Summer

CHAPTER ONE: SPIRIT

The best way to think about reality is to get as far away from it as possible.

- Murakami Haruki

The sky lit up to the sounds of explosions, pyrotechnics casting magical colors across a moonlit summer night.

It was *O-bon*, the Japanese festival of the dead, a Buddhist celebration dedicated to ancestral souls who have moved on, and a time for those souls to return home once more.

Today's Japanese, it seems, celebrate the occasion with fireworks.

I craned my neck upwards, mimicking the locals, and found myself wondering how the lights could be so bright.

I was wondering where I was, and how I had landed in this farflung outpost called Mima, a small mountain town in the prefecture of Ehime, on the lush, isolated island of Shikoku. I was hundreds of miles from Tokyo, thousands of miles from my home, and light-years from my American dream.

Tucked away in Shikoku's southwestern, Ehime is a quiet, rugged, even mysterious prefecture, a distant world from the mass industry of Osaka and Tokyo and the ancient, traditional culture of Kyoto.

Even within Ehime, Mima is but a dot on the map, a country needle in the urban haystack that is modern Japan. Before I arrived there, I had scoured English maps to find it, but the town was virtually impossible to locate. In that sense, the town didn't really come alive until I learned to read Japanese, which wasn't until many years later.

It was like I had arrived into a dream world of total darkness, yet the sky above me somehow still sparkled.

I had reached Japan two weeks before living Japanese return to their ancestral homes to honor those who had gone before them. *O-bon* is one of the few chances each year that Japanese have to visit family, and that often means a trip to the country. Most of the people around me were returning to an old home, while I was arriving to a new one. The Japanese were paying their respects to the departed, and, in some sense, that was me.

Suddenly, as the last firework exploded, I realized what that meant: for the next year of my life, and perhaps even longer, I would have to learn how to make a life for myself in this

new home. There may have been ghosts in Mima that night, but mine was the only white face around.

Earlier that week, as I stepped off a 747 in the sleepy port city of Matsuyama, Ehime's capital, I wearily looked over three Japanese holding a white poster board sign that read "MILLER AARON" in black, block capital letters. I indicated that their sign referred to me, and the people began to smile.

Then, as if they had been practicing it for weeks, they waved to me and sang, "*Haaaro!*"

A man in his thirties, who called himself Arima Nobutaka, approached and put out his hand. I took it and shook; I remember this well because it was the last time I would shake a man's hand for a long time.

Next to him stood Inagaki Kazuko, a young woman who smiled cutely as she curtsied to acknowledge my presence.

"*Yokoso!*", she said, adding a nervous giggle. "Welcome to *Japaaan*!"

Inagaki-San said she was assistant to Sasaki Seiki, the small, gray-haired man standing next to her. At first this man said nothing, offering only a slight twitch.

I said hello, and I bowed deeply, as if it were my natural instinct. I had been practicing, too.

He smiled, closing one of his eyes gently.

Then I spoke the few words of Japanese I knew, to introduce myself, and Sasaki-San bowed back and said, "*Saank Yuuu*!".

The mayor of Mima had sent Arima-Sensei, Inagaki-San, and Sasaki-San as representatives of the town, and they had come to collect me at the airport in Matsuyama, which was also Shikoku's largest city.

I can still remember Inagaki-San fumbling the "MILLER AARON" sign as I approached. She was clearly nervous.

I could empathize.

Arima-Sensei showed little sign of anxiety. In fact, he showed little sign of much at all, keeping a straight face that appeared to be painted on. I had a hard time reading him, but I wanted to make a good impression, so I told him that he looked like the spitting image of the baseball star Ichiro, hoping he would take that assertion as a compliment.

He laughed, briefly, but then replied, "Everybody says that," and then his face returned to stone.

I had actually arrived to Japan a few days earlier, but I had spent those days in Tokyo at an orientation for all new participants of a program known as JET – Japan Exchange and Teaching. For the most part, this orientation was a jet-lagged daze of which I remember very little.

The JET Programme was an initiative of the Japanese government, and it brought thousands of young wanderers like me to Japan each year, mostly lost souls of an unnamed generation. Many of the people I met were just like me, looking for a global adventure. For some reason, the Japanese thought we would make good English teachers.

Like many of my contemporaries, I was just happy to have a full-time job, even if it had a less than ideal commute.

Back at the airport, Arima-Sensei dutifully loaded my belongings into Sasaki-San's car, and we began to drive slowly toward Mima. When the words found her, Inagaki-San spoke to me shyly in English, but I had no choice but to respond through Arima-Sensei, who was and would for many months be my trusted translator. At the time, I had no ability to speak even the simplest expressions in Japanese, and Inagaki-San could not understand much of what I said. Sasaki-San could not speak any English.

Arima-Sensei was patient, listening to my questions and then translating them for his colleagues to answer. He was a thirty year-old English teacher, he said, but he made it clear he wanted to defer all questions to Sasaki-San, who would be my boss.

Arima-Sensei's English seemed rusty. Though he had lived in the United States for over a year and a half, he said, it had been several years since his return to Japan. He apologized, bowing from his perch in the front seat. I thanked him for his help, and told him not to worry about making mistakes.

