Mr. Haneda was Mr. Omochi’s supervisor, who was Mr. Saito’s supervisor, who was Miss Mori’s supervisor, who was my superior. And I…was superior to nobody.

Let me rephrase that. Mr. Haneda gave orders to Mr. Omochi who gave orders to Mr. Saito, and so on and so forth, forming a sort of…corporate food chain. At Yumimoto, I was the small fish in the big pond.

January 8, 1990: Elevator spits me out on the top floor of the Yumimoto office building. The window at the end of the hall coaxed me toward it, as if it were a shiny lure and I the unassuming fish. Far, far below it lay the city – so far I wondered if I had ever really set foot in it.

It didn’t occur to me that I should introduce myself to the receptionist. In fact, every thought in my head was overpowered by my fascination with the window and the void beyond it. Suddenly, a husky voice behind me uttered my name. I turned around. A man of about fifty, small and scraggly, was glaring at me.

“Is there a reason you didn’t tell the receptionist you were here?” he asked me. I found nothing to say and said nothing. I tilted my head and shrugged my shoulders, realizing that in the space of ten minutes, without uttering a single word, I had managed to make a bad impression on my first day at Yumimoto.

The man told me his name was Mr. Saito. He led me through several large rooms, in which he introduced me to hoards of people, the names of whom I promptly forgot halfway through their being pronounced.
Next, he shuffled me into the office of his supervisor, Mr. Omochi, who was enormous and scary, clear evidence he was the vice-president. Then he showed me a second door behind which sat, he told me nonchalantly, the president, Mr. Haneda. Needless to say, I wasn’t going to hold my breath for our introduction.

Lastly, he showed me to a gigantic room which, from the looks of things, forty-plus workers called home. He pointed out my desk, which was directly across from that of Miss Mori, who he informed me was in a meeting and would join me after lunch.

He briefly introduced me to the other workers, and afterwards asked me if I enjoyed challenges. “Yes,” I said, an affirmative answer clearly my only option. It was the first word I uttered at Yumimoto. I knew by then I could no longer get away with a simple head-tilt.

Mr. Saito’s proposed ‘challenge’ was to accept a certain Adam Johnson’s invitation to play golf with him the following Sunday. I was to write a letter in English expressing said sentiments and to send it to the aforementioned concerned party.

“Who’s Adam Johnson?” I was dumb enough to ask. Mr. Saito sighed loudly, and didn’t answer. Was it absurd not to know who Mr. Johnson was? Had I been too forthright in asking? I never found out, and still don’t know who Adam Johnson is. Writing a letter seemed easy enough. I sat down and wrote a cordial response:

‘Mister Saito would be delighted to play golf next Sunday with Mr. Johnson and sends him his best regards’.

I brought it to Mr. Saito.

He read my work, mumbled his disapproval and tore it up. “Start over”.
I thought that maybe I had been too familiar or colloquial with Adam Johnson and I wrote a second draft which was decidedly more matter-of-fact:

‘Mr. Saito acknowledges Mr. Johnson’s proposal. He intends to acquiesce to the wishes of the former by engaging in a game of golf.’

Mr. Saito read my work, mumbled his disapproval, and tore it up. “Start over”.

I wanted to ask what the problem was, but it was obvious he didn’t appreciate questions, as evidenced by his reaction to my inquiry regarding the identity of the letter’s recipient. It was up to me to find the right tone to use with the mysterious Adam Johnson.

I spent the next few hours writing and re-writing my missives to the unknown golfer. Mr. Saito routinely shredded each draft I showed him, without any explanation other than his refrain of mumbled disapproval. With each new draft came a different phrasing.

I came to the conclusion that by “start over” Mr. Saito merely suggested I take advantage of my artistic license. Reminded of Sir Absolute and ‘his physiognomy so grammatical’, I began performing syntactic experiments. What if ‘Adam Johnson’ were the verb, ‘next Sunday’ the subject, ‘play golf’ the object, and ‘Mr. Saito’ the adverb? ‘Next Sunday would gladly come Adamjohnson a playgolf Mr.Saitoly.’ Take that, Aristotle!

I was just starting to amuse myself when Mr. Saito interrupted me. He tore up my latest draft without even reading it, and told me Miss Mori had arrived.

“You will work with her this afternoon. In the meantime, go get me a cup of coffee.”
It was already two o’clock. I had been so absorbed by my epistolary experiments that I had forgotten to take a break.

I put the cup on Mr. Saito’s desk and turned around. A woman, tall and taught as a bow, walked towards me.

