

Only Regrets

A Journey Through Life's
Unexpected Turns



S.A. OZBOURNE

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S.A. Ozbourne asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

First edition

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Chapter 1: Finding My Voice in a Noisy World

Introduction: Why Am I Writing This Book?

Hello, dear reader. If you're reading this book, chances are you're either:

1. A friend or family member who got guilt-tripped into reading it.
2. Someone who Googled "how to survive life when your dreams fizzle out" and stumbled upon this.
3. Or, like me, you enjoy reading about other people's messy, unpredictable lives because it makes yours feel a little more normal.

Whichever category you fall into, welcome! My name is Oz, a customer service agent by day, karaoke enthusiast by night, and full-time over thinker 24/7. I'm also a failed rock star, a proud dog dad, and a guy who has moved more times than a chess piece.

I'm writing this book because life hasn't ended up like I planned. And you know what? That's okay. Actually, it's better

than okay, it's kind of hilarious. Because in my 40s now, I still feel like a teenager who is looking for his path, wanting to know what he will be when he grows up. The adventure is just beginning for me, as other people my age are winding down.

The Karaoke Revelation

Let's start with a confession: **I'm not great at anything.** I am good at some things, like singing, but not an expert in anything.

There, I said it.

But here's the thing: I love singing, specifically karaoke.

There's something magical about standing in front of a screen, holding a microphone (that may or may not be sticky from last night's beer spill), and belting out Bon Jovi like it's my last night on Earth.

Karaoke taught me something important: **Life doesn't require perfection**—just participation.

I spent years dreaming of being a rock star. I imagined stadium tours, screaming fans, signing autographs, taking selfies with hot girls who were obsessed with the band, and touring around the world. But reality? Reality said, "Nah, how about a call center job instead?"

And yet, in that tiny karaoke booth in Tokyo, or my living room singing and dancing while my dog Maple jumped, barked, and howled along, I found something just as valuable as fame: **joy in the attempt.** The memories of Maple and me singing and dancing our hearts out after a dinner of somen noodles and tofu are unforgettable.

Why This Book?

This isn't a memoir of some grand, extraordinary life. I haven't climbed Everest, won a Nobel Prize, or invented a new type of sushi (though I have eaten a lot of sushi in my 15 years living in Japan).

This is a book about:

- Dreams that change shape (like my rock star fantasy turning into “please just let me nap”).
- Family, love, and loss (because life isn't all karaoke and dog cuddles).
- Failure, reinvention, and tiny victories (like finally figuring out how to balance work and life).

Mostly, it's about learning that **success isn't a straight line, it's a scribble.**

What to Expect

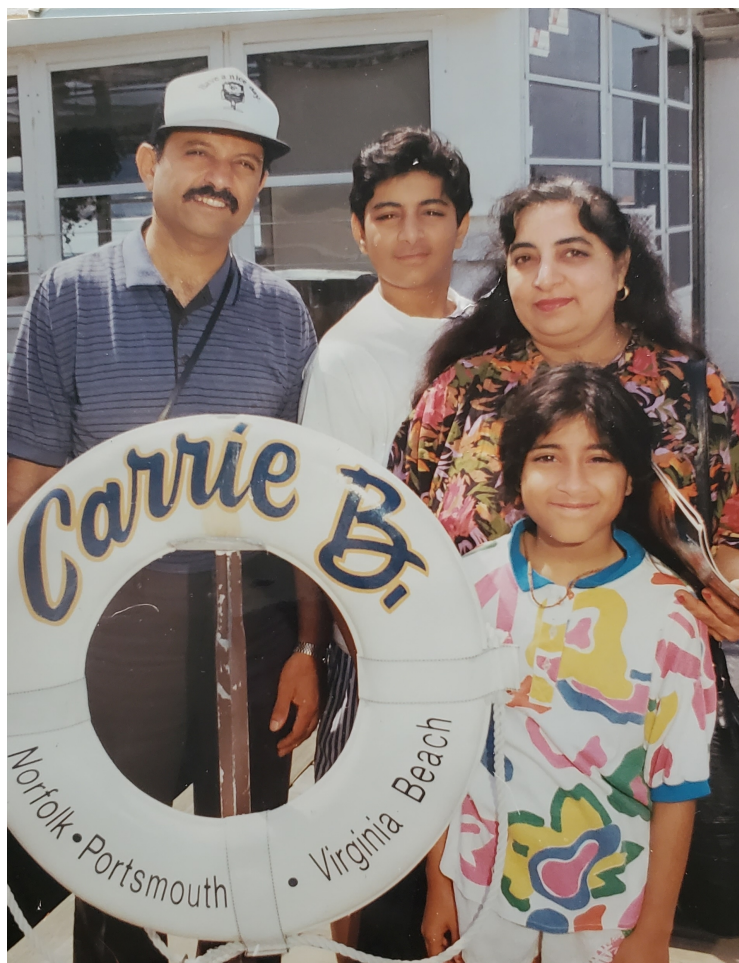
In this life story, we'll cover:

- Growing up as the brown, short kid who just wanted to fit in (Chapter 2).
- My disastrous attempt at being a musician (Spoiler: Japan was not ready for my rendition of “Sweet Child O' Mine”) (Chapter 3).
- How my conservative best friend and I stay friends despite political Armageddon (Chapter 17).
- Why my dog, Kokoro, is both my greatest joy and the reason

I can't have nice things (Chapter 13).

So, if you've ever felt like life took a detour you didn't sign up for, if you've ever screamed into a pillow (or a karaoke mic), or if you just really like stories about dogs, travel fails, and questionable life choices—this book is for you.

Let's begin.



