

Home Sweet Home

There was a stain on the front of her dress, it had formed a pattern like drops of water spraying out from the middle of her chest, it stood out because the dress was light beige, it was probably food the kids had spilled, either that or drool, that's why it's a bad idea to wear a plain color other than black—thinking all of this, she leaned on the glass door that drank in the light of the noonday sun, pushed it open with the weight of her body and went inside.

Your name is Arakawa, my maiden name was Arakawa, she murmured, looking at his name tag, and the Arakawa in front of her replied 'I see' with a smile and immediately dropped his eyes to the form she had filled out, it's Shibakawa now, the 'kawa' part is the same, the kanji for 'river' is still there, so you're just a different kind of river, he said as though he was talking to himself, and then asked, you have two children, is that right? so she nodded.

They're twins and they're one and a half, everyone was always threatening me that things were going to get harder when they learned to roll over, or walk, or eat three meals a day, or when they started saying 'no,' and it really is always just exactly as hard as they said it would be, she answered, and Arakawa said 'I see' again, and then, so, to get started, we are the first design-build firm you've visited, is that correct?

Yes, I keep thinking I should be visiting display houses and things like that, too, but this firm is close to the land where we're going to build the house, and the photos on Instagram are lovely, my husband's father, my father-in-law, already bought the land for us, the land behind his house went up for sale, it's on this shore, she answered, and he said enthusiastically, Ma'am, did you know that next door to this very office is a model house where you can spend the night?

It's so you can get a feel for our houses, check the size of things, like if you think the living room windows should be bigger, things that you only realize if you live there, so it's equipped with a fridge and a microwave, you can think of it as staying in a business hotel, previously we loaned out some basic bedding, but, well, in these times, he said, and pointed at his mask.

The gas is connected, so if you bring some ingredients you can cook something, and you can think about the height of the sink and the counter and things like that, so we recommend trying the kitchen, and the office is right next door in case you need anything, Arakawa explained, we just ask you to bring any linens like a sleeping bag and towels, and he mimed pulling the zipper of a sleeping bag up to his neck.

Putting down her bag, she said thank you for letting me choose the house, I'm going to stay in that model house next Saturday, and her husband replied, well, it's only fair, you let me pick the location, and after all, all I'll do in the house is just spend the night and go out again the next day, but you're going to stay there alone? Isn't there a better way to do it? and he randomly scooped up one of the children.

A better way to do it? Like what? Your mother has a bad back, so she wouldn't take the kids, and my parents live too far away, she said in a small voice, and, without meeting her eyes, he said, you know, like some other way that's easier for all of us, and he swung the child back and forth in his arms, and she said, that's too much, he'll get shaken baby syndrome, and she took the child from her husband's arms and held him close.

Okay, okay, her husband said, and swung his suddenly empty arms as if to shake the stiffness out, and she asked, can you handle one night? and he said you do it all the time, I'll be fine, and he laughed and went away, and, thinking to sort out the various receipts and whatnot in her bag, she reached in and her fingers found the sonogram picture she'd gotten at the obstetrician, she gazed at the black and white image on the thin, glossy paper.

It showed the inside of her in white, a shape like half a slice of roll cake with a pattern like closely-packed ripples that might be the inside of her womb, or maybe empty space? She hadn't seen many of them, but she thought it looked like those photographs of the night sky where they take the picture over several hours to show the movement of the stars; when the two of them were in her stomach there was a dark ocean inside, and two little circles floating in it, and now there wasn't anything there.

She'd gone to the clinic because there was a pain that felt different from the usual period cramps, and a heavy discharge, and she was worried, she had to wait forever in the waiting room, trying to keep the kids out of trouble, but the test didn't find any abnormalities or pregnancy, they told her her womb

was perfect and she said thank you very much, it was hard when these two were born, my husband wasn't there so he doesn't know, if only it was like the crabs in Okinawa that all risk their lives crossing the roads to the beach to lay their eggs in the ocean, then it would be easier to see the effort it took.

When she looked at the TV the two of them were crowded together like insects in front of it, the show was comparing coffee chains, apparently the face of the siren on the Starbucks logo isn't symmetrical, and, patting their legs with both hands, she told them your first time for everything will be with me, I'll take you to Starbucks and all the other cafés.

