

Parker Choi Is Super Sugoi

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PARKER CHOI IS SUPER SUGOI

by Robet Jung

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

This book is dedicated to five of the finest writers I know: Nik (aka Angela), Matt, Pete, Priscilla, and Leroy. The all-star team of my first writing group and my de facto editors. I miss their wit and

talent.

Cover illustration by Nicolae Negura. Nicolae is a Romanian painter, designer, and muralist based in Portugal, who is constantly in motion making the world vastly more interesting. He takes a bold comics-inspired illustrative style that pops with color and detail. See for yourself. Portfolio: <https://cucubaou.carbonmade.com/> I'm a big fan of Nicolae's work, and can't wait to write more things with the hope that he will illustrate them.

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Outro With Ambient Whalesong

This is a self-portrait of a fanatic, an ascetic. I must lead the life of a savage and the public has my sympathies. I will be so outrageous that I will give them all the power to reveal their blackest secrets.--Gustave Courbet, artist

Opening Salvo: Destruction Tokyo

As I stomp through Tokyo I feel like Godzilla. I wanna steal everything and destroy what I canâ€™t steal. I wanna dredge my reptilian tongue through course thickets of black treasure trails that smell of pocky and kelp. I wanna hug old people with hanging skin like sharpeis. I wanna spank a gothic lolita until her caked-on black mascara runs down to her caked-on black lipstick and drips on to her Kiwi-shined black Doc Marten 18-eye boots, while she one-hand texts her best friend in Osaka. I wanna eat a live octopus, and when the living tentacles suction to my air passage, get Heimliched by a passing Sumo wrestler who is secretly gay. I wanna dip my head in a vat of Fugu entrails marked for *Toxic Disposal* and pretend Iâ€™m bobbing for apples at a Halloween party. I wanna wear roller skates and hit random people in the head with a Sadaharu Oh baseball bat made from sacred trees. I wanna watch a geisha crack a raw black egg over my steamed white rice, while I casually finger her ass. Then slurp a bowl of Momofuku Andoâ€™s ramen while holding a giant megaphone in front of my face. I wanna be the thirty-ninth guy in line on the set of a bukkake movie and hear hushed â€œoohsâ€• and â€œahhsâ€• as my mighty seed arcs toward a smooth, tanned forehead, full, parted lips, and slightly crooked teeth. I wanna strut Shibuya Station with a massive boombox, a giant afro, and a purple cape, playing my Axis Powers Mix of The Pillows, Boredoms, Kraftwerk, Rammstein, and Pavarotti. I wanna go to the fish market and glue the dorsal fin back on a shark, set its jaws open with a flimsy chopstick and trick some sleazy poacher into sticking his hand inside. I wanna sit on the windowsill of a high-rise hotel looking out longingly at the Tokyo city lights in see-through pink panties while drinking Suntori whiskey. I wanna kiss the hand of Hayao Miyazaki, and sip sake out of Princess Masakoâ€™s Harvard-educated belly button. I wanna do a one-man stage-play of Kurosawaâ€™s Seven Samurai that ends with me ritually disemboweling myself with Toshiro Mifuneâ€™s sword. I wanna play soccer with one of those fly, white Asimo robots. Iâ€™ll headbutt it like Zidane after I program it to say shit about my sister in Italian, and then smash it into more pieces than there are stars in the sky. I wanna go to the best sushi joint and demand a kimchee taco, and when they pretend not to understand Iâ€™ll snort a line of wasabi and throw up on the floor. I wanna wear a T-shirt that says â€œFat Man & Little Boyâ€• while sitting in a Nagasaki chicken joint. I know itâ€™s wrong but itâ€™s gotta be done. And I wanna scream out how overwhelming it all is because no matter how big you are and how monstrous, the reason monsters exist is because they find the world so overwhelming that they have to break shit and bones to overcome their fears. The bigger you are the lonelier you are. Blue whales are a lot lonelier than krill, even though whales are better singers, and krill donâ€™t really understand the value of companionship.

Iâ€™m no monster. Iâ€™m just an artist, but I have a monstrous, kung fu, two-handed spray-can technique that blows motherfuckers and other fuckers out the bath tub. I can tag a building with a mural the size of your house in the time it takes most donkeys to whack off. And I can whack off in less than two minutes and use that shit as varnish from twenty paces. Youâ€™ll never know when you buy one of my originals and your wife kisses the painting because she thinks itâ€™s so beautiful, but really itâ€™s just my pheromones talking, reminding her of her own fertility and probably making her nipples harder by proxy.

And all I really wanna do is paint.

Wherever I like.

Chapter One

Virgin Mary Lunchbox

There were already hipsters milling around the entrance of Blue Bones, talking excitedly like they were waiting for a concert to start. I chatted up a few of them because I had to do a live mural during the opening, and wouldn't have time to talk much once it got under way. I'd be the only one actually working at my own reception, as Dom, Ichiro and Maki would probably be getting tanked.

One kid showed me his sketchbook, which featured a lot of drawings of Bambi-eyed girls being molested by a Nazi octopus and a giant starfish. Twisted shit, but he was proud of it, and not at all self-conscious. You'd think he was showing me pics of his family or his new puppy. The girls looking over my shoulder only giggled at sketches of a manga chick being penetrated by a hairy crab with ejaculating pincers. I felt a little guilty for getting half a boner, but the kid did draw nice girls. He asked me if I would do a sketch and I knocked off something really quick. I drew a caricature of him chained to phallic tree with a lyric from George Michael's "Careless Whisper" in a word balloon coming from a notch in the tree. No one quite got the caption--*Guilty feet have got no rhythm*-- including me, but the liked the sketch so much, I thought he was going to drop to one knee and propose.

I wandered inside and Ichiro handed me an Asahi beer and disappeared down the hallway. He didn't seem at all mad about the strip club. The DJ was here now diddling his laptop and rummaging through vinyl. His mop-top and paisley shirt made him look like the 5th Monkee, and he had long, spidery fingers that stretched across the face of the white label records he was shuffling. He should have been a classical pianist but his heart was all about scratching. I'm sure his parents gave him shit for it too. He probably had regular cello lessons throughout school.

On the wall behind the DJ was a projection of a cartoon cat repeatedly getting clubbed in the head, not by a mouse, but by an anthropomorphic carp. Like a turn of the century Tom & Jerry as animated by Yoshitoshi. Except the loop ended each time with Tom biting Carpies head off and pink blood spouting up like a flowering fountain. Over and over again. It was a cool visual, well-animated, but after five viewings it gave me vertigo.

All my art stuff was laid out on a sheet of plastic in front of the wall in the backroom. Several dozen cans of Mirot spray paint with multiples of the primary colors, some fat WN brushes, some small ones too, a cupful of Alamagne graphite pencils, chalk in several colors, black Sharpies, a wooden crate stacked with oils, and a box of acrylic tubes, lots of rags, some jars, two wooden boards, palette knives, a painter's smock (which I definitely wouldn't be wearing), some toothbrushes for splatter effects, although the spray cans work just fine (especially when they're almost empty), some bottles of water on the floor, a plastic hubcap in case I needed some big perfect circles, blue tape, and a couple of filtered masks to protect my lungs from the effects of spray paint. I knew it was only a matter of time before my daily exhalations started to look like the colors of the rainbow. A huge 12x6 sheet of canvas was already fastened to the wall. As soon as I finished, the auction would

start and by nightâ€™s end someone would walk away with my mural while the paint was still warm and drippy. And hopefully their pockets would be a lot lighter.

Maki showed up at the bar with covered trays of sushi cut to only a quarter-inch thick so they almost looked like silver dollars. She told me to try a few, and I helped myself. A free trip to Japan, sake, decent food, cute girls, music, incredibly nice gallery owners. This is what I hoped for when I became an artist. I wasnâ€™t taking this shit for granted.

DJ Spiderfingers was just over my shoulder reaching for, and popping, sushi into his mouth. I couldnâ€™t help but turn to watch as his long alien fingers crawled the tray, snatching up little dollars of wrapped fish. The nails of the middle and third fingers on each of his hands were painted purple. I knew Iâ€™d have to draw someone with elongated fingers in a future piece. And when somebody gave me shit about anatomy, Iâ€™d know that people with foot-long digits did exist. Maki introduced us and we just sorta nodded, and bowed, and smiled, while trying to choke down mouthfuls of seaweed and sticky rice. His name was Akuja but he went by DJ Deathnote. His red t-shirt even had a nametag on it that read in English â€œHello my name is! Deathnote.â€• Maki apparently told him some nice stuff about me or at least about my art, and he continued to nod and smile. Then after dabbing his hand on his pants he reached out to shake mine which, for some reason, sent a shiver down my spine. It felt as if I was gripping a hairless tarantula. I watched closely as his fingers enveloped my whole hand in a delicate, almost feminine shake. His palms were kinda clammy (or maybe those were my palms?). I guess I faced down another fear.

Deathnote didnâ€™t speak much English, but he asked me what music I liked and I tossed out a few names--Pixies, White Stripes, Amon Tobin-- that I figured all sentient species could agree on. Then he rattled off a bunch of DJâ€™s, electronic outfits, and Japanese bands, I needed to check out; most of which Iâ€™d never heard of, or just couldnâ€™t understand the names he was saying. We converged on two J-bands I knew: The Pillows and Melt Banana. A typical Melt Banana record sounded like a Chihuahua barking backstage at a Fugazi concert, except less melodic. The Pillows, on the other hand, were a near-perfect hybrid of The Replacements and The Kinks with a healthy dash of Pixies. Which is to say, pretty great.

