

TOMOKA, 21, WOMENSWEAR
SALES ASSISTANT

When Saya sends a text to tell me she has a new boyfriend, I instantly write back: *What's he like?* But all she replies is: *He's a doctor.* Nothing about looks or personality, or what kind of doctor he is – I mean, he could be any kind, couldn't he? It's true I know what she means by *doctor*. Jobs can be a clue to somebody's character. A short-cut way of describing them. But only in a limited, stereotyped sort of way.

That starts me thinking: what do people think about me based on my job? What does it say about my personality or qualities?

I've known Saya since high school. She's a friend from back home who's kept in touch ever since I left to come to college in Tokyo. She sends me texts every now and then. Bit by bit, the story of how she met her new boyfriend at a party appears on

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the pale sky-blue screen of my smartphone. Then she writes:
How r u doing?

With my finger poised above the screen, I tap *b* and *brilliant* pops up in the auto-predict, so I just select it and tap send. What I really meant to say, though, was *bored*.

I work at Eden. That sounds like paradise, doesn't it, but it's actually a chain of general merchandise stores, not as upmarket as a department store. Every morning I put on my tight black skirt and matching waistcoat to go and spend the day serving customers and working behind the till. I started this job six months ago after graduating from junior college. The time has flown by. I started in spring and now it's nearly winter. In November, when the heating was turned on in the store, my feet started getting sweaty inside in my stockings, making my toes squish together and bunch up in my tight pumps. Most women who have to wear a uniform at work probably feel the same. The thing that makes the Eden uniform special, though, are the blouses. They're a kind of peachy-orange colour called coral pink, which was selected by a famous colour coordinator. We learned that during training. Coral pink supposedly projects a bright, caring image, and is flattering to women of all ages. I saw the coordinator's point when I started work in my assigned section of Womenswear.

'Miss Fujiki, I've had my break. You can go next.'

That's Mrs Numauchi, one of the part-time workers.

When she returns to the counter, her lips look shiny and moist. Obviously retouched. Mrs Numauchi is an old hand

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who's been working here for the last twelve years. Last month when it was her birthday she said that she'd reached a number with two digits the same. She can't be forty-four or sixty-six, so I guess she's fifty-five. Around my mother's age.

Like I said, I really get it about the coral pink – it looks good on Mrs Numauchi, too. That colour coordinator must've been aware that most of the staff here are part-time older women.

'Miss Fujiki, you've been cutting it close coming back from your break recently. You should be more punctual.'

'I'm sorry.'

Mrs Numauchi is really bossy. She's so picky about trivial things, and sometimes acts like she's in charge, but she's usually right, so I put up with it.

'Okay, I'm going,' I say and bow to take my leave. While walking across the shop floor, I stop to straighten some clothes that I happen to notice are out of place.

'Ah, excuse me,' a customer calls.

I turn round to see a lady in a frumpy old down jacket with a frayed backpack. Even though she must be as old as Mrs Numauchi, she doesn't have any make-up on.

'Which one do you like best?' she asks, and holds up two knitted tops in turn: a mulberry V-neck followed by a light-brown turtleneck.

In Womenswear we don't make a point of approaching customers as the staff at in-store boutiques do. I'm really glad of that, but if a customer asks for help, then of course I have to assist.

'Let me see . . .' I say, looking at each one to compare them, secretly wishing I'd ignored the untidy shelf and gone straight

out on my break. I point to the mulberry top. 'This one's nice, don't you think? Very elegant.'

'Do you think so? It's not too flamboyant for me?'

'No, not at all. But if you're looking for something less conspicuous, the brown one would be nice and warm around the neck.'

'But I think it might be a bit drab.'

And so on and so on. The pointless exchange drags on. I ask if she'd like to try the tops on but, no, that's too much trouble. I have to stop myself from sighing. Touching the mulberry top I say to her, 'This is a lovely colour and it really suits you, I think.'

'You do?' The customer stares at it for a long time then looks up.

At last . . . is she going to make up her mind?

'Well, I suppose I'll take it,' she says, and goes off to pay for it at the till.

Hooray! I fold the brown turtleneck and return it to the shelf. There go fifteen minutes of my precious break down the drain.

As I'm heading through the staff exit at the rear, one of the girls from a brand boutique on the same floor brushes past me. She's wearing a gorgeous moss-green and white country-style check skirt that flares out and swings as she walks. She has her hair up in a cute bun to complete the look. I wonder if her clothes are from the boutique. Uniforms aren't compulsory for boutique staff; they can wear their own clothes. Having girls like that around makes even Eden feel a bit more of a cool place.

