

*Snapshots of My Year in Tokyo*

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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## Abstract

This thesis is a work of creative nonfiction recounting formative moments of the author's time studying abroad in Tokyo, Japan from 2017 to 2018. Each chapter stands alone as a memory of something that moved the author's life in a new direction, but also works together to tell a cohesive narrative about the author's growth as an exchange student in Japan. The piece covers topics such as the natural versus man-made world, navigating uncertain cultural expectations, and self-discovery.

## Acknowledgements

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## Process Analysis Statement

Writing is unique from art in that you have to produce from scrap the material you will sculpt. If there are no words on your paper, you have nothing. If you are so worried about perfecting every sentence as it is written, you will never reach your word goals. This was my constant battle when writing my thesis; it was painful to write any mediocre sentences, even knowing I would go back and work with my writing to make it better. It was also difficult knowing entire sections I had written, while interesting in their own right, had no place in my final paper. This thesis has taught me the power of revision and how most of the writing process is not putting words on the page but molding them to best convey my story.

A triumph I had while writing my thesis was being able to write so many pages about one personally significant topic. I have written many poems, short stories of both fiction and creative non-fiction, and research papers, but I had never before written something of this length. I learned that keeping a strict, clear schedule is incredibly important when trying to accomplish a large task. While writing my thesis, I also realized the difference between memory and story, the impossibility of capturing complete history on the page, and the rhetorical implications of omitting or including certain details, thus altering the tone or meaning of the narrative.

This project enabled me to review all of my experiences studying abroad in Japan and gather lessons that I learned from being immersed in a different culture. It is thanks to this project that I have been able to do such deep reflection which has allowed me to grow as a person. It was not until after I started writing and noticing themes that I realized what was most important to me about my time abroad.

## Arriving

On a cloudless day in September, I touched down at Narita airport, the portal of entry and exit for most foreigners visiting Japan. I dozed on and off in a dark chamber for twenty-two hours before stepping out, disoriented and expectant, into the harsh sunlight of a fresh time and place. I was sucked from my Indiana cornfields and deposited into the anonymous, illuminated jungle, Tokyo, and to be honest, I wasn't so thrilled to be there.

I was traveling with my classmate Adam, who sported shoulder-length curly blonde hair and a full, bushy beard--an aesthetic inspired by bands like Steely Dan and The Grateful Dead. In a tie dye shirt and at six-foot two, he was sure to stick out in Tokyo. His distinct style also meant I wouldn't lose him in a crowd of black hair and business suits, and for that I was grateful.

We stretched our stiff limbs as we exited the plane into the tunnel, dragging our carry-ons behind us. At first I was worried we would be lost, but the halls of the airport were organized with fluorescent orange and blue signs bearing mostly unintelligible symbols, but luckily every direction was translated from Japanese into English (as well as Chinese and Korean). Passing through customs was relatively simple; I wasn't carrying any drugs, fresh fruit or vegetables, and hadn't visited a farm recently, so I was clear to enter the country. I continued to baggage claim, and as I waited, the sparkling afternoon sunlight filtering through the massive windows confused me. My body had no idea what time it was, whether I should be hungry or full, awake or asleep. I had tried to stay awake on the plane, thinking that to arrive as tired as possible would be the fastest way to overcome jet-lag because I could fall asleep at any time. The plane's shuttered

windows did not help me stay awake, but I think most passengers were trying to sleep through the misery of being trapped for almost a full day. Finally in the airport, despite my lack of sleep, adrenaline was jolting my body to attention as if I had downed a double shot of espresso.

After Adam and I collected the bags containing everything we would live with for the year, we were free to go anywhere. In other words, free to find our lodging or to get hopelessly lost. I relied on Adam to choose the right train and lead me to our hostel. I had never navigated by myself before, and his guidance was half the reason I wanted to take the same plane. There were so many lines to choose from, but it turned out Adam had selected the right one—Narita Sky Access. The name intrigued me. It was as if we had special tickets to see the sky, a commodity in a land protected by skyscrapers.

As I sat in the train bound for the heart of Tokyo, suitcase wedged between my legs, I was relieved the car wasn't more crowded. I had seen the videos on YouTube where station employees have to push passengers' backs so the doors can close. People are packed like an overstuffed suitcase, and everyone holds their breath until the doors seal shut, releasing a communal sigh when passengers can finally uncoil against the sides of the train. I would experience this for myself a few months into my study in Japan. Later, a school friend told me he had once been packed so tightly his computer screen cracked in his backpack from the pressure.

