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## ***Gaijin* Male Model**

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Fifteen years and a few pounds ago I was one of the first twenty-something *gaijin* models in Tokyo to specialize in the young businessman look. With Japan's stock and property markets the envy of the world, I exploited one of the only times in history where a mere mortal could moonlight through a few wacky years of over-the-top TV commercials, exotic location shoots, spotlights with beautiful women and encounters with the famous. I enjoyed a wild ride courtesy of Japan's financial hysteria and my luck at being there at the right time with the right look.

In late-1980s Japan, asset inflation was rampant. The stock market set record highs every week. The several hundred acres of land under the Imperial Palace in Central Tokyo was worth more than all of California. The roaring economy provided corporate Japan with seemingly unlimited budgets to produce bigger and better TV commercials and print advertisements. Fortunately for me, Western (*gaijin*) models were all the rage in selling products in Japan.

My modeling adventure started because the American company I worked for had recently transferred me to Tokyo and I found myself with free time in a city where I had yet to make many friends. I answered an open cattle call from an agency looking for Western men "of all types" for modeling jobs.

I arrived at the agency's lobby directly from a business meeting at one of Japan's biggest banks, with my gray Brooks Brothers suit jacket draped over one arm, a briefcase in the other hand and my colorful tie loosened because of the oppressive summer heat. The handful of Western hopefuls already waiting, each looking like a page out of *Esquire*, shocked me with

their sniveling stares. I was the only person in the room not wearing black, including the bored-looking receptionist who asked for my portfolio. Portfolio? Yeah, right.

“Don’t have one,” I said.

Handed a clipboard, I laughed out loud at the first few application queries: Runway work? TV commercials? Movies? Underwear ads? I looked up to see my fellow hopefuls writing furiously, filling in most of the spaces. But then I found the set of questions I could actually answer with a yes: Can you swim butterfly? Ride a mountain bike? Water-ski? Speak Japanese? Operate a right-hand drive automobile with a stick shift? Do you have a valid Japanese drivers’ license?

The receptionist lined us up for Polaroid headshots. I tightened my tie and slipped on my jacket. Unlike everyone else who forced a professional pout as the camera flashed, I smiled at the absurdity of the situation I had gotten myself into. When the photo session was complete, we were told to wait. Well, I thought, I had come this far, so I might as well hang in there until I was formally rejected as an imposter.

Soon an older Japanese version of a Seventh Avenue Fashionista entered the room and examined each of us over the top of her half-glasses. Her stylish clothes and haircut hid a few extra pounds. Obviously the boss, she was all business. As she paged through portfolios, I began to notice differences in the perfect specimens around me. One man was a little older — nearly thirty. Another was wearing perfectly tailored black trousers and big, clumsy buckle boots. The boss glanced at applications, shuffled photos and scribbled notes. One model sneaked a quick pick of his nose.

Then, in heavily accented English, she said: “Thank you very much. I have everything I need. We will be in touch when you get job.”

We gathered our belongings and began to leave.

But then she added, “David-san, please stay.”

A collective groan went through the room. Now the stares from the real models returned, but this time they were much harsher.

As he passed me, Buckle Boots said snottily: “Nice tie.”

I grinned but didn’t respond.

A few moments later I was alone with the boss. With a slight bow she said: “My name is Maya and I am the owner of this agency. I can get you many jobs.”

“Really?” I asked.

Maya glanced at my briefcase. “You look just like businessman. I get many calls for *gaijin* businessman look. These boys,” she flipped a few Polaroid’s onto a table, “are too pretty to be businessmen.”

“Well, to be honest, I’m not actually a model. I really am a businessman. I’m Marketing Director at the Tokyo office of an American corporation.”

Her eyes lit up. “I can get you many, many jobs. I will start you at a hundred thousand yen a day.”

Wow. I paused to calculate: that was nearly a thousand US dollars.

“I pay cash,” she said. “A hundred thousand yen a day net to you after I take my commission.”

“My problem is I can’t work during normal business hours. I’d like to model nights and weekends. If that’s possible.”

“We get weekend jobs sometimes.” She thought for a moment and then smiled. “Maybe you can sometimes be sick from your company too?”

