

Grievances of an Aomori Raccoon

I met that old raccoon in Aomori, a mid-sized coastal city in northern Japan. I had planned to go there after graduating college, not for any particular reason other than to get away.

The train from Tokyo to Aomori took about four hours. I spent most of them catching up on sleep. I can't sleep on planes; there just isn't enough room to be comfortable. The bullet train, or, "Shinkansen" as it's called in Japan, has plenty of legroom, and knowing that makes me feel better about putting the seat back. The trains also have an outlet for each passenger to charge devices, which was fortunate, as I had not yet booked a place to stay my first night in Aomori.

We arrived at Shin-Aomori Station at sunset, about a half-hour walk from the hostel I just booked. I figured I might as well walk it so I could get my bearings in the city.

Aomori sits at the northern tip of Honshu, Japan's main island. Famous for their apples and pristine woodlands, these were the two things that had stuck with me from the guidebook I read. Walking to my hostel, I noticed the streets were astonishingly bare, even by the bay, where the only other people out were market vendors, selling apples or raw seafood. I inspected the apples from afar. They had been placed carefully upright in wooden baskets, each sitting snugly in their own foam mesh. Despite their presentation, they looked no different than the apples I was used to back home. How special could an apple be?

I passed only two other pedestrians on the way. I had hoped that Aomori would be a relaxed city, but this startled me. When you ask for quiet and really get it, it's nice, but your mind needs time to adjust. Like a car, it takes time to slow down even after the foot is off the gas, due to the inertia. Still expecting sounds, I couldn't help but search for them. Around corners, in alleys and open windows, my eyes and ears were desperately trying to return to something

familiar. But there was almost nothing to fill the new lack of stimulus, just some window cats and a faint ocean breeze.

It was only two days before that my parents dropped me off at the Portland airport. I hugged mom and said goodbye to my dad, trying to appear indifferent to his disappointed look. “Get away from what?” he had asked after I told him that I simply wanted to get away. He would've preferred that I stay in the States and go directly into graduate school, being a law professor himself. But elaborating on it would've only started conflict, so I didn't; I'm sure he knew why anyway. Sometimes it's not worth being direct with people; it's redundant; you already know you disagree with each other.

I arrived at my hostel just before sunset. It looked similar to the other traditional houses, aside from some unusually overgrown ferns that fanned out in front of the doors, almost blocking the entrance. I brushed by them and placed my finger on the doorbell.

“Ano, Sumimasen.” The voice came from an alley next to the building. An old lady, covered in a beige robe ambled into view. She directed me toward another entrance on the other side of the building.

“Sumimasen... sumimasen,” I repeated a few times as she brought me inside.

I followed her up a small flight of stairs, arriving at a narrow hallway with two doors on each side. The cherry wood floor creaked under her feet as she opened the door closest to me. She smiled faintly and nodded, handing me the key to the room.

My room was small and empty, aside from a knee-high dining table and the small futon resting on the tatami mats. I'd just use it to sleep anyway, since I wanted to spend my time outside. I looked out the window; the sky was orange and the clouds were lavender. It would be nice to watch the sunset by the bay.

On the way, I picked up a pack of Lucky Strikes from a vending machine. Next to it was another, more colorful machine, covered by designs of trees and leaves, selling only apple juice. I knew I'd feel guilty if I had cigarettes before trying one of Aomori's apple products, so I found change for a bottle.

Continuing towards the water without much thought, I came to a sleek suspension bridge. The bridge was probably a mile long and stretched across the entire bay. Under the bridge there were two stairways, one of them metal, going up to the bridge, and the other wooden, going down to an old pier.

A current of salt and sulfur invaded my eyes and nostrils as I went down the steps, drying them out and alerting them to the descending sun. The once pale purple clouds were now beaming orange. In the bay, seabirds drifted around aimlessly; except for a few gulls who congregated around a fisherman's line further down the walkway. I took a seat in the middle of the pier, letting my legs dangle over the edge.

I was sitting on the pier smoking when the raccoon appeared in the water, floating slowly towards me. "Excuse me," he said in a raspy voice. Until he spoke I had thought he might be dead; I had never seen a raccoon swim before.

Without much grace, the raccoon scrambled up the wooden support beam onto the pier. He shook vigorously, expelling water from his soaked fur. An unmistakably musty odor began to fill my nostrils.

"Do you mind if I rest here for a moment?" he asked me.

"No," I said reflexively. I scooted over a bit to make room for him. He was still dripping wet.

"Thank you."

