

## **Your Forever Home**

She noticed a spatter of stains that seemed to spurt out from the centre of her chest, a pattern of drops that stood out on her light beige dress, probably drool or something spilt there when she was feeding the kids, basically it would be better to just give up on anything other than black for solid colours she thought, as she leaned her weight on the glass door letting in the daylight and entered.

Rivers, is it? That was my maiden name, she said in a hushed voice, looking at his name tag, and the Mr. Rivers sitting before her answered with a smile, Oh, I see, dropping his gaze to the application form she had just filled out, So it's Mrs. Brooks now, you've become a different sort of river, murmuring almost as though speaking to himself, And you have two children, he asked, so she nodded.

Twins, one and a half years old, everyone warned me, it's going to be tough you know when they start rolling over, or when they start walking, or when they start needing three meals a day, or when they start to want things their own way, and it is tough, just like they said, she answered, and Oh, I see, Mr. Rivers said again, So getting down to business, we are the first home-builder you've approached, is that right? he confirmed.

Yes, I was thinking I ought to go see some display homes and so on, but your company is close to where we're planning to build and your Instagram page had some great photos, the land has already been bought for us by my husband's father, because a property behind my in-laws' place just came up for sale, in the beach area, she answered, Madam, we actually have a company display home right next to this office where customers can stay overnight, Mr. Rivers responded, his voice louder.

You can get the true experience of our homes, get a feel for the space and so on, so perhaps if you'd like the living room window a certain size, all those things that you can only really know through living there, we have a fridge and a microwave oven already installed, and you can think of it like a stay in a business hotel, we usually also provide basic bedding, but just not at the moment, said Mr. Rivers as he pointed to the face mask he was wearing.

The gas is connected too, so if you'd like to bring some groceries, by all means go ahead and prepare yourself a meal, I'd certainly recommend it, that way you can check the height of the sink

and so on, and our office is right next door should you need any assistance, Mr. Rivers explained, You just need to bring a sleeping bag and a towel, making a gesture as though zipping a sleeping bag up to his neck.

Thanks for letting me choose the house, she said as she put down her bag, I'll stay overnight at that display home next Saturday, Well, what can I say, seeing as you agreed to get it built where I want, and besides it's really just somewhere for me to crash at the end of each day, her husband answered, But do you really have to go and stay there for a night? Isn't there some other way of doing it? he said, casually scooping up one of the kids.

Like what? Your mum's got a bad back, so it's not like she can look after the kids, and my parents are too far away, she said quietly, and still her husband didn't meet her eyes, Something that's easier for all of us, as he vigorously rocked the child in his arms, Don't be so rough, the kid will end up with shaken-baby syndrome, and she took the toddler off him, hugging her child close.

Okay, okay, as though unsure what to do with himself, her husband shook the tension from his arms, Can you really manage a night on your own? she asked, If you can do it, then so can I, her husband laughed as he walked off, she decides to sort out the various receipts and other items in her handbag, her fingers coming upon the ultrasound photo they'd given her at the gynaecologist's earlier, she stares at the black and white image on the thin glossy paper.

This part here in white, shaped like a wedge of a tree trunk in cross-section, these densely-packed rings are the inner muscles of the womb, and here is the space within, it looks like a rare glimpse of the movements of celestial objects, like a time-lapse photo of the stars, she thought, here where a black sea had formed when the twins were inside her, two spheres floating in her belly, now empty.

She'd gone to the gynaecologist, concerned about pain that was unlike a period, experiencing heavy discharge, sitting in the waiting room for ages trying to keep the kids under control, but the examination showed no sign of problems or pregnancy, The uterus looks perfectly normal, they told her, Thank you very much, she'd answered, it was so hard giving birth to those two, my husband wasn't there so I don't think he has any idea, it would be nice if all the effort was easy to see, like those crabs in the islands of Okinawa that travel for miles just to lay their eggs even though they

might get run over by cars.

Looking over, she saw both the kids in front of the TV, drawn to it like insects, the program was comparing coffee shop chains, apparently the face of the goddess in the Starbucks logo is asymmetrical, I want to be there for all your firsts, for your first visit to Starbucks, or Doutor Coffee or wherever, she said, caressing their legs with both hands.

