

Chapter 44

BAD TEACHERS

WEDNESDAY, 4 SEPTEMBER 2002

Teaching is a performance, and your stage persona defines what kind of teacher you are. Fun and energetic. Calm and gentle. Strict and intolerant. Kind and caring. Firm but fair. Smiley and positive. Good cop, bad cop. A teacher's role is to deliver instruction that educates, motivates, inspires and encourages learners to perform at their best. Teachers must also function as surrogate parents, mentors, counsellors and safety officers to maintain student well-being and achieve at least a modicum of academic success.

Today is Wednesday and Jason's first day at BCA. He will watch me for forty minutes and then stand up in front of thirty children. He's nervous. Of course he is. Teaching is hard when you start out. It requires study. Four years if you want to work in primary or secondary schools. Three months of intense study if you do the CELTA to become an English teacher.

Matsubara Primary School is just a twenty-minute drive from BCA. Aki is the teaching assistant and designated driver. I don't enjoy Wednesdays. My lessons start at 09:30 and finish at 12:30. Nine back-to-back twenty-minute classes that require super-human energy. I have various classes in

the afternoon and then a big gap. By the time I teach the high school hyenas at 19:10, I'm yearning for the sweet release of death. Wednesday feels like all I do is work, go home, blink a few times, then go back on Thursday.

Jason observes two of my twenty-minute classes and then takes the reigns. 'Okay,' he begins, clasping his hands together, which then separate and become fists with popped-up thumbs. 'Let's do the *Hello* song.'

The song has twenty words. All are *hello*, so he doesn't need to spend time learning the lyrics. After the song, he launches into flashcards and activities. I stand at the back, assisting Jason like an orchestra conductor, using my hands to signal him to move on or remind him of the next activity. The temptation to make random gestures, just to throw him off and see him blush, is overwhelming, but I want him to succeed. And Aki is not someone who will see the funny side if Jason fucks up. I'm impressed with his performance. It's much better than my train wreck with K1B in Taiwan. And in twenty minutes, he only says *okay* thirty-six times.

I pick up more work to supplement my BCA job in the following days and weeks. I want to build my savings again for future travel. Primarily so I can ride the Trans-Siberian home.

Monday nights, I teach at Caravan English in Ikebukuro. Classes run from 19:00 to 22:00. The students are nice enough but riding into Tokyo during rush hour is gruelling. Also, while the Japanese winter is dry and most days are sunny, it tends to rain every Monday. I'm well aware of this because I ride my moped to Akabane Station, and every week, I arrive wet. It makes me think about Keith and Tristan and ensures that I ride carefully. Perhaps it saves my life.

Thursday nights, I teach a two-hour class in Kita Yono. The students are ten ladies in their seventies. It pays well, it's only a thirty-minute ride from home, and it *never* rains. I like my elderly students. They're loveable and much easier to teach than drained high school students. There is also something about the older generation of Japanese, a spark the younger ones sometimes lack.

We have a five-minute break halfway through the two-hour class.

'You like Japanese *okashi*?' one of the ladies asks, holding out a packet of assorted biscuits.

‘Yes, I do. Arigatou gozai masu.’

‘Green tea?’ another asks.

‘Sure, fill me up.’ I take a paper cup and hold it with two hands in the Japanese way while she pours me the hot beverage from a flask.

As the weeks roll by and my popularity increases thanks to my age-friendly humour and impeccable manners, five-minute breaks turn into ten minutes. Fifteen. Twenty. During these increasing breaks, we eat and drink and make small talk.

‘Do you want sandwich?’

‘Ooh, yes, please, what’s in it?’

‘Tuna.’

‘Huh, that happens to be my favourite.’

The following week. ‘Doughnut, Mr. Chris?’

‘Don’t mind if I do.’

Twenty-minute breaks become thirty minutes.

‘I buy, I’m sorry, bought Big Mac for you.’

Then, ‘You like spaghetti bolognese, ne?’

It’s becoming a competition among the old ladies. It’s like having ten grandmothers.

I no longer regard this as a class. It’s dinner.

At 07:00 on a Saturday morning, Jason and I arrive home from a night out in Tokyo, both blind drunk. I have to be at work by 10:00, meaning I have to be up at 09:00 to leave the house by 09:30. Or I could just call in sick. For some reason, I don’t. What is wrong with me?

My first class is with two high school boys. I’m seeing four. I try hard not to breathe on them when I speak. ‘Answer all the questions in Part A. Write clearly. Take your time, don’t rush.’

The two well-behaved boys start writing in their notebooks, so I close my eyes for a bit just to rest the lids, lubricate the eyeballs a little, catch a minute’s rest, take a deep breath, relax my revolving mind, breathe out, darkness. What the ... where am I, who’s that tapping my arm? My mouth instinctively sucks up the drool on my lips as I glance down and gape at two boys, trying to figure out who they are, why they are in my house, wait, this isn’t my house, ah, I’m at my school and these boys are my students.

Was I ... sleeping? The boys' pencils are on their notebooks with several lines of writing. I glance at my watch, realising with horror that I've been asleep for almost ten minutes.