“Maybe an occasional vacation day,” I said, and we finalized the deal. She said she’d call when I got a job.

Before I left I was measured for exact clothing, shoe, and hat sizes.

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A month later, I found a message on my answering machine when I arrived home one Friday after a long workweek. “David-san, this is Maya. You got job. You got job. Tomorrow. Here are directions...”

I was told to be at the Roppongi subway station entrance at 7:00 AM. I looked at my wristwatch: only nine hours later. What kind of job? I wondered. I had nothing else planned, so I set my alarm for way too early on a Saturday morning. I figured I should record the occasion of my first modeling job, so before I crawled into bed, I placed my camera near my shoes so I wouldn’t forget the next day.

Several dozen other bleary-eyed Western men, most of whom were furiously smoking cigarettes, had assembled at station. Many looked as though they might have come directly from the Roppongi nightclub district where they had been partying all night. We boarded busses.

The guy sitting next to me didn't know much more about the job than I did, except that it was a TV commercial for a big Life Insurance Company. He lit Mild Seven cigarette and began the two-minute-what-you're-doing-in-Japan-and-how-long-you've-been-here speech that I soon learned was part of every new encounter in the Tokyo foreign model circuit.

"I'm from the UK. Birmingham actually," he said, pausing to exhale. "I'm here making some serious money and having a bit of a laugh before heading to Australia to smoke herb on the beach for a year."

After an hour, the bus stopped in a grungy industrial area on the outskirts of Tokyo. Storage facilities with drums of chemicals stood next to metal-bashing factories turning out all sorts of parts and pieces for the corporations of Japan Inc. The whole district appeared to be running at full capacity on a Saturday morning. The skies were grayish brown from the smoke of nearby burning garbage dumps.

Following the rest of the gang, I stepped off the bus and through a gate in a metal fence into my first taste of a full-blown, active film set. Equipment of all sorts was strewn around a vast field: cameras at various positions, lighting on tall rigs, trucks of various sizes and shapes — each marked *Kurosawa Film Studio*, and at the far end was a city of tents. Approaching the field, I quickly sorted the mass of people into three groups: a swarm of young *gaijin* men; at least 50 Japanese TV people; and a group of still photographers huddled around a catering truck.

We entered the tent. A young woman who spoke excellent English introduced herself as the assistant director and briefed us on the shoot through a megaphone. Then the walkie-talkie at her waist warbled loudly, resulting in a brief pause as she deftly removed it from its holster. She replied in Japanese. Returning to English and the megaphone again, she explained the spot involved many *gaijin* businessmen running in exaggerated motion from the end of the field toward the cameras. When we near the halfway mark, the large group approaches and then passes a single person walking alone. The timing is critical, she said, to get the entire shot in 30 seconds. Then she introduced the director, a small man who issued one last command into his own walkie-talkie before stepping forward to address us in Japanese. He bowed a few times as the young woman translated for the *gaijin*. We learned that the lone figure was Kuwata Keisuke, the lead singer from the Southern Allstars. The amazement the director expected us to feel at that moment yielded nothing. None of us foreigners had ever heard of Japan's most famous rock band or its lead singer, the "Japanese Mick Jagger."

Laughing and joking, we *gaijin* moved en masse into the next tent for makeup and hair. In yet another tent, we were fitted into black Armani suits, ties and shoes. Throughout the process I tried to remember to snap a photo or two for posterity.

Then I noticed someone familiar. It took me a moment to place him without his Buckle Boots. “Nice tie,” I said, grinning.

He stalked off in a snit.

I did a quick mental calculation: one hundred models at probably two thousand a day average, plus their Armani suits and shoes; all the equipment; another 50 crew; the famous Kuwata-san from the Southern Allstars; and assorted bits and pieces, from busses to food. This was an expensive shoot. I had only been in Japan for a few months and was experiencing one aspect of an overheating economy: over-the-top TV ads produced at any cost.

The actual shoot finally began. The director stood at the far end of the field. He communicated to the assistant director by walkie-talkie. I felt a rush at the spectacle I was now part of, and was eager to begin the run.

The assistant director shouted “action” through her megaphone.

