

Mystery Dinner

Suzanne Kamata

Earlier in the day, the streets of Tokushima had been jammed with cars on their way to, or in avoidance of, the annual marathon. Now, at five o'clock in the evening, there were just a few automobiles and fewer pedestrians. On the way to the entertainment district, I came across a group of young men in running gear, their numbers still pinned to their shirts. They staggered from exertion, perhaps on their way to some private celebration.

My old friend Lance, a Hawaiian in an aloha shirt and long ponytail, had started organising 'mystery dinners' five years ago. Although I'd been intrigued by the idea of joining a group to sample courses at three secret locations in one evening, I'd never signed up. My Japanese husband had to go out drinking often with his colleagues, but he didn't like meeting new people, and we had two children, one of whom was disabled. I mostly stayed home, alone, with a glass of a wine and a good book.

I had known Lance for over 20 years. We worked together at a nearby Board of Education as EFL teachers in the public schools. Now he was a full-time instructor at a local private university, and I had just been demoted due to budget cuts, power plays, or perhaps my own ineptness – who knows? – from full-time contracted lecturer to part-time teacher. I was feeling down and in need of a distraction to take my mind off my fall from grace (and income bracket). This would be my last splurge for a while.

When I arrived at the meeting place, Lance quickly introduced me to the rest of our small group: Colleen, a strawberry blonde from Colorado; Shintaro, a tall, thirty-something Japanese man with a punk-inspired haircut and a sprinkling of white whiskers on his chin; and Rachel from Oklahoma, who taught at a language school run by a former Japanese Scrabble champion. Lance glanced at his watch and told us that two others would be meeting us in front of the first as-yet undisclosed restaurant. 'Ready to go?' he asked. A light rain was falling, so we unfurled our umbrellas and followed him down the street and into a back alley.

'I was a little nervous about going into this restaurant at first,' Lance confessed.

Lance? Nervous? I was surprised. I knew that part of his reason for starting the Mystery Dinner series was to encourage foreign residents to try out new, out-of-the-way eateries. It doesn't take much courage to go into a chain restaurant, or one that has an easily understood array of fake food in the front window, but foreigners new to Tokushima might miss out on the more intimate spaces and original dishes prepared in smaller restaurants. Most menus at these places are only in Japanese, after all. But Lance was always posting photos on Instagram of himself eating exotic treats in unusual places: horse sashimi at a tiny bar in Osaka, absinthe in Tokyo, noodles simmered with the meat of wild boar on a mountainside in Shikoku. I had always thought of him as an intrepid explorer, the Robert F. Scott of restaurants. I didn't think that Lance was ever shy around any kind of people or food.

We met up with the other two participants – Peter, a Chinese-Canadian, who had just finished the marathon, and Jana, a Slovenian researcher – in front of a popular Mexican restaurant. This would not be a night for burritos, however. Lance led us to a small shop with a yellow Mini parked in front. There were no windows from which to peer inside, only a sliding door with slotted wood, meant to resemble a bamboo forest. From outward appearances, it could have been

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one of those If-you-have-to-ask-the-price-you-can't-afford-it or If-you-aren't-invited-you-won't-be-welcome places, but Lance had checked it out beforehand.

'I read about this place in a magazine,' he told us. 'It's called Mocchan.'

When we entered through the flap of indigo blue cloth, the action behind the counter was boisterous. We were welcomed and led to a small, private tatami room. After shucking our shoes, we crowded around the table, which was already set with pottery platters heaped with what looked like potato salad.

'This is the store's signature dish: potato salad made with daikon pickles,' Lance announced. Wafers, the kind that usually encase ice cream, were stabbed into the sides of the mounds. Interesting, I thought.

We ordered drinks, and grabbed chopsticks. There were no utensils for serving, so I switched my chopsticks around to the ends that I wouldn't be eating from to scoop a few bites onto my plate, and then switched them back, in Japanese fashion. The potato salad had a nice crunch and a smoky flavor from the pickles.

Peter was sitting across from me. I learned that he had been teaching English in Japan for five years, and would soon be returning to Vancouver. He didn't have a job lined up, but he didn't seem scared. He had come to Tokushima on the same government-sponsored scheme that had brought me to Japan almost thirty years ago. During my second year on the program, I'd met the Japanese P.E. teacher whom I would marry. For my first eleven years in Japan, I'd worked full-time, earning almost as much as my husband. But when I gave birth to our twins, fourteen weeks prematurely, I'd had to quit working. Our daughter was multiply disabled, and since we had little support, and there were no short buses or home helpers, my teaching career had been on hold until three years ago, when I'd finally been hired as a full-time lecturer at the public university. Alas, that was about to end. But I didn't want to think about that tonight.

The server brought plates of tempura-fried stuffed lotus root, and lightly sautéed firefly squid, which is only briefly in season, and is so named because the tiny squid flicker in the water. The latter was wrapped in bamboo leaves.

'What is that underlying taste?' Lance asked, savouring the squid. 'Miso? Soy?'

We tried to guess the secret ingredients while talking of Lance's recent walking tour of Kyoto. He'd been with a tree expert, so we got onto the subject of the communication of trees, and then onto pests, and then wasps. As it turned out, Shintaro had a PhD in entomology, though he now worked as a researcher at a major pharmaceutical company.

After an hour, it was time to move on to the next restaurant. On the way out, Lance asked about the squid recipe. The cook said that he'd used only a bit of salt.

We walked down the rain-wet streets to another tucked-away establishment, this time with an Italian flag out front.

'This is Anji,' Lance said.

I liked the mix of nationalities. It was one of the delightful surprises of the evening.

