

# back in **6** years

A JOURNEY  
AROUND THE  
PLANET WITHOUT  
LEAVING THE  
SURFACE

TONY ROBINSON-SMITH



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# Prologue

I sit in my study, teapot at elbow, stack of beat-up notebooks to one side, folding map of the world open on my desk. What a map. Torn, tatty, taped along every fold, smeared with the juices of smashed insects, stamped with the dirt of fingers, spattered with grease from campfire frying pans, stiffened with sweat and seawater. Unfolded a thousand times, refolded, folded back the wrong way, jammed in a rucksack, sat on. Survivor of six years of surface travel.

I trace my finger along a black ink line that crawls across it. It begins at a blob in England near Birmingham. A date is scrawled beside the blob: 20 Sept '93. The line heads south, over the English Channel, through France. It crosses the Mediterranean, then plunges into Africa. At the southern tip of South Africa, it shoots northwest, out across the Atlantic Ocean to Brazil, hits the coast just below the mouth of the Amazon. Then it turns south, reaching down almost as far as Cape Horn. Next, a long wriggle north through the Americas all the way to Canada's east coast, across the continent, and back south to San Diego. Then over the Pacific to Japan, spearing Hawaii and Guam on the way. Like a snake, the line writhes through the Orient to Australia. There it flattens out, heading almost due west on the Indian Ocean

towards Africa, zigzags finally up the Red Sea and wanders exhausted through the Middle East and Europe back to where it started. Next to the blob near Birmingham, another date: 27 June '99.

The journey that began one damp autumn morning when I stepped out the garden gate of a little cottage in a sleepy village called Sapcote in Leicestershire, England, had really started in my head several months earlier in Japan.

I had a furnished fifth-floor apartment in Kumamoto on the western-most island of Kyushu, a teaching job at the local airport and a girlfriend named Akemi who owned a Nissan Sunny hatchback. I took Japanese language classes twice a week and did karate at the dojo in the evenings. I ate miso soup, boiled rice, raw horse (a Kumamoto delicacy) and chocolate-coated biscuit sticks called Pocky that Akemi brought over to my place last thing at night. I took my vacations by the sea. One day these things were all right. The next, they weren't.

It was May 1993. I had arrived in Japan five years before with the intention of becoming Bruce Lee. English language teaching would finance my stay. That plan hadn't worked out. After a fall off a slippery mountainside while on vacation, I spent eighteen months recovering from two fractured heels and a cracked spine.

But Japan was good to me. I learned the language well enough to move from Tokyo to the countryside and live comfortably. I found a high-paying job running an English school owned by All Nippon Airways. With a distinct lack of grace and a great deal of sweat, I earned my black belt in karate. I loved my grinning karate master, who took me aside from the class from time to time and roughed me up. I loved my kanji teacher, who was preparing me with devotion for the National Japanese Language Aptitude Test. I loved the good-natured Japanese and was grateful for the hundred times they had slid back their rice-paper doors and treated me like visiting royalty. I loved sushi. I even loved *nato*, fermenting soy beans usually disliked by foreigners.

Five years, however, was enough. My suit-and-tie job was grinding

me down. I was fed up with bowing and being polite, with breathing second-hand smoke, with listening to Japanese students butcher English. I had collected more than enough bruises at the dojo. Memorizing the two thousand kanji needed to read the daily newspaper was addling my brain. And it was time for a change of diet. Karaoke nights with Mister Oda and Mister Ito, All Nippon Airways' administrators, had lost their appeal.

"Mado o akeru wa dame, Tony-san!" chuckled Mister Oda on one of his frequent drifts over to my corner of the office. Opening the window is not allowed, Mister Tony. Oda-san had switched to his summer suit: the light grey instead of the dark. It looked as if he'd ironed it that morning. Still the same navy blue tie, though, I noticed, knotted with enviable precision. The windows on the third floor were heavy, sound-resistant slabs of glass not designed to be opened. You had to pop the catch on one, then lean into it with your shoulder. There would be a gasp and an out-rush of smoky air. Then a gust of wind would shoot in and scatter everyone's papers. After that, the prehistoric roars of parting airliners heaving themselves into the sky, company lettering in white on the blue tails, bellies full of people going places. For me, another day at the office stretched ahead.