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I collect the vinyl tote bag with my lunch things in it from the locker room, then head for the staff canteen. It has a pretty limited lunch menu: soba or udon noodles, curry or a weekly special set lunch that always has something deep-fried. I ordered lunch from the canteen a few times, but then I got my head bitten off once by the woman in the kitchen when I told her she'd made a mistake with my order. So now I buy a sandwich or savoury roll at a convenience store on the way to work.

Women's blouses dot the room in splashes of pink, among the men in their white shirts and boutique staff in casual dress. Four women part-timers at a table near me are having fun chatting and laughing noisily about their husbands and children. To a customer I would look like one of them in my coral-pink blouse. But, to be honest, those ladies scare me. I can't stand up to them, and try not to get into any kind of exchange with them.

There is one reason and one reason only that I work at Eden: it was the only job offer I received. I didn't put much thought into my application. It was just one out of many that I sent off at the end of college. I didn't think there was much I was capable of doing anyway, so anywhere that was willing to take me was fine with me. I'd received about thirty rejections and was totally fed up by the time the offer from Eden arrived, so I accepted it immediately. Besides, it ticked the most important box for me – it was in Tokyo. But it wasn't that I wanted to live there so much as I didn't want to go back to the country.

Where I come from is a long, long way from Tokyo. A place

with rice fields, rice fields and more rice fields, in every direction as far as the eye can see. The nearest convenience store is a fifteen-minute drive, and even that is just one lonely shop all by itself on a main road. Magazines always go on sale a few days later than they do anywhere else. There are no cinemas or fashion stores. Nothing you could call a restaurant, either; the closest thing to eating out are the small local diners with set menus. I'd been dying of boredom there ever since I was a teenager, and couldn't wait to get away at the first opportunity.

I had an image of Tokyo from the dramas I used to watch on the four limited TV stations that were available to us. Tokyo was the ultimate, the dream city that had everything. If I could only make it there, my life, too, would be as cool and fun as the lives of the actresses I saw on TV. At least that's what I believed. It was also what drove me to study hard at high school, so I could get into college in Tokyo.

Once I'd made it here, however, I realized what a fantasy world I'd been living in. Tokyo is still a dream, though – I mean, there is always at least one convenience store within five minutes' walk, and the trains come every three minutes! Plus anything you could possibly want in the way of daily necessities and ready-prepared food is available at your fingertips, at any time. After I'd been accepted for training with Eden, I was assigned to a store just one train stop away from where I was already living.

Sometimes, though, I think about the future. What will I be doing years from now? I don't have the same kind of burning desire like I used to when all I wanted was to escape to Tokyo,

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and I don't feel excited any more about achieving a goal. That all fizzled away, like froth.

Hardly anyone in my hometown goes to college in Tokyo, so having people tell me how amazing I was used to make me feel good, but when it comes down to it I'm not amazing at all. I have no ambitions, nothing I enjoy – I don't even have a boyfriend. It's hard to see anyone since I don't have weekends off. I know there's more to it than that, but I still can't find a guy.

The only reason I don't go back home is because I couldn't face the inconvenience of country life again.

What will I do? I worry about the years slipping by, while I stay on at Eden getting older and older. Living a life with no dreams or ambitions, getting old and wrinkled inside my coral-pink blouse.

Find a new job, Tomoka. This thought has been on my mind a lot recently. But it feels such a huge effort to do anything about it. Basically I'm not very driven. Even writing a CV is a big hassle for me. Anyway, what else can a girl like me do? A young college leaver with no skills, who only Eden was willing to employ.

'Hey, Tomoka,' calls Kiriyama. He works behind the counter at the in-store branch of ZAZ, a chain selling spectacles. He's twenty-five, four years older than me, and the only person at Eden I can really talk to – his eyes are friendly. He started working here four months ago but I haven't seen him in a while. Because he's an employee of ZAZ, not Eden, he sometimes gets called to help at other ZAZ branches.

Kiriyama is holding a tray loaded with a deep-fried mackerel

set lunch and a bowl of udon noodles topped with meat. For someone so thin, he really eats a lot.

‘Okay if I join you?’

‘Sure,’ I tell him, and he sits down opposite me. He wears thin-framed round glasses that really suit him. You can tell he’s doing exactly what he should be doing. Though I remember hearing that he did other work before ZAZ.

‘Kiryama, what did you used to do?’ I ask.

‘Do – me? Ah, print production. Magazines, that kind of thing. Editing, writing, stuff like that.’

‘Really? Wow.’ I didn’t know he’d worked in publishing. All of a sudden my impression of him switches from gentlemanly, nice guy to smart intellectual. See, even previous jobs have the power to influence your image of a person.

