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From the Land of the Rising Sun to the Free:

Insecurity in Two Homes

February 21, 2017 was a special date. Not only was Tetsuyuki’s twenty-first birthday, but it was also the day that Akihiro Kawai and his wife, Reiko, could file paperwork to obtain their Permanent Resident cards in the United States. It had been over twenty-nine years since Akihiro had first stepped foot on U.S. soil.

Growing up, Akihiro Kawai was a troublemaker. Unlike his twin brother, who was academically gifted and wanted to become a lawyer, or his younger brother, who was passionate about architecture, Akihiro was neither studious nor passionate about craftsmanship. Instead, he fought with other students, skipped school, and did just about anything to avoid studying. He said he disliked studying so much that he had his twin brother take his standardized tests in his stead in high school.

There weren’t many things that Akihiro did consistently, except going to church. As a firm believer in Tenrikyo, Akihiro would follow his family every month to make the two-hour drive to Nara Prefecture, where the Head Tenrikyo Church was located. It was at the Church where he met the reverend who motivated him to emigrate to the United States.

At a young age, the unconventional Akihiro realized that he wouldn’t be able to conform to the strict rules of Japanese society where conventionality led to success. “I didn’t know what to do. I wasn’t going to university, but I couldn’t keep living under my parents,” he said.

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The perfect opportunity presented itself when the reverend he met at church announced he was leaving for the United States to set up a Tenrikyo Church on the Golden Coast. In the summer of 1991, Akihiro boarded a Japan Airlines flight to LAX.

He was eighteen.

Akihiro first arrived to the United States on an F-1 Visa. He “attended” East Los Angeles City College. He said, “I enrolled at school, but it was so I could keep my visa.” He did the bare minimum to pass his classes and keep his full-time student status. He lived in one of the Tenrikyo Churches already established in Los Angeles while working at a local Japanese ramen shop.

Eventually, he moved out from the church to an apartment in Boyle Heights, a city with a very large Hispanic population where he learned elementary Spanish. He thrived in Los Angeles. LA was a fresh change in scenery. Japan was so stuffy, but America was so freeing, he said. He got his ears pierced and even considered getting a tattoo – things so taboo in conservative Japanese society. LA was a paradise.

After a few years in the United States, Akihiro went back to Japan to visit his family. It was on this trip he met Reiko Obara, a flight attendant for Singapore Airlines and his future wife. Akihiro’s reverend set the two on a coffee date, saying they had “similar interests.” At a small coffee shop in Nara, he met Reiko. She was a petite woman with dark brown curls that framed her face and her soft pink colored cardigan illuminating her face he said.  Reiko was reserved, polite, and well-read — everything he wasn’t. He fell in love.

They were married in a traditional Tenrikyo ceremony in April of 1994 after a few months of courtship. Immediately after, they moved to the United States and applied for Green Cards. The couple lived blissfully in Los Angeles — Reiko was pregnant and Akihiro had been working at a Japanese auto body shop, selling used car parts. The bliss was cut short when they discovered that their

immigration lawyer had declared bankruptcy and was nowhere to be found.

A new immigration lawyer informed the couple that they wouldn’t be able to re-apply for a

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Green Card, so they would have to wait until their firstborn son, Tetsuyuki Kawai, turned twenty-one. Both of them were no longer covered by their tourist and F-1 Visas, so their futures in the United States were uncertain.

Thinking back at what happened, he chuckled and said, “Ashita no koto o iu to tenjō no nezumi ga warau.” (“If you speak of tomorrow, the rats in the ceiling will laugh”) It’s a Japanese idiom that expresses the unpredictability of the future. Never in their wildest dreams, did Akihiro and Reiko thought this would happen.

Luckily for them, George H.W. Bush had passed an Executive Order in 1990 that deferred deportation of immigrants with children who were American citizens. Tetsuyuki, who had just been born on February 21, 1996, protected his parents from being deported. They just had to play the waiting game.

Even in the face of uncertainty, Akihiro managed to live life as though his prospects in the United States were completely stable — that was how he was. While he waited for Tetsuyuki to turn twenty-one, he started his own company. He sold American vitamins, clothing, and snack products to Japanese resellers — Aki Trading Co., he named it. Business was booming, Reiko was pregnant with their second child, and they were still waiting. In order to keep up with the Japanese market, Akihiro would work both American and Japanese hours. He was up from 7 in the morning all the way until 3 in the morning. This put strain on his marriage. They were married less than five years, she had three children, and he was absent from as soon as he left the bed to when he would sneak in beside her at the the end of the night.

He managed to squeeze time with her in a ten-minute period when Japanese tv-shows aired in the evening. It became their ritual. After dinner, she would put the kids to bed and he would turn on the TV. Together, they would sit on the couch,

side-by-side while a new episode of a soap-opera aired on the screen. During this time, they would enjoy each other’s company, silently.

Eventually, Akihiro made enough money to purchase his first house in Arcadia, California for $1.5 million.

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As the years trickled on, his three children grew older and Akihiro no longer could work the long hours he used to. The one house in Arcadia grew to five all around California as Akihiro continued to invest in real estate when he got the chance.

Akihiro was forty-eight when Tetsuyuki turned twenty-one.

On February 21, 2017, Akihiro and Reiko Kawai filed paperwork to re-apply for their Green Cards, now with the justification that their son, an American citizen, was of age.

Today, Akihiro is forty-nine and finally holds a Green Card.

His hair has grayed and he now relies on glasses to help his eyesight, but his rebellious nature hasn’t died. He dresses like a trendy twenty-year old, but with a larger budget — baggy rock and roll t-shirts and tapered blue jeans usually complete his look. On some days, when he feels extra fancy, he’ll throw on some Tod’s driving loafers or a Valentino leather jacket. Rather than hardening his animated personality, his struggles in America seem to have accentuated it.

With his new Green Card, Akihiro went back to Japan for the first time since he and Reiko first immigrated to the United States, over twenty-three years ago. While his three children had the freedom to go back and forth between Japan and the United States, Akihiro didn’t. He was finally able to see the Japan that his children had told him about, one he only saw through photographs and television shows, for himself. Japan has changed so much, he says. From the streets of Nagoya all the way down to the food, there were so many differences from when he first left. However, Japan’s conservative nature has stayed the same. “It was nice, but I still like America more. Japan is too traditional,” he said while chuckling. America was his home.

Akihiro had spent about thirty years making

a life for him and his family in the United States. He lived over half of his life in a country where he wasn’t allowed to call himself a resident of. While he saw other immigrants become Permanent Residents of the United States, he wasn’t allowed to re-apply.

“O Tsukare-samadesu,” he says, (“I am tired,”) a phrase said by a wife or employee after a

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long day of work. To him, waiting over half his life to become a Permanent Resident of the United States has been similar to a long day of work. Now that he has his Green Card, it feels like the end of a long day, but his wait isn’t over. He’ll have to wait longer to become a citizen of the United States of America.

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