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Dear Asahi: Japan's office ladies lash out

TOKYO — They are the unheralded backbone of Japanese industry: running its offices, making its tea, pampering its bosses — and taking its abuse.

Now Japan's ever-polite "office ladies" are exacting their revenge — in newspaper and magazine columns where they irreverently gripe about their bosses' foul manners and expose their companies' quirkiest secrets.

Instead of the smoothly run Japanese companies shown to the outside, the "OL" columns reveal a world run by bizarre rituals, where executives whack underlings with rulers and receptionists cover up for philandering bosses.

"The things they take for granted are really weird," said Shigeru Suzuki, an editor for the weekly "Company Mysteries" column in the national newspaper Asahi.

One woman, for example, told Asahi — anonymously — that her colleagues were so "brain-washed" they treated a visit by the company president like the arrival of a venerated religious leader.

The columns often provide an irreverent window into the corporate obsession with rules, formality, hierarchy and all-encompassing loyalty to the company.

In one Asahi column, an OL said her bosses arranged a training seminar on the proper method of brewing tea, the correct way for getting on an elevator and suitable colors for painting nails (no red).

Office ladies were even ordered to keep diaries for six months — and then exchange them with senior colleagues.

"That training seminar was hell," she said.

Miwako Hatayama, a "Company Mysteries" editor, said many OLs actually enjoy their roles and aren't interested in moving up the career ladder. Often they get their jobs through family connections and are simply looking for a husband, she said.

"I assume these women ... sort of expect to marry company guys when they get hired. For them it's a status symbol and they feel like they won the prize," she said.

stranger

THAN FICTION

Driver finds parking space in motel room

GRANTS PASS — A car soared through a motel room, knocking a 5-year-old boy and a man into the parking lot but causing only minor injuries.

One moment, J.C. Warner was sitting on a bed in Room 1 of the Parkside Motel watching cartoons with his mother's boyfriend, Michael Williams, asleep beside him.

The next, a dark green 1997 Pontiac Grand Am had flown through one wall and out the other. J.C., Williams and the bed were in the motel parking lot.

"Somebody was looking after somebody today," marveled city building inspector Robert Mathias as he surveyed the wreckage.

Gregory Cochuban, 30, of Glendale, Calif., said he was in town on business, driving about 30 mph down 6th Street at about 8 a.m., when he reached for a water bottle and lost control. His car veered across three lanes of traffic before jumping the curb and smashing through the motel room.

Mathias figured a foot-high cement retaining wall sent the car airborne, so that it flew over the bed rather than through it.

Williams woke up to find himself in the parking lot in his underwear, with minor cuts on his nose and a slash on one forearm. J.C. was safe but for a few facial scrapes and a sore thumb. Cochuban had cuts on his left hand and a ticket for careless driving.

J.C.'s mother, Jennifer Wilson of Cave Junction, had left earlier to drive two older daughters to school and returned to find the room in a shambles.

An hour after the crash, Cochuban was shaking hands with J.C. and Williams.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what happened," Cochuban said. "I'm glad I didn't hit anyone."

Court considers if love is a reason to marry

LAHORE, Pakistan — Saima Waheed, a conservative Muslim who has worn a veil outside the home since puberty, never thought she'd fall in love. She did though, and when she got married her parents took her to court.

On Monday, Pakistan's High Court ruled that Waheed can stay with her husband. But the court made no solid ruling on whether women can marry for love, avoiding a decision on whether a woman can defy the strong Pakistani tradition of arranged marriage.

Waheed always assumed she would marry the man her parents chose for her, whether she loved him or not. That all changed when she was 20, and her parents hired an English-language teacher to tutor her younger brothers.

Waheed fell in love with Ershad Ahmed, and after a brief, secret courtship, he asked for her hand in marriage. Waheed's father refused; he already had decided that she would marry her first cousin.

Last year, in a show of independence that is rare in Pakistan, Waheed defied her father's wishes and married Ahmed.

Her parents were enraged. Her father, whose land holdings made him a relatively rich man, accused Ahmed of abducting his daughter, and Ahmed was thrown into jail for four months.

Waheed moved into a women's shelter, where she has lived for a year.

Her parents went to court to try to have the marriage declared invalid. They argued that the tenets of Islam forbid "love marriages" and require a woman's parents to consent before she can marry.

The case went to Pakistan's High Court. Pakistan's legal system, a mix of British common law and Islamic Shariat law, allows the high court to decide on some religious questions.

On Monday, the court handed down its decision: Waheed's marriage is legal. But the judges disagreed over whether a woman can choose her own husband.

India wants to rid country of 'Serpent'

He is suave, well-read, handsome, speaks six languages fluently and makes friends easily. He is also, by his own admission, a killer, a forger and a fraud.

Charles Sobhraj — whose talent at disguise, traps, jail escapes and media manipulation earned him the slippery sobriquet "The Serpent" — is ready to go free after 21 years in an Indian jail.

Indian officials want to deport their most notorious criminal but so far have been unable to find a country to accept him. The Vietnamese-born Sobhraj says he's French, and Paris is checking into his citizenship.

In the meantime, he's stranded at a police station in central New Delhi. Indian officials say he is no longer under arrest, but that they are "restricting his movements" because he has no travel documents.

Sobhraj, 52, was acquitted of murdering two tourists in India but was jailed for theft — and held beyond the end of his sentence because he escaped and was recaptured.

Sobhraj's sentence was about up in 1986 when he broke out of jail. He says he staged the break and was recaptured on purpose so he could serve more time and avoid extradition to Thailand, where he faced 14 murder charges and the death penalty. India doesn't extradite people who are serving time.

In December 1995, the statute of limitations expired on the Thai crimes and Sobhraj started bail proceedings. He hadn't been sentenced for the jailbreak yet but had already served more than the maximum sentence, so Indian authorities last month withdrew the case.

His imminent release fueled a near frenzy among journalists. Sobhraj, who telephoned some reporters to tell them the news, promised them all exclusive interviews.

Sobhraj doesn't deny the charges — he admits to killing young tourists from Europe and the United States. But he doesn't like to talk about it any more, and he says he has changed.

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