

chest, just as he had when he had taught us about imaginary numbers. "Eternal truths are ultimately invisible, and you won't find them in material things or natural phenomena, or even in human emotions. Mathematics, however, can illuminate them, can give them expression—in fact, nothing can prevent it from doing so."

As I mopped the office floor, my mind churning with worries about Root, I realized how much I needed this eternal truth that the Professor had described. I needed the sense that this invisible world was somehow propping up the visible one, that this one, true line extended infinitely, without width or area, confidently piercing through the shadows. Somehow, this line would help me find peace.

I had just got back from shopping and was about to start dinner for the tax consultants when a call came from the secretary at the Akebono Housekeeping Agency.

"Get right over to that mathematician's house. It seems your son has done something to upset them. I don't know what happened, but get over there now. That's an order from the Director."

She hung up before I'd had time to find out more.

I remembered immediately the curse of the foul ball. At first, I'd mistaken it for good luck when the ball missed Root, but it seemed to have come back to haunt us, to fall right on his head. The Professor had been right: "You should never leave a child alone."

Maybe he had choked on the donut I'd given him as a snack. Or he'd gotten a shock trying to plug in the radio. Frightening images ran through my head. I didn't know what to tell my employer as I ran off to the Professor's, her glare following me out the door.

It had been less than a month since we'd left the cottage. The broken doorbell, the dilapidated furniture, and the overgrown garden were the same, but the minute I stepped inside I had a bad feeling.

It was clear that Root had not been hurt, which came as a relief. He hadn't suffocated or been electrocuted but was sitting next to the Professor at the table, his school backpack at his feet.

The bad feeling was coming from the Professor's sister-in-law, who was sitting across from them. Next to her was a middle-aged woman I had never seen before—my replacement, I assumed. There was something indescribably unpleasant about seeing these intruders in a space occupied, in my memory, by just the three of us, the Professor, Root, and me.

As my feeling of relief faded, I began to realize how odd it was for Root to be here. The widow sat at the table, in the same sort of elegant dress she had worn during my interview. She held her cane firmly in her left hand. Root seemed completely cowed and refused to even look up at me. The Professor had assumed his "thinking" pose, staring intently off into the distance, acknowledging no one.

"I'm sorry to call you away from work," said the widow. "Please, have a seat." She pointed to a chair. I was so out of breath after running from the station that I forgot to give a proper answer. "Please, sit down," she said again. "And you, get our guest some tea, please." The other woman—I had no idea whether or not she was an Akebono employee—got up and went to the stove. The widow's tone was polite, but I could see that she was upset by the way her tongue darted over her lips, and the way her fingers drummed on the table. Unable to think of something to say, I did as I was told and sat down. We were silent for a moment.

Excerpted from:
Ogawa, Yoko. *The Housekeeper and the Professor*.
Picador, 2009.

"You people . . ." she began at last, tapping a fingernail on the table again. "What is it you want?" I took a breath before answering.

"Has my son done something wrong?"

Root was staring down at his lap, where he held his Tigers cap, nervously crumpling it in his hands.

"I'll ask the questions, if you don't mind. The first thing I'd like to know is why your boy needs to come to my brother-in-law's house." The polish on her perfect nails was flaking off as she tapped on the table.

"I didn't mean to—" Root started, still not looking up.

"The child of a housekeeper who has left our employ," the widow interrupted him. Though she had said "child" more than once, she made no attempt to look at Root—or at the Professor—as though neither of them was in the room.

"I don't think it's a question of 'need,'" I said, still unsure what she was getting at. "I think he just wanted to pay the Professor a visit."

"I borrowed *The Lou Gehrig Story* from the library, and I wanted to read it with him," Root said, looking up at last.

"Why would a ten-year-old child pay a visit to a sixty-year-old man?" She ignored Root's explanation.

"I'm sorry my son came here without my permission, and I am very sorry if he bothered you. I apologize for failing to supervise him properly."

