

Cigarette
Rob Walker.

Watanabe stares at his fingers curled round the steering wheel. Other teachers see him in the car park as they arrive. Perhaps he's planning the day's lessons or waiting for the end of the news. But when he isn't in the staff room 30 minutes later they go back and there he is, staring through the windscreen. Seeing nothing. When they knock on his window he says he's fine, grabs his collapsed briefcase and heads for the office.

Perhaps the hacking cough will be eased by a cigarette. Morning Staff Meeting has finished early. He can get down to the ground floor, slip on his Outside Shoes and hide behind the gate pillar for a quick draw – maybe three quarters of a Hope – and back to Lesson 1 in four minutes. He's done it before. He gives a nod or a '-masu'.

There's a small knot of them there. All middle-aged men with grey hair and skin to match. The students are safely locked in. Only late-arrivals will see their teachers drinking in the furtive smoke. *Nomimasu*. Drinking. The chrome gate is a massive structure on track and wheels. It could keep out a tank.

All the men dye their hair. Some try to take off twenty years and go for black, but most go for a shade somewhere between. Like that *gaijin* book, he thinks grimly, fifty shades of grey. At least he doesn't have one of those cheap jobs with their tinge of purple or blue...

The public address plays the Chimes of Dunkirk and they draw in deep, final inhalations and the glowing orange tips race towards their lips. They squint from smoke and concentration or pleasure and stamp out unfinished butts and the nicotine is already in the bloodstream for the three hour haul until lunchtime.

Watanabe's hands shake. He was called out by the police this morning at 2 am. Some kids in his class were causing trouble at the 24 hour McDonalds. The police always call the *sensei* first. There were no charges pressed. A brow-beating for the boys from him, *gomenasais* all round to Manager and Police, then drive the boys home to their parents. All this in less than two hours, but at home he couldn't get back to sleep. If his wife were still there he could talk to her. Perhaps she would massage his shoulders. She'd been good at that. Now she was back with her parents. The chances of reconciliation were about as likely as snow in July and neither wanted the shame of divorce.

At four he takes the last temazepam he begged from the doctor. It doesn't work, his mind a roulette wheel. The little silver ball of thoughts spins against the wheel, rolls down into a groove and whips into a circle. Then it jumps out *Pachinko!* Bounces off the rim like a pinball and flies off at a new tangent.

Will she ever come back? I must submit my schedule tomorrow morning... I forget return-gift for Sakata-sensei... three more math tests to correct before Thursday... should I get my hair cut before parent interviews?

He turns the light back on. Perhaps one more cigarette.

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Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 1, November 2014.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

And so it goes, one thought bouncing off another like a *pachinko* ball, each tangent a catalyst for a new chain reaction. Yes. He is the *pachinko* ball. Contained. Out of control. Contained. Out of control.'