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*Akasuri*

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## Introduction

As I lay completely naked on a wet, pink, plastic-covered table being aggressively scrubbed by an older Korean woman I realized how influential the past nine months of living in Japan had actually been. How could I have gone from quickly changing my clothes in locker room bathroom stalls to comfortably waltzing around public houses in the nude and getting every inch of my skin scrubbed off by a complete stranger? This was the first time during my study abroad experience in Japan when I realized what a different person I had become.

I had certainly become much more confident. Before coming to Japan I was nervous about basically everything. Aside from locker room shyness I was also afraid of driving, talking on the phone, talking to people in general, going to places I had never been before, making mistakes, etc. Studying abroad, especially in a country that doesn't speak my first language, was a strange decision for me to make. Sometimes I couldn't bring myself to talk to the cashier at the grocery store; how could I expect myself to live in a foreign country? But I was studying Japanese and I wanted to improve my skills and that can only really be done where you can immerse yourself in that language.

In August of 2016 I stood outside the security gate of Denver International Airport waving goodbye to my parents. I was finally going to Japan. I had been to Japan once the summer before, but had been accompanied by a close family friend. It was a high school graduation gift and we spent two weeks touring Japan from Tokyo down to Hiroshima. A part of me was relatively confident in returning to Japan for my junior year of college because Japan wasn't a completely foreign country to me, except this time I would be doing it alone. I would be living in a foreign country by myself. This was only my second time leaving the U.S. and all of this terrified me.

Honestly, one of the hardest parts for me was simply getting there. I had to navigate four airports in three countries and then take a shuttle bus from the airport in Japan to my dormitory. I had flown alone plenty of times before but I always had someone to escort me to my gate and pick me up at my destination. I had never been alone on an international flight or on any flight where I had a layover, but somehow I managed it. After twenty hours of flight, a night in a hotel, two hours on a bus, and a lot of unnecessary self-induced stress I stood sweat-soaked for the hundredth time since arriving in Japan outside my dorm in Hirakata City, Osaka Prefecture.

## **Kansai**

Hirakata is a moderately sized city roughly halfway between Osaka and Kyoto on the edge of Osaka prefecture. As a foreign student looking to explore Japan, Hirakata is in a fantastic location. Taking the express train takes about thirty minutes from Osaka, forty minutes from Kyoto, an hour from Kobe, and an hour from Nara. If you take the bullet train, or *shinkansen*, Hiroshima and Tokyo are only a couple hours away in either direction. Japan's highly efficient rail and bus systems made getting around Japan relatively easy.

It was here in Hirakata that I attended Kansai Gaidai University, a small private university that isn't particularly remarkable for local Japanese, but is well known for producing a lot of famous foreigners in Japan. Several foreign students who attended Kansai Gaidai have gone on to achieve a degree of stardom in Japan, mostly as comedians in nearby Osaka. Kansai Gaidai's most famous alumni is probably Jero, an American of mixed African-American and Japanese heritage who mixed rap with *enka*, a genre of Japanese ballad music with a traditional and somber feeling.

My fall semester was mostly spent adjusting to my new environment. I learned how to navigate the grocery store, how to use the transportation system, how to order food online for delivery, and other mundane things. During this time I was mostly focused on academics. During the fall semester we didn't have any breaks from school, so traveling was limited to weekend trips to Osaka and Kyoto. Kyoto in particular is famous for its classical Japanese culture.

Kyoto is the old capital of Japan and was spared from Allied firebombing during World War II, resulting in excellent preservation of classical architecture. Most all of Japan's oldest and most famous temples and shrines are located here, such as the "Golden Pavilion" *Kinkaku-ji*, *Kiyomizu-dera* which is known for its sweeping view of Kyoto, *Ryōan-ji* and its famous rock garden, and *Fushimi Inari Taisha* and its iconic red gates. Kyoto is representative of all things classical Japan, from temples and shrines, to geishas, to tea ceremony, to traditional arts and theater.

