

EMILY SCHULTZ

## SUSHI HARU

She said she was in love with loneliness, that there was something ecstatic about it. The chicken karage, halfway to my mouth when I overheard, tumbled from my chopsticks and landed in the soy. I put my left knuckles on the bench beside me (chopsticks still balanced in my right) and lifted myself ever so slowly, half an inch or so, hoping no one would notice. But in spite of the position, I still couldn't see the eyes of the woman who'd made the admission. A high black wall surrounded our booths. She was separated from me, giving me only glimpses through a cut-out design slatted with bamboo.

*Loneliness is like a bruise that you can't help running a finger over.*

My own companion glanced over at me but didn't smile. Her name was Ashley but she preferred to grimly call herself Ash (which, I had to admit, went well with her complexion). Ash, I had learned in the past thirty minutes, had taught English in Japan a lifetime ago—the '90s, she'd said, with quotation marks made from fingers. She trekked home when her live-in boyfriend of the time took a post in a tumultuous Taiwan—in spite of her earnest protests, in spite of her having said she would not follow him there under *any circumstances*. I wondered if he'd country-hopped for that specific reason. Since then, Ash had been dating, but nothing serious *yet*, she said, and concentrating on perfecting the application of lip liner.

She was a tattoo aesthetician, and I couldn't fathom how I had failed to gather this information from her online profile. I had thought she was a tattooist. In our e-mail exchanges, she'd seemed a little flatter than expected—down to earth, I'd reassured myself. At least she'd written back. I knew she'd lived with someone before—that was in the profile and I'd thought it a reasonably good sign. People who'd lived with other people were more likely to make room in their lives, more likely to succeed in future relationships, weren't they? The Japan thing and the tattooing had been what raised my interest initially, made me think of her as someone with zing who might bring to my life a kind of youth and vitality.

She was looking for a professional man, but one who also liked to *take risks and have fun*. Her *passions* were: *movies, parties, good friends, good music*. She was five or six years older than she'd said—closer to my age—and I couldn't help wondering if she'd posted her profile several years ago and purposely neglected to update it. In her photo, she looked more personable, relaxed: she wore a

black long-sleeve T and a pair of old jeans. In person, she wore three shades of taupe, and two more shades of it on her face. Unless that was permanent ...

Her lids fell and she stared at the fumbled deep-fried lump of karage. There it sat—an overly crisp, fallow-coloured, misshapen knot of flesh. Normally, I would have made some self-deprecating comment about my clumsiness, but I found I'd clammed: I wanted to hear. The conversation at the next table was so much more alive than ours, and even though all I could see of the speaker through the slatted partition was her mouth, I felt as if I was dining two feet over.

No aesthetician had gotten at that mouth. The lips were a raw pink, the eyeteeth slightly crooked but shining. This woman had a valentine-shaped face. I could make out her tight triangular chin, the curve into a pair of cherubic cheeks, freckles like someone had flicked brown paint at her.

Her date had obviously mumbled some kind of disbelief, because her voice, which had a choppy cadence, persisted low and sweet.

*What happened was this:*

*I went through this intense break-up. I moved here from Montreal and walked around the Annex in a daze. All the time I felt as if I had some illness. I mean, I felt like I was bursting with this thing. I would go to Yonge Street and buy a used book every week—you saw, I still have stacks of them. The thickest I could find. Like, 'I can't kill myself before I finish London Fields,' 'Or Anna Karenina,' 'Or One Hundred Years of Solitude ...' Don't worry, this was seven years ago, I'm fine now. Everything you feel is so huge at that age—*

I blinked. She was hardly old enough for such a statement. Thirty, maybe. No, that was wishful thinking. She was younger. Twenty-seven. Twenty-five.

Ash's cuttlefish arrived and our attention shifted from the dreadful dropped karage, which I retrieved and consumed in a necessary gulp. Her complexion actually warmed slightly as the server slid plates onto the table between us: ruby-laden sashimi, perversely flesh-like, along with tightly spiraled black seaweed bubbling orange roe, and solid cucumber-avacado rolls. In spite of her brief stint in Asia, Ash had selected two things that sounded terrible: the Salmon Pizza and the CNE Roll. I wasn't sure what was in either, but both tasted like fairgrounds. I was thankful I'd insisted on adding my own selections regardless of her protests that it would be too much. I had come hungry, in spite of knowing this was a mistake for any date one might want to terminate quickly. One never arrives with the intention of leaving, though.

