

But I don't wanna move!

Glimpses of Tokyo

Jessi looked out her bedroom window at the man in her front yard. He was hanging a rider on a For Sale sign boasting “SOLD.” Once done, he stood back to admire his work.

“On the market twelve days. Three competing offers. The seller accepted one ten thousand dollars over asking price.

“Sure. All I did was enter it into the multiple listing service, stick a lock box on the door, and put out this sign. The market did the rest. Not a lot of three-bedroom, two-bath ranches to pick from. Still, I got the listing and I’m pleased with the results. Why not pat myself on the back?” he pondered.

Glancing up, he saw the 14-year-old. Reflexively, he waved and beamed her a broad smile. She stuck out her tongue and abruptly dropped the window blind.

“Brat. Did everything she could to torpedo the sale. Two agents took the time to give feedback that her room was a mess and their buyers barely stuck their heads in to take a peek. Whatever. Sold it anyway. Now the parents have to deal with relocating her to Japan.”

Jessi spun away from the window and surveyed her room sullenly. Two suitcases sat fully packed by the door. The walls were bare. A neighbor was coming later today to pick up the bedroom furniture her mom had sold through the newspaper. Most of the rest of her stuff had been hauled off yesterday for one of two places—long-term storage in town or a sea container on its way to Tokyo.

A tap on the door shook her from her funk.

“Can I come in?” asked her dad.

“Why not? Since when do I get a say in anything?”

The door opened. “Cissy, come on. This is going to be a big adventure! You’ll make new friends in no time. And think of all the great places and things we’re going to get to see!”

Jessi’s resolve to stay mad at her dad weakened ever so slightly. When she was little, she would mispronounce her own name. The “Juh” would come out “Suh” resulting in a slurred “Cissy.” It stuck with her dad. He’d use it whenever he was tugging on her heartstrings for a little sympathy.

“You even picked out our new house without me! When we moved here, I got to help decide which one we bought. Now we’re off to only you and Mom know where! Some adventure. I’m being kidnapped and taken to some foreign country against my will!”

“We talked about this. The company wouldn’t spring for airfare for you to go on our house hunting trip. And you had school. It’s not like you’ve been kept in the dark. Take those orientation sessions we got to attend. We learned about the train system and subway. You’ll have access to one of the largest cities in the world! Plus, we’re not buying the new place. If we don’t like it after a year, we can move to another condo or apartment. But this place is pretty special. It’s in a neighborhood of houses near the main line, the Yamanote, that goes all around Tokyo. The complex is called Tokugawa Village. The family that owns it is descended from the last shogun. They ruled over all of Japan for more than 250 years. Then Emperor Meiji took over. So, you could kind of say the Tokugawas went from being warlords to *landlords*. Heh!”

The corner of her mouth twitched. She couldn’t help but be amused at her dad. Not because what he said was funny. But because he was his own best audience and it was amusing to see how much he entertained *himself* with his own mini-lectures and wordplay.

Reconciled to the fact she didn’t have a choice in the matter, she folded her hands across her chest, gave a “Hmmp!” and declared, “If I have to go, then I get the window seat the whole way!”

“DEAL!” her dad declared, knowing when to take the win. “Now let’s get a *move* on! Heh,” he punned as he snatched up both bags and pivoted toward the door.

Jessi just rolled her eyes.

* * *

She had to admit, flying business class was great! She’d lucked out and the seat next to hers was empty. Her mom and dad were right behind her. The complimentary Shirley Temple and mixed nuts before takeoff were delicious. She’d already mapped out the ensemble of videos she planned to watch on her private console during the thirteen-and-a-half-hour direct flight. She even had brochures from the expatriation orientation class to peruse. Since it was the end of May and she’d just graduated eighth grade, she would be starting high school in the fall at the American School in Japan on the outskirts of the city. Of course, the propaganda made it look wonderful, but it lacked a critical feature—Alan Donovan.

