

From After the Earthquake

Those on the twenty-ninth floor had to wait forty minutes before they could begin their descent. The stairs were thronged with people from the floors above.

Ikuko's legs were wobbly, her stomach queasy. Motion sickness. She needed the support of the banister as she made her way down. Sometimes she thought the building had begun to sway again, but it hadn't. The swaying came from inside herself.

'Ichi, ni, san, shi.' *One, two, three, four.* The voice was young and male.

'Go, roku, shichi, hachi.' *Five, six, seven, eight.* A chorus of office ladies sang in response.

'Ichi, ni, san, shi.' The young man.

'Go, roku, shichi, hachi.' The OLs.

'Ichi, ni, san, shi.'

'Go, roku, shichi, hachi.'

'Cut it out,' roared a man a few steps behind Ikuko.

The OLs giggled but quit their chanting. Ikuko kept up the singsong silently. It carried her along on the way down.

Outside it was cold. Ikuko was glad of her woollen coat. Those on the lower floors, those who had evacuated earliest, were in their shirtsleeves, shivering. Ikuko wondered if Takeshi was among them. He worked on the third floor. She roamed around the edge of the crowd, looking for him. She imagined he might be looking for her too.

Then she spotted him. He was chatting to a couple of OLs, each one as young and pretty as he was. He turned and saw her.

'Ikuko san, are you all right?'

In his voice she detected only friendly concern. There was none of the deep yearning that she felt. He was not yet thirty. Ikuko was forty-five, an old lady to him.

'I'm fine,' she told him, before rejoining her co-workers.

Lauren said that Ikuko was not really in love with Takeshi. She was merely infatuated with him. Ikuko did not understand the distinction. At night she bid Takeshi enter her dreams. And the fantasy she had built around him was better than any reality she had ever known.

Still, maybe Lauren had a point, because when Ikuko was cowering under her desk praying for the world to stop shaking, it was not Takeshi who had come into her mind, but Morioka san. That must mean something.

Morioka san, with his receding hairline, hooded eyes and heavy jowls. She would marry him if he was still interested.

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An elderly German couple were the only other customers at the restaurant at Coral Garden Villas. The elegantly dressed waiting staff in their sarongs and lacy blouses outnumbered the diners. Francesca would have preferred somewhere more casual, somewhere that made this dinner seem less like a date.

Over dinner Greg told her about his home in Auckland, his second house in the Bay of Islands, his teenage son, 'a great kid', his ex-wife with whom he remained good friends, his extremely successful recruitment firm that 'ran itself these days' because Greg had done such a good job choosing and training his staff that he could now delegate the entire operation.

Poor Greg. Francesca thought he must be quite insecure if he needed to boast so much, his sense of self all bound up in his achievements and his property. Good thing her self-worth was not connected to her possessions. The most expensive thing she owned was the MacBook Air she'd treated herself to at Christmas.

Greg ordered a fish curry. Apparently his ex-girlfriend couldn't eat spicy food, but he liked hot dishes himself. He had mentioned the ex-girlfriend, Joanna, earlier as well. Francesca surmised that the break-up was recent, the wound still raw. Underneath the swagger, he was fragile.

They were having dessert before he got around to asking Francesca about herself.

‘So what is it that you do in Sardinia?’ he asked.

‘I don’t do anything in Sardinia,’ she replied. ‘I live in Tokyo.’

‘Tokyo, Japan?’

Her mouth full of black rice pudding, Francesca nodded. She hadn’t heard of a Tokyo anywhere else.

‘So what is it you do in Japan?’

‘I teach Italian,’ she said.

‘Really? There is a demand for Italian lessons in Tokyo?’

‘After English, it’s the most popular European language.’

‘Who’d have thought ... Wasn’t there an earthquake or tsunami or something in Japan recently?’

‘Both. And a nuclear meltdown.’

He winced. She wondered if he was remembering his tsunami quip earlier. Not that he needed to feel embarrassed; she had not been in the path of the tsunami. She had watched it on television like everyone else in the world.

‘When was that? A year ago? Eighteen months?’

‘Six months ago,’ she said. ‘It was in March.’

‘Were you affected by that at all?’

Because she hadn’t lost her home, her job or any loved ones, Francesca usually said no, when people asked her this question. But she had been affected and she continued to be affected. The aftershocks were frequent and each one terrified her. And then there was the strange phenomenon of the phantom earthquakes; imagining the ground was moving when it wasn’t. And she didn’t sleep like she used to.

‘Sì,’ she said, ‘a little.’

Guilt was another effect, guilt that she had been relatively unaffected. To assuage the guilt, she had been spending her weekends packing boxes of relief supplies to be sent to the affected area. And in August, she and Alessandro had gone to Tohoku with a small group of volunteers. There she had unloaded boxes at one of the relief centres. Handling boxes was the only thing she was qualified to do. Alé had shovelled mud from out of homes to make them habitable once more.

