



GOODBYE MADAME BUTTERFLY

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Sex, Marriage and the Modern Japanese Woman

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THE MANNEQUIN

Ai Kusanagi, Office Administrator, 40

AS SOON AS AI closes the door, Masayuki picks her up and tosses her on the double bed, which occupies more than half the space of this hotel room. It's a decent hotel by Tokyo standards, which means it's pretty snug.

Masayuki is on top of Ai in seconds. With a smile, he tries to undress her. Ai quickly rolls on top of him, rips his jacket off, loosens his tie and unbuttons his shirt. He smiles and says, "Wow, wait a minute" — a half-hearted effort to slow their passion play.

Masayuki is enjoying every second of this, but Ai has other motives for stripping him down. One thing Ai really hates is leaving lipstick marks on Masayuki's clean, well-ironed shirts, which can be easily stained when Masayuki is in a hurry. The last thing she wants to do is to spend half an hour in the bathroom of the hotel, scrubbing a red mark off the collar of his shirt. That would really spoil the night.

There's no point explaining this to Masayuki. It's better just to rip his clothes off. Men are capable of being careless and silly when they are in love. And Ai wants to reward his love while minimizing his carelessness.

Masayuki is already in bed, naked. He is getting better at pleasing her. Ai never told him this, but Masayuki wasn't very smooth in bed when they started having sex. It was clear he hadn't experimented much — he needed training, and Ai trained him well. Masayuki proved a curious student willing to test the possibilities between them.

Masayuki is an industrious sort of guy, Ai says, and a thorough, passionate researcher. He has to have answers to his questions, and that has helped him learn what pleases Ai. Over time, he has found all of her pleasure zones, and this has made Ai deeply grateful.

Once they are done making love, Ai and Masayuki cuddle in each other's arms. This is their most peaceful moment. She forgets about everything that is bothering her, and her body melts into oblivion.

In the midst of a long, peaceful silence, Masayuki turns to her and asks, "Shall we go soon?"

Ai's heart goes numb and a sadness emerges from deep inside of her, spreading across her body. Masayuki is up and putting his pants on, but he seems to sense her sadness. He turns to her and kisses her softly. Behind him, Tokyo Tower stands illuminated against the night sky. Ai knows that Masayuki specifically re-

quested this tenth-floor room because she once commented on how much she liked the view. This hotel is so much better than a tawdry love hotel with the trace of cigarette smoke reminding them of the couple who came before. And the location is quite convenient. Ai can catch an express train home from here, while Masayuki can also board his train, going in the opposite direction. They each have one-hour commutes ahead of them.

After leaving the hotel, they flag down a cab, and Masayuki directs the driver to the train station. Ai gets out first. There have been times in the past when Masayuki has paid her cab fare home from here. The sadness would overwhelm her on those nights, and she'd linger with him too long, missing the last train home. He'd always give her more than enough money to cover the cab fare. He's a very considerate man.

Ai taught Masayuki to use the sentence, "Shall we go soon?" In the first few years of their affair, he used to say, "We must go now." This would always get on her nerves, although she didn't say anything about it at first. Recently, however, she told him how it jars her and asked him to use the softer alternative. It helps keep some of the sadness at bay.

She told him: "I know we should go, but you don't have to say 'we must' to remind me. Could you please rephrase it with something like 'shall we?' I don't enjoy hearing the word 'now,' either, because I feel rushed. Perhaps, 'shall we go soon' would be better?"

Her intonation glides upward as she offers her alternative — Shall we go soon? — making the question mark emphatic. Masayuki took her suggestion right away and has been using the softer sentence ever since.

It didn't take long for Masayuki to express his affection toward Ai. "I love you, Ai. You are so beautiful," he told her shortly after they started going out.

Ai did not immediately return the compliment. In fact she held back. If she told him how she felt, he might feel burdened by it, she thought. But Masayuki has gradually convinced her that even though they are committing adultery, they should be honest with each other — verbally and spiritually. She could tell he was pleased when she started telling him, “I love you too.”

Masayuki’s dishonesty toward his wife was not something they would choose to talk about on their dates, but once in a while, the topic would emerge. Masayuki would say that while he loves Ai dearly, he also loves his wife. Ai recalls that he once told her: “We are a married couple. I have an obligation to support my wife. She’s been supporting me throughout our life together, and she plays an important role — a role I appreciate. At some point in the past, she transformed from being my lover to my family member, and my love for her is similar to my love for my sister or my mother. I am fully aware that I am being dishonest and selfish by wanting you as you are, and I feel awkward about this. But I love you so much, and that’s not a lie.”

