

A Warm Winter

For the spring break, I'm attending a university abroad, mostly to improve my English speaking skills. I left Japan two weeks ago, and I've already gotten quite used to life here. The first week was tough, though. I was very jet-lagged, and sleep deprived. Also, when I went downtown, the smell of marijuana was overpowering, and gave me headaches. But funnily enough, I don't even notice the smell anymore.

Every morning, I wake up to the sound of breakfast being made in the kitchen. My host mother and father are early risers. I enjoy waking up to lifestyle noises, or people talking, because for the last two years my alarm was the first sound I heard every day. When I head downstairs, I'm greeted with a "Good Morning! Did you sleep well?" Colleen, my host mother, is really sweet. I've only known her a short time, but she cares for me like a real mother.

Today was just a little different to normal. On the dining table beside the breakfast was a small present of cookies in red wrapping paper. Colleen said they were for me – she remembered I love cookies!

After breakfast, I take the bus to uni as always, and, as I glance out the window, I see flags flying in the street. The flags bear the same colors as Japan's, but you don't see so many flags in Japan. There are many flags flying here, quite a lot, actually. I wonder if the people here are patriotic, or nationalistic. Nevertheless, people from many different cultural backgrounds live here, and it's a very multicultural society. I love the atmosphere of this country, where there is no discrimination against any race. As always, my friend boarded the bus partway through the journey. Today when he sat down next to me, he handed me a small gift of caramels. At this time of year, back when I was in high school, I used to make similar presents for friends and boys at school, but I haven't done that in a while now.

Anyway, my friend is super kind. He always shares food with me when we have lunch together – especially his favorite spiced fermented cabbage. Although I'm not great with spicy food, I suffer through it since it's a kind gesture. Over lunch, we talk about our home countries. Despite being close by, his country has a few differences, like compulsory military service, or a culture that emphasizes quickness over thoroughness. Quite different to the often bureaucratic Japan, I don't think I'd do well there – especially since I work quite slowly.

When I get home from uni, as usual, most of the family isn't there. My host brother, Malcolm, loves sports, so he's probably at his soccer or basketball practice. Miguel, my other host brother, is still in high school, but also works part-time three days a week. Although he usually just serves food, he says it makes him nervous because he is part of a very important day for his guests. But he says he enjoys it because he gets to experience his guests 'once in a lifetime happy experience.' I don't think many Japanese students do such a job – and his pays quite well, he earns 27 dollars an hour, or about 3,000 yen. Miguel teased me a bit when he heard I only make 1,000 yen an hour at my job in Japan.

Ah well, most of the time the family is very kind to me!

Questions, Answers and Hints:

1. What country is the narrator visiting?

Answer: Canada.

Hints/Clues: It's a multicultural country, although an English-speaking one (at least in the region she visited: she went to practice her English speaking skills). It's also likely in a very different time zone, as apparently her jet lag lasted for about a week after arrival. The national flag's colors are the same as Japan – red and white. Finally, she mentions an overpowering smell of marijuana. Marijuana has been legal nationally in Canada since 2018, and so people are likely comfortable with smoking openly.

- 2. In what month is the story set (If possible, what day does the narrator specifically talk about)?**

Answer: February (14th – Valentine’s Day).

Hints/Clues: The title of the passage is ‘a warm winter,’ and, given the setting of Canada, and that she is visiting during the Japanese spring vacation (so either February or March, but likely the former). As for the specific day, the narrator’s host mother prepares cookies for her, and her friend gives her caramel on the bus. While this is not necessarily sufficient to determine that it’s Valentine’s Day (February 14th), the narrator mentions that “back when I was in high school, I used to make similar presents for friends and boys at school” – a very common custom for Valentine’s Day in Japan.

- 3. What country is the narrator’s friend (whom she met on the bus) from?**

Answer: Korea.

Hints/Clues: The narrator mentions that the country is close to Japan, and her friend also mentions compulsory military service, mandatory in Korea. Further, the narrator mentions her friend sharing spiced fermented cabbage, i.e., kimchi.

- 4. In Japan, does the narrator live with family or by herself?**

Answer: Probably by herself.

Hints/Clues: The narrator mentions that “for the last two years my alarm was the first sound I heard every day.” This suggests she has not been woken by others for a long time, and likely means that she lives alone.

- 5. What kind of part time job does Miguel do?**

Answer: Server at a wedding hall.

Hints/Clues: Miguel told the narrator that his job makes him nervous because “he is part of a very important day for his guests,” but also that he enjoys it because he gets to experience his guests ‘once in a lifetime happy experience.’ This, given the fact he is serving food, suggests he works with wedding services.

- 6. Why do you think the title of the passage is ‘A Warm Winter’?**

Answer: Because the host family (and her friend) are all very kind.

Hints/Clues: This relies a little on knowledge that the setting is Canada in February, which should be very cold. ‘Warm’ here rather refers to emotional warmth, as the narrator’s descriptions of her stay in Canada suggest a very welcoming host family, and also good friends.