

REALMATTER



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The House Of Rain



REAL**MATTER**

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1. The couch

Reading Time 3'



I was almost at the beach when I realised that I had left my Walkman at home. In front of the kiosk I saw our neighbours, getting into their Honda Civic. I gave my little brother our towels and umbrella and told him to find a spot on the sand and wait for me

there; no swimming until I got back, and please keep your sun hat on. I opened the car's back door as they were starting the engine: do you mind? I can walk back here, but it will be so much quicker if you give me a ride at least on the way home.

They have the radio on; a catchy song comes on and we all start singing along. The windows are rolled down and the breeze is lovely on my bare shoulders. As we go on driving I realise that we have passed our block, and I ask the neighbours where they're headed. To France, says the dad, without turning, eyes on the road. I laugh, but when he doesn't react at all I realise that he's not joking. What the hell?

"I'm so sorry, I should have asked, I assumed you were just headed home! Could you turn around and bring me back?"

It is his turn to laugh, heartily. When I ask if he can at least drop me off at the next traffic light, he simply says no. An uncomfortable silence settles in, and I begin to panic. Kilometres of coast go by; it is almost lunchtime.

I try a different strategy and suggest stopping for

lunch before we reach the border; I know a place that makes a killer cheese focaccia. The family's taken by the idea; the kids started chanting, "Fo-ca-cchia! Fo-ca-cchia!"

The place where we end up stopping is a villa-style resort that doubles as a restaurant. It has a lovely patio facing the sea. Wafts of salt and seaweed scent come from the shore nearby. I think of my little brother waiting for me on the beach and wonder how I will get back there. The owner of the villa comes to greet us in a beige linen suit and beautiful pale brown leather shoes. He is tall and lean, in his seventies or maybe in his eighties. His neatly trimmed hair is pure white, but he shows no sign of balding.

We sit at a table on the patio and look at the menu, written in coloured chalk on a wooden-framed blackboard. The owner comes back in a completely different outfit; this time it is a shiny velvet suit, a dark shade of crimson. Every few minutes he goes back inside the villa and comes out in different clothes, each of them gorgeous. His hairstyle seems to change too; one time his head has disappeared entirely, replaced by a smooth, mother-of-pearl-like disk capping the base of his neck. He finally settles on a pair of olive-green lederhosen with knitted cable knee-high socks; he comes sit with us, pours himself a glass of wine and chats amiably about

music, literature, the history of his small town. He is a charming fellow.

After our coffees have been served and consumed, he invites us to board a couch that lays nearby. Funny that we had not noticed it when we arrived—was it there or did they bring it in while we were busy eating? I doubt that we can all fit on one couch—we are six people between adults and children—but somehow we are able to sit comfortably. As soon as we are seated the couch takes off in a swirl of colours and shapes, and I realise it is a time travelling machine. I can go back to the beach after all, and even do it before my brother starts worrying!

But we land on a university campus instead. A young woman with long, reddish-blond hair waves at us as she walks past, carrying books under her arm. She seems completely unfazed by the presence of a couch in the middle of the Quadrangle. The more I look at her, the more familiar she seems, until I realise that she is a younger version of my chair of department, and I think, oh but of course, she did do her undergraduate studies at this university! And that's how I know that we have travelled back, not to this morning, but to thirty years ago.

2. The house of rain

Reading Time 1'



We are going to a house of rain. It is an apartment in Manhattan, but the owner is a lover of rain and she has turned it into a sort of greenhouse, filled with green plants, with moisture dripping from the ceiling in gentle droplets. The apartment has several rooms, and we are surprised that our friend can afford such a place in New York City.

The owner of the apartment asks us to help her in the kitchen; I realise that our vegetarian friend has been put in charge of gutting fish and shelling

shrimps and feel sorry for him; I want to go rescue him from this awkward situation but I cannot find my fish cleaning knife.

As I keep looking for the knife, I notice a video installation in the living room. A woman is half hidden by a folding screen; first her head, then her torso emerge above the screen. She is wearing a green bikini top with a yellow and white flower pattern. She rises further and floats cross-legged above the screen. Her legs are wrapped in a plastic dish that lights up, glowing a soft yellow-white.

She is trying to mimic something, and I want to understand the symbolism, but I cannot figure it out. I give up attempting to interpret it and suddenly feel overwhelmed by how beautiful it is.

