The American Wife sits on the floor in front of a fireplace. The flickering light from an electric yule log, left there all year round, plays across the sweaty sheen of her large, pale face. Legs tucked, toes curling nervously in a brand-new pink shag rug from Wal-Mart, she is leaning forward on one arm, perfectly still. Her lips are pursed. Her husband faces her, his mouth drawn taut, ready, inches from hers. They wait.

"Takagi!"

"Hai!"

"Chotto . . . can you please tell the wife not to stare like that! It is creepy. It is not romantic at all."

"Hai . . . Excuse me, Mrs. Flowers . . . ?"

Without turning her face, the wife glances sideways toward me.

"The director, Mr. Oda, was wondering, do you think you could close your eyes for this scene, just as your husband comes in close to kiss you?"

"Okay," grunts Suzie Flowers. Her jaw remains motionless, but she can't keep her head from nodding ever so slightly.

The cameraman, eye pressed to the finder, groans in exasperation.

"Takagi, tell her not to move!" he says.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Flowers, but I have to ask you once again not to move your head . . . ?"

"Muri desu yo," the cameraman tells Oda. *"It's impossible. We*

can't go in any closer than this. Her face is all shiny and blotched. She looks ugly."

"Takagi!"

"Hai!"

"Ask her if she has any makeup she can use to cover up her unattractive skin!"

"Uh . . . Mrs. Flowers? Mr. Oda is asking if you happen to have any foundation? We are having a bit of a problem with the camera, and there's this one little area . . . It's just for the close-up."

"Should I go and get it?" Suzie asks, her jaw still frozen.

"She has makeup. Do you want her to go and get it?"

"Baka . . . Don't be stupid. I don't want her to move. Ask her where it is, and you get it!"

"Uh, Mrs. Flowers? Do you think you could tell me where it is? So I could get it for you?"

Suzie nods. "Do you know in my bedroom?" she says through her teeth. "The dresser? The one next to the mirror on the wall on the left side as you—"

"She's moving!" moans the cameraman, sitting back in disgust.

"Forget it!" Oda barks at me. He turns to the cameraman. *"Sorry, Suzuki-san. Listen, just widen the frame out a bit and let's shoot it."*

". . . in the top right-hand drawer, underneath—"

"Uh, Mrs. Flowers, that's okay. Actually, we're just going to shoot. . . ."

"Roll camera—and five, four, three . . ." Oda slaps me on the shoulder.

"Action!" I call out.

Suzie squeezes her eyes shut. Like a projectile released from a catapult, Fred Flowers' head lurches forward for the kiss—too fast—and he bangs his teeth hard against his wife's upper lip. Her eyes pop open.

"Ouch!" cries Suzie.

"Cut!" cries Oda.

"Tape change!" says the video engineer.

Oda shakes his head, disgusted, and walks away.

"I think my lip is bleeding," whimpers Suzie.

"This is stupid," growls Fred.

"Okay," I say soothingly. "Why don't we all relax for a bit, just take a little breather while the cameraman changes tape."

"What is this, anyway?" says Fred, standing and stretching his legs. "Is this the beginning? Is this how the show is going to start?"

"No, honey," explains Suzie. "Don't you remember? This is the last scene. Of the whole program."

"Well, if this is the end, how come you're shooting it first?"

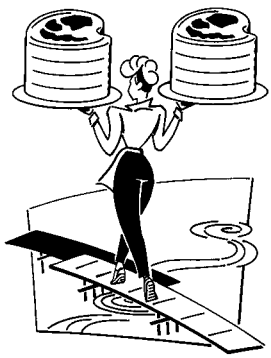
"Well, Fred," I explain patiently. "In TV, sometimes you have to shoot the endings first."

"Takagi!"

"Hai!" I answer, gently easing Suzie and Fred Flowers back down onto the rug.

"Get them into position. We're ready to go."

THE SPROUTING MONTH



SHŌNAGON

Pleasing Things

Someone has torn up a letter and thrown it away. Picking up the pieces, one finds that many of them can be fitted together.

JANE

"Meat is the Message."

I wrote these words just over a year ago, sitting right here in my tenement apartment in the East Village of New York City in the middle of the worst snowstorm of the season, or maybe it was the century—on TV, everything's got to be the worst of something, and after a while you stop paying attention. Especially that year. It was January 1991, the first month of the first year of the last decade of the millennium. President Bush had just launched Desert Storm, the most massive air bombardment and land offensive since World War II. The boiler in my building had blown, my apartment was freezing, and I couldn't complain to the landlord because my rent was overdue. I had just defaulted to a vegetarian diet of cabbage and rice because I couldn't find a job. Politics and weather aside, the rest was fine. I mean, I was doing the starving artist thing on purpose: I wanted to be a documentary filmmaker, but who could find work in a climate like this?

