



Rajendra Kumar

Love Story
Series

1

THE
HASEGAWA
GARDEN

THE HASEGAWA GARDEN

Obooko Edition

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THE HASEGAWA GARDEN

The July afternoon sun is turning the countryside into a furnace. Leaves on the trees look droopy, grass on the ground wilted, farm land scorched. The village, Mizue, has a gloomy look without anyone on the dirt paths or any vehicle on the one narrow paved road connecting other nearby villages. The brown wooden homes, lumped close together, stand like dejected ghosts.

A blast of hot air slaps Steven on the face and ruffles his short brown hair as he gets out of the taxi in front of an old dilapidated house. While squinting his eyes in the bright sunlight, he pulls out a pair of sunglasses from his shoulder bag, puts them on, and feels better. Then, noticing sweat drops forming on his forehead and under his armpits, he withdraws a handkerchief out of his right pant pocket and wipes his face. He is sorry that he chose to wear a gabardine suit instead of cotton jeans and t-shirt. The habit of dressing up in business attire when going out of the house is hard to give up even when there are no clients to meet, no court proceedings to attend, no judges and prosecutors to confront, and no corporate staff meetings to attend. He must change that habit along with many others. Along with many other things about his life, too.

He scans the house. It shows signs of abandonment. Weeds, knee high, are all around it. The wooden structure appears intact but the paint has fallen off of it in many places leaving ugly gray-brown patches. Part of the cornice has disappeared and drain pipes are rusted. Many tiles on the roof are missing, leaving gaping holes. Several glass panes in the front door panel are cracked, some are missing.

Ignoring the fact that the house may be unsafe to enter, he slips his right hand in his left inside coat pocket and fishes out a key. He inserts it in the recessed lock in the front door, turns it, and hears a 'click'. Then he fits tips of four fingers of his right hand into a notch just below the lock and slides the door to the left. A dusty and musty hall, like a gaping cavern, appears before him. He enters it. The afternoon sunlight filtering through the open front door allows him

to see some stairs to the left leading to a small platform merging into the living room. He hears the flapping of wings in the ceiling and is startled. Just for a second. He thinks there are bats and even smells the guano.

He carefully unlaces his shoes, takes them off of his feet, and climbs onto the platform. The wood slats under his feet creak as if in pain.

‘I knew you would come,’ Steven hears someone.

He looks towards the source of the sound. He sees a figure in the doorway to the living room. It bows and sidesteps to allow him entrance. Steven recognizes it. It is Haruko.

How can it be? Haruko has been dead for two years.

‘Am I hallucinating?’ Steven wonders.

He enters the living room. All the things are still there in their usual places. A cupboard filled with books, figures of Shinto gods and goddesses, knickknacks, a kerosene heater, a TV, family photographs in artistic frames on the walls, a low dining table in the middle of the room with several seat cushions around it, the carpet on the floor, and the curtains on the windows. Everything has deteriorated with disuse, is covered with a thick layer of dust, and all the colors are faded. The spiders have invaded every corner, window, and door of the room with their cobwebs.

Steven walks around the table. The carpet feels damp under his feet. He looks up and sees cracks in the ceiling. Rain water must have dripped during monsoon seasons. He bends down and lifts a corner of the carpet. The tatami mats underneath are mildewed and rotting.

He slumps down on one of the floor cushions, feels the softness of the damp cotton filling sticking out of the torn covering, and lets the wetness seep through his pants. He does not want to get up.

He feels sad.

* * * * *

Steven was visiting the Hasegawa family for the first time. He came down the stairs, tightening the belt around his *ukata* robe to ward off October's early morning chill, and entered the combination living-dining room made warm by a kerosene heater sitting in a corner, next to a TV. It felt good.

He heard Haruko, his mother-in-law, "Come and sit with us."

Steven had learned Japanese from Chieko, his wife of seven years, and had gained sufficient facility in the language to be able to converse in it adequately, if not fluently. He mumbled a good morning.

Haruko patted a floor cushion next to her.

Steven got the message, 'Sit here'. He loosened his belt and lowered himself on the cushion. Knees bent with his feet behind him, he tried to sit on his heels, the Japanese way. He succeeded only in not falling forward or sideways, but his feet hurt so badly that he abandoned the effort and stretched his legs forward under the table.

And then he noticed Chieko, sitting on the other side of the table, smiling at his clumsiness.

Haruko asked, "Would you like some tea? We're having Oolong, or would you prefer green tea?"

"Oolong is fine," Steven said out of courtesy. Actually he wanted coffee, American style.

"I'll get you some coffee. We have freeze dried Nescafe," Chieko said. Steven was thankful that his wife knew him so well.

Chieko got up and, before entering the kitchen, said, "What would you like for breakfast? We just had raw eggs over boiled rice, pickled garlic, and fried tofu with soy sauce."

While married to Chieko, Steven had developed some taste for sushi, sashimi, tempura, and teriyaki steak and chicken but was not prepared for the fare offered. So he said, "I don't want anything. I'm not hungry." And he wondered, 'Would I have to spend my whole month here lying?'

Chieko smiled and said, "I'll bring you a couple of five-minute eggs, some

toasted bread, and jam.” She disappeared behind a sliding door into the kitchen.

Steven thanked someone or something, his lucky stars perhaps, for falling in love with and marrying a woman who could read his mind, or at least know his preferences in food. He really did not believe in supernatural explanations and was sure that many years of togetherness made them aware of each other’s behavioral peculiarities. No surprise that Chieko knew what he liked to eat and perhaps many other things, too, about him. No surprise that he knew many of Chieko’s preferences: blue color, skirts over pants, seafood, European classical music and Beatles, romantic movies, curling up under his left arm and against his chest, and putting her weight on her left leg while tilting her head to the right when standing. Maybe there was something like mental togetherness which allowed them to be aware of each other’s psyche. Whatever it was, it was great and it made their marriage work.

His reflection was interrupted by Haruko who suggested, “Have some tea in the meantime.”

Haruko poured the hot drink from the teapot into a handleless ceramic cup finely decorated with *sakuras*. Steven held the cup between his palms. The warmth of the cup felt good. He took a sip. The hot tea warmed his throat and his stomach. It too felt good.

He turned his head toward the picture window and saw the sun peek over the Eastern horizon, jaggedly defined by tall pines in rolling wooded hills. He remarked, “It’s going to be a nice day.”

“Good. We won’t have to go into town in the rain,” Haruko said.

At the mention of rain, Steven remembered that Chieko had told him even before they were married that in her parental village it rained all year long, not daily, but often enough for people to dislike it and to welcome sunny days. However, it wasn’t ‘rain’ so much as ‘town’ which caught Steven’s attention. Steven and Chieko had come to Japan to visit Chieko’s dying father, Noboru, who was in a hospital in the ‘town’.

In all the years of their marriage they never visited Chieko’s homeland and

her parents. Not because Steven did not want to, but because Chieko had prohibited it. That would have been strange had Chieko not explained the reason for it.

Ever since she completed high school she had been at loggerheads with her family. She wanted to be a modern woman by discarding traditional Japanese lifestyle. Which meant everything Western, especially American, became primary in her life, and everything Japanese had been relegated to a secondary status. So she coveted jeans, t-shirts, skirts, and dresses, over kimonos; hamburgers and fried chicken over sushi and tempura; Christianity over Shintoism and Buddhism; and a high powered, financially lucrative career over home making.

Both her parents expressed their disapproval of Chieko's direction in life, but only her father was vehement about it. Once he told her, "Americans are our enemies. I fought them in World War II. I was a prisoner of war for two years in China during which, they tortured me. I carry the scars, both physical and psychological, to this day. They dropped the atom bomb upon us. They have taken over a large swath of our small island to have a permanent military base. They wrote our constitution, and now tell us how to run our government and how to conduct our foreign policy. They don't allow us to have our own defensive force and treat us like an occupied people. They are evil."

Chieko did not buy any of that and left home. Not left-left. She did not sever all her ties with home, nor did her parents abandon her. In spite of her waywardness, her parents supported her financially and welcomed her home whenever she chose to visit them. They did that out of love, she was sure. Only they were just disgusted with what she was doing. Pretty much the same way, she loved and respected her parents while being appalled at their prejudices against America and Americans. She figured it was possible to love and care for people without liking some of their behaviors.

First she went to college in Tokyo and studied journalism. She also converted to Catholicism and adopted 'Catherine' as her spiritual name. This made even

her mother furious, who told her that she was a disgrace to the family. Chieko did not care. She loved her parents but was not going to let them dictate her lifestyle.

The relationship remained strained, and the uneasy peace was maintained by not talking about Chieko's behavior.

A few years later, she got an opportunity to go to her dream land when she was accepted as a student by Columbia School of Journalism. After getting her degree and securing a license to practice her profession, she took an entry level job as a reporter with a medium size news magazine, The Herald, based in Washington DC. Only about eight months into her career, her life took a major turn. She met Steven and married him.

And that brought another change in her relations with her parents. She stopped visiting them, because she was sure that, given her father's attitude toward Americans, Steven, and most likely now she herself, would not be welcome home. Contacts between them through mail, phone, and internet still continued, talking about trivialities, wishing each other well, and avoiding the touchy subject of her new life.

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Steven sees a bed materialize before him. It is floating and a frail, male figure is lying in it. Steven gets up and stands beside it. It seems like the figure wants to say something, but the words don't come out. Yet, Steven knows what it is saying, 'Take care of my daughter, please. I see danger lurking for her. Please.'

Steven wishes he could have seen the future, could have seen the danger Chieko would be facing, and could have done something about it.

Wishes are just that, wishes. They are never fulfilled.

