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[Forum]

# Sleeping Together

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by Gideon Lewis-Kraus

She bowed and introduced herself as Yukiko and I knew it was her real name. I'd heard about the games played by the women in Tokyo's hostess bars, that they introduced themselves first with a fake name, then, after a few minutes, reintroduced themselves to their "special" customers with their real name, i.e., a different fake name. But I was and remain sure that the name she gave me, which was not Yukiko, was her real name. She was from Saitama prefecture, the New Jersey of Tokyo. I told her I was from New Jersey, the Saitama of New York. She was twenty and this was only her second time. She wore her own pajamas: a gray top with yellow flowers and puffy gray shorts with a ruffled hem.

For ¥3,000, or about thirty dollars, I had gotten a membership card at Tokyo's first co-sleeping café, and then I paid another ¥3,000 for forty minutes of sleeping; it's ordinarily ¥5,000, but as a first-timer I was eligible for a promotional rate. (A ten-hour package costs ¥50,000, a 20 percent discount off the hourly rate.) The café had a video explaining that all sexual overtures, regardless of financial incentivization, would be refused. But there were add-ons available: I chose staring into each other's eyes (1 min, ¥1,000) and being patted on the head (1 min, ¥1,000). Other options included having the woman change her pajamas once, spooning, or sleeping with your head in her lap. As appealing as they were, those had all struck me as crossing some sort of line.

Yukiko and I lay down on our foam pallet and she covered us with a flimsy blanket. It had the overwashed nap of a child's transitional object. She leaned toward the cubicle wall to set one of two pink egg timers she'd withdrawn, along with her phone, from a pink pencil case, then flopped onto her back. I followed her lead. We looked at the ceiling. Our bodies did not touch. There wasn't even a pretense that we were actually going to sleep.

First of all, we were too nervous. Second, it was seven P.M. Third, she was going to be switched out for a second-round sleeper after twenty minutes. Furthermore, there was too much to talk about. Her English was surprisingly not bad — when she was fifteen she took a vacation to Australia, the only time she ever enjoyed to leave Japan — but she kept her phone nearby for assistance. It was a white iPhone 5. This was, she said again, only her second shift at the co-sleeping café.

"Did you sleep the first time?"




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"Didn't sleep, no."

"Did you talk?" Yukiko nodded. "What did you talk about?"

"We talked about his work. He talked about his work at a company."

"Do you mind if I write this stuff down?"

"Yes, okay to write down." Yukiko smiled, seemed to loosen a little bit. Her teeth were small and even and spaced far apart. I reached for my notebook, which I'd hidden on the windowsill behind the heart lamp in the hope that, if I failed to fall asleep, I might record what it felt like to be here, not sleeping.

"What was his work?"

"It was . . . *hokken*." She felt around beside her for her phone, decided she could just explain it. "Like, when I get sick, when I hurt myself, I get money." She waved her arms in rapid swoons toward her chest, as though she were in one of those game-show flying-money wind chambers.

"Insurance?"

"Yes, insurance! Insurance. That's right. He was insurance-salesman celeryman."

"Did he get any of the options?"

"He wanted five-second hug option."

"How much does that cost?"

"*Sen* yen." A thousand yen.

"What was it like?"

She mimed wrapping her arms around a thorn tree. She wincingly patted the thorny emptiness.

"Why do you think he came here, to the sleeping café?"

"He wanted five-second hug maybe because he had no one to hug. Japan is *haji* culture. Shame. Is shame culture. Or maybe also is shyness. I don't know why. Tokyo people . . . very alone. And he does not have . . . " She thought for a second, shrugged, reached for her phone. "Please hold moment."

She held it close to her face, multitouched the screen not with thumb and forefinger but with tiny forefinger and middle finger. I could hear another customer whispering in Japanese in the silk-walled cubicle at our feet. His co-sleeper laughed loudly, then laughed softly. Yukiko tapped a button and shone the phone at my face. The screen said COURAGE.

"You also got option." She looked up at a laminated card posted over the bed. "Two option. First option, we watch." She pointed to her eyes, which were small and black and wide-open. It looked as though she was wearing those contacts that make your pupils seem larger. She smoothed her hair, tucked it behind her ears, smoothed it again. She started the




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Yukiko smoothed her hair, put her hand to her chin. “Customers think this is different from *kyabakura.* The options here aren’t . . . deep. No deep option. There’s just pat the back and watch the watch.” She pointed to her eyes, then mine. Watch the watch. “It’s very . . . soft . . . here. They cannot do the deep thing because they don’t have the courage. Don’t have the courage to cabaret club.” In other words, it’s easy here. Even a hostess club, or a cabaret club, has a ritual to it, a social component; the man is expected to play his part. Here the lone expectation is that he be present horizontally.

