

Also by Ruth Ozeki

All Over Creation  
A Tale for the Time Being

# MY YEAR OF MEATS

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CANONGATE  
*Edinburgh • London*

## JANE

"Meat is the Message."

I wrote these words just over a year ago, sitting right here in my tenement apartment in the East Village of New York City in the middle of the worst snowstorm of the season, or maybe it was the century—on TV, everything's got to be the worst of something, and after a while you stop paying attention. Especially that year. It was January 1991, the first month of the first year of the last decade of the millennium. President Bush had just launched Desert Storm, the most massive air bombardment and land offensive since World War II. The boiler in my building had blown, my apartment was freezing, and I couldn't complain to the landlord because my rent was overdue. I had just defaulted to a vegetarian diet of cabbage and rice because I couldn't find a job. Politics and weather aside, the rest was fine. I mean, I was doing the starving artist thing on purpose. I wanted to be a documentary filmmaker, but who could find work in a climate like this?

When the phone rang at two in the morning, I didn't bother to answer. It was unlikely to be a job offer at that hour, and I had just gotten into bed and was lying there, rigid, trying to relax against the icy sheets long enough to fall asleep. I didn't want to lose what little body heat I'd already invested,

so I let the answering machine pick up— isn't that what they are for? But then I recognized the voice. It was Kato, my old boss at the TV production company in Tokyo where I had gotten my first job, translating English sound bites into pithy Japanese subtitles. Now, he said, he had a new program and could use my help. I threw back the covers and dived for the receiver. After a brief conversation, we hung up. I wrapped myself in blankets, huddled over my computer keyboard, and, blowing on my fingers to keep them warm, wrote the following:

*My American Wife!*

Meat is the Message. Each weekly half-hour episode of *My American Wife!* must culminate in the celebration of a featured meat, climaxing in its glorious consumption. It's the meat (not the Mrs.) who's the star of our show! Of course, the "Wife of the Week" is important too. She must be attractive, appetizing, and all-American. She is the Meat Made Manifest: ample, robust, yet never tough or hard to digest. Through her, Japanese housewives will feel the hearty sense of warmth, of comfort, of hearth and home—the traditional family values symbolized by red meat in rural America.

I sat back and read it with some satisfaction. It was a pitch for Kato's new program, a more or less faithful translation of the Japanese text that he had dictated to me over the phone—well, maybe not so faithful, maybe a little excessive, in fact. But I liked it. It would do. I faxed it off to Tokyo and crawled back into bed. As I lay there, shivering, wondering about the new show, I had no way of realizing that what I'd just written would turn out to be some of my most lucrative prose—it would land me a job and keep me both meat-fed and employed for over a year.

My Year of Meat. It changed my life. You know when that

happens—when something rocks your world, and nothing is ever the same after?

My name is Jane Takagi-Little. Little was my dad, a Little from Quam, Minnesota. Takagi is my mother's name. She's Japanese. Hyphenation may be a modern response to patriarchal naming practices in some cases, but not in mine. My hyphen is a thrust of pure superstition. At my christening, Ma was stricken with a profound Oriental dread at the thought of her child bearing an insignificant surname like Little through life, so at the very last minute she insisted on attaching hers. Takagi is a big name, literally, comprising the Chinese character for "tall" and the character for "tree." Ma thought the stature and eminence of her lofty ancestors would help equalize Dad's Little. They were always fighting about stuff like this.

"It doesn't *mean* anything," Dad would say. "It's just a name!" which would cause Ma to recoil in horror. "How you can say 'just a name'? Name is very *first* thing. Name is face to all the world."

"Jane" represents their despair at ever reaching an interesting compromise.

In spite of the Little, my dad was a tall man, and I am just under six feet myself. In Japan this makes me a freak. After living there for a while, I simply gave up trying to fit in: I cut my hair short, dyed chunks of it green, and spoke in men's Japanese. It suited me. Polysexual, polyracial, perverse; I towered over the sleek, uniform heads of commuters on the Tokyo subway. Ironically, the *real* culture shock occurred when I left Japan and moved here to New York, to the East Village. Suddenly everyone looked weird, just like me.

Being racially "half"—neither here nor there—I was uniquely suited to the niche I was to occupy in the television industry. I was hired by Kato to be a coordinator for *My*

*American Wife!*, the TV series that would bring the "heartland of America into the homes of Japan." Although my heart was set on being a documentarian, it seems I was more useful as a go-between, a cultural pimp, selling off the vast illusion of America to a cramped population on that small string of Pacific islands.

As a coordinator, I was part of the production team that shot fifty-two half-hour episodes of *My American Wife!* for the Beef Export and Trade Syndicate, or, simply, BEEF-EX. BEEF-EX was a national lobby organization that represented American meats of all kinds—beef, pork, lamb, goat, horse—as well as livestock producers, packers, purveyors, exporters, grain promoters, pharmaceutical companies, and agribusiness groups. They had their collective eye firmly fixed on Asia. BEEF-EX was the sole sponsor of our program, and its mandate was clear: "to foster among Japanese housewives a proper understanding of the wholesomeness of U.S. meats."

This was how we did it: *My American Wife!* was a day-in-the-life type of documentary, each show featuring a housewife who could cook. My job description, according to Kato, went something like this:

"You must catch up healthy American wives with most delicious meats."

His English was terrible, but I got the picture: Fingers twitching on the pole of a large net, I would prowl the freezer sections of food chains across the country, eyeing the unsuspecting housewives of America as they poked their fingers into plastic-wrapped flank steaks.

Travel, glamour, excitement it wasn't. But during that year I visited every single one of the United States of America and shot in towns so small you could fit their entire dwindling populations in the back of an Isuzu pickup—towns not so different from Quam, Minnesota, where I grew up. I remembered the scene.

It all came back to me during a pancake breakfast in a VFW hall in Bald Knob, Arkansas.

It was our first shoot. I met my Japanese crew at the local airport. A brass band was playing when I arrived, and the ticket counters were decorated with proud banners of spangling stars and stalwart stripes. Yellow ribbons festooned the departure lounge, and Mylar balloons floated like flimsy planets over the cloudlike tresses of blonde girls in pastel who had come to say good-bye.

At the center of all this effusion were the callow recruits, with brand-new crew cuts and bright-red ears, dressed in the still-unfamiliar pale of desert camouflage. Babies were pressed to their clean-shaven cheeks. Mothers' breasts heaved like eager battleships, while the soldiers' fingers lingered over ramparts of stone-washed thigh. Many tears were shed.

My Japanese team was shocked. Stumbling off a twenty-hour flight from Tokyo, jet-lagged and confused, they ran smack into Gulf War Fever. In modern-day Japan, militarism is treated like a sexual deviation—when you see perverts practicing it on the street, you ignore them, look the other way.

Then, at the pancake breakfast where we had been filming, a red-faced veteran from WWII drew a bead on me and my crew, standing in line by the warming trays, our plates stacked high with flapjacks and American bacon.

"Where you from, anyway?" he asked, squinting his bitter blue eyes at me.

"New York," I answered.

He shook his head and glared and wiggled a crooked finger inches from my face. "No, I mean where were you *born*?"

"Quam, Minnesota," I said.

"No, no . . . *What* are you?" He whined with frustration.

And in a voice that was low, but shivering with demented pride, I told him, "I . . . am . . . a . . . *fucking* . . . AMERICAN!"

MEMO

TO: AMERICAN RESEARCH STAFF  
FROM: Tokyo Office  
DATE: January 5, 1991  
RE: *My American Wife!*

We at Tokyo Office wish you all have nice holiday season. Now it is New Year and weather is frigid but we ask your hard work in making exciting *My American Wife!*. Let's persevere with new Program series!

Here is list of IMPORTANT THINGS for *My American Wife!*

DESIRABLE THINGS:

1. Attractiveness, wholesomeness, warm personality
2. Delicious meat recipe (NOTE: Pork and other meats is second class meats, so please remember this easy motto: "Pork is Possible, but Beef is Best!")
3. Attractive, docile husband
4. Attractive, obedient children
5. Attractive, wholesome lifestyle
6. Attractive, clean house
7. Attractive friends & neighbors
8. Exciting hobbies

UNDESIRABLE THINGS:

1. Physical imperfections
2. Obesity
3. Squalor
4. Second class peoples

\*\*\* MOST IMPORTANT THING IS VALUES, WHICH MUST BE ALL-AMERICAN.

MEMO

TO: RESEARCH STAFF  
FROM: JANE TAKAGI-LITTLE  
DATE: JANUARY 6  
RE: *MY AMERICAN WIFE!*

Just a quick note to clarify the memo from Tokyo. I spoke with Kato, the chief producer for the series, and told him that some of the points in the memo had offended the American staff. He is very concerned and has asked me to convey the following:

NOTE ON AMERICAN HUSBANDS—Japanese market studies show that Japanese wives often feel neglected by their husbands and are susceptible to the qualities of kindness, generosity, and sweetness that they see as typical of American men. Accordingly, our wives should have clean, healthy-looking husbands who help with the cooking, washing up, housekeeping, and child care. The Agency running the BEEF-EX advertising campaign is looking to create a new truism: *The wife who serves meat has a kinder, gentler mate.*

NOTE ON RACE & CLASS—The reference to "second class peoples" does *not* refer to race or class. Kato does not want you to think that Japanese people are racist. However, market studies do show that the average Japanese wife finds a middle-to-upper-middle-class white American

woman with two to three children to be both sufficiently exotic and yet reassuringly familiar. The Agency has asked us to focus on wives within these demographic specifications for the first couple of shows, just to get things rolling.

NOTE ON ALL-AMERICAN VALUES—Our ideal American wife must have enough in common with the average Japanese housewife so as not to appear either threatening or contemptible. *My American Wife!* of the '90s must be a modern role model, just as her mother was a model to Japanese wives after World War II. However, nowadays, a spanking-new refrigerator or automatic can opener is not a "must." In recent years, due to Japan's "economic miracle," the Japanese housewife is more accustomed to these amenities even than her American counterpart. The Agency thinks we must replace this emphasis on old-fashioned consumerism with contemporary wholesome values, represented not by gadgets for the wife's sole convenience but by good, nourishing food for her entire family. And that means meat.

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A final note:

The eating of meat in Japan is a relatively new custom. In the Heian Court, which ruled from the eighth to the twelfth centuries, it was certainly considered uncouth, due to the influences of Buddhism, meat was more than likely thought to be unclean. We know quite a bit about Japanese life then—at least the life of the court and the upper classes—thanks to the great female documentarians of that millennium, like Sei Shōnagon. She was the author of *The Pillow Book*, which contains

detailed accounts of her life and her lovers, and one hundred sixty-four lists of things, such as:

*Splendid Things*

*Depressing Things*

*Things That Should Be Large*

*Things That Gain by Being Painted*

*Things That Make One's Heart Beat Faster*

*Things That Cannot Be Compared*

Murasaki Shikibu, author of *The Tale of Genji*, wrote the following about Shōnagon in her diary:

Sei Shōnagon has the most extraordinary air of self-satisfaction. Yet, if we stop to examine those Chinese writings of hers that she so presumptuously scatters about the place, we find that they are full of imperfections. Someone who makes such an effort to be different from others is bound to fall in people's esteem, and I can only think that her future will be a hard one.

Murasaki Shikibu scorned what she called Shōnagon's "Chinese writings," and this is why: Japan had no written language at all until the sixth century, when the characters were borrowed from Chinese. In Shōnagon's day, these bold characters were used only by men—lofty poets and scholars—while the women diarists, who were writing prose, like Murasaki and Shōnagon, were supposed to use a simplified alphabet, which was soft and feminine. But Shōnagon overstepped her bounds. From time to time, she wrote in Chinese characters. She dabbled in the male tongue.

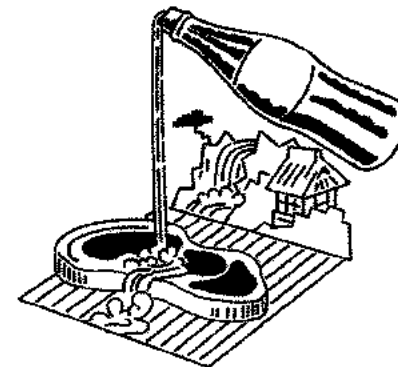
Murasaki may not have liked her much, but I admire Shōnagon, listmaker and leaver of presumptuous scatterings. She inspired me to become a documentarian, to speak men's Japanese, to be different. She is why I chose to make TV. I wanted to think that some girl would watch my shows in

Japan, now or maybe even a thousand years from now, and be inspired and learn something real about America. Like I did.

During my Year of Meat, I made documentaries about an exotic and vanishing America for consumption on the flip side of the planet, and I learned a lot: For example, we didn't even have cows in this country until the Spanish introduced them, along with cowboys. Even tumbleweed, another symbol of the American West, is actually an exotic plant called Russian thistle, that's native not to America but to the wide-open steppes of Central Europe. All over the world, native species are migrating, if not disappearing, and in the next millennium the idea of an indigenous person or plant or culture will just seem quaint.

Being half, I am evidence that race, too, will become relic. Eventually we're all going to be brown, sort of. Some days, when I'm feeling grand, I feel brand-new—like a prototype. Back in the olden days, my dad's ancestors got stuck behind the Alps and my mom's on the east side of the Urals. Now, oddly, I straddle this blessed, ever-shrinking world.

## THE CLOTHES-LINING MONTH



he slips away. The lady watches him go, and this moment of parting will remain among her most charming memories.

Indeed, one's attachment to a man depends largely on the elegance of his leave-taking. When he jumps out of bed, scurries about the room, tightly fastens his trouser-sash, rolls up the sleeves of his Court cloak, over-robe, or hunting costume, stuffs his belongings into the breast of his robe and then briskly secures the outer sash—one really begins to hate him.

## JANE

I had a lover in the Year of Meat. His name was Sloan and he was a musician from Chicago. A mutual friend had sort of set us up, but I was never in New York much and he was always on the road, so it was months before we actually met in person. Instead we got into this phone sex thing. I'd call him up late at night from some trucker's motel in Gnawbone, Indiana, or wherever we happened to be shooting, and we'd have these libidinous conversations that went on into the night. Production paid the bills, so it didn't matter how long we talked. When we weren't on the phone we'd fax, and I could usually count on a transmission waiting for me at the front desk when I'd check into a new motel. It made things interesting, helped mark the time. I always wondered if the desk clerks read our faxes or listened in to our calls.

"Exotic? Well, botanically speaking, yes, but not what you'd expect. I'm more of a hybrid or a mutant. . . . I'm tall. Very tall, pole thin. . . .

"Green eyes, shaped like my Japanese mother's with her epicanthic fold. My dad's eyes were blue. The green's not traceable, but Ma thinks it's the *oni* and I'm the devil's spawn. . . .

"Brown hair. Usually. Sometimes I dye it when I'm not working. Short, but respectable. No, like *really* short. Like boy



short. Yeah, with a couple of AWOL parts that stick out in front. . . .

"Breasts? Upstanding, small. Never discouraged, never lethargic . . . Yes, quite sensitive . . . Hmm, yes, some pain is good. . . .

"Now? At a truck stop. Lying on the bed looking up at the drop ceiling . . . An old army-green sleeveless undershirt and brand-new boxer shorts from Wal-Mart . . . Haven't been near a laundromat in weeks. Yes, men's shorts . . . More room to move around in . . .