We stopped at a restaurant near the airport. Everyone ordered thin, brown *soba* noodles for lunch, so I followed suit. It was a hot and humid August day, and the cool air conditioning of the restaurant felt like a desert oasis. We ate in near silence, interrupted only by my questions about my new life.

"Mima is a small town in the mountains," Arima-Sensei translated. "You have your own apartment, and you'll be teaching mostly at our middle school."

I was giddy, excited to see my new home and meet my students. If it is in the mountains, does it snow? *Yes*. Are there ski slopes? *No*. Is it beautiful in the winter? *Yes*.

Their terse replies felt like a shushing mother, gradually lulling my questions – and my excitement – to sleep. I wanted to know everything about Mima; they wanted to eat their food in peace.

We climbed back into the car and cruised up a winding river valley road flanked by lush, green, towering mountains, the city of Matsuyama fading in the rearview. I stuck my head out of the car window to cool off and catch the peaks. I had never seen any place in the world like it.

Through Arima-Sensei, Sasaki-San warned me that what I was doing "might be dangerous", so I curled my head back in.

I had so many questions.

How long was the journey to Mima? *About two hours*.

What is this town that we are passing through called? *Uchiko*.

What do you all do for a living? *Board of Education Section Chief, Section Chief Assistant, English Teacher*.

So will I be working with you, Arima-Sensei? *Yes*.

Realizing that Arima-Sensei would be my colleague at the middle school came as a bit of a surprise. I had not heard from him before my departure, though another English teacher from Mima Middle, a woman called Futagami Mamiko, had written me a letter. Why hadn't Arima-Sensei contacted me, too? If we were going to be close colleagues, why hadn't he at least signed Mrs. Futagami's letter?

I was still jet-lagged from the long flight from California, and I tried not to doze off as we began to climb up a steep mountain road.

When we finally arrived in Mima, population 6,600, it was nearing dusk and the sky was turning pink. The sunset over Mima's flooded rice paddies glimmered on the Western horizon, sinking softly over distant, wavy mountains. The dimming of the day was telling my body to shut down.

Sasaki-San suggested we eat dinner, but I refused. I wasn't hungry, and I was tired, and anyway I assumed it was the Japanese custom to politely decline such offers. But Sasaki-San refused to accept my refusal, and I refused to accept his refusal of my refusal, until

finally I had no choice but to give in. He was older, after all, and I had heard in Tokyo that I ought to defer to authority. This was a battle of etiquette I would lose many times over the course of many years living in Japan.

Inagaki-San bowed and exited – for some reason she was entitled to refuse Sasaki-San's offer – but Arima-Sensei joined us at Bunkate, Mima's Chinese restaurant, which served dishes like fried rice, ramen, pot stickers, and sweet and sour pork.

I obviously couldn't read the menu, so Sasaki-San ordered *miso ramen* for all of us, a delicious mix of pork broth and *miso* soup, with hefty helpings of vegetables and seafood and yellow ramen noodles. I immediately fell in love with it. It was salty, savory, and hearty, a bit like the chicken soup upon which I was raised, but richer and better with beer. Soon, *miso ramen* would become the staple of my diet in Japan.

On this first night in Mima, though, I couldn't really stomach it. I sat in Bunkate's small private *tatami* room just staring at it, wanting so badly to finish it but being consumed by very different feelings.

For the first time, I felt very homesick. It had taken a short eternity to get to Mima; from Oakland to Los Angeles: one hour, from Los Angeles to Tokyo: twelve hours, from Tokyo to Matsuyama two hours, and from Matsuyama to Mima, another two hours. Traveling this distance would have taken weeks, maybe even months, just a century ago, but even via modern means the distance was beginning to take a toll. I fell quiet, stopped asking questions, and stared into my bowl of dark brown soup, my eyes bloodshot from repressed urges for sleep.

Arima-Sensei and Sasaki-San sensed this, I think, and they called for the check. They still had to show me to my apartment before I could finally rest. Thankfully, my new home was just around the corner from Bunkate, in a long, brown one-story building reserved for Mima's teachers. Arima-Sensei explained that other teachers working in Mima used the three adjoining apartments as temporary weekday residence, their late working hours prohibiting a commute back to their hometowns.

My new home was raised up on cement blocks to guard against flooding, and at its entrance a second step was required to enter the main part of the house.

As I entered, the smell of damp *tatami* grew stronger with each step, and, because it was a smell I had never smelled before, an overwhelming sense of loss rushed over me. At the time, I would have rather been anywhere else in the entire world. As if to highlight that feeling, I immediately hit my head as I crossed from the foyer into the house. In my wearied stupor I had not realized that I was taller than the thresholds of my new home.

My head pulsating, I surveyed my new dwelling: a kitchen, a bedroom and a extra *tatami*-floored living space were laid out like the vertices of a triangle. Next to the entryway, I

found a toilet with no plumbing, and on the other side of the kitchen a shower and laundry room.

For these amenities, Arima-Sensei explained, I would only be responsible to pay for heat, water and gas I used; the rent would be paid by the Mima Board of Education.

“It’s nice. Thank you.” Sasaki-San nodded, and then he smiled. “Please relax here,” he muttered softly, and then both men returned to the dream world from whence they came.

