



2007 JETAA USA
Kintetsu Essay Contest

Topic: Narrative Essay of Japan

Essay contest participants were asked to submit a narrative essay depicting a scene, point, or experience of Japan and/or the JET Program. The following fifteen essays represent the top submissions as selected by a judging panel of JET alumni and Kintetsu International representatives.

Narrative essays recount a connection forged and developed either in the time the author lived in Japan or recounts recognition of this connection when the author goes home where the tie to Japan remains strong. The narrative uses the theme of "building bridges," "ties through time," or "uncommon journeys."

Essays focused on the themes of:

- Home away from home
- A familiar "stranger"; new friends and families
- Stories and lives, connected through time
- Uncommon stories, hiccups along the road
- Foiled again, learning is never easy

All of the judges for the 2007 essay contest greatly enjoyed reading the submissions of more than 75 talented JET alumni writers. We hope you will enjoy reading the winning essays as much as we did.



JETAA USA Kintetsu Essay Contest

2007 Grand Prize Winners

1. "An Enlightening Journey"
James LoPresto
Redondo Beach, CA
Niigata 1994-1997
2. "Dedicated to Mrs. Bell Deer"
Janabeth Benjamin Reitter
Northwood, NH
Osaka 1993-1995
3. "Dreaming in Japanese"
Julia Hibarger
Renton, WA
Fukui 1991-1993
4. "Karaoke: The Great Unifier"
Alexi Esikoff
Minneapolis, MN
Fukushima 2001-2002
5. "One and the Same"
Robin Hattori
St. Louis, MO
Kumamoto 1993-1996
6. "Otori"
Brendan A. Victorson
Albany, NY
Okinawa 2000-2002
7. "Ping Pong Diplomacy"
Earth Bennett
New York, NY
Aomori 2000-2002
8. "Sakiko's Speech"
Melissa Todd
Seattle, WA
Niigata 2004-2005
9. "Silence"
Meredith Hodges-Boos
Rocky Face, GA
Ehime 2003-2005
10. "The Cicada's Cry"
Michael Holmes
Dallas, TX
Niigata 2002-2004
11. "The Union of Purple and Brown"
Paul Cummings
Houston, TX
Osaka 1996-1999
12. "The Way of Tea"
Mary Perkins
Washington, DC
Fukui 2003-2005
13. "Then & There"
John S. McGee IV
Seffner, FL
Nagano 2004-2005
14. "Two Views of Nagasaki"
William B. Agor
Pompano Beach, FL
Saga 1998-2001
15. "Unintentional Engagement"
David Flynn
Nashville, TN
Osaka 1987-1988

An Enlightening Journey

It was a glorious spring afternoon as I boarded the Sado Kisen car ferry for the two-and-a-half hour voyage from Niigata City to Sado Island. It had been a cold and bleak winter in which the sun had refused to peek out from behind oatmeal gray clouds even for a few fleeting moments. Now with spring in full bloom, a crimson sun was setting on the water and cherry blossom petals swirled along the ground, blown by the gentle breeze. I absolutely enjoyed living on Sado, but the ferry crossing was often quite mundane. There was nothing to indicate that this Sunday afternoon's trip would be any different. I would soon discover that was an erroneous assumption.

Throngs of anxious travelers crossed the gangplank and hastily jockeyed for position in one of the many carpeted lounging rooms where one could lie down, sit or socialize during the journey. While called a ferry, it was more like a small cruise ship and had just about every amenity one could desire. I decided to head for the ferry's video game arcade. A game of video baseball was the perfect distraction to help pass the time.

Entering the arcade, I barely noticed the young boy. He was standing in front of one of those arcade games in which one tries to snag a stuffed animal by manipulating a mechanical claw. For me, tonight's baseball game would be the Yakult Swallows challenging the Yomiuri Giants. I was engrossed in my game when suddenly I sensed somebody was watching me. Ever so stealthily, or so I thought, I glanced left and then right, in an attempt to see who was there. It was the boy whom I had passed when entering the arcade. He saw me glancing over and quickly said, "Ame o tabemasu ka?" Translation: "Do you eat candy?" He then thrust his hand in my face and offered me a sour lemon candy.

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Initiating this type of contact with a foreigner was so out of character for a young Japanese child that I practically fell off my stool. I gestured for him to sit down next to me. In the eight months I had lived in Japan, nothing quite like this had ever happened to me. Most of my experiences with young children outside school had been of the ‘hit-and-run’ variety, where they ran up to me, said, “Hello! Good-bye!” and then darted off before I could muster a response. Now I was definitely in uncharted waters, and eager to communicate with this exceptional little boy. My Japanese language skills were downright dreadful. He spoke no English other than a handful of vocabulary words he had learned in elementary school. The cacophony produced by the surrounding arcade games made it difficult to hear everything he was saying, but we were able to carry on a simple, yet meaningful conversation. As I struggled to put simple sentences together, I was able to ask him which arcade game was his favorite. He immediately stood up, pointed towards the game with the claw and belted out, “Catcher!”

Seeing the excitement on his face as he answered my question, I motioned for him to follow me across the room to the game. From my pocket I dug out my coin case, fished out a ¥100 coin and offered it to him. This caught him off guard and he hesitated for what felt like minutes before reluctantly taking the coin from my hand. I pointed to the stuffed animals inside the game and gave him the thumbs up sign. He inserted the coin and it clanged all the way down until it hit bottom, then the start button illuminated.

It was immediately apparent that he had done battle with the ‘Catcher’ before. Within seconds, a stuffed toy was in the claw’s grasp, headed for a rendezvous with the prize chute where it would be deposited and victory would be his. Just prior to reaching the prize chute, the stuffed animal slithered out of the claw’s grasp, falling gently on top

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of the other stuffed animals. The boy's reaction at this turn of events was like that of a young child who discovers his beloved goldfish had just been eaten by the family cat.

I immediately inserted another ¥100 coin into the slot and signaled for him to try again. The look on his face transformed from one of disappointment to exhilaration. Once again within seconds, the claw had pounced upon a stuffed toy, and was headed for victory. However, as with the previous attempt, this one also ended in failure. This time he was a bit more composed after his defeat. I dredged up one more ¥100 coin and said to him, "Lasto," Japanese-English for 'last one'. His eyes flickered as he readied himself for this last attempt. With a resounding, "Bonzai!" he launched his final assault upon the 'Catcher'. This time he was not to be denied. He was so excited at his triumph over the 'Catcher' that one would have thought he had just won a year's supply of ice cream.

While we were engaged in the struggle against the 'Catcher', several other Sado ALTs, who likewise were returning home, had seen us and entered the arcade. I described to them how the young boy had approached me and initiated contact. As I had been impressed with his initiative and courage, so were they. In asking him questions about himself, we learned his name was Koichi, he was ten years-old and he lived on Sado. We had only been chatting for a short time, when Koichi thanked me for the stuffed animal, politely excused himself and exited the arcade. I never saw him again.

Koichi's abrupt departure was a bit peculiar given the fact that he had been brave enough to initiate contact with me in the first place. Perhaps he had grown uncomfortable being the focus of our attention, or maybe he just needed to return to his parents. The other ALTs began heading towards the dining area, but as I did not have much of an appetite, I said good-bye and went on my way.

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Deciding to get some fresh air, I hiked the stairs to the upper deck of the ferry. As the last rays of sunlight reached up from just beneath the horizon, I could see the silhouette of Sado in the distance. Leaning against the railing, I listened to the rhythmic sound of churning water as the propeller pushed us towards home. I reflected on what had just transpired with Koichi.

Just as the day turned into night, I had the proverbial 'a-ha' moment. It was one of those realizations that ties everything together. The cornerstone of the JET Programme is to foster internationalization. Internationalization was one of those ubiquitous buzz words that was used in everything related to the JET Programme. I had been struggling to understand how teaching English in the classroom would translate to internationalization. While students would be exposed to a foreign, native English speaker, I just did not see the correlation between learning English in the classroom and internationalizing the students. Following my exchange with Koichi, I realized how short sighted I had been. The once nebulous word had now crystallized into something tangible, something I could comprehend. I realized that even the simplest action or event can have a profound effect on one's life and the lives of others.

My encounter with Koichi epitomized the fundamental purpose of internationalization. I am convinced this type of encounter is what the JET Programme founders envisioned when they chose this word to describe their goal. Koichi and I could not have come for more dissimilar walks of life. He was a young boy living in rural Japan; I was a Western foreigner from a big city. We spoke different languages and our cultures were as different as the sun and the moon. Yet we found common ground in the sharing of a hobby, in all places, the arcade of a car ferry. Had somebody told me

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prior to my arrival upon the Japanese archipelago that one of my most indelible memories would be that of meeting a young boy, in an arcade, on a car ferry, in the Sea of Japan, I would have laughed.

It has been twelve years since that exceptional afternoon. I often think of Koichi who is presumably in his early twenties. I wonder what he has done with his life. Does he still possess the inquisitive and bold spirit that led him to initiate our meeting? Does he remember me as I do him? If so, did I make a lasting impression on him as he did on me? Regardless, what was anticipated as a routine passage home, instead, became an enlightening journey.

Dedicated to Mrs. Bell Deer

I returned from two years on the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program twelve years ago. Even after all this time, Japan still plays an important role in my life. I credit this to a woman named Ikuko Suzuka. She shaped my JET experience in a positive way and through her kindness, generosity, and hard work she has inspired me to continue sharing and learning about Japan.

Suzuka sensei was a Japanese Teacher of English at the Toyonaka City 13th Junior High School in Osaka Prefecture when we met. She had a warm smile and spoke excellent English. “My name means ‘bell deer,’” she explained with a laugh; I liked her immediately. We worked together for six months. She had a good rapport with the students, which translated into engaging team-taught lessons. Because we enjoyed what we were doing, the students became enthusiastic, as well.

Suzuka sensei rallied the other eighth grade teachers to assign student-group presentations in English, which I videotaped for the classes to watch afterwards. The students impressed us with innovative talks on topics such as their school’s regulations, the contents of their Japanese box lunches, Japanese traditional things, and the school song. This last one occurred spontaneously after “the class clown and company” arrived with nothing prepared on their topic, which was supposed to be the abacus. When I began taping, “Mr. Clown” started belting out the school anthem. The others in his group had no choice but to follow suit. As he sang, the class clown marched in place like a grand marshal, pumping the abacus up and down like a makeshift baton. One boy on the end laughed the entire time. He tried to compose himself, but collapsed in a fit of infectious giggles again when the leader started clapping his open hand against the

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abacus while wagging his head and swinging his hips. This video would later prove to be invaluable when I returned to the United States.

At their home, Suzuka-sensei and her teenaged son Shimpei gave me pointers in Japanese calligraphy. For fun we assigned kanji to my first name. The best we could come up with were the characters for “cooking pot,” “snake,” and “vinegar”. Our visits were wonderfully entertaining as well as educational.

Suzuka sensei had the patience of a saint. I pestered her constantly with questions about how to do my Japanese homework for the JET Correspondence Course and how to fix my Canon Word Tank. She didn't even blink when I asked to borrow her clothes dryer to shrink a sweater that was too large for me.

Suzuka sensei helped me clean and pack my apartment when my two years on JET were over. Another Japanese friend Detani-san came over to help, and when she left, Suzuka sensei knelt on my entry way as a Japanese mother would, thanking Detani-san for all the trouble she had gone through on my behalf. At that moment, I felt like Suzuka sensei's daughter and was touched that she might view me that way. When Suzuka sensei saw me off at the airport I was sad to leave her, but I felt confident I would see her again.

When I returned to New Hampshire, I taught introductory Japanese to junior high school students for a year, applied to graduate school for Japanese studies, and got engaged. I invited Suzuka sensei to my wedding, which she and her two sons attended. Suzuka sensei and some other Japanese teachers dressed my husband in their wedding gift for him: a kendo uniform with “Eric” embroidered on the hakama pants. Again I was touched by Suzuka sensei's kindness.

