



Opening pages: Suzanne Kamata on the shores of the Yoshino River. **Opposite:** Seated at a Shinto shrine in Aizumi, Japan.

Last November, I was on edge, worrying that my family might have to flee Japan at a moment's notice. Tensions were brewing between nearby North and South Korea. My husband, Yoshi, was sure that there would be a war, and the ominous newspaper headlines seemed to confirm his suspicions. Adding to my distress was the fact that the passports for our 11-year-old twins had expired.

"What if we have to escape?" I asked Yoshi. "We need to be fully prepared."

Yoshi dismissed my concerns. "There's no rush," he said, mentioning the copious paperwork we would need to complete and the lengthy trip to the consulate in Osaka, which is 2½ hours away from our home in Aizumi, in the Tokushima Prefecture.

I didn't care about the inconvenience; I just wanted to know we could leave if we needed to. That thought has always been in the back of my head—perhaps the logical by-product of being an expatriate. More than two decades ago, I moved from South Carolina to Japan, supposedly to teach English for one year.

Yoshi couldn't be more different from me. He has lived in Tokushima almost all his life, leaving it only to attend college. He is deeply rooted: We live with our son and daughter in a house built and formerly inhabited by his parents. As the eldest—and only—son, my husband is the designated heir. His father's bones are interred in a cemetery a short walk from the house, and it's largely our responsibility to tend the grave. The last thing he would ever fantasize about is running away.

I, on the other hand, have dreamed about whisking my family off to multicultural Hawaii,

where no one would tease my biracial kids about being "half," or to Scandinavia, where I wouldn't be the only blond in the neighborhood. If there was even a small risk of something bad happening, I've wondered, why bother hanging around?

In Japan, I've always lived on the fringes, never quite fitting in. People avoid sitting next to me, an obvious foreigner, on buses; they shrink back when they see me. I often feel ill at ease as well. Although I speak Japanese fluently and make my living as a writer, there are gaps in my vocabulary, and I commit etiquette breaches on a daily basis.

For example, I had been in this country for more than a decade when I found out that it was rude of me to store my broom in the entryway. I had been here even longer before I learned that I didn't know how to serve rice properly. During a lunch at my daughter's school, another mother told me that I was doing it wrong: "You should heap rice in the bowl like that only if you are preparing an offering to the dead," she scolded. Apparently it's also indelicate of me to answer the door in my flannel pajamas when our neighbors, early-rising farmers, come calling at 7 A.M. Of course, there are things about Japan that I love: the cleanliness of the parks and the streets, the fact that everyone is always punctual. But at times the cultural misunderstandings and the frequent corrections wear me down, and I think I would rather live anywhere other than here.

And yet when the U.S. State Department issued a traveler's advisory on March 17—warning Americans not to come to Japan, and urging U.S. citizens within the country to consider departing—I realized for the first time that I wasn't leaving Japan. Not now, maybe not ever.

One week earlier, a friend in Osaka had reported via Facebook that he was experiencing an earthquake—the largest he had ever felt. I didn't think much of it: There are about 2,000 earthquakes in this country every year, and I had been here during the 1995 Kobe quake, which rocked me awake in my fourth-floor apartment. My husband, who was even more accustomed to quakes, still talks about how I stood there frozen on the bed like a crazy person (rather than taking cover). If the earthquake in Osaka was the biggest ever, I would have felt it here. Or so I thought.

An hour later, when I went to pick up my kids from school, the principal rushed out to my car to tell me that a tsunami warning had been issued. The wave had already hit the northeastern coast of Japan, hundreds of miles away, washing away entire buildings. It was due to arrive here in 30 minutes.

I drove home on a road that runs almost parallel to the Yoshino River. This road