Typical early 90s family photo

The Unexpected Soundtrack of My Life

If my life had a theme song, it wouldn't be some epic anthem by *Journey* or *Kiss*. It would be *In the meantime* by *Spacehog*. A one-hit wonder from some random band from England with a weird name and quirky lyrics. Because not knowing what life is about, what my purpose is, or what I am supposed to be doing, is exactly like their chorus, *maybe in the meantime, wait and see...*

I never planned for things to turn out this way. I thought that things would just eventually become clear, and suddenly I would know what I was supposed to do. And that's the first lesson I want to share with you: **Life doesn't care about plans, it just happens.**

Maple: The Dog Who Was My Anchor

Before Kokoro, my barky little Jack Russell with a heart murmur, there was Maple—my 15-year-old soulmate in dog form.

Maple was born in Toronto, moved with me to Japan, then back to Canada, and then, because we both had commitment issues, back to Japan again. He was there through breakups, divorce, career flops, and nights when I wondered what the hell I was doing with my life.

He was also the reason I talked to strangers.

In Japan, walking a dog is like wearing a sign that says, "Please talk to me!" Old ladies would stop me to say, "*Kawaii!*" (cute). Kids would ask to pet him. And drunk salary men would slur, "*Sugoi inu da na!*" ("Amazing dog!")—though at that point,

anything was “*sugoi*” to them). Since Maple was a Jack Russell beagle mix, bigger than many dogs in Japan and very unique compared to other dogs there, he was quite memorable and popular.

And I, being a foreigner, we both stuck out quite a bit. We were like *Batman and Robin*, *Rick and Morty*, or *Bill and Ted*. Everyone knew and loved us. Maple was also quite the wingman.

When Maple passed away, I felt like I’d lost my best friend, because I had.

But here’s the thing about love—human or canine—**it leaves marks on you**. And sometimes, those marks push you into places you never expected.

The Band That Shouldn’t Have Worked (But Did)

A year after moving to Japan, I found myself in Hokkaido, freezing my butt off in a tiny bar, surrounded by Japanese guys who spoke about as much English as I spoke Japanese (which, at the time, was roughly: “*Konnichiwa*,”(hello) “*Arigato*,” (thank you) and “*Eigo ga wakarimasu ka?*”(Do you understand English?) Spoiler: They did not.

Somehow, over beers and badly pronounced compliments (“*Anata no... guitar... um... good!*”), we decided to start a band.

Our set list?

- 90% terrible classic rock covers.
- 10% Japanese songs we butchered with enthusiasm.

Our audience?

- Usually, the bartender.
- Sometimes, a confused tourist.
- Once, a group of young and enthusiastic fans came to see another band and realized they had canceled, and now they were stuck watching us.

But here's the magic: It didn't matter that we sucked.

Because through those chaotic jam sessions, I:

- Learned more Japanese from yelling lyrics than any textbook could teach me.
- Made friends who didn't care that I was the "weird foreign guy."
- Got to perform on stage—something my younger, rock-star-wannabe self would've cried happy tears over.

The Best Decisions Are the Ones You Don't Overthink

Here's a fun fact: I had never met any Japanese people before moving to Japan.

Yep. I moved to the land of the rising sun without knowing a single real Japanese person. I had only seen some Japanese people on TV, like Yoko Ono and David Suzuki. I also:

- Didn't know anyone in Japan.
- Had no teaching experience.
- Had absolutely no plan beyond "Uh... let's see what happens?"

And yet, that unplanned leap led to:

- Falling in love with the country (and eventually, my wife).
- Discovering that I could perform music, just not in the way I imagined.
- Learning that sometimes, the best things happen when you stop trying to control everything.

Baby Steps, Not Blueprints

Another thing I learned is this: **You don't need a master plan.** You just need to take the next step.

- I didn't move to Japan because I had a grand vision. I did it because it felt right.
- I didn't join a band because I thought I'd be famous. I did it because it was fun.
- And I didn't write this book because I have life all figured out. I wrote it because I don't.

So, if you're reading this and thinking:

- *"I don't know what I'm doing."*
- *"My dreams didn't work out."*
- *"Why does my dog bark at nothing?!"* (Join the club.)

Welcome. You're in the right place.

Life isn't about having all the answers. It's about laughing at the chaos, singing off-key sometimes, and remembering that even the weirdest detours can lead somewhere beautiful.

Now, who's up for karaoke?

Chapter 2: Growing Up Brown and Short – Surviving Childhood as the Human Fun-Sized Snack

The Unwanted Superpower: Being Eye-Level with Belly Buttons

If I had to describe my childhood in one word, it would be: “Where?”

As in:

“Where’s Oz?”

“Oh, just look for the floating head between everyone’s elbows.”

Being a brown kid in Toronto in the 90’s already made me stand out. But nature decided to spice things up by making sure I stopped growing vertically at the ripe age of 12.

The Harsh Reality of Being Fun-Sized

Let me paint you a picture:

- Age 10: Average height! For an infant girl!

- Age 12: Growth spurt? Now I am of average height for an Asian schoolgirl
- Age 16: Officially the same height as my little cousin. Who was nine.

I tried everything:

- Stretching exercises (Result: Still short, but now with sore hamstrings.)
- Platform shoes (Result: Looked like a confused disco reject.)
- Hanging from monkey bars (Result: Zero inches gained, many blisters earned.)

I remember watching the movie *Gattaca*, and in order to pull off being one of the elite members of society, Ethan Hawke had to get metal rods in his legs to extend his height. And though it looked painful, I was totally hoping this dystopian future would become reality so I could also be taller.

I asked around if there were any pills or secret ointments that helped people get taller. But unfortunately, no one had invented anything.

Eventually, I had to accept it: I was short. And brown. And awkward. The holy trinity of “eww, of course I won’t dance with you.”

The Basketball Incident (Or: The Day I Learned Gravity Hates Me)

In 8th grade, during gym class, our teacher made us play basketball. Of course, the two popular guys were the leaders of the team and took turns choosing who they wanted on their team. And I was left with the final two. I and an extremely obese guy named Sam. And they chose him over me. A guy who could hardly walk and wheezed when he sat was athletically more popular than me.