While I did some exploring of Kyoto with friends during this time I began to feel a little disappointed that I wasn't really doing as much in Japan as I could. I ended up not doing a lot of things because I was scared to do things alone. The only things I had done by myself were going grocery shopping and walking around the local shopping mall. Because of this anxiety to do things alone I was really holding myself back. I confided this to one of my roommates, Lizzie, who suggested we try taking up Osaka on its infamous nightlife.

## **Clubbing**

In general, Osaka is the exception to every stereotype you will have about Japan, especially when comparing it to Tokyo. Osaka has litter, it has graffiti, it has more violence, it's the headquarters of organized crime, the food is deep-fried and covered in sauce, the people are

louder and more straightforward, and even the local accent is seen as rude and rough by those from Tokyo. This isn't to insult Osaka, I came to love it as well as identify with the feel of region and feel way more comfortable there than in Tokyo, but it's certainly a different experience from the rest of Japan, especially with its rowdy and vibrant nightlife.

Osaka can be described as the clubbing capital of Japan. On the university campus students openly advertised club events and it seemed like many local Japanese students, and foreign students, went clubbing on the weekends. So Lizzie and I decided to check out a club recommended by other students called Giraffe located in *Dōtonbori*, a shopping and eating district popular with tourists I had frequented before.

Growing up in Fort Collins, Colorado, and being under the legal drinking age in the U.S., meant I had zero experience with clubbing in any capacity. It was loud and hard to see and thirty-seconds after entering the building we were being asked for photographs by the club event promoter. As a foreigner in Japan, you have to get used to being photographed. Overall, I didn't enjoy it. Everything felt overpriced, it was crowded, and the music wasn't very good. I found myself wishing we had just gone to Torikizoku, a chain bar and restaurant located throughout Japan where everything on the menu is ¥280 or just under three dollars. It's primarily meat skewers and alcohol meaning it's perfect for poor college students looking to eat and drink on a dime.

While I didn't enjoy myself clubbing, it was somewhat insightful. Interestingly, Japanese clubs have coin lockers to keep your things in which seems uniquely Japanese. I don't think American clubs offer coin lockers. Similarly to America though, there is an expectation that people don't just go to clubs to dance. I think that what I liked the least was the way I was treated by other people which is very uncharacteristic of any of my other experiences in Japan. While I

did give clubbing a couple more chances and checked out a few other clubs, I found out that it's really not my thing. I preferred going to bars in Hirakata like Torikizoku or this small place across from campus called Club Mono, usually avoided by the foreign students in favor of clubs in Osaka and Kyoto because it was too boring.

My friend Hannah, whom I already knew from back home at Colorado State University, and I went to Club Mono on a drizzly Halloween night upon Hannah's recommendation. The place was completely empty except for the three bartenders. This was particularly notable because the place could only hold maybe ten people. We got to practice our Japanese with the girls who worked there, they made us custom drinks, and we danced to music off YouTube. I returned to Club Mono a few times with Hannah and Lizzie and ended up meeting the owner of the bar and teaching some of the other patrons the Macarena. I learned that I'm not a fan of clubs, but I can enjoy going to a bar, which I never thought I would say before going to Japan.

## **Spa World**

The fall semester was coming to a close and there was one obstacle I decided I wanted to overcome -- Japanese bath culture. Japan has an abundance of natural hot springs and a long history of public bath houses. Back home in the U.S. I always appreciated a hot bath and with chronic joint pain and the stress of finals setting in I thought going to a bath house would be a great idea. The biggest challenge would be overcoming my dislike of nudity. At almost any hot springs or bathhouse in Japan swimsuits aren't allowed because it taints the purity of the water and I questioned if I would be able to get naked with a bunch of strangers. Even in the locker room back home I would change in a bathroom stall or just wear something like my swimsuit

underneath my clothes. I was hesitant about the nudity, but decided it would be good for me to give it a try.

