

A Tale Of Folly and Hokuto

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Folly was dog who sad to say, lived up to her name. She hung around the fishing pond in the village where a warm-hearted *obaasan* fed her leftovers. One day someone with a grudge against the old woman called the dog pound (*hokensho*) who sent foul-mouthed men with wire nooses to catch Folly. Folly was wily enough to hot-foot it up into the mountains while the *obaasan* was left in shock, both by the near capture of Folly and by the hostility of the local authorities. She could no longer guarantee Folly's safety and as she already had one dog too many in her tiny house she asked me to look after her. Short of tying her in misery, there was no way to keep Folly in. She'd dig, bite or climb out of every enclosure. Every day she'd faithfully make her way over the mountain to the pond and everyday I'd receive a phone call from the *obaasan* telling me that she'd arrived and would I collect her. This pattern continued for months and then one day she disappeared. Together we combed all possible routes and roadside ditches. She had gone without trace. Not knowing what happened to her is the saddest part of the story.

Most strays that come here are eternally grateful for having a secure place to stay – a warm bed, regular meals and a lot of love. Boarding

dogs, on the other hand, spend their time listlessly listening and looking for signs of their returning owner. They may refuse to eat for a day or two until they adjust. Cats are even more difficult and some will literally pine to death.

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Dogs and cats naturally bond to their life-long owners and to people they see everyday. They also bond to people who, at some point, have handled them – for however short a time. The animal will show instant recognition when that person appears. But when that person is out of sight, somewhere far away, does the animal know or sense where that person is? A recent episode make me realise that the bond is, perhaps, much deeper than we humans think it is.

I was on my way home from south Osaka in the early evening. Only a madman would seriously consider attempting this route at this time – every highway and byway jammed solid with home bound masses. Normally I would be whizzing in the opposite direction towards Nishinomiya, but on that day my class had cancelled so I resigned myself to a long miserable journey home. (Yes I know there are escape routes but then so do most of the regulars too.) Nearing Kawanishi along the Inagawa, a jam loomed ahead. Accident. On getting closer I saw a large dog, a Husky, lying on the road with a circle of spectators around it. The driver who had hit it was wringing his hands and like everyone else, wondering what to do.

If there's one thing the Japanese are good at, it's obeying instructions. We slid the dog gently onto a blanket (always keep several handy in the

car) and many hands lifted it into the back of my station wagon. I told the driver to follow me and gave the vet's name to the gaping witnesses – should the owner appear. Within 10 minutes veterinarians rushed it from the car onto the operating table. But too late. The impact had caused fatal haemorrhaging in the lungs.

Since the dog had died I felt my duty was over and turned to leave. But the vet asked me to stay since the dog's owners were now on their way to the clinic. The driver and I sat uncomfortably waiting, knowing the distress and shock the family would display. They say that Japanese side their emotions but they all wept copiously as I would have done if it were my dog lying there. Then in unison they apologised to the driver and he to them. The dog had jumped into the road suddenly and to give him his due, he hadn't driven off as many others do, though I don't think I could have forgiven him so readily as they did. In their shock they had scarcely noticed me, a foreigner, sitting there but the vet explained what had happened. A look of disbelief swept over their faces. They knew me. They knew my name. "That is *Hokuto*," they cried. Like an unfolding drama I realised that I was not merely a witness but part of the play. It was my turn to weep. Hokuto had stayed with me when his previous owner had died suddenly and his widow unable to cope had asked me to find a new home for him. These people were the ones who had offered him a home and had loved him dearly. He had been with them about six months. Every morning and evening the daughter had taken him for walks by the river, allowing him to run unleashed, putting him on the leash before re-crossing the road. That evening he had crossed alone.

Did Hokuto have a premonition of his impending death? How did I arrive at that spot at that particular time? We shall never know. Hokuto's bones came home to Nose and now he lies buried under a pine tree beside the river, the place he could safely run free.

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