

“Have you changed your seat reservation at all?”

The woman’s question flummoxed him somewhat.

“Er, no, I don’t believe so.”

“It’s just that the seat reservation you made was for the 3.30 flight.”

Thinking about how grating the phrase ‘seat reservation’ was, he looked across the counter at his plane ticket and saw that she was right.

He had a feeling that when he had made the booking several weeks ago, he had gone for the earlier flight so as to get home sooner. The situation had changed since then, and he had ended up with several afternoon appointments, but his work had been so busy of late that he had forgotten to alter his travel arrangements. Nor had he thought, when picking up his tickets at the start of his trip three days ago, to check the time of his return flight. He had been under the impression that he was booked on the late flight as he always was.

It was now 6.30. The 3.30 flight had left long ago, without him on it.

“Are there any seats free on the 7.50?”

“Just a moment, please.”

The woman behind the counter tapped away at the keyboard and peered into the screen.

“I’m afraid that one’s full. If there had been seats available I could have changed your ticket over, but of course with tomorrow being the start of the long weekend...”

He finally understood why the airport was so unusually congested. It was a bad oversight on his part.

“Would you like to be put on the standby list for the 7.50 flight and the one after that?”

“Yes, please. Can I also reserve a seat on a flight tomorrow, just in case?”

He was worried that all tomorrow's planes would be fully booked as well, but luckily there was a seat available on a special early morning flight. That meant he would definitely be able to get home tomorrow. If possible, though, getting back today would still be better. He was given standby ticket number 67. He figured that a decent proportion of the passengers given standby tickets would give up and go home, and others would get on flights with other airlines. Besides, an aeroplane with a capacity of 400 or more passengers could end up letting on as many as 20 or 30 people from the standby list.

The problem was his luggage. It wasn't certain that he'd get a seat on either of the planes, so he couldn't check it in at the desk. Instead he had to take it to the boarding gate himself. His luggage was bulky that day, and what was more, one of the items was a cardboard box that he couldn't carry unaided. In the end, he queued up for the security check with it still loaded on the trolley.

Owing to an incident a few days ago, the security procedures were more stringent than usual. The gate attendant was an inexperienced-looking young woman, who seemed as though she might be a real stickler for the rules.

"You can't take trolleys past this point."

No sooner had he thought that she looked like exactly the type to say something along those lines than, sure enough, she came out with exactly those words.

"The thing is, though, I'm on standby for a flight, so I have to take my bags to the boarding gate. I can hardly carry these by myself."

"But you can't take trolleys past this point."

"So what am I supposed to do, then?" he said. His tone was perhaps a little harsh.

After they had been arguing the point for a while, a man who appeared to be her boss came up to them.

"Oh it's okay, people on the standby list are allowed to take trolleys through."

So then the luggage that he had intended to check in was passed through the X-ray machines.

"Does your luggage contain any sharp objects?"

Oh here we go, he thought.

“Yes, it does. This isn’t hand luggage, you see. I’m going to check these in.”

“Would you mind if I took a look?”

“Sure.”

He opened up one of his bags, took out the small scissors he used for trimming his beard and handed them over.

“Would you mind my measuring them?”

“Go ahead.”

Was it really necessary to ask permission each time? This he wondered as he watched the security personnel measuring the length of the scissors. Why did they always have to speak in this kind of over-polite and yet somehow intrusive way? And in any case, if the scissors were deemed dangerous and confiscated, when and where would he be able to reclaim them, given that it hadn’t yet been established which plane he was getting on? There was a logical inconsistency between security’s rules and those of the standby flight system.

“Yes, these are within the limitations. Thank you very much for your cooperation.”

After that, he went to the boarding gate for the 7.50 flight and waited for it to depart, but he wasn’t let on. While he was heading towards the boarding gate for the next flight, he began to notice his growing hunger. He had calculated that, by arriving at the airport at 6.30, he would have time for dinner once he had cleared all the check-in procedures, but now that plan had been turned upside down. He didn’t have time to lug his bulky bits of luggage up to the restaurant on the upper level. When you were on the standby list, you had stick close to the boarding gate at all times, or else your chance might pass you by.

