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Judith Wilson
Excerpt
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Part 1 Going away

Chapter 1 *The promise*

‘Are we really eating here, Hiroshi?’ Ikuko stopped by the door of the expensive Tokyo restaurant, looking unsure.

Hiroshi smiled as he held the door open for her. ‘Of course. It’s your birthday. Everything’s arranged.’

Inside, the big room was almost full. Well-dressed people talked softly together. The waiter showed Ikuko and Hiroshi to their table and brought them a bottle of wine. Ikuko felt a little nervous. This wasn’t the sort of place they usually came to. But when Hiroshi smiled at her across the table, with his dark hair falling into his eyes as usual, she felt better.

Hiroshi raised his glass. ‘Happy birthday, Ikuko,’ he said. ‘How does it feel to be twenty-three?’

She smiled. ‘I can’t believe it. I still feel sixteen.’

As they came to the end of their meal, they fell silent and looked at one another. There was a candle burning on the table and Ikuko could see its light in Hiroshi’s eyes. After a moment Hiroshi put his hand in the pocket of his jacket, and brought out a little box.

‘Ikuko,’ he said, and then stopped. ‘Ikuko, you know how I feel about you. I’ve never met anyone else like you. I’d like you to have this. I’d like us to stay together always.’

He handed the box across the table to Ikuko. She opened

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it, her hands shaking. Inside there was a ring. It was a simple ring, perfectly chosen for her by someone who loved her. But part of her was thinking, 'This isn't happening to me.' It was as if she was watching someone in a movie.

She knew her parents liked Hiroshi. He was a considerate man who had done well in his company and would look after Ikuko, their only daughter. Her friends liked him too – he was kind and always ready to help anyone with a problem. Ikuko knew that she liked being with Hiroshi and that he'd never made her feel unhappy for a moment. She couldn't imagine her life without him. So why did the idea of marrying him seem like a door closing on the future?

Hiroshi put his hand on hers. Ikuko looked up at him. 'Hiroshi. I do love you. But ... if we get married now, what will I do then?'

'I'll look after you. You won't need to work any more. You'll have time to do all the things you want to do.' Hiroshi spoke with his usual optimism. 'You can carry on with your English classes and do more of the things you enjoy ... things like your photography. We can get a flat – maybe even a house one day, with a garden for the children.'

'It sounds lovely,' replied Ikuko. 'But I'm younger than you. I've never really done anything. I just went straight into the Hayakawa company after college. You've done lots of things – you've travelled and studied in America. You've learnt something about the world.'

'Ikuko, people talk about travelling as such a great thing, but what I found is that I like Japan best. I had American friends, sure, but we never got very close. You can never really understand someone from another culture. Believe

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me, the most beautiful places and the people who matter most are the ones in your own country, your own home.'

Ikuko thought she'd be happy with Hiroshi. She'd imagined spending her life with him – just not so soon. She knew she would have to tell him how she felt. But before she could find the words, Hiroshi found them for her.

'Ikuko, I remember how much I once wanted to travel. And I don't want you to miss that chance if it's what you really want. So if you want to go and study for a few months, in America or in England, I can wait for you.'

'He understands so well,' thought Ikuko. Suddenly, everything seemed clear.

'Yes,' she said at last. 'I think I need a few months to see things for myself. To grow up a little more. Will you wait for me? Then I'll come back and we can get married.'

'Don't grow up too much, Ikuko. I like you just as you are,' said Hiroshi. Gently he put the ring onto her finger.

* * *

Two months later, Ikuko turned off her computer in the big office in the Hayakawa building for the last time. Outside, the Tokyo sky was dark and lights were already shining in the tall office buildings. She got up from her desk and went across the room, past the desk of old Mr Honma, the office manager. He looked up as she walked past. 'Well, Ikuko, so it's goodbye. We'll miss you. Where are you going to in England, anyway? London?'

'No – a place called Birmingham,' Ikuko replied.

'Never heard of it. Is it beautiful there?' he asked.

'I don't know. But I'll bring lots of photos back.'

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She went to get her jacket. It was a cold December day and she pulled on a warm hat in front of the mirror. She looked at herself. The girl looking back at her out of the mirror did not look very different from the girl who had started work there more than two years before: a pale serious face with long straight hair and a pointed chin. She wondered how this next year would change her – living in England, and then the wedding.

On the train journey home, Ikuko sat and thought about the past two years. She'd been lucky to get the job in the Hayakawa company. Lucky because it was a good company and she found the work interesting. And lucky because she'd met Hiroshi there.

She remembered the day they'd met. It had been late on a Friday afternoon. She'd only been working there for a few weeks and she was still feeling unsure of herself. She was entering numbers on the computer for a sales program. But the results looked wrong. She took a deep breath and went up to Mr Honma's desk to tell him. Mr Honma hadn't been very helpful, but he'd arranged for one of the programmers to have a look.

Half an hour later Ikuko had looked up to see a tall man, young and with rather untidy hair, coming across the room towards her. He stopped and introduced himself.

'I'm Hiroshi Masuda. I hear you have some problems with the sales program,' he said.

Ikuko explained and Hiroshi listened carefully, then sat down and did some work on the computer. Suddenly he stopped and looked up at her, brushing his hair out of his eyes. He was excited. 'You're absolutely right. There's a mistake in the program. I knew there was something wrong

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with the numbers we were getting. Now we can change it. Thanks!’ He stood up. ‘Anyway, it’s probably time you got off home. Do you live far away?’

‘In Ome. It’s an hour away on the train,’ said Ikuko.

‘Oh, yes, I know. In fact I go through Ome on my way home. So we’ve been travelling on the same train. I’m surprised we haven’t seen one another before.’

‘Well, the trains are so crowded,’ Ikuko said.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘but I’d notice you, even in a crowd.’

And that was how it had begun. Sitting in the train now, two years later, Ikuko remembered the early days of their friendship: meals in small restaurants, walks in the park – slowly getting to know each other. They discovered that they’d both gone to the same Junior High school, although Hiroshi had been four years ahead of Ikuko. After leaving university, he’d gone to do a computing course in America. He’d done very well, but hadn’t enjoyed life in America and decided instead to return to Tokyo.

In those first days of new love, Ikuko and Hiroshi had spent almost all their free time together. Ikuko liked his gentleness and understanding. It was the perfect relationship. No arguments or bad surprises. Wasn’t that what she wanted?

‘Ome . . . Ome.’ Ikuko heard the name of her station and woke suddenly from her thoughts. She got off and walked out of the crowded station. On her way home, she stopped at a department store – she still had to buy a suitcase for her trip. As she walked to the suitcase department, she passed a shelf of diaries. She stopped. That wasn’t what she’d come for. She looked at the diaries a moment longer and then chose one with a plain white cover.