Mrs Kuroda on Penyfan

Nigel Jarrett

Solemn over fertile country floats the white cloud.

Mrs Kuroda remembered those words from the diary she had kept as a teenager, and now they seemed to be written in the skies, signalling to her personally a truth so long untold. In those days, she kept lots of similar things: newspaper cuttings, snippets from books, tattered pictures of the Western world. Each will come true, she had told herself, each will materialise.

Smithereens. She had learnt that word from Bill while they were underground at the mining museum. Ichiro, her husband, hadn't been bothered at all. 'Look after her, Bill,' he had said, emphasising the man's name as though he had been practising it all night for some important leave-taking ceremony at which his face would be creased, all-smiling. That was why he had done so well for himself, Mrs Kuroda thought. His determination to succeed in that windswept, hilly land among its emotional people would see them through. Forty years before, in Nagasaki, these were the qualities which mothers-to-be seemed to will on their unborn children in the anguish of bringing them into the world. Mothers who had survived, of course. 'Blown to smithereens,' Bill had said while recounting the tail of the pit disaster. It was almost as if Ichiro had instructed him to

mention it, in order to impress on his wife the triumph of similarity over difference.

Alone in their house in the Vale, she stared at her face in the dressing-table mirror, vaguely aware of the double reflection looking in from its two side panels. In front of her was the photograph. The whole effect was that of a shrine, in which she and her mirror images were fixed; not the gazer but the gazed upon. Ichiro had taken the picture with one of his firm's remote-control cameras just before they came to Wales. 'Sachi, my dearest', he had written on it. That was what he called her in private. Now, in their new country, he used it in public instead of Sachiko, which seemed to her like something cast off by another against her will, or something surrendered reluctantly at Customs.

She collected her walking boots, so tiny they made her grin, and placed them on the back seat of her car with the bobble hat and the windcheater. The company had provided them with a big house on its own in the country. It was too big, really, but there was a lot of entertaining involved in being Mrs Kuroda. Ichiro had taken ages to choose. At each likely property, in similar locations to the one he had finally picked, he would race to the first upstairs window, then to the highest point in the garden if it weren't flat, and train his binoculars on the horizon. Only at their chosen site did he obtain a view of a green landscape unfolding tumultuously into purple-saddled hills and jagged spoil heaps. One wintry morning, not long after their arrival, Ichiro woke her and led her excitedly to the bedroom window, offering her the glasses. The tip above distant Pantmoel was snow-capped. 'Mount Fuji!' he cried.

Mrs Kuroda's Mazda showed the beginnings of rust at its hem. She drove it through the gates and let it roll down the slope, through the tunnel of trees. It had been another one of Ichiro's ideas for her to buy a second-hand car which would demonstrate that she was neither ostentatious nor concerned to present all things Japanese as faultless. 'In any

case,' he had told her, 'this is the car of our people' – our people meaning the workers at his Pantmoel electronics factory. She went along with these harmless subterfuges. Ichiro's energy made her breathless. He was so sure of himself that she was swept along by his enthusiasm. She had the feeling of always being in his wake, but an affectionate smile over his shoulder every so often would reassure her. He knew all this; he was conscious of having to look back every time he craved her sweet, doll-like features. That was how the sinecure had come about. That was why he had placed her in charge of the Home Club, for the company's middle management and their families.

Tears were welling as she pulled up at the city junction ready to drive north to the Beacons, and they broke like dammed waters as she giggled at the small roadside hoarding. BILL POSTERS WILL BE PROSECUTED it said in bold multiples. Bill had explained the joke, which hadn't been all that difficult to understand with her good command of English, but she had not found it as funny as he had. It wasn't all so unproductive where she and Bill were concerned. He had begun by telling her about the past of Wales and the need to embrace a different Welsh future. He'd told her that her face was like the dawn, on the afternoon he'd introduced her to the story of the ill-fated Gelert. She laughed again through her tears as she recalled her comical attempts at pronunciation. 'Smith-er-reens, Mab-in-og-ion,' she had repeated between her little high-pitched cries of glee. Ichiro had heard her practising the words in the kitchen.