Dedicated to Mrs. Bell Deer

After earning a Master of Arts degree in Japanese studies, I taught first-year Japanese at a prestigious boarding school and, at the same time, instructed second-year Japanese students at the University of New Hampshire. It was challenging work and I was tempted to give up, but I felt a bond with Japan that Suzuka sensei had nurtured. Giving up would have been like pouring years of time and energy down the drain, so I persevered. When I was no longer expected to teach Japanese language classes because a native speaker had been hired, I was asked to design a course on Japanese life and society for the university.

“Introduction to Japanese Culture and Civilization” (JPN 425) was an instant hit, attracting a diverse mix of students with majors ranging from computer science and mechanical engineering to history and art. Students told me that they took the class for many reasons: to understand their family heritage, to improve their anime and manga comprehension, to satisfy their curiosity about Japan that books such as *Memoirs of a Geisha* and *Shogun* had raised, and yes, to fulfill their foreign culture degree requirement. The curriculum that I developed required students to read academic articles and personal accounts, watch Japanese films, hear guest lectures, write essays, and give culture presentations, to give them a broad perspective on Japanese society.

Suzuka sensei took time to visit my JPN 425 classroom four years ago. She led a one-day workshop on Japanese calligraphy and the students were thrilled to learn from an authentic source. We took a group photo of her with the students holding up their hand-drawn characters for “dream,” “love,” “earth,” and “hope.” I was honored to have my mentor as a guest in my class. I was touched that she had made the trip despite an extremely tight schedule. She was on leave from work and pursuing a Master’s degree in

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teaching English as a foreign language in Japan. This was a huge personal challenge, but she was determined to succeed. As I took her to the airport the next morning, I hoped I would see her again soon.

My JET experience came full circle when a former JPN 425 student called and said he had just returned from Japan after three years as a JET. He had taken the first JPN 425 course I had ever taught. I thought it had gone horribly, but the fact that it had inspired him to go to Japan and learn more warmed my heart. The slide lecture he gave on his JET experience impressed the JPN 425 students and provided valuable insight into contemporary Japanese life. Most of all, it made all of the hard work I had invested in the course seem worthwhile.

While I was teaching JPN 425, the New Hampshire Council on World Affairs asked me to give presentations on Japanese school life and culture to elementary, middle and high schools students throughout the state. The Japanese students' presentations that I had videotaped with Suzuka sensei became an integral part of the talks I gave. While all parts of the video were informative, the most popular segment was the singing of the school song by the class clown's group. Through humor, this segment dispelled the myths that Japanese students never miss a homework assignment or have any fun, and also made the Japanese children seem familiar. I showed this video dozens of times to several hundred New Hampshire students and their teachers. They laughed *with* the Japanese boys every single time it was shown.

JPN 425 and the presentations for the New Hampshire Council on World Affairs were tools for integrating Japan into my life in a meaningful way. I taught JPN 425 eleven times in seven years to 300-plus students. I am grateful to have been a cultural

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ambassador for so many. In a state with limited diversity, I know that I broadened perspectives.

Being elected to the school board in my town required that I suspend teaching at the university. However, our district's first-ever foreign language program for kindergarten through eighth grade students will begin this fall, and I am happy to have been part of that process.

My Japanese odyssey continues in a more private realm these days. I tutor twelve year-old Sam in Japanese, as I have done weekly for the past eighteen months, and I am excited by his progress. My five- and seven-year-old children sing "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" in Japanese. A current family goal is to take a trip to Japan in 2010 to celebrate my return after a fifteen-year absence. I look forward to guiding and interpreting for my family, and of course, we all look forward to visiting Suzuka sensei and her family.

When Suzuka sensei and I worked together on the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program, she was an invaluable role model. She taught me how to be positive and try new things. Although it has been twelve years since I last visited her in Osaka, and four years since she last visited me in New Hampshire, I still feel close to her and by extension, to Japan. This connection inspires me to work hard to integrate Japan into my life in the United States, personally and professionally, in as many ways as possible. And I have come to the conclusion that Suzuka sensei will always be my role model.

Dreaming in Japanese

“You’ll know you have arrived when you start dreaming in Japanese.” Grandma’s voice on the other end of the line was so reassuring -- in a Nissei, sage-like sort of way – that I decided to pay closer attention to my dreams and less attention to my legs, which were falling asleep from sitting cross-legged on the tatami of my cramped roku-jo apartment. It was Sports Day at my school and I didn’t really have much time, but I could never turn down one of Grandma’s early morning calls. With two years of college Japanese and a month of JET under my belt, I wondered if I would ever “arrive” as she had described.

Grandma was a Nissei from a line of Kumamoto farmers, born and raised in northern California as “the pretty one” of ten siblings. She fell under the spell of a charming Canadian-born Nissei, the oldest of eight from a line of Tottori Samurai, and they soon married. Defying anti-Japanese immigration laws in the U.S. and Canada at the time, they fled to Japan for the right to live together. One world war and three children later, the second one being my mother, Grandma returned to California forever changed -- speaking and behaving like a native Japanese rather than her previous Nissei self. While Grandma’s siblings had been interned in camps on one side of the Pacific, Grandma had been on the other side, negotiating the Japanese way of life, yet choosing to raise her children with English in anticipation of eventually returning to North America. With the war’s end, Grandma continued to forge close ties with her Japanese relatives, and took great pride in being our family’s bridge across the Pacific. Now, she was encouraging my Japanese studies with weekly phone calls and the passing on of her trusty Word Tank before I left for Japan.

And so here I was, a happa living in inaka, fully immersed in all things Japanese, courtesy of the JET Program(me), yet feeling my gaijin half winning me over as Sports Day unfolded at the junior high school to which I had been assigned. Students and teachers alike were bustling busily about in preparation for the big event. I sat at my desk in the Teacher’s Room observing and straining to catch bits of Japanese that I might recognize in hopes of figuring out what was going on, and where I might fit in to this confusing flurry of activity.

Having made no progress whatsoever, I stared blankly outside the window to the field behind the school. Unlike most American schools, the field sported no grass or beautifully paved

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track, and lacked basketball and tennis courts. Instead, because it had poured heavily the night before, the field resembled an Olympic-sized swimming pool -- of mud. And though it was not raining now, the sun was nowhere to be seen.

I approached one of the English teachers, Yoshikawa Sensei, in an attempt to insert myself into the proceedings, and said, "That's too bad that we will have to cancel Sports Day!"

"Maybe no..." replied Yoshikawa Sensei.

"Chotto wakarimasen. Doushite?" I asked, trying to understand what, exactly, "Maybe no" meant in this context.

"Maybe the students will clean up the field."

Before I could respond, Yoshikawa Sensei had quickly excused himself and began directing a group of students. Clean up the field? Surely I had misunderstood. I decided to ask another teacher, Hatta Sensei, since her English was pretty good. She confirmed what Yoshikawa Sensei had said. I couldn't help it, but I burst out laughing in a glorious display of skepticism. "Now THIS, I gotta see!" I ran over to peer again out the window. Hordes of students were flooding out of the building onto the field, taking their shoes off and rolling up their pants. They carried buckets and rags. Before long, they were crouched in happy cliques, scattered about the field of mud, diligently sopping up water with their rags and ringing it into the buckets. The sight was so unbelievable and ridiculous that I knew photographic evidence was in order for my fellow ALTs and friends at home. I grabbed my camera and ran outside. Within minutes, I had snapped about a dozen shots of smiling students giving me the peace sign with mud all over their hands and faces. This was priceless! Then somebody called me.

"Julia Sensei!" It was Sugimoto Sensei, one of the youngest and friendliest English teachers. "Maybe you should stop taking photograph and help!"

"Okay, hai, wakarimashita!" I said, taking my place at her puddle. While I felt silly for taking part in this effort, I also felt a bit guilty for being identified as someone who was not pitching in. I went to work with Sugimoto Sensei and some students. Nobody was complaining or questioning our mandate. As a previous high school teacher in the States, I imagined American students in this scenario and chuckled to myself. They would never participate, much less

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cooperate, and if anybody would be doing the mopping, it would be a janitor. My thoughts were interrupted when one of the students spoke to me.

“Tanoshii deshou?” She laughed and continued to ring out her muddy rag.

At that moment, I realized that yes, this was fun! As I looked around, students were laughing, talking, and enjoying the mud on their feet. And so was I! Before we knew it, the sun had come out and some of the teachers were leveling the last of the mud with a squeegee. About an hour later, it was perfectly dry and Sports Day was a smashing success. It was as if it had never poured all night prior!

For the first time since arriving in Japan, on that quirky Sports Day, I had abandoned my American, happa, gaijin self, and made room for the Japanese way. This seemingly absurd group effort had, in fact, paid off and benefited all in not only the end, but in the means to that end. I suddenly saw the best of being Japanese in action – the unified, cooperative spirit, and unselfish group emphasis. Had this been an American school, Sports Day would have been cancelled and nobody would have experienced the joy of mud on their feet. I realized that if I were ever to “arrive”, I would have to do more than learn to speak Japanese and live in Japan. I would have to embrace my inner Japanese and *be* Japanese.

When the opportunity came to renew my JET contract, I did not hesitate. This would be the first step of my personal journey toward reclaiming and sharing my Japanese heritage. In the sixteen years since JET, I have managed to trade bows with African American middle school students as a Japanese teacher; experience the life of a Tokyo “shosha woman”; lose a lot of sleep studying kanji on my way to a Masters degree; chat with Kiichi Miyazawa and Akebono’s mother; forge a friendship with one of my Japanese relatives; and best of all, dream in Japanese.

Just as my second year on the JET Program(me) was getting started, Grandma passed away. I never had the chance to tell her that I had finally dreamed in Japanese. I like to think that I arrived though, perhaps in ways that even she never had. Japan had found the Japanese in me, and I was learning how to open myself up to embracing this culture and my heritage.

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Now, I am trying to pick up where Grandma left off. To ensure that my family's Japanese heritage is not lost, I am doing my best to be our bridge across the Pacific. I have made a conscious decision to raise my children, ages two and four, with Japanese language and culture. They attend a Japanese preschool and are now teaching me Japanese songs and games! I continue to learn an entirely new kind of Japanese, that of a parent, by speaking and reading with them every day. I look forward to the day when we will visit Japan together and wonder if they will find their own way to Japan in the future. In the meantime, I wait for that special moment when they tell me that they too are dreaming in Japanese.

Karaoke: The Great Unifier

I knew little Japanese when I moved to the mountains of northern Japan in 2001. I had practiced basic introductions while on the Tokyo orientation. That meant, when the new ALTs in my town met with the entire Board of Education, I could follow proper protocol. The simple “Hello, my name is such and such; I am from so and so” speech wasn’t a problem, but I couldn’t respond to anything asked afterwards. I was 22 and my mother still called me her “noisy child”; here I was almost a mute. Like many new arrivals, I smiled often and clung to my Americanness to apologize for frequent gaffes.

To break the ice a week after our arrival in the mountain town, my BOE took all five of us new ALTs to an *enkai*. I had read about *enkais* and spoken to people at the Tokyo orientation about them, but it still took me a couple days to prepare, looking up appropriate things to say in Japanese, preparing my outfit, even biking the route beforehand so I wouldn’t get lost and be late.

My curly hair, a source of fascination in Japan, twisted off my head in a prim knot. I had on eyeliner and mascara, accoutrements I had forgotten how to use during four years at a neo-hippie university. A conservative dark suit and small tasteful earrings completed my new professional look. My only concession to comfort was black flats—tottering around Tokyo the previous week in heels left my right ankle swollen. In the mirror I sucked in my belly and pulled in my butt (I hulked next Japanese women) and flashed what I thought was my brightest smile. Downstairs I boarded my bicycle, pedaling gingerly in a skirt.

Karaoke: The Great Unifier

In front of what I thought was a restaurant were the other new ALTs. We were all right on time. Our supervisor, a *genki* man who began every phone call and meeting with “My name is Kimishima” clapped his hands together. “Let’s enjoy karaoke!” he exclaimed. The other ALTs, most of who came to Japan with a working knowledge of the language, kept their smiles broad. I doubted their authenticity.

