

The Sound of the Rain



Kim Taylor copyright ©2022, all rights reserved

She stood naked on the veranda, the rain had yet to make a difference to the oppressive heat of the day before. She listened to the tinkling drops on the tile roof of the veranda, and as it came down the chains to the ground. She watched the small pulse of the water as it ran from link to link under the command of gravity, and the bell-like ringing of the chain that was forged like a series of cups.

She listened to the rain hitting the bamboo forest in front of her as the sun struggled to shine through the clouds, for the moment, it cast a dim light. She watched as a leaf collected water which moved slowly to the tip where it became a different drop. That drop would swell until it could no longer be held by the leaf, and would let go, the leaf rebounding to bounce three times before starting to collect another drop.

She felt the roughness of the boards under her feet, and the slight slipperiness as the drifting mist wet the algae that grew there. She loved the feel of the cedar grain under her feet, so different from the smooth floors inside the house, so different from the feel of the slippers she usually wore.

Hearing a different sound, she walked down the veranda until she came to a leak in the roof, and she watched drop by drop as the water hit the boards in front of her feet. "I shall have to have that repaired" she thought to herself. Lifting her eyes again, she concentrated on the sound of the rain in the bamboo, a rustling sound not so very different from when they were blown by the wind. But there was no breeze that morning. There was nothing to interrupt the sound of the drops.

Slowly, the oppressive heat was going away, the rain was washing the humidity out of the air, and as she stood, she could feel the heat leave her body. Despite this relief, today promised to be as humid as the one before, still, for the moment there was a period of coolness. She said a silent thank you to the rain and turned to walk slowly back into the house.

She padded through the hallway to her bedroom where her husband was sleeping. She slipped under the covers to warm up once more. "It's raining again Shige."

Shigeru grunted and turned to face the wall. Yumi watched his back for a few minutes and, thinking back on it much later, realized that this was the moment she decided. Yumi's mother said she had named her after a bow, because she wanted Yumi to be able to bend with circumstance and not break. Yumi thought that perhaps she had bent, but had not yet snapped back into shape.

She sighed and got out of bed, trying not to wake Shige again. She dressed for yet another Sunday morning and went into the kitchen to prepare breakfast. They could have afforded a housekeeper, but Shigeru had declared that it would give Yumi something to do if she took care of the house by herself.

Yumi prepared the rice, the eggs, the fish and put them all into the oven to stay warm. Shigeru had come home late yesterday, and might sleep for a couple of hours more. Yumi might be back from practice before he got up, but she wasn't going to chance him waking to no breakfast.

Jodo practice was held in the village dojo each Sunday morning and she had told Shigeru that she could not abandon something she had done since she was a child. Fukuoka was famous for being the birthplace of jodo, and so her practice was traditional. Shigeru was born in the same village so he could hardly object to such a traditional practice.

Yumi changed into her keikogi and picked up her bag of weapons and an umbrella on the way out the door. She walked the half mile up the hill to the dojo, looking at the flags by the shochu bar as they showed themselves through the mist. The rain was already giving way to the heat of the morning. This early there were few people on the road, only those who were moving toward the hall.

Practice was as good as always. Yumi loved the feeling of danger and discipline as wooden sword met wooden stick. This was one place where she could, within the limits of the kata and the art, express her freedom and her imagination. It was a place where she was responsible for her own safety, and that of her partners. A place where obeying the strict rules of her society could be dangerous. The men here would not tolerate less than a full commitment from her to an attempt to strike them. If she had backed off, allowing the men to dominate, they would quickly make sure she was thrown onto the floor or into the wall. This was one of the hardest lessons for her to learn as a child, there was no simpering girl in the dojo, she was to be left outside.

It had been her mother that encouraged Yumi to begin jodo. Yumi's father and her two brothers had expected that Yumi would stay home and take care of the family, but her mother

would have none of it. To the dojo she would go for every practice, and in between times she would go to school and do her homework. Only when that was done would she be allowed to help with the housework and the cooking.

Somehow Yumi had picked up all the skills she needed to be a proper wife, along with a fifth dan in jodo and a University degree in Agricultural Economics at Kyushu University.

It was when she came back from University that she had married Shigeru.

After practice Yumi approached her teacher. “Sensei, may I speak with you a moment.”

“Of course Yumi chan, what is it?” He smiled at her.

“Sensei it may be that I will need to leave practice for a while, I didn’t want to simply disappear, so I would like to ask you if it would be all right to go.”

“Of course you may Yumi san, I have been expecting that you might leave. You have my blessing, and if you should find yourself someplace where you can find no jodo sensei to study with, you have my permission to teach.”

Yumi was stunned, but her teacher had watched her grow up, and it was a small town, he had anticipated her before. She decided not to ask or say much more, and simply said “I thank you for your permission and your faith in me.”

He nodded and looked a question. Yumi bowed by way of answer and left to go home. She was not sure why she had asked her teacher for permission to stop attending class, but she suspected it was part of something building toward a decision inside her. She felt like a bamboo leaf as the water built up on it.

When she got home, Shigeru was not there, he had left a note saying he was going to play golf, and that he would leave for Tokyo from the golf course. Yumi showered, paying attention to a few abrasions she had received in practice, and made herself a light lunch.

After eating she settled down in the shade on the veranda. It was another humid day, but there was a small breeze and she was comfortable enough. She listened for a moment to the bamboo and then turned to her book.

~~

Shigeru walked down the first fairway with his foursome. He was quiet, one might think he was considering his wife, but he was thinking about the business.

“How is that cute secretary you have in Tokyo?” said Shinohara, not quite interrupting his train of thought.

“She is my administrative assistant,” said Shigeru “and she is fine, in good health, thank you for asking.”

“I imagine you keep her well exercised then” replied Shinohara to laughter from the other two players. “And how is your father?”

“He is well, I stopped by on the way here, he is healthy but still does not recognize me.”

“The hazards of age, I suppose. You know I helped your father set up your business.”

Shigeru nodded “I recall you saying.” Shigeru then glanced at Ishida, who rolled his eyes. Yes, Shinohara helped set up the business, but he pulled out when the business needed his capital most. It was Ishida who had stepped in and provided the cash the company needed.

Ishida had profited quite handsomely as the company grew into the large car parts supplier it was today. Shinohara seemed to have resented that profit and tended to remind anyone who would listen that he was in it at ground level. That he had got off at the second floor, he often forgot to mention.

Tanaka Industries had started as an farm machinery repair shop. Shigeru’s father had begun machining his own spare parts simply to get the tractors and trucks fixed without long waits for parts. From there he had passed on a fairly successful business to Shigeru.

Shigeru had taken the company, with the help of his new wife Yumi, into the car parts business. It had been Yumi who suggested the move, and who had made it profitable to manufacture in Fukuoka by finding inexpensive land for their

giant warehouses. They shipped “just in time” to several large car manufacturers.

“And when will you be heading back to your assistant,” said Shinohara.

“I will be leaving directly from our game. A car has picked up my bags and will take me from here to the airport.

Ohara, the fourth player in the game, and Tanaka Industries local boss, nodded to himself, making a note to text Yumi that her husband had left for the airport. Shigeru would not bother to do so.

As they continued with their round, the talk came back, as it always did, to Yumi. The three older men considered themselves mentors to Shigeru, and they were friends of Yumi’s father.

“Won’t you spend another day or two with Yumi?” asked Ishida, “Don’t you miss her?”

“She is happy to keep the house, she enjoys her time without me underfoot.” Said Shigeru.

“Still I am sure she was more happy when she was involved in the company, and it is a bit of a shame to waste her education cleaning floors.” Ishida had helped pay Yumi’s way through college a few years before.

“Perhaps,” said Shigeru, “but there is no place for her in the company now”.

With that the foursome let things drop and finished their game. As Shigeru's car drove away, Shinohara said "he works too hard".

"Always has" replied Ishida, "shall we go for a drink?"

As they walked toward the clubhouse, Ohara texted Yumi to let her know she was on her own for another week.

"You know, Ishida-san, I think Shigeru moved Yumi out of the company because he was a bit ashamed that she had a better education than he did."

"You may be right, after all he stopped after high school to help his father." replied Ishida. With that they went on to other topics as they dropped their clubs at the pro shop to be cleaned and wandered in to the bar.

~~

Having thanked Ohara for letting her know that Shige was on his way to the airport, Yumi sat for a while longer on the veranda, her book forgotten on the table in front of her. She stared off down the drive as if expecting someone.

"Once, Shige would have been coming home and I would have bathed him before dinner." Yumi thought. "That was back when we were struggling to keep the company afloat, and to pay for this place, even if we did buy it from his mother's family. We worked so very hard then, and I was happy. I was happy from the time I came home from school and he asked me

to be his wife. He wasn't movie star handsome, but he was good looking, hard working, and he needed me.

“He worked so hard to build the company and as soon as he didn't need me any more he assumed I wanted to sit in this empty place instead. Oh dear, did I just say this place was empty? Well it is. There's only me here except on Saturday nights when Shige flies home and sleeps over, just to fly back the next day.

“While he never has sex with me any more, he certainly does his duty by coming home when it's seemly to do so I guess. I suppose he's doing his duty by me, maybe he even thinks it's his best, but this separation for most of the week isn't what I wanted, and it certainly isn't doing Shige any good.”

With that Yumi sighed, took a last look around and went inside to cook herself some dinner. “No doubt Ohara will be stopping by later to talk about the business, and I'll tell him what I always tell him, talk to Shige.”

But it wasn't Ohara that dropped by, it was Ishida. Yumi made tea and took him out to the veranda. “I love it here” she said, sitting so she could see the bamboo. “What is it you would like to talk about?”

“I can't just visit a friend?”

“You can, you are much more than a friend, you are my adviser, my benefactor, and you are always welcome, but you usually have something to talk about.”

“I should visit more then, but you are correct. I want to talk to you about a difficult subject, about Shigeru.”

“You are here to tell me he has a mistress.”

“You know? I wasn’t sure.”

“Yes, Shige isn’t the world’s most devious man, I smelled her months ago. I’m glad he has someone to look after him in Tokyo, he was a bit lost when he first moved there.”

“It is his assistant, apparently.”

“Good, then she is working for the good of the company as well as Shige. I am happy for him.”

“But Yumi, aren’t you upset about it at all?”

“It has not been good between Shige and I for a long time, his long focus on the company stripped him of desire for me.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” said Ishida, “but I am glad that you know, because I had a second reason to talk to you. Have you thought about going on with your education?”

“It is strange that you should mention that, Ishida-san, I find myself thinking often about Sato sensei, my undergrad advisor. He told me that I had a standing invitation to his group, but he is in Canada now. He took a position in a University near Toronto, so far away. I might consider a Masters at Kyushu, but to go so far away from this place, I do love it so.”

Ishida was silent for a while, then looked up and said “You should go,” and nothing more. They finished the tea just as the first drops of rain began to fall. Ishida left then, to go home and Yumi sat on the veranda, listening to the drops.

Each time she came onto the veranda the sound of the rain was different, but not this time. It seemed that the sound tonight was the same as last night. Yumi rose and walked down toward the leak, but it was true, the rain sounded the same.

“You should go,” she repeated softly, “You should go.”

~~

Shigeru rode in the car, looking out but not seeing the countryside as he rode toward the airport. He thought of Yumi, wondered yet again why she had agreed to marry him. They knew each other in secondary school but she had gone off to University while he began work. When she came back she had called him, something he found quite forward, something he had found exciting. Their fathers had thought it a good match, and so he had asked.

She was wonderful, she was still wonderful, but after those first few years of hard work, when the company had grown large enough that she could stop working and become a proper wife, something had changed. She was a dutiful wife, but with more and more of his time spent in Tokyo, they had grown apart.

It was just that he was so busy, it was hard to get home to see her each weekend, and when he did get home he had to touch base with Ohara and the board, He felt guilty not paying more

attention to Yumi, which made it even more uncomfortable being with her.

Shigeru could think of nothing that he could do to take things back to those early years, so he sighed again, as he always did at this point in his thoughts, and opened his briefcase to get some reading done before getting on the plane.

~~

Kumiko had not had a happy childhood. The youngest daughter of an ambitious family, it was expected that she would go to University, and through very hard work, she had. She had degrees in business management, business law, politics and an advanced diploma in business law. Yet, with all those qualifications, the best jobs that seemed to be available were essentially “tea lady.”

While heading to one of those jobs on the train one morning, she was grabbed from behind and fondled by a groper. Kumiko had had it. When he didn't stop at a single squeeze, she turned half way toward him and looking him directly in the eye, she pressed her stiletto heel down onto the top of his foot. As she applied more and more pressure she kept looking at him, daring him to cry out. By the time the next stop came he was almost crying and stumbled quickly out the door. “Good,” she thought, “now explain to your boss why you're late.”

It was in a bar one evening after work that she met Tanaka Shigeru. He was drunk, as usual, they were always drunk, and made an awkward pass. Kumiko had little trouble deflecting that pass, but while talking with Shigeru she caught the feeling

that he and his company were in trouble. After putting him into a cab that evening, she went home, took out his business card and started to research Tanaka Industries.

A week later she showed up in his office with her resume and a few written suggestions for changes in the corporate structure. He promised to look into them and as she was walking out, he asked her out for drinks. Shaking her head at the predictability of such things, she agreed.

Unsurprisingly, he made a pass as soon as he got drunk, and once more she refused him, but before that, he had admitted having read her proposals and thought them good, “but I don’t know if I can implement them”.

A week later, she called in to his office and discussed the proposals once more. Once more he was unsure what to do with them, or with her for that matter. It was at that moment that Kumiko resigned herself and invited him for drinks. Just before he was drunk, she said to him “I would like to become your mistress Shige san, but it would do your company harm if it was found out. Why not hire me as your Administrative Assistant which will give me a reason to be with you often.” She was disgusted with herself, but she hoped he would agree.

As it turned out, he did. As far as being his mistress, he was not too demanding, his lovemaking was somewhat unimaginative, but at least he was gentle. In time she grew quite fond of him.

As for the job, she quickly realized that Shigeru was in over his head. Kumiko started with head office and fired several people who were skimming revenue, and then started to work her way

down the chain. Word soon got out that the new Administrative Assistant was not to be trifled with, Tanaka kaicho always backed up her decisions. She did the hard work and always gave him the credit.

As she drove his car to the airport she was going over the production reports from the brake line in her head. Always planning, always looking for ways to trim costs and increase profits.

She parked in the short term lot and walked in to the arrivals area to wait for Shigeru. She had learned that he became upset at getting a taxi to the apartment and it was easier all around if she collected him. She supposed that he was a country boy at heart, and Tokyo confused him.

“Tanaka san!” she said to catch his attention as he came through the doors. She bowed low to him and he bowed back, formal as always in public. She took his briefcase and umbrella and led the way back to the car. “Did you have a good flight?”