"The room? Lurid. Weeping walls and peeling ceilings, and it reeks of Tiparillos. The wallpaper's flocked, harvest gold with a floral pattern. The walls are riddled with pockmarks, looks like from an air gun, and the mirror has a large crack in it. Mattress like a sponge. The carpet is golden, too, and sticky, so I'm wearing my combat boots . . . unlaced, no socks. . . . No. You know what it's like? A 1960s porn set, exotic Eurasian of ambiguous gender, dressed in men's underwear and combat boots, lying on her back having phone sex on the damp polyester bedspread—sort of post-Vietnam nostalgia-porn thing. A quick little R and R fantasy in Tokyo or Seoul. I should call the boys in to film it. There must be a market for this. . . ."

We finally met in Nebraska. I got back to the motel after a day of shooting a Mrs. Beedles and her Busy-B-Brisket, to find Sloan sipping a martini at the motel bar. He had no trouble recognizing us, of course, being as we were the only Japanese television crew in the 77,355 square miles of high plains that is Nebraska. He strolled over to us and extended his hand.

"Jane Takagi-Little? Sloan Rankin, Nebraska Film Commissioner. It's my distinct pleasure to welcome you and your distinguished crew to the Cornhusker State."

I tripped over the tripod I was carrying. Suzuki and Oh and the director were right behind me, so I introduced them all, and that's when I noticed something peculiar about the Japanese crew—they would not look an American in the face. The director, a shy, sweet man this time, approached the ersatz Commissioner with desperation and gusto. In a valiant simulation of a hearty American greeting, he pumped Sloan's hand, but he was unable to raise his eyes from the floor. When Oh's turn came, his body just seemed to rotate like a magnet driven away by an opposing charge. Suzuki was the most successful; he fixed his gaze in the region of Sloan's solar plexus and haltingly greeted the string tie Sloan had purchased as part of his Commissioner disguise. Along with the cowboy hat. Or so he told me later.

"Will you be visiting our national forest during your stay?" Sloan drawled with unctuous aplomb. "It truly is one of Nebraska's more notable attractions, being as it's the only man-made forest in the United States of America."

The crew stood quietly, heads bowed, and withstood this onslaught of English like schoolboys being singled out for unfair punishment, so I excused them and they escaped to their rooms with the equipment. Later I gave them petty cash and asked them to fend for themselves; I had to eat with the Commissioner. He'd been such a valuable asset during preproduction, I explained, and had introduced us to Mrs. Beedles and her Brisket and all the nice folks of Nebraska . . . but Suzuki and Oh and the director were already deep into communion with Jack Daniel's, cackling convulsively about something esoteric pertaining to their choice of video entertainment for the evening.

I left them in the motel room, cabling up the Betacam to the motel TV. In our equipment case was a small but well-curated collection of prerecorded tape stock with titles like

"Texas T-Bone Does the Hoosier Hooters." These were little-known regional delights that the crew had acquired during our travels, and needless to say, the climax was always about meat.

It was a cinematic night. A seedy motel room. A tall, dark stranger in cowboy boots, who followed me through the door, shut it firmly behind, then locked it. The unfamiliar hand, resting heavily on my shoulder, letting me know that I wouldn't get away. In the cool night, beyond the venetian blinds, the nervous light of the neon flickered red and hot. Sloan was unapologetic as he pushed me down onto the flimsy bed and lowered himself on top. As the Commissioner, he was relentless.

"Nebraska," he breathed into my ear. "Population: one million, five hundred eighty-four thousand, six hundred seventeen. Birth rate: seventeen per thousand. Death rate: nine point two per thousand. Population density: twenty point seven persons per square mile. Thirty-seventh state in the Union."

He kissed me for a long time, then turned me over onto my stomach. "Major agricultural products," he continued, "—corn, soybeans, hay, wheat, sorghum, dry edible beans"—he gnawed on the back of my neck—"sugar beets"—he doubled me over—"cattle, pigs, sheep . . ."

He ran his hands around me, up under my T-shirt and down into my boxer shorts. With a quick yank, he pulled them down, then pressed against me. "Nebraska state motto: Equality Before the Law."

There was to be no discussion.

Sloan played the sax. He had a remarkable embouchure and a memory for facts. All the things I'd told him on the phone over the previous months he remembered and now put to use, in an ebb and flow that lasted until morning. It was odd. Since I knew him so intimately from the phone, I felt emboldened to do or say anything—but at the same time, since I'd never met the physical man before, I was rocked by

the heart-pounding terror of fucking a total stranger. He felt the strangeness too. During a rest, I opened my eyes and caught him staring.

"Is it what you'd imagined?" I couldn't help myself. I had to ask.

"More or less. You're younger looking. Like a prepubescent boy after a growth spurt."

"Do you feel like a pedophile?"

"A bit. But I like it. What about you?"

"I knew you. Your descriptions were good. Gaunt, cadaverous."

"Do you feel like a necrophile?"

"No."

"Good. I don't mind looking like a corpse, but you shouldn't think I fuck like one. I'd be upset."

He rolled onto his back and closed his eyes. His face was rough and his eyes were deep-set, curtained by a forelock of dark-brown hair, which diffused their intensity. He was tall. Taller than me, and lanky, but still somehow elegant. He had the most remarkable fingers, long and dexterous, and a habit of pressing his fingertips against his lips, as though to seal them shut. He could do wonderful things with his fingers.

In the morning, when it was still dark, I dragged myself out of bed, showered, and dressed. I left Sloan asleep, sprawled across the bed; he was an exquisite corpse. The crew was in the parking lot, silently loading the equipment into the van. We drove through the deep-blue, shadowy dawn to shoot the sun rising over the Nebraska dunes. Throughout the long day I thought about Sloan incessantly. He had insinuated himself under my skin. Whenever I could, I would disengage from the scene at hand, and my mind would retract like an oyster to its shell, to worry this newfound nacreous pebble. When we got back to the motel later that day, he was gone. He had chartered a flight from the municipal airport and disappeared

as abruptly as he'd come. The room had been cleaned, sheets changed, bed made. I thought perhaps he might have left a note on the night table, or perhaps in my suitcase, or on the bathroom mirror. Perhaps a message at the front desk. But he hadn't. I went to bed. Lay there and waited. By the time he called, I was dead asleep.

"You're not here," I told him groggily.

"No. That's right. I'm here." His voice was low, a rough whisper. Suddenly I was wide awake.

"Oh. Weren't you just here?" A deep, sleep-induced indifference was the effect I was after, but my heart was in my throat and pounding.

"Yes. I was there last night."

"Oh." I yawned. "I don't believe you."

"No?" I could hear him smile.

"No. Because I don't think you exist. Good night."

"That's too bad. It's sad that I leave such a transient impression. I will try to fix that. Let's see, Bloom on Saturday, isn't it? Just south of Dodge City?"

"How'd you know that?"

"Called your office. Told them I was the Kansas Film Commissioner, calling to complain that you hadn't submitted your location permits. They faxed me your itinerary for the rest of the month."

I liked him. He produced records in New York, scored films in L.A., and his band, based in Chicago, played a dark, demented brand of postmodern jazz that was popular in Tokyo and Berlin. He was always flying across the country, so it was relatively easy for him to touch down for a night or two.

I worried about the crew at first. The ex-flight attendant knew right from the start, but I bought him off by approving his phone sex. He smirked a lot, but he kept quiet. The directors from Japan changed from week to week, so they would never catch on. Suzuki and Oh were the problem, but

somehow they never seemed to notice that the film commissioners from Kansas and Utah looked the same as the one from Nebraska, and Sloan changed his shirt and the shape of his tie on a state-by-state basis. I kept waiting for the boys to raise their eyes, to recognize his face, but they never did. Maybe they were just too drunk, or Sloan was too tall, or maybe it was that all Americans looked the same, so why bother? More likely, they just didn't care.

Sloan regarded these trips as opportunities for sex and sociological surveys. So did I, but that was my job. The sociology part, I mean. It's not easy to find My American Wife and you have to initiate a broad base of inquiry. First we'd look for an area with distinctive geographical features and scenic appeal and then we'd undertake a survey: chambers of commerce, churches, PTAs, agricultural extension offices. The researchers would sit in the New York office, phoning these bastions of small-town culture; what I learned is that there's precious little culture left, and what's managed to survive is mostly of the "Ye Olde" variety.

Main Street is dead, which is no news to the families whose families ran family businesses on Main Street. When I returned from Japan and visited Quam, I found that all the local businesses from my childhood had been extirpated by Wal-Mart. If there is one single symbol for the demise of regional American culture, it is this superstore prototype, a huge capitalist's boot that stomped the moms and pops, like soft, damp worms, to death. Don't get me wrong. I love Wal-Mart. There is nothing I like more than to consign a mindless afternoon to those aisles, suspending thought, judgment. It's like television. But to a documentarian of American culture, Wal-Mart is a nightmare. When it comes to towns, Hope, Alabama, becomes the same as Hope, Wyoming, or, for that matter, Hope, Alaska, and in the end, all that remains of our pioneering aspirations are the confused and self-conscious

simulacra of relic culture: Ye Olde Curiosities 'n' Copic Shoppe, Deadeye Dick's Saloon and Karaoke Bar—ingenious hybrids and strange global grafts that are the local business person's only chance of survival in economies of scale.

Anyway, once we'd found a town, we'd start homing in on its married women. Using Tokyo's list of Desirable Things, we'd extract the names of plausible candidates from our initial contacts—local clergymen and newspaper reporters made the richest sources—then we'd start phoning the wives. It was easy to get information from them about their families, hobbies, and favorite cuts of meats. Even wholesomeness could be ascertained over the phone. The challenge was to find out what they looked like. But there were ways. You could phone up the local Nu U Unisex Salon or Chez-Moi Hair Styling and Life Insurance and appeal to the owner as a colleague:

"So, Cindy, you've known Mrs. Crumph for five years, you said? Great. Now, just between you and me . . . you're a beauty professional, and what I really want to ask you for is your *professional* assessment of her appearance. . . . I mean, this is television, and we need someone who looks attractive—not necessarily glamorous, but you know, not horribly overweight, or with a walleye or goiter or anything."

"You really ask them that?" asked Sloan, bemused.

"Of course. We need to know these things."

"You can't shoot a wife with a goiter?"

"No. The BEEF-EX people are very strict. They don't want their meat to have a synergistic association with deformities. Like race. Or poverty. Or clubfeet. But at the same time, the Network is always complaining that the shows aren't 'authentic' enough. Well, I've been saying if only they'd let me direct, I'd show them some real Americans. So this is it, Sloan. This is my big chance. . . ."

Sloan was entertained. I lay on the bed at the Outlaw Inn as he applied Wet 'N Wild nail polish to the reddened clusters

of chiggers that were breeding all over my legs and thighs. They burrow under your skin and the only way to get rid of them is to cut off their oxygen supply.

I got the chiggers in Texas, in a field outside Lubbock, but it was worth it. We'd been standing there for a good part of an afternoon, shooting a very small child playing with his piglet. In the background was a white farmhouse. The boy, whose name was Bobby, lived there with his parents, Alberto and Catalina Martinez. Alberto, or Bert, as he now preferred to be called, was a farmworker. He'd lost his left hand to a hay baler in Abilene seven years earlier, a few months after he and Catalina (Cathy) had emigrated from Mexico, just in time for Bobby to be born an American citizen. That had been Cathy's dream, to have an American son, and Bert had paid for her dream with his hand. Since then he had worked hard in the fields to support the family, and Cathy had worked too, in factory jobs, and finally their efforts had paid off. They had scraped up the money to buy the little white farmhouse and a few acres of surrounding land, and the way I figured it, Alberto, Catalina, and little Bobby were on their way to becoming a real American success story. The problem was getting the chance to tell it. After four months, the BEEF-EX injunction on the demographics of our wives was still in effect, and we continued to shoot primarily middle-class white American women with two or three children. The Martinez family would obviously break this mold.

To make matters worse, the director for the shoot was the bonehead Oda, back for his second round.

"Takagi, don't be stupid," he told me. "The program is not called *My Mexican Wife*, you know. . . ." I had given up trying to sell him on the idea.

But then the oddest thing happened. We had been filming in Oklahoma, the "Sooner State," just across the border in a town at the tip of the Panhandle. Oda had this great idea that

the entire meal should be cooked in frying pans with handles and our wife, a Mrs. Klinck, agreed. She made German Fried Potatoes and Succotash and Griddle Biscuits, and her meat was a delicate Sooner Schnitzel, made with thin cutlets of veal dredged in crushed Kellogg's Krispies and paprika, then pan-fried in drippings with sautéed onions and sour cream. Mrs. Klinck insisted we try a cutlet or two, and to my surprise, Oda dug in with gusto. He had a fondness for German food, it seemed, but after the first few bites, he dropped his fork and clutched his neck as though he were choking.

"*Oda-sani Dame da yoi* Stop it immediately!" I hissed at him, furious that he should make such cruel fun of Mrs. Klinck's cooking. I mean, she was sitting at the table, facing us and watching to see how we liked her Schnitzel.

But he didn't stop. Instead, the strangling noises he was making intensified, and as Mrs. Klinck watched him, her eyes grew wide and round. She stood up, knocking her chair over, and ran from the room.

"Call nine-one-one!" I heard her cry, and that's when I realized something else was happening.

Oda's entire body had suddenly grown rigid and was starting to swell. Within minutes his windpipe had closed, and by the time the local paramedics arrived he could barely breathe. They gave him a shot of adrenaline and we airlifted him in a crop duster to the nearest hospital.

"Anaphylactic shock," the emergency room doctor said. "What was he eating when it started?"

I described the menu in detail.

The doctor shrugged. "Sounds a bit heavy," he said, "but basically okay."

After the seizure had passed and I was helping Oda fill out the medical history forms, he answered yes to the question about antibiotic allergies. When the doctor saw this, he nodded.

"That's it," he said grimly. He was a young man just out of medical school and had come to Oklahoma from San Francisco. He was cute and really tall, so we'd been flirting a little.

"What's it?" I asked.

"Antibiotics," he said. He looked at me. "You're a city girl. You've probably never been to a feedlot, have you?"

"What, you mean for cows?"

He rolled his eyes. "No, cattle. Meat."

"No, but it's funny you should bring it up. What do feedlots have to do with anaphylactic shock?"

"Well, if you'd been to one, you'd know what I was talking about. They're filthy and overcrowded—breeding grounds for all sorts of disease—so cattle are given antibiotics as a preventive measure, which builds up and collects in the meat."

"But this was veal. . . ."

He looked at me. "Are you kidding? Especially in veal. Whew! Those calves live in boxes and never learn to walk, even—and the farmers keep them alive with these massive doses of drugs just long enough to kill them. What sent your director into shock was the residue of the antibiotics in the Sooner Schnitzel."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. What's his name . . . Oda? He must be the sensitive type."

"Oh, please . . ." If he only knew.

The young doctor's smile faded. "You know, it scares me. I mean, allergies are one thing. But all these surplus antibiotics are raising people's tolerances, and it won't be long before the stuff just doesn't work anymore. There's all sorts of virulent bacteria that are already resistant. . . . It's like back to the future—we're headed backward in time, toward a pre-antibiotic age."

I remembered this conversation much later on, but at the moment all I could think was damage control. I phoned Kato

in Tokyo to let him know what had happened, and to my immense surprise, he turned the shoot over to me. To direct.

This was it. Without bothering to ask for anyone's permission, I rerouted us south into Texas and straight into the Martinezes' kitchen.