Go ahead and use the smart key to open it, Mr. Rivers lowered his voice unnecessarily, offering her what looked like a car key, You can even just leave this in your bag or pocket and the door will open with a touch of this button, it's a very convenient option, especially when you've got your hands full with the little ones, he said, For an additional fee, I'm afraid, he added.

He ran through the basics of the interior, There's a great view from here, pointing out a small window so high up that she would probably never open it even if she did live there, Tomorrow morning I'll be in at the office next door by around 10 o'clock so please return the key to me in person then, switching suddenly to a firm tone, Mr. Rivers left the house.

Looking for somewhere to put her luggage, she shoved the large rucksack stuffed full of her bedding into a closet on the first floor, then walked around the rooms, every nook and cranny waiting to be filled with more furniture and appliances, the kids would be just waking up from their naps about now, probably eating the veggie chips and peeled apple slices that I left for them, their dinner tonight is the cream stew and bread rolls I prepared, for breakfast tomorrow they'll have the rice balls and pumpkin miso soup that's in the fridge.

She puts the key and her cellphone and purse in her pocket and goes for a walk outside; heading away from the station and towards the beach there's a park, full of trees like you'd find on a tropical island, a wide watercourse running straight down to the sea, she's so used to always carrying something in her hands these days, as she walks now she wonders how she used to swing her arms, she sends a message to her husband on her phone, How are the kids doing? Fine, came the reply.

At the recent 18-month public health check-up, the hall of the community health centre had been full of kids, her two had never seen so many other children all in one place before so they both began

screaming straight away, in the dental check-up booth she had to pin down their arms from behind, forget about doing the block-stacking test, she'd hauled the two struggling bodies in both arms trying desperately not to drop them, nobody else's kids were kicking up such a fuss.

She smiles at the memory, their next check-up should be when they're three years old, surely it'll be easier by then, after the health check there had been an interview that she'd requested with a community nurse in a private room, I'm worried that they might have a speech delay, she explained, There's plenty of organisations that can offer advice, they might also benefit from some therapy the nurse replied, when she asked, Where can I do that? the nurse rummaged through a pile of papers, then answered, Try looking it up on the internet.

Usually around this time, after both the kids have woken up from their naps, she puts them in the stroller, goes to the park or maybe the supermarket, the wheels on the cheap twin stroller they'd bought didn't turn properly, she had to constantly push hard to make it go, it was quite long and always veering off in the wrong direction, one time she had a turn of a friend's stroller for a single child and was surprised at how light it was, if I had something like this I'd even be able to manage a sun umbrella, she thought.

She swung her arms a little, as if to feel the wind, approaching a row of orange banner flags that advertised the newly-opened housing subdivision still under construction, New Homes, All 66 Allotments Released, the sign read, it looked like the completed dwellings were already for sale, only about half of them had been built, the sound of hammering echoing from behind the tarpaulins covering incomplete houses, New homes, she murmured as she looked around her, the grass half-grown, pipes snaking everywhere.

Still unobscured, the wide sky made a dome overhead, she could hear the cries of seabirds, further in were rows of houses like the display home, but already occupied, made by the same company so they all looked alike, but there was one that hadn't sold yet, identical to the others, maybe nobody's bought it because it doesn't get much sunlight, she thought, it was fun looking at other people's houses, it seemed like there were plenty of points that could be improved.

New Estate Now Open: All underground power lines! said a sign facing the main road, she wished

she could live there, the trees free to grow lush and green, yet orderly, water flowing down a slope, she stops by a supermarket, picks up groceries for dinner and breakfast, filling her shopping basket with the ingredients for meals for one, today she can easily move along the narrow aisles, take her time browsing the wine section that she usually never goes to.

The doorbell rang while she was preparing dinner, Mr. Rivers appeared on the intercom screen, If you push the button next to the monitor you can let visitors enter without having to go to answer the door, the magnified image of his face announced cheerfully, then as he entered the living room, I always make a point of checking in with our clients just in case, I hope that everything is to your satisfaction? he gestured widely with both hands.

Although she wished he would just go home she didn't let it show, Well, would you be able to give me a hand with measuring a few things, she asked, Absolutely, it's important to get to know what the dimensions in centimetres actually feel like, and it would be great if you could take a moment to think about where you might like the wall sockets, as many of our customers say they ought to have requested additional sockets, lots of people these days also want to put one in the closet so they can charge the Roomba.

