

My Cheesecake-Shaped Poverty

By [Haruki Murakami](#) September 7, 2023

Illustration by Ryan Anderson

This is the tenth story in this summer's online Flash Fiction series. You can read the entire series, and our Flash Fiction from previous years, [here](#).

The Triangle Zone was our name for the place. I couldn't think of any better name for it. I mean, the area was a perfect triangle, as if someone had drawn it out. And she and I lived there, on that land. This was back in 1973 or '74.

When I say "Triangle Zone," don't go picturing a kind of delta. The Triangle Zone we lived in was much narrower, more like a wedge. Imagine, say, a round, full-sized cheesecake. Cut it into twelve equal pieces with a knife so it's like the face of a clock. What you'd end up with, of course, are twelve slices of thirty degrees each at the tip. Place one of these on a plate and, as you sip your tea, take a good hard look at it. That tapered end of the thin slice of cake? That's exactly the shape of the Triangle Zone I'm talking about.

O.K., so how did such a weirdly shaped plot of land come about? Well you might ask. Or maybe not. Either way's fine

with me, since I don't know the answer. I asked some of the neighbors about it, but all I found out was that it had been shaped like a triangle long, long ago, was a triangle now, and would probably—far, far into the future—remain a triangle. People there didn't seem to want to talk about this Triangle Zone, or even think about it. For them, it was like talking about a wart behind your ear. Better left undiscussed. Probably because of its weird shape.

Railroad lines ran along either side of the Triangle Zone, one a national railway line, the other a private line. The two lines ran parallel for a while, then at the very tip of the wedge formed a junction where it was as if they were ripped apart, branching off at strange angles, one north and one south. It was quite a sight to see. Whenever I gazed at the trains whizzing by at the tip of the Triangle Zone, I felt as if I were standing on the bridge of a destroyer slicing its way through the ocean waves.

In terms of livability, the Triangle Zone was appalling. First of all, there was the obvious noise level. But what do you expect? How could it not be earsplitting to live hemmed in between two railroad lines? Open the front door and there was a train roaring by; open a window at the back of the house and yet another train would thunder by, right before your eyes. And when I say "right before your eyes," I'm not exaggerating. The trains were so close that I could look the passengers in the eye and nod a greeting. Really something, now that I think about it.

You'd assume that it would be quiet after the last train of the night had passed by, right? I thought so, too, before I moved there. Problem was, there was no such thing as a last train. The last passenger train was just before 1 A.M., but then came the late-night freight trains. And, once they'd finished rolling by, at dawn, the next day's passenger trains would start up again. It was an endless repeat of this, day after day.

Talk about crazy.

We picked this place to live in for one simple reason: it was dirt cheap. It was a detached house with three rooms, its own bath, and even a small garden, all for about the same price as renting a studio apartment. Since it was a stand-alone house, we could bring our cat along, too. It was as if the place had been specially made, just for us. We'd only recently got married, and, not to brag or anything, but we could very well have been featured in the Guinness Book of Records under "World's Poorest Couple." We saw the house listed in the window of a real-estate agent's office near the station. At least as far as the rent and the layout of the rooms were concerned, this was a lucky find. Astonishing, even.

"Yeah, cheap it is. For sure," the bald real-estate agent said. "But I have to warn you—it's really noisy. As long as you can stand that, you could call it a lucky find."

"Would you mind showing it to us?" I asked.

"Sure. But can't the two of you just go? I get a headache every time I go to that place."

He handed me the keys and drew a map. What an easygoing agent.

On the map, the Triangle Zone didn't look far from the station, but, when we actually walked to it, it took forever. We had to detour around the railroad tracks, cross an overpass, and trudge up and down a somewhat filthy hill before we finally arrived at the rear of the Triangle Zone. There wasn't a store in sight. A totally seedy neighborhood.

My wife and I went into the house at the very tip of the Triangle Zone and stayed for about an hour, just hanging out. During this time, trains kept on rumbling past. Whenever an express train roared by, the windows would rattle. We couldn't hear each other while a train was passing. We'd be talking and then would have to stop until it was gone. We'd resume talking when it got quiet, only to be interrupted a moment later by yet another train. Choppy, interrupted communication à la Jean-Luc Godard.

Aside from the noise, the house wasn't so bad. The structure itself was old-fashioned and in need of some serious repair, but on the plus side it had a tokonoma recessed alcove and a small outside sitting area attached to the house, and had a nice feel to it. Spring light shining

in through the windows formed little sunny squares on the tatami. It was a lot like the house I'd lived in, years ago, when I was little. "Let's take it," I said. "I know it's noisy, but we'll get used to it."

"If that's what you think, I'm O.K. with it," she said.

"Sitting here together like this, it feels like we're married, our own family."

"Well, we *are* married."

"Well, yeah. True enough," I said.

We went back to the real-estate agency and told the bald agent that we'd take it.

"Isn't it too noisy?" he asked.

"Yes, it is, but we'll get used to it," I said.

The agent took off his glasses, wiped them with a tissue, took a sip of tea from his teacup, put his glasses back on, and looked at me.

"Well, 'cause you're young," he said.

"Right," I replied.

And we filled out the rental agreement.

A friend's little minivan was more than enough for our move. Futons, clothes, a lamp, a few books, and a cat—

that was the extent of our belongings. Nothing else. No radio or TV. No washer or dining table or gas stove or telephone or kettle or vacuum cleaner. That was how poor we were. So our move, such as it was, took only half an hour. Life can be simpler if you don't have much money.

When the friend who helped us move took one look at our new dwelling, hemmed in by railroad lines, he was aghast. After we'd unloaded everything, he turned to me and said something, but a passing express train drowned out his words.

"Did you say something?" I asked.

"People really live in a place like this, huh?" he commented, impressed.

We ended up living in that house for two years.

It was a poorly built house in a way, since wind blew in through cracks and gaps all over the place. Pleasant enough in the summer, but, come winter, it was hell. With no money to buy a space heater, my wife and I and the cat would crawl under the futons once the sun set, literally clinging to each other to keep warm. Many a time we'd wake up to find the water in the kitchen faucet frozen solid.

Once winter passed, the spring would come. And spring was a lovely season. She and I and the cat would breathe a sigh of relief. In April, the railroads went on strike for a

few days, and we were ecstatic. Not a single train came rumbling by all day. We carried the cat down to the railroad tracks and sat there sunning ourselves. It was so quiet it was as if we were sitting at the bottom of a lake. We were young, just married, and the sunshine was free!

Even now, when I hear the word "poor," I remember that thin, triangular sliver of land. And I wonder, Who could be living there now? ♦

(Translated, from the Japanese, by Philip Gabriel.)