I did the limbo into the bedroom and collapsed on a futon that had been laid out for me. Blissfully, I closed my eyes and listened to the summer cicadas out my window serenade me to sleep, wondering where in the world I was, and why I had ever agreed to live there.

The sun rose over the rice paddies and warmed my new home like a pot of green tea. It was dawn, but I had been awake for hours. The heat of this summer morning had overwhelmed my slumber.

I did not yet know how to operate my air conditioner, so I rose, bathed in a tub half an adequate size, and savagely downed two bread rolls. They were, for some reason, filled with hunks of cheese and butter.

Inagaki-San had delivered them to me the night before, just as I was dozing off. I snapped out of bed to greet her at the door.

“I…I…I…” she stumbled, “I think you…like *pan….eto...ano…breddoo*.” She stepped back, uncomfortably, as if I might slap her if she mispronounced another English word. “I…I…made myself.” I bowed and thanked her in Japanese, butchering her language as well I am sure.

To what did I owe such kindness?

I began investigating my new home. It was anything but spacious, and the ceilings were low, but it had everything: pots, pans, tables, chairs, television, even a washing machine. In the smallest room of all, there was a high-powered squirt gun to clean up toilet “residuals”.

I was shocked to see that my bathroom didn’t have plumbing. Hadn’t I arrived in the world’s most technologically advanced country? I would later learn that I was lucky to have a western-style toilet at all – many JET Programme participants living in rural Japan were forced to use traditional Japanese squat toilets. At the time, though, I just had to laugh.

I stepped outside to have a look around. My back yard was small but beautiful. A square plot of land about the size of an American driveway was covered in lush green grass and blooming azaleas. My first thought was to start a garden.

I decided to take a stroll around the neighborhood to get my bearings.

It was just after dawn and the streets were empty. The early morning daylight seemed dimmer than back home, foreign and new, and I was captivated my Mima's natural beauty. The mountains that surrounded Mima stole my gaze, rising abruptly out of the flat valley to heavenly heights, and I could see their reflection in the rice paddies that fanned out in every direction. One in particular towered over Mima; it was so huge it made up the entire southern horizon. I later learned it was called *Izumiyama* – "Spring Mountain" – and it reminded me of the mountain shadowing my own hometown back in California. I looked up at it and took a deep breath; there was something oddly comforting about living in the cool shade of a mountain, as if inanimate soil could help you forget your fears.

Life had taken a strange turn for me.

I had boarded a plane in search of excitement but found myself amidst only confusion. I had flown very far west but found myself in "The East", which seemed only to make that confusion more apparent, and more intense. It would be months before I could understand even the basics of the world that surrounded me, like how to use chopsticks, read a restaurant menu, or have a simple conversation.

I wondered what sort of life I had chosen for myself.

Not that this was Japan's fault. College in America had brought me no closer to knowing what to do with my life, and I had spent four years there. Sure, the American "economy" wasn't exactly humming when I graduated, but many of my peers had landed good jobs. I had mostly been wandering a directionless path, purposeless and without a plan, so I had no one to blame for the predicament but myself.

Later that morning, after I returned home from my walk, Sasaki-San knocked on my door and gestured that we had to attend to some business. Arima-Sensei, who I later learned lived in Matsuno, a town twenty minutes east, was not yet in Mima, so Sasaki-San said, "No, no!" when I asked where he was. Without him, Sasaki-San and I were forced to rely on body language and pointing to communicate our ideas. He motioned down to the end of the street, and then pointed to his nose. I hadn't realized that Sasaki-San lived just three houses down. Bonsai trees and a finely groomed rock garden framed his large, beautiful traditionally-designed Japanese home.

Sasaki-San motioned for me to get into his car. We drove around the corner past Bunkate. Suddenly, Sasaki-San stopped, and we waited silently at some train tracks as a short and stocky one-carriage train passed us heading west. It was riding so high on the tracks that it looked to be on stilts. As we crossed the tracks, Sasaki-San noted a grocery on our right. In red and green English letters, the store announced itself – "A-COOP" – and Sasaki-San scooped air into his mouth, pretending to be eating.

When the street ended, he pointed to the left and showed me my new office, saying, "school" as he did. I was a bit surprised he knew the word – by then the only other English words he had used were "Yes", "No" and "*Saank yuuu*!" – but he was the head of a Board of Education that mandated English curriculum for students age 12 and up, so I should not have been.

From the school, Sasaki-San turned down Mima's "Main Street", if you could call it that. It was more like Mima's "Only Street": a narrow alley of old wooden structures lined with barbershops, clothing stores for old women, and a single indulgence for parents (liquor market) and children (toy store) alike. Suddenly, the row of shops ended, and through the windshield we were once again staring at miles of rice.

Where was the rest of the town? Where were the bookstores, the bars, the cafes, and the nightlife? Where was the commerce, the industry?

Where were the *people*? By now it was 10am, but still the streets were empty, just as they had been when I had walked the town at dawn.

We turned the car around. I realized that our town tour was over.

Sasaki-San parked in front of a large white building toward the eastern end of "Only Street". Near its front door hung an English sign that said, "Town Hall". We entered and passed a spacious, cubicle-filled office. Inside there were dozens of workers, dressed in matching uniforms and sitting quietly in front of boxy desktop computers. Was this a bank? Post office?

