

Tokyo South

Stories of a Mormon Missionary in Japan

A novel by Eugene Woodbury

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Introduction

If there is a genre of literature unique to Mormon letters in terms of the church's social culture (as opposed to being unique, say, in terms of its theology), it is the missionary memoir—the autobiographical account of the two years a young Mormon man (and the occasional woman) spends spreading the message of the church in distant lands.

For a kid from Provo, Utah, that “distant land” may well turn out to be Los Angeles. For a kid from upstate New York, it was Tokyo, Japan. This is certainly not to say that the narratives penned by ministers of other faiths possess less literary merit or a less interesting perspective. The Mormon missionary memoir measures itself only against its own historical standard: always the same, only different.

The typical missionary hails from North America and the suburban middle class, begins his service at the age of nineteen, and sallies forth with a thin comprehension of his religion (but making up for it with confidence to spare). In the end, he's been there and done that with the rest, been subject to the same institutional regimes and regimens, has dealt with the same sort of heroes and jerks.

And yet the inescapable mystery remains—that these identical pressures and deformations, punishments and rewards,

produce such wildly different products at the end of the spiritual assembly line.

The majority, to be sure, are spared any true physical hardships or trials of the soul. They carry purse and scrip and wear shoes made for walking. They are weekend warriors in a lay army. The work is the kind that tempers a young mind for the challenges of the post-industrial world: long, dull hours of seemingly pointless work interrupted by moments of inexplicable wonder and discovery.

These moments can propel them into the shocking embrace of a world completely different from everything they thought they knew. It shakes the complacency out of them, and a good complacency-shaking is what the average teenager needs.

This is not, of course, the stated purpose of the program—the stated purpose being Preaching the Gospel and Saving Souls. Except that as a purely evangelical enterprise, the missionary program hardly constitutes the most efficient use of the church’s resources. The number of graduates from the Missionary Training Center has more than doubled since I spent my two months there—evidence of enormous success, one would think—except that baptisms per missionary have dropped by half over the same time period.

And as I illustrate in the largely autobiographical account that follows, those baptisms have only an abstract statistical relationship to the official membership numbers the church publishes.

Hence the admonition that “every young man” serve a mission has been qualified of late to mean not *every* young man (and you slackers know who you are).

Similar and understandable objections are raised by professional soldiers when presented with proposals to reintroduce the draft—not to better fight wars, but in the pursuit of high-minded goals of social engineering.

From a purely practical standpoint, the mission should not have become the venue of choice for Personal Growth and Re-

habilitation. But we are an imperfect species, and if not now, when? More importantly, the church remains in short supply of what universal conscription supplies the nation in times of crisis (an organized religion, by definition, being constantly in a time of crisis): a common cause and experience that reaches simultaneously across generations.

All politics is local, Tip O’Neil observed, and that is especially true of religious politics. Such a geographically concentrated church can only achieve “worldwide” status by uprooting its youth and sending them abroad—as metaphysical pirates, scavengers, and ambassadors of good (and bad) will—so that they will bring home with them a more expansive sense of the world “out there.”

Self-funded and run and staffed by volunteers, the missionary program is not sustainable in its current form. But important things are always lost in the pursuit of efficiencies, beginning with that universal, shared experience. It is especially important for young men, who are provided by modern society with little in the way of canonized “coming of age” ceremonies.

(Which is why I find it difficult to disparage missionary farewells and homecomings, their silly and self-aggrandizing tendencies notwithstanding.)

A similar problem has developed as the Mormon population has grown beyond the carrying capacity of the Church Education System. The point has already been reached where BYU has become the long-trumpeted “Harvard of the West”—not in terms of academic reputation, but in terms of meritocratic exclusivity (and referring to piety, not intellectual ability).

If not “every young man” is cut out to be a minister of the faith—and not all are—the church might instead transition its agricultural and international programs (the Benson Institute and the Kennedy Center) into the mainstream of ecclesiastical life, building a pragmatic equivalent of the Peace Corps that would welcome all hardworking comers.

But I cannot wring my hands too tightly or bemoan fates that have yet to fall. We are dealing here with institutions that move at the speed of continental drift. The rise and fall of the Tokyo South Mission (itself a Buddhist metaphor for the fleeting nature of things) set in motion a reactionary response that, decades after the fact, still outlaws anything resembling “catch sales” street proselyting techniques.

Though it would probably be impossible to discern exactly when the sea change occurred. Perhaps this was the end of a great era, when a naive teenager from upstate New York could mingle with saints and sinners equally (and I mean the saints and sinners found among his fellow missionaries), without anybody asking what in the world he was doing there or what he hoped to accomplish.

So I remain grateful for those two years when The Powers That Be shrugged at my real reasons—because I was supposed to, because it was what all my friends at church were doing, because I’d never honestly considered the alternatives, or, for that matter, deeply questioned any aspect of my religious life—and said, “Fine, if that’s what you want to do. Maybe it’ll do you some good.”

Well, it did. But not in the way I expected or the way they intended.

First District: Senzoku

Chapter 1. Lost in the Works

Elder Thomas Thackeray pressed the glowing button. Nothing happened. He stared at the strange Japanese writing and wondered what to do next. He was supposed to buy a 270 yen ticket. But the machine had all his change and he still didn't have a ticket. So he hit it. Hard.

There he was, an American in an off-the-rack, three-piece suit, beating up on a ticket machine in Shinjuku station. But the people standing in the line behind him seemed to approve.

He was winding up for another try when the machine surrendered with a metallic *thunk*. The copper and silver coins jangled down into the smooth metal tray.

Thackeray scooped up the coins and shoved them into the adjacent machine, glancing over his shoulder in time to see Elder Patrick shepherding the rest of the missionaries down the staircase to the subway platform.

"Wait!" he shouted. He punched the button. The ticket spit out into his hand. He sprinted to the turnstiles and stumbled down the steps to the platform.

Subway cars waited on each side of the platform, pneumatic doors gaping wide open. Thackeray froze. *WHICH ONE?*

He ran down the platform, searching frantically for the navy-blue suits and pale Caucasian faces. A bell clanged loudly above his head. The conductors blew their whistles. Red running lights flickered to green. The doors hissed shut.

“WAIT!” He held out his arms as if he could bring the trains to a halt through sheer force of will. The couplers pulled tight with a dull thud. The cars rolled away from the platform.

“Wait—” he said again, his voice fading to a frightened whisper.

Thackeray paced the platform in a daze. For an hour he watched the subways come and go. But after each arrival and departure, after the crowds dispersed, he was still alone.

Finally he walked back up the stairway to the concourse. “I should have gone with Elder Carpenter,” he muttered to himself. Carpenter had carted the luggage back to the mission home in the mission van. Two new missionaries went with him.

He looked up and stopped. A policeman was standing in his path. “Excuse me,” he said, backing up a step. The policeman frowned and said something. Thackeray shook his head and the policeman repeated himself.

Thackeray concluded he was asking for his passport. He produced it from his suit coat pocket. The policeman snapped open the booklet, peered at Thackeray, then at the photograph in the passport.

“*Nyu Yoku desu ne!*” The policeman raised an eyebrow and said something Thackeray took as a reference to New York City. He wasn’t from New York City but figured the best tactic was to agree with whatever the cop said.

“Can I help?” said a voice in heavily-accented English.

“I think I’m lost.” Thackeray didn’t know who had spoken to him, but the English was gracious music to his ears. A college student walked up and introduced himself. He and the policeman exchanged a few words.

“Where you going?” the student asked.

“I’m not sure. I think—I think maybe I have something—” He

reached into his pocket and pulled out the envelope Elder Patrick had given him at the airport. “Will this do?”

The two Japanese men examined the return address on the envelope. The policeman’s eyes lit up. “*Ah! Hiro desu.*”

He knows the address,” the student explained. “It’s not far from here.”

The policeman sketched a map on the back of the envelope. He traced over the coarsely drawn lines with his pen as he spoke.

“Go through the turnstiles over there,” translated the student, pointing. “And take the right subway. Hiro is the seventh stop. Go up the stairs and left. About a hundred meters down the street.”

Thackeray didn’t stop to think why the subway to Hiro was in a completely different direction than where he’d last seen Elder Patrick. All he knew was that he could get from *here* to *there*. The icy desperation in his gut began to melt.

“The policeman will change the ticket,” said the student.

Thackeray turned to thank him but he was already gone, lost in the crowds.

“Come, come,” said the policeman, assuming an impatient, official tone. He approached the ticket taker sitting in the booth between the entry and exit turnstiles and spoke briefly. He turned and snapped his fingers. Thackeray held out the ticket. The ticket taker marked it with a transfer stamp and handed it back.

“Uh, *domo arigato.*” Thackeray stuck out his hand, then corrected himself and bowed. The officer grinned and nodded in return.

Thackeray pushed through the turnstiles and walked down the stairs to the subway platform.

Hiro was the seventh stop, just as the student had promised. The station name was written in bold *romaji* letters on backlit signs along the station wall.

Up on the street, the city was dark and quiet. It was past ten

at night. Thackeray vaguely remembered eating breakfast in the Missionary Training Center in Provo twenty hours before. But he wasn't tired. He set off down the sidewalk.

The mission home was an office building, five stories of gray metal and tinted glass that glistened in the rain-streaked darkness like black, polished granite. "*The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*," Thackeray read aloud. The lettering was etched into the glass above the entranceway. He walked up the short flight of steps to the landing and pulled on the door handle.

It didn't budge. The door was locked. He pushed. Definitely locked. Had they forgotten about him altogether?

"Hey! Anybody home?"

Thackeray paced back and forth on the narrow landing. He felt stupid, the same way he'd felt his first month in the MTC. Boy, was he glad that was over. Eight weeks memorizing discussions and cramming vocabulary lists. By the halfway point, four groups of Japan-bound missionaries had come in behind him. At least they knew less than he did. By the time he left he was an old sage. Knew everything about the MTC, everything about Japan. Or so he thought.

Now he didn't know a thing. He was losing IQ points by the minute. He stepped down to the sidewalk and stared up at the obsidian-like glass.

A man strode down the sidewalk. He was wearing a bowler hat and a charcoal gray overcoat. Even more unusual, he was a good two or three inches taller than the missionary. He touched the rim of his hat as he passed.

"Good evening," he said in a clipped British accent.

"Good ev— Hey, wait!" Thackeray ran down the sidewalk after him.

"What is it?"

"I—I think I'm lost."

"So where do you want to be?"

"The Tokyo South Mission?" It was as much a plea as a statement.

“South?” The man chuckled. “You definitely are lost. You found the right place on the wrong side of town. These are the offices of the Tokyo North Mission.”

“Tokyo North—”

“Yes. President Atkinson’s children attend my school.” The man asked, slightly puzzled, “How did you get here in the first place?”

Thackeray handed him the envelope.

“Ah, yes. That’s the address. Don’t you have some other reference?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, there might be something in this envelope.”

“I guess,” said Thackeray. He’d only looked inside the envelope to get traveling money. Dumb and dumber.

The man sorted through the contents: a letter of greeting from the mission president, a handful of proselyting leaflets, and several thousand-yen notes. The man pulled out one of the leaflets and turned it so the light from the street lamp fell on the paper.

“There you go.” He pointed at two telephone numbers and a small map printed on the back of one of the leaflets. “Those are probably the phones at your office. Give them a ring. They should be able to help.” He handed the envelope and leaflet back to the missionary. “Good luck, eh?” he said, waving off. “If you get lost again, find a *koban*—a police box—and give that slip of paper to an officer.”

“Where’s a phone?”

“There’s a cafe up the street.”

“Thank you!” said Thackeray. The Englishman waved back without turning around.

The cafe was closed. A single bulb burned in an overhead fixture. An old woman, wearing a pleated white smock over a faded kimono, was meticulously sweeping the floor in the warm, yellow light. She looked up with squinted eyes when Thackeray rapped on the colored panes.

She opened the door a crack and peered out.

“*Denwa?*” said Thackeray. At least he remember the word for telephone.

The cleaning woman slowly opened the door and stepped back into the middle of the room, giving him a wide berth. She pointed at a pay phone in a small nook behind the cash register. There was a single slot on the top of the phone, a large “10” stamped into the chrome. Thackeray dug into his pockets and pulled out several coins, but he had none in a 10 yen denomination.

“Uh, *sumimasen?* Excuse me?” He held up one of the silver coins and pointed at the phone. The woman took the coin and walked over to the cash register and scooped out ten copper coins. Thackeray nodded and returned to the phone.

The phone at the other end of the line rang once.

“Hello?”

“Hello? Who is this? Thackeray—is that you!? Where are you!?”

“A cafe about a block from the North Mission in Hiro.”

“WHAT!”

“Uh, that was the address on the envelope I got at the airport.”

“THAT’S OLD STATIONERY!” wailed Elder Patrick.

“Oh.”

“You found our address, didn’t you?”

“Well, there was this leaflet in the envelope and—”

The phone clicked and went dead. The dial tone hummed.

“Hello?”

Thackeray pushed another coin into the slot. He dialed the mission home number. Busy. He looked at the leaflet and dialed the second number. The phone rang several times.

“Hello!” wheezed Patrick, having sprinted from the clerk’s office back to the secretary’s office. “Listen, Thackeray Choro, how many *ju-en* do you have? That’s those ten yen coins.”

“Ju-ens? Oh, eight.”

“Put them all in.”

Thackeray slipped the coins into the slot. The receiver clicked as each coin rattled down through the mechanism.

"Listen," Patrick went on. "Can you remember how you got to Hiro from Shinjuku?"

"Shinjuku?"

"The place you got lost."

"Oh, I think so."

"Go back to Shinjuku and get on the Keio train, outbound. That's the one on the right going down the stairs from the ticket machines."

"How do I know when to get off?"

"Just ask someone," said the exasperated Patrick. "Just ask, *Fuchu desu ka?* That's where you want to go. Fuchu."

"Right."

"You got that? If you get lost again, call!"

The line went dead. Thackeray hung up the phone. Three coins rattled down into the coin return slot. He picked them up and turned to leave.

"*Domo arigato,*" he said, bowing. The woman smiled, likely in relief at his imminent departure, and bowed in return.

The Shinjuku-bound subway was more crowded than the one to Hiro. A pack of teenagers wearing copycat James Dean leather jackets milled together at the far end of the car. They were surprisingly unintimidating.

The train jerked forward. Thackeray grabbed a strap. A girl with blue and red hair held onto the strap next to him. *Unique*, he thought. It was all unique. He was from upstate New York. He'd never been on subway before. He'd never been lost before. He'd always known where he was going. Until now.

The train pulled into a station. Thackeray glanced out the window to check the destination sign, but it flashed by too fast. *I missed it!* he thought. He leaned over the seats and craned his head to look down the platform. Was this stop five or stop six? It couldn't be stop seven—could it? The girl with the rainbow hair eyed him curiously. He looked at the open subway doors and

back at the girl. He took a deep breath.

“Is this Shinjuku?”

“*Chigaimasu.*”

What does *that* mean? The bell clanged. He stepped towards the door.

The girl grabbed his arm. “No! No!”

“The next one?”

She nodded. When the subway arrived in Shinjuku, the girl touched him on the shoulder. “*Shinjuku desu,*” she said.

“*Domo arigato,*” said Thackeray. He wanted to say more but didn’t know how.

He found his way back to the concourse, back to where he’d started. He was no longer afraid of the city. In fact, he was enjoying himself and was sorry that the adventure would have to end. He bought a 270 yen ticket and walked down to the Keio line platform. The train arrived several minutes later.

“At least I know my way around Shinjuku Station,” he told himself as he found an open seat.

At the next station a young boy, no older than fourteen, boarded the train and slid into a seat across the aisle from him. The boy wore a dark blue suit that Thackeray recognized as a school uniform. He held a small black leather attaché case on his lap. The *salaryman* training started early.

The train pulled into a station. Thackeray turned around to see the destination sign. When he turned back, the boy blurted out, “Are you American?”

Thackeray nodded.

“Where are you from?” The boy strained at each word, but his accent was better than the college student’s.

“New York.”

“New York City?” said the boy with wide eyes.

“No.” Thackeray laughed. “Upstate. Uh, the country—” He gestured with his hands trying to mime the word.

“Oh. *Inaka,*” said the boy.

“Yes. *Hai. Inaka desu.*”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a missionary. *Senkyoshi desu.*” Thackeray handed him a leaflet.

The boy took it eagerly. “I don’t know *Morumon Kyokai*,” he said, studying the small map on the leaflet. “You going here?”

“Yes.”

“Lots of Americans here.”

“Yeah. There probably are.”

The train slowed as it approached a station, the sharp hiss and squeal of the air brakes. The boy jumped up and stood by the exit doors. “Can I keep?” he asked, holding up the leaflet.

“Sure.”

The train shuddered to a stop. The doors hissed open.

“*Fuchu wa tsugi no tsugi.* Next after next.” The boy hopped down onto the platform and scooted away into the night.

Thackeray listened carefully as the train coasted into Fuchu station. “*Fuchu de-gozaimasu, Fuchu de-gozaimasu,*” the conductor’s voice squawked over the loudspeakers.

Thackeray stood by the door as the boy had. The train stopped. He stepped out into the cold night air. As he walked down the short flight of stairs from the platform, he could see Elder Patrick and another missionary waiting next to the turnstiles. He handed his ticket to the ticket taker and joined them.

“Well, tell me, Thackeray,” said Elder Patrick. “What was it like getting lost in the biggest flippin’ city in the world?”

He shrugged. “Not so bad, I guess.” He glanced back over his shoulder at the empty station platform. He could still feel where the girl with the rainbow hair had grabbed his arm.

Chapter 2. Catch Sales

Somebody flushed the toilet. Thackeray rolled over on the upper bunk. The slats under the mattress creaked. He opened his eyes and listened to the winter rain blowing across the tar and gravel roof of the church apartment.

He snuggled deeper under his futon and electric blanket. He felt safe beneath the covers. How long had he been here? Six, seven weeks. Years, it seemed. Christmas had come and gone, another working day. Nobody was homesick. Or nobody was willing to admit it.

He watched his breath condense into fog and contemplated the sting of cold linoleum on his bare feet. The ward members had purchased two high-BTU kerosene space heaters for the apartment. But kerosene was expensive and the missionaries could afford to use the heaters only a few brief hours a day.

The church apartment was too big to be practical. And housing six missionaries, too crowded to be comfortable. With a little care and upkeep, it would have made a fine studio apartment, but the missionaries treated it more like a halfway house for transients. Which, in a very real sense, it was. A real life illustration of the tragedy of the commons.

The single room and adjoining kitchen nook—like the light

that filtered in through the frosted glass windows in the early winter mornings—was uniformly gray. Dust gathered undisturbed in corners, in the closets, under the bunk beds, behind the “tea boxes” (the wooden trunks missionaries used to ship their personal belongings from district to district). The bathroom alone was bigger than the typical “rabbit hutch” apartment: three stalls, three sinks, two showers and a washing machine.

Nothing had been cleaned in some time.

McGowan plodded out of the bathroom tying the strings of the hospital greens he used for pajama bottoms. He yawned and scratched his tangled, rusty hair. McGowan carried a tall, gawky presence about him, a striking contrast with the pair of sharp, blue eyes set deeply into an otherwise languid face.

“Hey Dode,” whispered Chadwick from his bunk. “Goak!” Chadwick was McGowan’s senior companion.

McGowan was immediately wide awake. “Where?”

“Under Longstreet’s bunk.”

McGowan fetched a broom from behind the refrigerator. He crept up to the foot of Longstreet’s bed, crouched and squinted into the musty darkness. He cocked the broom over his shoulder like Jack Nicklaus teeing off at the Masters.

Longstreet lifted his head off his pillow, saw the fierce expression on McGowan’s face and said, “Morning, Mac.” He rolled over and peered under the edge of his mattress. “Got a big mother there.”

“Yeah. Dead meat.” McGowan took a step back and swung the broom. The bristles swished across the linoleum in a wide arc. Lint exploded in a dusty cloud. The cockroach shot out between Mac’s feet. It had a good jump and plenty of traction, but moving across open ground it was caught in the crossfire.

Chadwick shouted, “Five o’clock!”

“Aha!” McGowan pivoted neatly and flicked his wrists in a vicious slap shot. The cockroach hummed through the air like a greasy Oreo cookie, ricocheted off the front of the stove and

splattered against the cinder block wall facing the sink.

“Good shot!” Thackeray called out. Chadwick applauded.

Bennett sat up and threw off his covers. “*Scrud!* Who needs an alarm clock? McGowan’s killing goaks again.”

Elder Peterson stuck his head between the bed uprights and glared at McGowan: “Clean it up.”

McGowan answered with a Benny Hill salute. “Yes, Sir!”

Thackeray laughed.

Peterson banged on the bed frame with his feet. “What’s so funny, Elder? It’s time for you to get up.” Only Peterson and the mission president ever called an elder *Elder* instead of the Japanese *Choro*.

“I’m up,” Thackeray replied.

“Hey Pete,” said Chadwick, “will you vibrate my bed too?”

Peterson climbed out of bed and stalked into the bathroom, towel and clothes in hand.

“Ever righteous, ever vigilant.” Chadwick jumped off his bunk and sauntered into the kitchen. He was wearing ragged cotton garments and tattered blue pajama bottoms. He scuffed along wearing a pair of bright pink bunny slippers.

“It’s *mugi* time!” he announced. Time to boil the oatmeal for breakfast.

Thackeray had already figured out that the best elders were crazy. Or at least mildly eccentric. Unlike his companion. Peterson walked out of the bathroom buttoning his shirt.

Chadwick leaned towards Peterson. “And how is our *de facto* leader doing this fine morning?” Chadwick took pleasure in being district leader only because Peterson wasn’t.

Peterson ignored the quip as if he understood it. He walked back to his bunk and sat on the edge of the mattress. “Up and at ’em, Elder!” he barked again. He rapped on the mattress slats.

“Ah, c’mon,” complained Thackeray, stealing a glance at his clock. “It’s only six-fifteen.”

“Hey, Thackeray,” said Longstreet. “Let’s go for a jog around

the block.”

“Forget it.” Thackeray rolled over and sat up. “It’s freezing out there.” He curled his toes and shivered.

“C’mon.” Longstreet skipped across the room and grabbed Thackeray’s left foot.

Thackeray jerked his foot free and Longstreet jumped back, laughing, but Peterson shot up and took Thackeray’s right ankle in a vise-grip.

“Hey!” He jerked back again, but Peterson held on tight. There was an angry look in his eyes and a crooked smile on his face, like a sick Cheshire cat. “Let go—” Thackeray shoved hard and caught Peterson above the left ear. The smile vanished from Peterson’s face. He pulled down with his full weight. Peterson stood only five-seven, two inches shorter than Thackeray. But he was thirty pounds heavier and none of it was fat. Thackeray grasped at his blankets, felt his back scraping past the edge of the bed frame—a moment in free fall—and then the floor came up and smacked him hard and cold on the left cheek and shoulder.

Chadwick strode in from the kitchen. “Hey, no fighting,” he scolded. He shook his ladle at Peterson, flicking a glob of warm, soggy oatmeal onto his face. “Including you, *kisama*.”

Thackeray lay face down on the dirty linoleum. The pain in his shoulder was hardly as fierce as his indignation. “Hey, you.” Chadwick squatted and tapped Thackeray on the head with the handle of the ladle. “You all right?”

“Yeah. Sure.” Thackeray sat up with his legs bent in front of him and shook his head clear. McGowan pulled him to his feet.

Thackeray glanced at Bennett. The zone leader had observed the whole incident with casual disinterest. “I only got four months to go,” he’d announced the moment Thackeray set foot in the apartment. “I don’t get involved with nothin’ but zone.”

Bennett wiped off his shoes with a dirty cloth and tossed the rag in the direction of his footlocker. See no evil, hear no evil, do whatever.

Tokyo South missionaries were supposed to begin their day with gospel study, then eat breakfast, then review their lesson plans. But Chadwick refused to read the Old Testament on an empty stomach and prepared breakfast first thing in the morning. When the district was gathered around the kitchen table, he sometimes made a stab at a religious discussion.

Chadwick peeled two *mikan* and mashed the mandarin orange slices into his mugi oatmeal. "So," he said, picking up a spoonful of the gunk and studying it intensely. "Does God watch the Super Bowl?"

"You mean, does He watch television on Sunday?" said McGowan, between bites of toast.

"He could videotape it," suggested Longstreet.

"But maybe in heaven Saturday's Sunday and Sunday's Monday," said Thackeray. "Like Sunday is Monday here, you know."

"By the way, you guys see the Super Bowl?" said Longstreet. "I mean, do they even show it here?"

"Sure did," Bennett said. "I was in Fujisawa ward. Crazy Nips cut the whole thing down to an hour and a half, though."

Chadwick said, "You've been awfully quiet, Pete. Want more mugi?"

That was the extent of the day's gospel study. It satisfied the spirit of the rule, the rule being that missionaries were supposed to spend time together at the beginning of every day "strengthening the moral of the district," according to the *Senior Companion's Handbook*. There was certainly not much company to be enjoyed during language study. Language study was also supposed to be a district activity, but it was pursued individually with a vengeance.

Good juniors memorized the discussions and didn't bother their seniors. Good seniors helped their juniors when they asked, and good juniors didn't ask. Longstreet was a good junior. His ignorance notwithstanding, Thackeray never asked Peterson any questions. He coveted the time to be left alone.

Language study ended at ten o'clock. Peterson dragged Thackeray out of the apartment at exactly ten o'clock every morning.

"Look at it from our point of view," Chadwick told him. "At least Pete's the first one to leave. Out of sight, out of mind."

Motivated, testimony-possessing missionaries were always on schedule and always on time. Peterson ran his life on the basis of what was expected of motivated, testimony-possessing missionaries.

"You know what Pete wants to be when he grows up?" McGowan asked Thackeray one morning. They were doing the dishes.

"What?"

"Assistant to the President. That's one of his goals."

"Along with his one thousand baptisms, I suppose. How did you find this out?"

"Chaddy always gives his letter to the president a once-over before he sends in the district reports, just to make sure he doesn't get blindsided. People like Pete are dangerous people for people like Chaddy to be around."

Peterson, Thackeray had observed, drew his inspiration from Bennett, who was so good at looking good that Peterson never figured out that all the while he was keeping up with Bennett he wasn't keeping up with anybody.

Longstreet once confessed: "Ben and I mirf around most of the time. He doesn't even try to compete with Pete, despite all those stupid challenges they have. We make up enough hours to make it look good."

"But you always have more baptisms—"

Longstreet answered with a shrug.

The number of proselyting hours a missionary put in every day, Thackeray concluded, were in no way related to success in terms of baptisms.

Peterson and Thackeray walked down the gentle suburban streets and past the small park and lake to the train station. A

few old men were already at the fishing ponds. Snag a carp, pry it loose, throw it back. Hook it again. *Tsuribori*, it was called.

Naked branches brushed against the telephone wires that crisscrossed over glistening cobblestones, scattering drops of water down on them. It was an old street, and the missionaries walked up and down it several times a day. At the station, they flashed their rail passes to the ticket taker and boarded the subway.

The bulk of commuter traffic had been delivered two hours before. A few passengers stood, but only to stretch their legs. Two small old women, backs bent in dowager's humps under their drab kimono, occupied the reserved sections by the exit doors. Housewives and children sat on the worn, red plush bench seats that ran the length of the cars on each side.

There were seven stops within the district boundaries, five of them bigger than Senzoku station. Thackeray considered this a fortunate situation. Not proselyting at the district station kept Peterson from alienating the neighborhood.

Proselyting at the train station plazas included distributing pamphlets and leaflets (English-class invitations, religious tracts) and *eki dendo*—in English parlance, “streeting”—at Tokyo's countless train and subway station. *Eki dendo* had lately become the most productive form of *dendo* ever. The last zone conference had spelled out the New & Improved “affirming” streeting approaches, as presented by the affable and affirming Elder Kyle.

“And the rest of the story,” Chadwick recounted on the train ride home, doing his Paul Harvey imitation, “is that Kyle went *mano a mano* with this catch seller in Shibuya a few months back and saw the light. Remember the moment, boys. Twenty years from now when Kyle Choro is CEO of a Fortune 500 multilevel marketing corporation, you can tell your kids you were there when it all started.”

Thackeray and Longstreet didn't know what he was talking about. Chadwick explained: “It's called *catch sales*. Another one

of those lovely English loan words. You start with a bunch of marketing agents posing as pollsters or whatever. Our age. They hang around train stations and target—you got it—high school, college students. Kids who've got time on their hands, money in their pockets, and who think they're a lot smarter and hipper than they really are, but have never experienced a truly in-your-face sales job. See, they don't know *your* limits, how far *you're* willing to go. It's easy to make them forget their own. Well, you get them into a friendly environment—in our case, naturally, the church—and you make the sale. That's what it means—you catch them, hook them, and don't let them off the line until you've instilled in them that intangible illusion of mutual obligation.”

Longstreet objected, “I heard Kyle got it from the Moonies.”

“Naw. The Moonies got it from us. About the same time they started dressing in suits and ties.”

Thackeray and Peterson arrived at Gotanda station. Peterson set out to catch his limit. Thackeray tried his best to pretend he didn't know him.

By noon, Peterson had eleven contacts, four intro lessons, and one lesson appointment—one lesson appointment, three intro lessons and five contacts more than his companion. Being ineffective bothered Thackeray. Bennett continually reminded him that his stats weren't “up to par,” but then Bennett's remonstrations were far more tolerable than Peterson's attempts to motivate him.

“Pick it up!” he was always saying. “Pick it up, Elder. Let's do the work. Let's get dedicated. Let's meet those goals!”

Peterson never ran out of faith-promoting phrases and Thackeray hated eki dendo all the more because of them. He couldn't rid himself of the belief that approaching a perfect stranger and telling him something he probably didn't want to hear was contrary to good Christian behavior. Even so, he thought he might try harder when he learned the language. He hardly knew what to say in English, let alone in Japanese. He

knew that in a few more months he would do better, but Peterson expected him to do better *now*.

Like Longstreet. Longstreet did better without even trying.

They taught a Joseph Smith discussion after lunch and returned to Gotanda. An hour or so later, Thackeray watched as two men approached his companion. They were wearing dark sports coats and expressions far too serious for the bustling commercial atmosphere of the station plaza. Thackeray hurried over to see what was going on.