We were lead, equal numbers of overly-dressed foreigners and BOE members, into a closet of a room dominated by a wooden table. The walls were seafoam. The Japanese sat on group of benches, the foreigners on the other. Pitchers of beer the size of small children chilled between us. Kimishima-sensei pointed to one of the two black binders in the middle of the table: “English song.”

None of the other ALTs reached for the binder, so I did. The number of 70’s and 80’s tunes surprised me: Queen, old-school Madonna, ABBA. Did the Carpenters really have that many hits?

Kimishima, twinkly-eyed, punched some numbers into a large remote. Indecipherable *kanji* scrolled across the room’s outsize TV. Even though he remained seated, he clutched the microphone just like a man deprived of his beloved. We clapped heartily.

Kimishima, red-faced, took a gulp of beer. “Next,” he gestured towards the foreigners. My new Canadian and Australian friends, I noticed, were hiding their faces behind their mugs.

“I’ll go,” I said, in English, feeling desperate and maybe a little brave.

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The song I entered was “Hey Jude” by the Beatles. I picked it because I figured everyone had heard of it, and I wanted nothing more than to please my hosts. “Hey Jude,” I sang, slightly shaky. Everyone nodded in recognition. A couple Japanese men started mouthing along.

I’m going to make it better, I thought. I stood. An ALT cheered. I became less demure as the verses developed. Hand gestures were added.

Then the Na na na na part started.

Following the lead of one of the BOE members, who hadn’t spoken a word besides *konichiwa*, I leapt onto the couch cushions: “Na na na na!”

“Na na na na!” responded the Japanese men. Now everyone had their outdoor shoes up on the cushions. I took advantage of the unity to show off my best Paul McCartney wail: “Hey Jude, Hey Jude, WAAAAH.”

And then the song was over, and I too reached for my beer. My body pulsed. “Good! Good!” yelled the BOE members I shook my head in poorly hidden modesty. I knew I was good.

More beer was delivered. (*Nomihodai*—all you can drink—is a fine thing indeed.) Glowing with alcohol, the other BOE members and ALTs took their turns. I joined in as many as I could, mikeless, leaping around the room in my flats to provide backup harmonies. A costume trunk appeared. The night ended with a fuzzy yellow wig on my head as I free-styled to “Killing Me Softly.” Kimishima accompanied on air guitar. Outside we all bowed graciously, dangerously close to pitching on the concrete. On the bike ride home I wandered into a fence.

Karaoke: The Great Unifier

Karaoke was what I could do and I used it to my best advantage in social situations. Inadequacies I felt as a Japanese speaker could be forgotten in front of a mike. Whenever we had BOE events from then on, the other ALTs pushed me forward as their entertainment representative. When out alone on an *enkai* with my schools, the *kyoto-sensei* was thrilled when I eagerly joined him in “Sing a Song.” We only knew basic compliments in the others’ language, but karaoke (and beer) united us.

Karaoke even came in handy in uncomfortable situations. Once, on a disastrous *go-con* (group blind date) I was paired with a purple sweatshirt-ed man-child. He wanted to discuss various, ahem, positions, so I positioned myself at the front of the bar with a microphone and never sat back down.

Eventually I joined a choir in my town as a soprano. Yoshie, a woman my age who had spent a month in California, took interest in the group’s only *gaijin*, and so I made my first Japanese friend. Not only did I sing in Japanese, but also Latin, English and, bizarrely, Finnish. I wrote all my Japanese music out in *hiragana*, which I now could recognize.

Now I worked on expanding my karaoke repertoire outside of English. I learned the popular “*Ashita ga aru sa*” and perennial favorite “*Sukiyaki*.” My Japanese tutor escorted me to a karaoke bar one lesson to learn the *enka* classic “*Kawa no nogare no yo ni*.”

The last karaoke took place before the ALTs from all over the prefecture returned back to English-speaking society. We gathered in the same room the BOE had first taken us. Americans, Brits, Canadians, Aussies, Kiwis and Japanese paid homage to the

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drunken singalong. The Oceanic crowd sang their favorite Europop, like “Dancing Queen.” Beer and sake flowed. The Brits blessed us with Blur. Our friend Daisuke treated us to SMAP. Arms around shoulders, swaying, I lead my countrymen to “Sweet Child O’Mine.” A young swoopy-haired Japanese man in the next room heard all the *gaijin* voices and decided to join us. He assured us the song he chose, “Train Train,” was in English. But only the chorus, consisting of the words Train Train, was. We thanked our new friend anyway, and he left happily with a mug of beer.

When I needed a Japanese fix back in New York, I loaded up my friends for the local karaoke joints Sing Sing or Japas. Some of them were tone deaf. But I’ve discovered that doesn’t matter. Karaoke is not about the best voice. Karaoke forms community through catchy tunes and insipid lyrics. When you sing “Living on a Prayer,” the passion with which you rock is all that counts.

After a few years in New York, I moved on again to the Midwest. Like Japan, all my friends from my time there gathered for a last karaoke. “*Mina-san, utaimasho!*” I shouted in welcome.

“Huh?” they answered.

“Let’s sing!”

One and the Same

“Because I’m like a Teriyaki McBurger.”

That was it...the culminating explanation for why I made the ideal candidate for the JET program. Like McDonald’s, I could use the familiar to infiltrate an unknown market. My last name was one and the same as a famous *ninja*, and my hair impossibly straight and black. These qualities gave me a special edge, I reasoned, so that the locals would find me a little less foreign, a trifle more palatable. In Japan, I hoped, I’d finally be able to blend.

You see, to grow up Japanese American in the Midwest is to have to constantly explain oneself. My family learned this reality quickly. During my first check-up, a nurse glimpsed the bluish blotch enveloping my back, the ‘Mongolian spot’ that most Asians have at birth. “Oh!” she exclaimed, and ran off to report my mother for abuse.

Later on, perfect strangers posed the oddest questions. Did I speak like a “Chinaman”? Could I do karate? Did I eat raw fish? The answers were no, no and no. But in that case, what *did* I do? I could fold an *origami* crane. I knew that my family liked rice. Beyond that, I possessed scarce knowledge of my own culture. I had lived most of my childhood with Japanese grandparents, but to me they were already ghosts – I could sense their presence, but had no tangible way to make contact. Their cryptic language and peculiar customs held little interest for me. Stubborn and childish, I shunned anything “different.”

Unwittingly, I had settled for a lifestyle that repelled most of my immigrant heritage. As a legacy of World War II, the internment of Japanese Americans left an indelible stain on our community. Though my parents were too young to remember it well, the psychological impact clearly lingered. Having sacrificed all that was precious, having weathered three trying years behind barbed wire, my family emerged from the war battle-scarred and confused. Survival depended on being as American as possible. Like a tattoo that one comes to later regret, our Japanese-ness felt shameful and foolish, yet impossible to hide.

Then along came JET and a personal opportunity. In Japan, perhaps I could turn an uneasy truce between my upbringing and my ancestry into an asset. For once, my appearance

One and the Same

would help me fit in. If this reconnaissance mission was successful, I could finally feed the Japanese part of my soul that was malnourished and weak. I requested an assignment in the south, where my grandparents were born.

Life in my small town proved full of “a-ha” moments. Every day revealed some puzzling behavior or jarring difference that tried my ability to make sense of my surroundings. Meanwhile, the townspeople welcomed me with fanfare that I felt was undeserved. I had my own newspaper column and was often thrust into the local limelight. So much for blending in.

Once in awhile someone would confide that my Japanese appearance made me more approachable than the typical foreigner. Here it was – the Teriyaki McBurger principle in action. Yet in a mysterious turnabout, I rarely felt as obviously and persistently American than my first months as a JET. Though the questions were different, the situation felt startlingly familiar. Did I own a gun? Did I eat beef every day? Could I use chopsticks? The answers were no, no, and just barely. The attention was flattering and frustrating. I tired of having to satisfy the curiosity of others. Had I traveled more than six thousand miles only to land back at the beginning?

Fall arrived, and one day I was puttering around the community center when the sky darkened, like a blanket had been pulled over the sun. The wind began to cry loudly and without restraint. This was my first typhoon. I knew I had nothing to fear, but the fury of the elements made me anxious. As was my nervous habit, I turned to talk to whoever happened to be sitting next to me.

This is how I made friends with Takako. She was sitting demurely with her hands in her lap and her legs in a wheelchair.

“I know you,” she grinned. “I read about you in the paper.” I forced a smile, thinking that we would have a friendly but superficial conversation.

Competing with the storm outside, she and I talked furiously about a whirlwind of topics: the prime minister, pros and cons of small town life, reading versus television, and what I would miss when I left Japan. In a rare moment I lost my self-consciousness and just enjoyed

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expressing my thoughts to kindred spirit. I let go of the conversation reluctantly as the rain dwindled and Takako felt it would be safe to go home. Offhandedly, I invited her to join my English conversation class.

From that week on, Takako sat in the first row, not missing a single moment. Her language skills didn't markedly improve, but her unabashed enthusiasm made her a delight. Unlike many, she could care less about making mistakes or looking foolish. Because she was different, everyone was looking at her anyway. She just had fun.

During my visits I began to grasp what a formidable person existed behind the happy-go-lucky exterior. Takako could do anything. Customized leg braces made her mobile on her knees, so she could plant a garden and do chores. While others bought *niku-man* meat buns ready-made from the store, Takako showed me how to punch down the dough and concoct a tasty filling by instinct rather than recipe. We chuckled when she hung her father's old clothing on the laundry line so she wouldn't be vulnerable as a woman living alone, and later laughed uproariously when the whole town thought she had taken a lover.

One day we decided to go into the city by train, which took a considerable effort. We called ahead to have the station prepare for a wheelchair, but even before that was the ordeal of getting her there by taxi. Never had I dealt with such obstacles, so it was rather eye-opening. At the end of the day, Takako casually mentioned that the problems associated with getting around were one reason she had not left her house since childhood.

Surely I misheard her. Of course she had left her home before; I knew how capable she was. Takako reassured me that since rheumatism deformed her limbs at age 9, her family had not allowed her outside. Back then, disabilities were considered an embarrassment and burden, so she withdrew from school and society. Apparently, her first foray into the town after decades of isolation was the very day we met. Thereafter, my class gave her reason to venture out of her house twice a week.

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This astonished me. It was then I realized that as different as our situations were, Takako and I shared a common challenge. Everyone saw her first for her disability, not the person she was. Even I constantly described her to others as “my friend in the wheelchair,” instead of “my friend who can knit a sweater in two days,” or “my student who has never missed a class.” This, in spite of my own struggle with stereotypes I faced as an Asian American in the U.S. and my bitter complaints about Japanese people who pigeonholed me as a foreigner or *gaijin*. Suddenly, like a clap of thunder, I understood that we were one and the same.

My hypocrisy stared at me with a naked eye, and I squirmed under its glare. Amazingly, Takako did not register my unease. Instead, she gave me credit for transforming her life. After years of being housebound, she was *Amaterasu*, lured out of her cave to light the darkened world with warmth and sunshine. I had a fresh and humbling understanding of the joy she brought to our lessons each week. Having more than once questioned whether my presence Japan had any impact or made a difference, now I dared to acknowledge that it maybe it did.

I think it was no coincidence that the typhoon blew Takako into my life at a time when I needed her most. She challenged the importance I gave to my own insecurities and helped me cast aside others’ preconceived notions of who I should be. Takako showed me that while I scrambled to gain acceptance from everyone else, I forgot what it meant to accept myself.

Years later, the JET experience remains an inextricable part of my life. Across the table sits my husband, born in Tokyo. There on the shelf you’ll see my attempt at Japanese pottery, the vase that ended up as a plate. Behind that, stacks of books on Japanese language and culture. But the piece of Japan that matters most is something others don’t see. It’s Takako, who walks by my side each and everyday, nurturing a grateful self-assurance that continues to grow. Because of her courageous example, wherever I may be in this world, I am comfortable in my Japanese American skin.

Otori: The Communication Drink

“Do you know what otori is?” asked Tim.

I looked at him blankly “No, I don’t.” “*Otori*” would be my first Okinawan word.