In the end he was turned away from the next flight, which was the last of the day, having missed a seat by four people.

“Woah, what a relief! I really didn’t know whether we’d make it on.”

He averted his eyes from the passengers chattering excitedly as they lined up to board the plane, and walked away from the boarding gate. From a public phone box in the corridor, he put in a call to a hotel that would be easy to get to from the airport by the monorail, and reserved a room for the night.

He would have to be back at the airport by six tomorrow morning, so it was best to stay somewhere close by.

The problem now was how to go about leaving the airport from the boarding gate side. The simplest thing would have been to go back through the security gate, but with the last flight having already left, the shutters were down. This meant that he had no option but to follow the same path as the arriving passengers. He pushed his trolley all the way along the assigned route, took the lift down to the lower level, and exited through the arrivals lobby.

He had intended just to leave his luggage there in a coin locker overnight, but when he thought ahead to tomorrow morning, it seemed better to take it across to the departures lobby and store it over there instead. So he looked again for a lift, rode to the upper level, put his things in a coin locker and carefully placed the security ticket in his wallet. He was damned if after all this he was going to have trouble with a coin locker which wouldn't open. He had got a seat on the special flight, but he had been told that all the flights after that one were full. If he missed this plane, that would be it.

He put on his backpack and boarded the monorail, got off at the station closest to the hotel and walked the short distance there. At reception there were further complications.

He presented his credit card, which the machine should have had no trouble verifying, but the hotel wanted him nevertheless to sign a credit card slip with no amount filled in.

“No,” he refused, “I won't sign a blank cheque. That's something one shouldn't do under any circumstances, and it's something that you shouldn't demand of your customers. You may not trust me, but I don't trust you that much either, I'm afraid.”

After arguing for a while, the receptionist backed down. Once again, his tone had perhaps been a little sharp, he thought to himself. It was probably on account of his hunger. Why did it feel, though, as though they were speaking different languages? Both of the people he had argued with that evening had been employees of some kind. Both had acted exactly by the book. That attendant at the security checkpoint had been thinking of nothing but the rule which stated that trolleys were not permitted beyond that point. She hadn't had the capacity to understand that he needed, somehow, to get his over-sized luggage to the boarding gate. His words hadn't had any effect on her. She could only utter the lines that had been pre-programmed into her head.

It was the same at the hotel. The receptionist had accommodated his request not on the basis of some rational exchange they had had, but had rather backed down because he was a troublesome customer. He definitely hadn't convinced them to change their policy of asking overnight customers who made same-day reservations over the phone and turned up shortly afterwards to sign blank slips, in order to prevent them leaving. Just thinking about it made him feel exhausted.

Having put his backpack down in his room, he turned his thoughts to the next pressing issue, which was what to do about his empty stomach. After all that had happened, he didn't want to eat just anything. He wanted something which would leave him satisfied, but he didn't feel like having his dinner in this hotel. Making his way here along the street from the station, though, something had caught his eye. Some tasty memory had lodged itself at the corner of his consciousness.

As he stood in the lift on the way down to the lobby, the memory grew clearer: it was a specials menu, chalked up on a small board. Somewhere along the way, the English word 'oysters' had been written up on a blackboard positioned outside a restaurant. Given the circumstances, oysters with some white wine might be just what he needed. He liked oysters a lot.

He headed back in the direction of the station in search of the blackboard. He walked past it once without noticing, finding it only when he glanced behind him, as it was facing towards the station.

It was a simple sort of restaurant, the kind people call a bistro. There were a few specials written up on the board, the second of which was 'Fresh oysters flown in from Washington State'. He went inside.

"We're closing at ten tonight. Is that okay for you?"

The waitress who addressed him wore a white blouse and black skirt with a long black apron. He saw on the clock that it was 9.25. That gave him plenty of time to finish up a solitary dinner. Perhaps this was considered late for this neighbourhood, for there were only two other customers in the restaurant, both of them women dining alone. He was shown to a table directly in the middle of the two, facing them. There was one woman sitting in front of him to his right, and one in front to his left, like a pair of stereo speakers, and both of them were eating something.