When the phone rang at two in the morning, I didn't bother to answer. It was unlikely to be a job offer at that hour, and I had just gotten into bed and was lying there, rigid, trying to relax against the icy sheets long enough to fall asleep. I didn't want to lose what little body heat I'd already invested,

so I let the answering machine pick up—isn't that what they are for? But then I recognized the voice. It was Kato, my old boss at the TV production company in Tokyo where I had gotten my first job, translating English sound bites into pithy Japanese subtitles. Now, he said, he had a new program and could use my help. I threw back the covers and dived for the receiver. After a brief conversation, we hung up. I wrapped myself in blankets, huddled over my computer keyboard, and, blowing on my fingers to keep them warm, wrote the following:

My American Wife!

> Meat is the Message. Each weekly half-hour episode of *My American Wife!* must culminate in the celebration of a featured meat, climaxing in its glorious consumption. It's the meat (not the Mrs.) who's the star of our show! Of course, the "Wife of the Week" is important too. She must be attractive, appetizing, and all-American. She is the Meat Made Manifest: ample, robust, yet never tough or hard to digest. Through her, Japanese housewives will feel the hearty sense of warmth, of comfort, of hearth and home—the traditional family values symbolized by red meat in rural America.

I sat back and read it with some satisfaction. It was a pitch for Kato's new program, a more or less faithful translation of the Japanese text that he had dictated to me over the phone—well, maybe not so faithful; maybe a little excessive, in fact. But I liked it. It would do. I faxed it off to Tokyo and crawled back into bed. As I lay there, shivering, wondering about the new show, I had no way of realizing that what I'd just written would turn out to be some of my most lucrative prose—it would land me a job and keep me both meat-fed and employed for over a year.

My Year of Meat. It changed my life. You know when that

happens—when something rocks your world, and nothing is ever the same after?

My name is Jane Takagi-Little. Little was my dad, a Little from Quam, Minnesota. Takagi is my mother's name. She's Japanese. Hyphenation may be a modern response to patriarchal naming practices in some cases, but not in mine. My hyphen is a thrust of pure superstition. At my christening, Ma was stricken with a profound Oriental dread at the thought of her child bearing an insignificant surname like Little through life, so at the very last minute she insisted on attaching hers. Takagi is a big name, literally, comprising the Chinese character for "tall" and the character for "tree." Ma thought the stature and eminence of her lofty ancestors would help equalize Dad's Little. They were always fighting about stuff like this.

"It doesn't *mean* anything," Dad would say. "It's just a *name!*" which would cause Ma to recoil in horror. "How you can say *'just a name'*? Name is very *first* thing. Name is face to all the world."

"Jane" represents their despair at ever reaching an interesting compromise.

In spite of the Little, my dad was a tall man, and I am just under six feet myself. In Japan this makes me a freak. After living there for a while, I simply gave up trying to fit in: I cut my hair short, dyed chunks of it green, and spoke in men's Japanese. It suited me. Polysexual, polyracial, perverse, I towered over the sleek, uniform heads of commuters on the Tokyo subway. Ironically, the *real* culture shock occurred when I left Japan and moved here to New York, to the East Village. Suddenly everyone looked weird, just like me.

Being racially "half"—neither here nor there—I was uniquely suited to the niche I was to occupy in the television industry. I was hired by Kato to be a coordinator for *My*

American Wife!, the TV series that would bring the "heartland of America into the homes of Japan." Although my heart was set on being a documentarian, it seems I was more useful as a go-between, a cultural pimp, selling off the vast illusion of America to a cramped population on that small string of Pacific islands.

As a coordinator, I was part of the production team that shot fifty-two half-hour episodes of *My American Wife!* for the Beef Export and Trade Syndicate, or, simply, BEEF-EX. BEEF-EX was a national lobby organization that represented American meats of all kinds—beef, pork, lamb, goat, horse—as well as livestock producers, packers, purveyors, exporters, grain promoters, pharmaceutical companies, and agribusiness groups. They had their collective eye firmly fixed on Asia. BEEF-EX was the sole sponsor of our program, and its mandate was clear: "to foster among Japanese housewives a proper understanding of the wholesomeness of U.S. meats."

This was how we did it: *My American Wife!* was a day-in-the-life type of documentary, each show featuring a housewife who could cook. My job description, according to Kato, went something like this:

"You must catch up healthy American wives with most delicious meats."

His English was terrible, but I got the picture: Fingers twitching on the pole of a large net, I would prowl the freezer sections of food chains across the country, eyeing the unsuspecting housewives of America as they poked their fingers into plastic-wrapped flank steaks.

