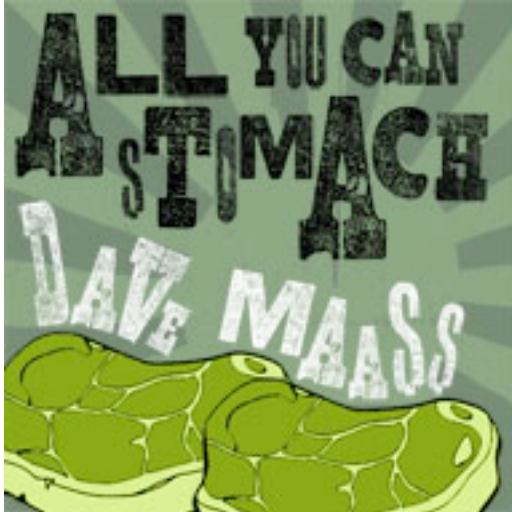


Douglas Coupland 1,000 Word  
Short Story Award: 2<sup>nd</sup> prize winner



## ALL YOU CAN STOMACH Dave Maass

When I look back at where Janie's sitting on the flight from Tokyo to Seoul, she's yapping it up with the baby-faced Korean couple book-ending her against the window.

She's doing her Muppet laugh, you know, her chin stays in place while her head whiplashes back. Meanwhile, I'm at the front of the plane daydreaming about red meat. That's part of the travel package our school's arranged: airfare, one night's accommodation and all-you-can-eat Korean barbeque.

We teach English to 12-year-olds in Japan and the government is making us leave the country to renew our visas. I don't particularly like Janie. She suffers from what I call Liberal Tourette Syndrome. We'll be discussing the weather, teaching methods or American versus Japanese Disneylands, and out of nowhere she'll blurt something

about aggression by rich, white dudes in someplace irrelevant, like Gabon or Myanmar. And she's always boasting 'receptivity' is what separates wonderful multiculturalists like her from ethnocentric, imperialist, rape-n-pillage American assholes like me. You know, guys who daydream about red meat.

It's been six months since I've sat down to a truly gut-busting meal. The only Japanese cuisine that's both cheap *and* filling is this noodle soup so oily, and I'm talking Valdez disaster here, a thick layer of grease collects on the surface. Below the oil spill are the same ramen noodles that made me anemic in college. No nutritional value whatsoever, so in that sense, the equivalent of a conversation with Janie.

Apparently the Korean couple thinks differently because they're waiting for us at baggage claim, all peachy-cheeked and dressed like toddlers. It's not until we're crammed together in a cab that Janie lets me in on the change of plans. They've invited us to their temple; in the name of 'cultural dialogue' she's accepted for the both of us.

I whisper behind the girl between us, 'Janie. I'm starving. I'm going to the hotel.'

'Chill. You can eat later.'

She doesn't understand. I want Korean barbecue now *in addition* to later. I want it for dessert and I want it with orange juice tomorrow morning. Hence, All-You-Can-Eat.

'But I skipped the mid-flight snack.'

Janie rolls her eyes. Before I can find in my guidebook how to pronounce 'stop the cab' in Korean, our host twists around and gives me what I'll call the Look of Infinite Disappointment.

'Okay, just a short visit.'

‘We feed you. Good food,’ he assures me with what I’ll call the Look of Infinite Glee. ‘Korean food. Delicious.’

Jeong-Hwa and his girlfriend Min-Hee return to the waiting room where they’ve left us for 45 minutes. The church feels more like a clinic except there aren’t chairs in the waiting room. Janie has produced an ancient granola bar from the deep recesses of her hiker’s backpack, and I’m about to take a bite when Jeong-Hwa shoots me the Look of Infinite Disappointment.

‘I won’t spoil my appetite,’ I say, defeated, handing back Janie’s snack. The Koreans blush with Infinite Glee.

‘This will make a great blog entry,’ Janie says as Min-Hee leads her away.

‘We eat soon,’ Jeong-Hwa says. ‘First, we cleanse ourselves.’  
I don’t feel dirty.

I’m supposed to be concentrating on universal harmony. Instead I’m consumed by violent resentment. I’m so hungry I’m nauseous. Janie *sucks*.

Jeong-Hwa’s using the Look of Infinite Disappointment unsparingly. And it’s not just him. Earlier, his brethren gang-shamed me into a cold shower where Jeong-Hwa scrubbed the skin off my back with a brick of black soap. Then they forced me to watch a 60-minute animated messiah story narrated by a winged panda. After that they started with the God-stuff. They grilled me on faith and spirituality and when my answers disagreed with theirs, they blasted me with Infinite Disappointment.

Now here I am, arranged into some sort of symbolic contortionist

position on the hard tile floor, surrounded by men in trances. I'm afraid to break the silence to ask about Janie.

They've isolated me. They're starving me, bullying me with their Infinite Looks, and now, sensory-deprivation – it's pretty clear they're weakening my will for indoctrination. What about Janie? She's so 'open-minded' these guys could easily walk right in and steal everything. Before I know it, we'll be decked out in Star Trek costumes as the proud parents of a clone-baby.

Screw that. Ground yourself in important thoughts, I tell myself. So, I meditate on banquet platters of thinly sliced raw beef, so red they could be arrangements of flower petals. In my mind's ear, the grill sizzles. I remind myself I hold the chopsticks.

Finally Jeong-Hwa rises.

'We are very poor church,' he announces. 'We make you dinner now, but we must ask you give money.'

'How much money?'

'90,000 wan.'

All too coincidentally, 90,000 wan was exactly what I changed at the airport.

'No way,' I say. 'And that infinite disappointment shit won't work. I'm not even going to look at you.'

Squinting, I drag my overnight bag outside and catch a cab.

In the taxi I worry about abandoning Janie. What happens if I return to Chiba alone? I'll have to explain it to Yukura-sensei, then again to Interpol and after that, I'll have to write a letter to Janie's father. What could I say? Your recently abducted daughter is a brainless liberal who can't tell cult from culture and she almost got me sucked

in too and I hate her?

I arrive to find Janie's gear has somehow already made it to the hotel room. It's claiming the bed closest to the television. I discover her downstairs forking a block of steamed tofu.

'What happened to you?' I ask.

'I got bored and left.'

'Without me?'

'I heard you were really digging the meditation.'

'Brainwashers!' I say. 'You left me with fuckin' Kim-Jong-Jim-Jones.'

She nods with mock sympathy while she chews.

'Forget it,' I mutter. I yell across the restaurant, 'Gimme a big fat plate of red meat, please.'

'You're *such* an American,' Janie says through a mouthful of food.

Later that night we humped.

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