

# **Little Pieces: This Side of Japan**

Stories by Michael Hoffman

*This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.*

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## **Author's Note**

Fate, I guess you'd call it, placed me in Japan at a certain impressionable stage of my life, and I've been here ever since. That's why my stories are set in Japan - not the Japan of the Japanese, not quite the Japan of the non-Japanese, maybe nobody's Japan but mine.

"First Snow" and "Sonoko" first appeared in The Japan Times.

Michael Hoffman,  
Hokkaido 2010



## First Snow

“Tamaki-kun! It’s you, isn’t it?”

Startled, the man looked up from the book he’d been perusing. He stared at the woman in bewilderment. “Yes, my name is Tamaki...”

“And you don’t recognize me!”

“I...no... I’m sorry...”

The woman seemed amused rather than offended, as though the man’s failure to recognize her was even more delightful than their unexpected meeting. She smiled; her eyes twinkled mischievously. “Will you take a chance and come with me anyway?”

“Go with you! Where?”

“For a cup of coffee. My treat. There’s a coffee shop one floor down. We won’t even have to go out. Is it still snowing, I wonder? Imagine snow this early in the season! What’s this?” She took the book from his hands. “A history of India! Are you interested in India?”

“I’m thinking of going there.”

“Business or pleasure?”

He shrugged vaguely. Opening the book at random, she read, “‘India’s largest concentration of temples, in Bhu...’ something-or-other... ‘was constructed over many centuries by a succession of...’ Oh, look!” She showed him a color photograph that suddenly struck her: a gleaming golden temple, its reflection shimmering in water.

"That's the Golden Temple at Amritsar."

"Quite the connoisseur, I see. Are you going to buy the book?"

"I don't know, I..."

"Oh, buy it, it looks so interesting!" She made a movement as though to take it to the cash herself, but Tamaki in confusion cried out, "Wait!"

"Well, put it back then, and let's go for coffee. You can come back for it later."



They seated themselves at a table by the window. Outside, the snow fell in fat, lazy flakes. To the waitress, who appeared almost immediately, the woman said, "Cappuccino, please," and then looked questioningly at her companion, who nodded as though affirming some inner thought and mumbled, "Mm."

"Tamaki-kun! Really, I'm so happy... but you still don't know who I am! Oh, but this is... Wouldn't it be nice to just spend an hour together like this, me knowing you but you not knowing me? But I'm sure you'd recognize me long before the hour was up. No? Nothing? You look at me and see a perfect stranger, nothing more? Can I have changed so much in thirty years?"

"Thirty years! Thirty years ago I was six years old!"

"And I was seventeen. There, I've confessed my age. If you care to flatter me and tell me you'd never have guessed, I won't mind. Think,

Tamaki-kun, think! Who babysat for you that time your father had a gall bladder operation and your mother - "

"Sayoko-chan!"

"Ah, thank you." The waitress had returned with their coffee. There was a moment's silence while she laid down their cups, and then:

"Sayoko-chan! But... how can you possibly have recognized me? I'm bald..."

"Oh, baldness changes a man much less than men seem to think. Besides, I saw you at your father's funeral."

"You were at my father's funeral?"

"Yes."

"Well then, why didn't you come over and speak to us? Mother would have been so pleased."

"I'm not so sure of that." She smiled faintly. "But tell me about yourself! What have you been up to all these years? What have you made of yourself? I'm dying to know."

"What have I made of myself? Nothing." He shrugged and gave a somewhat forced laugh. "Whatever potential I may have shown at six, I failed to live up to."

"Oh, come! You're still young! Your life has barely begun!"

"No doubt. What about you? You're married, of course?"

"Why 'of course'?"

"Single, then."

"It would seem to follow, but no, not that either. I was married twice. Once divorced and

now... I don't know what I am! My husband and I live in the same house, we exchange greetings every now and then... Is that marriage? Well, maybe it is. And you?"

"I'm single."

"More and more people are nowadays."

"Actually" - Tamaki's face brightened at the memory - "it was you I wanted to marry."

"When you were six. I remember."

"You said, 'If you want to marry me you'd better get a sword.' I said, 'Why?' And you said, 'Because my boyfriend will challenge you to a duel, and you'll have to fight him for me.' Remember?"

"I do!"

They were silent for a time, looking into each other's faces and smiling.

"Would I ever have guessed who you were?" he mused dreamily. "It seems so obvious now. Why, you've hardly changed at all!"

