

## The Moth

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“That tickles,” thought Fusako, awaking to find a moth fluttering around her bed. The room was awfully bright. The curtains of both windows were slightly open, and a whitish light filled it entirely. The moth kept landing on Fusako’s hair and grazing her eyelids. She brushed it away with her hand, but it came back and would not leave her alone.

She sat up. What time was it? Judging from the angle of the sun, it must be close to noon. I’ve become a real lazybones, thought Fusako. She’d been living like a child without parental supervision since her husband Junnosuke had left her. That wasn’t an unpleasant thought, however. Being back where she started made her feel at peace in a way that deep down was somehow exhilarating.

There wasn’t a sound. The bedroom was neat and tidy because there was no one to mess it up. The spacious bed retained only Fusako’s warmth, smelt only of her.

Although the curtains were slightly open, Fusako noticed that the door and the windows were shut tight. So how had the moth gotten in? It kept flitting round and round the bed in a blur, fluttering its light brown wings without ever seeming to tire. Fusako found the tiny creature’s movements beautiful.

*Here I am, here I am, right here,* it seemed to be frantically insisting in its flight. *Here I am, here I am. Look! I’m right over here, right over here.*

It looked like something that had strayed in from beyond this world. She blinked in awe. At the very least it belonged to a world where none of the logic and laws of this one that she knew applied.

“Come,” she said out loud, just to amuse herself. She never imagined that the moth would flutter over and hover before her eyes.

Slowly, slowly, she put out her hand. The moth alighted on the tip of her middle finger — she definitely felt it grip her skin with its slender, threadlike legs — and after a pregnant pause nimbly flew off. Fusako let out her bated breath.

“That’s amazing. I thought it understood me,” Fusako murmured, not so much to the moth as to excuse her own childish behaviour. The moth was merrily flitting about. *Here I am, here I am, right here. Look at me! Look! Look!*

Fusako did not yet realize that today was going to be one of those days.

She realized it after breakfast, when she was reading the newspaper while running the washing machine. The doorbell rang, and when she opened the door, there stood a plump, suntanned woman of somewhat advanced years — you would be hard pressed to say whether she was middle-aged or slightly older. In her hand she held a plastic bag containing a plant.

“Buy this, ma’am,” she said abruptly when she saw Fusako, looking and sounding on the point of tears. Meanwhile she lifted up the bag she held in her hand to show her. It was a white plastic bag, not a transparent one, and Fusako could not see what was in it, though she could tell it was a plant.

“I’m from Ibaraki and I sell houseplants door to door. Buy this. It has beautiful red berries in the fall.” The woman spoke rapidly, for some reason in a great hurry.

“Whenever I buy plants, I only end up killing them.”

Fusako wasn’t good with door-to-door salespeople. She found herself buying things she didn’t want, even though she had meant to be firm and refuse. Her now-vanished husband Junnosuke felt sorry for her every time she was thus pressured into buying something. He didn’t complain, didn’t tell her off; he felt sorry for her. “If you’d bought it because you were too wishy-washy,” he would say, “then I’d have something to tell you off for, but in your case you end up buying stuff because you’re silly. What can I do? Poor Fusako.”

“Oh come on, buy it,” the woman said, forcibly thrusting the plastic bag into Fusako’s hand and then looking behind her. There was nobody there. “My hubby’s coming,” she blurted. She continued in a hushed voice. “My hubby will hit me if I don’t sell this. The pain — I’m scared of him.” She grimaced as if she had just been struck. “Buy it. It’s yours for five thousand yen.”

The sky was blue. Fusako sighed. “Okay, I’ll buy it.”

She couldn’t be bothered to continue the conversation. She didn’t want the woman to go on any more about her “hubby”, for example.

She went inside to fetch her purse. If Junnosuke could see her now, would he think he had been right to leave such a woman? The thought made her heart ache. He was still legally her husband, and she truly felt a deep affection for him.

She had first met Junnosuke at the time of her father’s death. Her mother was in a

daze, Fusako was still a student, and alone the two of them could not have satisfactorily managed any aspect of her father's final journey from the hospital room to the morgue, their home, the funeral parlour, the crematorium, and finally the cemetery. Junnosuke, who worked at the same company as her father, arrived with several others to handle all the arrangements on their behalf. Afterwards they continued to turn to him for all manner of advice, and that was how it all began. He was an honest man, which was what most attracted Fusako to him, and now, after almost twenty years of marriage, he had left her, honestly making no secret of the fact that he had fallen for another woman.

