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NATURAL PERFECTION

THE TIMELESS JULIA ROBERTS

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MAY 2014

WHAT'S NEWS.

THE EXCHANGE.

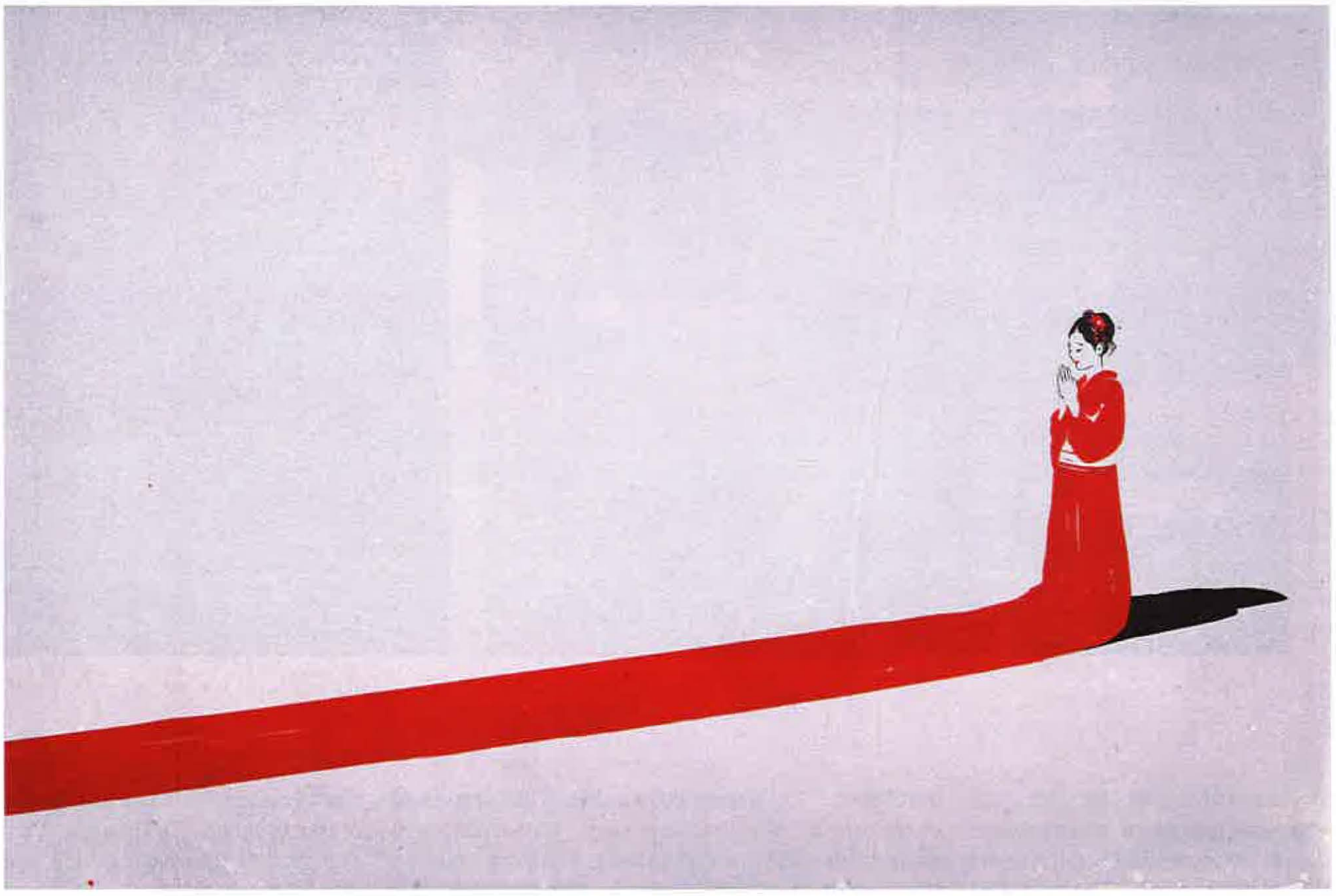
ON THE COVER Julia Roberts photographed by Josh Olins and styled by Elin Svahn. Céline sweater and her own rings. For details see Sources, page 110.

