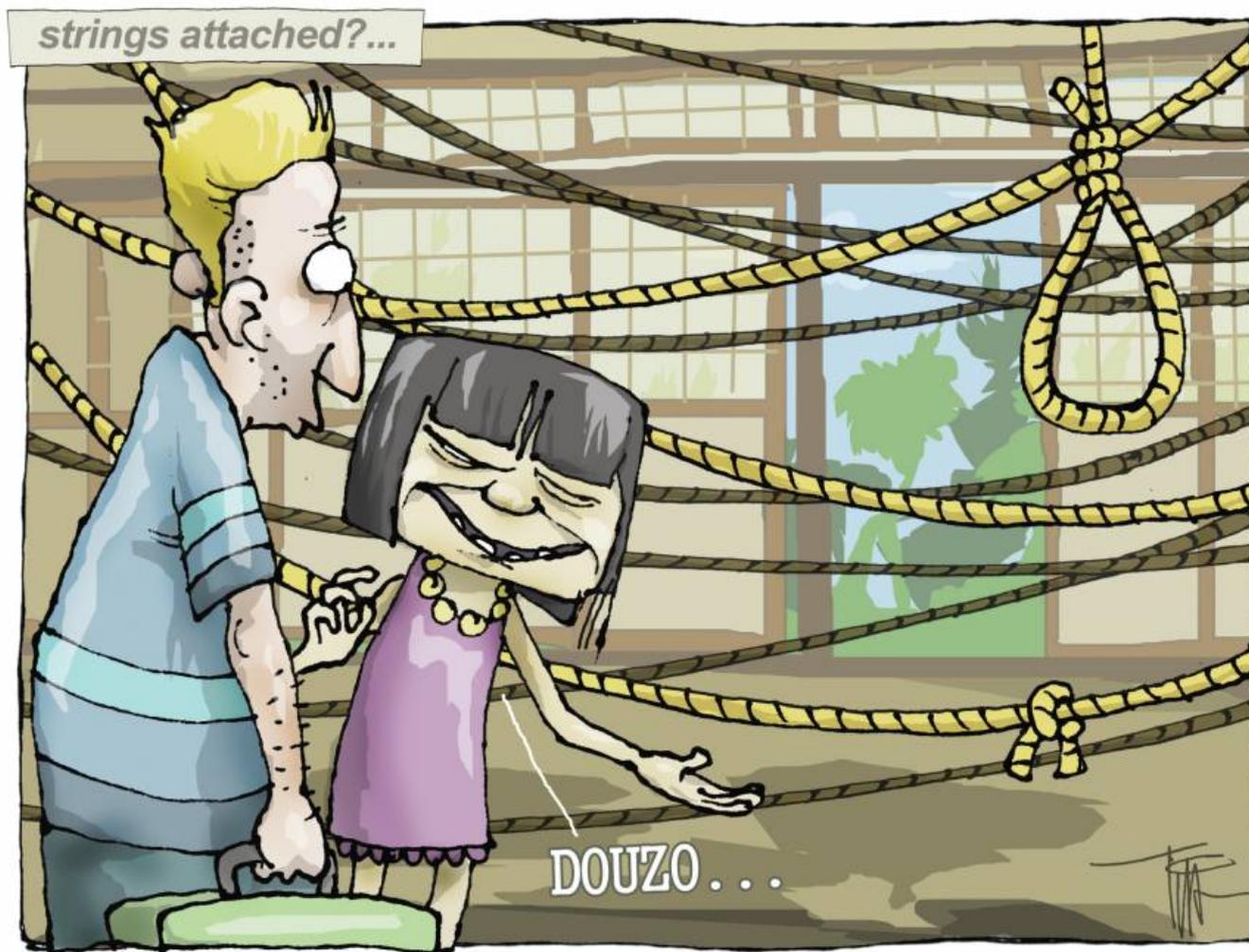


# The psychological perils of a Japanese homestay

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There is no better way to learn the language, adapt to the local customs and steep yourself in the nuances of culture than staying at the home of a welcoming Japanese family. Very often you will also make friends for life ...

