

MARNIE LAMB

MRS. FUJIMOTO'S WEDNESDAY AFTERNOONS

Mrs. Fujimoto takes her powdered green tea on the balcony at three o'clock on Wednesday afternoons from April to October. She has a standing appointment at one for a rinse and set. Her hair, a delicate helmet of curls, has retained the softness and lustre of youth. On leaving the stylist, she strides to the florist's, designer two-inch heels clicking, turquoise coat (a small, as always) swaying. Older men smile as she passes, younger ones open doors.

At the florist's, she chooses the freshest flowers, yellow chrysanthemums perhaps. Back home, she arranges them asymmetrically in the two-headed porcelain vase and places the arrangement on the mahogany dining table. She boils water and opens the tin with the powder. She adds two jade-coloured scoops to a cup, stirs the mixture with a bamboo whisk, and brings the cup out to the balcony.

The balcony faces a box-like building populated by low-level salarymen and foreigners, a view that is usually uninteresting to Mrs. Fujimoto. Instead she cranes her neck to the north, pinpointing the spot behind the NTT and Panasonic spires where she knows the temple garden lies. The honking of car horns and the yelling of schoolchildren below fade away as she imagines the winding pathway enclosed by azaleas, the spark of meeting a patch of irises in full bloom. Her face becomes slack. This slackening occurs only when no one else is present.

One Wednesday in May 2005, two things attract her notice. The first is a white camellia petal which has blown onto the balcony and lies at her feet, waiting. She caresses the flower, its texture soft and vulnerable as wet paper, and inhales the aroma. The second is a flicker from the opposite balcony. A new foreigner, a young woman, is bending over a washing machine. She peers around the side, lifts up the top, and looks inside. She steps back and stares at the machine. From the way the foreign woman coils her copper hair behind her ear and stands with one leg slightly bent, Mrs. Fujimoto concludes that she is shyly aware of her good looks.

When the foreign woman goes inside, Mrs. Fujimoto appraises the machine. She has excellent eyesight and can see that the machine is dirty and the hose to connect machine and tap is missing. The foreign woman comes out with a pile of clothes and begins stuffing them in the washing machine. Surely she realizes ... but she pours detergent on the clothes, replaces the top, and reaches for the tap. Water sloshes onto the floor, and a rogue jet shoots into her eye. She leaps back. The corners of Mrs. Fujimoto's lips twitch.

The foreign woman grabs the clothes out of the machine. She stamps into the apartment and hurls the door shut, leaving Mrs. Fujimoto amused. What did she expect? Has she never done laundry? Mrs. Fujimoto hasn't noticed the washing machine before and, later, discreet inquiries will reveal that the apartment was recently rented by an English-language school, which supplied the furniture. It isn't entirely the foreign woman's fault, then. She probably expected to find electric lipstick here, and they leave her with this ancient contraption? What stories will she take home to her country about Japan? *I thought it would be so modern, but they don't even have automatic washing machines.* Mrs. Fujimoto rubs the petal into shreds.

Sixty-four years earlier in a neighbouring prefecture, she plays on the beach with her friend Sakina after school on Wednesdays. Wednesday is Mayuko's day off. The other days are spent helping her mother, perhaps by shaving the dried bonito and stirring the flakes into the stock her mother is cooking.

But Wednesdays she and Sakina race each other to the beach, down the alleys crowded with hawkers shouting to bargain seekers, past the stench emitting from the cartloads of freshly caught yellowtails. The beach has sand the texture of ash. Savage little waves snap against the shore, spitting their juice onto her bare feet. To Mayuko, it is paradise.

This Wednesday, the wind pulls at Mayuko's hair and buffets the terns in their path across the grey autumn sky. Nearby, a group of boys are playing soldiers. The taller, more muscular boys are the Japanese army, while the younger, weaker ones are the Chinese resistance. Mayuko and Sakina do not want to play, despite being offered the role of Chinese girlfriends. They have rejected the Japanese army's gift of shiny stones.

The girls prefer the oddly shaped shells they collected last week, the prizes for this round of *jankempo*. "One, two, three," says Sakina. She points two outstretched fingers at Mayuko, who shows a flat open hand. "Ha!" Sakina exclaims as she snatches a shell. She looks at the boys, who are whooping

and spearing each other with willow branches. "Soon we'll have a war with the Americans. Because they won't let us have oil."

