

TOKYO UNRAVELED

William Snyder

TOKYO UNRAVELED

Published by:
William Snyder
Ban Kan Throm
Thailand

Printed by:
Lightning Source, LLC

ISBN: 978-616-95180-7-5

Filed from The Border Dispatch archive.

borderdispatch.com

© Copyright 2026 by William Snyder
All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews or articles.

This dispatch is adapted from a chapter of *The Road Here*, a larger work chronicling the unlikely chain of events that carried one man from collapse to a village halfway around the world into a life he never saw coming.

Willie spent his final two nights in Tokyo with a serene sort of punctuation mark – like the whole trip had ended on a soft exhale. His flight wasn't scheduled to depart until 9:05 p.m., which gave him an additional full day to wander the city that had, strangely, started to feel like a second skin.

He woke early, refreshed. Showered. Hauled his backpack to the curb and flagged down a cab in front of the hotel. The driver, polite and quiet, whisked him away through the winding arteries of the city while Willie sipped a perfectly aromatic hotel coffee and let the morning glide past the window. He had a plan for the day, casual but complete – exactly the kind of

intentional loafing he'd perfected by now. Check in, get his boarding pass, walk to Haneda Shrine, soak up the ocean air at Jonanjima Seaside Park, grab a late lunch, head back and browse the airport's legendary shops before drifting toward his gate.

The cab let him off at Terminal 3. The place was practically empty. Serene. In a strange way, it felt like the universe was still cradling him – like it wanted this journey to end on a whisper, not a bang.

The All Nippon Airways counter stood almost directly ahead. No line. A beautiful young attendant greeted him with a bright smile. Willie handed over his passport with the air of a man who was already imagining himself in seat 01A – Asahi in hand, slippers on, stretched out in “The Room” and watching the moonlight paint the

sky over the Pacific.

Tokyo Haneda to Los Angeles LAX

Flight NH126

Departure: 9:05 p.m.

Arrival: 2:05 p.m. (same day)

Seat: 01A

Flight Time: 11 hr

As she typed away, Willie's mind wandered forward – to Cave Creek. He imagined pulling up to his place, dust in the air, later maybe catching the last strains of a band playing down at Harold's. He felt good. He felt ready. In that moment, he told himself, he was going home whole.

But then came the hiccup.

The smile on the attendant's face faltered, just slightly. "I'm sorry, sir," she

said, “it appears your ticket has been canceled.”

Willie blinked. “I’m sorry... what?”

She pointed gently to her screen.

“You were scheduled to board a flight to Sapporo on the ninth. You didn’t check in. Under our policy, that’s considered a no-show. When that happens, the rest of the itinerary is automatically voided.”

Willie’s mouth moved before his brain caught up. “I had no idea. I thought I could just skip that leg. I didn’t realize it would cancel the rest.” He tried to steady his voice. “Is there any way to fix it? I paid a lot for that seat.”

“I’m very sorry, sir. There’s nothing I can do here.”

She bowed, soft and final.

And just like that, the end of the journey turned into a fork in the road.

Willie stepped away from the counter slowly, like a man waking up from a beautiful dream only to find the alarm clock blinking 12:00. He took a breath, counted to three, and let the inner monologue roll:

Alright, keep it together. This is just another turn in the story. You're not on a schedule. You're not in crisis. Not anymore. You're okay. You're strong. You're good. So... what now?

He checked his account on his phone – over budget by a heap the yen was perilously close to bare. No return flight. No backup plan. But standing in that polished terminal, beneath signs in kanji and the scent of warm dorayaki from a nearby stall, Willie didn't feel panic. He felt... curious.

This wasn't a setback. It was a plot twist.

And for a man like Willie Lyonsan, plot twists were just invitations to lean in a little more.

He called his mom back in Michigan to let her know the latest installment of the Willie Lyonsan Odyssey: stuck in Tokyo, ticketless, but strangely serene about it. No panic in his voice, no shame in the predicament – just a kind of amused curiosity, like the universe had paused the film and handed him the script with a wink.

“Don't worry,” he told her, “I've been in tighter spots with less.” And he meant it. He had a little money left – not enough for a flight, but enough for a bed, a

few bowls of noodles, and a few more stories to tuck away.

He wasn't about to ask his parents for a bailout. They were on fixed incomes and he'd rather sleep in the airport than put that kind of pressure on them. Instead, he phoned his buddy in Cave Creek – the pilot, the one who helped book the multi-city ticket in the first place. He might have some ideas.

