

A Home Of My Own

Spread over her outfit, the splash-like stains give the appearance of an eruption from the middle of her chest, the light beige dress making it all the more obvious. *Must be from the kids getting their breakfast or drool on me*, she thinks and leans in her body to open the glass door absorbing the midday light. Stepping inside, she tells herself, *That's what you get for wearing something plain that isn't dark*.

A glance at the name tag. 'Ms Arakawa is it? That's my maiden name,' she says under her breath.

In front of her, Arakawa smiles, 'Oh right I see,' and looks over the filled-in registration form. 'So it's now Mrs Shibakawa, a change of *kawa*,' Arakawa says, as though thinking out loud. 'I see here you've two children.'

She nods in confirmation.

'Twins, eighteen months old. I did get warned about the trials that lay ahead. *Just wait until they're rolling over in their sleep, taking their first steps, eating solids three times a day, becoming self-aware, then you'll see*. And, sure enough, there's never any respite from it.'

'Oh right I see,' responds Arakawa once more. 'But regarding your visit today, we're the first house builder you've come to, I imagine?'

'That's right. I'm thinking I still need to visit a model home exhibition site, but you're not far from the plot we're using, on top of which the photos on your Instagram page looked lovely. My husband's family – my father-in-law – is buying us the land since the area behind his house came on the market at the perfect time, here on the coast.'

Arakawa raises her voice. 'Madam, next door to this very office is a model home we've constructed that you can stay in and experience for yourself.'

'It's a chance to sample what it's really like to live in one of our houses and get a sense of its proportions. Only by living in a house might you discover, for example, how much you appreciate the size of the window in the living room. We've furnished it with things like a refrigerator and microwave oven, and, well, we trust you'll treat it as you would a stay in a business hotel. Until

quite recently, we made basic bedding available, but in the current times...’ Here, Arakawa points to her face mask.

‘The gas is connected too, allowing you to cook dinner if you have the ingredients. That provides an opportunity to consider such details as the height of the kitchen worktop, so it’s something we encourage. The office is next door should you have any concerns,’ Arakawa advises. ‘We do have to ask that you bring your own sleeping bag and towels with you.’ The mention of a sleeping bag is illustrated with a zip-it-up-to-the-neck hand gesture.

‘Thank you for leaving the decision on the house to me,’ she says, putting down her bag. ‘I’m going to try staying at their model home next Saturday.’

‘Well it seems only fair,’ her husband replies. ‘I’m getting my way on the location, and for me a home is little more than a base from where I take off again, after all. You’ll be by yourself though? Isn’t there some better way?’ He lifts the two children into his arms.

‘Some better way, like what? Your mother has a bad back, so there’s no one to look after the kids, right?’ she says, adding in a whisper, ‘With my parents so far away.’ Avoiding eye contact, he explains he just wants to make things easier for everyone, then sways the twins to and fro.

‘Do you have to be so rough? They’ll end up with shaken baby syndrome.’ She plucks them from him, holding them close.

‘Yeah, yeah.’ He keeps his arms occupied by swinging them about, as if doing some stretching exercises.

‘Can you manage for one night?’ she asks.

‘I think I can manage if you can,’ he chuckles and goes off elsewhere.

She peers into her bag, thinking to sort out the jumble of receipts and slips of paper in it, and her fingers brush against the ultrasound printout she got from the gynaecology clinic the other day. Her gaze is upon the thin, flimsy monochrome sheet.

There’s a thick arc shape – like half a slice of German tree cake – with a whitish interior. Would that ripple pattern be purely tissue within her womb, or is it empty space too? Although she hasn’t seen many, it reminds her of one of those time-lapse shots of the night sky revealing the motion of the

stars. When those two were in her belly, something like a black sea had formed in there with a couple of circles floating on top. Now, nothing.

The visit to the clinic was prompted by a pain that felt different to period pain and her concern about the appearance of a weak discharge. She was left sitting in that waiting room for ages as she kept the kids restrained. In the end, the examination revealed no abnormalities, no signs of pregnancy. *Your uterus is just fine*, they told her, and she thanked them. The delivery of the twins had been tough, something her husband wouldn't be aware of as he didn't witness their birth. On Okinawa there are crabs that migrate across roads en masse in order to spawn, running the risk of getting struck by a car. At least their exertions were conspicuous.

She looks up at the television. In front of it are the kids, attracted there like a pair of insects. On TV they're comparing coffee house chains, apparently the face of the Starbucks siren isn't quite symmetrical. Stroking a leg of each of her children, she says, 'Let's do everything together at first. Whether Starbucks or Doutor Coffee, let's go together.'

