

The Whole World is Jealous

Ito Hiromi

My, what a long summer it's been. All we ever seem to greet each other with is *It's a hot one today!* I've all but forgotten that we once had autumn greetings for autumn, winter greetings for winter.

A long time ago...now, when I say 'long time ago' I don't mean dinosaurs roamed freely, this is a little more recent than that. When I was but a wee child, we had a phenomenon called 'winter', when something called the 'north winds' blew and something called 'frost' formed. And we would say, *It's cold.* Oh you don't know what that is. Hmm, how do I explain...? Imagine being in a refrigerator for a very long time, you would start to feel...what, you've never been inside of one? I guess that's fair. You're not meat or eggs. Hmm. Okay, imagine eating three bowls of shaved ice in an air-conditioned room, and you're so cold your teeth start to chatter...what, you'll get diarrhea? Well, yes, I suppose you're right. But that's not the point here, can you be quiet and listen? There was a time, a long time ago, when we would get cold without eating any shaved ice at all. The room would chill over by itself, and our hands and ears would get freezing cold. That's right, with no air-conditioning. You can't imagine? Kids these days, you don't even know what *cold* is. And so on. This is the explaining I would have to do. Ah, global warming.

It is amid this unbearable heat that I am reminded of another phenomenon called Jealousy. Jealousy closely resembles the act of waiting, yes, I agree, sometimes it's hard to keep track of which is which. When people are forced to wait, people grow agitated, and when we are agitated we become suspicious, dreaming up all sorts of stories, true or false. Our delusions inflate like balloons and before you know it, we're writhing in jealousy. It's an excruciating state.

"Are you here, Hiromi-san?" That's my landlord, an unmarried woman in her late 60's.

"Welcome home, Ms. Landlord! How was your trip abroad? Quite the luxury, considering your tenants haven't paid rent..."

"Everyone's paid but you, that's how I was able to go. You're paying up today and that's that. But first, will you take a look at this? I was away for two weeks, and I came home to this fax."

On the page was a furiously scribbled note:

To Ms. So-and-So: Please do not destroy our family. We have our hands full with a son who has not left his room in years. We do not need you to email or call this house. X

"Who's Ms. So-and-So?"

"That's me."

“I didn’t realize you had a name other than Landlord.”

“I wasn’t born a landlord. My parents gave me a name.”

“But wow, who would have guessed? You don’t look the type to kill a man.”

“Hiromi-san, it’s *fly*. Hurt a fly. Kill a man? I would never. Anyway, I have no idea what I’m being accused of here.”

“I’d be scared if you did.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Do you have a clue as to who X could be?”

“I do.”

“That’s... scary.”

“A classmate from high school. Says he had a thing for me back then. But I haven’t seen him in fifty years, and at least a year’s passed since we exchanged a few emails. He was coming to a nearby town and asked to visit, but I told him I was busy.”

“So you didn’t have sex with him.”

“I didn’t even see him! Anyway, the first fax arrived the night of said date. Five minutes later, the second fax. And not five minutes later, a third. The fourth and fifth arrived a few days later.”

“Let me see. I may not know my proverbs but I *am* a professional writer. Hmm. From the wording, I would say these are from X’s wife.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“From what I can tell, your high school buddy X missed his chance early on and married when he was almost forty. To a much younger woman. The wife is now in her mid-fifties, she’s post-menopausal, and sex has been nearly non-existent for years. Their last encounter was over a year ago. They have two kids. Older sister works, has no man in her life. Younger brother’s in his mid-twenties and has been holed up in his room for over a decade. There were a few violent episodes in the past, but he’s settled down since. The night of the fax, the wife was all alone, her husband out, daughter working late, son shut upstairs in his room. As she sat munching on some shrimp-flavored rice crackers, doubt and jealousy crept into her mind and started growing, slowly at first but then they kept swelling until finally they were out of her control. That’s when she grabbed the phone, punched in your number. But you were away on your trip and the answering machine wasn’t set up. “Liar, pretending not to be home!” Incensed, she sent that first fax, *toot-toot-toot* (that’s the sound of the fax being sent). *Beep!* (The sound of the fax being delivered.) She exhaled with her whole body and tried to calm herself but it didn’t work, so she reached for more shrimp-flavored rice crackers and as she munched the jealousy and rage continued to boil. So she sent the

second fax, *toot-toot-toot, beep!* More munching on shrimp-flavored rice crackers and then the third fax...*toot-toot-toot, beep! Munch, munch, munch.* Her son is upstairs this whole time, by the way, his eyes glued to his computer game.”

