized that it was time to head back to our hotels. Needless to say, I was still hungry. I asked if others wanted to join me. Greg declined, so Ross and I went to the Suntory Restaurant & Bar in the Kita-Shinchi that I had scoped out earlier. Kita-Shinchi is an area about three blocks south of the Hilton, and is a smaller version of the Shinsaibashi area just north of Namba. And, boy, are both areas a lot like they sound! Most of the establishments are private clubs. Because this is where the money is, there are many interesting buildings as well. The buildings are slender and tall, much like the heels worn by the ladies here.

The Suntory is in the second basement of a small hotel. The atmosphere is spacious for a basement, with low lighting level. The bluish-white iridescence of about eight built-in aquariums provide half the light, while concealed downlights bouncing off of hanging sheets of white strings seems to provide the rest. Altogether the room has a reserved but elegant feel.

After waiting a few minutes, we were seated. The first five pages of the menu were bilingual – and listed beverages. The last page, which was the menu, was in Kanji only, except for one item near the bottom which said Haagan-Dasz. Fortunately, they had a waiter who spoke some English. As he went through the list (which was mostly seafood based) I asked for the tomato salad and the mushroom chips accompanied by a twelve year old Suntory. Ross had some chicken and something else with a gin and tonic.

Here is where I learned that surprise is proportional to one’s presumptions. The more two cultures differ, the greater number of presumptions that get exposed. Surprise becomes the rule rather than the exception. The matter then becomes whether to deal with the surprise with amusement or rage. My salad arrives. The tomato has been lightly cored, inverted on two small lettuce leaves, cut parallel into vertical slices, slathered generously with mayonnaise, with a fistful of fried jellyfish tentacles dropped on top. The mayonnaise guarantees that some of the tentacles adhere to each slice. So I was left with the mushroom chips. They were good.

Then there was the matter of the Suntory. It came in a tall glass with ice and water. In my book you just don't do this to a twelve-year-old. We tried explaining that it should be just whisky – no ice. It came back in a smaller glass, mixed with water. NO – no, (don't do this to me!) – just the facts ma'am, no water, no ice. Finally I got it, but enough of the ice had melted that it all tasted watered down. So, instead of paying for the returned drinks, they hit us with a twenty-dollar table cover charge.

Ah well, it was time to go back and count sushi jumping over the fence.

Dateline 18 Feb 1999

More from the Big Udon

...and still another day closed to the collapse of civilization as we know it ...
or, has it already happened? Y2K to you too.

Yeah.

It was a day without meetings – but it was a day discussing the days that had meetings and the meetings themselves. And all this interspersed with the destruction and creation of emails. It is the essence of existence; the nectar of communicative interrelatedness; the fetid stench of the remnants of thrice chewed cud.

I love productivity. For that matter, I love many things that are elusive.

A case in point, I'm on my way to stalk down dinner in the Shinsaibashi area. On the Yotsubashi train down, a businessman-looking gent is across from me. Printed on his shopping bag was his company's name and credo, something like:

TAGANAKA CHEMICALS
High Technology and Sincerity

Now... I love this 'cause I can't get it. It's an elusive concept. For example, if the HPUs are running dry, would you want to refill them with the best fluids that technology can provide, or fill them with sincerity? Maybe they can be filled with chemicals that look like :-) or ☺ or ☐. Or maybe I'm just full of it. Sincerity, that is.

Yeah.

Dinner is good. I've taken my presumptions with me, and I am entertained by a string of little surprises. I have chosen amusement over rage as the appropriate response. Perhaps being by myself has something to do with it.

Verdicchio is a 6th floor penthouse Italian Restaurant. I know that I can find some meatless dishes there, partly because there are two black cats lounging on a ledge by the elevator. It's not because they're black – rather it's because they're alive. But the blackness and thickness of their coats is like duvateen – only the eyes reflect any light. The rest recedes into the night. Out of reach, they stare back at me, the big gray bear, out of place in these tight little streets.

I ride the elevator up, am warmly greeted (no surprise there), and am seated at a table for two in the alcove adjoining the main dining area. I feel somewhat safe: The menu is bilingual – Japanese and Italian. I get a little rectangular basket with utensils (no chopsticks) paper napkin and a package towelette. Then comes two pencil-round

breadsticks in a julep glass. They're half again as long as pencils. The table already is set with a bread plate, a small bottle of Bertoli's extra virgin olive oil, Mcillheney's Tabasco, rice vinegar, and a shaker of MSG. I pour a bit of dipping oil for the bread sticks while I dip into the depths of the menu.

I start with a '90 Trebbiano di Romagna – nicely chilled, as dry as a Pinot Grigio, but a bit fuller in flavor. As an appetizer, I order Griglia di Pomodori et Zucchini. Grilled veggies? Surprise – a one-inch (25mm) length of zucchini, quartered, and two cherry tomatoes, halved, have been given the tempura treatment. Good, though. On the dish is a thimble size pie plate of MSG to dip the griglia.

I had noticed a side of olives on the menu. On the lettuce leaf they come, in an oval ceramic dish the size used for entrees on planes. Three (3), count 'em, green olives and ten blacks. They come with a bit of olive oil on them. They are the seedless variety of olives – you know, the kind that come in a can. Tasty though.

My entrée arrives: Risotto di Funghi. Again, very tasty, but surprisingly surprising. It appears to be made with butter rather than cream, with Shitake rather than Porcini, and finished with toasted sesame oil rather than olive oil.

Throughout the evening, I am facing the rear wall of the restaurant, about ten meters in front of me. Hanging jauntily on it is a flag – green, white and red vertical bands. It seems it needs that little round emblem in the center, then it would match the mariachis that have been serenading from the speakers.

As I leave, I pick up a brochure – and am flattered. There in the cover photo, right in the very foreground, is the very chair I had occupied, and the very view I had enjoyed during this journey of the senses to Romagna.

Ah well, the bus to the train is about to depart, as am I.

Dateline 19 Feb 1999

Slurpings from the Big Udon

Y is it that when I see one digit extended, I feel insulted?

Y is it that when two digits are reduced to nothing, I should feel fear?

Y2K indeed

351 days 'til, and dreading.

The daily commute begins. Walk across the street to the train station. This “street” has four eastbound lanes and eight westbound. It’s sort of a one-and-a-half way street. In the station, buy a ticket from the vending machine, through the turnstiles, up a flight, crab-stride through the outflow to cross the passage and escalator up to the platform. I go to the station at street level, because on the second day here, I tried it underground. For about seventy meters of a ten-meter wide corridor, I was the only person walking toward the station. A shoulder-to-shoulder flowing mass of humanity was pouring towards me. This mere pebble then had to cross to the other side of the lava flow to reach stares at the end. It was scarier than Y2K.

The trains follow the left lane rules like the cars here do. It still Surprises. I take the JR Loop Line for three stops local, or one stop express – and step across the platform to another train. This train merely shuttles back and forth between the Nishikujo station and the Sakurajima station adjacent to the site. At the station there are shuttle busses to each area, and another to the USJCo and USI offices. Door to Door, it’s about twenty-five minutes.

Walk up to the second floor offices, use my shoehorn to get into the cube and start decimating emails. Fergus announces that he has finally read through all 417 in his in-box. Time to grab a shuttle and go to the Area 2 GC [*General Contractor*] offices. We’re talking T2. We work on ways to support speakers, catwalk massages for targets, support of side screens, etc.

Lunch – we get back to our canteen just as the kitchen is closing down. Greg gets the pilaf with seafood; I get the beef with vegetables, two Avocados, and a croissant. I pick off the beef, and give it to Greg. Now I’m looking at ten haricots verts, and a quartered baby bok choy, two avocados and a croissant. I leave with an avocado in my pocket and a song in my heart. I think it’s Chopin’s Funeral March.

Bus back to Area 2. More ‘round and ‘round.

Off to the hotel. The one nice thing of meeting in Area 2 at the end of the day is that they have no railroad shuttle. Their entry is adjacent to the station. If you ever have a hankering for calling Fergus when it’s midnight in LA, here’s where you can catch him.

Return to the hotel. I look in the yellow pages for dinner possibilities. Lo and behold, here is an Indian restaurant next door to the Hilton, two basements down. Ashoka is located in the round hotel's Maru Biru restaurant plaza. I order vegetarian thali and some wine. Dinner starts with a complementary wafer-bread made from a well-spiced garbanzo flour. The thali platter has a scoop of Japanese rice, a vegetable fritter, and bowls of aloo ghobi ('taters and cauliflower), sag paneer (spinach and cheese), chana dia (yellow lentils), rhaita (yogurt), carrot halwah, and a portion of naan spread across the top. They are generous with the heat. Dessert is a very substantial portion of their version of ice cream – frozen condensed milk is the base.

It was all among the best Indian I have had to date here, but a bit pricey – and the better dressed clientele here are an indicator of that.

I don't mean to give the impression that food is all that there is. It's just that the culture and language are sufficiently different as that it seems the people coming here are settlers of a new frontier. The necessities are the focus of their existence – clothing, food, shelter, sex, and a source of sustenance. In most cases they already have clothing, and sex is a nonPC subject. So, everybody talks about the housing they got or are thinking of getting; where they ate or are thinking of eating, and where they work or what they think of the latest Dilbert.

I'm not looking for housing, since I'm not relocating, and the paper at the Hilton doesn't carry Dilbert. That leaves me with food and this journal. So, when I'm not eating, I'm regurgitating my day. Life has its symmetries.

Ahhh.h.h... another day beckons! I hear another meal calling! If the weather holds up, I'm off to Kyoto.

Dateline 20 Feb 1999

Revenge of the Big Udon

It's Saturday and Y2K means Why To Care

I'm pondering whether to go to Kyoto today. The 7:00 AM sky looks promising. It's mostly blue above, but with some clouds in the near distance. By the time I shower and get dressed, there's these big sticky white things on the other side of my room's window that suggest an alternate activity should be pursued. Like staying in.

So I dawdle – catching up on the last couple of days of the slim paper that keeps getting slid under the door. The *Mainichi Daily News* does not provide the more in-depth coverage of this Japan Times. However, it partly makes up for it in the “News in Brief” sidebars that occur on several pages. Yesterday for example:

Aussie boss keeps staff who burned factory

PERTH, Australia (AFP-Jiji) – Two teen-agers who burned down their workplace in a 1.5 million Australian dollar (0.93 million US) blaze here will probably keep their jobs because the boss feels sorry for them.

Although the 18-year olds admitted setting fire to the Perth premises of Gascoigne Furniture, company owner Kim Gascoigne shrugged off the damage on Thursday as the result of a silly, youthful prank.

The youths were lighting flamethrowers in a paint room at the factory on Monday when the flames hit a wall, starting a fire that got out of control.

“I was so saddened for these guys. At least they owned up and accepted responsibility,” Gascoigne said.

What a guy. He feels sorry for the pranky pyromaniacs. Perhaps the adjusters will persuade the owner otherwise, like when they ask him to select between two rate structures – one that retains a certain two Gascoigne employees, and one that does not.

Thinking of flames and scorched stuff, of course I start thinking of cooking and where I will spend lunch. I open the yellow pages. And what's this!? Here's a boxed add for a vegetarian place called *Seed of Life*. (4-2-2 Kitakyuhoji-Machi, Chio-ku, (06) 251-1245.) It looks like it may be a place for true believers, but I figure I'll give it a try.

In my book, most vegetarian places are for true believers and that means the primary ingredients are toe-phoo and sawdust. The “food” is not eaten because of its taste, but because it tests our commitment to some cause or other. In other words, if you can wolf (strike that, that's carnivorous) nibble down that pizza made from a whole bran chapatti

topped with seaweed, tofutti, and tamari sauce, then you've proved that you love whales and won't hunt one down for dinner.

Seed of Life is one block west of the number 15 exit from the Hommachi Station on the Midosuji Line, then two and a half blocks south on the east side of the street. They're open Monday through Saturday from 11:30 am to 3:00 pm. So this will be my only remaining chance to eat there this trip. It's early so I decide to explore. I take the Tanimachi Line to the Tenmabashi station close to Osaka Castle. I was drawn to here because on the map it looked like there might be some narrow old streets here. No such luck. I meander south, then west and wind up at the locked up *Seed of Life* almost an hour early.

I walk back north a block and explore a small temple complex. Facing it is this incredibly tight mortarless masonry wall of hewn granite rocks – many bigger than myself, and most heavier as well. The stonework looks to be several centuries old, whereas the buildings rising above it are certainly from the 20th century. This is the back wall of another, more contemporary temple complex reached from the other side of the block. I think it's called Minami Mido. I check out all the gold leaf while a monk's chanting and incense smoke waft toward me from behind a carved screen. Judging from the office building that is part of this complex, religion is a bug business to some here too.

Now what – I still have plenty of time. I walk a short block or two west to Yotsubashi-Suji Avenue. There is a Senba Market – the closest thing I've seen yet to a supermarket. Next door is a little bakery, and next to that a liquor store. I go to the market – it's comparable in size to a Trader Joe's. I browse the aisles and come up with stuff like CreaP (powered coffee creamer), President Coffee (Have a sip of the President), First Lady Beer (Have a sip of the First Lady), and Pipi straws (Have a sip with your Pipi). I buy a bunch of this stuff to take home to the nonbelievers.

Rather than haul bags around, and due to a call of nature, I decide to return to the hotel. The entrance to the Yotsubashi Line's Hommachi station is just across the street, and two stops takes me to the end of the line, which adjoins the Hilton's basement. I take it upstairs, only to find that my room is being made. From all the stories, I've come to believe that privacy is not to be had. The cleaning will take place no matter what I do. So I drop my bags and go out to explore the hotel. I finally visit the restaurant floors, the guest facility floors, and the banquet floors where elderly ladies in Kimonos partake of tea while their husbands ride the elevators with shopping bags stuffed with costumes and clothing changes.

I nonchalantly sprint back to my room – this time to find that the bed-maker has been replaced by the room-cleaner. She is moving things about on the bathroom counter, searching for the Zen arrangement of toiletries, medication, and toothbrush glasses – stopping to reflect on each arrangement. I manage to contain myself (so to speak), put my coat in the closet and sidle out the door.

I explore the two basements and seven upper floors of the Hilton shopping arcade. I find little of interest here. Armani & Co. didn't design anything with people like me in mind. Y' know that specter in the painting "The Scream"? Add hair and high heels, connect them with a coat hanger and you have what these guys' model of the ideal woman should be. Then they put them on a runway, tell them to walk like they're squishing along a slippery sidewalk paved with dog poop, and to wear an expression like their smelling it too. Not that Rubens was right either, mind you!

Ten minutes have gone by, and I've run out of hotel. But wait, I haven't yet been up to the Windows of the World Sky Lounge!

With ears popping, I'm catapulted up to the 35th floor. They're serving buffet brunch at some \$40 a pop. But remember, I still want *Seed of Life* lunch. So I ask to sit at the bar. I'm the bartender's only ward on this raised platform in the middle of the long and narrow dining room floor. Tables line the windows and the two aisles alongside. I have a panoramic view out both sides. I also have a bowl of sparkling candied walnuts with sesame seeds on one side. And an Asahi draft on the other. It's a struggle, but I manage to look up at the view now and then. I pay up and descend.

They've finished my room. Finally, an hour after arriving at the hotel, I take advantage of Hilton's hospitality.

Soon, I'm ready for more. Back down and down into the train tubes, clattering and screeching, while dueling PA systems retrieved from airport duty competitively blast holes in your consciousness. Back up and out and along, and shortly I'm entering the womb of the *Seed of Life*. Service is all-you-can-(stand to)-eat buffet. Of course, I'm exaggerating my negativity to try to make a funny at their expense. My apologies. Actually, the salad bar has very fresh items, as well as some Japanese pickled specialties. On the hot side, there is spaghetti with either the ubiquitous brown curry sauce, or a pretty good tomato sauce with either wheat gluten or some soy stuff that does a reasonable simulation of ground meat. There is also vegetables and miso soups, soba, a casserole something, steamed green beans, and a few other comforting things I can't remember. I have a beer to wash it all down.

The place is simple, homey. The front room has the tiny kitchen on one side of the entry. The server counter on the other. Dining is in the back room, with posters, announcements, and advocacy literature taking up the passageway between. From what I've heard, the Hard Rock has more Caucasians than any place in town. The *Seed of Life* probably comes in second. While I was there, two other tables had Americans at them. Between them and myself we made up 40% of the attending clientele. Considering the number of Americans in Osaka at the moment is probably somewhere around a few thousand, then vegetarianism is more popular in the beefy ol' USofA than in red-meat-as-flavoring Japan.

The meal was good enough and cheap enough that I will probably come back yet another time. Meanwhile, back to the hotel.

I look for other places to go. I see some twisty streets in the Miyakojima area. So I hop the JR Tozai Line train to the Osokajo-Kitazume station and start walking east. It's looking promising. I'm walking towards the Kyobashi Station and there's a houseware store under the north side of the tracks. I go inside. I try to ask for a card. No comprehend-u. I reach to get my wallet to show them what a "card" is. My hand comes up empty. Apparently so was my brain when I walked out of the hotel room. My wallet, ID, money, telephone numbers, etc. were having a happy rest back on my writing table. Fortunately, I had enough change to catch the train back.

Back to the hotel.

I return to the Kyobashi station via the JR Loop Line, which leaves from across the hotel. Dusk is falling. So are my arches. But I explore on. There are several covered streets that radiate out from the station. The first block or so in all directions is like Vegas on steroids – it's solid Pachinko parlors. The harmonic warbling bells and clatter of steel balls bouncing into stainless bins is an ear-splitting din of happy sounds perfectly paired with the whirling, blinking, bright colored lights that strobe their way into the cerebral cortex jack-hammering away on the pleasure button. It is the yin to the womb's yang. If conception takes place in quiet darkness, then this must be the environment at the moment of death. This is the human equivalent of transfixing deer with the onrushing roar and headlights of a truck. Some of the robotized slack-jaws transfixed in front of these machines prove my point.

The covered streets are a bit disappointing as well. They fizzle out in a block or two, and most of the shops have closed for the night. Only the little restaurants are open. Teenage hookers line the streets nearest the station and at the station itself. They are serially spaced out like sparrows on a power line. They cast furtive glances at each other, making sure their turf is not trespassed, as they try to act like they're waiting for someone. I feel uncomfortable and leave. What outwardly appeared attractive belied the soullessness within. Every smile a fraud, every laugh an insult. Sadness rode hanging on the strap next to me to Osaka station.

I had ventured enough for the day. I go to an Italian café I had spotted at noon on the 2nd basement of the shopping complex next to the Hilton. The plastic food out front is in both Japanese and Italian. The menu headings are in English (Salad, Pizza, Pasta, etc.), but the individual menu selections are written in Kanji. I think the pronunciation of the Kanji approximates the Italian.

I have an Insalta Vedula, Quattro Fromaggio Pizza and some wine. The salad greens are fine, with an indecipherable tomato (?) based dressing that is a little strange, but flavorful. The pizza is on one of these thin, flavorless, lavish style cracker crusts. The top is unadorned but for the cheese. The unusual use of Gorgonzola overpowers the flavors of the other three cheeses. It's okay, but not as good as other Italians I've been to.

It's been a full day, but an empty day. A day of several false starts - and false endings as well. Lots of activity, but little accomplished. It seems like a continuation of the past five days rather than a reprieve from them.

Ah well, tomorrow is Kyoto.

Maybe.

Dateline 21 Feb 1999

Half-Life at the Little Udon

Kyoto contains a Y, 2 'o's and a K. I guess the t stands for Time-bomb.

It's frightening. Absolutely frightening, I tell you. There are just too many coincidences for this to be the result of random chance. Could it be Nature's revenge upon us for monkeying around with existence? If we had merely enjoyed existence for what it is, instead of arbitrarily assigning numbers to spans of time and counting them, cataloging them, and calculating them, we would never have gotten to the year 2000, much less any year at all! The problem is within ourselves, and we project it upon the universe, molding it into the image of ourselves; our problems.

Had you going there for a bit? Huh? Huh?

Actually, there was this dyslexic emperor who lived in Tokyo, but thought it was Kyoto - and that's why the capital of Japan was moved.

Shuffled again, we get a phonetic version of cute. How kyoot. Or a so-so Mattel product: ok toy. Or Milton-Bradley's *Kooty*. So, where am I going?

Well, there's a light drizzle as I wake up, but it clears up within an hour. Kyoto, here I come. I go to the JR Station. One sign says Tracks 7, 8, 9, and 10 go to Kyoto. The stairway leading up to the platform between 7 and 8 says Kyoto, while the one between 9 and 10 is in Kanji only.

Security up one stair, mystery up the other - which way would Robert Frost choose? This tourist takes the safe way. The first train that pulls up says Kyoto in the little windows on the side so I get in. About seven stops later, after three other trains have rattled our windows in their passing wake, I begin to realize that I'm on the local. I bear my punishment with pride - and ride it out to the end. Well, at least to Kyoto Station.

Even seeing it now for the second time, this station is awesome. It's a cavernous space that celebrates people in motion. Escalators ascend in strung-up sequential sets rather than in stacks - The top of each escalator is but a couple steps from the bottom of the next. The ascent to space (heaven?) is in multi-storied lines. Unlike the supposedly conventional wisdom of theme park planning, there is no weenie at the top, only the sky; a void - and the people at the top appear to just drop into its nothingness. Columbus didn't see a weenie. He saw the edge of the earth. He was a moth and he saw the light. I had seen Tracks 9 and 10, but hadn't wanted to risk getting zapped.

I know I have to catch a north-south train, whose station is directly under the JR Station. I hunt around and finally find it. I descend, board, and count the stops to my exit. It's a long, long stairway up to Imadegawa-dori. There's a university here, readily determined

by the young people wearing grunge, and the makeshift banners in front undoubtedly protesting the failure of the rest of society to comprehend the sensitivity of the students. A block to the south gets me to the perimeter of my destination, the grounds of the Imperial Palace.

The park is some 1200m x 750m. It has mostly grass and trees, with formally laid out pedestrian ways. A handful of traditionally gated entries provide access to the grounds. There appear to be very few people about. The fact that the sky has clouded back over and an occasional snowflake is finding its way to earth may have something to do with it. I enter and am greeted by music filtering through a grove on my left. It's a brass quartet playing some jazz standards and rags. I decide to leave it a mystery and proceed inward.

The few people that are in the park are invariably being towed about by Akitas and other husky-like dogs. So these are the Imperial Pooping Grounds.

Ahead of me I see the wall the surrounds the palace compound. It marches in a perfect rectangle some 500m x 250m x 6m high. It has an entry gate on each short end, and two on the longer sides. It is lined on all sides with a graveled causeway some 20 to 30 meters wide.

I proceed to crunch through the gravel down the long west side. After rattling pebbles for the length of a football field, I come to the first gate. The gate has timber doors that happen to be shut. I continue along the wall for the length of two more football fields. The second gate on this side is as welcoming to me as the first. I am undeterred. I continue south, despite the fact that global warming has changed the snowfall to a light sprinkle. I reach the south end and head east until I reach the main gate in the middle. Its closed condition just goes to reinforce my premonition that something was not quite right with the picture - which happened to contain several construction cranes within the compound. Thanks for letting me know the place is closed, guys.

There's a peculiar phenomena which seems to have reduced the gravel in a very thin line along the palace wall. The "Ching-ching!" of a bell behind me quickly leads to the conclusion that bikes are the cause. I step out of the way. I continue east to be greeted with closed gates at the Sento Goshō Palace gardens that adjoin the Imperial Palace. Kyoto extends its welcome to me.

I walk south for a couple of miles and get to downtown. Along the way I spot a stained glass studio. I stop to investigate. The door is open. I step into an anteroom cluttered with packing boxes and a Tiffany-type lamp or two. The door to the workshop is open, but no one is there. I wait five minutes or so, poke around, but see no card. I go back out, jot down the name and number, and continue on.

For lunch, I continue my non-adventurous streak and eat at a place I've gone to before. I would have preferred elsewhere, but my footsies were tired. The place is called Pronto, and it's right above McDonald's on the south side of Shijo-dori, just west of the Kamogawa river. Service is where you pick up any pastries you want on a tray with tongs,

order your entree and drinks at the counter and pay there as well, and then they bring your counter order to your table. It's cheap but pretty good. I have a tasty pasta with pesto sauce. It's made with butter instead of oil, no parmesan, and the walnuts are broken up on top rather than ground in as a part of the sauce. Ice tea keeps the thirst level down.

I walk east across the bridge to the Gion area. One of the reasons I wanted to come here was that Fergus O'Reilly said there was a crafts center here. The four or five blocks between the Kamo-gawa river and the Yasaka-jinja shrine to the east have sidewalks shaded by an articulated canopy that has been tagged onto the various facades. In its shelter are many craft shops interspersed with Kyoto's equivalent of T-shirt and trinket shops. About midway along the north side there is a larger establishment called the Kyoto Crafts Center that has a better than average cut of goods displayed on three floors. I buy some chopsticks and book about knots. If I don't go to work on Monday, it'll be because I'm either too busy playing walrus, or I'm all tied up.

Almost next door is the Kyoto Museum of Contemporary Art. I pay the 1000¥ admission to the fellow sitting at the desk by the door. There are about three works in this lobby. I have to take the elevator to see anything else. I punch 5. The door opens. I'm facing a sheet of glass which separates me from a 2m x 3m rectangle of moss with a tree growing out of it. The roof above the tree is open to the sky. There are two pieces in alcoves on this floor. Back in the elevator, I punch R. It goes up to the roof. The door opens, and I'm in a broom closet with two steps in it that lead up to a door that I presume leads out to the roof. My non-adventurous self takes over, and decides not to go out.

I punch 3. I get out into one of the larger floors - about 5m x 15m. There's about half a dozen smudged ink on rice paper experiments gracing the walls. I take the open stair down one floor for more of the same. The stairs down to the ground floor are roped off, and the elevator doesn't stop here, so I go back up to 3 and take the elevator down. I walk out. I've spent close to 20 minutes alone in that building. This kind of modern art deserves the kind of attention it is getting.

