

## Jealousy's For All of Us

Itō Hiromi

*Yes, we had a long summer this year, didn't we? Used to be, autumn was autumn, winter was winter, and we knew just what to say to suit the season, but now with these endless summers we've forgotten all that, more's the pity.*

*In the olden days—oh, makes it sound like the time o' the dinosaurs, doesn't it!—not long ago at all, in fact. When I was a little girl, not the old woman I am now, we had somethin' called "winter," you know, when a northerly wind'd blow, a frost'd set in, and we'd say it was "cold"—eh? You don't get it? Hmm, how should I put it? Well, it felt somethin' like a long, long stay in a refrigerator—eh? You've never been in a fridge? Well, of course not! You're not meat or eggs or somethin' like that, are you? All right then, um.... Imagine you're in a room with the AC on, eatin' a triple helpin' of shaved ice. Your teeth're so cold they're chatterin' away in your mouth—eh? That'd give you the runs? Ah, no doubt it would, but that's beside the point right now, so be a good 'un and just listen for a moment, would you? In the olden days, you didn't need to eat shaved ice to experience somethin' cold. Even without that mouthful of ice, the air around you'd be chilly and damp, and your hands and ears'd get so cold—eh? That's right, without the AC on. Hmm, still don't get it? Oh dear, nothin' to be done, is there, what with you kids these days bein' unfamiliar with the word "cold" and all? What a state we're in.*

*Yes, what I'm comin' to with this is, when we get all het up with jealousy, stewin' in our own memories—it's like global warmin'. It's just like we're waitin' for the change of season, waitin' to cool down, but it just doesn't come, and we're left at sixes and sevens, right? The longer we wait, the scratchier we get, and it's a vicious circle, see, with our suspicions growin' on themselves—we brood on things that ain't even there, our jealous delusions swellin' up inside us and turnin' us into lunatics....*

*Yep, that's a world of hurt.*

“Hey, Shiromi, you in?” my landlady asked, turnin' up at my door. A single woman in her late sixties.

“Oh, welcome back! How was it over there? With all the rent I've been holdin' back, I'm impressed you c'd afford an overseas trip.”

“Only because everyone but *you* paid on time! And I’m looking forward to collecting it off you today, by the way, but first of all, take a look at this, would you? This fax was waiting for me when I got back after those two weeks.”

Scrawled in big letters was the followin’ message:

*Ms. Z, please do not destroy our peaceful home. Our son is a hikikomori, you know.  
Please do not email or telephone. – X*

“Ms. Z?”

“The letter’s standing in for my surname, I assume.”

“You know what, oh landlady mine, I never even thought ’bout you havin’ a *name* as such!”

“Well I wasn’t born “Landlady,” you know—my parents named me.”

“Hmm, you look like you wouldn’t hurt a mouse, you know, but behin’ that façade....”

“Shiromi, I have no memory of killing anything, be it a mouse or a person.”

“Be pretty frightenin’ if you did!”

“What did you say?”

“Um, well ... d’y’have any idea who ‘X’ is?”

“I do.”

“Then they’re in *big* trouble.”

“There’s this classmate from high school, someone who apparently had a thing for me then. We haven’t met for fifty years, but a year ago we got to emailing each other. He asked whether I’d meet him nearby in town when he was there, but I turned him down, saying I was too busy.”

“So you haven’t had sex or anythin’ like that?”

“We haven’t even met, as I said. Then on the day the first fax came, it was followed by another less than five minutes later, and a third hot on its heels. The fourth and the fifth ones came through some days later.”

“Let me see. I may not know my proverbs ’n stuff, but I’m a pro when it comes to vettin’ the written word. Hmm. Reads like the wife to me.”

“Thought so.”

“Yep, from what I’ve just read, I’d venture your classmate X avoided gettin’ married early on, and then when he was nearin’ his forties he finally tied the knot with a young woman. His wife’d be in her mid-fifties now. Just gone through menopause. The sex’s dropped off over the last few years, and they haven’t done it in over a year. Two kids. The older girl’s got a job, and there’s no sign of a man in her life. The younger boy’s in his mid-twenties but’s been a shut-in for over a decade. At one time there was violence in the home, but it’s pretty much gone away. That night, the missus was by herself—husband not back yet, daughter doin’ overtime, son shut away upstairs.... She’s eatin’ prawn crackers or somethin’, and all these doubts and jealousy just start bubblin’ and swellin’ up in her and she can’t stop herself makin’ the call. But you’re away on holiday. No answerphone on, either. She throws a fit—*Put your damn answerphone on, lady!*—and shoots off the first fax:

*tootle-tootle-toot!* (on its way!)