Travel, glamour, excitement it wasn't. But during that year I visited every single one of the United States of America and shot in towns so small you could fit their entire dwindling populations in the back of an Isuzu pickup—towns not so different from Quam, Minnesota, where I grew up. I remembered the scene.

It all came back to me during a pancake breakfast in a VFW hall in Bald Knob, Arkansas.

It was our first shoot. I met my Japanese crew at the local airport. A brass band was playing when I arrived, and the ticket counters were decorated with proud banners of spangling stars and stalwart stripes. Yellow ribbons festooned the departure lounge, and Mylar balloons floated like flimsy planets over the cloudlike tresses of blonde girls in pastel who had come to say good-bye.

At the center of all this effusion were the callow recruits, with brand-new crew cuts and bright-red ears, dressed in the still-unfamiliar pale of desert camouflage. Babies were pressed to their clean-shaven cheeks. Mothers' breasts heaved like eager battleships, while the soldiers' fingers lingered over ramparts of stone-washed thigh. Many tears were shed.

My Japanese team was shocked. Stumbling off a twenty-hour flight from Tokyo, jet-lagged and confused, they ran smack into Gulf War Fever. In modern-day Japan, militarism is treated like a sexual deviation—when you see perverts practicing it on the street, you ignore them, look the other way.

Then, at the pancake breakfast where we had been filming, a red-faced veteran from WWII drew a bead on me and my crew, standing in line by the warming trays, our plates stacked high with flapjacks and American bacon.

"Where you from, anyway?" he asked, squinting his bitter blue eyes at me.

"New York," I answered.

He shook his head and glared and wiggled a crooked finger inches from my face. "No, I mean where were you *born?*"

"Quam, Minnesota," I said.

"No, no . . . *What* are you?" He whined with frustration.

And in a voice that was low, but shivering with demented pride, I told him, "*I . . . am . . . a . . . fucking . . .* AMERICAN!"

MEMO

TO: AMERICAN RESEARCH STAFF
FROM: Tokyo Office
DATE: January 5, 1991
RE: *My American Wife!*

We at Tokyo Office wish you all have nice holiday season. Now it is New Year and weather is frigid but we ask your hard work in making exciting *My American Wife!*. Let's persevere with new Program series!

Here is list of IMPORTANT THINGS for *My American Wife!*

DESIRABLE THINGS:

1. Attractiveness, wholesomeness, warm personality
2. Delicious meat recipe (NOTE: Pork and other meats is second class meats, so please remember this easy motto: "Pork is Possible, but Beef is Best!")
3. Attractive, docile husband
4. Attractive, obedient children
5. Attractive, wholesome lifestyle
6. Attractive, clean house
7. Attractive friends & neighbors
8. Exciting hobbies

UNDESIRABLE THINGS:

1. Physical imperfections
2. Obesity
3. Squalor
4. Second class peoples

*** MOST IMPORTANT THING IS VALUES, WHICH MUST BE ALL-AMERICAN.

MEMO

TO: RESEARCH STAFF
FROM: JANE TAKAGI-LITTLE
DATE: JANUARY 6
RE: *MY AMERICAN WIFE!*

Just a quick note to clarify the memo from Tokyo. I spoke with Kato, the chief producer for the series, and told him that some of the points in the memo had offended the American staff. He is very concerned and has asked me to convey the following:

NOTE ON AMERICAN HUSBANDS—Japanese market studies show that Japanese wives often feel neglected by their husbands and are susceptible to the qualities of kindness, generosity, and sweetness that they see as typical of American men. Accordingly, our wives should have clean, healthy-looking husbands who help with the cooking, washing up, housekeeping, and child care. The Agency running the BEEF-EX advertising campaign is looking to create a new truism: *The wife who serves meat has a kinder, gentler mate*.

NOTE ON RACE & CLASS—The reference to "second class peoples" does *not* refer to race or class. Kato does not want you to think that Japanese people are racist. However, market studies do show that the average Japanese wife finds a middle-to-upper-middle-class white American

woman with two to three children to be both sufficiently exotic and yet reassuringly familiar. The Agency has asked us to focus on wives within these demographic specifications for the first couple of shows, just to get things rolling.

NOTE ON ALL-AMERICAN VALUES—Our ideal American wife must have enough in common with the average Japanese housewife so as not to appear either threatening or contemptible. *My American Wife!* of the '90s must be a modern role model, just as her mother was a model to Japanese wives after World War II. However, nowadays, a spanking-new refrigerator or automatic can opener is not a "must." In recent years, due to Japan's "economic miracle," the Japanese housewife is more accustomed to these amenities even than her American counterpart. The Agency thinks we must replace this emphasis on old-fashioned consumerism with contemporary wholesome values, represented not by gadgets for the wife's sole convenience but by good, nourishing food for her entire family. And that means meat.

