

## SUSHI LESSONS

By Edith Maxwell

*Can sushi mend a failing relationship? Nicky's bartender friend Kiki knows a thing or two about dealing with men troubles.*

The truly creative can always find more than one way to teach a lesson.

In the Yoshinoya *sushi-ya*, Nicky plucked the next small plate from the conveyor belt as it passed and set it on the stack of empties in front of her. The white porcelain held two pieces of *maguro* sushi. The rich red tuna melted in her mouth, the vinegary sweet rice was piquant on her tongue, and the chef had applied exactly the right-sized smear of sinus-clearing wasabi in between.

She winced when she glanced at Terrance's stack of plates—twice as high as hers—and the little dish of extra wasabi next to them. His Navy income as a seaman and her part-time paycheck from Business English Center were going to suffer from this splurge. Still, it was the anniversary of when they'd met two years earlier, and they'd taken the train into Tokyo to celebrate. Not that Yoshinoya was a fancy restaurant. Conveyor belt sushi places were the equivalent of McDonald's here. But it was all they could afford. She drained her glass of Kirin beer.

"Ter, we should learn to make sushi ourselves. How hard can it be?" She gazed up at her boyfriend, his legs way too long for these short stools. His big blue eyes, now-cropped blond hair, and luscious lips had made him a target for giggling schoolgirls wanting the apparent movie-star's autograph ever since he'd been stationed in Japan.

He raised a single pale eyebrow. "You always think you can do better. Go ahead and try."

She pressed her lips together as she signaled for the waiter to count their plates and give them their bill. They made their way toward the train station where they'd catch the Odakyu-sen back home.

"Five months, Nicky. Five months 'til I get out. You ever been to the Greek islands?"

"No, but I'd love to visit them."

“That’s going to be the first stop on my trip.” He sauntered with hands in pockets.

*MY trip?* Nicky wasn’t included?

“I want to see Sweden, too, and Egypt. You know, with my family’s history of heart issues, I plan to travel all over as soon as I’m discharged in case I don’t get a chance later.”

His father had died of a heart attack in his forties, but Terrance had been healthy ever since she met him. Nicky wanted to say, “But what about me? Don’t you want me to travel with you?” She kept her silence. It would only sound whiny, and he’d already given her his answer by not inviting her to be part of his grand plans.

She glanced up sharply to see him exchange a rakish smile with a young woman who looked maybe five years younger than Terrance’s—and Nicky’s—twenty-three. The girl wore a short tight skirt, knee-high boots, and heavy eye makeup.

Nicky knew if she said anything about his flirting with other women he would calmly protest, “Of course I’m with you, babe. Doesn’t mean I’m dead, does it?”

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“See you in the morning, babe.” Terrance planted a perfunctory kiss on Nicky’s lips late the next afternoon.

*Don’t call me babe.* She wasn’t quite sure when their passionate relationship had devolved into unfeeling pecks and oblique criticisms, at least on his part. It seemed sudden but must have been a gradual slide when she wasn’t paying attention.

She watched him bicycle off to the small Kamiseya naval base in the November near-twilight for his night shift, then returned to perusing the *Mainichi Daily*, one of the two English-language newspapers.

So Jimmy Carter had pulled it off, the first Deep South president to be elected since the Civil War. More power to him. It’d be good for the country to have a Democrat back in office, too.

Nicky didn’t have any English-conversation classes to teach on Wednesdays or Thursdays and she’d been wanting to hack back the *wisteria floribunda* plant in front of the little house they rented in the commuter town of Minami-rinkan. Without its leaves or the fragrant lavender-colored blossoms of the spring, the gnarled and twisted branches loomed ominously outside the front door.

Except it was impossible to tame the plant without pruners or loppers, which this rental cottage evidently didn’t supply. She settled for collecting the pendulous seed pods into a plastic shopping bag. One of them exploded with a puff of powder, releasing a round brown seed the size of a stone in the game of Go,

or as they called it here, *igo*.

Inside the house Nicky stared at the pods, barely seeing them. She'd left a budding career as a landscape architect in her home state of Indiana to follow her heart—that is, Terrance—to Japan. She was good at coaxing classes of businessmen to actually speak the language they'd studied the grammar of for so long, but her true love was plants. Researching growth patterns, shade and soil needs, varieties of colors, and more let her be creative in other people's gardens in a way teaching conversational English couldn't even begin to approach.

Sighing, she turned to the book on making sushi she'd picked up at the English-language bookstore on the way to the train the day before and began reading about the proportions of ingredients for the rice, which fish to buy, and how to slice it.

