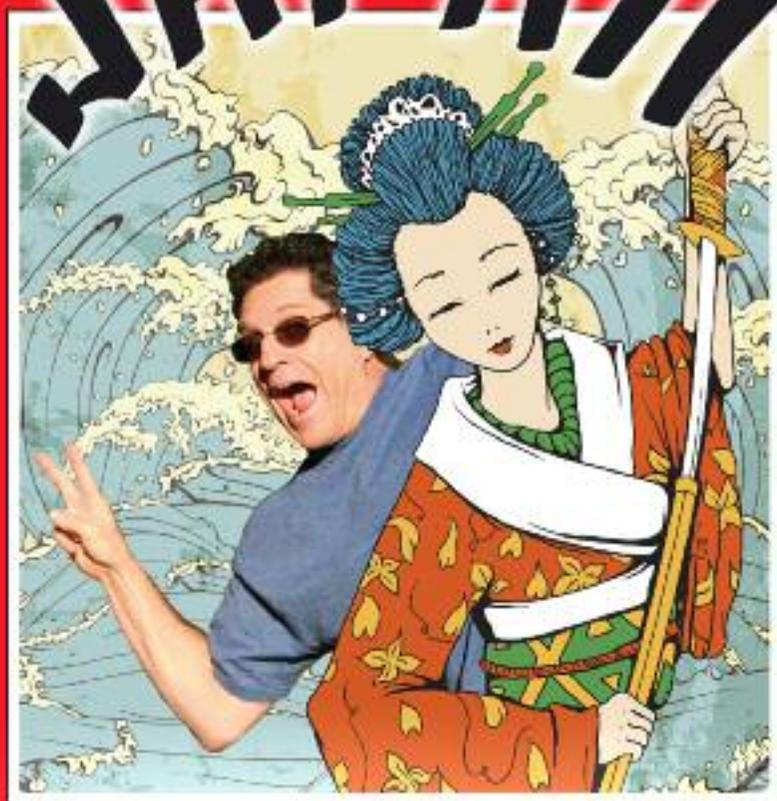


I Married JAPAN



Japan's hilarious journey
into one man's life

William M. Dean

CHAPTER 7

Dining with the Queen of England

My father was a man of few words, the majority of them shouted at the dinner table. Dinner conversation was punctuated with shotgun blasts of “Elbows off the table!”, “Mouth closed when you’re chewing!” and “Fork down between mouthfuls!”

I think that when my father married Mom, he thought he wanted to have kids. Then he had kids, which brought order and sanity to his world much in the same way a pet ape might, while throwing feces and pulling the limbs off relatives. Proper table manners was where he drew the line and attempted to restore order.

After we’d finish eating in silence, my siblings and I would sit rigidly in our chairs like POWs, waiting in silence for a lull in the conversation so that we could chime, “Thank-you-for-the-lovely-dinner-excuse-me-from-the-table-please” like Mary Poppins saying “supercalifragilisticexpialidocious,” but much faster. Occasionally, my father would become angry at our lack of sincerity and call us back to say it again, this time, with feeling. We’d spend about a week emoting like Hamlet, then slide back into our old routine.

Dinner times were not much fun for us, back then. I survived by receding into fantasy, imagining that I was MacGyver or James Bond strapped to a chair, enduring a grueling hour of torture. My brother developed a speech impediment and my sisters chose PCs instead of Macs. However, we all are well-mannered eaters.

Dining with the Queen of England

Since that time, I have come to see good table manners as a gift from my father. At formal dinners, I frequently notice others perplexed by seemingly extraneous utensils, confused by dining protocol and distracted by trying to eat politely. Meanwhile, for me, this is all familiar and reflexive. I am in my element, except for the lack of shouting.

I am much more lenient than Dad, but do find myself repeating his old phrases and trying to whip my kids' eating habits into shape. And whenever they ask "Why?" I answer, "You must always be prepared to dine with The Queen of England." It may well turn out that if I've taught them nothing else, I've taught them to hate Queen Elizabeth II, and possibly England, as well. If she ever did invite them for supper, they'd likely decline.