I followed Sasaki-San as he made his way down the hallway. As we walked, I bowed profusely at everyone who acknowledged my presence, hoping I could trick them into believing that I'd been in Japan before, that I knew what I was doing there. Some people bowed back, so I smiled. Had my trick worked?

We climbed some stairs and entered another office, and I was instructed to take a seat on a black leather couch and wait. Sasaki-San said, "No. Go," and made and X shape with his arms.

After a few minutes, an older, bald man arrived. He bowed and I bowed back. He did not smile. Sasaki-San and the bald man jabbered about something for a while until a knock finally came on the door. It was Arima-Sensei.

"Thank God!" I thought. I hadn't been with Sasaki-San for that long, but I was quickly exhausting my vocabulary of gestures and the inability to communicate was quickly becoming intolerable. Sasaki-San spoke fast, and very little of what he said – even when he could find an English word – made any sense.

Arima-Sensei bowed deeply to the bald man and repeated the word "*Hai*" to what I can only assumed were the bald man's commands.

"They want to give you the contract," Arima-Sensei said. "Please stand up."

Although I had accepted from the Japanese government a free flight from Los Angeles to Tokyo, and three nights in a four-star hotel there, I had not yet signed anything agreeing to live and work in Mima. In principle I was committed, but obviously, signing the contract set that commitment in stone. For a moment, I had second thoughts, and I could feel my palms growing moist with sweat. I had never traveled so far before. Jet lag still felt a truck that had hit me at full speed. I was homesick and beginning to have second thoughts. But now it was time to commit.

"It's only a year of your life," I said to myself, rather foolishly. Then Arima-Sensei showed me the dotted line, and I signed.

A small ceremony ensued, and in a moment we were in the hallway.

I asked Arima-Sensei for a debriefing: "What just happened? Who was that bald man? What were they saying?"

"That was….was…the Mima Town mayor," he stammered, "You…just…agreed to teach in Mima for one year".

"Oh," I muttered, and I felt my heart drop to floor. As the son of an attorney, I had committed a cardinal filial sin, signing something I couldn't read, let alone understand. Hearing Arima-Sensei confirm my mistake made me feel even worse.

Sasaki-San approached us, smiling. Then, he said one word that I did know in Japanese – "*sayonara*" – and he walked down the stairs.

Sayonara to a year of your life, I thought. It seemed like the perfect word to sum up the moment: terse, cold, and final.

As Sasaki-San turned and walked away, all I could think about was how confused and alone I felt, wishing I understood more than just this one word of his language, and wishing he understood many more of mine.

That night, a sweltering night on which even the insides of my ears seemed to drip with thick beads of sweat, I found myself at Bunkate yet again.

When I had been there with Sasaki-San and Arima-Sensei, they had done the ordering. This time, I pointed, probably rudely, at a table in the corner, unable to accompany the gesture with any sound at all. In that corner sat an old farmer just in from the rice fields – he was covered in dirt and donned a faded baseball cap that read "JA (Japan Agriculture) Mima." I would soon be eating whatever was on his plate.

As I waited for this meal to arrive, I stared at the menu completely mystified.

What did all these characters mean? I had never lived in a country where I could not understand the language before. I had heard that *kanji* characters had been borrowed from Chinese, but why did the Japanese use them? They seemed a very complex way of forming a written language, so why would any nation in their right mind want to use them? Why were there two other scripts – *hiragana* and *katakana* – mixed in with the *kanji*? Why not just combine these into one language, for simplicity?

In Tokyo, some JETs who had been to Japan before informed me that *hiragana* and *katakana* were easy to learn, but I wasn't so sure. Many of them looked similar and were hard to distinguish from one another.

I opened a yellow bilingual pocket dictionary that I had bought a week before my departure. If I was going to learn Japanese – said to be among the hardest languages to learn for native English speakers – there was no time better than the present.

I started searching for the words on the menu. First, I located the most common character on the menu – a "+" shaped design with four diagonal lines splashing out from the center – and looked it up. It looked like this – 米 – and the dictionary said it was pronounced, *kome*, and denoted a staple grain that had me surrounded.

Rice.

Aha! I yelped, almost audibly, and I grinned to congratulate myself. Naturally, rice would be on the menu *at a Chinese restaurant!*

I looked up another character common to the menu and realized it was the character for "noodle". It looked like this – 麺 – and was pronounced *men.*

This was temporary euphoria, though, and it didn't take long to realize how sophomoric my discoveries were. *You're in Asia, you idiot.* I said to myself. *So what if you figured out the characters for "rice" and "noodles"!?*

With all the complexities of the *kanji*, and the strangely designed indexing system of my dictionary, it took me a few minutes just to find each character on the menu, let alone memorize them.

I finished my meal and rose. I walked to the cash register and, not quite yet understanding just how much value a yen had, tried to offer the chef a tip. Bunkate was the only restaurant in town, so I figured it might be a good idea to get on good terms with its chef.

He waved a flat hand in front of his face, the preferred gesture of Japanese men wanting to turn you down. At the time, I neither realized that tipping was uncommon in Japan, nor that my offer of ¥3,000 ($30 dollars) on a ¥1,000 ($10) meal was quite ludicrous. In an ensuing battle of bows, the Bunkate chef out-insisted me, and I feebly put my money back into my pocket.

