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Mottainai

A Journey in Search of the Zero Waste Life

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Mottainai - A Journey in Search of the Zero Waste Life

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The Voice of the New Age

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Thank you to the people of Japan for their guiding presence in the movement toward less waste.

And to Wangari Maathai (1940-2011), founder of Africa's Green Belt Movement, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, and global advocate for *mottainai*.

Before You Read

The story you are about to read is a lie.

Well, maybe not a lie, but certainly an exaggeration. A fish tale. A fish tail that grows longer with each telling. Actually, the story is more like a fairy tale. A postmodern allegory about a young man who dramatically changes his life.

A regular guy, Greer Grassi could be you or someone you know. A corporate employee with a nice home, a spiffy car, a moderately successful career and a busy life, he feels an underlying sense of desperation. There's this deep hole deep inside, an emptiness that more stuff cannot fill. It's the kind of emptiness that leads you to try new things. Take risks. Explore. Go on a crazy adventure.

That's the story part of the book. The rest of the book is true. No lie. *Mottainai* is not only a real movement, it's a postmodern philosophy. A way of thinking. A way of life. A real way to live.

As you read, remember the dichotomies. True lies, and real truths—the kind we do not always choose to believe or allow to influence us. Hopefully, the story will resonate for you. Enough so that *mottainai* begins to influence how *you* walk through the world.

* * *

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and Sumiko Uo, for her generous and informative input on Japan and its people.

ONE

The Guru Finds You

The traffic clogged, inching along the four lane thoroughfare that led to the turnoff to my office. I cranked up the club music, attempting and failing to rev up my enthusiasm for the day ahead. I was tired of being a corporate drone, tired of the day to day monotony, the sameness of the cubicles, the slow rise up through the ridiculous and outdated hierarchy. But I had no other choice. Four years out of school and my college loans were an anchor that bound me to my fate. Somebody had to stave off the circling sharks, and I seemed to be the only person on the planet who could somehow make that happen. Oh, I had decent income, a nice apartment, a cool car. But sometimes it felt like I was drowning, sucked under by my shallow life.

Another Monday morning, the sun not yet scalding hot, the Florida sky a magnificent shade of springtime blue, yet my mood was dark and gloomy. As the newly departed Prince crooned about purple rain, my engine lights went on. Huh? Then the car sputtered and the engine stalled.

Rolling out from the crawl of commuter traffic, I coasted over to the entryway of a strip mall parking lot and pulled in. I swore silently, then loudly when the engine refused to turn over. No faint roar, no click, nothing. Car was dead. Now I would be late for the meeting with the director of marketing. He had a project lined up for me, one that would most certainly involve too many hours of my time spent doing things I detested.

Okay, so maybe the delay wasn't all bad.

After calling triple A, I texted the office to warn them I didn't know when I would make it in. Then I climbed out and guided the

car into the closest parking space. Wiping the perspiration from my brow, I checked my designer watch. I still owed on the wildly impractical impulse purchase, but the flashy Patek impressed the women, so I figured it was worth adding to my debt load. Whatever.

With a sigh of exasperation, I slammed my car door closed and leaned against it. A slight breeze fluttered against my face. The air smelled sweet, as it does in the morning before the traffic smog sets in. I decided it was best not to angst about the time it would take for the tow truck to arrive, so I began dicking around on my phone.

The sun beat down. The lush green fronds of a nearby royal palm tree provided me with a little shade, but not much. Not nearly enough. I could feel the sweat dripping down my back.

"Mottainai," a voice said. "What a waste."

I looked up. The sun was in my eyes. In my work attire, with the requisite long sleeved shirt and dark dress pants, I felt damp all over and a little lightheaded. My mood had devolved from bad to foul. The repair to the car I had big monthly payments on would cost me more money I hadn't yet earned, and my debt load hung over me like a fat black cloud in the perfect sky. A cloud that was doing nothing to keep me cool.

"What did you say?" I asked, scowling. I wasn't up for idle chitchat with sidewalk bums.

A few feet away, the man stood staring at me. He cocked his oversized head and laughed. His voice was high, youthful, but he appeared to be comfortably past fifty. His gray hair was long and thick, his big frame padded with middle-age fat. He was dressed in white, in the kind of suit guys once wore to discothèques. On his long feet were white cotton shoes, the type people wore on boats.

"Mottainai. A Japanese word. You are familiar with the language?"

No. Why would I be? Japan was irrelevant. These days it was all about China. The kids I'd gone to school with took Chinese lessons. I'd opted out to study computers and play tournament chess. Now I worked in the IT department of a big company and played chess on my phone whenever the busywork died down.

I dismissed the man. "Sorry, no."

I returned to my phone. I'd been scanning the markets, poring over the financials, looking for ways to make an overnight killing. So far, I had lost four figures from my speculative attempts. Not much in the scheme of things, but equivalent to a month's paycheck for me. I needed a win.

And I thought I could make that happen. I was optimistic I could game the system. Everyone was doing it, and plenty of people had managed to make a lucrative career out of it. I was smart, so why wouldn't I be able to join the ranks of the big winners? Instead of standing in an asphalt lot like some loser, waiting for AAA to tow away my overleveraged luxury vehicle.

