



## AWE (A Woman's Experience)

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### Home

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# Home

I STOOD IN THE BRIGHTLY LIT BATHROOM, A GIGGLE BUBBLING out of me as I inhaled the coconut and gardenia scented hand soap. The gentle breeze I'd missed tickled my skin. The Hawaiian humidity hugged me. The rustling palm fronds outside the window whispered hello. Welcome home.

I shed my layers and stepped into the shower, ready to wash off the day's events, eager to lather up in fragrant familiarity. I turned the showerhead on. Water streamed out loudly, so loud, like white noise, like—

Airplane fans made silence scream, like that droning air conditioning vent that could not drown out my mind as it chattered nervously to itself in Japanese. I leaned against the airplane window and watched as Japan disappeared beneath the clouds. I was still not convinced of the reality of returning home. The chaotic events of the last three weeks played on loop.

Panicked phone calls from the volunteer headquarters about a virus. A coordinator telling me to move here then move there. Living with one person one week and another person the next. Vans full of friends speeding off to catch Japan's final flights out, pulling away before I could say goodbye. Crying on the floor of a small Japanese apartment in a city turned ghost town. My mind struggled to keep pace with my body as I flew across the ocean from Japan to home, a completely unexpected end to the life of Japanese immersion my mind still thought I could live. I lay down across the four seats I had to myself in the middle row of the plane and prayed the white noise of the airplane fans would roar reality into my mind.

I scrubbed my body harder, hoping the extra effort might help the cedarwood body wash mask the scent of miso and cigarette smoke still clinging to me after months in Japan. Smelling Japan was like feeling a phantom limb, a painful reminder of something once so constant but now so violently removed.

Inhale. Smell the cedarwood. Exhale. Listen to the birds. Inhale. Smell the plumeria tree. Exhale. Listen to the breeze.

Inhale. Smell the miso. Exhale. Choke back tears.

Frustrated, I squeezed more soap onto my loofah and scrubbed furiously. Dissatisfied with my cleanse but pruning from the water, I shut off the faucet, wrapped my towel around myself, and headed to my room.

My head was spinning. How was I home when not even twenty-four hours prior I was in Japan, cleaning my apartment and planning for the week? The events of the past month presented me with a deluge of changes, and I felt like I was drowning. I had lived with a different person from a different country each week, trying to navigate not only the uncertainty and emergency of the newly emerging coronavirus pandemic, but the foreign country we were in as well.

Now, here I stood. Home. Trying to reconcile the abrupt and unexpected end to my life in Japan. Trying to adapt to the new environment of home. After so much change, how could I possibly feel at home again?

I lay down timidly on my bed, the scent of cedarwood lingering on my skin, and closed my eyes. My *futon* mattress cushioned me, and I could smell the straw of my *tatami* mat floor. I opened my eyes and inhaled. Cedarwood and memory foam. I closed my eyes again. Japan. Opened my eyes. Home. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to reorient myself, but blinking only further fragmented my reality.

I stared at my ceiling, searching for comfort. How had I done it before?

I blinked.

Turquoise sparkled around me as I broke through the Hawaiian ocean's surface. I treaded water, panting from my dive for shells, and took a long look at the mountains on shore as they hugged the sea. The wide sky stretched above me, and a flock of albatross cried as they migrated across the Pacific. In just a few hours, I too would fly to a new life in a foreign land. I could never leave home without first paying homage to this beach, though. The Hawaiian culture I grew up in teaches that one can always learn from the land, and this beach had long acted as my teacher. The way it held on to its identity even when the raging ocean beat down on its shores, or the way the mountain grass always grew back bright green even after a fire, all taught me the power of adaptability, of making a home in any environment or circumstance. I carry these lessons with me wherever I go, for the land is what grounds me.

Clutching my newly filled bag of shells, I swam back to shore. A gentle wave pushed me onto the sand, where I took off my snorkel mask to examine my loot. Reaching into my bag, I grabbed a purple cowrie shell and flipped it over in my hand. The sea snail once residing in my newfound treasure had long since found a new shell to call home, and then another and another, seamlessly finding ways to fit in each time. Nature makes a home out of anything. I closed my fist around the cowrie. My new lucky charm. I held the shell

against my chest and prayed that I too would seamlessly transition through all the changes in my life.

I blinked again.

The aspens whistled in the fall's evening wind. I crunched the fallen leaves beneath my boots. I had never done that before. Autumn was unfamiliar, just like the mountains and river and grasses.

"Are you sure you're gonna be warm enough?" Sarah asked as she zipped up her fleece jacket, shivering. "I don't think you realized that Utah mountains are cold in the fall."

She was not entirely wrong about that; this was my first experience with seasonal change.

"Yeah, are you sure you'll be okay?" Hannah added, chattering. "It gets colder the higher you go, and this Halloween ski lift gets you *pretty* up there."

Would I be okay? The question ran through my head daily. I was out of my element, I came to Utah with no friends, and I had no family around me. I felt dizzy. I looked at the land for stability.

The trees kept growing, even when their leaves changed color and fell. The mountains kept standing, even when snow piled on their heads. The view always changed, but the land stayed the same.

I turned to look at my new friends. We met a week prior at freshman orientation, a massive meeting on a football field full of five thousand unfamiliar faces. "Trust me," I said. "I'll be fine!"

Blink.

