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ONE YEAR IN TOKYO

THE STEPMOTHER SERIES: BOOK 5

Story by James J. Craft • Illustrations by Kwon Lee Tran



J A M E S J C R A F T

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TOKYO***

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by James J. Craft

illustrations by Kwon Lee Tran

A Tales of Transformation Story



2013 Digital Edition

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ONE YEAR IN TOKYO

Annabelle Jones-Cole was a woman in love, and Buff was the man of her dreams. At least the most recent one. Since divorcing her first husband, there had been more than a few incarnations of ‘the man of her dreams.’ However, more so than the others she had met through the years, she was quite sure Buff was ‘the one.’ She would do anything for him, believing that showing her love for him was just as good a substitute for feeling love.

When he first suggested that they shed their worldly possessions and spend a year traveling the world, she had her doubts. But after he proposed to her on bended knee, she decided that it was exactly what she wanted to do. Buff, after all, was an experienced world traveller – as he rarely missed an opportunity to mention to anyone who would listen. A year circumnavigating the globe to find the passion she knew she must have for her new husband sounded so romantic there was no way she could refuse.

But what to do with her son?

Annabelle had fought hard for full custody of Mickey, and won it. She was legally responsible for his well-being, and had been for the past nine and a half years. He was a good kid, though unusually subdued most of the time and fairly low maintenance. He generally did as he was asked.

In fact she couldn’t recall a single instance of him ever not doing as he was asked. That was just who he was. He kept decent grades in school, yet he didn’t have any plans on what to do after graduation. Annabelle didn’t worry much about it because Mickey was always good at adapting to whatever got thrown at him.

When his Dad and her had first separated, he adapted. When his father announced that he was taking a job overseas and wouldn’t be back in the U.S. for several years, he adapted. When he never returned, he adapted. When Annabelle went through a brief spell of self-discovery and thought she was a lesbian, he adapted. When she banned meat and synthetic fibers from the house, he adapted. When she did the exact opposite three months later, embracing an all-meat diet and allergy-free textiles, he adapted.

Which is why she was so certain he would be okay with the idea of her and her new hubby just up and leaving, and Mickey going to live with his father for a year.

It was true, Mickey was used to his Mom being a little on the flaky side. Since leaving his father nearly a decade ago, she had married and remarried several times since. So there was no reason, in his mind, to expect that her most recent arrangement would be any different.

That is of course, until she told him their honeymoon plans.

Mickey had been downstairs in the den reading when she approached him with the news. She paused for a moment, taking a proud, Motherly moment to look her son over. In her mind he was a handsome young man who looked like a miniaturized version of his father.

She sighed. Though she loved Buff (the abbreviated version of Buford, his real name) more than anything, she couldn't deny that she still held Mickey's Dad in very high regard.

Mickey was walking towards her, book in hand, his longish hair brushed back in stylish fashion. He wasn't a particularly large boy, never had been, but in her mind he was just about perfect.

"Honey?" she began, "You know your stepfather and I will be taking a little honeymoon together soon, right?"

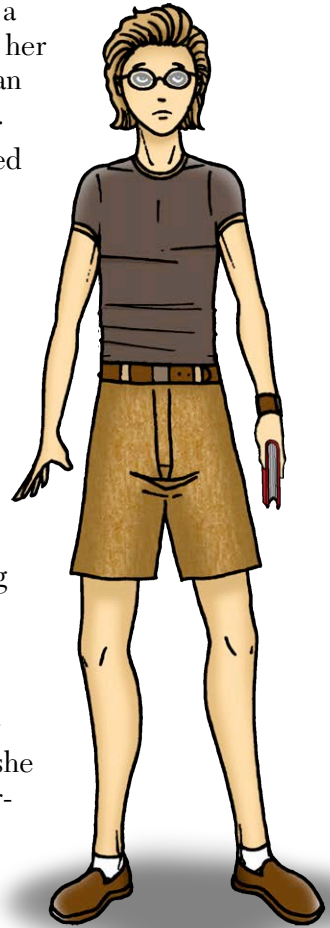
Mickey nodded. He was used to his mother talking to him in this sugar-coated way. It bothered him a little, but it was just a part of her personality, and had grown used to it.

"Yes Mother," he rolled his eyes, "I know." Mickey didn't want to sound too exasperated with her, but she and Buff had been going on and on about their 'perfect honeymoon' for quite a while now. "Everyone knows that you and Buff are going on a big honeymoon this summer"

It was true that Annabelle had taken the time to inform nearly half the town of her intentions to travel the globe with her new beau. Mickey wasn't sure it was a smart idea, but hey, it was her life. He was looking forward to a little peace and quiet around the house.

"Well actually Dear," she looked away, "It's going to be a little longer than a few weeks..." she let her voice trail off. This was proving to be harder than she thought. Annabelle was used to making people happy, and tried to avoid situations where she thought that she was going to have the opposite effect.

"Okaaaaay," Mickey narrowed his eyes behind his trademark round glasses, still holding his book in his hand. He knew when his mother was about to tell him something that she thought he might not want to hear, and he was sensing that such a thing was just about to happen.



“Your stepfather and I are planning to be away for about a year... actually...” she paused for a moment to review her words in her head, “actually it’ll be more like a few months.”

“*Months?*” Mickey yelped.

“Well, maybe as much as a year,” Annabelle said. “Well, exactly a year.”

Mickey’s jaw fell open, “What?” he finally said, followed by “Wow!” His mind started to think of a year living alone. He pictured having the house to himself, cooking his own meals (fish-sticks and French fries every night) watching TV, playing video games, reading... maybe thinking about applying to college... maybe get a job for a while...

A smile curled up at outer corners of his lips.

Annabelle’s next sentence would quickly make it disappear.

“And since you’re taking a year off of school... before you commit to college,” she paused again, “We... your Stepfather and I... thought you might want to spend some time with your father in the Orient.”

“Huh?” Mickey furrowed his brow, “Why would I want to do that?”

Annabelle paused, “Well Mickey,” his mother continued, “You know that our trip is going to cost a lot of money...” her voice trailed off. “So we’re going to have to downsize a little bit while we’re away.”

“Downsize?” he repeated her word back to her with question mark at the end.

“We... Well... We’re selling the house dear,” Annabelle finally spit out the point she had been trying to make since the beginning, “And pretty much everything in it.”

“*What?*” Mickey had roared, “You can’t just sell the house! This is our house! This is where we live! Where I live!”

“Now dear,” Annabelle began, “I know it seems a little drastic, but your stepfather and I have done the math. The house is worth quite a lot, and by the time we get back, the market could drop and we’ll lose all the...” she paused for moment to think of the word that Buff had used, “what does he call it again?” she wondered aloud.

“Equity?” Mickey offered. He was used to filling in his mother’s sentences for her. Annabelle was a very pretty Southern girl, and had gotten by on her looks for most of her life.

“Equity!” She continued, “We’ll lose all the equity in the house, and that would be bad. And with borrowing costs expected to go up...” she twanged in her Southern drawl, “And besides, you haven’t seen your Dad in years... Won’t it be exciting to catch up with him... Have some new adventures in the land of the rising sun?”

