

Cherry Blossom Time

Mairi Neil

In 1984, we landed at Narita airport, Japan with trepidation. Our jet approached Tokyo, and the Qantas pilot warned of delays. Farmers were protesting the Japanese Government's forced acquisition of land to expand the busy international airport.

Unhappy landowners blockaded, marched, and deliberately damaged the machinery of contractors - even setting alight temporary buildings. Protests escalated and police response became more militaristic.

'Don't worry, Nobuko will get through to meet us.'

John sighed and said, 'Does trouble follow us, or do we create it?'

He was referring to the bitter internal union dispute we recently survived. I squeezed his arm, 'Relax darling. This trip is to recover from stress and regain some balance and joy in our lives.'

A flash of angry faces and raised abusive voices replayed in my mind with Australian voices morphing into Japanese and placards transforming into pitchforks. I shook my head. 'Nobuko will be there, our plans will work out.' John smiled as if aware by my tone, I was trying to convince myself as much as him.

When we landed, our worry proved unnecessary because Nobuko was there, plus new husband André. Our embrace reflected a deep love and friendship sustained since we first met as teenagers at Croydon High School, where Nobuko was an exchange student in 1970.

The way out of the airport lead past the demonstrations but the ever-polite Japanese were leaving tourists alone and targeting official business. 'You've timed your visit perfectly, Mairi,' Nobuko said, her smile lighting dark brown eyes, 'you always were a great planner.'

John rolled his eyes pointing at the crowds of protestors silhouetted against the night sky. André negotiated their tiny Mitsubishi sedan over bumpy roadworks and John said, 'Yes, nothing like a noisy welcoming committee.'

André laughed. 'Nobuko means the season - it's cherry blossom time and Tokyo is having a week-long celebration.'

Nobuko recalled my love of photography. 'The neighbourhood's in bloom Mairi - you'll get some fabulous photos.'

The next day, John and I explored the Shibuya district on foot, the beautiful tranquility of almost deserted streets a contrast with the raucous introduction to Tokyo the night before.

Pink blossoms flourished in profusion, reminding me of when we arrived in Australia in 1962, and the cherry plum trees at Croydon. That triggered another memory of the

sweet smell of simmering plums as Mum prepared a mountain of jam to last our family for the year, with enough jars to give as special gifts to neighbours and friends.

Clumps of mauve hydrangea and overhanging wisteria dripping purple petals could be Aunt Edna Gray's lovingly tended garden - only her trademark iceberg roses missing. Children's laughter replaced the fury of the protestors and we paused to watch a game of peek-a-boo in a handkerchief-sized garden, much too small for hide and seek.

A plop crack plop from above drew our attention to a nearby multi-storied building André had pointed out. The noise caused by the Japanese obsession with golf and the tall green nets on flat rooftops indicated the workers could practise the game during their lunch hour.

A tiny breeze shook the trees sending petals fluttering to the pavement. I caught a handful and commented on how smooth and velvety they felt. 'I'll press these in my diary.'

'A memento to wither and fade over time, my love,' John said, 'but not I hope, that imagination of yours.'

I grinned and focused the camera. 'Who knows, darling, but please stand beside those gorgeous azaleas, I want to capture the rainbow background. It'll be a beautiful memory.'

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Haiku

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Cherry blossoms fall
pink velvet raindrops
crushed underfoot

Tranquil and silent
old men hushed
as blossoms on ground

Children play peek-a-boo
mothers ponder
the change in the wind

Vibrant colours everywhere
blossoms float and fall
brightening my day

