

A Letter/email from a Friend who is in Africa/Asia/America for a Year. This is their first Communication to you

Elizabeth Shove

I have been in prison for two years now. From time to time, I get an email from Benjy, my partner in crime. This one arrived yesterday.

To: Richard Walsh, Belmarsh Prison, Wing 32.

From: His excellency, Benjamin Patterson, British Ambassador to Japan

Dear Ricky

I arrived in Tokyo just over a week ago, and it has taken me all this time to get settled into the ambassador's residence. It turns out that I have a staff of five, and that I have inherited a fluffy white dog called Moji. As you know, I dislike dogs, especially ones that bark a lot, but I have no choice. Moji comes with the job.

I thought I'd write now while my first impressions are fresh. I don't know if you want these details, but I must start with the wallpaper in my bedroom. It is incredible. I find it a bit fussy, but I think you'd like it. It is hand-made and printed with peacocks and dragons in red and gold. I can't imagine how many hours it must have taken to produce – the very thought makes me feel a bit ashamed, so much effort and so much labour but for what? The details are astounding, as is the technique. The furniture is just as ornate. I've never liked this kind of pompous opulence, but I'm stuck with it for this year's posting.

Then there is the food. Gastronomic pretension is part of a diplomatic career but even so, I can't begin to describe what I'm eating - there are soups and noodles, fishes and meats and pastes and tastes I've never encountered before.

Last Tuesday lunchtime I was allowed to leave the building. I walked out into the cold Autumn air and wandered into a supermarket just down the road. I was astounded. There were packets of shrivelled mushrooms, dried black seaweed and aisles containing who knows what else: oyster sauces, wine vinegars and vegetables I'd never set eyes on before. I'd have been stumped if I had to cook dinner with any of these ingredients but fortunately, that's all taken care of. I guess you don't make your own meals either, so that's one more thing we have in common.

My days are very organised, perhaps as organised as yours. I have someone who manages my diary, and who briefs me, each morning, on who I'll be meeting in the day ahead. I know this is how it works, and I know this is what is expected of me, but to be honest, I don't really like this way of life. Of course, it is flattering but I can't escape the feeling of being cosseted and muffled up. I am nothing to the staff who work here: just a figurehead, a fleeting symbol of Britain, but not a person in my own right. Providing I maintain appearances and do what I'm told, no one, but no one, cares what I think.

When I started this letter, I thought I'd write to tell you about my new life in Tokyo, but there isn't much to say. It is true that I am free to travel around the city as a diplomat and as a representative of state, but what kind of freedom is that? I am boxed in by invisible walls of protocol and procedure. Even my trip to the supermarket attracted attention.

I am now sitting at a desk with clawed feet sinking into the thick cream carpet. Moji is staring at me impassively. He has seen many ambassadors come and go. He knows I'm not the first who finds it hard to navigate the cuisine or warm to the décor. And from the look in his amber eyes, he really doesn't care. He knows that each of his masters is here by chance and not by right.

How true that is. If things had worked out differently you could be living in these fancy surroundings in Tokyo, and I'd be the one languishing in jail. I often think about this, and about Lovelace's saying 'stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage'. Maybe our paths have not diverged so much after all – I don't know about you, Ricky, I know you have a hard life, but it comforts me to recognise that we are both confined by the past, and that we both have sentences to bear.

With fondest love

Benjy