

Learning to love me

How living in Japan has helped this writer embrace her looks

Like most of my young students in Japan, Maya was curious about her Western teachers, making it a point to pinch my backside every day. Following school policy, I said nothing. She was little, after all. But the day Maya fondled my bosom, I told my boss. She only laughed. "Too big," she said, gesturing at my chest. "Beautiful." I was stunned. No one had ever called my chest "big and beautiful" before.

In the American South, where I was raised, the locals grow tall and sturdy, like racehorses. The people in my Italian/Guatemalan gene pool, however, were miniature and frail, like ponies.

In middle school, I heard one of the popular boys say: "Eva would be pretty but she's too short." By high school graduation, I was so self-conscious that I wore high heels every day and platforms to the beach while my friends luxuriated in flip-flops. I moved to New York City for college, hoping I might fit in better there, but I was still forced to shop in the children's department. Even in my twenties, I always winced at my reflection in windows when I went on dates, distracted by the image of a man leading his little sister by the hand.

In 2007, I quit my editorial job in New York to teach English in Osaka. My school emailed all recruits, warning us, "Women over 170cm won't find clothes, so bring plenty from home!" Well, that certainly didn't apply to me: I was 150cm. In Japan, I told myself, I would be no one's little sister.

I'd thought that by moving to Japan, I would finally be the "typical size" – but I was still an anomaly. In Osaka, I sang karaoke and slept on futon beds. I took my shoes off before I entered a room. I ate takoyaki. But I still stuck out like a sore thumb. Clothes had always been too long for me, but they were suddenly too tight as well. When I tried to stuff my round curves inside Japanese

underwear, only the XL fit. Too much takoyaki? It took me a while to understand that in Japan, 43kg is XL.

My young students groped my "too big" bottom, hairdressers called my head "small, like a baby" and my new Japanese friends always added the diminutive "chan" to my name – reserved for little sisters or anything cute. The first few times, I recoiled, but after a few months of being adoringly called Eva-chan, I finally realized that being considered kawaii isn't an insult; it means you are loved.

The weight of 27 years of self-consciousness slipped from my shoulders. I was tiny all over the world and it was okay. I was curvy, too, which was a fun switch. Most of all, I was cute, and that was wonderful. For the first time in my life, I felt proud when glimpsing myself in windows; my "beautiful, too big" Jessica Rabbit curves strutting down cherry blossom-lined streets in yellow ballerina flats and baby-doll dresses – as confident as John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*.

– **Eva Sandoval**

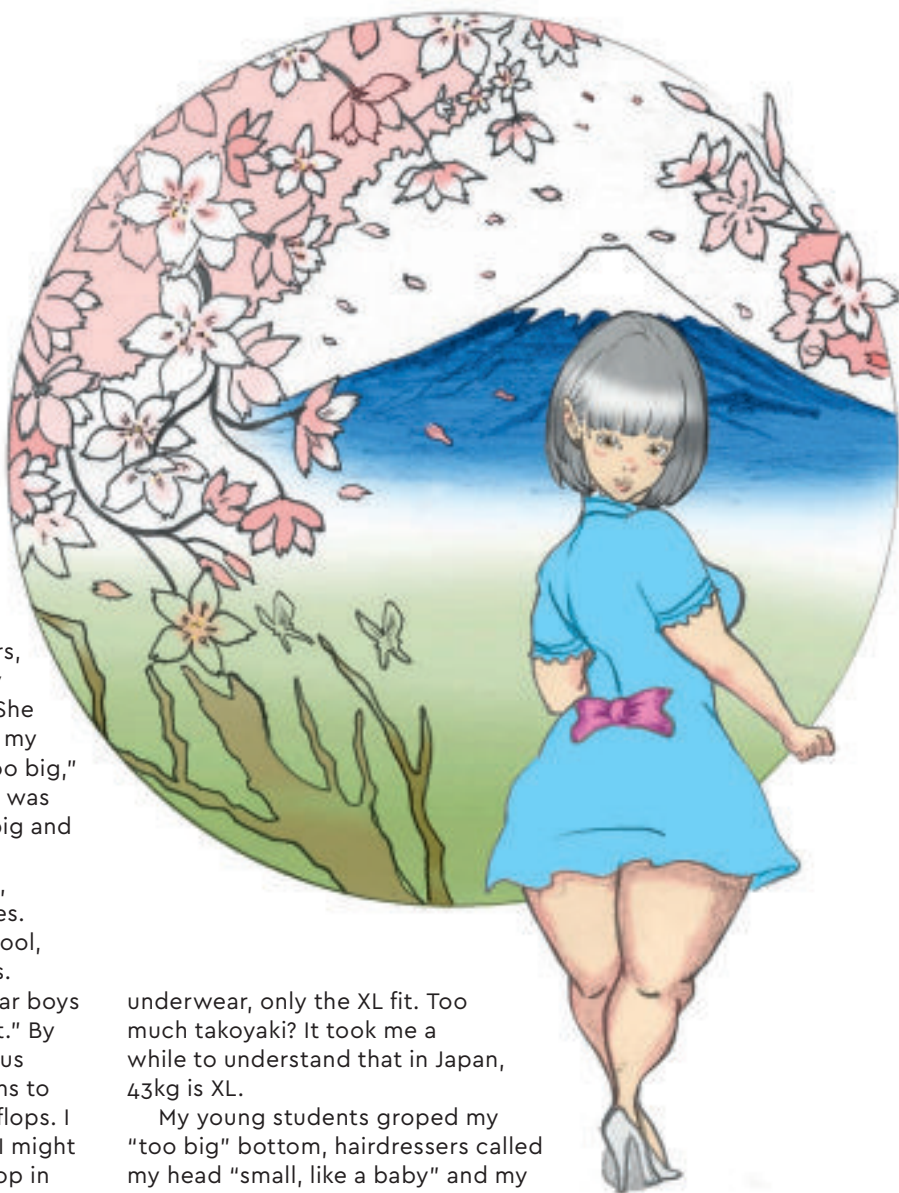


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