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A Real Job

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You're ready for a real job. For the past fifteen years, you've been fitting in random part time gigs while raising your multiply-disabled child, supplementing your Japanese husband's salary as a high school P.E. teacher. But now, you've had enough of reading *Everyone Poops* to preschoolers, enough of kindergartners groping you during "Duck Duck Goose," enough of sullen businessmen forced to study English after hours in a company class. Enough of scrounging between the sofa cushions for one-hundred yen coins and tofu (only 88 yen per pack!) for dinner. Enough of your husband saying, "Don't you think it's time to go back to work?"

When your Canadian friend who teaches full-time at the local university tells you about an opening—instructor of American Culture—you immediately update your resume. You're American, after all. In between driving your kid to Deaf School and physical therapy, between once-a-week kindergarten classes and twice-a-week businessmen, you've managed to write and publish seven books. You have a Master's degree from a prestigious American university. You know all about Lady Gaga.

You submit your application.

Your husband buys wine. "I have a good feeling about this," he says.

Although a celebration is premature, you drink the wine together. You wait. A week passes, then two weeks. The phone doesn't ring. No one from the university sends email. Finally, you get an official looking letter in the mail, along with a package containing your seven books and various other publications. "We regret to inform you that…"

Your Canadian friend tells you that someone else was hired for the position—a guy from Jordan who wrote a book in Japanese on the U. S. government's complicity in the events of 9/11.

"Sorry," she says, and you can tell by her pained expression that she really is. "I'll let you know when something else comes up."

A year later, you publish your eighth novel, but the advance is small, hardly enough to cover the cost of your daughter's new wheelchair. Your

house is falling into disrepair. Your husband keeps saying, "Why don't you get a full time job?" But there are just so many things that you can do as a middle-aged American woman in rural Japan.

One day, you and your Canadian friend are having lunch at Starbuck's (her treat, because this is something that you really can't afford).

"You know that Jordanian guy we hired?" she asks before taking a sip from her matcha latte.

"Yeah, what about him?"

"Well, a couple of weeks ago he announced that he is no longer going to teach American Culture."

"Can he do that?"

She nods. "He has tenure."

"So what's he going to teach instead?"

"Islamic Studies."

"Huh." Maybe that's what the university wanted all along.

"But there's an opening in the Literature Department," she tells you. "One of my colleagues is going on maternity leave. You'd be perfect for that."

You *would* be perfect. You majored in literature in college, and you've written several works of literary fiction yourself. Although you've heard that foreigners are rarely given jobs teaching literature in Japan, and are usually consigned to teaching English conversation to freshmen, it's worth a shot. This time, you prepare your resume on expensive vellum paper. To compensate, you'll be eating tofu twice this week.

This time your husband doesn't buy wine. He's become more cautious, more crafty. "You need a connection," he says. "That's how things work in Japan. If you don't become friends with the right people, you'll never get a job."

You mention your Canadian friend, a well-liked insider with tenure. And you know a couple of other people who work there—a guy from Uganda and a few part-timers from various countries.

He shakes his head. "Foreigners don't count. Only Japanese."

Two weeks later, your books are returned along with a letter: "We regret to inform you…"

"I didn't get the job," you tell your Canadian friend the next time you meet for coffee.

"I'm so sorry," she says. "I put in a good word for you. I told the chair-

man about your literary awards, but…"

"So who got it?"

"This German guy. He's been working in a contract position."

"A German. Huh. And he's going to teach American Literature?"

She waves her hand dismissively. "He wrote his master's thesis on superheroes in American comics. I think his specialty is *The Incredible Hulk*."

"Well, I bet the students will enjoy his class," you say, trying not to sulk. They'll probably enjoy comics more than the Fitzgerald novel you fantasized about teaching.

"Maybe they were intimidated by him," she says. "He has gangster tattoos and he's always yelling at people. Maybe they were afraid of what he'd do if they didn't hire him."

You're not a yeller. After sixteen years of being mother to a child with special needs, you've developed reservoirs of patience. All these years in Japan have changed you. Your street smarts have atrophied. You speak too softly and apologize too much. And now you're not tough enough even for rural Japan.

"But there's another opening," your friend says.

"There is?"

"They're looking for someone to fill the contract position. It's not tenured, but it's full time."

You're already exhausted by this whole job hunting business, but you made too much money in your part-time gigs to remain on your husband's health insurance. Now not only do you have to pay income tax and cover your own pension, you also have to use your meager earnings to pay for obligatory national health insurance. You are now working more but making even less money than before. How is that possible? Obviously you have no future in Mathematics.

