



The train rolled into the station like a long green dragon, its clickety-clack echoing through the platform. Mitsuko's heart raced as the brakes brought the train to a halt with a loud squeal. Although she was used to the sound, it still scared her, reminding her of a tragedy.

More than a decade had passed since a tsunami hit her village near the Fukushima nuclear plant. The awful noise the sea made would not go away nor would the vision of people being dragged into the ocean by the retreating wave. Guilt at surviving still ate away inside her. What a day. Even after all that time and having moved three hundred and fifty kilometres south and away from the coast it still lingered in her mind. Her many visits to the *Jinja* to ask *the kami* who dwelt in the shrine had not helped even though she brought offerings of rice and fish. The loss of her parents and siblings on that tragic day left her with no-one close with whom to share her fear.

Mitsuko eased her way along the platform. She found a seat in the third carriage opposite a European man. The advantage of getting the train at this second stop on the line meant she would get a seat. Further on into the city it would be standing room only. With a lurch, the train set off. Fields, villages, and orchards whizzed by. The first signs of cherry blossom peaked out, awakened from their wintry slumber. Soon the train would live up to its nickname of the Cherry Blossom Special. Tourists from around

the world and all over Japan would travel the line from terminus to terminus during March and April for the spectacular displays.

Lifting a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* from her shoulder bag she opened it at the page kept by her silk bookmark. This was her second reading of the Jane Austen masterpiece in English. Her first was a long time ago at university as part of her degree. If only there could be a happy ending for her, but her Mr Darcy had yet to appear, and she was approaching thirty-five. A glance at the man opposite, whom she decided was about her own age, almost made her smile but shyness prevailed, and Japanese culture had instilled into her propriety and not to stare at strangers, particularly at such a person.

One thing was for sure, Toshiro-San was not and never would be her Mr Darcy. He was the Deputy Assistant chief of the Sako Tourist Company and her line manager with a habit of getting too close. Today he had a conference at the British Consulate and had instructed her to accompany him. He spoke good English so taking her as translator seemed superfluous except, she had an inkling why! Well, she decided he would be disappointed. Her longing for love had its limits. How to deny him was still worrying her.

A shudder and then a howling screech of metal on metal made Mitsuko drop her book, screw her eyes tight shut and grab the arm rest while her heart thumped so hard, she feared it wanted to break out of her body. A sudden loss of momentum catapulted her into the lap of the European.

Mitsuko slowly opened her eyes. *"Oh! Gomen'nasai!"*

The man blinked. "Sorry, what did you say?"

At a complete loss of how to react sitting on the man's knee she muttered: "Sorry. You're English. I said I'm sorry!"

"You're trembling? Are you all right?" The man helped her off his knee and back into her seat. He picked up her book and handed it her.

"Er. . . yes, thank you."

"Don't worry. There's probably just some technical fault. It's time they replaced this old model. Harry Carpenter. I suppose you could say we have been introduced." A laugh spread across what Mitsuko thought a kind if rather pale face.

Should she introduce herself? No, not really. She didn't know him even if she had sat on his knee!

A voice in Japanese came over the speakers in the carriage.

“What did he say?” Harry Carpenter raised his blond eyebrows.

“He said there is a fault in the braking system, and we should not be held up for long.”

“Thank you Miss. . .?”

Mitsuko lowered her eyes to her book.

A lurch and the train pulled away. Mitsuko kept her eyes down to her book for the rest of the journey now travelling much slower. It trundled into the city station twenty minutes late. Stuffing her book into her shoulder bag and offering a slight bow to the man who said his name was Harry Carpenter, she hurried from the carriage, along the platform and out onto the bustling city street.

Why oh why couldn't I talk to him? What's the matter with me? I have to stop being so. . .so. . . what? Polite? Traditional? Shy? Maybe.

“Ah there you are!” said Toshiro-San as Mitsuko hung her jacket over the back of her chair and placed her shoulder bag on her desk.

She made a slight bow. “I'm sorry I'm late. The train had brake trouble.”

