

PARIS SYNDROME

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PARIS SYNDROME

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*This book is dedicated to the memory
of Takeki Taketani, and to the many people
who showed me such kindness when I lived in Japan.*

*In a mad world, only the mad are sane.
Akira Kurosawa*

Paris Syndrome: A transient psychological disorder encountered by some individuals visiting or vacationing in Paris, France. It is characterized by a number of psychiatric symptoms such as acute delusional states, hallucinations, feelings of persecution, derealization, depersonalization, anxiety, and also psychosomatic manifestations such as dizziness, tachycardia, sweating, and others. Similar syndromes include Jerusalem Syndrome and Stendhal Syndrome.

SOURCE: WIKIPEDIA

ON THE MORNING of her fifth birthday, Miki Suzuki sat perched on her grandfather's knee, at the edge of the porch in the family home, a short distance from Sendai.

Giggling and grinning, and tugging at his scraggly beard, she pleaded for her birthday gift.

His eyes narrowing until they were little more than creases in a wrinkled face, the old man said:

'I am going to give you something very special my little plum. A gift that you can never lose – one that will be with you every minute of the day, forever.'

Squirring up closer to her grandfather's face, Miki kissed him gently on the cheek.

'What is it, Ojūchan?'

'It is a story,' he said.

And, before the little girl could utter another word, her grandfather began:

'Once upon a time,' he whispered softly, 'there was a city that was Paradise on Earth. All the women were beautiful and were dressed in the finest gowns, their skin scented with delicate perfumes. And all the men were handsome, like movie stars. The streets were wide and graceful, and were lined with trees abundant with blossom all year round. The sun never stopped shining, and the warm air was filled with butterflies and birdsong.'

Miki tugged at the long hairs of her grandfather's chin, and she laughed.

'I want to go there, Ojūchan!' she cried. 'Will you take me there, please, please, please?'

The retired old salaryman smoothed a wizened hand over his little granddaughter's cheek.

‘One day we will go there together,’ he said, ‘and will walk the length of the great boulevard hand in hand.’

‘But, *when*, Ojii-chan? When will you take me?’

Miki’s grandfather looked deep into the little girl’s eyes.

‘When you are a little bit older, my little plum.’

‘Tomorrow? I will be older tomorrow.’

‘Well, maybe a little after that.’

‘Next week?’

‘Perhaps.’

Miki stood up on her grandfather’s lap, and wrapped her short arms around his neck.

‘Do you promise?’

‘Of course I do.’

‘Ojii-chan?’

‘Yes, Miki-chan?’

‘Will you tell me one last thing?’

‘Yes, what is it, Miki-chan?’

‘What’s the name of the city – the one in the story?’

The retired old salaryman hugged his granddaughter, and pressed his lips to her ear.

‘It is called Paris,’ he said.

2

TWENTY YEARS PASSED.

Miki grew into an energetic woman, with a frenzied love for life. She had long black hair, an impish face, and did everything at top speed. But, most of all, she was kind in a deep down way, a quality that endeared her to almost everyone she met.

After school, Miki had left the slow suburbs of Sendai, and moved to Tokyo. There, she got a job selling discounted beauty products door to door, for the Angel Flower Beauty Company.

She may have been far from home, but Miki never forgot her grandfather's story, and would turn it around in her mind as she trudged from one apartment building to the next.

And, on some nights when she couldn't sleep in her minuscule apartment, she would fantasize about the place first seeded in her thoughts all those years before.

She would imagine herself strolling through the streets of Paris in late spring, wearing a floral print dress from Dior, with a matching pink parasol.

And all the young men's heads would turn.

The sunlight would be dazzling, gleaming on the serene waters of the Seine. There would be music flowing from the little cafés, and the sound of feet tap-dancing on the sea of cobblestones.

As the years passed, Miki became more and more preoccupied with her fantasy, the fantasy of the French capital. It was a symbol as much as a destination – a symbol of all that was good and right.

She spent every spare moment reading about its secrets and its history, learning of the museums and the architecture, and of the traditions. And the more she learned, the more Miki realized that Paris was a place tied to her destiny, a place in which her own future would be acted out.

It was just a matter of time.

3

EVERY FEW MONTHS, Miki would leave the urban sprawl of Tokyo behind, and travel back home to Sendai on the Shinkansen.

