

Makoto Critical Incident

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Makoto came to the United States from Japan in 1995 with her mother, an older brother, and two older sisters. As she began third grade, her mother entered an American university to pursue a master's degree. When her mother finished her master's degree, she made the decision to work on a doctorate degree as well.

Makoto is now a seventh-grader, which means this is her 5th year in the public school system. Throughout elementary school, Makoto had excellent grades in every subject. She won an award for her science project and even won the school's Spelling Bee. Despite her academic success, Makoto doesn't really like school very much. Makoto has always been shy and reserved in her interactions with peers. Her only and best friend in elementary school was a Navajo girl. When she went to junior high school, her Navajo friend went to the middle school across town. The summer before seventh grade, Makoto's parents divorced and her brother graduated from high school and moved back to Japan.

Just as Makoto imagined, her first week in 7th grade was quite intimidating. In her English class, there were only three girls in a class of 25 students. She never speaks with the boys in her class. Even in group work, she only speaks if the task requires it. Actually, Makoto is quiet in all her classes. One of her teachers didn't even know English was her second language for the first two months of the school year.

As the youngest child, Makoto relies on her two older sisters in many ways. Her sisters enjoy speaking a fun mixture of English and Japanese with Makoto at home. According to her sisters, Makoto sounds American, acts American, and needs lots of help with her Japanese. If you were to ask Makoto if she feels American or Japanese, she would tell you without hesitation, "I'm Japanese. I'm not American."

When Makoto isn't hanging out with her sisters after school or doing homework, she is logged onto the internet emailing the Japanese friends she left behind years ago. She doesn't really write with Japanese characters well, but she does her best, and her friends figure things out. With these Japanese friends, she shares that she loves basketball, misses Japanese music, and begs to be kept up-to-date on Japanese pop culture. She imagines going back to Japan to live one day with her brother and father, but her mother confides that Makoto could never reenter the Japanese schooling system. In Japan, she has lost the chance to attend a Japanese college.

Her English teacher surprised her the other day. He gave the class a homework assignment to write a paper on things you like to do with friends. She sat down to write, but her mother soon found her in tears. She cried, "I don't have any friends! What am I going to write about?" With much coaching and consoling from her mother, she finally wrote a few paragraphs about the email friends she corresponds with in Japan. The paper was much shorter than the teacher required.

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