

A Family Matter

November, 2008

“It’s like little America there.”

Jonathan’s words from the bar in Tokyo two months ago echoed in every corner of Carl’s head. Snowflakes clumped onto Carl’s eyelashes like cheap mascara, refusing to melt with body heat.

Carl looked down at his hands, making sure that they were still gripping the steering wheel of the snow plough the size of an elephant. His hands, though covered with industrial-grade gloves, struggled to feel.

As he shoveled boulder-sized deposits of snow, his mind settled on his beautiful children. They were with his wife Rumi and in-laws Mariko and Seita in temperate Tokyo wondering where their father went. Occasionally, they spoke to him on the phone, but more often than not the kids were fast asleep by the time he called Rumi.

For now, or at least this is what he is telling himself, Carl makes a living shoveling snow for Japanese hoteliers in the sleepy ski-town of Niseko, nestled in Hokkaido prefecture. At night, he crawled from bar to bar, hoping to find a job he can be proud of.

Back in Tokyo, Henry and Shelly bothered their mother with questions about their absent father.

“When can we see him again?”

“What is he doing?”

“Why doesn’t he live with us anymore?”

To these questions, Rumi smiled and handed them a Nintendo DS. Rumi loved Carl. What Rumi did not admit to herself nor anyone else, however, is that she did not fully trust Carl. He told her that in Niseko, he would become a real estate agent. He had little knowledge of professional Japanese, nor could he read or write. Worrying about potential earnings was too tasking, though, because her kids were so young. So, she had a blind trust; it was easier this way. This is love. As Shelly and Henry giggled and started toward the living room, their grandmother Mariko called them over. She placed a piece of chocolate in each of their hands, and a kiss on their foreheads. They said thank you and ran towards the couch, already forgetting their mature queries and silently fiddled with their devices.

November, 2015

I.

They asked me, “Grandma, When can we see him again?”

“Grandma. What is he doing?”

I told them he will be home soon. The moon was unusually bright tonight. It had been four days since Shelly and Henry had seen their father. The kids decided to wait for him to come home so they could surprise him. Last night, their light was on at midnight, hours past their bedtime. I didn't say anything. Their bedroom was in the basement of the hostel that we run and live in. Many years ago, Carl heard about this town from one of his friends. His friend described it as a “Little America, where you don't need Japanese.”

I found this statement perplexing. Why move to Japan, marry a Japanese woman, then decide to move to a town in Japan that is advertised by other foreigners to their foreign friends as

a town that requires no knowledge of Japanese? This idea was silly at first; there seemed no way that such a town could exist in Japan. How wrong I was! Here, I was a foreigner. Here, I did not speak the unofficial language of English. What a peculiar situation I'd gotten myself into. Seita and I only moved here with Rumi's family because we were growing old, our dreams already achieved. Seita was also ill. Since Rumi and Carl had decided to move here, in order to ensure some care into retirement, we followed them. In exchange for care, I would work at the hostel and watch the grandchildren while their parents worked.

Seasonal foreign skiers who the local Japanese call *gaijin*, Japanese farmer families, and foreign men with Japanese wives and mixed families made up this town. It was a small town, with 5,000 permanent residents. Most of the residents dressed functionally to protect themselves from the harsh and exceptionally long winter season. Rumi told me that whenever I am seen at the local convenience store, I am noted for my metropolitan fashion sense. Bold colors, stripes, floral, dark makeup, and Italian designer bags. When I first moved to Niseko, I wore my fur coats and Hermes bags which reminded me of my past life in Tokyo. Rumi was embarrassed by this, though she never told me directly. She would come home and tell me that the local farmers call me "flashy auntie." Rumi owned a cleaning business, and most of her employees were daughters and mothers of farmer families who sought seasonal work, for work on the farms was limited in the winter. To Rumi's luck, winter was the busiest season. Now, I dressed in my uniform of black trousers and cashmere sweaters.

"Grandma, look!" Shelly pointed to the right side of her bed, now stained with the soy sauce that the fish had marinated in. As a gift to her father, Shelly had saved a piece of fish from

her dinner. The smell of soy sauce conquered the room, neglecting not even the messiest corners littered with dolls, trains, clothes, and books.

I looked over at my grandchildren, perched on the black leather sofa coated in old scratches from past homes and beloved pets. They dressed in color combinations that, if we lived in Tokyo, I would never abuse my children with. Here, no one cares.

