

Encounter 7

A Short Story by Michiko Itatani©

Walking using a flashlight is not as easy as I expected. The woods are overwhelming. The trees are much taller, the undergrowth thicker and the ground more uneven.

Finally stop, look up, and see the Big Dipper. I try to see more open sky and walk while looking up. My one good eye is getting used to the darkness. I find the "Pleiades", the open cluster, the blurred light spot in the sky. Yes, it's still there. It seems that the dots were arranged with the most sensitive aesthetic concerns. Although nearby cities emit bright horizons, the stars are much more visible here than in my city.

I haven't been here in the countryside for a while. It all looks familiarly the same. But there is always a sense of surprise whenever I come. Yet I see it as a stable aspect in the chaos my life has become. It's a good place to visit now. Can I find the shack in the dark? It seems impossible. Already I've lost the sense of direction. But I think this path leads to it, so I'll try it. Dark and narrow. I can focus on only a small distance ahead. Suddenly, there seems a chill in the air and I have a feeling of uncertainty about everything.

A small florescent blue-green light appears and seems to lead in a direction. It feels friendly. Following is a reasonable thing to do. The light is moving a little faster, and a few other blue-green lights join it. Then a few more arrive, jumping around, and gather together as a ring from time to time, glowing brighter to dimmer to brighter. I feel no fear to follow them.

It's taken quite a long time walking before I reach the almost invisible small house. Was it this far? The lights have gathered as a ring firmly, and pulsate in front of the door. I opened the door and step into the dimness. As I get used to it, I realize this is a surprisingly large area. The door has disappeared behind. I rub my eyes. It appears only the damaged eye is working now. Although I have been used to the defect by now, I become extremely sensitive to the eye condition once in a while; it feels like living in a bubble. I am standing in the middle of large hallway, the tall ceiling in a mist, every surface decorated meticulously with unknown scripts. There exists a strange order, nothing is in symmetry and nothing is repeated, yet there is a sense of strict system in this space. Dizzy. Better to rest my eyes and quiet my mind. I sit on the floor and close my eyes. I will count to one hundred.

I open my eyes and stand up. The method works always to bring back normalcy. I start to walk into the space. I reach the end of the vast

hallway, there is a grand curved staircase with small bright lights along the edge of each step. Together with enormous glowing chandeliers, the lights don't help to see things clearer, just to make the whole space more gorgeous. Everything is illuminated, yet nothing is clear.

The act of walking up the staircase gives me an uplifted feeling, and a sense of control. It has been a long time since I have had these feelings. Step by step, I slowly follow the ring which has reappeared. I ascend upward through a slight mist. The place is an enormous library. It is three open stories high, each floor filled with bookcases with ladders here and there on each floor. The ceiling seems sky high. Actually, it is covered with an uncountable number of stars, either painted, projected, or real. It is hard to tell.

I take out a book at random. Old binding. Heavy. Opening the almost brittle pages require care. A square decorative illustration is at the beginning of each chapter. Each illustration shows a structure/building, some geometric others organic, a little familiar. But the text is totally unknown, with squiggling lines and dots and heavy structure here and there, and it seems to keep changing. Impossible to figure anything out. I put the book back and take out another one nearby. The cover is deep maroon, decorated with complicated patterns of gold inlay. The patterns look like a long calculus formula scripted decoratively. There comes a constant sound, like chanting, from the book. It might be reading the script? I put the book back and take out the next one. This one is a picture book, with dozens of pictures grouped on a page, each group forming a picture of something which I can't tell what. They seem like parts of some machine, categorized into groups. A catalogue of some sort. I put it back to the shelf and take out another. It is rather contemporary looking. The cover is white and there is a dark 3D sphere in the center. Thumbing across it, the sphere turns, showing different patterns of dots contained within it. As I turning it, there appear different patterns of dots each time. Some dots appear as a miniature spiral. Others appear as two tiny dots circulating each other. The patterns never repeat. Each turn reveals a different pattern. Also everything is moving slowly. I put the book back on the shelf. A strange library! I'm thinking I can spend days here. Everything, the space, the books, the content of the books is impossibly dense.