'What's that, Sachi?' he had called from the doorway, lowering his opened newspaper to waist height.

'Oh nothing,' she had replied. 'More English sayings.'

Mrs Kuroda worked hard at her job. Turning up the valley parallel to the one where Ichiro was at that moment addressing his assembled workforce on the impending need for redundancies, she heard the Home Club documents on the back seat cascade to the floor like a column of slates. She

didn't care. Her tears were as much for poor Dr Kagoshima, due to arrive from the Osaka plant at the weekend as for anyone else, including herself. Even Dr Kagoshima, coming with bad news from the East but due to be confronted with all that was positive in his Western empire, even the modest Pantmoel Home Club, could not take her far enough back. She remembered a scene from a film in which a teenage boy waited in vain for the return of the suicide pilots before clambering into the cockpit himself, white headband trailing, only for the engine to fail. It might have been old Dr Kagoshima. Both of them in their own ways had been born too late for the big events.

She pulled in at a lay-by which led down to the side of a small reservoir. It was where she and Bill had gone after the visit to the museum. 'My recent past,' he had called it. How thrilled she had been at the success of those first meetings. Ideas and suggestions drifted against the Club's slender administrative structure, almost suffocating it with potential. In the dark evenings, she would sit at home under the standard lamp with her glasses balanced on the tip of her nose and map out the Club's course, while her husband, stretched out on the settee, examined the *Financial Times* in microscopic detail. She felt there was a sense in which he had found her something with which to occupy herself and was loath to intrude unduly.

One night, after a committee member had resigned through illness, she had written the name of William Posters in a vacant space in her minutes book. The surname was a deliberate mistake, and she had stifled a smile. She told her husband his real name. 'Do you know him, Ichiro?' she had asked, without looking up. 'No – oh, yes,' he had replied, and turned the page of his newspaper.

There were three ducks on the choppy waters, bobbing together against a stiff wind. A thousand wavelets broke together. Hers was the only car in the gravelled parking bay.

She put on her hat and walked towards the water's edge, wrapping her arms around her to keep warm. For every wave a thought, collapsing to make room for another. The endless succession wearied her; the wind almost carried her away. She remembered giving Bill that first lift home after they had stayed late to discuss the Club's summer programme. It was he who had suggested the Japanese evening, the slide show, the tea ceremony. Then there was the time she had grabbed his arm as the cage plunged down the shaft at the museum. Then the phone calls to the Vale when Ichiro was at work, the vast silence of the house save for the wind chimes.

She looked up at the sloping main road high above the reservoir and saw one of Ichiro's transporters, sleek in its blue and silver livery and catching the sun as it slid down from the hills towards the border with England. She could barely keep up with Ichiro's explanations of what was happening. She knew nothing could be done about his mother and her father, independently growing frail back home. Each time Dr Kagoshima came over, he reminded her with his hunched shoulders and thinning grey hair of the widow and widower, sitting silent in the groves of Wakamatsu.

Shivering as the wind rattled down from the Heads of the Valleys, she wondered what Ichiro would think of her acting independently beyond the space he had created. What would anyone think, come to that? On his first visit to the house, so long ago that its heart-thumping excitement had been transferred to thoughts of the future, their future, Bill had warned of the perils of being a woman alone in a remote house, describing a Wales in which all slept with their doors bolted at night, unlike the old days. She thought that her small stature made him overprotective. They certainly made an odd-looking pair: he big and brawny yet considerate and gentle of voice; she for ever on tiptoe, as if peering over a ridge, the better to catch sight of some forbidden territory.

