

Position

Saki and her husband, Kenji, watch their two-year-old daughter through a small glass window. Haruka is auditioning for a spot at a fancy preschool in Glendale. In the playroom various cutouts of animals, plants, and foods are taped to the walls. A rabbit leaning against an apple tree. A sleeping bear beside a plate of cookies. At the far end of the room, Haruka and one of the female teachers are looking at a cow and some bananas. Haruka laughs and the woman claps her hands. Saki can't tell how well the test is going. It's impossible to hear anything through the door.

"Do we have everything we need for the party?" Kenji asks.

"Cake mix," Saki says quietly.

"You don't need to whisper. They can't hear us."

The two speak Japanese to each other only when they're alone. Both are skillful enough in English to converse easily with most people, and they're raising Haruka to be bilingual, hoping that it will give her an easier life.

"Let's go to Vons after this," Saki says.

"That grocery is awful. How about the bakery in Koreatown? They have better stuff. We haven't had matcha cake in a while. It's healthier."

"I want to bake an American cake," Saki says. "Plus, Vons is on the way home. There's going to be so much traffic to get downtown." It's a balmy weekend in late summer. Of course people would want to be outside.

Saki assumed that the move to Los Angeles would mean shorter workdays for Kenji. It would mean more time together as a family, a Western education for her daughter, and American desserts. And even in such an expensive city, they'd have more space than they ever dreamed.

"We're all getting fat." Kenji rubs his stomach. "Look at me."

"You look fine. You're still more skinny than most people."

Haruka will be three years old tomorrow. One-tenth her mother's age. How cool, to be a kid growing up in America. Saki can't help but feel jealous. She idolized Hollywood actors when she was a child. Now they are walking the same streets as Julia Roberts and stuck in the same traffic jams as Denzel Washington. They'd even stumbled on a red carpet premiere with Jennifer Lawrence and Chris Pratt. Her friends back home swoon over her new life. Saki knows how lucky she is.

The teacher pulls out a book and sits down with Haruka. She points to a page and Haruka stares like it's a portal to a perfect world. Saki notices this and puts her face against the window. The woman, dressed in khaki pants and a pink blouse, starts to read. Her eyes are wide and her lips animated. She makes undulating motions with her hands. Haruka does the same. Good.

Saki shuts her eyes and exhales. She has pinned a terrible amount of hope onto this school.

The hour is up and the woman and Haruka exit the room. Haruka runs into Saki's arms. Saki kisses the top of her head, soft as a peach.

"That was so good, Haruka-chan."

"She really is very sharp," the teacher says. "Very impressive for her age. I'll have a discussion with my boss and give you a call on Monday. Whatever you're doing with her, keep doing it."

"Really?" Saki blurts out. Kenji and the teacher look at her incredulously. Blood rushes to her face. She steps back.

"Thank you," Kenji says. "We're glad to know that." He brushes Haruka's hair with his fingers.

"Yes, thank you," Saki says. She bows. It's one of the rare behaviors that she can't suppress. They are not in Japan; she doesn't need to keep doing it. People here have given her some strange looks, but not this woman, who simply smiles and wishes her well. Saki is certain that this is the right place for her daughter, that Haruka will be better off in the capable hands of professionals than staying home with her mother all day. She fears she'll ruin the girl in some irreparable way, that her melancholy will spread to her daughter like the flu.

On the car ride to the store, Kenji sings along to Garth Brooks. He and Saki have grown obsessed with country music; it helps them with their diction and they can easily understand the story-like songs. Haruka bounces in her car seat to a *SpongeBob* DVD, the headphones barely clinging to her tiny ears. Saki relaxes and shuts her eyes for a little bit. She relishes the southern California sun on her face. It feels an altogether different kind of star.

