

## **A Bridge and a Window**

Apprehensively, I leave the haven of the teacher's room and shiver as I step into the crisp, cool air outside. The familiar sounds of children screaming and shouting as they play reverberate around me, and the sun shines so brightly from the clear blue sky that I'm blinded by the light reflected off the playground.

I put my hand above my eyes and squint a little, and the blur of rapidly moving silhouettes comes into focus – some flying through the air, some hurtling along the ground. The flying objects turn out to be balls of various sizes, as well as the occasional child with a Superman complex. The ground soon teaches him the error of his ways.

Amongst this carnage sits a small mountain topped by a river of soft golden hair; a river which seems oddly familiar. An arm extends out of the mountainside and points in my direction. I freeze in terror as understanding dawns in my mind. The mountain collapses and breaks into about twenty small people and a relieved-looking blonde lady. The small people come running towards me, making noises that sound suspiciously like my name, but not quite.

Now I am the mountain. Wide-eyed faces look up at me in wonder, jabbering at top speed in Japanese, firing a barrage of questions at me. Small hands come jumping up to hold my hands, to hug my legs, to climb on my back, to rob me of my glasses, to feel the hair on my arms, and to insist that I participate in one, if not all, of their many games. Their welcome is overwhelming, but filled with warmth, and I'm happy to do my best to accommodate them.

Five minutes later, sweat drips down my back as I run across the playground with a pack of laughing six year-old boys in hot pursuit. It occurs to me that a suit might not be the best thing to wear to elementary school.

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Not a soul is to be seen as I stand shivering at the bus stop, the wind stinging my face. In the distance a slowly-moving figure hobbles along the roadside, resting her full weight on her walking stick as she drags a lethargic leg behind her. She comes to a stop a short distance away from me, and I feel her eyes on me: staring, questioning. I give her a friendly nod; her shoulders tense for half a second as if frozen by my gaze, but then she recovers her wits, returns my nod and looks away, her mouth ever-fixed in its downward grimace. We wait together in silence.

Eventually, a bus whines to a halt next to us, its engine spluttering. I take a seat next to the door and watch my new travelling companion wheezes her way to the far corner. Our carriage departs, lurching around the bends in the road. Wide, expansive fields are soon replaced by rows of houses, which in turn become apartment blocks, offices and shops. More passengers join us on our journey; each glance around the bus, their eyes resting on me for a few seconds before they move towards their seats. People do their best to avoid sitting next to each other; once there are no double seats free, new passengers reluctantly share. Eventually the seat next to me is the only one left vacant. One man opts to stand instead. A tired-looking woman relents and sits next to me.

We arrive at the bus' penultimate stop, and a man gets off, leaving a double seat singly occupied by an elderly man with few teeth and a slight aroma of urine. The woman next to me gets up and sits next to him instead. Several people remain standing. Paranoia begins to set in, and I take a discreet sniff under my armpits, just in case.

Finally we reach our destination, and I wait for the other passengers to spill onto the pavement before getting off. Local residents walk past on their way to work. Some look resolutely downwards, avoiding eye contact at all costs. Others stare as they pass; when I say hello, a look of bemusement crosses their face, and they look away. If I'm lucky, I may be

granted a grunt of acknowledgement. I feel thankful I'm not lost today; I know from bitter experience that finding help is just as difficult as finding someone who will return my smile.

In the depths of winter, a cold wind blows through the streets and permeates the air and my clothes, turning my brown skin a shade greyer. Days go by and I see not a single smile, not a single friendly face. I wonder why I choose to live in this hostile land, where a foreign face is regarded with suspicion and fear. I try to remind myself that the population is largely homogeneous and feels besieged by the onslaught of international culture that attacks its borders, its major cities and its media. People fear the loss of their cultural identity to pernicious immigrant influences, of which I appear to be one.

Mostly, I live here because it's my home. It's where I was born. It is middle England.

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I count the number of people who stare as I walk home: only fifteen today. I've been in Japan for six months now, so maybe people are getting used to me. Other days, in other places in this complex country, are a different story.