I found this place in Osaka called Spa World that was different bath styles from around the world. One floor is Asian style baths like a traditional Japanese hot spring or a Persian public bath house. The other floor is European themed and has a Finnish sauna and a bath that looks like the Trevi Fountain. Another floor is just saunas modeled after different global saunas like a Korea sauna where you lay on hot gravel or the Iceland cold wind sauna which was a room kept cold with a giant fan. Spa World is seven stories high and also has a pool area with water slides, a gym, multiple spas, an arcade, several restaurants and a hotel attached. I had to check it out, but I was nervous to do it alone. I faced the paradox of not wanting to go alone, but also not being sure which friend I was comfortable being naked with.

I asked my friend Hannah who immediately was interested in going. She also had chronic pain and was interest in going to bathhouses, but everyone she had asked didn't want to deal with the nudity. Hannah had been to Japanese bathhouses before and showed me all the ups and downs and I ended up having a really fun time. This was the beginning of me being more comfortable with public bathing culture and ultimately being more comfortable in my own skin.

## **Seoul**

When the semester ended we had a month-long break and I decided to finally get out and do some exploring. I decided that I wanted to go to Seoul, South Korea for a few days. It's only an hour and a half away by plane and for short visits American's don't require a pre-approved travel visa; a visa can be obtained at the airport. In hindsight I realize that I never actually checked the visa requirements before I left, I just knew people who took weekend trips to South

Korea during the semester and assumed that meant that similarly to Japan, U.S. citizens don't need to apply for a visa for short visits. This is actually somewhat reckless and really highlights how spur of the moment I was being about this and I am not a "spur of the moment" kind of person. Even now I'm surprised that I didn't check that.

Primarily, I was scared to go to Korea alone because I didn't speak any Korean and was scared to be in a large city alone. I asked everyone I knew and no one was able to go either because they had to return to the U.S., they were out of money, or they had prior plans. Running out of time I finally decided to go by myself. My mom helped me buy a plane ticket and reserve a hotel room and over Christmas I spent three days in Seoul.

Getting myself to the airport in Japan was easy because my dorm mother helped me reserve a highway bus to airport. Once I was at the airport it was rather easy getting to where I needed to be compared to when I was first coming to Japan; I felt much more competent at navigating airports. It was going to be finding my hotel that had me nervous. Incheon Airport is actually about an hour away from Seoul and I spent hours just making sure I understood how to take the direct train from the airport into Seoul. I landed at the airport at nine o'clock at night and armed only with Google maps and hours of research I set off to find my hotel.

Fortunately, the train to Seoul was fairly easy to find and as I settled in for my hour ride into the city I really felt the anxiety setting in. This was really happening. I was going to Seoul alone and I had never even been to Korea before. I thought I had been nervous going to Japan, but at least I had been before and I could speak Japanese. A little bit of regret started setting in and I couldn't believe what I had done, but now I was stuck.

The train pulled into Seoul Station and I had to figure out which subway to take to get to my hotel. I'm still thankful for how English-friendly transportation hubs are in Japan and Korea.



Almost every station has stop names and directions available in English. Seoul's subway stations are also significantly easier to use than in Japan. In Seoul you can just walk up to the kiosk, search for your stop name and it will tell you how much to pay in fare. In Japan you have to consult a map above the kiosk to see the price for where you are going then you enter the price, not the location. If you get the price wrong you have to see a station master to get your fare adjusted. Using Google Maps I was able to know my station name and just had to type it into the machine. It was so easy, but I was so used to the Japanese system I stood by the machines for a few minutes trying to find the fare map.

As I walked through Seoul station to the subway platform I noticed several signs saying that when you were going to the airport you had to select the airport as your destination and not Seoul station. In hindsight, these are very clear instructions, but I wasn't really thinking at the time. I managed to end up at the correct stop and navigate my way to my hotel. As I came out of subway station, Korea surprised me again as I was greeted by a giant neon sign that said "gun range" and had a neon gun shooting a target. It was something I hadn't seen since leaving America. I found my hotel and checked in and had to find dinner. I didn't want to try to find someplace that was open, although the neighborhood was still bustling and most places were probably open. Looking out my hotel room window I saw a 7-Eleven and decided to just get dinner there.

