Bridge of Tears: The Hidden Homeless of Japan

by Trevor Greene

Dedicated to the memory of my first writing mentor,

CW Nicol, a gentle, wise old Welsh bear

In the early 90s, I worked at an English-language daily in Tokyo covering social issues. One summer, a source blew my mind by introducing me to the city's homeless quarter, Sanya. I wrote a feature piece, but knew I hadn't even scratched the surface, so being an impetuous lad of 28, full of piss and vinegar and still firmly under the sway of Hunter S. Thompson, I decided to write my first book. I quit my job and lived for about six months in a filthy little room above a decaying noodle shop in the middle of the homeless quarter to do research. I wanted to find the human beings behind the stigma. To touch their faces, smell their stink, call them by name. I tried to find a line. I tried to see if at one point the men of Sanya straddled a line in their minds, moistening suddenly dry lips at the prospect of life on the streets; living by their wits and their hands and answering only to themselves. Or opting to return to the benign oppression of everyday village life watching the years slip by in a muddy rice terrace looking at the arse end of an ox all day. What I found was a bridge. A bridge of tears, a street in present-day Sanya, that in the feudal era led to a desolate execution ground roamed by doomed souls and ruled by wild dogs. Those who crossed the bridge had their lives ripped from them, their bodies hurled away with contempt. Those who crossed the bridge never returned. The bridge is still there, the name and the metaphor live on, and it still leads to doom, but it is a drawn-out, almost casual breed of doom. Instead of a swift executioner's blade, death comes gradually from alcoholism, tuberculosis, exposure, neglect and loneliness. I made a stunning discovery. I asked government officials, missionaries, shopkeepers and, of course, the homeless men themselves if anybody who had lived in Sanya for more than a few months had ever gone back home. I discovered that nobody had ever crossed back over the bridge to return to mainstream society. They're all still there or dead. Many came to Tokyo in the early 1960s to build an Olympic city and stayed on, attracted by the lights and the money and the excitement, loathe to return to more pedestrian life in the countryside. I perched on benches with men who sat with the stunned bovine inertia of people with nowhere on

heaven or earth to go. I saw a man sit next to a garbage fire for three days, looking like a Hindu priest praying to vengeful gods as the toxic smoke wreathed his squatting figure. I smelled men who leave behind their odour of warm earth, wet dog and sweaty feet like mangy gray ghosts. I heard missionaries from warm, poor countries raise their voices in prayer for the shunned citizens of the richest empire on earth. I sensed the crush of loneliness like steel bands around their hearts. I held a sick old man in my arms on a cold, cold night as he told me he wanted to die. I looked into late-night eyes on the streets, scared and round and pleading for sleep, seeking oblivion from the cold, gray night.

Sanya is shaped roughly like a diamond. Exiting the train station and walking toward a large intersection, Namidabashi, you pass a bus parking lot. The street gives a queer dip at this point. The street is called Kotsu Dori, the Street of Bones. The remains of 200,000 people executed between 1600 and 1850 were found here when the road was built. It fits rather neatly actually, the intersection was once a bridge which led to the executioner, waiting in what is now the parking lot and the bodies were flung into a pit, these days a road with a wicked stomach-in-the-throat dip in it. Just to the south, there was a temple where the corpses of prostitutes were thrown. Tokyo was built like a nautilus shell, layered out from the shogun's [military dictator's] palace in the centre of town ringed by the houses of the daimyo, or feudal lords, in descending order of importance. The closer you were to the castle the bigger wig you were. Sanya and the Yoshiwara prostitution district were deliberately left far out on a wrinkle on the outer edge by the river as a section for outcasts. They knew their place and they stayed [and died] in it. They sleep by riverbanks under the stars, get legless drunk with their mates every night, brawl with abandon in the streets. They have no mortgages to sweat, no paper to shuffle, no taxes to pay. They laugh out loud when they feel like it, howl at the moon, light bonfires in the streets and piss on police-box walls. They endure disease and wounds, writhe with loneliness, are ignored and reviled by society, eat garbage to survive and die on winter streets. Their blood has been

spilled building Tokyo's most famous landmarks, their bones crushed under soulless office buildings and bridges. They are referred to with a mixture of awe and distaste as johatsu or ‘disappeared person.’

At midday on a beautiful spring day, a dozen men are scattered around a small playground ringed by park benches not far from the station with the placid immobility of people with nowhere on heaven or earth to go, staring down at the pigeon shit-splattered pavement. Long blue banners stretch from the opaque plexiglass roof, 30 feet from the grimy white tile floor. Shops line both sides of the street; furniture, fruit and vegetables, fish, meat, small mechanical wind-up toys, rice cookers, fresh-baked bland white bread, all can be found here. There are three stores selling construction clothes and three liquor stores on this street alone, each guarded by a bank of beer machines. An almost continuous row of bicycles parked dead centre in the street occasionally becomes a navigation hazard for some of the drunker patrons of the Iroha Shop Mate Street. The street is bisected along its 300-metre length by side streets lined by old wooden houses and an ancient bathhouse. Everywhere you turn you see the doya, or flophouses, ranging from three-storey brick and shiny chrome buildings which will take 2,500 yen [$19 US] from you for the night, to squat dumpy houses with the traditional sloping scalloped roof and white plaster walls which throw in the fleas and mildew, and a slim ghost of tuberculosis for free and will only take about 1,000 yen [$7 US]. At the end of the street there’s a wide traffic intersection called Namidabashi, the Bridge of Tears, the locus of Sanya. This is where the bridge was in the time of long swords and instant death. About 10,000 homeless day labourers live in the roughly three-square kilometre neighbourhood. You won't see them all at once, but you will come across groups, clumps of men in the eddies and cracks of the side streets and on the banks of the Sumida River. And it simply wouldn't do to have salarymen and office ladies tripping over cold stiff bodies while hurrying on their way to work in the morning, so the homeless men tend to do their dying in Sanya. When the body

of a day labourer is found, it is reported to the police, who determine if foul play is involved. The relevant ward office is notified, and the body taken to the nearest hospital morgue. The ward office goes through the motions of contacting the next of kin to identify and claim the body. When, inevitably, nobody comes forward, the body is cremated and ashes are stored at the ward office in a small white box on a badly dented grey metal shelf. Day labourers do the kind of work that mainstream construction workers refuse, such as digging earthen trenches and sorting metal scrap. They are known collectively by several names. In descending order of respectability, they are called rodosha, or itinerant labourer; furosha, which means somebody who floats between several lifestyles and occupations; and last and least, johatsu. Johatsu means ‘disappeared person’ and usually refers to people who run out on their families and jobs to avoid debts to loan sharks. For those too old or sick to work, there are few options. The men used to sell their blood but this practice was discontinued because too many of them had liver ailments and occasionally venereal disease. Also, if it was their only source of income for drinking and, well, living, they would run a high risk of contracting anemia by going round to as many different blood banks as possible and having their veins sucked dry. While homeless in other countries don't think twice about stealing money for food if they're hungry, the men in Sanya would starve before they would steal to live. They won't break the law and would prefer to survive within societal norms; or die.

The residents and shopkeepers of Sanya have to live nimbly with the indigenous homeless population, a point that was brought home to me early one morning when a shaggy string bean who was one of the few homeless I've ever seen actually dressed in rags, tried to take a shit outside the breakfast nook where I occasionally ate. He was shambling along absolutely hammered when he abruptly turned and half-bowed toward the door, perhaps in apology for what he was about to do, shucked his pants off and squatted down to do his thing. The owner of the shop, a short pixie-cute middle-aged woman with infinite patience

and a kind voice, was having none of his shit today or any day and she came steaming out of the shop with a broom. Before he could darken her doorstep, she smote him on the ass for all she was worth then beat him on the head. She had him rolling and howling and crawling all the way to the other side of the street, his sphincter no doubt clamped up so tight from sheer terror that he probably took a week to unclench. Her territory defended and her doorstep unsoiled, the broom maiden holstered her weapon and went back inside. The thing that impressed me about the scene was how efficient she was; not a wasted movement, no hesitation at all, careful consistent swats with the broom. It was as if there is a manual for how to run a shop in Sanya and she just happened to have read the chapter on doorway defecation the night before. If there is a manual, it must suggest that elevator music be played in the covered shopping street. The elevator music that plays every day the entire length of the blessed street would alone be enough to drive anybody to drink. The music is paid for and arranged by the local shopkeepers, perhaps to drown out or put a comforting, civilised background patter to the drunken bellowing of the men. Or maybe like the muted-pink walls in insane asylums and prisons, the music is meant to have a calming influence, to keep simmering drunken violence at bay. With the blithe elevator music soundtrack the only constant, Sanya has many faces. Paradoxically, one of its strangest is the most conventional: normal neighbourhood. People raise kids, grow flowers and put on suits and go to work in the morning in Sanya. However, the shadows seem to grow longer here than in Shinagawa, the dirt blacker than in Ikebukuro, the pre-dawn grayness grimmer than in Kayabacho. Asked what she thought of the old men in the neighbourhood, a young woman who lives in Sanya with her family pursed her lips and wondered if I was inquiring about her uncles. I said I was asking about the men outside. She started telling me what she thought about the shopkeepers. I said nononono, the homeless guys. "Oh," she exclaimed, "them. To be honest I've never given them much thought." It was then I realised that I was bound to get such an answer. Just as residents of

