



Mori Yōko (b. 1940) began writing at age thirty-five. She says that she "is a complete devotee of things Western who, even as a child, never went to see a Japanese movie." Her fiction reflects the intermixing of Western and Japanese cultures, the ferment of hybridity, that is a major feature of postmodernism and late-twentieth-century Japan.

Spring Storm

The small orange light on the lobby wall showed the elevator was still at the seventh floor. Natsuo's eyes were fixed on it. 1

From time to time her heart pounded furiously, so furiously that it seemed to begin skipping beats. For some time now she had been wild with excitement. 2

Intense joy is somewhat like pain, she thought. Or like a dizzy spell. Strangely, it was not unlike grief. The suffocating feeling in her chest was almost unbearable. 3

The elevator still had not moved from the seventh floor. 4

The emergency stairway was located alongside the outer walls of the building, completely exposed to the elements. Unfortunately for Natsuo, it was raining outside. There was a wind, too. 5

A spring storm. The words, perhaps romantic, well described the heavy, slanting rain, driven by a wind that had retained the rawness of winter. If Natsuo were to climb the stairs to the sixth floor, she would be soaked to the skin. 6

She took a cigarette from her handbag and lit it. 7

This is unusual for me, she thought. She had never smoked while waiting for the elevator. Indeed, she had not smoked anywhere while standing up. 8

Exhaling the smoke from the depths of her throat, she fell to thinking. I'll be experiencing all kinds of new things from now on, I've just come a big step up the ladder. No, not just one, I've jumped as many as ten steps in one leap. There were thirty-four rivals, and I beat them all. 9

All thirty-four people were well-experienced performers. There was a dancer with considerably more skill than she. Physically also the odds were against her: there were a sizable number of women with long, stylish legs and tight, shapely waists. One Eurasian woman had such alluring looks that everyone admired her. There were professional actresses currently active on the stage, too. 10

In spite of everything, Natsuo was the one selected for the role. 11

When the agency called to tell her the news, she at first thought she was 12
being teased.

"You must be kidding me," she said, a little irritated. She had indeed 13
taken it for a bad joke. "You can't trick me like this. I don't believe you."

"Let me ask you a question, then," responded the man who had been 14
acting as her manager. In a teasing voice, he continued, "Were you just
kidding when you auditioned for that musical?"

"Of course not!" she retorted. She had been quite serious and, although 15
she would not admit it, she had wanted the role desperately. At the au-
dition, she had done her very best.

"But I'm sure I didn't make it," she said to her manager. "At the inter- 16
view, I blushed terribly."

Whenever she tried to express herself in front of other people, blood 17
would rush to her face, turning it scarlet.

"You're a bashful person, aren't you?" one of her examiners had com- 18
mented to her at the interview. His tone carried an objective observation
rather than sympathetic inquiry.

"Do you think you're an introvert?" another examiner asked. 19

"I'm probably on the shy side," Natsuo answered, painfully aware that 20
her earlobes had turned embarrassingly red and her palms were moist.

"The heroine of this drama," added the third examiner, "is a spirited 21
woman with strong willpower. Do you know that?"

Natsuo had sensed the skepticism that was running through the panel 22
of examiners. Without doubt she was going to fail the test, unless she did
something right now. She looked up.

"It's true that I'm not very good at expressing myself, or speaking up for 23
myself, in front of other people. But playing a dramatic role is something
different. It's very different." She was getting desperate. "I'm very bashful
about myself. But I'm perfectly all right when I play someone else."

If I am to express someone else's emotion, I have no reason to be shy, 24
she confirmed to herself. I can calmly go about doing the job.

"Well, then, would you please play someone else?" the chief examiner 25
said, with a nod toward the stage.

Natsuo retired to the wings of the stage and tried to calm herself. When 26
she trotted out onto the stage and confidently faced them, she was no
longer a timid, blushing woman.