Sitting at the window, she would stare out, as the bullet train gathered speed, her eyes glued to the blurred landscape of identical concrete homes, their balconies cluttered with rusting bicycles and junk.

And she would find herself dreaming – of Paris’s magnificent stone *hôtels particuliers* and of the grandeur conjured by Baron Haussmann a century and a half before.

There was no detail Miki couldn’t imagine – from the patina of the roof slates on the Elysée Palace, to the aroma of the creamy cappuccinos served up at Café de Flore. She could visualize the Eiffel Tower illuminated on a chill winter evening, as though she were standing before it, or the great rose window on the Gothic façade of Notre Dame, or the enormous tricolour rippling back and forth in the breeze high above the Grand Palais.

Each time Miki arrived at her family home, her parents were a little older and a little more subdued. They always asked about their daughter’s life in Tokyo, and she did her best to make it sound exotic and amusing. Secretly, Miki wished she could tell them the truth – that she detested her job and a life in a city so large that there was hardly a beginning or an end.

She missed her family home in the suburbs of Sendai, but most of all she missed Paris – a place she regarded as her real home, a place she had known only through stories.

The one person who could grasp the infatuation was her beloved ojii-chan.

The summer before, he had suffered a stroke. Now he spent his days staring into space, propped up on the futon against goose-down

pillows. He couldn't talk, but he could whisper, although he tired after only a minute or two.

Miki had always dreamed of walking arm in arm with him down the Champs-Élysées, from the Arc de Triomphe towards Concorde. She imagined kicking through the autumn leaves with him as they strolled past the posh shops. Most of all, she imagined herself glancing into the old man's eyes as they went.

Deep down, Miki knew there was little hope of her grandfather ever leaving the house, let alone travelling so far as the capital city of France.

Each year, for twenty years, the ojii-chan had presented his granddaughter with another fragment of the same birthday gift.

The story.

Less of an actual tale, it was more of a description – one gleaned from a first-hand memory of a short visit he had made to Paris in the decade after the War.

'I was young then,' he whispered on the afternoon of Miki's twenty-fifth birthday, 'so young and so foolish. I wandered day and night through the cobbled streets, my feet floating, my heart beating as though I had fallen hopelessly in love.'

'In love with Paris?' Miki asked, as she sat on the corner of her grandfather's futon.

'Yes... with Paris, my true love,' Ojii-chan sighed, 'the most bewitching of lovers. She casts a magic spell on every man who sets eyes upon her.'

Miki reached out and touched her grandfather's fingers with her own. There were tears welling in her eyes. She could feel the old man's strength draining away, as though he were coming to the end of his story-telling days.

'Tell me something, dearest Ojii-chan,' she said, stroking his hand with hers. 'Out of all your experiences in Paris, what was the most wonderful moment of all?'

Her grandfather's eyelids lowered very slowly, and his breathing seemed to shallow, until it was so faint that Miki wondered whether he had expired. His eyes still closed, she felt his hand tremble in hers. And then, in a voice so soft as to be inaudible, he said something.

'I didn't hear, Ojii-chan.'

The old man tugged tenderly at his granddaughter's hand. She edged closer, until her ear was an inch from his mouth.

'The coin pouch,' he said. 'It was the moment that I saw the coin pouch.'

Miki didn't understand. Squeezing her ojii-chan's hand a little tighter, she coaxed him to tell the tale.

There was silence for a minute or even two.

All of a sudden the old man began to whisper again.

'It was a bright Sunday morning,' he said, 'Paris in spring, and my last day in the French capital. I had been ambling through the Tuileries Gardens, enjoying the calm pace of life, and watching people out walking their dogs, or just relaxing in the sun. There was nothing planned until the evening, and so I decided to do a little exploring. Without looking at my map, I meandered through the quiet backstreets, until I reached the beautiful Avenue Marceau.'

Miki's grandfather took a deep breath, his eyes still closed. Only after another long pause did he continue, his words delivered slowly, one by one:

'I had heard about that street,' he said. 'It was very famous at the time – famous for expensive shops. My guidebook said that it was where royalty, fashion models, and Hollywood stars shopped. I had heard that Emperor Hirohito himself had even visited in 1921, when he travelled to Paris as Crown Prince.'

