

Senpai

Marcia Flanders Stornetta

THE FIRST THREE WEEKS OF MY MISSION in Koshigaya, a small city outside of Tokyo, Japan, breezed by. Despite two months at the Missionary Training Center in Provo, I still couldn't understand the gibberish that rattled over train station loudspeakers and spewed from thousands of mouths. Nor could I make any sense of the delicate brush strokes on shop window signs, the flashing neon lights of evening, or the sprawling train maps at every train stop. Fractured grammar made even familiar English words on shop signs and T-shirts seem foreign. But it didn't matter. My assigned companion was an American. As my senior companion, she could translate the gibberish and read the signs.

Even though I was twenty-two, I followed Smith Shimai around like a little puppy those first three weeks. In theory, I knew missionaries lived and worked together in pairs because it was safer (morally and physically), more efficient, and more economical. In actuality, my companion created sense and order from chaos for me. Two sticks became eating utensils; the covered square tank with a gas heater became a bath after her patient instruction. She taught me to squat for the toilet, to sleep on *tatami* mats with a *futon*, to remove my shoes quickly just inside the doorstep, to push through crowded trains, and to bow politely. But after our third week together, her eighteen-month mission ended, and she went home. I was assigned a new companion, Shimizu Shimai. She was from Sapporo in northern Japan and spoke no English.

MARCIA FLANDERS STORNETTA, a freelance writer, lives with her husband, Scott, and their two children in Morristown, New Jersey. She and her daughter have recently written a children's book about diabetes.

Those first few days in our tiny third-floor apartment were difficult. We briefly introduced ourselves to each other that first morning in *seisa* position, sitting upright on the *tatami* mats, my thighs resting uncomfortably on my calves and heels. After I had spoken all the Japanese I knew and she all the Japanese I could understand, we relaxed our sitting positions. The wind blew the stifling warmth of humid summer through the open window. I smiled. She smiled. What in the world are we going to do for the rest of the morning? I wondered.

It soon became obvious that my days as an admiring puppy dog were over. Instead of an indulgent master for a senior companion, I now had a drill sergeant. Shimizu Shimai took her role as senior companion seriously. Later that first afternoon when we returned to our apartment, she motioned to a stack of written records that Smith Shimai had left her on the table. She offered some sort of explanation and then turned to me and said slowly, "Yū-shoku o tsukutte kudasai."

For a long moment I looked at her, trying to decipher the short sentence. *Yū* meant evening, *shoku*, meal. We were going to eat dinner. I was hungry, too. I nodded approvingly.

"Yū-shoku o tsukutte kudasai," she repeated, emphasizing the word *tsukutte*. *Kudasai* was a polite request form. But what did *tsukutte* mean? I ran through the base forms of all the verbs I knew, but I couldn't figure out what she wanted me to do. I shrugged my shoulders and gave my helpless foreigner's look.

Irritated, she threw open the door to our small refrigerator, removed a package of noodles, a cabbage, onions, and carrots. She piled them in my arms and repeated more slowly and loudly, "Yū-shoku o tsukutte."

I looked down at my arms, then at her. I began to panic. "Shirimasen. Shirimasen," I repeated. "I don't know. I don't know." That was all I knew how to say. I couldn't say "I have never cooked with chopsticks and a wok before" or "Show me how to do it." Only "I don't know."

She grabbed her knife, pointed to the cabbage, carrot, and onion, and made some chopping motions. Next she poured a little oil in the heavy wok, pointed to the vegetables and then the noodles, and made some stirring motions with the cooking chopsticks. Then she went to the table in the other room and buried herself in the records.

In the stuffy kitchen, I slowly chopped the carrots, trying to imitate the precisely chopped vegetables I had seen displayed in the windows of the small eateries we passed each day. As the hot plate flamed the wok, I burned inside, humiliated that I could not communicate, indignant that I was viewed as a cook. Finally I produced my first dish of *yakisoba*.

Small humiliations became a part of everyday life. The next day, my face burned as I stood in a narrow grocery aisle listening to Shimizu Shimai shout at me. The other shoppers scurried past us, heads down, trying not to notice my loss of face. A few days later, using a map I had carefully drawn in the back of my small appointment book, I tried to lead Shimizu Shimai to Tanaka-san's, one of Smith Shimai's golden investigators. I'm not sure where I made the first wrong turn, but we were soon lost in a maze of snaking, narrow pathways. Flustered, I could sense her anger smoldering. I longed for square, even city blocks and street signs written in English. I longed for America, "the wide place," as the Japanese called it.