It was not that I was comfortable with the raccoon; instead, I was in more of a dazed state. I had not expected to meet a talking raccoon, nor had I ever met a talking animal, or think that was even possible. But at the same time, I didn't exactly know how to bring it up.

"May I take a puff?" he said, eyeing the cigarette.

I thought about the question for a while. I didn't want to be rude, but I also didn't want to get rabies.

"You can have the rest if you want," I said, passing it to him. My only other option was to say no, and I didn't want him to think I turned him down because he was a raccoon.

His eyes lit up as he grabbed the cigarette delicately with both hands.

"Ah Lucky Strikes, my favorites."

"Mine too."

"It's not so often that I can get my hands on them either." The raccoon brought the filter to his nose, twitching as he inhaled the chemicals. "Do you know what gives them their sweet flavor?"

"Um, no, I don't."

"They toast the tobacco leaves in a giant oven, rather than just drying them out in the sun. Apparently this removes the harsh throat sensation, and all that's left is the flowery flavor of tobacco."

I was at a loss for what to say, I didn't care about cigarette production. My attention was still stuck on the simple fact that he was talking at all.

"Interesting," I offered.

The raccoon looked at me blankly, seemingly unbothered by my lack of conversational support.

“But sweet gets old.”

We both fell silent again. I occasionally glanced at him, trying not to stare. He looked just like any other raccoon, gray mostly, with that distinct black band across the eyes.

If I had to guess, this one was older; he was breathing heavily and patches of his fur were matted. He also had those sunken eyes that looked like they might not be able to see as much as they used to.

I took a deep breath. “So how did you learn English?”

The raccoon looked unsurprised by the question, and I felt some shame after asking it, realizing he probably got it often.

“My mother taught it to me. It’s a long story, but I don’t mind telling you, if you’re up for it.”

I nodded, “Of course.”

He scanned me for a moment, sighed, and then faced back toward the sun. “My mother was brought to Japan in the late ‘80s. It was after an animated show called “Rascal the Raccoon” made us the pet every kid wanted. Japan began importing thousands of raccoons, mostly the young.” He paused to take another drag. When he smoked, he retracted his lips, baring his teeth, which looked like human teeth apart from the fangs that hung down the sides.

“So you were someone’s pet?”

“Well I wasn’t, but my mother was. However, raccoons are not obedient animals, they don’t make good pets. Most of the imported raccoons either escaped their homes or were released into the wild within a few years of arrival. This didn’t work out so well for the people though...” he trailed off, holding the finished butt between his fingers.

“Oh, I apologize... I lost track of the question. So I learned English from my mother. You see, the daughter of my mother’s family--her human family--was quite lonely. She decided she would teach my mother English, both as a way to communicate and bond with her new pet, and to learn English herself, since she needed to for school anyway. But a couple of years later, after the daughter had left home for college, my mother appeared as nothing but a burden to her human family, and was no longer fed. Having to fend for herself, and having no connection to the parents, my mother left her human home.”

“That’s terrible, they just abandoned her like that?”

The raccoon flicked the finished cigarette into the ocean, “Maybe, but the parents never wanted a raccoon in the first place. In their minds, it was just another temporary solution to their daughter's happiness. And as for my mother, I don’t think she would’ve stayed there much longer anyway. With the daughter gone, she didn’t have any reason to stick around. You might think of raccoons as solitary animals, which can be true, but bonds are still important to us.”

A cormorant down below was having trouble with a fish, flapping about trying to free itself and the fish from the dense ocean swell. But the fish was too big for the oily seabird to carry, let alone go down its gullet, and it flew off with empty talons. The raccoon had been watching too, he seemed to consider taking the abandoned catch.

“Anyways, I was born somewhere in the forests south of the city, near Lake Towada, which is where my mom taught me English. She thought it would help me find a job if I ever had to leave the forest. I guess she was half-right.”

“That you had to leave the forest?”

The raccoon nodded and grew quiet, scrunching his eyes. A middle-aged man walked by, giving the raccoon a disgruntled look.

“What was that about?” I asked.

“Raccoons are invasive here, so most people don’t really like us. Especially since we’ve been eating farmers’ apples.”

“Oh, I’m sorry... that sounds rough.”

“Yes, I guess it was in the beginning, but there are tradeoffs to living here, like the apples...”

“Are they really that good?”

“Without question.”

I wondered if the apples were all he subsisted on. “Um, I don’t mean to offend you, but don’t raccoons just eat what they find lying around in the city?”

He chuckled, “No, unfortunately, Japan is too adamant about cleaning up their trash for that to be possible. I mean, you can get lucky and find something every once in a while, but the streets here are mostly barren, and there are no public trash cans.”

