SATURDAY MORNING

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Up at eight, I begin putting away futons, sweeping the tatami mats and readying breakfast for six. I've already bought what I need: two loaves of bread, cinnamon sugar, nutmeg, and syrup for French toast. I've got fruit—apples and oranges and bananas—should the students find French toast too sweet. At school lunch, they always eat fruit. I've got tea and coffee and orange juice and Coke. Coke will be special treat. I hope they don't tell their mothers. I pull out a homemade video of American basketball games and Saturday morning cartoons should we run out of things to say, which I expect we will.

The girls arrive in a pair, which is how junior high school girls travel. Two by two, best friend in tow. They are ninth graders, these two. Smart, and so far, successful. Each one wants to go to one of Matsumoto's top high schools. Each one wants to travel abroad one day, go to Canada, for example, to see Anne of Green Gables country. Both asked me Friday, "Could we see your room?" *Onegai-shimasu.* I'd invited four boys two weeks ago. Come tomorrow, I told the girls. I will make French toast for all of you.

The boys arrive in a pack of four. For this is how they move: in packs of three or four or five or six. They present me with gifts: a box of cakes from a downtown bakery and a big bouquet of long-stemmed roses, red, the kind the men I've loved have never given. Roses are my favorite, I tell the boys, though this is not exactly true. They look around my room and see dried roses hanging from a wall. They nod and smile to one another, confident they've chosen their gifts well. *Sugoi*, they say—your room looks great. *Iinei,* the girls add—we envy you. Then I make breakfast and we eat—both loaves of bread, all the cakes, juice, tea, coffee, and Coke. No one touches the fruit.

You cook very well, the boys say. I laugh. No one has said that before. *Honto ni*, they say, straight-faced as blackjack dealers. Really. I open the kitchen window to air out the smoky room. I had forgotten what a mess cooking causes.

The girls ask, "Is America beautiful?" I tell them the truth: "Some parts are; some parts aren't." Then the girls excuse themselves, leaving early to study for exams, while the boys linger on, asking me questions, most of them predictable: Where am I from? Do I like Japan? What do I think of Shinmei Junior High?

America, I say. Salt Lake City, Utah. Have you heard of the Utah Jazz? Yes, I like Japan. I like Shinmei, too. Students from Shinmei are interesting—*omoshiroi.*

They struggle to ask more but I understand just enough Japanese now to anticipate what's coming. What did you...before...? I was a newspaper reporter, I say. Newspaper...*shinbun.* Reporter...I gesture to show I'm scribbling something into a notebook. *Ah! So-so-so-so-so. Wakarimashita.* They understand.

As afternoon begins, we watch TV, snippets of old basketball games, bits and pieces of American cartoons. I offer them oranges, worried they will tell their mothers the truth: that they ate only sweet bread and cakes at the home of their American teacher.

One boy spots a deck of cards and suggests we play. So we do, first a memory game in which we try to match up pairs. Then slapjack. Then, without a word, we begin trying to construct a house of cards, all of us together, each one taking a turn while the others whisper *gambare, gambare!*—do your best!—as if a single sound might tip the fragile house. The boys begin with teepees but never get past a small first floor. They begin again and again, working patiently, each time trying a new configuration.

After an hour, when another house tumbles, one boy flips a card into the air. Then we all follow suit, sending cards flying, a flurry of kings and queens and jacks and a joker, twos and tens and fives and nines, all of them up into the air like rice at a wedding, and we are laughing, all of us. Then it stops and without a word, the boys gather up the cards, putting each one back into a tiny plastic case, taking care to count the deck, making sure nothing, not a single card, gets lost. They check their watches, say they need to go, bow deeply to thank me and leave me alone.

Later one boy will write a note saying, "Thank you. I am much obliged." And I will wish I had a way to say, no, *I'm* the one who is beholden to you. I can count on two hands the number of times I've been up before eight this past year. More often, I've straggled home from parties or bars at hours close to dawn. When you're single or childless, or in my case both, there's little reason *not* to sleep in, not to indulge in the luxury of a Saturday morning spent under the covers. But to me, that visit from the boys was a luxury and so were the roses, which I saved and dried and hung on my wall.

A few months after that visit from the boys, I gave the dried roses to a sweet man, a professor of economics who was married at the time and looking for something or someone and confused all that with me. I left the flowers at his office one night because I knew I would be leaving Japan soon, and I wanted to do something but I didn't know what. I wanted to tell him I thought he was a lovely man, the kind I imagined was once a sweet and gentle boy. I wanted to say

I was sorry. But for what? Nothing sounded right. What happened between us formed no definite shape. The words just sat there like a collapsed little house of cards, flat and finished. So I left a bunch of dead roses on his bookshelf and forgot to tell him where they came from or why they mattered.

Later I realized what I should have said was this: that I was obliged but unable to give back to the professor what those boys one Saturday morning had so freely given me—a gesture of kindness, simple and pure, an afternoon as lovely as a sleeping child. Full of possibility, but inarticulate, as yet unformed.