

Introduction

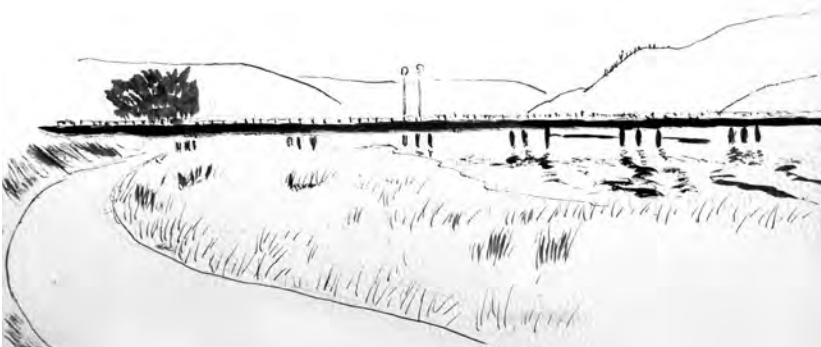
by the Author

After five months in Toki City, Japan, I hit a serious speed bump. One day, at the school I taught at, I felt ill and went home early. I collapsed into bed and stayed there – for a week. All I could think about was returning home to New Zealand. I didn't eat, hardly drank, and the thought of going back to work and teaching English to forty students all day terrified me. I wanted to pack it all in. Teachers came to check up on me, bringing rice porridge and fresh fruit. My supervisor fussed and worried, and nervously reiterated the terms of my contract. I managed to hang on the few more weeks till the end of term when I could reconnect with my old life in Wellington, New Zealand. At the end of my brief Kiwi holiday, my family literally pushed me back onto the plane to Japan. "Nothing but a bit of culture shock," they said.

After the long return journey, I remember trudging miserably up the dark, narrow street from the train station to my tiny apartment, dragging my suitcase through icy puddles and dirty snow, silently cursing Japan. When I reached the apartment, I curled up in my futon feeling sorry for myself.

That night while I slept, a fresh blanket of snow fell over the city. I got up early, threw on several layers and set off on my bicycle through the streets with my camera. Something seemed different. Even for a Sunday morning, the place was deserted. I rode a short distance to the banks of the Toki River. Mist hung low around the foothills on the outskirts of the city and cranes poked about among reeds on the frozen river bank. Peering through the camera's viewfinder, I began to take photos. I took a wide-angle panoramic shot of the bridge that connected the two halves of Toki. I captured frosted potted bonsai trees outside homes. In a derelict park I snapped a snowman wearing an instant ramen (noodles) cup for a hat. I stood by a row of vending machines and sipped a can of hot chocolate. That was the beginning of seeing the place in a whole new light, and from that morning on, for the next two-and-a-half years, I dreaded the day I would leave Japan.

I became enamoured with the beauty of the place, the all-night karaoke clubs, the fresh fish, the trains that were always on time, the clockwork predictability of the routines and the heated toilet seats. But best of all, I liked the people. Nihon-jin (Japanese people), are often unfairly stereotyped as conservative, meek, conformist – even robotic. Perhaps they can be when they need to be. In New Zealand, the Second World War has left a residue of prejudice, Kiwis holding on to an unfavourable image of the people we fought. But what I discovered were Japanese characters – hilarious, outgoing, generous, caring, empathetic, eccentric, gracious and forthcoming – who helped me to unravel some “ribbons of fate” that had, for a long time, been tying me up. This book attempts to capture my experiences in simple vignettes, glimpses that focus on a single moment, a character, an experience or a situation that stood out to me. It is my hope that this collection of stories will portray the wonderful diversity of the people of Japan and the lovable qualities of the particular individuals I came to know – and love.



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