He explained to Ai that while he loves her, he will never consider divorce.

Having been married once herself, Ai understands his determination to protect his family. She says that she appreciates him for being so honest and considerate. He tells Ai how he loves his wife, although not in the same way that he loves Ai, and Ai accepts his feelings and loves him nonetheless. It is not easy — the truth hurts — but Ai says she would have dumped him a long time ago if he were the type to feed her cheap lines about how he doesn’t love his wife and how Ai was the one and only.

Ai is sure Masayuki knows she’s too smart to believe in cheap lines. Masayuki respects her and appreciates her strength, or at least she believes this to be so. That’s why he can tell her the truth, Ai says. Masayuki is not a very verbal person, but he often

apologizes for putting her in this difficult position. He reminds her that he deeply appreciates her love. Sometimes even his gestures — the way he moves around her — remind her of how much he cares.

Ai says Masayuki is always sincere with her. They are drawn together by mutual respect, not just animal magnetism, she says, although their physical attraction for each other is an integral part of their relationship.

By the same token, Ai can tell that Masayuki is passionately in love with her. Three years have passed since they started going out, but Masayuki seems head over heels for her still. He doesn't get mad if she complains about something — although she tries not to for her own peace of mind. Ai likes to think of herself as a giving person, someone who can soak up the bad to help those she loves. The more difficult, the better. Perhaps she is mildly masochistic, at least in a psychological sense.

At times she finds herself wishing his wife didn't exist. She doesn't want to share Masayuki. But then that thought quickly evaporates, in part because Ai can't picture her rival. She's never seen a photo of Masayuki's wife — all she knows is that she is a year younger than his wife and not quite as tall.

When Ai imagines Masayuki's wife, she's a mannequin without a face. She can't picture the style of clothes this woman likes — her image is devoid of personality. She's a mannequin, and Ai can't muster up enough anger to hate a mannequin. Ai is curious about Masayuki's wife, but her sensible side tells her it's better not to know.

Ai and Masayuki love each other, but Ai also knows that their relationship will evaporate into the ether as soon as she gets to know his wife. Ai knows her actions are immoral, but her guilt stays in check as long as she is cheating on a mannequin. If Ai saw Masayuki and his wife walking down the street, side by

side ... well, that's the moment when Ai would say goodbye. This is what is called *kejime*: knowing where to draw the line.



AI AND MASAYUKI worked at the same company when they started going out. It was innocent at first — nothing physical happened for the first two years. Ai was in charge of office administration in the trading department, which Masayuki ran. Ai was there before him, so when he arrived, she taught him the day-to-day details, including the good local lunch spots.

Masayuki is tall, good-looking and successful. But Ai had no sexual attraction toward him at first — none whatsoever. He was married, so she didn't even consider dating him. Masayuki, however, was mistaking Ai's friendly nature as a sign of her interest, as he confessed to her later.

Soon after Masayuki joined the company, they started having lunch together. It was just lunch for Ai, but Masayuki later confessed that he was already finding her attractive. They often talked about what was going on in the department. Other times, Ai talked about her sons, and their involvement in soccer. Although Masayuki was a soccer fan, he was sometimes perplexed about her lengthy descriptions of her sons' soccer games. At the same time, Masayuki started to feel deep admiration toward Ai for working full time while being such a loving mother. Ai took care of every detail of the department, gave her full attention to everybody on his floor and yet showed no indication of unhappiness or frustration about raising her sons alone. In fact, it took Masayuki a long time to realize that Ai was a single mother.

His admiration toward her continued to grow. Ai sat close to his desk, and Masayuki soon found himself glancing at her more than necessary. He just couldn't help but look at her. When he got a glance at her legs underneath the desk, he would blush.

He told himself to get a grip — I'm her boss. Plus, I'm married. Forget about her.

Ai was friendly to everybody, but Masayuki felt special in her eyes. One day during lunch, Ai was talking about her sons as usual, when she turned to him, looked him in the eye and said, "I think you will become a good father." Masayuki blushed. Was she talking about being a father to her sons?

Ai found all this out later, of course. At the time, she swears she had no idea how much she had agitated Masayuki's imagination. They were friends, but nothing more. Masayuki was a considerate boss. He was well liked too. He was sharp, unafraid of making quick decisions, and she couldn't imagine how his emotions roiled for her just below the surface.