“In *kyabakura* you do not sleep. You cannot sleep. You cannot sleep with me. Here you do pure things.” I think she meant pure as in simple. Simple but also intimate. We were, after all, lying in bed, shabby as the bed may have been.

“What about the maid cafés?”

“Not like in maid café, where maids have to do lovely actions. I don’t want to do.”

“You mean sexual actions?”

“No, not sexy actions. Lovely. Loving.” She made a brittle heart in the air with her hands and grimaced. She quickly shook it off. In the maid cafés, the whole point is the performance of servile adorability.

“But here you just have to sleep.”

“Just have to sleep, yes. Pure thing.”

“But then you don’t actually sleep, you just end up talking most of the time.”

“This my only second time.”

“Sorry, you just ended up talking once.”

“Yes, once. He talk to me about work, and I have . . . Please hold moment.” She looked to her phone, which she’d been holding in her left hand. Before she could tap I ventured a guess.

“Sympathy?”

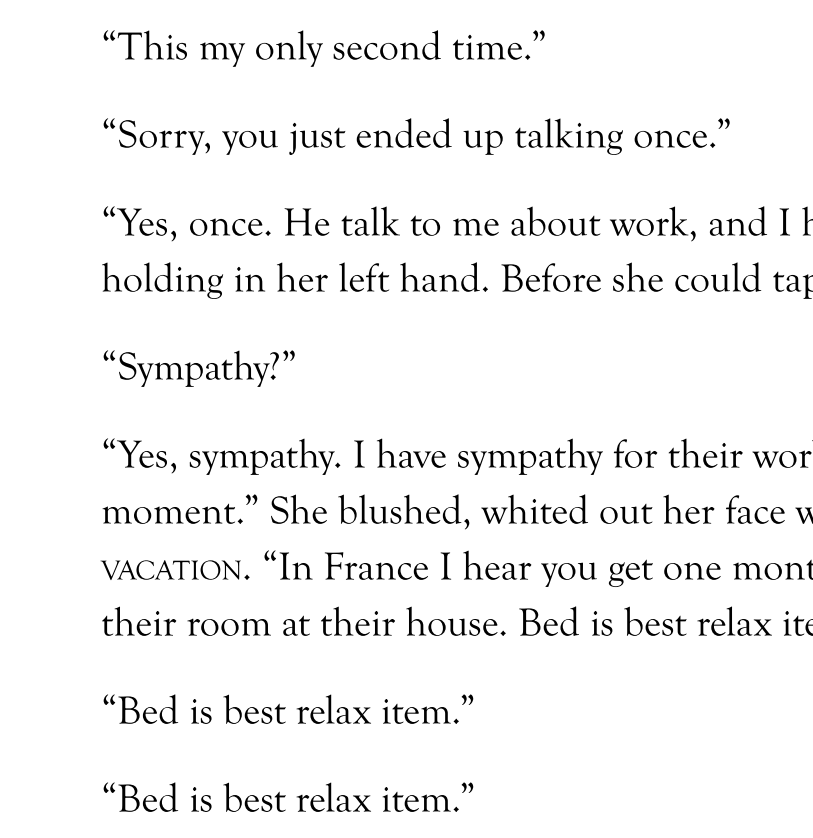
“Yes, sympathy. I have sympathy for their work. For *any* work. I am at work now. In Japan you have no . . . Please hold moment.” She blushed, whited out her face with her screen, tapped lightly. She held the phone out. It said PAID VACATION. “In France I hear you get one months. But Japan is no. Men come here want time, relax time. It’s like being in their room at their house. Bed is best relax item.”

“Bed is best relax item.”

“Bed is best relax item.”

“But here they are with you.”

“Here they are with me.” She turned to the ceiling for a few seconds, turned back to watch the watch again, this time off-clock.




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"No."

She rose to her knees, smoothed her pajama shorts, pulled at their ruffled hem, smoothed her hair, put her two pink timers and her white iPhone 5 into her pencil case, and bowed and said goodbye it was nice to meet you and bowed again. She withdrew behind the flutter of cheap silk.

I lay back next to a Pikachu.