I would later learn an important lesson about why the chef had been so adamant: tipping was not common in Japan because workers were generally paid a fair wage and good service was expected. If I had tipped him, I might have insulted him and his sense of duty.

In the evening heat outside, I dripped my way back to my apartment. Even in a summer sweat I couldn't help but marvel again at Mima's calming splendor: a sweeping valley of shaggy rice fields, shadowed by lush, emerald mountains. Izumiyama towered over it all, probably chuckling at my struggles to understand the language and customs of the people he protected.

A ceremony was held at Mima Middle to introduce me to the children – aged 11-15 – who would soon become my students. When I arrived to the gray gymnasium where the ceremony was held, I found the school's children sitting on the floor, single-file, straight and orderly like the carefully-planted rice paddies outside.

From a bank of chairs beside them, I was told to rise and approach the stage to deliver a speech and something called my "self-introduction". In Tokyo, the JET orientation staff had made it clear how important this introductory speech was to smooth social relations, but though I walked slowly to the podium, as I had been instructed beforehand, I realized that I wasn't adequately prepared.

Still, I had to say something, so I struggled through the Japanese words that a bilingual friend had generously helped me draft in Tokyo.

As I began to speak, I noticed that the audience was oddly silent, as if I were telling a ghost story. I started to feel my palms clam up once again.

"I am happy to be your new English teacher," I told them. "I hope you will help me learn Japanese. Let's be language friends," I added.

Then I spoke of Mima's natural beauty, and though I knew that my Japanese ability was poor, that I was studying with all my might in order to improve.

When I finished, a young girl wearing glasses approached the stage, faced my direction, and proceeded to speak to me in a similarly unfortunate version of my native tongue.

"Welcome Mima!" she read from a sheet that looked like it had been wrinkled from nervous anticipation. "We…hope…enjoy Mima *Chugakko*!" she said, using the Japanese term for "Middle School".

That last word got me worried. If this was Mima's best student, and she had been selected to "impress me", how could it be that she did not even know how to say the full name of her school in English?

After her speech, the audience clapped, and I made my way back to my seat.

I sat down, waiting patiently as some of the other new Japanese teachers made their own speeches, and I began to look around.

Immediately, I noticed their shoes. All the children were in matching uniform, just like the office workers at the Town Hall, so only the different stripes on their shoes caught my eye. Red for girls, blue for boys. Otherwise, the shoes were exactly the same: rubber soled low-tops, made for running. There were no other noticeable differences between the students, either. No dyed hair, no tattoos, no wild cut-off jeans, no gold chains. No one even wore hair gel. Every child was the same, or at least they appeared to be.

We all sat quietly as the Principal spoke.

Then several students approached the stage at the request of the Principal.

What was their purpose? I asked Arima-Sensei, who was sitting beside me for support.

"She says that she will make an effort this year in school and with club."

"OK," I asked, "so does that mean that she did not make an effort last year?"

"No. But she was a bad student last year," Arima-Sensei said, and then he shushed me.

At the beginning of each term, I would later learn, "bad" students were required to apologize for their past wrongdoings in front of the entire school. These "bad" students did not, at least when judged by my American standards, seem all that bad. Maybe they failed to turn in their homework on time, or they forgot their gym clothes. Yet Mima Middle's Principal seemed to value embarrassment as a means of rehabilitation.

When these speeches had finally finished, the Vice Principal directed us to applaud and show our respect for the Principal, who had stood and was set to speak once more. The Principal climbed the stairs to the stage, straightened his body and bowed to the Japanese flag, a red circle on a white background. Then he began to lecture the students about taking school seriously.

My attention wandered around the room, first to the other teachers, who were seated along the side of the gymnasium in folding chairs, and then to the children, who sat uncomfortably on the hardwood. They looked forlorn, like they were waiting for a train that might never come. It almost seemed as if their spirits had been crushed.

I turned my attention back to the Principal, hoping I could glean some new Japanese words from his speech. I made out a word that I had heard before, so I picked up my dictionary to find it: *taihen*, meaning "very." But as I turned to proudly announce my miraculous discovery to Arima-Sensei, I jerked the chair beneath me, which made a loud screeching sound and rudely interrupted the Principal's speech. The eyes of the entire crowd turn to me. Knowing not what else to do, I bowed reflexively and tried to hide my embarrassment.

Silence followed, as the Principal waited for me to put the dictionary down. Perhaps my "self-introduction" speech had been delivered acceptably, but whatever respect I had earned from doing so, I had just swiftly lost.

I looked down at myself in shame; I stuck out like a sore thumb. I was wearing a black shirt and a silver tie, donned dark socks with brown shoes, and stood a good four inches taller than everyone else in the building. I was the only person not wearing white.

All of a sudden, I sneezed violently, over and over again as is my family's inherited curse. A sea of black eyes was upon me once again.

With great salvation the music teacher stood and made her way to a grand piano in the front of the gymnasium. She played a gentle melody, and the entire room burst into chorus. It was the school song, Arima-Sensei said, but since I knew none of the words, I tried to hum the melody instead. It sounded strangely German.

