

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Never the Twain

Wendy Jones Nakanishi

East

Mamiko Ohnishi was kind-hearted, but she wasn't taken with the new girl at first sight and further acquaintance only deepened her feeling of unease.

Lisa Foster was a typical American. Tall and blonde. Verging on plumpness. Blue eyes shining out of an innocuous pink face. It was hard to suppress the suspicion that only empty friendliness lay behind those brilliantly coloured orbs.

Could she really imagine those purple trousers and flouncy pink tunic top suitable for a hot summer's day devoted to supervising and teaching children? She seemed to have got herself up like a hippie contemplating a hike in the Hindu Kush.

Mamiko sighed heavily. She wanted nothing to do with her but it couldn't be helped. She had been asked to take the poor girl under her wing. Mrs Ikeuchi, the kindergarten principal, had made a point of singling Mamiko out to induct the American into the daily routines.

After the customary staff meeting at seven that morning — a gathering lent an unusual frisson of excitement on this occasion because the new employee was introduced — Mrs Ikeuchi, a thin little woman with a sallow face lined by responsibility and worry, had beckoned Mamiko to follow her to her office.

Once the door had been closed and the two seated, Mrs Ikeuchi had made her request. 'She knows nothing,' the principal had said. 'She must be taught. She must be helped.'

Then Mamiko had leant forward, sensing her boss was about to confide a secret. She recoiled involuntarily at the sourness of the woman's breath as the principal added confidentially, 'She must be controlled.'

Mamiko had settled back in her seat, hoping her discomfort had gone unnoticed. Mrs Ikeuchi was a gentle person, a *good* woman, known for her kindness in managing even the most recalcitrant children in her charge. Who could have the heart to tell her she needed to use mouthwash or breath mints.

Mamiko could understand her employer's concerns. More and more foreigners were being invited to act as assistant language teachers in Japan's classrooms in recent years. Naturally, problems occurred. Few had any idea of Japanese traditions or customs. Even fewer spoke Japanese. They talked too loudly and acted too impulsively. They complained. Some even exhibited violent tendencies. Mamiko recalled hearing of an appalling incident of an American working in a Tokyo suburb who had attempted to hold up a convenience store with a gun he had smuggled into the country.

These *gaijin* were an uncertain commodity. They could be dangerous and volatile, like a chemical substance that needed to be handled with care.

Mamiko Ohnishi was an employee at 'Rainbow English,' a kindergarten located in a medium-sized city in southern Japan that offered English immersion sessions to its children. She was the most fluent English speaker on the staff, but Mamiko associated the language with unhappiness, mental and physical. She had lived in Houston for five years, married to a Texan she had met in a bar in Tokyo. It

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turned out he had a fondness for giving her a clip around the head when he'd had a beer or two.

Mamiko had been able to divorce her tall, lanky husband, but how could she solve the problem of the new foreigner in her life? Not that she suspected Lisa-chan would ever offer her physical violence. No, the unpleasantness Mamiko imagined was having to listen to the ramblings of a childlike soul needing to be guided every step of the way.

Mamiko was in the habit of shaking her head impatiently whenever she found herself musing about her ex-husband and how bad he made her feel about hearing or speaking English. It was reprehensible self-indulgence. She had been trained up from her earliest years to bear the unpleasant without complaint. Besides, it couldn't be helped. Fluency in English was a component of her job.

She shook her head now. She would do what was required of her.

Mamiko saw her role as superintending a damage limitation exercise. The kindergarten children's parents would be delighted and reassured to see a bona fide foreigner on site. They would imagine their little darlings imbibing English and exotic customs through sheer proximity with a westerner.

Her love for the kindergarten's children meant Mamiko genuinely hoped they would profit from Lisa's presence. But Mamiko knew Lisa had only flown in from her hometown of Chicago a week before. The girl would know nothing.

The problems Mamiko had anticipated arose within minutes of Lisa's appearing by her side to manage the first-period class. Twenty children clad in the summer uniform of white cotton short-sleeved tops and blue shorts or skirts were seated at their desks, their faces beaming with excitement.

'Stand!' Mamiko ordered them. There was a sound of chairs scraping back as the tiny figures got to their feet. 'Bow!' Mamiko snapped out, and happened to look over at Lisa as the children obeyed. She was disconcerted by the look of shock there.

'They all have to bow?' Lisa asked. 'How...*strange*.'