"That's not the point. I want to know why a housekeeper who has been let go would send her son to see my brother-in-law. What is it you want from him?"

"Want? I'm afraid there's some misunderstanding. He's just a little boy who wanted to visit a friend. He found an interesting

book and he wanted to read it with the Professor. Isn't that enough of a reason?"

"I'm sure it is. I'm not implying that the boy had any ulterior motive. I'm asking what you wanted in sending him here."

"I don't want anything, except for my son to be happy."

"Then why do you involve my brother-in-law? You took him out at night, you stayed later than was called for. I don't remember asking you to do any of that."

The housekeeper brought over the tea. She set it in front of us without a word or so much as a clink of the cups and went straight back to the bedroom. It was obvious she would not be taking my side on this.

"I realize that I was out of line, but I can assure you I had no ulterior motive. It was all very innocent."

"Is it about money?"

"Money?!" The word was so unexpected that I nearly shouted it back at her. "How can you say such a thing?"

"I can think of no other reason why you'd indulge my brother-in-law like this."

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"You were fired. You have no business being here!"

"Excuse me," the new housekeeper interrupted, standing in the kitchen doorway. She had removed her apron and was holding her purse. "I'll be going now." She left as quietly as she'd come. We watched as she slipped out the door.

The Professor seemed lost in thought; Root's cap was crushed almost beyond recognition. I took a deep breath.

"It's because we're friends," I said. "Is it a crime to visit a friend?"

"And who is friends with whom exactly?"

"My son and I, with the Professor."

"I'm afraid you've been deceiving yourself," the widow said, shaking her head. "My brother-in-law has no property. He squandered everything on his studies, and he has nothing to show for it."

"And what does that have to do with me?"

"He has no friends, you understand? No one has ever come to visit him."

"Then Root and I are his *first* friends," I said.

At that moment, the Professor stood up.

"Leave the boy alone!"

He took a scrap of paper from his pocket and jotted something down. Setting it on the table, he walked out of the room. His manner had been utterly resolute, as if he'd decided from the beginning that this was the only course of action. There had been no anger or hesitation, he was calmly determined.

We stared at the note. No one moved. On the paper he had written a single line, one simple formula:

$$e^{\pi} + 1 = 0$$

No one spoke. The widow's fingernails had ceased their tapping. Her eyes, so full of suspicion and disdain a moment earlier, now looked at me with a calm, understanding gaze, and I could tell then that she knew the beauty of math.

Not long after that, I received a message from the agency asking me to report for work again at the Professor's house. I could not say whether the widow had a change of heart, or had simply never liked the new housekeeper. I also had no way of determining

whether the absurd misunderstanding had been settled or not. But the Professor had now earned his eleventh star.

No matter how many times I went over the strange scene in my mind, it remained a mystery. Why did the widow report me to the agency and have me fired? Why had she reacted so strongly to Root's visit? I was sure she had spied on us from the garden that night after the baseball game, and when I imagined her dragging her bad leg behind her and hiding in the bushes, I almost forgot my anger and felt sorry for her.

The mention of money was probably nothing more than a smoke screen. Maybe the widow was jealous. In her own way, she had been lavishing affection on the Professor for years, and to her I was an interloper. Forbidding me to communicate with the main house was her way of preventing me from disturbing their relationship.

I started work again on July 7, the day known as Tanabata, the Star Festival. The notes fluttering on the Professor's jacket as he met me at the door reminded me of the strips of colored paper on which children write their wishes for the festival. My portrait and the square root sign next to it were still clipped to his cuff.

"How much did you weigh at birth?" This question was new to me.

"I was 3,217 grams," I said. Having no idea what my own weight had been, I used Root's.

"Two to the 3,217th minus 1 is a Mersenne prime," he mumbled before disappearing into his study.

During the previous month, the Tigers had managed to climb back into the pennant race. After Yufune's no-hitter, the strength of the pitching staff had given a boost to the offense as well. But at the end of June things started to unravel. They had lost six straight,