

# **Tokyo's Mystery Deepens**

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“Curiouser and curiouser,” cried Alice.

***Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll**

And then, if your ideas get larger and you want to expand—why, a dig and a scrape, and there you are! If you feel your house is a bit too big, you stop up a hole or two, and there you are again! No builders, no tradesmen, no remarks passed on you by fellows looking over your wall, and, above all, no weather.

**Badger to Mole in *The Wind in the Willows*  
by Kenneth Grahame**

To make anything interesting, you simply have to look at it long enough.

**Gustave Flaubert**

Be careful how you interpret the world: It is like that.

**Erich Heller**

# Introduction

I had to go get my visa renewed a couple summers back and as I was sitting there waiting for my number to be called, I thought back to what one of my colleagues asked me over drinks a week before. He asked me whether I felt comfortable living here. The question caught me off guard so I stammered, “Well, um, I suppose I do feel comfortable over a drink, but I am not sure about the rest of the time.”

My editor keeps saying this book shows how well I’ve adapted to Tokyo, but I’m not sure that’s true. Maybe I have accepted some level of confusion and disorientation, and work around it, just to keep going. I have more Tokyo habits, and find myself reacting at times not like an American, but like a Tokyoite. There are more and more places I love to hang out in Tokyo. So, maybe that’s adaptation of a sort. So, I guess in a way, these essays are somehow like drinks. I feel comfortable when I am writing about Tokyo, but I am not sure I always feel comfortable living here.

This second collection of essays about life in Tokyo was an even greater pleasure to write than the others, more difficult and more interesting, too. Tokyo is a place full of hidden meanings and provocative experiences. I feel

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compelled to think about Tokyo more and more with each passing year. Like Alice in Wonderland, I find Tokyo to be “curiouser and curiouser.” I start from a need to satisfy my own inner curiosity, but try to expand my understanding of Tokyo more broadly and deeply, too.

Tokyo's meanings appear only in scattered observations, odd experiences, and disparate fragments of life. Tokyo is a city that resists generalization, in a very willful and quirky way. Tokyo is a capricious city, so that you can interpret it in many different ways. Like a traditional Japanese garden, wherever you look it seems to be a different place altogether. Moments of alienation are followed by moments of exhilaration; aggravations turn to amusements; confusions tumble into insights. You just have to step to a different point of view and look again.

Tokyo delivers experiences in odd portions of wonderful and exasperating: the excitement of a great concert but with overpriced tickets; the fun of a night out with friends but in a smoky, over crowded room; the smell of fish cooking as I ride my bike home with pant legs soaked from the rain. I guess maybe I'm adapting if I know everything in Tokyo comes in such pairs. But no matter how Tokyo arrives in front of you, looking at it for a long, long time reveals its interesting side.

Tokyo is a city that is, in many ways, easy to ignore. Its size is overwhelming, of course, but its daily experience is



unimposing. There are no overt demands to participate or appreciate its beauty, like in most other large world cities, even though Tokyo can be a triathlon of a city. But, taking time to muse over the finer points of Tokyo life is always abundantly rewarding. Essays perform the task of finding the extraordinary in the ordinary and the unusual in the usual. So much of Tokyo seems practical, efficient and shiny-clean, but beneath that surface are hidden meanings and complex values.

My unconscious mind gets tickled all the time in Tokyo. I see things that are interesting, or they strike me as funny later on, or I just jot them down for no reason at all. I try to write down as much as I can, but most days in Tokyo, I see hundreds of potential essay topics. For this collection, I have written up the most interesting ones. In reading them, I hope the reader will find Tokyo as amazing as I do.

# **Part One**

## **Essentials of Tokyo-ism**

# Apology Speed

After clumsily stepping on the toes of a man getting off a crowded Chuo Line train at Yotsuya recently, I pulled up my foot instantly and said, “*Sumimasen!*” followed by a quick bow. The man look startled, perhaps because I was a foreigner, or perhaps because I shouted because my iPod was in my ears. In any case, he nodded in forgiveness. Though I didn’t time myself, I felt surely that it was one of my fastest public apologies ever! I felt a bit odd, as I didn’t decide to apologize. I just did it. “Man, I’m becoming Japanese,” I said to myself.

As I hurried away from the site of my latest impoliteness, I realized I had been bettering my apology speed little by little during the years living here. And though my Japanese may not be as fluent as I want, since I still stumble along much of the time, I do feel confident that at the very least, my apology speed is at a very high level. Perhaps the best sign of adapting to Tokyo life is apology speed. I’ll never be a native speaker, but I am already a “native apologizer.”

