

## YOU CAN'T GO TO AMERICA

The legend hung above the Hidden Door English School like a taunt. Daisuke didn't care. He was going to get some of that Disney money even if it killed him.

The program was not that expensive, really, but the first payment was more than he could afford. It was all he could do to stay current on his tuition at the English School. Hidden door, indeed. How would he ever get out of this place?

All day and all night he thought about getting rich. Trite aphorisms washed over him. "What is the sound of one hand getting money?" And: "Why ask why?" And: "A hard man is good to find." None of them were any help. He was still broke.

He stuck with his training. Every day he learned inane new American phrases. He was able to follow TV and movies now, without subtitles. He was less confident in conversation. At the end of each lesson he would cut the kuji and seal up his notes.

Daisuke had dreamed about leaving Japan his entire life. He wanted to be rich. Somehow, the two goals had gotten tangled up in his mind. One seemed like a prerequisite for the other. And how could that work?

He thought:

EARTH

You endure. Obstacles shatter against your hull. The water parts as you continue on your course unabated.

## WATER

You react. Your insight flows around the problem, addressing it from several angles at once. You extinguish the troublesome flames sparked by the problem with your own final solution.

## FIRE

You experience. You enjoy the conflagration. It amuses you to observe the opposition as it consumes itself with useless resistance. Oxygen fueling your fire, you burn through the problem on your way to the ultimate victory.

## WIND

You engage. You contemplate the myriad possibilities inherent in tackling the problem, mindful of potential pitfalls and traps. You stay clear of the edge; after all, the winds are high, and you don't want to topple over the side into the abyss.

## VOID

What is the sound of one hand getting money? No, seriously.

His will exhausted, Daisuke retired to his futon. He opened and closed several games in his emulator before finally falling asleep. Nothing was helping.

—

Daisuke gave up on giving up. He got out of bed and went through his junan taiso fitness routine. His calves hurt. So what.

It kept coming back to the money. He had to get out of Japan. He remembered suddenly a friend of his brother's, Carmine bin... something or other, whose cousin lived in America, and ran some sort of charity for those too poor to fend for themselves. He supposed that he fit into that category, and wondered if the charity could assist him. It wouldn't hurt to ask.

But he wasn't speaking to his brother. He had no idea how to reach Carmine... whatever his family name was. Another dead end.

It would be several more hours before anyone he knew would be awake. He decided to study his English School supplements. He skimmed the videos at 10x, defeating the purpose. Nothing stuck in his mind. He could only observe helplessly as the sense data skittered into and out of his consciousness. He couldn't muster the will to interpret, or retain, or reflect.

After an early breakfast he walked to school, reciting in his mind the rhyme of the week.

God damn  
Another fucking payback with a twist  
Them motherfuckers shot but the punks missed

It sounded better with the music. Daisuke had memorized the whole piece, for whatever that was worth. The other students didn't seem to like the material, but he was like, whatever; it scanned.

He checked his messages for work. No alerts. Twice in the last week he'd booked a job only to have it canceled at the last possible minute. Of course, he still had to pay the fees. It cost money to make money, which seemed perverse.

It started to rain. Daisuke pulled on his hood and hailed a cab.

—

It was no closer to happening. Daisuke tabled the ambition and tried for something more realistic: graduating the English School.

He noticed that his life was all plot. There were no descriptions even of what he looked like. He watched as the thought came and went, his awareness shifting even as he considered what it meant to be thus described. And then it was on to something else.

Daisuke graduated from the English School. Work picked up and then slowed down again. He returned to form: he had to get out of Japan. The monotony of the cycle was grinding him down.

Daisuke plucked raisins from a tobe ware bowl as he carefully considered his options. He could stay. He could leave. He could stay and enjoy the perks of his current work. He could leave and starve to death, or worse. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't do both.

This was not the plan.

He took refuge in the knowledge that he was not the first to suffer this dilemma. Young people were always leaving Japan, failing, and then returning home, embarrassed, never wanting to talk about what had happened abroad. He wished he could afford to fail like that, but he knew that there was no safety net for him and his kind. There was no one at home to take him back.