Every time I think of Fubuki, I see that Japanese bow again, taller than any man. That’s why I chose to christen the company “Yumimoto” – i.e. “of or relating to the bow”.

And every time I see a bow I think of Fubuki, taller than any man.

“Miss Mori?”

“You may call me Fubuki.”

Her mouth was moving, but I heard nothing. Miss Mori was at least 5’10”, which very few Japanese men achieved. She was svelte and positively radiant, despite her obligatory Japanese posture. But what most fascinated me was the beauty of her presence.

As she talked to me I listened to her voice, soft and erudite. Smiling, she was showing me some files and explaining their contents to me. I didn’t even realize that I had stopped listening to her. Next, she suggested I read the documents she had lain on my desk; the desk opposite hers. She sat down and began to work. I leafed obediently through the paperwork she had given me. It dealt with rulings and listings.

The sight of her face – a mere six feet from mine – was captivating. Her eyelids lowered on a page of figures, I studied her unhindered. She had the most perfect nose in the world, the Japanese nose, inimitable, with unmistakable, delicate nostrils. This is not to say that this describes every Japanese nose, only that such a nose is categorically
of Japanese origin. I’m sure that if Cleopatra had had this nose, the geography of the world would have been given a serious blow.

It would have been silly had I given any thought about not having used a single one of the qualifications for which Yumimoto hired me. After all, this is what I had wanted – to work in a Japanese firm. I was there.

No day could have been more perfect than the one I had had. The days that followed confirmed this. I still didn’t understand what my role at the firm was, and I couldn’t have cared less. The harder I tried to show Mr. Saito I was capable, the more condescending he became and I realized that I could indeed care less than before. But, my co-worker hypnotized me and her friendship would more than make up for the ten hours a day spent at Yumimoto.

At once white and olive, her complexion was undoubtedly that of which Tamasaki thought so highly. With the exception of her stunning height, Fubuki was Yamato Nadeshiko – the personification of the ideal Japanese woman. Her face resembled a carnation – the symbol of the nobility of ages past. Laid atop her impressive silhouette, it was destined to rule the world.

Yumimoto was one of the biggest companies in the world. Mr. Haneda was the head of its Import-Export division, which bought and sold all that existed across the entire planet. Yumimoto’s Import-Export catalogue was enormous and carried everything but a kitchen sink. From Finnish cheese to Singaporean sodium with Canadian optic fiber, the French tire, and Togolese hemp in between, it was unabridged.

The money changing hands at Yumimoto was unfathomable. After so many zeroes were added, the figures left the realm of numbers and entered into that of
abstract art. I wondered whether there was, in the dregs of the company, a being who rejoiced with earning 100,000,000 yen, or one who would bemoan the loss of an equivalent sum. Yumimoto’s employees, like the zeroes, had value only when they followed the other figures. All, save me, who didn’t even have the value of a zero. The days flowed by and still I did nothing. This did not particularly worry me. I got the impression they had forgotten me, which was not half-bad. Sitting at my desk, I read and re-read the documents that Fubuki had left at my disposal. They were largely uninteresting, with the exception of one that listed the employees of Yumimoto: Last name, first name, date and place of birth, significant other and/or dependants with, for each, a date of birth.

In and of itself, this information was nothing spectacular; but when you’re hungry, even a crouton looks good. In the state of idleness and starvation my head was in, the list was to me as juicy as a trashy magazine. And frankly, it was the only document I understood.

To look like I was hard at work, I decided to learn the list by heart. There were a hundred names. The majority were married and fathers and mothers of families, which made my task that much more difficult.

I set to work studying. I leaned over closer and closer to the list and then sat up to put my photographic memory to the test. When I sat up straight my gaze always landed directly across from me – on Fubuki’s face.

Mr. Saito didn’t ask me to write any more letters to Adam Johnson, let alone anyone else. Moreover, he didn’t ask me to do anything, except to bring him coffee.
It is only natural that I began my work in a Japanese company performing *ochakumi* – the honorable task of pouring tea. I took this role all the more seriously as it was the only one assigned to me. I soon had the routine down pat – for Mr. Saito – at eight-thirty on the dot – a black coffee. Café au lait, two sugars, for Mr. Unaji at ten. For Mr. Mizuno, a glass of Coke every hour. For Mr. Okada, at five o’clock, an English tea with a hint of milk. For Fubuki, green tea at nine, black coffee at noon, green tea again at three, and a final black coffee at seven. Each time she thanked me courteously.