Once they were in the car she was careful not to show any affection toward him. Shigeru was always somewhat conflicted when he came back from Fukuoka. Kumiko could understand that, he felt terribly guilty about his wife, especially after he came back from the weekend, and so she let him come to his Tokyo-self, as she thought of it, in his own time.

As they drove, Kumiko went back to thinking about the brake line. She had some ideas and she would give them to Shigeru when they were home. He would agree of course. He agreed to almost everything she put to him. She even set her own salary

which was almost the exact centre of the range for someone who held her position. She wasn't in this for the money, and she now considered Tanaka Industries to be her own company.

She wasn't the only one, she often had to remind the upper managers to go to Shigeru with their problems and suggestions. They were always sent back to Kumiko, but proper was proper. He was the president, not her.

They got to the condominium in good time for a change, and parked without incident. Taking his overnight bag and briefcase upstairs, Kumiko put his laundry away. His bag always came back with his clothes beautifully laundered and folded and Kumiko found herself liking his wife all over again. She knew that Shige still loved her, but didn't know what to do with her. Nothing, Kumiko hoped, she knew that Yumi had been shunted aside to be a "proper wife" as soon as Shige could do it.

Kumiko had no intention of being a proper wife to anyone, she liked running the company.

It was but a moment to put away his travelling clothes and then she went back into the living area. "Come along love, it has been a long sweaty day, let's get you cleaned up." She took Shigeru by the arm and walked into the bathroom. Kumiko noticed, early on, that he would go into a sort of trance when he was washed, and she assumed that his wife did this for him as well. Because of this, Kumiko would wash him from behind. No sense arguing with ghosts, let him think of whoever he wanted as she worked.

She turned the hot water on to warm the tub she had filled earlier, and got the washcloth and bucket. Wetting him down with the cloth and water, she soaped up the cloth and lathered him from head to toes. He really did seem to almost go to sleep as she cleaned him, she paid great attention to his arms and legs, reaching around from behind and scrubbing his legs especially. All the drinking Shigeru had been doing had given him a bit of diabetes and she knew he needed some help with his circulation.

Rinsing him off, she felt the bath and told him to get in. After he had, she got in behind him and for the next half hour, until the water got a bit cool, she rubbed his back and neck, then his shoulders and arms. Not a word was spoken as they were in the bath, just the sound of water rocking, and her hands making the occasional splat sound as she worked.

Kumiko got out first, quickly towelled off and then held out a dry towel for Shigeru. As she often did, her thoughts wandered to the times she was told to wash her older brothers, they too, would hold their arms out at their sides, waiting for her to dry them. “Children,” she thought, “in some ways they never grow up.”

With their robes on, they went back to the living room and Shigeru said “What about those plans you were working on last week, how are they going?”

“They are fine, but not tonight, you’ve had a long trip, we can talk tomorrow.” With that she mixed a whiskey soda for him, and poured a white wine for herself. She handed him his and sat beside him on the couch, not too close.

About half way through the drink, he turned to her and held out his arm, with that, Kumiko leaned into his shoulder and closed her eyes. “Ishida told me again that I should put Yumi back to work in the company. Damned old man, she’s my wife and she will stay home to take care of our house.”

Kumiko was used to this and was silent, she knew from experience it was best to say nothing when Shigeru talked about his wife. In point of fact, she was quite happy he felt that way, from what she had been told by various managers, if Yumi were working, there would be no need for Kumiko. That may or may not be true, but Kumiko certainly wasn’t going to suggest that Yumi come back to work.

Eventually, they retired to their own bathrooms to take care of teeth and whatever else women took care of before bed, as Shigeru said. Kumiko had a suite of rooms to herself, for appearance’s sake she had said, but it was a place for her to retreat, when she needed some space to herself. Later, Kumiko padded into the main bedroom and joined Shigeru in bed.

He did not grunt and roll over to ignore her. She made sure of that.

~~

As Shigeru was drifting off to sleep, his mind wandered back to his sixteenth year, when he discovered girls. Not that he could do much about it, he went to school and then worked late into the evening for his father in the shop, but wonder on wonders, Yumi would sometimes come by as they were closing

up the shop and she often had a basket with her. She would take him by the hand and walk with him up onto the hill above the village where there was some grass to sit on.

From her basket came a blanket, and a couple of bento boxes. They would sit side by side watching as the village slowly became quiet. On one evening, Yumi took Shigeru's hand and felt the roughness of his palm. From the basket she took some lotion and with both her hands she massaged his. She gave him the lotion and told him to use it after work each day. From then on she would check his hands and if he had forgotten, she would take out another bottle and do it for him. He forgot quite often, her hands felt so good on his.

One evening she gave him a brush and told him to clean his fingernails of the oil and grease that accumulated there. Again, she would check and sometimes she would trim his nails for him, carefully cutting away and filing the ragged spots where he had caught one on a piece of machinery.

She would take his hand up to her face and lean her cheek into it momentarily, then turn and kiss his palm. She would lift her hand to his cheek and hold it there so that he could feel the warmth of it. The first time they kissed she gently took his cheeks in her hands and leaned in.

It wasn't that Shigeru was slow, but he had always been passive. He went along with what his father told him to do because that was how he was raised. His was a traditional family and there was no question that Shigeru would work hard, then take over his father's business.

Most evenings Shige would lie back and look up to the stars while Yumi would put her head on his shoulder and drape her arm across his chest. Often Shigeru would have to wake her up when it began to get damp and they had to go home.

When Yumi came home from University, Shigeru asked her to marry him and nobody was more surprised than he, when she said yes. His father approved, which was important. Shigeru was a virgin on their wedding night and he apologized to Yumi for his lack. As usual, Yumi took him in hand and he got through the process without too much awkwardness. Still, their sex was never very exciting. Yumi seemed content that he be satisfied and then she would go to sleep on his shoulder.

Thanks to Kumiko, Shigeru was much more accomplished now, but this made him reluctant to have sex with Yumi when he went home on the weekends. He was rather afraid that she would wonder where he had learned the new techniques and discover his secret. As usual, he found it easier to ignore the problem. For her part, Yumi gave no indication that she missed having sex, or at least she didn't mention it to him which made him thankful.

Kumiko made a soft sound and shifted in the bed. Shigeru turned toward her, buried his face in her hair and drifted off to sleep with his arm around her.

~~

That same evening Yumi found herself feeling horny, well, not exactly horny, but missing sex with Shige. She thought back to her experiences with sex, mainly that boy in second year

University who had taken her out a few times and then invited her back to his apartment. Things had progressed as they both knew they would and she had ended up staying the night. When he entered her, she felt very little, he finished and that was that. They had sex a few more times but she finally broke up with him. She realized that he simply didn't need her and that made her feel quite sad.

When she went home and Shigeru asked her to marry him, she realized that here was someone who needed her. If she needed proof, it was Shige who asked, a rare thing for him. Sex with Shige wasn't exciting, but she could feel his need, and his relief at having her beside him. When she slept on his shoulder, he never failed to stroke her hair and hold her arm with his other hand. He never realized it, but she could tell he slept much better when her head was on his shoulder. She slept well too.

When he stopped having sex with her, they both ended up with a poor sleep. Yumi was used to sleeping in bed alone, so it wasn't so bad for her, but she wondered how much worse it was for Shige, going from his mistress to an awkward bed with her. She wished that she could tell Shige that it was all right, that she wasn't jealous, so that he could relax in her bed. But he gave no hints to her that she could use to tell him. He tried so hard to be secretive that she couldn't tell him she knew.

She threw her arm over his pillow with a sigh and went to sleep.

~~

Monday mornings were always a bit sad for Yumi, she would wake up alone. This morning was no exception. She made her breakfast and drank her coffee at the other end of the veranda. The view from here was closer, more tight than where she usually sat. The enclosed space suited her mood, she could feel her life becoming more and more restricted, more and more closed off from others.

When she finished her coffee she dressed for a hike and walked to the trail up the hill to where she and Shigeru used to picnic. It was a good climb and she felt better when she arrived at the grassy spot overlooking the village.

She stood a moment in confusion, looking for where they sat together when they were in school. There was the place that we created our little world within the small world of the village. She was vaguely disappointed not to see an indentation in the ground, but she sat anyway and gazed at the village.

It had looked so large when she was young, but now it seemed much smaller. The youngsters leaving for the cities didn't help, the movement below was the slow progress of the elderly, no briskness of people going from one place to another on important business. There was a time when she appreciated that sedate pace, it was peaceful, but now it seemed to drag, as she seemed to drag. She could almost feel herself slowing down and her life contracting. Would it be this way until she too was old?

Without thinking about it, she realized she had made up her mind, she would leave Japan and go back to school. She would do a Masters in Economics and perhaps a Doctorate, and she

would come back to Japan to find a job for herself. There, it was a direction, and she felt better for choosing to move forward. As she walked back down the trail, she felt lighter, she felt as if she were on her way to something.

Once Yumi decided on a course of action, she didn't hesitate. She had decided to marry Shigeru and they had been married within weeks. Now she started by contacting Sato sensei, the man she wanted to work with. As it happened, he was in his office when she called, having obtained his number from her old University. He was delighted to hear from Yumi and asked "how is your English?"

"It is as good as it ever was, perhaps even better, I practise when I can," she replied in English.

"Good, that will help. I have an opening almost immediately, come when you can."

And that was it. She had a place, now she had only to arrange for a life away from Japan for several years, away from Shige.

She phoned Shige's office in Tokyo. His assistant answered and announced herself as Yoshida Kumiko.

"I would like to speak with Tanaka san," Yumi said, after announcing herself.

"I am afraid he is in a meeting for the next hour. May I have him call you back then, please."

Yumi said that would be fine, and hung up. This was the first time she had talked with Shige's mistress and she found her voice oddly reassuring. Perhaps it was that she was confident in her job. Yumi made herself another coffee and settled down to wait.

She wondered where the rain was, as it had rained for many days each morning, but today the sun remained stubbornly out. Yumi decided to enjoy it while she could and carried her chair around the corner where she could sit in the sun. It would not be so hot in the next hour that she would have to move.

Kumiko was in a bit of a fluster, her heart was beating faster, she had never considered what she would do if Shigeru's wife phoned. She never had before. She made a note of the number and made sure to be there when the meeting ended. Somehow she felt it was important that she do what she told Yumi she would do.

As the meeting ended, Kumiko deftly stepped between the managers and Shigeru and when they were moving off, she told Shigeru that his wife had called and that she would like him to call back. Shigeru stopped dead, he looked at Kumiko with a confused face, as if not knowing what to do. This was not the way his Monday morning usually progressed.

"You should call her back," Kumiko said "I have dialed her number, all you need is to press connect."

Shigeru took her arm and guided her back into the conference room. "Close and lock the door." he said. For some reason, he put the phone on speaker after he had connected.

When Yumi answered the phone Shigeru almost yelled “I am at work, what do you want?”

After a pause while she collected her wits, Yumi said “I have decided to go back to school and I have a place in a University in Canada.”

After a pause, Shigeru said “No, this is impossible, I forbid it, you are my wife and it is not appropriate for you to go back to school.”

Kumiko was shocked, but kept her face neutral. Of all the answers she might have imagined, she would never have thought that he would simply deny her this chance.

Yumi said “I have decided to go, I will need some funds to travel to Canada and to live while I am there. I have never asked you for much, will you provide this for me?”

Shigeru became even more angry. “I have forbidden this thing. I will certainly not give you anything to allow you to do what I forbid. That is the end of it.” And he broke the connection.

When he turned to Kumiko she was quite startled to see that his face was bright red and he was shaking. She took the phone from his hand without saying a word, and led him back to his office where she made him tea and gently brought some papers that only required his signature. As he worked, he muttered occasionally but calmed down. Kumiko made a note to arrange a visit to his doctor. She was worried about his blood pressure now, along with his diabetes.

Yumi was astonished. Had Shigeru begun to hate her so much? He was her husband still, and she had a right to their funds, not to mention the large number of shares she owned in the company. Not for a moment did Yumi consider changing her mind about going to school. She was not built like that.

She thought about calling a lawyer, but dismissed that instantly, she would not do that to the family. Instead she called Sato sensei in Canada. After that call, she called Ishida.

“Ishida san, I have decided to accept your advice and I have talked with Sato sensei who has a place for me. He also says he can arrange a stipend and some tutorials for me, to defray my living costs. I would like to ask you to loan me some money to fly to Canada. I can assure the loan with some of my stocks in the company.”

Ishida paused, perhaps thinking, and then said gently “He will not support you? Hmm, that is difficult. To your question, no, I will not loan you the money. I will however give you the money for the flight to your school. I will also give you enough to live for the first six months until things settle down for you there. Always there are unexpected expenses, and I do not want you to worry about them. Do not refuse this, it was I who suggested you should go. I am a director of the company, as you know, and I have made a lot of money from the company shares I own. It will be no hardship if I transfer some of that to you.”

Yumi was in tears, “Thank you so much Ishida sensei, I appreciate your kindness to me.”

“Nonsense, it is nothing at all, now go make your arrangements and don’t worry about money. You can always, always ask me for assistance. Now off you go, I will see you before you leave.”

Yumi bowed low to the phone. She had not known how much Ishida cared for her, although he was a friend of the family, both families, that friendship was through her parent's generation. Very well, she would accept his help and arrange the travel.

She began to make a list in her head, How to get there, Where to stay when she did, What to pack? Yumi had a University friend at the, at her, new school. She would call her, but first she had another call she must make.

It turned out she didn’t need to call Ohara, he stopped by that afternoon, on his way from work. When they had settled down for tea on the veranda she said “Ohara san, I have a favour to ask you, yet it is also work related. I am going to Guelph in Canada to continue my schooling. That means this house will stand empty while I am gone, except on weekends when Tanaka san comes home. Since the house can be considered somewhat of a company asset, can I ask that you take care of it while it is empty?”

Ohara nodded, surprised at how much this news upset him, “I will miss our afternoon teas, but of course I will take care of the house. I would be delighted to do so.”

Yumi thanked him and they moved on to their more usual talk. As Ohara left to go home, Yumi looked around herself, and thought, "I'm going to miss this place."

The rest of the week was spent arranging to travel to Toronto. There was a direct flight from Tokyo so it would not be such a bad trip. She called her friend in Guelph, who promised to find Yumi a place to stay, as well as get her from Toronto to Guelph.

~~

Shigeru threw his phone across the room where it landed on a couch. He brought his fist down hard on the table in front of him and yelled incoherently. Kumiko was alarmed but said nothing, hoping he would calm down.

Shigeru looked at her with hatred on his face and Kumiko drew her head back, as if she was afraid he would hit her. This calmed him enough to be able to talk. "She is going away, Ishida just told me, and that he agreed with her. Ishida gave her the money to go, the bastard. This is not acceptable, I will have her stopped."

