

A CHRISTMAS CAKE IN SPRING

by

D. R. Summers

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Chapter 1

Iron Face

I am *not* pretty. Men do not chase after me. Why do I say this? It's simple enough, really. It is the considered opinion of my one and only suitor, Mr Nobu Isono, a man who must be believed. In his place of work the secretaries call him *No-san*¹, a nickname which secretly he cherishes. Manager Isono is a man whose main joy in life is to refuse all favours, all requests, while inwardly his heart swells with pride at the misery he inflicts. He is, I am certain, the most insensitive pig God ever created. But his words – those cruel, crippling words – cling to me like leeches...

But that is enough torment for now. Let me stop and greet you properly before you feel obliged to ask all the usual questions: why do I not jettison the creature, ignite its necktie or, as my friend, Rika, frequently encourages, raise a knee abruptly and with determination when next it seeks to possess me..? My name is Asako Kurakawa. I am honoured to meet you and, in a strange way, am pleased that you have entered my life at such an auspicious time. It is true, there are no mystical signs or portents to suggest that matters of any great import are about to unfold. All I know is that my heart is beating to a different rhythm: a rhythm which heralds the arrival of chaotic change. For this reason, and despite my preference for isolation, I am glad, comforted even, that you will accompany me through whatever mayhem lies ahead. As for my appearance, my background, my hopes and dreams... Please allow me to defer any explanation of these until later. For the moment I feel the need to concentrate on recent events. A messenger approaches and, if I'm not very much mistaken, he bears news of the impending chaos I sense...

Today was never destined to be a normal day. I awoke with a start to the demanding clamour of my alarm clock, and even before my brain could recover from the shock, a merciless wave of stomach cramps threw me into a contorted spasm. They passed; I cursed my womanhood for the thousandth time then dressed. From my tiny apartment in a small hamlet of Tokyo known as Aoyama I then gazed out upon a rare sight – snow. Last year the city escaped without a single flake drifting onto its dull, grey pavements, but this: this was the result of a spirited storm and we have barely entered December.

It was six o'clock before I was forced to contemplate my next challenge: how to get to work. For most of the weekend I'd busied myself preparing many special documents at the request of my boss, Mr Morton Barraclough, an Englishman with a pleasant enough disposition.

'It's very important,' he'd explained, trying unsuccessfully to conceal a heavy burden of anxiety. 'Inconvenient, I know, but if you can bring the files in by 7 a.m., Monday, I'll make it up to you, I promise.'

Widely respected as a man of his word, I knew he would honour his pledge, but it was an unnecessary inducement. I enjoy my work and was happy to oblige. That, of course, was before I knew the city was destined to be snowbound and the air filled with radio waves bearing news of delayed or cancelled services.

According to the Japanese calendar today is *not* a favourable day. I am not by nature superstitious, but there was the inclement weather, my painful awakening and, when I opened my apartment door, having decided that an early-morning departure might favour the

¹ genderless honorific form of address much like Mr, Mrs, etc.

prospect of a stray taxi prowling the streets, I encountered my third misfortune: a parcel of dry-cleaning delivered by a local merchant. A section of its plastic wrapping had split open, giving the snow free reign to saturate one of my favourite blouses. Indeed, it would not be a good day!

During the autumn and spring seasons I prefer to walk to work. The route is neither especially attractive nor the rush-hour hustle and bustle in any way relaxing, but Tokyo's morning air can still be invigorating – if a stiff breeze succeeds in dispelling the ever-present exhaust fumes, that is. My journey normally takes no more than 20 minutes at a determined walking pace, but despite the temptation to savour today's magical scene and even more magical silence, I instead successfully 'captured' a taxi. It was my first good fortune of the day: it would have been foolish to reject it.

As the taxi driver weaved in and out of the warren-like back streets, his stolid determination to fulfil his fare clearly etched across his weather-worn features, my mind had succumbed to the overheated atmosphere and drifted. It was irresistible. Reality ambled over to its well-worn seat just off to the right toward backstage, while imponderability pirouetted into the spotlight.

Modern existence: the strangest of conditions. From birth to death we constantly struggle to meet the demands of both mind and body. I want food. I want money. I want love. I want fame. I want, I want...