Now he wants to cry. He swallows hard.

Now he wants to lash out at the world.

He slumps on the wet cushions again.

Tears are dangling at the edge of his eyelids. He wipes them gently.

* * * * *

Steven felt a special attachment with the Hasegawa home, because this was the place where Chieko was born and raised. Having married her, he was part of her present, sitting in her parental home, he was now part of her past also. Being part of her entire life felt good, very good. This was love.

He was glad that he had found her, and recalled all the details of their first meeting and everything that happened afterwards leading to their marriage.

Steven was in Caracas, Venezuela, on assignment by his employer, Turnbull and Associates, a New York based high-powered law firm, specializing in international law. He was there to safeguard the interests of his firm's client Hitachi America Ltd. whose wholly owned subsidiary in Venezuela was experiencing labor unrest.

While taking a tour of the plant, he noticed a young girl, Japanese by looks, talking to some factory workers. He asked the tour guide about her and learned that she was a reporter from an American news magazine, and had been allowed by the management to talk to the workers. As part of his legal strategy, he decided to find out what she was up to.

He walked over to her with a broad smile on his face. She looked at him as if asking, 'What do you want?'

He asked very courteously, "I understand you work for an American news magazine. Right?"

"Yes, The Herald. And..."

Steven cut in, felt a need to introduce himself, "I am Steven Thorp, an American attorney representing Hitachi, and..."

Now the young Japanese reporter cut in, "I'm Chieko Hasegawa, covering worker discontent and agitation at this plant. The magazine thought that I, being

Japanese, would be an ideal person to write a story about a Japanese business.”

Steven said, “Of course, very logical. Now that you have talked to a few people here, you must have found out that this agitation is by the left wing trouble makers. Hitachi always treats its workers well. I just wanted to make sure that your reporting will be fair.”

“That is not what I am getting from the workers. But yes, my reporting will be fair.”

“Perhaps we could compare notes.”

“That would be nice.”

“At dinner, perhaps? I’m staying at the Marriott.”

“I’m not so lucky. I’m at Hotel Caribe. If you care to come there...”

“Sure. Will seven be okay?”

“Yeah, I think so.” The tentativeness in her response was surprising to Steven. Maybe she did not want him to think that she was eager to meet him, that she was lucky to meet someone richer and more powerful than her.

At dinner, however, they hardly talked about business.

Steven started by complementing her, “You speak very good English.”

“Thank you. I went to school in the USA.”

“I see. And are you an American citizen now?”

“Not yet. I like the American business climate. I also like the people, the place.”

“So what’s keeping you?”

“Immigration. Currently I am on a work permit which will expire in a year.”

“There must be some way.”

“Yes. Marry an American.” She smiled as if it was a naughty thought. Quickly, she added, “I wouldn’t marry someone for that. I’ve got to like the man.”

“So you do like the idea of a family? You’re not all business?”

“Yeah, I guess. I mean my career is very important, of course. But when you think about it, there is something neat about a family.”

Something stirred somewhere within Steven's body, and his heart began to flutter. Embarrassed at his emotions, he slapped himself mentally. Slapped himself again, harder the second time.

He looked at her. Really looked at her this time. She seemed to be in her late 20's. Slim, short, about 5'3", she carried an exquisitely proportioned body encased in pink-beige skin. And he could also see those mischievous, almond shaped bright eyes, canopied by foldless eyelids, studded into an oval face. The thin long fingers, chiseled body curves, and parasol mushroom breasts did not go unnoticed either.

He was attracted to her. But he wasn't thinking of taking her to bed. He was thinking of marrying her. On looks alone? He was mature enough to know that that was not it. Then what was it about this young woman which was making the hard-shelled attorney turn into a jellyfish teenager? He had no clue.

At age 32, for the first time, he was really falling for someone he could think of as a wife. He had at least three serious relationships in the past and each died an ignoble death. The women profusely spilled the word 'love' but acted in blatant self-interest. He had even considered giving up the idea of a family life. But a renewed interest in marriage had ignited while talking to an elderly client who wanted to set up a real estate business in Viet Nam. When Steven queried, "Why in Viet Nam?", the man answered, "Because my wife is from that country." Curious, Steven asked, "You married a..." "Yes," the man sounded miffed as he said, "People often ask me why I married someone from Asia. I'll tell you. I married an Asian because I wanted a wife, not an adversary. ... Anyway, let's talk business." Steven did, but could not forget his words.

Now he was facing an Asian himself. Was she the one? Immediately, he chided himself, 'Shut up.'

To quiet his racing heart, he changed the subject to business. Surprisingly, they both agreed that the problems at the plant had nothing to do with Hitachi, they had to do with the strained relations between Venezuela and the USA.

The dinner ended very amicably with the two of them going dutch. Before

departing for his hotel, Steven suggested that they exchange phone numbers and e-mail addresses for business communications. Except that was not what he had in mind.

A week later both went back to their respective cities. But Steven could not forget Chieko who kept sprouting in his mind like an infeasible thought. Finally, he had to admit to himself that he was in love with her. But what about Chieko? Let alone love, did she even like him? He would have to find out.

He started finding opportunities to see her, talk to her, all disguised as business. It involved travel between New York and Washington DC, but he did not mind. He found Chieko responsive to him, and comfortable with him. Comfortable enough to smile when he once spilled red wine on his white shirt, and, another time, comfortable enough to suggest that he looked good in his dark purple shirt and short hair parted on the right. Still, in order to be sure of her feelings toward him, he had to be direct, take initiative, make the first move.

So one day at a dinner meeting, he mustered all his courage, ready to accept rejection, if that was in store for him, and asked her, "How about settling down with me?"

"Are you proposing?" she asked with a smile which could not hide her incredulity.

At least it was not rejection. Emboldened, he said, "I'm a decent person. If you don't like me now, you might come to like me later."

"I like you all right. But marriage? How could we manage that along with the demands of our work?"

"Marriage would make it easier. We'll share the burden."

"I never thought of that."

That was all the answer Steven was looking for.

A few days later, as he was driving home from work late in the evening, he noticed the moon. It was almost full and reminded him of Chieko. The next day he bought an engagement ring, called Chieko, and suggested a dinner date the coming weekend in Provincetown.

“Provincetown?” Chieko asked in disbelief.

“It will get us both away from our places of grind. I’ll reserve a seat for you to fly into LaGuardia. From there we’ll fly to Provincetown in a chartered jet.”

“Just for a dinner? I’m not used to such luxury.”

“It could be more than a dinner. We have the whole weekend. It’ll be up to you.”

Chieko accepted the arrangement, and it was encouraging to Steven. He even reserved two rooms in an oceanfront hotel.

In Provincetown, when Chieko did not object to the hotel, Steven was even more encouraged. So after dinner, as they sat on the hotel’s deck facing the ocean, Steven looked at the moon, which was full now, bouncing on the unruly waves on the horizon, and said, “Look at the moon. It’s beautiful. Your face is just like that. I want to see it every day. So, I hope you’ll accept this.” He showed her the engagement ring.

Chieko looked at the ring, then took it very slowly, very deliberately. Steven noticed her body tremble slightly; her eyes focused on him, gleaming and damp; her eyelids lowering in a shy acceptance. She put the ring on her finger without saying a word. That was answer enough. Steven moved a bit closer to her and, a bit hesitantly, kissed her. It was their first kiss, a tender touch of lips.

A few months later, they were married in a church. Right after that, Chieko told Steven why they could not meet her parents. He was a bit disappointed, but understood. She also told him her desire to keep her maiden name for business purposes only. Steven understood that too and had no objection.

About a year later, Chieko became an American citizen.

Six more years passed. During this period, both, Steven and Chieko, moved up in their careers. Steven became a junior partner in his firm. Chieko was promoted to the Assistant Editor position within her news organization. Her magazine even allowed her to have her office in New York and fly into Washington DC as needed. They were as if in a boat gently floating on the calm waters of a placid lake.

All of a sudden, there was a storm and their boat was rocked. Chieko and Steven were relaxing in their living room after dinner, when the phone rang. Chieko answered. After the call ended, Steven saw her shaken. He looked at her inquiringly, and she told him, "It was my mom. My father had a stroke and is in the hospital. My mother wants us to come."

"Us?" Steven asked skeptically.

"Yes. My mother never felt like my father about Americans. I hope my father has pardoned me. Even if he hasn't, I must still see him. Who knows, this might be the last time. And, you're coming with me. No compromises there."

Even though Steven wasn't sure, he went along with Chieko's decision. Both took a month-long leave of absence from their respective jobs. The next day, they flew to Tokyo, then took a bus to Chieko's village, Mizue.

And now Steven was sitting with Chieko's mother who seemed to have accepted him as her son, asking him to sit with her, and offering him tea. In a few hours, he would be visiting Chieko's father too, and hoped the visit would go well.

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Steven looks around. He sees a shadow lurking behind the paper paneled door leading into the next room. The shadow seems reassuring rather than frightening. Wanting to see it up close, Steven gets up, goes to the door, and tries to slide it open. The door is off its tracks and it falls down, leaving a huge gap in the wall. Steven walks through it, and sees a couple of lizards run up the wall and a few mice scamper past him to hide in the holes in the floor. In one corner, he sees a few 20-kilo bags of rice, infested with insects and bugs. He ignores all that and looks in front. There is Haruko again. Vaguely defined like a smoke sculpture, but unmistakably Haruko. Steven sees her standing in front of a *tokobashira* containing a statue of some god he does not know and some prayer gadgets he does not understand. He smells incense and hears the clapping of

hands, the ringing of a bell, and the words, ‘Protect the Hasegawa family.’

