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eBooks



Salmonella Men on Planet Porno

STORIES

YASUTAKA TSUTSUI

Praise for Yasutaka Tsutsui's

Salmonella Men on Planet Porno

“The collection unabashedly romps in the sexual facets of modern humanity and culture. But Tsutsui’s work does so much more, sometimes brilliantly, often hilariously, always fantastically, never bound by reality or convention.”

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“Tsutsui’s fabulously morbid sense of humor, his obsessiveness and his wit make this collection sufficiently entertaining and disturbing to warrant our attention, especially today when the world as we know it has indeed tilted into the fantastical.”

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“Memorable.... Quirky and entertaining.... Tsutsui shrewdly reveals the hairline stresses, lusts, and insanities that no society can ever completely wall in.”

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“Tsutsui is a shrewd satirist.... Potent are those stories where the author eschews genre pyrotechnics and reveals the strangeness and horror of the ordinary.”

—*Review of Contemporary Fiction*

“Off-kilter and marvelously entertaining. In Tsutsui’s world, the fantastic and the mundane collide, throwing the lives of ordinary men and women into disarray.... Just what the doctor ordered.”

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“This collection is not for the faint of heart; you must be open to receive its infinite joys.”

“[These] stories show [Tsutsui’s] trademark fearlessness in the face of taboos; war, sex, the media, and the sheep-like mentality of groups are all fair game.”

—*Theme Magazine*

“Imagine a cross between the music group the B-52s, Thomas Pynchon’s *V.*, Ryu Murakami’s *Coin Locker Babies*, and James Turner’s graphic novel *Nil: A Land Beyond Belief*, throw in a good dose of science-fiction tropes and bitter social satire, and you’ll start to get a good idea of what’s in store for you in this collection of thirteen imaginative stories from one of Japan’s best-known science-fiction writers.”

—*School Library Journal*

“With a sharp eye toward the insanities of contemporary life, Tsutsui crafts an irresistible mix of imagination, satiric fantasy, and truly madcap hilarity.”

—*Bookmarks Magazine*

“Imaginative, farcical stories that sometimes amuse and sometimes perplex.... [They] focus on the comic follies and irrational whims of the human race.”

—ArmchairInterviews.com

“Weird, wonderful and wild.... Sparkles with biting pieces of social and political satire that reveal a formidable talent.... Tsutsui’s voice is witty and quirky, seducing us to suspend our disbelief for even the most fanciful narrative.”

—*BookPage*

YASUTAKA TSUTSUI

Salmonella Men on Planet Porno

One of modern Japan's most renowned writers, Yasutaka Tsutsui has won the Tanizaki Prize, the Kawabata Prize, and several other awards. He was decorated as a Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres by the French government. He lives in Japan.

Salmonella Men on Planet Porno

Stories

YASUTAKA TSUTSUI

*Translated from the Japanese
by Andrew Driver*

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The Dabba Dabba Tree

My father came up from the country carrying a curiously shaped bonsai tree.

“This here’s a Dabba Dabba Tree,” he announced, showing it to me and my wife. “It’s a special kind of cedar, see.”

“My, what an odd-looking thing,” said my wife, examining it with a look of puzzlement.

The tree was about eight inches tall. It was thicker at the base but tapered off towards the top, where the foliage was more sparse. Standing upright, the trunk formed a perfect cone.

“Yes, and what an odd name,” I added, watching my father’s expression. Perhaps it would shed some light on his reason for bringing the tree.

“Well, it’s not just the name that’s odd,” he said, narrowing his eyes. “If you put this Dabba Dabba Tree in your bedroom at night, you’ll have fruity dreams till morning comes!”

“Gosh! I wonder what he means,” said my wife.

I whispered in her ear. “Erotic dreams, of course.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, blushing.

My father gave her a lewd look and continued. “You’ve been married five years but still ain’t had kids. That’s why I brought you the tree. Put it in your bedroom tonight – you’re sure to have some cracking dreams. Go on, have it! It’s no good for an old codger like me. Kekekekekeh!” he chuckled like some weird bird, before setting off back to the country.

That night, we took the Dabba Dabba Tree into our bedroom and placed it at the foot of our double bed. Yes, we were still using a double bed even after five years of marriage. Well, our bedroom was rather small. There wasn’t enough room for two beds.

“Good night, then.”

“Yes, good night.”

We dived under the sheets, excitedly turned our backs on each other, and concentrated on getting to sleep. At times like this, you want to be the first to drop off. Otherwise, the sound of your partner’s breathing gets on your nerves and keeps you awake. So much the worse if you know she’s having an erotic dream. And worse still if she starts talking in her sleep.

Luckily, I nodded off immediately.

And I started dreaming. I dreamt I was in my bedroom, sleeping in my double bed with my wife.

“Yes! A dream!”

I sat up. My wife was slumbering peacefully next to me, completely naked. She can't sleep any other way. I turned my head in puzzlement.

“Great. What's erotic about that?!”

If I made love to her after all this time, there wouldn't be anything erotic about it at all. It would just be dull old reality – whether she was naked or not.

“Well, if this is an erotic dream, I'd better do something erotic!”