“Jesus, Willie,” the guy said, “Say the word and I’ll wire you what you need.”

It was a kind offer. A good offer. But Willie waved it off – for now. Mixing money and friendship was like mixing whiskey and milk: fine in theory, tragic in practice. It was enough to know the option existed. That alone gave him room to breathe, to lean into the moment like maybe – just maybe – this was supposed to happen.

The universe doesn't always send angels. Sometimes it sends delays and cancellations and busted itineraries.

And so, he pivoted.

He cracked open his laptop, scanned for last-minute lodging, and landed on a capsule hotel just across the street from the Oriental Express, where he'd stayed the two nights prior. He liked that stretch of town – knew the streets, the rhythm, the way the vending machines hummed at night like distant cicadas. For thirty U.S. bucks, it was a no-brainer. He booked two nights, just in case.

He skipped the shrine, bypassed the seaside park, and made his way back toward familiar ground.

The capsule hotel was exactly what it claimed to be: a pod. A tiny horizontal

coffin of serenity, lined with pressed board and possibility. Willie climbed up, stretched out, and stared at the ceiling for a while before cracking his knuckles and getting back to work. There was always a way forward. He just had to find it.

With late afternoon approaching his stomach piped up. Time for dinner. *This puzzle will live to see another day.* He put it out of his mind, stowed his things, dropped to the floor like a paratrooper, headed out the door and rounded the corner toward the Oriental Express. The city was already beginning to take on its early evening tone – neon signs flickering awake, salarymen loosening ties, the smell of grilled yakitori seeping from tiny alley kitchens. He turned and walked into the lobby.

The clerk he'd befriended – a soft-spoken woman with an easy smile and a nonsense bun – was behind the desk.

“Back so soon?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Turns out,” Willie said, “I’m not quite finished with Japan.”

She laughed. He gave her the thumbnail version of the airline mishap, shrugged it off with the charm of a man who’s either lost his mind or found his peace.

Then he slipped back into the Tokyo dusk to hunt down something familiar, something cheap, and something distinctly Japanese – because if the universe was insisting he stay, the least he could do was order seconds.

A short walk from the Oriental Express – quicker still if you cut through the

alley – was a little tavern Willie had taken a real shine to. One of those blink-and-you-miss-it joints, local to the marrow. Inside, a slim bar hugged the left wall with maybe eight stools, worn smooth by regulars. Opposite that, four small tables stood in a soldierly line, two chairs apiece, their wood lacquered with decades of soy sauce, laughter, and spilled secrets. On the far end – where you had to tilt your whole spine to see it – hung a single, flickering TV. Baseball. Always baseball. The bartender, a rather tall Tokyo lifer with a penchant for conversation and a deep love for the Yomiuri Giants, had owned the place for twenty years. His English wasn't perfect, but it was better than Willie's Japanese, and the man poured whiskey like it was church communion. If there wasn't a live game on, he was playing

an old one – old baseball footage looping like a memory. The kind of place you don't find so much as get found by.

Right next door was a little restaurant. The waitress in there looked like she'd retired her smile sometime around the late 80s. Ornery as a cactus. Willie had eaten there twice before, both times trying to tease out even the smallest grin. No dice. But this time, as he stepped through the door – having said a soft, unanswered farewell the night before – something in her posture shifted. Maybe it was the way the afternoon light hit his face. Maybe it was the way he bowed. Whatever it was, he caught it: the hint of a smirk that wasn't entirely hostile. “Konichiwa,” Willie said, smiling like a man with nowhere better to be. She pointed at an empty table without a word.

And I'll be damned – when he sat down and glanced toward the window, he caught her reflection in the glass. She was smiling.

“Yakiniku Donburi?” she asked without looking up.

“Hai,” Willie nodded, his grin softening into something real.

Just then, the bell above the door jingled, and in walked two familiar faces. They slid into a booth like regulars. Willie recognized them instantly from the night before at the baseball tavern – two guys who'd stood out not just for their friendliness, but for that unspoken quality that says, we're good people, trust us. A nod. A smile. That effortless rapport.

“Thought you were flying out,” said the taller one – the pharmacist, if Willie remembered right.

“Little delay,” Willie said, patting his chest. “Long story.”