Now, however, there were only about five others in the car with us, most of them holding on to suitcases as well. I wondered if they were returning home from vacation, or just starting their adventures. I gazed out the window at the expanse of buildings meeting the horizon, save the odd mountain peak cutting through the skyline. There were only specks of green coloring the grey. I suppose I expected rice fields in exchange

for my Indiana corn. I realized later that even a patch of grass was a rare gem, exclusive to deliberate parks, made to remind us that nature exists.

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Adam and I chose to fly to Japan two weeks before the fall semester so we could avoid nodding off during class due to 13-hour jet lag. I also wanted to have a tourist experience of Tokyo before I was integrated into the daily routine as a foreign resident. I wasn't sure how busy I would be during the semester or whether I would have time to explore the city. After about an hour in our seats, we heard the conductor announce we were pulling into Asakusa station. I had visited Tokyo with my family two years prior, so I had a slight idea of what to expect—flashing lights, hordes of people, and endless distraction. I was glad for a change of pace compared to my modest-sized home town, but I still had doubts about how well my time would be spent. I couldn't speak Japanese even though it was my college major, and I was doubtful whether it was even worth my time to continue to study the language. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, and I was worried the few friends I had back at home might not last a year of my absence.

With many things on my mind, I wound through cramped streets teeming with tourists and locals alike, following Adam and ignoring the salespeople offering green tea soft serve and mini Buddha statues for our consumption. We just wanted to get to our hostel and recuperate. At last, I spotted "Sakura Hostel Cafe" written on a hot pink awning affixed to a blush colored complex, and my muscles relaxed as I knew I had located home for the next couple of weeks. Even though I would be sleeping in a room with six strangers, it was a relief to have a regular bed to sleep in instead of an upright plane seat.

When I approached the automated glass door at the entrance, it wouldn't budge. Confused, I began to wave my arms to try and catch the sensor. Nothing happened. I started to flush as those inside the hostel looked up from their books and conversations and regarded me with amusement. I thought, *what is this advanced Japanese technology? Do I need to enter a passcode?* Then, Adam reached from behind me and tapped a grey button on the right side of the door, and it promptly slid open. Even more embarrassed I thought, *if small differences like this trip me up, what else am I in store for in the upcoming year?*

We checked in at the desk to our left, decorated with group photos of international visitors to the hostel and brochures of things to do in Tokyo. All faces were smiling, enjoying some facet of Japanese culture like sumo wrestling or sakura festivals. I knew my prolonged stay would be much different than a fleeting tourist experience, but I wasn't yet sure how. It seemed like a long-term stay might be deeper, less flashy but more meaningful. It would be real, like getting to know someone you love and realizing their faults but still choosing to love them as a whole person.

Adam and I approached the concierge to retrieve our room key and borrowed some tiny-looking towels. Surprisingly, the two chipper employees greeted us in English and cheerfully informed us about the area immediately surrounding the hostel. There was a notorious love hotel around the corner, and a small-scale theme park across the way. At night we could hear the clicking of rides and cries of fear or delight. To our right was the dining hall with a row of chunky computers against the wall, a sitting area around a flat screen, and a kitchen tucked away in the back. The cafe menu was written in chalk above the refrigerator, and I learned "cafe" just meant white toast, jam, and miso soup. We decided to try the local shops in the neighborhood instead.

After storing our bags wherever we could find in the cramped room, Adam and I decided to walk down the street and dine at whatever restaurant struck our eye. Our bodies were not on a sleep schedule, so we figured it didn't matter if we were eating dinner with the early birds at 4 pm. We clarified right away what we were in the mood for: authentic Japanese food—not MacDonald's or the Italian place next to the shoe store. MacDonald's would be for later when I wanted a reminder of home.

The restaurant we chose was cozy, with only about eight bench-style tables. The air was hazy, swirling with smoke from cigarettes I had gotten so used to avoiding in the US where rules were stricter. After a while of waiting, we realized no server would approach us, but we needed to call out that we were ready to order. I had learned about this custom in my Japanese courses back at home but couldn't get over my embarrassment of yelling during a meal. After convincing Adam to order, we were brought roasted peanuts and I was presented with my first draft beer (drinking is legal at 20 in Japan, and I was 20).

Because of the smoke, I tried breathing shallowly at first but quickly realized I couldn't keep that up for an entire dinner. As we waited for our food, the beer helped to soften my irritation. Adam and I were presented with piles of seafood chunks soaking in a thick, grey soup, and it actually was delicious. I wondered if most Japanese food would look as foreign to me as this, but I told myself I was willing to try anything, except for raw horse meat (called *basashi*).

We slept early that night, around seven pm, and woke the next morning at four. As the days went by, we explored the Sensoji Temple, ate at a handful more places (including the Italian restaurant we had written off previously) and discussed what we thought it would be like when we finally reached our school, Tokyo Gakugei University. I



wasn't sure whether I would be able to make friends, but I knew I would make my best effort to meet my fellow classmates.