I had waited what seemed like an eternity for the letter I now held in my hand, the letter from the Japanese Consulate telling me I had been accepted into the JET program. With college winding down and graduation in two weeks, I had been nervous about my next move, but now I knew. I was going to Japan, a place I had been in love with since I had watched my first Godzilla movie. Now I would be going there to live and work as an English teacher. I was so happy I hugged my friend picking him up off the ground. I HAD A JOB, I WAS GOING TO LIVE IN JAPAN!!!..., where the hell was Gusukube? I dropped my friend and ran off to the library to find a map.

Okinawa: Gusukube is a town on Miyako-jima, an island in the Okinawa archipelago, not far from Taiwan I learned when checking the world atlas. My friend and kendo teacher Katsu told me that Miyako and the surrounding islands were like the Hawaiian island to Americans. I had been chosen to go to a tropical island in the South China Sea to teach English junior high school students. Katsu then told me they are known for their drinking culture. I thought this an odd comment at the time, maybe misunderstood, but then again we had our own drinking culture in Minnesota. Still I couldn’t be more excited, but before my two years on Miyako were finished I would come to understand my misinterpretation and many other things I had once though I knew about Japan.

Otori: The Communication Drink

I had previously spent a year abroad living with a host family and studying in the Kansai area. Unlike some of my fellow JETs I thought I had a handle on the Japan thing with my passable conversation skills and my head full of Japanese culture and history. When I learned our prefectural leader was from the same island I was going to, I grabbed a seat next to him to pick his brain about Miyako; soon learning that what I thought would be familiar territory was going to be a whole new learning experience and maybe even another language. Okinawan *Hogen*!?!?

Tim had just asked me if I had ever heard of *Otori*. I sat there with my mouth open slightly racking my brain for the word, but fearing that I had come across something entirely new. Tim was a tall lanky Canadian who taught in a nearby town and looked right at home slugging back the mug of Asahi beer with rest of our prefectural group at the eccentric Tokyo bar he had brought us too.

“*Otori*?” I said, “No, I’ve never heard that before.” Tim told me it roughly translated to “the communication drink.”

“It is kind of an important part of the local custom,” he said. He then proceeded to with a little demonstration and soon the rest of the group wanted in on what looked like a drinking game that Tim seemed to be teaching me. He smiled and with the rest of the Okinawan JETs he lead a round of *Otori*, but by the end it looked like the rest of our fellow JETs might slip under the table so we headed back to the hotel.

“So that’s *Otori*?” I said as we spilled out of the bar.

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Tim smiled again and shook his head.

“Not really.” He said. “We only went one round and we were drinking beer.”

My eyes bulged as the calculation slowly came together through my alcohol induced fog. “They use sake!” I said, blurring out the last word in a little shock.

“No they have a local alcohol called *awamori*.” “*Awamori*” would be my second *hogen* word of the night.

“What’s it like?” I asked.

Tim thought about it. “It’s hard to describe, it’s clear and they cut it with water because it’s strong, but not like vodka or sake, don’t worry you’ll be fine,” he said. So with Tim’s mischievous wink and assurance that I would find out soon enough, I staggered back to my hotel room thinking about *otori*.

“*Otori mashimasu*,” Said the school superintendent, and the board of education members echoed him in one voice. It was my welcome party with the employees of the Gusukube board of education. I had only been there a couple of weeks and tonight was my introduction to not only the whole board of education and some municipal workers in the Gusukube town office, but their introduction to me, the new assistant language teacher. It was also my real first introduction to *otori*.

Something that my fellow JETS misunderstood was that *Otori* is not a drinking game. *Otori* takes place when ever there is a special gathering; welcoming the new teacher, a speech contest, town festival, *undokai*, *ekiden* or other special events where after the event is held, the organizers have a dinner where they celebrate the day’s events.

Otori: The Communication Drink

Otori starts with a speech usually by the most senior person. They stand and give a brief (or sometimes not so brief) speech and then the person ends by saying “*otori mashimasu.*” The rest of the people respond in kind and drain their little glass of *awamori*. But that is not the end, because in *otori* everyone who is at the table or in the circle must make a speech and the group will follow each speech with a shot of *awamori*, starting from the seniors and working all the way down to the juniors. They will make speech after speech and take shot after shot until everyone has gone and only empty bottles remain.

Most would retire home after that, but a few of the stouter among us would continue on to another venue perhaps a karaoke parlor or hostess bar to possibly begin the ritual all over again.

While it seemed like a way to get everyone good and drunk after a hard days work, I soon began to see something else. We all talked, we all gave speeches but what was said and what was felt weren't always the same. Or what might start off about our great and hard work for the school festival would end with us crying about the young mother who hung herself or me who had experience a friend's suicide so long ago commiserating with student's parents and other people I had barely known three hours before. I won't say every *otori* session I came from brought a new enlightened feeling or better understanding of the people of Miyako or Okinawa in general. There were some nights I don't remember coming away with much of anything, but a severe headache the next day. Looking back on those nights I later realized reminded me of tribal meetings

Otori: The Communication Drink

and clan gatherings from my anthropology classes, not in a scientific or analytical way, but in the feeling of people coming together to share a part of themselves that crossed over cultural and linguistic barriers. I didn't find some Rosetta stone but the *otori* allowed me to open up to the Okinawa people and see from their world and their side of things. We talked and spoke about everything from the most mundane to the most horrific. I will never forget hearing the stories from my superiors how the Okinawans were treated during the war. One night as *otori* was in full swing an old prefectural employee told how he was found by American troops chained to a cave dehydrated with only a machine gun and fetid bucket of water. *Otori* brought out these stories, tales and other conversation in the gaps between speeches and pauses to eat more food. But it was here as much as anywhere else where I learned the most from my host town and its people.

Later I realized that first night of *otori* was how the town got to know me for the first time. I ate everything they put in front of me and drank everything they put in my glass and when it came my turn to give my speech I was able to give a decent message in Japanese and was also able to throw in some Okinawa *hogen* I had learned in my early weeks on the island. Another ALT told me later that they were worried about me because I was the son of a minister and had minored in religion. They were concerned I might be like some of the Mormons on the island in my views on alcohol, but when the beer and the *awamori* started to flow and the *otori* was in full swing I assured them I was at least up to the challenge.

Later that night singing the Beatle's tune "Let It Be" that would become a karaoke

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staple for me, I began to loosen up and relax with my new found friends as another round of *otori* had begun. *Otori* would be the experiences I would later dwell on with fondness and sadness, but with great happiness all the same as it was one more step in finding my way in the land of the rising sun.

“Otori Mashimasu!”

Ping Pong Diplomacy

Anyone making a list of the 20th century's greatest catalysts for international exchange would be mistaken to ignore the power of ping pong: The first Americans to set foot on Chinese soil since Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution weren't diplomats or journalists – they were the U.S. Table Tennis team. Brought about by an impromptu souvenir swap in 1971 between Chinese and American players at a World Table Tennis Championship in Nagoya, “Ping Pong Diplomacy” – the cultural exchange of both countries' ping pong players – paved the way for President Richard Nixon's historic visit to a country that considered America one of its greatest enemies at the time. Over a decade before that, my father discovered the effects that a spinning celluloid ball could have half a world away from home.

When he was young, my father was ranked one of the best junior table tennis players in the United States. He enlisted in the army after he graduated from high school and was sent to Hokkaido's Chitose Air Base, which was then used by the Allied Occupation in the aftermath of Japan's World War II defeat. My father continued his favorite pastime with the other soldiers on the base. They never provided any real competition for him, but he didn't have anyone else to play with. Japan in the 1950's was still reeling from its loss in the war, and there wasn't much interaction or exchange between Chitose Air Base and the country surrounding it.

At the same time, however, these were also the golden years of table tennis in Japan. The shattered country found pride and inspiration in Toshio Tanaka and Ichiro Ogimura – names my father can recall nearly a half-century later as titans who dominated world table tennis for nearly all of the 1950's. He doesn't remember why the man from Sapporo came to the base one day and invited my father to meet his table tennis team there. My father credits this man, however, with instilling an interest in Japanese culture that stayed with him the rest of his life.

The man was the coach of the Hokkaido Table Tennis Team, and he wanted my father, barely 19 years old, to show his team the curious “shakehand” tennis-like grip that Western players used. In return, they taught him how to effectively use the powerful defense that the Asian

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“penhold” grip provided. Through the exchange of Eastern style and Western form over a 9’x 5’ table, my father made his first Japanese friends.

He befriended several members of the team, but the man he most looked forward to playing against was Ichiro Kudo. My father had a low forehand that could crush the ball and send it hard and straight across the net by fractions of an inch. It had made him a champion in the U.S., but Kudo quickly learned to send it back. The Japanese player would return the ball with a stroke that my father had never seen before. It wasn’t fast like the American style, but the heavy topspin on the ball made it shoot into the air off of any surface it touched, and it turned my father’s returns into ineffective lobs.

My father spent six months traveling snowy roads between Chitose and Sapporo in his enormous ’49 Cadillac to play against Kudo and his teammates. Spring came, and his unit was transferred down to Yokosuka Base near Yokohama. He kept in touch with the Hokkaido Table Tennis Team for the remainder of his few years in Japan, but only Kudo stayed in contact after my father returned home. Kudo’s unreturnable topspin, a Japanese invention used by then-world champion Tanaka, hadn’t been seen stateside when my father left for Japan. It had caught on by the time he returned to the U.S. It reminded my father of his friend overseas long after the letters ceased.

Nearly 40 years later, I was accepted into the JET Program and sent to teach English in Aomori Prefecture. My father had foreseen my decision to live in Japan long before I made it: Since I can remember, he’d always had fantastic stories about his time in Japan and the people who lived there. Before I left, he told me about his friend Kudo up in Sapporo, and jokingly told me to look him up if I ever made it to Hokkaido.

While I was going through the never-ending welcome *enkai* of my introduction to Aomori, my father returned to his family home in Boston and began sifting through his old mementos from Japan. Among the paper fans and yellowed *yukata*, he found a box that contained

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the last letter he'd ever received from his old friend in Sapporo. Kudo's address was still legible on the envelope, and my father asked me to see if he still lived there. My Japanese was nearly nonexistent at the time, so the Board of Education staff patiently helped me draft a simple letter explaining who my father was, who I was, and whether I might be able to cross the Tsugaru Strait sometime and talk some table tennis with him. Summer passed without a reply. I forgot about the letter until one day in October, when I received a reply from Ichiro Kudo welcoming me to use his ping pong table anytime.

I made it up to the Kudo household in early December. I had just taken the annual Japanese Proficiency Exam in Sapporo, and had a head full of newly-learned Japanese with which to greet the Kudo family. I never got to use it. Kudo's granddaughter, Akiko, met me at the train station and greeted me in perfect English. She was an English Literature student at Hokkaido University and had recently returned from a year of studying abroad in California. "My grandfather said that he'd pay for the entire trip if I chose to study English in college," she explained.

I'd never seen a photo of Kudo, and he'd never seen one of me. It was hard to picture the athlete my father had described in the stocky, balding man at the door of the Kudo household. To me, he looked like one of the hundreds of Japanese *ojiisan* that I'd seen over the past few months. To him, I was a portal to the past. "I'd have known who you were even if you were in the middle of a crowd in New York," he said.

As with every warm welcome to a Japanese household, there was the feast and the beer and the photos afterward. But on this evening at the Kudo home, the ping pong came first. I followed Kudo and Akiko to their unheated garage. Although it was clear from childhood that my brother and I would never take up our father's ping pong legacy, I'd played a lot since I was very young and seldom lost matches. With a bright blue Snoopy scarf around his neck the entire time, Kudo gave me one of the toughest games of my life. I managed to win two of three long sets. It seemed strange that I was able to beat him, considering my father's stories of his prowess.

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When Kudo and I had finished playing, Akiko stepped up to the table. Just as my father taught me table tennis when I was young, Kudo had passed his love of the sport to his granddaughter. After she proceeded to crush me in three straight sets, I realized that Kudo had probably let a few of his balls fly long – in the name of diplomacy.

