

LBRIS

We know
books

THE TATAMI TIME MACHINE BLUES

A NOVEL

Tomihiko Morimi

Translated by Emily Balistreri

 **NOMAD**
EDITIONS

 **HARPERVIA**
An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers



We know

Without limiting the exclusive rights of any author, contributor or the publisher of this publication, any unauthorized use of this publication to train generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies is expressly prohibited. HarperCollins also exercise their rights under Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive 2019/790 and expressly reserve this publication from the text and data mining exception.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

THE TATAMI TIME MACHINE BLUES. Copyright © 2020 by Tomihiko Morimi and Makoto Ueda; English translation copyright © 2023 by Emily Balistrieri; Afterword copyright © 2023 by Makoto Ueda; Note from the Translator copyright © 2023 by Emily Balistrieri. All rights reserved. Printed in Malaysia. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, address HarperCollins Publishers, 195 Broadway, New York, NY 10007. In Europe, HarperCollins Publishers, Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper, Dublin 1, D01 C9W8, Ireland.

HarperCollins books may be purchased for educational, business, or sales promotional use. For information, please email the Special Markets Department at SPsales@harpercollins.com.

harpercollins.com

Originally published as *Yojō-Han Time Machine Blues* in Japan in 2020 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION; English-language rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc.

FIRST HARPERVIA NOMAD EDITION PUBLISHED IN 2026

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-0-06-348584-6

26 27 28 29 30 PCA 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

ONE

August 12

1

TWO

August 11

121

THREE

August 12 Again

227

Afterword

269

A Note from the Translator

277

LBRIS

We know
books

ONE

August 12

I'm going to say it up front: I've never had a meaningful summer.

Summer is commonly said to be a season for personal growth. Meet a boy after one summer, and you'll hardly recognize him! In order to attain that glorious moment when you show off the new and improved you to your classmates, a detailed plan, early nights and early mornings, tempering of the flesh, and academic devotion are essential.

But in my third year living at my lodgings, I was spurred by impatience.

During the Kyoto summer, my four-and-a-half-mat tatami room transformed into a fiery hell on par with the Taklamakan Desert. In this environment, so harsh it's doubtful life

could even be supported, I proceeded steadily toward the collapse of my daily rhythm, my detailed plan turned into an armchair fantasy, and summer fatigue hastened my flesh's deterioration and my academic corruption. Under such circumstances, not even Buddha himself would be able to attain growth as a person. Ah, even if one's dreams are dashed, the four-and-a-half-mat tatami room remains.

I had already passed the halfway point of the study period known as "college." And yet I hadn't spent a single meaningful summer. I hadn't built myself into a person who could be of use to society. If I didn't stop twiddling my thumbs, society would no doubt heartlessly slam its gate in my face.

The breakthrough for revitalization was that civilized convenience: an air conditioner.

• • •

It was the afternoon of August 12.

In my student apartment, room 209, I sat face-to-face with a man.

My base of operations was a room at Shimogamo Yusuiso in Shimogamo Izumikawacho. When I first visited the place on the university co-op's introduction, I thought I must have wandered into the walled city of Kowloon. The three-story wooden structure caused all those who saw it anxiety; it seemed ready to collapse at any moment. Its dilapidation was practically Important Cultural Property-level. Certainly no one would miss it if it burned down.

If you want to know what is offensive in this world, it's the sight of two sweaty male college students sitting shirtless in a four-and-a-half-mat tatami room glaring at each other. At that moment, the scorching sun was broiling the roof of Shimogamo Yusuiso, and the displeasure index inside room 209 had reached its peak. With zero shame or concern for my reputation, I left the window and door open, but even when I turned on the basically antique fan I brought from my parents' house, it only pushed the hot air around the room; I was so warm my consciousness was growing fuzzy. Did the man

squatting before me really exist? He wasn't a grimy mirage only purehearted I could see?

Mopping my sweat with a hand towel, I spoke to him. "Hey, Ozu."

"... You rang?"

"Are you alive?"

"Oh, don't mind me. I'll be dead before long," he said with a cold stare. His grayish, unhealthy-looking face was slick with sweat, which made him gleam slimily—he looked just like a freshly birthed Nurarihyon.