“You talk as if you were there.”

“But don’t you feel a little sorry for her? Sending three of these in a span of ten minutes. She must have really felt backed into a corner.”

“I agree. It worries me that a woman is out there buried underneath these thoughts. It’s not as if I can’t relate. I’ve gotten into some messes in my time. I agonized, drove myself insane. I didn’t do anything like this, but I’ve done countless, countless things.”

“I’ve done countless things like *this!* Everyone has. This is how you become a full-fledged woman.”

“Sometimes you say the wisest things.”

“Thank you. Can you wait on rent?”

“No. Anyway, I think I understand the extent of this woman’s pain. How about I write her back, ‘You’re imagining things. There is nothing going on?’”

“She would never believe you. She’s filled with doubt and suspicion and can’t think straight. The next time she calls you in a fit of fury, all you can do is address her concerns as sincerely as possible. Once she hears your voice, she will settle down a little. Right? I mean, take a look at world literature throughout the ages, people like this are everywhere. Jealousy drives a man to kill his partner, but jealous women? They point their wrath at the other woman—condemning the crime but not the man. Lady Rokujō put a deadly curse, not on Hikaru Genji, but on his wife Aoi no Ue. Medea didn’t burn Jason, but his new wife something-or-other. It happens everywhere. Even in Japan recently, a woman torched her married lover’s house and killed his children. The man wasn’t even home. And how about the incident where a woman stalked her husband’s lover and eventually ran her over in her car? Oh yes, I’d say X’s wife is plotting her revenge on you as we speak, for taking advantage of her husband!”

The landlord got so scared she left without collecting rent.

As if on cue, I checked my computer and saw an email from a woman asking for advice. Her plight seems to sync up—or does it?—with the landlord’s situation. The misery is palpable.

“Hiromi-san, I’m hurting so much I can hardly stand it. I think my boyfriend has a new woman on the side. A woman with a husband and children! Our relationship is also an affair, but we’ve been seeing each other for five years. His wife doesn’t know about us. When I ask about this new woman, he swears

there's nothing going on. But I know he's lying. How can I expose their fling to the woman's family and his wife?" (Age 39)

To summarize, the woman seeking my advice, whom I will call A, is single. Her lover, B, is married. While dating A, B started seeing C (allegedly), who is also married. A cannot bear it. She knows she has no future with B, and yet she can't stop. She can't stop from feeling jealous. "Why do I have to suffer in this way?" she seethes. "If I could choose not to be jealous, I would. But it just won't go away."

The thing is, this woman and X's wife are hardly unique. I've received numerous, countless emails like this. The whole world is torn with jealousy.

"I'm secretly seeing a married man from my department. The thought of his wife doesn't bother me, but I get so upset when I see him acting friendly with a certain coworker." (Age 32)

Here's another. "I'm envious of a girl who is slightly younger than me, beautiful, from a good family, and went to a great school. As soon as I realized this, everything began to annoy me, and now I can't stand the sight of her. I only went to junior college and I have no special traits to speak of. I feel completely worthless." (Age 35)

Jealousy stands shoulder-to-shoulder with waiting, and waiting with illicit affairs. So it doesn't surprise me that many of these emails are about extramarital affairs. "My boyfriend and I are discussing marriage, but I'm hung up on a man I split up with two years ago. We were together for about a year but I broke it off because I couldn't endure the weight of an affair." This woman says she felt crushed by the resentment she felt toward her lover's wife, the lack of a future in the relationship, and the constant sneaking around. And yet. "I've never felt such a strong connection with a man, and I worry I won't be able to marry anyone else." (Age 26)

This seems like a good time to address what lies at the root of all affairs. "Extramarital affairs are special indeed," I wrote back. When I was a much younger woman and caught up in one myself, I felt a love and connection so deep it couldn't be described as anything other than fate. Surely our relationship was meant to be, and not some cheap fling like the others. But now I know the truth. Illicit affairs feel 30% steamier because they are illicit affairs.