Kumiko waited to see if he would say more, but he seemed to be finished. In a calm voice she said "How will you stop her? She is your wife, not your property, you cannot appeal to the law, she is free to go if she wishes. You have denied her access to money that she has every right to. It is she that could go to the law. You must let her go Tanaka san, for the sake of the company and your family name."

Shigeru seemed to collapse, he slumped in his chair and began to weep. Kumiko walked to him and put her arm around his shoulders, letting him cry for a while. Then she urged him up “I will run you a bath my love, please go get ready and I will scrub your back.”

~~

The weekend arrived but Shigeru did not. Yumi was worried, and called his apartment in Tokyo. Kumiko answered the phone and went to tell Shigeru that Yumi was calling. Yumi could hear in the background, Shigeru shouting “she is dead to me!”

Kumiko came back on the line and said “Tanaka san, I am very sorry to tell you that your husband refuses to talk to you.”

“I understand” said Yumi with a catch in her throat, “may I ask please, that you take care of Shigeru while I am gone, and when he comes to visit the house here, please come with him as this place will be too empty for him.”

Kumiko was stunned, so Yumi knew about her, and knew she would be the one to take care of Shigeru. She did not speak but Yumi, after a moment, continued. “I realized long ago that you were more than an assistant to Shigeru. The others in the company speak to me and they have kept me aware, delicately of course, of your relationship. Please be kind to Shigeru, take care of him. I will be away at least three or four years and although I may come back to visit, I can see that Shigeru will probably not want to see me. It would comfort me to know that he has someone to talk with.”

Kumiko bowed her head and said “I will certainly do my best. If you would please give me your contact information when you get to Canada I will contact you if it is necessary.”

“There is no need for regular reports,” Yumi said, “but I thank you for your kind offer,” and she hung up after the usual pleasantries.

At least I know the situation, Yumi thought, and I can go with a clear heart.

~~

Her preparations made, Yumi had two days before she left. She spent some time wandering the village, talking with those she met on the street and in the shops. She even spent some time in the Shochu Bar, something she didn’t often do, but she felt a need to store up as much memory of her home as possible. The two men who ran the bar seemed to know what was happening, welcomed her with smiles and fed her yakitori and shochu for several hours. They caught her up on the local gossip, who was courting, who was cheating, who was moving away to find work in the big cities. “We will miss you Tanaka san.”

When she left the bar, they made her sign her shochu bottle and they put it onto the shelf behind the bar. “This way you will be sure to come back,” they said.

Walking a bit unsteadily, Yumi made her way home and once she was in her kitchen, she sat at the table and cried. After a few minutes she wiped her eyes, told herself that she was being

too sentimental, that she would be back after her degree, and went to bed.

An empty bed was not an unusual thing for Yumi, she was alone each weekday, but the idea that Shigeru would not be there again for a long time made her a bit sad. Her dreams were dark and confusing and she was glad to see the morning sun.

~~

When the day came to leave her house, Ohara was there with a van. She packed her bags into the rear and sat in the front. “Thank you again Ohara san for taking me to the train.”

He smiled and replied “It is my pleasure, and please let me say that I will miss you deeply while you are gone.”

Yumi smiled back “Thank you, you have been a good friend and I am sure you will keep the house as carefully as you keep the company assets.”

It had been Yumi that hired Ohara to build and manage the warehouses and the local parts factory. She knew he had feelings for her beyond the usual obligations for hiring him, but she thought it prudent to remind him that there could be nothing between them.

Ohara nodded and said little more on the drive. Yumi looked out the window at the passing landscape, it was overcast and she decided that it would be raining by the time they got to the station. As it turned out, she was correct, it was pouring down as they unloaded the bags and Yumi made a dash for the

terminal, turning to wave just before she went in. Ohara was beside the van, soaked, and waving back.

Yumi found her way onto the train and found an empty seat. She wanted to take the train instead of an airplane to Tokyo, just to see the scenery go past. Just to fill her memory with more images of the country she loved so much.

She watched the passengers walking past on the platform, looked at the stalls full of newspapers and manga. She had bought a box lunch as she came aboard and it felt comforting on her lap. She lay back in the seat, turned her head to the side and watched her old life sliding by as the train started up.

They were soon in the countryside and she split her time between looking out at the farms, the mountains and the towns along the way and yes, the occasional Tanaka Industries factory or warehouse, and watching the raindrops on the window run sideways. Wondering for the first time if she was doing the right thing, she put her forehead on the window just to feel the vibrations of the train.

The tunnel between Kyushu and the main island was a relief to her eyes, she closed them, knowing she was missing nothing, and dozed until the train emerged again. Somehow that seemed to be a dividing line, she was no longer looking back to her past, she was moving forward to a new chapter in her life. She opened her bento box and ate her lunch, enjoying the food, despite it being just railway station fare.

Once the train had arrived in Tokyo, she had made her way directly to the airport. She had considered visiting Shigeru, but

decided that would be too awkward as she had never been to the Tokyo apartment after she discovering he had a mistress. She had also not bothered to tell Shige when she was leaving Tokyo, she doubted he would come to see her off.

Going through security with little trouble, Yumi waited at the Air Canada desk for boarding. She bought a novel to read and lost herself in the story until it was time. Shortly afterwards, the plane was in the air and leaving Japan. Yumi looked out the window for as long as she could, watching her country growing smaller. Soon Japan was lost in the clouds. As they broke through the top, Yumi saw a brilliant sun and she dropped her window shade, turning to look at the seat in front of her.

She tried to read her book again, but her thoughts drifted back to Shigeru and her home. The dominant image in her mind was of her veranda and the sound of the rain on the bamboo. Eventually she fell asleep, woke to read a bit, to eat the meals, and to sleep again.

~~

Arriving in Toronto and getting through customs was not very exciting, a lot of standing in lines and shuffling ahead. When she finally got out into the main concourse she felt a wave of panic. So many strange people, so many different languages, but she soon spotted a sign being held by her friend from the University. Yumi nearly ran down the exit ramp to where Niko Uchida waited. As Yumi approached, she bowed, but was shocked as Niko grabbed her in a hug.

“So good to see you,” Niko said “how was your flight, do you have all your bags, come this way and we’ll get out of this damned place, I’m parked across the bridgeway, not too far, we won’t bother with anything in Toronto right now, it’s raining and there’s not much to do except the CN tower anyway. Let’s get you to Guelph and settled in. You are going to live with me and some of the other grad students, we have a big apartment and one of us just moved out, isn’t that lucky.”

Yumi was stunned, she was swept along by this strange woman who was so shy and polite when she knew her back in University. Putting the bags in the back, Yumi of course walked to the wrong side to get into the front. Niko laughed about that, saying “You’ll get used to it.”

All the way to Guelph, Niko kept up an steady stream of chatter, and Yumi just let it flow over her. She looked out the window and wondered if Canada was nothing but Tokyo, city and industrial areas as far as the eye could see. She had expected a wilderness and she asked Niko about it.

“Oh that’s just Toronto, wait a moment and we will be out of it and you’ll see some greenery.” said Niko. Sure enough, the road soon narrowed down to three lanes and the buildings gave way to trees. As they turned off the highway onto another one, Yumi began to wonder whether Guelph was a village in the forest. Niko laughed and said “Guelph is a small city, don’t worry, you won’t get eaten by a bear.”

“How is your English,” said Niko, switching to that language. “I remember you were pretty good.”

Yumi answered in English, “I hope it will be fine, I haven’t practised in a while. Can we please speak English from now on and you can correct me?”

“You sound fine, I will help if you need it. First stop, the Mall, you will have to get a phone plan I suspect. Then the bank to open an account and get a credit card, and we’ll look around for what else you might need. Did you bring enough clothing for a while? We should get you settled into the new place.”

Yumi wasn’t sure about all this, but she did have some Canadian money that Ishida had given her. She could use that for now. She was supposed to let him know her bank details later so that he could deposit more money for her.

They drove to the mall, which turned out to be rather small, and went to a phone kiosk in the middle of the aisle. Niko talked with the saleswoman and Yumi was shocked by how much the plan would cost. Thankfully her phone would be suitable with a switch of a card.

Next they went to the bank and spent some time filling out forms and applying for a credit card. After some time doing this, they wandered through the rest of the mall and ended up in the food court where they ate a small meal which tasted all wrong to Yumi. “You will soon get used to it” said Niko.

Yumi wasn’t sure she would. This was a different world to the one she had grown used to. The air was colder, the greens were the wrong shade, the food was tasteless and too sweet, the clothes styles were rough, harsh and the colours discordant.

Not to mention the language and the traffic on the wrong side of the road.

After eating at the Mall, an experience in itself for Yumi. She had especially enjoyed looking at the Japanese food, before choosing a hamburger. Niko drove to the apartment, along the way, Yumi saw some riverside parkland and thought perhaps the place would not all be ugly.

When they got into the apartment, Niko introduced Yumi to one of their flat mates, “This is Jeff Cole.” Two others were at the University, working, but Jeff was home. He stood and bowed, although Yumi half expected to be crushed in a hug. She bowed back with a smile.

Niko and Yumi did not take long to put away Yumi’s clothes, and when they came out of the room, Jeff had made a pot of tea. After the trip, Yumi was grateful to sit and drink a cup. She tried to let all the tension of the past two weeks flow away. It was easier than she thought, Niko and Jeff kept up a constant stream of chatter and seemed happy to leave Yumi to her thoughts. Yumi finished her cup and her eyes were starting to drop when Niko suggested she have a shower and go to bed.

Yumi slept for almost 18 hours before Niko woke her up. When they had finished breakfast, Niko showed Yumi her email account from the University and left her in the lounge. Yumi used her new phone to send a text to Kumiko with her new address. She also texted Ishida with her bank information, and then telephoned Shigeru.

Once again Kumiko answered. “I am very sorry Tanaka san, but I have been told to tell you that Tanaka san is not at home. I received your address and I now have your new phone number. I will tell Shigeru that you have arrived safely in Canada. Please don’t hesitate to contact me should you need anything. I wish you the best for your studies.”

“Thank you Yoshida san, please tell Shigeru that I understand that he is not home, and give him my best wishes.” Yumi managed.

As Kumiko hung up, she was embarrassed and furious. Embarrassed that she had called Yumi’s husband by his first name, and that Yumi was so understanding of her position. Furious at Shigeru for his childish behaviour toward his wife.

Angrily she shouted into the next room “Your wife is safe in Canada and she sends her best wishes!” She heard nothing in return and went back to the work on her desk.

Later that evening, Shigeru suggested they go out for dinner. While at the restaurant, Shigeru apologized. “I am sorry for putting you in this position, I just cannot face my wife at this time. Thank you for telling me she is safe.” With that they finished their meal and took a walk before going back to the apartment. Kumiko washed Shigeru as usual, gave him his whiskey, and later, after he had fallen asleep, Kumiko thought about his wife. She truly hoped that Yumi would be happy in her studies.

~~

Later that day, Niko walked with Yumi up to the University. This turned out to be a magical adventure. Niko had forgotten what a treat it was to see squirrels, but she remembered when Yumi practically screamed with delight. “Kawaii” she yelled, and then remembered “So cute! Are they pets?”

“No, they are wild, but they are fearless when they think you have some food. They will often sneak up and steal your lunch if you’re not careful.” Said Niko.

They got the registration paperwork done, and then visited Sato sensei. He was delighted to see Yumi, “You were one of my best students, I am so happy that you have come to work with me. I understand that you have registered, let us sit down and work out your courses and studies. I have not assigned you to any tutorials for this first semester. It is likely best that you have a few minutes to call your own while you settle in here. I imagine that right now you are suffering jet lag. If I am anyone to go by, you will be fine in about two weeks.”

With her coursework assigned, and promises of many more meetings to find a good Master’s project, Yumi had a couple of hours to herself. She spent it walking around the campus and what she found, she thought absolutely charming.

The grounds were lovely, lots of grass and trees, but it was the architecture she was fascinated by. It was a very quaint mixture of red brick and Brutalist concrete, with the occasional wooden barn thrown in. She wandered as far as the athletics building and dropped in for a course booklet, thinking she might find something to do. Beyond the Athletics building was the Arboretum and when she saw that, she smiled widely. It wasn’t

the forest on the hill behind her house, but it was green and wooded and there was even a sweet little Japanese garden, amongst other garden examples. The Arboretum Centre was an absolute gem of a building. Brutalist construction but in a whimsical, half buried building and a courtyard pond. Yumi took many photographs with her phone.

When she and Niko got home, it turned out that dinner was almost ready. Jane, Kit and Jeff were cooking and Yumi was introduced to the last two of her roommates.

After dinner, Niko and Yumi did the dishes and Yumi must have been feeling more rested because there was a bit of the old giggling and laughing between them as they washed. Funny how you fall into the old ways without thinking about it.

After they had finished, Kit and Jane went out to a bar while Jeff and Niko kept Yumi company. Yumi talked about her discoveries, and showed the two her photographs in the Arboretum. “Brutalist Fairyland eh, it’s perfect, I’ll have to remember that,” said Jeff.

That wasn’t the only language phrase Jeff caught. While describing a corner of the Arboretum that had been left to regenerate naturally after a tornado strike, Yumi said, “It was a fall wind.” Jeff laughed loudly and said, “Yes, a fall wind created a wind fall!” This horrible two-language punning was to continue as Jeff and Niko helped Yumi become more comfortable in English.

It turned out Jeff was a bit of a fitness buff, and he had been studying aikido for years at the athletics centre. Yumi

mentioned that she would like to continue her jodo studies and Jeff said “Ah, we do jodo in our aikido class, you should join.” Yumi smiled and said “I will consider it, I don’t know aikido, but I would like to try.” She didn’t mention that her form of jodo was very different than aikido.

“Wait,” said Jeff, “I have a jo here in my room, let’s go out on the lawn and practice.”

Niko rolled her eyes and winked at Yumi before shouting down the hall “bring a bokuto as well.” She turned to Yumi and said “Don’t hurt him too much, he’s like a big puppy with his martial arts.”

Yumi nodded and went outside with the other two. Niko said “Jeff, give Yumi the jo so you can see her style of jodo.”

What I do is called Shindo Muso Ryu said Yumi. It is practised in pairs, jo against bokuto, stick against sword. It is very old, over four hundred years, and it was a martial art that originated in Fukouka on Kyushu, my home.

Jeff nodded and then bowed to Yumi. “What should I do?” he asked.

“You may just walk over here and cut for my head.” Said Yumi. Jeff did so and his bokuto was flying across the grass, Yumi’s stick inches from his face.

Yumi bowed and gestured for Jeff to go get the sword, then bowed again and took another stance with her jo. At her nod, Jeff came again to cut, this time at her shoulder. The jo was

over Yumi's head and down to Jeff's face before he could finish his swing.

When he had slowly backed away, Jeff put his bokuto away and bowed deeply. "Yumi sensei, may I ask athletics to allow a jodo class please, and will you teach it?"

Yumi frowned "you must ask your aikido sensei such a thing first, you do not simply jump from teacher to teacher. If he agrees, I will be happy to teach you jodo."