That, at least, is the theory, and something I have heard often repeated. But do not believe a word of it — nothing sends shivers of Hunter S. Thompson-esque ripples of fear and loathing through every nerve of my being than the thought of a homestay. All the homestays I have done in my

life — three of them — were psychologically traumatic in uniquely torturous ways. In the final one, I seriously worried that I might be murdered. Friends for life? I would sooner check into hell.

Why homestays are so particularly dangerous is because they usually start off brimming with hope and potential — “So delighted to see you, please come into our home.” The joy you have getting to know each other puts you off your guard, little preparing you for the horrors that await.

## **La vie parisienne**

My first homestay was not in Japan at all, but in Paris, when I was a mere 13 years old on a three-week school exchange. My French family occupied a splendid Belle Epoque apartment on the Right Bank of Paris with high ceilings and a grand chandelier in the hallway, under which they dined royally on Louis XIV chairs each evening on delicacies that Maman had prepared each day.

At the weekend Papa took the whole family to a pizza restaurant on the Champs-Elysees followed by a visit to *le cinema*, and the following day the whole family drove to their pretty house in the country, where Maman and Papa played golf and the children cycled around the holiday homes. In the evening, they played games of chess around a crackling fire. “What lives these Parisians lived!” my 13-year-old self marveled.

But enamoured as I was with my French hosts, I was not sure the feeling was reciprocated. Hailing from a modest semi-detached house in the north of England, my family could hardly dazzle their daughter with the glamour of Manchester.

Meanwhile, in Paris, one night at dinner I put my hands on the decorative curves of my Louis XIV chair, leant back and felt it crack in my hand. Too embarrassed to know what to do, I held my hands behind my back for the next hour until everyone had left the table. The next day I returned home

from school and discovered the damaged antique pulled out into the middle of the room and the broken section left prominently on the seat. I was never invited back to re-visit my homestay hosts.

## **A cat lady in Tokyo**

But Japan would be different. On my second visit to the country, at the age of 20, I spent a term at the International Christian University in Mitaka, Tokyo, and was assigned to a homestay near the bustling area of Kichijoji. My host was a single middle-aged lady (let's call her K-san) who lived in a compact, pretty house with an open-plan lounge and kitchen downstairs and two bedrooms — hers and mine — upstairs.

K-san was quite friendly, spoke hardly any English and worked as a seamstress in her bedroom all day long. Her big interest was cats. Her house was full of cat ornaments and rosettes for winning at various cat shows. A couple of cats wandered in and out of the downstairs lounge.

I spoke little Japanese, but I was confident we would get on fine. She cooked tasty dinners, but I stood on ceremony slightly, fearing to overeat despite supposedly being on “full board,” and surreptitiously slipped out to the convenience store whenever I felt like eating anything more than she offered me. I even carefully hid the wrappers so she would not be offended.

“Damian, please eat as much as you want,” she encouraged me night after night. “Make yourself at home!”

Like most 20-year-olds, I was too preoccupied with what was going on at the university and my relationships with my fellow students to give much thought to analyzing my relationship with K-san. I mostly thought of it as a financial relationship: I was paying a certain amount of money for a service, namely bed and board.

What I failed to see was K-san's motivation for taking in boarders. K-san

was, in a word, lonely. Before I came on the scene, she had played host to a blue-eyed American boy called Matt for a year. She and Matt were constantly going together to concerts and on shopping expeditions. But when I was 20, heading out to social events with a frumpy middle-aged lady was not high on my list of priorities. I quickly proved to be a poor successor to Matt.

Then I made the mistake of relaxing and, taking her at her word, started eating to the extent a young man's appetite required. I comfortably ate twice as much as she did and also helped myself to bits of chocolate lying around the fridge.

