

Learning to laugh in Japan

BY BRAXTON YOUNTS

THE THING IS HUGE, spanning the entirety of my back, from shoulder to shoulder, neck to waist, hip to hip. Occasionally, when the angle is just right, I can catch a glimpse of the tattoo in the bathroom mirror. After returning from a two-month sojourn in and around Tokyo, I solicited an artist. He tattooed a koi, a monstrous golden carp, swimming up the river of my back, ornamented by rosy sakura and a violet chrysanthemum. As I understand, in Japanese folklore, a koi represents persistence, perseverance, and determination. Japan inspired me to be tattooed.

Karen had graduated from college and was combing the classifieds for jobs in the field of anthropology. Our relationship was stressed with uncertainty and student loans tugged at her purse. I pointed out that a job in a foreign country would be like an ethnographic study- and putting 9000 miles between us, well, that was a built-in bonus.

She soon acquired a job teaching English to children in Japan. Lonely and jealous in small-town North Carolina, I flew out early one morning over wintry trees and hay fields to visit her. Ducks on icy ponds preened themselves in dawn's bucolic light. I flew west- so far west that West became East- and Japan, land of the rising sun, loomed into view.

After 17 hours, with my butt cheeks asleep and a crick in my neck, I landed in Tokyo. Karen met me at the airport and taught me to navigate the labyrinth of commuter trains and indecipherable signposts. At the bottom of urban canyons, schooling pedestrians darted in rivers of grid-locked traffic. Lime, ruby, lemon, chartreuse and cerulean, Tokyo's Lite-Brite displays rivaled Times Square's.

The next day Karen and I were invited to Fuji-kyu Highlands, an amusement park located at the base of sacred Mount Fuji. In a car with a Japanese couple, we raced to the amusement park. We rode a roller coaster that had once held the dubious title of tallest traditional roller coaster in the world.

After working up a thirst on the Tilt-A-Whirl, I located one of the ubiquitous beer vending machines. The others nibbled at ice cream while I loosened up with my drink. I pulled up my shirt and rubbed my

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bloated belly, signifying my satiation. A lean Japanese male noticed my western-sized gut and remarked, "Too many cheeseburgers?" We laughed at America's gluttony.

Next our cultural guides insisted we visit a Japanese house of horrors. To them it was scary. They squealed and giggled the whole way through. I'll admit it was dark and disorienting but not frightful. There were images of skinny, under-fed farmers up to their knees in rice patties, wearing stereotypical disk-like hats seen in war movies. It was not the least bit terrifying to Karen or me.

After 20 one-hour tattoo sessions, my body still shudders, the pain never waning. The mechanized needle plunges ink into my skin forever. Burning turns to swelling, and swelling turns to scabbing. To alleviate the discomfort, my tattoo artist suggests soaking in a warm bath. He says traditional Japanese tattooists recommend therapeutic hot springs, but we don't have any in America. Lapping warm water soothes away the pain, leaving raw patches of skin that soon give way to sunburn-like peeling. Sparks of discomfort evoke memories.

One night Karen suggested we go eat dinner in Tsudanama. We met an Australian bloke who invited us to Sala's, better known as "the tent," a bar covered by a circus-like tent. British expatriates packed Sala's. We guzzled beer and laughed as an English gent kept us giddy with his raucous array of jokes. "Do you know what an oxymoron is?" he prodded. Silence.

Everyone focused on Karen and me. "American Intelligence," he said. We all laughed.

As an initiation we bravely partook in the ritual of drinking Lion's Penis Liquor. It tasted like sweet vodka. After speaking with a few other bar patrons, I found out it was made from some variety of root touted as an aphrodisiac, and not actually a lion's penis. The bartender liked to get women and gullible tourists to try it. Again, we all laughed.

I slept late on my last day in Tokyo. The scrambled eggs Karen had cooked for my bon-voyage breakfast laid heavy in my stomach as I walked to the train station nearby. I had thought a nice ten day vacation in Japan would refresh my mind and body. The hot, smoggy air nauseated me. All of the train platforms were jammed with people. On the train I tried to steady myself, choking back vomit. I jumped off at the next stop. Deliriously, I zig-

zagged through throngs of business men until I found the toilets.

Traditional Asian toilets bear no resemblance to Western ones. The toilet's ceramic trough was flush with the floor, and a user squatted over it, deftly avoiding the stainless-steel hood that covered the back half of the toilet. Exposed chrome pipes ran up the wall to a tank at the ceiling. I had avoided these toilets until now, because of stories I had heard about people losing the contents of their pockets while squatting. Now I found solace in an unoccupied stall. Immediately dropping my bag, I retched. It brought me to my knees. Soon I collapsed onto the cool floor. The stall was huge, large enough for me to lie curled in ball. Seeking respite, I rested my sweaty forehead against the pipes and eventually, I laughed. Ten days just wasn't enough time for me to gain an appreciation for the culture. Soon I was back on the train, en route to the airport and America, where the jokes weren't always on me.

Laughter helps wounds heal. The vivid Japanese-style artwork endures in my skin to this day, and Karen and I again live together. When we spot the tattoo it reflects memories, memories we left in the past. Auspiciously, my tattooed koi freely swims through time's white water.