This went on for two years — Masayuki lusting after Ai in his heart, but remaining boyish and platonic on the surface. Meanwhile, Masayuki's responsibilities at work grew. He was flying all over the world and was interviewing candidates for vacant positions in the department well after six PM when he was in town. He had other things on his mind as well: his mother, who lived on the southern island of Kyushu, was not well. He would fly to Kyushu almost every weekend to be with her. Ai watched and worried about him.

One night after work, Masayuki was invited to a casual party with his colleagues. He was exhausted, but he decided to make an appearance all the same. He noticed Ai as soon as he walked into the bar, and told her later that a feeling of relief swept over him.

During the party, Masayuki tried to grab Ai's attention, but his efforts were clumsy. Frustrated, he kept drinking until he was pretty drunk. As everyone headed home, Ai went to the restroom. When she came out, he was waiting for her. Shall we have another beer? he asked.

Masayuki later told her he was scared she would turn him

down. He is a calculating guy, and this was a risky move. She could have easily rebuffed him and told him to go home and get some sleep. Even worse, if she interpreted his request the wrong way, he could be brought up on sexual harassment charges. After all, he was a married man and her boss. But he just couldn't stop himself — his longing for her had grown into an obsession on this night, and he had to act. Stress and alcohol fueled his courage, but that wasn't the whole reason he waited for her. This had been building in him for two years — he could no longer deny his attraction to her.

To Masayuki's surprise, Ai paused for a moment and replied, "Sure." Ai says she wanted to support him — he was exhausted. She felt something akin to maternal love kick in, something like deep compassion.

They hailed a cab, and once inside the back seat, Masayuki squeezed her hand and embraced her. To Ai, it felt more like a boy clinging to his mother than a man trying to have an affair. She immediately sensed that she was not in the hands of a playboy.

In the cab, he kept shaking his head in disbelief and muttering about what a bad situation they were in. "This isn't good," he kept saying. He was obviously drunk.

"It's OK. Please don't worry," Ai said. "Just calm down, please."

The cab dropped them off at a beer hall. Masayuki held her close. Then his cellphone rang. He answered. Ai could tell it was his wife. He quickly ended the conversation, started shaking his head again, but he continued to hold her close.

As they left the beer hall, Masayuki invited her to a hotel. Ai knew this was coming, and she knew her answer would be yes. In the hotel, Masayuki was too drunk to perform. He lay on top of Ai, staring at her, muttering over and over (at least one hundred times, Ai recalls), "You are so beautiful."



THE NEXT DAY, Masayuki invited Ai to lunch. After a few awkward minutes, Masayuki began, “About yesterday ...”

Ai interrupted before he could continue. “Let me speak first. I don’t mind at all if you say, ‘Let’s pretend it never happened.’ I understand your position and where you’re coming from.” She felt sincere as she said this.

Masayuki listened attentively, reflected for a moment and finally replied: “I’m not here to tell you ‘let’s forget about it.’ I might have been drunk, but my feelings for you are genuine. I know I am selfish to say this, but I would like to see you again. I don’t know when I can see you next time, maybe two months or three months from now, but I don’t want this to end because I like you a lot.”

Ai wasn’t sure about her own feelings at that point. She liked Masayuki also — that was for sure — and she didn’t want to break his heart, so she agreed to have a date with him. That date occurred two weeks later; they had another date two weeks after that. They continued to have lunch together and began emailing back and forth almost every day.

Ai and Masayuki continued to see each other, careful not to let their co-workers in on their secret. They made time once or twice a month, which was all they could manage with their busy schedules and their need to be discreet. But slowly, as their happiness increased when they were together, they started longing to see each other more.

At the same time, Masayuki remained tight-lipped about his wife. Masayuki had an unwritten code he lived by where he wouldn’t bring his wife to social functions unless it was absolutely necessary. When both Ai and Masayuki were invited to a wedding or party or they had to attend a funeral, one or the

other would come up with an excuse not to attend. Both were worried that Masayuki's wife would insist on attending, too.

When one of Masayuki's subordinates got married, Ai made an excuse. Back at work after the wedding, co-workers passed around photographs. Ai was curious, but she didn't look at them for fear of finding Masayuki's wife in one of them.

Only once did Masayuki offer anything about his wife. "She wants a child, but she hasn't gotten pregnant." There was a pause.

"As a mother, I know how important that is for her," Ai finally responded.

"That's why I respect you so much," Masayuki told her. "You are such a caring mother, and you work full time to support your kids."