Ash consumed silently, nipping at the food with her chopsticks quickly, as if it would bite her. Carrying on a conversation with her was difficult. She asked nothing of me—nothing of my previous relationships, my work in statistics, my interest in music—and she tended to parcel out

information about herself so exactly, I was convinced that beneath the table in her designer purse she had a set of measuring spoons to size each thing she said. She was also the type who was self-conscious about eating, which wasn't helping our situation. The sushi was larger than her mouth, so most of her vigor went into encompassing, chewing, and swallowing. The rest of her energy went into avoiding eye contact, clutching at her tiny waist and saying she couldn't possibly, and then arrow-quick selecting another piece and starting the process again. At least she was an expert with the chopsticks.

She had chosen the restaurant, and when I asked her, she said that *Haru* meant *born in the spring*. I felt as if she'd filled a whole tablespoon with that piece of information. In New York there was a famous restaurant called Haru, but Ash and I were a long way from New York. Outside the window on College Street, Toronto was beginning to cloak itself in the din of night, wrapping itself in another layer of gloss, gathering together the bleat of horns and the nervous pulse of electronic music. It was March and everything smelled vaguely rotten out there, garbage and long-dead autumn leaves and old dog shit breaching the melt, yet the girls were ready for their shortest skirts and highest heels—as if the season had already broken in spite of the slick sidewalks that threatened to congeal into ice again at the slightest whim.

How long were you in Japan? What was it like, growing up in Niagara? What are your clients like? Do you have to entertain them the way a dentist or a hair stylist would? I mean, they can't talk while you're working on them, can they?

If there were answers to these questions, I knew I would forget them before our drinks arrived. Cucumber vodka for Ash. Sapporo for me.

At the next table, the woman and her date were only ordering now. They were two courses behind us. *Edamame and the Spring Bento*, I heard the woman order with obvious pleasure, anticipation. Haru, I had named her in my mind, after the restaurant, though she wasn't Asian—or was she? I couldn't see enough of her to say for sure. Then Haru's mouth went on, opening and closing delightfully. Her male dining partner had a vocal pitch that wasn't registering. Perhaps purposely, all I could hear was her:

*I remember taking my roommate's cat to the vet with her—I was living with this older, kooky cat lady because all I could afford back then was a room—and there was an Xray taped to the wall. This Xray: it was of the dog that swallowed a knitting needle. It lived for months with this needle inside it, almost as long as it was. A terrier at that. I'm not making this up. The family discovered it purely by accident. All of the dog's internal organs had moved about to accommodate the knitting needle, and the picture showed it, extending from its esophagus practically to*

*its tail. As soon as I saw it I thought, 'That's it, that's how I feel, like there's this long sharp thing inside me. I'm growing around it and no one knows it's there.'*

*For the next couple weeks, there were capital letters in my mind: THE DOG WHO SWALLOWED A KNITTING NEEDLE ...*

Her voice rose. Even as she relayed her saddest story, there was an odd lilt: excitement and humour in the telling, a confession. *I walked around kind of replaying this phrase to myself on volume ten. But after I had this image for the feeling, it subsided. Gradually, it just went away. The whole thing. I did grow around it, I guess. I just kept on.*

I watched my Haru. She would lean across the table, her long hair swaying, and for a second, I thought she would shift clearly into my line of vision. But she didn't. *That's it*, she said, *my biggest heartbreak. What about you?*

I inquired whether Ash considered herself impulsive. I asked about her dreams. I tried to lean toward my date, incline my head to indicate interest, as Haru on the other side had done with her partner. If I went to Ash's apartment and pressed the Eject button on her CD player, what would I find there?

*I have an iPod.* She raised an eyebrow at me and looked genuinely confused. *Don't you?*

Ash moved the straw round and round her drink. *What do you do for a living?* she asked with a kind of finality.

I wondered if I would be more interested if she were asking me the questions I could hear at the next table. I decided I wouldn't. I was ninety-six percent sure that if such questions came from Ash's mouth, it would be a mean kind of lie, a desire to play at intimacy rather than actually experience it. She ambushed another piece of maki. Before she transferred it to the prison of her sharply browned mouth she said, *They come all the way from South America, you know. Then they go to Japan. Then they come here.*

I felt like looking under the table for her measuring spoons. What did? I asked, but she was chewing now.