Occasionally I am lucky enough to witness the Gaijin Emergency Stop, where someone is so startled to see a foreigner that every muscle in their body freezes, and they can do little more than stand, statue-like, as I walk past. Equally entertaining is the alarmed confusion when I walk into some restaurants, and am greeted by frightened waiters scurrying away to find a colleague brave enough to attempt communication with me.

Somewhat sadder are the mothers who gather their children close to them when I walk past, or the pensioners who clutch their bags a little tighter. Were it not for the herds of small children that besiege me when I visit their Elementary School I might begin to interpret these

events as personal slights. Fortunately I am lucky enough to have the regular opportunity to look into the eyes of six year-old: eyes entirely devoid of fear, and full of wonder and intrigue. I wonder when those eyes will lose their natural curiosity, and learn instead to be afraid.

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My class is going well. We've covered the grammar, checked that our students have understood, and are giving them a chance to talk to each other. A cacophony of familiar phrases rings through the air, pronounced with varying degrees of proficiency.

Several students speak quickly and clearly. A few mumble their way through the task, while others push out each word individually as if each one were a nail they were forced to hammer through their hand, or a giant boulder they had to lift.

I walk up to one of my students. His hair is arranged impeccably on top of a narrow face. One day he will be handsome, but for now the turmoil of puberty has wrapped him in iron bars of self-consciousness, choking his confidence. I ask him a question and he stands mute, chewing his lower lip. Repeating my question, speaking more slowly and switching to Japanese only produce more chewing, though now he periodically tilts his head and inhales sharply through his teeth. After what feels like an eternity he pronounces the words almost perfectly, in a voice so small that even an ant would struggle to hear. I congratulate him heartily, and he manages a weak smile.

Another of my students sits staring listlessly out of the window, an expression of utter boredom on his face. So great is his sense of existentialist ennui that the appearance in front of him of a small brown man grinning like an idiot and waving provokes no reaction whatsoever. He is entirely disinterested. After class he is similarly aloof; other students may say hello or whisper furtively to their friends when I walk past or greet them, but he simply

ignores me. It's students like him for whom I fear. It's easy for me to convince people that I pose no threat; it's a far harder task to convince them I'm interesting, especially when they're already so sure that I'm not.

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Every now and then, I am pleasantly surprised.

Another old lady stares at me as she struggles past, and I greet her in my best Japanese. She cheerfully reciprocates, her prune-like features unfolding into a broad smile.

I'm in the supermarket, pondering the question of which type of tofu to buy this week. My ears tune in on hearing my name whispered loudly by a small child trying, and failing, to be discreet. I turn round and see a mother pushing her reluctant offspring towards me to practise speaking English. We have a brief conversation as his mother looks on proudly.

On the bike-ride home, I see a student's tired face turned downwards into a frown. I give her a cheery wave and say "hello" on my way past, and her crumpled face erupts into a toothy smile.

A few minutes later I look back along the long, straight road, and see her walking in the distance. She's still smiling.

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It's the day of the local running race in my town, and I've found myself roped into participating. As I stand waiting, I see a small group of friendly-looking locals who look like they might be a similar age to me. I attempt to initiate conversation by asking a simple question to the cheerful man nearest to me.

"So, umm, do you guys live near here?" I say, in Japanese that I have rehearsed many times.

He tilts his head to one side and inhales sharply through his teeth.

"Hmmm, English is difficult..." he replies, his face squashed into an apologetic smile.

His friends look at him in amusement. One of them gestures in my direction and admonishes:

"He can speak Japanese, you idiot."

He considers this seemingly-new information for a second whilst his friends snigger behind him.

"Oh yes, so he does."

This realisation seems to liberate him: he now happily answers my question and we manage to converse in a mixture of Japanese and English, both laughing as we stumble over our words.

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I join some after-school clubs in a bid to spend more time with my students. Some are excited to see me, others cower in small groups doing their best to avoid me, and the rest carry on with their activities as normal.

The teacher asks the students to explain today's activities to me. They look at each other blankly, unsure how to proceed. There are no set phrases here; no textbook to refer to, no teacher who will give them the answers if they just wait long enough.

One of them musters enough courage to produce a few broken sentences, and looks enormously relieved and a little triumphant when I show that I understand. Suddenly, this complex set of rules and items that he has been learning has a purpose: it's a necessary tool for real communication.

