

5 TIMES FROM ZERO

EPISODE 1

The Edge of a Typhoon



Matsuyama, Shikoku, September 3, 2005

Kim Christian Botho Pedersen

PREFACE

My name is Kim Pedersen. I am a Dane who grew up in Japan, two very different worlds that have shaped me throughout my life. I have never stopped belonging to both. I am one hundred percent Danish and I am one hundred percent Japanese as well.

Looking back, I see a life defined by crossroads. Moments when there was no obvious right answer, only a choice that had to be made. Sometimes either path would have led somewhere worthwhile, and I chose without hesitation. Other times I knew exactly which decision was right, and I followed it regardless of the consequences.

From a very young age, I have been an all-or-nothing person. Once I made up my mind, I committed completely. I never looked back, and I never spent much time wondering whether I should have chosen differently. When I was around forty years old, my aunt told me that I was exactly like my father, a man who did everything at one hundred percent or not at all.

She was right.

Whatever decision I made, I made it with the information, experience, and convictions I had at the time. Put me back into the same situation with the same knowledge, and I would almost certainly make the same choice again. For that reason, I have never been particularly interested in the question of what I could have done differently. History always enjoys the advantage of knowing the outcome. Life does not.

That does not mean everything worked out well.

Soon I will reach the age of 60. The recent years, things have changed a bit, given the outcome throughout the years. So I have started thinking back whether I did make the right decision in certain situations.

In hindsight, there are certainly decisions I would prefer had produced different results. Some of them cost me dearly. But every choice belongs to the person I was at that moment in time, not to the man writing these words today. I still do not regret any of my decisions, but certainly I wish things had turned out better. Knowing what I know today, there are decisions I would have made differently.

I no longer possess the certainty I carried as a young man. Some of that certainty came simply from youth and inexperience. Much of it came from the way I was raised. Some from a stubborn character. I was raised knowing what I did was the right thing from the very beginning. I had a certainty and stubbornness only few can match.

I grew up in a fundamentalist christian family. We were convinced that we alone possessed the truth. Not a truth. “The truth”. Who argues with god?

Everyone else was wrong. Of course...

Worse than that, everyone else was destined for hell unless someone warned them in time. It was our duty to save them by convincing them to choose the right truth, the right god before it was too late.

Looking back, it is difficult to imagine a heavier burden to place on a child. To genuinely believe that the eternal fate of other people depended on your ability to persuade them.

Today, I no longer believe any of it. Christianity often tells you that if you believe, you are free. For me it was the total opposite. The years I spent believing, was “prison time” for me. When I left christianity, I was finally really “free”. I no longer had to live another mans life, I was not bound to any religious rules which make no sense. All those things which prisoned my mind, was finally released and now I could think freely.

I left christianity around the age of twenty-five. Not through rebellion or disappointment, but through reasoning. One question led to another, and every answer produced new questions until the conclusion became impossible for me to

ignore. The conclusion was clear. There are no god, at least not the god I grew up worshipping. Now I even had my own proof, built up through years of questioning. God never answered my questions.

Thirty-five years have passed since then, and I have never doubted that decision to leave christianity. I have been free for 35 years. It took two decades after that, to be really free in my mind. When indoctrinated as a kid, things seems to stuck.

Thousands of religions have existed throughout history. Thousands more have disappeared. Each claims access to the only truth. Each claims authority to speak on behalf of god. Each claims that those who disagree are mistaken, misguided, or condemned. Throughout history, such convictions have divided people into believers and non-believers, insiders and outsiders, the saved and the damned. They have inspired acts of generosity and compassion, but they have also been used to justify persecution, violence, war, and suffering. People have been imprisoned, tortured, and killed because they believed the wrong thing, questioned the wrong authority, or belonged to the wrong faith.

This is not unique to any one religion. History provides examples from many of them. Recently people were believing covid 19 vaccine was necessary, until they realized it was all built on a lie. In the meantime, millions of lives were affected negatively. It happens because people don't ask the critical question from the very beginning. I did that with christianity, which is part of my story.

The logical problem is obvious. Christians claim that islam is false. Muslims claim that christianity is false. Other religions make similar claims about both. They cannot all be right. By their own definitions, all of them must be false.

That is the conclusion I reached, and nothing I have seen in the 35 years since has persuaded me otherwise.

Leaving religion behind did not answer all my questions. In many ways, it created larger ones. If religion is false, where do our values come from? Why do people from vastly different cultures often arrive at similar ideas about honesty, loyalty,

fairness, kindness, and justice? Why do some values survive throughout history while others disappear? What makes a principle worth defending? And how much are we willing to sacrifice for the things we claim to believe?

I came to the conclusion that goodness does not originate in religion. It originates in people. It's a human nature you can cultivate or not. I try to be the one type of humans, who cultivates the goodness. I am absolutely not sure that I have succeeded, but certainly it made me truly free and whole, to have my own standard. I am far from perfect. I know that if any. But for sure, I have got a goal in life that I can be proud of. I have a standard I can be proud of. I don't need a god any longer, to try to be good. If you need god, to do good, you certainly have a problem. Good should come from within a person. Not through rules, other people, churches, mosques or who ever tells you what to do.

"If you need a god to tell you what is right and wrong, you are the poorest man in the world."

Goodness must come from within. It cannot be borrowed from a holy book or delegated to someone else's authority. It must be chosen. You must be the one deciding whether a thing is good or evil.

Understanding that changed my life.

Freedom, however, did not arrive overnight. Although I had stopped believing, christianity continued to influence me for decades through fear. Fear is one of the most powerful tools ever created for controlling human beings, and fear of eternal punishment is perhaps the greatest of them all. It took almost twenty years before I could honestly say that I was no longer carrying that burden.

The years that followed took my life in directions I could never have imagined.

