

First, Not Worst

“This is our first time to eat at Burger King.”

“ . . . why worst??”

“Worst? No! First!”

“ . . . worst?”

“Nooo! First!”

This incident took place in a hamburger shop that my dad and I went to just after we arrived in America. In spite of the long line of customers, he had this exchange with the clerk.

Standing next to him, I thought, “How embarrassing! If she can’t understand him, what’s the point in talking about it? This has gone from being the first thing on our trip to the worst!”

My dad’s English pronunciation was not good enough to communicate the difference between “first” and “worst.” When I listened to him speak English, his mistakes really stood out to me. Even so, he would talk on and on about difficult topics, like explaining to Americans the history of Christianity in Japan.

“There he goes again . . . I know he’s doing the best he can. But if his English is this bad, why does he try to discuss things like that . . .?”

Our host family in one town arranged for me to go to the County Fair with some other girls my age.

I really wanted to see the Fair. On the other hand, I found myself unable to quickly say, “Thanks for inviting me, I’d be happy to go!” Until then, I’d never experienced being by myself with people who didn’t know any Japanese.

“How am I supposed to act with girls I’ve never met before?! There’s no escape! Oh—what should I do?? This is the worst!”

“Hi!” Seeing the girls’ cheerful smiles, somehow I was able to smile back.

“Lydia, do you like onion rings?”

“Huh? What’s that?”

Together we stuffed our mouths with hamburgers, and grabbed onion rings.

“Yeah! Onion rings!”

And then we showed each other our bright-red tongues from the red snow cones.

“Aaah! ”

“Lydia, what do you want to do next?”

“Let’s ride on that!”

“What?! You’re gonna ride on that??”

Suddenly I realized, “Hey, I’m speaking English!”

As we left that town, my dad asked, “Would you like to study in America? Are you interested in living here?” For a moment it sounded like a joke. But I felt something begin to stir in my heart. Is this it? Could this be my chance? My dream? My hope for the future? A purpose for my life? In my mind, something clicked. I want to go for it! From now on I’m going to start using my English!

At the next town we went to, I started speaking English proactively to people I met for the first time. When they asked about Japan, I tried to answer sincerely and in a way to help them understand. This was a different person than the one who coldly asked my dad, “Aren’t you embarrassed because your English is so poor?”

When my heart changes, my behavior changes!

What I thought was “the worst” actually became “the first step ” to joy like I’d never known!

When I return to America, I want to go back to that hamburger shop, and say:

“This is my first time to come to America, all by myself!”