They shared a knowing chuckle, that quick bond of strangers who had, for a few hours at least, not been strangers at all. Turns out they’d hit it off harder than Willie realized. Both men were in their thirties, sharp but unpretentious. The pharmacist was thoughtful and precise, the kind of man who measured words before using them. The other, hat backwards and velvet grin, was a semi-famous pop star in Japan – not household, but enough that heads turned when he walked into a place. Willie had no clue, of course, until they’d parted ways the first time and the bartender filled him in.

As Willie worked through the last few bites of his meal, the pop star leaned over the table with a casual proposition. “We wanted to take you around last night,” he said, “give you a proper send-off. A real Japanese yokocho experience. Still got time?”

“Yokocho?” Willie asked.

“It means alleyway,” the pharmacist explained. “Where the real izakayas live. The good stuff. Not the tourist joints.”

Willie raised an eyebrow. He didn’t need convincing. Experience was the one thing he never turned down.

“Sounds fun,” he said with a grin.

“Lead the way.”

They hit the alleys like old friends with a shared past instead of three men whose stories had only barely overlapped.

The yokocho was everything they promised – tight backstreets lit by paper lanterns and the low hum of a thousand conversations, punctuated by the hiss of yakitori on open coals and the occasional drunken laugh skipping across puddles of spilled sake. These weren't the polished restaurants from the guidebooks. These were tucked away living rooms with a liquor license, where you had to know someone to stay, the table legs wobbled and the stories were older than the barstools themselves.

The pop star – RYO Tanaka from the group Ketsumeishi – was greeted like a long-lost brother everywhere they went. Heads turned, jaws dropped, and at more than one stop, girls squealed like the Beatles had just materialized out of a puff of shochu vapor. But the man never soaked in the

adoration. Instead, he pulled Willie tighter into the spotlight, introducing him like some mysterious American auteur who'd shown up to shoot a documentary on the soul of Tokyo nightlife. "He's a photographer," he'd say, "but really, he's a poet." Willie, modest as ever, would just nod and lift his glass.

And not once – not once – did they let him pay. Not for a drink, not for a skewer of grilled mackerel, not even for the hot towel they handed him between bars. At each stop, drinks materialized in front of him like conjuring tricks. If his glass dipped below half, someone refilled it. If he reached for the bottle, a hand gently stopped him. "You are our honored guest," the pharmacist said at one point. "And our elder." That last word made Willie laugh. The kid was maybe thirty-one.

They spoke in a blend of English, Japanese, and what Willie later called “drunk dialect” – that slurred, universal shorthand where gestures did most of the talking. They laughed without a care, toasted to music, to brotherhood, to America, to late trains and missed planes and second chances.

Eventually, after four or five bars and countless toasts, they wound back toward the neighborhood near Willie’s capsule hotel. The pop star’s fans were still whispering behind their phones when he gave Willie a hug and said, “You changed my view of Americans.” The pharmacist bowed deeply, then reached out and squeezed Willie’s shoulder like they’d known each other since the sandbox. With a final wave, they turned and disappeared into the electric haze of Tokyo’s midnight.

Willie, buzzed but lucid, wandered back toward the baseball tavern. The neon flickered like it was trying to wink him inside. He stepped in, nodded at the bartender, and settled onto a stool for one more like a man slipping into his element. Then he saw her – Famica.

She was perched at the end of the bar, drink in hand, smile already forming before he even looked her way. She'd been there the night before, small talk and glances, nothing much. But now she looked up at him like he was the encore she hadn't expected. "You came back," she said.

Willie smiled. "I guess I wasn't finished."

She slid over a few inches, just enough to close the distance but leave a whisper of mystery between them. The

bartender placed another whiskey in front of him without asking.

And here, dear reader, is where the shadows began to lean in.

Willie still had his wits. He knew his limits. But Famica had other plans. She didn't come just to drink. She came with a different kind of thirst. The kind that curls into your ear and makes you forget what time it is. The kind that lets you think you're steering, while she's already chosen the destination. A couple more drinks. A closer lean. Her hand briefly on his thigh. Just enough contact to make him feel welcome, just enough mystery to keep him guessing.

To be sure, the night began to slide right here – slowly at first, like a glass too close to the table's edge.

And Willie, bless him, didn't see it coming. Not yet.