After leaving christianity, I got a job, representing the Danish government in Japan as a Commercial Attaché with diplomatic status. I managed the Japanese office of a French company. I built businesses of my own, watched them grow, and watched some of them fail. I experienced successes I could never have predicted and

disappointments I never saw coming.

More than once, circumstances beyond my control swept away years of work.

Many people experience one major restart in life. I experienced five. This is the story of those five restarts. How it started, how it ended, how I came on the other side, how those restarts did not crush me.

Five times I found myself forced to rebuild significant parts of my life from the ground up. Not because I was reckless, and not because I was seeking adventure, but because life has a habit of rewriting plans without asking for permission first. You can plan and calculate as much as you want. The best plans and calculations are NOT a guarantee for success.

Those failures and restarts taught me lessons that success never could. Success confirms what you already believe. Failure forces you to examine it.

Repeatedly starting over forced me to ask who I was without the things I had built around myself. Without the business, without the title or status.

The title, *5TimesFromZero*, refers to those repeated beginnings. But it is about far more than starting over. It is the record of the choices I made and the reasons behind them, a narrative of success and failure, friendship and betrayal, ambition and disappointments, played out across the theaters of business and politics, throughout soon 6 decades.

It is also the story of Denmark and Japan, two countries that shaped me in profoundly different ways, teaching me contrasting lessons about society, responsibility, community, and individual freedom. It explores what happens when different cultures, value systems, and ways of seeing the world collide within the same person, navigating the tension between belief and disbelief, wealth and poverty, privilege and hardship.

Most of all, it is a story about values.

Living between different cultures, between faith and doubt, and between periods of

abundance and scarcity forces a person to think deeply about what truly matters. Experiences have a way of stripping away assumptions and exposing what lies underneath. Some values survive that process, while others collapse entirely; some beliefs become stronger when tested, and others disappear.

This is the chronicle of that testing. It is an invitation to walk through those moments with me and to ask yourself the same questions I was forced to answer:

When everything you have built disappears, what are you left with?

When the road ahead is blocked, what do you do?

When life leaves you with no good option at all, what do you do?

And when the values you once considered unquestionable no longer provide the answers, what do you do then?

Are you willing to fight for your values, or do you simply go along with what you are told?

What do you tell your kids? Which values do you pass on to your children? Probably the most important question you will be faced with from the story.

I hope this book encourages you to think about your own life, your own choices, and the values that guide them. I have no interest in telling you what conclusions you should reach. Every person arrives at their beliefs through a different history, a different journey, and a unique set of experiences.

But please question your own values. Don't let other people tell you what your values are. Think, make your own decision based on who you are. Don't live somebody else's life. Live your own. Be proud of who you are.

My values are not necessarily the right ones. Neither are yours. But they are ours to examine, challenge, defend, and change. We live in a time when we are still free to do so, and that freedom is precious and worth defending.

Above all, this is the story of the values that survived when everything else was lost.

Kim Pedersen

August 17th 2026

Sweden

A note on format and structure

This file is the companion text to the *5 Times From Zero* video series, released on YouTube as @5timesfromzero. The story is told across multiple series, each divided into episodes, this volume covers Series 01, Episode 01, "Introduction".

Episodes are being written and released on an ongoing basis, roughly one per month. As of this writing, only Episode 1 exists in finished form. The remaining episodes in this series, and the series that follow it, are still being written, and will be added over time rather than delivered as a completed whole. What you are reading is a work in progress, made public as it is made.

5TimesFromZero will be published in English, but will also be translated into Japanese. There might be small differences between the Japanese and English version of various reasons.

A note on truth

This is a true story. Every event described happened, to the best of my memory and the records I have kept. I have not invented incidents, exaggerated outcomes, or dramatized what didn't occur. Where I describe what I thought or felt, I have written only what I actually thought or felt, not what would make a better scene.

Memory is not a transcript, and different people who lived through the same moments may remember them differently. But this account is offered as an honest one, not a fictionalized one.

A note on names

Some names, and in some cases identifying details, of people mentioned in this book have been altered. This is done to protect the privacy of individuals who did not choose to be part of a public story, and to avoid placing them at risk of being wrongly identified by readers who were not there. Any resemblance between a name used here and a real person, other than myself, should not be assumed to be accurate.

A note on language

Throughout this book, the words *god* and *christianity* and others, are written in lowercase, without capitalization. This is a deliberate stylistic choice on my part, not an error. This is chosen where I find it inappropriate to use capitalized letter. Such example is God, whom no one knows who is, no one knows whether he exist, no one know if any of the many thousands gods people believe in exist or not. I don't find it worthy to capitalizes such word, which is to mislead people and supporting the idea something devine exist. The same background applies to word like christianity, islam, christians, muslims etc.

Where to find

Web: 5timesfromzero.com

YouTube channel: @5timesfromzero

Links related to Kim Pedersen

Business:

www.japantradestatistics.com

www.gaikokuujinkomon.com

www.japantradeadvisor.com

THE FIRST END

MATSUYAMA, SHIKOKU ISLAND, JAPAN. SEPTEMBER 3, 2005. AFTERNOON.

They came for the car on September 3rd. Around 2pm in the afternoon. A Saturday. It was a beautiful day.

I had bought the car three years earlier, in 2002, shortly after leaving the embassy and starting with NTC, launching the Danish urinals from Uridan into the Japanese market. At the time, it felt as if things were finally coming together. As if I had reached a point where something stable could be built.

I did have an offer from the Danish ambassador, to be permanently employed at the embassy, as local staff. Thinking back, saying no to this position was a wrong decision, but at the moment, it felt right to say no, and go for the better option, to start my own business.

Years later, I went through those days, trying to figure out what could have been a better option. I could have taken the job at the embassy, with some kind of clause letting me explore my own business simultaneously. The ambassador was an educated lawyer, and he wanted the best for me, so he would probably have figure out something for me which could have worked out.

But I said “thank you but no thank you”.