coal mining or mill towns look quizzically at visitors commenting on the strong smell, it hadn't occurred to her that I would be talking about the men, who she had come to view as transitory, albeit noisy, adornments of the landscape which warranted no attention and little thought. Setsuko Mizumi runs a pharmacy with her husband Yoshihiro on the covered shopping street. When I told her I was doing some research in Sanya, she wondered with mounting excitement who I was planning to interview. I had just started telling her when she interrupted me. "No way, no way, the missionaries and government people don't really know what's going on," she insisted. "You have to talk to the residents, the people who have lived here a long time." A few days later I was sitting in the living room of their house just behind the drugstore. "The missionaries hand out blankets," Yoshihiro said. "What do I find outside my shop the next morning? Blankets scattered all over the street. The missionaries hand out noodles. What do I find outside my shop the next morning?" I knew I had him this time, so I said, "empty noodle bowls." "No," he thundered. "Oops," I thought. "Bowls of noodles with one bite taken out of them," he said. "Who is supposed to clean this up?" I had learned my lesson and kept my mouth shut. "Myself or my wife, that's who cleans it up, just as the shopkeepers do all over this street," he said. Setsuko then complained about a newspaper article which accused the shopkeepers and residents of Sanya of heartlessness for retracting the roof over the street when it rains to keep the men from sleeping on the street. "Nonsense," she snorted. "The roof is on a timer which opens it at 8am and closes it at 8:30pm." The roof is not really the issue though. If the roof is not retracted, prospective customers would have to pick their way over a living carpet of homeless men every day and that would be hard on repeat business. Even though there are no homeless shelters and the doya are raising their rates as they upgrade, there has been little thought as to what to do with all these men. "They'll find somewhere to sleep," seems to be the mindset. Somewhere else, not here. Regardless, there are ways to keep the men from sleeping on your doorstep. Some shops park bicycles

in front of their doors, others wash down the street in front of their shops when they close at night. Setsuko insists the residents keep a weather eye on the men. "If I see a man has been sitting in the same place for a few days not eating, never getting up to work, I check him out and call an ambulance if necessary," she says. I think the residents of Sanya do indeed feel for the men and, rightly enough, are pissed off that more isn't being done for them. The people I've spoken to both in and out of Sanya seem to think that the men should help themselves, should be able to pull themselves together and get a life. Also, helping the men could be construed as condoning their lifestyle and actions; something that just isn't done. In a video put out by the Maryknoll fathers' missionary group, one priest who had spent years in Japan helping drug addicts said the Japanese like the concept of social welfare but only as far as it extends to "proper" needy, such as handicapped kids, the elderly or victims of disasters. Drug addicts, alcoholics, day labourers and the homeless just don't fit the profile. I asked the owner of a small clothing shop in Sanya if he knew the names of any of the men who lived in the streets. Somewhat proudly he said that he didn't have the foggiest clue. The Japanese are notorious for erasing people completely from existence. But in Sanya the men don't need names or identities. They just need to survive. What they don't need they discard. That's probably why I had such a hard time getting to know them. I would be friendly and hunker down on the pavement with a small group, hand out a couple of beers and shoot the shit for a while, and then, as subtly as I am capable of, start asking the men where they are from. It was like farting in church. They clammed up, finished their beers and drifted away. I realized that I had broken a rule that the men hold near and dear. They had made a conscious decision to become non-people and were willing to face the consequences of their action, willing to lose their history, to forget what they had been. The loss of family, the loneliness, the cold streets, the brutal labour, the sickness and pain, they could handle all that as long as they were allowed to forget what they had been, what could have been. I made them remember when I came

along with my big nose and my little tape recorder. I reminded them of their past lives. I made them think, for just a fleeting second, of their past then instead of the reassuring present.

On the south side of the river, about a ten-minute walk from Namidabashi intersection, the building materials of choice are plastic sheeting and plywood on a patch of land where about 10 men live year-round, sleeping on a deep pile of discarded futons, and sheltered by a thick tarpaulin braced by two-by-fours and rope. The men cook for themselves over an open campfire and their dishes are washed and neatly stacked beside their shelter. They wash their clothes in coin laundries and dry them on a line strung between two saplings growing on either end of the camp. The grass is untrimmed and there are a few empty bottles strewn here and there but basically the place is boy-scout neat. Their needs are few and their independence complete, but they do lack one thing. I visited the camp once with an eager young nun. Compassion and adventure written on her face, she plunged into the camp, interrupting their evening meal. Eight men sat there, chopsticks poised in mid-air, the firelight dancing on their faces as they pondered this tall foreigner and the fidgety little nun. I kept as low a profile as was possible and turned on my tape recorder. The sister was a hive of activity, passing out rice balls, complimenting the men on their camp and trying to ask all of them their names all at once. She said she and her community would pray for the men and asked if there was anything they needed that the nuns could do for them. I think what she had in mind was prayer and maybe darning a few socks, so it came as a bit of a shock when one of them asked for firewood. I then noticed that their fire was made of hundreds of tiny, perfectly straight coals. Restaurants in the neighbourhood collect the disposable chopsticks used each day and store them in three-foot clear plastic bags to be put out once a week. The men of course know about chopstick day and keep their eyes peeled on the way back from work. They go through one bag about every three days. Perhaps as they feed the used chopsticks into the fire, they hesitate for a moment and

imagine the meal that was eaten and the hands that held the chopsticks, the small stubby hands of children, awkward and slow, the graceful touch of a woman's slender fingers. I noticed the men don't talk very much when they eat. Nearby, a deep concrete drainage ditch runs along a seldom-used access road. About 250 men live in the ditch, housed in man-sized bicycle or refrigerator boxes. They pad the bottom with futons and carefully hinge the top half of their box so that it flips up much like the lid of a coffin. About once a month the police go around and paste flaming red stickers on the bicycle box, beer crate and blue canvas walls of the Sumida homesteaders, warning the occupants to pack up and clear off or...or...something was going to happen. One eviction day was a warm sunny creature of summer. I spoke to a box-bungalow resident reading a well-worn comic book. I asked if the cops had been around at all that day to turf them out. He sort of grinned a gray-stubble grin at me and said no and he wasn't expecting them either. His next-door neighbour was similarly unfussed, fast asleep in his box with the lid open, his cuckoo clock propped next to them. So much for eviction day.

The Sanya welfare centre is a solid-looking three story white building encircled by a ten-foot black iron fence two blocks in from Namidabashi intersection. I thought Sanya must be the bottom of the barrel for Tokyo civil servants, purgatory for government paper arrangers. I figured it might be the place they send you to if you happen to knock up the boss's daughter. Apparently, however, it is a normal two-year hitch just like working in any other neighbourhood or department. In the basement is a cavernous recreation area filled with rows of wooden benches. On any given day, about 200 men sit comfortably and quietly in the bile-yellow concrete room watching television from 9 to 5. On rainy days, the population doubles. Upstairs on the ground floor is the employment centre, where job openings are posted to bulletin boards. By 6:15am there is a crowd of about 100 men waiting outside the gate. By 6:30 when the iron gates are opened, the scene is like a sumo match; a quick charge, a flurry of arms and shoulders squeezing into the room, contact