‘Why so surprised?’

‘But you had an amazing job.’

Kiryama smiles and slurps down his noodles. ‘Working in a glasses shop is also amazing.’

‘Oh, sure, yeah.’ I smile, too, and take a bite of my sausage bread.

‘“Amazing” is your favourite word, isn’t it, Tomoka?’

‘Um, maybe.’

He might be right, though. When Saya was telling me about her boyfriend, I might’ve used the word ‘amazing’ more than a few times. What do I think is amazing, I wonder? A special talent? A deep knowledge of something? A unique skill?

‘I’m gonna end up in Eden for the rest of my life,’ I whisper into my strawberry milk.

‘What’s up? Do you want to change jobs?’

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‘Yeah . . .’ I say, after a pause. ‘I’ve been thinking about it lately.’

‘Do you still want to work in customer service?’

‘Yeah. But I wouldn’t mind working in an office. So I can have weekends off, and wear whatever I like, and have my own desk. I could go to a café near work for lunch with my colleagues, and bitch about the boss in the tearoom . . .’

‘I don’t hear anything about the actual job in any of those scenarios,’ says Kiriyaama.

That can’t be helped. I mean, I don’t even know myself what kind of job I want to do.

‘But you’re a permanent, Tomoka. In a few years you can transfer to head office, can’t you?’

‘I guess so, but . . .’

After starting with the company, permanent staff have to put in three years at a branch store. Once you have the sales experience, you can apply for a transfer to head office. You can try for General Affairs, or Human Resources, or Product Development and become a buyer or an event planner. Any of these would suit me. But I’d also heard that in reality the chances of a transfer application being approved were low. The most realistic outcome was rising to division chief, like my uninspiring boss.

Mr Ueshima is thirty-five and has been in the same position for the last five years. When I look at him, I get the feeling that this is all I can ever hope for, even if things go well. Sure, I might get promotion, but the work would be the same. The only thing that’d be different is having more responsibility, supervising the part-time staff mainly. Just the thought of it

gives me the heebie-jeebies. The pay might be a bit better but I really don't feel I could pull it off.

'How'd you find the job at ZAZ?' I ask Kiriya.

'I registered on a career-change site and got a good response. So I chose from the offers.'

He pulls out his smartphone to show me the site. You select the descriptions matching the kind of work you're looking for, give details of your experience and skills, and wait for emails with matching offers. The information required seems to be quite specific. Qualifications, English-proficiency scores, driving licence . . . Just tick the boxes.

'But I don't have any skills. Only Level Three for the English-proficiency test.'

I wish I at least had my driving licence. Back home, everybody used to register for driving lessons in the spring vacation immediately after finishing high school, because that's the kind of place it is. You can't do anything if you don't drive. But I was going off to college in Tokyo, so I didn't think I needed to and instead I spent my last vacation mucking about. While scanning the site registration form, I notice that computer skills are listed: Word, Excel, PowerPoint . . . Plus others I've never even heard of.

I do at least own a laptop. I used it at college for writing reports and my dissertation. But once I started working I didn't need to write that kind of thing any more, so when my router broke I couldn't be bothered buying another or getting it connected to Wi-Fi – mainly because I didn't know how to – and I haven't used it since. Almost everything I need to do I can do on my smartphone.

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‘I can use Word, I guess, but not Excel.’

‘If you want to work in an office, you have to know Excel.’

‘Computer courses are expensive, though.’

‘You don’t have to go on computer courses,’ Kiriyaama tells me. ‘Community centres often have that kind of thing. Cheap classes for local residents.’

‘What – really? I didn’t know that,’ I say, looking down at the time on my wristwatch while I fold up the plastic wrappers from my lunch. Only ten minutes of break left – I should get back to the till three minutes before time or Mrs Numauchi will be on my case again, but I need to go to the toilet first. Draining the last of my strawberry milk in one gulp, I stand up and leave.

Later that evening, I tap out *Hatori* – the name of the ward where I live – *ward resident* and *computer class* on my smartphone. And, wow, I can’t believe the number of hits. Who would’ve thought there was so much out there! My eyes rest on a link that says *Hatori Community House*. It seems to be connected to an elementary school less than ten minutes’ walk from my apartment.

I click for more information. This place has all kinds of classes and events: shogi, haiku, eurhythmics, hula dancing, exercise classes, *lots* of flower-arranging classes and lectures on different topics. I’ve never heard of an elementary school doing this kind of thing, let alone one I’ve lived near for the last three years.