I did my best. I ran from one side of the court to the other. I watched for the ball just in case someone was dumb enough to pass it to me. Once, someone missed, and the ball pretty much fell into my hands. When it was my turn to shoot, I ran with the ball to the hoop, I gave it my all, and jumped with the power of a thousand suns and...fell. I missed completely too. I was also fouled for traveling.

During gym class, I was the last kid out because I waited for everyone to change clothes and leave the change room before I changed. I didn't want anyone to see my chubby brown body. But one day, as I ran out to the soccer field where everyone was waiting for me, I realized it had rained and the grass was wet. I slipped and fell flat on my face. And it wasn't just a simple fall. I slid, my body spun around and my too big for me, shorts fell down to my ankles flashing everyone my tighty whitey underwear.

The girls, who were also having gym class and practicing cheers, saw me, and the laughter erupted. So I quickly realized I was not meant for athletics. But my shortness did help with other things.

The Unexpected Perks of Being Compact

Here's the thing about being short: **You develop skills.**

- Sneaking into concerts? Easy. Just walk in like you're someone's kid.
- Airplane seats? Actually comfortable with plenty of leg room.
- Hide-and-seek? Undefeated champion. (*"Wait, where'd he go?" "I think he's behind that cereal box."*)
- I could pass as a child on public transit until I was 18, saving tons of cash on bus tickets
- Also, after high school, no one wants to pick on someone smaller than them. So I've never gotten harassed by people.

And most importantly, people underestimate you.

Which, as it turns out, is the perfect setup for:

- Winning at dodge ball (nobody can hit the short guy).
- Karaoke (when you're this close to the ground, you've got stability).
- Surviving Japan's tiny apartments (finally, a country built for me).

The Day I Realized Short Could Be an Advantage

It happened at university. A girl I liked, said to me:

"You're kinda... tiny, huh?"

Now, the younger me would've panicked. But this time, I just grinned and said:

"Yes, I am. And you know what they say about guys who lack

height, right?”

“No, actually, I don’t. What do they say?”

“What we lack in vertical, we make up for while being horizontal.”

I didn’t even really know what that meant. It just kind of popped out.

She laughed. I didn’t die of embarrassment. And that’s when it clicked:

Confidence isn’t about being tall—it’s about standing tall in who you are.

We never ended up hooking up, but it was the first time I started to use comedy and fake confidence to make girls laugh or feel good.



As you can see, I am shorter than the average male. These guys were average height for Japanese men.

What I would tell my younger self now

If I could go back to 13-year-old Oz, the one who was scared to even make contact with a girl, I'd say:

“Hey! Yeah, you’re never gonna dunk a basketball or date a cheerleader. But one day, you’ll live in Japan, where you are unique. You’ll perform on stage and realize nobody cares how tall the singer is if he’s got passion. And you’ll marry a woman who thinks it’s cute that she can wear the same size clothes as you. So relax. The best things in life—karaoke microphones, dogs, and sushi—come in all sizes.”

The Takeaway: Height is Just a Number (A Small One, But Still)

And despite what *Skee-Lo* says(you guys are probably too young to get that reference), Life’s too short to spend it wishing you were taller.

- Can’t reach the top shelf? Ask for help (or invest in a sturdy step stool).
- Tired of “*How’s the weather down there?*” jokes? Come up with better comebacks (Better than the air from up there—must be the altitude that is messing up your brain)
- Feel invisible sometimes? Good. Stealth mode is underrated.

Because **the things that make you different are the things that’ll make your story worth telling.**

And trust me—you’re gonna have one hell of a story.

No matter if you think your kryptonite is being short, fat, tall, ugly, shy, nervous, sweaty, bald, hairy, or whatever is wrong with you, the truth is, it is that thing that makes your life more unique and extraordinary.

Who wants to be just average? Accept fate and what God gave you, and make it work for you!

Chapter 3: The Rock Star Dream – Hits, Misses, and Drunk Salary men

The Delusional Beginnings

Every kid has that one “*When I grow up, I’m gonna be a...*” dream.

For some, it’s an astronaut. For others, doctor.

For me? It was much simpler. I didn’t even remember what my dream was until my elementary school had its 50th anniversary and I went to visit. There had been a time capsule that housed all the students’ different artworks and memories of their year.

I was in grade three the year that they used our entries. As I made my way to the gymnasium I used to play in as a kid, a table with our teacher’s name was displayed. A book of construction paper with a page for each kid. There was a name, a sentence of what they wanted to do when they grew up, and a picture drawn by the child. Some of them were like;

Bob, I want to be a fireman.

Jenny, I want to be like my mom.

Sebastian, I want to be Spider-Man.

Then there was mine.

Oz, I want to drive a car.

That's it. Not even like a Ferrari, or I want to be a race car driver. Just a picture of me standing beside what looks like a standard Pontiac or Chevy sedan. What big dreams!

I am sure, though, once I hit grade 6, I wanted to be a musician.

Not just any musician, no, no. I was going to be the brown Michael Jackson. Or the short Vanilla Ice.

There was just one tiny problem:

I had no idea what I was doing.

The First "Gig" (If You Can Call It That)

My musical debut happened in my friend Jason's basement when I was 17. By this age, I was more into the pop-rock scene. Bands like *Green Day*, *Treble Charger*, and *I Mother Earth* (the last two being Canadian bands before it was cool to be from Canada)

Our band name? "*Blue Urine*" (We thought it sounded cool. It didn't.)

Our instruments?

- A guitar that wasn't properly tuned.
- A drum set made of buckets.
- My "vocals," which were mainly whining into a mic about

not getting laid.

Our audience? Jason's brother and cousin who made fun of us and said we sucked.

But in that moment? I felt like a legend.

The Harsh Reality Check

As I got older, reality started whispering (then yelling) some uncomfortable truths:

1. I didn't look like a rock star. (The front man rarely is an obese, nervous, brown guy who needs to put the mic stand at the lowest setting)
2. I didn't play an instrument well. (My guitar skills peaked at 3 chords)
3. The music industry wasn't exactly begging for a 5'3" Indian-Canadian front man who was shy and couldn't make eye contact with girls.

