

## VANISH ALL THINGS

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In Tokyo, time passed quickly during the day and slowly at night. Sleepless nights swelled out in front of me like a pregnancy. Daylight delivered me shattered, yearning to crawl back into the womb of night.

One of my students mentioned that insomnia was a common problem in Tokyo. I took to the streets every night, willing the anonymous sleepless to join me in my vigil. Around midnight I would set out, walking along canals, across highways and through cemeteries until exhaustion brought me home sweating. Loneliness had taken root in my solar plexus, and was working its way up to my throat.

By day I taught English at a school on the third floor of a building in West Ikebukuro, one of the less-reputable districts of Tokyo. It was a place of gambling, prostitution and foreigners. My students told me that in the morning, before the street cleaners arrived, the streets of Ikebukuro were awash with blood. I found it hard to believe, as I had never felt so safe at night anywhere else in the world, including Melbourne. The mainstream media in Japan exaggerated stories of crime. As in most places, fear sold papers.

Something happened to me in Tokyo that I did not tell my students. In fact, no one else knew about it except for Simone, who was there when it happened. It seemed such a small thing, but so strange that I wanted to hold the incident close to me, like an enemy whose strangeness would otherwise engulf me.

I had stayed overnight at Simone's place in Meidaimai, supposedly an arty student-suburb not yet gentrified. To be honest, I struggled to determine the demographics of any area of Tokyo. In my tired haze,

everything seemed overwhelmingly similar. Apart from the homeless, most people wherever I went looked well dressed. Most suburbs held the same mix of impeccable houses, tiny restaurants and exceedingly bright convenience stores. So I took Simone's word for it when she said Meidaimai was on the cusp of being hip.

It seemed fitting that she lived in such an area, yet I half-wondered if she wasn't exaggerating its artiness to justify putting up with a shabby apartment and spending her money on partying.

Simone had lived in Tokyo for several years and taught English like I did. We spent this particular evening downing Chu-Hi, which were fizzy rice-wine drinks, and discussing the various ways in which we felt racially discriminated against.

This was a favourite subject among many foreigners in Japan, but I found it mostly banal. Growing up in a conservative Jewish family, with members who wore their fear on their sleeves like stars of David, I had heard it all before. 'They don't like us' and 'we're different' were phrases I would be happy to never hear again.

Normally, I tried to reframe this discussion, instead turning critical eyes to the impact of Western Imperialism and Capitalism on Japanese society and the world in general. I'd spoiled the mood at a number of social gatherings by asking the question 'As white English teachers in Asia, are we not agents of colonisation?'

But Simone was half-Philippina, and I was weak. She had more to complain of, and despite my better intentions, I was drawn into carping about our lot in Japan. Besides, Simone's irreverence made whingeing delicious, especially when we were drunk on local booze.

We stayed up until late, shrieking and cackling on her futon, forgetting momentarily that the following morning we had to face the very world we criticised. At seven the next morning, we stepped out into the icy air and headed for the train station to catch our respective trains. I spoke little; Simone babbled enough for two.

I thought about Melbourne as we trudged along winding streets to the station. Back home, my terminally ill grandmother, Lily, languished. She had made me promise I'd be back to see her before she died. I kept

hearing from other family members that Lily was ‘putting up a good fight’. But the cancer was in her liver, and I had the growing sense that her ‘fighting’ her illness would bring her body the same type of stress that had caused cancer in the first place. I had tried telling her at one point that letting go of her anger might help. It enraged her.

We arrived at the train station and lined up at the ticket machines, behind dozens of salarypeople headed for work.

‘Chi-ke-to!’ Simone said wryly, as we both dug through our bags for money. I often hoped that the Japanese around us didn’t realise that Simone was mocking them.

Once, not long after I had arrived in Tokyo, Simone and I had walked for an entire day in the streets of fashionable Shibuya and Harajuku, speaking ‘French’ in theatrically loud voices. Out clubbing the previous night, we had met an extremely arrogant DJ named Frank, who had told us that his grandmothers in France were named Nicolette and Simone. We found this coincidence profoundly amusing.

By the next afternoon, still without sleep, shouting ‘Je suis jambon’ and ‘Gerard Depardieu sur la plage, s’il vous plait’ in the most affected accents we could manage was a source of great hilarity. We drifted about the streets, attempting to outdo each other’s temporary insanity. At the time I thought we were creating a kind of spontaneous theatre, and perhaps sending up the absurdly aloof DJ Frank. Later I realised that by disturbing the peace the Japanese valued so highly, Simone had been putting up resistance to the racism she experienced every day.

We moved up in the queue, salarypeople making their orderly way from the machines to the ticket gates. I counted and recounted my coins, pretending to ignore Simone as she searched noisily through her bag for her mobile phone, muttering that she thought she’d lost it.

Again? I thought, but didn’t say it.

Finally I reached the ticket machine and placed my coins one by one into the slot. Three hundred and ten yen. A one-way trip to Ikebukuro station on the Yamanote line. The coins disappeared soundlessly, the digital screen registering each one instantly. When I had entered the required amount, the machine politely dispensed my ticket.

My hangover was beginning to make itself known. I placed my bag and my train ticket just to the right of me on the steel ledge that ran beneath the row of ticket machines.

Convenience seemed so important in Japan and was embodied in the design of public amenities. Even though I am tall compared to many Japanese women, the ledge was the perfect height to rest my bag.

Breathing deeply, I closed my eyes just for a moment. When I opened them again, my train ticket was gone. Just like that. In its exact place was a small blue square of metal the size of a matchbook. I looked around me quickly, my hand simultaneously searching my bag for the small stiff cardboard ticket I had just bought. I opened my wallet, searched my pockets, the ground. My ticket was gone.

I picked up the blue square. It was metal, smooth in my hand. There was the slightest hint of warmth from the hand of whoever had just left it for me. Someone had just left it for me.

Stepping away from the ticket machines, I looked around for the owner of the square of metal and saw no one but silent swarms of commuters moving in the morning rush.

I examined the square closely and read three words printed on it in English:

**Vanish all things**

the black lettering read. I flipped it over, and again:

**Vanish all things**

*(end of excerpt)*