

Living in Toyko: A day in the life

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Special to the *Guilfordian*

7:42 am

Brring, brrring-I shut off my alarm clock and huddle deeper into the covers, avoiding the chill of an unheated room. 7:50 am and I groggily cling to the rungs of my bunk bed as I attempt not to fall climbing down. Tomo-chan and Ran-chan, my roommates, are still asleep. I pour a bowl of banana flakes (a Japanese version of corn flakes) and sit on the floor under the warmth of the heated table (kotatsu) from which a thick blanket (futon) spreads out.

8:30 am

Japanese class begins. There are 11 of us, 10 Americans, 1 German, 9 females, 2 males. We struggle learning the different verb forms which change according to the rank of the person you're speaking to and then change again according to the gender of the person who is speaking. I cringe as the teacher instructs me in the use of the feminine particles, which to me denote deference and hesitation. Later I forgive her as she tells us that she quit her job at a company when men with the same position as her insisted that she pour tea. She asked, "Why?" They said, "Because you are a woman," and so she left.

9:30 am

A ten minute coffee break. Americans sprint to the next building where we huddle around our God, CNN, worshipping the news which we barely bothered to keep up with at home. "Bernie (Shaw) is wearing the same tie as yester-

day," someone mutters. "Shh, Clinton's on," we respond.

11:00 am

Class is over and after picking up the various newsletters from my mailbox, which I can't read, I step outside. The grass is turning yellow and the trees are changing colors, over which I can see the cross of the ICU chapel. A few students are laying outside talking, professor's kids are playing catch and speaking a funny mixture of English and Japanese, and the grounds keeper wearing a big straw hat is sweeping leaves off the sidewalk. A bloodmobile is parked outside and so I decide to try a new experience, giving blood in Japan. There are no questions like in America, except for "are you feeling well?" and "have you been to a foreign country in the last year?" The first one was easy, but to the second question I said, "Yes, Japan." He gives me a funny look and asks me again. Suddenly I realize my ethnocentric mistake and embarrassed say, "I mean America."

12:30 pm

I go to a meeting of CSPP (Cultural Sharing Partners Program) where today's topic is animal rights. However, as usual, the subject veers and we begin talking about relationships in Japan and America, particularly the lack of affection among Japanese people. The Americans explained the withdrawal we felt from human touch. For over two months, I said, I haven't been hugged. A Japanese looked at me as if to say, "So what?" "I've never been hugged," he says. We Americans stare at

him if he said he's never been born. "Never?" we say together. "Yeah, me neither," says a 21-year-old Japanese woman. "Well, maybe once when I was little I hugged my Dad by mistake."

Our eyes must have shown our feelings of great pity for them, for the next minute a Japanese asked, "Why do Americans have to show physical affection to show love? Why do you always have to say the words 'I love you'?" We never say that, either, but it's not because we don't feel love. We just show it in different ways."

I suddenly thought about how my host mother used to wait for me to get home until late at night, or how when I was sick, my roommates made me hot tea and brought me candies and cold packs, or how my friend paid for my taxi fare so that I wouldn't have to walk back to the dorms in the dark. I've never hugged any of these people, but their gestures have touched me just as deeply.

Although it doesn't change the fact that I miss hugs, it did change the look of pity on my face to one of understanding. Love, like anything else, doesn't exist only in terms of how Americans define it. And only by learning how to feel in ways other than those that our culture teaches us, does our experience of human love deepen.

3:00 pm

I go running around the spacious campus and out into the suburb, passing ancient tea gardens and ancient high-rise apartments, smelling McDonald's cheeseburgers as well as sweet bean pastries of the street vendor. An elderly woman in a kimono sits on a bench,

head bent, waiting for a bus which finally arrives, bearing a huge Coca-Cola sign with a young, smiling, blond girl. Never is there a whistle or a honk as I run and never do I fear strangers, whether it be dark or light.

5:05 pm

I transfer from the crowded bus to the more crowded train, hanging onto the rings above me as bodies lurch back and forth to the rhythmic pulsing of the train which throws strangers' bodies against each other, leaving lipstick imprints on white shirts and smashed toes. Everyone hates rush hour and desperately tries to avoid the hell from 5 pm to 6 pm, but sometimes I feel a secret comfort in being supported by all these bodies which rock and sway together into one massive being. The train lurches to a stop and I stumble off, disentangling myself limb by limb as I become a separate body once again.

6:00 pm

I arrive at the Toyamas' to teach English for two hours, once a week. Tonight's dinner is sashimi, a rare treat of raw shrimp, squid, and tuna, along with pickled potatoes, radish salad, and fish paste patties with vegetables, and of course, rice. I eat every bite while Ms. Toyama and her two teenage daughters practice their English conversation with me. By the time we finish tea and coffee with truffles, apples, kiwi, and sweet chestnuts, I have stayed half an hour late and have to leave. She apologizes for keeping me and pays me \$45 for the two hours.

I feel almost guilty for taking this from a mother who works 9 to 5 in a department store, raises two children by herself and lives in a tiny two-room apartment the size of my family room at home. I can't even honestly understand their

desire to learn English, seeing as the mother has no chance to travel, or for a promotion, and both daughters study English at school. But then, English is becoming a growing necessity for all Japanese people. As Ms. Toyama asked me, "Why do you study Japanese if you already know English?"

8:30 pm

The hot water is finally turned on in the dorm and I step into the bathing room, leaving my towel and robe in a cubby. Three other people are already bathing and I greet them as I grab a bucket and stool. I sit down and we all chat as we wash using both the buckets and shower heads. After I'm totally clean, I step into the hot bath tub, joining two girls already there. We talk casually until someone squirts us with the shower head and we retaliate by shooting steaming water with our hands from the tub until a truce is declared. After relaxing for a few more minutes, I leave feeling warm, sleepy and lightheaded.

9:30 pm

I am again under the warmth of the kotatsu, ending my days as I started it, this time studying and chatting with my two roommates. We complain about tomorrow's test and cleaning duties: "You have first-floor stairs? I have second-floor toilets." We speak in Japanese, which has become more and more familiar to me, English slipping away as the days go by. Gradually, I remember tomorrow's early alarm and crawl into the top bunk, running over vocab words in my head, trying to decide what train would be the fastest to get to Ginza, reminding myself to bring my laundry in from the line...until I fall asleep.

Foreign Facts

Compiled by Paula Swonguer



1. In Bulgaria, the average length of time that a government has stayed in power since 1900 is one year and three days. (Submitted by Teddy Kolev)

2. Bulgaria is one of the few countries in the world that had a national holiday of literature and a national holiday of alcoholism. (Submitted by Teddy Kolev)

3. Indonesians rarely spank their children. Instead, they give them a stinging, painful pinch. Light pinches are also given to children as a sign of pleasure. (Submitted by Joanna Eure)

4. In Greece, gifts are exchanged on New Year's Day rather than Christmas in honor of St. Basil, the epitome of philanthropy. (Submitted by Loretta Boll)

5. An old Bermudian wedding custom which is still practiced today is the arrival of the bride and bridesmaids at the church

in a decorated horse-pulled carriage. (Submitted by Deirdre Lohan)

6. In Korea, young people are forbidden to smoke in front of older people such as teachers, parents, or senior students. (Submitted by Nick Choi)

7. The Cameroon Mountain in Cameroon is one of the wettest places on Earth, receiving more than 30 feet of rain in a year.

8. Kenya is East Africa's most prosperous country, but it also has the world's fastest growing population.

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