Jeff bowed again and said he would do that, although he knew his aikido teacher would be quite happy to have another Japanese martial art on campus. Jeff of course had every intention of studying both.

At that moment, Niko pointed her finger at Jeff and pulled the trigger. Jeff grabbed his chest and said "You got me!" while falling down dramatically. Both he and Niko laughed but Yumi, while smiling, had a puzzled look on her face.

"It's an Osaka thing," said Niko "I never played the game in University because nobody was from Osaka, but Jeff here somehow learned about it, so he falls down dead real nice."

Yumi shook her head, "the things you don't know about your friends, I never knew Osaka girls were so silly."

Niko stuck out her tongue and threatened to shoot Yumi, who held up her hands in surrender.

~~

He was an awkward kid, and he trailed far behind the rest of the class as they ran around the track. He was so much better at board games. Still, he never gave up and slow or not, he always finished what the physical education teachers asked them to do. Later, he started to enjoy running, and while he was never a champion, he became better, and continued to run on his own through high school and his undergraduate degree.

Jeff started off in a small rural town, where he had never seen anyone who was not him, was not white anglo-saxon. The best his town could do for differences was the Catholic school vs public school kids.

University was quite a shock. Students of all different colours and nationalities, and rich kids. He'd never met a rich kid either, in his little farming town. The richest kids there were farmer's kids who got to drive the farm truck around on Saturday night dates.

In University, he roomed with kids from Rwanda, China and the Philippines. Never having had the chance to become prejudiced before, he learned to dislike people on a strictly non-denominational basis. His friends were a mixed lot, as were his enemies, such as they were. They were few as Jeff was almost universally accepted as a "nice guy". Something he didn't quite know what to do with.

Another thing Jeff found when he got to University was the martial arts. He had sampled just about all the arts in the program, but the one he found first and loved best was aikido. It just spoke to him. He had plugged away at it while an

undergraduate, taking tests as they were offered, but never worrying too much about rank. Still, he eventually ended up with a black belt, a teaching rank in his organization.

Jeff also started lifting weights, something he found handy to keep his joints together. Starting as a big kid, he wound up a big buff kid.

By the time he was a graduate student, he was teaching the aikido class at the University. This was one reason he was pretty certain the teacher would approve of Yumi.

Time slipped by, Yumi got into the rhythm of her classes and she began teaching jodo a couple of days a week after Jeff arranged the classes. She was surprised they didn't ask for any proof of qualification, but Jeff said that they were happy if the students were attending the classes. Jeff had made sure enough of the aikido students signed up for the class, but he said he didn't care who came to practice, as long as he got to learn.

Jeff did well in his classes, Yumi didn't have to push him much, and once she realized that a combination of showing and explaining moved him along even more quickly, she had him to the point where she could get some practice herself.

~~

After about a month, Yumi received a bouquet of flowers with the card "From Shige." At the same time, Yumi found three thousand dollars had been deposited into her account. She had her doubts that Shigeru would have sent the flowers or the

money, but she decided not to look too deeply into either of them.

As it turned out, the money was very useful, the promised assistance from Sato sensei did not turn up. When Yumi explained that she no longer needed it, Sato was relieved and her studies began in earnest.

Life soon settled into a comfortable routine. Niko and Yumi would go to school early, Yumi would help Niko with her project, and attend classes. The two of them would come back home together at about six pm. Jeff would be home already, he worked as a technician and was home by five pm. Kit and Jane were almost never around, they were both in Landscape Architecture and worked very strange hours.

Jeff was a terrible cook, but since dinner was waiting for the two women when they got home, they never mentioned how bad it was. Eventually Yumi suggested that she teach Jeff how to cook some Japanese dishes and he was a delighted student. Eventually he became a better cook overall, apparently the problem was that he ate anything and everything put in front of him. He had no reason to be a good cook for himself, but he began to suspect his roommates were a bit more fussy.

Shortly after Yumi arrived, Niko and Jeff decided she should see the tourist attractions. First was Niagara Falls. They drove down on a sunny fall day and parked by the falls to walk to the visitors' centre and see the water. As most visitors are, Yumi was a bit overwhelmed, especially when, from about five feet away, she looked directly at the water as it went over the edge.

“I feel like it’s pulling me with it, over the edge,” she said, and both Niko and Jeff nodded.

It was a treat to go down under the falls and see a wall of water thundering onto the rocks. Yumi couldn’t imagine all that power, she had never seen such a wild display in her life. There was nothing delicate about the falls she decided, and that was its charm. Yumi decided that Niagara Falls was a sort of Brutalist example of nature.

They left the car where it was, and walked down the riverside, constantly looking back at the Canadian Falls and across to the American. Seeing the boats, Yumi was intrigued, but Jeff said “one treat at a time, we will come again and you can ride the boat.”

At Clifton Hill, they turned left and wandered up what has been described as one of the world’s most tacky streets. Of course they went through the wax museum, the stationary roller coaster and the fallen over Ripley’s Believe it or Not! Museum. Again, Jeff put a halt to seeing everything at once. “Lots of time to see more of it later”.

Walking along the top of the escarpment, they took the incline railway back down the hill, and then drove to Niagara on the Lake, where they had dinner and wandered a bit more.

Both Niko and Yumi were tired, so Jeff drove Niko’s car back to Guelph. On the way, Yumi had some confusing and at times terrifying dreams about her new home, such a mixture of terrible beauty and silliness. Not at all like the austere grace and serious-mindedness of her Japan.

The next weekend, the three travelled to Elora to see the gorge. Now this was nature more on a scale that Yumi could relate to. The river was much less boisterous than Niagara, and when they climbed down into the gorge itself by the old stairs, she could admire the ferns growing out of the cliffside, and she could even take off her shoes and wade a bit in Irvine Creek, as it headed toward the Grand River.

With promises of tubing down the river the next spring, and swimming in the quarry, the three had dinner in one of the restaurants by the river and then went to the Gorge Cinema to watch an old movie.

Yumi began to look forward to the weekends when Jeff and Niko would take her to the many tourist destinations an easy drive away. The Lion Safari, the St. Jacobs market, Rockwood Park, and many more. Fall drifted into winter and Yumi had her first taste of the South Ontario snowfalls.

It wasn't as if Fukuoka never saw snow, but this was a whole different feeling. The snow would come down thick and fluffy, then perhaps, the temperature would fall below -20°C for two days. After that it may get above 0°C and the snow would melt down into ice. The choppy, ice strewn sidewalks soon earned the nickname "Brutalist snow", yet another example of the roughness of this young country.

Yumi would spend her free time during the day exploring the campus and the arboretum. She especially loved the way a new snowfall made the trees and paths look freshly made.

She sat on the bench in the Japanese garden and watched fat white snowflakes come down onto the dead iris stalks and the tiny pond. The tree over the pond held the snow for a while, but then it would fall and when it hit the water in the pond it made the only sound Yumi could hear, a sort of plop in a soundless world. The buildup and release of snow reminded her of the way the rain would build and then drop from the bamboo beside her veranda back home.

She held out her hand and watched as the snowflakes landed and melted, and then she tipped up her face and opened her mouth, sticking her tongue out to catch the flakes. She wondered at the sharp cold taste that disappeared as fast as she felt it, and she wondered at the way the snow built up on her eyebrows and eyelashes, while the snowflakes that hit her skin were gone in an instant.

Sitting in this garden was a reminder of her home that was so different, yet attempted to be the same, she thought of herself, a small piece of Japan in a huge new country. Deciding she was being too melancholy, she got up, brushed the snow from her pants, and went back to work.

~~

That spring, Kumiko wrote to tell Yumi that Shigeru and she would be in Toronto for business meetings with the aim of selling Tanaka Industries car parts in Canada.

Yumi took the train into Toronto on the agreed upon day and walked from the station to the hotel where Shigeru was staying.

When she arrived at his hotel room, she found an informal mid-afternoon drinking party with the potential clients and partners.

As she walked in, she bowed at Shigeru and greeted him formally. Shigeru looked up, didn't bother to stand, and announced "Here is my wife, who ran away." He then turned his back to Yumi. The translator, who was more than a little drunk himself, translated this into English, much to the shock of both Yumi and Kumiko.

Kumiko spoke quickly, "Tanaka Yumi san has come to Canada to complete her Masters in Economics. She is fluent in English and would be a valuable liaison for you, should we agree to a contract."

Yumi nodded her thanks to Kumiko and bowed to the potential clients, saying in English "Any assistance I can provide, I will happily offer."

The Canadian businessmen, who were looking decidedly uncomfortable, relaxed a bit when they heard Yumi speak, and saw that she took no offence to the treatment by Shigeru. They assumed, perhaps, that this was one of those "back and forth" things between husbands and wives in Japan.

Shigeru obviously didn't want her there, so Yumi bowed again and took her leave of the party. She went into the hall where she leaned back against the wall, closed her eyes, and tried to get her temper under control.

She opened them again as she heard the door open and close, and Kumiko was there. "I am so sorry Tanaka san, for that

rudeness, I am afraid your husband is still bitter about your leaving for school, and he seems to be under a lot of strain with this business deal.”

Yumi smiled, “There is no need to apologize for him. I understand, and please, call me Yumi.”

“I am Kumiko, and I still feel badly for that. He does love you, but he can’t seem to get past your leaving. I sometimes feel he is becoming quite childlike in his annoyance.”

“You mustn’t feel that way, the poor man just doesn’t know how to deal with his wilful wife. Please let’s not talk about it any more. Are the meetings going well?”

“As well as we expected, we may have some business to do in Canada, and your living here might be quite an advantage for the company.”

“Best not to suggest that to Shigeru,” said Yumi with a laugh.

Kumiko smiled. “May I take you for a coffee? I will catch you up on the business. They seem to be past the stage of discussions and are now into the stage of drunken laughter. I have asked the translator to call me if there is a problem.”

Yumi nodded and said “I have a better idea, let me take you to the CN Tower, it is not far from here, and you can have at least one bit of tourist fun before you go back home.”

With that, they left the hotel and walked toward the Tower. As they did, Yumi commented “I would like to thank you for the

monthly flowers and the support, it is much appreciated. I know that Shigeru will not have sent either.”

Kumiko looked embarrassed. “It is the least the company can do for you, it is what Shigeru should have done.” With that she winced a bit, realizing she had used such an informal name for Shigeru.

Yumi actually laughed “Call him by Shigeru, it is your right and I truly don’t mind. I suspect that without you by his side, he would be in trouble both privately and as the company president. I really do appreciate what you have done for him.”

Kumiko stopped and looked carefully at Yumi. She then bowed deeply and said “You are too generous, too kind.”

Yumi laughed, put her arm through Kumiko’s arm and said “Come on, the Tower is just over there, tell me quick what’s happening with the company, the things that Ishida san and Ohara san will not have told me.”

Kumiko, after being dragged a few steps, accepted the familiarity and walked along, talking steadily about the business. Yumi could tell just how deeply Kumiko was involved in all aspects of the company, and decided she approved.

Once at the Tower, business was forgotten. They rode the elevator upward to much delight at the views of the city. At the main observation deck they found the clear floor and Yumi urged Kumiko to walk out onto it. Kumiko tried once or twice

to get her courage up but finally shook her head and said “I cannot, I am not brave enough, will you come with me?”

At that Yumi laughed loudly and said “No, you would not get me out there, I'm scared silly even thinking about it.” Hearing that, Kumiko laughed right along with Yumi.

Then Yumi pointed out another attraction. “How about that, shall we go up higher and walk around on the outside of the Tower, get some fresh air?” Kumiko looked at the poster, looked back at Yumi with wide eyes, and they both screamed with laughter.

Heading back down to ground level, they had coffee and snacks and Kumiko said “I thank you for this, Yumi san, and I am so pleased to have met you. I will continue to send the support for your schooling and stop sending the flowers.”

“Don't you dare!” said Yumi “My roommates love the flowers and so do I.”

Kumiko smiled and promised to keep sending flowers. “And now I should probably get back to the meeting, I will need to tidy up afterwards.”

“And put poor Shigeru to bed, no doubt. It was wonderful meeting you Kumiko san and I thank you again for looking after Shigeru. Can you find the way back to the hotel, my train is near here.”

Kumiko nodded that she could find her way and bowed to Yumi. Yumi shocked her once again by gathering her up in a

big hug, saying “This is the Canadian way.” and laughing as she turned away to catch her train. “Give him a hug” she called over her shoulder.

Kumiko bowed to Yumi’s back as she turned a corner, shook her head and turned toward the hotel, hoping Shigeru wasn’t too drunk.

~~

Shigeru was indeed too drunk. The translator had got the visitors out just in time, just before Shigeru threw up and passed out. Thank goodness it was in that order.

Kumiko got him into the shower and cleaned up and then into bed, then she cleaned up the common area. She giggled thinking that she had told Yumi she was going back to clean up, she had figured bottles and glasses. Oh well, they were heading back to Japan the next day, perhaps Shigeru would sleep the flight away.

She was fairly certain they had an agreement to supply parts to Canada, and that they would have a partnership or two, to do it. Hopefully it would happen. The Tanaka Industries board had let it be known, quietly, that Kumiko was the one to negotiate with, and her discussions had gone very well.

The flight to Japan was quiet, Shigeru did indeed sleep for most of it, and drank while he was awake, allowing Kumiko to look over the paperwork. When they got back to the apartment in Tokyo, Shigeru was jetlagged, and slept for a day.

As it happened, Kumiko needed to go to Fukuoka to discuss the new deal with Ohara and Ishida. When she suggested to Shigeru that they should go and stay in the house, he flatly refused. That left Kumiko little choice but to go herself, and this she did after arranging for some of the secretaries in the company to drop in on Shigeru with papers to sign, as an excuse to check on him, and to make sure he was eating.

Ohara had been asked to arrange a hotel room for Kumiko, but when she got to Fukuoka, he drove her to the Tanaka house. Kumiko objected, saying she had no right or permission to stay there, that it was inappropriate, but Ohara said “Tanaka Yumi san told me that you were to use the house. It should be used, and I have been taking care of it as a company resource. Please find the guest room made up and let me know if there is anything more you need. I will be by in the morning to take you to the factory, where we can talk about the new deals”

With that he left her on her own. Kumiko settled her things into her room and then wandered around the house. She was amazed to find so few things of Shigeru’s, more or less just his golf clubs. Instead, she found things that were obviously bought by Yumi to represent she and Shigeru together.

She also found that the place could use a bit more attention than the cleaning company had paid to it. She took a dust rag and soon had the place cleaned to her satisfaction, then she made herself a dinner from the fridge and the cupboards. It was no surprise that she found what she needed exactly where she would expect them to be. Yumi ran a well-organized house.

After eating, she made coffee and moved out onto the veranda to drink it. The house was lovely, and Kumiko could see why Yumi thought so highly of it. She could also see why she had been allowed to stay there, the house obviously needed someone to live in it.

