

The Cult Of Yakushima Island

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In the shimmering subtropical waters far south of the mainland archipelago lies the island of Yakushima, a mountainous granite landmass forested with ancient cedars that have stood for thousands of years, ringed by a coastline of jagged cliffs and gigantic waterfalls and coves with sandy beaches. Home to a number of rare species, the island is the largest nesting site for loggerhead sea turtles in the Pacific. During nesting season the turtles crawl from the sea onto the beach late at night, burying eggs deep in the sand before hurrying back to the safety of the water. I first heard rumors of the existence of a cult on Yakushima while reading through the letters of a recently deceased professor, an obscure evolutionary biologist who had studied the turtles for decades. I'd discovered the letters in the bargain bin of a used bookstore in Kanda Jinbocho, in Tokyo. Strangely, although bundled along with the rest of the letters with a strand of striped twine, the letters that referenced the cult were neither addressed to nor signed by the dead professor, and how exactly the professor had come into possession of the letters was unclear. The authors mentioned the cult only briefly, but while the language used to reference the cult was somewhat vague and occasionally contradictory, the authors were clear on one point: that members of the cult were forced to eat shards of plastic. Disturbed, but also fascinated, I

decided to travel to Yakushima, hoping to learn whether the cult was real. I boarded a train the next day, journeying to the southern tip of the mainland, to the cloudy port town of Kagoshima, where a ticket-taker in a uniform waved me aboard a hydrofoil at the harbor. Smoke was rising from the volcano across the bay as the boat set out to sea. The skies were dark. About an hour out onto the ocean, I glanced out the window and noticed a bright red object floating past on the surface of the water. A plastic kitchen spatula, bobbing with the waves. I might not have given the spatula any thought, if not for the rumor that members of the cult were forced to eat fragments of plastic, which made the sight of the spatula seem vaguely ominous.

There was no rain until the hydrofoil had docked at the island. I had just stepped off the boat when the first raindrop struck my cheek, and then the breeze blowing through the streets swelled to a gale that made the trees sway, and a sudden cloudburst dropped a breathtaking shower of rain onto the harbor, drenching my clothes instantaneously. Rainy season had just begun on the island, I learned, and would last for months to come. I rented a room on the coast, in the scenic village of Nagata, on the bluff beyond Nagata Beach, in a drafty wooden inn with futon bedding and tatami floors and heavy granite stones placed between the slats on the roof to keep the roof from blowing away during typhoons. The inn had the capacity to house dozens of guests at a time. I was the only guest there. Most tourists apparently knew better than to visit during rainy season. Borrowing an umbrella from the innkeepers that afternoon, I walked down to Nagata Beach, where nesting season had just begun for the loggerhead sea turtles. The idea that the survival of an entire species could depend so much upon a single beach amazed me. The beach was a beautiful strip of golden sand, and the nesting area had been carefully roped off to ensure that the eggs buried under the sand wouldn't be crushed by human footsteps. Farther down the beach, however, I was startled to find clusters of garbage lying in the sand. Crumpled

bottles, grimy jugs. Plastic litter that had washed ashore. I stood staring. I had read that loggerhead sea turtles were an endangered species, creatures so fragile and vulnerable that only one in a thousand hatchlings survived to maturity, so the sight of litter on the beach where the turtles nested made me feel profoundly sad. Back at the inn, the innkeepers told me that a dead turtle had washed onto the beach just the day before after choking on a shopping bag. A warning sign posted on a bulletin board in the hallway displayed photos of turtles who had gotten caught in soda rings underwater and turtles whose nostrils had been impaled with drinking straws. As rain pattered on the roof of the inn, I drifted off to sleep thinking about all of that plastic on the beach.

By morning all of the roads that led to the hiking trails in the mountains had been closed by flooding, but the circular coastal road was still open, and reportedly nobody lived in the mountains anyway. I bought a hooded poncho and some rubber boots from the local grocer and over the course of that next month proceeded to explore the various towns on the island, riding to and from the inn on the buses that traveled the coastal road. I had been told that the population of the island was relatively diverse, thanks to an influx of nature-loving expats drawn by the promise of world-famous hiking, but during rainy season the island hardly seemed to have any population at all. Most residents stayed indoors during the rains, peering through windows before receding back into the darkness of a house, and the few who did venture outdoors claimed to have never heard of the cult. I went into bakeries, restaurants, gas stations, post offices, supermarkets, and hair salons, interviewed both employees and customers, and a month later still hadn't found a soul who could confirm the existence of a cult on the island. I became accustomed to standing in puddles at bus stops with a grim sense of defeat. The rains there astonished me. I had never experienced a rainy season before anywhere, and that island was one of the rainiest places on the planet. In the evenings, after eating supper in the empty dining room at the

