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# Cliffs of Tojinbo

## **Abstract**

If I were a temporary worker in Japan, I would take one of my days off and go to Tojinbo to gaze out over the sea. This would be out of character for me. I would never have gone to the sea except as a child, when my parents would have dipped my toes in and out of the Pacific until I cried.

## **Cover Page Footnote**

"Cliffs of Tojinbo" was originally published at [Booth](#).



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**BOOTH**

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## **Cliffs of Tojinbo**

Fiction by Cathy Ulrich

**I**f I were a temporary worker in Japan, I would take one of my days off and go to Tojinbo to gaze out over the sea. This would be out of character for me. I would never have gone to the sea except as a child, when my parents would have dipped my toes in and out of the Pacific until I cried.

*What are you crying about?* they would have asked, but I could never have said.

Despite this, I would go to Tojinbo to gaze out over the sea.

If I were a temporary worker in Japan, my Japanese boyfriend would be the breadwinner. He would *bring home the bacon*.

*That's not how we say it here*, he'd tell me.

Being the breadwinner would be expected of him. It would be expected of me, as a temporary worker, to go wherever someone might need me, to sit alone in our twelve-tatami apartment until someone did. It would be expected of me, as an American, to laugh too loudly, to touch people who didn't want to be touched, to say *eigo-o hanashimasu ka?* when my Japanese failed.

*Please tell me you speak English.*

If I were a temporary worker in Japan, the sea and the sky at Tojinbo would be gray the day I went there. There would be no other tourists, no tour guide with a garish flag, just a smattering of rain, or perhaps only the spray of the sea, spattering my glasses.

While I was gazing out over the sea, I would be approached by an older man. If I talked about him later, I wouldn't use his real name. I would call him something like Tanigawa, which, to me, is very Japanese.

*It's beautiful, isn't it?* he'd say.

*Hai*, I'd say. *So beautiful.*

If I were a temporary worker in Japan, Tanigawa-san would crouch beside me, chin in his hand. He would talk about innocuous things, such as the weather or the price of square watermelons nowadays.

He'd say: *In my day, we didn't even have square watermelons*, and I would laugh too loudly and tap him on the shoulder.

He'd say: *Are there square watermelons in America?*

*Oval*, I'd say, and make the shape with my hands. *Only oval.*

If I were a temporary worker in Japan, Tanigawa-san would say: *You shouldn't jump, you know.*

I'd say: *I wasn't going to jump.*

Tanigawa-san would look out over the sea. He'd tell me about all the people he had stopped from jumping before. He would say he'd seen enough of them to know. They all had the same look on their faces.

*You know*, he'd say, but I would shake my head.

And these people, he'd say, these people who had come here to die—he helped them. He'd say he could help me, too.

*I'm not going to jump*, I'd say.

Tanigawa-san would smile, but it would be the kind of smile my parents gave me when we drove away from the Pacific Ocean, promising me ice cream to stop my tears. He'd pat my shoulder.

*That's good, he'd say. That's good.*

If I were a temporary worker in Japan, I would walk along the rocky path with Tanigawa-san back to the train station. The rocks would be wet with sea spray. I would look back at the gray sky, the gray sea.

Tanigawa-san would take both of my hands in his. *If there's anything I can do to help.*

*There's nothing, I'd say. I don't need any help.*

Except that I would say it wrong, so it would come out more like this: *You can't help me.*

Tanigawa-san would squeeze my hands tightly in his.

*I just wanted to see the ocean, I would say. I have to go.*

I would ride the train away, without looking back. I would whisper the Japanese word for help to myself: *Tasukete. Tasukete.*

If I were a temporary worker in Japan, my Japanese boyfriend would be waiting for me in our twelve-tatami apartment. He would say: *You smell like you've been to the sea.*

He would say: *How was it, the sea?*

*I met an old man there, I would say. He thought I wanted to jump. Isn't that funny?*

My boyfriend would laugh too loudly and tap my shoulder. He'd say: *It's very funny.*

He'd say: *Yes, it's very funny.*

Cathy Ulrich is a writer from Montana. Her work can be found in a variety of journals, including The Mondegreen, Fiction Southeast, Monkeybicycle, and Third Point Press.