In Japan, convenience stores are easy one-stop-shopping for pre-prepared meals. Korea continued to surprise me when the convenience store didn't have any pre-prepared food. Similarly to American convenience stores there were plenty of snacks, but no fresh spaghetti meals. There was instant cup ramen and I had an electric kettle in my hotel room. In hindsight I could have just bought ramen, but I was so tired and stressed out I just grabbed something

familiar, but still new. I wanted to try Korean short ribs, called *kalbi*, and Korean liquor, called *shochu*, so I ended up with *kalbi* flavored Doritos and a small bottle of *shochu*.

At convenience stores in Japan you'll be offered a plastic bag for buying anything, even a small candy bar or soda. I was surprised once more when the cashier just handed my chips and alcohol back to be with a smile. Was it okay to just walk around with a bottle of alcohol as I went back to my hotel? I hadn't opened it, but I wasn't familiar with Korea's liquor laws. I had to assume it was okay since I wasn't offered a bag and rushed back across the street to my hotel room. I spent the rest of that night enjoying my food and watching international news in my hotel room, relishing the fact that I made it to Korea, found my hotel, and fed myself all by myself in a truly foreign country.

The next morning I set out and saw some of the sights in Seoul. I visited Bukchon Hanok Village and saw its traditional Korean houses that people still live in, one of the old imperial palaces called Gyeongbokgung Palace, and finally went to the top of Seoul Tower which was surprisingly the most difficult place to get to. The gondola center that takes you to the base of the tower is kind of hidden in a neighborhood and is not that easy to find. Korea is known for their skincare and on my last day I wandered around Myeongdong, a shopping district with rows of makeup stores, and used up the last of my money buying whatever would fit in my carry-on. The only issue was that I basically failed at feeding myself every single time I attempted to eat.

In addition to my first night of liquor and Doritos in my hotel room, I discovered that Seoul isn't designed for solo eating and had to eat two servings everywhere. Judging by the lone English utterance of "oh my God" I think I impressed a group of high school boys sitting next to me at a shaved ice parlor when I finished off a bowl of *patbingsu*, or Korean shaved ice, that could have fed 2-4 people. I was also hand fed by an old woman at a short-ribs restaurant when I

couldn't properly handle my chopsticks. Korean chopsticks, unlike Japanese and Chinese chopsticks, are stainless steel and are more oval shaped with a flatter edge. I was confident in my chopstick skills until I couldn't properly wrap melted cheese around the ribs and the elderly owner of the restaurant stood by my table dutifully wrapping the cheese for me and handing the rib back to me so I could eat it. Meal-time in Korea was a struggle for me, but I got through the rough parts by thinking of the funny stories I'd have to tell.

I made my way back to airport, much more confidently this time, but ran into trouble at Seoul Station. When I purchased my subway fare from my stop near my hotel I selected Seoul Station and not the airport. I followed the directions to the airport platform, but my ticket wouldn't let me through the gates. I tried going a different way and thought I would find an info desk, another ticket kiosk, or someone to help me. I kept walking and walking and finally went up an escalator and ended up outside. Following the people I ended up in a giant train terminal where the trans-national trains departed. I started panicking a little.

I found a ticket kiosk and was able to successfully buy a ticket to the airport, but I didn't know where to go to get to the airport and not the other side of the country. I finally ended up showing a maintenance worker my ticket and he pointed me in the right direction. Following his directions and going down three sets of escalators I found where I needed to be. I was immediately reminded of the directions I saw when I arrived that said to purchase a ticket to the airport and felt so stupid, but I had left for the airport early and fortunately was not going to be late for my flight. Navigating the airport was easy this time and as I sat on my flight back to Osaka I felt strangely relieved. I knew that I could get home without even using Google Maps and for the first time realized what I had just accomplished.

Not only had I successfully gotten to and from Seoul and wander around the city for a day and a half, but I only realized how comfortable I had become in Japan. I had initially been scared of going to Japan and now it had become a second home I could easily navigate. I settled into my seat and felt a little giddy at my realization that I could now travel alone and looked forward to getting to return to South Korea someday with more confidence and experiencing more of what it has to offer.