“They want to see our green books,” said Peterson.

Thackeray got out his green book. The older of the two men examined it, then Peterson’s. They nodded and handed them back and walked away.

“What was that about?”

Peterson shrugged. “Nothing.”

That evening, Thackeray got an explanation from Chadwick.

“Immigration cops.”

“What happens if you don’t have your green book when they ask for it?”

“You go directly to jail and do not pass go.”

“No. Really.”

“Really. If you don’t have a passport or a green book, you’re an illegal alien. They won’t let you go until you can prove otherwise.”

“Missionaries always dendo the plaza. Why the hassle?”

“Maybe a shop owner thought you were driving away business. Eki dendo is intimidation by any other name. Think about it—a couple of Americans in your face all day long. Some of those guys would probably like to intimidate back a little.”

After the plainclothes cops disappeared into the train station, Peterson moved back into the plaza. But Thackeray noticed that he stayed away from the sidewalks and was remarkably polite the rest of the afternoon.

They worked until five-thirty and returned to Senzoku in the

crush of suburban-bound commuters. Several of the ticket takers working the turnstiles were high school students—still dressed in their school uniforms—working part-time during the rush hours.

The roaring 1980s—the decade that would briefly see Japan elevated to the stature of “Number One”—wouldn’t begin for another year, and the frenzied automation of the nation hadn’t reached the slow-paced suburbs.

Thackeray didn’t know if Peterson had taken out his rail pass or not, but the ticket taker didn’t see it and barked at Peterson.

The kid was acting a bit cocky, so Peterson paid him back. “What?” he said in English, feigning surprise. This was for him a humorous moment. The commuters jammed up against the turnstiles all expected the kid to be able to communicate with the foreigner. He desperately grasped for a few mispronounced words of English. Then Peterson said, “Why, of course,” and produced the rail pass.

The student breathed deeply, bowed, and let him go.

“Crazy Nips,” said Peterson as they walked up to the street level. “What do they study English for?”

They walked home silently through the early evening gloom. Thackeray stayed two steps behind his companion, like a feudal wife. The two of them rarely had anything to say to each other.

Thackeray had been just one more green missionary, fresh from the MTC with three days of orientation under his belt, when he was parceled out to Peterson. Inspiration it wasn’t. In a world of arranged marriages, some worked, some merely survived. Theirs was broken. Chadwick and McGowan’s was a match made in heaven.

Peterson marched up the wrought iron staircase to the apartment, threw open the door and stomped his feet hard on the linoleum. He sniffed the air. “Where’s dinner?”

“Coming up, dear.” Chadwick walked into the kitchen.

Peterson looked at Chadwick and then glanced around the

apartment. He snapped, “Where’s your companion?”

Chadwick ignored the question and busied himself at the sink.

Bennett leaned back from his desk—he was filling out zone reports—and looked around. “Yeah, Chad. Where is he?”

“Up on the roof,” Chadwick said. “He’s thinking something out. Got a bad letter, I guess.”

“Dear John?” asked Thackeray.

Chadwick shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Well, an elder shouldn’t be anywhere alone,” said Peterson. He started for the door.

Thackeray caught a sharp look from Chadwick. “I’ll go get him,” he said quickly.

“Thanks,” said Chadwick.

A steel rung ladder was bolted to the side of the church. It came down to about four feet off the second floor landing. Thackeray grabbed the second rung and hoisted himself up. The roof was flat, and a large puddle of water had gathered in a slight depression in the far corner. McGowan was leaning against the railing that ran along the edge of the roof. The heavy clouds at the horizon had lifted high enough to let the rays of the setting sun burn a bright red streak across the sky.

Thackeray said, “Nice sunset.”

McGowan looked over his shoulder at Thackeray. “You can even see Fuji-san,” he said. He lifted his long arm and pointed at the distant snow-capped volcano.

Neither missionary spoke for several minutes.

“Uh, they were wondering about you downstairs.”

“You mean Peterson?”

“Yes.”

“And how is your Captain Righteous? Howzit feel getting beat up first thing in the morning?”

“Oh, it’s that kind of relationship. He really loves me.”

“Tell me about it.”

Thackeray didn’t reply for a while. Then he said, “Anything

you want to talk about?”

A slight smile creased McGowan’s lips. “What? Everybody think I got Dear Johned?”

“Well—”

“Nothing like that. It was from a friend of mine, Randy Robertson—”

He paused. “The four of us were together all through high school—Randy, me, J.J. Huish and Sticker Lafferty. Last summer we all got together one last time and made this pact that we’d do the mission stuff and make it through okay. I mean, what the hell. A year or two and we’d be good with the Lord and it’d all be behind us. Anybody can do that.” He paused again. There were tears in his eyes. “But Sticker—he screwed everything up.” He wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt. “Listen to this,” he said. He pulled a crumpled piece of paper out of his trouser pocket, smoothed it out against the railing and read:

“Me and J.J. went to the BYU-USU game last Friday, dates and everything. Ten days to go, you might as well live it up, right? Well, we’re getting out of the car and here comes Sticker in his Corvette. I couldn’t believe it. He was supposed to be in Costa Rica last Tuesday. I don’t know what he did or didn’t do. I didn’t even know what to say to him.”

McGowan folded the paper up and put it in his shirt pocket. He said, “He couldn’t go a few lousy months without that damn car and his damn Friday nights. I figured he was brighter than that—” His voice trailed off.

Thackeray stood there with McGowan and watched the sunset. He said, “It’s about time to eat.” Then he climbed down to the landing. *McGowan will make it*, he thought to himself. McGowan was tough. “Just doing my time,” he liked to say. “Just doing what I have to do.”

Thackeray looked up at the darkening sky. It was the truth, really, for all of them. But it wasn’t a truth he grasped viscerally. His *truth* was all justification and rationalization. He envied that ability to be unconsciously dedicated to the work, to put his brain on hold and do what he had to do. Having to have reasons

for everything could be a real bitch at times.

He opened the door and stepped into the apartment. The air was thick with the hot smell of curry.

Chapter 3. Chaddy on the Town

The companion split was Chadwick's idea. He was the district leader and it was the responsibility of the district leader to organize such things. Companion splits were supposed to facilitate the exchange of proselyting tips and techniques—on the job training, so to speak.

It wasn't altogether a bad idea and it wasn't hard to do, what with six guys to mix and match. But as it usually turned out, it was a good excuse for a couple of seniors to dump their juniors for a day. Of course, no one except Bennett ever wanted to split with Peterson. So the two of them ended up together. They left early to go camera hunting in Tokyo. Peterson's principles always ceded to the demands of hierarchy and the necessity of kissing up.

"This is great," said Longstreet. "I'll tell you one thing. We're not going to street all day." He was addressing himself to McGowan.

"I've got an after-baptism interview at eleven."

"No problem. Do I have to be there?"

Thackeray went into the bathroom to brush his teeth. Before the door closed, he heard one of them mention "arcade dendo."

Chadwick peered at himself in the mirror. "Looks like it's me and you, kid." He stroked his jowl and grunted.

“What’s that?”

“Don’t think I’ll shave.”

“Another day and you’ll need a lawnmower.”

“A five o’clock shadow makes me feel so self-confident. Like Samson.”

“Sure.”

Chadwick patted him on the cheek. “Someday, my son, you will know this feeling also.”

“I can hardly wait.”

“I bet. In the meantime, what d’ya say you and me go teach somebody about this Mormon stuff?”

The New Year’s displays were finally coming down in the windows at the station plaza stores. Tall, blue-eyed mannequins adorned in western winter finery instead of kimono-clad Japanese. Calendars on sale in all the stationery shops.

“He lives in Shibuya,” said Chadwick, as they approached the ticket machines.

“Who does?”

“Akio Goto. Teaches at a trade-tech there. Picked him up off English class. Fine prospect. He’s a good man.”

The train cars were large and empty and the sounds rushed in to fill the empty spaces—the hard steel *clack* of the rails, the pump and hiss of the air compressors.

The track emerged from darkness and elevated as it approached the city stations. Houses and apartments pushed against the trestles, packed together in eclectic patterns and shapes. The train raced along the tile and galvanized steel rooftops. It was early enough in the morning that every balcony railing was draped with futons being aired out, turning the apartment buildings into bright patchwork quilts.

They got off at Kamata Ekimae, a university commuter stop. The station was worn and well used. High school students dressed in black Prussian cadet-style uniforms (girls in the ubiquitous navy sailor suits) were waiting to board.

“This is right in the middle,” said Chadwick as they pushed

through the turnstiles.

“Middle of what?”

“Between the city and the suburbs, where the students, the *ronin*, and the rest of the socially dispossessed live. A kind of Greek perdition, where souls await salvation or annihilation.”

Chadwick tended to ramble on about whatever popped into his mind. It was pleasant chatter to listen to, but Thackeray was beginning to get worried. He didn't know what discussion they were teaching, let alone how they were going to split up the concepts. Sometimes Peterson didn't even warn him—he just looked at him and Thackeray was supposed to automatically pick up right where he'd left off.

“Chad, what are we going to teach?”

“Don't worry about it. Wait for the inspiration.”

Thackeray said glumly, “I'm not so good at inspiration.”

Chadwick laughed. “Who is? I won't spring anything on you. Relax.”

They passed a young mother on the sidewalk. She was wearing a white blouse and a plain skirt. A child was strapped to her back. The child was fast asleep, his head bobbing up and down as she walked.

Chadwick turned up a street that led to a narrow bridge across a drainage canal. Pilings and concrete retaining walls held up the banks. Clothes fluttered from lines strung between the rickety balconies of the apartment houses.

White sunlight spilled into the alleyways. Chadwick stopped before the open door of a student dorm and stepped into the sunken foyer/mudroom that constituted the *genkan* of every Japanese dwelling. He kicked off his shoes and said, “He lives on the second floor.”

The hallway was lit by a single bulb in the ceiling. The air had the heavy, warm taste of kerosene heat and cigarette smoke. A curious face poked out into the hall.

“*Hora! Gaijin!*” The door slammed and there was a flurry of conversation, barely muffled by the thin plaster walls.

Chadwick went to the end of the hall and knocked on the

door. "It's Chaddy."

"Come in."

The room wasn't more than twenty feet long by ten feet wide, but it seemed larger. A floor to ceiling bookcase covered one wall. Pushed into the far corner of the apartment was a gas range and a pair of cupboards. Akio was sitting on the *tatami* mat next to the bookshelf. His legs were covered by a *kotatsu* futon.

"Morning," said Chadwick. "How are things going?"

Akio nodded. He looked at Thackeray and said, "Where's Makku?"

"We had different places to go today. This is Thackeray Choro."

"*Hajimemashite*," said Akio. "You'd better get under the *kotatsu*. It's pretty chilly this morning."

Thackeray sat down and tucked his feet under the low table. The table was skirted by a thick quilt. He gathered the quilt in his lap. The warmth of the heat lamp bolted to the bottom of the *kotatsu* soaked into his toes.

On the wall across from the bookcase was a poster of a buxom Asian girl practically bursting out of her bikini top.

"You like Agnes Chan, eh?" said Akio.

"Who?"

He nodded at the poster.

"Oh, uh—"

"Sure he does," said Chadwick. They all laughed.

Half an hour later, the subject of religion had still not been broached. Chadwick turned to Thackeray and said, "Let's hear a little bit about yourself, Thack."

That was easy enough to do. He had even learned to anticipate the inevitable question about New York.

"You're from the countryside—" echoed Akio. The Japanese word, *inaka*, contained echoes of places far, far away from the Tokyo megalopolis.

"Yeah," said Thackeray. That point always piqued a little interest and made him feel quite accomplished in the process.

"Didn't Joseph Smith come from New York?"

“He was born in Vermont. But the church was founded in New York.”

“By the way,” said Chadwick. “Did you read that book I gave you?”

Akio searched through some papers and books stacked up under the window sill and came up with a dusty Book of Mormon. “A bit here and there. It’s kind of interesting,” he said, flipping through the opening pages. “Gold plates and angels and visions and all that.” He looked up at Chadwick with a kidding expression. “Did it really happen?”

“Of course!” said Chadwick, feigning outrage. “I think Thackeray here would like to tell you a little more about it. How about it, Thackeray?”

“What? Oh, sure.” He reached for his flipcharts. “Where do you want to start?”

“Why don’t we take it from the beginning?”

Thackeray was startled, not scared. He had the first half of the discussion down pat. He was to the point where he just opened his mouth and the words came out.

Chadwick didn’t strand him. He answered most of the questions. But he didn’t interrupt. Thackeray recited the “Prophets” and “Latter-day revelation” sections, and the “Joseph Smith story” without missing a word.

“Well?” Chadwick hiked up his left eyebrow.

Akio was impressed, if only by the mere possibility of the tale. “So what if it is true?”

“Well, if God really did talk to prophets,” said Thackeray, quoting the lesson plan, “wouldn’t you want to know what He told them to tell us?”

“Suppose so.”

“So what do you say we get together next week and talk it over,” said Chadwick.

“Okay.”

“Great.” Chadwick clapped his hands and got to his feet. He looked at his watch. “*Hora!* It’s been a hour and a half. Sorry for wasting your time.”

“Thanks for coming by.”

“No problem.” Chadwick walked to the door. “Next week, okay?”

In the hall, Thackeray said, “We sure left in a hurry.”

“It’s best to leave right after a discussion. Give them some space to think about what you just told them. That’s the only chance you’ve got, you know.”

“Chance for what?”

“Return appointments, more discussions, baptism. All that stuff. You can’t talk somebody into being spiritual.”

“But you didn’t set up a time.”

“I created an excuse for a follow-up. I’ll give him a call, invite him to single-adults, take care of the particulars.”

Outside, it was almost warm. Children were playing in the street. An old man in a yukata was sweeping the sidewalk in front a soba shop.

“I thought you told me you weren’t going to spring anything on me.”

“So I lied. Anyway, I’ve heard you pass off Restoration and you’ve got it down pat.”

“I know, but—”

“Look at it this way. If I told you to do the first three concepts, you would have spent all your time worrying about the lesson plan and none of your time worrying about Akio. Priorities, that’s all.” He glanced at his watch. “Lunchtime. Feeling pucky? There’s a great little place by the station.”

The cafeteria had a low, overhanging awning painted with large Chinese characters. Next to the slatted sliding door was a display window showing off plastic replications of the main dishes. The floor of the cafeteria was bare concrete. Portable sekiyu stoves were scattered among the linoleum-topped tables.

“Pork cutlet?” suggested Chadwick, as they sat down.

“What do you want?” shouted the cook from behind the counter.

“*Tonkatsu*.” Chadwick held up two fingers.

The waitress—a middle-aged women wearing a dark blue yukata and a white smock—came to the table with two glasses of water, two heated hand towels and chopsticks.

Chadwick took one of the towels out of its plastic wrap and held the steaming cloth against his face. “What do you think?” he asked in a muffled voice. “Of Akio?”

“Looked interested.” Thackeray opened his towel wrapper and wiped off his hands.

“But will he make a good member?”

“I suppose so.”

“He will. He’s a good man. Just needs time to make up his mind about what he wants out of life. That’s all it really takes, you know.”

The waitress returned with the bowls on a tray and placed them in front of the missionaries. “*Itadakimasu*,” said Chadwick, the customary shorthand for grace. They ate for a while in silence.

Thackeray said, “Tell me something. Do you always take so much time getting around to the discussion?”

“Not always. But when I visit someone like Akio, I figure I’m on his turf. If he wants to talk about religion, he’ll talk about religion.”

“What if he doesn’t want to?”

“Then he doesn’t want to.” Chadwick shrugged. “Leave it at that. You can talk anybody into getting baptized. But you can’t convert them if they don’t want to.” He placed his chopsticks across the bowl, leaned back in his chair, folded his arms. “Tell me, how’s the mission?”

Thackeray shrugged. “Hard to say. Well, it’s not quite what I thought it would be.”

“Not surprising. The real world’s pretty hard on idealists.”

“Who says I’m an idealist?”

“All missionaries start out as idealists. They think they’re gonna convert the world.”

“Not me. You know that goal-setting seminar the first day at the mission home? Well, the mission president got up and went

through this spiel about how we've got to think big and baptize everybody we look at. So I'm really hyped and I'm thinking big and I write down fifty for my mission goal."

"What'd they hit you with?"

"Five hundred."

Chadwick nodded. "Missionary one-upmanship. It didn't make any sense to me either. And then I remembered this article I'd read in one of those apostate publications." He grinned. "It was about how in the early 1960s a couple of GAs in the missionary department came up with the *Field of Dreams* approach to proselyting. Baptize them and they will come. Thing was, they didn't. Oh, they came, but they didn't stay. Big revelation there—all getting a bunch of people wet gets you is an instant ramen church. You're hungry ten minutes later. But Atkinson's from that era. He was here at the height of it. He still thinks that way—numbers equal success. And maybe he's got a point—go for the gross and screw the percentages. I don't know. But he's going to make it work, whatever it takes. When I was a greenie, we were looking at thirty to forty baptisms a month, fifty on a fluke. Since dropping house-to-house and pushing hard on English classes and streeting—going after the young and the restless—we've more than doubled that, and climbing fast. Way ahead of every other mission in Japan. And when they finally get rid of us old-timers and train the new guys on catch sales techniques, there'll be no stopping it."

He paused, shook his head. "On the other hand, you can tell yourself you're going to find the one perfect baptism that makes up for everything. Don't do it. All my perfect baptisms are inactive. And don't be bitter when it's all through. Whatever happens, it won't kill you. You may not like it, but nothing lasts forever—not companionships, not transfers, not missions. Most missionaries make things twice as hard as they need to be. They make good Pharisees, missionaries, always hedging about the law. But stick to the basics, don't do dumb stuff, and they flat out can't send you home. Keep that in mind."

"You being depressing on purpose?"

“No. Survival techniques, that’s all. Most of the time, a mission’s not a bad place to be. You’ll learn to like it.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“Of course you will. That’s why you’re here.”

“Oh—” Thackeray decided not to ask him what he meant. “So what are we doing this afternoon?”

“Searching for lost sheep. Last month’s stats came yesterday. New convert activity at 38 percent. That’s 62 percent to play shepherd with.”

“I thought that was the ward’s responsibility.”

“Sure it is. But most of these new converts haven’t been to church long enough to know anybody except the missionaries, if they’ve been to church at all. It’s the old social alienation scene, the opposite of *ie*-society—the community as a natural extension of the family. Leading the horse to water and all that.”

“I know, but is it worth the effort? Seems to me a missionary can’t be around long enough to make a difference.”

“Maybe it is a waste of time. But I’d feel guilty if I didn’t try. Anyway, it’s kind of fun. Going all over the place, getting to know these people. I don’t mind at all.”

Thackeray hadn’t paid any attention to the weekly Baptism & New Convert statistics sheets. The numbers didn’t mean anything to him, not even his own numbers. But now that Chadwick was playing a game with them, what the numbers meant suddenly dawned on him. No matter how hard Chaddy tried, the game would never end. The majority of a missionary’s baptisms didn’t stay active. It was so obvious, one of those stubborn little facts no one mentioned in the Missionary Training Center.

“Doing things Atkinson’s way, activity bottoms out around 20 percent in the long run,” Chadwick said on the bus. “Though my bet is its going to slip ever lower as the Kyle approach kicks in. Let me put it this way: if a missionary makes it to the end of his mission with 25 percent activity, he’s doing a mind-blowing, fantastic job. It’s a tragedy, I know, so you turn the numbers into people and get them to play along.”

They played the game all day and all night, wandering through the mazes of streets and thoroughfares and apartment complexes.

“A shell game,” said Chadwick. “That’s what it is. You move the investigator from one shell to another shell and hope they don’t disappear when you lift it up to take a look.”

They were walking down the high street a few blocks from Shibuya Station. The roofs of the buildings that lined the sidewalks were joined together with corrugated plastic skylights that sealed out the dark sky. The street was paved with polished concrete and colored tile.

“How you holding up?”

“I’m fine.”

“This guy’s name is Fukuda Kenji. He’s a ronin. A masterless samurai. It means he’s academically redshirting a year to re-take his entrance exams.”

“What university?”

“Todai or Waseda. Probably studying his brains out. That’s why we don’t see him around anymore.”

Chadwick turned down a side street. It was quickly dark again. The only light came from the faint blue-green glow of the fluorescent lamps on the telephone poles.

He rapped on a door. “*Gomen kudasai.*”

There was a rustling of books and paper, the sound of someone getting slowly to his feet. The door opened.

“Chadwick Choro?” Fukuda ran his hand through a mat of tangled hair.

“Happened to be in the neighborhood. Stopped by to see how you were doing. Studying for tests, eh? Well, *ganbatte*. If there’s anything we can do to help, let us know.” Chadwick handed him a card printed with the church’s address and phone number.

Fukuda took the card with a slight bow.

“It’s getting late, so we won’t keep you. Take care.”

“Thank you.”

“*O-yasumi nasai.*”

“G’night.”

Chadwick smiled as they walked back to the high street. “Keep it short and to the point,” he said. “That’s always best. Don’t make them want you to leave.”

The winter night was falling fast and hard. The vendors along the sidewalks were packing away their wares. The video game arcades hummed alongside the strains of karaoke music drifting out from the bars. Thackeray felt the cold winter air closing in around him and shivered. There was still the faint taste of sweetened shoyu in his mouth from the cafeteria.

He paused in his stride, paused as his mind reached out and connected to the world as it never had before. For the first time he understood *a’wa’re*—the pathos and beauty of the human condition—the tremulous ache of a freshly broken heart. For the first time he knew that America was very far away.

For the first time he knew that his life would never be the same again.

Second District: Kunitachi

Chapter 4. Treading Water

Chaddy finally blew Peterson up. He didn't have Peterson in mind as a specific target, but was hardly disappointed that Pete was the first one to turn on the stove the night before March transfers came out.

Chadwick had a stash of firecrackers left over from the summer festivals. He and McGowan spent a good amount of time dreaming up creative ways to get rid of them. Thackeray uncovered the latest conspiracy when he'd turned on the gas that morning to boil the mugi and caught the brief sparkle of a firecracker fuze out of the corner of his eye. The fuze, tied to the burner arm, burned through, dropping the firecracker into the grease pan, where it snuffed out.

"You know," Thackeray said to McGowan. "It'd work better if you tied the firecracker to the burner arm with some black thread or something and stuck the fuze into the gas jet."

So it was Thackeray's fault, though he wasn't about to claim credit. Peterson didn't think such things were very funny when they happened to him. Chadwick was safe because Peterson wasn't about to lift a finger against McGowan.

The only injury Peterson suffered was to his dignity. The

firecracker went off with a *BANG!* Peterson did a four foot standing jump and fell right on his ass.

When the transfers came the next morning, Peterson was happy to go. He and Longstreet got transferred to Sagamihara. Chadwick insisted on going down to the train station to see them off.

“Good luck, eh?” he said. He shook Peterson’s hand. “Hope you make A.P. Remember me when you get to the top, will you?”

Peterson didn’t know what to say. The departure bell rang. Chadwick handed him his suitcases and waved goodbye as the train pulled away. Thackeray was puzzled as well. Chadwick said with a wink, “Always be kind to your enemies when they leave you forever. Drives them batty.”

Bennett’s new junior was Elder Hunsaker. He was eager and competent and ready to go senior. Thackeray’s new companion was Elder Cantwell, a soft-spoken, rather homely missionary who never looked like he had much to say, and pretty much lived up to his looks.

“A glimmer of hope says he’s the strong, silent type.” It was the district’s first meeting together, and Chadwick was engaging in some wishful thinking. Cantwell had stepped out for the second or third time to go to the bathroom.

“If he’s the mission president’s idea of making up for Peterson,” said Thackeray, “I think he overdid it.”

“He ain’t nothin’ but a hound dog.” Chadwick stretched his cheeks down with his fingertips and drooped his eyelids. But then he said, “You never know. Maybe he’s got *geri*.”

It wasn’t *geri*, though the malfunctioning of his digestive tract didn’t brighten his disposition.

At any rate, life improved in Senzoku, if nothing happening was an improvement. Thackeray sometimes wondered if getting beat up every now and then might have some small advantage over being totally bored.

Every day followed the same routine: “Hey, Cantwell Choro, what are we going to do today?”

A nod, a shrug, a vague gesture.

“We have a lesson at two and English class at seven-thirty tonight.”

“I guess so.”

Oh, joy, Thackeray sighed to himself. He did not want to become senior any faster than necessary. He had only half of the discussions memorized. The rest he’d committed to three-by-five cards. He’d gotten adept at palming them during the discussions.

But at least streeting was a diminishing horror.

Bennett did practically nothing the whole month. “He’s trunked out to the max,” complained Hunsaker.

The first week in April, the week the cherry blossoms bloomed, Bennett finally died. On the first Thursday in April, he’d officially been a missionary for two years. He flew home to Bountiful, Utah, the next day. The still mortal Senzoku elders—including a dazed and confused greenie by the name of Elder Farley (Hunsaker’s new companion)—held a party for him the night he croaked. They ate *senbei* and toasted him with mugi-cha and envy. Good elders went to heaven when they died, they told him. They did not doubt what they said was true.

His position as district leader now unfettered, Chadwick was an even happier man. Their numbers never matched the heyday of Peterson and Bennett’s tireless baptizing competitions, but were sufficient to keep certain people higher up the food chain off his back.

Chadwick and McGowan, in fact, had a baptism the Sunday after April transfers. Elder Matthews, the new senior zone leader, came to do the interview. He was as tall as McGowan and the same age as Chadwick. But he somehow looked older.

“Going to be the number one district in the zone again this month?” he asked as he filled out the recommend form.

“I could promise you the moon, but one can’t be number one forever, can one?” Chadwick held out his arms and sighed.

Matthews cracked a thin smile. “Do the best job you can,” he said. “I don’t think breaking records is that important.”

“Music to my ears.”

Matthews signed the recommend and tucked his pen back in his suit coat pocket.

“Tell me something,” said Chadwick, in a curious tone. “Do you always take that long with baptism interviews?”

“I like to be thorough.” He paused. “Anyone can pass a recommend if you ask the right questions.”

“You’re telling me.”

“Keep up the good work, Choros.”

“*Ganbarimasu.*”

“Definitely the strong silent type,” said Chadwick, after he left, “I like that model.”

The days went by in easy pieces.

On the eve of the May transfer call-outs, Thackeray lay on his bunk and mused over an uneasy feeling of trepidation and expectation. It all seemed like a roll of the dice from his point of view, and the odds ran out in the long run. He had been there six months, almost seven. A transfer was inevitable. It wouldn’t be hard leaving Senzoku. It would be the natural thing to do. Like going on a mission.

Where did you want to go on your mission? That was the question they all asked each other in the MTC. Longstreet wanted to go stateside. He didn’t think he’d end up in Japan.

“But it’s not so bad,” he liked to say.

President Matsuoka, Thackeray’s branch president in the MTC, once told them how he’d gotten down on his knees and said, “Lord, it was your idea to send me to Japan. So get me out of this mess—”

That wouldn’t work for me, Thackeray reminded himself. He’d wanted to go to Japan. That’s what he’d prayed for. And now he didn’t know why.

Anyway, by now he was pretty much enjoying his mission. Bennett was gone, and Peterson had become almost tolerable in the end. Almost. But it didn’t matter anymore. His companion

was merely someone who happened to be in his general vicinity twenty-four hours a day. And “the work” was, well, work. Apathy worried him. Missionaries didn’t leave memories behind, only temporary voids that were soon filled. Except for Chadwick and McGowan, he didn’t care if anybody remembered him or not.

The phone rang early the next morning. Chadwick draped a futon around his shoulders and crawled across the floor to answer it.

“*Moshi-moshi?*” He yawned. “Oh, g’morning, Matthews.” He plucked a district report out of the trash and jotted down the transfers. He curled up on the floor and pretended to go back to sleep.

“Well?” said Thackeray.

“What?” teased Chadwick. “Oh, of course—” He squinted at his writing. “Well, me and the redhead are still together.”

McGowan ran his hand through his matted, rusty hair and grinned.

“And Cantwell has a new co-senior. One Jeffrey Naylor Choro.”

Cantwell seemed unperturbed. He picked up his towel and went into the bathroom.

“And?”

“Let’s see—know where Kunitachi is?”

“Kunitachi?”

“Co-senior with Lundquist Choro.”

“You mean Ol’ Luddy?” said McGowan, with a puckered expression.

“What does *that* mean?”

“He was my companion in the MTC.”

“So?”

“Actually we were in this threesome: Larson, Lundquist and me. Me and Larson got along pretty well, but Luddy—he was, uh, something else.”

“Like how?”

McGowan paused to reflect. “You had Morgan Sensei in the MTC, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, one day, me and Larson were out in the hall mirfin’ around and Morgan comes by and starts talking to us. He says how he’s taught a lot of missionaries in his time and he’s been able to figure ’em all out—except Lundquist.” McGowan shrugged. “He’s been out the same as me, eight months. But you never know—”

Thackeray grimaced. *Be patient and it’ll turn out all right.* He’d heard that before. “I don’t think I want to.”

“At least you’re going senior. That’s something.”

“Yeah? That’s not what I’ve heard.”

“What have you heard?”

“They make you co-senior when they have two mediocre elders they don’t know what to do with. Peterson said it’s a fate worse than death.”

“That sounds like something Peterson would say.”

“Okay. I’ll tell you what. We’ll change places. You go to Kunitachi and be co-senior with Lundquist. I’ll stay here.”

“No, thanks. I’d rather die.”

Thackeray spent the rest of the day packing his suitcases and shipping off his tea box. He called every investigator on his lists—active or not—that had a phone. If nothing else, a transfer was always a good excuse to wring one more discussion out of even the most recalcitrant investigator.

Longstreet called that night: “Hey, I hear you’re coming to Kunitachi.”

“You’re going there, too?”

“Transferred here when Holahan Choro died.”

“Oh.”

“By the way, I’m zone leader.”

“Zone leader? You’re a zone leader?”

“He’s a zone leader?” said McGowan.

“Congratulations,” said Chadwick.

“Chadwick says congratulations.”

He left the next morning. The district came down to the train station to see him off. “Sayonara,” they called out as train rolled away from the platform. Thackeray waved back through the streaked glass.

He caught a connecting train at Medamae, picked up the ten-thirty Chuo commuter express at Kichijoji and was in Kunitachi within the hour. It was easier the second time around.

