

Strawberries

D-i-n-g... D-o-n-n-n-n-g...

The dull chime of the doorbell hung in the air as Miki's head slowly cleared.

She looked up and stared vacantly towards the door.

"Who could it be at this time?" she wondered.

It was four in the afternoon. And on a Saturday too. People don't just call round unannounced on Saturday afternoons...

Maybe it was one of those door-to-door salesmen trying to persuade her to sign up for a newspaper subscription? At least she hoped so. It was easy enough to just say no. But there were other people. People she would prefer not to see today.

Miki sighed. It was better not to tempt fate by guessing. She placed both hands on the table to steady herself and tried to push herself up from the chair.

She was so exhausted.

Her body felt heavy, like she had a thick blanket draped over her shoulders, and as she tried to stand, the weight of her fatigue seemed to drag her back down again. Gravity seemed to be working against her. Her legs felt heavy too. And as she finally won the battle to stand, her knees creaked as she shuffled wearily over to the intercom.

She pressed the button and a dry, static click connected her to the outside world.

"Yes?" she said weakly, trying hard to muster enough energy to make voice sound cheerful. "Who is it...?"

"Oh... Miki? It's me. I'm sorry to drop in on you like this, especially at the weekend. I was going to phone you earlier..."

It was as she had feared. The voice was unmistakable, and hearing it sapped the last remnants of strength from her already weary body. It was her mother-in-law.

Miki imagined her standing by the gate with her finger on the button and her mouth pressed close to the white plastic grill. No doubt she had brought her husband too.

"Oh..., give me a second, please... I'll open the gate for you."

Reaching her hand out towards the door knob, Miki felt a dull sickness in the pit of her stomach. She had spent the entire day, from early that morning, cleaning the house from top to bottom. But not so much cleaning it as "decontaminating" it.

Cleaning was easy. Just wipe a duster over a few surfaces and vacuum the carpets from time to time. Nothing to it. And if you don't make a perfect job, where's the harm? After all, it's just a bit of dust...

But things were different now. Now she had to be sure everything was perfectly clean: she had to be careful to remove every last trace of the invisible radioactive particles which were now a part of her

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daily life. There was no cutting corners. She could no longer afford to be blasé about “a bit of dust”. The danger was all around her.

And how do you make sure you have cleaned everything properly when the very thing you’re trying to protect yourself from is invisible? Some people said you had to imagine that it was volcanic ash, and that you had to be very careful not to disturb it and send it up into the air, because the last thing you’d want to do is to inhale it...

So Miki was meticulous and she cleaned everything – everything – very slowly and very carefully.

She searched for information about the best way to clean the house to reduce the radioactive contamination, and though it was a laborious process, she followed the advice to the letter: washing every surface in every room with a wet cloth, cleaning from high to low, starting with the ceiling, working down the walls, and finally the floors.

But even that wasn’t easy because there were pictures on some of the walls and there was furniture pushed up against others. So each picture had to be taken down in order for her to clean the wall behind it. And each picture frame had to be cleaned individually.

From the walls, it was then on to the doors. And after the doors it was the furniture. And finally, when all that was done, she could move on to the floors. All the time, rinsing the cloth thoroughly in fresh water to wash away the contamination.

And as she cleaned, she had to imagine the invisible danger lurking on every surface, hiding in every nook and cranny, so she could be sure that she had cleaned everything thoroughly... the lamp shades... the screen doors... the often-forgotten air-conditioner... the tops of the curtain rails. And she had to be especially careful in the bedrooms of course, because that’s where her family slept.

So whilst the house wasn’t large by any means, cleaning it had become a major task. But Miki took the responsibility seriously: what could be more important than reducing the danger of exposure and making the home a safe place for her family to live?

However, despite all her efforts, if someone brought more radiation into the house from outside, then all her work was in vain. Her efforts meant nothing.