The shipping company offered Kenji an international manager job at double his old salary. They could live abroad for the first time, something he and Saki had talked about ever since they met in their high school English club. What excited Saki more was the thought of reconnecting with her friend Erin, a former English teacher who had taught Saki for several years after college. When Erin's work contract was over, she returned to New York, married a man named Stanley, and immediately got pregnant. She gave birth to a little girl named Posey a few months after Haruka came into the world. Now Posey was two-and-a-half, and Saki felt like a poor friend for having not met her yet. But all would be forgiven—they were on the same continent again. Erin was giddy at the news. She would come visit them in L.A. as soon as possible. Their families could finally meet each other. It had taken a while, but the plans were made. Erin and her family would be the special guests at Haruka's birthday party, then head on a road trip up the California coast.

In Tokyo, Erin would often drag Saki out to drinks at expat bars. The people were always sociable, and it was an opportunity for Saki to practice her English. Afterwards, Saki would tell Kenji, who never wanted to come and held minimal interest in their exploits, about the people she met with Erin, the conversations they all had. A Frenchman who loved American football. A Scottish woman on the cusp of breaking up with her longtime lover. A couple from Mexico who thought Japan was the coolest place on earth and took photos of the bar stools. Their stories were fascinating to Saki, like peeling back a corner of a wrapped box and getting

a tiny scent of what lay inside. She was always curious to know more about people, including her friend, but rarely had the courage to ask.

Saki found Erin attractive. It was purely physically at first—she loved the bounce in her hair and the soft tone of her voice—but as they went out more and more together, it was the readiness with which she met new people, the kindness she showed to them, the utter lack of judgment towards even the most strange of folk. How could such a person feel such freedom? During English lessons she paid careful attention to Erin's pale skin. The longer Erin stood in front the more her face would turn an innocent pink, a calm color, the color painted on the walls of prisons to stem aggression. It was that pink, spreading across Erin's face, that Saki often thought of when she and Kenji made love. Not every time, but most.

The week before Erin returned to the States, she took Saki to a club in west Tokyo called Position. It catered mainly to gay men, but on the first Thursday of every month there was a ladies night. Erin had gone there several times with some of the other English teachers, and she had been wanting to take Saki. You didn't need to be gay to enjoy yourself, she'd said, you didn't even need to be outgoing. It would be a fun time all the same, the perfect way to celebrate Erin's last weekend in Asia. Still, Saki was mortified. The word 'gay' had not once escaped her lips.

At Shinjuku station, Saki checked her face with her pocket mirror. A little more mascara and blush wouldn't hurt. She had no idea what style of dress was most appropriate. Everything in her closet was plain: black, olive, white, pink. She would stand out in a club full of free spirits, so she went to a department store and bought a patterned dress that she'd seen Erin wear a few weeks prior. As she dusted her cheeks someone whistled at her. Erin had on jeans that held tight to her hips and a sparkly t-shirt with a plunging neckline. Her hair was put back in a ponytail and her lipstick made her mouth shimmer under the station lights.

"Well well, don't you look pretty tonight," she said. "Did you raid my apartment?"

"You're my inspiration." Saki blushed.

The club was a nondescript building sandwiched between a karaoke hall and a twenty-four-hour curry joint. There was no sign above the door; most gay and lesbian clubs didn't overtly advertise themselves. And if not for the people coming and going, the place would have seemed abandoned. Erin took Saki by the hand and led her in. The bar area occupied one half of the room, and a black light dance floor on the other. When they got there around 10:30 the place was crowded. Saki had never seen so many foreign women in one spot before.

There was a cover charge of five hundred yen. After the bouncer took their money, he asked them to pick a bracelet: blue, pink, or yellow. Saki had no idea what the colors meant. She looked at Erin, who smiled mischievously.

"That's why the club is called Position. You pick them so people know your preferences. Blue is aggressive. Pink is passive. Yellow is in between."

"Do I have to put it on?" Saki asked.

"No, but it might be fun. Plus, people will ask you why you're not wearing one. So you might as well. And you're with me—so most people will think you're taken anyway." Erin winked, then added, "I'll fend off the stubborn ones."