Why put all this money into something that only an accidental tourist like me is fooled into paying? If "art" wasn't subsidized, then the marketplace of ideas would financially reward those that reward other's minds, feelings, and senses. Instead of a Kyoto Museum of Contemporary Art, we would have a Universal Theme Park of Contemporary Art brought to you by the Kyoto Chamber of Commerce. Who needs "art" when you can ride up and down elevators? Or, better yet, fool you into thinking that you are riding up and down elevators.

I decide to leave. I came to get uplifted. Instead I felt ignored, isolated, and foot-sore. I walk back over the bridge, and catch the Hankyu line back to Osaka. Forty minutes later, I'm back in the hotel. It's become my withdrawal cocoon, my escape from the unexpected unpleasantness that life occasionally deals my way. And at the same time it is confining and imprisoning. The moment I'm back, I set about to plan my escape - my next excursion. It's only 4:00 in the afternoon and the sun is back out in force.

About ten blocks from my window is the Umeda Sky building. A vertical counterpart to the Kyoto train station. Back down I go. My feet are too sore to walk far, so I take a cab. Minutes later, there I am, looking up along with everybody else around me. The main building consists of two rectangular office towers, a two story observation deck connecting them at the top. The observation deck has a huge oculus cut into it, with two escalators crossing in between. This building challenges - it asks: Do you dare take this elevator up this narrow glass tube that sits out there detached in space? Do you dare take these escalators across space with nothing but the plaza 40 stories below? I suffer my share of acrophobia - but I take on the challenge.

I take regular escalators up to the third floor and buy a ticket for 700¥. I cross the plaza on a bridge at the same level over to the elevator. I and some 15 others sardine ourselves into one of the two Haboobs (see-through elevators, according to the brochure). The shaft is connected to the building only at two spidery bridges along the glass shaft and at the transfer lobby on the 35th floor. But for a half-meter wide strip on two sides, the rest of the cab walls and doors are glass. Lots of "Ooohs" and "Ahhhs" as we go up.

At the top, we get out, walk around the corner and enter an ascending glass tube housing an escalator that crosses space - lots of space. Lots of nervous titters as everyone steps out. I'm surprised by how little squeamishness I feel. Despite the glass, there's lots of overdesigned steel, so that if you look up the tube, it seems solid. Everything feels totally rigid and without vibration. I reach the top, where the 39th floor souvenir shop is set up. There's a restaurant and a lounge here as well. I take the escalator up to the next floor. This is the main observation floor, with a snack shop and a bit of a gallery as well. While light pours into the observatory, the gallery seems to be in total darkness - since it is a sort of slow moving light show involving 25 music stands.

I walk up to the roof. It's about an hour to sunset, and cooling down. Fortunately, it's breezy but not windy. It's slowly starting to cloud over again, causing shafts of light to illuminate parts of the city below in a changing pattern. A shaft hits Osaka Castle's gleaming white walls as the area behind it darkens in the oncoming clouds. On the other side, the glancing rays create an opal iridescence on the river next to Universal's site, silhouetting the giant Ferris wheel by the aquarium. Great views with spectacular lighting.

And then a gong rings out - an electronic one from two giant concealed speaker clusters. Slow booming music emanates much like the piece during the light show at the WTC atrium. And with the music, mist is spewed out from under the walkway with a surrounding hiss, limiting the views for several minutes.

Why can't the view be simply appreciated for what it is on its own terms? Why must the experience be filtered or modulated by the intrusion of someone else? Must every garden be manicured to the teeth? Why bonsai? Perhaps, the culture is more social, more mutually assuring. I see many cafes/restaurants with maybe six seats at a counter - with everyone talking and warming to each other, like friends or family. I see meetings where consensus is more important than correctness, where mutual approval is more real than

facts. The human hand is seen as the sign of socialization and is more welcome here. I'm more comfortable with detachment, isolation, individualism.

I work my way back down and out the building. At the basement level are the ever-present cafes. Here there is a very good reproduction of the very tight pedestrian streets - as little as a meter wide. This is the "Main Street" part of the "park". Outside, in a circular depression in the plaza above, is a wooded forest with a rushing stream and a bit of a path. Quite a contrast, the almost natural feel of the spot, with the very high-tech tower with its spiderwork of bridges terminates the view between the leafy branches.

Across the JR track is the Hankyu Station and the Hankyu International Hotel. On the way there, the driver tells me this is the premier hotel in Osaka. It too is about 40 stories and quite modern in appearance. Inside, it's a disappointment. It's done up in a very conservative fashion that makes the interior of the Dorothy Chandler seem scandalously modern. The Hilton tends to go that way as well: very modern exterior, but a modestly retro interior. But the contrast cake has to go to the Ritz. Talk about dichotomy!

I go down into the Hankyu's basement cafe section, and there is Buco di Muro (06) 377-5567 with a Japanese and Italian menu. I find it quite good. So good, in fact, that I seem to have swallowed up the memory of what it is that I ate here. I do remember being seated at a center table along a banquette. Nobody was seated at the tables to either side of me until I arose to leave. Maybe the two things are connected in some way.

I work my way back to the Hilton through the underground labyrinth that connects all. I think of the work day coming up tomorrow. I reflect upon the labyrinth of underground agendas that connect aspects and events in the project. Perhaps if they could be seen, then those aspects and events might appear to have logic behind them.

Might.

Yeah.

Dateline 22 Feb 1999

Cubing it at the Big Udon

The *Mainichi Daily News* slips in under the door. I scan it and conclude that Y2K is small fry news today. No, it's not diminished by:

UFO Conference Blasts Into Turkey

or by:

Mystery Witness Offers Diana Crash Info

but by:

Fangs the Python Dives in the Doghouse

LONDON (AFP-Jiji) - Fangs the python is in deep trouble. Not content with swallowing its owner's puppy in one tasty gulp, it also fractured her jaw, nearly choked her and then tried to tuck into her pet rabbit.

But Terri McEntee is fighting for custody of the snake after rueing her snap decision to hand it to her local zoo, the British tabloid *News of the World* reported on Sunday.

McEntee had been keeping the 4.5-meter python at her home in Glasgow when things began to go wrong.

She brought an injured pigeon into her house, only for Fangs to dive out and try to bite it. The ensuing tussle with the python to save the pigeon's life left McEntee with a fractured jaw.

The zoo wants to keep Fangs for breeding, she added, "but I miss him very much."

I'm betting that Terri's nickname is Monty. And I wonder why the zoo director thinks that attacking is a good survival trait to breed into pet pythons. And if, during the breeding process, one python sidles up to the other, and give it a little squeeze?

With these world whirling issues, I reel off to work. I deal with some paperwork, deal with some e-work, and then deal with some jerk; all while Fergus attends the weekly staff meeting and Greg is out home-hunting. The second floor offices of Area 2 are mostly empty and hard surfaced - with silence reverberating off the vacuums housed by the cubes. The secluded atmosphere is cold but focused and productive. The short streak of productivity is broken when Fergus returns from the staff meeting and downloads.

It is very uplifting.

Lunch sneaks up to me, I sneak down to lunch. I pick out minestrone, salad, an avocado, a croissant, and a ginger ale. The minestrone has little gray bits lurking about in its depths - now hiding beneath the carrot slice, now behind the cabbage. I know they are not mung

beans, or any kind of vegetable matter. Then again, the bits are so far removed from any matter at all after processing, that it hardly matters what they really are. Maybe they are little afterthoughts that Fang the python left behind. The salad is mostly shredded Napa cabbage, with a chunk of celery, a section of tomato, and some sliced baby banana with some white creamy stuff that Fang also provided during breeding. The rest of my selection is without surprises, which in itself is surprising.

After lunch I try to puzzle out an approach to resolving some items around the speakers in T2.

At 2:30, I meet with Fergus and Greg in Conference Room 2 where Fergus downloads again for Greg's benefit, and we discuss strategies for bringing closure to the 100% CD. Fergus and I also discuss the role of FDMs [*Facility Design Managers*], and try instilling the proper attitude. When crossing the threshold from realism to cynicism, the facts do not change, only one's response to them does. The more seriously a minor aspect of existence is regarded, the more readily humor and absurdity can be found lurking nearby.

So, for example, there is so much paper to go through, and so little time, and so few people, yet everything transmitted must be stamped. So it is more important that FDMs stamp everything, than that they review anything. And then there must be meetings to discuss why there was so little time to review anything. And there must be work sessions to systematize the process so that it can work more efficiently. And then there must be discussion groups to develop forms for entering review data with columns for dates received, dates sent, dates due and dates eaten, and yet other columns for responsible parties, signatories of approval, area, group, number, component, sheet number, temperature and humidity. And then there must be meetings to review the forms, to determine who should be responsible for filling in the forms, and who has the authority to approve the forms. At the end of this, the FDM will have more forms to sign without reviewing.

We've got Greg so hypnotized with his job description, that he asks: "Where do I sign?". No wonder they're called F_____ Dumb Mothers. He'll work out just great.

It's 4:00 PM and counting. In between trying to work on T2, I try with civility to fend off welcomers (He-e-y! Good to see ya! Welcome to Osaka.), well-wishers (Everything goin' all right for you here?), enquirers (So, what's happening in California?), and the just plain lost (Does anybody know how I connect to this printer?). One group of people I don't hear from - the producers. You know, the ones that are actually productive, the ones that are too busy creating to demand the attention of others.

It's 5:30 and I have the floor to myself. I elect to pen (digitize, actually) the journal to give structure to the surrounding insanity. Later I accept an invitation to dinner. We leave at seven and board the train bound for a date with destiny. I am about to lose my virginity: for the first time, I will pass through the portals of the Osaka Hard Rock Cafe.

We enter and greet Erik who is already in the bar. Debbie has beef fajitas and a soda and Susan has a salad and chicken wings. I have lightly lumpy lifeless library paste on a limp, light-hued library paste pastry with a layer of library paste cheese. The fries are pretty good, but seem dusted with MSG. Accompanying my "vege{paste}burger" are three raw rings of an onion, a half a slice of tomato, one small leaf of lettuce, and one long thin slice of pickle. The beer manages to dislodge the paste from my mouth, and I survive to tell about it.

Upon leaving, we pass by a table whose occupant is catching the eye of a number of other patrons. Her neckline is being ignored, while the topographical features below her neck (and barely beneath her dress) are bursting for attention. I turn to Debbie and say: "Now there's someone for whom there are low expectations." Actually, I had to shout it, because this place is LOUD.

We stop and say Hi at another table where Greg and the table-hopping Erik are seated with three others. Then on to the gift shop, then out, and back to the hotel. The Hard Rock certainly seems to be a place to be seen - whereas in LA it would be a place not to be seen. In LA, tourists would come in hopes of seeing stars, while locals would steer clear. But here, overseas, it almost seems like the locals come to ogle the tourists.

I regret that I was too busy engaging in dialogue (well, actually monologue with a captive audience) to scope out others' behavior. From the corners of my eyes, I caught enough tantalizing glimpses of activity that lead me to conclude that here is a gold mine for pop psychologists and would-be behaviorists. Maybe I'll return another time when I get another craving for library paste. Or when I want to feel like one of the Rolling Stones - exhibiting signs of age and weariness.

I get ready for bed while watching a program that has a countdown clock, while they show preparations around five huge, old daikon pickling barrels. They show the lined faces of the elderly whose lives were completely centered upon the products of these barrels. And then, while everybody smiles and waves, the barrels blow up - fragments of history go up in flames.

What fun.

I end the day watching a Japanese hip-hop group. They all have perfectly pressed denim. The three leads have spiky dark hair, the five backups have spiky blond hair. The choreography is militaristically precise. No slouches in this group. But they're trying hard to look and act like street punks. It's tough to do when the music is from Phantom of the Opera.

The show ends. You know how we read from left to right, but our credits scroll down? The Japanese read from top to bottom, but the credits on this show scroll from right to left. I no longer know which way what should be - so I close my eyes and go out.

'Night.

Dateline 23 Feb 1999

The Seventh Samurai of the Big Udon

Y2K
 Makes the day
 Happy and OK.

I've just made the connection between the good and the bad. Not surprisingly, there's even a little bit of ugly.

Every evening there is a ritualistic offering that I sacrifice the following morning. I'm talking about the apple and tangerine stereoscopic still-life that reappears in my room every afternoon. The fruits await me side by side. As I enter and face the window, the apple is always on the right, the tangerine always on the left. I suppose it would be disconcerting if they both were on the left or the right. Be that as it may, they face me, beckon me, and entice me from the shelter of an octagonal tray on the reading/coffee table by the window. The northern light benignly backlights their form, their being, their aqueous essence. The lacquered tray they are reposing on is black on the bottom and outside, and Chinese red on the inside. It has a handle that forms a rectangular arch; an abstract gazebo for the wedding of these two fruits.

Today, it seems, they have been blessed. Two strawberries are the offspring glistening at their feet (?). They sport little mops of green atop their heads. Cute. Oh, so cute.

And there we have it:

Y is for the yellow skin of the apple,
 2 is for the berries at their feet,
 And K is for the kitchen knife that I use in the morning
 while their juices stream down my fingers
 and their pulp is pounded
 between my teeth.

I love poetry, don't you?

I clean myself up afterwards - but leave the corings, the rind and the pips as a warning for whomever or whatever may wander into here while I am away battling demons and slaying dragons. I prepare my coat of arms and umbrella, stride out to my JR Line stables, and mount my steel-wheeled steed. Shortly I arrive at the edge of the unknown and unbuilt Universe, draw my trusty blade ExCADibur, and engage in bloody battle. I slay many a monstrous, ever-multiplying, and malicious e-mail - dispatching them hither and yon - Sending them, Saving them, or relegating them to the Trash pile. They "beep" and "bing" in protest and in pleasure.

Oh, happy day!

A mouse! A mouse!
I rule my kingdom with a mouse!
Klickety-click! Klickety-click!
If only I had a joystick!

I love poetry, don't you?

It's the poetic justice part that I could do without. And, speaking of which, 10:00 AM is approaching, and it's off to see the wonderful wizards of the kingdom of Kajima. Our squire directs his coach to the guarded gates where a sentry (I know, I know - you and would say "sentry", but when in wherever...) lets us pass, but only after we don the arm-bands and headdress of our hosts.

Today's negotiations deal with Backdraft 90% CD [*Construction Documents*] Review Comment Log Checkbacks and initial Sekozu [*Japanese Construction Documents*] Comments. Ritually, we go over each comment, over the questions on comments, the comments on comments, and the question of what is the true meaning of commenting. Just before running out of questionable comments, our warlord host saves face by suggesting that we break for lunch. Fergus and I save face by declaring that we knew that already, and that the only reason we haven't suggest it first is because we want to be polite. He, in turn, shows his politeness by apologizing that there are no cars available to take us back to the trailer - even though it may appear that their parking lot is full, and that his lieges are either lounging around or vacuuming up the contents of their bento boxes. We save our faces by declining to respond and leaving before they can karate-chop our cuspidors and bicuspidors down our throats.

They're terrific people to work with.

And I just sense that they love poetry too.

Speaking of poetry, the prime luncheon entry looks like a beef-less hamburger on a bed of rice, but with both ends of a sardine jutting from the bun. It has my attention so riveted, that I fail to note the other offerings. Perhaps they were not as picturesque or intriguing - but they were equally unappealing to my fragile vegetarian self. So I stuck with my rut of miso soup, avocado, croissant, salad, and ginger ale. A truly well balanced meal - when you arrange them on the tray, the soup and the avocado on the left weigh as much as the rest of the stuff on the right.

I love the integration and commingling in the canteen. All USJ people sit at one table. All Japanese interpreters sit at another. Almost all USI personnel sit at one of two tables. The remainder is USI Area 2 - we sit at our own table. Either we are feared for our prowess in battle, or for the intimidation projected by the size of Ross and myself, or for the contagiousness of our viral cynicism, or more likely, they had mistakenly heard that we were suffering all morning with a back-draft. Ah well, when you're a hero, who needs friends?

Besides, they probably don't love poetry.

After attending to some miscellany in our office, we return to Kajima and continue with Backdraft. At three, we move on to Sekozu issues, with Fergus and Greg in attendance. It has been an interesting day. Kajima's main conference room has a sheet of vinyl that is accordioned open most of the time. But today it is closed, and there is a 50mm gap at the bottom. Ross has been meeting with facade vendors next door.

All day.

I'm not exactly Mr. Soft-Spoken either. We compete to be heard. Towards the end, the accordion is flung open repeatedly. The barriers of civility only appear to threaten to come down. Instead we engage in poetry. We explore the ambiguous line between having fun and making fun. The double-entendre and the pun are the most distilled form of poetry - in that they have a literal meaning, but at the same time they are metaphors that stand for something else entirely. All great art is metaphorical on many levels. A good joke may not be great art, but for a moment, both elate the spirit; both make us think.

The sun descends; the battleground of the conference room is strewn with massacred schedules and decimated budgets. An occasional spear projects from the carcass of a paper coffee cup. The shrapnel from sugar sticks lies amidst the shreds of abandoned agendas. It's time to saddle up and ride off into the sunset. As I engage in this iconic American tradition, I reflect that it is the mirror image from the Land of the Rising Sun. Which probably explains why they are reluctant to go home until the sun is closer to rising than setting.

The sun I follow sets over in the northern Shinsaibashi area. It sets at the door of Namaste, an Indian restaurant recommended by Erik. If you're on the Shinsaigashi-suji covered shopping street, heading north from the Crystal shopping plaza under Nagahori-dori street, you will see a sign for a Pango House on a southeast corner. Turn east, go a half block, up a half flight of stairs, and there you are.

I order a vegetarian thali, even though it is not on the menu, and a beer. The waitress confers with the owner, who verifies my order and I'm on my way to a good time. The meal starts with the papdum. On the table are salt, pepper, red pepper, and a small crock of lime pickle - spicy and delicious, but not for those on a restricted salt diet. I have a Maharajah Indian beer. The thali arrives. I place the slab of naan bread on the side and soak in the savory scents on the platter before me. There are the small bowls of curries with yellow peas, lotus root, potato and cauliflower, yogurt raitha, and cabbage and carrot salad. In the center is a small pile of rice and a fried pakora. Mint and tomato dipping sauces are on the side. It is interesting that the tomato sauce is almost straight ketchup - which actually derives from the original Indian formulation of kadjup, which the Brits first modified along its evolutionary route. Everything tastes very good and feels poetic. Thanks Erik.

The owner is, as it appears with many Indians here, fluent in English. He asks how I found his place, I blame Erik. He waxes enthusiastic. He reveals that he would like to open an Indian restaurant at USJ. I explain to him that there are no plans at this time for an Indian restaurant. I do offer him some encouragement, and suggest that all is not hopeless. He could fulfill his dream if he were to start by buying Seagram's. He becomes so excited that he mistakenly buys my next beer. Whadda country! I luvva dis man!

On the way back to the train, I pass by an elegant looking restaurant/bar amidst all the private clubs. It's in what is called the Gallery Building. The backlit picture board shows several elegant establishments in the same building on other floors. It is all very sparse, very modern, very chic, veddy-veddy. I go in to get a card for future reference. Forty to fifty nouveau-riche heads pop up from their tailored black jackets and fitted black dresses at the alien intruder wearing my clothes and my face. Senni-ma-sen.

Ichiriki, (06) 243-2085, is reached by going two blocks east along the street between the Sogo and Daimaru streets on Midu-soji Avenue, then a half block north. Just south of it, I spotted a hangout for boxing enthusiasts appropriately called the Blow Bar. Whadda country! There's poetry around every corner.

I love poetry, don't you?

Dateline 24 Feb 1999

Veggin' Out at the Big Udon

I'm waiting for the train from the JR Station to take me to the shuttle line. It's rush hour. Actually it's clogged hour - it's impossible to rush anywhere. And I'm not talkin' cars and freeways! The scariest part is thinking about getting to the top of the escalator at the train platform. People are queuing up in neat twin rows behind circular and triangular floor markings near the track edge. One pair of symbols designate where the doors to the express will come to a stop, the other pair marks the local's doors. Me, I feel like a pair of squares, 'cause I'm still not sure which is which.

Think about it - if I can't connect basic symbols like circles and triangles with expresses and locals, how can I connect Kanji characters with meaningful words?

But back to the top of the escalator - when the trains pull up, the lines ripple apart while the exiting passengers run the gauntlet between them. Then the lines get vacuumed into the innards of the train from either side of the doorway. It's really very neat. And very organized. True civility in the face of adversity. Well, I really don't know about the "true" part, but it certainly gives every outward appearance of civility. And perhaps, that is the point - subjugating inner urges so as not to tear the social fabric is the essence of civility and civilization. Motive becomes inconsequential, form is everything.

Manners may seem superficial and artificial, but they do eliminate the need of assessing the intent of strangers, so long as they adhere to protocol. Which is why I love to skate at the edge of civility - insults with a smile; stating the blatant within a veil of obscurity; finding humor in the tragic; and vice-versa - it stretches the social fabric without tearing, it challenges all to check their premises. (i.e., a favorite: "I'm not prejudiced. I hate everyone equally".)

Anyhoo - these queues stretch across the platform. When a train pulls in, the density is doubled, as those exiting plow between the waiting lines, and seek out the stairs to below. The danger on the escalator is that the people coming off the top may be blocked from going anywhere, where the conveyor belt keeps delivering people to the top. This is where civility almost does a duet with panic.

Now the train is pulling into one of the stations. Right outside the window is a window proclaiming the presence of a "Bakery and Cafe". It's named "Pumpkin Poo". You've heard of thousand year old eggs - I suspect this is the pumpkin scoopings equivalent. Maybe it's even stirred in with some mayonnaise and left out in the sun for a few days.

Think about it.

At the office I'm shuffling electrons into patterns of pixels - into words that move mountains -or maybe move dirt into darkness, and night into never - and the big bang

recurs when the cursor hits Start. I love this e-mail stuff: I paint ideas with photons; scatter seeds of thought across EMF fields; rain oblivion on others with an "X" and a beep. This is "Space Invaders" at the adult level or "Tetris" without the visuals.

Fergus and I get a lift to Kajima's offices where we meet regarding Back to the Future. The questions, as in almost all sessions, revolve around information not yet obtained from show vendors - or clarification of information that has been received. It almost seems that every time I provide assurances, or information that gives assurances, to Kajima, I feel that much less secure in the validity of what is provided, and in the unchangeability of that information.

Lunchtime arrives. We head back to the canteen in eager anticipation of gustatory delights.

What could I have been thinking? Where do I get these sudden outbursts of optimism? Especially here, where the nail that sticks up is pounded down hardest. As I sit at the table, I can't remember the other offerings - they're a blurry zoo of dismembered beasts. I have Minestrone with Mystery Might Be Meat nodules lurking amidst the slurry at the bottom. I endure. However, I do have to pass on the salad. Again, there's this thing about this weird white stuff on the bananas. It doesn't look presidential, but one never knows.

Back to Kajima and questions regarding the Triangle Buildings. Here we are, grown adults from opposite sides of the earth, brought together to discuss the provisions needed to house a 10+ meter high inflatable monkey. Where else but in show business?

At 4:30, we take the train back to Umeda for a tour of the Hal-Mode building. Kajima is the designer/builder. This is a twenty-story high-rise Romeo and Juliet building - Hal, done in rectangular silver and blue, is a computer school; Mode, is a fashion school done in angled rose. The building is a collision of a basic square planned office tower colliding with another one that is chamfered from a skinny wedge at the top to a square base at the bottom. Near the middle, a giant ball hovers above the glassed-in lobby. The sphere reveals itself to be a representation of Earth, approximately 20m in diameter. Except that the North Pole is down, and all the landforms are beige, except one: a red Japan. Unbeknownst to the casual visitor, the globe contains the main lecture hall.

When we arrive, we descend to the second basement, using the automobile ramps at the back. Mind you, this is still a construction site, but down here, we have to take off our shoes, and don slippers. I go in my stockinged feet - slippers here don't come in 13EEEEEE. We take an elevator to the top. The 20th floor is taken up by the assembly hall, which has a panoramic view to the front, back, and one side. The floor has several broad platformed risers and a low stage with a runway for models. Their backdrop will be the city lights to the north.

We descend the stairs as we tour exposed ceiling classrooms with surveillance cameras in each, smoking rooms with stainless steel kitchen-style hoods built into the ceilings large

enough to exhaust students that would forget to fasten their seat belts, conference room, interview rooms, sewing rooms, etc.

Elevators are available. And I'm in my stockinged feet. But no, they want me to think about it.

Eventually, we get to the command center in the basement, and then back to the comfort of shoes. We tour the outside, where "Area Development" has tried to fit an abstract history of the universe into a sliver of space between the Hal-Mode building and a high-rise hotel under construction next to it. Of course, I exaggerate, but it does seem a bit busier than the space warrants.

But it does make you think about it.

We say our thank-yous, our good-byes and our good-nights. It really is a stimulating, thought provoking project. As a designer, there is no escaping the could-of-beens and should-of-beens that the imagination keeps conjuring up. But the fact of the matter is that a metaphoric statement was made, and at a very stripped budget. Perhaps the designer did not specifically have Romeo and Juliet in mind when he developed this metaphor for the relationship of the masculine to the feminine. Shakespeare's lovers came to a tragic end - here the two consummate their love in a momentous act of creation. Where the two masses converge, they give birth to the sphere. It is men and women, together that create this world and give it meaning. How life and mind-affirming this is! How stimulating, as opposed to the proposition that we are but biological products of this earth's evolution - that our instincts are still in the trees, that our minds are on what is below others' navels.

Back at the hotel, I look out the window. Virtually across this street, the Hal-Mode building rises to just below my horizon. The sun is setting and the lighting crews are positioning the floodlights on the face of the soon-to-be-opened structure. The floods wash this way and that, bringing out texture and reflectance, hot-spots and back-lit auras. It's good to see minds at work - experimenting, assessing, modulating - working to bring out the essence within.

I call Ross regarding dinner. He's hungry, but he's waiting for another call. I'll call him back in a half-hour.

I think about the drama that metaphoric buildings can convey - not the drama of an Arthur Miller, or Edward Albee, but the slow inevitability of ancient Greek theater. Oedipus comes to mind. Then I scan the *Mainichi Daily News*, and there on page 4B:

Japanese stabs self in eye with chopstick

TAIPEI (AP) - a Japanese tourist accidentally lodged a chopstick into his eye socket while eating a bowl of instant noodles, but doctors said on Monday that he will retain his sight.

