



The Eel Bone

On the homeward leg of our road trip to the Izu Peninsula, my friend Hiro and I stopped for lunch in Fuji City at a kaiten-zushi (conveyor-belt sushi) bar called Jumbo Zushi. Hiro was anxious for me to try the crab soup and a variety of raw treats. Sushi would not have been my first choice after having already consumed plates of deep-sea delicacies the previous night in Heda Village. In fact, I had been wondering all morning if it was the meal of spider crab and sea urchin that had played a part in my sleepless night. Nevertheless, I was soon seated before a rapidly-moving stainless steel sushi carousel. Hiro grabbed at coloured plates, thrusting them in front of me one after the other.

“This is tobiko, flying fish. Please try!” he said, excitedly. “And this I think you know, ika, squid.”

I already had a mountain of plates to get through and had yet even to pour some soy sauce into my dish.

“Actually, do you know unagi?”

“Eel?”

“Yes, ah, you know well. This is good.”

He pulled a small plate of grilled freshwater eel off the line then neatly snapped apart a set of cedar chopsticks for me.

“Come on, Hiro! Eel is too easy,” I joked, “you’re going to have to try harder than eel to give me something that’s a challenge.” I popped the whole piece in my mouth. There was a moment of great taste before I felt a small bone lodge itself firmly behind my jaw. It was tiny and sharp, and it had pierced the back of my throat. Each swallow began to feel more painful.

Hiro began to gorge himself on plates of red seabream, Spanish mackerel and swordfish. I excused myself and found my way to the bathroom. Once behind a locked door, I carefully pushed my index finger back into my throat to try to get at the eel bone, but it was stuck fast. With the second attempt to dislodge it, I ended up with my head deep in the toilet bowl. Realising I wasn't going to get it out anytime soon, I rejoined Hiro with some reluctance. "Hiro, I have an eel bone stuck in my throat." I told him as casually as I could muster, so as not to create alarm.

"Oh that's good. I ordered crab soup for you; it's delicious – do you know it?"

"Hiro, I actually have a bone stuck in my throat and it might be hard to eat anything else."

"Oh, no, no, don't worry."

"Do you understand what I just said?"

"Yes, but I promise it's not hard to eat. And it has no bones; it's just got a soft shell."

"Excuse me. I'm going to the bathroom again."

The second time I was equally unsuccessful with the bone, but managed to rid myself of the mandarin I had eaten for breakfast. I became convinced that forcing copious amounts of food down my throat might just dislodge the bone. I returned to the restaurant and sculled my now lukewarm crab soup then violently downed two pieces of Skipjack tuna, a fistful of baby octopi and the largest Californian roll the place had to offer. Soon enough I was back in the bathroom, the bone still stuck. It was all or nothing. Forcing four fingers into my mouth, I clawed at the back of my throat. No luck, but plenty more regurgitation.

Hiro seemed delighted with my new-found ravenous hunger. I came close to freeing the bone with a piece of raw shrimp, which encouraged me to launch into a new, frenzied round of eating: a five-dollar plate of snapper followed by an eight-dollar portion of bluefin tuna and a ten-dollar plate of raw oysters – which were far too slippery to snare the bone.

After a final turbulent and altogether unsuccessful bathroom visit, I trudged to the counter in considerable misery to pay for my half of the meal. I left the restaurant with less food in my stomach than when I came in, and a pocket sixty dollars lighter! And so began the three-hour drive back, Hiro,

me, and the eel bone, to the soulful tunes of Diana Ross and the Supremes. I could have killed the inventor of 'continuous play' for stereos.

During the journey home, I found the only way to get at the bone was to quack like a duck. At first Hiro looked alarmed, but then seemed to accept that it was just a quaint foreign habit. I spent the entire trip trying not to quack too loudly, in constant fear of throwing up all over his spotlessly shiny car interior. It wasn't until later that night, long after Hiro had dropped me off that I managed to remove the offending bone with the help of my toothbrush. And so the weekend trip to the Izu Peninsula ended with the extraction of one tiny eel bone and a fresh appreciation of Japan and my peculiar new friend, Hiro.