It was a matter of prevention. So when she came home from shopping, Miki would brush herself down outside the front door to get rid of as much of the invisible dust as possible from her overcoat. Ideally, she preferred not to bring bags, clothes and shoes into the house at all, so when she came home she took them off and put them in a large plastic bag which she kept by the door.

Of course, all this effort required a great deal of family co-operation, so Miki’s task was made all the more difficult by the dismissive attitude of her husband.

“This is just ridiculous!” he would say. “Radiation? What radiation? Do you even know what you’re talking about? It’s not a problem! They said so on the TV I read it in the newspaper too. You’re just paranoid, woman! Get a grip of yourself!”

Aoi, Miki’s eldest daughter, was no better. She just laughed condescendingly.

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“You have got to be kidding me! You want me to leave my school bag by the door and then take all the books and stuff out of it each time I come home from school, so that I can do my homework in my room? And then you want me to put it all back again every morning? You’re crazy!”

Only Kenta, her ten year-old son, was on her side.

“I’ll do it if you help me, Mama...”

Of course, Miki wanted the family to wear facemasks when they went out of the house too. Aoi had given her a withering look and just snatched the mask from her when Miki told her she wanted her to wear it, but her husband had just refused to listen and there was no persuading him.

It left her feeling helpless, but at least she could try to protect her children, so she kept nagging Aoi, trying to make her understand that it was a necessary precaution, until eventually she snapped.

“Okay! Okay! I’ll wear your stupid mask if it means that much to you. Are you satisfied now?!”

She had begged her at least wear the mask on the way to school and on the way back home again but Aoi was a high school girl now, and Miki knew that she couldn’t force her to listen. She also realised that her daughter would probably leave the house wearing the mask (just to stop the nagging), but that she would probably take it off and stuff it in her pocket as soon as she rounded the corner, out of sight of the house.

And however hard Miki tried to keep things clean, her husband and Aoi would always bring more radiation into the house when they came home. It was a thankless task, but Miki suffered in silence and did her best to keep everything spotless and safe.

Today, her husband had been at home all day and Aoi was out with friends. So Miki had spent the entire morning cleaning, painstakingly washing and wiping down every surface in every room in the house. Apart from the living room where her husband lay dozing in front of the TV. And she had been particularly careful to clean the entrance hall by the front door, because she had read that it was one of the places where radioactive material accumulates most.

She donned her sandals on the gleaming tiles and opened the door to greet her husband’s parents.

“Please, come in. How are you?”

They were both wearing overcoats and Miki watched them as they entered the house, carefully studying their every move.

“Oh, Miki, have you been cleaning?” asked her mother-in-law as she started to take off her coat.

“The house looks just lovely. You always keep everything so nice...”

Miki knew they were covered in radioactive material from outside. It was invisible, but in her mind she could see it on their clothes, cascading from their overcoats onto her freshly mopped floor, and polluting her home with their filthy shoes. She wanted to cry with the frustration, but she held back her tears.

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“Shall I take that for you?” she said to her father-in-law, reaching out a hand for his coat.

“Sure... thank you.”

“Can I take yours too?” she said to her mother-in-law, holding out her hand.

Holding the coats gingerly, trying to keep them away from her body as much as possible, Miki was tempted to put them into one of the large plastic bags she kept by the door, but somehow she resisted the urge.

“Please come on in,” she said, ushering them towards the living room.

“Mamoru, darling... your mother and father are here.”

There was no reply. Maybe he was sleeping.

Still holding the coats, Miki hurriedly made her way to the bathroom, took a plastic bag from the cupboard and gently placed the overcoats inside, being careful not to make too much noise. Then she stood in the empty bath tub and carefully brushed her clothes off with her hands. That would be fine for now... she could always clean the bath tub again later.

Miki returned to the kitchen to wash her hands and found her two guests sitting at the kitchen table.

“Would you like a cup of tea or a coffee?” she offered.

Her husband came in from the living room.

“There you are, darling. Your parents are here...”

“Ah, good to see you. I was just taking a nap on the sofa,” he said sleepily. “If you’re making coffee, I’ll have one too...”

