

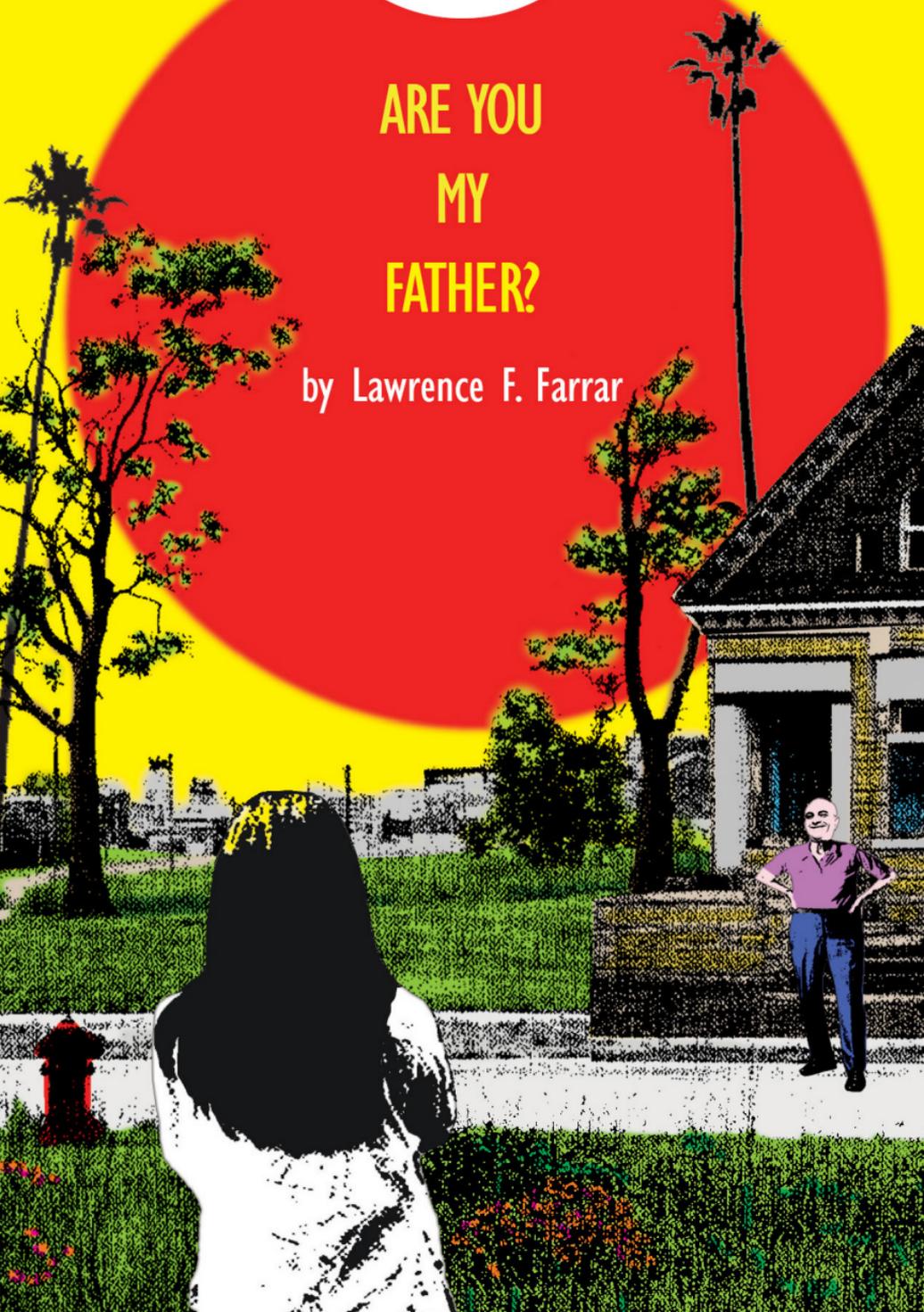
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# ARE YOU MY FATHER?

by Lawrence F. Farrar



# ARE YOU MY FATHER?

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LAWRENCE F. FARRAR

On a Saturday afternoon in 1993 Owen Stubbins stood in his backyard garden and stared dejectedly at his dead and dying rose bushes—mites, bugs, whatever. *You win some, you lose some, and some get rained out.* Except, Owen believed he always lost. On this occasion, his horticultural efforts a flop, he trudged up the low back step and went into his house. The afternoon stretched empty before him, as it always did.

