

Lockdown with the Shining Prince

By Mel Kelly

Genji asks me which of his many women I like the best. I gaze out of the window, studying the miniscule lawn turning now to untidy patches of pale straw in the chilly mornings. I hesitate, then reply in a way that half-masks my disapproval. He's an honoured guest after all and living together in such close quarters out of necessity, there's a need to observe decorum.

"There've been so many Genji. I'm struggling to remember them all? I guess my favourites wouldn't be yours."

"Meaning...?" He's made himself comfortable on the creaking wicker chair across the cramped bedroom, tucking one elegant foot under him after a bit of a struggle and smoothing his robe with a pettish gesture.

"You like them very young and biddable, don't you? The ones who put up some resistance or rejected you wouldn't be in your top ranking, would they?"

He glances out towards the garden that's no longer really a garden since municipal water restrictions came back into force.

"Yes and no? Nee, yah, nee?" Genji finishes with a fey tittering, which he cannot know sounds distinctly effeminate.

"You're going to insist it's a cultural thing or a social thing and that most men would do as you did, given the opportunity."

"You wouldn't believe me anyway if I said I loved most of them in my own fashion."

I decide not to point out that his fashion included forcing himself on women without their agreement. I'm not going to be so blunt so early in our relationship, so this must remain a topic for another time.

"The wonder is you didn't end up siring a whole household of children. So far as I can make out, no precautions were ever taken." I fell back on an ill-fitting assumption before I registered the incongruity of expecting a bona fide aristocrat to practise safe sex.

But Genji had disappeared. I like to think he had gone outside to view the few remaining flowers and contemplate the passing of the seasons in an unfamiliar land. Autumn dawns always made him elegiac, even more so than usual.

"What've you told other people about me?" Genji enquires the next day, emerging from the shower and inspecting a threadbare towel with which he's just finished drying his thick, inky-black hair. As usual, he has covered up before presenting himself to me and I have to imagine what he would look naked.

“What people? I’m getting a hundred memes a day from contacts I can barely recall, encouraging me to ‘Keep Calm’ and do something-or-other, if that’s who you mean.” Now it was my turn to be peevish.

“They’re sending messages because it’s somehow expected of them. I know all about that.” Genji was a quick study, which made him an astute observer of the similarities –as well as the contrasts – between our lives.

“Well, I’ve told my son that I’ve got a foreign acquaintance staying in the guestroom who goes about his own business and I imagine that Elias hopes this lets him off the hook. He doesn’t have to keep checking in now he knows I have company. The people who’ve learned I’m home on half-pay, I tell them I have a visitor stuck here and contributing some rent until he can go home. That seems to satisfy pretty much everyone.”

“If only they knew…”

“If only they did so. They couldn’t care less about how I’m coping, let’s be honest, and for that I’m grateful. I can dedicate my time to you.”

He smells simply gorgeous; the suggestion of carnations trailing in his wake isn’t emphatic but subtle and insinuating – definitely not the scent of any of the cheapest own-brand toiletries I have been reduced to buying recently.

“The grass needs cutting?” This has evidently been on his mind since yesterday.

“It does Genji. Are you volunteering? Because I let the staff go some weeks back.” He looks at me as if I had proposed he walk naked through The Grove mall – shocked but then relaxing as he becomes aware of my effort at a joke – of course, I never had a gardener. I doubt that in his whole gilded life, Genji has ever turned his manicured fingers to manual labour of any description.

“It’s nice to have *some* leisure time though, isn’t it?” Genji, changing the subject, is trying to put a positive spin on things.

“From the man who never had anything but.”

“There was lots of official stuff I had to attend to almost every day, so I resent your choice of words somewhat. With my position came duties that I couldn’t avoid, social obligations and so forth. I couldn’t wait to retire from public life, as you are going to discover for yourself eventually.”

The day before, spiteful winds had stripped many of the leggy bushes around the yard of their last shreds of foliage. On the street outside, I’d heard the rattle of plastic bottles somersaulting down the empty road’s incline and thought it the loneliest sound I had heard in ages. Now, Genji is examining a fallen bougainvillea sprig he’d found by the back door. He keeps raising it to his nose in a show of confusion, curious as to why I’d grow a plant with no scent and little to recommend it in the way of beauty. I venture an effort:

“This flower that failed to perfume the summer night’s air

Lingers against the wall, wet in the autumn's dew"?

Genji pats my head with a series of condescending taps.

“No gift for poetry. And no dew here in the autumn either.”

It's the first time that a man has touched me – except with a strictly professional handshake – in five years.