I never learned to communicate very well with Shimizu Shimai. I didn't even try to explain my panic the morning I fainted in our bathroom from the heat of the *o-furo*, the Japanese style bathtub. Every day I dreaded all the feeble attempts we made to communicate during the fifteen-minute walks to and from the storefront church we used as a chapel on a main street in Koshigaya. Sentence after sentence stopped midway after it became clear I didn't understand, followed by seconds slowly ticking away the silence. It reminded me of my first date, only this silence was more painful. After a few days I no longer tried to understand her small talk, or to answer back. How grateful I was the day we got bicycles. I didn't even care that mine was rusty and had been rummaged from a pile of discards at the train station. That is, until I discovered that one of the branch members had given *me* the shiny green bicycle she slowly pedalled down the street before me each day.

Daily rhythms also rescued me from the need to communicate. At six every morning Shimizu Shimai turned on the gas water heater. Then came bath at six-thirty, wheat cereal at seven, scripture study at eight, language study at nine, and train station at ten. There waves of people rushed in and out as we competed for their attention with cosmetic saleswomen and Moonies. Afternoons and evenings we taught discussions at the church. Tuesdays and Saturdays, I taught free English classes. Sundays we attended church. Mondays were preparation day, when we shopped, cleaned, and washed our clothes. We didn't need to communicate. I tagged along, hoping each day for a transfer to a new city and a new senior companion.

I didn't talk much those days, even with others. There weren't a lot of people particularly interested in hearing my personal introduction or a memorized story about Joseph Smith. I didn't understand the crowded, miniaturized, hurried world that went on around me. There was no one to explain the jingling music at stoplights or the lilting shouts from store owners whenever I walked into a small *misei* or neigh-

borhood store. No one to warn against taking big bites of *wasabi*, sinusclearing horseradish, or *nattō*, fermented soybeans. But I did understand the leering look and crude gestures of the peanut man who stacked bags of his roasted peanuts on his cart parked outside the train station. I also understood from her gestures and the intonation of her voice that the gospel of love Shimizu Shimai daily preached in private, hour-long discussions at the church was very different from the Utah gospel that nurtured me as I grew. She deviated from the lesson on the commandments that I had methodically memorized, sternly expounding on the Word of Wisdom, adding cola and soft drinks to the tea, coffee, and sake that were forbidden. To naive high school girls, who tittered at the word *sex*, she taught a strict sexual morality new to me. She had expanded the law of chastity to include never wearing T-shirts, sleeveless or low-cut blouses, never entering a man's apartment, and never, but never, being anywhere with a man unchaperoned. I was glad she was not privy to the T-shirts, handholding, and kisses of my damning past.

Her forcefulness intimidated the young girls, who were generally the only audience we had. She ramrodded them through six painful discussions. I breathed a sigh of relief with them at the end of each lesson as they escaped to the real world. I wished I could take them aside and whisper to them about my *kind* Father in Heaven. And I wondered why they came back. Were they afraid she would track them down if they didn't?

But I never objected. I never knew how. Or perhaps I didn't dare until we met another Tanaka-san. (Tanaka is a surname as familiar in Japan as Smith or Jones.) Nineteen-year-old Tanaka-san was different from the other girls we taught. Bubbly and enthusiastic, she believed what we taught her about God, Christ, and baptism. Even so, that Thursday when Shimizu Shimai pressured Tanaka-san, whom we had met only three days earlier, to be baptized on Saturday, I knew I must do something. I didn't doubt Tanaka-san's sincerity or faith, but I did doubt whether she understood what joining the Mormon Church would be like. It was not like joining a social club. In Japan, it was the antithesis. Mormon women did not sip ice coffees with their friends after school or tea with their elders after dinner. They went to church, not movies, on Sunday. They revered their ancestors by doing genealogy, not offering gifts to the family shrine in the corner of the living room. And Mormon women did not have Buddhist weddings, the dream of every young Japanese girl.