“Yea, it is really clean here. So you just survive on the apples then?”

“Among a few other things, fish, sea urchins... gulls if they’re clumsy.”

I thought about the raccoon’s story for a while, but something just didn’t add up. If raccoons were despised, why stay in Aomori?

“So why did you leave the forest?” I asked reluctantly. I was asking too many questions. The raccoon probably wanted to converse, not get interviewed.

The raccoon let out a sigh and flicked the cigarette butt into the ocean.

“What if I met you where you're staying? That way I can answer your questions, and we can get more comfortable with each other over some drinks.”

“Ok.” I did want to see him again. “Tonight?”

“Yes, is that alright?”

“Of course, I’ve got nothing going on.”

“Great, I’ll pick up some drinks from the store then. Is sake alright or do you prefer beer?”

“I don’t mind sake. Oh, and here, take this,” I said, handing him my apple juice.

The raccoon took the juice without hesitation but didn’t open the bottle, instead resting it on his lap. His eyes were fixed on the horizon.

“Thank you, but I will say you must try some if you haven’t already. It’s no joke, the apples in this city.”

“Ok, I will.”

A gentle ocean breeze blew by, carrying with it the scent of fish and brine.

“Sorry, one more question. Do you have a name?”

“No,” he said.

The sun was almost down now. A honey-hued half-circle peeked out from the sea, sending out the last of its light. I told the raccoon where I was staying and watched as he lumbered down the pier, juice in mouth.

As I walked back to the hostel I came to a tiny stone bridge crossing a drainage canal. In the water, there were four Koi, gently swimming in a line down the narrow channel. From what I know they were typical Koi, white, dappled with various patterns of orange and black. I wondered how they ended up in the canal: Were they displaced like the raccoons? Or did they wind up here by accident, not bothering anybody enough to be removed? I decided that they must've simply been placed there for aesthetic purposes. It was the most comforting view, as that way they would probably be well taken care of. I followed them down the canal until I was about

a block from my hostel. At this point it was dark, the sky a ghostly indigo. Moonlight reflected on the Koi's pearly scales as they swam quietly out of sight.

A few friends had asked to come with me on this trip, but I had to tell them no. I felt that it wasn't ideal to go with a group, as there would've been conflicting priorities. For example, they probably would've wanted to stay in Tokyo and go to the arcades, then bar hop in the evening. It might've been fun to do those things, but I didn't want to feel obligated to, and I knew I would if they came. People are always getting in each other's way. Everybody wants different things, but everyone also wants to engage with others. I've never known how to navigate this tension.

My parents seem perfectly content in their social lives. And it's not like they don't deal with conflict, it's just that it doesn't seem to weigh them down. My father especially, for him, conflict is like the wind picking up: for a moment it's tense, but when it's over nothing lingers. But what about the lingering tension he causes for others? When our arguments are over he quickly returns to a peaceful baseline, while I am left carrying the weight of resentment. Maybe I don't need to carry that weight, but shouldn't he take some responsibility for it? He would probably tell me it's all self-imposed, that I'm wasting time and energy thinking about problems that don't exist.

I was walking up the old stairs to my room when I noticed the lack of clocks anywhere in the building. I did not know exactly when the raccoon would show up. A can of apple juice sat on the little square dining table. The innkeeper must've left it there while I was away. I began anxiously sipping. It was delicious: sweet and aromatic. There was a shuffling on the roof, and soon after the raccoon's head was peeking through the window. I unlatched it and let him in.

"Thank god it's you," he said. "I didn't want to intrude on the wrong room."

He crawled down to the floor and sat down. He was wearing an old toddler-sized backpack, yellow, aside from a few brown patches stitched over the pockets. I wondered where he'd found it, or if it had been given to him. Opening the tattered leather flap, he pulled out two bottles.

““Drunken whale” is what this one is called.” He showed me the bottles; an image of a plump whale was sketched on the label.

“That’s an interesting name,” I said. I didn’t really have anything meaningful to say about it.

The raccoon opened the bottles with his teeth and handed one to me.

“Cheers.”

“Cheers,” I said, trying discretely to wipe off the lip of the bottle with my shirt.

“Ahhh,” he uttered after lapping up the drink with his tongue, “this really hits the spot... but I ought to watch myself.”

“How come? raccoons can’t hold their liquor?”

“No, not well at least, but that doesn’t stop us. On warm summer nights we go to the orchard to eat fermented apples, which can make us quite intoxicated. But at least if we pass out there we are somewhat hidden. On the other hand, if a raccoon was found passed out in the city, animal control would likely be called, and that raccoon would be killed.”