'What about the coin pouch, Ojii-chan?' Miki prompted, worried that her grandfather had lost his train of thought.

‘I am coming to that,’ he replied pointedly. ‘As I said, I was strolling down Avenue Marceau, enjoying the fine weather, and window-shopping. After all it was a Sunday and most of the shops were closed. I can remember every detail – the pigeons flapping about; the sound of a little girl screaming because she had dropped her ice cream; the stiff uniformed police officer on patrol; and the sight of a wealthy woman striding past me, wearing a voluminous green hat.

‘And then, suddenly, I found myself peering into the window of a luggage shop. I remember that it stood at Number 78, and that it had two large windows, in which were displayed all manner of fine leather goods. Above them, in discreet lettering mounted on the iron railings, was the name – Louis Vuitton.

‘As I stood there, peering into the window, I set eyes on a little coin pouch, crafted from simple brown leather. It was not the grandest thing at all – there were bulky steamer trunks and other far more elaborate items. But that coin pouch was the most exquisite thing I had ever seen.’

‘Did you buy it, Ojüchan?’ Miki asked in a low voice.

‘No, no... as I told you, the shop was closed, and early the next day I had to leave for home. Almost every day which has passed since then, I have thought of the little coin pouch. It may sound silly to you, but seeing it was the high point of an unforgettable visit to Paris. Indeed, in a way it was the high point of my life.’

The old man opened his eyes, allowing the memory to fade. He sighed again and, as he did so, Miki leaned forward and kissed his cheek, as she had done twenty years before.

‘Thank you for my birthday gift,’ she said lovingly. ‘It means more to me than anything I have ever been given.’

‘A silly gift,’ said the ojüchan with a smile.

Miki sat upright.

Overcome with solemnity and emotion, she pressed her fingertips together as if in prayer. As she did so, she looked into her grandfather's clouded eyes.

'I will go to Paris!' she exclaimed. 'I don't know how, but I will... and I will bring the coin pouch for you dearest Ojiiichan – the coin pouch from Louis Vuitton!'

4

THE NEXT DAY, Miki took the bullet train back to Tokyo.

And, the day after that, she was again trying to entice the housewives of overworked salarymen into buying beauty products on the cheap. The winter chill was biting, the city bracing itself against a cold front racing south from Sakhalin.

Miki's studio apartment was more freezing than it had ever been. There was ice on the inside of the windows, and a pool of frozen water on the bathroom floor.

As soon as she got home from work, Miki would put on her pyjamas and clamber into bed. And she would lie there, thinking of her ojiiichan, and how she could get the coin pouch for him from Louis Vuitton.

Each afternoon she struggled out into the roaring wind, to give demonstrations in small apartment homes far from the centre of town. The format was always the same, carefully designed at head office in Shinjuku by an army of planners in uniform grey suits. They had trained Miki on a special course, teaching her exactly how to respond to any conceivable situation.

An officious angry man had been appointed as her boss. He was named Kiato Yamato. He had a big red wart in the middle of his forehead, and very rotten teeth, the kind that make children giggle

in fear and surprise. Behind his back everyone called him ‘Pun-Pun’, which is the onomatopoeic sound of someone being angry. No one liked Pun-Pun, not even his wife. But, as with everyone else, she endured him because she was very frightened of him indeed.

During the long and wearisome training course, Pun-Pun had taught Miki to always stress the positive side of the Angel Flower beauty line. This included being excellent value for money, and being easy to use. Over and over he underlined that she was never, ever, on any account to mention the shortcomings of the brand. These included a plethora of adverse effects which had been widely reported in the media – such as the way the cleansing balms caused severe blistering on sensitive skin.

Following Pun-Pun’s orders, Miki had learned to wax lyrical about the secret ingredients and the miraculous effects of the much-lauded Angel Flower range. With time and indoctrination, she had learned the right way of selling the lotions, creams and ointments.

This entailed getting as many women as possible clustered together in a small apartment. Friends and neighbours, and even passersby, all were welcomed by ‘special invitation’, to take part in what was a classic party plan marketing method.

Three days after returning from Miyagi Prefecture, Miki went out to Kasai on the Toyo Line. The journey from her home in Ikebukuro was a long one, but the rewards were great. There wasn’t another Angel Flower representative working the patch, and so rich pickings were assured for a diligent saleswoman like herself.

