

## Japanese characters

Elizabeth Oliver battles with furtive squatters, an absent-minded but generous housewife and unreliable carpenters

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No hope of a lie in. Dogs hysterical at sight of Mr. Ugh plodding along road with lumbering hounds at heel. Unwise to encounter him if you are also walking dogs. General fracas ensues with his dogs refusing to give way. There's enough space for everyone to walk dogs without confrontation but Mr. Ugh has never given this a thought. Even when teeth are bared and it's obvious things are going to get nasty, he doesn't bother to call or leash his two.

Nearly a year has passed since the Ughs moved in. Have forgotten their real name. Doesn't much matter. Named them Ughs on account of their unique way of speaking. "Ugh, good morning, ugh, ugh, looks like ugh rain, ugh, doesn't it ugh". They appeared bedraggled on my doorstep, as people often do, with a tale of woe. Their company (never exactly discovered what this was) had gone bankrupt and they were being forced out of their home along with 20 odd cats and the dogs. It's the recession of course which brings this unending flow of tragedy to my door. One can't help them all otherwise this place would end up looking like the Rwandan border. But this couple must have got me in a philanthropic mood, possibly before I'd had my early morning cuppa or maybe

suffering from a hangover because I weakened, and offered to help. Any piece of land they cried that they could build a small hut for the animals and they themselves would find an apartment nearby. Well the long and the short of it was, I introduced them to Mad Tani, who's a generous-minded guy with plenty of land and a taste for Philippine girlfriends i.e. different from the general run of narrow-minded locals, and asked him if he'd help. Mad Tani suggested a tiny triangle of scrub next to the field where our dogs exercise, clearly wanting them as far away as possible from his place.

You could hardly have put up a tent there but the Ughs were grateful and after a while erected a sort of prefab with a weird golf net over it. I had warned them about the cold and the snow but they said the animals would be fine. It was only when I discovered their car in the early morning covered in snow, no visible tyre tracks and met them bleary-eyed and snuffling coming from the depths of the prefab that I realised that we now had squatters on our hands.

They have no electricity, no running water and the track is infested with insects and snakes, but they've hung in there. They disappear during the day and creep back furtively at night. Our dogs don't even bother to bark any more.

Ughs apart, we've also a motley selection of regular callers. Mrs. Loaf, who seldom uses hers, arrives punctually just as I've dished out the supper on a Sunday evening with a jeep load of bread, boxes and boxes, all stuff that the bakery couldn't sell. Supper gets cold as we cram the bread into every available freezer to stop it going mouldy. A lot goes mouldy anyhow and ends up on the compost heap. One is always grateful for these donations but they can overwhelm one. For someone who claims to be an average housewife she has an exciting life. Every week she has some drama to relate. Just after she had got the new jeep, she was driving along the highway and she saw a tyre whizzing alongside her. Turns out it was the jeep's back tyre. Instead of hauling Nissan over

the coals and suing them for selling a defective and potentially lethal vehicle, she just accepted their offer to fix the bolts.

Last year she handed 20 dogs she owned over to a dog trainer she'd met through her local vet, to take to Nagano for boarding while she renovated her house. That was the last she heard of them. When she finally went to the police, a month later (at my urging) to report their disappearance, she found that the trainer was under suspicion for murdering not only dogs but people as well. In fact she came near to being his sixth victim as he'd asked her to lend him money and she'd refused. The other victims had lent him money and were bumped off when they asked him to return it. Despite the fact that he'd confess to disposing of bodies, renting a bull-dozer in Nagano to dig graves, the police couldn't actually charge him with murder because he hadn't confessed to any of the killings. Japanese police interrogation is well known for getting speedy results. After a week in custody he confessed. Mrs. Loaf can finally sleep soundly at night.

Another character is Mrs. T. who owes us a favour since we've been looking after some dogs she rescued. Said she could conjure up a carpenter should we need one. Well actually we are planning a new set of enclosures with kennels and a professional wouldn't go amiss. The problem with professionals that work for free is that they come and go as they please, and you find the original plans get fairly distorted by the end. First he promised to turn up in August but didn't arrived until mid-September. Before starting on the kennel construction, we had to shore up the mountain slope where countless dogs had tunnelled to make dens for themselves. I had envisioned some fancy stone wall. No problem he assured me but concrete was a lot easier. In a jiffy he banged together boards to make a metre high retaining wall into which the concrete would be poured. Poured is the operative word. Ready-mixed concrete moves like runny honey and weighs tons. How to get the concrete from the mixer to the site was the problem. On level ground you can struggle

with wheelbarrows. On a steep slope, impossible. Chutes were the answer. So off he haired to borrow chutes. These would provide a channel for the concrete to flow downhill into the frame. At this stage the sake was also flowing: “he needs sustenance”, Mrs. T confided to me. Everyone furiously paddled the slurping concrete into the frame looking from a distance like longshore boatmen. Suddenly the chute shifted and unable to stop the grey lava flow now surging over the frame and across the ground around his feet, our professional, with a one-cup Ozeki in his hand said, “these things happen”. Time and the sun were against us as we began shovelling the rapidly setting concrete back over the frame. The result is a somewhat uneven wall.

Just when we’d given up all hope of him coming back to finish the job, he reappeared with three of his equally inebriated mates. “Just leave it to us, professionals” they hiccupped as they set a date two weeks down the track. The materials have arrived. We are ready for them but I feel in my bones its going to be the gnome saga all over again.