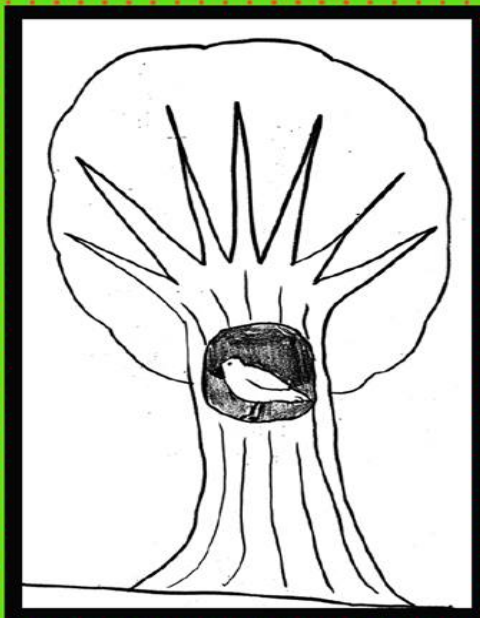
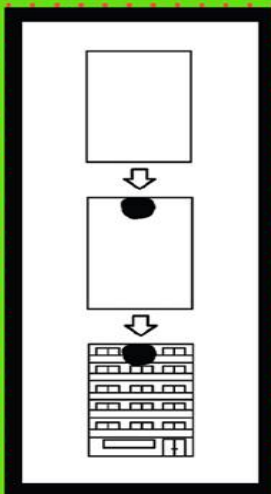


STRANGE PICTURES



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**THE
JAPANESE
MYSTERY-
HORROR
SENSATION**



TRANSLATED
BY JIM RION

UKETSU



STRANGE PICTURES

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Translated from the Japanese by Jim Rion



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Prologue

‘All right, everyone, now I’m going to show you a picture.’



The professor, Dr Tomiko Hagio, fixed a sheet of paper onto the classroom’s blackboard.

She pointed at the drawing on it as she spoke.

‘As you well know, I now dedicate my time to teaching, but before I started lecturing young people like yourselves, I cut my teeth as a practising psychologist. I offered therapy to quite a number of patients over the course of my career. This picture is a copy of a drawing done by a patient I treated early on. A young girl. Let’s refer to her as “Little A” for now. When Little A was eleven years old, she was arrested for the murder of her mother.’

Her words sent a ripple of shock through the students.

‘I decided to administer a drawing test when undertaking her analysis. A drawing test requires that we have the patient follow a drawing prompt and use the results to analyse the patient’s mental state. Like they say, “Painting is a mirror of the soul,” and a drawing can often offer valuable insight into the mind of its artist. In particular, drawings of houses, trees and people tend to be remarkably revealing. Now, does anyone find anything about this picture strange?’

Dr Hagio surveyed the classroom.

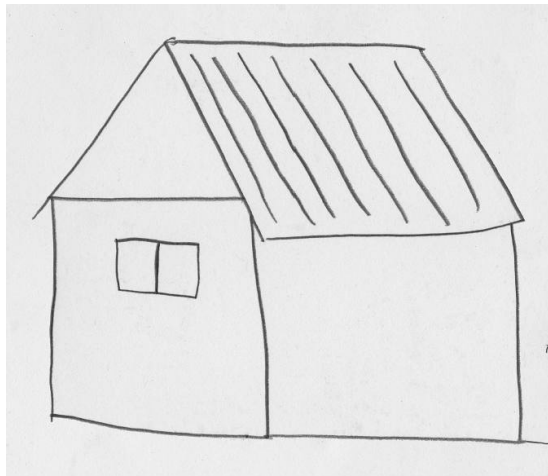
The students only stared intently at the picture on the blackboard, wearing puzzled expressions.

‘Does nothing stand out? At first glance, yes, it probably looks rather ordinary. But here and there pop up some very unusual points indeed. First, look closely at the girl in the centre of the drawing. Her mouth, in particular.’



Dr Hagio pointed at it. ‘It’s somewhat messy and smudged. Little A had difficulty getting the mouth right, having to redraw it many times. She managed to get the other features down in a single go, so why did she keep making mistakes at the mouth? This offers us a clue to understanding her state of mind.