“The what?” Mickey looked at her like she had just fallen off the turnip truck. “No, it won’t be exciting and *no* I don’t want any new adventures. The adventures I have right here,” he pointed downwards at the hardwood floor, “are just fine thank you. And besides,” his voice turned to a mocking tone as he coined his mothers’ phrase, “Dad doesn’t have any adventures because he’s a self-absorbed workaholic! Which is why he’s *there* and we’re *here* in the first place”

And with that, he stormed off to his room and slammed the door. It was the most emotional she had seen Mickey in a long time.

“Well?” Buff asked as he wandered into the room from the hall. “How’d it go?”

“Not very good,” Annabelle sighed, “he just got mad and stormed off... Just like his father would have. But he’ll just have to deal with it, ‘cuz you and I are selling off our junk and going on a lovely trip around the world...” she leaned into her new husband and kissed him on the lips.

Buff chuckled as he kissed her back, “That’s my girl”

Annabelle giggled like a schoolgirl at her new hubby. She loved to be referred to as his ‘girl.’ It showed commitment and responsibility, something she had lacked in her previous relationship with Mickey’s dad, and most of the ones that followed. While her ex husband had been just as driven and determined as Buff was, he had never taken the time to show her that she mattered – or that anything other than his career mattered. She knew the animosity that Mickey had towards his father was justified, but like she’d told her new man, he’d just have to deal with it.

And that’s just what Mickey would eventually do, in his own way. Over the next several hours, he had to get himself right with this new reality. He knew quite well that his Mom wasn’t going to back down from something once she had set her mind to it. Not that she was a stubborn person, she just made herself oblivious to objections. She would live in blissful ignorance of anything Mickey could do or say to show how foolish she was behaving. So if she was committed to selling the house and taking a trip around the world, than that is, in fact, exactly what she would end up doing.

Which meant that Mickey was days away from being shipped off to live with his estranged Dad. Last he had heard, he was working in Japan, of all places.

Great, just great.

He grabbed his phone and began to break the news to his friends on social media. He carefully phrased it to avoid having to explain that his mother was a dingbat. Mickey told them was taking a ‘year off’ to spend some time traveling across Asia with his father. He knew that it wasn’t exactly truthful, but it sure sounded better than, ‘my flaky mother and her bull-headed new husband are leaving the country so I have nowhere else to go.’ Mickey’s closet friend Kyle

messaged him back within seconds, “I thought you hated your Dad?” he commented.

Mickey chuckled. Nobody knew him better than Kyle. “I don’t hate him...” he began to type on his phone’s touch screen, “We just never... connected... you know?”

Kyle replied with, “I guess I misunderstood when you said that you hated your father and always would, lol”

Mickey chuckled again, paused, then replied with “says the Momma’s boy.” It was a well known fact that Kyle was heavily and easily influenced by his mother, to the point where most of their mutual friends questioned Kyle’s sexual orientation.

“Whatever,” Kyle posted, then followed up with, “Just remember, when I’m flipping burgers all summer, you’re going to be touring around Asia. Lucky bastard.”

Mickey laughed. He knew there wouldn’t be very much ‘touring’ going on, as his father was a chronic workaholic. The most sight-seeing he would likely end up doing with his Dad would be at the airport when he first arrived.

Kyle posted another comment, “I hear that Chinese girls are really horny for American guys... You might end up getting some Chinese tail!”

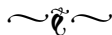
Mickey rolled his eyes. He was almost glad for a break from his ignorant and slightly racist friend, “I’m going to Japan moron, not China. And I’m pretty sure I won’t be getting any.”

Kyle continued to push the matter, “I’m just sayin’, if you get the chance to get some Geisha goddess in the sack, promise me that you’ll do it. Don’t let us all down over here! You’re getting a once-in-a-lifetime chance here... Don’t blow it!”

Mickey scoffed aloud then replied with, “Sure. Whatever.”

He closed out the app on his phone and tossed it on his nightstand. Kyle was such an idiot. Getting it on with a Japanese girl really isn’t his priority. Surviving a year with a neglectful father in country that doesn’t speak English was. He sighed deeply and flopped down on his bed, closing his eyes.

It would only be a year, he told himself. He’d just have to survive it.



Mickey was trying his best to ignore what Kyle was blabbering on about. His idiot friend, dropped by to say his goodbyes.

“But seriously, if some Chinese bitch throws herself at you... You’d do her, right?” he asked.

Mickey checked the time on the clock. Kyle had ten more minutes before his ride to the airport. He was beginning to wonder what he saw in his friend in the first place. Clearly it wasn't for insightful knowledge of foreign women.

"Right... Okay," Mickey sighed, "I'll 'do' every Chinese bitch I see..." he paused for a moment with his hand on his hip, "while I sit in my Father's boring-assed apartment... for seven days a week... in Japan... which is a totally different country."

Kyle didn't seem to get it. All he wanted to know was that his pal would get lucky in the Orient. That seemed to be all that that mattered, "Okay... Just promise me you won't mess up the opportunity of a lifetime, okay?"

Mickey raised a vexed eyebrow. "Yeah, sure. I'll even bring you back a bitch of your own, okay?"

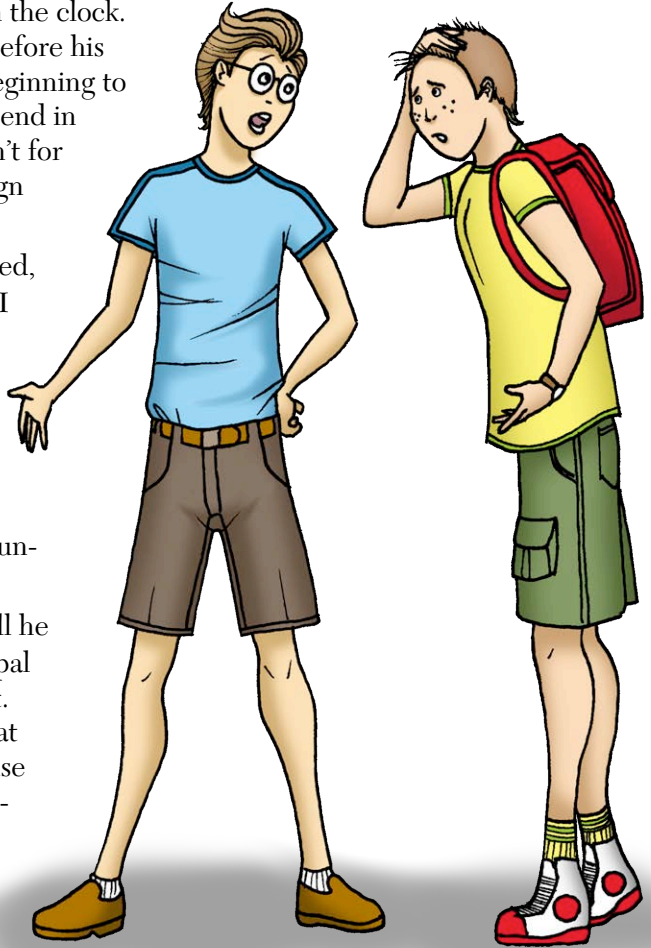
Kyle's face lit up, "You can do that?"