Deathnote gave me a pat on the shoulder as he headed back to the little stage where he had his wheels of steel, and a Mac Hydrogen running Ableton Live. Music had been playing low in the background, but now that Deathnote was on the tiny stage he cranked the volume, and gave me an elongated thumbs up. Four Tet and Modeselektor remixes stuttered out of the speakers. I glanced over at the far wall and noticed an amazing girl with a wife beater, and a full sleeve of tattoos on her left arm, had stepped behind the bar. Where did she come from? Iâ€™d have to talk to her later.

Dom wanted me to go over a checklist to make sure there was nothing else I needed aside from all the stuff they already had set up.

â€œNo, Iâ€™m good.â€•

Tonight I had a full palette, a full belly, and now that people were flowing through the doors, a full house. Itâ€™s great to have a well-stocked sling of art materials, but I could blow minds with a chopstick and a few packets of soy sauce if I had to.

We were officially open for business. Art business. If all went well I'd be able to afford Wagyu beef for dinner tomorrow. Or maybe I'd just pay to give a tensed-up cow a massage. No happy endings, though.

Just as Dom drifted off promising to be "right back", Ichiro came up and gestured at the crowd.

"Did you know you have so many fans in Japan, Parker?" he asked.

"No way, man. But thanks for promoting my work. I appreciate everything you and Maki have done," I said. I have some manners after all.

"We do because we are big fans," he said. "We only support real great things."

In his element, and with the show starting, Ichiro already looked a lot less nerdy than he had earlier.

Several dozen people flowed in and bee-lined in the direction of the first few paintings. Seeing the initial reactions always gives me a little rush like a whippet, only buzzier and longer lasting. The same group of kids that I had talked to outside earlier came up to thank me for signing shit for them. Then they sort of stood around in a semi-circle staring, no one saying much. Before it got too awkward, Ichiro stepped in to direct them toward the paintings. I no longer recognized the music playing in the background.

Soon I was chatting up hardcore local taggers who wanted to talk about techniques and show me photos of their best tags. They actually carried around portfolios and contact sheets of their stuff. One of them gave me a flash drive that had more photos and videos of them at work. They wanted me to come over later and watch videos at their place. I wasn't totally against it. It could be good fun, or could be like watching paint dry—literally. I'd much rather go out with them and actually do the shit than watch the video highlights, but they said Friday was a bad night. Too many cops on patrol. Os Gemeos told me the same thing in Brazil. No matter where you are in the world Tuesdays and Sundays 2am till dawn are prime. No one on the streets but a few zombie crackheads and hardcore winos, and very few cops. Even the glue-sniffing gangs of Sao Paulo are snoozing at those hours, saving their strength for afternoons when the side-streets are filled with *ovelhas*. People they can rob, scam, or busker.

Of course when the cops catch you out at 4am on Sunday they're usually more suspicious than normal. And less busy. Which means they may have time to fuck with you. If I was black I probably would've been truncheoned to death by now. But as long as LAPD didn't think I was in a Cambodian gang, the Asian brainerd stereotype worked heavily in my favor. And I have some good tricks too. When I'm night-tagging if I see a cop I'll stuff the spray can down my pants and rock the horn-rimmed glasses I've had since 10th grade. Glasses on an Asian kid have a mystical Clark Kent effect on cops of all races. You can tell them you're researching a paper on inner city architecture, or mass transit, or basically anything. They'll tell you to look out for baseheads and gang members; and to keep your cell phone in one hand. Other times I'll just start breakdancing on the sidewalk (always keep a stray sheet of cardboard box around for this very purpose). If they ask, I'm practicing for an Asian-American hip hop recital at the local community

college. They'll give you that patronizing "crazy chink" shake of the head, and cruise away, and it's all good. It's about attitude. All about soft-shoe. Step and fetch-it. If you're too nervous you're in for the 5th degree. If you get defensive or angry, or if your skin is too dark, or you have a drop of Persian blood in you, look out. You could be in for the post-9/11 Gitmo shakedown. It could result in a nasty beatdown if you say any magic words, or maybe just if there are no witnesses around. One out of four cops are sadists. Often they partner these guys with more mellow veterans who can sort of cool them down. Whatever you do, never yell "Don't tase me, bro!" First of all that sounds like an order and the cops aren't sweet on taking orders from street scum like you. Secondly, the only time they don't use their tasers late at night on innocent people is when they forget they have them. They remember they have guns but know they can't really shoot you unless you take a swing at them or brandish a plastic spork from your cargo pants. But they'll tase you just for having bad breath. They love that shit. And so do your local Republicans and paranoid AARP blue-hairs. They have circle jerk parties in Simi Valley, where they watch videos of all the people cops unjustly tase each month. So don't remind them. You are the straightjacketed chimpanzee, and they are the evil researchers dying to put "No More Tears" baby shampoo in your eyes until your nostrils bleed onto your diapered crotch. These are the guys that grew up burning ants and their baby sister with magnifying glasses. These are the guys that beat the snot out of the one kid in school with a mod haircut and checkered pants; or the kid with even the faintest hint of a feminine side. And these are the guys that the minute no one is looking will anally rape you with a plunger handle, while chanting the pledge of allegiance. So, you know, if they come to hassle you, act the cool fool and it's all 5th Element. Love or at least not a beat-down and a puke-stained holding cell.

One of the Japanese taggers, Shinji, mentioned checking out an underground Fight Club. I was down with that. Apparently nothing much happened until late night so we could head over there after the show. But for now Maki and Dom were hauling me to the backroom to do my mural. Suddenly Deathnote stopped the music. He made an announcement in Japanese, the only part of which I understood was my name. But it was obvious by the applause that I'd just been introduced. A crowd was already gathered in the back room staring at the blank canvas stretched across the wall. I considered just walking up signing a corner of the canvas and bowing to the crowd. *Thank you, good night Tokyo!* I'm sure they would've applauded that too. But, the people were cool here. I'd save my cynical shit for New York. I'd love to do the old urinal on a wall installation bullshit, but complete with a live urination demonstration. Encourage the crowd to participate. Girls totally welcomed. We'll mount'em low on the wall for the squatters. I wonder if I could get my face stamped on urinal cakes? It would be the best merch ever. Golden showers in absentia.

I splashed a paint color I called *Yellow Bitch* (the can read "Yellow Beach") into a pan with plenty of thinner and some Ivory White (or as we say in the streets, Cracka) and quickly laid down a semi-transparent base with a roller. I should've done this earlier so it'd be dry by now. I think Dom just assumed I was going with a white background, but I knew I could make it work. I picked up the rotary fan I requested for this purpose. The fan had the kind of American art deco design with a steel base, that made it look like a fat rocket ship, and it was heavier than expected. I'm sure the Japanese had invented a walking robot with a hair dryer for a mouth that would do the same task, but it would retail for a 100 grand.

I cut off the fan, and patted my hand on several spots on the canvas. One spot near the upper right border was still a little sticky, but it would be dry by the time I got around to it. Besides most of the wet part just came off on my hand. I hadn't really thought about what I was gonna draw so I just picked up a piece of chalk and dove right in. To give symbolic props to my Japanese hosts I drew big orange carp in the top left and bottom right corners. Carp have large, defined scales, which makes for a good design element. And I wanted to pencil in little faces on each of the scales. Faces in the crowd. Maybe it would take too long. I'd sort it out. In the other two corners I sketched out sushi rolls. So we'd see the whole fish. Then in the sushi we'd see how man processed it, and turned it into something entirely different in appearance and composition. Reconstituting organic realism, like what Picasso did to human faces and Monet did to gardens (my old art teacher would have loved if I'd put this bullshit in one of my essays). And in the faces on the scales we'd see the consumers of the finished product. It was the circle of life. Or actually, death. I've never heard of carp sushi, but who gave a fuck? The Japanese could turn anything into sushi. Jellyfish, barnacles, old tires dredged up from the harbor. There was probably already a specialty market for tuna irradiated from the Fukushima meltdown. I decided to give the carp more flavor by adding huge anime eyes, and buckteeth from those WWII Yellow Peril propaganda posters, while keeping the rest of the fish looking as realistic as possible.

I recognized the Ninja Tune remix of Luma Banga vs. Santogold in the background and thought of Deathnote's spidery fingers sputtering across the surface of the vinyl. I told him he should've been a pianist, but really he missed his calling as a gynecologist. Those fingers were made by God to probe for cysts and insert IUDs and stuff. If I ever dropped my keys down a meerkat hole, I'd call Deathnote to fish them out.

Even over the bass-heavy groove I heard grunts of approval and layered whispers that sounded like someone raking dead leaves. Behind me was a five-deep semicircle of people watching my every move. I picked up the graphite and sketched out a big figure in the middle who looked a little robotic, and was hunched over like something incredibly heavy was weighing him down. I put some dirt trails behind his feet. Whatever he was carrying was making him drag his feet to the point where he was creating two troughs instead of deep footprints. It was still sketchy at this point. I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned to see Dom.

“Sorry to interrupt, Parker. Are you okay? You need a beer or something?” he asked as if I'd been breaking rocks in the Gobi. Hell, I'd been at this less than 30-minutes, and I had several bottles of water on my perimeter.