In the kitchen he poured a glass of milk and sliced a bagel. When the bagel halves popped up from the toaster, he slathered them with cream cheese and munched away at a leisurely pace, almost as if trying to consume time as much as boiled and baked wheat. A fifty-year-old confirmed bachelor—*confirmed* by circumstance, not by volition—Owen had maintained a near-solitary existence for twenty-five years. He resignedly conceded

his life was a lonely one. But, he convinced himself, it was at least an orderly, predictable life.

He had outfitted his unpretentious San Diego bungalow with furnishings acquired mostly at bargain prices. His neatly made bed, really little more than a cot, reminded him of the one he'd slept on in the Yokota AF Base barracks twenty-five years before. A fang-baring tiger on black silk, something he'd picked up in a Tokyo souvenir shop, served as his single wall hanging. Owen's mother denounced the painting as a tribute to bad taste, but Owen was fond of it. Owen had a penchant for reading, and paperbacks and magazines cascaded out of a too-full bookcase. He was deep into *The Bridges of Madison County*. Plunging into the pages of a book and staying there helped move the hours along. Owen also relished the challenge of crossword puzzles, although he'd given up on the *New York Times*—too hard. Owen had a rotary phone which, save for solicitors' calls, rarely rang. He possessed neither a television set nor a computer. He reckoned his portable Sony radio gave him all necessary access to the world, and he deemed the computer a passing electronic fad.

Chinos and button-downs laundered and pressed, floors and shelves scrubbed and polished, Owen maintained himself and his place like a well-disciplined monk. His kitchen sparkled. Owen had affixed a magnetized placard to the refrigerator: *Waste not, want not*. The counter next to the sink displayed a stack of carefully washed TV dinner trays; who knew when they might be put to use? Owen Stubbins was a frugal man.

Also a smallish, pale man with thinning hair and sloped shoulders, Owen took solace from the fact that the receptionist at the Sunnyside City Office where he worked as a clerk complimented him on his "nice smile." Alone in the men's room, like an actor in a dental advertisement, he

delivered smiles from various angles to his mirrored self. He wanted to believe she meant it.

Every weekday morning at precisely 7:15 Owen departed his house. He walked three blocks to the bus stop and boarded the bus. He then spent twenty minutes staring out the window as the sun-bleached, paint-faded residential neighborhoods yielded to brightly hued shops and stores and finally to the Sunnyside City Hall. This stuccoed structure featured a red tile roof and was fronted by a half dozen palm trees. Owen fancied the palms; nothing like them where he'd grown up in Baraboo. At day's end, after eight hours of processing documents, Owen returned home and popped still one more frozen dinner into the oven; the Salisbury steak ranked among his favorites.

Now on this Sunday afternoon as Owen restored the milk container to the refrigerator he detected a soft but insistent rapping at the front door. The sound perplexed him. Few visitors made their way to his house, and, like someone fearing a home invasion, he approached the door with trepidation. When he opened it, however, no threat confronted him. Instead, he encountered a dark-haired young woman, her high heels planted firmly on his welcome mat. Simply dressed in a modest blouse and skirt, she scrutinized him from behind dark glasses.

"Are you Mr. Owen Stubbins?" she said.

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

"My name is Mari." She paused. "I think you are my father." It seemed she had waited a long time to say those words.

"Your father? I don't understand." Owen's Adam's apple rose and fell, like a barometer of his unease. "There must be some mistake. I have no family."

“My mama is Chieko Nakamura. I think you are my father.” Her tone implied this to be a sufficient explanation.

“Chieko?” Owen experienced a surge of apprehension, one laced through with excited anticipation. “Chieko?” he said again. His expression cautiously neutral, he struggled to conceal his emotions.

“May I come in so we can talk,” the young woman said.