Later that evening, as I flipped through my dictionary trying to locate the words I had heard earlier in the day, I tried to shake the notion that my school was raising a community of computers. All the students dressed the same, they seemed to act the same, and at this

point, all they ever said to me was *exactly* the same. "*Haaaro! How are* yoooooou! I am fine, thank you. And you!?"

After the ceremony had ended, the schoolgirls laughed shyly when they looked at me, and the schoolboys laughed or smiled. Were they simply hopeful that I would not turn out to be another rule-making figure of authority?

The formality of the ceremony seemed to sap the life out of the children. They sat on the floor unable to demonstrate any individuality or zest, but then, I would soon learn, that was exactly the point. The idea that children should be seen, not heard, seemed to be alive and well in this part of rural Japan.

Why were there were no clowns to be reprimanded for disrupting the event? Because the Japanese teachers did not want there to be.

Why were there were no jokers passing notes to each other in mild, adolescent rebellion? Because the Japanese teachers did not want there to be.

For either of these infractions, there would have been strict repercussions, maybe even public humiliations.

In the audience that day, it seemed there was only one troublemaker, only one person breaking all the rules and making a scene: the tall California redwood dressed in black, surrounded by a forest of perfectly-trimmed bonsai in white.

Every day I rose at seven and was at my desk at Mima Middle by eight. It was a pleasant commute if the sun was out: three minutes on a rickety yellow bicycle that I had been lent upon arrival.

There were two English teachers at Mima Middle School: Arima-Sensei and Futagami Mamiko, the woman who had written me a kind letter before my flight to Japan. One day, a few weeks after my arrival, she approached me in the teacher's lounge, wearing a wide grin.

"Hello, Aaahhron. My name is Mamiko Futagami. Please call me Mamiko. Nice to meeech you!"

Then she said, "If there is anything I can be help…please tell me!"

Mamiko-Sensei was short and thin, like most Japanese women, and carried a cute grin on her face as she spoke. She wore a smart white dress suit the day we met. Her hair was cut

short like a schoolboy's, but appeared and acted very feminine. Her laughter – often a quick shriek – was jarring but deliciously contagious.

"I'm sorry I have not been here to show you around. I have been at a conference in Matsuyama since you arrived."

Then she repeated, "If there is anything I can be help, tell me, please."

For the first few weeks I lived in Mima, Arima-Sensei had been a good guide, introducing me to new people and explaining what was going on. But when Mamiko-Sensei arrived, I happily realized that there was someone else working in Mima who could speak English. I was relieved to realize that I didn't have to entirely depend on Arima-Sensei for help.

That day, after the children had gone home from their after-school club activities, Mamiko-Sensei invited me to have dinner at Bunkate. "I live in Uwajima," she said, referring to the nearest city, "but let's eat here since it is more convenient. There are many more restaurants in Uwajima; Mima only has one! Aaahhron, you can come to my house anytime. I can cook for you!" She tilted her head and grinned widely, showing no teeth.

I ordered what had by now become my usual – *miso ramen* – and Mamiko-Sensei left me at the table to chat with the cook. She returned to find me squinting at the menu. "Oh, great, Aaahhron!" Mamiko-Sensei said. "You can speak Japanese!"

"No", I replied. "Quite the contrary, actually. That's why I am studying this downright incomprehensible menu."

"Do you know what this one means?" she pointed to a character I had, of course, never seen before.

"No."

"This one?"

"Don't be silly, Mamiko-Sensei. Look how complicated it is."

"And this one?"

"Alright, that's enough Mamiko-Sensei."

She laughed heartily, as if she was proud to be part of a culture whose language was so complex. "But that's great, Aaahhron" she said, "you are making an effort, and that is very important, *ne*!"

I wasn't so sure. Learning Japanese was beginning to seem like an insurmountable task.

Even if I could not understand what they said, all of Mima Middle's teachers struck me as professional, friendly, conscientious, and very hard working. I gathered that just from watching them scurry around the school.

Work seemed to consume much of their lives, though, and later I would learn that they were hardly unique. In Japan, public school teachers are often referred to as *komuin* – "public officials" – and most of them take that role as civil servant very seriously. Even when the children leave school premises before 4pm (or 12pm during the "summer vacation"), Mima's public school teachers stayed at the office until long after the sun had set over Mima's wavy Western peaks.

I had invaded their lives during "summer vacation", a nasty euphemism that meant teachers only worked until 7:30pm, instead of the usual 9pm. I felt bad that I could not help them with their work, which was obviously conducted in Japanese, and that my presence probably meant more work for them.

Like the children they must guide, the teachers also dressed their part. Even the physical education teachers at Mima Middle wore shirts and ties atop their tracksuits, symbolizing their dedication to educational professionalism and to the sports club activities they supervised. As they shuffled paper around their cluttered desks, one teacher's stack of textbooks the only barrier between her desk and a colleague's, I began to admire their work ethic. I marveled at the stoic mentality. There were no "Gone Fishing" signs on people's desks; you were gainfully employed and you were thankful for it.