He had been her first true love. They were inseparable. Both were in the band. They shared English and Math classes. And each had been the other’s first kiss. It had taken all year for him to finally get up the nerve to ask her out. It was the Spring Fling dance. Her dad insisted on driving. Remarkably, he had been on his best behavior and kept his corny jokes to a minimum. He’d even given them a moment of privacy when she had walked him to his door at the end of the evening.

That’s when it happened. Fireworks from their embrace!

But it was fleeting. They’d had the luxury of a mere three weeks of holding hands on the bus, swapping love notes during fifth period, and Saturday matinee movies.

Then her dad dropped the bomb on her. Fitting. Since the news was that they were moving to Japan.

Their parting had been tearful. At least for her. He was stoic as she left. But his phone call afterward revealed how lost and confused he was.

She'd vowed to write him every week. He had done the same.

As she fought back the tears, the intercom chimed with the announcement that they had reached cruising altitude and it was safe to move about the cabin. Like there was anyplace to go.

Instead of exploring, she fired up the first of her movies—*She's All That*—a high school rom-com about a socially inept girl transformed into a prom queen.

Dinner, another movie, sleep, breakfast, and a final movie consumed the flight until the next thing she knew, they were touching down at Narita.

“Let the adventure begin,” she grouched sarcastically.

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As the threesome exited the jetway, they were met by an attractive Japanese woman dressed in a black business jacket-and-skirt ensemble with a white blouse and black ribbon tie.

“Yōkoso. Watashi wa Minami desu. (Welcome. I am Minami.)”

Jessi's dad did not hesitate at the opportunity to use the meager amount of Japanese he had learned.

“Konnichiwa. Watashi no kazoku desu. Carla to Jessi to Gene Miller desu. (Good afternoon. This is my family. Carla and Jessi and Gene Miller.)”

Slipping smoothly into English with a hint of a British accent, Minami-san explained, “Miller-san, the company has arranged for me to assist you and your family with the customs process. After traveling to the city, it will be a pleasure to give you a tour of interesting sites before taking you to your hotel. Your luggage will be sent ahead to the hotel once we arrive at Tokyo Station.”

“Domo arigatou gozaimasu (thank you very much),” Jessi’s dad replied, puffing with pride like a peacock at another flawless demonstration of his Japanese linguistic skills.

Jessi just shook her head.

* * *

The Narita Express whisked the group nonstop from the airport to Tokyo Station, the preeminent stop on the Yamanote Line. Minami-san explained the network of train lines, each having its own color. She handed out a train book the size of a passport with a dedicated page for each route, along with a preloaded train card to allow access through the turnstiles. Those would become invaluable tools for the Millers in navigating through their new expatriate lives.

Via a Toyota minibus with large side windows, comfortable seating for ten, including the driver and front passenger swivel seat for Minami-san, they set out on their tour. Despite having less-than-restful sleep on the flight, they were advised it was a good strategy to combat jet lag by staying active at least past dinner.

That would not be a problem given the number of sites to be seen.

From Tokyo Station, the driver cut a southwest arc across the city.

First stop was Ginza, the elite shopping center of Tokyo. Department stores, restaurants, and global companies keen on projecting an image of luxury made their home there.

Next, they drove by Tokyo Tower. At over a thousand feet tall, the red and white steel observation and communication structure modeled after the Eiffel Tower was a vital navigation point for any foreigner finding themselves lost in that part of town.

And the Millers would learn this area was a popular place for expatriates.

Nearby was the Tokyo American Club, whose membership was highly sought after by management-level employees. Within walking distance was the Nissin International Grocery store—an oasis of culinary delights such as Fritos and Twinkies to satisfy the craving destined to befall the Millers by month three of their experience.

Not far from there was Roppongi, the hot spot of nightclubs—a must-see destination for dignitaries attending quarterly business meetings from abroad.