3. The cormorant

Reading Time 1'



I walk to the beach just before dawn; the ocean is beautiful, a silvery blue under the grey sky. I try to capture the colours in pictures, but they look very

different on the camera screen.

A few cormorants fly in; then more. People start arriving as well, all dressed in colourful clothes; they walk into the water. I think to myself; a lot of people and a lot of cormorants.

One of the birds flies right at me and lands on my head, making me drop my camera in the sand. I hold on to its wings, trying to protect it with my arms. The cormorant shits on my head.

4. The mask

Reading Time 1'

I am exchanging a passionate kiss with my lover. He takes off his necklace and shows it to me. It is made of many different coloured stones; many of them are turquoise, my birthstone. He cuts a bit from the necklace to give to me; it is a stone attached to a string of leather, but it is too short to circle my neck.

The leather-bound stone morphs into a slate of lacquered wood. I look more carefully and realise that it is larger than I thought; it is the reverse side of a Noh mask. The front side of the mask is painted gold and white. It is only half a face, torn in the middle. It has a single black and dark blue painted eye. A tear is eating at it, making it come apart. I sit and stare at this beautiful, precious thing.

5. The chasm

Reading Time 2'

It has been raining for days, and it is still pouring.

Still digesting their pork and chive dumplings and red wine, the couple walks into a love hotel. There is something deliberate about their entrance, as if they were stepping onto a stage. Their hands casually brush in the elevator. She opens the door with the swipe card, and they both remove their shoes in the hallway, looking at the room as if they were going to live there for a while. She has a quick shower while he smokes a cigarette.

They both change into the yukata provided by the hotel; it feels both freeing and constraining. Her white, smooth thigh slips out from the fabric; they embrace. A few moments later, they are both holding cigarettes as they lie naked on top of the blankets, covered in droplets of sweat.

“I didn’t know you smoked,” he says.

“Uh-huh. At work I do it in the fifteenth-floor kitchenette, with the window open. I used to smoke

at home too, but the neighbour noticed and complained to the building administrator.”

The next day they meet again, and they are immediately drawn to each other. They are not at the office this time; they are at a construction site, standing up high on the scaffolding. The sky is darkening. She is wearing a grey pencil skirt and a white shirt; he is in his usual suit, the white-collar worker’s armour. As soon as they were done with their work, they sneaked out here to talk, before going back to their respective families.

This time there is no garlic, no alcohol on their breaths. She talks quickly and coldly, as if everything had been decided before they even wore those fateful yukata. He feels trapped, scared, angry; suddenly he is screaming at her, leaning in just slightly. Startled, she pulls back, lifts her chin just a fraction, looks him in the eye. For a moment she regrets what happened between them, but then she thinks that no, she has no qualms; it was the right thing to do, she wanted it and she is happy that it happened. And just in that instant, her right heel slips under her, finding emptiness beneath.

She opens her arms and falls; he tries to grab her, catches the edge of her shirt, feels the silky fabric

under his fingers. The anger on his face gives way to pure horror. He loses his grip; her body traces an arc in the air, as if she were dancing. The pencil skirt flips open, revealing again that white, smooth thigh. She lands on the cement with a loud thud.

A few hours later, he is in a small grove near the site, digging a grave to bury her. His eyes are widened, crazed, finely inked. I snap the volume shut and put it back on its shelf. I feel frazzled. Those four pages of manga have completely exhausted me.

I get out into the street; the sun is warm and the breeze is gentle on my skin. I went into a café to get an ice coffee and do some work, and I fell into a narrative chasm.

6. Canberra

Reading Time 1'



At the conference reception, an American professor keeps pronouncing the word Canberra in a strange way; it sounds something like 'Naolan.'

I am a bit annoyed, but try to be polite and ask her why she is pronouncing it that way if it is spelled C-A-N-B-E-R-R-A. How can one arrive from that

spelling to this sound? But she sticks to her version and explains to me that the word was spelled in a much more complex way in the Aboriginal language of the region.

To corroborate her explanation, she points at the word on a screen; it is made of endless repeating syllables, that are followed by a series of images of the Buddha, like still frames from a movie; after these there follows a bright light; finally the professor does an expressive dance.

And this is the way the word Canberra was spelled in its original language.

7. Gold to gold

Reading Time 2'



I wake up in an unfamiliar bed; as I shake the remainders of sleep from my eyes, I remember I am at my family's beach house. We are hosting a ceremony in the afternoon, and I came here to lend a hand. I check my watch, it is still early morning, so I decide to go for a quick boat ride before things get too busy. I go down to the water and take out the dinghy. The sea is really calm, the surface of the

water slick as oil, but the bay is lined by strings of buoys linked by nylon ropes and I struggle to manoeuvre around them.