Saki sighed and grabbed a pink bracelet. Erin took a yellow. They found two empty stools at the edge of the bar and ordered whiskeys. Saki spun the bracelet around and around her finger like a hula hoop. Its glow looked slightly medicinal, as if she was supposed to cut it open and drink the contents to calm her stomach. Finally she slipped it on her wrist.

She looked over at the dance floor, dotted mostly with pinks and blues. Bass from a disco song thumped in the air. Erin shook her hips along to the rhythm and made a funny face. Saki found it difficult to smile back. Of course she was happy to be with her friend. But she wished, sitting amid the noise and the lights and the general carelessness of the people in the club, that they had gone someplace quieter, just the two of them. She did not belong there.

Two gentlemen in their forties, one British, based on his accent, and one Japanese took the seats next to them.

“Evening, ladies,” the British one said. “Having a nice night?”

“Oh, the best,” Erin replied. She looked over at Saki, who was staring at the floor.

“Are you two a couple?” the man asked. Saki’s eyes grew wide and Erin laughed deeply.

“We’re not together. I’m straight, and this one is married.” Erin leaned back so the man could get a better look.

“Ahh, I see. Eigo hanaseru ka?” he said to Saki.

“Oh, she’s more fluent in English than me,” Erin said.

Saki blushed and shook her head. Introducing herself had always made her nervous, regardless of the language. It always took her too long to respond. Moments were lost as she searched for the right thing to say. Oftentimes she took so long to compliment people that they thought she was joking.

“I’ve had a lot of lessons,” she told the man, “but I’m still not very good. I like English, though, it’s a more”—she scoured for the word—“*assertive* language.” More like a blue wristband.

“Your accent is spot-on,” the man said. “You must have a good teacher. I should hire them for my partner here.”

“Why, thank you.” Erin smiled. “But I’m closed for business. It’s my last weekend here.”

“No shit? Why would you ever want to leave?”

“Oh, more places to go, people to meet. And I really, really need good pizza. Like stat. I don’t know how I lasted this long. This country knows just the right way to burn cheese.”

“Aww, come on now. You’re gonna miss it, aren’t you.”

“Well, I’ll miss her.” She turned to Saki, who tried to hide her face behind the bar menu. “You okay girl? Do you want to dance a little bit?” Saki nodded and rose from her chair. Anything to not talk. She wondered what the men were thinking of her.

“Let’s go then,” Erin said, shaking her shoulders. She invited the gentlemen to join them, but they waved their hands and told them to have fun.

They made their way through the crowd and found an open space near the deejay. A Beyoncé song had just emerged from the deck and everyone got a second wind. Erin swayed back and forth, moving her legs to the beat. Her wrist glowed yellow from the bracelet, like a

highlighter, or a secret code. The creases in her white shirt shifted with each movement, giving a fluid, almost undulating shape to her chest. At certain points Saki could see her bra strap.

“Hey, you okay?” Erin said.

Saki hadn't been moving to the music, but instead standing as if something had petrified her. She began to bounce around a little bit. When the song changed Erin grabbed Saki's hands and they did a salsa-type motion, back and forth with each arm. They danced cheek to cheek and started to sweat. They spun around the floor, bumping hips with other clubgoers. People formed a circle around them and they did a tango across the radius. They cheered. Saki wanted to die. She wanted to dissolve into the wall and slide all the way to the exit. But she had lost control of her body; a specter had taken control. She was a schoolgirl again, sneaking glances of her classmates, their freckles, the white tights they wore in winter, their eyelids painted like porcelain dolls. She was the girl in the front row, the one who everyone said was the most beautiful and would marry someone charming and lush and respectable. She was the one who couldn't possibly mess things up.

