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CONVERSATIONS WITH A SEAGULL *by* ANNE HOTTA

Inside her head she's held there. Imprisoned by what she's seen.

Voyeurism?

No. She's a journalist. It's her job.

This particular job, however, is different. She's with her Japanese boyfriend, Keiyu. He knows what she's doing up there in this hell on earth. While she types, he reads novels, scrolls through his emails, goes to the hot spring baths. At first glance, onlookers might say their relationship's probably a physical one—cultural and language difficulties being what they are. But as much as they like having sex, they do share other interests. And commitments. She's forever grateful for all the times he's protected her—the trusting novice in the land of the inscrutable.

They've hired a car and driven northeast to Tohoku, the site of a giant tsunami and a nuclear meltdown. They talked about it as a 'pilgrimage'—paying their respects to the victims, supporting the survivors. She was tentative; barely six months after the event anyone not directly connected to the region had to be. Keiyu had spent holidays in the area as a child, but what reason did she have? An editor who wanted a story? Many would say it wasn't good enough.

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'Yes, Jennifer, the right. Do you have the right to tell this story?' Sensei stares out to sea. 'But what about Japanese visitors? Your Keiyu. Do they?' He pauses. 'They come. They see the residents, the survivors. People looking to rebuild, move forward.' He stands up. On one leg. He's a seagull. 'But they don't get it. What they see is not what they think it is. It's true, they're survivors, Jennifer, but they're also keepers. Custodians of that tragic day. For the rest of their lives. Witnesses to the almighty wrath of the gods. Oh yes, they seem to be going about their daily chores with a smiling face. Inside, though, they carry an unimaginable burden. It might be sacred—preparing the sake, the fresh rice cakes, delivering them to the gravesites...' He scratches about under his wing with his beak. 'Serving the departed for all of us. But you tell me, who would want such a job?'

'What if they're thinking of leaving?' She gestures towards the wasteland.

'They can't. They're the people of this valley. This bay. When the water needs land, or the land, water, they're here. Fishing and tending their rice fields.' She looks up at the glistening

paddies etched out of the cliffs. ‘That’s what they do. Infused through millennia with ancestral lore. Ancestral blood. Where else could they be who they are? Especially now, after what they’ve seen.’ He shakes his head. ‘The Earth and the Sea. At war. Violating, killing. Pillaging. Mercilessly. On *their* watch.’ He sighs. ‘Then there’s *obon*, Jennifer. The ancestors will still come back. Expect a welcome.’

Obon is a short period each summer when the deceased return to their places of birth and are welcomed back by their descendants. Many family members, no longer residing in their hometowns, also make the journey home. ‘We don’t just live with the departed after a tsunami, Jennifer. Or for that matter, during *obon*. They’re always here. Moving among us. At a time like this, the survivors are not the only ones searching for somewhere to shelter. Someone to share some sake.’ He sniffs at the salty air, looks over what was once his bay, his valley. ‘Jennifer, the water and the land are one. Even at war. They will not be partitioned off. And neither will the living and the dead.’

A little miffed by what seems like an unfair rebuke—after all, she’s not Japanese and this is pretty heavy stuff—she tells him they’re going to try. The government’s building new sea walls. Twenty-five meters high. Behind them they’ll make hills. Sand, gravel, stones. The survivors will live in tall concrete apartments. Safe.

‘Jennifer, please. Of course, they’ll build walls and barricades. Even hills. And, yes, apartment towers, too. But when the water has been disturbed and seeks out the land...’ His feathers shudder. ‘Do you really think humans

can control any of this? Control the sea? Force bays and valleys to do what *they* want? Huh!’ He pauses, settles. ‘You catch a cold. It becomes pneumonia. You suffocate in a hospital bed. You get shaken to pieces crouching under your kitchen table. Then you rush outside, run where others run. But it catches you and still you suffocate.’ He shakes his head. ‘Pneumonia. Sea walls. Look out there.’

They look out at a lone house, stalwart in a desert of putrid grey mud. The second floor gone, the ground floor no more than flapping panels hanging off wooden uprights. Open for everyone to see. A desecrated doll’s house.

‘Everything’s gone,’ she says.

‘Yes. Buildings, houses... It’s true, they’re gone. But consider this, Jennifer. I sleep on the sand, eat and drink on the water. Rest on the branches of trees. Different houses every day.’ He lifts his head. Demands full attention. ‘It’s true, the wood, the bricks and mortar are gone, but if you place all your trust in walls, you’re bound to be disappointed. Of course, you need a shelter. From cold, heat, those who want to eat you. But a fixed, impenetrable fortress? No. We live in our hearts, Jennifer. Our minds. Our souls. Sometimes we forget this. Become too attached. Covetous. Lose our way.’

‘I’m sorry, Sensei.’ How can she possibly understand what he feels?

‘Take me, Jennifer. That island over there. I slept on it a lot. Now? A bad combover.’ She smiles. But he’s right. Exposed roots—once were trees—straggle over a scalped limestone cranium. ‘Paradise. I had the pick of places. Now I have to camp up in the shrine. With crows.