I sit up and check their work. 'Good. Well done. Now, about Part B, I want you to write the answers *and* the questions this time.'

They slowly pick up their pens and start writing while I slowly close my eyes, letting the darkness carry me away.

One of my many part-time jobs is with English Club. Chika is in charge there. She organises cover for absent teachers at various branches across Saitama. The job is ... dreary. The classrooms are depressing and dark. The school attracts mostly unenthusiastic businessmen sent by their employers to study business English. Children also study at English Club, sent by their parents. It's a school where both the teacher and the taught would rather be elsewhere doing something different. And if students don't show up, which happens often, substitute teachers go unpaid, despite the preparation time and waiting around. Still, the hourly rate is excellent, and the extra weekly hours make up a decent working schedule.

I recommend Jason to Chika since he is also trying to save money. After his successful demo lesson, he gets hired and Chika thanks me for the recommendation.

One Saturday, I'm teaching a class on the Keihin Tohoku Line when Chika calls me. 'Jason didn't show up for his class this morning.'

I pause. 'Did you call him?'

'He didn't answer.'

'I'll try and contact him. I'm really sorry about this.'

'Thanks. I just hope he's okay.'

I call Jason, but he doesn't answer. I know all too well about Jason's habit of not giving a fuck when one of his storm clouds hangs over him. He is prone to these dark moods and lapses into depression cycles; they cunningly manipulate his emotions. Then I fear he's had an accident or an asthma attack. Getting capsules for his inhaler has been problematic. I have a full schedule but struggle to concentrate, checking my phone every two minutes to see if he's rung back. With Keith and Tristan passing in the same year, I can't go through the pain of losing another friend.

I speed back to Soka City that afternoon on my moped, straight to his apartment. I ring the doorbell and wait.

He opens the door. ‘All right, bro?’ He’s sheepish and doesn’t smile.

‘Are you okay?’

I follow him into the lounge. He’s drinking beer and playing football on the PlayStation.

‘I couldn’t face going there.’

‘I’ve been worried about you all day. Chika’s been trying to call you. What the fuck?’

‘I woke up and just wasn’t in the mood. I hate it.’

I blow up at him some more, but after he apologises for having me so worried and I calm down, he declares that he’s not going back to English Club. It makes me realise how much I dislike the job, so, with my deepest apologies to Chika, I quit, too.

Three-year-old Sakura wants to go into the playroom at BCA, but some mothers are blocking the doorway, tying their kids’ shoelaces. So I lift her up over the mothers. ‘There we go.’

Thump!

Her head hits the top of the doorframe so hard that the mothers look up in shock. Little Sakura is rubbing her small head, too startled to cry right away. I’m blushing hotly now, so I try to behave nonchalantly and hide my embarrassment by putting her down, there you go, off you pop, go and play, but she is still stunned and rubbing her head, so I try to distract her, look, what’s that, over there, I say, pointing at nothing on the wall, but the tactic doesn’t work and she bursts into tears.

Then, two weeks later, I almost break Rui’s arm. Same break time, same playroom. The kids love it when I lift them up, not under doorways I’ve learnt, and spin them around, and Rui is next. She holds my hands, and I swing her in circles so her body is horizontal, her legs almost whacking the other kids standing too close and watching. Rui’s laughing, loving it, but her left hand slips out of mine, and she’s hanging on with only one hand, causing it to twist upwards with the momentum, and I hear this massive crack. I stop and put her back on two feet, oh my God, I’ve broken her arm, I’ll get sued for this, they’ll deport me for child abuse, I’ll never be

allowed to teach kids again. I try to console her, then point at nothing on the wall, look, what's that, but she is frozen, clutching her wrist, and any minute now, there'll be tears and loud wailing, but she does neither, that's worse, she's in shock, like someone who has just stepped on a landmine but refuses to believe *their* leg is two yards away, torn to bloody shreds. She scurries to the corner of the room and crouches, still holding her wrist, and I feel sick. The other kids are badgering me for a turn, but I can't stop staring at Rui and just want to crawl down a sewage drain and pull the cover closed, but before I permanently vanish into the underground network of Japan's secretions, I report what happened to Akiko, who checks in with Rui. It turns out nothing is broken, but with a badly sprained wrist, she never comes near me again.

In between injuring young kids, turning up to class drunk or not turning up at all, Jason and I play Winning 11 on the PlayStation in his apartment, devising the ultimate tournament. It involves 1,000 fixtures recorded in neat tables. The prize money consists of ¥10,000 for whoever wins the most games, ¥10,000 for the most goals and ¥10,000 for the best goal.

I'm abroad, but it's hard to say I'm travelling at the moment. I have few opportunities to sightsee or immerse myself in culture, and when I do, they coincide with my job and domestic responsibilities. Jason and I are doing things we'd be doing at home, like playing futsal on Tuesday and Thursday nights, regularly attending the gym and playing the PlayStation. And that is how we spend the final weeks and months of 2002. It's just normal life in Japan, and our lives *feel* normal, but these are, in fact, special days in our mid-twenties.