The smell and the sounds gradually become faint and then cease. The smoke sculpture itself evaporates in the air.

Steven walks close to the *tokobashira* and looks at the idol inside. Its colors have faded, adornments broken, and clothes torn. Steven touches it gently, and it crumbles.

* * * * *

Steven followed Haruko and Chieko into the hospital room where Noboru sat propped up against the pillows. He saw Noboru bow his head in welcome and noticed Chieko take a sigh of relief. He himself felt at ease; Noboru obviously knew that Steven was coming to visit him and had accepted him in spite of his reservations. Accepted him probably because he could not reject Chieko, his own daughter. He remembered an Indian saying he had heard somewhere, ‘It’s natural for children to misbehave, it’s important for grown-ups to forgive.’

Steven took the only chair in the room, and Haruko and Chieko sat on the edge of Noboru’s bed.

“How are you doing?” Steven asked a ritualistic question.

Haruko answered, since it was clear that Noboru could not speak, “His left side is completely paralyzed. He can hold a small ball and push buttons on his electric wheel chair or the emergency buttons on his bed. But he still can’t feed himself or talk.”

So Steven asked her, “What do the doctors say? When can he come home?”

“They want to put him in a nursing home. They think that our home with tatamis and thresholds is not fit for his wheelchair, and that I would not be able to provide the round-the-clock care he needs.”

“But the home can be modified and a daily visit by a nurse can be arranged.” Steven offered a solution.

“I think so too, but it’s hard to convince the doctor. I’ll talk to him again.”

Steven was going to offer to talk to the doctor himself but was interrupted by the arrival of a nurse who had brought Noboru's lunch.

The lunch tray was placed in front of Noboru, and Steven saw that it contained fish soup, steamed rice, sautéed eggplant, and daikon pickles. He also saw Chieko take charge. First she lifted the soup bowl and placed its edge to Noboru's lips. Noboru drank the soup. When the bowl was empty, Chieko put it aside and used *hashis* to pick up the other food items and feed her father.

Lunch over, Chieko helped Noboru lie down.

Steven liked what he saw. A father-daughter bond. Was it real or a temporary show? There was no immediate answer nor was one needed at the moment. He was happy to see the family together, pleasant, comfortable, supportive. He was even happier to have been accepted into it. Reluctantly? With reservations? Whatever, acceptance was what mattered to him.

When they were ready to leave, Steven saw Chieko bend over Noboru and say softly, "Thank you for forgiving me. I'll be here a month then I will fly back any time you need me."

Noboru nodded to indicate that he understood.

During their bus trip back home, Steven said to Chieko, "I'm glad I met your family."

"I'm glad that you could see the place where I was born and grew up." Then she turned to Haruko and said, "Talk about 'grew', do we still have the garden?"

"Yes," Haruko answered, "Both the farm and the garden. The farm is run by the hired help, but I take care of the garden. ... Remember when you were small, how much you loved to work in it beside me and your father? You probably also remember, how your eyes used to get big when discovering a sweet potato, a carrot, a daikon, or a taro root?"

"Yes, I remember. It was so wonderful to watch the plants germinate, grow, and mature."

"You must visit it. Take Steven with you. Maybe the two of you could harvest some of the produce."

When they got back home from the hospital, Haruko said, “Why don’t you rest in your room upstairs. I’ll call you at dinner time.”

“And you?” asked Chieko.

“I’ll rest, too. But first I’m going to pray for your father’s health.”

Chieko climbed the stairs and disappeared in the upper floor, but Steven lingered to see Haruko pray.

He saw her go in the adjoining room, stand in front of the *tokobashira*, light an incense stick, clap her hands a few times, ring a bell, then with folded hands, said, “Dear God, protect our family.”

That was very touching.

Not wanting to disturb Haruko’s prayer, Steven tiptoed up the stairs where Chieko was waiting for him, clearly with something naughty on her mind. Her naughtiness showed in her sparkling eyes, in her sultry posture, and in her pouting lips. She had also put on her favorite lavender perfume and was playing her favorite Beatles song ‘Yesterday’ on an old record player, enhancing the euphoric atmosphere.

They had come upstairs to rest.

They did not rest.

* * * * *

Steven retraces his steps and stops in front of the stairs. He looks up at the black ceiling. All of a sudden, he sees it vibrating and hears music, ‘I believe in yesterday...’, a Beatles song. There is no one in the house and no electricity to operate a record player, a radio, or a TV. The music must be coming from a neighbor’s house. But the nearest neighbor is about 200 meters away. And who would be listening to a Beatles’ song in rural Japan? Chieko, of course, but she is not here. He remembers Chieko telling him that the Beatles, although British rather than American, were her favorite.

He climbs the stairs which complain loudly. He is not sure the planks can

support his weight; they seem to be giving way. He ascends slowly, carefully. At the top landing, he sees two rooms. He is quite familiar with them. One is primarily a bedroom and the other a living room. He enters the bedroom. The tatamis have rotted away in many places leaving big holes. He walks around them toward the wall in which the big window has cracked glass panes and torn paper coverings. He looks out of them and sees an irrigation canal, some farms, and scattered clumps of trees. Also many narrow trails. He remembers Chieko walking beside him on one of them toward the garden. Chieko in yellow rubber boots, loose fitting jeans, red polka dot blouse, a beige apron, and a wide-rimmed straw hat, carrying a shovel and a bucket. And Steven in black rubber boots, gray t-shirt, pushing a wheelbarrow. He is filled with nostalgia and wishes Chieko to be next to him, walking on those trails with him again.

He turns his head sadly to the right and sees a wall lined with four cupboards. Three of them are filled with mementos and souvenirs visible through glass panels. The fourth has drawers. He walks to it and pulls out one of the drawers. It contains a neatly folded silk kimono. He pushes it back in and pulls out others. They all contain kimonos. And his eyes are drawn to a framed, faded, 3"x 5" photograph of Chieko, hanging on the wall next to the cupboard. Chieko is about six, wearing a pink and gold kimono, standing in front of the Meiji shrine. He wonders what Haruko wished for her little daughter that day, and if it ever came true. Little Chieko looks happy, so innocent. He wishes that he had seen her when she was a child. Child? Actually, he wishes he had seen her happy and innocent, and in a kimono. He only remembers her as a worldly, smart, sophisticated, mostly serious professional woman, in western clothes. He takes the photo down. He looks at it one more time, a little sadly, then carefully puts it in his coat pocket.

He recalls his time with Chieko in that room many years ago. On a futon. Is it still there? The one with huge colorful flowers on its cover. He turns around and looks at the opposite side of the room where there is a huge futon closet. He crosses the room, stands in front of the closet, and slowly slides one of its doors

open. Futons are still there, many of them. He searches for the one which reminds him of the lotus petals, also of snowflakes and fireworks at the same time. He finds it and pulls it out. Strangely, it still smells like the body fluids the two of them had spilled on it so many years ago. The smell is musky and intoxicating. He feels dizzy. He puts the futon back, closes the door, and walks into the living room. He needs to sit down.

The small room has a couch and a low ornate glass topped table. In a corner, there is a small color TV. A glass paneled cupboard stands against one wall containing many 33 and 45 sized vinyl records, some books in Japanese, and a board game 'Go'. There is also a record player. That's where that 'Yesterday' song is coming from. He forgets to sit down. He goes to the record player and lifts its dust jacket. The lid comes off in his hand and the dust flies around. There is no record on the turntable. But the song is still playing, 'Love was such an easy game to play...' And he also smells Chieko's lavender perfume. His dizziness comes back and he seeks support on the couch. The metal springs protruding out of the worn fabric pinch his thighs. He does not care. It feels good. All of it; the body fluids, the lavender perfume, the Beatles song, the pinch in the thigh.

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Steven made room for himself beside Chieko.

A minute later he complained playfully, "Don't be naughty. That hurts." Chieko had pinched his thigh mischievously as they sat on the couch in the living room.

"What do you want me to be? A little girl in Kimono with a candy smile. Like the one in the picture on the wall?"

"Yes. And I'd like to hold her like a big fluffy doll."

"You can hold me. I'm still soft."

"Of course, you are."

Steven grabbed Chieko in his arms, and she fell into his lap. He caught a whiff of the lavender perfume she was wearing.

"This perfume is intoxicating," Steven exclaimed.

"Good. Let's cool it, on the futon," Chieko suggested.

Steven found that the invitation was even more intoxicating. He picked her up in his arms and said, "Hold on tight."

Chieko wrapped her arms around Steven's neck, legs around his waist, and hung on. Steven carried her into the bedroom and, with his free hands, slid open the closet door. He pulled out a futon. It had large colorful flowers on its cover. He threw it carelessly on the tatami mats and spread it flat with his feet. Then he put his hands around Chieko, gently lowered her onto the futon, and threw himself upon her.

Somewhere in the middle, the record stopped playing, but the music still rang in Steven's ears. And the intoxication of the music together with the lavender perfume was only enhanced by the sex fluids. He felt dizzy. A few minutes later, his intoxication had subsided. He lay relaxed with Chieko sleeping in his arms. Chieko, like a big fluffy doll.

This was the strangest and most unusual sex experience Steven ever had with Chieko. Usually their love making was gentle and comforting. But this was wild and exciting, something that could shatter every bone in your body and drain every drop of blood out of your veins. Was there something in the air, the water, the food, the house, or the tiny village? He must ask Chieko about it when she woke up.

And he did, "What do you think happened?"

He didn't get a helpful answer. All he got was, "I don't know. But it was great."

"Spontaneous."

"Yes. And you know what? In our spontaneity, we used no protection."

"What about your pills?"

