



Mariko's Mouse

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When she was seven, Mariko's father shifted her family from Tokyo, and they began a new life in Australia. Mariko said goodbye to cherry blossoms and ginkgo trees. She said goodbye to her cat Tobi and her best friend, Akira. She said goodbye to the family's Shinjuku apartment and to Mount Fuji and to her little school. Her family travelled 8,000 miles and went to live in a city called Perth.

Mariko's father placed her in the local primary school, and she was the only Japanese child at the school. On her first day, Mariko wore the school uniform from her little school at home in Shinjuku. She wore her white sailor dress with long socks that came up to her knees and highly polished lace-up shoes. Her mother tied ribbons in her hair.

The Australian children crowded around Mariko as if she were a doll. She was not tall like her father and she wished they would stop petting her. During recess, she ran away and hid behind the bushes. When the bell rang, Mariko ran to her classroom and she looked for a place for her shoes and for the uwabaki. Sitting on the bench outside the classroom, she carefully took off her shoes and socks. Her mother had packed a clean pair of socks for Mariko to wear in the classroom. The other children kept their shoes and sweaty socks on, and Mariko couldn't help but notice the floor of the classroom wasn't as clean as her classroom floor in Japan.

After a few weeks, when Mariko no longer worried about the cleanliness of her classroom floor, she made friends with a girl named Caterina. Caterina was almost as small as Mariko, but where Mariko's hair was black and her eyes were brown, Caterina's hair was blonde and her eyes were somewhere between blue and green. Mariko's new friend had recently arrived in Australia, too. She had left Argentina. Caterina's English was almost fluent but sometimes she mumbled to herself in Spanish. Mariko's English wasn't as proficient as Caterina's, but she decided it was nice to have a friend even if she didn't always understand what Caterina said.

In Perth, Mariko lived in an apartment. It was different from the family's apartment in Shinjuku. Their new apartment faced the Swan River and Perth city. Every afternoon, the Fremantle Doctor rushed in through the open balcony doors and poked his nose into each room of their new home. Mariko's father told her the job of the Fremantle Doctor was to cool down the land. Mariko imagined the Fremantle Doctor to be a Japanese doctor. She was sure he wore a white coat and glasses. Every time her mother opened the doors for the doctor, Mariko opened her mouth and made an 'ah' sound which made her mother smile.

Australian food was strange. Luckily, Mariko's mother discovered a Japanese grocery store in Subiaco. Perth didn't have convenient vending machines. Mariko swapped ramen noodles for Tip Top bread smeared with Vegemite and she missed her favourite brand of seaweed sheets. She liked to fold each sheet into small squares and wait for the squares to disintegrate on her tongue. But there were pleasant surprises, too—like Tim-Tams and lamingtons.

A mad scramble arose when the bell rang for recess. Mariko lined up with the other children before a hutch in the wall of the school hall. She pushed two coins across the wooden counter to Billy Samson's mother and in return received half-a-knot roll on a paper napkin. The roll was covered in gooey melted cheese and her first bite was soft, chewy, and warm.

Sometimes Mariko forgot that she was the only Japanese child at school. When the children played handball, she waited patiently in line for her turn. She hit the frayed tennis ball with flushed cheeks. Matthew Evans would invariably miss, and she watched him trudge to the back of the line.

During math class, Mariko forgot the many differences between Tokyo and Perth. Numbers made sense. Numerical values were static, dependable and similar to Lego building blocks. Caterina liked math class, too. The alien children bonded over a love of numbers.

On entering their new home, the family swapped their outside shoes for uwabaki. Mariko's mother brought their tatami mats from home and in the evenings, they unrolled their beds. Just inside the apartment, her mother had set up the family's butsudan. In the bottom drawer were the ashes of Mariko's grandparents.

Twice a week, Mariko and her father cycled to Hensman Street Tennis Club. Her father had an expensive tennis racquet and wore white sweat bands at his wrists. Mariko's racquet was pink, and she wore a pale blue tennis dress with a little crocodile on the breast. She kept a vibration dampner on her racquet strings. Her father said it took the shock from the strings, but Mariko knew better; the panda was her lucky charm.

Mariko's father was a serious man. Sometimes he chuckled but mostly he was stern. Being a serious man meant he was precise about tennis. Her father inspected the grass courts carefully. He measured the net height with a laser distance measurer and called out the score even when it wasn't his serve.

One Saturday morning, Mariko awoke to blistering heat. Her bedding stuck to her body and a desk fan ineffectually pushed hot air around the small room. The day was dry; every drop of moisture had been leached with the full ferocity of a summer's day. A hot wind blew in her face as she stood at the balcony doors. Mariko supposed the day would be too hot, even for the Fremantle Doctor.

After breakfast, her father emerged from his bedroom in dazzling tennis whites. Mariko's mother hurriedly left the apartment; she was helping a friend recently arrived from Tokyo.

At the tennis courts, Mariko and her father were the only players. The grass had long given up and lay down flat in exhaustion. The sky was deep blue without a hint of cloud. Not a bird could be seen; they had sought shelter before the sun made its ascent high into the sky.

Mariko's father measured the height of the net. At precisely 0.914m he ceased winding the noisy crank and looked at his daughter. She pulled at her dress. Mariko had rubbed sunblock in generous globs and her eyes smarted. She bounced the ball twice, checked her feet, her torso and the height of the ball toss. Every day she practised her ball toss for precisely two minutes because she knew her serve hinged on her ball toss and the game hinged on her serve. It was a mathematical equation—a riddle best solved by practise. Despite her efforts, Mariko's ball toss veered towards her left shoulder and as if to test her father's patience, a good percentage of her serves avoided the server's square altogether.

'Fault!'