It wouldn't be good to stare at them too much, he thought, idly contemplating the space in front of him. Yet he could still see the two women at the periphery of his field of vision. Both had plates in

front of them. The woman to the left was already onto coffee and ice cream, but the woman on the right was eating from a dinner plate with a knife and fork, a glass of red wine to her left.

The waitress brought him a menu, as well as a blackboard of the same size as the one outside the restaurant, and a stand, on which she placed the board so he could see it.

On closer inspection, the oysters were 250 yen each. Quite a price, he thought. Perhaps they were particularly large ones. Half a dozen would probably be too many. Maybe he should go for four. For the wine, a whole bottle seemed excessive given that there was only half an hour until closing, but a single glass might not suffice. Thinking this, he looked at the menu and saw that, rather cleverly, the house wines came in carafes. A carafe contained the same amount as a half bottle, which would be perfect. For his main course he would go for Cajun-style sautéed chicken.

After a while, the waitress came back.

“Are the oysters large?”

“The *oy-sters*?” She used the English word that was written on the board in a way that struck him as pointless.

“Yes.”

“Hold on a moment please,” she said, and headed to the kitchen to ask. She returned shortly.

“Yes, they’re large ones.”

“Okay, so I’ll have four of those, a carafe of house white, and the Cajun chicken.”

His order was complete. All he had to do now was wait.

When the woman on the left had finished drinking her coffee, her mobile phone rang. She held it to her ear, speaking with a joyous expression. Her conversation didn’t last long and when it had finished she put the phone away and sat still. It seemed as though she was waiting for something, or someone.

It was easier to study somebody’s face when they were engaged in something. So he thought as he fixed his gaze on her. Her narrow, lightly-made up face had a placid look to it. He would have put her in her mid-twenties. The woman on the right continued to eat her meal without expression. As far as he could tell from the corner of his eye, she was properly made-up, and kept her back straight as

she ate. He couldn't make out what was on her plate. Her glass of red wine was about half full. To supplement the joy of eating with a glass of wine was a good thing, he thought, even if you were doing so alone. She was just a little over thirty, perhaps, and wore an elegant-looking jacket of grey wool. He could tell from his fleeting glances in her direction that she had a refined sort of face.

His oysters came. They were the size you would have expected for oysters that cost 250 yen a piece – you couldn't have eaten them in a single mouthful, and it would have seemed a waste to try. They tasted rich and packed full of flavour, a far cry from the measly ones you sometimes got that were so obviously farmed. These were like Noto rock oysters. Slightly lacking in fragrance, perhaps, but that was more than compensated for by their taste and body.

Things were not progressing badly at all, he thought to himself as he ate the oysters and sipped the wine. It was just the house wine so he could have ended up with anything, but the taste actually went well with the oysters.

Little by little, as he worked his way through the oysters, his mood began to improve. His frustration at not having been able to get on the plane slowly ebbed away. It was around once a month on average that he flew to the capital, so it was only to be expected that every now and again he wouldn't manage to catch his flight.

The last time that he had failed to make it had been the summer before last, when his flight had been cancelled due to a typhoon. Passengers whose flights are cancelled have no special rights to seats on subsequent ones; they simply have to wait until a free seat comes up. The airline usually lays on a special service to take the passengers left behind, but that time he had wandered around the airport all day holding a standby ticket with a number in the 900s, before finally managing to get on an evening flight. This time was better than that one, at least, in that he definitely had a ticket for a flight tomorrow morning. In any case, the oysters were good, and casually watching these two women wasn't too bad either. That was as far as his thoughts had progressed when a man came rushing into the restaurant. Seeing him, the woman on the left gave a happy cry and stood up out of her seat. This must have been the person she had been waiting for.