So what do we humans do? Well, the only thing that satisfies the incessant crowing, of course: we learn to communicate. Then, having acquired the ability to speak or sign, draw and write, we're fully equipped to persuade, coerce, argue, threaten, lie, and occasionally negotiate, for what we want.

You are troubled, I can tell. But there is no need to be. It's just the beginning of a game I like to play. I select someone I know or have just met then award them points in the various communication categories, both civilised *and* uncivilised. As for results, they're not often encouraging, although thankfully there *are* one or two exceptions. And trends? I have only ever discovered one. When it comes to lies and deceit the male of our species wins an enviable haul of medals every time.

Oh dear, listening to me now, you've probably concluded that I'm a lonely, workaholic, man-hater with a skunk for a boyfriend. All I can ask, then, is that you do not judge me too hastily. In time you will discover that only one of those descriptions is wholly correct.

On this occasion, however, it wasn't long before I was forced to abandon my mind game, as one too many blocked back streets and a selection of unhelpful police signs launched the taxi driver into 'complaining' mode. Out of politeness I listened and even sympathised, but at the same time I couldn't help but ponder the reason behind my weekend 'homework' and early attendance at the office. Was a day devoid of good fortune so designated by my ancestors and a series of minor inconveniences a prelude to something much worse: disastrous even? I didn't know, but a mounting sense of apprehension was brewing in the pit of my stomach and that has never before been a good sign.

Much to my relief after 30 minutes the taxi finally skidded to a halt in front of my office building – a non-descript structure like so many others hastily constructed in the early 1970s: grey, unimaginative, one of a thousand other clones. Due to the early hour I was then obliged to enter via the security lodge and present myself for inspection by the infamous Igarashi-san, security officer second-to-none, expert on all known topics in the universe and an inveterate lecher. He followed his usual routine: unnecessary interrogation, signing of the register and the odd veiled remark about female clothing, which roughly interpreted reflects his ardent belief that all women under the age of 70 should be strip-searched if they wish to pass through his domain. A treat at any time, I can assure you, but on today of all days a special

pleasure! My deadpan response drew the expected expression of disdain, and I imagined the words parading through his microscopic brain.

‘Lesbian... Frigid... Ugly... Spinster.’

Strange that this middle-aged specimen will never understand the strength of my desires, the passion I feel for music or the intensity with which classical prose affects me...

It was in the very instant that I successfully cleared my security review that fate began to crank the giant handle which urges its fabled machinery into life.

‘*Ohayō gozaimasu*,²’ a friendly voice called out from behind. ‘Thanks for being so prompt. I really didn’t think you’d make it given the bad weather.’

‘Good morning, Barraclough-san,’ I responded, turning. ‘I believe you had a good weekend?’

My English boss, apparently oblivious of my remarks, smiled then ushered me towards the main lobby in what can only be described as a clandestine manner.

‘Sorry,’ he whispered. ‘Captain Igarashi understands little English, but what he lacks in linguistic prowess, I’m sure he makes up for in imaginative storytelling.’

It was a curious comment, but before I could seek clarification he encouraged me to precede him into the elevator and advised me to pay his unusual behaviour no heed.

During our short journey I stole a glance at his profile and concluded instantly that he appeared as one about to meet Madam Guillotine. How unsettling! I cannot deny that Morton-san sometimes gives the impression of being a tormented soul: of someone trying hard to conceal some deep-seated anguish or pain; but this... I couldn’t help but shudder.

At our journey’s end he gave me a second brief smile, repeated his thanks and warned me that later in the day I may be called upon to provide interpretation services at some unspecified meeting. He then touched my shoulder – a matter of no concern, except he had never done so before but clearly regarded the gesture as the best way to convey a deeper mark of gratitude than could be expressed by mere words. And from that point on my curiosity slipped its leash and began to prowl... So, you can imagine my excitement and anticipation when Nigel Lyndhurst, one of two other British expatriates working in our company, literally stumbled into Morton-san’s office only moments ago.

Nigel-san, the ‘pretty boy’, as many of the office girls call him, is no more than 26 years old and currently on assignment to the President’s Office as part of an international management training programme. He is tall even by Western standards, has over-long blonde hair, azure-blue eyes and the smile of a habitually naughty boy. Regarded as endearing by some of my sillier female co-workers, he has been in Japan less than six months and is already suffering from an acute case of yellow fever. Not the virus-mediated disease, I hasten to add, but perhaps an equally dangerous condition: a sexual fascination for all girls of oriental extraction. The term, I know, is derogatory and crude, but as a ‘foreign import’ I find it mildly amusing.