By the end of my stay at Sakura Hostel, I was ready to leave. I was tired of my rickety yellow bunk bed and reading *Murder on the Orient Express* to make myself drowsy enough to sleep through the snoring (although it was a fantastic novel). I was excited to see my dorm and my university and to explore the surrounding area. Now that I was actually in Japan, I thought I should make the most of it; there would be no point in squandering a year because I felt inadequate at Japanese. I had come to learn, after all.

### The Lost Photo Booth

On international student orientation day, I passed through the north campus gate and heard a sound like a baby crying in the bushes to my left. Alarmed, though quite sure no one had ditched their child in some university bushes, I took a closer look and realized it was just a goat. I didn't know there could be barn animals in the middle of a city, but I never learned what purpose the goats served. To my right was a neighboring ten-story corporate tower, with a digital clock plastered to the side, reminding students how many minutes and seconds there was until class began (or how late you were). There were rows and rows of bicycle parking spaces, and the campus was overgrown, as if it was abandoned. In the US, universities care so much about appearance and marketing, but in Japan, public universities seemed to attract students mostly based on academic programs.

When I reached the main building, I prepared for the unexpected (which seemed to be my daily routine). I was mildly interested in what information we would be presented with about life in Japan, but I was nervous for the required health examination. I had heard the doctors in Japan did not speak English, and if I didn't pass the exam I would have to go to a clinic for further tests. There was nothing more anxiety-provoking for me than when I was touched under my shirt by a stranger who couldn't communicate what he was doing. I trusted the doctor because it was my only option, and I realized for the first time what daily life experiences we take for granted that can be scary for an immigrant.

After the health exam, I walked into another grey building where all of my classes were held, passing by swarms of students holding papers. The administration had instructed us students to print and deliver a headshot for their files, and I thought, *another headshot?* I had already taken one for my passport and another for my study abroad application, and it wasn't as if I had some extras in a drawer somewhere. I wasn't a celebrity ready with a self-portrait to sign on command. Where was I supposed to get photo paper? A printer?

After asking around, I found out I would have to wander the neighborhood to look for an elusive photo booth. I learned that to apply for a part-time job, a scholarship, health insurance, or pretty much anything else in Japan, a person is required to submit a tiny headshot so the employer can judge the applicant's capability based on how professional he or she looks. Sometimes the company just needs a photo for an ID card. Nevertheless, there are countless photo booths all across Tokyo where you can slip into a well-lit sauna and snap a shot before the beads of sweat forming at your temples ruin your composure.

I kept my eyes peeled on my forty-minute hike from campus to my dorms, but all that I had found so far was only the notoriously abundant vending machines filled with both hot and cold tea, coffee, and juice. Luckily for me, Adam stumbled across our neighborhood's booth on his way home from shopping at Maruetsu Grocery. The booth was located in a back alley between the train tracks and rainbow-painted Christian Pre-Kindergarten, and I would have never found it if Adam had not opted to avoid the main road traffic on the flip side of the tracks.

After snapping a shot of myself that afternoon, I waited outside the booth to collect my washed-out face printed on the glossy photo paper. I was disappointed but not surprised to find that my hair looked greasy, despite it being pulled up in a ponytail. Was water so different in Japan that the minerals stuck like wax, making me look positively brunette? It took me a couple of weeks to figure out how to look like I'd taken a shower recently. I considered wearing a t-shirt, shorts, and running shoes to make it look like I had just finished an intense workout, but I didn't think that would make a good impression on my new peers, so I stuck with a crew neck tucked into my favorite navy skirt and sandals.

After I had secured six mini photos of my face, I headed back to my dorm; I heard there was a barbecue being held for newcomers, and I told myself I would try to make friends so I wouldn't spend the year watching YouTube in my room. When I arrived at the central lawn, circled by three towering grey dormitory buildings, I was unsurprised to see no familiar faces, but I was surprised that the thirty or so people were idling around a cooler of ingredients. The RAs seemed to be discussing whether to cook the meat or vegetables first or everything together, while the exchange students were supposed to be mingling. Expecting everything to be cooked and ready upon my arrival,

I began to feel a bit guilty and entitled. *In America*, I thought, *we wouldn't be expected to help cook our own food at a University welcome party*. Then I realized, the act of making and enjoying our food together was in itself a community builder.

I met one of my closest friends that day—Ronya from Germany. She stumbled upon the party without realizing what it was and asked if she could join. I admired her bravery when talking to strangers and also her unique style of a black concert t-shirt, tights under shorts, and Vans. She was also concerned about the photos she needed to take and wondered if anyone had found a photo booth. I knew this was my chance to make a friend—a chance I would have never taken back at home—and I spoke up, eventually leading her to the booth and grabbing ice cream after.

