

# Skirts in The Boardroom

But  
This  
Is  
**Tokyo!**

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# SKIRTS IN THE BOARDROOM

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**QUOTE**

“Here’s to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in square holes. The ones who see things differently. They’re not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can’t do is to ignore them. Because they change things. They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do.” – Apple’s ‘Think Different’ campaign

## CHAPTER: 1

“The night is still young, stay on for a bit more, Emi,” the long haired, vodka swirling young woman with a body to diet and die for, said, trying to make herself heard above the current Michael Jackson’s “This Is It” theme song craze in Tokyo. Really, this Michael Jackson was still everywhere, large as life and twice as popular dead or alive!

Then as her friend mouthed the words, “What did you just say?” for the third time, Sachi Ishikawa slid off her seat and grabbed Emi’s arm, mouthing back the words, “Look, let’s go outside for a while, I’ve just realized that I can’t compete with Michael Jackson in here! . Really, this guy is still hogging the music charts and almost every bar in Tokyo, as popular and controversial in death as in life, I wish we could be more like him!”

“You don’t really want that, do you?” Emi screamed above the metallic music. “Do you know what his life was like?”

“Why not?” Sachi screamed back. “At least his life and all its messiness was challenging and impacted a lot of people all over the world, for better or for worse!”

Outside, the nifty early autumn air raised the goose bumps on their bare arms and shoulders but it was refreshing after the smoke and heat of hundreds of gyrating human bodies inside one of Shibuya’s many hip disco bars.

“Oh, the fresh air feels so good,” Sachi said, breathing deeply and immediately contradicted herself by drawing out her favorite LV cigarette case and lighting up. Her hands shook with the nervous energy of a young and restless woman, let loose in Tokyo with the money and freedom of a growing pool of young, well educated and ambitious Japanese professional women.

“Look at you,” Emi laughed. “I thought you just said the fresh air is so good and here you are, lighting up at the drop of a coin! You really shouldn’t smoke so much, Sachi.”

“Says who? This is Tokyo and I work as hard as I play, I can do anything I want as long as I don’t break the law!” Sachi retorted good

naturedly. Really, Emi was still so earnest and fresh faced, there wasn't a mean bone in that flat chested, small waisted little girl body of hers.

She didn't smoke, drank only very moderately, didn't do the boyfriend hopping thing they all did and held a sane, down to earth job at a blue blooded bank in Tokyo, sometimes Sachi wondered what the hell she was doing hanging out with them.

The truth was that the fresh faced Emi reminded Sachi uncomfortably of her conservative roots back in Matsumoto where her mother still bowed the correct number of times and angle, according to the rank and closeness of her visitor. Her father, Michio Ishikawa, lived his life very correctly as required by the city office bureaucracy he had been working for almost his entire adult life, he was truly a firm believer of Japan's employment for life rhetoric.

Sometimes Sachi pitied Michio, who had to submit himself daily at the city office to the demanding taxpayers who paid his salary and when he returned home, he had to hand himself over to his quietly domineering wife.

In fact, Sachi wanted to laugh whenever she read books or documentaries by Western writers and "experts" of Japanese society portraying Japanese women as submissive, demure extensions of their men folk who walked at least three shuffling steps behind. But then who could blame them? Look at her mother, for instance, no one would imagine that behind that soft, demure face and sweet, gentle nature lurked a woman, hard as nails and twice as astute, who controlled the family's purse strings with iron clad fists and could quell her supposedly superior husband with just one silent, reproachful look?

And then there was the money issue, how many Western writers lamenting Japanese women's second class status really know about "salary men" like her father who dutifully handed over his whole pay packet every month to her mother and waited for her to dole out his "lunch and pocket money?"

Sachi would never forget the day she saw her father stuffing a wad of 10,000 yen notes behind a picture and warning her not to tell her mother about it. Even at 12 years old, she could already empathise

with him for having to hide any additional money he made just to have some economic independence from his wife! Of course, he lied about his annual bonuses and held back a little of his hard earned money for himself. Sachi remembered the fun she had, being a willing accomplice of these domestic scams.