After that first visit, Kumiko found herself attending more personally to business in Fukuoka, and she became friends with Ohara, Ishida and Shinohara. It became a habit that she would cook them a meal on Saturdays, and they would teach her golf on Sundays. Their excuse was that they needed a fourth for their round, but of course they were also talking company business. They also shared any news they had of Yumi's progress in Canada, and of Shigeru in Tokyo.

The one time Shigeru returned to Fukuoka was for his father's funeral. Kumiko could see that he was upset more about being in the house than his father's passing, so she did her best to take care of his needs while being as quiet as she could.

She told Yumi about the death, but advised her not to return for the funeral "It would upset Shigeru greatly and everyone else understands that you are too far away to get home in time anyway. I have arranged flowers from you, I hope you don't mind."

Yumi wrote back thanking Kumiko for telling her, and for her attention to detail. She also said "Ohara tells me that you have been using the house when you visit on business. I am very pleased with that, it makes me feel better to think that someone who can appreciate it, is using it."

When she read that, Kumiko almost cried. Why was this woman so nice to her?

~~

Yumi's studies were going well. Kit and Jane graduated and moved away, Niko also graduated and moved on to another position at another University. Yumi had been curious whether Niko and Jeff had been an item, but when asked Niko laughed and said "He's a nice guy, too nice for me, I prefer my men to be what you might call 'bad boys,' that way I get the fun without the weight of a relationship." Yumi could see the attraction of that attitude. Her own schooling had been delayed too long because she got married.

With the three roommates gone, Yumi and Jeff discussed getting more people in to share the rent, or finding a smaller place. They decided to find a two bedroom apartment and, since they had lost Niko's car, Jeff bought one, saying it was about time he owned a car since he was working full time.

Jeff was easy to live with, he made few demands on Yumi's time, he cooked and she washed the dishes. As he cooked, Yumi found herself becoming much less fussy about what she ate. Jeff had the time to clean the house, so he did. Often they would go out to a bar for a couple of beers together, and other times they would go out with the aikido or the jodo club. Yumi had become a fixture in the local martial arts community, and it provided both a change from her studies, and a sort of family for her. So much so that she did not miss Japan.

She and Jeff still made weekend trips around the area, once or twice driving down to Lake Erie where Yumi was introduced to the mysteries of foot longs, Orangeade and cole slaw. She loved sitting on the sand and looking out over a lake that looked like the ocean, she could not see across it. Yumi didn't live on the coast in Japan, but it was never very far away. She had looked at a map one day, and was shocked to see how far from the sea Guelph was, so it was a comfort that the lake at least looked like one.

Their life together became very comfortable, but Yumi wondered that Jeff never seemed to have a girlfriend, he certainly never brought a girl to the apartment. Still she figured it was none of her business, and he had certainly never made a pass at her.

When the snow fell once more, Jeff said he had a treat. He had a friend who owned a cabin up north, in the bush. He told Yumi he would give her a taste of cabin fever, and so they drove up for the day. The drive had been plowed the week before and it had not snowed since, so they could drive right to the cabin. Inside they built a big wood fire and then while Yumi looked out from window to window, Jeff cooked them lunch.

This was entirely different than sitting in the arboretum. This was serious snow, bending the cedars almost to the ground. The snow was heavy and deep except for a small path that was cleared out to a shed. "What is in there?" said Yumi.

“That’s the outhouse.” Came the reply, “The place where you go if you need to go. The water has been turned off, so you need to use the big hole in the ground.”

Yumi could hardly believe her ears, and yet as Jeff spoke she could feel her bladder demand that she try out this outhouse. This she did, after Jeff gave her the instructions and a roll of toilet paper. “There will be alcohol hand sanitizer out there. And to avoid making Mount Doom higher, try to throw the paper into the corner.”

When Yumi got to the shed she could see that it was a double door, and quickly realized that you could sit and watch out without being watched yourself. She pulled down her pants and sat down quickly, and was very glad she did. The seat was cold! It was beautiful, she looked out on all that snow and the trees, there was no wind so it looked like a Christmas card.

When she was done, she was quite proud of herself, and decided she had ticked off yet another item on her Canadian to-do list.

After lunch, Jeff declared that they were going to do some snowshoeing. Another thing that Yumi didn’t know was on her list. Jeff took Yumi outside and strapped what Yumi could only describe as tennis rackets onto her boots. He strapped another pair on himself and set off through the woods saying, “Now we can go places we could never get to, during the summer, with all the undergrowth.”

Yumi found out how deep the snow was when she fell over backward about a hundred steps from the cabin. She hit

backside first and sank well down until only her armpits and feet were showing.

With a laugh, Jeff came back to help her out. As he bent over to pull her up, Yumi realized just how big he was. She knew he was tall because she was constantly looking up at him when they practised jodo, but she hadn't realized just how wide and how strong he was, not until he picked her up like she weighed nothing at all. "My hero" she said, as a joke, but Jeff seemed embarrassed and turned away.

They made a loop in about an hour and then it was back to the warm cabin for hot chocolate in front of the fire. Yumi watched the crackling flames and imagined all sorts of images while she did. When they had warmed up and cleaned up they got back into the car and drove home, stopping on the way for supper and coffee.

Yumi told Jeff how much she enjoyed the day and he promised that they would do it again, maybe stay the weekend. "I'd like that very much," said Yumi, and Jeff once again looked slightly embarrassed.

Yumi was confused, Jeff had become a very good friend, one of her closest, she realized. She certainly didn't want to embarrass him, but she had no idea what she had done. She decided to do nothing, since it seemed nothing need be done.

Life continued, Yumi studying, Jeff working, both of them walking together to school and then meeting for dinner when Yumi got home, or sometimes going directly to budo class. Yumi had started to take aikido classes, despite Jeff's protests

that he was not good enough to teach her. He was actually quite a good teacher, and Yumi decided that good teachers often thought they weren't very good, that's what kept them working at their own skills while they taught others.

~~

Toward the end of winter, Kumiko called Yumi: "Yumi san, I have very bad news. Shigeru san has fallen down the stairs and broken his neck. He is gone. Can you come home please, I have taken the liberty of booking a flight for you tomorrow."

Yumi could hardly speak, other than to say she would be there. She told Jeff, who promised to tell her supervisor and to take care of anything that came up. "Just get yourself packed and I'll drive you to the airport. Let me know when you are coming back and I'll pick you up as well."

In a daze, Yumi packed and then sat down on the couch and cried. She had left him, gone to Canada against his wishes, and now he was dead. Was it her fault? Was she such a bad wife?

Jeff sat down beside her and gave her a cup of tea but said nothing. Yumi leaned on his shoulder and cried a bit more, then drank her tea. She leaned against his shoulder for a long time before she got up and Jeff made dinner.

Jeff was quiet the next day as he drove her to the airport. When they got near Yumi told him to simply drop her at the departures section, she could find her way from there. He nodded and then said "You will be back won't you?"

“I don’t know, Jeff, I really don’t know, but I will tell you.”

Jeff nodded and as he stopped to let her out, Yumi leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “You are a true friend,” she said.

~~

Kumiko was driving from the airport, she had spent the weekend in Fukuoka and now she had the feeling that something was wrong. She hurried as much as Tokyo traffic would let her, and as she got to the apartment, she saw an ambulance and several police outside the building. Parking quickly she took the elevator up to the apartment and realized the fuss was centred on her apartment. One of the secretaries was there crying, she had brought Shigeru his dinner and had discovered his body at the foot of the stairs. Luckily the body had been removed before Kumiko could see it, but she still felt numb. What had happened, was it her fault? She should have been there to prevent whatever it was.

The police talked to her and said that from what they saw when they got there, it was an accident, he had tripped at the top of the stairs and fallen to the bottom. There was a very strong smell of alcohol on his body so perhaps that was the cause of the trip.

When Kumiko got to the hospital one of the doctors said to her “We have looked over his medical history, he had diabetes, high blood pressure and was a heavy drinker. I understand that you lived in the same apartment, so you will have noticed this.”

“I was in charge of his medication.” Kumiko said quietly.

“And there is no indication that was the problem,” the doctor said quickly. We will do an autopsy but it is my guess that he had a stroke, that he may even have been dead before he hit the stairs and broke his neck. I understand you were out of town when this happened, please don’t blame yourself. These things happen.”

Even so, Kumiko felt guilty, she had been playing golf when he had died. She also realized that she had indeed been very fond of Shigeru, she supposed that you could not share a bed for several years without becoming attached, and so she let herself cry a little before doing her job and setting things in order.

She booked Yumi a flight, arranged the funeral for Fukuoka, notified the board and started to assemble the company books.

When Yumi arrived at the airport, Kumiko was there to greet her and they flew together to Fukuoka. “Thank you for meeting me at the airport and arranging the travel.” said Yumi.

Kumiko was silent, but gave a small bow. While on the plane Kumiko told Yumi what had happened, that it was indeed a stroke and a massive one. Shigeru was dead before he fell, and would not have even realized he was dying.

Kumiko said “I have been getting the company books in order and have packed my bags, I can leave as soon as the funeral is over. I have also booked myself a room in a hotel for the funeral and I will intrude as little as I can. The board will be there for the funeral and I am sure they will confirm you as the

new president. I will brief them on current projects and I have a recommendation for my replacement.”

Yumi looked at Kumiko for a long time. Finally she said “First, let me say that I consider you a friend Kumiko san, and as such, I would like to ask you to stay with me at the house. It will help me to have a friend with me at this time. As for the company, let us wait until we meet the board, in the meantime let us say goodbye to the man we both loved.” With that she began crying and opened her arms to Kumiko, who was also crying.

Ohara collected the two women from the airport and drove them to the village, and to Yumi’s house. “I have had the main bedroom and the spare room made up just in case, and I will cancel Yoshida san’s hotel room. The funeral will be tomorrow and the next day there will be a board meeting at the main factory. I hope that will be satisfactory.” Both women nodded and Kumiko thanked him for his kindness.

~~

As Jeff drove away from the airport he felt a deep sadness. There was a good chance that Yumi would not come back from Japan, she had a responsibility to the company and to her family and friends. What was a roommate compared to that.

Not for the first time, he realized that he had come to care deeply for Yumi, in fact, if he were to admit it to himself, he loved her. Best wipe the tears away and concentrate on driving he thought, as he turned up the radio.

When he got back to the apartment, he thought “our home” which was the first time he had admitted that to himself. He knew he was in for a rough time until he found out whether or not Yumi would return.

In the meantime there was work and classes to teach, and when he was home, perhaps there was time to clean and repaint the walls. That would give Yumi a surprise when she came back.

In the jodo class he had to explain that Yumi had gone back to Japan for the funeral of her husband. Some of the more junior students didn't know she was married, and some of the seniors, who seemed to know what Jeff felt, better than he himself did, gave him some words of comfort, as best they could.

Taking him out to the bar after class, his friends gave him such advice as “she'll be back for sure” and “plenty of fish in the sea” none of which helped.

Mostly, he tried to keep busy and send good thoughts toward Japan.

~~

After dropping the women off at the house, Ohara went to the factory to make sure all was prepared for the board meeting, and then he went home to rest, but when he got there, he found Ishida and Shinohara waiting for him.

“I'm sorry I left you waiting for me, I didn't know you were coming,” said Ohara.

“Not a problem,” said Shinohara, “we should have called, do you have a few minutes to talk?”

“Yes of course, please come in, I will make coffee, or would you prefer shochu?”

“Shochu, by all means,” answered Shinohara.

Ohara got the glasses out and made hot water for the thermos, set that and the bottle on the table and then sat down.

“We two are on the board and we can swing most of the others to our ideas, but we need to decide what to do about the company.” Ishida started, “Specifically, what to do about the presidency and then what to do with Kumiko san. She seems to assume she will be asked to leave, either because she was Tanaka san's mistress, or because we will blame her for not taking better care of him.”

Ohara was stunned, “I assumed that Yumi san would take over as president, it is at least half her company after all.

“You don't want the job then?”

“No of course not, Yumi brought me into the company and I am comfortable here. As for Kumiko san, we three could be as easily found neglectful since she was playing golf with us when Tanaka san died. Anyway, just because she was his mistress doesn't mean she was responsible for his choices. Her bigger role was in running the company, as we all know. It would be a shame to lose her.”

Ishida and Shinohara nodded, but Shinohara said “What about Yumi, what does she think about Kumiko? She was the wife after all, might she wish Kumiko gone?”

“Ohara san, you have been spending a great deal of time with Kumiko when she is here, and you know Yumi as well as any of us, what do you think?” asked Ishida.

Ohara replied instantly, “Yumi seems to like Kumiko, she commented to me many times that she was happy someone was taking care of Shigeru san in Tokyo. They are both at the house now staying together.”

Shinohara looked startled but Ishida nodded saying “She said the same thing to me several times. The more important question is whether Kumiko will want to stay on. I think we can agree that we would prefer she does.”

Ohara said “But what about Yumi herself, will she want to run the company? Or will she go back to Canada to finish her schooling?”

“Why not do both?” Ishida said, “We now have the partnership in Canada, and she will be helpful there, and Kumiko can run the company from Tokyo and from here, just as she has been for the last several years. Not to speak ill of the dead, but Shigeru san has not been much of a leader since he started drinking heavily.”

Ohara was a bit taken aback with this frank talk, but he nodded anyway.

“So we are agreed then, Yumi will be president and return to Canada with the president’s salary. Kumiko will remain here with a new title and a raise in salary to run the company as she has been doing.” Ishida looked at the other two as he said this, and they both nodded.

“Good, let’s drink to Tanaka san and send him off well tomorrow, I will call the other board members to be ready for the day after.”

The future of the women established, the three men settled down to drink the bottle.

~~

Yumi walked out to the kitchen to find Kumiko sitting at the table.

“May I get you some tea?” Said Kumiko.

“I think I’d prefer a beer, I got used to it in Canada.” said Yumi as she pulled two from the fridge and waved one at Kumiko who nodded. Opening them, Yumi sat at the table. “Despite the jet lag, I couldn’t get to sleep. Here’s to our man.” she said, raising her bottle and as Kumiko raised hers, Yumi clanked the necks. Kumiko was rushing to catch up to this obviously Canadian etiquette, but her instincts to adapt were well honed.

As they drank, Yumi looked closely at Kumiko. “Tell me what you truly desire. I suspect that Shinohara san and Ishida san are planning our lives, and they carry the board, so we should decide what we wish to happen.”

“I would like to continue with the company as I have, I have come to feel that it is mine, if you will pardon my forwardness. The problem is that I worry what others will think.”

“You have indeed been running the company, would you like to become President?”

Kumiko laughed “From President’s mistress to President? I suspect not even our Canadian partners would approve of that!”

Yumi smiled “You are probably right, but do you want the position?”

“No, no I don’t. I like what I am doing as Administrative Assistant.”

“But Assistant to whom?”