Buff's loud and thick Texan accent interrupted the two teens. "Yer cab's here sport," he boomed.

Grateful to get away, Mickey shrugged. "Sure, why not?" He said, happy to end this ridiculous conversation, then he grabbed his suitcase as he headed for the door.

Asa he was about to exit, Buff awkwardly offered his Stepson his outstretched hand in a 'good luck' kind of way.

Mickey paused as if not sure what to do with it, then gave the hand a weak shake before leaving the room. *The boy shakes like a sissy*, the big Texan said to himself as he made a derisive sniff. He had never thought very highly of



Mickey, and in a way, was hoping that a year in Japan with his father would toughen him up. Or maybe he'd just stay there, with any luck.

Kyle's well-wishing was far less manly. He threw himself at Mickey, giving his friend a giant bear hug, then wiped a tear from his eye as he sighed.

Buff gave the display a full-on snort of disapproval.

Annabelle was fighting to hold back her tears as well as she could. She wanted to look strong for her son and new husband, but her sorrow in seeing her only son leave could barely be contained.

"Have you got your boarding pass?" she asked, trying to deflect her emotions.

"Yes Mom," Mickey replied, feeling a tad-bit teary eyed himself.

"And your passport?"

"Yes, for the *third* time," he sighed, realizing that he might be sounding a little harsh.

"I love you son," she said as she threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around her boy and sobbing loudly.

"I love you too," Mickey whispered.

The taxi driver sounded his horn again, breaking up the moment.

"He really should get going," Buff interjected, gently removing his wife from her son.

Mickey nodded, took a deep breath, and headed for the door.



The cabin of airliner was loud and crowded. Mickey had been pressing his headphones into his ears for most of his flight in an attempt to listen to one of the in-flight movies. He was trying to drown out the noise of the young families that were seated around him. They appeared to be Japanese, returning home from a trip to Orlando, judging by their Mickey-Mouse ears and Harry Potter t-shirts. There were several children under the age of six, and all were wound up on American sugar and culture. They were running, fighting, yelling, hitting and otherwise behaving boisterously. Especially for such cramped quarters.

Mickey had already been climbed over, bumped into and unintentionally kicked at least once. He pressed the volume button on his phone to make the sound as loud as possible. He then looked down at the time display and sighed. *Only eight more hours left*, he said to himself, gritting his teeth. Mickey wished he had been old enough to drink. He could use it right now.

He closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair, trying to envision his arrival in Tokyo. He wondered if his Dad would pick him up in a shiny Toyota sports car? Maybe he would take him to see a baseball game – Mickey knew that the Japa-

nese were big into baseball. Hopefully his father would at least take a few days off to show his son around.

Mickey smiled at the thought of spending time with his Dad. But his smile didn't last. He knew his Dad was a chronic workaholic, and the chances of his dream coming true were slim. He checked the time on his phone again – seven hours, fifty-five minutes. He looked around him at the madness of over-tired, over-excited children gallivanting about unsupervised – it was going to seem a lot longer than that.

Eventually the plane and its cargo of noisy tourists touched down at Tokyo's Narita Airport. Mickey was instantly awe-struck by how new and modern-looking everything was, and at how many people there were. It was quite literally a sea of people. It was nothing at all like back home.

Mickey's first stop was customs where he presented the officer with a three-month tourist visa. His stepfather had suggested he apply for an extension after a month, since it was easier than applying for a year-long visa. 'Those Japs don't like forr'ners staying too long,' he had muttered. The customs officer furrowed his brow as he read the document over.

"Stay with father?" he asked.

"Yes," Mickey replied.

"You stay ninety days?" the officer inquired after a pause.

"Yes," Mickey replied again.

The officer looked up at the boy and narrowed his eyes, "And then you leave."

Mickey wasn't sure if that was a question or a statement, but he remembered the answer that Buff had coached him on, "Yes," he said.

The customs agent glared at him for a moment, then stamped Mickey's documents before handing them back to him, "Have nice stay," he forced a smile at the end of the sentence.

Mickey grabbed his stuff and headed into the arrivals line, where his mother had told him his father would be waiting. But once in the line, things began to get a little overwhelming. There were people everywhere, all frantically scurrying about like ants at a picnic. He stood in the middle of all the hustle and bustle, feeling somewhat dazed, clutching the ancient, fraying suitcase his stepfather had lent him.

How the heck would he ever find his way anywhere in all of this? It was everything he had feared about Japan. The frenetic pace of life, the incomprehensible signs and language, and the feeling he was the only person in the entire country who didn't know what was going on. He moaned and looked around hopelessly – until a somewhat familiar voice spoke to him from behind.

"Mickey?" the voice said.

Mick turned around to see his father towering over him with a tentative look on his face. Mickey's Dad was a tall man, and being surrounded by thousands of Japanese pedestrians who were substantially shorter than him, made him appear to be almost giant-like.

"Hi Dad," Mickey tried to force a smile.

"Let's go Mick," his father returned a forced smile of his own. He checked his phone. "I've got a meeting in 75 minutes I have to get to."

Mickey sighed, "Yeah... Okay," he said with a heavy exhale. He had fully expected to find that his father hadn't changed, but it was still a disappointment to discover he was right. *It's going to be a long year*, he said to himself as he picked up his suitcase. He had to run to catch up, and followed his father out of the airport terminal. The train station was located next door, where they boarded a waiting train for the hour-long ride into the city.

The ride was impressive, to say the least, as the train sped at an insane rate through the various towns and cities that surrounded the Japanese capital before stopping in the bustling metropolis itself. Neither Mickey nor his father spoke a word as they travelled. Mickey pulled out his phone and switched it out of 'airplane' mode. It took a minute, but the device eventually found a signal.

His father had arranged for Mickey's phone to be switched to his mobile service provider upon the boy's arrival. *At least he did something for me*, Mickey thought as he popped his earbuds into his ears and turned on his playlist. He sent a text to his mother to let her know that he had arrived, and another to Kyle which read 'In Tokyo. No hot babes yet. Keep U posted.' He looked over at his father who was typing away on his blackberry.

Same old Dad.

His father didn't look up from his phone's screen the entire train ride into the city, nor on the way from the train to the waiting taxicab, or for the cab ride to his apartment building. Mickey wished his Dad would pay more attention to him. He longed for it, now more than ever – but his father wasn't on the same page.

What can I do to get his attention? Mickey wondered. *If I knew that, maybe he wouldn't have given up on me in the first place.*



The downtown apartment wasn't really what Mickey had expected. By American standards it was tiny, though his father assured him that by Japanese standards it was 'huge.'

It featured a central room, ornately decorated in traditional Japanese décor, with four separate rooms branching off. A kitchen, a bathroom, and two bedrooms.