My other closest friend in Japan was Kai from Hawaii. Even though Hawaii is technically part of the United States, its culture is unique enough that Kai and I could learn a lot from each other about the islands and the mainland. Whenever Kai introduced herself to others and said where she was from, she was met with something like, “Hawaii? No way. I would love to live in paradise.” For Kai, Hawaii wasn't paradise, it was home. And I learned Hawaii has its own problems, like homelessness and an astronomical cost of living that makes it difficult for those native to the island, like Kai, to live as comfortably as her family was once able to long ago.

Over the months, I noticed that my classmates began dividing by country: the Chinese students would hang out with other Chinese students, the Germans with the Germans, and so forth. At first, I thought this was sad because if we only spend time with those from our own country, we won't benefit from being immersed in a different culture. Even though I spent a bulk of my time with Kai, I justified it with the information I was learning about Hawaiian culture. It wasn't until after a few months

that I realized us international students were not trying to be anti-social by hanging out with those from our home countries. We were resting our brains with something, or someone, familiar. It is mentally exhausting trying to speak a second or third language, not to mention cultural differences that call for altered niceties and considerations. It is natural for humans to connect with others who understand them, but imperative to make conscious effort to make time for those from a different background.

## Rice Balls

I woke up on Friday morning wondering whether I should skip class. I prided myself in the US on my consistent attendance, but I had been out until four the previous morning at my Australian friend Tyler's birthday party. I had downed a few too many mojitos during the all-you-can-drink two hour special, and on top of that it was raining. Or at least, these excuses were how I justified it to myself. I decided to skip my first class and attend the second.

A chill had seeped through my sliding doors and silky sea green curtains, but I didn't risk turning up the heat for fear of racking up my heat bill. I wasn't really able to sleep any extra, since alcohol does an annoying thing of making you want to do nothing but sleep, and also wrecking the sleep you manage to get. I decided to just start getting ready for my second class. I skipped the full face of makeup I usually donned, threw on my free dorm hoodie and Adidas Stan Smith sneakers, and headed out the door. I felt like an adult for the first time, and it wasn't as lonely as I had feared. A bit stupid maybe, but I was living my life the way I chose and facing the consequences of my decisions on

my own.

Despite the weather, I opted to ride my bike and brace the mist in my face. I gave in and bought a \$125 bike after a couple weeks of walking to school in various weather conditions and waking up at 7:30. A bike bought me extra time to sleep, eat breakfast, and had the added bonus of making me look more like a local. On my way to school, I breathed in the delicious smell of baking bread, but didn't stop because in Japan bread is more of a snack than a breakfast item, so the bakery never opened before I needed to be on campus.

I was peddling quickly, hoping to beat the train because I had just enough time to stop by the seven-eleven across from campus for some breakfast. On the way, I passed by a young man with a briefcase in his bicycle basket, holding a plastic dollar store umbrella to save his pressed suit. I passed by an old man singing to himself, pedaling slowly and teetering to the left and right with the rhythm. I passed elementary-aged boys wearing identical yellow hats with straps around their chins running to get into school before they were soaked, probably having walked about a mile on their own. I thought about all of the personality you miss driving to work every day. I still missed being able to hide from the elements in the comfort of my Chevy Malibu.

After a brisk trip, I finally pulled into the bike parking space on the back side of the convenience store and then headed straight for the rice balls (my favorite was tuna with mayo). I picked up a warm green tea to make up for my soaking clothes and took a breath, grateful for a break from the rain. I looked at the sandwiches with the crust cut off and considered why Japan preferred to ditch the best part of the bread. I was pretty health conscious in the US, but in Japan I had no idea what the nutritional value was of most of the things I consumed. It was freeing in a way, even though I did

gain a couple pounds.

Standing in the checkout line, I was surrounded by exclusively Japanese faces, which I had become accustomed to. They were often faces visually consumed in their own fast-paced urban lives, but sometimes they would break from their routine and look at me. I became aware of my blonde hair, green eyes. I wondered if they thought I was a tourist. Or perhaps they were used to the occasional exchange student shopping for prepackaged meals in seven-eleven because I definitely don't know how to cook with Japanese ingredients.

When I paid for my food and drink, I threw them in my backpack and pedaled quickly to campus so I wouldn't be late. As I passed by the outer gate a fellow student—he looked like a baseball player—slipped his bike tire off the curb and wiped out on the sidewalk. I couldn't tell if he was hurt, he was probably embarrassed at the least, but I wondered if I should stop and help him. No other passersby even turned a head in his direction, so I figured it must be Japanese custom to mind your own business when others crashed their bicycles. Perhaps others were not glancing his way so as not to make him feel embarrassed.

