

EXPECTATION



Tying the knot: Crown Prince Naruhito and his princess bride in traditional dress during their 1993 wedding ceremony.

Behind the chrysanthemum curtain

She has no past, no passport; every move she makes is monitored by the omnipotent palace officials. And failing to produce a son made Princess Masako a royal outcast. By **Ben Hills**.

The Men in Black came for her at 6.30 on a dreary Tokyo morning, hardly an auspicious start to what was supposed to be the happiest day of a woman's life. Nor had the weather gods smiled – the *tsuyu* season, the “plum rains” which coincide with the ripening of the fruit, had arrived that summer the earliest anyone could remember. The two palace chamberlains, in their long, fusty, black dress coats, unfurled black umbrellas as they climbed out of the black limousine. The chauffeur in his brass-buttoned jacket sat rigidly gripping the steering wheel with his white-gloved hands. The police motorcycle escort dismounted and stood stiffly to attention. The scene looked to me more like a state funeral than the royal wedding we had been waiting for. The Owada family, on whom the cortege had come to call, live in a bunker-like, rain-stained, ferro-concrete mansion in what is normally a quiet little backstreet in the well-heeled suburb of Meguro, lined with maple trees and azalea hedges. But on that June morning in 1993 it was the bustling epicentre of the Japanese media world.

Crammed into a small parking area opposite the house, and bristling with lenses and microphones, was a battalion of some 400 reporters, photographers and news cameramen from all the major national newspapers, radio stations and TV networks.

Why the frenzy? At the age of 33, Japan's mild-mannered Naruhito Hironomiya, heir apparent to the world's most ancient continuous monarchy, was getting married. He was the oldest unwed crown prince in the country's history, and his parents had begun to despair that he would ever find a bride and ensure the dynasty continued. But at last, after more than seven years of rejections, he had persuaded the woman he loved to tie the knot. Masako Owada, a strong-minded career woman, graduate of Harvard and speaker of six languages, had reluctantly succumbed to the pressure, though not with any obvious enthusiasm. "If I can be of support to you, I would like to humbly accept," was the strange, stilted way in which she finally accepted his proposal. For his part, the prince, when the engagement was announced, declared: "I will do everything in my power to protect you." That ominous nuance was not remarked on until much later.

TO THE WESTERN OBSERVER – AND TO MANY Japanese of her generation – this brave, or foolhardy, woman was about to give up not just her career but her family, her friends, her future and, some would say, even the 20th century. When she crossed the palace moat she would enter a secretive world of oppressive protocol and arcane religious ritual, a medieval imperial court where she would be required to bow at an angle of precisely 60 degrees whenever she met the in-laws, and to address her husband (in public, at any rate) as "Mr East Palace". Her only role in life would be to play the part of a demure and deferential consort mincing along three paces behind her husband; her only task to produce a son and heir to the Chrysanthemum Throne. Her every move would be monitored, her every public word scripted by the Men in Black – officials of the Kunaicho, the Imperial Household Agency, the officious bureaucracy which controls the lives of Japan's royals. What she would go through over the long years ahead would make Princess Diana's ordeal look like a picnic.

In Meguro, the bunker door opened. The head of the besieged household emerged, a distinguished-looking gentleman of the old school with grey, receding hair, owlish eye-glasses and a perpetually pained expression. His name was Hisashi Owada and he was one of Japan's most powerful mandarins, the head of Gaimusho, the foreign affairs ministry. He stepped into the street, and bowed to the two emissaries as raindrops speckled his spectacles.

It was not, of course, the father that the media and the palace officials had come to see this drizzling dawn, but his daughter, Masako. The crowd surged, the cameras went kerchunka-chunk, the small crowd of mainly middle-aged mums and dads waved little red-and-white rising sun flags. She emerged, her thick black hair bobbed, a nervous smile flickering across her face, immaculately turned out in an aquamarine outfit with a matching hat and a strand of pearls around her neck – the first of four costumes she would wear



before this day was done. "Masako-sama" cried the crowd, clapping, already giving her the royal honorific which would attach to her name.

Her mother, Yumiko, in a cream suit with her hair drawn back in a chignon, stepped into the street to bid her farewell, followed by Masako's younger twin sisters, twentysomethings Setsuko and Reiko. Her mother's parting words sounded to some more like a general dispatching his troops into battle than a mother wishing her daughter a happy married life. "Please take care of yourself and do your utmost for your country," she exhorted Masako.

"I feel a mixture of emotions," her father lectured reporters. "I hope she will gallantly fulfil the duties which come with being a public figure." Then, almost as an afterthought, he added, "And, as a parent who is giving his daughter away, I want her to be happy."

