

If Only I Were Born in Japan

By Cathy L.

Beyond a few light-humored conversations between Japanese friends about their seasonal trips and a few dramas I had been fortunate enough to watch over the past years, I had only menial knowledge about the plethora of Japanese culture and what would eventually come to greet me as I first stepped from the terminal in Narita Airport. I arrived as a *tabula rasa*, unnerved and numb over the fact that I would be parting from my natural family and placed among strangers in a completely novel surrounding. Thus, even I did not know what I could or should expect. However, now that this initial phase has long passed, and after these flashing six weeks had flown behind me so abruptly, I have finally earned the privilege of saying: Yes, I was able to finally take a peek at daily life in Japan.

Aside from even having the opportunity to apply and even winning the full scholarship from Mitsubishi Electric, I can only just scratch the surface with tearfully admitting how fortunate I was to have had the family I had. Yuka Suzuki, my host mother, was the first one to greet me after my arrival in Haneda. She appeared young and spirited, holding up a blithe sign the entire family had decorated as a symbolic means of welcome. Having had my share of meeting a variety of mothers throughout my sixteen years, some in China, others here in California, Yuka, or so we agreed on me calling her during the monorail from whisking me away from the airport, had an impressive style.



Naturally, the father Kuniyuki was busily supporting the family at his work, and my siblings, Moka and Mikuni, were thriving in school. I could not have expected to see them waiting for me alongside their *yasashii* mother. I met the entire family eventually, and Moka-*chan* and Mikuni-*kun* had a bout of

bashfulness when they first saw me in their home.

Eventually, I flew through the uncomfortable phase of feeling like a stranger, outsider to their home. Yet it was only after the first day, after I collapsed in the *kawaiiiiiii* room they bestowed upon me that first night, did Moka-*chan* run home from school in her uniform, yellow hat and insist upon reading me her favorite books. I near melted with love, and I came across the discovery that Japanese, children's book illustrations towered over the ones in the United States in terms of cuteness.



Moka always wanted to do everything, every time, everywhere. One day, I caught her peeking into my room to check if I had arisen that morning. Though a little disgruntled at first, staying annoyed with the girl for more than a period of one hour was an impossibility.

Mikuni, two years his sister's junior, was a big baby. I can recall watching their old family memories with them on a Saturday morning, and the six-year-old boy had the exact same face he



did when he was one. In my opinion, he was the more random of the siblings—with Yuka having to actually lug his sleepy form by back over to the living room during school days while he woke up before anyone else at five in the morning to play his daily hour of Donkey Kong or Super Mario Brothers on the Nintendo DS when it was a resting day. Yet he endeared to those around him, bear-hugging everyone and everything (including an artificial, giant spoof of an ice cream cone at the hypermarket Carrefour) at a whimsy.

Unfortunately, Otousan was beyond busy with his career. Aside from the weekends or holidays in general, the only times when I had an opportunity to speak with him were limited to the

mornings. Similar to how I pocketed a little Japanese in school, he had a hand in speaking English. When I was unable to word my thoughts in one language, I would attempt the other. Despite his air-tight schedule, he would take the family (and me) to long car or train rides to Nara, the aquarium, Kyoto, Umeda, or fun places in general. I would enjoy the variety of the trips, but there was always some part of me experiencing the guilt of being the burden, always wondering how much of a strain my stay and forced upon them. At some low points, I found myself drowning in a sea of tremendous paranoia.

Yet Kuniyuki was friendly despite all the stress and hours invested into his job. He had an interest in the drama known as *Rookie*, where the namesake baseball rookies were plagued with all sorts of extreme obstacles like gangsters, fighting, and the baseball games themselves. Personally, I preferred watching *Sapuri*, the cross-dressing beautician Ikko-san with his makeover show, and *Seigi no Mikata*. I especially find the latter amusing, with the protagonist constantly tormented by her devilish elder sister known to the rest of the world as an ‘Ally of Justice’.



I had a meager two years of Japanese learning experience, and that barely sustained my conversational skills. I fancied everyone grinning good-naturedly at my blunders when my eyes were averted. Yet these meager skills managed to carry me through the endeavors of speaking to my quickly made Baika High School friends, meeting extended relatives of the family, and getting a haircut.