## **Nara**

The remainder of my winter break was fairly uneventful. My roommate was gone traveling and the dorms were mostly empty and awaiting students for the next semester since most of the students only stay for one semester. I enjoyed getting the dorm mostly to myself and the spring semester began soon enough. I had several new suitemates that I got along extremely well with and I credit this as being part of the reason I spent more time getting out and experiencing Japan beyond my hometown of Hirakata.

The end of January ushered in the Lunar New Year and one of my suitemates and some of her new friends invited me to a New Year festival in the nearby city of Nara. Nara is home to several temples and shrines, but is most well-known for their deer. Nara deer are considered sacred messengers of the gods and are therefore allowed to freely roam the city. Small vendors set up carts around the areas most populated by deer and you can buy crackers to feed the deer. If you buy these crackers, or *senbei*, and walk up to a deer and bow, it's supposed to bow in return, though I personally have had limited success with this.

I had been to Nara twice before. The first time had been just over a year before when a close family friend and her husband took me to Japan as a high school graduation present. One of

the many places we visited was Nara. I had a mixed experience. What they don't tell you about the Nara deer is that because they are sacred they can't be culled when their population gets too great. For these deer *senbei* constitute a fair amount of their diet and that means they can be somewhat aggressive in trying to get them. I had purchased some *senbei* and was so excited to feed the deer when ten of them swarmed around me and started nipping me. I was too slow unwrapping my *senbei* and one deer bit me on the rear. I screamed and dropped all of my *senbei* and they shattered on the ground. I had a softball sized bruise for over a month.

Naturally, I was a little more cautious the second time I visited Nara earlier in the year and just took pictures and laughed as my friends tried to fend off the tiny but ravenous deer. The worst part of this trip was just that we got on the wrong train, a direct "express" train as opposed to the regular "limited express", and ended up paying thirty dollars instead of ten dollars. I was starting to think that Nara was cursed for me. My third time in Nara, however, wasn't to see the temples or deer, but to see the New Year festival in which there's a long fireworks show and then a small mountain on the edge of the city is set on fire.

The sun set, the fireworks were spectacular, and the fire on the mountain burned in the shape of a deer before overtaking the whole side of the mountain. After the festivities we went in search of some dinner and found this adorable American-themed diner where we ate hamburgers and chicken-and-waffles. It was a really fun evening. We finally headed back to the train station just before nine o'clock to make our way home. We would have to transfer trains halfway to get back to Hirakata and a few stations before where we were supposed to transfer the train slowed to a stop. We were sitting in the last car and we saw the conductor look out the window before nervously coming over the radio.

Voice shaking, the conductor said that something very unfortunate had happened and that he was sorry for the inconvenience. Then the lights went out. Immediately we feared the worst. Japan has a significant problem with suicide by trains. Express trains don't stop at every station, meaning they pass road crossings and go through stations at sixty or seventy miles an hour without slowing down. Trying to get across a crossing before the train or intentional train suicides are a common issue in Japan.

Emergency vehicles soon arrived and our suspicions grew further. We had been waiting for over an hour when one of my friends had to go to the bathroom and couldn't wait any longer. I went with her to the front of the train to find someone who could escort her off the train. As we passed through one of the middle cars we saw that the windows were mostly covered with a blue tarp and from an angle as we passed we could see the EMTs pulling something out from underneath the train.

We were able to get my friend off the train and after another hour the train pulled into the next station and we were all transferred to other trains. At this point it was almost midnight and now we had to rush to get on the last train to Hirakata before they stopped running at midnight. We rushed onto a train going to the next station where we could transfer to our regular line and then we literally ran between the stations to catch the last train going to Hirakata. We just barely managed to make it, but we all made it back to the dorm that night a little shell-shocked. The next morning when I told my roommates about the event we asked our Japanese RA if she had ever been in a similar situation and she said rather nonchalantly that she had and that it was a minor inconvenience, but that there isn't much that can be done about it. This was my first experience with human death and it was eye-opening how common of an issue this particular situation is in Japan. It was a little surreal and difficult to process by myself. I don't think it

necessarily impacted me deeply or on an emotional level, but it was certainly something I didn't know how to go about handling. After this event I did feel with a little more conviction that Nara may actually be cursed for me, but it's a lovely place regardless.

