

GAIJIN: Nine Cautionary Tales is the story of a number of folk who, for a variety of reasons – love, money, family - decide to make their home in Japan. It's a study of the often bizarre, sometimes tragic ways their lives develop.

**GAIJIN: Nine Cautionary Tales of Life
in Japan's English Teaching Community**

By Peter Smith

Order the book from the publisher BookLocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/12108.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**



GAIJIN

NINE

CAUTIONARY TALES

OF LIFE IN
JAPAN'S

ENGLISH TEACHING
COMMUNITY

(Nine True Stories)

Peter Smith

Copyright © 2021 Peter Smith

Print ISBN: 978-1-64719-504-5

Epub ISBN: 978-1-64719-505-2

Mobi ISBN: 978-1-64719-506-9

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2021

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Smith, Peter

GAIJIN: Nine Cautionary Tales of Life in Japan's English

Teaching Community by Peter Smith

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021915699

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|------------|
| PART ONE: ARRIVAL | 7 |
| 1) The First Gaijin..... | 7 |
| 2) The Amazing Mr. Peach..... | 39 |
| 3) Jim Takes a Boat Ride..... | 75 |
| 4) Douglas: End of the Road | 107 |
| INTERMISSION: WEDDING SEASON | 141 |
| 5) Thomas Meets his Match | 141 |
| PART TWO: LEAVING | 173 |
| 6) Ben: The Man with a Plan | 173 |
| 7) Odie: The Happiest Man in Japan..... | 206 |
| 8) Sally: The Country Gal..... | 236 |
| 9) Mayu: The Japanese Gaijin..... | 268 |

7) Odie: The Happiest Man in Japan

In Japan, land of earthquakes, eruptions and countless other natural disasters, the biggest danger may actually be one of its biggest attractions: Flattery. You will be praised on the size of your eyes, the colour of your hair. Your style will be admired and your height will draw gasps. And that's just your appearance! Once you open your mouth and talk, your (pathetic) attempts in the language will cause amazement, your professed love of green tea and tofu will generate bravos and your (amateur) appreciation of the finer points of Sumo will probably set a few people swooning. Better not mention your post-graduate thesis on the Meiji Restoration and your ability to use shuriken like a Ninja for now. Leave those for later, just in case you cause a scene.

Japanese are masters of giving compliments. It's undeniably nice how the smallest "achievement" can be met with a fanfare of applause, but at times it can be quite baffling. Egos brought up in the west have evolved a protective mechanism, so when any modest feats are met with sarcasm, silence or downright insults, we are prepared. Far less impressive acts in Japan will get the opposite treatment. Fragile egos which may be crushed in less forgiving cultures can find fertile ground in which to flourish.

"You can use chopsticks? Wow, that's amazing. You've heard of Ichiro? How knowledgeable you are! "Arigato, Konnichiwa, Oishii" - your Japanese is fluent!"

Even for someone who has never set foot in the country, this seems rather excessive, but for those of us who actually live here? It's just a difference in culture, the flattery is entirely well-meant, but

here's the thing: It suddenly becomes necessary to develop a strategy to cope with this unfamiliar barrage of praise. Smiling "Thank you," while thinking, "C'mon, please, did you take me for a total idiot?" is my policy on this. I like to think it's protected me against becoming a self-important twat, but you can never be sure. You'd have to ask people who know me.

The sad thing is that not everybody realizes the importance of this mechanism. Certainly, it is tempting - like a mother whose baby forms its first words a few months earlier than others of similar age and is briefly convinced that she may be nurturing a future Einstein - to let such words of praise go to your head and persuade you that you really are a little special. It may be forgivable for a mother, whose hopes will anyway soon be dashed as she slowly realizes her little darling is just as useless as all the other brats, but it's unpardonable - aside from being entirely ridiculous - for the unexceptional Gaijin who, having spent a few months in Japan and is unsurprisingly able to perform some of the most basic cultural and linguistic functions, convinces himself that he has achieved something extraordinary. The accolades only seem to confirm what he so desperately wants to believe. That's when the baby ego gains the potential to turn into a monster.

With that, I'd like you to meet Odie. A very ordinary specimen of the human race, most people would concur. A nice guy, to be sure. Handsome in a conventional young white American way. Tall by Japanese standards. I venture he would go entirely unnoticed back in his hometown. But in Japan, nobody told him to reset his ego defense switch. And he succumbed.

GAIJIN

The first time you meet Odie, you'll probably get a good impression. He's not shy, he's chatty, kind of interesting. He has a nice happy face. Actually he was a dead ringer for one of my old friends from Hull University, Dave, leader of The Lesbian and Gay Society. Dave too had a very happy, unmistakably gay smile, and Odie's was almost identical. Therefore I kind of assumed that Odie too was homosexual. Stands to reason, right? Same facial expression, same sexual orientation. I was always waiting for him to come out, but he never did. Totally wrong on that account.

But in spite of that first impression, there was something about him which suggested you wouldn't be too upset if he didn't come to the next party. Weirdly, this feeling never left me the whole time I knew him, spanning over fifteen years. For a long time I couldn't quite put my finger on it, until it finally hit me: The guy never asks questions.

"I'm Odie, from Tennessee, USA."

"Right, I've never been there. Down near Florida, isn't it?"

"Well, sort of..."

"I'm Pete, from Yorkshire, England."

"Oh, OK, I know Yorkshire."

"Have you been there?"

"No, never been there, but I have a friend here in Kumamoto from London."

Or, many years later, a typical conversation would run,

"Hey, Odie, did you have a good weekend? DJing again?"

"Yeah, it was good. Quite a big crowd out on Saturday."