Laden with boxes of samples and gift boxes to sell, Miki made her way to the apartment of a friend. Through a great deal of social networking in the days before, she had lined up a casual coffee morning for a dozen local housewives.

On the dot of 10.45 a.m., the invited women arrived at her friend’s two-room flat. Removing their shoes as they entered, they bowed a

greeting and filed inside to the sitting-room, where they took their places on the floor.

Once they were assembled, the owner of the apartment, Keiko, welcomed the ladies formally and set about serving green tea. There was a great deal of smiling and anxious laughter. Having been trained how to handle a group meeting and, more importantly, how to turn it into sales, Miki began her routine.

‘The Angel Flower beauty range has been brought from Australia,’ she said, ‘and it is brightening the lives of women just like you across Japan. Our products are different from those of other companies, because they are made with natural ingredients from an ancient formula.’ Miki paused. ‘A formula that we don’t test on animals,’ she said.

Kneeling together in the tiny sitting-room, the housewives sipped their tea, and listened attentively. Once Miki was done with her introduction, she opened the oversized lacquered box before her, and handed out little gift packs, one to each of the women.

A wave of enthused cooing rippled through the room.

‘Go on, please open them up,’ said Miki, as she had been told to do by the training team. ‘Try the products, and see how you look.’

With great delight, the housewives tore open the packaging, and began rubbing their skin with the scented lotions and creams.

As Miki watched them, she found herself thinking of her ojii-chan strolling through Paris on a Sunday in spring. She imagined the soles of his leather shoes on the gleaming cobbles, and the bright yellow light filtering through the young green leaves of the sycamore trees. The memory may not have been her own, but she wished it were. And the more she wished, the more she felt warm inside, as though she were staring into a painting in which she belonged.

‘I will go there,’ she whispered.

‘Go where?’ asked Keiko, as she spooned a pungent-smelling balm onto her cheeks.

‘To Paris.’

‘*Paris?!?*’

‘Yes...’

‘You’re going to Paris?’

Miki nodded. Then she giggled, covering her teeth modestly with a pair of horizontal fingers.

‘When?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Oh,’ Keiko replied.

‘It’s my dream,’ said Miki quietly. ‘The greatest dream of my life.’

Her friend smiled in a kind way.

‘Believe hard enough, and dreams always come true,’ she said.

5

THE NEXT DAY, the temperature fell even lower and it began to snow.

But rather than being disheartened by it, Miki found herself enlivened. The pristine mantle of white gave a sense of serenity to Tokyo’s bleak cityscape. With her morning sales sessions cancelled because of the weather, Miki arranged to meet her best friend, Ichiko, in Shinjuku.

Ichiko worked for Angel Flower as well. A little shorter than Miki, she had unusually round eyes, a feature that gained her the attention of a great many young men. She, too, spent her life crisscrossing the suburbs, desperately trying to get impecunious housewives to take advantage of discounted beauty products.

Arriving early, Miki slipped into Kinokuniya, the cavernous bookshop on Shinjuku Dori, on the south side of the station. Once inside, she made a beeline for the section where the coffee table books were sold.

A clerk with gelled-back hair stepped forward and asked whether he could be of help. Nodding her head in thanks, Miki smiled and, in the shrill voice of formal enquiry, she said:

‘Do you have a big colourful book about Paris?’

The sales clerk touched a finger to his upper lip. He tilted his head on one side, then the other.

‘Yes,’ he said abruptly, ‘I think we have just what you are looking for.’

His hands caressing their way through the forest of vertical spines, he withdrew a large square-shaped volume. Prominent on the front was a photograph of the Eiffel Tower.

‘Are you going there?’ he said, passing Miki the book.

‘Yes!’

‘When?’

‘Not sure. But soon, I hope.’

‘I went there once,’ said the clerk, combing a hand back through his shiny hair.

Miki gasped.

‘What was it like?’

‘It was like a daydream.’

Clutching the volume to her chest, Miki sighed.

‘I want to go there very badly,’ she said.

‘Well, when you do, you must go to a little museum. It’s called Musée Nissim de Camondo.’

‘*Nissim de Camondo?*’

‘Yes... Camondo.’

‘I will remember.’

The clerk asked Miki if she was going to buy the book.
Her enthused expression melted.