On that day, and others, too, I had a sense of pride in doing something so correctly Japanese. Most foreign-

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ers living here probably feel the same whenever they do something in the correctly prescribed form. A few small 'tricks' of the city, then, like standing to the side when train doors open or not using up too much space or politely standing in line, are evidence of the degree of being Tokyo-fied. The older women at the grocery store are always impressed when I shove my bag out of the way to give them room to pack their groceries. I guess they are calculating how long I have lived in Tokyo, and they are probably right!

The most common questions on the "adapting to Japan exam" are usually about chopsticks, *natto* and *seiza*. Unlike apologizing quickly in public, though, all of these skills can be acquired through practice and conscious learning. Other things are learned through embarrassment. When I first came to Japan, I used to always forget to take off the bathroom slippers, walking foolishly back to the living room before the startled glances of people clued me in. Now, I switch from slipper to slipper with ease. And just for the record: chopsticks, 'no problem'; *natto*, yuck; *seiza*, 5 minutes to numb legs.

I think apology speed shows the greatest adaptation to the public flow of Tokyo life. In other countries, of course, people also apologize, but in different ways and not so often. Every time I return to the States, my constant apologizing to strangers for small things makes me look like

a fool. It took me years to realize that I could still apologize without feeling terribly sorry or truly embarrassed. In Tokyo, apologizing is more of an expected response than a deep feeling. Apologizing is a kind of protection against a minor situation developing into a more difficult one. Keeping small things small is essential when one has thousands and thousands of interactions with people all day every day.

Most of those daily interactions are ignored and deleted like spam emails, but they need to be natural and immediate just the same. To keep a crowded city like Tokyo fluid and functioning at all requires millions and millions of small apologies and subtle bowing on any given day. One little “*sumimasen*” may not seem like much, but if all the Tokyo apologies were all to somehow mysteriously be silenced, the whole city would grind to a halt. Saying it is like throwing a little bit of oil on the huge social machinery to keep it running smoothly.

Apologizing means taking on a certain superficial, *tatema*e approach to the thousands of people one encounters every day in Tokyo. Like my iPod, it is a way of tuning people out. Tokyoites have an amazing ability to interact with people without really interacting with them. Like the automatic doors that automatically say “*Irrashaimase*,” most Tokyoites have a storehouse of phrases and gestures to be used in different situations, all of which come out as

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naturally as a batter's swing.

A stepped-on toe, a slight bump or inconvenience of any kind can all be acknowledged, apologized and forgotten in an instant with that special Tokyo brand of prompt, rather distant politeness. Apologizing is one of the best ways of keeping other Tokyoites out of one's mind. To spend too much time on a passing stranger is to over-involve and irritate that person. Tokyoites like quick, simple apologies so that they can get out of the situation and get on about their business. In the unceasing flow of city life, the speed of apologizing is liberating, letting an accidentally bumped-into person drift right back into their anonymous world.

'*Sumimasen*' is an important word in Tokyo but a more important attitude. In one sense, a public Tokyo '*sumimasen*' does not really count for much. Like most Tokyoites, most times, I'm apologizing because it's easier, quicker and less worrisome. Saying it, I do feel sorry, at least a little, and yet I don't in any larger sense. But the saying of it lets me keep swimming along in the fluid currents of Tokyo life. That is part of the great satisfaction of Tokyo life, bumping into small troubles, but then, with a quick word, to continue on without worrying too much about someone's sore toes.

## Looking Away

Getting on a train home from Totsuka one day I caught sight of the back of a foreigner's head. As usual, I looked away and headed for another part of the train car. But, for some reason, I glanced back and was surprised to see a friend! "Oh," I said, "I did the ignore-the-other-foreigner thing, but it was you!" "It's good you looked back," he laughed, "I never do."

He's lived here longer and is more accustomed to one of the basic "rules" for westerners in Tokyo: when you meet another one, look away. Even though it would seem that the minority of foreigners living here would converse easily, sharing a common experience, just the opposite is true. Westerners avoid each other as completely as possible. I *naturally* look away from the constant onrush of Asian eyes, but *intentionally* look away from the sporadic westerner.

When I first came to Tokyo, I looked straight at foreigners pretty often, curious to see their reactions to Tokyo and compare them to my own. Gradually, though, I started to look away. A friend who had lived in the Japanese countryside for years told me that when he first moved to

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Tokyo, he did what was normal among westerners in the countryside—cheerily shout out to other westerners, “Hi, how are you?” In Tokyo, though, he was met with frowns, shrugs and silence. Like me, he quickly converted.