“Not to worry.” He put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “We're leaving at ten. The meeting starts at eleven and may go on all day with a break for lunch. I've made arrangements for our lunch. I doubt the British one is worth having.”

Mitsuko sat in her chair, logged on to check her incoming emails, and tried not to imagine what Toshiro-San may have in mind for lunch. He had an apartment near the consulate. Why me? After nine years at the company and glowing annual appraisals from the Deputy Chief she deserved better than to be the subject of such unwanted attention from Toshiro-San. If she complained nothing would be done. In her opinion, this male dominated company like many in Japan was misogynist. Few women were in positions of authority. Perhaps the new company chief would change it as some other companies were doing but her hopes were not high. The women in the office looked to her for leadership though she held no leadership role. Perhaps they recognised hidden under her outward façade of conformity and tradition she had a rebel heart. Or more likely it was her empathy. Mitsuko wished she could unleash that rebel to talk to strangers! That morning on the train she had failed.

A glance at a digital clock on the office wall showed 09:55. Without any enthusiasm she closed her desktop, slipped on her jacket, and lifted her shoulder bag.

Toshiro-San breezed into the office. "Ready?"

Mitsuko nodded.

Her hopes that he would sit in the front of the cab were soon dashed when he climbed in the back with her 'accidentally' brushing his hand over her leg making her wish she had worn her business suit with the pants rather than the black skirt that came just above her knee.

Security at the consulate ran with quiet professionalism and soon Mitsuko and Toshiro-San were in the conference room with lots of other people; a few she recognised from their visits to her company's offices. She sniffed as an air-conditioning system pumped out a clearly artificial fragrance pretending to be cherry blossom. It irritated her nostrils.

"Take notes," said Toshiro-San guiding Mitsuko to a chair. He sat next to her with his leg against hers.

She moved her leg away and slipped a notepad from her shoulder bag. And then she saw him come to sit on the stage to the left of the lectern. The man from the train. Their eyes met. She lowered her eyes to her notepad.

The first speaker extolled the historic sites of the United Kingdom. Mitsuko had never been and imagined it may be an interesting place though she would never have enough money to go. The second extolled the virtues of cruise lines based in the UK. Harry answered questions when the speaker turned to him for help. A vacation on a cruise ship she would never have. Not with her fear of the ocean.

The British Consul brought the first session to an end and invited the delegates to lunch.

"We'll go round to my place and have something," said Toshiro-San with what he may have considered a smile but what Mitsuko regarded as a leer.

"I think we ought to join the other delegates, sir. It may not be appropriate to refuse their hospitality."

"No! No! No! I insist we go to my apartment where we can rest before the next session."

Mitsuko sucked in a deep breath. This was it! Did she have the courage to stand up for herself? Yes! She would not go with him. His intentions were clear, and he had taken advantage of other women. About to open her mouth and make a stand a voice interrupted.

“Hello again.”

“Hello!” Mitsuko found her voice. “Er. . . Harry, sorry I forgot your last name.”

“Harry Carpenter.”

“Mr Carpenter this is Toshiro-San the deputy assistant chief of my company.”

Harry made a slight bow. Toshiro-San returned it losing inscrutability and replacing it with a glare.

“Mr Carpenter, I’m so looking forward to seeing what you British provide for lunch,” said Mitsuko surprising herself at her sudden influx of confidence or was it self preservation against her boss?

“Then I would be most honoured if you would both join me,” said Harry.

“I’m so sorry,” said Toshiro-San. “We have a previous engagement.”

Mitsuko gave him a slight bow. “You don’t really need me for that appointment Toshiro-San. Thank you Mr Carpenter I would be delighted to join you for lunch.”

They left Toshiro standing in the conference room. The twitch under his left eye that appeared when he was angry was volcanic. Mitsuko expected retribution but not here. Today was Friday so he would wait until he had her in the office on Monday. And a strange thing happened. She didn’t care!