"I didn't bring any. Because of our hurried departure, I didn't think of them."

“So, are you sorry?”

“No. I hope I’m pregnant. It’s about time we had a family. Seven years is a long time to wait. Besides, we’re not building our careers any more. We’re professionally secure.”

Yes, they were not the same people any more, Steven was sure. He really liked what they were now. The circumstances which brought them to this place were unfortunate, but the outcome for them was turning out to be pleasant.

He kissed Chieko wildly, thrusting his tongue into her mouth. When he separated, she took a deep breath, as if to fill her emptied out lungs, and said, “Let’s go downstairs and find out from mother when we’re going to the garden. You know, before we have another bout on the futon.”

“Another bout wouldn’t be all that bad.”

“Yeah.” Chieko pushed him down and jumped on him.

They went downstairs a couple of hours later, only after they heard Haruko calling them, “Are you coming down? It’s dinner time.”

* * * * *

The sun has set and it’s getting dark. ‘Enough for today,’ Steven tells himself. He needs to get back to his daughter, Mitsu, a couple of months shy of her fourth birthday. He hopes that she and her hotel-provided babysitter have gotten along well. He feels a bit guilty for not bringing her with him, particularly because she wanted to come. He remembers explaining to her, “The place may not be safe. Let me first check it out.” He clearly sees the look of disappointment on her face, and hears her screaming as he heads toward the door. He remembers feeling a little unsettled but a bit reassured upon hearing the babysitter, “Please go. She’ll be all right in a few minutes.” He also remembers standing like a statue in front of the door of his suite for a couple of minutes, not sure if he should actually leave without Mitsu, listening to her scream, then cry, then sob, and finally become quiet.

He descends the stairs, puts on his shoes, and walks out of the house. He locks the door and wonders, 'Why? What's there to protect?' Then answers himself almost immediately, 'Memories, of course.' He pulls out his cell phone and calls a taxi.

He stands on the sidewalk with his hands in his pocket, waiting. His right hand feels a piece of paper. It's a letter he got from the Director of the Mizue Community Center. A letter which prompted him to take this trip to Japan. The Director wants him to do something about the deteriorating property, otherwise it will be demolished and the farm and the garden auctioned off with proceeds going to the Center. For Steven, the Hasegawa property is filled with experiences, many of which redefined his life. He wants to savor them one more time. So here, he is looking over the place, trying to decide what memories he could salvage before letting the property go into some uncaring hands. Of course, memories are always with him. What he intends to salvage are the things memories are made of. After that, he will let the Center handle the disposal of the property.

His thinking is brought to an abrupt halt by the horn of the taxi.

At the hotel, he finds Mitsu doing origami, carefully folding paper to make a ship under the patient direction of the babysitter. He remembers the babysitter's words at the time of his leaving Mitsu in her care, and is happy to note that she was right. Steven is also glad that Mitsu is bilingual and can understand the babysitter, thanks to her Japanese immigrant nanny and Chieko. He sees Mitsu abandoning her project, running to him, and wrapping her little hands around his legs. Steven bends down, puts his hands under Mitsu's arms, and lifts her up to his face level. He sees Chieko in her, the same round face, the same big expressive almond eyes, and the same dimpled cheeks. His sole contribution seems to be in her height and color. Mitsu is tall at about 90 centimeters and her skin hue is that of rose colored milk, her hair a light shade of pine.

"Were you good?" he asks.

"Yes. And see what we made?" Mitsu points to all the paper animals and

objects strewn on the floor.

“That’s wonderful. Now go, clean up for dinner.” He puts Mitsu down who runs into the bathroom.

He thanks the babysitter, pays her, and, after she leaves, walks over to the bathroom door and asks, “Need any help?”

He knows Mitsu likes to feel ‘I-can-do-it-myself’ but can’t always reach the sink faucet and shower controls easily. He remembers helping her ever since they lost Chieko about two years ago.

“No, thank you,” Mitsu answers.

After dinner, Steven puts Mitsu to bed, sits beside her, and says, “I have something special for you.”

“What?” Mitsu sits up excitedly.

Steven pulls Chieko’s photo out of his pocket, gives it to Mitsu, and says, “This is your mother when she was a little girl. A little older than you.”

“Mother? She wears funny clothes.”

“As a child, she did. I think her clothes are pretty. It’s a kimono.”

“Kimono?” Mitsu examines the photo again, this time for over a minute without saying anything.

Steven draws her attention by saying, “One day I’ll put a kimono on you, take you to the Meiji shrine, and pray for you.”

Mitsu shakes her head indicating she does not understand what he is talking about, but whatever it is, it must be all right.

But Steven understands. It has nothing to do with a Shinto religious ceremony. It has to do with Chieko. He wants to see Chieko in his daughter, wants Mitsu to know what it’s like to go to the Meiji shrine in a kimono and see her father pray for her in front of an idol.

“Is it mine?” Mitsu asks, pointing to the photo.

“Of course, I brought it for you from the house.”

“House?”

“Yes. Your mom’s house. We’ll go there tomorrow. I think it’s safe enough

for you to visit. And we'll see your mom's garden, too." He thinks about the farm also, but that can wait.

Fifteen more minutes of chit-chat and Mitsu goes to sleep.

Steven looks at her for a few moments, then bends down, kisses her on the forehead, and mumbles, "Your mother still lives here."

He turns his attention to the clock on the nightstand. It's a few minutes before ten. He is not sleepy. He pulls a chair next to the window, sits in it, and looks out. Sadly, he reminds himself to call the Community Center tomorrow morning, a little after ten. It must be open by that time. They must be told when they can take over the property.

* * * * *

In the morning when Steven woke up, he noticed it was nine. He shook Chieko and said, "We're late."

"After yesterday's workout on the futon, I felt tired and lazy. What about you?"

"Me too. But we've got to get moving."

"Yes. I better help mom put together breakfast."

When they got down, they found Haruko drinking tea and watching TV. Chieko said, "Sorry mom. What do you want for breakfast?"

"Whatever you want. Better still, whatever Steven wants."

"All right. And what time are we going to visit father?"

"We are not. We are going to the garden."

"Why?"

"I got a call from the hospital. They want to run some tests on your father and it might take all day. So no visitation. ... And Chieko, would you pack some lunch?"

That settled, everyone had a quick breakfast.

While eating, Chieko said to Steven, "Work in the garden is dirty and hard.

So, you better put on your jeans and a sweatshirt. Take a windbreaker, in case clouds roll in and it gets cold. You could try my father's rubber boots. If they are too small, I'll get you a pair from the neighborhood general store."

"What about you?"

"I'll wear what I used to wear before I left home. I'm sure my mom hasn't thrown them away. Have you mom?" She asked Haruko teasingly.

"They're all here," Haruko reassured.

Steven dressed the way Chieko had suggested. Except that he had to buy a pair of rubber boots, the largest size available, and even they were slightly tight but wearable. There was also an addition, a *hachimaki* which Haruko tied around his head and explained, "It will keep you cool."

Haruko herself wore what looked like pajamas, front covered with a neck to knee length apron tied in the back in three places, a wide-rimmed white cotton hat, and gray rubber boots. She also carried a sturdy walking stick for support.

Chieko put on a pair of loose fitting jeans, a long sleeve red polka dot print blouse, a wide-rimmed straw hat, a beige apron, and yellow rubber boots.

As they walked out of the house around eleven, Chieko came to Steven and said, "You'll have to push the wheelbarrow to the garden. It's too much for my mother."

"What about you?" Steven asked jokingly.

"We're putting you to work." Chieko laughed.

Right away Steven had a feeling, it would be a fun day. He walked over to the wheelbarrow loaded with garden tools, lifted its handles, and started pushing it. Haruko and Chieko led the way.

The three of them walked on the muddy trails between farms, doing shlip-shlop shlip-shlop in their rubber boots. When the farmland ended, they started climbing a wooded hill. After about 20 minutes, Haruko stopped and said, "Here we are."

Chieko stopped behind her. Steven brought the wheelbarrow to a halt beside her, looked around, and saw an ill-defined piece of land, about two acres in size,

some of it cleared, the rest filled with weeds and plants.

Haruko walked into it and issued orders, "I'll start pulling taro roots, Chieko, you do sweet potatoes. That's all we have left to harvest. Steven can clean up after us; gather all the discarded leaves, vines, and pesky weeds, and dump them on that pile of farm trash that has been growing into a small hill over years."

They got busy.

As he was clearing the weeds and dead vegetation, Steven noticed a bright orange-yellow fruit on the ground. He looked up and found himself under a tree loaded with this fruit. He picked it up and asked Chieko, "What kind of fruit is this?"

"It is kaki," she answered.

"Kaki?"

"*Kaki* in Japanese. In English, it's persimmon."

Curiously, he looked around and saw the entire hillside covered with persimmon trees. His mind focused on the vegetable garden, he had not noticed them before. With surprise in his voice, he said to Haruko, "You have a lot of kaki trees."

"We have only one, the one under which you are standing. The others belong to other villagers," Haruko clarified.

"Why do you have just one?"

"Because of Chieko. We didn't care for any kaki trees. Actually we didn't care for any trees. Just wanted the land for vegetables only. But Chieko liked kakis so much that, in season, she would go around stealing the fruit. That's why we decided to have one of our own. She actually helped us plant it. She was only eight then. I think she still likes kakis. Don't you Chieko?"

"Yes, I do. Let me have one, a ripe one."

Steven reached up and picked a couple of really ripe persimmons. He extended his hand toward Chieko and said, "Here, taste the fruit of your labor."

Chieko snatched one from Steven's hand and said, "You eat the other one."