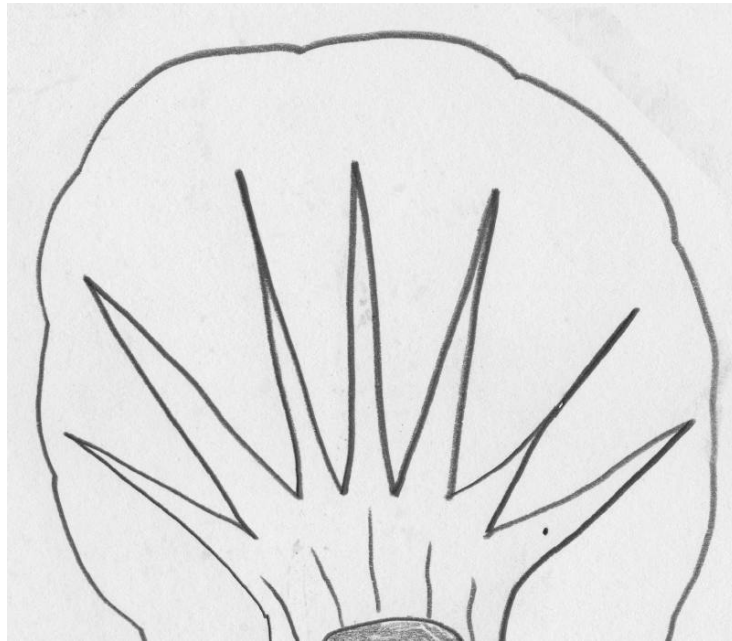
‘Little A was abused by her mother,’ Dr Hagio elaborated. ‘It seems that whenever she was home, she always had to force herself to smile and act happy, so as not to anger her mother. Inside she was frightened, but her face said otherwise. Even if it was a lie. She reasoned, “If I don’t smile right, she’ll beat me.” While drawing the mouth, the feeling reawakened, and it disturbed her. Her hands trembled, and she couldn’t draw well. This same pain also arises in the drawing of the house next to the girl.’ Again, she pointed at the picture.



‘The house has no door. Without a door, you can’t get inside, right? This house mirrors the girl’s interior life. “No one is allowed inside.” “I want to be alone in here.” It illustrates her desire for a refuge from the outside world.

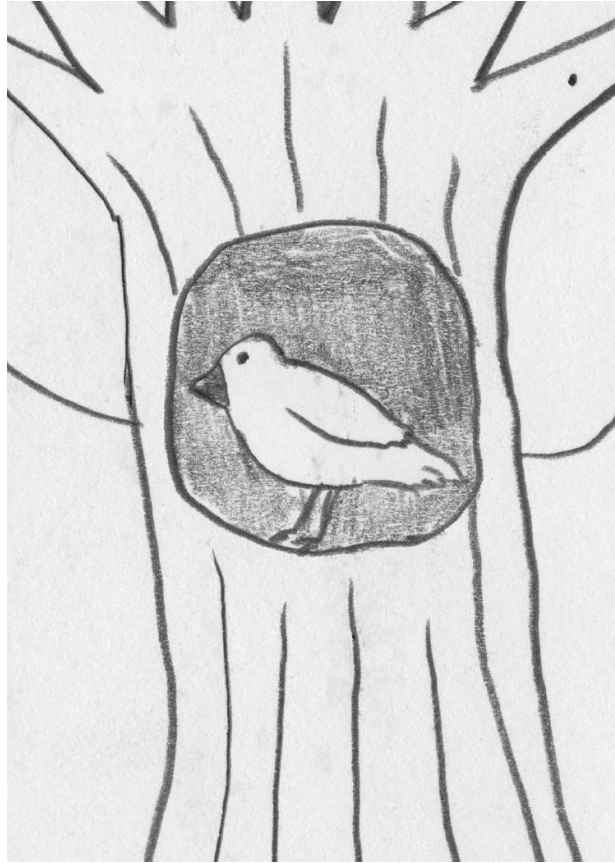
‘Now, finally, I’d like you all to look at the drawing of the tree.

‘The ends of the branches are sharp and pointed, like thorns. We sometimes see this pattern in drawings by criminals. It seems to express a defiant, aggressive nature. It says, “I will hurt you,” or “I will prick you.” Now, as a psychologist, I had to consider all this information together to diagnose the subject.’



Dr Hagio looked into the eyes of her students as she spoke, slowly and with careful deliberation.

‘After looking at this picture, I concluded that Little A had a strong chance at rehabilitation. Can you see why? Look again at the tree. This time, look past the branches, and focus on the trunk. There is a little bird living in a hollow there. People who draw pictures like this display a desire to protect, and a tendency towards strong nurturing love. It expresses the desire to defend the weak, and to create a safe haven for them to live in.’



‘Deep inside Little A’s thorny, aggressive exterior beat a kind heart. If we gave her a chance to interact with animals or small children, we could foster that kindness and possibly overcome her aggressive spirit. That is what I surmised then, and, to this day, I remain confident in that diagnosis and recommended course of treatment. I understand that Little A is now living happily as a mother.’

Chapter One

The Old Woman's Prayer



Shuhei Sasaki, May 19, 2014

In the window of an old apartment in a working-class Tokyo neighbourhood, a light glimmered despite the late hour.