At a time when most foreign policy hinged on oil barrels and arms races, the members of the Chinese and American Table Tennis Teams used their skills to create an unlikely bridge between East and West. Through the same sport, my father and Kudo forged a bond between their countries that was carried on through generations. Commodore Matthew Perry was born too early to witness the awesome influence of ping pong. If he had, he would have left his fleet of Black Ships in America and arrived in Yokohama Harbor carrying only a hollow white ball and two rubber-faced paddles.

Sakiko's Speech

The air was hot and heavy with humidity on my last day at Ni-chu, the cicadas thrumming in the air around me as I walked to school. It reminded me of my first day there, one year ago. The first day I attended an all-school assembly, which was terrifying. I didn't understand that they had assembled all 500 students just to meet me. The Principal gave a speech, none of which I understood, and I had no clue where I was supposed to go, or when, or what to do. Amano-sensei, the lead English teacher, had to shepherd me around like a poor, lost child. I had worked so carefully on a speech in Japanese, a language I didn't speak, and then, as I stood before that anonymous sea of bodies, all dressed in the same white, blue and plaid, I couldn't do it, and gave a short speech in English instead. Afterward, as the mass of students filed out, some glanced shyly at me, but they were just as scared of me as I was of them.

A year later, I approached the front doors of Ni-chu with confidence, comfortable with the school and its students. "Good Morning, Merissa-sensei!" Greetings welcomed me to the school, as several third year girls, Sakiko, Haruka and Miki, rushed past, wide smiles on their faces. "Good Morning!" I replied, smiling back. Those girls had worked hardest in my lessons throughout the year, always eager to participate in any new activity, and attending any extra English club activities. The first several months they hardly spoke to me; I didn't even know their names. As the year wore on, I noticed they spoke to me more frequently, especially Sakiko, even though she wasn't the best in English class, or as outgoing as the other girls. She was very curious about America and my hometown. She was always asking me to eat school lunch at her table, so I could tell her stories of college, popular music, and American school lunches.

Sakiko's Speech

On my last day at Ni-chu, as I approached the gym where the assemblies were held, I was reminded that this would be the last time I would visit this school as a teacher, and a wave of sadness overtook me. I only had an all-school assembly to attend before leaving for America. I was looking forward to my last assembly with mixed feelings. Trepidation, excitement, sadness, were all jumbled up inside of me. I was eager to return home to my family, but dreading leaving behind the community I had created here.

Amano-sensei led me to the stage once all the students had filled the gym. I sat on the stage, just like at the first assembly, during the ceremony. As I mounted the steps to the stage and looked out at the school, I no longer saw an anonymous sea of faces and uniforms. I saw the first years up front, Michiko, Kubota and Akira. The second years were in the middle, the girls subtly waving at me and giggling. And the third years in the back, looking cool, each having managed to personalize their uniform. Eisuke, Sakiko, Kiki, so many individuals, I don't know how I ever saw them as only a group.

As the Principal began his speech, I listened, part of my mind astonished that I was able to understand, only a year later, to what he was saying. Throughout the ceremony I kept experiencing that surreal feeling, as I comfortably navigated the assembly on my own. Amano-sensei was not in charge of me this time; I was part of the school now. I understood not only the language but also what would happen during the ceremony, what I should do, I had even memorized the school song. This school, these teachers and students, had become my community, my home. Then, the Principal said a student wanted to give a speech, and introduced Sakiko, the third year who had shown so much interest in me. Sakiko, who wouldn't speak to me the first few months I taught, who slowly became involved in my class, who eventually demonstrated such interest in

Sakiko's Speech

my culture and language that she excelled in English. She came up to the stage, smiling nervously, holding a piece of paper and an enormous bouquet of orange lilies. I can still smell the scent of the lilies' light perfume, drifting across the heavy, hot air in the gym. She began her speech, in English. As Sakiko read her speech I felt so proud of her, for her courage and language ability. For her to speak English in front of the entire school was incredibly brave. As she read, I realized that this was not merely a farewell to a job; I would be saying goodbye to people who had become part of my life, and my heart. Sakiko thanked me for coming to Japan, for helping her with English, and for making English interesting to her. She asked me to come back as soon as I could. The inevitable welling of tears happened, and as Sakiko gave me the flowers and a hug, we both were crying.

Sakiko's ability to give that speech in English, in front of the whole school, was a tribute to my role not only as a teacher, but as a cultural representative. She was not active in school council, nor was she the best in English class, but her interest in me, and in my culture, gave her the determination and courage to study well enough to show the entire school her skill. For a student who started out too shy to even speak in class, she was remarkable. But she and I were two sides of the same coin. Because of Sakiko and students like her, and other Japanese friends I had made, I had studied Japanese all year, and tried hard to learn about Japan. I too gave a speech in a different language to the whole school, in Japanese, demonstrating the same success in learning about another culture.

Human beings share a curiosity about their world, a desire to understand people and places around them. With the world shrinking through affordable travel and media,

Sakiko's Speech

people's curiosity is expanding. Sakiko showed me this shared trait, and showed me that we are all coming from the same place as humans. Through the JET program, I was able to give her tools to satisfy her curiosity about my place, and me, and she showed me about her, and her place.

That last assembly, and Sakiko's speech, taught me that it only takes one person to make a difference. Sakiko and I built a bridge that we will both use the rest of our lives to reach out to one another and to others. I know that I will strive for her courage to stand up and speak out, even in difficult situations, and I hope that her curiosity about the world and her determination to learn about it will continue throughout her life.

Silence

I never felt more alone in Japan than when I was riding on the buses, silence pressing down on my foreign shoulders. In Japan no one talked on the buses. Silence was the only way to maintain your personal space. In winter, words would turn to frost anyway and in summer they'd just drip down your chin with the sweat, making it pointless to begin a conversation. Everyday, everyone commuted to work or school in their drab uniforms and suits. Swaying back and forth, mouths shut tight against the day and those around you, sometimes too much silence makes you mean.

There were a few things my family kept under wraps even before I left. Granddaddy had never been the most affectionate man. I remember more glares than smiles. After I applied to teach in Japan things got nasty. Christmas contorted into a shouting match across red and green ribbons. World War Two had sucked the sweetness out of Granddaddy. His stubborn refusal to speak about what happened on Iwojima pickled his feelings so sour no one could ask him about it. It also kept us from telling him about my plans to go overseas.

But off I went. I worked at eight different high schools in and around my city. Silence prevailed in the classroom as well as outside. Waiting at the bus stop one day with a young man from Fishery High School, we watched the rain fall to the sidewalk. The rain smothered any words we may have said until a man got too close to the curb. As the bus pulled up to the light, it doused him. The businessman waddled away cursing as his shoes squished. "Wrong place, wrong time." I murmured. I didn't think the boy heard me. He only stood silent and watched the man disappear around the corner.

The ones who held the pin that popped the annoying space bubble were the very young and the very old. Kindergarteners babbled at me as if I was just like them and

Silence

understood high decibel, warp speed Japanese. It was harder to decipher the guttural chortles from elderly *obaasans* (grandmothers) and *ojiisans* (grandfathers). The old had their own language, omitting grammatical rules left and right. Trips to the grocery were always interesting. Old women took it upon themselves to make sure I ate the proper Japanese foods, like raw octopus legs and crispy fish embryos. My cookies and chips disappeared replaced with rice crackers and green tea, with toothy smiles and pats on my powerless hands. Then the *obaasans* would don their baseball helmets, hobble to their motor scooters and zoom away with their plastic bags hanging down like triumphant battle flags. I didn't always get to eat what I wanted, but at least they talked to me.

Later my town scheduled culture lessons for the local foreign English teachers. Our calligraphy lesson was taught by Hamazaki-sensei, an *ojiisan* the same age as Granddaddy. He looked nice enough, his dark skin wrinkled so deeply it was hard to see his eyes when he smiled. I expected the same curiosity that bridged the culture gap from him as the rest of his age group. But that night the calligraphy brushes came out and that sweet old-man smile disappeared. There was steel behind those soft bristles. He snapped at me as soon as my brush hit the paper. "Stroke order is wrong." Snatching away my paper, he whacked my knuckles with his brush. It didn't hurt but it was hard enough to uncover anger. "You know Japanese. Do it again." This repeated throughout the entire two hour lesson and earned Hamazaki-sensei the cruel nickname "Brush-Nazi." It stuck with the other ALTs for a year.

Talk about The War was also taboo for most Japanese. But some were more open about the topic. My husband, our friend and I took a taxi and made the mistake of asking

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the driver if he knew where the Cultural Exchange Office was. He didn't. To make up for his lack of direction, the cabbie decided to give us a taste of culture.

"I don't like English." He started out. I took the bait and asked. "Oh, why not?" Behind me, Jenni and Greg cringed in the back seat. "Because of The War." The driver began, "My father was a kamikaze fighter." My friends' eyes grew larger in the rear view mirror as the taxi accelerated. "Everyday, Mama, Papa, Baby...bye-bye!" We sped through a red light. "Boom!" He shouted and laughed when we jumped. "That's why I don't like English." He grinned, "But your Japanese is pretty good! I'm happy to talk to you." I bowed slightly, my hand clamped to the door handle. "T-thank you." We made it to our destination safely if not a little carsick.

A week after that, I returned to Fishery High School. Wandering the halls, I saw the student who waited with me at the bus stop. I looked over his shoulder. An intricate model of a boat sat behind thick glass that reflected my student's sad face. "Are you okay?" I asked, alarmed that he was on the verge of tears. His words were so badly slurred I couldn't understand him. Frustration crossed his young face before he motioned for me to follow him back to the teachers' room. Inside he cornered the English teacher and asked him to explain. The teacher sighed, ran his hand through his hair and said, "The ship is a model. It was a ship our students sailed to Hawaii. An American submarine hit it and our ship sank. This student's brother died when the ship went under." I burst out in tears and started to blubber apologies for being so insensitive. I tried to say I was sorry my country did such a thing. The boy shook his head and said his first English words to me. "Wrong place, wrong time."

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For two years I went without speaking every time I rode the bus, gagged by the cultural taboo. I always had lots of room in the small seats even in when people were cramming the aisle in the mornings. Sometimes I listened to the whispered words about me from behind. Very few people knew I spoke Japanese. My students also indulged in this innocent eavesdropping and watched my reaction to conversations about how much I weighed and if I could use chopsticks or ate rice. I only smiled and ignored it. If my student could forgive the death of his brother, I could deal with a little behind the back gossip.

I did more with my community and saw more of Hamazaki-sensei. In between heated lessons we became good friends. I think I amused the old man, but he'd never admit it. I dropped the mean nickname. He doted on me the way I wished my real Granddaddy would. I even made the cover of the International Club's annual report thanks to Hamazaki-sensei's growing prowess with Photoshop.

One day I was dosing against the window of my fifth bus of the day when I heard the doors squeal open. Behind me I heard greetings from other people who were headed back to town. I almost jumped out of my skin when someone yelled "Oi, M!" There was Hamazaki-sensei hobbling down the aisle one hand raised in hello. I bowed then slid over as he plopped down beside me. For the next thirty minutes we had the nicest conversation in Japanese and shattered the vow of silence on mass transit with reckless abandon. The driver glared at us the entire time. I could feel the panic from the women behind us who assumed I had no idea what they were saying for the past year and a half. I couldn't stop grinning while Hamazaki-sensei kept wondering aloud why the other passengers looked so panicked. As we neared my last stop, he grew silent again, then

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with a sad smile he said, “I’m going to miss you when you go home.” I fought back tears as I got off the bus and waved to the 80-year-old Japanese man who now seemed like family.

When I got home I visited my grandparents. My grandmother was diagnosed with lung cancer and it was important to see her again. But she was tired and went to bed. The silence fell as my parents went to the car. My Granddaddy sat at the kitchen table as I put my photo albums back into my bag. He hadn’t looked at a single snapshot or said a word. I had loved Japan and it was hard for me to look back. How much harder would it have been if I hated the Japanese as a whole? Then his voice broke the silence and I jumped like on the bus with Hamazaki-sensei. “I missed you.”