Kumiko lowered her eyes slightly and said “Pardon me for being so bold, but to you. I am sure the board is going to offer you the President’s position and I would happily be your Administrative Assistant.”

Yumi was thoughtful for a moment, “But what if I want to finish my degree? To go back to Canada?”

“I see no problem, our Canadian partnership gives you the excuse to be there, and you could oversee my work here, along with the board.”

It was Yumi's turn to laugh, "You haven't had any oversight for quite a while, why would you need it now?"

"That is not quite true, I have been playing golf with Ishida, Shinohara and Ohara regularly and they are as informed of what we've been doing as they were when Shigeru san played with them."

"Probably more so," said Yumi with a sad smile. "Did you stay here when you visited to play golf?"

"Ohara told me you wanted the house used, so I did, should I have asked you first?"

Yumi clapped her hands "Not at all, I'm delighted to hear that it was used regularly. I wonder, you seem to get along with Ohara quite well, you know he is single?"

Kumiko turned her head away and giggled. "You are a wicked woman Yumi san. Yes I know he is single, should I marry him and visit on the weekends?"

Both women roared with laughter as Kumiko went to the fridge for two more beers. As she got them, Yumi walked out to the veranda and sat in her favourite chair. Kumiko put the beers down on the table and pulled up another chair. "I miss this place," said Yumi.

"I understand, I often sit and watch the bamboo and look across the valley, especially when it is misty."

"I like the rain best. I'm sorry, is this your chair?"

Kumiko held up two hands, “No, I thought that would be your view, and so I picked this chair and this view.”

Yumi smiled and again they tapped the neck of their bottles. They sat in silence for a few minutes and then Yumi said “I am so happy that you chose Shigeru. I can see why he liked you because I like you too. It is too bad that we didn’t meet much earlier, but I suppose Shige would have thought we were plotting behind his back.”

“I suspect we would have been. I came to love him you know.”

“Yes, he had his moments and he could be very kind. I suspect he loved you as well.”

Both women listened to the wind rustling through the bamboo leaves. Two women who had just lost the same man, who took solace in the company.

Kumiko looked at Yumi, “and what do you truly want? Will you simply accept what the board decides?”

“I honestly don’t know. I suppose I have a responsibility, but I don’t know if I want to stay in Japan. I have ties in Canada now, and my schooling. I am not sure what I want for myself.”

“Ties?”

It was Yumi’s turn to drop her eyes, “There is my work of course, but I have a roommate that I have come to care about. His name is Jeff and honestly, he reminds me of a big friendly

bear. I have been teaching him jodo and he teaches me aikido. Before you ask, there is nothing romantic between us, I am a married woman, but I do care for him.”

“Is he like Shigeru?”

“What a question, do you know, I’ve never thought about it. He is kind, but he is anything but needy, certainly not helpless. He has never made a pass at me, a perfect gentleman.” Yumi gave Kumiko a look “Although sometimes I might have wished for less of a gentleman.”

Kumiko laughed. “He sounds a lovely man.”

“Man, you know, I usually think of him as a boy, although I’m only five years older. But yes, he is a lovely man.”

“Perhaps if I take Ohara, you should take Jeff.”

“Who is a wicked woman now!” roared Yumi as they both laughed. “Well, let us see if we can sleep, the future will wait for a few hours.”

~~

When Yumi woke the next morning, far too early, she made coffee and sat outside. The chat the evening before had settled some things in her head, and raised other questions. She was sure that she could talk Kumiko into staying with the company, which would go a long way to smoothing any transition problems, and that was good. But Kumiko’s questions about Jeff unsettled her.

It wasn't that she was wildly in love with Jeff, but she realized now that she cared deeply for him. His whole attitude was so different from Shigeru's that it had not occurred to her what he meant to her. For one thing, she was sure he didn't need her, and that was probably why she hadn't thought of him as a partner.

Oh dear, they hadn't put Shigeru in the ground yet, and she was already thinking of another man. Perhaps she truly was a wicked woman. And yet, her thoughts kept drifting back to Jeff.

She was glad when Kumiko came out with the coffee pot and breakfast for them both.

"Good morning, you spoil me, I should have made breakfast for us but it was so early I wanted to soak in the morning air."

"I understand, I am an early riser myself. Thank you for making coffee."

With that they fell silent, each thinking about Shigeru.

At the correct time, Ohara arrived with the van and took them to the temple. The ceremony was quiet, all correct, just as Shigeru would have liked.

The only discordant note was that the wife and the mistress sat together, this brought many glances and a bit of whispered comment, but Yumi had insisted they sit together. She had her plans, and they included making sure that no stain should be

attached to Kumiko. She wanted to make it clear that Kumiko had her blessing, for the future and for the past.

Because of Yumi's travel arrangements, the wake had been moved to the afternoon, after the cremation and burial. While not strictly traditional, Yumi was certain Shigeru would not have minded much.

The wake was held in the house, and Kumiko had arranged with local caterers to provide the food and drink. Yumi very much approved, and after the traditional rituals, guests were invited to stay and eat. Many did, including the owners of the Shochu bar, who brought Yumi's bottle along so she could have another drink from it. Yumi hugged both men, to great embarrassment all around.

The board was, of course, at the wake and there was much rumbling in the corners as Ishida and Shinohara did their lobbying. Many glances were sent the way of Yumi and Kumiko as they stayed near each other for most of the afternoon.

As the last of the guests excused themselves and left, Kumiko and Yumi sat side by side on a couch and collapsed. A tension neither of them knew they had, seemed to lift, and with it, their firm self control. They leaned together sobbing and stayed that way for a long time.

~~

In the morning, Ohara drove them to the factory meeting room, but he didn't go in with them. In fact it was just Yumi, Kumiko

and a lawyer. It turned out that Shigeru's will had recently been changed and Yumi didn't know about it.

"This is fairly simple, except for one rather unusual part. Tanaka san you naturally inherit all the family property, the flat in Tokyo and the house here, and all the other things you and your husband held in common. The one unusual thing is that your husband willed only half of his shares in the company to you, the other half he willed to Yoshida san, but with a proviso that you, Tanaka san, must approve that dispensation," said the lawyer. He looked up and said, "I advised your husband against this proviso, as it would put you in an awkward position."

"It might have, and it could be seen that my husband did this to cause trouble, but I don't believe that was why he gave me approval of this bequest. Shigeru san was a traditional man, and so he gave everything to me, provided I wanted it. However, he was also an honourable man, and so he has provided for his faithful assistant and close friend. I most certainly approve of this bequest."

Kumiko bowed low to the table with tears in her eyes. So he had noticed her after all. Even if Yumi had said no, the message would have been clear. He had cared for her and wanted to provide for her.

Shortly after that meeting was finished, the board filed in, along with coffee, which Yumi and Kumiko gladly accepted so that they could hide their eyes behind the steam.

Ishida, as chair, called the meeting to order and announced that there were only two items on the agenda. First, the selection of

a new President for the company, and second, the matter of Yoshida Kumiko, who had tendered her resignation. This she had done the day Shigeru had died.

First, the selection of a new President. Shinohara stood up quickly and said “I propose the new majority shareholder and current board member, Tanaka Yumi as president”. It was seconded by Ishida and the motion opened for discussion. One of the other board members suggested that they ask Yumi if she wished to accept the position.

“I have no wish to disrupt the current direction of the company and I will fulfill the duties as my late husband fulfilled them.” Yumi said.

Kumiko had to hide her grin behind her coffee cup.

The motion went to a vote and was approved unanimously, and Yumi took the floor once more to formally accept. She kept the floor and said “As to the second matter on the agenda, I would like to ask Yoshida san to withdraw her resignation letter and I would like to ask her to act as my Administrative Assistant as she performed those duties for my late husband.”

At that point, Shinohara had to be slapped on the back, he had spit coffee half way across the table and was coughing. When he had recovered, Ishida stood and said “I wholly support the request for Yoshida san to withdraw her resignation, and I would further suggest that we appoint her to the new position of Chief Operating Officer, with duties to include the day-to-day operation of the company as a whole, and with a salary double of what she is currently being paid.”

“You can’t do that,” said the Treasurer, “she would be underpaid so much that we would be embarrassed. I propose we pay her the equivalent of what a COO would be paid at a company of comparable size.”

Behind her hand, Kumiko’s mouth was hanging open, and Yumi was grinning at Ishida. She was right, those two old foxes had been plotting. Yumi took the floor again “I accept those amendments to my motion and would like to call the vote.”

It was again unanimous, and Kumiko was asked if she agreed to the board’s request. She bowed low after standing and said “I will happily withdraw my resignation and will accept the new position. I do request however, that I also continue to assist the new President as I assisted the old President.”

Yumi whooped with laughter as Ishida slapped Shinohara on the back once more. Ishida looked at Kumiko to see if she had timed that last remark for when Shinohara was drinking again. He was fairly certain she had.

The meeting was adjourned and a meal was catered, followed by drinks. After about the third drink, Yumi and Kumiko took a couple of bottles of beer from the tray, opened them and clanked the necks together shouting “kampai,” then broke out into laughter at the faces of the board. “It is a Canadian custom,” said Kumiko.

The board, looking at the two highest ranking members of the company, broke into grins and reached for the beers on the tray.

Later that evening, Yumi and Kumiko sat on the veranda with Ishida and Ohara, who had been invited back to discuss matters.

“You are my two closest advisors in the company,” said Yumi “so, I would like to tell you that I am not at all certain whether I should go back to Canada to complete my schooling. I have accepted the Presidency and if you think I should stay in Japan, I will of course, stay.”

Ishida spoke up “Don’t think I missed that reference to performing your duties as your late husband performed them. I was not born yesterday madam,” and he grinned “to have the company run as it has been running, you have just landed Yoshida san in the same position she has been holding. You can go back to Canada should you wish to, we can spare you as long as Yoshida san is here to run things. As for both of you young ladies, that was not a nice thing you did to Shinohara san, you know he’s a traditionalist.”

“Yes, but in our last golf game, he stepped on my ball,” said Kumiko.

“Ah, understandable,” nodded Ishida.

As for Yumi, she was painting the very picture of innocence.

“Will you go back to Canada Tanaka san?” asked Ohara.

“I haven’t decided yet, but if I do, I expect Yoshida san will be visiting from Tokyo for your weekly golf games.” Yumi said with a gentle smile.

The four friends talked for a while longer, reminiscing about Shigeru and discussing the future. Kumiko, as expected, had plans and she outlined some of them.

When the men had left, Yumi asked “are you tired Kumiko san, or can you stay up a while longer.”

“Of course I can stay up. I don’t think I can sleep yet.”

“Good, I am in need of some advice from a friend. Can you really get along without me if I return to Canada? Please speak plainly to me.”

“I would want to call you on anything but day-to-day operations, but that won’t be often, so yes, that will be no problem. Are you really still uncertain if you will go back to Canada?”

“I am, my studies don’t seem so important now.”

“Is that the question? Or is it a certain man?”

“Oh Kumiko, I don’t know what to do about him. I have just buried Shigeru, am I truly wicked to think about another man so soon?”

Kumiko put her arm through Yumi's and said "My dear, you want plain speech, here it is. You have not been with Shigeru for a long time. I know this and it hurt me for just as long, but I could do nothing, I could certainly not tell Shigeru to do his husbandly duty to you."

Yumi smiled at that image and nodded for Kumiko to continue.

"Your attraction to Jeff did not come to you last week, you may not have allowed yourself to see it, but I suspect it was there when you moved into an apartment with him. May I suggest that you go back to Canada, finish your degree, it would be a shame not to, and while you do that, see where it goes with Jeff."

Yumi didn't say anything, but she went into the kitchen and came back with her bottle of Shochu. "Thank you for that. Tonight I will finish this bottle and by the end I will decide, and tomorrow we will go to the bar and start another bottle."

And so they drank the rest of the bottle, and when it was gone, and another couple of beers, they had to help each other up off the couch.

"Come to the porch," said Yumi, and they stood and watched the stars overhead, while a cool breeze took away some of the alcohol.

"Kumiko san, we shared the same man for several years, and for quite a while now, my bed has been empty. On this night without Shigeru, do you think we could sleep together as sisters, to have someone to hold, please."

Kumiko just hugged Yumi's arm closer, and the two of them turned to go to bed.

The next day, after breakfast and while enjoying their coffee, Yumi turned to Kumiko, "I have decided to go back to Canada, you are correct, it would be a shame not to finish my degree, and yes, you are right again that I should decide what I feel about Jeff."

I would like you to keep the apartment in Tokyo if you can bear it, the extra room would be handy should I need to visit. And I would of course like you to continue using this house. It would be too bad for it to go empty."

"I will do both those things," said Kumiko, "I will remember the good times with Shigeru, it will not be too sad, and I would be delighted if my 'sister' came to visit."

"Good, thank you. Now, for this morning, I think the world is leaving us alone for a change and I would like to take you to a place that was special to Shigeru and I since our school days. Would you like a walk?"

Yumi stayed in Fukuoka for a week more, talking with Ishida, Kumiko and Ohara. She even played some golf and she took Kumiko to the Shochu bar where they eventually left a new bottle with 'sisters' written on it. "You must work on it the next time you are here" said Yumi.

During this time, Yumi joined a practice with her jodo sensei. After practice, her sensei said "I did not get a chance to speak

with you at the funeral, please accept my deepest condolences for your loss.”

Yumi bowed and her sensei continued. “I see you have found a student.”

“I have several students, sensei, all of them beginners but all willing to learn.”

“When a sensei teaches a student, the student changes. But that is not what I’m talking about. When a sensei is lucky enough to find a special student, they are both changed. When you came here you had to be strong to keep up with the men. That was good, but I suspect your student is far stronger than the men you have faced here. You have become subtle, your movements are softer, yet sharper. I am pleased that you are still making progress in your new home, and I am even more pleased that you have found such a student. Some of us wait for decades for such a one.”

He walked to the closet and from it took a package, “Please accept this for your dojo. It was written by my teacher and is the same as that plaque you see there on the wall. I would be very happy if you would come again some time to show me your progress.”

Yumi was overwhelmed as she accepted the package, and deeply confused. Sensei was obviously talking about Jeff, who was certainly stronger than most people she had met, but had he affected her jodo so much? She promised to come again to practice.

The next day, Ohara drove the two women to the airport. From Fukuoka, the two flew to Tokyo to do some more business. When they got to the apartment, Yumi saw the packed bags and boxes, and helped Kumiko to unpack and arrange her things. Yumi was delighted with the smaller suite, and insisted that Kumiko move her things into the main part of the apartment. "That is yours now, and I will need some room for my things."

At the end of three weeks in Japan, Kumiko arranged a return flight for Yumi to Canada. The two said a sad goodbye at the airport, and Kumiko went back to her apartment to start work once more.

~~

Ohara was happy that Kumiko would be staying with the company, but somewhat disappointed that she was not going to be quitting. "If she quits," he thought, "I could ask her to marry me."