During my one week of experiencing a Japanese high school, everyone was ecstatic to greet me. By the end of the week, I was going to Misuta Doonatsu (people liked to shorten it by calling it Misutado, or Mister Donuts without the katakana pronunciations) with them, taking 400 yen purikura pictures at the arcade with them, and going to expensive, cute shops

with them, and mailing their amazing cellphones with my prehistoric method of using 'e-mail'.

I grew a knack for adorable, Japanese emoticons like these: (=ω=) 、 () シ、 (* *) . I felt like a part of them, even though this was far from the reality of my situation. I was able to bond with Emiko, the grandmother who came to visit practically every other day. I was able to see a Takarazuka musical with Kuniyuki's aunt (who loved Takarazuka enough to see the same showing twice) in Umeda and delight with having ice cream in the presence of a cousin my age.



It never came across my mind that I would be inspired to cry when the whole family, Kuniyuki and Yuka, Moka (who coerced my tears with her own, that little adorable oni child) and Mikuni, and Emiko-baaba accompanied me to my final train ride and saw me off as I passed through the gates to my flight. I found it ironic that even before I left the family, the friends, the melon soda, and the melon bread, I promised myself that the first thing that would be on my mind after I traveled back to America was to battle out a means to return.

Thus finally arrives the purpose of my silly title all the way back to the very beginning of this bundle of emotional, ranting informality: I came, I saw, and yet the only thing I conquered was any sort of hesitation I had about going abroad to Japan by my lonesome. In fact, I have made up my mind that I want to go back..

I was able to explore my own identity

By Jordan M.

Thank you very much for the Mitsubishi Electric US YFU scholarship. The past six weeks have been an unforgettable experience. Being a part of the exchange program has really opened up my eyes to the world and it has changed my life forever.

For six weeks I lived with the Kawakami family, who I now consider my second family. They have treated me with great hospitality, as if I was their own son. It took me a couple of days to get used to my surroundings, but soon I made myself right at home. I couldn't have asked for a better host family.



Although Mr. Kawakami was only around for a third of the time, I built a strong loving relationship with him. He was always very busy with work, business trips to China, emergency calls to the office, but on the days he had off, he always offered to spend time with the family and me. He coached a youth baseball team, where my host brother Shota, and I also came by to help out on a couple practices. The children thought that I was a major league baseball player.



I also built a very strong relationship with Shota, who I 15 and my host sister, Rika who is 8. During the first

couple of days of my stay, I was a little hesitant to talk to Shota, because I was a little shy and we both spoke 2 different languages. It took me around two to three days to actually build enough strength to talk to him. My host mother, Satomi, was ecstatic. She rushed and grabbed her camera and said, "First contact!" I later learned that we both had the same interests in many things, but I was only



capable of talking to him on a translator. Soon, we did everything together, from sports, shopping, watching television, and getting on the computer with each other.



I had the same relationship with Rika. I still remember the first day she came home from school with two of her friends, and she was afraid to talk to me. Mr. Kawamai had told me that she was very shy. I noticed that she was only quiet around me because, in her eyes, I was still a stranger. As the days went by she became more comfortable around me. We would always get on YouTube and watch Japanese game shows together.

She once taught me that word of the theme song to the newly released Japanese movie, “Gake No Ue No Pnyo.” It’s a very catchy song. Around the second week of my stay, Rika and I went to the game center together. She had lost all of her money and did not win anything, so I took her to the super market and bought candy for the both of us in order to cheer her up. My host mother thought it was the sweetest thing ever. I will always consider Rika the little sister that I never had. I will miss the days of playing Nintendo Wii with her (she would always beat me at bowling), and setting up the dinner table with her at 8 o’clock every night.



The one person that I greatly appreciated was my host mother. She is a woman of many strengths and abilities. Every morning her alarm clock would go off at 5:30a.m., and she’d be up fixing breakfast by 5:45. I will always remember Satomi yelling up the stairs to wake up Shota every day. After we would finish our breakfast she’d rush Shota to the train station to go to school. Rika and I would be waiting patiently, watching television until she returned. Satomi manages to schedule her time perfectly, dealing with three children in the house, having a part time job, being in the PTA, and playing volleyball on top of cleaning and cooking.

This woman sets an example to many women out there. She never seemed to be stressed out at any time of the day. I still keep in contact with her every day, via e-mail, and she is always keeping me updated on what is going on with the Kawakami family.