“Well, in that case, why don’t we all have coffee?” said his mother.

His father nodded in agreement.

“Where’s Ken-chan, Miki?”

“I think he’s up stairs. Shall I call him?” she said, spooning the freshly ground coffee into the filter.

“Oh yes, do. I have a surprise for him. It’s still a little early for strawberries, but I know they’re his favourite and I managed to find some for him. He will be so excited...”

Miki stiffened. Strawberries. Berries were the worst... they soak up more radiation than any other kind of fruit. She wondered where they were from. She could feel her heart pounding hard in her chest.

The old lady reached into her bag and produced a large box of strawberries which she placed proudly on the table in front of her.

“My goodness, they are beautiful aren’t they?” said Miki, forcing a smile.

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She glanced nervously over at the box and wondered if she could get away with saying that they would eat them later. It was an expensive-looking package, so that meant it wasn't from the supermarket or from the greengrocer. Probably an up-market fruit shop or a department store.

"The coffee's ready... let's sit in the living room," she suggested, leading the way with the cups and saucers on a tray.

There was a drumroll of footsteps as Kenta thundered down the stairs as only a ten year-old boy can.

"Grandma!" he exclaimed with a grin, poking his head around the kitchen door.

"Ken-chan!" she beamed. "I was just about to call you..."

"Grandpa's here too..." called his father from the living room. "Come and say hello."

"Ken-chan, would you like something to drink?" asked his mother as she placed the coffee pot onto the tray to take it into the living room. "Shall I make you a hot chocolate? Or would you prefer a snack instead?"

More than anything, Miki wanted to put off any talk of the strawberries.

"Can I?" he asked excitedly. "Hot chocolate! Hot chocolate!"

"Okay, just wait till I have poured the coffee and I will make it for you."

She knelt down in front of the coffee table and began pouring the coffee, but her mother-in-law could not contain herself any longer.

"Ken-chan!" she blurted out, "You'll never guess what I've brought for you!"

Miki's heart sank and the dull pain in her stomach intensified.

"What is it, Grandma?" asked Kenta, excitedly.

"STRAWBERRIES!" she grinned.

"Grandma! I love strawberries. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you!"

"Well if you've not had your snack yet, then why not have some now?" she suggested.

"What a good idea," his Grandpa chimed in. "Let's ask Mama to wash them for us, shall we?"

"Is that okay, Mama?"

"That's a lovely idea," said Miki with a forced smile, "but your sister will be home soon and we haven't had dinner yet..."

There was a cold silence as she continued to pour the coffee and she could see the look of frustration on the old woman's face from the corner of her eye. The cup rattled noisily on the saucer and in the emptiness, the sound seemed to echo around the room.

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“Why not let him have a few now?” asked her husband. “They’re his favourite. Where’s the harm?”

“Yes,” her father-in-law protested, “his Grandma went to a lot of trouble to find those. It’s still early for strawberries, you know...”

With everyone against her it seemed Miki had little option, so she stood up with the tray and took the coffee pot back into the kitchen.

She looked at the delicately wrapped package on the kitchen table in front of her and carefully began to open it.

The strawberries were a beautiful colour, vibrant, shiny and studded with tiny golden seeds. Miki looked for a label which would tell her where they had come from. Nothing on this side... nothing on... and then she saw it.

Fukushima.

Maybe she gasped. She wasn’t sure. Or maybe it was because there was no sound coming from the kitchen. But she heard her mother-in-law’s shrill voice from the living room.

“Is everything alright, Miki?”

“Everything’s fine,” she said hesitantly. “It’s just... the strawberries are...”

Her mother-in-law appeared in the kitchen door.

“They look lovely, don’t they?”

“Well...”

“I wasn’t sure at first... you know, when I saw where they’re from... but I’m sure they’ll be fine won’t they, Miki?”

“...”

Miki just stared at the strawberries in stunned silence.