The earthquake had had a strange effect on Alessandro. Suddenly he wanted to marry her. They weren't even living together. And although they'd been lovers for several years, she'd never expected a proposal of marriage from him. She'd always assumed she'd lose him someday to a Japanese temptress.

After dinner, Greg and Francesca moved on to a bar that Francesca had spotted while exploring Lipah earlier in the evening. The only bar in the neighbourhood, it opened onto the roadside. A high, exposed thatched roof gave the place an airy feel. The billboard outside advertised live music tonight. The band was just setting up, but quite a crowd had gathered already.

They sat at the bar. And because Greg had insisted on paying for dinner, Francesca insisted on getting the beers.

'Japan is a fascinating country,' Greg said.

Francesca agreed that it was.

'I heard that pay rises and promotions in Japanese companies depend not on merit, but on the age of the employee, how long he has been with the company and whether or not he is married.'

'Si. I think so, in the traditional companies.'

'Extraordinary. No wonder the country is in a slump.'

Francesca hated the way so many Westerners hastened to find fault with the Japanese way of doing business. Japan was a wealthy country. Its citizens enjoyed a high standard of living. It must be doing something right.

'There are advantages to the Japanese way, no? Less friction between colleagues, less office politics than in Western companies.' She wished she knew more about business management so as to be able to argue more effectively. 'And if employees are paid according to their needs, then it could be better for society, no?'

'To each according to his needs? You are sounding like a communist, young lady.'

Young lady? Greg was beginning to irritate her. 'I'm not a communist, Greg. I'm an egalitarian, and Japan has quite an egalitarian society, and I think that's a good thing.'

'Well, I couldn't disagree with you there, but I do think that companies need to reward merit. Otherwise ...'

Francesca switched off. She heard someone speaking Japanese

behind her.

‘Nani o nomitai?’ *What would you like to drink?*

She turned to see a man in his fifties trying to catch the barman’s attention, bushy eyebrows and fleshy jowls. His wife looked younger, mid-forties perhaps. Pleasantly plump, her round face was framed by a neat bob.

‘Nihon-jin desu ka?’ *Are you Japanese?* she asked them.

‘Wa! Nihongu jyosu!’ *Your Japanese is very good,* the man said.

Francesca smiled. Japanese people always praised her Japanese even when she only uttered a couple of words in the language. So nice to be talking to people from her adopted homeland. They introduced themselves – Mr and Mrs Morioka. They were Tokyoites too. They lived in Meguro-ku, they told her.

‘Go shujin was nihongo dekinai?’ *Can’t your husband speak Japanese?* Morioka san asked.

‘Shujin ja nai desu yo.’ *He is not my husband.* ‘Kinoo atta hito desu.’ *He is someone I met yesterday.*

Francesca introduced Greg. The Moriokas bowed low and then, remembering Western custom, shook hands with the Kiwi.

‘Come sit together,’ Morioka san said and led the way to a nearby table.

Even though Morioka san didn’t speak the language very well, for Greg’s sake, the conversation proceeded in English. Ikuko spoke fluently. She had studied in the States for a couple of years in her youth.

‘Where are you staying?’ Francesca asked.

‘Hillside Villas.’

‘Me too.’

‘It’s a small world,’ Ikuko said.

The music started up. Ikuko pulled Francesca to the dance floor. Greg joined them there, leaving Morioka san sipping his beer at their table.

A handsome Balinese boy began dancing opposite Francesca. Dark glossy hair; strong, broad shoulders; his body muscular, yet slender; he smiled and revealed a set of even white teeth. He moved closer to Francesca. He spoke some words in her ear. She didn’t catch them. She mouthed ‘what?’ and lent towards him. He was bending his head to repeat his words when suddenly Greg stuck himself between them. The boy raised his hands as if in surrender and backed away.

‘Oh, Greg.’ Francesca slapped her forehead. ‘You scared him away.’ She fell against his shoulder in mock despair.

‘I thought he was bothering you,’ Greg said.

‘Bothering me?’ She reached her hand out in the direction the Adonis had vanished. ‘He’s beautiful.’

‘You weren’t interested in him?’

‘No, Greg, no. I have a boyfriend.’ She shouted to be heard over the music.

‘You have a boyfriend? In Japan?’

‘Sì, sì. Alé is in Tokyo.’

Francesca thought she saw disappointment flitter across Greg’s face. He hardly thought she would be interested in him. He was twenty years her senior. Well, maybe not twenty, but at least fifteen. His spindly legs sticking out from under his shorts, his paunch and his thinning hair did nothing to excite her desire.

When would she learn? She should have made a point of mentioning Alessandro sooner. She should have made it clear that dinner wasn’t going to lead anywhere.