Going to Suzurandai High School was an excellent experience. I learned what it is like to be disciplined and obedient, and the students there have shown me the kind of friendship one remembers for the rest of their life.

From this trip I was able to explore my own identity and figure out who I am, and who I can be in a different context. Being isolated from my friends and family in the US helped me realize what I have the opportunity to do and has reshaped how I can see my future. It also helped me gain life-long friendships.

I feel as if I could go on about my host family and Japanese friends forever. I can remember each of their personalities and smiles vividly, as if our last encounter had been just yesterday. I will never forget them and I will never forget the experiences I shared with them in Japan. Thank you so much for this opportunity. Without the Mitsubishi Electric US Scholarship I would have never met such extraordinary people in such an extraordinary place.



I wish the Kawakami family well, and hope to see them again in the near future.

Surreal...it was such a unique experience.

By Rohan D.

Mitsubishi Electric, thank you for giving me this wonderful travel opportunity to go to Japan. I had so much fun and learned so much. The six weeks I spent in Japan were some of the most amazing weeks of my life.

At first, I thought the six weeks were going to feel like a long time, but it seemed like one of the fastest weeks of my life. I saw so many interesting sites and met so many nice people.



One of the best parts of the trip was the food. I never ate so much rice in my life, but toward the end of my stay, it was one of my favorite foods and it still is today. I also learned how to use chopsticks when eating.

I went to Japanese high school for a week, which was an interesting experience because I got to learn what my peers in Japan do in school. I lived in a town called Zushi in Kanagawa prefecture which is about an hour away from Tokyo and 30 minutes away from Yokohama.



In the time I spent in Japan, I experienced more new events and new feelings than I've had the past five years. One of my highlights of the trip to Japan was the time I spent with my host family. My Otousan (host dad) and Okasan (host mom) were some of the most nice and loving people that

I have ever met. And I had so much fun with my three host brothers Kenji, Satoru and Shuhei.

I was very close with every member of my host family. My Otousan and I spent a lot of time together during the weekends because he worked on most of the weekdays.

The weather Japan was extremely hot and humid. We went to a baseball game one day and it was just so hot that I've never experience such hot weather before in the U.S. Although I enjoyed the game and trips to Tokyo, the weather was a little uncomfortable for me.

On the very first day when I came to Japan, my Otousan came to pick me up from the bus station. I was really nervous because I was meeting my host family for the first time and this was my first time to visit Japan. My Otousan bought me a train ticket and I put it in my pocket. When I reached in my pocket to take the ticket out again, I could not find it. I was really scared because I did not want to make a bad impression on my host father. My Otousan bought me another ticket and I felt really bad about that. But now that I look back on it, the event was rather funny because of the way I reacted. My host father was a really nice guy and I overreacted at the time. I was glad to find out that Otousan was indeed very nice.

My Okasan and I spent every day together and I learned so much from her. She taught me many words and phrases in Japanese. She really helped me out because I did not know any Japanese. She was always there for me and she was someone I could talk to when I wanted to get something off my chest.

My oldest brother Shuhei who was fourteen years old who was always busy with school and the soccer club. But the time we spent together was always fun. One night we went to a soccer game at Nissan Stadium in Yokohama. I was never a big soccer fan but I saw the joy Shuhei had when he played and watched



soccer, I decided to go to the soccer game with them. I had a great time at the game and it gave me a good opportunity to bond with my host brothers by watching the soccer game together. After watching the game at Nissan Stadium with my host brothers, definitely I became a soccer fan.

I also had a good time with my other brother, Satoru, who was nine. We had a great time playing catch in front of the house and playing Nintendo GameCube. My youngest brother Kenji was my best friend. We did everything together from playing baseball to playing board games. We played all different types of games, though I don't like to admit it, he often beat me.

My favorite event was to play baseball in a bedroom with an inflatable bat and a paper ball. Even though it seemed childish, it was really enjoyable. None of my host brothers could speak English fluently and I only knew a few phrases in Japanese; however, we all were still able to communicate in some way because of the bond and connection that we developed during my stay. By the end of my stay, they really embraced me and I felt like I was a real member of their family.

Since I've returned from Japan, the whole trip seems surreal. It was such a unique experience. I can still believe that I actually was in Japan during this summer. Hopefully in the future I will have another opportunity to go back to Japan because I had such a wonderful time and met many nice people there. I want to thank Mitsubishi Electric and my host family for giving me this wonderful opportunity.