Mariko sighed, although she was careful to keep the sigh hidden under her breath. She lined up her left big toe with the net post and rearranged her body.

'Higher,' she muttered, imagining the arc of her arm as she swung to hit the ball. Her father returned the serve and Mariko aimed for the T again. Mariko's father was agile and even with her best efforts, he returned her serves again and again. The girl's movements became a slow exaggeration as a heat haze settled over the tennis court. She wanted to ask to stop and fill up her water bottle, but by the set of her father's jaw she judged it better to wait.

The morning passed in a blur of savage summer heat and double faults. Once or twice, Mariko heard her father call out 'deuce' but invariably he won the next shot and the

one after that. The heat was so thick and heavy, Mariko knew what it would be like to wade through hot custard. She wondered if her father even realised the day was hot.

Finally, with his mouth in a thin line, her father passed her an icy cold bottle of lemonade. It was Japanese lemonade in a glass bottle with a ball caught in the gullet for carbonation. A treat from home. Cool lemonade slithered down Mariko's throat in an icy stream. The sharp sting of an ice head-ache throbbed at her temples but she continued to guzzle at the bottle. After the last drop of lemonade hit the back of her throat, Mariko and her father clambered onto their bicycles and slowly cycled home.

Her father asked her to shower and dress in fresh clothes. Once showered, Mariko padded quietly into the kitchen and her father set a ham omelette and a bowl of salad down on the table. Carefully, she cut her omelette into five equal strips. She took three bites to eat each strip and between each bite she would pop a cherry tomato, some lettuce and a forkful of shredded carrot into her mouth. She slathered each mouthful in sesame dressing.

They ate silently. Mariko's father's Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he ate. He wiped his mouth with a cloth napkin and efficiently moved the dishes from the kitchen table to the dishwasher. He methodically stacked the dishwasher and Mariko watched him carefully tear a foil wrapper off a dishwasher tablet and slide it into the dispenser.

In the afternoon with the curtains closed tight against the fierce heat and the AC humming, Mariko gave up on the Fremantle Doctor. She imagined the breeze frolicking in the waves of the Indian Ocean. The doctor had forgotten the sizzling people of Perth. She wondered if he was often forgetful just like her. How many times did he abandon the population and instead spend his time skimming over the turquoise waves of the ocean?

Mariko's mother returned in time to serve the evening meal. When darkness began to fall, her father threw open the doors and Mariko sat cross-legged before a jigsaw puzzle. The evening sky sat behind the city in rosy pinks, skyscrapers glowed like ancient bronze statues. Before long, her father sat in an armchair. His reading glasses were perched at the end of his nose and *The Australian* held open before him. Every now and then he grunted. Mariko was unsure if his grunts signalled disapproval.

Out of the corner of her eye, Mariko spied a twitching nose and delicate whiskers. She watched as a mouse slowly inched along the balcony wall flattening itself like a secret agent. The mouse sat up on hind legs, pink nose trembling and big eyes hopeful. Mariko didn't

move a muscle. She couldn't; she was rooted to the spot. This mouse was infinitely better than a visit from the doctor. Mariko wanted it to crouch on her shoulder like a pet bird and whisper stories. She wanted to know where the mouse went, what he had seen, and what he did. What did this mouse think of Australia?

Mariko was grateful that Tobi was in Tokyo and that he couldn't pounce and sink his fangs into the soft downy fur of the mouse. Shifting on her bottom, she strained forward. Slowly she extended an arm towards the mouse; an invitation to come inside. She watched the quivering nose and looked into big friendly eyes. This mouse could be her friend—then she would have two Australian friends—her mouse and Caterina.

She longed to pick him up. Mariko envisaged the tiny bed she would prepare for him. She imagined him sitting in her pocket at school when something so unexpected, so horribly awful happened that her heart dropped to the floor. Her father's agile feet moved swiftly and silently onto the balcony and in one quick movement, her mouse was trapped.

Her mother hurried over with a bucket full of water. All at once, before Mariko could take a breath, her mouse was gone. Her father held down the body with a plastic lid. She heard the tiny feet of the mouse scramble wildly against the steep sides of the plastic bucket. A wail rose filling the room and Mariko's mother pulled at her, held her tightly against her body. Her mother whispered in her ear, told her this was the way it had to be. The mouse was dirty. They couldn't let it live. The mouse would bring its babies inside and before long there would be mice everywhere. How would they be able to live like that?

Mariko's heart stopped. Just for a moment and then it started again with a heavy thud. She knew she would never look at her father the same way. Was this what it meant to grow up? Her father bent down before her. She tried not to meet his eyes when he put his hand under her chin. Mariko's body stiffened. Why had her father committed this crime? Why had he got rid of the mouse? It wasn't fair. The mouse was only searching for a new home—a new place to live with plenty of food and shelter and safety. Tears stung her eyes and slowly she looked up. Her father's mouth drooped, and his shirt front was damp. Mariko smelt an odour of sweat and something else. She thought she smelt fear.

For the first time, Mariko regarded her father as a man. He wasn't a bad man. He was a man who took care of her and loved her. She raised her face towards his. Tears glistened at the corners of his eyes. She knew her father had loved the mouse too, but he was scared there

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would be too many mouse babies and not enough room. Mariko wanted to say it was okay. She would have made beds for all of the mouse babies. The words caught in her throat. She knew those words would make her father unhappier and so she did the only thing she could to take away her father's pain. Reaching up, she kissed his cheek.

Mariko slid her arms around her father's waist and pressed her face into his belly. She didn't think about sodden fur and wet whiskers. She remembered her father reaching into his backpack for an icy cold bottle of lemonade on a sweltering Perth day and pushing it into her hands with love.

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~2,391 words