with the job postings, a struggle to the windows to apply and then the slow ebb of men wandering back out of the room. There's one job for every eight men who wait at the black iron gate every morning. The race is to the swift. Once a month, each man who can prove that he worked 14 days that month is given six thousand yen [about US$45] by the government. The government side of the plexiglass-and-booth barrier contains -- steady yourself -- rows of desks with government employees moving papers around and signing things. But hang on. There's not a white shirt in sight, not a polyester-blue, fire-retardant necktie to save your life. All the boys are decked out in high-collar black warmup suits, as if poised to hit the deck for 50 pushups on command. The casual attire is worn because Sanya is not an "ordinary" constituency and the work can occasionally be "strenuous," which I construed as wrestling mean-drunk day labourers out the door when necessary. On the Friday before the annual Golden Week holiday starts, the government guys are out in jeans and golf shirts and slim elegant white cotton gloves to hand out chits for a few nights' stay at Sanya flophouses because holidays mean no work and a long dry week coming up for the men. They usually receive chits every month for two nights stay at a doya but the long holidays are killers. Literally. Since Thursday night, a line has curled around the job centre, and by Friday morning, over 500 men are waiting in a gray, surprisingly warm drizzle with the stolid patience of Muscovites hoping to snag some blood pudding. The line proceeds slowly past two guys standing at the entrance passing out tickets. The rest of their department is standing in a gaggle not far behind as two scrawny day labourers weave in and out barking abuse and random threats. The whole loose-knit group of government guys is doing a sort of stiff pirouette trying to follow, endeavouring to look official with their hands behind their backs and compassionate at the same time by not turning their backs on the two piss-tanks darting in and out of their ranks like deranged pilot fish. Two of the government guys flap their white-gloved hands at the two men, making shush movements and trying to calm them down. As soon as that

happens the shark moves in. I watched him lounging against a wall with his mates checking out the goings-on. He's a tall man with long scraggly black hair streaked with white and pushed back behind his ears. His thin wrists protrude like sticks from a dark-blue ski jacket and his filthy hands flap when he walks. He's seen the breach in the defenses of the thin young kid with the heavy hair gel going soggy in the rain and the bull-necked dude with the yellow half-moon sweat stains in the armpits of his white golf shirt. Targets. He throws his head back as if to test the air with his thin hawk nose and buttonholes the two hapless government guys, whose colleagues move away closer to the entrance, throwing their mates to the dogs. The man wades in with a long harangue about how inefficient and half-arsed today's chit-distribution procedure was. "You office pricks don't seriously think we're going to stand for this do you," roars the utterly-disenfranchised-homeless-alcoholic-itinerant-labourer to the two employed-for-life-plus-a-dental-plan-civil servants. The government guys are making their same flapping, shushing movements with their hands, looking miserable and wet and trying to get a word in edgewise against the man. He's on stage wearing a shit-eating grin with a captive cast and an audience that thinks he's a hoot. He knows he can get away with this, that he can bellow at hair gel and bull neck, watch them sweat, hassle them right around the bend because they'll take it; they'll take anything from a man who burns old television sets and bags of garbage for warmth. They'll take it because they'll be back inside in a while, behind their plexiglass, cradling a cup of hot tea and adjusting their karma. Later in the day, in the hospital for the poor in Kita Senju, just north of Sanya, Minoru Isobe sweeps his hand around the ancient hospital lobby where we are sitting, a sea of shabby; worn wooden floors, cracked peeling paint in that queer shade of institution green you only see in hospitals and prisons, scented by soiled sheets, piss and disinfectant. Upstairs, Isobe's tiny room holds four worn-out old-fashioned metal-pipe beds. The paint hangs from the plaster walls like flayed skin. Isobe is in for a liver ailment and spends

most of his time swallowing pills, reading comic books in bed and shuffling around the tacky halls with the rest of the inmates in his white linen long johns. Isobe articulates the difference between normal people and his kind of people. Normal people, he says, don't worry about day-to-day expenses. They don't worry about where the money will come from because it's just...there. Day labourers however, have to sweat out every yen. And figure out where to sleep. And figure out where to find work the next day. Those days are over for Isobe, at least the part about finding work. He knows he won't be able to work after this recent illness and even if he was capable, the job brokers would take one look at his painfully thin frame, close-cropped white hair, drooping right eyelid and pass him over in favour of somebody who doesn't look like he will collapse after five minutes of work. Isobe has applied for a bed in a welfare rest home for men over 65 but he hasn't heard back yet. He arrived in Sanya in 1959 after working as a cook and odd-job boy at an American military base in his native Hokkaido. Things were going well when he arrived; there was plenty of work to be found and he had no family, so he put down temporary roots in the barren soil of Sanya. He's been here ever since.

One fine spring afternoon I came across two men passed dead away in the middle of a narrow sidewalk a few metres from the Namidabashi intersection. One had pillowed his head on the cinderblock wall of a second hand watch store while beside him the other lay stretching toward traffic a few feet away with his arms flung back and his thin brown short-sleeve cotton shirt, unbuttoned to the waist, draped off his shoulders. His shoulders were the reason people were walking gingerly off the sidewalk and partially into traffic to get around them. Not his shoulders per se, narrow and rounded, but the intricate full-colour tattoos on his shoulders identifying him as a yakuza soldier. The Kannamachi-Ikki yakuza gang run Sanya out of nice offices in a new two-story red brick building not far from the police box on the Sumida River side of Sanya. They act as job brokers for the construction companies, basically middlemen between the labour supply

and the corporate demand. I had planned to try to interview the yakuza but was told that it was not a particularly good idea for a foreign writer to stroll into Yakuza Central and ask for the verbal equivalent of an annual report from a mob of gangsters. When I heard of the 1984 murder of a television journalist who tried to do with videotape basically what I am doing with pen and paper, I decided that was sound advice and kept my distance. The men don't like to work for the yakuza because on days when they are sick or injured and don't want to go to work, the gangsters beat them until they comply. Two streets in from the police box, dice games draw up to a hundred day labourers every day, guarded and watched by groups of young yakuza at each end of the street. Longtime residents of Sanya say that the wink-and-nod system is the only way the police and gangsters could coexist. The yakuza job brokers are also a major control element so it is in the interests of both not to interfere in each other's activities in order to keep the day labourers pacified. Yoshihiro Mizumi, the pharmacist and a 30-year resident of Sanya, says the police used to be tough but are now all but useless. "You can call the cops if there's a disturbance outside, and they say, 'yes we'll be there soon' and then never show up," he says. "Or if they do, all they say is something like 'okay you fellows keep it down.' They're useless."

Weekday mornings, the day labourers stand on the street corners and entrances to side streets along the wide Street of Bones in the early cold morning drinking hot can coffee and smoking, alternately spewing steam and smoke into the icy rain. The trucks, vans and flatbeds that will take the men to the worksites pull up and park, the drivers slouching by the doors and smoking while the job brokers sort out which men will work that day. The men jostle around, trying to look fit and sober. It's surprisingly orderly and relatively quiet. The lucky men who get picked quickly clamber into the truck. On a side street near the police station, brisk business is done in...everything. Stiff new cotton pants, white dress shirts, worn old wooden sandals, solid brass alarm clocks, porn magazines, a lovely photo album of an unknown family's trip to Mount Fuji, pots and pans, toy pistols, rocking

chairs, you name it, it's there. This street is called Thieves' Alley, where it’s said that you can eat a bowl of rice in the morning and sell the bowl and the chopsticks by the afternoon. The vendors are usually day labourers trying to make their junk another man's treasure. Thieves' Alley is either completely deserted or roaring for business with their wares neatly spread out on both sides of the street on blankets. The blankets are for sale too.

Japan's only privately managed free medical clinic is located on the Sumida River side of Sanya, about five minutes from Namidabashi. Sanyukai was formed in 1984 by missionaries and volunteers. The ground floor is an open tatami-mat [woven straw] lounge with a broad concrete staircase leading up to it from the small alley it faces onto. The men waiting for medical attention often sit in the lounge, stoically sipping tea as they wait to be called in and watching the free haircuts. Father David Walsh, a Roman Catholic priest working part-time at Sanyukai, often wields the clippers. Father Walsh says some of the men come for haircuts just for the attention, solely for the sensation of having another human being touch their heads without violence, to have somebody groom them. He makes a big show of bellowing 'okay who's next, step right up for the best haircut in town.' Tentatively, with a shyness almost painful to watch, a man will sit in the chair Walsh is holding ready for him by the steps to the lounge. A mustard-yellow cape appears and is whisked around the neck and pinned at the back with an old-fashioned wooden clothespin. Father Walsh snicks the clippers on with a dramatic flourish and maybe cracks an oldie, "thicker on top and longer on the sides, right?" Another shy smile from the man encased in mustard yellow and a quiet "short all over please." Father Walsh, in his late thirties, cuts a quietly authoritative figure with his thickset frame, thinning brown hair and wide, easy smile. Most of his customers have less than a centimetre growth of hair on their heads. The clippers drone away, trimming away the hair molecules. All done with a few quick touchups around the ears and the man bounds free of his cape and the chair, invigorated by

life on the stage. He rubs his shorn head and grabs up a broom and dustpan to sweep up his hair.