After they escaped the mob for a quiet corner, she thought the embarrassment a fair trade-off for seeing her friend so happy. Even after the fourth or fifth drink, after they were too tired to dance any longer, Saki was still acutely aware of everything: the way Erin touched her shoulder, the kiss they shared during the blackout, the fingertips on her neck, the train ride home where they leaned on each other for support. The time on the clock when Erin departed. The text Erin sent, dotted with hearts and smiley faces.

When the night was over, Saki crept quietly back into the apartment. Kenji was asleep. She timed her steps with his snores, locked the bathroom door, and wept. The next evening, she fucked Kenji with an abandon that shocked him, and he climaxed in her for the first time. Haruka was born. By the time she said her first words the family was readying the move to California, an ocean apart and fourteen hours behind Tokyo, and Saki imagined the bracelets, the club, the kiss as a far-off life, a place so foreign she wasn't sure she'd ever been there at all.

The food and cake are prepared, the presents wrapped and ready for tomorrow's party. Around seven p.m. Saki and Kenji read Haruka a story, and she falls asleep on the second page. Both parents are thankful for a seamless bedtime; they relish these extra few minutes of quiet. They step gently to the kitchen. Saki sets the stove and warms up leftover herring and noodle soup, a recipe she learned from her grandmother in northern Japan, and they have their fill.

Kenji flips through the business section of the *L.A. Times*. It's true that he has grown more portly since they've been in the U.S. His face is rounder, his cheeks more puffy. Saki likes him this way. He looks different from their college years, like someone new. She knows he has become self-conscious about his weight, but there isn't much they can do. People had warned them that weight gain was inevitable. The American government subsidizes corn and wheat rather than fruits and vegetables. Corn syrup is king. Saki has never seen so many sugary products in a grocery store. The cereals alone! But she enjoys the variety, the sheer explosion of choice. And she still tries to mix in some Japanese foods into their diet, like she has done

tonight.

As the two of them eat, Saki's phone buzzes. She glances at it quickly and smiles.

"They're in the hotel resting up." She counts on her fingers the time difference from New York. "They must be exhausted." By this time tomorrow they'll have come and gone.

"Did they have a nice flight?" Kenji asks.

"She said Posey loved looking at the clouds. She sent a photo." Saki shows the picture to Kenji, then looks outside. The sun is just beginning to set. "We should take Haruka on a plane ride sometime."

"My parents keep begging us to visit. Should we take a trip to Yokohama for New Years? If we buy tickets now it won't be too expensive."

"But we're on this side of the world already," Saki says. "How about Chicago? Or New Orleans? Maybe we can ask Erin where we should go. I want to explore as much of this country as we can."

"Haruka needs to see Japan. We don't want it to be totally foreign for her when we return."

They need to take advantage of living here. They said they would explore the world. They said they would see all the things their parents never cared for, all the countries, all the food, all the people. They said they wouldn't live in a box.

"Haruka is old enough for weekend trips," Saki says. "When we go back it'll be even harder to take time off. She'll be in school all year with activities, clubs, homework, exams. We should take advantage of the freedom she has."

"Do you really think she'll care about a couple souvenirs? She won't remember the sightseeing."

"But we will," Saki says. "We'll tell her what happened. She needs to experience different places. It's good for her brain, the novelty of new surroundings. There's more out there than Los Angeles or Tokyo."

They eat the soup slowly and calmly, taking small bites, as they were taught growing up. Saki's grandfather used to say that one should never overeat; it's not good for body health. And, he would often add, forcing yourself to stop helps build mental strength. It builds character. He lived to ninety. Perhaps he was on to something. But how sad, to live life without ever feeling full.

"I learned a new slang at work this week," Kenji says. "From one of the guys." He finishes chewing and clears his throat as if about to deliver an important speech. "Wack."

Saki makes a hammering-type motion with her arm.

"No," Kenji says. "It means crazy. You're crazy."

"Wack. Wack," Saki repeats. "Hmm."

"You're wack," Kenji says, pointing at her.

