

A Simple Thanks



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Translated by Meredith McKinney

I've had reason to move house again, this time to a place one station on from Shimokitazawa. So my nearest city— if you could call it a city— is still Shimokitazawa.

This feels like the last move I'll make before I die, and it was particularly poignant in all sorts of ways.

The haunting sense that this just might be the place where I die.

The wrenching thought that the animals who live with me will no doubt die here, too.

It's the first time I've had feelings like this about where I live, and for this very reason I have a presentiment that these things will indeed come to pass.

This house will be my base from which I'll set off hither and yon and to which I'll return.

The first time I entered this house, I had the conviction that this was the place I'd seen for so long in dreams. That conviction stayed with me while I moved in. All flowed smoothly, and questions of money, of time and all the other various difficulties somehow turned out just fine. The child me who lives inside myself sat for a while hugging her knees miserably, unable at first to really adjust to the change. But my animals, who'd protested hugely at the last move, quickly settled in this time, and things all slid nicely along according to schedule. The move was tough, yes, but this time round I wasn't struggling against the flow, so the damage was minimal.

Itchan and Masako, who came to help, carried in and set up my dear precious objects with wonderful sympathy and care. The carpenter and the gardener, long-term friends of mine, did excellent work. Midwinter though it was, they didn't stint on labor; they saw to the construction of the house and setting up of garden plants with the same infinite care they would have given to their own homes. Even now when I think of it I'm close to tears.

I also had a great many unusual experiences this time in my real estate and bank dealings. Often very happy and lucky ones.

The site manager's note saying "Thank you for making me coffee. It was delicious" made me smile; the architect's tales of his early childhood filled me with a desire to care for this house of his. The estate agent was not only smart but an interesting man, and the whole family became great fans.

The business of real estate had changed in a number of ways in the years since my last experience of that world.

The fact is that no matter how careful you are, either with renting or buying, the individual is always on the losing side of the deal. There's nothing you can do about it. Individuals are simply in a weak position.

In these times when business transactions always involve a certain amount of rip-off, putting the breach-of-promise clause in tiny print is one of the less unethical behaviors.

To give you an example, the contract for the previous house I sold had a clause stating ‘ten-year guarantee against flaws in construction’ with an additional clause to cover any interim change of title holder called a ‘special resale agreement’.

This guarantee against flaws means that in the case of leaks or corrosion, which are clearly the responsibility of the builder, the insurer is required via the estate agent to foot the bill for repairs.

But, as it turns out, if the builder or the estate agent chooses to dig in their heels and resist, the result is that you can’t register a different title holder so that ‘special resale agreement’ is in fact not legally enforceable. None of this did I hear about when I signed.

When I bought the place it was, ‘Don’t worry, there’s a resale agreement so you can sell any time and the guarantee remains. Looking forward to future dealings with you ...’ and off they went with the money. Then, later, it was, ‘Oh no that won’t be possible. The construction company doesn’t accept a change of registered owner’s name these days you see ... blah, blah, blah,’ and I realized I’d been had.

By chance I’ve moved somewhere not far away so the problem isn’t so acute, but if I’d gone to some other part of the country or overseas, as legal title holder I’d have to come flying back whenever something went wrong, oversee repairs, employ the renovation company and so forth.

So just what is this ‘ten-year guarantee’, I’d like to know?

You’re the one who signed the contract, so you’re the one who does it all now. It’s nothing to do with us. But when it comes to inspections etc., where we stand to gain, we’ll be in there like a flash ... And these swindlers are probably still there brazenly selling property today. Of course, it’s not just this estate agent. I’ve heard that all the major building firms do similar things. In other words, this kind of semi-legal rip-off is absolutely standard now.

Those days are well behind us when you made a good livable house, sold it to someone who was happy to buy it and if that person sold it on you would go on feeling responsible for what you’d built and maintain an ongoing arrangement to look after it. Now it’s more like, ‘Thank heavens. So far they’re being submissive and nodding obligingly.’ People my age can only shake their heads in wonder. This is not just a case of Good Old Days nostalgia - after all there’s plenty that’s better today than it used to be.

But I have a feeling it’s a big mistake to assume that today’s system will go on as it is forever. As long as people are people, those who are out to pull the wool over our eyes will sooner or later come to grief, just as happened in the case of nuclear power in Japan.

I’ve written about this elsewhere, but the fact is that unless humans treat other humans as human, something sometime has got to give.