The orange light from the sun setting battled the white reflection of the snow, and together, they created a symphony of foggy blues and pinks. This was my favorite time of day. The two screens on the device lit up Henry and Shelly's face. I watched them as they contorted their glowing faces, legs sprawled across the old leather..

I began preparing dinner. An hour earlier, Shelly and Henry returned from school on the bus, and I fixed them fruit. Tonight, we had nine guests, myself, two grandchildren, and my daughter and her husband. The produce I ordered by phone the day before had just arrived. The vegetables here were so fresh, often there remained bits of dirt. Every week, I looked forward to perusing the local catalog distributed by local farmers, all in Japanese. There were images of the produce accompanied by bold fonts advertising their low prices in bright reds and yellows. The ink of the catalog sometimes transferred onto my fingertips. I carried the delivery up the stairs, ignoring the sharp pain in my knees, into the kitchen and opened the box. It is filled to the brim with potatoes, *shiso*, an assortment of different radishes, lotus root, garlic, carrots, and filets of the finest yellowtail in all of Hokkaido. I cherished making dinner for my guests and my family.

It was nothing new for me. Back in Tokyo, my husband and I ran a boarding house-style motel for local construction workers. On busy days, we had 40 guests, and despite the numbers, I

always prepared the finest dinners for them. We could afford it, and more importantly it was a clever advertisement for my motel. Construction men returned from work exhausted, so much so that even a simple bowl of rice would taste like a gourmet meal.

Our motel became known throughout construction worker networks as cheap lodging with fantastic meals. I looked forward to the waves of compliments about dinner as I walked into the dining room after the men had finished their dinners to collect dishes.

“*Oka-san!*” they would call me, “tonight’s dinner was so wonderful. I cannot wait for my next job in Chiba, just so I can taste your food one more time.” Faces red from beer, the inhales of cigarettes punctuated their sentences. The guests never skipped a meal during their stay, and sometimes their stays spanned over five months.

In time, we sold the motel for lower than the market rate. Carl needed fast cash to purchase the hostel we would soon call home. Seita, perhaps in an illness-induced insane state of mind, agreed to help his daughter. The motel was sold, most of the things I’d collected for 40 years tossed into a landfill, and the motel, our home where I raised my two beautiful daughters, was demolished.

They spoke to me through their facial expressions, making gestures with their hands. They were naturals at this exaggerated way of communicating. I could not understand their words. I gathered that they were communicating to me that they enjoyed their authentic Japanese meal. Tonight’s main dish was yellowtail filets cooked in a strongly flavored sauce with sake, soy sauce, and sugar. To prepare this, you must boil the fish until it is bone white, prepare the sauce, then cook the boiled fish in the sauce. The flavors are not too unique. I must be careful

with what I chose to prepare; sometimes, the foreigners did not appreciate the unique taste of our more traditional dishes. This yellowtail, however, has never failed me; old and young, foreign and Japanese adored it. I nodded at their praise, and my glasses slide down the bridge of my nose. I told them in my broken English thank you, and let out a laugh.

“See you to-mo-ro!” I said to the nice couple, almost in a sing-song tone, and watched them walk down the stairs to their room. I collected the dishes and quickly set the table for my family. We waited to enjoy our meal until the guests retired to their rooms.

“Grandma, is there more *buri*?” Henry asked me in Japanese. His button eyes rimmed with thick lashes rested in the sea of his porcelain skin. He was big for his age. His Japanese was stronger than his English, thanks to my taking care of him since his birth ten years ago as his parents worked. I knew Carl resented me for this, though he never said this to me directly. I was lucky that Carl did not have enough money to move his family back to New Zealand, where Henry and his five-year-old Shelly would forget Japanese, and eventually, forget me. Carl was stuck here. He simply had no money. He had drive, and ambition, but executed his ideas with little to no rationality. His ideas were big and charming when Rumi first brought him to meet me, but his ideas existed in the clouds, and Carl did not have a ladder, or a plane, to come close to touching them.

Thirty minutes into the meal, the sound of tires crunching snow interrupted us. Shelley stuffed the last piece of yellowtail in her mouth along with a few strands of her long, curly brown hair and jumped out of the chair and ran to the window.

