

## THE OLD MAN AND THE BATH

This is a story I've told too frequently; it's one I won't tell again.

I am in a hotel in Hiroshima, sitting on my bed. Spread across the counterpane is a map of the Tokyo rail and subway system. More precisely, it is a 'plan' and not a 'map'. A 'true' map of Tokyo's network of trains and subways would — like an unedited memory — leave one drowning in a sea of detail.

I have two reasons for studying the Tokyo rail and subway system. The first is purely practical. I am taking the *shinkansen* tomorrow morning to attend a conference in a Tokyo suburb and I need to find the nearest station. The second is more indefinite. If I can, I would like to establish a fact — a simple detail — to support a story, this story: 'The Old Man and the Bath'.

We arrived in Nakhodka — the civil port of Vladivostok — and boarded a ship for our passage to Japan. In Yokohama we were met by two representatives from the institution that was to employ us. One was short; the other was tall. Both wore sunglasses and sharp Italian suits. After our long, wearisome train journey across Europe and Russia, we might have hoped for a ride to Tokyo in the school car. But we were badly travel-stained and had shared our cabin with a boy from Nagoya who had been violently seasick throughout the two-day crossing. This may be the reason why we were led to the railway station and put on a train to Tokyo. There, dazed and disorientated, we disembarked and were met once more by our short and tall colleagues who now instructed us to take the *Yamate* line to a station near the hostel where it had been arranged we would spend our first night in Japan.

At that time, Tokyo station signs were not transliterated, and I vividly recall how apprehensively we counted the stops, anxious not to miss our station. But what was the name of that station? This is the detail I've never been able to recall or include in my story ...

At the hostel our clothes were taken away from us — politely but firmly — and each of us was given a small blue towel and a much-laundered *yukata* to wear. We were shown our sleeping spaces and then directed to the bathrooms. There I filled my pail from the taps and washed myself with a rough flannel before stepping into the steaming water. Sitting in the small, deep bath, the shaking of the train and the shuddering of the waves started to subside and I began to relax.

I knew, of course, that Japanese baths were communal but I hadn't expected to be sharing one so soon. Taking shape in the steam, my bathing companion revealed himself to be a wrinkled, elderly man who spent several minutes staring intently at my body. His skin was the colour and texture of a dried apricot; mine was as white as Knight's Castile soap.

Suddenly, the old man leant forward through the steam and experimentally pinched me. I stepped out of the bath. This seemed the best thing to do in the circumstances. Whereupon the old man also stepped out of the bath. I stepped back in. He stepped back in. And pinched me again. I stepped out. He stepped out. I stepped in. He stepped in. And pinched me twice. Harder. We did this two or three times more until — by now a little exasperated — I took hold of his child-size hand and crushed his knuckles as brutally as I could. The old man smiled at me sweetly and withdrew his hand. A moment later, he was about to reach out again when he seemed to remember something and stopped. After that, we sat and soaked together in companionable silence.

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I must once have known, but then forgotten, the name of the subway station near the hostel. Now, sitting here in my hotel bedroom in Hiroshima, I have the opportunity to fill in this gap. Then I make a most disconcerting discovery. Something which seems to show a flaw in my story. It was not the *Yamate* line we took on our first night in Tokyo. I have misremembered the name. The circle line that connects most of Tokyo's major stations is the *Yamanote* line. *Yamanote* and not *Yamate*. A single missing syllable. A tiny detail. But it unsettles me to find I have been wrong for so many years.

Returning to London, I forget all about my error. Until, at a supper party, the conversation turns to the Japanese and Japan: *Samurai*. *Geisha*. *Sumo*. *Sushi*. Shame cultures. Guilt cultures. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* ... The talk has become more serious. Those who know little shout down those who know more. Normally, to lighten the mood, I would take the opportunity to re-tell my story of the old man and the bath. "We arrived in Nakhodka — Nakhodka was at that time the civil port of Vladivostok — and boarded a ship ..." But on this occasion I let the moment go. Naturally no one notices. Why would they? My friends have heard the story many times before. Besides, the talk has moved on to China, Confucius and *The Analects* ...

Later that night, I switch on my laptop and type in: 'Yamanote'. I find that the trains that run clockwise round the *Yamanote* line are called *soto-mawari* or outer circle, and those that run anti-clockwise are called *uchi-mawari* or inner circle. It isn't something I knew when I lived in Tokyo. Should I now be seeking some hidden meaning here? Outer and inner? Light and shadow? Truth and illusion? '*Un train peut en cacher un autre.*' The endless knot. *Om Hrim Namah Shivaya*. But nothing symbolic or mystical takes shape in my mind. Instead, I fall back on the literal and concrete, which proves illuminating.

The official name of the line has always been *Yamanote* (*Yamanote-sen*) but it is written without the *kana*, or character, 'no': *Yamanote* / *Yamate*. On some station signboards the name was therefore transliterated as 'Yamate'. As a result, for many years, many passengers regularly referred to the line as *Yamate-sen*. Until 1971, that is, when Japan National Railways transliterated all the signs to *Yamanote* to avoid ambiguity and eliminate confusion. Everything is now explained. I was, it appears, both right and wrong. An odd satisfaction. However, I now realise that I have failed to establish the name of the subway station near the hostel. It hits me. This is a sign. A signal. I have told the story of the old man and the bath too many times. I must let it go. Allow it to pass on from an innocent anecdote to a fading memory.