No one met him at the station. Finding the apartment wasn’t difficult. He set his overstuffed suitcases down in the genkan with a *clunk!* and rubbed his hands. The suitcase handles left red creases into his palms.

Longstreet came out of the bathroom at the end of the hall, zipping up his fly. “Hi, Thackeray,” he said. “There are two rooms upstairs. Pick one.”

“Two rooms?”

“And some leftover spaghetti in the kitchen. Help yourself.”

“Thanks.”

Thackeray climbed up the stairs and opened the door on the left. The room was a full-sized six *jo* (about eight feet by ten), with two closets and a chest of drawers by the door. He opened the drawers and began unpacking.

“This is one big place,” he said out loud. “I wonder how much it costs the mission—”

“Not as much as you think.” Longstreet was standing in the doorway.

“At least fifteen-hundred a month.”

Longstreet shook his head. “Used to live in this piece of crap about a klick north of the station. The other side of the tracks, you know. Somebody decided to tear the place down. It turns out there’s this city ordinance that says evicted tenants get relocated for the same rent for something like eighteen months. So Jensen comes up from the mission home and picks out this condo at a heavy discount. Not bad, eh?”

“I guess so.”

Longstreet shrugged. “The plaza’s a good place to street, though. No shop owners to worry about.”

“What about food?”

“Your basic American-type store is two blocks past the plaza. But there’s this sharp little market down the street behind the station. Yamazaki—the guy who runs the place—he’s a good man. But leave him alone about the church. Every missionary coming through for about the last ten years has tried to dunk him.”

“No problem.”

“Watch out for the old *’baasan*, though. She’ll talk your ear off. Likes missionaries for some strange reason. You don’t have to listen. Nobody takes her serious.”

“Thanks for the advice.”

Longstreet shrugged again. “By the way, you’re district leader?”

“I am? I’ve only been here four months.”

“Five. Seven months, counting the MTC.”

“Lundquist is two months older than I am.”

“I know. Jensen told me it was you or nobody. Guess this guy Lundquist is some kind of scuz, huh? I’m already zone leader and the group/district rep and I don’t feel like doing everything. So you’re district leader. Don’t worry. It’s all good.”

“What do I do?”

“Your only concern is the kitty and the Book of Mormons. Give the D.L. report to me. It’s the easiest job in the mission.” Longstreet turned to leave. “I’m calling in transfer confirmations. Any idea when your companion is arriving?”

“No.”

Longstreet thought for a moment and then dismissed the question with a wave of his hand. “As long as he shows up—”

Elder Lundquist arrived four hours later.

“You get lost?” Thackeray asked.

“No,” was all Luddy said.

The next morning he ate breakfast alone and then went up

to Lundquist's room and knocked on the door. There was no response. He opened the door and glanced into the room. Lundquist was asleep on his futon.

"Hey! It's eight o'clock! What's the matter? Still got jetlag?" Lundquist opened his mouth, seemed to reconsider, and said nothing.

He was actually going to say he had jetlag, Thackeray thought to himself.

Lundquist came down the kitchen forty minutes later. Longstreet was doing the dishes. He scowled at Lundquist and said, "We eat breakfast at eight." That was all he said. So two months with Peterson had not turned Longstreet into a disciplinarian.

"Punctuality," was his only motto. "I like punctuality." He was punctual. He was always back from the arcades in time to make his zone stat reports.

A week later, Thackeray cornered him and said, "When are you going to get after Luddy?"

"Get after him for what?"

"I don't know. For anything. For being a lethargic bum. Jeez, I'm not asking a lot. A little intimidation, maybe."

"Hey, *you're* the D.L. That's *your* job." Longstreet grinned. "Besides, you know what they say about people in glass houses." He gave Thackeray a sympathetic pat on the shoulder.

Longstreet wasn't a hypocrite. Only a paper tiger.

Thackeray stomped up to his companion's room. "Listen, Lundquist. I don't care that you're no good at streeting. I never liked it either. But I think life around here would run smoother if we tried to follow some kind of schedule. Okay?"

"Sure thing."

When Lundquist came down to breakfast, Longstreet, who was perhaps feeling guilty about the effects of his *laissez-faire* leadership, put on an animated face and tried to strike up a bit of conversation.

"Say, Luddy, leave any broken hearts behind?"

Luddy perked up. "Uh huh."

There was a long pause. Longstreet waited for details. None were forthcoming.

Luddy spent the rest of the day in a daze. He didn't even make a pretense of streeting. He wandered through the crowds bumping into people.

Thackeray phoned Chadwick in Senzoku.

"They only thing I can tell you," advised Chadwick, "is to bear with it. He won't be your companion forever."

"I was hoping for something a bit more optimistic."

"Just wait till you get your first baptism. Things will pick up after that."

Thackeray's first and only baptism in Kunitachi came on a referral from the Tokyo North Mission. Her name was Nobuko Watabe. She was twenty-three years old college student, a slight, plain girl. She lived in West Tokyo but attended school in Chiba prefecture. Thackeray met her the second Sunday in July in the lobby of the Kunitachi ward building. She was, in fact, waiting for him.

"My name is Nobuko Watabe. I want to join the Mormon Church."

Thackeray later decided that Nobuko showed up on his doorstep because she would have gotten baptized no matter who taught her. Maybe neophyte missionaries were sent into the mission field on purpose—certainly, no one could argue that his rhetorical brilliance had anything to do with her conversion. Maybe the dumber the missionary, the better. In a just world, Longstreet would be too smart for his own good. Except that he knew exactly how to play the fool when a fool was called for. As far as the mission was concerned, that made him nothing short of brilliant.

Thackeray baptized Nobuko two weeks later at the Kichijoji stake center.

But despite Chadwick's promise, things didn't pick up. He hadn't expected them to.

Chapter 5. Undertow

Thackeray pretended he didn't see Nowland. On any other day, the hovering presence of Longstreet's junior in his doorway meant the Z.L. had some errand for him to do. But today was P-day.

Thackeray clicked his pen. "You wanted to ask me something?"

"Longstreet Choro wants to know if you want to go to a movie."

"What's the occasion?"

"A *friend* is visiting from Sagamihara."

"Uh huh. What movie?"

"It's a Schwarzenegger flick—hey, your companion's going too."

He wasn't surprised Luddy was going. Luddy would go along with anything. Thackeray looked over the letter he was writing. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Nowland getting ready to plead. Nowland was a good pleader. Thackeray could turn down Longstreet, but Nowland still had some youthful innocence left. He put down his pen. He could finish his letter later. His inner resolve had already crumbled and he didn't want to be begged to.

"Okay," he said.

“Hurry up or we’ll be late.”

Wasted P-days, Thackeray decided later that afternoon, were felonies.

On the other hand, he kind of liked the movie, the associated guilt notwithstanding. The girl Longstreet brought along shrieked and giggled through the whole thing. She had once been an investigator, he gathered. Big deal. He couldn’t get to worried about Longstreet. Longstreet didn’t kowtow to the rules but he wasn’t stupid. He knew exactly how to avoid getting himself into too much trouble.

He heard Longstreet calling him. Thackeray pulled on his pajamas and walked downstairs to his room and was handed the phone.

“It’s Jensen.”

He took the phone. “Hello?”

“Hello, Thackeray Choro? Been looking over your stats for last week and they’re a little low.”

Thackeray took a deep breath and shifted his stance.

“You see, Thackeray Choro, I’ve set some goals for my area and there’s no reason why we can’t all meet them.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Now, we’ve really got to put our shoulders to the wheel. Twenty new contacts per missionary next week.”

“Twenty?”

“I know you can do it, Choro.”

“Don’t we have zone conference the day after tomorrow?”

“Can I get a commitment on that, Choro?”

“I’ll try.”

“I don’t want you to try, Choro, I want you to do it.”

“Right.”

“I got faith in you, Choro.”

“Thanks.”

Jensen hung up.

“You know, Thackeray,” said Longstreet. “You don’t have to

be so blasted honest on those reports.”

Thackeray shrugged. It wasn't because he was so blasted honest. But because it was too hard making stuff up.

“What did you think of the movie?”

“I wouldn't take my mother to see it.”

Longstreet shrugged. “Whatever.” He picked up a note off his desk. “The mission office is short on Book of Mormons,” he said. “A guy I knew in Sagami, Gordon Choro, just made D.L. down south. Their zone conference is tomorrow. He'd like to stop by and take a few off our hands to tide him over. Spare a few?”

“I could give him twenty.”

“Great. He'll be by around lunch. Be a good man and wait around for him?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks, Thack.”

Gordon showed up the next day at twelve-thirty.

“I'm Gordon from Odawara.”

“I'm Thackeray from New York.”

“Greetings, Thackeray from New York.” Gordon put a hand on his companion's shoulder. “This is Johnson from Houston.”

“Hullo,” said Johnson, sticking out an enormous hand.

“Johnson is greener than California weed before a DEA bust,” said Gordon. “He's gonna do fine if doesn't knock his brains out first.”

Johnson grinned and rubbed his forehead. Gordon stepped into the genkan. He called out to his companion, “Duck!” He pulled out his wallet. “I gots the money. Where's the books?”

“Upstairs. In my room.”

“Ah. A district leader who watches the kitty closely.” He said to his companion and Lundquist, “If you'll excuse us, we've got business to tend to.”

Thackeray kept the Book of Mormons in a drawer neatly stacked behind his socks. He wrote out a receipt for six thousand yen and handed Gordon fifteen books.

“You're one careful D.L.”

“Show me a careless D.L. and I’ll show you a snookered senkyoshi.”

“Ha! I like that.”

Thackeray frowned. “Tell me something, Gordon. You knew Longstreet when he was in Sagamihara?”

Gordon nodded.

“So who did he bribe?”

Gordon laughed. “C’mon, Thackeray. He gets lots of baptisms.”

“From junior to zone leader in two months? He takes his girlfriends to movies and spends half his allowance at the arcades. Give me a break, Gordon.”

“Okay, okay.” Gordon set down the books and thought for a moment. “Well, it’s like this. Longstreet got good reviews from Bennett—as a deathbed favor—and made the hot junior list from the start. So he gets transferred to Sagami as Peterson’s companion. *Molding the leaders of the future*, that kind of crap. Now, he and Peterson do not become bosom buddies. Heck, Longstreet’s a mirfer at heart. That business with Bennett was all an act. When Triptow Choro transferred out, bang! Longstreet goes D.L. Next thing you know, Peterson goes APe. Longstreet pulls a few strings and ends up a zone leader.”

“I think he paid somebody off.”

“With Longstreet running his own show, anything can happen.” Gordon stood up and looked around the room. “So you got this room all to yourself? Tell me, how is the condo life?”

“I don’t know what the mission thought it was buying. It’s way too big for four missionaries. Senzoku was half the size of this barn. We’re wrecking the local property values. Seriously.”

Gordon laughed. “You’re Nipponizing.” He put a friendly arm around Thackeray’s shoulders. “Tell me, are you a man with aspirations?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, do you have a driving desire to become zone leader, assistant, mission president?”

“No.”

“Then you can come to my district anytime. It’s on the coast. The most wonderful beach you’ve ever seen. I’ve decided to stay there till I die.”

“You can decide that?”

“Longstreet’s not the only one with connections.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Johnson shouted up the stairs, “What’s taking you guys so long!”

“Coming, Johnny!” Gordon winked at Thackeray. “The big guy gets lonely when I’m not around.”

He dumped the books into his backpack and lugged it to the bottom of the stairs and handed it to Johnson. “I’ll take the flipcharts,” he said.

“Don’t strain yourself.”

“Now, where’s your humble leader?”

Thackeray shrugged.

“Oh? Well, what arcades does he frequent about this time in the afternoon? A slow day—five getcha ten he’s there.”

In the process of searching for Longstreet for one reason or another, Thackeray had been to most of the arcades within walking distance of the apartment. He knew of only one that opened before the junior high schools let out.

“Yeah, I think I know where he is.”

The video arcade was a five minute walk from the station. Gordon pressed his face against the dark glass and cupped his hands around his eyes. “Let’s see,” he said, “ten video tables, two pinball machines—ah! There’s my main man.” Gordon flung the door open and marched into the arcade.

“APE BUST!”

Longstreet’s head jerked up. He saw Gordon laughing and collapsed over the video table. “Jeez, man, don’t scare me like that. Got your books?”

“Got ’em.”

“How was zone conference?”

“Yours is tomorrow, eh? Why should I spoil the excitement?”

Longstreet rolled his eyes.

“How to get one thousand baptisms next month. The usual bunch of nonsense. Scary thing is, I’m starting to believe we’ll actually pull it off.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Yeah? The same way you pulled off making zone leader. Wouldn’t believe it if I didn’t see it.”

“No mystery. It’s because I play good Space Invaders.”

Gordon plucked a coin out of his pocket and flipped it onto the glass-topped table.

“You got enough time?” asked Longstreet.

Gordon looked at his watch. “Oh, about thirty minutes. Time enough to beat you.”

The next morning, Longstreet left at seven-thirty to attend the Z.L.’s meeting. Thackeray and Lundquist got there an hour later. It was a “pass off” conference: each missionary had to recite a lesson from a discussion in front of the zone for review and evaluation.

Thackeray had stayed up late studying the night before his first pass off until Chadwick snatched away his discussions and unplugged his light.

“It’s nothing to get worried about,” Chadwick scolded him. “Pass offs are for hot young juniors who want to go senior fast, and hot old seniors who like to show off.”

He made senior, anyway. Gordon said it: “The usual bunch of nonsense.”

The president opened the conference with a talk on: “How to achieve one thousand baptisms a month.” Thackeray didn’t take notes.

The air in the mission office had grown stale by noon. The missionaries ate lunch at a cafeteria across the street, savored the fresh air and prepared for the long haul ahead.

The rest of the day was devoted to pass offs.

Thackeray pressed his cheek against the cool partition wall.

The air in the mission office smelled musty and warm, smelled like four hours of white shirts and loose ties and damp underarms. He leaned over his companion's shoulder. "What discussion is Nowland passing off?" he asked.

"D-2."

Each lesson in the missionary "discussions" was identified in outline format by a letter and a number.

"Oh." Thackeray looked down at the evaluation sheet in his lap. He clicked his pen several times. *A 3.5 for presentation*, he said to himself as he marked the form, *a 2.5 for language*, *3.0 for lesson plan*, and *a 3.0 overall*. He clicked his pen several more times and put it back in his pocket.

Nowland said, "Now, Mr. Tanaka, why do you think it is important for us to have free-agency?"

"Uhh—" replied Elder Okamoto. He played the investigator's part with little enthusiasm.

"Time!" announced Elder Anderson "Hand your evaluation sheets to Longstreet Choro. I'm giving my second pass-off."

Longstreet read off the composite scores in a monotone voice. He stapled the papers together and put them in a manila folder under Anderson's chair. He sat down next to Thackeray and handed him a note.

He read the note—*Score Anderson low*—and passed it on.

"Why don't we have someone else be the investigator?" Anderson looked around the room. "Randall Choro, why don't you take Okamoto Choro's place?"

Randall slumped into the investigator's chair and hunched over with his chin in his hands.

"C'mon, Randall," complained Anderson. "You can do a better job *pretending* to care." Randall sighed and straightened. Anderson shook his head in disgust.

Thackeray picked up an evaluation sheet and wrote, *Overall: 1.5*. He asked Longstreet, "How much time does he get?"

"Five minutes."

"Five minutes—" Thackeray leaned back farther in his chair. In exactly the right position, the cool air next to the wall flowed

down his collar.

Now, what to say to the mission president? *Yes, president, I'm doing fine, but my companion—you know, president, I bet you can't guess what movie we saw last week—*

What *not* to say to the president. He pulled out his train schedule and peered at the tiny numbers. If they left the mission home at four-fourteen—

“Time!” said Longstreet.

Anderson snapped his flipchart closed. “Read off my scores, will you, Longstreet Choro?”

Longstreet shuffled through the papers as they were handed to him. “We got a 3.8 here,” he read, “and a 3.5.”

Anderson nodded. He knew what to expect, being the senior zone leader and all.

“Another 3.8,” continued Longstreet. “A 1.5, 1.2, 1.0, 1.1—”

“Wait a minute!”

Everybody in the room snickered.

“Guess you’ll have to be a junior again,” chortled Elder Furner.

Anderson grabbed at the papers. “Ha, ha,” he said. “Not funny.”

Elder Marchant, the mission secretary, leaned into the room. “Kunitachi district! You’re up for interviews.”

Wasted zone conferences were merely misdemeanors.

Thackeray put a pot of water on the stove and turned on the gas. He was ripping open a package of instant ramen when Longstreet burst into the kitchen.

“Hey! c’mon. Get your companion.”

“C’mon where?”

“Dinner’s at the Curry Shop. On me.”

They walked down to the station plaza. “Why the celebration?” asked Thackeray.

“Transfer of a lifetime,” said Longstreet. “What an interview! I mean, first there was the regular stuff. You know—How’s the

finances, Elder Longstreet? How's your companion, Elder Longstreet? Any girl problems, Elder Longstreet? But then he asks me if there's anything he can do for me. And I said *sure!* I put on my humble face. *President, I wasn't a very good missionary in Shizuoka. But when I got transferred to Senzoku, Elder Bennett taught me the true meaning of missionary work—*

"Oh brother," said Thackeray. "So when were you in Shizuoka?"

"No, listen," Longstreet went on. "So I said that what I'd really like to do is go back to Shizuoka and show the members there that I can really do the work."

"And?"

"And he said, *Well, Elder Longstreet, I think we could arrange that.* It was great."

"I'm happy for you."

The matron of the Curry Shop called out "*Irasshai!*" when they walked in. The missionaries sat at the counter and ordered. A waitress set out glasses of water, and a few minutes later brought out the steaming bowls of curry from the kitchen.

Longstreet glanced around the room and said under his breath, "So what did you tell the mission president in your interview?"

Thackeray grimaced.

"Longstreet was suddenly suspicious. "You weren't struck with some kind of guilty conscience, were you?"

"I didn't say anything."

"Ask for anything?"

"Asked to—" Thackeray lowered his voice. "Asked to get Luddy transferred."

"Really?" Longstreet grinned. "What did he say?"

"He said that I've been with Elder Lundquist longer than any other elder in the mission."

Longstreet laughed. When Nowland and Lundquist looked at him, he laughed again.

Chapter 6. Low Tide

Obaasan died the weekend before transfers. *Obaasan* was the old grandma of the family that ran the Yamazaki fruit and vegetable market.

Friday evening, Thackeray and Lundquist had stopped at the market to get onions and peppers for Sunday dinner. She was sitting on her stool in front of the white enamel freezer selling ice cream. As soon as she saw the missionaries, she began rattling on about an American soldier she'd met after the war. He'd given her a bag of rice when her family was starving. A touching story. The same old story.

Thackeray bought a popsicle. "*O-genki desu ka?*" he asked her. Bent over the way she was, she peered up at him. Her face split across the wrinkles into a toothless smile and she nodded vigorously. She waved as they left.

"*Ja, mata,*" she said. *Come again.*

The next day the market was closed. The day after, funeral wreaths sat on easels along the sidewalk.

"The old bag must have finally kicked off," said Longstreet.

Finally kicked off.

When Thackeray and Lundquist passed by the store early Wednesday morning, Mr. Yamazaki was taking down the funeral wreaths. Thackeray put down his companion's suitcase

and help him fold up the two remaining stands.

“Thank you,” said Mr. Yamazaki. He saw Lundquist’s suitcases and said, “Are you moving?”

“My companion was transferred to Fuchu,” said Thackeray.

“That’s too bad.” He waved to Lundquist. “Goodbye.”

Lundquist had been sent to Fuchu district, one stop down from the mission home. He was replaced by Elder Tuckett. Elder Nowland’s new senior was Elder Kempner. Kempner had been a small group/district representative in Machida, and he did good things with small group/districts.

At least that’s what people said: “He can’t proselyte worth beans but he sure can rep a small group/district.”

Kempner arrived on the noon express. He was a big man—in circumference, not height. He looked like a Volkswagen bug standing on end.

He pushed through the turnstile, sideways. Thackeray stepped forward. “I’m Thackeray. The district leader.”

They shook hands. “I hear you have a hot small district here,” said Kempner.

“That’s what I’ve heard,” said Thackeray. “My half of the district is Kunitachi ward. You’re following in Longstreet’s footsteps.”

“Longstreet, eh?” Kempner harrumphed.

“Our missionary correlation meeting is at twelve o’clock,” said Nowland. “Church starts at one o’clock with Priesthood and Relief Society.”

“What about you guys?”

“Church in Kunitachi starts at nine. Since we’re done first, we usually cook dinner.”

Kempner grunted his approval.

Sunday afternoon, Thackeray and Tuckett taught two mediocre C discussions and ran through an after-baptism questionnaire with Nobuko Watabe.

“How did you first learn about the church?” was the last

question.

“I was going to school,” she answered, “and I saw these American women walking around the station plaza talking to people. One of them asked me if I knew anything about the Mormon church. I said I didn’t, but I was late for school. So she gave me a pamphlet.”

Back at the apartment, Thackeray filled out the rest of the after-baptism sheet from the notes he’d taken during the interview.

Tuckett opened the refrigerator door. “What are we going to have for dinner?”

“Whatever’s there.”

“The curry still looks good.” He pulled out the Tupperware dish and sniffed at the contents.

“There should be some old rice in there too.” Thackeray paused at the last question. The answer was: *Streeting*. He didn’t want to write that down. It looked awkward on the paper. He hadn’t had a single baptism off of *streeting*. Not his own *streeting*. All of his baptisms with Peterson and Cantwell had come from referrals or English classes.

Tuckett looked out the kitchen window. “Here comes the rest of the district,” he said.

The front door slammed open and Kempner stomped into his room. Thackeray slid open the *shoji* screen between the kitchen and the room.

“Dinner’s on the stove.”

Kempner said, “That’s nice,” and chucked his flipcharts and notebook across the room. The notebook flapped open and the new convert activity forms spilled out over the tatami.

Thackeray looked stupidly at the notebook. “Be ready in about ten minutes,” he said and closed the *shoji*.

“Thackeray!”

Thackeray opened the *shoji* again and peeked into the room. Kempner sat down and leaned back against the desk. The chair castors dented into the matting. “Get in here.”

Thackeray stepped into the room.

“Know what a *boku* baptism is, Thackeray?”

“Baptizing kids for the numbers. So?”

“Nobody showed up,” said Elder Nowland.

“Showed up?”

“At church.”

Kempner held up four fingers.

“Actually four people showed up. I mean, four new converts showed up.”

“How many on the rolls?”

“The rolls!?” shouted Kempner, rocking forward in his chair, thrusting his red face towards Thackeray. “*Twenty-nine*. And guess how many were Longstreet’s? Nineteen. Nineteen! You know what that means? That means it’s gonna be at least three months until the rest of his seventeen dunkings go off new convert and onto membership inactivity.”

Nowland peered at his credit card calculator and said, “Gee. That’s only 13.8 percent.”

“Yeah, just what I’ve always wanted. The record for all-time low.” Kempner sank to the floor on his knees.

“It’s only missionary transfer shock syndrome,” suggested Thackeray. He tried to sound optimistic. “Activity should pick up next week.”

“Pick up from what?”

“Uh—pick up—”

Kempner grabbed his notebook and ripped out a handful of mission statistics reports. “Kunitachi branch: 31 percent.” He threw the paper away and read the next. “Kunitachi branch: 39 percent.” Another: “Kunitachi branch: 64 percent. What’s going on, guys?”

“It—it wasn’t that bad before,” stammered Nowland. “Longstreet Choro would call everybody Saturday night and tell them to come over to the apartment.”

“He’d tell them to come over to the apartment—” Kempner glared at Thackeray.

“Hey!” Thackeray held up his hands. “I’m a ward missionary. I’ve never had anything to do with small groups. I don’t even get

why they even exist.”

“They exist, Mr. Thackeray, because the local bishops were getting the idea that this business of baptizing at the speed of light wasn’t so *wonderful* and *spiritual* and, gee, I wonder why?” He stared straight at him. Thackeray shifted uncomfortably. He didn’t know if Kempner was making an explanation or an accusation. “So, what’s your excuse—you must have done most of the baptism interviews.”

“Yeah, I did the interviews, but that’s all I did.”

“Did you ever consider failing any of them?”

“For flip’s sake, he was the zone leader.”

“What difference does that make?”

Thackeray bit his lip, trying to remember if he had ever even considered failing one of Longstreet’s investigators. “They all had the right answers,” he said. “I had to pass them. You know how it is.” He didn’t tell Kempner that when he had first come to Kunitachi, he barely knew enough Japanese to ask the right questions, let alone understand the right answers.

“Yeah. Sure. I know.” Kempner picked up his notebook and fastened the bindings. “Yeah, I know.” His voice softened. “Damn, this is going to be impossible. He didn’t leave me anything to work with!” For a moment Thackeray thought he was going to cry.

“Nothing is impossible,” said Tuckett.

“Don’t give me that positive mental attitude crap!”

Tuckett laughed. Kempner began to smile. “Ah, what the hell,” he said. “I won’t be here forever.”

“After you call in those stats tonight, you won’t be here at all,” said Tuckett.

“No such luck.”

“But why should anyone blame Kempner,” protested Nowland. “He didn’t do anything.”

“Let me tell you something, Nowland,” said Kempner. He picked up the phone and dialed. “Longstreet’s a Z.L. He’s a golden boy. So if I wanted to make him look bad I’d have to mess up too many lives. Did it once and that was one time too many.”

“But you’d have to be stupid not to figure out what’s going on. I mean, you got here three days ago.”

“Never underestimate the ignorance of an APe, Nowland.” Kempner paused, listening for the phone to ring at the other end. “Everybody wants the rewards. Nobody wants to hear about the costs.” He held the phone between his shoulder and ear and gathered up the strewn papers in a pile. He looked up and smiled. “You see, I really don’t care.”

Thackeray didn’t believe him.

Two more new converts showed up on Kempner’s small district stats the next week, and activity climbed above 20 percent. The week after it was down to 17 percent. By the end of the month, Kempner had one baptism and that bumped activity back to 20 percent.

“When I leave here, it’s back to zero.” That wasn’t his pride talking but his firm grasp of reality. “And it’s still my fault.” He slapped himself on his ample stomach. “Hey, at least nobody’s gonna order me to cut open this fine belly of mine.”

The summer months soaked on. *It’s getting hard to proselyte*, Thackeray wrote in a district report he would never send. *We just don’t have enough investigators to use up the time teaching or fellowshipping.*

So every week, Kempner assigned them one of Longstreet’s baptisms to search out and invite to church. They trekked all over West Tokyo, by train, bus, an occasional taxi when it rained, searching for lost sheep. Thackeray was sorry Chadwick wasn’t there. Chadwick would have loved it.

“The worst thing about streeting,” Thackeray remarked to his companion, “is that you never know whether they’re coming or going. Pick them up, teach them at church, *sayonara*. Gone forever.”

“One lost cause after another,” said Tuckett.

“Funny thing is,” said Thackeray. “I’m glad none of them feel guilty about it. We got no right to expect anybody else to take getting baptized any more seriously than we do.”

But at least it wasted the time away, watching life pass by outside the train windows. They spent the time talking. There was a lot of time to talk.

Tuckett was from Berkeley. He missed seeing the Golden Gate cutting through the fog in the morning.

“My mom’s from Salt Lake. Born and raised there. She doesn’t know you’re supposed to be liberally-minded in San Francisco. Before I left for the MTC, she made me promise I wouldn’t bring a Japanese girl home with me. You know, I think I’ll find some oriental girl on the way home and talk her into holding my hand when we get off the plane. Give her a heart attack.”

Thackeray said, “I think the first time I thought about going to Japan was after I saw that James Bond movie—*You Only Live Twice*. What kind of a reason is that?”

“Sounds like a pretty good one to me.”

Late one night, after finishing off a Kirin Lemon at a train kiosk, Tuckett said, grimacing, “Could you believe what that last guy said?”

“You mean, *What’s a baptism?* That guy?”

“Yeah.”

“I liked your explanation. A holy *furo*.”

“That’s what it was. Literally. Longstreet baptized him in the bathtub.”

“Come to think about it, it is kind of appropriate.”

“What is?”

“The o-furo. You know, washing your sins clean—”

They both laughed. It was either that or weep.

Thackeray was awakened late in the night by the momentary blast of a radio turned on at high volume. He threw off his sheet and opened the patio doors. Each room on the second floor had a pair of large sliding glass windows that faced a lanai. A clothesline was strung across the diagonal. He leaned on the window sill and peered through the screen into the other room.

Tuckett stirred restlessly on top of his futons.

“Can’t sleep?”

“It’s too hot.”

“Uh huh.”

Tuckett said, “Nowland says Longstreet got himself transferred back to Shizuoka.”

“Yeah. Must be a heckuva place. I wonder who he was with the first time.”

“Mr. California Sunshine. Joe Shimada. About as Japanese as General Motors. Boy, did he know how to have a good time. When Joe went senior they put him with this Chadwick guy—you know, the mutual self-destruct theory—but they didn’t party themselves to death, they just partied.

“So then they tried the green-machine approach with Longstreet. It worked the first week, and then the two of them got to be such good friends—”

“What busted them up?”

“The ward mission leader ratted him out to the mission president. Longstreet ended up in Senzoku with Bennett. You know, everyone blames the senior for corrupting the junior.”

Thackeray smiled in the darkness.

“And he got himself transferred back there.”

“He sure did.”

“Unbelievable.” Tuckett shook his head. “But a smart move, after the mess he cooked up here.”

“It’s not that bad. Not as bad as Kempner thinks it is.”

“It sure doesn’t look good.”

“All I know,” said Thackeray, “is that I asked the questions and they gave the right answers. Yeah, I know, it’s a crummy excuse. But these days, nobody wants to hear bad news. They’re fine with the excuses.”

Inspiration doesn’t come with the territory, Chadwick had said. Thackeray sank back on his futon. *I’m going to die in another year or so*, he thought to himself. *I’m too young to have a midlife crisis.*

The only elder he’d seen die was Bennett and Bennett died

easy. And Obaasan. She died for real. Thackeray wished he'd gotten to know her when she was alive. And he could have been better to Lundquist. Being a self-righteous asshole didn't make anybody a better person. But now it was too late.