From my desk I can just see past the partially closed window blinds and into the office now. In contrast to Nigel-san’s animated speech and wild gesticulations, Morton-san remains calm: his expression and manner slowly but surely calming the fire consuming his young compatriot. This is as I would expect. It may benefit you to know that Mr Barraclough – ‘our leader’ as he is affectionately known – has worked with us in Japan for almost five years. Currently head of our marketing department, he is widely tipped by those who love to speculate to become president when Yanagihara *Shachō*³ retires either by choice or by instruction in two years’ time.

² polite form of good morning

³ company president

As abruptly as Nigel-san arrived he departs, his eyes wide, his lips taut. All around me I can hear whispers swelling like a giant wave. Men and women alike, consciously or unconsciously, have all been smitten by the hand of intrigue.

The gaijin⁴ are anxious. There must be great trouble travelling on the wind.

So it is said and therefore so it must be.

Fortunately for the company's productivity, lunchtime is soon upon us, effectively releasing the floodgates on my colleagues' desperate need to spread the 'news' throughout Japan. And on this point I make no jest. Sales offices, distributors, contacts and clients from Hokkaido to Okinawa will, within the space of 45 short minutes, be fully appraised of the impending 'trouble'.

Today, as on most days, I remain at my desk during lunch. Surrounded by grey metal cabinets and the synthetic wooden surface of my section manager's desk – my own personal cocoon – I consume the contents of a commercially prepared *bentō*⁵ and submerge myself in private thought.

'Submerging' is a national trait – you might have noticed that. Whether on trains, on buses, at home or in the office, we Japanese have the extraordinary ability to shut out our surroundings and push the world aside with no more effort than that needed to flip a light switch. As for myself I am a Grand Master, although I must admit my circumstances in the office facilitate my talent. As a junior manager I command a work area slightly larger than that of the general staff and in a location marginally less cramped. Far more importantly, though, in addition to my normal duties in technical sales and marketing I was recently appointed personal assistant to Morton-san, a role that carried with it relocation closer to the row of senior management offices and the audio-visual bonuses there inherent.

So what shall I consider in my cocoon today? Perhaps the short story I'm reading by Yuuko Tsushima or maybe the new *koto*⁶ piece that's causing me so much trouble. No, I can't focus at present! Something light and amusing instead perhaps. Something like... Yes! The funny shape of No-san's—

'Sorry to interrupt your lunch, Kurakawa-san, but...'

Oh, what a terrible shock! Morton-san's stealthy approach caught me completely off-guard. I cough, smile, and hope he cannot detect my acute embarrassment.

'I know I'm already in your debt,' he continues jokingly.

'But,' I mimic his initial remark, still trying to collect myself.

He laughs.

“‘But’ indeed... Regarding my “standby” warning this morning... Well, there's an important meeting tonight in the boardroom. It starts at six. If you can make it, I'd like you to interpret for the foreign contingent.’

He pauses and it is obvious that further explanation in the open office would be difficult.

'That's fine,' I interject promptly. 'I've no important meetings this afternoon, so you can call on me at any time to discuss the details.'

It is now five thirty-five and I sit alone among the empty chairs, silent overhead projector and place-marked table of the boardroom: the site of all great decisions. An overly romantic description, perhaps, particularly the part about great decisions... But, upon reflection, I shouldn't be disrespectful or cynical. My apologies.

Alone, though, I am, having received a request from 'our leader' to meet him here at five forty-five for our pre-discussion briefing. And yes, this is another worrying occurrence. In the past all such sessions have taken place well in advance and without exception in the company

⁴ foreigner (lit. outside person(s))

⁵ lunch box

⁶ Japanese harp

library. Add to this the fact that a fourteenth, as yet unmarked, position has been set at the table, and no longer does my curiosity prowl, it paces.

Five forty-five has marched onto the parade ground, stood to attention and saluted. It is now five forty-six and for the first time in my memory Morton-*san* is late. Pacing now gives way to stalking.