Bert wore a mean-looking hook in place of his missing hand, and during lunch he had taught me how to two-step, resting its point in the middle of my spine, while Cathy took a turn around the kitchen table with Suzuki. They were excellent dancers. Bert used to play the guitar beautifully, Cathy told me, when they were still in Mexico, before the accident.

"So now"—she shrugged—"in America we have not so much music. But we can still dance."

We filmed them stepping out on Saturday night, and on Sunday afternoon after church, Cathy prepared Texas-style Beefy Burritos, made with lean, tender slices of Texas-bred sirloin tips. The burritos were the symbol of their hard-earned American lifestyle, something to remind them of their roots but also of their new fortune. Afterward, Bobby wanted to show us his 4-H project piglet. So there we were, in the chigger-filled field, filming little Bobby in a sea of golden grass that rippled in the wind. Bert and Cathy stood arm in arm, watching. The piglet, whose name was Supper, was so big and heavy that Bobby could barely hold it up in front of him. Bobby was wearing his Sunday suit, a hand-me-down from a neighbor, which was still a bit big for him and the trousers flapped against his bony shins. His head was dwarfed by an old felt hat of his father's. He had given the piglet a bath and the animal was still wet, sending glistening droplets into the sunlight as it squirmed in his arms. Bobby smiled at the camera, a little Mexican boy shyly offering his American Supper to the

nation of Japan. Everything was in slow motion. It was a surreal and exquisite moment.

## AKIKO

The alarm clock rang at seven-fifteen on Saturday morning. Akiko woke in panic, which subsided into gentle dread when she realized she was alone. She lay in her futon, staring up at the acoustic ceiling tiles and fluorescent light fixture. Out on the balcony, she could hear the dull rhythmic thump of someone's wife beating the bedding hung over the balcony rail. Children were awake too. Their voices drifted up from the playground. When Akiko went to market, she always took great care to avoid the playground and the young mothers who congregated around its periphery, just inside the gate. Akiko found it difficult to walk by them along the path outside.

Akiko found it difficult to do many things: to go to bed at a reasonable hour, for example, when "John" stayed overnight in the city or was out of town on business. The air in the small apartment smelled damp and sweet. Sweet poofy exhalations all the night through. She turned over on her side and spotted the squat little whiskey bottle that she'd emptied last night in her exaltation. It had felt so good to be alone. Unmolested. She felt the hard lump of Shōnagon under her pillow. Then she spotted her pillow book diary, its pages scrawled with her own pickled lists.

*Things That Make One's Heart Beat Faster*

Rain clouds massing before thunder. To stand on one's balcony looking toward the city. To see the dull green-

## JANE

Anyone who travels around the sprawling heartland of this country must at some point wonder why Americans are so uniformly obese. Are we *all* so ignorant about diet and health? Or so greedy, or so terrified of famine that we continuously, and almost unconsciously, stockpile body fat? Or is there something else? These are the questions that Suzuki and Oh would ask me, confronted with yet another bleeding steak the size of a manhole cover, spilling over the sides of the plate. And the potato, stuffed with butter and sour cream? Why both? they would cry in dismay.

I am not fat, but my tallness amounts to the same sort of gross affront to nature, at least to my Japanese mother, who comes up to my rib cage. She sees my height as a personal insult and something that could have been avoided. It's all tied up in her mind with her efforts to counteract the Little in my name—she thinks I grew just to mock her. On her saner days, she gazes skyward at my face and blames the red meat she fed me as a child. But it was Minnesota, Ma. There were lots of cows and not a lot of sushi.

When Miss Helen blurted out that remark about chicken necks causing Mr. Purcell's voice to change and his breasts to grow, I was shocked. I knew about antibiotics from the cute doctor in Oklahoma, and I guess I knew that hormones were

used too. I'd just never given it much thought before. But now I couldn't get the image of Mr. Purcell out of my head. "Meat is the Message," or so I'd written, and suddenly I wanted to know more. Once I started researching, it didn't take me long to stumble across DES. It was a discovery that ultimately changed my relationship with meats and television. It also changed the course of my life. Bear with me; this is an important Documentary Interlude.

DES, or diethylstilbestrol, is a man-made estrogen that was first synthesized in 1938. Soon afterward, a professor of poultry husbandry at the University of California discovered that if you inject DES into male chickens, it chemically castrates them. Instant capons. The males develop female characteristics—plump breasts and succulent meats—desirable assets for one's dinner. After that, subcutaneous DES implants became pretty much de rigueur in the poultry industry, at least until 1959, when the FDA banned them. Apparently, someone discovered that dogs and males from low-income families in the South were developing signs of feminization after eating cheap chicken parts and wastes from processing plants, which is exactly what happened to Mr. Purcell. The U.S. Department of Agriculture was forced to buy about ten million dollars' worth of contaminated chicken to get it off the market.

But by then DES was also being widely used in beef production, and oddly enough, the FDA did nothing to stop that. Here is a brief recap:

In 1954, a ruminant nutritionist at Iowa State College had discovered that if you feed DES to beef cattle they get fat quicker. In fact, the DES-"enhanced" cattle could be "finished" (brought to slaughter weight) more than a month sooner than unenhanced animals, on about five hundred pounds less feed. Obviously this was a good thing for meat producers. DES was trumpeted as a "miracle" and "a revolution in the cattle industry," and without further ado, that very same year, the FDA

approved DES for livestock. A year later DES received a patent as the first artificial animal growth stimulant. By the early 1960s, after the ban on implants for chickens, DES was used by more than 95 percent of U.S. cattle feeders to speed up production. Sure, there were accounts of farmers who accidentally breathed or ingested DES powder and started showing symptoms such as impotence, infertility, gynecomastia (enlarged and tender breasts), and changes in their voice register. But in the face of all that promised profit . . . And after all, farming has always been a dangerous business. Everyone knows that.

DES changed the face of meat in America. Using DES and other drugs, like antibiotics, farmers could process animals on an assembly line, like cars or computer chips. Open-field grazing for cattle became unnecessary and inefficient and soon gave way to confinement feedlot operations, or factory farms, where thousands upon thousands of penned cattle could be fattened at troughs. This was an economy of scale. It was happening everywhere, the wave of the future, the marriage of science and big business. If I sound bitter, it's because my grandparents, the Littles, lost the family dairy farm to hormonally enhanced cows, and it broke their hearts and eventually killed them. But I'd never understood this before.

Meanwhile, all this time, since it was first synthesized, DES was being used for another purpose entirely. Researchers and doctors were prescribing it for pregnant women in the belief that DES would prevent miscarriages and premature births. The pharmaceutical companies ran ads in professional medical publications, like the *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*, recommending the drug for all women to produce "bigger and stronger babies." Many doctors prescribed it as casually as a vitamin, to an estimated five million women around the world. *Five million!* This was despite evidence, right from the start, that hormone manipulation during pregnancy was dangerous. In



the 1930s, researchers at Northwestern University Medical School gave doses of estrogen to pregnant rats and discovered that the babies were born with various deformities of their sexual organs. But those were rats.

Then, in 1971, a team of Boston doctors discovered that DES caused a rare form of cancer, called clear cell adenocarcinoma, in the vaginas of young women whose mothers had taken the drug during pregnancy. And as if that wasn't bad enough, DES was finally exposed as a complete sham. That was the real tragedy. It was all hype. As early as 1952, researchers had found that DES did absolutely nothing to prevent miscarriages. On the contrary, a University of Chicago study showed a significant increase not only in miscarriages but also in premature births and infant deaths due to DES. Ironically, it was even used as a morning-after pill to terminate pregnancy. But again, this evidence was ignored.

Once the link between DES and human cancer was established, other effects were discovered as well. In addition to the cancer, DES-exposed daughters were suffering from irregular menstrual cycles, difficult pregnancies, and structural mutations of the vagina, uterus, and cervix. DES sons developed congenital malformations including undescended and atrophied testicles, abnormally undersize penises, defective sperm production, and low sperm count, all of which increased the risk of testicular cancer and infertility.

Of course, there was an immediate outcry to ban DES in cattle feed. But cheap meat is an inalienable right in the U.S.A., an integral component of the American dream, and the beef producers looked to cheap DES to provide it. So it took almost a decade of bitter political struggle to ban the drug, overcoming tremendous opposition launched by the drug companies and the meat industry, who argued that the doses of DES given to cattle were minuscule and harmless to humans and that the residues in the meat were far below the levels of

danger. Finally, in 1979, the government banned DES for use in livestock production.

In 1980, however, half a million cattle from one hundred fifty-six feedlots in eighteen states were found with illegal DES implants. Three hundred eighteen cattlemen had decided that since they didn't agree with the ban, they would simply ignore it. Frontier justice. You take the law into your own hands. They were given a reprimand. None were prosecuted.

Today, although DES is illegal, 95 percent of feedlot cattle in the U.S. still receive some form of growth-promoting hormone or pharmaceutical in feed supplements. The residues are present in the finished cuts of beef sold in the local supermarket or hanging off your plate.

In 1989, Europe banned the import of U.S. meat because of the use of hormones in production. BEEF-EX started looking for a new market.

In 1990, as a result of pressure by the U.S. government, the New Beef Agreement was signed with Japan, relaxing import quotas and increasing the American share of Japan's red-meat market.

In 1991, we started production on *My American Wife*.

This was my first glimpse of the larger picture. Of course, I didn't put these pieces together all at once. I started reading about the meat industry, and little by little, over the course of the next few months, the chronology sort of dawned on me. Please keep this in mind.

she begins to hear strange sounds in the back of the house and outside. Frightened, she gently moves over in bed towards her lover, tugging at the bedclothes, whereupon he annoys her further by pretending to be asleep. "Why not be stand-offish a little longer?" he asks her finally.

**JANE**

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**FAX**

**TO:** J. Takagi-Little  
**FROM:** J. Ueno  
**DATE:** September 1  
**RE:** Wyoming

Dear Takagi-Little:

It is good that you have corrected your way and are showing proper respect for beef as sovereign of meats. The Montana show is most original one and the Beef Fudge was delicious. Please continue to make such quality programs that BEEF-EX, the American sponsor of meat can feel pride.

Sincerely,

J. Ueno

P.S. Please do not forget that you must sending me ALL ideas for next show so that I can make the right decision.

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Ueno wants beef, and beef he shall have. Went to the library and found more books on the meat industry. The DES stuff was only the tip of the iceberg. Why didn't I pursue this? I call myself a documentarian, but I've learned almost nothing about the industry that's paid for these shows. Paid me for these shows.

So here we go. I will probe its stinking heart and rub Ueno's nose in its offal. No more fudge. I'm thinking slaughterhouses for the next show. A meat-packin' mama in Chicago, perhaps? Or a feedlot family?

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FAX

TO: Lara and Dyann  
FROM: Jane Takagi-Little  
DATE: September 2  
RE: Wives, Meat, etc.

Dear Lara and Dyann:

I hope this finds you all well. I write it with some trepidation. . . . Did you get the copy of *My American Wife!* that I sent you? I haven't heard back from you and I'm worried that you didn't like the show. I hope this isn't the case, but if it is, I also hope you will let me know.

I am writing to ask for some advice. I am researching my next *My American Wife!* This time I happen to be featuring a wife whose family is involved in the livestock, specifically beef, industry. I started to research the topic and I'm finding it very disturbing.

I remember that during the cooking scene you both

talked a little about being vegetarians by default because of the practices of factory farming meat. I wasn't able to use it in the final program, but could you tell me more about this? I have read quite a bit, but I want to hear what you have to say.

If this is presumptuous of me and you don't have time, or you hated the show and don't want to have anything else to do with me, I understand and apologize. I hope I will hear back from you.

Sincerely,

Jane Takagi-Little

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FAX

TO: "John" Ueno  
FROM: Jane Takagi-Little  
DATE: 9/3/91  
RE: Blatzsik & Dunn

Dear Mr. "John" Ueno:

As per your instructions, I am attaching a copy of our research thus far for the next *My American Wife!* program. As you will see, we have found two promising candidates, Mrs. Anna Blatzsik, the wife of a meatpacker in Chicago, and Mrs. "Bunny" Dunn, the wife with a Colorado cattle ranch. I have asked each of the ladies to tell us her *best beef* recipe to share with the Japanese audience.

Sincerely,

Jane Takagi-Little

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FAX

September 3

Takagi,

You won't return my calls so I have to resort to faxes. I don't know whether you've gone and had the abortion already, but I have to see you regardless.

I reacted very badly to your phone call from the Montana jail. I'm sorry. Collect calls from prisons make me nervous. But you did sort of railroad me, you know. Anyway, can we please talk? I need to know what's going on.

Please, call me.

Sloan

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FAX

September 4

Dear Jane,

Thanks for your fax. Don't worry. The show is a hoot and the girls in particular loved it. They think it is hysterical that they are on TV, talking in Japanese. They took it to school for show-and-tell, and now they prance around acting like goddamn movie stars. Actually, they can't decide between being stars or directors. Any suggestions?

When we were trying to get pregnant, I started getting interested in fertility rates and I ended up writing a series of articles (which I will send you) for a local ecology magazine, surveying recent studies of natural and

242

synthetic hormones in the environment and their impact on human reproduction. Do you know that some studies show that sperm counts have dropped globally in the past fifty years by about fifty percent? This coincides with the start of factory farming and the heavy use of estrogens and other hormones in meat production. Granted there were a lot of other chemicals and pharmaceuticals just starting to saturate the environment around that time too, and the research is disputed, but my feeling is how could it not take its toll?

Anyway, the meat thing in particular interested me, so I pursued it and started to dig up all sorts of nasty information about the industry, which I am sending to you. That's when Lara and I became vegetarians. Basically, at first we didn't believe that there was anything inherently wrong with eating meat. We simply decided to try not to eat contaminated foods when we were pregnant, or to feed them to our daughters. But then we started to feel that eating meat was, not wrong exactly, but not the best of all ethical choices, either, you know? So that's where we stand.

Best of luck on your show.

Fond regards,

Dyann

P.S. The girls want me to ask why there are black sections in the tape? Is that where the commercials go?

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*Beef Junkies*  
by Dyann Stone

How do you know when your cows are in the mood for love?

243

This is a serious question for cattle ranchers, who need to know which of their cows is in estrus and ready for artificial insemination. In the good old days, the rancher relied on a "teaser bull." He was a bull of inferior stock, who, like any bull released into a herd of cows, promptly found and mounted those in heat. The difference was that the teaser bull had a paint marker around his neck, which left behind an identifying smear of paint on the cows' rumps.

But that was all he left behind. Naturally you do not want this bull's lesser sperm weakening your gene pool, so it was important to keep him from actually fulfilling his biological imperative. A simple surgical alteration took care of this problem. A slit in the skin of the bull's penis rerouted it out the side, so when the bull became aroused and mounted the cow, his skewed erection circled futilely around his target. Accordingly, these bulls were nicknamed "sidewinders."

The use of sidewinders, however, is old technology. The Upjohn Company now markets a new estrus-synchronizing compound called Lutalyse. Injected into all the cows in a herd, it forces them to come into heat simultaneously, within a matter of hours. Imagine! No more "Not tonight, honey, I've got a headache." This is modern love—efficient, assembly-line artificial insemination and controlled calving. Upjohn's slogan? "You Call the Shots."

Lutalyse is a prostaglandin, a chemical that functions similarly to a hormone, affecting almost everything that a body does, including respiration, digestion, nerve response, and reproduction. Prostaglandins work equally on both cows and women, and are being used in human medicine to stimulate menstruation as well as to abort fetuses in the second trimester of pregnancy.