On my way to the café, I'd stopped for a drink. Since the Japanese recession began, in the 1990s, there's been a resurgence in enjoyment of a drink called Hoppy. Hoppy was first marketed after the war, when most people couldn't afford to drink beer; beer was something you kept in your home for very special occasions. Hoppy is a nonalcoholic beer drink that comes in a clear bottle with a retro design. A Hoppy cocktail is a bottle of Hoppy served with a tall glass half full of cheap, tasteless *shochu,* Japanese grain alcohol, on the rocks. You pour the watery nonalcoholic beer drink over the cheap iced grain alcohol and come away with a counterfeit beer. But because it's half grain alcohol, it's extremely strong. You get drunk very fast. It's fake, but powerful.

Three minutes passed. You couldn't really sleep in here if you tried. Timers in cubicles kept beeping. I lay by the Pikachu in the orange light, watched the ceiling, and listened for sounds in the alley outside.

Yukiko parted the pink silk.

"I'm back again. Not someone else." She tried to explain but I waved it off.

"I figured you'd come back again." She pulled the thin cover over us and we returned to our backs and resumed neither sleeping nor touching.

"Does anyone ever sleep? You said the *otaku*s sometimes slept."

"Maybe sometimes. My friend, who worked here first, she is how I found out this place, she had a man sleep for eight hours. It costed forty thousand yen. Maybe he is rich."

"Did your friend sleep, too, when the man was sleeping?"

"Maybe a little bit. I think she was bored."

"What did they do? Options, I mean. Did the man have options?"

"They did only this." She motioned for me to lift my head. She put her arm around my head in a tense, shallow spoon. I settled against it.

She yanked away her arm. "No, this is option!"

She laughed to cover the yanking and our embarrassment. I felt ashamed. I'd tried to get an option for nothing, even after she'd said I was like her. I was unlike her.

"Do any of the girls have boyfriends?" I asked.




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"I am student, at Japan Women's University."

"What do you study?"

"Culture. And society. But I want to be cosmetics and work skin care. I am student, so I have time but no money. I have other job too. I tell my parents am at other job. When I am here I tell my parents I am at tapioca-and-crêpe shop."

I'd seen the places she was talking about; it was a chain. Or maybe there was more than one chain. They sold tapioca drinks and crêpes.

"I work here to save money for a trip. At maid café you make eight hundred fifty yen one hour. Here work is . . . Please hold moment." PAID COMMISSION. "I make more money with option."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Belgium."

"Belgium?"

"Belgium."

"Why?"

"My friend, friend who also work here, friend who brought me to work here, has boyfriend from Belgium. He is very nice. He says nice things about Belgium. I want to go there, to Belgium. Have you been to Belgium?"

"Yeah, once, briefly. I'm actually going there next week."

"Next week you go to Belgium?"

"Yes."

"Next week you go to Belgium." She paused, lay still. "I don't think I go on with this job."

We were quiet.

"It makes you feel bad."