Mayuko considers. "My dad says war is bad. He says we should leave China and make peace with the United States. He says we should build things other countries want and sell those things. That's how Japan will advance." She emphasizes this last, new word, which leaves a glow in her mouth.

"Your dad's stupid. He shouldn't keep saying bad things about war. He's going to get in trouble. That's what my dad says."

"My dad is not stupid."

"Yes he is." Sakina turns to look at the boy soldiers.

"Can we play my game now?" Mayuko asks. A few days ago, she invented a game. She and Sakina would collect wildflowers and use them, with the shells and sand, to make ikebana on the beach. Mayuko has been thinking all week about the kinds of flowers she will use, how she will position them between the shells.

"Your game's not a real game. Real games have winners and losers."

Mayuko blinks away tears. "Race you to the big willow tree!" Sakina says. She leaps up and runs away, her foot crushing a small pink shell. Mayuko picks up the pieces and cradles them in her palm.

That night, Mayuko dreams of storms. The snapping waves become giant green monsters, thumping onto the beach, swallowing everything in their circumference. Shells, branches, children. Thump. Thump. Thump. Mayuko is awake and the thumping is coming from inside the house. She slides open her bedroom screen and walks down the hallway, stopping at the living-room screen.

Through the glow of a lamp, two figures are silhouetted against the screen. One is crouched on the floor like a rock. The other bends over the rock like a tree twisted by the wind.

"You insult the emperor. Why do you speak against the Japanese way?" the tree demands. The voice is unfamiliar.

The rock answers. The words are indecipherable, but the tone, low and measured, is her father's.

The tree raises a branch and strikes the rock. A shrill cry from across the room reveals a group of three figures, one struggling to free itself from the grasp of the others, like a sheep caught in a thicket. Her mother.

Mayuko's body trembles, but she knows she must remain still. Though she wants to burst through the screen, wielding a sword, and pierce the tree

so that sap runs to the floor, she must stay here. If she does that, the men will leave and everything will be all right.

“We know you studied at a university in Boston for three years. Are you a spy? Are you spying for the Americans?” Thump.

The low voice, laced with panic Mayuko has never heard.

“You will help the war effort. You will manufacture your lenses, and they will all be sold to the navy for radar. No more microscopes, no more cameras. Say that you will do this!”

“I will do it.” Her father’s voice is like the edge of a stone chip, hard and jagged.

The tree straightens and waves a branch. The sheep, freed, tumbles across the room to the rock. The screen is yanked open, and two soldiers stomp out the front door. The tree pauses to pull his khaki jacket taut over his waist, the gold buttons jiggling.

Mayuko shrinks into the shadows, but he turns and sees her. She feels a circle being drawn around her body, feels the force of the wave in his eyes, black as forest pools. He snaps his head forward and stalks out.

The Wednesday after the camellia petal, the foreign woman takes another pile of laundry out to the machine. Wednesday must be her day off, Mrs. Fujimoto thinks. Her eyes narrow as she peers over the top of her teacup. It seems she will no longer be alone in her contemplations. Yet this fledgling routine suggests a steadiness she would not have attributed to a foreigner.

Sometime between one and four on Monday, the washing machine was connected. Mrs. Fujimoto cannot tell the exact time, because she was at her *ikebana* class all afternoon. She has been studying at the innovative Ichiyo School for twenty years. Long ago she passed the advanced course. The next step would be to take instructors’ training. But she cannot abide the thought of blandishing neophytes into crafting inferior arrangements. So she remains in the advanced class, creating original, sometimes wild, flower sculptures, to the amazement of the other students and muted respect of the headmaster.

Namika cannot understand this interest. “Why fiddle around with a bunch of dead twigs?” she always says. She thinks her grandmother should undertake something zestier, like photography. “Photography! I don’t need to take photos. I prefer my memories,” Mrs. Fujimoto says. But then it’s hardly surprising that Namika does not appreciate the art. She prefers the flashy style of flower popular with the Hollywood celebrities whose weddings she

reads about. Roses, hydrangeas, carnations, with their shameless profusion of large red petals.

