

Learning to Speak

A cross-cultural love story

Three weeks after we first meet, my husband tells me he loves me. At least I think.

We're hidden away, deep in the night, in my faculty dorm room in a corporate training center in Kobe, Japan, where I'm a professor and he's one of twenty East Asian Executive MBA students. I'm supposed to be teaching them business English. I have never taught ESL before and had been hired a few weeks earlier, under the distorted belief that, because I teach writing to American students, I can teach Asian executives to talk like native English speakers.

By now, I've realized that the university has made an awful mistake and that I'm terrible at the job, not knowing anything about the field of ESL, how our brains acquire language, how to help foreign speakers exercise the muscles in their mouths to shape English sounds.

So when Toru, balanced above me on lithe arms, his spiky black hair jutting out in tufts, says quietly, "I love you," I don't nod with brisk encouragement or prod him patiently to elongate his syllables more distinctly. Instead, I say "You what?"

Inside me, I think what he's saying, what he may be saying, could be one of the

best things I've ever heard, because although the job is turning out to be an unmitigated disaster, this student—with his sharp-cheeked beauty and quiet smile—has already begun to make my heart churn. At first, I noticed Toru mostly because he was one of the few students my age, the rest being significantly older business men who spent years climbing the corporate ladder in traditional Japanese and Korean companies, where it seems their experience working alongside women had amounted to being served tea and expecting female colleagues to defer to them.

But Toru seemed different right from the start, listening respectfully when I try to explain new vocabulary, thanking me earnestly for my help, even though I know the whole class knows I'm not experienced enough to be teaching them effectively. Now, what had started with shy glances in the classroom has progressed past afternoon talks in broken English and then into secret, fleeting, drunk kisses late at night—after a program dinner with much sake and bad karaoke—and then finally two weeks of nights of sneaking into my faculty dorm room when we hope no one is awake to see.

But still, I've only known Toru for three weeks, this man who has spent his life a hemisphere away from my home,

who bows when I shake hands, who eats miso soup for breakfast when I eat cornflakes. I don't want to think he's told me he loves me when in fact he's said, "I live far from you."

Yet when he repeats it again, and then a third time, and I answer, "You do?" he says unmistakably, "Yes, I'm in love with you." And somehow, right then, I know I've found a lifetime perk to the worst teaching job I've ever had. Even though I don't speak a word of Toru's native Japanese. And he's barely conversational in English.

Months later, back in my hometown of Boston, where Toru has come to finish his MBA, with my Japanese still non-existent and Toru's English still reflective of my dismal ESL-teaching abilities, we announce to my family that we've decided to build a life together.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, my family responds to this idea, and our lack of shared dialect, with alarm. "You have a PhD in English, for goodness sake" my mother says, dismayed. "Don't you think you'll be happier with someone who's at least fluent in your language?" Eventually, they accept the marriage, muttering along to the Hebrew transliteration as the Rabbi blesses us, Toru's family bowing silently under the



huppa. But they express honest hope—which comes out sounding more like unmistakable concern—that we will at least study the other's lexicon more fully.

Yet I've refused. Well before Toru and I ever married, I knew a fluent husband would never do.

The first time he returned to his hometown of Osaka with me still in Boston, he called me when he landed at Kansai airport. Not reaching me, he left a message. "Hello, this is speaking Toru!" he called, tired and happy, into the phone. When I heard the voice-mail, I giggled with delight, thought of our engagement, and alongside my nervousness about committing to be with one man for the rest of my life, felt buoyed by the prospect of endlessly pleasing malapropisms.

Early on, in the daze of new love, I quickly realized that his broken English made me giddier than any native speaker's endearments could. When I recited to him the opening lines Nabokov's *Lolita*, telling him he was the "Light of my life, fire of my loins," my arm flung out dramatically, he looked quizzically at me and just smiled. But minutes later, his smile broadened and he quoted proudly back to me, "Love of my life, tenderloin of my heart" — a proclamation that struck me as more visceral, touching,

and eloquently twisted than any other in the entire Western canon.

Now, when I have a new article accepted for publication, and I tell him about it, I can't imagine getting any better praise than the semantically-skewed kind he gives me. He'll read the article, slowly at first and then speeding up in the knowledge that he won't understand it anyway, and then he'll look at me gravely and say "Yes, I feel proud you." When I get anxious about one family spat or another, he doesn't jump in to analyze the situation with me, to parse who is in denial or who confrontational. "Take care," he tells me. "I worry you. I worry you have injury inside," he says, and it's like balm.

These are the tales I usually tell when people ask if it's hard to be married to a man whose native language I don't share. I explain that from the moment Toru announced his love for me, five years ago, with an accent I could barely follow but an earnestness I couldn't resist, I've delighted, rather than despaired, when words have failed us.

But, if truth be told, these delightful malapropisms, the ones I point towards to explain how our lexicographically mismatched love works, are only half the story.

The rest—the heart of it, really—took root in the first few days of our new, linguistically challenged passion. Back in the Japanese corporate training center when we first met, we communicated in broken language, hand signals, and shy glances, fusing together in the silence between our words.

One night, he notices the faint scars on the back of my forearm, made during a particularly hard period of adolescence when I wanted not so much to destroy myself as make an intangible grief into a mark that might somehow, in being rendered definable and visible, begin to dislodge and recede. I don't know how to explain that to him, or my shame at such a banal act of useless drama, but I admit I made them once, all by myself, and he just reaches out and traces them gently.

I also don't know how to articulate the lingering sorrow of my parents' ruined marriage, the years of stony silences punctured by occasional bursts of hot fury, how we woke one day to kicked-in kitchen cabinets and shards of a broken Bacarrat glass—or my embarrassment that such long-ago, middle-class conflict could have had a lasting impression on me, a girl brought up with weekly Shabbos prayers acknowledging all those whose misery is really real, those who once burned in ovens or die today



in genocides across the planet. I do describe, in flat, mundane details, how later my parents called us into the library in our large house, where we sat amongst the rich wood walls and old leather volumes, and we listened to them explain that they were separating. "Then we went to the country club," I tell him, and he nods sadly and doesn't ask why.

Later, I tell him how I called my sister in the mental hospital that afternoon, before driving to club, to tell her of our parents' separation. I don't narrate to him how she replied that she knew, she always knew, things were never as perfect as the rest of us told ourselves, as we all thought they must be since we

lived within the walls of a house whose size and landscaping others envied. I just tell him that I waved goodbye to her a few weeks later, this sister who seemed so lovely and wise and remote, and then she turned away down the hospital hallway into her beige-walled room, and that was the last time I saw her before she went to live with a different family.

When I look down, sad and embarrassed and still confused by these stories whose narratives I've been revisiting, silently, for years, his hand is already there, holding mine. He nods then, not to tell me that he understands, but that he still knows what I mean. I don't have words to tell him how comforted that makes me, but even so, he never lets go. ♪

Tracy Slater has her PhD in English and American Literature from Brandeis University and now teaches writing one semester a year at Boston University. She lives half of every year in Boston and half in Osaka, Japan, where she writes for the *Asahi Weekly* and *Kansai Scene* magazine. She has also published pieces in *Best Women's Travel Writing 2008*, *Boston Magazine*, the *Boston Globe*, *Post Road*, *Chronicle Review*, and *Japan, Inc.* Tracy is the founder of the award-winning literary series *Four Stories*, which runs events in Boston, Osaka, and Tokyo (www.fourstories.org), and recipient of the 2008 PEN New England Friends of Writers prize.