ESSAY

A Year in Tokyo

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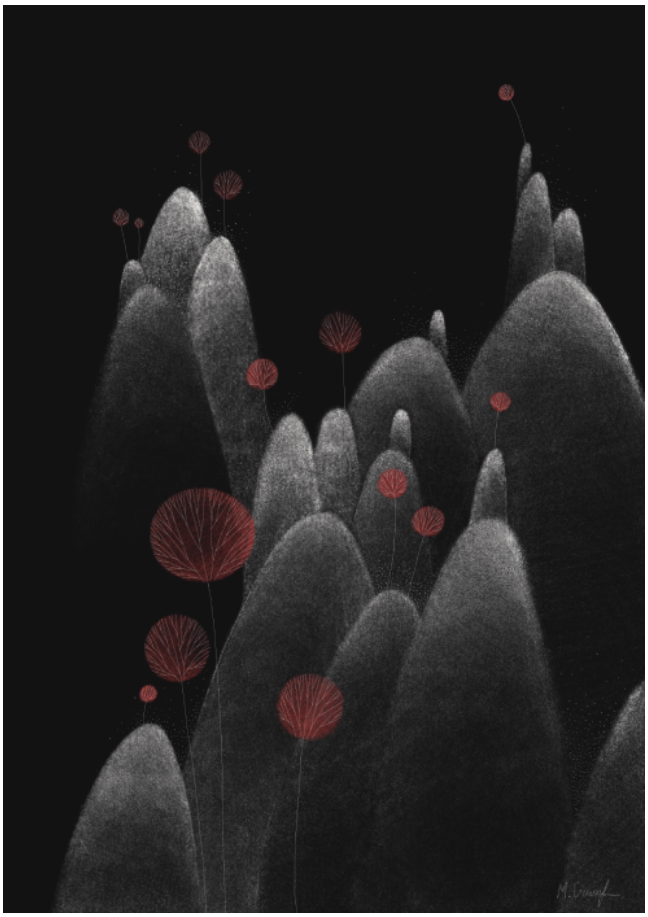

"A Year in Tokyo" by Monika Gustevi?i?t?

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The first thing you notice in Tokyo is a siren going off every night.

You've booked a business hotel in a suburb of Nishi-Shinjuku. It's a stone's throw away from a McDonald's, three convenience shops, two supermarkets, and one subway station. You're on the sixth floor. Your room is tiny. A washer-dryer machine is tucked into a space near the door. Next to it is a lean wooden cabinet. And then you have your bathroom, complete with a toilet, shower, and bathtub. Your queen-sized bed is pushed against the right side of the wall. You have a TV and a desk next to a giant window.

It's clean, convenient, and cheap. The TV has no English channels, but thank God there's free Wi-Fi, so you watch Netflix instead.

And while you're slurping your cup noodles, you hear the first siren of the night. I say "first" because right after taking a shower, you hear another one. And while you're tossing and turning on the wide bed, you hear the blare of that *wang-wang-wang-wang* again.

You start to wonder if you should be concerned, if you should, in fact, be on your feet and dressed. Is an earthquake coming? A tsunami? Why are there so many sirens in one night?

But there's no panicked shouting or shrieking alarms from your phone, so you settle into the lily-white comforter that has a mild citrus scent and fall asleep to the lullaby of cars speeding on the highway.

They say Tokyo is the world's most populous city. But when you get to the promised metropolis, you learn that "city" has a different meaning. Tokyo is, in fact, a prefecture made of smaller cities and "special wards".

You walk along the streets of West Shinjuku at ten in the morning and marvel at the quiet roads. They're not as jam-packed with people as you were led to believe by pictures on the internet.

It's your first time abroad, your first time living independently, and you have always wanted to go to Japan. You're excited to explore, but your Japanese is laughable, so you use Google Translate for everything.

