

## *My Graduation Trip*

Everyone has  
some fragments of precious memories  
in their heart.



Japan is a long-shaped chain of sea-girt islands that spreads from north to south, with many mountain ranges that run through its middle. This landform leads to characteristic weather conditions on both sides of the mountains. The climates are markedly different especially in winter: fine days with dry winds last in the region on the Pacific Ocean side, while areas with heavy snow fall spread on the Japan Sea side.

These two regions were once called the Front Japan and the Back Japan respectively; but since these names suggest a kind of derogatory image to the people in the latter region, they have become obsolete now. The southeastern region of the Pacific Ocean side has a large population, so it has developed and has taken a leadership role early on in the history of Japan. On the other hand, the countries by the Japan Sea side have fallen behind the times, therefore they have never been the focus of historical events. During the economic growth of the 1960s, the city businesses began to employ teenagers from the countryside, cheap and plentiful labour, to fill its needs. Following the ever higher demand for labour force, a particular phenomenon occurred in the provinces, including that area: students of tender ages were employed in the city factories in a mass group every year and they had to live apart from their families. For quite a long time making a living as a full-time farmer in the snow districts had started to be increasingly difficult. Consequently many men, breadwinners of their households, also had to go to work as seasonal workers or immigrant workers, leaving their wives and little children in their hometowns. Most of the poor farmers in those regions had to supplement their income by taking on jobs away from their rice fields. Some stayed only in winter and others settled down in Tokyo. They were all heading for Ueno Station, some lured by high wages and the bright neon lights of Tokyo, and others nourishing a ray of hope in their breasts.

At every year end, retrospective TV documentaries are usually broadcasted. In those black and white films images of the old Ueno Station are presented, on the background of the nostalgic popular songs sung by Mihashi Michiya or Kasuga Hachiro, and there we can see people whose faces look uneasy in the strange city. Behind the scene of rapid economic development, those who were left in the country had to work desperately in a corner of the grain fields, where various deities were believed to guard their paddies from the grove of the village shrine. There is still a lot of peaceful rustic scenery in the villages far from big cities, where those very people have preserved various ancient customs against the main stream. Most of them originated in agrarian culture and native animism and they are still performed in each season.

With the early and heavy snowfall in Tohoku region, that year was the

harshest winter in many years. Its records were rewritten at more than one hundred observation points. In snowbound regions, some roads were buried and closed because of the heavy snow. Moreover, a few villages ahead of the traffic standstill became isolated. Removing the snow from the roof as such is a common practice, but that large amount of snow was said to be nothing of the sort people had anticipated. The TV news reported that an old woman, who had more than four meters of snow around her house, had said her house was creaking due to the weight of the snow, but all she could do was sigh and pray. Another report said that the number of the victims who had passed away in snow shoveling accidents, such as falling off the roof or being buried under the snow, amounted to one hundred and twenty, and what is more, most of them were over seventy years old. The reality of the depopulated villages is harsh and brutal. Their inhabitants have to live in a constant dread of avalanches. Recent anomalies in weather have become the norm, and the mildness of spring and autumn has reduced. I wonder where have the Japanese ancient seasonal deities gone? Is it because we had ages ago forsaken the old ways of doing things in exchange for modern civilization? Nature has been polluted and destroyed for years, now we can see only its ruined scene. Yet, our generation can reminisce about the lost nature, but I wonder what the trip down memory lane will be for the next generation.

At the end of that year, it snowed even in Sakai: a small town in Osaka where snow has seldom lain, most likely, because of global warming. I looked out of the window, when fine snow was falling silently under a bleak overcast sky. Before long, the snow turned to large snowflakes and began fluttering down ceaselessly. Everything in my temple-yard became white with snow in an instant, and silence settled over the surroundings. The ground covered in a thin blanket of snow reminds me of a friend in Akita. He used to talk of the life in snowy country. During snowstorms, he could not go outside. Though reluctantly, he had nothing to do but play with folk toys by the fireside, irori. Actually, he had a great skill in playing at cup and ball. Snow shoveling, he said, was really a backbreaking job and he had got fed up with it. He mumbled he had been depressed just looking up at the leaden gloomy sky, he had had quite enough of snow, he could not really feel like being in a happy mood. For him, winter was nothing more than hatefulness. Therefore, I was often told sarcastically that he could not relate to a guy from the Front Japan like me, who was able to laugh merrily so frequently even in winter. I could imagine his life, but he could not imagine mine. Then he talked to me of his miserable experiences in his childhood: that he had fallen down from the roof of the main hall of his temple while removing the piled snow. Fortunately, he got off with only a slight injury, but then he had thought he would die. Besides, he had slipped into a night-soil reservoir by the side of a footpath between paddy fields