But did that stop me?

Of course not.

Japan: Where Delusion Met Opportunity

When I moved to Japan to teach English, I figured my rock star dreams were over. I was in a country where most people didn't speak English, I had no friends, and I was struggling to even just

talk to people rather than make them my fans.

Then I discovered two magical things:

1. Karaoke bars. (Where everyone sounds bad, so no one cares.)
2. Japanese people's willingness to humor a weird foreigner.

I would often go to karaoke after work with co-workers, and they were amazed by my vocal range. They loved it when I sang and often requested English songs that they liked. Word of mouth spread, and eventually everyone wanted to go to karaoke with me.

In passing, I mentioned to one of my coworkers that I wish I were in a band. They then put me in touch with their friends who were in a band and were looking for a vocalist.

One night, after a particularly spirited rendition of *Poker Face* by *Lady GaGa*, the drunk guitarist of the group slurred:

"You... so good. And funny! Let's start a band!"

And just like that, "Puzzle" was born.



Playing in an abandoned movie theater which was changed into a live house

Puzzle: Japan's Worst (But Most Enthusiastic) Cover Band

Our lineup:

- **Me** – “Vocals”
- **Eichi-kun** – Guitar
- **Ko-chan** – Bass (mostly just stood there looking cool)
- **Tama-Chan** – Drums (his rhythm was... creative)

Our setlist?

- 50% *Bon Jovi*
- 30% 80's Rock Ballads other than *Bon Jovi*
- 20% Japanese songs from *Ellegarden*

Our gigs?

- **First show:** Invited all our friends to an abandoned movie theater turned live house. Quite the show despite the floor being still sticky from popcorn and drinks of the past.
- **Biggest crowd:** A summer festival in a small town in Hokkaido, hundreds of people, however, over 80% were seniors there to see the flower gardens.
- **Low point:** Our last gig, when the guitarist picked a fight with the bassist and our band “broke up”.

But here's the thing—**it was the most fun I'd ever had failing at something.**

The Lesson

That's when it hit me:

Maybe success wasn't about being the best—**it was about being brave enough to suck in public.**

Because:

- I made friends through those terrible gigs.
- I learned Japanese from mispronouncing lyrics.
- I got to feel like a rock star, even if only for three minutes between songs.

Letting Go of the Dream (But Not the Spirit)

Eventually, I accepted that I wasn't going to sell out stadiums. But you know what?

- I did sell out a tiny bar once. (Okay, “sold out” = 10 people showed up.)
- I did make someone's night when I sang *Basketcase*.
- And I did learn that passion doesn't need talent to be worth pursuing.

What I'd Tell My Younger Rock Star Wannabe Self

“Hey!. You're never gonna be on MTV. But one day, you'll scream Bon Jovi lyrics in a Tokyo bar while a drunk salary man cries into his beer. You'll high-five strangers after messing up the chorus to Sweet Child O' Mine. And you'll realize that the real rock star life isn't about fame—it's about the friends you make while sounding terrible together.

Now go practice your cheap guitar. You've got a 'concert' in Jason's basement next week.”

The Takeaway: Play Anyway

Life's too short to only do things you're good at.

- Want to sing? Record yourself doing a cover and upload it on *Instagram* or *TikTok*
- Dream of being on stage? Find an open mic night and just sing.

- Scared of failing? Do it scared. No one will know, and once you are off stage, the next person will be feeling the same way.

Because the world needs more people who play, not just professionals.

People say **NO REGRETS**. I say **ONLY REGRETS**

There will always be regrets.

Whether you do something or not, you might regret it. I regret not getting up on stage and singing. Or I regret getting up on stage and getting booed. Or I regret getting up on stage and rocking out, but having a hangover the next day.

It is human nature to always second-guess and regret your decisions. But only regrets that are from not taking action are the regrets where you don't know how it would have gone.

So choose the regret you want to have.

1. Regretting doing something and failing. Or 2. Regretting something you never even tried to do.

Most people truly regret the second type.

Chapter 4: Navigating Family Dynamics – Dementia, Liver Transplants, and the Sister Who Won't Forget Me

The Family That Life Built (Then Knocked Down, Then Rebuilt Again)

If my family were a TV show, it would be:

- 20% medical drama (“Code Blue! We’re losing him!”)
- 30% dark comedy (“Wait, you did WHAT as a kid?!”)
- 50% emotional montage (Cue sad piano music over childhood photos)

A mixture of *Married with Children*, *The Cosby Show*, *Perfect Strangers*, and *How I Met Your Mother*, my life is definitely a season of laugh tracks, weird story lines, strange characters, all in front of a live studio audience.

No happy ending guaranteed, though. Just a lot of love, a lot of loss, laughs, and a mother who still brings up that time I let a loose stool fall out of my diaper and roll under the dining table.



Our last family vacation when everything was great!

Dad: The Man Who Forgot Me

My father, Nasir, was a brilliant, funny, stubborn man—right up until dementia decided to rewrite his story.

Early days:

- Taught me how to drive (despite driving terribly himself).
- Could cook anything (but refused to cook at home since it was his job during the day).
- Had a laugh that made entire rooms light up.

The main thing about my father is that he was the kindest, nicest, and saddest man I've ever met.

He was born in India, but his family had to flee to Bangladesh during the fighting. He had an older brother and three younger sisters. They were a poor family, and his father worked in a factory for his brother-in-law.

Despite my grandfather having a stroke and half his body being paralyzed, this brother-in-law forced my grandfather to walk to work every day until he finally died.

Then it was my father and his brother's turn to take over. My dad's older brother was too scared to do anything, so my father volunteered to get a student visa and move to America to save his family.

Which he did!

He studied accounting at the *University of Miami* and worked nights at a convenience store. All his money that didn't go to school or rent was sent back home. He ended up saving enough money to buy his mom and siblings a home in Pakistan. And what did he get in return?