Lutalyse is only one of many "growth-enhancing"

drugs, hormones, and other pharmaceuticals used in beef production. In America, 95 percent of cattle routinely receive estradiol, testosterone, progesterone, and anabolic steroids, not to mention the huge doses of antibiotics needed to control disease in feedlots, where cattle are crammed into pens, standing knee-deep in urine, feces, and mud, with no place to move.

Trace residues of these drugs end up in the beef we eat, along with concentrated doses of herbicides used in cattle feed, and pesticides and insecticides needed to control the rampant fly populations in feedlots.

These drugs, hormones, chemicals, and poisons are being blamed for a host of modern human health crises, including dropping sperm counts and fertility rates, cancers, and our rising resistance to antibiotics. In addition, the "diseases of affluence"—the heart attacks, strokes, and stomach cancers caused by too much meat in the diet—are killing Americans, Europeans, and increasingly the Japanese. . . .

*Journal: September 4*

The creature inside craves meat. This is the month of manic growth, they tell me, when the manikin will double in size, from a puny three inches, crown to rump, to a whopping six. I take out my ruler and stare at it in disbelief. This much baby in my belly!

Meanwhile, a massive rift has occurred between the seat of my so-called intelligence and my dumb, stunned body. With my mind, I am studying meat. I am immersed in accounts of pharmaceutical abuse. I recall Purcell Dawes, the DES, and the cute young doctor in Oklahoma with his warnings about antibiotics. I am reading chilling descriptions of the slaughter-

house, the caked filth, blood coursing down the cement kill floor, the death screams of a slaughtered lamb (exactly like the cry of a human baby) going on and on, long after the lamb's throat has been cut. And yet . . .

And yet my body still craves the taste and texture of animal between my teeth. I read, I shudder, I gnaw a spare rib. How is this possible? I've had a long course in psychic numbing, but if this is the outcome of my documentary career, then I'm doubled to a psychotic extreme.

Found a health food store that sells organic beef. I don't want this child born with two penises or half a brain if I can help it.

Sloan's been calling. Now he's faxed, asking to see me. What does he want from me?

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FAX

TO: "J." Ueno  
FROM: Jane Takagi-Little  
DATE: September 4  
RE: Sausages and Prairie Oysters

Dear Mr. "J." Ueno,

I am delighted that you approve of our researches for *My American Wife!* thus far. I spoke to Mrs. Anna Blatzik, who told me that she often makes sausages with the "leftovers" from the meatpacking plant and she would like to make these for our program. She said she has a dish that she likes to make when her in-laws come for dinner, called "El Quicko Sausage Surprise." The name sounds fancy, she said, but it's real simple to make. She cooks the wieners in a sauce made from a can of cherry pie filling and a cup of

246

rosé wine (or you can just substitute sugar and orange juice, she assured me, if you don't have rosé wine).

Mrs. "Bunny" Dunn loves variety meats and has suggested her special recipe of Pan-Fried Prairie Oysters. Do you know what a prairie oyster is? It is a bull's testicle, a traditional delicacy in the American West, which American men eat in order to increase their strength and their manhood. I think this would be a very nice custom to introduce to Japanese families. However, if you think it is too crass a meat for the refined Japanese palate, she also has a very nice recipe for Scrambled Brains 'n' Eggs or Simmered Heart.

I will visit Chicago and Colorado and scout both women. I will send you my opinions, but of course, the final decision is yours. You call the shots.

Sincerely,

Jane Takagi-Little

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FAX

September 5  
Sloan,

I will be in Chicago next Monday for a location scout and I can see you then if you want. However, I will be spending most of the day at Blatzik Meat Fabricators. I haven't yet aborted, although I did deposit your check.

Sincerely,

Takagi

247

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FAX

TO: Mr. "J." Ueno  
FROM: Jane Takagi-Little  
DATE: September 5  
RE: Wild West

Dear Mr. Ueno,

The more I find out about "Bunny" Dunn, the more I like her. She is a former rodeo queen and everyone says she is physically quite attractive. She was born and bred in Texas, and perhaps you may recall how charming Texas girls can be. In addition she has a warm, outgoing personality. She and her husband, John, have a feedlot, which is different from a ranch and better for the purposes of our program, I think. A cattle ranch may have several hundred or maybe several thousand animals. But at the Dunns' feedlot there are cattle from ranches all over the country, about 20,000 head in all!

The Dunns feed the cattle special food to fatten them up and give them medicine to make sure they do not get sick. The cattle are kept in one place, so they will be easier for us to film and get all 20,000 into one spectacular shot. Now that's a lot of beef! In addition there is a meat-processing business nearby owned by good friends of the Dunns who have agreed to allow us to film all the different and interesting steps involved in meat production.

Aside from the attractiveness of Mrs. "Bunny" Dunn, there is much to recommend the rest of the family as well. Mr. Dunn is quite a bit older than "Bunny," but he is still vigorous, and the two fell in love at first sight. John Dunn has one grown-up son from a previous marriage who works

with his father on the farm. John and "Bunny" have a little daughter as well. John sired the girl at the age of 72 and he says his virility comes from the red meat he's eaten every day since he first grew teeth. "Bunny" swears it's her Prairie Oysters. All in all, I feel that the Dunns are a pretty typical American family who would do much to promote an image of the wholesomeness of BEEF-EX.

Sincerely,

J. Takagi-Little  
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*Journal: September 5*

Bunny Dunn was indeed a rodeo queen, in the small town of Fossil, Texas, when she was in high school. Then she took a shot at the state title and ended up as a stripper and an exotic dancer, moving from town to town until she wound up in San Antonio. John Dunn is old enough to be her grandpa. He spotted her at the club where she was working, bought a ring at a pawnshop next door, slipped it on her finger during a lap dance, and took her back to his spread in Colorado.

If the feedlot is anything like the ones I've been reading about, there should be plenty of opportunity to shoot some pretty horrifying material. And the slaughterhouse—I have high hopes for that.

What am I hoping to accomplish? Am I trying to sabotage this program?

I need this job. I can't afford to get fired now. On the other hand, I can't continue making the kind of programs Ueno wants, either. What am I supposed to do?

FAX

TO: "J." Ueno  
FROM: Jane Takagi-Little  
DATE: September 6  
RE: Documentary Ethics

Dear Mr. Ueno:

There are a couple of things that have come to light in my researches that I think you should know about. I have inadvertently discovered an unsavory side to the meat industry. I am talking about the use of drugs and hormones in meat production, which are being blamed for rising rates of cancer, sterility, impotence, reproductive disorders, as well as a host of other illnesses and harmful side effects. These drugs are routinely given to the cattle that end up as steak on the plates of the Japanese television viewing audience. I am concerned about the ethics of representing either the Blatziks or the Dunns in a wholesome manner, knowing what I now know about the health hazards of meat production.

I am sending you a summary of all of my research. Since there is so much technical language, I've asked Kenji to translate it into Japanese. Please advise how to proceed.

Sincerely,  
J. Takagi-Little

P.S. On a more personal note, while there is still no proven link to meat, did you know that now the average man produces less morphologically sound sperm than an average hamster?

250

FAX

September 6  
Dear Dyann and Lara:

Thank you for your articles. They were very helpful in planning my next show. To answer your question, yes, the commercials for the program sponsor go into the black spaces in the tape. The copy I sent you, without commercials or titles, is called a "white mother." This time I am enclosing the "on-air" copy with the commercials included. Before you watch it there is something you should know—and I'm afraid it's going to make you angry. The program sponsor for *My American Wife!* is an organization called the Beef Export and Trade Syndicate, or BEEF-EX. I neglected to tell you this before the shoot, probably sensing that you wouldn't go along with it, and after the shoot was over it was too late. I didn't have time to reshoot, and your program was so good. I felt it could deliver a truly affirming message about sexuality and race and the many faces of motherhood to Japanese women. I know these aren't adequate excuses, nor do they tell the entire story, but there is nothing I can say that would be sufficient to exonerate myself. All I can do is apologize and ask you to forgive me and promise to make it up to you somehow.

Sincerely,  
Jane

251



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FAX

TO: J. Takagi-Little  
FROM: J. Ueno  
DATE: September 7  
RE: Beef Safety

Dear Takagi-Little:

Please do not be concerned with these matters that are none of your business and which you know nothing about, and that is the wholesomeness of BEEF-EX. They have one good committee called the Meat Affirmation Task Force who assures me of high quality of all meats. So do not waste your time. This is not hobby. If you cannot be professional television director and make wholesome program of *My American Wife!* I have asked Mr. Kato to send some another director instead.

Sincerely,  
J. Ueno

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*Journal: September 7*

Well, that settles it. Ueno will have his meats. I leave for location scout tomorrow. I don't want to see Sloan.

That is such a lie. Of course I do. He is picking me up at the airport.

AKIKO

*Dear Miss Takagi-Little,*

You do not know me because I am only the wife of Ueno of BEEF-EX so I regret to bothering you at all. But I feel compelled to writing for the reason of your program of the Lesbian's couple with two childrens was very emotional for me. So thank you firstly for change my life. Because of this program, I feel I can trust to you so that I can be so bold.

You see, Ueno and I wanted to have the child at first but because of my bad habits of eating and throw up my food I could not have monthly bleeding for many years. But now I can have it again thanks to eating delicious Hallelujah Lamb's recipe from your program of *My American Wife!*, so secondly thank you for that also.

But I am most wanting to say that I listen to the black lady say she never want man in her life, and all of a sudden I agree! I am so surprising that I cry! (I do not know if I am Lesbian since I cannot imagine this condition, but I know I never want marriage and with my deep heart I am not "John's" wife.)

I feel such sadness for my lying life. So I now wish to ask you where can I go to live my happy life like her? Please tell me this.

Sincerely yours,  
Akiko Ueno

Akiko painstakingly finished copying the final draft of her fax. She had written it several times, consulting the dictionary, and felt that she had managed to express herself rather well. She put down her pen and read it over once again, checking for mistakes. The problem that remained was one of courage and logistics. She didn't dare use the fax machine at home because the New York fax number would

## JANE

Colorado is one of the most beautiful states in the country. I love driving from east to west across the vast Great Plains, through Denver and straight up into the mountains, still so young and assertive with their jagged upward thrustings, then over the Continental Divide to hook up with the Colorado River and to follow it past the Glenwood Dam and on into the plateau. The westernmost town of any size is Grand Junction, once a thriving uranium production center in the years following WWII. When the mines closed, the Atomic Energy Commission allowed the radioactive mill tailings to be used in over six thousand housing structures and school foundations. Now Grand Junction is a center for fruit production—a rich riparian zone, the countryside bursts with iridescent peaches, sweet pears, luscious cherries, and glowing apples. The old river valley is cupped on either side by wildly eroded sandstone cliffs, like worn hands with fingers softly folded. Gradually these buttes and outcroppings subside even further, flattening into the gray clay deserts of eastern Utah, where ancient seas hid dinosaur bone and prehistoric fossil.

Before going to an area, I would read all about it, keeping track on a map of scenic spots, places of interest, as well as all military and atomic installations.

In Colorado Springs, the North American Air Defense

Command established the Ent Air Force Base in 1957. In 1966, inside Cheyenne Mountain, they opened a new combat operations center.

Just outside Denver was the Rocky Flats plutonium plant. It was closed in 1989 after two major fires and numerous accidents and leaks led to charges that the plant had seriously contaminated the surrounding countryside, causing a significant rise in cancers among Denver area residents and a veritable plague of mutations, deformations, reproductive disorders, and death among farm animals.

I kept track of these places even before our arrest in Montana. On the way to Fly, Oregon, driving through southwest Washington State, we had unwittingly stumbled across the border of the U.S. Department of Energy's Hanford site. I don't remember what we were after—possibly the perfect sunset, or the inflorescence of a rare northern desert cactus—but when we came to the barbed wire and a sign said "Department of Energy—Keep Out," how was I supposed to know that we'd reached the perimeter of the 570-mile nuclear city that produced the plutonium for "Fat Man," the bomb that leveled Nagasaki? Later, as we were passing through the adjacent town of Sunnyside, I happened to ask our waitress at a diner about the facility, and she raised her eyes and whistled.

"You went in there?" she said. "Ooh, that's a no-no."

Hanford was one of three atomic cities hastily constructed in 1943 to produce plutonium for the Manhattan Project. Over the next twenty-five years, massive clouds of radioactive iodine, ruthenium, caesium, and other materials were routinely released over people, animals, food, and water for hundreds of miles. In the 1950s, it was discovered that the radioactive iodine had contaminated local dairy cattle, their milk, and all the children who drank it. As the incidence of thyroid cancer grew, the farmers in the surrounding areas—"downwinders,"

they're called—began to wear turtlenecks to hide their scars. It was the fashion, the waitress told me.

When I recounted this story to the boys later on in the bar, Suzuki's narrow eyes widened. He'd had relatives in Nagasaki, all of whom had died.

We were lucky we didn't get busted. These sites are hazardous, and I'm not even talking about the environmental fallout. They are well and jealously guarded by men who make a Rodney Dwayne Peairs, the Louisiana butcher who shot the Japanese exchange student, look reasonable and benign. Paradoxically, they have conserved these desolate parts of the country. Often these landscapes hide underground bunkers, but on the surface they are rich with flora and fauna that have flourished, protected from families with fat-tired recreational vehicles, grazing cattle, and other ruminants.

We drove through Colorado in our fifteen-passenger Ford production van, past towns called Cope, Hygiene, and Last Chance. For this trip, it was the eastern part of the state that I was interested in. Early explorers called it the "great American desert," mile upon softly undulating mile, breathtaking and beautiful. Of course, it looks nothing like it once looked, when the first settlers came. The vistas, unbroken then and alive with grasses, are now cropped and divided into finite parcels whose neat right angles reassure their surveyors and owners while ignoring the subtle contours of the land. The fences stretch forever.

"You see that?" Dave, my local driver, interrupted my plains-induced reverie. He pointed to an immense field we'd been passing for several minutes or maybe hours. It looked like all the others, stubbly hacked wheat stalks in neat rows as far as the eye could see. It made me dizzy, like a bad *moiré*

pattern on a videotape, and the back of my eyeballs ached. I squinted, trying to see what, in particular, he was pointing to.

"What?"

"There. The way wheat's been planted up that hillock, with the rows perpendicular, up and down the side?"

"Oh . . . Yeah?"

"Bad. Very bad."

"Why?"

"Erosion." He shook his head morosely.

Dave was an agricultural student at Colorado State University. His last name was Schultz, and he looked remarkably like a baby version of Sergeant Schultz on *Hogan's Heroes*, with an enormous breadth of chest and calm hands like sun-warmed rocks, made for comforting large terror-stricken animals. Suzuki and Oh liked him because he talked slowly and didn't use a lot of words.

One of the first things I ask a prospective driver is whether or not he likes to talk. Then I ask him what he knows about. Dave said, "Nope" and "Farms." I hired him on the spot.

Dave gave me the facts about farms:

The United States has lost one-third of its topsoil since colonial times—so much damage in such a short history. Six to seven billion tons of eroded soil, about 85 percent, are directly attributable to livestock grazing and unsustainable methods of farming feed crops for cattle. In 1988, more than 1.5 million acres in Colorado alone were damaged by wind erosion during the worst drought and heat wave since the 1950s.