“I'm good, Dom. Thanks!”

“You need a beer?”

“Nah, man. I'm cool.”

“Okay, if you need anything at all just yell out, or raise your hand and one of us will grab it for you.”

I nodded. If I needed a drink that bad I'd just get it myself. It wasn't like I was stirring risotto here. I could walk away. Dom was like this even when my paintings only sold for a few hundred bucks, so there was nothing phony, but he could be a little

too Mother Hen at times. Then again I was his fucking Golden Goose now.

I used my hand and erased the first carp drawing and heard murmurs from the crowd. It looked like I was going in a different direction. Was the temperamental artist unhappy with his initial concept? No, he just shouldn't have used the chalk which is hard to paint over with a brush. Besides I was just getting the dimensions squared away. I saw the carp outline perfectly in my mind's-eye and took a medium sable to the corner and painted in the fish. I then erased the second carp and did the same thing, although I made the eyes different; more demonic. I could go ahead and paint these because they were in the corners and I wasn't worried about dragging my hand across them and fucking anything up as I worked on the center of the canvas. I needed some photo reference for the details on the big slumped figure in the center though. I turned around to see Ichiro quietly beaming from the crowd just behind me. I waded into the semicircle of crowd and Ichiro suddenly looked nervous. I had to wonder what kind of temperamental pricks gallery owners like Ichiro were used to dealing with that they always seemed so jumpy.

"Is everything alright? Do you need something, Parker?" he asked.

"Yeah man. I need to take a look at your laptop?"

"Is desktop ok?" he asked.

"That's fine! anything with internet."

He gestured a little more frantically than necessary and Maki materialized from I dunno where. He whispered in her ear and she took me gently by the wrist and led me away to the principal's office. Boy did this feel familiar. I heard Ichiro make an announcement in Japanese that probably went like this:

The gaijin artist had to take a bathroom break. My wife is joining him to explain the semiotics of the futuristic toilet control panel. Everyone please have more sake and green tea cakes and continue bowing to one another until he returns.

Maki led me straight to a new Mac desktop with two giant flat panel monitors, and of course asked me if I needed anything. Then she said she'd give me some "privacy" as if I was going to scan Japanese urabon or something. I would have, if I'd had the time. At first glance the wallpaper backgrounds on both screens looked exactly the same, but then I noticed bunnies falling from the lip of the second wave and realized the first screen had the original on it, and the second had Kozyndan's remix of Hokusai's *The Great Wave Of Kanagawa*, with white bunnies replacing the sea foam. Ichiro and Maki were tuned into the American art scene. But then that's how I got here, right?

Suddenly Maki reappeared.

"So sorry, Parker. I forget something," she said. "One moment."

She pressed a button that activated the virtual keyboard, which really was nothing more than a projection of light on the desktop. Then she changed the language orientation from Kanji to English, so I could tell what the fuck I was typing.

"That should make easier for you," she said with a sweet smile. "If you have

question just ask. Here is the browser, she said pointing out the browser icon on the screen that looked like a light saber with a hula hoop around it. Ok?

Got it. Thanks, Maki, I said with a wink.

I did an image search for Ultraman; and after finding one I liked, printed it up on the fancy printer. I needed another image so I typed in Jesus at how the hell do you spell Gethsemane? That's one I never got asked even in the Bible school spelling bee. After mangling it, I used the search engine's *suggested spelling* and got several screencaps from The Passion of The Christ. I skipped forward a few pages until I got a good image from Scorsese's film instead (Willem Dafoe rules!). I printed it up.

I stared at the second print for a minute and got a solid mental image--I could use the light source in this one too. Then I tossed it in the stainless steel trashcan with the Murakami sticker on the side. Takashi, not Haruki. I snagged an orange tack from the hollowed-out head of a Totoro figurine on the desk. Maki, who was so active now that I started thinking she may be one in a series of a dozen clones, reappeared with a tray of sushi, green tea cakes and something that looked and tasted like seaweed taffy. She smiled at the sight of the Ultraman printout. Given his Planet of the Apes fetish, Ichiro probably collected Ultraman stuff too. I went ahead and popped some sushi in my mouth, bowed and smiled at Maki, and headed back to the mural as I was chewing.

The canvas was being watched over by Dom as if he was secret service. I gave Dom a pat on the shoulder to let him know I was back on the case. I tacked the first printout directly onto the canvas and the crowd *Oohed* and talked excitedly. Maybe I should just leave it like this? I sketched in the Ultraman super-fast, but in greater detail. The main thing was getting his bug-eyes and the shark-fin ridge of his helmet down. You can screw a little with the red pattern on his silver suit of armor (which was obviously nothing more than a painted wet-suit in the television show) because the design changed around some during the show anyway.

I worked close to the center of the canvas which freed up the corners, so I asked Ichiro to explain in Japanese that I wanted everyone in the crowd to draw a small self-portrait in the boundaries of each scale on the carp. He looked a little worried then he smiled and said: This is very brilliant. I handed him a fine-tip Indian Ink pen and told him to let one person at a time draw and then pass it on. Quick and not too detailed. We don't want them to take forever. There's no erasing, so if they fuck up, fine. Mistakes are part of the process. And I don't want anyone showing me up either, I said. I know how competitive some people are.

Oh yeah, and make sure they know they're working for free. When this sells we're not splitting the money 87-ways.

I sketched a heavy wooden cross on the back of my big, slumped-over figure, making sure to convey the weight of the object in a believable way. Ultraman or not he's gonna have a bad back by the time he hauls this thing to the final destination. I thought about making the cross out of iron instead of wood, but the juxtaposition of post-Atom-bomb Ultraman with an old rugged cross worked better. Still, I compromised and sketched iron plating on one side, adding a bunch of rivets which really sold it. Then I added a tiny sticker to the side of the cross with an image of

Rosie The Riveter flexing her muscles. It seemed cool to suggest that she was like the *go-to* riveter when something important needed welding; and also that the sticker was her seal of approval. Made in the USA. It reminded me that I also needed to draw an *Andre has a posse* sticker on some obscure spot in the background; just to show that Shepard Fairey had pretty much hit every corner of the globe. Heâ€™d even time-traveled.

A few people watched what I was doing. But a lot more watched anxiously as the carp self-portraits went off. Waiting their turn. I guess I had inadvertently counter-programmed my own live performance to my detriment. It was like trying to perform an acoustic show while a karaoke contest was going on in the same room. But I donâ€™t really need attention when Iâ€™m working. I just need loads of attention when Iâ€™m not. Iâ€™d lost track of the music in the background which had been one long glitchstep groove for awhile now. Deathnote mustâ€™ve been getting a blowjob in the bathroom, and left the mix on autopilot. Just as well, cause if he was playing old Gâ€™nâ€™R or Nirvana, Iâ€™d be leading the karaoke.

After some graphite shading on Gethsemane Ultraman I moved on to sketching a bunch of onlookers lining the dirt path he was walking. A big laugh-cheer went up to my left at the carp self-portrait line. I guess somebody did something exciting in the confines of a single fish scale. I drew some west coast hip hoppers, hands in the air, beside a pair of Japanese geisha girls wearing surgical masks. Then I stuck in some Cambodian gangsters in wife-beaters, and a couple of white-suited yakuza bosses eating skewers of chicken hearts. I intentionally didnâ€™t put the yakuza in wife-beaters cause then Iâ€™d have to draw all the fucking tattoos on their arms and I donâ€™t have time for that shit. Two girls behind me pointed at something on the canvas and clapped excitedly. The short one was wearing a Celtics jersey and a headscarf. Her tall friend in a red peasant dress and white top, looked like she might be hapa. Maybe it was just her height? 5â€™7â€™ or above was Amazonian by Japanese standards. The short one offered me her beer. I took a swig, smiled, and handed it back and they both giggled.

I glanced over and saw that Ichiro had left Dom to preside over the carp drawings. For a dude so into street art Domâ€™s instinct was still to rein in the chaos, when he shouldâ€™ve been unleashing it. He probably shouldâ€™ve been telling these kids to take some paint and totally fuck my shit up, but instead he had it running as smooth as a girl scout finger-painting class. Deep down, as much as I like chaos, I guess I appreciated that. And I could certainly go for a box of thin mint wafers right now.

I turned back to the canvas and drew some Roman soldiers smoking Lucky Strikes, looking bored. I put Emporio Armani logos on their breastplates. Armani actually designed modern Roman police uniforms, so it seemed kinda fitting. Plus heâ€™s an Emperor. Beside the soldiers I drew a back-shot of a couple of lovers holding hands that I dressed like Ichiro and Maki.

I sketched fast, getting down rough proportions, and then winging it with just enough detail to make it work. In the background, sitting in a chair that looked like the Popeâ€™s, I drew my version of Pontius Pilate all pimped out with gold chains and rings on every finger. Bare-chested but wearing a wolfskin coat, probably made from Romulus or Remus. I guess I should have drawn a row a bitch nipples down the seam or something but I got lazy on that one.

I added some graffiti-style bubble lettering for a tattoo across his belly that read

“Thug For Life” just like Tupac. It should have been in Latin but I didn’t feel like going back to the computer for translation, and it’s not like Pilate’s coexistence with a messianic Ultraman demanded realism anyway. Nothing in my life now demanded realism either, which was the way I liked it. Reality was shit, except for fucking and pizza.

