**Chapter 5　Life and its Treasures**

Almost every person who has heard the story of my school asks me the question "Why can you do that for people you do not know?"

 I have once reflected back on my life to seek its answer. Tagava Konate from Republic of Mali probably had the biggest influence on me.

 In September 1996, I dropped out of Tongji University in Shanghai and contacted Draman, a senior international student that attended Tongji. He was from Mali and was residing in Hong Kong at that time. Back then, Hong Kong still hadn't been returned to China from England. Draman told me that Hong Kong economy was booming and there were a lot of jobs available.

 He invited me, who had nowhere to go since I had just dropped out, to visit him in Hong Kong anytime. I was planning to go to the interview at a real estate company in Shanghai that an Australian friend had introduced me, but I declined the opportunity and headed for Hong Kong alone.

On a side note, back then I had many, many friends. The day before I left Shanghai, all of my friends threw me a big farewell party at the university's student dormitory hall. At the end of the party, my friends prepared a world map bigger than three tatami mats. Drunk as I was, I declared "I am going to throw a dart on the map and wherever it lands, I will go there within three years!!"

 It was one of those student impulses. They blindfolded me, and I threw the dart. It landed on a ridiculously remote island called Flores Island. It was the westernmost island of Portuguese Azores islands, floating in between the Americas and the European Continent. It actually took four years, but in 2000, I went to that not-so-exciting island to fulfill my promise with everyone. They all told me it was impossible to get there... I proved them wrong, making 12 transits with a roundtrip airfare of 120,000 yen. On the island there was even a monument that indicated it as the westernmost location in Europe. You can see how remote of a place it is on the world map (lol).

 Okay, back to my story in Hong Kong. So, the next day, my friends came to see me off at Shanghai Airport. I departed from the university's dormitory to the airport in a "parade" of 14 taxis. I remember someone saying "Hiroshi is one lucky guy. 14 taxis must be a university record for a farewell party!"

However, as I was thanking my friends one last time before checking in, I noticed that I had misplaced my passport. I desperately searched for it all over the airport. One of my friends happened to be at the spot when a cleaning lady picked up my passport. Luckily, I was able to find it.

 However, I was not able to check in for the flight I was supposed to take. Awkwardly, I rode back in the parade of taxis to the student dormitory. When I returned to the airport a week later, there were only three taxis of friends sending me off...and I safely arrived in Hong Kong.

 I was finally able to meet Draman there. I naturally thought that Draman was living in a room he rented on his own, but he wasn't. He was a lodger at a fellow Mali, who was a friend of a friend of his Sudanese friend. The room owner (the person renting the place) was Tagava Konate.

You heard French, an African tribal language, and Chinese (since all lodgers were studying abroad in China) in this community of eight people, including Tagava. Here, I started my life in Hong Kong.

Everyone was kind. I was the youngest. There was someone a bit older than me and those a lot older like Tagava. We were an extremely diverse group with different culture, different race, and different religion. Some were Islamic, and some were Christian, while I was an atheist who did not believe in God.

 I was given an area that was less than one tatami mat. Every single morning, I woke up with someone's feet in front of my face. I will probably never forget these memorable days. It was a queer space shared by completely different types of people.

This life was supported only by Tagava's income. He ran a trading business. Though he called himself a trader, it was a very small private trade, without a secretary or a clerk, to send parcels of goods bought in Hong Kong or China to a client in Africa, once or twice a week. There wasn't anyone else working besides Tagava. Yet everyone had a huge appetite.

In the morning, someone would make a soup called "mafé", stewing up the carp, lamb, and chicken that Tagava had bought the day before. We would eat it with rice or tortilla-like food (made by kneaded maize and flour). We all sat in a circle to eat and they would always 'God' and 'Missions.'

 Though I am an atheist, I have never confronted them that there are no such existences as 'God' or 'Missions. ' I had no intentions to disturb their faith which they value, and I also didn't want to be kicked out saying something inappropriate.

 Though the people living there didn't work, they were swift at housework. Their cooking was amazing. Draman had made African dishes for me while we had been studying abroad in China and they were quite delicious. My favorite was "Chicken mafe (chicken stewed in tomato and peanut butter)."