The student apartments were peaceful and quiet in the afternoon. The cicada cries that had been obnoxiously loud in the morning had ceased altogether, and the silence made it feel as though the flow of time had stopped. Many residents had gone home to their families; not many idiots spent midsummer days cooped up in a four-and-a-half-mat tatami room.

Probably the only other person in the ramshackle building aside from Ozu and me was my neighbor in room 210, the perpetual student Seitaro Higuchi. The previous night, we

had solemnly held a wake for my air conditioner. At dawn, Higuchi snakily intoned an error-riddled version of the Heart Sutra before blurting, "If you clear your mind, even a four-and-a-half-mat tatami room is as refreshing as Karuizawa—*katsu!*" as if to jolt us toward enlightenment as he repaired to the room next door. We hadn't seen him since. I was amazed he could sleep so soundly in this hellish heat.

Ozu said he wanted a mango Frappuccino, so I poured some salty, lukewarm barley tea into a little cup for him. Ozu slurped it like an ill toad sipping muddy water.

"Ahh, this is awful . . . just awful . . ."

"Shut up and drink it."

"I'm sick of getting my minerals the same way they did in the Edo period."

I ignored his sad moaning.

Earlier, I wrote "a wake for my air conditioner."

It's only natural that some of you wise readers would dubiously wonder what that was supposed to mean.

The air conditioner we mourned throughout the night was a fabled appliance that had been installed in room 209 in ancient times. The civilized convenience, so at odds with the atmosphere of a four-and-a-half-mat tatami room, was almost surely installed without the landlord's permission; it was a historic heritage that spoke volumes to that former resident's great courage. As the only four-and-a-half-mat tatami room in the building with an air conditioner, 209 had become the envy of all the residents.

I first heard rumors of room 209 two summers ago. A longtime student wearing only his briefs, whom I encountered in the common-use kitchen, whispered into my ear as I sweat, "My good sir, apparently this building has a four-and-a-half-mat tatami room with an air conditioner." At the time, the "four-and-a-half-mat tatami room with an air conditioner" that the student—who introduced himself as Seitaro Higuchi—mentioned sounded like some kind of far-off dreamland, like the legendary isle of

Avalon where King Arthur is said to have spent his final days. I never imagined I would have the honor of moving into it two years later.

But despite moving from the first floor to the second expressly for the air conditioner, I was able to benefit for only a handful of days.

That was all the fault of the man before me, Ozu.

• • •

Ozu was in the same year as me. Despite being registered in the Department of Electric and Electronic Engineering, he hated electricity, electronics, and engineering. At the end of freshman year he had received so few credits, and with such low grades, that it made you wonder whether there was any point to him being there.

Because he hated vegetables and ate only instant foods, his face was such a creepy color it looked like he'd been living on the far side of the moon. Eight out of ten people who met him walking down the street at night would

take him for a yokai goblin. The other two would be shape-shifted yokai themselves. Ozu kicked those who were down and buttered up anyone stronger than him. He was selfish and arrogant, lazy and contrary. He never studied, had not a crumb of pride, and fueled himself on other people's misfortunes. There was not a single praiseworthy bone in his body. If only I had never met him, my soul would surely be less tainted.

"I can't believe you ruined my life."

"But all I did was spill Coke on your remote." Ozu wiped his slimy face and cackled. "I'm sure Akashi'll figure something out for you."

"The point is, you should think about what you've done."

"Why should I have to do that?" His expression said he found the suggestion entirely unjust. "This is what they call joint liability. Saying we should film a movie here was Akashi's bad, leaving the remote where you did was your bad, and the one who left out a half-drunk bottle of Coke was in the wrong, too."

The one most at fault is the one who declared, 'I'm going to get naked and dance'—which was you."

"I don't recall saying anything like that."

"There's no getting out of it now. You worked us all into a frenzy, didn't you? Anyway," he continued blabbing, "if the whole thing becomes inoperable just because some Coke got spilled on the remote, that's pretty shoddy design. Yet here you are trying to put all the blame on me—'think about what you've done'? I'm the one who's the victim here!"

The Nurarihyon had a point: it was strange that the unit itself didn't have any buttons. If Akashi's attempt to get the remote repaired failed, we would have lost the only way to turn on the air conditioner, and I would have to spend the rest of the summer in a broiling four-and-a-half-mat tatami room. Agh, if I had known this would happen, I wouldn't have moved. It was cooler on the first floor.

I stood up, wrung my hand towel out in the sink, and put it over my shoulder.