

There is an old Japanese maxim that states *Issun saki wa yami*, roughly *one step ahead lies pitch darkness*. The life ahead of us is unpredictable. If you had asked Scott twenty-five years ago where he would end up after accepting his position with the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program, he never would have guessed. He had no idea that this single decision would alter the course of his life forever.

In the late 80s as Scott entered college in Florida, he was impressed by the rapid economic growth in Asia and was drawn to the huge potential in the region. After graduation, he accepted a friend's invitation to teach English not in Japan, but in Taiwan. After arriving in Kaohsiung, Scott quickly realized that jumping into the heart of a rapidly industrializing city was not the right fit for someone who had grown up loving the outdoors. Some thrive in a boisterous city, full of action, people and constant development, but Scott frequently got sick in the bustling city. The minute he fulfilled his contract in Taiwan, Scott went back to Florida. However, he still itched to be in the region, so he decided to go back again, this time as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) in Japan with the JET Program.

From the moment he arrived in Ibaraki Prefecture, Scott knew that this was much more his style. The prefecture sat in the middle of the Kanto Plain, surrounded by nature and rice paddies. Although he was less than two hours from Tokyo, Shimotsuma Town was the very definition of the Japanese countryside—commonly known as *inaka*. With a population of just 40,000 people, he had plenty of quiet, fresh air and wilderness to soak in. With his health refreshed, he really enjoyed teaching at his assigned high schools and found many friends within his new community.

About six months after his arrival in Japan, Scott was invited to a house party by one of his Japanese coworkers. He ended up talking to Atsuko, a cute English teacher who grew up in Ibaraki and had spent some time living in California during an exchange program. Although Scott's Japanese had rapidly improved while immersed in rural Japan, her English was even better. Their conversation was a mix of both languages and went on for hours. By the end of the party, Scott had asked her out.

Their first date was a day trip to Kamakura Town, home of the famous *Kamakura Daibutsu*, the Great Buddha, a designated National Treasure. They spent the day wandering the old streets of the quaint seaside town, surrounded by nature and the culture of old Japan, stopping along the way to take in historic sights. They finished the day at a popular date spot, Enoshima, a small island wrapped in long sandy beaches.

Back in Ibaraki, they started to spend a lot of time together. Scott and Atsuko were fond of the outdoors and made frequent trips to Mount Tsukuba. One of the most famous mountains in Japan and full of lush vegetation, it is well known for its twin peaks, Nyotai-san and Nantai-san. Legend has it that Nantai-san is home to a male divinity, Izanagi-no-Mikoto, and that a female divinity, Izanami-no-Mikoto, resides in Nyotai-san. It is fabled that the two deities married and gave

birth to other deities and even Japan itself. Not a bad spot to frequent for a young courting couple!

The deities must have approved of Scott and Atsuko, for their relationship progressed quickly to the next milestone: meeting her parents. Atsuko's parents lived in a very small historic town peppered with Edo and Meiji Era shops and Scott was understandably nervous as he entered their traditional Japanese home. He didn't know what to expect, but the minute Atsuko's mom saw Scott, she called him into the kitchen and abruptly told him to sit down. A little on edge, Scott obliged and sat wide-eyed as he watched her pull some beer out of the fridge and grab two glasses. She plopped them down on the table and said, "Drink!" Formalities quickly melted away as they got to talking; warmth flowed freely in the household and Scott got along well with the entire family.

Scott's tenure with the JET Program ended after two years and he went on to pursue his master's degree in International Business back in the United States. Not to let an ocean divide them, Atsuko studied for her associates degree in history at a nearby university. With degrees in hand, they returned to Japan and found work in Tokyo.

By this time, the couple was in their mid-to-late 20s and, as is customary for parents to do worldwide, Atsuko's parents did, on occasion, bring up the topic of their future plans. After eight years of courtship, they clearly were serious, but Scott wanted to wait until the perfect moment to pop the question. The day finally came during a trip to Malaysia. They had just climbed up Mount Kinabalu, one of the highest mountains in Southeast Asia. Perched on the summit, Scott took a knee and proposed. Once again, the mountain deities gave their blessing and Atsuko said yes. When asked how her family reacted to news of their engagement, Scott quickly answered, "Relieved!"

The rest, as they say, is history. A year after their wedding, Atsuko had a son and two years later, a baby girl. They lived in Tokyo for another eighteen years and, eventually, Scott naturalized to become a Japanese citizen.

Three years ago, Scott's work brought him and his family to Guam. However, Atsuko and Scott remain strongly connected to the place that initially brought them together. They visit Ibaraki often and each year, his son and daughter spend their summers with their grandparents in Atsuko's idyllic hometown. Atsuko and Scott continue to make the trek up to Mount Tsukuba, but now it is a whole family affair.

Scott arrived in Japan not knowing a thing about Ibaraki prefecture. All he hoped was that it was a better fit than the bustling industry of Taiwan. He had no idea that his decision to become an ALT with the JET Program would have such a huge impact on the course of his life. But for Scott, taking that step into the dark unknown lay the foundation for the rest of his life and has led to an incredible journey full of surprises, joy and love.