Try opening the door with the smart key, Arakawa said, for some reason speaking in a hushed voice, and held out something like a car key, if you have this in your bag or in your pocket, all you have to do is touch the button on the door and it unlocks, convenient, right? When you have kids you often have both hands full, he said, then continued, of course, I'm afraid it is an additional charge.

He showed her around the house, the view from here is gorgeous, and he pointed at a small window that was up so high you'd probably never open it even if you lived there, tomorrow morning, oh, about ten o'clock, I'll be in the office next door, so please give the key back directly to me, he emphasized just that part, and then Arakawa went out of the house.

Looking for a place to put her luggage, she took her big backpack stuffed full of cloth and pushed it into the downstairs closet, then went around the house, all of the nooks and spaces were waiting for more furniture or appliances to be placed in them, about now the kids should be waking up from their naps, they'll be eating the vegetable sticks and the apples I peeled for them, for dinner they'll have the cream stew and bread rolls, and for breakfast the rice balls with chicken and carrots in the freezer and the miso soup with pumpkin in the fridge.

She put the key and her phone and wallet into her pockets and decided to have a walk around outside, heading the opposite way from the station; toward the shore, there was a park full of trees like on a southern island and a wide drainage ditch flowing directly into the ocean, it felt strange to not be carrying anything in her hands, and she tried to remember how she used to swing her arms when she walked by herself, and sent a message to her husband asking how the kids were, and he replied OK.

Before at the city 18-month health check, all the 18-month-olds in the city were gathered in the big room at the community center, the two of them had never seen so many children at once before, and they started bawling as soon as they came in the door, at the dentist's booth she had to pin them from behind to keep them still, there was a development test where they had to stack three blocks, but she had to skip it, she just stood there holding their two struggling bodies in both arms, trying desperately not to drop them, they were the only ones there that cried so much.

Thinking of it now she smiled, the next check-up is at three years old, it'll probably be a little bit better by then, when the check-up was over, she'd marked the box for a private consultation with the city nurse, they might have a speech delay, she worried, the nurse said the city had a lot of organizations she could check with, it might be good to try going to the child development support center, and she asked how she could get an appointment and after rummaging through a sheaf of papers the nurse answered to try looking it up on the internet.

Usually at this time of day after they'd both woken up from their nap she'd put them in the stroller and take them to the park or the supermarket or somewhere, the double stroller they'd gotten was cheap and the wheels didn't turn very well, so you really had to push it or it wouldn't move, and it was long in front so it always pulled to one side or the other, when her friend let her push her single stroller she was surprised it was so light, you could even have a hand free to hold a parasol.

She tried swinging her arms lightly, so she could feel the breeze, there was a big area under construction, so she went to look, and there was a row of orange flags that said New Development; 66 Lots For Sale, apparently they were selling the houses off as they built them, only about half of them were finished, from under the drop cloths around the houses under construction echoed the sharp, percussive sound of nail guns, she walked around it looking at everything and murmuring 'new development' under her breath, there was still low grass growing here, and a score of pipes writhing across the ground.

There was nothing blocking the sky, so it was round, she could hear the calls of the seabirds, farther in there were some houses that looked like show houses, but there were already a lot of houses with people living in them, all of them were made by the same company so they all looked pretty much

the same, even the one that hadn't sold yet wasn't any different than the others, it's just because of the way the sun hits it, she thought, it was fun looking at other people's houses, she could think of a million ways to improve them.

On the billboard that faced the main road it said 'A New Type of Town With No Overhead Wires,' she was jealous of that, the trees could grow as big and green as you liked, even if they were planted in orderly rows, and water would always find a way to flow downhill, she stopped at the supermarket to get something for her dinner and tomorrow's breakfast, loading one serving's worth of groceries into her shopping basket, today she could go down the narrow aisles, she even went into the wine aisle and took her time looking at all the labels.

When she was making dinner the doorbell rang, she looked at the monitor screen and saw Arakawa, if you push the unlock button next to the screen you can unlock the door without coming all the way to the entrance, his close-up face said cheerfully, when he had come into the living room he said I always like to just stop by to check, you haven't had any trouble with anything, have you? and spread both his hands.

She really wished he would just leave, but to be polite, she asked, well, could you help me use this tape measure to measure the size of the rooms? and he said, yes, right, it's important to get a feel for what these measurements are really like in person, also you might want to think about the outlets, one thing we hear a lot is that people wish they'd put in more outlets, like one in the back of the closet for a Roomba charging dock, that's become more common recently.