“Am I old to you, Genji?”

He pushes an index finger against my shoulder gently so that I turn around under the warm pressure, then runs a palm under the tips of my fishtail braids. I'm alert and defensive:

“I can't be expected to have nice hair under the circumstances.”

He gives a side-to-side jiggle of his head, indicating that while he concedes my point, at the same time my failure to maintain my appearance is a source of disappointment to him.

“I don't understand your hair. So, I don't know how younger or older looks.”

“I was 51 in January; 52 in your years?”

His diplomatic silence confirms that to Genji I am an old woman who would've been of no consequence to him ordinarily. Not so much because of my age – I've recently discovered that when still a young man, he'd had an affair with a woman who was almost 60 – but because maintaining my looks (such as they are) is no longer a preoccupation with me. Like other people with family in Europe, I'd begun paying attention to the looming threat some weeks back and had imposed various restrictions on my activities of my own accord. Perhaps Genji believes that the extra time I now have on my hands offers an excellent opportunity for improving my beauty routine and it's only his aversion to speaking about money – a vulgar topic he won't lower himself to even allude to – that prevents him from mentioning this.

“You're not seeing me at my best. In normal times I do look much better groomed.” It's an afternoon when I'm wearing ancient velour tracksuit bottoms and a faded promotional t-shirt, since nearly all my other clothes are mouldering away in the laundry basket. I've noticed him eyeing my vintage pedicure, with one jewel missing from a big toe where almost as much naked nail is to be seen as that portion still sporting a slick of crimson polish.

If there was one indication that I was at war with myself, the condition of my feet was surely it – not that Genji would have any awareness, naturally.

“I was brought up to believe that one's station in life dictates one's comportment and sensibility.” He just can't stop himself from delivering a brief homily of this nature at least once a day, guest or no guest.

“And that's where we differ and it's a subject that we'll have plenty of time to explore if the latest update from the ministry's anything to go by.”

The lockdown days went by in a dull but not especially dismal procession; some more monotonous and oppressive than others. To his credit, my esteemed visitor had no complaints about keeping me company as I tackled a decades' worth of old filing, or re-catalogued my CDs. If he felt irritated by the requirement to be sociable, his good manners prevented him from giving any sign and I was genuinely grateful for his gracious, generally unjudgmental company – it felt at times like a lifeline to reality – yet he could sense when I needed my solitude too. In the middle of some task I would remember that I ought to be making conversation out of courtesy, only to note that he'd made himself scarce. Writing to someone, I had assumed, which took up an inordinate amount of his time.

We're inspecting my pile of unread novels, balanced on a low pallet table. This accumulation of enticing reading matter seems prescient now, awaiting the moment when I would finally have long hours to devote proper attention to it. Yet I'd found I couldn't begin any of these books, strangely guilty that I hadn't earned the empty afternoons that could have been spent immersing myself in other worlds. Only one battered brick of a paperback, curling now at the edges of its bamboo-embellished front cover, accompanied me everywhere I went.

“Genji, what is it that mostly killed people where you came from?”

“These little complaints. We never knew how seriously to take them. A person is reported indisposed, maybe an excuse to avoid an inconvenient social engagement? Then, boomp, and they are gone, taken maybe by an evil spirit, or they were ailing because they had lost their purpose in life. With women, particularly, perhaps...” He pauses a little between these last three words, looking at me sceptically, assessing if I might be in the mood to question his blanket assertions.

“And epidemics, like now?”

“There must've been I suppose. We naturally kept ourselves apart yet still – storms, earthquakes, fires, famines – these disasters could test the social fabric. But generally, we put death down to ill fortune, the fates conspiring.”

“Did people really die of broken hearts? Or lose the will to live?”

He slides a peek at my book, registering my progress by the strip of silk ribbon I use to mark my place. He realises who I am talking about and that I am probing one of several mysteries that are troubling me and that require his explanation. He doesn't want to humour me at present, however; the lockdown is still only a few days old and we will have ample time yet to explore even the most baffling conundrums.

I was still supposed to be gainfully employed, finalising various shamefully overdue reports that my organisation had drafted over the years but had never satisfactorily fleshed out. There'd been no time to appoint someone senior to supervise me once I was working from

home however and, since I had it on impeccable authority that I'd be let go soon enough, I'd been ignoring the files that had been hastily emailed to me in the hours before the office officially closed up its physical premises. In these unprecedented times, the press release had stated, it was not possible to determine if and when normal operations would be resumed. It seemed to me a foregone conclusion though that the person newly assigned the task of urgently working up this confusing tranche of materials would be viewed as an unaffordable, unnecessary luxury in due course.