when he was playing tag with his friends. He explained that he had known its position but he had been so engrossed that he did not notice the cover which had been invisible because of the deep snow. I laughed at his funny story, but it was no laughing matter for him then. I knew how embarrassing it must have been. His friends bent over with laughter and poked at him, catching a whiff of the night soil, "You stink!" He said the smell had not come off of his body for three days. Poor fellow!

A snow landscape reminds me of my school days, as well. I will never forget the simplicity and the sentiment I had on my solitary trip to the northern region of Japan before graduating from university. It was snowing lightly on a February night when I finished writing my graduation thesis. I packed up my few belongings and left my rooming house for Ueno Station to take a night train bound for Sendai, holding a one-week discount excursion ticket tightly in my hand. In those days, it was popular for poor students to go youth-hostelling with a student discount. I could get on and off over and over again at any station for a five-thousand-yen ticket, by express but with an unreserved seat, and to lodge for five hundred yen per a night. The price included two meals as well. Hunger is the best sauce; that was no time to be picky about the food. I thought that trip might be the last chance for me to use the student discount. Some friends from the snowy district said that it was a ridiculous idea to make a trip on such cold days simply because I wanted to see snow, not to ski. But no matter what anybody said, I just wanted to see a snow landscape as the last memory of my school days; I had had a strong yearning for the life in a region with heavy snowfalls. Actually, I had no interest in skiing, or rather I could not afford to, I should say. I was living on a tight budget and I had no money to spare. Such an expensive sport was simply beyond my means. I lived on a monthly allowance and a part-time job, but the most part of it usually ended up being spent on drinking. I used to go on a spree with my friends, then finally I got fed up with it. I wanted to outgrow my playful but frivolous mood in those college days. So I got the idea of going on a trip in an attempt to make a clean break from my flippant days.

Despite the fact that it was almost eleven, Ueno Station, one of the terminal stations for the Tohoku region, was congested with passengers carrying large packages in their hands or on their shoulders. The bell rang loudly each time trains arrived and departed, and just hearing the repeated announcements over the station PA system got on my nerves. Crusted snow was stuck to the window frames of the train which had just arrived from Aomori, giving a shudder and grinding to a halt. The paint was off in places and rust had eaten deeply into the metal parts of the old car. Many people poured out of the cars with exhausted looks on their faces. I sat on a bench and savoured a can of beer. That was what I

had wanted, I would soon be a man in a carefree solitary trip. I was alone in the buzz of conversation watching those who came and went. Though it was around midnight, I could not even see their shades in the brightly lit station yard. A constant noise, brilliant fluorescent lights and the smell of diesel fumes in the air. "Unless I leave this hustle and bustle of the city, there is no way to get rid of my fatigue," I mumbled, bidding farewell in my mind to the carefree days of my youth, drinking a toast to myself with the rest of the beer.

The train I got on was relatively empty except for a few groups of ski passengers who were chatting and laughing. They turned on a radio and made a toast merrily when the train began to pull out. The more they drank, the louder they got; their raucous laughs were a little hard to my empty stomach. The car was stuffy with the smell of cigarettes, sake, shredded dried-squid and peanuts. As I could not sleep even after lights-out, I moved to a window seat in the corner. While the train roared through many stations, they ceased talking and seemed to drop off to sleep. I would wake up every time the train ground to a halt at a station. The windowpane was clouded up. I breathed over it, wrote my sweetheart's name recalling her face, then sighed and wiped it with my hand. A few drops of water began to run down the inner side of the fogged pane. The train was stopping at a station. It was snowing slantingly on a brightly illuminated empty platform. A limited express passed by with a roar, making the cars of our train sway. Soon the train moved again, I lit a cigarette, and my face was reflected in the pane by match-light. I closed my eyes and I looked back on my days gone by in Tokyo. The alarm of a crossing bell came near by and died away, I fell asleep before I knew it.