I wanted to pursue the big opportunity laying just in front of me, which eventually would give me enough wealth, to pursue even more business opportunities. Staying at the embassy, even in a permanent position, was not an option for me, as it certainly would block a lot of those potentials.

The car was a blue metallic Toyota Altezza. I had tested Audi, BMW, Toyota and other cars before deciding. I am not particularly interested in cars, but as a former taxi driver I pay attention to how they perform under pressure: acceleration, response, control. The Altezza had the right balance. It looked like a BMW and drove almost like a BMW 328.

Fast accelleration, very close to match the BMW 328. It was sporty, cost the half of

a BMW, but since it was a Toyota, you could expect less repairs than a BMW.

It cost around 2.5 million yen and required about 100,000 yen a month to maintain.

Not long before I bought it, I had a conversation with the salesman. I asked him about performance. Durability. How long I could expect the car to last. I loved to drive, and expected this one to last for many years.

He answered immediately.

“We test it by driving at 100 km per hour for at least 24 hours. So we test it for 100,000 kilometers. This model has no issues at all. The test takes about a week.”

I looked at him. Then I told him he should check his numbers because they don’t add up.

If you theoretically drive 100 km per hour for 24 hours, you cover 2,400 kilometers in a day. Ten days would bring you to 24,000 kilometers. To reach 100,000, you would need more than forty days. To do it in less than a week, is impossible.

I have always been sharp with numbers. It is a habit. I notice when numbers are total nonsense.

I did not have anything against the salesman, but told him it is important to check numbers, because they can be tested by anyone.

The Altezza was never “just a car” for me. It was confirmation that I had reached a certain level in my life. Now I was on the right track, I had reached something and heading for more. But now, that confirmation was changing content from success to total disaster and fiasco.

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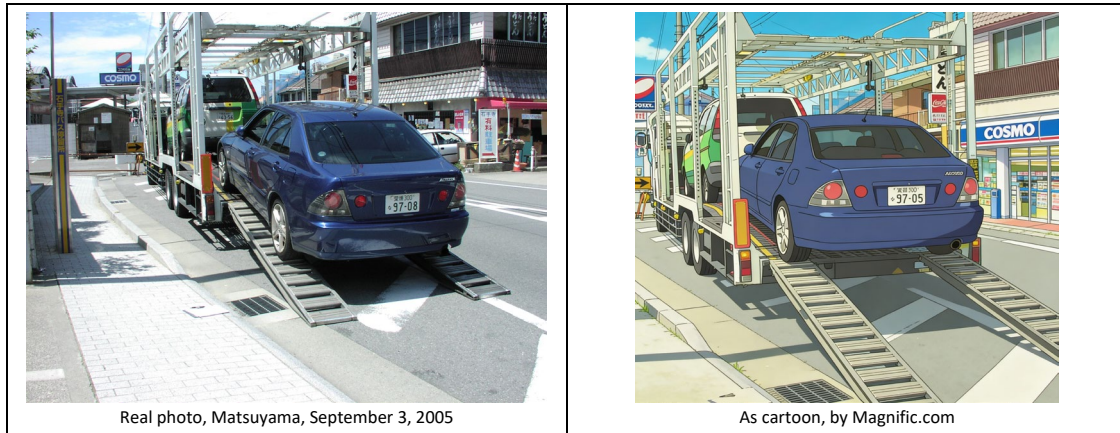
I stood on the pavement and watched the transporter winch it up onto the ramp of the towing truck. It was a day with bright September sunshine.

What I was left with instead was clarity. I followed the movement of the car all the way up the ramp, not because I needed to understand what was happening, but

because I already understood it too well. The car itself was not the issue. It could have been any cars. But this one belonged to a specific moment in my life, a moment when I had been certain that things would work out well. I had finally reached a position where everything was in place.

Watching it being towed away made something very precise visible. That version of my life had already ended, whether I had fully accepted it or not. The car disappearing simply confirmed it in a way that could no longer be ignored.

The transporter turned the corner and that was it. Probably the last car I would ever own in Japan, I thought.



I stood alone on the pavement for a moment, looking at the empty space where it had been. Then I turned and started walking back.

THE HOUSE

I walked back to the house. It took about ten minutes. I was not in a hurry.



Matsuyama, September 3, 2005 Cartoon image created from real photo - Magnific.com

The house felt different when I came back. It was the same house, but something had changed. It felt empty. The car was gone. I no longer had my Japanese family. No wife, no stepdaughter, no related Japanese family any longer. My job was gone. All my belongings were still there, but I couldn't bring them with me anyway. I simply couldn't afford the freight.

I had lived in her house in Matsuyama alone for the past year. My Japanese wife had lived in Hitachi saying:

“Let me know when the business is up and running. Then I will join you with my daughter.”

I lived in her house, which was her father's house before that, left to her when he died, long before I had ever come into her life. But it felt like “Tanshin Funin”.

“Tanshin-Funin” (単身赴任), is a practice, very common in Japanese corporate culture, where an employee is transferred to a new work location by their

company, but the rest of the family (spouse, children) stays behind in the original home, often to avoid disrupting the children's schooling or the spouse's job. The employee lives alone near the new workplace, usually returning home on weekends or holidays when distance allows. It is often practiced for work abroad also, making visiting the spouse even more difficult.

It's treated as a normal, almost expected sacrifice within traditional Japanese company culture, loyalty to the employer taking precedence over keeping the household physically together. Today, I think there are beginning protests against it from ordinary Japanese, but back then, nobody questioned the practice.

Wikipedia has a Japanese description of this phenomenon but not in any other language indicating this is a Japanese phenomenon, a Japanese company practice, probably not seen anywhere else even in other Asian cultures.