I'd taken my work laptop from my desk on that last chaotic day and had wondered since whether, when the inevitable process of gutting the payroll began, anyone would make the effort to retrieve it. I'd not been given any receipt to sign – people had been too busy collecting up their own bundles of paperwork and bits of hardware – so I debated whether my conscience would win out once I received my dismissal letter, or if I'd consider the computer a form of compensation for the indignity of having to find another job so far into middle age. For the time being, it provided me with regular updates of new infections spreading stutteringly across the land and supplied me with answers to questions about Genji's home that I didn't feel I could broach with him directly.

In order to break up the open-plan design of my townhouse, I'd arranged for a dividing wall to be constructed partway across the downstairs area giving, as I'd hoped, the impression that a collection of rooms extended towards the back. I'd sit at the breakfast nook, reading or sewing patches onto a quilt I laboured over when the creative urge overtook me, and Genji would appear in the archway linking the two spaces. He'd stand framed by the opening, waiting for his presence to register. Often, he would have one finger raised in silent enquiry: a point of contemporary etiquette or custom was exercising him and he wished to interrupt me so we could discuss what was on his mind. He was a late riser; his perplexing questions tended to come at me in an uninterrupted flow at just the time of the day when my mind was becoming unfocused and my replies too vague to really satisfy him.

I doubted he felt any great affection for me but Genji always seemed ready to converse in depth. I had unmarried acquaintances only a few years my senior who seemed incapable of following even a simple conversation, starting off down a random track of their own choosing only to lose the thread of their thoughts in a way that left everyone silent in bewildered consternation. Chatting with my visitor revived a pleasurable skill that I'd begun to fear I might lose through lack of use.

Even before this stupid sickness arrived, some nights I felt so lonely that I vaguely wished to die in my sleep so that the years ahead of me – when I would feel more and more insignificant and invisible – could be avoided. I would wake up grief-stricken, inconsolable, though no tragedy had engulfed me.

Everyone else who worked in my office was my son's age. When, pre-Covid, they'd half-heartedly invited me to join them at some social event, I'd know that I was doing us all a favour by making some excuse not to tag along. They had to work with me, but they didn't have to like me – even I didn't like myself much these days. It was only when I'd gone for my pap smear and the doctor had asked me how I was coping with the menopause that I'd

realised why recently I'd harboured a suspicion that my personality was being dismantled by a sinister force. How had I not known that half the world was eventually hostage to this infernal derangement? I couldn't fathom how, with older female relatives in abundance, this topic had not once been raised in conversation. Had they all suffered terribly in silence or was my own experience an especially punishing one? Of the physical discomforts I had little to report; instead it was my mind that was reconfiguring itself – all perspective dissolving away, leaving an inchoate fury as my default setting. Only a terror of slipping away for good from a manageable form of private lunacy kept me performing a pantomime of normalcy out in the world.

“Why did you invite me to share your home Meke? I still await a proper explanation for your kind gesture.”

“Because I was terrified to face the hours and days – maybe even months – completely by myself? Because my thoughts were destroying me? Because I would dwell in my solitude on people from my past whom I thought had slighted me and vindictively hope that they woke up every morning even more bereft than I did? Because recently my need for company to keep me quote unquote normal had driven me quite mad.”

Of course, I said none of this to him.

“Um, I knew you a little by reputation and always wanted to get to know you better, in person? This virus thing seemed to present an ideal opportunity to become better acquainted at last. There's not anyone else I'd rather be self-isolating with.”

Not true by now, but good enough.

I still liked the way he filled a doorway, everything about him so finished, so neat. When I'd downsized years ago, alone once more, I'd imagined that if my luck took a turn for the better – as I surely still had a right to expect that it might – then one day a worthy, decent man would stand just as Genji stood then, taking possession of the space he occupied as if establishing a partnership with me was natural, easy and right. A man with natural authority, who could look me in the eye without glancing away after a second or two and could debate an issue without needing to browbeat me. A prince, not a beggar.

Several days later, Genji discovered me fiddling with my phone.

“I'm fixing it so people can't see that I'm available. It's been interrupting me every five minutes, literally.”

People were now bored with the lockdown and were increasingly using their phones to send repetitious or ill-informed dispatches out into the ether in the hopes of getting a few replies back. Someone from work had texted staff members to suggest that we should begin scheduling meetings online but, thankfully, the idea appeared to have died a death. Only later

did it cross my mind that perhaps the conferences were going ahead but I'd been deliberately excluded.

