

Thanksgiving Tuna

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By Liz Sheffield

“Today is Thanksgiving,” I say to the Japanese students in Classroom 1A.

They sit alphabetically by last name, rows of desks placed in a four-by-eight formation that leaves no room for mistakes or misbehavior. Their dark blue uniforms are creased and pressed. My clothes – a light pink skirt and plum-colored v-neck sweater – are subdued by American standards. Here in Sapporo, they add outrageous color to this English class.

“Thanksgiving is the day in the United States when we...give thanks.”

Blank stares. Umeki-Sensei, my co-teacher, does not translate. Instead he asks me a question.

“Elizabeth-Sensei, what do you eat on Thanksgiving?”

“We eat turkey, big turkeys.”

Using a stub of white chalk I attempt to draw a turkey on the black board that spans the front of the classroom. My drawing resembles a punk rock pig, plump and round with feathers poking out from its hind quarters. My family’s typical 20-pound turkey would take up half the table in my small living room here in Japan. This drawing provides no point of reference for my students who have likely never eaten turkey.

Two boys in the back of the room, Takahashi and Ueno, chuckle. Since I arrived in their high school classroom in September they have enjoyed mocking my artistic attempts to provide illustrations in our English class.

“*Urusai*,” Umeki-Sensei says to them.

I cringe at his words: shut up.

“And we eat potatoes. Mashed potatoes,” I add.

I mash the air with my right fist, my other arm holds a large, invisible pot of boiled potatoes.

“You know...*jaga imo*?” I ask.

A few students give courtesy nods in response. They know potatoes. We are making progress.

“Will you celebrate Thanksgiving this year?” Umeki-Sensei asks.

“No. But, I will call my parents tonight. They will be celebrating.”

With the mention of my family, I look out the window. The cars driving on the wrong side of the street, the metal roofs, the billboards in a language I can’t read. Everything I see reminds me of the distance between here and home.

“What are you thankful for?” I ask the students.

After three months of teaching English in Japan, I should know better than to ask an open-ended question of my high school students. They refuse to respond unless I ask them directly, by name. Volunteering to answer a question would make them appear bold, maybe even brazen, to their classmates. But today, I ask the open-ended question

anyway, wanting to divert the attention away from me and the homesickness that has set in with my first holiday outside of the United States.

“*For what* are you thankful,” Umeki-Sensei corrects my English from where he stands next to the window.

“Yes. *For what* are you thankful?” I repeat.

The silence hangs. I wait. Finally, the bell rings. The students rise and bow. I trail behind Umeki-Sensei out the classroom door and towards our next class, where another discussion of Thanksgiving awaits.

Later during my free period, I begin a group letter to friends and family at home:

It's Thanksgiving and the closest thing I have to Turkey and stuffing is a rice ball wrapped in seaweed and filled with tuna that I bought for lunch at the school cafeteria.

Maybe this is what they referred to in my pre-departure training as culture shock. No one in this room, in this school, maybe no one within a ten-mile radius has ever celebrated Thanksgiving. Except me.

I sit alone at my desk in the teachers' room, across the ocean from my family, my friends and my Thanksgiving dinner (oh, for a bite of stuffing!), practicing turkey illustrations for my next class. Green tea from a porcelain cup burns my tongue with its heat. Placing the cup back on the wooden saucer, I head to the restroom – to cry.

At the end of the day as I'm preparing for the snowy trek to the bus stop, the door of the teachers' room slides open. Takahashi and Ueno, the artistic critics from Classroom 1A, bow as they cross the threshold.

“Shitsurei shimasu,” they mumble once the door slides shut behind them.

This greeting, an apology of sorts, is a formality required upon entering a room in Japan.

None of the teachers look up from their desks, covered by the stacks of student papers to grade and thick notebooks containing lesson plans. Slivers of smoke swirl to the ceiling from the desks of two male teachers, Saito-Sensei and Nishi-Sensei, who frequently interrupt their work to pull a drag from their Mild Seven cigarettes.

“Hello Elizabeth-Sensei,” the two boys greet me in unison.

They have found their way to my desk through the fog of cigarette smoke. Now the other teachers are watching. The promise of hearing students speak to me in English draws interest.

“Er, we give thanks...to you? For you?” Ueno asks.

The toe of his right foot, in a black and white Converse high-top, taps time, a metronome against the gray linoleum tile. He watches his toe.

“Or...with you? We give thanks with you?” Takahashi adds, jabbing Ueno in the ribs.

“You’re both right. To, for, with...all three are correct,” I tell them.

This makes them happy, but they are still confused.

“Correct? Really? All three?” Takahashi asks.

“Well, there are some differences.”

How can I explain this to them?

“If I give thanks *to* you, it means that because of you, I was able to do something. For example, thanks to my mother, I was born.”

They nod. We are getting somewhere.

“If I give thanks *for* you, it means I’m thankful for you, thankful that you’re in my life.”

“Okay!” Saito-Sensei says, stubbing out his cigarette.

This English lesson, even without the illustration of the turkey, is having more of an impact than my previous three classes.

“If I give thanks *with* you, it means we are thankful together...for something.”

Ueno leans to Takashi’s ear. I hear a mix of Japanese peppered with English: to, for, with. Takahashi is nodding.

They both look at me.

“We choose ‘for’. We give thanks...for...you,” he says.

Both boys bow and hurry away from my desk.

“Okay!” Saito-Sensei bellows again.

The other teachers laugh.

“*Shitsurei shimashita,*” the boys apologize at the door.

“Takahashi-kun! Ueno-kun! I’m thankful for you, too,” I holler from my desk.

I am celebrating Thanksgiving after all.

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