The route continued its arc through the southwest corner of Tokyo, passing through Shibuya Crossing. Whenever B-roll images of the city were used as background for a news report, inevitably a shot of the most populous intersection in Japan would show throngs of people weaving their way from one corner to the other.

In contrast, the next stop was Meiji Shrine. A Shinto place of worship, its classic Japanese architecture surrounded by newly blossoming sakura cherry trees was awe-inspiring. Equally interesting to see were the native attendees. From conservative matrons dressed in traditional kimonos to *kawaii* (cute) girls in Little Bo Peep miniskirts above platform shoes—all were respectfully paying homage to their deities.

The last stop was Mejiro, an area tucked in the northwest corner of the Yamanote Line just below the bustling district of Ikebukuro. It was notable because it would be their new neighborhood. Their house with a walled garden was a brisk seven-minute walk from the station. The van deposited them at the corner of the main road and a small street that led back to their home. They took the opportunity to stop at a local shop to sample bean-curd doughnuts and milk tea as a pick-me-up before heading back to their hotel.

They were staying at the Tokyo Dome Hotel. Located due north of the Imperial Palace almost directly in the middle of the city, the skyscraper was nestled against the Tokyo Dome sports arena. Home to the Yomiuri Giants baseball team, the oldest professional sports

team in Japan, the stadium was also known to host international competitions such as America's National Football League.

Committed to staying awake until after dinner, the three checked in and immediately headed to the 43rd-floor Artist's Cafe. Featuring Italian cuisine and a panoramic view of the city, they kept the meal simple and ordered the Neapolitan Pizza of the Day. Jessi was so exhausted that, halfway through the meal, her bobbing head—but for her dad's quick reflexes—nearly face-planted into the oregano-basil-flavored tomato sauce dish.

“Now's as good a time as any for your reward,” piped up her dad, hoping the surprise distraction would keep her energized for just a little longer.

He reached into his jacket pocket and revealed a rectangular device half the width of his hand and no more than seven inches in length. Its top third was a screen and the rest was adorned with push buttons bearing alphanumeric characters.

“What's that?” Jessi inquired. Her mom smiled. She had received hers on the flight over. They had agreed to wait for the right moment to present Jessi with hers.

“It's a phone, Cissy. They're all the rage over here. You can even play simple digital games on them. And with patience and practice, you can send messages in text form instead of calling people. You just have to get good at pressing the correct key the proper number of times for the right letter to appear. You'll be able to let us know where you are while you're getting around Tokyo or back and forth to school. We promised you an opportunity of a lifetime exploring the city. You're growing up so fast and we trust you with this responsibility.”

She took the metallic pink device in her hands, turning it over and over, admiring it with awe. Tears welled in her eyes. It was contagious, as her parents dabbed at the corners of theirs.

“Wow. I don’t know what to say ... except, thanks!”

* * *

The next morning, Gene and Carla got an early start on the day. They left Jessi sound asleep on her pull-out with a note by her head.

“Your mom is attending a new members forum at the Tokyo American Club. She’ll hear about their services and more about expat services available in and around Tokyo. Should be back by mid-afternoon. I’m making an appearance at the office before I meet the moving company delivering our container of stuff to the house. We decided to let you sleep in. Feel free to order room service and catch a movie on the TV. We love you!”

Jessi took her parents up on the room service offer and ordered Belgian waffles and orange juice. After wolfing down that feast, she debated on what to do next. Another movie didn’t have much appeal after the marathon she’d consumed on the flight over.

Then she remembered the gift from the night before. Fishing her new phone and its small pocket manual out of her fanny pack, she devoured its instructions.

Page 17 would reveal to her Pandora’s Box.

International dialing.

After a quick review of the process, she dialed her true love’s number. It was 9:30 in the morning Tokyo time, so she was certain he would be home by 8:30 in the evening Eastern time.

Several rings of the U.S. land line later, a girl answered.

“Hello?” she inquired.

Jessi, taken aback by the vaguely familiar voice, blurted, “I was trying to get Alan. Who is this?”

