



Stefan

from Burlington &
Burlington Lakeshore

to

Japan

“Celebrating Exchange”

The time of the month has come again to write up my Beaver Tale for my family and friends back in Canada, and for anyone else who might come across this. Hello again. Writing this, it still doesn't feel like I will be returning home soon. I've completely gotten used to life here in Japan.

To sum up my experiences since my last Beaver Tale, life has followed a routine schedule without much change. The school year came and went, and now we've all graduated to the next year. Since April, my class and I have become second years, the middle age group of our school. Although some of the students of my previous class have switched rooms, I am still largely with the same group of kids as the previous term. I even have the same homeroom teacher. At home, I've changed host families a few more times, and am now on my fifth (and final) family. Although I have lived in many places across Kanazawa city, I have been extremely fortunate to have had such loving and kind host families to stay with. My memories with each family are still crystal clear in my head, each set of memories bringing back a specific emotion related to my progress during the exchange. Although now should be the time for me to reflect on my long journey, it still doesn't quite feel like I'm that far along my path as an exchange student. But nevertheless, I am here to reflect.

The first and foremost topic I will bring up is my language skills, keeping in tradition with my previous Beaver Tales. It's weird to say it, but I've become fluent in Japanese at a basic level. Thinking in Japanese and speaking it come second nature to me, and there isn't a person I am unable to communicate with. Of course, it's not perfect, but anything beyond what I currently am capable of would just be frosting on the proverbial cake. Talking with my host families is especially easy, and I'm able to share all sorts of trivia about Canada and a Canadian lifestyle with them. At school, I'm able to join in on the jokes and teasing my friends are always up to, and I'm very comfortable with making plans to meet up with them outside of school. The contents of class however, I'm still unable to understand (thoroughly), as expected, but it doesn't bother me much. My classmates have had a 16-year

head start on speaking Japanese. I am very comfortable with my language level, and the only goal I have from here is to not forget what I've learned after I come back to Canada. It's been a real privilege to get to explore a foreign language so in-depth, it would be a waste to lose my ability to understand it. Coming on this exchange has changed a lot of my plans for the future, and now I've decided that I won't make it through post-secondary education without having the opportunity to continue studying the Japanese language. Forgetting Japanese is the last thing I plan on doing. To all future exchange students who may be reading this right now: the language will come to you if you study and practice. It seems difficult, and in your first few months here it will definitely seem impossible. You can't let that stop you from trying, because I guarantee you that as long as you try, you will find that the impossible may very well actually be possible. If I was able to do it, that should serve as proof that anyone can do it, since I've studied French in Canada for six years and I still can't understand the French nutritional facts table on the back of food products you can buy in Canada.

Moving on to school, it has definitely been the most wild ride of my life. No other time in my life have my emotions fluctuated so much. It's hard to really decide on my feelings about attending school here, since it's such a swirl of different memories and emotions that it all comes together in one big great melting pot. I've had good days and bad days, and I've had neutral days. I've experienced being lonely and afraid, I've experienced being surrounded by caring friends and carefree laughter, and I've experienced everything in between. If you were to ask me "has this been the *happiest* school year in your life?", I wouldn't say so. But man, I wouldn't have missed this year for the world. You have to take the good with the bad in life. There is always going to be bad things in life, it doesn't matter if it's here in Japan or back in Canada. However, I've come to find that the purpose of exchange is to take the good with the bad, and to push yourself to overcome the bad. That's what makes you grow on exchange. That's how I grew on exchange. Running away from the bad won't solve things. Obstacles can always be climbed over or worked around. The language barrier, the cultural differences, the misunderstandings, I've worked to overcome it all, and in return I've grown in ways that I couldn't have had I stayed back in Canada. This is all something I can only say with confidence after having lived here for as long as I have. To all future exchange students who may be reading this right now: school will be difficult. Nobody said that exchange was going to be easy. But I've found that the more you put in to it, the more you will get out of it. Passiveness will be met with passiveness. Likewise, action will be met with action. Communication is a two-way thing, as you may recall I wrote in my previous Beaver Tale. If you do your part on your end, people will do their part on theirs.

Although I've learned so much about Japanese culture and the Japanese way of life on exchange, I think that I have learned even more about myself and the broader world around me by being here. A sense of community, initiative, communication skills, the ability to create lasting bonds, these are all greater things of life that I was able to really feel developing within myself by going on exchange. I think these are things that all exchange students will learn, no matter the destination country. It's universal to the exchange experience. After all these months, I think that I've found it. I think that I've found what the true meaning of exchange is. My mind is clear as I'm writing this, but I'm still struggling to really conclude what I've written. It's obvious that living in Japan has not exactly improved my *English* writing skills (although I'm not too sure they were ever good to begin with, ha ha). Even so, I'll try my best to do just that. Spending almost one whole year here has changed me both inward and outward. It's changed the way that I think and feel about life on the inside, and it's also changed the way I view the world on the outside. I've lived here

so long that it's hard to imagine coming back, but I know that it will happen soon enough. Although part of me wants to continue living here in Japan for even longer, I am very, very happy with my experience, and I do not mind the thought of returning home to see my family and friends who are all waiting for me. I'm calm on the inside, the calmest I've ever felt. While I do have one final stretch left to cruise through, I am comfortable knowing a that new life is waiting for me back in Canada. To all future exchange students who may be reading this right now: you are approaching the most eventful year of your life. Make it your own. Take the good with the bad, and work to overcome the many obstacles that you will surely come across.

From here on out, I will be facing the future with a big smile.



Me with my three host brothers from my fourth host family. From left to right: Ryuuta, Hakumi, Eiji, Me.

A picture taking during an outing with my school friends. From left to right: Ayumu, Masahiro

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