As my mind runs out of control, speculating and fantasising, my eye settles on the old conference table before me. Unlike the other furniture in our office, this piece is an authentic, wooden creation apparently crafted some 50 years ago by an old master carpenter – a relation, so it is said, of our current president. This table pleases me, and although I am an infrequent visitor to this hallowed sanctum, I think the table is pleased by me. It is an odd statement to make, I know, but I have always felt a strong affinity, a bond even, with the antiquity of nature. Mountains, trees, rivers, seas: all physical marvels of our strangely metaphysical world, each in its own way alive, inexorably linked and ever-watching. Watching as the seasons change and the centuries roll by; watching as man and animals walk, climb or sail upon their mighty limbs. As for this old oak table, who knows the life of its parent tree? How many winters it witnessed change into spring before sadly it fell victim to the cruel axe? However steel alone could not vanquish such a powerful and ancient soul. No, its spirit lives on – I can sense it!

So there, you have learnt something new about me. I'm a little crazy. Set me apart from my fellow man, charge me with a compelling emotion – apprehension, concern – choose what you will, and voilà! My poetic sensibilities overtake me. But make no mistake, I truly believe that because I am aware of my wooden companion here, he or she is not only aware of me but also is gratified that their existence is both recognised and appreciated...

Suddenly a door opens, shaking me from my introspection, and board members flood through it in silence, their faces filled with trepidation.

I glance at the wall clock. Six p.m., of course. But where are Morton-*san* and the mysterious visitor?

Answers to both questions are provided before the participants have time to locate and occupy their seats. A second door adjoining the president's office slowly opens and through it, like a trio of military commanders, marches the guest, our president and 'our leader'.

Morton-*san* takes the seat at my side, smiles briefly and whispers an apology.

I am no longer in any doubt that the situation is serious. All faces are glum; the atmosphere is thick with tension and foreboding. Grim matters must be about to unfold, as evidenced by Morton-*san*'s prolonged presence in the president's office. An unscheduled and urgent meeting that overran: the clear reason behind the cancellation of my briefing.

Yanagihara *Shachō* is about to speak, but in mid breath he is distracted by the appearance of his secretary at the door, beckoning him. During their brief exchange 'our leader' talks to me in a low whisper – a more elaborate apology for not keeping our appointment. As he speaks I feel compelled to recount to you my impressions and what I have learned so far about this 'pleasant enough' English gentleman.

At 40 years of age Morton-*san* is very young to hold such a senior position in a Japanese company. However he is a clever man. A scientist and engineer by training, he is a fluent speaker of four languages including Japanese: a natural gift, he once told me. Although most foreign businessmen tend to be clones in both appearance and manner, 'our leader' does not entirely fit into this mould, but for reasons I cannot quite describe. He is, after all, not an exceptional specimen: six feet tall with a passable physique, he is well groomed and always immaculately dressed, as you would expect. If I were forced to speculate on the distinguishing features responsible for his individuality, however, I believe I would choose three: his head, his hands and his neckties. The first item of the trio is perhaps the most significant. It is topped with a dense covering of fine, light-brown hair, has eyes, both dark-

green but remarkably transparent, and is wrapped in a smooth veneer of pale white skin. As for finishing touches, my favourite is his friendly, honest smile and my least favourite, the inexplicable absence of chin stubble at all times. Hands interest me, and Morton-*san* is blessed with a pleasing combination of long, artistic fingers and dry palms which emit an aroma akin to fresh sea air. And finally there are his neckties, which are always of intriguing design: perhaps a pattern of hieroglyphics or a montage of musical notes, and a cunning blend of strong and subtle colours.

There now, you have learnt yet another of my traits. When it suits me I like to pay attention to detail.

Needless to say, there is more to tell about this man than mere appearance, but the president's secretary is leaving and Morton-*san*'s final words are ringing in my ears.

'This won't be easy. Just do your best.'

I would not say so myself, but my colleagues consider my knowledge of English and my ability to interpret to be quite exceptional, if a little overly classical in style, and I suppose, there is some truth to this accolade, as I do feel most comfortable among the words, phrases and nuances of the Bard's beloved tongue. In the present circumstances, however, I suspect it will be my ability to interpret the vagaries often inherent in the Japanese language when bad news is conveyed that will be in demand tonight.

