

A Trip to Singapore

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Mariane's call came as a surprise, and her invitation for Susan to visit her in Singapore an even greater one. They hadn't been particularly close during the six years they had inhabited the same city in southern Japan, where they had practically been neighbours, and they hadn't met each other for five years. Susan wasn't sure she even really liked Mariane.

The two were complete opposites. Susan was a plump and placid American; her greatest ambition was to keep her house sparkling clean and to put good meals on the table each night for her husband and young daughter. Mariane was lean and lanky, a pretty Australian with a broad mouth that often widened into a gap-toothed smile set in an attractively angular face. She was outgoing and popular and fond of going out with fellow ex-pats, spending at least one night a week at a bar with 'the boys,' as she called them: fellow ex-pats working at local language schools.

The two women had first met at a special gathering of a club for foreign wives married to Japanese. Mariane's husband Shin was a man with a wide smile, tailored suits and good English who worked as a salesman for a large multinational company that had a branch in their city. He liked to go out drinking with his own friends, mostly company colleagues. Susan was married to Tak, a quiet and burly individual with a crew cut, whose real name was Takehito. Tak was the manager of a division of a local agricultural cooperative and had lived in Canada for a year, so he could also speak English well. Susan and Tak had met through the local branch of the Salvation Army.

The two women had laughed and chatted but the antagonism between Shin and Tak was palpable. Though they had just met, the hostility was instantaneous and fierce. Susan could almost see her husband's short hair bristling, and she noticed Shin clenching and unclenching one fist.

On their way home, Tak was repentant. 'There's something about that man,' he confessed. 'He got my back up from the start.'

Susan took his hand and squeezed it reassuringly. 'No need to apologise. He looks like a used car salesman. *Ugh!* I would have credited Mariane with better taste.'

Tak smiled gratefully.

'Mind you,' Susan said, 'there's something of the attention seeker about Mariane, too. Those gaudy clothes she wears. That gap in her teeth.'

'That was down to God,' Tak said. 'Let's remember our faith and pray for her.'

Susan shrugged and suppressed her wish to retort that there were orthodontists in the world. Mariane's marriage was in trouble; there was no doubt in Susan's mind about that. It was obvious to her almost from the start.

But Shin and Mariane seemed the picture of marital harmony when they met her at Singapore Airport one bright March afternoon. They were even holding hands. The small propeller plane had taxied to a spot near the arrivals hall, and a mobile stairway was wheeled up to the plane's front exit door.

Susan had left a rainy and chilly Japan. Before her departure, she had checked the weather in Singapore and tried to pack and dress appropriately, but she was surprised and dismayed to step from the plane into temperatures so high that heat waves shimmered off the tarmac.

She swayed slightly, feeling faint. She saw Mariane and Shin from the top of the stairs as she clutched the railing. They were standing by the bus that would convey them all to the terminal building. He was dressed in yellow shorts, a pink tank top and a panama hat. *Car salesman*, Susan thought. But Mariane wasn't much better. She wore a purple sarong tied low. Her long hair was swept into a French roll, and her hoop earrings were so large they brushed her bare shoulders.

Susan looked down at her own clothes. The long beige canvas skirt and sky-blue frilly blouse chosen with such care only days earlier now looked frumpy, more appropriate for an English tea room than for a tropical paradise.

'Susan!' Mariane's bright red lips opened in a broad, gap-toothed smile and she enveloped her friend in a tight embrace. 'I couldn't *wait* for you to get here! I was so impatient that I *forced* them to let us come right out here to greet your plane.'

Susan smiled and tried to reciprocate Mariane's enthusiasm. Mariane was treating her as though they had always been bosom buddies.

When Susan had cleared Immigration and collected her bag, they emerged into brilliant sunshine. Shin was at the wheel of a blue van, and there seemed to be at least one face peering out from every window. Then Susan remembered; how could she have let something so important slip her mind? In the five years since she had left Japan, Mariane had had two more children. Now she had four boys, ranging in age from fifteen to two.

At her approach, the boys leapt from the van. The three elder children held back, smiling at her shyly, but in no time the youngest was pawing at her like an enthusiastic little animal.

'JJ!' his mother scolded him. 'Please stop touching my friend with your dirty hands.'

Susan looked down. The toddler had a chocolate bar in one hand that seemed to be melting. He had left a brown smear on her new skirt. 'It doesn't matter,' she managed, despite her dismay. 'How *cute*! You have to tell me all their names again.' She smiled at the children with what she hoped seemed like friendliness.