I started splashing on paint both with brushes and cans. Clothes, skin, highlights, shading and all. I was in a nice creative flow. Once I got my basic composition down and roughed out the major focal points the actual application of the paint came so fast and easy that my hands moved like I was conducting a symphony. I was seeing five moves ahead of my next one. Like Bobby fucking Fisher. I played it up a little bit for the crowd’s sake, but not much. It really was the way I worked.

I didn’t plan anything out in advance, but the mural was unfolding as an obvious commentary on Japan’s placing more societal value on their own pop cultural iconography than the ancient religious stuff that every other culture seemed to roll with. On the surface it may seem kinda shallow on their part. But really it was a lot fresher. So what if Hello Kitty is their Virgin Mary? That shit makes people happy and the merch is unstoppable. You ever see a decent Virgin Mary lunchbox? I didn’t think so. Let alone a cute pair Nativity scene panties.

The Japanese definitely had their traditions. They just didn’t involve a thousand Hail Marys and an armada of horny priests. Instead they had samurai, ninjas, kamikazes and Tezuka. Even their blind monks knew karate and how to wield a sword, which is a helluva lot cooler than a guy whose only knife skills involved trimming foreskin from a crying infant’s knob. But I wasn’t into idealizing Japanese culture like a lot of Nipponnerds. Every society has its share of fucked-up aspects. As if whaling for research purposes wasn’t bad enough, the Japanese liked to round up dolphins and club them to death until the ocean turned crimson black. It takes a cold-blooded motherfucker to beat a warm-blooded baby dolphin in the head until it drowns in its own blood. If Atlantis hadn’t sunk the Japanese would have netted all its citizens and rolled them into sushi by now.

I looked at the smiling faces of the art-lovers behind me and wondered how many had eaten whale or dolphin. Then I thought of my grandma in Seoul’s recipe for spicy boiled dog, and I knew that nobody’s hands were clean. My mom swears she never ate any of it and even had a puppy that made it to (artificially-fattened?) adulthood before mysteriously running away. But I’m sure that they snuck it into her soup at some point and told her it was pork. Which means that some of the protein that formed me when I was a little peapod in my mom’s womb probably included dog meat somewhere along the line. That would explain why I had such impressive canine teeth. Not that any of this makes it okay. Besides, to be honest my grandma was the sort of black-hearted, illiterate bitch who would give you a big rotten-toothed grin while crushing your balls between her icy fingers. “She grew up in a different time,” my mom always said in her defense. Yeah, she grew up in a different time. So did Pol Pot. It’s a shitty excuse. Then again I knew if my grandkids grew up right and progressive they’d think of me as a savage one day too. I hope so anyway. I still eat meat for fuckssake.

The paint was barely dry and the auction hadn’t started yet and already two guys in suits and skinny ties, who I hadn’t seen until now, were negotiating with Ichiro to buy the mural. I could tell he was waving them off until the auction, but they’d probably win anyway. It was obvious they were big-time collectors, which was good

for me, good for Dom, and good for Blue Bones. Although I'd much rather one of the cool kids in the crowd bought it, but I guess even then it would be with their rich daddy's Sony money. You can't consistently deliver art to the common people unless you wanna starve. Besides that's what the graffiti is about. Everybody can own it equally. And everyone who likes it can feel like a Sandinista knowing that the cops, politicians and bluenose stiffs hate it. And all those who hate it can get their Mao on and rage about order and culture, and the evils of individualism; or whatever the fuck bugs them, which gives them a sense of purpose. They can complain about debasing a condemned cinder block castle in a corner of the city where they won't even drive, even as they make plans to fill in a pristine wetland for another beige strip mall, or cookie-cutter pastel suburb, with a bullshit name like The Commons at Marshview. But that's okay because I'll be around to tag their Venetian marble tombstones when the fat fucks are dead.

I stuck around long enough to do sketches for everyone who asked, then peeled out with the Japanese taggers before the auction even got under way. Judging by the number of paintings on the walls already marked "sold"---I counted five---it was going to be a very good night. I knew Dom would snag pics of the mural for the website, and we expected that whoever bought it would allow us to come check it out when they hung it. I hoped it would land in some yakuza Batcave that demanded I was blindfolded before being taken there. Or maybe a glass house on a cliff owned by a porn producer and his AV Idol mistress. But the reality was never that good.

Chapter Two

The Pugilists

The underground fight club turned out to be a series of contests taking place in a warehouse. It wasn't what I'd hoped. We weren't calling each other out, staging one-on-one bare-knuckle brawls, and then sharing manly hugs after being pounded like milk-fed veal. Chuck Palahniuk was not wackin' it in the corner, and no one was ranting about consumerism, or making soap from human body fat. The Japanese would never waste good fat that way. They'd use it for tempura and stir fry.

The first fights were pretty dull. All the guys had jiu jitsu and karate training and there wasn't much punching. Mostly a lot of choppy kicks to the calves before grappling around on the mat in ways that would make George Takei erect. Someone finally tapped out when a guillotine or arm lock was applied. There was little blood. No Bruce Lee or Tyler Durden, or even Batroc The Leaper. No human cockfight. I had wickeder fights with my older brothers growing up. One of my gang said that professional MMA fighter Yoshiro, who once knocked a guy out with a liver kick, was in the crowd. He pointed in the general direction of fifty guys

standing, arms folded, all wearing baseball caps, all lean, short, muscular and Asian. So who could tell? Anyway, I was munching on a snack of garlic cloves pickled in red miso, so soon I'd be able to knock out any fucker here with just my hot breath.

Things started to pick up when a couple of muay thai fighters paired off. Too dark to be Japanese, both looked like they could fit in my pants' pocket and I'd still have room for my keys. Bantam weights? Flyweights maybe. They bounced around the ring like wasabi-coated jumping beans. For the first time the crowd seemed more focused on the ring than the black market concessions. They knew something. A gong sounded and the fighters touched tape-rapped fists, and suddenly there was a violent eruption of kicks and punches. About two minutes in, a crunching right hook displaced all the saliva in the puncher's mouth and sent him falling back on the ass of his beet-red shorts. At the exact moment of impact his face looked like that famous 60's photo of the Viet Cong guy about to get shot in the temple. Black blood flowed down from the fighter's right nostril over his lips and dripped from his chin like a leaky faucet. Karo, one of my new graffiti pals, leaned into my ear and told me that some fighters had the cartilage removed from their noses to preempt what usually happens when a nose full of cartilage meets a fist full of bone. I wondered whether the offspring of generations of fighters would evolve with cartilage-less noses, and end up looking like bonobos. Or maybe no nose at all. Just two holes in the face without the flesh canopy acting as a two-car garage. Maybe a soft little awning running horizontally just to keep the rain out of their nostrils. I think there are some monkeys with that design.

The knockdown wasn't even the coolest part. You see, the guy with the runny nose got up and shook off the cobwebs. After the fish-faced ref gave him a once-over (there was no way they were stopping fights early here, even I knew that), and gestured both fighters forward again, they bounced to the center of the ring, touched knuckles, and unleashed a flurry of punches so fast that it looked like someone sped up the tape on the images entering my cornea. Then seconds before the bell, bloody-nose guy took a step back did a mid-air 360 and cracked the other guy's skull with a flying roundhouse kick that looked like some Matrix shit. The sick thud echoed in my ears, followed by the orgasmic moan of the crowd, even as the kickee crumpled to the mat like he'd been machete'd at the knees. I could almost see the blue stars, red swirls and yellow canaries circling his head. About a third of the crowd went apeshit-happy over the knockout, while the rest shook their heads and dabbed their brows with handkerchiefs.

Shinji told me that the main event would be the heavyweights. I never understood that because the little guys like the two we just saw always proved faster and more vicious than any heavyweight. With the little guys at least there was always blood and a knockout. With the heavyweights there were a few big punches and a lot of sweaty waltzes in each other's arms. At any given time one guy was resting his head softly on the shoulder of his opponent like a prom date. Not unlike a prom date with the captain of the football team, occasionally a punch or two was thrown.

The heavyweights would be fighting for purses put up by rival yakuza gangs and that he was certain some of the spectators were off-duty cops. If I were obviously gaijin, like a white German or an American soldier they wouldn't have let me be here. But in a crowded hotbox where everyone was jacked up by blood-scent and sake, I guess I looked Japanese enough. But soon I realized there was at least one other gaijin in the house, in the person of a towering black guy who strode through a crowd where no one's head was level with his shoulders. Those shoulders were wider than a car's hood, and his pecs alone were too big to squeeze into a Tokyo apartment. Suddenly this looked more like a pro boxing match than all the previous fights, as the big guy's yakuza handlers were patting him down with a washcloth and squirting water into his mouth even though he wasn't wearing any gloves

and could obviously do it himself. They treated him like a prize racehorse with their hands all over his shiny skin, massaging his shoulders and rubbing down his chest and stomach in that weird patronizing, almost sexual, way. No other man had ever touched me that way except my doctor. And even he wore latex before cupping my balls. The huge black guy had a face carved from a chunk of rock, all hard angles and jutting jawline with surface-of-the-moon pockmarks on both cheeks. His eyes were fierce blanks. His elbows and knees were ashy and pale. He must've not been lotioning religiously like the black girls I knew in school. Maybe he just prayed a lot--the knees. And played a lot of chess--the elbows.