'Please use this smart key to get in,' Arakawa says – in a lowered voice for some reason – and holds out something similar to a car key. 'When this is in your pocket or bag, you only have to press the button on the front door to open it. How convenient is that? Especially if your hands are full with the children. Though this is an optional extra.'

As the house tour draws to a close, a small high window that would likely be just left shut is pointed out. 'There's a great view from up here,' Arakawa says and then adds in a more assertive tone before heading off, 'Ah, tomorrow morning, yes, at around ten o'clock, I'll be in the office next door. Please hand the key back to me then.'

After mulling over where to put her belongings, she squeezes a big clothing-filled rucksack into a ground floor closet, makes a circuit of the house. Empty alcoves dotted around the place invite the installation of more furniture and appliances. By now, the kids must have awoken from their afternoon nap, and they'll be tucking into their vegetable snacks and the slices of apple she'd peeled for them. Tonight it will be pre-prepared cream stew and bread rolls, in the morning mixed rice onigiri from the freezer and pumpkin soup with miso from the fridge.

She puts her key, phone and purse in her pocket, having made up her mind to go out and take a walk around. In a direction moving away from the station and towards the beach, a park thick with trees evoking a tropical island, a large canal flowing into the sea. Unused to having her hands free, she tries to remember, *When I was walking by myself, how did I move my arms again?* Via an instant messaging app, she asks how the kids are doing, 'OK' is her husband's reply.

At the recent health screening for eighteen-month-old infants, there was a gathering of children in the community hall, and never having seen such a crowd, both her kids were crying and yelling from the off. In the dental check-up booth, she put them in a nelson hold. Moving on to the block stacking test was the last thing on her mind, with their kicking and screaming it was all she could do to keep them from slipping out of her arms. The only kids crying so hard were hers.

She smiles at the recollection. The next occasion should be at three years old, things must surely be a little easier by then. The screening over, she had seen a public health nurse in another room as she requested. After expressing her worry that perhaps their speech development was lagging, the response came that there were many organisations she could contact about it, that it may be possible to get remedial help. When she inquired where this was available, the nurse leafed through a bundle of information sheets before suggesting she try a search on the Internet.

Normally by this time, the kids had awoken in sequence from their afternoon nap, and she would be pushing them in their double buggy, sometimes going to a park or supermarket. The poor traction of the wheels on this buggy, a bargain purchase, meant it was a continual struggle getting it to go where she wanted it to, and its height brought a tendency to lean either one way or the other. When she was given a go of her friend's single buggy, its lightness came as a surprise. It occurred to her she could even push it and hold up a parasol at the same time.

Letting her arms swing airily, lightly, she draws closer to a house under construction, and a series of vertical orange banners proclaims, *New Village – 66 Plots For Sale*. The house will be placed on the market when finished, it appears. With the building work only about half done, the clang of hammer on nail reverberates behind construction hoardings. Murmuring the words, 'A new village,' she surveys the scene. Grass has been planted, as yet still short, and numerous pipes are strewn around.

Still the vast sky appears rounded. The cry of seabirds can be heard. She goes further within the development where the houses are lined up as if on exhibit, though many people already live here. Built by the same company, they all appear of a piece, and even the one house still unsold looks in no way different from the others. She wonders if it suffers from a lack of sunlight. Checking out people's houses gave her real pleasure, they had so many aspects that could stand to be enhanced.

A signboard faces the main road. It says, *Introducing The Village Free Of Overhead Cables*. That's to be admired. The trees grow in profusion, but with a sense of order. Water finds inclines to flow down. She approaches a supermarket where she will get her dinner and breakfast, filling the basket with ingredients enough for one person. Today, at least, she can also stroll down the narrower aisles, taking a leisurely look on her way to the wine section, which she seldom visits.

Dinner preparations are interrupted by the sound of the door chime, and a look at the intercom screen reveals Arakawa in close-up. 'You can release the lock without coming to the door, just press the button next to the monitor,' the face says cheerfully. They move in to the living room. Extending her hands, Arakawa says, 'I'm ready to assist any time, is everything to your satisfaction?'

She'd prefer her not to be hanging around, but out of courtesy asks for help in taking some measurements with a tape measure. 'Yes,' Arakawa says, 'it's important to develop a sense of how large a given distance is in centimetres. Also, I would be glad to have your thoughts on matters like the placement of power outlets. We often hear expressed the wish that more were available, and recently we've been getting requests to add them within closet spaces – for the operation of a Roomba cleaner or whatever.'