The nights were long and muggy, the days hot and humid. Kempner trained them in the secret ninja art of snatching cartons of Mr. Donuts day-olds after closing time. Dumpster diving was hardly proper missionary behavior. But squashed donuts tasted way better than stale bread and overripe mikan. No wonder Kempner was fat.

Streeting was the same as it ever was. But Thackeray caught them and let them go.

Hey, how'ya doing? Know who we are? Right! Missionaries. Ever heard about the Mormon Church? A little? You're not interested, eh? Well, have a good day.

Still fishing in the tsuribori pond.

Thackeray sat down on the bench in front of the Station Curry Shop. Tuckett walked over and peered down at him.

"What'cha doing?"

"Nothing."

"That's a good idea." Tuckett sat down beside him.

Thackeray stared across the station plaza. A bus pulled into the terminal. Two Americans got off. Tuckett said, "It's Jensen."

"Sheez. You're right. What should we do?"

"Run away."

"Elders!" Jensen shouted across the plaza.

"This is embarrassing," said Tuckett.

"What was that?" asked Jensen.

"Nothing."

"Where's Kempner Choro? I have to talk to him about his district rep responsibilities."

"Gee. Can't imagine why," said Thackeray. Tuckett looked away and laughed silently.

Jensen stared at them both for a moment. "Something I should know about?"

“No. Sorry.”

“You know, Thackeray Choro, I was going over some of these old baptism recommends, and it seems like you did most of the interviews.”

“So?”

“Maybe you’d like to explain to me what the NCA here is doing at 18 percent.”

“The NCA?”

“New convert activity.”

“Oh. Well, you know, Jensen Choro, got to get those one thousand baptisms. Isn’t that the goal this month?”

“Are you saying they shouldn’t have been passed?”

“I’m saying Longstreet taught them and I interviewed them. That’s all.”

“The district leader is responsible for the welfare of the district, Thackeray Choro. I get the feeling you don’t understand that.”

“The *what* of the district?” began Tuckett.

“Oh, come off it, Jensen,” said Thackeray. “When’s the last time anybody in this mission failed an interview? You want a baptism, you get it.” He leaned back and rested his arms on the back of the bench. Inside, he felt like he’d had the breath kicked out of him. He couldn’t believe the words he heard coming out of his mouth. He waited for fire from heaven.

“Where’s Kempner Choro?” said Jensen.

“Well, we were by the church about an hour ago and he wasn’t there, so he’s probably at the apartment,” said Tuckett. “I think Thackeray Choro has a map-tract.”

“I know where it is.”

“That’s right. You bought the place, didn’t you?”

Jensen said, “Why don’t you get back to work?” and left.

“Mind if I call in?” Kempner asked Thackeray that night. “I have to give Jensen some junk about district rep.”

“You can do call-ins any time you want to. Two intro lessons for each of us.”

A few minutes later Kempner called Thackeray down to the kitchen. He covered the mouthpiece of the phone with his hand and said, "Jensen wants me to tell you something."

"Can't he tell me himself?"

Kempner held up his hand, listened, nodded. A wry smile came to his lips. "He says he watched you proselyte this morning and—"

"I figured that much."

"And judging by what he saw, he's taking an hour off your compiled stats for this week—"

Thackeray almost burst out laughing. "I'm cut to the core."

"And—really?" Kempner covered the mouthpiece again. "He says that while we were talking, Harper Choro went upstairs and he says there were cassettes in your tape recorders that are unacceptable in this mission."

"Yeah, Sada Masashi. Compared to him, the Mormon Tab is Van Halen."

Kempner grinned. "Tell me about it."

"Why not—" Thackeray leaned forward. "The last thing I need in this mission is somebody's junior companion telling me how to run my life!"

Kempner put the phone up to his ear. "He hung up."

"He's a jerk."

"I dunno," said Kempner. "Tossing crap around is a good way to end up in the manure pile."

"It's also a good way to get transferred," added Tuckett.

Which he was. To Odawara. Gordon called him the next day and told him he was delighted that he was coming.

Chapter 7. Chadwick's Ghosts

The Shakey's Pizza at Kichijoji station was off limits. President Atkinson made the rule clear at the end of the morning session of the August all-mission conference. The Shakey's noontime menu included an all-you-can-eat special for about fifteen bucks a head at the current exchange rate. Not a cheap meal, but a hungry missionary could put down enough to make it a cost-effective excursion. So much so that the franchise owner would have gone broke in an afternoon. It could be considered an act of Christian charity that the Relief Society fed them instead.

But that evening a handful of missionaries stopped in before taking the Chuo Express into Shinjuku. Dinner prices proved dear, but Chadwick had gotten indulgent in his old age and Thackeray was willing to pay to keep him company.

"Hear you had a run-in with Jensen," Chadwick said.

"A bit deal over nothing. I was asking for it. But it got me transferred to Odawara."

"If that's what happens when you get on Jensen's bad side, I should have been more disagreeable myself. It's a good district. Gordon's a good guy."

When they found the rest of their districts, Longstreet had

already launched into his favorite story. “You’ve got this zone leader, okay? It’s his last day. He’s in the mission home and a bunch of greenies show up. The Z.L. spots this one, looking like he’s all confident and everything, and he says to him, *If I was in your position right now, I’d slit my wrists.* And the greenie looks right back at him and says, *If I knew I was going to turn out like you, I would too.*” Longstreet chortled and slapped the table. “Love that.”

He looked up and saw them. “Sheez, Chadwick. I thought you’d died a long time ago.”

“A few more weeks.”

“So what are your plans?”

“No plans.”

“C’mon, Chaddy. You gotta come back and see us.”

Chadwick shook his head. “Don’t think so. Wouldn’t be the same.”

“No joke, it wouldn’t. No rules, no curfew, no companion.” Longstreet elbowed Elder Stanwick. “Nothing personal, Dode.”

Stanwick grinned. “Hey, the feeling’s mutual.”

Chadwick said, “I’ve seen guys who’ve come back, looking for it. And they can’t.”

Thackeray knew what Chadwick was talking about. In Senzoku district, on one of their splits together, they’d gone up to Kamata to teach a first discussion to a high school teacher they’d tracted out the week before. They finished pretty late and stopped at a soba shop to get something to eat before heading back.

An American was sitting at the end of the counter, finishing up a bowl of soba. He said, “You guys missionaries?”

“That’s right,” said Chadwick.

“What district you in?”

“Senzoku.”

“Really?” He moved a few seats down. “I was in Senzoku on my mission. Hard to believe, eh?” He stroked his beard and smiled wryly.

“So what do you do now?” asked Chadwick.

“English teacher. What else?”

“And how is the real world?”

He waited a long time to answer. “When I on my mission, I thought it’d be great coming back again. And, okay, the job’s not bad, can’t complain about the money. But when it comes right down to it, it’s a job. Nothing special. You can’t willy-nilly recreate that drive you had as a missionary. And the craziest thing is—you think, no rules and no companion, it’s gonna be nothing but good times. But the fact is, when you’re a missionary, all you got is time. Rules, companions—big deal. The rules in the real world are a lot worse. You won’t believe me, but there’s no freedom like being a missionary.”

Neither of them knew how to respond. So Chadwick asked him about where he lived, what kind of apartment he had. He asked them about the mission, what kind of dendo they did, how many baptisms. They wanted to talk about the world. All he wanted to talk about was the work.

“Missionaries die.” He laughed to himself. “They come back as ghosts. That’s the way it feels sometimes. That was the real life. I just didn’t know it at the time.”

There was a long quiet moment. Thackeray finished his soba. Chadwick glanced at his watch. “Getting late.”

“Yeah. I should be heading back myself.”

Chadwick got out his billfold. “So where do you attend church?”

“The Tokyo gaijin ward. I’ll have to come down to Senzoku one of these days and ring you guys up.”

“We’ll be there,” said Chadwick.

Thackeray had looked back over his shoulder as they left. The ghost sat by himself at the counter, gradually disappearing from view as they walked away.

“Did he ever show up?” asked Stanwick.

“Not before I transferred. But I doubt it. It’s the same with every RM I’ve run into here. Thomas Wolfe was right: you can’t

go home again.”

“Yeah, sure.” Longstreet produced the back page of the *Japan Times* classifieds from his suit coat pocket and unfolded it on the table. “Take a look at this. English teachers: 2500 yen an hour. Can you believe that? I’ve talked to guys who teach classes for two thousand *a head*.”

The missionaries crowded around Longstreet to look at the show-and-tell. Except Chadwick. There wasn’t much of a point. He didn’t belong to their world any longer. A missionary that close to the great beyond—Chadwick was fading like a shadow in the twilight. It wouldn’t be long until the body was dust and only the spirit remained.

He would come back. Someday. But he wouldn’t come back looking for what he’d left behind. Because he knew it wouldn’t be there to be found.

Third District: Odawara

Chapter 8. City to City

It was late in the morning. A handful of passengers boarded the train. About as many disembarked.

Thackeray opened the window over his seat. The wind blew against his hair. The sunlight was warm on his face. The sway of the cars and the metronomic *click-clack* of the steel rails filled his head. He'd finally left Tokyo behind. The train threaded down narrow valleys that closed in the sky and shut out the world. He was surprised at first. He imagined the city would go on forever.

He should have known. In the classroom in the MTC, a map of Japan was tacked to the wall next to the blackboard. The Tokyo South Mission was outlined in red. He could sit back in his chair and trace the thin black lines across the map from city to city with his eyes—

Elder Thackeray! What's the answer?

“What—what was the question?”

Do you love your companion?

“No. I mean—” Who asked the question? Not Sensei. The branch president at the MTC asked the question. Every Sunday. What a dumb question. At least he didn't want to kill him. Now,

Peterson—Thackeray knew he didn't love Peterson. But he didn't hate him anymore. He didn't want to go through his mission hating anybody.

Elder Lundquist, do you love your companion?

Thackeray smiled at the thought. Hey, Luddy, what about it? The mission president probably asked Luddy the question during the last zone conference. And after what he said about him—it wasn't that he didn't like Luddy, Thackeray reminded himself. He didn't understand Luddy enough to dislike him. He just didn't want to be his companion anymore. That's what he told the mission president during their interview: *It's not that I don't like him. We can't work together. He can't teach. He can't speak.*

Back in the MTC, Thackeray had been no savant, either.

"Elder Thackeray, you've only memorized one discussion in two months."

"Yes."

Sensei smiled. "Pretty frustrating, isn't it? Don't let it bother you." Sensei patted him on the shoulder. "Once you break out of the plateau, you'll do real good. I know it."

That's why Peterson didn't like him. Because he couldn't speak and he couldn't teach. Except for the Restoration discussion, and that never impressed anybody. He broke out of the plateau two months too late. Not as bad as Luddy. Luddy might not break at all.

Thackeray opened his eyes. A child was standing in the aisle, staring at him.

"He's never seen a real gaijin before," apologized the embarrassed mother. Thackeray smiled disarmingly. He wasn't tired anymore. He breathed deeply, filled his chest with the hot musty air. He felt like he'd escaped. *Escaped from what?* The feeling didn't make sense. He respected Kempner. He liked Tuckett. But the irrational fear that he'd never leave Kunitachi kept him awake late into the long, wet nights. When the transfer came, he almost cried.

The train crossed a long bridge. The glittering currents cut shallow gullies into the wash. A broad concrete levee lined the banks. Old men dangled fishing lines in the water. Children played in the hot sun.

Peterson and Bennett had once spent an evening bitching about “bratty Japanese kids.” Chadwick explained, “Parents indulge their preschool children. It’s like they’re giving their kids a happy childhood before they get chomped up by the educational system. I think it’s kind of the same thing with missions. The church gives us this brief respite before we get chomped up by life.”

“It’s not much of a respite to me,” Thackeray had argued.

“How can it be anything else? What do we do but eat, sleep, read a few scriptures, proselyte a few contacts, mirf around on P-days? No taxes. No girls. I don’t worry about what I’ll do tomorrow or next week. It’s all in the book.” Chadwick smiled. “It’s a wonderful life, Thackeray. I hope you figure that out before it’s too late.”

Maybe, Chadwick. Maybe.

“Look!” A boy stood up on the seat next to his mother and pointed out the window. The peak of Mount Fuji jutted above the mountains. Wrapped in clouds. White like heaven. Then it was gone. Through the windows across the aisle he could see the ocean.

Elder Taylor was standing in the middle of the station plaza, waving, when Thackeray pushed through the turnstiles. At first, he thought Taylor was waving to him. But then he saw the girl. She was looking back at Taylor. By the time he realized she wasn’t looking where she was going, it was too late.

“Hey!” Thackeray dropped his suitcases.

The girl grabbed his shoulders before he lost balance. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she said, bowing with each “sorry.” Then she straightened. “You must be Taylor Choro’s new companion.”

“Yeah,” said Thackeray.

“See you around,” said the girl.

Taylor Choro walked up. Thackeray said, "Who was that?"
"Kumiko Mizutani."

"She a member?"

"Yes."

"Do all new missionaries get welcomed like that?"

"What? Oh, no," said Taylor. He regained his composure.
"Welcome to Odawara district." They shook hands. Taylor
picked up one of Thackeray's suitcases.

Thackeray asked, "Do we have any lessons today?"

"Not really a lesson. The Yamamuras invited us over."

"How far along are they?"

"All the discussions."

"Fellowshipping, huh?"

"They're really golden. Givans said they were ready to get
baptized if their father would give them permission."

Taylor turned up the first street off the station plaza.

"Looks like you've got a few cabarets even out here."

Taylor looked a little disappointed, like he'd been beaten to
the punch line. "Most missionaries don't notice. At least, that's
what Gordon Choro says."

"Well, I was around Tokyo enough. Learned the vocabulary.
How far is the apartment?"

"Another block."

They passed the fish market. Seagulls screeched overhead.

"We live on the second floor," said Taylor. He turned up an
open staircase behind a row of vending machines, unlocked the
door and held it open. He looked like a doorman, standing there
in his still new, pressed suit.

"Thanks." said Thackeray.

"We've even got an air conditioner." Taylor stepped into the
genkan behind him and shut the door.

"Really?"

"We're in the first room. Right through the shoji. Gordon has
the tatami. Sorry."

Thackeray set his suitcases on the floor and began un-
packing. He said, making conversation, "Where you from,

Taylor Choro?”

“Salt Lake.”

“I’m from New York.”

“New York City?”

“No. Upstate. You’ve been out two months?”

“Yeah.”

“How’s your lesson plan?”

Taylor shrugged. “So-so.”

“Well, it was rough for me the first couple of months too. Gets easier.”

Thackeray scooped up his socks and threw them into the back of the closet. He paused for a second. *Let’s not get off on the wrong foot*, he thought. Conversation at all costs.

“Good grocery store in the neighborhood?”

Taylor sort of gestured with his left hand. “Couple of blocks thataway.”

Thackeray was beginning to wonder if he would run out of questions before he finished unpacking.

“Say, Taylor Choro, have a girlfriend?”

“Huh?” A faraway look came to his eyes.

“Girlfriend.”

Taylor’s head snapped up and his face began to flush. *Oh no*, thought Thackeray. The face of the girl at the train station flashed into his mind.

“Hey Thackeray!” Gordon’s hand smacked down on his shoulder.

“Morning, Gordon.”

“Looks like you got here in one piece.” He walked through to his room. “Come in to my office. I’ll show you the trash.”

Gordon sorted through the papers piled on his desk. It was a solid oak office desk, worn and pitted but sturdy. A Coca-Cola bottle opener was fastened to one corner.

“Nice desk.”

“Beat the junk man to it,” Gordon said proudly. He handed Thackeray a weekly report. “Got the chest of drawers the same way.”

“Any bikes?”

“Old school. Real junk. Under the stairs. You don’t want to ride them.”

“That bad?”

“That bad.” Gordon stacked the rest of the papers together, opened a drawer and shoved them in. He took Thackeray by the arm and said, “Come take a look at the view.” He opened the sliding glass doors and led Thackeray onto the narrow balcony.

“You can dry your clothes on the racks here.”

Thackeray nodded.

“Gotta be careful about the seagulls, though. One other thing. Notice anything strange about your companion?”

“No. Well, there was this girl at the station. You mean—?”

“Yup.

“Is it serious?”

“Not as serious as it is annoying. She was *my* baptism. But then Mr. Orton Zone Leader come up with this great idea for a zone-wide companion split, so I let Taylor and what’s-his-name from Hiratsuka do the after-baptism interview. Big mistake there, guy.”

“Brown know about this?”

“I was expecting Taylor to transfer this month, not Givans. Guess the higher-ups didn’t get the message. I’ll have to deliver it personally next time. I wouldn’t lose any sleep over it. Just don’t let him out of your sight.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“By the way, we street in front of the station.”

“Anything to avoid?”

“The cops don’t appreciate it when we play Frisbee between arrivals. And Thackeray—”

“Yes?”

“It’s your turn to buy *Time*.”

“Buy what?”

“English edition. At the newsstand at the station.”

The church occupied the bottom floor of a boxy, three-story

office building. The meeting hall could hold about thirty chairs, or half that number plus the ping-pong table that was set up in the middle of the floor when they walked in.

"It's been a while since I played," said Thackeray. "How are you at it?"

"Not as good as Johnson. He's the district champ."

"He's got the reach, that's for sure."

Taylor walked around the table. This is where we teach," he said, opening one of the doors to the side rooms. "Givans Choro kept all his investigator sheets in here, too."

Thackeray followed his companion into the room. Taylor placed a notebook on the table and opened it to the pages with *Investigators* stenciled at the top and *Tokyo South* in smaller letters in the right-hand corner. In Kunitachi, Longstreet was always running out of investigator log sheets. Running out of investigator log sheets was a sure way to impress the big shots.

He read the information slowly, deciphering Givans's notes. Givans had three baptisms in two months. They were still active. "You're a good man, Givans," he said to himself.

He heard the front sliding doors open and close. "See who that is—" he said. Taylor was already out the door.

The Yamamura family's stats filled the bottom of the second page. Every box next to each name was filled with an "X" or a check mark. Alongside the two daughters' names, Givans had drawn in several more boxes and filled them in. There was some scribbling at the bottom of the page: *Challenged for baptism. Strong expectation. I think girls have testimonies. Challenged again. Girls want to but no permission.* The writing trailed off with an arrow pointing to the bottom right-hand corner. Thackeray turned the page over. *Met with father,* Givans continued, *and—* He'd written something in Japanese in bright red characters.

"You are pushy," said Thackeray, reconsidering his earlier opinion. It was understandable, though. Good family prospects didn't show up every day.

"Hey, Taylor," he said, picking up the notebook, "what does

this mean?” He looked around the room. “That’s right, he went to see—” Thackeray got up, opened the door and poked his head out.

“Tay—” he started to say. Taylor was sitting at the ping-pong table, his back to the door. Next to him was the girl Thackeray had run into at the train station. He watched them for a while. They seemed to be doing English homework. Innocent enough. But he couldn’t help feeling a little jealous.

Thackeray closed the door, but not all the way. He sat down, opened the notebook and thought for a moment. Then he yelled, “Taylor Choro!”

There was a quick rattling of chair legs against linoleum and Taylor popped into the room.

“Yes—”

“What does this mean?” He pointed at the investigator sheet.

“Oh, that. I think it’s supposed to be *kinshi*. Prohibited. Mr. Yamamura told us not to talk about religion anymore when we came over.”

“Not at all?”

Taylor shook his head. “He said Michiko and Shinako could come to church but—”

“Who?”

“The girls.”

“Right.”

“They can come to church but we’re not supposed to teach them any more lessons until he decides whether or not they can get baptized.”

Thackeray slid back in the chair and stared across the table at the white plaster wall. First Taylor and his love life and now a couple of golden prospects turned to lead.

He closed the notebook and got up. The girl was still sitting by the ping-pong table, studying a school book. She smiled at him when he came into the room. He pushed open the sliding glass doors and stepped out into the bright sunlight. High school students, dressed in navy blue uniforms, were walking down the street to the train station.

“*Konnichi wa!*” Two girls separated from a small group and skipped across the street.

“You’re the new senkyoshi?”

“Yes. My name’s Thackeray.”

“Nakamura Shinako.”

“I’m Michiko.”

“*Hajimemashite.*” The both gave him slight bows.

“Has Chieko come by yet?” asked Shinako.

“Who? No, I don’t think so. But Sister Muzutani—”

“Kumiko’s here? Great!” The girls disappeared inside the church. Thackeray walked out to the sidewalk and leaned against a telephone pole. Every now and then, a student shouted, “Hello, hello,” waved and laughed. Thackeray waved back. Directly across from the church, across the JR right-of-way, the pagoda-like upper story of the Odawara castle peeked at him from between the rich foliage of the city park.

Chapter 9. Easy Come, Easy Go

Z.L. Brown looked suspiciously at the two elders sitting across the table from him. “Remind me what I’m doing here again?”

Gordon and Thackeray glanced at each other. Gordon said, “He’s *your* companion.”

“Companion trouble?” queried Brown.

“Not at all. We get along fine.” Thackeray jabbed his thumb sideways at Gordon. “He’s the one looking for a transfer.”

“One of you would like to get transferred?”

“No!” they both blurted out.

“It’s, uh, Taylor,” said Gordon.

Brown looked puzzled. “Taylor Choro didn’t indicate any problems in our last interview.”

“Of course. Well, it’s like this—” Thackeray looked at his district leader for help.

Gordon leaned back in his chair. “Girls,” he declared.

“A girl,” explained Thackeray. “He and this new convert. Kumiko Mizutani. Even the branch president is wise to it.”

“And what makes it worse is that she was *my* baptism and *this* guy’s companion is the one corrupting her.”

Thackeray grinned. “He feels slighted.”

“You bet I do.”

Brown was suddenly quite concerned. “How bad?”

“Nothing he could get sent home for.”

Brown relaxed considerably.

“But it’s bad enough. What Taylor needs is a senior who can crack down on him.”

“Thanks a lot,” grumbled Thackeray.

Gordon shrugged.

“Is that right, Thackeray?”

“Hey! C’mon, Brown. You’re not the crackdown type either.”

Brown smiled. “Yeah, but—”

“We want him transferred. That’s all.”

“For his own good. It’s nothing personal.”

“Well, it’s not that easy. Transfers don’t come out for two weeks.”

“Fine. It doesn’t have to be right now.”

“We’ll keep an eye on him until September,” said Thackeray. “But we thought you ought to know.”

“You could have said something about this before.”

“I did, and Givans Choro ended up being transferred.”

“So I thought there was a problem with the companionship. You guys have got to communicate.”

Gordon rolled his eyes.

Brown got out a mission roster and Thackeray leaned over the table to get a better look at it. “Right here,” he said, pointing. “Stahler and Matlock. I can’t imagine any junior being too upset about getting transferred away from Stahler.”

“True, true. And he is the crackdown type.”

“Crackdown?” guffawed Gordon. “He’s going to found the first celibate order for Mormons.”

Brown winced at the remark. He underlined Matlock’s name with a red felt-tip pen. “I’ll see what I can do about this. And you two—keep Taylor away from what’s-her-name.” He paused. “You know, I never figured on Taylor.”

“It can happen to the best of us,” said Gordon.

Thackeray stood with his companion in front of the ticket machines at the east entrance to the train station. “This one,”

he said, pointing at a glowing button on one of the machines, “Hiratsuka—380 yen.”

“It’s a pretty good place?” Taylor had been asking the question all morning.

“That’s what I hear.” Thackeray had been answering the question all morning. “You even got an ocean view.”

“Stahler Choro was in your zone once?” Taylor slipped coins into the machine and punched the button.

“He’s got good lesson plan. You’ll learn a lot from him.” Thackeray tried to sound sincere.

The first-call bell rang on the train platform. Taylor turned to his senior companion with a look of quiet desperation. As annoyed as Thackeray had become with his junior companion, he couldn’t avoid a brief pang of sympathy. It was, after all, the kid’s first transfer.

“Yeah. That’s your train. C’mon.” He led Taylor to the turnstiles and handed him his luggage.

“Good luck, eh?”

“Yeah.” Taylor pushed through the turnstiles and walked to the train.

Thackeray relaxed, shoved his hands in his trouser pockets and leaned back against the turnstiles. Suddenly, he realized that he was missing something. Waving his arms, he called out, “Taylor! The key!”

Taylor stopped and waved back, smiling. He boarded the train and the doors hissed closed.

“Forget it,” Thackeray said to himself. “Give a junior a little responsibility and he’ll take it with him when he transfers.” Isn’t that what it said in the Senior Companion’s Handbook?

He walked out into the sunlight and sat down on a bench facing the turnstiles. The train from Hiratsuka wouldn’t arrive for forty minutes. He pulled a handful of index cards out of his pocket. Free time was study time. Maybe he could tan a little.

He’d recited the first two discussions to himself when the familiarly-dressed American came through the turnstiles—white shirt, tie, dark blue pants, and suitcases in both

hands. No doubt about it.

“Over here!”

The American walked over. He looked down at Thackeray, straightened his wire-rim glasses, and with a very straight face and in an overdone English accent said, “Dr. Thackeray, I presume?”

Thackeray replied, after a brief pause, “How you must have suffered—”

“Huh?”

“You still have a sense of humor.” Thackeray shook his head. “Incredible.”

A grin split across the missionary’s face. “The Stahl wasn’t that bad. I’m Matlock from Kentucky.”

“Thackeray from New York.” They shook hands. “You don’t sound like you’re from Kentucky.”

“You don’t talk like you’re from New York.”

“I’m from upstate.”

“I suppose there is more to New York than New York City.” Matlock turned around, making an obvious point of taking in his new environment. “So this is Odawara.”

“Welcome to the suburbs.” Thackeray picked up one of Matlock’s suitcases and gestured with his free hand. “We go thataway.” They turned up the street. “It’s a pretty nice apartment. Gordon got the place right before I transferred in.” Thackeray didn’t mention the cabarets. He didn’t think Matlock would notice, and he was right.

“Second down on the second floor.” Thackeray marched up the open staircase and threw open the door to the apartment.

Matlock stood in the genkan as Thackeray paced around the kitchen like a tour guide. “Here we have the head—ceramic flusher, but a squatter. Sorry.” He picked up a fly swatter and pointed out the attractions. “The bathroom. Shower works fine. Refrigerator, cupboards—that one’s yours.”

Matlock wasn’t paying a great deal of attention to his new companion. He had noticed something different, something unique, when he walked in the door.

“Air conditioning?” he said incredulously.

“—and the bedrooms are in there,” Thackeray went on. “Gordon has the tatami, we have the simulated wood tile. You have the closet on the left.”

“Very Japanese.”

“No cockroaches. Well, we caught a big mother two weeks ago. Burned it ceremoniously. Haven’t seen any since. Think we scared ’em all away.”

“Where’s the air conditioner?”

Thackeray pointed into Gordon’s room. “Pretty nice, eh? This is one of the best apartments in the mission. The neighbors don’t seem to mind. Even the landlady’s nice.”

Matlock put down the suitcase and walked through the apartment, nodding to himself. The full tour took less than a minute.

“But you’ll have to unpack at lunchtime. We have an intro lesson in thirty minutes. Want it?”

“Sure. Where’s the church?”

“Up the hill, past the station. I don’t know when we’re going to bump into the other two, but Johnson’s the tall one.”

Matlock marched through the intro lesson in fifteen minutes. He was right on time and right by the book.

“Good job,” Thackeray said after the investigator left.

“Did we get a return appointment?”

“Yep. Wednesday.”

“I thought that’s what you said.”

Thackeray took his daily planner out of his shirt pocket. “How are you with the *D* discussion?” he asked, flipping the small notebook open.

“I’m great on pre-existence and mortality.”

“They’re yours. How about the *I* discussion?”

He winced.

“That bad, eh? You can run the film strip projector.”

“When are the lessons?”

“Three-thirty and nine o’clock.”

“Nine? That seems a little late.”

“He’s a college student. Commutes to Tokyo every day.”

“What do we do in between?”

“You mean proselyting? Street.”

“Oh,” said Matlock. “Oh, well.”

“You good at streeting?”

“Good enough.”

“Probably better than me.”

They streeeted the rest of the afternoon, and each picked up an intro lesson. They went back to the church after dinner. Matlock was puzzled. “I still haven’t seen the other two.”

“We do usually run into each other at the station,” agreed Thackeray. “Or at least during meal time. Maybe they ate out.”

“Where do they dendo?”

“I really wonder about that sometimes. But I can give you good odds where they are right now. You ever heard of the Odawara arcade king?”

Matlock shook his head, no.

“Also known as Gordon Choro. The man is a genius at the video game. Nobody does it better. Except maybe Longstreet. Here we are—”

Thackeray stopped in front of a small grocery store a half a block past the train station.

“Here?”

“In the basement. Follow the signs.”

A blast of cold air and the clamor of electronic noise greeted the two missionaries when they opened the door and walked down the narrow staircase. The dark room was jammed with tabletop video game machines, each surrounded by a crowd of teenagers.

Gordon was at the controls of the latest version of Space Invaders. A small entourage of junior high school students had gathered around the table. He was playing one of the kids and was beating him soundly. He jammed the joystick from side to side. His starship caromed across the screen as it burped out

electronic torpedoes. The alien blips loosed a return salvo. Gordon flicked his wrist to escape the barrage. His fingers slipped off the warm plastic. *Kaboom.*

“Your turn,” he said to the boy across the table from him. He looked up.

“Hi, Thackeray. You must be Matlock. I’m Gordon,” he said as they shook hands. “This is my companion, Johnson.”

Johnson formed a great white wall along one edge of the table. “Hiya,” he said, and extended his thick, hairy arm across the table.

“Glad to meet you,” said Matlock.

Gordon asked, “What’s up?”

“Orton called,” replied Thackeray. “He wanted to remind you to get pass-off assignments taken care of.”

“I know,” said Gordon. “I’m taking care of that with Brown tonight. Ah! My turn.” He turned back to the video game machine.

“We have a late lesson. We won’t be back until about ten.”

“Okay.”

Thackeray turned to Matlock and asked, “Are you any good at these games?”

“No.”

“Neither am I,” said Thackeray.

The *I* discussion filmstrip was originally developed for some sort of membership fellowshipping program. It was pretty useless as such. But fast-forwarded to the middle, it provided a great “Life of Christ” summary that tied into the Joseph Smith business very nicely.