During the first take, I noticed the pack of photographers snapping away near the finish line, but I still had no clue who they were or what they were doing. They clearly weren’t in the camera frame.

After each of the dozen or so takes, we would stroll back to the tents to get our hair primped, our suits smoothed and prepare to run again. During the lunch break, I asked Kuwata-san, the famous singer, if I could have a photo of me taken with him, and he was happy to do it. I’d never tell Maya-san, but I had so much fun I would have done it for free.

Late the following week, back in my downtown office, I discreetly showed my photos with the rock star to several Japanese women. They squealed with delight. One woman pulled a copy of a weekly news magazine from her bag and there was a full-page photo of the shoot. I pointed to me running in the far background. She squealed again. Apparently Kuwata-san had never agreed to do a TV commercial before and it was big news in Japan. I realized then that the photographers on the set had covered the event for Japanese newspapers and magazines. The snapshot with me in Armani and makeup together with Kuwata-san turned me into a minor celebrity around the office: his fame had rubbed off onto me.

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A month later I found myself playing a priest for the opening sequence of a TV comedy show. My character's gag played off pronunciation similarities of the Japanese words for God (*Kami*) and turtle (*Kame*). In the scene, I'm trying to recruit the star of the show into my religion. My small screen debut featured the memorable line translated as: "Do you believe in turtles?" The studio audience found this hysterical.

Flush with my comedy success, I called my agent for the first time.

"Maya-san, what do you have for me?" I was getting cocky.

"Don't worry, David-san, I get you many jobs. Directors like you because you speak a little Japanese and they don't have to use interpreters. Maybe you get job next week. By the way, can you type?"

Sure I could type.

My next gig was a TV commercial for a major office equipment manufacturer. Day one (Saturday) included a half-dozen other business types looking busy in an office. We were told that our 20-second scene would have music and voiceover, but we needed to have realistic-looking office conversations. For something like forty takes this is what I did: a co-worker approaches my desk from across the office; I stand and hand him a sheet of paper; he turns and walks away. Our interaction resulted in a conversation happening in several second bursts but spaced five or ten minutes apart between the takes.

During take one, I handed over the paper and asked him: "So where are you from?"

He answered some time later during take two: "New York. How 'bout you?"

I manage, "Connecticut," during the same take.

Take three he says: "I'm only here for a few weeks."

During takes four through ten he tells me: "I have to be back in Thailand soon for two more months of battle scene filming in Brian De Palma's *Casualties of War* with Sean Penn and Michael J. Fox." Then he asked about me.

"I really am a businessman, I do this part time," I said during take eleven.

It took ten minutes until the next take to get his reaction. "A businessman? That's weird."

Sunday's filming was just the crew and me for a full day of close-ups with a computer. I had to type the same three letters and then the Enter key, take after take. Because my wristwatch was in my line of sight during the action, time seemed to move even slower.

I called my agent. "Maya-san, the first day was cool, but the typing thing wasn't so much fun."

"David-san," Maya said, then paused a beat. "You should be happy you have job. Director thinks *gaijin* fingers are more pretty. For this he pays us money instead of having crew type on computer."

*Gaijin* fingers being worth more than Japanese fingers made me laugh. This really was a bubble economy. Instead of thanking her, I said: "Maya-san, can you find me more interesting jobs next time?"

It seems to me that a sure sign of an economy expanding to the breaking point is when you get jaded about your own unwarranted success.

My answering machine was blinking a month after I had complained to my agent. "David-san, this is Maya. You got job. You got job. This weekend you go to Izu Peninsula and drive cars on racetrack. Call me."

Cool.

It was for a major automobile company. A TV commercial had been filmed in Paris with a couple of famous French movie stars in a sports car driving past typical scenes: the Eiffel Tower, a cafe. The director needed three more seconds of footage to complete a scene. I was chosen because I could drive a right-side manual transmission. The model in the passenger seat was chosen because she resembled the French movie star.

For an entire three-day weekend, when I heard "action" from my walkie-talkie, I executed the following sequence: from a standing start on a straightaway, quickly shift through the gears to reach 100 kilometers per hour by the beginning of the first turn. Follow the lead of the camera truck in front of my car — try to stay close but not too close. As my car begins the turn "smile like you on honeymoon." While completing the turn "look at girl like you love her." Then, just before crashing into the retaining wall or the camera truck (because I'm not looking at the track), hit the brakes and then cruise around the back turn to wait for "action" again.

