

All week Shimpei got home late from his job. He works after hours every day—Japanese culture makes this the norm, I'm told. No wonder Japanese women drop their jobs once they're married with children, I thought. Typically, Kyoko is asleep when her dad gets home; he sees his daughter only on weekends.

While I visited, however, young Kyoko was on vacation, the school year having ended the previous week. Noriko showed me some of her daughter's schoolwork, and I marveled at the patience with which small hands must draw the intricate characters as they learn to write the language. School children also practice Chinese symbols, Noriko explained, adding that Japanese is a distant variant of Chinese.

On afternoon we visited Kyoko's school, leaving our shoes at the entrance and donning slippers, which the students also do. A vice principal showed us around. As Noriko translated for me, he took particular pride in the school's English classroom. Astonishingly, the building also holds a museum that displays field tools, cook wares, and photos of days gone by.

Noriko informed me that the students do the school's janitorial maintenance, for which parents provide the supplies. She wasn't any too pleased with the practice; children go to school to learn, she said, but admitted that the kids enjoy the regularly-scheduled, supervised tasks, even vying to clean a toilet.

On another day a young woman, who spoke only a tiny bit of English but used to run half-marathons, visited with her girls, who are friends with Kyoko. When I happened to mention that I drive a Toyota Prius, the young woman beamed, explaining in excited gestures that Toyota had sponsored her team in a U.S. competition, for which they trained at altitude in Colorado. Inasmuch as our mime-conversation on marathon running happened two weeks before the Boston violence, it proceeded without the horror and sorrow the tragedy was to bring upon us.

That evening Noriko's sister arrived for Kyoko's weekly piano lesson. Afterwards, she treated us to a splendid rendition of Chopin, which, Noriko noted with pride, the sister had recently played at some important political function. Her sister is married. Unable to have her children herself, she dotes on her niece.

Kyoko is the only grandchild of Noriko's parents. "They spoil her with gifts and money," Noriko said. She also pointed out ads that encourage grandparents to finance their grandchildren's college education; the system offers special tax breaks in return.

Of Noriko's parents I was to meet only her mother; her father was overseeing a remodeling project in their home. The mother explained that they had lived in the home for forty years, having bought it when open spaces and stands of forest still existed in Matsudo. The house urgently needed an upgraded bathroom, she said.

We had lunch at a noodle shop, and I remembered Shimpei's admonition that the Japanese

delight in slurping their noodles. Unlike in the States, noisy eating is not taboo in Asia; indeed, it's considered a sign that you are enjoying your meal.

One day Noriko and Kyoko took me on a one-hour train ride to a charming seaside town. In the afternoon, we joined a bus tour that took us to the city's famous shrines and temples. I learned something of how Buddhism first arrived in Japan at a time when the Country of Eight Islands practiced Shinto, a prehistoric tradition rooted in veneration of nature and natural phenomena. Japan's Buddhism, like its poetry, often contains, and expresses, Shinto ideas.

In the morning we strolled on the beach, then sat down on an oilcloth Noriko had thought to take along. We talked while Kyoko built sand sculptures in the black sand. "It's black because it contains iron," Noriko explained.

"I used to go sailing out here," she said, wistfully gesturing toward the ocean. One time her company sponsored her team in a famous race on the U.S. east coast. They came in second in their division, which meant their employer picked up the entire tab.

"You must miss the sailing," I said.

"I miss it a lot," she answered.

Shimpei occasionally joins a sports-fishing vessel that leaves from here, I'd learned earlier. In Mitchell, he was in a bass-fishing club that practiced catch-and-release, which I thought a cruel joke on the fish, water-boarding in reverse. Now, however, he fishes for the family table and freezer, though "The end doesn't begin to justify the expense," he admitted.

April 5, Kyoko's first day as fifth grader, coincided with my leave-taking. She was sad that I would be gone when she returned—we'd played Monopoly one rainy afternoon and she much enjoyed acting the banker, not to mention, she was way ahead when we quit.

I hugged her good-bye as she grabbed her cell phone, heaved her backpack, and trundled off.