Matlock knew enough Japanese to match up the right frame with the right *beep*. Thackeray leaned back in his chair and watched the dust motes floating above the vent in the top of the projector. He’d gotten a card from his sister two days ago. Beneath a cartoon of a perplexed dromedary she’d written: *Happy hump day!*

He showed the card to Gordon. “Now you’re on the down-

side,” Gordon quipped. “You can slide to the finish line.”

Slide to the finish line. That had a nice ring to it.

The film strip was over. Matlock punched the rewind button on the cassette player, turned on the lights and unplugged the projector.

Thackeray scooted his chair up to the table. “Any questions?” he asked. The investigator shrugged. “Well, read those scriptures I showed you and we’ll talk about it next time.”

Matlock gave the closing prayer.

They walked to the front door. “I do have a question,” said the investigator. He asked Thackeray, “Why did you become a missionary?”

“We, uh—” said Thackeray. “We believe the message of our church is so important that the least we can do is volunteer a few years of our lives to help teach it.”

The investigator nodded. “That sounds right.”

“We’ll see you on Sunday.”

After the investigator left Thackeray closed up the church for the night. He ran the sliding glass door home, then leaned against the glass, pressed firmly in and to the right, and heard the lock catch and snap closed.

“Don’t you have a key?” asked his companion. Matlock stood a few yards away at the edge of an embankment that cut down to the railroad tracks, place-kicking rocks over the right-of-way.

“Well, if Taylor’s a good man, he’ll bring mine to zone conference tomorrow.” He yawned and picked up his backpack. He stepped off the curb, waited for a car to pass, and joined Matlock on the other side of the street.

“By the way, how’d you like that answer?”

“I thought you put it pretty good.”

“Actually, I think I went on a mission because the thought of not going on a mission never entered my mind. Why did you?”

“Ditto.” Matlock straightened his glasses and looked out over the city.

The chapel was set into the foothills overlooking the Tokaido

line, and beyond, the narrow coastal plain that held the city of Odawara. From where the missionaries were standing, the panorama opened up with an almost majestic grandeur.

“See those lights?” Thackeray pointed east. “The harbor. A mile south is the wholesale fish market that supplies this whole area. I’ll take you down there some morning. It’s quite the sight.”

Matlock smiled. “I think I’m going to like Odawara.”

The neon signs of the Odakyu department store winked out, followed a few moments later by Coca-Cola’s goodnight flicker. Steel wailed on the rails below. The Tokyo Express rumbled into station.

“Ten-oh-four,” said Thackeray. “Let’s get on home.”

It was a mile to the apartment from the church—a well beaten path that paralleled the right-of-way down the hill, then across the tracks and through the station plaza.

After hours, now, the commuter platforms were strangely empty. Trains arrived only twice each hour, overworked businessmen evaporated slowly into the night. A solitary ticket taker guarded the turnstiles. The cops stood in front of the koban watching the world go by.

“Evening,” said Thackeray as they walked by. Matlock saluted. The two policemen nodded in return. Except for Gordon’s Frisbee games, they didn’t mind the missionaries and their odd but mostly innocuous behavior.

The missionaries passed the koban, rounded the corner, and started up the street.

Matlock took a step and froze in midstride. “Hey! Cabarets!”

“It sure lights up at night, doesn’t it?”

During the summer, the streets were washed down to quell the dust and cool the night before the cabarets opened. The wet asphalt reflected the shimmering neon lights and the blinking incandescent bulbs lining the marquees.

“There’s a pretty good cabaret district in Hiratsuka. We used to pass out *Law of Chastity* pamphlets Sunday nights. Stahler’s

idea of a good time.”

“That is kind of funny.”

“The bouncers didn’t think so. I mean, some of those guys were mean.”

“Well, this is the suburbs. They’re polite around here.”

“How reassuring.”

“See that guy over there, the big one?” Thackeray pointed to a portly figure standing under the marquee of the “Blue Dragon” cabaret. “That’s Johnny Naka. A washed-up sumo wrestler. Bounces for the place. Blocks ice at the wharf during the day.”

Thackeray called out, “Hey Johnny!”

“Hello! Good evening,” replied Johnny, exercising half of his English vocabulary.

“How are things going?”

“Going great.” Johnny smiled broadly. Then in Japanese, he said, “Have I got a great deal for you tonight!”

It was an old game on cabaret row—bargaining down the exorbitantly high cover charges as an enticement. Since the missionaries never consented, no deal was unreasonable.

“Maybe some other time.”

“How about your friend?” Johnny grinned at Matlock. “Something special for a new face in town?”

“Uh, no,” stuttered Matlock. The bouncer and his companion were using a vocabulary he hadn’t learned in the MTC.

Johnny shook his head. “Too bad.” A group of college students had drifted by during the conversation and Johnny shifted his attention. He said to the missionaries, “Sorry. Back to work.”

“Goodnight, Johnny.”

“We’re not going to save the innocents?” Matlock asked, glancing back at the college students. “Stahler considered it his Christian duty.”

“What innocents? Besides, this isn’t our turf.”

“Hey! Takori-san!”

Thackeray stopped and looked up, shielding his eyes from the flashing lights. “Evening, Mariko.”

The woman leaned out of a second-story window above the *Blue Dragon* marquee. "Who's your friend?"

"We call him Matlock. Matti-san."

"What happened to Taylor-san?"

"He got transferred to Hiratsuka."

"But I never got to say goodbye," she protested. She made a good pretense of being crestfallen.

Matlock nudged his companion with a surprised look. "Did she really mean—"

"Sure," said Thackeray. "She's a caring kind of person. A long time ago, I guess some missionary was bent on saving a fallen woman or something like that. And she happened to be around. Too bad she's only the assistant manager for the place. Not *that* fallen."

"Anybody teach her the discussions?"

"Probably. Mostly she's fun to talk to."

"Hey! What are you two talking about?"

"Sorry. Nothing important." Thackeray nudged Matlock. "Give her your two-and-a-half-minute autobiography and we'll be on our way."

"What do I say?"

"What you always say." Thackeray took his companion by the shoulders and turned him around. "Pretend she's an investigator. After all, we're all investigating something."

Gordon was at his desk, phone to his ear, when Matlock and Thackeray walked in the door.

"Stats!" he yelled.

"Two intro's, a *D* and an *I*."

"Not bad. Any baptisms commitments?"

"No."

"Expectations?"

"Two, in two weeks."

"Say three. It'll make them happier."

Behind Gordon, that hunk of a Texan stereotype, Elder Johnson, was slumped back in the armchair, wearing shirt and

tie, sans pants. A fan was blowing at his feet. A portable radio, tuned to the American Forces Country Hour, was in his lap. Walkman earphones were wrapped around his head. He ventilated in contented silence.

Gordon turned from the phone.

“Hey, Matlock, what do you want to pass off tomorrow?”

“I didn’t know we had a choice.”

“Brown’s a friend.”

“Oh. How about a C-3?”

“Good enough. Johnson?”

“D-2, all the way.”

“Thack?”

“I-1 and 2.”

“Daring. Got that, Brown? Put me down for an H-4 and 6.”

Thackeray emptied his pockets and remembered the key. He said to Gordon, “Did he get the stats from Hiratsuka yet?”

“Just a second—no.”

“When he does, tell him to tell Stahler to tell Taylor to bring my church key to zone conference.”

“Will do.”

Thackeray returned to his bedtime preparations. Johnson put his radio away and rolled out his futon. Gordon finished his conversation with Brown and cleared off his desk. Thackeray began undressing.

“Hold it right there!” said Gordon.

“Say what?” said Thackeray. His pants dropped around his ankles.

“Pull your pants up. You’ve got a visitor in five minutes. Kumiko. Did you know Taylor’s birthday is next Tuesday? Me neither. She found out about zone conference and wants us to bring him a present. I figured you were the most qualified.”

“Gee. Thanks.”

“Think nothing of it.” Gordon shrugged. “Anyway, I put you down for a half hour of member fellowship.” He raised an eyebrow and grinned. “But don’t take half an hour.”

Thackeray grimaced the best he could.

Kumiko's knock came at the door and Thackeray yelled for her to come in.

"Need a chaperon?" asked Matlock.

"No. I'll scream if she tries anything."

"You will?"

"On second thought—"

"Ha! Catch the shoji, will you? Don't want to embarrass the natives."

Kumiko was waiting in the genkan when Thackeray came into the kitchen. He pulled out a chair for her and they chatted a while across the kitchen table.

"The transfer came so unexpectedly," she sighed. And Thackeray agreed that these things come right out of the blue, don't they? Yes, Taylor was doing fine (he assumed), everybody was doing fine. She was doing fine. Finally she gave him the small, colorfully wrapped box and extracted a promise that he would absolutely, positively deliver it to Taylor.

Kumiko left in a cheerful mood. Thackeray had to admit to himself that he enjoyed talking with her. She was cute and she had that way about her, such a warm and gentle voice. It was not hard to understand why Taylor's heart, as Johnson put it, melted like butter on a Houston sidewalk in July.

Thackeray locked the door and turned out the lights. The apartment was dark. He walked carefully to his room and groped for his futon.

"I laid it out for you," mumbled Matlock.

"Thanks."

"And Gordon said to turn off the air conditioner when you finished. And I said prayers—for both of us."

"Good night."

Thackeray woke to the clanging of Gordon's alarm clock. Wisps of an ocean breeze drifted through the open balcony doors.

"What time is it?" groaned Matlock.

“Five-thirty.”

“Fetch.”

“That’s what happens when you move to the suburbs. You have to commute.”

“You’d think the hierarchy would have a little more consideration,” said Matlock. “Like, they should start zone conference at noon.”

“Good idea. A pass-off luncheon. Why don’t you mention it in your next letter to the president?”

“Who’s on shower!?” barked Gordon, peeling himself off his futon. He was his gruff, D.L.-ish best first thing in the morning.

“That’s me.” Matlock stumbled off to start up the water heater.

“Breakfast?”

“Yo.” Thackeray shook himself awake. “Where’s Johnson?” he asked, looking around.

“Exercising on the balcony.”

Thackeray went to the kitchen, got the bowl out of the cupboard, and mixed up a batch of mugi pancakes.

Matlock came dripping out of the bathroom just as Thackeray dumped a cup of mugi flakes into the batter.

“No!” he cried in mock alarm.

“Yes!” said Thackeray with equal bravado. “Roughage! Your G.I. tract will thank you.”

“Another bunch of pancakes perfectly ruined.”

“Don’t insult the cook,” retorted Thackeray. “You’ll eat them.”

By six-thirty, the apartment was vacant. Gordon paused on the sidewalk in front of the apartment building. “Water heater off?” he asked Matlock.

“Got it.”

To Johnson: “Air conditioning?”

“Yo.”

“Apartment locked? Present for our favorite Choro?”

Thackeray nodded.

“So everybody’s fine—? Good. Taking the 6:46 express, we should be at the mission home in a little under two hours.”

Matlock yawned. “I’m sleeping all the way.”

The cabarets were silent and dark. Empty Suntori beer crates were stacked under the dark marquees.

As they walked by, Thackeray paused in his stride, glancing absentmindedly at Johnny Naka’s perch. Back in the shadows stood Mariko. She was wearing a pale blue kimono wrap. Her cheek was pressed against the cool cinder block. She started a bit seeing him.

“Conference,” said Thackeray, explaining the early hour. “In Tokyo.”

“Who’ya talking to?” asked Matlock.

Thackeray stopped and faced his companion. Trying to see who his companion was talking to, Matlock smacked into him head on.

Mariko burst out laughing and quickly covered her mouth with her hand.

“Good move, there, Dode,” said Thackeray.

“Hey! Didn’t see your brake lights. Oh! Hi, Mariko.” Matlock snapped off a half-wave salute.

She smiled in return, softly, it seemed.

Thackeray cornered his ex-companion during lunch break when he was sure neither the president nor his assistants were around.

“This is for you,” he said, taking the small package out of his backpack and handing it to Taylor.

“Oh. Thanks. Who’s it from?”

“Kumiko.”

“Who?”

“Sister Mizutani, dummy.”

“Oh.” Elder Taylor produced a crooked smile.

Thackeray rolled his eyes. Stahler had been more effective than expected. “For your birthday,” he said, “Happy birthday.”

“Thanks,” said Taylor. He shrugged. “You know how it is with triffs—easy come, easy go.”

“Right.” Thackeray was suddenly very pleased with Taylor’s adolescent flakiness. Kumiko would be better off because of it.

One of the few things Thackeray had positively figured out at this point in his life was that, given a compelling-enough cause and lofty-enough goals and couched in manly-enough terms, there was nothing a nineteen year old couldn’t be convinced to believe in, be it love or religion.

That is, until the next big thing, the next pretty face, came along. Or he just got bored.

Still, there was a big difference between being celibate and being a celibate jerk. Thackeray made a point of avoiding his ex-companion for the rest of the day.

Chapter 10. Jitensha

Japanese rode *jitensha* the way Los Angelenos drove cars. Anyone who lived too far from the train station to walk or too close to bother with the bus depended on pedal-power. That added up to a lot of bikes.

Fortunately, the only good proselyting was at the train station and most missionaries lived close enough to a station not to have to bother with bikes.

Gordon hadn't bothered with bikes, even at the old Odawara apartment where it took a good half hour at a brisk pace to walk to church. He was indifferent with good reason. The bikes were monstrous contraptions with steel tube frames and skid brakes and fender racks big enough to carry a missionary's entire set of luggage.

"You can pedal downhill and coast on the level," Gordon explained to Matlock, who had expressed an interest. "But don't try going uphill, and don't count on stopping in any kind of a hurry going either direction."

Gordon had been trying to dispose of the bikes for some time. He left them under the stairs, in rather plain view, with only the fork lock engaged. The fork lock was a pressed-metal gimmick that threw a bolt through the spokes of the front tire. The bolt could be circumvented simply by twisting the lock around on

the fork. Not much of a deterrent. Consequently, the bikes were stolen about once a week by drunks stumbling home from cabaret row after the trains and buses stopped running.

Getting the bikes to *remain* stolen, however, was a bit more difficult. Attached to the crossbar was a large metal plate on which "Mormon Church" was painted in white block letters.

"Think of it this way," said Gordon. "Some guy is going haul home on one of these things, realize he's stolen church property, get all guilty, and then show up on our doorstep wanting to get baptized."

Not in any of their lifetimes.

The local police dutifully retrieved the bikes every time they were stolen. They often called early in the morning to inform the missionaries of the location of the vehicles before the missionaries knew they were missing. But the bikes finally did disappear for good.

"Hosers must've finally got smashed up enough to get the crates right into the river," remarked Gordon.

And he was right about meeting people because of the bikes.

"Are you the Americans whose junky bikes keep getting stolen?" a junior high school kid asked Gordon one day after getting beat soundly at Space Invaders.

"Yup," said Gordon.

"My dad's a cop. He could get you some good bikes."

"How?" asked Matlock, who was watching them play.

"The police auction is this Sunday. I bet he'd let you pick out a couple before it started."

Thackeray and Matlock stopped at the police station Sunday morning on their way to church. The boy's father was pleasant and understanding.

"You should have come by earlier," he said. "Those bikes you had were, well, not so good." Then he took them behind the station where several hundred bicycles were chained together in a long row that stretched around three wall of the compound. They picked out two ten speeds, each rusty but mechanically

sound.

“You ought to see all the bikes they got there,” Matlock told Gordon that afternoon. “I bet they’ll have some good ones left over after the auction.”

But Gordon wasn’t interested.

“You’d save a lot of time,” Thackeray pointed out.

“It’d mess up my suit.”

“That?”

“Besides, I’ve got enough time on my hands as is. Why should I want to save any?”

So Gordon never rode the bikes, but the very next Sunday he did come to appreciate them. It all started during the weekly meeting with the branch mission leader. The phone rang in the branch president’s office. Thackeray left the meeting to answer it.

“Good morning, Elder. This is President Atkinson.”

“No kidding? No, I mean—”

“Is this Elder Thackeray?”

“What? Oh, yes. Good morning, President Atkinson.”

“Is Elder Gordon there?”

“Just a moment. I’ll go get him.”

He gingerly put the phone down and hurried back to the room. “Hey, Gordon—” he gestured to him from the door.

“What’s up?”

He hissed in English, “The mission president is on the phone!”

“Fetch! What for?”

“I don’t know. But it didn’t sound long-distance.”

Gordon hurried off. Thackeray sat down next to his companion and began reviewing their investigator sheets. Gordon was back a moment later.

“What did he want?”

“He wants to see the apartment.”

“What for?”

“Because he hasn’t seen it in the flesh. We got it a couple of months ago. Anyway, he’s coming here and then he wants us to

show him where the place is.”

“We can’t do that.”

“I know. But that’s not all. He wants to attend church too.”

“Why can’t he see the apartment afterwards?”

“Because church doesn’t start for another hour.” Gordon said to Brother Iwakawa in Japanese, “The mission president called. He’s going to attend church today.”

“Really?” Iwakawa was pleased.

Gordon said to Johnson and Matlock, in English, “You guys take the bikes and get down to the apartment and clean the place up. Stay on the *east* side of the station and go around the back.”

Johnson and Matlock left at once. Gordon and Thackeray continued with their meeting until the mission president and his wife drove up to the church in their white Toyota.

Gordon and Thackeray got in. The interior of the car was hot, the vinyl seat covers warm and sticky.

“We couldn’t find your apartment,” said President Atkinson.

“Well, yeah, it is kind of off the beaten path,” said Gordon. “Take the road past the *west* station exit and it’s the first right under the tracks and then left around the corner.”

The mission president’s wife turned to them and cheerfully asked, “How are you young men doing?”

“Oh, fine, Ma’am.”

“No health problems?” she asked, in a way that made them feel guilty for not having any.

“No, Ma’am.”

The president pulled up in front of the apartment building. Gordon and Thackeray got out and stomped noisily up the stairs. Thackeray went straight in while Gordon waited outside for the president and his wife to catch up.

Matlock was coming out of the bathroom. “Get everything?” whispered Thackeray.

“I put the dishes in the furo.”

“What about the tape players and Johnson’s radio?”

“Under the futons.”

“The JAL posters?”

“In the tea boxes.”

Thackeray hurried into Gordon’s room as Gordon and the mission president and his wife stepped into the genkan. “Yes, this is a nice apartment,” they both observed.

“Johnson, what about the magazines?” Thackeray pointed at the formidable collection of *Time* and *Asahi Weekly* by Gordon’s desk.

Johnson grunted and hoisted up the stack of magazines, stepped out onto the balcony, and dropped them over the railing. They landed with a loud thud and a cloud of dust—to the great delight of a couple of kids skipping rope in the alley. The crazy gaijins next door could be counted on to enliven a dull day in the most unexpected ways.

“You can see we have air conditioning,” said Gordon. “Our landlady wired the phone for free.”

“That’s very nice.”

Thackeray and Johnson smiled and agreed.

“Well, I think it’s about time we got back to church,” said the mission president, glancing at his watch. “We don’t want to be late.”

“Of course not,” Gordon gravely agreed.

The mission president and his wife went back into the genkan to put on their shoes. Gordon looked at Thackeray and sighed.

They both nodded and said under their breath, “*Way* too much excitement for one day.”

Chapter 11. Sekiyu

The sun rose over the harbor. The sunlight streamed down the alleys and thoroughfares of the city. Fish were delivered to the street markets packed in salty ice. Where the shadows ended along the tattered canvas awnings, the slush melted away in silvery streams.

Thackeray took his hands off the handlebars of his bike, stretched and yawned. P-days in Odawara were as fresh and rejuvenating as the early morning air, a far cry from the stale, mangled afternoons in Kunitachi. Here they could get away to the ocean or the country and still be back before noon. It didn't take more than half an hour up the winding roads into the foothills before the horizon was taken over by rice paddies and mikan groves.

"The boondocks," Matlock called it. It made Thackeray remember his transfer to Odawara. Nobody ever told him Japan had boondocks.

"Hey, Dode!" called out Matlock. "What are we doing today?" He shifted gears and glided alongside his companion.

"We've got the shopping this week."

"Besides that."

"I dunno. What do you want to see?"

"Haven't been on the castle tour yet."

“Me, neither. It does look interesting from the outside.”

They were a mile from the city center on the main street of the small oceanside community that paralleled the Tokkaido highway along the lee side of the high levee. Weathered store fronts jutted out along the sidewalk. Door chimes rang out sharp and clean above the rumble of traffic.

“Hey gaijin-san!” A wiry man in his late thirties waved from across the street. He was standing in front of a DayGlo painted sign that said in large block letters: AOKI SURF SHOP.

The missionaries stopped at a traffic light and waved back. The light changed. The missionaries walked their bikes across the street.

“How’s business, Blue?” Thackeray asked.

“Hey! It’s cold! Business is not so good. But the surf’s up in Azuma!”

“You’re going surfing? You’ll freeze.”

“Hey! That’s my life,” said Blue, with a touch of comic sadness. “So rough, eh?”

Matlock said, “I could stand it.”

“You want to go? Hey, I’ll find another wet suit.”

“Call me in a year and I’ll take you up on that.”

“Hey! You should come now.”

“No can do.”

“Aww. Too bad. You going to the beach?”

“Yep.”

“Not so good now. Too cold. No girls to look at, eh?”

“Nope.” Thackeray and Matlock laughed.

“Too bad. Well, I got to go.”

“See you around, Aoki.”

The narrow alley behind the Surf Shop led to an access culvert under the levee. The culvert emptied onto a grassy dune that looked down on the wide expanse of white sand.

It was as if the levee dammed up the impatient civilization behind it. The beach was a sandy swath fifty meters wide that stretched twenty kilometers from the harbor breakers in the

north to the lava cliffs of Hakone National Park in the south. Trawlers dotted the seascape. A few old fishermen tended their lines in the surf.

They propped their bikes against a section of storm fencing and set off toward the breakers.

“You know,” said Matlock, pulling off his glasses strap, “I do miss the girls. I haven’t seen a bikini in a month.”

“Gordon says there’re still some sights to see later on in the afternoon.”

“Tempting.”

“But not worth the time, eh?”

“Guess not.”

“Gotta know you’re a missionary—with messed up priorities like that.”

“Speaking of which, we still haven’t decided what we’re going to do today.”

Thackeray picked up a stone and skipped it into the surf. “Thought we decided on Odawara Castle.”

“How much is it?”

“Two hundred yen.”

“That’s not bad.”

“Anyway, I need to take some pictures.”

“I’d think you’d have all the pictures you needed by now.”

“Well, I do, actually. Except every time my mom writes, she says how she really appreciates the pictures and slides, but where am I?”

“The boondocks don’t turn ’em on, eh?”

Matlock shook his head. “Guess not.”

“First we stop by Odakyu and get groceries. What do you want to eat this week?”

“Anything but *natto*.”

Matlock said to his companion, as they rode down the escalator to the grocery store on the bottom floor of the Okakyu, “Got your wallet? I didn’t bring any money.”

“Never go anywhere without it. I’m paranoid about getting

caught without my green book.”

“Ever been stopped for it?”

“Twice. Both time in Senzoku. My first senior was one of those aggressive eki dendo types. He made the cops suspicious. Ah!”

An attractive girl wearing a miniskirt version of the store uniform bowed as the missionaries stepped off the escalator. Matlock saluted in turn. The girl giggled and covered her mouth with her hand.

“Slaying triffs again? You’re as bad as Gordon.”

“Only on P-day.”

Thackeray picked up two shopping baskets and handed one to his companion. “What think ye?”

“Spaghetti, for starters.”

“Only if we buy meat.”

“It’s more expensive that way.”

“I don’t see how you and Johnson can stand potatoes in spaghetti. A starch on top of a starch.”

“Simple. Bulk.”

“Takori-san!”

Two girls, wearing high school uniforms and carrying full shopping baskets, walked up to them.

“Good morning Michiko, Shinako.” Thackeray nodded. “Don’t you have school?”

“School starts late today because of teacher conferences.”

“So we’re helping Mom shop.” Shinako said to Matlock, “You’re Matti-san, right?”

“Yes.”

Shinako said to her sister, “I told you he had a new companion.”

Matlock shook their hands. Shinako said, “Why don’t you come over sometime and meet our parents?”

“To play,” added Michiko.

“Play?” echoed Matlock.

“Of course,” Thackeray broke in. “We’re free tonight after Eikaiwa.”

“Great!” said the girls together. “We just got a new *Off Course* album. We can listen to it.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“We’ll be waiting,” said the girls. “We’ve got to go now. Bye-bye.”

The missionaries waved back.

“Nice girls,” said Matlock, raising his brow. “Members?”

“Nope. Triffs. With a capital T. Got picked up before I got here.”

“No possibilities, eh?” asked Matlock.

“There’s always a possibility. But heavy parent permission problems.” Thackeray sorted through a pile of mikans. “Givans and Taylor went through the whole gambit. That’s why we got invited over to *play*. Their dad put the nix on religion. And just as well. I’m lousy at pressure proselyting.”

“Don’t throw away all hope.” Matlock took the bag of mikans from his companion and weighed it.

“You’ve taught triffs before.”

“Well, there’re triffs and then there are triffs.”

Thackeray took the bag of mikans off the scale and put them into his basket. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll keep an open mind. But by the rules. Parent permission and all.”

“Hey, I’ve got no expectations. I just met them.”

They finished shopping and took their baskets to the cashiers’ aisle. The totals were tallied and Thackeray paid the girl, who handed him the receipt and several plastic bags.

Thackeray hadn’t seen a brown paper grocery bag since coming to Japan. The stores used incredibly strong plastic bags with handles. And the customers had to stuff them themselves.

For bike riders, the plastic bags were a blessing. Thackeray preferred to sling his groceries over one shoulder and steer with one hand, while Matlock looped the bags through his handlebars and kept them out of the spokes by banging them with his knees.

They made quite a sight: the two Americans and their incredible grocery bag and bike balancing act.

By the next Thursday, the first of the winter monsoons had swept ashore a thousand kilometers to the south, bringing gray mornings, wet days and dark nights to the southern end of the Kanto plain.

Thackeray pulled the collar of his jacket over his head and leaned into the rain. Matlock held a red fifteen liter container over his head as he ran down the street. They ducked under the awning of a fruit and vegetable market to catch their breath.

“Fetch!” said Matlock. “What happened to all our perfect Thursdays?”

“Winter.”

“I thought it snowed in winter.”

“Not here. And be glad it doesn’t. It gets miserable enough.”

“Where’s the gas station?”

“Another block. Run for cover whenever you see it.”

They dashed for the awning of the bakery, across the street to the deli, to a video arcade, and then to the gas station. The attendant was servicing an Isuzu pickup.

“What do we want?” asked Matlock. “So I know what to do when I grow up.”

“*Sekiyu*. Kerosene. As in *sekiyu* stove.”

“Right.”

The Isuzu drove off and the attendant said to the Americans, “You need kerosene?”

“Sure do,” said Matlock. The attendant took the container and walked over to a pump by the garage.

“Very good,” said Thackeray.

“Oh, shut up.”

The attendant lugged the full container back to the Americans and set it down in front of them. “Eighteen hundred twenty-five yen,” he said.

Thackeray handed the broomstick to Matlock and paid the attendant. “Okay,” he said, “put it through the handle and let’s go.”

They grunted, picked up the container, and started up the

sidewalk. Matlock asked as they stepped off the curb, "How often do we have to do this?"

"Every couple of weeks."

"And it makes that big of a difference?"

"Come January, the most precious thing in your life, other than your electric blanket, will be the sekiyu stove."

A metallic blue Honda whipped by the missionaries and pulled up to the curb. The passenger door opened and Michiko Yamamura leaned out and shouted, "Hey! want a ride?"

Before they could answer, She took the car keys from her mother and jumped out of the car. "You can put the sekiyu in the trunk," she said. She unlocked the trunk. Matlock wedged the kerosene container between the spare tire and the wheel well.

Thackeray and Matlock got in the back seat. Michiko sat between them.

"Where do you live?" asked Mrs. Yamamura.

"A block north of the station."

"I know how to get there," said Shinako.

"I haven't been in a car since I left home," said Matlock.

"What's that?" said Michiko. "Don't speak English!"

"He said this is the first time he's been in a car since he left home," translated Thackeray.

Shinako said to her mother, "You know what? Takori Choro got his driving license when he was eighteen and it only cost him twelve dollars!"

Thackeray said, "That's nothing. Matlock got his when was sixteen."

"Sixteen!" The girls gasped together.

Shinako twisted around in the front seat. "Do have your license with you?" she asked Matlock.

Matlock reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. "Here it is," he said, handing the license to Michiko.

"You used to have a moustache!"

"Let me see!" Shinako grabbed the license and peered at the laminated card and then at Matlock face. "You look better

without it.” She handed back the license.

Matlock said, as he tucked his wallet back into his pocket, “Girls always say that.”

Shinako said to her mother, “Turn here.”

Mrs. Yamamura stopped the car in front of the missionaries’ apartment. Thackeray and Matlock got out. Michiko unlocked the trunk.

“What are doing next Thursday? she asked as Matlock pulled out the container.

“We’re going to Zama Base for Thanksgiving,” Thackeray said.

“Maybe you could come over afterwards?” There was a wistful air to her voice that Thackeray found a bit unnerving.

“I don’t think so. We’ll be pretty busy.”

Matlock slammed the trunk closed. Thackeray opened the car door for Shinako and closed it after she got in. She rolled down the window and said, “We might be able to come to church this Sunday.”

“Great!” said Thackeray.

“We’ll be seeing you then—”

Michiko tapped her sister on the shoulder and whispered something to her. “That’s right!” said Shinako. “I almost forgot.” She took a small envelope from her purse and handed it to Thackeray. “It’s a question we had. Michiko thought we should write it down.”

Thackeray held up the envelope and flipped it over in his hand. “We’ll do our best,” he said.

Mrs. Yamamura started up the car.

“Bye-bye,” said the girls, in that utterly ingenuous manner that made it very hard to leave.

Chapter 12. A Day in America

The Chevrolet was parked in front of the station plaza. The taxi drivers had to thread their way around the immense hunk of Detroit steel to get to the loading zones.

The driver stood like a sentry by his automobile, oblivious to inconvenience he was inflicting. With his blue eyes, cropped brown hair and camos, he and his car looked like some kind of postmodern sculpture, almost comically out of their element.

“I guess you ride those things a lot,” he said.

“What things?” said Thackeray. “Oh. Trains. Yeah, we do.”