Perhaps it was out of bounds because Ichiro had already identified places which would remind her of home, sites of gaping dereliction with kids mimicking aeroplanes in flight, just like the black, water-filled 'bumps' of Nagasaki, where the aged saw their own ruination mirrored in the endless rubble.

She walked back to the car with her head bowed. Her tiny feet made scarcely a sound on the stones. Such lightness she felt now, as though she were disappearing into pure memory, out of range of all that might do her harm. She and Bill had exchanged old photographs of themselves at one of the Home Club's late sittings, while they waited for Ichiro to pick her up in his own car, hers having broken down impressively. The Japanese wives had changed into kimonos for the evening, and she recalled how, quickstepping, they had fluttered colourfully across the play area of the leisure centre, where the Club's monthly-hired room made perfect neutral ground among the learners. In one of the pictures, Bill was a lively nine-year-old, straining forwards as a snow-haired great aunt held him in check for the photographer. Hers, too, were from an equally austere time. All was innocence then, in the days of struggle. As they shuffled the photos, passed them to each other and let them slip into a pile on the table between them, they took on the chaotic shape of destiny in the making. 'Little did they know,' she had thought, 'little did they know.'

While waiting to pull out on to the main road, she thought she spotted one of the wives – there were just five of them in the district – driving in the opposite direction. Her heart quivered like a momentarily trapped bird. But it was too late to be worried by ostracism. In fact, she wished something like that would happen, some trickle of evidence to release the pressure of all her piled-up pain and frustration. She even cursed the old car as it laboured up the slope towards the Beacons, its low gears groaning. Ichiro's success had not made the other wives particularly friendly. As appendages of

their go-getting husbands, they were saturated with the influence of ambition, the prospect of once more moving on. This was not the engagement with Western ways she had yearned for as a girl; it was the old behaviour simply transferred to another place. In it she recognised the selfless but rough-shodden manner which, Bill said, had created so much ferment among the miners. He'd welcomed the arrival of Ichiro's factory but she knew when he had sighed so heavily at the museum's coalface – a huge black arrowhead, caught pincer-like by crushing stone above and below – that reality was one thing and dignity quite another. Now that his workmates all wore overalls with their names on, it seemed easier to dispense with their services. She imagined someone ripping off the old tags and sewing on new ones.

At the Storey Arms, she parked opposite the hostel and read Bill's letter again. He had handed it to her at the last Club meeting. (The old formality had been perishing beside her zeal for the new customs, so that even faint-heartedness could barely masquerade as shyness.) She ran her fingertips over the clear, steady handwriting. He had addressed her as 'Dear Sachiko'. She remembered how someone had described Bill as a 'gentleman'. What had that meant? Discretion, good manners, consideration for the feelings of others? In Nagasaki he would be considered a good match for someone like her. On the afternoon of his visit to the house, when Ichiro had phoned minutes earlier to say he had arrived safely in Doncaster for a meeting with Dr Kagoshima's team, she had almost crumbled under the weight of duplicity in a foreign land. Yet there had been a peculiar thrill attached to its shared nature, as though it were a rite of passage to a higher plane of happiness, some fresh and sanctioned departure in a new country. In Bill's embrace she might have been burying herself in the protective folds of the landscape he had commended to her with such pride of possession. She had lain on her bed in Nagasaki, reading of hills and valleys and a people moved instinctively to song. 'Dear Sachiko,'

Bill's letter had said. 'We cannot go on. There is too much in the way.'

The long, worn path beckoned her to the summit. She closed her ears to the siren wind. How the other wives had giggled at the opera in Cardiff as Madama Butterfly tortured herself with ridiculous, old-fashioned feelings and Western music splashed everywhere like breakers on a strange but exciting shore. In the costly seats, sitting together with the others, the strangeness was not on stage but in her mind, reclothing the confusion of her thoughts.

She balanced nervously at the edge of the escarpment and gazed into the void. Her arms shot out. In the gardens of Wakamatsu the trees shivered and a wheelchair turned sharply on a polished floor.