This looking away is actually pretending to look away. Secretly, westerners watch each other rather closely, deeply curious, but covert in how they do it. It starts with a brief side-glance or dispassionate once-over. You look without really looking, a skill that Tokyoites excel at, too. At my swimming pool, if there is by rare chance a foreigner in there, I keep my goggles on and never stop. Underwater, though, I secretly check out what kind of person they might be as I swim past.

Out of the water, in the city, I can more easily tell whether someone has been in Tokyo longer than me or not. Standing in the wrong place on the train or talking too loudly are obvious hints at short-term status. From there, I calculate whether they seem to have adapted to Tokyo better than I have. The real test, though, is this: if they don't bother to look at me, they've been here longer.

Not looking is natural in Roppongi or the foreign book section of Maruzen Bookstore, where westerners abound. But sometimes, the 'look away' rule doesn't work. Stepping into a small hidden-away blues club one evening, my eyes landed on the sight of twenty-some foreigners dancing and drinking beer. There was simply no place to look



away! This group of lawyers celebrating someone's birthday was having too good a time to bother with the workaday 'look away' rule.

We chatted easily together that night, but I still had the discomfoting feeling that they were in "MY" blues bar. All those other westerners there made my going there feel less special somehow. I went there many times before them, so the territorial claim I staked on that little nook of Tokyo had been invaded. Of course, no part of public Tokyo is really anyone's special territory, but the desire to experience Tokyo uniquely alone, to uncover the city's exotic mysteries for oneself, is a strong one.

In my mind, Tokyo feels like an ever-undiscovered territory. When I see some foreigner in an unexpected place, I want to demand, "What are you doing here?" as if I had stumbled across another pith-helmeted explorer in some African jungle in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. "Tokyo is MY city!" I want to shout. The feeling of being some kind of brave explorer in an uncharted land is a kind of fantasy that seeing another foreigner instantly destroys.

Occasionally, though, it is nice to talk with other westerners. At a 'hidden' *onsen* in Gunma one snowy winter, my wife and I met another foreign couple in the *rotenburo*. We had a wonderful conversation, naked in the steamy night air, snow catching the lantern lights and a small river gurgling close by. It was a beautiful, shared occa-

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sion, though hard to repeat. If we did ever meet each other again by accident in Tokyo, after all, we would just quickly look away.

# Walking Shoji

At certain times of year in Tokyo, people lose face. Actually, they don't lose face in embarrassment; they lose face by covering them up with white gauze masks. Tokyo must rank first in mask sales in the world. During the rush hour, many trains look like a convention of surgeons.

For many allergy sufferers, spring is one long sneeze. And given that the cold season lingers long past winter, wearing a mask seems like a pretty sensible idea. In one of the most densely populated cities on the planet, micro-cosmic irritants like viruses, pollution and pollen are even more densely populated. Masks help keep those small enemies at bay.

But, other cities in the world are also germ- and pollen-ridden, yet, there, you hardly ever see a mask outside of Halloween or the operating room. On those days when I feel like I've stepped into some minimalist Mardi Gras costume party, I start to suspect that in Tokyo masks serve other purposes, and rather confusing ones, as well.

The standard white color seems oddly out of place. Tokyoites dress in the most stylish black of any city in the world, yet still seem unafraid to pull on a silly-looking

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piece of cheap white cloth. They lift up their designer glass frames to pull the little strings around their ears then carefully position what looks like a wad of tissue over their mouth. As unfashionable as it looks, it had better serve some practical function.

These masks also politely keep one's cold viruses to oneself while publicly signaling sickness. Whenever I see one, I tend to stand on the other side of the train. If a colleague has one on, you do not even need to ask how they are. The mask says it all: "Do not disturb." Their heroic appearance at work, sick as they are, finds them flying a white flag of surrender. Anyone with a mask on is best left alone.

Truly sick or not, masks, like a protective shield on cell phone screens, hide the communicative activity going on underneath. In this sense, masks offer some peace of mind hidden behind another layer. They are a helpful defense against Tokyo's constant human contact, where on an average day, you might have thousands of face-to-face encounters. Tokyo "face-fulness" can be exhausting.

When traveling outside Japan, I am always first struck by how expressive other culture's faces are. The closeness and numbers of faces in Tokyo, though, demand a sort of public blankness just to get through busy days of constant "interface." These white masks are an extension of this "Tokyo Noh mask," where the real character stays hidden deep inside.