“You know, I’ve never been on one.”

“Never been on a train?” said Matlock.

“Don’t get off the base very often. Only going to be here another year, you know. Suppose I should get out and see the country.”

“What?” said Matlock.

“Hey! A Chevy!” Johnson whistled. “How’d you get it?”

“Bought it from a guy on rotation. People used to ship ’em over all the time. Which one of you is Elder Gordon?”

Gordon stepped forward.

“I’m Brother Nolan. This your district?”

“We’re all here.”

“Pile in. It’s about a mile to the base.”

The car rolled slowly down the narrow streets. It was like any other small Japanese town, shop fronts crowding the sidewalks and narrow front yards cordoned off with gray cinder block walls. In Odawara, people would have gawked at an American car driven by an American and filled with Americans. No one noticed here.

Brother Nolan made a left turn. The gates and guard blocks of the military base loomed up in front of them. He nodded to the guard and drove on through.

“Holy cow!” Johnson pressed his face against the passenger window. “Will you look at that? Lawns! When’s the last time you saw a lawn?”

“And real houses,” joked Brother Nolan.

A dumb thing to say, thought Thackeray, but that was the first thing that popped into his head too. A Cape Cod here. A split level there. Two-family flats perched behind broad front yards. Neatly striped blacktop bordered by white concrete sidewalks. Thackeray stared and twisted around. Japan had vanished. They’d driven right into small-town America without crossing the Pacific.

Brother Nolan parked behind the base chapel. They walked into the building—with their shoes on—and down the hallway to a large rec room. Full of food, Americans, and missionaries.

“Hey Thack!”

“How ya doing, Tuckett?”

“Okay. I’m okay.”

“I saw they put you together with Kempner Choro.”

“Yeah. It’s working out pretty well. Hey, you know who’s dying next Tuesday? Jensen.”

“Congratulations.”

“Yeah. We’re having a party.”

Kempner’s thick hand clamped down on Thackeray’s shoulder. “Looks like I caught me a runaway.”

“Hiya Kempner Choro. Nice improvement on the last stats.”

“Yeah. Maybe I’ll be out of the doghouse by the time I die.”

“Don’t get caught stealing donuts.”

“No way.”

“Yo! Adkins!”

“Where’s that D.L. of yours?”

“Over there.”

“Who’s the new sister missionary? No, the cute one—”

“Yeah, I know. I’m gonna smoke you at the arcades next zone conference. Yo! Gordon. That means you!”

“When are we gonna start eating?”

“WELL, LET’S GET THIS THING ROLLING!” A stocky man, graying around the temples, stood up on a chair. “We’re really glad you missionaries could share this Thanksgiving with us.” A smattering of applause. “And for you who don’t know me—I see a few new rotatees out there—I’m President Whitfield. As you know, the family and I recently returned from an inspection tour in California. Spend ten hours laying over in Hawaii. And I’ll tell you, never thought I’d say it, but it’s good to be home! Now, Brother Allen, get up here and bless the food.”

Brother Allen offered a Thanksgiving prayer—overlong but tolerable. And entirely comprehensible.

“Jeez, I don’t know where to begin,” said Johnson, leaning over the serving table.

They heaped up their plates and sat down together.

“This chair taken?”

“Nope.”

A man not much older looking than the missionaries sat down next to Thackeray. “Hi,” he said. “Name’s Jim. Jim Ed-dins.”

“Elder Thackeray.”

“Where’re you from?”

“Odawara. Or New York. Depending.”

“Seattle.”

“Army?”

“Coast Guard. This is my first tour. Say, do you guys come to the base very often?”

“Only on Thanksgiving. Yokohama missionaries get farmed

out to Yokosuka and I guess the Air Force gets the rest.”

“I didn’t know the Coast Guard went overseas,” said Gordon.

“Sure do. I’m a technician. Radar telemetry.”

Matlock said, “I have a question.”

“What’s that?”

“We rode in with this Nolan guy.”

Yeah. Tom.”

“Said he’s never been on a train before.”

“Yeah. You know, there are guys who come here on a three year tour and never step off the base unless it’s in a sightseeing bus.”

Gordon said, “With this place, though, that wouldn’t be hard to do. Reminds me of Pasadena without the smog.”

“You don’t have to live on base. I share an apartment with Bob over there. The Hirsch’s live on the economy too. Do it right and you really come out ahead.”

A middle-aged woman came around behind the table. “It’s so nice to have you elders here,” she said, patting Matlock on the shoulder.

“Thank you, Ma’am,” mumbled Matlock through a mouthful of potatoes.

“I suppose it’s difficult for you growing boys having to eat that Japanese food all the time.”

“It’s not so bad, Ma’am.”

“Well, we’re glad we have this opportunity to give you a good American meal. Eat as much as you want, now.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

Thackeray drank some punch and tried not to laugh.

“I hate being called *Elder*,” said Matlock, after the woman left. “What does she think we are, starving prisoners of war?”

“We eat like it.”

By this time, Johnson was ready for seconds. “Careful, big guy,” his companion warned. “Your stomach’s not used to the load. Something’s gonna give.”

Johnson wasn’t convinced until after splitting a pie with a marine from Pocatello.

Thackeray felt his right leg going to sleep. He got up and walked to the end of the room and sat on the edge of the stage. He watched the Americans eating and talking and socializing, and it struck him that they were all either tall or fat or both, except for the enlisted men, who were just big.

“Having a good time?” A girl sat beside him on the stage. She had long brown hair and was wearing jeans. She looked about eighteen.

“What’s your name?”

“Thackeray.”

“Why don’t any of you have on those little badges? It would make it easier to get to know you guys.”

“Out of habit, I guess. We don’t wear them when we dendo because it scares people off. Makes them think we’re Sokes or Moonies or something.”

She nodded. “By the way, my name’s Lisa Hirsch.”

“*Haji*—”

“*Hajimemashite*,” she interrupted. “There, beat you to it.”

“Sorry. Force of habit.”

“I’m taking Japanese at school.”

“How’s it going?”

“I’m making everybody in the branch dependent on me. Only the brats ever bother to learn the language or go off base.”

“Brats?”

“You know. Army brats. Actually, we’re civilian. On the economy, in fact. Dad doesn’t like being on base any more than he has to.”

“How do you like it?”

“I think it’s neat. You know, you ought to come over and see us sometime. Mom cooks a great sukiyaki.”

“I don’t think so. I’m in Odawara. Zama is out of our zone.”

“Too bad.”

A man waved to them from the other side of the room.

“That’s my dad,” said Lisa Hirsch, sliding off the stage. “He probably wants to go now.”

“Nice meeting you.”

“Yeah. Bye.”

Gordon walked up. He was carrying a brown paper grocery sack. “Hey Thack, when’s the last time you saw one of these?”

“Where’d you get that?”

“It’s our doggie bag. Say, were you counting on being back in time for English class?”

“Suppose so.”

“Well, then we’d better get a move on.”

The crowd in the rec room was beginning to thin out. The Machida zone elders had already left. “Are you sure you can’t take some more?” asked Sister Whitfield.

“Thank you, Ma’am,” said Gordon. “But our refrigerator’s not big enough.”

Jim drove them back to the station in his beat-up white Nissan. He took a different route than Brother Nolan. “You can save a one station fare from the south gate,” he explained.

The base turned out to be far larger than the small suburb they’d come through. They went past a golf course, and several large playing fields dotted with basketball courts, baseball diamonds and backstops. The bachelor officer and noncom quarters were scattered about indiscriminately. Thackeray was amazed at how much open space simply went unused.

They came to another suburb of houses and office buildings. Bright red octagonal stop signs were perched on every corner. Jim waved to the guard and drove back into Japan.

“Thanks for the ride,” said Gordon when they arrived at the station.

“No problem. It was great having you guys around.” He waved goodbye and drove off.

“You know,” said Thackeray, “I feel like I’ve just come back from a foreign country.”

“Foreign country?” Gordon laughed. “More like the Twilight Zone. If that’s what America is like, I’m going to have a heckuva culture shock going back.”

Chapter 13. Lonely Nights

Sister Iwakawa had only been in her second trimester when Thackeray transferred to Odawara in August. But his first Sunday there was the last time he saw her in church.

Sister Iwakawa was expecting her first child. Like a good Japanese wife, she went to stay with her mother—ten minutes up the coast by train—during the last few months. She was presently in the maternity hospital and wouldn't leave until the baby was born. Good Japanese wives who were expecting their first child didn't take chances.

This all made Brother Iwakawa one lonely guy. He was second counselor in the branch presidency and missionary leader as well, but the branch was not a large one and Brother Iwakawa was an efficient man.

"You know, if Iwakawa didn't have all these church meetings to go to, I think he would have absolutely nothing to do," said Chieko Oharu after English class one week. It was a few minutes until SAP began and she and Kumiko were offering local news and commentary.

"The old-time gossip hour," Matlock called it.

Thackeray said, "Well, what would he do if he weren't a member?"

"Go out drinking with the boys," said Gordon.

“That’s rather out of the question.”

The only Mormon boys in town were the missionaries. So every Friday night and sometimes on Wednesdays, Iwakawa showed up on the missionaries’ doorstep. They didn’t mind because he usually brought food.

This time it was ice cream. “It’s not summer anymore,” he said with a sheepish grin.

“Sure it is!” replied Johnson, never known to turn down free food. “We’ll crank up the sekiyu stove.” Matlock got some dishes and spoons off the drying rack and they all trooped into Gordon’s room, which had the only good sekiyu stove.

Johnson sat down on the tatami and dug into his ice cream. “Want some turkey?” he asked Brother Iwakawa. “Got a couple of drumsticks. Thanksgiving stuff.”

Iwakawa shook his head.

“How about pumpkin pie? Goes good with ice cream.”

Iwakawa almost winced at the thought. “Thank you, but—” He turned to Gordon. “Any new investigators this week?”

“A college student. Name’s Hiroshi. Gave him an intro lesson Tuesday. He might be coming to church.”

Thackeray said, “We saw the Yamamuras again.”

“Haven’t seen them in a while. How are they doing?”

“Okay, I guess. They wondered if I could answer a question they had. They wrote it down but I couldn’t read it.”

He handed the note to Brother Iwakawa. Brother Iwakawa unfolded the paper and read it slowly.

“Well?” asked Matlock.

“The question is—” He glanced back over the paper. “The question is about when the father of a family doesn’t join the church, when can the rest of the family do his temple work, sealing, etcetera.”

Gordon was sitting at his desk, eating ice cream and filling out district reports. He said, “Not while he’s still alive. Even then there are all kinds of permission problems.”

“There ought to be a more tactful way of putting it.”

“I could write up an answer for them,” suggested Brother

Iwakawa.

“That would be a good idea. They said they were coming to church Sunday—” Thackeray’s voice trailed off. “Yeah. That would be a good idea.”

Brother Iwakawa folded up the paper and tucked it in his shirt pocket. “Hey, Matlock Choro,” he said. “Let’s practice that discussion you’re studying. I’ll be the investigator.”

Thackeray excused himself. He went into the other room and opened his proselyting notebook to the investigator sheets. Next to the Yamamura’s stats, he’d scribbled: *Triffs. But cute. Probably a waste of time.* He’d written that after meeting them his first day in Odawara. Maybe he was wrong. The thought sent a chill up his spine. Missionaries weren’t supposed to be wrong about things like that.

Brother Iwakawa didn’t show up for correlation meeting Sunday morning. The missionaries knew why.

“Bet you it’s a girl,” said Johnson. The missionaries were standing together along the shoulder of the road across from the small chapel.

“My sister’s first kid was a girl,” said Matlock. He wound up and chucked a rock down the embankment.

“What are you aiming for?”

“The pole next to the switch signal.”

“Hopefully it’s a boy,” said Thackeray. “The branch needs deacons.”

Brother Iwakawa wasn’t sitting on the stand at the beginning of Sacrament meeting and everybody knew why.

“We have a new member of the branch!” President Kanda announced proudly. “Sister Iwakawa gave birth to a girl Saturday morning. Three-point-two kilograms!”

“Told you,” said Johnson.

President Kanda tacked the address of the hospital on the bulletin board in the foyer. Thackeray and Matlock decided to visit after lunch.

The hospital was a one-story maternity clinic in a residential neighborhood. The reception room looked new, but everything else was made of varnished wood and polished linoleum, washed, waxed and worn to a dull luster.

The ten beds in the ward were spaced generously apart. Screens surrounded some of the beds. The windows were draped with white curtains. The air smelled faintly of antiseptic. Sister Iwakawa was sitting up in bed. She looked tired. Brother Iwakawa was cradling his daughter like a china doll.

“Congratulations!”

The Iwakawas smiled. “The Yamamura’s were just here,” said Sister Iwakawa. “I told them you might be coming, but they couldn’t stay.”

Brother Iwakawa said, “I gave them the answer to that question they asked you.”

“Thanks. That should help.”

Matlock said, “Kinda looks like my sister’s kid.”

“Really?” said Brother Iwakawa.

“Yeah. I became an uncle two days before I came on my mission.”

“Want to hold her?”

Thackeray stood by the bed watching his companion and Brother Iwakawa fuss over the baby. He drifted off in his thoughts for a while. The curtains rippled gently over the heating vents.

“Thackeray Choro—”

Sister Iwakawa was looking at him.

“Yes?”

“How are the discussions going with the Nakamura girls?”

“Well, we’re not really teaching them right now. There’s sort of a permission problem.”

“Yes. Chieko told me.”

Thackeray paused for a moment. “I’m not sure, sometimes,” he said.

“About what?”

“Sometimes I think they want to get baptized because their

father said they couldn't."

"Because they're triffs?" Mrs. Iwakawa smiled.

"Yeah."

"Don't expected every teenager to be another Elder Kikuchi, Thackeray Choro. Give them something to belong to first. Give them a chance to grow up in the church."

The baby whimpered. "I think she wants to be nursed," said Sister Iwakawa.

"Well, I think it's time we should leave," said Thackeray. He asked Brother Iwakawa, "Will you be at SAP?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I guess we'll see you then."

"Good luck, Thackeray Choro," said Mrs. Iwakawa.

Thackeray smiled. "Thanks for the advice."

They walked down the hall to the reception area.

"It's too bad in a way," said Matlock.

"What?"

"No more ice cream Friday nights."

Gordon called them into his room when they arrived back at the apartment. "How was everybody?" he asked.

"They're doing fine."

"We'll have to go see them. By the way, Michiko called. Wanted you to come over tonight. Said it was important."

The Yamamura's lived about a mile from the missionaries' apartment. Thackeray and Matlock parked their bikes by the front gate.

"What do you think, Dode?" Thackeray stopped with his hand on the latch of the gate.

"About what?" said Matlock.

"They don't leave messages unless it's serious."

"Then what?"

"If this was last week, I'd be expecting another big lecture from Mr. Nakamura. But since they came up with that question—I don't know."

Thackeray stepped up on the porch and rang the intercom.
“Yes?”

“It’s the missionaries.”

“Great!” said Shinako.

Thackeray opened the door. Shinako and Michiko were standing at the foot of the genkan.

“G’evening,” said Matlock. They stepped into the genkan and removed their shoes. Shinako set out two pairs of slippers.

“How was your Thanksgiving?” asked Michiko.

“Very nice, thank you.”

The girls led them into the living room. It was a “western-style” room, with a hardwood floor instead of tatami. Mr. Yamamura was reclining on the La-Z-Boy at the far end of the room. Mrs. Yamamura sat on the chair next to her husband. Michiko and Shinako sat on the floor on two cushions at the other end of the room. Thackeray and Matlock sat on the short couch opposite Mr. Yamamura.

“You’re right. This looks serious,” Matlock said under his breath.

Mr. Yamamura swung the La-Z-Boy straight up and looked sternly at the two Americans. “I suppose you know why we invited you to come over this evening.”

“Yes,” said Thackeray, though he was still in the dark.

“My daughters have expressed an interest in joining your church for several months now. I thought at first that it was girlish infatuation. But they appear to be quite intent. I spoke with your Stake President yesterday. I was impressed.” He paused and tucked his hands inside the sleeves of his yukata. “I’ve decided to give permission.” With that, he stood up and walked out of the room.

Thackeray and Matlock stood and nodded their heads as Mr. Yamamura left the room. Thackeray felt like a retainer bowing to his samurai lord.

Shinako and Michiko jumped up. “Surprised?” asked Shinako.

Thackeray couldn’t help smiling. “Yes. I’m surprised.”

“Daddy has to be so strict about everything.” Shinako grinned and dimpled. “He’s really a softy.”

Michiko said, “Mama’s coming to homemaking meeting next Wednesday.”

Mrs. Yamamura confirmed with a little, self-conscious laugh. She got to her feet. “Would you like something to drink?”

Thackeray started to refuse but ceded to etiquette.

She said to Michiko, “Why don’t you show the missionaries your yearbook?”

Mrs. Yamamura came back into the room a few minutes later carrying a serving tray. She put a cup and saucer down in front of Matlock and then sat on the couch next to Thackeray. She held the tray in her lap and handed him the other cup and saucer.

“Chieko Oharu is a member of your church, isn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“She attends school with my daughters. They’re good friends.” She smiled a demure Japanese smile that made Thackeray feel as transparent as glass. “I appreciate your reservation, Thackeray Choro,” she said. “I didn’t see it in the other two missionaries.”

Thackeray nodded weakly and sipped at his cocoa.

Mrs. Yamamura got up to leave the room. “Don’t keep them long, girls,” she said.

“Oh, yes,” said Thackeray. “It is getting late.”

They walked together to the hallway. The missionaries stepped into the genkan and put on their shoes. Thackeray straightened and handed the shoehorn to Michiko. “We’ll, uh, see you Sunday,” he said.

“Good night,” Shinako and Michiko said together.

Matlock opened the door. “G’night,” he called back.

They rode back to the station plaza. The narrow residential streets gradually widened and filled with the lights and noises of the city center. Taxis were parked in long rows in front of the train station. The missionaries stopped in front of a half-block

of pachinko parlors and video arcades to wait for the light to change.

“Well?” asked Thackeray.

Matlock shrugged. Then he grinned and punched the cold night air with his fist. “Great, wasn’t it!”

Thackeray nodded. He looked down and scuffed his shoes on the colored tile that lined the curb in front of the arcades. “You know, I was ready to give up on them the first day.”

“I had a hunch. But you had the style.”

“What style?”

“Laid back. No big list of commitments and goals. That’s what their old man was waiting for. You knew it all along.”

“Did I? But they’re still tri—they’re still just kids. I guess that’s what really bugs me.”

“How’s that?”

“I don’t know what they’re thinking. Or feeling. I’ve been in the church all my life. Never had to take the plunge.”

Matlock turned to his companion. “I’ll tell you something, Dode. I don’t think that makes a difference. When I was fifteen, religion was scouting and basketball and passing the sacrament. In that order.”

“So what made the difference?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea. Because it was the right thing to do, I suppose. Like it says in Second Nephi: line upon line, here a little, there a little. That was me, all right. Here a little, there a little, all over the place. I mean, a testimony’s something you build up to, even after you’re baptized.”

“Just need the time to grow in the church.”

Matlock nodded. “Yeah. That’s about it. Of course, my real revelation of truth is another story.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, I’m in the MTC my first week, right? Wondering what in the world I’m doing there. One morning, I’m in the bathroom shaving. It’s early, no one else is around. So I say, right out loud, *Okay, Joseph Smith wasn’t a prophet and the church isn’t true.* And I felt awful. I mean, I really felt bad. I knew it was the wrong

thing to say. And I nicked myself three times.”

“So?”

“So that’s when I knew I was in the right place and on the right track. Negative reinforcement, you know.”

Thackeray laughed. “You give me faith, Matti. You really do.”

The walk light turned to green. The missionaries pedaled across the street to the station plaza.

Chapter 14. The Stainless Steel Baptism

Thackeray stepped out of the back door of the church. The whine of a car transmission in low gear cut through the evening gloom as an automobile climbed the steep hill to the parking lot above the embankment. Thackeray looked up and saw the headlights flash around. He felt a light rain on his face.

The alley was dark and damp. Mounds of moss surrounded the rusted drainage pipes that jutted out of the cracked surface of the retaining wall.

“Are you there, companion?” Thackeray said.

“Yo!” Matlock appeared at the other end of the alley.

The baptismal font was between them. It fit snugly between the side of the church and the retaining wall. Brother Iwakawa said the font had been lowered into the alley from the parking lot with winches.

Matlock lifted the edge of the plywood sheet covering the font and pushed it toward his companion. The wood was warped and weathered and split along the sides.

“Got it.” Thackeray leaned the plywood against the side of the church. He wrapped a towel around the rim of the font, squatted and pushed up. “*Yusho!*” he grunted, locking his elbows and knees.

Matlock grimaced. The drain was clogged. An inch of silt and

dead leaves had gathered on the smooth metal bottom. He picked up the hose. "Here comes the water!" he shouted.

The stream thudded against the stainless steel. Spray showered over the rim.

"Hey!"

"Sorry about that."

Thackeray ducked his head against the mist. Japanese writing was etched on the side of the font: *Nippon Steel/1.5 cubic meters*. He called out, "Done?"

"Just a sec. Okay."

He heard the hiss of the nozzle and lowered the font slowly. The rim brushed against the retaining wall. The stainless steel rumbled like faraway thunder.

"Throw me the hose."

Thackeray washed off the plywood. "Set the plug?"

"Yes."

He leaned over the rim of the font with the hose and unscrewed the nozzle. Water spilled out over his hands. The water was as cold as the sky.

Matlock peered down at the swirling water. "Ever done a winter baptism before?" he asked.

"I once swamped a canoe on a spring camping trip in the Adirondacks. I thought I'd never get warm again."

Matlock said, "My grandmother said she was baptized at the first break of ice in spring."

"No kidding?"

"Makes you appreciate hot running water."

Gordon leaned through the doorway. "Hi guys. Which of you is doing the baptizing?"

"Both of us."

"Who's with who?"

"Matlock's baptizing Shinako. I'm baptizing Michiko."

Gordon wrote this down. "Parents coming?"

"Mrs. Yamamura is."

"Good evening, Choros," came the voice of the branch mission leader.

“Hi, Brother Iwakawa.”

Brother Iwakawa looked over Gordon’s shoulder at the font. “All ready?”

“As soon as it fills up.”

“My wife has the kimonos.” He rubbed his hands together and shivered. “Sure is cold! *Ganbatte!*”

“*Ganbarimasu!*” said Matlock, from the other side of the font.

“Hey Thackeray,” said Gordon, thumping him on the back as they walked inside. “Looks like you made it happen.”

“If you say so.”

The last Sunday in November, Mr. Yamamura had finally given permission for his daughters’ baptisms. But with one condition: they’d have to wait until school let out for the New Years’ recess. In four weeks, Thackeray had been convinced, anything could happen.

“The world will blow up,” he told his companion, “and Japan will sink into the sea.”

“Or you could get transferred.”

“Don’t say that.”

Gordon had reassured him. “Don’t worry, Thack. I won’t let them transfer you.”

So he made it, just as Gordon had promised. But he still didn’t know what it was they had done right.

“Let’s not question our blessings,” was his companion’s opinion.

The girls arrived with their mother. Chieko was with them. Chieko was one third of the seminary program in Odawara. She, if nothing else, was what went right.

“Sister Iwakawa was showing us the baptism kimonos,” said Michiko.

“She’s changing her baby’s diaper,” said Shinako.

“Are the kimonos going to fit all right?”

“Yes,” said Chieko.

“Then we’re all set.” Thackeray glanced at his watch. “Ac-

tually, it's a little early. I think Gordon Choro has some forms he wants to fill out."

President Kanda didn't arrive until after eight o'clock, bustling through the door, briefcase bulging, his presence commanding the meeting to begin.

Sister Iwakawa played the piano. Johnson gave the opening prayer. Chieko introduced Shinako and Michiko to the branch members. Brother Kondo gave a talk about the principles of the gospel.

Thackeray listened to the introductions, and then his mind wandered. It was hard to think and translate at the same time. He recited the baptismal prayer to himself, and recited it again.

"Matlock Choro will baptize Shinako first," he heard President Kanda saying. His mind flashed back to the present.

Matlock stood up. "Let's go, Thack," he said.

Elder Gordon and Brother Iwakawa climbed up the hill behind the church to the parking lot. Iwakawa had parked his car alongside the upper railing of the retaining wall. He clicked on a small spotlight and directed its beam down into the alley. Reflected light danced on the retaining wall.

The rest of the members crowded together beneath the small back door awning. Johnson set a chair in front of the font and held it while Matlock climbed into the water. Thackeray heard his breath whoosh out as the water rose past his waist. Shinako sat on the rim of the font and swung her feet around, curling her toes tightly as her feet brushed the water. She slid into the water. A surprised look came over her face.

"Oh!" she exclaimed.

Gordon called out, "You people okay down there?"

"We're f-fine." Matlock placed Shinako's hands on his wrist, took hold of hers, and raised his arm to the square. He glanced at Thackeray, who nodded. He closed his eyes and spoke the short baptismal prayer. *Amen*. He lowered her into the water and brought her up into the cold, dark air.

"Looked fine to me," said Gordon from his perch.

Matlock helped Shinako out of the font. Chieko threw a towel around her shoulders.

“Hurry up, companion,” said Matlock. “Before we freeze to death.”

Thackeray jumped into the font and then wished he had gotten in more slowly. It was like an unbroken fall onto a icy sidewalk. Sudden, wet, cold.

“Do you remember how we practiced?” he said, helping Michiko into the water.

She didn’t speak. She nodded her head.

He paused, positioning his feet, raised his arm, said her name and recited the prayer.

“Ready?” he whispered.

“*Hai*,” he barely heard her reply.

He lowered her beneath the surface. She disappeared in the reflected glare of the spotlight. When she came up again, the water streamed off her hair, shimmering like liquid ice. Her lips were blue. Smiling.

Thackeray looked up, shadowing his eyes.

“It’s a keeper!” said Gordon.

The spotlight clicked off.

Michiko skipped over to her sister. They hopped up and down the wet concrete, shivering and laughing in a funny kind of dance. Chieko and Sister Iwakawa finally hustled the girls inside.

“Remember the plug,” came Gordon’s voice.

Thackeray reached for the chain, fumbled at it. His fingers were stiff with cold. He breathed on his hands, and tried again. He pulled out the plug and hung it over the over the edge of the font. The water ran down the alley to the gutter, washing away the scattered debris.

Thackeray hoisted himself over the rim and sloshed into the branch president’s office. His companion was peeling off his shirt.

“Feels weird, doesn’t it?” he said.

“Like your legs are burning up.”

“Yeah. All tingly. Nerves trying to make up for the cold.”

Thackeray reached on top of the filing cabinet and pulled a plastic garbage bag out of a box.

“Put the clothes in here,” he said.

They undressed in silence. Gordon knocked on the door. “You guys dressed yet?”

“A few more minutes.”

Johnson was mopping up the hallway when they came out. They sat next to Brother Iwakawa. He was holding his baby daughter against his shoulder. The small face turned and the dark brown eyes stared curiously at the two Americans. Thackeray glanced at the dozen or so chairs that were set up towards the front of the meeting hall. Johnson walked in and sat down in the front row. Behind him, Kondo was reading a textbook. Kumiko was talking with Gordon and Mrs. Yamamura.

Sister Iwakawa came in from the Relief Society room. “Almost ready,” she said to her husband. She took the baby into her arms.

Chieko popped into the meeting hall. Shinako and Michiko followed her, sheepishly, their long hair lying damp on their shoulders.

The branch president stood, and after ushering them to their seats, announced that Shinako would be confirmed first, then Michiko.

Iwakawa was voice for both confirmations. Thackeray closed his eyes and listened to the words. He understood the words. He repeated them in his mind as he had the baptismal prayer.

He opened his eyes.

“Thank you, Thackeray Choro.”

Michiko was smiling at him. He nodded. He shook her hand. Her hand was very cold.

Brother Kondo offered the closing prayer.

Mrs. Yamamura came up to Thackeray. “It was very nice,” she said.

“Do you have any questions?”

“Gordon Choro explained everything very well.”

“Wasn’t it wonderful, Mama?”

“I told Thackeray Choro I liked it very much.”

“Not too cold, was it?” asked Matlock.

The girls shook their heads. “It wasn’t so bad,” said Shinako.

“Odawara members are proud of being baptized in cold water,” said Chieko. “It toughens the spirit, *neh?*”

Thackeray laughed.

“Want to ride back with us, Choros?”

“We have to teach a discussion at nine.”

“Diligence, Thackeray, diligence,” said Gordon. “Well, close up, will you?”

“Sure.”

“*O-yasumi*,” said the Suzukis and the Iwakawas.

“Bye-bye,” said the girls.

The missionaries waved goodbye. Michiko hugged her hands inside the pockets of her jacket as she walked to the car.

Thackeray opened the front doors and stepped out onto the damp sidewalk. In the darkness, he could barely make out the outline of the castle museum jutting up among the tall, leafless trees in the city park. The wooden shutters of the cupola perched between the gables were open. The small rectangle of light glowed like a beacon through the driving rain.

“You know,” said Matlock, from the doorway. “You see that light and you have to wonder who in the world is up in that little room at this time of night.”

“What time is it?”

“Nine forty-five.”

Thackeray ducked back into the meeting hall and picked up his coat. “I don’t think he’s coming,” he said.

The department stores were open late. Bright red and green bunting hung in the display windows, above the Santa Clauses and mounds of fake snow. The sidewalk was crowded with shoppers.

“Christmas isn’t a holiday here, is it?”

Thackeray shook his head. “Not a holiday. A good excuse for a sale. Wait till New Year’s. That’s when the real party begins.”

The ice cream vendors were out in front of the commuter station again. There were two of them this night, one ringing a bright copper bell while the other called out, “Ice cream! Ice cream!”

“Hey, wait a minute,” said Matlock, reaching for his wallet.

“What? You’re not cold enough? Besides, they charge a fortune for that stuff.”

Matlock shrugged and grinned. He walked over to the vendors and returned a minute later with a liter of Neapolitan. He tossed the carton to his companion.

“Merry Christmas!” he said. “Let’s celebrate that cold that toughens the spirit. *Neh?*”

Fourth District: Hakuraku

Chapter 15. O-Shogatsu

The Odawara missionaries accompanied the Yamamura family to Hakone park for the New Year's (*O-Shogatsu*) festival.