I moved on after visually checking that the guy wasn't injured and parked my bike in the soggy campus lot. The overgrown campus looked especially lush during a rainstorm, and I almost didn't mind my damp discomfort. Even though Tokyo was much more man-made than my hometown, my college campus felt more like a guest in its environment than did my home university with its perfectly manicured lawns and flowers selected to match our red mascot, the cardinal.

After locking my bike, I headed into my least favorite class: a three-hour intensive Japanese language course. My teacher taught the class by painstakingly

sticking to the textbook, having us repeat a list of about fifty vocabulary words and then go through each grammar drill. I decided to eat my tuna rice ball in class so it wouldn't go sour, and then Mrs. Nakamura stopped the class. She said to me something along the lines of, "Here in Japan, we don't eat in class. I would appreciate you never doing it again."

"Gomen-nasai," I said, which means "I'm sorry." Getting scolded in Japanese is much more embarrassing than when you can understand fully the feelings of the person who is angry with you. The remaining half of rice ball felt heavy in my hand, and I felt a trickle of mayonnaise slip down my palm. I had no idea what to do with it.

I started looking for a trashcan, but then my teacher said, "Just finish it." I shoved the lump in my mouth and was conscious of the class waiting for me to finish. I wiped my hand on the plastic wrapper and promised myself I would never eat so much as a cracker in class again.

## The Wooded Path

A lush wooded path ran parallel to the narrow one-way road I biked each morning to school. I loved this path; it was my respite from the manmade world I was thrust into after stepping off the train at Hitotsubashi-Gakuen Station, just a few blocks from my dorm. The path was a long strip of nature in an otherwise scrubbed clean and sectioned society. I often walked this path to school, gripping an umbrella when the gusts of rain discouraged me from any attempts of pedaling the two miles to campus. The path was also a safe place for my morning jogs, as long as I watched my sneakers and skipped



over any exposed tree roots and stones. Taking this route to school was a daily reminder of the fading world I knew existed: one that wasn't crafted by human hands.

Running beside the dirt and gravel path was a stream, cut down deeply from decades of erosion and shrouded in vegetation. As I passed by, I often wondered how polluted this stream might be, and if any fish would dare call it home. Once on an afternoon walk, I saw an elderly man throwing crushed rice crackers at the birds I presumed were congregating near the river of urban runoff. Without leaning over the low metal fence, however, it would be easy to never realize the river even existed.

Trekking home from school on a steamy summer day, Ronya, Kai, and I discussed the obstacles when trying to dispose of a dead body in a dense place like Tokyo.

Ronya suggested, "Why not just toss it in the river?" gesturing over the bridge we were crossing, single-file, making sure not to sway too close to the oncoming traffic.

"I think it would start to smell pretty quickly," I replied. "Someone would notice." We turned left, leaving sidewalk and entering the dirt and gravel path that meant we were halfway to our dorm. "Oh, and how would you be able to drag a body here in plain sight?"

"Good point," Ronya responded. Silence followed. We all probably wondered why we were discussing such a psychopathic topic, and I thought I should probably cool it on the Agatha Christie e-books and dip into some poetry or something.

Perhaps the constant presence of people (or potential witnesses) due to the compact living spaces contributed to the low homicide rate in the city. Did potential criminals feel a constant anonymous eye on them, thwarting their wicked plots? Proximity was the replacement for God's omniscience. Somehow, this was reassuring to

us. We moved on to discuss weekend plans.

## A Bicycle Shop

They say crime is so low in Japan that police officers have to invent things for themselves to do. They check on local families and share a cup of green tea; they open tight jars for old ladies; they execute elaborate stakeouts to catch petty thieves. In Tokyo, I could feel a constant police presence, and some might compare this to a military state, but really the officers just want to help you find your way or your lost umbrella. Most of the time.

Sometimes a pair of bicycle riding officers pull over college students, like my friend Ronya, who was on her way home from class. When we met that evening, she explained to me that she could hardly understand what the officer was saying, but it summed up to his disbelief that a foreigner could own a bike. She must have stolen it, and he wanted identification and proof of ownership. In Japan, it is illegal to ride a bike without carrying registration, just like having a car. Luckily, Ronya could produce the papers from her black backpack, and the officers left her to check the neighborhood for illegally parked cars, or other suspicious activity. Ronya rode back to the dorm, hands shaking and heart pounding.

As we were standing in the dorm lobby, Ronya told me how she had never had such an encounter with law enforcement in Germany and was beginning to feel disillusioned with life in Japan. I figured the hyper-vigilance was a passable byproduct of a hyper-safe society, but I empathized with her indignance at having been profiled. It

reminded me of stop-and-frisk, though on a much milder level. I immediately felt guilty at comparing a mild inconvenience with the racial profiling that happens in American cities, and finally I wasn't sure what to think about the situation.