"Kondo no kinyobi, karaoke wa do desho ka?" How about some singing this Friday? I stiffened. Not the bar with the watered-down whiskies, the bowls of glossy rice snacks; not the endless debate about students' progress in spoken and written English. Please, not the choice of two songs in English: "Yesterday" or "I Left My Heart in San Francisco."

"Chotto sawatte mo yoroshii desu ka?" Would it be all right for me to touch it? Last time, Masami, our hostess for the evening, had insisted that I lift a trouser leg so she might verify that *gaijin* (foreigners) did in fact have curly golden hairs growing from their legs. Her own were long, hairless and clad in white stockings. It was her job to make the administrators and their guests feel cozy and loved. She sat close, lit cigarettes, offered polite conversation, topped up drinks, sang, even stroked and slapped thighs.

Masami disintegrated into helpless giggles, hiding her mouth politely

behind one hand. It did look rather silly: my trouser leg rolled to the knee, my shiny office shoe and grey ankle sock up on the drinks table. Oda-san and Ito-san puffed smoke rings and looked on approvingly. Masami's hand hovered. Oda-san took it firmly by the wrist and put it on the naked knee. The hostess squealed.

“Sugoi,” Ito-san spluttered into his drink. Great.

“Ja, Tony-san. ‘Yesterday’ wa do desu ka?” On to the main event of the evening. Well, Mister Tony, how about “Yesterday,” then? The gaijin-san who sings like a crow being throttled will once again massacre the Beatles classic for the entertainment of the house. Left trouser leg rolled up, I made my way to the podium. With the opening bars of the song, the video screens hanging from the ceiling showed a young Japanese man with a troubled expression on his face reclining on a park bench next to a pond with ducks.

“Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away . . .”

I was in the habit of going back to England once a year to see my folks, usually at Christmas. On my last visit, fancying a little adventure, I booked my return flight to Japan from Greece. Somehow I had to get from Sapcote to Athens. I gave myself three days to hitchhike there. I made it in two and a half. Except for the price of a ticket for the ferry from the Italian port of Brindisi to the Greek port of Patras, I hadn't spent a penny. This pleased me, as had my struggles at making myself understood to Italian truck drivers with my dozen memorized words and pocket phrasebook. From the Parthenon, I looked out over the sparkling waters of the Mediterranean to the yellowy haze beyond and wondered idly if I might continue scrounging lifts all the way to South Africa.

Back in Japan, restless at my desk, I wrote to my father asking him to send me a map of the world. It arrived two weeks later: a metre by a metre and a half, made of heavy, durable paper, the countries in different colours. I brought a yellow white-board marker back from school and drew a line across it connecting all the places I hadn't been and

wanted to go. Long, indulgent arcs up, down and across the world from England, bisecting continents, dividing oceans, back to England. It took about six minutes. I stood back, looked at this piece of art, noticed that the line had turned green on the blue sea.

I will not fly. Not at all. Not even once. However great the temptation. This commitment came from the one and only travel book I had read, *Jupiter's Travels*, by Ted Simon. "It is no trick to go round the world these days," says Simon. "You can pay a lot of money and fly round it non-stop in less than forty-eight hours, but to know it, to smell it and feel it between your toes, you have to crawl. There is no other way." At the office window, I often stood watching airplanes take off, climb into the sky, lose themselves in the clouds. I imagined the passengers seated comfortably in rows, earphones on, eyes fixed on the TV screen, waiting for their first meal. "You have to stay on the ground," Simon continues, "and swallow the bugs as you go. Then the world is immense. The best you can do is trace your long, infinitesimally thin line through the dust and extrapolate."

Simon had gone full circle around the earth on a 500-cc Triumph motorbike. I knew nothing about motorbikes. I would travel by whatever local means came to hand: bus, bike, boat, truck, train, rickshaw, camel.

I emptied my desk at the airport, bowed to Oda-san and Ito-san, my karaoke partners. I bowed to my karate master, thanked him for the beatings. I bowed to my Japanese teacher, thanked her for patiently filling my head with hieroglyphs that would soon disintegrate and vanish. I closed my bank account: \$15,000. I shared a final box of Pocky with Akemi. I ate my last nato. Packed my bags, returned to the U.K., stayed for as long as it took to repack them.

Like Simon, I would travel alone. That way, I could follow my long yellow line around the world and leave it when and where I pleased. I visited the Coventry Motor Museum to look at Simon's motorbike. The names of all the countries he visited were painted on the panniers. Reeling them off in my head, I walked out onto the motorway and held up a sign: Dover.