Uncertain, Owen shifted from foot to foot, but he finally said, “Yes. Sure. Can’t leave you standing in the doorway.” He gestured toward his two cushion sofa. “Please. Sit down.” Owen occupied an arm chair opposite. He could not remember when anyone had last been inside his house.

The young woman settled herself demurely and then removed her glasses. Like a shy school girl, she initially lowered her eyes; eyes that signaled her Japanese parentage. At the same time, her high nose appeared to confirm her Western parentage. Her English, while good, was marked by a Japanese accent.

“You have a nice face. Just like Mama said.” She accompanied this statement with a tentative smile.

Nonplussed, Owen could find no immediate words. Suspicion shadowed his face. “There must be some mistake,” he said again.

“This is me,” she said and showed him an Arizona driver’s license. His eyes focused first on her photo and then on her date of birth—September 22, 1968, several months after he’d returned to the States.

“I still don’t see . . .”

“I have this picture,” Mari said. “I have studied it many times. Sometimes I cried.”

She produced a small black and white photo with serrated edges from her purse and handed it to him. In the picture a young American airman posed with his arm

around a Japanese girl. No ambiguity. The airman was Owen. And the girl was Chieko.

“You were both young,” Mari said. “I think you were very special to her.”

Studying the picture, Owen swallowed hard and nodded. A tin box containing a similar now-faded photo rested beneath folded shirts in a dresser drawer.

“But why have you come to me now, after so many years?”

“I did not know how to find you. And Mama said you did not want us. She said you ran away.”

The photo seemed like a marker of authenticity. Yet, Owen’s misgivings persisted. Could this person be telling the truth? Could she really be Chieko’s daughter? *His* daughter?

“If what you say is true,” Owen said, “I did not know you existed. Please believe me. It was all so long ago.” He stopped to gather his thoughts.

Mari smiled again, this time with affection. “I hoped Mama was wrong. I always dreamed you wanted us.”

“How can I . . .?”

Her head bent and meditative, she said, “My story is sad. My life was not easy; so many burdens. People teased me because I had a foreign father. They said I looked strange.” She paused, and Owen discerned a look of pain in her eyes. She, in turn, seemed to be reading his reaction.

Owen stared at his folded hands. He wanted both to believe and to disbelieve her words. “Tell me about yourself. How did you live?”

“Mama worked in the “entertainment” business. She felt so much sorrow. She tried to protect me. I wanted to escape. I wanted to go to America.”

“Well, how did you . . .?”

“I married an American soldier. His name is Jeff

Perkins. Last year he took me to a little town in Arizona. I think he tried to be kind, but when he drank alcohol he was mean. Sometimes he hit me. His parents hated me. One day he just went away. I have not seen him in a long time.”

Hearing all this, Owen felt at a loss, outside himself, uncertain what to do.

“My heart has had no joy. But now I have found you and I can be happy,” Mari said.

He wished she would quit smiling.

His mind far away, Owen sat considering things long past. His late 1960s assignment at Yokota Air Base had been a high point—*the* high point—of his life. He’d been somebody, proud to wear the uniform displaying his NCO chevrons, and excited to have a girlfriend, even if she was only a local bargirl.

Owen had wanted to marry her, but the military authorities raised barriers, and when his CO warned him that, after all, *it isn’t just about sex*, he lost heart. In the end, burdened with regret, he promised Chieko he would send for her once he got back to the States. But he never did. His courage failed him. In time Chieko became a half remembered dream.

Nonetheless, remorse and guilt became permanent residents in his heart and mind. And now this girl had materialized on his step. If her story were true, another accretion would be added to the sediment of guilt that had already found its way into his being. Could she really be his daughter?

Owen’s mind flip-flopped. What to do? What to say? His first instinct had been to retreat and to send her on her way. But he felt a pang of uncertainty and, moved by some indecipherable emotion, he hesitated.

“I was just having a glass of milk? Would you like

some?” he said. “How about something to eat? I have some Hostess Cupcakes.”

“No, thank you. Maybe just a glass of water.”

Owen stepped into the kitchen and filled a glass. He'd never told his now-elderly parents about his Japanese girlfriend. How would they react to the news that they had a granddaughter? How about his judgmental neighbors? How would they react to the girl's appearance? Perhaps it would be best to leave things as they had been. Yet, the idea he might actually have a daughter triggered a sensation of warmth and feeling otherwise absent from his life. Owen was torn.