inn, I would sit naked in the murky brown water of the stone onsen down by the ocean, just watching the weather. Even when there wasn't rain, the winds were so fierce that waterspouts would occasionally form out on the ocean, spinning across the surface of the water at terrifying speeds before suddenly scattering to mist. Flying fish leaping from the water would get blasted backward by gusts of wind. Seagulls gliding above the ocean would tumble wildly through flurries of wind before recovering. Then rain would begin to fall again, and lightning would flicker in the clouds, and thunder would rumble across the ocean, and the beach would abruptly disappear behind a whiteout of pouring rain, only to reappear moments later when the rain slowed to a drizzle. At dusk, I would often see a stocky figure hurrying along the beach with a bright pink shopping bag, collecting the litter from the sand. By dawn, eating breakfast alone in the dining room of the inn, I would see that new litter had already washed ashore.

One afternoon, walking back to the inn with a purple shopping bag full of passion fruit from the local grocer, I suddenly wondered if the stocky figure who collected litter from the beach might have some connection with the cult. On an instinct, I brought the purple shopping bag down to the beach with me later that evening. Waiting for the stocky figure to appear, I began to collect the litter on the beach, carefully depositing each object into the purple shopping bag. A plastic fishing float had washed ashore that day, along with a plastic chopstick and a plastic zipper. Some plastic netting. Rain was misting as dusk fell. I had just plucked a plastic hairbrush from the surf when the stocky figure came strolling onto the beach, carrying the pink shopping bag as always. Noticing me, the figure froze, staring at me a moment, and then hurried over to me, pointing at the purple shopping bag in my hand.

“What is that plastic for?” the figure said.

I hesitated, sensing a tone of challenge in the voice, even urgency.

“It will be eaten,” I said.

The figure dropped the pink shopping bag into the sand, stepped toward me, and embraced me, tightly, giving me an extra squeeze after a moment, as if meeting a beloved relative for the very first time.

“Let us pray,” the figure said.

Nobu was a retired bus driver who lived in the cluster of houses on the hills above the beach. He liked poetry, baking, and romantic movies with happy endings. He had belonged to the cult since he was a teenager. The cult met once a week at a sacred location in the mountains. He apologized that the cult had been so difficult to find. He wished the cult had more followers. He thought the cult needed better branding. He told me all of this as we drank cups of genmaicha later that night, sitting cross-legged at the table in his kitchen as rain fell beyond the windows. Nobu had been raised in that house, and still lived there with his parents, a pair of elderly wanderers who occasionally drifted past the doorway in t-shirts and sweatpants. Although clearly in the early stages of dementia, his parents were still lucid enough to reprimand him, periodically hollering at him from the bathroom or the entryway to come put away some stray belonging. None of the objects in the house appeared to be made of plastic, I noticed. The dishes were ceramic. The cutlery was metal. All of the furniture was made of glass and fabric and wood. The only visible object in the house that was plastic was the pink shopping bag full of litter that he had collected from the beach. I snuck glances at his teeth while we talked, looking for signs his teeth had been damaged by chewing pieces of plastic, but his teeth were white and smooth and perfectly straight. I wondered if maybe rather than chewing, members of the cult swallowed the pieces of plastic whole. Nobu wanted to bring me to the cult meeting that next morning. I'd love to, I told him. I just didn't want to have to eat any plastic.

I had been worried he might be offended, but instead he only smiled.

“Ah, my friend, you do not understand,” Nobu said.

That next morning he drove me to the trailhead in a rusty hatchback. The rain was torrential. Mud splattered across the windshield as the hatchback splashed through flooded dips in the road. Other cars were parked at the trailhead, but nobody else was in sight as we climbed out of the hatchback. I had brought the purple shopping bag as instructed. Nobu had brought the pink shopping bag as well. Together we hiked through the forest into the mountains, carrying nothing but shopping bags full of litter. I hadn't been on a hike that intense in years. By the time we had crossed the first stream, sweat was trickling down my temples and my back, and my thighs and my calves were burning. Nobu didn't even seem winded. He hiked like an animist, periodically muttering blessings at the forest, muttering blessings whenever a deer or a monkey bounded off through the ferns, muttering blessings at beetles, muttering blessings at mushrooms, even muttering blessings at stumps and stones. I would have been lost without a guide. There were no trail markers, and the footpath that we were following faded in and out of existence, sporadically vanishing when the route crossed over tracts of moss or fields of boulders or the rock-hard soil in the passages beneath the arched roots of giant banyan trees. The rain had soaked through my poncho into my clothes. My socks were squishing in my boots with every step. I was shivering from the chill. Abruptly, the rain finally stopped, and after the roar of the downpour, the silence left behind seemed almost unnatural. Steam rose from the ferns as rainwater dripped from the trees. Nobu glanced back at me as we were passing through a grove of cedars.

