The Home

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HERE WE ARE. Your new home for the year,” said Dad as they started up the steep graveled drive. The high concrete wall in front of the two-story house was covered with ivy. Set into the wall beside the gate was a narrow strip of wood inscribed with Japanese characters. “Sano Shoin,” Dad read out loud. “This used to be the University president’s home. No one has lived here since he died. The gardener lives in the front right wing and takes care of the grounds,” Dad explained.

The front door was surrounded by carefully trimmed bushes, a potted dwarf tree on the door step, and alongside the house a tall pine, plucked of its needles leaving three to a twig, rose to the roof. The copper-tiled roof was mossy and green. Dad rang the doorbell. The door opened and a lovely little Japanese woman bowed graciously, her red-orange silky kimono hugging her small frame as she moved. “This is Shizui,” said Dad smiling at her, then outstretching his arm towards his family said, “My family — Mrs. Shepard, Newton, and Dede.” Shizui bowed again, smiling shyly. “The first rule of the house,” Dad continued, “we must take off our shoes before entering.” Sitting on the raised floor of the house, they took off their shoes and Shizui handed each of them a new pair of satin embroidered slippers. Dede watched Shizui as she turned and shuffled down the long hall. Her waist was wrapped with a stiff wide band that tied and folded intricately at her back. “Follow me and I’ll take you on a tour of the house,” Dad said. Dede was still gazing at Shizui; “You’ll see her again, Dede. She will be our maid,” Dad whispered in Dede’s ear.

“This is the benjo, our bathroom,” said Dad as he slid back the satin-wood door. A small multipaned window cast light on a group of black glistening boulders that held a rock
basin. “This is where we wash our hands.” A trickle of fresh cool water from a tube filled the basin. The overflow of water spilled down the boulders to the well below. Dad picked up a long-handled cup that lay on the edge of the basin, dipped it, and then holding his hands over the rocks, poured the water over them.

“Is this where we have to wash all the time?” said Dede, and Mom said, “Isn’t there any hot running water?”

Dad dried his hands with a towel that hung over a stand like a torii and said, “We have another lavatory. We’ll see it later.” Then Dad stepped forward opening another sliding door. A porcelain object resembling the rim of a cradle was flush with the floor, and a wooden lid covered the strange object.

“What is that for?” asked Newt.

“That’s a toilet.”

“Oh.” Mom said.

“You’ll get used to it,” Dad chuckled.

Back in the main hall, Dad led his group to still another sliding door. The heavy glass panel rattled as he slid it into the wall. “Wow! What’s this room used for?” asked Newt.

“This is our Western room. The president held meetings and banquets here.”

“I have never seen such a large oak table,” said Mom. The heavy table filled the length of the room. Dad, pointing to the Victorian marble fireplace, formally balanced along one wall, said, “We can’t use this. It needs too much repair. I bought a little stove instead.”

“Oh, look, Mom,” Dede squealed. Then they all discovered the pot-bellied stove in one corner.

“We’ll huddle around this in the winter. Our only other heat is from hibachies,” said Dad.

“What are hibachies,” asked Mom.

“We have one in our dining room. They are containers made of pottery or metal and filled with sand and glowing charcoal.

“Where is ours, Dad?” said Dede, anxious to see everything at once.
"Patience, you'll see one soon. Now let's go upstairs."

When Dad stopped to point out the stained-glass window, Dede bumped right into him. Smiling guiltily, she said, "I'm sorry, Daddy," and looked into his face. "Daddy, you look funny," she laughed. The light through the window had colored his face with deep blues, greens, and yellow ochres.

"You should see your face," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "Come on let's see our bedrooms." Dede stepped on the tatami floor.

"Where do we sleep?" she asked.

"Dede," Dad pulled her back into the hall. "I forgot to tell you the second rule of the house: we take off our slippers before entering a room with rice straw flooring."

"But where do we sleep?" she persisted. After they removed their slippers, Dad took them into the largest of three rooms.

"This is our suite, Mom." The room was empty.

"Where is all the furniture, dear?" said Mom.

"Where do you sleep, Dad?" Dede asked again.

"See those shelves?" Dad pointed to the ante-room. Several folded quilts were neatly arranged in the shelves. "Those quilts go on the floor to make our beds."