I rode my bike every day to get where I needed to go, which was mainly to class and the grocery. Fortunately, I was never stopped. When I could help it, I preferred to walk due to narrow streets and interesting places to encounter along the way. Every once in a while, I would stop into a used book store, a specialty grocery (the only place to find real cheese), or a local cafe for a cappuccino. I was astonished at what a difference it made to walk rather than drive. I saw faces bored with life, lost and late, or taking delight in a pounded rice cake. I experienced the sun and the cold and the humidity. I felt like a part of the community and often forgot that I didn't look like everyone else. In a strange way, the city both cut me off from nature and subjected me to it in a way I never had been before.

Sometimes, when walking around my train station with curious eyes on me, I felt like a celebrity. I was anonymous, but everyone "knew" many things about me from my face. People would guess I was not native, I did not speak Japanese, I was only in Tokyo for a short stay, and I liked "American hugs." I was warned before coming to Japan that Japanese people do not like to be touched. Japanese students must have been advised to treat Americans the opposite way, to make us feel welcomed. I can say I only felt uncomfortable when my friend told a person he was introducing to me, "Go on, give her an American hug!"

## On Seasons

In the Midwest, we feel akin to bears when winter strikes. We grow lazy, sluggish, and slip into a metaphorical hibernation until spring comes to reawaken the earth. We put on a few holiday pounds, curl up by a warm fire with our hot cocoa or tea, and hope for one of those freak days when temperatures suddenly rise and melt the snow delivered by the last winter vortex.

In Japan, I found the perspective is opposite. The cold is invigorating, tightening the muscles, thus encouraging productivity and unrest. The summer months turn us into cats, warming our backs under the blazing sun, mustering up energy only sufficient enough for our daily routine.

I learned from the lack of air conditioning and travel mainly by bike and foot, that the difference is the Japanese are completely immersed in the seasons. We Americans do our best to avoid discomfort; we heat and cool every room, school, and car, thus avoiding the sting of winter gusts or beads of sweat forming at our brow in the summer. The seasons stand in the way of equilibrium; they are something to be observed from a bay window, and to be enjoyed less and less as the atmosphere strays from room temperature.

The halls and bathrooms of the North and South buildings at Gakugei were not heated or cooled; only classrooms contained remote units that could be switched on at the beginning of class. The halls seemed to be built merely to keep out precipitation, leaving large gaps for wind to flow from one end to the other, bringing relief during the

sweltering months, but making snowy days tougher.

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A single day of heavy snow in January caught Tokyo by surprise; it was the only snow of the year, and the sidewalks became nearly impossible to navigate without slipping at least once. The walkways were almost constantly being tread by feet, compacting the snow before anyone had time to shovel, and this formed treacherous sheets of ice. On my way home after eating dinner with Adam at Lawson convenience store one day, we witnessed an elderly lady slip, fall, and hit her head on the concrete outside her apartment. My heart dropped.

I rushed to the woman, and together with Adam I slipped my arm underneath her, hoisting her up. Her straw hat had dropped in the snow, and her blouse was rumpled and untucked.

I asked one of the most useful phrases I have learned in Japanese, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," she said hurriedly, as she arranged her clothes and restored her hat to her head. She knitted her brows, appearing dazed and speaking breathily as if winded. I was worried she might have a concussion, or that maybe I was scaring her. Maybe she wished someone who spoke better Japanese was there to take care of her. I searched my surroundings desperately, but for once there was not a person in sight.

I looked to Adam, asking with my eyes what we should do. I didn't want to scare the lady by suddenly speaking in a language foreign to her, and I began to feel ashamed I hadn't learned better communication skills after living three months in Japan. Then, I remembered the power of even short utterances to imply meaning. I

suddenly recalled a word I had looked up recently on a whim, and I said, “*kyu-kyu-sha?*” which meant, “ambulance?” I did not have cell service, but luckily Adam’s carrier allowed him to make international calls at no extra cost.

The elderly woman replied, “No, no, no, I’m fine. I’m fine” and shuffled up the steps away from us and into her apartment building.

Before I could process it, the moment was over. Adam and I ambled back to our dorm, going over the incident and assuring ourselves that we had in fact done everything we could for the woman. I imagined all kinds of scenarios. I imagined the lady going to sleep and never waking up. I imagined if we had called the ambulance and had to give a statement to the police. Would they believe us if we said we had not tried to harm the woman? Surely she wouldn’t lie. I imagined if she didn’t live in a city, how long it would take for someone to find her on the walkway in front of her house. I wanted assurance that she would be alright, but I never saw the lady again.

