**Home Sweet Home**

by Emi Tsuruta

Don't get me wrong. I love my mom. She raised us - my sister Norika and me - to be good girls. Mom tried to teach us the difference between right and wrong. She supported me when I went to study abroad in California. I know that she just wants us to be happy... but sometimes I feel like she is so different from Norika and me. The two of us are so free, while my mom tends to be more uptight, more worried about what people will think. Even though we don't always see eye to eye, I was going to try to be good now that I was back home. I owe her that much.

Anyway, there Mom was at the arrivals gate in Narita airport when I came out. She was wearing a white bucket hat and a windbreaker, not all that dressed up herself. I'd pulled on a yellow sun dress for the occasion. She did seem glad to see me, and started gabbing away about what all was new. The preparations for Norika's wedding were under way. My mom had some doubts about Evan, Norika's British fiance, but honestly, I don't see why. If anything, he seems even more prim and proper than she is.

Anyway, Mom and I boarded a train bound for home, Kamakura, the seaside town where my parents live. I listened to my mom as best I could, but I was sleepy from the long flight over from Los Angeles, and eventually, she just let me sleep. When we got home, I ditched my dress for workout pants and a hoodie, and went straight to bed. It was a relief to get settled back into my old room, my old bed.

That evening I awoke to the sound of the TV coming from downstairs. Wondering who was up, I went down to the living room to find Dad and Evan sitting there like two old friends. Dad smiled to see me home, but Evan was more aloof. I guess I teased him a bit the last time I was here. That was over a year ago now. You'd think he'd be over it.

"Dad. Evan," I greeted them. "Where are Mom and Norika?"

"Your mom is upstairs, and Norika is in the bath."

I could hear Norika clanking around. I was feeling kind of hungry, so I got some food from the kitchen, and came back to sit with Dad and Evan.

"Namie phoned, and so did Miori," Dad told me. That was nice to hear. Namie is my first cousin, and lives not too far away with her new hubby Ryoichi. Miori is a younger friend of mine I met at a Shinto festival a few years back.

"What about Michiyo? Did she call?" I asked. Michiyo was my best friend from high school. I hadn't heard from her for a while, and I was wondering what she's been up to.

"No, I don't think so," my dad shrugged.

"Oh OK. Anyway, I'll call them tomorrow. Can I get a new cell phone?"

"Ask your mother," Dad replied. "Oh by the way, I've been asking around about a job for you. I think I might be able to get you an interview with a good company up in Tokyo." My dad has always been a big one for jobs. He works in personnel, so that's kind of his thing.

"Oh OK. Thanks."

It sounded like Norika was almost done in the bath, so I scooted upstairs, and grabbed a pair of pajamas. I couldn't very well traipse around in one of my see-through nighties with Evan and Dad here. I was going to have to change my ways now that I was home again. In California, I'd had a lot of freedom, but here I'd have to rein myself in a bit. I didn't want my parents to worry.

I went back downstairs to the little make-up room next to the bath to see if Norika was out yet. I could see her naked body through the frosted glass. She slid open the glass door, and picked up a towel from the basket on the floor. I was glad to see her. It had been a while. She looked good. She's probably been working out to look her best for the wedding.

"Hey, Non," I teased, calling her by her old nickname.

"Emi? You're home!"

"Yeah, I just got back. So what's the story with Evan? Is he sleeping with you up in your room?"

"What? There's no way Mom would stand for that. Evan's been sleeping on the sofa in the living room."

That was disappointing to hear. I'd been hoping that Mom had mellowed a bit, but it sounded like she was as strict as ever. Norika and Evan were getting married for heaven's sakes. Why make them sleep apart? It made no sense to me, but it was hard to argue with Mom. She made the rules, and we kind of had to follow.

Norika continued to stand there - naked - while she wiped off her face, arms and sides with her towel. Norika has never been shy about her body. I'd always been a bit jealous of her confidence.

I ended up stripping out of my clothes, and we switched places, so I could bathe next. The water felt so warm and refreshing, but when I came back out, I realized that there weren't any more towels. Norika must have taken the last one. Drat!

I glanced down at my p.j.'s, but I didn't want to pull them on while my body was still wet. There were probably some clean towels hanging in the dining room, but if Evan was still up, he'd see. Drat, drat, drat. Now what do I do?

Rather than risk it, I ended up drying myself off with the t-shirt I'd been wearing. It wasn't as absorbent as a real towel, but it would have to do. I was originally planning to go back to bed, but I wasn't really sleepy anymore. I ended up pulling on my p.j.'s, going upstairs, changing into street clothes, and going out for a little walk. It'd been so long since I'd lived here. I wanted to see what all had changed.

Things didn't look that different though I suppose. There were more new houses on the hills across from us. The old temple Hase was still there with its big iron bell. Takuhiro, the quiet boy who used to live next door, had moved up to Tokyo to go to university. My mom still seemed bent on getting the two of us together, but I doubted that would happen. He is far too shy. Eventually, I came back home, and went back to bed.