"Sorry I couldn't go. Big night out on Friday, I was exhausted all day Saturday."

"No worries."

You see? It's very subtle. It's actually so normal that you don't notice it for months and months but then once you identify it, it becomes mildly irritating. The balance of conversation gets slightly skewed, which is the whole point in the first place, because in Odie's brain nobody is more interesting than himself.

He's also one of those people who talk slightly louder than they need to. Is it because he's sub-consciously angling for a bigger audience? Does he feel that his words would be wasted if there was only one listener? Just a tiny bit annoying. That and the slight pause he gives before pronouncing his views on a particular matter, which - assuming he's not just slow - I guess he employs to give his words more gravity.

Oh yes, Odie is a happy man all right, and that in itself is a wonderful thing to see. I met him at a small school downtown just after I started working for Douglas. And it was clear right away that Odie had found himself the perfect job. For Odie, the class is his audience, the students are his fans. The curtain goes up and Odie is on the stage every hour. He doesn't have to work hard to search for subjects for the lesson; words come naturally to him. He's no wordsmith, but he can single-handedly keep a conversation going almost indefinitely. Usually the teachers are constantly checking the clock, working out how much more material they have time for (or how the hell they can drag things out until the bell). In Odie's lessons, it's the students who are busy glancing at their watches, wondering who's going to draw Odie-Sensei's attention to the fact that the lesson has already overrun by ten minutes.

It's curious really that Odie doesn't ask questions. It's a staple of almost every teacher. "Have you ever... How often do you... When was

the last time you...?” I shudder to think how many times I use those three alone in the course of a single week.

In the school where we taught, a young lady always came in on Friday night before the end of the last lesson and waited for Odie.

“Is that your girlfriend?” I asked one time, genuinely curious that he might actually be straight and just managing to catch myself before I started asking any embarrassing “how often” questions.

“Oh, that’s my wife, Erika. We got married last year.”

“Your wife? Really?” Wow, that threw me. Here I am complaining about Odie never asking any questions, and I’d never got far enough to find out his marital status. I guess I’d never even asked him about girlfriends before. Must have been that sub-conscious gay assumption.

So young Odie had been snapped up already, barely a year after setting foot in Japan, still only 24.

“You know, we met, we’re into the same music, we started going to karaoke, and then just kind of tied the knot,” he explained, pausing way too long after each comma. I guessed that this probably wasn’t much of an over simplification. She didn’t seem like a regular Wife-of-Gaijin, if such a thing exists; definitely on the quiet side.

“I think she gets a bit jealous. She kind of wants to stay home most of the time. We hardly make it to karaoke any more since we got married.”

Oh dear. Sudden post-marital personality U-turns don’t bode well for a long happy life together. Once I’d discovered her identity, I tried some small talk but it was painfully obvious that she had no interest in me at all. Her husband was her whole world. I could picture her, hands clasped, hanging onto his every word in conversation, straining

to catch every note he sung in karaoke. I guessed she probably couldn't believe her luck - and the whole thing was mildly confusing to me too: A proposal is usually a question, right? Was Odie capable of that?

I have two theories about Odie which I'd like to present now. First, his name. It sometimes crossed my mind that Odie's over-healthy interest in himself might have been somehow connected to his slightly unusual name. Nobody gets too excited when meeting a Chris, Mike, John or Peter. It's not a conversation starter, more of an eye-roller, whereas Odie was unusual. It seemed to be missing a letter. Cody, Jody, Brody: OK. But "Odie"? Just downright O.D: Odd. It was almost impossible not to ask a couple of follow-up questions.

On top of that, one of the most popular songs in Japan at the time, on heavy rotation, was *Oh Dear My Sweetheart* - which instantly became *Odie My Sweetheart*. Boy did he love that. "You're sooo vain," I wanted to say, "I bet you think that song is about *you*. Don't you? *Don't you?*"

Second is my theory of relative skills. Odie wasn't too proud to admit he had zero hand-eye coordination skills. One time he was invited by some Japanese friends to play badminton. It was one of those situations where they simply wouldn't take no for an answer.

"I can't play," protested Odie.

"That's OK, we're not very good."

"No, but I don't mean I'm not good, I mean I really can't play."

It was futile. Odie went along and gamely tried not to make too much of a fool of himself. He picked up the shuttlecock and tried to hit it. The shuttle dropped to the floor and his friends burst out laughing.

He picked it up again and tried once more. Another swoosh of air, and more laughter, just a ripple this time. Third time, same result - and silence. It's a good story and instructive that Odie didn't mind telling it. He wasn't bothered by being a duffer at racket sports. Why should he be when he shone in so many other areas? So my theory is that Odie measured his other meagre talents alongside his sporting prowess and reached the erroneous conclusion that he was a gifted musician, this essentially by virtue of not being tone deaf.

Music: The love of Odie's life. He didn't actually play anything. No guitar, violin or trombone for him, but he wasn't going to let that get in the way of him carving out a name for himself in the local music scene. He decided to launch a two-pronged attack. DJ ODIE was there spinning the discs every Saturday night to a packed dance floor in *The Red Zed*.

Now I have to rein in my natural skepticism here as I don't know much about the skill requirements of a local weekend DJ. Playing Chemical Brothers, R.E.M, and Blur records one after another doesn't strike me as a massively difficult task, but credit where it's due, these were fun nights. If there is a skill among DJs which separates those who can get people onto the dance floor from those who can't, then he had it.

Unluckily for everyone though, it was the second prong that really appealed and it was into this that he poured most of his energy. His dream was to be a singer: ODIE the Rock Star. A Saturday night local DJ is usually a marginal figure, the majority of those shaking their thang under the strobe lights probably even unaware of his or her existence. But the singer is the centre of attention, the focal point, drawing all eyes onto him. This is where Odie believed he belonged.