Mrs. Fujimoto's eyes follow the foreign woman. Yes, she will grant that certain physical similarities exist between this woman and Namika. The fine shoulder-length hair, the curve of the hips in tight-fitting jeans, the giddy way the foreign woman claps her hands when the washing machine finally starts to fill.

The foreign woman begins to dance. A crazy dance like a woman in a cup ramen commercial. Heels kicking her behind, arms crossing over each other as she punches an imaginary target. Then she stops, makes a fist, and pulls her right arm back and forth, a victory salute.

Mrs. Fujimoto glances around, wondering if anyone else is witnessing this display. That the foreign woman would dance by herself in a public place where anyone could see, all over a washing machine ... Such imprudence. Such wantonness. Such joy.

Mrs. Fujimoto sips her cold green tea.

The sun sparks off the newsstand's metallic sign. The date on the *Yomiuri* reads Wednesday, June 6, 1951. It is noon and Mayuko, along with two new friends, is strolling the main street of the city in that neighbouring prefecture. All three sport trendy polka-dot dresses with full skirts, but while the friends have opted for slim belts that cinch in their waists, Mayuko has wrapped a wide sash, obi-style, just under her breasts. The three swing handbags, coil hair behind ears, dash across the street to the record store.

On the empty lot beside the store, two American soldiers slouch against a shrivelled willow tree. Whiffs of smoke drift from the cigarettes between their stubby fingers, and reckless laughs flee their throats. Mayuko's friends whisper excitedly. She catches the words "Frank Sinatra." But to Mayuko these men do not resemble Sinatra. One has the spotty yellow skin and bloated belly of a fugu, the poisonous blowfish. The other resembles a crab, with his sunburnt face and gangly limbs.

Is it because of them that all this has happened, Mayuko wonders. That her father was beaten that night a decade ago? That, weary and dispirited, he recently sold his company to wealthy Mr. Hampton of Rhode Island? That her mother, weakened from post-war diphtheria, no longer has the strength to lift the big pitcher to water her irises?

A third man joins the others. He is not like anyone Mayuko has ever seen. His skin is pale and luminous as that of a peach, his blond hair soft

and wavy. His uniform hugs his slim, slightly muscular frame. From the tips of his long fingers dangles a three-inch wooden amulet. An amulet from a Buddhist temple. He speaks—his voice is low and sonorous as the murmur of the ocean in a seashell.

Fugu grabs the amulet, hangs it from his nose, and waddles around the tree. Crab cracks up. The third man smiles but his eyes cloud over. He grabs the amulet and cups it in his hand. The others guffaw.

She feels a poke in the ribs. “Go talk to them, Mayu.” Mayuko shakes her head. “Yes,” says the second friend. “Didn’t your father used to teach you English? Talk to them in English. Ask them their names.” “Ask them if they have girlfriends,” says the first. The two giggle.

Mayuko looks down. “That was a long time ago. I don’t remember any English.”

“Con-itchy-wall!” Fugu shouts. He and Crab beckon the girls. Mayuko’s friends titter, then scamper over. She follows, careful to remain behind them.

Fugu and Crab make several embarrassing attempts at Japanese, to the tinkly delight of the friends. The third man gazes at the amulet. Then Fugu notices Mayuko. “Geisha!” he exclaims, pointing to her sash. He and Crab look past the other girls to Mayuko, their eyes moving over her body like snakes slithering up and down hills. She looks at the pavement.

The other girls exchange looks. One fumbles in her handbag, pulling out a camera and gesturing to it. Fugu claps and shouts, and she shoves the camera into Mayuko’s hands. “Here, you take the picture.”

Mayuko retreats several paces and when she looks up, a tableau is in place. Crab in the middle, beside the tree, one drooping branch looking as if it is sprouting from his ear. Fugu slouching on the right. The girls in front, faces stupid with shy giddiness. The third man to the left, a couple of paces away, his eyes like blue topaz. Mayuko holds the camera to her face. His gaze intensifies through the prism of the lens. She names him Romeo. Romeo from Massachusetts.

Fugu shouts. Her friends exhort her to hurry up. She positions her finger on the button. At the last second, she shifts the camera so that Romeo is the focal point, cutting off her friends’ legs and slicing Fugu’s body in half. Click.