The man was dressed in a suit, over which he wore a light brown coat. In one hand he carried a briefcase. They had made a date to have dinner together, but his work had dragged on and made him late. He had apologised to the woman over the phone and told her to have dinner without him, then later phoned to say that he would be able to leave soon – that was the phone call he'd heard her take

– and now he had arrived. Watching them now, the course of events was clear as day. The man took the woman's bill in his hand and put his arm around her, and the two of them quickly left the restaurant.

When all was calm again, he had the thought that the man's intrusion had been like a whirlwind. Wondering whether he might not share this impression, he looked over to the woman on the right but, having finished her main course, she was simply staring expressionlessly into the blank space in front of her, waiting for her next dish to arrive. She had a pretty face, but it seemed unlikely that conversation was going to arise from the simple fact of their being the only two customers left in the restaurant. He realised, as he thought this, that what he really wanted now was just that: *a conversation*. Not the mechanical exchange you got with attendants or receptionists or waitresses, but a real conversation.

He finished his oysters and found himself, like the woman, waiting for his next course. He still had plenty of wine left. To sip it slowly as he buttered the roughly-cut baguette and lifted the slices to his mouth was not so bad. The waitress walked past him, carrying the woman's next course to her table. Coffee and dessert. He could see a cake and some ice-cream on the plate, which was decorated with whipped cream, strawberries and some kind of fruity sauce. The cake was topped with white icing.

Dessert was a course which he mostly skipped. Yet he could understand why some people liked it. He preferred to end a meal with a cognac, but there were people, particularly women, who would always go for dessert. Thinking this, he let his eyes follow the plate. When the waitress put it down on the woman's table he noticed something which hadn't happened up until that point. The woman's mouth twisted. Inadvertently, she smiled.

Then, using in turn a knife and fork and a large flat spoon, she began to devour the cake: slowly, one piece at a time. Watching her, he felt quite blown away. The way that she ate the cake made it look genuinely delicious. Her expression was more or less one of rapture. It was a face of unabashed joy, seeming proof of the principle that food can bring people happiness.

His chicken came. The taste wasn't disappointing, and the strong aroma and spiciness of the pimento stimulated his appetite. But it didn't send him into rapture. It wasn't like that dessert. A short way into his chicken, he cast a glance over in the woman's direction. She was lifting the last piece of the cake to her mouth with evident regret.

Their eyes met. It was the first time that it had happened since he had taken his seat. She smiled broadly.

“It looks like you enjoyed that,” he said. He figured it was probably alright to speak to her now.

“I’ve had a bad day,” she said, having finished her last mouthful.

“Really? I have too.”

She ignored his reply. “It really was a crappy day. Can I tell you about it?”

“Yes, please do,” he replied, thinking how he liked her slightly informal way of speaking. She picked up the saucer with the coffee cup on top of it and moved over to sit with him.

When she sat down opposite him, he saw that her face was really quite wonderful: lively and genuinely pretty. She had a somewhat full mouth, which gave her an expressive smile. Thanks to the restorative effect of the dessert, she was positively glowing. She was probably the type to wear her heart on her sleeve, he thought.

“So my mum took my money and vanished,” she said out of the blue.

“Your mother did?”

“Yes. She’s a real sucker for men, my mum. She’s always getting hooked on these good-for-nothing guys. Every time she makes a big deal about it and then gets dumped. But still she never seems to learn.”

“Right.”

Some people’s mouths grow loose with drink, but maybe this woman’s mouth was loosened by dessert. Or perhaps it was the sense of release that came with the day having ended.

“This time was the same thing again. I met this guy once, and he seemed like a particularly bad one. I told her he was no good, you know, but she didn’t want to hear it.”

“Well, I suppose when you’re in love...”

“Yes, she’s in love. For the millionth time. But the thing is, it’s nothing. She makes a great big deal out of these things, runs away, and then eventually comes back. Gets dumped and comes home, always. It makes me lose any desire to get involved with men, seeing that.”

“Is that so?”

“She kept saying that this time it was different. Of course, she always says that, but this time it definitely did seem different from usual. It seemed worse than any of the other times.”