Early the next morning, I was standing on the platform of a rural station in Miyagi carrying a rucksack on my back. A bitter cold air stung my nose. The snowstorm from the previous night seemed to have raged before dawn. The whole world around me was covered with new-fallen snow under the clear blue sky. The snowdrifts were piled up high and the blanket of snow was dazzling. There I changed to a local train, and then made a bus connection for Zaou Onsen, where trees covered with snow are famous. The hot-spring resort was crowded. Most of the tourists fully dressed in colorful skiwear were in groups, so I felt like I was the only one who had put on a worn-out khaki duffle coat which I had bought cheap from my friend, and who was tired of flocking together. They were talking noisily about trivial things on a neon-lit street where many souvenir stores lined on the both sides. I realized then that I might have been touchy, their talk sounded stupid to me. I had imagined a calm snowy scene dimly lit by a yellowish light bulb and a rural atmosphere by a fireplace, where I could hear the local dialect. But it turned out to be quite a disappointment. I walked up to the outskirts of the town in the shades of night with the help of a map, and I put up for the night at a

shabby small youth hostel. There a futon had been laid in a three-tatami-mat room, and a small table had been arranged with a few plates of food. At the first glance, I couldn't say the food looked tasty, but I was satisfied to be able to appease my hunger. I got into the cold thin futon silently, closed my eyes, when I heard several hushed voices coming from the next room, separated from my room by a sliding door. Feeling uneasy, sleep didn't come to me until far into the night. Being able to soak my tired, stone-cold body in a hot spring was the only treat in that freezing evening.

Iwate, Aomori, Yamagata... After wandering about the snowy Tohoku region to my heart's desire, I finally reached Akita on the fifth day, at dusk. A snowstorm had set in since that morning. I quickly ate some noodles at a stand in the station, then I got on a bus to the terminal. I could catch a glimpse of the Sea of Japan from the bus window on the way in the twilight; countless crests of waves dashed against the rocks and broke with the ceaseless north wind under a leaden sky. Unlike its deep blue color in summer, the sea of Japan in winter was dark and severe. In the white of the broken waves I could read the harshness of the winter in that area, as well as the loneliness of the people who were almost prisoners in the snow country.

I got off at the terminal and walked along a narrow country road buried in snow. The cold wind pierced me to the bone; snow came into my eyes and clogged my shoes. Finally I arrived at my destination, when the shadows of evening were falling. I was standing in an open space at the bottom of the Shinzan Shrine in the Oga Peninsula. There was a big bonfire higher than a man, burning brightly and its sparks flew up so high that flames scorched the sky. People warmed themselves up while waiting for Namahage to appear. I got myself a cup of icy sake that really soaked into my throat. Suddenly, terrible growls echoed through the mountain and more than ten ogres came down yelling from the mountainside. They came up to the bonfire, barked at and almost bore on us. Some tourists desperately ran away slipping, fell on their buttocks, but scrambled to their feet, and ran away again. Another ogre now began to chase the others, who had cracked up a moment ago. The big shadows of Namahage ran around on the mountainside. Then screams of children and loud laughter of adults echoed around the bonfire. The sudden laughter cleared the atmosphere, and the spectators got excited like being kids again in a shower of falling sparks. Everybody entered the spirit of the performance; it was indeed an enjoyable evening. When I got to the day's inn, the snow had subsided. I felt the futon on that night was warm.