They ate the fruit without bothering to wash it.

Steven threw a glance at Chieko and saw her standing there smiling mischievously, with the yellow pulp covering the area around her mouth, including the nose, the cheeks, and the chin. A very enticing picture. He felt like grabbing and kissing her. 'Not in front of her mother,' he told himself. Controlling his urge, he only said, "It's delicious."

He looked at Chieko's persimmon tree one more time in admiration before resuming his weed clearing task. 'Noboru would be happy to hear about our work in the garden,' he thought.

A few hours later they sat facing each other on a patch of earth Steven had cleared. Chieko spread a large piece of cloth and placed the picnic basket and the thermos on it. She took it upon herself to serve everyone, *nigiris* on paper plates and barley tea in plastic cups.

Steven started chewing the rice balls wrapped around with seaweed, with gulps of tea in between. Everything tasted delicious. Maybe because he was hungry after the hard physical labor he was not used to. Or maybe it was because of the air, the sun, the persimmon trees, the smell of the earth and vegetation. Or maybe because of the company, the feeling of family.

After three *nigiris* and two cups of tea, he took a breather and noticed that Haruko and Chieko were watching him, smiling. He became self-conscious and said, "I was hungry."

Haruko did not respond to him directly. Instead, she said, "You fit in very well." The admiration in the words also told him that he did not need to be sorry. Emboldened, he reached over and grabbed another *nigiri*.

He had taken a bite when the words, 'fit in' popped in his head. What did Haruko mean? That he was a natural to be a farm boy? No, she was wrong. It was not natural for him to work in a vegetable garden. No. But the implication was not offensive. Actually, it seemed to be attractive. He liked the idea, even though only for a moment.

After lunch, they had only another hour of work. In the end, their handiwork had left a clean half acre ready for planting in the next season. 'Who will do the

planting? Will there be anyone here to do that?' Steven wondered.

Not he. Not Chieko. Certainly not Noboru, he was too sick. Haruko? But she was too old. Steven threw a glance at her and was surprised to see a contented smile on her face. Maybe she was sure the garden would be replanted even though she would not be the one to do it.

* * * * *

Steven opens the window curtains and looks out. The image of the dilapidated Hasegawa house forms on the canvas of the dark hillside. Then he sees a white ghostly figure emerge from behind the hill. He hears it say, 'I'm coming home.' He watches the figure slowly enter the house and disappear. Finally, after midnight he goes to sleep, but the image must have stayed in his mind, because he dreams it. It looks so much like Chieko.

* * * * *

The sun was high up in the sky when Steven woke up. Must be about eight. Steven's muscles ached, all of them. He sat up on his futon, stretched, and looked at Chieko lying beside him. Her eyelids twitched and her face was strained. It looked like she was pretending to be asleep.

"Are you going to get up?" Steven asked.

"I think I will lie here for the next century. I hurt all over."

"A cup of tea will cure that."

"I don't think so."

Just then they heard the phone ring downstairs. They ignored it. It had to be for Haruko.

They heard her, "*Moshi, moshi.*" The normal greeting was followed by alarm in her voice, "What? When? ... I'll be right over."

The click of the phone being put down sounded unusually loud.

Chieko jumped up. "Something is wrong. I'm going down," she announced.

Steven too felt something unsettling and also a need to support Chieko in whatever it was she would be facing. "I'm coming with you," he said and rushed after her.

They found Haruko hurriedly putting on her street clothes.

"What is it, mother?" Chieko asked.

"That was the hospital. Your father is in intensive care."

"What happened?"

"Another stroke, this morning."

Steven saw Chieko shake all over and open her mouth as if to speak but no words came out. He pulled her toward him with his left arm, held her close to his chest, and said to Haruko, "But he was tested yesterday. They would have called if there was any problem with him."

"Strokes are sudden," explained Haruko

Steven understood. He also understood that there was no need to understand the whys and the hows, there was only a need to act. And act he did, "We'll go with you. Please call a taxi."

The three of them were in the hospital within an hour. They were not allowed to see Noboru immediately. They waited and waited. They did not know when the morning turned into noon, then into afternoon.

It was about three when a doctor came to talk to them. It was not much of a talk. The doctor talked and they listened, "You may see him now. But remember, he does not look good."

Steven did not know what it meant, so he asked, "Can he recognize us?"

"I think so."

Haruko and Chieko were already moving toward the intensive care ward before the doctor could finish his short sentence. Steven rushed after them.

They found Noboru lying motionless, but his eyes were open and there was a glimmer of recognition on his face.

Chieko sat at the edge of Noboru's bed, looked at him, and said, "We came

as soon as we heard. You'll be okay. It's a good hospital."

Noboru's lips moved as if he tried to say something.

Chieko asked, "What?"

Noboru's lips moved again, very slightly.

"Home? Did you say home?"

There was no lip movement this time, but Noboru had a twinkle in his eyes.

Everyone understood. Noboru wanted to die at home without any more medical intervention.

The word 'home' reverberated in Steven's mind. It seemed to have a meaning which he had never conceived before. Home was not just a structure which could be discarded after use. It was a place defined by life and death. It could never be discarded.

Noboru came home against the objections of his physician. He was so bedridden that there was no need to modify any part of the house for his wheelchair. But the hospital provided a nurse to visit him daily for necessary medical care which the family could not provide. Even that proved unnecessary. Only one day at home, Noboru had another stroke and died.

Haruko fainted. Chieko tended her while Steven watched helplessly. A few minutes later Haruko regained consciousness and started to move about like a robot in slow motion. Her face was completely expressionless. Yet, she took control of the situation and made funeral arrangements, stoically. She presented an image of a courageous woman who carried out her social responsibilities even in the face of extreme loss, even with turmoil within that no one could see.

After the body was cremated and the ashes put in an urn for later burial under a memorial tomb, Haruko became withdrawn and wandered in the home aimlessly. She cried almost all the time and refused to eat. It seemed like she was trying to die and be with her husband in death.

Steven did not know what the future held for Haruko. All he knew was that he and Chieko would be leaving her behind, alone. Would she be able to carry on her lonely existence? She might not, so he offered, "Come and live with us."

But Haruko did not accept his offer. “This is my home. I intend to die here,” she said.

Perhaps the answer and the philosophy behind it changed Haruko, and she started to resume the chores of daily living.

About a week after the funeral, Chieko was helping her mother go through Noboru's things, his wardrobe, his papers, and his cherished objects mostly from the war period, in an effort to decide what to keep as mementos and what to throw away as meaningless junk. Chieko came across an envelope bearing her name in Noboru's handwriting. Curious, she opened the envelope and pulled out a piece of paper which turned out to be a letter Noboru had written to Chieko about three years after she had married Steven but never mailed. It was a short letter which made Chieko cry:

Dear Chieko:

You are a sweet daughter and I love you very much. But you broke my heart into a thousand pieces by marrying an American. Even though I never approved your American lifestyle, I forgave you for pursuing it in the past, and I must forgive you once more, simply because I cannot stop loving you. I want to see you badly. But I am hesitant to ask you to come, because I don't know how I would react to your husband. If I never see you again, I hope you will have a happy life.

Your father

Chieko wondered why the letter was never mailed. She showed it to Haruko and asked, “You know anything about it?”

“No. But we talked about your marriage several times. I think he never sent it because he thought you might take it as an invitation. And he did not want you to come for the reason he mentions in his letter.”

“Then why did you ask us to come, overriding his decision?”

“When I thought he might be dying, I felt you should meet each other, no matter what.”

“I'm glad you asked us to come. I think my father accepted us.”

“I think so, too. I think he passed away peacefully, knowing that his daughter married a good man and is happy.”

At that Chieko pressed Noboru’s letter to her heart and had an unrestrained cry.

About a week later, Steven and Chieko prepared to leave. They could not believe their experiences while in Japan. They had come to cheer everyone up. Instead they ended up participating in a funeral.

They said their good byes and got into a taxi for the nearest train station.

Before the doors closed, Haruko stretched her hand with a key into the cab and said, “Take this. You may want to come someday when no one is here.”

Steven was sitting on the same side of the car where Haruko stood. So he took the key but wondered, why was she giving it to them?

When Haruko withdrew to the sidewalk, the taxi driver closed the door electronically and put the vehicle in forward motion. Steven turned his head and looked out the window. He saw a lonely, forlorn figure, holding on to a wood post on her *engawa*, receding and getting smaller, until it became just a dot which, too, was swallowed up by houses and trees.

“What should we do with this key?” Steven asked Chieko.

“I don’t know,” Chieko answered in a tone which indicated, ‘We don’t need it but we can’t just throw it away.’

Not knowing what else to do, Steven put the key in his coat pocket.

* * * * *

Steven is shaken awake. He opens his eyes and sees Mitsu jumping on top of him, saying, “Time to get up.”

The sunlight filtering through the window curtains tells Steven that indeed it is time to get up. But for what? Oh yes, he remembers, to take Mitsu to see the Hasegawa home and garden.

While Mitsu is in the bathroom, he orders room service. He sits in a chair at

the dining table, waiting for Mitsu to come out of the bathroom, so he can also clean up before breakfast. While waiting, he taps on the table surface rhythmically and a vaguely familiar song prances upon his lips:

*Sakuras are born, radiant white,
Spreading fragrance day and night,
Intoxicating, but not for long,
Only the memories left in a song.*

Steven is startled because the song makes him think of Chieko, her face as pretty as the cherry blossoms. And he also thinks of her childhood photo. He turns his head in the direction of Mitsu's bed and sees it. The photo is lying next to where Mitsu has slept, leaving indentations in the bedding. Mitsu has slept with her mother. It is so sweet.

