

**Mary Roach** (1959-) is an American of average size, a journalist and former columnist at the magazine *Salon* – articles from *Salon* are easily found on the Internet. She has also written for *Outside*, *GQ*, *Vogue*, and *The New York Times Magazine*. She contributes to *Reader's Digest* and the science magazine *Discover*. Her sense of humour has been put to macabre use in the two books *Stiff: The Curious Life of Cadavers* (2003) and *Spook: Science Tackles the Afterlife* (2005). She lives in San Francisco.

Mary Roach

## Monster in a Ryokan (1999)

A monster is a relative thing. In Godzilla's hometown, everyone was fifty feet tall and scaly. The sidewalks were wide enough that no one had to trample parked cars and knock over buildings. Only in Tokyo did Godzilla become a monster.

5 Likewise myself. In my own country, I am not thought of as brutish and rude – or anyway, no more so than the next slob. But in Japan, I am suddenly huge and clueless. I sprout extra limbs and make loud, unintelligible noises. In Japan, I am a monster.

I came to this conclusion following a recent stay at a *ryokan*, a traditional Japanese inn. It was raining the night I flew in to Tokyo, and the cab had dropped me at the wrong place. Having walked the remaining distance, stopping every few blocks to perform the quaint flailing pantomime of the lost foreigner, I was drenched and disheveled by the time I arrived at the right place.

15 I lumbered down the foot-path, crashing into bicycles and trampling tiny ornamental trees. As I opened the door, several of the staff could be seen fleeing from the room. Others crouched behind traditional Japanese furnishings, which, though pleasing to the eye, offer little in the way of protective cover.

20 "HRRARGGHH ARGGHH HAARGH RARRRRHSCHRVRANN." (Hello, I have a reservation.)

I lurched forward and stepped up to the reception window. The woman's face crumbled in distress. A large portion of this appeared to be

scaly *adj* skællet  
trample *vb* trampe på  
brutish *adj* dyrisk  
slob *sb* sjuske  
clueless *adj* uvidende  
sprout *vb* skyde  
limb *sb* lem  
quaint *adj* lejerlig  
flailing *adj* svingende med armene  
pantomime *sb* stumt skuespil  
drench *vb* gennembløde  
di'sheveled *adj* krøllet  
lumber *vb* humpet tungt afsted  
crouch *vb* krybe sammen  
furnishings *sb* møblement  
lurch *vb* tumble  
di'sstress *sb* bekymring

dainty *adj* nydelig  
 immaculate *adj* pletfri  
 battered *adj* ramponeret  
 nubbly *adj* nopret  
 sporting a cute saying  
 her: med en sjov tekst  
 dis'lodge *vb* fjerne  
 a'ccumulate *vb* hobe  
 sig op  
 threadbare *adj* tyndslidt  
 penalty *sb* straf  
 im'ply *vb* antyde  
 fa'stidious *adj* pertentlig  
 squalid *adj* snavset  
 shod *adj*, skoet  
 vista *sb* udsigt  
 single-occupancy room *sb*  
 enkeltværelse  
 a'ccommodate *vb* have  
 plads til  
 lumberjack *sb* skovhugger  
 NBA = National Basket-  
 ball Association  
 center = center-forward  
 (US, BE: centre-)  
 spread-eagle *adj* med  
 spredte arme og ben  
 dresser *sb* toiletbord  
 Maine amerikansk delstat

directed at my feet. She pointed to a shelf of shoes and then she pointed to mine. The shoes on the shelf were dainty and immaculate. The shoes on my feet were wet and battered and huge.

I apologized for the size and condition of my footwear. This was not the problem. The problem was that I was wearing them *inside the ryokan*.

As an American, I was raised to believe that the simple act of passing one's soles across a nubbly plastic mat sporting a cute saying will somehow magically dislodge an accumulated eight hours of filth, muck, and germs. The Japanese do not share our faith in doormats. The Japanese remove their shoes at the door.

As a *ryokan* guest, you are expected to do the same. Inside the front door is a bench for you to sit on and take off your shoes. This is normally located directly across from the reception window, enabling the staff to tell at a glance that your socks a) don't match, b) need washing, and c) have little threadbare patches at the heels. You are then provided with a pair of Japanese slippers, which are open in the back so that the staff, over the course of your visit, can see that, indeed, all of your socks have threadbare heels.

The slippers, you soon learn, are special hallway slippers, not to be worn inside the rooms. In the rooms you wear only socks. That is, unless you are in the toilet room, in which case you exchange your special hallway slippers for special toilet slippers, which are never, under penalty of shame and humiliation, to be worn anywhere but the toilet.

I do not mean to imply that Japanese people are needlessly fastidious. I mean to imply that Americans are needlessly squalid – especially in hotels. In American hotels, the whole idea is to create as much of a mess as possible, as someone else will be cleaning it up. Do unto others as you figure they'd do unto you if you had a job cleaning hotel rooms.

