

Day 10: Gifts Along the Road

March 13

*“With no companion, I walk this road — the wind is my friend.” —Matsuo Bashō*

The day began quietly, wrapped in the hush of waves and the pale light of a sky not yet fully awake. I opened my eyes to the gentle rhythm of the tide brushing the shoreline, a sound both ancient and immediate, as if time itself had slowed to rest beside me for the night. My tent, pitched just above the reach of the surf, was beaded with a fine film of sea mist. I lay still, cocooned in warmth, reluctant to abandon the comfort of stillness for the promise of the road.

Eventually, I stirred, unzipping the door to let in the breeze. The air carried a mingled scent of salt and pine. My first steps were barefoot, tentative, toes sinking into the sand as I stretched and took in the changing colors of the morning. Coffee came from a vending machine, one of the ubiquitous comforts of Japan. I cradled the warm can in both hands, sipping slowly as the sky shifted from pewter to soft blue and a streak of sun crept along the horizon.

Today, the path hugged the coast, curling gently through sleepy villages that seemed folded into the rhythm of the sea. The pace of life slowed to match the tide, boats bobbing in quiet harbors, laundry flapping lazily on lines, a dog barking from behind a garden wall, then falling silent again. There was no rush here. Even the crows seemed unhurried, their calls softer than I remembered from the cities.

I set out walking along the coast as the sun began to rise. The sky was a brilliant blue, and the air warmed with a hint of salt. By midmorning, I ducked into the shade of a shuttered shop, where another vending machine offered cold green tea. The aluminum can was chilled against my palm. As I stood sipping, a fellow *henro* approached from the opposite direction. His face was lined, his eyes kind. We bowed in greeting, each of us carrying the wear and wisdom of miles. No words were exchanged, none needed. That silent bow, shared under the quiet shelter of an overhang, held everything: respect, solidarity, understanding.

Around noon, I came upon a small, unnamed shrine nestled beneath an ancient camphor tree. It wasn't listed in my guidebook. There was no plaque, no pilgrims gathered, no monk to greet me. Just a weathered offertory box, a tarnished bell, and a stone lantern tilting slightly beneath a shawl of moss. It felt like a secret place the world had left untouched. I lingered longer than I'd expected, letting the hush settle around me. I rang the bell softly and stood in silence, breathing in the scent of old incense and damp earth.

Heikki came to mind again. So did Jonah. I let them come without trying to make sense of it, these twin lives stretching in opposite directions from the same moment in time. Birth and death. Arrival and departure. How strange and beautiful that one week could hold them both. I

didn't need to resolve the mystery. It was enough just to stand there, held between grief and wonder.

Midafternoon, I passed a fisherman seated cross-legged by the roadside, repairing his nets with movements so fluid they seemed choreographed. His fingers worked with a grace born of repetition, patience, and necessity, looping, tying, pulling. I stopped a respectful distance away and watched, unnoticed or at least unacknowledged, allowing the rhythm of his work to steady my own breath. It felt almost sacred, as if each knot was an offering to the sea.

My legs felt strong again today. Maybe it was the rest at the beach, or the salt air loosening the tightness in my calves. Maybe it was just the mental shift, knowing I didn't have to climb a mountain or tick off a temple. I wasn't chasing anything. Just moving forward. There's a strange kind of freedom in that: to walk not toward, but simply with, the day.

Not long after, I came upon the *Kabuka Meoto Iwa*, two towering rocks rising from the sea, bound by a thick *shimenawa* (sacred *Shinto* rope). These "husband and wife rocks" were among the largest of their kind in Japan, and striking in their presence. According to local legend, if you pray to the rising sun as it passes between them, sometime between the autumn and spring equinox, you may be blessed with the meeting of your soulmate. The scene was deeply still, the surf brushing the shore in slow, steady breaths. The rocks stood as symbols of union, devotion, and something timeless. Even without the legend, their quiet majesty carried a blessing all its own.

As dusk crept in, I entered a small village. I aimed for a nearby elementary school I'd read about, supposedly a good camping spot for *henro*. But when I arrived, construction workers

at the gate shook their heads. “No,” one said firmly but kindly. I must have looked lost or tired, or both, because after a pause, he pointed toward the post office.

I bowed and walked in that direction, unsure what I’d find. At the post office, no one spoke English, but the moment they saw my white vest and *sugegasa*, their faces lit up with recognition. There was a flurry of gestures, some back and forth, and then one woman said with a smile, “*Busu* stop, futon.” I stared, confused, “Bus stop?” She nodded. “*Hai. Busu* stop, futon.”