“Daddy!” she screamed, still chewing the yellowtail, her breath fogging the window which I cleaned earlier that day. Carl entered the house, and dragged his feet up the stairs. His children greeted him at the top of the stairwell with kisses and hugs though he was still wearing a large, black, waterproofed winter coat. I never received the same response from the children.

“Eat dinner next to me daddy!” Shelly screamed to Carl, still not able to calm her excitement. For once, Carl was actually home, almost on time for dinner. Rumi, seated on the other side of the table next to the window, took a silent sip of beer.

“How are you kids?” Carl asked as he unzipped his wet coat and threw it onto the sofa. He revealed a cheap, baggy suit underneath. They told him about their day at school, the bus ride, and how one of Shelly’s classmates was moving to Hong Kong at the end of the month. Or I assumed this is what she told him. Rumi and I had already heard about their days at the beginning of dinner. This conversation already happened and must be repeated because Carl was late to dinner. When Shelly speaks English, her mouth struggles to make the right shape in order to pronounce the words like a fluent speaker. Like a protective mother, her native Japanese is not letting her adapt fully to her new language yet.

“Carl,” I called his name, “*otsukare*” I tell him, a Japanese platitude for giving appreciation to a person who has just finished the working day.

“I’ve prepared dinner for you,” I said in Japanese, and I motioned to his place next to Shelly. He paused. He looked at the fish, and told me “no, thank you, I am stuffed.” Carl refused the meal, and the others continued. I cannot remember the last time Carl ate my food with the rest of our family but nonetheless, I offered him dinner every evening. Henry worked on his

second filet of yellowtail. I distributed Carl's harmoniously arranged food onto everyone else's dishes, and later it was mindlessly consumed by Rumi and her children.

II.

"I hired a couple from New Zealand to help out with the hostel, *oka-san*, so that the work is not too burdensome for you," Carl informed me. He appeared from nowhere into my sight. I continued to fold his laundry, chipping away at the large mountain of clothes beside me. Two weeks ago, Seita had another stroke. He was hospitalized for three days, but recovered quickly and came home where he prefers to be. I had not spoken to Carl since the stroke, and work had only gotten more tiresome on top of attending to my sick husband.

At the hospital, I gasped audibly, so much so that the nurse jolted her head in my direction. The problem was with the cost on the receipt. Never in my time living in Niseko had the bill been so steep. I could not afford this with cash or a card. I called Rumi to ask her why the bill was so high, assuming she would know what happened, and how to fix it.

"We stopped paying for father's insurance," she informed me. We? I was under the impression it was *her* money. Why must she insist that Carl had any part in providing for this family?

"I am sorry you had to find out this way." Her sentences were unembellished. To the point. All of her sentences were without imagination; Carl had a monopoly on imagination.

Panic infected my entire body. From the permed, white, three-inch locks on my head down to my toes. It was so overwhelming that for a moment I forgot the pain in my knees. Rumi explained to me that she and Carl had realized that the amount of money they had paid for Seita's

insurance over the years living in Niseko had broken even with the money that Seita and myself had lent Carl in order to purchase the hostel when they had first moved to Niseko. The motel money. According to her logic, which I am sure was entirely the work of Carl, it was no longer justifiable or sustainable for Carl to support a family along with paying for Seita's insurance. I knew, however, that Rumi was the breadwinner in that family. It was her money that paid for the children's education, food, expensive extra-curricular skiing for sport, and Seita's insurance.

I could not speak to Rumi. I hung up the phone. I paced around in the waiting room, the nurse still watching me with the bill on the counter. The insurance that Rumi paid usually covered hospital costs. I had to think quickly. I ran to my car, sat in the driver's seat with my coat still on, damp from the perpetual shower of snow, and wept silently.

I called my daughter Emi. She was more sympathetic than Rumi, perhaps because she had been a homemaker since the birth of her first daughter. Work strips women of sympathy. At least that was the case with Rumi. Once a year, Emi and her family would visit us in Niseko. I keep my makeup on for longer than usual when I expect a call from her, looking forward to hearing her voice especially when the moon shines onto the snow-covered mountain, making the night sky so bright I cannot sleep. Emi answered after the first ring. I explained to her the situation, and she somehow sent me enough money from New York City to pay the bill, at least for this time.