There was one more surprise in store for Mickey what he certainly wasn't counting on when he arrived at his father's home.

His father's new wife.

The woman had been standing quietly when Mickey and his Dad first entered the room. Mickey had assumed that the woman – who was dressed in traditional-looking Japanese garb – might be a maid. She was taller than he expected a Japanese woman to be and glared at him with disapproving eyes. When his father introduced her as his wife, Mickey's jaw hit the floor.

"What?" he gasped.

"This is my wife... Your stepmother..." his Dad repeated, "Keiko"

Keiko stepped forward changing from glare to an extremely forced smile.

"I am please to meet you Mickay" she said in a thick Japanese accent.

Mickey looked at his father, "What?"

His father looked a little confused, perhaps even upset, "I thought you knew. Didn't your mother tell you?"

Mickey lied, "Oh... Sure, yes." His mother had said nothing of the sort. "She just isn't..." he paused to choose his words, "she isn't what I expected"

Keiko bowed slightly, "Well you are certainly not what I was to expect either Mickay"

"What?" he turned to his father, "What was she expecting?"

His father chuckled, "It's the funniest thing. You see, in Japanese – like other languages – the language is sexed, you know, there's a male version and a female version. So when I told her that my child 'Mickey' was coming," He paused scrunching up his face, "well let's just say that in Japan, Mickey is not a boy's name..."

Keiko huffed and shrugged her shoulders, as if re-living a traumatic event.

Mickey paused, as if taking a moment to digest what he had been told, then blurted out, "So you never told her that I was a boy?"

His father looked defensive, then softened his look, "Well Son," he shrugged, "It never occurred to me that I would have to. Japanese is a complex language, don't forget."

"You've been in Japan for ten years, dad" Mickey retorted, "You'd think you'd have figured out the difference between having a son and a daughter in ten years," he turned to Keiko. "Hasn't he ever talked about me before?"

Keiko looked confused by the question, "Well yes Mickay," she began to reply.

“It’s Mick-ee, not Mick-kay” he corrected her.

Keiko looked deeply offended, huffing and stomping a slippered foot as she turned to her husband in anger. She muttered something in Japanese to him. It sounded to Mickey like she had said ‘Care wah donna yo,’ which wasn’t too far off the truth.

Mickey’s father’s face turned red. “Now listen here!” he roared at his son, “You are a guest in this house...” he paused and looked over to Keiko then back to his son, “Our house... So if this is going to work, you will need to start showing a little more respect for both Keiko and I! Are we understood?”

Mickey shook his head. His father was exactly the way that he had remembered him. Short tempered, abrupt, inattentive. *Staying here is going to suck*, he thought to himself.

“This isn’t the U.S.A. son,” his father continued on his tirade “This is Japan. You just can’t go around blurting out things like that – it just isn’t done like that here. The Japanese are very big on etiquette, honor and decorum. So either you start to show some of each along with a little respect, or you can go back to America.” He pointed upwards with this finger to emphasize his point.

Mickey glanced up at the ceiling, wondering to himself when the United States was moved into outer space. His father realized his gesture was incongruent with his statement and slowly retracted his hand.

“Now,” his dad continued in a much calmer voice, “while you are here you will show respect to Keiko and I – is that understood?”

Mickey nodded, his eyes wide from the shock of his father’s angry outburst.

“Now...” his father continued, again, “Keiko will help me in getting you settled in, show you around, and show you how to behave in Japan. I expect you to listen to her every word, and treat her with the same respect I would expect you to treat me with.”

Keiko leaned forward and whispered something in her husband’s ear. Mickey’s father paused and nodded his head then turned back to his son, “Keiko suggests that she take you on a shopping trip for some new clothes. She believes it will help you to ‘blend in’ a little better while you are living with us.”

“What?” Mickey lamented aloud.

“You’ll stand out like a sore thumb dressed like that...” he motioned at his son’s very American-looking shorts and shirt, “No need to bring any more attention to yourself than you need to.”

Keiko nodded in agreement. Mickey just sighed and shrugged his shoulders, “Fine,” he muttered. One hour in Tokyo and he wanted to leave already. How on earth was he ever going to last the year?

“Follow me,” Keiko commanded, as she turned to leave the room. A brow-beaten Mickey grabbed his suitcase and obeyed. His father had already left the



room to take an important business call and was yelling into the phone about ‘not caring if that’s the way we do things back in the U.S., it won’t fly here.’ Apparently Mickey wasn’t the only one not showing the right amount of respect for the way things are done in Japan.

“This your room,” Keiko said in a rushed tone, “Get unpack and get to bed. Very busy tomorrow”

“But it’s, like, two in the afternoon,” he protested.

“You have jet-lag,” she barked, “You get rest!”

Without another word, she turned around and minced away in her slippers and long gown. After the lecture that he just received, he wasn’t in the mood to get any more. So he decided to get unpacked and take a nap as Keiko had suggested.

Mickey’s ‘room’ was essentially an oversized closet. There was a bed along one wall, and closet along the other – and that was it. Mickey was pretty sure that if he fell out of bed in the night, he’d end up sleeping in the closet, they were that close to each other.

He opened the closet door, hoping to find a spot to stow his luggage, but discovered that the cupboard was crammed full of what he could only assume was Keiko’s stuff. There were shoes, and brightly colored outfits on hangers and in

drawers, and not one square inch of available space for anything that he had brought.

“Great,” he mumbled to himself, as he propped his suitcase up between his bed and his closet door, and climbed into the tiny bed.

This is going to be a very long year, he said to himself again as he closed his eyes and tried to sleep.



The next morning, Mickey slept in. It turned out that he really was severely jet-lagged and extremely exhausted from the previous day's travel. When he finally awoke, he discovered that his father had already left for work, and his new Stepmother Keiko was puttering around the tiny apartment.

Today Keiko was dressed in trendy leggings and tunic-style top. She could have easily been mistaken for a Japanese-American, at least until she opened her mouth.

“What are you staring at, rude boy?” she growled in her thick Japanese accent, “Do you have no manners?”

She glanced him over.

“You stick out like sore drum,” she said in an out-of-the-blue kind of way, “We go buy you some new clothes.”

“I'm pretty sure you mean a sore thumb,” Mickey tried to correct her.

“Don't you insult me boy!” she yelled, “Have some meal, then we will go to shop. If you want to see Tokyo, I will show you – Let's go, eat up now!”

Keiko pointed at the food on the table in front of him. Mickey could only assume it was what they considered to be breakfast. There was a bowl of plain white rice, another of what appeared to be some kind of soup, two odd looking pickles, another bowl containing an uncooked egg, and several sheets of a green leathery looking substance. On a plate at the centre of the spread was some cooked fish.

“Eat!” Keiko barked.

Mickey, fearing that he would be yelled at more if he declined her offer of food, sat slowly at the table. Thankfully there was a fork placed before the plate of fish, so he began with what he knew, and took a mouthful of rice into his mouth.

“Mmmmm,” he muttered as he chewed the bland rice.