The apartment's sole resident was twenty-one-year-old Shuhei Sasaki, a college student. He really should have been cramming for exams or working on a résumé for his upcoming job search, but that night he found himself glued to his computer screen for an altogether different reason.

'So, this must be the blog Kurihara was talking about,' he muttered to himself.

Kurihara was a younger student. He and Sasaki were both members of the college Paranormal Club. That afternoon, Sasaki had run into him in the cafeteria, and they had ended up having lunch together. Sasaki had been too busy with job hunting lately to attend any club meetings, so he was eager to catch up with his clubmate after so long away.

After they'd brought each other up to date and discussed the upcoming overnight with the club, naturally the talk turned to their shared interest in the bizarre and unexplained.

'So, Sasaki, have you gathered any intel lately?'

Kurihara wore an odd expression as he spoke. In their club, 'gathering intel' was code for watching or reading anything related to the paranormal.

'None. I've been swamped. I haven't seen any movies, read any books or even surfed online.'

'All right then, I'll put you onto something juicy. I just recently found a very strange blog.'

'A blog? What about?'

'It's called *Oh No, not Raku!* At first glance, it's perfectly innocent, but there's something there. Something *strange* about it. I can guarantee a chill, at the very least, so do give it a look.'

'Right . . .'

In Sasaki's experience, Kurihara was an easy-going kind of guy. He always preferred to hang back and stay out of things. So, when he recommended something with such enthusiasm, Sasaki knew he couldn't ignore it.

* * *

12 a.m. The only sound was the ticking of his clock. Sasaki gulped as he opened the blog Kurihara had told him about.

He felt . . . nostalgic, rather than nervous. Once, there had been so many blogs like this.

Ah, blogs. The concept now almost seemed quaint. Everyone had a different take on theirs. The blogs came in all sorts of styles: some simple diaries, some hobby sites, others outlets for political rants. . . . There was so much freedom to them, there had even been a time when you could find blogs 'written by' cats or rice spatulas. But these past few years, the fever had died down, and you found far fewer than before.

By the title alone, you'd assume the author was named Raku, but it was such an unusual, suggestive name. A pen name? Probably.

And that exaggerated 'Oh no' was such a weak attempt at humor. The kind of uninspired silliness that was the hallmark of your average diary.

Oh No, Not Raku!

My journal. I'll try to update every day!

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'To the one I love most'

28/11/2012 Wednesday 03.24

I am going to stop updating this blog today.

I've finally figured out the secret of those three drawings.

The latest post flickered beneath the title. It was dated November 28, 2012. So, about a year and a half ago. Meaning the blog hadn't been updated since.

It read:

'To the one I love most' 11/28/2012

I am going to stop updating this blog today.

I've finally figured out the secret of those three drawings.

I can't imagine the kind of pain you must have been suffering.

Nor can I understand the depths of whatever sin you committed.

I cannot forgive you. But even so, I will always love you.

Raku

Sasaki read this short, disturbing entry over and over. The more he did, the deeper the mystery grew.

He couldn't imagine what meaning lay behind the phrases 'To the one I love most', 'the secret of those three drawings' and 'whatever sin you committed'.

So he scrolled down, skimming past entries to see if they could help him unravel the mystery. The first entry was dated October 13, 2008. It read:



'Hello world!' 10/13/2008

I've decided to start keeping a blog from today. So, I guess I should begin by introducing myself. My name is Raku.

I was going to post a photo of myself, but while I was setting it up, I was told it's dangerous to post personal information on the web, so here's a drawing instead.

It's actually by my wife.

I'll just call her Yuki. She's six years older than me.

When I told her I was starting a blog, I asked if she would draw a picture of me to use instead of a photo, and it didn't even take her five minutes. That's what you get with a former pro illustrator! She's so talented!

But I think maybe she made me look too handsome. . . .

So, anyway, this is going to be like a diary, just me writing whatever I happen to feel like.

I plan to post every day, so I hope you keep reading!

Raku

'Anniversary' 10/15/2008

Hi there, it's Raku!

I know I promised I'd update every day, but I was just so beat yesterday I went to bed without writing. Sorry. I'll do better from now on!

So, today, October 15th, is a very important day.

It's our first wedding anniversary!

I bought a whole cake to celebrate. It was a little pricey, but so worth it!

I ended up devouring two pieces, before Yuki scolded me, 'Don't eat so much! You'll get fat!' She's so mean! (SOB)

The last four slices went into the fridge. That's tomorrow's breakfast. I can't wait!

Raku

The entries went like that, four or five a week. They were all pretty tame, 'I ate so-and-so' or 'We went to do such-and-such', and Sasaki found no hint of anything that could be the 'sin' or 'pain' mentioned in the final entry.

Along the way, though, the couple's lives took a turn.

'Announcement' 12/25/2008

Hi there, it's Raku!

