

The Highs and Lows of Barefoot Pleasure

*“Don’t it always seem to go,
that you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone.”*

Joni Mitchell

A sudden gust whooshed along the crowded platform and a long, white flash streaked to a hissing stop. A young group of friends spilled out of the burgeoning bullet train, laughing and stretching as best they could amid the undulating sea of limbs and faces. Each took deep breaths of the dry, dusty air before taking selfies by the ‘*Square Delight Station*’ sign, then donning dark glasses and paper dust masks. Looming in around them, countless, towering huddles of high-rise buildings gleamed in the shimmering heat of the city.

One of the group, a girl with a birthday kanji painted on her dust mask in sparkly, pink strokes, suddenly span around, pointing and gasping.

“OMG! Look! A BEE !!” How did that get out of the wildlife sanctuary?!”

A surly-browed boy stared at it for a moment then took a puff from the bamboo inhaler on the lanyard round his neck.

“I blame Ryo – he was stationed there last month, wasn’t he? And speaking of our conscripted friend, where *is* he? He said he’d meet us here! Don’t tell me he ran out of travel rations again!”

The birthday girl frowned.

“No, he’s – “

“Still at sea? What happened to the day’s leave he promised you after his Plastic Trawling tour? Some boyfriend! Fumiko, you deserve better!”

“It’s not like that, Haruto! It’s just the weather - the minute he landed, the Coastal Defence Corps moved him straight to Flood Management. It’s not his fault!”

She stared at him, and then at her feet, fidgeting with the string on her own inhaler.

One of the girls scowled at the boy, then tugged at Fumiko’s sleeve.

“Look! Look! I can see the end of the queue from here! Come on, come *on!*”

They all turned and squinted at the human snake disappearing over the distant hilltop.

“Why rush?” Haruto shrugged. “We’ll be in it for hours anyway.”

“I know, I’ve just been looking forward to today for *so* long.” Fumiko smiled, regardless.

“At least *you* lot get paid holiday leave, you lucky *akuto*” he grumbled. “We can’t all work at Brainbox Central – us desalination workers are treated like *unko*! Sometimes I hate conscription.”

“Aww, don’t be bitter, Haruto!” one of the girls chided. “It’s only a year, and it’s for the good of the planet. And Fumiko really slogged to get that Hydroponics job. And it’s her twenty-first! *And* we haven’t seen each other since Graduation! So, let’s just enjoy the day, ok?”

“Sorry, Fumiko.” Haruto mumbled. The birthday girl nodded and pulled on a sunhat.

“It’s ok, it’s just nerves talking. When my father came here for *his* 21st, he was so nervous he was sick in the queue!”

Haruto nodded.

“Well, I did the Hisakata Tower Observation Deck with my father’s cousin last year – the 350th floor? There were tethers and oxygen masks and everything, but *this* – this is more unnerving. The unknown, the once in a lifetime experience, y’know? So yeah, I may just up-chuck a little too, I warn you now.”

Fumiko gave a tiny squeal, shaking her head.

“Shh! Don’t even joke about it! They’ll arrest you if you do! Do you *know* how many Yen per square foot The Square is worth?”

One of the boys lifted a finger.

“Wait, WAIT! Haruto’s father has a *cousin*?! How was *that* allowed?!”

“It’s coz’ my uncle is seriously old,” Haruto shrugged. “Born before the ’35 Sole Child Law”.

“Wow... I can’t get my head around that...” the other boy gave a low whistle, then raised his arm again “WOAH, Fumiko, don’t trip over the sign there! Unghh... Does that say *two hours* to the weighbridge? *Please* tell me you all remembered to put your swimming costumes on under your clothes? And everyone brought enough water to pay with? I hope you didn’t bring that black-market water, H.? – that stuff is just naaaasty! You won’t get away with it, you know – I’ve heard they’re more anal about it than my mother on Deep Dusting Day!”

The queue slowly slithered its way up over the scrubby, bare hill and down into a broad, bowl-shaped dip with a small marquee at its centre. The clean, white canvas stood out against the stark, bare landscape; barren and brown, save for the black, ashen remains of summer wildfires. It was nothing at all like the old photo in her Grandmother’s album of the ‘Park’ - lush, green slopes dotted with blossoming cherry trees. She dismissed the thought of taking a photo herself – no point in making Jiji cry.

After an hour of shuffling and fanning, coughing and chattering, the group reached another sign. Its big, black letters declared,

Weighbridge checkpoint.

Wait time from here : 1 hour.

Place all belongings, shoes and clothing in baskets provided.

Collect baskets from second weighbridge after your visit.

Removal of any part of the attraction will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.’

None of them spoke for a whole minute, then Fumiko bit her lip and leaned close to one of the other girls.