Her friends are upon her, their boldness evaporated, and she is pulled towards the record store. Nails claw into her tingly skin, bubbly voices hammer at the shell encasing her ears.

Two weeks later, the friend with the camera moves away. Mayuko never sees the picture.

The last week in June, the husband is in Switzerland on business, so Mrs. Fujimoto invites Mrs. Okada and Mrs. Inoue over to drink tea, eat dinner and watch the foreign woman. It will be a pleasure to linger over dinner, to not bother preparing a plate for the husband when he stumbles in from his after-work socializing.

She chooses her jewellery carefully, selecting the platinum chain with the emerald crane pendant. She will pair the pendant with her green suit. The jacket's scoop neck will allow the pendant to rest against her bare skin. As a young woman, she learned about the seven ages of women's skin from a magazine: silk, satin, cotton, linen, wool, crepe, and leather. While most of her contemporaries have reached the crepe stage, she remains at the linen.

Mrs. Okada and Mrs. Inoue arrive precisely at three. After so many years of friendship, they know better than to be early. They are not what their hostess would call cultured women, but they are docile and amiable, and at her age Mrs. Fujimoto cannot be bothered cultivating new friends. It takes too long to become accustomed to the rhythm of another's existence, the unchanging complaints, the irritating habits.

She shows the two women her latest arrangement, birds of paradise bent to resemble a bird taking flight, placed on a triangular plate. As usual, they ooh softly but ask no questions about the inspiration or technique. Mrs. Fujimoto presses her lips together and offers tea.

On the balcony, Mrs. Okada talks about her new English school; she changes them faster than most people change chopsticks. Today she is raving about the handsome Londoner who teaches her, his Pierce Brosnan looks and alluring accent. But this is nothing new. She poured out dithyrambs about a vegan with celiac disease who taught spelling by having the students form their bodies into letters.

Mrs. Fujimoto does not study English. As a child, she listened ravenously to the fairy tales her father read her. "Beauty and the Beast," "Rapunzel," "Cinderella." But when the war came, her father returned late at night, thin, haggard, with no time for stories, no motivation to speak the enemy language. As a teenager, she learned a little English, through grammar workbooks at school and at the movies with friends, giggling over the dulcet tones of the latest Hollywood heartthrob.

As an adult, forty years ago, she returned home after her father's death from a heart attack, to help her mother pack up the house. Her mother was preparing to move in with a widowed sister in Kyushu. The bookshelves contained hundreds of books, many of them English. "Take them," her mother urged. "He wanted you to have them." But when Mayuko looked at the nicked leather, she saw only the khaki of the soldier's jacket. She donated the books to a local library and never looked back.

Today, Mrs. Okada and Mrs. Inoue are fascinated by the foreign woman. She turns on the tap and then, as if responding to a sudden sound, dashes into the apartment. The telephone, perhaps. As the three women watch, the tap continues to run until streams cascade down the sides of the machine. The foreign woman runs out, shuts the tap and stomps in a puddle of water. Mrs. Okada and Mrs. Inoue tsk. Mrs. Fujimoto suppresses a sigh. It seems the foreign woman is not so steady after all.

Mrs. Fujimoto recounts the time the husband did the laundry, when she was pregnant with their first. He hung the clothes outside overnight—in January. The result was predictable. His face was almost as frozen as the tie he cradled. He had an important meeting that morning. Following her suggestion, he held the tie over the kettle on the gas burner she was heating for the breakfast tea. The ice melted and the steam straightened the wrinkles. "He obtained a promotion that day," Mrs. Fujimoto says with a conclusive smile.

The two women nod perfunctorily, then look across the street. "Why leave her with one of those awful old things? Surely they could have found an automatic one," says Mrs. Okada.

Mrs. Fujimoto coughs. She has several coughs, which vary in volume from a leaf rustling to a branch snapping in two. This one is a twig being stepped on, cracking a little.

Mrs. Okada's eyes dip down briefly. "Has anyone been to the movies lately?"

"Yes, I saw that new American film about Pearl Harbour. The lead actor, the one who plays the American general, is so handsome," says Mrs. Inoue.

Mrs. Fujimoto bristles. "Why do people continue to be interested in that? The war ended a long time ago."