Finally Yanagihara *Shachō* begins his long awaited speech. After a brief preamble he pauses while I am instructed to sit behind the two gentlemen requiring my services. Then the lid of Pandora's Box is slowly raised.

Our stern-faced visitor is introduced as Mr Akira Kimura, president of the Karato Corporation in Japan. This company, based in Sapporo⁷ is a subsidiary of an American conglomerate of the same name which, although not exceptionally well known to me, is clearly recognised by all those around the table. Karato business interests are many and wide-ranging including plastics, chemicals and microelectronics, but their primary focus is metallurgy, a theme which can be traced back to the company's origins in the late 1930s.

My interpretation causes Nigel-*san* to smile.

'Great,' Jason, his colleague, moans, rolling his eyes expressively. 'All very interesting, all very nice, but what the hell has it got to do with us?'

My young friend has a point, but if he can check his impatience for just a few more minutes he will, I suspect, surely learn that which Nigel-*san* has already guessed.

Yanagihara *Shachō* concludes with a gesture towards President Kimura that he may assume the floor. His wrinkled face is taut as he sits back in his seat. He conceals sadness, anger, perhaps even fear. I can feel his pain.

Now it is the turn of President Kimura, an older man than his counterpart – perhaps 65 years old or more. His expression is fixed, stern. He does not harbour sadness, anger or fear. No, this man contrives only to conceal arrogance born of a sense of inflated superiority. He is the victor, we the vanquished...

And thus it is so, for the world of Domarin Technologies, our beloved company, is about to end. Secret discussions in the US and the UK have led to a prospective merger agreement to be formally announced tomorrow.

Words continue to tumble from the victor's lips: guarded words with double meanings.

Nigel and Jason glare at me intently, anxiously awaiting my famed insight. I glance at Morton-*san*, his eyes grant me permission, and so reluctantly I explain.

Karato wishes to venture into the medical arena. Initially it has targeted diagnostic testing and, as leaders in the field, Domarin is the obvious acquisition. And the reality? We are the

⁷ capital city of the northern island, Hokkaido

subject of a hostile takeover, Karato in Sapporo will reign over a new empire of slaves and, as always when such conquests occur, there will be many casualties.

As if part of a well-rehearsed double act, Yanagihara *Shachō* once again grasps the 'speaking baton'. He promises a more detailed explanation, ample opportunity for questions and, to round off this initial merger meeting, a slide show to introduce Karato and its future expansion plans. First, however, we will have a short coffee and cigarette break, cued by the arrival of two of our more attractive office ladies manoeuvring refreshment trolleys into the room.

Nigel-*san* swears, shoots an exasperated glance towards 'our leader' then shrugs. 'Karato,' he pretends to muse. 'Doesn't that mean empty head in Japanese?'

The ordeal, for that indeed is what it is for all except President Kimura, drags on interminably. After two hours I suddenly feel an acute stab of pain striking the back of my neck, injecting hot liquid fatigue throughout my body and soul. Fortune, however, smiles upon me, for the slide presentation begins: a US headquarters' creation and hence thankfully in English. My 'clients' agree that they can manage even though the explanation will continue in Japanese, so at last I can rest.

As the pictures flash before me in rapid succession, the underlying message takes form and builds upon itself until there can be no doubt in anyone's mind. Karato is all-powerful. Images of the grand sites that pepper the globe are impressive. In many cases the slides contain pictures of smiling employees in the foreground, obviously delighted by their salubrious surroundings, smart uniforms and the chance to star in the corporate propaganda machine. Soon the faces of enthusiastic drones give way to facts, figures, plans and forecasts. All are equally spectacular and all obviously a wafer-thin veil waiting to be drawn aside to reveal true horror: the organisation chart. Streamlining, efficiency, waste reduction, re-engineering – the well-worn words and expressions used by management and consultants alike to disguise a single message: in Queen's English, redundancy; in American English, downsizing; in Japanese, cultural disintegration.

For the 20th, perhaps 30th, time I survey the faces of my Japanese colleagues: proud gentleman to a man. Nine sets of eyes stare as if mesmerised by the flickering screen, yet few, if any, see people, buildings or charts. No, they are looking at themselves; not as happy, smiling, Karato managers, but as men in their sixth decade of life, experienced, respected and empowered, soon to be judged, found wanting by default, and eliminated.