The next day Mom took me to Fujisawa to shop for a cell phone and some new work outfits for my job hunt. Some of our neighbors came to their windows to watch us as Mom and I walked by. For some reason, I seemed to be attracting attention now that I was back. I guess they're just curious, but it did feel kind of weird to be stared at.

The next few mornings, I'd have a shower, get changed, and then find my mom, usually in the kitchen. She'd complain,

"You're not going to wear that, are you?"

"What's wrong with this outfit?" I'd balk. It was always something. According to her, my kaftans or ponchos were too 'foreign-looking.' My yoga pants were 'practically see-through.' My booty shorts were too 'short.' It seems like she didn't like any of the outfits I'd brought back from the States.

"If you don't like the clothes I have now, can I go buy some new ones?" I asked. She nodded hesitantly, not trusting me to buy something she'd approve of. I was kind of annoyed by the whole thing. In the States, my host mom Loretta had let me wear what I like, and almost never complained. Anyway, to humor Mom, I'd go back upstairs, and change into something more conservative. I guess I'll have to tone things down for now.

The strangest thing about our tiff was my mom must have a pretty good idea what I'm like by now. She saw the backless dress I wore to Namie's wedding. She probably saw the video of me skinny-dipping with her sister's family at the waterfall. For sure, she saw me running around in just a t-shirt in front of her beloved Takuhiro when he came knocking to get my address. I didn't really understand why I had to pretend to be something I'm not. I guess that's how things are. She puts up with my craziness as long as I behave.

Then one day, my dad phoned me from work. He'd left some papers at home, and wanted me to bring them up to him in Tokyo. I suspected that this was just an excuse to talk to me about jobs, but anyway, I found the papers, and headed out to visit him.

Some neighbors came to their window again to watch as I walked by. This was going to take some getting used to. Sometimes people stared at me in the States, but I figured that was because I was Japanese. Here I look like everyone else, don't I? Maybe there's something different about me now. Self-confidence? A cosmopolitan air? I wasn't sure why they seemed so curious.

Dad was in a meeting when I arrived at his office. While I sat waiting, I got talking with a cool Japanese guy who was there. He'd lived in the States too, so we had that in common. He was there for an interview, and it sounded like he had a lot of interesting ideas.

Soon though, my dad called me in. As I suspected, Dad had set up an interview for me with this big trading company, Oote. It sounded pretty serious. It didn't sound too bad though, so I agreed to go, and give it a try.

When I came back out, the boy I'd been talking to was gone. Taira I think his name was. Too bad. He seemed kind of nice.

Midweek, I went up to Yokohama to convert my American driver's license to a Japanese one. They made me take a driving test again. There was this cute little obstacle course out back, and you tool around in these miniature cars with other student drivers. I was kind of nervous, so I made a few mistakes, but the inspector was a nice guy, and gave me a pass anyway.

That Friday, at night, I came downstairs, looking to see if I could have a shower. Mom and Dad had gone to bed, Norika was staying at their new place, but it sounded like Evan was in the bath. The TV was on, so I sat down, and looked to see what was on. They had this show called Ookubonbon. A woman named Ookubo was there, and she'd play 'news' clips on the latest trends gathered by their reporters. All the reporters are women too, so I guess it's supposed to be like a women's show, but the topics are kind of spicy. I'd never seen it before, so I was kind of curious.

The top story - believe it or not - was about how women in Tokyo seem to be going braless or pantiless lately. According to the women they interviewed, it's not so much to feel sexy, but for comfort or health reasons. The women lounge around home like that, and then don't bother to put on a bra when they pop up to the convenience store. Wow! Who would have imagined?

I wanted to see more, but unfortunately, Evan came out, so I shut the TV off before he saw. He's a bit uptight, so I don't think he'd approve of all these women wandering around the city pantiless. Norika had been trying to pass herself off as this innocent princess, all sweetness and light, so I don't know if he knows what she's really like. Anyway, I wished him good night, and headed up to bed.

On Monday, I had to go to my first job interview. I got all dressed up in the new 'recruit' outfit I'd bought with my mom - a white silk blouse, navy blazer, tight navy mini-skirt, white cotton panties, white socks and black loafers. I also put on my good-luck necklace with the locket, but no bra. It was warm out, and with the blazer, I had enough layers as it was.

I caught a bus and then train to Tokyo. The Oote office was in this tall modern building, all gleaming glass and steel. While I was waiting, I felt terribly nervous. I'd never applied for a job in Japan before, so I wasn't sure how to act. Should I smile, and tell jokes, or be all serious, and just listen? A woman came, and served me some tea, but she disappeared before I could talk to her. They all seemed so busy.

I felt restless, all bound up in this tight suit. Wondering about my lucky locket, I stuck my fingers down the front of my blouse, but I couldn't reach the chain. There wasn't anyone in the waiting room anyway, so without really thinking, I undid the buttons on my blouse, seeing if I could fish out my locket. Just then the secretary came back, and told me they'd see me now. I snapped to attention, and then followed her into the conference room, my heart beating away in my chest. My blouse was still open, but there was no time to worry about that now. I'm up.