 A week passed, then another, and I eventually started to help with the cooking. Unlike other lodgers, I had a small amount of cash and I tried paying it to Tagava to help with the rent and food expenses. He never took my money saying, "I am happy and fully satisfied, so if you want to help, please help somebody who isn't happy or satisfied."

 About a month since I started to take turns cooking, I had begun to master making African dishes. I was stewing mafe as usual when Tagava asked me what kind of work I was interested in.

I couldn't answer Tagava's question right away. I had started university studying applied physics but switched to architecture in my second year. I couldn't come to like architecture which pursued beauty. It just wasn't for me.

When I got up in the morning the next day, Tagava handed me "South China Post" a major newspaper in Hong Kong. He had marked some sections in its recruitment column "Classified Post" with a fluorescent highlighter for me.

To seek for a job in Hong Kong at that time, the most typical way was to check "Classified Post" on Sundays and send your resume to the company's HR department.

Tagava had picked up several companies for me who was clueless. He asked me more questions and made my resume for me.

 I had no address or phone number in Hong Kong, so I used Tagava's and sent me resume to four companies that I thought I had a better shot at. By Tagava's suggestion, I wrote "Tongji University 1993-1996" for my educational background, making it seem like I had graduated even though I had dropped out.

 The following week, Tagava got a call saying that I had made it to job interviews at all four companies. It was my first time getting a job interview, so Tagava and the other African residents helped me practice by acting as the interviewer.

 On the day of the interview, I realized I was not fully prepared. I did not have any business suits, not even a pair of trousers to wear to the interview.

 Tagava told me to wear his jacket, so for my interview outfit I picked out my own shirt, one of Tagava's most plain neckties (because all of them were extremely flashy), and one of the nicest pair (meaning they weren't torn) of jeans that I had because Tagava's trousers were just way too big for me. As for the purple jacket I borrowed from Tagava, I couldn't wear it because it was too big (never mind the color). I told this to Tagava and he shortened the sleeves by stapling the end.

 I went to my first job interview wearing a purple jacket with sleeves fixed with staples. If I had seen someone dressed like this walking towards me on a sidewalk, I would probably have crossed the street to the other side much sooner than I had to pass him. That was how crazy I looked.

 As soon as I was shown into the interview room, I introduced myself in both English and Chinese and appealed to the HR people sitting in front of me, as I had practiced. The HR people at the first company was an old man and the interview was conducted in Chinese. When the interview finished, the man offered me the job because there are not so many Japanese who can understand technical terms of architecture in Chinese.

 Tagava had told me that in Hong Kong it was better not to immediately accept a job offer. Despite I already had an offer, I went to the interviews of the other three companies that I had sent my resume to. These were all conducted in English.

 Regardless of the purple jacket, I was offered a position at all four companies. It may have been that there were many Japanese clients or Japanese-favoring clients in Hong Kong, which was in a real estate bubble at that time. "Timing was everything" I thought as I slid the hanger into the crumpled purple jacket. Tagava and the Africans all celebrated for me. After much consideration, I decided to join the major real estate developer.

 Even after I started working and began receiving salaries, Tagava never once accepted my money for rent or food expenses. This continued for the three months I had stayed at Tagava's place.

I decided to help someone who wasn't happy or satisfied as Tagava always said.

I must note that there was one more life-changing encounter.

 In the summer of 1996, when I was still a university student, I was invited to a wedding ceremony of a French couple, Christian and Martin, who I had befriended during my time abroad studying in China. The wedding ceremony itself was at the beginning of September. Since I was going all the way to France, I figured it would be fun to go to Europe in advance, around July when university was closed for the summer, and travel around before attending the ceremony.

 However, after I booked my ticket to Rome via Moscow, which was the cheapest flight from Shanghai to Europe, I had only 100,000 yen left. Though this was twenty years ago, it was still nearly impossible to travel around Europe for two months with only 100,000 yen. A normal person would have given up their initial idea of going. My friends had all said that it was impossible and impractical. But no, Hiroshi Taniguchi isn't the kind of guy who listens.

 I didn't have much money, but I had many friends who were sure to help me with my European tour, starting with Rome and then heading north to Venice. From there I would head south to Sicily, back to Italy, then to France and Switzerland, head north from Austria to Germany and back south again to Netherlands, Belgium, and finally into Paris, France. I asked around to find friends who would let me stay at their place along my planned route of Germany-Netherlands-France.