THIS PAGE The living room of interior designer Steven Volpe's San Francisco home, photographed by Mark Mahaney.

ESSAY

JAPAN'S RED-CARPET SERVICE

From a department store's elaborate welcoming rituals to a hotel's nearly uncanny sense of its guests' needs, one writer explores how the Land of the Rising Sun has perfected hospitality culture.



BY OLIVER STRAND ILLUSTRATION BY PATRIK SVENSSON

THE LAST TIME I was in Tokyo, I made an excursion to the Nihonbashi branch of Takashimaya, a chain of department stores founded in 1831, because a friend told me to ride the elevators. Architecturally, the elevators aren't anything special—the building dates to 1933, and it looks like other grand department stores from that era. But it's staffed by employees so attentive and polite that they transform the act of moving between floors from a mundane, even annoying, task into a pageant of ritualized courtesy.

It starts as you approach the elevator bank. An attendant in the well-tailored uniform of a 1960s stewardess (jacket, skirt, gloves, pumps, jaunty hat) welcomes you with a series of bows and spoken greetings that continue, without pause, as she pushes the call button and directs you to the arriving elevator with an arm held at a perfect 90-degree angle. When the elevator door opens, an operator—dressed like a stewardess from a competing airline (different color jacket)—welcomes you with more bows and greetings. This is when the display of politeness turns into a delicate series of choreographed movements: You step into the elevator; the operator pivots and extends her arm to protect you from the closing grate; and the attendant in the lobby turns to face you and bows deeply, holding the position with practiced stillness. Third floor, please.

Is it too much? Maybe. The bowing and gesturing might be unnecessary—if you've made it to Tokyo, you know how to work an elevator—but it sends a message: From the moment you walk in the door, the employees are completely attuned to you.

Before I went to Japan for the first time, I was told by well-traveled friends to expect a level of customer service so polished and comprehensive that even the most basic transactions can take on a ceremonious air. But that's like somebody telling you what it's like to drive loops on the Nürburgring Nordschleife test track or watch a Big Sur sunset: It's just words until it happens to you.

Even though I was impressed with Japanese civility from the moment my passport was stamped at Narita airport, I didn't fully appreciate the extent of the country's service culture until I was partway through a multicourse meal at Ishikawa, a small Tokyo restaurant with three Michelin stars. I was sitting at the counter, directly opposite chef Hideki Ishikawa. At times he explained to me what he was preparing, but he left other dishes to my waitress, who spoke excellent English. After asking her a quick question, I noticed

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—CHEF DAVID KINCH

that she kneeled before answering. In fact, she always kneeled before speaking. She wore a slim-fitting kimono, and when she lowered herself she gracefully corkscrewed her body so that her knees settled on the ground without her needing to steady herself.

I felt awful—and elated. What a wrong, beautiful manner in which to be guided through dinner. At the end of the meal she, Ishikawa and what seemed like the rest of the staff escorted me to the sidewalk. They stood in a line and bowed. At the end of the block, I glanced over my shoulder. They were still in formation, and when they saw me turn they bowed again.

"You have a three-star restaurant in Japan, the famous chef with all the awards—and he's not only preparing the food, he's preparing it *for you,*" says David Kinch, the chef and owner at Manresa, in Los Gatos, California. Kinch, who once worked in Japan, returns at least once a year, and he tells me that my meal at Ishikawa is how it's done in Japan. "He actually hands it to you. He asks you, 'How are you? Are you enjoying it? Is it to your liking?' It's a sense of hospitality that comes across as genuine, not as part of a training program," says Kinch.

Just as important, you don't pay extra for that care. There is no tipping in Japan. It's not only discouraged, it's simply not done. There's no tip line on a credit card slip, and if you try to press cash into the hand of someone opening your door or taking your coat, the person will look as confused as your dentist would if you tried to slip him or her $20 for being so generous with the Novocaine.