As they strolled through the corridors of the impressive building Harry said: “You still haven’t told me your name.”

“Mitsuko Watanabe.”

“Hello Mitsuko Watanabe.”

“Hello Harry Carpenter!” Mitsuko couldn’t help but smile.

A buffet awaited the guests in a dining room with portraits of Queen Elizabeth II and King Charles III and a grand chandelier hanging from a ceiling painted like the Sistine chapel. Mitsuko had only seen photographs of Michelangelo’s masterpiece in brochures she prepared for tourists visiting Italy.

“What is this?” said Mitsuko after swallowing a piece of sausage roll.

“Sausage roll. Do you like it?”

“Erm. . .”

Harry laughed.

“So, what do you do, Mitsuko? Is it all right if I call you Mitsuko?”

“Yes, you may. I’m a translator at our company’s main office. Sako Travel if you know it.”

“Yes, I know it. You arrange visits for our cruise ships.”

“And what is your role?”

“I work for Seascope Cruising. They sent me here to check on our systems to make sure we are providing a quality service to our customers at a competitive price.”

“But you don’t speak Japanese.”

“Actually, I do. That’s why they sent me. I did Economics and Japanese at university.”

“Oh. I thought you didn’t speak the language after the train incident.”

“I confess. You’ve caught me out. I asked you to translate because I wanted an excuse to talk to you.”

“And I didn’t.”

“No. I got the message when you went back to your book but I’m glad you are talking to me now.”

Mitsuko may have found her confidence after defying Toshiro-San, but she still blushed. The lunch was all too quickly over. Harry escorted her back to the conference room.

“How long will you be in Japan?”

Harry shook his head. “I’m not sure how long it will take me to complete the project.”

“And then you go back to England?”

“Probably not. Another posting to somewhere our cruise ships visit.”

“It must be fascinating visiting other countries. I only see them in brochures.”

“You should take one of our cruises. I could get you a good deal. The Mediterranean is a great place to cruise with so many historical sites and culture to enjoy.”

“I don’t think I would like a cruise.”

“Oh! Why?”

“I think I had better go to my seat. Toshiro-San is staring at me.”

Harry Carpenter took his seat on the stage while Mitsuko with great effort managed to avoid showing her reluctance as she sat next to Toshiro-San. He huffed but said nothing and didn’t try to put his leg against hers. The volcano had subsided but still twitched.

Two speakers droned away on stage, but Mitsuko was far away in her head. Not in the trauma of the tsunami but sitting under the cherry blossom in her garden.

A man came on stage and whispered in Harry’s ear. Harry moved off stage in a hurry.

Mitsuko woke early on Saturday even though there was no need to get ready for work. Outside a Japanese bush warbler sang to a potential mate somewhere nearby. It made her smile and wonder if it was happy like her. Spring had arrived. The feeling of amazement at her performance yesterday remained in the form a warm glow. Could she really shake off her shyness and the doom that resided deep within her from the tsunami disaster? Perhaps today was a new beginning!

With her breakfast of grilled sea bream, rice and nori, Mitsuko took her plate out to her small, enclosed garden to enjoy the bright though chilly morning. The cherry tree she planted five years ago had grown to almost two metres. More sheltered than its cousins out in the orchards, the tree was already a riot of pink blossom. As she sat on the single chair at her marble topped table for one, she gazed at the blossom and imagined the *kami* who may live in the tree. She liked to think her parents and siblings inhabited this tree or ones like it.

The bush warbler still sang his sweet tune though he hid from view.

Her breakfast finished she leaned back in her chair and contemplated what had happened on the train and then at the consulate. What did she really feel about Harry Carpenter? Well, she wasn’t sure. Certainly, he was an attractive man and had an affable manner. But he was English and so different from her own culture.

After carrying her plate into her small kitchen, she sat at her electronic piano, put on her headphones so she wouldn't disturb the bush warbler's attempts at finding a mate and to not annoy the neighbours, she played her second favourite piece; Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 2.