The computer class costs 2,000 yen a time and is held every Wednesday from two to four, which is great for me. Especially as this coming Wednesday happens to be my rostered day off.

Students can take their own laptop or borrow one at the class. Lessons are customized but it's not a course and you can attend whenever you want. I read the teacher's introductory message:

Beginners welcome. Study at your own pace with individual guidance. Instruction in basic computer skills, Word, Excel, building a website and programming.

Y. Gonno

Already I can see myself using Excel like a pro, and for the first time in a long while, I feel slightly excited about something.

Two days later, I'm standing outside the elementary school with my laptop in hand. I follow the directions from the Community House home page and walk along the school fence until I reach a narrow road. There it is: a two-storey white building with a sign over the canopy at the entrance that says 'Hatori Community House'.

I go through a glass door and see an old guy with bushy grey hair at the front desk. In the office behind him, a woman with a bandanna sits at a desk writing something.

'Um, I'm here for the computer class,' I say to the old guy.

'Put your name down here. It's in Meeting Room A.' He points at a folder on the countertop. A sheet of paper inside has a table with columns headed *Name*, *Purpose of visit*, *Time of arrival* and *Time of departure*.

Meeting Room A is on the ground floor. Going past the front desk to the lobby, I turn right and find it immediately.

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Through an open sliding door I can see two students sitting at long tables facing each other with their laptops open: a girl a bit older than me with soft wavy hair and an old guy with a square face.

The teacher turns out to be a woman, not a man. Ms Gonno is probably in her fifties.

I go over and introduce myself. 'Hello, my name is Tomoka Fujiki.'

She gives me a friendly smile. 'Please, sit wherever you like.'

I choose to sit at the same table as the girl, but at the other end. She and the old guy are concentrating so hard on their own stuff they take no notice of me. I open up my laptop, which I'd already started up at home since I haven't used it in ages and which took for ever to boot. My fingers feel like bananas on the keyboard, probably because I only ever use a smartphone. I should probably do some practice in Word as well.

'Ms Fujiki, you want to learn Excel, don't you?' says Ms Gonno, glancing down at my computer.

'Yes. But this computer doesn't have Excel.'

She looks at my screen again and moves the mouse around a bit. 'Yes, it does. I'll make a short cut for you.'

A green icon with an X for Excel appears at the edge of the screen. No way! Excel has been hiding in my computer all along?

'I can see you've used Word, so I assume you have Office installed.'

I don't have a clue what she's talking about . . . But I did ask a friend at college to set up Word for me when I couldn't figure

it out for myself. Maybe that's how it got in there. This is what happens when you leave stuff up to other people.

For the next two hours, I learn all about Excel. Ms Gonno wanders between me and the other two but I get special attention, because I'm the newcomer, I suppose.

The most amazing thing I learn is how to perform addition by highlighting cells. Just press a key and *bam!* With one touch they all add up! It impresses me so much I can't help cheering, which Ms Gonno seems to find funny.

While practising as instructed, I overhear the conversation between Ms Gonno and the other students. I get the impression they are regulars: the old guy is building a website about wildflowers, while the girl is setting up an online shop. I feel like such a waster. All the time I've been lazing around in my apartment doing nothing, not far away these two have been getting on with stuff – learning things! The more I think about it, the more pathetic it makes me feel.

When it's nearly time to finish, Ms Gonno says, 'There's no set textbook, but I'll give you a list of recommended titles. Don't restrict yourself to these, though. Have a browse in a library or bookshop and see what you can find for yourself that's easy to follow.' She holds up a computer guide and smiles. 'You might like to look in the library here in Community House.'

Library. What a nice-sounding word. So comforting. I feel like I'm a student again. *Library . . .* 'Am I allowed to borrow books?'

'Yes, anybody who lives in the ward can borrow up to six books for two weeks. I think that's the rule.'

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Then the old guy calls for help and Ms Gonno goes over to him. I make a note of the recommended titles and leave.

The library is also on the ground floor. I pass two meeting rooms and a Japanese-style room at the back of the building beside a small kitchen. The door is wide open with a sign on the wall that says 'Library'. Rows and rows of bookshelves fill an area about the size of a classroom. A counter to the left of the entrance is marked 'Checkouts and Returns'. Near the front counter a petite girl in a dark-blue apron is arranging paperbacks on a shelf.

Feeling shy, I approach her. 'Excuse me, where are the books on computers?'

Her head jerks up and she blushes. She has huge eyes and hair tied back in a ponytail that swings behind her. She looks young enough to still be at high school. Her nametag says 'Nozomi Morinaga'.