They both laugh. She fills a kettle for tea. The stove is still warm and heats the water quickly. In ceramic cups they add the matcha powder and take turns with the whisk, stirring until the tea is bubbly and a thin layer of foam forms on the top. It's bright green, like a newly budded leaf. They sip and smell and finally know that this day is at an end.

“I’ll sleep now,” Kenji says. Saki follows him upstairs. She’s tired too. She looks forward to tomorrow. Sundays are always the most relaxed for the family, and this one will be even more special. Their guests will arrive at two.

After checking on Haruka they go to the bedroom and wash up in the side-by-side bathroom sinks. Kenji splashes water on his face and massages his temples. Saki gets behind him and rubs his back. He stands there with his eyes closed and reaches to hold her hand. They remain still for a minute or two, doing nothing else but breathing together. Kenji’s body has always had a pleasant warmth, and yet he never seemed to mind the perpetual chill of Saki’s hands. He says it feels good.

They kneel down on their respective sides of the bed, not to pray, but to spend a last moment of stillness, to help bring their activity to a close. This is one of many rituals they have adopted as adults, as parents. Perhaps if they keep practicing them, they will emerge as different people, better people for their daughter.

Kenji gets into bed and leans against the headboard, looking at something on his phone. He laughs. He likes to read online comic books, check the results of the Japanese baseball league, and watch clips of his favorite shows. He values this little touch of home. Saki sits on her side of the bed and brushes her shoulder-length hair. It used to go all the way down her back, but ever since Haruka learned how to yank things, she decided to keep it cut short. After a few minutes she puts the brush away and lies down, her head sinking into the pillow. She looks at some of Haruka’s drawings hanging on the wall. Her favorite is the three of them standing next to a palm tree. When Haruka drew it, Saki felt a keen sense of everything surrounding them. Palm trees, not cherry blossoms or bonsai, had become the dominant image of nature in her daughter’s mind. They really were on the other side of the world.

Kenji slides up behind her and kisses the back of her neck. He buries his face into the crevice between her shoulder blades. She turns slowly onto her side and faces him, but she does not open her eyes. She finds his lips with hers. His hands reach around and gently pull her close. He waits for her to acknowledge that she wants to continue. Saki does; she knows that it’s been a while.

He gets on top of her. For a brief moment Saki opens her eyes. As she looks at him, she remembers taking her birth control earlier. They don’t want any surprises; Haruka is enough for them. Kenji’s cheeks are smooth and pale. In some ways he still looks as he did during their teen years, when they were both ignorant about what it really meant to be a part of another person. His breaths grow rapid; he makes grunting noises that seem fake, for bravado, Saki thinks. She closes her eyes and scrolls through images in her head, trying to find one to make the experience more pleasant. But then, as most often happens, she finds Erin for a split second, and that is long enough to send her into momentary bliss.

At 2:00 p.m., right on schedule, the car pulls up to the driveway. Saki waits at the porch. The first person out of the car is Danny, Erin’s husband. He is fair-skinned, dark-haired, and his body is stocky but sagging, as if he played college football but hasn’t been to the gym since

graduation. He opens the back door and unstraps Posey from the car seat. Saki can see her little feet wiggling behind Danny's body.

On the other side of the car Erin steps out. She waves to Saki and walks across the cobblestone path. She has not changed much over the years. Still the same eager, confident person inside and outside the classroom. They hug for a long while, to reclaim lost time.

"Oh, girl, I can't believe we waited until now," Erin says when they finally let go. "How are you?"

Before Saki can reply Danny comes up with Posey in his arms. He and his daughter look so much alike, down to the doe-eyes and the curly hair. She's trying to stand on his palm, but can't quite stabilize herself.

"This is Posey," Erin says.

Saki smiles, says hello and waves. Posey buries her face in Danny's chest. They all laugh a little bit.

"She's a shy one," Danny says. "Definitely doesn't take after us."

"That's okay. Sometimes it's good to be different." Saki shakes Posey's hand. "It's so nice to meet you both."