"Tamaki-kun, listen. I can't stay, I'm meeting someone for lunch in an hour. Why don't you come to my place for dinner tonight? We can get a little drunk, talk over old times... Or are you already spoken for, this last Sunday of the year?"

"No, but... what about your husband?"

"My husband is in Manila. He travels all over the world. For business and pleasure. Don't worry about him. We'll be quite alone."

"No children?"

"A daughter, married and living in New Zealand."

"Well..."

First Snow

"Say yes, Tamaki-kun. It's so dreary all alone in that big house."

"Well... yes then. With pleasure. Shall I bring white wine or red?"

"Surprise me."

---

They sat side by side on a long white couch, nursing their drinks - he scotch on the rocks, she vodka and tonic. By now whatever reserve there had been between them had melted away. They were simply old friends, lifelong friends, who had known each other since childhood. The fact that they had not seen each other in thirty years was forgotten. Tamaki marveled at the magnificence of the room he found himself in. It was like a drawing room in an old romance, with lighted candles, a small fire crackling on the hearth, and in the background, as though provided by an invisible private orchestra, soft, feathery chamber music. The savory odor of roasting meat wafted in from the kitchen.

"It's funny," she was saying. "You can always tell when it's snowing outside, even when the curtains are drawn and everything else about the outside world, including the damp and cold, has altogether vanished from your mind. Do you see what I mean?"

"Yes," he said, smiling blissfully, though in fact he had scarcely taken in her words. It all seemed so unreal. Sayoko-chan! He sipped his scotch. How many glasses had he drunk? He

must be careful. When he drank too much he was not immune to being sick to his stomach - and what an awful end that would be to such a beautiful, beautiful evening!

They brought each other up to date on their life histories. She was, she said, "a second-rate jazz singer," performing at "second-rate clubs" in Tokyo and occasionally elsewhere in the country. She laughed now at her childhood pretensions of having serious talent. Her disillusion had been traumatic but not crushing. Did it matter, after all, if she wasn't a star? Her singing might not please the most discriminating ears, but it was good enough for the easygoing audiences who came to see her. If she failed to shake people to the core of their being, she at least made them happy, "after a fashion, for a passing moment... It's funny," she said again. "More than once over the years I imagined I'd look out into the audience and see you sitting there."

"I'll come. You sang to me when I was little. I remember."

He told her in turn of his attempt, and failure, to follow in his father's footsteps. His father had been a distinguished journalist - an investigative reporter in his early years, and later on managing editor of the notoriously hard-hitting *Maiasa Shimbun*. His father's position assured him a place at the newspaper, and at first he showed no small degree of promise. Writing under a pen name in order to come out from under his father's shadow, he established himself as a respected

commentator on global politics. But then, he said, suddenly it all fell apart.

"What happened?"

"I suddenly realized... I didn't know what I was talking about. I was merely *pretending* to know, using highly sophisticated language (I was good at that) to hide my ignorance. My opinions, my world view, were built on sand."

"I suppose we all - "

"One day I wrote a column of sheer nonsense, learned-sounding gibberish. I did it on purpose. I'm not sure what possessed me, but... well, I did it. And do you know what? Nobody noticed! It got past the page editor, past the proofreader... and later that week there were three letters to the editor from readers who thought it brilliant, provocative, 'intellectually daring' - yes, one reader actually used those very words. 'Intellectually daring'!"

"Well?"

"I gave myself the weekend to think it over, and on Monday... I submitted my resignation."

"Your resignation! For that?"

"Yes! For that!"

"When? How long ago?"

"In October."

"You've been out of work since October?"

"Yes, Sayoko-chan. I've been out of work since October."

"But what will you do? You can't simply..."

"I don't know. One thing I thought of was to go to India and... just see what happens..."

After dinner she accepted his offer to help clean up, and when the dishes had been washed, dried and put away she said, "You don't have to leave yet, do you?"

"No, I'm in no hurry."

"Shall we have another glass of wine?"

"By all means."

"I can't tell you how much pleasure this evening has given me, Tamaki-kun."

"Me too. It's wonderful seeing you again, Sayoko-chan."

"And this won't be the last time, will it? I mean... now that we've found each other, we can be friends - can't we?"

"Of course. *We are* friends."

"Let's go into the living room."