'You'll remember Rowe, the eldest. He was born just a month before your Claire. Then there's Shaw and Kento and the youngest is JJ.' Mariane smiled. 'That is, after my two grandfathers – John and James – but we call him JJ.'

Susan solemnly extended her hand to the four boys, one by one. She noticed that Rowe looked completely Japanese, Shaw, almost entirely Western, and that Kento and JJ were notably Eurasian.

By this time, Shin had got out of the van. Susan smiled at him and shook his hand. 'Thanks so much for having me,' she said, and she extended her present, an elaborately wrapped and beribboned box containing a type of chiffon cake with a sweet black bean centre that Mariane had assured her was Shin's favourite Japanese treat.

Thirty minutes later they pulled into a large parking lot abutting a sandy beach crowded with restaurants and food stalls. Shin recommended a place that featured what it termed 'New Californian Asian' cuisine. Mariane insisted on ordering for them all, and she shoed them outside the air-conditioned interior to deck chairs on the balcony. Susan would have preferred to sit inside, but she contented herself with moving her chair nearer a beach umbrella, managing to position herself completely in the shade and with a view of the sea. Shin tried in vain to keep the boys from stripping off their clothing and rushing into the water in their underwear.

Mariane finally emerged, bearing a large tray. She looked at Shin reproachfully. 'Gone,' he sighed. The three of them toasted each other with mugs of cold beer before beginning to sample the delicacies Mariane had chosen.

'I can't believe Tak actually let you go,' Mariane said, smiling mischievously. 'You two always seemed joined at the hip when I was living near you.'

It's only for four days,' Susan said. 'And Tak has a new secretary at work. He told me he'll be busy for the next two weeks training her and that this was the perfect time for me to get away. And now Claire's at high school I've become an embarrassment to her.' Susan was surprised to hear the sadness in her voice. She tried to speak more brightly. 'Anyway, she's off on a school trip, so she won't miss me at all.'

The two women chatted until Susan could bear it no longer. 'Shouldn't somebody be watching them?' she said, nervously, looking from Shin to Mariane. 'The boys, I mean. Supervising. Checking they're okay?'

Mariane sipped her third beer appreciatively. 'They're perfectly fine,' she said. Intercepting Susan's dubious glance, she added, 'They look after each other. Brothers, you know.'

An unkind thought popped into Susan's mind: *Mariane can pop out babies like nobody's business but then she loses interest.* No, she thought, that was unfair. And ungrateful. And probably all down to envy. We would have loved another child, but it just never happened. Tak says it was God's will.

When the four boys finally appeared, dripping wet and ravenous, faces flushed by the sun, Susan dug the fingernails of her right hand into her palm, nearly drawing blood, to punish herself for lacking generosity of spirit. She was further chagrined when, before they ate, each child presented a cheek for Mariane to kiss, saying 'Thank you, Mummy'. They obviously adored her. Their father they ignored as, carrying laden plates, they raced each other to a beach table several metres away. Shin sat with a fixed smile, staring at the ocean and drinking deeply from his mug of beer.

Susan tried not to feel disappointed. The house was smaller than she'd anticipated. Somehow she had conjured up a vision of a tall, white columned building surrounded by tropical foliage in extensive grounds. But twenty minutes after they left the beach, Shin drove down an undistinguished residential street and stopped at an iron gate set within a cement wall. Mariane jumped out to open it and he drove in, parking under a carport attached to a rambling, one-story house covered in vines.

A young dark-skinned woman rushed out to greet them. She smiled shyly at Susan and herded the children into the house.

'Our maid, Nina,' said Mariane. 'From the Philippines.' She saw Susan's look of surprise. 'Everyone has servants here.'

A tiny room off the kitchen that looked like a pantry turned out to be Nina's bedroom, and the photograph of a little girl with a sad smile and lustrous black eyes was pointed out to her as Nina's daughter, left in Manila, in the care of her grandmother. Susan learned that Nina was the financial mainstay of her family back home, sending most of her maid's salary to them every month.

'Nina insists on ironing everything,' Mariane said. 'Don't be surprised if she returns your underwear, neatly pressed and folded.'

