



Santa and his raindeer greeted us when we arrived at Karuizawa Train Station on the first of December.

## Karuizawa: Coming Home

In this Buddhist/Shintoist land, Christmas is an excuse to get drunk in the week prior to the holiest of holidays, the subdued *Shogatsu* or New Year festivities, when the nation virtually shuts down for four days. As a young man living in Japan more than four decades ago, I joked that a foreigner could starve to death during *Shogatsu*. But Karuizawa, although clearly Japanese, is a little different. It was “discovered” and populated by Christian missionaries more than 100 years ago, and Christianity has a greater hold here than elsewhere, which is not to say that Karuizawa Japanese don’t go out on Christmas Eve and get drunk. I was “Coming Home” to Karuizawa in several senses. The charming town, with its tall *karamatsu* deciduous pines (green most of the year, golden in autumn, bare in winter), may be my favorite place in Japan. It is always restful. Yoshi and I have our “own” room at the 120-year-old Mampei Hotel where everybody knows us. And, too, I was returning from two full weeks in “Old Japan” on the far side of Honshu, next to the Sea of Japan, where I had never before been. Karuizawa and our next stop, busy Tokyo, were familiar territory. A week from now I would be back home in Lake Forest, California, another beautiful and restful place.

As usual, we declined a formal French dinner in the Mampei Hotel's no-smoking dining room. We preferred to hop from one Karuizawa shop to another. A little something delicious here, a little something else there. A beer here, a bottle of *sake* there, and cigarettes everywhere. Our dinner was capped this evening at a tiny *yakitori* shop near the station, where an employee snapped the picture below with my pocket digital camera. *Yakitori* is charcoal-grilled chicken nuggets and chicken innards on a stick. I am especially fond of the innards — liver, hearts, gizzards, even cartilage. But what I *really* wanted in terms of *yakitori* was what Jack ate at Japanese *yomise*, or roadside night stands, when he was a poor student in the late Fifties, and again when he was a poor newspaperman in the early Sixties. Jack, it should be noted here, is Jackson's youthful alter ego, who lives today only in Jackson's writings. *Yakitori* ingredients in Jack's time and place were not chicken at all, but pig guts and other swine innards. Yoshi says some uncouth Japanese, mostly old folks like me, prefer pig *yakitori* to chicken *yakitori*, but they must go to Shinjuku back alleys and other out-of-the-way places to find such low-class but now-expensive fare. Essentially I have always been low-class, and I take a certain pride in liking what common folks of my generation like. At least Jack felt that way. Jackson, more affluent, mostly hungers for something that once upon a time tasted good, regardless of price. Nowadays he yearns without hope for the skillet-baked crackling cornbread that his grandmother Jennye made for him after a hog butchering in Kentucky. Cracklings were little bits of fatty pigskin. Will he ever taste such delicious things again?