It was impossible to guess, though, how the examiners appraised her 27
performance. They showed little, if any, emotion. When the test was over
there was a chorus of murmured "Thank you." That was all.

Her manager was still speaking on the phone. "I don't know about the 28
third-raters. But I can tell you that most good actors and actresses are
introverted, naive, and always feeling nervous inside."

He then added, "If you don't believe me, why don't you go to the office 29
of that production company and find out for yourself?"

Natsuo decided to do just that. 30

At the end of a dimly lit hallway, a small group of men and women were looking at a large blackboard. Most of the board was powdered with half-obliterated previous scribbles, but at the top was written the cast of the new musical, with the names of the actors and actresses selected for the roles. 31

Natsuo's name was second from the top. It was scrawled in a large, carefree hand. The name at the top was her co-star, a well-known actor in musicals. 32

Natsuo stood immobile for ten seconds or so, staring at her name on the blackboard. It was her own name, but she felt as if it belonged to someone else. Her eyes still fixed on the name, she moved a few steps backwards. Then she turned around and hurried out of the building. It never occurred to her to stop by the office and thank the staff. 33

Sheer joy hit her a little later. 34

It was raining, and there was wind, too. She had an umbrella with her, but she walked without opening it. Finally realizing the fact, she stopped to unfold the umbrella. 35

"I did it!" she cried aloud. That was the moment. An incomparable joy began to rise up inside her, like the bubbles crowding to exit from a champagne bottle; and not just joy, pain as well, accompanied by the flow and ebb of some new irritation. That was how she experienced her moment of victory. 36

When she came to, she found herself standing in the lobby of her apartment building. The first person she wanted to tell the news to was, naturally, her husband, Yūsuke. 37

The elevator seemed to be out of order. It was not moving at all. How long had she been waiting there? Ten minutes? A couple of minutes? Natsuo had no idea. Her senses had been numbed. A round clock on the wall showed 9:25. Natsuo gave up and walked away. 38

The emergency stairway that zigzagged upwards was quite steep and barely wide enough for one person, so Natsuo could not open her umbrella. She climbed up the stairs at a dash. 39

By the time she reached the sixth floor, her hair was dripping wet and, with no raincoat on, her dress, too, was heavy with rain. 40

But Natsuo was smiling. Drenched and panting, she was still beaming with an excess of happiness when she pushed the intercom buzzer of their apartment. 41

"Why are you grinning? You make me nervous," Yūsuke said as he let her in. "You're soaking wet, too." 42

"The elevator never came." 43

"Who would have considered using the emergency stairs in this rain!" 44

"This apartment is no good, with a stairway like that," Natsuo said with a grin. "Let's move to a better place." 45

"You talk as if that were something very simple." Yūsuke laughed wryly and tossed a terry robe to her. 46

"But it is simple." 47

"Where would we find the money?" 48

"Just be patient. We'll get the money very soon," Natsuo said cheerfully, taking off her wet clothes. 49

"You passed the audition, didn't you?" Yūsuke asked, staring intently at her face. "Didn't you?" 50

Natsuo stared back at him. He looked nervous, holding his breath and waiting for her answer. 51

"Natsuo, did you pass the audition?" As he asked again, his face collapsed, his shoulders fell. He looked utterly forlorn. 52

"How . . .," she answered impulsively, "how could I have passed? I was just kidding." 53

Yūsuke frowned. "You failed?" 54

"I was competing with professionals, you know—actresses with real stage experience. How could I have beaten them?" Natsuo named several contending actresses. 55

"You didn't pass?" Yūsuke repeated, his frown deepening. "Answer me clearly, please. You still haven't told me whether you passed." 56

"What a mean person you are!" Natsuo stuttered. "You must have guessed by now, but you're forcing me to spell it out." Her eyes met his for a moment. "I didn't make it," she said, averting her eyes. "I failed with flying colors." 57