A final note:

The eating of meat in Japan is a relatively new custom. In the Heian Court, which ruled from the eighth to the twelfth centuries, it was certainly considered uncouth; due to the influences of Buddhism, meat was more than likely thought to be unclean. We know quite a bit about Japanese life then—at least the life of the court and the upper classes—thanks to the great female documentarians of that millennium, like Sei Shōnagon. She was the author of *The Pillow Book*, which contains

detailed accounts of her life and her lovers, and one hundred sixty-four lists of things, such as:

Splendid Things
Depressing Things
Things That Should Be Large
Things That Gain by Being Painted
Things That Make One's Heart Beat Faster
Things That Cannot Be Compared

Murasaki Shikibu, author of *The Tale of Genji*, wrote the following about Shōnagon in her diary:

> Sei Shōnagon has the most extraordinary air of self-satisfaction. Yet, if we stop to examine those Chinese writings of hers that she so presumptuously scatters about the place, we find that they are full of imperfections. Someone who makes such an effort to be different from others is bound to fall in people's esteem, and I can only think that her future will be a hard one.

Murasaki Shikibu scorned what she called Shōnagon's "Chinese writings," and this is why: Japan had no written language at all until the sixth century, when the characters were borrowed from Chinese. In Shōnagon's day, these bold characters were used only by men—lofty poets and scholars—while the women diarists, who were writing prose, like Murasaki and Shōnagon, were supposed to use a simplified alphabet, which was soft and feminine. But Shōnagon overstepped her bounds. From time to time, she wrote in Chinese characters. She dabbled in the male tongue.

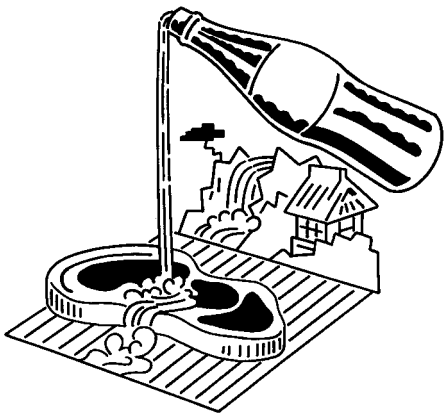
Murasaki may not have liked her much, but I admire Shōnagon, listmaker and leaver of presumptuous scatterings. She inspired me to become a documentarian, to speak men's Japanese, to be different. She is why I chose to make TV. I wanted to think that some girl would watch my shows in

Japan, now or maybe even a thousand years from now, and be inspired and learn something real about America. Like I did.

During my Year of Meat, I made documentaries about an exotic and vanishing America for consumption on the flip side of the planet, and I learned a lot: For example, we didn't even have cows in this country until the Spanish introduced them, along with cowboys. Even tumbleweed, another symbol of the American West, is actually an exotic plant called Russian thistle, that's native not to America but to the wide-open steppes of Central Europe. All over the world, native species are migrating, if not disappearing, and in the next millennium the idea of an indigenous person or plant or culture will just seem quaint.

Being half, I am evidence that race, too, will become relic. Eventually we're all going to be brown, sort of. Some days, when I'm feeling grand, I feel brand-new—like a prototype. Back in the olden days, my dad's ancestors got stuck behind the Alps and my mom's on the east side of the Urals. Now, oddly, I straddle this blessed, ever-shrinking world.

THE CLOTHES-LINING MONTH



SHŌNAGON

When I Make Myself Imagine

When I make myself imagine what it is like to be one of those women who live at home, faithfully serving their husbands—women who have not a single exciting prospect in life yet who believe they are perfectly happy—I am filled with scorn.

AKIKO

2 kilograms	American beef (rump roast)
1 can	Campbell's Cream of Mushroom Soup
1 package	Lipton's Powdered Onion Soup
1.5 liters	Coca-Cola (*not* Pepsi, please!)

"Rumpu rossuto," Akiko repeated to herself. "Notto Pepsi pleezu." She watched the television screen, where a sturdy American wife held an economy-size plastic bottle of Coca-Cola upside down over a roasting pan. The woman smiled broadly at Akiko, who automatically smiled back. The woman shook the bottle, disgorging its contents in rhythmic spurts onto the red "rumpu rossuto." Under her breath, Akiko pronounced the words again. She liked the sounds, the parallel Japanese *r*'s, with their delicate flick of the tongue across the palate, and the plosive *pu* like a kiss or a fart in the middle of a big American dinner.

She liked the size of things American. Convenient. Economical. Big and simple. Like this wife with the "rumpu." Impatient, she shook the bottle up and down, like a fretful infant unable to make its toy work. A close-up showed the plastic Coke bottle so large it made her fingers look childlike as she squeezed its soft sides. The camera traveled down the foamy brown waterfall of cola until it hit the meat, alive with shiny bubbles. The woman laughed. Her name was Suzie

Flowers. What a beautiful name, thought Akiko. Suzie Flowers laughed easily, but Akiko was practicing how to do this too.