Arakawa holds her end of the tape against the wall and says, 'From this edge will do?' They proceed to go around as a pair, repeating their measurement routine.

'Your children are twins, aren't they? Which sex?' Arakawa asks. She answers that they are boy and girl, and Arakawa beams, 'Oh, nice! That's ideal, isn't it?'

Absorbed with inputting a measurement on her phone's memo app, she says mechanically, 'That's right. It's ideal.'

Time for some calculations. Factoring in the need for a closet, it looks like this eight-mat room has space for a TV stand, a double bed and a single bed only. When the kids are a little bigger, she'll want to add an extra single bed to make a sleeping space for four, including their father. In that case, a nine-mat room may be required. But when those two fly the nest, how would it be used then? As a hobby room? It was all getting a bit complicated.

Together they end up in the kitchen. On the chopping board is a piece of chicken thigh she'd left there. 'Ah, so you're doing some proper cooking,' Arakawa says. 'And how do you find the height of the work surface?'

'Well let's see.' She retrieves the knife and tries taking up a carving posture. The feeling she gets is that it wouldn't make much difference whether it were higher or lower. She could bend her body to adapt.

'Madam is on the tall side I should say. But how about your husband?' inquires Arakawa.

'I think he'd say he leaves the kitchen to me because he'd be out of his depth, but I'd suggest the same goes for the lavatory and balcony,' she laughs.

'Yeah, that's how it goes!' Arakawa says, also laughing. 'At home, madam rules the roost, eh!'

So the deferential mask can be dispensed with when you're thinking out loud, she muses.

Having nothing else left to do, she is trimming the chicken thigh with a carving knife. 'You're meant to prepare it by removing the sinew,' she says, 'but it's hard to judge how much, isn't it? As I extract it, I'm always wondering at what point I should stop. The white stringy stuff, is it blood vessels then? I worry the meat will fall apart if I remove it all.'

'Oh right I see. Well, you might say that sinew, as a blood vessel, is like a home which binds and sustains a family, no?' says Arakawa, not so subtly bringing them on to the subject of houses. 'But in a poorly lit kitchen the sinew is hard to make out. My older kitchen is like that, it's so gloomy that even when the meat's on a chopping board, you get the impression what's in front of you is long past its sell-by date. There's no such problem with these kitchens of ours though. They're so nice and bright. And what durable worktops...' With that reminder, Arakawa takes her leave.

Tugging it reveals the extent to which the white sinew travels under the surface, at times fragmenting along the way. The chicken is cooked at low temperature in a frying pan, skinside first, along with mini tomatoes which are crushed to make a sauce. Some bread serves as accompaniment. Although the children aren't next to her for once, she eats her meal in brisk fashion nevertheless. When taking a bath, she notes the dimensions of the lengthy bathtub which it appears might also have room for the kids to sit in side by side.

Their current tub being so small, with the three of them in it the children needed to stand. She twice outlines a pair of shoulders with a caress-like motion of her hands, *one there... and one there*, but she's not sure if she got her children's size exactly right. Following a change of clothes, she goes from room to room to check whether they seem any different after dark. 'These windows may be wide, but they're still going to end up covered with curtains,' she says softly.

To her it seems a lot of people opt for a ready-built home because they're willing to make do with any kind of spec or design provided the house is already there waiting. The exterior colour scheme of the house next door is a major concern. You don't want to be dazzled by walls of sunset orange whenever you look out your window. *But the plot we're building on has already been decided, so it's out of my hands*, she thinks. *Nor can I choose who lives next door.*

She unfurls the sleeping bag in the Japanese-style room and, liberated from the noise of nocturnal crying, sleeps uninterrupted until dawn. Her husband always slept in a different room, separated from the three of them, so the disturbances he must have experienced during the night would have come as quite a shock. *He better not have put them to bed in a room distant from his*, she thinks. *I won't let it go if he did.* The window is composed wholly of frosted glass, so the lack of a curtain is no big deal. Through its rectangular frame she gazes at the blurry form of the window next door.

A distant memory comes back to her. Catching sight of her granddad in the library, she passes behind him then heads off without saying a word. He was peering at the shelf set aside for returned books, hands on hips. That she didn't speak to him then didn't play on her mind in the least, yet after his death all she remembered was the profile of his face in front of that book shelf and his brown tweed jacket. When they walked together, his stocky arm was always intertwined with hers. He was so very nice to her.