Shall we start from this wall? and Arakawa put the end of the tape measure against the wall, they went around and measured a couple of places together, you said you had twins, right, are they girls or boys? Arakawa asked, a boy and a girl, she said, oh, that's just right, then, Arakawa returned her smile, but she was busy studiously taking down the measurements in the memo pad on her phone, so she answered indifferently, yes, it's just right.

So, this room is supposed to be about 15 square meters, but because of the closet it's actually smaller, we could only fit the TV stand, one double bed and one single bed, when they get a bit bigger my husband will probably come in and we'll all four share the room, we'll want another single bed then, so

we'll need at least a few more meters, but when they get older and move out, what will we do with that big of a room, make it into a hobby room or something? she fretted.

Somehow the two of them ended up back in the kitchen, the chicken thigh was still out on the cutting board, ah, I see you're trying out the kitchen, Arakawa said, and continued, how is it, what do you think of the height? and oh, right, she picked the knife back up and stood as if she were about to cut, she felt as if it could be higher or lower, she could bend herself to fit.

Ma'am, you're on the tall side, what about your husband? Arakawa asked, he'll probably say that he doesn't know anything about kitchens so it's all up to me, but I bet he'll say the same thing about the balcony and the bathroom sink and everything else, too, she laughed, that's true, the wife is always the real queen of the castle, Arakawa laughed too, he thinks he can be more familiar if he makes it sound like he's talking to himself, she thought.

She didn't know what else to do, so, running the knife lightly over the chicken, she said they say when you clean chicken you're supposed to trim off the fat, but I never know how much I'm supposed to take off, how do I know when I've cut off enough, when I cut chicken I always think that, like these big white things, are they veins? If I keep trimming until it's all gone the meat will be in little tiny pieces.

I see, Arakawa answered, well, you know, it's a bit like a house, the veins and tendons connect everything, help everything grow, like the family who lives there, and he awkwardly tried to force the conversation back to the topic of houses, but if the kitchen is too dark you can't see what you're cutting, my kitchen at home is like that, it's dark, so even though the meat is on a cutting board and everything, it just feels like you're staring at a dead thing, you know, but here, our kitchens are well-lit so it's okay, and the countertops are sturdy, too, and with that addition, Arakawa left.

She pulled out the white veins until they disappeared down into the meat, some of them kept breaking off, she put the chicken skin-side-down in the frying pan and cooked it, she cooked the cherry tomatoes beside it, then crushed them, making them into tomato sauce, and ate it with bread, even without the kids beside her she finished it quickly, when she took a bath the tub was long and narrow, she thought, in a bath this big, the three of us could all sit side by side.

Where we live now the bath is so small, when we go in together the kids only have room to stand, about here and here, she held out both hands and described the shape of their shoulders as though she were rubbing their backs, but she couldn't tell if it was really the right size or not, she dressed and, wondering if it would be any different at night, went around and looked in all of the rooms, the windows were so nice and big, but, she muttered, it doesn't really matter since they're all going to be covered up with curtains.

Whatever it looked like or how it was designed, if she had a house, she felt like she could find a way to make it work, I guess that's why so many people buy pre-built houses, the color of the house next door is important, though, if it's bright orange right outside your windows it'll be like a sunrise all day long, but we already have the land so that doesn't apply to me either, I can't choose who we live next to, she thought.

She laid her sleeping bag out straight in the room with the tatami floor and, without any crying to wake her, slept straight through until morning, my husband always sleeps in a different room from the three of us, so last night I bet he was surprised how noisy they are, if he left the two of them alone and went to sleep in a different room by himself I won't forgive him, she thought, the windows were all frosted glass so they could do without curtains, she gazed at the windows of the house next door, vaguely visible behind the blurry squares.

She remembered once a long time ago she spotted her grandfather in the library, but she didn't talk to him, she just passed behind him and left, her grandfather was standing with his hands on his hips looking at the Returns shelf, she didn't regret not stopping to talk to him, but after he died whenever she thought of him it was always his profile in front of that bookshelf, that yellow tweed jacket—he used to take her anywhere, her hand through his thick arm, he was so nice to her.