We did some twenty takes the first day so I had quite a bit of time to talk with my co-star.

“I’m the wife of an officer in the American Army stationed near Yokohama,” she told me. “We’ve been here for two years.”

“Oh, so you’re an amateur like me!” I replied. “I can’t believe we’re being paid to spend a long weekend doing this. The resort hotel is awesome. I’m being filmed driving a brand new sports car on a racetrack. I feel like I’m at Movie Camp.”

“I’ve gotten so much work recently,” she said. “My agent told me the directors like my all-American look. So I can pick and choose the choice jobs and leave the bad ones for the pros.”

We giggled.

She added: “My husband and I have it really good here. The government pays for our housing and we both make good money. Most of it goes into the bank.”

At the end of the long day I eased myself into the hotel’s outdoor natural hot-spring bath. Pungent, mineral-rich steam enveloped me. My view of the other people was slightly blurred because of the mist, but I noticed the cameraman and nodded to him. In the distance, the moon cast shadows from pine trees onto shrubs and stone lanterns. As I finished the last sip of my warm sake, I turned to the cameraman: “*Totemo yokata desu* (this has been great).”

He smiled, closed his eyes and leaned back.

At dinner that evening we were served multiple courses of sushi, tempura, broiled fish and more sake. “*Campai*,” we all said in unison to toast the day’s shoot. The cameraman leaned close and said in English. “David-san, we got perfect take on first try, but crew wants to be in Izu longer instead of go back Tokyo.”

OK with me.

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A particularly memorable TV commercial was for a famous brand of women’s underwear. I was once again in my signature role as a businessman and I shared the scene with a beautiful young woman. As the director introduced us, I found my eyes drifting from the blond hair of her tanned arms to the curves of her well-worn jeans. The director showed the camera placement at one end of a long office corridor. Initially, it would be focused on a rear view of the black high-heeled shoes my co-star would wear. At “action,” she would begin to walk away while the camera angle widened and panned upwards. I was to be situated off-camera at the

other end of the corridor. On cue I was supposed to enter through a doorway, turn left, and approach the woman. When we passed, we were to brush against each other and I was to continue past out of camera range. We quickly blocked the scene and practiced a few times.

Just before going to makeup and wardrobe, the director pulled me aside and said: "David-san, during film please do not look at girl."

"No problem," I said. "I'll look straight ahead."

He bowed.

Soon we were ready. I was at my doorway when I heard "action." I waited a few seconds for my cue and executed a perfect left hand turn. But then I froze. The woman was approaching and she wore only black high-heeled shoes and panties. Absolutely nothing else.

Nobody had explained this part.

"Cut!" The director was shaking his head. "We do again."

I concentrated on the floor on the way back to my door. While I waited, I reached down to touch my toes and then did a few jumping jacks.

"Action."

As I turned the corner and saw her in my peripheral vision, I couldn't help myself. It was at this precise moment that I finally understood what the acting term "work" referred to.

"CUT." The director said it louder this time. "David-san, do not look at girl!" He paused for a moment, then added: "We take twenty-minute break."

I could use the downtime to compose myself. I found a quiet place away from the crew. A moment later she approached me. I was thankful she had been provided with a powder blue terry-cloth robe to wear during the break.

"Sorry," I mumbled. I found myself staring at the black high-heeled shoes. They looked so sexy underneath the pale robe. "So, how long have you been in Japan?" I asked to break the tension.

She smiled.

I had the feeling she often dealt with tongue-tied men who can't help but stare.

"Well, my US agency sent me here a few weeks ago. But I haven't seen much of Japan except for the inside of studios 'cause I've had a lot of jobs, you know? I work every day."

"I'm sure you do." I tried to hold eye contact.

She smiled again. "I'm kinda just doing this for the easy money. But my stepfather thinks it's, well, sort of a sleazy business. But I'm 18 now, so I can do what I want, you know?"

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"Santa Cruz. What about you? How long have you been a model?"

