
2009-10 Postcards

Postcards from Abroad

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Baseball!

Lily Niland
Linfield College

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Journals from Kanto Gakuin University

2009-09-10 Baseball!

Hola everyone! (I still can't quite kick that habit)

Baseball! I love it. But I'll get to that story in a bit; first let's chat about earlier stories:

Last Saturday, right after I wrote my last update, I went exploring. It was the first bit of exploring I had done on my own, without a crew of Japanese buddies and exchange students, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. Overall, I'm very happy with both this year's group of exchange students and this year's buddies (most everyone is energetic, cheerful, flexible, and willing to look a bit silly in their new language for the sake of getting the general point across, even if it means doing some creative and less-than-dignified pantomime!) " but, as usual, I like going out on my own sometimes because it makes it easier to start conversations with new people. When I'm on the bus/train with eight other Americans, most of us chat in English and we only talk to each other. When I go alone or in groups of two or three, I get to meet people, use my Japanese and soak in the surroundings.

So, back to Saturday. I spent the morning catching up on homework and emails, and when I got hungry around noon I resolved to forage for lunch. Considering my (lack of) cooking skills, I picked a direction and headed out into Hayama in search of a restaurant. I already knew how to find two pizza places, a Denny's, and a place called Jonathan's, but I refused to give in and eat American food! No, I was looking for a small family place where I could become a regular customer.

Now, that's harder than it sounds. It has been sixteen years since I learned to read in English, and reading in Spanish progressed naturally as my conversational skills improved. But here well, here I'm functionally illiterate. I can read all of the symbols from the two phonetic alphabets in Japanese, and I know about 300 kanji (the symbols that represent ideas rather than individual syllables; they have several meanings/pronunciations depending on context). Your average Japanese sixth grader, however, knows 1,006 kanji, and you need to know about 2,000 to puzzle out most of the newspaper. So when I walk down the street, I can usually only read parts of signs. For example, I know the kanji for "Caution!" (it's all over the place; people here are apparently expected to be quite careful) but I can't usually tell what they want me to be so careful about. I can read the kanji for "store", but I can't usually read the kanji that say what the store sells.

Although there is a bus from Hayama to the train station where we take the train to school, I usually walk (a little over a mile and a half) so that I can enjoy the morning, people watch, and try to decode signs. The first two or three mornings, I felt triumphant because I saw signs and thought, "Ha! I can read two-thirds of that!" After a while, though, it got frustrating to see the same signs every morning and never understand the other third of what they said. So what do I do when I'm frustrated? I make flashcards, of course! I'm on a kanji-learning streak; the other exchange students think I'm crazy for studying so many kanji voluntarily (and enjoying it, to boot), but I'm twenty (almost twenty-one) years old and I don't like not being able to read! So I'll figure it out.

Oops, so I was talking about Saturday. Anyway I was looking for a restaurant, trying to decode signs as I went because a lot of the stores lacked handy windows that would show me what was inside. Finally, I found one with a banner that had been blown backwards by the wind. Even backwards, I read "tonkatsu", and thought to myself, "Aha! That's food! And food I like, too" So I crossed the street. It didn't have an open sign, so I slid the door open a bit tentatively and poked my head in through the curtain " where I was surprised to see a tiny restaurant chock full of people! I timidly asked in Japanese, "Um, can I come in?" and the waiter hurried over and said, "Yes, yes, of course, over here." He ushered me to a little table in the corner, and went back to another table.

That was when I noticed that everyone else in the restaurant was male and middle-aged. Hm. I wondered if maybe I wasn't supposed to be there, maybe this was some kind of Japanese lunchtime men-only cantina,

but nobody seemed to object to my presence, so (feeling rather out of place) I concentrated on decoding the menu. I successfully decoded three or four items (the same three or four I can always decode), and had decided that I would settle for one of those (yet again), when the waiter came with an English version of the menu. Dam. I mean, it was helpful, but I felt like such a cheater. It was nice to order something new, though, and I ordered it in Japanese, so I guess it worked out. It was tonkatsu (fried pork cutlet) stuffed with garlic and covered in delicious katsu sauce, plus miso soup, veggies, pickled veggies, a bowl of rice, and plenty of iced tea. Yummm. Eventually the twenty or so middle-aged men finished eating and left, and I felt a bit better. The waiter came over to chat, as did a middle-aged lady who I think was the owner, and they were very nice. When I paid and said in Japanese, "Thank you very much, it was delicious," they said they hoped I would come again. I promised that since I can't cook, I would probably be in a lot. They laughed, and promised to feed me anytime.

So that was a successful adventure! Next, I went back to the Hayama House, where I ran into Brandon (a very tall, rather quiet, but smart and entertaining Linfield student). He said he had nowhere in particular to go, so I proposed more exploring. We decided on a general direction and headed out.

Hayama is surrounded by steep, tree-covered hills, and ever since we arrived I had wanted to climb one. So when we saw a narrow street leading up, we took it. It was tiny and ridiculously steep, and we kept thinking it would end, but it kept going. Finally, we ran into a Presbyterian church that looked like the end of the road, but I saw a path that went around to the left of it into the forest, and we didn't see any signs prohibiting entry, so we kept going. It went up and down and around but mostly up, along a ridge with steep, tropical-plant-covered slopes on both sides. Finally we reached a clearing of sorts, went up and up and up some more, and at the very top there was a shrine under a pine tree. We sat under the tree and quietly enjoyed the view: all of Hayama, more tree covered hills, the beach, the ocean, the islands, the sail boats

We got to talking about Japan, our exchange program, and how we live with Americans, study with Americans, and speak in English with Americans. Brandon mentioned that two Japanese exchange students at Linfield had made a pact to only speak English to each other " so we made pact to stick only to Japanese! It only lasted a couple of days, until I completely forgot and chatted with him in English for a good five minutes without realizing it but at least we're trying to speak as much Japanese to each other as possible, which is better than before.

We had already been up at the shrine for a while when a pudgy Japanese man came huffing and puffing up the hill. He looked up, surprised to see us, and said hi as he collapsed onto a picnic bench. "Hi! (Huff, puff) Where are you from?" I answered, "Hi! I'm from Seattle." He got all excited and said, "Oooh! Seattle! Ichiro!" I laughed and nodded. Then he asked Brandon where he was from and Brandon said Idaho. The guy got excited again: "Oooh! Idaho! Potato!" Seriously! It made my day.

So that was Saturday. Um, I still haven't gotten to the baseball game And I have so many other stories! But that's probably enough for today. I'll write to you about baseball next time!

Lily Niland, Intercultural Communication
Linfield College Semester Abroad Program in Yokohama, Japan, Kanto Gakuin University