“No-no!” Keiko shouted, “Like this” she moved him aside, then used the fork to place rice, fish and pickle on one of the green sheets. She then proceeded to roll the sheet up and hand it to Mickey. “Eat,” she commanded.

Mickey took a big bite of the green ‘tortilla’ roll, and instantly realized that he was eating seaweed. He gagged a little, but didn’t want any more shouting from his new stepmother, so instead made the same muttering “Mmmmmm” as he had before, even though the roll tasted like a mouth full of ocean.

Once Mickey had finished, Keiko grabbed her purse and the two of them descended from the apartment down to the City’s hyper-congested streets.

“Follow close,” Keiko ordered.

They began to cut through the crowded sidewalks to the subway station, where they boarded a train for the ‘Ginza’ district, whatever that was. Mickey pulled his phone from his pocket and checked his messages. His mother was now on her way to Mexico, and was happy to hear that he had arrived in Japan safe-and-sound. Kyle was also happy to hear from his friend, but seemed to be more concerned with how cute the girls were there.

He really hadn’t had a chance, yet, so Mickey looked around the crowded subway car. There were so many people everywhere that he couldn’t really tell if any of them were cute girls.

Keiko saw him texting and smiled. “You like new phone?” she asked.

Mickey glanced down at his aging, cracked, off-brand handset. “It’s not that new.”

Keiko shook her head. “Not what I mean. I buy new phone for you? You would like?”

Mickey smiled, “Oh yes... I’d love a new phone!”

“If you are good boy, maybe get good phone,” she then glared at him with a hint of anger.

Mickey wasn’t sure how to respond, so he didn’t. He just nodded.



The streets of Ginza were just as crowded and busy as the other section of town from which they had come, only instead of rows of office towers, the street was lined with rows of stores and boutiques. People were buzzing about everywhere, chatting amongst themselves, or on cell phones. They paid no attention to Mickey as he struggled to keep pace with his stepmother.

Their first stop was a small salon. Mickey was immediately confused about why he needed to be there. Especially after Keiko began to talk to one of the salon’s workers, while pointing and gesturing at him. Finally the young woman smiled and motioned at Mickey to come over to her, which he did – reluctantly.

She sat him in one of the big salon chairs, under Keiko’s watchful eye, and spun him away from the mirror as she began to brush and trim his already mid-

length hair. The whole process didn't take more than fifteen minutes, and without allowing him to see what had been done, Keiko thanked and paid the stylist and escorted Mickey briskly from the salon.

From there they spilled back out onto Ginza's teeming streets and walked another block to their first destination. The store that they entered bore a passing resemblance to the night clubs back in Texas. Though this certainly wasn't a country bar or hillbilly shack. Instead, it was decorated with bright-colored lights and oversized neon fixtures in strange Japanese symbols, along with faces of cartoon kittens. Thumping techno music played over a high-powered sound system as hordes of teenaged girls looked over the racks of brightly colored clothes, tittering to each other in their native tongue as Mickey walked past them.

This certainly isn't Texas, he thought to himself.

One girl, who caught his eye, smiled then giggled before turning to her friends to chatter in Japanese. 'Something-something-something, American?' was all Mickey could make out.

"Come-come," Keiko barked, "Stop playing around! Let's go!" She grabbed Mickey's shirt and gave him a tug. Mickey lurched forward, almost tripping, as he scrambled to follow.

"No grace, no balance," Keiko muttered loudly, "Such a disgrace." She maneuvered through the store with Mickey in tow until she reached her destination near the back. Mickey didn't need to translate the big red and white sign over the rack of clothes that stood before him, it was already pretty apparent.

It was the clearance rack.

He sighed and stood silently as Keiko held a few articles of clothing against him, scowling and groaning after each item was tried. There were a couple of pieces that actually looked good, as far as Mickey was concerned, but she snapped at him with an abrupt "Urusai!" every time he so much as looked like he was going to open his mouth. He didn't know what that meant, but he figured it was along the lines of "shut up."

This process was repeated over the course of four grueling hours in seven different stores, until Keiko seemed satisfied she had either sourced an adequate number of articles of clothing to sufficiently improve her stepson's image – or – she had spent as much time and money as she could stomach on her husband's disgraceful child.

Only Keiko would know which one was true.

At the last store they visited, Keiko ordered Mickey into a changing room to try on an outfit that she had selected for him. It was a little loud for his tastes, with bright white shorts and a deep red tank-top, but nothing terribly over-the-top.

That was, until she through a little jacket over the door and slid a shoe-box under it.

“These too!” she commanded.

Mickey tentatively slid the red-trimmed white half-length jacket over his tank top and looked in the mirror. It wasn't a look he was familiar with, but he recognized that Japanese styles were bound to be a little 'different' than he was used to.

However the contents of the shoe box were a different story altogether.

Contained inside the brightly decorated paperboard box were a pair a thick-soled white sandals that looked very much like something a girl would wear, not a man.

“Keiko?” he asked through the door, “Are these the right shoes? They look a little...” his voice trailed off as he carefully searched for a word that wouldn't be offensive, “...a little, girly”

Nice going Mr. Culturally Sensitive! He thought to himself.

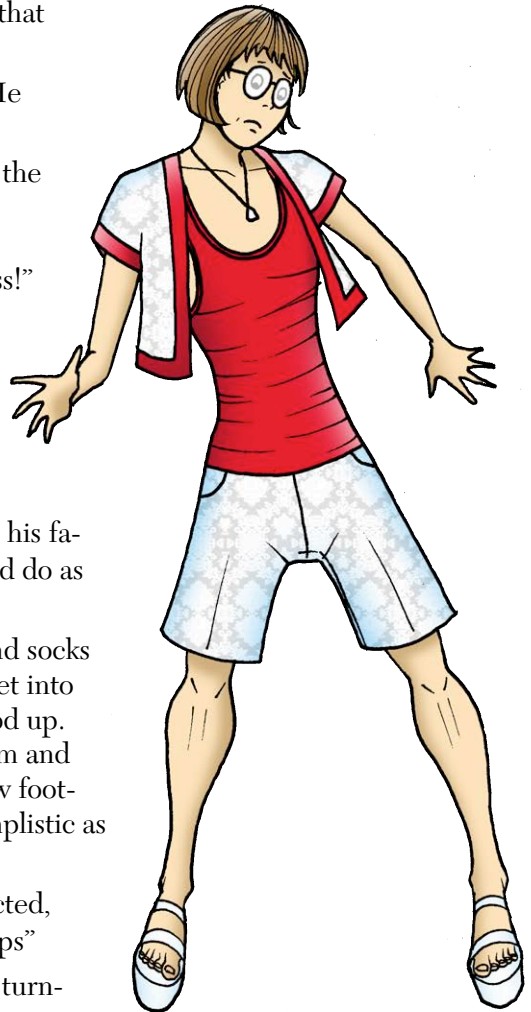
“Girly?” Keiko cried back, “These are the highest in fashion you disrespectful insect! You put those one right now or I will tell your father about your rudeness!”

