



## *Our pay arrived in a brown paper bag!*

**“Look there’s teacher,” I hear a familiar Asian voice, and wheel around to find my class of ten Japanese girls in a giggling huddle behind me, underneath Michelangelo’s wonders in the Cistine Chapel. It was just a week since we said our goodbyes at the end of the Cheltenham summer school. I knew they were to tour Europe but meeting again in The Vatican was hard to believe.**

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The position I had secured earlier that year was a dream job, which involved teaching students who arrived each year from an upmarket girl’s high school in Tokyo. They were on a European learning tour, which included two weeks or so to brush up their English, during the summer break at one of Cheltenham’s posh private schools. In true Japanese fashion there were always 100 students, divided neatly into ten classes.

I say *dream job* because there were only ten very compliant girls in each class; teaching ran five days a week, four morning lessons a day, sports in the afternoon and three day-long excursions to nearby places dripping with history, after which pay-packets were handed out in fat, brown, paper bags. Crispy notes: no questions asked! The job held so many unforgettable moments it’s now the one I look back to with a unique fondness.



I tended to teach from outside the book, so the freedom of the summer school suited me perfectly. Other classes were intrigued and more than a little envious to hear the sound and see my girls dancing mini-skirted and singing along to Tina Turner's *Simply the Best*, while they struggled along with textbook exercises.

I was given the role of squash coach in the afternoon sports sessions, and while I think I had previously seen a squash court, actually playing on one was quite a novel experience. Fortunately, only one or two girls were anywhere near my lowly standard, so I was able to claim the status of King of the Court, as well as King of the Classroom.

On those day excursions, the teachers had their favourite hideaways in each of the historical towns – Oxford, Stratford-upon-Avon, and Bath - which tended to be the blandest of pubs in some anonymous back alley (partly to escape the tourists, but also to avail themselves of the cheapest prices). Thus, after the girls had scurried off for their obligatory afternoon high street shopping, their esteemed classroom mentors would gather for lunch and untold rounds of drinks, before returning to the meeting point at an allotted hour, hardly able to negotiate the three or four steps into the bus.

There was a general feeling that the educative value of these jaunts to historical places was slightly overrated: that the girls were invigorated more by dolls from *The Alice Shop*, than the history of *Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll)* the author and somewhat eccentric academic, across the road in Christchurch College. And of course, this was true; acquiring bags and hats and other name-brand souvenirs from high street shops was for most, top of the agenda, but there could also be glorious exceptions to the rule, where perhaps two or three girls each year would show a rewarding interest in Shakespeare's plays or Roman History, to add to their classroom travails. Finding those unique young people was perhaps the moment I cherished the most.



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At the end of my final year of those summer school delights, I wrote a poem which pondered this juxtaposition of history against high street shopping:

### *Excursions in History*

***The excursions were the sweetest part  
Of this sixteen-day sojourn:  
Shakespeare's Stratford,  
Dreaming spires of Oxford,  
Sunning in the gardens on the Avon's banks at Bath.  
Prepositions of place  
Useful now in practice,  
Translated from the classroom and so put out to work.***

***But could these tours of England's heart  
Be enough to please  
Young Japanese ladies,  
Keen to find the delicacies  
In those High Street castles, such as 'Next' and 'Gap'.  
For whom the 'Alice Shop'  
And 'Peter Rabbit's Place'  
Meant so much more than two thousand years  
Of history, on view from Roman times in Bath.  
... Mostly not.***

***But there were a few – a glorious few,  
Who could see beyond the tourist hordes,  
To glimpse a past of majesty and meaning  
That reflected back  
To make the tours worthwhile.***

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