He paused. Then he began telling Ai about his wife. Masayuki said that a few years after they were married, his wife stopped having sex with him. This was long before he met Ai, he assured her. He didn't offer any details or explain the sexual falling out, but Ai believed him. She had heard talk of sexless marriages, of men who say they love their wives like sisters or mothers but can no longer see them as objects of sexual desire.

Masayuki said he didn't dwell on the lack of sex until she said she wanted a baby. They began trying, but without success. They turned to fertility treatments as a last hope.

Masayuki also told Ai that his wife had had an abortion in the past, when she was still in college. "We were young. I didn't want to quit school to support a family then, so I asked her to have an abortion and she agreed. I married her soon after I graduated."

He didn't say that her infertility was linked to the abortion. He simply said that if he was going to give her a child, they needed to act now.

Masayuki's wife was in her late thirties, desperate for a baby.

Ai thought of her own son Ken. He was already a teenager, a good kid, but going through a difficult stage. He was a star athlete, and had been good at sports since a very young age. He played soccer on his junior high team and was looked up to by others because he was so good. In fact, he was good enough to get a full-ride at a prestigious high school next spring. He would get free room and board. Ai would miss Ken. She was very proud of him.

Ken was not a studious boy, however. And lately, there had been problems. Because Ai worked late, Ken and his little brother, Sei, ate dinner at her parents' condo, on the fifth floor of their building. Ai had bought a condo in her parents' building after her divorce. Ai's mother was a happy homemaker, and she readily offered to make dinner for the kids every weeknight but Thursday, when she had an ikebana class.

When Ai would get home from work, the boys were usually still up, so they had time to chat. When she worked very late, they were supposed to go to bed by eleven.

One night, Ai returned home to find a pair of high heels in her entranceway. She felt her heart start to pound. She checked Sei's bedroom first. He was sound asleep. Then she took a deep breath and knocked on Ken's door. "Can you please come out of your room?"

"What do you want?"

"Please come out for a second."

Ken swung open his door. He looked down at her — Ai was not short, but Ken was about six feet, at least a head taller than his mother. He wore pajama bottoms but no top.

"I know she is here again. Please tell her to go home now. You have school tomorrow."

It was almost eleven-thirty.

"Shut up! What is it your business?"

"It is my business. You agreed last time that you wouldn't

bring her here when Sei is around because it's a bad influence on him."

"Sei was already asleep," Ken protested.

"Fine. I believe you. But it's still my responsibility to supervise you because you're still a minor. It's getting late; please tell her to go home."

Ai closed the living room door behind her to give them some privacy. She heard Ken kicking the wall, cursing. Then she heard the girl gather up her stuff and leave. Good, Ai thought, at least she left of her own will.

The girl was two years older than Ken. Ai sensed that she was taking the initiative on these late-night rendezvous. Ai was shocked to learn that her fourteen-year-old boy was already involved in a physical relationship, but she told him as calmly as she could about condoms and the precautions he needed to take. After that talk, she found used condoms in his wastebasket. Her heart would pound as she pulled the sperm-filled condoms out of her son's trash.

Ai felt it was her responsibility to let the mother of the girl know about all this. The family lived upstairs, and Ai knew her from PTA meetings. Ai was expecting to be criticized for being too lenient with her son, but the mother said, "I'm glad it's your son. Ken-chan is a good boy. She could have ended up with a worthless kid."

Ai insisted that the children still needed supervision. The mother replied, "I have no control over her anymore, but thanks for letting me know. I will tell her to be careful."



MASAYUKI WAS silent. Ai felt weird knowing that the man she was having an affair with was trying to make his wife pregnant, while at home, Ai was doing everything she could to keep Ken

from getting someone pregnant. Would Ai become a grandmother before Masayuki became a father?

Ai let out a sigh. “As I said, I’m a mother. I know how important that is to your wife. When the stork arrives, I will leave you. Children must come first, whether they’re yours or mine.”

Masayuki was quiet for a while. “I’m sorry Ai. I will not stop you from finding a husband. Obviously, I have no right to stop you. You deserve a man who can take good care of you, although I will be desperately jealous when that does happen.”

Ai was jealous herself from time to time. Despite Masayuki’s reluctance to talk much about his marriage, Ai gradually began to piece together a picture of them in her mind. She was in charge of office administration, so she was privy to sick-leave requests, vacations and other personal requests. She knew, for example, that Masayuki took a few days off to look into possibly purchasing a second house somewhere on the Izu Peninsula. She had been aware of him owning a condo in Tokyo, where he lived with his wife, but the second house was a mystery to her. Neither one mentioned it.