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Kiki-san poured more Asahi beer from the liter bottle into the small glass in front of Nicky where she perched on a bar stool that evening. Nicky had learned by now one didn't pour one's own drink in Japan. The tall bartender and proprietor set down a small dish of kimchi, the Korean spicy fermented cabbage that was a perfect bar snack. She added a pair of black enameled chopsticks, which in Japan always tapered to points. Nicky often walked down to Kiki's when Terrance worked night shift. She felt safe with a woman proprietor, knowing Kiki wouldn't let any local men harass her. Kiki thought it was entertaining that their names were so similar, even though she pronounced hers "kee-kee."

"*Arigatoo*." Nicky thanked her as she lifted the glass. "*Kampai*."

Kiki smiled through her heavy makeup. "*Kampai*. How are sings, Nicky?"

*How are things*. "They're okay."

The bartender peered at her. "What you mean, only okay? Terrance-san, he not treat you good, I sink."

"Sort of. It's nothing serious." Nicky had the urge to unburden herself to Kiki. She didn't have any women friends here and it was hard to be around only men all the time. Terrance, his Navy friends, her students. But she restrained herself. "I'm trying to learn how to make sushi."

"Good, good. You go *sakanaya* next door, ask *Obaa-san*. She teach you."

"Grandmother? Your grandmother works at the fish shop?"

Kiki threw her head back and laughed, but her red-dyed hair didn't budge. "No, just old lady."

"I'll go tomorrow." Nicky ate a bite of kimchi, then sucked in

air. “Man, Kiki, this batch is super hot. Way too spicy for me.”

“I know. I make it that way.”

“Terrance would love it,” Nicky said, fanning her open mouth. “He’s a Californian.”

Kiki leaned over the bar. “One time I put *gaidoku* in kimchi for bad man who, how you say, follow me all atime, call me all hours, don’t go away.”

“A stalker?” Nicky’s eyes went wide. “What’s *gaidoku*?”

“He never come back.” She slapped her hands together in a dusting motion. “I say, good riddance.”

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Nicky left Terrance sleeping the next morning and paid a visit to the fish shop. She passed Kiki’s bar, dark and locked with a sliding metal grate across the front that protected it until she opened at the end of the day.

Nicky had bought fresh fish at the *sakanaya* before but had never paid much attention to who was behind the glass case. Usually a young man had taken her yen. But sure enough, a bent-over little woman with a white headscarf tied over white hair and wearing a lab-type coat to match, stood at the back counter wielding a dangerous-looking knife. The young man was nowhere to be seen and Nicky was the only customer.

*Obaa-san* turned at the jangling of the bell on the door. “*Hai!*” she called out.

“*Ohayoo gozaimasu,*” Nicky greeted her. Strictly speaking it meant something like, “Early is, nicely,” but it was the morning greeting.

“*Ohayoo.*”

“*Ano, anata wa Igirisu o hanashimasu?*” Nicky thought that was right. The little particles that went between words often tripped her up.

“Yes-u, I speak-u Ing-gi-rish-u.”

Most shopkeepers in this area where so many American Navy personnel lived had at least one employee who spoke a bit of the language. It wasn’t often the older ones, though.

Nicky spoke slowly. “Kiki-san said you can teach me to make sushi. I want to learn.”

*Obaa-san* nodded, holding her hand up to hide her smile. “I teach. We start now?”

“Why not?”

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Nicky had never had a worse Thanksgiving.

“Can’t you ask for it off?” she’d pleaded with Terrance the week before. “It’s Thanksgiving, Ter.”

He'd shrugged. "Doesn't mean anything to me. I told Deser I'd take his shift. He's got kids and a wife."

All she could do was stare. Terrance had her, and he knew Thanksgiving was her favorite holiday. It was bad enough they couldn't get a turkey, and the only pumpkin pies available in the commissary were cheapo frozen ones. Now he was abandoning her, too. Because they weren't married, Nicky couldn't go on base without him, even if she'd wanted to attend the mess hall version of the family meal, which she didn't. And out here on the economy—as the Navy called anywhere off base—the third Thursday of November was just another work day. When had he stopped needing her? When had he stopped caring if she was happy or not? More to the point, why did she need him to need her? That was the hardest question to answer.

So she stayed home alone and made a new batch of sushi, her hurt hardening into resolve to be more creative in her search for happiness.

*Obaa-san*, who had said her name was Haruko Watanabe, had taught Nicky the correct proportions of vinegar and sugar to heat up and pour onto warm medium-grain rice. She'd showed Nicky how to pack a small log of the fragrant sticky rice into her left palm with her right index and middle fingers. She'd instructed how to mix the powdered wasabi with a little water into a smooth green paste, and how much to swipe across the log before topping it with raw fish.

The cutting of the fish Nicky left to the old woman. Whenever she walked in now, Haruko-san no longer covered her smile when she called out greetings. She always asked how many people Nicky was making sushi for. Her answer was never more than two, but the fish lady would nod and proceed to cut perfectly sized slices of tuna, salmon, octopus, and other offerings. Nicky sometimes purchased a few cooked shrimp, a half dozen slices of cooked eel already in its thick sweetened soy marinade, or pickled mackerel to go with the raw fish.