Mickey rubbed his forehead with his hand. Keiko was talking to him like he was five years old. Clearly this woman wasn't playing with a full deck. But what other option did he have? He couldn't go back to the U.S., and he couldn't stay here without his father's help. So he decided that he would do as he was asked, for the time being.

He slipped off his grungy old shoes and socks and with a long sigh, slid his slender feet into the straps of the new sandals, then stood up. He opened the door of the change room and stepped out, only to realize that his new footwear wasn't as straight forward and simplistic as his old shoes had been.

“Walk slow, foolish boy,” Keiko instructed, “Use balance and grace. Take small steps”

He nodded and did as she instructed, turn-



ing to view himself in the mirror. What he saw made him nearly lose his newly-found balance. His hair had been styled into a weird bob-cut with short bangs, and even worse, his new shoes had a definite pronounced wedge heel at the back of a thick platform sole. It was a girl's haircut – and they were girl's shoes!

“Keiko I...” he began to protest, but she interjected before he could start.

“You look perfect. Just right for a child your age,” she smiled for the first time since Mickey arrived, “I am so please.” She collected two more boxes similar to the one Mickey's sandals had come from, and proceeded to the front counter to pay.

Mickey sighed, stuffing his old shoes into a bag which he handed to Keiko. He gasped as he watched her then stuff the bag into the garbage.

“But!” was all he could muster in protest. He didn't protest any further though, not wanting to end up in trouble from his dad. Instead, he grabbed the bags of clothes he had been carrying since the first store, and followed Keiko out.

Later in the day, Keiko would tell Mickey's father of their great shopping adventure and of how rude and uncooperative he had been. Mickey's dad glared at his son as he ate his rice and chicken. He handled the chopsticks with ease. Mickey was still struggling to figure out how to use them.

“Well, I'm sure that he will do better for you the next time,” his father growled.

“Yes, Father,” Mickey sighed with a defeated expression. He didn't think he had done that poorly, and was both surprised and disappointed that Keiko had made the comments that she had. Clearly this woman was going to be impossible to please, but Mickey was not going to give up. He reasoned that if he could somehow make her happy, it would somehow make his dad happy.

That was more important to him than anything right now. Just for his survival, if nothing else.



“Get up!” came a shrieking voice. “You going to layabout all day lazy boy?” Keiko growled as she poked her head in the door of Mickey's room. It had been a few days since Mickey's arrival in Tokyo, and since then every day began with her same cheerful greeting. Mickey groaned and got out of bed. He wasn't sure what it was that he was supposed to be doing instead of lounging about. He didn't have school or anything like that, and it wasn't like his dad seemed to care what he did.

Just to nice, he thought he could try to help out with the household chores, such as sweeping and doing dishes. But his efforts were futile. Keiko would

complain about him doing it ‘wrong’ and berate him with more negative comments, like “How did you become so useless?” and “What purpose do you serve?”

But he didn’t give up. Instead, he took it as a challenge. He was determined to show his stepmother he wasn’t the ‘lazy boy’ she assumed he was. Gradually, he took up doing even the most menial of household tasks, in hopes that Keiko would change her tune. Instead, she would berate him again, and make him do paces in his new platform wedge sandals. Back and forth, across the floor, she made march and march in tiny mincing steps.

“His lazy American attitude is shameful,” she would complain to his dad, “But his balance and grace are better.”

Mickey’s father just shook his head and glared over at his son, who quickly went back to immersing himself in his phone with either texts or listening to music. Mickey could tell that he didn’t approve of his son’s new clothes – especially those weird looking shoes – but his wife claimed that it was the latest trend, so he didn’t push the issue. At this point all he wanted was for his son to acclimatize to living in Japan, and as fast as possible.

Mickey’s dad had his reasons for leaving his son in his step wife’s hands. One of his coworkers was joining them for dinner soon and he wanted to ensure that Mickey was not an embarrassment. Mickey’s father gave his wife full control over making sure that didn’t happen.

For the week that followed, Keiko continued to browbeat her stepson while explaining how to behave in the presence of dinner guests. “Do not make eye contact. You must not speak until you are spoken to. You must not look at anyone unless they speak to you. You must remain still and not draw attention to yourself, unless you are asked to move.” She instructed him daily, in between telling him how lazy he was and making him practice walking in his ‘weird-looking’ shoes.

What Mickey didn’t know was that Keiko had already decided that she didn’t like the boy, and was going to make his life full of misery, until he reached the point of begging his father to leave. She wanted him out of their lives, as soon as possible. For his part, Mickey was determined to do everything she asked, to that his father would finally show some kind of pride in him.

In short, neither of them were going to give in.

On the night their dinner guest was due to arrive, Keiko ordered Mickey to dress in the red and white outfit she had made him try on at the store days ago, and to brush his hair in the ‘proper’ manner.

Mickey hated doing it, but he didn’t want to get yelled at again, so he stood in bathroom in front of the mirror, brushing his short bangs, styling his hair into the ‘bob’ he had been shown originally. He convinced himself that it was a ‘Beatles’ haircut, and that it was likely all the rage in Japan.

When he emerged from the lavatory, he discovered that his father's co-worker had already arrived – with someone else in tow.

A girl.

A pretty Japanese girl.

Mickey ran his fingers through his hair to muss it up again, not wanting to appear too proper to the guest. Beetle-cut be damned, he wanted to protect his macho pride.

Mickey's Dad attempted to introduce his son in Japanese, "Watashi wa anata ni watashi no on'nanoko Miki ni teiji," his father said with a smile, not realizing that he had unknowingly made an error in his translations and introduced his 'son' as his 'daughter.'

The Japanese girl giggled, Keiko looked horrified while the co-worker looked confused but remained quiet, as he did not want to bring shame to his friend. Mickey was oblivious to the entire interaction.

The co-worker approached Mickey and bowed politely and in terrible English told him "It pressure to meet you Mickey-Chan."

Mickey nodded in return as he had been instructed by Keiko to do, but spotted the girl giggling to the side.

"This is Mr. Makato," Mickey's father introduced the man before him, "And his daughter Yoshiko. He thought that maybe you would like to meet another person your age. Isn't that thoughtful?"

"Um, yes," Mickey stammered as he looked over at the girl again, who was still looking very amused at something that had happened. Mickey had no idea what it was.

"Tell Mr. Makato, thank you," he added at the last minute, remembering his father's speech about how the Japanese like to be shown respect.

The five of them sat down to a dinner of steamed rice, fish and chicken, which Mickey was starting to believe would be his daily ration, morning, noon and night. The adults conversed with each other, mostly in Japanese, while Mickey ate quietly. It was strange to hear his father speaking in a language that wasn't English.

Occasionally he would glance over a Yoshiko, who seemed to be keeping a very close eye on him. She was looking at him nearly every time he looked over.

After they had finished, Mickey began to clear the plates away as he had been asked. Mr. Makato turned to Keiko and with a very quiet voice asked, "Mikki wa minikui on'nanoko desu. Kanojode wanai desu ka?," which essentially meant 'Mikki is an ugly girl, isn't she?'