Since it was still relatively early (Lance likes to hold these dinners during off-hours, since we are only sampling from the menu, not ordering full courses, which are more lucrative for the business owners), the restaurant was empty. We settled at a long wooden table. Grunge-like music spewed from the speakers. Along one wall were shelves of olive oil and tomatoes, and handmade wooden coasters for sale. The menu was scrawled on a blackboard in Japanese.

'Ame-ri-can-o piz-za,' I read. This selection was underlined with a red squiggle. It appeared to be pizza topped with French fries. But that wasn't what Lance had ordered for us. The owner, a trim Japanese guy with longish hair and an immaculate white shirt, came over to greet us. A younger server took our drink orders. Peter and I decided to split a small bottle of sparkling rice wine. The others ordered glasses of red.

Lance explained that the restaurant was an off-shoot of a previous Italian restaurant, and that the owner was a veteran restaurateur, who'd put an original spin on his menu. First up, he brought out dishes of tripe in tomato sauce flecked with wasabi leaves.

'I love tripe,' Peter said. He extolled the virtues of stewed tripe *a la chinoise*. I'd never had it before, and I probably wouldn't have ordered it myself, but the tomato sauce was excellent.

The sparkling sake arrived with the richly flavored balsamic chicken and mashed potatoes. Peter poured us each a glass, and the others, curious, asked to smell it. 'Fruity,' Rachel said, after inhaling from the glass. 'Kind of floral,' Lance added. I swirled it in my mouth, tasting its delicate fruity, floral sweetness.

We ordered bread for sopping up the sauces. 'It's homemade,' the owner told us.

'I carbed so hard last night,' Peter said, helping himself to a slice. No doubt he was in need of more carbohydrates after his 45k run.

We tried to guess what was in the chicken sauce. *Demi-glace?* Soy? We talked about the Cooking Dog on YouTube. Someone mentioned the UFO Table café, a restaurant associated with a local anime studio, which had a manga theme. Then we got onto the subject of anime and manga. Rachel said that she had learned all about figure skating from a manga. I told them my daughter was a manga fan.

'What's her favourite?' Colleen asked me.

'*Naruto*,' I said. It was about a ninja. 'But lately she's into this one with zombies at Versailles.'

'Oh, I know it,' said Peter, and he began to describe the preposterous, convoluted plot.

'Because manga,' Lance said, with a laugh.

'Because manga,' Peter agreed.

When we'd cleared the plates of the last of the spaghetti pepperoncini, which had the interesting addition of cabbage, we donned our coats, slung on our bags and backpacks, and headed for dessert. I walked with Colleen, and learned that she had relocated to Tokushima from Fukushima after the triple disaster – earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown – of 11 March 2011. We talked about Japanese men, and I told her a little about my daughter.

After a five-minute stroll, we arrived at Oz, an old-fashioned ice cream parlour. The front window was filled with brightly coloured fake ice cream sundaes. The interior had a retro feel with faux Tiffany lamps, and little round tables. The proprietor had set up tables for us on the second floor. We climbed the narrow staircase. Peter was wincing, by now the marathon having taken its toll on his legs. Colleen, Lance, and I sat at one table, the others at another.

'We're getting the Strawberry Tower,' Lance told us. It looked huge on the menu: a foot-tall glass mug filled with ice cream, whipped cream, gelatin, and fresh strawberries.

'This place serves a lot fewer cornflakes, and a lot more ice cream,' Lance said, referring to the Japanese custom of using dry cereal as filler in parfaits. 'And it's homemade on site.'

We ordered coffee, which arrived in pottery cups. I lifted mine to check for the stamp of the local Otani Yaki potters, but found an owl face instead. 'Hey, guys, look at the bottoms of your cups,' I said. Lance's had a pig, Shintaro's a rabbit's face, Rachel's a cat.

The owner brought two humongous parfaits, one by one, and set them on our tables. I took a long-handled spoon from a cup on the table. I realised that we would be eating out of the same dish, date-style, and although I thought of my germ-a-phobic family in America, the household in which we never drank out of the same cup, I shrugged and dug in. At this point in the dinner, we had achieved a kind of intimacy. Colleen asked if she could add me as a friend on Facebook. Of course, I agreed.

'The next Mystery Dinner will probably be at the end of April,' Lance said.

If I wanted to participate, I would have to save. Around that time, I would be getting the final instalment of my salary. For the past three years, our family had been able to afford to go out to dinner once or twice a month, but before that, it had been once or twice a year. We would have to return to our austere ways, especially since my son would be off to college soon – a sobering thought. Tonight, however, I had been able to forget about my problems.

After we scraped the last of the ice cream from our dishes, we got ready to leave. The four other North Americans and Jana were going to prolong the dinner with drinks at a bar, but I wanted to make the last train home. A taxi ride would cost ten times more. I walked toward the station with Shintaro, the guy who'd wanted to be an insect specialist, but who'd had to settle for something else. I asked him where he was from originally.

'Kobe.'

'The big city! Do you like Tokushima?'

He said that he did, and that he would go surfing the next day, something that he couldn't do in ultra-cosmopolitan Kobe. I liked living in Tokushima, too, but I wasn't quite sure how I would be able to continue to do so. My husband thought I should find a job in another prefecture, but I wasn't sure that I wanted to live by myself, even after our son had gone off to college.

'Well, I go this way,' I said, veering to the right. 'Good night!'

It occurred to me that beyond the delicious food, the good company, and lively conversation, there was a lesson for me in the Mystery Dinner. With the exception of Lance, I had never met any of these people before. Before this evening, I had never been to the three restaurants we'd visited, never sampled tripe or sparkling sake. Beforehand, I hadn't known exactly what I was getting into, and yet I'd had a great time.

I moved on, towards my train home.