"I'm not a full-time model," I said. "I work in Marketing for an American company here in Tokyo. I'm just modeling for fun."

"You really are a businessman?" She looked down at my tie and stifled a laugh. "That's so weird. I thought you were a model."

Now I had come full circle — a beautiful, young, professional model thought I was a model too.

Soon we tried it again.

This time I only moved my eyes.

"CUT."

I wondered why she didn't have any tan lines.

"David-san, DO NOT LOOK AT GIRL."

\* \* \*

"Hello?"

"David-san, this is Maya. You got audition. You got audition."

"Maya-san, hi." I looked up to make sure nobody was listening in. My workspace was open and quite crowded. "It's better if you don't call me at work."

"But David-san, you need to do audition tonight. For big, important newspaper ad."

"Why do I need to audition this time?"

"Not many jobs anymore," she said without her usual enthusiasm. "Directors and producers become picky and need audition."

I agreed to do it.

"Please wear businessman suit," Maya said.

"No problem, I'm already wearing one," I replied.

Several hours later I was holed up in the monthly sales meeting. I checked my wristwatch, but this time I didn't care if anyone noticed. I hadn't let my modeling interfere with

my real work, but I had agreed to the audition and I didn't want to let Maya down. I would need to leave to very soon or miss the audition.

Fortunately the sales manager stood, signaling the end of the meeting. "David-san, would you like to join us for beer?"

I checked my watch again. "No thanks, I need to prepare for a conference call with New York."

Forty minutes later I emerged from the subway system into a grimy industrial district. Dark and quiet, with a maze of unmarked side streets, this was quite different from the bustle of the Tokyo financial districts I normally frequented. I checked the map I had been faxed and set out in what I thought was the correct direction. Several wrong turns later, I ducked into a *ramen* shop to ask for help. Looking up from shoveling noodles into their mouths with chopsticks, I realized this place wasn't frequented by *gaijin*. Fortunately, my basic Japanese language skills fixed the uncomfortable situation. The owner cheerfully explained where I needed to go.

The audition was held in a large photo studio. An assortment of *gaijin* models dressed head-to-toe in black waited in line. Several Japanese men sat behind a table at the other end of the room. I joined the lineup. One at a time, a model would walk to the table as if they were on the catwalk, stop, jut out a jaw or a hip, perform a runway twirl, and then walk back to the end of the line.

Soon I saw my old pal Buckle Boots at the starting line. As he turned near the end of the walk, his pirouette was particularly exaggerated. It all seemed so forced, certainly not what I knew a businessman would do. When it was my turn, I picked up my briefcase, walked to the table, stopped to check my wristwatch and then walked back quickly as if I were late for an appointment. Buckle Boots laughed loud enough for everyone in the room to hear. The other models giggled.

I got the job.

The next Saturday I returned to the same studio for the shoot. Together with two *gaijin* businesswomen, we were supposed to "look amazed" as a Japanese businessman jumped into the air. The cameraman was trying to capture the very top of his jump while we maintained just the right facial expressions. This time, my job was easy, but I felt sorry for the poor man who had to jump on cue a hundred times.

A few weeks later I agreed to another audition because I thought the job would be cool. A Japan Airlines TV commercial was being produced and I was up for the co-pilot job. A weekend of being paid to hang out in the cockpit of a jetliner sounded like fun. But I arrived to find a hundred models waiting to show their stuff. Buckle Boots was there and this time he was in a business suit. I went through the motions, but it was too competitive.

As Japan's bubble economy began to deflate, modeling work was much more difficult to get. Auditions became the norm. Although I could find jobs held on weekends, auditions were normally held during business hours. And my real job was becoming more and more demanding in the nearly two years since I first arrived in Japan. I didn't have the time and it wasn't fun to chase long-shot opportunities, so I needed to ease myself out.

"Maya-san," I said. "I'm really sorry. I just can't go to auditions any more."

"OK, David-san," she sighed. I sensed she knew this was coming. "Business is tough. Nobody working enough. Many *gaijin* go home. Some teach English to make extra money. I will call if you get job, but no more audition."