“I’ve heard -” she paused, whispering, “that it can make you ... y’know... ‘excited’?” Her friend blushed, but grinned and whispered back.

“It’s ok – it may be a legal high of sorts, but I read that it’s *soundproofed* – like old public toilets used to be? And ...” she giggled “we all clubbed together for you to have a solo session, so feel free!”

Fumiko gasped, her widening eyes tearing up a little.

“Ohhh, you are such good friends! *Domo origato!* Thank you!”

The girl hugged her, then produced a thin tube from her pocket.

“Don’t hyperventilate, you’ll set off your asthma! Here, use this lip balm - you don’t want cracked lips spoiling your birthday. And calm your breathing before you get a dry mouth – I doubt any of us can afford to buy more water rations.”

Before long they reached another sign.

Payment checkpoint. Wait time from here : 10 minutes.

Entry fee : One litre of filtered water per person

Please enjoy The Square Delight responsibly and respectfully.

One by one the group carefully poured a pouch of water into the silver collecting funnel, each producing a delicate, musical ‘ting’ from a clacking turnstile. Finally, they all stood, silently smiling, beside the entrance to The Square Delight

One of the girls clasped Fumiko’s hands in her own, and whispered,

”Here we go! We’ve got a group pass – you ok waiting for your turn on your own?”

Fumiko nodded and waved them off, then clutched her stomach as a gloved guard approached and directed her inside to a cubicle.

The clothing check-in, the staff tugging her bangs to check for a wig, the silent frisking and even the embarrassment of the x-ray cavity scan all passed in a blur, save for the incongruously cheery music that played while she was obliged to pee. Fumiko distracted herself by wondering how many people had ever tried to smuggle out pieces of The Square.

Her daydream was abruptly interrupted by a faint rumbling. But there was no familiar wail of tremor sirens. Then she laughed aloud as she realised that it was her own body trembling.

Feeling self-conscious in her too-small swimsuit, Fumiko followed the guard, who was pointing her toward a final screen. This was it.

And finally, there before her, barely bigger than her tiny dorm apartment, and guarded by four solemn, gloved staff, was a perfect, *perfect* square of lush, green turf, its long, slim blades trembling in the temperature-controlled breeze. Her skin rose into goose-bumps, and Fumiko realised she was holding her breath. Never had she seen anything so beautiful – it was the exact same shade as the tiny Daruma wish dolls that her Grandmother bought her every year, and more vibrant than her mother’s heirloom, emerald kimono.

As she stood staring, the guards withdrew, but not before pointing at the CCTV cameras at every corner of the spotless tent walls.

The slender shoots swayed and waved, seeming to beckon her closer, and Fumiko stepped forward in a light-headed moment of longing that defied a lifetime of restraint.

As she stepped onto the Square, the soft, moist grass tickled the skin between her bare toes making her blush, and she pressed her fingers to her chest. Her heart was fluttering as wildly as it had during her very first private moments with Ryo.

She bit her lip and crouched, running her hands over the feathery fronds, then knelt and inhaled deeply. The scent washed over her like the air before a summer storm – almost like the hydroponics trays, but far earthier. Leaves, rain, mud, dirt, her Grandfather’s pottery and real soy beans from the ground, when she was very young. The wafting movements felt like the turf itself was breathing, panting, hungrily, lustily, desiring contact, drawing her down. She surrendered in an instant, stretching out her limbs into a tumbling, rolling, gasping sprawl, giddy with delight and groaning in sheer pleasure at the feel of a thousand tiny, damp fingers caressing her nearly bare skin. Hearing her own voice echoing back at her, Fumiko clapped her hand over her mouth, then remembered the soundproofing and giggled aloud, sighing and relishing the saturation of her senses, until – it seemed only moments later, a pinging sounded the end of her five precious minutes.

A tide of dismay engulfed her, and only the returning guards made her jump to her feet.

Bowing to the guard on the exit, she whispered.

“Thank you. I’m so glad I could do this. Such a shame that there are so few.”

The Guard nodded politely, then pointed at a poster by the door. Fumiko frowned as she read.

‘Save the Square Delight !

All citizens please take note - the Global Government have decided that each country can be adequately served by a single Square in each capital city, as running more is a prohibitive drain on dwindling resources and water rationing. Please sign below if you wish to respectfully protest this decision.’

Fumiko passed through the scanner and weigh station and quickly dressed. Taking a final, deep lungful of the delicious coolness, she sighed and stepped out into the arid heat. Her body felt heavier, somehow, like it used to after a sea swim, before they were declared unsafe.

No-one spoke as she re-joined her friends and they made their way back to the railway station. The group shared the water bottle around again, and as they neared the waiting throng on the station platform, the precious mouthful wetted Fumiko’s parched tongue, and was joined by a salty trickle that ran slowly down her cheek.