But sushi wasn't the only thing Nicky prepared that Thanksgiving.

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That evening found her in Kiki's bar again. "No, I want something stronger than beer tonight," she said when Kiki set the usual bottle of beer in front of Nicky. She needed real alcohol tonight.

"Whiskey?" the older woman asked as if she already knew the answer. She turned away and brought back a squat unopened bottle of Suntory. "You buy bottle, I keep here for you." Kiki smiled and

waved her hand toward the rows and rows of bottles in all stages of full and empty behind her, each labeled with a different name written in kanji, the Japanese version of Chinese characters.

Nicky took a deep breath. "Perfect."

"Mix-u?"

Nicky blinked at her. "What?"

"You want gingeru, supuraito, Coku?"

*Oh.* Kiki was asking if she wanted ginger ale, Sprite, or Coke to mix with her whiskey.

"No, thanks. Just ice." Nicky looked around. The place was devoid of other Americans tonight, and not that many locals, either, only one booth of red-faced men across the room.

Kiki set down a squat glass full of ice cubes and poured generously from the bottle. She uncapped a marker and wrote two characters on the label. "See? *Ni-ki*. Your bottle. It's means two spirits. *Ni ki*." She grinned.

"*Doomo*." Nicky took a sip. The whiskey warmed her all the way down.

"You don't look so good again. Wassa happening?" Kiki leaned both elbows on the bar.

"I might be going home soon."

"Man trouble?"

The whiskey emboldened her. "Terrance doesn't want me anymore. Maybe he's seeing someone else, maybe not. But if he isn't now, he will be soon."

"Thas-a bad."

Nicky nodded once. "Can I buy a jar of kimchi from you? I'm making him a special birthday dinner next week."

Kiki regarded her with tilted head. "I give to you tomorrow. We friends." She winked a heavily made-up eye. "But careful. Extra hot."

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On the first day of December Nicky let Terrance sleep as long as he wanted. It was his birthday, and by some quirk he didn't have to work again for two days. She'd bought an expensive selection of fish from Haruko-san and had prepared the rice. When Terrance had been on base last night, Nicky had taken the bag of wisteria pods across town and thrown it in a dumpster.

The man could have won the Guinness world record for Healthiest Man Alive, apart from his family's heart history, that is. He never caught even a cold. Maybe if he felt sick, he would realize he needed her to take care of him. She knew how toxic the saponin *wisterin* was. Six seeds, which she'd ground into a powder on Thanksgiving night, wouldn't kill him and shouldn't affect his

heart, either. On the other hand, he wouldn't feel at all well for at least a week. She'd be willing to stay in Japan until he got out of the Navy if their relationship was restored. But just in case, she'd also charged a one-way ticket home.

Now she mixed the seed powder into the dry wasabi and created the paste. Any taste the seeds had would be masked by the strong wasabi, as well as the flavored rice and the fish itself. She arranged more than a dozen pieces of assembled sushi in the round dish she'd bought and added a little pile of candied ginger. She also made two *nori maki* rolls, one with a generous dose of wasabi smeared next to the skinny spear of cucumber. She used the bamboo mat to wrap the thin crisp seaweed tight around the rice, then sliced it crosswise and arranged it on another plate. She set both dishes aside and scraped the rest of the wasabi into a little soy sauce dish. He always asked for extra when they ate out.

Nicky washed her hands and made a much smaller array for herself, all without wasabi. She spread a piece of classic indigo-and-white *ikat*, their sole tablecloth, on the small table. She laid out his plates and the wasabi, and her own, with a pair of chopsticks for her and a fork for him, plus the bottle of soy sauce and a little dish for each. It looked like a lot of food, but Terrance always awoke ravenous after night shift. She lit a fat scent-free candle and placed it on a small plate on the table.

After she set a pot of water on the stove to simmer for warming the little ceramic vases of sake she'd already filled, she placed two small sake cups on the table. It was nearly six o'clock and already dark outside. Maybe she should wake him.

Two strong arms encircled her waist from behind. "What's all this?" Terrance asked in a voice still husky from sleep.

Nicky eased out of his embrace and faced him, mustering a smile she hoped looked normal. "Happy birthday."

His face lit up. "I'm . . . speechless. Look at all this. You did learn to make sushi. Is it any good?"

He said that every time. She bit back her retort. "Are you ready to eat?"

"Let me just wash up. I'll be right back." He kissed the top of her head, which only came to his shoulder, and headed for the bathroom.

Nicky checked the table and snapped her fingers. She dished some of Kiki's kimchi into a bowl and set it at Terrance's place, too.

