

A Cardboard Box in a Popular Location

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People scarcely noticed the old man's passing. The ambulance had flashed through the night, sirens blaring, and whisked him away to the hospital where he died – or people assumed he had died – no one really knew. They only knew something was amiss when the officials had come back and stuck a notice on his belongings warning the things would be removed in ten days, unless claimed. The only one who cared whether he came back or not was his shaggy dog who sat rooted to the only home he had ever known.

Maybe originally off-white but now a pollution-street-grey, this little terrier kept up his vigil and hopes. The days lengthened into weeks and he grew visibly thinner. Nearby folks offered him food but he refused to eat. As long as he had his home he felt secure but, although he did not know it, the wheels of bureaucracy were turning and within a day or two his world would be shattered. One truck would roll up to cart the old man's belongings to the city garbage disposal depot, another would disgorge the faceless men in rubber boots carrying wire nooses that they would tighten around his neck. Half strangled he would be hurtled into the truck among the morning's haul of terror-stricken canines, all destined for the gas chamber.

The possessions, all the basics – a kettle, several instant noodle packets, *shoyu*, salt, odd bottles of spices, a pair of pliers, several blankets and *futon* which

doubled as the dog's bed – lay neatly stacked, like a miniature apartment without walls, but easy to move at a moment's notice. Cardboard boxes had offered the old man some measure of privacy and perhaps kept out the winter wind. Being under a bridge, at least rain had not been a problem. The location was in the heart of Osaka, popular with other local down-and-outs. He had earmarked a good position.

Who was he? Where had he come from? Information was sparse. They knew he as from Okinawa and that his brother, elsewhere in the city, had done better for himself – owned a small business in fact. The old man had survived by pushing his cart around the streets gathering the abundant waste of the affluent. His age they said, varied from fifty to eighties according to whether you met him after he had just had a bath or not. Like so many other homeless he lived and died in anonymity. The only soul he could trust was his mutt.

His friend with a pad across the street was moving on, frightened by the official notice he'd seen on the dead man's belongings. "Sorry, I feel bad about leaving the dog but...", and he disappeared into the night pulling his life behind him.

For the second time in a couple of weeks I ventured into the underworld of Osaka – not that the old man's patch was a particularly run-down area. Yotsubashi-suji north of Namba is swarming with chic business – but there are pockets of neglect here and there.

This is in complete contrast to the south of Namba, namely Nishinari-ku where the majority of Osakans would never dream of setting foot unless they were on some sort of sociology study. But this place is now teeming with foreigners – amazing though it seems. Not there for sociological studies either, but seeking cheap lodgings.

The atmosphere hit me the minute I stopped my car to unload some luggage for a friend, who straight off the plane, had been offered 'a modern Western apartment in central Osaka'. Immediately a surly gangster-minion rushed out from his pad (obviously a recruitment office for the jobless) to check if my vehicle had scratched his BMW. Disappointed it hadn't, he then complained that I was blocking the street. Arguing is pretty pointless in these case, and threatening to call the police even more so. Nishinari police live in armour-plated stations and seldom venture out. The recent riots when they

were fire-bombed is a memory they prefer to forget. Some crazed woman was throwing her possessions from the fifth floor window, while below pony-tailed labourers in psychedelic jodhpurs strutted along the street. In five minutes I had had a basinful of downtown Osaka (the Nose people that haunt my area might be an odd lot, but at least they're predictably odd). A block or two in another direction and one is in another world. Tennoji, the southern hinterland of Nagai and Abiko (my ultimate destination) seemed posh in comparison.

The dog too could not believe what it was as I took it for a walk on his first day in the country. Trees, grass, birds flitting by the river – all too much for an Osaka dog just rescued from certain death. He is an extrovert, loving, and one thing you can depend on, he is the most loyal dog you'll ever come across. Anyone who can offer Haggis, as we now call him, a good home, please call me (0727-37-0712).

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