Properly shod, I was shown to my room. It was approximately nine feet square and contained three or four pieces of traditional ankle-high furniture. To someone accustomed to the vast prairies and vistas of the American hotel room, this takes getting used to. In America, a single-occupancy room must contain a bed – heck, make it two! – large enough to accommodate lumberjacks and NBA centers lying spread-eagle in any direction. Though guests will be leaving their belongings strewn about the bed and floor, there must be a dresser, a desk, and a closet the size of Maine. There must be six bars of soap and a telephone in the bathroom. A *ryokan* room, on the other hand, serves the simple purpose for which it was designed: that is, to provide a neat, comfortable place to sleep for a few nights.

Though I appreciated the rational scale and modest aesthetics of my accommodations, I was nonetheless hopelessly disoriented. I kept running into walls and stumbling over traditional ankle-high furniture. Someone had spread bedding out all over the floor, which caused me to trip and smash headlong into a low-hanging lantern. Tea cups were cap-sized. Miniature dressers toppled and rolled. Soon the Japanese national guard would arrive with rifles and tranquilizer darts.

I tried to get a grip on myself. Thrashing violently in a small Japanese room is a dangerous proposition, as the walls are fashioned not from plaster, but from delicate sheets of waxy rice paper. It's like living inside a Dixie Cup. One false step and you come crashing through to the adjoining room, which in this case happened to be a carp pond, and god only knows what sort of slippers are required for that.

I decided to go soak in the tub. Like other large reptiles, I am plodding and ungainly on land, but surprisingly graceful underwater. I asked the staff for a robe and entered the steamy, tiled sanctum. To my great relief, the bath was already drawn and everything seemed self-explanatory.

Later, back in my room, I noticed a small booklet on the table. It was called *Information on How to Enjoy a Ryokan* – a "guide book" to "living, eating, and sleeping as the Japanese do." According to a section titled "Tips for Taking a Bath," I had committed no less than three ablutinary offenses. For starters, the bathtub is not for bathing, but for relaxing. To soap and rinse yourself inside the tub is an unthinkable act, akin to peeing in the pool or drinking milk straight from the carton. The cute plastic baskets are not floating soap dishes; they are for storing your clothes.

The traditional Japanese robe closes left side over right, not right over left, and is called a *yukata*, not – as I had called it – a *yakuza*. (*Yakuza* are Japanese mafiosi, the guys who chop off their pinkies for dishonorable behavior, such as cowardice or soaping oneself in the tub.)

While I contemplated my sins, there was a knock (rustle? thwap?) on the wax paper. It was the proprietress, bearing a tray of tea. She seemed displeased. "I'm sorry about the soap," I blurted. "I didn't see the instruction book."

She smiled – the sort of bemused, resigned smile Fay Wray used to give King Kong after he tipped over the garage or stepped on the house pets. Without a word, she set down the tray and left.

Shortly thereafter, I noticed the toilet slippers on my feet. It was almost a relief. Every wrong thing that could be done had been done. I could only go uphill from here. I rested my huge wet head on my little prehensile arms and went to sleep.

aes'thetics *sb* æstetik  
 accomo'dations *sb* (US,  
 BE: accommodation) ind-  
 kvartering  
 cap'size *vb* vælte  
 tranquilizer dart *sb* pil  
 med beroligende middel  
 thrash *vb* slå ud med arme  
 og ben  
 propo'sition *sb* forehav-  
 ende  
 plaster *sb* gips  
 Dixie Cup *sb* papbæger  
 ad'joining *adj* tilstødende  
 carp pond *sb* karpedam  
 reptile *sb* krybdyr  
 plodding *adj* langsom-  
 melig  
 un'gainly *adj* klodset  
 tiled *adj* flisebelagt  
 sanctum *sb* helligdom  
 ab'lutinary *adj* bade-  
 a'kin *adj* beslægtet  
 pinkie *sb* lillefinger  
 cowardice *sb* fejhed  
 contemplate *vb* tænke over  
 pro'prietess *sb* kvindelig  
 ejer  
 be'mused *adj* forvirret  
 pre'hensile *adj* gribe-

## Pre-reading

The very first line of the text is: "A monster is a relative thing". Search your soul and find a situation where, when travelling, you made a complete fool of yourself or felt you were a monster.

## Analysis and Interpretation

1. Describe the narrator's situation when she first comes to Tokyo.
2. She runs into a number of difficult situations; for instance, describe the various problems she has with her footwear – in how many ways does it go wrong for her? What other problems does she run into?
3. Point out her general comparisons between her own country, the USA, and Japan.
4. How do the Japanese react to her behaviour?
5. How does the narrator herself feel about her situation and behaviour?
6. Comment on the finishing lines.
7. What type of text is it?
8. Who is speaking? To whom is that person speaking?
9. What is the theme of the text?
10. State in a sentence or two what the purpose of this text is.

## Post-reading

1. What makes the text funny? Try to establish how humour is created through language, situations, paradox and contrast.
2. Based on the text, make a list of do's and don'ts when staying at a ryokan. Next, produce a leaflet aimed at visitors to Denmark in which you tell them what they should and should not do.
3. Discuss the saying "When in Rome, do as the Romans do". What is the Danish equivalent to this expression?