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Sayonara Bar

Susan Barker

I

MARY

Shinsaibashi wakes for business, metal shutters clattering upwards, broom bristles scratching concrete. Dribs and drabs wander round, salarymen reading menus in restaurant windows, high-school drop-outs killing time till dusk. Edged by the aerials and billboards is a sunset the shade of blood oranges.

The building where I work is in the grimy end of the entertainment district. The chef from the grilled-eel restaurant on the floor below us slouches in the doorway, easing dirt from beneath his thumbnail with a toothpick. We nod hello as the sign for the Big Echo karaoke blinks on, and its fluorescent palm trees hum.

The Sayonara Bar is empty; only the spectral drone of Spandau Ballet drifts over the empty stage and dance floor. Every table sits in a pool of jaundiced light, the tasselled lampshades hanging low, making the place look ready for a séance or psychic convention.

In the changing room, shoes, magazines and crumpled balls of lipstick-stained tissue litter the floor. Blouses with deodorant-stained underarms hang from the sagging curtain rail. In the midst of it all stands Elena, peering into the slanting mirror, dotting concealer under her eyes. We bounce smiles and greetings off the glass. My back to her, I start to undress, flinging my T-shirt and jeans onto the mound of clothes in the corner. I zip myself into the goldsequinned top that Katya lent me and a black knee-length skirt.

Elena budges sideways to give me room at the mirror. 'Nice sequins,' she says.

'I know. Couldn't get away with it anywhere but here. Did you have a good day?'

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'Same as usual: up at seven to get Eiji and Tomo ready, then I had to clean up after the pair of them . . .'

Elena is petite, jaded and prone to world-weary sighs. She came to Japan with a TEFL qualification and a four-month English-teaching contract. Six years on, she has a Japanese husband, a five-year-old son and a vast catalogue of cross-cultural grievances. She makes me feel young, lightweight as flotsam. I watch her pull an eyelid taut and drag a sharpened kohl pencil along her lashes.

'Did you hear about the trouble I had last night?' she asks.

'Yeah. I hate that creep. He should be made to wear a muzzle or something.'

Last night this salaryman laddered Elena's tights, then stuffed a thousand-yen note down the front of her dress, telling her to buy herself a new pair. Elena told him her tights cost more than a thousand yen. So he ripped the other leg and tried to stuff another thousand yen into her dress.

'When I complained to Mama-san she told me to get a sense of humour.'

'That's disgusting.'

'I know. I am leaving at the end of the month.'

'You should.'

I really wish she would, but she has worked here for two years already and I bet she will be here long after I'm gone.

Her hand shakes, jolting her eyeliner upwards. 'Shit. Can you pass me a tissue? . . . First I quit this place, then I divorce Tomo.'

'Hmmm,' I murmur, not really in the mood to listen to her marriage problems.

We stare ahead at our reflections. I smudge on some MAC Purple Haze eye shadow. Elena traces her lip line in berry red.

'Did you get up to anything today?' she asks.

Today I woke at Yuji's place around two-ish. We tried to get up but were sunk in his bed like quicksand. So that was where we stayed, in a tangle of mouths and limbs. A whole afternoon with the curtains drawn, rutting from one end of the bed to the other, the television chattering in the background. I am sure there were things that mattered before I met him, but Yuji has this way of making me forget what they are.

'Nothing much,' I say.

In the mirror Elena clips on a gold earring and smiles.

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The other hostesses arrive while I am setting up the bar. Yukiko negotiates a shift swap with me so she can see her boyfriend's band play at the Metro next Friday. Mandy shows off the henna tattoo she had done on her navel in Bangkok. Katya walks in late, clutching a take-away bag and pushing a french fry between her lips. Her hair is swept back into a silk headscarf, and a faux fur coat flaps at her too skinny calves. When she sees me she heads over. She smiles and grazes my temple with a greasy, menthol-cigarette-scented kiss. 'Wow,' she says, 'that top is hideous. Glad I gave it away.'

'Thanks, Katya. Appreciate your honesty.'

'Where are you tonight?'

'Bar duty. You?'

'Karaoke booth. Mr Shaky-hands has booked it for his ninety-seventh birthday. Do you want to swap?'

I reject the offer with a rueful smile. Mr Shaky-hands has Parkinson's - Katya can be quite cruel sometimes. She narrows her eyes and stalks away to the changing room, sinking her teeth into another french fry. We fight tooth and nail for bar duty here because you spend the whole evening airlifting drinks to the lounge and small talk is limited to short, near-painless bursts.

Waiting for things to get busy, I slice up a lemon and watch Supermodel TV. Mama-san put it on the wide screen because our Wednesday night keyboard player called in with stomach flu. Supermodel TV is this satellite channel that broadcasts nothing but fashion models charging up and down catwalks all day long. All these ethereal beings with jutting hips and swanlike necks. Not sure of Mama-san's strategy here. Perhaps she hopes we will absorb their glamour by osmosis - I do develop this 'sashay' in my walk whenever it's on. But there is something too innate about our imperfections; our bedraggled, lipstick-on-teeth, taut-seams-at-the-hips slovenliness. Something no amount of exposure to beauty will fix.

One of the first customers is Mr Mitsui, the head of some corporation in the Umeda Sky building. He and his companions take up a table by the cigarette machine and I watch him twist his neck about in search of me. Mr Mitsui bought me a Gucci handbag once; burgundy leather, it was, with a golden clasp that fastened with a sophisticated click. But Yuji hates it when I accept gifts from clients, so I gave it to Katya. The handbag was a reward for participating in his ongoing English-speaking scam. Mr Mitsui knows a smattering of English and he likes to use it to impress his business associates. He'll call me over, introduce me to his friends and then we begin to chat.

'Mary, in your country do you have sushi?'

'Yes. In Japanese restaurants and sometimes in supermarkets too.'

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'Ah! And your country. Winter. Colder or warmer?'

'About the same, I think.'

And so on. The whole time his friends make admiring noises in their throats and exclaim things like: 'Isn't Mitsui-san's English skilful?' He always has different associates in tow, so they have no idea that we run through the same dialogue every time. Tonight I carry over some Martinis and we do the routine for the benefit of two starry-eyed assistants. We have it down pat, word for word, except when Mr Mitsui throws me by substituting 'sushi' with 'escalators' in a rare spurt of improvisation. Afterwards he chomps on the olive from his Martini and looks proud of himself. He slips me a thousand-yen note and whispers I am not to share it with the other hostesses.

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