*beeeep!* (transmission complete!)

She takes a deep breath to calm herself down, but it doesn’t work. Guiltily munchin’ away on the crackers again, she feels the jealousy and anger boil up once more inside her—off goes the second fax: *tootle-tootle-toot!*—*beeeep!* More crackers—*munch, munch, munch*—then the third fax: *tootle-tootle-toot!*—*beeeep!* *Munch, munch, munch.* Meanwhile the son upstairs is glued to his computer screen, intent on his game as if possessed....”

“Wow, sounds as if you were actually there watching.”

“But dear, don’t you feel a bit sorry for her? Sendin’ off three faxes like that, in the space of ten minutes—clearly the act of someone driven to the edge, you know?”

“That’s what I thought, too. You just know that somewhere in the world right now a woman will be feeling that way. It’s not like I haven’t felt the same way myself in the past! A looong time ago, I was agonizing over something. Something I just couldn’t shake. Not that I did something like *that*, though. Okay, I did something similar—went a bit *overboard.*”

“*I* certainly did something like that—went overboard. We all do. You can’t become a grown woman without doing something like that.”

“You know, the odd pearl of wisdom does drop from your lips.”

I chuckled. “So will you wait on the rent, then?”

“That I can’t do. Anyway, I can well understand she’s had it tough. So how about I write back and tell her it’s all in her mind, that there’s nothing between us?”

“She won’t believe you. She’s caught up in that vicious circle o’ doubt and can’t think straight. All you can do is, next time she’s agonizin’ over her situation and gives you a call, you respond with total sincerity—don’t you think? Maybe the tone of your voice’ll reassure her a little, eh? People like her turn up in stories the world over. Men off their partners out of jealousy, but a jealous woman blames the sin, not the man—and will hold a grudge against the “other woman” forever. Am I right? It’s not Prince Genji who Lady Rokujo haunts to death—no, it’s his wife Aoi. And Medea doesn’t burn Jason to death—no, his new bride whatshername instead. Right? And it happens in modern-day Japan, too—that woman who set fire to the house of the guy she was havin’ an affair with, and all those kids burned to death. The man in question wasn’t even there when she did it. And that woman who stalked her husband’s lover and in the end ran’er over. Yes, right about now our Mrs. X is fair *bubblin’ over* with resentment toward that *damn husband-trickin’ landlady....*”

Rattled, my landlady took off, havin’ clean forgotten about the rent.

Just as she was leavin’, the email I’d been waitin’ for arrived in my inbox, seekin’ my advice on love. Its heartrendin’ contents seemed to chime with the landlady’s story.

*Dear Ms. Shiromi, I can’t take it anymore. Recently my boyfriend has been seeing another woman. And what’s worse, it seems she has a husband and children. We ourselves began as an affair five years ago. His wife doesn’t know about me. When I ask about the new woman, he just gives me the brushoff and claims there isn’t anyone. But I’m certain. I feel like telling her family and his wife about what’s going on.*

(Woman, 39.)

So, in summary, this Ms. A who has written to me for help is single, and her lover is married man Mr. B. This Mr. B is carryin’ on a relationship with Ms. A while (apparently) havin’ got involved with a Mrs. C, who has a family herself. This is hard for Ms. A to take. On carefully re-readin’ her missive, it feels to me like Ms. A is almost at the end of her tether when it comes to her relationship with Mr. B. Yet she can’t just stop—she can’t just stop bein’ *jealous*.

*Why am I so consumed by this jealousy? I don’t want to feel this way if I can help it. But I just can’t stop.*—She writes in a wounded postscript.

And it's not just Ms. A and Mrs. X, you know. You wouldn't believe how many people have written to me with the same kind of problem. All of 'em writhin' around in the throes of jealousy.

*I'm seeing a married man from the same section at work on the sly. I don't care about his wife, but it bothers me he's friendly with my coworker.*" (Woman, 32.)

Much the same.

*[The girl I'm jealous of] is a little younger than me, a beauty, graduated from a good university—a proper young lady. Once I started thinking about her, I couldn't stop, and now I find myself resenting everything about her. I only went to a junior college and haven't got much going for me—I feel such a loser in comparison.* (Woman, 35.)

Jealousy meshes with waitin'—the waitin' and not knowin'—and in turn, waitin' meshes with affairs. In so many letters from people, the jealousy is to do with affairs.

*I'm dating a man, and we're planning to get married. But I can't forget the guy I broke up with two years ago. We dated for about a year, and in the end I couldn't stand the fact we were having an affair, so we broke up. But I loved him, and I've never felt such a close connection to anyone. I'm worried whether I can get married with this hanging over me.* (Woman, 26.)