‘I think that I will just look at it today,’ she said. ‘Because it will help me to get a little closer to the daydream of my own.’

Once the clerk had gone off to help someone else, Miki flicked through the pages. Each spread was packed with wonders – immense boulevards and prim little cafés, chic couples strolling arm in arm, and grand stone buildings.

As she stood there, the large volume held between her hands, Miki began to cry. She couldn’t help it. The thought of a place so perfect in every way, and the notion of her own ojūchan being a bridge between her and Paris, was too much to take.

Half an hour later, she was sitting with Ichiko in Starbucks, each of them slurping hot chocolate with whipped cream on the top.

Ichiko pulled out a little gift bag.

‘For your birthday,’ she said.

Miki clapped her hands fast and emitted a short squeal of delight.

‘You remembered!’

‘Of course I did.’

‘What is it?’

‘Open it and see.’

Miki tore away the gold and blue packaging and found herself holding a French phrase book. She began sobbing again.

‘How did you know?!’ she exclaimed, wiping her eyes.

‘About what?’

‘About my love for French... about my love for Paris?’

‘I am your best friend,’ Ichiko replied. ‘I know everything about you.’

Miki sipped her chocolate.

‘Then, do you know that I am going to Paris?’ she said.

‘When?’

‘Everyone asks me that. And the answer is – *I don’t know*. But I have to go there. You see, I’ve made a promise.’

‘Who to?’

‘To my ojiiichan.’

‘What is it... your promise?’

‘To bring him a little coin pouch from Louis Vuitton.’

Ichiko frowned.

‘There’s a Louis Vuitton in Ginza,’ she said. ‘You could get the coin pouch there.’

Miki dried away her tears.

‘It wouldn’t be the same,’ she said.

6

THE NEXT WEEK, the Angel Flower Beauty Company was in the news again.

A housewife from Fukuoka went on television denouncing the firm’s cactus cleansing lotion, claiming it had given her a painful rash and swelling on her face. The rash had gone septic and she had been left looking as though exposed to a chemical weapon rather than having been treated with a beauty product.

The firm’s leadership went into crisis management. The chairman called an emergency meeting for the top executives. A beefy, round-headed barrel of a man, he was feared by all – even more than Pun-Pun – not because he was cruel or angry, but because he was so mysterious.

No one knew anything about him. They didn’t even know his name.

After outlining the situation, the chairman pledged funds for a special publicity campaign. Then, with a grunt, he asked for suggestions on how to boost sales.

One of the executives suggested giving away samples at subway stations. Another had the idea of getting a celebrity to champion the brand. Then a young manager from Sapporo raised his hand.

Pun-Pun looked at him with characteristic ire, wondering how such a lowly executive had got into the meeting.

‘What do you want?’ he snapped.

‘Excuse me, but I have an idea, sir.’

‘What idea?’

‘To hold a competition.’

‘What?!’

‘We will put special tickets inside our products for our customers to win, and the woman in our own workforce who sells the most products will...’

‘*Will what?*’

‘Will go on an amazing journey!’

Yamato slapped his hands together and dismissed the idea as utterly preposterous. He was about to reprimand the young executive, when the chairman cleared his throat.

‘A splendid idea!’ he roared.

There was complete silence while the leader ruminated.

‘But where would they go, on this vacation?’

‘On a cruise, sir!’ a voice called out.

‘It’s been done already.’

‘What about New York?’ suggested an executive from the Osaka office.

Again, the chairman wagged an index finger, left and then right.

‘Our products have been banned in America,’ he said awkwardly.

The young executive who had come up with the idea rose to his feet.

‘They will go to Paris!’ he exclaimed.

THAT EVENING, MIKI got home and immediately climbed into bed, huddling beneath half a dozen blankets.

The ice on the inside of the windows was twice as thick as it had been the evening before. She didn't have enough money to buy a heater, let alone to run it. But, having grown up with her grandfather's tales of post-War economizing, Miki was content to make do without the luxuries that others took for granted – luxuries like heat.

Her salary was entirely based on a commission from sales. In recent weeks, the slew of negative press reports featuring the Angel Flower brand had done nothing to help Miki afford a heater, let alone buy a long-haul air ticket.

Despite this, just before turning in for the night, she caught her neighbour's WiFi signal and went online to check prices of flights from Narita airport to Paris.