Emi called me after I successfully paid the hospital bill. On the sidewalk of the hospital, Emi said through the phone, "I can't believe Rumi. How could she do this? Why is she so submissive to her no-good, conniving husband who *lied* about having a college degree? You are blood, he is simply a stranger."

Carl repeated the sentence, "I hired a couple from New Zealand to help out with the hostel, *oka-san*, so that the work is not too burdensome for you."

"That's great, you are so considerate. Thank you" I told him, refusing to look up at him. He walked over to the kitchen and made some noise. He retired to his bedroom, only coming out into the living room at an hour before midnight, after the rest of the family went to bed, to watch foreign films and nibble on sweets without anyone bothering him.

Three days had passed since Carl told me of his new hires, a decision made without any consultation from me. The couple arrived earlier than I had expected.

In the driveway, a couple exited a taxi cab. A man in a navy knit hat with a long, scraggly beard impossible for Japanese men to grow extended his arm towards me. I grabbed one of his hands with both of mine dressed in black leather gloves.

All I heard coming from his mouth that was buried deep in his beard were sounds, but I nodded and shook his hand anyway, then looked to the woman on his left. "I am Mariko," I told them. I made the sound of each letter, figuring out how to fuse them to create syllables, a custom unique to the English language. In Japanese, every letter of *hiragana* represents one syllable, by and large made up of one vowel and one consonant; there was no need to worry about pronunciation like English words. The woman's long brown hair was kept in two neat braids, pointing upwards at her shoulder, ricocheting off the breast panels of her bulky down jacket. Her braids made her mature, freckled face appear more juvenile. Her eyelashes and eyebrows were white, like the snow falling on our faces. I smiled, and shook her hands in the same manner I did with the man.

I knew their names already, Chris and Charlotte, because Carl had told me this about them, and nothing more. I did not enjoy conversing with Carl regardless of the subject matter, so I never asked him where or how he found these helpers. I motioned to them with my right hand, a gesture that universally conveyed the sentiment “follow me.” They forgot to take their shoes off at the entrance. I do not have the words to communicate that in Japanese households, we leave our shoes at the entrance. Somehow, I gained their attention, and pointed to their snow-boot clad feet on the rug, and then to my bare feet. They let out a sound of understanding, and quickly took their shoes off. Then, I showed them their living quarters, which they will pay for through labor around the hostel.

They arrived right as I was about to serve breakfast to my husband, usually before breakfast for the guests is served. My husband has been bedridden since we moved to Niseko. The reason why I agreed to abandon my life in Tokyo was because of Seita’s medical conditions. He was no longer able to golf, scold, or fold potstickers, the pillars of his identity.

Seita was my first and only love. We met at age 20, exactly 20 years after Japan’s surrender of the war, and we eloped quickly after a few wonderful dates. I started working at his family’s motel business, which soon became our business. It was a funny thing, being the same age as Seita but in gravely different physical states. Beside my knee and a few extra pounds on my hips, I was healthy. I was active. I ran a hostel with little help from anyone; the grandchildren were far too young, Rumi ran her own business of cleaning ladies for luxury hotels and condos in the area, and Carl would not be of any help, regardless of whether or not his work is legitimate. Seita, on the other hand, could barely make it to the washroom without assistance. I suspected

that Carl and Rumi were planning to cease the hostel operations because of the occasional nuisances Seita caused to the guests.

Seita wore an adult diaper. I changed his diapers without complaint, yet he was not a baby. I always loved Seita more than he loved me, and I doubted he would change my diapers if I were in his position. He did not have to say this, but I knew. I knew because he had an affair with another woman thirty years ago. I did not resent him for his lapse in loyalty. In response to his affair, I silently packed one leather duffel with enough clothes and underwear to last one week, stuffed rolls of 10,000 yen notes in a leather waist-bag, and escaped Tokyo for Paris. I did not buy a return flight at first, but bought one two weeks later at the counter as soon as I landed at Charles de Gaulle.

After two days in Paris spent shopping, resting in cafes between boutiques, and staying out late at jazz clubs, I took a train to Venice. On the train, I flirted with the man next to me, without speaking. We looked at each other, then at the lush green mountains and fields outside the window, then back at each other. We drew images onto the green velvet chairs, and chuckled quietly as we were riding the silent car. We sat across the aisle from each other, his back facing the rear of the train and mine the front. When the train arrived in Venice, he unloaded my suitcase and kissed first my right cheek, then my left. I grabbed my shopping bags and declared “au-revoir,” and headed to the gondola. This sort of encounter continued for the two weeks I spent in Europe, acquiring exquisite designer goods in every city I passed through, and finally returned home, where no one, not even my children, asked me where I had been. I tied on my apron and began counting stock in the kitchen, the TV humming the monotonous sound of a baseball game with my husband’s favorite team.