When he returned with the water he said, “where are you staying?”

“I am staying with Japanese girl I met in Japan. She also married American. Lives in El Cajon, not far. I have her car.”

Owen had glimpsed a battered Chevy at the curb. “Why have you waited until now?”

“I knew your name for a long time. But I was afraid. I thought you would laugh at me. Tell me to go away.”

“How did you track me down?”

“My friend helped me find your house with her computer. Whitepages I think. Not many people with name Stubbins.”

“Well that's true.” For the first time Owen delivered a smile of his own. “Some people used to call me Stubs.”

She looked at him blankly. His effort at a bit of good-humored intimacy had missed the mark.

“My mother always called you Mr. Stubbins. I think you are still in her heart.”

“Your mother. How is your mother?” Owen asked. It seemed awkward. He hadn't even been sure she was alive.

“Her life is so miserable. I do not want to say it, she

has so little. But she is quite brave.”

“Does she still live near Yokota, near the . . .” He did not want to demonstrate too much familiarity.

“Yes. It is the same little house on a narrow alley. I’ve tried to help her. But now I, too, have almost nothing.” Her eyes moistened and she twisted her hands before her.

Her distress discomfited him. Like a self-defined societal reject, for as long as he could recall Owen had dealt with no one’s emotions other than his own. Yet, rising sympathy for another human being, an unfamiliar commodity for Owen Stubbins, welled up. His good sense erected a wall of caution; nonetheless, like a would-be penitent, he felt obliged to atone for the damage he’d possibly inflicted.

“Perhaps I could . . . perhaps I could provide something, some money.” Owen was hardly wealthy, but his frugality and modest living had enabled him to create a comfortable bank account and stock portfolio. He’d often wondered for what purpose he’d created these assets. Yes, for what purpose? Now maybe he’d found an answer.

Mari clapped her hands to her mouth. “Oh, no. I only came to meet my father. Finding you is enough.” But Owen believed her pleading eyes delivered a different message.

“I didn’t mean to insult you.” Owen tried desperately to recall Japanese attitudes toward gifts and giving. But he could not.

With Mari’s arrival, suddenly unfamiliar challenges and possibilities beset his well-ordered inner life. But it struck him the possibilities might not necessarily all be bad. He’d been alone so long; the prospect of someone new entering his life intrigued him, especially if that someone could be a person with whom he might share a bond of affection. Owen didn’t know what to think. A strange avenue, one he’d never imagined, had opened before him.

It was true he’d sometimes wondered if there might

have been a child, but he'd mostly managed to block the idea. Surely, Chieko would have told him had she been pregnant. Yet, now a young woman sat in his house declaring she was just such a child. His self-serving rationalization was disintegrating. Echoes of guilt besieged him while glimmers of hope embraced him. It was happening too quickly. He needed to step back and consider things more coolly. But how could he do so with so many disparate thoughts hurtling through his mind?

Banners of afternoon sun streamed through a window and illuminated Mari's face. Taken with her appearance, Owen sought to discover any resemblance with his own face. Although he could distinguish no specific characteristics to support the notion, he somehow concluded she bore Stubbins-like features. And, he decided, she was not a bad looking young woman. She fit the picture he'd conjured up of how his child might look if he had one.

Owen began to think he could, indeed, be happy with this girl in his life. In addition, the notion tugged at him that acknowledging her would be the right thing to do, the decent thing to do. His mind ranged ahead. He envisioned chatting with her on a garden bench, sharing meals, celebrating holidays. There seemed no end to it as his mind danced over the possibilities.

"How long will you be here?" Owen asked.

"That is sad thing, now that I found you." Mari said. "I thought I had no life in America and Mama is very sick, so I am going back to Japan. But I am happy to meet you even for a little while."

"What is wrong with your mother?"

"She is very tired. She has weak chest and she gets confused sometimes. Once I thought I could bring her to America. But that dream is gone."

“Are you leaving soon?”

“Two more days. Jeff’s parents sent me ticket. Told me never to come back.”