Satoshi Kitnoshida, 48, was recovering at National Taiwan

University Hospital after doctors removed the chopstick, which had penetrated three centimeters into his right eye socket early on Sunday.

The chopstick did not puncture the eyeball, eliminating any immediate danger of blindness, although Kinoshida will be hospitalized for a week as a precaution against infection, said hospital optometrist Chen Wei-li.

Kinoshida told journalists that he tripped in his Taipei hotel room while fixing a cup of tea during his morning meal of noodles, inadvertently poking the chopstick into his eye socket.

After a while, we decide to go anyway. I make a suggestion, he counters with another that sounds better. We meet up in the tunnels, and head north on the Midosuji line to the Esaka station. We go off the north end of the station and head west. After a block, we turn south a short block, then west again. In a half block, we come to Asperge, a quite good Italian restaurant that Linde, Sevak and I ate on our last trip.

We double back to the Tokyu Hands, go to the third, top floor, where I proceed to buy up all of their stock of VW miniatures. As if the five real ones we have at home aren't enough. Meanwhile, Ross is ogling the variety of tools on display - this would be a goldmine for Sears, if they ever wanted to become sophisticated.

We work our way down, and go out the south end of the store. Across the street to the west, and just a bit north is our dinner destination, Tucci Benucch (06) 6821-8050. Apparently there are four locations for this mini-chain that is part of the Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises Inc. empire. On the outside, part of their signboard is a meter-and-a-half diameter dimensional tomato. We go down below the street level into the lobby. Just past the cashier, on the way to the restrooms, is a wine rack that holds a selection larger than what can be found on the menu. We are seated in a dining room that can seat well over a hundred - cavernous by Osaka standards. The theming is pretty decent - suggestively restrained, rather than overdone and toon-like.

We are seated and handed a menu in English. We order arrancini (rice croquettes), and a tomato and eggplant dish as appetizers. Both are quite good. Now comes a garden salad. I think the chef has been listening too much to a particular Beatles song, 'cause this garden has octopus, tuna, and sardines growing in it. For an entree, I wander across the threshold of vegan ambiguity and order the pasta with eggplant and ground beef. As expected, the beef is virtually nonexistent, but the sauce is stimulatingly zestier than a straight marinara. Ross has a dinner "seto" (i.e.: soup or salad, entree, beverage, dessert), and we share a mildly sweet Muscat - it's a wine, not a fricasseed feline. I smooth out my after-dinner palate with a tiramisu - here it is much airier and is mostly whipped cream with virtually no mascarpone. I thank Ross for his suggestion, since it is the best Italian I've had on this trip.

It's started to rain as we head across the street to the station. We're both so lazy, we walk the length of the station to ascend via the elevator, rather than hike up a set of stairs. Being a foreigner is great - almost everything is excusable.

We take the train back to Osaka station. I suggest we go up to the Windows on the World, the sky lounge at the Hilton, since this is Ross's last evening for a while. Over at the Ritz, where he is staying, their equivalent to the "sky lounge" is on the fifth floor - which puts you about five floors below the lowest building around the place. The view with the city lights glistening below is like a reflecting pool for the galaxy of stars above. We have a cocktail each while munching on those incredible glazed walnuts studded with sesame seeds. With all of this luxuriant atmosphere, scenery, service, etc., etc., around, what else are we going to talk about but the day-to-day work that needs to be done in the weeks ahead.

We think about how it can be better.

Somewhere out there, out the other side of the building, lighting crews are playing lights over the features of an office building masquerading as two schools. And here we are, office people masquerading as to two fools. Or, is it really form dreamers costumed as two cube dwellers. Whichever, we talk, we hope, we close the place out. Like Hal and Mode, for the past two-plus years we have been creating this limited world for others to live in. The sun is setting. I'm ready for the lighting crew, Mr. Preminger.

Think about it.

Dateline 25 Feb 1999

Heartbreak Ridge at the Big Udon

Off to work again. Tomorrow's on my mind. Tomorrow I return to LA. Home. I can almost smell the dog droppings in the yard. Who said LA has no there, there. They haven't been out our way.

Acchh – they might be smelly, but at least they're our droppings.

And so, it's out the room, out the lobby, across the street, main train, shuttle train, shuttle bus. A couple of construction workers recognize me and greet me with an "Oohss-s" (Rhymes with goose) – I gather that it's a blue-collar abbreviation for 'Ohayo-gozaïmasu.' [*Good morning. Literally 'It's early.'*]

It brings my thoughts back to some two weeks ago when I got on the shuttle bus. The driver greeted me with a full "ohayo-gazaimasu" as I sat down near the front. Six or seven USJCo [*the international conglomerate which owns Universal Studios Japan*] personnel followed me on board. As each got in, the driver greeted them with an abbreviated "m-Ahss-s", each would respond with a "m-Ahss-s". Then each would exchange "m-Ahss-s"-es with everyone else on board as they moved to the seats towards the rear. I felt like there was a den of snakes behind me seething and hissing. I didn't dare turn around, for fear they would sense my heat and strike.

* * * * *

My favorite (and only) morning paper, the Mainichi News, carries this to further prove that some among the Japanese do strike out:

Japan denies envoy's 'wife-bashing' excuse

WASHINGTON (Kyodo) – The Japanese ambassador to the United States on Tuesday denied newspaper reports that the Japanese consul general in Canada, who allegedly assaulted his wife in the country, later downplayed the incident as a matter of Japanese culture.

At a regular news conference, Ambassador Kunihiko Saito was referring to the alleged misconduct by Shuji Simokoji, 51, consul general in Vancouver.

Shimokoji was recently served an arrest warrant on suspicion of assaulting his wife in the Canadian city, and turned himself in.

The reports said he told investigators that the incident should be judged from a cultural point of view and that it has no significance in Japan.

It just warms my heart that there are so many Americans that subscribe to cultural relativism—that claim that no culture is better than another, and that therefore we should not judge others. Just think of where Hitler and Stalin would be now if most believed then what is believed today. Well—at least either way, they still would have died.

* * * * *

So, off to happier things. I'm in the office. A stack of drawings is spontaneously propagating on Fergus's chair, a bunch of Sekozus [*Japanese construction drawings*] on mine. A collection of Raouf's abandoned medicines pose in a melancholy stilllife behind me. There's sunshine outside, and I'm not.

I call home to Suezanne to confirm arrangements for meeting at LAX. As she talks, silent icicles stab into my being from a universe emptied of light. Her best friend's daughter is about to undergo the excising of an advanced malignancy in a procedure so horrific that I'm not sure I could face the same.

I have met her more through Suezanne's stories than in person. She has struck me as a true innocent—someone with such a positive sense of life that she cannot acknowledge the existence of malevolence. She is also gifted with an appearance most would wish for. When riding C'boy, she truly is a free spirit in a radiant universe of joy. Why then is so much cruelty visited upon such a freshness of life? What system of belief can welcome such a travesty of justice?

The totality of what surrounds is a field of flowers that comes alive in the spring of existence. Blossoms emerge, then shower the ground with the petals of their former beauty. It is usually this wave of color that imagination is launched upon—rather than the individual blossom. But this blossom—this particular blossom—Kelley, has brushed against our lives—and it matters.

Deeply.

I can only pray that this poinsettia blooms through the winter of her existence and flourishes into the spring.

* * * * *

I stumble numbly through work until lunchtime asserts itself. I go to the canteen. No flowers here. I scoop out the reconstituted seaweed hairball from the udon and thicken it with chili sauce in hopes that I won't be able to taste the seafood in the broth. I venture into the unknown as I top my salad with soy dressing. Ginger ale is my aperitif. Kampai.

I attend a meeting at USJCo, my first with them during these past three weeks. In the USI trailers, anybody can wander in anytime—and they do. Unfortunately, this is not always conducive to doing work. So the smart folk at USJCo solve this by sticking to custom at their trailer. Mind you, this is a construction site, and most people wear laced-up work

boots. Sticking to tradition means taking off your footwear upon entry, and donning slippers, then replacing your boots when you leave. The net result is that most people are lazy enough to think twice before going to USJCo.

Afterwards, we go to the Area 2 GC offices for a T2 Facility Coordination of Actor's Access meeting. Here I come to realize that there is a disconnect between what I assume they have gotten, what I know they have gotten, and what they say they have gotten. All I know is, I don't get it; they're gonna get theirs; and I've been had.

* * * * *

After dinner, a half-dozen of us go to **Pietro** (Tel.06.6343.7103), in the Herbis Plaza basement, which is just east of the Ritz-Carlton. They have an English menu (only one—so large groups take time). Most everything is pretty good and pretty reasonable—although the bottle of red wine vinegar seems out of place in our wineglasses. There is a more extensive wine list, but it is in Japanese.

Earlier in the day, Andrea had announced her departure for that place that appreciates long naked tails. So we talk of quitters and bottom feeders. Although we look at her, we're actually referring to Kerry, Alan and that ilk. Nevertheless, it's strange to watch those two black disks emerge from the top of what's left of her head.

The whiskers don't turn out too bad, but boy-oh-boy!—those clunky yellow shoes!

Ahh-h-h! And tomorrow is home.

Dateline 9 Mar 1999

Return to the Big Udon

This is crazy! Suezanne is taking a piano class at Glendale College later this morning and can't drop me at the airport. So I'm up at 5:30 to catch an 11:00 flight? Welcome to the modern world of preemptive liability—everything is somebody else's fault, and even if it isn't, everyone expects to be blamed.

[Note, This was written before 9/11/01]

Super Shuttle buys into the pap that we have to be at the airport two hours in advance of the departure of an international flight. Why two hours? Because everyone at the airport is suspected of sneaking bombs and assault weaponry onto the flight! How many times and how many souls have met their ends departing from LAX to Osaka since WWII due to bombs or weaponry on a flight? What part of a great big zero is bigger than nothing and never?

People are scaring each other silly, dreading events that have virtually no probability of occurring. Yet they exhibit no qualms engaging in behaviors that are vastly more likely to hasten their departure from this world—such as operating or getting into a moving vehicle.

Anyway, these fears prompt Super Shuttle to place my “guaranteed” airport arrival at 9:00 a.m. Even though the driving time on a virtually infinite combination of local streets during Monday morning's rush hour would not exceed 60 minutes, they insist on 90. Since there is another pick-up along the way, they add another 30 minutes. So, “Please be ready to depart at 7:00 a.m.” And, of course, I don't want to miss my ride. My morning routine is normally an hour and I packed the night before. But, well, ya know...just in case...even I choose to have that extra 30-minute cushion.

So I'm the one that chose Super Shuttle and I'm the one that chose the advance time I needed. So, whose fault is it that I got up so early? My wife? My wife's piano coach? Universal?

Nope! This Crabby Customer, this Ridiculing Rider, is the one that was stupid enough to tell the shuttle company what time my flight was to take place. Next time, I'll just tell 'em my flight is at 12:30 and I'll get up at 7:30. And then I'll scare myself silly between 7:30 and 11:00, worrying that I'll miss my flight.

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As usual, I have a window seat, and do what I usually do—stare out the window. This trip's trajectory over the Pacific is far removed from any adjoining landmasses. Besides, there is a solid blanket of clouds tucking the ocean away from sight for the entire flight.

It still fascinates me. It's the layering of the wisps, lumps and quilts that make up the clouds. No one cloud or portion of a cloud is quite like any other—a composition that should be classed as chaos. Yet there is pattern, structure, rhythm in the forms as they pose in infinite variations of infinite themes.

It is almost miraculous that pattern manifests itself within this chaos of form. Are the patterns actually there, or do our minds superimpose patterns in order to comprehend what we perceive?

Laws of physics and fluid mechanics force me to conclude that structure is objective. But it still amazes me that the mind has the discernment to perceive pattern amidst the chaos.

No matter where the plane goes, there are great lessons in architecture just the other side of those ovals of light. If only tea leaves were as revealing!

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Ahhh- but the menu, the viands, the *symphonie gastronomique*! At least, looking at United's list of offerings would have you imagine it that way. They note that Martin Yan is the executive consulting chef that helped steer the development of their menu. I have seen several of his televised programs—and it would serve United well to show some of these in flight. He's very entertaining and upbeat, and gives every indication of being an accomplished chef. In addition to his "Yan Can Cook" program, he also has several cookbooks to his credit.

Most memorable to me is his promotional advertisement. It shows him ambidextrously chopping food (?) in a machine gun staccato with two speed-blurred cleavers. The smile on his face belies the threats in his hands. Impressive.

But maybe Yan's smile is a result of fees collected. He starts our culinary journey with poached salmon and a salad with Parmesan dressing. Being the good, kind-hearted vegan that I am, I push the moist pink thing to the side. I drown the cup of lettuce in the thimble-and-a-half of dressing, and gnash, chomp, masticate and mangle the fledgling flora until it dissolves in a frenzy of salivated froth—which screams as it slides to meet Dr. Duodenum.

Being kind to Mother Nature requires some compensatory moments.

Then—Ahhh, and ahhh again! My favorite part. Here between courses I am offered—no, not sorbet—but a small dish of mixed nuts. These are luxury nuts—there's not a peanut to be had. Now this will clear my palate. If only some cloves of garlic were tossed in, it would also clear the plane. Nuts, especially salted nuts, are best when warmed. But I find myself savoring the refrigerated pecan halves—it's like taking a cold shower on a cold morning. It feels best when it stops, and it feels even better knowing and anticipating that it will be warmer shortly.

Entrée: Steak and mushrooms in a brown reduction. My lump of meat is met with the same treatment as that fish thing that came calling this way before. The gravy gets scooped onto the sticky stack of shoestring-sized home fries. The dozen or so *haricot verts* lay at attention next to the *pomme bruns*. But not for long. The Great Gastro is on the prowl for unsuspecting innocents. A couple of faint brown streaks are all that remain on the dish—a memorial mark of where the *pommes* hit the palate.

For dessert, I opt for the cheese and fruit offering—a small bunch of pachinko ball-sized red grapes, crackers, Brie and two other cheeses whose identity my wine-clouded consciousness could no longer discern. Then along comes a tong-wielding stewardess with a box of Godiva confections. I ask for two of the darkest-looking ones, then brood in the dark pleasure of the chocolate flesh that clothes their mocha souls. This is a materialist’s spiritual communion.

Still later come the temptations of Japanese almond cookies, Italian ices and paper wrapped cones of fruit sorbet.

The objective seems to be to put everyone to sleep. But I show ‘em. Some passengers have portable PCs. Hah! Mine’s got a Mega-Soundblaster card, a powered mike, amped outboard Seiko speakers, and Karaoke CDs and software. I load in the best of the Bee-Gees. I’m workin’ the aisles. I’m pitching peanuts with the elastic band from the oxygen mask. I’m using the demo seat belts as castanets. I’m up on the center seats, dancing from headrest to headrest. Everyone is shouting and going wild! I’m propelled at the head of a Conga line, out a side door and onto a wing. I’m...I’m...dreaming.

I put my portable—actually the folding tray—back in its armrest. I alternately read and stare out the window as the hours grind by. Eventually, the last meal is served. This is a plate with pineapple slices, watermelon balls, mango chunks, cantaloupe and honeydew slices, all garnished with an orange leaf. What a weird anatomy a fruit has that it can yield such a diversity of bodily parts. And there it all is in its autopsied most-mortem splendor—slowly oozing various fluids and juices as it lies in pieces on my plate. A small bread roll and a container of raspberry yogurt partake silently in this exhibition.

Japan makes its appearance sparsely through holes in the clouds.

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The plane lands, the shuttle train disgorges, the luggage cart transports, the bus delivers, and the porter ports. Almost two hours later, I’m at the Hilton.

“Hello, Mr. Grants!”

“Good to see you again, Mr. Grants!”

“How have you been, Mr. Grants?”

“You’re such a gaijin [*foreigner*], Mr. Grants!”

They are all here, smiling, bowing, shaking hands—the new Manager, the Assistant Manager, the Bellhop, Others and Assistant Others. What a show! For fifteen seconds, I am a celebrity in the lobby. Their unqualified graciousness is difficult to reciprocate. After the long flight I’m a rumpled lump—Carey Grant, Dick Powell, even Orson Welles didn’t look this way when they swept, sauntered, or stomped into flickering images of hotel lobbies. Their hotels were ephemeral, but their presence was real. On the other hand, my hotel is real, and “Where and what am I” sums up my metaphysical state.

William chances to be on the same elevator up to the 25th floor. He, his cardigan, and his mumbled English are *en route* to cloister themselves for the night with room service. I’m on my way up to take out my clothes, take myself outside, and outrun my tiredness—I haven’t really slept since the morning before.

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I call Shim, who is also staying at the Hilton. We head out for dinner. Although he has spent time in Osaka from years ago, I had just spent three weeks at the Hilton a week earlier. So, the Anglo tour guide takes the resident Japanese on a culinary cruise.

We decide to stay within easy walking distance. So, off to the Hankyu complex. We cross over to the JR Umeda station, head east alongside the tracks above, and cross the street to the stentorian march tune pumped by the speakers to the pedestrian masses. We enter a high-ceilinged arcade lined with the Hankyu’s trademark art-deco-like floral grilles. We turn south at the crossing arcade, then east through some doors to the elevator lobby of the Hankyu Building. We attempt to go up the top five floors, all of which are restaurants. Unfortunately, this is Tuesday, the one night of the week they are all closed.

Back down we go, back north and continue east along the east-west arcade. Across the street is a red, nine-story building with a giant red Ferris wheel on top—the HEP Five. I remember a garlic restaurant on the seventh floor. It’s Shim’s first time here, so we ride the escalators up past the plastic whale hanging in the atrium. There is a long line of young adults at the restaurant, and we’re too old and tired to hang for the hour or so to get in.

We go on up and explore Sega’s Joypolis, the amusement park on the top two floors, which is prefaced by the Ferris wheel on the seventh. The park has one tracked ride, five simulator or simulated environment attractions, two walk-thru’s, two arcades, and a café. One of the simulator attractions is *The Lost World*, complete with the Jurassic logo. Joypolis’s designers must have thought, let’s make it “Industrial Warehouse”—a kind of Gameworks with fewer chachkas hanging around. But there is no overarching idea of the what and the why and the wherefore of the relationship of the elements to the theme. Hence, amusement park, and not theme park. You see, the theming is amusing.

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We return to where we first entered the Hankyu complex. There, next to the street, and directly under the tracks is a rabbit's warren of thirty or so restaurants and native dives. Except for the Aussie Bar, they all present traditional Japanese fare. Shim selects an establishment where we duck under the hanging cloths at the entrance. [*These are called 'noren' in Japan.*] He speaks to the hostess, and we are seated at a table cheek by jowl with other workmen that have stopped in on their way home.

The atmosphere is homey, the décor is basic and functional, the food is good. This is one of the larger establishments in this complex—it fronts of two of the parallel interior streets, and seats close to forty, and perhaps another ten at the counter. Instead of chips and salsa, a small dish with carrots and a marinated, chewy root is slapped down in front of each of us. Shim orders beer and I, sake—the sweet “Chardonnay” of Sapporo.

Always considerate of my dietary peculiarities, Shim orders a variety of other dishes:

- Tempura – with green beans, shitake mushrooms, eggplant, lotus root, etc. (light, crisp and direct from the deep fryer)
- Tofu – with bonito flakes (which wriggle in resistance as I try to scrape them away) and scallions
- Root vegetables with fermented bean sauce
- A Japanese-style omelet
- Beef with onions (so Shim can get some meat on his bones)

We leave full and head back to the hotel. I sink into bed. Soon I'm among the clouds—separating pattern from chaos in the colloidal confusion that is the flock of sheep that leap through my dreams...

Dateline 18 Apr 1999

Go Wet, Big Udon! Go Wet to Nara

New paper this evening—the *Asahi Evening News*, Kansai Edition.

Truckin' tramps redefining expressway 'rest' areas *Shukan Jitsuwa 4/22*

“You must be tired, having driven such a long way,” says the man, who appears to be in his mid-40s. “Are you looking for a little action before heading back on the road?”

The approach is a classic one. But the venue, a service area beside the Tomei expressway near the foothills of Mt. Fuji, is definitely not. Inside the cargo area of the man's truck is a sofa bed, upon which is seated an attractive young woman. And 30,000 yen buys an hour of her company.

Unfortunately for those seeking to indulge in such activities, this sex on wheels service does not maintain a fixed schedule. Nor can it be identified by any distinctive ornamentation or signs.

“These trucks make guerrilla-like appearances and then vanish,” a veteran driver tells **Shukan Jitsuwa**. “You never know when to expect them. If I spot one and feel up to it, I always let them know I'm in the market. I can usually get them to knock 5,000 yen off the price. You don't get a choice, but the women I've had so far were always real bits of crumpet.

“While we were in there doing it, the truck was making all kinds of noises, and the girl's squeals were echoing around inside,” the driver adds with a chuckle. “But the engine was running, and I doubt if people walking around outside could hear anything.”

According to a moving van driver, the sex traded at highway service areas is a source of added revenue for gangsters based in the Kanto region.

“A group of Kansai gangsters tried to horn in on their business and trouble broke out. The two actually faced each other down with their guns drawn. One wrong move, and things could have turned pretty messy,” the driver remarks.

Shukan Jitsuwa notes that use of service areas astride major expressways for prostitution and other

illegal shenanigans has a long history. Action aboard the trucks is believed to date back about a decade. In the evenings, hookers prowl the areas on foot, soliciting males to join them for quickies standing against the buildings, on benches or in the surrounding shrubbery, with the going rate at about 20,000 yen. Such action, however, appears limited to the warmer months.

The daylong comings and goings (if you'll pardon the expression) of vehicles at rest areas has also made them a popular transfer point for pilfered and embezzled goods. Among items said to be available are rings and other types of jewelry, electric heaters, motorcycle helmets and rolls of thermal facsimile paper.

"Drivers will load up more goods than on their cargo manifest," explains the aforementioned driver. "Then they peddle the stuff at service areas before going on to their destinations. The going rate will be at least 50 percent off the market price. Sometimes items even sell for 70 percent to 80 percent off retail."

But illicit business at service areas is by no means limited to truck drivers: Another technique is to scrawl cell-phone numbers, city and items for sale, such as hard-core porno videos, on lavatory walls. A bus driver notes that the areas are also a haven for dealing amphetamines, which many long-distance drivers are said to depend upon to ward off drowsiness.

A spokesman for the highway authority sternly advises expressway drivers to refrain from service area temptations, of the flesh or otherwise.

"We've heard of men who went running to the police afterwards, whining that while playing around they had been ripped off of everything but their highway tolls," he tells **Shukan Jitsuwa**. "Some operators are nothing but con artists. And there's a risk that you can be charged with aiding and abetting as well."

(Mark Schreiber)

Student kills principal who refuses day off

MULTAN, Pakistan (AP) – A disgruntled student shot and killed his college principal Friday after the

principal refused his request to declare a holiday, police said.

Abdul Rehman Sungera, head of the Pakistan Muslim League student wing in Multan, wanted the Government Technical College closed to let people attend a Muslim League rally they said.

The principal, Shahid Ameen, refused and was shot, police said.

So far no arrests have been made, but police said they were searching for the student.

Museum seeks Pamela's breast implants

MIAMI, Florida (AFP-Jiji) – Ripley's Believe It or Not museum has offered to buy Pamela Anderson Lee's recently removed breast implants, curator Christine Barnes said on Friday.

"We are interested in them for our Hollywood Museum. We are going to feature different practices from around the world as far as making yourself beautiful," Barnes explained.

"We figured that they would make the implant display more interesting," Barnes added.

Seeking a more "natural" look, former "Baywatch" star and ruling Internet sex queen Pamela Anderson Lee had her breast implants removed.

Ross is staying in; Steve and some others are going to Kyoto. I haven't been there, so I figure I'll go to Nara, as this is my last weekend.

Take the Midosuji south one stop to Yodoyabashi and switch to the Keihan Main Line. Take express to Kuzuha and switch to local to Yawatashi. On the way, pass Kirakanta Park just before Hirakatakoen station—it has roller coaster, Ferris wheel, etc.—a tame version of Six Flags. Also pass big racetrack.

Next to station is an incline railway, 200¥ one way, 400¥ round trip. Simple system—two trains, one cable with bypass in center in a tunnel. Deep gulch, massive trees, birds, crows. Feel like kid sitting in front row looking up through window.

At the top, go right up path, since stairs lead up to observation point. Come up to clearing with parking on sides. In center is some semi-modern 40' high monument to something—scouts maybe, judging from a bust nearby. To the side is a memorial dedicated to Thomas Edison. In between is a "weeping" cherry tree, under which a bamboo pagoda-like trellis has been constructed to support the boughs.

Continue past the two-story refreshment and information building to the north and enter midway along an avenue of lanterns under huge elms(?). Interspersed are blooming camellias, cedars, maples with tiny leaves and, of course, more cherries.

Heading east toward the temple there must be hundreds of stone lanterns lining the path covered with moss and lichen, dripping in the drizzle that descends from the sky making pocketa-pocketa sounds as it falls in tiny puddles held by the gravel pathway. To the east is the temple gate, washed by a milky haze of mountain fog. Approaching, the temple reveals itself in the frame formed by the gate. A stage is in the center of the courtyard, souvenir counters are situated at a couple of places around it. Featured are white feathered arrows for 3000¥. Posters of the temple are displayed, but no photographic memorabilia is available. Bad merchandising. Staff wears all white clothing.

A ceremony is taking place inside—chanting is going on, people can be seen. Judging from the location of shoes and umbrellas, guests have come in through the side rather than the front. I continue around the perimeter of the temple alone but for a lady who is preceding me, pausing at each shrine, offering some money and praying. Maybe she is praying for some money, but she seems too reserved and conservative. Maybe she is praying because the atmosphere is so mystical that spirits could almost be sensed emerging from the ancient stone lanterns.

Some of the outbuildings have cedar bark roofs, overgrown with moss and lichen. But the roofs are low enough that the edge of the eave reveals the six to eight-inch thick overlapping stack of bark strips. One building, in the southwest corner, is built in a striking log cabin style, but with the logs cut in the profile of right triangles—the hypotenuse turned to the inside, the two right angled sides forming a distinctive shadow line to the outside.