"*Mottainai* means many things. In Buddhist thought, *mottainai* is essence. What's important. In Japan, the term is used in directing others to waste nothing. Here, with you, it translates to what a waste. Which is what I see here. And I do not mean the broken down car. I mean you, and your lifestyle."

Huh? Was he still talking?

I looked at him again, tensing up a little. So, what, was this weirdo actually trying to rile me? Was this his way of picking a fight? I wasn't in the mood for fisticuffs or even manly ego banter. I was never in the mood for that kind of sports bar bullshit.

"Say, guy, I'm busy here. Want to move it along?" I ventured. I had him by a good twenty-five years. I'd spent far less time at the all you can eat buffet. What could he do to me? "I got more than I can handle right now. You're distracting me."

He laughed at that, emitting another one of his middle school cheerleader giggles. "You're the one who's distracted. Your whole life is being wasted in distraction. Yet I can tell you are very bright, and highly ambitious. This is why I say it. *Mottainai*."

Moe what? Well, Moe Larry Curly, the guy was some kind of a stooge. Whatever the hell he was on about, I was not interested in hearing it. Maybe the sun was getting to me, the morning heat invading my brain as well as clothing suited for air conditioned sedentary behavior, not outdoor lounging. The stranger had slipped under my skin and my usual placid demeanor was bubbling up to a low boil.

I put away my phone. "Bro, you know zip about my life. So

why don't you take your *Miami Vice* suit and your paternal but trite advice for a nice hike to the beach. Okay?"

My spine stiffened when his cheerful smile faded. I had never been in a fight. Verbally, I could hold my own, but physical encounters scared me. I knew I could probably take the guy, but I didn't want to have to try. Plus, I had on a super nice shirt by Ralph Lauren. And pleated slacks from Neiman. No way I wanted to mess up my clothes putting Studio 54 in a headlock.

When he stepped toward me, I froze. My heart sped up and warm sweat coursed down my sides, rivering over my ribs. I slipped off the watch and tucked it in my pocket, prepping myself mentally for the oncoming scuffle. Should I put up my fists or wait for him to make the first pugilist move?

"Take this," he said in a lower voice. "Please." He held out a crisp white business card.

What could I do? I accepted it. My heart was racing like I had a bloodstream full of cocaine, but my hand was rock steady.

When he let go of his card, our eyes met. His were snow cone blue. "Hope to hear from you," he said. Then he nodded knowingly at my car. "Good luck with the vehicle."

I said thanks and watched him walk away, hustling east on the brick sidewalk. He moved lightly for a big man. After calming myself, I returned to the financial news. When I looked up from my phone again, he'd disappeared.

The rest of the day was a fiscal nightmare. Tow truck fee, Uber ride to the office, car repair estimate, it all added up to negative numbers. Also, there was the missed meeting, the lost work time, and the sweat-soaked shirt destined for the dry cleaners. I felt out of sorts, totally off my game all day. Then I had to ping Uber again for a lift home. My car would be in the shop until Thursday.

I skipped dinner and went for a run. The city streets were quiet and shadowed, the moon a bleached half-smile high in the sky. Breathing in the cool night air, I jogged past pastel colored apartment complexes behind thick vegetation. The bright purple bougainvillea were in bloom, pink desert roses and red hibiscus flowers everywhere. Everything so sweet smelling, and in an array of brilliant hues. Embroiled in my useless excuse for a life, I'd somehow missed the colorful arrival of spring.

I was always missing something. I missed out on entire days, sometimes weeks. A month could pass without me noticing the world around me. Was this any way to live?

Moe Larry Curly, I thought to myself. What a waste.

Before bed, I retrieved my shirt from the leather chair I'd tossed it on earlier and added it to the dry cleaning pile, then hung up my wool pants. Something slipped out of a pocket and landed on the floor of my closet. A business card.

I picked it up. *Stop Waste! Mottainai Consulting. Martin Handler, President.*

The area code was local.

I stepped toward the chrome wastebasket to toss it, but something stopped me. Call it instinct, call it fate. Whatever guided my hand, I changed direction and dropped the card in a sock drawer instead. Then I forgot about it for another six months.

By the time I found the card again, the stock market had tanked and none of my brilliant startup ideas had started up. I'd managed to work my way up one rung of the corporate ladder, but I was as bored there as I had been as an entry level drudge. In fact, I was still a drudge, only now with a senior in the job title and a bump up in the pay. I was spinning my wheels, wasting my time in corporate America. My salary didn't make me happy. It didn't even pay off my debt.

Then, one night while raking through my bureau for enough loose change to cover the tip for a delivery pizza, there it was. Martin's business card. I stared at it. The card, it seemed to be calling out to me.

Mottainai.

The next morning, after a long hot shower and a cup of double-strength coffee, I gave the man a call. Martin, the weird dude in the *Saturday Night Fever* suit. The person who would introduce me to my guru and change the course of my life.