I climb up one of the ladders a few steps and take out another book. The ladder is crafted with some meticulous inlay design in metal and ivory on heavy dark wood. A book with an old leather cover and a flap closure. It looks ancient, worn out. However, when I open it, it lights up. It makes a faint noise, like a living creature. "Hello!", it whispers. "I am glad to be with you. May I tell you a story?" I am surprised; I try to close the cover. "Don't, please" I stop. There are

faint images on the page, blinking, as if trying to wake up. The book said, "I am going to tell you about a girl who lived in a castle with a starry ceiling painting. She was trapped there from another dimension. It was a stupid mistake. She had accidentally created an opening and when she peeked in, there was a grand hallway. It looked beautifully decorated and inviting. So, curious, she slipped in. She was excited by what she found there. It was a large library. After walking around to investigate, she sat in an old comfortable chair and began reading a book which she had found lying on a table. The pages were filled with mathematical equations she could not understand but the text told the story of the beginnings of the library. Countless pieces of information had poured in and started to form an encyclopedia. There was no editing, just an accumulation. Truth and False blurred. Each word, sentence, chapter had a hyperlink. There was a layered history of the formation of the library, but no individual was listed, everybody and everything had equal value. Too much information started to create an impossible situation. A few technicians started to dismantle the library because it became chaotic. However, the library already had its control system, operated by itself. Whenever some components were damaged, it repaired itself. The encyclopedia became a battle ground, everybody was fighting sincerely for what they believed. Every chapter was exciting for her because the information sounded familiar yet strange, and dense with detail actions and conspiracy. She read through several chapters. Rich and delicious! She couldn't stop reading it. Oh, I cannot waste time like this. After just this page, I will go. Then another chapter. At the end of the thick book, she started to read another one. The impulse was so strong, she could not stop herself. She didn't realize how long she had been reading. She thought she should go back. But now, she couldn't find the opening she had come through. I thought it was here. But she couldn't find it. Well, I will find it eventually, she thought. She picked up another book to read. She now thought it was worth the time."

I see that the image on the page has become a little clearer, though it is hard to tell whether the image is of a woman or a man. The voice sounds neutral, could be a woman or a young man. "Yes, she kept reading book after book. Since she couldn't find the opening to go back home now, she thought she might as well occupy herself. She knew the opening would turn up. She had never traveled to another dimension before, but she somehow knew she could go back. It was a strong feeling, and she didn't doubt. It was a result of growing up in a safe and loving environment."

I hear a buzzing sound somewhere and look up. The ring, now firmly together, blinks brightly, vibrating. OK, I am coming. I close the book. There is a complaining sound briefly, but then quiet. I put it back on the shelf and go toward the ring. It starts to float away

from me, then move up the grand stairs. As I follow the ring higher, I glance up at the ceiling; still it is hard to understand whether I was looking at the inside or the outside. It could be a gigantic dome window looking out into cosmic space. On the highest floor, there is a hallway receding.

Beyond the hallway, there is another library. White columns stand high, and there is another domelike ceiling with millions of stars. None of the constellations look familiar, not as beautiful as I know. Do they need to be familiar in order to find beauty? But there is a sense of ill-fittedness. The floor is a complicated geometry and it looks like some sort of varied color marble. In front of the tall bookcases, there are scattered numerous globes and orreries. Some are old and heavily decorated, standing on ornamented heavy legs. Some represent mechanically the system of stars and planets, moving very slowly. There are several clock like objects, also moving slowly on their gears, pendulums and needles. Familiar but strange. There is a flat computer screen on the floor, glowing in the dim light. On it are numbers, symbols and pictures. No buttons nor switches. It is tempting to stop and examine.

There is a faint noise from the ring. I think it is becoming impatient, so I follow quickly to yet another hallway. A dark, long corridor. I hurry to get through.

Another library. The room is circular and minimalist, filled with lime colored light. The walls are covered with shelves dense with books. There are several small doors along the wall. There are again a dozen or so various sizes of globes and space ship like objects on the floor, some on pedestals. At the center is a gigantic orrery of some sort. It has slowly turning dark but translucent spheres of various sizes. A mechanically visible device of gears and chains makes soothing vibrating sounds. Against the far wall is a chair facing the center. Is there someone sitting there? I can't see well. The libraries are either too bright or too dark. Again the ceiling is a gigantic domed sky, full of stars. The constellations seem to be a completely foreign arrangement from the other libraries.

