



Above: Paper back Book cover

## Chapter 7

### Reiko Hombo

"My name is Reiko and I am sixteen years old. I came to Australia in 2003 when I was fifteen. I came from a family of three children and I have a brother and a sister. I am studying classical ballet in Australia and I want to be a professional ballet dancer.

I have been learning ballet since the age of four. When I was fourteen, I decided that I wanted to be a professional. By that age I realised that the European and Australian companies were more highly regarded throughout the world than that of Japan.

I understood that if I could graduate from one of these schools then it would open other doors. So I decided to ask my ballet teacher to help me prepare for an audition for ballet schools in Australia.

I did some research on the internet and asked my friends and then asked one of them who lives in Germany and attends the German National Ballet School which company was the best. She said that ballet schools in Australia were the best.

I emailed a school with my bad English, asking them how I could get in. I prepared a video with my ballet teacher from Japan at fourteen years of age. I initiated it and did the research all myself. My parents were so impressed, but I think they already knew that this is what I wanted to do, even before I told them. They supported me all of the way which made a big difference.

[Reiko came out with her mum and auditioned and was accepted by an Australian ballet school. She had four months in which to prepare herself. She learnt as much English as she could before returning to Australia]

I started to tell my friends at school and they were upset because I was leaving. They started to cry but I couldn't cry at all because I was so happy and excited.

When I left Japan it was my sister's birthday. My mum told me later that they had a lonely birthday, because my father had to come with me to Australia. He stayed with me for one week. We went shopping and then it was time to visit the homestay host family that I would be staying with. I was really nervous.

My host family lived in Ivanhoe. The family consisted of a mother and her seventeen year old daughter. Her father had died which was really sad. I couldn't speak much English at the time. When we first met my host family it was a brief encounter and everything appeared to be fine on the surface. After my father returned to Japan I felt so lonely.

When I went to stay with the host family I noticed the house was really dirty. There were lots of ants everywhere in the house. It was so disgusting. The house was really dark all the time, and when I needed to go to the toilet at night the host mother would growl at me to turn off the light when I would switch it on. She was unusual and very weird. She would never flush the toilet after going to the bathroom. Every morning I would feel sick. It was so awful.

I told my carer immediately and she said, 'Okay, you can change your host family'. I started to have my tea at my carer's home. I only stayed two weeks with that host family.

I then moved in with another family in Northcote. My carer also came with me to see what they were like. I thought they would be good as they were so different from my first family. The mother had two children a son aged fifteen and a daughter aged thirteen. They all appeared really nice. The house also looked clean. It was a lot better than the previous place. My room was also very nice. By this time my English was improving so I was able to communicate with them. I lived in this house for six months and I didn't have any problems. I got on well and made friends with the children.

Soon after I was there the son started to get a bit naughty. The parents were going through a divorce. At first I didn't get too upset because my own brother was about the same age and I knew what boys were like at this age, but it got worse. Her son started arguing and screaming with his mum. I was becoming very unhappy. I really think that the children were missing their father as he only had access every two weeks. My host mother admitted she felt lonely when her children were with their father also.

I felt really sorry for the host mother, because she was doing everything herself, the cooking, cleaning, working full time and looking after the children. She also had two cats and two dogs and six gold fish. She was getting busier and busier and she was trying to start her own business. By the end of the day she was so exhausted she could barely cook tea.

The family were Greek so the children would spend a lot of time with their grandparents. The grandmother would feed the whole family and I would wait every night till after 8.00 p.m. for my tea. I would ring the host mother who was at her mother's place with her children and ask her, 'What time are you coming home? Are you going to cook tea tonight?', and if she said no, I would have to cook tea for myself. Sometimes they would bring me some Greek food home from their grandmother's. I didn't really like their food as there was lots of meat and no vegetables. They would have a lot of take away food, and one week they had pizza four times. Many times she would say to me, 'I will be back in 30 minutes', but they would never get back till after 8.00 p.m.

I felt awful and so unhealthy. I'm a dancer and I was really worried about my body. I would have to get up at six o'clock in the morning to leave to go to school at about 7.00 a.m. and then get home after 6.00 p.m. at night. So I was really getting very tired. My mum would send me some Japanese food parcels that I could cook with rice to help me and I also spent a lot of money during the day to try and eat proper foods. After six months in Australia, I returned home for a visit for the first time. I cried when I saw my mum. It felt so good to see my family again. One thing I noticed though was that I felt uncomfortable with all of my friends that I had been to school with previously. I noticed their attitude towards their parents. At fifteen years of age my experience had shown me how important my parents are to me and how much I appreciated them. I felt my friends in Japan hadn't realised this yet. I couldn't say anything to them but it made me feel a bit sad.

I noticed how much I had changed over the six months. I actually liked doing things for myself, like my washing, being responsible for myself, getting up early, keeping my room tidy. I had never done such things before. I thought how hard it would be for my mother doing it for the whole family and working full time in a hard job and then having to come home and cooking dinner each day, never really having any free time for herself. I realised what my parents were doing for me. During that time when I was home I helped my mother as much as I could.

In July while I was in Japan I rang my host family and she seemed surprised. She said 'Reiko, we have moved because we had to sell the house due to the divorce.' The new house was very different. It wasn't as nice as the other home they lived in. No one in the family seemed to like it. The house in Northcote was a two storey home where as this was one level and you could hear the noise in other areas of the home.