“Oh...” said the old woman quietly, with an uncomfortable look on her face. “I suppose I should have known better...”

“...”

“What’s going on?” asked her husband as they returned to the living room.

Miki bit her lip awkwardly.

“Well,” began her mother-in-law hesitantly, “it seems the strawberries are...”

“It... it’s fine,” interrupted Miki nervously. “Don’t worry about it. Let me take them back into the kitchen and I’ll wash them...”

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Miki hurried back to the kitchen with the strawberries and placed them in the sink. They really did look delicious. So shiny and fresh.

She put them in a bowl and filled it up with water, throwing in a handful of salt to clean them.

Miki felt dizzy. She didn't know whether the strawberries were contaminated or not. Maybe they were. But maybe they were fine. There was no way of knowing unless you had them tested. And she couldn't do that. Certainly not here. Certainly not now.

"Is everything okay in there?"

It was her husband calling from the living room.

"It's the strawberries," explained his mother in a low voice. "I suppose I should have been a bit more careful when I was choosing them..."

"What are you talking about?" asked her husband, clearly irritated.

"Well..., they're from Fukushima aren't they, dear?" she said, apologetically.

She looked embarrassed.

"Fukushima? What about it?!" said the old man indignantly.

"Well, you know that Miki is a bit nervous, don't you?," she said in a hushed voice, trying to pacify her husband. "About the radiation and that sort of thing..."

She was doing her best to keep him calm, but the old man was clearly angry.

"So just because they're from Fukushima, we're not supposed to eat them? We went to a lot of trouble to find those strawberries!"

"No, no... that's not what Miki is saying..."

"You want to know what I think? I'll tell you what I think..."

The angry words flew like knives through the kitchen door, burying themselves into Miki's back and shoulders one after another in quick succession. The onslaught seemed relentless, but soon the voices became a muffled blur: background noise as her attention returned to the strawberries.

Miki transferred the strawberries into a colander and lifted it out of the sink to drain the water out of it. She wondered if washing them would be enough to get rid of the radioactivity. Would it wash off? Would it flow away with the water? Or was it in the fruit itself? She stood at the sink, staring at the strawberries, not daring to turn off the tap.

Miki felt as if everything were silently breaking around her. The relationship with her husband. The relationship with her daughter. The relationship with her parents-in-law. Her bond with the entire family. Her sense of trust. Her joy for living. And with them, her own heart.

"Mama...?"

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It was Kenta. He was staring up at her with those beautiful big eyes of his.

“Don’t worry, Mama... I don’t mind. I don’t mind if I can’t eat the strawberries.”

Miki stared back at him, expressionless. Numb.

She turned her attention back to the sink and turned off the water. The strawberries were piled high in the colander. She reached out her hand and put one in her mouth. The sweet, juicy flavour filled her senses, making her mouth water as she swallowed it.

She reached into the pile again, this time taking three of the fat, red fruit and stuffing them quickly into her mouth. All she knew was that she had to get rid of them as quickly as possible.

“Mama ...?”

Kenta sounded nervous. But Miki couldn’t hear him. She was too busy gorging herself. Another one. And another one. And another.

“Papa! Papa!” called out Kenta in alarm.

Miki had to be quick. The only way she could protect Kenta was to eat all the strawberries before anyone could stop her. Nothing else mattered.

But with the colander only half empty, Miki felt someone pulling her back away from the sink.

“Leave me alone,” she screamed, spattering the sink with half-chewed mush. “I’m not finished!”

“Miki... Miki...”

It was her husband. But his voice was muffled and distant.

“Miki-san...”

Her mother-in-law.

“Mama! Mama!”

With a wild look in her eyes Miki fell to her knees, crouching down protectively over the colander, forcing the ripe strawberries into her mouth as fast as she could.

Her hands were smothered in the sticky, red pulp. It was smeared on her face and there were bits in her hair too.

And with a sickly smile on her face, the juice oozed from her mouth and ran down her chin, staining her blouse, dripping like blood.