"I remember it. I was on my dad's farm," said Dave. "I was just a kid then."

"Dave . . . 1988? That was just a couple of years ago."

"Yup."

Drought and heat waves happen, Dave explained. Erosion didn't have to. Not like this.

"You know what we have here?" Dave asked, an hour or so later.

"No, what?"

"A Crisis. A National Crisis."

"A national crisis?"

"Yup. Nobody sees it yet, but that's what it is, for sure."

"Dave, what are you talking about?"

He turned his head and stared at me, disbelieving, for a long time, so long that I started to get nervous; the Ford was rocketing down this country road, and Dave, though behind the wheel, wasn't watching at all. Finally he shook his head and turned to face forward again.

"Desertification," he pronounced glumly. He had more than his share of profound German melancholy, which seemed at odds with his sunny blond, pink face. He'd wanted to enter the Beef Science Program at the university and had written a paper on the effects of cattle on soil erosion. The paper was called "The Planet of the Ungulates," and it started out from the point of view of a Martian botanist who is circling the planet Earth in his spaceship, making a report on the creatures he sees below, only he's made a terrible mistake because he thinks that Earth is ruled by these large-bodied hoofed mathematicians who own small multicolored two-footed slaves; the slaves work from morning to night to feed their masters and to fabricate over the land their vast intricate geometries. Of course, the Martian never gets to see the inside of a slaughterhouse. But then again, who does?

Dave's professor failed him on "The Planet of the Ungulates," suggesting that he might be better off in the humanities rather than in agricultural sciences. As a result, he was taking a semester off, which was why he was free in October to work for us. He was thinking of dropping out entirely. Dave was not so popular at school because of his "take on things." This depressed him. So did his landscape.

Cattle are destroying the West, he told me, and whenever we passed a grazing herd, I could hear him groan. According to a 1991 United Nations report, 85 percent of U.S. Western rangeland, nearly 685 million acres, is degraded. There are between two and three million cattle allowed to graze on hundreds of millions of acres of public land in eleven Western states. *Public land*, Dave said, shaking his head.

"I read this thing by a guy in a magazine once," Dave said.

"Oh, well, that sure sounds interesting. . . ." Sarcasm, I figured, would be lost on Dave Schultz.

"Yup," he continued blandly, then gave me a dirty look. "It was an article in *Audubon* magazine. The guy was Philip Fradkin. Anyway, what he said was: 'The impact of countless hooves and mouths over the years has done more to alter the type of vegetation and land forms of the West than all the water projects, strip mines, power plants, freeways and subdivision developments combined.'"

"Wow." I took out my notebook to copy it down. Dave was odd, but I was impressed. "Tell me, Dave, did you happen to . . . I mean, did you memorize that?"

"Yup."

"How come?"

"I dunno. Guess I musta thought it was neat."

We drove in silence for another mile or two.

"Did you know seventy percent of all U.S. grain is used for livestock?" Dave suddenly burst forth again. His big hands clutched the steering wheel and he stared straight ahead, as though struggling to control some powerful emotion.

"And with all the tractors and machinery, it ends up taking the equivalent of one gallon of gas to make one pound of grain-fed U.S. beef?"

"And do you know that the average American family of four eats more than two hundred sixty pounds of meat in a year? That's two hundred sixty gallons of fuel, which accounts

for two point five tons of carbon dioxide going into the atmosphere and adding to global warming. . . .

"And that's not even taking into account that every McDonald's Quarter Pounder represents fifty-five square feet of South American rain forest, destroyed forever, which of course affects global warming as well. . . ."

"No kidding." I was writing it all down. He looked over and gave me a smug grin.

"Nope. . . . Are you at all interested in methane gas emissions?"

Okay, so he'd lied about not liking to talk. I could forgive him, because Dave was obsessed.

"Ready?" he continued. "Scientists estimate that some sixty million tons of methane gas are emitted as belches and flatulence by the world's one point three billion cattle and other ruminant livestock each year. Methane is one of the four global warming gases, each molecule trapping twenty-five times as much solar heat as a molecule of carbon dioxide." He finished on a triumphant note, then sighed, and his powerful shoulders sank.

"This is great!" I said, scribbling wildly. I was excited. I had the beginnings of a solid Documentary Interlude that I could work into the Bunny Dunn Show. "Go on. . . ."

"I just don't know," he said sadly, as though the sight of my enthusiasm had somehow quenched his. "All these figures, but who cares? So what? It doesn't help one bit. Nobody is going to do anything about it, and then slowly, bit by bit, it will be too late."

"I really wish you hadn't said that." I put my notebook away and stared out the window.

Too late. Until Dave said that, I'd been feeling lucky. After Akiko's call, I had rounded up Suzuki and Oh, called the travel

agent, and phoned Bunny and then Dave to tell them we'd be on the next plane to Denver. Next I called my obstetrician—I was due for a second ultrasound, as I was approaching the twenty-week mark, but he said it was fine to postpone for a week, until after the shoot. He asked how I was feeling and I told him just fine, which was true. In fact, I'd never felt better physically; although my belly was rounding out, it still wasn't really visible under my clothes and wasn't getting in my way at all. And emotionally I was oddly calm. And happy. And we had a four-day head start on Ueno. Somehow everything seemed to be falling into place.

### AKIKO

Akiko stood in the bathroom with her bottom to the mirror, bent in half, peering over her shoulder. She drew her underpants slowly down around her knees. Two days later, and her rectum was still bleeding. She looked at it now. Little flakes of black crusted blood stuck to the insides of her buttocks, and as she watched, a trickle of bright-red blood oozed from the center. Like a bleeding eye, she thought. She studied it, twisting her body to get a better view. Then she lunged toward the toilet. Tripped up by her underpants, she fell to her knees and vomited repeatedly.

Life is bloody, she thought, wiping her mouth. I don't mind, because it can't be helped.

She got up and shuffled to the sink. She gargled some water from the tap to rinse out the sour taste, then sat down on the toilet. She stuck a fresh sanitary napkin to her underpants and waited. The worst was this terror of bowel move-

ments. It hurt so much. She'd stopped eating almost entirely, hoping to avoid them until she healed, but it hadn't worked. She still had to go. She sat, shoulders clenched to her ears, fingers laced in prayer. Her knees trembled in anticipation of the pain. Instead she felt a sudden flooding sensation. She got up from the toilet seat. Her eyes went starry, and the world went black. She stood there for a moment, like a cartoon character who gets socked in the nose and sent reeling round and round while all the pretty little birds twitter, then her knees buckled and the floor disappeared altogether.

### JANE

The problem with Bunny Dunn was one of framing. Specifically, it was her hair. Suzuki looked perplexed. I watched on the monitor as he framed in tight on her features, studied his composition, then widened out to encompass the perimeter of her hairdo. But this required such a radical expansion of the frame that now her face seemed dwarflike in the center, a small, bright diamond set in cotton candy. Suzuki sighed in frustration and zoomed back in again.

Balanced on the split-rail fence that surrounded her ranch house, Bunny Dunn was amplitude personified, replete with meats, our ideal American Wife. She had dressed for the interview in purple stretch jeans, hand-tooled alligator cowboy boots, and a purple checked shirt decorated with fringe and mother-of-pearl snaps that fought to stay attached across the expanse of her bosom. The upper snaps had popped open to reveal a massive depth of cleavage. The fringe had beads on the tips, which dangled from the edge of her breastline

like raindrops clinging to the eaves of a house. Her perfume bent light like an aura. And then there was her hair, golden, like spun metal forged into a nest by a mythical bird of prey, impossible to capture on television. And this was only the head shot. When Suzuki widened out once again to show me a bust shot . . . Well, Bunny gave new meaning to the phrase. Her structure invited a CAD/CAM analysis of its component parts, and watching the monitor, I could imagine the digitized 3-D frame, slowly rotating. Oh waited on the sidelines, fiddling with the pin mike. He was going to have to go in and attach it inside Bunny's shirt. He was stricken with terror.

Maybe she heard Suzuki snicker or saw Oh shake his head in dismay.

"You think I don't know?" she cried, teetering on the rail. "You think I don't realize I look like a goddamn cartoon character with these inflated boobies and this big old butt? You ain't got no idea what it's like. Why do you think I dress like this?"

She was waiting for an answer. "Bunny, I . . ."

"Well, I'll tell you. 'Cause if I don't, I just look fat. Like a block on stilts. At least if I wear tight things I got some shape. You're probably laughing at my hair too. Don't worry. Everyone does, but do you know how limp and pinheaded I look without it?"

"I'm sorry, Bunny. We didn't mean . . ."

"Forget it," she said, recovering her balance. "I'm used to it. Hell, I used to be an exotic, remember? People were always laughing and staring. And darn it, they oughta stare. These babies are Nature's Bounty. That's what John calls 'em. No artificial growth enhancement here."

She cupped her huge breasts and lifted them toward Suzuki, made a little moue into the camera, and then turned on Oh. "Come here, boy. Don't be scared, they ain't gonna

bite you. There's plenty of room to hide that little gadget of yours down here. Just stick it in wherever you want."

That's when we all began to like her. Bunny drove a custom-painted purple Sedan de Ville. It was a comfortable car for her husband, John, to ride in and easy to get in and out of as well. John was less active in running the feedlot these days, but he still liked to keep an eye on what his son was up to, so Bunny would drive him on his rounds every day, a long, sleek purple ship cutting through a sea of milling cattle. We set the camera up on one of the feed towers, and it made a great wide shot for the title sequence. At their various stops Bunny would help John out of the car and into his wheelchair. He spent most of his time in his chair, propelled by Bunny.

"I like it down here," he cackled, gazing up adoringly at the shelf of breast that shielded his balding head. "Lots of shade."

Bunny slapped his pate. He pinched her bottom. They had a playful and loving relationship that caused his son, Gale, to shiver with rage. Gale was a pale, flaccid man with a chin that simply receded into the swollen flesh of his neck. A thyroid condition, perhaps. His handshake reminded me of Ueno's. Cold. Damp. Suspicious.

And then there was Rose. Strange Rose. "She's shy," explained Bunny as the little girl clawed her mother's thigh and buried her face between her legs. She was still just a baby at five, but her eyes were haunted, and there was something about her, not timidity, not just the eyes, that was deeply disturbing. She looked ordinary enough, a plump, pretty child with light-brown ringlets, dressed in puffy smock dresses. Her daddy doted on her, but it was Gale whom she adored. From time to time a flicker of doubt crossed Bunny's face when she looked at her daughter. There was a secret. I didn't know what it was, but Gale knew, and he leered at me when he caught me staring at his half-sister.

The Dunn & Son feedlot was a twenty-thousand-head operation located about fifteen miles down the road from Bunny and John's house, in a shallow bowl of land just shy of the foothills. The Rockies rose up in the distance to the west, but the east was horizontal, an endless expanse of griddle-flat cropland.

From a distance, the feedlot itself looked like an island, an enormous patchwork comprising neatly squared and concentrated beef-to-be. Angus, Brangus, Hereford, Charolais, Limousin, and Simmental, these were breeds, not animals, penned with precision and an eye to slaughter that was antithetical to the randomness of living things. The only aspect of their animal nature that could not be contained by the gridwork was the stench, an aggregate of all the belches and flatulence, the ammonia, methane, and hydrogen sulfide gases exuded with the fecal matter and urine of twenty thousand large-bodied animals. It rose and spread like anarchy on the autumn wind. The closer we came, the stronger it got.

The wooden ranch gate that marked the drive into the feedlot proclaimed:

Dunn & Son, Custom Cattle Feeders  
John and Gale Dunn, proprietors  
*"Dunn to Perfection"*

Gale was waiting for us in the small feedlot office. He was nervous and had taken special care with his appearance. His baby-blue plaid shirt was buttoned tight around the neck, making his reddened wattles bunch up at the collar. He wore a string tie fastened with a big hunk of turquoise. The polyester fabric of his shirt stuck to his sweaty skin, despite the stale, humid air-conditioning in the office. He fidgeted, removing his cowboy hat to run his fingers through his straw-colored hair. He had the jittery blue eyes of a newly farrowed sow, rimmed in pink, with pale, bristle-like lashes. Periodically he

puffed out his chest to levitate his gut, a maneuver that gave him enough room to tuck his shirt into the belt below it.

He was to take us on a tour of the feedlot. We would film the operations, and later Bunny, John, and Rose would join us to shoot some family scenes. I was hoping to get most of the feedlot footage on Day One. On Day Two we were scheduled to go to the slaughterhouse. On the morning of Day Three we would shoot Bunny and John's house and their interior decor, and by the afternoon of Day Three, when Ueno was due to arrive, we would be on to the cooking scenes and the family dining. I thought that the sight of Bunny in an apron, searing bulls' testicles, would soften Ueno, and he could supervise that scene to his heart's content. He had approved the show, after all. I just wanted a free hand with the meat production.

Suzuki got set up and Oh pinned the wireless mike on Gale, although I didn't anticipate getting much usable sound. So far, Gale had been surly and uncooperative, and it seemed he had agreed to this tour only at his father's insistence. Still, you can't shoot cows without a cowboy, and I needed Gale because his father was too decrepit.

"Ready?" I tried to give him a reassuring smile, but Gale was growing more distraught by the minute.

"Cheer up. You don't have to say anything, just show us around. Or ignore us. Pretend we're not even there."

But he surprised me. We filmed him leaving the office, then walking along one of the dirt access roads that cut alongside the pens. Suzuki went handheld, tracking backward with Gale, filming him as he walked. I stayed next to Suzuki, with my hand looped through his belt, steadying him and trying to keep him from tripping in a rut. Oh was attached to us by the camera cable, doing his best to record ambiance, mix, and keep up with us. Dave orbited the periphery with the tripod on his shoulder, staying out of the frame. We made a



curious constellation, with Gale as our stiff, silent nucleus. Then all of a sudden, with no warning, he looked straight into the camera and started to speak.

"Well, howdy," he said with a nervous smile. "Uh, I guess I'll just introduce myself first. I'm Gale Dunn, and this here's my spread. I'm the one in charge here."

He had actually scripted his lines and now was going to perform them. Warming to his role, he puffed out his chest and lowered his voice, sounding bass and manly.

"Uh, some guys run their operations from the office, but I'm a hands-on kind of guy, if you know what I mean."

He shifted his pale gaze from the lens and looked over at me. "I said 'guy' twice. Is that okay?"

"Uh . . . yeah, fine." I was astonished. "You're doing just great. Please go on. . . ."

With a renewed sense of confidence, he looked back at the camera and raised his arms in an awkward sweeping gesture that encompassed the acres of pens surrounding us.

"Like I was sayin', I'm in charge of all this here, ever since Dad got remarried to that . . . married Bunny. That's his new wife's name, but she ain't my real mother. My real mother died. Ever since Dad got remarried he ain't too effective 'round here anymore, so I oversee the operations of the entire lot and personally supervise mixin' the feeds and the medicines."

This seemed like a good opportunity to focus the conversation.

"What kind of medication do you give them?"

"When they come in for processin', we give 'em a prophylactic dose of Aureomycin and then implant 'em with Synovex as a growth supplement."

"Are you using DES?"

"No, it's illegal."

"Did you?"

"Oh yeah. Who didn't? It's still the best and cheapest growth enhancer around—"

"Still?"

"No. That ain't what I meant. I meant if it was still around. Which it ain't." He stopped walking and glared at me, his voice rising in pitch and volume. "Wait a minute. What's goin' on here? I thought you were workin' for BEEF-EX. What are you givin' me the third degree here for?"