Continuing a relationship with a man who 'would be perfect if he didn't have a wife' is comparable to staying married to an alcoholic. Wives who claim, "He's a good husband when he's not drinking" or "He can't go on without me" believe they're standing by their men, when what they're really doing is supporting their alcoholism.

I wrote, "I'm going to be straight with you. This man is a cheater. When you tell yourself, 'He would be a good man if he didn't have a wife,' you're averting your eyes from the insatiable greed and

spineless hemming and hawing. He hasn't chosen you as his partner. If he had, this wouldn't be an affair. Do you understand? I think it's time to face reality."

Where does jealousy stem from? In the Buddhist world, there is a word called *tonjinchi*, denoting the three mental states—greed, rage and delusion—that are said to be the source of all earthly desires. *Ton* is the greedy thirst for more, *jin* the fury that comes with losing control, and *chi* the ignorant mind that avoids the truth. Yes, this is beginning to sound like a priest's sermon.

Of the three states introduced above, I believe it is *jin*, the fury, that fuels the green-eyed monster and leads us toward self-hatred and crippling resentment. But here's what's tricky. Jealousy occurs, not because one wishes for it, but simply because another person *exists*. No matter how spiritually enlightened we are or how stoically we go about our days, the instant we learn there is 'another woman' we fall straight to pieces. But isn't that what being human is all about? We can't be held accountable.

I can picture the wise old folks in the neighborhood now, shaking their heads and sighing, "You have so much to learn." What would my landlord say, you ask? Oh don't even bother with her, that woman lives in a bubble. She's almost seventy years old and yet remains so naïve. But that's why you have to love her. She is a female, through and through.

The old-timers in the neighborhood can save their lectures, because I know exactly what I'm talking about. I have endured enough pain in my lifetime, agonized with the best of them. If there exists such a thing in the world as the Art of Jealousy, I have mastered the craft. No, not of being jealous. I've mastered the art of overcoming the jealousy.

So what *is* the true nature of jealousy? I am about to tell you, so brace yourself. Are you ready? The true nature of jealousy...is the battle with the self. Jealousy rears its ugly head when one loses confidence. Or perhaps one loses confidence when one becomes jealous. Either way, jealousy is that moment when you feel weak, when you feel you have less worth than others. We all possess an instinct, a natural desire, to be stronger than others and leave behind our offspring. When outsiders invade our territory, we fight to keep them out. We feel threatened when someone more powerful appears. It's an instinctive, animalistic reaction. Yes, a universal impulse shared by all living beings.

I believe the same is true for love. A woman falls in love, she wants to spend time with her man, get to know him better. She misses him when he's gone. At the root of that longing is a desire for control. It's the need for validation, the need to say, "I am powerful." The truth is that simple. I hate to break it to you.

Before I reached full enlightenment, I too ate up all of that head-over-heels nonsense. But then I saw the light. My poor, dear husband, who believes it was burning, passionate love that brought us

together. You see, when a man loves you, he listens to your every wish. If you ask, “Can you buy this for me?” he says “Okay, sure.” You say, “I want to eat that,” and he replies, “Sure.” This is true with women and men alike. If he wants to have sex, you say, “Okay, sure,” even if you’re not in the mood. Because you love him. A pregnancy? You have the baby, even if you’re not overjoyed. That’s all part of the man’s plan, see. And then the baby comes and you’re busy so you ask him, “Can you change the diaper?” and “Can you do preschool pick-up?” and being in love with you he replies, “Okay, sure.” That’s the *woman’s* master plan.

Some people actually do wish to be dominated. They get a thrill out of being under someone’s control. But this too, is actually a desire for control. When this same woman finds out her man wants to control another woman more, watch out, here comes the jealousy.

