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312 words

After returning from Japan

*After returning from Japan, he dreamed a dream:*

A Westerner is standing at the busy intersection of Imadegawa and Karasuma streets in Kyoto, near the Imadegawa subway station. Across the intersection he sees a man of the Heian period—pale, fat-faced, wearing a kimono and a black lacquered hat—pass through the crowds, who take no notice of him, and go down the stairs to the subway station.

The Westerner walks south on Karasuma. He is on his way to take the Imperial Palace tour. In the street he sees a Heian ox-cart. It looks like a compact Conestoga wagon. The automobile drivers move around it. It attracts no special attention from them or from the people on the sidewalks.

The tour: The group is standing outside one of the Palace rooms. The guide has her back to the paper panels, which are shut. As she speaks, sounds begin to come from the room: moans and grunts of a couple having sexual intercourse. The group does not look at the guide, but at the wall. The guide continues to speak. A smile is fixed on her face. She keeps trying to glance behind her without turning her head.

(Later, security guards visit the room. It is evident that nobody has entered it for weeks, but in the center of the floor there is a splotch of fresh blood.)

The Westerner is standing on a subway platform. Sitting on a bench is a Heian woman—pale and fat-faced, wearing a kimono, and with thick black hair that reaches to her feet. She is sobbing into her hands.

The Westerner walks up and places his hand on her shoulder.

“Sumimasen,” he says. [Excuse me.]

She looks up; she has stopped crying. Then the Westerner notices that the platform has become very, very quiet. He looks around. Everybody is staring at him.