

## Winter Commute

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No matter where you live or where you work, commuting is rarely fun. Japan is no exception, with most of the clichés about crowded trains, etc., firmly rooted in fact. A bunch of other less well-known and less pleasant treats are right there in the mix, too. This morning, though, a lot of that has faded into the background, it being something of a *de facto* day of commemoration, if not a full-blown holiday, for the people in *Kansai*. On the morning of January 17, 1995, at 5:47 a.m., one of the nastier quakes of modern times hit the area, centered near Kobe and eventually killing about 6500 people. Yes, that's almost 15 years ago. Still.

So, there's something going on this morning. No, no earthquake survivor secret handshakes or anything, but no one who was around back then has forgotten it, not this morning, for sure. Tellingly, there's almost none of the usual pushing and jostling as the silver JR train slides into position at *Kyobashi* Station, the doors slide open, and the Osakans maintain an orderly queue as we embark. The train burrows underground for its dive under Osaka's core, and there's a certain air in the JR train car, quite distinct from the usual stale overheated cloud of commuter breath. Or so one would like to imagine.

I get lucky and nab a seat after only a few stops under the concrete sea. I settle my butt into the fake mouse fur and let my iPod do its cloak of isolation that it does so very well. Arms crossed, eyes shut gently, head down...the train pulls smoothly west, back toward the epicenter of the quake, not far from where the old house I'd been renting from an old friend came crashing down around me. Duck and cover, just like the fifties air raid drills. I saw a video of the original filmstrip, and damned if the kid's name wasn't Tony. How'd I forget that? As soon as the first jolt knocked me to my feet, I dove under the *kotatsu*<sup>1</sup> and it and I skittered about the room like a giant air hockey puck. The bouncing and sliding was bad enough, but the sound, the sound of the earth rending apart in pain. Nothing like it, or at least I hope not. I emerged unscathed - aside from the post-traumatic stress, of course.

But that was then, and another story for another day. Yet, like I said, no one who lived through the quake has forgotten, and this morning, not unlike then, everyone was just a bit kinder, a bit less hurried, a bit less rude.

Nearing the end of the underground portion of the ride, two little souls too young for any recollection of that day get on at the *Ebie* stop. A girl and a boy, let's say 9 and 7, presumably sister and brother. Spindly limbs poking from navy school uniforms that hung no better on their frames than they would on coat hangers; bony knees with a bluish cast from the January chill; popping out the uniforms' tops, insubstantial necks balancing oversized heads adorned with thick round wire-framed eyeglasses; topping it all, funky navy blue hats with slip cords fastened too tightly around their soft chins. Your standard issue Japanese elementary school kids.

They step on, all full of, what, duty? Some kind of inevitability, fatalism, or certainty about what they are to do that relieves them of even the idea of an option. No playing hooky, no playing sick to stay home and watch *terebi*,<sup>2</sup> not even the thought to whine about yet another day of school. Thoughts as unlikely as thinking that round was square. Incapable of forming the thought. Just all *do*. Some might call it *zen*, some see the breaking of the human spirit. It's none of that. It's just *do*. You just *do*.

As all of us are, on this train, on January 17, just doing. Doing what we do. It's how and why it

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<sup>1</sup> *kotatsu* - low, square table, often equipped with a heavy cover and heater in winter months.

<sup>2</sup> *terebi* - TV, television. My schtick on sick days was to create "inventions" - Rube Goldbergesque chains of the most unlikely staged mini-events stretched from one end of our south side Chicago bungalow to the other. Yes, bless my poor mother's patience. Then I'd let my younger brother set the whole thing in motion once he got home.

works here.<sup>3</sup>

The kids get lucky, too, and score seats immediately. Elder sister takes the preferred spot at the end of the seat, leaving younger brother to wedge himself between her and an old, gray, codger. He's a piece of work, this old guy. Surely old enough to be retired for a while now, not dressed well enough to be one of the chosen ones in the Japan, Inc. hierarchy, he's probably off to or coming home from some part-time gig that supplements his meager pension. A once potentially respectable visage, he's ruined it with a life of practiced defensive scowling, so that now he resembles nothing so much as a pond carp suffering chronic indigestion. Deservedly or not, lots of kids in Japan hate their fathers. Wives their husbands, as well. No opinion on cause and effect to offer you. He does his carp scowl at younger brother as he climbs up, but the kid is undaunted, and goes thigh to thigh with the old codger for the last half-inch of seat space.

The doors slide shut. The train lurches westward. Out of the kids' regulation backpacks (*randoseru* from the Dutch *ransel*) comes their morning reading. What grabs me about these two now is that their books are not goofy *manga*, or even not-so-goofy *manga*, but real age- and gender-appropriate ("Hey!" yourself, friend.) books. Before the train is up to speed she's hunched over a copy of *Himitsuniwa*<sup>4</sup> and he's face-down over *Takaramonoshima*.<sup>5</sup>

The train now begins its ascent from the bowels of Osaka and soon it's nose is poking out of the tunnel into the brown Amagasaki sunshine. The bay is on the left, actually behind me somewhere, and over the heads of the codger and kids, looking north, I can see the snow-capped mountain range that tries to squeeze us all back into the water. In the earthquake, rails twisted like pipe cleaners into double helices over bridges and viaducts that disintegrated beneath them. Like the ones beneath us now.

Out from underground, a world all its own under the city itself, across the last wide river, the train approaches its first above-ground stop, *Amagasaki*. The eastern edge of the hardest stricken area. Carp-mouth has come to accept the existence of his tiny commuter-mate, and in the smog-diffused sunlight, his face seems to have softened a bit. After swapping a few passengers with the platform, the train pulls away from the station. I notice that the codger is first, glancing at, and then reading younger brother's copy of *Takaramonoshima*. Westward we roll on blessedly stable, stationary rails, my ears sealed from the din around me, my three fellow travelers across from me engrossed in their reading.

Next stop, *Nishinomiya*, and just as the train starts to slow, brother and sister simultaneously and wordlessly snap their books shut and begin procedures for disembarkation: books in *randoseru*, straps buckled, hats secure, train pass clipped to jackets fingered, glasses pushed up on noses. The sudden closing of the book has startled carp mouth a bit, but he recovers and, I'm betting, clears his throat, though I can't hear a thing. The train stops, the doors slide open. The train trades the kids for some twenty-something office workers. The day's grace abides.

The codger folds his arms across his chest, lets his eyes close peacefully. The train pulls away from the station.

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<sup>3</sup> It's that simple. Don't let anyone convince you differently.

<sup>4</sup> *Himitsuniwa* - The Secret Garden

<sup>5</sup> *Takaramonoshima* - Treasure Island