I turned and said, “Granddaddy, let me tell you about someone I met in Japan.” I walked back to the table. “He reminded me a lot of you.”

The Cicada's Cry

In the cicada's cry

No sign can foretell

How soon it must die.

–Basho



It is often moments we consider the most mundane which in retrospect prove themselves to be the most influential in our lives. A recent postcard from a friend, a former coworker from my time in Japan, reminded me of this. She mentioned a time when I, along with another friend, had accompanied her and her two children to dinner one evening after work. Nearly four years had passed since that day and, until I read her card, I had completely forgotten about that evening. It was one of those moments so seemingly mundane that I had had almost no reason whatsoever to recall it.

I remember that the table service was excruciatingly slow that night. It seemed hours crawled by as the five of us searched for ways to amuse ourselves in the midst of the boredom while we waited for our food to arrive. Although normally busy, the Italian-style family restaurant near my apartment was packed with more customers than usual that night. The rush had exposed the fact that the restaurant was severely understaffed, as the three young waitresses scurried about from table to table and in and out of the kitchen, bringing out orders or attempting to carry away dirty plates, glasses, and utensils from just-cleared tables. All around us, every booth and table was crammed with high school students, young office workers, and mothers and fathers with their children in tow, every one of them straining their voices in order to make themselves heard over the surrounding din.

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It was a constant battle to maintain any kind of a conversation, but at our booth we made the best of it, as we three coworkers discussed the English classes we had taught that afternoon or the upcoming teachers' workshop our office was organizing. The long wait, however, had begun to take its toll on my friend's two children. Their youthful energy had just about reached the breaking point after about twenty minutes and still no sign of pasta. My American friend, Lance, kept them entertained for a while with simple guessing games about his favorite movies, anime, and the like. But surprisingly, the restaurant's 100-yen all-you-can-drink soda fountain provided the most significant avenue of release for all of their pent-up creative enthusiasm, particularly for Ken, my friend's fourth-grade son. I couldn't count the number of times he made the round trip from our booth to the drink bar in order to try every conceivable combination of the limited flavors of soda and juice available. He reminded me of a young Dr. Frankenstein or Dr. Jekyll conducting a laboratory experiment, each time returning with a concoction slightly more sinister than the last.

"So what's this?" we would ask when he returned to the booth.

"Lemon-Melon-Coke," he would reply with a gleeful smirk before drawing the straw to his mouth to personally test his new creation.

"Well, how is it?"

"DISGUSTING!!!" and even before the five of us could stop laughing, he would be off again to try some other yet unexplored combination. The four of us would then follow him to the drink bar with our eyes, eager to see what he would bring back next. The eyes of his second-grade sister, Shiori, sparkled especially brightly as she watched in delight her brother mixing and tasting each new drink.

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Eventually, though, our food arrived and the hilarity died down. Famished by the long school day and by waiting in the crowded restaurant, we turned our attention away from drink bar chemistry experiments and childhood antics to the meal before us. When we had all finished, we settled the bill, said goodnight, and split up to return to our homes. I saw Ken and Shiori only a handful of times other than that night, usually when I would teach an English lesson at their elementary school. Sometimes I might have them in my class, or sometimes I would just see them in passing in the hall or as we teachers were loading our cars preparing to return to our office. Shiori would often come bounding up to us in the hall to say goodbye or talk to us before we left, but Ken, being older – and a boy, to boot – seemed to be slightly embarrassed about being seen by his school friends hanging out with his mother and her fellow teachers, but he would usually come and talk with us anyways.

I remember the last time I saw Shiori and Ken. It was during my last month in Japan, on the day two of my American coworkers left our town after their contracts had ended. Shiori and Ken came to the train station with their mother to see them off. I was also there with my fiancée. There is a photograph in my scrapbook of the seven of us standing before the platform entrance at the station. It was this photograph I thought of when I first received the news.

You see, in the spring of 2007 I received word from a friend that Ken had passed away from leukemia. About a year after I returned to the States, I had heard that he had been diagnosed. After two short years of treatment, of hoping, of praying, of grieving, of fighting, and of sacrifice, it was all over for Ken and his family. The flesh-and-blood son

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and brother they had loved and admired so dearly was gone from them, and in his place were left only the memories of the moments they had shared.

When I heard the news, I cried. Not only because someone so young and so dear had passed away, but also because of the complete uselessness which I felt. Being separated by so many thousands of miles, how could I even begin to comfort my friends in their loss and share their grief? It was then that my thoughts turned to that photograph of us all standing together smiling in the train station. Besides my memories, the photograph was about the only record I had left of the short time I had spent with Ken. Perhaps his family would like a copy of that photograph as well. It was the only thing I could do. My friend had written her postcard to thank me for sending them the photo and for thinking of them in their time of deepest sorrow.

Now I can hear the cicadas crying in the summer heat outside my window. Within weeks, they will be gone. Like the cicada of Basho's haiku, there is no way to tell how much of their life remains at any one instant. Their cry is just as strong at the moment of death as it is in the prime of life. Looking back, I realize that Ken was very much like the cicada. The cancer took him swiftly and quietly, so quickly that his song had not diminished in the least until the very last moment. And then in that one moment it was gone. It was then that the cry was at last recognizable in the midst of the piercing silence it had left behind. Reading my friend's postcard six thousand miles away, I also heard the cicada's cry in the silence.

It is an unfortunate reality of this life that the connections we forge with others often only become evident when they are lost. Our lives are so filled with needless distraction and worry that we find it easy to lose sight of what is really meaningful. The

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trivial becomes needful and the needful becomes trivial. Brief though it may have been, I am grateful for the time I spent with Ken and his family in Japan and the experiences we shared. Those experiences taught me that every moment is a gift. They taught me not to squander one second of this life or the relationships I've been given. Now, every time I hear a cicada's cry, I will think of Ken and remember to cherish every second I have to spend with those dearest to me. I will no longer only take notice of the cicadas' song by its absence. Because of Ken, before it passes into the shadowy depths of mere memory, I will always stop to hear their song.

The Union of Purple and Brown

If memory serves, we sat there for a full three seconds before anyone said anything.

Ayako leaned back, eyes wide open, chin pulled in, waiting for me to offer some kind of explanation. I had crossed the line, and our relationship was close enough for her to toss diplomatic reserve out the window and register shock at what I'd done. I wasn't about to say a word in my own defense. Oh, I figured out the rule I'd broken shortly after I heard her gasp, but I was dying to hear her rationalize her reaction. I don't know if I suspected it at the time, but that dinner experiment was one of the last real moments of earnest and profound cultural discovery I would enjoy during my tenure as a JET.

“Profound” is an awfully hackneyed expression to use in an essay about international experiences, so I have to make it clear that I don't sling it around haphazardly. In fact, I reserve its use for those moments that I categorize as Level 3 realizations. I fear this will sound horribly affected, and I don't have a fancy graduate degree to back it up, but I believe that all intercultural discoveries fall into these levels.

Level 1 is the superficial, the plastic, a collection of those things a person could discover without any travel or scholarly interest. For Japanese culture, this would include the awareness that hiking boots belong outside, not on the *tatami* mats, or that the tea ceremony is a timeless tradition involving patience and precision. A number of corny movies (several starring Sean Connery) will reveal that the Japanese believe in saving face or that they value conformity. No eureka moments here.

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Level 2 provides the bulk of any JET's memories of Japan, and mine are certainly no exception. They almost invariably require travel and a keen interest in learning about the culture. A person who knows the pungent odor of new *tatami* mats, or one who learns to perform the tea ceremony, can count these as Level 2 experiences. These are the memories a returning JET can share with friends and family, without fear of great confusion or need of lengthy explanation. These are satisfying, but not uncommon.

Level 3, on the other hand, is full of the wonderful and the baffling. These experiences are rare, exposing not what the Japanese do differently, but rather how they think differently. They are so fundamental in nature, the Japanese themselves are often unable to explain them. Ask five Japanese language instructors why rabbits are counted as birds (as opposed to, say, squirrels), and you might get five answers. Dig into the elaborate history behind the invention of family names in Japan, and you'll be surprised at how differently we relate to our sense of place and heritage. These are tougher to bring back as anecdotal material, unless you like to hang out with linguists or sociologists. But for the amateur ambassador, these are the most revealing and rare glimpses into the people we grew to love while teaching abroad.

Of course, not all Level 3 revelations are of historical significance. They're frequently unnoticed because they aren't topics of conversation, or because they deal with such mundane objects or activities that they don't merit attention. The best of all are those that escape discovery because all parties involved assumed they were universal. This was the case when I invited Ayako to dinner, a dinner she suddenly refused to eat.

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I would say that no one has ever accused me of being skilled in the kitchen, but that isn't exactly true. During my first week in classes, sweating out the self-introductory marathon and sifting through hundreds of impossibly thin paper worksheets, I came across a student's speculative observation that I could "cook dynamic." I'm pretty certain she received extra points for that comment, but it was woefully off the mark. My diet in Japan consisted mostly of those things I couldn't ruin, limiting me to a handful of cheap, bachelor-friendly selections from the convenience store near my train station. Before this attracts any pity, I should point out that I *loved* that food. I could write a doctoral thesis on the foil-bagged House #4 Curry (far superior to the acrid #5, which I'm convinced will cause the diner's eyebrows to fall off).

Like many expatriates, though, I was subject to the most acute form of homesickness, the progressively intense need to find authentic comfort food. Given my lack of culinary skills, something as complex as a burrito was always out of the question. So I settled for simpler efforts, and achieved surprising success with grilled cheese sandwiches. After a few blackened mishaps, I found a reliable system and enjoyed positive reviews from both Japanese and American guests. Soon, however, the grilled cheese sandwich became a standard item on the menu, too accessible to remain a *bona fide* craving. It was yesterday's news, a favorite album played to the point of boredom. And the prospects for other fancy, less labor-intensive choices weren't good at all. That's when I stumbled onto a major discovery in Kyoto, one that led to an even greater revelation about Japanese beliefs about the relationship between food and color.

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I don't know why I'd gone to Kyoto that day, but somewhere between watching the *maiko* toss beach balls for tourists and nursing a cold beer near bustling Sanjo Dori, I wandered into a shop and glanced over the foreign food aisle. There it sat, likely ignored by the uninitiated: A jar of American peanut butter. The Japanese had their own brands of peanut butter, of course, but they were imposters; sugar-infused, hyper-smooth pastes, engineered by people who didn't understand the premise of the original. Candy masquerading as peanut butter. This was the real deal, crunchy and substantial, the kind I imagine would earn a nod of solemn approval from George Washington Carver himself. And I knew just what to do with it.

The ride home was one of giddy anticipation, like waiting in line for the roller coaster. The plan was coming together. Grape jelly could be found in abundance in larger supermarkets, and Japanese bread is surprisingly good, oversized and thick-sliced like Texas toast. I was going to make a sandwich thicker than a hardcover James Clavell novel, with real peanut butter, level nine on the stick-to-the-roof-of-your-mouth scale.

The peanut butter and jelly sandwich wasn't just a comfort food for me, it was a childhood staple. It was also idiot-proof, something I knew I could prepare without fear of failure. My enthusiasm was warranted. I couldn't say the same for Ayako, whom I had talked into joining me for what must have seemed to be the cheapest dinner imaginable. She had never eaten a peanut butter and jelly sandwich before, but I was a

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passionate advocate. The grilled cheese hadn't disappointed, so she predicted another successful cross-cultural dining experience. As it turns out, we were both wrong.

Somewhere in the armchair philosopher's arsenal of coffeehouse questions, next to speculation about Adam and Eve's navels or the sound of one hand clapping, is this old chestnut: What if we perceive colors differently, and the words we use are just common labels? For the expatriate in Japan, this isn't just idle speculation. Some colors, like green, seem to be an uncomfortable addition to the language for someone else's benefit. Japanese parents still teach their children that stoplight colors (on identical devices to ours) are red, yellow, and blue. Before green staged its popularity campaign, blue was the color of both the sky and the grass. I discovered this after a friendly but spirited debate over a ratty windbreaker I wore; English speakers considered it blue, and every Japanese person I know called it green.