Both Keiko and Yoshiko gasped. Keiko covered her mouth and Yoshiko broke into another fit of giggles, while the American Father and son looked oblivious

again. Keiko glanced from her husband's friend to her stepson to her husband and back. Not knowing who to shame and who to honor, as the mistake her husband had made would surely make him look like a fool – and would make her the devoted wife of a fool. So she instead nodded, “Kashikomarimashita. Kanojo wa shonen no yonimieru” Which essentially acknowledged his statement, while adding that Mickey ‘looked like a boy.’

The man scrunched his face into a concerned expression as he looked Mickey over, before turning to his daughter. “Anata wa, menta, kono-ko to,” he said, “kanojo wa watashitachi no bunka ni doka tasukerubeki.” Which meant ‘You should mentor this child and help her assimilate to our culture.’

Yoshiko nodded, then turned to Mickey and his Dad, “My father thinks that Mickey and I should hang out. I can show him around Tokyo,” she said in near-perfect English.

Keiko didn't wait for a response, “Yes, tomorrow, absolutely!”

Mickey's father looked unsure, but knew that turning down the offer down would be disrespectful.

“Of course,” he smiled, “Mickey would be happy for the opportunity”

Mickey shrugged, “Sure, okay.”

Yoshiko spoke up, “Oh, I'm a little busy for a few days, let's do the end of the week or so, okay?”

Makato-san smiled and nodded his head, thinking he had just helped a great cultural divide. Keiko smiled, worried that she had just allowed her husband to bring the mother-lode of disgrace into her house. Yoshiko smiled, knowing that her Dad thought his co-worker's son was a girl, and also knowing that neither the co-worker, nor the son had a clue. Mickey smiled, because he thought he was going to finally get somewhere with a hot Japanese girl.

Later that night, he decided to try his luck, and approached her. She was extremely thin, yet had nicely-sized breasts that he couldn't take his eyes off. In her fancy wedge-heeled boots she appeared to be slightly taller than he was, which was somewhat intimidating. But regardless, he took a deep breath, and tried to start up a conversation.

“Your English is really good,” he began, “You almost sound...”

“American?” she cut him off, “I should. I grew up in New York.”

“Oh?” Mickey replied, “Whereabout? Like Albany? Syracuse?” he tried to sound smart. Those were the only two cities in New York State that he knew.

“Um,” she rolled her eyes, “Try Manhattan. You know, New York City?”

“Right,” Mickey nodded, “Of course. That would make sense.” *Way to go, idiot*, he thought to himself.

“Were you going to school there?” he tried to recover the conversation.

“I lived there with my Mom after my parents broke up,” Yoshiko replied, “My dad is a frickin’ workaholic and very old school. He doesn’t think that a woman should have a career, so my mom left him.”

“I know all about that,” Mickey sighed, “My mom left my dad for the same reason – except she didn’t want to have a career, she just wanted to be looked after,” he chuckled, “And then he got transferred here.”

Yoshiko nodded, “My mother wanted to be a fashion photographer. My dad thought she should be a housewife. Needless to say, he didn’t get his way, and I’m not exactly what you’d call a traditional Japanese girl either”

Mickey nodded as he looked her over. Her long hair was dyed bright purple, matching her knee-length shorts, worn under a short white miniskirt with blue trim, that complimented her knee-high boots. A blue crop-top with puffy sleeves accentuated her breasts. She accessorized with bracelets, earrings and a white headband, and her face was carefully made up in complimentary purple tones. “Clearly,” he replied.

“I like to call it fusion fashion,” she continued, “I blame my mother’s fashion photo shoots back in the States. I saw a lot of fashion in my childhood. You might say it’s become a bit of a hobby of mine. Hey!” She pointed at him to emphasize her statement, “I could totally help you with your look too. You look like you could use a little help.”

“No kidding,” Mickey replied.

“Yeah,” she said, “I don’t know who told you that red is your color, but it’s totally not.”

“It’s not my outfit,” he tried to explain his clothing, “It’s my stepmom’s.”

“You’re wearing your stepmom’s clothes?” she asked in a droll voice.

“No!” he retorted, embarrassed at his mis-communication, “I mean she picked the outfit for me. It was her choice.”

“It’s fine by me if you want to wear her clothes. The Japanese can be very traditional in some respects, but when it comes to that, we’re very liberal. You’d be surprised what you can get away with wearing here,” she said with a laugh.

“For the last time, I’m not wearing girls clothes!” he shouted, then turned to see the adults staring at his outburst. Keiko in particular looked extremely displeased.

“Okay, okay!” Yoshiko chuckled, “You don’t have to shout.” The adults had gotten up and were shaking hands, indicating an end to the evening. “I’ll see you on Friday. It’ll be fun!” she gave Mickey an air-kiss on each cheek leaving him standing, a shocked expression on his face, as she took her father’s hand and left the apartment.

“Well,” Mickey’s father exclaimed as he closed the door behind their guests, “I think that went really well!”

Mickey nodded nervously, unsure what to expect in the days to come. “Yeah, I guess” he said.

Keiko looked more nervous. She was trying to figure out how to break the news to her husband’s co-worker that Mickey was a boy, not a girl, so as not to bring any embarrassment to her husband, or to her. It was a reivous shame that the mistake had been made in the first place. Now, letting it go on through the evening had made it doubly more so. Just a single mention at the office of this sort of gender-mix up might get her husband fired. A boy dressing as a girl at home was a humiliation they could not survive. But there didn’t seem to be any way to fix the error at this point.

Then the thought occurred to her. If she couldn’t find a way to make Makato-san think that Mickey was a boy instead of a girl, could she find a way to make Mickey look the part of a girl instead? All she needed to do was fool Mr. Makato, whenever their paths crossed. That would save face for their family.

A smile formed on her lips as she looked at Mickey across the room.

To Mickey, things were looking up. His father seemed pleased. His step-mother was smiling at him. And he was about to get to know a hot Japanese chick. But in reality – he had no idea that things were about to get a whole lot worse.



Keiko was very anxious the next morning. She didn’t wait for Mickey to get up, she just came storming into his bedroom at a very early hour.

Early by Mickey's standards, anyway. It was six.

"We must shop before you meet the daughter of Makato-San," she said.

"What?" Mickey yawned, "What time is it?"

"Get up now!" Keiko shouted, "We need a new outfit for you!"

"What are talking about?" Mickey wondered aloud, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, "Besides, we got all kinds of stuff last week. What else could I possibly need?"

"Insolent boy!" She yelled, tugging his blankets from his bed. "Your father instructed you to be obedient to me. You should not question me!" Her voice was so fierce it was cracking.

Mickey looked shocked at her outburst. He didn't want to be lectured by his father again about listening to Keiko's rules, so he ended his protests with a grumble, before standing up and stretching. It wasn't worth inciting a confrontation over something as stupid as shopping. What did he care? If she wanted to buy him more stupid clothing, why should he complain? It wasn't like it was costing him anything. And clearly no one seemed to care about him wearing ridiculous-looking clothing and shoes here. He had seen far weirder outfits on people everywhere he looked.

