

Reading

Where I'm From

By Misa Sugiura

RUDE

It's pouring rain the day I move into my dorm freshman year at Duke University. My parents and I walk down the hall, wiping rain off our faces and checking room numbers. 210... 212... 214. My roommate, Chloë, is already in the room with her parents.

Introductions and small talk **ensue**¹: what rotten luck we had with the weather today, of all days. What the flight was like from Minneapolis-St. Paul to Raleigh-Durham, where we stayed last night, how the rain caused three accidents on the highway between here and Chloë's hometown of Charlotte.

"So," say Chloë's parents to mine, "where are you from?"

"We live outside of Minneapolis," my father answers, looking confused—didn't we just go over this?

"Oh, yes, right. But where are you really from?"

"Mom," says Chloë quietly. She looks at me, clearly **mortified**².

"What?" says Chloë's mom.

But my dad doesn't notice, doesn't care, or maybe he doesn't want to embarrass Chloë's parents. So he tells them, "I was born and raised Takarazuka, Japan." He nods at my mom.

"Natsume is from Ōsaka."

Later, as we say goodbye outside the dorm, I tell them that they don't have to humor anyone who asks them where they're really from. My mom says, "But we are really from Japan."

"Yeah, well, when I'm asked that question, I'm going to say, 'Minneapolis is where I'm really from,'" I say, but my mom shakes her head.

"Eriko, that's rude," she says. "Don't do that to people."

¹ **ensue**: follow

² **mortified**: very embarrassed

GUARDIAN ANGEL

When I was in eighth grade, a Japanese kid showed up at school. She was awkward and pimply, and on her first day she wore a sort of sailor uniform with a navy skirt and a white middie blouse with a big navy scarf tied in a bow. To top it off, her name was Miho, which is a pretty name in Japanese, but I just knew that the boys were all going to ask her, “Are you a ho? ‘Cause that’s what your name says.”

Mrs. Mintz, our homeroom teacher, pulled me aside before class and introduced us, beaming. “Eriko, I’m appointing you to be Miho’s guardian angel for a few weeks,” she said, and she moved my seat partner and best friend Zayna so that Miho could sit next to me instead. “I know you’ll help her get acclimated and make lots of friends.”

How could I possibly help this girl? I didn’t speak enough Japanese to be able to translate anything beyond the simplest conversational phrases. I was suffocating at the bottom of the dogpile that was the **eighth-grade social hierarchy**³, struggling to hang on to my elementary school friends as they changed and clawed their way up and away from me.

Miho looked at me with dull eyes in a round face. She murmured, “Yoroshiku onegai shimasu,” —a phrase I vaguely understood to be a polite greeting of some kind—bobbed her head at me in a **deferential**⁴ little bow and came over to the desk next to mine. She did another head bob at me as she sat down. Now that she was next to me, I could see that she had probably been crying earlier. I felt sorry for her—how miserable it must feel to be new, to not speak a word of English, and to have to start off in that ridiculous outfit that I was sure her mom had made her wear, with that awful name, and she wasn’t even pretty.

But I felt even sorrier for myself. Miho was exactly the kind of person that I feared everyone saw when they looked at me: weird, awkward, foreign. Japanese. I could not afford to take on an anchor like Miho, with her Japanese face and her Japanese clothes and that humiliating little Japanese bowing thing she kept doing every time I looked at her. I hadn’t asked to be her friend, I told myself. It wasn’t fair to lump me with her just because she came from the same country as my parents.

Eighth grade. Sink or swim. Eat or be eaten. I **endured**⁵ Miho’s presence next to me in class, muttering a few broken Japanese sentences to her when I absolutely had to. Once the bell rang, I cast her off and went running to Zayna and Sophie.

³ **eighth-grade social hierarchy**: a social ranking based on things like popularity, appearance, athletic ability, and influence within an 8th grade at a school

⁴ **deferential**: respectful

⁵ **endured**: tolerated

“Oh, her?” I said. “She’s Japanese, not like me. Real Japanese people are weird. Look at her. Look at how weird she is.”

CHOPSTICKS, AGE 13

Zayna and Sophie and I spent the day at Schulze Lake Beach that weekend, and Sophie’s mom got us Chinese takeout for dinner. I used chopsticks, they used forks.

“How do you *do* that?” they asked, not for the first time, and not for the last.