Owen hesitated, his mind still unable to process it all.

“Must you really leave so soon? I’d like to talk to you again, to learn more.”

“I too. But I must go. Mama needs me.” Mari got to her feet. “I am happy to find you, Mr. Stubbins. I hope we can meet again. I hope you might want to share our life a little. Even if we are far away.”

“Are you certain you can’t stay a bit longer right now?”

“No. I cannot. I must return my friend’s car.”

“How about tomorrow, then? There is an Italian restaurant just down the street—Giovanni’s American Grill. We could have lunch. Say, one o’clock.” Owen had never set foot in the place but he’d seen it from the bus.

She pondered his suggestion for a moment and then said, “That is kind. I will come there tomorrow.” An expression of happiness illuminated her face. She delivered a little bow and went out.

Rooted there in the doorway like one of the shrubs that lined his sidewalk, Owen watched her drive away. He wondered if any of the neighbors had seen the young woman enter and leave his house. What might they be thinking? Should he really care? It had been a singular day, a truly singular day. However her appearance on the scene played out, his life would never be the same. And he hoped that would be a good thing. A daughter; it seemed he had a daughter. The idea pleased him. It pleased him a great deal.

At the same time, he agonized. He felt like a candidate auditioning for a role for which he lacked both qualification and preparation.

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Awake at first light, Owen perched on the edge of his cot considering what to do. Who could he tell about Mari? In whom could he confide? Her appearance had whelmed and then overwhelmed him. What should he do? Immersed in ambivalence, his thoughts twisted first one way and then another. Like jumbled components of a thousand-piece puzzle, fragmented images of Japan, imagined images of Mari as a child, remembered images of Chieko, and mind pictures of what it might be like to have a daughter in his life all competed for space in his brain. Why had he committed to see Mari again? Then again, why shouldn't he see her again? Owen got up and paced about on his bare feet. At last he decided. He chose to see the good in her; she had, after all, asked for nothing.

Owen knew it to be an impulsive act, but Mari would soon be on her way to Japan. He called a taxi and had the driver deliver him to a nearby Von's market where Wells Fargo maintained a branch that opened at ten. Once there he lingered at the entrance, again seized by doubt, like someone experiencing anticipatory buyer's remorse. Finally, his mind made up, he strode to a teller's window.

"I would like to purchase a cashier's check. Five thousand—no, ten thousand dollars. Take it from my savings account."

Owen placed the check in a bank envelope, folded the envelope to fit, and slipped it into his shirt pocket. Ripples of uncertainty still plagued him, but he *wanted* to believe her, and he *wanted* to be ready to offer his help to Mari and her mother.

He arrived fifteen minutes early at Giovanni's and took a seat at a corner table. He hoped she would like the décor. It struck Owen as rather elevated: a Venetian wall mural, checkered table cloths, and candles in Chianti bottles. While Owen ostensibly studied the menu, he worried.

He was convinced his heart was either speeding up or slowing down—possibly both. Would she actually show up? Periodically he glanced at the door. One o'clock came and went and she had not appeared. He tried to fend it off but doubt had once again become a close companion. Perhaps he'd dispatched himself on a fool's errand. Yet, the opportunity might never come again to grasp even a modicum of the happiness this relationship promised. And, truth be told, he realized he still sought forgiveness. And so he waited.

At 1:15 she breezed through the entrance—his *daughter*. Yes, he decided, she was his daughter. He knew it with certainty. Owen raised his hand in greeting, and Mari joined him at his table.

"I am so happy we could meet again," he said. "I've been thinking of all the things you told me. So many memories and feelings, it is hard for me to find the right words."

"For me, too," she said.

They paused awkwardly.

Owen smiled at her. What did he intend the smile to communicate? Affection? Empathy? He didn't know.

A waitress arrived to take their orders. "Let's have spaghetti," he said. "Maybe with a bit of *vino*. He assumed she must like noodles. After all, she had grown up in Japan.

"Could I just have a burger and a coke?" she said.

"I have so many memories," Owen said as they ate. "My time in Japan was the best time of my life. And now I have found you. Or I guess you have found me." He avoided commenting directly on Chieko and their relationship.