'It's our custom,' Mamiko said as she extended a hand, beckoning the children to resume their seats. 'What all schoolchildren do before a lesson.'

Lisa collected herself with an obvious effort. 'Oh,' she said. 'How *quaint*.' Then she had wandered over to the windows and gazed out at the school's playground, Mamiko groaned. The American should have stood dutifully at attention by her side as Mamiko outlined the day's schedule of lessons. The blonde girl seemed to be snuffling; had she caught a summer cold?

She looked around the classroom with a sense of satisfaction. It was very tidy. Coils of jump ropes were tethered to hooks above the bank of small cubicles in which the students stored their belongings. The walls were decorated with crayon pictures drawn by the children. The desks and floor were shining. The little boys and girls had cleaned the room before their lessons began, scrambling on hands and knees up and down the room with cloths or swarming around the windows to wipe the glass with rags.

Mamiko hoped the American appreciated their efforts. Whether she did or not, the girl soon proved she could be useful. Mamiko had to grant her that. Her exotic presence spurred the children on to unusual exertions. Many had never been in such

close proximity to a foreigner before, and they treated her as they would some famous person suddenly planted in their midst. They competed with each other, thrusting their hands up to volunteer whenever she asked a question and nearly shouting out their answers.

The foreigner was an asset in the break times, too. As soon as she stepped out into the dusty courtyard with its slides and swings she was surrounded by a circle of adoring little girls and boys. The Japanese teachers stood by, smiling but at a loss. The children usually loved playing with them and vied for their attention, but the American was a celebrity. She bent down to let them touch her blonde hair and look into her blue eyes. The children giggled wildly as she picked them up at random and swung them round.

Apart from one regrettable incident, when Mamiko happened to look up from helping a child climb the jungle gym, and noticed the foreigner nip out the front gates to the convenience store opposite, she could find nothing to complain about. Mamiko made a note to herself to explain to Lisa that staff members weren't allowed to leave the premises unless specifically granted permission by the principal.

On seeing the American playing an impromptu game of tag with five or six little girls who were shrieking with delight as they were chased by her, Mamiko couldn't help laughing. She adored the children, and their happiness made her happy. They *were* darlings, all apart from Kenji Ikeuchi, who seemed to think the fact his mother was the kindergarten principal gave him a license to behave as badly as he pleased. Ikeuchi-sensei was in her mid-forties and had only the one son, who was badly spoiled and even rather nasty. Mamiko knew she wasn't alone in counting the days till he graduated and entered primary school. Then he would be some other poor teacher's problem. But it was as unimaginable to mention the boy's bad behaviour to his mother as to make the slightest allusion to her bad breath.

Even now, as all the other children were jumping up and down in a frenzy of ecstasy, she could spy Kenji lurking by the front gate, scowling as if observing a party to which he had not been invited.

Mamiko noticed with horror that the little boy had picked up a stone. No, it was more like a small rock. He looked at his new teacher and hurled it at her.

It was all over in a minute. Lisa staggered, a tiny red thread of blood trickling from her right forehead. The children stared at her with shocked faces. One little girl took her hand and seemed to be stroking it. Mamiko couldn't help smiling. *Yappari*, she thought. It was no wonder. It was her favorite, Akari-chan. She was the sweetest, most loving child Mamiko had encountered in her twenty years of teaching.

Noticing that the American was wiping her forehead with a handkerchief and that another teacher had rushed to her aid, Mamiko ran over to the Ikeuchi boy and grabbed him roughly by the hand. She saw that everyone was staring at them as she marched the child to his mother's office.

Mrs Ikeuchi glanced up from a tangle of papers on her desk, looking exhausted. And surprised. Mamiko hadn't even knocked.

'*Ikeuchi-sensei*,' was all Mamiko managed to say before they were interrupted by a sharp rapping at the door.

Without waiting to be invited in, the impatient soul opened the door and entered.

Mamiko issued an involuntary sigh. It was the foreigner.

Lisa smiled broadly at them both. She was holding up a white handkerchief to her forehead.

'Oh, Mami,' she grinned, as though they were the best of friends. 'And little Kenji. Good. Can you translate for me, please, Mami?'

Then the tall foreigner turned to Mrs Ikeuchi and bowed. 'I'm so sorry. This talented little boy was practicing his throw and I got in the way.' She knelt down to Kenji while Mamiko reported her remarks in Japanese. 'You're *good!* You should play baseball. You have a real talent for sports.'