"How much water should I give it? Should I put it in the sun, or does it prefer the shade?" asked Fusako as she paid the woman.

"It's up to you," the woman replied. "Anyway, ma'am, you're such a nice person."

Fusako couldn't help puckering her brow when she noticed that the woman was missing several front teeth. Her face was far from beautiful to begin with, but now it looked even more hideous.

"I once led a lifestyle like yours, believe it or not." The woman suddenly became talkative once she had the money. She spoke as rapidly as ever but no longer showed any trace of fear. "You were drinking alone last night, right? Wine. Chablis or something. You can't fool me."

Fusako didn't drink at all.

"And you have a cat, right? Not a real cat but a stuffed cat. Because a stuffed cat is hassle-free. You don't have to give it water."

The woman cackled. Idle small talk. So anybody would think.

"It must be lonely without kids. I've had three kids myself. But no matter how lonely you are, you shouldn't be shacking up with some guy in broad daylight."

Fusako recoiled at the torrent of words. Her knees quaked. She couldn't tear her eyes from the woman's lips. The midday sun shone brightly on the peaceful neighbourhood. Fusako didn't own a stuffed cat and had never shacked up with some guy.

"But what can you do? A woman's got her desires. It's a real bummer being all dressed up and just peeling carrots every day, right? I know how you feel."

In the depths of her fear Fusako became convinced that today was one of those days. Otherwise she would never have been insulted by a total stranger.

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Fusako didn't understand much about such days. She only knew from experience that they existed. Days when nothing went right, or when anything could happen. Days when the world was bizarrely twisted or warped, and all you could do was stand aghast at what was going on.

To Fusako's way of thinking, on such days it was best just to sit at home doing nothing, but unfortunately she had two things planned for today. Junnosuke's lawyer had an appointment to come over in a little while, and to cheer herself up — because she'd doubtless be feeling down — she was to have dinner with her sister-in-law Haruka that evening.

“Of all the days.”

Frowning, Fusako took her coffee cup to the sink and washed it. She had long lost any desire to return to her newspaper. For now she placed the plant she had bought in a sunny spot on the living-room floor. She thought she noticed a blackish green leaf pop out of the bag quivering.

Fusako first became aware of the existence of such days when she was in elementary school. She was playing in the school playground during lunch break when a man in a brown overcoat approached. There were many other children around — enjoying a game of dodgeball, climbing the jungle gym, just standing about and talking. Fusako was next to the horizontal bar, using it in turns with two or three other girls. It was a sunny, windless day. The man made a beeline for Fusako amid the cheers and laughter, the creak of the swings, the thud of balls being caught, the boys' yelling back and forth.

“You're good on the horizontal bar,” said the man with an ingratiating smile. He was unshaven and his stubble was peppered with grey. His hair was black and looked greasy.

Several of Fusako's best friends were right there beside her, and one of them might have been expected to say, “Who's that, Fusako? Are you okay?” But nobody said a word. It was as if either the man wasn't there, or if he was, only Fusako could see him.

“Would you like to come with me?” said the man, looking directly at Fusako and extending his hand. She found herself about to take it, because she felt that she had no other choice. It wasn't like being abducted. It was nothing so menacing, so coercive.

The man evidently intended to take her away somewhere — somewhere that wasn't here. It seemed so natural. Not just natural, but even inevitable. All the noises of the playground — the cheers and the laughter — receded into the distance. She could still hear them, but they were now the sounds of another world unconnected to her. That world had vanished, and only she and the man remained. She therefore had to go with him — so it seemed.

“Oh, so you don't want to come.” The man retracted his hand with a feeble laugh, and Fusako was almost plunged into despair. She had to her sorrow committed an irretrievable blunder, like missing the train.

“Don't worry, it's no big deal,” said the man. He leisurely strolled away toward the school gate. Fusako had the urge to run after him. She felt all alone, as if she were being abandoned, and it pained her to have disappointed the man when they were the only two people left in the world...

“Fusako, who was that man?” asked one of her friends. Fusako was astounded. Only when she realized that the man had actually existed and been seen by all did fear bare its teeth.