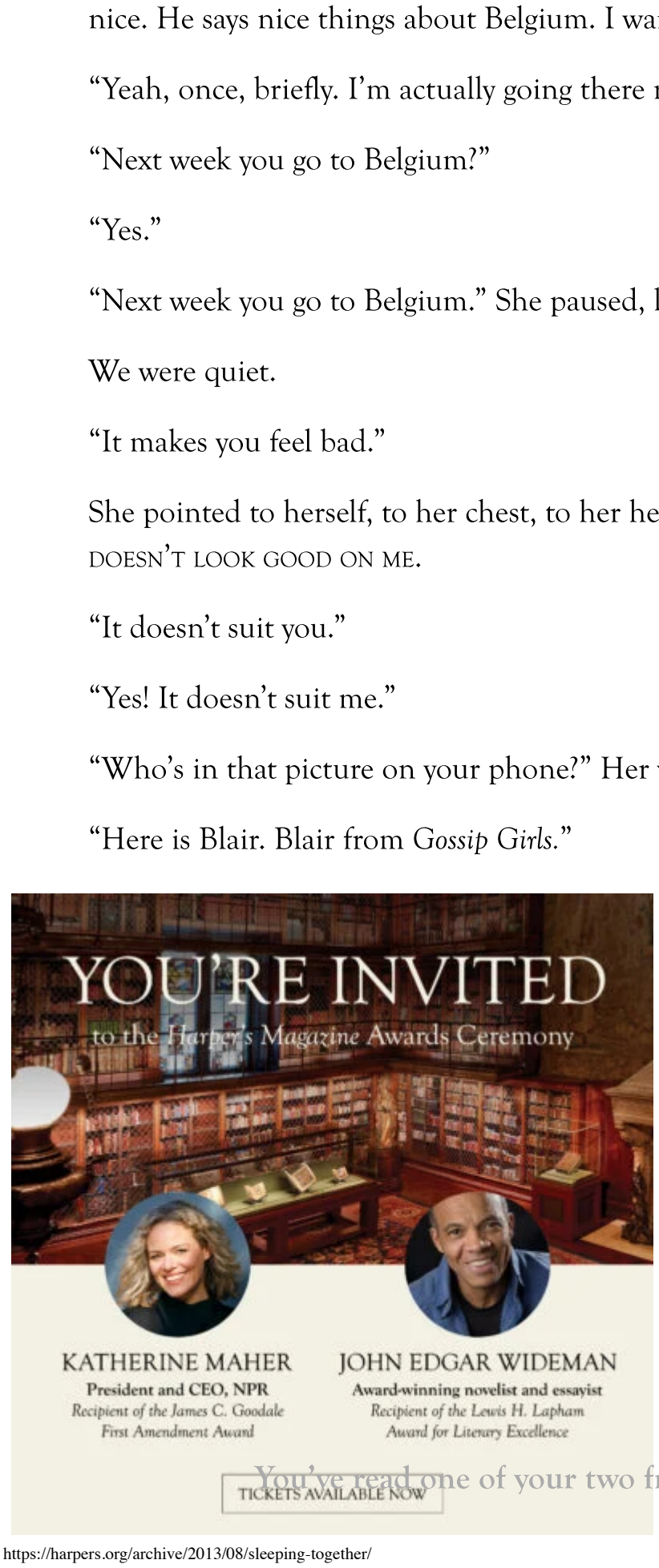
She pointed to herself, to her chest, to her heart. "Makes me feel bad. It doesn't . . . suits. Please hold moment." IT DOESN'T LOOK GOOD ON ME.

"It doesn't suit you."

"Yes! It doesn't suit me."

"Who's in that picture on your phone?" Her wallpaper was a uniformed schoolgirl, a Westerner. She laughed.

"Here is Blair. Blair from *Gossip Girls*."




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behavior and Western inclinations of the youngest have brought them shame. They try to take comfort in the Japanese rituals celebrating impermanence, such as the annual viewing of the cherry blossoms. The apparently untranslatable Japanese title evokes both snow and blossoms.

I flicked my finger to the bottom of the Wikipedia entry, selected the tab for other languages, and brought up the Japanese version. I passed Yukiko the phone. Her timer began to beep. Our second twenty minutes were up.

She began to read, then turned the beeping timer off. “Please hold moment.”

She held the phone up to her face. I watched her, pale in the white phone light. She slowly drew the screen down through the entry. We lay there for four more minutes. She read down to the bottom.

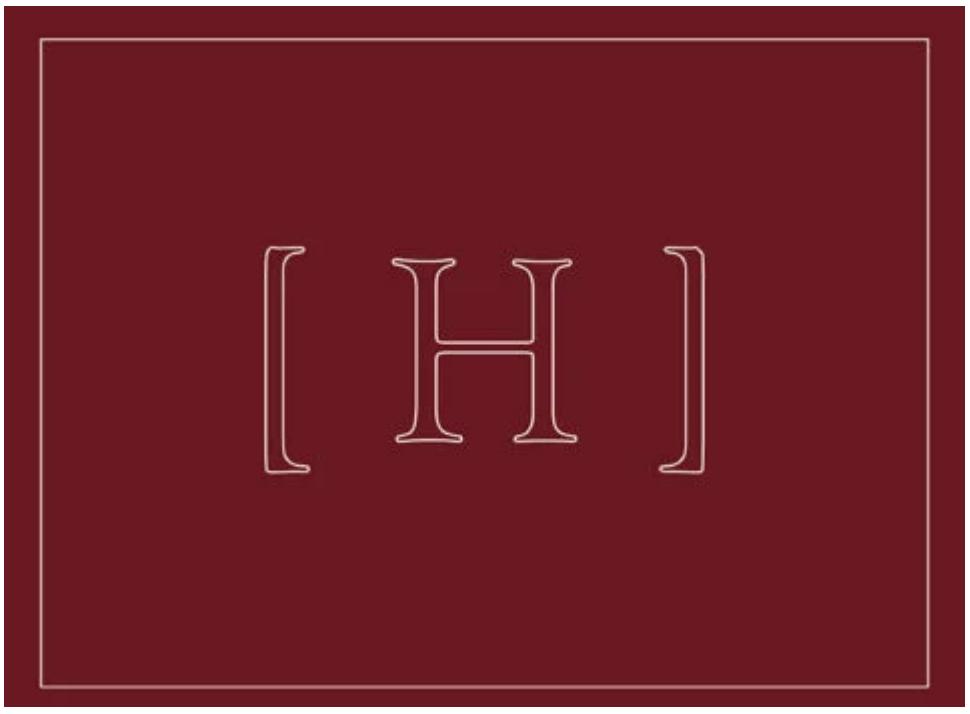
“I think I really like this book.”