You arrived in August. It's the middle of summer, and temperatures can rise to 32 degrees Celsius. The humidity is suffocating, like a heavy fleece blanket on a hot night. You go to the mall to cool down and order a *kakig?ri*, a shaved ice dessert drizzled with condensed milk. You get one with matcha syrup. The ice flakes look fluffy, and they're served in a huge

bowl. You take your time, digging your spoon into a hill of green-dusted snowflakes. You have nowhere else to be, and no one's waiting for you back home. You have all the time in the world to enjoy a good dessert.

It's your first time riding a train. The lines, arrows, and platforms are daunting to remember; Shinjuku Station alone is an overwhelming terminus. People always look like they know where they're going, always in a hurry to be somewhere else.

Except you. It's not the *where* you're interested in. It's the *how*.

You're exploring! You're discovering! You're getting lost.

You rely on Google Maps to take you anywhere because there are 200 entrances and exits in Shinjuku Station, and you have to know the difference between Rapid, Special Rapid, Local, Commuter Rapid, and Commuter Special Rapid. Back home, you took the taxi, the three-wheeled *sikad*, and the jeepney, which, in hindsight, had its own complicated system that entailed remembering landmarks instead of street numbers, squeezing into a toddler-sized seat, and being at the right place at the right time.

You marvel at the punctuality, cleanliness, and general silence of the trains and think, *It's true what they say about Japan!*

You ride the wrong train and inconvenience the poor platform staff in broken Japanese. But you don't let that stop you from going somewhere. You are lost but never afraid. Because all roads lead to Rome, and all lines lead to Shinjuku Station.

It's September now, and you got an apartment in another city. You decide that you need a vehicle, so you ask your co-worker about his bicycle.

"It's a *mamachari*," he says. "You should get one. They're cheap and sturdy."

You're intrigued because the mamachari is the quintessential Japanese bicycle present in every anime you have ever watched. You're drooling at the chance to own one.

But you don't know how to ride a bike. When you were young, your parents had balked at the thought of you riding a two-wheeled contraption into the streets. But now you're in a country where 99% of the population owns a bicycle. It's only logical for you to own one, too.

So, you buy an old *mamachari* at an old shop run by an old man. It's a heavy, green-painted steel bike made for an upright riding position. It has a step-through frame, equipped with a front basket and a rear carrier. It has a wheel-mounted lock. The keys feel heavy in your hands.

In Tokyo, there are just as many parking buildings for bicycles as there are for cars, if not more. People use their bikes to transport groceries, lumber, and small children. It's an all-around vehicle, and you're proud to have one finally.

You can't wait to use it to get to the nearest Family Mart for midnight snacks. So, you practice for one month before you can pedal from one end of the street to another without falling.

You're twenty-nine years old, and you just learned how to ride a bike on your own. You weep in celebration. The feeling of accomplishment is unlike anything in the world.

It's finally autumn, and your friends invite you to hike Mt. Takao (or Takao-san, as the locals call it). You stop halfway up the mountain, trying to catch your breath, as other hikers pass you by: old people with their hiking sticks, young women with an infant strapped to their backs, fathers carrying a toddler on their hips, and dogs on a leash. You and the dogs pant in sync, except they have more stamina than you.

Takao-san is relatively easy to climb, they say. It stands at 599 meters, but you wonder if you should have taken the cable car instead. You've never hiked back home. Before Japan, your idea of an outdoor activity was taking a book to the beach and watching small children collect seashells while their guardians loomed over them to make sure they didn't put anything suspicious in their mouths.

Yet you find yourself hiking Takao-san three times since coming to Japan. Everyone hikes in Tokyo, your new friends say. And you relish in the exercise you're getting, even if it does render you comatose at the end of the day.

It's winter, and nobody tells you that cotton jackets will not cut it. You come from a tropical country that knows only two seasons: wet and dry.

"How're you finding the winter here?" your other co-worker asks. She's from Ireland, where 18 degrees Celsius is summer weather.

“I’m dying,” you say, only half-joking.