I got out of bed and put my shirt and trousers on. Then I slipped on some sandals and went outside. To find a woman worthy of sharing my erotic dream, I'd have to go to the nightlife district. I walked along a dark side-road, then turned into a major thoroughfare. The street shone as bright as day, thanks to the bars and restaurants on either side. There were people everywhere.

“Where are all the tasty women then?” I grumbled. I was feeling rather tired after walking two or three blocks. Having an erotic dream clearly demanded a certain amount of perseverance. I would spot a woman who looked promising from a distance but who, on closer inspection, turned out to be a wrinkled old hag. Or a tall, slender girl with a great figure would be walking in front of me. I'd hurry to catch her up, only to find that she was a complete dog to look at. I'm not usually picky about my women. But now that I was having this erotic dream, it would have been pointless to go for someone I didn't fancy. I walked on.

Then a girl stepped out of a streetside café. She was dressed in a dark-brown suit and looked like a college student. Wearing little make-up besides her lipstick, she had pale skin, large eyes and a pretty face.

“YES!!!” I exclaimed, blocking her way.

“Can I help you?” she asked, looking me up and down.

“Well, actually...” I replied falteringly, wondering how to explain. “Actually, I've got this Dabba Dabba Tree, you see, and...”

“Oh no. Not you as well!” she giggled. Then her expression changed to a frown. “You're the fourth one tonight. You're going to say you're having an erotic dream because of this ‘Dabba Dabba Tree’, and you want to have sex with me. Right?”

“What? You mean there are others?” I replied, somewhat surprised. But after all, it was just a dream. Who cared? “I mean, er, that's right. I really want to have sex with you.”

“In your dreams!” she said with an ironic smile, shaking her head. “I've said the same to all of them. This might be a dream for you, but for me, it's reality! And anyway, I'm still a virgin. I refuse to lose my virginity just to fulfil someone else's dream!”

What was she on about? Well, it didn't matter. It was just a dream.

“Those other three must have been weak-willed. Spineless. And maybe they didn't want you enough anyway,” I said. “But I won't give up so easily, d'you hear? This may well be reality for you, but for me it's just a dream. So I don't care what happens! And anyway, I fancy you. I fancy you like mad, so I'm going to make love to you. And if you say no, I'll just have to force myself on you, right here and now.”

“What, here in the street?”

“That’s right. I don’t care who sees us, or where we are. I’m going to pounce on you, and rip that tasteful, well-tailored dark-brown suit off your body, a-a-and then, and then I’m going to pull off your bra, and – and—”

“All right, keep your hair on! Look, you’re slobbering!”

“Oh.” I quickly wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. “And then, and then, I’m going to pull down your panties—”

“Er – I’m wearing tights.”

“I’m going to pull down your panties together with your tights, then I’m going to grab hold of you, throw you onto the pavement and ravish your body by force. Well, you say you’re a virgin, and that’s a bit unfortunate for you. But hey, it’s a dream, it doesn’t matter! I’ll ravish you, and then—”

“The police might see us.”

“I don’t care. If they come to arrest me, I’ll just shout out at the top of my voice. Then I’ll wake up. Mind you... This is reality for you, isn’t it. Your clothes will be in a mess and you’ll be stark naked. You can’t go home like that. What’ll you do?”

“I don’t know. What do you think?”

“Why don’t we find a hotel? I don’t really want to rape you here. If the police came they’d only spoil it.”

She hesitated for a moment, observing me with a sideways look. “All right,” she answered eventually, with some reluctance. “I’ll go with you. After all, it seems I only exist inside your dream. I can’t just ignore you, can I.”

So we turned off into a side road and wandered around the back streets looking for a discreet hotel. There were none to be found.

“Where are they all?!”

I was getting irritated. If we didn’t do it quickly, I might wake up.

“We might find one if we went away from town,” she said. “There’s a hotel right next to my college.”

We went up a hill and at last found a hotel. We entered the lobby and stood at the reception desk. A middle-aged woman with thinning hair came out. “I’m afraid we’re full,” she said. “But if you’d like to wait five or ten minutes, there’s sure to be a vacancy.”

I couldn’t be bothered to walk around looking for another hotel, so we went into the little waiting room next to the lobby. There, we sat on a sofa waiting for a vacancy. We were alone.

“Are you married?” the girl asked me.

“Yes.”

“Really? And what’s your wife doing now?”

“Sleeping next to me in our bedroom.”

“You mean you’re having a dream like this while your wife’s sleeping next to you? What

sort of a husband are you?!”

“And how do I know what she’s dreaming about?!”

As I said that, another couple came into the hotel. I could hear the receptionist repeating the same words in the lobby.

“I’m afraid we’re full. But if you’d like to wait five or ten minutes, there’s sure to be a vacancy.”

As the couple came into the waiting room, I let out a cry. When they saw me, they stopped in their tracks. The woman was my wife. Her partner was our neighbour, Mr. Miyamoto.

“Well, well!” said Miyamoto obsequiously.

They sat on the sofa opposite us. Chubby Miyamoto looked down at the floor in embarrassment.

“Well, aren’t you having a good time!” my wife said sarcastically.

“Yes, and you too!” I replied. I was going to ask how long she’d been seeing Miyamoto. But it was just a dream. It would be pointless to ask.

“She’s pretty,” said my wife, indicating my partner with her chin.