I looked around for the big Gaijin's opponent. Who the fuck could they get to fight this guy? Yao Ming? Just looking at him was scary. The only MMA fighter I could think of big enough was the hamhock-fisted Asian Frankenstein, Hong Man Choi (no relation, smartass). Hong was the biggest organic creature to come out of Korea since Kim Jong Il's pompadour. But the guy actually had something of a career in MMA so I couldn't imagine him taking an underground gig like this until he was totally washed up. Unless maybe the yakuza rolled up a cargo plane of coin and kimchee.

A few seconds later I got my answer. Through a side-door that looked like broom closet came a massively round, Japanese guy. He waddled in slowly to grunting cheers. The sound of a thousand men clearing their throats at the same time. As he passed through the crowd, slaps on his fat back made pond ripples in his skin. I leaned over to Shinji, "This guy is a sumo wrestler, right? He's gotta be!"

Shinji nodded. He was fixated on the sumo. A minute passed and he whispered to me. "He is not only sumo but was once Ozeki. It is the highest rank a sumo can reach. A position of great honor. But disgraced. He was my favorite when I was a boy, but Japanese never truly embrace because he is gaijin."

"Gaijin? Really?" I asked. He sure looked Japanese to me. At least as Japanese as any sumo looks. Did any native athletes look less like the general populace of their country than sumo? And they don't alter their physiques with steroids, testosterone, and supplements (despite the copious bitch-tits). They just eat a shitloads of food. Which of course would make them very average in the US. Hell, I've seen whole families, including grade school kids bigger than most sumo, just grazing at the local buffet. Which is maybe why Americans never make much about how fat sumo are and instead focus on the fact that they wear thong diapers. But this dude was massive even by bloated American standards. Maybe 600 lbs.

"Yes, of course. He is American. No Japanese can grow so big." Shinji said shaking his head in disbelief. "As a sumo he is called Mikazono. You never heard him before? Not ever?"

I shook my head "Never, man. I didn't even know they allowed Americans to be sumo."

"Yes, they allow. But rare. Japanese culture is hard for American spirit. Sumo culture even more hard. Much more. Mikazono is from Hawaii. His real name is Josh."

"Josh! That guy's name is Josh?" I asked, half laughing. Shinji just nodded as we watched Josh adjust the slick topknot in his hair. That alone seemed to exhaust all his energy.

"Josh from Hawaii?" I repeated again. "Well that explains the tent-sized, floral-patterned shorts."

“What does the name Josh mean in America?” Shinji asked sincerely.

“Josh? I don’t think it means anything,” I said. “Oh wait, it means from the suburbs.” He looked confused.

“So if that’s Josh, who’s the huge black dude?” I asked.

“That is Bob Boone,” he said.

“Bob Boone,” I repeated to myself. “Is that his real name?” I asked Shinji.

“Yes, I think. It is typical American name is it?” he asked.

“Yeah I guess so. Typical American. Just like Parker Choi,” I said.

To be honest I came here to see willing combatants punch the fuck out of each other. Blood on the floor. Someone so dazed from a beating you could see the cartoon X’s over their eyes. But looking at Bob and Josh, I didn’t really want to see either of them get hurt. Actually I was afraid for Josh. Bob was built like the Great Wall, and Josh like an igloo made of jellyfish. He looked like a really chill, quarter-ton, surfer dude, and since I couldn’t imagine him having any evasive moves I was pretty sure he was about to be a punch-up meatsack. What was it Shinji had said about Josh reaching Ozeki only to be disgraced? He promised to explain later. Knowing the Japanese, this fight was just another way to further his disgrace. To rub it in. Probably to take advantage of a guy still desperate to make a living from his bulk, and thoroughly humiliate him for ever reaching Ozeki and beating up on their Japanese heroes. A bamboo vat of baby eels was brought to the center of the floor and the crowd wildly applauded the fabulous prize. Shinji assured me that there was also decent money going to the winner. Enough to buy at least one decent piece of fresh fruit in Tokyo. I felt a lot better about that because I knew two American dudes couldn’t possibly be psyched about a fucking vat of eels, no matter how long they’d been living in Japan.

The fight started slow with Josh and Bob circling each other in the ring cautiously. Bob slapped Josh on the side of the head a few times, testing the water, and then threw a big right-handed haymaker that somehow missed. Josh was lighter on his feet than he looked but mostly he just swiveled his head and walked side-to-side. Josh seemed scared of Bob’s punches, kicks, knees and elbows. Bob’s only fear was probably that Josh might fall in his direction when he knocked Josh out. Both kept their distance at first even as their respective corners yelled a steady stream of excited gibberish instructions at both of them.

Just as the crowd was getting restless and their annoyed grunts starting to sound like a large frog pond, Bob brought his leg up high and cracked Josh on the side of his round head. There was a pop-slap sound like a cane hitting a side of beef. Josh looked stunned and Bob stepped in and smacked him in the left eye with sharp right cross. Josh stumbled backwards against the ropes and clumsily tried to cover his face as Bob took a big stride forward and rained punches that alternately glanced off Josh’s arms and ears. Josh flopped forward and tried to wrestle with the towering black man, but Bob caught him with two nasty uppercuts that popped Josh’s head back. Then a crunching elbow on the top of his head landed, and the round ended with Josh resting his head against Bob’s massive shoulder like a drowsy prom date. Bob walked to his corner and stood there confidently taking squirts of water in his mouth as his handlers barked orders that probably amounted to “finish this giant slug.” Either that or “more in-ten-sity.”

Josh collapsed onto a tiny stool that amazingly didn’t crumble under his girth. Instead of

squirting water into his mouth his handlers took the tops off the plastic bottles and poured the water on him as if they were trying to keep a beached whale cool and hydrated. He was sweating and heaving and even worse the left eye, where he took a couple of shots, was already swelling shut. This was a guy whose longest sumo bouts lasted barely more than a minute and biggest cardio moment came when he threw sea salt at the other guy. Here he was fighting rounds that lasted three minutes each and getting punched and kicked in the face the whole time. Either there was gonna be a knockout soon or Josh's heart would go Hindenburg before the fight ended.

The gong signaled the start of the second round. Bob was already waiting at the center of the ring as Josh labored to jack his 600 lbs off the micro-stool. He grabbed the top rope for help, then trudged to the center slapped hands with Bob and the ref motioned them to fight. Another slow start. It looked like Bob could step forward, clock Josh a couple of good ones and drop him, but for some reason he still seemed wary. I asked Shinji if the fights were fixed. He shook his head "No," but after thinking about it another second he shrugged uncertainly. Either way Bob's kicks and punches were real enough. On the rare occasion when Josh threw one of his awkward punches it rarely caught anything but air, and had no velocity or sting behind it. And since Bob was put together like a jagged slab of granite, I couldn't imagine Josh having anything in his arsenal that could possibly hurt him.

Every now and then I saw Shinji shake his head in disgust at Josh's futility. He grew up admiring this guy as the underdog gaijin sumo, but the odds were just so stacked against the fat man in a fight like this. For one thing he wasn't a boxer. Not even close. For another, even though kicks were allowed, Josh could barely lift his feet to walk, let alone kick somebody. And finally Josh had next-to-zero stamina. This wasn't a guy who did ten miles a day of roadwork while training. He wasn't chasing chickens around a yard for agility. And if he did any jump rope there'd be reports of tremors in Osaka. Bob also had a big reach advantage so if Josh tried to get in close enough to grapple he had to wade through a barrage of stiff jabs first. And his soft face didn't seem to like that very much. Bob was an athlete. Josh was a specimen.

I chewed some yellowfin sushi as Josh tried to wrap Bob up in a hug and took a deep knee to his quivering gut instead. He flailed wildly and caught Bob with an open-handed slap to Bob's cauliflower ear. Bob responded with a straight overhand right that flattened Josh's nose, followed by two sharp left jabs. Josh tried to grapple and Bob wrapped his oak tree arms around Josh's fat waist and in a holy shit moment lifted Josh a half-foot off the ground. Bob couldn't really throw Josh or do anything to gain an advantage once he lifted him but there was a collective gasp followed by excited applause. Bob had just cranked a 600 lb man off the ground like a giant baby. I don't think Bob did it for any other reason than simply because he could.

The gong sounded. Josh had huffed, heaved, held and staggered his way through two full rounds. Fuckin' six times longer than he ever spent in a sumo ring. I guess that was a small victory in itself. His broad ass swallowed the tiny stool again and he got drenched in bottled water again. Men who were no bigger than one of his thighs barked in his ears as he struggled to catch his breath. I saw money changing hands already. A lot of people bet on this fight to be over before the second round ended. I asked Shinji if by some miracle it went the distance who would decide the winner. He pointed his chin in the direction of a trio of yakuza bosses. Still the chances of that happening seemed impossible. Josh was gassed two minutes into the first round, and it looked like it would take his entire pit crew just to crane him off his stool and shove him back to the center of the ring. Plus his left eye was nothing more than a puffy slit that must've made everything look like he was seeing it through a horizontal keyhole. Good luck seeing Bob's overhand right, or definitely those right hooks that make his

biceps look like Popeye's after a double helping of spinach lasagna. But while Josh may have had an enlarged heart, it was the heart of a warrior. Either that, or he really wanted those eels. He somehow rose again from his stool at the sound of the gong and waddled to the center of the ring to take another beating. This big baby-faced Hawaiian who once had been a god at the top of Japanese sport was now being served up as a freakishly huge gaijin punching bag in a hot industrial warehouse filled with gangsters.