The next day I arrived at Yokote City, where a famous snow festival was

held featuring Kamakura, an igloo-like snow hut. When I got on the train in the morning, the snow was falling thick and fast. But by evening it stopped snowing. Night was descending upon the village. A naked light bulb of a telegraph pole lit the snowy road dimly. I was walking after my own long shadow. I used to play with my friends chasing each shadow in this way. A crowd came into view up ahead. I could see a number of Kamakura, large and small, dotted along the roadside in the snow light. The warm flickering candlelight tinged with yellow coming out of the entrance of Kamakura floated in the darkness. I kept on walking, throwing glances inside each hut. Each Kamakura had a small wooden altar inside, where the water deity was worshipped. Candles were lit and a few children were playing house in the big ones. I could hear laughing voices from the inside where the candle light picked out brightly. They spoke separately, but in unison, to the tourists who came and went, "Pop in, please!" I just wanted to have a look at the inside. A straw-mat had been spread on the frozen ground and there a small hibachi had been set up, a charcoal brazier on it, and two cute rosy-cheeked girls wearing cotton-wadded hanten were sitting in a most proper posture. I took off my shoes and entered one of the Kamakura with a stoop. "Good evening, may I sit here?" I said. The two girls bobbed their heads at me laughing. I sat facing them at a small hibachi with my back against the wall, whose glistening surface was icy and as slippery as glass. It was bright inside, lovely and warm. They were turning mochi upside down on a toasting net in the hibachi, where the charcoal fire was blazing bright red. I warmed my hands at the fire. They coyly served me a small cup of amazake and a piece of toasted mochi a small wooden tray. Hibachi, charcoal fire, partly burnt black mochi with their pleasant smell and amazake made of malted-rice; all those things reminded me of a good old taste in my home. "Thank you for the nice meal, it's tasty." I wanted to talk to them more, but they just looked at each other and giggled. I thanked them again and I rose to my feet to get out, when there was a sound like something had come off at my back. I discovered that the back of my duffle coat had accidentally touched the ice wall of the small hut and it had frozen. They burst out laughing. "They might have known that my coat had been freezing and sticking to the icy wall," I later noticed. It was so funny that I could not control myself, I walked laughing to the station.

I was happy I could feel those heart-warming nights, and I could meet such elfish girls in the snow. It was worth coming to Akita all the way from Tokyo. I was able to watch the folk entertainment and to feel their genuinely gentle nature. Lost in my memories of that trip, I was gazing at the rural snowy scenery outside the window on my return trip to Tokyo, finding my heart tranquil and filled with bliss.

Winter shows different aspects on both regions. On the Pacific Ocean

side, a gentle rain falling in February soaks into the dry soil and brings notice that spring is in the air. With the news of plum blossoms, people perform the ritual prayers for a good harvest even at a small village shrine. Festivals offered to the deity of the paddy fields are filled with a joyful air, and people's faces brighten up. Around the same time, the snow country is still covered with lingering piles of snow. The day is still far off when the frozen ground begins to thaw and the water of the melting snow streams into a brook. The harsh climate had refused the wave of modernization; therefore, the original spiritual climate of the Japanese may have been cultivated in the remote villages isolated in severe winter. Unaffected beliefs such as prayers to the deities have been passed down from generation to generation. Especially, Namahage and Kamakura are supposed to be festivals mainly for children and certainly produce a scene that reminds us of the world of folk tales. Waiting for the long dreary winter to be over, people from snowy villages have performed Namahage to awaken the early arrival of spring for the children who have been idle by the fireplace. Playing house in Kamakura has become a pastime for the snow country children. Water deities are believed to communicate only with children who retain the purity of heart.

People who once hankered for comfortable lives abandoned the snowy provinces tagged as the Back of Japan and sought success in cities. They may now think of themselves as being satisfied with urban life. But people who were born in a large city occasionally feel inclined to move to the countryside, where they can savor the rural scenery away from big cities: the smell of earth, the murmur of a stream, wild flowers and other living things. It may be their dream to return to their spiritual home and be in touch again with the simplicity of old times.

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#### Foreword

Just as I was completing this essay, my friend in Akita passed away. This year, almost forty years later, I repeated my trip to the North of Japan, with a far less light heart. I was carrying with me the burden of my own years and the indescribable sorrow at the loss of a friend.

It was snowing in Akita. I descended once more in snow country, this time to say farewell. I was no longer a poor student, I had traveled by airplane and I could afford to stay in a comfortable hotel and have tasty meals. Yet never had my huton felt colder, nor my drink more bitter.

Good bye, my friend! Until we meet again, this story is for you.

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