The surrounding wall is made from flat roof tiles laid horizontally, with about 1” of fiber-reinforced plaster in between, creating a very strong horizontal effect. I spot on the ground an ornamental brass reinforcement plate that would fit around a gate pivot. I pick it up, look at it, as temptation washes over me. But it’s probably been lying here for months? years? With who knows how many people passing by without taking it. So I put it back and walk on. The gods thank me by raining harder.

I leave the compound, and walk back downhill along the lanterned avenue to a smaller structure that anchors the processional way at the other end. It’s a horse stable, and it has an unattended white horse tethered within. It looks at me questioningly—what will I do?

Steps lead down. The ones to the south lead who knows where, the ones to the north back to the town where I started. But this path will quickly lead me back into “civilization.” I want to enjoy the woods—so I opt for what I thought was a path leading south from the clearing. The map shows that this leads down to the station just south of the one I embarked from. It turns out this is a paved road. For a short distance it descends through cultivated timber bamboo stands. An occasional person or two is harvesting bamboo shoots and selling them at lonely stands along the way.

Shortly the road turns to a suburb—it has to be, since I met someone in a jogging outfit who was jogging. He guided me on the way that eventually wound down to the train station. Along the way is a house with happy things lining the entry path—but painted on the rockwork wall at the entry is a smiling Mickey and Minnie. What a country.

Take train north to Tanbabashi, then change to Kintetsu line to Nara. The Kintetsu network serves the area east of Osaka and is distinctly not English-friendly. Not on the trains, not in the stations, and not at the maps above the ticket machines.

Get off at Nara, walk south one block along covered mall—it has a better quality of gifts and such than any I have seen in Osaka. Head east at next street. Within a block, at the end of the commercial stretch, there is a nondescript café on the south side. I go in and have soba and a beer. There are only two other customers here during lunch, yet it's situated alongside one of the two main thoroughfares to the sights of the city. And it's lunchtime. The guy next to me is slurping voluminously. The other pays up moments after I enter. The waitress watches a game show with boredom. She flips a channel or two after it's over, then switches it off, with boredom. The guy finishes slurping, belches, and takes his dishes to the counter—apparently this is the husband of the waitress. He returns to his table and reads the paper, with boredom. I pay my boring bill and move on.

The walk starts with a four-tiered pagoda to the north. I walk over, and see deer all over the lawn area in front. I also see a restroom. The beer has not been so boring, and it wants to go out. Privacy is not in the vocabulary. There is no door, just a wide opening to the park outside. As you enter, urinals line the left wall, sinks the right, and WCs the rear. I stand at the urinal and count my blessings that it's raining, and that the yard right outside the opening is not filled with screaming kids wondering what this big hairy guy is made of.

The road continues up. This crunching pea-gravel path continues endlessly up the base of the hill. After a while, the path gets steeper, and now stone lanterns line the sides—not just one deep, but three on each side. Here we're approaching thousands.

Finally, I get up to one of the main temple compounds, and of course by now it's raining, not drizzling. The fun is seeping out of this excursion. And now this temple is closed for a wedding that is going on. How dare they! It's getting late, so I turn back and head down another path towards the station.

I stop at a municipal bus stop—the bus is supposed to arrive in 2 minutes. So I wait. Along comes a peculiar-looking fellow, who keeps pointing to a sign, which I gather means that busses are not running today. Upon his beckoning, I follow him down the hill. Shortly we get in a cab, thinking that we will get off at the Kintetsu station. But he keeps mentioning JR as well. So we wind up at the Kintetsu station, and only then I realize that he is continuing on to the JR. What a guy.

Back to Namba, then north on the Yotsubashi to Umeda and the hotel.

I call Ross—wake him up again. He'll call back later once he hears from Steve and the folks who went to Kyoto. I sneak off for souvenirs. I go to Mos Burgers—my son's name is Maurice. So I order a couple of things for the packaging while I pack away some fries and a burger bun. There are things you grow up with that become comfort foods. For example there's soba—cool, damp, slithery, with a clammy taste from the shiny-flaky stuff invariably sprinkled on top. And then there's French fries—warm, crunchy on the outside, creamy on the inside, slightly salty on the outside, slightly sweet from the starch on the inside. Soba. French Fries. Soba. French Fries.

You be the judge.

We go to Kohinoor (06) 6343-7112 in the Herbis Plaza B2F basement with Ross, Norm, Steve, and one other. We go in as Gregg is heading out. I order garlic naan and palak paneer (spinach with paneer cheese). It's tasty, but there's more ghee in the dish than other Indians, and they said they were out of Kingfisher, Taj Mahal, and for that matter, all Indian beers, as well as all Indian deserts such as Kulfi and Gulab Jamun.

Back to the Hilton while chimes play an expectant exit theme.

Dateline 20 Apr 1999

Ramblings and Roses (Stinking) in the Big Udon

My favorite (and only) morning paper, the *Mainichi News*, presents motivational anecdotes along with my morning fruit:

Dipping hippo evades French authorities

CORBEIL-ESSONNE, France (AFP-Jiji) – Bouglie Dum-bo, 6 years old and 1 ton in weight, evaded divers, the fire brigade and trainers for a couple of hours on Saturday when she went for an unscheduled swim in a nearby river just before her circus performance was due to begin.

The hippopotamus, star of the Willie Zavatta Circus, had been allowed to roam at liberty inside the circus encampment when the nearby Essonne River, in this country town south of Paris, attracted her attention.

Hundreds of spectators watched from a bridge as the emergency services and her trainer coaxed the circus star back out of the water and into a cage mounted aboard a truck.

Elderly thief blames life of crime on wallets

A 79-year-old habitual pickpocket arrested on Saturday in the western Tokyo suburb of Chofu for stealing has told police that she feels a sense of calling from wallets, police said on Monday.

Police said they caught Kikui Tomoe on Saturday morning in the act of stealing a wallet containing 8,000 yen in cash from a 52-year-old woman at a flea market in Chofu.

Tomoe allegedly told police, “When I see wallets in a crowd, I feel as if they are calling out to me to take them,” police said.

She has also asked police not to treat her as an elderly person, they said.

Tomoe, who lives on her own in an apartment with a monthly rent of 50,000 yen, reportedly told police that she planned to use the cash she stole to cover living expenses.

The orange rind is still firm, but the orange itself is mildly sweet.

Sahoko is on the train where I get in. We get to talking about work. I mention about having worked at Disney earlier. She tries to understand my relationship with Universal. Am I under direct contract? (No) Then am I an independent consultant with my own business? (No) Then doesn't that mean that I can be fired or laid off at any time? (Yep) Doesn't that feel insecure? (Get used to it) Of course, I can quit at any time too. I fail to mention that even with most contracts, you can still be fired or quit at any time.

Spend the day reviewing T2 [*Terminator 2 3-D The Ride*] 100% CDs [*Construction Drawings*]. I think that we owe them more than they owe us.

Lunch is a limp croissant with a prepackaged pat of creamed butter. Lunch is also a salad with some kind of sprouts and some kind of chewy stringy dark green pickled stuff. The pickles get pickled and sent packing. The *piece de resistance* is candied potato—and I mean like candied with a hard sugar coating. Good, but not so good for you, but then this reward does not go to one's head—it goes to other parts of the anatomy.

I take my tray and walk to the far end of the cafeteria, where I have never seen anyone sit before. Of the three rearmost tables, the center one has a potted tree between it and the rest of the room. Greg, with reservations, joins me. We lurk there like Arte Johnson from Laugh-In doing his secretive SS shtick. Within a few minutes, the adjacent table fills up with Bob, Vernon, Gary, and a gentleman I do not know. I invite Greg and myself over to discuss Lombards [*Restaurant*].

Back to checking T2.

Fergus strolls in. I feel better already—the cynics are back in the groove.

On the way home, share ride with Vasili, Mike Hopewell, and an art director with a British accent. Get off at Fukushima station, which is slightly closer to the Ritz, and a good way to go on a decent day. Otherwise, go underground to Umeda. I head west a block or two along a small shopping street from the north side of the station. I turn south where the street frames a distant view of a massive new building nearing completion with exposed bracing. I head towards it, going under the tracks I was recently on, then jogging to the west when the street ends in a T. Soon I turn south again and pass Shimofukushima (Susan's favorite word) Park, partly filled with the blue plastic and cardboard telltales of homelessness.

I cross the Dojimabashi Bridge to Nakanoshima—the isle in the middle of the Ajikawa River. That is, the north side of the river is Dojimagawa, the south is the Tosaborigawa, the upstream section is the Okawa, which in turn is the confluence of the Yodogawa, the Neyagawa and the Hiranogawa. It seems that the location is more important than the content. When dealing with features on a geographical scale, that is probably true.

However, if we're talking big intestine, little intestine, it's the contents that we want to watch out for.

The new international convention center seems to deal with exhibition space by stacking it vertically in column-free floors. Next door is the Rhiga Royal Hotel. It looks like there are three restaurant floors at the top, so I decide to explore. On the ground there are a couple of places like a bar and an Italian café. There is an enormously spacious lobby lounge with intensely elaborate but modernistic chandeliers hovering hugely below an eight meter ceiling. The wide end of the room is floor-to-ceiling glass with a view of the bamboo forest and torrential waterfall in the garden outside.

Elevators go up to the 28th floor for a great view, and an escalator continues up to the 29th to a French restaurant at the north end of the floor. The balance of the two floors is actually meeting rooms, and not restaurants as I previously thought. A great place to come with a telephoto lens for a shot of the Sky-Umeda building whose arch is right on axis with the view. Another set of escalators connect the 28th floor to the Sky Lounge on the 30th. The trip up the escalator is almost worth it—they've done some interesting effects with acrylic rods and lighting, and a simulated fiber-optics ceiling with perf metal panels. Even though the panels are custom made, it still has to be cheaper than fiber optics.

I walk back north across the Tamaebashi Bridge and back up to the Fukushima JR station. On the southeast corner is a development which just opened a week ago—the Laxal Plaza which contains retail, dining, offices the new location of the Hanshin Hotel. (The Hanshin Line runs directly under the street in front of it.) There is the usual assortment of Japanese restaurants in the basement as well as what appears to be a pretty decent Italian (menu in both Japanese and Italian) and a new branch of the Entec Group's Garlic Pierrot restaurants.

On the street, Ross greets me as he is coming back from the office and having stopped off at Makadoneru for some comfort food. He wishes me well in the hunt for the evening's meal.

I head back to the hotel to take my medicine and to “freshen up,” then continue down to Namba on the Yotsubashi line. It still amazes me—the chandeliers that have been created in this station using scores of bare bulb 2m fluorescents. It's the only place where I have seen fluorescents used with theatrical effect.

At Shinsaibashi, I follow the Namba Walk east and surface on Midusuji Avenue and head north to just over the bridge over the Dotonborigawa. Here I turn east and continue a block and a half past the Kirin building with its four square paneled towers of light. On the north side on the 6th floor is Garlic & Garlic (06) 6212-5770. Judging from their matchbooks, they're affiliated with the Hollywood Star Karaoke and Party Room (which may be what was on the third floor). However, it is not in evidence in the restaurant.

It's a casual place with nothing but Beatles albums in the CD changer. Both the beverage and food menus are bilingual except for the main headings. But when all of the dishes in a group include chicken, you can pretty well guess that the heading is chicken.

I order a 97 German Gewurtztramminer whose slight sweetness should offset the oily intensity of the garlic—if done right. I actually get a metal bucket with ice for the bottle—a good sign. The garlic croquettes are battered cloves of garlic, deep fried until they turn soft inside and golden crispy outside. They come with ample dipping sauce—a cool soothing aioli to offset the heat and crunch of the croquettes. There is also a scoop of a potato salad with a few bits of ham in it, a leaf of lettuce, and some ziti in a light tomato sauce. It all goes together nicely, and has a subtlety that reinforces rather than overpowers the flavor (not to be confused with the pungency) of the garlic.

The eggplant with garlic and miso is the best variation of oriental eggplant with minced pork I have ever had. The miso and garlic substitute for the minced pork, and the eggplant is cooked almost to the state of total comfort. The dark glistening colors on the light creamy plate reach out to me.

Then finally there is the simple dish of garlic spaghetti. It comes with a small pile of thin little fried garlic chips while the pasta still simmers *al dente* in a broth visibly flecked with garlic.

Where have I been all this time? I feel like my time in Osaka has been wasted while this Mecca of malodorousness has been denied to its foremost worshipper. Ah well, even one taste of heaven is better than never having known it at all.

On my circuitous way back, I encounter a Thai restaurant, also in the Shinsibashi area. It is about a block and a half west of Sakai Suji Avenue, which is the next major street east of Midosuji Avenue, and one block north of Soemon Cho, which is the street with Garlic & Garlic. There, on the fourth floor on the north side of the street, is a building with a mix of uses—private clubs, love hotel, dining and God knows what else, is Indra (06) 214-1536. I take the elevator up, turn right from the elevator and right again, and there, next to the draft beer sign on the floor is the entrance to a small establishment. The first to greet me is girl of about 2 years. Her mother is working in the open kitchen right next to the Maître de/Cashier's stand—if they had a Maître de or a Cashier. Her husband greets me, and with very little gesticulation, he hands me a card and nicely asks that I please come back soon. I said I would. Interestingly enough, the card says that they are “Open every night 07:30 PM ~ 07:00 AM. All I can say is, everybody's gotta eat sometime.

It can most readily be reached by the Yotsubashi line south to Namba and changing for the eastbound Senichimae line for one stop to Nippombasi. Walk north over the Dotonborigawa on Sakai Suji Avenue, turn left on the second street after the bridge, and look for the signs with Indra Thai Restaurant. They seemed like decent people that could use some extra patronage.

Dateline 05 Jul 1999

Reunion With the Big Udon

I wake up. The pale gray sky is blanketing the city. Just a few hours ago millions of multicolored skyrockets had torn holes throughout it and left blankets of smoke and smiling faces all across this country. Now it was 5:25 AM, and my alarm was set for 5:30. When the alarm does go off, I decide to snooze five minutes to the next buzzing, just 'cuz I woke up five minutes early.

It buzzes again and I obey. An hour and a half later, I am packed, packaged and pacing inwardly awaiting my brother. He has been visiting from New York and has offered to shuttle me to the airport. I kiss my wife adieu, and load my luggage and myself in with my brother.

En route, he plugs his Sony DAT tape recorder into the automobile's tape deck and starts playing a recording. It consists of fifteen minutes of samplings of sounds made by every imaginable body orifice in every unimaginable way. It ends with an interpretive "piece" that portrays the sounds of maggots munching on...well, whatever it is that maggots munch on.

This is my brother. This is his idea of breakfast for the brain, a treat before a trip. Yep. Birds of a feather...sick (sic) together.

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I check in at United International at 8:00 AM and hike on over to gate 84 to catch the Shuttle to San Francisco. I have been led to believe that this wing of the terminal has been recently renovated. They can't fool me though, because I know that this is the Southwest terminal. It's the carpet that gives it away—it looks like half-slices of melted cheddar cheese have been scattered across a wall-to-wall bowl of blue corn tortilla chips with an occasional strip of sun-dried tomato thrown in.

I sit down at the end of a row of four seats facing the floor-to-ceiling windows that look out over the tarmac to the facing gates of the next terminal wing. The area between is full of planes taxiing up, being towed out, and parked at gates. For every plane, there must be at least five other vehicles scooting about, around and under the big silver birds.

Suddenly a red paramedic truck whizzes by, coming from the direction of the runway and racing towards the service bays of the terminal. Its siren wails in silence, made mute by the layers of acoustical glazing. A few minutes later, a page is repeated: "If there is a priest or minister in the house, please report to gate 80."

Poor soul. I do hope that whoever it was had just landed. Then they would have the unique distinction of departing while arriving.

I realize I should be writing this down. Unfortunately, I forgot to bring notepaper with me. I go to the terminal gift shop. Amazingly, they do have paper pads. Let's see, there's one pad of 100 8½ x11 sheets for \$4.95 and another of 100 5x8 sheets for \$11.95. I guess the smaller pads are more valuable because the thoughts set down on them will be more concentrated.

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I board the shuttle and sit down at 4H, my assigned window seat. Rows 1 and 2 are first class; the rest is 3 by 3 coach seating. I'm trying to figure out my seatbelt. Whether buckled or not, I can pull the strap completely out of the buckle. In other words, if the plane started to bounce around, instead of being restrained, I would be flying through the cabin. I'm tellin' you; it's a conspiracy.

A thirty-/forty-ish couple with a one-year-old slide in beside me. They barely sit down when he starts to complain about his book getting wet from the condensation on her water bottles in his carry-on. The two of them spend the remaining time until take-off fishing around in their bags and bundles of baby stuff. The kid starts squirming. The mother pulls out a picture book and baby talks through the pages. The father, a truly enlightened yup, unclips the air-phone in front of him and hands it to the kid to play with. I almost suggest that I join in—I could push the window blind up and down whenever Daddy presses the phone buttons. The kid would think he was channel surfing.

A stewardess suggests I move to another row that has only two seats, since it is adjacent to one of the wing exits. Much as I love the view, I also love my neighbors. I move once the seat belt light is turned off and let him use my malfunctioning seat belt. By that time we are starting our descent into San Francisco. Bounce, baby, bounce!

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A short distance from the shuttle gate is an escalator that wafts me up to the mezzanine where the Red Carpet Club has its nose thrust into the stratosphere. Mind you, somebody gave me assurances at LA ticketing, that I could tread on the hallowed Red Carpet in both LA and SF. The gatekeeper at SF looks down her nose as it wrinkles in a way that implies I have not bathed since birth. I am embarrassed, humiliated. With trembling hand and stuttering voice I extend my ticket up to the dais. She peers down. Eventually she realizes that I am bound for overseas and therefore a citizen (albeit temporary) of the elite. I am once again adjudged socially irredeemable and subject to the saturational privileges of the well heeled at the well as well as the swell heels. Hey, I'm with the big boys now!

I establish my credentials by opening up my laptop. "It's a Small World" plays when Windows fires up. So I'm sittin' here, poundin' out the prose, and does anybody look? Does anybody turn electric green with techno-envy? Apparently not. The lounge empties out during the lunch hour—mini bags of pretzels do not make a good meal.

Anyway, it's time to go. And go. And go. And go...

If the lounge is in San Francisco, then the International Terminal has got to be in Sausalito. But I make it on time, and settle in next to Kevin in the upper deck. Lunch/dinner is served shortly and we talk a bit. We wonder who the fellow is on the other side of the aisle by the window. He has talked about himself and his opinions for over two hours running—and we still don't know what he does. Amazing.

It's only 3:30 PM LA time, dinner is over and everyone is preparing for nappy-time and lowering their window blinds. I check out the scene downstairs. There are still some daylight holdouts in the rear section. I go back up, grab my stuff and resettle downstairs next to the galley. The stewardesses try to discourage me, claiming this is the noisiest part of the plane. Maybe, but "I'm not here to sleep, so please keep the noise up."

Most importantly, I get to keep my window blind up. I'll be sleep-deprived when I get to Osaka, but at least I won't be awake and tossing in the middle of the night, or jet-lagged in the morning.

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I check into the Hilton. There is a message from Shim to call. I do, but he's left the office for the day. I figure I'll call him a few minutes later when he gets to the hotel. I go out to the Hanshin Department Store and its Le Bihan bakery to stock up for tomorrow's breakfast. When I get back, another message from Shim states that he won't get back until late. So I head out to dinner alone.

I'm feeling the lack of sleep, so I decide to try someplace close at hand that I haven't tried before. I try the **Ninikuya Goemon** (06-6343-7104). It is located in the Herbis Plaza basement restaurant court next to the Ritz-Carlton. Niniku means garlic, and I want to be mean to vampires tonight.

An English-language menu is available. There is a full range of dishes, from appetizers, salads, pastas, pizzas, as well as meat, poultry and seafood entrees. In other words, a typical Californian café menu—except for the fact that almost everything features garlic. I place my order and sip on some Albana Di Romagna '96 Tremonte. It is pleasingly crisp, cool and dry—everything that the weather outside isn't.

While waiting, the décor starts to penetrate my dozing brain. Right in front of me are several oblate green shapes peek-a-booing through some rectangular cutouts in a stucco wall thing. Abstracted cactus pads? The bottles of Chili Beer and Corona longnecks above the bar, and the peeler-log beam ends protruding from the opposite wall clue me in that this is Southwestern. Hopi zigzag motifs, painted steer skulls, and desert colors complete the metaphor. Icing on the cake is a poster for Fruits Margarita—750ml for ¥2000. Only fate could take me from a Southwestern carpet in a LA airport waiting room to an Osaka restaurant at the other end.

The appetizer of vegetable spring rolls arrives. My vegetarian sensibilities require a slight bit of editing. Namely, I have to unravel the fresh won-ton skins to remove the shrimp that translucently glow through the wrapper. Then I remove the julienne slices of ham from the cut ends. Left in the wrappers are shredded iceberg, cucumber and rice noodles. And now I have with what I ordered. I am also left with a mess on my plate and a lot of stares from adjacent tables. A garlic infused dipping sauce accompanies the four rolls.

Next up is the Deep Fried Garlic. This turns out to be a regular garlic head sized bulb of elephant garlic, consisting of 8 large cloves and no small ones. The cloves are soft and sweet as in a baked head. An unsweetened plum sauce, chutney-like in thickness, makes an excellent condiment for the dish. The similar softness of the two nevertheless contrasts as warm and cool, slightly salty and slightly sweet, pungent and perfumed. A subtle dish that needs to be slowly savored. A tea ceremony, if you will, for those that prefer to wield a club.

Lastly there is a simple dish of spaghetti with sliced garlic sautéed golden-brown in olive oil with hot chilies and a touch of parsley. The pasta is perfectly al dente and I am perfectly satisfied. Except, that is, that I am too tired to order the garlic ice cream.

Something to look forward to next time.

Dateline 07 Jul 1999

Royal Flush at the Big Udon

It's 5:30 AM. I just woke up in strangely familiar surroundings. I'm at the Udon Hilton once again. So, I'm scratching and stretching while standing in front of the window on the 26th floor. I'm scanning the panoramic view to see what's new and what's not. The "pan-" part is still there, but two new buildings across the street from the Ritz-Carlton have abbreviated the "-o-rama" portion. Since I was last here, their construction has risen above my horizon. Is it that everything around me is ascending, or is it that I am on this slow but inexorable descent?

I'm distracted from my morning musings by a slight "sussh-ing" sound coming from the hall. I turn and see that my old friend, the *Mainichi News*, has been slipped under the door. I look and realize that all is right with the world—the *Mainichi* has not failed to deliver.

Right there, page 1, top story above the fold:

Aging toilet seats flush with risks

BY KAZUHIKO TOYAMA

Mainichi Shimbun

Owners of aging heated toilets who wish to avoid being put on the hot seat would do well to inspect the units carefully, warns the Tokyo Fire Department. Failing to do so could literally be a pain in the butt.

Over the past six years, fire department officials have traced the cause of three house fires in the Tokyo area to the heating units of multifunction toilet seats.

We also learn that:

The most recent fire involving a heated toilet seat broke out at a grocery store that doubled as the residence of a 61-year-old shopkeeper, who wished to remain anonymous...

And that:

In October of last year, a fire broke out at the home of a 67-year-old self-employed man in Toshima-ku. A similar blaze struck a house in Tanashi in July 1993. Like the man in the recent Higashimurayama incident, those in the affected households requested anonymity.

And finally:

According to the Economic Planning Agency, the number of multifunction toilet seats in use has more than doubled over the past seven years, from 14 percent in 1992 to 36.5 percent as of March this year. The rate first topped the 30-percent mark in 1997.

See, now I think that the anonymity thing is the real story. What are these people trying to hide? Is there something in the diets of Japanese 60+ year-olds that spontaneously combusts? Is Popiel Products developing a line of other posterior pampering devices, such as Oven Buns ®, Poop Poachers ®, or chilled seat pads called Wind Brakers ®?

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But work I must, and to work I go.

I arrive on time—though there are some narrow-minded people that would call this late—and join the Area 2 Weekly Team Meeting. This is very modern, very upwardly mobile. This is mano-a-mano bi-coastal triangulation. This is win-win consensus building.

The purpose of the meeting is communication. The most frequently discussed item, though not on the agenda, is communication. Everyone is talking about the phone system, the poor quality of reception, the feedback in the line, the static due to sunspots, and the frequent cutoffs while on line, etc. But this talk is to each other in the room, and not to the group at the other end—which is doing the exact same thing. Despite the fact that Patrice is in the room, it’s kind of a guy thang.

What so few recognize, is that this system provides a fudge factor. It creates deniability. It presents possibilities rather than prescriptions. For example, when asked: “Do you understand that?” the appropriate answer is: “I hear you.” and not “Yes.” Or, when asked: “What are your thoughts on this matter?” the answer should be: “We’re looking into that, Tony.” and not: “It’s hard enough to understand you foreigners, but when you’re mumbling away while I’m trying to carry on this conversation on the side, don’t expect me to understand a word you’re saying.”

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Eventually, the meeting ends and off we run to meet with the Area 2 GCs. We live in luxury. We no longer depend on the shuttle bus driver to chauffeur us around. We now have our own Jeep. And not just any Jeep, but one with air conditioning and power windows. I think the tires have optional booties in case the construction site gets wet and muddy.

Fergus is at the wheel. Fergus is the Project Engineer that has Grand Prix promotional material as his desktop wallpaper. Fergus is the Project Engineer that has Grand Prix racer bios as his screen saver. Fergus is the diehard patriot, that when given a choice

between racing in the Grand Prix and letting Eire sink below the sea, he would always don a crash helmet.

But he isn't wearing a crash helmet here.

I know we're moving faster than the speed of sound. I swear I can see Greg, Shim and Mark screaming, but I can't hear them. Going to the contractor's offices is like flying from Osaka to LA—we get there before we've left. But, hey! It's just us guys doin' our guy thang.

At the GC's offices, everything seems the same, but out of place. In fact the offices are no longer in the same place. The twin two-story trailers have been relocated some one to two hundred feet away from their original location. They are sitting up on blocks and beams. The steps no longer reach the ground. Unbeknownst to me, the move has not been completed.