During the opening minute of round three I got distracted by the sideshow of an emaciated old man who ran up to the far side of the ring and started wailing like a cracked-out kogal, and shaking what looked like a baby rattle. I didn't know whose side he was on. Shinji just shrugged and laughed. The crazy man never raised his mad-cow eyes above the level of the fighters' feet. This being Japan maybe he was driving away some invisible demon, but after a long minute he disappeared back into the crowd with some helpful assistance from a pair of yakuza strong-arms. A roar went up and I turned back to the fight, the whole right side of Josh's face was smeared with blood flowing from a deep gash on his forehead. Probably caught an elbow. Josh's left eye was now sealed shut and his right eye was obscured by his own blood. It's not like he was doing that good when he could see.

Bob fired a front kick and his heel flushed into Josh's gut. Another freeze frame as Bob's entire foot up to his ankle completely disappeared into the displaced folds of the giant's belly. It flashed through my head that if I had an actual photo of this I could turn the photo on its side in Photoshop, crop it just right and maybe multiply the field so that it would look like Bob's foot was sinking into quicksand made of human flesh. Josh had a delayed reaction to the kick. Then again everything was a delayed reaction with Josh. It was like he was operating on another plane than the rest of us. Maybe he was moving at such incredible speed he only appeared to be moving so fucking slow? Maybe he could catch a bullet between his teeth, or a fly by the wings, or outrun Sea Biscuit in his bare feet? Or not. Bob had kicked him with such force that the shot reverberated through multiple layers of fat and struck something that really hurt Josh. Like an internal organ. For a second Josh looked completely unfazed. As I said, delayed reaction. Then like a tree toppling he bent in half but stayed on his feet. With his hands carelessly resting on his knees everyone in the building could see it coming. Everyone except for Josh, of course. But I'm pretty sure he sensed it, and felt the whoosh of air as Bob cracked a brutal knee into his broad forehead. With clinical precision Bob had struck Josh squarely on the gaping cut above his right eye. Between rounds Josh's handlers had stemmed the bleeding with big gobs of salve. But as Bob's knee connected a fine spray of blood, like mist from an aerosol can, crossed over the ropes and did a subtle Jackson Pollock number on the wifebeater of a hot prosty standing ringside. The expected knockout was eminent. Slackjawed look? Check! Drunken elephant demeanor? Check! Eyes rolled back in the head? Well, impossible to tell under the feast of blood and swelling. But at the very least Josh's vision was completely contaminated. He was laying across the ropes as if they were his own private hammock. I expected them to unravel and explode at any moment. If the ref had a sliver of human decency he would have stopped the fight right then, but the whole place went silent with the anticipation of what was to come. It looked like super slo-mo as Bob reared back his right arm. It may as well have been a guillotine for all the damage it was about to do to Josh's swollen lump of a head. Before the punch even landed I had a vision of the sheer force blasting every strip of flesh from Josh's face, manga-style, sending fatty detritus flying into the gasping crowd and leaving nothing but a bleached white skull wobbling around on a giant directionless body. But a funny thing happened on the way to the meat grinder. Whether by his own accord or simply the need to buckle over again to catch his breath and lick his internal wounds, Josh ducked! Yes, he fucking ducked and covered, just as a hydrogen fist-bomb exploded right where his head was bobbing a nanosecond before. Bob's sure-to-knock-Josh's-head-off-haymaker was so wild, so unrestrained, so out of control with the certainty that it would not be ducked, dodged

nor deflected, that when it struck nothing but the warm exhaust of the overheated crowd, Bob's own frame lunged forward behind it. Completely off-balance and turned to the side, Bob fell through the gaping hole between the top and second rope. Josh's huge ass was still resting on the second rope essentially creating a black hole on the fringe of the ring that Bob got sucked into. Bob tumbled forward behind the force of his own punch and somersaulted head over heels into the crowd. Remember the faces of the Japanese extras when Mothra was goose-stepping all over Tokyo? All I saw were gaping maws of horror as Bob squashed half a dozen people ringside and the ensuing domino effect took out dozens more. The unscathed surged to the corners of the ring to see the carnage, and maybe to see if Bob had broken his back. Bob just laid there for a minute resting on top of unlucky members of the crowd who looked just as hopeless as anyone trapped under earthquake rubble. Waiting to inhale.

A stone colossus come to life, Bob gathered himself and slowly rose to his feet, again towering over the dwarfish toppled bodies. If only I could've viewed this scene from the rafters. It must've looked like someone cut a crop circle out of the spectators. But the whole time Bob was human-bowling, Josh was folded over in the ring too exhausted to monitor Bob's regress. Hands on his knees, Josh was heaving in those enormous breaths that made his entire body ripple. He must've been trying to gather a second, third, and fourth wind before Bob made his way back in the ring. As surprising as the duck and cover had been, it only delayed the inevitable. Josh was still sightless, and in way over his head against a guy who was taller, stronger, and a fuckuvalot more athletic. Actually if Bob's punch had landed it might have been Josh flying into the crowd and definitely people would have been killed. As Bob climbed his way back into the ring, it was sure bet the next punch, kick or elbow wouldn't miss. Shinji caught my eye and gave another shrug. I think everyone was hoping for a quick and merciful end. Besides I was ready for a sit-down meal and lots of sake.

Josh was dripping sweat like pineapple fountain. The sweat was diluting the blood on the side of his face as if a clean mountain stream had intersected a muddy polluted river. As they touched taped knuckles, Bob looked fresh and ready to kill. Determined not to miss again, he took aim at a far easier target than Josh's swollen head, itself a pretty ripe target, and cranked a wicked uppercut to the round man's belly. Josh lumbered backward and plopped against the ropes again. It sure as hell didn't look like it, but I guess he had Bob exactly where he wanted him. As Bob deliberately waded in for the kill, Josh took another quivering breath and launched a balls-out, last-ditch, what-have-I-got-to-lose-but-an-exploding-heart sumo charge worthy of the greatest Ozeki. Finally looking more like charging rhino than a hungry hippo, he bum-rushed Bob. First disorienting him with a wicked sumo clutch to the windpipe. Then grabbing Bob around the waist using his momentum to pin him against the ropes. Bob bounced off, spun around, and with Josh still clinging to him lost his footing and fell backwards. When Josh collapsed on top of him with all of his weight you could hear the air rocket out of Bob's lungs, the same as a punctured truck tire. Bob's mouth popped open. I'd had the wind knocked out of me when I fell wrong on a football once in middle school, and no matter how hard you try to catch your breath right away it takes several scary seconds to kick in. And unlike Bob I didn't have a 600-lb Hawaiian dude humping me. It was water-boarding but with a lard typhoon in place of the water.

The crowd was actually roaring now, and for a second as Bob tried to catch his breath his dead eyes flashed real panic. But I guess fighter's instinct kicks in faster than basic survival instinct because, mouth still open begging for a fresh hit of oxygen, Bob started using Josh's head as a floating punching bag. He was having to short-arm it because Josh smartly cradled his head into Bob's burly and curly chest to protect himself (this is where pro athletes are not like you and me because every time I see shit like this I can't imagine

having some other dude rub his flop sweat all over my face without throwing up on him). Bob's right bicep flexed as if a cantaloupe had been slipped under his skin, and he pummeled Josh's head which seemed to be in a constant state of swelling since the fight began. It was like watching an accelerated video of a flower blooming. But even as he was getting hammered by a bare-fisted man, Josh just laid there doing a horizontal rope-a-dope. A beached whale. Probably a bad idea because the Japanese still like to eat whale and Josh's bloated frame could probably feed the whole crowd. He looked unconscious except every now and then his body trembled as he took another huge breath in between having his head thumped.

Despite the beating, and an inevitable brain-damaged future, it was obvious that Josh was just resting like a sleeping giant and Bob was his pillow. His big, black, angry, face-punching pillow. But again something weird happened. Apparently rested, Josh lifted his own massive right arm, which compared to Bob's oak tree limbs, looked like the arm of a morbidly obese Polish grandma, and cracked his elbow, one of the few hard parts of his exterior, down on Bob's noggin. Then he did it again and again and again—and yeah, one more time. The stunned crowd roared. I feared that any minute Bob's head would roll off into the crowd, and break open on the floor. But maybe I was thinking like an American, while the rest of the crowd was thinking “Mmm, brains.” Josh's counterattack forced Bob to actually protect his own face for once. He may also have been covering his eyes from the torrential sweat still pouring from Josh's brow. Watching Josh labor just to gather another huge breath, I figured that even while laying on the mat he didn't have much stamina left. Five punches in a row for him was like running a marathon for me and you. The round was gonna end soon and once they were both back on their feet Bob would beat Josh's head until it became a Damien Hirst meat sculpture.

“Replacing the head of a 600 lb man with twenty pounds of fresh ground beef? What a delightful post-modernist commentary on the ties of human obesity to institutionalized carnivorous culture. I'm positively erect from this display of potently plump pomposity from the cow-halving bad boy of the British isles,” writes Robert Cavendish Hughes of the *Shag You Daily Standard*.