## **Hokkaido**

The spring semester fortunately had two breaks in the middle of the semester; a spring break in the middle of March and three days off for Golden Week at the beginning of May. For Spring Break several of my friends and I decided to go to Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island and prefecture known for snowy mountains, hot springs, beautiful nature, and beer. It certainly reminded me of Colorado in many ways. Hokkaido is also famous for dairy and melons. We decided with little planning that we would visit the Shiroi Koibito Chocolate Factory, the Sapporo Beer Factory, Sapporo Tower, The Sapporo History Museum and Historical Village, and a hot spring outside of Sapporo – the prefectural capital.

Our flight from Osaka was early in the morning, so the five of us decided to sleep overnight at the airport. It was my friend I knew from CSU named Katie, my roommate Dana, and Honore and Sarah who I met earlier in the semester through Dana. Because we got there later than expected we couldn't get through security and had to sleep on the hard plastic benches under harsh fluorescent lights in the small main lobby of the domestic terminal. Fortunately, we did have a 7-Eleven to feed us, but it also meant that we had to listen to the Japanese 7-Eleven jingle and an acoustic version of Daniel Powter's "Bad Day" for six hours. I know hate that song more than I ever thought I could and I already associate it with the 2007 film adaptation of *Alvin and the Chipmunks*. I do not envy 7-Eleven employees who are forced to listen to that day in and day out.

We were up bright and early the next morning, though not well rested, and we were on our plane and on the way to Hokkaido. Fortunately, we had couple hours on the plane and an hour on the train from the airport to Sapporo to get in a power nap. All of the places we visited were amazing, but what I most looked forward to at the time was going to an outdoor *onsen*. I had been to Spa World and their indoor baths, but I had yet to visit a volcanic-fed hot spring and with the snow still on the ground in Hokkaido and wanted to visit an outdoor one, called *rotenburo*, with an excellent view.

We went to one about an hour by bus outside of Sapporo, but this presented a new challenge; I was still not completely comfortable with nudity. I had been to Spa World with Hannah, but this was four of my friends, not just one. Fortunately, everyone was familiar with bath culture in some way and it actually ended up not being weird in any way. We ended up sitting in the springs for three hours before grabbing lunch at the Indian restaurant attached to the *onsen* building and heading back into Sapporo.

Many Americans, and certainly myself, are very uncomfortable with nudity even when it's innocent or innocuous. Personally, I think it is increasingly harder on younger generations because it's not as normal. My mom and grandmother had to shower after P.E. at school when locker rooms showers at my schools never even worked and when we changed our clothes everyone would use the bathroom stalls. It's easy to be nervous about trying an *onsen* in Japan, but you really shouldn't pass up the opportunity if you find yourself in Japan. If you've got tattoos, it may be difficult because most of them don't allow tattoos due to gang connotations, but if you find one you can visit, don't let modesty hold you back, because it's really not so bad.

I ended up really liking Hokkaido. There isn't much there, but the scenery and environment really reminded me of Colorado. The wider streets, bigger houses, and steak



restaurants also reminded me of home. Most people only travel to Hokkaido for the skiing, but I think it's definitely an underappreciated pocket of Japan.

## **Hiroshima**

As the semester was coming to a close I had one more break ahead of me – Golden Week. Golden Week is one of the biggest holidays alongside the New Year, and is the biggest holiday for traveling. It's a series of national holidays one-after-another in early May that everyone gets off because it's so nationally important. For Japanese people you are expected to visit your hometown and see your parents, but a lot of people just take the time to travel. If you're traveling in Japan during this time expect it to be more difficult because there are people everywhere and everything is more expensive.