This sense of gentle concealment runs through Japanese culture. To me, masks are a kind of walking *shoji*, letting in a little air, but offering privacy as well. This way of discreetly half-covering runs the gamut from fans to bamboo blinds to women covering up their laugh in formal situations. Though some other cultures cover bodies or sacred places in veils or cloths of different sorts, in Japan this partial covering up remains a complex gesture of communication, alluring as much as excluding.

For some women, the mask conceals their lack of time to put on cosmetics. They want either perfection or a curtain. I find these masks kind of erotic. They draw attention to the eyes, focusing one's gaze on the highly expressive area above the nose. Eyes, of course, are tremendously powerful communicators. Masks make people seem as if they will pull aside the cloth only to state their honest feelings or offer a passionate kiss. Obviously, no one wants more cold germs than they already get, but masks are never just masks; they really are about faces, eyes and feelings.

In Tokyo's dense and often fatiguing daily life, face-to-face contact can start to wear anyone down. Everyone's face needs a day off now and again. Masks give a little hidden distance that serves as remedy not only for colds and allergies, but also for the stress of a crowded city. Looking out from behind a mask offers a unique vantage point, and a very rare one in Tokyo, to see, but not really be seen.

# Tokyo Brain Navigator

At first in Tokyo, I felt as lost as a rowboat in the Pacific Ocean. Sailors have their sextants and pilots their radar, but no matter what technology is available, I quickly learned that Tokyoites need a brain navigator to get around the city.

Most Tokyoites keep their navigator unconsciously in their brain. It tells them which direction to go, where to eat, how to find things in a new area and guides them mysteriously home when they are totally drunk. It seems to be part of every Tokyoite's autonomic nervous system. But as a newcomer, it took me time to build my own navigation system to guide, feed and protect me in the city.

Mistakes were frustrating but instructive. At first, I constantly went out wrong exits, waited in the wrong place, and wandered forever to find a local flower shop or fruit stand for a gift in an unknown part of the city. I would get drenched before I could figure out where to even buy an umbrella.

The first month in Tokyo, I wandered into a sushi restaurant in Ginza with a traditional wooden front and no menu outside. Strange, I thought, no menu, but I went

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in anyway, sat at the counter and used one of my very first Japanese phrases: "Course and beer." That mistake cost me 12,000 yen, but became a data entry in my evolving navigation system: "Don't enter restaurants without a menu outside!" was programmed in forever after.

Another day, when my train into Tokyo from Saitama stopped, I thought I'd try a clever little end-run around the system. I took a train back north, thinking I'd switch to the Saikyo Line and go down along the west side of the city. Thirty minutes farther into Saitama than I had ever been before, or since, I finally got off, but had to take another local line to connect. Finally, I caught the Saikyo going toward Shinjuku, but got to work an hour and a half late. Never again would I try to out-navigate the system.

Little by little, the entries to my navigator database accumulated: where a good ramen shop probably would be (hunger builds the database quickly); which exit is simplest to meet (having once waited for an hour and a half at the wrong exit in Ikebukuro); and which streets are most unique (having wandered lost in dull back streets for years). My brain navigator gradually took over to help me get around.

These days, I pride myself on my personally built brain navigator. I am not sure exactly how it works, but it does. Yet, every time I do get overconfident, I end up getting lost again. I felt slightly humiliated earlier this year, when I took a colleague out, but could not remember exactly

where this British pub was. I had to ask at the *koban*, the clearest evidence my brain navigator had failed.

Other times, though, the navigator works better than expected. A couple years ago, I was looking for a small sake place I had the name of in the small streets of Asagaya. I walked around and around looking for the sign, but finally, I pushed open the small wooden door of an unmarked place, ducked under the *noren*, and heard, “*Ir-rashaimase!*” It was the place. “The sign fell down years ago and I never put it back up,” said the master! My Tokyo brain navigator’s advanced functions had somehow worked perfectly!

Tokyo is becoming more and more clearly marked these days, and there seems less need of any internal navigator. It’s all online. Many people, Japanese and foreign, now rely on the super-clear help of bright signs, colored maps and detailed directions rather than developing their own Tokyo brain navigator. These people end up following the map, but not really seeing the city.

A too-rigid straight-to-the-place simplicity misses out on the fun of navigation and the real experience of the city. Tokyo is not built from straight lines and pointed arrows, after all, but from delightfully fuzzy logic and deeply human intuition. The Tokyo brain navigator is not about just getting from point A to point B, but about understanding the tangled and fascinating realities of Tokyo, and adding them to the database one by one.