Tickets started at 100,000 yen.

With hotels and other incidentals, it was a trip way beyond a saleswoman's means.

Closing her old laptop, Miki switched off the light and laid her head on the pillow. And, then, before lulling herself to sleep, as she did each night with silent landscapes of Paris, she said a prayer.

She prayed to her ancestors, that they hear her wish and transport her magically from the cramped studio in Ikebukuro to the sprawling boulevards of the French capital. And she prayed that she would find true love and happiness in the city of her dreams.

'It's not only because I want to go there,' Miki whispered to the ancestors, 'but to get the coin pouch for my dear ojiichan.'

AT THE END of the week, Angel Flower announced a new product line, a range of creams called Blue Onyx, made with aged shark liver oil. The line was hoped to act as an added diversion from the recent tempest of bad publicity.

The entire sales force was given a special briefing in the company's assembly hall on the many merits of Blue Onyx. The chairman of the firm himself made an appearance to wish the saleswomen the best of luck. Addressing them from the stage, he gave thanks for all the work they did in the good name of Angel Flower. And then, before sending them off to sell the new range, he asked for one last minute of their attention.

'I have an announcement,' he said in a distant voice, as Pun-Pun, his much-maligned henchman, stepped forward from the shadows.

A wave of murmuring swept through the room. At least half of the sales force imagined they were about to be laid off. After all, it was no secret that Angel Flower was in serious financial trouble.

But the chairman's sour expression warmed.

'Here at Angel Flower, we are dedicated to making lives more pleasurable,' he said. 'Each day, women across Japan use our cosmetics and, as a result, they find happiness and escape. Even though they might be here in Tokyo, or in Osaka or even in Hokkaido, they can apply our creams to their skin, and imagine they are walking down the Champs-Élysées.'

The chairman buttoned the jacket of his charcoal suit as he scanned the hundreds of female faces below him.

'I am proud to announce a competition,' he said. 'Three members of the public who find winning tickets in our special gift packs will be taken on a journey of a lifetime! And, with them, will go the one

member of our own sales force who outperforms all the rest in the next thirty days.’

Lowering his head as if to stress his humility, the chairman paused. ‘And where will these lucky people go?’ he boomed.

The sales force looked up at their leader, a vacant expression on every face.

‘Well, I shall tell you,’ he thundered. ‘They shall go to Paris!’

A cheer ripped through the hall as the all-female sales force celebrated the thought that one of them – one in six hundred and twenty-two – would be selected to represent Angel Flower in the French capital.

On the far right side of the hall, Miki Suzuki stood still as a statue. She couldn’t speak, or even make a sound. She was too excited and too terrified. Even when her friend Ichiko hurried up to her, she just stood there, paralysed.

‘Did you hear what he said?!’ she cried. ‘They’re sending someone to Paris!’

All of a sudden, Miki thrust her arms up over her head and gave the loudest scream of her life.

‘I’m going to win! I’m going to win!’ she shouted over and over. ‘I just know it for sure that I am going to win!’

9

FOR THE NEXT three weeks, Miki worked harder than she had ever imagined possible.

Each morning she left home in darkness, returning late at night. Taking trains further and further away from Ikebukuro, she reached housewives who had never before been offered the affordable and

interesting products of Angel Flower. Some showed curiosity, while others slammed the door – having heard about the firm’s shortcomings on the national news.

Every night when she finally got home, Miki rubbed her feet, cooked up a little fish and rice, and counted the money she had made for the company. Before going to bed, she would get her products ready for the next morning, and would pray to her ancestors to give her a little more strength to carry on. So preoccupied was she with the competition, that she forgot all about the cold.

The days passed, and Miki sold more and more cosmetics.

Whereas, before, she would only need to have her stock replenished every month, she was now getting restocked twice a week. Even the hard-hearted Pun-Pun managed to raise an eyebrow when he saw her sales sheet.

But Miki wasn’t the only member of the sales force breaking records.

Noemi, whose name meant ‘little laugh’, was the most celebrated saleswoman in the entire company and had been for years. She was pretty, funny, popular, and was practically perfect in every way. And these assets did wonders when selling to the legions of housewives on whose doors she knocked.