I had various duties at Mima Middle but none of them were particularly challenging. Since I didn't speak any Japanese, little more beyond speaking English was asked of me in the first few months on the job. Showing up, joining Mamiko-Sensei's or Arima-Sensei's English lessons, and telling the students about my country and its language was enough. I did not need to be prepared with detailed lessons on dangling participles; I was informed that describing photographs of my high school friends would be sufficient. Mamiko, Arima-Sensei, and I would perform what was called "team-teaching", which meant I could stand back while they taught the nuts and bolts of my language, and ask simple questions or articulate simple words with my "native fluency" whenever called upon.

I still remember giving my first lesson to a group of thirteen-year-old 2nd year students. They quietly listened as I showed them pictures from my home in California. "Here is my family," I said proudly, "and here are my friends. His name is Tony. He is very good at American football!"

Mamiko-Sensei said the subject matter was fine, but the students who could understand my babble must have thought I was a fool, or worse, a braggart.

After delivering my "self-introduction", I knew that I had solidly established myself as an incomprehensible fool from a far off land of the slow and dull. The most focused students surely saw right through this hollow opening. I spoke no Japanese, knew nothing of Japanese customs or culture, and had no knowledge of Japanese history, politics, geography, or art. I knew very little about the job I was being asked to do – I was not a trained teacher – or the situation I had gotten myself into. Even I wondered why these poor students should have cared about anything I was saying.

Unless I was content showing pictures of my family and friends for two years, I had a lot to learn. At least I had Mamiko-Sensei and Arima-Sensei to lead the way.

I had not seen Sasaki-San since I had signed my contract with the mayor, but he came to my house one day toward the end of the summer to help me sort my garbage into recyclable and non-recyclable bins. He moved swiftly as he did, muttering something I couldn't grasp. For all I knew he was saying, "You have to eat the rest of this apple core – the authorities won't take it away like this."

He instructed me to take the bags of garbage to the A-COOP, where I would find caged dumpsters, so I bowed and followed his advice. It was the night before garbage pickup, and my house was starting to smell like a sewer, so I hopped on my bicycle with two large sacks of trash weighing me down evenly on each side.

On my way, I met my first Shikoku pilgrim.

"*Sumimasen....garbage doko ni*?" I said, bludgeoning Japanese grammar like a toddler smashing a toy truck.

The young man shrugged, so I pointed to my sacks.

"I'm not from around here," came the reply in a language I strangely recognized. "Sorry".

His shirt was ripped, his shorts were caked in thick dirt and he was wearing a cone-shaped hat, like the Mima rice pickers I had seen in the fields. When he turned around, I realized he was backpacking.

"Where are you from?" I jumped back excitedly, forgetting about my garbage and hoping that his first well-enunciated English line had not been a fluke.

"Tokyo...My name is Taku. I am *henro*." What is *henro*? I thought to myself, and then I remembered that he could speak English and I no longer needed to relegate myself to internal monologue.

Taku explained that *henro* were pilgrims who walked around the island of Shikoku, visiting 88 Buddhist temples along an 868-mile trek. He said the journey could take months to complete, and that *henro* were tracing the steps of the Buddhist prophet Kukai (774-835), posthumously known as Kobo Daishi, who brought Shikoku great fame when he walked this route in the year 815.

I nodded in complete bewilderment, not at the enduring tradition or the physical feat, but at the simple fact that he could speak English. By then it had been weeks since I had had a regularly paced English conversation.

Taku explained that Kukai first made a name for himself by traveling with Japan's ambassador, Lord Fujiwara, to the T'ang Court in Chang'an, China, in 804. He had been selected to make the journey because of his mastery of Chinese calligraphy, and for the next two years, Kukai shadowed the great Chinese Buddhist master Hui-Kuo, who had himself learned Buddhism from the great Indian master, Amoghavajra. Upon his return to Japan, Kukai imported Vajrayana mandalas and mudras, along with the idea that the best of Buddhism could only be transmitted through art. In 815, Kukai paved a path for Taku through the mountains and valleys of Shikoku, and in 816, Japan's Emperor gave Kukai permission to build a monastery on the top of Mt. Koya, outside Nara. That monastery would later become the center of the Shingon ("True Words") sect of esoteric Buddhism, a sect in which only the initiated could learn the teachings of the Buddha, and all that they learned would be transmitted orally.

Like many *henro* who visit Shikoku each year to retrace Kukai's steps, Taku was hoping to find some of the great master's inspiration.

Two of the 88 temples happened to be in Mima, and, having already visited them earlier that day, Taku was now looking for a place to sleep.

I asked him if he had any luck finding accommodation. He turned from me and pointed toward the Mima train station, a one-room box that was delightfully decorated by the cobwebs of large, leggy black spiders.

I shook my head and invited Taku to my home. I wanted to hear more about his journey.

At the age of 14, Ashino Taku (he pronounced his name, "Taak") had traded suburbs, moving from Kamakura outside Tokyo to Ulster outside Boston. The move had unhinged him, and he had been traveling ever since, living as a wanderer with no particular destination. First, he had walked from Tokyo to Hokkaido, a journey of more nearly a thousand kilometers. Next, he bounced around Japan's northern island for almost a year, working on rice farms. Then, he moved to Germany, because his mother thought he needed to leave Japan to find perspective, and, perhaps, find a reason to settle down.