In short, she writes she's jealous of the previous boyfriend's wife, can't see a future with her current man, and couldn't take sneakin' around. In my answer to her, I felt the need to drive home a point about the nature of affairs, namely: *affairs are special*.

When I had my own affair in my youth, I was so passionately in love—as if a red thread of destiny was joinin' us—that I believed what was gettin' me so worked up wasn't that we were having an affair, but that our love itself was special. But now I know: an affair's an affair, and it makes things *a third more excitin'*.

Continuin' a relationship with a guy who's perfect apart from havin' a wife is much like how it is between an alcoholic husband and his wife. *He's a good husband—apart from the*

*drinking. ... He'd be lost without me.*—Sure, it's fine to be supportive, but supportin' a drinkin' habit is the road to vexation.

Here's what else I wrote to her: "Let's not mince words. Basically, you're dating a cheater, thinking what a great guy he'd be if he didn't have a wife. You're shutting your eyes to his self-serving flouting of social norms, to the mealy-mouthed indecision that's dragging you down. To top it off, he hasn't chosen you as his partner. If he had, it wouldn't be an affair. Dear, you need to face reality."

*Oh, our jealousies....*

Buddhism has the expression *ton-jin-chi*, humanity's trio of "worldly desires." The heart that craves ever more. The heart that rages when things don't go its way. The ignorant heart that makes no effort to know. Yes, sounds like a monk's sermon, I know.

Here's what I think about the rage in our hearts, which amounts to jealousy. It is truly a green-eyed monster. But at the same time, it's funny—you get jealous because there's someone to be jealous about, not because you set out to be jealous. No matter how enlightened you may be, no matter how committed you are to livin' an upright life, the moment your man gets another woman, your heart is thrown into disarray, and you have no say in it. Isn't that what it means to be human? And it's not our fault.

I can just hear the tongue-lashin' from the gray-haired curtain-twitchers—*Hey, it is all your fault, you good-for-nothin'!* What's that? What about our old landlady? The same with her. Soon be 70, but she's down in the mud with us, too. Ha ha, that's why I can't hate her. It's in our nature, we women.

Y'know, I've suffered such a tongue-lashin' myself from the neighborhood morals brigade, and havin' thought it all over, I truly understand how jealousy works. If there's a course in jealousy, I'm fully proficient—no, not in *bein'* jealous, but in overcomin' it.

So then, what's the essence of jealousy? I'll come straight out with it, all right? Don't be shocked, now. Jealousy is essentially a battle with yourself. Jealousy appears when you lose your self-confidence. Or conversely, you lose your self-confidence when you feel jealous. So jealousy is the moment you feel weak, the moment you feel less worthy than others.

All of us have an instinct buried within us to become stronger than others, a desire to do what it takes to leave behind as many offspring as possible. If a stranger intrudes on your territory, they're in your way, and you fight 'em. If someone stronger than you turns up, you

curse 'em under your breath. Yes, it's completely normal for all animals to feel and behave like that—we can call it a universal impulse for all living creatures.

I think love is just the same. Fallin' in love with someone, wantin' to get close to someone emotionally and physically, and missin' 'em when you can't be—this, I believe, is the possessive heart that wants to affirm just how strong you are. To put it bluntly.

Previously, I too thought love meant fallin' hard for someone, but at some point along the way I had my satori moment. My present husband was so in love with the woman I was, warts and all, and me with him, and we wanted to be together—I feel a little sorry for him, truth be told, but also grateful.

If you love someone, you listen to what they say, don't you? If they tell you to buy somethin', you say, "Yes, dear." If they tell you they want to eat somethin', you say, "Yes, dear." Woman or man. If they ask for sex, you say, "Yes, dear," even if it's a bit of a chore—because you love them. If you get pregnant, it can't be helped, can it; you might as well go ahead and have it. And that's what your spouse is aimin' for.

Say you have the baby, so you're busy and you ask your partner to do a diaper change or pick it up from the nursery, and as they're in love with you, they say, "Yes, dear." That's what you're aiming for, too.

Some people want to be dominated: it's pleasurable for them to think, *Ah, I'm under this person's control*. This is of course the flipside of the desire to dominate. But if you find out your man wants to dominate another woman more, you will suffer at the hands of jealousy, no doubt in my mind.

Jealousy is the rage you experience when someone else causes you to lose the power you'd had up till then. If you win, you don't feel that jealousy. If your opponent is younger, a *lil'* bit more beautiful, on a higher salary, you feel the ground shake under your feet, and jealousy rears its head. You feel hopeless and anxious, and in the end you may be so lonely you feel you're goin' to vanish altogether. That's how it is.