So, Yuki woke up feeling unwell, and it seems she went to hospital to get checked out this morning.

And, wouldn't you know it, they said she had a baby in there!

When Yuki told me, I was so happy I started jumping for joy! This is the best Christmas present ever!

So, I am hereby announcing that we are going to be a mummy and daddy!

Raku

From that point on, the blog was consumed by all things baby. Raku's entries overflowed with emotional writing about his expected child, as well as with concern for Yuki's condition.

'Morning sickness sucks' 1/3/2009

Yuki's morning sickness was really bad again today, so she could barely eat any of the New Year's leftovers.

All I can do is rub her back. I feel so powerless.

I've always heard that women start craving sour food when they have morning sickness, though I guess everyone's different.

Anyway, Yuki said she thought she could eat yogurt without feeling sick.

And so, our fridge is now packed with yogurt.

And I'm off to the store to buy more!

Raku

'Baby bump' 2/8/2009

Today we are entering the 13th week of pregnancy.

But it seems morning sickness isn't through with Yuki yet.

She ate a load of yogurt again today. She's tried a lot of different varieties, but it seems that the kind with aloe chunks agrees with her stomach best.

And speaking of her belly, she's really starting to show.

It's like I can see how the baby is growing! I'm so happy!

Raku

'Cherry blossoms' 3/16/2009

Yuki has started feeling a lot better, so today we went out for the first time in a while.

We went to the neighbourhood park. The cherry blossoms were beautiful, although they haven't reached full bloom yet.

We sat on a bench and talked about the baby.

Things like, 'What kinds of classes should we sign them up for when they're older?' and 'What anime should we watch with them first?'

We're rushing things a little, but imagining our lives with the baby is so much fun.

I want to start thinking up names, but we're going to wait until after we know if it's a boy or a girl before we do too much of that. Although, sitting under the cherry blossoms, we both agreed that Sakura would be a good name for a girl.

Raku

Up to that point, the couple's daily life had seemed one of endless sunshine.

But then, in May, when they'd passed the midpoint of Yuki's pregnancy, clouds appeared on the horizon.

'Ultrasound scan' 5/18/2009

I had the day off from work today, so I took Yuki to her prenatal check-up.

It was so moving to get a first glimpse of the baby on the ultrasound!

But apparently it's a breech baby.

I've heard that breech babies can cause problems when it comes time to deliver, so that made me nervous. But the baby is still small, and I'm told they still move around a lot at this stage, so I was relieved to hear the doctor say it would probably turn itself the right way. Phew!

But there was another surprise to come.

Because the baby was head up, its pubic area was hidden behind Yuki's pelvic bone, so we still don't know if it's a boy or a girl.

So, I guess we'll have to pick a name without knowing!

Raku

A breech baby . . . that's what they call it when a baby is positioned head up and feet down in the mother's womb, the reverse of what usually happens. This discovery would go on to become a major issue for the couple.

'Doing our best!' 7/20/2009

We had another check-up.

The baby is still head up.

At this stage, apparently, it's very rare for babies to turn around on their own, so I guess we have to do it ourselves.

They taught us some exercises to help turn a breech baby. Yuki is going to be doing them every day at home from now on.

And I'll be there every step of the way, doing what I can to support her!

We're doing our best!

Raku

'Hot summer!' 8/18/2009

We had another check-up today.

We've both been working hard at the exercises, but the baby is still the wrong way up.

Yuki seems to be taking it pretty hard.

But we were told that with proper preparation, she should be able to deliver her breech baby normally. We're lucky we've got a veteran midwife on hand!

And so, it looks like we'll have to wait until the baby is born to find out if it's a boy or a girl! (LOL)

On the way home, we stopped by a cafe for juice.

Yuki got a refill. Twice! We've been having so many hot days, it's no wonder she's so thirsty lately.

And since she's drinking for two, it must be hard to keep hydrated.

Raku

Then, on September 3rd, with the due date fast approaching, something seemed to change in Yuki.

'Baby blues' 9/3/2009

So, today Yuki suddenly broke down crying.

She didn't answer when I asked why, so I was totally at a loss. . . .

Maybe this is what they call 'baby blues'?

All I could do was sit there rubbing her back until she calmed down.

She could go into labour any time now, so I can't imagine how much stress she's feeling.

I really need to step up and be someone she can depend on. . . .

Raku

'Baby picture' 9/4/2009

Yuki has made a complete recovery from yesterday and is in high spirits!

And she also finally drew another picture!

It's adorable! She said she had imagined what our baby might look like.

When I asked her why it was dressed like Santa, she said, 'Because this baby is our Santa.'

It took me a while, but I finally clicked.

It's because we found out she was pregnant on Christmas Day! And it's already nine months later. . . . The time has gone by in a flash, but at the same time seems to have lasted forever. . . .

Raku