I emptied the remaining bits of yogurt out of the plastic container into a Dutch painted bowl. My mind wandered to the two strangers living in my house, Chris and Charlotte. From what it seems, they made no effort to learn any Japanese. Foreigners who speak English tend to believe, with much entitlement, that they can easily communicate in any country in English. This entitlement was especially pervasive in this town. I remember being in Italy, with a dictionary in hand, attempting to adopt key Italian words to communicate with Venetians, inquiring about transportation back to my hotel late at night, when the gondoliers traded their oars for beers and assumed the role of patron. Among Chris and Charlotte's belongings, there seemed to be no dictionary, or book for that matter, in sight. I gripped the wooden handles of the tray and slowly made my way down to Seita to serve him the same breakfast he has eaten for the past three years: yogurt, slices of peaches, lightly toasted bread glazed with local honey, and a cocktail of medications.

Later, I explained, while speaking slowly in Japanese, to Chris and Charlotte their daily responsibilities. Somehow, this arrangement worked out until the New Year.

III.

January, 2016

Chris stole Henry's New Year's money, and he and Charlotte were promptly exiled from Lodge Mahana. Carl, who exhibited no physical symptoms of guilt, consoled Henry. Henry cried for hours on New Year's Day. He cried and cried until Rumi could not stand it anymore. Henry pleaded with his father to call the police to have Chris arrested, however all of the adults knew

this was not possible. Carl had knowingly hired seasonal help who were in Japan on a holiday visa, which did not permit working. At least the firing process was as easy as Chris's theft.

Rumi asked Carl to give Henry three sheets of 10,000 yen notes, but Carl presumably gave her a lousy excuse for why Rumi should take care of it. I knew this, because after asking Carl to give Henry money, she clicked her tongue and looked for her purse. From her wallet, she yanked out three notes and gave them to Henry. He didn't stop crying. This was money, but not his. I could not help but enjoy watching Henry witness Carl's emasculation.

For two months, Chris and Charlotte had lived under the same roof as us. I even started to grow fond of them, to an extent, and I showed my appreciation by offering curated bowls of cut fruit to them. I usually only give sliced fruit to my grandchildren. Peaches so soft that even the gentlest finger's touch would indent the smooth surface.

Two weeks after this incident, I went on my annual trip to Tokyo with Emi and my grandchildren. Today, I returned to Niseko after spending a few days arching my neck so far back I almost fell over admiring the gray skyscrapers. I held paper bags with treats and trinkets from Tokyo for Rumi, Shelly, Henry, and Carl. I walked into the front entrance and noticed that the shoe racks were not densely packed like usual. Down the entrance, there was significantly less clutter. I dropped the bags, slid my shoes off and walked upstairs to the living room. Rumi sat at the table, her hands wrapped around a small, white mug.

“Hi Rumi, how are you? Is your father okay?”

Rumi nodded, which brought me relief. Any time I traveled, I worried deeply for Seita.

Rumi looked at me, her face painted for the first time in a while.

“We just moved into our new house, about a mile down the road from here.” she said, in a tone that suggested that she is addressing no one in particular, though I was the only other person in the room.

“A new house? You bought one? When?”

“It’s not new, we built it.”

My insides writhed. A rock sunk deep in my stomach. I said, quietly, “Congratulations. What an amazing accomplishment. I am happy for you. That is the dream. I understand.”

“Thanks, Mom. Well, I have to get going now. Carl’s cooking meatball spaghetti for dinner.”

Rumi carried her cup to the kitchen and placed it in the sink. She exhaled, and walked down the stairs toward the door. I heard the sound of her engine putter from upstairs, but I couldn’t bring myself to watch her drive away, not knowing the next time I would see her, or Shelly, or Henry. I walked to my bed and lay down in a separate bedroom from Seita. I picked up my iPad device and attempted to video call my granddaughter, but she did not answer. For the first time in 40 years, I did not look forward to preparing dinner.