So if she was hell-bent and determined to take him shopping for more ridiculousness, than he would go. At the very least, he could just break the monotony of being cooped up in the apartment.

"Be ready to go in two minute!" she demanded as she stomped out of the room in her tight green jeans and wedge-heeled shoes.

Must be casual day, Mickey snickered to himself, thinking of the elaborate costume that he had first seen her in when he first arrived.

Out in the common room, Keiko was trying to remain calm. Mickey was right to assume that his clothes were satisfactory to maintain his image as a middle-class son of an office manager. But Keiko's mind was running a million miles an hour – Makato-San suspected that Mickey was a girl, which meant he expected to see him appear as such, otherwise there would be questions asked, and eventually the truth might be revealed.

And that would be horrifyingly shameful.

On the other hand, if she pushed him too far – made him look too feminine, he might become upset. Or worse, his father would be become upset.

She paused and thought about her Husband's oft-short temper, and envisioned him blowing a fuse at the sight of Mickey dressed as a girl. But perhaps that wasn't a bad thing?

It was possible that he would be so incensed that he would send the boy back to the United States for good, which would restore order to their home and

return Kieko's life to the way it was before her insolent American stepson appeared. She smiled at the thought, knowing what she must do next.



The Ginza district was crowded and busy again when they arrived. School was out, and the city's teenagers had flocked to the area to shop for clothes. Mickey was having trouble not staring at some of the elaborate outfits that we being worn. Young Japanese girls had extremely varied tastes, with some dressing so ultra-conservatively, they looked nearly Amish, and others so vividly bright and flashy they looked like they had jumped out of an Anime cartoon, and everything in between.

I've got a date with a hot Japanese chick! He texted Kyle along the way, *My stepmom is taking me to get some new threads. Totally awesome!*

Kyle's reply was almost instantaneous, *Dude U rock! I'm sooooo jealous! Pics or it didn't happen!*

If only he knew how ridiculous-looking the new 'threads' were, Mickey thought as he placed the phone back in his pocket, *he wouldn't be so jealous then.*

The first stop on their trip was to the same hairdressers where Keiko had taken him last time to have his hair trimmed and styled. Naturally, Mickey was confused by attending the salon so soon, and questioned the need to have his hair done again, as less than a week had passed since his last 'appointment.'

Keiko rolled her eyes, "You are a boy," she muttered, "How could you understand such issues?"

She dismissed his concern with a hand gesture and led him to a waiting salon chair. The hairdresser spent only a few minutes trimming and styling his brown locks. She blended his bangs with the longer hair at the side of his head and brushed it back and over in a sweeping motion, then cut the longer hairs in an angular fashion to frame his face, giving him an androgynous-looking bob-cut.

Before she let Mickey see his revised hairstyle, Keiko quietly whispered something to the hairdresser in Japanese. The woman's eyes seemed to light up, as she turned to him and gave him a command in Japanese, "Anata no me o toji" Mickey stared blankly at her, not understanding a single word.

"Lean back and close your eyes, rude boy," Keiko translated in a loud commanding voice.

Mickey groaned his displeasure and leaned back into the chair. He hated the way Keiko barked orders at him. More importantly, he hated the way he automatically capitulated every time she did it. He wanted to tell her to fuck off,

but he knew that would just lead to more shouting and terse words from his father. He really didn't have much of a choice.

As he lay back in the salon chair, he felt something warm and comforting being applied to his legs. A few moments of soothing warmth passed, and Mickey heard a 'ripping' sound, followed by a searing, stinging pain.

"Ahhhhh!" he screamed, "What the hell?" He leaned forward, opening his eyes in the process. Both of his legs were being waxed.

"Keiko!" he cried. "Why are they..." he began, but the beauticians did not stop their assault, ripping another chunk of body hair from his legs. "Fuuuuck!" he exclaimed.

Keiko slapped his face. "Watch your mouth rude boy!" she scolded.

The procedure carried on until his legs were devoid of what little hair he had once owned. A sweet smelling lotion was then applied, that slightly soothed the burning sensation he was feeling. Keiko took some of the lotion on her fingertip and rubbed it over the boy's mouth, "That is for being rude" she said, "Now rub your lips together" she demanded before the salon chair was turned to face the mirrors. He obeyed, scrunching his face in confusion at the smooth feel of whatever had been applied.

"Open your eyes!"

He did, and almost fell over as his eyes focused through his thick glasses to the reflection in front of him. His hair was straight and weird looking, but nothing to concerning as compared to the hairstyles he had already seen in Tokyo.

His legs shone under a thin coating of lotion, as did his lips! He instinctively puckered them which made them sparkle and shiny as he moved them. It was extremely un-masculine and made Mickey wonder why Keiko was determined to make his life so miserable.

Why does she hate me so much? He wondered to himself, but dared not ask. Keiko seemed somewhat pleased at the moment, "You look much cleaner with smooth legs. Very important to be well kept," she decreed.

He wanted to scream and yell at her, but given the torture she had just put him through, he decided against it. No need to make a scene – especially one that would result in a lecture from his dad. Keiko grabbed his hand and motioned for him to follow her out of the salon, and though he wanted to, he didn't resist. He followed her quickly from the hairdresser's to a boutique a few doors down, where she began searching the racks for outfits for him to try on.

Mickey was concerned that the color schemes she was selecting were a little 'loud' compared to the browns, whites and grays that he was used to wearing. Even as compared to the red outfit she had made him wear when he met Yoshiko, the bright oranges, purples and lime greens that Keiko was selecting, made Mickey's stomach turn.

“Try this on,” she said finally, shoving a pile of orange material in front of him, then pushing him into a changing room. Mickey tried not to fall as he was forcibly shunted in the small booth with his newest outfit. He took a deep breath and began to remove his clothes.

Keiko had given him a new pair of super-short, super-tight ‘boxers’ to replace his jockey shorts. They were bright orange and slightly transparent, and worse still, were tight around his male bulge. A pair of slightly short shorts in an amber-colored orange, followed next. Then a goldenrod tinted top that left him exposed from the shoulder-blade up. An amber-orange vest that matched his shorts, followed by a thin white decorative belt finished his outfit.

For footwear Keiko had selected another pair or ramped ‘posture shoes’ in amber/orange and white, with a slightly taller wedge heel and thicker platform sole. A tiny gold banded watch was the only accessory.

“Keiko!” He exclaimed as he came stumbling out of the change-room, holding his head, “I can’t wear this! There’s no way!”

Keiko glared angrily at him, her arms folded in front of her. She said nothing. “Now!” she gritted her teeth into a snarl and pointed at the checkout counter. “But, but, isn’t there anything else I could try?” he pleaded. He was very concerned that she didn’t understand how ‘odd’ he looked in the outfit, and wanted to ensure that his position was properly and emphatically explained. “It’s just too...” his voice trailed off as he tried to find the word, “Girly.”