They say I'm not the right sort for such a holy place. A one-legged profligate.' He turns to face the wind, bobs his head. 'Until tomorrow.' Then lifting himself up, he slides off her ledge, hitches a ride on the wind and glides down the side of the hotel, swirling about a bit—he knows she's watching—and he's gone.

That night she sits in the *onsen* bath of their concrete hotel, well above sea level. She is alone. Her mind drifts back to the day's lesson and Sensei's words. 'Infused through millennia with ancestral blood. Custodians. Serving the departed for all of us.' Serving a legacy so precious it's a sacred duty. Who, she wonders, serves the custodians? Serves those who have seen the 'unimaginable'? Carrying their gifts to makeshift burial sites. Solitary figures, kneeling there, arranging their rice cakes, flowers. Tears and sake.

One evening in an improvised bar, actually a tent used during the day for instructing volunteers, they meet a local taxi driver. Keiyu shares some hot sake and they start chatting. A genial, quietly spoken man, Keiyu draws people out. The taxi driver is no different.

'I was in my car, driving to a pick-up. Mid-afternoon. I knew it was massive. The road was heaving. Rocking the car. I turned the engine off. Clung to the wheel. When it stopped, the road was cracked. I backed up, called my wife. Lucky the phone still worked. I told her to get out of the house. Tsunami's coming. Run up the hills. Silly woman. How did she think she could run in high heel shoes? Like a child she was sometimes.'

'Maybe it was the nearest pair,' Jennifer says.

'She was in a hurry.'

Keiyu shakes his head at her. Surely, she knows a Japanese man of the driver's age can refer to his wife as 'silly'. He'd certainly done it before. And everyone had laughed, his wife included. Why would he be any different now?

'You know, the funny thing is,' he continues, 'the shoes were still on her. She bought them for her niece's wedding. Down in Tokyo. That's how I knew it was her. Poking out from under the sheet.' He sighs. 'I hardly eat rice anymore. Without her pickled radish, it's not rice. Some nights, I hear the cupboard doors rattling. Saucepans clanging about. She's angry with me for pulling her back. But after 45 years...'

The driver is silent. Jennifer has nothing to say either. Keiyu takes her hand under the table and squeezes it. 'It's going to be hard,' he says to her in English. 'But the world should know, as best you can, what happened here, Jen. To an ordinary guy like this.'

'As best you can.' Sensei said the same, but far more bluntly, when he first stood on her window ledge. 'I can give you the information, Jennifer. The cultural context. But it's only one interpretation. Then there's the translation into English. How can we expect your readers to understand what really happened here? Even those of us still living, don't. But you must try. Listen to them, Jennifer. Their words, their feelings. Their silences. You are their voice. They'll be forgotten soon enough.'

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She sits in the bath every night, relishing the warmth. Although it's the very place where her

physical differences are excruciatingly obvious, she usually feels relaxed. Content. Perhaps it's the sisterhood—women, naked and bathing together. Bereft of their trappings, carrying out the most basic of rituals.

1. *Wash yourself outside the bath.*
2. *Rinse off all soap and shampoo.*
3. *Then using your hand towel for modesty, approach the baths.*
4. *Before entering the water, fold the towel, and place it on your head or on the edge of the bath.*

She will follow the procedure, respect the customs. But her red hair, fair skin, lanky body can't be covered in 'procedures'. Inevitably, an outsider, a *gaijin*. No less so should she become the wife of a Japanese man. What would be the procedure for that?

When she comes back to their room, she mentions her writing.

'It's tormenting you,' Keiyu says. 'It's not your job to feel what these people feel, Jen. You can't. You can only represent them. As a journalist. At a distance. Hoping the rest of the world will comprehend something—anything—of what happened here. And care about it.'

'But the other night at that bar, didn't you say go beyond the events? Write about ordinary people? Kei, I've lived in Japan for five years. I speak the language. I'm not fly in, fly out. Of course, I don't feel what these people feel. But

I feel. How can I not?' She stops. She can't talk about the entanglement of taking on this disaster as a reporter, and taking on life with Keiyu as if they somehow inform each other. They haven't even discussed marriage.

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'Good morning, Sensei. Nice to see you.'

'Yes, yes. All that.' Even though he's propped up on one leg, the wind ruffling his soft neck feathers, he's formidable. 'Jennifer, Japanese culture is not just language, food, festivals. There's religion. Beliefs. We've talked about Buddhism, taking care of the dead, but I haven't mentioned Shintoism. How it's mixed up in this tragedy. Shinto gods are all around us. Gods of earth, water, air—air includes the gods of wind, storms. The intangibles. Deities live in everything. We treat them well, show some respect, and they make life peaceful. As you see, it doesn't always go right. We forget our duties. Become arrogant. Neglect those who gave us all we have. And then...? Earthquakes, typhoons, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis... Jennifer, are you ready for all this? Ready for this country?'

What a question. How did he know?

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'Jen, are you alright?'

'I've got a headache.' It's true she's got a headache, and true she can't go into what she's thinking about. Not yet.

'It's the pill. It's not good for you.'

'I don't want to get pregnant.' The medical establishment in Japan doesn't like the pill; her sister sends it to her from Australia.

