



THE UMBRELLA MYSTERY

Fiona Hack

Preview copy

THE **U** Fiona Hack
MBRELLA MYSTERY

First print 2020 (Dutch version)
Second print 2021 (English version)
Copyright © Fiona Hack

Cover design illustration Ingrid Friesen
Cover design Probeeld | Ambilicious

Interior design Probeeld | Ambilicious
Interior illustrations Ingrid Friesen

Translator Shala Alert
Final editing Kim Segers | Ambilicious
Chief editor Inanna van den Berg | Ambilicious
Copyright © 2021 Ambilicious, Breda (NL)

ISBN 978-94-93210-65-3 | NUR 280
www.ambilicious.nl

No part of this publication may be reproduced and/or made public by means of print, photocopy, microfilm, or any other means, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

THE UMBRELLA MYSTERY

With thanks to Shala Alert

The merchant ship Waterland is moored in the port of Tokyo, Japan. Marcus looks over the railing. The quay is crawling with people. Men are unloading cargo from many ships. Wagons with food and clean water are waiting to be loaded on board the ships.

"They look like ants," says his friend Mark. "We'll stay here for five days, then we'll sail back home. Tokyo is our last stop."

Marcus nods and sighs. He stares into the distance.

"Come on!" Mark slaps Marcus on the shoulder. "Dreams won't clean the deck any faster." That sets Marcus in motion. He wants nothing more than to look around the harbour when they finish.

"I want to buy something for Maggy," says Marcus.

"She will like that. There are plenty of shops here."

"I wrote her a letter yesterday, and I promised to bring her a gift from Japan. Maybe something she can wear on our wedding day."

"Then you have to get her something really special."

"I intend to," says Marcus. "Also, I must not forget to include the letter to her for the post collection."

"Let's keep working," says Mark. "We have a lot to do."

Marcus and Mark scrub the deck as if their lives

depend on it. When they finish, they go to their cabin to freshen up. Marcus puts on clean white trousers and a white sailor shirt with a dark blue border around the swagger collar. His sailor cap is just as bright a white as his blouse. He wears the white cap with dark blue brim with pride.

“Hurry up, Marcus!”

“I’m coming.”

They bump into Martin on the gangway. He is also allowed ashore. The three of them decide to have a look around the harbour.

“Which way shall we go?” Mark asks.

“No idea,” Marcus replies.

As they walk, they are careful not to be run over by the many carts and wagons.

“That way.” Marcus points in the direction of the food stalls. After all that hard work, he is hungry. They all want food, but they don’t understand the language. The Japanese characters on the signs are a set of black lines that seem to jumble together. They are surprised by the many colours and scents. People are eating meat or fish with spoonfuls of rice in bowls in their hands.

In a street-side cafe, where the cook prepares the food right in front of them, the friends point at what they like. Martin chooses rice with chicken. Mark and Marcus laugh at him when he doesn’t manage to put the delicious food in his mouth with his chopsticks. With a sullen face, a fat Japanese woman hands him a fork. Martin quickly empties his bowl. Mark tries sushi. And Marcus opts for omurice, an omelette with rice in it. The friends don’t feel like going back to the ship yet.

Marcus feels in his pocket. He has the money he has earned safely stored there for the best gift he can find for Maggy. Before he left with the ship, she told him she was pregnant. When he gets home, he will marry her. He has already found other work, no longer on the deep sea, but on a small ship. If he works on an inland vessel, he will not be away from home for more than a week at a time. Now it will take another six weeks before he gets home. He hasn't seen Maggy for six months and misses her very much. The friends browse through all the food stalls and souvenir shops until their feet hurt.

"I haven't been able to find anything to give to Maggy yet," says Marcus.

"Let's take a look here."

Martin and Marcus follow Mark, who enters an alley. It is quiet. A bit too quiet for their liking. As they walk further, the alley becomes narrower and quieter. A strange twilight overtakes them. It is not yet five in the afternoon, and nowhere near getting dark. They will never admit it if anyone were to ask them later, but they are starting to find it a bit scary.

"I don't see any shops here at all," Martin grumbles. "Let's go back."

"I'm getting thirsty," says Mark.

Marcus also prefers to return to the busy shopping street. But the moment they want to turn around, a door swings open. The sound of music and conviviality fills the alley. A Japanese girl in a floral kimono beckons them inside. They look at each other in surprise.

"Did you notice a door?" Mark asks.

"We probably just walked by it," Martin replies.

The Japanese girl says something they cannot understand. She smiles so sweetly that they decide to take a look.

"I'm really thirsty," says Martin, taking the lead.

Mark follows him. "Are you coming too, Marcus?" he shouts over his shoulder. Before Marcus can answer, he sees his friends step over the threshold into the cosy room. The Japanese girl closes the door behind them.

Marcus remains alone in the dim alley. His shoes feel as if they are glued to the ground. He couldn't take a step if he wanted to. It's as if there is a very heavy elephant sitting on his feet. He calls out, but no one answers. How could anyone hear me, Marcus thinks, that door seems to have melted into the wall. His knees buckle in fear. He tries to take a step, but his feet won't move. He bends over to take off his shoes when something catches his attention. Something is flashing behind him. At that moment, his feet feel as light as a feather. He turns around and cannot believe his eyes.

In the glow of the flashing light shining down the alley, he sees a shop selling all kinds of Japanese souvenirs. His heart leaps for joy.