As a way of increasing the sense of competition, Angel Flower’s top sales totals were sent by SMS to everyone at noon each day. It was the one moment that Miki dreaded more than any other. And, even though looking at the numbers made her sick to the pit of her stomach, she forced herself to go through them one by one.

At the end of the first week, Noemi had sold 342 gift packs. The next closest sales figure was 212. As for Miki, she had only sold 199, and that was by almost killing herself through overwork.

Undeterred, with holes in her shoes from walking, and hardly able to breathe from a severe chest cold, she carried on – each day travelling further and further from home.

At the end of the second week, Miki's best friend found her lying in bed, with a fever and badly swollen feet.

'You have to stop this!' she ordered. 'In any case, Noemi is sure to win. She has sold more gift packs than anyone. I heard she's already been out shopping for the dress she'll wear in Paris.'

Miki scrunched up her fists and held them to her eyes.

'I hate her! I hate her! I hate her!' she yelled. 'I have to be the one who goes to Paris. It *has* to be me!'

Ichiko shrugged.

'Well, if you are going to beat her, you will have to think of a clever plan,' she said.

'What kind of plan?'

'Something that housewives can't resist.'

10

BY THE THIRD week, all three of the special tickets had been discovered by lucky customers. The winners were featured on TV, shown jumping up and down with excitement. The lavish details of the trip were broadcast, and the Blue Onyx line of cosmetics got plenty of free publicity.

Meanwhile, each morning Miki scraped herself out of bed and carried on selling door to door, at mothers' meetings and coffee mornings as she had always done. The problem was that each rendezvous took time because the housewives loved to gossip.

It was a vicious circle.

You couldn't get them to buy until they had been given a sufficient opportunity to gossip. And, the longer you let them gossip, the less time there was to move on to the next group of housewives.

Another drawback was that, like all the saleswomen, Miki had to carry her stock of gift packs around with her. They were heavy and bulky, and she could never carry quite enough to satisfy demand.

Losing hope, she sank into a terrible depression, and for three days she stayed in bed.

‘I can’t win!’ she moaned to Ichiko on the phone. ‘I’ll never beat Noemi. You even told me so yourself!’

‘Well, you won’t beat her by not trying,’ her friend replied.

‘But what’s the point?’ asked Miki. ‘I’ve given up trying to get to Paris. I’ll just go to Louis Vuitton in Ginza and use my credit card to buy Ojii-chan the coin pouch from there.’

‘It won’t be the same,’ Ichiko said sternly, as she hung up.

Miki tossed the telephone onto her bed and burst into tears.

She couldn’t remember ever being so unhappy. Shuffling into her minuscule kitchen area, she opened the cupboard. At the back was an extremely large bar of extra-dark chocolate. She had been saving it for a moment of inconsolable melancholy, a moment that had at last come.

Taking it out, she pulled off the gold wrapper and ate it all.

Then, feeling sick, she flopped back down on her futon and turned on the TV.

She watched the news – a stream of misery from Japan and then the world. But, after that, just before signing off, the anchor told the cheery story of a homeless man in Ueno Park, who had become something of a celebrity merely for being different. People brought him food and blankets, and applauded him.

And they loved him.

All he did was to stand there in rain and shine – on one leg, greeting everyone who passed.

Miki screwed up her face. It was the stupidest thing she had ever heard or seen.

But it gave her an idea.

THE NEXT MORNING, Miki took her suitcase filled with Blue Onyx gift packs over to Shiba Park. Selecting a spot where a lot of people passed, she closed her eyes and wished. She wished and she wished, and she wished and she wished. Then, taking out a white sheet of card and a black marker, she wrote a neat sign in *kanji*. It read:

MUST GO ON AN EXPENSIVE JOURNEY
TO FULFIL A FAMILY DUTY.
MY ONLY HOPE IS IF YOU TAKE ONE
OF MY GIFT BOXES FOR FREE.
DONATIONS ARE WELCOME.

For half an hour Miki stood beside the open suitcase.

It was so cold that everyone who passed was in such a hurry to get to work, that no one bothered to read the sign. Or, if they did, they didn't give it a second thought. Miki felt her fingers and her toes getting colder and colder. She stamped up and down to get her blood circulating, but it didn't do anything to warm her up.

