

Excerpt from Chapter 5:

Effluvium

At Syougannai junior high, the students were taking their tests. So for a couple of days, all I did was write and edit. This is one of the perks of teaching that make it so appealing—the abundance of free time it affords. I imagine that's why many writers have teaching gigs. That, and being around youth day in and day out has a way of fueling ones imagination and setting a fire under ones procrastinating bum. Surrounded constantly by all that boundless energy, enthusiasm, and promise, as well as watching them from enrollment through commencement, growing and maturing right before your eyes, is like watching hundreds of human hands racing round the timepiece of your life and serves as a daily reminder that time stands still for no one.

Works like a charm, it does.

At Mendokusai junior high I had a school-furnished laptop exclusively for my use on my desk. But, at Syougannai, I didn't. While Akiyama-sensei, who occupied the desk on my left, kept her desk orderly and her belongings where they belonged, my neighbor to the right tended to spread out in my two-week absence, as if he believed I'd never be coming back. So, Instead of a computer, I'd come in on Monday mornings to my co-worker's flotsam and his profuse apologies as he bulldozed loads of papers and books, sports drink bottles, and baseball equipment—he was the coach of the baseball team—off of my desk back onto his own unholy mess of a desk. Sometimes my own documents would get mixed in with the bulldozed stuff. Ultimately, these were things I would spend hours looking for only to discover them at the bottom of a stack of shit on his desk.

And peeking out from underneath these leaning towers of clutter rested the laptop he rarely, if ever, used.

I asked him one time if I could use it to prepare some lesson plans and he looked at me like I'd asked him if I could borrow his liver because I was planning to do some heavy drinking with friends that night. So, I never brought it up again. I'd only asked him because the two computers for general use by the staff, which were located in the rear of the office, were in use at the time.

They were used daily by teachers who were not fortunate enough to have a laptop provided to them by the school—temps, substitutes and yours truly—or as a backup should a laptop breakdown. They were two relatively archaic machines, one of which was running a Windows version from the late 90s.

Unperturbed, I did quite a bit of quality writing on those machines. Some of my best posts from the early days of my blog, *Loco in Yokohama*, were written on these venerable devices. Usually, I'd be alone at this vintage computer station. Stretched out and lounging comfortably and undistracted, the muse would get so good to me that I'd forget I was at work.

There was one person who could be counted on to snap me out of it, though. Actually snap is too soft a word. He'd bitch slap me out of my rapture.

He was the office computer whiz—every school has at least one—and would come over and do techie stuff in order to maintain those two collector's items. Ozawa-sensei was his name and he was a really nice guy. He was approaching retirement age at full speed, so it was really impressive to me that one of the oldest guys in the office, raised in an age when computers were fodder for science fiction, had the know-how of a hacker. I'd even brought in my laptop from home one time and he de-bugged it for me and tripled the processing speed.

However, Ozawa's services came with an almost cost-prohibitive price tag. He suffered from chronic halitosis. Thus everyone in his vicinity suffered, as well. A stench not unlike raw sewage assaulted the nostrils every time he exhaled. And it was not the kind that Tic-Tacs, Scope, and Listerine were made for. That would be like putting a mint garnish on a stool sample. Those treatments were merely decorative. I'm not trying to make a joke out of this. I had a childhood friend who suffered similarly and it turned out his condition was the by-product of something much more serious that had gone undiagnosed for years. And Ozawa-sensei, for all his charm and intellect, was a very sickly looking man. His skin had a pasty pallor, so I wouldn't have been surprised to learn his breath was a symptom of one of his organs putrefying as he died a slow odorous death. He wore a surgical mask, like Japanese allergy and cold sufferers do customarily. Only he wore his everyday. All day. He'd been wearing it when I met him and not a day went by that he didn't. I imagine the mask filtered the smell somewhat but, having never seen him without the mask, I had no basis for comparison. From what I could tell, it mostly just localized it, like slacks do flatulence, forging a perimeter that lead and followed him wherever he'd go like an aerosolized minion. But, since he was pretty old, every trip up and down Syougannai's four flights of stairs left him heaving, huffing, and puffing that miasma of his beyond his locale. Sometimes you could tell where he was in the building, on what floor or in which room he was, or even where he'd been within the past hour, just by following your nose.