Letters begging him to work harder and make more money. So he dropped out of school, started working full time at the convenience store, and pretty much sent as much money as he could every month.

He ended up working so much he had to drop out of school, overstaying his visa, got caught, was arrested, and was about to be deported.

He was lucky that the woman he married, my mother, had a visa for Canada. So she brought him over to Canada and they started a life in Toronto, where I was born.

He could never finish his schooling, the house he bought in Pakistan was in his brother's name, so he never got a cent back,

and all the money he had sent to have his siblings taken care of was also never paid back.

This made him bitter and resentful of his family. But rather than cut them off or ask them for the money back, he swallowed it and instead continued to help them whenever they reached out.

His sister asked him to sponsor his mom and her and her husband to Canada. All out of my dad's pocket. He never received any money, despite housing them until they could get on their feet.

Why am I telling you all this?

To let you know that **sometimes you need to follow your own dreams even if they go against the people around you.**

Because of all his family issues, the relationship with his own family suffered. My mother would always get into arguments, and my childhood was filled with relative after relative staying in my room, taking free food and board from my dad, only to get a job, start a business, or become wealthy well beyond my dad.

And my dad was left footing the bill. He was like the start-up investor, but he never got any returns.

His dream was to have his own business, but it never came to fruition. Mainly because he never had any support, was responsible for my mom during her health issues, and had to feed and pay for two kids.

He could never take the risk and start a business because there were too many people relying on him, and if he failed, all of us would fail. So he stuck it out in his blue-collar job as a kitchen worker at a hospital until he retired.

He had so many regrets that he could **never realize or enjoy the good things in his life.**

Thanks to him, my mom survived her liver transplant and years of ailments that came with it.

He started off in a small apartment in the worst part of Toronto and ended up having a nice, high-end condo in North York. He retired with a very good pension and was able to support his daughter, who always needed money for groceries, rides to work, and money for rent.

He paid for both his daughter's and my weddings and gave us each his used cars, which I still drive. Thanks Dad!

He was an active part of the local religious community and volunteered at seniors' homes and museums. He was well-liked and had zero enemies.

But in his mind, **he was a failure.**

I think that was one of the reasons why he ended up losing his life.

COVID hit, and he was stuck at home. Everything stopped. Going to the gym, going out, volunteering, going to mosque, living life. Unlike those who spent the COVID closures to their advantage by enjoying hobbies and relaxing, this time was a nightmare for my dad. He was trapped at home with nothing to do, and it messed up his mind.

Last Days:

- Asked me who I was. (“You are the guy who stole my money, and I need to call my lawyer”)
- Kept seeing a woman in his house and secret doors through his closet, like it was *Narnia*.

- Forgot how to eat, how to speak, how to be him.

The hardest part? **Grieving someone who's still alive.**

One day, near the end, he looked at me and said: *“What’s your job?”*

I smiled. I explained to him for the hundredth time that I work for the government. He opened his eyes wide with an impressed look and said, *“That’s great! You should also start a business.”*

He would always say he was starting a business and ask to be taken to his friend’s home so he could work on his business. He never knew the name of his friend or what type of business he started, but he always continued to demand to be taken to him.

Or sometimes he would say his mom was waiting for him, and he had to go. His mom passed away a decade before, but he always asked to go to her. We always wondered if he knew she was gone and was asking to be with her in heaven.

He passed away in a seniors home after choking on food, and his heart stopped. And I regret not being there. But I am happy that the last time I met him in the hospital, we said goodbye on good terms, and he seemed in a good mood. He thanked me for visiting him and told me to take care. I didn’t know that would be the last time I would talk to him.

Mom: The Unkillable Queen

If my dad was the quiet strength, my mom, Roshan, was the hurricane in a sari.

Her resume includes:

- Surviving a liver transplant (“The doctor said I have five years tops. Joke’s on him—It’s been over 20 years since the transplant.”)
- Due to her health conditions and weakened body, she has broken her legs, ankles, shoulder, and arm several times, and has had multiple metal irons and pins in her body. We call her *Iron Woman*
- Raising two kids while working nights at a sewing factory
- Still, to this day, refusing to let me win an argument (“Beta, I birthed you. I win by default.”)

Despite that, my mom, unlike my dad, has had a strange and sheltered life.

She was the youngest of 9 kids, and there was always someone taking care of her. She went to school only until third grade, and her father pulled her out because the teacher scolded her. “*The hell with education. No one tells off my daughter!*”

When her father died and they lost everything, all the siblings got married off or started their own lives. My mother was the only one who stayed in the care of her mother until she met and married my father.

From her mother, straight to my father, someone was there to take care of her financially and make all the decisions for her. She never rode a bike, drove a car, learned to read or write, didn’t know how to use an ATM, or even had a need to learn English.

Her life was easy mentally, but physically she had to work factory jobs, take care of two kids while my dad was working, and ended up getting so sick that she required a liver transplant.

She has had to deal with a life of obesity, diabetes, osteoporosis, and loads of other side effects from her liver transplant.

But here's the thing about my mom—**she doesn't die. She just keeps going.**

She also has a very happy-go-lucky attitude and never seems to get angry. My dad had quite a temper and often took it out on his family, but my mom was always the calm one. She never raised her voice, got angry, or demanded anything from life.

She just went with the flow and dealt with life. I think that is why she is still alive.

No matter what the world threw at her, she just took it and moved on. She doesn't regret anything in her life and wouldn't change a thing. The only thing she wishes for in her life is that my father hadn't left first.

Naureen: The Sister Who Dreams Big

My sister is my biggest supporter and always gives up. But she then finds something else to try.

Highlights from her Greatest Hits:

- Went to college/university for over a decade but still doesn't have a PhD.
- Has had dozens of careers and continues to find new ones.
- Still looks and acts like a teenager

But here's the truth: **She's the glue.**

When Dad forgot, she remembered for him.

When Mom was sick, she became the nurse.

When I moved to Japan, she became our parents' caretaker, without ever complaining.

(Okay, she complained. But she did it.)