Kenji and Haruka are in the living room, which is decorated with pink and white streamers and a big pastel birthday sign taped across the TV cabinet. Haruka is standing on the couch, her head barely visible behind a stack of books.

"Kenji!" Erin says. She goes right up to him and gives him a hug. "Oh. My. Goodness. You must be Haruka. I've heard so much about you."

Haruka smiles. She looks down for a few moments and then raises her head and arms. Saki goes over to pick her up. Erin bends over, looking at her eye to eye.

"How cute are you?" Erin extends her hand and Haruka gives her a high five. "Saki, she's wonderful. I can't believe how big she is."

"Yes, she's in the 89th percentile for weight."

"Oh...I mean, I didn't mean it like that. I just felt like it hasn't been that long since she was born. I think she's perfect."

"Did you all have lunch?" Kenji asks Danny. "We have some extra sandwiches in the fridge."

"Oh no, we're great," Danny says. "Aren't we." He tickles Posey on the cheek, then puts her down and walks over to Kenji. "It's nice to meet you, man. I've heard so much from Erin."

"I hope not too much." Kenji smiles. He and Saki have heard that expression many times. It's never as funny when Kenji says it.

"Well," Saki says, "even if you all aren't hungry, we've got to have cake." She goes to the kitchen and opens a big rectangular box. The icing is white with a cascade of pink sprinkles. A big number three candle is in the center. She places the cake in front of Haruka's high chair, then strikes a match. Everyone sings Happy Birthday, nobody in tune. They all look at Haruka.

"Make a wish," Saki says. She wonders what her daughter might hope for.

The children are sprawled on the living room carpet, taking turns with Haruka's gifts. Erin and Danny are on the couch and Saki and Kenji are in the chairs facing them.

"Erin told me about how you two met," Saki says to Danny. "But I want to hear your version." A wide grin spreads across his face.

"We both went to a singles meeting on the Lower East Side. It was in this big room with three TV screens and karaoke, a bunch of tambourines and beer pitchers everywhere. I didn't know anyone there but I love to sing me some Billy Joel. I'm sitting in the corner talking to some random people, I forget who, and the songs are boring me out of my mind, you know, Britney Spears, N'Sync and that poppy crap. So I'm not paying attention. Really, I'm mostly just drinking. Then, out of nowhere, I hear the first few keys of 'Piano Man,' and I look up."

Danny turns to Erin, who blushes as she tries to contain her laughter. Saki wishes she could take a picture of Erin right now, her face full and vibrant, like all the days in the classroom, like the night in the club. Danny continues.

"And oh man, this one came up to the front of the room, head down while the intro's playing, all cool and confident. She sang the first verse and her voice was sublime. I couldn't even tell you what she was wearing; she just performed the hell out of that song. My favorite song. And I couldn't have plowed my way to the front when she finished."

"All the guys must have rushed up to you," Kenji says to Erin. Saki gives him an annoyed look. She wants Danny to finish the story.

"I don't know," Erin says. "He just came up, so I started talking to him. Nobody else even tried to say hello." She looks at Danny lovingly. Danny kisses her on the cheek.

"I told her that she did the best rendition I'd ever heard. We had our first date a few days later, and she wore this shimmery silver shirt and these skinny jeans, and there wasn't an awkward silence the whole night."

"How romantic," Saki says. "Though I'm not surprised. She's got an amazing voice. We did a lot of karaoke together."

"'Total Eclipse of the Heart'," Erin says. She sings a few notes. The children tire of the toys and begin tapping the empty boxes like bongo drums. Erin smiles at them. "The sugar's in full effect. I feel it too."

"Coffee?" Saki says. "Come on, I'll give you a tour of the house while it's fixing."

"While it's brewing," Kenji says.

She smiles and motions for Erin to follow her. "Can you two watch the kids?" Before either of the men can answer she turns and goes into the kitchen.

There isn't much to the house, but Saki shows Erin the two bedrooms, the small garden out front and the garage that has been converted into an office since there's no need to cover cars in Southern California.