“That’s awful,” I said, “please be careful then. You can spend the night if you need to.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that, but I should be fine. You wouldn’t want to get caught with a raccoon in your room.”

I had not thought about this: was the raccoon putting itself in danger by visiting me? I took a swig, “I didn’t think about that... so there are other raccoons in Aomori? Do you speak

with them much? Or, well, hang out with them?” I forgot that talking raccoons were the exception.

“Not really,” he said. They don’t like me because I can talk with humans.”

“So you just talk with other humans then? You just know English, right? Not Japanese?”

“I can speak some Japanese here and there but I’m not fluent. I talk with some humans, mostly tourists and kids, if they can speak English.”

“Interesting. It’s almost funny that you don’t know Japanese, living in Aomori.” I let out a chuckle.

“Well it’s not easy to find a teacher, being a raccoon.”

“Oh right,” it’s like I kept forgetting I was talking to a raccoon. If I closed my eyes and just listened to him, there was no indication that he wasn’t a human.

“So why are you still here then? Aside from the apples.”

“You know sometimes I wonder that too. Initially, I came to the city because I figured I might as well make use of my English and learn about the human world. You know, thought there was more to it than the simple raccoon life. But honestly, now I just don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“You can’t go back to the other raccoons?”

His eyes strained, looking past the tatami. “They wouldn’t accept me.”

I didn’t know what to say, he had been isolated by humans and raccoons, where else could he go? He broke the silence.

“What about you? Did you come to Aomori alone?”

“Yea, I did.” After saying this I felt a great pressure to explain myself, as if coming alone was not a normal thing to do. “I figured that way I could do whatever I want. I don’t want to

have to worry about anyone else, what they want to do, or what they want me to do. Maybe that's stubborn though; maybe I need to learn to compromise."

He stopped me, "No, I don't think it's stubborn. Are you happy with your decision to come alone?"

"I don't know if I'm happy about it, more like it just couldn't be helped. Bothering other people, being bothered by them, it's just too much. How are people meant to live with that kind of weight?"

"It is a lot of weight," the raccoon affirmed. "But that's part of what makes relationships meaningful. Without that weight: the potential to bother others and be bothered, would there be any weight behind feelings of trust and connection? Maybe you just need to find others you can share that weight with, if you haven't already."

"Maybe."

I still didn't understand why you would need that weight, couldn't you have one without the other? Was conflict simply inevitable?

"It does seem like our experience is meant to be shared... but what's the point of shared experience, if when I am in one, I feel the need to be someone other than myself?" I hung my head back, letting the blood rush in, creating a swirling cauldron of blood and grog. "I don't know, maybe that's not true; I think I'm being myself with you right now."

"I think you are too, but I know what you mean," he said, looking back at me. "I can be myself when I'm alone, no need to wear a mask." The raccoon put his hands over his eyes.

"Exactly."

"But it seems like you desire connection."

I nodded; the raccoon was right; I did desire connection: connection to old friends, connection to my father, connection to the raccoon.

“Maybe you shouldn’t worry about being yourself so much; act however you are naturally inclined to, or do you think people would not accept you?”

“It sounds risky. Sometimes it’s possible, with the right people, in the right circumstances, to be myself. But there are other times, where if I don’t keep the right mask on, I’ll be judged, or cause a conflict, I know it.”

“So be it then!” The raccoon threw his paws in the air and grinned, “Let some feathers be ruffled.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. Though it seemed some relationships would never find peace, at least if I took the raccoon’s advice. My father would never approve of me. But I might feel more at ease, not having to maintain that mask anymore. It’s not like it had been working much anyway.

The raccoon continued, “You know raccoons identify each other by their masks. Every raccoon is born with a different mask, and from a young age we learn to recognize the small differences between them.”

“Is that so?”

“And that’s the problem, I’m stuck with my mask!” he exclaimed, startling me and knocking the bottle over, the last quarter of it leaking onto the tatami. Just a moment ago he had seemed so calm. “All the raccoons can identify me on sight because of this mask. “Look! It’s the raccoon that has abandoned us to be with the humans,” they say. Well it’s not true! They abandoned me! Sometimes I wish I could just rip this thing off!” He pulled down at his cheeks with his claws. “Sorry about the spill,” he muttered.

I wanted to help him feel better, after all, he had helped me. But what could I say? There was nothing he could do about his mask.

