

Stranger in my Homeland

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Making the decision to move back to Canada (temporarily) was pretty easy. I thought about why I wanted to go (so my children would have the opportunity to attend school and improve their English skills); where to live (with my sister's family); what I would do with my time (look after my 3-year-old nephew/study Japanese/catch up with family/nap?). But what I didn't think about was what it would be like to move back 'home' nearly 18 years after I left. Sure I visit every year, but there's a difference between visiting and living.

I look like I fit the part of the average Canadian, but I have become used to life in Japan. I've forgotten how some things are done in Canada or life has changed here in the years that I've been away and I just don't know how things are done anymore.

So I've found myself having feelings of being out of place, not quite sure what I'm doing sometimes.

Most are small everyday things. The other day, as I was driving and wanted to merge into a lane of traffic, a car slowed to let me in. I wanted to bow or flash my hazard lights at them as a 'thank you', but realized that would be weird. But what do I do? Same goes for cars stopping to let me cross the street. They probably think I'm an idiot bowing as I hurry across.

Going shopping is a little different. It starts with the shopping carts. Generally, the carts (which are the size of a small Japanese car) are locked together to prevent theft. You need a \$1 coin to unlock your cart, which you get back upon returning it. Every time, I forget that I need this and have to stand there rummaging in my wallet hoping I have the kind of coin I need, while the Canadians hurry by, insert coin and go. Inside the store, it's a little overwhelming. The size is rather larger than I'm used to and I don't know where anything is. I wander around looking carefully at all the shelves hoping to find what I need. Once at the register, paying can be tricky. While here, I prefer to pay with my

credit card, but some stores only accept Mastercard, while I have Visa. I feel a little foolish when I'm told I need to use a different form of payment.

Usually communication is not a problem, but occasionally someone uses an expression that I don't know. Language does change and after so many years, there are some new expressions. It usually doesn't affect the main point so it's easy to just smile and pretend I understand (after living in Japan, I'm pretty good at that) but sometimes I ask. The other day, my sister, who had taken a cookie I made for her lunch, texted me 'This cookie tastes like more'. I asked 'more what?' She said it was an expression meaning it tastes so good, she wants to eat more. Oh, I have no idea.

Another thing I'm not used to is all the hugging! When I make my yearly visit, it seems natural to greet family and friends

whom I haven't seen in over a year or more, but hugging someone I just saw last week? I have to remind myself 'oh right, now we hug again!' It's just not a habit I have.

Tattoos are much more mainstream here than in Japan. I don't have a problem with them the way some Japanese might, but because I live in Japan and don't see them regularly, I feel like a tourist gawking at the sites when my waitress has so many and I'm trying not to stare.

Finally, sometimes it's the little missing commonplace Japanese things that I never think about that I suddenly notice aren't there. When I pay with cash and there's no tray to put my money. Or no hot towels or free glasses of water when I sit down at a restaurant. There's no cold, unsweetened tea at the convenience store.

Of course, all of these things are small and insignificant. They are easy to get used to and change. But they do make me realize that I have changed and although my passport says I'm Canadian, after 18 years in Japan, I'm a little Japanese too.