“Is this your wife?!” the girl said, hurrying to her feet. “Pleased to meet you. I’m, er—”

“Don’t be stupid. You don’t have to say anything.” I tugged her back down by the edge of her skirt.

The receptionist came in. “We have a vacancy now,” she announced. “This way, please.”

“Well, excuse us,” I said to Miyamoto and my wife as we got up to go.

The receptionist led us to our room. As soon as she’d left, I jumped on the girl, yelling “Come on, then!”

“Don’t!” she shrieked. She evaded me and stood at the corner of the bed. “That woman will be back with the tea soon.”

“You seem to know a lot about it!”

She blushed.

“Anyway, I can’t wait for all that. Let her come in!”

The girl eluded me again.

As we continued our chasing game, the receptionist came in with the tea. “The bath water should be hot now, so please feel free. Good evening.” And with that she left the room.

“I want to have a bath,” said the girl.

“I can’t wait for that,” I moaned. “Can’t you have one later?”

“Certainly not! I’ve been perspiring with all that walking around. You should have one after me, too. Look at your face. It’s covered in sweat.”

“No! I can’t wait any longer!” I said, lunging at her.

She darted into the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

“All right, I’ll come in with you!” I called out as I banged on the door.

“No!” she shouted. “I’d be too embarrassed.”

There was nothing for it. I took off my clothes and sat on the edge of the bed, naked, waiting for her to reappear. I was getting more and more irritated. This dream seemed awfully close to reality. I even started to think it might *be* reality. So, as a test, I dug my fingernail into my right cheek. If this was a dream, it wouldn’t hurt.

It hurt.

It hurt so much that it woke me up. In my sleep, I’d dug my nail hard into my cheek.

“DAMN!!!”

My wife was still sleeping peacefully, contentedly next to me. In my rage, I jumped up and punched her on the arm.

“Ow! OW!! What are you doing?!” She sprang up, startled. “Just when I was getting to the good bit!”

“Huh! You think I’m going to let you have all the fun? I’m going to go back to sleep and have the time of my life!”

“You think you’re the only one? Watch me!”

We turned our backs on each other with huffs of indignation, and concentrated on getting back to sleep. Luckily, I dozed off in an instant. And I started to dream. I dreamt I was sleeping in our bed at home.

“Yesss!! A dream!”

I slipped out of the sheets. My wife was sleeping naked on the bed.

“Right! Let’s get back to that hotel!”

I hunted around the bed looking for my clothes. But my shirt and trousers were nowhere to be seen. Of course they weren’t. I’d taken them off in the hotel.

I quickly looked around for another pair of trousers. But I couldn’t even wait that long. And anyway, it was only a dream.

“All right! I’ll go as I am!”

I raced out of the house stark naked, with nothing on my feet.

I ran along the dark side road and came out onto the main street. As before, it was as bright as day and full of people. Passers-by opened their eyes wide when they saw me running through the street in my birthday suit. A few women screamed.

“Oy, you! Stop!!”

Near the crossroads, a policeman came running after me. “Stop that man! He’s gone insane!”

There’s always someone who gets in the way, even in a dream. A passer-by stuck out a leg and tripped me, sending me sprawling on the pavement. The policeman jumped on my back as I struggled hard to resist. “This is my dream!” I cried. “Why don’t you just disappear!”

The policeman was desperately trying to handcuff me. “He’s lost his mind! Help me

apprehend him!” he shouted to the watching bystanders.

Four or five men stepped forwards and tried to hold me down. I was punched hard two or three times, but I hardly felt a thing. It was a dream, after all. Still, I couldn't waste any more time messing about like this. If I didn't get away soon, the girl might grow tired of waiting and leave the hotel. So, reluctantly, I decided to wake up again. Even as the policeman and bystanders were holding me down, I shouted at the top of my voice.

The sound of my voice woke me up.

“What now, for God's sake?! What are you shouting for? You've gone and woken me up again! And just when I was getting to the good bit!” My wife, also woken by the sound of my voice, flew at me in a fury.

“You think you're the only one who wants a good dream?!” I said. I got up, took a fresh shirt and trousers from the wardrobe, laid them down beside the bed and got back in. “This time I'll get it right. I'll show you!”

“Well, you're not the only one!”

Once again, we turned our backs in indignation and concentrated on getting back to sleep. Again, I dropped off immediately. And I started dreaming again.

“Yesssss!!! A dream!”

I got up immediately and hurriedly pulled on the shirt and trousers I'd laid beside the bed. I'd left my sandals in the hotel, too, so I slipped some shoes onto my bare feet. Then I dashed out of the house. If I failed to make it with that pretty girl this time, it would be the end of the world. I ran through the main street with my hair all over the place. I did knock down the odd passer-by, but this time I managed to keep running without being challenged. I turned off the main street onto the dark uphill road that led to the hotel. I raced up the road panting, my whole body covered in sweat. I caught sight of the hotel's purple neon sign. My knees were about to give way.

“Where have you been all this time?” said the girl as I rushed into the room. Dressed in a bathrobe, she was drinking a bottle of beer she'd taken from the fridge. She looked utterly fed up.

“Sorry about that. Come on, then. Let's get on the bed!”

As I went to embrace her, she turned her face away in disgust.

“No way! You're covered in sweat! Go and have a wash!”