"Sometimes I do yoga in here," Saki says. "One of our neighbors gave me a DVD." She sits on the carpeted floor and stretches her legs.

"You should take a class," Erin says as she scans the framed photographs on the wall. "Doing yoga with other people is great. It makes you more accountable. And it's fun. Hey, did

you do that?" She points to a painting of Haruka sitting on a picnic blanket with blooming cherry blossoms all around her.

"We had it ordered," Saki says. "A guy in Venice does them."

"You went to Italy?"

"No, the beach, by the airport." They both laugh.

"She is so special, really," Erin says.

"Thanks." Saki has to think for a second who Erin is referring to. Not her, but Haruka.

"I hope she and Posey can become friends. Maybe they can be pen pals when they learn how to write. It's going to come quick. Preschool's coming up, then kindergarten. Oh my."

"I know," Saki says. "They're growing up so fast."

"Guess our clubgoing days are over."

"No more bracelets." Saki forces herself to smile.

"That was the greatest night."

"I thought so too."

"You got the pink one, right?" Erin asks. "I remember wondering which one you would choose."

"What do you mean?"

"You've got a little blue in you." She slaps Saki on the shoulder, as if they're old buddies kicking back a couple beers.

The comment dumbfounds Saki, and when she tries to think of what to say, all that springs to mind is: "That's wack."

"No it's not. Most straight Japanese girls would never set foot in a club like that. You're brave. You're—"

"What's your life like, in New York?" Saki asks.

"It's strange, actually. Nothing like Tokyo, that's for sure. Everyone is aggressive, speaking of blue bracelets. You have to be. Otherwise you wind up giving things away too easily: parking spots, appointment times, your self-respect."

"No, I mean your life with Danny and Posey."

"Oh, well, it's great, you know. It's just great."

"Tell me more," Saki says. She wants to know everything. She wants to see her friend happy, to observe a level of comfort that she can study, that she can someday have herself. They do, eventually, reminisce about other things. Lantern festivals and late nights, day trips to Hiratsuka beach, all the classes they had together. Erin recalls some of the funnier people in the English school. A man who always came to class drunk and slurring. An elderly woman obsessed with Tom Hanks movies. Two college girls whose pronunciation of *peanuts* sounded a lot like the male anatomy.

"I remember them," Saki says. "What happened to them?"

"They went to Vancouver for an English intensive, and one of them met a Canadian guy. We're all Facebook friends."

"They were great," Saki says. She hasn't kept up with anyone from the school. Outside of

classes, she only ever spent time with Erin.

“Sometimes I wish I could just go back there and keep teaching,” Erin says, “keep hanging out with you and everyone.” She squeezes Saki’s hand. “But we all have to move on eventually, I guess. I couldn’t build a life out of repetition.” She says how excited she is to drive up the Pacific Coast Highway with her family and visit all the cute towns along the way. Their last destination will be San Francisco, and then they’ll fly back to New York. She makes Saki promise to come visit her soon. There will be so much for them to see and do. Holidays in New York are magical. She talks about a relatively new Ibiza-style dance club on the West Side Highway.

“It’s so much better than anything in Tokyo,” Erin says. “Just pure fun. There’s no need for bracelets. Nobody cares. It’s just everyone moving and bouncing around together, totally free.”

Saki wonders what such a place would be like. She can’t wrap her head around it. She would not fit in. But she thinks of the club, and for a split second, thinks that maybe she can. She could leave Kenji.

“You know what,” Erin says. “I never want to go back there, Position.”

“Why?”

“Because it’ll never be as much fun again.”

Saki considers what Erin has said. It’s true. Things wouldn’t be the same. Saki does the math; it’s 6:00 a.m. in Japan right now. The club is surely a pitiful and empty place with the bar empty, the stools upside down, spilled drinks and forgotten articles of clothing are strewn about the floor, the vague hum of street sweepers permeating from outside. There is no light because there are no windows. The place is nothing more than a gray box.