One day, after I had spent a month in the homestay, which was meant to last four months, I borrowed her new bike — Matt's old one had a puncture — and rode to university. Walking into the university office, an assistant knowingly informed me that they were looking for an apartment for me and would soon have some places to look at. It took a little while to register that I was being evicted and that K-san, rather than telling me to my face, had simply rung the university office instructing them to find me alternative accommodation.

Slightly reeling from this development, I wandered over to where I had parked K-san's new bike, only to find it was not there. It had been stolen. In a scene of couldn't-make-it-up awkwardness, at the same time as going back to face K-san having heard I was being evicted, I also had to break it to her that her new bike had disappeared.

We then entered a period where despite knowing that K-san wanted me out as soon as possible, I still needed to live there until alternative accommodation was arranged. All of this not unnaturally focused my thoughts more on what type of person K-san actually was.

One of Matt's American friends used to still visit the homestay once a month, and after dinner, while K-san was busy in the kitchen, he told me

the important details of K-san's life. Apparently when she was in her early 20s she had been engaged to be married, but just before the wedding her fiance had been killed in a motorbike accident.

K-san had stayed single ever since, pouring her love into cats. Then, when she had reached an age where she might have expected to have had grown-up children of her own, she began to welcome 20-year-old Western boys into her home.

“And you know about the cats, right?” the American friend whispered. I knew about her love of cats and the cat ornaments everywhere and the cats wandering about. “No, not those cats. The *show cats* she keeps in her room. Before you leave, make sure you go in and see them.”

Separated by a corridor upstairs, K-san's bedroom was somewhere I had never entered. The next day, I bided my time until she had left the house and held my breath as, like an assassin, I opened the door.

Looking at the tatami flooring, a waft of cat hairs fluttered up and I looked inside to see her futon where she worked all day — ironically — on wedding dresses. Surrounding it were some enormously bloated, preened cats and their litter trays, staring in glassy-eyed suspicion at me. Fattened up on the choicest steak, the “show cats” were never allowed to leave the room. Within our own little psychological torment, here was another round of hell.

Here was the real point about homestays: Suddenly moving into the home of a complete stranger is an unnatural act. No normal person would invite you to do so — only someone with a profound psychological need.

Homestays are presented as a means to get to know a foreign culture, but the skill you really need to survive them is the ability to penetrate the complex inner psychology of a human being.

## **Family drama in Kobe**

After the Tokyo horror, wild horses would not drag me back to a homestay — or so I thought. Any cheap, bath-less *apāto* was better than a homestay, as long as I could just call it home and not have to constantly concern myself with the person I was living with. But then, in 1995, when I had just moved into just such a basic apartment in Rokko near Kobe, the Great Hanshin Earthquake struck and my home was filled with cracks and instantly rendered unlivable.

I fled as a refugee to Kyoto and was put up for a few days by an ex-girlfriend, who used the opportunity of my homelessness to revel in temporary dominance over me. It was insufferable and I would have done anything to escape. I went to the Kyoto International House, explained my plight and asked if they could make any suggestions. The assistant answered, “By chance, we have just taken a call from a family saying that if there are any foreign refugees of the earthquake, they would be happy to take them in.”

This seemed like a gift from the gods and I immediately arranged to meet Mr. and Mrs. T, who took me back to their small, comfortable home in Yamashina. I was 26 and they were both in their mid- to late 30s. Mr. T was thin and bespectacled, sporting a small mustache under his nose, a symbol that he worked for a computer company from overseas.

The house had three bedrooms; as honored guest, I occupied one of them. Mr. and Mrs. T together with their three children — aged 8, 6 and 4 — occupied another one. A third contained a piano and board games.