Now Suzie was opening a can with her electric can opener. Several children ran through the kitchen and Suzie good-naturedly chased them out with the spatula. Then, never missing a beat, she used the spatula to smear pale mushroom soup over the roast and pat its sides. Pat, pat, pat. She sprinkled the onion soup mix on top and popped it in the oven. Bake at 250° for 3 hours. Easy. Done.

Akiko was so thin her bones hurt. Her watch hung loosely around her wrist and its face never stayed on top. She spun it around and checked the time. The recipe was simple, and if she did her shopping in the morning she would have plenty of time to get to the market and back, marinate the meat, and cook it properly for three hours. She double-checked the ingredients that she had written down on her list and realized she should have a vegetable too. Canned peas, Suzie suggested. Easy. Done. Suzie bent over the oven. Her children pushed between her sturdy, mottled legs and hung off her hem. They must have just poured out, Akiko thought, one after the other, in frothy bursts of fertility. It was a disturbing thought, squalid somehow, and made her feel nauseous.

"It's not spite," Akiko muttered, chewing her lip, "or my contrary nature." She tried a smile again at Suzie, tried to feel happy-go-lucky.

When her periods stopped coming, Akiko's doctor had told her that her ovaries were starved and weren't producing any eggs. Akiko's husband, Joichi, was very upset. He told her that she must put some meat on her bones and he bought her a stack of cookbooks—*Meats Made Easy*, *Refined Meat for the Japanese Palate*, *Delicate Meats*, and *The Meat We Eat*. He read each one, cover to cover.

"'A liberal meat supply,'" he said, quoting from this last book, "'has always been associated with a happy and virile people and invariably has been the main food available to settlers of new and undeveloped territory.'"

He held up the book for her to see.

"Professor P. Thomas Ziegler. A wise man. An American."

Joichi believed in meat. The advertising agency he worked for handled a big account that represented American-grown meat in Japan. After a few months of reading cookbooks, Joichi began working late at the office every night. Then he started making business trips to Texas. Akiko didn't mind, but she began to worry when he returned from one of them and told her curtly:

"Joichi is not a modern name. From now on, call me 'John.'"

He was working on a big project, he told her. As his state of suppressed agitation grew, she wondered if he was also having a Texas affair.

Then one day he arrived home and made an announcement.

"*My American Wife!*" he proclaimed, then sat back and waited for her reaction.

Akiko's heart sank. "Who . . . ?" she whispered sadly. "When . . . ?"

"Saturday mornings at eight o'clock. Thirty minutes. Our new TV show. It's a *documentary*."

He swelled with pride—and that's when her meat duties started. Every Saturday morning, she would be required to watch *My American Wife!* and then fill out a questionnaire he had designed, rating the program from one to ten in categories such as General Interest, Educational Value, Authenticity, Wholesomeness, Availability of Ingredients, and Deliciousness of Meat. To complete these last two, she would have to go out and shop for the ingredients and then prepare the recipe

introduced on that morning's show. On Saturday evening, when "John" came home from work, they would eat the meat, and he would critique it and then discuss her answers to the questionnaire.

"Kill two birds with one stone," "John" said jovially. They were sitting at the low *kotatsu* table after dinner. "John" was drinking a Rémy Martin, and Akiko was having a cup of tea.

"You will help me with the campaign," he continued, "and learn to cook meat too. Fatten you up a little." Then, all of a sudden, he got very serious. He sat straight up on his knees in front of her, spine stiff, head bowed.

"It was on account of your condition that I was able to have this wonderful idea for the BEEF-EX campaign in the first place," he said in formal Japanese. "I have received great praise from my superiors at the company, and if everything goes well I shall get a significant advancement too." He bowed deeply in front of her, touching his head to the tatami floor. "I am most grateful to you."

Akiko blushed, heart pounding with pleasure, then she realized he was drunk.

It was the Sociological Survey part of the program that Akiko didn't really care for, so she stood up to get ready to leave. She checked the thermometer on the balcony, then stepped outside and looked over the railing at the playground in the courtyard, twelve flights below. It was cold and still quite early on a winter morning to be outside. A toddler, a little girl swaddled in a pink snowsuit, was playing on the swings. Her mother stood near the chain-link fence with an infant strapped to her back, draped in a hooded red plaid cape that made the woman look hunchbacked. She leaned forward under the weight of the child and bounced it gently up and down. Akiko watched the little girl in pink. She could hear the chains quite

clearly as the girl swung back and forth. The *kree kraa kree kraa* sound echoed up the sides of the tall buildings of the *danchi* apartment complex, which surrounded the playground like steep canyon walls.