The meeting up in the second floor is progressing. Suddenly, the room is slamming and shaking as in a 5.0 earthquake. Not to worry, we are assured. They're only jacking the building down. We be cool. Cuz' we be guys.

The meeting progresses until the lunch break. We pile back into the Jeep. Now we fly by way of freeway to the World Trade Center. No, I decide, a safety belt will do nothing for me. Wings and a parachute might, given how elevated the freeways are.

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We arrive near the WTC and park several blocks away. The planners of this wasteland didn't want cars, but wanted open windswept space with nothing to do and nowhere to go. Nowhere for us is the USJ display model on the 36th floor. We pose a cardboard cutout of an ape on one of the buildings and try to imagine that it is huge. The model, especially the lagoon part is not made for eye-level viewing. At least, not without appropriate miniature video equipment. We wrap up with some compromising group photographs. Nothing bad, mind you, jes' us guys doin' our thang.

We have lunch on the 46th floor at **Marouche** (06) 615-7120. There is a very reasonable buffet lunch for ¥980 with about 25 items to select from, and ice cream tossed in to boot. Beer, sake and other adult beverages are available for an extra charge. The incredible view is for free. In the afternoons and on into the evening, this turns into a seafood-oriented café. Definitely a place for a cheap date.

Regrettably, the combination of the environs, the comity, and the comestibles do little to influence the depravity that the discussion dips down to. The subject of eating monkey brains comes up. Then its raw baby octopus dipped in soy sauce. And then about the drunk who swallowed one the wrong way, and almost was choked to death by the octopus trying to climb its way out the throat. I argue, what's the point; you can't taste anything except the soy sauce if you swallow it whole. Unless that is, it goes to the

bathroom on the way down, giving that extra little fishy taste. On and on it descends. But, hey! We be guys.

It's time to go back. We go down a block and across the street to an Ando building. The four storied barrel-roofed entrance structure has an Italian restaurant on the left and storage for a collection of rare sports cars on the right. The restaurant looks sophisticated, the prices look very reasonable, and the place looks abandoned. The wasteland environment outside does not bring people in the door. Setting the cold and austere entry substantially back from the street doesn't help any either. Forcing people to enter from the corner, which is the point furthest from any parking, adds even more folly to the venture.

After making a wrong turn, we all wind up jumping over a barbed wire fence in order to get back to the car. There's something threatening about going over that wire. It's kind of a guy thang on one side of the fence that could end up a non-guy thing on the other.

We survive the ordeal and its time to reassert our guy-ness. So vroom! VROOOM! Fergus takes us on another flying lesson back to the site. I never did learn whether he did Immelmans or loop-the-loops, but I did learn how to use a barf bag in zero-G.

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After another half-day of meetings with the GC, it's back to the hotel for a quick change and back out to meet Shim and Mark. We head out to explore the labyrinths under the Hankyu Station. Among the stops is Kiddy Land, with a large selection of toys for all ages on the lower level. I buy a pack of Sumo Wrestler trading cards. I won't describe what's on them. I'll just mention monkey brains and that one can apparently exist without the other. If you don't get it, don't worry, it's just a guy thang.

We go to the 4th floor lobby in the Hankyu International while Mark makes use of the facilities. Shim and I notice that the space is filled with respectably dressed young ladies, who all get up at one point and go to one of the meeting rooms on the floor. Shim inquires and finds that they are all members or former members of the women's equivalent of Kabuki dancers. In Kabuki, men play all roles. In the other, women play them all. Tonight they are doing a parody for their own enjoyment. Do we question these ladies' preferences? Nah! We just do the guy thing and move on.

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We wind up at **Kissho** (06 6373-3456). This is under the Hankyu Station on the second basement near the southwest side of the Epicure Museum. We start with a round of beer in nice big half-liter mugs and a bowl of edamame to keep me from chewing on the tablecloth. Then a plate of sushi arrives for Shim and Mark with perch, tuna and octopus. Shim declares the perch to be very good. Somehow, the subject of monkey brains comes up (no pun intended) again.

I then get a bowl of vegetable tempura with the usual dipping sauce. The batter is eggy-er than some, but freshly done nevertheless. There is one piece each of over half a dozen veggies and a cherry-sized blob of minced daikon to stir into the sauce.

Another vegetarian dish arrives of a bowl of ice water. Okay, well, a little more than that. It also has a chunk of silky tofu paddling about. It has two slices of a small cucumber on top to keep it company, and a maraschino cherry to keep it colorful. On the side is another dipping sauce, some lime green wasabi and little clump of chopped chives.

Mark and Shim also get tempura, but with seafood mixed in. Another round of amber beers melds out the flavors, mellows out the evening, and keeps the evil spirits of the monkey brains away. One thing about those that eat monkey brains: they have remained anonymous. No one I know has been witness to this. But many know someone who has, or know someone who knows someone who has. But they stay anonymous.

Here's the answer: The toilet seats were used to clamp the monkeys' skulls into place. An over-tightening of the clamps created pressure, which resulted in an increase in temperature. Added to this was the temperature increase from the seat's heating element. The overheating then resulted in explosions and spontaneous combustion. Investigations have been hampered by the fact that all evidence was then flushed away. Or eaten.

So remember—beware of anonymous strangers that refer to your toilet as a hibachi.

Oh, and by the way—that monkey? That exploding monkey was a guy, and he was jus' doin' his thing.

Deadline 08 Jul 1999

The Wayward Noodle at the Big Udon

This morning's *Mainichi News* carries two stories in need of merging:

Toyota to introduce merit-based pay system

TOYODA, Nagoya – Toyota Motor Corp. plans to abolish seniority-based pay for white-collar workers in October, and instead pay salaries based entirely on the individual's work performance and ability, company sources said Wednesday.

This begs the question: Is there anyone in the company that is capable of making this kind of evaluation? In other words, do the evaluators have firsthand experience with the work they are evaluating, and were they good enough at it to know what is good and what is not? The evaluators should be tested by reviewing the individuals in story number two:

'Hospital of Hell' bunglers to be charged

YOKOHAMA – Staff members at a "Hospital of Hell" here who bungled January operations by mixing up a heart and a lung patient face charges after police sent documents to prose-cuters on Wednesday outlining the case.

The 18 employees of the Yokohama City University-affiliated hospital, ranging from its former deputy head to nurses who assisted surgical teams, face indictment for gross negligence resulting in bodily injury.

Police said that on Jan. 1, nurses mixed up patients they were responsible for transporting to operating rooms. Surgeons failed to notice the patients' respective charts. They subsequently operated on the heart of a person due to undergo a lung operation and operated on the lungs of a person due to have their heart examined.

Please note the date above. They were even premature with Y2K.

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Yesterday afternoon I was told to call Tony at home, right away. So I did. He said he was in bed. I said, "Be gentle with me. This is my first time." Little did I know it might be my last.

I have had to make only a few decisions where I have known in advance that they would have a significant impact on my life; decisions such as the choice of careers, marriage, or the purchase of a property. There are no course corrections or opportunities to turn back the clock.

I was asked whether I wanted to examine the heart of the lung patient, or operate on the lungs of the heart patient.

And could I please respond in 48 hours while away from my family, who incidentally, are the patients I have to treat. Hey—it’s my own fault for being away from them.

When I joined the USJ project I had three reasons I gave why I could not relocate: my marriage, my parents, and our house. 1) My wife refuses to relocate—which is within her prerogative. 2) My father is 92, and my mother is 91. They live in their own house just minutes from where we are. My father was up patching his roof just a year ago, and my mother was setting stones in the garden. But now my farther can barely shuffle and my mother needs oxygen in the mornings and during the night. 3) Our house is an adventure in remodeling. It has exceeded my time and energy to complete anytime soon. So now we have the Department of Building & Safety bearing down on us.

If just one of these problems existed, then some accommodation could be entertained. All I could think of was that when I called my mother to tell her I had arrived in Osaka safely, she was wheezing while trying to sound pleased. It’s bad enough facing myself in the mirror in the mornings, but what would it be like if my absence accelerated her decline, or the day of her demise? Or what would it be like to learn from my wife that she had to move out because the Building Department had condemned out house due to lack of progress?

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I explain the options, the potential consequences, and ask for her opinion. As expected, we are in agreement. However, the discussion is not as simple and smooth as it is sounding. The awkwardness is not over either—tomorrow I have to let Tony know my decision.

As the project nears its end, I’ll miss seeing a lot of friends. One never knows, though—there may be missives issuing out of the Big Paella on the one hand, or the Big House on the other.

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I get to the office, pour a cup of coffee, and closet myself in a conference room where I call Suezenne. We talk over a few things such as whether I’ll be able to meet up with our son and his wife, who is winding up her month-long tour of Japan with...(please insert drum roll here)...the Percy Faith Orchestra. Then I bring all the happiness crashing down.

I have Indian food on my mind. Other than that, my thoughts are preoccupied with the consequences of our decision. At lunch, I ask Sundeep for his Indian restaurant recommendations. We both agree that Ashoka is the best. Of course, I want to find better, newer, different.

Please note that I refuse to talk about the “lunch” I had at the commissary. However I will say one thing about somebody else’s lunch. Fergus demonstrated how one could play with tempura so that it looks like rubber flying fish.

When I get back to the Hilton, I check out the yellow pages for the location of other Indian restaurants. Regrettably, the phone book they used to have is no longer in the room, and the listings in the current one are extremely limited. So I look at a map. I notice that the Indian consulate is located at the Sakaisuji-Hommachi station. I go there and poke around the neighborhood, but can’t come up with anything—not even the consulate. The heat and the humidity outside seem to be getting worse as the evening approaches. I duck down to the subway, where at least the oncoming trains cool you down with that wave of air that they push.

Back to the map. It looks like there’s a bunch of hotels around the Osaka Shinkansen station. Maybe there’s a better cut of Indian restaurant up there. At the Shin-Osaka station I walk all around with no luck. I try to get out to the surrounding streets—also with no luck. Apparently, the station is in the middle of a railroad yard, and is serviced only by other trains, a cabstand, and a bus station.

The heat is getting to me so I cop out, and head back to Umeda.

At least those doctors and nurses had one thing right. When they read “heart” they understood it to mean a heart. When they read “lung” they knew what a lung was. But here I was the subject of a debate: Did I have a heart or lung problem? Simple observation would make you think I have a stomach problem. I wish that were all.

I wind up eating somewhere, eating something, but tasting nothing and starving for answers.

Dateline 09 Jul 1999

The Big Picture at the Big Udon

I start the morning, the significant part of the morning, that is, by calling Tony to reaffirm my unavailability for relocation. So—that ends that chapter. I'm shuffling about, pen in hand, trying to figure what to write in the next chapter. At least the covers of the book are still open.

When all else fails, go from the momentous to the mundane. If not, it will come to you anyway. So, I go meet with the GCs for the rest of the morning, and return to the further mundaneity of the commissary at lunch.

I'm gonna miss this food. I'm gonna miss it real bad. I settle for a croissant: as crisp as a marshmallow, as buttery as beach sand, as fluffy as a wet furball. Add to that a salad with shaved this and that and some shave egg in it as well. The egg gets to permanently visit the face of my tray. For an entrée, I have the spaghetti with marinara sauce and bacon. I gargle it all down with a ginger ale.

I get a spot of marinara sauce on my white shirt. I wipe it with my paper napkin. I didn't realize it, but some of the marinara sauce had spilled over the edge of the bowl. The edge of the napkin had been soaking it up. My wiping had painted a good portion of the front of my shirt with marinara sauce. I feel really good about myself right about now. I may not have a rosy complexion, but my shirt sure does.

I go back to meet some more with the GCs, dyed shirt and all. I cut a really respectable figure. Thank God it's Friday and I won't have to hear that laughter for another three days. Maybe.

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The day ends and I head back to the hotel, change my shirt and head out to meet with some others at the Kirin Plaza Building where Shinsaibashi-suji shopping arcade crosses the Dotombori River. I had suggested a Thai restaurant near there. Others had suggested Baskin & Robbins as a meeting place. I thought the Kirin across the street would be more relaxing. Besides, why start dinner with dessert?

I go into the Kirin and ride up to the second floor where their restaurant and bar are located. They tell me that it is booked for a private party. So I take the elevator on up to the sixth floor. I had noticed on the way in that a portion of the ground floor, and floors three through six are a gallery that currently has a sculpture exhibit titled "The Brain of Fern." The pieces appear to be life-sized figures made from driftwood. I learn that tickets are available on the third floor for ¥500. I stop on the fifth floor for still another peek before heading all the way down. I figure I'll propose this to the group as an appetizer; as

a prelude to an in-depth discussion of the arts; as a counterpoint to the meaning of existence itself.

Meanwhile, as the first one there, I decide to wait it out in the ground floor **Cafés Suavor** with a beer. As I seat myself at a window table, I notice that there is no window. The entire south wall of the building has been rolled away, making this an outdoor café, separated from the Dotombori River by only two or three meters of planting. A steady cooling breeze blows in from the river. The falls and the fountains mask most of the city sounds. There is perfect people-watching of the multitudes crossing the Dotombori Dori (bridge). Only two other tables are occupied—and it's past 6:00 PM on a hot Friday evening. This has got to be the perfect place for urban relaxation in Osaka.

Just before I get to my second beer, along come Greg, Susan and Sundeeep. Shortly behind them come Andrea, Patrice, and Patrick. After a while we get up. I suggest a tour of the gallery but no one wants to expose themselves to the arts. And here, I thought, creative people were exhibitionists.

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From the Kirin building we head north, cross the street and turn east after one block. About four blocks down, the restaurant is in the middle of the block on the north side. There is an illuminated signboard shared by a number of establishments among which is **Indra** (06 214-1536). We ride in two loads up to the fourth floor in a tiny elevator that faces the street. We exit into a tight hallway. After turning right, we see a sign for some club named Lucifer. Another door might have said “Mafia,” but I can't read Japanese.

But there along the corridor, crowded even further by a beer sign, is the entrance to Indra—except that it is closed. Not open until 7:30. One of us knocks on the door, which is answered by Adun, the proprietor. Persuaded by our friendly faces, he opens early, “Just for you.”

We file past a curtained closet, which serves as a playroom for the family's child. Next to that is a bar all of about five feet long. We turn into the dining room, which has seating for about 24. A 5'x7' stage faces the entrance into the room. The back wall of the stage is a video projection screen that seems even larger than the stage. Two more giant video screens face each other on the flanking walls. In addition, there are two HDTV monitors, theatrical lights, and an assortment of disco balls.

This has all the hallmarks of offering authentic Thai food.

Andrea takes charge of the menu—a three ring binder circus with pages and pages of color photographs. She makes inquiries with our host, who can speak some English. Andrea, as do most of the group, keeps asking for dishes that they are used to in Los Angeles. Adun has never heard of them. It's kind of like there ain't no Chop Suey in China. Adun is pushing the fried fish patties. We keep pushing for things about which he insists: “You can't eat! Too spicy!”

The remnants of our group retire briefly to the **Pig & Whistle** (06 6213-6911). There is also a branch in the Umeda district, as well as one in Kyoto. This particular tavern is on Suomachi Street, midway between Nagahori-Dori Street (under which is the Crysta Court) and the Dotombori river. It is located not quite one block east of the Shinsaibashi-Suji shopping arcade, on the second floor of a building on the south side of the street.

It's Friday night and it's about 10:00 PM. The place is packed—about one third Euro. It's amazing. Give a guy a Brit accent, and so many people just confuse the rudeness for breeding and intelligence—even the Japanese. Now, Latvians, on the other hand... Nahh—we'll get into this some other time.

Hey!—but what a place! Music is booming, and people are shouting to be heard over it. And others are shouting to be heard over the shouters next to them. It looks like the self-realizational discussion about art and the meaning of life will have to be postponed yet again. Besides, I've just noticed two pints of beer, still $\frac{3}{4}$ full just sitting there two tables away. The glasses are crying out for someone to take them, to hold them, to give them some meaning, some purpose for being. Some purpose such as being chug-a-lugged. A busboy dashes my dreams as he totes my would-be fellow conversationalists away.

The now vacant tabletop is lacquered and polished. I look more closely at the emptiness that is there. And all I see is my reflection.

Dateline 10 Jul 1999

Wipeout at the Big Udon

A bout of indecisiveness has been playing hot potato with my morning start. It's Saturday and I'm free! Free, that is, to make decisions, commitments. Free to take one branch down a diverging road, never to return again. Free to shackle myself to an unknowable future.

Sounds like life to me.

I get over it, get my butt in gear, and get on a JR train to Noda. This district was named for the fatalistic Russians that settled there. This morning I feel it's my spiritual home.

I head south from the station, weaving my way through narrow residential streets dotted with family businesses. What wheeled traffic there is, is almost exclusively bicycles. The riders are mostly housewives, bringing groceries home, or on their way out to do so. There are parents out with their kids teaching them how to ride a bike, how to play, how to grow up. There's a grizzled geezer volubly collecting morning-after mucus in his throat and spitting it out on the pavement. The Akita he has on a leash partly mimics his activities, except with a rear leg in the air.

Eventually I reach my quarry—the Central Wholesale Market. This thing's big—it's bigger than JR Umeda station, plus it's three stories high—all negotiable by trucks. I'm standing at the west end, where trucks are pulling in and out, and going up and down ramps to the other floors. To my right, the market ends at the waterfront of the Ajikawa River.

It's 10:30 AM. It's 90 degrees. The sun is beating its way down through the humid air. The area is saturated with the smell of decomposing fish. The odor makes a gag wall that even I'm not willing to penetrate. I turn back to the station. Mother Nature tells me that I have some unfinished business.

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Last night, hours after the Thai Kareoke extravaganza, I was looking for some papers in my carry-bag. I encountered two pastries that I had bought a couple of days earlier. One was sweet without filling or frosting. The other was a savory with corn. A hunger reflex made me eat them—knowing as I did, that they had sat for a couple of hot summer nights in the construction trailer.

Having returned to the Udon Hilton, I'm now paying the price of my carelessness. On the other hand, I'm losing a lot of weight. I'm happy that I had the foresight to bring Desitin on this trip. I'm happier still, that I don't need to use it.

Once I stabilize, I decide to go to lunch. I had skipped breakfast, so I was hungry. I play it safe and stay in the hotel. I go up to the **Windows on the World** on the 36th floor. They have a lunch buffet that is reasonably respectable. Because this is in the shadow of the 4th of July, and they have a guest American chef, there is an American food station as well as a salad station, a Chinese station (mostly dim sum), and a Japanese station.

The dessert table is geared more towards Japanese tastes—lighter, less sweet, and little in the way of chocolate. The real dessert is the expanse of Osaka below.

Afterwards, events prove that eating in at the hotel was a good decision.

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I feel the need to get out, but again, I choose to stay close to the hotel. I decide to explore even further nooks and crannies of the labyrinth that lies below the heart of Umeda. At its core is the Diamor underground shopping plaza. This in turn is connected to other subterranean shopping areas. To the north is the Gare (under the JR station), Hankyu Sambangai is to the northeast, Whity Umeda to the east, Do-Chika to the south, and Herbis Plaza to the west. Whether traversed from north to south or east to west, it tunnels below the streets for almost a mile.

As a pianist and audiophile, my brother had encountered someone that wanted to sell their laser disc player for \$100. He bought it on a whim and got their entire collection consisting of one disc of pop. He had asked me to look for some classical recordings. I find several used CD and LP stores under the Osaka Ekimae buildings that flank the boulevard just south of the Hilton—National Highway Route 1. Several shops have just the kind of material he wanted.

My curiosity draws me upwards. On the second floor of Building No. 2, I find what is probably the premier store for classical sheet music in Osaka. It may be only half as large as Patelson's in New York; but then again, the number of people interested in playing classical music in Osaka is probably less than in New York. The fact that my wife, son, and daughter-in-law are all classical musicians should put me in the cat's seat as supplier of Japanese editions.

This particular floor yields some other unusual shops. Right across the hall from the music store is a shop for N-scale model railroaders. Near the center of the building is a sales and display room for Roland pianos—one of the top makers of electronic keyboards. Across from them is a store for collectors of coins and currency. Still another caters to philatelists. Especially nice is a supplier for ink painters and calligraphers. Here can be found ink sticks, grinding blocks, papers, bamboo handled brushes, and more.

The rest of the floor is given over to medical clinics and doctor's offices. For those confused about which limb is used to hold a brush, there's a podiatrist next door to the calligraphy shop. Judging from the diagrams outside, this guy may be one of those pin-

poking, wholly holistic, types. I can't read Japanese, but the nameplate seems like it says Sakatu-em & Howe.

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I return to the hotel. My body tells me “sleep”, but my mind says “way too early”. Matter wins over mind. I wake up around 7:00, a bit groggy, but rested.

I step outside. The temperature is cooler plus there's a breeze. This is nicer than it's been during this trip to Japan. Much as I'd like to wander about, I'm still too wiped from my earlier ailment. I walk two blocks south and turn east into the Kita-Schinchi area. There is that gourmet emporium better known as **Lawson's**—Japan's answer to 7-11. And no, white-bearded Americans wearing Uncle Sam suits and top hats do not staff them.

I get what I need to replenish what I lost (it's virtually the same stuff), head back to the hotel, chow down and crash. End of story.

Dateline 11 Jul 1999

Monkey Business at the Big Udon

The elevator doors open and I get in. Already inside is a bellhop who greets me by name. He then asks what I'll be doing today. I tell him "I'm going to Mino-o".

"Mino-o – many monkeys," he says.

"Good, I'll join them."

"No, no! Many monkeys, very mean, very hungry." He warns while making slashing motions with his arms.

"Good, I'll especially enjoy joining them."

I walk to the Hankyu station and buy a ticket for ¥260. I take the express train on track four towards Takarazuka and get off at Ishibashi. I cross over to the other side of the station and catch a shuttle train that dead-ends on separate tracks. Three stops later it reaches its other terminus, the Mino-o station.

Just to the east of the train station is a bus turnaround. I'm sure if I asked, I could find which bus goes up the hill to the Visitors' Center above Minoh Falls. I could then descend by foot. But hey! I'm a guy. I don't ask. So I hoof it uphill.

I can't help but notice some features regarding the way people dress for the occasion. For one, it seems that the older one gets, the more likely it is that one will wear one of these floppy cloth hats. It seems to be a visual cue for "outdoorsmanship". Carried to extremes is this chap who has: walking boots, knee-length socks, walking pants cinched below the knees, a khaki-colored plaid long-sleeved shirt, a drab olive sporting vest, a camouflage patterned floppy hat with several pins on it, a tummy pack, a day pack, and a back pack. Everything one needs for a 2.8km (1.7m) hike up a paved road. In contrast, a number of ladies walk with parasols.

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The walk itself is along a gradual rise in a canyon with a substantial stream at the base. The primary objective is the falls. The first portion of the walk is marked more by the feathery maples with their delicate leaves. Further up are evergreens, perhaps hemlocks that rise over 100 feet tall and have a bark similar to redwoods, but much finer in texture. Ferns and mosses are everywhere. The welcoming feature today is that it is a number of degrees cooler here in the forest than in the city.

From the train station, the walk proceeds to the north for a couple of souvenir shop-lined blocks. Many of the figurines here are of monkeys. At most shops there is a cooking station where someone is stirring stuff in a bowl. They are making a confection which begins with dipping maple leaves in a sweetened batter and then frying it.

Briefly, the trail continues to the right, while to the left are elevators that go up to the Minoh Hotel. For ¥100, I ride some 100 feet up, cross a bridge to the hotel, and get a good view back towards Osaka. At the hotel are a variety of spa facilities. I look for an alternative connection back to the trail, but cannot readily find one—at least not one marked in English. Back down the elevator I go.

About a third of the way up the trail is the Insectarium. It was founded because of the extent and variety of insect life in the canyon. ¥260 gets me in the door. I'm even given an English version of the literature. The first few exhibits inside are geared more towards kids and tend to be interactive. The bulk of the building is given up to box after box of pinned and mounted insects. One in particular startles me—it is of a scarab-like beetle that is iridescent gold—*plusiotis aurigans*. I can now understand why the ancient Egyptians valued it: it really looks like it is made of gold.

Towards the end, I go into the butterfly house. For a brief while I have all the butterflies fluttering about all to myself. I stop to look at one poor fella with an injured wing. But he is still resplendent with the deep iridescent blue of his wings. Then up runs a three-year-old who wants to clap him between his hands. Fortunately his father stops him just in time.

On up the trail is the Ryuanji Temple. It was founded by an ascetic, who “trained himself by standing under the waterfall”, the literature says. It neglects to say what he trained himself for.

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Eventually, I reach the falls, which cascade down some 100 feet into a pool. Before it is a collection of vendors, selling mochi, corn on the cob, grilled fish on a stick (about the size of the fish in the stream), beverages, and souvenirs. I cool down with a beer while sitting on a second floor concrete deck with a rain roof. One can not be sheltered enough when one is in the great outdoors.

I work my way back down, pleased with myself that I observed all of those do-not-feed-the-monkeys signs. Come to think of it, I didn't see a single monkey. Perhaps it was the same way with the insects, of which I also saw virtually none. A number of people on the trail had butterfly nets. My answer for the missing monkeys came at the train station. There on the east side of the station is a Wendy's. Those square things in the buns—are they really beef?

It all brings back to mind a minivan that was parked up by one of the souvenir vendors. The manufacturer's stencil on the side read: “MU Van”. In fine print below that, it read: “Mysterious Utility”. Is this the vehicle of choice for fatalists— “What's the use”? Or, after peeking into the window, is this vehicle for monkey business? If so, the monkeys need to be fairly short to fit. So, yes, its utility still remains a mystery.

Dateline 12 Jul 1999

Unfinished Business at the Big Udon

The day is quiet. The clock hands move slowly. The pile of *sekozus* to be reviewed is diminishing, only to be replaced by more. Like emails, they multiply exponentially. They come down the conveyor belt like Lucy and Ethel's cakes. They pile up but the ammonia-laced paper is no substitute for icing.

Ahh-h, but think of the satisfaction derived by knowing that all has been made well. All of the boxes have been appropriately checked, all of the comments clouded, and all of the stamps pounded onto the sheets. Then the transmittal is typed, signed, stamped, scanned, sent and spindled.

This is how art is produced. This is the essence of creativity. This is the moment.