And watching him on stage for the first time was when I really understood that Odie would be in Japan forever. There was no safer bet. He was loving every moment, punching the air à la Freddie, doing slightly provocative hip moves à la Mick Jagger, and singing 100% à la Odie. Which means not terribly well. You could see the audience gamely clapping along; you could see the other band members trying to avoid looking at their singer. And there was Odie taking the applause, as if it was a genuine appreciation of his talent rather than just something polite people do when a song stops. This scene could only possibly be in Japan. No way would he last one night back in the US, but here he and his band, *Butter Fingers*, had got a monthly slot at one of the local live houses. I knew the other band members and tried to go and see them when I could.

After the performance we'd go over, have a chat. "Good show, guys. Interesting gyrating movement you were trying out there, Odie. Where did that come from?"

"Well you know," he said earnestly, "I want to try to reach out to some of the younger fans. (pause) Give them a little excitement. (pause) Set their pulses racing."

Or after another resoundingly ordinary show:

"I think we nailed that last song." (pause) "But on our second album we should aim for more of a dance sound." (pause) "I think our fan base would like that."

Fan base?! What the hell are you talking about, Odie? You're taking the piss, right? There were barely forty people at the show and most of them were friends or family. But no, Odie didn't do irony. There was no modesty. He really believed they were heading for stardom. Florence Foster Jenkins had been re-incarnated.

GAIJIN

“Don’t think much of the singer,” said Ben’s brother on a final night out before flying back to Australia a couple of days after Harumi’s funeral, his Australian twang carrying a little too easily to the ears of the musicians on stage. No, I don’t think anyone thought too much of him - but what can you do? He was enjoying himself, he was happy, who were we to pop his bubble?

And then, to complete his happiness, there was Risako. For readers wondering what became of Erika, I am unable to enlighten you. I have no idea. She was not connected to anyone of my acquaintance besides Odie. It appears they got divorced as easily as they had got married. There was no lasting legacy, other than the honing of Odie’s unique singing talent in the pre-marriage karaoke dates. If she has any place in this story then that is it. There were no children. I guess she either entered a convent, convinced that Odie was the only one for her and if he didn’t want her, she didn’t need anyone. Or more likely, a few years later she married a salaryman and led a very normal life raising two kids, never mentioning her strange former life quirk to anyone.

But Risako’s role couldn’t be more different. Once Risako steps on the scene, Odie’s life will never be the same again. Odie even has to make room for her. Risako may not have been a natural show-off but her role was not merely the adoring wife, smiling benignly at her hero from the side of the stage. Risako, you will see, has quite a personality of her own. We should probably rename Part II of this chapter, *Risako: The Siren of Kumamoto*. Terribly sorry Odie, it’s time for you to step aside; Risako becomes the main protagonist in your story from now.

Risako was one of the regulars at *The Red Zed*. She loved dancing and was genuinely pretty and sexy. Which is more than you could say for her husband. You see, Risako was already married. She'd spent a year studying English in Texas. No fishing manual necessary for Risako: She'd met Howard in a bar, attraction had been instant and mutual, they'd had a torrid love affair and Risako had brought the goofus back with her to Japan.

Howard would win the unofficial *Least Attractive Gaijin in the City* award by some distance. Aggressive, edgy, unable to hold a job down - even in Japan! - Howard was the kind of Gaijin who gives us a bad name.

Love is blind, you may say, but on this occasion it was just Risako whose eyes were not functioning properly. But the good news was that they were rapidly recovering. It appeared that way too late, she was starting to reach the same conclusion as everyone else. There are only so many times you can hear, "What's a gorgeous girl like Risako doing with a moron like Howard?" without asking yourself the same question. And it didn't go unnoticed that she seemed to rather enjoy sidling up to the DJ and spending rather longer than strictly necessary to request the new Mylo record. Maybe she liked the way he talked to her. Perhaps Risako had had her fill of the Macho Gaijin and she was attracted to the softer version which Odie incarnated. She started staying longer and longer at the DJ's booth every night out. No surprises there for Odie; for him she was just another of his adoring fans. What could be more normal than for some Japanese chick to be interested in the cool guy spinning the discs? Wouldn't it in fact be odd if he didn't have his circle of groupies? And Risako was indeed interested in many things about this showy, confident young

American not the least of which being that he had already been through a divorce.

“Divorce...”

Was this the first time she played the sound of that word around her lips?

Odie started playing a very dangerous game, spending more and more time with Risako. Howard may not have been the Dumbest Gaijin in Kumamoto - the man wasn't greedy in his trophy hunting - but he wasn't smart. And yet the signs were clear enough to anyone watching. You could see the collision course, and you had to fear it would not end well for Odie. Odie had quite a meaty build, but I imagine his boxing/kung-fu skills would be more on a par with his badminton than his DJing skills (“I'm a lover, not a fighter”). Howard had a track record. He'd been involved in a few scuffles in the bars and always ended up on the winning side. He was one of those I was wary of. Always be polite when Howard's around. Keep away as far as possible. Keep any conversations with his wife brief. Keep any negative thoughts to yourself.

“Fascinating, Howard,” I smiled sweetly as he stood there at *The Red Zed* one Friday evening, trying to impress us with his ludicrous flat-Earth theories. “You're so smart!”