I feel tired and sleepy suddenly. There is a hard bench on the right and I fall onto it. Sleep comes quickly. And a dream. I am inside the brain of a computer and I spot a foreign object, which has just landed. Small, no shape, transparent, perhaps it is invisible mostly to most people. But I have been trained to see it. That has been my job for the past two years. It moves strangely. The object is an efficient little packet of data in computer code, discreet and quiet. It nestles inside the computer and starts to duplicate itself at high speed. It also seems to be programmed to invade into any new environment connected to the computer. There is no purpose to it, except to multiply. I see it, and I panic realizing that it is I who

should be the one to fight it here. I can't move. I break into a sweat and wake up. I had been involved in the project of tracking down that particular worm for two years. Many people were involved trying to identify the origin of the worm and finding a way to stop it. The worm did no damage except to quietly occupy space in millions of computers. No data was lost or damaged, except sometimes a computer would slow down, but the program was self-regulating just enough not to bother anything. No one could tell where it originated or how dangerous it would be to let it exist. Most people didn't suspect it existed in their computers. The quiet coordination among people who were concerned was a surprising phenomenon in the field. It became an international effort. Over the time of my involvement there were many discoveries and attempted remedies. Especially the last one gave everyone high hopes. But, in the end, the worms won again. My breakdown came right after the discovery that the last effort had failed. My personal life faltered; my concentration and sense of happiness disappeared completely. I often neglected to eat, to exercise and to smile. One day, Quima disappeared, and I didn't make the effort to find her. I went down deeper. I was helpless. At least, this time from this dream, I wake up.

It seemed like a long dream. I get up and walk over to the chair where I thought I had seen someone sitting a while ago. No one now. There is a small table with a tray of food on it. I sit down and pick up a fork. Natural to do this. I feel hungry suddenly and eat everything quickly plus drink a pink liquid from a glass at hand. Where is my ring guide? I look around to see if the ring is nearby. Nowhere in the room. I feel lost and start to walk around aimlessly. One of globes is pink, with light green soft spots here and there. There is some unreadable script on a metal plate on the foot of the pedestal. Another globe next to it is covered by a gold metal cage with patterns formed in the metal showing some animals and birds. The globe is almost black, smooth but there are numerous sparkling small jewel-like stones inlaid. I examine other objects on the floor also. There is a flying vessel-like object at the top of a short metal pole. There are tiny windows, emitting light. I lean over to examine. There are some activities inside. I try to see what is happening. It's hard to focus.

"Hello!" I jump and look back, there is an odd-looking little person standing there. It is hard to tell whether the person is old or not so old, but surely not very young. Frail and shy looking. "Hello!" I say. The person said, "My name is Xequi." I try to introduce myself. "I know," Xequi said, holding up one hand, almost whispering. "Welcome to our library. Would you like to have some tea and dessert? I assume you liked the supper." I am speechless. Xequi opened one of the side-doors and we go to another library.

This one is a cozy one, relatively, though the ceiling is

disproportionately high. It is obviously painted with stars in strict patterns similar to Giotto in Padua. We sit at a corner table. There is a tea set and a decorated wooden box. Xequi makes tea, and after asking me, puts milk and sugar into my cup. Xequi opens the small box and edges it to me. I pick out a preciously wrapped small sugar covered fruit. It is delicious. I sip tea. Encouraged by Xequi's smile, I ask, "How long have you been here?" "For a long, long time."

"We made ourselves a mission: to start this library. It was needed, we believed. Information was vast and scattered. We needed somewhere to put it so that there would be access. It's a long story. I will tell you more about it another time. But it collapsed and only some of the original library survived. Still, it's a good collection."

There is a soft touch at my foot. A small creature, hairy, friendly and warm has settled there. "Oh, it's my friend, Ndoff." Xequi said. "We created it when we were very young. Modest but a success. We couldn't bring extra creatures with us." Ndoff looks up at me. I reach down and Ndoff responds with affectionate movements, evoking in me a loving sensation. I feel instant comfort and tenderness. I kneel down to Ndoff, feeling my tears forming. I feel heartache, thinking about Quima, regret and worry. I stay in that position for some time, head down, and wait for my tears to stop. When I get back, I will search for Quima. Quima is all right somewhere safe. Nobody hurts Quima!

"So there are more people here?" "No, no, not any longer, but there were quite a few at one time. All gone now except me. I miss them," he sort of smiles, "but I get by with Ndoff." A rather tall plain looking figure appears and clears the table. "And I have quite a few good helpers." I am overwhelmed by questions I want to ask, but feel shy and hesitate.