Nina was up every morning at dawn to prepare their breakfast. Susan's room was just off the kitchen, and she could hear faint stirrings of movement as the palest light appeared in her windows. When she finally emerged from her bedroom, Nina would already have blended a variety of exotic fruit juices and baked small rolls to be served with butter and jam, and fried eggs and bacon. Nina would also have done the laundry and ironing, and even packed

lunchboxes for the three elder children to take to school. JJ attended a nursery school in the neighbourhood that provided cooked meals.

Shin was conspicuous by his absence. Apart from that first afternoon of her visit, when they lazed by the beach for hours, he was scarcely to be seen. He was gone before Susan opened her door each morning, to find two or three of the boys lying in front of it like puppies waiting for her to take them out for a run. He usually got home after Susan had retired for the evening.

Mariane was the perfect hostess, insisting on taking Susan to all the tourist sights. They'd gone to Chinatown and Bugis Street and taken photos of each other in front of the Merlion statue. One afternoon they visited Raffles Hotel and had Singapore Slings on its broad veranda before making their way to the Botanic Gardens. They met some of Mariane's ex-pat friends, confident and successful individuals who lived in the best neighbourhoods, their big houses next to mansions occupied by Chinese businessmen.

One morning they visited Changi prison. Mariane sat on a bench outside, chatting to a friend on her cell phone, while Susan bought herself an admission ticket and attached herself to a tour group made up of middle-aged and elderly Westerners with pink faces and wide hips. The guide, a beautiful young woman in a sari who spoke perfect English, first led them to a large, forbidding-looking door in the complex.

'Please let me know,' she said, 'if any of you have heart problems or suffer from panic attacks. As part of our Changi museum prison experience, I would like you to spend two minutes in an internment area where the Japanese held men, women and children for days and even weeks after the fall of the city in 1941.'

'Two minutes?' said one man dismissively. 'I'm sure we can all stand it *that* long.'

The door opened into a dark, oppressive, tunnel-like space. The tourists were invited to sit on benches that lined two windowless walls. The door was closed. There was no light and no sound. Within seconds, Susan felt she couldn't breathe. She lunged for the door and beat at it frantically with her fists. 'Please let me out!' The door opened, and the guide extended her hand sympathetically. Susan could hear muffled giggles from the people still sitting in the tunnel.

'Mariane,' Susan said on the way home, 'I found that tour upsetting...'

'Me, too,' Mariane replied, needing no explanation. 'The memories the locals have of the Japanese are so difficult to reconcile with my experience of them when I lived in Japan.'

'I know,' said Susan, relieved the topic had been broached. 'A more polite people can't be imagined.'

'So gentle. So considerate,' Mariane added.

'And there's the fact we're both married to Japanese.'

'And that our children are half-Japanese.'

'Since living in Japan,' Susan said, 'I've tended to think the Japanese are perfect. When I compare them to people in the States, I always think, Americans *bad* and Japanese *good*.'

'Me, too, with Australians.'

'But during the war some Japanese obviously acted like monsters.'

'Or many of them did. The mystery of human existence. Maybe that potential for cruelty exists in us all. Shin says he thinks Japanese are so polite *because* they know the brutality they're capable of.'

The next morning was bright and hot, and Mariane proposed a trip to a tiny island. Susan felt fat and uncomfortable, an unpleasant sensation she had often experienced since her arrival. She couldn't help comparing herself to the Singaporeans, all looking cool and slim and dressed so elegantly.

'Have you heard from Tak at all?' Mariane asked as she drove. 'Any calls?'

'Not a one,' Susan said, with a worried look. 'It's very odd. He said he'd ring. He must be so busy at work. Mind you,' she added, her face clearing, 'that's not so unusual. March is the end of the financial year in Japan. Everyone is frantically rushing about, filing taxes and things.'

Mariane brought the car to an abrupt halt in the ferry parking lot. 'Susan, do you know I envy you?'

Susan was gratified and surprised. For her, nearly all the comparisons that could be made were in her friend's favour. Mariane had four children and she, only one; Mariane had a husband obviously earning a generous salary, a maid, and she lived in a large, comfortable home in the exotic splendour of Singapore where her bi-racial children could have their English fostered to native fluency level. Tak, on the other hand, earned a regular salary as a government employee, but it certainly wasn't much and in recent years, with the recession hitting Japan, his bonuses had been cut. For all Susan's efforts, Claire had only a rudimentary English-speaking ability. Their house was small and ordinary. Susan did all the housework.

'But how? But why?' she spluttered.

Mariane looked at her, but it was only when they were seated on a little wooden boat smelling of fish and petrol that was pattering to a wooded island visible in the distance that she answered.

