

Kumiko

A short story by Graham Price

It was so uncertain, what with the sounding of the ship's horn as it moved toward Station Pier. She was frightened by all the noise and the loud cheering below as the S.S. Astara nudged against the timber wharf.

The old steamship had come down from Yokohama, called at Manila, Lae, then Brisbane, Sydney, and reached its final destination, Melbourne, in September 1946.

Kumiko trembled a little in Melbourne's cool spring-time air. It had been a difficult journey, she'd had limited understanding of the Australian or the English language spoken on board, and was glad that the sea journey had now ended because there appeared to have been a fair amount of discrimination on board by the Australian crew and officers of the ship. The grim looks that she received at times as she strolled on deck were evidence that in all things she was not wanted.

She was called a Japanese war bride and had been subjected to so much paper work and bureaucracy for the past six months, that she almost gave up hope of ever seeing her beloved Douglas again. But he was in Melbourne now and she would join him.

So, she was here at last. She was actually here in this strange land which seemed so flat. Oh, so different from her native Japan with its myriads of islands.

Peering down from the boat deck she watched for a sign of him — her young handsome Douglas, which papers in her hand-bag told her unequivocally, was her husband by law — a Lieutenant in the Australian Infantry Forces, but she could not discern his face in the crowd. Soldiers, some with their slouch hats, others with none, clambered down the ramps, eagerly embracing their loved ones, and soon the ship had emptied itself of passengers from Yokohama. But still she stood there on the railings, watching and waiting for her beloved to appear.

Eventually a ship's officer came up to her and said:

“You will have to leave, madam, we are shutting up for the night.”

In her broken English she managed to say: “No one here..... can not go.”

The officer looked at her curiously and said: “This is not a hotel. You will have to leave. See, down there. You have to disembark!”

Kumiko returned his look with bewilderment, but gathered her belongings — her battered suitcase with a floral cotton bag, and moved toward the gangplank. They don't understand, she thought, no understand. Nobody here to meet me. Why do I leave my home and come to this strange forbidden land? Barbarians, these people, must be barbarians. Have no understanding, no compassion.

At the end of the gangplank stood Johannes Marks of Her Majesty's Customs. He watched the Japanese woman coming down before him and thought: “possibly carrying illicit contraband, undeclared whiskey, cigarettes. Watch this one.”

Kumiko dropped her suitcase in front of him. She was tired — tired of all the rules and regulations that she had to go through just to see her husband, who was not here to greet her. She was also tired of the stony looks from these military people. She stared at the customs officer and in her halted English said: “Okay, you look. You okay, you do.”

Something moved in Johannes' mind that day. He looked at this young woman in front of him with her pale, frightened face, and suddenly he was back in Holland in 1943 just before he had escaped from the Nazis over to England and finally to Australia.

He stared at her, as memories of his own persecution arose. He took her by the hand and said: “No problem, no look, you go on now, go through.” He stamped her papers, smiled, and said: “Welcome to freedom.” He nodded “Yes, to freedom!”

She took her suitcase and floral bag and went through the barricade, turning back to smile at him in gratitude. She would find her Douglas now and everything would be okay. And there he was, struggling through the crowd to reach her . . . pushing through the uniformed and civilian bodies as fast as he could, her handsome young Lieutenant in his khaki uniform. Douglas took his slouch hat off and waved to her. His smile was all she needed. •