“Jessi, is that you? This is Patti. It’s so good to hear from you so soon. How are you?” Her best friend besides Alan asked sweetly.

Still stunned that Patti was answering Alan's home phone, Jessi pressed pointedly, "What are you doing at Alan's house?"

"Why, we both made the high school band for next year. Band camp has already started, so I offered to come over and practice the new music with him. He is sooo good on the trumpet. It's all in those luscious lips, you know. Would you like me to get him? He's in the kitchen getting us a soda. We've been at it for over an hour and needed to come up for air."

Jessi fumed. Patti's little innocent act wrapped around a double entendre was not lost on her. She'd not been gone a week and already her *former* best friend was making a move on Alan. Seething, she decided not to give Patti the satisfaction of knowing she was upset.

"Don't bother. I just wanted to tell him no need to write me. I've got a new cell phone—you probably don't know what that is—I can give him a call when I feel like talking to him. It's expensive, so don't want to waste my minutes (*on you*, she didn't say). Be seeing you."

If she could have slammed the little phone down, she would have. Clicking the disconnect button as hard as she could would have to suffice.

Her agitation grew the more she thought about her situation. Talking to herself, she grumbled, "One thing's for sure, I'm not going to sit around here and do nothing. I've got to work off some of this bad vibe." Thinking for a minute, she concluded, "And I know just what I'm going to do!"

It couldn't be classified as "running away." She hadn't done that since she was 5 years old and got mad at her parents the *last* time she was told they were going to move. She'd made it as far as the empty lot down the street where her dad found her hiding in a storm drain that went under the road. She was covered in mud, shivering, and happy to be found.

No, this time, she would call it “spiteful exploring.”

“I’ll show them. If this is going to be a *big adventure*, it might as well start now. And there’s no need for them to know!”

Collecting her necessities in her fanny pack, she left the room, marched down the hall to the elevator, and rode it to the lobby.

She traversed the space unhindered. Salary workers sat sipping coffee, reading their newspapers, or simply nodding off with their eyes closed. She had no way of knowing most were unemployed. To save face within their neighborhoods, they would commute to the city and wile away the day to give the appearance of going to a job, rather than sitting at home while they collected a government subsidy.

Now for the biggest hurdle—the concierge. “Might as well face the challenge head-on,” she plotted.

Walking up to him, she waved her hand gently to catch his attention and asked, “Which way to the green line, please?”

“Certainly, miss,” the man answered in heavily accented but understandable English, tugging at his crisply pressed gray tunic with a double row of brass buttons down the front. Impeccably trained never to challenge a guest, especially if foreign, no matter how young, he advised, “You’ll need to turn right as you exit the hotel. Go past the fountain. An eight-minute walk will take you to the Suidobashi Station on the yellow Chuo-Sobu Line. It will take you to Akihabara Station on the green, or Yamanote Line.”

Bowing respectfully, Jessi responded with the only Japanese phrase she remembered. “Domo arigatou gozaimasu.”

With the aid of her JR (Japan Rail) book, she confirmed the instructions she’d received, and found herself shortly emerging from the car at Akihabara. Seeing brightly colored posters directing the masses to a variety of stores and kiosks outside the station, she spurred herself on, “This stop is as good a place to explore as any.”

Bordering the sidewalk leading out to the main street were dozens of small booths tended by vendors hawking their wares. The closest thing she could compare it to was if Radio Shack had hosted a neighborhood garage sale.

Circuit boards, transistors, switches, buttons, wire—every component needed to build anything from a doorbell to a fully functioning Transformer robot.

Flyers posted on street lamps promoted *Electric City*, the world's largest market for electronics. The five-lane thoroughfare was lined by concrete buildings of varying shapes and sizes. One in particular caught her eye—an eight-story white building with a blue and orange LAOX sign.

