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English 215

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Slice of Life

The telephone rang at 4:15 p.m. on a foggy Friday night. It was Keisuke calling to invite Karin and me out for dinner.

“You won’t believe where I’m gonna take you!” he said with a mischievous laugh. “Where are we going?” I inquisitively asked.

“If I told you, you wouldn’t come!” said Keisuke.

Naturally, my sense of adventure kicked in as I plunked the phone down on its base. “Karin!” I hollered. “Slip into a fancy dress and get ready for a night on the town.”

Keisuke arrived at our house at precisely 6:30 p.m. His girlfriend, Yoko, was waiting in the car and Karin and I hopped into the back seats.

“*Kon-bon-wa,*” we said to Yoko as she sat staring straight ahead.

She turned to us and replied, “Hello.”

Karin and I looked at each other with sheepish grins knowing that Yoko couldn’t speak a word of English. Since our Japanese wasn’t much better, we all breathed a sigh of relief that we had Keisuke to translate. Yoko cranked the music to avoid further conversation and we all sat back and sang, “I Think I’m Turning Japanese.” The traffic wasn’t too congested and we arrived at a small, dimly lit restaurant in a back alley of Yokohama. I asked Keisuke what the name of the restaurant was since I couldn’t read the *Kanji* on the neon sign and he replied, “*Sakana-Ya*.” Although my Japanese wasn’t great, I immediately knew that the word *sakana* meant fish and that tonight’s dinner was going to be seafood.

Keisuke turned to me with a sly grin and said, “Wait ‘til ya see what we’re gonna eat.”

As the young Japanese couple opened the doors to the restaurant, the host rushed over to greet them like a cat pouncing on a mouse. Much to his surprise, the couple was followed by two *gaijin* (foreigners) who were awestruck by the restaurant’s unusual decor.

The host shouted, “*Ira-shai-mashe*!” in a loud voice which formally invited the group to the establishment. He sat them on pillows on the floor and carefully placed a bottle of *sake* beside them. Without saying a word, the host grabbed the hand of the *gaijin* and pulled him to his feet.

“*Iki-masho,*” he said.

The *gaijin* looked startled and said to his friend, “Keisuke, what the hell is this guy doing?”

Keisuke smiled and said, “Don’t worry about it Paul, this is Japanese tradition.”

The host dragged Paul over to a massive aquarium full of fish. “*Doichi-demo-ee,*” said the host as he pointed to the tank.

Paul turned and looked at Keisuke and said, “What am I supposed to do?”

“Pick a fish!” shouted Keisuke.

“Okay, that one,” said Paul as he pointed to the first fish he saw.

The host picked up a fish net and thrust it deep into the tank. With the flick of a wrist, he plucked the fish out of the water and rushed it to a large wooden table located in the middle of the restaurant. In one fluid motion, he pulled the fish out of the net, placed it on the cutting block, and pinned it with his left hand. He then grabbed a razor sharp knife located at the end of the table and began slicing the fish down its sides.

“Holy crap!” yelled Paul. “He just skinned that fish alive!”

“Come back and sit down,” said Keisuke. “You don’t wanna miss the next step.”

With the meat of the writhing fish stripped from its sides and its head and tail still in tact, the host gently picked up the skeleton and carefully jabbed a wooden spear through its body. He then placed the fish upright on a plate, surrounded it with its own meat, and rushed it to the group. The host bowed and quietly disappeared into the back of the restaurant.

“*E-tada-kimasu,*” said Keisuke, as he dipped his index finger into a cup filled with *sake*.

Keisuke dangled his finger above the open mouth of the fish, and as a single drop of *sake* fell to its lips, the jaws snapped shut.

“Oh my god!” said Karin. “That thing is still alive!”

“Yup,” said Keisuke. “You’re about to eat some really fresh sushi.”

Word Count: 700