There was silence. Wiping her wet hair with a towel, Natsuo was aghast and mystified at her lie. 58

"No kidding?" said Yūsuke, starting to walk toward the kitchen. "I was in a state of shock for a minute, really." 59

"How come? Were you so sure I wouldn't make it?" Natsuo spoke to him from behind, her tone a test of his sincerity. 60

"You were competing with professionals." There was not a trace of consolation in his voice. "It couldn't be helped. You'll have another chance." 61

Although Yūsuke was showing sympathy, happiness hung in the air about him. 62

"You sound as if you were pleased to see me fail and lose my chance." 63

Combing her hair, Natsuo inspected her facial expression in the small mirror on the wall. You're a liar, she told her image. How are you going to unravel this mess you've got yourself into? 64

"How could I be happy to see you fail?" Yūsuke responded, placing a kettle on the gas range. His words carried with them the tarnish of guilt. "But, you know, it's not that great for you to get chosen for a major role all of a sudden." 65

"Why not?" 66

"Because you'd be a star. A big new star." 67

"You are being a bit too dramatic." Natsuo's voice sank low. 68

"When that happens, your husband would become like a Mr. Judy 69
 Garland. Asai Yūsuke would disappear completely, and in his place there
 would be just the husband of Midori Natsuo. I wouldn't like that."
 "You're inventing problems for yourself," she said. "You are what you 70
 are. You are a script writer named Asai Yūsuke."
 "A script writer who might soon be forced to write a musical." 71
 "But hasn't that been your dream, to write a musical?" Natsuo's voice 72
 was tender. "Suppose, just suppose, that I make a successful debut as an
 actress in a musical. As soon as I become influential enough and people
 begin to listen to what I say, I'll let you write a script for a musical."
 "Let you write, huh?" Yūsuke picked on Natsuo's phrasing. "If you talk 73
 like that even when you're making it up, I wonder how it'd be for real."
 The kettle began to erupt steam. Yūsuke flicked off the flame, dropped 74
 instant coffee into two cups, and splashed in the hot water.
 "Did you hear that story about Ingrid Bergman?" Yūsuke asked, his 75
 eyes looking into the distance. "Her third husband was a famous theatrical
 producer. A talented producer, too." Passing one of the cups to Natsuo, he
 continued. "One day Bergman asked her producer-husband, 'Why don't
 you ever try to get me a good play to act in?' He answered, 'Because you're
 a goose that lays golden eggs. Any play that features you is going to be a
 success. It will be a sellout for sure. For me, that's too easy.'" Yūsuke
 sipped the coffee slowly. Then, across the rising steam, he added, "I per-
 fectly understand how he felt."
 "Does this mean that I'll have to be a minor actress all my life?" Natsuo 76
 mused.
 "Who knows? I may become famous one of these days," Yūsuke sighed. 77
 "Or maybe you first."
 "And what would you do in the latter case?" 78
 "Well," Yūsuke stared at the coffee. "If that happens, we'll get a di- 79
 vorce. That will be the best solution. Then, neither of us will be bothered
 by all the petty problems."
 Natsuo walked toward the window. "Are you serious?" she asked. 80
 "Yes." Yūsuke came and stood next to her. "That's the only way to 81
 handle the situation. That way, I'll be able to feel happy for you from the
 bottom of my heart."
 "Can't a husband be happy for his wife's success?" 82
 "Ingrid Bergman's second husband was Roberto Rossellini. Do you 83
 know the last words he said to her? He said, 'I'm tired of living as Mr.
 Ingrid Bergman.' Even Rossellini felt that way."
 "You are not a Rossellini, nor I a Bergman." 84
 "Our situation would be even worse." 85
 From time to time, gusts of rain slapped at the window. 86
 "When this spring storm is over, I expect the cherry blossoms will sud- 87
 denly be bursting out," Yūsuke whispered.