Naureen is younger than me, depended on me to help her with

her homework (or do it for her), asked me for advice about love, school, work, and life, but always did what she wanted.

She has tried so many different things, both job and hobby-wise wise and continues to develop and grow despite being a mother herself. She is often confused, deals with depression, anxiety, and frustration. But somehow, she is a true hybrid of my parents because, despite the confusion in her life, she doesn't give up.

She fights and always comes out ahead.

The Unspoken Family Rule: Laugh or Cry (Preferably Both)

We cope how we can:

- Dark humor (“It took my dad dying for my mom to finally learn how to use a bank machine”)
- Food (“Here, eat this biryani. It fixes everything.”)
- Selective amnesia (“We have suppressed the beatings we got in the 80s. Or have we?”)

But the real rule I learned from my family: **Show up.**

Even when it's hard.

Even when you're tired.

Even when all you have to offer is a bad joke and a hug.

What My Family Taught Me

1. **Love isn't always pretty.** Sometimes it's wiping drool off your dad's chin. Sometimes it's yelling at your mom to take her meds.
2. **Laughter is survival.** If you don't laugh at the absurdity of life, you'll drown in it.
3. **Home isn't a place—it's the people who get you.** Even if they also roast you mercilessly, and are the reason why you started balding.

A Message to My Younger Self

“Hey! One day, your dad won't know your name. Your mom will cheat death. Your sister will become your parents' parent. And you'll feel guilty for living halfway across the world.

But here's what you won't expect: You'll learn that love isn't about fixing things. It's about showing up—whether it's in person, over Whats App, or by sending stupid memes to make your sister laugh during your parents' doctors' appointments.

Because at the end of the day, family isn't the people you're stuck with—it's the ones who stick with you.”

Chapter 5: Karaoke as Therapy – How Singing Saved My Sanity

The Night I Screamed Away My Problems

There's a Japanese saying: "*Even a nightingale won't sing if you don't ask.*"

Well, nobody had to ask me.

Because on a rainy Tuesday night in Tokyo, I stood in a tiny karaoke booth, clutching a microphone like it was a lifeline, and screamed my way through *Livin' on a Prayer* like my rent depended on it.

Spoiler: It didn't. But my sanity sure did.

Tokyo is a densely populated area and has the highest population of any city in the world. But it is probably one of the loneliest. Especially if you live there alone. I lived in Chiba, which is next to Tokyo. It's not as populated, but it is just as lonely.

Tokyo has lots of bars, clubs, lounges, karaoke boxes, restaurants, cafes, hostess clubs, dance clubs, and game centers. Tons of people everywhere you look. But everyone is a stranger, and even the friends you meet are very superficial.

It's very rare to find someone you click with and create a deep bond with. Especially if you are a foreigner.

And this isolation in a crowd gets old pretty quickly. The neon lights and nightlife of Tokyo can only entertain so much. Especially if you are not rich and can't afford to buy a social life.

So one of the only things I found that helped me enjoy my time in Japan that didn't drain my bank account or leave me empty was music. I love music and from a young age, have turned to it to be my babysitter, friend, confidant, and partner. I didn't have any dates or girlfriends well into my 20s, so most of my teenage life was listening to music. And singing in my shower or in my room was not only a hobby but therapy for me.

But in Japan, being packed into a tiny apartment with thin walls, my neighbors did not appreciate my renditions of *Sum41* or *Simple Plan* at 2 am. So the perfect place was the karaoke box.

The boxes are private and can handle groups or single patrons. You pay an hourly rate and get an all-you-can-drink soft drink bar and a list of thousands of songs. It actually helped my Japanese by singing Japanese bands I came across on the radio or recommendations from students and teachers.

The karaoke boxes are open 24 hours a day, and you can even buy packages in 3-hour, 6-hour, or even 12-hour packs if you want to spend the night singing away until the subways open up again.

These times in karaoke booths alone or with friends saved my sanity. Listening to music is great, but singing is therapeutic.



Karaoke at its finest...

Why Karaoke is Cheaper Than Therapy

Let's break it down:

Therapy - \$200/hour

Karaoke - \$10/hour (plus all-you-can-drink deals)

Therapy - "How does that make you feel?"

Karaoke - "WHOOAAA WE'RE HALFWAY THEEEEEERE!"

Therapy - Lying on a couch

Karaoke - Dancing on a table (not recommended after 3 beers)

Therapy - Confidentiality guaranteed

Karaoke - Strangers may hear you belting out rock songs

depending on how insulated the room is.

Karaoke became my emotional release valve—the place where:

- Stress went to die.
- Shame went to get drunk.
- My dreams of being a rock star went on to come true.

The Science of Singing (Yes, It's Real)

Turns out, belting out power ballads does something to your brain. Studies show singing:

- Releases endorphins (the “happy chemicals”).
- Lowers cortisol (the “stress hormone”).
- Boosts Oxycontin (the “cuddle hormone”—explains why drunk strangers hug after duets).

In other words, Karaoke isn't just fun. It's medicine.

Bad medicine. Another *Bon Jovi* reference. You guys must think I love that band.

My Greatest Karaoke Triumphs (And Regrets)

The Good:

- The time I nailed *I Will Always Love You* by *Whitney Houston* and made a salary man cry (“So... beautiful...”).
- When my rendition of *Man in the Mirror* by *Michael Jackson* made the bartender give me a free shot

- Every duet with my wife, Mayu, of *Barbie Girl* by *Aqua*, where I was Barbie. We laughed until we cried.

The Bad:

- Attempting *Eminem* in an Indian Accent.
- That one *Welcome to the Black Parade* by *My Chemical Romance*, where I couldn't focus and ended up mumbling the lyrics
- Any *Taylor Swift* song

Karaoke was the place where I sang alone and found myself. But it was also the only place I went with true friends. The place I went with people I trusted, shared a bond with, and revealed my true self. Between songs and drinks, we talked about the struggles of life and the importance of friendship.