He followed her to the window, where she drew back the curtain slightly and exclaimed, "Oh, look!" The snow was falling thick and fast, though gently. "Look how white everything is! Do you like snow, Tamaki-kun?"

"I hate to disappoint you and say no, but... well, no." He laughed. It was such a ringing, childlike laugh that he himself was startled by it.

"Come, let's sit down. A glass of white wine, in honor of the snow. Tamaki-kun... I want to tell you something. May I?"

He laughed again. "Do you need my permission? Granted!"

"Yes, I do need your permission."

He noticed with surprise her strange gravity.  
“What is it?”

“I’m... I don’t... I...”

“What is it, Sayoko-chan? Tell me.”

“I don’t *have* to tell you this, nothing *compels* me... if I keep it to myself there is no way in the world you would ever find out, or even suspect... it would never cross your mind...”

He was all concern now. “Sayoko, what’s upsetting you? Was it something I said? Sometimes when I’ve had a bit to drink I...”

“No! No, nothing like that. As I said, I don’t *have* to tell you this, and I’m not altogether sure myself why... suddenly... But suddenly, you see, it somehow feels *right* to tell you, and... and wrong not to. May I proceed?”

“Please do, if it’ll ease your mind.”

She sipped her wine. “Your father... when I was seventeen...”

He thought he saw her lower lip quiver, but a moment later he wasn’t sure; if it did, she immediately recovered her self-possession.

“Your father seduced me. Or I seduced him. Or we seduced each other. Who knows how these things happen? I know only one thing: I loved him. Loved him madly, passionately. I’ve never loved anyone since. Maybe a girl has to be seventeen to really love a man. After that, the mist falls away, she sees life too clearly, she is no longer swept away by fantasy ... and fantasy... love is unthinkable without fantasy. Unthinkable. I was married twice, both times to good men, and yet... I was no longer seventeen. Have you

understood me, Tamaki-kun? From the expression on your face I'm not sure you have."

"I'm not sure I have either..." He was afraid he might be sick. Should he make a beeline for the toilet? He didn't know where it was, he would have to ask. It would be embarrassing, but the alternative was to stain this white couch, stain it grotesquely, irreparably; it wouldn't wash out, it would remain as a reminder, an eternal reminder... He rose unsteadily to his feet, took a deep breath, then another. "Let's go outside for a bit."

"Yes, let's!"

She seized his hand, in her enthusiasm pulling him forward with such force he almost stumbled, and the next thing he knew he was outside, filling his lungs with fresh, cold air, breathing it in in huge gulps. "Ah! Ah!" He turned and saw her behind him, her arms stretched out full length to the heavens and her mouth open, trying to catch the falling snow on her tongue.

"Isn't this beautiful, Tamaki-kun! Isn't it beautiful?" She laughed and laughed. "Oh, Tamaki-kun, it's so beautiful!"

The fresh air had steadied and sobered him. "We'll catch cold, it's freezing."

"Let's make a snowman!"

"No, Sayoko, we'd better go inside. We don't even have coats on."

The last train would already have left, and Sayoko pressed him to stay the night. When he demurred she said, "Do you have any idea how big this house is? To this day I sometimes get lost in it. There are twenty rooms you can choose from! Come into the kitchen, I'll make some coffee."

It was wonderful coffee, fresh, strong and hot. Closing his eyes, Tamaki sipped in silent appreciation.

She said, "You're not angry at me?"

"Angry? You know, I'll tell you something odd: I've never been angry in my life."

"Is that true? If so it's most unusual."

"It is true. My mother tells me that even as a baby I was never angry."

"How is your mother?"

"She's well."

"Still teaching tea ceremony?"

"Yes. Declining enrollment only fires her sense of mission. The more the times threaten to pass her by, the more..." He broke off suddenly, and looked hard at her. His silent, searching scrutiny seemed to go on a long time, until at last, lowering her eyes, she asked, "What is it?"

"When you said I should get a sword because your boyfriend would challenge me to a duel... did you... did you mean... my *father*?"

"No, Tamaki-kun!"

"No? But..."

"There was no *meaning* in that! It was just something funny to say to a six-year-old. Tamaki-kun! Listen to me, now. If you're going to get

angry for the first time in your life... don't let it be over that!"

"No, you're right, it would be silly, wouldn't it?" The silence thickened and seemed to envelop them. Closing his eyes, Tamaki could almost fancy he heard the snow falling outside.

"Sayoko-chan, did you tell me... what you told me... for a reason?"