But this was the night of a thousand (and three) surprises. So with a skinny minute left in the round, Josh somehow reared up the whole top half of his body and for a frozen moment his upper torso levitated above Bob. The place went completely silent as everyone, including Bob, stopped breathing. The difference was that in a fraction of a second Bob wasn't going to be able to inhale as easily as the rest of us. Or at all really. Josh came crashing down, a fat fucking zeppelin in rapid descent. In the same motion he descended on Bob's throat with his right forearm and all 450-lbs of mass that existed above his waist (I'm generously allotting the other one-fifty to his legs and package). Bob's eyes bulged with an effect that looked like a Chuck Jones animation cel. An undulating giant slug, Josh scooted his quadruple-wide ass forward to get more leverage and put all of his weight behind this final gambit. I tried to imagine balancing a refrigerator on my Adam's Apple. Or at least a quarter-ton bean bag chair. Was I the only one actually worried for Bob? No, Josh was worried too. Even in the heat of the moment. Even huffing and puffing, his face looking as if it had been stung by a shoal of box jellyfish, Josh swiveled his head around desperately, wondering if the ref or Bob's handlers were going to intervene before Bob's head snapped off. For whatever reason Bob wasn't tapping out. I don't think his arms were receiving the proper commands from his oxygen-deprived brain. The ref leaned over Josh's shoulder to

get a better look, and everyone, especially Josh waited for a signal that the fight was over, but still nothing. Not only had Bob's eyes rolled back in his head, but his tongue was hanging from the side of his mouth like the corpse of an expired whelk. Finally all the tension went out of Bob's neck and his head flopped to one side. He was out cold. Was he dead? Josh was the only one in any position to feel a pulse. But having gone through most of the fight with all the passivity and temperament of Buddhist monk, at last the big man flared with anger as he barked something in Japanese.

Josh rose to his feet with maximum effort, and glared at the paralyzed ref as best he could through puffy, bloodied eyes. What the fuck man, call the fight! By now the ref was paying less attention to Bob's condition or even to Josh's protest than to the trio of yakuza bosses in the crowd. The invisible leash became apparent. The ref couldn't do a damned thing without a Roman emperor-style thumbs-up or down from the gangsters. I guess someone gave him the high-sign because the ref finally waved his arms over Bob officially ending the fight. In truth it probably was only a few seconds, but it seemed like an eternity compared to American fights where referees dive to protect prone bodies with the same speed as heroes on hand grenades. On cue Bob sat up rigor mortis straight, and his handlers bounded into the ring to drape wet towels over his head. I watched as Josh ambled back to his corner and collapsed on the tiny wooden stool one last time. Who was more relieved the fight was over? Josh's heart, or that fucking tiny wooden stool? It must've been forged of sacred unbreakable wood from a Sakaki tree blessed by Shinto priests. I realized Josh's expression had remained exactly the same from the start of the fight to its conclusion. There was something very sympathetic and endearing about the guy. Both of them actually. Bob may have looked tough but he never showed even a whiff of arrogance or assholery. He clearly didn't take much bully joy from several minutes of fisting Josh's ear-hole.

I realized that the main event had somehow actually lived up to its billing and was the best battle of monsters to take place in Tokyo since 'well you know.

Me and Shinji weren't in the mood to stick around for the ceremonial presentation of the vat of eels, crock pot of natto, tube of sea salt, and whatever disgusting parting gifts they handed out after the match to a pair of gaijin. We'd both worked up a real appetite watching fat dudes bleed. It was yakitori time.

Chapter Three

The Man Who Questions The Sky

Ramen joints in Japan are extraordinary. After all this is a country that created art out of tuna, and a delicacy out of a fish fatal to humans, while the best America could do was "Sorry, Charlie" and Mrs. Paul's fish sticks. So why not noodles? Get that image of hot tap water over dehydrated carbs with a near toxic dose of sodium and a little plastic container, out of your head. Yeah that shit is great on a budget. But in Japan you can get ramen combined with any meat or vegetable you can think of in a broth so addictive you'll want to run it through an IV drip bag permanently inserted in your cheek.

Shinji, Karo, Koji, Red Hand, and another guy (who needed a suitable alias cause I couldn't pronounce his real name), all parked at a table and ordered multiple courses of food. A lot of these places are built like a narrow hallway with nothing more than a stove, a counter and a row of hard wooden stools. But this place was much bigger and had wooden tables and hard chairs instead. Comfort is a relative term in Japan. They still sleep on mats on the floor after all.

It was only a few minutes before a deep bowl was placed in front of my face. It had a fistful of noodles swimming in pork broth with a half of boiled egg and a strip of pork. I liked what they did with the pork strip. Most places just boil it pink, but here they dropped it on the grill to give it a nice char. I could've done without the egg. The requisite UFO in the bowl was a white oval thing with a bright pink swirl floating around that looked like a fucking piece of candy. I'd seen it in New York once before and it freaked me out; like the cooks put it in my bowl as a prank. I learned that it was actually a processed piece of fish with a texture not so different from the boiled egg.

Even after midnight huge pots were on the back burners boiling down the bones of hooved and cloven-hooved animals. And creatures removed of scales and feathers. If this were China I'd have expected some house pets in the broth as well. I watched one of the cooks haul out three big fish heads one at a time and stuff them in a new pot. One of the fish had really thick lips, like it had had one too many collagen injections. Shinji pointed in the direction I was looking.

"They are starting on a new broth for the breakfast people."

He explained that the longer the stock reduced the more intense the flavor. This one would have a good five or six hours to bubble and meditate before being slurped down.

My new pals called themselves the ID Crew. Shinji explained that it stood for *itsu/dare* which translated to *when/who* in English.

"Because after a spot is fresh tagged the first question people ask is: 'When this happened?' The second question is: 'Who did this?' So we are the Itsu Dare Crew,

but we go ID for short. ID like identification.â€•

â€œYeah, yeah I get it,â€• I said over the slurps of the rest of the crew, and in between my own.

They were anxious to talk graffiti techniques and strategies. Conquests and failures. Goals and wild dreams. Shinjiâ€™s was to tag the Taj Mahal with the Hindu elephant god Ganesh, which he thought the Indians might leave intact if he kept it traditional. I was pretty sure heâ€™d be shot on sight. Koji wanted to wheatpaste the Great Wall with a series of life-sized door photos from a variety of world architectural styles. I was pretty sure heâ€™d also be shot on sight. Karo wanted to do a massive sand mandala using truckloads of colored sand in the Sahara, big enough to be seen from space. Heâ€™d arrange for his government to take satellite photos before the desert winds wiped out his piece in the same way a wave washes away a sand castle. Then heâ€™d sell prints of the photos. I told him heâ€™d better hurry before Christo got wind of the idea. Heâ€™d never heard of Christo. Karoâ€™s idea was good (and potentially profitable even) but Red Hand topped it. He wanted to paint the Jokerâ€™s face on the corpse of former VP Cheney (the fact that dick, Dick, was finally dead didnâ€™t make him any more sympathetic, it just meant we couldnâ€™t drag him kicking and screaming through the streets and hang him by his toes from the Statue of Liberty with piano wire). Of course youâ€™d have to break into the assholeâ€™s mausoleum to tag him; and just like he spent his life, it seemed Cheney was spending death in an undisclosed location. Well his physical body anyway. His soul was of course, in hell. Godspeed Red Hand.

When tagging, the ID Crew usually wore baseball caps or even surgical masks so they couldnâ€™t be easily identified by street security cameras. Plus the surgical masks are often worn by people with colds in Japan, so the taggers didnâ€™t look too suspicious wearing them. Personally, I still think the best way to be inconspicuous, is to be as conspicuous as possible. It takes elephant balls, but wear a day-glo orange vest and headphones and take frequent smoke breaks as you paint in the middle of a weekday, and youâ€™ll go completely unnoticed. Unless, of course, you donâ€™t.

The ID Crewâ€™s best story was Karoâ€™s. He understood English better than he spoke it and although we could talk, he turned to Shinji to explain things that required more than a short, broken sentence. Almost two years ago Karo stenciled the silhouette of a nude woman against the mountain face of a cliff under a waterfall. So in the right light, through the veil of water, it sometimes looked like a real person bathing. Of course it was discovered, but locals decided it was an ancestral spirit (apparently obsessed with cleanliness, like an OCD Aphrodite with rice and beans hips) and it was never removed. Shinji explained that although Japanese girls were hot they werenâ€™t voluptuous enough to give Karo the curves he needed for a female silhouette in profile. He couldâ€™ve went with the exaggerated, tiny-head, huge-tits, anime prototype. Instead he used the proportions of a Brazilian girl he saw in photos from Rioâ€™s carnival. Karo made his index finger erect to show me the typical Japanese physique.

I used both hands to make a round shape and said â€œthe typical American physique.â€• Everyone laughed.

Red Hand asked with some concern â€œIs just pussy or whole body?â€•

â€œBoth!â€• I said. Everyone laughed more. Like holding their bellies, sliding off their chairs, sake-fueled, laughter.

Karo said the hardest part of the job was keeping the paint from running because of the

constant mist off the waterfall. He and a friend patted down a six-foot section of wall and used a battery powered fan to keep things as dry as possible so his beautiful girl didn't end up all jagged and melty. The few spots where the paint ran actually looked like water dripping from her body, so it worked out perfectly. Karo smiled wide. He said something in Japanese to Shinji and punctuated it with the universal hand signal for jerking off, while looking at me. Everybody laughed including me, even though I wasn't sure what he was trying to tell me. Was it a commentary on my art? I was playing it safe in a gallery while he was painting the Japanese countryside black and nude. Or was a *happy ending* traditional after ramen here?