Navigating her way among the throngs of people across the intersection and through the doors, the signage and banter of shoppers—all in Japanese—assaulted her senses. Spying a narrow escalator to her right, she sighed in relief at the arrow pointing up in bold black letters proclaiming DUTY FREE.

The top floor was an oasis of Western civilization amidst the sands of foreign stimuli. Rows of glass showcases attended by uniformly dressed associates waited to answer any question. Cards in English with Japanese subtitles described the wares.

Radios, TVs, VCRs, TV-VCR combos, calculators, digital watches, and something called an MP3 player tempted the shoppers. The last boasted the ability to digitally store and play music without the need for cassettes or discs. Having only a modest amount of emergency cash, she made a mental note that she would soon lure her dad here for another bribe to ameliorate the fact that she did NOT want to move.

Although this place could grow on her.

Back on the Yamanote, the next stop was Ueno Station.

Standing before a map of the area, deciding her next move, she projected an aura of being lost and confused. Within three minutes, a young Japanese woman in her twenties came up to her. The obligatory bow was followed by “Sumimasen (excuse me). May I help?” in a mix of Japanese and English. Jessi recalled from her orientation class that it was not uncommon for Japanese wishing to improve their linguistic skills to come to the aid of hapless tourists.

“Oh. Sure. Where is an interesting place to sightsee nearby? And maybe get something to eat?” The breakfast waffle had quickly released the last of its energy reserves with all the walking.

“Ano... asoko no deguchi wa...” giggling, the girl caught herself “... sorry, in English, that exit over there leads to Ameyoko Market. In three blocks you will find many shops to buy souvenirs, clothing, and food.”

“Domo arigatou gozaimasu,” Jessi replied, now fluent in saying thank you.

“Doitashimashite ... you are welcome,” the young lady responded, bowing, and dissolved into the current of people passing through the station.

The market was as promised. Alleys full of vendors awaited, eager to negotiate. She walked by natives and foreigners alike sitting at tables eating bowls of noodles, skewers of fried vegetables and shrimp, and even a soup where diners would sprinkle shredded dry fish on the surface to watch the pieces writhe and dance.

Not quite brave enough to venture into a shop, she elected to purchase from a food cart a triangular rice cake with an edible seaweed wrapper filled with tuna paste—an *onigiri*, as she had been taught. She found it surprisingly good, especially when washed down with a bottle of milk tea, her new favorite drink.

Now satiated, she needed to rest and digest. Ueno Park was just the place. A few blocks from the market, she found a bench by the

expansive Shinobazu Pond. An avenue of cherry trees in full bloom complemented a group of people performing fluid movements—Tai Chi, she would later learn—that soothed and relaxed her.

Almost an hour later, she awoke with a start! She had dozed off. She was surprised no one had bothered her. She didn't realize it was a perfectly Japanese thing to do. Known for a work ethic demanding long hours and diligent servitude, it was not uncommon to see exhausted company men and women dozing on trains, park benches, and even in the workplace. One expatriate would later share with Jessi's mom how her Japanese dental hygienist had nodded off as she leaned over her face with a metal scraper and suction!

Still groggy, but realizing it was now mid-afternoon, she considered what to do next.

“Surely Mom is back at the hotel by now. Who knows where Dad is. I *could* head back. Or, I can max out the impact of running away.”

Flipping open her train book, she looked at the thirty stops on the Green Line. Almost all were unintelligible collections of consonants and vowels. Hamamatsucho ... Uguisudani ... Takadanobaba. And she had only explored *two* in the better part of a day! Studying them a little more closely, other than Tokyo Station, there was only one that was slightly familiar.

Mejiro.

With a strategy in mind that might save her from being grounded for a year, she set out for her next destination.

Nine stops later, having people-watched as an assortment of businessmen, children, kimono-clad women, and foreigners got on and off the train, the diversity of the city intrigued her.

“It's like a window to the world!” she mused. “So much more interesting than back home.”