On another day, Masayuki’s wife called to tell him she had cut herself in the kitchen. The wound was deep, and she was bleeding heavily, so she had to go to the hospital to get stitched up. Masayuki asked for permission to leave the office early to be by her side.

That was the night they were supposed to see each other. She figured their date was cancelled, but then later in the day, he returned to the office. Ai asked casually if his wife was OK. He gave her a pale smile and said, “Thank you.” Ai insisted that he go home that night.



TWO YEARS after Ai and Masayuki began seeing each other, he decided to take a job with another company. His colleagues were planning his farewell party when one of the bosses approached Ai and casually asked her to buy something as a farewell gift. "Perhaps something that both he and his wife can use," the boss said, "you know, because they're so close."

Ai was sure the boss had no idea about her and Masayuki. But still, his comments stung. Masayuki never asked Ai out on the weekends; it was clear he devoted his weekends to his wife. Perhaps they traveled to that second home that Masayuki had recently purchased. Ai wondered what they did there. Did they play tennis or golf together? Or stay inside and read? Perhaps they were making love in the hope of having a child.

Ai asked Masayuki what he wanted for a farewell gift. He gave her a boyish smile and said, "An iPod Nano." They secretly went shopping for it later. Ai told the boss that she had asked Masayuki what he wanted so as not to waste the money his colleagues had raised. "That was a good idea," said the boss.



AI KNEW she couldn't blame Masayuki for everything. She had her share of guilt too.

Ai had slept with Jim, an African-American computer engineer in charge of the information technology on Masayuki's floor. Jim was the classic playboy: He had a much younger Japanese wife; he was funny, talkative and good-looking with a killer body thanks to his steady weight-lifting routine. Jim became friends with Ai over time, and even though she knew he was a playboy, he turned out to be a very good listener. Their time together was pleasant.

On their first date, after a few drinks, Jim embraced her openly on the street and kissed her. On their third date, she

agreed to go to a hotel with him. They slept together several times, but Ai eventually lost interest and stopped seeing him. Ai never really was clear why she fell for Jim for that brief spell. Was she curious? Or just lonely?

After Masayuki had left the company, Ai decided to tell him about Jim. Jim liked to boast of his exploits with women, and though she knew Jim would keep their affair secret at the office, now that Masayuki was working at a different company, Ai worried that Jim would tell him. She imagined the worst: Jim telling Masayuki buddy to buddy about making her scream in bed.

Masayuki and Jim were acquaintances, not good friends, but the two men still had drinks once in awhile. What if Jim got drunk and decided to tell Masayuki about his exploits at the office?

Ai had been jealous since Masayuki left because one of the women in the office gave him a kiss on the cheek and told him how much she was going to miss him. This woman was married and very serious at work. Ai couldn't believe it. Masayuki laughed it off, but she could tell he enjoyed it.

Ai was also frustrated that Masayuki had planned to spend a month overseas with his wife. Her reasons for confessing to an affair with Jim were clouded by this growing jealousy, but still, she expected him to forgive her.

He did not.

When she told him while they were together in a hotel room, he lay speechless on the bed for a long time, staring at the ceiling. Finally, he spoke.

"Why him? That's too much. How could you have done this to me..." he murmured. Masayuki remained still for a long time after that, then finally said, "Maybe we should go home."

Masayuki had issues about the size of his penis. He's a tall, slim, handsome man, and Ai felt his size was just right — not

too big, not too small, but Masayuki confessed that he didn't have much confidence in that department. Ai said she never dreamt that Jim being black could become such a big issue. For an average Japanese man, being compared to a well-built black guy was like being condemned to death, she concluded.

Ai apologized. She began to cry. "I'm very sorry. I really am. I was jealous about your holiday with your wife. I won't see you for a month."

Masayuki was quiet.

Ai could tell she was losing him for good. She kept talking: "Size is not an issue. Jim was so big that it hurt. You make me come all the time, but he didn't. Size isn't what women are after. We need love, not a big dick."

Masayuki did not look convinced. Ai told him she didn't want to leave him, but it was up to him. Perhaps he could think about it over his holiday. He was married, after all, and she was just lonely.

Masayuki finally said he had no right to keep her from seeing whomever she wanted. It was selfish of him to expect her not to.

A few days later, Masayuki and his wife left on their vacation. Two weeks into the trip, Ai received flowers and a letter from Masayuki. It was Valentine's Day. Masayuki must have arranged this before he left. "I'm sorry to leave you so lonely," he wrote. "I really wish we were together. I will try to email you as much as possible."