Akiko used to play on a swing set like this one in Hokkaido when she was little. She loved the swing, but it was always crowded with other children. One winter day as she waited her turn, standing off to one side of the set by the upright pipe that supported the crossbar, she pressed her tongue to the cold metal—for no reason, except that she thought it would taste refreshing, like ice. But to her surprise, her tongue stuck fast. She remembered the pain and also the strangeness of being stuck like that, surrounded by people who didn't know. It was lonely. She whimpered a bit to see if anyone would notice, and then stopped when no one did. Finally she held her breath and wrenched her head back, ripping the skin. Separated from the pipe, her torn tongue filled her mouth with blood. She crouched down so no one would see and spit onto the frozen ground. Then she swallowed and stood up. The blood lay on the frozen sand in a little puddle, so she rubbed it out with the tip of her toe and continued to wait her turn.

Akiko shivered. Now, whenever a cold wind brought tears to her eyes and the winter sky turned the color of steel, she could taste the flavor of blood and metal. She went back inside and slid the glass door shut.

Suzie Flowers and her pipe-fitter husband, Fred, were posed in an awkward group portrait with a dozen neighbors and family friends. The Survey was conducted like an informal quiz show; the participants all held two large cards facedown in their laps, and when a question was read off, they answered by flipping up one or the other of the cards to reveal a bold YES or NO. It was the special Valentine's Day Show, so there was a romantic

theme to some of the questions, and the cards were decorated with big red hearts.

"Did you marry your high school Valentine?"

"Was he/she a virgin when you got married?"

"Do you think Japan is an economic threat to America?"

The questions mixed current events with a bawdy household humor that made Akiko uncomfortable. She put her coat on, ready to go.

"Have you ever had an extramarital affair?"

Finger on the button to turn off the TV, Akiko watched as pipe-fitter Fred flipped a YES. No one laughed. The camera cut to Suzie Flowers' panic-stricken face and, astonishingly, the sound track reverberated with a loud *boinnggg!* Akiko sank slowly back down to her knees and watched the show until the end. The piece of paper with her shopping list on it was in her pocket, and later, standing in front of the butcher's counter at the market, she pulled it out and realized that she had kneaded it between her fingers until the writing had all rubbed off. The butcher waited impatiently as she stared down at the limp scrap in her palm, trying to decipher the meat. Then she remembered the parallel *r*'s and the plosive *pu*.

"Rumpu rossuto, please," she said to the butcher. "A big one."

SUZIE

Out of habit, Suzie Flowers stifled her crying under a mountain of brand-new floral bedding. From time to time she wiped her nose on the comforter and she noticed that the polyester blend didn't absorb as well as the old cotton one. When Jane, the

coordinator, had come for the location scout, she had asked to see all around the house, including the bedroom. The old quilt caught her interest and she had asked all sorts of questions about it. Suzie's mother had made it. It was all stained and torn, and Suzie was so ashamed of it that after the coordinator left that day, she went right out to Wal-Mart and bought new bedding that would look nice on TV. She also bought new guest towels for the bathroom and lots of extra sodas for the Japanese crew. But they never wanted any. They were so well prepared, with their own cooler in the van, filled with mineral water from France. They were polite about it, but Suzie figured that the Japanese people just didn't like American pop.

During the shooting the following week, Jane had hesitated when she saw the new bedding and asked again about the old quilt, which Suzie had already washed and sent off to her sister in Wisconsin, who collected antiques. That was the big joke, that the quilt was so old you could call it an antique. Jane frowned and consulted with Mr. Oda, the director, in Japanese, then she asked if there was any way to get it back quickly. But Suzie had sent the package by parcel post, because airmail was so expensive. There wasn't any real hurry for it to get there, after all, and now it was probably on a mail truck somewhere between here and Sheboygan. Jane had looked stunned. She explained that it was the *old* quilt they liked, because it had old-fashioned, wholesome family values. The new quilt was not interesting, she said, and Mr. Oda seemed very angry and decided not to shoot in the bedroom. Suzie felt terrible.

Fred was furious with her for caring so much, for spending all the money on the new comforter and towels, for agreeing to the shoot to begin with. But when Jane had first called her, all the way from New York City, Suzie thought the TV show might be just the thing to help her and Fred feel positive about their lives again, especially since it was the Valentine's Day

Show. And even though the Romantic Evening Kiss scene had been difficult at first, by the end everyone seemed satisfied, and even Fred was in an okay mood by then, but maybe that was just the champagne.