Jealousy is the emotion, the anger, that flares up when we realize someone has robbed us of our sense of control. It doesn’t show up when we feel superior to another. But if the other person is younger, a little prettier, or makes more money than us, we promptly lose our footing. We’re affronted with loneliness and anxiety, which when examined carefully, is a mourning for the loss of self.

I received an email awhile back that describes this situation perfectly. “This is a silly story, but here goes. My husband and I divorced a year ago because he was cheating with a woman who worked at a bank. Since then, whenever I see a bank employee, even if it is inside of a bank (where there are many bank employees), I feel the urge to run away. It’s been a year since the divorce, and I’m ashamed to admit how sensitive I still am.” (Woman in her 30s)

I don’t think this is silly at all. I can feel how much this woman suffered one year ago. So I wrote back, “For every divorce, I would give it four years.” Four years is the length of time it takes to recover from a breakup of that magnitude. A year since the divorce? She’s still in the early grieving stages, nothing is back to normal. Outwardly, things may appear to have settled some, but she’s still torn up inside. The smallest trigger, such as seeing someone who works at a bank, can rip the scab right off and the blood will start to trickle again. “I promise the pain will subside someday,” I wrote. “But while it lingers, try to stay away from the bank. You can withdraw and deposit money through a machine or online, so take full advantage of those options. Fly the coop. Better safe than sorry. Run and hide for as long as you need, there’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

Remember, I’ve achieved full mastery in this area. See here, I have a scroll to prove it. Let me unroll it and share the secrets inscribed inside.

First, you are human, which means you will lose confidence at times. You're bound to feel down once in a while. People will excel at things you do not, and it's natural to feel envy. Better to release that emotion than to keep it bottled up inside.

Once you understand that, repeat this mantra: *I am me*. To fully grasp the meaning of these three words, I suggest you step away from the values society deems 'normal'. In the 'normal' world, for example, thin, young, and beautiful are considered to be more valuable traits than fat, old and ugly. But nothing is forever, you hear? Everyone who is thin, young and beautiful will one day grow fat, old and ugly. Not a soul in the world can avoid this fate. When you're fat, old and ugly but still live by 'normal' standards, you'll have to trick yourself into believing you're the most beautiful woman in the world, like Snow White's evil stepmother. Sorry, not going to happen. You must adjust your values, learn to step beyond those limits. Say *The hell with it* and get on with your life. Repeat after me: *I am me*. It's not easy. No one said this was a walk in the park. But once the belief is attained, it will be yours to keep forever.

Next, find something you can get lost in. Don't make a relationship with a man or woman the central theme in your life. This too is easier said than done. From personal experience, I'd say it becomes effortless after six or seven years with a man. It's helpful if you have something else to satisfy the need to own and control. Like a dog. Or a cat. Or gardening. But not children. They're useless in this case, I'll just tell you that upfront.

What else...oh yes, get into the habit of being absolutely overjoyed whenever you receive a compliment. If you can train yourself to react with unabashed joy, you will be able to bounce back from jealousy or loss of confidence that much quicker.

And another thing. Aside from your jealous streak, I'm sure you have other qualities you'd be better off without, like being stingy, impatient, or sloppy. Remind yourself that jealousy is just another of those unappealing personality traits, one of many.

Now, is jealousy reserved primarily for extramarital affairs? Oh no, it belongs to everyone. The whole world is jealous. Lots of married women get testy every time their husbands so much as come into contact with other women. A woman who says she stopped being jealous when she wed is forgetting the caveat that she's been married ten years. Romance cools substantially in ten years.

Let me share another email. "My wife is accusing me of having an affair with a woman at work. I'm friendly with the co-worker and consider her an ally at the office, but it's not at all what my wife imagines. I've tried to explain this, but she won't believe me. I fear she will chase the woman down and try to settle things with her. How can I assure my wife that nothing is going on?" (Age 45)

This is from a male reader, but as I am a master, I of course know the answer. “Your job is to make your wife believe, ‘You are my number one.’ No matter what you do, do not make her wait. If she’s kept waiting for any length of time, her suspicions will mushroom, she will begin creating stories, and she will end up a prisoner to her delusions. You must *not* keep her waiting. Check in with her frequently and invite her places even if she thinks you’re being too attentive, even if you annoy her. And don’t forget the sex, that goes without saying.”