An overly bleak scenario, you say. Perhaps so, but consider the alternative. Survivors there may be, but like all those to whom fate grants a reprieve, they will never be the same again. Unless a Domarin president emerges triumphant their days under the new regime will be miserable and almost certainly numbered. In the end I can imagine no survivors: only a set of honourable resignations. As for the trio of Englishmen, two are already speculating on exciting opportunities in the US... But not so the third!

Morton Barraclough sits straight in his chair, his expression set, his hands gently resting on the table. What an interesting sight! He seems the only man in the stricken Domarin troupe not willing to yield at the first assault.

How puzzling. His stance is, of course, not wholly surprising. It is in his character to display loyalty and protect his own. Nevertheless, he has a wife and young child, and is often the target of head-hunters both in Japan and overseas. Why stay to fight a losing battle?

The answer, however, immediately assails me as if I were engulfed by a rushing mountain stream. Morton-*san* cares. He actually values the welfare of others above personal ambition. Saint or fool, his intent is plain. He will stand firm against any generic plan that unnecessarily threatens our company or its employees. Stand and, if need be, fight.

I just conclude that in a local battle of wits Morton-*san*'s bright mind and excellent if sometimes unorthodox Japanese language skills could afford him the narrowest of victories when the slide presentation ends, and with the final image – a picture of the Karato company logo – still emblazoned across the screen, Yanagihara *Shachō* speaks. He tries to sound enthusiastic about the alliance but fails. He expresses his belief that the two companies can work together as equals to forge a new, stronger business, but no one believes him. It is then that I notice the light from the exhausted projector streaming across the old conference table, and for the briefest of moments I gain the impression that the table is silently weeping. Madness, I know, but as I focus on its illuminated surface there is clearly no mistaking the pattern. Behold! Outlined in the wood grain are two eyes: narrowed, sorrowful, and forming in their corners a steady stream of tears...

And so the meeting ends.

As the dejected line of men file out into the reception area 'our leader' draws his chair alongside mine.

'Pretty horrendous, eh.' He sighs. 'Once again, I'm sorry for leaving you unprepared, not to mention in the lurch.'

I accept his apology with a slight bow and listen carefully to the potted account of events he has obviously rehearsed for my benefit. It is as I'd surmised. The Karato attack materialised from nowhere, catching everyone off-guard. As the senior foreign manager he was charged with handling international logistics between Japan and the centre: an unenviable task, I've no doubt. Due to the ever-present spectres of press leaks, insider trading and malicious rumour, secrecy was of paramount importance; urgent, ad hoc meetings a given.

As he concludes his account his voice drops and he whispers in my ear.

'You did a marvellous job. I'm very grateful. I have to say, though, you definitely have stiff competition in old Mr Kimura.'

We exchange knowing glances and, after bidding me a safe journey home, Morton-*san* follows on after his colleagues.

'What did he mean by stiff competition?' you ask.

It is simply an office joke at my expense, but between Morton-*san* and I it has become an early sign of friendship in our working relationship.

You would like to know the story? Well, I am tired and my head aches, but I suppose it will take only a few more moments...

Shortly after Nigel-*san* arrived in Japan, Jason joined the accounts department on another training programme. I call the pair twins, for they resemble each other quite closely both in appearance and manner, and although I am sure there are distinct differences I choose not to explore them. 'Young boys' hold little interest for me. But I digress... During his first month Jason-*san* and I attended a number of the same meetings, and being the only woman present I attracted both his attention and his crude attempt to describe my appearance in Japanese based on his, then, only six lessons. The result was an expression which, having been unfortunately overheard, was avidly broadcast throughout the company.

Tetsu no kao, roughly translated means iron face.

When made aware of his faux pas an embarrassed and contrite Jason-*san* approached me to apologise, explaining that his intention had been to describe my expression as strong. Needless to say, the nickname attached itself to me like a limpet and through secret whispers has continued to amuse my friends – so called – and foes ever since.

Now I must return home. If I do not bathe soon I fear my skin will succumb to the grime of this long day and crumble to dust. There is, however, one observation I feel compelled to make before I go. President Kimura is no threat to my title. He is its new owner.