Karaoke as a Love Language

When my wife, Mayu, and I were still friends, our first date was karaoke.

She sang *AKB48* songs, I sang *Maroon 5*. We realized we both have the same high voice. I sang *Justin Bieber*, *Backstreet Boys*, and *The Jonas Brothers*.

Despite that, somehow, she still married me.

Now, when life gets hard—when her depression feels heavy or my job feels endless—we do two things:

1. Order too much takeout sushi.
2. Go scream-sing *Stayin' Alive* in the kitchen while she cooks.

It's not a cure. But it's a reminder that joy still exists, even on the darkest days.

The Night Singing Saved Me

After my dad died, I didn't cry. Not at the funeral. Not when we packed up his things at the seniors' home.

Then, one night, I found myself alone in my room listening to music.

I scrolled through the songs, landed on *Cat's in the Cradle...* and finally broke.

Sob crying. Snot everywhere. Voice cracking like a teenager's.

Thank God Mayu was out walking Kokoro.

But when I was done, I felt lighter.

That's the magic of singing: It gives you permission to feel everything, even when the world tells you to be strong.

What Karaoke Taught Me

1. Perfection is overrated. (The best performances are the messiest ones.)
2. Vulnerability is strength. (Nothing bonds people faster than mutual embarrassment.)
3. Sometimes, the only way out is through. (Preferably with a key change.)

A Message to My Younger Self

“Hey, you. Yeah, the one stressing about being ‘good enough.’

One day, you’ll stand in a Tokyo karaoke bar, surrounded by strangers, and sing Wonderwall so off-key it’s basically a new song. And you’ll realize: Nobody cares.

Because life isn’t about hitting the right notes. It’s about having the courage to sing anyway.

Now go grab the mic. Your soul needs this.”

The Takeaway: Sing Like No One’s Listening (Even Though They Definitely Are)

- Stressed? Sing in the shower. (Your dog will judge you. Let them.)
- Sad? Blast *I Will Survive* and dance like a maniac.
- Alive? Then you’ve got a song in you. Let it out.

Because sometimes, the best therapy comes with a backup track and a cheap microphone.

Chapter 6: Lessons from Losing Loved Ones – Grieving My Father, My Friend, My Sidekick and the Unexpected Gifts of Loss

The Phone Call That Changed Everything

I was standing in a 7-Eleven in Tokyo, debating whether to buy a chicken karage or a melon pan (the eternal struggle), when my sister called.

Her voice was stressed.

“Oz, it’s time for you to come back to Canada. I am moving to the States with Aamir for his work, and mom and dad will be alone. It’s your turn to take care of them.”

And just like that, the world changed.

The life I had made as an English teacher in Japan, the nice apartment near the station that I had so nicely decorated, the girlfriend who had just moved in to live with me, the dog who had been recently diagnosed with a heart murmur, and the lofty teaching job that paid a lot and required very little effort was all going to change.

My future wife, Mayu, and my 13-year-old dog, Maple, de-

cided to join me and leave Japan behind to go back to Canada, a place where I had no job, no place to live, and hadn't lived for over a decade. I was starting over again. But this time, I had no relevant job experience in Canada and had to support a wife and a dog.

I arrived in Toronto, started at the bottom (like *Drake*) and jumped from a really shitty call center job to a decent call center job (unlike *Drake*).

I couldn't find any jobs that would hire me except these call centers of customer service, where every minute of every hour is monitored, you have to follow schedules to the minute, and the upper management is listening on every call to find reasons to keep you down.

The culture of micromanaging and soul sucking is big in this industry, which is why there is such high turnover, very little loyalty to the company and almost no job satisfaction.

But I did it because I had no choice. I needed money to pay rent and buy food for my wife and dog. Mayu couldn't speak a word of English and was taking ESL classes, so we were in a basement apartment with one income. Which is one income too little to survive the prices of Toronto, Canada.

Just when I finally got a decent-paying job (still a call center) with the government, the next day my dog vomited blood. His kidneys were failing, and despite our attempts to give him meds, special food, IV injections every week, and pain killers, the vets said there was nothing more that could be done and he would be gone soon.

The day after he vomited blood, the next day, he had trouble walking, he couldn't eat much, and after a week, it was time to let him go. It was the saddest moment of my life so far.

There were more of those to come.

The next would be my father. I've already talked about him, but he deserves a mention in this chapter as well.



My Dad and Maple.

Grieving a Man Who Had Already Left

My father, Nasir, didn't die suddenly. Dementia stole him piece by piece.

When I arrived in Toronto, he was almost himself. He didn't really have any memory issues, his body was still in good condition, and he could do everyday things like drive, shop, and go to the gym.

But every week, things got worse and worse. Unlike Alzheimer's, which takes years to progress, my dad had a form of dementia that was very rapid. Within a year he was no longer able to drive, go out on his own, would forget who my mom was, lost control of his bowels, had a personal worker come every day to shave, shower and exercise him, and he continued to plead me to take him home even though that is where he was most of the day.

By the end:

- He didn't recognize me half the time.
- He forgot how to eat, walk, and speak full sentences.
- He'd smile at strangers as if they were family and stare at family as if they were strangers.

So when he physically died, it wasn't like in movies—no dramatic last words, no poignant moments. Just... a call from the seniors home that my dad was unresponsive and us rushing to the hospital only to find he was on life support and brain dead. We had to pull the plug and say goodbye.

Just six months after losing my dog, I lost my dad.

And the weirdest part?

I felt guilty for not feeling worse.

The Five Stages of Grief (As Experienced by a Sarcastic Brown Guy)

1. **Denial:** “Maybe the doctors are wrong. Maybe he’ll suddenly sit up and ask for chai.”
2. **Anger:** “Why him? Why dementia? Why did his last moments have to be alone in a seniors home choking to death?!”
3. **Bargaining:** “If I donate to every Alzheimer’s charity, will it undo this?”
4. **Depression:** “I should call him. ...Oh.”
5. **Acceptance:** “Okay. This sucks. But I’m still here.”