## My Hair

Noel, a Japanese friend I made at Gakugei’s weekly International Conversation Club, threw his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party at the Ant Pub. I biked about 10 minutes from campus in the massive group of partygoers, which amused me greatly. We were altogether a group of sixteen—it was like riding in a really slow marathon, except at the end you drink beer instead of Gatorade. I was pretty sure Noel was the only Japanese person in the group; the rest of us were from all over the world. I only knew a couple of people, but I was used to seeing new faces.

After we had locked up our bikes at a buck-an-hour lot, we headed for the bar. As I descended the cramped stairwell, I considered how much more difficult it would be for customers going back up after drinking heavily. Also, how did anyone find a basement bar like this one? We entered into a dimly lit room, a bustling group speaking various levels of Japanese, and we divided ourselves between four tables divided by wooden panels. It was such that we couldn't really talk to the other members in our party, and I didn't see the birthday boy more than a couple times that night. Since I also didn't know most of the people in the group, it didn't matter much to me at which table I sat.

Noel ordered bright red spiked pitchers for each table, and I took a few sips of the sickly-sweet concoction but decided not to finish it as it was mostly corn syrup. When the food came out, it was salty and sad, and I was thankful I wasn't too hungry because the custom in Japan is to share food, family style, so I could get away with eating less and saving it for the others. I knew only one person at my table, Ronya, and I was glad to have her to lean on.

After a couple of hours of stiff conversation, the night came to a close, and we headed outside to take pictures. It was here that I met Kohé. He had wispy dyed-brown hair, harsh brows like tire streaks, and sideburns just like his brows, but turned sideways. His broad, beak like nose led most who met him to doubt his Japanese nationality and assume European descent. In fact, he was pure Japanese but seemed flattered when others tried to guess his mysterious nationality.

I had noticed Kohé looking at me during the evening, but I brushed it off. Then, as I was waiting to hear what would happen next after the photo session, he approached me and touched a strand of my long, dark blonde hair.

He said something like "very nice," without so much as an introduction, and then

rejoined his very drunk girlfriend, Tracy. In the US, my hair was nothing special, but I received endless compliments in Japan. Even though I could never understand what it feels like to be a black American, in that moment I understood why something seemingly as innocuous as touching someone's hair (or asking to touch it) is uncomfortable or even offensive.

## Train Delay

It was around six pm on a Thursday, and I was on my way back from shopping in Shinjuku, riding the Chuo line. The seats were full, so I was standing in the aisle, holding the hanging ring with my right hand and reading *Enlightenment Now* on my phone in my left. After months of riding the same line, my ears were sensitive only to the chirp of my own platform's name, "Kokubunji. Kokubunji," and could filter out every other stop on the line. I figured this was how people managed to take naps on the train, though I would worry about missing my stop.

Gradually, the train was chugging slower and slower, and I figured we were approaching Kichijoji station, where I often went to shop and get lunch with my friends. It was also home to a beautiful park with a lake at the center and swan boat rides, mainly for couples. This time, however, what was announced was not a station name. The train finally screeched to a stop in the middle of an average suburban neighborhood. I couldn't quite understand what the conductor was saying, but the screens bore a brief English translation: "Delay due to passenger injury."

Everyone was silent, either nodding off from a long day at work or doing



something on their phones. I wondered if train delays like this happened frequently and the passengers had become desensitized to it. Or maybe it just wasn't considered polite to discuss the situation or act out of the ordinary. Perhaps everyone was silently annoyed at having to wait an indeterminate amount of time to get home after a long day, or maybe distressed by the situation. As for me, everything in Japan was so new that I approached every new situation with curious open-mindedness. I understood how much I didn't know about the situation, so I waited. That's not to say I wasn't concerned for the potential victim. I wondered, what kind of passenger injury would cause a whole line to stop? A heart attack? A stroke? Was someone giving birth?

After about twenty minutes, following a brief announcement, the train started moving again. The blank faces of the passengers betrayed no sign of relief or interest as we pulled into Kichijoji station, as if we had never been stuck halfway between exits in a metal box.

Later when telling the story to a Japanese friend, I learned what "passenger injury" really meant: someone had jumped off the platform onto the tracks. Immediately, I realized the silence on the train was somber, not disinterested or dispassionate. What we were waiting for was for the police to take care of the scene. It was something presumably everyone on the train knew while I waited in ignorance. My friend also told me that the family of the victim is liable for fees sometimes totaling almost a million dollars. It was one of those moments that takes you out of your mind and gives you a perspective beyond yourself. I was no longer concerned with my loneliness or being back to campus a bit later than expected, but I was worried for a person whose life was already too late to save.