Mitsuko rolled off her *tatami* mat and *shikifuton* mattress and pulled open the sliding door that led to the garden. The bush warbler sang his song making her wonder how long he would keep it up. And then she realised he would keep going until he won his mate. Would that someone would pursue me with such ardour, she mused. She filled her lungs with the fresh air of morning and the scent from her cherry tree so different from what came out of the air-conditioning at the consulate. Mondays usually came round too quickly for Mitsuko. Not this Monday. Would she see Harry Carpenter on the train? She hoped so. He hadn't come back to the conference room after leaving so abruptly and she hadn't seen him again.

With its clickety clack, clickety clack the train matched Mitsuko's heartbeat but not from fear. With a tinge of apprehension and huge dose of hope she boarded the third carriage. Harry Carpenter sat in the same seat he occupied on Friday.

Don't be too obviously happy to see him. Keep it cool. Remember propriety, said the little voice in her head. Oh, shut up!

"Good morning, Mitsuko!" Harry stood and made a slight bow.

"Good morning, Harry." Mitsuko returned the bow and took her seat opposite with an imagined gag around the little voice.

"Sorry I missed you on Friday. Emergency on one of our ships. Someone had a heart attack and I had to arrange to have him collected by helicopter and flown to hospital. Everyone had left when I got back."

"Oh! Is he all right?"

"I believe so."

"Do you take this train every day?"

"Most days. Sometimes I must stay in the city overnight if I have a late meeting or an early one the next morning."

Pride and Prejudice stayed in Mitsuko's shoulder bag as she enjoyed a conversation about literature and Japanese art. The orchards had a little more blossom on this sunny day.

After she parted from Harry at the terminal she strolled along the busy street to her office with a smile and a spring in her step. Whatever Toshiro-San had in mind for her she knew she could cope.

Taking her place at her workstation she logged on to her desktop. A glance around the open plan office failed to locate Toshiro-San.

Time ticked by on the office clock. Still no sign of Toshiro-San. The sooner he came and berated her about what he probably thought was her disgraceful behaviour in going to lunch with the foreigner rather than himself, the better to get it over with.

She looked up to see the new chief's secretary coming through the office heading in her direction. Mitsuko's heart gave a little flutter of apprehension.

"The chief wants to see you, now, Mitsuko."

"Oh!" Mitsuko stood, slipped on her jacket, and followed the secretary to the stairs and up to the next floor. "Why does he want to see me?"

"Don't know."

But Mitsuko had an idea. Toshiro-San would have done something to show her in a bad light or accused her of impropriety. The hypocrisy!

Both the chief and the deputy chief sat in a plush office with an *ikebana* display on a black lacquered chest under a wide window. As a teenager, Mitsuko had taken lessons in *ikebana*, the Japanese art of flower decoration that emphasizes the simplicity, balance, and harmony with nature. She expected no harmony in the next few minutes. Where was Toshiro-San?

"Come in, sit down Mitsuko," said the Deputy Chief. He pointed to an antique chair to the side of a grand desk.

Mitsuko sat and put her hands in her lap. No histrionics, she would listen to their tirade and let it drift over her head. Just like her visits to the dentist, she would let her mind drift away to sit under her cherry tree.

“I have reports about you,” said the chief.

Mitsuko made no reply. She was far away offering food to the *kami* who lived in her tree.

“So, there is the matter of Toshiro-San,” said the deputy.

Still Mitsuko sat quietly.

“For reasons I do not wish to disclose, Toshiro-San has been dismissed from the company with immediate effect,” said the chief.

That brought Mitsuko back from her garden and into the room. “Oh!”

“We have many good reports about your work here. It has been noticed how you help other employees, particularly but not only the female ones,”

“I don’t know why but they come to me,” said Mitsuko.

“Because you have something that marks you out. You have empathy Mitsuko, and that is in short supply these days or in the old days to be honest,” said the deputy.

“There is a dreadful shortage of women managers in this company and others,” said the chief.