I received this agony letter quite some time ago, but it illustrates this to a T:

*Excuse me for taking up your time with my trivial problem, but please help. I got divorced a year ago. The reason was my husband's affair with a bank employee. Since then, whenever I see someone from a bank, even if it's at the bank (and there's a lot of*

*workers there), I'm seized by the impulse to run away. I'm disgusted with myself for being fixated on this a year on from the divorce. (Woman, 30s.)*

This is no trivial problem. Her words make you *stingin'ly* aware of just how much she was sufferin' a year before.

“Please think of divorce as a four-year process,” I wrote back. You see, it takes four years to get over it. After one year, you're still in the initial stage: nope, nothin' yet returned to normal. You may look calm enough on the outside, but inside you're still a wreck: any lil' thing, like, yes, catchin' sight of a bank employee, will be like the scab comin' off a wound before it's healed—the blood ain't yet staunched.

“However long it may take, this kind of pain will lessen. While it's still hurting, you should avoid banks as much as you can. Withdrawals and deposits can now also be made at an ATM or online, so make use of them. You're right to run away at this point—you shouldn't feel at all embarrassed. Go ahead and hide yourself away if that works for you,” I wrote.

Imagine that laid out before us is a scroll filled with esoteric Buddhist teachings, there for me—fully initiated into the inner mysteries as I am—to interpret. Let's take a lil' gander. Well, first of all, written there's the fact I'm human, and thus naturally prone to losin' my confidence and gettin' depressed. And of course, there are people who're superior to me. That natural feeling of envy shouldn't be repressed but instead set free. If I can do that, I'll be aware of myself *as myself*.

To achieve this, it's good to view our regular values from a bit of a distance. What I mean by our regular values in this case is the belief that being thin, young, 'n' beautiful's better than being fat, old, 'n' ugly—what the Buddhists call *vanity*, the impermanent.

Most everyone was once thin, pretty, 'n' young, but time passes, and every last one of us gets fat, ages, and loses their looks. Ain't none of us who can avoid it.

And when you do get fat, old, 'n' ugly, if you're still clingin' to those values for dear life, pretendin' you're still “the fairest in the land” like Snow White's stepmother or somethin', you're done for. So you need to adjust your values a little. Flip the paradigm, and state to the world, *I am myself*.



Okay, not easy to do. Not easy at all—but if you can manage it once, you can do it for the duration.

All right, now another thing we get caught up in. We don't have to make the man or woman we're seein' the center of our world. Or at least not the *entire* center! Again, easier said than done. From my experience, such a thing becomes possible after I've been seein' a guy for six or seven years.

If you can find somethin' else to soak up all that possessiveness, it's a great help indeed. Like a dog, or a cat, or a garden. Just not a child, okay? You should think carefully whether your focus of attention is fit for purpose before you plunge in.

And you should cultivate the habit of respondin' to praise with a real sense of elation. If you train yourself to revel in the praise, it'll help you get back on your feet faster no matter how jealous you've got or how down on yourself you are.

Furthermore, there's plenty more aspects of our personalities besides jealousy we could do without—like bein' a tightwad, hotheaded, slovenly, and so on. So we can think of jealousy as one of a bunch of popularly bad-mouthed personality defects that are lumped together.

What I'm sayin' is, it's not like jealousy over an affair is some special case. Jealousy's for all of us. There're lots of married women who are jealous of the "other woman" their husband has got involved with. Those women who claim they've *stopped* being jealous since gettin' married are mostly forgettin' the proviso that that's only the case after a decade or so of marriage, when their relationship has really settled down.

The following kind of email has hit my inbox:

*My wife wrongly suspects me of having an affair. It's true I'd got close to this woman at work, but not at all in the way she suspects—the woman simply gave me moral support. My wife won't accept any of my explanations. She has got to the point where she's straining at the bit to have things out with this woman, and I'm embarrassed to say I'm scared of her. How can I dispel her doubts? (Man, 45.)*

This plea for advice may come from a man, but as I've said, I'm fully qualified to cover such issues: I know *exactly* what to do in this case. Here's my reply:

*You need to convince your wife to her complete satisfaction that she is your top priority. There's no time to waste—better to make a few missteps than keep her waiting. The longer she waits, the more her suspicions feed on themselves, and the more she'll become captive to the dubious delusions bubbling up within her—so whatever you do, don't make her wait. Sure, she may claim your declarations of love make you seem all the more suspicious, or that you're coming on too strong, but even so, reach out to her frequently, show her a good time—and that means sex, too, of course.*

And then I got a similar request for advice from the wife in such an equation. So similar, I almost suspect it's the same couple involved. The wife in question sneaked a look at her husband's phone and discovered a large number of emails from a woman. After anguishin' over them for a long time, she finally confronted him, 'n' he was able to assure her, "That woman and I just exchange emails as friends—I love you!" But his assurance didn't set her mind at ease.