All right. I took off my clothes and went into the bathroom.

When I came back out, she was on her second bottle of beer. I suddenly remembered that I didn't have any money. I wouldn't even be able to pay for the hotel room, let alone the beer.

Who cares, I thought. As soon as it was time to settle the bill, I'd just shout out loud. Then I'd wake up and get away without paying. The girl would be left behind, of course. She'd be taken away by the police on charges of not paying for drinks or accommodation. That would be a bit sad, but it couldn't be helped. If I told her about it, she'd only refuse me again. Anyway, she was bound to have some money of her own, even if she was only a student.

Alcohol had given her cheeks a rosy glow, and her eyes were beginning to look glazed. The front of her bathrobe had fallen open, revealing a glimpse of her plump white breasts.

“Come on then, let’s get you on the bed. Heheh, heheh, hehe-heheheh!”

I lifted the girl in my arms and laid her down on the bed, where I undressed her.

Her body felt much too realistic for this to be a dream. *If things feel this realistic, I should have had a beer too*, I thought. I’d been thirsty just now and really needed a drink. But I thought it wouldn’t taste any good, as it was just a dream. So I decided not to. Anyway, I couldn’t get out of bed to have a beer now that I was in the middle of it. I started to get on with the action.

Then the doorbell rang.

The sound of it woke me up.

I was in bed, lying on top of my wife and making love to her.

“What? You??” I groaned. “The last person I wanted to be doing it with!!”

My wife had woken up at the same time. “The feeling’s mutual!” she replied with immense displeasure.

The doorbell rang again. It was already morning. Sunlight flooded in through a gap in the curtains, illuminating the Dabba Dabba Tree at the foot of our bed. I’m self-employed, so I don’t have to get up early.

“Who could that be? At this time of the morning?”

“Go and find out,” said my wife.

“You go!”

“I haven’t got anything on.”

“Nor have I!”

“You can get dressed more quickly.”

I got up, slipped on my shirt and trousers and went to open the front door.

Standing there in the porch was our neighbour, Mr Miyamoto.

“Mr Miyamoto!...” I was going to mention our meeting at the hotel, but I managed to stop myself in time. That was a dream, after all. “What is it? At this time of the morning?”

“Yes, I’m sorry to bother you so early. It’s just that I’ve got this ‘Dabba Dabba Tree,’ you see,” he said. “It’s a kind of bonsai tree, and if you put it in your bedroom at night—”

“Yes, yes, yes,” I interrupted. “I know, I’ve got one myself.”

“Then you’ll know what I mean. As it happens, I’m in the middle of a dream right now. Me talking to you here is actually part of my dream. Now, I’ve been quite keen on your wife for some time, you see. And I’ve always wanted to, you know, *have* her, if ever I had the chance. Well, thanks to my Dabba Dabba Tree, I can now fulfil my wish, even if it is only a dream. And that’s why I’ve come over. So without further ado, is your wife at home?”

“She’s still in bed, actually.”

“So much the better!” he said, and tried to force his way in.

I barred his path in utter incredulity. “Now just you wait a minute! This may be a dream for you, but for me it’s reality. I’m not going to let you barge in here and sully my wife’s honour just to fulfil your dream!”

“But I really want to make love to her! Otherwise what’s the point of having an erotic dream?”

As we stood there arguing, Miyamoto’s wife came running up.

“Oh dear! I really am sorry for my husband’s selfishness. I said you shouldn’t go, didn’t I?! Look how much trouble you’re causing our neighbour!”

“I know what,” Miyamoto said, turning to me. “You can have sex with my wife. Now that’s got to be fair, hasn’t it?”

“Oh!” gasped his wife. Her face immediately turned a shade of crimson. She looked up at me with fluttering eyes and started to contort her body suggestively. “I’m sure he wouldn’t be interested in an ordinary woman like me.”

I found it hard to agree, and looked her over. She was a slim, good-looking woman with an oval face and large eyes. Yes, now that I saw her in this light, she was actually quite attractive. I gulped.

“No, no, not at all,” I eventually replied. “Quite the opposite, in fact. That is, if *you* don’t mind...”

She wriggled in embarrassment. “Well! I never dreamt this would happen. I mean, I don’t mind at all, if *you* don’t mind...”

“Really? Well, in-in-in that case... um...” I turned to Miyamoto, to make sure it was all right by him. But he’d already slipped into the bedroom. “Right, OK, so let’s get... um...”

“Right, yes, let’s, shall we? Haha! Who would have thought it? Ho ho ho!” Mrs Miyamoto started to take off her blue-and-white striped dress, revealing a dark blue bra and panties underneath.

I ripped off my shirt and trousers, put my arm around her shoulders and led her into the bedroom. Her whole body was quivering with excitement. Her husband and my wife were already at it on the double bed.

“Er, excuse me, could you move over a bit?”

“Yes, of course.”

Miyamoto shifted over to the edge of the bed while still making love to my wife. I flopped down on the other side with Mrs Miyamoto. We threw our arms around each other and started getting down to it.

The two women began to gasp and pant, each spurred on by the other. Then the doorbell rang.

“You go this time,” I said to my wife.

“No!” she replied through her panting, shaking her head vigorously. “You go, please!!”