The host family would go to bed after 11.00 p.m. at night. The television would be turned up so loud and their son's music was blaring until 1.00 a.m. I couldn't sleep or relax at night. I asked the son, 'Can you please turn off the music?' I started to feel really bad asking all the time and I couldn't understand how he could be so selfish. The teas were getting worse and the mother was getting home later and later.

There was a time in September that year when the host family asked if I would like to go on a holiday to the snow with them but I had dancing assessments and I didn't want to incur an injury so I said no. They said they would be away for one night. I thought one night is fine. I could cope with that.

The next day I rang the host mother in the afternoon as they had not returned. She said, 'Oh Reiko, I am so sorry, but the snow is so beautiful so we will be staying another night, is that all right?' So I said it was okay. That night I was so scared, I wasn't expecting them to be away for so long and I just couldn't relax. The next day the mother rang again and said, 'We can't drive back, we will have to stay another night.' I thought, 'This is getting worse.'

I had to go and buy food for myself and for the animals because she hadn't left anything for any of us. The host mother said she would pay me back, but I told her I couldn't stand it any more as cat and dog faeces were all around the house. I decided to go and stay with my friends from school, but everyday I went back fifteen kilometres to the house to feed the animals as I worried for them. Eventually the mother rang the grandmother to go and clean up the house.

The family stayed away for five nights. When they returned I asked to speak to the host mother. I called her to my room and told her as I was crying, 'Don't you know what you have to do? You left your cats, dogs and fish with no food. Have you no sense of responsibility, don't you care for your animals if they die, that they were starving? I can take responsibility for myself, but what about them and your house? It was so dirty with their poo everywhere, your mother had to come here and clean up. Don't you feel guilty?' It just seemed like she didn't even realise. She later apologised to me, but I realised I couldn't live there anymore and thought that it was all getting too much for my host.

I spoke with my carer and she agreed that I should move. She was quite shocked with what had happened. I felt bad to leave the family, as I had been there for a while and had become good friends with the daughter. The family also realised that I wasn't happy staying there anymore.

When I left I wrote a letter to the host mother and her daughter. To the host mother I wrote, 'I know that you were very busy, but thank you for looking after me', and to her daughter, I thanked her for helping me with my English. I had been very happy there at the beginning but they had their own problems that they needed to deal with and I felt that I was an extra burden on them.

I really would have liked to then live with my ballet friends but am unable to, as I am underage. I became negative and scared about having to go and stay with another family. I spoke about it to my carer and my mum in Japan. She suggested that I try just one more time.

When I went and saw the new host family and where I would be staying I was happy because it was much closer to my ballet school. I had been travelling for an hour each day where I was staying before.

Now it would only take me fifteen minutes. Also there were some other overseas students which I thought would be really good for me so I immediately became relieved.

I love my room. It's the biggest room I have ever had at any homestay I stayed in and everything is really comfortable. When I was in Japan I used to have a hamster. My parents would have loved to have a dog but it wasn't possible but now where I am living my host family has a dog. I love this house. On the weekends when I go outside it's so beautiful. There is a swimming pool and when I do my washing it looks so pretty, I just feel really lucky. In Japan we live in apartments so we don't have much space.

I feel I can talk to my host family about anything. In my last homestay the family rarely ate together but in this one we eat our evening meals and have long conversation. In Japan we usually have a big breakfast, but here I look forward to my meals. I don't even miss Japanese cooking.

I feel really happy in my new surroundings and it allows me to focus on my ballet. I feel so lucky because I know exactly what I want to do and I have started planning more of my life. I talk about it with my friends a lot. I think of not only which company I can get into but more importantly how to be a great dancer.

I never really felt that I have had any problems with the Australian culture. I think it is because I left Japan so young and it was easier for me. I know it would be much harder for my parents to adjust.

All my friends are very good to me. When I first arrived they all helped me as they had experience with overseas students. Sometimes I didn't know why they would be laughing, I would ask, 'I don't understand why are you laughing,' when they told jokes or if the teacher made a funny comment, but now I understand them.

I really like them so much, they are so nice and they all work very hard. I often think that I would be so bored if I was still at my old school. The ballet students have such a positive attitude and know what we want to be and our direction in life.

My boyfriend Gary is Australian. He is a very special person in my life and I am so glad that I have him. He has helped me a lot. He understands exactly what my ambitions are and is very sensitive to my needs, especially when I am worried about certain things or have problems with my feet because they are swollen. He understands. My parents, teachers, host family and carer can help me with other issues but I find that Gary can help me with both as he is also living away from home. I can talk to him about anything. Gary is coming to Japan this year to visit my family and I also get on very well with his family.

[At the end of the interview Reiko said her life was well balanced. She loves her ballet school and the teachers. She feels she is in the best institution and has the best tuition followed by other support such as doctors, physiotherapist and psychologist at the school if students need them.

Reiko said that apart from the incidents with the homestay families she really didn't have any problems. When she left Japan she had assumed that it would have been like living at home with her family. She didn't want to complain as she had built up a sister like relationship with the daughter and felt guilty about leaving even though she was unhappy. She recommends that underage students tell their carers if they are not happy as soon as possible so that they can help.

Reiko stated that she now says to her mother in Japan, 'Oh, I can live anywhere because I've moved so many times. I think each family has their own unique way. I realise that now. I'm not going to be shocked anymore. I think I got tougher from the whole experience.']