

Letter from Nagasaki

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Dear Ishmael,

I hope this finds you well.

We arrived in Nagasaki after another lovely superefficient Shinkansen ride and settled into our hotel is situated across the river from Chinatown. One of my favorite features of this inn are the free late night soba and the baths. Which was most necessary following this afternoon, washing away the ghosts.

We visited the atomic bomb museum where Mark had to chastise a group of loud giggling school boys. Casey silently looked at the aerial photographs of the bombed out city, absorbed in thought.

My gaze lingered on the crumbled remains of Uramaki Cathedral and the forever stopped clocks at 11:02.

I had seen images of survivors in Shindo's Children of Hiroshima and Resnais' Hiroshima Mon Amour and the silhouettes of people killed by the blast have been with me since childhood

We left the Museum in a somber mood; then we passed idiot girls with their IG ready pose selfies in front of the Peace Statue pool. What a tastelessly disturbing new part of travel, where holy sites and memorials become cool backdrops for would-be fashion shoots by vain idiots covergirl model wannabes.

I am reminded of Pearl Harbor and the bubbling oil rising from the submerged USS Arizona and the ghosts of the young men forever entombed below and the flowers floating in the sea in those hallowed grounds.

The exhibit on Admiral Yamamoto, the Harvard educated commander of the Japanese fleet was surprisingly even account of his life and another reminder of war's devastating costs.

A delightful contrast were the cheery survivor vets, full of first hand tales and remembrances. Our living history. One fellow signed his photo for Casey. For me, From Here to Eternity is the Pearl Harbor movie, but the old veterans all recommended Tora Tora Tora for the best portrayal of that day, which Mark and I watched upon our return to the mainland.

After the Nagasaki afternoon, we headed home on the trams that weave through the city, and were lucky to ride in one of the vintage cars. Mark & Casey are great travel companions & we have done some long hauls together. Casey's been on the adventure with us since he was a baby, absorbing and enjoying the adventure, from Indian rail through Kerala to the funicular in Donostia to stargazing in Colonia.

You know how Diaspora has always fascinated me, so whenever I go, I hit or stay the Chinatown - whether in Place D'Italie with its Chinese-Vietnamese restaurant with some excellent phos to eating bao in Chinese Cultural center in Port of Spain or Havana occupied by older Chinese men who came in the pre-Castro days or at the Hong Kong- style noodle joints in London.

watched Toshiro Mifune flicks, whose dad took us to J town matsuri and watched Kimba and Speed Racer in LA.

Back at the inn, I go for my nightly wash, soak & steam. There is something extremely liberating about public nudity and the way it equalizes. I recognize a woman from the first night. We nod at each other. One morning we meet at reception. I say "you look different in your clothes." She chuckles, "You, too"

The Dodgers are in the playoffs. Maeda & Darvish are on the roster so Japanese fans have been eagerly following their progress from across the timezones and seas. Throughout this trip, baseball has been the subject starter of so many conversations.

I love yatai culture. At evening come the temporary stands, manned by masters who specialize in simple homecooked dishes and their stalls are filled with devoted followers.

Earlier in Fukuoka, I had the best tempura from one master made. A large bear of a man. His secret? The freshest vegetables and a bit of yuzu kosho in his homemade dipping sauce.

This yatai was at the entrance of Chinatown and On tonight's menu, there's noodles, oden, beers. As usual, the regulars are here.

There's Mr. Honda, who is a manager at Mitsubishi. After an initial awkward moment about the war, the US dropping the bomb (I avoid saying, "well, your nation attacked Pearl Harbor" or Nanking or unit 731 or bataan), he & Mark move on. A shift as sudden as the winds, they are talking about jazz, the Village Vanguard near where we live, Miles and Bird.

There's Saki and her friend, a local artist Taro, who gives me a card of his work at a nearby gallery.

Saki asks me if I know "New York New York."

Then, between the noodles, oden, and the cheap sake, we start belting out our karaoke style rendition, causing Casey to chuckle at his mom's belting.

"If I can make it there.

I'll make it anywhere

It's up to you.

New York, New York"

The master pours some more sake; it's fierce stuff.

The yatai represents a moment of transience - a sense of camaraderie on an autumn night, with a group of people sitting together outside, drinking, making toasts, eating delicious ramen & oden, talking about jazz and baseball.

See you soon.

From Nagasaki with love,

Susanne