From that day on, Masako ceased to be part of the Owada family – her name was expunged from the official family register – and she became a member of the family of Japan's reigning emperor, the ailing Akihito, the 125th in the imperial lineage. As a member of the royal family, she would not have the right to vote nor even a surname any more, let alone those other essentials of modern life: a passport, credit card, health insurance or a car. There would be no public record of her existence. It could be months, or even years if the precedent of her new mother-in-law was anything to go by, before she was allowed to see her relatives again. And unlike Charles and Diana, there would be no way out – separation and divorce are unthinkable for Japan's royals.

The previous Christmas she had written her family a desperately sad little card, decorated with holly, which showed quite clearly that Masako had more than an inkling of what she was letting herself in for:

Dear Father and Mother, Sorry for making you worry so much about me this year, but with

Happy days: a formal portrait of Crown Prince Naruhito and his bride-to-be before their marriage.

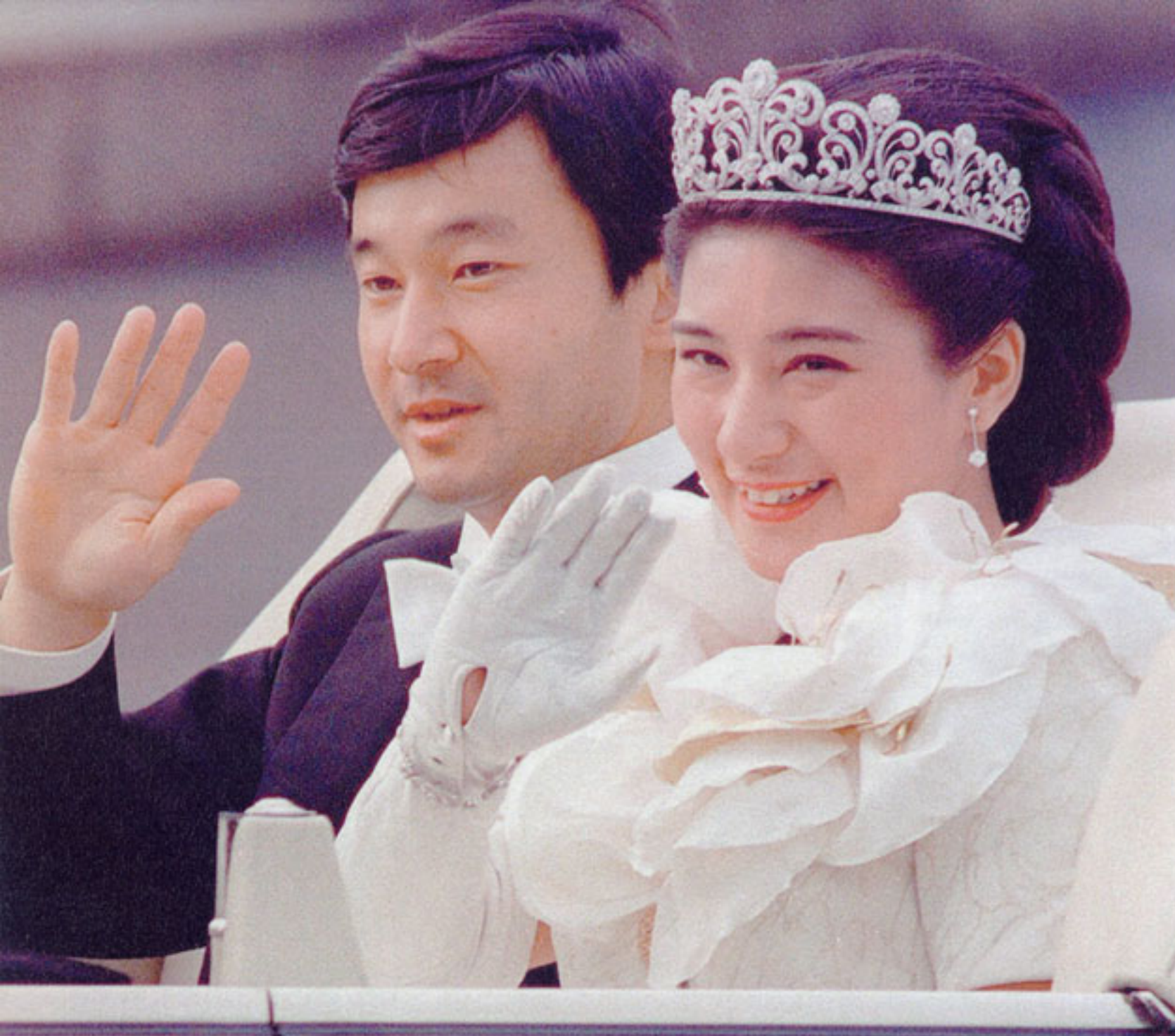
Masako entered a secretive world of oppressive protocol, her only role to play the part of a demure consort; her only task to produce a son and heir.

your support I was able to think it through and make the right step towards a new life. This Christmas and New Year may be the last we will be able to spend together. I really appreciate it that you raised me all these years in such a warm and happy family. Tough times are waiting for us, but I hope we get through.