Whether the kids were here with her or not, in the end she didn't feel any different, she thought, she loved them, when they saw her they moved their arms and legs and smiled, they slept with phosphorescent pacifiers that glowed dimly so even in the dark she knew just where both of them were, one of them had watery drool, and the other one's breath smelled like canned corn, but surely someday they wouldn't smell like that anymore.

She heated up the bread she'd bought in the microwave and ate it, took her time drinking her canned coffee, and brushed her teeth, she felt like her saliva was thicker than most people's, once in elementary school after lunch they were all brushing their teeth at the sinks and one of the boys told her you've got a string of drool hanging down, when she looked it really was, it was trailing out of her mouth in a long, thin line, nobody else's was like that, so after that she never rinsed her mouth where anyone could see her.

She gave the house a quick cleaning, opened the door of the bath and used the detachable shower to spray down the walls, starting at the top, to rinse any hair away, the built-in shelf had looked big at first, but she thought there aren't really a lot of places to put things, if you pulled out the shower hose too far it would knock everything over, if I put my shampoo, conditioner, and my cleanser and that foaming face wash on it that would take up the whole shelf.

Having packed up and locked the house, she opened the door to the office, Arakawa was waiting to pounce, I know you must be tired, so you can take this questionnaire with you and fill it out at home, and he held out two whole pages full of questions she would have to answer and a heavy bottle of dish soap, she supposed as a customer incentive, she said I'll think about it, he answered of course, after all, it's going to be your castle for life.

Let's take one more good look at the outside, thus prompted by Arakawa she went out and turned her eyes to the outside wall of the house, what did you think of the color, dark colors are popular right now, Arakawa began an explanation, she could see mountains in the distance and started thinking vaguely about the time back in college when she climbed Mount Fuji with her friends from her club, but they'd stopped to spend the night in a hut about three quarters of the way up and slept all crowded together, and she couldn't recall anymore anything that came after that, only those bunk beds.

The sun kept going behind clouds and coming back out again so frequently it was almost eerie, yesterday they ate stew so today we should have something Japanese, she thought, they say it's important to eat rice, and she gazed down at her own generous breasts, although when she took her clothes off there were a lot more moles now than before she had the kids, now that they were big enough to go in the bath with her she couldn't leave her razor in there anymore.

It must have been the house company's slogan or something, next to her she heard the words 'your castle for life' repeated again and she suddenly burst out, stop saying 'for life' like that, I'm very sorry, Mrs. Shibakawa, Arakawa apologized automatically, and then murmured, didn't you like the castle, he was still very young, I used to be Arakawa, too, a big, raging river, Shibakawa is smaller, just a little stream, the water flowing through the drainage ditch at the side of the road kept making little noises that sounded like the children's burps.

Mr. Arakawa, I've decided not to go with this company, she said, I see, Arakawa answered, but he looked flustered, he must have a sales quota or something like that, Mrs. Shibakawa, we would like to know why you feel that way, we value your opinion, he said, and got into position to take notes, a business notebook, she thought, I quit my job so I don't have one of those anymore.

No matter what I do, I can only picture living there alone, she answered, Arakawa smiled, so you enjoyed spending the night here by yourself, we get that a lot, there are a lot of couples who get someone to watch their kids for the night when they come here, the next morning they often say they wish they could get a house for just the two of them.

Oh, really, she said, I guess they must, and she made sure to face Arakawa and smile, oh, right, I don't really need to make him understand how much I used to be able to spend time alone, put things where I wanted to put them, how I hadn't really noticed, but that was definitely freedom, Arakawa was writing in his notebook, he put down the word 'alone' and underlined it.

But that would be true no matter what housing company you chose, wouldn't it? Arakawa said, again in a tone as if he was talking to himself, it's like if you're afraid of earthquakes because you're near the ocean, but earthquakes are dangerous no matter where they happen, he continued, she looked at her watch, it's about the end of their favorite cartoon show, I wonder if they're laughing right now, and she smiled fondly.

Turning her gaze back to Arakawa, who was still talking, yes, a house is those white veins and tendons, it connects everything and helps it grow for a time, she muttered and laid the key at Arakawa's feet, then turned her back to him and walked away, we'll call you another time, she heard from behind her, when she got underneath of the big palm trees the leaves hanging down enfolded her, the park near

the shore was full of trees like on a southern island, and, swinging her arms lightly, she decided to head there first.

(By Iko Idogawa, from the short story collection *The Joy in This World*, published by Kodansha, 2022)