The service culture of Japan, which always overdelivers, directly contradicts the tipping culture of the United States, which supposedly incentivizes superior service but can have exactly the inverse effect: Tip well, or watch out. "You have to remember that in Japan you don't have a category called service, because it's completely integrated into what you do," says Merry White, author of *Coffee Life in Japan* and professor of anthropology at Boston University. "It's not an extra. It's valued, but it isn't monetized."

I find the Japanese system liberating. The price is the price, and if you are treated well it's not because you're expected to pay extra. "We [in America] are the ones who separate it out," White notes. The service I experienced in Japan wasn't simply a better version of what I find in the United States and Europe, it was the expression of a profoundly different understanding of what we consider "work."

A job means more than just checking off a couple of boxes. According to Masaru Watanabe, the executive director and general manager of the Palace Hotel Tokyo, a grand hotel overlooking the grounds of the Imperial Palace, it demands an emotional commitment. "Although Japanese hospitality, or what we call *omotenashi,* has developed a reputation outside of Japan as being a benchmark for exceptional service, it can be very difficult to define. It's as intangible as it is palpable, something to be felt rather than explained," says Watanabe. "To me, [it is] hospitality that's extended with the utmost sincerity, grace and respect, however big or small the gesture or the task. Not to be mistaken with the other, perhaps more commonly experienced version of service, which is superficial service delivered out of a sense of obligation and with an expectation of reward."

I experienced that one night when I went for a nightcap at the New York Bar on the top floor of the Park Hyatt Tokyo, where I was staying. The staff reopened the bar—even though it was well after last call—because it was my birthday. How did they know? My mother had a cake delivered to my room earlier, and it seemed the entire hotel was notified. Looking out over the blinking red lights that punctuate the Tokyo skyline, with a long pour of a Yamazaki single malt, I thought about what might have happened at a similar hotel in London or Paris: I would have been given a courteous but firm no, possibly offered a glass of Champagne in the lobby or my room. It's a safe bet the hotel wouldn't have reopened its marquee bar for one last $14 whisky.

According to White, what I experienced at the Park Hyatt Tokyo was an example of *omoiyari.* "It means the active sensitivity to other people," she tells me. "It anticipates the needs and desires of other people. It's not broad-brush, it's fine-tuned." White explains that omoiyari is taught to children and praised in school. When the staff reopened the bar for me, it was because they could tell it would make me happy to play out my *Lost in Translation* fantasy.

And it's more than just an expression of national character. "There are real institutional reasons why service is so good," says Amy Borovoy, associate professor of East Asian studies at Princeton University. "Sociologists call it stakeholder capitalism versus shareholder capitalism," she continues. "In the United States you have shareholder capitalism, in which shareholders will pressure a company for short-term profits. Japan and Germany have a stakeholder system, which lets companies invest in workers who are better trained, more loyal and more informed."

You find loyal, informed workers even in the most modest settings. "I believe that the world's best McDonald's service is in Japan," says Tokyo-based book editor Masanobu Sugatsuke. "The same goes for Starbucks. No staff sighs during work and there is no extensive chatting between co-workers," he adds, describing the reverse of almost every McDonald's and Starbucks in the United States.

I found omotenashi in a municipal agency that rented bicycles for what worked out to 85 cents a day. I walked down a flight of stairs into a windowless storage room located under the sidewalk and was greeted by an elderly gentleman who welcomed me, carefully went over the contract, then personally checked the wheels, gears, brakes, handlebars and seat before escorting me to the street. The attendant wasn't being servile or obsequious or overly concerned by my obvious foreignness. When he bowed and wished me well with what seemed like heartfelt sincerity, he was being professional. ●

DOMO ARIGATO An elevator attendant bows at one of Tokyo's branches of Takashimaya. Above left: The top-floor bar of the Park Hyatt Tokyo, which was reopened after closing time for the author's birthday.