One of the mainstays of Sanyukai is Giichi Nakajima. Nakajima has a withered left arm, courtesy, he says, of a low-flying American fighter plane in World War II. With his horn-rimmed glasses, tousled hair and lined face, Nakajima looks like he's seen everything. He has probably the closest personal contact with the men of all the missionaries in Sanya. He knows all their names, all their problems, he jokes with them when he can, chastises them when he must and generally appears to love the men in a hard-bitten kind of way. Sanyukai has been administered since its founding by Jean LeBeau, a deacon in the Quebec Foreign Mission society. LeBeau has a barrel-chested, soldier of Christ look about him, tempered by soft brown eyes and a casual manner. In his neat third-floor office, LeBeau runs his hand through his iron-gray hair and says it isn't getting any easier as the years go by. "Sometimes I feel completely helpless," he admits in his French-inflected English as he told me about an afternoon in the early 90s when a man who had just had both legs amputated because of liver complications showed up out of the blue. His stumps still bleeding, he'd discharged himself ridiculously early from hospital and made his way to Sanyukai with the help of a Tokyo government worker. With the volunteer doctor gone home for the day and nowhere in Sanyukai for the man to stay, all LeBeau could do was throw up his hands and tell the man to turn right around and go back to hospital. Eventually the man skittered away on his wheelchair, probably to get drunk with his friends, LeBeau says. Gashes from fights with each other and from smacking drunk into the pavement are common for Sanyukai patients, but foot problems seem to be frequent as well. Not in-grown toenails and corns either; these feet wouldn't have been out of place on Vimy Ridge. When the feet go gangrenous from infection and neglect, they swell up fit to burst, the toes like fat, little sausages, the heels and ankles turn pinkish-green, wrinkly and dusty-looking with a texture like rotten grapefruit. Dr. Noboru

Honda, a Sanyukai volunteer, says medically the men suffer the most from sleeplessness, whether from rain, cold or alcoholism. The lack of sleep causes mental problems and sickness, and eventually the men can't work anymore. But LeBeau says the worst hurt felt by the men has nothing to do with cuts and coughing. They sometimes say loneliness is killing them. Sanyukai tries to alleviate the brutal loneliness with neighbourhood patrols passing out onigiri [rice balls], soup, blankets and a touch of grace. First stop is usually Tamehime Park, where about 30 men live in tarpaulin tents among the trees and swing-sets. On especially cold winter nights, big cauldrons of curry are prepared and curry rice is served in white plastic bowls from a cart at the entrance to the park. Huge plumes of steam and mouth-watering smells waft into the dark air and the queue often stretches through the park and curves into the street, upwards of 300 men, who are surprisingly quiet when queuing up for the hot meal. They eat quietly, almost sparingly, then put their used bowls in garbage bags held by volunteers, mutter a polite 'gochisoo sama deshita' ("thank you for the meal") and walk away. Sometimes after leaning down and handing someone an onigiri and saying goodnight, I'd hear "moshiwake nai" ("I'm terribly sorry") hanging lonely and fragile in my wake. My partner on patrol was a Japanese missionary named Francis. He had been a successful architect and occasional volunteer in Sanya until he felt called to live among the men and share their lives as a day labourer. Francis shucked his suits in the late 80s and started working as a steeplejack, living out of a van equipped with three seats, a sleeping bag and a small table with potted plants taped to it. He wears construction clothing, bathes at a public bath, eats at the same cheap restaurants as the men and wears a thick wooden cross around his neck. Francis is 41 but looks about 25 with his close-cropped hair, soft, rounded features and shy, stare-at-his-feet smile. He often eats at Maria shoku-do, a cheap restaurant run by another missionary who was called to Sanya from a life of suits and conventionality. In the mid-80s, Pastor Yuzuru Kikuchi of the United Church of Christ had been working in the finance industry for a couple of years

when he felt called to study theology and go to Sanya as a missionary. Kikuchi worked among the men as a day labourer for 10 years. "My God called me to do it," he says in his soft voice. Kikuchi has a lean, hard-looking body with the corded veiny muscles of a manual labourer, but the mutton-chop sideburns, long mournful face and receding hair are classic preacher; a perfect combination for a Sanya missionary. In the late 80s, Kikuchi noticed that the men didn't really have a cheap restaurant which served good, nutritious food and with the help of his wife and daughter set up Maria Shoku-do restaurant. Staffed by volunteers and one full-time cook and supported by donations, the restaurant, located in a side street not far from the Missionaries of Charity house, serves set dinners for about 300 yen [five dollars US] every night between five and seven. Maria Shoku-do seats about 40 and is usually comfortably crowded during dinner hour. Too early to be drunk, the men linger over their meals watching the news or sumo.

I followed an ambulance one twilight as it threaded its way around bicycles and flower boxes on the shopping street. It parked near a small group of people standing in front of a soba shop and the attendants jumped out vigorously, all piss and vinegar in their white coats, toy helmets and stretchy rubber gloves. They approached a day labourer who was sitting on the street with his arms hugging his knees. Without a word, one of the attendants put the index finger of his right hand under the man's chin while another put his left hand on the man's head as if he intended to spin him like a top. They soon deduced that the man had sustained a head wound probably as a result of crashing onto the ground to judge from the stream of blood gushing out of the man's head and the splash of red on the dirty white tiles of the street. All three attendants, still practically silent, produced gauze swabs soaked in alcohol from out of thin air and proceeded to vigorously dab and swipe at the man's face. Some of the wild dabs and swipes actually got near the area of the wound. At this point the man came out of his coma and tried to swat at these annoying hands who seemed to think his head was a bowl of chip dip. Nonplussed, the three attendants easily parried

his gentle wild swings and kept on dabbing. One produced a square of gauze and held it on the wound while another taped it on. Still completely silent, they jumped back into their ambulance and drove back off the way they had come. The whole procedure had taken maybe three minutes and left the man still holding his head in his hands, perhaps trying desperately to sort out what happened to him. He reached up to pat the gauze on his head, took it off, folded it carefully, put it in his pocket and went to sleep.

That night, I found a man lying on the street looking ancient and vulnerable in a thin black-and-white checked cotton shirt with snap buttons, gray polyester pants and beat-up black dress shoes. He was moaning softly on his side. It was a cold night and it had rained. I leaned over him, touched him on the shoulder and asked if he was okay. No answer, just soft, oddly melodic moans. I went and got him a blanket and rolled him into a sitting position to wrap him in it. The side of his body which had been lying on the ground was soaked through and freezing. He spoke suddenly in a voice so soft I almost missed it. "Shinitai," he said. I want to die. I sat down behind him, half-picked him up and leaned him against me and put my arms around him. His upper body was freezing, like holding a block of impersonal granite. He lolled his head back against my chest and looked up at me out of the sightless socket of his right eye. He'd lost the eye violently; there were jagged scars tracked over his cheekbone and eyebrows. He started grinding his worn teeth and knuckling his eye socket. We sat there for a while as the cold seeped through and around us until he stopped moaning and went to sleep. I picked him up to move him to the side of the street sheltered from the rain. He was heavy and groaned as I moved him then fell back asleep wrapped in the blanket.

One of the more interesting natural phenomena in Sanya happens around five o'clock when the men usually get back from work. Thirsty, and doubtless plied with a couple of ales on the way back from a hard day's work, they start tucking into beer at a great pace

squatting on the street around the beer machines. The smell of beer, the beer breath of a hundred rugby teams, drifts through the shopping street like a fine mist, obscuring all other odours. It's a fine thing because it isn't the fetid stench of old beer, it's the clean, grainy smell of your first cold beer on a hot day. A fine collective olfactory "tadaima" ("I'm home") for the neighbourhood from her 10,000 errant husbands. If it’s raining, they light garbage fires to dry off which burn with an acrid stink and oily texture one would expect from 50 bento [plastic takeout] boxes and the hardened crud inside them going up in flames on a rainy spring evening. The smoke cakes mouths and rings nostrils with black. Standing in the warm smoke turning their bodies in a wobbly orbit trying to baste in the heat, the men become painted with soot as if they had just come off double shifts in a coal mine. They burn anything and everything. I saw mattresses smoldering, washing machines throwing off toxic rainbow flames, even a safe being burned, or at least scorched.