Mrs Ikeuchi had risen in alarm, noticing the blood on the handkerchief.

'Just a scratch.' Lisa laughed as though it were all a great joke.

Mamiko was amazed to see the boy's perpetual scowl vanish from his face as Lisa gently took his hand. He could actually be good looking when he smiled. The foreigner's unexpected mercy had accomplished the impossible and made him a sweet child again. Mamiko couldn't suspect an ulterior motive. Lisa had no idea the boy was Mrs Ikeuchi's only child.

Lisa put on a sterner face and looked seriously at the little boy. 'But you need to make up for hurting me. I want you to help me collect all the playground toys after this break time. Okay? *All* the ropes and balls. And promise you won't throw stones again. Balls are far preferable.'

When he agreed, Lisa beamed and, still holding the boy's hand, abstracted a pack of breath mints from her pocket with the other. 'A treat for us,' she said, 'after all that drama. Just something I got from the store opposite.'

They each obediently extended a palm into which the tall foreigner rattled two or three vivid blue pellets. Mamiko was relieved to see her boss slip hers into her mouth.

As they left the room, the little boy still confidently clutching the American woman's hand, Mamiko found herself repeating what he had said, but in English, 'Thank you, teacher.'

Mamiko had expected a stone around her neck. She had found a gem.

West

Lisa Foster looked down at the little Japanese woman beside her. The kindergarten principal had just brought the woman over, bowed, and introduced her as Mamiko Ohnishi.

Lisa had stepped back at Mrs Ikeuchi's approach. From their earlier encounters, Lisa knew what to expect. My God, thought Lisa, the poor creature should be forced to register her breath as a lethal weapon. But Lisa managed a smile, looking curiously at the woman who had been described to her as a fluent English speaker. She knew she would need to rely on her heavily. She hoped they could become good friends.

'Please call me Mami,' Lisa's new acquaintance said.

'And call me Lisa. I hear you lived in Texas for a while. I'm from Illinois. I've never been further south than Kentucky.'

Lisa found herself observing somebody who seemed to be trying to hide in plain sight. Miss Ohnishi was self-effacing and slight. She wore heavy makeup, as if concealing her face behind a mask. She kept her eyes cast down. Like all the other kindergarten employees, she also looked as if she was just about to set off for a sports

match. Lisa looked down at her own clothes. Was there a staff uniform? If so, she hadn't been told. But all these diminutive women who worked as assistants were clad in blue training pants and white polo shirts. They even wore similar hats: broad brimmed cotton ones in pastel shades.

And why were so many of them rake-thin? If it was due not to anorexia but to the Japanese diet, Lisa looked forward to changing her eating habits and shedding a few pounds herself.

What a blessing this Ohnishi woman may prove, Lisa thought. Her English so good, if flavored with the charming inflection of a southern drawl.

They were standing in the large forecourt of the kindergarten. It was a large dusty space crowded with brightly painted playground equipment. The air was filled with the cries and laughter of children darting around them like swallows. They kicked up little puffs of dirt as they ran and jumped.

'We try to provide the children with a happy play environment,' Mami said proudly.

Lisa struggled to suppress a sigh. It would not do to show the two women how dreary she found it all. The swings and slides were fine, and she approved of the row of unicycles parked by the storeroom: they could teach children balance and bravery, and Lisa wouldn't mind trying to have a go on one herself. There was a little paddling pool beneath a trellis. There was a hammock slung between two poles. But these were the place's only redeeming features.

There was almost no greenery apart from a stiff barrier of evergreens blocking the kindergarten and its premises from street view. The exercise yard was packed dirt instead of grass. The kindergarten building was a grim rectangle of cracked and stained concrete. There were no curtains at its windows or curtains on its floors to add a dash of colour or a hint of comfort.

Lisa had been astonished, too, when she realised there was no heating or air conditioning in the building. The teachers could have small fans positioned below their desks in summer, or small electric heaters in winter, but the children had to cope with chilblains in the cold and sweatiness in the heat.

When Mrs Ikeuchi and an English interpreter brought in specifically for that purpose had given her a tour the day previous, and Lisa had queried them on this point, the principal had turned to her with a smile Lisa preferred not to think of as patronising.

'We Japanese believe in trying to live naturally,' she had said. 'We live *with* nature. We live *in* nature. When it is hot, we perspire. When it is cold, we shiver.'