The others study the painted twigs on their teacups. Mrs. Fujimoto inhales sharply. Why does she expect empathy from these women? What do they know about birds of paradise, nicked leather, frozen ties? She wants to slap them.

“More tea?” she asks.

“It is a good match for you, Mayu-chan. Just think about it.” Her father's voice is worn, like a stone eroded by centuries of pounding surf. Her mother's is that of someone who has tripped over the stone. “Put a little effort into your hair, Mayuko. Don't you know how many young men were killed in the war and the tuberculosis epidemic? You might not get another opportunity like this.” These voices overlay Nat King Cole's sensuous baritone, which emanates from the radio in the café opened last month.

On this Wednesday night, Mayuko waits at the table as the young man with the earnest grin and fuzzy eyebrows stands at the counter ordering coffee. Across the street is the record store. It has been two years since the photo, and Romeo has surely departed with the rest of the soldiers. She imagines his long fingers buttoning his olive shirt, combing through the pale waves of his hair, the dark fields of hers, unbuttoning her blouse ...

A splat of coffee scalds her wrist. She swallows her irritation and smiles at the young man, who apologizes and sets the cups down on the table. That evening he came to the house with zinnias (a symbol of loyalty, her mother indiscreetly noted), a business degree fresh from the local university, and a junior position in a new electronics firm. Never mind that the zinnias are orange, her least favourite colour, or that spittle foams at the corners of his mouth when he talks about his favourite baseball team. He is a nice boy with prospects. She should be grateful.

Mayuko and the young man sip their coffee, exchange pleasantries, and fall silent. His hands begin to shake, coffee staining the white tablecloth, his white shirt cuffs. His voice trips over itself, a series of compliments tumbling out, the most memorable of which is “You have very beautiful eyelashes.”

Mayuko could smile or nod, but she does not. As he stutters, she looks at the willow tree, which has shrivelled further. She wonders how much more it can shrivel before it dies.

She thinks of blond men from Massachusetts, a place where people surely have never needed to subsist on rationed gruel. A place of creature comforts beyond even nylons and lipstick. She sees a clapboard cottage, inhales the aroma of the purple irises outside the doorstep, hears the rumble of his laugh as he steps towards her.

She looks across the table and sees a young man with fuzzy eyebrows and prospects, smells his blend of sweat and cologne. If she reaches her hand only inches, she will feel his moist palm. The seconds pass with an almost audible click.

“Yes. I will marry you,” she says.

It is late July. A film of grey haze enshrouds the surrounding buildings. The air is broken only by the buzz of cicadas. The days melt into one another, and Mrs. Fujimoto imagines the black numbers and lines on the living room calendar dissolving into the white.

Mrs. Okada and Mrs. Inoue left to visit out-of-town daughters and will not return until September. Mrs. Fujimoto’s children, always busy with their own lives, are vacationing in Okinawa and Australia. The husband stays out later than usual after work. By the time he returns, Mrs. Fujimoto has withdrawn to her room, so they see little of one another. He is long past retirement age, but as a vice-president, he is indispensable to his company; this is what they tell each other. Even the foreign woman spends little time on her balcony. She has mastered the washing machine and emerges only briefly to drain the machine or change loads.

Mrs. Fujimoto knows that, like other housewives, she should be preparing for the festival of *Obon*, which celebrates the return of the ancestral ghosts. But this year she is irritated by the niggling details of finding the best incense for the family altar, or airing out extra futons in preparation for her children and grandchildren’s visit.

She thinks of Namika. Namika wants her grandmother to climb Mt. Fuji, to become a tourist astronaut, to do something huge that will disrupt her life, like a careless footprint on raked sand. Yet Namika is the only grandchild who notices her after the new year’s money has been doled out. The others are all too busy with soccer, hip-hop lessons, manga. To Mrs. Fujimoto, Namika is a red poppy: sweet, bright, a little wild. She will attend university, Waseda hopefully.

A horn sounds. On the street, a young Japanese man leans out the window of a white Honda. A Japanese woman is at the wheel, trying to manoeuvre the car into a parking spot. The foreign woman appears on the balcony, shouts to the couple, and disappears into the apartment. Two minutes later, she reappears in front of the building and hops into the back seat. The car speeds off.