The man never appeared again. But Fusako knew that on that occasion she came within an inch of going with him. It was that close. There was more than one world, and their boundaries were fuzzier than you might think. There were even days, though rarely, when they merged enough that you might easily slip from one into another.

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It was the second time Fusako had met the lawyer, a gloomy young man by the name of Fukagawa who lacked energy despite his youth. Fusako was put off by his pasty skin and the curiously slender fingers with which he neatly arranged his papers and spread them on the table. She studied the man in front of her with indignation. Why on earth had Junnosuke hired such a fellow? He had brought along his own bottle of green tea. He realized that Fusako had no intention of serving him anything.

“Excuse me while I take a sip,” he said, drinking the tea directly from the plastic bottle. He had nothing new to tell her. Your husband wants a divorce. He isn't interested in mediation, because that will only wear you both out. He says he doesn't

want the house. He proposes evenly dividing the savings between you. I can't tell you where he is.

Fusako wasn't listening. She was examining the lawyer's hair — it was closely cropped — and the scalp that peered through it, the collar and cuffs of his striped shirt, his shifty eyes, his chapped, pale lips. She'd heard it all before, and she had no intention of agreeing to a divorce.

"Mr. Fukagawa," she said after waiting for him to finish.

"Yes?" he replied in an all too calm voice, interlacing his slender fingers on the table, when, behind him, the plant rustled, not so much shaking as quivering audibly — the plant Fusako had bought from the door-to-door saleswoman, the one that had red berries in the fall. Fusako's gaze was inexorably drawn beyond the lawyer to it. The air conditioning was on in the room, and the windows were tightly closed.

"Are you all right?" asked the lawyer, but Fusako could not tear her eyes from the plant. Between the leaves a small object could be seen falling to the floor, followed by another, and then another. Plop. Plop. Plop. As if jumping to their deaths.

"Mrs. —?" The lawyer turned around, following Fusako's gaze.

"Did you see it?" she asked.

"See what?" the lawyer asked back, his voice tinged with annoyance.

"The plant," said Fusako, unfazed. She got up and went to see what had fallen on the floor.

"I bought it earlier today from someone selling them door to door."

They were snails. Their shells measured about two centimetres across, and the fleshy part underneath was milky white with a slight trace of brown. Magnificent tentacles extended smooth and rodlike from their heads. Four such snails were gliding across the floor in the sunlight, glistening moistly.

"Oh." The lawyer, having also left the table at some point, was standing next to Fusako looking down at the floor and the plant.

"Can you see the snails?"

"Yes. Are they your pets?"

"Are you kidding?" Fusako reflexively scrunched up her face. "I don't have any pets. Or stuffed cats, for that matter."

"Oh."

The four snails were slithering haltingly across Fusako's living-room floor.

"These little guys plopped out of the plant one by one, all beautifully shiny."

The lawyer didn't even oh.

"Don't you think that's strange?" continued Fusako. "Where did these little guys come from?"

They went back to the table, leaving the snails to their own devices. Fusako was thirsty, so she went to the kitchen and took a container of barley tea out of the fridge. She brought two glasses. She couldn't very well drink it alone, even if the lawyer did have his own bottle of tea.

She became more convinced than ever that today was one of those days. Days when something was out of whack.

"A moth got in here this morning." She did not add that it had for a second understood her. She knew that the lawyer wouldn't believe her.

"At this rate who knows what else might show up?"

"Why don't we get back to the subject?" said the lawyer, looking very serious. He moved the cup of barley tea that Fusako had placed on the table away from his stack of papers.

"Go ahead," Fusako replied, wondering what those papers contained. Junnosuke's account of the circumstances? His grievances against his wife? Or a kind of timeline of their marriage?

It had been six months since Junnosuke left. What Fusako remembered about him was, for example, Junnosuke's face when she had peeled some fruit and he opened his mouth wide like a big baby. Or how he would ask her to scratch his back where it itched, and when she did, would make a big fuss. "Not there, further to the left. Higher. A bit to the right." Or his amused expression when he said to her, "You're so silly." Or the contours of his arm that she held each night as they slept. Hadn't they genuinely been a close couple?

That's why Fusako had been dumbfounded when Junnosuke told her, "Keep your nose out of our business."

"*Our* business?" she echoed with a hysterical laugh. "*Our* business? Is that what you just said?"