The men hang out with the lads beside the booze vending machines glowing on most corners of Sanya, or hit one of the cheapie neighbourhood pubs, like Mako, a filthy little hole in the wall right on Namidabashi intersection open 24/7. Squatting out on the pavement is more fun though. You all sit around and shoot the shit and drink until you wobble. If you're smart you've already got your cardboard box ready for the night because otherwise you have to go scrounging and your vision and reflexes aren't what they were four hours and 12 pints of beer ago now are they my son? So, there you are. Where is it going to be tonight? Ah, you know just the place. Right up near Yoshiwara is Nihonzutsumi Park, a gravel playground with swings and whatnot, bordered on four sides by trees and a fence of black and yellow nylon rope stuck to waist-high wooden poles. Off you go then. Two blocks up the covered shopping street then left. The houses are dark and quiet, the floodlights every 15 feet or so pierce hot columns of glare into the night. Wander in under the trees on the side of the playground and prepare your box, scrounged from the pile kindly left out by the vegetable-shop owner on the corner. You're unsure of the

likelihood of having a shit kicked out of you during the night, so you leave your shoes on in case you have to run like a crazed jackrabbit. Now you're all spread out under the trees on your box. You've shifted your hips and pelvic bones to adjust to the protruding roots and rocks. Your head is still buzzing from the beer, your warm arm is bent under your head, your legs are tucked up in a semi-fetal position and you feel like this chunk of ground has been waiting for you all night. This cozy feeling lasts for about four hours until you wake up for the first time but you don't know that yet, so you drift off to sleep. You feel how noisy the night is, traffic whirring through intersections, the scrape of an evil iron power shovel across concrete keenly felt like a pin scratching your inner ear; the rumblings of all the earth echoed through your spine on the ground. Sweet green pollen slowly drifts down to anoint your chest and forehead, the tree above you dark-green, permanent and canopied. The cardboard gives off a mellow warm fibre smell which mingles well with the dark earth scent. You become very conscious of your skull, weighted and tenuous and balanced on the tip of your spine-stalk and heavy on the ground as if it had put down roots. You perceive your body like an X-ray, your shoulder blades, pelvis, knees and ankles stark and glowing as if conducting some kind of electrical charge from the earth. Your perceptions grow softer, and you sleep. The cold wakes you up at the back of your head just behind the ears; it seems to creep in stealthily, tap your dream shoulder and declare that it's time to re-enter reality. The rest of your body is just cold, but the back of your head is beyond freezing, a conduit for frostbite. You know that you won't be able to get back to sleep and the thought physically pains you. The alcohol has worn off, you've got a wheatfield growing on your tongue, and you have to pee but you irrationally think your pecker will freeze off if you expose it to the cold. You wake up with the strangest sensation of someone squatting nearby watching. You quickly take a startled squint around you, up in the trees, across the gravel playground. There's no one there of course but the feeling persists that someone is squatting on their haunches (why squatting, why not sitting

or standing up!) looking you over like a piece of meat. You gotta move, you gotta move now because the alternative is waiting for whoever the little shit is squatting in your psyche to stand up and do something drastic. Your body feels old and creaky and seems filled with cold viscous fluid. Your stomach feels tender and toxic from no food and too much beer, as if somebody had just shovelled lime down your throat. You leave your box, redolent of damp earth and lettuce, under the trees and walk toward Namidabashi. You're not alone, others like you have been woken up by their squatting man and dehydration and are headed in the same direction. Finally, you can smell the smoke and sense the light from the garbage fire in front of the government welfare centre. Nobody speaks, they just squint their eyes against the vile smoke and wait for morning.

When they go to work in the morning, the men leave behind their smell of warm earth, wet dog and smelly feet, lingering on the asphalt and swaying in doorways like mangy gray ghosts. After being in Sanya for a while, at night every shape seems to be a man slumped or asleep on the ground. Many times I've offered rice balls to garbage bags and tried to wake up discarded futons, and ignored rounded bushes which suddenly woke up and regarded me with baleful eyes. These men wake up like animals ready to flee or fight. You can almost see the adrenaline tracing through their veins, goading tendons and muscles into trembling readiness. Their eyes are wide and horrible, huge brown marbles floating in blood.

FIVE A.M.

Through the night, the men are loud and raucous like teenagers into their first bottle of rum. Now they are scared, furtive and fidgety as a bunch of rabbits. They stand on the street corners and entrances to side streets along the wide Street of Bones in the early cold. The force of bodies bulges the crowd off the sidewalk and out into the street. On the shopping street near the Street of Bones, a small knot of men are tucking into a breakfast

of yakitori (chicken on skewers) and large bottles of strong beer at the long narrow yakitori stand.

FIVE THIRTY A.M.

The trucks, vans and flatbeds that will take the men to the worksites pull up and park on the Street of Bones and the side streets. The drivers slouch by the doors or sit inside smoking while the job brokers sort out who will work that day. The men jostle around, trying to look fit and sober and trying to get a word in edgewise. It's surprisingly orderly and relatively quiet. The lucky men who get picked quickly clamber into the truck.

SIX A.M.

Every weekday morning, on a side street near the police station, a brisk business is done in...everything. Stiff new cotton pants, white dress shirts, worn old wooden sandals, solid brass alarm clocks, porn magazines, a lovely photo album of an unknown family's trip to Mount Fuji, pots and pans, toy pistols, rocking chairs, you name it, it's there. This street is called Thieves' Alley, where it’s said that you can eat a bowl of rice in the morning and sell the bowl and the chopsticks by the afternoon.. The vendors are usually day labourers trying to make their junk another man's treasure. Thieves' Alley is either completely deserted or roaring for business with their wares neatly spread out on both sides of the street on blankets. The blankets are for sale too.

SIX THIRTY A.M.

Some men give in to despair or crack under the pressure of waiting with thousands of others for too few jobs in the pale cold dawn. Perhaps the memories of dirt, danger and utter exhaustion paralyses any notion they may have had to find work again. They sit in the yakitori shops or the dimly lit stand up bars and angrily, desperately, down beer and begin their solitary, unsteady alcoholic dance again.

SEVEN A.M.

The men who weren't able to find work keep wandering around in the early morning haze, dressed in their brightly coloured baggy pants and shirts, their kitbags riding high on their shoulders, many with towels knotted around their heads. Grizzled Cinderellas wondering if there are going to be any more balls to attend.

7:15 — I was having breakfast at a toolshed-sized breakfast nook near my room. My baked fish, rice, miso soup and pickles are served at a formica table with rusty cast-iron legs on a concrete floor. The television set in the corner of the room was tuned to a Japanese-language broadcast of CNN news which featured an item on a priest helping the homeless of Boston. I feel a tap on my shoulder and look into the eyes of a small man, his face tanned chestnut-brown and seamed by years of working outdoors. He is dressed in mud-streaked, burnt orange sweatpants and a beige crew neck sweater. He is, of course, having beer with his breakfast. Without taking his eyes off my face, he points to the TV screen and says, "homeless over there too." I nod my head with all the gravitas my 28 years permit. His face inscrutable, the guy pats me on the shoulder, turns away, finishes his bottle of beer in two massive gulps and leaves.

TEN A.M.

In Tamehime Park on the Sumida River side of Sanya, a small group is taking a short break from reality in the luxurious spring sunshine. His head barely visible, one is twirling around slowly in a playground flying saucer ride, a smile creasing his worn old face as he waves at his friend sitting under a nearby tree. The friend is a bent old man with a perfectly round head crowned by white stubbly hair and seven or eight unbearably long white whiskers erupting from his chin like solitary cacti. Across the playground near a row of perfectly good benches, another man, lank-haired and with a moon-round face sporting

brutal flat features, is sitting cross-legged on a piece of cardboard the size of a magazine cursing loudly at a spot on the ground about three feet in front of him.

ELEVEN A.M.

The men on the sidewalk around the welfare centre sit solidly, like ancient idols anchored to earth, fully aware that if they aren't working, they aren't making money and life is tougher. This message is transmitted by their bodies. They don't cross their legs or fidget with their hands. They only use their eyes to look around occasionally without moving their heads.

11:15 — It is the dirtiest men who are the most fastidious about cleanliness. One man with stubble-short hair blackened by grime, had been irrevocably stained from years of sitting by fires fueled by garbage and whatever else came to hand. He sits cross-legged against the wall of a coffee shop, compulsively sweeping imaginary specks of dust off pants stiff and cracked with filth. He sometimes leans his head back to stare into space then furiously works his tongue over the yellow stumps his teeth had become, smacking his lips in the process, combing the crevices for bits of chipmunk food.

ONE P.M.

Laundry is more than just a chore in Sanya; it is an event, a happening, a bloody big part of everyone's day. If they didn't happen to get work and aren't blind drunk, the men sometimes wander into the coin locker rooms; open, rough wooden rooms at street level which hold 200 or so breadbox-sized lockers which are used by the men to store their belongings. They sit inside on stools or squat outside nursing a one-cup sake glass. Those who are washing their sole pair of pants sit in their boxer shorts waiting for their clothes to come out of the dryer crisp and warm, perhaps remembering a time when mothers and

wives would wash their clothes for them, maybe thinking of women's hands folding clothes briskly and neatly as they breathed in the familiar soap-smell.

TWO P.M.