I knew it would do no good to try to talk to Shimizu Shimai. Even if through some miracle I was able to express my feelings, she would never have agreed with me. So the next morning when I saw our dis-

strict leader, Elder Brown, an American responsible for the three missionary pairs in the city of Koshigaya, I casually mentioned the baptism planned for Saturday. I also let slip that Tanaka-san had been studying with us for only a few days. I talked with him just long enough to see if he had nibbled my bait. Then I smugly settled into scripture study with the other district members, waiting for justice. When we began language study, Shimizu Shimai left to make some phone calls. Surely Elder Brown will confront her now, I thought. But Shimizu Shimai said nothing when she returned. We went to the train station. She gave no indication that anything was different. We ate lunch. Maybe Elder Brown isn't going to do anything, I thought. We went to the church for English class.

We were early, so I sat on the folding chair in a small second-floor classroom, trying to study Japanese from the small note cards I carried with me everywhere in the sweltering heat. Then I heard Shimizu Shimai talking to Elder Brown in the next room. And suddenly she was there, her stocky five-foot body filling the door frame. She slammed the door behind her.

"Fu-ran-da-zu Shimai," she said slowly and loudly as if addressing a deaf or disabled person. She leaned her face close to mine, invading my personal space. Her dark eyes burned with anger behind the gold squares of her wire frame glasses. Her forehead glistened with perspiration, and an occasional trickle escaped from the fringes of her heavy hair.

She pushed her index finger into her small nose, flattening it, a physical abbreviation for the personal pronoun. "Watakushi wa senpai da yo," she said slowly. "I am the *senpai*," she was saying, using conjugations reserved for children and insult. But the way she conjugated verbs made no difference to my foreign ears. I didn't know what *senpai* meant. Then she began hurling words at me, her nostrils flaring from the pressure of her index finger that seemed to grind into her nose.

"Senpai." The word split me in half, leaving each half in two different worlds. Outside, I watched Shimizu Shimai act before me, staring at her exaggerated actions that dragged along, hearing her angrily repeat the word over and over again at sixteen rpms. Inside, the word pounded twice as fast as my heartbeat.

"Senpai. Senpai."

I know I have heard that word before, I thought. But what does it mean? Mentally I raced through my wordbook and flipped through my pocket dictionary. I willed myself to remember.

Then I remembered. I had heard it with Smith Shimai a few weeks before when we had tracted in a dormitory for young working or college girls. We had surprised one timid girl, who had not expected to

find two gawking Americans at her door. Not knowing what to do, she had looked past us and yelled “senpai” down the hall to get the attention of an older girl passing by. The *senpai* came to her rescue, asking us to leave. As we walked down the hall towards the door, Smith Shimai had explained the order of Japanese society. Even the language reflected this. There were no words for sister or brother, only older and younger sister or brother. Dogs and children, peers, superiors, and the elderly were all addressed using different conjugations and different words. *Senpai* meant senior.

Shimizu Shimai then jabbed her finger toward me, stopping a few inches from my chest. “Anata wa cohai da.”

I had never heard the word *cohai*, but I knew that it must mean “junior.” I also knew from the anger in her voice that I had not understood all the implications of that word. In going to the district leader, I had caused her to lose face.

I wanted to cry. But I would not. I had never cried in front of Mrs. Henry, my piano teacher, no matter how much she harangued and humiliated me. I would not cry now. I used my handkerchief instead, as the Japanese do, to wipe my brow. Convinced I had understood her tirade, Shimizu Shimai stormed out of the room.

The stifling heat blew through the open window. I moved closer to the electric fan, staring at the blades whirring round and round. I wanted to rush to the safety of my mother’s waiting car as I had after my piano lessons. But there I sat in a small, hot room, on a rickety folding chair, staring at a fan. No mother to cry to, only a fan. I wanted to go home. I didn’t want to speak Japanese. I didn’t want to live like the Japanese. But I couldn’t go home. It was time for English class to begin, time for me to assume the role of *sensei*, honored teacher.

After that confrontation, I played the role of the dutiful junior companion. At times I thought I would go crazy. But after two long months, I was transferred north to the cool mountains of Takasaki City, where the three-story, concrete statue of *Kannon no Yama*, the goddess of mercy, and my new senior companion, Andō Shimai, protected me. Shimizu Shimai seemed genuinely sad to see me go. I was not.

After I left, she wrote me a few simple letters. By then, my hand had mastered the curves and squiggles of *hiragana*, a simple phonetic alphabet that young Japanese school children learn before they study the more complicated two thousand characters of modern Japanese. After I received her second letter, a guilty conscience and proper etiquette told me I really must send a reply. By then I had realized she was not the only one at fault. But each time I poised my hand above the paper, I could not bring my hand to write.