I decided to visit Hiroshima with my roommates Kaity, also known as Pink Kaity and not to be confused with Katie from CSU. A friend I met through her, Sung Eun also went with us. While we didn't get the whole Golden Week period off, we did get three days next to a weekend, giving us a week in total to see Hiroshima and the neighboring Miyajima island. I had been to Hiroshima before when I visited Japan with my close family friend, but we didn't make it to Miyajima so I was pretty excited. After getting to Korea and to Hokkaido, taking the bullet train to Hiroshima was fairly easy. We saw the Peace Museum and Park as well the Bomb Dome, we spent a day on Miyajima, and we saw Hiroshima Castle. All-in-all it was probably the easiest trip I took in Japan and when I realized how comfortable I was getting in Japan.

Our first night we decided to go to an *okonomiyaki* restaurant since Sung Eun had never tried it. It's a savory egg pancake with mix-ins like cabbage and various meats, topped with Japanese herbs, a sweet and sticky sauce and mayonnaise. Kaity and I couldn't eat it due to our

egg allergies, but the chef/owner was kind enough to help us order some side dishes that we could eat.

As we got to talking with the chef, who was from South America and spoke decent English, we realized that our identities were starting to change. When he asked us where we were from, we all chimed out “Osaka!” not realizing he meant what country we were from, but it started a great conversation on us being students and on how he came to Japan. The three of us later found it funny how none of us hesitated at saying Osaka and how Kansai was becoming part of who we were. Even after returning to the United States I still feel more of an allegiance to Osaka and the Kansai region than Tokyo and the Tohoku region.

### *Akasuri*

With the semester coming to a close and my time in Japan running out there was one last obstacle I wanted to overcome. I had noticed before at Spa World and at the *onsen* in Hokkaido rooms that were labeled *akasuri*. After Hokkaido I had decided to look it up and discovered it was a full-body scrubbing from Korea. I had heard about it before from a YouTube clip from Conan O’Brian’s show “Conan.” In the clip Conan and actor Steven Yeun visit a Korean spa in Los Angeles. The video hilariously shows Conan and Steven getting their skinned literally scrubbed off. A small part of me was kind of curious to try it, but I decided that there was no way I could lay on a table for twenty minutes getting my body scrubbed by an older woman.

One day my roommate Shantell came back to the dorms after having just been at Spa World and was raving about this body scrub she got done. Remembering the video and the room at Spa World I asked her if that was what she had done. She confirmed and said that if I was interested in it that I should definitely try it. She said it was this strange combination of gross and

satisfying to see your skin be scrubbed off, but that your skin gets so smooth it ridiculous. I thought about it and mustered the confidence to try it. If anything it would give me a funny story to tell, and that it did. The next weekend I went to Spa World, enjoyed the baths a little bit, and then nervously walked into the *akasuri* room.

There were several pink, plastic covered tables in the room and no people other than the older ladies clad in sports bras and bike shorts who worked there. Seeing that I was a foreigner they didn't bother trying to use Japanese, a common occurrence, and took my by the hand to one of the tables. One of the ladies helped me onto the table, covered my eyes with a wet washcloth, adding a pleasant but false sense of privacy, and began scrubbing. I recalled the Conan video with the two men writhing on the table from the pain of being scrubbed. I didn't think it was that painful at all and couldn't determine if they were just weak or if the lady was just going easy on me.

She did try speaking to me in Japanese a little bit, and I was able to actually converse with her a little bit. I learned that she was actually Korean and I thought it was interesting how we were both using a second language to communicate. While I understood most of what was going on there were a few hang-ups. When she finished one side of my body I initially didn't understand her telling me to flip over under she said "*hantai!*" meaning opposite. It's not technically correct for the situation, but I understood her and happily flipped over. This would recur several more times with the woman yelling "*hantai!*" and at one point she started slapping me on the flank to really drive it home I guess. It was such a bizarre experience, except I wasn't really weirded out by it. I began thinking about how I went from being unable to change out in a locker room to getting my entire body scrubbed. It was certainly quite a change. Shantell was right about how smooth it will make you though.