"Whatever."

The lawyer was going on about something but Fusako, paying no attention, straightened her back and said, “Just tell my husband this. He doesn’t have to come home if he doesn’t want to.”

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That was truly how Fusako felt, strange though it seemed even to herself. She loved Junnosuke dearly, yet she didn’t particularly want him to come home. She found things pleasant enough without him.

The lawyer left and Fusako again had the house to herself. The snails were still here and there on the floor, motionless. The sight of them looked somehow familiar and reassuring.

“You’ve come for me?” Fusako said to them, just to amuse herself again. “Where are you going to take me?”

The snails didn’t move. They remained completely still in the evening light.

Fusako had a memory that she had never shared with anyone, of a spring night when she was seven years old. Her mother had gone to the hospital to give birth, and she and her father were at home alone. Their two-storey house on the edge of the Tama Hills seemed all too large and empty without her mother. The lights in the hallway and the sounds emerging from the television, she still recalled, had a false quality because of their very hominess; they only intensified the uneasy feeling of having being abandoned along with her father. They ordered out for dinner, though her memory was hazy as to whether they had eaten soba or sushi. She couldn’t remember what if anything she and her father had talked about as they watched television while waiting for the call from the hospital. At any rate, she was vaguely restless and anxious yet felt that she should not betray it. She had a lot on her seven-year-old mind.

“I’m going to brush my teeth,” Fusako said and went out into the hall. She closed the sliding screen behind her, but instead of heading for the washroom down the hall to the right, she slipped on her mother’s sandals at the entrance immediately to the left. She gently slid open the louvered door, making as little noise as possible, and stepped outside. It was a warm evening, and humidity permeated the darkness.

Why she did this, she did not know. She was going to walk around the perimeter of



the house: it was comforting to inhale the fresh night air, and perhaps she wanted further comfort. She had long found the sight of her own home reassuring. Especially at night, it calmed her beyond words to see the lights in the windows and the steam wafting from the silver exhaust pipe that projected from the rear wall of the bathroom.

That night, however, Fusako was unable to circle the house as she usually did. After walking out of the front door she went around to the side, but as soon as she looked up at the wall, she froze on the spot and could not take another step. The entire wall was crawling with snails — more snails than she had ever seen in her life. There were fewer higher up, but at Fusako’s eye level they covered virtually every inch of the wall. She perhaps let out a brief cry, but if she did, it was only the faintest one, and afterwards she was unable to utter a word. The snails were lit up by the streetlamp beyond the fence. Fusako simply stared, barely breathing. Snails were nothing unusual, but when you saw so many all at once, the eeriness of each one’s shape and texture — and Fusako thought they were not of this world on that night — struck the eye with a clarity, an appalling distinctness, that was overwhelming.

Fusako did not run back to the house screaming. She quietly walked back at an unhurried pace as if nothing had happened. She told her father nothing. She realized, with a philosophical resignation that was almost serene, that there was something very wrong with their home tonight.

The baby her mother delivered early the next morning was a boy, but he lived for only seven minutes and died without ever having cried.

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“The stewed beans here are exquisite,” said Haruka. Fusako got on strangely well with her sister-in-law. Haruka, who was the same age but single, worked at a travel agency and had for many years been posted overseas. Even after Junnosuke’s elopement the two remained friends. Haruka would come over to Fusako’s place to see how she was doing, and Fusako would, when she ordered foodstuffs for herself, courier some to Haruka.

On learning that her brother had run off with another woman, Haruka didn’t look at all dismayed; she chuckled sadly and muttered, “Junnosuke’s a fool.” That’s why

Fusako liked Haruka and felt at ease with her: she took things as they came without making a big deal of them.

Haruka had ordered Fusako pea soup, stewed white beans, a tomato salad, sausages, and some bread. They were at a German restaurant near the travel agency where Haruka worked; it evidently served as her kitchen.

“So how did the meeting with the lawyer go? Where’s Junnosuke?”

“Didn’t go well at all. He wouldn’t tell me,” Fusako replied and took a gulp of apple juice from a glass beer mug so heavy she could barely raise it. She suspected for some reason that Haruka might know where Junnosuke was.

“Junnosuke is being a real pain.” Haruka was fond of beer and drank nothing else, even when she wasn’t at a German restaurant. She downed such prodigious amounts of the stuff that Fusako wondered where in her slender body she put it.