I reluctantly prised myself from Mrs Miyamoto’s tight embrace, threw on my shirt and trousers, and went to open the front door. Standing there in the porch was the Lola Cosmetics salesgirl. Now, this woman was stunningly beautiful. I’d always had a secret lust

for her.

“Er... Good morning! Is your wife at home?” she asked.

“Oh, it’s you! Heheheheh!” I replied slowly. I licked my lips and rolled my eyes over her voluptuous physique, compressed into a suit of pure white. “Yes. Of course she’s at home. Anyway, why don’t you come in!”

She gave me a dubious look and edged into the hallway, keeping her distance at all times, before closing the door behind her.

“By the way, have you ever heard of the Dabba Dabba Tree?” I asked, still staring lewdly at her body.

“No. What’s that?”

She really didn’t seem to know. Realizing that it would take a while to explain, I thought hard before telling her the whole story.

“In other words, this is all part of Mr Miyamoto’s erotic dream,” I added in conclusion. “We are nothing but characters in his dream. So how about it? If we’re merely characters in someone else’s erotic dream, we might as well do something erotic too. The least we could do is have it off and enjoy ourselves!”

She looked at me as if I were mad. “I never heard anything so ridiculous in all my life! This is someone else’s dream?! You must be out of your mind.”

“No, you don’t understand,” I said with a sigh. “I’m perfectly sane. But we’re in someone else’s dream. Could you please take your clothes off now, quickly.”

She opened her eyes wide. “What unbelievable depravity! You, a seemingly respectable householder – a-a-a respectable member of society—”

I’d had enough. So I just pounced on her. “If we don’t hurry, Miyamoto will wake up! This salesgirl was younger and more beautiful than Mrs Miyamoto. She was bound to be a much better sex partner.

As I ripped off her suit, she resisted me with all her strength. “But for us, this is reality!” she cried as she tried to hold me off. “Our lives will continue, even after your Mr Miyamoto wakes up. Then what will you do about these marks on my body?”

“Yes, you’ve got a point. But there’s another way of looking at it. As soon as Miyamoto wakes up, we might simply cease to exist!”

She was wearing a dark brown bra and panties. Her attempts to resist had made her perspire profusely, but when I pulled down her pants, she suddenly seemed drained of all energy. She flung herself onto me with a moan. “You complete bastard,” she said, and started to sob.

I lifted her in my arms and carried her into the bedroom. “Er, excuse me, could you move over a bit?” I said to the other three on the bed.

Mrs Miyamoto was still lying there in a state of limbo, just as I’d left her. When she saw the salesgirl, she cried out in despair, “No! You can’t leave me like this! Finish me first!”

Miyamoto half-lifted himself off my wife and glared at me. “That’s right. Dream or no dream, I won’t have you insulting my wife!”

At that moment, the doorbell rang again.

“Sorry. You’ll have to excuse me for a moment.”

I set the salesgirl down on one side of the bed, returned to the hallway and opened the door. Standing there in the porch was a shabby middle-aged man, with what looked like a Geiger counter dangling from one hand.

“Yes. Can I help you?”

“I’m from the City Sanitation Department. Am I correct in thinking you have a Dabba Dabba Tree?”

“Yes, we do. How did you know that?”

“I thought as much,” replied the Sanitation Officer. “This is an Erotic Dream Sensor. It never fails. And now, if you would let me have the tree please.” And he strode into the house without so much as a by-your-leave.

“Just you wait a minute!” I called. But the Sanitation Officer walked straight into our bedroom and made for the Dabba Dabba Tree at the foot of our bed. “What do you want it for?” I asked.

“Haven’t you read the morning papers? All right, I’ll tell you. Recently, these Dabba Dabba Trees have been causing serious social unrest. Because of them, people can no longer distinguish dreams from reality. People have been having sex in the streets, or violating bus conductors in front of their passengers. Men have been accosting female assistants in department stores. Women have been cavorting through the streets stark naked, arousing young men in broad daylight. Girls have been asking complete strangers to go to bed with them. It’s a world of sexual violence and wanton depravity. So the government has started to confiscate the Dabba Dabba Trees.”

“Oh dear. I didn’t realize there were so many,” I said with a sigh. “But if that’s what the government says, I suppose we have no choice.”

“It’s not fair!” moaned my wife, who was sitting on the bed listening to us. “We’ve only had ours one night!”

“Don’t worry,” said Miyamoto, raising his head from the bedclothes and scowling at the Sanitation Officer. “Because, you see, this is all happening in my dream. If I so choose, this man will no longer be allowed to exist. He will simply disappear!”

The Sanitation Officer pulled a wry face. “So there’s another madman in the house, is there?!”

“You don’t believe me?” said Miyamoto, standing on the bed. “So be it. I’ll prove it to you. I’ll prove that this is my dream.” And then he shouted out at the top of his voice.

Miyamoto was awoken by the sound of his own voice. And in that instant, everyone else simply ceased to exist.

Rumours About Me

I was surprised to hear my name mentioned on the evening news one day.

“And now, other news,” said the announcer. “Earlier today, Tsutomu Morishita asked Akiko Mikawa out for a drink, but was turned down. Mikawa works as a secretary in the same company as Morishita. This is the fifth time Morishita has asked Mikawa out for a date. He’s been refused on all but the first occasion.”