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Back at the hotel the phone rings. Su-Fei and her enthusiasm have arrived. We head across the street on the east side of the Hilton. Two floors below the street is **Ashoka**, my favorite Indian restaurant. We are vegans in paradise as the two vegetarian thalis arrive. Su-Fei is unable to finish her dinner, and even I'm unable to finish my naan.

We stumble out and wander a bit through the Osaka Ekimae Buildings just south of the Hilton. Heading east, we cross Mido-Suji Avenue. A block north is the eight floors of the **Asahiya** bookstore.

We spend some time poking around among the architectural section. I buy a Japanese book about Frank Lloyd Wright and a guide to sake. Wright was an avid collector of Japanese prints and even wrote a book on the subject. While neither of the books deals with the prints, the guide can sure help in imagining them.

Su-Fei makes a find—a CD Rom dealing with Tadao Ando. He is the architect's architect in Japan and is famous worldwide. She gets mad, because she and her husband were planning a similar project—and now somebody has beaten them to it. Maybe. She is torn between wanting to see what the competition has to offer and the ¥6000 price tag. Frugality wins out. "Maybe next time."

On the seventh floor is a large English section, with mystery and science fiction sections dominating the fiction shelves. The nonfiction deals mostly with things Japanese—from cooking and eating, to etiquette and diplomacy.

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We go north to the corner of Ogimachi-Dori, then east a short block. Turning right, we head down the arcaded Ohatsu Tenjin Dori. The smallish winding street is alive with

shoppers, hustlers, teens, vendors, hostesses, average Joes and Janes (Yoshis and Yukis?), and slick suited mafia toughs. The storefronts contain a mix of fast food, pachinko, souvenirs, clubs, convenience stores and restaurants.

A quick walk down a five-foot wide alley tweaks the nerves and keeps them on edge. Who knows what lurks in the darkened dead-end passages that branch off along the walk? It's like a kinetic version of telling ghost stories—you walk through spooky stuff, you don't just hear about it. Some have said that opium dens still operate in some areas. We pass by a speakeasy window where pachinko prizes are turned in for the real winnings.

Shortly we reach the gate to the Ohatsu Tenjin Shrine. The courtyard within is throbbing from the giant bass drum mounted flat on a cart. A young man is teaching eight boys the elements of style for beating the drum. The mallets are not quite a foot long and about two inches in diameter. A thong tied to the mallet's middle is looped around the wrist. When the drum is struck, the left hand is to appear to bounce back up to the shoulder. The right hand stays in position where the mallet strikes, but the mallet bounces and flips after striking and is caught by the hand. A group of teens is nearby, practicing the same, but with an imaginary drum. Their girlfriends look on adoringly in some cases, boringly in others.

Kids practicing drums
Girls playing flute
Other kids with cymbals
More kids doing a dragon dance

Return via Kita-Schinchi

* * * * *

My favorite (and only) morning paper, the *Mainichi News*, carries this to further prove that some among the Japanese do strike out:

Condom machine gives Dane the clamp

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AFP-Jiji) – A 20-year-old Danish man spent two hours with his finger stuck inside a condom vending machine at a bar before finally giving up and taking the machine with him to a repair center to be freed, Danish radio said.

The man, whose name was not disclosed, had tried to buy a condom from the machine at a bar in Thisted in northwestern Denmark late on Saturday night, but the distributor suddenly clamped down on his finger before he could get his hand out.

Two bar patrons tried to help the man, but without success.

The man was finally taken—machine and all—to a Thisted emergency repair center where he was separated from the machine.

UK tabloid saves squaddies sphincters

LONDON (AFP-Jiji) – The top-selling British newspaper The Sun on Tuesday announced that it was sending 2,000 rolls of soft toilet paper to the country's troops in Macedonia after complaints that army paper was too hard.

The paper said it had learned from a British army magazine that the 1,250 troops in Skopje, Yugoslavia, to join a possible NATO peacekeeping force for Kosovo, had said that the recycled paper issued to them was “like corrugated cardboard.”

Teaming up with manufacturer Andrew, The Sun said it had launched “Operation Loo Roll” to help “Our Boys in the Balkans.”

German man flushes savings away

HANOVER, Germany (AFP-Jiji) – A German man who hid 23,000 marks (12,900 dollars) in his underpants during a train journey for safety's sake lost the money while going to the toilet, police said.

Police from this northern German town managed to find the money on the rail line after the passenger told them how he had lost his savings, with which he had planned to buy a car.

The 36-year-old man hid the money in his underpants fearing pickpockets but forgot it was there when he went to the toilet, where he flushed the stash away and on to the track.

<p style="text-align: center;">Pride Of India <i>Peter Scot Malt Whisky</i> <i>Best For Gifts</i> Sold at <i>Mitsukoshi (Tokyo, Osaka, Kobe, Sendai, Sapporo),</i> <i>Matsuya (Ginza, Akasaka), Daimaru (Tokyo, Osaka,</i> <i>Kobe, Kyoto) and Famous Retail Shops</i> <i>Served at famous Indian restaurants</i> Sole Agent NAIR CO., LTD. Tel.: 03-3541-8246</p>
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Dateline 13 Jul 1999

Hidden Noodles at the Big Udon

While walking to Kirin Plaza from Shinsaibashi, I pass shoe store with piano keys depicted as part of the leatherwork.

Need to check out nearby gallery which is on 2nd floor on a northeast corner. Framed works could be seen hanging on the walls inside, but the only visible piece, which is hung in a window to face the street, is architectural.

Cafés Suavor at the base of Kirin Plaza is empty—what a waste.

Garlic & Garlic.

While waiting, check out glue-on brick over stucco-faced columns.

Start with Madonna Liebfraumilch '98 produced by P.J. Valckenberg, Worms am Rhein—slightly sweet.

Kimchi Spaghetti. Spaghetti hovers in a pink pool of cream and peppers simmered from the kimchi. A dollop of cool cabbage graces the creamy strands. This dish has presence without the fire.

Eggplant, miso & garlic—comes out super hot. Eggplant—soft and creamy, with miso that was almost meat-like, and with a touch of hot pepper and a strand of cilantro.

Finish with a dessert of what was to be warm blueberries over vanilla ice cream. Actually, they are black currants with two small scoops of vanilla. Good nevertheless.

Why are there more women than men in a garlic place? All the men are with dates or wives—except me. Several tables have women only.

On the way back, I pass by what seems like a nicely-designed place from the outside—kind of a warm, woodsy, but modernly minimalist with discrete lighting. The modern graphics proclaim it to be **BUDO Y λ** (06 6213-1589). And yes, the last letter is an underlined lambda. I step into the passage leading in, and both a host and a hostess discreetly dressed in semi-formal black smilingly greet me. I mention that it is a very nice design, and would they have a card for my future reference. The lady at the cashier's stand hands me a card and suggests, in virtually unaccented English, that I look around. And that they have many beautiful girls and...

I break in and inquire if this is a private club. No, she replies, it is a lounge open to the public. I thank her and leave. In the light of a streetlamp outside, I read the card which further says:

“In elegant, yet homely surroundings, and an atmosphere of refined luxury, relax, make yourself comfortable, and put a smile back on your face. Since 1975.”

I'm sure one could relax here and I'm sure that they have put smiles on many faces over the years since 1975. But I've been married since four years before they opened their doors for business, and I've been smiling and relaxing without their help very nicely, thank you. But for the design oriented, they are on the same block as the Shinsaibashi Pig and Whistle. This is just east of the Shinsaibashi-Suji shopping arcade, on the south side of Suomachi-Dori.

If anybody goes there, please let me know if the design of the lounge lives up to the promise of the entry. Just research and intellectual curiosity only.

Dateline 14 Jul 1999

Makin' Plans in the Big Udon

Go to get ticket for tomorrow evening. Take JR Loop Line to Tennoji station. Cab to Shitennoji Temple—driver is probably ticked off due to shortness of ride after waiting a long time in line. So he drops us off at side gate, a couple of blocks from the main gate which is open. Walk past bundled piles of trash—eventually realizing that they were possessions of the homeless. Why weren't they concerned about anyone stealing their stuff—or tossing it in the trash? In the temple grounds are even more piles.

The compound is dominated by a substantial four-tiered pagoda. The inner compound in which it resides is closed. Only the starlight passes across the threshold.

I was expecting a main road lined with shops leading up to the main entrance of the temple. The road is there, but it is lined with medical facilities, apartments and Mercedes. Looking up at the lit windows of one building, all that can be seen are ceilings patchworked with fluorescent fixtures, and chrome-plated contraptions decorated with dripping IV sacks. On the other side of the street is a Goodwill establishment whose second floor is chock-a-block full of pipes, hoses and ducts. This must have been the original inspiration for Terry Gilliam's Central Services in "Brazil".

Eat at the Ristorante Betsujin at the Cantina (06 6772 9485, www.nipposhoji.co.jp/betsujin/).

4-14 Hidein-Cho, Tennoji-ku. One block east of Tanimachi-Suji Avenue along Tamatsukuri-Suji Avenue. Then head north for a couple of blocks and look for entrance on the east.

I have white wine, Su-Fei has juice.

Boiled vegetables—two split snow peas, one quartered floweret of cauliflower, one quartered floweret of broccoli, one one-inch section of baby carrot, split in sixths lengthwise, two or three shavings of an onion—well, you get the picture.

Tomato salad with mint—two quartered cherry tomatoes.

Pasta Arrabiata—pasta al dente, olive oil, crushed red pepper, one broken chili pod, crushed tomato, maybe garlic.

Moroccon props, Tunisian architecture, New Mexican art images, American Jazz and Italian food.

(I must make mention of the architecture and use of lighting and natural light (skylights, atrium) and of the arches.) Had a meaningful discussion of architecture—I discoursed and Su-Fei fidgeted.

Also have cards for Lee Cap, Chinese Dim Sum (06 6771-2961) 1-1/2 blocks east of Tanimachi-Suji Avenue, on the north side of Tamatsukuri-Suji Avenue.

My favorite (and only) morning paper, *The Mainichi News*, carries this to further prove that some among the Japanese do strike out:

Oratory Results

The Kwansei Gakuin University and Kinki University joint team of Takashi Itazaki and Takashi Emi won the 20th DLFJ (Debate League for the Inexperienced) Debate Contest in 1999, which was held on Saturday and Sunday at Osaka Prefecture University.

Masahiko Takeuchi of Kitakyushu University was named as the best debater.

The event was sponsored by the Debate League for the Inexperienced and supported by the Mainichi Daily News and the Mainichi Weekly.

Irish gunmen raid train for cigarettes

DUBLIN, Ireland (AP) – Like bandits of old, masked gun-men hijacked a goods train in a quiet siding Monday and made off with their booty.

But these robbers wielded a thoroughly modern weapon – a large crane, which they used to remove a large container of cigarettes worth 800,000 pounds (1.2 million dollars).

The cargo train was on its way to Dublin with a variety of goods when the gunman used the crane to block its path at the disused rail station in Dunleer, 56 kilometers north of Dublin.

Police said up to eight men were involved in the heist. The group had stolen the crane from its operator earlier in the day.

One of the men held the train driver and guard at gunpoint while his accomplices removed the container of cigarettes and put it in a truck.

Dateline 15 Jul 1999

Beer Garden in the Big Udon

Beer Garden—Advance tickets required.

Booze: Malt whiskey, Singapore slings, automated beer tilters—small and large, lager and dark, red wine in a keg

Food: Pepperoni pizza for show—a lot slower than Shakey's Bunch-a-Lunch, cold spaghetti and marinara

First Station

Meatballs

Deep fried soybeans and batter

Kimchi

Second Station

Edamame

Entertainment: Ferris wheel over our shoulders and rainbow guy in toilet with mike

Companions: Emer, Fergus, Patrice, Greg, Su-Fei, Quillain, Mike, Hiro, Emer's sister

Interesting evening. Yeah.

Dateline 17 Jul 1999

Entertaining in the Big Udon

Maurice had called Monday night to say that he would call again regarding his and his wife's arrival in Osaka. A week ago, she had concluded touring Japan with the Percy Faith Orchestra. Maurice joined her in Tokyo for the last week, and they spent a week vacationing in Hokkaido and Sapporo.

Like any good child's promise to a parent, he didn't call. Instead I learned from his mother that he would call me last night. Again no call. And now, he rouses me from sleep at 7:00 AM, breathless, almost panicked. He says he and Lynn are checking out of their Tokyo hotel and will arrive on the Shinkansen at 10:30.

Click.

So I get up, ditz around, catch up on stretching out some Udon noodles, and putting them in the pot to simmer. I wrap up and am at the Shin-Osaka station by 10:20. It's easy—it's just one stop north on the JR trains to Kyoto. At Shin-Osaka, I have to wait at the turnstiles next to the Shinkansen ticket booths. I'm not allowed past the turnstiles unless I have a ticket.

10:30 passes. Let's see... what was that contingency plan? Like, what happens if they're late? Do I wait all day? If I go back to the hotel, will they know how to call? Or what number? I get a schedule. I check it against the characters for Osaka and Tokyo and hope that the timetable reads from top to bottom. In that case, the next train from Tokyo is not due in for another hour-and-a-half. Wouldn't that be fun?

At 10:45, they pass through the turnstiles—apparently their train was delayed at some point to let another one pass. But they're here. Laden down with luggage, and here. Could you carry this? So, after having gained some sixty extra pounds, we head back to the Umeda station and the Hilton.

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Stop at Le Bihan.

Stop at Daimaru for mini croissants.

Yes, the Hilton. The hotel for which they have no reservations. Their flight is currently scheduled to leave Tokyo on Monday, but they want to change their departure from Osaka. Does Maurice want to take care of his arrangements? No. He and Lynn want to go to Kyoto to see the Gion Festival. I insist that business be taken care of first.

Dump luggage in my room.

No resolution on changing flights as a result of calls—ANA LA is closed except during flights. ANA Japan cannot change flights booked thru LA, etc.

Can't get to Hilton thru local or overseas calls, but get best rate by talking to Asst. Mgr.

Take the Hankyu to Kyoto. Arrive there and parade is over.

Get info at Info counter of Takashimaya on south side of Shijo-dori, Kiyomizu
Wait at refreshment stand. Get green tea with red bean ice. Walk past various temples until we reach the bottom. See Crane dance. Also:

- Shogun with cell phone
- Twirling ark
- Boy on horse, not girl
- Procession while traffic continues on
- Taxi tries to squeeze into parade

Lady taxi driver back to JR station

- FM station (Mo' Cool '99, Alpha Station, 89.4 FM-Kyoto) DJs on stage with hundreds on steps to platform
- Work way to the top
- Go back to Osaka

Check In

They pick up their luggage. Their room is fancier.

I help carry it up. It looks like same room as mine but with an extra line of wood trim, and all of the wood trim and furniture stained dark. I prefer the light treatment in the rooms that I have stayed in.

The view might be a little better because it's on the 31st floor instead of the 26th.

Kirin Plaza—empty though close

Baskin & Robbins—walk thru but no chocolate

Garlic & Garlic

- Eggplant & miso
- Pumpkin Soup—cold, with cream
- Roasted garlic
- Garlic & Pumpkin Croquettes
- Pumpkin salad
- Scallops
- Pizza—soggy, dried basil (like seaweed)
- Beer for me, tea for the others

Walk to Hard Rock

Unbeknownst to me, my son is a Hard Rock fanatic regarding collectables. Not too concerned about eating there, other than the fact that it has been a saving grace in some foreign lands.

Aren't children wonderful?

Dateline 18 Jul 1999

Where's the Kobe Beef?

Sleep in until 9:00.

Maurice & Lynn are presumably at the Himeji Castle. I lounge around, write, read and run a quick errand. At 11:00 Maurice calls, "Can we meet at around 11:00".

"OK." Hmm... His voice sounds too clear to be calling from any distance. Sure enough, they slept in too.

"We'll be down to leave our bags."

"OK. Don't you want to see if you can have your flights changed before packing and hauling the stuff around?"

"No, it's easier this way."

"OK."

It's 1:00 and the doorbell is ringing. Lynn comes in with some bags, goes back out, and comes back in with some more. "Maurice is downstairs trying to make arrangements for the flight."

OK. And he's doing the important stuff while Lynn plays packhorse. How does he do it? So we go down to the Hotel's business center and hang while the hotel staff try to make arrangements with the airlines (no luck) and the Hilton in Tokyo (much luck).

It's 2:00 and it's off to Kobe.

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We take the JR to Sannomiya go south a block and start hoofing it west along the Sannomiya shopping street. This street and the next one we are heading to are covered with high vaulted arcades. The impression is one of moving down the central aisle of an enormous linear cathedral. Teeming throngs of worshippers stream to and fro, not knowing if the altar is before or behind them. They are in search of their souls' place of perfection. The shops along the way enlighten them and provide tantalizing hints of the glories to come.

At Sannomiya's end we drop down to the Motomachi arcade, then take the first alley to the south. A short block later we wind up at the east end of Chinatown. Maurice and Lynn have spent over a month traipsing about China, and tell me that this is almost like China, unlike America's Chinatowns. They say "The only thing missing is all of the people constantly retching and spitting from all of the coal soot in the air."

OK. Where's the travel agent? I'm almost gone. Yeah.

We follow the street west for several blocks picking up street food here and there along the line. Beware of the fake steam coming up from some of the bamboo steamers that are set out. It's more like fog than anything hot. The tell-tale is that it comes up in one spot of the steamer only.

Most people are trying to cool off with bowls of what looks like flan floating in water. It turns out to be almond jelly in fruit syrup. I try some kind of a deep-fried pastry. It sure could use some powdered sugar and some mariachis strolling along the street. Maurice has something that looks like a spinach and pork soft taco. If this is authentic Chinese cuisine, than the genealogists have to accept the theory that Mexicans crossed the Bering Straits during the winter and headed south to settle in China. Viva La Raza!

Up one of the alleys to the north, an erect buxom pig in a pink dress smiles and attracts passersby to enter the souvenir shop beside her. I can't resist. I buy a little jade horse, probably made from a genuine imitation of fake Beijing plastic.

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We jog back up to Motomachi and continue west. The throngs have thinned out even though the canopy still defines a monumental space. A crew of "charity workers" have dragged out a half-dozen of their wards in wheelchairs. The tragic part is that the ailing and/or handicapped individuals are genuinely in need of help. Unfortunately, the "workers" use them only as a means of getting money for themselves.

As the pitiful cries recede, more and more exclusive shops line the arcade. They deal in antique furniture, antique books and prints, artwork, European clothing and custom tailoring. There is even your friendly local Samurai shop where you can get armor, swords, and all of the hardware needed for going into ancient battle. That oughta' get you on the diamond lane.

It is approaching 4:00 PM, and all that Maurice has been asking is "Where's the Harbor Circus?"

Oh, it's just up ahead, I say. And then we walk another league or so along the Motomachi. Because it curves to the south, the end is not in sight. Finally we are out. In front of us is a small plaza with an arc of glass panes. They are about two meters wide and high. The eight or so panes are separated by mullions as they follow the arc. Within them is water that is swirled by rising jets of water and air bubbles. At a distance it appears like upside down snow, but in waves.

We stop to examine the fractal patterns formed by the spiraling bubbles. "Where's the Harbor Circus?"

OK, OK.

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We keep walking two blocks west and one south. It has been drizzling since we got off the train. But, since almost the entire walk has been under arcades, this has not presented a problem—until now.

We approach a bus terminal. There are stairs leading down to parking levels below the adjacent office building. On a hunch, I suggest that we head down. The first basement is a dud, a dead-end. So we head down to the second. Success! It connects to the subterranean arcade that heads south only to terminate under the Harbor Circus some three blocks further.

We head up the escalators to the ground floor where the reason for coming here reveals itself. Staring us in the face is the merchandising shop of the Hard Rock. All these years of hard work and sacrifice, of discipline and love, of Oy-veh and Oh, yeah!—and this is what I get. Despite making a good living playing classics on his cello, he’s a Gee-tar Pin Pervert, a cloisonné Stratocaster collector. My son, my son, why hast thou abandoned me?

Ah, well, I count my blessings. The rebellion is material, not spiritual. He’s OK.

We stop to use the second floor facilities on the west side of the Circus. There’s a retailer of nicely designed contemporary furniture for those on a less than extravagant budget. I believe the name is Bo European Furniture. Next to it is a small kiosk selling Caribbean arts and crafts.

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We go across the second floor bridge on the east side over to the Water Gardens complex. As we swing around the corner, we make a mandatory stop at a little bakery window. All that they make are ever so lightly glazed mini-croissants served direct from the oven. They go down in two mouth-watering buttery bites, tops. Incredible.

We first ran across these delicacies in the Daimaru department store next to JR’s Umeda station. As you leave the central exit, descend down the stairs and continue heading south. When you are alongside the Daimaru, enter the west side of the store on your right. The melodious mini-croissants will serenade you like a refrain from Tommy: “Touch me, feel me, eat me”. And you must. And you will.

We munch and gulp on our way down the escalators to the ground floor and continue heading east. Right in front of us is a ball-and-rail contraption about eight feet to the side and some twenty feet high. It uses the striped and solid balls from a pool table to go through Rube Goldberg-esque manipulations. The contraption produces bongs, gongs, rattles, and clangs—all of which enliven the west end of this mall. I stop and reflect that one of these days Shim just might see this before the one at Back to the Future is built.

The Water Gardens is yet another multi-storied shopping mall in this string of public places called Harborland. It centers on a very linear and very vertical space topped out with a running gable of glass. When we get to the east end, we ride up an escalator that has two “landings” along it—because it can. Maurice, who loves roller coasters and simulator rides, becomes visibly nauseous by the time he gets to the top. Go figure.

We continue across yet another bridge to the east to enter the Mosaic complex. This is kind of like a Ports-o-Call outdoor boardwalk that has two stories. Except for one area that is open to the port, the rest of the complex it turned entirely inwards. The restaurants that do flank the courtyard that is open to the port have operable doors across their entire fronts. Unfortunately, they are never opened.

We get ice creams from a shop near the entrance. The flavors range from some of the standards, to uniquely oriental flavorings such as passion fruit, green tea, and some other unpronounceables. Perhaps there’s a Durian among them. I get a cup of what I first think is pineapple, but turns out to be loquat. The fruit forms a refreshing counterpoint for this hot and humid day. I really appreciate napkins as the ice cream rapidly melts and drips down my fingers in the heat. Too bad we didn’t get any. And I forgot to bring my Hilton washcloth.

We look out at the harbor. An excursion boat is in the process of boarding its passengers. There must be several hundred making their way in and up to the three levels inside. We imagine that it will be a dinner cruise out in Osaka Bay. We imagine what it would be like to be on board. We dream of the smell of the ocean spray, the hiss of the surf against the hull, the kiss of the breezes as the ship plows through the water’s surface. And then we see that there are no publicly accessible decks or outdoor areas, and that the windows are all fixed glazing. It’s like inverting the concept of an aquarium—the tank is for the observers while surrounded by the sea and the fish.

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We look for a place to eat. The Sizzler is out. We settle for Hafenburg. The last time I was here, this place was owned by one of the beer producers Kirin. Now it appears to be independent, although it features Sapporo beer. The entrance is through a passage with several turns and bends. Along the way is merchandise ranging from trinkets to antiques that would appear to come from the mid-east or from the steppes of Asia.

The major portion of the dining room is stretched out along the long band of windows overlooking the harbor. The bar backs up to the windows, and bar seating extends along the expanse of glass. The tables furthest from the windows are stepped up to provide excellent views for them as well. The décor suggests anywhere from Morocco to Mongolia. The music is definitely Persian.

The menu ranges from Mongolian, to Korean, to Japanese, to pizza. In the center of the table is a recessed electric grill for barbequing. Maurice and Lynn order two single sets,

which wind up being cooked over a flame other than the one in the table. I have pasta with eggplant, tomato sauce, a bit of chili pepper, and a few small pieces of bacon. Everything is reasonably tasty, but it lacks in spectacle for a special occasion. Perhaps if we had ordered that meter of beer in a clear tube there would have been something more memorable, but the young 'uns tend to drink very little.

Part of the problem is that although the entire menu is presented in pictures, they tend to be small. Compounded for us visiting turistas is that there is virtually no English on the menu. During the course of the meal, we wind up looking at what everybody else got. It looks like the getting can be quite good, if you know what to ask for and how to ask for it.

Yeah.

Dateline 20 Jul 1999

Holiday in the Big Udon

Due to the holiday*, trains are only half full. Walk to office in heat and sun. I get in at 8:00. I have office all to myself. Fix coffee. Work in silence.

At lunch have bag of Trader Joe's blue corn tortilla chips and a jar of TJ's salsa with black beans and corn. For a while I almost forget where I am. I knock down a near beer. (It was nearby.)

I'm so enthused, I plow thru the remaining stack of Sekozus, answer all my email, and work on items on my To-Do list until everything is in somebody else's court.

Since I worked thru lunch, at 4:30 I head back to hotel.

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Chris, Mike and I go to Osaka Ekimae No. 2 Building to have dinner at the beer garden. Usually, there is a staffed elevator and ample signage to direct customers. There appears to be none. Step outside, and realize that I have the wrong building. We go next door to Edimae No. 1 Building. Sure enough, all of the proper cues are in place except that there is no elevator operator.

When we get to the top, all of the lights are out, and the doors to the roof are locked. They are closed for the holiday. We go back down to the "catacombs of Osaka" and weave our way to the basement of the Osaka Ekimae No. 4 Building. Here the elevators are staffed and the lights on the roof appear to be on.

The elevator operator tries to tell us something before heading up. We can't make it out. So we start heading up, and finally he gets through to us that because of the holiday, the garden will close at 8:15. He tells us if we eat, we have to hurry since it is now 7:45. So, we decline and head back down. I suspect that he took one gander at Mike and me, and figured that they would lose less money if they could turn us around.

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We hop into a cab and head down to the Shinsaibashi area to my favorite – **Garlic & Garlic**.

