

The Italic

Erica Plouffe Lazure

Shoji asks if I'd like to go out for Italic. "You know, for pizzas?" he asks. Shoji is our school's Japanese foreign exchange student. He is our responsibility, we were told, to make sure he feels welcome. So I do not correct his English and tell him that pizza is *Italian* food, not *Italic* food. And anyone who has actually been to Italy knows that American pizza, particularly Pizza Chef pizza, isn't real Italian food. So I say yes to Shoji so he feels welcome and I bring Carissa with us. In case Shoji thinks this is a hot date.

So Carissa, Shoji and I sit in "Pizza Chef Italic Restaurant" and I shush Carissa, who loves to correct bad grammar and mispronunciations, her way of nerd-lording over something, because honestly she has nothing going for her except, of course, being my friend. Shoji orders a "cheese pizzas" and there is mass confusion when two arrive. "We only need one cheese pizzas," Shoji says.

"It's pizza," the puny register dude says. "Pizzas is plural. Pizzas is two or more. So pay up."

But Shoji only has enough money for one pizza, and the puny dude won't budge. So Carissa and I cough up five each—our weekly lunch money gone—and we sit down to eat. Shoji apologizes. "We'll just take it home,"

Carissa says. She and I dig in, the roof of our mouths scald upon contact with the hot cheese. Shoji does not eat.

"Don't you like pizza?" I ask.

"I do not know," he says, looking down at his napkin. "Sorry to have you pay. I like you as my guest." His face deepens red. We stop eating. Carissa looks terrified. *Is he going to cry?*

"It's okay," I say. "We love pizza."

"Yeah, we eat it all the time! We even eat it cold, as leftovers," Carissa says. "It's really okay."

Shoji brightens a bit. "It is hard to make friends," he says. "You eat Italic food all the time?"

Carissa smiles. "I meant to tell you before, it's 'Italian,' not Italic. Italics is when the letters are typed at an angle."

"Thank you," Shoji says. He glances at the sign over the counter: Pizza Chef Italian Restaurant. "I didn't know."

"And I wanted to ask you," Carissa continued, "how are your classes? You're in my Calc?"

"Calculus is easy," he says. "English, for me, you can see, is hard."

"Ugh, Mancini is a bear in math. Maybe you could help me?"

Shoji beams, and offers a phrase straight from his English textbook. "I would be delighted!"

And now Carissa and Shoji are always together nerding out over Math and English and sometimes they invite me but usually they don't. The other day I walk by Pizza Chef and see them together through the window

sipping soda from the same cup, a steaming hot pizza on the table, and I zip my hoodie to protect from the cold and keep walking thinking, *Italic, Italic, Italic.*

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