'You've been a good wife. It hasn't been easy, I know. I have grave doubts about the wisdom of Japanese and Westerners marrying. We have such different expectations of marriage. Tak seems so...so...*dependable*. So reliable.' Mariane gazed at the sea intently, as if seeing it for the first time, and a tear made its way down her cheek. 'I don't know if you realize that Shin gambles.'

Susan tentatively put her arm around her friend's shoulder but then withdrew it as Mariane continued to focus all her attention on the sea, as if she was counting the waves. 'You shouldn't envy me and Tak,' Susan said. 'We're comfortable, but the romance died long ago.' She hadn't meant to blurt that out. She and Tak hadn't had sex for years. They jogged along in the same old rut, more like brother and sister than man and wife.

She sniffed, suddenly feeling tearful, and breathed in the salt tang. She fished out sunglasses from her bag and occupied herself with looking at their fellow passengers: old men with bamboo hats smoking cigarettes and tired-looking women clutching plastic bags of shopping.

On their arrival, Mariane seemed to recover her spirits. 'Let's rent bicycles,' she suggested. 'I know a place just by that little shop.'

They set off on big heavy bicycles. Pot-holed dirt roads traversed dense jungle. There was a fresh breeze underlain by the tang of petrol, but the heat was intense, and sometimes the air seemed to tremble with humidity. The rasping of cicadas rose to a deafening chorus, stopped, and then resumed. They came to a pen holding three brown-and-white goats and a small row of dusty wooden shacks with fruit and vegetables for sale and an assortment of tiny, clouded bottles of soda. Flies swarmed above the produce. *Who would buy any of this?* Susan thought, but then Mariane walked away and got them two Cokes. She and Susan sat on the peeling ramshackle bench outside the shop.

'I used to meet my lover here,' Mariane announced suddenly, taking a deep sip of her Coke through a faded red straw. 'On this island, I mean.' Then she gave a loud hoot of laughter. 'Your face! You look like I'd just told you I'd *murdered* a man.'

Susan blushed. Mariane's gap-toothed grin seemed to signal more than ever a woman of dubious morals. 'But it's a sin. You're married. You have children.'

Mariane's face darkened. 'Oh, it's not just me. Shin has lovers, too. He not only gambles with our money, *and often loses it*, he sleeps with other women. Lots of them.' She scowled. 'Some of them so-called friends of mine.'

Earlier, Susan had admired the long-sleeved peach-coloured caftan top Mariane was wearing. Now Mariane lifted one sleeve to reveal a vivid purple bruise. 'And he pinches me when he's angry. Where it won't show, of course.'

They set off again. Susan was afraid to say anything. Mariane seemed to be a woman possessed, cycling rapidly down the dirt road as if pursued by demons, while brightly-coloured birds, startled by their appearance, swooped up, with a leathery sound of flapping wings, from dusty bushes and trees.

Susan found the exuberant foliage daunting. Branches stretched out menacingly. Yellow and blue butterflies hovered over fleshy red flowers. Spiders had woven webs above their path. The women had to swerve their bikes to avoid small green lizards and the occasional tiny black snake wriggling in the dirt. It was like being in an endless green tunnel whose sides pressed in on them. Susan felt suffocated. The plants and bushes and trees seemed to have sucked life from the very air, leaving only a sticky vapour in its place.

Finally, just as Susan felt she couldn't go any further, her lungs bursting from the unusual exertion and her legs aching, she saw that Mariane had stopped and dismounted. She looked back at Susan, flushed and panting.

'Sorry,' she said. 'Somehow I felt I *had* to get here, and as soon as I could.'

Susan wiped her face with her handkerchief and looked at a tall brick wall covered with a thick tangle of vines.

'This is where I used to meet my lover,' Mariane said, leading Susan to a small hole in the wall obscured by the foliage and then down an overgrown path past what must have been formal gardens. The old house might have been the residence of a high-level colonial officer. It was a large, two-story substantial brick dwelling facing the sea.

'We used to go up there,' Mariane said, as they entered, indicating a large, elaborately carved wooden staircase, 'but then we noticed the floorboards upstairs were disintegrating. It was simply too dangerous.'

The building was dark and dank inside and smelled of something Susan couldn't identify.

Mariane entered the spacious but gloomy living room with the careless ease of possession. A big stone fireplace was festooned with cobwebs. Just beyond the windows, all miraculously intact although the glass was cracked in places, a broad verandah afforded a stunning ocean view.