- Garlic croquettes
- Eggplant, Miso & Garlic
- Chicken Mozzarella Cheese
- Garlic Spaghetti
- Kimuchi Spaghetti
- Potato Gratin

On to the Dubliners' Irish Pub, Osaka
1-13 Soemon-cho Chuo-ku Osaka
06 212-7036

Guinness
Kilkenny

* Ocean Day. The day when all of Japan feels compelled to visit the ocean. The only day of the year where it is impossible to find an unoccupied grain of sand. The weather is irrelevant. They flock to the sea en masse. *Editor*

Dateline 21 Jul 1999

Dinin' Chinese in the Big Udon

Mike H., Mike C., Chris and I finally make it over to the 12th floor of the Osaka Ekimae No. 1 Building. Walk past belly-up bar and liquor store next to lobby. With vending machines inside, in case the beer runs out. Everybody's smokin' and jokin'. The lovely interior of the elevator is finished the same as a walk-in refrigerator except for the quarry tile that should be on the floor.

We go in, and are given tickets, redeemable for a bottomless mug of beer. Soft drinks and tea are also available, but no wine or liquor. The essence of this buffet is Chinese. There are:

- Steamed dumplings
- Marinated Shiitake mushroom
- Sautéed Japanese Eggplant
- Spring rolls
- Edamame
- Peanuts
- Glazed sweet potato
- Cooked bitter melon
- Sausages
- Shrimp
- Pork ?

Food is not particularly special, but quieter than the others to date.

Music is Japanese pop – quieter than others.

Mike and I go to Windows on the World to reminisce about the future that could and should have been. Instead, we talk about the end that was and chili peppers.

Dateline 1 Sep 1999

Consuming Beauty in the Big Udon

Boioioing! It's 5:15 and I'm up.

A somberly billowing gray bank of clouds blankets Mt. Rokko's range to the west. Thirty-four floors below, the sidewalks are still curled up in a hushed silence – recovering and regenerating for the next stampede. The sun gradually paints the clouds into a spreading glow of candy corn colors. September sails into Osaka Harbor amidst this aerial splendor. It unloads its hold of heat and humidity onto the docks, then spreads out to greet the commuting swarms.

I turn to the matters more immediately at hand. Like the plate of fruit on my sitting table. This time, it's not a plate, but a platter. A broad band of golden yellow brims the white center. An artful arrangement of shapes bearing Nature's colors compliment each other. There is a pastel yellow Asian pear, three red strawberries, a cluster of reddish purple grapes, a purple plum, an orange nectarine, and a pale lime tangerine.

I destroy it all with gusto and relish. Beauty never tasted so good.

I retrieve my morning stimulator from under the door. It does not fail me. Once again, *The Mainichi News* (my favorite English language Japanese newspaper) stands tall in its field:

Viagra leaves 2 stiffs since drug's approval

Two people have died after taking Viagra without a doc-tor's prescription in the seven months since the anti-impotence drug was approved in January for sale in the country, the Health and Welfare Ministry said.

Let me just say, that the story continues at some length.

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I sum up the rest of the day as follows:

Sky Umeda building – misting, light show inside.

Restaurant downstairs – high rent district.

Long tunnel to Hankyu

Off to Rhiga Royal and Sky lounge – light effect.

Dateline 6 Nov 1999

Uphill at the Big Udon

It's Saturday in the fall. The colors of maples should be evanescent against the crisp blue of the cooling sky. But it's too soon. Probably El Nino has poked its warming thumb into the soils of Japan and sprinkled antifreeze into the air. The last several days have been cumulatively supercharging the air to an electrical crispness that snaps with a metallic brightness.

I want to get out – I want to see, to feel. I want my hair to stand on end as the crackling current courses through me.

I plot a course that will take me north and up – cooler, crisper, cleaner.

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I start at the Hankyu Station in Umeda. At the ticket machines, I drop in my ¥580. The machine only lights up to ¥380, so I punch in the yellow button below where it says “Connecting Lines.” I assume it's the yellow button because the line I want is yellow on the map. Sure enough, ¥580 comes up.

I go north on the Hankyu Takurazuka Line from Umeda. At some point we go through Tada Station. Imagine getting off here! You would step out of the train and onto the platform, and...Tada! There you are. It's not every day that one has the opportunity to be part of a living pun, but I do pass this one up and instead get off at the Kawanishi Noseguchi to catch the Nose Railway. No, there were no Colombian bad guys or yellow Pulp Fiction wannabes lurking about. But yes, there were white lines on the platforms. There were even a few people lined up along them. But not many.

On the way north, the rail steadily ascends, passing through at least nine tunnels. The rail corridor narrows to a single set of tracks, with pine boughs and shrubbery brushing the windows on both sides as the train snakes its way up.

Eventually, we reach Myokenguchi, the last stop. As I leave the station on the north end, across the street from me is a bus with a driver standing outside. He recommends that I take it to the next “station” in order to reach my destination. I get on board. I watch my step, since the headroom is barely six feet in the center aisle, and much less on the sides where the seats are. There is a row of singles on the right and deuces on the left. The deuces look more like American singles, than the singles. Plus, there is so much clutter underfoot, between wheel wells, heaters, tool boxes, etc., that at most seats, my knees would be higher than my shoulders. But, for the miniaturized, diminutive elderly Japanese ladies, this is just their size.

Eventually, the bus leaves and drives up the hill for about two miles on a one lane paved road that carries two lanes of traffic, bicycles, and pedestrians. About half the bus exits. A man in front of me pauses while his wife continues ahead. As we all pass by, he irrigates a low retaining wall next to the road, despite the fact that just a few hundred feet in front of us are toilets. Yes, it's a man's world hereabouts. Yep. U-betcha!

- - - - - YYYYYYYYYY - - - - -

So, straight in front of me is Mount Myoken, my destination, my challenge. Stretching up from its base is an incline rail. It's like Angel's Flight in LA – with two cars on a cable that counterweigh each other from the top. ¥540 buys me a round trip ticket. I get on and sit in the front seat – looking out at the downhill side. The 24 or so seats fill up shortly, and they keep cramming people on board. With some 60 to 70 passengers, the car starts up the slope.

I start contingency planning: Now, if the cable breaks, should I stand up on the seat and be flung out the front window and, maybe, sail out over the turnstiles and out into the pavement in front of the place? Or, should I duck down and be instantly crushed against the platform at the bottom? In the Boy Scouts, they used to tell me to “be prepared”. Now I realized that they were talking about being seasoned and tenderized before being flung on the barbie. Do I sound nervous? Scared? Worried?

Nah! Not macho me!

Near the top, more distant peaks peer up behind the ridges closer up. A gorgeous spectacle of greenery unfolds as it dissipates into the haze near the horizon. The descending cable car passes us predictably at the halfway point. At the top we get out. Predictably, we are not at the top. We have to climb a steep paved road for about half of a mile. Predictably, since in Japan “they” always feel “they” need to retain some remnant of challenge, otherwise, you won't remember having “been there”. – And, you can still retain some pride and bragging rights when you tell your friends that you've “done that” – while omitting just how much you actually have done.

- - - - - YYYYYYYYYY - - - - -

On the way up, two young Japanese ladies ask me about where I got my jacket. As we talk between puffs, pants, and wheezes on the way up, it turns out that they are on their way to a company picnic. I notice that all men are schlepping plastic grocery bags with at least one six-pack in each – usually more. Most ladies have other unseen stuff in their backpacks. At the top, we part our ways as they go on to the picnic grounds to the right.

I continue to the left to the single seater chairlift. A brief analysis tells me that it's about an eight-minute ride, and that it has a THC of about 540 each way. Even further inquiry reveals that I will be reduced by weight in coinage by another ¥480 for a round trip.

This is my first time on a chair lift. So I watch carefully what the people in front of me do when they get on. When it's my turn, I almost mangle my legs under the seat – all of the people I had observed had much shorter legs. So much for following others' examples.

Once airborne, it was fantastic! It was almost like what I have heard ballooning to be. Well, not quite. But it was calming, quiet, and there was a definite sense of floating. My feet grazed against the hydrangea blossoms on either side, as well as other blossoming plants underfoot. At the top, there was another ascent up a gravel road for about a mile to get to the base of Mount Myoken's crown – the Nose Myokengu Temple.

Immediately after entering the outer gates, the path is flanked by two full size statues of mares, with another two statues set well back behind them of stallions. Each mare has a front foot that is bent over in preparation for kneeling. Actual carrots have been placed there for whatever reason. At the raised area containing the left mare, there are three dogs relaxing. I can only remember that there is some saying about leaving temple dogs lying, but I can't remember what or why. But, there they are. On the job, as the job description has been given. One of them gets up to irrigate a temple wall. It's a dog's world hereabouts. Yep. U-betcha!

I continue on up the stone paved avenue to the top of the mountain – all 660 meters of it. At the top is an eye-popping geometrical construct of wood, steel, and concrete, rising some twenty meters above its plaza/observation deck. It is a totally contemporary interpretation of the function of the temple. Yet it is rich in tradition and mysticism through its adherence to the eight-pointed figure that is at the core of the sect's symbolism. It also happens to have been published somewhat recently in one of the leading architectural magazines.

Also true to Japanese tradition, despite all the glass and the ensuing greenhouse effect, the sweltering heat inside is not relieved. No one seems to be interested in opening the several large and ingeniously-designed doors that slope along with the glass walls that contain them.

I wipe my brow, wring out my clothes and continue the tour of the temple grounds. I proceed to the traditional temple building. I listen respectfully to the traditional recording of the chanting monk emanating from the temple. I wonder if he was respectfully collecting residuals through Local 47, AFofM.

I poke around a bit longer and continue down the other side past the souvenir stand and a couple of residentially scaled buildings with collapsing roofs. A bit further on, I take the path that branches to the right, while the one to the left descends steeply down some steps that are undulating with wheezing and gasping figures that slowly make their way to the top. My path quickly takes me back around to the front by the horse statues where I started. From a souvenir stand, I buy some horse chestnuts (in homage to the four horses?) and two toy Volkswagens painted up with flowers (in homage to the five vintage V-dubs I have back home?). Maybe they were being sold 'cause they had something to do with horsepower.

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Looking at signs and maps near the temple entrance (reachable by vehicle with ample paved parking), Mount Myoken is along a hiking trail that goes from the San-in coast on the north to Osaka Bay on the south. Other trails traverse the areas on both the north and south sides of the island nation. My avid hiking days, regrettably, seem to be in the past. I'm tempted to take the trail from the top down the ravine to the bottom of the mountain, but I don't trust my feet to adequately sustain me for the trek. Besides, I want to enjoy that floating in the chair lift again. Which is what I do.

Halfway down, I meet a lady coming up. No, she has no cats or sack with her on the chair lift. I see that she is a good twenty years my senior. She looks back at me and says "Konichiwa". I reply in kind as we float past each other. At which point she breaks out in some traditional sounding Japanese song. Or is she channeling a banshee to drive the image of some evil spirit (me) from her memory. Her caterwauling continues until distance prevents me from hearing further.

At the bottom of the chair lift I flip a mental coin and decide to round the hilltop over to where the picnic grounds are. Are the Japanese different at picnics from Americans? Soon I will find out.

The path gently descends about a quarter of a mile. The entry is guarded by a concessionaire that sells all nature of beverages, including beer and sake at reasonable prices (for Japan, that is) as well as foodstuffs for grilling. Close-by, they have shelves loaded with colanders, salad bowls, skillets, teapots, tongs, etc. that can either be borrowed or rented. There are covered areas with rows of pot sinks on one side, and counters with grilling stoves on the other.

Spreading out from the entry are grilling pits that seat nine, interspersed with round tables that seat six. The grilling pits sit on four-meter diameter stone platforms, with a cluster of boulders in the middle and a grill that nests into the stones about a foot above the platform. Concrete, cast to look like sections of hewn logs, forms a ring of seating on the platforms.

But the *pièce de résistance* is the view. All of the lower limbs from the trees in that direction have been trimmed – so the view is clear but for the trunks, while the effect of the leaf canopy is retained. In the far distance are Mount Rokko and the western ranges. In the foreground the Inagawa Township fills the valley below like a sea lapping against the feet of the surrounding mountains.

I'm drawn to the edge of the picnic grounds nearest the view. Almost strangely, the tables and fire pits closest to the edge are vacant, while the ones in the middle are full. I say "almost", because it no longer is that strange to me. In Japan, people like to be with people. In America, the tradition of rugged individualism and self-reliance is still evident, even if not as prevalent as in the past.

I stroll back up to the concessionaire and buy a beer. I go back to the view edge and go into alpha wave mode. I just open up and let it float in – the sun’s sparkle, the tempering haze in the distance, the snap of the blue sky, the soldier’s march of the pines on the slopes, the musty moistness of the dirt at my feet, the float and cry of the crows, the shifting scents of various foodstuffs being singed, the background gaggling of this flock of picnickers. And they do gaggle. And honk. And laugh, and shout, and cry. These folks are downright boisterous.

What is pleasantly missing is radios and commercial music. It’s just people being with other people. I really do prefer just the sounds that “nature” provides: the wind whistling through leaves and needles; bird calls echoing in the stillness; the “whoosh-whoosh-whoosh” of wings churning the air; countless chirping insects laying down a background buzz; water burbling in streams, whitely roaring in falls, and the cyclic cadence of surf. The sounds here are like nature. Like the sounds just mentioned, to me they are devoid of meaning. Yes, the laughter I know is mirth, and anger has its own tone. But there are no specifics. No single point calls for attention. It all is background. With respect to content, to me it is no different than a flock of geese or a herd of sheep.

It’s sort of like the signs. In Japan, the characters have no meaning to me. So they are just graphic patterns. Change the Kanji to English words, and suddenly it would be visual pollution. The characters change from a background abstraction to a foreground attention-getter and consciousness grabber.

So here I am, sitting on a hillside, sipping a beer, alone, but for some 200 head of wildlife hooting and honking while doing ritual mating displays consisting of scorching various organic products over an open flame. It is almost three hours since I rode up the cable car, and most of the wildlife is leaving in a staggering procession – their bags of canned goodies having been guzzled.

Suddenly there’s glitter in front of me. A beetle is flitting about in front of me as the sun reflects off of its carapace. It lands upside down at my feet. I right it with my hand. I’m awestruck. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen a golden scarab beetle. Its iridescence is truly like polished gold. It seems impossible that a living creature could have such an appearance. No wonder that it was prized by the pharaohs. And here’s this one that just stopped by to say “Hi.” A very silent “Hi” before flying off.

I’ve collected my gold and reaped my harvest of golden silence. And now it’s time I “fly” off, back to Umeda, back to the echoes, and back to the foghorns crying out hollowly in the mist. Perhaps tomorrow another scarab will come my way.

At Kyoto, I go up to the connecting concourse, but descend to street level just before entering the main station building. This is where tracks 32 and 33 have trains bound for Amanohashidate at the eastern base of the Tango Peninsula. I get in line for a seat a half hour before departure, with only six other people in front of me for the car in front of us. The car probably seats 100. I'm relieved, as are my feet.

Eventually, the train pulls out, heading west. Shortly (less than a mile) it passes to the south of a large municipal park whose area development is quite new and devoid of temples and traditions. It looks interesting, particularly for theme park project managers that are into **VE. At the end of the park is a modest open-air flea market. I suspect that the diminutive size of Japanese garages has something to do with the low accumulation of objects destined for the garage sale.

After leaving the west side of Kyoto, that train goes through a series of closely spaced tunnels. When it pops out of a tunnel, it bridges over a stream down below and then pops into the next tunnel, while the stream winds its way the long way around. The effect is like strobe lights on a grand scale.

Editor's Notes:

This narrative remains unfinished. Too bad, since we'd have loved to be the beneficiaries of Daumants's observations.

*Actually, it's Matsushima. *Editor*

**Value Engineering *Editor*

Dateline 18 May 2000

The Udon is Greener on the Other Side of the Bowl

I'm up!
I'm here again!
Ya' can't keep a good floater down!

Even before my first trip out, I learned how to beat jet lag – I stay awake during the entire flight, and (most important) I keep the window shade up. That is, up at least enough to read by sunlight when it's out there. Keeping the shade up helps in staying awake because of having to fight off the flight attendants and other passengers who misguidedly want to sleep. Whatsamadda wid' 'em, haven't they found the blindfold in their freebie flight packet?

The point is, that when I got into the Big Udon last night, I was wiped, gulped down a quick dinner, and then hit the hay. But before I did, I set the alarm for 6:20 a.m. And here I am, congratulating myself for accurately resetting my bio-clock – 'cause I have woken up six minutes before the alarm.

Unfortunately, closer inspection reveals that it is not 6:14 am, but 12:14 just past midnight. Ah, well, I need to take a trot anyhow. See ya' in the mornin'!

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Q: "What are you doing here? – I thought you were gone!"
A: "Abble-gabble gabble gab, and gabbledy gobbledy gook."
Q: "So, how long are you out here for?"
Or,
Q: "Welcome back! – It's good to see you again!"
A: "Yadda 'n dadda and iddledy diddledy squat."
Q: "So, how long are you out here for?"
Or,
Q: "Iki kageiki kinishi-spa, get it? Mas?"
A: "?"
Q: "?"

The last was a philosophical discourse I had with the gentleman ladling out the pasta Bolognese at the cafeteria. That was my lunch. The others were what took place during most of the rest of my day. Roman and biblical epics are back now. In Universal's depiction of Dante's "The Inferno," Schatzie approaches the gates and reads: "Abandon all hope ye who enter here – you'll be back."

I'm not knocking it. It is good to be back. It's just that I was supposed to have left three times already. Should I have given those farewell gifts back each time? How many times

does the wolf come around unseen by others before they start thinking that I'm paranoid? Can those emotional farewells be pushed back into the bottle a few more times and still come out tasting as strongly as before?

The answer, though, is with the Irish. There is little wonder that their favorite color is green. If I want to remain nourished, I'll take my Udon green (thank you) and I'll have it in O'Saka.

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I wrap up the day, head back to the hotel.
 Bus. Train. Train.
 Routine. Routine. Routine.
 Crowds. Mobs. Hordes.

I need to push myself to keep from being oblivious to my environs. This morning I noted that several others had "gone native" and adopted the local garb: mini-walkmen. Tune in to tune out. It becomes increasingly harder, but it's so much more pleasant to see things with the eyes of a tourist. It's like a good marriage – you have to keep working at it.

And there it is – on the north side of the Fukushima station: a bar on the 4th floor that promises "Shot & Rest". It must be a walk-up.

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It's getting to be summer, and the beer gardens are open. I go scout around the Umeda area to see what's new or different from last year. These all-you-can-eat-and-drink buffets run about ¥3000. [about \$30.00 American] What I like, is that this means eating outdoors – something that is preciously rare in this here crowded bowl of noodles.

Among the candidates I find:

Kirin World 2000 – Mongolian self-help grilling at your own table. This is located in the Ekimae Number 4 building just south of the Hanshin Department Store.

The Hanshin Department Store has "**Get Together 2000**," which I gather is sports related because the circular mentions Sky PerfecTV and depicts the Hanshin Tigers emblem. For access, go to the elevator lobby on the west side of the store – the one closest to the Hilton.

An Italian-influenced buffet is located atop the **Fukoku Seimei** building, which is just east of the Hankyu Department Store. This one's got elaborate automated beer decanting machines that pour a perfect mug every time.

Lastly, I find one at the **Hankyu Station**. At street level enter the station heading towards the Kinokuniya Book Store. When you enter the high space, go to the middle of it and turn to face south (with your back to the bookstore) and you will see the elevator lobby.

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I stop at the Kinokuniya and pick up a copy of *Kansai Time Out*. [English language expat magazine] I head back out to stalk dinner. There in the high space of the Hankyu Station is a temporary belly-up bar. It's hot. It's humid. It's thirsty time and the Kirin is lookin' mighty purty. A man approaches and strikes up a conversation.

“So, how long are you out here for?”

No, really, I'm kidding. He didn't say that.

At first.

J says he's originally from the Caribbean (he's got the accent) but that he's been in Osaka since the mid eighties. He's in the household moving business. He's also into giving the business. While we talk, he tries to hit up on two different young ladies. I don't understand what's being said, since the exchanges are in Japanese. But, he manages to engage them for at least five minutes each.

I have read that many Japanese women (not unlike many others) imagine that they would like someone that is like themselves – someone that is emotional. I think that J can string them along as well as he does because of his moving lines.

And then along comes the pink thing.

This pink thing was dressed entirely in pink. Not just any pink, but loud and shiny pink. A pink hat with a gawky angular face sticking out below it. A pink-lipsticked face with teeth in misaligned rows and an afternoon's stubble on its chin. A pink blouse with angular and hairy arms sticking out. A pink mini-skirt with hairy, knobby-kneed legs attached. And let's not forget the pink shoes.

He/she/it walks by, sees J, and the two of them greet each other, crack a line or two, then wish each other well in parting.

It just goes to show that there is something to be said for the sedentary tourist. Rather than running around in search of the unusual, just stand still long enough and eventually everything unusual will roll around to you.

Or over you.

Dateline 20 May 2000

The Big Udon Goes Limp

The morning clouds are thick, dark, and spongy. The TV forecast is chirpy, colorful, and soggy. My long-awaited hopes for an outing around Mt. Ikoma must be postponed for yet another time. The umbrellas marching across the monitor tell me that I better stick moderately close to shelter. I savor a **Starbucks** and a cinnamon scone brought back from across the street while formulating an alternative.

Finally, it's 11:00 and I've made my plans. I call GB and ask if he wants to join.

"Nno-o-o. I kinda wanted to go to this antique fair thing, ya-no?"

Yeah. I know. Have a good time. I'll go it alone – see ya', sucker!

So, off I go. Alone. Alone to explore the folds and seams of that great rice paper origami they call Osaka. Bring 'em on, one and all – the cranes, the monkeys, the elephants – fold 'em fast and furious! I'll flatten all comers! I'll cut all their corners! I'm the Great Udon and no adventure is too tough for me!

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Yodeling, I spring aboard the Yotsubashi Line. I'm Cap'n Karaoke, and I ride my songs to the Chuo Line. Like Popeye's spinach, I whip out that trusty bowl of udon and tell that train to "Chuo on this, pal"! And lickety-spit – we're at Cosmo Square.

And there, behold! But a mile away is the object of my quest – the **Maritime Museum**. The glass of the dome reflects the gray in the sky and the steel in the water. This alien craft needs exploring. I look for a bus to take me there. No such beast exists.

Typical, I think to myself. Only Osakan planners would put a major museum in a location where it would photograph well, but not be accessible. After all, if they made it easy to get to, a crowd might actually show up!

I hoof it to the place. But first, I double back on a false route, end up on an ended walkway, all while never seeing a sign pointing to the place. Mind you, this is now almost noon on a Saturday, and I'm the only person headed this way. And I'm not meeting anybody headed the other way either. When I get near the dome, there is a construction fence and a whole mess o' dirt between it and the dome.

I go to the guard shack. The guard doesn't speak English. I don't speak Japanese. I point to the dome, form an "X" with my arms, and raise my brows enquiringly. The guard points to the dome, forms and "X" with his arms, and shakes his head from side to side.

I look. I sigh. I look again. I leave.

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How dare they! Who told me that it had "...just opened, or something"? Who? Who, but GB, my loyal friend, who chose not to come along. I hope there's a rabid mongoose up his sleeve when he laughs into it. Hah! But the Big Udon does not accept defeat that easily. He has other plans. Other big plans. Plans that were conceived earlier over that tankard of Starbucks.

I double back to the **ATC** (the Asia & Pacific Trade Center). I cross over hedges, go in through a back door and up some stairs until I'm standing in the grand space. It looks like Osaka's version of the Blue Whale is suffering from the same problems as the one in LA. Most of the lower floors are now a retail bazaar, with small shop owners selling all sorts of chachkas.

But my destination is the true artsy stuff up on the tenth floor. The elevator cab leaves me on a vacant walkway. The gallery I'm looking for is still there. It has a current exhibit, but it's closed.

I look. I groan. I don't bother looking again. I leave.

On my way out, I walk by the design library - which is open. A magazine catches my eye. Even here, in what I thought was a haven of design, bureaucracy and bean counting have planted their cancerous seeds. The magazine is **FDM** – also to be visited at <http://www.fdmonline.com>.

I need a cleansing of the palate. I get a cup of sweet potato gelato at the **Crepe House** in O's North. This is just about the only place that has outdoor seats on the waterfront side. That's where I head. I enjoy my treat in solitude. Everybody else is staying indoors with the heat and the hordes and the squawk-sonic songs blaring from the speakers.

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I continue south through O's all the way to the end. Herein lies my third quest – the **O's South Museum**. There's a showing of French Impressionists – probably my favorite style other than plein aire and a number of individualists. I call up the elevator, get in, and press the B2 button.

Nothin'.

We ain't goin' nowhere today.

Like, as in closed – or somethin'.

I give up in disgust and head back for the train station. Here I see a poster that advertises the opening of the Maritime Museum as July 14. No wonder I couldn't get into the glass dome. The GD SOBs, - especially that GB! I've been sent on a goose-chase! I've been made a fool! How dare they do this to the Great Udon?

It's all their fault!

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Back on the Chuo Line, I get off at Awaza and head north on Amidaike-Suji Avenue. After about a kilometer I cross the Tosaborigawa onto the long island in the river. There looms the recently opened **Osaka International Convention Center**. Kurokawa, Epstein & Arup Consortium designed this thirteen-story cube of metal panels and trusses.

Not only was it recently opened, but it's also open while I'm here.

The building has its points – for those that are into this kind of thing. The first two floors are mostly outdoor space – a stark windswept no-man's-land. A lobby inhabits a glass curvilinear gesture to one side with a café filling the space above it. The third floor is a 2600 m2 clear span exhibit floor. At the moment, the hall is filled with recruiters for business opportunities for establishments such as 7-11, KFC, and a variety of domestic companies. They're not sure what to make of me as I wander through looking at the detailing and overall effect of the space.

Floors five through nine are taken up by a 2754 seat concert hall. It has the flexibility for a variety of capacities and arrangements, but still preserves the acoustical assets of a shoebox configuration. However, given its size, it sacrifices by placing the rear balcony seating substantially away from the stage. I ask one of the event personnel in the lobby if it would be possible to look at the hall.

“Impossible”, he replies.

OK. And he's starting to look like GB to me.

I go up a service elevator, which stops backstage. A J-Pop concert or a convention performance is caterwauling through the corridors to where I am. A security guard stands in the way of my entrance onstage. Yeah, impossible. Thanks, guys.