The annual Matsuri [festival] wound its way through Sanya's streets one lovely Saturday afternoon, mikoshi [religious palanquin] pulsing on countless shoulders, young girls wearing first lipstick breathtakingly beautiful in graceful yukata [summer robes], middle-aged pot-bellied men with their pimply arses hanging out of white loincloths, whistles, bells, bangs, shouts and joy. Surprisingly enough, the homeless men scattered about the street showed little interest in the goings-on. Either they weren't interested in festivals as a whole, extremely unlikely in a Japanese person, or maybe they felt it wasn't really their neighbourhood after all, so they were awkward about joining in the fun. I got a little mad watching this, the men neither excluded nor excluding themselves but regardless left out of the fun. I thought up an alternate festival we could have in Sanya to rival the biggest in Japan, a blasphemous tribute to outsiders looking in. We would roar through the streets in filthy work clothes, chug beer cans and throw the empties at accidental spectators, hoist a garbage can on an old bed frame for an idol and hurl it up and down in the air with abandon. We would wind up by the Sumida River, sprawled on the grassy banks, sleeping the sleep of the drunk, wicked and avenged.

THREE P.M.

One of the worst hurts is loneliness and one way to assuage this hurt is to try to talk to someone, the more exotic the better. Often the men would bellow at me to come over and talk or say good morning. If I shake their hand I'm hooked. I got into the habit of just giving my hand and forearm in greeting, and sacrifice. When it was time for me to be on my way, time to pull my body part away from whoever was in possession of it, the guy would almost always be insulted. You can never stay with him long enough because long

enough means staying through the night and all day tomorrow and five years down the road; long enough is until all the whiskey in the world has been drunk. You pull away and go from being bosom pal, "my new buddy," to bakayaro [fucking asshole] -- easily the most popular word in the ‘hood. Everyone swears around Sanya. If you didn't, it would be like joining the army and saying "my goodness" when everybody else says "shit." It's still quite the macho culture in Sanya; even the most bandy-legged, malnourished, pencil-neck little runt can work up the gumption to square off on you if your eyes meet for more an injudicious second.

3:15 — A critical case of tuberculosis in a free clinic in Sanya caught by a television camera crew. Homeless man lying on the bed in the infirmary, young doctor bending over him with a stethoscope listening to the murmurs of his tired old body. A nurse on the phone, calling the hospital, "that's right, a likely terminal case of tuberculosis." Listens. "Sanya, near Minami-Senju station." Listens. "Okay I understand, thank you for your time." Looks at a long list of hospital numbers. Almost knows them by heart. Dials another one. To phone an ambulance to pick up one of the men, a hospital bed must be arranged in advance. This practice isn't as heartless as it seems because, understandably enough, the nurses have trouble with the men. They want to drink while in the hospital and many of them, hating the rigid institutionally and acres of white, just up and leave as soon as they are able. One man has bolted from eight hospitals for the same ailment. Finally, a hospital is found in Setagaya, well across town. The nurse tells the attendants to be careful to burn the blanket the man is wrapped in as they load him into their ambulance.

FIVE P.M.

One of the more interesting natural phenomena in Sanya happens around five o'clock when the men usually get back from work. Thirsty, and doubtless plied with a couple of ales on the way back from a hard day's work, they start tucking into beer at a great pace

squatting on the street around the beer machines. The smell of beer, the beer breath of a hundred rugby teams, drifts through the shopping street like a fine mist, obscuring all other odours. It's a fine thing because it isn't the fetid stench of old beer, it's the clean, grainy taste/smell of your first cold beer on a hot day as it hits the back of your throat. A fine collective olfactory "tadaima" ("I'm home") for the neighbourhood from her 10,000 errant husbands.

SEVEN P.M.

I followed an ambulance one twilight as it threaded its way around bicycles and flower boxes on the shopping street. It parked near a small group of people standing in front of a soba shop and the attendants jumped out vigorously, all piss and vinegar in their white coats, toy helmets and stretchy rubber gloves. They approached a day labourer who was sitting on the street with his arms hugging his knees. Without a word, one of the attendants put the index finger of his left hand under the man's chin while another held the man's head as if he intended to spin the man like a top. They soon deduced that the man had sustained a head wound probably as a result of crashing onto the ground from the stream of blood gushing out of the man's head and the splash of red on the dirty white tiles of the street. All three attendants, still practically silent, produced gauze swabs soaked in alcohol from out of thin air and proceeded to vigorously dab and swipe at the man's face. Some actually got near the area of the wound. At this point the man came out of his coma and tried to swat at these annoying hands who seemed to think his head was a bowl of chip dip. Nonplussed, the three attendants easily parried his gentle wild swings and kept on dabbing. One produced a square of gauze and held it on the wound while another taped it on. Still completely silent, they jumped back into their ambulance and drove back off the way they had come. The whole procedure had taken maybe three minutes. The fun over, the small crowd dispersed and left the man still holding his head in his hands, perhaps

trying desperately to sort out what happened to him. He reached up to pat the gauze on his head, took it off, folded it carefully, put it in his pocket and went to sleep.

NINE P.M.

I found a man lying on the shopping street one night who didn't seem to belong. He was ancient and wore a thin black-and-white checked cotton with snap buttons, gray polyester pants and beat-up black dress shoes. He was lying on his side moaning softly. It was a cold night and it had rained and everyone else was bundled up in coats or blankets. I leaned over him, touched him on the shoulder and asked if he was okay. No answer, just soft, oddly melodic moans. I went and got him a blanket and rolled him into a sitting position to wrap him in it. The side of his body which had been lying on the ground was soaked through and freezing. He spoke suddenly in a voice so soft I almost missed it. "Shinitai," he said. I want to die. I sat down behind him, half-picked him up and leaned him against me and put my arms around him. His upper body was freezing, like holding a block of impersonal granite. He lolled his head back against my chest and looked up at me out of the sightless socket of his right eye. It appeared that he had lost the eye violently; there were jagged scars tracked over his cheekbone and eyebrows. He started grinding his worn teeth and knuckling his eye socket. We sat there for a while as the cold seeped through and around us until he stopped moaning and went to sleep. I picked him up to move him to the side of the street sheltered from the rain. He was heavy and groaned as I moved him then fell back asleep wrapped in the blanket.

ELEVEN P.M.

The garbage fires the men build to keep warm at night cake mouths and ring nostrils with black and burn with an acrid stink and oily texture one would expect from 50 bento [plastic takeout] boxes and the hardened crud inside them going up in flames on a rainy spring evening. Standing in the warm smoke turning their bodies in a wobbly orbit trying

to baste in the heat, the men become painted with soot as if they had just come off double shifts in a coal mine. They burn anything and everything. I saw mattresses smoldering, washing machines throwing off toxic rainbow flames, even a safe being burned, or at least scorched.

MIDNIGHT

The stinkiest izakaya (local pub) in all of Japan is near Sanya's Minami-Senju Station. I couldn't decipher the name because the awning is practically torn to shreds and only has pretensions to once having been white. The wax food samples are caked with years of greasy dust in a display case which looks to have been kicked to splinters and taped back together a couple of times. Hostesses with squeaky voices usher the men back into the night after the midnight closing. It is a huge place with long plywood tables and fly-specked posters on the walls of young women lunging forward to show their cleavage holding on to full mugs of beer. Hand-lettered ribbons of paper stuck to the wall with yellowed scotch tape announce the day's meals. I don't see how anybody could eat though because the stench of garbage is almost too much to bear, like having a beer in a dumpster. The hostesses speak accented Japanese and are mostly young Asian women. They dress in unappealing white barber smocks and stand at the end of your table and fill up the quickly drained beer glasses. There is very little groping or mucking around between the hostesses and the men, most of whom are still relatively sober and simply grateful for the service. After the pub closes at midnight, they either wander around looking for a place to sleep or head to Mako, the pub right on Namidabashi intersection which is open all night. I went in one night and ended up having a three-hour conversation with two day labourers about sumo wrestling and the vagaries of long-distance relationships over about a thousand beers and glasses of a mysterious red alcoholic liquid that I probably had no business whatsoever drinking. The bog is the smallest I have ever seen. You piss through what is

basically a white porcelain hole in the concrete floor that seems to go forever. There is always somebody in the bar but it doesn't seem to get particularly crowded at night. Common to all the pubs, izakayas, yakitori shops and stand-up bars in the neighbourhood is the unreality of it all. The smell of beer and pub food combine to create the illusion that time has stopped, it's always warm and happy inside. Outside is confusion, cold ground and indifference. Inside is warmth, a sense of belonging and good mates.

ONE A.M.