Mari smiled behind her hand. "Yes, it is all very nice."

"Very nice. Yes, Mari, very nice. I think you've brought some real brightness to my day."

She looked embarrassed and covered her face with

her hand. “Mr. Stubbins, tell me about your life. Mama will want to know.”

“Not much to tell,” he said. “Almost thirty years at the city office. Tending my garden. I’ve had some pretty good roses.” Even that was a gloss, and he realized he really didn’t have much else to say. He thought for a moment and added, “I used to have a dog. His name was Bruno. I really liked him.”

He didn’t tell her how empty his life had been. In fact, he realized, it had been no life at all. He simply passed the days.

“You never married?”

“No.” The question pained him.

“I think you are still in Mama’s heart.”

“You said your mother was not well. I really would like to help.”

This time she did not resist his offer, although she seemed a reluctant mendicant.

“I really cannot take . . . but we are so poor. Any small thing would be good. I know it comes from your goodness.”

Owen produced the envelope from his pocket. “I want you to have this. It is for you and your mother.”

Mari seemed conflicted and looked away.

“Please. It’s a cashier’s check. It’s for \$10,000.” He’d blurted out the amount and immediately saw himself as boorish for doing so.

Mari seemed unable to speak. She simply nodded and accepted the envelope. Tears of gratitude wet her eyes.

“I hope you will write to me from Japan,” Owen said. “Tell me about your mother. Tell me how you are doing. Maybe someday we can meet again.”

She nodded, and Owen offered what he now intended to be a fatherly smile. He had done the right thing; he was sure of it. He felt buoyant, energetic, even jovial—feelings

that had long evaded him. He was an imaginatively challenged man, and these feelings amazed him.

“It is so much. Thank you, Mr. Stubbins. Not for me—for Mama. You are so kind.”

“I only wish you’d found me sooner,” Owen said, his voice a bit tremulous.

For the next fifteen minutes Mari described her childhood, her fascination with American movies and music. *Jurassic Park* was her current film favorite. She loved Whitney Houston and by way of confirmation she began to hum *I Will Always Love You*.

Owen paid close attention, occasionally interjecting a question. The more he heard, the more he sensed the good in her. He’d been right in his judgment. From time to time he experienced a twinge of tenderness, something he had not experienced for many years. He felt more and more confident it was not too late to establish a relationship.

When their talk ended and she got up to leave, Owen leaned forward about to give her a hug, but then he thought better of it. Instead, he simply accepted her extended hand.

“Here is my mailing address and phone number,” he said and pressed a piece of paper into her palm. “I will be waiting to hear from you.”

They walked together to the sidewalk where he hailed a taxi for her. Owen struggled to cope with a bubbling stew of emotions. But the distillate that emerged was that the sun was shining and the scrim of unparalleled loneliness that shrouded him, had, at least for the time being, dissipated.

“Goodbye, *Papa*,” she said. “I will write you long letter.”

“Goodbye, Mari.” Owen bit his lip. “Goodbye.”

She rolled down the taxi window, bowed her head,

and then waved as the cab pulled away.

A new day. Yes, sir. A new sunshiny day.

Why not? Mari had told him her flight to Tokyo was scheduled for Monday afternoon. Why not see her off? It seemed an appropriate gesture. More than anything, he simply wanted to see her once more. Owen Stubbins brimmed with anticipation about a new chapter in his life. Ideas piled up. Retirement loomed close at hand and he began to think about a trip to Japan. He had revealed none of this to Mari, but the notion settled in increasingly fertile soil. In what was now the near-euphoria generated by Mari's appearance, Owen paid little heed to the fact she said she was married or to the question of how he might possibly relate to her mother.

Owen called his office to say he wasn't feeling well and would not be in. He then put on a fresh shirt, combed his hair, and checked his smile. He set out for the airport by bus; he had to transfer twice, but he'd allowed plenty of time. Once in the international terminal, he viewed the departure board. *PanAm 133 to Tokyo. Loading at Gate 12;* that had to be the one. His heart hummed.