Taku spent six months in Europe, learning Spanish, Italian, and German. Before long he could easily communicate in all three, and he had of course picked up English living in New England. At 18, Taku found himself in the middle of the Pacific, learning Indonesian, too. Taku was a world traveler before most people even leave home.

Still, he was not satisfied.

Returning from Indonesia, Taku enrolled at Rikkyo University in Tokyo. Although Catholic priests run the university, studies at Rikkyo introduced Taku to Zen, another major sect of Japanese Buddhism. Having grown up in Kamakura, just minutes by bicycle from Engaku-ji, one of the most famous Buddhist temples in all of Japan, Taku was ready to discover Zen at Rikkyo. He began to practice seated *zazen* meditation daily, and he spent hours in the library, temples, and his professors' offices. But Taku stayed at Rikkyo just two years.

Buddhist monks nowadays have "squeezed souls," Taku said to me; they had "no spirituality". He saw the Buddhist monks who escaped to the hills to do penance as fake; they did their two years of training in Zen and then stopped, only practicing Zen as a means of becoming a revered monk.

To Taku, their ascent was merely political. They were climbing, not walking as Kukai had once done. I could tell he felt a deep connection to the man who had made Shikoku's pilgrimage famous, and that he was frustrated by a religion into which he had once place so much spiritual hope.

Taku was more purposeful than I had initially realized.

As Taku continued, my eyes wandered to his dangerously ravaged feet. One of his toenails, on his left foot, was bloody and looked like it might fall off. To myself I wondered: had he been walking around Shikoku on the tops of his toes, like a ballerina? Were his shoes too small?

"Kukai's journey was exaggerated, though," I awoke from my reverie to hear. "I do not think he really walked this entire trip."

How could it be that a disciple of the great Buddhist monk and the father of the Shingon School was questioning his prophet's verity? I wondered if sacrilege meant the same thing in the East.

"No," he replied calmly, "it's just that over the years, many people have embellished his story. I think Kukai walked some of this route, just not all of it."

"Why then," I asked, "do you still want to mimic the route and see all eighty-eight?"

"There is no reason to cut it short," he explained. "For me, walking is nothing. It is a spiritual experience, so I don't think about distance or time."

"You can reach enlightenment in many ways," Taku said to me as we finished dinner. I nodded, as if I understood.

It was getting late. Taku had another day of walking ahead of him and I had to go to work the next day. We both knew this, but continued to talk anyway. It seemed to me that I ought to hang on his every word. *Do not waste this opportunity to hear such a wise man speak*, I thought to myself. You may not meet anyone like him again.

Just before we turned in, Taku told me, "I don't know why I am walking. If I knew why I was walking, I would not be walking." I knew very little about Zen, but that sounded very Zen to me.

Taku's words reminded me of Bruce Chatwin's theory that walking, in and of itself, is sacramental, like a prayer offered with each ensuing step.

And yet Taku couldn't explain it this way, because, despite his fluency in my native tongue as well as the tongues of others, language could not fully capture his movement's inherent sanctity. Zen was, I was learning, all about leaving the important things unsaid.

Taku slept on my hard *tatami* floor that night. He declined my offers for a futon or blankets. He said he was used to sleeping with just a jacket for a pillow, and was beginning to prefer it that way. When we woke the next morning, it was raining outside. I asked him if his next night would be spent sleeping in a rain-soaked train station somewhere.

"Maybe," he said, "but that is no problem. At least I will have shelter."

Taku wouldn't see his next temple until the following week, though when he did, he would be able to see three or four temples that same day. He carried no map to show him the way; he insisted that it made good conversation to ask for directions.

The kindness of strangers was all the light he needed.

Tan, thinning, and beginning to physically break down, Taku had plenty of reasons not to see all eighty-eight. But I knew he would one day.

Taku thanked me for what he called "*O-setai*" – the alms Shikoku residents offer to *henro* as they walk the eighty-eight-temple route – and he stepped out of my apartment to begin yet another day of walking. In his hand, he held my forgotten garbage, promising to put it in its proper place.

At Mima Middle the next day, I told Mamiko-Sensei about Taku, and she smiled.

“That’s great, Aaaahhron! Taku sounds very strong.”

I tried to tell Sasaki-San about Taku, too, but I just couldn't find the right words to explain myself. On my front porch after work that day, while I flipped through my bilingual dictionary trying to find them, Sasaki-San must have concluded that the Japanese government had made a huge mistake when they hired me. *Who was this stuttering idiot from America, anyway?*

Though I tried to keep in touch with Taku via modern means, I never saw him again. Still, over the next decade I met hundreds of Japanese just like him, pilgrims pacing slowly and looking to find deeper meaning in their lives, pilgrims looking to reflect the light of past generations upon the present.

By the end of my first summer in Mima, I had been in Japan just a few weeks, but already I had met many of the people who would become the most devoted and trustworthy strangers I had ever known.

Little did I know then that my relationship with one of them would become one of the most significant and transformative relationships of my life.

Little did I know then that through this man, I would come to recognize that I was something of a pilgrim myself, wandering along my own long Shikoku path.

And little did I know then, that through this man’s generous friendship, I would grow to gain from dozens of other Japanese along that brightly lit path, all of whom would in their own ways suggest the endless possibilities of a life well walked, even in a world full of runners.