The end came inevitably, Howard confronting Risako one night about the exact nature of the relationship between her and Odie - and Risako admitting that basically the marriage was over. And to Howard's credit, in his storm of fury, the violence was limited to objects. He ripped the cash register out and hurled it across the counter, he smashed a few of the whiskey bottles, kicked over some tables and chairs, generally made lots of noise and disappeared out of

the bar and into the night. Not a scratch on Risako, and even if it crossed his mind, he didn't head to Odie's house with a hammer, knife or chainsaw, which he could so easily have done. Instead, the next day he simply moved away from Kumamoto, never to be seen again. Boy did Odie get off lightly there. And that *Least Attractive Gaijin* trophy was once more up for grabs. (Thomas, anyone?)

And so it was safe for the two of them to come out openly as an item without risking a fork in the neck. They were suddenly The Celebrity Couple of the Kumamoto Gaijin community. ("Brad warned me about those paparazzi.") And only months later, after presumably Odie's second and last use of an interrogative during his time in Japan, they tied the knot. For Risako, if she'd been listening carefully it may have been a sense of *déjà entendu* - some non-believers cruelly whispering that Odie didn't seem a huge improvement on husband number one. Certainly you tended to think Odie, like his ex-wife Erika, probably couldn't believe his luck - or then again maybe not. Self-confidence was one thing he didn't have a problem with. Thinking about it, he probably wouldn't have raised an eyebrow if Beyoncé had declared her love for him ("She wants to do a duet with me"). But there he was with a drop dead gorgeous wife, to be followed one year later by a cute-as-anything little baby son.

And so, Odie was set. A perfect job, a perfect wife, not quite such a perfect singer ("Two out of three ain't bad"). But now for his greatest role yet: Dad. I think it's fair to say that Gaijin Fathers tend to be more involved in raising kids than their Japanese rivals. This is even one reason why they are sought after (by some). Away from the exhausting demands of rock superstardom and in the more humble domain of the daily grind, Odie had gravitated to teaching kids. The

guy had endless reserves of energy. He loved playing, adored dressing up, spent all his time bouncing, jumping, singing, running - no ball sports obviously - and he became the ultimate kids' teacher, opening his own school, ODIE'S KINGDOM. It might have been perfect training for parenthood, but it wasn't necessary. In the realm of fatherhood, Odie really came into his own: He was a natural. Nobody I knew could hold a light up to him in this regard. It was a seamless transition, the vote is unanimous. (Drum roll) *The Best Father in Kumamoto* award goes to...ODIE!"

It's so good to see a genuinely happy family. It warms the heart. Risako had also, somewhat surprisingly, transformed from hard-core party girl to soft, patient mother. She was positively oozing maternal goodness, which only flowed even more abundantly upon the arrival of another truly adorable baby, a daughter this time, two years after the first. You'd have to have a heart of stone not to be happy watching them, even if the feeling of not, in fact, minding too much if Odie wasn't around at the next party had never left. Like a family of owls, you didn't want to get too close, but neither did you want any harm to come to them.

Yes, even if I still wasn't about to join Odie's inner circle of chums, the new Odie was certainly an improvement on the old version. But wouldn't you know it - Odie going up in my estimation due to his heroic turn as a Dad coincided almost exactly with him going down in my estimation owing to his excessive use of Facebook.

God only knows why I ever agreed to join Facebook. It seemed like a dumb idea at the time, and it was. "It's great," enthused a friend. "You can keep in touch with all your family and friends in England."

“I already keep in touch with them. We talk on email about three or four times a year and that’s plenty.”

“But you can send photos, do live chats!” she gushed.

It didn’t even sound remotely tempting, but unable to come up with a strong enough argument against it, I allowed her to set up my account.

Once there, I quickly discovered that none of my friends or family in England even seemed to be on it, and the posts were almost exclusively put up by acquaintances living within five miles of my house, the majority of whom seemed to like nothing better than uploading the most inane crap. And the Worst Offender was of course Odie.

Jeez, I really did well to never get too close to this guy, I thought every time I read his memes or some “hilarious” package he’d spotted at the local supermarket. I had seriously underestimated just how annoying he really was.

Facebook was made for Odie. Yet another platform from which to perform, to spread The Word of Odie. And now, thanks to Facebook, there was ODIE grinning at me in a Sponge Bob outfit, ODIE expounding his thoughts on the latest episode of some US TV show I’d never see, or ODIE declaring his love for some new soda product, virtually every bloody day. I started to occasionally wish a tiny bit of harm might come to him.

Odie’s roots in Japan just kept getting deeper and deeper. He gave up the DJing, but would still perform regularly at the live houses, now with *The Shape Shifters*. Time sadly had not turned him into a more watchable performer. The years went by, the kids grew quickly, his son reached 6th grade in elementary school and he was already a

GAIJIN

dead ringer for his Dad. Rather miraculously, both kids showed a remarkable aptitude for sports. Tomoki was the school baseball team captain no less, while Michiko had joined the basketball club. Risako was suddenly busy ferrying them around every weekend to matches all over the city - Odie didn't have a driver's license - and somehow found the time to open her own small shop selling "American" cookies. She never seemed to have a moment's rest. There seemed to be multiple Risako's. On top of the mother, the driver and the cookie maker, she had to help Odie with the running of his school. Odie spent all his energy on useful things like dressing up in superhero costumes and jumping around with kids. Risako spent all her energy on useful things like cooking, driving and managing both businesses.

Life went on. I didn't care much to see Odie every time I turned on the computer, but there's always a certain comfort which comes with life maintaining a regular rhythm. I'd managed not to let myself get too irritated. It's just a part of life. Owls go "towit-towoo", and that's cool. And if Odie feels a compulsion to post stupid stuff on FB, so be it. Let it be. As long as you don't sing the damn song. It's a sign that things are normal, nothing more.