Mrs. Fujimoto sets down the teacup with a rattle. She begins to pace the length of the balcony.

She wants to talk to the foreign woman, to tell her things it will take her months, if not years, to figure out. Where to go to experience the best tea ceremony in the city. (The ceramics museum, not the lotus temple, it’s too

crowded and touristy.) How you should never open the door to a man in a cable company uniform. (These “salesmen” have been known to be disguised *yakuza*.) How to deal with groping men on subway trains. (Embarrass them. Grab their hand, look them in the eye, and say “no.”) The foreign woman won't stay longer than a year, two at most. They never do. Mrs. Fujimoto feels an urgency to impart these pieces of wisdom before it is too late.

She continues to pace.

One Wednesday night, a few months after her father's death, she perches at the edge of the futon, watching her husband in the mirror as he fumbles with his tie. A small velvet box sits beside her. Outside, a drunken man hollers. She waits for the echo to fade before speaking.

“Why are you giving me this? It's not my birthday.”

His eyes rise to meet hers but dip at the last second, like a wave that cannot gather the strength to crash against the shore. “You deserve something special.”

She remains still, breathing shallowly. He turns. Their eyes meet, then his sink. He runs a hand through his oily hair. She waits. “I've done something,” he says. “With another woman. It was a few times only. I'm very sorry.”

A cry escapes her throat. She throws the velvet box at him, but it hits the edge of the dressing table and bounces to the tatami. A moan from beyond the papery walls, followed by the thump of someone turning over in sleep. One of the children.

She forces herself to whisper. “I've given you a son and a daughter. I cook, I keep this apartment clean, I don't question your decisions—”

“It's nothing you've done.”

“I buy the best clothing we can afford. I try to make myself ...”

“You are beautiful. But you're cold. I feel I cannot touch you. In any way.” She squares her shoulders. His voice hardens. “Most of my colleagues have done it at least once. It happens.”

She places a hand against her mouth, the satin of her robe tickling her chin, mocking. “My father would never have—”

“Your father was a different type of man. Look where it got him.”

She turns away, swallows the bile rising in her throat. After a moment, he picks up the box, creeps across the room, and sits beside her.

“I'm sorry I hurt you. Will you forgive me?” He holds out the box. “Will you accept this?”

The topaz bracelet is stark against its white pillow. Four stones. Four people in the apartment. She holds out her hand, and he fastens the bracelet to her wrist.

Later, she places the bracelet in her lacquered box, where it will be joined by other pieces. Three strands of Mikimoto black pearls, a rhodium watch with a diamond-studded face, an emerald pendant and platinum chain, among others. Each given with the same look of eyes rising and falling, each received with the same wave of bile rising and subsiding.

The first Wednesday in August, Mrs. Fujimoto realizes that she has run out of the powdered tea. Why didn't she notice this last week, so that she could have picked some up before now? She cannot be bothered walking to the back-alley tea shop in the stickiness of the afternoon heat. Instead, she takes the mail out to the balcony.

Two things are about to slice through the stickiness. The first is a brochure from the foreign woman's school. Bright blue lettering on glossy paper proclaims in Japanese, "Come learn with us at the Edelweiss School. We can teach you to speak English with confidence and ease." Mrs. Fujimoto's heart begins to pound as she looks at the smiling faces of the students and the foreign woman. Her name is Cheryl. Cheryl from Philadelphia.

The second is a flicker from the opposite balcony. Cheryl is standing at the edge, her hand shading her eyes as she gazes in the direction of the temple garden. Her face is slack. She turns and looks directly at Mrs. Fujimoto. They stare at one another. Then Cheryl waves.

Mrs. Fujimoto feels light and cool, as if she is hovering weightless above the sea. Seconds pass. Her body begins to sag. She tries to raise her arm but it is heavy as a sandbag. A fly lands on her elbow. She does not have the strength to shoo it away. Cheryl's arm slowly drops. Mrs. Fujimoto is pulled under by the sea.

A minute later, she resurfaces, and by the time she reaches land she has made a list of twenty things she must buy for Obon. With only days to go, she can complete the preparations, but not to her satisfaction. She has wasted too much time.