

Kansai Time Out

November 1993

Dear Diary

5 am or thereabouts, awaken to dawn chorus. Soaring crescendos of canine tenors, 80 strong, their sleep disturbed by *something*. Has to be *something* as dogs don't bark without reason. Hope it isn't human as am scantily clad to meet an emergency. Spy muscular black dog in the yard, sniffing around nonchalantly, lifting his leg here and there. He has a white bib down his front and his tail is curled confidently over his back. not one of ours but know him by sight – have named him the Musketeer. He has included our place in his territory which ranges from the primary school down the valley where he eats lunch to a dog-loving *obaasan* over the mountain who gives him supper. He's not here for food but merely to see who's new and to make passes at the girls inside their enclosures. Cindy, who guards the yard and is normally quite aggressive to strange dogs, sidles up to him looking coy and rolls over on her back. Little hussy. Having succeeded in waking everyone up, he saunters to the border fence, pops over and disappears.

No point in going back to sleep so decide to make pot of tea and come to grips with the day watching BBC news courtesy of satellite. Even this pleasure is denied as NHK has decided to blanket out all the news with a golf tournament. This is getting to be a habit of theirs, leaving us newsless for three days at a stretch. The whole world might have gone up in smoke and I'd be none the wiser. Don't dwell too much on this improbability but sip tea and scan the horizon from window.

Urusai Inaba, wearing a red baseball cap and storm across his face hurtles along dirt road to inspect his fields before going off for the day to earn his living in a factory. His home is only a stone's throw away but it doesn't occur to him to walk. Not much to be cheerful about this year on

account of the dismal summer – rice ears half empty and barely ripened. Even when things are going well for him he finds something to complain about. Dogs are his pet hate especially when they're running around and enjoying themselves. His own cur chained to a rotting box outside his opulent farmhouse stands eternally on guard, its hair on edge, tail clamped between its back legs, barking unceasingly. That's the way he thinks dogs should be kept. Would like to put him and his wife on a short chain for a day and see how they like it.

Another truck loaded with what seems to be the remains of a house and garden, scrapes across narrow bridge leading here and dumps contents in unused paddy field. Having unloaded, truck bogged down unable to get out. Wheels spin, truck sinking fast in mud up to axels.

Wish I could watch this drama longer but dogs need their walk. Dress in dog-walking gear and head up path to pond. As we approach dogs stop in their tracks, bark then run back to me for protection. A jeep is parked. Pondman emerges. Haven't seen him all summer and have wondered what he's been up to. He's holding a gallon jar of dog shampoo in one hand and a bunch of roses in the other. "Presents" he stutters by way of explanation. Being an inarticulate fellow it's hard to grasp the meaning of this gesture but thank him anyway. Next he conjures up what looks like a vine. *Matatabi*, no less – cat's delight. Cut it up into small sticks and your cat will go senselessly silly and stay amused for hours. Sold at inflated prices in pet stores, it is hard to find in the wild.

Return home laden with these unexpected gifts. Cats somersault with delight on getting a whiff of the *matatabi*. Truck has now been extricated from mud so go to suggest to driver that instead of getting stuck each time he can save himself a lot of trouble by off-loading the wood here instead. Need stock of firewood for winter. Actually the house-that-was turns out to be bigger in pieces than I imagined, so now have nowhere to park cars until someone gets going with a chain-saw.

Scrapman-down-road Itami-san drops by with several lengths of metal fencing, prised from some house on his rounds. He also produces some rusting tools: “with a bit of oil, they’ll be as good as new,” and a small bronze temple bell (the sort you rattle in front of altars while you pray). Is old – might even be antique. He won’t accept money but he doesn’t lose out. I wing him a couple of flagons of *sake* from time to time. Someone like Itami-san is an invaluable contact and ally if one lives in the countryside. Not only will he be on the lookout for any obscure thing you want but can’t find elsewhere, but he also is a fund of information: who’s dropped dead, who’s building a new house, what land is for sale and well, you name it he knows it. Spending his life taking things to pieces, he knows how they work and how to mend them.

Next comes the postman, his scooter top-heavy with our L.L.Bean parcels. We are all mail-order freaks round here, in fact anyone who stays around long enough is likely to get addicted. So far have converted Frozen meat man (man who drives refrigerated juggernaut with free supply of meat for dogs from supermarket), local policeman who drops in occasionally for coffee and chat, and one postman at least. Have explained simplicity of ordering this way and saving themselves a lot of money. Think L.L.Bean owe me a huge discount for promoting their goods like this.

Phone call from bloke working at Kobe docks. Has surplus bales of good hay hanging around his warehouse plus miscellaneous tins of dog/cat food which ‘fell off a lorry.’ Needs picking up though. Amazing the amount of damaged waste that collects around docklands. Doubt if there are many takers for this particular consignment however. Negotiate with local carpenter Hirata for loan of his truck for the next day in exchange for case of beer. It is likely to be a fair load from Dockbloke’s description and even if our small truck makes it all the way to Kobe, it may not make it home again.

The golden rule around here is never to look a gift horse in the mouth and never to refuse anything which comes *gratis* unless of course it turns out to be something like a hundred cats which someone doesn't want and hopes we'll accept. But some gifts however welcome are a problem to store or even put somewhere. Just when I'm congratulating myself on now having enough firewood to last through the winter, Have-A-Go Mukai phones to say he's knocking down a house and would we like the timber? Another house? Well. One can't refuse, can one?

Elizabeth Oliver