A minute later he was back, face washed and hair damp. After he sat opposite her, she poured sake for each of them and held up her cup.

“*Kampai*, babe,” he said.

She mentally gritted her teeth. “*Kampai*.” The warm rice wine was strong and just what she needed to get through this meal.

He picked up a piece of salmon sushi with his fingers and dabbed even more wasabi on top of the fish, exactly as she’d known he would. As he always did. He popped it into his mouth and swallowed, then downed three more pieces in succession. He finally focused on her separate plate.

“Is yours different somehow?”

“I have a canker sore brewing. Wasabi would kill me right now. So would kimchi. It’s all for you.” Nicky smiled. She refilled their sake cups and drained hers again. He hadn’t learned the protocol and did not do as Japanese do—fill your drinking companion’s glass.

He plowed through his meal as usual, alternating popping sushi into his mouth with forkfuls of kimchi. At one point he picked up a piece of *nori maki* and then set it down again. “Whoa. I think I’m eating too fast. I’m getting dizzy.”

*Poor thing*. Dizziness. She checked one expected symptom off her list.

“Maybe some nice spicy kimchi will fix it,” she suggested.

“Yeah.” He forked in another mouthful of kimchi. He clutched his stomach. “Shit.”

“What’s the matter?” Nicky tilted her head.

“Cramp. Shtomach . . . Shtomach . . . cramp. Got a cramp.”

“Take a deep breath. Sometimes that helps.” Impaired speech and intestinal cramps? Also symptoms.

He sat up straight. He inhaled and exhaled. “Yeah. Thanks, babe.” Spittle flew out with the gratitude.

She started to pour him more sake, but he covered the cup.

“No, I had ‘nuff.” He got a confused look on his face. “Nuff . . . stuff. Whassit called? Sha-key. Yeah, shhha key.”

Confusion. Another symptom. “You sound kind of funny, Terrance. Maybe you should go back to bed. I bought your favorite chocolate cake, but it’ll keep.”

“Don wanna wase all this ssuuushi.” He popped in the last piece.

“There you go. Nice job. Clean plate club,” Nicky said cheerily. She poured herself more sake and drained the cup of the now cool wine. The vase was empty, so she carried it to the stove, filled it from the bottle, and exchanged it in the pot for the full warm one.

When she turned back to the table, Terrance was on his feet, a blank look on his face. As she watched, he fell straight over



backward. His head whacked *thud* on the wooden floor. He lay still and limp.

*What?* Nicky rushed to his side. “Terrance!” Passing out was definitely not a symptom, not from only six seeds. She knelt next to his head. His eyes stared, but he didn’t see her. She couldn’t feel a pulse in his neck. Death wasn’t a symptom, either.

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Kiki glanced at Nicky’s rolling suitcase an hour later, at her jacket, at her shoulder purse slung across her chest, at her stuffed backpack. “So you leaving?”

“Yes. I, um, can’t take it anymore. I need to get back to the work I love.” Nicky was breathing hard, her words rushed and nervous.

“And maybe find good man who rubu you, too.”

*A good man who loves me?* “Maybe.”

“Terrance okay with you go?” The bartender raised her slivers of painted eyebrows.

Nicky shook her head once, slowly. She beckoned Kiki closer. “What did you put in that kimchi?” she asked in a raspy whisper.

“*Gaidoku.*” Kiki looked entirely satisfied with herself. “Poison.”

Nicky inhaled sharply. “But I only wanted to make him sick!”

Kiki looked around. She made a tamping motion with her hand. “Talk soft.”

“I’d already dosed his birthday dinner,” Nicky went on. “And his father died of a heart condition. Kiki, you killed him.” She stared at the woman, eyes wide, nostrils flared.

“We kill together. I guess he learn his lesson, yes? Now he not bother you.” She touched her nose with her index finger. “Me, I help you, Nicky.”

“But I didn’t ask for your help.”

“He not nice to you. I take care of business.” Kiki shrugged. “You leave him there or you call the fuzz?”

“I didn’t call anybody.” In fact, she’d left a note on the table for him. It was dated today but with four p.m. as the time. It said she was desperately homesick and was leaving on the next plane she could catch. It was a terrible thing to abandon his body, but there had been no saving him. He’d been dead as soon as he hit the floor. *Wisterin* alone would not have caused his death. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know what kind of *gaidoku* Kiki had added to the kimchi. The Navy had Terrance’s health records. They would assume he died of sudden heart failure on his twenty-fifth birthday.

After she’d hurriedly packed, Nicky had slipped out the back way in the darkness and didn’t think any neighbors had seen her.

She'd dropped the trash bag containing his dishes, fork, and anything else that had touched the *wisterin* in a dumpster behind Kiki's place before coming inside.

A new customer hailed Kiki from the other end of the bar.

She bowed to Nicky. "You take-a care, now. Write me postcard from America."