"Sorry. Just curious. What's Synovex?"

"It's a growth hormone. Perfectly legal. You give the heifers Synovex-H, and the steers get Synovex-S."

"What's in it, do you know?"

He looked at me with scorn. "Estradiol, testosterone, and progesterone. All natural."

My questions seemed to have quenched his enthusiasm for television and he walked along for a while, huffy, ignoring the camera entirely. I didn't know what had gotten into me; I was normally not so blunt and graceless with my interview questions, but the guy just bugged me. Still, now I'd blown it and needed to lure him back.

It was high noon and the desert sun bore down so hard it dimmed vision and made solid objects wriggle. This kind of heat was odd for October. The dirt was parched and the hot wind buffeted your face with a stench you could taste—the sick-sweet smell of manure, cut with searing fumes of ammonia that rose from the urine-drenched ground by the feed bunkers. Black flies buzzed furiously around us, but Suzuki had given up trying to shoo them away from the lens, concentrating instead on clearing his eyes of the sweat that cut rivulets through the dust on his forehead. Dust was everywhere. It got in your eyes, in your throat. The wind lifted up the dust, twirling it into tight little twisters that danced in and out of the pens. The only sounds were the wind, and the flies

buzzing, and the eerie wheeze and rattle of twenty thousand cattle coughing. We stopped by the side of a pen. Gale turned to face us, resting the backs of his elbows casually on the top of the gate and hitching his boot heel around the rung at the bottom. He looked at me. His body language was all about openness, a casual cowboy-nailed-to-the-cross sort of posture, but his eyes were wary. The penned cattle in the background turned to watch. It made a lovely picture. Dave sidled up to me while Suzuki reframed.

"Ask him about feed," he whispered in my ear.

I looked over at Suzuki, who turned on the camera and gave me a nod and a thumbs-up.

"So, Gale, what kind of feed do you use?"

Gale grinned. "Well now, I was hopin' you'd ask about that. You East Coast environmental types are always going on about recycling . . . well, that's just what we're doing here with our exotic feed program and we're real proud of it. We got recycled cardboard and newspaper. We got by-products from potato chips, breweries, liquor distilleries, sawdust, wood chips. We even got by-products from the slaughterhouse—recycling cattle right back into cattle. Instant protein. Pretty good, huh?"

"That's cannibalism!"

He looked at me with utter contempt. "They ain't humans," he said.

"Wasn't there a problem with that in England a couple of years back? It caused something—some disease that ate the cows' brains and made them crazy. . . ."

"Nineteen eighty-seven," Dave hissed behind me. "It was in nineteen eighty-seven."

"Wouldn't know," said Gale, spitting. "This is America. Never been a problem here. . . ."

"I think it's illegal," Dave said. He couldn't keep quiet.

"Nah, it's all done local." I didn't quite see how this

addressed our concerns, but Gale continued without missing a beat.

"It's a changing field—there's scientific developments in feed technology happening all over America, all the time. Some guy down at Kansas State I read about has come up with plastic hay. It's these plastic pellets you can feed the cattle instead of regular hay. Hay's a bitch, but this plastic stuff—it's clean, it's easy to deliver through an automated feed system. Works just as good for roughage and you only need a tenth of a pound compared to four pounds of hay. That's a forty-to-one ratio. They say it's a savings of about eleven cents a day per head. And the best thing is they can get back about twenty pounds of it—right out of the cow's rumen at the slaughterhouse. Make new pellets. Talk about recycling!"

"You feed animals *plastic*?"

"And if you like that, well, get this one. Cement. That's right. Cement dust. High in calcium, and the cows in the tests put on weight thirty percent faster than normal feed, and the meat was more tender and juicy."

"Who is doing these tests?"

"United States Department of Agriculture. I got one more for you, but you ain't gonna like it."

Behind him, dominating the center of the pen, was a towering bulldozed mound, which rose above the sea of cattle. The mound was alive with flies. He pointed to it with his thumb.

"See that?"

"What?"

"Shit." He grinned as Suzuki racked focus.

"No way. . . ."

"No shit—I mean, I ain't kidding. Out one end and in the other. Now, talk about fast turnaround."

"That's disgusting."

"Nope. It's recycling, only it's recycling animal by-products.

You gotta understand the way feedlots work. The formulated feed we use is real expensive, and the cattle shit out about two-thirds before they even digest it. Now, there's no reason this manure can't be recycled into perfectly good feed. There's this one pig farmer in Kansas who ran his pregnant sows underneath his finishing pens? You know what he saved in feed costs? About ten thousand dollars a year." His words resonated with awe and he withdrew for a minute into a private reverie, then he shook his head and continued.

"And another thing you East Coast environmentalists are always griping about is organic-waste pollution. Well, you should be real happy, 'cause this pretty much takes care of the problem, don't it. Feed the animals shit, and it gets rid of the waste at the same time. That's two birds with one stone."

The cattle that formed a backdrop did not look happy at all. Suzuki, picking up on the content of the interview, zoomed in on a cow who was raising her tail to defecate. I was proud of him. His English comprehension had improved immensely over the months of shooting. He adjusted his position and grabbed a close-up of a steer, feeding mournfully at the trough.

Just at that moment we heard a car horn in the distance and turned, to see the purple Cadillac barreling toward us, followed by a massive wake of dust. It stopped about ten feet away, but the dust cloud kept on coming. Suzuki cursed and coughed as he shielded the Betacam with his torso, but an odd noise from Gale made him reframe and turn on the camera.

"Ro-o-osie!" Gale squealed.

The purple car was hidden, but out from the center of the billowing cloud came Rose, running. Gale leaned down to greet her and she threw herself into her half-brother's arms. He swung her up high, tossing her into the air over his head. Her dress ballooned around her little kicking legs as she came to land solidly on his hip.

"How's my favorite little helper today?" he crooned. "Come

to help Uncle Gale mix up a nice dinner for all the cows?" Rose nodded happily, but when she saw us she withdrew, burrowing her face into the side of Gale's soft neck and peeking at us out of the corner of her eye. Suzuki trained the camera on her as Bunny emerged from the direction of the car, pushing John in his wheelchair over the rough dirt road.

"What's that lyin' son-of-a-bitch son of mine been tellin' y'all?" John hollered. "Come on down here, Rosie. Come sit on yer daddy's lap and we'll go for a ride."

Rose shook her head and clung tighter.

"Leave her alone, John," said Bunny, pressing his shoulder. "She wants to help her Uncle Gale."

"Well, she's a smart one. He needs help . . ." John grumbled.

I liked the idea too. It would make a nice scene—big brother teaching little sister how to feed the beef—so we filmed the family walking to the feedmill, and inside we prepped the scene. Gale would mix feed and medication, Rose would help. Bunny and John would look on approvingly as the knowledge and traditions of the American West were passed on to the next generation. Everyone was in place. Rosie was helping Gale get ready, dragging a half-empty paper sack that was almost as big as she was across the floor. Suzuki was resetting the white balance on the camera to accommodate the hospital-bright fluorescents, and while I waited for him I took a look around.

A larger hopper dominated the room, used for funneling the mixed feed into the auger system. There was a refrigerator in one corner and an industrial sink in the other. Next to me was a long stainless-steel counter, which I leaned on. Stacked against the wall were more paper sacks, like large flour bags, containing what I suddenly recognized as various brands of powdered drugs. A thick coat of dust covered every surface. At first I didn't think anything of it. Dust was everywhere.

indoors and out. But then I noticed I had dust on my hands from the stainless-steel counter, and up close it seemed to consist of a mix of ground-up grains and powder.

Something caught in my chest, a quick little fear, and it traveled straight down to my gut. I went to the sink to wash my hands. Next to the sink was a large metal garbage can filled with small empty bottles. I picked one out and examined the red and white label. Lutalyse, the hormone used to synchronize the estrus of a herd for easier artificial insemination. I didn't understand. Gale was not breeding cattle. Why would he be using Lutalyse in a feedlot? In the garbage can I found the insert that came with the bottle.

**WARNING:** Not for human use.

Women of childbearing age, asthmatics, and persons with bronchial and other respiratory problems should exercise extreme caution when handling this product. In the early stages, women may be unaware of their pregnancies. Dinoprost tromethamine is readily absorbed through the skin and can cause abortion and/or bronchospasms. Direct contact with the skin should, therefore, be avoided. Accidental spillage on the skin should be washed off immediately with soap and water.

Use of this product in excess of the approved dose may result in drug residues.

I was still holding the bottle. I dropped it back into the garbage and turned on the tap. My hands were shaking and the bar of soap kept slipping from my grip and landing on the bottom of the sink with a drumlike thud. There was a brush next to the faucet and I scrubbed my hands with it as hard as I could. I couldn't stop scrubbing. Or shaking.

"Are you all right?" Dave asked, suddenly next to me.

I pointed to the garbage pail. "I touched it."

Dave picked out the bottle and looked at the label. "Lutalyse," he said. "Fairly common. It shouldn't be a problem—"

"I'm pregnant."

Dave stared at me. "You shouldn't be here at all."

Just then Suzuki gave the thumbs-up. I turned to Gale and tried to control my voice.

"Why are you using Lutalyse? Are you breeding cattle?"

John and Bunny looked confused. Gale snickered with pride. "Now, ain't that something? You see what I mean? That's just another example of modern science comin' up with a way to kill two birds with one stone. We ain't breedin' here, but we use that same Lutalyse to abort our heifers when they get accidental bred, you know? Before gettin' here. Actually, we give 'em all a shot when they come in for processin', just in case. They abort so nice and smooth they don't go off their feed for a second, don't even miss a mouthful."

"But why?"

"Jeez," he said, shaking his head. "You can't have pregnant heifers in a feedlot. All they do is eat, eat, eat, and never gain. Our job here is gainin'."

John snorted. Suzuki panned over to him, adjusted the frame, and continued to roll.

"Crazy, that's what it is," John growled. "Used to be you waited till an animal was sick or needed it before you pumped 'em full of drugs. It's all a scam, son. You're just throwin' your money at these big pharmacooticals. . . . My money, I should say. Them scientists of yers, they git their paychecks from the pharmacooticals, and they're all in cahoots with the govment."

"Can't do it any other way, Dad," Gale whined. "I've explained all this to you. Times have changed."

He turned to address us. The pitch of his voice was rising again, the more excited he got.

"Profit's so small these days you gotta deal in volume, and

without the drugs we'd be finished. The math just don't work out. I'm bringing more head to slaughter than he ever did. If it weren't for the modernizing I accomplished around here—"

"Yeah, yeah, I heard all that before," John interrupted loudly. "Maybe it's so, Gale, but that don't make it right. Getting so you gotta be a goddamned chemist to fatten up a cow."

He spun his wheelchair around and headed toward the door. "Come on, Bunny. Bring your daughter. This ain't no place for a child to be playin'."

Bunny looked at us and shrugged.

"Rosie, baby, come on," she called. "Uncle Gale's got work to do."

"Uncle Gale?" Rose whispered, tugging at Gale's elbow as he watched Bunny help his father negotiate the threshold. "Uncle Gale . . . ?"

Gale ignored her, but she persisted.

"Uncle Gale . . . ?"

Finally he noticed, crouched down, and put his arm around her. "What is it, darlin'?"

She whispered something in his ear. He grinned and stood and went to the dusty refrigerator. As he opened it I got a glimpse of the shelves inside, lined with row after row of little rubber-topped bottles. Gale reached into the freezer section above and pulled out a bright-blue popsicle on a little plastic stick from a tray of molds. He saw me watching.

"You want one?" he asked. I shook my head. "You mix 'em up with Kool-Aid. Rosie loves 'em. Can't have a visit with Uncle Gale without an ice pop, hey?"

Rosie took the popsicle in her dust-covered hands and stuck it in her mouth. The heat started melting it almost immediately and the sticky blue liquid ran down between her fingers. Contentedly she licked it off and sucked at the pop.

"Come on, Rosie," called Bunny from outside. Rosie reached

her arms up to Gale. He bent down and she planted a sugary kiss on his cheek, then scampered out the door. When he stood up again I saw that her kiss had left behind a wet mark on his skin, like a brand, in the encrusted dust.

"He's an old fart," said Gale, more to himself than to us. He stood in the doorway watching Rose run after her father. "Can't see an inch beyond the tip of his pecker." He noticed Suzuki was still filming and put up his hand to block the lens. "Don't you use that last thing I said," he growled at me. "Don't need you stirring up more trouble round here."

I told Suzuki to cut and thanked Gale for his time and for the tour. He grunted, then went back to work, turning his attention to one of the large drug sacks. All I wanted was to get out of that room. I washed my hands again quickly, but by then Suzuki had spotted a cutaway shot—a shaft of sunlight filtering through a high window, illuminating the dust particles that were sent swirling in the air as Gale dragged the sack toward the hopper. I fled through the door before he had time to rip it open, then waited outside in the blistering heat until finally the crew emerged. Suzuki apologized. Gale had started to mix up some feed, he explained, and he had gone ahead and shot the scene without me. He watched me with a worried expression.

"Takagi, are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I'm sorry. You're right, I should have thought of it. Of course we need that footage. I should have stayed. . . ."

"No, that's not what I mean. Are you all right physically?"

"I'm fine, Suzuki, thanks. Really. I'm sorry. It's just . . ."

"You should go home and take care of yourself and the baby."

"I know. But really, I'm fine now. Let's just get this over with."

My throat ached and I felt tears pressing up into my eyes. I was losing it, losing focus, control, forgetting what I needed

for the show. The shots of Gale mixing the feed were essential—without them I'd never be able to edit together his interview on the subject. And we needed footage of the entire feedlot too, to show the extent of the Dunn operation. But the heat was sucking the air from my lungs, and for the first time, I was scared.

I wanted to get out of there, to go back to the motel and get perfectly clean and then curl up in cool sheets and hug my belly for the next few months, until it was huge and viable.

Instead I led the crew in the direction of a cluster of long, low buildings that Gale had identified as the processing area, telling myself all the while to stop being self-indulgent.

The Dunns had a custom lot, where ranchers brought their cattle for finishing. Nearby we heard the clatter and clang of hooves striking steel and the *wbump* of a hydraulic squeeze chute. This was followed by a bellowing cry of pain. Oh shuddered. The cattle wound in a long curving line toward the chute, confined between high narrow walls, they waited their turn to get processed. A young cowboy was operating the squeeze, and two others were branding and administering injections. Every time an animal was released, the row of waiting cattle reluctantly advanced by one and the animal at the head was forced, struggling, into the chute, where a metal collar trapped its neck and the hydraulic sides of the pen compressed to restrain its body.

"Sonofabitch," said the young cowboy, planting his heel down hard on the bony rump of a recalcitrant steer.

The terrified animal evacuated copiously and the smell of searing hair and flesh from the brand added to the stench.

"What's that?" I asked an older cowboy. He was wielding an enormous hypodermic needle, which he plunged into the

steer's neck. The thick hide twitched. The cowboy ignored me and withdrew the needle.

Suzuki swung himself up onto the top of the chute to get an angle on the incoming cattle and the action inside the squeeze. Dave stood next to him, supporting him with one hand and holding the camera with the other. The cowboys watched skeptically, but the sight of Dave seemed to reassure them. I waited for Suzuki to get settled, retrieve the camera from Dave, and turn it back on.

"Lutalyse?" I asked again. "Is that what you're injecting?"

The older cowboy snorted with derision. "This here's a steer, miss. Don't give Lutalyse to no steer."

