

DO YOU KNOW ABOUT RAKU?

(By *M.S.Clary*)

“Moving here wasn't just my idea, you know.”

She's thrown a pile of books roughly down onto the sea-grass mat. Those mats were a hundred and ninety quid each as I recall. We bought two. Laughed a lot like a couple of kids that day. Must have been celebrating buying the house, or a rise, something like that. Had lunch at the Fox, probably drank too much, and no doubt she ate tuna.

“Hey, careful what you're doing with those books!” I say.

“Yeah, like one day you might actually pick one up and read it.”

She always knows what wounds me most. Though it's true they were bought it bulk, without much thought of content, to fill up the wall of book-shelves that came ready fitted in the barn conversion. It was those shelves that sold it to us. Well, mainly to me. I thought of the dinners we would give, how the guys would drift in here to smoke their cigars, while the women swapped recipes. Not that Shelley ever let anybody smoke inside the house. She's not so keen on cookery either.

“You know, I reckon we could sell some of this stuff.”

Now she's picked up a hand thrown pot. The potter had told us he was using some kind of ancient technique. “Do you know about raku?” he asked. It hadn't made sense to either of us, but it sounded good the way he told it. An investment, we thought. I hadn't hesitated to hand over three hundred notes. In those days, and not so long ago, I always had cash in my back-pocket for an impulsive sum like that. Didn't think twice about it. Looking at the pot now, with its nacreous interior and ashy streaks, I'm not even sure I like it.

“If you're looking for something to sell, sweetheart, just look inside your wardrobe. There must be at least a couple of hundred handbags.”

There's no response. I glance over – perhaps she didn't hear me. I think she's looking a little fatigued. Her hair is pulled back with a thin orange band and she's wearing a pair of old running shorts. I glance down, and reckon I'm not looking that great either.

Outside the big windows the sun is beating down. I love that view across the countryside. I hear the sound of Frank's tractor starting up in the field across the way. Before long, he'll be sitting up there wondering how long it will take before he can finish up and go for a beer. Once upon a time I'd have gone out to join him. We'd have a man to man about life and lawnmowers. Not sure I'd know what to say to him today.

“Anyway, if we're on the subject of wardrobes, what about those cashmere sweaters you bought in three different colours because you couldn't decide between navy blue and navy blue.”

So she had heard me. I seem to recall we had one of our first little contretemps that day. We were in town just before the banks went bust. Saw an exhibition, did a little shopping. It's true, I didn't need any more sweaters, I just liked the feel of the store. It was the way they piled the old leather suitcases around, just so. Something about the framed cigarette cards of old sportsmen on the walls and the old fashioned games like marbles on the counter. It was class. You knew you couldn't go wrong buying a couple of sweaters in a place like that.

“What about if we give ourselves a break from all this,” I say. Fix ourselves something cold to drink, and sit out in the shade for a while.” She doesn't even look up. “You've got to be joking. There's far too much to do in here.”

She carries on clearing the books and knick-knacks. She's taken down the photographs and the shelves are looking bare. Now she's holding up a painting, looking at it this way and that, like it's some old master. It's a water colour of Bliss Mill we bought one afternoon in a consignment shop soon after we moved in. It's not by anybody you'd know and it's a bit old fashioned if you want the truth, but it appealed to us both at the time.

“I suppose you'd like to sell that too,” I say. I remember we couldn't agree about the best place to hang it. She won, of course. Well, she's good at that sort of thing. Still, it surprises me when she says “No, I'd like to hold on to this one.”

We've nearly finished in this room. We'll be moving out in a few days, *moving on*, as they say now. It's for the best. Shelley's going to her sister's place for a while, but she says it's only temporary.

I'm not quite fixed up yet. I cross the room and pick up a couple of books from the floor. Dan Brown sits next to Dickens. She's right, I've read neither.

“Well, I need a break”, I say. “I'm going to send out a few more CV's”

I turn on the computer and sit staring at an empty screen for a while before opening up the job sites. I try to put in a few hours each day. It occurs to me that I can't hear Frank's tractor any more, so I reckon he's finished for the day. If I opened the window now, I'd be able to fill up my lungs with the sweetest smell of summer grass, just cut. I get this mad idea, that it's Frank and the sound of his tractor we're going to miss the most.

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