“And I was going to ask you if you felt lonely or isolated. Or depressed?” He eyed my plate of cappuccino muffins, foiled cheese triangles and *droëwors* then sat back, not disguising his distaste at my meal.

“Actually... the opposite? I've always been pretty happy in my own company but since Elias moved in with the girlfriend, I've anyway had no choice. Now I'm feeling like: ‘Welcome to my world, suckers. If you people are suddenly feeling abandoned or ignored – that's my reality.’ I wouldn't tell this to anyone else but right now I'm feeling contented even, knowing that all the rest of the world is now sharing my sense of alienation. So Genji, yes, I'll confess that it's strangely comforting – and I know that sounds disgustingly selfish. But you did ask...”

I'd maybe revealed more about my state of mind pre-Covid than I'd intended and despite what I'd just said, summing up my life in such stark terms was making me tearful.

“I'm flattered you feel you can share those sentiments with me. Not to mention pleased that you're not feeding me.”

“Well since we are about it, I want to ask: did you ever have any genuine friends, ones that you could share your innermost thoughts with? You seemed to end up in a form of rivalry with just about every man who ever crossed your path, even childhood playmates. Could you ever show your real feelings or was all that weeping and wailing only for show?”

“It was for show, everything was for show and spectacle, but also genuinely meant. I think that biographer rather tended to over-stress the emoting, though.” He briefly looked as if he had something else to add and so when he stood up instead to signify that the chat was over, I completed the sentence for him.

“Because she was a woman? Does it bother you that you are famous because of a mere female?” I wasn't being sarcastic: I had a very clear sense by then of how Genji regarded the weaker sex.

Genji was describing his retirement and trying to draw parallels between his voluntary retreat from society and my own enforced withdrawal. It was a warm, still day and we had taken every cushion and pillow I owned outside to lie in a patch of sunlight on the sharp, desiccated grass. An oddly shaped silhouette beat high across the sky on slow wings and a look of delighted recognition passed over Genji's face as he told me the bird's Japanese name and listed what it signified when it appeared in a painting or a poem.

“Normally your sky is so boring, so blue. Normally I tire of it very easily.”

“Apologies your majesty. Next time, I will attend to it at your urgent command.”

We were holding hands, not from any romantic impulse but because it seemed like a natural way to behave by now – Genji, transfixed by the contrast between our skin tones, would make a grab and entwine our fingers at any opportunity. I knew why.

“I want to ask you something Genji, OK? One person in your story, a woman I should say, she’s struck me as even sadder than the ones you toyed with and then discarded. Do you know who I mean?”

By this point, Genji wasn’t happy to be reminded of his history of seducing then swiftly growing weary of his conquests. He set about itemising them according to their stations in life, emphasising how many he’d ended up supporting at his own expense, including the neglected favourites haunting the sprawling home he’d provided for them. I let him ramble on; it was important for me to hear how he regarded his treatment of them all, whether he now realised that he could have been more compassionate in many instances. Yet evidently, he’d misidentified the unfortunate lady in question, as the look of blank incomprehension that met my explanation revealed:

“No Genji. She doesn’t fall into that category of your past lovers. I’m talking about the lonely wife of Hige-kuro.”

Though bittersweet longing and melancholy ran through almost every incident in the life of my Shining Prince, the appalling tragedy of a loving spouse wholly undone by her husband’s affection for a younger woman, coming as it did at the time of her life when her own appeal was waning, had never registered with him.

The time had almost arrived to say ‘Farewell’. No announcement had yet been made concerning the lifting of restrictions but we both knew my guest would be leaving soon.

Years ago, I’d picked up a copy of the ‘Tale of Genji’ at Uncle Spike’s Book Exchange, intrigued by its extraordinary heft and its odd presence alongside three travel guides to Thailand. Googling the title as I stood in the narrow aisle, I learned two remarkable facts – first, that it’s probably the first psychological novel ever written and second, that the protagonist, a commoner son of the Emperor, dies about two-thirds of the way through the story. Indeed, it’s even more brutal than that – at the end of Chapter 41 Genji is alive and well in middle age, enjoying his retirement from court life and the time he can finally devote to his religious studies. Then, without any forewarning, he is dead at the commencement of the following chapter, with scarcely a word of explanation.

I’d been putting the now very tattered paperback to one side more and more in recent days, delaying the inevitable moment when Genji – and therefore my imaginary visitor of royal blood – exits the tale. I didn’t want to lose him entirely just yet but if I were being honest, I’d have to confess that I’d grown a little bored and impatient with his solipsism. Used to being the centre of attention, he seemed incapable of attending to another person for more than a few moments before the topic of conversation must return, inevitably, to him.