‘One day you might.’ She’s lying next to him in the crook of his arm. He pulls her closer. ‘Shall we practise just in case?’

She laughs. ‘You never give up. Do you really see me having kids? Living out in the suburbs, getting them off to school, music lessons... On my bicycle? I don’t know if I could do that. I need to work.’

She’s said too much. He shifts his arm from under her. Sits up.

‘Seriously?’

‘Well, yes. But I’ve never really thought... We’ve never talked about marriage, kids... anything like that.’

‘We’ve been living together for nearly two years. It’s not such a stretch. I think my parents—I don’t know about yours—just assumed we’d get married.’

‘And they’d have grandkids.’

‘No. Not immediately. But... It’s natural, isn’t it? Parents think that way, don’t they?’

‘I don’t know. I guess so.’

She’s not ready for a marriage conversation even though some of her talks with Sensei have been heading in this direction. She just can’t get into it. Not in the midst of death, destruction and journalistic ethics. She gets off the futon, pulls on her undies, her *yukata*, and grabs a towel from the drying rack.

‘I won’t be long. I need a bath before they close for cleaning.’

Why hadn’t she said: ‘I need a bath before they... but I love you?’

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In the bath, outdoors and overlooking the sea,

she looks up towards 604. Maybe Keiyu’s looking down. Or Sensei. Would he understand her ‘unnatural’ attitude? Salty water leaking into her eyes, out of her eyes.

When she returns, Keiyu’s not in the room. She gets into bed and waits. It’s very late when he comes in. She pretends to be asleep. She hears him pulling his futon away from hers. Sleeping alone. In the morning he says he’s going back to Tokyo. He’s bought a bus ticket and will leave the car for Jennifer. ‘You might need it.’ He doesn’t have to go back—he has another day off work—but he says they both need thinking time. He apologises for drinking too much. He didn’t. He always snores when he drinks; he was silent all night. Awake. Like she was.

‘Stay as long as you need. Do you have money?’

‘Yes. I’m sorry about last night. You’re right, we weren’t ready. Bad timing.’

‘Can’t be helped. We’ll start again when you get back.’ The room phone rings. ‘It’s your photographer. He’s waiting in the lobby.’

‘Photographer?’ She’s forgotten; the editor said he’d try to find someone to work with her. How did he get here so early? ‘Tell him I’m on my way down.’ Shoving things into her bag—press permit, gas mask, keys—then giving him a quick kiss, she leaves. ‘I’ll get back to Tokyo as soon as I can.’

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She knows the photographer; he often works in Japan.

‘It’s awful, Jen. I can’t believe it. I got here last night. Couldn’t see much. But this morning...

How can you describe it?’

‘You can’t. That’s why you’re here, Chris.’

The newspaper has hired a taxi to take them to the places she’s writing about. Places filled with remnants. Of churned, tumbled and vanished lives. The detritus of valley people, bay people. Shredded ropes and fishing nets, dislocated red floats, reams of escaped plastic swinging on steel skeletons like clothing on a line, or transparent seaweed, swathing the underside of a jetty. Only it’s not a jetty; it’s a jungle gym. From a playground. A thing to cling to. Broken beyond repair.

‘What’s this?’ Chris points to a toy, a small kewpie doll resting in a basket for hand towels. It must have caught her, ferried her to safety. Wanted her to be found. He takes a photograph. ‘At least you can get your head around it.’

It’s not cold but he has a windproof on. Sensible. All the pollution, contamination in the air. She waits on an embankment, letting him walk further into the debris—the police don’t like too many visitors at one time, especially the press. It’s a crime scene after all. He picks his way around hard things: a pile of wooden splints held in place by congealed black oil and seaside sludge, folding screens, paper gone, frames snapped. Then there’s soft things like the toy doll, dead fish and flies. Everywhere, flies. Ravenous flies. He can’t shoot easily with a gas mask on. Suddenly, he stops, raises his hand. Then he tugs at his bag, takes out a white flag.

Plants it. Waves again.

‘We’re coming.’ In hard hats and rubber boots, carrying picks, levers, tools for excavating, two policemen hurry towards him. Gently but efficiently, they do what they must. Chris turns away. Vomits. He’s embarrassed. Keeps bowing. Apologising. Twenty minutes later, he finds a photo album jammed into a desk drawer. It doesn’t belong there. He tugs on it, takes it out. ‘Maybe the pages could be dried out. Pried apart. If you’re careful.’

‘No. Put it back.’ She starts to walk away.

‘But everyone has an album. People can relate... Maybe we can hand it in.’

‘Hand it in? No, not us. I’ll wait for you over there.’

What she wants to say is, we’re not the right sort for such a holy place.

After he finishes, Jennifer takes him to another village where they buy green tea and *onigiri* rice balls for lunch. She tells him she’s leaving early the next day; she wants to get back to Tokyo. Chris says he needs more time and will stay on. They agree to meet with the editor as soon as he returns.

‘I’m sure Adrian will be very happy with your work,’ she says.

She’s not so sure he’ll be happy with her proposal to write a series of articles on The Great Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami called *Conversations with a Seagull*.