"There'll be another storm in no time. The blossoms will be gone, and summer will be here." Brushing back her still-moist hair with her fingers, Natsuo turned and looked over the apartment she knew so well. 88
 "You've been standing all this time. Aren't you getting tired?" her husband asked in a gentle voice. She shook her head. 89
 "You're looking over the apartment as though it were for the first time." Yūsuke said, gazing at his wife's profile. "Or, is it for the last time?" 90
 Startled by his last words, Natsuo impulsively reached into her handbag for a cigarette and put it in her mouth. Yūsuke produced a lighter from his pocket and lit it for her. 91
 "Aren't you going to continue with your work this evening?" she asked. 92
 "No. No more work tonight." 93
 "What's the matter?" 94
 "I can't concentrate when someone else is in the apartment. You know that, don't you?" 95
 Natsuo nodded. 96
 "Won't you sit down?" Yūsuke said. 97
 "Why?" 98
 "I have an uneasy feeling when you stand there and smoke like that." 99
 Natsuo cast her eyes on the cigarette held between her fingers. "This is the second time today I've been smoking without sitting down." The words seemed to flow from her mouth at their own volition. His back towards her, Yūsuke was collecting some sheets of writing paper scattered on his desk. 100
 "You passed the audition. Right?" he said. His voice was so low that the last word was almost inaudible. 101
 "How did you know?" 102
 "I knew it from the beginning." 103
 "From the beginning?" 104
 "From the moment you came in. You were shouting with your whole body—'I've made it, I'm the winner!' You were trembling like a drenched cat, but your face was lit up like a Christmas tree." 105
 Natsuo did not respond. 106
 "The clearest evidence is the way you're smoking right now." 107
 "Did you notice it?" 108
 "Yes." 109
 "Me, too. It first happened when I was waiting for the elevator down in the lobby. I was so impatient, I smoked a cigarette while standing. I've got the strangest feeling about myself." 110
 "You feel like a celebrity?" 111
 "I feel I've outreached myself." 112
 "But the way you look now, it's not you." 113
 "No, it's not me." 114
 "You'd better not smoke standing up." 115
 "Right. I won't do it again." 116

There was silence. 117
 "You don't at all feel like congratulating me?" Natsuo asked. 118
 Yūsuke did not answer. 119
 "Somehow I knew it might be like this," Yūsuke continued. "I knew this 120
 moment was coming."
 Now she knew why her joy had felt like pain, a pain almost indistin- 121
 guishable from grief. Now she knew the source of the suffocating presence
 in her chest.
 "That Rossellini, you know . . ." Yūsuke began again. 122
 "Can't we drop the topic?" 123
 "Please listen to me, dear. Rossellini was a jealous person and didn't 124
 want to see his wife working for any director other than himself. He would
 say to her, 'Don't get yourself involved in that play. It'll be a disaster.' One
 time, Bergman ignored the warning and took a part in a play. It was a big
 success. Rossellini was watching the stage from the wings. At the curtain
 call, Bergman glanced at him while bowing to the audience. Their eyes
 met. That instant, they both knew their love was over, with the thundering
 applause of the audience ringing in their ears . . ." Yūsuke paused, and
 then added, "I'll go and see your musical on the opening day."
 Natsuo contemplated her husband's face from the wings of the room. 125
 He looked across.
 Their eyes met. 126

Translated from the Japanese by Makoto Ueda

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are Natsuo's feelings when she learns that she has just landed her first major acting role?
2. Natsuo is "mystified" at her lie to her husband, Yūsuke, about the result of her audition. Analyze her ambivalence and motivations for lying.
3. Why does Yūsuke bring up the Bergman-Rossellini story? What parallels are suggested in the relations between Natsuo and Yūsuke and those between Ingrid Bergman and Roberto Rossellini?
4. Discuss the possible symbolic significance of the nonworking elevator, Natsuo's smoking, and the spring storm. What effect do these elements have on the story's thematic and emotional meanings?