He was just far enough removed from his wits – and the promise he'd made to himself – tilted just enough off the rhythm he'd built to the point of the cosmic reroute of the cancelled flight, that he started looking at her differently. Noticing, nay, studying the sweep of hair that draped over one eye and across her cheek like a sigh of vulnerability. Taking in, perhaps too late, the low line of her blouse and the single pearl resting just beneath it, catching light like a secret. Famica was the picture of Japanese elegance – poised, enigmatic, a little too perfect. And Willie? Willie was neck-deep now, floating in a moment that felt warm and ageless. The clarity he'd carried 24 hours earlier had dissolved like sugar in hot tea. He wasn't

thinking of promises or plans. He was untethered. No watch. No compass. Just a man adrift, and damn the consequences.

What he didn't see – or couldn't through the haze of the celestial moment he was in – was the mirage forming just outside his line of sight. Famica wasn't alone in this little theatre of misdirection. There was a quiet choreography at play. The bartender knew her, that much was clear. And just beyond the reach of the bar light, a third player sat against the far wall – half-shadowed, unreadable. Willie had clocked him moments before, in passing, on the way to the bathroom. He'd been there the night before too. But tonight, Willie wasn't quite himself. His radar was dim.

When he returned back at the bar, Famica resumed her gentle pull. That subtle

gravity of proximity. Willie, to his credit, had already decided he was done drinking.

Nearly 50 years I'd known the man – never once had he crossed the line between controlled looseness and genuine intoxication. But something was off. Way off.

He planned to finish his drink, say something slick and maybe follow her lead – see where the night wanted to end. But just as he turned to speak, the ground shifted beneath him. Not metaphorically – literally. The bar pitched sideways like the whole world had slipped its axis. The floor moved in fragments, the lights smeared across his vision like oil on water. He blinked hard, forced a smile like nothing was wrong, and fixed his eyes on the door, trying to find something – anything – to hold his balance.

What the hell is happening? he thought. This isn't booze. I know what a buzz feels like. This is something else.

He bolted. No goodbye. No explanation. Just muscle memory and survival instinct. Like a thoroughbred at The Preakness loosed from the gates, he lunged for the door.

And then – Darkness.

It's hard to piece the timeline together exactly – too many missing frames, too much static on the reel. But from what Willie later managed to reconstruct, somewhere between the moment his mind slipped into the dark and the faint, dreamlike glimpse of the Oriental Express sign flickering like a candle in a fishbowl, he somehow, by divine muscle memory or cosmic grace, managed to call Wasum.

What he said, if anything, was unintelligible. Just the sound of him, warped and distant, like a voice pulled through three dimensions – like he was phoning from underwater in a different timeline. That's how she described it. His words were not words, but feeling. Instinct. A distress flare launched into the unknown.

And from there – well, we know now what he didn't know then: that invisible strings tied to something far more divine than logic intervened. That fate, God, karma, ancestors, ghosts, or whatever name you want to give the hands behind the curtain pulled him from the ledge of certain doom and smuggled his spirit out of Japan. Had they not? Best case, he'd be nursing a weeklong hospital stay. Worst case? Front-page headline. A confused, foreign man in

custody. A face on the evening news. A footnote in someone else's cautionary tale.

Instead, he found himself deposited into the surreal quiet of a Thai train car, his memory a torn map and his soul still somewhere mid-air. Bangkok to Sisaket – ten hours of purgatory on rails, an inexplicable sense of calm washing over him like warm rain, asking nothing in return. Peace – artificial, maybe, but peace nonetheless.

He was now in a land he didn't know, among people he didn't recognize, unable to communicate and unsure he even wanted to. He was married, apparently. Tattooed, inexplicably. Fragmented. Humbled. And yet... somehow at home. Like the universe had grown impatient with his

wandering and finally yanked him into stillness, said: Enough.

Was it fate? Karma? Dumb luck? Or was it the culmination of every choice, every woman, every sidestep and misstep, finally cashing in their receipts? Hard to say. Willie didn't have the language for it yet. But he did know this much: someone – or more likely, someones – had moved heaven and earth to get him here. Risked. Acted. Believed.

For that, he felt gratitude. Or something adjacent to it. But the questions – too many, too jagged – kept him from fully stepping into it. Not yet. First, he needed clarity.

The first question?

He rolled up his sleeve, blinked at the unfamiliar ink burned into his skin, and

squinted into the morning sun like it might
offer a translation...

When did I get this tattoo... and
what the hell does it say?.

•
•
•
•
•
•
•
•