*We went out on more dates together, and were more active in bed, but the unease I'd thought had gone away was still there. I got so stressed out every time he came back late, I actually lost weight. Do I simply have to change my attitude and trust him?*  
(Woman, 40s.)

Here's my reply:

*Ex-act-ly. Trust him, and change your attitude. You can't play defense in this case. When it comes to this aspect of life, you should always be on the offensive. Looking at his emails is playing defense. Going on fun dates with your husband and having sex with him is going on the offensive.*

I keep forgettin' to mention it, but jealousy isn't confined to romantic love. We can be fiercely jealous about anythin', whether it's success or failure in work or study, or the relative state of our abilities, looks, or finances.

*After I graduated from high school, I got a job that was basically continuing on from previous part-time work. But my classmates from school went on to university and really made something of themselves, so I feel like I'm in the shadow of these women. I'm jealous and angry, and I feel both scared and sad about the way I am. (Woman, 26.)*

Another in the same vein:

*I'm insecure about my looks. Seeing a beautiful woman makes my head explode. I did well academically, so I've got a professional position, but when I come across a woman with the same or a lesser status at work who is the slightest bit pretty, I detest her with a vengeance. It always leaves me feeling so bad about myself. (Woman, 44.)*

Then there's this one:

*I just can't help comparing myself to others. Even though I know everyone has different abilities, and have had different experiences and made varied efforts in their lives, somehow I always feel inadequate. Is it always going to be like this for me—comparing myself with others and feeling envious, self-loathing and depressed at every turn? (Woman, 32.)*

And again:

*I hate myself for being jealous of my best friend. We've been best friends since university, both gone through a divorce at a young age, and have supported each other throughout our lives. Recently she's been successful workwise, even appearing in the paper, and I've found it very hard to take. But even more so the fact that I'm harboring such negative feelings toward my best friend. (Woman, 30s.)*

One such missive agonizin' over the topic of jealousy asked me if I'd ever felt that bad about myself in such a way. Of course I have. Or should I say, I used to, horribly—in recent times I haven't felt jealous one bit. Ha ha—full proficiency, remember?

Let's see ... it's been more than a decade since I put paid to men and work issues. It feels almost like Buddha himself has given me his seal of approval.

My mantra—*I'm me*—has acted like a kind of—how shall I put it—*panacea* since I was young. A kind of medicine that I didn't need a doctor to dispense, like an antacid or laxative: I just simply *had* it as a cure-all for jealousy. I deployed it with effortless mastery, but for the past 10 years, living way out in the sticks, in a kind of exile, I haven't read anythin' recent, nor've I hardly met any youngsters. On the rare occasion I *have* read somethin' new, it's all seemed so fresh and interestin'. *I'm me* has always been my mantra, but once I stepped back from the crowd, it struck me that it's also *People are people*. And in my job as agony aunt, I listen to people's various troubles.

Hearin' them on a daily basis, I've become keenly aware that when people get together in groups, all those *Is* become *we*. And if *I* means *we*, then I become just one person among many, and the concept of jealousy fades away.

A certain man—well, my husband, as it happens—still seems, from my viewpoint, someone so good you'd love to hold onto him tightly, but from an outsider's viewpoint, he seems nothing so much as some old geezer you'd rather hold off at a distance. What I've learnt from such a thing is how we can lose our objectivity, something that didn't use to happen to me. I felt like every woman in my husband's vicinity must be after him—a most unsettlin' feelin' indeed.

My husband's recedin' hairline, expandin' waistline, his wrinkled face, wanin' sexual prowess—they all drove home to me that he just didn't have the wherewithal to step out on me. Regardless of whether or not he was devoted to me, I'd come to be able to trust him. Serves the old goat right, I guess! And I no longer fret over my appearance.

*Blemishes, wrinkles, gray hairs, cellulite.*

Now if someone tells me I've gained weight, I don't turn a hair. *I'm me*, it's perfectly natural for someone in their fifties to look like me, and my husband says he's fine with it, so that's that—I feel fine how I am. I don't know whether possessin' such self-confidence in one's youth makes life easier or harder, but in either case it's the kind of confidence that has a limited shelf life. Yet one thing's for sure—it works wonders on the ol' jealousy.