Take the much-loathed subcontractors who make what money they can through a process whereby a property-maintenance check is pretty much the equivalent of a fault-finding exercise. And the companies that shamelessly suck that money out of them without dirtying their own hands.

Or, for instance, the onsite subcontractor guys who put together the furniture or install the air conditioners in these places, working to a strict schedule that dictates how much has to get done each day. If they make a mistake it’s taken out of their pay, so their only option is to knock themselves out working as fast as they can while making damn sure they never slip up, then move on to the next job.

This is an age where a bank will recommend to someone of eighty-five that he put his money in a ten-year-term deposit that only pays interest at full term.

In this land of ours, someone from a bank or insurance agency will go around knocking on the doors of elderly people living alone to try to lift their money from them by getting them to sign up for things. All smiles and kindness, they get the insurance money out of you, then when you go to hospital it turns out there’s some exclusion clause in the contract that means you get nothing.

Japan is a different case from America where there's all that land to go around. We just can't do things the same way here. But I have a feeling that, although the way you get swindled in other countries may be more merciless, at least the approach to it is more straightforward than in Japan.

But the good thing about the Japanese is that here you'll occasionally come across someone who can actually transcend all this right there on-site, the kind of person who's capable of changing the world from the ground up. That's why you can at least afford to have hope.

'Everyone's doing it - and after all we all have to put food on the table, so there's no point in thinking too deeply about it,' you may say. But this is a big mistake. Why? Because always and everywhere, then as now, what we're dealing with is still other human beings.

Humans want to be happy, they want peace of mind, they want to maintain friendly relations with honest people. So long as this continues to be the case, whenever and wherever you are, you'll find the great principle of cause-and-effect at work - that universal, unalterable karmic law of retribution that says you reap as you sow.

Whenever I see a staircase I remember my mother.

When she could no longer walk, we installed a stair lift on the staircase of the family house.

My mother would have her meals in the downstairs guest room, then, when she got tired of sitting there, she'd climb on to the lift and ascend to her bedroom on the second floor. Up she'd sail with a smile and a wave and the words, 'Well, see you later', accompanied by the music that always played to announce that the lift was in motion.

Her beaming face was reminiscent of some young starlet leaving the stage.

It is a great sorrow to me that my poor highly strung mother lived a life that held very few such smiles, and it feels to me like a blessing from above that once a bit of dementia had crept up on her she spent her days smiling. A certain degree of relaxation does seem to be more conducive to human happiness.

Well anyway, no sooner had I moved into the new house than I fell down the stairs.

I was somewhat exhausted from the days of hard work, I wasn't paying attention, and I was flustered by the need to be ready to go to the airport.

Down I went with astonishing momentum, striking my coccyx hard on the stairs as I fell, and, when I looked in the mirror, I was astonished all over again to find my backside in four neat quarters!

I wept from the pain of it. The dog delighted me by coming over to lick me. But I couldn't stand and I couldn't sit, and whatever I did my head just screamed 'Ow!'

Nevertheless, once I could walk a bit again I set off as planned to Hokkaido. I yelled with pain as the plane touched down, and once I reached the hotel I developed a fever and took to my bed. Outside was a frozen world of wildly swirling snow. My spirits plummeted, but I nevertheless dragged myself along as promised to the Sapporo headquarters of the Magic Spice Restaurant.

This is a soup-curry restaurant that also has a branch in Shimokitazawa near where I live. The owner Shitamura-san is a very intrepid fellow who has been abducted in Thailand, been a practicing psychic and generally followed a checkered career to finally arrive at what his fate dictated - bringing health to others through spicy curries. The chaotic glitter inside his restaurant holds all the glorious complexity of that world of his.

You could read a book about him and never really grasp intellectually what he's about, but you only have to meet him to know what a sharp yet serene and thoroughly warm-hearted person he is. His daughter is the well-known singer who goes by the name of Hitomi Toi. I just love her delicate voice.

His wife is too cute for words and always shining like the very sun. The whole family gets on famously together; it feels somehow as if they've been naturally drawn to be together.

Perhaps it was the power of Shitamura-san's karma, perhaps it was the kindly welcome, but, although I'd barely managed to stagger there wracked with pain, just sitting eating a bowl of soup curry I felt my spirits rise and my health returning till I felt so much better that, for all the pain, I was happy.