**Gideon Lewis-Kraus** is a contributing editor of *Harper’s Magazine.* His book *A Sense of Direction* is out now in paperback (Riverhead).

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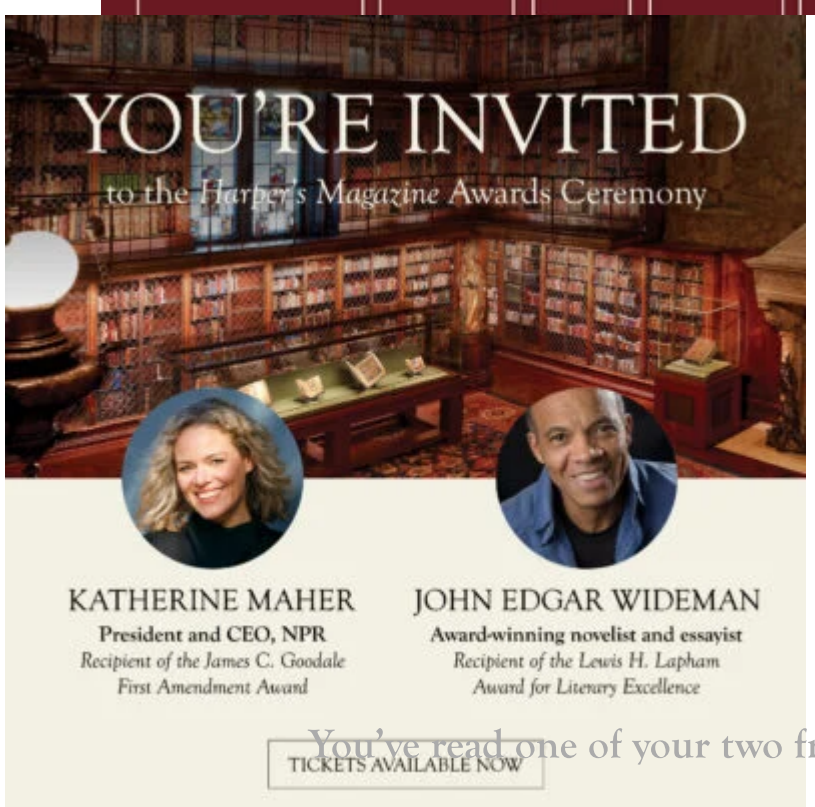
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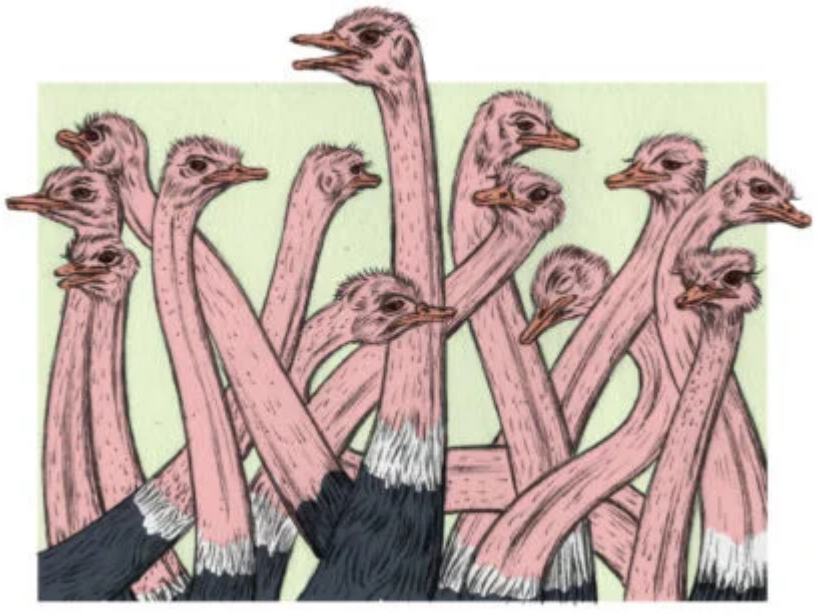





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