“That was the best time of my life,” Saki says. She stops before saying anything more. She leans her head against Erin’s shoulder. She smells the strands of blonde hair and wonders if she’ll remember the scent when Erin is gone, if she has soaked up enough of it to recall at will, to recall on the days she needs an extra boost.

Even just one good memory could get her through the rest of her life. Saki can picture it all: the meeting in the train station, the walk over, the bracelet, the music. Then the car pulling up, the birthday cake, the carpeted floor, the hand, the hair. Saki tries to file them into the back of her mind, filling the spaces that haven’t been claimed by Haruka and Kenji. Then she stands up. She pulls Erin to her feet. They are silent for a moment. Erin starts to dance. She nudges Saki with her hip. Saki tries to move along with her, but she can’t hear whatever Erin hears. She can’t sense the rhythm. She’s already gone.

“Plenty more good times to come,” Erin says, smiling, dimples wide on both cheeks. Saki isn’t able to smile back. All she can think is I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. She has forgotten all about the coffee. Surely it has gone cold by now.

The men have been alone with the kids for too long. Haruka is asleep in Kenji’s lap. Posey is on the floor in front of her father, coloring a picture of a princess and her footman. A baseball game is playing on TV, the sound muted. Both Kenji and Danny are paying close attention. Something happens on screen and the men quietly but forcefully throw their fists in the air.

The motion wakes Haruka. Kenji should not have let her nap. It'll be bedtime in a few hours and she'll have an impossible time settling down for sleep. Saki sits next to them for a few moments, then goes to wrap up the leftover cake for Erin to take with them, in case they need a snack later. Erin shakes her head, but Saki insists.

"You might be stuck in traffic, you never know," she says.

"It's not that. At the rate Danny and I are going, we'll devour it before we get back to the hotel."

"Take it. Here." Saki drops it into the canvas bag with Posey's things. Erin sighs. She puts the bag around her shoulder and walks up to Danny.

"Ready to go, love?"

"For sure. The game's a blowout." He gets up, stretches, and scoops Posey up into his arms. He extends a hand to Kenji.

"Always nice to meet a fellow baseball fan. Go Dodgers."

"Enjoy your trip," Kenji says.

The motor is running, the adults and child strapped safely inside the car. Through the open window, Erin gives one last pitch for a holiday trip to New York. "Rockettes," she says, humming the Can-Can and doing leg kicks with her fingers.

Saki smiles, then looks at Haruka.

"Say bye-bye. Our friends are leaving, look." Saki points at the car and waves. Haruka turns around but makes no grand gesture. She simply looks at Erin and sucks on her thumb.

"I'll email you some pictures from the road," Erin says. "Love you girl." She blows Saki a kiss as the car speeds away.

In the bedroom, lights on, Kenji is preparing for an early morning meeting. A large manila folder of papers and reports sits on the nightstand. He's wearing glasses, and they make him look distinguished and thoughtful. Saki reaches deep into her top drawer and pulls out a cheap plastic bracelet. The color has faded; the pink is gone. She holds it in her palm then slips it around her wrist.

"What's that?" Kenji says as he reaches for the folder.

"Nothing. A trinket I got with Haruka at the lake."

Saki removes the bracelet and quietly places it in the wastebasket under the desk. She climbs into bed and hopes that sleep will come quickly. Tomorrow she will wake at five-thirty to say goodbye to her husband, and then fix eggs and rice for herself and warm cereal for Haruka when she wakes. The Glendale preschool will call, but Saki decides not to worry about the result. Instead, as she slides under the covers, she tries to plot out their day. Go to the park; read some books; take a drive to the beach and look out at the water. Sitting on the sand she might point and say to Haruka: "Look, Tokyo is that way. We'll be there soon." Or, they could just stay home. After running through her list of options, she isn't sure at all which one would be best. She'll decide in the morning.