The restaurant was bustling with people and had a warm, almost family atmosphere. A cursory glance revealed that most of the clientele were businessmen in suits. It appeared to be the kind of place to which men above a certain age who earned a respectable income liked to take their peers and junior colleagues when they didn’t want women around. Yet among them, seated alone at the counter and nonchalantly enjoying a plain meal of stew accompanied by a beer, was an elderly woman of distinctive appearance: she had long, straight hair, more than half grey, reaching down to the middle of her back, and wore a purple shirt and a long denim skirt. Fusako was rather impressed when she noticed her. She had no idea who she was, of course, but she thought she looked splendidly self-assured.

“Considering the kind of guy Junnosuke is, as long as you don’t agree to a divorce, sooner or later he’s bound to come home with his tail between his legs, but I’m not convinced that’s the best thing for you,” said Haruka.

“Oh yes it is,” replied Fusako. “I mean, that’s fine with me.”

Junnosuke might be selfish and highbrow and spoilt, but in the end she loved and thought she understood him. And she was confident that Junnosuke was well aware of it. So thinking — though she did not say as much — she smiled what was intended to look like an insouciant smile.

“Anyway, today is one of those days when odd things happen.”

Adopting a more cheerful tone, Fusako gave Haruka a brief summary of the day’s

events: first the moth, then how the saleswoman had baselessly insulted her, how the snails had plopped onto the floor behind the lawyer, and how she had gathered them up into the dustpan and tossed them out in the garden as she left home. When she had finished, Haruka narrowed her big eyes and chuckled.

“What’s so odd about that? There are bugs everywhere, and I’m the butt of baseless insults all the time. People are like that.”

“They are?” replied Fusako, thinking to herself, Well, it’s correct to refer to moths as bugs because they’re insects, but snails aren’t bugs, they’re, what do you call them, mollusks?

“Sure they are. You’re so naive, Fusako,” Haruka said dismissively and changed the subject. “I’ve started taking swimming classes. It’s lots of fun. You should get some exercise too, Fusako. It’s not healthy to just sit around an empty house doing nothing.”

Haruka rattled on about where the swimming lessons were held, how much they cost, and the beautiful musculature of the youthful coach not even half her age, concluding, “So it would work wonders for your body and soul, Fusako.” Then she thirstily drank her beer with an audible gulp.

“Yeah, I guess so,” replied Fusako noncommittally, uninterested in swimming. But in her mind she was turning over something that Haruka had said a few minutes ago: People are like that.

Are they? thought Fusako. Are they really? You were drinking alone last night, right? Fusako unconsciously squirmed as the saleswoman’s coarse voice echoed in her ears. You can’t fool me. And you have a cat, right? Not a real cat but a stuffed cat.

If that woman is what people are like, Fusako thought as she reached with her fork for the tomato salad sprinkled with minced onions, then I feel a lot closer to moths and snails than to people. And a lot fonder of them too.

“I’m just going to the washroom,” said Haruka, rising from her seat. When she returned, Fusako could hardly believe her eyes.

“What do you think, Fusako? I just bought it.”

Haruka was standing next to the table with her arms outspread, dressed in a swimsuit. She had been loved by her share of men in her day, but she was not a pretty sight in a swimsuit now that she had completely lost her figure.

“Haruka.” Fusako was so astonished that she could say no more. She stiffened with

embarrassment.

“It’s a competitive suit so it flattens the bust, but don’t you think the colour of this fabric is gorgeous?”

“It certainly is,” replied the elderly woman at the counter. “It looks great on you.”

What are you doing dressed like that in a place like this? The words caught in Fusako’s throat and failed to emerge. None of the other patrons in the crowded restaurant looked at all surprised, as if they thought that changing into a swimsuit in a German restaurant was perfectly ordinary.

The hubbub receded into the distance. The food and the table and the other guests and everything else seemed terribly far away despite being right there. Fusako was acutely aware of being alone and detached from the world, just as she had felt when the man appeared in the school playground all those years ago.

She noticed a snail gliding along behind her half-empty glass mug of apple juice, where the table was wet from the mug’s condensation. She looked up, and there was a pale brown moth fluttering about near the ceiling. Now it seemed like a friend.

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