It all went wrong with the Coca-Cola Roast. Jane had seemed so excited when Suzie first described it over the phone to her in New York City. But when it came time to actually cook it, she and Mr. Oda appeared disappointed because there were so few steps. That was the whole point, Suzie tried to explain. It was quick 'n' easy. Yet instead of appreciating this fact, they just seemed annoyed. The meat-cooking section was the most important part of the show, Jane said. It had to be interesting. So to make up for not having *enough* steps, the director decided to take lots of different shots of the *same* steps over and over again. But Suzie had bought only enough ingredients to make *one* rump roast, so they had to go out to the grocery store and buy a dozen economy-size bottles of Pepsi because the store had run out of Coke. Unfortunately they couldn't find another rump roast that looked the same, and in between each take, Suzie had to wash off the raw meat in the sink and pat it dry with paper towels and make it look new again.

It was kind of funny at first. Jane stood off to one side, funneling the Pepsi into the Coke bottle, which Suzie then poured onto the tired rump, over and over again, until the meat turned gray. Finally they told her to put it into the oven a few dozen times, and when that was over she was so relieved—but then, out of the blue, Jane asked for the matching, already cooked roast she was supposed to have prepared in advance, so they could shoot her taking it back out of the oven without wasting time. She was supposed to have prepared the meats in *multiples*, Jane groaned, in *stages*. But Suzie hadn't understood this. There was no help for it, and they all just had to wait for the roast to cook, and it was the longest three

hours Suzie had ever spent. The crew went out to the van, where she could hear them laughing.

Later they shot her and Fred and the kids eating the Coca-Cola Roast for dinner, but the kids were cranky because they didn't like the taste of the Pepsi, and Mr. Oda kept screaming at Jane, and Jane kept telling the kids to act like they were enjoying their meat, until finally Fred stood up and walked out the door.

She should have known then. She should have just put her foot down, put a stop to the whole thing. Then Fred would have just come home eventually, like he always did, and the Sociological Survey would never have happened, and she would never have learned about the cocktail waitress, and the neighbors wouldn't have, either. And right now she would be happy—well, not happy, perhaps, but at least asleep. She wiped her nose again and inspected the silvery streak that lay on the nonabsorbent surface of the polyester. It looked like a slug trail. At least, Suzie thought, she would ask her sister to send the old quilt back, since she just couldn't seem to stop crying.

JANE

"Well?"

Kenji, my elegant, sloe-eyed office producer, leaned back in his chair, feet propped delicately against the editing console. He was eating cashew nuts from a small cloth sack. He gazed pensively at Suzie's horrified expression—slack-jawed, incredulous—frozen on the screen.

"The Survey's a bloody bore," he offered. He'd been

educated in England, one of the new breed of *issei*, first-generation Japanese immigrants, who wore his British accent like his Armani suit, casually draped, with a sense of perfect global entitlement.

". . . could have cut out quicker and thrown in a couple of reaction shots of someone laughing."

"No one was laughing," I told him.

"Oh."

Our office was located in the East Village. It was an improbable location for a Japanese TV production company, since most tended to cluster around Rockefeller Center, a secure, Japanese-owned neighborhood. Kenji had preferred SoHo, but Kato had nixed the idea because the rents were too expensive, and so we settled here. I thought it was great, five blocks from my apartment, but Kenji, who lived on the West Side, was still annoyed.

When the first edited episodes of *My American Wife!* arrived from Japan after airing, the New York office staff crowded around the VCR in the conference area to watch the fruits of their labors. The disappointment was palpable—*My American Wife!* was dumb. Silly. After the first few shows, the New York staff stopped watching.

The program looked like this: The Wife of the Day appeared in a catchy, upbeat opening . . . she introduced her husband and her children . . . she led us on a tour of her hometown and her house . . . and she ended up in her kitchen, where she cooked the Meat of the Week. Occasionally there would be a special regional or seasonal theme, but at first the programs stuck to this format, embellished with various "corners," with titles like "My Hobby," "Lady Gossip," "Pretty Home," "Romantic Moody," and the "Sociological Survey," which purported to investigate "Timely Topic in American Home and Nation." Okay, it was really dumb.

I was upset. I may have been glib in my pitch and clumsy in my initial dealings with the wives, but I honestly believed I had a mission. Not just for some girl in the next millennium, but for here and now. I had spent so many years, in both Japan and America, floundering in a miasma of misinformation about culture and race, I was determined to use this window into mainstream network television to *educate*. Perhaps it was naive, but I believed, honestly, that I could use wives to sell meat in the service of a Larger Truth.

I mean, this was an amazing opportunity for a documentarian. *My American Wife!* was broadcast on a major national network on Saturday mornings, targeting Japanese housewives with school-age children, who represented the largest meat-eating slice of the population. The show played opposite cartoons, which wasn't easy. But the first episodes we'd shot had scored ratings of up to 7.8 percent and penetrated approximately 9,563,310 households. This was very good. With an average of 3.0 persons per household, an estimated 28,689,930 members of the Japanese population watched our show, and the sponsors were pleased. I mean, that's a lot of sirloin.