Three hours went by, and she hadn't sold – or even given away – any of her gift packs. She began cursing herself for being so stupid. The homeless man on the TV had done so well because people felt sorry for him.

And no one felt sorry for Miki.

Just as she was about to pack up her case filled with Angel Flower gift packs and head for home, something especially unpleasant occurred.

It began to snow.

But, rather than rushing away, Miki stayed standing there. She wasn't quite sure herself why she didn't move. It was as though someone was calling to her to be patient, to hold her ground.

The snow began falling more heavily.

Great crisp flakes of it covered Miki, her suitcase, and the edges of her sign. Rather than feeling colder though, she felt her fingers and toes warming, as if something magical was happening.

Then, spontaneously, she began to laugh – a laugh inspired by hopelessness.

And, at that moment, a student approached where Miki was standing. He was dressed in a thick blue duffel coat like Paddington Bear. Although he didn't say anything, he took out his phone and clicked a picture of the sign, the bag filled with gift packs, and Miki, laughing.

Five minutes later, he had uploaded it on Mixi, Japan's number one social media site.

Ten minutes after that, people began to arrive.

At first it was a handful of ladies who worked in offices nearby. Having seen the Mixi post, they had been touched enough to come out and help a young woman trying to fulfil a family duty. Then, as they took pictures and shared them with their friends, more and more women started to turn up.

By lunchtime, dozens had come.

And, by mid afternoon, the dozens had become hundreds.

They lined up, neat and orderly in the cold, pledging donations in return for an Angel Flower gift pack from the Blue Onyx range.

At three o'clock, Miki called headquarters and ordered an emergency supply.

'How many gift packs do you need?' the sales officer had asked.

'As many as you can spare. It's an emergency!'

Within the hour, six hundred gift packs were delivered. But they were quickly gone.

Some women gave five times the money that one gift pack normally cost, but took only one. Bowing reverently, they offered

words of encouragement, and told Miki how well she was doing. A great many of the women brought hot soup and cocoa, mittens and scarves.

And, all the while, the snow fell.

By early evening, a thousand women were lining up. They spilled out from the spot where Miki was standing, around and around in a great human spiral. The snow was deep now, but the more heavily it came down, the more women arrived.

And the more Angel Flower gift packs they bought.

At 8.30 p.m., Miki phoned the head office again to request another emergency delivery of stock. This time the call was put through to Pun-Pun, who was still crouched over his desk. When he heard where Miki wanted the gift packs delivered to, he bristled with anger, and ordered her to stop wasting company time. He was about to hang up the phone, when one of the executives held up a hand.

‘Request that you look at Mixi, sir,’ he said.

Again, more extra stock was rushed to Miki. As soon as it arrived it was handed out, with the donations amounting to many times the value of the stock.

By the time the park was closed for the night, Miki had distributed all the cartons. But, better still, she had become a celebrity in her own right. Three local TV crews had lit up the frozen air with their floodlights, their reporters telling Miki’s tale to millions of viewers watching at home.

The next day, Miki stood out in Shiba Park again, as the commuters filed silently through to work. But, before she could get back into position, women started to arrive. They were armed with banknotes, blankets, and soup. Each of them wanted to be touched by the myth – the myth of Miki Suzuki and her family duty.

By the end of the week, Angel Flower executives had drawn up an entire sales strategy based on the idea of donations in return for

goods. Henceforth, they declared, all their products would be given away for free – in exchange for a minimum recommended donation.

All across Japan sales teams were suddenly studying Miki Suzuki's business model.

In boardrooms, from Kagoshima in the south to Sapporo in the north, experts discussed the model, poring over its simple genius. Social media tapped the youth market, spreading the message like wildfire, while donating for a cause had touched the hearts of ordinary Japanese.

As for Miki, she was frozen to the bone, but elated like she had never been before.

On the Saturday evening, Ichiko brought her best friend a pot of noodle soup.

'I have to tell you something,' she said, as Miki slurped the meal.

'What is it?'

'It is Pun-Pun.'

'What about him?'

'He hates you.'

'Why?'

'Because he wants Noemi to go to Paris.'

'I do not understand.'

Ichiko rolled her eyes.

'Didn't you know?' she said. 'They're having an affair.'

Miki balked.

'But everyone hates him – even his wife.'

'Noemi doesn't. She loves him, especially the huge red wart on his forehead.'