I ended up being so comfortable with bath culture that I ended up convincing one of my roommates, Lexie, to come with me the next time I went to Spa World. Like me, she was initially uncertain and uncomfortable with the idea, but she went with me and she ended up really enjoying it. I went from being uncertain about it to encouraging other people to try it. Japanese bath culture is so unique, and it's a great way to relax and experience something about Japan that's completely unlike anything in the United States.

## **Returning Home**

It was the end of May and it was finally time to return home. I was a little sad to leave behind some things about Japan, but honestly I was really ready to be home again. After all the traveling I did getting home was a breeze. I wasn't nervous about getting lost or missing my flight. I knew that if something happened I could figure out a solution. Worst case scenario was that I missed my flight and had to sleep in the airport overnight until my next flight, but at least that acoustic version of "Bad Day" wouldn't be there to bother me.

The most stressful part of coming back home was actually when I arrived at San Francisco International Airport. I was surprised to see police officers patrolling in SWAT gear with guns out. I had been gone long enough I couldn't figure out if that was normal or if something had happened while I was on an airplane for twelve hours. I was also shocked to see how rude the TSA was. It was something that I knew, but the Japanese airport staff was so polite and the staff in Korea was stoic if not polite. I was actually a little offended at how rude the staff at San Francisco was and how inefficient the airport was.

I finally made it back to Denver, was greeted by my family, and was finally back home. Slowly a sort of homesickness for Japan started to sink in. I missed Japanese convenience stores

and their food selection. I miss a few Japanese foods that aren't common in the United States; I could cook them at home but I'm too lazy. I miss the fun pizza options at Dominos and Pizza Hut, even if they are severely overpriced. I also miss the fun seasonal foods and items at grocery stores, convenience stores, and fast food restaurants.

However, I am happy to be back where I don't get stared at all the time. I'm happy to know the rules and not be worried about offending someone or getting deported over something stupid. I'm happy to be back where meat and fresh produce are actually reasonably priced if not really cheap. I'm happy that movie tickets are significantly cheaper here, at least in Colorado. I'm also happy that it's so easy to get different types of cuisine at a reasonable price. During the fall semester Hannah and I traveled to Osaka and paid almost thirty dollars each at Mexican restaurant. We both ordered margaritas and I got an enchilada while she chose the burrito. There were no sides and the portions were small even by Japanese standards. I'm happy to have cheap Mexican food again.

Amount a month after I returned home I was sitting in the car with my mom waiting at a stop light. Suddenly she turned to me and said, "You know, you've really blossomed after living overseas." Aside from me being grossed out by being told that I've "blossomed," I was a little skeptical. I thought about how accomplished I felt after going to South Korea by myself and how I realized I was a lot more relaxed and comfortable with myself after getting the Korean body scrub, but "blossomed" felt like an overstatement. It also felt patronizing.

A lot of the words I heard people say about my personal growth since I got back, like "blossomed" and "matured" have felt patronizing like I left a little kid and came back and adult, but I was an adult when I left. I don't like to think of it in those terms. I didn't "blossom" I became more adventurous, more curious, and more open to new ideas. I at least tried a lot of

things that were really uncharacteristic for me. I went clubbing, I traveled alone, I tried new foods, I talked to strangers, and I got naked with strangers. I did a lot of things that I never would have considered before going to Japan. Before going to Japan I was the kind of person who always said “no” and now I’m the kind of person who says “I’ll try it.”

It was very influential and helped me a lot with some of the things I’m uncomfortable with or that I have anxiety about. It wasn’t all fun all the time, there were certainly a lot of times when I felt really discouraged that my Japanese wasn’t improving as quickly as I wanted or that there were some opportunities that I missed because I was nervous to try them, but overall I did a lot of new and scary stuff, and for that I can say that I am proud of myself. It is a fact to say that I have changed, I think in a positive way, and I’m excited to keep traveling and keep trying new things.