* * * * *

After they got home in New York, Steven asked Chieko to find out if she was pregnant. She purchased a home pregnancy test kit, didn't want to wait for an appointment with her gynecologist.

They were in bed when Chieko gave Steven the news, "It's positive."

Something good, actually great, came out of their trip to Japan which was otherwise mostly filled with sadness and heartbreak.

The first child. Chieko did not know what to do, but she did everything her gynecologist told her to do, including cutting down on her work responsibility. And she called her mother with the good news.

Haruko said, "I want to come and take care of you and the baby, before and after it is born. If that's okay with you."

"We'll love to have you here." Chieko was sure that Steven would have no objection. He had asked Haruko to come and live with them in the past anyway.

Of course, Steven was ecstatic when he heard about Haruko's request.

Steven and Chieko went to the airport and received Haruko. On the way home Haruko said to no one in particular, "The house in Mizue was gloomy without anyone but me. Now I'm in the midst of happiness again."

At that Chieko answered, "You can sell the property in Mizue and move in with us permanently."

"No, I can't do that. You were born and grew there. I have to keep it alive as long as I live. You can do whatever you want after I'm gone."

The baby was born in due course, healthy. They named her Mitsu. When the baby was about a month old, Haruko said, "It's time I went home. I have been away for about a year. The home, the garden, and the farm probably are in bad shape due to neglect. I need to revive them. But I'll come any time you need me. Also, call and write, keep me informed about the baby's progress. And come and visit me when you can."

After Haruko had left, Steven took upon himself the task of finding a nanny for Mitsu. He wanted someone who would be like a mother to Mitsu in every sense of the term. That meant she had to be bilingual and Japanese, so that the child could grow up fluent in the languages of both her parents and be a true Japanese-American.

He contacted a few employment agencies and took time to interview the prospective candidates. After he found one, he had Chieko talk to her, too, and to approve of the choice.

Things moved smoothly on all fronts for about two years, then, all of a sudden, a huge rock fell in the placid lake. The water was agitated, disturbed.

It was almost midnight. Steven was in the library preparing a legal brief. He heard a car door close outside in the driveway. He knew it was Chieko coming home in a taxi from the airport. That's what she always did when she went to DC on business. He went to the front door and opened it before Chieko could ring the bell. He saw her standing, holding her briefcase, shoulders slumped, and head bent. It seemed to him that Chieko was going limp and might fall. He

stepped out of the door and grabbed her in his arms.

“You don’t look good. What happened?”

He did not expect an answer and did not get any. He felt Chieko resting her head on his shoulders. He pulled her inside the door. Then he held her securely in his arms and walked toward the bedroom, Chieko putting one foot in front of the other, limply. After putting her on the bed, he said, “You look exhausted. You want some dinner? A bath? Anything?”

“No, I want to talk.”

“Sure,” said Steven and sat beside her.

“I don’t know how I made it home, I have been so distraught. Now in your arms I feel a bit secure. I heard something in the office tonight. Actually it was on the wire. It will be all over the place tomorrow.”

“What.”

“Two teenage girls, both 13, were raped and murdered in Okinawa. The local police say that the American airmen from the base did it. The base denies it. I, being a Japanese, have been asked to do an investigative report on it.”

“But, why are you so upset? You have been doing this kind of work for a long time.”

“Yes, but nothing like this. I’ve never investigated a rape-murder, and that of two teenage girls.”

“I see. ... So, when do you need to leave?”

“Tomorrow.”

“In that case, I suggest that you calm down and get some rest.”

The words sounded good, but they did nothing to soothe her. For that matter, even Steven was unsettled. Neither slept that night. They just lay there in each other’s arms.

The next day Chieko got ready for her trip. Steven decided to drive her to the airport. He took Mitsu along. Somehow that seemed like a right thing to do, to allow the daughter to bid goodbye to her mother, whether or not she understood what was going on.

Before entering the security area, Chieko kissed Mitsu and Steven, and said, "I'll miss you."

"Be back soon," said Steven, "And while you're in Japan, take a couple of days from your work and visit Haruko."

"Good idea," said Chieko.

After Chieko entered the security area, Steven had to deal with the screaming Mitsu who was also trying to wiggle out of his arms to be with her mother.

As he drove back home, he felt lonely and Mitsu sobbed intermittently and sulked quietly.

Steven received e-mails from Chieko every day to tell him about herself and the investigation.

Day one: 'Everything appears confusing. I might have to stay here longer than expected.'

Day two: 'I have been denied entry onto the Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, and so I have no access to the accused airmen. However, the local police have been very cooperative. Tomorrow I will interview the policemen who found the bodies.'

Day three: 'Policemen's account: Several calls were received into the police station at about eight pm from the residents of a neighborhood near the Kadena Air Base. The residents reported rushing to the windows of their apartments upon hearing screams from the street. They saw two white men, presumably American, grabbing and pushing two Japanese girls into a Jeep and racing away toward the beach. One resident got a cell phone photo of the Jeep and the abduction in action. The police rushed to the scene of the crime, then toward the beach area. It was about ten when they found the two girls, naked, bloodied and dead on a remote stretch of the beach. Their torn and bloodied clothes and other personal belongings were found scattered in the area. The girls were identified by their school ID's found in their purses. Their parents had been informed who reported that the girls had gone to the community center to see a movie and they must have been walking back home when the incident took place. The bodies

were taken to the morgue for autopsies. The medical examination report confirmed what was feared. The girls had been beaten, sexually assaulted, then choked to death. Several DNA samples had been obtained and it was believed that some of them belong to the rapists. The next day, in an attempt to identify the criminals, the police published the cell phone photo of the Jeep and the abduction, both in the local newspapers and on the TV. The photos were grainy and not clear, but they did the job. By the evening the police had a call from a bar at the beach which reported that their security cameras had recorded the suspected Jeep in their parking lot and the men who drove in it at about five, the day of the crime. The police let me see the security camera photos which were of better quality than those taken by the cell phone. The men were white, one dressed in khaki shorts and a gray t-shirt, the other in off-white cargo pants and a red polo shirt. The police interviewed the bar owner who reported seeing the suspects in his bar many times in the past but did not know their names.

‘Tomorrow, I’ll talk to the people who saw the abduction and the owner of the bar whose security cameras recorded the suspects and their vehicle.’

Day four: ‘Residents’ and the bar owner’s account: They told me pretty much the same story they had given the police. I went back to the police to find out if they had anything new. They did. They had talked to several bar patrons and found out that some of them had seen the men in question in the bar many times in the past, had talked to them, and had known them as Chris Knowles, and Thomas Biglow. The police then contacted the Base and requested that they turn the suspects over to them for questioning and possible prosecution. The Base confirmed that they had airmen by those names but insisted that they could not have committed the crime because, according to their records, they were on the Base during the time of the incident. Besides, if they had committed the crime, the Base would take an action, Okinawa police had no jurisdiction over them. The tug-of-war between the Okinawa police and the Kadena Air Base is continuing.

‘I need to find out how the suspects could be in two places at the same time.’

Day five: 'I went back to the bar where the suspects had been spotted and talked to a few patrons thinking they might know something about the Air Base and its operations. They didn't, but said that there were civilian employees at the Base who would. I knocked on the doors of the residences near the Air Base at random and, after identifying myself, asked the occupants where they worked. I found three men who worked at the Base, one as an English and Japanese translator, one as a lowly clerk, and one as a janitor. They were reluctant to talk to me for fear they would be punished and would lose their jobs but became vocal when I promised that their identities would not be revealed. They all told me something which surprised me. The airmen often sneak out of the Base for parties, drinking, and sex, in the city, many times with the help of the gate keepers. That explained how the airmen in question could be on the Base and also in the city simultaneously. I told the police about it without identifying my sources and suggested that they need to get the suspects' DNA somehow to make their case.

'The police seem to be unsure about how to do it. Maybe I will have to come up with an idea, a plan, and execute it. Actually an idea just popped in my head. I will go back to my informants who work on the Base and ask them to get something of the suspects' body, even a hair. That should provide DNA which could be matched with the DNA obtained at the crime scene. I will do this tomorrow.'

Day six: 'My report is done. It does not help the families of the victims, nor the police to prosecute the culprits. But it gives the full picture of what happened, who did it, and how. I also emphasized the need to get the suspects DNA somehow to provide incontrovertible evidence of the crimes committed by the airmen, whether or not they are ever prosecuted.

'I also put my plan into action. My informants were afraid to do what I asked, but when I explained the need to bring the criminals to justice and promised once more that they themselves would be safe because their names would not be revealed, they agreed to my request.

‘You know, I am going to get the DNA of the men who committed the heinous crime. Putting roadblocks in my way by the Base is not going to succeed.

‘So now I will call my mom and go to see her before heading back home. I miss you and Mitsu.’

Day seven: ‘My report has been published in The Herald. You can read it, although you have had the preview. The Kadena Air Base has already issued a condemnation of my report. It says that (a) it is false that airmen sneak out of the base and that the gatekeepers are complicit in it, (b) that the cell phone and security camera photos are doctored and do not provide evidentiary proof, (c) the local newspaper has always tried to paint the Base in a bad light by publishing criminal acts under the heading ‘Crimes Committed by Foreigners’ implying it’s the Americans, and this rape-murder incident report is just a continuation of the same thing, and (d) if this biased reporting and unsubstantiated police claims against the airmen do not stop, the Base may be forced to take legal action against the city, the police, and the news media along with their reporters.

‘The last item actually threatens me.

‘Anyway, I have called my mom and she says that she is anxiously waiting for my arrival.’