Having learnt from my Tokyo experience, I determined that this time I would pay more attention to my kind hosts, and to begin with, Mr. and Mrs. T and I got on wonderfully, sitting chatting each evening over tea. The only recompense they asked for their kindness was that I spoke English to Mrs. T, but as I was trying to immerse myself in Japanese, I managed to adjust this to a private class each day in which I would teach Mrs. T about English literature, and chatted to her about my favorite Shakespeare plays

and other favorite Western writers.

The problem, however, was the children. They not unreasonably resented that a big stranger had suddenly appeared out of nowhere and that all their parents' attention was now being directed to me rather than them. They looked upon me with hostility and suspicion.

I quickly realized that I needed to do something to repair this fissure in the family, and so went out of my way to engage with the kids, going out to play with them in the street and walking them to school. Before long we were getting on famously and balance seemed to have been restored. But without my noticing it, another fissure had begun to open up.

Like most Japanese salarymen, Mr. T worked long hours and often came home late, spending little time with his wife and children. At some barely conscious level, his wife resented the fact that she was not more appreciated and that she did not have a husband who engaged with her more as a person and listened to her feelings. Now, night after night, in our discussions on literature, she began to pour out her heart to me, her constant daily companion.

At just this moment, Mr. T was called away to Tokyo for a business trip. As he left the house, I sat in his chair at the dining table and neither his wife nor children seemed remotely bothered about his leaving — not, at least, when their new best friend “Damian-san” was here to lavish attention upon them all.

With Mr. T gone, things went from bad to worse. Mrs. T started speculating about leaving her husband, and at night I could see her hovering in the darkness outside the glass panel doors of my bedroom. I realized I had triggered some deep-seated discontent beneath the seemingly happy exterior of the family, and determined that I had to get out of this homestay as quickly as possible before disaster ensued.

My return date to England for Easter was coming up and it seemed like it would be a considerable snub to my kind hosts to leave the homestay before then. They had even talked about me coming back to stay when I returned from England, but one night while I was alone in the kitchen a fax came through from Mr. T in Tokyo. It was intended for his wife, but I couldn't help reading that he'd changed his mind, and that he didn't think the family should take me back upon my return from England. Mr. T had clearly begun to perceive the grave emotional shifts that were going on in the family.

Seeing this, I was keen to get out of the homestay immediately, but even after the couple realized I had read the fax, they insisted that I must stay at least until my return date for England. Besides, Mrs. T's birthday was coming up and they wished to celebrate it with me.

Mr. T came back especially from Tokyo for a few days for her birthday. I naturally had to buy his wife a little gift, so I purchased a gold-colored sweater and wrapped it up for her. After eating birthday cake with the children, Mr. T mentioned that his company had a retreat in the mountains that employees' families were able to visit, and the family would be able to stay there some time.

"Will Damian be able to come with us?" his wife immediately inquired.

She then opened her gifts, but paid not the slightest attention to the present given by her husband. But opening my gift, she cooed and marveled at the sweater and hugged it to her chest. I looked over at Mr. T and saw cold fury rise up behind his glasses.

That night at the homestay I sensed something was about to psychologically crack. Still sleeping restlessly due to the trauma of the earthquake, I felt as if at any moment the glass doors to my bedroom might be flung open and a figure come in and plunge a dagger into my heart. I longed to escape.

After I returned to England, I exchanged a postcard or two with Mr. and Mrs. T but never saw them again. Soon after that they sold the house and moved to Yokohama. The fissures in the family doubtless closed again and the psychological strains were buried, perhaps waiting for another earthquake to shake them open at some point in the future.

For me, earthquakes and homestays remain inextricably linked. If you wish to create an earthquake in your domestic situation, and expose torturous psychological needs previously hidden from the world, by all means welcome a complete stranger into your home. For those tempted to enter a homestay as a means of exploring Japanese culture, a word of warning: You might need a large book of Freud's essays more than you will ever need a collection of kanji primers.

*Any homestay stories to share? Send yours, as well as any comments and story ideas, to [community@japantimes.co.jp](mailto:community@japantimes.co.jp).*