



# Billy

## From Burlington Lakeshore to Japan

### *“Strange turns of events are strange”*

I was mowing my lawn today when I stopped, sat down, and realized how strange it was that I, Billy Kurelek, was spending an hour pushing a lawn mower back and forth. Shouldn't I be hiking up a chilly mountain on a wet day to see an ancient temple while my friends jabbered rapid Japanese around me? Or at least taking a train with Toshiya and Ryota on our way to a cool local rap concert where our buddy Yoshikawa was opening? Maybe even going to 100 yen sushi and getting free sushi if I could eat wasabi rolled in seaweed.

But no, I was pushing a gas guzzling machine back and forth across my front lawn so that our house would conform to what has been deemed acceptable by western society. How exciting.

It's not like I failed my exchange, or even broke any of the d's, no, I knew from the second I set foot in Japan that it would take a lot more than teenage stupidity to stop my exchange. So if not teenage stupidity, what other force could have led to me sitting on my front lawn with a lawnmower still running in front of me and a half mowed lawn behind me?

An earthquake, A tsunami and a series of nuclear explosions, perhaps?

Nah.

Combined with a frantic mother?

Yes.

I think the conversation actually went something like this,

Me: “Hey mom, we had an earthquake today, didn't hit us very hard though, I'll keep you posted”

Mom: “Alright, thanks for letting us know, glad you're safe.”

Next day

Mom: ” BILL! Did you get hit by the tsunami?!”

Me: “No mom, we're all fine here”

Mom: ”Alright good to know you're safe.”

Next day

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Me: "Hey mom... there were some nuclear explosions up in Fukushima today...."

Mom: "Nuclear...?"

Mom: "As in radiation?"

Me: "I believe so"

Mom: "Ok, well, you should go visit your sister in Australia for a few weeks"

Me: "Wait... what?"

Dad: "Hey buddy, heard about what happened, booked your tickets to Australia, it leaves tomorrow, you're going to live with your sister for a few weeks until we know whether the Fukushima plant can be controlled."

And I thought they were kidding....

So, off I went to Australia for 3 weeks, where I hunted down some volunteering opportunities and slept on the couch in my sister's apartment. It was nice seeing my sister for the first time in a few years, but I didn't belong in Australia, I belonged in Japan. It felt like getting woken up an hour earlier than you intended on a chilly day, you have to jump out of your cozy bed to turn off your alarm, and once you're out, you can't go back. Your eyes are still blurry and you're trying to do your normal routine, but everything is fuzzy, you're halfway to the bathroom when you realize that you are only half dressed and it is cold outside.

Fortunately I was fully clothed as I walked the streets of Brisbane, but everything was a blur, my psyche just was not ready to be surrounded by big white gorilla humans who didn't even bow and ate copious amounts of red meat. I simply didn't want to be awake but we all know that the thing about being woken up early is, no matter how uncoordinated you are when you first get up, eventually your brain clicks and you accept that you are in fact awake. Even though you would have loved that extra hour of sleep, you still do everything you were going to do that day, perhaps with a little less energy.

After 3 weeks of purgatorial Australia, the Fukushima crisis was upgraded to a level 7 nuclear disaster - the same as Chernobyl. A few days later I was saying bye to my sister and Brisbane airport with a plane ticket to Sydney, courtesy of Virgin Blue Airlines (I volunteered with them for a week). From Sydney I went to LA, then to Pearson airport, Toronto. When I went through Toronto immigration the border guard got upset with me for being "unresponsive and despondent", I apologized and told her that I just wanted to go home, she told me that unless I have another ticket, I'm stuck here for a while.

It was nice to see my Mom, Dad, Jane, Brother, and dogs again, on the car ride home I slept. The next day I woke up late and visited my school, saw my friends, talked to teachers, turns out nothing had changed very much.

Right now I'm mowing my lawn, then I'm going to go over to a friend's house and study for exams which will be followed by a dinner of spaghetti and meatballs. My camera broke and I lost all my pictures from Japan, so the only proof I had that my exchange ever happened was a citizen card that is in my wallet, which was stolen from my locker at the YMCA last Friday. I am once again just Bill, a grade 11 high school student who is trying to pass the courses that were started halfway through the semester.

The thing about the disasters I live through is that I suspect they looked worse in the media in Canada than they were. The earthquake did not impact any of the area where I lived, the Tsunami did not cause any damage in my city and the nuclear crisis was not considered dangerous by the Japanese people until a few weeks after I left. Frankly while

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I was in Japan life was pretty normal and we saw very little in the media about the disasters because a lot of the media communication were down and I suspect the Government did not want to freak us all out.

Even though my exchange was cut short by a few months, overall it was an amazing experience and one I will treasure for the rest of my life. I learnt so much about another culture and I also learnt so much about myself. For that I want to sincerely thank Rotary in Japan and Canada. I have changed, I can now speak and write another language and I did actually dream in Japanese.

*Billy*

Japan