 My friends from university who were returning home for summer vacation invited me over and gave me their contact information. Some were not even from the same university as I was, such as the Italian student studying abroad at the adjacent university. Now I didn't have to worry about accommodations or meals.

 All I had to do was to be able safely arrive at each destination. Or in other words, the mean of transportation. 　One of my German friends proposed hitchhiking. According to him, it was easy to hitchhike in Western Europe, excluding Italy and Switzerland. They all told me to stand at the entrance of a highway or the exit of a gas station, holding a piece of cardboard box. I should write my destination, en-route point, and major cities as rough destinations in large letters with a permanent marker. "It's easy" they would say, though I was not sure if that was true or not while being very sure these friends had never hitchhiked before.

My plans were to arrive at the airport in Rome, stay there for three nights to see Michelangelo's paintings and sculptures that I had long wanted to see as well as Vatican's treasures, then to rely on my friends to visit Venice or otherwise known as the "City of Water", Bologna which is famous for spaghetti Bolognese, Rimini to then quickly stop by San Marino, head to Naples where my friend lives, go to Palermo station which is at the farthest tip of Italy, where my Sicilian friend will come pick me up by car to take me to her hometown of Sciacca, situated in southern Sicily, and finally head back north to Milan to travel to Lyon in France where my friend will be waiting for me.

My plan was super simple.

 Although I would need to pay for tickets, I would go around Italy by railroad and head to Germany (where it was supposedly easy to hitchhike) sooner. Without second thinking, I bought the "Euro Pass" which would allow me unlimited rides anywhere throughout Europe the "Euro Pass" had just started its sales. It was a great deal because you were able to ride as much as you want in any railway within EU during the specified dates.

I bought a pass for two weeks because I intended to only use it to travel within Italy. In the course of the two weeks, I had to travel north then south and then north again to arrive in Lyon, France where my friend lived. Once I enter France, then I would be able to easily travel by hitchhike throughout Europe, other than Switzerland. My grand plan was to cut travel costs as much as possible by traveling on railroads in only Italy and Switzerland and hitchhiking in other countries.

 Alessandra came to Venezia and Mario came to Naples to meet me. Mario's house was quite a distance from Naples and told me it was difficult to allow me to stay. Instead, he introduced me to one of his friends.

 From the toe of the boot-shaped Italian Peninsula, I then traveled to Sicily. To my surprise, the train cars were disassembled to be loaded on to a big ferry and re-assembled again as a train.

 When the ferry arrived at the port of Messina, I sat in the same seat that I had sat before the disassembly/re-assembly. From there, the train aimed for Palermo, its final destination. It took a lot of time to travel that distance because the train had to be disassembled, ferried over, and re-assembled.

 When I arrived in Palermo station, my best friend Alica's father came to pick me up. He said something like "Alica is out playing right now, but she will be back soon!" in Italian. Alica's father, Don Fauci was a kind-looking man. According to Alica, he ran a tile and brick manufacturing factory, but in reality....well, I'll leave that to your imagination, considering he lives in Sicily with "Don" in his name (lol). Anyway, he was very kind to me.

 There was one favor that Alica had asked me to do as a condition to stay at her house. It was said that men in the southern part of Italy, especially Sicilian men, often become very jealous. To make sure that they did not mistake me as her boyfriend, she wanted me to say "non sono ragazzo" when I introduced myself.

 This meant "I'm not her boyfriend" in Italian. I had to first say "non sono ragazzo" when I first met with her father at Palermo Station, when I went swimming with Alica at the sea, and even when I was introduced as her acquaintance at the pizzeria after we got off the two-seater scooter.

 Alica's home was a large mansion sitting on top of a hill with great view. She lived with Don Fauci, her mother, her brother Alessandro, and two Cameroonians (probably illegal workers) that served them. When we went out to the beach, Alessandro lent me his swimming pants because I had not brought mine along.

 The city of Sciacca was originally a small fishing village. The fisherman and the man selling ice at the fishing port seemed to know Alica as a child. As did the lady at one of the diners nearby. Of course, I had to say it again.

"Non sono ragazzo!" (I'm not her boyfriend!)

 I spent nearly ten days in central and northern Italy, so I only had five days left in Sciacca. This was because my two-week Euro Pass was about to expire. However, this beautiful city of Sciacca was hard to part with.