AMERICAN CITIZEN

The summer after Miho, we went to Japan and my mother enrolled me in a sleepaway camp so that I would learn to speak Japanese. I was surrounded by a hundred Mihos, girls who Mrs. Mintz had thought I would understand. No one was unkind to me, but they gasped when I poured soy sauce on my rice. They stared, shocked, when I sat crisscross (only boys do that!). The toilets were awful squat toilets.

One day, a girl asked me when I was going to come home to live in Japan. I explained that I was an American, so I’d probably stay in America.

“You’re not American,” she said.

“I am, too.”

“You’re Japanese.”

“Yes, but I’m also American.”

She gave me a long, hard look. She asked me gently, “Have you not seen yourself in a mirror?”

“I know my face is Japanese. But I am American because I was born in America.” I didn’t know how to say **birthright citizenship**⁶ in Japanese. Or in English, for that matter. All I could do was keep repeating, “I was born in America.”

She shook her head. “Make sure you look in a mirror when you get home. You’re definitely Japanese.”

CHOPSTICKS, AGE 18

My roommate Chloë’s mom visits Duke one weekend and takes us out for sushi.

⁶ **birthright citizenship**: a legal principle that gives individuals who are born in a particular country automatic citizenship, regardless of the nationality or immigration status of their parents.

She asks me, "Can you use chopsticks?"

DOUBLE

Shortly after that week of sleepaway camp in Japan, my mother and I passed a Starbucks on the way back from the train station to my grandmother's house in Osaka. It was a steam bath outside, and I was dying for a taste of home. I asked my mother to come to the counter with me to help me order, but she insisted I try ordering on my own first. "It's practically the same menu," she said. "Even the sizes."

So I walked up to the counter and ordered a grande Double Chocolate Chip Frappuccino. I said it slowly, so that the barista could understand me.

I got a blank stare in return.

"Grande," I said. I held my hands in the air, one over the other, grande-height apart.

"Dou-ble. Choco-late chip. Frap-pu-cci-no." I pronounced everything carefully.

"Gu-rande," the barista repeated, and held up a grande-sized cup. "Fu-rap-pu-chiino?"

I nodded, encouraged. "Double chocolate chip."

Nothing.

"Double," I said slowly. I held up two fingers and said, "Ni," for good measure. Two isn't the quite same as double, but it seemed close enough.

Before I could continue, the barista furrowed her brow and reached tentatively for a second cup.

"No, no," I said. "Double. Dah-bu-ru."

She shook her head apologetically.

I looked desperately at my mother.

"It's not on the menu," she said.

"So? It's not on the menu at home, either."

"That's not the way it works here," she explained.

"Well, it should be. That's the way it works at home."

My mother shrugged. "You are not at home."

CHOPSTICKS, AGE 14

The day after the Starbucks incident, my mother's best friend from high school had us over for dinner at her house.

"Can you use chopsticks?" she asked me.

HISTORY

Mrs. Mintz paired us up to do presentations on different countries and their cultural contributions. Naturally I got paired with Miho, and we did Japan. It was okay, actually, because Japan is pretty great: castles. Samurai. Ukiyo-e. Taiko. Anime. Manga. Yuzuru Hanyū.

Miho wore a fancy kimono. We showed clips of *Sailor Moon*, handed out manjū, and passed around her collection of manga. Miho wrote everyone's names in katakana. People thought it was cool. I was proud of us both, and for once, I felt good about being Japanese. Miho smiled at me. I smiled back.

Then someone said, "My grandfather died in Pearl Harbor."

People looked at me and Miho. Miho looked at me.

I wanted to say, That wasn't me. That's not my country.

I wanted to say, What about Hiroshima? My great-aunt died in Hiroshima.

But the thing is, I'm not Japanese.

In the bathroom, I heard Sasha, the alpha girl of my class, **snicker**⁷ and ask her friends if they'd seen the way all the nerds went apeshit over *Sailor Moon*.

The next day, Miho thought we were going to be friends, and she smiled at me again. This time I didn't smile back.

CHOPSTICKS, AGE 12

I wore them in my hair once, after seeing a picture of a fashion show online. Sophie and Zayna thought it was cool. My mother thought it was disgusting. "Would you wear a fork in your hair?" she said.

⁷ **snicker**: a sneaky laugh or giggle, often mocking

WE

I am home from college, and my dad takes me for burgers and shakes at the diner. While we eat, he asks why I supported a Native American protest of an oil pipeline being built near their land. "First of all, it's a threat to their supply of clean water. And second of all, it goes through land that's sacred to them. After we basically wiped them out and forced them to live on reservations, the least we can do is respect their wishes about something that affects their lives now."

