

## Different Worlds, Same Hearts

By Miya Yung

Sitting in the airplane on that 14<sup>th</sup> day of July, I was heading to Osaka with an open heart and an empty stomach. My mind was swirling with images of *takoyaki*, *okonomiyaki*, *wagashi*, and everything else I could associate with Japanese cuisine. I went to Japan thinking that all of the amazing food I was going to be stuffing myself with was going to be my highlight of the trip. Little did I know that my heart was going to return heavier than the ten pounds I had put on afterwards. If you'd told me before the trip that I was going to come back a different person, I would've laughed that off. How could three weeks change my life? I wasn't convinced at all. Maybe if I hadn't met her from this trip, my opinion would've been the same. Her name is Keiko Kobayashi and she was my host mom for the three weeks. She's also the reason my outlook on life has completely changed, and why I'll never pass judgment on another human being again for as long as I live.

I met her my second day in Japan. I didn't know what to expect and so I was nervous and sweating all over. The humidity outside wasn't helping me one bit. Keiko brought her 7-year old son, Junpei, and we went out to eat dinner together. You're probably thinking we went off in a car to the restaurant with my 50-pound luggage in the trunk. No, this was Japan where transportation revolves around the subway system. And so she had to lug around my huge suitcase while I carried my duffle bag and Junpei strolled alongside us. I could tell she was struggling a lot, but she never complained and I felt awful. That was the only time I've ever wished to have Arnold Schwarzenegger's arms. Two train rides and a pint of sweat later, we finally made it to the restaurant. We had the typical starter conversation: how many siblings you have, what are your hobbies, what foods you enjoy, etc. She told me about her family, how her husband worked at the electric company so he was seldom at home, and how Junpei loved baseball and the Hanshin Tigers so he hardly spoke about anything other than that. I was surprised at how good her English was; communication was a breeze. She preferred that I talked with her in English, but when she didn't understand me I was able to communicate what I was trying to tell her in Japanese. She had only been studying English for three years, but she

had a strong desire to become fluent one day. She'd had seven other homestays from all around the world before in an effort to better her English communication skills.

When we were looking at the menu to order, she kept pointing me to the alcohol section and asking if I wanted anything. When I refused and told her I was underage, she said that was ok because she'd still order it for me. After finally convincing her that I only wanted water, she told me that she drank often and she liked beer. Two huge glasses later and I found out that she loved beer. Maybe it was the dark setting, combined with the fact that she was a little tipsy that didn't settle with me and had my stomach uneasy. I was thinking to myself, "Great, so she's going to be drunk all of the time and so I have to fend for myself while I'm here. No wonder Junpei doesn't interact with her. Poor kid, his mom's an alcoholic." That night I went to sleep dreading all the days to come and feeling very skeptical about my host family.

The next day, Keiko returned from a beer run to the convenience store with a huge bag full of candy, chocolates, crackers, and chips and she said, "Here you go! Lots of Japanese junk food in case you get hungry at night!" When I'd return from a long day out and about she'd always have little treats waiting in my room, along with my laundry all neatly folded. First she'd left me a bunch of tourist pamphlets she'd picked up from the train station. Another day, it was a teen Japanese magazine. Then two cans of peach drink (I'd told her it was my favorite the night before). It was the cute little things like that that helped me think that maybe things weren't going to be so bad after all. Soon enough, I realized that I had to look beyond what I'd initially imagined the homestay to be in order to experience for myself all that it truly had to offer. I saw Keiko in a completely different light after that.

I was able to open my heart up to her, and I know she did the same. Even little Junpei began to become more comfortable around me. I won this huge Pokemon toy in a raffle at the 7-11, and after I gave that to him he said "*Oyasuminasai*" to me every night. The only English word my host dad knew was "ok" but still he tried to talk with me through Keiko. Even though we never communicated much, he showed he cared in subtle ways like always asking whether or not I wanted to shower first or if I wanted something to drink. A few weeks ago, I was informed that he was going to start learning English! From the house to the train station, it was about a 25-minute walk. I found myself

running home everyday just because I didn't want to waste a single minute with my host family. Keiko and I stayed up talking until midnight every night after those first few awkward days. If I didn't have to wake up by 7AM every morning, I have no doubt that we would've stayed up talking throughout every night. We hit on every subject across the board, from my parents to her childhood, to dogs we wanted, to boys, to favorite foods-- you name it, we talked about it. Sometimes I even forgot that she was from Japan because I talked to her just as if she was one of my high school friends. She was also hilarious and so unpredictable at times. For dinner one night they made *sukiyaki* and so she went on her laptop and blasted the *Sukiyaki* Song and was singing it all throughout dinner while her husband and Junpei just acted as if this was a typical Keiko moment.

One night after she'd finished singing along with Olivia Newton John via Youtube, her mood changed and suddenly we had this serious conversation. I found out that her mother, father, and brother all had schizophrenia. This was the reason she became a caregiver for people with mental illnesses. She said her job was emotionally and physically exhausting, and often thankless but she stuck with it because she wanted to help others in need. She said to me, "I may act all crazy and stupid when I'm at home, but my friends know I am a very serious person. I act this way for my son, because I don't want him to know anything is wrong." I found out that drinking was her way of relaxing and letting the day's stress float away. She is also diabetic, and she smoked as well. I worried a lot for her after that, but she'd say not to because "I'm not an alcoholic. I have certain days of the week where I don't drink at all, so I know I can live without it." Too bad she wasn't convincing me at all. She told me that Junpei is the reason she works so hard. I began to notice how they interacted together, and it was easy to see how much love there was between them. The way they jokingly fought with each other over some candy I'd given Junpei made me feel guilty for my earlier thoughts. Keiko was an amazing mother, and I don't know how I could've been so blind to seeing that in the beginning. A few weeks ago, she emailed me to tell me she's quit drinking.

On our last day in Japan, I was an emotional wreck. Sure I was going to miss all of the other amazing people we'd met, the vending machines on every corner, the beautiful city of Osaka itself, etc. but the main reason for all of my tears was because I was leaving my host mom. That final night could've been the last time I'd ever see her

for all I knew, and that thought alone was enough to get the waterworks going. As Sarah and I were waiting at our gate in the Itami Airport, my cell phone started to buzz and my heart skipped twenty beats when I saw 'HOST MOM' pop up on the caller ID. I talked to her through tears and gasps for air for 30 minutes. Later on, I received the phone bill and that phone call cost \$60, but the words she said to me were absolutely priceless and I would give any amount to hear them again. The last few words she said to me were "Please don't be sad. You are the reason I want to have a daughter now. Miya, I'm not going to say goodbye to you, because the world is such a small place and so I'm sure I will see you again someday."

As I go on with my life, four months later, I've forgotten what meals I had in Japan but I still remember these words as if I'd just heard them yesterday. Keiko had taught me so much, probably without even realizing it. One person might not have the power to change the entire world, but they can certainly change your life. It didn't even matter that we were both from two completely different worlds. In the end you realize that we are all humans, with hearts that beat just the same. Now I am convinced.