The last late eyes are the worst, peering up from cardboard and concrete at your passing, as big as a child's and as pleading...let me sleep...dear God let me sleep. They know they are doomed to be solitary witnesses as the night silently unfolds.

THE GOOD NUN NEXT DOOR

My neighbour above the decaying noodle shop is Sister Keiko Hasegawa of the Sacred Heart order. She’s been a nun for 35 years and exudes an air of amused nonchalance at the world around her, favouring men's work shirts and jeans when she works. Sister Hasegawa is a counsellor at the Sanya Maryknoll Alcoholic Centre (MAC), a narrow Victorian-style house near the Yoshiwara end of Sanya. Sanya MAC was founded 10 years ago by a Maryknoll priest but it is currently managed by a former alcoholic and long-time Sanya resident. His years in Sanya are etched indelibly on Takashi Ishii’s lined face and gnarled hands. Pressed brown pants and striped sweater notwithstanding, Ishii retains a certain air of shabbiness, a permanent 7 o'clock shadow courtesy of his hard years on the streets. Ishii's drinking problem drove him to leave his wife and two kids and move to Sanya to work as a day labourer. He was one of Sanya MAC's first patients and has stayed on to manage the centre for the past seven years. Ishii says when he was in Sanya he never

seriously entertained the notion of getting back in touch with his family. "No way," he says through pursed lips. "That sort of thing just doesn't happen." The men like Ishii who do kick the booze and get off the streets belong to an elite sub-society of about 100. Sister Hasegawa estimates that's how many alcoholics the centre has helped. Scattered all over Tokyo, none of them has returned to Sanya for fear of starting to drink again. It's a deep dark hole and even if you only stand at the edge looking for familiar landmarks, it'll snake out a sinewy tentacle and pull you back in for good. One unlikely success story Sister Hasegawa spoke of was a rather violent dude named Endo who abandoned his family and drifted to Saya where he could drink his face off and beat up the neighbourhood at his leisure. He eventually wound up at MAC, kicked the habit, got married to a recovering alcoholic and now runs a construction subcontracting business in northeast Tokyo. He does not hire from Sanya. One night over tea, Sister Hasegawa told of a coal miner from Tohoku whose mine closed down, forcing him to look for work in Sanya. He had been sending money home but a heavy drinking habit ate into his earnings, slowing the flow of money back home and sometimes shutting it off completely. Occasionally, Sister Hasegawa would manage to get him back on the wagon and he would reestablish contact with his family. At one point he told his family he was finally coming back home. He got on a train and travelled half a day north. When he finally made his way to the family home, his family wouldn't let him in, said Sister Hasegawa sadly. "They were afraid of having an alcoholic in their house." He had gone all the way back home only to be turned away and sent back over the bridge. Sister Hasegawa also spoke of the quiet ones she has known in Sanya, the Tokyo University graduates and former middle managers who are so ashamed at what they have become that they can barely speak. The ones who cracked and abruptly exited the system. These ones don't talk to anybody. Period. Except occasionally to kind sympathetic nuns who are trying to help them stop drinking. They might occasionally tell the nun about the physics class they taught in room 402, or the personnel

department they ran in a big white office building downtown. Justifying their trust in her, Sister Hasegawa declined to introduce me to them. Balanced against the thousands of men who have lived in Sanya over the past decade, the 100 men Sanya MAC has been able to keep off the streets may not seem like much. However, there is only one other group in Sanya which has managed to rehabilitate but a handful of men. Rehabilitation is not even the professed goal of these groups. All they do is provide comfort. They say God does the work.

THE LEAST OF MY BROTHERS

Crash-screeech. The unmistakable sound of a refrigerator doing a face-plant on unyielding concrete. Easily the loudest sound in Sanya that late April night. By the time I arrived outside, a cluster of shopkeepers were in a ragged half-circle around the fallen refrigerator outside the pharmacists' shop watching two men shamble away down the street. There appeared to be nothing to do but mutter and grumble until the timely appearance of the enforcer, a fireplug of a man in a vile yellow paisley shirt and stretchy black pants. Getting right down to business he asked for and was given an account of what had happened, stalked after the piss-drunk perpetrators, collared them with two meaty hands and led them back to the crowd. The men mumbled an apology to the embarrassed pharmacist and had turned to go when playground macho etiquette intruded into their sodden skulls and made them turn slightly to the satisfied enforcer and spew out the wrong word. "Bakayaro [fuck off asshole]," they sneered almost in unison, lips curled in contempt. Oh lordy, did the kid gloves come off then. The outraged enforcer caught up to them in two leaps of his stubby legs and started raining Hulk Hogan elbow smashes on their astonished heads. "I'm an asshole am I," he roared at the top of his lungs. The two refrigerator assaulters, somewhat the worse for wear now, begged forgiveness in quaky timorous voices as they were led down the street caroming off the flashing elbows of the enforcer. The next day I started to

tell Sister Hasegawa about the incident when she stunned me by describing it to me scene for scene. Lying in bed in her room, she had been able to listen to the commotion and sort out exactly who was doing what to whom simply by the sound of their voices. Like a birdwatcher charting plumed songbirds, the good Sister had learned in her four years administering to the hearts and souls of Sanya to identify her charges merely by sound. Sister Hasegawa is typical of the dedicated men and women missionaries in Sanya. One of my original contacts with Sanya was a Roman Catholic missionary who belonged to the Missionaries of Charity (MC), an order founded by Mother Theresa. The four MC brothers live in a nondescript two-story house on the corner of a quiet side street and a busy avenue close to the police box. Every Thursday evening, mass is said in a large common room and it's always standing room only at about 60. A queue starts to build outside around 5 o'clock, and when the doors open, the men spill quickly into the room, looking for all the world like bargain-hunters rushing a toy store at Christmas. They quickly squat on the green rubber sheeting tacked to the wooden floor. Sitting cross-legged on the floor and watching the priest with curious, confused eyes, they resemble kindergarten kids during reading hour. There are plenty of regulars, including a man who was always bleary eyed but clean-shaven. He wore a dusty blue poncho and would make the sign of the cross with wild rubbery arm movements and twitches, an ecstatic spiritual third base coach signing the runner on second to steal third for Jesus. A former yakuza soldier who was disgraced and wound up in Sanya, having found it difficult to adapt his gangster skills to the conventional job market. Abe-san was orphaned in the war and raised by nuns or priests, so he knows the mass inside and out. He is always drunk and a bit of a clown in his dark glasses which seem to be welded to his lumpy bulbous nose. Due to either the closeness of the room, the presence of God or just plain old demon liquor, some of the men seem to fall into a kind of trance during mass, often sitting cross-legged with their arms out and palms upturned as if in supplication. As communion is prepared, the men stop their squirming

and scratching and yawning to peer closely at this most Christian of acts, perhaps realising its significance but always a little incredulous each time it happens. They have another reason to be excited because communion means that sandwiches, crackers, bananas and oranges will be passed out in about ten minutes. They sit back and smoke and chat and sometimes try to show off their English ability to the foreigner passing out orange sections. "Ssank you," one geezer would roar with much elbow poking to his mates. After the food is gone and the last of the tea poured the men file back out the doors into the cool night. The floor is swept down, then steaming buckets of water, rags and elbow pressure are introduced to the rubber sheets, redolent of smelly feet, farts and dust. The brothers are cheerful, quiet and thoughtful young men, three from India and one a Filipino. All of them speak Japanese and all seem to care very deeply for the men they minister to. The brothers aren't really big on bible-thumping, 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps' speeches and they don't seek converts. Rather, the mandate of the Missionaries of Charity is simply to provide comfort to those less fortunate. The brothers will spend hours playing board games and cards with the men in the common room each morning, will laugh at crude stupid jokes and massage tired, prematurely old necks. It is this, the gentle laying-on of hands, which touched me the most about the brothers' treatment of the men. They seem to put an extra ration of compassion into their words and their touch, the men almost purr under their hands. However, compassion alone is not enough to hold together bodies broken by the streets and wracked by tuberculosis. And every once in a while, these fishers of men haul one out of the darkest, deepest pool. Izuka-san was near death when one of the MC brothers found him on the street about nine years ago near their mission house. An alcoholic day labourer who'd been in Sanya for years, Izuka was living what would have been his last winter when he was found and taken to hospital. After his recovery, Izuka sought out the brothers and began to spend much of his time at the mission house. He decided he wanted to be a Christian and was baptised shortly afterwards. I first

saw him at the mission house during mass. He had a dark-brown suit on with a striped beige tie and a white shirt stained light yellow around the collar by sweat. He still looks homeless, still scruffy even after he shaves and combs his hair, still scraggly despite the suit. He has a narrow face, sunken under the cheekbones and hollowed at the eyes, with coarse bristly eyebrows. I tried several times to interview Izuka but he always refused. Nobody seems sure of what his first name is, nor of where he is from. They say he has a wife and maybe some children somewhere. He guards his privacy jealously while violating that of others with abandon. The few times I have seen him at mass he never stopped talking, muttering private prayers to himself, nudging the nuns in prayer to tell them some stupid thing or another. The patient nuns look severely at him, nod their heads at whatever stupidness he is babbling about then close their eyes and ignore him. He would move on to somebody else, his hands jerking as he emphasized a point. Izuka has a high-pitched whiny voice, stutters a bit and tends to repeat himself. He has the attention span of a three-year-old, the result, the brothers say, of mental unbalance from years of drinking. Izuka lives on a government pension and part-time work as a cleaner. He looks to be about 70. He will turn 49 next year. However, since he doesn't earn his living modelling knitwear and appears not to give a shit what he looks like, that isn't a problem. For a while after his baptism, he lived with Francis in his van. Francis says Izuka is one of the toughest old buzzard he's ever seen, often washing himself at a cold-water tap in the dead of winter clad only in a pair of pants.