NOW THAT MASAYUKI is working for a different company, Ai sees him less. His office is a few subway stops from hers, so lunch is out of the question. Ai sometimes tells him she misses seeing him in the office. His reply is that these different experiences will strengthen their relationship, make them closer.

Her friends sometimes ask her why she continues to see a married man. Ai, you look younger than your age, they say, and you could easily get remarried if you try. Why waste your time with someone else's husband?

Most of Ai's friends get upset when they talk about the affair. They see Masayuki as irresponsible, sneaky even. When these conversations occur, Ai feels as if they are talking about someone she's never met.

Ai is used to this kind of thing. People would badmouth her ex-husband, Joji, too, especially when their marriage fell apart ten years ago. They called him a loser.

Ai married Joji when she was twenty and just out of vocational school. Joji was thirty-five and had already been divorced once. He had two teenage kids who lived with his ex. Everyone told her she was too young, but Joji was her first love. He was a good husband, too. Ai became pregnant soon after they got married. She was a very young mother, and sometimes Ken's crying would confound her. She had no idea how to make him stop. Some nights, she would be on the verge of tears as her baby son wailed by her side. Joji would come home, pick Ken up, change his diaper and rock him in his arms. Ken would slowly nod off, and Joji would lay him in the crib. She could always count on him. And he treated her like a princess.

When Ai found out about the other woman, it was very hard for her to accept the fact that she was no longer his little princess. She was replaced by a younger woman, who was destined to walk in Ai's footsteps — marrying, bearing children, raising them, being Joji's little princess for a time.

Ai knew that Joji was a womanizer. But she also knew that their marriage was deteriorating before the twenty-year-old came on the scene. During the last five years of their ten-year marriage, Joji lost several jobs and began to rely on Ai's income.

Joji was a carefree man. When Ai complained about their financial situation, he brushed her worries aside, saying that love would help them through it. “Why worry?” he would say with a smile. Ai was in her late twenties at that time, a skilled office administrator, but the burden of working and raising a family was crushing her.

Late at night, when she was washing the dishes, Joji would say, “Why don’t you come here and relax a bit? I’ll do the dishes tomorrow.” He would do them, too, and he would help with the laundry. But that wasn’t what Ai wanted. She wanted him to get a job, not stay at home and do housework. This was eventually the thing that undid their marriage. She would confront him about his unemployment, and he would turn cold and say, “But I washed more dishes and changed more diapers.” Ai knew her marriage was all but over.

Ai believes that is why he strayed from her. Ai rarely sees him anymore, but he keeps in touch with the children. It can be frustrating, Ai admits, that she has had to raise their children without even a hint of child support from him, but she doesn’t hate Joji. When other women complain about their exes, calling them assholes or losers, Ai feels very distant from them. It’s not in her to hate him.

The same goes for Masayuki. Ai can’t imagine herself cursing at him or throwing things at him. Yes, she wishes they could be together. But she is not dependent on him, either psychologically or financially. She also can’t imagine Masayuki moving in with her and her two sons. For Ai, her children come first. They anchor her. Falling in love is one thing and being a good mother is quite another. If her children want pork cutlet for dinner, then they get pork cutlet. She doesn’t have to factor in her husband’s wishes.

When Ai feels especially weak, she wishes Masayuki could

support her financially. But she wouldn't be happy as a full-time homemaker. She's not in love with her work, but she is proficient and confident. Joji's line — "I washed more dishes than you" — would be easier to take than a husband who says, "Look at how much money I've spent on you."



WHEN AI got divorced, she felt a lot of pressure to remarry. But that idea and those pressures have evaporated. Ai still avoids the mall on the weekends — she doesn't like seeing all those happy couples shopping — but her children and her relationship with Masayuki keep her busy. Masayuki has been good about giving her advice on how boys need to be treated. But she also knows that she is nearing the end of her child-rearing days. What's next, she wonders. She has no idea.

Ai started taking flamenco lessons recently. She wanted to find something independent from her children. Her friends tell her she is already very independent, but Ai is not convinced. She has given so much energy and time to raising her two boys that her life is intertwined with theirs. But soon, she must stand on her own.

Flamenco is her first step toward independence, Ai says. And today is Wednesday, the day of her weekly lesson. After work, she will say goodbye to her colleagues, grab her bag with her flamenco shoes and fling open the door. ✨