Shinako and Michiko wore their formal kimonos, exquisite and colorful creations appropriate only on young, single girls. Married women's kimonos were far more conservative. Together, Mrs. Yamamura and her daughters were like stem and flowers.

The girls were not experienced in the art of traditional Japanese dress and had a great deal of trouble executing the short, gliding steps in their geta. They were constantly losing their balance and grabbing on to something convenient—like a missionary.

"You know what kind of trouble we'll be in if anybody sees us like this?" Gordon said to Thackeray. Shinako had at that moment fallen somewhat into his arms.

"This is duty," said Thackeray.

"Sure, it's member fellowship. I'll buy that."

"What are you talking about?" Michiko said peevishly. "Don't talk English anymore."

Hakone National Park reminded Thackeray of a cross between the New York Adirondacks and a mellow Yellowstone. The

lights and colors of the matsuri were like autumn leaves dancing in the wind under the gray, lifeless branches of the forest.

But the New Year holidays disappeared and then January too was quickly gone. Thackeray transferred to Hakuraku district on Valentine's Day. The day before he left he received Valentine's cards from his mother, sister, Shinako and Michiko, and some girl in his home ward he didn't know.

"Why is it," he asked his companion, "that you get all the attention when you can't do anything about it?"

Johnson was sent south to Hamamatsu. "At least I'll stay warm for the rest of the winter," was his closing remark in Sacramento meeting.

"Looks like you're going to die here," Thackeray said to Gordon. "When I first got here, I couldn't imagine spending six months in a district. Now I'm jealous."

Johnson and Thackeray took the Shinkansen in different directions. Chieko, Kumiko, Michiko and Shinako came to the station to see them off.

"A four triff send-off," quipped Matlock. "You're popular guys."

The train pulled away and everybody waved. Thackeray hadn't felt lonelier since he'd left New York.

He rode the Bullet Train to New Yokahama Station. The transfer otherwise would have taken more than an hour and a half. It was over in less than thirty minutes. And cost three times as much.

But it was worth it. The Shinkansen was like a Boeing 737, only smoother and quieter. It flew up the coast, along the Tokaido route, flashing past the commuter trains, leaving them behind as if they were standing still.

The Shinkasen moved out over the Kanto plain away from the coastal mountains. For the first time since he left Sensoku, Thackeray saw Fuji-san, brilliant in the mid morning sun. The mountain was normally visible from Hakone, but the winter

clouds had obscured the view.

At Yokohama he transferred to a local commuter line—by comparison, the equivalent of a bumpy, boxy prop plane. The Hakuraku ward chapel was perched on the hill above a small commuter stop ten minutes outside Yokohama.

Elder Michaels was waiting outside the station. With his bright, blue-eyed smile and receding hairline, he was hard to miss.

“Not a big place,” said Thackeray as they shook hands.

“That’s what I like about it. Little town, big city.” He pointed up the narrow street. “The church is at the top of the hill.”

“I heard the elders don’t live in the church anymore.”

“Nope.” Michaels picked up one of Thackeray’s suitcases. “Turn at the corner, it’s quicker that way. Now, where was I? Oh, yes. The mission got a bunch of new sisters and the president decided to stick them all here. They commute.”

“Commute?”

“Two to Hiyoshi, two to Ofuna, two to City district, two here.”

“And you’re responsible for all of them?”

“Only from nine at night to nine in the morning. It’s not so bad, as long as Sister Thompson isn’t raising her usual stink about the City district elders.”

Thackeray said, “Isn’t Sister Denison in Hiyoshi?”

“Yeah. She’s here. You’re in the same go-home group, right? She was telling me the other day. Sister Thompson was talking about you too.”

“I don’t think I know her.”

“Ah, here we are.” Michaels turned down a long flight of concrete steps leading from the steep shoulder of the road. “Watch your step. My last companion tripped here once and nearly killed himself.”

The apartment building was a two story L-shaped building with open walkways. The missionary apartment was located in the corner of the L on the bottom floor.

“It’s an old apartment,” said Michaels, “but it’s comfortable.”

Thackeray kicked off his shoes in the genkan. “It’s small.”

“We took down the shoji between the rooms. And with only two elders, there’s more room than most four man apartments.”

“How about cockroaches?”

“Very few—surprisingly. Unlike the sisters’ apartment. You know, they live in the basement of the church, heated and everything. I think all the cockroaches migrate there in the fall. Your room is on the right.”

They ate a late lunch. Michaels had a lesson planned at three. It turned out to be a weak C. They spent the rest of the day proselyting.

There was no plaza at the Hakuraku station. “That means there’s no home free,” explained Michaels. “I mean, when we street, we really street. So it’s best to keep the store people on your side. I’ve basically opted for the soft approach, regardless of Danbury.”

“That’s a good opt,” said Thackeray. “Who’s Danbury?”

“Our zone leader. The human steamroller, the five foot five linebacker. He can pick up anything anytime and intro it in under five minutes.”

“I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be. He’s a pain in the butt. But luckily he’s way up in Kamata so you’ll only see him if we get called up for a baptism interview.”

Michaels stopped at the intersection across from the station. A scrawny kid with a crew cut leaned out of the door of the florist shop on the corner. “Hey Michaels-san,” he shouted across the crowded street. “Is he your new companion?”

“Yes.”

They exchanged greetings. Thackeray asked his companion, “Who’s he?”

“Name’s Hiroshi. Shows up at SAP every now and then.”

“Friendly kid.”

“Most of them are. Except for the guy who owns the stationary shop. He’s got a nasty disposition.”

Thackeray watched Michaels out of the corner of his eyes as he proselyted. He was polite, and Thackeray instantly liked him

because of that. Polite missionaries were rarely highly motivated missionaries, but Michaels was effective enough.

They finished the evening with three intros between them.

“Looks like we do pretty good together,” Michaels said. “Not to knock old companions, but Marchant Choro was so shy even getting him to pass tracts was a major accomplishment. He felt plenty bad about it too. But getting him to talk to anybody was practically impossible. One time, he gave a tract to some guy, and the guy stopped and wanted to ask him a question about it and I swear Marchant about sank right through the cracks in the sidewalk. I really felt sorry for him.”

“I was always a pretty good tract-passer, but before I got the language down—” He shook his head.

“Once I psyche myself up for it, its not so bad. I had this little mantra: *Just doing what I have to do, so get out there and do it!*”

“Sounds like you’ve been around McGowan Choro.”

“He was my last senior. When did you know him?”

“We were in Senzoku together. How’s he doing?”

“As good as ever.”

They went straight up to the church, walked down to the basement apartment and knocked on the door. “You people decent?”

“Yes!” someone shouted.

Thackeray and Michaels walked in and sat at the kitchen table. A Japanese girl brushed aside the curtain that separated the kitchen from the rest of the apartment. She was toweling off her hair.

“Hi, Yoshida Shimai,” said Michaels. “This is Thackeray Choro.”

“Hello Thackeray Choro.” Yoshida said to Michaels, “Two C lessons and two intros.”

“No expectations?”

“No. The first C was promising. Tomoko Takada. But don’t tell Danbury that.”

“I won’t.”

Heavy footsteps and a large body burst through the portiere. “Hi! Michaels Choro. Who’s your new companion?”

“Thackeray Choro.”

“Thackeray Choro, I’m glad to meet you.” She smiled and offered a hand twice as big as his. “How long you been out?”

Thackeray shook her hand. “I’m in Sister Denison’s go-home group.”

“Wow! That’s two months more than Michaels Choro.” The big sister missionary squinted at Michaels. “You’re still the D.L. aren’t you?”

“We’re co-seniors.”

“Well, that’s great! Oh, I’ve got to tend to my journal.” And she plunged back through the curtain.

“Who was that?”

“That was Sister Williams, the Hakuraku hippo,” Michaels said under his breath.

Yoshida burst out laughing.

Michaels pointed his pen at Sister Yoshida. “She understands a lot more English than she lets on.”

“I do not.”

“You do so.”

The door opened and two more sister missionaries walked in. Michaels said, “Hi, Thompson Shimai. How was your day?”

“City district elders are a bunch of jerks.”

“That’s wonderful,” Michaels intoned. He said in Japanese, “How was your day, Yoshino Shimai?”

“It was okay,” she replied, cheerfully.

Michaels wrote in the margin of his report form so Thackeray could see: *Par for the course*. He asked, “Hand in your stats?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Michaels mumbled, “End of conversation.”

Yoshida and Yoshino sat down at the table across from the two elders and chatted together in Japanese. After a while,

Thackeray asked Yoshida Shimai, genuinely curious, "Why do Japanese girls always shower at night?"

Yoshida translated the question for Yoshino Shimai and they both laughed.

"No, seriously."

"It's a custom, that's why," said Yoshida.

"But there's got to be a good reason to wake up every morning with messed up hair."

"Because it keeps the sheets clean," said Yoshino.

"Because it keeps the sheets clean?"

"Gotcha," said Michaels.

"Actually," said Yoshida, "it's because traditionally the family *o-furo* was wood-fired and it took a good part of the day to heat up."

The last two sisters walked in. "A *D* and an *H* and one expectation," said Sister Denison. She turned to Thackeray. "Long time, no see, Thack. How's it going?"

Thackeray shrugged. "Okay, I guess."

"Getting down to the wire, huh?"

"I try not to think about it."

"Hey, Heaton," said Michaels. "Come over here. Do your routine for Thackeray Choro."

Sister Yoshida and Sister Denison leaned their heads together, smiled and dimpled. Perfectly mimicking the latest *Pink Lady* dance number, they intoned: "We're the perfect sister missionaries. We're always happy, never sad, convert thousands, and write inspiring letters to *The New Era* because obviously we have nothing better to do with our free time. Thank you." And they pirouetted and curtsied.

"They're trying to get out on a section eight," said Michaels. "It won't work."

A scream erupted from the next room. "Goak!" The cockroach scampered into the kitchen, pursued by Sister Thompson with a can of Raid. The doomed insect ran into a corner. Before it could turn and run, it was doused with insecticide.

"Take that!" Thompson said to Michaels, "Throw it in the

garbage on the way out, will you?"

Michaels ripped out a sheet of paper from his notebook and handed it to Thackeray. "You have the honors, companion."

Thackeray went to the corner and scooped up the dead roach. "Did the Raid kill it or did it drown?"

The Elder's apartment seemed larger at night. A Chinese lantern hung from the top runner of the shoji frame. The tatami, though dry and brown, was soft and smelled faintly like an August field.

Michaels dialed Danbury to phone in the statistic report. "Try not to touch the walls," he said. "The spackle comes off even if you brush it."

Thackeray unpacked and arranged his books on his desk. Michaels hung up the phone and said, "Danbury welcomes you to the zone."

"That's nice." Thackeray rolled out his futon. He spread out his sheet and suddenly stopped. "Earthquake," he said.

"Huh?" said Michaels.

"An earthquake—"

"I didn't feel anything."

Thackeray looked up at the lantern. "Had to be," he said. "Look at how the light's swinging. It's the sideways motion."

"Must have been a tremor."

Michaels rolled out his futon and undressed. They said prayers and went to bed.

Several hours later Thackeray woke up. The light was on. He looked at his watch. "It's three-thirty," he yawned.

Michaels was sitting up on his futon. "I felt one," he said.

"Earthquake?"

Michaels nodded.

Thackeray shook his head. "Naw." He reached over and clicked off the light.

There was a quick lateral jerk in the foundation of the complex. The walls shuddered. Spackle flew into the air. They both

bounded to their feet.

“Do we make a run for it?”

“Wait—”

Thackeray listened to his heart beat. He watched the lantern swing back and forth. He could hear people moving around in the apartment above them.

The floor shook a second time and then recoiled sharply. The frame studs twisted and creaked behind the plasterboard. Plates clattered out of the kitchen cupboards. A stack of notebooks slid off Michael’s desk.

“Time to leave!”

They ran for the door. Lights were coming on all over the building. People spilled out of the apartments and onto the walkways.

The missionaries stopped in the doorway.

“Cripes, it’s cold,” said Thackeray. He cocked his head. “I think the phone is ringing.”

“I’ll get it.” Michaels stepped into the kitchen and answered the phone. “Look, Denison,” Thackeray heard him say, “you’re the ones living in stressed concrete. If it gets any worse, we’re going to come and join you.”

Thackeray shut the door and crawled back into his futon.

“You figure it’s over?”

“If it happens, it happens. In the meantime, I’d rather not freeze to death.”

“My companion, the fatalist.” Michaels turned off the light and got into his futon.

The next morning Michaels cooked breakfast while Thackeray cleaned out the bathroom.

“How is it in there?” he asked when Thackeray came out with a handful of broken tiles.

“Not so bad. Lost about fifteen.” He threw the tiles into the trash. “What’cha cooking?”

“Pancakes. You’re not a mugi mush man, are you?”

“Only when desperate.”

“Get the frying pan, will you? It’s under the toaster.” Michaels stirred the batter. “I forgot to tell you—we’re going to go pass tracts at a station down the line. Sisters wanted to come along.”

“Good enough.”

“We’ll leave right after breakfast. Catch the big commuter rush.”

It was a cool February morning. The sun was bright on the rolling hills of Yokohama. The lowlands were still shrouded in coastal fog.

Michaels and Thackeray walked up to the church with their scriptures and flipcharts. “They’re probably not ready, as usual,” said Michaels, as they walked into the foyer.

The janitor came up the hall pushing a large broom in front of him. He was about their age. Michaels said, “Brother Honda, this is my new companion, Thackeray Choro. He just transferred from Odawara.”

They shook hands. Brother Honda shook out the broom and started back down the hall. Michaels said, “He works a few mornings a week before school. He’s a nice guy. But you’ve got to watch out for his dog.”

“What about it?”

“It’s a bleach-white mutt.” He went to the front door and peered out. “Don’t see it. Horny as heck. Has a thing for American ankles.” He sat down on the stairs next to Thackeray. “I have to tell you something, Dode”

“What’s that?”

“Thompson was wrong.”

“About what?”

“She wasn’t keen about you coming here—something about not getting along with the mission president.”

“She’s got a good memory. That was in Kunitachi. Besides, it was Jensen I didn’t get along with.”

“No one got along with Jensen.”

“I know. But I was dumb enough to make an issue about it.

How'd she find out, anyway?"

"I think Harper Choro was in her group."

"Ah, that explains it."

"Nope," agreed Michaels. "Shouldn't trust the grapevine. You hear some pretty strange stories though."

"Sure do."

"Mac told me about this greenie who got lost in Tokyo coming back from the airport."

Thackeray stared at him. He laughed. "That was me!"

"No kidding? You're a legend in your own time."

Thackeray smiled and shook his head in disbelief. "But you know," he said, "Chadwick was right."

"You mean Chaddy? Mac used to talk about him too."

"Well, as he told me once, it doesn't pay *not* to get along with people like Jensen. It took me a long time to learn that."

"Better late than never, eh?"

"Guess so."

By now, Sister Yoshida was waiting at the front door. "Morning, guys," she said.

"What are you talking about?" asked Sister Williams.

"Old companions. This and that."

"Well, let's go."

As they walked outside, Michaels said, "You know that elder I was telling you about—the one who got lost in Tokyo? Turns out it was Thackeray here."

"No kidding!" said Sister Williams. She turned eagerly to Thackeray. "Tell us about it, Thackeray Choro. Come on."

"Well," he began. "We were in Shinjuku, on our way back from Narita, and I was buying a ticket for the Keio train . . ."

Chapter 16. Number Games

Thackeray was feeling optimistic. The investigator's cellophane spirit made it through the war in heaven (who's going to argue against free-agency?), got born (stick the piece of cellophane onto a cardboard facsimile of the Japanese everyman), grew up in the perfect family, and decided (hypothetically, for the time being) to join the church and get baptized.

It was time to wrap up mortality. Cellophane and cardboard poised on the brink of—

“And since our bodies are imperfect, we must all die at some time.” Thackeray liked to finish up his half of the discussion with that matter-of-fact statement. He turned to his companion. “Take it away, Michaels.”

During the last paragraph of his companion's delivery, Michaels had quickly sorted through the glossy prints in his flipchart he planned on using. He closed the notebook, saving his place with his fingers, and looked the investigator in the eye.

“Now, Mr. Tanaka—”

A knock came at the door.

Like most missionaries attached to Tokyo/Yokohama ward units, Thackeray and Michaels taught the single investigators in a classroom in the church building.

The door cracked open a few inches. “D.L.-sama,” called out

Sister Yoshida. Michaels got up and went to the door, leaving the investigator in perdition.

“What is it?”

“Our beloved zone leader is on the phone.”

“What in the world could Danbury want?” Michaels leaned back into the room and said, “Thack, get Mr. Tanaka out of the telestial kingdom. This shouldn’t take long.”

Thackeray was polishing off the celestial glories when his companion returned.

“What kind of schedule do we have this afternoon?” whispered Michaels as Tanaka searched for a scripture in the Book of Mormon.

“Tanigawa at one o’clock.”

“He’s our really hot *H* discussion?”

“Yep. And then a brand new *C* at two, and a *maybe* at two thirty.”

“I thought so,” Michaels mumbled to himself, and left again.

Thackeray finished the lesson by himself and walked out to the foyer with Mr. Tanaka.

“Gee, Mr. Tanaka,” said Michaels, hanging up the phone, “I’m sorry about running out on you like that, but I had an important phone call.”

“That’s okay,” said Mr. Tanaka.

“Will we be seeing you on Sunday?”

“I think so.”

“Great!” Michaels shook Mr. Tanaka’s hand vigorously. “Have a nice day and we’ll see you on Sunday,” they said together.

After he left, Michaels asked, “How did the rest of the lesson go?”

“Oh, pretty good. I’ll get my hopes up if he comes Sunday. What did Danbury want?”

“You’re not going to believe this.”

“If Danbury said it, I can believe it.”

“Well, first he gave me his latest motivation speech.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“And then he asked for a baptism interview.”

“When?”

Michaels looked at his watch. “Half-an-hour.”

“One of his shotgun baptisms, eh? He’ll have to get Gibby or Kotter to do it.”

“Kotter’s too far away. And City district left their answering machine on. Again.”

“So that leaves us—”

“With a companion split.”

“Oh.” Thackeray thought for a moment. “Nothing wrong with that.”

“Only Kondo can’t split. Danbury’s doubled up on discussions.”

“So?”

“So, a companion split. Companion, I’m splitting.” Michaels got out his subway schedule. “Let’s see, how much is it to Kamata?”

“Uh—wait a minute,” said Thackeray. He waited for the punch line. It didn’t come. “That’s crazy!”

His companion shrugged. “Orders are orders.”

“He can’t authorize that!”

“Well, he has. And I’m not one to mock the great Danbury.”

“But what about the *H* discussion?”

“Teach it with Yoshida. She’s great with the commandments. But you have the *C* discussion all to yourself. Williams Shimai says they have a lesson at two, and you know that she can’t do jack alone.”

“This is nuts.”

“This is going to be fun.” Michaels grinned. “It feels so—so *sinful*.”

Thackeray watched in disbelief as his companion walked out the door.

“Hey!” Yoshida called down the hall. “Lunch is ready!”

“You’re not gonna believe this,” Thackeray said, walking into

the kitchen.

“Won’t believe what?” asked Williams, examining the rice cooker.

“Danbury called for a baptism interview.”

“The curse of being close and available,” sighed Yoshida. She said to Thackeray, “When are you leaving?”

“He already left.”

“Huh? Hey, where’s Michael’s Choro?” Williams peered around the kitchen through steamed-up glasses.”

“Oh—” Yoshida’s eyes widened. “It finally happened. He’s doubled up and couldn’t get Gibby.”

“That’s what it looks like.”

“But don’t you have a lesson at one?”

“Michaels said to teach it with you. It’s an *H* discussion.”

“Thanks for asking—”

Thackeray shrugged. “That’s the way it goes. What half do you want to teach?”

“First five. I’m not interested in the improprieties of men.”

“Ha!”

Williams unplugged the rice cooker and deposited in on the table next to a steaming pot of curry. “Who’s gonna bless it?”

The lesson went fine, which was about the best Thackeray ever expected when it came to spelling out the commandments. His solo effort after that fit more into the “interested” category. Had it been “confused” (as they often were), there probably wouldn’t have been a return commitment. But Thackeray was pleased with both. If the “maybe” showed up, it’d make his day. He went into the clerks office and scooted a cushioned armchair out into the foyer.

Williams and Yoshida came down the hall talking with their investigator. Thackeray guessed her age at nineteen, though he couldn’t be too sure. It was hard to tell with Japanese girls.

“Hi, there,” he said, trying to be conservatively charming.

The girl smiled and whispered something to Sister Yoshida. Yoshida shook her head. “No, this is Thackeray Choro. Michaels

Choro had an errand in Kamata today.”

Thackeray felt a tinge of envy. There must have been talk of a baptism interview.

“Oh,” said the girl, quite satisfied with the explanation. “But when will I meet Michaels-san?”

“Probably this Sunday,” answered Yoshida.

“Okay,” she said brightly, “I’ll see you then. Bye-bye.”

“Bye-bye.”

The three of them watched the girl walk down the church steps. Thackeray said, “You two have a *strong expectation* to report in tonight, eh?”

Williams beamed. “We set up an interview for Sunday afternoon.”

The front doors swung open and Michaels sauntered into the foyer. Thackeray glanced over his shoulder. “Ah, the prodigal son returns,” he said.

“Yessir, pilgrim. After braving the Mongol hordes all by himself.” Michaels slapped his companion on the back. He said to Williams and Yoshida, “I met your investigator at the train station. I’m pretty impressed.”

“She’s a good girl,” Yoshida agreed. But before she left, she said to Michaels, “Let’s forget to tell Danbury about it, okay?”

Michaels finished calling in the daily district statistics to Danbury and was writing in his journal. The sliding glass windows were open. A slight breeze drifted through the apartment. Two futons were laid out on the tatami. A mosquito coil smoldered in a jar lid. Thackeray leaned his chair back against the window sill and listened to the sounds of the outside world floating in the night air. The gurgling of an open storm drain, cicadas buzzing in the shrubbery along the roadside.

Michaels picked up an envelope off his desk and threw it across the room to Thackeray. “If you haven’t anything to do, read me the weekly stat report.”

Thackeray tore off one end of the envelope, taking off half of the mission logo and the stamped return address.

“Is Kunitachi still in the ditch?”

Thackeray studied the two page report. It was divided into three sections, according to mission assistant areas, and subdivided again into zones, districts and missionaries in each district. Next to the listings were six columns, filled with numbers indicating baptisms for the week, baptisms for the month, consecutive weeks with baptisms, consecutive months with baptisms, and new convert activity per week and per month.

“Yep. Scraping by in last place. Three baptisms and 24 percent new convert activity last month.”

“At least they’re up.”

“Yeah. If you want to look at it that way. The whole thing’s a bad joke.”

“How’s that?”

“Look up the week Longstreet transferred out of the district. That would be—let’s see—June twenty-first.”

Michaels got out an accordion folder and flipped through some of the papers. “He was a zone leader, right?”

“In my district at the time.”

“Ah, here we go. The week ending June twenty-first: two baptisms with 64 percent new convert activity. Impressive. But the town always comes out when a missionary transfers.

“Especially for Longstreet. But look at the week before.”

“Two with 44.”

“That’s a normal week,” said Thackeray, rolling his eyes. “Now, look at the week after.”

“Well, you’ve got to take it for granted that missionaries don’t get baptisms on a transfer week unless they’re set up.” Michaels looked back at the report. “Zero with fourteen!” He whistled softly. “I didn’t know their activity went down the drain that fast.”

“Yep. Kempner Choro shows up in town on Wednesday, goes to church Sunday morning, calls in Sunday night with 14 percent activity and catches it in the fan.”

“What for? The worst missionary alive couldn’t take out an

activity base that fast. Who was the APe? Jensen, right?” Michaels laughed cynically.

“And Longstreet can thank his lucky stars Kempner took a liking to him when they were down south together. Anyone else would have squawked.”

“With friends like that—”

“Kempner is apathetic enough about the hierarchy, and you’d have to know Longstreet. Ever since he made zone leader, he’s concocted this incredible personality that keeps on shining through, no matter what.”

“Rather like Gibby, huh?”

Thackeray looked back to the report. “Let’s see—Elder Gibbons: three with 53 percent last week.”

Michaels closed his journal and turned around. “You can’t fake baptisms,” he said. “But I was there when the man said he padded activity to keep the APes off his back.” He stretched and yawned. “Let’s see the second page of that.”

Thackeray handed him the sheet. Michaels looked at it with casual interest.

“Here’s something.” Michaels pointed to a name at the top of the page. “Matthews: four with 65 percent last week.”

“Now, that’s a number I can trust,” replied Thackeray. “Matthews is a good man. He was my zone leader once.”

“So it can be done? High numbers and high percentages.”

“Problem is, saying it can be done doesn’t mean everyone can do it. Or that it will last.”

“Speaking of which—how’s our fearless leader doing?”

Thackeray scanned his page of the report. “Danbury: four with 21 percent last week; twelve with 34 percent for the month.”

“At least he’s mostly honest,” said Michaels.

“A mostly honest megalomaniac.”

“A productive one as well.”

Thackeray shook his head. “Not with those percentages.”

“Come, come,” scolded Michaels. “Don’t you remember that zone conference six months ago when we decided to leave all

those nasty percentage points behind and put our shoulders to the wheels of grosses and sum totals?”

“Vaguely.”

“Look at it this way,” said Michaels, thumbing through the reports, “Danbury averages eleven baptisms per month over the last two months with a weekly new convert activity of 26 percent, four week average at 34 percent. Now, we two merry men come in at 4.5 baptisms per month with 60 percent activity over four weeks.”

Michaels got out a calculator and punched the black plastic buttons. “That gives Danbury a base of 3.7 new convert bodies at church every month, compared to 2.7 for us. Ergo, Danbury wins by a whole one point.”

“So?”

“So, it’s like the president says: sacrifice a few percentage points, get the big numbers and come out ahead in the end.”

“Unless you’re the membership clerk.”

“Or the home teachers.” Michaels shrugged. “But with the mission taking up the slack—”

“If the mission does take up the slack.” Thackeray turned off his desk lamp and lay down on his futon. “I don’t know,” he mused. “I can’t get into the numbers thing. Maybe I have the wrong mindset. I even get the urge now and then to house.”

“Take a cold shower. That’ll knock some sense into you.” Michaels filed the papers away and turned off his light. “Your turn to say prayers, ol’ ancient of days—”

The phone rang during breakfast.

“Who was it?” called out Thackeray, banging about the kitchen with the pots and pans.

Michaels came to the doorway. “Who else? We’ve been summoned for an interview.”

Danbury was at the kitchen table coaching his investigator when they arrived. Good coaching meant good interviews. Danbury was a good coach.

Before disappearing into his room after a final *Ganbatte!* Danbury said to Thackeray, “Kondo’s got an intro lesson in the other room. Give him a hand.”

Kondo didn’t possess the same ferocity as Danbury, but he taught with a magnetic sense of conviction. The investigator—a young college student—was swept along in the flow of words and images. Thackeray did his best to offer reassuring smiles at the proper times. After Kondo committed the new investigator to a return appointment, he decided to see how his companion was doing.

The interview was over. Thackeray pulled up a chair and looked over the interview/recommend book while Michaels and the investigator chatted about nothing in particular. There was finally a lull in the conversation.

“Well?”

“I’ve got to talk to Danbury,” Michaels replied.

He reached back and rapped on the door to Danbury’s room. Danbury bounced into the kitchen, smiling broadly at his investigator. He clamped his hands on Michael’s shoulders and spoke quietly in English.

“How’d he go?”

“Fine, except for this Sunday business.”

“Ah, yes. Well, don’t worry about—”

“He can’t come to church for six months?”

Danbury shook his head and thumped Michaels’ shoulders impatiently. “You know how it is with college entrance exams. Don’t worry about it. I have it all taken care of.”

“What about permission? He’s under eighteen.”

Danbury shrugged the question off without answering. Thackeray and Michaels glanced at each other and shrugged in turn.

“Okay,” said Michaels, “I’ll hold you to your word.” He took the interview book from Thackeray and signed a blank form. “Here you go.”

“Stay for the baptism?”

Another Danbury rush order, thought Thackeray.

“No can do,” said Michaels, putting on his suit coat, “we have appointments.”

“What appointments?” said Thackeray.

“Mr. Tanigawa.”

“Oh. Of course. Thanks for reminding me.”

A few minutes later, at the station, Thackeray said, “Tanigawa’s not till this evening.”

“I know. But when it comes to Danbury, I get more and more like Gibby every day.”

“C’mon. You’re not that bad. Besides, we don’t have an answering machine to leave on all day.”

“Well, what about that interview I just did?”

Thackeray kicked at the anti-skid grooves cut into the edge of the platform. He said, “I wouldn’t worry about it. You never know. Maybe he’ll become a stake president some day.”

“Maybe. But I still feel incompetent.”

“If you are, we all are,” said Thackeray. He laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, everything. Like that interview book of Danbury’s. I was flipping through it. Kondo’s signed some of the forms. For their own investigators.”

“Oh—well, the way they teach, the right hand doesn’t know what the left is up to anyway.”

“I don’t think that qualifies as a separation of interests.”

“The mission office must have said something.”

“I’m sure they considered it another sign of Danbury’s superior motivation.”

Sunday, Danbury struck again. Brother Honda poked his head into the classroom and whispered that Michaels Choro was wanted on the phone. The class was almost over, so Michaels waited in the foyer until his companion walked out with Mr. Tanaka.

“Guess what!” said Michaels.

“Oh, no!” said Thackeray, in mock horror.

“Oh, yes,” replied Michaels. “Right now.”

“Well, don’t let too many members see you on the way down. They’re wise to missionary protocols, you know.”

“I’ll softly and silently vanish away—”

Michaels returned after Sacrament Meeting. Relief Society had convened in the kitchen, so he found his companion down in the sisters’ apartment.

“You’re just in time for lunch, Dode”

“Hi, there, Michaels Choro,” chirped Williams. “How was it?”

“Oh, pretty good.”

“They’re always *pretty good*,” said Yoshino.

“How about Tanaka?”

“Better than I expected. I set up an *I* discussion on Thursday.”

“P-day?”

“Only day he could make it. At seven-thirty.”