The last time we visited my wife's family in Japan, Noah was 10 and Rihana was 8. My Mom and Dad came with us on that trip, and I emphasized to the kids how strict Grampy was about table manners, so they should be on their best behavior. They rose to the occasion and the entire time Grampy was with us, I was very proud of their manners. It probably helped that there were no knives or forks, only chopsticks.

Grampy and Grammy returned home ahead of us and I breathed a sigh of relief thinking that my worries about their behavior at the table were over.

But, apparently, there was one rule I had neglected to mention.

* * *

While I was courting my Japanese wife, Junko, she was busy trying to avoid getting married to another man. Her family had arranged for her to meet and marry into a very wealthy branch of their own family. This is not uncommon in Japan: A family without heirs may adopt a full-grown outsider male to carry forward their legacy. Sometimes, to insure that he marries well, a bride is also arranged, in advance. In this case, a very rich uncle who'd had no children of his own, had chosen a young man he thought would make a suitable heir. That young man had agreed to be adopted, swapping his birth-family name for theirs. In their perfect world, my Junko would marry this man and the union would produce male

children so that the family name and fortune would be secure for another couple of generations.

Because of this, Junko was reluctant to tell her parents about me. Instead, for months, she made excuses to avoid the initial marriage-meeting until, like a prince on a white stallion, I rode in on my 1975 Tercel, scooped her up and swept her away to the extravagant comforts of my musty basement suite. This is an endless source of amusement for me and whenever we can't afford to vacation in the south of France or get a tooth filled I can't help but point to that decision and laugh. We have fun together like that. If she'd married that billionaire, I doubt they would have laughed so much about such things. So, no regrets, I'm sure.

One day, for reasons that are very Japanese, Junko's father invited us all along to a business meeting with The Rich Uncle. On the way to the meeting, we preempted a possible rude moment by telling the kids to stop referring to him as "The Rich Uncle," even though that's how everyone in the family refers to him. The Rich Uncle took us on a tour of one of his warehouses, then one of his factories and then treated us to lunch. For other very-Japanese reasons, the business portion of the meeting was almost imperceptible, took under a minute and amounted to no more than three sentences. Afterward, we were invited to visit his home for a midday snack.

As might be expected, The Rich Uncle's house was a mansion; large and modern, yet with traditional elements reminiscent of a Buddhist temple. Walking through the large wooden gate felt like entering a movie set. The surrounding garden was intricate and perfect, the foyer huge and appointed with marble and exotic hardwoods. His wife (who, interestingly, is always referred to as "The Rich Uncle's Wife" and never as "The Rich Aunt") led the way down a long hallway to a large, glass-walled room that looked out on the garden. We sat on silk cushions around a massive Teak table and were served tea and expensive baked goods on very fine china. To be honest, being more familiar with plywood and brick shelving and milk crate coffee tables, I am easily impressed and have no idea whether all the elements were indeed as expensive as they looked or were purchased on roll-back at Wal-Mart. Still, the setting was convincing.

Dining with the Queen of England

There was an extended silence as we all settled in and I was never more happy to have drilled fine dining etiquette into my children because it felt like we were actually about to dine with The Queen of England.

And that's when my darling daughter, Rihana, farted.

It was not one of those subtle, muffled farts that might have been mistaken for the rustling of clothing against silk cushions or the low resonance of a saucer scuffing across polished Teak. It was a tuba-esque performance more akin to a Mac truck giving birth to farm equipment.

All eyes turned toward Rihana.

She pointed to her brother. "It wasn't me!" she lied.

Fart, point and lie. A faux pas hat trick!

I felt my father turning over in his easy chair.



It is more difficult than you might think to act casual and snap photos of the snack food while trying to blend with the aristocracy.

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