

## Third Spaces and Secret Places

It smells of smoke, even in the non-smoking area. Many cafes in Japan are like this, as the spaces tend to be small and without any dividers. Although I'm American and not a smoker, it doesn't bother me. It's just a part of Japan. I come here to read, escape the hustle of the city, and eat a pressed tuna melt sandwich. I don't drink the overpriced coffee, only ice water, which the waitresses kindly refill for me over and over, as the glass is small and I'm always thirsty.

When I'm in this small corner of the universe, tucked away in an unlikely location, I find I can easily get lost in a book. It's a quirky place actually... inside a giant mall, but with the feel of a Parisian cafe. – Lots of dark wood everywhere and not too brightly lit.

The patrons are a mixed bunch. The mother and daughter enjoying coffee and pastries while taking a shopping break, the salaryman with his much younger foreign girlfriend, the fancy ladies talking too loudly. I imagine what their lives are like. I wonder if they are happy. Life has so many paths and everyone we choose takes away other choices. Life is a game of many choices. It would be so fun to live alternate lives. I guess that's one thing I love about books. Of course, my life has veered all over the road and off the road many times.

I'm in Japan after all. Sitting in a dark cafe, reading and observing the lives of others. The train stations get busy here with all the people going to and fro; racing to get to work, get home, or meet friends. It's nice to have a quiet moment. Enjoy the stillness.

I see others reading here as well. It's the sort of place that encourages that sort of thing. It feels warm and inviting. I feel anonymous and I am unapologetic about how long I stay and read. This is one of my places.

Although it doesn't matter where you live, I find it even more important in Japan to find secret places. Places you are unlikely to run into anyone you know. These are the places where you go to recharge or be inspired. Places where you can steal away and savor some indulgent moments of reading and thinking.

As I sit here, the sandwich transports me back to the America of my youth, the book takes me into another alternate life, and the fact that I am in a cafe in Japan keeps me grounded in my own adventure.