Part of the success was due to the marketing angle that the Network chose. *My American Wife!*, they assured the Japanese audiences, was produced "virtually entirely" by a *real* American crew, so the America conveyed was *authentic*, not one distorted by the preconceptions of jaded Japanese TV producers.

But of course it wasn't real at all. Already, by February, I sat through each program out of a sense of responsibility and residual loyalty to an ideal. Kenji watched them all too. He didn't get out of the office much, or out of New York, and maybe that's why he liked the shows. As we stared at Suzie's frozen face, I wondered: Were we even seeing the same thing?

"Fred, the husband, left her right after the Survey. . . ."

Kenji popped another nut into his mouth. "Was it your

fault?" He had taken off his Italian loafers and was trying to operate the edit deck controls with his toe. His socks were made of fine knit silk. "Will we get sued?"

"No. I don't know. I doubt it. He was having an affair with some cocktail waitress, but he got so bent out of shape at us being there, and mad at Suzie for inviting us, that after he flipped his card, he told her. Everything. Right there, in front of us, in front of her family, the whole neighborhood. You see that expression on her face? That's her reaction shot. The director didn't speak a word of English and didn't understand what the guy was saying—he just had Suzuki keep on filming."

"Who was the director?"

"That bonehead Oda. Afterward, when we were watching dailies at the hotel and I explained what had happened, Oda got all excited and suggested using Fred's confession, then cutting to a sex scene with the cocktail waitress."

"He was serious?"

"Totally. He didn't get the concept of 'wholesome.' I had to call Tokyo and get Kato to explain the mandate of BEEF-EX to him."

Kenji shrugged, sat up, and rewound the tape. Suzie's face recomposed briefly, then Kenji hit the Play button again. The Japanese announcer's voice-over asked, "Have you ever had an extramarital affair?" The participants held up their Survey cards, and the camera zoomed in on Fred's big YES. The sound-effect track swelled with canned laughter, and Suzie's face collapsed into its expression of horror, punctuated with a resounding *boinnggg!*

"That's awful," Kenji said, grinning. "But it works. . . ."

"It makes me sick. How can we send this tape to her? The whole thing is a lie. Here, watch the ending."

Suzie and Fred were curled on the pink shag rug in front of the fire, toasting each other with glasses of champagne. They had put the kids to bed early, the narrator murmured,

and it was time for that special Valentine's Day moment, time to forgive and forget. They leaned slowly in and kissed, and when their lips met, Oda had laid in a cartoon heart, emanating from the point of contact and throbbing to fill the screen. It was a cheap computer graphics effect, like a TV ad for phone sex.

"It's sweet," Kenji said.

"It's dumb."

"It's television." He rewound it and played the scene again. "Nice graphics. How'd you shoot that kiss, if the husband had left her?"

"Out of sequence. We shot it the first day we got there."

"Smart girl."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Listen, it's great. Makes it look like they had this minor tiff but everything turned out all right in the end."

"But it didn't. It's a lie. Kenji, I should be directing these. I could do a much better job. I could make it real. . . ."

Kenji took out a carefully pressed handkerchief and dusted his fingertips and then the corners of his mouth. He was only in his early thirties, but his tastes—pressed handkerchiefs, fussy wines, antique cameras, and high-end audio equipment—had stiffened into those of a confirmed bachelor. Pachelbel and Delibes composed the sound track to his life, and listening to these melancholy strains, he would gaze eastward, out the window of his TriBeCa loft, past Liberty in New York Harbor, past London, and all the way back to Tokyo. He saw himself as a courtier, banished by his lord to a rude provincial capital.

"Yes, well, bring it up with Kato," he concluded. "But essentially you do direct them now, you know. You choose all the content. The only thing you don't do is cut."

"But that's big, Kenji. Editing is what counts. I mean, look what Oda did. . . ."

"Well, listen," he said, punching Rewind and cutting me

off. "At least you got good meat and the kids are cute and there's enough sidebar activity to keep things lively." He swung his feet to the floor and stood to leave. At the door, he turned back.

"What do you want me to do about sending her the tape?"

"Can we cut out the *boinnggg*?"

"No. Anyway, that's dishonest too."

"Well, then we can't send it. If she calls, tell her the show got canceled."

The rewinding image on the monitor caught his eye and he smiled. I turned just as the large Coca-Cola bottle sucked the last of its contents upward, off the bubbling meat.

"Mmm," said Kenji. "Great product shot."

I shook my head. "It's Pepsi, Kenji. Not the real thing at all. . . ."