If someone had told me that inside two years, the whole family would have left Japan and Risako would be filing for divorce, I would have told them to go away and stop wasting my time with such blatant nonsense. That dude was a lifer. He'd die if he left Japan. He'd suffocate. He was a model of Evolution of Gaijin. He needed to breathe Japanese air, needed his karaoke and his sushi, his stomach would refuse non-Japanese food. He had adapted completely to his environment and would never be plucked out. Divorce? Well, we never

know what goes on behind closed doors, but these two were so dearly devoted to their kids that whatever problems might develop between them, there was nobody less likely to separate. Ladies and Gentlemen, let me present the winners of *Couple Least Likely to Leave Japan* and *Couple Least Likely to Divorce*. It's a hands-down decision. Two more trophies right there to add to the collection. Odie's scooping them up left, right and centre.

So it would not be much of an exaggeration to say that it I was dumbstruck when they not only moved to USA but also broke up.

Their problems can be dated back with remarkable precision to one fateful night, 2016 April 16 at exactly 1:24 am.

We all had quite a shock that night in Kumamoto. I went to sleep with my seven year old daughter, Eri, who was still young enough to want to share my bed on occasion. My wife had passed out on the sofa. Eri was prone to kicking and punching in the middle of the night, so I could never get a truly peaceful night's sleep whenever she was there. What I was not prepared for however, was to wake up with the bed shaking violently from side to side and the sounds of heavy things crashing down and human screams, these sounds coming both from within the apartment and from outside. My daughter, bless her, was not to blame for any of this. Various sirens and bells were going off, but this was all only vaguely perceived, my attention more concerned with wondering why the hell my bed had suddenly become a bucking bronco and trying not to get thrown off. It continued for what felt like several minutes before blessed stillness returned. A quick check: Eri - OK. Wife - OK. Risa - in her bedroom, also safe. Relief. But we had to get outside. We somehow crunched our way in pitch blackness

through the piles of fallen furniture to the front door and joined our neighbours walking down the outside steps of our apartment building to the road below, then got into our car and drove to the nearest open space. We spent the rest of the night inside the car, doing our best to ignore the shrieks that went up every time one of the occasionally powerful aftershocks hit.

The Kumamoto earthquake was one of the strongest post-war earthquakes in Japan and it changed life in the city for weeks. It caused miraculously few deaths, largely due to the time it struck, when most people were safely in bed, but the destruction was everywhere. In a country with the strictest earthquake regulations on house-building in the world, you'd see at least one collapsed building every block. Yes, on the whole, we could count ourselves very lucky indeed. Eri even claimed to have slept through the whole thing. Many friends' houses had suffered structural damage, but only a month later, aside from a few of the more severely affected villages to the east of the city, life had mostly regained its pre-earthquake rhythm.

But there were exceptions. Mentally, people had responded in different ways. The relentless aftershocks were nerve-racking. There was no guarantee that another mighty tremor would not hit.

One family was affected more than all others of my acquaintance: Odie's. The entire contents of his house had been unceremoniously dumped all over the floor like everyone else, but they hadn't suffered any damage. His daughter, on the other hand, was suffering extreme panic attacks. Every aftershock that hit would send her into fits of terror. She shut her eyes, blocked her ears and started moaning and stayed like that long after the shaking had subsided. More than that,

in between quakes she became mute, refusing to engage in conversation with anyone, simply awaiting the next tremor with dread. Odie and Risako panicked. The reports were very confusing. Nobody could predict the future, but dipping into Kumamoto's history, the last substantial earthquake seemed to have occurred some 400 years previously, sparking a period of seismic activity which apparently lasted "years". Two days was bad enough, but months or *years*? That was way beyond imagining. So, supported by friendly calls from his family in the States to "get the hell out of there", that's exactly what they did. It wasn't easy either, but after a series of frantic phone calls, they managed to get their hands on some of the last precious tickets, and next thing, they were on the plane.

I'm sure it was with a huge sigh of relief that the wheels of the aeroplane left the liqueous concrete Japanese runway and an even bigger one when they landed on the reassuringly solid concrete of JFK. A wise decision, no doubt about it. It was the start of a long recovery process for Michiko. She slowly and surely started to re-emerge from her cocoon, but it would take many months for her to recover completely, let those terrifying memories subside.

Anyway, now they were nice and safe in Tennessee. The kids always loved visiting their grandparents' house. They were spoiled rotten naturally, but more than that - the house was BIG. A true castle compared to their exceedingly modest Kumamoto apartment. The grandparents loved spending time with the children. A couple of weeks once a year was woefully short, always over much too quickly. "You kids going back already?" they would say sadly, and it was a genuine sadness. Why did Odie have to live so goddamn far away? All the other grandkids were in the same city.

GAIJIN

So who was it who made the suggestion first? Probably Grandpa or possibly Grandma. Must have been one of them. “Why go back to Japan? Why not stay here? Lots of space, everyone gets along just great. Haven’t you been in Japan long enough already?”

I can hear the kids shouting, “Yeah!” I can see Risako looking on and nodding approvingly in her motherly way. And I can see Odie glancing around nervously at everybody, suddenly aware that he was in a minority of one and in need of some masterstroke if he was going to turn it around and get back to his beloved Japan, his adoring students, his devoted fans.

“Well, it makes sense to stay here for a while, I guess, and once things settle down in Kumamoto, we’ll be able to go back.” It was a very sensible thing to say, so why did nobody seem to agree with him?

“Tomoki wants to meet his friends again,” he continued, smartly identifying his son as the one least likely to contradict him. A base to build on.