ウィキペディア
 フリー百科事典


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単身赴任

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出典: フリー百科事典『ウィキペディア (Wikipedia)』



この記事は検証可能な参考文献や出典が全く示されていないか、不十分です。出典を追加して記事の信頼性向上にご協力ください。(このテンプレートの使い方)
 出典検索?: "単身赴任" - ニュース・書籍・スカラー・CiNii・J-STAGE・NDL・dlib.jp・ジャパンサーチ・TWL (2013年8月)

単身赴任（たんしんふにん）とは、労働の形態の一つ。政府統計では、単身配偶者又は扶養親族がいる人が、転勤に伴い単身で住居を移すことと定義されている^[1]。単身赴任をしている人は**単身赴任者**と言う。

夫だけでなく、妻が単身赴任もしくは、子供がいなければ別居ということも有り得る。

家族と別れて暮らすため、家族の生活に障害を来す場合があり、転勤命令を受けたことで退職をして他組織に転職や起業をする者も居る。

脚注

[編集]

Wikipedia - description of “Tanshin Funin” exist only in Japanese

In any case, I felt like I had a sentence from my wife for “Tanshin Funin”.

Looking back, I could not stop thinking that I had never really been a part of that

family to begin with. One year out of one and a half year of marriage, I lived alone, more than 1000 km from where my wife, and supposedly my stepdaughter lived.

Decisions about her daughter had always been made without involving me. At one point she changed her school without even informing me that she was considering to change the daughters school or informing me of which choices there were, what she thought or asking for my opinion. In a normal relationship that kind of decision requires agreement. In this case, it did not. How can you take responsibility of a girl, if you are not involved in any of the decisions?

At the time I accepted it. I had no other choice. In retrospect, it defined everything. The divorce did not change the situation. It confirmed it.

I had spent years getting here. The job in Japan, the visa, a marriage to a woman I had genuinely wanted to spend my life with. Everything I had wanted, finally in place. And in one moment, all of it collapsed.

I do not know how to describe what that does to a person. It is not one feeling. It is all of them at once, fighting for the same small space inside your head. Confusion. Lots of questions. What did I do wrong? Why is this happening? Can the relation be resrored? Could I have done anything differently?

Anger, sadness, hopelessness and underneath all of it, something that felt almost like relief, because at least now there was a decision, something fixed instead of the slow uncertainty that had come before it. I had already decided, I did not want to live with a woman who did not love me. Losing her and her daughter at once was its own kind of devastation but staying with her probably meant, I would loose her again in the future. What happens once, happens twice and three times... No reason to expose myself for that, I thought.

I let myself feel the devastation of the divorce once. Felt self-pity. A couple of hours of crying, the day she told me she wanted a divorce. After that I stopped. Not because the grief was gone. Because it would not change anything. It was simply a waste to cry and feel the devastation which would not bring anything positive

anyway.

I made the decision, then and there, never to have any contact with either of them again, ever. Not because I had stopped caring. Because I did care, and it was too painful to do otherwise. My relation to that family ended that day, never to be opened up again.

I did discuss this with my wife once. She was sure, if we ever got divorced, I would come running back within a month or so, begging her to take me back. Back then, I assured that was not going to happen. Now we were in the actual situation, and even if I wanted, if I am divorced, there are no way for me to get back to Japan anyway, so by accepting the divorce, we had by definition accepted there would be no going back. The rules for immigration to Japan back then, was that I could get a working permit, either in connection with a job, as a spouse to a Japanese, as an investor or a few other situations. But getting a job and get back to Japan seemed hopeless at that point. Spouse visa, I would not again subject myself to, because it meant submission to the Japanese spouse, which I would never accept. I had no money to become investor, so that door was already closed.

What was waiting on the other side of that decision was truly horrifying for me. I was not returning to Denmark without a job, no income, no furniture, no possessions beyond what I could carry in my suitcase with 23 kg limit. I did not know it at the time, but the social security I relied on, wasn't even there for me the day I returned to Denmark. Things has totally changed, and my contribution to the Danish society, was not appreciated at all, at the social security offices. I was treated as if I was an immigrant.

After the truck left, I had walked for about 10 minutes, thinking a lot. I didn't see anything on the way back. I wouldn't have noticed it if a car hit me. Everything was just one big question mark and concerns for what was going to happen.

At the entrance, the exhibition equipment stock was packed and waiting for being

picked up as well. Forty-seven boxes. A product I had spent two years building a market for in Japan. It was actually starting going well, but now it didn't matter.

In my office, a stationary computer, a Brother printer beside it, tons of books and A4 files covering the walls. This was seven years of a life. Japanese books I could not replace anywhere outside Japan. None of them were coming with me this time. I had to reduce it to 23 kg suitcase and 8 kg of hand luggage, total of 31 kg, which was my allowance on the plane. What would you have taken with you, if you should limit your total luggage you could bring to your next life?

I would have loved to take all the books with me, but they were far too heavy. They would take up space and weight for something much more valuable and important. So, I left all my books behind. The reason why I later decided to purchase a big paper cutter, cut all books I bought it, scanned it and through the original books away. I might never own a paper book again. That became my reality. So today, 2026, I have 3000 books and magazines, scanned and stored electronically. No more losing books due to moving abroad.



Packing the suitcase in Matsuyama - max allowance 31 kg total

I needed some basic things, like toiletry, underwear, personal documentation etc. But I couldn't really get started on packing. A total of 31 kg means you have to throw away almost everything you own.

I sat down at the desk and looked at the screen for a while. Not working. I saw nothing on what was displayed on the screen anyway. Just looking. Nothing penetrated my brain. My head was empty.