Despite her being the mistress of his friend, he had grown quite fond of Kumiko. He spent as much time with her as he could, but he would very much like to spend more.

Kumiko sensed his interest, and they had discussed it once. "You are a dear man, and I appreciate your friendship, but more than that? I am mistress to your friend Shigeru san. Does that not bother you that I am that sort of woman? It would surely be improper for us to be more than friends would it not?"

But as she said it, Ohara thought he had detected a gleam in her eye, and as she finished, she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, squeezing his shoulder at the same time. Ohara's heart had leapt, and now, was it bad of him to be a little happy that Shigeru had died?

~~

Jeff was becoming desperate. He had heard nothing for over two weeks. He was distracted at work and he almost hurt one of the seniors in his aikido class.

The fellow had decided to test him, and Jeff had responded without enough care. The student wasn't hurt, in fact he was delighted that his sensei could throw and control him so easily, but Jeff knew how close he had come to breaking an arm. Thank God, the kid had great breakfall skills. Jeff wondered how he could be so attached to anyone, it wasn't as if Yumi was his girlfriend, yet she seemed to be all he could think about. What the hell was wrong with him, he'd never felt this way over his past girlfriends, even after a breakup, and Yumi was just a roommate.

He kept working on the apartment, he'd painted all the walls and even refinished the floors. Now he was building furniture. His students had noticed he was nervous and upset, and they tried to calm him, they invited him for dinner, took him to the bar, and generally looked after him. They didn't want to lose their instructor, and they didn't like seeing their friend so upset.

"She will come back" said Susan, one night at the bar, and instantly regretted it as Jeff seemed to sink further into the seat.

They quickly went on to other topics, urging Jeff to talk about the history and philosophy of aikido, something that always worked to distract him, even if they'd heard it all before.

The day that he received a call from Yumi to say she was coming back, it was bright and sunny. As Jeff's spirits rose, he looked out the window and thought, "of course the weather would mimic my mood, life is just a poorly written book isn't it?" She would be back in two days, and with that thought, Jeff began to look around frantically to make sure everything was perfect.

Dishes! Laundry! He scurried to clean things that he had cleaned twice before.

The next day, flowers arrived and he cursed himself for not thinking of that. He looked at the card but it no longer said Shigeru, instead they were from someone called Kumiko.

He had arranged for a few hours off work and drove to the airport early on the day she was to arrive. He parked the car and went in to wait at the arrivals gate. Looking at the board he realized he was an hour early but he didn't care, Yumi was coming home, she's coming home. That sounded good in his head and for the tenth or twelfth time he rehearsed what he would say to her when she arrived. He had bought a teddy bear from one of the kiosks, and now he looked at it again, "too much?"

As he spotted her finally coming out of the gate and down the ramp, he waved the bear over his head and ran to meet her. Yet when he got close, he found his tongue frozen in his mouth. He

became afraid that she had changed and as he came to a halt in front of her he could only bow formally and hold the bear out like an idiot.

Yumi's heart lifted as she saw Jeff had come to meet her, and he had a little bear in his hand. "How cute is that?" she thought as she saw this giant of a Canadian holding a little teddy bear.

But when he met her, he didn't hug her like she was expecting, he bowed instead and in her confusion, she bowed as well. She took the bear as he held it out and said "thank you so much for coming to get me."

Had her feelings toward Jeff, and his feelings toward her been twisted in her head during her trip to Japan? She didn't trust herself, she was confused.

Jeff took her bag and she found herself falling in behind him, as if she were back in Japan following her husband. "This is stupid" she thought, but she couldn't bring herself to run forward and hug him.

Once they were in Jeff's beat up old car she felt a little better, and she took a good look at his face. No, she wasn't wrong about her feelings, or his. She could see he was in agony. He had a hard time expressing his feelings, almost as bad as Shigeru. She would have to do something to get their friendship back on track, and that's where she remembered her sensei's words about having a special student.

"There is an aikido class tonight right?" Yumi said quietly, so as not to startle the poor boy.

“Yes, but Joe is taking the class, I assumed you would be too tired to practice.”

“I have my uniform in my locker, you shouldn’t miss class, please let’s go.”

“Should we stop for some food?” Jeff asked, thinking about the meal he had prepared at home.

“I ate on the plane, let’s go to class, please tell me how things have been going while I’ve been gone.”

“I phoned Dr. Sato and he expects you back when you are rested, all is fine there. My job is the same as always, no problems. Classes have been running, I have been teaching both aikido and jodo. The students miss you in jodo, but they have been kind to me. I have done a little work on the apartment, you will see when we get back,” Jeff said shyly.

“It will be good to get back home,” Yumi said deliberately.

With that they fell into a somewhat more comfortable silence as they drove. Yumi was glad he hadn’t asked her about her trip, she would tell him when she was a bit more certain about what she felt about it herself.

They arrived with plenty of time for class, and the students all greeted Yumi warmly, hugs from the girls and deep, deep bows from the boys. Yumi almost giggled at the display.

About half way through class, Yumi was feeling the effects of the trip, becoming quite tired. At that point, Jeff called her up to work with him. He attacked too carefully and Yumi ended up hanging off his arm. Literally, hanging off of his arm. They fell to the floor and Yumi whispered in Jeff's ear "Try to hit my head."

Jeff came in for real this time, and Yumi found herself flowing in and around his attack. Jeff ended up hitting the floor quite hard. He got up with wide eyes, bowed at Yumi and said "again."

For the next five minutes, the class watched Jeff attack and Yumi counter with ease. She knew she was too tired to try to use even what strength she used to have, so, with the words of her jodo sensei in her mind, she became subtle. It was marvellous and when Jeff finally called a halt, he gathered her up in his arms and gave her a huge hug.

Suddenly embarrassed at this breach of dojo etiquette he turned to the class and said "This. This is what you are looking for." Those who knew Jeff's feelings toward Yumi smiled at his unintentional admission.

In the bar after class, the students asked Yumi about her trip.

"Why did you go back to Japan?"

Yumi thought again about how, not quite rude, but direct, these kids were. Then she looked at Jeff and decided this was the way to tell him what had happened. "My husband died, he was the president of a company that makes car parts."

“We’re all sorry to hear about that, are you the president now?”

“That’s not the way it usually happens, but yes, I was named the new president.”

“Does that mean you will be moving back to Japan?”

Yumi could feel Jeff stiffen up beside her. “Not right away, I am back to finish my degree, and then we’ll see. You won’t get rid of your jodo sensei that easily.”

The students laughed, “So how big is the company? Will you have to go back to Japan often? Do you sell parts to Canada? How does it work that you’re here, don’t they need you?”

Jeff listened with half an ear, he had heard what he needed to hear. When it came time to go home, Jeff walked Yumi’s bag into the apartment, letting her go ahead. She opened the door, took a look and turned back to Jeff. “Oh my goodness, you weren’t kidding about doing a bit of painting.”

“Do you like it?”

“Of course I do, every bit of it, even the rooms I haven’t seen yet. You are a talented man, Jeff Cole, a talented man.”

Jeff headed to the kitchen to make tea and to put away the dinner he had cooked. He almost made it, but Yumi came in and saw. She didn’t say anything, but she put her hand on Jeff’s arm and squeezed.

When Yumi saw the flowers and saw they were from Kumiko, she laughed.

“Who is Kumiko?”

“My sister, at least she is now. I will tell you about her over tea, and tell you the rest of the story as well.”

“You’ll really stay until you finish your degree?”

“Of course, with your help, I hope.”

Jeff visibly relaxed, “Go on out and sit before you fall over, and I’ll bring the tea.”

~~

The two drifted through the summer, they often took trips on the weekend to areas nearby. They visited Niagara falls again, as promised, but often they were content to walk downtown in Guelph and window shop, stopping for coffee and snacks.

Yumi had a full bank account and she wondered if she should buy them a new car, or even a house of their own, but two things stopped her. First, she wasn’t sure if they were a couple. Jeff was never anything but a gentleman and they still slept in separate rooms. This made her wonder about her own feelings. If there was nothing between them but friendship, perhaps she would return to Japan when she graduated.

And secondly, she wasn’t sure how Jeff would react to her new income. She knew he was an independent type, would he resent

her making more money? She even thought she might hide most of her salary so that he could continue to pay more than his share.

Eventually, she grew tired of arguing with herself and she told him what she was being paid as president. He whistled, “and what are you doing for that sort of money?”

“Owning the majority of the shares I guess. But I got those because I helped build the company with my husband. I also make decisions on any new business plans we make, I just don’t run the company day-to-day, Kumiko does that, and she’s damned good at it. I suspect she would not appreciate me sticking my nose into her company too much.”

Jeff laughed, “well I guess that’s OK then, as long as you’re doing what they want you to do.”

“Oh, I plan on doing quite a bit, when I graduate. I have plans for the business here in Canada, and even some fun things here in Guelph. A lot of our students stick around town and it would be nice if we could set up a couple of businesses for them to run.”

Jeff blinked, “Do you really make that much?”

“No, but the company has resources, and we happen to be cash rich at the moment. Personally, I am thinking of ways to diversify.”

“That brings up another thing Jeff. Should we buy a new car?”

“What for? The one we have runs fine.”

“So you wouldn’t like, say, a nice Porsche to drive around in?”

“You’re kidding right? Where would we stuff the weapons, or our bags when we go out of town for a trip?”

“Ah, and what about buying a house? With our combined income we could afford it, rather than paying rent.”

“Maybe, are you saying you’re going to settle down here, not go back to Japan? Otherwise would I be stuck with the mortgage?”

Yumi shook her head. “You are the most practical man I have ever met. And no, I haven’t decided if I am staying here. If I do I will have to travel back and forth a lot, so it might be nice to have a house here, and a roommate to look after it.”

She looked carefully at Jeff, who nodded in an altogether too neutral gesture. “Well, I actually have everything I have ever wanted, a good job I like, that pays enough, and my martial arts. I’ve never wanted anything more, I consider myself lucky, it’s much more than I started with, so I’m a rich man.

If you really want to buy a house, I’m in, but I was sort of hoping we could enjoy the decoration I did on the apartment for a little longer.”

Yumi laughed and squeezed his arm “You win, we’ll stay here for a while. So it wouldn’t worry you if I contributed more than an equal share, that I earn more than you?”

“Are you kidding, when we buy a house you can pay according to your means, how about that?”

Yumi laughed again, then got serious “Jeff you are good with staying with me then, being housemates?”

Just as seriously Jeff said “Yumi, I am with you just as long as you’ll have me. Longer because I’ll fight to stay.”

“I’ll want a jo,” grinned Yumi.

With that, Yumi pretty much decided she knew what she wanted, but she was still a bit unsure what Jeff wanted. It was clear that he wanted to live with her, but he hadn’t made a move to get her into his bed.

~~

Kumiko was amazed at how easy it was to slip into her new position at the company. Yes, the duties weren’t that different than her old position, but the management didn’t seem to have a problem with her being officially in charge. She asked one of her closer associates about that and he replied, “Yoshida san, you have had the real power in this company long enough that we all know who was running things. You now have the title that fits your job.”

Fine, she thought, let’s get on with it. For the moment, the Fukuoka and Tokyo divisions were going well, and that lovely man, Ohara, had an absolute gift for his job. Yumi had chosen well there. Kumiko went to Fukuoka almost every weekend

and played golf while keeping the board spies, as she thought of them fondly, up to date. In the evenings she had fallen into the habit of cooking for Hiroshi, since he came over to chat whenever she was there. Oops, she thought, I used his first name. Unprofessional, she thought. Ohara san she corrected herself and smiled.

Still, as well as things were going, the entire business was directed toward combustion engine cars, and Kumiko was starting to think that Japan might be falling behind in the electric car revolution. If electric cars took over, Tanaka Industries had better be in a position to shift.

As it turned out, Yumi agreed with her, in fact she was the one who pointed out that North America seemed absolutely determined to go electric. Fine, what to do about it. She had asked Yumi to consider the problem from her perspective. Could Tanaka shift in Canada, and protect itself from a collapse in Japan? Or did they need to diversify in both countries.

Perhaps I should get Hiroshi thinking about this as well. If anyone could pivot a manufacturing plant on a dime, he could do it. Kumiko shook her head, that man Ohara was distracting, even when she was thinking about the company she was too familiar in her thoughts toward him. Best get back to work.

~~

That last weekend with Kumiko had been heavenly for Ohara. They had caught up with the company business, and after the Sunday golf game, Kumiko had leaned over and said to him

“I’m staying for two more days, will you show me around the area?”

They had spent those two days on several car trips of a few hours each, and Ohara was more excited about the talk between sights, than for the sights themselves. Why had she chosen to spend extra time with him?

He could only hope.

~~

With the new winter and the first cold snap of the year, Jeff borrowed his friend’s cottage for the weekend. Yumi was excited to experience the place for more than a day. They packed the car and took their time driving up to the place. When they got there it was freezing. They built a big fire in the stove and started the small furnace. Jeff had brought water and food and they kept their winter jackets on while they packed things away, no need to use the refrigerator, they just put the food near the patio door.

While the place was warming up, they strapped the snowshoes on and went for a hike. Although it was early in the season, the snow was two and three feet deep on the ground and about half that on the branches of the trees. Yumi insisted on taking photos of her under branches that touched the ground.

With bright red faces and hands, the two went back to the cottage, and Jeff made hot chocolate, while Yumi curled up in the big soft chair in front of the fire. Jeff put a piece of wood on the fire and then perched on the arm of the chair. After a

moment, Yumi leaned her head on Jeff's thigh and closed her eyes.

The cabin was slowly warming up, but it was nowhere near temperature by the time they made dinner and had a couple of beers.

Jeff suggested that it was a bit cold to stay up, "it will warm up overnight, and tomorrow the sun should be out. Best we go to sleep early and then we'll have a full day tomorrow."

He hesitated and then said "I think it would be best if we sleep in the same bed Yumi, it's just too cold to sleep alone, we'd never get to sleep."

"Sure, that sounds like a plan."

"We've got our fluffy pyjamas to wear, the trick is to change in front of the fire after we've warmed them up a bit." Jeff said to laughter from Yumi.

And that's how the two ended up in the same bed for the first time. Yumi was fascinated at how she fit inside Jeff's curved body. Her back was against his stomach, her feet tucked up, and Jeff's nose was tucked into her hair. When he put his arm over her it was like a heated blanket. She fell asleep almost instantly, and woke only when he got up to feed the fire.

When he came back to bed, she would lift the covers and welcome him in with sleepy sounds that thrilled Jeff. They spent the night comfortably under many blankets and in the morning, they woke to the sun streaming in the window.

Using the outhouse on such a cold day was certainly an adventure to Yumi. Jeff chose to water a tree after making sure Yumi was looking elsewhere. Of course she peeked, giggling to herself at how absurd he looked, straddle-legged and serious. It might have been at that moment that she decided enough was enough.