Michiko Ishikawa ruled the family with a silken glove, she seldom raised her voice but, somehow, it was still understood that her word was law in the house. On weekends, she would join the league of housewives who needed to distress from the week of hard homemaking and throw the children at their overworked, exhausted husbands to entertain with compulsory trips to the zoo, baseball, soccer games, fishing trips or Disneyland and amusement parks if there were any, just to keep them away from their stressed out mothers.

Sachi started off by pitying her father and his weekend duties because her mother had her weekends but her exhausted, overworked father couldn't even sleep in on a Sunday and never seemed to have any time off for himself! But as she grew older, Sachi realized the wisdom of such weekend interactions with her father because it was the only time they actually saw each other.

Michio, like most of "salary men fathers" all over the country left home no later than 7 am each morning before their children were up and often came home late at night, especially on closing of accounts seasons, long after they had gone to bed. Sometimes Sachi could go for weeks without seeing Michio and if not for these enforced weekend bonding, Sachi was sure she would never even know her own father.

The weekend trips started as soon as she was old enough to ride the toy horses in the park and carry plastic pails and spades to dig for imaginary crabs and shells in between building doddering sand castles at the nearby beach under the bored supervision of her chain smoking, newspaper wielding father. Michio had strict instructions never to smoke in front of his daughter as the smoke was hazardous to a child of that age but who was to know or tell on him so he whiled away the time answering Sachi's endless questions absent mindedly while he lit up. That was till Sachi grew old enough to tell on him and then the smoking had to stop abruptly

but was replaced by something infinitely more rewarding and powerful.

By the time she was 8 years old, Sachi had become a friend, companion and useful ally for Michio against her mother and no longer just a weekend duty he had to endure or face the cold and reproachful silence of his wife. They began to actually have fun pitching with the other father and children teams at a nearby field reserved for predominantly weekend amateur baseball in a nation obsessed with the game. Some weekends, Sachi and her father trudged down to the mammoth Arakawa river to spend hours hunched over their fishing rods and discussed anything from his work and clients to her studies at school and at least one good therapeutic session to bitch about the person they called the Minister of Finance and Home Affairs, the woman of the house, Michiko Ishikawa.

One day, their conversation took on a more serious tone as Sachi asked her father a question that had been bothering her recently, what was she going to do with her life? She was just 12 years old and already being pushed unceremoniously into punishing tuition classes after school to prepare for the harsh entrance exams into the best *jyuku* or cram schools in the area.

The Ishikawas did not have a son and Michiko was determined that her only child would get into the best cram school in the area so she could hold her head up high among the neighbors who either had sons to carry on the family name or had children already proudly ensconced in the best schools and *jyukus*. So Sachi was pushed even harder than any of her peers and she resented losing her precious weekend outings with her father to more tuition classes which wore her out even before the weekend was over.

One day she heard her parents fighting over her punishing weekend study schedule and it was the first time she had ever seen Michio so angry.

“Everyday after school, Sachi is already balancing piano lessons with more tuition in math and science and now even weekends, you are insisting she goes to cram schools to prepare her for THE cram school you want her to enter!” Michio was shouting. “Really, Michiko, do you know how many children in Japan are committing suicide because they just cannot cope with their parents’ demands on them? Do you want to

push our only child to that?”

“I don’t know why you are so angry and shouting at me like that, Michio! All I’ve ever done is for the good of this family!”

“Yes, and it’s good for Sachi to be pushed beyond her endurance just so that you can tell the neighbors that your daughter got into the best jyuku in this area? I won’t accept every weekend in cram school, Michiko!”

When Sachi’s mother saw that her husband had dug his heels in for once and would not budge, she reluctantly agreed to a compromise and Sachi’s outings with her father were thankfully restored, at least every other weekend.

The young Sachi could not understand her mother and as she grew older, the complexities of Michiko’s mind became even more perplexing.

“Why is it, father, that Mother fights so hard for me to go to the best cram schools, the best high schools and now is fighting for me to get into the best universities and then she tells me it’s all right to get a good job after graduation for the main purpose of finding a good husband after which I can quit my job and spend the rest of my life caring for my husband and children!” she confided in her father on one of their fishing trips. “She never asks me if that is what I want!”