Matsuyama, September 3, 2005. Thinking about the situation

THE EMPTY MIND

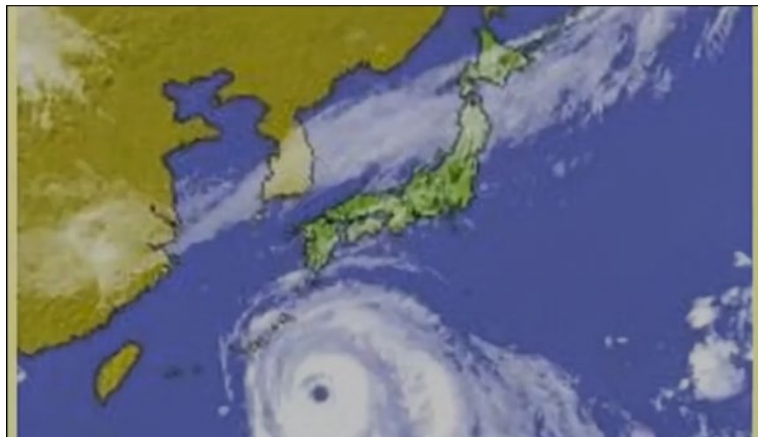
For the first time in a long time, there was nothing left for me to think about. For years there had always been something. Business decisions, structure, next steps, negotiations, planning. Always something unfinished. Now I had nothing.

No business to operate, no family to care about, no future to plan. I had nothing in Japan and nothing in Denmark. The only fixed thing was that my future home was now going to be Denmark. No way I could return to Japan now.

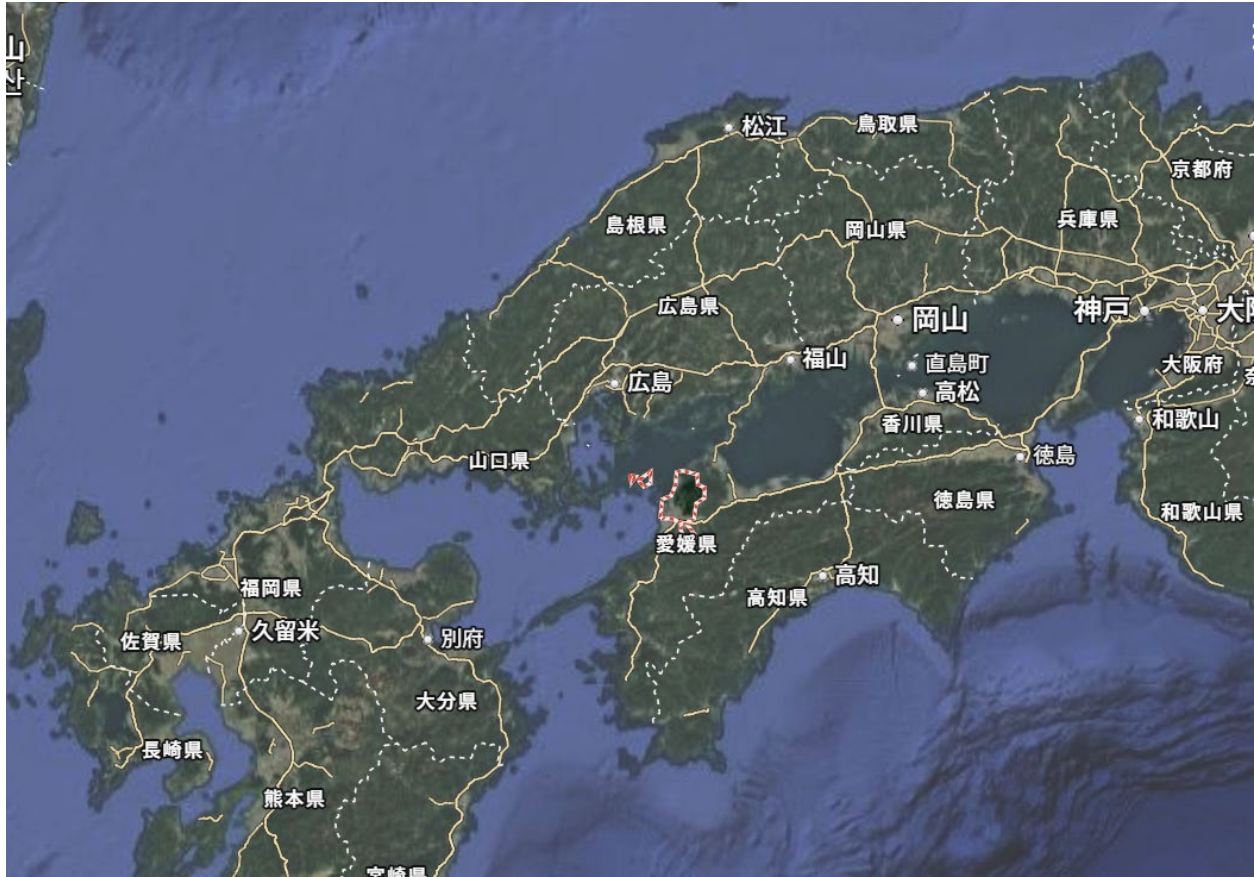
My only future plan was the flight to Denmark in a few days from now. Ticket was already purchased. Whatever might come after that did not require planning. It required waiting. My mind, which had been active for years without interruption, had nothing to offer left to work on. It was empty.

The internet was not that much developed, no AI either, so having a computer and access to the Internet, did not help me much at that point.

Outside, it started raining. Quietly at first, then steadily, the way it does when something larger is still out at sea. I turned on the television, which at least was still working. The weatherforecast showed two typhoons on the map, number 14 and 15, both working their way toward the country and directly towards Matsuyama. I listened to the rain hitting the window stronger and stronger, while the news continued explaining the typhoon was getting stronger and would hit Kyushu and Shikoku within the next 24 hours or so.



Typhoon No. 14, tracking toward Shikoku and the Kansai corridor. September 3, 2005.



Matsuyama, Ehime-ken, Shikoku marked with red.

I could not stop thinking about how many other people might have been in a similar situation losing everything they had. I had probably not really registered it yet. This was the first time for me, really losing everything. I hadn't really understood the magnitude yet. I wondered if this was something that happened often to other people. Some had probably lost everything in a fire. Maybe in an accident. Compared to an accident, I still had my good health, so perhaps I was better off. But I couldn't stop thinking it was a totally unfair situation I was ended up in. I tried to ignore the thought.

