

sored, raw subject-matter of dream. They are obtainable at any bookstall for about 10p. They are not meat for intellectuals; when Yukio Mishima disembowelled himself in public, he can hardly have been influenced by the delirious representations of *seppuka* in the comic books. They are read at idle moments by the people whose daily life is one of perfect gentleness, reticence and kindness, who speak a language without oaths, and where blasphemy is impossible since the Emperor abdicated his godhead. Few societies lay such stress on public decency and private decorum. Few offer such structured escape valves.

In imported editions of *Playboy* and in the home-produced nude and adult cinema magazines, pubic hair, if ever it appears by chance, is scrupulously blacked out with ink; the male genitalia, unless in a comic context (a man bowling a row of penises with a ball shaped like a pair of testicles), might not exist. A knight disgarbs to reveal loins as marmoreal as those in Blake's 'Bright day'. Another paradox.

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Poor Butterfly

A friend of mine, who is an English teacher of English, asked one of his Japanese students: 'What is the quality that you would require in a wife?' The student, a young lawyer who had graduated from one of Japan's best universities, replied in all seriousness: 'Slavery. I can get everything else I need from bar-hostesses.'

I recently visited a hot springs resort in the mountains near Tokyo; a spot where companies hire hotels to accommodate employees' annual outings. The town was full of souvenir shops, strip-shows and shooting galleries. Most of the latter were deserted, but one was crowded with laughing, shouting men. On examination, the targets at which they aimed their air-guns

proved to be small, china statuettes of naked and beautiful women. If you shattered a nude Venus with your pellet, you received, as a prize, a large, cuddly, fluffy toy. This seemed to me a fitting parable of the battle of the sexes in Japan. True femininity is denied an expression and women, in general, have the choice of becoming either slaves or toys. Not long after this epiphanic revelation, I found myself in the front line of the battle.

The *mama-san* explained that, as a special attraction during the festive season, she had originally intended to dress her fifteen resident hostesses in colourful national costumes from all over the world. Owing, however, to a printer's error, the postcards she commissioned to advertise her special attraction read: 'During the days before Xmas, your drinks will be served by charming and attractive hostesses . . . from all over the world.' Therefore she had to go out and search for a clutch of foreigners and she was prepared to pay well over the odds for them, since the notice was so short – 30,000 yen, about £35 sterling, for five nights' work in shifts of two and a half hours.

'This must be the only country in the world where it's cheaper to buy women than to do two bunches of advertising,' said Suzy, a friend who came from Long Island and who once worked as a hostess in a club where an amorous customer, whilst giving her a goodnight kiss, bit her lip so savagely the blood spouted across the room. She also worked, another time, in a club that had a special games room full of pin-ball machines where one directed one's balls towards the pictured orifices of women, and so on.

Our bar was called 'Butterfly', and it was in the most expensive and allegedly exclusive area of Tokyo night life, the Ginza. It was about the size of a largish studio apartment in Hampstead and somewhat tastefully panelled in beige pseudo-wood, with two chandeliers in a tiered, wedding-cake style. A whole lot of tinsel, a white Christmas tree fabricated ingeniously from synthetics, and the presence of Suzy and myself announced that the holiday was at hand. Some of the fifteen hostesses who worked there all the time were indeed decked out in subtly Japanified saris, cheong-sams and other exotic clothing – including one extraordinary costume consisting of a turquoise-satin, crotch-length shift, which had a

multiplicity of abdominal slits. 'Harem-style', said the wearer.

However, the hostesses were lumpy girls, on the whole, and, as they say about race-horses, aged. The *mama-san*, a kimono'd pouter pigeon, had the slightly harassed, professional joviality of a woman who has not yet put enough by for her old age – though her place, handsomely subsidised as it was by the Japanese government via the expense account system, was very plainly coining it.

In most bars, the regular visitor purchases his own bottle and drinks from that. But as the drinks are all poured out by a hostess, (there may be as many as five hostesses at a single table at any one time) and also because all the girls quite freely order extras – peanuts, dried fish, chocolate, and so on – the customer has no means of estimating the size of his bill. This will include, of course, a generous charge for the hostesses. In Japan, it is notoriously bad form to question a bill, anyway. Besides, the company usually pays. However, the bill for an evening at 'Butterfly' might cost, perhaps, £30 or £40 – an evening of innocent fun, watered whisky and the company of complaisant young women trained in the art of decorously lewd conversation: the last vestige of the traditional arts of the multi-talented geisha.