"Then what is it?"

"Dunno."

"You don't know what you're giving them?"

"Nope."

The young cowboy grinned and winked at me. "Boss's special formula."

The older cowboy frowned at him. "Listen. We just shoot 'em up. Don't ask no questions." He sounded too curt and he realized this.

"It's medicine to keep 'em disease free," he added. "Good clean meat for you city folks. That's all I know."

"Yup, these cows here's goin' straight to Japan," said the young cowboy conversationally. "I heard they even eat the assholes and everything. Is that where y'all are from?"

The older cowboy spit. "Donny, you just shut yer mouth and don't go sayin' shit you don't know nothin' about."

"Well, that's what Roy down at the packin' plant told me. Straight to Japan, Taiwan, and Korea. You ask me, it's a darn shame, wasting all that good American meat on a bunch of gooks. No offense," he added, looking over at me.

"None taken."

It was a great sound bite. Having had his say, Donny settled back into a silent sulk. We watched them process a couple more animals, then headed back to the van down one of the long access roads that cut between the acres of pens. Cows huddled, tails swatting, hides quivering with flies. You forget how big cows are, slow and warm and solid. Sometimes they looked up as we passed, watching us with mournful, seeping eyes. Suddenly Suzuki stopped dead in his tracks and handed me the Betacam. He clambered up the side of a pen and held out his hand. Passing him the camera, I climbed up next to him. On the far side of the pen was a cluster of heifers, feeding at the bunker. Suzuki ignored them and trained the camera on the ground just below us. In the dust lay a slimy, half-dried puddle containing a misshapen tangle of glistening calf-like parts—some hooves, a couple of bent and spindly shins. It was an aborted fetus, almost fully grown, with matted fur, a delicate skull, and grotesquely bulging eyes. Suzuki rotated the lens into a telephoto setting, but even without it, through the swarm of flies, I could see that the eyes of the calf were alive with newly hatched maggots.

We drove to the motel. Inside the van we were all silent. I thought the boys were asleep, but when I looked back they were wide awake, each slumped on a long bench seat by himself, staring out the window at the flat horizon. Dave kept glancing over at me and nervously adjusting the temperature controls. He didn't speak, either. It was cool in the van, but I was sticky with perspiration and dust. I kept imagining what the dust must contain, the microscopic particulates of toxic powder, dissolving in my sweat, now leaching back through my pores, and the thought made my skin prickle and flush and sweat some more.

At the motel, we unloaded quickly. I was desperate for a

shower, for sleep, for even just a short nap. We were due back at the ranch at five to shoot Bunny serving cocktails, still there was time. But as I shouldered my knapsack and headed toward my room, Suzuki stopped me.

"*Takagi-chan, chotto . . .*"

"Suzuki . . . what?" I turned, about to snap, but then I saw his face. And Oh's, behind him.

"*Gomen, ne . . .*," he said. "Sorry. I know you are tired. But there is something I think you must see."

"Can't it wait? Until tonight after we finish?"

Suzuki and Oh exchanged a quick look.

"No," Suzuki said.

"I will cue up the tape," said Oh. "If you would like to take a shower."

The hot water revived me, washed off the dirt, which ran in soapy rivulets down my legs, spiraling into the drain between my bare feet. But as I watched, it occurred to me that the heat of the water, by opening my pores, might increase the osmosis of any poison that remained on my skin. Panicked, I twisted the shower knobs and gasped as the water turned icy. I stood there shivering. For the first time, I think I was aware of the danger I'd walked into, the effect it might have on the baby. I needed to make a choice. I could continue with the shoot or abandon it right here, turn it over to Suzuki to finish, or call Kenji down from New York to take over. I rubbed my stomach, stupidly, as if that would help, and cried a little, then got out of the shower and dried myself off. My teeth would not stop chattering.

We gathered in Oh's room. He had cued the last half of the interview with Gale. It looked great: awkward and grandiose, Gale leaned against the rail of the cattle pen, gesturing expansively around him. I started to feel a little better.

"How did you know to ask him about feed?" I asked Dave. "It seems to be his little hobby."

Dave grinned. "When we were in the office I saw that he had all these copies of *Feed Sense* and *Feed Stuffs* and *Food Chemical News* all neatly cataloged on the shelf, and when I pulled one out I saw he'd tagged articles like he was seriously studying them. It seemed like a good bet he'd have something interesting to say."

The interview was over and Gale was leaning with his back to the pen and behind him the cautious cattle were drawing closer in a line, doleful and curious, when suddenly a swish pan triggered by a squeal of joy caught little Rose running from the middle of the dust cloud. She leapt into Gale's arms and he swung her up and tossed her high, and the camera followed her arc so that for a moment it looked as though she would just keep on flying up into the bright blue sky. But then she came down and landed on Gale's broad hip and behind them the cattle scattered.

Suzuki had lingered for a moment on this shot of the two of them, then slowly framed in on Rose. She buried her face in the softness of Gale's neck, but met the encroaching gaze of the camera and stared back into its depth. Suzuki kept zooming in, so close you could see the crosshatched texture of Gale's sunburned skin. Rose just stared, unblinking. It wasn't a look of particular intelligence, but once more, something struck me about the girl.

"She's odd, so weird-looking . . .," I said, and realized I was whispering.

Again, we had all fallen silent, drawn by the camera as it slowly passed across the little girl's face and down her body. Gale had wrapped his thick arm around her. His forearm supported her back and his hand held her in place, tight around her stomach, partially hidden in the folds of her dress. The camera paused there, studying this image, taking it in with a long, steady gaze, when suddenly it tipped, as though an unexpected shift in gravity had rocked the world.

"Oh God," said Dave in a low voice. I looked at him. He was staring at the screen, so I looked back too, but it was the same frame as before—the man's callused hand clasping the little girl's body.

"What . . . ?" I asked. "What is it?"

"She's . . . precocious," Dave said, and it sounded like a dirty secret, a cruel joke that I still didn't get. Rose was hardly precocious. Slow, perhaps even dumb . . .

"No, not her personality," said Dave, shaking his head impatiently. "Her development. Here." He clasped his hands to his chest.

"*Oppai ga aruyo*," said Suzuki, pointing at the monitor. "Look. Right there. See? I noticed it when I was shooting. I wanted to show you. She has breasts."

His finger tapped the screen where he had zoomed in further to Rose's chest. There, resting on the callused edge of her half-brother's hand, was a pronounced swelling, which had looked like bunched fabric at first but now, up close, had the weight and heft of a woman's breast. Underneath the white smock dress, pulled tight by Gale's hand, you could see the shape of the enlarged areola and the outline of her nipple.

"It's premature thelarche," said Dave. "I read about cases in Puerto Rico. Precocious puberty. These little girls with estrogen poisoning. They thought it was some kind of growth stimulants in meat or milk or poultry. I think they suspected DES. You asked Gale about it, so I guess you know about DES?"

I nodded.

"Yeah," he continued. "Well, it's still easy to get down there. Some of the girls were just babies, like a year old, with almost fully developed breasts. Some of them were even boys."

"What happened?"

"Nothing much. There was this one doctor who tried to get the FDA to do tests, which ended up half-assed and



inconclusive. But the media attention was enough to scare off the farmers from using the drugs, and after a while the symptoms just slowly regressed when the kids stopped eating the contaminated foods. But not before a lot of them developed cysts in their ovaries . . . and of course there's the danger of cancer too."

"Do you think it's in the meat, then?" I asked, still looking at Rose.

"It's gotta be that feedroom, something she picks up there . . ."

"The popsicles . . ."

"Or just the dust from her fingers. What I'm wondering is, do you think Bunny knows?"

I thought about it. "She must. Look at the way she dresses her, in those loose clothes. . . ."

"The brother knows too," said Suzuki. "Look."

We all stared at the screen. Suzuki was holding the tight shot of Gale's hand, and after a moment, the large thumb started to move, slowly, surreptitiously, up and down, underneath his sister's breast.

"God," said Dave. "He's fondling her."

Suzuki coughed. Oh turned away from the screen and started to re-coil the camera cables one by one, even though they didn't need it. His cables were never knotted or kinked. He always kept them perfectly wrapped and secured them with little-girls' hair elastics, the kind with pastel plastic balls on the ends. I looked back at the television. Suzuki widened out to a two-shot and something occurred to me.

"You know, I don't think Gale knows what causes it. In fact, I think he's got a dose himself. Look at him. I thought it was just a barrel chest, but now I'm not so sure. And his voice, it sounds like it's changing. He had to strain today to keep it low, but as soon as he got upset it went up about an octave and started to crack."

The tape ran out and cut to static. We sat there for a moment, watching, then Oh got up and ejected the tape and slipped it into its plastic case, and like the moving parts of a heavy machine, we gathered up the camera equipment and filed out to the sweltering van. A TV shoot is like a tank, I sometimes felt, rolling over anything that lies in the path of its inexorable forward momentum.

"What are you going to do?" Dave asked as we drove down the frontage road, away from the motel.

I looked out the window. We were passing a large construction site, where bulldozers had dug a gaping crater in the ground. The site was empty now, the workday was over. A red, white, and blue sign, standing next to the mobile office trailer, read "Future Home of Wal-Mart." Beyond the pit, the fields stretched away into the distance.

"I'm going to talk to her," I said.

Bunny and Rose came to greet us at the door in matching white cotton dresses with cinched waists and wide ruffles around the neckline. Bunny's was quite low-cut, to offer up her cleavage, but Rose's was cut high and prim. They led us out to the patio, where John sat by a low bar, scaled to the height of his wheelchair. He waved a bottle of Jack Daniel's over his head when he saw us.

"Just in time, just in time," he hollered. "I'm servin' bourbon and bourbon. Take your pick."

Behind me I could hear Suzuki gulp. I declined for all of us, and then relented: we'd shoot the cocktail scene quickly, I promised, then the boys could have a drink. They needed it. Suzuki and Oh sprang to a grim sort of attention, and within minutes they had the camera cabled up, balances set, and were tracking backward in front of Bunny as she proudly carried a large silver platter of piping-hot Pigs-in-a-Blanket from the

kitchen. She set them on the coffee table next to John. Rose climbed up on her daddy's lap and fed him a plump wiener, skewered on the tip of a toothpick and wrapped in a crusty swirl of golden dough.

"She's gonna be a regular little heartbreaker," John cackled as she waggled another sausage coyly in front of him. "Just like her mama."

He fed her a sip of bourbon from his glass, watered down now with melted ice, and she screwed up her face and shook her curls, then begged for more. Hand on the zoom, Suzuki hunkered down to get a close-up of the two, as John traded her a sip for a sausage.

We filmed a quick setup of the three of them—All-American ranch family spends a happy time together at the end of a long, hard day—then I called it a wrap and John made drinks for the boys. When Bunny went back to the kitchen to fetch some hot hors d'oeuvres, I followed her.

"I have to tell you something."

I know what denial looks like, and what it feels like too. It's a mercurial flicker of recognition in the eye, quickly blanketed with a vagueness that infuses the body like sluggish blood. It is opaque. Murky. Like wading through a swampy dream that drags at your limbs, and no matter how hard you try, you can't move forward. I know this feeling because I make television and try to walk through it on a daily basis. It feeds on convention, cowers behind etiquette, and the only way to deal with it is with a blunt frontal attack.

"Bunny, I think Rose is sick."

Her look was quick and sharp before she turned her back to me. She slipped her hand into a black-and-white oven mitt shaped like a cow's head and bent down to open the oven.

"I think she's received some sort of hormone poisoning, probably from the drugs around the feedlot, and that's why

she's got breasts. There's a name for it. It's called premature thelarche."

Bunny extracted a hot baking tray of Pigs-in-a-Blanket, set them carefully on top of the stove, then turned to face me.

"She takes after me, you know, in the breast department," she said. She looked ruefully down at her own chest and sort of pushed at it with the nose of the cow mitt. Her tanned skin was the texture of an old mushroom, dotted with beads of sweat that clung in the cleavage. It was hot by the oven and I was sweating too. "John says I should be proud . . .," she added.

"He knows?"

"Well, sort of." She took off the mitt and started scraping the pastries away from the tin with a metal spatula. "About her breasts, anyway . . . But he's so old, you know? Like, maybe there's not much difference between five and fifteen from where he stands. . . ."

"What is it, Bunny? Is there something else . . . other than the breasts?"

She piled the pastries onto a platter. "The doctor's a good friend of John's, you know? But he's an old guy too. Said he'd never seen anything like it. But even he doesn't know about . . ." She stopped again and looked out onto the patio. Little Rose was turning pirouettes and squealing with delight as she danced in a circle from her daddy to Suzuki to Oh and finally to Dave, popping the sausage pastries into their mouths, one by one. John was clapping, egging her on. The boys sat with hunched shoulders and frozen smiles while Rose spun round and round.

"It's none of your business, you know," Bunny informed me, handing me the platter.

"I know," I said. I took the platter and turned toward the porch, then stopped. "Well, actually, no, Bunny. That's not true. It is and it isn't."

She gave me a long, cool stare.

"I had a kind of estrogen poisoning too. Different—I got it from my mother—but, well, it screwed me up inside. I had a growth, like a cancer, on my cervix. And my uterus is deformed. These things are dangerous, Bunny."

I waited, watching her, but her gaze drifted, looked right past me onto the porch, just staring like she hadn't heard a word I said, so I gave up. Balancing the tray of Pigs-in-a-Blanket, I got as far as opening the sliding patio door when her voice behind me, so low I could barely hear it, made me stop.

"Come back tonight," she said. "After eleven. After they're asleep."

I turned back, but she was already busy at work, head bent, wrapping little canned cocktail wieners in triangles of Poppin' Fresh dough. I wasn't sure I'd heard her right. But then she looked up, looked me straight in the eye.

"Bring the cameraman."

The house was quiet when I pulled up the van and parked. Bunny met us at the door; she had recovered her composure and was as garrulous as ever.

"I gave John a sleeping pill," she offered as we walked down the hallway. "And also a half to Rose. We can tear the house down and they won't wake up." We entered a bedroom.

Rose lay under a white four-poster canopy, awash in crisp floral bedding. She was wearing an oversize T-shirt with a "Babes for Beef" slogan, from the local Cowbelles Auxiliary, emblazoned across the front. Bunny sat down on the side of the bed and patted the place next to her.

"I'm okay now," she offered as I sat down. "Now that I've decided to do this."

"Bunny, I don't want to force you. . . ."

"Forget it. I gotta do something. You guys are journalists. Maybe you can figure out a way to help."

"I'm going to need you to sign releases, you know. . . ."

"Yeah, that's fine."

"And I'll need to interview you about Rose's condition, like when it started and what the doctor said. . . ."

"I can do that. But let's just get this part over with first, okay?"

She reached over to her daughter and smoothed a wisp of hair from her forehead, then lifted the T-shirt to reveal her belly and the two concentric arcs of her lower rib cage.

Rose's skin was still a baby's, milky white and downy, and underneath this translucent sheath, her rib cage rose and fell with her shallow breathing. The bones were blue and achingly fragile. I thought of the tiny curl of a child inside me, and my heart leapt. I wanted to put my head against this small belly, blow warmth across it, inhale her sweet baby-sour smell. Then Bunny pulled the T-shirt up farther. Naked, Rose was not plump at all. The plumpness was an illusion created by two shockingly full and beautiful breasts, each tipped with a perfect pink nipple. Suzuki, behind me, shuddered. The girl was five years old. She lay on her back with her arms spread and bent upward at the elbows. Her soft little fingers were tangled in the hair on her pillow. The breasts were firm, but they had separated the way breasts do and slid to either side of her thin rib cage, into her armpits. Disturbed, perhaps, by our presence in the room, she arched her back and turned her head toward the light that was shining from the hallway door. Her mouth opened and closed like a little fish's. She rubbed the hair out of her face with the back of her hand, then her mouth found her thumb and closed around it, and she started sucking.