Day eight: ‘I am still in Okinawa. I have received a threatening message on my cell phone. Since it is my business phone, I guess its number is available to anyone who wants it. Anyway, I have turned over the threatening message to the police. I’ll stay here until the police investigation of the threat is complete, maybe another day. The gist of the message is: “One of your men has squealed. You won’t get the DNA, you bitch. But you will get something else.” It’s hard for me to accept what is happening, and even harder to think that my father was right about his assessment of the Americans, maybe not all Americans, but Americans nonetheless. I don’t want to believe it, but the facts scream against my belief.’

* * * * *

Steven and Mitsu have a leisurely breakfast. The days of work are over. He and Chieko have made money, lots of it. Money is not the reason to work any more. There are certainly many other reasons to work, but all of them seem meaningless to him, particularly since the tragedies.

The tragedies.

He is suddenly mournful

He closes his eyes to contain the tears. Two bodies float in them. They say nothing, but he can hear their gasps as they drown in the ocean of their hopelessness.

"You awake, daddy?" Mitsu asks.

"Yes, I am. Something got in my eyes," Steven says and wipes his eyes with a napkin."

* * * * *

Steven did not get any more e-mails from Chieko. Two days later, however, he got a disturbing call: "Sir, please pardon us to wake you up, because we know it is night time in New York. But this is important."

"Yes?" Steven was jolted by the call and answered it while rubbing his eyes.

"This is the Okinawa police. We obtained your number from Mrs. Chieko Hasegawa's belongings at her hotel."

"What? Where's she?"

"Sir, we are sorry to report that she has been shot by a person unknown."

"Shot? Where, when, how? Is she okay?"

"In front of her hotel by a man who, it seems, had been waiting for her to come out. After shooting her, he got into a waiting car, which raced away. Both the shooter and the driver appeared to be Japanese. It was about three in the afternoon, our time. We think Mrs. Hasegawa was going somewhere on

business. The whole incident was observed by the hotel doorman.”

“But, is she in the hospital? Is she okay? Can I talk to her?”

“Sir, she is dead. Her body is in the city morgue.”

The phone slipped out of Steven’s hand and rolled on to the floor. He sat there in bed, stupefied for a long time. Then he rushed to make arrangements for his travel to Okinawa.

To be with Chieko, even if with her body, and to complete the task that she had started. He, being an expert in international law, should be able to break through this hogwash of jurisdiction and bring the criminals to justice. He would make them pay for their evil deeds and not allow them to run to the shelter of the Base.

He reserved a seat on the first available flight to Tokyo. Then he instructed Mitsu’s nanny, “You know about Chieko. So, I have to go to Tokyo. Don’t tell Mitsu anything about it until I’m gone. I don’t want her upset like she was when Chieko left.”

After checking into an airport hotel, taking a bath, and changing clothes, he went straight to the city morgue. The attendant pulled a drawer containing Chieko’s body covered with a white sheet and left.

Steven looked at Chieko’s passive face and felt his legs giving way. He steadied himself by leaning against a wall. He stood blank for a few minutes, then was filled with rage, Chieko’s death would not be in vain.

Before leaving the morgue, he stopped at the front desk and said, “I’ll call you about the funeral arrangements, that’s if the body is ready for release.”

The girl behind the desk said, “It is.”

But more than the funeral, his mind was focused on Chieko’s murder. He wanted to know who did it and why?

So, he took a taxi to the police station. He met with the investigator and was told, “It appears that the murder was planned and carried out by a hired killer. We’re still looking for him and his driver.”

It didn’t tell him anything. So, he asked bluntly, “Could the Base be involved

in it?”

“Could be. We don’t know.”

Steven, still in rage, walked out of the police station, hailed a taxi, and went back to his hotel. First things first, he called a mortuary, picked out at random from the Yellow Pages. Cremation was to take place two days later.

Then he sat in his room, in a chair looking out the window, thinking. He even forgot to eat. By the time darkness fell and the city lights started to twinkle, he had a plan. He must get the suspected airmen’s DNA. His credentials might help him accomplish what Chieko could not.

The next day, he called the administrative offices of the Kadena Air Base and said, “I am Steven Thorp, an attorney from New York. I’d like to talk to your Base Commander.”

“What about?” The man on the other end asked in a gruff voice.

“About the recent rape and murder of two teen age girls.”

“Oh that. But we have nothing to do with it. You should talk to the police.”

“I have. They think that some airmen were involved. I do, too.”

“Sir, we have already given our answer to the allegations.” The phone went dead.

Now he knew it wasn’t going to be easy, but he wasn’t going to give up. Try a more powerful source to bring pressure on the Base to cooperate.

So, he called the American Embassy. Once more he used his credentials to seek an appointment with the Ambassador.

The receptionist, who answered his call, asked, “What’s this about?”

“About Kadena Air base.”

“Kadena Air base? Sir, this is American Embassy.”

“Yes, I know. But two airmen from the Base are suspected of rape-murder of two local girls. Our country’s image is tarnished. Perhaps the Ambassador can persuade the Base to cooperate with the local police. It might restore our reputation.”

“Sir, the Embassy does not deal with such matters. Good-bye.”

Steven came to the conclusion that he was all wrong in thinking that the bureaucracy would help him get justice. But there must be some legal basis to force it to do the right thing. He decided to consult with his senior partner about it, something he should have done to begin with. Then he realized that he had left New York without even informing his partner that he would not be in the office for a while, without even assigning his caseload to someone else in the firm. This was total irresponsibility. However, considering the emergency, he was sure that his partner would understand.

He called his firm in New York and got to talk to his partner. After he explained the situation to him and asked his advice, his partner said, “Steven, I know it is a personal tragedy and you are distraught. But what you are asking is not logical. There is no legal basis to force the Base to do what you want. Yes, I believe you that they are protecting the criminals, but we can’t compel them to provide the DNA of the suspects. Even the local police and the city administration have no power over the Base, not even our Embassy. The Defense Department and the Pentagon can intervene in the affairs of the Base, but they are only interested in protecting our country. The conduct of the airmen and their discipline is the responsibility of their immediate superiors. You understand? Let it go. Let’s hope that the police soon find your wife’s murderers. ... Take some time off after the funeral, get your wits together, and come back to work. In the meantime, I will take over your case load.”

Steven slumped.

He was the only one to attend Chieko’s funeral. As he waited for the ashes to be delivered to him, he thought of Haruko. Does she know? Maybe she heard about Chieko’s murder. She might have tried to reach him in New York, not knowing that he was in Japan. He must call her. Better still, he should call her and then go see her, take Chieko’s ashes with him and bury them in her village next to her father’s memorial.

He called Haruko.

When the phone was answered, he did not know how to break the news.

After he heard the third, “*Moshi, moshi*”, he had to say something, or else the phone was likely to go dead. He said, “It’s Steven, Haruko.”

“Yes,” came a very subdued reply.

“I don’t know how to say it...”

“You don’t have to say it,” Haruko interrupted, “I know. It’s on the TV, the radio, everywhere.”

Haruko sounded calm as if she had taken the news bravely. The sounds could be very deceiving. Steven heard a crash and the line was disconnected. It portended a problem. He called the police in the city nearest to Mizue and asked them to check on Haruko. He gave them her address and his own cell phone number.

About an hour later, he got a return call from the police station he had contacted. They informed him, “Sir, Haruko had passed out. We reached her in time, and she is in the city hospital recovering.”

Steven took a bus to Mizue.

As he sat in his seat watching the trees, hills, and homes pass by, he reflected on his perspective on life and death and decided, ‘Life did not end with death. Chieko could live on in his memories and in her village.’

Steven saw Haruko in the hospital as a frail, dejected woman. But she was alive, and the doctors said that she could go home.

Steven and Haruko came to the house in Mizue together. The same day in the evening, they went to where Noboru's monument was. Steven dug a hole next to it and buried Chieko’s ashes in it. Haruko looked on with wet eyes.

Steven offered, “Come with me. There’s Mitsu. You’ll have a part of Chieko with you. And you won’t be lonely.”

He saw the muscles on Haruko’s face quiver and then become still like the surface of a lake momentarily ruffled by a breeze. “Thank you, but no. Mizue is my home. That’s where my husband and daughter are. That’s where I want to die. And when I’m gone, the last of Hasegawas will be gone along with the Hasegawa home, farm, and garden.”

Steven understood. He had married a Hasegawa but he was not one.

Once more, as the taxi took him toward the city where he would catch a train for Tokyo, he saw a stooped figure, standing under the overhang of her house, getting smaller and smaller until lost behind a curve in the road.

Back in New York Steven faced another problem. As soon as he entered the house, Mitsu ran up to him and asked, “Mama?”

What was he to say? He looked at the nanny. She said, “I told her that you had gone to bring mama home. I said that to keep her calm. I’m sorry.”

He was sorry, too. But Mitsu had asked a question and he had to answer. And he could not lie like the nanny. So he said truthfully, “Your mom will not be coming home.”

Steven noticed Mitsu’s posture freeze, eyes become wide, and lips tremble without any words. He did not know if Mitsu knew what ‘not coming home’ meant. Still, he felt she needed comfort. He pulled her to his chest and felt her head on his shoulder. He took her to the bedroom, lay her down, and sat beside her, watching her face which seemed to have turned pale. A few minutes later he noticed Mitsu’s eyes close. After waiting a few minutes longer to make sure that she was truly asleep, he went into his study.

There he did not turn the lights on. He sat in a chair in the dark room. His heart was heavy, his throat had a big stone lodged in it, and his pupils wanted to burst out of his eye sockets. He had not seen this coming. Now that it happened, he knew what it was. Chieko had died seeking justice, and her adopted country had failed her.