When I mentioned how it hurt Shitamura-san and his wife produced a precious ointment they'd bought in Thailand, and when it was time to leave they helped me carefully back down the stairs. Privately, it stirred in me the vivid memory of the touch of my tender mother and father. That may have been what really did the trick.

In the beginning I was a little surprised by the astonishing amount of vegetables in the Magic Spice curries, their special Hokkaido sweetness and how tense the waiters seemed. I even found myself wondering if I could maybe play the tourist and just give the food a try.

But, as I continued to call in there and eat, I'd find myself thinking happily on the walk back, 'I actually like eating lots of vegetables. And think of all the good spices I've eaten. I've been warmly greeted and well treated.' I liked the place more and more. That extra sweetness now seemed to hold a deep tenderness. It's always a happy thing to witness the realization of a world born from inside someone's head, and that was what it felt like inside that restaurant. I felt it was a place of strong roots - not the kind of place created from some received idea or according to some vague concept of 'Asian style' but a place where everything was there for a reason and had come from somewhere deep. That's how it felt to me.

My coccyx still hurt, but I myself felt just fine.

This was because there was real love in that food. The friends I went with, who looked after me with such real concern; the gentle encouragement from Shitamura-san and his wife; the brisk efficiency of the waiters - all these things penetrated my heart as love does. Outside the windows was a world of whitest snow, where for someone like myself unused to such snows it was all too easy to slip and compound my problems by hitting my poor sore coccyx again. Yet somehow, I felt secure.

You receive love, you return thanks - what goes around comes around.

This is the essence of human relations, able to lighten the load of even the weightiest problems that burden each individual. How good it would be if only this was the way the world went.

That other house I lived in for just a little while - the one with that fine guarantee that didn't work - was a very good place.

I went through a truly grueling experience in moving in there; I talked with my family there, made myself sleepless with thinking there, became a serious person there and it was from there that I set out all those times to visit Funabashi, the setting for the novel I wanted to write.

The house was so small that I couldn't bring myself to contemplate spending the rest of my life in it with the family, but transients that we were, it held us tenderly in its walls. No problems ever arose there, and always a bright, gentle, sweet air flowed through it.

I remember the hot rainless summer evening last year when I came staggering back dog-tired from Funabashi and walked home from Setagaya Daita station. I greeted dear old Mrs Yamazaki, and my sandaled feet trudged on. My hands held a loaf of bread I'd bought at Funabashi.

Ah, I was thinking, I've gathered all the material I need from Funabashi at last. It's been such fun, it's kind of sad it's over. I'll enjoy finishing the novel, but I won't be getting off at Funabashi any more with that sensation that somehow I live there ... and I looked up at my house.

There, beneath the summer sky, it seemed to be beaming a welcome to me. There were the huge lotus leaves, and my family's name on the nameplate. Light flooded the house; the white of the walls glowed.

This was a space that always loved us 100 per cent.

The thought of letting go of this place was so scary I wanted to weep, but then new things are always scary.

Once I'm settled into this new house I'm sure I'll go on to write many more things.

This house isn't like that last gentle one. This is a house of power, a place of sharp edges in all manner of ways - after all, it could suddenly toss me down the stairs. There's a certain stern atmosphere that tells you it means serious business; it can see how infantile we are, and it's not about to relax and be kind just yet. I get the feeling it will take time to get to know each other, but that's what makes it such an honest, trustworthy place.

The first night after we'd moved here we plugged in the TV, and we all sat watching it and eating takeaway pizza together. Looking at these friends and family I love, I was flooded with the thought that this really was our house.

And yet, short though it was, that wonderful time in the other house is an eternal moment.

That day when I went out onto the veranda just as the old lady next door emerged, and we stood there chatting across verandas, gossiping about the neighborhood, both dressed in little more than our pajamas.

The old lady who came round collecting funds for the neighborhood association who was always so tired, but when I offered to help she smiled with that carefully painted bright-red mouth of hers and declared that if she didn't have this work to do she was convinced she'd turn senile.

The charming family that was always taking walks with their dog and cat in tow.

It hurts to think that this minor relocation of mine has wrenched me from that life where I lived in the same rhythm as those people.

But I want to live this moment, this day, looking up, looking forward.

It's like the way I can yearn a little for the time when my son was still a baby, and the sight of the toys and the picture books I read him every day as a child can smite my heart, but there's more delight in meeting him as he is now.

The fact is, the time I have in this life is only now.

Goodbye my dear, tiny, sweet old home. I simply want to say thank you.