Yet the longer I sat there, the more I found myself drawn toward a different question.

For hours I had been cataloguing what had been taken away from me. The list was long, and the losses were real. There was no need to exaggerate them and certainly no point pretending they did not hurt. An entire life had just come undone. Years of

effort, sacrifice, planning and hope had produced a future that no longer existed.

But eventually another thought entered my mind. If I was willing to devote so much energy to counting my losses, perhaps I owed it to myself to examine what remained.



Kim thinking about life

I still had a couple of beers in the refrigerator, so got one and opened it. But I didn't really feel like drinking that beer after all. I just opened it, took a sip, but couldn't get myself to take the second sip. It just sat there... I had no desire whatsoever to drink it.

There is a particular exhaustion that arrives when life asks you to start over yet again. It is different from physical fatigue. Sleep does not cure it. Rest does not cure it. It comes from repeatedly investing yourself in the future, only to watch the future refuse to honor the investment.

That evening I felt dangerously close to that kind of exhaustion.

Not the exhaustion of a man who wants to end everything, but the exhaustion of a man who no longer wishes to fight. A quieter surrender. A gradual lowering of the

arms. A willingness to let events take control simply because the alternative demands more energy than you believe you possess.

Looking back, I think that was the greatest danger I faced that night. Not because I lost my home or my job, not even because I lost my right to stay in Japan. The real danger was losing faith in the idea that another beginning was worth attempting.

Even then, some parts of me still wouldn't give up hope. Its like a strength or something in you, which does not allow you to end it all, despite how bad the situation has become.

If I started drinking, I would probably had been drinking until I fell asleep somewhere, waking up next morning not knowing where I was. I would have loved it, but couldn't get started at all.

Religious people tend to use these kinds of situations telling you it was god... But I guarantee it was not. God had all the opportunities he could wish for, to make sure I could have avoided this situation in the first place. But he did not.

I only knew that despite everything that had happened, there remained a small and stubborn conviction that life was not finished with me yet. Far from. Somewhere I still believed in myself, that I could recover and become a decent businessman again. I had no evidence for that belief. I had nothing at all.

That feeling mainly come from the wish of turn the table, and show everybody I am much more than a failed business man in Japan. But the thought of what I have to go through to reach that point, is devastating. It's a tough decision to make. Its so much easier just to give up.

I had absolutely no clear idea of how to rebuild, where I would live, what I would do for work, or how I would recover financially. All I possessed was the uncomfortable awareness that the person staring at the television, with a non-drunken beer on the table, was still capable of making choices. Defeated as I felt, nobody had taken from me the ability to stand up and try again.

I was now 39 years old. I was not sure I had the necessary strength for pulling it off.

At the time, that realization did not feel inspiring. It felt burdensome. Trying again meant failing again was still possible. I had enough of losing everything, and that was not something I would ever want to experience again.

Trying again meant accepting uncertainty. Giving up, seemed much easier.

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My thoughts eventually drifted toward Denmark. I remember taking comfort in the idea that I was going home.

I comforted myself with the thought that Denmark had always represented stability and that going down with a company, was never the end of life or new possibilities. That is one of the reasons we pay so much in taxes.

Like most Danes, I had spent my life participating in a social contract that felt almost invisible because it was so deeply woven into everyday life. We pay some of the highest taxes in the world, not merely to fund government institutions, but because we collectively accept the idea that no individual should be left completely alone when misfortune arrives.

The welfare state is, in many ways, an acknowledgement of a simple truth: sooner or later, almost everyone falls. People become ill, businesses fail, families break apart, jobs disappear and lives take unexpected turns.

A decent society recognises this reality and builds mechanisms to soften the impact when it happens. At least that was what I believed.

Sitting there in Japan, only days away from my departure, I found comfort in the thought that however badly things had gone, there was still a safety net waiting beneath me.

That evening, Denmark existed as my security net. I was convinced that after years abroad I was returning to somewhere that still recognised me as one of its own.

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Then the phone rang. I was not sure I wanted to answer it.

On the display, it said “Mori-san”. A good old friend of mine, whom I had known since 1999 or so. Back then he lived next door to me, in Omotesando. He worked with a company involved in Japanese broadcast production, developing celebrities for the networks, finding people who had something the camera wanted and turning them into personalities.



Matsuyama, September 3, 2005.

“Hello Kim! Long time no see! How are you doing?”

He had asked me before if I wanted to become a celebrity. I had declined then. It had not felt appropriate to use my diplomatic status to promote myself.

“Why don't you take the first plane tomorrow morning to Tokyo. Let's meet, have a beer, and discuss it.”

I thought about it for a few seconds. There was nothing left for me in Matsuyama anyway.

So I went.

CHAPTER ONE, TOKYO IN THE RAIN

TOKYO, SHINBASHI DISTRICT. SEPTEMBER 4, 2005. NIGHT.

So, I flew to Tokyo to meet Mori-san the 4th September.

As the flight passed Shizuoka, nearing Tokyo, I looked out and saw Mount Fuji breaking through the cloud layer.



Mount Fuji, seen from the flight to Tokyo – actual footage from 4th September 2005

I knew he had done well for himself. He was now a successful company owner, working on developing celebrities for the networks. I believed he worked with Fuji TV and other broadcast companies, created magazines, and handled other work related to the media and publishing world. He now had around forty people working for him. It should, in theory, have been easy for me too. But I did not have a single employee. I was broke, and on my way back to Denmark.

Mori-san introduced me to his staff, one after another. Everybody seemed to know who I was, though I had no idea who most of them were. Mori-san had likely told them in advance that a man he might be working with in the future would be visiting the office that day.

I am usually introduced as a former diplomat, now a business owner. Most Japanese people, at the time, found that impressive. Perhaps not so much any longer.

Mori-san brought up how we had first met in Omotesando, years earlier, and how I had once given Sakamoto Ryuichi a box of beer without getting so much as a word of thanks for it. We had a lot of history together. We laughed about it.