 I was lying on bed, glaring at my Euro Pass, sighing "Oh, I wish I had bought a longer Euro Pass." No matter how much I pouted, the expiration date written on the Euro Pass remained as the day after tomorrow.

 Just like in Japan, summers in Italy are hot and sweaty. Two days before, hail fell for the first time in Sicilian history, but it only cooled the air for a moment.

"I wish I could stay a little bit longer in Sciacca."

 And just as I sighed, I glanced down to see that the expiration date, written in ballpoint pen on the bottom right of the Euro Pass, had transferred onto my sweaty thumb.

 "Huh? What is this?"

I checked my Euro Pass and found something quite unexpected. The expiration date on the Euro Pass had cleanly been transferred onto my thumb, leaving the ticket blank.

Since I came to Italy, I've visited many Catholic churches, so I thought

"God must have heard my wish!"

I enjoyed my short summer stay at Alica's and left Sciacca a week later. I had written a new expiration date, a week later than the original, on the blank part of the Euro Pass with a ballpoint pen... I didn't forget to try copying the railroad staff's handwriting.

I sincerely thanked Alica's parents who had taken me back to Palermo station. Alica's mother gave me homemade cookies in return. I put the cookies in the pocket of my backpack and thanked them again. I kept waving my hands until the car they were driving were no longer in sight.

 Beautiful ocean, beautiful cityscape, and though I could hardly communicate with them, people with beautiful hearts. I must also note that all of Alica's friends were surprisingly beautiful.

 When I got onto the train, I noticed that there were also many famous churches around Palermo station. It was also said that the oldest astronomical observatory in the world was in Palermo. I should have gone to see it. I was beginning to regret that I stayed a little too long in Sciacca.

 The crispy Mediterranean wind came in through the compartment of the train from little opening of the windows and caressed my cheeks. It felt good and I was reminiscing the places, friends, people I met in each part of Italy. I realized that an hour had already passed since we left Palermo. The traveling distance in plan was double the distance between Naples to Palermo. I was riding a limited express, and so the train was not going to make any stops until Messina where it would be disassembled. I would be able to ride that ferry again from Messina! I recalled that Aranciini (rice croquettes) that were sold at the cafeteria on the ferry was very tasty. Even if I had to spend my small travel budget, it was worth it to buy it again. Just thinking about it excited me. Just then, I heard

"Tickets, Tickets. Please have your tickets ready."

 The conductor and a young boy, most likely his assistant, came around to check passenger tickets. I had ridden the railroad several times by then, and it was unusual to see the conductor coming around to check tickets. I saw the lady next to me take out her ticket from her bag. I took out mine from the pocket of my backpack and handed the conductor the ticket as the lady next to me had done. Just then, I heard

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 The Italian train conductor asked me something. I couldn't understand Italian, but the train conductor was pointed at the back of my train ticket and saying something.

".,:.@;^,.\;,:,@:./;,\-@,.:!"

 Soon, the conductor started raising his voice and ultimately the lady next to me started yelling at me too. I then finally realized what was going on. Looking from the back, you can easily see the date I had written in ballpoint pen and the actual date that was written at Rome station.

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The conductor shouted and a total of six people-- four passengers and two assistants-- pinned me down. My backpack was in the assistant's hands and the ticket was in the conductor's. Shortly after the train conductor said something into his transceiver, railroad officials in other train cars came gathering about.

When I heard the hustle and bustle outside the compartment door, I became frightened. The conductor and railroad officials were saying something in Italian into their radios to somewhere else. Passengers in the same compartment were saying something to me in a loud voice. At last, I began to understand the seriousness of the situation.

 There was an in-car announcement, and after about five minutes, the train stopped somewhere. Originally there wasn't any stop scheduled until the port of Messina, so I knew that this train had stopped for this one criminal (me). I didn't need to understand Italian for that.

Screeeeeeeech.

 The train skidded to a stop. I was robbed of my backpack by the train conductor and his assistant. Both of my hands were held down and I was forced off the train. A station staff member and a total of seven police officers were waiting for me to get off the train and I was soon handcuffed. It was at a small train station called St. Agatha.

St. Agata? was a small station, but we had to walk through a long underpass to get to the station building. I was surrounded by four officers in front and three behind. As I got down from the stairs, I was made to walk this dark and narrow underpass.