“W-what? WHAT??” I slammed my cup down on the table as I looked on in disbelief. “What was that? What did he say??”

My face appeared large on the TV screen.

The newsreader continued. “It’s not yet clear why Mikawa continues to reject Morishita. Hiruma Sakamoto, a friend and work colleague of Mikawa, thinks it’s because – although Mikawa doesn’t particularly dislike Morishita – she doesn’t particularly like him either.”

Now a photo of Akiko Mikawa appeared on the screen.

“In view of this evidence, it’s thought that Morishita failed to leave any impression at all on Mikawa during that original date. According to well-informed sources, Morishita went straight to his apartment after work today, and is now eating a meal that he prepared by himself. Well, that’s all we have on Tsutomu Morishita for today. Now let’s go over to our correspondent at the Yakuyoke Hachiman Night Festival in Kobe. I imagine things are starting to hot up now, Mizuno-san?”

“Yes, that’s absolutely right.”

I sat there open-mouthed, staring at the screen blankly as the next item continued.

I eventually came to my senses. “What was that all about?” I muttered to myself.

I was hallucinating. That was it. I was seeing things. And hearing things. That was the only explanation. I mean, what would be the point in reporting that I’d asked Akiko Mikawa out for a drink and was so spectacularly rejected, as always? The news value was zero.

All the same, it still seemed so real – the pictures of me and Akiko, the captions under the photographs, the newsreader’s manner, everything.

“Don’t be daft!” I told myself, shaking my head vigorously.

The news ended.

I nodded to myself. “A hallucination. Yes. That’s what it was,” I said. “But hey, what a realistic hallucination!”

I laughed. My laughter reverberated around my tiny bedsit room.

What if the news had been real, I wondered. What if Akiko Mikawa had seen it, what if my workmates had seen it? What would they have thought? I had myself in stitches just imagining their faces.

Now I was laughing uncontrollably. “Wahahahahahaha, hoo-hoo-hoo, hahaha, hee, hee, wahahahahahahaha!!!”

I climbed into bed, but still the laughter wouldn't subside.

There was an article about me in the morning paper.

MORISHITA REJECTED AGAIN

At around 4.40 yesterday afternoon, Tsutomu Morishita (28, an employee of Kasumiyama Electric Industries, Sanko-cho, Shinjuku, Tokyo) invited Akiko Mikawa (23, a secretary at the same company) out for a drink after work. Mikawa refused, claiming she had to go home early. Morishita was wearing a red tie with green polka dots, which he'd bought in a Shinjuku supermarket the previous day. Morishita later returned to his apartment in Higashi-cho, Kichijoji, and made his own dinner. He is thought to have gone to bed immediately after eating, as usual. This is the fourth time Morishita has been refused by Miss Mikawa.

There was a picture of me next to the article, the same one as had been used on television the night before. But there was no picture of Akiko Mikawa. I was obviously the main subject of this story.

I read the article four or five times while drinking a glass of milk. Then I tore the newspaper up and threw it into the bin.

“It's a conspiracy!” I muttered. “Someone's playing a practical joke on me. My God! All this just to have a laugh!”

Whoever it was, they'd need a lot of money. Even a single copy of a newspaper would be expensive to print. Who could it be? Who would go to such bizarre lengths just to get at me?

I couldn't remember offending anyone that much. Perhaps it was someone else who fancied Akiko Mikawa. But what was the point? She'd done nothing but reject me.

No, this must be someone really perverse, I thought. Trouble was, I couldn't think of anyone who could possibly be that perverse.

Damn! I should have kept the newspaper, I thought on my way to the station. I regretted losing my temper. If I'd kept the newspaper, it might have helped me to ferret out the culprit. It would have been evidence once I'd found him.

I forced myself onto the packed commuter train and found a place to stand in the middle of the carriage. I thought about all the people I knew. Then I caught sight of a newspaper being read by the man standing next to me. It was a different newspaper to mine, but it also had an article about me. And this time, it occupied two whole columns.

I gasped audibly.

The man looked up from his newspaper, glanced back at the photograph next to the

article, then looked up again and stared at me. I hurriedly turned my back.

Who had done this?! I was livid. The villain had actually replaced all the morning papers along this line with fake ones. He wanted to make sure the article was seen not just by me but also by everyone else who took the same train as me. In that way, he could make a complete fool of me and vilify my name. And of course, the ultimate intention was to make me lose my mind. I filled my lungs with the stuffy air inside the packed train. The bastard! I wasn't going to play his game! No one was going to drive me mad!

I laughed aloud. "Hahahahahaha! Who's going mad, then?" I shouted. "I'm not! Hahahahahaha!"

At Shinjuku Station, an announcer was barking over the loudspeakers. "Shinjuku. This is Shinjuku. Change here for the Yamanote Line. The train on Platform 2 is for Yotsuya, Kanda and Tokyo. By the way, Tsutomu Morishita was on this train today. All he's had this morning is a glass of milk. Mind the doors!"

There was nothing unusual about the atmosphere at work. But as soon as I walked into the office, seven or eight of my colleagues started tapping each other on the shoulder, giving me sidelong glances and whispering to each other. They must be talking about me, I concluded.

