

Right Now

The sign said, “No Right Turn from 3:00 pm to 6:00 pm.” She glanced at her watch and saw that it was five minutes before three.

“Good, I’ll just cut through here and save a few minutes on the way to class,” she said to herself. She waited for one, two, then three cars to pass. The fourth car had straggled and left a gap. She cut in front and into the narrow side street lined with small, open faced shops spilling dry-goods and produce into the sidewalk.

As she straightened the wheel, a tiny figure stepped in front of her dressed as a policeman and pointed a short white stick with three red stripes at her. She jammed on the brakes, tilting the small red car forward slightly as she stopped short of making contact with the diminutive officer. She noticed his graying hair, crinkles alongside his eyes, and his gold tooth. He looked to be about 45 or 50 years old.

“Now what?” she said aloud, rolling down the window.

“Please move to the curb and park your car,” the policeman said in the local dialect of Japanese.

“Why?” she answered, mimicking his accent, “I’m in a hurry and you’re in my way.”

“You’re a foreigner,” he replied in amazement, “why are you speaking in Japanese?”

“Because you’re speaking in Japanese and I’m trying to be polite,” she answered, “would you rather we speak in English?”

“No, it’s too much trouble to speak in English,” he retorted. She guessed he probably knew only a few phrases in poorly accented English but would never admit it, especially not to a woman. She drove the car to the curb on the left-hand side of the street.

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“You’re a foreigner,” he repeated, coming to the right side of the car and stopping at the driver’s window “where are you from?”

“Yokohama,” she replied, “I’m just down in Yokosuka to take a class at the university. You’re making me late. Why did you stop me?”

“You made an illegal turn,” he said, “where are your parents from?”

“From Yokosuka, but they live in Yokohama now,” she said, “and I didn’t make an illegal turn, it isn’t three o’clock yet.”

He pushed his left sleeve up to expose his government issue wristwatch and held his arm out to his side, showing her the watch face. Pointing to it he said, “Yes, it is three o’clock.”

“Maybe it is now,” she retorted, “but it wasn’t when I made the turn.”

“Are you a policeman?” he asked, arching his eyebrows.

“No,” she replied, “what’s that got to do with...”

“I am a policeman,” he answered in a low, officious growl, trying hard to imitate Toshiro Mifune, the actor, “and I say it was already three o’clock when you turned. I was watching you.”

“Well you are mistaken,” she said evenly, and then, in English, she mockingly warned, “Don’t make me get out of this car.”

“Okay, get out of the car,” he said in Japanese, misunderstanding, “and please show me your driver’s license and registration.”

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She opened the door and stepped into the street. Nearly six feet tall in heels, her willowy figure towered over the five-foot three-inch policeman. The low afternoon sun at her back emphasized her long, flowing, chestnut hair. Her shadow completely engulfed him.

Now, Japanese men in general are often intimidated by foreign women, but this confident, statuesque beauty nearly overwhelmed him. Involuntarily, he took a step backward. He drew himself up to his full height, puffed his chest out, and stood a little on his tiptoes, struggling not to show his consternation.

He took her documents and went to his nearby motorbike. It was not a motorcycle that the highway patrol might ride up and down the freeways, but a 90cc putt-putt that housewives rode to market, except that it was painted black and white and had a blue light on a pole just behind the seat.

“Attention, K-Mart shoppers,” went through her mind and she suppressed a smile. The last thing she wanted to do was to laugh or do anything to appear not to take this lawman seriously.

“Lord knows,” she thought, “he takes himself seriously enough.”

Just then a clock tower down the block chimed the hour: three bells spaced a few seconds apart. The policeman stole a glance at her and quickly turned away, tucked his wand under his left armpit, and busied himself with his forms on a small clipboard he took from his motorbike’s black plastic saddlebag.

“I can’t read your name,” he said finally, turning to her with her driver’s license. He was determined to put this woman on the defensive, somehow.

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“In English it’s Luanne Smith, in Japanese, Ruanne Su-missu,” she replied smugly. Let him deal with that.

“I knew you were a foreigner; you have a foreign name; why do you speak Japanese?” he asked again, this time shaking his pen at her.

“I speak Japanese because you are speaking Japanese, would you rather we speak in Spanish or French?” she asked.

“Where did you learn to speak Japanese? I can’t understand most of what you say,” he answered. She knew her Japanese was flawless; she had grown up playing with her Japanese cousins in this area and, at 22-years old, knew several dialects and accents. She had worked in retail sales in Kyoto and Tokyo and was generally treated as Japanese in work situations. Social situations constantly reminded her that she was a foreigner.

“I learned to speak Japanese here, in Yokosuka, the same as you,” she said, “is there a problem with my license? I’d really like to get to my class.”

He handed her papers back to her and motioned her to return to her car.

“Just a moment, I’ll stop the traffic so you can turn around. You’re free to go but go back the way you came and the next time, read the signs and obey all traffic rules,” he said.

“You mean I can’t go through after all this?” she asked, “you’re deliberately making me late. I’m making a note of your badge number. I’ll report this to your station house.”

As she closed her car door and started the engine, he came up to the window.

“If I let you go through, everyone will want to go through,” he said in a conciliatory tone, “then what would happen? There would be chaos and traffic jam. No, you’ll have to go back. And be sure to turn left at the corner; it’s past three o’clock, after all.”

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“You...,” she started to say something really vulgar to him but thought better of it. She didn’t want a ticket and it looked as though he wasn’t going to write one. She smiled sweetly, tilting her head slightly as she had seen countless Japanese women do when placating a man. She actually fluttered her eyelashes. He turned and blocked two approaching cars, holding them in place with his wand of authority while she turned her car around in the tiny street. Just as she was ready to proceed, he came to her window again.

“If I could give you a word of advice,” he said to her in a fatherly voice.

“And what would that be,” she said, continuing to smile at him.

“If you talk to men that way, you’ll never find a husband,” he said.

She snapped the car into gear, popped the clutch, and shot to the corner, deliberately crossing traffic and making a right-hand turn.