

## Dead Shrimp and Dolly Parton

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After being "handed over" to my new hosts in the imposing lobby of a massive skyscraper I was escorted to the 15th floor to one of the thousands of restaurants hidden away inside the gleaming towers of downtown Osaka. Seated next to ceiling to floor windows we looked out at miles of elevated multi-level highways swerving between high-rise buildings, reminiscent of early sci-fi movies. With the exchange of greetings, family news and gifts, we once again picked up our friendship, initially started twelve years earlier when Noboru had been a post-doc with my husband at the University of Chicago.

After many visits to Japan I was no longer surprised at unusual eating experiences, so took in stride the arrival of three small, heavy-lidded glass dishes each containing a very large and angrily alive shrimp. As we discussed the country and western CD set I'd brought for Noboru, a consummate karaoke performer, his wife Yumiko looked up the word "compilation" on their then new computerized translator. The shrimps jumped and squirmed, snapping ineffectually against the glass in their effort to escape.

With the second flask of sake a discreet nod from my hostess prompted the waitress to drop a small pellet into each dish, causing the shrimp to gyrate frenziedly for several very long, agonizing minutes before falling immobile. Moments later she returned to peel the now defunct crustaceans, arrange them among some unidentifiable vegetables on exquisite ceramic plates, and proffer them for our consumption. Noboru and Yumiko, the ultimate urbane Japanese couple, elegantly dissected the dead bodies with their chopsticks without apparent concern. I followed suit with some misgivings, not at eating raw shrimp but at having witnessed their tortured demise.

A long taxi ride to Nara took us to their award winning home, replete with a full personal karaoke set-up from where Noboru regaled us with an eclectic mix of American folk and country and western songs. Later over small cups of tea we again talked of his abiding love of these American music forms. "Before you leave tomorrow," he asked, "would you transcribe a Dolly Parton song for me? She sings so fast I can't catch her words." No wonder he couldn't, nor could I. "Travelin' Prayer" is a really fast song, sung in a heavy southern American accent not easy to decipher for one of English upbringing. It took at least thirty-five replays before I could get all her words down. But as I listened again and again, the song, the singer, and the words she had written, grew on me and by the end of the morning I too was a Dolly Parton fan.

Relieved, I wrote out the lyrics and gave them to Yumiko who shyly handed me a note from her husband. His thanks indicated that he had not doubted that I would be able to transcribe "Travelin Prayer" - though I certainly had. In addition he asked me to find for him the background to "Ashokan Farewell," a quintessential Civil War melody of lamentation and loss that he had played for us the previous evening.

Back in Chicago I spent hours in the library researching Civil War music, but eventually, in those pre-Google days, I drew a blank. There had been neither a battle by that name nor a place in anyway connected to The Civil War. Yet the refrain was so familiar and so evocative of the era. Admitting defeat I sent my regrets to Noboru and moved on. But I never forgot the Ashokan Farewell or the melancholy feelings it aroused in me. Several years later, quite by chance, I learnt that this piece had been written as a waltz in 1982, a hundred and twenty years after the cataclysmic event it so epitomized. Based on an old Scottish lament Jay Ungar had composed it to express his sense of loss and longing at the closing of his Ashokan Music and Dance Camps in Up-State New York. Eight years later Ken Burns chose it as the theme music for his monumental documentary on The Civil War, thus establishing it indelibly on the minds of millions as music of that time.

Recently a sad email from Japan told of Noboru's decision to end his struggle against recurring depressions, something I had not known of in the early years of our friendship. I was shocked, saddened and filled with regret that he had dissolved and broken. Taking one's life is a time honored tradition in Japan related to honor and loyalty, thus I respected his decision to end his inner turmoil. Yumiko, after years of sustaining her husband through crises, is institutionalized having also retreated into the blank spaces of the mind. Both are now far beyond reach, adding poignancy and grief to my sad fond memory of shrimp, war and a Travlin' Prayer.

801 words, 6 minutes

### **"Travelin' Prayer"**

Hey Lord, take a look on around tonight  
And find out where my baby's gonna be  
Hey Lord, would ya look out for him tonight  
For he is far away from me  
Hey Lord, would ya look out for him tonight  
Make sure that he's gonna be alright  
Things gonna be alright with me

Hey Lord, would ya look out for him tonight  
And make sure all his dreams are sweet  
Send down that ya got him on the road  
But you'll make it softer for his feet  
Hey Lord, would ya look out for him tonight  
Make sure that he's gonna be alright  
'Til he's home and here with me

Hey Lord, would ya look out for him tonight  
For he is sleeping under the sky  
Hey Lord, make sure the ground he's sleepin' on  
Is always warm and dry  
Ooo, don't give him too much pain  
And keep him away from planes

Cause my baby hates to fly

Hey Lord, would ya look out for him tonight  
For it gets rough along the way  
And if it all sounds strange  
Just because I don't know how to pray  
Ooo, won't you give him peace of mind  
And if you ever find the time  
Tell him I miss him everyday

Hey Lord, take a look on around tonight  
And find out where he's gonna be  
Hey Lord, would ya look out for him tonight  
For he is far away from me  
Hey Lord, would ya look out for him tonight  
Make sure that he's gonna be alright  
'Til he's home and here with me  
Here with me