"Why do you say 'we'?" my father asks. "Our family was still farming rice in Japan when that happened. And you're not even white."

"Because..." I have to think about that one for a moment. "Because it was America that did it. And I'm American."

"What do you say when you talk about Hiroshima, where Haruna-obasan died? Who is 'we' then?"

I don't have a good answer to that question.

"Do you say 'we' when you're talking about America today?"

"Well. Yeah."

"Even when the government does something you disagree with? Like weak gun control or anti-immigrant laws? Still 'we'?"

"They."

My dad shakes his head. "English is hard."

I don't think it's just English that's hard.

FEAR

Three months after she arrived, Miho went back to Japan to live with her aunt. My mother blamed me.

"You were mean to her," she said.

"Mom. The girl was a freak. We had nothing in common. You expect me to give up all my friends to be friends with someone like that?"

"If people don't want to be your friend because you are Miho's friend, then they are not the real friend."

“They are real friends. She just didn’t fit in.”

I knew in my heart that my mother was right. I knew that I was being a coward. I knew that the right thing to do, the kind thing to do, would have been to be Miho’s friend. But Miho and I being Japanese together would have doomed us both, and I was afraid of testing my friends, of not fitting in myself. My fear was greater than my compassion, and I sacrificed Miho to that fear.

Who can face that about themselves in eighth grade, when we are all made of fear? I couldn’t. So even though I felt guilty when Miho went away, mostly I felt relieved to be free of the reminder of how I feared the way others might see me.

HINT

This guy comes up to me at a **frat party**⁸. We talk. He’s cute. He’s attentive. He says, “Eriko. Is that Japanese?”

I say, “Yes.”

He says, “I wondered if maybe you were Japanese.”

I say, “Why?”

He says, “You have a hint of an accent.”

I say, “No I don’t. Unless it’s a Minnesohhta accent.” I hit the *O* hard, the way only a true Minnesotan can.

He says, “No, it’s a Japanese accent.”

BON-ODORI

It was the summer of camp and Starbucks. We went into town for Obon, the festival of the dead, when we welcome our ancestors home. I wore a yukata and wooden geta that my grandmother had bought just for me. As we walked, the geta rang out against the concrete, karin-korin, karin-korin. The sun had set, and the streets were lit with lanterns and lined with **vendors hawking**⁹ toys, grilled meat, and sweets. Hundreds of people danced in a slow, happy procession around a central **dais**¹⁰ to the sound of the tankō-bushi song blaring from the loudspeakers. Up on the platform, men playing taiko and shamisen accompanied the singer.

⁸ **frat party**: fraternity party organized by a male social group at a college or university

⁹ **vendors hawking**: people selling something

¹⁰ **dais**: a raised stage

My grandmother taught me the words and helped me learn the steps:

Hotte, hotte, mata hotte!

Katsuide, katsuide atomodori!

It was a dance about mining for coal under the moon; dancers mimed digging, then swinging a sackful of coal over their shoulder, putting it in a cart, and letting it go. I moved my hands left, then right, clapped them together, swept them wide. I took four steps forward, then two steps back, two forward, then one back again.

We bought hanabi to take home with us, and crouched on the street in front of the house and watched the tiny balls of orange fire spark and snap at the ends of the rice straws that we held in our hands. My grandmother served us glasses of barley tea and sent us inside to bathe and go to bed.

I could feel the tradition in my bones. When I close my eyes, can feel it still.

WHERE ARE YOU REALLY FROM?

I am from golden acres of wheat and cornfields, from towering mountain ranges and suburban subdivisions, from long, snaking rivers and ten thousand lakes. I am from political arguments with my dad at the diner. I am from long afternoons with my friends at the beach. This is my country. This is my birthright. This, despite what anyone says or thinks, despite my own doubts and fears and worries, is where I'm from.

I am from bright green squares of rice fields, from towns and cities **chockablock**¹¹ with buildings, from glittering bays and busy harbors. I am from my grandfather's favorite soba shop, the one that's been there for a hundred years. I am from trips to the public bath with my mother. Japan is the land of my ancestors. This is where Miho was from. This is where my parents are from. This, despite what anyone says or thinks, despite all I've done to push myself away, is also where I'm from.

"Where are you really from?"

I know what people mean when they ask that question, and I can't—I won't—answer it the way they want, because "Japan" is not the truth. But "Minneapolis" is not the truth, either. All I can do is to ask back, "Where are you really from?"

Credit Line:

¹¹ **chockablock:** crowded

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