

The Tale of the Disappearing Doberman

Japanese was the reason I'd stayed in Japan. Now, that initial year had become sixteen months and counting. I still smiled when I remembered the pastry shop in Sapporo, but longed for another boost. There were over eighteen hundred kanji characters for daily use. I didn't know how many I'd learned, but I had a *long* way to go, and with no time to study in the temple I was forgetting. That made trips to town the best chance I had to bone up. Kanji was everywhere I looked.

I was deciphering signs on one trip to the grocery store, wondering if I would make it to the next level, when I noticed a Doberman Pinscher pup chained to a stake in front of a house. He looked at me with sad, pleading eyes. It was freezing cold and he was on a yard-long leash, a disturbingly representative example of how Japanese pets were treated. I stopped to pet him, and found him ecstatic at the attention. I was about to move on when the door opened and the lady of the house appeared on the porch. She was clearly shocked to see me—a foreigner, all in black—accosting her animal.

We stared at each other for an uneasy split-second. I felt I should say something, and knew the verb “to pet,” *naderu*. I stood up and bowed slightly. “*Namete ii desu ka?*” I asked politely. “Is it all right if I pet?”

Her eyes bulged as she took a step backward and hastily disappeared into the house. That's strange, I thought. Did I say it wrong? I didn't think so. I said good-bye to the dog, then resumed my walk into town.

A hundred yards down the road I stopped, hitting myself in the forehead as the enigma unraveled. I had wanted to say “*Nadete mo ii desu ka?*” or “Is it all right if I pet?” But what had come out inadvertently was “*Namete mo ii desu ka?*” *Nadete*, *namete*—the difference a single letter. The difference in meaning was daunting. For what I *had* said, looking her straight in the face, was, “Is it all right if I lick?”

The next time I passed the house on my way into town, the Doberman was gone.