For several months he gave piano lessons. This went well until disagreements inevitably arose as to what sort of material he would cover. Daisuke refused to teach anything written after 1995.

But he made money. He saved money.

For a year he worked as a custodian in an Internet cafe. The antiquated hardware and uniforms demanded near-constant maintenance. He finally quit, again over discrepancies in the timeline offered to customers; the presentation didn't really make sense.

But he made money. He saved money.

For some indeterminate amount of time he managed a public relations firm. He considered this a personal failure and never wanted to talk about what had happened in the office. It was bad enough that some of his clients had gone on to dominate the entertainment cycle; he would be unable to forget them if he tried.

But he made an awful lot of money. And he saved.

At the end of five years he was ready to move to America.

—

Daisuke's marketing plan was to franchise the skills he'd learned as a child. He preferred married couples for the stability they brought to the finances of his schools (the lazy occult symbolism was never discussed). Candidates could train for their own trips to Japan while simultaneously operating cram schools targeted at students further down the chain. Everybody got what they wanted and the money flowed uphill.

He didn't ask for permission. Whatever the license holders in Japan might have preferred, this was America: freedom of speech!

Graduates of his program valued their investment, and tended to supply public relations gratis, effective at roping in yet more of the kind of people who sought out this sort of thing. Inside of a decade he had taken the operation global.

Except for Japan. There remained the question of who ultimately owned (or rather, controlled) the intellectual property. Daisuke had no solid claim on his style save for his improbable success. The Japanese had never tried to monetize the material overseas. To his way of thinking this meant that what he was doing was okay. For the most part, so far, the courts had tended to agree. But he wasn't comfortable that the tacit arrangement would last if the Japanese started to raise objections.

He had to find a way back into Japan.

Back when he had been working contract hits for the Americans he had been hired to understudy for an aging, but unusually reliable operator out of New York. It turned out that he had never had to step in, but he had taken notes (strictly against protocol) on the operator's Japanese connections. Searching through his notebooks he located the entries he remembered jotting down. The operator had moved freely between New San Francisco and New York, and pretty much anywhere else that he wanted to go. This lack of paperwork was ostentatiously suspicious, and Daisuke had made it a point to follow up on the item and find out what was going on.

What he discovered made his jaw drop. The operator was being manipulated directly by a god.

This could help with Japan.

It was a dumb way to think about it, but the signs were all there. The operator's orders were coming from inside his body. Daisuke knew the setup well: interpret thyself.

He examined his motivations and realized that he'd already traveled some distance towards sympathy with the operator's goals. Yes, he would follow this thread. The operator's mind opened to him and he extracted the required information. On his way out he left behind the patterns that would attract the attention of the god. Careful...

He boarded his corporate jet, headed for New San Francisco. These days he traveled light, taking with him only what staff would be necessary to facilitate his mission. And what was that mission? Daisuke wasn't yet sure. This was no way to run his business but it might yet yield the results he was after.

Once he arrived in New San Francisco he traveled by motorcade to the operator's compound. The single file line of cars was bound to attract attention, and that was intentional. The operator would know he was on his way.

"I'm here about the job," Daisuke said, maintaining eye contact with the operator even as he settled into the plush leather seat in front of his desk.

"Ah, yes," said the operator.

Arrangements settled, Daisuke retired to his quarters. Thirty-six hours until he shipped out. He reviewed his orders and then tucked them into the secure pouch he carried on his person.

It had been a long day.

—

Daisuke did not particularly miss the business. In recent years the demands on his time had become a nuisance. None of the trappings, none of the people, were essential to his purpose. The operator provided him with direction. His internal monologue ceased.

When a ticket came in he would place it in TAKEN status, then consider the best way to respond. Often he did not need to leave his chair. The operator's organization had established a policy of minimizing unnecessary travel. He only left the compound when circumstances demanded manual intervention.

One such situation obtained. Daisuke started his mission, exiting the compound and affecting travel via public transportation. He browsed a magazine to pass the time. Once the bus arrived at his stop, Daisuke resumed the street and hiked on foot to his destination. He found that the mechanical aspects of his present employment agreed with him. Every modular action fitted snugly alongside the next. No daylight was visible between modules.