So off I went again, walking into the deepening evening light. At the edge of the village, next to a bus stop, I found an old wooden outbuilding, part storage shed, part animal shelter. It was dusty and drafty, but inside, a futon and a stack of blankets waited neatly, as if prepared just for me. Someone had thought of the needs of a stranger.

Not long after I settled in, a local fisherman arrived. He carried a small Tupperware container, *osettai*, which he held out without a word. Inside were chop sticks, soy sauce, and fresh sashimi, slices of tuna and mackerel, still cool from the sea, glistening in the dim light. I bowed deeply and accepted the offering with both hands. He smiled, nodded, and disappeared into the evening.

It was the best sashimi I’d ever tasted. Not because of the fish, though it was excellent, but because of the moment. The generosity. The unspoken kindness of a man who had nothing to gain and gave anyway.

Eating there in the quiet, I thought back to the first time I had sashimi. It was 1990, during a trip to finalize a muffler design for Honda. I had flown into Tokyo for a string of tense meetings that left little room for breath. The atmosphere was formal, the language barrier ever-present, and every word from me had to pass through a translator, stripping nuance, humor, and

ease from already delicate negotiations. Still, the work progressed. By Friday evening, the key decisions were made, the design approved.

On Saturday morning, the chief engineer, Mr. Iwai, invited me to go sightseeing. I was hesitant—I barely knew him beyond the conference room table—but something in his gentle formality and quiet curiosity made me say yes. We drove out of the city into the countryside. The pace of everything softened. We visited a quiet Shinto shrine tucked among the pines, walked slowly beneath the tori gates, and shared the kind of unspoken reverence that needs no translation.

We had just left the shrine, heading toward another, when, out of nowhere, a motorcycle slammed into the front of the car.

The rider flew over the hood and landed hard. I jumped out and ran to help, adrenaline surging. The man groaned, too stunned to get to his feet. He was huge, well over six feet tall, thick-shouldered. I leaned over him. “Do you speak English?” I asked. “No!” he barked. Yet he knew some English and asked, “Do you speak Japanese?” “No,” I replied.

We stared at each other. Stalemate.

Eventually, a crowd gathered. Someone called the police. The ambulance came, lights flashing in the late afternoon sun. We followed it to the hospital. Having caused injury, we were expected to take responsibility and pay for the man’s medical bills. And then, in a surreal twist worthy of fiction, we discovered that the motorcyclist, this bruised, bewildered stranger, was also a Honda engineer, working at a different facility than Mr. Iwai.

So, what did Mr. Iwai do? In an act of hospitality that still stuns me today, he invited him home with us for dinner.

That evening, I found myself seated on a tatami mat in Mr. Iwai's living room, knees aching from the unfamiliar posture, a cold beer in my hand. Plates of sashimi were set before us—tuna, salmon, yellowtail—beautifully arranged on a lacquered tray. I hesitated for a moment, then followed Iwai's lead. The taste was delicate, buttery, cool. Foreign but not alien.

More than the flavor of the food, it was the mood of the evening that left its mark: three engineers, one slightly limping, eating together in laughter and quiet awe. Mr. Iwai brought out a guitar. We passed it around, each playing a tune, soft jazz chords, a Beatles cover, something vaguely folk-like. The language had failed us that afternoon, but music, like food, needed no translation.

Later, Iwai's wife drove me to the train station since we had been drinking and she had not. Before I stepped onto the platform, Mr. Iwai pulled me aside. "Please," he said quietly, "do not speak of the accident."

I nodded. I didn't. Not for decades.

Now, so many years later, here I was again in Japan, older, slower, a pilgrim instead of an engineer, sitting cross-legged in another quiet room. There were no songs tonight, no guitars, no temple bells. Just the rustle of wind across the old roof, the rhythmic crash of the sea beyond the road, and the hush that follows a day full of grace.

My meal was modest: sashimi, fresh and delicate, served without flourish. I ate slowly, gratefully, each bite carrying the echoes of that long-ago evening. The taste was nearly the same,

but my body had changed. My life had changed. And now the food nourished more than my body—it nourished memory.

The stars blinked awake one by one, shy and slow. I lay back on the futon, wrapped in borrowed blankets, and listened to the world breathe. The building creaked softly. A dog barked once in the distance, then silence again. My legs tingled with the good fatigue of many miles. My heart, too, felt stretched and tender, but in a way that welcomed sleep rather than resisted it.

And somewhere in that quiet, beneath the wood beams, beyond the tide, I felt held. Not by a roof or a futon, but by the road itself. By its gifts. By its kindness.

The road always seemed to provide just what was needed.