“I have friends here too,” said Tomoki, a little too defiantly for Odie’s liking. Oh dear. This would be an uphill battle. His biggest potential ally might have already gone over to The Other Side.

And Risako wasn’t hanging around. Without even telling him, she was already getting all the documents together she needed to apply for residency.

When Odie arrived back on Japanese soil a couple of months later, he’d lost. He was all by himself, his family had stayed in Tennessee and he had a simple briefing: To sell up and move back.

“Unbelievable,” I said, glad that I hadn’t bet any money on this turn of events. “Odie? Moving back to USA? What can he do there?”

There were definite tinges of Charlie here, where just one unforeseen event sets in motion an unstoppable force, and what seems a solid, immovable existence is revealed for its true transitory nature. I pictured in my mind Odie singing *How fragile we are*, but managed to get rid of the image before he got to the chorus.

So what would the future hold for them? Well, now that the unthinkable had happened and Odie and his family had gone back to live in America, then all bets as to what was to happen in the next few years were well and truly off. My confidence in my core beliefs had been shattered. Who was I - who was anyone - to bet against his face suddenly appearing on MTV? He might be ushered in by popular demand to replace Adam as lead singer of Maroon 5. I had no right to assume that Odie wouldn't be representing the USA in badminton at the next Olympics. Evolution might be proved to be false. Nothing was impossible.

But for now, Odie had work to do. He had to sell his school, cut all his other ties. His students were probably no less shocked than he was. How could they find another teacher like Odie? He tearfully informed his band members, voice cracking, that they'd have to go on without him. (They did, found a replacement one month later and everyone agreed it was a big improvement on the previous singer.) He held a few garage sales; we tried to help him get rid of all the stuff that he couldn't take back with him. In truth he didn't have a huge amount of stuff. The apartment where the four of them had lived really was small, almost owl-size in fact. Easy to see why the kids were so happy to be living in Grandpa's. There were a few goodbye parties. He tried to put a brave face on things, but it was clear that if he'd had any say, this wouldn't be happening. At his final farewell

bash there was a pretty good turn-out. We wished him, them, the best of luck and went home. I may even have felt a touch of sadness finally that I would be unlikely to see him ever again, which was quickly replaced by the depressing realization that I'd be seeing him on an almost daily basis on Facebook, even if this time it'd (hopefully) be with news that I actually wanted to hear. But the overriding sensation was simply being dumbstruck that the LAST guy who would EVER leave Japan had actually left Japan. Maybe I had just inherited his trophy...

Sure enough, over the next few months Odie was never far from our thoughts, thanks to the constant stream of photos showing the family setting out on their Great New American Adventure: The kids beaming, Odie wearing a Spiderman costume, Risako standing to one side, trademark half smile on her lips. I realized I had never been more interested in him and was itching to know what the next few months held in store for the family. By any reasonable measure, he was at least ten years beyond the point of no return. He'd never held down a full-time job in the States. He had big responsibilities, providing for two kids just short of their teenage years. The odds were stacked against him. "Rather you than me," I thought, thanking my lucky stars once again that my daughters had regarded the whole earthquake and its aftermath simply as a bit of a jolly with less school and more board games than usual. But there was always the thought at the back of my mind that Odie tended to defy logic. Might he actually come through the whole thing unscathed?

It was fun going through the various different scenarios that might play out. Perhaps the kids gradually start to miss their old life

in Kumamoto, Michiko finally puts her trauma behind her and the family announce their triumphant return.

Or: Odie lands a plum position either in a university or a nightclub and loses interest in Japan, realizing that you can actually wear Incredible Hulk costumes in America too. (Duh!)

Or: Odie accepts that his family are set, they're never even going to contemplate The Return, but he's unwilling to give up his love of Japan and they settle on a compromise whereby he spends most of the year working (and singing) in Kumamoto, returning to spend time with the family as often as he can. They don't need him so much now that they're older anyway.

Oh what fools we were! Hadn't we by now had enough experience of life to know that the only thing that would happen would be the one thing we never even considered? Apparently not. All that "Will they come back? Will they stay in USA?" turned out to be totally irrelevant. The post-script hit everyone blindside, none more so than Odie.

The second wave of Facebook posts seemed to confirm a happy transition. The smiles and the superhero costumes were a constant, but now these were accompanied by some positive news. Odie had found a position in the local college. Risako too had found a part time job. The kids had settled remarkably quickly into their respective schools. The main problem was already nothing more than making sure they didn't lose their Japanese language. But then I realized one day that there had been no new posts for over a month. This was actually kind of what I'd been expecting right from the start: There were bound to be difficult times. Another post-free month later, I asked my wife if she'd heard anything from Risako. She was not as

prolific a Facebook user as her husband, but she liked to talk to her friends back in Japan. But no, there had been no news from her for months now. Mails had gone unanswered too, which was very un-Japanese, un-Risako like behaviour. Something had happened... but what?

So on to Part III of the story. The part where Odie is but a fleeting background figure.

Risako finds a job in the local bakery, mostly working on the counter. It's only three days a week; it's a humble job to be sure, but it's nice. There's no denying that feeling she hasn't had for many years: Sweet freedom.

The last few months have been draining for her, what with coping with her daughter's trauma, getting the family to safety, convincing her husband that this was actually a perfect opportunity for them - wouldn't it be the best thing to give the kids the second half of their childhood in America? And it all paid off! Now things are way better than she could ever have dared to hope. They seem to be settled, the kids are enjoying school - Tomoki's already joined the local baseball team - and they've both made loads of new friends; and Risako herself has a chance to relax just a notch.