There were three interviewers, middle-aged Japanese men in suits. They weren't all that friendly, and started in with hard questions right away. I got a handkerchief out of my pocket, and wiped my brow, doing my best to answer. A lot of the questions were kind of tricky, so I was happy whenever I managed to come up with a good answer.

It took me a while to notice that the youngest of the three was staring straight at my chest. I looked down, only to realize that since I wasn't wearing a bra, he could probably see quite a bit of my cleavage, perhaps even a nipple on one side.

All in a panic now, I quickly pulled the sides of my blouse back over my breasts. I looked at him apologetically, and let out a little laugh. I don't know why I was laughing. It was awfully embarrassing to be caught with my breasts out in my very first interview. The other two men were still forging ahead with their questions, so maybe they hadn't noticed. I kind of stumbled through the rest of the interview, in a bit of a daze. I was relieved when they finally let me go.

Back out in the waiting room, I covered my eyes. I felt so embarrassed I wanted to cry. A young man named Takahashi wandered by, and stopped to ask what was wrong. I told him I thought I'd blown the interview, but he was very kind, saying I looked like a smart young lady, and I probably didn't do as badly as I thought. He gave me his phone number, and said I could contact him to find out if I'd passed. I thanked him for his kindness, and then headed home.

That night, when I got back, Mom, Dad and Evan were gathering around the supper table to eat. Dad asked about my interview, but I just kind of shrugged, not wanting to tell him I'd inadvertantly flashed my breasts at the interviewers. I guess Dad could tell I was upset, because he just let it drop, and talked about something else.

After supper, Dad and Evan moved to the living room, and I joined them. Dad wanted to watch news, so I thought about going to our Japanese room where there's a second TV, but Mom had a bunch more things she wanted to tell us, so I stayed.

Dad went in for his shower, and then Mom, so it was just Evan and I in the living room. Evan is kind of a strange guy. He's tall and handsome I guess, but he never really looks at me anymore. It makes me wonder if he feels guilty about something. Anyway, hopefully, Norika would come back from their new place soon, so he could spend time with her. He is more relaxed when she is around.

Eventually, Evan left to go have a shower, and then when he was done, it was my turn. While I was showering, my new cell phone rang. It was my friend Miori finally catching me in.

"Miori, what's wrong?"

"You... crackle-crackle... something... I can't hear..." Her voice kept fading in and out. There is only one little window in our bath room, so I guess the walls were blocking the signal.

"Here. Hang on. Let me see if I can get a better signal." I was soaking wet and naked, but Miori sounded pretty keyed up about something. I opened the sliding glass door, and came out first to the make up nook, but I still couldn't hear her. I peered over at the thin curtain leading to the kitchen. I was pretty sure Mom had gone to bed, but Evan might still be up in the living room. I glanced down at my p.j.'s, but I still hadn't finished my bath. I can't get dressed all wet like this anyway.

I took a deep breath, and then ever so quietly, stepped out - still naked - into the kitchen. I could vaguely hear Evan breathing around the corner. Is he asleep? It was hard to tell for sure, but in a rush to get to Miori, I tiptoed over to the back door. I undid the lock, trying to be quiet, but it rattled a bit, and then made a big clunking sound. Once I opened the door, I could hear cars in the distance, but all I could see was the garden wall and the top of Takuhiro's house. I was sooo nervous standing here naked in the doorway leading outside.

"Can you hear me now?" I whispered to Miori.

"Yeah, I can."

"What's up?"

"I mainly wanted to welcome you back."

"Thanks. We should get together..." OK, maybe she wasn't in such a big rush after all. I felt a bit embarrassed to have come out all this way naked, but it was nice to hear from her.

"Yeah, of course. Oh! By the way, did you say you took a photography class when you were in the States?"

"Yeah, I did. Why?"

Suddenly, I heard rustling noises coming from the living room. I covered my pussy with my free hand, but I looked incredibly indecent, shivering here naked.

"Oh oh. Someone's up. Can you hold on?"

"Yeah, sure."

I looked back towards the dining room, but there was no sign of Evan... yet. Worried, I looked around for something to cover up with, but there weren't any clothes in the kitchen. I kicked myself for coming out here naked in the first place. What on earth am I doing? Maybe I should go back.

More rustling.

"Listen, Miori. I'd better phone you back. Can I call you tomorrow?"

"I might be at work, but I'll try you on my break."

"Oh OK. Sure. Have a good night!" I hung up, cocking my ear, trying to tell if Evan was coming. I could still hear him rustling around, but I couldn't see him. I briefly thought of stepping outside to hide, but that would be even worse.

I watched the shadows on the floor, but it didn't look like Evan was coming, so slowly, carefully, I tiptoed back towards the bath. I went all the way to the doorway to the dining room, and cautiously peered around the corner. It was hard to see Evan in the dark, but the light from the bath was shining on me, lighting up my naked body. I felt so nervous. I turned off the bathroom light, and just stood there, listening and waiting for the longest time.

Eventually, I heard Evan snoring again. Phew! That was close. From now on, I'm going to have to be more careful. I finished up my bath, pulled on my p.j.'s, and tiptoed back up to my room.

Anyway, lots more to tell, but I guess I'll stop here for now. Talk to you soon.