“No problem, no problem, don’t worry,” I said, sufficiently drunk. “I wish I could help...” I looked over at him. His face hung low, snout pointed down at the floor. A snot bubble inflated out from one nostril and shriveled back into his dark button nose. “Maybe I could bring you back to the States! You could have a fresh start, none of the raccoons would know who you are, and you wouldn’t be considered invasive. We could both start over togeth--”

He stopped me, “It’s ok, you know you can’t do that.”

He was right. We probably wouldn’t even make it through airport security. I felt my eyes well up with that salty fluid not unlike ocean mist, flushing out old crusted brine.

“Please,” he continued, “don’t worry about me, you’ve been a great help. It’s when I find other lonely souls that I feel most at home.”

I hugged him, and he put his little sake-soaked paws around my waist.

“Well, I should get going. Thank you for listening to my grievances, he said, collecting his things.

“Will I see you again? I only have one day left in Aomori.”

“Yes, I can come find you if you are down by the pier again.”

“Ok, I’ll come to the pier again tomorrow evening, and I’ll bring an apple or two!” I tried to give my most earnest smile.

“See you,” he said, and crawled out the window, fading into the darkness.

I woke up around noon the next day with a sharp pain in my chest and an empty feeling in my stomach. Two bottles of sake were on the floor, as well as some gray hairs caught in the tatami, proving my memories hadn’t just been strange dreams.

Outside the window, seagulls were crying on rooftops. They were squabbling over a crab that must've lost at least half its limbs. The crab dangled helplessly in their beaks. I couldn't tell if it was still alive, if it was it seemed to accept its fate, the struggle of moving its remaining limbs not being worth the effort. Eventually, a gull flew off with the crab with two others on its tail. Their calls blended so naturally with the sound of the waves. Every sound was beginning to fall behind the ocean's perpetual breath. I opened the window and lit another Lucky Strike, trying to be a part of that breath. But I didn't belong to the ocean like the gulls, I didn't belong in Aomori.

I couldn't figure out what to do with myself until the evening. What had I actually planned to do in Aomori anyway? I thought about going for a hike in the woods, but decided it would be too much trouble to figure out how to get there. Besides, what would I get out of hiking alone? It suddenly felt like the only reason I was here was the raccoon.

Finally, for lack of anything better to do, I walked down to a nearby 7-eleven and picked up a whipped cream and fruit sandwich. Meandering around the neighborhoods near my hostel, I eventually came upon an empty park. Fine needles of rain were just beginning to fall. I opened up my sandwich and took a bite. It wasn't bad, just kind of bland. I don't know why I expected any different.

Picking up quickly, the rain began to hiss. Plump droplets hammered down on the clay-tiled roofs. The sounds of the gulls had been drowned out entirely, or maybe they had sought shelter. I considered doing the same, but something had put me on edge, making me feel obligated to endure the weather. What had I done wrong? I looked at the sandwich, it completely lacked substance other than the fruit glowing in its center. Sweet does get old.

I continued my meandering until my drenched shoes and socks finally forced me back to my room. I threw my socks on the floor, tossed the sandwich, and took a nap.

When I woke up the sky was orange. I slipped on my flip-flops and headed out, picking up three apples on the way, one for me. I wished the raccoon would be there. I felt like I had met a long-lost friend, we just needed time to get reacquainted.

I arrived at the pier just as the sun was meeting the sea. The raccoon was not there yet, and the birds were nowhere to be seen. I sat down in the spot we had met and started munching on an apple. It had a custardy taste, less hydrating than a normal apple, but much sweeter. I preferred the juice.

Lampposts began to flicker on as a quiet dark fell over Aomori. Occasionally I would hear a crying gull, but they sounded far away, in the distant ocean. I waited there for two hours, but the raccoon never showed up.

At first, I felt self-conscious, replaying our meetings in my head, looking for something I might've said or done wrong. But that wasn't it. No, that raccoon was a loner, it probably had nothing to do with me; yet, like me, he felt the pain of that loneliness. Perhaps he had returned to the forest. I couldn't imagine the other raccoons would reject him, at least if he made it clear he was done being with the humans. But maybe he didn't want to do that. Did he really have to reject one group to be with the other? The raccoon had been forced into isolation by people and by his own kind. How do you escape from that kind of loneliness?

I thought about what my father said before I left when he asked what I was trying to get away from. Of course, I was getting away from what he wanted me to do, what anybody wanted me to do, or who they wanted me to be. The escape was to continue feeling lonely, but by myself, so there wouldn't be any conflict. Yet I want more than anything for them to be proud of

me. I at least owe it to my mom to find some semblance of happiness, but shouldn't I owe it to myself? Feeling utterly sad and alone, I threw the apple core into the ocean and left the others on the pier, in case he ever showed up and was hungry. There was no escape now.