I bring this up because it lies at the heart of the peanut butter and jelly sandwich dinner disaster. The rule I broke, Ayako explained, was the one prohibiting the mixing of purple and brown. It literally rendered the sandwich inedible. She acknowledged that it might even taste good, but the color combination ruined it completely as a reasonable thing to put in your mouth. This led to more questions, mostly involving creatively re-coloring peanut butter or disguising the sandwich as something else, but the most confounding one was this: She watched me make the sandwich, spread the peanut butter and jelly, so why did she wait until I slapped the two sides together before recoiling in horror?

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The answer to that question was what makes this a true Level 3 moment to me. She didn't stop me because she couldn't imagine a scenario in which I'd do something that crazy. Just as I couldn't predict an objection to something as benign as that sandwich, she was certain that I was familiar the universal law separating purple and brown. I can't explain why, but this new knowledge was priceless, worth far more than the nostalgic value of the sandwich itself.

The Way of Tea

Subject: JETAA US1 Washington DC

*Though many people drink tea,
if you do not know the Way of Tea,
tea will drink you up.*

- Sen-No-Rikyu

I grew up in Southern California, hanging out at the beach and swimming in the ocean. One of the few positive stereotypes associated with Southern Californians is that we adopt a laid back, carefree attitude towards life. I believe this stereotype is true, in some respects.

Another stereotype that is associated with Americans in general is that we are a clumsy bunch. This one also definitely holds true for me. In high school, I played basketball. Although I was a fairly good player, I had the misfortune of being incredibly poor at remaining on two feet the whole game. I fell. All the time. And when I wasn't falling I was awkwardly diving. My high school basketball coach gave me the nickname "fawn" because I looked like a small deer standing on unsure wobbly legs about to go crashing to the ground at any minute.

Both of these stereotypes combined made me the polar opposite of Japan. When I first came to Japan to teach English on the JET Programme I marveled at the strict attention to detail in just about every part of life. I was also keenly aware of my order-challenged shortcomings. I folded my papers in half the wrong way, I kept my money in my wallet the wrong way, I wrote the number "4" the wrong way. In short, I often felt like a giant

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foreign buffoon. I didn't resent it so much as I resigned myself to the fact that I could never become something so perfect, so full of grace and simplicity.

I was first approached about joining a tea ceremony club by a fellow English teacher. She sat in the desk next to mine, and I'm sure had witnessed my numerous mishaps involving various jumbled paperwork and spilt cups of coffee. Nevertheless, she suggested one day that I try a Japanese traditional art, and invited me to join her that evening for a taste of tea. The Sensei at her tea house, she assured me, spoke some English and had worked with foreigners in the past. I was willing to try almost anything in Japan, so I agreed to join her.

I met her at the tea house on my bike. There was an oil stain from the bike chain on my pant leg, and I was out of breath. Feeling my usual disorderly, awkward self, I stumbled into the entryway and took off my shoes.

That first night of tea was spent trying to ignore the searing pain in my legs after sitting on my knees for almost two hours. If I could only withstand the pain this might be something I'd like to continue. At end of the night Tea Sensei asked me: "will you study tea?" Perhaps it was the buzz from all that caffeine, or the fact that all the blood from my head had rushed to my legs, but I answered with an assured: "*Hai, onegaishimasu.*" Thus began my study of tea.

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The first few classes were pretty overwhelming. There were new tea words to learn and simple moves to master. The whole process was complicated by the fact that I couldn't feel my legs the entire time. Every week, I would head home on my bike, wondering what I had gotten myself into and questioning if this type of study was really for me.

Another problem with tea was the fact that I was so tall. I am 178cm tall, almost exactly the height of an average doorway in Japan. My feet were not meant for the dainty, tiny steps that a tea room requires, so I would usually overstep onto the wrong *tatami* mat. My legs (long even when folded) made putting the tea bowl in front of me difficult. I would also occasionally hit my head on the entryway, usually while carrying some fancy tea article.

My Japanese high school students found my study peculiar. "Sensei? You study tea?" they laughed. I understood their confusion. How could I ever master something as complex as Japanese tea ceremony? Despite my own misgivings I was determined to continue my studies and kept attending lessons week after week.

Slowly but surely I started to feel more comfortable in my Japanese tea-making skin. There was never a moment of realization, a moment when I suddenly understood the intricacies of tea and my place within it. What happened was more of a gradual appreciation and love of the act. The repetition went from being cumbersome, to being pleasant.

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This transition also spilled over into my everyday life in Japan. I noticed that the stacks of paper I graded became a little neater. I began to appreciate the way the teacher sitting next to me always folded her napkin for lunch just so. I even found myself at home stacking my dishes, and placing my chopsticks in a particular, more delicate manner.

As my time in Japan drew to a close, I wondered how my new more-ordered self would adapt to the old habits, culture and relative chaos of my home country. I would miss the calm reassuring voice of my Tea Sensei, guiding me through each week's lessons. When I expressed this concern to her, she replied "please continue to study in America."

When I tell friends and family that I studied tea in Japan, their first response is surprise. They proclaim the study to be too strict. I think this reaction stems from the belief that there is so much rigidity and order in Japanese life. However, tea helped me to enjoy the structure that in that rigidity. There is a strange comfort in the fact that even the smallest detail has not been overlooked. When making tea, you enter a zone of peace; there is no space for confusion or blurred lines. It is as constant and quiet as your own breath.

I never truly mastered tea, but I did take my Tea Sensei's advice. Now, on days when the world seems too chaotic and I feel disconnected from my former life abroad, I know exactly what to do. I go home and boil some water. I kneel in front of it and begin cleaning my *cha-shakku* with my bright orange *fukusa*. Immediately I feel a little less stumbling, a little less clumsy, and maybe a little more Japanese.

Then & There
How one person came to Japan.

My hands and feet stung in the icy water. I splashed it down my face and let it drip then plunged my hands back into the gravel. I felt the minnows nibbling my fingertips as they sucked up tasty morsels I had dislodged. Looking up, I was surrounded by enormous dragonflies darting into the streaming wind above the river inches from my face. The warmth of the sun, the cool of the water, the life darting about me, I felt like I had just awakened from an endless sleep. How had I gotten here?

I had driven across the state to the predeparture orientation where I'd spent the whole day dressed and pressed and pretending to have it all together. Everyone else had done the same. Conversations were stilted, and belied a nervousness we all felt. The evening was no better, eating strange food and mingling with elderly dignitaries. I couldn't wait to get back to my hotel for the last night with my wife and son before our world turned upside down for good. That raunchy hotel...last time I try to save a few bucks. The first sleepless night.

Then the unending flight, it started out exciting as we were all departing. My family would follow in a week. Then the three days of insanity in a posh Tokyo hotel. The mixture of nervous energy, the doubts about what I had done to my family and the ridiculous litany of smart sounding but contentless workshops by hungover seniors made for a uniquely disorienting session. I had quickly slid into a weightless fog as fear played upon fear through the endless night that blurred into endless sunless day in the windowless bowels of the behemoth hotel. Even seeing old friends in Tokyo didn't help, the city was so frenetic.

Then & There
How one person came to Japan.

On the last night in Tokyo I thought I was going to die, unable to eat, unable to sleep, unable to concentrate. Rolling through my head was the thought, “what if it didn’t stop, what if my family came and then we had to go back, after rearranging our entire life?” I sought out the CLAIR office as they were closing down for the night watch. “I don’t think I can do this.” These six words set into motion a whole process of which I was ignorant at the time. They laid out the options for me without judgment. I decided to wait through the night and make a decision about returning home in the morning. They’d promised I’d be back in the US in two days from my decision to leave.

The next morning arrived in the same numb fog as the night before. While sitting in a daze at the departure point for my prefecture, my roommate ran in huffing, “Hey, your wife just called. I told her I’d try to catch you.” I thanked him and darted out of the room to find a phone. She knew I was not doing well. I told her about my wavering. She sounded understandably cool. To have me backing out after selling our house, a car, quitting a job, and packing up to move was not a good feeling, and she couldn’t help with the decision being so far away. I told her I’d let her know as soon as I had figured it out. That was just it. I couldn’t think at all. So I wandered back to the departure point. As soon as I turned into view I was rushed by several hotel security, event staff, and CLAIR officials. Apparently I had been missed in the ten minutes I was gone and they had thought, after my comments the night before, I had bolted into Tokyo on my own. (I found out later that this has happened.) But in the rush of activity I yelled, “I can’t do this! I’m done!” Everyone froze for a fraction of a second while whispers translated what I had said to the half that didn’t catch it. There. It was done.

Then & There
How one person came to Japan.

Just then a tall Welsh man sidled in and mumbled something in Japanese. He then took me to the side as everyone backed off a bit. We sat on a bench as he said in his tough-sounding accent, “What’s going on?” I relayed my doubts, and the sleeplessness, the inability to eat, the sick feeling. “Ok look,” he said without looking at me, “I think the problem is you’re jetlagged, and once you sleep it off, you’ll be fine. So why don’t you get on the bus with me. I’ll make sure everyone leaves you alone. It’s a three hour ride. If you don’t want to stay, I’ll turn you right around on the Shinkansen, and you’ll be back here by sundown. You’d only be a day later back home.” I agreed.

At the end of the ride, everyone was abuzz with anticipation as our host advisors were waiting to meet us. I looked out the window to see an older man in an outdated suit. He pointed at me and pointed to himself. He must have recognized me from a picture. “Well,” I thought, “no going back now. Time to do it.” I summoned my strength and left the bus. The older man was next to a chubby younger fellow in a government uniform. This was my supervisor. He was shaking and sweating bullets. We greeted, and when asked how I was I replied, “chotto kimochi warui desukedo ganbarimasu.” My new supervisor nodded with an expression that said, “yeah me too.” And the cool older advisor slapped me on the back and smiled, “let’s go.”

In the van, I knew I was in good hands, and it didn’t matter much anyway, since I had no idea where I was, and if I passed out now it was all up to them. The older man was my town-appointed advisor, volunteering solely to help me get adjusted. My supervisor was recently transferred from the Forestry Service to the Board of Education, so we had a common background. I felt better in the fresh air of the countryside. That

Then & There
How one person came to Japan.

night, my advisor took me to dinner with his family and toasted my arrival. I had avoided alcohol recently, feeling so ill, but could not refuse this. That night I finally slept to the sound of cicadas and a reeling room.

The next day, I felt better. The CIR was right. Good man. My advisor got me settled: registration, accounts, etc., then left me to explore on my own. I wandered the tiny mountain town far into the fields of rice and vegetables, sat among the gravestones on a hillside behind the Temple and just breathed, then made my way down to the river bank. The rocky bed and clear running water were so inviting. I walked right in and plunged my arms to the elbows...

That was how I began in Japan. Though the rest of my time there would have ups and downs, confusions, frustrations, and joys, I knew that I was forever changed from that simple moment. My wife and son would join me, and we would forge lifelong friendships with people, stronger than my own blood family. And I would visit that place on the river many, many times again, even after returning from the JET program. I now have two hometowns: the one in which I was physically born, and the one in which I was remade. That town, its terrain, its buildings, its people, all of which took me in and reformed my thinking and lifestyle are more deeply a part of me than the place where I entered this world. And this is something no one else can really understand, unless...unless you know a similar place, but even then...everyone's experience is different.

Two Views of Nagasaki

These days I somewhat abashedly confess that the subject of history used to strike me as lifeless and lacking in personal relevance-- just lists of dates, names, countries, and conquests-- to be memorized and regurgitated come exam time. What I later came to realize, however, was just how very personal and “alive” history could be; and how naive and sheltered from its reach I had been.

Happily into the October of my first year on the JET program, I was pleased with my chance placement in Saga Prefecture, located in northwestern Kyushu. I had recently met some ALTs from neighboring Nagasaki prefecture and decided it was high time for a weekend road trip down to “Nag”. There, with one of my newfound friends, I spent a lazy Sunday afternoon strolling around Peace Park-- a memorial dedicated to the victims of the A-bomb.