You send in your application again, printing your resume on recycled paper. This time you send only three of your eight published books and a handful of articles and book reviews, not all one hundred.

To your amazement, you're called in for an interview. You buy a black suit and a white blouse. You take special care with your make-up. When you arrive at the room where the interview is held, several professors are seated already in a row of chairs. One of them, an older gentleman, says, "I know your husband. We sometimes go drinking together."

"Oh, really?"

Everyone asks a question. They want to know how you will improve students' TOEIC scores, and whether or not you are planning on pursuing your doctorate degree. One asks you to name your favorite Japanese writer. *"Is this relevant?"* you want to ask. Instead you cast about for a safe answer and come up with "Natsume Soseki," even though you've never read any of his books.

When the interview is over, you pick your daughter up from Deaf School, go shopping, and make dinner. Your husband comes home, he looks in the pot and frowns. "Curry and rice again? We had it for school lunch today."

You want to dump the pot over his head and watch the gravy slide over his face like lava, but you don't. Instead, you tell him about the interview. "Who was that guy, anyway? The one you go drinking with?"

"He was the principal at the first high school where I worked," your husband says. "Now he's a college professor."

Later that evening, your husband gets a phone call. It's his mentor saying that you've got the job.

This time, you do celebrate. With champagne. And the next time you go to Starbuck's with your Canadian friend, you pay for the coffee. You tell the preschoolers and businessmen that you won't be teaching them anymore. The preschoolers make cards for you out of construction paper and host a party with juice and rice crackers. The businessmen take you drinking and give you a vase thrown on a wheel by a famous local potter. Your first day on the job, you go to the main office. A secretary gives you a key. "Your office is on the second floor of building eight. Do you know where that is?"

"Umm, I'll find it."

Inside your office is a desk with a big box on top. You look in the box and see a computer that you have no idea how to set up.

Once you're settled in, however, you find that you enjoy the job. Your students are bright and motivated and they don't try to grope you. No one asks you to read *Everyone Poops* or explain business etiquette in Duluth. You don't get to talk about Lady Gaga or *The Great Gatsby*, but you now have health insurance and pension payments, not to mention your own office which you decorate with plants and art. Tofu is now an optional dinner choice.

You now have to attend faculty meetings as an "observer." Most of the time, you are the only foreigner in the meetings, which are conducted entirely in Japanese. Most of the time, you are the only woman. During one, at which the German Associate Professor of American Literature is present, you venture to ask a simple question.

The German turns to the chairman and says, "Isn't she supposed to keep quiet?"

"He's trying to pull your tail," your husband says when he hears about the incident. It's a funny expression. You imagine that you are a monkey being yanked out of a jungle tree. But it seems as if your husband may be right. For whatever reason, your new colleague doesn't seem to like you. Suddenly, there is a savage one-star review of one of your books on Amazon.com written largely in non-native speaker English: "The author is clearly not knowing about the Japanese tea ceremony." "This book is continuing until I feel boredom to tears." Etc. It must be him! Pulling your tail!

You do your job conscientiously, teaching classes which last the full ninety-minutes, making yourself available during office hours, and helping Japanese colleagues with their academic papers. You're desperate for your three-year contract to be renewed. The thought of once again having to scrounge for one hundred yen coins makes you weep. But as you reach the end of your contract, you realize that it hasn't been enough. You've published your ninth novel and taught as many classes as were asked of you—hundreds of students every semester—but you haven't made the right connections.

Although you do your best to stay alert to potential openings, nothing comes up. You learn that an Australian guy who used to run a pizza parlor for homesick foreigners has been hired for a new position that you somehow didn't hear about. Apparently, this guy's had a Master's in Education all along. Also, he has the right friends.

Your contract is dwindling. Your husband is worried. Your daughter needs a new hearing aid.

While scrolling the job listings, you come across a full time English teaching position at a nearby language school. Health insurance is provided, plus four weeks of vacation. There's the possibility of a promotion. The job calls for someone with experience teaching small children, preferably a native speaker. You sigh and send in your resume.

At the interview, the harried young woman who owns the school serves you tea. She doesn't ask you about methodology or how you'll improve TOEIC scores. She doesn't seem to care if you have a degree. Children are crying in the background.

"We're very short-staffed," she says. "When can you start?"

"Right away," you tell her. In fact, you'd be happy to start immediately. You reach into your briefcase and pull out a book: *Everyone Poops.*