On up – the tenth floor is conference rooms, the twelfth is a conference room, the Grande Toque restaurant, the main Conference Hall and an abstracted rooftop garden. I check out the round and domed Conference Hall. It can comfortably hold 50 to 100 people in a conference configuration while ringed in its entirety by a multi-media booth.

Need I say it? – The roof garden was locked. So how many strikes is that?

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Back at the hotel, I get a call – can I join for dinner? It's at SY's apartment – so, maybe, just maybe, it may not be closed when I get there. I meet up with ML and we head out there. It's gonna be a night out with the Vegans. Those antenna-like things are starting to sprout out above my temples. But it's OK – only other Vegans can see them.

Remember, this is the land of octopus balls and fish eyes and you name it – ain't no other Vegans around these parts, pahdner!

Dinner is great. It's flavorful, filling and safe – I don't have to worry about sudden "surprises". It also has enough novelty to be stimulating. Gorged, we're sitting around, talking, and admiring the view out the huge open window.

A slam of wind through the window declares the typhoon season officially open. The lights of Osaka disappear behind a roaring wall of rain and hail. Torches of lightning strobe the room while thunder shakes it like a two-bit vibrating mattress. Eventually, the storm dies down, time's sand runs out, and we must take our leave.

Walking the small streets on the way back to the station, I'm looking at some stonework inside a building that we're passing – instead of looking ahead. My right foot goes down into the gutter. I hop, flail, and windmill – only to accelerate my forward momentum. I go down flat.

And you think thunder shook the ground before!

My right arm is somewhat sprained, my right knee is banged up, but other than that, I tell myself that I'm OK. On we go to the station – with me limping.

Ahh-h – the sweet scent of defeat!

Turn me into a limpin' lizard, will ya? Ahm gonna getcha fer this, GB!

Dateline 21 May 2000

Highs and Lows in the Big Udon

It's a be-yoo-tee-full day in the Big Udon!

The sun's out, the sky's clear, and a breeze dances in the air. I pack myself out of the hotel as quick as I can and head for the hills – but not so quick that I can't savor a Starbucks from across the street. Ahhh – liquid sunshine!

I head for my oft-postponed dream. (Well, one of 'em.) I take the Yotsubashi Line to Namba and switch over to a Nara-bound express on the Kintetsu Line. After about fifteen minutes it starts to climb the foothills of the Ikoma Mountains, which are part of the range that separates Nara from Osaka.

Just to the west of the tracks I briefly spot a park? – a garden? – a place of New-Age rituals? Who knows, but it looks like some modern day would-be wizard placed a collection of astral figures about a large metal spherical thing - like a model of electrons whizzing about a nucleus. All this in a park/garden setting that overlooks Osaka to the west. It was but a fleeting glance, so I may not have seen things properly. Nevertheless, I'm looking forward to going back again. I note that the station just past it is Ishikiri.

Shortly the train enters a tunnel about 3km long. Ikoma City, the station immediately after emerging from the tunnel, is my destination. I exit up the stairs at the west end of the station, pass by some shops in the elevated structure, and generally angle to the southwest.

And there it is!

And there it is.

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“It” is the Ikoma Mountain Cable Car. I never imagined that it would be this way. But here I am, and I guess I'll go through with it. You see, the front of this incline rail car is a huge face of a cartoon clown. Blasting out from its speakers are kiddy songs pounded out on a calliope. And then there's the voice-over (screech-over) of some Ritalin-deprived Pee Wee Herman wanna-be.

I don't understand a word he's saying, but I know what it is:

“C'mon boys and girls!
We'll have some fun and play!
There's rides; there's toys –
Oh, what a happy, happy, day!
You'll race on the Whirlwind Coaster,

You'll spin on the Spit and Hurl,
 You'll shake in the Haunted Castle,
 It'll make your every hair curl.
 And then you'll have candy,
 And then you'll have cake,
 And then you'll have little
 Lumps of dead raw fish...

Well...it might be fun – for someone.

Whatever, it's not gonna stop me! I pay my ¥350, step inside and sit down in one of the thirty or so spaces. It takes about five minutes to go up. We all get off and board another cackling kiddy clown masquerading as a cable car. This one is steeper, and it starts out for the first 100m or so in an unlit tunnel. When it comes out, there's a good view of the valley around Ikoma City. The track is lined with trees, blooming rhododendrons, and an occasional house.

The vehicle is a-howl with screaming kids, calliope music, Pee-san or Wee-san, and the clanking of the wheels on the tracks. Just in case we should hear birds in the trees outside, they have protected us by adding loud simulations of birdcalls to the sound track. It's the bonsai approach to nature – nothing is of value unless man has created value out of it. So, if it moves, eat it. And, if it's subject to the elements, be the first element there to subject it - and fashion it.

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We unload almost at the top, at an elevation of 642 m. In front of me is what appears to be a theme park (ala Magic Mountain, but without the foliage) entrance dead ahead and a service road to the left. Rides and attractions are scattered at the foot of a forest of microwave transmission towers. After the sonic assault on the way up, I don't want to reward the management with a paid admission. I notice that others are just walking in – apparently there is no admission, but the attractions are ticketed.

I saunter in. To my left is a mouse-type coaster. To the right is another small coaster, but with Dumbos on top of the monorail track and with the riders slung underneath. Presumably they're equipped with umbrellas or shielded helmets like the ones firemen wear. After all, it's not like they're sitting on top of the elephants.

Up ahead is a variant of the parachute drop. Off to the right I see ripoffs of Mickey and Donald marquee-ing other rides. Somewhere in there is what I would call a Spin the Sphincter and a Duke-Puke-em.

My current favorite is a simple one-story box-like building with white clapboards on the front. Seemingly classical columns support a pediment over a centered portico. The sign says "White House." Under the portico is a painted statue of a barnyard bird holding a

sign asking for 300 yen. I don't know if it means that inside is a duck show, or if one should go to the "White House" for a cheap goose.

Inscrutable.

Further off to the left is a marginally themed flume ride. Just before it, is an arcade that looks like a Value-Engineered and abandoned Farrell's ice cream parlor. The sign overhead proclaims it to be "Las Vegas." How lucky.

Across the fairway is my ultimate favorite. Again, it is a simple concrete box, with only the front receiving any treatment – and 90% of that is an upper and lower band of sloping wall with score lines for character. On the lower left are four or five large vessels with a pipe or two coming out. Running horizontally across the front is a meter-high recessed band, halfway up the façade. In it are a few flashing strobes and some scrap pieces of pipe. Some have arrows on them pointing to the left, others pointing to the right – but they all say "Caution".

Then there is a circular gate?, portal?, lock?, with sections that look like they might slide up, down, and to the sides. There are arrows to enhance the experience – and next to each arrow is the warning: "Caution." Just in case you don't get the idea that this is a dangerous place, a space capsule about a third of the size of a VW bug is crashed into the corner of the building.

The show title on this extra-terrestrial edifice should warm the heart of every Eco-Feminist out there: "Gaia – Cosmic Horror."

Yeah – I'm horrified.

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I pass the mini-golf course on my way out. I cross the service road that leads up to the entrance and head toward more transmission towers. Right afterwards, the trail splits. Straight ahead, the trail essentially follows the ridge for the next 11.6-km to Mt. Ishigi, where another cable car brings one down to the terminus of the Kintetsu Shigi Line. To the right, the trail descends for 5 km to the western base of Mt. Ikoma where the Hiraoka Shrine and the Hiraoka station on the Kintetsu Nara Line are located.

The maps along the trail are next to useless, since they have no scale. The maps available at the trailhead are marginally better. All I know is that down is towards the station. The descent is steep along most of the way. Unfortunately, since it rained the night before, the trail has a slick coat of mud in most places. Where footing is available, the aggregate tends to be stones rather than rocks. The descent could be a breeze to a moderately skilled rock-hopper, but the smallish stones have no purchase in the mud.

It is hot and humid. There is no breeze. Everything is slowly, slowly dripping. Silkworms dangle from the trees above, and are swept onto my shirt as I descend. Birdcalls

reverberate in the cathedral-like forest. Occasionally there are brilliant spots where wild azaleas bloom. But mostly, I'm thirsty. Like a fool, I keep forgetting to bring water on these excursions – and I haven't had any fluids since breakfast some four hours ago. Much as I would like to take my time, I feel pressed to get to someplace where I can have something to drink.

About halfway down is a pavilion that overlooks the Osaka basin below. Both its roof and the guardrail around the drop have butterfly motifs. A section of trees has been clear-cut to provide a view – the cuttings left to litter the forest floor. But – who cares? – the butterflies don't know if this is pretty or not.

Still further down, the trail crosses a paved road to get to a wooden bridge that faces a waterfall amidst maples. Beautiful, just beautiful – but on I hurry. Water, water, everywhere, but nary a drop to drink.

My best friend for some years in New York was Shoji Hiraoka, son of one of Japan's most celebrated musicians, Yoichi Hiraoka. I had wondered whether there was any connection with his family and the Hiraoka Shrine. So, after all this anticipation, here I am. And zip!, zam!, badda-boom-bang! And I'm in there and I'm outa' there, 'cause I'm really, really, really thirsty.

Five minutes later, I'm down at the station. There's a broom closet sized shop with a little glass reefer with cold cans of Asahi. I sit down on some steps outside and sip slowly. Pigeons jostle for position on the power lines above. A handful of teenage slackers and slackettes lounge about on the pavement in the shade of the station – waiting for the next big thing to happen.

Nothing happens.

I finish my beer, and catch the next train back.

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I freshen up a bit at the hotel, and then head out to the "Dance on the Banks" festival on the Modugawa. I needn't have bothered. It looks like half of the Osakan Caucasian population is attending a grunge version of a Haight-Ashbury masquerade party. A handful of howling wretches is seriously abusing some instruments on stage while trying to impersonate musicians. The screeches of agony rebound from the few apartment buildings on the far side of the river.

Unfortunately, I'm still thirsty and I still haven't thought to bring my own. So, during the course of my stay, I buy a few cans of dearly overpriced beer.

I say "Hi" to some friends and acquaintances from the office. FO'R suggests that this is the perfect time for some ultra-nationalist local to launch some homemade ordnance and take a major step in ethnically cleansing Osaka. The degree of plausibility makes me

sprout eyes in the back of my head. I slowly scan the locals walking the tops of the embankment above us – trying to make myself think as they do. Suddenly, a cramp knots my brain during the attempt.

I saunter down to the water. Descending into the murk, a short flight of steps continuously follows the river's edge. It is reminiscent of the section of the Ganges where all manners of things go on on the steps that lead into it. The water's edge is filthy with debris and floating trash. Festival attendees are scattered about on the steps, chatting, watching the setting sun, or getting loud.

Three guys are shooting off little firecracker rockets – not towards the river – but towards me. I move on. Some other guy comes up to me and insists that “We need you in the mosh pit”. “No you don't”, I reply.

Amazing. The only purpose in life I have among these revelers is to be a target. I revulse at the cultural dead-end this event upholds. It is where an open sewer replaces a riverside, where noise replaces music, and where slovenliness replaces style.

I walk out of there, with the back of my scalp prickling. My extra eyes are still scanning, and I'm thinking, “Any moment now - any moment...”

Dateline 27 May 2000

Sake to Me, Big Udon!

The sky is drizzling in the gray monotony of this morning. Umbrellas are but large dots on the sidewalks twenty-four floors below me. They swirl and swarm past each other in a textbook case of colloidal motion.

Nope, no distant excursions for me this time. Besides, I have to be ready at 15:45 for a dinner engagement this evening. I decide to explore around my own backyard, so to speak. I know I haven't stuck my nose into every corner beneath and about the Umeda area.

I'm in no rush, so I fish out the newspapers I haven't read yet. There in the Tuesday, May 23 edition of *The Mainichi Daily News* is the following blurb:

Foot cult's hometown looks to ax group

FUJI, Shizuoka – The municipal assembly here on Monday adopted a request to dissolve the Ho-no-Hana Sampogyo foot-reading cult.

The Fuji-based cult has been at the center of a conflict between local residents and cult members regarding the expansion of the group's facilities.

The assembly's request says the cult has broken the law, and this necessitates action by the Cultural Affairs Agency. The agency has the authority to order the dissolution of a religious body believed to be harming public welfare.

Friday's edition further reports the arrest of the cult's leader and his second-in-command for extortion of millions of yen from women that joined the cult. After consulting the group and having their feet "read," they were told that they would die of cancer unless they joined the cult and turn over their money.

It seemed strange to me that the *Mainichi*, an oft light-hearted paper, did not refer to the heads as the cult leader and his right ha... - I mean, foot. Or, at what point the victims realized that the whole deal stank. Or, that the women were cajoled into joining by telling them that it would save their soles.

This story has legs.

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Another news brief also catches my attention, because by origin (and by second citizenship) I'm Latvian.

Russians rank Japan as 4th largest threat

MOSCOW (Kyodo) – While only 1 percent of Russians believe Japan is a threat to Russia, in terms of ranking, Japan comes out in a national survey as the fourth most feared country in Russia, the Interfax news agency reported Thursday.

Interfax, quoting results of a survey conducted by the Regional Policy Research pollster, said Russians rank the United States as the country posing the biggest threat to Russia, cited by 27 percent of the 1,600 respondents.

China ranked second, cited by 3 percent of the respondents, followed by Latvia, a former Soviet republic where there is constant friction with its sizable Russian population, with 2 percent of the respondents citing the country as a potential threat.

As I recall, there are some twenty countries that have confirmed nuclear weaponry. There are about twice that many that are suspected of having them or are in the process of developing them. Latvia is not among either one of these groups. The biggest threat Latvia poses to Russia is the closure of its beaches to Russian tourists.

I suspect that 25 percent of the respondents were so paranoid from brain damage that they were afraid of the US – which, by coinkydink, was the only country listed on the cover page of the questionnaire. The other 75 percent cast their votes randomly. They were too drunk to read the questions.

Vadda Kuntree!

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Eventually, I roll on out of the hotel and into the labyrinth below. I had run across mention of a cultural center up in the Hanshin department store. In the process, I figure I might do a little shopping for home as well.

At the east end of the second floor is the Breeze CD & Video store. I try to find a purported video of Martha Arguerich, but come up empty. I take an elevator up to the ninth floor – home of arts, crafts and jewelry. I browse through the calligraphy supplies, take time to enjoy the select pieces of pottery on display, and note that there is a little nook where a man is repairing the unclothed innards of an SLR camera. If I have a chance, I'll have to bring my Pentax there. I poke around the entire floor, but there is no cultural center here.

I go up a floor on the escalator. It's approaching noon and this is the restaurant floor. There's a promising Italian place as well as a bakery and grill called Alaska. I decide not to bog down with eating and continue on my quest.

I go back to the ninth floor, just in case I missed some turn or door. I still don't find the center. I ride down another floor, where shouting and hawking is going on at one end and toys are at the other. I buy a little gold bug to add to the other VWs on my shelf back home. The hawkers are in a "bargain basement" sale area. I buy a calligraphy brush for a couple of dollars less than what the store sells it for one floor up.

A store directory indicates that something like a cultural center is on the third floor. I take another elevator there in the west end of the store. As it stops along the way down, I see out into one of the floors a sign for the "Beauty Saloon". Nothing like a beer facial or a suds bath. I wonder if the owner's significant other is a beast.

When I get to the third floor, it's like I've wandered into the service corridors. As I weave through the dingy and deserted halls, I see through some partly open doors what may be administrative offices. I pass a couple of people, but they don't question my presence. I go back to the elevator lobby, off of which is what looks like a cafeteria with place settings on the tables – but there is no food or server in evidence.

Baffled, I leave. What I had expected was something like a gallery or museum with a collection of Japanese traditional arts and crafts. What there actually is, is a place for holding community and organization meetings. Stretching it, culture here is the process of interaction, not the product of individual initiative.

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I sink back down into the tunnels. As I head along the Whitey East Mall, there's a fairly new fast food court right next to a **Panda Express** ("from California!" it exclaims) and a **Haagen-Dazs**. Among the usual (for Japan) offerings in the court, is **Azteca** Mexican Tacos and **Ashoka** Indian. My favorite Indian restaurant in town is Ashoka, so I have to try this.

After ordering I sit down facing the pedestrian tunnel at a counter with fixed footstools. With my nose almost forcibly pressed against the glass while I eat, a gazillion gazers and I stare each other down as they swim the currents of the human sea outside. Or so it seems.

I had ordered a vegetable curry with mango juice. ¥745 lighter, I have on my tray a paper plate with sticky rice mildly flavored with saffron, a 300 ml foam cup two thirds full with a lumpy light brown gravy, and another 300 ml cup – but clear – half full of ice with some juice poured on top. I also get a wrapped plastic spoon with tines on the end of it. I pour some of the curry out onto the rice. It's edible, but nothing to write home about [*So, why am I doing just that?*]. Other than the occasional piece of a de-frozen vegetable medley of diced carrots, quarter-inch long pieces of green beans, and peas, this could almost be standard Japanese curry.

Pass.

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After tramping through Whitey North Mall 1 and Whitey North Mall 2 – where other future dining prospects present themselves – I go up into the Hep Navio. Like with the Hanshin, I had encountered some mention of a Navio Museum somewhere up in there.

I start with the seventh floor on top. There's a multiplex cinema at the north end. Among the restaurants is what appears to be a very popular pasta place branched off from Tokyo. In the center is a café with a high two-story ceiling. The atmosphere is definitely contemporary cathedral. There are organ pipes at one end above a slightly raised platform. No doubt, this is intended as a backdrop for weddings. Despite the pipes, there doesn't appear to be an organ. Ahh, those show designers and their scenery!

On the sixth floor, the central space is treated like a plaza courtyard with arched footbridges accessing it across running water. There are more restaurants – with most showing signs of bending to the onslaught of Italianate cuisine. An eye of mine is caught by an Indian restaurant.

As I pass by the window looking into the part of the kitchen with the tandoor oven, the two chefs inside grin broadly and bow. Hey, flattery with me may get you flattened, but if it comes with flatbread (like naan), then I'm a sucker. I vow to return in a couple of days.

It's time to head back to the hotel. I stop off at the Hanshin and pick up a couple of pastries. I chow them down in my room in case the dinner later is too carnivorous for my taste.

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I get down to the lobby precisely at 15:45. SY and his wife are there. After a minute or two, JH, his wife, his daughter, and one of the vendors' staff join us. We go south a block to the Kita-Shinchi station of the JR Tozai line. Heading east, it becomes the JR Gakken-Toshi Line. We take the express to Kawachi-Iwafune station in Katano City, which is about halfway to Kyoto. We exit the station, walk away from it a block and turn left. About a quarter of a mile up the road, our destination can be seen on the right hand (southeast) side of the road. It is an older two-story plastered building with large peeling painted kanji on the parapet. It is the only building that high in the area. It is part of a sake brewery.

There is no entry evident along this point. JH says it's around the back. The map tacked to the wall confirms it. We go up an asphalt driveway that bears to the right of the road. It goes up and into the service courtyard of the brewery complex. An odd note is that as we head up, a certain distinctively cloying odor keeps getting stronger. I can place it, but don't want to believe it until there is further information.

In the courtyard, a man tells us that we have come the wrong way – that we should go back down to the street, continue along it to the next street corner, and then make a sharp right. The pungent smell diminishes as we walk away.

We walk back down to the road. After the sharp right, we shortly come to the entrance of **Mukume Tei**. Tel: 072-891-0353.

A traditional courtyard gate building frames a view to the old, tiled wooden buildings about the garden within. A stone path leads us in to where we make a right turn and exchange our shoes for slippers before entering the brewery. I can get only four of my toes under the straps, and my size thirteen heels extend well beyond the soles of the slippers. Ouch!

We are welcomed into the lobby of the brewery. The 170+ year old structure is of wood stained almost black, with white plaster walls between the framing. The desk, the display shelves behind it, and a wooden screen are more recent in origin. The furnishings are long, low slabs of wood, sanded smooth but unplanned save for the tops. Their horizontality expands the room while their lowness creates the illusion of even greater spaciousness. Everything is simple and Spartan. The irregularities inherent in the materials used serve as the sole ornamentation

Just before the entrance to the dining hall is a waist-high volcanic stone. Water trickles down from a bamboo pipe into a bowl-shaped hollow ground into its top. Two slender wooden ladles, a floating lilac chrysanthemum blossom, and some well placed spotlighting form a composition of sights, sounds and textures that delight each of the senses. The fact that most of these things are available from your local gardening shop doesn't diminish the impact.

The dining room is an equally old barn warehouse. Great crooked logs criss-cross the space some twelve feet off the tiled floor. Rugged rafters slope up into the darkness well above them. Descending between the girders are six crooked and angular cylinders of white rice paper that are a modern version of Japanese lanterns. The tables are logs that have been planed on the top and finished clear. Only the chairs bow to modern flexibility – and are folding metal ones.

The guests are here for a night of jazz. They are the vanishing knights of the fabled shogun – battling the evils of a cultural war for finger-poppin' git-down-momma meaning - all in a world of surface.

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Just after being seated, orders are taken for either beer or sake – both of which they brew and bottle themselves. A pianist and a bassist launch into a couple of straight-up jazz standards. They're joined for the rest of the set by a Japanese lady that belts out a few in a style akin to Anita O'Day. I bet she could do a mean Billie Holliday too. Everybody in the room is bobbing their heads in time, tapping their toes, and clapping feverishly after

each number. It seems like a mostly fiftyish crowd of citizens – about forty altogether, filling in all of the available seats.

Meanwhile, the beer and sake arrive. The sake is served in what would resemble a small, personal-sized ceramic teakettle without a lid. It's then decanted into simple modern glass tumblers about 40mm high and in diameter. Like a wine, it is served temperate. The volatility of the oils and other substances that give adult beverages their flavor, are destroyed and/or altered with heat. At the other extreme, substantive chilling numbs the taste buds.

So, if you want to get snookered real quick, toss your tequila in the barby, stick your head under the steamer lid and breathe in real deep. [*Author's PC warning: Careful, Do not try this unless you are professionally licensed - this could be the last time you breathe.*] Or, if you want to give the appearance that you are still able to stand up, stick that Stoli in the freezer the night before. It'll lock the synapses in your brain and keep you from moving altogether. So if you start out standing, you'll still be standing. However, if you want to savor the flavor of a quality quaff, the owner of this place knows what he's doing.

Dinner is more a matter of appetizers than of a repast. The first course has a few slices of cucumber with pickles, two 25mm cubes of beef, and a small pile of thinly sliced lotus root chips that beat their potato cousins hands down. The second course features a baby octopus tentacle, three slices of some slightly slimy root (Yucca? Taro?), and two somethings like small sushi rolls curled up within bright green leaves. This vegan chows down on the root-lets - slime and all – but passes on the “stuff that used to swim”. Someone speculates on whether the proper plural is octopusses or octopi. I say that I'm not sure, but if you put two or more of these tentacles together you have an octipital convergence.

The third course is what might be this country's mon-de-nai football food: 20 dry roasted peanuts, three shoestring strips of provolone cheese, eight potato chips, two whole dried herrings, one slice of pepperoni, and 12 nori-wrapped rice snacklets. It's been a really nice meal – but I'm oh so glad I snacked earlier. And nice not just because of the drinks – but everything: the food, the facility, the entertainment, the company, the atmosphere, and the memories.

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We sit and talk. I chide JH's daughter about her avowed Feminism. I take things a step father than the Million-Man and Million-Mom marches in Washington DC. I suggest the more effective Million Mime March. Imagine a miles long line of mimes, moving towards Washington DC, while pressing against imaginary glass....Tell me that Leno and Letterman wouldn't be out there doing “interviews.”

We sit and we talk some more - with the owner. It gets to be well past last call and the rest of his guests have left. He's charming, intelligent, a man of taste, and fluent in English. Before we leave, he takes us to see the inside of a traditional house that is one of

the buildings off the courtyard. It has two rooms of eight tatamis each and one of six – all of the rooms in linear sequence, divisible by sliding screens.

Everybody is looking at a gilded niche for ancestors in the Buddhist tradition that is built into the side of the middle room. I'm drawn to the room in the rear where a print hangs. It shows a bird perching on a reed. Like the entrance and dining hall of the brewery, it is minimalist. It is seemingly made with just a few strokes of black ink. The scroll is dominated by the white untouched spaces. Nothing is rendered in full. Only the least possible information is overtly there – the imagination is engaged to complete the picture.

But it is the subject matter that arrests me as well. Here the painting celebrates the bird's singularity, isolation and individuality. Similarly, Ikebana (Japanese flower arranging) treasures the asymmetric, the dynamic, and the expressive. Again, in the same vein, the most treasured ceramics are irregular and enhanced with glazes that produce unpredictable effects during the firing process. All this in the supposed land of conformity.

Yet, in America, which purports to be the land of the extreme individual, the shared identity of commonly experiencing artworks is more important than the ideas expressed within the art. In this way, it is more important to have at home a poster for a David Hockney exhibit with the name "David Hockney" emblazoned boldly across the bottom than it is to have a Hockney itself. Your friends wouldn't recognize one of his works, but they recognize the name, and, hey! – they now know you've got taste. You've got the right label, the right rallying flag to gather around.

It's more important to have that designer label showing on your clothes than it is to select attire that expresses a style. News and talk about who's doing who and what's the buzz is more important than discussing the ideas (if any) presented in a film. The actors and actresses are labels that we can rally around and worship and adore, while the content of the films they appear in is irrelevant. Pop music is the same – the musicians are the message. Accessibility is desired more than refinement and intellectual engagement. And even at that, three to five minutes of incessantly repetitive rap thumping is the attention span limit. Who wants to sit through an entire symphony?

And that's the paradox – despite the seemingly pervasive conformity, some of Japan's arts extol individuality. In America, many people appear to act as self-styled individualists, but their culture revolves about conformity.

Every problem has its opportunities. When I get back to LA, I think I'll try to effect a cure. I think I'll found Conformists Anonymous – and encourage everyone to join my twelve step program in order to support each other in living one day at a time as individualists.

On the way back to the station, SY explains that the room we were in is used for brewing sake during the winter. In order to get additional revenue at other times of the year, it is

available for dining – with reservations. Which might explain that distinctive cloying odor I smelled upon arrival – that of heat-drying cannabis.