He slowly walks to the well-stocked shop window. Curious, he looks at the bright yellow sign hanging above the window frame. That's weird, he thinks. I can read Japanese characters. Tanaka's Souvenirs, it says.

In the window, he sees a large porcelain vase with branches of flowering cherry blossoms painted on it. Marcus looks at it with admiration. People come from far and wide to celebrate the sakura trees. The flowering period only lasts two weeks. It signals spring

and a new beginning. Many Japanese couples love to get married under the cherry blossoms. Marcus would have liked that too. Unfortunately, he will not see a blooming cherry tree. It blooms in March and not in August. He cannot take the vase with him. It's way too heavy.

In addition, there is a beautiful painting of cherry blossom branches. Marcus examines it carefully. Too big, he decides. Then, a box of several colourful Japanese chopsticks. When the sticks are next to each other, you can clearly see that light pink blossoms of the cherry tree are painted on them. Beautiful, but too clumsy. He laughs when he thinks about how Martin tried to pick up some rice with the chopsticks. The grains flew in all directions. He cannot do that to Maggy. And to leave them in the cabinet where they would never see the light of day is also a shame.

Marcus is just about to give up when his gaze is drawn to an object on a shelf in the store. It is long, slim and snow white. Like Maggy's wedding dress might be. Marcus's eyes light up at the sight. It's as if the object is calling him. He cannot contain himself. His feet walk him to the door. His hand reaches for the doorknob and pushes the door open. Without any control over his body, he approaches the thing and picks it up.

"Good afternoon, sir!" A friendly voice behind him disturbs his thoughts.

Marcus jumps. He feels as if he was floating through space and is now landing on Earth again. "Good afternoon," he stammers. How strange, I can understand him, and he can understand me. "Are you Mr Tanaka?"

The cheerful little man bows his head in greeting. The



front of his head is bald, and the hair at the back is twisted and fastened to his head. He wears a gold-coloured kimono that is edged with a light pink fabric. Marcus notices that the Japanese cherry blossom can be seen on all objects in the shop. Even on Mr Tanaka's kimono, he recognises white and pale pink blossoms from the cherry tree. Marcus even seems to smell them. The fragrance fills him with a deep longing for home and for Maggy.

Mister Tanaka looks at him with his friendly face. "Yes, I am Mr Tanaka. Nice to meet you."

"What can you tell me about this object?" Marcus wants to hand the item over, but Mr Tanaka keeps his hands hidden in the sleeves of his kimono.

"This is something very special. It comes from the Meiji period. Emperor Meiji was given it as a child in 1860 to protect him from the sun. Nobody knows how, but it is said to have magic powers."

"A magic umbrella?" That makes Marcus laugh. "What's so wonderful about an umbrella? What miracles has this umbrella performed?" Mr Tanaka thinks hard, and Marcus grins. "I don't think it's a magic umbrella, Mr Tanaka, but I think it's a nice story. I want to buy it for my fiancée." Mr Tanaka bows again. Marcus follows him to the till and settles the bill.

"I'll pack it up for you, sir." From under the counter, Mr Tanaka pulls out two strings and places them on the counter at some distance from each other. He bends down again and comes up with a square brown cloth in his hands. He puts the cloth on the two strings. Marcus puts the umbrella carefully on the cloth. Without touching the umbrella, Mr Tanaka rolls it up in the

fabric with his little hands. Then he takes the two strings and makes a bow. Mr Tanaka's hands disappear back into the sleeves of his kimono. Marcus thanks him and walks out of the store with the package under his arm.

Behind him, Marcus hears the door being locked. What a strange little man that was, he thinks. A magic umbrella? Do not make me laugh. I cannot wait to tell Martin and Mark the story. He scans the wall across from Mr Tanaka's shop looking for the door through which his friends had disappeared. Did I see it wrong? He walks a little way down the alley. The door is nowhere to be seen.

Worried, he walks back to Mr Tanaka's shop. Everything is dark. He knocks on the window. No movement, no sound.

Suddenly it starts to rain. How is that possible, Marcus wonders. He looks up and sees the rain falling harder and harder. When he looks down the alley in the direction they came from, he sees the warm light of the sun. It seems that the rainy cloud is only above his head. His sailor uniform is getting wet. Without thinking about it, he unwraps the umbrella and opens it. The white rice paper that the umbrella is made of does not allow a drop of water to pass through. Perhaps that is the miraculous thing, Marcus thinks. He looks curiously at the inside of the umbrella. He immediately forgets his friends. He doesn't believe his eyes. A Japanese garden seems to have been created for him. The most beautiful garden he has ever seen. The grass couldn't be greener, the wisteria couldn't be bluer, and the cherry blossom couldn't be a more delicate pink. He sees rose bushes and peonies in colours he can-

not even name. In the distance he hears water flowing. Rising above these beautiful colours he sees a pagoda, seven floors high and towering above the tallest trees. This white building stands out sharply against the sea of colours. He sees someone on the top floor. Marcus moves the umbrella closer and closer to his nose to get the best possible view.

This is the perfect gift for Maggy. A branch of the cherry blossom from this garden. His hand stretches out. A flash of light follows. The rain is pouring down from the sky. The umbrella is collapsed on the street. An old lady scrambles to her feet next to the umbrella. She pulls the collar of her weathered coat closer to her neck. A look of recognition brings a broad smile to her wrinkled face. She walks deeper into the alley as fast as she can. The door of Mr Tanaka's store swings open to let the woman in. They fall into each other's arms, as if they haven't seen each other for many years. The door closes behind them, leaving the umbrella alone in the rain.