## Mystery Sisters

Telltale's flat, resonant voice brings me back to rainy days spent in my quiet dorm room. Most of these days, I watched the Youtuber (Owen) deconstruct dogma of the Jehovah's Witnesses as I sat at my desk, eating Lawson's chicken nuggets dipped in Sweet Baby Ray's my parents sent from home. Telltale never shows his face, but opts to display only his artistic talent, sketching broken hearts, Bibles, serpent heads, and more as he narrates. I respected how he let his words carry nuance and emotion without revealing any facial expression. It felt somehow more intimate, like he was explaining his life story to me on the phone rather than performing for a camera.

On this particular rainy day, I sipped my peachy fruit smoothie and thought about the time the Witnesses knocked on my door and gave me a pamphlet about the four horsemen in the Book of Revelation who symbolized the evils during the apocalypse, or something like that. It was before I started attending the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, aka the Mormon Church, with my friend Anna, and then decided not to continue a year later. Telltale was an ex-Jehovah's Witness, so I suppose I identified with him in a way. I was also a sceptic, interested in understanding the human condition, and resigned to the world as I knew it—no longer searching for mind-calming answers to my burning questions about life. I picked up a carrot and dipped it in tangy peanut sauce. I could always count on Lawson for a delicious mid-day snack to accompany my YouTube binging sessions.

YouTube used to be a distraction from my daily dose of homework and stress. These days, YouTube had become a way to fill my time and avoid the worst feeling—boredom. Later that night, I would go shopping in Tachikawa with Kai to find an outfit

for ice skating that weekend. It was something I could look forward to. In the meantime, I watched Telltale to reaffirm what I didn't know and what I admitted wasn't knowable. Technology meant I never had to feel empty.

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It was a pleasant spring day, which came much earlier than in Indiana where it sometimes snowed in April. I was walking back from the grocery store carrying an indulgent box of strawberries (priced a dollar a berry), when I ran into a couple exchange students who lived at my dorm.

"Hey Emma! There are some girls looking for you at the dorms," said Megan, who was from my home university. I wasn't expecting anyone, so I was pretty baffled.

"Oh, thanks. Um, did they say what they want?"

"I'm not sure, but I think they were from your church."

I flushed and said, "That's weird. See you later." I didn't attend a church. I had gone once to Adam's protestant church, but I didn't return because I was bored listening to a sermon I couldn't understand for an hour—Japanese words for religious terms made it nearly impossible for me to decipher the young pastor's meaning.

In fact, I knew who the girls were who had come looking for me. I had never met them before, I but had the suspicion they were Mormon missionaries. *How did they find me?* I thought. I walked hesitantly to my dorm, wondering if I would meet them on the way there or if they were still waiting for me. I hoped I could avoid them altogether. I was embarrassed that they had been asking around for me, and I wondered how many others of my classmates they had encountered.

When I got through the gates and said hi to the campus cat, I circled the grounds to see if I could find the Sisters. There was no way they would know where I lived—the

eighth floor of my dorm, which you needed a key card to enter. On a whim, I decided to check my mailbox. Surely enough, they had left a note, decorated with seasonal sakura blossoms. They apologized for having missed me and invited me to church, with an address and phone number provided. It was characteristically friendly, yet felt somewhat like a reprimand. I had been in Tokyo a whole semester without attending church, and I thought I had gotten away with it.

I was still puzzled how the Sisters knew I moved from the US to Japan. I hadn't given my new address to the Church. Then it hit me; when my church friend Anna had asked for my address a few weeks prior, it wasn't so that she could mail me a letter. It was so she could update the church records. I was amazed at the Church's global reach, like a government that keeps tabs on its citizens so it can keep collecting taxes. To be honest, I was curious about what the church in Tokyo was like. Were they as kind as the members I knew back home? I knew I didn't believe in the doctrine, but my natural curiosity got the better of me, and I texted the missionaries.

I had started accompanying my friend to church in spring of 2016 because of the loving community. The stereotype of friendly Mormons is true, whether in the US or in Japan, and after a traumatic incident my Freshman year, the warmth coupled with structure was exactly what I needed to get back on my feet. Deep down inside I knew the church wasn't true, but the friendships I built made this matter trivial. Over time, however, I began to feel like a fraud. I couldn't keep attending a church I didn't believe in just for companionship.

This time, it was hard to say what drew me back to the church besides curiosity. Now I realize I was looking for an experience that would remind me of home. I only attended church a handful of times, and I found that while it was almost a carbon copy

of the church in Indiana, it was also missing the only reason I enjoyed church in the first place: the people I knew and cared about. Going to church made me realize that the way to feel a piece of home was not to search for replications of experiences I've had, but to spend time with people who matter to me. I learned that good friends can be found anywhere in the world, if you're willing to look.