She wonders if she's really the same person with her children there. She adores them. When their eyes meet hers, they laugh and wiggle their arms and legs. As they lay asleep with a glow-in-the-dark dummy in the mouth, the pair of them are easy enough to locate even in darkness. One has drool redolent of water, the breath of the other is scented like sweetcorn, but in time such qualities are bound to fade.

She eats some bread bought earlier after heating it in the microwave, sips on a canned coffee, brushes her teeth. She has this notion her saliva is more viscous than other people's. At elementary school, when gargling in the bathroom after lunch, a boy pointed out she had spit hanging. It does indeed dangle a long way, a quirk peculiar to her, so she no longer rinses out her mouth when people are around to watch.

In the midst of some final cleaning up, she opens the door to the bathroom and directs shower water against the walls, starting from the upper reaches, to flush it of any hair. While the attached shelf may look big, that's deceptive since a large movement of the shower hose might knock against things set down there. *If I put my shampoo, hair conditioner, cleansing gel and foaming cleanser on it, that would be the limit*, she thinks.

Finishing her packing and locking up, she visits the office next door. There waiting is Arakawa, who holds out two print-filled sheets of paper and says, 'It may be an inconvenient time now, but I hope you'll answer this questionnaire after you leave.'

'Complementary washing up liquid as an incentive? I'll think about it later,' she says.

'Right, of course. Because it's your stronghold for life.'

Arakawa urges her to take another good look at the exterior, and they go outside. She gazes upon the exterior walls of the house. 'How do you like it? Dark colours are in vogue now, aren't they?' says Arakawa, starting to give some explanatory patter. A mountain visible in the remote distance vaguely calls to mind Mt. Fuji, which she climbed long ago, though her climbing group had stopped over at the eighth station where they all slept in the same room. Beyond those bunk beds, she could no longer remember a thing about it.

The sun seems to be playing an enigmatic game of hide and seek. Since it was cream stew yesterday, she determines it would be best to have some traditional Japanese food today. While thinking about the importance of eating rice, she gazes down at her ample breasts. Undressed, she noticed more moles than she had before giving birth to the children. Now that she took baths with them, a cartridge razor could no longer be left in the bathroom.

Whether it's the corporate slogan of this particular house builder she's not sure, but next to her she hears those words again. *Because it's your stronghold for life.*

'Would you please stop saying that thing about a stronghold,' she says stridently.

The apology is spontaneous. 'Sorry, Mrs Shibakawa, I guess *stronghold* isn't appropriate,' mutters the still youthful Arakawa.

'I was an Arakawa too. The clan of a broad river, but...' From a roadside drain, a recurrent sound just like a child's belch.

'Ms Arakawa,' she continues, 'I won't be hiring your firm to build my house.'

'Oh right I see,' replies Arakawa with a flustered look, presumably from having a quota to meet. 'What has made you feel that way, Mrs Shibakawa? Would you let me know your thinking?' Arakawa readies herself to jot down some notes in a business-style notepad. *What's the use of that any more now I've pulled out,* she thinks.

'At the end of the day, I can't picture myself sharing that place with others,' she says.

'It was a pleasant change to have some me-time then,' Arakawa smiles. 'It's not unusual. Lots of people like to spend time away as a couple, unburdened by their children, don't they? And the next morning they'll say wryly, *How I wish we could stay here, just the two of us.*'

'Is that how it is?' she says.

'I would say so.'

Turning her eyes away from the house in response, she forms a smile. There wasn't a pressing need to reveal certain things here. The extent to which she could be alone in the old days, could put stuff right where she wanted, and her new found awareness that that was undoubtedly freedom. For the time being, Arakawa notes down the word *alone* and underlines it.

‘But wouldn’t it be the same with any house builder?’ says Arakawa, back in thinking-out-loud mode. ‘Did she feel that, near the sea, an earthquake would be scary? Well, an earthquake’s scary anywhere.’

A glance at her watch, and she sees their favourite cartoon is about to end. Reflecting wistfully, she wonders whether at that moment they were having a good giggle, those two.

Her gaze shifts back to the still chattering Arakawa. ‘You’re right,’ she murmurs. ‘A house is a white blood vessel, there to bind and offer protection.’

She leaves the key at Arakawa’s feet, turns about face and then walks away. ‘I’ll give you a phone call,’ a voice says from behind her.

When she steps under the tall palm trees, it’s like those cascading leaves are going to engulf her. The beachside park is abundant in trees which evoke a tropical paradise in southern climes. Arms moving back and forth alternately, she heads that way first.

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