From this edge? Mr. Rivers held the end of the tape measure against the wall, the two of them moved about the house measuring various places, Your children are twins, aren't they? Boys or girls? Mr. Rivers asked, A boy and a girl, she said, Wow, that's perfect, isn't it? he flashed back a smile, engrossed in tapping measurement figures into the notes on her phone, Mmm, perfect, she answered absently.

Doing the calculations, even this 8-tatami room would be small because there's a closet, it looks like we could only fit in a TV stand, a double bed, and one single bed, when the kids get a little older my husband will join us and we'll probably all sleep in the same room, so we'd need to fit in another single bed, in that case we'll need a bigger room, but when the kids grow up and leave home what would we do with such a big space, maybe use it as a recreation room; she was at a loss.

The two of them ended up in the kitchen, a piece of chicken thigh still sitting on the chopping board, Oh, it's great to see that you're cooking something to test it out, said Mr. Rivers, How's the

height of the bench? he continued, Let's see, she picked up the knife again as though to cut something, it wouldn't really matter if the bench was higher or lower, if she just adjusted her posture.

Madam, you're fairly tall, what about Sir? Mr. Rivers inquired, I think he'd just say he has no idea about the kitchen and leave it up to me, and probably he'd say the same thing for the bathroom, and the balcony too, she laughed, Yeah, the wife's home is her palace, huh, Mr. Rivers chuckled, he seems to think he can drop the formality if he says it like he's talking to himself she observed.

Seeing as she had nothing better to do, she prodded the meat with the knife, They always say to remove the sinews when preparing the chicken but I never know how much to take out, she said, I'm always wondering where exactly I should stop cutting, these white bits sticking out, I guess those are blood vessels, if I just keep going the meat will fall to bits.

I see, answered Mr. Rivers, Well, sinews, since they're blood vessels, they're a lot like a home you know, that's how family connects and grows, struggling to bring the conversation back to the topic of the house, But in a poorly-lit kitchen it's difficult to see them, the kitchen at my house is like that, it's dark so even if you lay it on the chopping board it's like you're just dealing with a hunk of dead meat, but here, our company's kitchens are well-lit so there's no problem, and the countertops are sound too, he reiterated, then left to go home.

She got on with preparing the meat, tugging at the white sinews and cutting them part-way through, then cooked it thoroughly skin-side down in the pan, along with some cherry tomatoes, squashing them to form a sauce, and served it with bread; even though the kids weren't there she ate her meal quickly, sitting in the bath later she noted the size of the long and narrow tub; the kids could probably fit in here too, sitting one behind the other she thought.

In the house they were living in now the tub was small, so you could only fit three people in if the kids stood up, about here, and here, she tried to mark the width of their shoulders, reaching out with both hands as though to stroke them, but she wasn't sure if she had the size right, she got dressed, maybe the rooms look different at night she thought, checking them one by one, Big windows, but even if the windows are big everyone just goes and covers them with curtains anyway, she murmured.

It seemed like the shape and specifications didn't really matter all that much, you'd just get used to it if it was already built, after all lots of people buy a readymade house, even though I do mind what colour my neighbour paints their wall, like supposing it was a glaring orange colour facing my window, like looking into a blazing sunrise, but the land's already been bought so it's not up to me, and I don't get to choose my neighbours she thought.

She laid the sleeping bag out straight on the tatami floor, and without the kids crying in the night to wake her, she slept soundly until morning, my husband always sleeps in a separate room to us three, last night I bet he was surprised at how loud the kids are, I'll be mad if it turns out he slept in his own room and let them sleep in the other room alone she thought, all the panes are frosted glass so we could manage without curtains, staring vacantly through the window, she gazed at the reflections in the window of the neighbouring house.

She recalled fondly how long ago she happened to see her granddad at the library, and followed him home without even saying a word to him, he was looking at the books on the shelf for recent returns, his hands on his hips, and even though she didn't regret not calling out to him, since his death all she could remember of him was his profile in front of the shelves, his brown tweed jacket, the way he linked his thick arm with hers wherever they went, how he was always so kind to her.

