

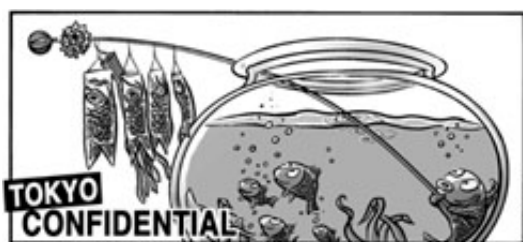
First love but without the sweat

By MICHAEL HOFFMAN

Sunday Mainichi (May 6-13)

First love. Who doesn't remember it? Who doesn't look back on it with pleasure? It's possibly the one unalloyed happiness there is in life.

Yumiko is in the throes of first love. "Look," she says, showing Sunday Mainichi's reporter her cellphone screen full of heart marks. The messages they adorn are short and simple, and refreshingly unashamed to be so. "Have a good day." "Pleasant dreams."



"He's the boyfriend of my heart," she says shyly.

The quirky thing about this is that Yumiko is 46, with a husband of 17 years and a child in high school. The man she calls her boyfriend is 34 and single. Their intimacy has never been — and will not be, Yumiko insists — consummated physically. It is, in a word, perfect.

First love after 40 is Sunday Mainichi's theme. Earlier generations at that age had either had the experience long before, or had resigned themselves to never having it. This generation resigns itself to nothing.

Yumiko is a book lover who, what with family responsibilities and a part-time sales job, doesn't get much time to read. One day, a year and a half ago, she was surfing the Web and came upon a blog dedicated to books. She dropped in, left a comment, and was pleased when the comment drew a reply. Soon she and Hiroshi were corresponding. Before long she began to look forward to Hiroshi's messages with an eagerness that surprised her.

It was five months before they arranged to meet face to face — at a secondhand book shop. They browsed, bought some books, went to a cafe. Hiroshi seemed shier in person than online. They talked and talked. "I'd had no idea conversation could be this much fun," she says. "He felt the same way. It's just quiet talk, and yet it's so satisfying."

A year later she still finds it satisfying. They get together once or twice a month. Yumiko defines the relationship as "more than friendship, less than adultery." If an intimacy that doesn't express itself sexually seems strange, that's not her worry. "We stimulate each other spiritually," she says. "We talk about our dreams, how we feel about life. It's because of the deep happiness this gives me that I'm able to carry on with my domestic role at home" — a role she speaks of as a responsibility, but not a pleasure.

Her coworkers are women her age, and the ones she's told about Hiroshi all envy her. "I want someone like that too!" they say.

Maiko, 43, *has* someone like that. She and Tatsuro, 45, met four years ago in connection with their work — she's a designer, he works for a clothing firm. Both are married, both have children, both have had multiple affairs, of which their own relationship started out as one, until they discovered in each other what they unblushingly call "pure love." Now, says Tatsuro, "apart from holding hands we have no physical contact at all."

They meet when they can. Their dates consist of cycling in the park, sitting on the beach or going for a walk. "It's a little late," smiles Maiko, "but this really is first love."

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