'Over here.' Still holding several paperbacks, Nozomi Morinaga walks past a reading table and guides me to a large shelf against the wall. 'If you need any recommendations, the librarian is in the reference corner.'

'Recommendations?'

'You tell her what you're looking for, then she will do a search and give you recommendations.'

I can't find any of the books Ms Gonno recommended on the shelf. Maybe I should consult the librarian. Nozomi said she was at the back, so I make my way to the front desk, then look towards the rear. That's when I notice a screen partition with a sign hanging from the ceiling that says 'Reference'.

Heading over, I poke my head around the corner, and yikes! My eyes nearly jump out of their sockets. The librarian is huge . . . I mean, like, really huge. But huge as in big, not fat. She takes up the entire space between the L-shaped counter and the partition. Her skin is super pale – you can't even see where her chin ends and her neck begins – and she is wearing a beige apron over an off-white, loose-knit cardigan. She reminds me of a polar bear curled up in a cave for winter. Her hair is twisted into a small bun right on top of her head, and she has a cool *kanzashi* hairpin spiked through her bun with three white flower tassels hanging from it. She is looking down at something, but I can't see what exactly. The nametag around her neck says 'Sayuri Komachi'. Cute name.

I edge a bit closer and clear my throat. Ms Komachi's eyes roll up to look at me, without her moving any other part of her body. The whites of her eyes are enormous. She's stabbing a needle at something the size of a ping-pong ball balanced on a mat the size of a handkerchief. *What* is she doing? Putting a jinx on someone? I almost scream out loud.

'Ah . . . it's, ah . . . it's okay,' I manage to squeak, but all I want to do is turn tail and get away as fast as possible.

'What are you looking for?'

Her voice . . . it's so weird . . . it nails my feet to the floor. As if it has physically grabbed hold of me somehow. But there's a warmth in it that wraps itself around me, making me feel safe and secure, even when it comes from that unsmiling face.

What am I looking for? I'm looking for . . . A reason to work, something I'm good at – stuff like that. But I don't think that's

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the kind of answer she expects. 'Um, I'm looking for books on how to use a computer.'

Ms Komachi pulls a dark-orange box closer. I recognize the design of white flowers in a hexagon shape. It's a box of Honey-dome cookies. I love these. They're dome-shaped, with a soft centre, and made by Kuremiyado, a company that specializes in Western-style confectionery. They're not exactly gourmet, but they're a little bit special and not something you can just pick up in a convenience store.

When she lifts the lid, I see a small pair of scissors and some needles. She must be using an empty box for her sewing things. Ms Komachi puts away her needle and ball, then stares at me.

'What do you want to do on the computer?'

'Excel, to begin with. Enough to tick the boxes on a skills checklist.'

'Skills checklist,' Ms Komachi repeats.

'I'm thinking I might register on a career-change site. I'm not that happy with my current job.'

'What do you do?'

'Nothing great. Just selling ladies' clothes in a general department store.'

Ms Komachi's head tilts to one side. The flower tassels on her hairpin shake and sparkle.

'Is being a sales assistant in a department store really not such a great job?'

I don't know what to say. Ms Komachi waits patiently for my reply.

'Well, I mean . . . Anybody can do it. It's not like it was my dream job or anything I desperately wanted to do. I just kind

of fell into it. But I live on my own, so I have to work to support myself.'

'You managed to find employment, you go to work every day and you can feed yourself. That's a fine achievement.'

Nobody's ever summed up my life in this way before. Her answer makes me want to cry. It's as if she sees me, just as I am.

'But all I do to feed myself is buy stuff from the convenience store,' I blurt out clumsily, though I know that's not what she really means by 'feed yourself'.

Ms Komachi's head tilts to the other side. 'Well, the motive doesn't matter so much as wanting to learn something new. That's a good attitude to have.'

She turns to the computer, places both hands on the keyboard and pauses. Then she begins typing, at amazing speed. *Shoo-tatatata!* Her fingers move in a blur and I nearly fall over myself in surprise.

Ta! She gives one final tap, then delicately lifts her wrists from the keyboard. Next moment, the printer springs into action.

'These should be suitable for a beginner on Excel.' Ms Komachi hands me the sheet. *A Step-by-Step Guide to Word and Excel, Excel for Beginners, Excel: Fast Efficient Notebooks, A Simple Introduction to Office.* Then I notice, right at the bottom, a title that stands out.

Guri and Gura? I stare at the words. The kids' picture book about two field mice, Guri and Gura?

'Oh, and this too.' Ms Komachi swivels on her chair slightly as she reaches below the counter. I lean forward a bit more to

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