IN THE FIRST FIVE YEARS OF MARRIAGE, THE globetrotting former diplomat Masako got to visit the VIP departure lounge at Tokyo's international airport just twice. On both occasions it was for trips to the Middle East – to countries where the influence of women on public affairs is even less than in Japan.

It did not take long for the racier magazines to put two and two together: they began speculating that Masako had been "grounded" until she produced an heir. A comparison was made with Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko who, when they were crown prince and princess, had visited 37 countries. Naruhito's younger brother Prince Akishino and sister-in-law Kiko, having produced the requisite child within two years of their wedding, were travelling abroad more often; so even was young sister Sayako. The household did nothing to dispel the story, and years later, when he resigned, Toshio Yuasa, grand steward of the imperial household, confirmed the gossip was true. "It was painful not to be able to meet the wishes of their majesties regarding overseas trips," he said. "I believe my predecessors, too, naturally became cautious due to hopes for the pregnancy of Her Majesty."

Few, if any, countries have been faced with the royal succession crisis that confronted Japan in 1993 when Crown Prince Naruhito finally married Masako. Seven girls, but not a single boy, had been born into the imperial family since Akishino was born in 1965. The imperial family was down to its last two "breeding pairs" – the newlyweds, and Akishino, next in



line to the throne after his brother, and his wife. If no boy was produced, and unless the rules were changed, the 2600-year-old Japanese imperial dynasty would come to an end.

There were four other males in the line of succession, but all were too old for children. So – until the fortuitous arrival of a baby prince last month to Akishino and his wife – there was extreme pressure on Naruhito and Masako. From day one, the media had been speculating about an heir. In fact, even before the marriage, at the press conference to announce their engagement, they were asked about their plans for a family. Naruhito coyly replied, “Let’s say it’s up to the stork.” Masako then revealed they had rehearsed their answer to that question before the press conference. She had urged her eager royal groom-to-be not to blurt out what he had told her in private – that he wanted “enough children to form an orchestra”.

But it was not to be that easy. For a start, like an increasing number of Japanese couples, they were marrying rather late. Naruhito was 33, Masako would turn 30 at the end of the year. As well, just imagine the difficulty of achieving intimacy while surrounded by prying courtesans, and in the full glare of an expectant media. Rihachi Iizuka, a fertility specialist at Keio University, was quoted as saying: “Being a wife in the imperial family has got to be the number one cause of stress. That’s why caged animals like monkeys and pandas in zoos don’t have as many babies as the ones out in the wild.” One year became two, and two became three. “Third Year Without Pregnancy – Masako’s Crucial Year”, blared a women’s magazine bold enough to give the couple a deadline. The prince pleaded with the media to stop badgering them: “The stork needs some peace and quiet.”

HIS COLLEAGUES, STAFF AND STUDENTS AT Tokyo University’s elite medical school called him simply *sensei*, master. But his patients and the public at large came to know him as something far grander, “The Hand of God”. Professor Osamu Tsutsumi, a solid, square-jawed man in his 50s, is one of Japan’s leading obstetricians and gynaecologists, a world-renowned scientist with a book and scores of learned papers to his name. More importantly, at his university clinic he was one of the pioneers in Japan of the technique of in-vitro fertilisation, more popularly, if inaccurately, known as test-tube baby-making. By the summer of 2000, Masako and Naruhito must have been despairing of ever having one child, let alone an “orchestra”. Seven years of marriage had resulted only in the heartbreak of a failed pregnancy the year before.

Akihito and Michiko were said to be “gravely concerned”, not only as parents, but as custodians of the ancient dynasty which now faced an unprecedented crisis. It was time to call in the experts.

Some time in the summer of 2000 the professor began clandestinely visiting the East Palace to begin his consultations, usually at night when he was less likely to be spotted by the ever-watchful media. There was a low-key reception for him at the palace hospital at which he took everyone aback by boasting: “One day in this hospital I am looking forward to the crown princess having a baby.”