And there's also the small matter of the energy shortage in Japan resulting from all its reactors being shut down after the nuclear meltdown, but Lisa only smiled noncommittally.

Lisa had come to Japan because she loved children. She wanted to become a kindergarten teacher in America. She thought of her job at 'Rainbow English' as a kind of apprenticeship. She was on her gap year, between high school and college, and what better way to spend it than to be with children while seeing something of the wider world.

But Lisa hadn't been prepared for quite how different Japan was from the States. She found the kindergarten children charming, but there seemed to be something that smacked of the militaristic in the way they treated. They were

corralled here and there, forced to bow in unison, and made to wear the same clothes as if they were in training to be little soldiers. They seemed happy enough, but was that because they had been brainwashed?

Lisa had been looking forward to her first class session with Mami, but she felt she had entered a time warp when she saw the classroom. The desks and chairs looked so old they could have been ones used by the children's parents or even by their grandparents. The surfaces of the desk were heavily scored and stained and the wood floor was scuffed and bumpy. The walls were concrete. Lisa could imagine that in the winter they held in the cold and in the summer, the heat. Despite the children's efforts earlier, the windows were cloudy and streaked.

Lisa couldn't help comparing the place to her nephew's kindergarten. Her elder sister had insisted she accompany her to the open-house day at the facility in Chicago on a blustery winter's day. It was a low-slung brick building surrounded by bushes and trees. The playground was a grassy space. There were thick, tasteful drapes at the windows and a pile carpet on the floor. Paintings, albeit reproductions, adorned the walls. Boys and girls dressed in fashionable jeans, sweaters and scarves sat nonchalantly in swivel chairs positioned before birch wood desks. They seemed to regard their teacher as a friend rather than as an authoritarian figure to be respected and obeyed.

Different places, different customs, Lisa tried to remind herself. But when Mami's class opened with the children being asked to stand and bow, Lisa felt she couldn't stand the drabness and regimentation a moment longer. She walked over to the windows to compose herself, gulping down a sob.

It was a relief and a release when she was asked to take charge of the students' English pronunciation drills and then to play a few games with them. Lisa was thrilled by the children's enthusiasm. It was infectious. It made everything worthwhile. She wanted to hug each and every one of them.

There was only one boy who held back. He was a small child with a disagreeable expression on his face. Lisa was concerned to see that he seemed to have no friends. When the children were put in a circle and practiced saying 'catch' and 'throw' by tossing a ball back and forth to each other, nobody threw the ball at him. Lisa noticed that he was also shunned during break times, when the children voluntarily segregated themselves by sex. The little girls monopolised the jump ropes, the boys engaged in rough games of football.

Lisa learned the boy's name was Kenji. She saw that that even at lunchtime, when Kenji was one of the monitors assigned to don a white gown and mask and fetch the food from the kitchen, the other monitors ostentatiously kept their distance from him.

Lisa decided to make the boy her project. She would save him. It would be her challenge.

At the recess after lunch, she saw Kenji loitering by the front gate and saw the stone in his hand even as he threw it at her. She didn't have time to duck, and it hit her with surprising force. But she was determined to limit the damage as much as she could. She raised her hand to her forehead and felt the soft sticky warmth of blood. Luckily there was a handkerchief in her pocket. She pulled it out and dabbed her face and smiled as though it had all been a game.

There was no time to lose. She had noticed Mami hurrying up to Kenji and

marching him off to the principal's office.

When she entered the room, she saw that everyone looked strained and unhappy. It was clear where her duty lay. She knelt by the boy and took his hand. She was gratified when his face cleared and he smiled.

She wanted to be his friend, but she wouldn't allow him to get away with bad behaviour. She told him he must help her collect all the playground equipment, and she would never lie for him again. *Tough love*. That was the remedy.

Even better, she could offer the breath mints she had just bought at the convenience store opposite the kindergarten.

As they stood swaying companionably together, sucking their candy, Lisa looked around and felt she might find her place at the kindergarten. She knew Mrs Ikeuchi and Mami loved the children and cared about their welfare. What had looked like regimentation in the children's routines might be regarded in a different light. Sometimes Lisa thought her nephew a bit spoiled. Maybe all the luxuries offered America's children could make them selfish.

Lisa had to suppress an urge to hug the two women beside her. She would become friends with the other staff members and try to learn Japanese. She might even buy a polo shirt and blue training pants and a cotton hat to show willingness.

Her new life had begun.