Come to think of it, even before the earthquake, she'd been working non-stop for ten years. She'd given herself over to her kids completely and was as proud of them and the way they'd turned out as any Mum could be, but in throwing herself into motherhood, while also working bloody hard to keep a constant income coming in, she had sacrificed a little more than maybe she had wanted. She was

always rushing around like a demented thing, with barely a minute to stop and think.

But now for the first time in what seems like ages, she has a little time to herself. Here in the shop, it's never really that busy. She enjoys chatting to the other staff and the customers are all really friendly too. She has a chance to think about things she hasn't thought about in a while; like remembering how much she enjoyed the American lifestyle.

Her personality was made for the USA. She always loved the confidence, the swagger of the average North American. How small Japanese people seemed by comparison in almost every way; always working too hard, always worrying about tiny trivial matters. The American way of life just seemed so much more attractive. How she had enjoyed her year in Texas as a 23 year old: The Time of her Life. Had that really been her? It was so long ago that it often felt like a different person, but now, finding herself back in America, that part of her had re-awakened. It was still there, it had just been snoozing.

How she'd loved flirting with those handsome boys. Yes, she had known how to work that girlish charm all right. But what a long time ago! How many times had she felt like a woman in Japan since her eldest had been born? She could count the times she'd been out dancing with her girl-friends on one hand. All eyes on her in Kumamoto were watching Risako the mother, not Risako the sexy lady. It had been so long since she'd been the object of desire, she'd forgotten what it was like. She'd even - for a melancholy moment - wondered if her feminine powers might have vanished entirely, irrevocably.

GAIJIN

But just maybe that was not yet quite the case. Here, working in the bakery, she notices some of the second glances the customers give her - and it's a nice feeling. She still makes heads turn. Of course; she knew Japanese were always young-looking to American eyes, so that she probably looked over a decade younger than her 44 years. Her figure was still very tidy - she'd never had any problems controlling her weight (and not to be smug, but she's only half the size of the other employees). Yes, she could see that she still had it, she was still desirable. She didn't mind a bit of flirting. At first it was just to see if she got any response. And it wasn't really flirting anyway, was it? Just good old polite Japanese customer service. Do everything with a smile. And throw in a little flutter of the eyelashes for her favourite customers.

Be careful, Risako, somebody should have told her.

You too need to reset your culture switch. It's not only Gaijin Males living in Japan; it applies to Female Foreigners in USA too. Yes, it's nice when good-looking guys notice you, when they make eyes at you. Didn't happen much in Japan lately, did it? It's just not the Japanese way. It's got to be good for your ego, but what's good for your ego is not necessarily going to be good for you. You have to watch that ego, make sure it doesn't get over-inflated. If you're not careful it can get out of control, turn into a monster. You still have a great family, they need you; don't you go and do anything stupid to ruin everything. Please, Risako.

Oh dear, there's that blindness returning. Or is it more a deafness this time, a refusal to listen to the voices of sense in her head

frantically warning her she's literally flirting with danger. And there's that dude again, the friendly guy in the wheelchair. He seems to come in almost every day lately; he must love these cookies!

Risako treats him to her extra special radiant smile. "So what can I do for you today, Sir?" she asks.

Picking out the cookies he chooses from the counter and carefully wrapping them gives them a chance to talk for a few minutes.

"You're not Chinese, right? I'd say you're Japanese," he says with a charming smile.

"Nice guess, mister. That's right I'm Japanese. Or do you prefer Chinese girls? I bet you like Asian ladies don't you?"

"Well if you're a typical Japanese lady, then I guess I like Japanese ladies."

Over the weeks he's asked all kinds of questions - why does that feel like such a novelty? - and she's told him all about the horror of the earthquake, the rush to escape from Japan.

"Oh my God, I remember seeing it on TV. That's the city you're from?"

And the mother in her couldn't stop herself proudly adding a few details about her sports-mad kids.

"You have a *teenage* son?" he asks, managing to look genuinely shocked. "Get outta here! Did you get married in high school?"

She can't stop blushing.

No, don't do it Risako, please. I know your husband can be a little insensitive sometimes; I know he should probably be a little less interested in himself and try harder to ask after others, at least occasionally. Plus it would be nice if he wore superhero outfits slightly

less often and talked a little more quietly - but you've been with him for long enough, you must be used to it by now, surely?

“Poor fellow,” thinks Risako. “He can’t be much older than thirty, and yet he’s consigned to a wheelchair. I wonder how he manages. Does he live alone? Maybe he still lives at home with his parents?”

She puts everything one by one into a paper bag, as he continues asking questions about the earthquake, about Japan, about her family. “It’s funny, but when you see somebody like that it makes you realize how lucky we all were in the earthquake, Michiko’s panic attacks were bad enough, but they’re over now. This guy presumably is wheelchair-bound for the rest of his life? He always seems so cheerful, though.”

Order ready now, she steps out from behind the counter.

“So can I ask how you ended up in a wheelchair?” she asks as she hands him the bag filled with cookies.

“Drunk driving, Ma’am. Had a crash just a few months after I got my license. Paralyzed from the waist down. Lucky to be alive. Still just a kid, really.”

“And you’ve been in a wheelchair since then?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Gosh, I’m sorry. That’s awful.”

“You know what,” he says with a piercing stare. “It’s probably the best thing that ever happened to me. I was a bad kid, did lots of bad stuff, but that crash set me right. It was a long road back, some real dark times, but it really toughened me up mentally. A guy I met in rehab encouraged me to take up basketball, so I joined a team. Seem to have a knack for it. Who would’ve thought it? I was never a sporty

kid. Now, they say I have a chance to make the US Paralympics team; that's my goal. Although I should probably cut down on these cakes!" he adds with a laugh.