Mitsuko wondered what was happening. She had come into the office expecting at best to be harangued and at worst to be dismissed.

“I have discussed you with the chief and we have agreed that we would like you to replace Toshiro-San as the Deputy Assistant Chief, if you are willing to accept the position,” said the deputy chief.

Mitsuko could not help her mouth dropping open in surprise.

“Please understand we are not promoting you because you are a woman. You have been chosen because you are the right person for the job,” said the chief.

At a loss what to say, she managed: “Thank you.”

“We are trying to improve equality in the company, so your salary will be the same as Toshiro-San received,” said the chief.

Mitsuko carried out a quick maths calculation in her head. More than twice her current salary!

Clickety clack, clickety clack the train came to halt with a squeal of brakes but this time it rekindled no fears.

He was on the train.

“I’ve been promoted!”

“Really, that’s good news.”

“Yes, the man I was with at the consulate, Toshiro-San, he’s been fired. I don’t know why. They have given me his job. I’m now the deputy assistant chief.”

“Congratulations!”

On Wednesday and Thursday that week she met Harry on the train. He told her all about his travels raising a desire to see more of the world now she had the income to allow her foreign holidays.

On Friday morning he sat in his usual place.

“I must stay overnight in the city. I have a meeting with staff very early tomorrow so I will be staying in a hotel.”

“You have to work Saturdays?”

“Cruise ships don’t take a day off!”

“Oh, poor you.”

“I was wondering if you would like to have dinner with me this evening if you don’t have to rush back home.”

“Nothing to hurry home to. Yes, I would like to have dinner with you.”

“I will be staying at the Johinna. Do you know it?”

“I know of it. It’s very expensive. Some of the VIPs who use our company stay there.”

“One of the perks of my position. The company pays! I’ll meet you in the roof-top bar at say eight, is that okay?”

“Yes.”

Mitsuko parted from Harry at the station. The train, she knew, would go on to the coast. Someday, she hoped, she would take the train all the way to the coast to see if she could finally rid herself of her fears. So much had happened to her recently. It had to be possible.

For most of the morning she fretted about what to wear for her dinner date. Was Harry just a friend or was there something more? Mitsuko wasn't sure. He was a nice guy but was a romance with him likely or even wanted by her, or by him? She could not make up her mind.

Taking advantage of the lunch break and the prospect of her next month's salary being far more than her previous one, she toured the downtown shopping area and found a modest black cocktail dress. The afternoon dragged.

A commissioner in a long brown coat and peaked cap greeted her at the revolving glass doors of the Johinna Hotel. Butterflies took off in her tummy as she saw the elevator and stepped out towards it with a click of her heels on the hard floor.

"Good evening, may I say how good you look." Harry slipped off a bar stool to make a slight bow.

He looked handsome in his dark blue jacket and his light blue pants that Mitsuko saw were the same colour as his eyes.

"Good evening, Harry."

He led her to an alcove, summoned a waiter and ordered a bottle of champagne.

"You do drink champagne?" said Harry as the waiter trundled off towards the bar.

"Not often." Mitsuko felt her hands clammy. Something wasn't right. Why was he trying to impress her so much? This hotel was way outside her comfort zone, and she knew enough to realise that a bottle of champagne here could cost more than an office worker's weekly pay if it were vintage.

"You all right?" said Harry.

"Yes, just a little tired after a long day at the office."

She glanced over at woman in a red silk dress who had taken a seat at the bar. Why was she glaring at Harry?

“So, what is it like being a boss now, Mitsuko?”

“I like it. I have more of a say in how the office works and I’m better equipped now to help the staff.”

“They are lucky to have you.”

“Thank you. Harry, I think that woman at the bar has a problem with you.”

He shook his head. “Don’t know her.”

The champagne arrived. With a flamboyant gesture the waiter popped the cork, poured a little into a flute for Harry to approve and then filled two.

“Well, here’s to your climb up the greasy pole,” said Harry raising his glass.

The phrase wasn’t lost on Mitsuko, but she raised hers too.