“We're here,” Nobu said.

My pulse quickened as we stepped from the trees into a massive clearing. Hundreds of figures were gathered there, all facing the same direction, kneeling or kowtowing or lying prostrate on the ground. I suddenly felt nervous. I hadn't expected the cult to have so

many followers. Many appeared to be locals, but some were clearly foreigners. I could recognize a variety of tongues in the hushed chatter. A cluster in wet raincoats muttering in French. A couple in drenched soccer jerseys murmuring in Hindi. A pair in damp sports bras whispering in Mandarin. A teenager in a soaked dress praying in Spanish. Other gaijin were speaking in Japanese, or quietly gazing ahead. But for me the greatest shock was what stood across the clearing. Rising high into the air across the clearing was a monstrous jumbled heap of plastic litter. Crusted milk cartons, faded detergent jugs, floppy disks, compact discs, iced tea and soda and ketchup bottles, peanut butter and tahini and mayonnaise jars, tangled shower curtains, discolored chairs, broken coolers, bubble wrap, packing peanuts, coffee lids, twist caps, fluorescent shopping bags, ice cream buckets, toothbrushes, headphones, seeding trays, golf balls, cooking utensils, cereal bowls, spray nozzles, cigarette lighters, asthma inhalers, disposable razors, spoons, forks, sporks, knives, neon drinking straws, and shimmering wrappers. While much of the packaging was labeled in Japanese, an assortment of languages were visible. A bent yogurt cup in Russian. A soap dispenser in Arabic. A deodorant stick in Thai. A biscotti package in Italian. Some of the litter was speckled with moss and lichen, as if having sat in the forest as long as a stone, while other litter was slick with bright algae, as if fresh from the sea. Colorful flakes of plastic were embedded like pebbles in the soil around the heap.

“We have been meeting here for over a century,” Nobu said.

The other cultists in the clearing fell silent as he walked toward the heap of plastic with the pink shopping bag full of litter. He shook the contents of the shopping bag out onto the heap. Sandy pacifiers and floss containers and souvenir sunglasses came to rest among the debris.

“This is the plastic that has washed onto the shores of the island in that time,” Nobu said.

Still holding the empty shopping bag, he turned to look at me.

“In a predominantly capitalist global society, nothing can halt the production of plastic. Plastic will be produced because plastic is useful. Because it is cheap and it is durable. But those very properties are also what makes plastic so dangerous. Something made out of plastic gets used once before being thrown away and then takes thousands of years to decompose. Already there are millions of tons of it in the ocean, poisoning the waters, and more is created every day. As a result eventually life in the ocean will collapse, and life on land will collapse as a result too, and humanity will go extinct, and the planet will become a wasteland, a vast graveyard of crumbling bones and decomposing plastic floating silently through the void of space,” Nobu said.

Fireflies were drifting through the clearing.

“Unless,” Nobu said.

And as he spoke the word a ripple of movement passed through the cult as others nodded and repeated the word in hushed tones.

“Unless,” Nobu said, “a bacteria evolves that is able to eat plastic.”

I blinked in surprise. I had initially assumed the cult was worshipping the heap of plastic, but that was only a monument. A growing record of global pollution. A gathering place to await salvation. Rather than the heap of plastic, what the cult worshipped was the future species of bacteria that would someday evolve to consume it.

“That bacteria will save this world from destruction. At this moment the bacteria that we await could be anywhere, living on a rock, or in a pipe, or in a wastebasket, or in the gut of a snake or a bird. Maybe the bacteria will evolve in the ocean. Maybe the bacteria will evolve here on land. There are microplastics in the water that every animal on this planet drinks. Even us,” Nobu said.

His voice had taken on a quality that frightened me.

“The bacteria that we await may even evolve in you,” Nobu said.

Gazing at me with eerily fanatical expressions, the cultists rose from the ground and began to gather around me, some blinking back tears of gratitude, others openly weeping with devout fervor, reaching toward me with trembling hands, touching my arms and my chest and my neck and my cheeks, humbly blessing the bacteria that lived in my body, begging for salvation. My heart was pounding. As palms continued to press against my skin, I realized with a shock that what he had spoken was truth. The savior of the world might be living within me even now.

About The Author

Matthew Baker is the author of the graphic novel *The Sentence*, the story collections *Why Visit America* and *Hybrid Creatures*, and the children's novel *Key Of X*. Digital experiments include the temporal fiction "Ephemeral," the interlinked novel *Untold*, the randomized novel *Verses*, and the intentionally posthumous *Afterthought*.

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