Not long after, I received an email with a similar question, this time from a wife. For a second I thought it was from the same couple. This woman checked her husband’s cell phone and found numerous messages from another woman. After suffering in silence she finally sat him down and made him swear he and the woman were just friends. “I love *you*.” Still, the doubt lingers. “My husband and I go out for drinks and we’re intimate at night, but I’m plagued by the thought that they’re still in touch. When he comes home late, I worry. I’ve lost weight from all of the anxiety. Do I have to just trust my husband and switch my mindset?” (Woman in her 40s)

My reply. “That’s right. Trust your husband and switch your mindset. What’s important here is to take the initiative. Don’t be passive. Snooping through his phone is passive, it’s defensive. Going on dates and having sex with your husband is being on the offensive.”

Often we forget that jealousy doesn’t pertain only to matters of love. It takes over our lives in areas including performance at work and school, talent, looks, how much money we have.

“After graduating high school I started a part-time job, which kind of spilled into the job I have now. But my classmates all went on to college and now have great careers. They seem so independent, I can’t help but feel there’s a huge gap between us. It saddens—and frightens—me that I’m always jealous or angry.” (Age 26)

“I’m insecure with my looks and get angry whenever I see a beautiful person. I was a good student in school and now have a job that requires some skill, but if one of my subordinates or someone in my department is even slightly good-looking, I hate them. The bitterness has long eaten me up inside.” (Age 44)

And this. “I can’t stop comparing myself to others. I know people have wide-ranging skills and experiences, and some have put forth more effort than others. But I always feel like I’m not enough. Am I going to continue on like this forever, comparing myself to others and feeling like an utter failure?” (Age 32)

And another. “I hate myself for being jealous of my best friend. We’ve been close since we were in school, and we supported each other through our divorces years ago. Recently she has found success with

her work and was featured in a newspaper. I can't describe the misery I felt seeing that article. And it *kills* me to harbor such negatives thoughts toward my best friend." (Woman in her 30s)

I don't remember which email this was, but someone asked, *Have you ever felt this much pain?* Of course I have. It used to happen all the time. But it doesn't bother me anymore. For the past ten years or so, I've been problem-free in the area of men and work. Hey, I wasn't given the title of master for nothing. I'm expecting a certificate of merit to arrive from Buddha any day now.

The *I am me* mindset is medicine I've had stored in my medicine cabinet for years. It requires no prescription, like pills for a stomachache or constipation. I've protected it fiercely, relied on it whenever I needed it. About ten years ago, we moved to a remote area far away from everyone else, as if in exile. I no longer read contemporary works, nor do I talk to anyone in the modern world. When I do very rarely read something, it's refreshing and enjoyable. Only after stepping away from the masses did I come to the full realization that *I am me* means *other people are other people*. Accepting myself means accepting others.

On top of that, I receive these emails every day. The more I read people's problems, the more it sinks in that we are a collective. When individuals who believe *I am me* come together, it forms a collective *we*. I'm part of that *we*. I'm both an 'I' and an 'other'. Once I learned this, I really had no use for jealousy.

With regards to men, and I'm talking about my husband here...after all these years I still think he's a fantastic catch. But to anyone else, he's just an old man they're happy to throw back in the water. I'm objective enough to see that now. I used to believe every woman who crossed our path wanted a piece of him, and that kept me on my toes. Now I glance over at his receding hairline, protruding belly, wrinkles on his face and decline in sexual performance, and I know he no longer has the energy to try and sneak around. I finally, truly, believe I'm his one and only. It serves him right, is what I say.

As for my own appearance, I don't struggle with that anymore either. Wrinkles, blemishes, gray hairs, a little extra fat. I don't bat an eye when someone quips, "You've gained weight." I am me. At fifty, things are as they should be. My husband is the only one who sees me regularly, and if he says it's fine, then it's fine. This is confidence. If only I had possessed this confidence when I was younger, how much easier things would have been. Or maybe not, who knows? This confidence is a limited-time offer, available during a specified period only. But let me tell you, there truly is no better medicine for jealousy.