Over many delicate and delicious courses Mitsuko still had a feeling that something was not right.

“I’ve been transferred. I’m off to Athens on Sunday. I need to hand things over to my replacement tomorrow.”

“Oh!” So that is why he is different tonight.

I’ll miss our conversations on the train,” said Harry.

“Me too.”

The meal over, Harry said: “We can finish with a coffee in my room if you wish.”

And there it was. In my limited experience a man invites you to his bedroom for only one reason, she mused. And Mitsuko was tempted. But then she shook her head. There was no future with Harry Carpenter. Just one night.

“Thank you but I must go. I must catch the last train.”

“Oh! Are you sure? I don’t expect I will see you again.”

“Probably we won’t meet again but I wish you good fortune.”

“If you ever decide to take a cruise. Contact me through Seascape Cruising.”

“Thank you for the dinner.” She kissed him on the cheek and walked out of the hotel wondering if she had made the right decision.

Outside on the sidewalk with the city’s neon lights flashing and traffic hurrying by she dithered. A one-night stand? It was something she had never done before. What kind of woman would I be if I did go back and spend the night with him? Why didn’t he try harder to get me to go to his room? Such a gentleman. I can’t blame him for trying and I respect him for not pressing me. For goodness sake you know you want to go back! Go! The little voice in her head piped up.

So, she walked back into the hotel, took the elevator up to the roof top bar and saw Harry sitting in the alcove where they had been before dinner. Now he was with the woman she saw at the bar glaring at him. She was laughing, drinking champagne and up close to him. He had his arm around shoulders.

Mitsuko turned and left thankful that they had not seen her.

On Sunday she decided to take the Cherry Blossom Special all the way to the coast. It was time to face her fears about the ocean and the only way she could do that was by going there. Much to her surprise she did not feel upset at what happened at the hotel.

Boarding the train, she sat in her usual seat with an empty one facing her. Now the cherry orchards were in full bloom. She took her *Pride and Prejudice* from her shoulder bag. At the city station she stayed on the train. Many more people filled the carriage with a mother, father and child taking the seats opposite Mitsuko. Oohs and ahhs came from the passengers as the train clackety-clacked through the orchards.

At last, it arrived at the coast.

With her hands clammy and butterflies in her tummy she made her way to the seaside and found a bench facing out over the beach to the sea. A few white horses crested the small waves bringing the tang of salt to Mitsuko’s lips. What a difference to the tsunami that had taken so much from her.

Sitting with her book open in her lap she looked out to sea. Were her parents and siblings out there as *kami* now? A feeling of calm spread over Mitsuko. Her fear had gone as if carried away on the breeze.

“Mitsuko? Mitsuko Watanabe?” said a voice.

She looked up to see a man standing by the bench. Did she know him? She didn't think so. And then he smiled. A smile with a slight gap between his two front teeth. He was a lot older than the last time she saw him.

"Kaito?"

"Yes."

"I haven't seen you since you went to university. I'm so sorry about your parents. I was with your sister at the refuge centre after the tsunami."

"I remember her telling me. You lost your parents, your brother and two sisters."

"Yes, I don't know how I survived. I can't remember how, and I don't want to."

"My sister was lucky being further away when it struck. Sorry, if talking about this brings back such bad memories."

"I have to face it. This is the first time I have been to the ocean since it happened. I want to overcome my fears."

"I can't imagine what you went through. I was at uni when it happened. I came back and everything was gone."

Kaito sat on the bench.

To change the subject Mitsuko said: "Look at you now! You were a horrible and annoying child! You put a frog down the back of my dress, and I got into trouble from the teacher for screaming!"

"And you didn't tell on me."

"I'm not a snitch!"

Mitsuko thought back over the years to when they were teenagers. Kaito was the first boy she kissed. There were others since but not many.

"So, do you have a family, Kaito?"

He took the book from Mitsuko's lap and turned it over in his hands. "No, I'm waiting for my Elizabeth Bennett to come along."