Clearly, though, the hostesses do not really need to speak and no doubt soon will cease to do so. They are not selling their charms; they do not usually sell their flesh. If they do, it is strictly a private arrangement; and since, at all costs, the pretence must be maintained that they are not *de facto* prostitutes, they rarely get honest cash paid down for the transaction, but only something useless, like a kimono.

It would be easy to construct a blueprint for an ideal hostess. Indeed, if the Japanese economy ever needs a boost, Sony might contemplate putting them into mass production. The blueprint would provide for: a large pair of breasts, with which to comfort and delight the clients; one dexterous, well-manicured hand for pouring their drinks, lighting their cigarettes and popping forkfuls of food into their mouths; a concealed tape-recording of cheerful laughter, to sustain the illusion that the girls themselves are having a good time; and a single, enormous, very sensitive ear for the clients to talk at.

Japan must surely be the only country in the world where a man will gladly play out large sums of good money to get a woman to listen to him. Possibly slaves do not make good listeners. However, the hostess – the computerised playmate – may conceivably be an illustration of the fact that Japan is just the same as everywhere else, only more so; perhaps she is indeed the universal male notion of the perfect woman.

'Butterfly' is a bar typical of two or three thousand others in the Ginza alone. It is a sufficiently respectable place, patronised by solid businessmen. These include a number of, if not captains of industry, at least first mates and pursers. Of the twenty or thirty men who will visit it during the course of an evening, not one will arrive alone and not one will bring a woman with him. Why, the company man might well ask, bother to bring coals to Newcastle?

Yet a throbbing sensuality is by no means the dominant quality of such places. The atmosphere is curiously similar to that of an English domestic charabanc outing, or even the kind of family New Year's Eve party at which drunken uncles pat the buttocks of their nieces. The plump company men would probably eagerly don paper hats with 'Kiss me Kwik' and 'I am a Virgin (Islander)' on them if some enterprising entrepreneur were to tour the bars selling them. 'I am a naughty boy!' they surreptitiously confide. And 'he is a naughty boy!' they whisper, giggling, about their friends, while, under the table, a continuous groping goes on.

In the warmth and privacy of the bar (as, indeed, of the rush-hour subway), the Japanese abandon their aversion to public heterosexual touching. The hostesses touch and are touched freely, though their status as interchangeable non-persons negates, to a considerable degree, the sensual – or, indeed, purely tactile – connotations of such touching. This depersonalisation process also applies to the customers. Both customers and hostesses are interchangeable commodities. The hostesses move from table to table as fresh customers enter, leaving the drinks, conversations and seduction attempts half-finished. The dirty glasses are instantly removed and the other attentions at once transferred to whichever hostess remains. When a customer leaves, he abruptly terminates interaction as though he suddenly remembers he is

paying for it all. Without any warning, he gets to his feet and rarely bothers to bid his hostesses a civil good night, even when the girls move to the door with him in a chattering convoy, carrying him to a waiting taxi if he has become helplessly drunk.

But the price the customer pays, over and above the bill, for such boosts to his male self-esteem is a palpable loss of identity in the warm bath of spurious affection and indulgence supplied by the hostesses. It is hard to say which sex is most exploited by the system; yet both customers and hostesses, as if in diabolical complicity, remain blissfully unaware of the dubious existential status of the interaction. In the course of the evening, the customers, petted, fawned on and indulged, regress to behaviour of a masculine crassness sufficient to make a Germaine Greer out of a Barbara Cartland.

For example, the girls even go so far as to feed their large infants food. 'Open up!' they pipe, and in goes a heaped forkful of raw shellfish or smoked meat. Unaware how grossly he has been babified, the customer masticates with satisfaction. Meanwhile the *mama-san* herself takes ice from the crystal ice-bucket with a pair of silver tongs and pops it into her customers' drinks with gestures of (in the circumstances) ludicrous refinement. And a hostess can hardly call her breasts her own for the duration of the hostilities.

