

## Excerpt from Chapter 2: Chikan Chicanery

I could feel the awkward pressure against me, his bodily insistence that I move when I was not obstructing his path. Besides, I discerned with a glance that ample space awaited him in the other direction. If this were New York I would've thought he was a pickpocket or nutcase, but this is Yokohama, and the mere fact that he was touching me voluntarily was a red flag in and of itself.

What the hell was he up to?

At the next station the doors slid open and more people filed in. I am accustomed to being surrounded by what has come to be known as the “gaijin perimeter”—a perimeter Japanese tend to place around foreigners in their effort not to come into contact with them—whenever I ride the trains. Sometimes this perimeter is gaping, and sometimes it's pretty tight. The size varies from day to day, but it's generally there. I've learned that people who dare to enter this perimeter sometimes have an agenda.

This guy certainly did.

I've observed that, once the perimeter is breached by one bold or determined commuter, others will follow suit. It's as if the initial breacher has informed them using some secret Japanese masonic-like code. “Come on in! The water's warm!”

And, that's just how it went that morning. People filed in, glimpsed me in all my conspicuous foreignness, hesitated—or froze causing a logjam, crashing into and stumbling over one another like something out of a Three Stooges or Charlie Chaplin movie—then, noticing the breacher's rather close proximity to me, decided I must be relatively safe and bounded for any available space even if it brought them within the perimeter.

To my left was a high school girl wearing a traditional uniform with the skirt hiked up rather high, but no higher than can commonly be seen on any given day during any season. She favored one of the kids who had graduated from my junior high school a couple of years ago, but it definitely wasn't her. She was writing a text to someone, her thumb a tiny blur.

The space to my right, previously vacant, was now filled by one of the “Women in Black”, the uniform for freshmen office workers here.

My rear was occupied by the breacher.

As the passengers boarded, I could feel increased pressure on me. A couple of

commuters wanted to get by the breacher to the vacant space on his left, but his hand was gripping the strap over my shoulder like doing so was the only thing that stood between him and prematurely meeting his ancestors face to face. So, the passengers had to squeeze around him.

The red flag became a fire alarm! With not only the option of moving, but the insistence that he do so coming from his fellow nationals, he fought to stay close to me? What the hell!

I turned around for the first time to take a good look at this guy. In sync with the turn of my head, he upturned his face and took a closer look at the train's ventilation system. It fascinated him—like he'd never noticed before how intricate yet practical its design was, or at least his expression said as much. But I knew it was just a poor effort at masking his chicanery. There was no way he was going to sell me on the idea that he loved ventilation so much that he'd fight crowds the way he had to merely examine them.

What the hell was he up to?

He was your typical “salaryman”, 50-ish, wearing a dark suit with striped tie, and a little shabbily groomed with facial stubble and hair that was unusually unkempt, but he looked decent enough. He had a briefcase in his right hand and nothing in the left. Could he be a pickpocket? I couldn't even imagine that if he were he would mark me as a target.

But he was up to something. I just knew it.

I returned to facing forward as the train pulled away from the station. I could feel his breath on my neck. It was a very unusual feeling here—at least for me—to be breathed on. It smelled like this morning's fermented soy beans, miso soup, rice, and fish., and I counted my blessings that I was spared this torture most mornings. That was one of the unsung benefits of the perimeter.

The school girl beside me almost dropped her cell phone suddenly. She caught it, glanced at me kind of coyly, brushed the hair out of her eyes, and went back to thumbing her message. That reminded me that I needed to send a text to my student to confirm our lesson that night.

Then, abruptly, she jerked slightly, like she'd been pricked with a needle she'd been expecting from a trusted source like her family physician. She sort of half glanced behind her, as if she were checking the shoulder of her jacket for dandruff.

That's when the pieces began to fall into place. The reason for his position behind me, slightly to my left, and his reluctance to be moved from his established beachhead became clear. I had a pretty good idea what he was up to now, or at least I thought I did.

At the next station, a good number of people got off. Some from my left headed by me for the door to my right. I watched peripherally as the breacher made way for them, actually exiting the car and standing on the platform that I could see through the windows. After the last departing passenger had exited, he let a few newcomers board before him.

Without the breacher occupying the perimeter and attesting to its safety and my civility, the first few people of the new swarm hesitated then fled to available spaces as far from the perimeter as possible. Once he re-boarded and headed back to his position behind and beside me—affirming the harmlessness of the area within the perimeter—the swarm behind him closed in. Again, he grabbed the strap over my shoulder and let the swarm push its way by him, like a man holding a tree branch just before the edge of a cascading waterfall.

That was enough confirmation for me. He was a chikan (groper) definitely.