“It’s almost as if all that hard work and money spent on my education is just to be in the right place at the right time to find a good husband and nothing more! Can you see any sense in that?”

“I guess to your mother, there is nothing wrong with this mindset because she too walked the same route as her mother before her. Do you know, she was a Waseda University graduate and working in a bank when she met me? When we got married, it just seemed so natural for her to resign from her job and stay at home without a thought about whether she was wasting a perfectly good education in finance. If she had wanted to continue working I would never have stopped her but I couldn’t insist otherwise her family would think that I was reluctant to fulfill my duty to provide for my wife and wanted her to bring home a pay packet as well!”

“Oh my God, did Mother really graduate from Waseda University? Do you know how many students, myself included, want to get in there?”

Looking at her now, no one would believe she once graced the blue blooded halls of Waseda University!”

Sachi shuddered as she thought of the prospect of becoming like her mother and continued, “No father, I would much rather be a career woman and I mean a career woman and not an office tea and coffee lady many female university graduates seem satisfied to be and even if I scare off the men with what Mother calls my “unfeminine ambitions,” so be it!”

“You can be anything you want, Sachi chan, provided you work for it, I am not the kind of father to clip your wings. But you will have to fight a system that does not place women in a very high priority for long term careers, a system you can’t really blame because women like your mother themselves have encouraged it as their desired role in society.”

Sachi looked at her father and her eyes shone with love for him, unlike other fathers who would have gladly relinquished their roles of weekend child minders, Michio had actually fought to maintain the status quo of their weekend bonding. He really cared about her and was no absentee father, like those of so many of her friends and Sachi decided this alone would make her different, for good or for bad.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Emi’s voice cut into Sachi’s mind, awash with nostalgic memories of her childhood and growing up years in Matsumoto. “You have been standing there with that scowl on your face for a long time, I’ve been to the ladies’ room and back and you’re still here with that scowl! What on earth are you thinking of?”

“Just thinking of my father and how much I miss him and those innocent childhood days when he was the center of my life!” Sachi replied and then she let out a scream as the cigarette she had been holding burnt to the quick and scorched her fingers.

The moment was broken, someone opened the door of the bar and a blast of music drenched them like a sudden rain shower and Sachi shouted above the din, “Come on let’s get back in there!”

## CHAPTER: 2

It was six am and a few streaks of dawn light had just started to brighten the sky over Tokyo. In a small but cozy apartment in upmarket Shibuya, a kinky pink alarm clock which had been set for that unearthly hour, as always, on week days released its loud, relentless squawking that was fit to wake the dead. There was a shuffle and a golden brown mop of curly hair on the pillow a few feet away moved and groaned. A hand reached out to fling the offending object across the room but the alarm clock had become immune to such daily assault and continued to ring indignantly, undeterred and louder than ever, as if to protest its abuse.

After a while, Suzue Tanaka, the owner of the golden brown mop of curly hair, gave up and padded across the room to retrieve what she called her daily morning bully. God, how she hated having to get up each morning almost at the crack of dawn and some days she even wondered why she didn't give up the struggle and just get married and be a home maker, that way her life would not be controlled by pink alarm clocks and "must have, can't lose" clients who set tight deadlines to punish and terrorize their agencies.

Suzue had studied communications and upon graduation joined a major advertising agency in Tokyo, exchanging her comfortable home in the spacious Kyushu countryside for a small 1DK apartment to take the job. Her family and friends waited for her to find a husband from the pool of energetic, attractive young men she worked with and announce her resignation but Suzue had disappointed them because nine years into her job she was still there, steadily climbing from a junior accounts executive to her current position of senior accounts director. Recently, her massive contributions to the company and large pool of clients had even gained her a place in the boardroom among the poker face "corporate suits" who obviously didn't like a skirt in their midst.

An enviable corporate position and impressive remuneration package plus the acquisition of a beautiful apartment in trendy Shibuya later, Suzue's mother was bought over but her grandmother was still not convinced that this was how a Japanese woman should live her life,