Finally arriving at her stop, she exited the station. Since they used a van to visit the area the day before, she had no reference points to

guide her. “Dad said you could come up a different exit from a frequently used station and feel like you were in a whole different world. He wasn’t kidding!”

A wave of frustration-induced fatigue swept over her. Looking around, she sought anything that looked familiar.

A block ahead rose a marble structure—uncharacteristically Gothic in design—composed of arched stained-glass windows, ornate obelisk pinnacles on its facade, and a set of stone steps begging for her to sit and rest.

It was Gakushuin University, originally built to educate the Imperial family and aristocracy.

With her last ounce of energy, she reached them. Their shallow height, obviously designed for people of smaller stature, enabled her to use her bent legs as the perfect podium upon which to rest her head. The afternoon sun bore down unmercifully, so for shelter she tucked her face in the crook of her arm as she laid it across her knees. Her plaid shirt and flaming auburn hair spoke of her Scotch-Irish genealogy. Clearly a foreigner in need of assistance.

But this time, no one came.

* * *

Carla made it back to the hotel by mid-afternoon. She couldn’t wait to bestow upon her daughter the wisdom of the ages she had learned at the Tokyo American Club expatriate forum.

Bursting into the room, she was surprised to find it vacant. Suppressing an immediate pang of desperation, she rationally concluded, “She’s probably in one of the dining rooms. Rather than call or go to each one, I’ll ask the concierge to check.”

The attendant dutifully responded to the warbling of his desk phone. Listening intently to the woman’s explanation, he responded,

“No need to check the restaurants, ma’am. Your daughter left this morning by way of the train and has not returned.”

The “WHAT!” at the other end of the line followed by a series of hysterical, yet rhetorical, queries was concluded by the abrupt click of the guest ending the call.

Immediately Carla grabbed her new cell phone and called Gene.

“Jessi’s not at the hotel! The concierge said she left this morning! She could be anywhere! Is she with you?” Carla blurted before he got past “moshi moshi,” the Japanese way of answering a phone. She was in no mood for language lessons.

“No. She’s not with me. I’ve been at the office all day. The sea container delivery to the house was delayed. I’m heading there now. In fact, I just got off the train at Mejiro.”

“What are we going to do?” Carla lamented. “She’s just a little girl lost in a foreign city!”

“Now, now. She’s more mature than we give her credit for. This is the safest city in the world. The people have four groups they protect—the elderly, the young, the drunk, and foreigners. She at least fits into two of those categories. I’ll call her on her phone and ...”

Looking out across the vista of bustling Japanese passersby, a flash of red against a sea of black glistening in the sun caught Jessi’s dad’s eye. “It has to be her,” he told himself. “...Carla, no need to worry. She’s safe. I’ll call you in a bit.”

Clicking off his phone, he hastily strode up to the young girl, head still down, unaware of his presence.

Looking down on his daughter, Gene lowered his voice and assumed his best gruff, Japanese accent.

“Sumimasen. Daijibu desu ka? (Excuse me. Are you okay?)”

“Great,” Jessi thought. “The last thing I need is a nosy native practicing their English. So why is this one saying something unintelligible?”

Looking up from her arm cradle, the sun was directly behind the man, creating a silhouette within a blinding aura. Squinting, her father’s face finally came into focus. She didn’t know whether to make a snarky comment about how unfunny his imitation was, or to jump up and hug him.

She chose the latter.

Before her dad could scold her for running off, or make her feel guilty about worrying her mother, Jessi released a stream-of-consciousness explanation.

“I know this was a crazy stunt. I got mad. I broke up with Alan. He’s a loser. I thought exploring Tokyo would get my mind on something else. Maybe finding my new house on my own would help me connect with it. And you know what, Dad. This move can either tear us apart, or it can make us inseparable. I’m ready for the second one. How about you?”

A tear formed in her dad’s eye. She really was more mature than they gave her credit for.

“It’s a deal,” he said as he hugged her more tightly.