This humble task marked the beginning of my ruin at the company. One morning, Mr. Saito informed me the vice-president was hosting an important delegation from a neighboring firm – “coffee for twenty people.” I walked into Mr. Omochi’s office with my platter and my performance was the epitome of perfection. I served each cup with the utmost humility, incanting the most sophisticated language, lowering my eyes and bowing.

If there was an *ochakumi* Order of Merit, it would have been awarded to me.

Several hours later, the delegation broke up. The booming voice of the enormous Mr. Omochi yelled “SAITO-SAN!”

I watched as Mr. Saito leapt to his feet, turned deathly white, and ran to the vice-president’s lair. The screeches of His Obeseness made the wall vibrate. I couldn’t make out exactly what he was saying, but it didn’t sound good.

Mr. Saito returned incensed. I felt a pang of sympathy for him, considering he weighed a third of his aggressor. Then he called for me angrily. I followed him to an empty office. He addressed me with such anger that he began to stutter.
“You deeply offended the delegation this morning! You served the coffee with the most current Japanese expressions, as if you spoke it perfectly!

“But I don’t speak it all that badly, Saito-san.”

“Silence! What right have you to defend yourself? Mr. Omochi is furious. You could have cut the tension with a knife in the meeting this morning; how are our partners supposed to feel at ease around a white woman who understands their language? From this moment on, you no longer speak Japanese.”

I looked at him wide-eyed.

“Excuse me?”

“You no longer understand Japanese. Is that clear?”

“But it was because I know your language that Yumimoto hired me!”

“I don’t care. I order you to forget that you understand Japanese.”

“That’s impossible! No one could obey an order like that.”

“There is always a way to obey; this is what occidental minds need to understand.”

“The Japanese brain is probably capable of forcing itself to forget a language. The occidental brain doesn’t have that capacity.”

This elaborate argument seemed acceptable to Mr. Saito.

“Try anyway. At least pretend. I’ve been given orders concerning you. Are we understood?”

His tone was dry and brittle. When I got back to my desk, I must have been making a face; Fubuki looked at me with soft pity. Paralyzed, I sat there for several moments wondering what I should do next.
To give a letter of resignation would have been the most logical thing. Yet I could not bring myself to carry out this plan. In the western world, resigning would have been nothing out of the ordinary; however, in the eyes of the Japanese giving my letter now would have meant losing face. I had barely been at Yumimoto for a month, and had signed a one-year contract. To leave after such a short time would have disgraced me, in my eyes as well as theirs – all the more reason to stick it out.

It wasn’t easy getting a job at Yumimoto. I studied language of business used in Tokyo, I passed the tests, and I had no illusions of becoming the head honcho of international trade. My first memories as a child are of this idyllic country, and I’ve worshipped it ever since. I would stay on.

So, I had to find a way to obey Mr. Saito’s order. I racked my brain in search of an archeological layer conducive to un-learning – were there any dungeons in my neuronal fortress? Alas, my brain had its strengths and weaknesses, watchtowers and fissures, holes and ditches, but nothing in which to bury a language that I heard constantly.

Failing to forget it, could I at least hide in it? If language was a forest, could I hide behind the French beeches, the English limes, the Latin oaks and the Greek olive trees, if the immense Japanese conifers were so well established?

Mori, Fubuki’s last name, means ‘forest’ – is this why now I was looking at her helplessly? I noticed that she had been looking at me inquisitively. She stood up and motioned for me to follow. In the kitchen, I collapsed on a chair.

“What did he say to you?” she asked me.
My voice was trembling and I was on the verge of crying. I couldn’t hold back the insults any longer.

“I hate Mr. Saito. He’s a bastard and an idiot.”

Fubuki gave a little smile.

“No. You're wrong.”

“You, obviously you're nice, you don’t see the harm. Well, for giving me such an order, doesn’t that make him...”

“Calm down. The order didn’t come from him. He acted on the instructions of Mr. Omochi. He had no choice.”

“So then it’s Mr. Omochi who...”

“He is someone very special,” she interrupted, “What do you want? He’s the vice-president. There’s nothing we can do.”

“I could talk to the president, Mr. Haneda. What’s he like?”

“Mr. Haneda is a remarkable man. He is very intelligent and very good; however, it is entirely out of the question that you go complain to him.”

She was right, and I knew it. It would have been impossible to get the attention of the small fish, let alone the whale. I had the right to speak only to my supervisor, who happened to be Miss Mori.