Double entendre, bawdy allusion and a constant reference to sexual performance and phallic dimension stoke the continuous conflagration of mirth, which will occasionally modulate into the authentic, empty hysterical sound of the laughter of the damned.

Such bars will employ Caucasian girls as exotic extras, like a kind of cabaret. A black girl would be far more exotic and could probably command any price she liked for such work. A curious double standard prevails among the clients; a man whose cigarette has just been lit by a Japanese girl will often produce his lighter to light the cigarette of a foreign hostess. Foreign girls also get more pay and exercise far greater job mobility, having different notions of the nature of employment. These things make the Japanese girls overtly hostile to the alien competition, especially when the foreign girls stage strikes for more money, and walk-outs over

obscenity. A girl whose livelihood depends on the hostess bars simply cannot afford to have the self-respect to strike.

The Japanese hostess is locked in a remorseless dialectic. Save for the very few who regard hostessing as a profession which – plus, perhaps, a little prostitution on the side – will lead, one fine day, to their very own bars with their very own flock of hostesses, most of these girls are working in bars at night to supplement the monthly income from a daytime job that does not provide them with a living wage. The hostess, poor butterfly, is selling her youth and time and energy at a very cheap rate to people who could not afford to pay for them out of their own salaries. They usually charge her up to a firm which would refuse to give her enough money on which to live if she were officially on its pay sheet. Such are the ambiguities of acute capitalism.

The actual position of a foreign hostess is, however, sufficiently ambiguous as a social phenomenon. We are asked to exercise the customers' English in a kind of dexterous, cross-cultural, tight-rope dance. I transcribe the following conversation verbatim:

Customer: I will provide you with accommodation during your stay in Japan.

Hostess: Will you buy me a house?

Customer: Only if you do it three times a night.

(Roars of delighted applause from the rest of the table, at which are seated three company men and four hostesses.)

Hostess: Will there be room for my children?

(Whoops of appreciation at such wit.)

Customer: I will have my pipes cut (*sic*).

(They all cried the Japanese for: 'Touche!')

Hostess: I mean, the children I have already.

(Cries of: 'Huzzah! Huzzah! Bis! Bis!')

Customer: How many children?

Hostess: Eleven. There will also be my mother; my father; my two sisters; my brother; my aunt; and my husband, a *sumo* wrestler of incredible proportions and invincible strength. . .

At this point, the customer said to his friends: 'Let's move on to the next bar.' They did so, somewhat precipitously. The *mama-san* was a mite peeved and suggested we foreign girls behave in a more

lady-like manner, that is – to laugh more and talk back less. She herself laughed almost all the time, even when nothing funny happened.

One customer's English was limited to the single word, 'masturbation', which he pronounced very frequently and with a singular relish. Another raptly muttered the phrase, 'sexual intercourse', over and over again. Suzy claimed to observe a man stifling the signs of an orgasm, while another grasped my thighs quite unexpectedly and then announced: 'I want you tonight.' It is no good turning wrathfully on the poor things and crying: 'What do you think I am? A prostitute?' They *know* you aren't a prostitute. 'No charge, of course,' he added categorically.

After we finished work the first night, Suzy and I walked round to look at the shop on the next block that advertised 'adult toys' and keeps open until all hours. On the way, we passed a mournful transvestite in a kimono, who was warming his hands on a baked sweet potato, hot from the charcoal glowing on a peripatetic vendor's cart. We passed a tea-room that advertised the presence of 'exciting New World bunnies'. It was night-time in the world's most exciting city.

The adult toyshop carried a splendid selection of whips; some tooled-leather chastity belts; all manner of electronically-operated dildos; a variety of books and records, including one entitled *Fornicating Female Freaks*, which offered the authentic sounds of some 'bold butch lesbians having AC/DC sex', imported from America; and many other things. The salesman offered for our inspection a fat fish made of foam-rubber. When he pressed a switch, a red light on top of the fish's head glowed and the whole diabolical contraption started to shudder convulsively. With an enviable, deadpan expression, the salesman explained: 'A masturbatory device for gentlemen.'

Which is, presumably, the same function Suzy and I had performed for the last two and a half hours.

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