Other students gradually follow his lead. There is occasional confusion and few perfect sentences, but with the aid of a few diagrams drawn in the sand and a little patience, we're able to communicate. Even one of my aloof students takes a short break from being cool to contribute a word or two, laughing a little at me and a little at his friends, but mostly laughing at the situation.

Later, I think of all the times I've seen him, and a sad realisation dawns on me: it's the first time I've seen him laugh.

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During my time in Japan, there is one question I'm asked virtually every day. But it is also a question I was often asked in the UK:

“Where are you from?” An innocent enough question, and one which I’m happy to answer. In Japan the answer is simply “the UK”, but before coming here, I would give the name of the town in which I was born and spent the first 18 years of my life:

“I’m from Stoke”

For many people, this leads to a conversation about Stoke-on-Trent, home of the British ceramics industry and the 13<sup>th</sup> worst town to live in the UK. For others, however, this answer is not satisfactory:

“No, where are you from *originally*?”

“Oh, I was born in Stoke,” I cheerfully reply, aware that this is not the answer they are looking for, but hopeful that it will be accepted.

“Yes, but what is your origin? Where are your grandparents from?”

I wonder how my origin differs from the place in which I was born. I wonder why it’s important where my grandparents are from. I wonder why people want to talk about a place that I have never been to rather than the place that is my home. I wonder if I can ever really be British if the people around me consider me to be a foreigner.

The sad truth is that as long as I live, there will probably be people who cannot accept that a brown person can be truly British. But I know that I’m not meant to be fully accepted. In time, my descendants, whether they are my children, my children’s children, or their children in turn, will be able to tell people of their nationality without facing disbelief or confusion. I’m merely a stepping stone, here to help others understand that what was once alien is now part of themselves. I’m a link between an old world and the one to come: a bridge across the seas that separate us on our increasingly tiny planet.

Such is the immigrant's burden, and his privilege. Yet as teachers in Japan our power is increased, for we have access to its children. We are able to influence still-developing minds before they have the chance to learn to be afraid, and show them that foreigners can be friendly and approachable.

As they grow older, we can demonstrate that there is a real purpose to the language that they're learning, and provide a window to an outside world that is rich with fascinating sights and experiences, and filled with a plethora of different people. And for children and grown-ups alike, we can remind them that communicating with foreigners is not only nowhere near as difficult as they think it is, but is also a genuinely rewarding experience. We show them that all they need to do is try.

We give them a reason to do so.

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My fingers struggle to hold onto my map as the bitter winter wind howls past, making tears stream down my face as my hands turn into a collection of useless icicles. For what feels like the hundredth time, I'm lost. In the distance, a stooping figure lurches up the hill, arms crossed across his chest in a bid to keep out the cold. A face-mask covers his mouth and his nose, and a woollen hat conceals his hair and his ears. All that remains visible are the two narrow slits of his almost-closed eyes.

"Soo-meee-mar-sen," I mumble, my lips refusing to obey the instructions given by my brain.

"Thai-yo-ga-oh-car waa dokko des kar?"

The slits stay narrowed for a few seconds, before slowly widening in recognition of the strange sounds coming out of the strange face before him. My Japanese language skills are still in their infancy, and his words arrive half-processed in my consciousness.

“Ah, Taiyougaoka is? Straight go please; hmhmmhfff coffee shop after hmhmmhfff.”

I rummage desperately in the recesses of my brain, willing the appropriate words to come to me as I attempt to seek clarification. I manage little more than a few um’s, but my helper sees my confusion and comes to my rescue.

“Straight go please; coffee shop after third of right take,” he says slowly and clearly, giving definite hand signals as he speaks.

I juggle his words in my head and feel my chest relax as comprehension dawns. I ask him when the park opens; in response he tells me about the supermarket. Or at least, I think he does; I’m not at all sure.

“Ah-ree-gah-toe,” I say, genuinely grateful to him for making the effort to communicate. I continue on my way, and his directions prove to be perfect.

Later that day, I see the same man again. He makes an enquiring “ok” symbol with his hand. I give him the thumbs up and say thank you. He nods in acknowledgement. There is warmth in his eyes, and I notice his face mask become a little wider.

He is smiling. So am I.