“You are my only recourse, Fubuki. I know you cannot do much for me. But thank you. Your mere kindness makes me feel so much better.”

She smiled. I asked her what the Chinese characters in her name meant. She showed me her business card, and I looked at the kanji.
“Snowstorm!” I exclaimed, “Fubuki means ‘snowstorm’! What an incredible name!”

“I was born during a snowstorm. My parents saw it as a sign.”

I thought about the list of employees I had memorized: ‘Fubuki Mori, born January 18, 1961 in Nara’. She was a winter baby. I imagined this sudden snowstorm in the beautiful city of Nara, blanketing its countless bells – was it not natural that this lovely young woman was born the day the beauty of the sky fell upon the beauty of the earth?

She told me about her childhood in Kansai. I told her about mine, which had begun in the same province not far from Nara, in the village of Shukugawa near Mount Kabuto – the mere mention of the mythological scene brought tears to my eyes,

“How exciting that we are both children of Kansai! It is there that the heart of the old Japan beats.”

It was there that my heart beat since the day – at the age of five – I left the Japanese mountains for the Chinese desert. This first exile had such an impact on me that I felt I would do anything to be accepted in the country I had for so long believed to be mine.

When we returned to desks that faced each other, I had found no solution to my problem. I knew less than ever what was and what would be my job chez Yumimoto. But I was relieved. I was the colleague of Fubuki Mori.

I had to be careful not to appear as if I understand what was said about me. From then on, I served the tea and coffee without a trace of politeness. Under this new
law, I couldn’t respond to the executives’ compliments and niceties. They were surprised that the gracious geisha had transformed into a carp; her mouth agape, yet unable to speak.

Unfortunately, ochakumi didn’t waste as much time as I had hoped it would. So I decided, without asking anyone’s opinion, to deliver the mail. I pushed an enormous metal cart from one side of the office to the other, giving everyone their mail. I was good at this. Firstly, it made use of my linguistic competence, since most of the addresses were in ideograms; when Mr. Saito was out of earshot, I didn’t hide the fact I knew Japanese. Then I realized that memorizing the employee list had not been for naught. Not only could I identify employees of even the lowest of stations but I could, if it were ever necessary, wish them – or their wives or progeny – a happy birthday.

I would say, with a bow and a smile, “here’s your mail, Mr. Shiranai. Wish little Yoshiro a happy birthday for me. Three already…”

Every time I got the same disbelieving stare. My work took all the more time as I had to deliver mail to both sprawling floors of the company. The metal cart made me look productive, and I felt entitled to free use of the elevator. I liked that I could rely on the bay window always being there when my work took me to the top floor. I played a game I liked to call ‘launching myself into the view.’ The city was so far below me. Before I crashed to the ground, I leisurely took in my surroundings.

I had found my calling. I felt so alive during this simple, useful, human game so conducive to contemplation. I would have loved nothing more than doing that for the rest of my life.
Mr. Saito called me into his office. I deserved to be lectured; I had committed the serious crime of taking initiative. I had given myself responsibilities without asking permission from my superiors. What’s more, the company’s real postman – who didn’t work until the afternoon – was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, believing he was about to be fired.

“Taking the job of someone else is a bad action,” Mr. Saito rightly told me. I was sorry to see such a promising career so quickly taken away; again the question of my role in the company arose.

I had an idea that seemed, in my naivety, brilliant. Wandering through the company, I had noticed that several offices had calendars that were almost never updated; whether it be that the little red, moveable frame was on the wrong day, or a page had not yet been turned to that of the current month. This time, I didn’t forget to ask permission. I asked Mr. Saito might I put the calendars on the correct date. He said yes without hesitation; I considered myself to have a job.

Every morning, I passed through every office and I moved the little red frame to the appropriate date. I had a job; I was a calendar updater.

Little by little, the members of Yumimoto realized what I was up to; it quickly became a running joke.

“Everything alright? This exhausting exercise doesn’t tire you, does it?”

“It’s terrible. I take vitamins.”
I loved my work. It had the disadvantage of occupying too little time, but it allowed me to take the elevator and play at ‘launch myself into the view.’ Plus, it entertained my audience.

In this regard, I reached the summit when the month of February turned to the month of March. Moving the red frame was not enough that day; I had to turn – or literally tear off – February.

The employees of various offices welcomed me as one would an athlete. I would assassinate the Februaries with great samurai gestures, miming a merciless fight against the giant photo of Mount Fuji, covered in snow, which was that month’s depiction on the Yumimoto calendar. Then I would leave the battlefield, exhausted, with the simple pride of a victorious warrior, surrounded by the spectators delighted cries of “hurrah!” and “long live the emperor!”