With Mori-san and his staff. Tokyo, September 4, 2005.

But the meeting never really became what I had expected it to be: a real discussion of what we might do together going forward. I suppose it was too sudden for both of us, and neither of us had a genuinely workable idea.

He said I was perfect for television. A foreigner who spoke Japanese without any strange accent, who understood the culture from the inside, who could stand in front of a camera. He had contacts. He knew the right people. He was certain it could work.

I wish he had called me a year earlier. Six months earlier. Even just three months earlier. But he called me three days before my flight back to Europe, when the ticket was already bought and the divorce was already final and the fourteen-day countdown on my visa had already begun. I had no legal right to remain in Japan

any longer, and no money to survive if I stayed and nowhere to go if I did. The timing was simply wrong.

We agreed to meet anyway. We talked about whether there was any way to make something work later, from a distance, or after I had sorted things out in Denmark and found a way back. It was a conversation full of hope and possibilities that had no foundation under them. We both knew it. We were friendly enough to have the conversation anyway. Inside, I knew I had only come to say hello and have that beer, and to pretend for an evening that there was still a way to save the situation. I knew I was grasping at a straw that had already vanished.

That was September 4th. By the time I was looking for a hotel for the night, the wind had already picked up and the rain had started pouring down.

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After the meeting, I needed to find somewhere to stay for the night. I walked toward the nearby Shibuya Scramble Crossing, expecting it would be easy to catch a taxi there. It was approaching eight o'clock in the evening, and the weather was already showing the first signs of the approaching typhoon. I decided I had better find a hotel as quickly as I could.



Shibuya Crossing, Tokyo. September 4, 2005.

My best option, I thought, would be a business hotel in the Shinbashi area. Shinbashi is well known as a gathering place for Japanese business men, who go

there after work to socialise with colleagues or entertain clients. Because of its business-oriented character, I assumed there would be plenty of reasonably priced hotels nearby.

By then it had already started raining. At first, it was little more than a drizzle, but it intensified with every passing minute. Gusts of wind swept through the streets, turning umbrellas inside out and sending pedestrians hurrying for shelter. The typhoon was clearly gathering strength, and I wanted to be indoors before the weather turned truly unpleasant.

I hailed a taxi and asked the driver to take me to a business hotel in Shinbashi. He accepted and suggested a hotel he knew. He stopped there, I paid for the fair, and I stepped out of the cab.

My foot went straight into standing water. Fifteen, maybe twenty centimeters of it. My shoe was submerged instantly.



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The young man at the front desk looked up. His expression changed immediately. There was no hesitation. No attempt to ask anything. The decision had already been made.

“No no no! No no no no! Japaneezu onrii.”

He yelled at me, the second he saw me. He walked towards me with open hands waving trying to decline me entering the hotel.

I became furious instantly. Truly furious, in a way I rarely allowed myself to be.

In seven years, through all the corporate headquarters, embassies, and boardrooms I had entered in this country, nobody had ever spoken to me like that. Not once. I sat across the table from CEOs of some of the world's most respected companies, directors, division heads, importers, exporters, distributors and senior executives. I had negotiated contracts and built professional relationships throughout Japan. I had always shown Japan and its people the highest respect possible. Never, not even once, had anyone dismissed me on sight.

For seven years, Japanese people had told me that I thought like a Japanese, behaved like a Japanese. Repeatedly, they paid me the same compliment, perhaps the highest they could offer, that I was one of them. For seven years, I had contributed to Japanese society in countless ways. And now, during what would be among my final days in Japan, I was being turned away from a hotel simply because “I did not look Japanese”. The clerk had not asked who I was, whether I spoke Japanese or not, whether I lived in Japan, or whether I might even be Japanese for that matter. He had made no effort to find out. The sheer arrogance of it left me stunned.

How dare he!

Never had I felt more humiliated. And what made it truly unbearable was that this was not happening in isolation. It was falling upon a life that was already falling apart. I had lost almost everything. My marriage had ended. The future I had spent years building had collapsed around me. I was carrying the weight of disappointment, grief, and uncertainty wherever I went. Yet I had finally come to terms with it. I had accepted my fate. I had stopped fighting against what could not be changed and learned, instead, to appreciate what remained. Then this happened.

Had it happened at another time, it might have been nothing more than an

unpleasant encounter. But in that moment, it felt like a final judgment: a blunt, merciless rejection of everything I had tried to be during my seven years in Japan. I had worked to earn trust, contribute where I could, and build a life worthy of respect. Yet with the casual flick of a hand, a young hotel employee reduced me to nothing more than a foreign face that did not belong. It felt like confirmation that none of it mattered.

I answered him in Japanese. Fast and precise. The kind of Japanese that makes it instantly clear you grew up inside the language, not learned it from a textbook. I told him he should be ashamed of himself. I told him I would not stay in a place like that under any circumstances. I made sure he understood I would file a formal complaint with his superiors. I probably also swore like never before, in Japanese, of course.

I watched his face change as it landed. The realization, then the apology, forming before he'd even found the words for it.

Too late.

The decision had already been made. Not his. Mine. I turned around and walked out.

For a moment, standing under the entrance canopy, I considered turning back. The clerk had understood his mistake by then; he would probably have welcomed me back in with real apologies. But my pride would not allow it. The humiliation was still too raw. The anger, too fresh. Something inside me refused to go back.

The rain hit me immediately.



Tokyo, the night of September 4, 2005.

The cab was gone. The street was wet and the wind was picking up and my umbrella, was useless. It lasted maybe five seconds. I dropped it in a bin and kept walking.

At first, I thought I might at least be able to keep my computer bag dry. That assumption lasted less than a minute.