“She was serious about it this time?”

“Oh, she’s always serious about it. That’s the problem. But this time it seemed like the guy was especially bad, and she’d been sucked in further. I thought she was heading for trouble.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, where’s your father in all of this?”

“Oh, the guy I called my dad died when I was seven. My mum worked and stuff, so we never had problems getting by or anything. But I grew up very close to my mother, meaning I’ve always been there to see all her flings.”

“With a critical eye?”

“Yeah, with a critical eye. Then last night, when I got back home, really tired after work, there was a note from my mum on the table. ‘I’ve had to borrow your money. Don’t worry, I’ll definitely return it when I can. Sincerely, Mum.’ Just that. Next to it was my savings book and my personal seal.”

“So she took her own daughter’s money and ran off with a man.”

“Right!” she exclaimed. “And what kind of mother writes ‘sincerely’ to her own daughter, anyway?”

“Yes, that’s definitely odd.”

“So then today I was phoning around everywhere looking for her, but obviously I couldn’t find her. I’m angry about the cash, of course, but more than that I just can’t bear the thought of all the tears and pathetic excuses when she finally returns without a penny in the world.”

The woman looked him straight in the eyes.

“Can you understand why?”

“Yes, I completely understand,” he answered, flustered at having suddenly been consulted.

“It is bad, isn’t it? It’s always tears and excuses with my mum. And then I realised that this kind of mother-daughter relationship is actually a classic example of what they call co-dependence, and I nearly lost it. I thought, actually, that this would be a good opportunity to totally sever all ties with

her, but I can hardly sell the house, with it being in her name, and I mean it's not like I can break off our connection just like that anyway."

"What if you were to fall in love with someone too?"

"No way. Then it would be the end of us both. We'd both become victims of men."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. I hate men. Probably because I grew up seeing what happened to my mother. So I make sure I keep my distance."

"I see," he said.

"So now you see why it's been such a terrible day."

"I do see," he said, but she wasn't listening at all.

"I had some trouble at work today too, so when I came in here, I was right at the end of my tether. I ate my main course and tried to cheer myself up. That's why there was so much riding on that dessert."

"Now it makes sense."

"Yeah," she said forcefully. "Thanks to that dessert, and to talking to you, I'm feeling a lot better. I feel as though I'll probably be able to tolerate hearing my mum's pathetic excuses in a few months time. Like I might be able to tell her that this really has to be the last time."

"Maybe your mother's in love for real this time."

"I can't see it, but I won't rule out the possibility."

"And just in case it does all end in tears as you say, you should make sure that you hide your savings book in a place where she won't be able to find it."

"Yes, that's good advice. I'll definitely do that."

The woman stood up.

"I'm sorry you've been forced to listen to all of this from a total stranger. But I'm sure that it's because you are a stranger that I've been able to tell you."

“Yes.”

“Your chicken will be cold.”

He looked up at her face, and realised that he had been so absorbed in listening to her story all this time that he hadn't once touched his meal.

“No, it's still fine.”

“Okay, well that's good.”

She went back to her table, picked up a large bag, a coat, and her bill, and looked once more in his direction.

“Bye, then, and thanks.”

“No, thank you.”

“And by the way, you made those oysters seem pretty delicious too,” she said, and strode out of the restaurant.

He was left with three things troubling him. The first was that, despite what he had told her, his chicken had got cold and the flavour had suffered. The second was the fact that he had listened to a story of hers that was pretty personal, and yet their acquaintance would end there. He wanted to meet her, full of post-dessert cheer, a few months down the line and listen to more of her stories. He wanted to hear how her mother's love affair turned out, but he would never get the chance. The third grievance he had was that he hadn't got to tell her why he had savoured his oysters as enthusiastically as she had her dessert. He hadn't been given the chance to explain why it had been an awful day for him too. But compared to a love-struck mother who had run away with your savings, failing to get on a flight was really a minor misfortune. Had he told her, the conversation would probably have ended with her saying, “You men really are stupid, aren't you?”