She was wearing little white cotton underpants, hiked up high over her belly. Bunny stood over her and raised her small hips and drew the underpants down around her thighs. The

baby skin continued, smooth and uninterrupted, down over the swell of her belly to her pubic bone, where suddenly, like grotesque graffiti, her skin was defaced by a wiry tangle of hair.

"She's had some bleeding too," Bunny said sadly.

I turned on the sun gun and gently panned the beam across the child as Suzuki hoisted the camera and focused. My hand was shaking and I couldn't make it stop.

"Just . . ." Bunny tapped Suzuki lightly on the arm. "Please, not her face . . ."

And then she dropped her hand to her lap and looked down at her daughter. Her spine, formerly so straight and tall, strong from counterbalancing the weight of her chest, collapsed into itself, and in that instant Bunny looked old and fat.

"Oh, what the hell. It's not like it's her fault. And with a body like that, who's gonna be looking at her face, right?"

Gently she stroked the tendrils from her daughter's forehead. Her tone, part defeat and part bravado, was filled with the echoes of strip joints and neon, of tinsel and tassels and the hooting of men. All the pain of her own freaky career seemed to hang in the gaps between her words and then spread like an oily wake, wide, in the silence behind them. Suzuki heard the pain and slowly panned the camera to her face.

"Bunny?" My voice sounded harsh even though I was whispering. "I'd like to do the interview now. Tell us about Rose."

That night I dreamed it was time to give birth. It was odd, because my stomach was still taut and concave around the hipbones, and Ma laughed and pointed to my chest and said it couldn't be time since I still didn't have any *oppai* to feed my baby with, and she handed me some small white pills to make

them grow bigger. But I knew she was wrong, because this is America and she just didn't know, so I went out behind the milking barn where I used to play on my grampa's farm before he went bankrupt and sold it, and I pulled up my dress and waited. As I stood there with my legs spread, it started to emerge, limb by limb, released, unfolding, until gravity took the mass of it and it fell to the ground with a *thump*, gangly and stillborn, from my stomach. It was wet, a misshapen tangle, but I could see a delicate hoof, a twisted tail, the oversize skull, still fetal blue, with a dead milky eye staring up at me, alive with maggots.

I woke and had to pee, but it was a strange motel and I couldn't remember where the bathroom was, which sometimes happens on the road in the dark. And I forgot the dream until I had groped my way to the toilet and was sitting there with my elbows on my knees, staring into the blackness, and maybe it was the release of my bladder that brought the birth dream back, but suddenly I remembered it and started to cry. And when I was finished I turned on the light and checked the toilet bowl carefully, but there wasn't anything there except water and pee.

I went back to bed, shivering, so cold. I wanted to call Sloan, but then I'd have to tell him about the feedroom and the Lutalyse, and it made me sick with shame to think about. So I decided, just tomorrow, just the slaughterhouse, and that's all. It will be easy after that, no danger, and after this show I will quit, and even though we've never talked about it, I'll make Sloan support me while I grow fat and happy, maybe we'll move in together somewhere, not Chicago, maybe New York, maybe the country somewhere, where I can grow organic vegetables and learn to pickle things . . . and I drifted back off to sleep.

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Mornings had once been filled with a secret joy, but not any longer. Now they were cold and overcast, no place to linger.

The weather had changed overnight, suddenly bleak and autumnal. The wind whipped up the tumbleweed and sent it skittering across the road in front of Gale's oncoming Dodge. He had come to meet us at the motel to take us to the slaughterhouse. I opted to ride with him in his pickup, while the van with the boys followed behind us. I told Dave what I was planning and asked him to stay close. Now, as we hurtled down a rutted back road, I could see the van in the rearview mirror, swallowed up in the dust.

I turned to face Gale across the wide bench seat in the cab of the pickup.

"Bunny showed me Rose's breasts last night. You know about that, right?"

I watched his head slowly swivel on his mottled, turtlelike neck. He stared at me, then swiveled back. Maybe he thought that if he didn't respond I would just disappear.

"Well," I continued, "then you may already know that she's also got pubic hair and she's starting to menstruate. The problem is that this condition almost always coexists with ovarian cysts and often leads to cervical or uterine cancer, which can kill her. I told Bunny. I'm pretty sure it's estrogen poisoning from the feedlot. There were cases like this in Puerto Rico, where they kept using DES—"

"You still goin' on about that?" He was trying to sound light. "What is it with you and this DES business, anyway?"

"Gale, I think you've got it too. I heard about a case of hormone poisoning in the South where grown men started developing symptoms. . . ."

He drove with both hands, and his knuckles whitened. I thought the steering wheel would snap, but I kept on going.

"Enlarged breasts and elevated vocal—"

He reached across the wide front seat and grabbed my hair and yanked my head to within inches of his face.

"You shut your mouth!" he screamed, spraying me with rage and spittle. "You go spreadin' these filthy lies around here and I'll kill you, you fuckin' bitch, I swear I will."

His eyes were cold and insanely blue. The truck was veering wildly from side to side.

"I saw you, Gale!" I screamed right back at him. "We have it on tape. You were feeling up her breast, you pervert. I saw it."

"Shut up!" Gripping my hair hard in his fist, he shook my head like a dirty onion. Finally he let go, but his voice continued, tightening with rage, spiraling up and up into a high-pitched squeal.

"I never touched her, I swear it! I love that little girl. I wouldn't ever do that, not ever. And about the other, well, you think you're so fuckin' smart, if you got somethin' to accuse me of doing illegal around here, you just go right ahead and try. You and that whore my daddy's married to. This here's ranch country, girl, and we do *what we want, when we want*, without no government's say-so. You got that? Your East Coast politicians can't say boo out here. We take care of our own. We got our own kinda justice, frontier justice, and don't you forget it. . . ."

"Are you threatening me?"

His small eyes were fixed on the road ahead and he spoke through gritted teeth. "I'm just tellin' it like it is. So don't say I didn't give you no warning."

"Right. Got it," I answered. "Likewise."

He didn't answer, but his knuckles stayed white and ready, and my heart stayed pounding in my ears.

We drove the rest of the way in silence. When we got to the slaughterhouse, I climbed down from the Dodge and my knees buckled. Dave saw and came over.

"You all right?" He put his strong, calm hand on my elbow to steady me.

"Yeah. He didn't take it very well."

"I figured."

"Come on. Let's go do this and get out of here." I shouldered the heavy knapsack full of batteries and spare tapes. The boys were ready.

We were surrounded by enormous trucks rattling in, backing up, raising dust. It was hard to talk over the noise of the engines and the crack of gunshots, which were not gunshots at all but whips striking hide, and the bellows of pain that followed the whipcracks, and the hooves thundering down metal off-ramps, and the clatter of cattle against the sides of the corral.

The slaughterhouse was a long, low-lying rectangular structure made of cement and cinder block, embellished here and there with curlicues of razor wire and stuck on top with tall smokestacks, like candles, belching a rank steam into the steely gray sky. Sticking out from the side was a pipe like a sewer duct, spewing a viscous, thickened gruel of blood and offal into the tank of a waiting truck. The effluent red sea.

The boys were all business today, silent, bent to the task. Suzuki's sensory receptors were twitching, and though he was ten feet away and had his back to the duct at that moment, he knew that I wanted the shot and spun around and nailed it. When he lowered the camera we went inside.

The boss was a man named Wilson, a buddy of Gale's. He met us in the office, a wood-paneled panopticon decorated with a large poster of a young blonde Amazon in jungle bikini, who overlooked the meat-cutting operations below. The only plant life in the room was a ratty aspidistra in a green wire plant stand. Wilson stood beside it, sized us up, and shook his head.

"I don't care who yer workin' for, I don't like this one bit.

Never woulda agreed if it wasn't for Gale's daddy twistin' my arm an' sayin' as it would be a favor to his wife. Said y'all want to take some pictures to take back home with you to Japan, but I'm damned if I know why. Kill floor's no place for sightseein'."

"Well, I'll tell you now, Wilson," I shot back. "Folks in Japan are real innerested in seeing all them new and advanced technologies for killin' comin' from the United States of Ameriker. . . ."

Dave trundled by me with the tripod and whacked me in the shin with the pan arm.

"Sorry," he said, but I got the message and shut up.

"We'll be real quick," he said. "Be outta here in no time."

Wilson still seemed reluctant, but then Gale spoke up from the back of the office, where he'd been talking on the telephone.

"What's the problem, Wilson? Get 'em suited up and out there. We gotta educate these city folks, show 'em how we murder our animals round here, ain't that right, Miz Takagi? How we stick it to 'em. That's what you want, ain't it? That's what you been askin' for. . . ."

Wilson's eyes narrowed, then he shrugged and walked over to a row of metal lockers. He took out four yellow hard hats, a bundle of bloodstained white lab coats, safety goggles, and four pairs of knee-high rubber galoshes.

"Well, yer gonna need to put these on, now. . . . An' I got earplugs if you want 'em."

He looked at Suzuki. "And you girls with long hair gotta wear a hair net too. We run a sanitary operation here."

Suzuki looked at the limp net cast in his direction, looked at me, then grimly started tucking his ponytail into it. Dave had been to a slaughterhouse before and had told Oh to bring the rain cover for the camera and garbage bags for other pieces of equipment that shouldn't get wet. We were ready. Wilson

made a phone call, summoning a young employee named Joey, who was still talking on his cell phone as he walked through the door. Wilson directed him to show us around, and he stayed behind with Gale. As we walked down the staircase and away from the office, I looked back up at the wide glass observation window and saw the two of them, their heads perfectly aligned under the jungle girl's large proffered breasts. They were watching me, and when I turned around they both burst out laughing.

Stepping into the slaughterhouse was like walking through an invisible wall into hell. Sight, sound, smell—every sense I thought I owned, that was mine, the slaughterhouse stripped from me, overpowered and assaulted. Steam hissed, metal screeched against metal, clanging and clamoring, splitting the ear, relentless. Chains, pulleys, iron hooks, whipped around us with unbelievable speed, and as far as the eye could see, conveyors snaked into the distance, heaped with skinned heads and steaming hearts. Overhead a continuous rail system laced the ceiling, from which swung mammoth sides of beef, dripping, and heavy with speed as they rattled toward us.

Blood was everywhere: bright red, brick red, shades of brown and black; flowing, splattering, encrusting the walls, the men. The floors were graded toward central drains for easy cleaning, yet the place was caked with a deep, rotting filth. And thick with flies.

As we walked through the processing area, we passed cows being sorted by parts—brains, tongues, livers, intestines, kidneys—all scooped or severed, then tossed into separate steel carts. I looked into a cart filled with hundreds of large livers, spotted with blood and oozing a viscous yellow liquid. Dave tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to the secretions.

"Hormones!" he hollered over the din.

I grabbed Suzuki and trained the sun gun on the glistening, seeping meat.

It was very, very cold. An acrid, humid stench sucked us forward toward the heart of the place, located behind steel vault doors, which opened slowly and let us onto the kill floor, a huge atrium that was known as the "hot floor," Joey informed me, screaming into my ear, "*because blood is hot when it pours from a living body!*"

Suzuki had been shooting all along, but when we walked through the steel doors, his focus became even keener. He had the camera on his shoulder, pressed against the side of his head for stability, but the hard hat and the safety goggles kept knocking against it, getting in his way, so he whipped them off and tossed them to Dave. Joey started to object, but I tugged on his sleeve and gave him a supplicating smile. "Pleeeese?" I mimed, pressing my palms together, and he shrugged and grinned and turned his back on us.

There was no place to stand, so we kept moving, and it was like some sort of obscene square dance, with us doing the do-si-do around massive swinging animals that had been hoisted into the air by a hind leg, suspended between the incremental stages of life and death and final dismemberment. Trying not to get clobbered, we sashayed in and out between the bodies along a slippery grate, beneath which the blood flowed like a dark red river. The workers stood on raised platforms, all in identical blood-drenched coats, yellow hard hats, goggles that obscured their faces, and earplugs that shut out sound. They used power tools to perform various operations on the hanging carcasses—lopping off hooves, decapitating, eviscerating—and the whine of the saw severed the air, its blade slicing bone, searing bone, scorching hide and hair. Skinning a giant carcass is like peeling the pajamas off a dozing twelve-foot child. Evisceration is done with a quick slice up the belly, releasing the entrails, which pour out in a cloud of steam.

We found the knocking pen. Suzuki and I climbed up next

to the operator. Down below, a cow was herded into the pen by a worker wielding an electric prod. The cow balked, minced, then slammed her bulk against the sides of the pen. She had just watched the cow before her being killed, and the cow before that, and she was terrified. Her eyes rolled back into her head and a frothy white foam poured from her mouth as the steel door slammed down on her hindquarters, forcing her all the way in. The worker next to us leaned over and, using a compression stunner, fired a five-inch retractable bolt into her brain. He pressed a button and the metal side of the pen rose up, to reveal the stunned cow, collapsed and twitching on the floor. But the stun was incomplete. He shrugged. He climbed down and wrapped a chain around her hind leg. It was attached to a winch that hoisted her up into the air, where she hung upside down, slowly spinning, head straining, legs kicking wildly in their search for solid ground. The worker approached and took a knife from his belt.

Suzuki had climbed down. With the camera braced on his thigh, he crouched in front of the dangling cow, getting a low-angle shot and waiting for the kill. The worker motioned for him to step back. Suzuki nodded but didn't move. The cow was breathing hard, raspy breaths through the foam and the spittle, and from time to time she let out a strangled cry. Oh stood just behind Suzuki, trembling and bloodless, holding the boom. His headphones looked like goofy plastic ears, feeding the amplified cries of the animal directly into his brain. His face was all screwed up, leaking tears, like a little kid trying hard not to cry out loud. I climbed down next to him and tapped his arm, pointing to the exit and to the camera mike, which we could use if he wanted to leave, but he shook his head. He would stay.

The worker put his hand on the cow's arched neck to steady her, and I stood behind Oh and turned on the sun gun and aimed the beam at her pulsing throat. The worker was

talking to her all the while, saying, "There now, girl, calm down, it's gonna be all over soon," and then he did the most amazing thing. He bent down and looked straight into her bugging eye and stroked her forelock, and it seemed to calm her. And when he straightened up again, he used the upward movement of his body to sink the knife deep into her throat, slicing crosswise, then plunging it straight into her heart. This is why it is important that the cow be stunned but not dead when her throat is cut—the blood gushes out in rhythmic spurts, expelled by the still-pumping heart muscle.

Suzuki had no idea. He did not anticipate the force of this expulsion or the distance the blood would travel, so when the bright-red torrent spewed toward him, he leapt back to protect the camera, knocking into Oh, who knocked into me and sent me sprawling into the path of a thousand pounds of oncoming carcass. I must have caught the meat just as it swung around a corner at the peak of its centrifugal arc. It slammed me, lifting me right off my feet, and that's as much as I remember, because on the way back down I hit the base of my skull against the edge of the knocking pen, which, appropriately, knocked me right out.