As we whimsically snapped off pictures on a gorgeous, sunny, autumn day, the screaming irony of the situation choked the air— that here in this spot, roughly fifty years ago, and not far above my head, my country had detonated one of two nuclear devices ever to be wielded against human beings in the world.

“But how could I have been responsible for that?” I asked myself. “I wasn’t even born yet.” A quick mental calculation confirmed that even my old man was only six years old when the “Fat Man” had hit. I began to internalize the fact that I was standing where one of modern history’s most significant events had taken place; what had previously been memorized by rote in a classroom had suddenly become re-learned experientially.

Sunday evening arrived, and I bade farewell to my friend who had accompanied me to Nagasaki Station, as I boarded the night train back to Saga. My mind filled with images of the day’s events, I quickly drifted off to sleep; comforted by the reassuring, gentle rocking of the limited-express train; and the rhythmic accompaniment of its wheels clicking over the rails like a metronome.

A couple of months passed by and that weekend trip to Nagasaki had seemingly become just another memory mixed in with so many others from the daily barrage of new sights and sounds

Two Views of Nagasaki

that greets the recent newcomer to Japan. One particular Sunday evening I found myself in front of the entrance to a rural train station near the border of Saga and Nagasaki prefectures. Hoping to catch a local train headed back toward my home in Saga City, I entered the small station, passed the unmanned ticket window, and walked up the stairs to cross over the tracks to the platform. As I descended the opposite set of stairs, a slightly eerie feeling gripped me, realizing I was the only person in the station.

Fifteen minutes until the train arrives... what do I do now? My eyes meandered around the station. "I don't know THOSE *kanji*," I remarked to myself, looking at the train station's placard. I would later joke that you know you're in rural Japan if the train station's name isn't written in *romaji*. My eyes focus in on a well-lit vending machine in the distance, and I lose myself in its beckoning radiance. I have since come to speculate that train stations (like waterfalls, lakes, streams, hills, and other places of nature in Japan) are inhabited by protective Shinto-like deities. There is a strange calm that can be found here during the rare, uncrowded moments.

I spot an older Japanese man who has entered the narrow portal to the station, dressed in a suit and overcoat. He looks very distinguished and professional. He passes by me without a glance, puts down his briefcase, and seats himself in the adjacent set of chairs.

"Ten more minutes till the train," I approximate under my breath, mindlessly staring at my shoes and the platform beneath them. I sense that the new arrival has now taken notice of me and is aware of the non-Japanese-ness of my profile. He picks up his briefcase and moves closer, seating himself with an empty chair between us. He looks at me and greets me.

"Konbanwa."

I return the greeting.

"Konbanwa."

I feel a bit tense, unsure of whether this polite exchange will lead into an awkward mutual realization that I don't speak much Japanese yet, and that he doesn't speak much English. To my surprise he does say something in English though.

Two Views of Nagasaki

“How are you this evening?” he asks, with a broken fluidity that tells me his English is good, but perhaps just rusty. I answer him in English and he seems to understand well enough. I feel my initial tension ease off.

“Where are you from?” he queries warmly.

“America... Florida. Do you know it?” I inquire.

“It’s a very NICE place!” He continues, “Very hot!”

“Yes, yes, that’s it.” I answer, pleased that I’m now not feeling so far from home anymore either.

“I have been to America,” he goes on, “You see, I am a businessman so I travel often.”

I nod knowingly.

“I am also a member of the Japan America Society,” he adds.

He hands me his *meishi*, and I accept it with both hands as I have been taught is polite to do. He asks what I am doing in Japan and where I have visited since my arrival in July.

I share an abbreviated version with him. He tells me that he is originally from Nagasaki prefecture, at which point I jump at the chance to tell him that I had in fact visited his home prefecture on one occasion. He looks a bit surprised and more interested now.

When I tell him that I visited Peace Park and the A-bomb museum he genuinely seems to want to know my thoughts about them. I blabber a few intended well-meaning words because the truth is I’m still not sure how I feel about it.

He gets a far away look in his eyes and pauses momentarily.

“I lived outside of Nagasaki City when I was a boy. I remember the day that the bomb exploded,” he states plainly.

My jaw had surely dropped at hearing this, but I said nothing, avoiding eye contact.

He continued, “My family lived far enough away that we were not directly affected by the blast itself.”

I feel a little relieved at hearing this.

“My father used to commute into the City, but he was not in the City on that day. I did

Two Views of Nagasaki

have some other relatives who lived closer to the City than we did," he adds.

I braced myself, knowing that his story would not have a happy ending.

"They were not harmed initially," he relates, "but succumbed to radiation poisoning later in their lives."

I have no words, no thoughts; I am in almost disbelief of not only what I am hearing, but more so by WHERE of all places I am hearing it—a seemingly random train station in a small, rural town in Saga!

He straightens himself up a bit and finishes calmly, "But I have no bad feelings toward America or Americans. It is history now."

It seems he has so much more to tell, but just as he pauses, a train rushes in and its doors open briskly. He stands up with his briefcase.

"This is my train so I must go," he says, adding earnestly, "It was nice speaking with you. Please enjoy your stay in Japan."

He enters the train car and seats himself; the doors swish shut, and the train efficiently heads out of the station until its twinkling lights fade into the distance.

I am floored. What just happened?!

Before I can even begin to get myself around this question another train slowly scrapes and squeaks its way toward the station from the same direction into which the other had just disappeared; this is my train. I enter the doors and sit down, still numbed by what I've just heard.

The doors clap shut, the train speeds up, and although I'm tired, the less gentle swaying and jerking of this train will not permit me to sleep. Nor should I-- the stranger from the station has given me a lot to think about.

1,478 Words

Unintentional Engagement

An American living in Japan for the first time has to learn the many cultural differences between what he is used to back home and what is daily all around. Some are obvious, such as bowing instead of handshaking. Others are below the polished surface. In my case, cultural ignorance led to my almost becoming engaged to be married without my knowing it.

Miss Wada was a substitute English teacher at a middle school in rural Tondabayashi, Osaka-fu, where I was assigned for one fall month as part of my Japan Exchange and Teaching (J.E.T.) year in 1987-88. We taught a few classes together and spoke a few times at my desk. I was charmed one day in her class when she told the students about her childhood in a small village: "When I vuz a leeetle girl. . . ." Short and athletic, she and I were, to my mind, friendly.

After I left the school, she and her friend took me for a tour of Kyoto, then she and I met at a local coffee shop, the Cafe de Bebe, so I could give her copies of the many pictures I had taken. At this point I should have recognized signs that something more serious than meeting a colleague was going on, but I had been in Japan only a few months. There would have been nothing important in any of this activity back in the States.

After the first cups of coffee, we agreed to meet again, to practice English and Japanese. I had asked officials if they could arrange such practice. I asked her given name. To me, the American, it seemed impolite and cold to keep calling her Miss Wada. She seemed embarrassed,

and even looked at the floor. But she mumbled, "Yoshie."

As our schedules were unsure, Yoshie told me to call her house to decide on our first language lesson at the Cafe. That I did. Her mother answered, and after a lot of giggles and confusion caused by my poor Japanese, the woman went for her daughter.

And so it stood until the next week at my new middle school when I was asked to edit a letter the vice-principal, Inoue Masahiro, had written in English. An American exchange student had visited the year before, and now wrote to him as "Mr. Masahiro." One paragraph of his response explained that the Japanese family name came first, then the given. Inoue was his family name, Masahiro his given. He continued, "Names are very important in Japan. For example, if a man calls an unmarried woman by her given name, it is a sign of great romantic seriousness. In some cases, it is even a sign that the couple is engaged."

"Flynn-sensei, are you all right?" he asked. My face must have turned white.

Inoue led me into an empty office. I told him about the, to me, small occasions with the substitute teacher, and the *kyoto-sensei* grew more and more concerned. Miss Wada was 25-years-old, an age by which most Japanese women were married. She already had cut her black hair short, for the middle-aged look. There was a terrible saying about Japanese women being like Christmas cakes: on Christmas Day, the 25th, the cake is fresh and desirable, while the next day, the 26th, it is stale and no one wants it. Miss Wada was approaching the 'stale' age of 26.

Meeting at the coffee shop was a bad sign too, Inoue said, particularly because of the village where she lived near the mountains of Wakayama, which was *inaka*, or country. Dating as such didn't exist there. At best, the young went to coffee shops in groups. For a single man and a single woman to meet at a coffee shop alone was a sign that they were engaged, or close to

it. The majority of marriages were still arranged, matchmakers bringing the potential couple together for *omiai*, marriage meetings. Inoue's marriage had been arranged by *omiai*.

Finally, when I described calling the house, he threw up his hands. "Mr. Flynn, when is the wedding date!" he said, a bit too mischievously for me. Permission to call a single woman at her house was given only when the couple was serious. To have the mother answer the telephone, then allow her daughter to talk with me, was a sign that we were considered by the family quite far along, he said. I didn't dare tell him that the parents had invited me to their house to play mah jong, or that Miss Wada wanted me to meet her sister at the Cafe de Bebe that Friday.

The more details I told him, the worst I felt. Even the trip to Kyoto with her friend was a sign of a romance that had developed without my knowing it. The friend, he surmised, was there to pass judgment on me as a romantic partner. That Miss Wada had subsequently met me at the Cafe de BeBe meant I had passed. I must have been too friendly at the school.

After my talk with Inoue, I made mistake after mistake trying subtly to end the 'engagement,' while keeping face for both of us. Word apparently reached Miss Wada that I was not interested in marriage, and the couple of meetings we had at cafes, both with a friend of hers, were suddenly tense. Her sister did not appear.

One meeting was to show off her new car. A driver's license in Japan was extremely expensive, involving a required school. That easily could cost more than \$10,000, plus the cost of the car itself, a small Toyota. Miss Wada in addition was the worse driver I had ever seen. She almost crashed many times on our drive to and from the cafe. Still, I felt she was proud, and wanted to show me what she had accomplished.

"It is good to have a friend," I said, when she let me out at my aparto.

She didn't say a word. Her sad face stared directly at me. Men and women were not friends in Japan.

One night soon after, I was drinking with two high officials in local school affairs. One, my J.E.T. go-between, sat on a stool at the local karaoke bar, his head bobbing as he neared alcoholic stupor. The other, a bureaucrat in his 30s, and I were talking about America, and why there was so much divorce there. Suddenly he grinned broadly, and said, "I know about your secret."

"My secret?"

"The Japanese woman!"

Oh dear. I had to be very careful. Miss Wada was only a substitute teacher, and it was these very men who would have to give her assignments and eventually hire her full-time. Her reputation, which may have been blemished already, had to be maintained.

"Oh her," I said, nonchalantly as I could, "but we are just friends."

"Oh Mr. Flynn! You are a very lucky man." He slapped me on the back like a man among men.

No amount of persuasion would work on the official. I felt badly that I had harmed Miss Wada. She had been working as a restaurant hostess that spring, and I wondered if I had caused her to lose her teaching job.

I called her house, genuinely concerned, and was told by her sister that she was out. Miss Wada never returned my call. A decision had been made, I thought. Just as well.

I saw Miss Wada by accident that July, near the end of my J.E.T. year, on an historical

tour of emperors' tombs in Fujiidera for new teachers. She had been hired for a one-year temporary job at a district middle school. I felt relieved as could be. I had been an idiot, and wanted to apologize to her. Directness, however, my American way, was offensive. We exchanged a few stiff words about her job as we entered the bus, then we sat at opposite ends during the tour. At the school where the ride ended, she talked to the women teachers. She looked at me once, angrily I thought. I watched her back as she walked away. That was the last of my 'fiancée'.

No one confirmed whether or not we were engaged. Even discussing the problem with Inoue was chancy, as the concept of privacy was not part of the culture, and what we said 'in private' undoubtedly became news a hundred miles around by the next morning. In the end, I have no sure idea of how close to engagement we were, but in the process I learned a great deal about how to live in Japan. The rest of the year I kept a distance from single Japanese women. I think of Miss Wada from time to time, hoping she has found happiness in spite of my American blundering.