After clearing a few memos from my desk, I went over to Admin. In the office were four secretaries, one of them Akiko Mikawa. As soon as they saw me, they changed their expressions and started typing feverishly on their keyboards. It was quite obvious – they hadn't been working but talking about me until that very moment.

Ignoring Akiko, I called Hiruma Sakamoto out to the corridor.

"Was someone enquiring after me yesterday?" I asked.

She looked as if she were about to cry. "I'm really sorry," she answered nervously. "I didn't know they were journalists! I didn't think they'd put it all in the newspaper like that!"

"They?! Who?"

"There were four or five men. Of course, I didn't know any of them. They accosted me on my way home and asked all sorts of things about you."

"Hmmm." That got me thinking. The conspiracy was clearly much more sinister than I'd imagined.

Just after lunch, I was called to the Chief Clerk's desk. After issuing a new work assignment, he gave me a knowing look. "I read about it in the paper," he whispered.

"Oh?" I answered, not knowing quite what to say.

The Chief Clerk grinned and brought his face close to mine. "You can't trust the media can you. But don't worry. Personally, I couldn't be less interested." The liar. He was loving every minute.

My new assignment took me out of the building and into a taxi. The young cabbie had his radio on at full volume.

"Ginza 2nd Street, please."

“Eh? What’s that?”

He couldn’t hear me for the music.

“Ginza 2nd Street.”

“Ginza what Street?”

“Second. Ginza 2nd Street.”

The cabbie finally understood, and the taxi set off.

The music ended. An announcer started talking.

“This is the news at two o’clock. The government this morning ordered all laughing bags to be confiscated from shops throughout the country. Police nationwide have been instructed to clamp down on the illegal manufacture or sale of the bags. Laughing bags are novelty toys that emit a hysterical laughing noise. Today’s move follows a dramatic surge in social unrest caused by nuisance calls using the bags. Calls are often made at two or three o’clock in the morning. When the victim answers, the caller makes the bag laugh into the telephone. There have also been reports of a phenomenon known as ‘laughing-bag rage’.

“Tsutomu Morishita arrived at work on time this morning. Soon after entering his office he went to the Administration Department and called Hiruma Sakamoto out to the corridor, where the two were observed in conversation. The precise nature of their discussion is not yet clear. Details will be announced as soon as they’re known. Later Morishita went out on company business, and is currently travelling towards central Tokyo in a taxi.

“The Ministry of Health & Welfare today released the results of a nationwide survey of pachinko game-machine users and designers. The results suggest that playing pachinko after eating eels can be very detrimental to health. According to Tadashi Akanemura, Chairman of the National Federation of Game-Machine Designers—”

The cabbie switched the radio off – he probably wasn’t too interested in the news.

Was my name really that well known? I closed my eyes and thought about it. Could I really be so famous, when there was nothing distinctive about me at all? After all, I was nothing but a lowly office worker, a company employee. No one as unremarkable as me could possibly merit attention in the world of the media.

So just how well-known was my name, my face? Take this cabbie. Was he aware that the person mentioned on the news just now was none other than the passenger in the back of his cab? Had he recognized me as soon as I got in? Or did he actually know nothing about me at all?

I decided to test him. “Er, driver? Do you know who I am?”

He checked me out in the rear-view mirror. “Have we met somewhere, sir?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Well then, I don’t know you, do I.”

There was a pause. “You’re not one of them celebrities, are you sir?” he asked at length.

“No. Just an office worker.”

“You been on telly?”

“No. Never.”

The cabbie smiled wryly. “Then I’m not going to know you, am I sir.”

“No,” I replied. “I suppose not.”

I thought back over the radio news I’d just heard. The announcer knew that I was in a taxi heading for central Tokyo. That meant someone must be following me. They must be watching my every move. I turned and looked through the rear window. The road was full of cars – it was impossible to know which of them was following us. Come to think of it they all looked pretty suspicious now.

“I think someone’s following us,” I said to the cabbie. “Can you shake them off?”

“That’s a lot to ask, sir, if you don’t mind me saying so,” he said with a grimace. “Unless you know which car it is. Anyway, you’d have a job shaking anyone off in this traffic.”

“I think it’s that black Nissan. Look! It’s got a newspaper company flag on it!”

“Well, all right sir, if you insist. Though, personally, I just think you’re being paranoid sir.”

“I’m perfectly sane,” I countered hastily. “Don’t go taking me to the madhouse, will you!”

The taxi meandered and roamed aimlessly for a while, as if driven by a sleepwalker before finally arriving in Ginza 2nd Street.

“Well, I lost the black Nissan at least,” the cabbie said with a broad smile. “That must be worth something!”

I reluctantly added five hundred yen to the fare on the meter.

On entering the office of our client in Ginza 2nd Street, I was greeted with uncommon courtesy by a female receptionist whose face I recognized. She led me to a special reception lounge for particularly valued guests. Normally, I’d be called to the duty clerk’s desk, and would stand there talking while he remained seated.

I sat myself on a sofa in the spacious lounge and was fidgeting in some discomfort when to my surprise, the Department Director walked in with his assistant. They both started greeting me with particular formality.

“Suzuki is always most glad of your kind assistance,” said the Department Director bowing deeply. Suzuki was the duty clerk who usually saw me.