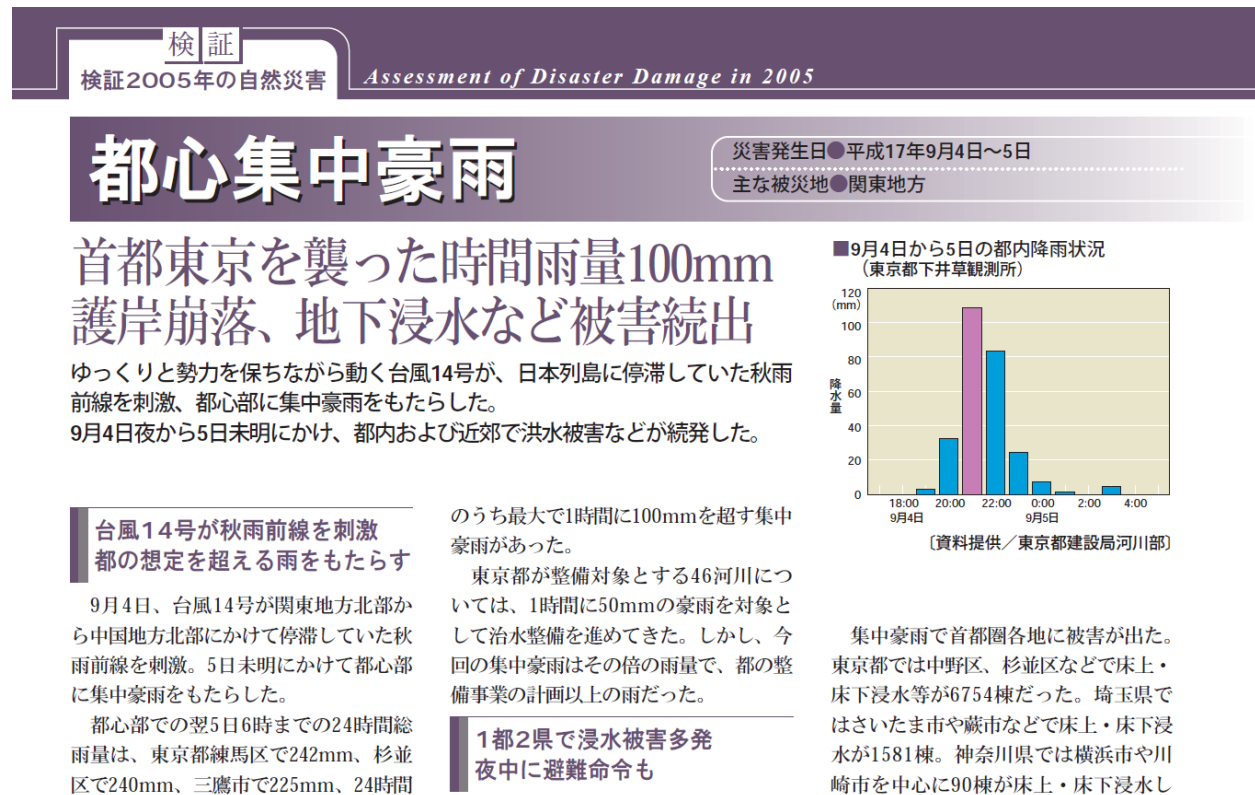
My suit was the suit I needed to wear on the plane in three days. I had one suit only. There was no second option. I was walking through Tokyo in a typhoon in the only clothes I had that were acceptable for travel, getting more wet by the minute, and I was not going back into that hotel.

Some decisions are made by calculation and some are made by something that does not calculate. This was the second kind. I was not going back through those doors if I had to walk all night. No way!

I tried to hail taxis. Several passed without stopping, which is unusual in Tokyo, where the taxi culture is orderly and professional. The rain was now heavy enough that visibility was really poor and I suspect several drivers simply did not see me in time. I kept walking and trying.

The rain got worse.

I have been in Japan through many typhoons. I know what serious rain looks like. This was something beyond serious. The water was no longer falling in drops but in a continuous mass, if it was coming out of a bucket rather than a cloud, and the drainage system of one of the most sophisticated cities in the world was visibly failing to cope with it. Water was rising on the pavements. The street was becoming something between a road and a canal.



Article published about record rainfall in Tokyo, 4th September 2005

Neon lights shimmered on the flooded streets, breaking into fragments across the rippling surface.

I eventually got a cab. The driver took me to an area where I knew there were capsule hotels. I had never stayed in one before.

A capsule hotel is exactly what the name suggests, a room the size of a large drawer, with a mattress and a small television and just enough space to lie down and exist. They are cheap, they are everywhere in the right districts, and they do not ask questions.

I found out later that this particular hour, in this particular area of Tokyo, set a national record for rainfall intensity. One hundred and ten millimeters of rain in less than sixty minutes. There is no city infrastructure on earth designed to handle that. I was experiencing it firsthand.

Checking into any hotel in that condition is uncomfortable under any circumstances. In a capsule hotel, it became even more so. Every movement felt unnatural. Everything carried the smell of rain, not fresh rain, but that heavy, enclosed smell of soaked fabric and humid air that does not easily disappear.

Inside, everything became quiet. The space was small, just large enough to lie down. That is the whole concept of a capsule hotel. You are not there for the comfort. You are there because you do not need comfort, and you cannot afford anything better.

I hung the suit and hoped it would dry before the morning next day. My wet clothes clung to me until I finally got out of them and into the onsen-style robe the hotel provided. There was no space inside the capsule itself, so everything had to hang outside the “room”. It made no difference. Even the air inside the hotel felt heavy, almost as humid as the street. Normally, I am not fond of leaving any thing where other people easily can steal it. It won't happen in Japan, a lot of people may say. But you don't know what people turn into when they are drunk. This was my last suite. I could not afford it to be stolen or destroyed.

Eventually, I stopped trying to solve it. I left the clothes hanging and lay down in the dark and listened to the rain outside.

End of Episode 1, The Edge of a Typhoon
Episode 2: Back to Zero, Denmark, Autumn 2005