 In the back pocket of the young policeman's trousers in front of me, a pistol was casually stuffed away. I could take out the pistol with handcuffed hands, threaten the policemen with it, and escape from their hands....

 I fantasized it for a second, but we passed through the underground road sooner than I could put it into action. If the road were a bit longer, then I probably would have done such a stupid thing. No doubt, I had lost my cool being pressed for the first crime in my life.

 By the time we arrived at the police station at the edge of the station building, I was quite exhausted emotionally. I have often seen the guilty stay stubbornly silent in movies and TV dramas. I was forced to sit down, and by the time the young police officer started taking records, I too decided to not talk unless absolutely necessary.

 The young police officer confiscated my passport and wallet and started interrogating me. However, none of policemen or station staff knew English. I had a bit of knowledge on French, so when they said "Documenta" I was able to predict that it likely meant the same as "Documente" which was 'passport' in French. However, I was not able to communicate in Italian during the interrogation.

The young police officer frantically wrote something on the paper and repeated "Yapon Ambasciata" over and over. "Yapon Ambasciata" probably meant the Japanese Embassy. The police officer who was typing next to us heard this, took a copy of my passport, and apparently faxed the copy to the Japanese Embassy in Rome to reference me.

Perhaps one hour had passed.

A large-built man with a mustache came into the room. He said something to the young officers and they left to go to the next room with the fax machine. The man sat in the chair that the young officer was sitting on before. He sat comfortably with his legs spread out.

He looked straight into my eyes....

For may be about a minute or so.

 He called in the young officer and had the officer report to him in Italian about my incident. He looked straight into my eyes again. And finally, he opened his mouth.

"You did it?"

“Do you understand a bit of English?”

The man held a type-written record in his hand and asked me in English with an Italian accent, "Did you really cheat on your train fare?" I was embarrassed of what I did and couldn't look at the man in his eyes. I quietly sat there, looking down.

All I heard were sounds of the keyboard clicking away in the room next door.

 I then heard the phone ring a few times. It seems the young officer was receiving a fax. I heard the scratching sounds of the fax paper being printed out amid the clicks of the keyboard. The printing sound stopped as well as the typing sound of the young officer. Silence fell in the room.

 The young officer from the room next door brought in the fax paper just printed out. He handed the paper to the man, in which he took a quick glance and then stared at me in the eyes again.

"You are a good boy." said the man. Then he picked up the record in front of him and put it on top of the fax about me that was probably sent from the Japanese Embassy. He ripped those papers in front of me. And he said again,

"You are a good boy."

I stayed looking down. The man continued,

"You like Italian cafe?"

 I couldn't believe my ears. The man was asking me whether I liked Italian coffee or not. I finally answered the man.

"Yes....."

 The man smiled and patted me on my shoulders. He gestured me to come out of the room. The man handed me my backpack that the young officer brought to me, and the man followed.

 It seemed St. Agata really was a small city. There was only a small cafeteria in the station and no shops like other stations. The man sat me down in a chair at that one cafeteria and ordered a cafe granita (a mixed drink of ice, sugar and espresso) for himself and for me.

The waiter handed us coffee poured in a small crafted glass. The man asked,

"Italian gelato?"

 I sat there at the little cafeteria with the man that was just interrogating me, drinking Italian coffee and Italian gelato (ice cream).

 I was truly embarrassed, felt uncool and could not make eye contact with the man. I stayed looking down, sometimes glancing at the beautifully crafted glass with the ice cream, and just prayed for the time to pass. Yet the man was kind enough to tell me that I should head to Palermo station and go to the beach-side terminal to find the ferry for Genoa (a town in northern Italy). It would be a much cheaper route to France than the train. The train for Palermo was about to arrive in 30 minutes.

 Until then, the man kept smiling and ordering coffee for me who sat very nervously in front of him. I think he was trying to help me relax.

 When the train finally arrived, the man came up to me and held out his big hand to shake hands me. He grasped my hands tightly. His hands were big and warm. He wrapped them around my hands. But I kept looking down.

　I boarded the train and turned around to find the smiling man raising his big right hand.

"Ciao!"

In less than 20 seconds, the train announced its departure and the doors closed. I whispered "Ciao" (meaning 'Bye" in Italian) to the man far away.

The window on the connecting parts of the train became smaller and smaller. I was no longer able to see the man. I crouched there and wept, crying out loudly.