I had a few more jobs before amateur-hour on the *gaijin* model market ended. In a print advertisement for hair coloring, I was so blurry in shadows of the background that you can't even tell it's me. No audition is fine, but they could have used a cardboard cutout for this one. A TV commercial for a new automobile had me petting a Dalmatian puppy. I was dejected when I found out that I would only be seen from the back. And the puppy made more than I did.

My last job was as an extra in what must be the most expensive opera ever staged. In late 1988, Teatro alla Scala chartered 747 jetliners to bring a thousand people from Milan to Tokyo for an extravagant production of Puccini's *Turandot* and three other operas. Franco Zeffirelli, the massive undertaking's designer, spared no expense in his mission to show the Japanese how real opera is done. The production had the best of everything: the biggest stars, a full orchestra and chorus, James Levine from the New York Metropolitan Opera to conduct, shiploads of sets and props, lavish costumes and countless extras. Japanese corporations of all types paid big money to sponsor the event and ticket prices were outrageous.

"But I cannot sing," I said to the flamboyant assistant director in charge of the extras when I showed up for the first day of rehearsals.

She gave me the sort of dirty look that only an Italian woman can get away with. “Of course you cannot sing. You just stand in the background with the rest of the crowd for *Turandot*’s Chinese street scenes.”

“But I’m *gaijin*,” I questioned. “I don’t look Chinese.”

“This is La Scala!” she shouted. “We do everything as Puccini had intended! We must employ hundreds of *gaijin* extras and make them up to look Asian. We cannot use real Asians!”

We worked through two weeks of rehearsals and then four performances of *Turandot*. The company also staged three other operas with a total of 16 performances. My girlfriend paid \$100 to stand in the back of the uppermost balcony of NHK Hall in order to see the top of my head with binoculars. The best seats were \$3,000; more if you got one through a scalper. A program was fifty bucks.

The opera production of La Scala reflected the end of Japan’s economic miracle. What a dramatic end it was! As the opening chords from the orchestra filled the hall and the curtain rose on the spectacular sets, the audience saw countless extras on stage, and there was an audible gasp and spontaneous applause. In the opening scene I helped carry a sedan chair containing the 250-pound, full-throated tenor soloist down a flight of stairs as he sang the opening aria commanding the townspeople to listen carefully to his important announcement.

An important announcement indeed: the bubble had burst. Within a year of La Scala, Japan was well into a decade-long recession. Since *Turandot* at NHK Hall, the *Nikkei* stock index has gone from 40,000 to under 10,000. Japanese real estate, if you can sell it at all, is worth 10% of its value at the economy’s peak. Foreclosures, bankruptcies and unemployment are all at historical highs and the government still sees no way out of the mess, even more than ten years since the beginning of the fall.

With the financial collapse, the majority of *gaijin* model market went bust too. Except for a select few elite models with impressive credentials or those who were willing to devote countless hours chasing auditions all over town, most people either left Japan or changed professions.

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The phone rang for what must have been the tenth time since I had returned from lunch.

I had been busy planning an important new product introduction and my deadline was fast approaching. I focused time and energy on each of the many details: marketing budgets, sales quotas, user guides and customer launch parties in cities from Bangkok to Sydney.

“David-san, this is Maya.”

“Maya-san.” We hadn’t spoken in months and I was caught off guard. “How are you doing?”

“I know it best not to call you in office,” Maya said. “But I have job for you.”

I looked up to make certain nobody was eavesdropping.

“If you can be sick from your company, next week you fly to Saipan and do brochure shoot for big hotel chain. A week in sunny resort island must be nice for you, David-san. Many *gaijin* want job but director want you.”

I smiled as bikinis, tropical drinks and palm trees came to mind. I glanced at the piles of paperwork on my desk. Then my eyes swept over columns of numbers on my computer screen. I could certainly use the break. I even flipped my appointment book to the next week.

But somehow I knew as soon as I had heard Maya’s voice on the telephone that I would never model again. It had been a terrific adventure, but it was over. I was really a businessman.

“Maya-san, thank you for asking but I’m too busy at work. I have to say no.”

“OK,” Maya said. “It is short notice.”

“Maybe its best if you take me off your list for good.”

I said goodbye to Maya for the final time, hung up the telephone and continued working on my budgets.