

Japanese Time

A short story by Neil S. Plakcy

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I was living in New York, staying with an old college friend in graduate school at Columbia and working the late shift at a restaurant on Columbus Avenue. During the day I struggled to write a novel, and for eight hours every night, I washed dishes, plunging soiled plates into a sink full of soapy suds, rinsing them with a harsh spray of boiling water and then stacking them neatly in the rack to drain until I could wipe them dry with one of a set of tattered linen cloths. I wore a Seiko watch, a fancy day and date model with a metal band which had been given to me by my parents as a college graduation present. I even wore it at the restaurant, because the band would expand enough to be pushed up over my bicep while I worked, tank-topped and sweaty, in the heat of all that equipment.

It was a friendly place, frequented by would-be chic Upper West Siders in expensive clothes, who drank the best wines proffered and ate platters of faux southwestern cuisine presented with unusual fruits and unexpected decorations. The staff was composed of unemployed actors, out-of-work writers, artists waiting for discovery in a new SoHo gallery, and dancers between shows. The head waiter, Lucas, had a master's degree in music from Oberlin, and as the evening hours expired he could be coaxed to the highly polished baby grand poised against the side wall, where he entertained the staff and regulars with boogie woogie from the '40s, jazz from the '50s, and early rock'n'roll from the '60s.

After about one am, there were few platters to cook and even fewer dishes to wash, and it was easy to get the kitchen cleaned up so that we could all go out and sing along around the piano. One night in November, just after the first cold snap, a party came into the restaurant just before midnight, a distinguished-looking couple

in their mid-sixties, accompanied by a guy and two girls who looked to be just a few years older than I was.

I didn't see them come in; I was still back in the kitchen then. But Tom, a waiter who was a fellow writer, alerted me a few minutes later. "Do you know who's here?" he asked, rushing in, leaving the double doors banging behind him. "Ricardo Mitchell and his wife."

I knew the name. Ricardo Mitchell's grandfather had founded one of the big Wall Street investment banks, and he had started a literary magazine shortly after graduating from Harvard. *New Literature* had published Ginsberg, Kerouac and the other Beats, then been one of the first to publish the black writers who emerged from the sixties. Since then, it had been in the forefront of every literary movement. Publication in *New Literature* was a sure sign that a writer had promise.

"I'm going to slip a poem under his plate," Tom said, reaching down into his backpack for the battered folder of poems he always carried with him.

"Think I can get a chapter under there, too?" I asked, rinsing what seemed like my thousandth plate of the evening.

Tom ignored me. I was accustomed to that; dishwashers were the lowest of the low on the restaurant hierarchy, and Tom only deigned to talk to me at all because I'd had a short story published in a little literary magazine a few months before.

I moped for a while, regretting that I was stuck back in the kitchen, until I started thinking about a place in my novel where I was blocked, and figured out what I wanted to do. Then I forgot all about Ricardo Mitchell, until I heard the piano start up out in the dining room.

I finished the last few dishes I had to wash and pulled my apron off. I slipped through the swinging doors and joined the group at the piano, where the manager, the waiters and waitresses, and a couple of the line cooks were banging out time on

the lid as a couple jitterbugged in the front window.

The couple, I soon figured out, were graduate students in creative writing at Columbia, two of those who had come in with Ricardo Mitchell. When the music stopped, suddenly Tom began reading his poem. Everyone in the room maintained a respectful silence for a few minutes, though the poem was, in my opinion, too sentimental and nothing *New Literature* would ever publish.

But Mitchell led the applause when Tom finished, and flipped a card out of his wallet. My heart sank as Lucas launched into another song, and I realized I wouldn't get the chance Tom had. I kept singing, snapping my fingers, and shuffling my feet, though, because these nights were what I lived for, this brief glimpse of life in the arts. It was the life I'd dreamed of when I was in a small-town college, staying up late alone in the library, scribbling my stories into spiral notebooks, sitting in the audience when any visiting writer passed through town.

I noticed that the other graduate student was standing next to me, singing along, and we smiled at each other. Then when Lucas slipped into something quiet and instrumental, she turned to me and said hello. "Are you a musician, too?" she asked.

I shook my head. "A writer. Though not a poet," I hastened to add.

"Thank god," she said. "Ricardo's an angel, though, isn't he? He's so good to any young writer."

"So how do I get him to be good to me?" I asked, before I could even think about what I was saying.

"Be good yourself," she said. "Are you?"

I shrugged. "I work hard." I told her about the story I'd had published.

"I read that!" she said. "It was amazing." She told me that she and the other graduate students had been helping Ricardo Mitchell put together the next edition of *New Literature*, reading through every journal and little magazine looking

for talent. "Come on, you've got to meet him." She grabbed my hand and dragged me over to Mitchell's table, where she introduced me.

Mitchell was just as gracious to me as he'd been to Tom, giving me his card and inviting me to submit something for the next issue. I thanked him profusely, and then, not wanting to overstay my welcome, said that there were probably dishes back in the kitchen that needed washing.

Before I could slip away, the girl told me her name was Carol, and she gave me her phone number, along with an invitation to a reading up at Columbia a few days later. I told her I was sure I'd see her there. "Maybe we can go out afterwards," I said, over the sound of Lucas, who was belting through "I Heard it Through the Grapevine." "Someplace a little quieter than this."

"Count on it," she said.

I banged back through the double doors and picked up my apron, my heart pounding, already thinking about the story I'd send to Ricardo Mitchell. I popped the band on my watch so I could slip it up over my bicep, and I caught sight of the time. That late at night, the words for the days of the week on my watch would rotate up into the watchworks, and for an hour or two of the very late evening or very early morning the Japanese character would come up in the day box.

I didn't know if I'd fall in love with Carol, or if Ricardo Mitchell would ever publish one of my stories. But in those enchanted moments of the early morning, knowing I was already a part of that wonderful life in the arts was all that mattered, those few brief hours of Japanese time.