Would I actually be the same person whether I had my children or not? she wondered, I love those kids, when our eyes meet, they wave their arms and legs and smile at me; they always sleep with their glow-in-the-dark pacifiers in their mouths, so even in the dark I know exactly where those two are from the dim light; the watery smell of the saliva of one of them, the smell of the breath of the other like canned corn, but of course a day will come when they no longer smell like that.

She heated up the bread she bought yesterday in the oven, slowly drank a canned coffee, brushed her teeth; her spit seemed to be more viscous than other people, back in elementary school, when everybody was gargling at the sinks after lunch, one of the boys said, Hey your spit is all stringy, and it was true, nobody else's spit was hanging in long strings like hers, so ever since then she'd always rinsed her mouth in private.

She cleaned up around the house, opened the bathroom door and used the shower hose to wash

down any hairs from the walls, the built-in shelf in the shower that had looked ample at first didn't really have all that much space to put things, there wasn't much room to use the shower hose without bumping into it, by the time I set out the shampoo and conditioner, shower gel and my foaming facial cleanser it'd already be full, she thought.

After packing her things and locking the house, she opened the door to the company office, Mr. Rivers was waiting expectantly, As I am sure you must be tired, you can fill out the survey when you get home, if you'd be so kind, holding out a densely printed two-page questionnaire, along with a heavy bottle of complimentary dishwashing detergent, I'm going to think about it, she said, Of course, it's your forever palace, he replied.

Let's look over the exterior one more time, shall we? Mr. Rivers urged, leading her outside, she fixed her gaze on the wall of the house, What did you think? Right now dark tones are a popular choice, he began explaining, she could see mountains in the distance, her mind drifted as she recalled the time she climbed Mount Fuji with her school club, but all she could remember was the bunk beds of the mountain lodge where they had spent the night, packed in like sardines.

Passing clouds made the sunlight flicker strangely; seeing as yesterday's dinner was cream stew, I think tonight I'll cook something Japanese, they say it's important to eat rice, she thought, looking down at her ample chest, she'd noticed when she undressed that she had more moles on her skin than before her pregnancy, now that she took her baths with the kids she couldn't leave her shaving razor sitting in the bathroom anymore.

Maybe it was the company slogan or something, It's your forever palace, once again the words slid sideways into her ears, Could you please stop going on about forever! she said loudly, I'm terribly sorry, Mrs. Brooks, his apology like a reflex, I shouldn't have said palace, the still inexperienced man muttered; I was once a river like you, wild and strong; a sound just like a child's burp was coming from the watercourse gurgling next to the road.

Mr. Rivers, actually, I've decided not to go with this company to build the house, she said, Oh, I see, Mr. Rivers answered with a panicked look, he's probably got a sales quota to fulfil, Mrs. Brooks, could you tell me what brings you to that decision? he said, poised to take notes, it's his work records,



but I've changed my mind so what's the point of that now, she thought.

I could only picture myself living there alone, whatever I was doing, she answered, a smile appeared on Mr. Rivers' face, It was good to have the place to yourself, right? I hear that a lot. Plenty of couples get someone to mind their children while they stay overnight of course, and they often tell me that they wish it was just the two of them living here.

I suppose so, she said, That might be true, she looked Mr. Rivers straight in the eye and smiled, there was no need for him to understand, how I used to be able to spend time on my own, putting things wherever I wanted, how even though I didn't realise it at the time, I did have freedom, Mr. Rivers makes a note just in case, Alone, and underlines it.

But isn't that sort of thing going to be the same whatever company it is? Mr. Rivers said, as though talking to himself again, Is the idea of an earthquake frightening because it's by the beach? But an earthquake is frightening no matter where it happens, he continued, she looks at her watch, they'll have just finished watching their favourite cartoon, I bet those kids are all smiles right now, she thinks of them affectionately.

She returns her attention to Mr. Rivers who is still talking, Yes, a home is like one of those white blood vessels, it's there to connect and protect us, she murmurs and returns the key to Mr. Rivers by placing it on the ground at his feet, and turns and walks away, I'll contact you again by phone later, his voice comes from behind; her arms swinging freely, towards the beachside park full of trees like on a tropical island, to be enfolded in the lush heavy leaves beneath a huge palm tree, that's where she heads first.

(Idogawa Iko, from *Kono yono yorokobiyo*, 2022, Kodansha)