Until now Steven had not known what loss was. He had known disappointments, but they were trivial and temporary. Losing Chieko was final. He was now aware that this kind of loss was inevitable and, in a strange way, it also defined life for those who were left behind. He had to accept this new loss, new reality, new life. Which meant that he had to become a mother and a father to his daughter.

Steven decided to quit his job. It did not define his life any more. Yes, he still

needed money but he did not have to work for it any more. His investment income was sufficient to meet all his needs.

A little composed with his decision, he went to bed and slept with Mitsu. In the morning he called his partner, "I'm sorry but I will have to retire."

"Retire? You are too young to retire."

"Actually you're never too young to retire. But you know, Chieko is gone. My heart is not in the job any more. Particularly when it does not prevent injustice."

"What do you mean?" Came a bewildered question.

"Never mind." Steven did not think anybody would understand what he meant.

Time passed. The nanny retained her job although her responsibilities were greatly reduced, because now Steven was there all the time doting on his daughter. Steven and Mitsu became very close. So close that Mitsu would not eat without Steven present, would not go to bed without his giving her a goodnight kiss, and would not go to nursery without his driving her to school.

They did not talk much about Chieko, the subject was painful to everyone. But it was brought into focus a few months later.

There was a call from someone in Japanese, "I am a neighbor of Haruko and visit her every day. Today, I found her dead. I know, you're the only family she has, I've seen you here. So I called you. Got your phone number in her belongings."

Another tragedy. Steven was speechless. A few moments later when he found his voice, he asked, "You know what happened? I mean how did she die?"

"Looks like she died in her sleep."

"Peacefully, I hope."

After the call ended Steven became numb. He sat looking at the phone and wondering, 'Did Haruko feel death coming? Was she sad that with her death the Hasegawa home, farm, and garden would also die? With Chieko gone and Mitsu thousands of kilometers away, did she feel there was no purpose in life? Was that

what killed her?’ He had no answers.

He felt a tug, a pull, somewhere in his consciousness. For what, he did not know. He shook his head, his body, as if it would free him from whoever, whatever, was there. It did not work. The pull, the tug was still there. But there were no more questions, disturbing questions. Maybe he had shaken them off.

Once more he had to fly to Japan, and once more without Mitsu, to take care of Haruko’s funeral. He made sure that her ashes were also buried next to Noboru’s and Chieko’s. There was a monument for Noboru. He must have monuments for Chieko and Haruko built, too. Later some day.

Two years passed.

The Okinawa police never found Chieko’s killer. And the two rapist-murderers also remained out of their reach. They were never again seen in the city. In the meantime the police stayed busy investigating numerous other crimes, robberies, break-ins, thefts, and of course, rapes and murders; almost all of them thought to be committed by American servicemen who were never caught and prosecuted.

Steven was not surprised. Disappointed, but not surprised. He understood that in today’s world, truth and justice were only slogans.

Then one day, he got a letter from the Mizue Community Center, threatening to dispose of the Hasegawa property. He must take care of it before they did; write the final chapter of the Hasegawa story. Even the final chapter of the love story that he and Chieko had started.

He must make another trip to Mizue and take Mitsu with him. Because this time she wouldn’t be exposed to any deaths. Because she must see her mother’s childhood home even if for just once, even if for the last time.

* * * * *

Steven and Mitsu get into the taxi which will take them to the Hasegawa house. Along the way, Steven asks the taxi driver to stop twice, first at a general

store to buy some water and snacks, then again at a nursery to get a persimmon plant. He puts his purchases in a shoulder bag. At their destination, they emerge from the taxi, Steven with his shoulder bag and Mitsu with Chieko's framed baby photo. They are wearing jeans, t-shirts, and sneakers.

"This is the house where your mom lived as a child," Steven informs Mitsu.

Mitsu looks at the facade curiously.

Steven also scans the exterior of the house. It's in bad shape. He knows it. With some work it can be made habitable, but the Community Center most likely will demolish it and put some modern building suitable for group activities for seniors or children or some other group. He looks beyond the house where there is the family farm. He has never been there, but from his talks with Haruko he knows its general location. He thinks it can be used to grow crops, to make a modest living. The Community Center might use it as a cooperative farm for the whole village. He turns his head in the direction of the garden in which he and Chieko had worked a few years ago. It can be revived. The Community center might use it as a gardening project for anyone who wants to learn to grow fruits and vegetables.

Mitsu proceeds to enter the house hesitatingly. Steven hurriedly unlocks the door. They enter with careful steps.

"I want to pick a few things, things important to me. You, too, can take anything you want," Steven suggests.

"I can?" Mitsu quickens her steps.

Steven knows exactly what he wants, the cup with sakuras painted on it, the floor cushion on which he once sat, the Beatles record, 'Yesterday', the futon with big flower decorations all over, and a porcelain figure of a Shinto god similar to the one in front of which Haruko had prayed. Mitsu finds a few kimono clad dolls in a cupboard. That reminds Steven of the kimonos he had seen the day before. He runs upstairs and takes a few of them from their drawers for Mitsu to wear sometime in the future, maybe.

They put their finds next to the front door to be taken to the hotel when they

are ready to go back.

Then Steven, followed by Mitsu, walks to the left side of the house where there is a storage shed. It is open and is filled with garden tools. He picks a big shovel for himself and gives a trowel to Mitsu and says, "Now we go to the garden."

They walk on the dusty muddy trails. They meet a few villagers and exchange 'konichiwa' with them.

A few minutes later they arrive at the garden. It is completely overgrown with weeds. But Steven can still spot the little hill made of farm waste and the mound on which he had lunch with Chieko and Haruko. There is a monument to Noboru, and two small mounds next to it where the ashes of Haruko and Chieko are buried. The Noboru monument is untended and dirty. He feels he should clean it. But what for? It will get dirty again in a few days after he leaves and will probably be dug up and discarded like so much debris after the Community Center takes over the property.

He ignores it and walks right into the garden through thick brush, Mitsu at his heels. He stops in front of Chieko's persimmon tree. "This is the tree your mother planted," he tells Mitsu.

Mitsu looks at it, starting from the base and slowly lifting her head to see the top, and says, "It's big."

"Yes. It's a persimmon. It was little when first planted. It has grown."

'Grown', something pinches his heart for a moment. He turns his head to where Chieko's mound is. He walks back to it.

He puts his shoulder bag down on the ground. "Let's loosen some dirt around it," he says.

He starts to dig in front of Chieko's mound. Mitsu puts Chieko's photo on the ground and helps Steven with her trowel. In a few minutes there is a foot deep hole in the ground and the earth is soft around it. Steven opens his bag, pulls out the persimmon plant, and says, "This will be your tree. It will grow like your mom's."

He places the plant carefully into the hole, covers its root with dirt, and makes a round dam around it. He pours his drinking water into the dam.

He stand up, walks back a few steps, and looks at the tree. Mitsu copies him.

After a minute or so, Mitsu picks up her mother's photo and holds it against her chest.

Suddenly, Steven feels a pinch again.

He has a dialogue with himself:

'In a day or so, I will leave this place. This place where Chieko was born, this place where Mitsu was conceived, this place where there is Chieko's persimmon tree, and this place where Mitsu just planted her own tree which will soon die because there won't be anyone to feed and water it. And here I am giving this property to the Community Center.'

'But if I didn't, I will have to stay here with Mitsu. Right now it seems like she likes the place, but when she is a teenager or an adult, she may resent me for this decision and may want to leave this life behind, something like what Chieko did.'

'That's the pain I will have to bear, like Chieko's parents did. For now it is my responsibility to decide her future.'

'Future? What future?'

'Her happiness. One day I will dress her in a kimono and take her to the Meiji shrine and pray for her happiness.'

'As if that will work. What good did it do to Chieko?'

At that moment he feels a tug on his pants and hears Mitsu, "Daddy, daddy."

His inner dialogue is shattered and he is back to reality. "What?" he asks.

"Can we stay here? Mom's place?"

This time it is not a pinch, it is a stab in Steven's heart. That does it.

He looks around and finds a straight tree branch, about two feet long. Using it as a pen, he inscribes on the ground, near the dirt road, THE HASEGAWA GARDEN, in big letters. Later he will erect a permanent sign.

That's what it is, that's what it will be, at least through his lifetime.

He makes a mental note to call the Community Center in the evening from his hotel and inform them of his decision to fix the property and stay here.

That done, he turns toward the Noboru monument, bows his head, and says, “I am an American but I love your daughter. Life will grow again in the Hasegawa home and garden.”

He hopes that Noboru's soul is appeased.

Then he turns his attention toward the persimmon tree, the one Chieko had planted. A figure emerges in front of it out of thin air.

It is Chieko in her red polka dot blouse, blue jeans, yellow rubber boots, beige apron, and wide-rim straw hat. She is standing, her weight on her left leg, head tilted to the right, smiling mischievously, with the yellow pulp of the persimmon fruit all over her face.

* * * * *

About the Author



Rajendra Kumar, a retired psychologist, divides his time between writing, hiking, and traveling. Writing has been a passion with him since age 12. His work reflects unconventional ideas which rattle the cage of tradition. It also makes you, the reader, feel all kinds of emotions and prods you to think about a variety of issues.

The series:

This series of love stories presents many different ways in which humans express love, the most personal of emotions, and all the varied ways in which they experience its consequences, both sweet and sour.

This story:

Steven, an American lawyer is married to Chieko, a Japanese reporter. The couple is caught in a web of rape, murder, and bureaucratic wrangling and is victimized. Steven, because of his deep love for Chieko and his daughter, Mitsu, has to make the hardest decision of his life.