Shinji translated that although the stencil was merely a solid black silhouette thrown up in the countryside, the rumor was that teenage boys, and even salarymen with access to very fine J-porn, trekked to the waterfall to masturbate over his figure. Some local taggers even nicknamed the place Bukakke Falls because so much man-seed got dumped in the water below. The joke was, if you drank the water you'd get pregnant. Or that it was the only saltwater pond in the mountains.

The best thing about graffiti is seeing, or at least hearing the public reaction. Taggers are used to having their work trashed after a few days, and always being hated on; so for Karo's piece to not only be preserved and revered by locals but also to be a Mecca for onani purists? Well let's just say everyone at the table envied Karo and were already plotting their own ways to turn-on an unsuspecting and pervy populace. Yet who could do it so subtly, or in such a flawless location? This was the subject of much debate. For my part I wanted to do the obvious, and unsubtle, by drawing giant hairy cunt lips around the mouth of a freeway tunnel in a major urban area. But the logistics would be pretty complicated for something so big and illegal. And if I got caught, the bluenoses would want me hung or sent to Gitmo.

Red Hand rightly pointed out that the real beauty of Karo's waterfall nude wasn't the execution or even the concept but that he had created something that added a new layer of mythology for the bored locals. That not only did they not scrub it off, but they embraced it. They loved it. They gave it spiritual implications. Karo promised to show it to me the next time I was back in Japan.

There was so much talk, laughs, and drink that no one had finished the first bowl of ramen, when jaws dropped. A pair of huge samurai warriors rolled through the doors accompanied only by a wrinkly old lady in a silver kimono. It was Bob and Josh. The same two man-mountains we'd watched pummel each other an hour before. It was another minute before I realized the wrinkly old lady was in fact the crazy-eyed man with the baby rattle from ringside. All you needed to know about the difference in Bob's and Josh's physiques, is that Bob had to do a deep knee-bend to pass through a door that brushed against both sides of Josh's body as he squeezed through. Japanese doorways are designed for small people. For Japanese people.

In a strange way it was like watching the rock band you'd just seen in concert wander into an IHOP. There's that removal of the stage that creates distance, and suddenly heroes walk among you. And eat pancakes. Or in this case what was sure to be swimming pool-sized portions of ramen.

The difference between fighters and rock stars after the show was that you couldn't see any residue of the concert on a musician's face. Maybe some fatigue and a minor post-show crackpipe burn. Or a used condom stuck to the heel of a boot. Then again the great ones always looked like that. But the residue of the Bob and Josh performance was all over their faces. Or at least all over Josh's face. Bob's dark skin showed a few reddish

splotches on the exposed part of his neck above the collar bone, but otherwise he was no worse for the wear. He sure as hell didn't look like the loser of the fight. Josh, on the other hand, had a face that looked like John Belushi's filled with mashed potatoes, and stained with blackberry juice.

Shinji popped up and ran over to them speaking hurried Japanese before he caught himself and reverted to slower English with a lot of hand gestures. Both big guys and baby rattle man strolled over to the table and agreed to join us for some late-night gluttony. The table was big enough but we pulled up a few extra chairs, and for some reason Red Hand who was sitting to my right moved over one spot and planted a chair beside me which was quickly filled by Baby Rattle's crazy ass. He grinned at me with a mouthful of teeth the same color as Homer Simpson's skin, and then he pointed at my bowl of ramen and shook his rattle over it. I didn't see any demons fly out of my bowl, but I looked at my soup to see if any dirt had fallen in.

Parker, this is Mr. Bob Boone, and this is Mr. Josh. Shinji said by way of introductions. Josh's Samoan surname was now the second unpronounceable name at the table. His vision was still impaired although it looked like salve applied to his right eye had taken the swelling down a notch. Still he had groped his way through the door and followed Bob's lead like a blind man. The weird thing about professional fighters was that they could beat each others brains out and as soon as the bell rings, smile through the pain and hug. I mean I get the shared sense of struggle. The mutual respect for a fellow warrior. It's like fatally wounding your enemy in war but as you stand over his dying body, agreeing to mail his wedding ring and final love letter back to his wife. I get it. It's like being a good sport in a game of life or death. Or at least a match fought *to the pain*. Still if somebody punches me in the nose and tries to bust my spleen, I hold a grudge. I don't wanna eat dinner with them. At least not until the swelling goes down and my jaw stops clicking. And then only if they're paying. I half-stood up as both guys reached out to shake my hand. Bob's hand was a calloused cinder block. Josh's was warm pizza dough. When he sat down Josh put on a pair of 70's-style Ray-Bans with huge lenses that covered the top portion of his meaty face. They didn't make shades that were double-wide so the arms of his glasses pressed into his flesh so deeply that they were lost between the valleys of fat. Somehow he looked both totally cool and ridiculous at the same time. It was hard to believe he could see anything through the swollen slits of his eyes. Fortunately he seemed to know the menu by heart and rattled off a sumo-sized order for the waitress. Josh's voice had a soft Hawaiian lilt to it when he ordered. But he still sounded less like Don Ho than a surfing Snoop Dogg in need of an oxygen mask. Bob's voice was exactly what you'd expect. Not an embarrassing Tyson squeak, but a rumble somewhere between low cello notes and The Iron Giant. As far as I could tell he spoke good Japanese too. As soon as he gave his order, Bob headed off to the bathroom, and Josh appeared to take a catnap before his food arrived, so it was strangely quiet for the first few minutes after their arrival. The Japanese gang focused on their bowls while nodding and smiling at Josh, who to be truthful no one was sure was awake.

Thankfully Baby Rattle didn't say much, which was a surprise because he looked like a gabber. He gawked at me as I picked at the chunky bits of my soup in that uncomfortable way you eat when other people at your table haven't gotten their food yet. His staring and rictus grin was making it worse so I made the mistake of asking Shinji to ask him about his rattle. A solid five minutes of explanation in Japanese from Baby Rattle followed. I tried to keep eating, but although Shinji was acting as my translator, Baby Rattle was talking directly to me in a voice like a transvestite cobra. I had no idea what the fuck he was saying but I had to at least look at him some of the time while he was talking. Aside from noticing the obvious; that his face was a map of wrinkles that made no sense and his weird sloped nose seemed to point to his upper lip; I also couldn't take my eyes off a silver glint between two of his front

incisors. For a split second I thought he had a cap except that didn't register because it didn't cover the whole tooth. It wasn't a mercury filling either. Finally I saw it right and made sense of it. The guy was talking with what I am sure was the silvery tail of some tiny fish stuck between his teeth. He must've snacked on some raw anchovies or something while watching the fight. Who knows how many days it would remain stuck there since brushing and flossing would never be high on this guy's agenda? When Baby Rattle finally shut up, Shinji explained that the rattle was actually a hollowed out wooden penis carving from the Japanese fertility festival. Just then Bob walked up and bent down to point at the rattle and rumbled "that rattlesnake sound actually comes from dehydrated mongoose testicles stored in the wooden sac."

As disturbing as Baby Rattle's voice was, I could listen to Bob talk all day.

"I love the irony, that although it sounds like a rattlesnake, it actually comes from a snake's mortal enemy the mongoose," Bob said as he sat back down. "Of course, they don't have rattlers here in Japan. But they have other kinds of vipers."

Actually the mongoose's mortal enemy was the cobra. Baby Rattle hissed like a cobra and carried a rattle around with dried mongoose balls inside. What better way to conquer the fear of your enemy than to castrate it?

Shinji was still translating remnants of Baby Rattle's blather.

"He also say you have the good posture" Shinji said with a slight shrug of the shoulders. "And your family come from Korean nobility."

It was a weird thing to say. The only thing my parents were king and queen of was eating bacon. And I've never been known for my posture. Then I realized I'd been craning my neck upwards the whole time Baby Rattle was talking in my direction. I was trying to stay above the green nimbus of his breath which smelled of dead possum and spoiled tofu.

I think we were all relieved when a bowl was placed in front of Baby Rattle and instead of talking he started slurping very loudly. Joined by the synchronized chorus of slurps now coming from Bob and Josh and some of the other guys, it was like audio from a Rocco Siffredi orgy scene. As soon as the two giants polished off their first bowls more steaming cauldrons of ramen were placed in front of them. Some with clear broth, some greenish, some reddish. All had loads of stuff from veggies to chunks of meat and unidentifiable things, sometimes with eyes, protruding and draped with noodles. A vinegary mist engulfed the table. Halfway through his second huge bowl, Bob pointed at Baby Rattle who had finished eating and was now sitting comatose, a distended belly atop his scrawny frame.

"Tarahono has been my spiritual advisor for the past year," Bob said to no one in particular. *

What happens when a transgressive Korean-American street artist is legitimized by his rapid ascension to the fine art world, and the money starts rolling in? Well he can still rob you blind and paint a pornographic mural on the wall of your office building. No amount of success can domesticate Parker Choi. As his star rises in the fine arts world, Parker takes on a gallery show in Tokyo. Soon he's doing his best to ravage this vibrant new playground. Japan will never be the same, and neither will

Parker.

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