After another long pause, I ventured, "Where did all of you come from originally?" "From far away. And a long time ago. Most of us, scattered around in groups in diverse places. We didn't hear from each other after a while. But we knew we existed, somewhere. It's like a dream now." Xequi's green eyes looked far away into space. "And you decided to make a library?" "Yes, we thought that was the first thing we should do, after all the necessary things were figured out. There was still so much information floating around. It was a struggle for all of us. Consumed all our energy. But it began to shape up nicely." "And the helpers?" "That was a simple part. They have a good system. They don't make situations any more complicated than necessary. The library was a different case. It started to be more and more independent." I feel more confused. There are a multitude of questions, yet none come out properly. Well, I will

figure it out later. I feel I should go.

“Thank you. I’d better get going.” I stand up. “Wait, I have something to give you.” Xequi said. We go back to the circular library together and Xequi opens another set of side doors. The room, as expected, is surprisingly large, a haphazard storage room with rows of shelves and drawers. Xequi walks into one of the corridors, opens one of the drawers and takes out a small flat object. “This might help you.” Xequi puts the object on my palm. “Good bye then. Come back if you like. There is something to eat anytime. Food is the most secure system that’s still operating well.” That seems quite something, indeed.

I go back to the circular library, back to another library, and another. Back to the grand staircase. I look for my guide. However, the ring can’t be seen anywhere. I retrace my steps slowly. I remember the door had disappeared behind me, when I came in. However, the door is there. “Good! Now, I will go back and sleep until morning and I will make strong coffee.”

I open the door and step out. It seems all right, except the woods are brightly lit as if from very bright moonlight. I start walking down the path. The passage turns left. I thought I had come from the opposite direction. Is it because I am going back? I feel a little confusion. Scratch my left ear. No, the weak ear should be on the right. I close my left eye. Everything looks clear. So, I have a good right eye. Wasn’t it my right eye which was injured? More confusion. I need a good sleep.

There is a sense of misfitting again, which is becoming a reality. The pocket of my gown is on the right side? No. I feel in the left side pocket and pull out a Kleenex and wipe my eyes. Such a bright night. The passage just looks different. It’s just a small area of three acres. Can’t get lost. Cool, comfortable air brushing my ears.

I follow the path. It seems to go on and on. Am I going in circles? Was I here before? Hard to tell. Everything looks washed out in the brightness. Then a figure appears down the path. “Knowy?”, I called out. There is no answer. I keep walking toward the figure. It is so hard to see clearly. I remember the injury which had damaged my eye. Optical nerve injury. After that I sometimes saw things differently. It took a while to get used to it, but it is fine generally.

I approach the figure. It seems familiar, but I’m not certain. It is wearing the same gown as I am and also holding something flat like the gift from Xequi. Closer. The figure is a mirror image of myself! I must be rather tired; I need a good sleep, I told myself. We pass each other. May as well play along. I wave. The figure waves back. I

am so tired. I keep walking. Why I am not at Knowy's cottage yet? I could not figure it out. After I walk a while more, I need to do something different. I decide to leave the path and go into the woods. The cool breeze is inviting, as are the deep shadows of the trees. It feels like a good decision. The main path to the cottage must be close.

The quietness seems deeper and the moonlight not as bright. Suddenly, there is the ring. Not blue-green this time. It is a cluster glowing orange. I feel relieved as I follow it. Seeing the ring floating made my walking seem lighter.

Moon light, trees, shadows. A fire-ice ring. No sound. Following. It seems completely natural. Any sense of oddness is gone. I check the pocket on the right side of the gown and slip out the flat object which Xequi had given me. Was the pocket on the left before? I realize everything had flipped back to normal, perhaps when I passed the other of myself. After all that's happened, I think it makes sense. Yes, everything is all right. The ring will show me Knowy's cottage around the corner.

I follow the ring to a clearing. I can't remember this open area. How many times did I spend summer here with Knowy? I thought I knew every corner of this little property. There is a majestic tree at the center of the clearing. The orange ring separates itself momentarily and encircles itself around the trunk of the tree, pulsating. I realize my self-destructive plan has disappeared completely from my head, the plan which had been my preoccupation recently. I reach into the pocket of my gown and find the object. It appears to be on and is some kind of communication device. A little screen glows. I glance at it, and manage to turn it off without looking at anything.

Yes, first I will sleep until the morning, then a cup of strong coffee with Knowy, and then we will go fly-fishing and ride on Knowy's motorcycle.