At the end of his employment term Daisuke decided not to re-up. He still found the work agreeable, but perhaps it had distracted from his ongoing goal of gaining access to the Japanese market. In the years since he'd surrendered control of the day-to-day operations of his company, little evident progress had been made. It figured.

At any rate, the boss was back.

"I'm the boss, I can *be* late," Daisuke announced at the inaugural board meeting of the New Era.



No one present disagreed.

—

No, there would be no New Era. Daisuke dropped the pretense he could return to his old life. Japan or no, he was much too busy with each day's fresh batch of problems at work.

The operator had moved him to a desk inside his own office. Sitting there, watching his boss breathe, Daisuke found it difficult to concentrate on his work. It didn't seem to matter. The operator liked having him within earshot, just in case he decided to say something that required an immediate response. Daisuke had faced more challenging work in the past.

Much of it was listening to the operator talk on the phone. He spent a lot of his time chatting with one particular fellow, Slate, or Snake, or something like that. Very deferential. Totally unlike the way he spoke to people in real life. He could only imagine what the other guy must have been saying during all those calls.

Daisuke worked in the office for five, maybe six years. He began to forget what it had been like in the field. The moment-to-moment hustle and bustle conspired to grind all the reflection out of him. He was left with a smooth, matte surface. Blank. By the end of each day he wanted nothing more than to lay down on the floor and never get up again. That, he imagined the operator covering the phone with his hand and saying to him, could be arranged.

Daisuke had begun corresponding with former employees. One in particular, a man named Stan who had returned to his previous job as a mail carrier, had become a good friend (or at least someone who would answer

Daisuke's frequent letters). From Stan he gradually pieced together a clearer picture of the events that had taken place shortly before he was hired. Daisuke was surprised at what he learned.

—

The boy on the skateboard had attracted attention not because skateboarding was inherently interesting, but because he had wandered into a restricted area. The operator decreed that his progress should be monitored indefinitely, even after he left the restricted area. Daisuke worked out the details and the surveillance was commenced.

This kind of thing was becoming more common. The operator would fixate on some random civilian whose activities obviously contained no intelligence value. But the record would be created. After all, orders were orders. From time to time Daisuke would catch a glimpse of the bigger picture, and, wouldn't you know it, it was all there. He guessed that the operator really did know what he was doing. Summaries were the purview of a totally different department, so each time he caught a glimpse Daisuke would shrug and shortly forget all about it.

He thought back over the last few years and tried to remember how long he had been working in the office. It was no use. He gave up.

The collapse of his conception of history had been gradual, and he hadn't noticed it happening at the time. The shape of his thoughts now flattened into a schematic view of a singularly focused event: present time, present day. He checked all his connections and everything seemed to be in order, but there was no orderly progression from A to B, no sequential coherence he could discern in the arrangement of constituent parts, only a continuous,

everlasting moment that always seemed to be happening at the precise instant he attempted to observe it. He felt dumb. Was this heaven?

Moments later he was distracted by a comment from the operator. He was obliged to laugh.

—

RIN

"I am strong." Daisuke's mind smashed through itself. He was ready.

PYO

"I am me." Daisuke discerned the light. It was bright.

TOH

"It's okay." On this day, Daisuke gave a shit. Really.

SHA

"I am healed." Daisuke went through the motions, contentedly.

KAI

"I know what you're thinking." Daisuke gulped. The words were stuck in his throat.

JIN

"You don't know me at all." Daisuke was sure. Right?

RETSU

"I know what I'm doing." Daisuke's third eye opened upon a curious vista. He focused.

ZAI

"Words I manifest." Daisuke performed a freestyle vocalization.

ZEN

"Now I'm nothing." Daisuke's face drained of color and he climbed down off of his desk. His last day at the office would leave an impression. The operator withheld comment until Daisuke had taken his small box of belongings and vacated the office. At which point he turned in his swivel chair to gaze down upon the city, whispering to himself, "What was that all about?"

There was no one left to respond.