The rumor of my glory reached the ears of Mr. Saito. I expected to receive a lecture for being such a clown. I had even prepared my defense.

“You gave me permission to update the calendars,” I began before having endured his wrath. He answered without anger in his usual tone of discontent.

“Yes. You may continue. Just don’t make such a spectacle. You’re distracting the employees.”

I was shocked at how lightly he had reprimanded me.

“Photocopy this for me,” he continued.

He handed me a huge stack of 8½ x 11 pages. There were at least a million.

I slid them into the tray, and the copier responded by performing its task with exemplary speed and courtesy. I brought Mr. Saito the original and the copies.
“Your photocopies are slightly off-center, he said, pointing to one sheet. Start over.”

I returned to the copier, thinking that I had misplaced the pages in the tray. I took care to do everything right; the result was flawless. I brought my work to Mr. Saito.

“They’re off-center in the other direction.”

“That’s not true!”

“How rude to speak to your superior that way!”

“I beg your pardon. It’s just that I stood there the entire time to make sure that the copies came out perfectly.”

“They didn’t. Look.”

He showed me a sheet that, to me, was impeccable.

“Where’s the problem?”

“There. See? It’s not absolutely parallel with the border.”

“You think so?”

“Would I have said it if I didn’t?” He chucked the stack of papers in the garbage.

“Are you putting the papers in the tray?”

“Of course.”
“That explains everything. You can’t use the tray; it’s not precise enough.”

“Mr. Saito, putting each sheet in the copier separately would take hours.”

“What’s the problem? You clearly didn’t have enough work to do.”

Now I understood how I was to be punished for the calendar scandal. I stood in front of the photocopier as if it were a gallery wall. Each time, I had to raise the top, place the page carefully, press the button and then examine the results. It was three o’clock when I arrived at the ergastulum. At seven, I still wasn’t done. People passed by from time to time. If they had more than ten copies to make, I humbly asked them to please use the machine at the other end of the hall.

I caught a glimpse of what I was copying, and almost burst out laughing when I saw that it was a list of the bylaws of the golf club of which Mr. Saito was a member.

A second later, I wanted to cry as much as anything else, at the thought of the innocent trees my superior was wasting for my punishment. I imagined the forests of my childhood, maples, evergreens, and ginkgos, cut down just to punish someone as insignificant as me. I thought of Fubuki’s last name meaning ‘forest’.

Mr. Tenshi, who headed up the dairy products division, had the same rank as Mr. Saito, who was director of the general compatibility division. I was stunned to see him at the copier; an important executive and he hadn’t delegated anyone to make his copies?
“It’s eight o’clock,” he responded to my silent question, “I’m the only person from my office still at work. Tell me, why don’t you use the tray?”

I explained to him with a humble smile that it had to do with the express instructions of Mr. Saito.

“I see,” he said with a voice full of understanding.

He seemed to stop for a moment then asked me, “You’re Belgian, are you not?”

“Yes.”

“How convenient. I have a very interesting project related to your country. Would you agree to come to work on it for me?”

I looked at him like one looks at the Messiah. He explained to me that a Belgian cooperative had developed a new process for removing the fatty layers from butter.

“I believe in reduced-fat butter,” he said, “it’s the future.”

Right away I made up an opinion saying, “I always think about it!”

“Drop by my office tomorrow.”

I finished my copies in a trance. I was being given the chance of a lifetime. I left the stack of 8 ½ x 11 papers on Mr. Saito’s desk and left triumphantly.

The next day, when I got to Yumimoto, Fubuki said to me timidly, “Mr. Saito would like to do the photocopies again. He found they were off-centered.”
I broke out laughing and explained to my colleague the little game our boss seemed to be playing with me.

“I’m sure he wasn’t looking at my new photocopies. I did them one by one, calibrated to the closest sixteenth of an inch. I don’t know how many hours it took me – all that for the bylaws of his golf club!”

“He’s torturing you!” Fubuki sympathized with a soft indignance.

“Don’t worry,” I assured her, “it amuses me.”

I returned to the photocopier that I had begun to know so well and stacked the papers into the tray. I was sure that Mr. Saito had rendered his verdict without even looking at my work. I smiled a little smile and thought of Fubuki. Thank heaven she’s here!

\(^{1} \text{Archaic. A workhouse for slaves.}\)