Thursday morning, Michaels and Thackeray skipped gospel study and left for church after breakfast.

“You don’t mind teaching on P-day, do you?” asked Michaels as they walked into the foyer.

“Heck, no. Proselyting on the off-hours gives me a great feeling of self-righteousness.”

“Maybe we should do it more often.”

“One shouldn’t get too holy.”

“Right. I’ve got to get stats from the sisters.” He had started down the hall when the foyer phone rang.

“It’s for Yoshida,” Thackeray called to his companion. “One of her housewives.”

“I’ll get her.”

Thackeray went into the clerks office and settled down in his favorite swivel chair. After Yoshida finished with the call, he scooted back into the foyer.

“How is she?” he asked.

“She’ll do okay as long as her husband doesn’t get too uptight about it. *Damn!*”

Startled at this unexpected exclamation, Thackeray looked up. Danbury and the Junior Z.L., Joe Kotter, were coming up the steps of the church.

“Hiya there,” said Danbury, pushing the front doors wide open. Kotter, at his left shoulder, looked quite uncomfortable. “As I thought—you weren’t at home, so you must have a lesson. Decided to drop by on our way to the Z.L. conference. What is it?”

“An *I* discussion.”

“An *I* discussion? Seems a little late in the game for an *I*. You know, we could stick around a few minutes and get him through an interview.”

“I’d like to teach him the *I* discussion first.”

“C’mon, Thackeray, where’s the spirit? I ought to give that D.L. of yours another talking to. Where is he, anyway?” He looked around the foyer. Thackeray didn’t say anything. Kotter shrugged. Danbury turned back to Thackeray, maintaining the fake aura of familiarity: “Yep. Get ’em into an *I* and they’re already wet up to their knees. That’s what I say.” He punched Thackeray in the shoulder.

Yoshida said, “If they haven’t already drowned.”

Danbury’s face twitched. “Yes,” he continued, “I think I need to talk to that D.L. of yours.”

“Well, thanks anyway,” said Thackeray, “but—”

Danbury interrupted, “I don’t think you guys know what you’re supposed to be doing here—”

“We know what *we’re* doing. Not so sure about *you*.”

The two missionaries glared at each other. Kotter tried to fade through the nearest wall.

Yoshida said in Japanese. “Be on your way. Please.”

Thackeray had heard the expression before, and associated it more with epithets of a four-letter variety, despite the gilded honorific she’d cleverly tagged onto the end.

“Yeah. Let’s go,” said Kotter, making a break for the door. Danbury turned away and Kotter gave Thackeray a sympathetic roll of the eyes as they left.

“Fireworks, eh?” Michaels walked up behind Thackeray and Yoshida.

“Yeah. But it would have been worse if Tanaka showed up.”

“He did.”

“Huh?”

“When I heard Danbury come in, I went out in front and waited for him. He’s in the teaching room right now.”

Thackeray turned to Yoshida and smiled. “Do we have a brilliant D.L. or what?”

Michaels held the weekly district meeting every P-day afternoon promptly at five o’clock. But Yoshida was delayed with a phone call. Michaels, Thackeray and Williams gathered around the table in the clerks office and discussed the latest chatter on the mission grapevine while they waited for her. The gossip had turned to the subject of Danbury when she walked in.

Michaels was saying, “Well, it’s like Thack and I were talking about the other night. Danbury may not have the percentages but he sure has the numbers. I guess it all averages out in the end. I may wonder about people like Longstreet and Gibby—you know, out and out cheating—but if the powers that be say that Danbury’s a better missionary—”

“You should disagree,” Yoshida said. “Danbury doesn’t love the Japanese people. He baptizes to get a lot of glory. He’s not a good missionary, and I—”

The room fell into an uncomfortable silence.

“—don’t like him,” she said, suddenly self-conscious. She hurriedly sat down next to Sister Williams and spread some papers out on the table.

The room was still again. Michaels rustled through his D.L. folder for an itinerary. He pulled a sheet of paper out and began writing on it.

“Well, uh, shall we begin?”

Thackeray looked up as Yoshida turned around, and for a moment, their eyes met. There were tears in her eyes.

Michaels said, “Um, could someone pick an opening song?”

That night, after prayers, Thackeray said, “That was a most interesting district meeting, Michaels.”

“Yoshida surprised me.”

Thackeray nodded. “Really caught me off guard.

“I think she was ticked about the way Danbury raked you over this morning.

“I think she just doesn’t like him.”

“That’s for sure.” Michaels paused. “Say, Thack. When you were in Kunitachi with Longstreet—to put it bluntly—did you ever think about ratting him out?”

Thackeray didn’t say anything for a while. He lay on his back on his futon and stared at the ceiling.

“I thought about it a lot of times. Every time I got pissed off at the world. Problem was, Longstreet’s too easy to like. And we go back—we were juniors together in Senzoku. Well, during one of those mission president interviews, I tried bringing it up—being real subtle and cautious. Except the president made everything I said sound like it was *my* problem. Like I was *inferring* these things because of my bad attitude.”

He paused to organize his thoughts. “The thing is, I really did have a bad attitude. Acting all self-righteous didn’t make up for it. So there I was, rambling on and on, and suddenly I said to myself, *What’s Longstreet got to do with me? Why should I care? He may be bending the rules, but he didn’t make them up.* Ever since then, I figured it was better to live and let live.” He breathed deeply. The air was still.

“Just wondering,” Michaels said.

“Planning on taking the offensive?”

“If it was only about you and me—” He didn’t finish the rest of the sentence.

Hakuraku district didn’t hear from or see Danbury for a whole week. When the stat reports came in the mail on Wednesday, though, there were three more baptisms next to

Danbury's name.

"He must have given up on us and called out the dogs on City district," said Michaels.

P-day was equally uneventful. During district meeting, the phone rang. Thackeray answered it.

"This is Danbury."

Thackeray steeled himself for the unexpected.

"Uh—" said Danbury, clearly discomfited. "Uh, I have to apologize to you guys."

Thackeray stumbled for a reply.

"It's about those one-man splits," Danbury went on. "The mission president found out and told me to apologize to everyone in the district and, uh, not to do it anymore."

"Oh—okay." Thackeray tried thinking up a caustic rejoinder, but his mind went blank. He told Danbury to hold on while he got the rest of the district.

Thackeray walked down the hall with deliberate steps. He wanted to feel some vindictive delight in Danbury's forced apology. But there wasn't anything there. *Schadenfreude* made for shallow pleasure. And it wouldn't change anything in the long run anyway.

Two months later, the reign of Lake-the-APe ended. Danbury filled his place as Assistant to the President.

Chapter 17. Neon

Tracting was a contact sport, especially along the arcade strip in front of Hakuraku station.

Thackeray played the game well. He worked his way up the crowded sidewalk, dodging the shills and drunks, flipping out tracts at every opportunity. A light rain was falling. The busy noise of the pachinko parlors filled the night air. The asphalt shimmered with rivers of silver and gold.

He reached into his suit coat pocket for some more pamphlets. Michaels had moved half a block further up towards the subway station. They saw each other and waved.

“How many left?”

Thackeray pulled out a handful of pamphlets. Michaels pointed and said something.

“What?” said Thackeray.

“Watch out where you’re going!”

Kimiyo Miyazaki stopped when she first heard Michaels, perhaps thinking he was shouting at her. Thackeray shouted back, “What?” and turned around and he practically walked into her arms.

“Oh!” said Kimiyo.

Thackeray had not been so close to a woman his same age for a very long time—close enough to see the neon reflection in

her eyes, warm electric orange, flashing blue. He tried to step out of her way, but his feet felt like concrete blocks. He looked at Michaels. Michaels was laughing.

“You—wanted to give me something?”

“What?” His eyes came back to the girl. He glanced at the pamphlets in his hand. “Just a religious pamphlet.”

“Can I see?” She held out her hand.

“What? Oh, sure.”

She took the tract but didn’t look at it. She said with a curious expression, “I’ve never talked to a gaijin before.”

“Really?” was the only thing he could say.

“What’s your name?”

“Elder—Thomas Thackeray.”

“I do have a few minutes.”

Thackeray slowly translated her words in his mind.

“There’s a nice cafe up the street,” she said. She opened her umbrella. A polite gesture.

Michaels crossed the street. “Can I come too?”

“Who’s that?” Kimiyo asked.

“Michaels Choro,” said Thackeray. “He’s my, uh, friend.”

The cafe interior was finished in varnished synthetic pine. The incandescent lights in the ceiling cast a soft yellow glow on the walls. They sat down at a table.

Michaels picked up the menu. “I’ll think I’ll have lemonade,” he said.

“Lemonade would be fine,” said Kimiyo. Thackeray nodded.

“One must be a D.L. to take charge in these kinds of situations,” said Michaels. The waitress came to the table and he said, “Three lemonades.”

Kimiyo said to Thackeray, “I see you in front of the station sometimes on my way to school. I’ve always wondered what you were doing.”

“Handing out pamphlets, talking to people.”

“You’re missionaries, right?”

“That’s right,” said Michaels.

Kimiyo opened the tract and read down the first page.

Thackeray asked, "Have you ever heard of the Mormon church before?"

"I don't think so."

Thackeray followed her eyes as she read the rest of the tract. He pointed to three lines printed in bold characters. "These questions—where we came from, what our purpose in life is, what happens when we die—you've thought about them before, haven't you?"

She looked perplexed for a moment. "No," she said, shaking her head. "Not really."

"Strike two," said Michaels, under his breath. The waitress came with the drinks.

"Would you like to know more about the Mormon church?"

"Sure. It sounds interesting."

Michaels couldn't hide his surprise. "It does?"

"Well," said Thackeray, gliding smoothly through the memorized material. "There are five lessons and each one takes about thirty minutes. What do you think?"

"Do you teach the lessons?"

Michaels grinned at the question.

"There are some lady missionaries. Williams Shimai and Yoshida Shimai."

"Of course." She seemed a bit disappointed, and then made the connection. "She's the big American woman, isn't she?"

"It takes a lot of room to contain her spirit," said Michaels.

Thackeray took out his pocket planner and opened it to a blank page. "I could give them your phone number and they could call you and set everything up."

"Okay."

Michaels lent her his pen. She wrote at the top of the page: *Kimiyo Miezaki. 044-62-4247.*

Thackeray said, "What's a good time to call?"

"Before eleven's fine." She opened her purse.

"Don't worry about that," said Michaels. "We'll pay. It's the American thing to do."

She smiled. "Thank you."

"Our pleasure. G'night."

"*O-yasumi.*"

They watched her leave. "Well?" said Michaels.

Thackeray smiled to himself as he stirred the ice in his glass with his straw. "She might."

"You're a missionary. You're supposed to be more optimistic than that."

"I didn't say she wouldn't. Besides, the sisters will teach her. They're the ones who have to be motivated."

Yoshida appreciated the referral. She asked Thackeray what he thought her prospects were.

"She'll take all the discussions," he said, confidently.

A week later, Kimiyo met Thackeray and Michaels at the subway station and told them she'd had her first lesson.

"So, what do you think about Joseph Smith?" Thackeray asked.

"He's an interesting person. All those things he did and the *satori* he had. Kind of like Gautama."

Michaels and Thackeray nodded. It was a common enough allusion.

"And Sister Yoshida told me to ask you about a baptism?"

"Oh, yes," said Michaels. "Brother Tanaka is getting baptized Saturday evening at seven. If you have the time, you could stop by and see what it's like."

She hesitated. Thackeray said, "You don't have to do anything. Just sit and watch."

"That's all?"

"I promise."

Kimiyo came to the baptism in a blue and white print dress that fit her well. Michaels performed the baptism. Thackeray and Yoshida offered commentary. After the confirmation and closing prayer, they all snacked on mugi-cha and mikans.

“It’s kind of like a party,” said Kimiyo.

“In a weird sort of way,” agreed Michaels.

Thackeray had less than a month to go before his mission ended. His companion took endless delight in reminding him of this, especially while they were proselyting.

“You know what I’ve noticed?” A train had just come in. Michaels stepped off the curb, next to his companion, to get out of the way of the homebound rush.

“What have you noticed?”

“You run out of streeting steam every Wednesday about this time. Look at all those people! You should be chasing them down.”

“You’re not exactly pounding the pavement, either.”

“You’re afraid of picking up an intro and missing Kimiyo.”

Thackeray shrugged in an offhand manner. “So?”

“You’re in love.”

“I am not. I had a companion who was, and it’s quite a different thing.”

Michaels grinned. “Sure it is.” He looked up. “Ah! And there she is.”

“Good evening,” said Kimiyo with a nod.

“How are the lessons going?” Michaels asked.

“Next time I learn about the commandments.” She sounded enthusiastic.

“About the commandments?”

“Yes. Um—” She paused. “Does your father pay tithing?”

“All his life.”

“What kind of job does he have?”

“He’s an engineer with General Electric.”

“My father works for Sony. He’s a businessman.”

Thackeray nodded.

“I think Michaels-san wants me to go.”

“Eh?” Michaels said, rocking back and forth on his heels.

“Michaels-san is a man with heavy responsibilities,” said Thackeray.

“That’s right. Like call-ins. Reports. Statistics.”

“G’night,” said Kimiyo. She walked a few steps and turned around. “What are going to do when you’re not a missionary anymore, Takori-san?”

Thackeray opened his mouth, getting ready for some kind of instant, memorized reply. He couldn’t think of anything. So he shrugged. “Haven’t really thought about it.”

Kimiyo nodded. “Good night,” she said again.

“Wait.” Thackeray ran up to her. “I almost forgot. Tomorrow we’re going to Shakey’s with some missionaries in Yokohama. And then down to Sakuragi-cho. Want to come?”

“I have a lesson with Yoshida Shimai and Williams Shimai. At four o’clock.”

“If we leave about twelve-thirty we’ll be back in time.”

“It sounds like fun.”

“We’ll meet you in front of the station.”

“I’ll be here.”

“So what are you going to do after your mission?” asked Michaels as they walked up to the church.

“I haven’t the slightest idea.”

“I thought you were going to be an engineer.”

“I was. Like my father. Except my freshman year I almost flunked physics.”

“Sort of takes you out of the engineering department.”

“I didn’t suck at English. Writing essays and stuff. Not much of a direction, though.”

“Well, you’ve got a month to think about it.”

“Yeah. I suppose I do.”

Thackeray folded his futon. Sunlight fell in white patches on the tatami. Michaels was shaving in front of the mirror on his closet door. He clicked off the electric razor.

“Hey, Thack. Ever been on the president’s triff list?”

“Nope. But George was. So was Longstreet.”

“I was, once.”

“Why Michaels, I never knew.”

“Not on purpose. When I was with Mac. Being with those tall, handsome types makes one guilty until proven innocent.”

“Never on your own merits, eh?” Thackeray picked up his tie and crouched behind his companion, trying to see himself in the mirror.

“Nope. Kind of a blow to the ego, come to think of it. I mean, you’re so ordinary the president trusts you implicitly.”

“He’s right, isn’t he?”

“About what?”

“About you not fooling around.”

“Yeah, but—”

“There you go.”

“How about you, though? You could if you wanted to.”

“Suppose I could.”

“If you had the chance, would you?”

“Would you ever give me the chance?”

“No. But that’s beside the point.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Uh, huh.”

“What’s *uh, huh?*”

“Lucky you’re dying. Your hormones are coming out of hibernation.”

“I’m not dead yet.”

They met Kimiyo at Hakuraku station and rode with her to Yokohama. Gibson was already at the pizzeria. He was sitting at a table amidst a crowd of uniformed junior high school students. He waved to them.

“Where’s the rest of the district?” asked Michaels.

“They’ll show up in a few minutes. Some *departo* is putting on a promo concert at the plaza. It’s just about over.” He stood up and said, “Well, don’t just stand there with your trays.” He shoed the kids down to the end of the table. “And save my place. I’m going back for seconds.” As he walked back to the serving line he nudged Thackeray. “Who’s the triff?”

“Investigator.”

“Oh? Prospects?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“You ever get tired, I’ll take her off your hands.” He said out loud, “What do you people want to drink?”

“Cokes.”

Elder Gibson came back to the table, his plate piled high with pizza.

Kimiyo gaped. “You can eat that much?”

“There’s always thirds.” Gibson grinned.

“Gibby’s a pig,” said Michaels.

“Oink,” said Gibson. “Baker eats more than I do.” He bit off a mouthful of pizza. “Oh, I almost forgot,” he mumbled. He chewed and swallowed. “You’re looking at the next Z.L.”

“Says who?”

“Reliable sources. Danbury’s leaving for Fuchu. Kotter goes senior zone leader. Who else is there?”

“They’ll transfer somebody in.”

“Z.L.’s have to have tenure. Besides, I have the image. I’m the perfect bureaucrat.” Gibson bit off another hunk of pizza and smiled, cheeks bulging.

“You’re gross,” said Thackeray. Kimiyo laughed.

Baker sat down by Gibson. He had a hand over his plate to keep the pizza from spilling off. “Say, Thackeray, aren’t you almost dead?”

Gibson said, “So is Denison, I’ve heard. You’re in the same go-home group, aren’t you?”

“Who’s dying?” asked Kimiyo.

“It’s missionary lingo,” explained Thackeray. “You see, we’re missionaries for only two years. When our time is up and we have to go home, we say we die.”

“It’s also known as getting trunky.”

“That means getting excited to go home,” said Michaels.

“Are you trunky?” Kimiyo asked Thackeray.

Thackeray drank the rest of his Coke. “No.”

“You lie!” howled Gibson. “I’ve got four months to go and I’m

so trunky I can't stand it."

The three of them took the train to Sakuragi-cho. Thackeray found a hardware store that had what he wanted. A traditional Japanese saw. The blade was wider at the end than at the handle. The teeth were serrated backward. Odd. But practical. Very Japanese. He smacked the flat of the blade against the palm of his hand. His father would like it.

They walked down the wide city streets to the dockside. A fishing boat was tied against the pier. Seagulls glided lazily between the masts and loading cranes, darting down into the water for scraps of fish.

Kimiyo said, "You're looking forward to going home?"

"Yes," he answered honestly.

"Will you ever come back?"

"I don't know."

"Tell me when you find out, will you?"

Thackeray looked at her. *Don't count on it*, he wanted to say. But he nodded and didn't say anything.

The sister missionaries were waiting in the foyer when they returned.

"You ought to come with us sometime," said Thackeray.

"We're all on diets," Yoshida said with a wink. She turned to Kimiyo and asked, "How are you doing today?"

The tall panels of clouded glass in the cultural hall were bright with the afternoon sun. Honda had mopped and waxed the floor before he left for school that morning. The linoleum had a slick, wet look to it. Michaels lay down on the stage and took a nap. Thackeray sat down at the piano. He played mostly by ear—playing hymns for church was more an exercise in improvisation. Finally he started on *Lord, Dismiss Us With Thy Blessing*. It was the only hymn where he could play all the notes printed on the page. Sister Yoshida came into the cultural hall from the foyer.

“How did the discussion go?”

“She’s still curious.”

“How curious?”

“More curious about the fact that we believe than believing in it herself. We’ll show her some film strips, make up some more lessons.”

“And then what?”

Yoshida said with a shrug, “And then maybe the one will turn into the other.”

She stood at the side of the piano for a moment and then left. Thackeray pulled out the keyboard cover and let it drop. He leaned forward and rested his forehead on the smooth varnish and listened to the discord of faraway music ringing inside his head.

Chapter 18. Dying on the Run

Thackeray tried to remember what upstate New York was like. But all he could see in his mind's eye were children playing in the marble blue water.

A small park was tucked into the tree-lined knoll between the apartment and the church. It had a wading pool. When the sun was hot and bright, kindergarten children came with their teachers to play.

“Thack, I think I got it—”

Michaels balanced the head of a tack on the ball of his middle finger, wound up like Catfish Hunter, and flicked the tack toward the bulletin board. The tack bounced off the cork and skittered across the linoleum.

“Too much wrist,” said Thackeray.

“Are you guys throwing tacks again?” said Sister Denison.

Michaels said, “When people ask me what I learned on my mission, I’ll have something to tell them.” He picked up the tack, positioned it, and flung it at the bulletin board with a sweeping over-the-shoulder motion. The tack stuck into the corkboard with a faint thud.

“Ha! There you go. Ninja skills.”

“I’m so impressed.” Denison rolled her eyes.

Thackeray asked her, “What’s your companion doing?”

“She’s tripling with Thompson and Yoshino. How about you, D.L.?”

“I’m splitting with Randall Choro’s junior.” Michaels looked at his watch. “They’re coming in on the next train. We should get down to the station.”

“Just think,” said Denison, as they walked down the steps in front of the church. “We’ll only have to hike up this hill one more time.”

“Tell it to this guy,” said Michaels. “Pretending not to be so totally dead.”

“I’m a good missionary who doesn’t corrupt his companion with trunkiness.”

“Subliminal trunkiness is far more deadly.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

They stopped at the crosswalk across from the station. “By the way, Thackeray Choro,” said Denison. “My companion wants to know if she can have your tea box.”

“If Michaels doesn’t want it.”

Michaels shook his head.

“Thackeray Choro!” Brother Tanaka jogged up the street. He smiled and wiped the sweat from his brow. “I wanted to give you this.” He held out a small, narrow box.

“Thank you, Brother Tanaka,” said Thackeray, accepting the gift with a short bow.

Brother Tanaka smiled again. “Sorry to be in a hurry, but I have to catch the bus. Good luck in America, okay?”

They waved to each other. Brother Tanaka climbed onto the bus and it roared away in a cloud of diesel smoke. Thackeray tucked the small box into his suit coat pocket and walked up the street to the train station.

The Yokohama air was heavy and wet, laden with the fine ocean fog that drifted off the bay with the night breeze. Thackeray took off his suit coat and leaned back against the cool cinder block. Standing still, water seemed to condense onto his face and arms until the skin glistened. The touch of the smooth

dampness meant something else—it meant that he was still *here*, still a missionary.

Randall and Denison stood by the white warning line. They'd come to Japan exactly—Thackeray had figured it out once, down to the day, minute, and second. In twenty-four hours, they'd be Americans again.

The southbound express rumbled into the station, steel wailing on steel, overhead power lines arcing with electric blue. The doors hissed open. Humanity flooded out onto the platform and streamed away towards the exit ramps. A woman wearing a blue and white dress stepped out of the crowds, searching in her purse. She was young and attractive. Thackeray stepped toward her and then hesitated, remembering that he was not alone.

She found her rail pass. Looking up to find an exit, she saw the Americans. She smiled and waved. Randall and Denison were surprised at the salutation, and more surprised when Thackeray waved back.

A month before she had “investigated” his church. Now, they were only friends, and it was good to see her.

The girl dressed in blue came over to the Americans. “Takori-san!” she said brightly. “What an nice coincidence, meeting you here.” She looked suspiciously at Denison. “Where’s Michaels-san?”

“We’re leaving for America tomorrow,” Thackeray explained. “So tonight our mission president is taking us to dinner.”

“Oh,” said Kimiyo. “That’s right. You did say—” Disappointment dimmed her eyes. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning?”

“Yes.”

She was happy to hear this. “Tomorrow, then.” She held out her hand. “It’s getting late. Have a good time in Tokyo.”

Thackeray took her hand firmly and smiled warmly. “We will.”

She waved to the other two, “Bye-bye.”

The two men watched her walk away.

“She’s a fox,” said Randall. “With a couple of investigators

like that, I might think twice about leaving.”

Thackeray was quiet for a time. “Don’t know if I really want to go.” He winced to himself. He knew the words sounded contrived and sentimental.

Randall looked surprised. “Hey, I’m being real, here. I’ve done my time in the desert and a greener world awaits.”

Randall was right. No way did he want to keep on being a missionary. Thackeray turned and closed his eyes.

Those long, bitter months in Senzoku and Kunitachi were so far behind him. *Don’t be bitter*, Chadwick had told him. Bitter about what? Bitter about everything. Being a missionary didn’t mean the times would always be good, and it hurt like hell when the times were bad.

He shook the thoughts away, sweat ran down his cheeks.

“You’re so dead,” Michaels told him earlier that day, “I ought to dump you in a tea box and mail you home.”

He didn’t want to die. There wasn’t enough time to atone for the past. Resurrection was sometime tomorrow. But it wouldn’t be the same world. Not anymore.

A train pulled up to an adjoining platform. The calliope of noise jostled the missionary back into the present. He looked across the commuter platforms. He was going to miss the trains. The trains always knew where they were going.

“Uh—excuse me.”

The man addressing him was an American about his age. He had on faded jeans and a T-shirt. Although the same height as the missionary, he showed an advantage of twenty or thirty pounds of solid muscle. However intimidating his physique, though, it was negated by the helpless look on his face. Behind him were several other men dressed like him, wearing similar expressions. Probably sailors from Yokosuka on their way back from fun and good times on the Ginza.

The spokesman for the group said, “Where are we?”

“Yokohama station.” He anticipated the next question: “The Yokosuka train is the last platform on the left. You’ll see the

sign.”

“Knew you were the right man to ask,” the sailor said. He whacked Thackeray on the shoulder and nearly knocked him over.

Thackeray watched as the sailor sauntered back to his compatriots. He smiled to himself. They were all young, scared, and dying on the run. Would any of it matter a year, a decade, a lifetime from now? In a strange way, he dearly hoped not.

The Tokyo express arrived. The lines of commuters surged forward to the warning line. Thackeray let himself be carried along with the flow. Inside, miraculously, there was an open seat. As the train jolted into motion, he remembered the small box in his pocket. He took it out and slid off the cover. It was a delicate bamboo fan. Unfolding it, he saw that Tanaka had written on the two middle blades: *Thank you, Thackeray Choro.*

Thackeray closed up the fan and placed it back in the small wooden box. He sat back in his seat and stared out the windows across the aisle. He watched the city lights fade into the distance.

“*Sayonara,*” he softly said. Sometime tomorrow morning there would be time for a final goodbye, but then it would be too late.

Much too late.

Final District: Provo

Chapter 19. In the Afterlife

Two months after Thackeray died, he got a letter from his old companion.

Hey, civilian, Michaels wrote. Guess who's my new companion? Danbury! I guess Prez. Atkinson wanted to prove you could get ten in a month here. Hey, as long as I don't have to stick around and clean up the mess, I'll bask in the glory—if Yoshida Shimai doesn't kill him first, that is. Oh, Atkinson got his one thousand baptisms. Was there ever any doubt?

No, there hadn't been.

Michaels died before the mission changed presidents. The new president was Japanese, President Inoue.

He's a good man, Yoshida wrote. But no matter how Atkinson's old APes tell him to run things, he'll listen to the local leaders. Because that's where he comes from. And because he's not some hotshot gaijin from Salt Lake City who can intimidate people because of who he's related to and all the big numbers in his reports.

Thackeray was back at BYU, majoring in English lit. *The center will not hold*, he pontificated, having recently digested a good deal of Yeats.

The center was having a tough time of it. Then the North Asia Area Presidency was reorganized. And things fell apart. The new GA took one look at the Tokyo South Mission and did not like what he saw. He eliminated the small groups, recombined the two-man districts, and banned streeting. He followed that up by expanding the pre-baptism church attendance and lesson plan requirements for investigators.

Baptism rates dropped 90 percent. Long-term activity rates showed no signs of rising out of the low teens.

Thackeray decided to minor in Japanese. Most of the students in the 300-level classes were returned missionaries from Japan. The subject of missions inevitably came up.

“Tokyo South,” he said, simply answering the equally simple question.

“*Tokyo South!* Jeez, so you were one of those thousand a month weasels, huh? Flip, we were lucky to get a couple hundred in a *year*. You know how many times we got our noses rubbed in it? Like every flippin’ zone conference. Like we’re not as holy as you guys ’cause we’re not drowning everything that doesn’t naturally sink. How many triffs and kids did you baptize anyway?”

The guy tried to come off lighthearted but Thackeray could taste the animosity. He wanted to defend his mission, point out that there were a few missionaries—Chadwick, Matthews, Kempner, Yoshida—who maybe weren’t dunking ten a month, but were doing the work well and weren’t cutting corners. He wanted to pursue the question he’d asked Michaels—about the point at which baptizing for the numbers turned into nothing but numbers.

He already knew the answer. A fine Potemkin village they’d constructed, all soaring and majestic. And about as substantial as a billboard. The first hard squall blew it clean over.

Then there was the time an RM came up to him after class and introduced himself as a Tokyo South alumnus. He knew Thackeray from the old lost-in-Shinjuku story. Thackeray didn’t recognize him.

“Yeah,” he said. “I hear them bad-mouthing Tokyo South and President Atkinson. Fact is, they didn’t have the spirit like we did. They could have done it if they wanted it. You just gotta want it.”

Thackeray listened, nodded politely, and walked away. *No wonder they hate us.* In his heart, despite all his knowing cynicism at the time, he hadn’t been part of the solution. That made him part of the problem. And no less a prick than the rest.

The wounds wouldn’t heal until the Atkinson-era missionaries had all died and reality fully settled in and those halcyon days turned to myths and legends, hardly to be believed.

For a long time, he didn’t talk about his mission except in the abstract. The next summer, Yoshida Shimai died. She came to Utah to see him. They talked about everything for a long time.

About the Author

Eugene Woodbury was born and raised in the upstate New York community of Scotia-Glenville. After serving for two years in the Japan Tokyo South Mission, he graduated from Brigham Young University with degrees in Japanese and TESOL. His stories and essays have appeared in *The New Era*, *Sunstone*, *Cricket Magazine*, *The American Gardener*, and *Clubhouse*. He has twice been a Utah Original Writing Competition finalist and is a recipient of the Sunstone Foundation Moonstone Award for short fiction. Visit his website at www.eugenewoodbury.com.

Also by Eugene Woodbury

Angel Falling Softly

Rachel Forsythe's daughter is dying of cancer. Milada Daranyi, chief investment officer at Daranyi Enterprises International, comes to Utah to finalize the takeover of a medical technology company. When a chance encounter brings them together, Rachel makes an unexpected and dangerous discovery: Milada is a vampire, and the only person in the world who can save her daughter's life.

The Path of Dreams

Although they have never met before, a seemingly chance encounter leaves BYU students Elaine Chieko Packard and Connor McKenzie haunted by erotic dreams they cannot control. They determine to resolve the growing tension between the moral strictures of their religion and their own overpowering emotions by eloping, a decision that triggers an unexpected series of events.