As I sat there bewildered, the Department Director and his assistant, far from discussing the business at hand, started to heap sycophantic praise on me. They admired my tie, flattered my dress sense, and even started extolling my good looks. In my embarrassment, I hurriedly handed over the documents I’d been given by the Chief Clerk, passed on his message and quickly took my leave.

As I left the building, I noticed the same taxi still waiting there by the pavement.

The young cabbie thrust his head through the side window. “Sir,” he called.

“Still here, are you?” I said. “Well, that’s perfect. Take me back to Shinjuku, will you.”

I was just settling into the rear seat when the cabbie thrust a five-hundred-yen note towards me. "You can have this back, sir," he said. "You've got to be joking!"

"Is something the matter?"

"I switched the radio back on, didn't I. And they were talking about you, weren't they? They said you'd been carried off by a rogue taxi driver, who'd deliberately taken you out of your way and squeezed five hundred yen out of you for it! They even mentioned my name!"

Now I understood why I'd been treated so courteously at the client's office.

"I told you, didn't I? We were being followed!"

"Whatever. You can have your five hundred yen back."

"Go on. You keep it."

"No way! Have it back!"

"Well... All right. If that's the way you feel. Anyway, will you take me to Shinjuku now?"

"How could I say no? Next thing they'd say I refused a fare!"

And with that he started off towards Shinjuku.

I was gradually realizing that the plot to drive me out of my mind was unimaginably massive in scale. Apart from anything else, my enemy appeared to have bought off the mass media. Who on earth could it be? And what was his motive? Why would anyone want to do something like this?

All I could do was to follow the flow for now. It would be virtually impossible to uncover the mastermind at the bottom of it. Even if I caught one of my pursuers, he would just be small fry. He wouldn't know who the mastermind was. That was the big cheese - big enough to buy off the media, at least!

"I'm not trying to make excuses, sir," the cabbie said suddenly. "But I did lose that black Nissan. I did, really."

"I'm sure you did," I replied. "But I reckon it's not that simple anyway. They're not just following me in a car. They've probably even bugged this taxi."

Hold on a minute, I thought. How did I know I could trust this driver, anyway? He could be in on it too. Otherwise, how did they know the tip was five hundred yen?

I suddenly noticed a helicopter circling above us. It was flying at dangerously low altitude, almost skimming the tops of the buildings.

"I'm sure I saw that chopper on the way out, sir," said the driver, squinting up at the sky. "Maybe they're the ones that are following you."

There was a thunderous crash, and a blood-coloured flash of light streaked across the sky. I looked up to see fireballs flying in all directions. The helicopter had crashed into the top floor of a multi-storey building. The pilot must have been paying too much attention to events on the ground and lost control.

"Serves him right! Heheheheheheh!"

The cabbie laughed insanely as he sped away from the scene. He already had the look of a deranged man.

I knew I'd be in danger if I stayed in the taxi any longer. "Ah, I've just remembered something," I said. "Could you let me off here." Actually, I'd remembered there was a small psychiatric clinic nearby.

"Where are you going?" the cabbie asked.

"That's my business," I answered.

"Well, I'm going straight home to sleep," he continued. He looked pale-faced as he took the fare from me. That decided it – he wasn't one of them.

"Good idea," I said as I stepped out into the unbearable heat.

I entered the clinic and sat in the waiting room for about twenty minutes. An apparently hysterical middle-aged woman was followed by an apparently epileptic young man. I was next. I went into the treatment room, where the doctor was looking at a television on a desk by the window. News of the helicopter crash was just coming through.

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. Even the sky's getting congested now," the doctor muttered as he turned to face me. "And of course, there'll be more patients as a result. But they won't come for treatment until it's too late, oh no. Another bad characteristic of people today."

"Yes, you're right," I said with a nod of agreement. I didn't want to seem pushy, but I jumped straight in and started to explain my situation anyway. I was supposed to be at work, after all, and didn't have much time. "They suddenly started talking about me on TV last night. And there were articles about me in this morning's papers. They made an announcement about me at the station. I was even mentioned on the radio. At work they're all talking about me in whispers. I'm sure they've bugged my house and the taxis I travel in. In fact, I'm being followed. It's a major operation. That helicopter on the news crashed while it was following me!"

The doctor stared at me with a pitiful expression as I continued my story. Finally, however, he made a gesture to signal that he could take no more. "Why didn't you come to me sooner?" he moaned. "But no. You only come when your condition is already too serious! You give me no option but to admit you to hospital immediately – by force if necessary! For there's no doubt about it at all. You are suffering from a persecution complex, a victim complex – in other words, total paranoid delusion. A classic case of schizophrenia. Luckily, there's no loss of personality as yet. I'll admit you to the university hospital right away. Leave it to me."

"Wait a minute!" I said. "I was in a hurry, I didn't explain myself well! I had a feeling you wouldn't believe me. I'm not a good talker, I can't express things logically. But everything I've just said, it's nothing to do with any complex – it's plain fact! Yet I'm just an ordinary office worker – certainly not famous enough to be followed by the media! No, however you look at it, these media people who are tailing me, reporting about me – yes, even someone as ordinary as me – they're the ones who are insane! I just came here to ask your advice, you know, what you think I should do to cope with all this. You've written books about the pathological tendencies of society and the perversion of the media. You've

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