She suggests getting a thick down jacket, an item of clothing you never knew existed before moving to a country with four seasons. You drag your trembling body, held together by nothing but will-power and spite, into Uniqlo and buy a down jacket worth two thousand yen. Warmth floods your veins. Next week, you buy two more.

The biggest thing you’re waiting for in winter is the snow, but then your co-workers say, “Oh, Tokyo rarely gets snow.”

Instead, you witness lights that dance to songs from *Aladdin* and *Frozen*. You and your friends go to Roppongi, Marunouchi, Kichijoji, and wherever there are light shows. You miss the colorful star lanterns, explosive fireworks, and loud Christmas dinners from back home, but you think, *This will do*. It’s your first Christmas away from your family.

You prepare *noche buena* with a friend, noting the lack of roast pig, sweet spaghetti, *queso de bola*, *biko*, and other rice cakes from home. More than that, you miss your relatives fighting over the karaoke.

In Tokyo, Christmas Eve is quiet. You are serenaded only by the passing cars and the loud sirens that you now consider background noise. On New Year’s Eve, you and your friends watch a 59-foot-tall Gundam robot put on a show. Later, you join the countdown at the infamous Shibuya crossing. There are too many people, and there are no fireworks.

In the first week of January, you do your first *hatsum?de*. It’s the first temple or shrine visit of the year, where people throw coins, offer prayers, buy a new *omamori* (good luck charm), and return the old ones.

Anyone can go to a temple or shrine and offer prayers, regardless of faith. People mill around the food stalls. The temperature drops to 10 degrees. You have on three layers of clothing underneath your down jacket. You buy a 700-yen *yakisoba* (stir-fried noodles) and push it down with a 250-yen *amazake*. The steam rises from the paper cup. It’s mildly sweet and has that fermented-drink smell. Later that night, you tell everyone back home you drank *sake*. Your family thinks you’ve become an alcoholic.

You finally witness your first snow in early March. It catches you by surprise. You find out about it only after a friend blows up your phone with texts and missed calls. You jump out of bed, wrap yourself in your thick down jacket, shove your feet into winter boots, and run out of your apartment. You take a video and touch the snow draped over the trees. You try to catch falling snowflakes with your tongue. You shiver from the cold and excitement.

You film yourself walking around with snow on your hair and eyelashes. They make your shoes and jacket damp. Your hands are ice, but that doesn't stop you from making a snowball and flinging it in the air.

Your first snowfall.

The memory will stay with you forever.

You think spring is your favorite season. It's not too cold nor too hot. And in Japan, spring means cherry blossoms. There's a large *sakura* tree outside your workplace, and you often see strangers taking pictures of the flowers.

You go to your first *hanami* with friends at a park. You snap a million shots and change your Facebook profile picture. There are many picnic-goers like you, lounging on picnic mats bought from Daiso, eating *onigiri* (rice balls), and drinking Suntory beer from the nearest *konbini* (convenience store). The wind blows and carries cherry petals in the air. You stand underneath a tree and imagine you're in a drama series.

On the weekend, you ride your bike to another park to snap more pictures of cherry blossoms. On the way home, you fall and skin your knees and tell only your friends. (You don't tell your parents because your mother will panic, and your father will shoot lasers out of his eyes.)

Spring gives way to summer quickly enough. You remember what it was like stepping foot in Tokyo in the middle of the sweltering heat and unforgiving sun for the first time.

Your Japanese is a little less broken now, and you rarely bother train staff about directions anymore. You're still best friends with Google Maps, but you give Google Translate a rest once in a while. The quiet roads outside your apartment are no longer a shock but an anticipated respite. Takao-san isn't so intimidating anymore, either. You've developed a love-hate relationship.

Someday, you will leave. You know this isn’t forever. And when you go, you will remember, not late-night parties in Shibuya, anime-themed shops in Akihabara, or trips on bullet trains, but nascent independence, curiosity-fueled adventures, getting lost and finding your way back, riding and skinning your knees, and learning and failing.

You lived an ordinary life in an extraordinary place, and you will always be glad that it was yours for a while.