The only man to refuse to give me his name had a master's degree in philosophy. Apparently, he was walking around a popular lake in central Japan, lost in thought on some thorny philosophical debate, when a bunch of kids came up on him and started throwing stones at him. Back then, as befits academics who are generally out of touch with everyday life, he affected a shabby air of messy hair and unkempt clothes. The little monsters thought this a hoot and decided to chuck rocks at him and call him a beggar. Just

as he was about to get into a good hot bout of anger, he suddenly calmed as if somebody had doused him with cold water. He had a blazing epiphany that morphed him into a beggar-king. In hardship, the petty hardship of a bunch of callous, annoying brats, he discovered a means to strengthen himself and transcend the frivolities and trivial accomplishments of everyday life. In hardship the beggar-king had found his higher plane, his Buddha. He made the decision right then and there to immerse himself in a trial by fire with no ends and no means and seek out the hardest life he could find. His Buddha led him to Sanya. The beggar-king lives there now, eating garbage off the street and playing in his own feces. Coherent one day, twirling around a mind-bending galaxy far, far away for the rest of the week.

I first saw Onishi at Sanyukai clad in a filthy overcoat, a baseball cap and two flannel shirts. He wore nothing below all that but for a pair of longjohns which were spotless white except for the milk-coffee-coloured shit stains on the crotch. Some years ago, Onishi badly damaged his neck in a construction accident with the result that his head is permanently bent forward. Whenever he is standing up and speaking to someone, he has to crane his head sideways and up, like a scientist interrupted while peering through a microscope. He has oddly slanted Mr. Spock eyes, a flat, protruding forehead and short cropped hair with black filth grafted onto his scalp in splotches. He was sitting slumped against the cinder-block wall across the small alley from the Sanyukai doorway with his odd head propped up by a hand on his raised knee, muttering to himself. After a while he pulled a pair of clean white briefs out of his pocket. It soon became clear that he intended to put the briefs on but was mystified by the mechanics of his full-length longjohns. After a while, Onishi pulled a pair of scissors from his voluminous pocket. His epiphany was brief but undoubtedly intense to judge from his flashing eyes; he would cut off the offending garment and don the clean underwear. Onishi shrugged off his overcoat and, in an incongruous show of modesty for a man who regularly defecates against walls in full

view of humanity, laid it across his lap and began to snip. I fully expected him to cut his penis off and bleed to death right then and there in front of me. However, it soon became obvious that his innate sense of male-member preservation didn't fail Onishi this time. A lifetime of booze and rough street life had dulled his judgement, clouded his eyesight, corroded his liver and stained his skin, but it couldn't lull him into cutting off his pecker. It took him the best part of an hour to circumnavigate the waist of his longjohns with the scissors. He triumphantly brandished the legs like a freshly killed vermin carcass, dropped them to the ground and nodded off to sleep. After a few minutes, he woke up and fumbled his new underwear on under the overcoat. He pulled himself to his feet and wandered down the street. Onishi claims to be 44 years old and is in a constant state of amazement that I am only 28. He reckons someone my size (6'4" 195 pounds) should be older. Since we first met, he has always referred to me as "nijuha-sai," which means "28 years old" in Japanese. He is comforted by the fact that I play sports because his fantasy persona is the all-Japan karate champion. He occasionally wanders around bellowing of the great victories he has won and challenging one and all to a fight to the death at the Budokan national sports stadium. Onishi would affirm our brotherhood in sport with spine-jarring slaps to my back whenever we met. Every winter, his siblings wire money to a Sanya flophouse in his name and ask that he be given a place to stay. This is the only contact Onishi has with his family. As far as anyone knows he has never stayed in the room rented for him, preferring to stay on the streets. Onishi likes to hang out at the garbage fire smoldering against the outer wall of the Tokyo government centre in Sanya. He can be found there most cold days sitting almost in the fire itself, the toxic smoke engulfing his squatting figure, giving him the appearance of a Hindu holy man swaying in sacred smoke and praying to vengeful gods. Onishi is prone to fits of violence, especially if he feels he is being patronized or pitied. Sitting outside Sanyukai one afternoon he shuffled over to one of the social workers, who was sitting on the steps smoking a cigarette as he surveyed his

brood. Onishi demanded a cigarette then sat back down, the cigarette hanging unlit from his lips. He suddenly tore the cigarette from his lips and hurled it and the lighter to the ground, growling, "I'm the toughest guy in town, don't you forget it.” Just then one of the nuns came down the steps with a plate of cheese sandwiches for the men. Onishi lurched up and grabbed three and stuffed them in his mouth. A few seconds later he spat the half-eaten sandwiches on the ground. His little display over, his supremacy assured, he calmly walked away with as much dignity as his E.T. head would allow. Onishi's affectionate side showed itself late one night as I was walking home from the train station. I saw a familiar apparition lurching down the street; Onishi, his head swaying, his cardboard box-bed under one arm and a bundle of clothes under the other. When he saw me, still a good 30 metres away, he dropped everything, spread his arms wide and started shambling toward me. "Nijuha-sai," he bellowed, "oy, brother." He ran up to me wrapped his arms around my shoulder and laid his head on my chest. He is one of the more melancholy characters around Sanya these days but at one time he was one of its leaders. Sanyukai’s Jean LeBeau says Onishi, who has been in Sanya for about 20 years, used to be leader of a group of men who hung around together sharing their food, money and drink, and generally watching out for one another. The men started dying off about 10 years ago and Onishi is the last one left alive. A little bit of Onishi died with his boys as well. LeBeau says Onishi became sad, drunker and more violent after the deaths. LeBeau recalls Onishi approaching him one winter evening and asking if LeBeau remembered his friends. "You remember them don't you, you remember how nice they were?" he recalls Onishi pleading. LeBeau says Onishi is not likely to survive the next one or two winters. The harsh life and his dead friends will soon prove too much for him to bear.

Postscript: January 2023

My prediction that foreign workers would populate Sanya turned out to be wrong, but the gentrification of the neighbourhood is going strong with several of the flophouses upgraded and priced out of range of the homeless. And there is a trendy café, called the Sanya café, where Maria Shokudo once stood. It could be a modern café anywhere and opens on to a cozy back garden of bamboo and river rock. Fortunately, the menu is reasonably priced and caters to the unique demographics of the neighborhood, featuring so-called "sympathy coffee" which offers the chance for patrons to buy coffee for a day labourer and hear his story. The small, filthy room I rented above the decaying noodle shop has long since composted. Jean LeBeau at Sanyukai is still tending to the men's physical ailments and the Missionaries of Charity still tend to their souls. For many years undoubtedly, my friend with the ET head, Onishi, has been reduced to a pile of ashes in a small white box on the battered gray shelving unit in the Sanya government office. The gruesome history of Sanya has been immortalized in a bizarre tourist attraction called Kozukappara Execution Grounds which breathlessly howls that "prisoners were crucified, burned at the stake, or beheaded with their heads then placed on spikes for three days" in the bad old days 500 years ago. It also lists the names of doctors who studied anatomy by dissecting the bodies of the poor souls. A 2019 feature piece on the community in the Guardian newspaper was headlined "The Tokyo neighbourhood where people come to disappear" and features a day labourer named Aizawa in front of his tarpaulin home with a flat-screen TV powered by solar panels. Not far away, another man is staring blankly at the middle of the road taking off all his clothes. Aizawa is a 64-year old veteran of Sanya who reminisced fondly about his 30-odd years in Sanya. "There used to be riots, but it's a more peaceful place these days, probably because we're all too old to fight. Life is hard, but I can be a free spirit here."