Susan gasped. 'This must have been magnificent!'

'Yes,' Mariane murmured absentmindedly, absorbed in her own thoughts. 'Of course, there were lots of servants to attend to every whim.' She gestured to the dim space visible beyond the staircase. 'There's a huge kitchen, and an ice house at the back. Life must have been good.'

'Until the war,' Susan said. 'I can just imagine it, see them all with stiff upper lips, dressed in pressed white linen, sitting out on that verandah waiting for the Japanese to arrive.' She peered through the streaked glass. The ocean was calm and a soft blue. There was no clear line between it and the sky. 'They must have been expecting to see warships, never guessing their invaders would arrive by bicycle through the jungle of the Malay Peninsula.'

'It's so odd that we've married the *enemy*! And found they're human. Just like us.'

Susan was going to reply, but she suddenly noticed tears streaming down Mariane's face. 'My lover and I were *happy*!' she said. 'And now it's all over.'

Susan felt unable to ask any questions. Was her lover Japanese? Australian? Someone from Singapore? *Married*? And why had the affair ended? She walked up to her friend and held her in a silent embrace.

Susan appeared at breakfast the next morning, her hair in Singapore, with a bright, cheerful face. 'I've just had a call from Tak,' she announced. 'He's fine. And abjectly apologetic for not being in touch before.'

Mariane smiled. 'I'm so glad!'

'It's just as I thought. There were several deadlines at work. Everyone's had to stay late and even work on the weekend.'

'And Claire?'

'She's fine, really enjoyed her school trip. I'm hoping she'll come to the airport with Tak to meet me.'

JJ, who was running a temperature, lay down his spoon and looked disconsolate. He and Susan had struck up an unlikely friendship. She no longer cared whether he dribbled on her or stained her clothes with his dirty hands. 'You go soon?' he asked, his face drooping with misery.

Susan scooped him up in her lap and cuddled the boy's fragile little body. She lay a cool hand on his hot forehead and felt a wave of sadness. 'Oh, sweetie, you must come visit me in Japan. *Soon!*' It was ages since Claire had been so needy, so affectionate. Susan only realised now how much she missed it.

Before she left, Susan gave Nina an envelope with a considerable sum of money in it and said she hoped she could see her daughter again soon.

Despite his fever, JJ insisted on accompanying Mariane when she took Susan to the airport. As she passed through the departure gate, she looked back at her tall, attractive friend and wished she could dart back, just for a moment. She wanted to apologise to Mariane for having always judged her, and so unfairly. She longed to hug that little boy one more time.

The official examining her passport looked up sympathetically, noticing the tears in Susan's eyes. 'Nice visit?' he asked. 'Sad to leave?'

Susan shook herself, trying to regain her composure. 'The heat. I won't miss this dreadful heat.'

The arrivals hall was nearly deserted when Susan finally emerged from Immigration and Customs in Osaka. She put down a suitcase bulging with souvenirs with a loud thump.

And waited. It was odd. Tak, usually so reliable, was seriously late.

Susan was consulting with a tourist information clerk about buses to their city when Tak finally appeared. He looked exhausted and miserable.

'I'm so sorry,' he said. 'I decided to drive here rather than take the train. I had no idea it would take so long.'

Susan was torn between anger and relief. 'But you're here now,' she said. 'That's the important thing.'

Tak picked up her bag and they walked in silence to the parking garage.

In the car, she found her husband reticent about what he'd been up to in her absence. 'Work, work, work,' seemed to be the only answer she could elicit.

'And your new secretary?'

'It didn't work out,' he said, averting his face, looking out the window as if enjoying the view of the Osaka skyline. 'She's decided to look for another position.' Then his face darkened. 'She wasn't willing to put in the hours. Kids today. They think the world should be given them on a plate.'

He had little interest in what she'd been up to on her visit. 'As long as you had a good time,' he said, and failed to ask for details. 'Claire?' he said in response to her query. 'You'll have to ask her.' He turned on the radio as if it would provide a cover for their silence.

Susan pressed her forehead against the window on the passenger side and stared at the skyscrapers and factories and apartment buildings flashing past. The image of Shin rose in her mind. Whenever he had looked at her during her stay, she had seen his gaze skittering over her, registering *big, blonde, white, plump*.

Susan dug her nails into the palm of her right hand, lying on her lap. Tak had bestowed a similar look on her when they had met at the airport.