I give up and make my way back to shore, but in the process, I lose one shoe. I laugh, thinking that I keep losing one shoe of each pair, so that now I own an inordinate amount of odd shoes. And what is even funnier, I realise, is that I have lots and lots of pairs of gloves, in all sorts of colours and materials. Why did I end up owning so many gloves?

It is mid-morning by now and guests have started arriving. I see some relatives, my great-aunt Elena and her daughter Anna. They look older than I remembered them, and they look strikingly like each other. I hear them talking about the struggle of raising many children—one had ten, the other six. I say a quick hello and rush into the house.

Preparations for the ceremony are in full swing. The house looks so different, adorned in luxurious curtains and draperies: brocade, velvet, lace; purple, crimson, yellow. I walk around admiring the paraphernalia, the soft, smooth fabrics and the bright, rich colours. I stroll into the garden and I see my brother with other young men carrying a mikoshi shrine; they are all wearing identical black

and gold uniforms. I am surprised to see him in the group; I knew my family had offered to provide the venue, but I thought we were not participating in the actual ceremony. I wonder if I should worry.

My father is sitting in a lounge chair and is muttering to himself, “gold to gold, gold to gold.” It sounds like a slogan, and I feel I may have heard it before, but I don’t know what it means. I go back into the house and slip into the studio, turn on the computer and look it up on the internet. It is the motto of an organisation that traces the provenance of golden jewellery, so that customers can avoid gold from mining companies that support wars in Africa. I feel reassured; the ceremony now seems less ominous, more joyous.

8. Room number 1

Reading Time 2'

I arrive at the hotel exhausted; the trip was long and uncomfortable. I have booked a single room; it's actually more like a studio, it has its own kitchen and a living-study area, quite large and airy, it looks really great. A woman comes through the door and screams finding me there. It turns out that I got into the wrong room, I had not checked the number at front. This is room number 5, my reservation is for room number 1. I repack my bags in a rush and start looking for room number 1, which is nowhere to be found.

I wander through long, airy corridors; doors open onto beautiful large rooms with stained-glass windows and polished wood furniture; tiled bathrooms in pastel colours; spacious kitchens with copper pots and utensils hanging over marble counters; but none of them is my room. I end up on a crowded street and keep walking, still searching for room number 1.

Someone offers to show me the way, but they walk much faster than me. I sense the jet lag kicking in,

my legs feel heavy and I struggle to keep up. Every step is painful; I start pulling myself along with my arms, grasping at building walls and streetlight poles to prop myself forward. In the end I am crawling on my elbows, feeling utterly exhausted. I see my guide cross a motorway intersection; the road is bathed in a blue light. I wake up, covered in sweat.

I had fallen asleep at the desk; at first I don't recognise my surroundings, until I remember that I have moved into a new office. It is much larger than the previous one, and even has its own bathroom and a small lounge area to receive clients. I notice that someone has left their purse on the coffee table; instinctively I look for my own handbag, worried that someone may have taken it while I was sleeping. Luckily it's still there under my chair, but when I peer inside I find objects that I don't recognise. My wallet is there, so are my keys, but there are other things: lip gloss, a lighter; I'm sure they are not mine. How did they get there?

I call security and ask them to go through the contents of the bag with me, to try to unravel the mystery. Other people from the office peep through the door and start voicing their opinions, making guesses, talking over the security guards and each other. As I try to shut them up, I notice the culprit: he is in the next room, I can see him clearly through the tinted glass wall. I drag him inside and he has

really long arms, they are at least seven metres long. I manage to get him into the office and ask someone to stab him in the heart: it is the only way to solve this whole mess. I give a colleague a mechanical pencil and tell them to push the point through the culprit's chest. They do, and the creature is killed.

End credits roll, the movie ends. My brother presses the space bar on his laptop to pause the video, and he tells me that he has downloaded another movie, one that I really wanted to see, but jet lag overwhelms me, I can barely keep my eyes open. I decline the invitation. I lay my head on the couch armrest and I fall into a deep sleep.

Notes

Artwork by Yuko Adachi, a Swiss-based, Tokyo-born artist who has lived and created in Japan, Paris, London and the USA.

You can see her work at:

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