After breakfast they drove into the local town to wander around a bit. Jeff said he loved the feel of a tourist town in the off season, and Yumi could see his point. There was a sort of sleepy sadness combined with waiting for the future when the town would wake up again.

They found an open restaurant with several locals having coffee and lunch. There were many questions aimed at the visitors, and a general feeling of “good to see you here.” Later Jeff remarked to Yumi “That’s the other reason I like the off season, the locals aren’t so grumpy as they are when the tourists are there in force.”

Yumi frowned a question at him and Jeff said “I was born in a tourist town, and as a local, I knew we needed the visitors but damn they could be obnoxious. They figured we were some sort of amusement park put there to serve them, rather than being visitors to our home.”

“Home is important to you isn’t it Jeff?”

“I suppose so, I suppose that’s why I’m so attached to our apartment, it’s the first time in a very long time I’ve had a place that feels like I belong to it.” He looked shyly at Yumi

and continued, “I think that having you there is a big part of it feeling like home.”

With that he ducked his head as if expecting Yumi to give him hell. Instead she grabbed his arm and hugged herself to him.

Wonder of wonders, they found a thrift shop open, and Jeff insisted they go in so he could buy her a big fur coat they saw in the front window. Yumi was horrified, and then relieved when it turned out to drag on the ground as she tried it on. But they did find a quite wonderful puffy jacket for her and Yumi let Jeff buy it for her. He really was like a big kid sometimes she thought. The smallest things could make him happy.

That evening the cottage was up to temperature, and dinner was quite pleasant in their shirt sleeves rather than the winter jackets. After dinner, they played cards and broke out the whiskey. Yumi also brought out a bottle of shochu she had found in the liquor store in Guelph. She heated water in the kettle and showed Jeff how to mix the perfect winter drink.

When it came time for bed, Jeff pointed out that it would be warm enough for them to use separate beds. Yumi looked at him for a very long time, long enough that Jeff started to get nervous.

“You dear sweet man, we have lived together for years now, and you’ve never made a pass at me. Don’t you like me?”

Jeff was near to panic “But you are a married woman and I didn’t want to do the wrong thing and lose you.”

“I was a married woman, but not for a long time. Jeff I am not going to use that second bed, I’m tired of sleeping alone, we will use the bed we used last night and you can wear your fluffy pyjamas if you want. I intend to sleep in what I usually wear in bed.”

With that she took Jeff’s hand and led him into the bedroom. Jeff, slow as ever to catch on, finally understood and they both got under the covers naked.

Jeff started very slowly, displaying as much restraint as he could. He trailed his fingers up and down Yumi’s body, tickling her lightly, avoiding her nipples for a long time. Yumi, for her part, became more and more excited and then somewhat frustrated. She had never been teased like that before.

As Jeff slowly got closer and closer to her nipples, she was shivering, and as he trailed his fingers down over her stomach it humped upward all by itself. Finally, Jeff went down over her pubic hair and Yumi was amazed that her legs parted without her instructions. She exploded into the first orgasm she’d ever had as he touched her clitoris. He tried to make it last for her, and it did.

As she finally collapsed, she said “What was that?” Jeff was as surprised as she was at the release he’d seen and managed a crooked smile. It was then that Yumi noticed that Jeff was quivering, his hands were shaking and she realized he was as wound up as she had been. She smiled, pushed him onto his back and threw her leg over him. It took no time at all for him to explode into his own orgasm.

After they had both collapsed and recovered a bit, he sat upright and said, “Oh my god, I didn’t even ask, are you on the pill?”

Yumi looked at him with lazy eyes, “no, and so what?”

Jeff’s eyes got even wider as he caught her meaning. He kissed her for a long time and then hugged her hard while Yumi giggled, as much a little girl as he was a little boy she thought.

~~

Later in the evening, Yumi slipped out of bed and went onto the porch, closing the door quietly behind her, she watched the snow drift down onto the trees. She listened hard and yes, she could hear it. She looked down at her feet and watched the snow melt around them until she was standing on the wood floor.

She didn’t feel cold, in fact she felt more content than she had for a very long time. She smiled as some stray flakes of snow blew under the roof and landed on her eyelashes. Watching the white flakes move past the black trees, she realized that she was happy.

When she went back in she stood at the fire, feeding a couple of pieces of wood in and warming up her body. Sure enough, as she got back into bed, Jeff was softly snoring and she tried not to wake him. She failed.

They didn't get back to sleep until almost dawn, and then they spent most of the next day in bed, getting out only to eat and feed the fire.

~~

Not much changed for Yumi and Jeff in their apartment, Yumi moved into Jeff's bed, they had a discussion about whether or not they could afford children, and decided they could. They would let things happen.

Jeff asked Yumi if she wanted to get married and Yumi answered "What for?" But they made wills and named each other as their beneficiaries. As it turned out, Yumi was surprised at how much money Jeff actually had.

"Inheritance, investment and living like a student," he said with a grin.

Yumi graduated, and then things changed for them. No longer could they pretend to be students. They did buy a modest house and Jeff enjoyed himself tremendously, painting, repairing and building more furniture. They kept the apartment while he worked and, in the end, Yumi was delighted with their new home. Jeff too, said it felt like home.

Yumi and Kumiko continued to plan, and Tanaka Industries bought the Canadian parts company. Yumi also invested in several electric car parts companies in Canada. In Guelph, Yumi and Jeff did indeed open a coffee shop, an art gallery and a couple of retail stores, and they were run by their students.

Surprisingly, all of them made money, something the couple hadn't anticipated.

In Japan, Kumiko and Ohara prepared for the day when they would need to shift the manufacturing, again investing in some start-up companies working on battery technology.

It all looked like it was going to run well enough for the foreseeable future. They had done as much as they could to keep things growing.

~~

Eventually, Yumi had to go to Japan and asked Jeff to take some vacation time to go with her. He agreed eagerly and soon they were on their way across the Pacific.

Kumiko met them in Tokyo and bowed politely to Jeff, calling him Cole sensei, making him blush. As he walked in front, Yumi waggled her finger at Kumiko, and Kumiko waggled her eyebrows, making "huge" signs at Yumi, who whacked her on the arm before the both of them started to giggle. Jeff turned back to see what was happening and they giggled all the more.

When they finally got to the apartment, Yumi saw that Kumiko had switched rooms, giving her the larger space and the larger bed. "Good thing too," said Kumiko, giggling again and getting a warning look from Yumi.

While the two women took care of business, Jeff spent the next few days sightseeing around the city with a guide that Kumiko had arranged. This was Jeff's first visit to Japan and it was all a

whirl. Kumiko had even arranged for Jeff to visit the home dojo of his aikido style, where he was soundly thrashed for a couple of hours, making him grin from ear to ear. At the end of his second class, the sensei said “You are welcome back any time Jeff san, please keep up your studies in Canada.” Jeff’s head was spinning.

In the evenings, Kumiko took Yumi and Jeff out to various restaurants, and much amazement was shown by everyone at how this huge foreigner could use chopsticks so well. Yumi avoided translating such comments, but Jeff caught enough to grin anyway.

One evening as the three of them walked to the train, Jeff commented, “It’s not how well the bear can dance, it’s that he dances at all.” The two women had to stop walking they were laughing so hard, and Jeff felt he had evened the score.

The business concluded in Tokyo, the three headed to Fukuoka where Yumi very much wanted to share her home village with Jeff. She also wanted to take the train, to show Jeff more of the country.

Jeff was fascinated, both at the speed of the train and the amount of countryside. Like many, he thought that Japan was entirely covered by Tokyo. Seeing the farms and villages was a wonderful gift.

While Jeff was making marks on the window with his nose, Kumiko leaned toward Yumi and said “I have a confession to make.”

Yumi raised her eyebrows and leaned over as well.

“You know how Ohara has the habit of coming over for tea in the evening, when you or I are in the house?”

Yumi nodded.

“Well one night, I kept him there all night.”

Yumi laughed and said “I thought you might one day, didn’t I tell you so.”

“Yes, but that’s not the confession. You see, he has only a small apartment, and so, for a while now he and I have been living together in the house when I visit.”

“Oh my,” laughed Yumi “the neighbours must be scandalized.”

“Strangely enough, they seem more pleased than shocked, they tell me that it’s time Hiroshi san gets married.”

Yumi was beaming, “Good for them, and good for you. My sister, if you marry Ohara san, I will give you the house as a wedding present.”

Kumiko’s mouth dropped open and she hastily covered it with her hand. “That is too generous Tanaka san.”

“Nonsense, it looks like I will be staying in Canada and if you and Ohara san buy another house, mine will stand empty or worse, be sold. No, you will have it.”

Kumiko made to bow in her seat, but Yumi gathered her up to hug her. Jeff turned from the window and said “what’s up?”

Yumi just kissed him on the cheek and he turned back to the window.

~~

Ohara was more than a little in love with Yumi, had been since high school. When she married Shigeru, Ohara just resigned himself to being alone.

But then Yumi hired him to run the company assets in Fukuoka and even better, the Tokyo office opened and Shigeru spent his weeks there. That meant he could have tea with Yumi most weekday evenings, before going home to his cold bed.

He wasn’t bad looking, and he made good money, he just wasn’t good with women. He supposed that some day his family would arrange for him to meet some woman that another family wanted to marry off. Until then, he would enjoy what time he had with Yumi.

But then she had gone to Canada, and Kumiko had started to use the house. After a few weeks he asked if he could come for tea to discuss business. He had meant it, just business, but she was so comfortable, so easy to talk to that he found himself discussing his life as well, and hers. She was quite a girl, and his old friend, Shigeru, was much more lucky than he deserved to be, with two such wonderful women.

When Shigeru died, Ohara was devastated, instead of consoling Kumiko, she had talked on the phone to him for hours. And afterwards, after the funeral, Kumiko continued to talk to him about things other than the company. He found himself falling in love for real, not a schoolboy crush, but a deep need to see Kumiko again the moment she left for Tokyo. If only he could show her, if only he could make her see just what he felt. But he remained silent, full of wishes and dreams.

One evening, after a long talk and more tea than anyone should drink, Kumiko said “You’re not going home Hiroshi san, is there some reason for that? Is there a monster waiting under your bed?”

Ohara turned bright red and Kumiko laughed, now he was angry and he got up to leave when she put her hand on his arm and said “Sit, sit, don’t be angry, I want to ask you something.” Ohara sat and she continued, “I think there is something that we haven’t talked about, that you want to talk about.” She looked closely at his eyes and nodded. She stood up and held out her hand. “Come on then, we will discuss it in the bedroom.”

~~

Once in Fukuoka, there was a great fuss made over Yumi and her new husband. Word had got around the small village, and friends and family seemed genuinely delighted with the situation. Not a few women grabbed Jeff’s arm and had to touch his hair, and the men all punched him on the arm after shaking his hand. For his part, Jeff seemed constantly overwhelmed by the kindness.

There were many dinners, some at Yumi's house, some at restaurants and Jeff was on full display, so much so that Yumi pouted a bit to Kumiko. Kumiko laughed and told Yumi that she should not have brought such a specimen along if she wanted the attention for herself. Yumi glowed with pride, "he is amazing isn't he?"

Yumi took Jeff to a practice at her dojo, and her sensei was delighted to see her. Jeff had to practice with everyone in the dojo, finishing with the sensei.

Jeff became alarmed while practising with this man, he was pushed, literally and mentally. The sword was constantly just about to break through his defences. Several times he was sure he would be struck but he managed, just barely, to respond. At one point, his aikido training came forward and he was about to throw his weapon away and then throw the sensei to the ground.

At that exact moment the sensei's eyes narrowed and Jeff forced himself to relax and stay in the kata. With the end of that kata, the sensei called a stop, and bowed to Jeff, to finish the practice. As they rose, Jeff saw the flash of a grin and he could swear, a wink.

After he had bowed to Jeff, her sensei turned and bowed to Yumi and said "You have taught him well." Yumi blushed while Jeff stood and panted. It had been quite a workout. This one small comment was worth more to Yumi than all the rank or praise she had ever earned.

The practice was not over yet, now it was the turn of Yumi and Jeff to demonstrate. Like the partners they truly were, they showed their best. No, more than that, because of where they were, they genuinely tried to take each other's heads off. Several moves brought murmurings from the watchers, and at the end there was tremendous applause.

The sensei stood and turned to the class. "Yumi san has grown up here in our dojo, and she has learned to be as strong as any man here, just so she could keep up and practice. With this man, Jeff san, she has found a partner, a true partner who pushes her, and who can be pushed by her. This is rare. Even more rare, he is so much bigger and stronger than she, that she has had to learn the next step of her training without help from her sensei. Or should I say, with the help of a partner who represents size and strength with obvious gentleness and caring. She has truly learned how to use the jo without strength, and this is also a rare thing. I thank you, Yumi san, for showing us your skill, and for sharing your student with our group.

As for Jeff san," The sensei moved to the cupboard and brought back a plaque which he presented to Jeff. He said, through Yumi "You are welcome here any time Jeff san. Please accept this plaque, it is the name of our school and I have written it as the teacher of your teacher." Jeff bowed so low that several people laughed.

With that the sake was brought out, along with several trays of snacks. It seemed the dojo knew Yumi was coming to visit.

During the party, Yumi's sensei told her that she had done a magnificent job of teaching, and asked her to continue. He then said "He's a big one, and he seems like a keeper, I am happy for you my daughter." Yumi bowed with tears in her eyes.

That evening, Yumi and Jeff decided they had better walk off the affects of the food and the sake. Yumi took him by the hand and walked him up to the hill overlooking the town. She didn't explain what the spot meant to her, leave the past in the past, but it was still a lovely place to sit and look over the village. Jeff lay back and opened his arm. Yumi lay down beside him and rested her head on his chest.

In that moment, after the hard workout of the practice, and after the words of praise by several of the senior members of the dojo, she was truly happy. She listened to Jeff's heart beat, felt him breathe, and dropped off to a well needed nap.

There were a few more days in the village, trips to nearby attractions, and a visit to the jodo shrine where Jeff appeared to be deeply moved to see the place dedicated to his newly loved art. Of course there were days of shopping, with each and every item discussed as to where it would go in their new house. Jeff ended up with several items of Japanese country clothing and would become a minor celebrity at the University for his exotic fashion sense.

Finally, the time ran out and their visit came to an end. That last night in Fukuoka, Yumi and Jeff lay quietly in bed. Yumi listened a moment and said, "It's raining."

Jeff hugged her close and said, “Don’t get too cold.” Yumi got out of bed and walked out to the veranda to listen to the rain.

The cover photo was taken in Fukuoka, Japan. In it, are bamboo and Japanese Maple.

Very special thanks to my editor, Ron Beck for valuable help.

You will find more free books from Kim Taylor at:

Martial arts

https://sdksupplies.com/cat_manual-free-ebooks.html

Poetry, Photographs and Prose

<https://180degreeimaging.com/TaylorBooks.html>