In March 2001, when Masako had already begun a cycle of fertility treatment, Tsutsumi’s appointment was officially announced. The Kunaicho did later refer obliquely to “hormone treatment” but if anyone put two and two together – that preparations were

Right royals: the prince and his bride wave during the parade after their ceremony in Tokyo.

“Being a wife in the imperial family has got to be the number one cause of stress. That’s why caged animals don’t have as many babies as ones in the wild.”

being made for the birth of a child who could become the world’s first test-tube emperor – no one published it, at least not in Japan, and not until much later.

Round about this time, curious reporters noticed that Masako had stopped playing tennis and riding horses. On April 16, Kiyoshi Furukawa, grand chamberlain of the crown prince’s household, called a press conference to announce that Masako was “showing signs” of pregnancy. One hundred reporters reached for their mobile phones, and TV stations broke into their normal programming with the news. A month later it was official: the princess was in her third month of pregnancy and the baby was expected towards the end of the year.

Masako gave up most of her royal duties for those anxious months, staying in seclusion at the palace, attended by Tsutsumi and her other physicians. And, of course, she was not allowed to neglect the obscure ceremonies that attend a royal birth. In the fifth month of her pregnancy, on the so-called Day of the Dog, she was swathed in a traditional broad white ceremonial *obi* to ensure a safe pregnancy and a labour as easy as a bitch’s is supposed to be. In her ninth month a messenger arrived from the palace bearing a pinewood box decorated with gilt cranes and pine trees. Inside was another special *obi*, a ceremonial four-metre-long crimson and white silk sash, which had been blessed at the three Shinto shrines in the palace grounds. Her chief lady-in-waiting wrapped it around Masako’s waist, leaving Naruhito, dressed in a morning coat, to tie the knot. This time the magic worked – the pregnancy went like clockwork, although, as often happens with a first child, the birth was a couple of weeks late.

On December 1, 2001, a cry from the delivery room of the hospital in the imperial palace grounds heralded the baby’s arrival. It was a girl, 3.2 kilograms and 49.6 centimetres long, announced the palace. The birth had been “relatively easy”, with no surgical intervention. Mother and daughter were doing well. The Owada family visited them in hospital. Masako was later to say that the baby “had a placid character very much like that of [her father]”.

On December 7, three scholars decided on a name for the child, which Emperor Akihito approved and wrote with black brushstrokes on a sheet of paper to be placed on the baby’s pillow. The little girl was to be called Aiko – the Chinese *kanji* characters stand for “love” and “child”. A floral emblem was chosen for her – the white azalea, symbolising a pure heart.

The baby celebrations continued for months and marked a new high point in Masako’s popularity with the public. But as time passed and even the women’s magazines tired of baby news, the doubts began to surface. Aiko might have been welcomed with due pomp and circumstance into the imperial family, but everyone understood that she could never, at least under the existing inheritance laws, accede to the throne. There was still no heir.

AT THE END OF 2002 – AFTER MANY requests to travel abroad had been rejected by the Kunaicho – Masako and Naruhito were allowed a week in Australia and New Zealand. That trip to Australia, we now know, was to be her last overseas sojourn for at least three years, and perhaps the last time



she would feel truly relaxed and happy. The prince still remembered Australia fondly from his home-stay nearly 20 years before, and had stayed in touch with some of his Australian friends. No doubt he chatted to Masako about his schoolboy pranks – disappearing from a farewell dinner at Queenscliff to play pool, a forbidden game of golf. They went to Sydney's Taronga Zoo where they were photographed cuddling a wombat, laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, shook hands with lines of officials – and found time to catch up with some old friends.

Colin Harper, who had hosted the young prince in Melbourne, received a phone call from the Japanese embassy to say the prince and princess would love to see him, and he flew up to Canberra for tea and cake with them at the Hyatt Hotel. The couple were animated and cheerful as they chatted – Masako he found to be a “charming young woman”, showing no sign of the strain she had been under.

Back in Tokyo, pressure was intensifying on Masako to undergo a new round of IVF, and relations with the Kunaicho had not improved. Magazines began carrying articles quoting palace staff making petty complaints about Masako – she made them stay up late ironing her clothes, she would ask for ramen noodles or a peeled apple at one in the morning, she “raises her high-pitched voice and gets angry with staff”. More seriously, there had been a complete breakdown in relations between Masako and the in-laws – Empress Michiko was said to be nagging her to try for a boy.

Akira Hashimoto, a royal-watcher and friend of Akihito, says the relationship had deteriorated to such an extent that the only time Masako and Naruhito now saw his parents was for official receptions, when they stood “like pillars of ice” in the imperial presence.