"Those're our beds?" Newt questioned skeptically.

"They're called futon."

"Look." Dede was at the other end of the room by a big glass sliding door. "It's—it's a porch." said Dede.

"How neat," said Newt.

"What is this?" Mom asked Dad. She had followed Dede and was looking at a tall niche in the wall.

"The Japanese call it a tokamono. A scroll or kakimono is hung here and flower arrangements are placed beneath it. Let's go downstairs for some tea and then we'll see the rest of the house." They slipped back into their stiff new slippers and followed Dad down to the main hall. The hall was a series of sliding doors on both sides. Dede wondered what mysteries were behind the doors. Dad stopped his group in front of a panel of doors. "Shizui-san, ocha dozo." Shizui appeared at the end of the hall. She wore a fresh white smock over her kimono. A soft sand-paper noise echoed as she shuffled towards the family.
“Tea, now?” she asked Dad.

“Hie,” he said as she bowed and disappeared again.

“This will be our dining room.” Dad slid back all the doors so everyone could see. Dede, absorbed in the beauty and simplicity, was speechless. Mom also stood quietly. A feeling of meditation came over all. The ante-room, just before the dining room, had a moon window that gave light to the pine bough and chrysanthemum arrangement on the ledge below.

“Oh, it’s lovely,” Mom said in a whisper. The sliding doors, that divided the two rooms, were of painted silk. Above was a hand-carved valance. Light coming through the intricate panel made unusual shadows on the tatami. The dining room, with its low blonde table and brilliantly colored silk pillows, made a beautiful setting. There was a hibachi at one corner of the table and a tokamono, much larger than the one upstairs, set in the wall. The room was well lighted. There were two walls of glass sliding doors opening out into the garden.

“This is such a peaceful room,” said Dede.

“It’s a Japanese custom to bow and meditate in front of the tokamono whenever entering this room. They do this to pay respect to their ancestors.”

“Do we have to do that, Dad?” asked Newt.

“If you want to pay respect to your Japanese ancestors, Son,” Dad chuckled.

“Let’s sit down. Shizui will be here shortly. This is how the Japanese sit.” Dad kneeled on a zabuton bringing his feet together flat on the floor; then he sat on his heels.

“That’s easy,” said Newt.

“Wait till you get up, if you can,” Dad challenged his son. Mom attempting the position, then shifted to the side.

“It’s going to take time to adjust.” Dede followed her Dad’s example and made no comment. Dede could hear the soft sand-paper noise in the hall and then the door slid back. Shizui-san bowed twice and entered with the tea. Everyone sat quietly watching her every movement as if it were a ceremony. Shizui poured hot water from the brass tea pot into a small pottery one and placed it on the hibachi to keep warm. The clear green tea was then poured into handleless
cups and placed in front of each person. The steam curled and rose from the cups. A tang-mint smell filled their noses. A small dish of carefully arranged crackers was set on the table. Dede broke the silence with, “Won’t you join us, Shizui?” She bowed smiling shyly and backed out of the room.

“She doesn’t understand English. Let’s drink our tea before it gets cold,” said Dad.

“But mine’s too hot; I burned my tongue,” said Dede.

“The hotter it is the better its flavor.”

Dede and Newt made funny faces at each other and blew into their cups.

“What are these, Dad?” asked Newt, pointing to the crackers on the table.

“They are called ohashi; they’re like our crackers. Try one.” Newt picked up a golden glazed cracker that had a black strip wrapped around it and popped it in his mouth. Dede did the same. When she put it in her mouth it felt slimy on the surface. As she bit down it crunched and slowly dissolved leaving a fishy salt flavor in her mouth. She had a puzzled expression on her face while she tried to analyze the taste.

“What is the black stuff?” she said.

“Well,” he laughed, “we call it seaweed.”

Dede’s nose turned up and her mouth twisted as she squinted her eyes. Newt dropped the cracker he held in his fingers and also made a face. Both Mom and Dad laughed at their children.

“I can see we’re going to have fun this year, trying different food,” said Mom.

“In two hours we have to be at the high school for registration.” Dad looked at his watch. “We had better leave soon. It’s an hour and a half ride on the trains.”

“When will we see the rest of the house?” said Dede.

“We’ll be back later.” They finished their tea and Shizui saw them to the door.