

The Ghost and the Machine

Last year we (the bank man and myself) sat in the lawyer's office waiting to complete the formalities for the sale of the house. I had asked him to come along partly to act as a witness but mainly to count and then guard the money in case I got mugged on the way to the bank. Selling a house is usually a simple procedure; hand over the deeds, sign and receive the money. But on that occasion everything went wrong. The vital document for transaction, the deeds, were missing. I thought the bank had them, the bank assumed I did. Everyone present expressed total disbelief. Nobody ever loses such a precious document as house deeds. But there must be extenuating circumstances like war, fire, earthquake when deeds get lost I pleaded, trying desperately to recall what Japanese house deeds looked like and where they could possibly be. In the end after fruitlessly searching through (by then) piled packed possessions at home and drawing blank, the lawyer agreed to prepare special documents so the sale could proceed. Nowadays having learnt my lesson, I keep all vital papers in a security box at the bank.

Things tend to get lost around here, a reflection perhaps of my erratic life-style. However when I found the truck missing one day I began to suspect someone had stolen it. I mean, you might easily lose the keys to a vehicle but it's unlikely you'd lose the vehicle itself. Looked everywhere, no truck. Better call the police to report stolen vehicle. One last look to alleviate growing anxiety about premature onset of senility revealed truck 'in river'. I certainly hadn't parked it there nor could it have in any way have been driven down the sheer stone riverbank. Closer

inspection revealed that truck had rolled down into river re-righting itself into a normal position. But how? Hand-brake still on and no slope between where I had parked it and the riverbank. Decided the police might be able to shed some light on this mystery. Clearly there wasn't much happening down at the station because my call mobilised an instant cavalcade of patrol cars and motor-bikes. (Pity they don't raise the same enthusiasm in locating lost dogs.) Sherlock Holmes would turn in his grave at the careless way they trampled over all potential evidence. After much sniffing around with their little powder puffs they drew up some conclusions. No one was in the truck. (That hadn't escaped my unprofessional gaze either.) No one had sat in the truck. (No self-respecting Japanese would ever sit on a dusty seat without wiping it clean first.) Because the hand-brake was on, it was unlikely that anyone had pushed the truck into the river. (People inclined to this kind of fun would have to release the hand-brake before pushing it. After it had rolled down they'd hardly take the trouble to clamber down into the river to put the brake on again.) But the fact remained that the truck couldn't, without some exceptional natural or supernatural force have landed in the river the way it did. By now absurd interpretations of this bizarre incident were filtering through my mind. The night before was the 12/13 August, the climax of O-Bon, the very night when spirits of the dead return to haunt the living. Had we by constructing a house here disturbed some ancient gnome spirit and caused him to take revenge? The next day when piling stones to build a ramp so as to pull the truck out of the river, we met with one very aggressive *mamushi*. Nothing could persuade this snake to leave and it sat coiled, its head erect in a striking stance, the whole time we were there. People who are evil in this world are said to return in the form of *mamushi* in the next. It's easy to put two and two together and make five but coincidences like this make even the most sceptic superstitious. There's not a lot I can do about disgruntled gnome

ghosts but it's reassuring to know, living as I do in a lonely outpost, that the police are on their toes and will come at a moment's notice if called.

Protection of a different kind has been on my mind of late. Nose winters in the old house were dreaded as it was impossible to get the place warm or at least to keep the heat from escaping. This new house, thanks to a heavy investment in insulation and double-glazing, should be a lot warmer. But it's the plants I worry about. The most cold-susceptible plants are already planted in pots or large wooden wine casks set on casters which can be rolled indoors any time. The old garden was in a valley with a measure of protection from wind and frost. This new location is much higher and more exposed. Plants succumb to cold wind even more than to frost so a windbreak makes a world of difference. Individual bushes and flowering plants can be protected by building a wigwam frame of sticks and covering it with a woven straw mat, vinyl or even paper. Rows of vegetables can be covered by vinyl tunnels but these tend to collapse under snow or get blown away in a gale unless they are very secure. Apart from hardy things like broccoli, kale cabbages or brussel sprouts there are four blank months in the year (December through mid-April) when there is nothing to pick in the garden and one is forced to buy vegetables, often at inflated prices and always steeped in chemicals, at the market. How do farmers grow vegetables through the cold spell? They invest in glasshouses or vinyl houses and pass the cost onto the consumer. Glasshouses belong to the professional league of growers who can justify their huge investment in oil and glass by selling either cut flowers to ikebana pupils or huge tasteless tomatoes at ¥300 apiece to people who crave them out of season. It's uneconomical to grow ordinary vegetables in them and unless you have some way to sterilise the soil, not very practical as disease builds up. Vinyl houses have the advantage in that they can be easily erected or dismantled and moved. You can take off the vinyl in summer or you can add a double layer of vinyl and heat them up to perform as a glasshouse in winter. A trip down

to my local nokyo confirmed my suspicion that even these are not cheap. The size I have in mind (11 x 4.5m) comes out at ¥150,000 all in. However if one calculates how much four month's supply of vegetables costs, I reckon it pays for itself in one winter. (Widths comes in three sizes; 3.6, 4.5, 7.2 metres but any length is possible. The frame should last indefinitely but the vinyl will have to be renewed every 2-3 years.)

Meanwhile the truck, except for a few bumps and scratches, is recovering, the mamushi are preparing to tunnel underground for the winter and hopefully the ghosts have packed up and gone for another year too.

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