*Slap-thud, slap-thud* went the cadence of the day's mochi pounding; my brother hammered the sticky rice with a mallet as my dad flipped the treat with a paddle. I sat under a tree, my mouth watering, and watched them make the treat.

"My dad and your grandpa built this whole setup," my aunt mused, approaching me. "They planted this tree too." she added, leaning against the trunk. She smiled softly, staring at the piece of family history. The stone bowl sat perched at the top of a hill in her backyard, Oahu's Waimano valley stretching out below.

"Japanese maples aren't supposed to grow in tropical places, you know. Too warm." She plucked a leaf off the tree, looked it over, then let it fly off in the wind. "This tree has stood here my whole life, though. Just like that stone bowl."

I tried to imagine what my family must have seen when they first looked out at this scene after immigrating from Japan. The dirt was too red to look like their home, and the seasons too unchanging. Still, they planted roots here and prayed for prosperity. The tree had long since adapted to the weather, and

so had they. I looked up at the tree like a sapling looking up to its progenitor, grateful for the versatility that ran through my veins.

“Come now,” my aunt called, walking back toward the house. “These mochi won’t stuff themselves!”

I trailed behind my aunt, rolling up my sleeves to continue what my family has always done at home, wherever that may be.

Blink.

The sun beat down on me, and I lay on my back, basking in its warmth, the soft grass of Lake Zurich acting as a perfect cushion. The old city lay sprawled around the lake, the fashionable locals accenting the scenes of European glamor.

I rolled over onto my stomach and stared out at the lake in all its postcard perfection. In the center stood a fountain made from a ring of giant metal orbs, with water cascading from the openings of each great silver ball.

“Kind of a funny looking fountain, huh?” I pointed toward the geysering water. “Every other structure here is so old, but this fountain is just kinda . . .”

“Out of place?” my uncle suggested. He lay next to my brother, both on their backs with closed eyes.

“Yeah, I guess so.” I folded my arms in front of me to rest my chin. “It just looks so juxtaposed, yaknow? Very metal. And very in the middle of the lake.”

“Oh, I know,” my uncle, the Zurich native, answered. He sat up, grinning. “That’s what makes it fun.”

“Fun?” my brother asked.

“Yes!” my uncle laughed, leaping onto his feet. “Your mom would bring me here all the time to do this when we were little! It’s a rite of passage if you grow up here.” He paused. “Let’s go jump off.”

“But we,” my brother started, pointing between himself and me, “didn’t grow up here.” His eyes were wide.

“Well it’s time to feel like we did.” I answered, smiling wide as I stood up too. “Let’s go!” I yelled and grabbed my brother’s arm. My uncle led the charge, and the three of us ran toward the lake, jumping in with a cold splash.

The swim to the fountain was much farther than I realized. Panting, I pulled myself onto one of the metal beams connecting each giant orb and sat, trying to catch my breath. Lake Zurich crashed down on my head, the heavy stream of fountain water turning the alpine view misty. I stared out at the city I did not grow up in, and pictured my mom and her little brother traipsing around the Swiss city they called home. I was out of place here—I looked nothing like a Swiss person. Then again, was the fountain not also out of place? It was an oddity, uniquely its own, and yet it still fit into the pic-

turesque Swiss scene, adding to the city's charm. I stood up on the beam and faced the city, determined to do the same.

"Let's jump!" I yelled. "*Eins, Zwöi, Drü!*"

Blink.

"We moved here from Brazil three years ago," six-year-old Laura translated into Japanese for her mother, who was still rattling on in Portuguese. Laura giggled, adding, "And my mom says I'm very good at Japanese!"

"Well, you certainly are!" I replied back, turning Laura's cheeks bright red. She reached for her mother, who sat on a mat behind the short Japanese *chabudai* table where our New Year's feast featuring a spread of both Brazilian and Japanese cuisine lay.

Hemi, the New Zealander I had lived with for the past several weeks, busily ate her *coxinha*. "This is definitely the best thing I've ever had," she said, her mouth full. "*Eu sou uma bateu forte!*" She was proud she remembered the phrase we'd just learned. Her attempt at Portuguese garnered a laugh from all in the motley crew of foreigners gathered on the floor of the small, two-bedroom government housing apartment.

The laughter and chatter continued as the men of the apartment assembled their capoeira instruments. Soon, sounds of music, dancing, and cheering filled the room, transforming the walls from a cold and foreign shell to a warm and familiar home.

A girl from Hawaii celebrating the new year in a Japanese apartment full of Brazilians—nothing should have felt familiar, yet everything did.

I threw my head back, laughing, and joined the dancing.

Blinking, I sat up on my bed. Evening light glowed through my room, and I stared out my window as the sun dipped slowly beneath a silhouette of palms. Reflected back at me from the glass was the same girl who stared at that same sun from countless windows around the world as she tried to figure out where she fit in. The girl who could acclimate to anywhere because she was raised by stories from everywhere. The girl who could make a home out of any shell. The girl who will continue to grow and give wherever the future may take her. Multifaceted, she sparkled under whatever sun shone down on her. She smiled at me and my heart warmed. I lay my head on my pillow as the sun disappeared in my window. The gentle breeze I'd missed so much tickled my skin. The Hawaiian humidity hugged me. The rustling palm fronds outside the window whispered hello.

"Hello." I whispered back and closed my eyes to sleep, confident in my ability to wake in the morning to whatever life might bring me next.