She nodded.

"What is it?"

"I want us to be friends. Between friends there cannot be such a secret."

---

He awoke in a room flooded with sunlight and thought for an instant he was in India. No, not there - but where? Surveying his surroundings, he saw nothing familiar, nothing to help him get his bearings. Even filtered through a shoji paper screen, the sunshine seemed almost unnaturally bright. His head ached dully; there was something almost pleasant in the slight throbbing.

He lay back on the pillow and pulled the futon up to his chin; in spite of the sun it was quite cold. He closed his eyes and smiled to himself as he thought, "Does it matter where I am?"

He slept again, and dreamed of his father. He often did, and would awake with a distinct sense, so vivid were the dreams, of having paid his father a visit in the afterworld. Dead, it seemed,

his father was very much as he had been in life – serenely strong, quietly wise. “You have to ignore a great deal to feel that life is good,” he liked to say. “The miracle is that sometimes we can.”

He awoke to find the sunlight fading. It was evening already; he had slept all day! Surprise cleared his head. He flung off the quilt, meaning to dash downstairs and make his apologies, but saw he was naked except for his drawers. Where were his clothes? How odd – he had no memory of undressing. On the other hand, what was odd about it? “Drunk as I was, it’s lucky I can remember my own name!”

His clothes lay in a crumpled heap next to the futon. In his haste he stumbled and almost upended himself as he struggled to get into his trousers. Managing at last, he rushed downstairs. The kitchen and living room were deserted and darkening in the gathering dusk. There were no lights on, and no heat either; it was uncomfortably chilly. Was Sayoko elsewhere in the house, asleep perhaps? Had she gone out, intending to be back soon? Or had she forgotten him and left for the evening?

The telephone rang. He gasped as though at a door being flung open by menacing strangers. The sound, echoing through the silent empty house, seemed unnaturally loud, but it gave no clue as to where it was coming from. Where was the phone? It rang and rang. Finally he found it, on a little table in the hall – but should he answer it? Maybe it was Sayoko calling to let him know where she was and when she would be back; on

the other hand, supposing it was Sayoko's husband - what would he say? Or her daughter. No, impossible, he must not answer, it was out of the question. But the caller was evidently determined to get through. The ringing went on and on, growing more insistent, it seemed, with each ring, while Tamaki stood gaping at the phone in a kind of blank, numb astonishment.

He shook himself at last. "I'd better get out of here; where's my coat? Where did she put my coat?" He didn't know, having either forgotten or, more likely, not noticed. "Will that damn ringing ever stop? No one's home, no one's home!"

His shoes at best half on, he flung himself out of the house, pursued by the ringing telephone. Not even distance, it seemed, could muffle the sound. When finally he paused for breath he found himself at a swirling river, gleaming silver in the moonlight. He shivered. How strange. There were houses all around, many of them lighted up as though for an uncommonly jolly evening, but not a soul in the street of whom he could ask directions to the station. There was nothing to worry about, of course; a cruising taxi would come by eventually, or failing that, if he just kept walking he'd get his bearings sooner or later. Well, he'd better get started. It was too cold to simply stand there, coatless as he was.

And yet he lingered, as though hesitating over something. Closing his eyes, he seemed to feel a radiant warmth envelop him. He recognized it immediately for what it was - fever; but did it matter? It was such a delightful

warmth; he needn't concern himself with the source of it. He felt something tickle his cheek. He opened his eyes and shivered. Snow. It was snowing again. The climate was changing; there was no accounting for the weather these days!

Was it true, what Sayoko had told him? Suppose it was. Did it change anything? Nothing. Everything was the same, exactly the same; he was now precisely what he had been before, a middle-aged man at loose ends - at hopelessly loose ends, indeed - and next week or the week after he'd be in India, a place as foreign to his experience and imagination as another planet. Yes, next week he'd be on another planet, another world, a world of golden temples gleaming under a searing sun. He closed his eyes and seemed to see them. And Sayoko... would Sayoko even exist, in that other world?

"What strange things are going through my mind! Strange thoughts, crazy almost..." Strangest of all was that he felt happy. There was no accounting for happiness at such a moment. He was feverish and lost, with no coat on, the snow falling more thickly every second. If he didn't start walking he would make himself seriously ill, perhaps even freeze to death, but though he saw this quite clearly he felt no inclination to move; everything seemed so perfect just as it was. "It's only when I open my eyes that I feel cold..."