Oh dear, this is going from bad to worse. The guy had a terrible accident, but refused to let it get him down for long. He made the most of a bad situation, and now he's on the verge of an Olympics appearance. Watch yourself, Risako, Yes, it is an impressive story, yes he has cute dimples, yes he is kind of young, but can't you see he's playing you. He sees your weakness. Time to step back, Risako. Risako? RISAKO!!! CAN YOU HEAR ME???

"So I was thinking; you have a day off on Friday, right? Would you like to come and watch our team play? Then maybe I can take you out for lunch. I know this beautiful spot down by the river."

"Well, OK, I'd better check with my husband first though."

"Oh, absolutely, please check with your husband."

And here is Odie's last chance.

Let's see if your radar is working, Odie. Look: Here's your wife, home again. Can't you see there's something a little different about her? Look: She's opening her mouth, she's going to ask you something, you've got to listen carefully, Odie. This is important.

"So, there's a guy who sometimes comes to the bakery. He's disabled actually, in a wheelchair. He invited me to watch his basketball team play on Friday. Do you mind if I go?"

GAIJIN

You have to admire the way it just slips casually off the tongue. She might as well have said, “There’s a nuclear war just started” and Odie wouldn’t have noticed.

But this is more than a nuclear war, Odie. Come on, remember your interrogatives. I know there’re in there somewhere, this is the time to use them. Ask her why he wants her to go, ask her more about him. Please believe me, there is a lot riding on this.

“Sure, have a good time.”

FAIL, Odie.

You have FAILED the test, and you are OUT. GAME OVER.

Risako did go. Risako had a good time - so good that she went the next week. And the week after that. And then three times the following week. In fact it was only months later that she moved in with her new Paralympic boyfriend.

But the good news is...it didn’t last.

Risako somehow managed belatedly to reset her ego switch, gradually came to realize she’d made an awful mistake and that she had to go back and correct it. Some things take a while, right? The luxury of time to ponder on the meaning of life had been something denied to her for so long that when it came, she had forgotten how to use it. She’d briefly lost sight of what was important.

That was the core of the apology she gave to Odie when she came to see him six months later, wiping the streams of tears away from

her cheeks, asking to be welcomed back into the family. And a shell-shocked Odie was hardly going to refuse now, was he? He almost even - almost, mind - started to ask some of the many questions that had started spontaneously and imperfectly forming in his mind of late.

What did I do wrong? What didn't I do? Why did you...

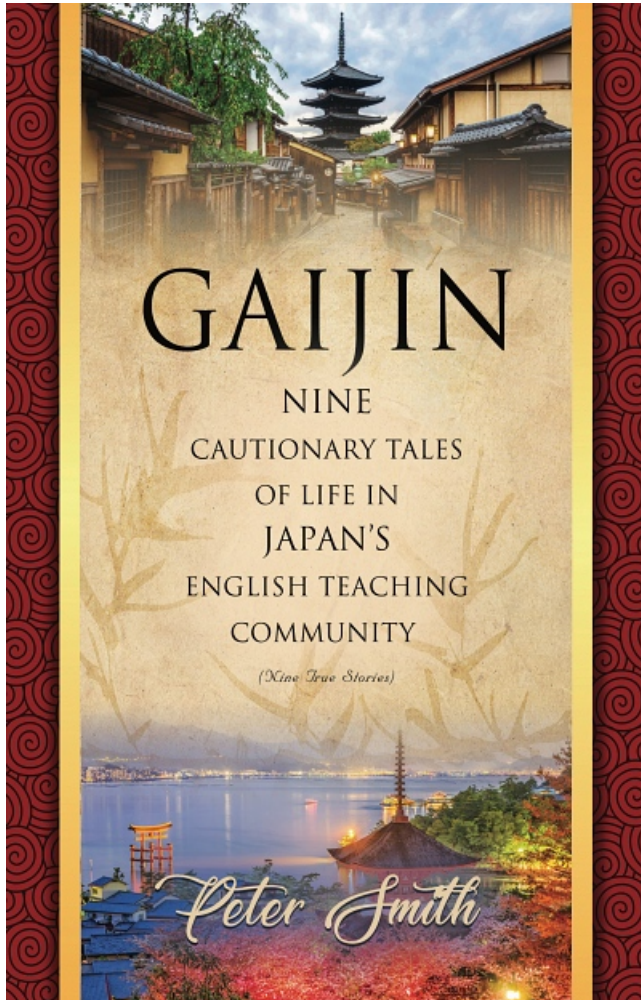
Does he... Could he...? How did you...

Do you think we can still... Are you still... Can we go back to...?

But somehow they never got asked. There are some questions that don't need answers. Sometimes things work out without the need to ask why. The kids were doubtless confused for a while there, but compared to the horror of the earthquake it was probably nothing so bad.

When they refer to it now, if they mention it at all, they simply call it "Mama's blip." It doesn't seem to have unduly affected either the kids or Dad in any fundamental way. I haven't spoken to him since he left, but I can confirm this to be true. I opened up Facebook just the other week and there was Odie dressed up as The Mighty Thor. Yep, I nodded, struck by the aptness of this image. I remembered thinking he had no chance of surviving back in America; that starved of Japanese oxygen he would curl up and die.

But really, how could I ever have underestimated The Mighty Thor?



GAIJIN: Nine Cautionary Tales is the story of a number of folk who, for a variety of reasons – love, money, family - decide to make their home in Japan. It's a study of the often bizarre, sometimes tragic ways their lives develop.

GAIJIN: Nine Cautionary Tales of Life in Japan's English Teaching Community

By Peter Smith

Order the book from the publisher BookLocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/12108.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**