*The fish*, Ash said eventually. *They grow them in farms down there. For the Japanese.*

The server was passing by, carrying two steaming bowls of miso to the table where my mysterious beauty was seated (only on miso still!), and I raised a hand and ordered two more drinks for us, though Ash hadn't finished her first. As we sipped, I also watched Haru place her lips against the tiny black bowl. Steam clouded the bud of her nose. Was it wrong that I felt I would know her if only I caught a glimpse of her eyes?

Yes, Ash said with alarming strength and decision. *These little guys are born just to get to our mouths.* I wondered if my attention shift had made her reckless. *To do it they have to travel around the world twice. They get flown from south of the equator, to Japan where they're sold and redistributed, and then flown back here. It's quite a trip.* It was the most she had said in one breath since we'd sat down. The information rested between us like the last of the cold packed rice.

When every piece of sushi was gone—finally I was grateful for Ash's protestations, because they'd drawn our dinner out—I agreed to the third drinks the server wisely offered, and after that, it was my intention to agree to the green-tea ice cream too! If only to continue to attempt to catch a glimpse of Haru, who was relating a dream she'd had the previous night in meticulous and surreal detail. By the time our neighbours were finishing their bentos, Ash was looking less nervous, though perhaps slightly sick to her stomach. She excused herself to the ladies' room. Finally I was free. Finally I could try to peek through the bamboo slats at Haru.

I was rising off the bench when I realized that her mouth was moving with me—she was doing the same. I watched in horror. Haru slid, turning away as she did, from the booth, from my view. She headed in the opposite direction—a blue bloused back—toward the ladies' room as Ash had done. *Right back,* she called without turning her shining head. Her companion answered woodenly, as he had done all evening.

Once she was gone, he took out his cell phone and I could hear him keying into it. *Hey,* he said into the mouthpiece, speaking louder than before, I thought, due to the connection. *Goin' alright. Flakier than you said though.*

I wadded the napkin into the tiniest ball possible.

He was a white guy in a jean jacket, average build. Other than that, I could only see the back of his toque. *I'm still takin' her home. Pub-leese,* the head drawled.

When Ash returned, she said she wasn't feeling well and that she thought we should call it a night. I agreed. The server arrived with our third drinks, and I told her to charge us for them anyway. I had to go to the back of the restaurant to pay. Part of me hoped that she would be there, emerging from the bathrooms that were tucked in between the bar and the kitchen. Haru. Or whatever her real name was.

But the women's room door remained closed. She was in there, somewhere behind that large black W.

I threw down more money than I should have and didn't get change. At the front of the restaurant, Ash was waiting for me, one hand on the door, face glassy as the pane behind her. She

was wavering on skinny legs and skinnier stilettos. I hastened, put a hand gently on her back, opened the door for her, and we stepped cautiously into the night.

As Ash was looking this way and that down the street for a taxi, I contemplated seeing her into the cab and then going back in. It had been foolish to flee, to leave Haru there with this man she surely knew no better than I knew Ash. But something happened after Ash flagged the cab.

She turned and said, *Thank you. I had a nice time*, in a voice that left no doubt she felt the opposite. With the cab door standing open and the driver looking over his shoulder at us, I took her by her taupe trench sleeves and kissed her. Just before I did, she said, *Oh*.

The kiss was gentle, and longer than I expected it to be even as I was doing it. I hadn't expected to do it at all. It tasted like something old, something I used to know, yet I wasn't thinking of Ash, or the woman at the next table, or anyone I had ever seen, dated, or slept with. I didn't think about anyone. When we parted, the cabbie said, *Where to?* and she got in and shut the door, not quickly and not reluctantly, but I knew we would never meet again.

I walked four blocks through a fog, club-goers weaving past me, laughing. I stood in front of a shop window looking at discount electronics, my shape hovering vaguely in the glass. There was nothing ecstatic about loneliness, I thought.

**Emily Schultz** is the author of the novel *Heaven Is Small* (House of Anansi Press, 2009). She edits the Toronto tab of *Joyland.ca*, the short fiction site she co-founded.