Heir supply: the birth of Prince Hasahito (above left, with his mother, Princess Kiko) in September this year may take the pressure off Masako (above right), pictured with daughter Aiko at Tokyo Disneyland in March this year.

It was a shocking breach of protocol for the prince to show his emotions, let alone to criticise the Imperial Household Agency, the Men in Black.

They had abandoned the weekly family dinner, a practice dating back to Hirohito's days.

Another royal correspondent was even blunter about the breakdown in the relationship. Quoted anonymously in an article by the London *Times's* respected Japan correspondent Richard Lloyd Parry, he said this: “Masako has become an imperial drop-out. She is hostile towards the emperor and the empress and is ... waiting for them to die.”

One can hardly blame Masako for alienating the in-laws by refusing to go through the ordeal of another round of IVF treatments. By now she was almost 40, and the odds of a successful pregnancy were receding rapidly.

As well as this, the high-flying Tsutsumi had found himself embroiled in a money scandal. He was disgraced and forced to resign as Masako's fertility physician. “The hand of God” was gone, and Masako was apparently not prepared to start over again with someone new. Against this backdrop, imagine how she must have felt when she picked up the newspapers to read this gratuitous advice from Toshio Yuasa, then the top bureaucrat at the Kunaicho. “Frankly speaking,” he expounded, “as grand steward of the imperial household I want them [Masako and Naruhito] to have another child.” In December, when Masako had not obliged by falling pregnant, he turned his attentions to Akishino and Kiko. “Out of consideration for the wellbeing of the imperial household, I would strongly hope for their third child,” he told the media.

THE CROWN PRINCE WAS LATE. THE JOURNALISTS gathered in the conference room of the East Palace were getting restless. It was a late spring afternoon in May 2004 and the Kunaicho had scheduled a routine press briefing before Naruhito and Masako winged off on their first overseas trip in 18 months.

Finally, half an hour late, Naruhito took his seat at the microphone and began to speak from prepared notes. He was “very grateful” for the invitation to attend two royal weddings in Europe – that of Crown Prince Frederik and Mary Donaldson in Denmark, and Crown Prince Felipe de Borbón y de Grecia to a TV newsreader, Letizia Ortiz, in Spain. He waffled on for a while about the two countries, until he was asked by one of the journalists about a last-minute decision by Masako to cancel her trip.

He began by once again reading from the script. The princess “has not fully recovered her health, and after consulting with doctors it was decided that I would make the visit alone”. Masako was “sincerely regretful” that she could not make the trip. Then the prince put down his notes, his face flushed with anger, and launched into an unprecedented and unscripted attack on the Kunaicho.

These are the highlights of what he said: “Princess Masako has worked hard to adapt to the environment of the imperial household for the past 10 years but, from what I can see, I think she has completely exhausted herself in trying to do so. It is true that there were developments that denied Princess Masako's career ... as well as her personality ... I believe that much tact and effort will have to be expended for Princess Masako to recover her original full spirit and strength, which are required to return to her official duties.”

To Westerners it was innocuous stuff. But by Japanese standards it was a shocking breach of protocol for the prince to allow his emotions to show, let alone to criticise the mandarins of the Imperial Household Agency. He was laying the blame squarely at the feet of the Men in Black.

The very private palace feud that had been simmering for years over Masako's failure to follow the script was now a very public debate that struck to the heart of the Japanese people's relationship with their monarchy.

The agency was initially taken aback by the prince's attack and the groundswell of support for Masako. But a fortnight later its head, Toshio Yuasa, went on the offensive. He had no idea what Naruhito was talking about, he told the hacks, but he would have a word with him. And then he dropped a bombshell. It was “difficult” – read “impossible” – for the agency to help Masako recover because her problems were “not physical”.

It would not be long before the dark secret of what was really ailing the princess would be out. All the important stories of what was rapidly turning into a royal romance gone wrong had been broken by foreign news media, from Masako's engagement to her IVF pregnancy, to her fights with the palace bureaucracy. So few were surprised when it was Richard Lloyd Parry who first dared write what the royal reporters were only whispering.

In an article a couple of weeks after the prince's press conference, headlined “The Depression of a Princess”, he revealed that Masako had suffered a mental breakdown. Her health crisis was to prove so serious that even the recent birth of a new prince and heir to her brother-in-law Prince Akishino has failed to lift the burden of her illness. ■

Edited extract from Princess Masako: Prisoner of the Chrysanthemum Throne, by Ben Hills, published next week by Random House; rrp \$34.95.