He was going to leave my life any day now and I still didn't know if he had any regrets about his predations, his regal right to take, by force if necessary, any woman who attracted his attention.

With utmost skill he evaded my insistent probing until I almost felt sorry for him. If Genji was applying this much effort to sidestepping the issue, then ultimately his refusal to confront the truth was as good as an admission of newly acknowledged guilt.

"I don't expect you to understand this Meke but they were such very different times. Very. It would have been strange if I *hadn't* taken my pick of the women available to me. Like a soccer star or a musician still today?"

"I don't think things were so very different. Except that now a man who violently acts on his baser impulses might just expect a prison sentence if he's found out. One would hope so, at any rate, although there's still many people who seem to think it's manly to refuse to take 'No' for an answer."

"I don't think that's truly why you turned against me so early in my story. And I know that you did, don't try to pretend otherwise. I'm supposed to be the hero but you never warmed to me, did you? You would've done much better to have invited Kashiwagi to stay instead of me. He was steadfast to the end, wasn't he? He pined away out of love for a woman he couldn't have and it killed him. Never was he capricious like me." For the first time, Genji's manners failed him and he sneered with contempt.

What he said about himself was true. Yet even more revolting to me was how ardently he would profess his undying affection to each woman in turn – a veritable flock of wives and mistresses and passing fancies – when the only thing genuine about his protestations was their insincerity. This was what I found most unsavoury in the end, not least because despite the passage of more than a thousand years since Genji had feigned love to disguise plain and passing lust, not much seemed to have changed with men in my eyes.

Therefore it wasn't so very odd that given the disdain my visitor voiced for Kashiwagi – who fell in love with a beauty at first sight and continued to adore her until his passion killed him – he didn't allude to the fact that the object of the young suitor's affection was the Third Princess, Genji's own wife.

The sacrificial offerings, the days spent poring over sacred texts in discussion with monks in his retirement years, these were how he wished to be remembered by me and by history. It pained him a great deal to recognize that exoneration was impossible now.

That last evening, when he knew I would retire to bed and finish the last few pages of his life, he had again become agitated and had pointed an accusing finger towards the driftwood sculpture of a cross that hung on the wall of the downstairs partition:

"Your own God, you go to him for comfort and for explanations. To pardon you and to give greater meaning to your life."

“Until only the other day Genji yes, this would’ve been true. But just recently I’ve come to see that if he exists as a merciful being – and since Covid I’m really not sure he does – then I’ve always lived outside his grace. In fact, you can take that thing down for me please. It doesn’t belong here anymore.”

The once-imperious guest meekly un-hooked the cross from its nail then without asking, took it out to the bin at the side of the house. It gave me no pleasure to see him brought so low, a Shining Prince no more. I’d needed him to be more than he was, so disillusionment was a thing we shared.

The crisis was over, for now at least. I’d familiarised myself with the early retirement package sent by email, deciding that accepting it represented my best worst option, and had made it known to my contacts I was now offering book-keeping services from home. Much was as it had been, although some of the modest luxuries I had taken for granted, like my bi-monthly pedicure, would have to be relinquished.

What was more doubtful was the identity of the person who was circling back to this repurposed existence: what hadn’t killed me over the past few years most definitely hadn’t made me stronger, only diminished my sense of self. Furthermore, I’d only myself to blame for lighting upon a most unpromising man in the hopes that he would bring some warmth, kindness and intimacy into my life, ultimately enduring again only familiar disappointments.

Elias phoned as I was taking the secateurs to the bougainvillea, the first time he’d done so in ages. Lockdown with his new girl had not been too much of a sacrifice it seemed and after the obligatory enquiries after my health he remembered to ask after my visitor. Had he now been able to repatriate to... where was it exactly that he came from originally? Elias’s curiosity was perfunctory, too little and too late, and I marvelled once again at the self-absorption of the young. The unconventional nature of my arrangement with Genji, as I had sketched it out to Elias some weeks previously, had likely only struck him as odd when he found himself describing it to someone else subsequently, maybe someone who’d pointed out how unlikely the whole accommodation had seemed.

I could hardly explain that Genji had died; Elias, naturally panic-stricken, would’ve had far too many questions given this particular moment in time. I simply reported that the visitor had gone on his way and the conversation turned to the new girl, whom I had yet to meet. I doubt that my son, or anyone else for that matter, gave even one second’s consideration to the Shining Prince, companion in my isolation, ever again.

The End