Like a detective on a benign stakeout, he seated himself in an adjacent gate area. That way he would be able to surprise her. Waiting there Owen experienced ripples of anticipation. He'd not been in an airport in many years, and the announcements of flights to far off places, the bustle of travelers coming and going, and the roar of planes lifting off the runways all pleased him. Two soldiers dropped their duffel bags and settled in chairs across from him. His salute seemed to baffle them. More memories rushed back. He felt alive again. Just like his Air Force days at Yokota.

Time passed. People began to gather in the vicinity of

the gate, waiting, he supposed, to proceed outward through immigration and customs. She had probably already checked her bags, and Owen expected Mari's momentary appearance. But when people began funneling through the gate she still had not appeared. Owen studied his watch. Well, she'd been late at the restaurant. Still, he got up and walked out into the concourse where he scanned its length from one end to the other. No sign of her. He'd hoped they would have a chance to chat a bit, but now all he could expect would be a quick goodbye. He fidgeted. Was she on another flight? Did he have the day wrong?

And then came the crackling, hard-to-hear announcement. "PanAm Flight 133 for Honolulu and Tokyo is now in the final boarding process. All passengers should be on board." The status board revealed no further scheduled flights.

At a loss, Owen trudged back to the terminal entrance and flagged a cab. What had promised to be a fine day had not turned out to be one. Not at all a bright sunny day. Owen went home.

When he arrived, he opened the refrigerator and poured a glass of milk. Then he sat down by the phone. Perhaps she would call. He sat there for a very long time. But the phone did not ring. On reflection, he concluded it didn't matter. He pushed away the surging doubts. He dismissed the negative thoughts. His face took on a look of blissful contentment. Owen didn't care. He'd met his daughter. Nothing could change that.

At about the same time fifty miles up the coast, Mari came out of a bank and slid into the passenger seat of the Chevrolet.

"Here it is," she said and handed a bank envelope stuffed with cash to Charlie Edgerton, a lanky man of

thirty or so with bad skin and bad teeth.

He tore open the envelope and quickly counted the money. “Yep, it’s all here.”

Edgerton stuffed the envelope in his jeans pocket, took a long drag on his cigarette, and said, “Let’s go. Time for the next one.”

“He seemed like a nice guy,” Mari said. “I feel kind of sorry for him.”

“Hey, Babe, way the cookie crumbles,” Edgerton said. “He delivered way better than we expected. We’re just lucky the *mama-san* that ran the bar where your old lady worked found that picture.”

“Do you think he’ll go to the police?”

“Hell, no. He’ll cry in his beer. But who’s he gonna tell? What’s he gonna say? That he thought he knocked up some Japanese girl twenty-five years ago? And stupidly gave away a bundle of money? No way.”

Mari stayed silent for an extended time. Maybe, she thought to herself, he *was* the one. Maybe he really *was* her father.

“He tried to be kind to me,” she said softly as they cruised through another suburban neighborhood.

Edgerton ignored her comment. “That must be it,” he said and pointed to a bungalow not unlike the one occupied by Owen Stubbins. “I’ll wait at that shopping center burger place.”

Ten minutes later Mari returned. She parked the car, walked up the sidewalk, and rang the bell. When a man in his mid-fifties opened the door she said, “Mr. Quigley, I think you are my father.”



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LAWRENCE F. FARRAR is a former US diplomat with multiple assignments in Japan as well as postings in Germany, Norway, and Washington, DC. He also lived in Japan as a graduate student and as a naval officer. His stories have appeared nearly 50 times in literary magazines such as *The Chaffin Journal*, *Zone 3*, *Streetlight*, *Curbside Splendor E-Zine*, *Big Muddy*, *Tampa Review Online*, *O-Dark-Thirty*, *Jelly Bucket*, *The MacGuffin*, and *Green Hills Literary Lantern*. His stories often involve people coming up against the customs of a foreign culture.

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

PIERRE-PAUL PARISEAU is an artist and illustrator working for a wide range of international clients. He exhibits his personal work regularly. Evoking currents of surrealism and pop art, the creative work of Pariseau invites us into a world of images where anything is possible. Happy coincidences and anecdotal events inspire him in a fantasy that translates into images made of vibrant colors, stunning juxtapositions, and hypnotic reveries. He lives in Montreal.

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