These same thoughts ran through my head for my dog as well. Except for the dementia part. My dog was almost 16 and still sharp as a tool.

The Funeral That Wasn’t About the Funeral

We held the service in Toronto.

- My mom cried and cursed him for going first.
- My sister cried and was still in the denial stage.
- I just did what I was told to do, stood where I was supposed to, carried the coffin when the time came, and dropped the dirt on his casket when instructed. It was a strange and awkward day, and I was dry-eyed the whole time.

Grief's Unexpected Gifts

The Clarity of Loss

- Suddenly, petty arguments didn't matter.
- Time became precious. (No more "I'll call later.")

The Stories That Surface

- My mom: "Did you know your father wouldn't let me have any friends. He wanted me all to himself."
- My sister: "He called me every day. Just to ask how I was doing."

The Permission to Be Messy

- Some days, I was fine.
- Others, I felt empty and useless.

Then, after losing my dog and dad, a few months later, I lost my aunt. My favorite aunt, actually. She had the same birthday as me! Of course, it was 40 years apart, but the same month and day; December 23rd.

She was always nice to me and would laugh at all my jokes. When she died, my mom felt it the most, but it hit me again. Three deaths, each roughly 6 months apart. I wasn't liking this trend.

What Death Taught Me About Life

Talk About the Hard Stuff Now

- Ask your parents about their stories.
- Pet and kiss your dog every day
- Enjoy the moments together and take as many pictures as you can!

Grief Isn't a Problem to Fix

- It's a wave. Sometimes it drowns you. Sometimes it just laps at your ankles. It will come and go. You just have to let it.

The Best Way to Honor Someone? Live.

- My dad loved to travel. I booked a trip to places he'd taken us.
- He hated wasting time. I stopped postponing things and started taking action more. Like writing this book.

A Letter to My Dad

Hey Daddy,

It's been a year. I still:

- *Forget you're gone when I see a picture of you.*
- *Hear your laugh when someone says something ridiculous.*
- *Wish I'd asked you more questions about your past, your life, your likes, and wishes.*

But here's what you'd want to know:

- *Mom's okay. She is actually learning how to use the ATM and manage finances.*
- *Naureen's good. Still annoying and undecided about her career, but she is a good mom.*
- *I'm... getting there. Still singing songs, less worried about little things, and trying to enjoy my life like you would have wanted.*

Miss you. Love you. Thanks for driving me around on rainy Sunday mornings when I had to deliver newspapers.

—Oz

The Takeaway: Loss Carves Space for Love

- *Grieving? Let it hurt. Let it heal. Let it change you.*
- *Guilty? Stop. They'd want you to live.*
- *Lucky enough to still have loved ones? Call them. Today.*

Because in the end, every single person and pet you know is going to die, including you. And unless there is an afterlife, you won't be able to take anything with you, including memories. So remember, rejoice, and continue to live while you are alive!

Chapter 7: Life Lessons from a Building Inspector – What My Conservative Best Friend Taught Me About Bridges (Both Literal and Metaphorical)

The Unlikely Friendship

If our friendship were a sitcom, it would be called:

“Right or Woke?”

Kevin and I have been friends since we were two awkward kids bonding over Nintendo and bad haircuts.

We met when we were probably around six or seven, as our parents went to the same mosque. All the kids used to hang out together and trade baseball cards, Pogs, Game Boy games, and VHS tapes of illegally copied movies from the cable box.

However, most of the kids didn’t get along with us. There were four of us misfits who stuck together and bonded in the lounge area while the adults were in the prayer hall.

Kevin was an only child, loved basketball, but for some reason never got along with the cool kids.

I was the short, slightly chubby one who got ignored and overlooked as my younger sister was the popular and pretty one.

Shawn was a really skinny, dorky, computer geek who had really thick glasses and a really bad temper.

And finally, there was **Rammy**, the chubby, loud, potty-mouthed kid like the fat guy from *Superbad*.

We got along great. Hung out at mosque, went to each other's homes for sleepover parties, or met up for days at amusement parks, bowling, or movies. We were good friends.

As we grew older, we grew apart. Some of us moved away, while others distanced themselves from the religion. But despite that, Kevin and I ended up staying close throughout everything.

He was into basketball, hip-hop, and Latin girls. I was into pop-rock, was surrounded by super rocker-type dudes, and always had a crush on some petite blonde with blue eyes. Our tastes in friends, hobbies, girls, and even food were very different.

Now?

- He's a building inspector (loves rules, structure, and arguing about code violations).
- I'm... not (see: moved to Japan on a whim).
- Politically? We cancel each other's votes every election.

And yet—he's my brother from another (very opinionated) mother.

Despite all our differences, we remained friends. And I think that is why nothing, including religious beliefs, political views, or social media, has broken our friendship.

Lesson 1: Foundations Matter (In Buildings and Friendships)

Kevin's job is to ensure people follow the rules for construction and follow the law to the T.

One time, over green tea, he said:

"People think they can do whatever they want and build any way they see fit. Nah. A good one needs:

1. *A solid foundation.*
2. *Materials that won't crack under pressure.*
3. *Regular check-ins so it doesn't fall on someone's head."*

And that is how he treats every part of his life, including friendship.

Friendship, like architecture, needs maintenance.

- We argue. Then we talk.
- We disagree. Then we listen.
- Sometimes, we avoid politics entirely and just watch movies.

Lesson 2: Sometimes, You Gotta Demolish to Rebuild

Kevin once showed me a house under renovation. They were building a whole upper level.

"See that? The foundation is still good, so rather than starting fresh, you take what you have and you build upon it."

I thought about:

- My failed music career.
- Relationships that collapsed.

- Dreams I outgrew.
- My struggling finances
- My first marriage

Not every structure deserves saving. And that's okay. Some things are meant to disappear. Some things are only there for a short time, and then you have to move on. The best way to move forward is to fight for the things that are still part of your journey. Looking back and regretting decisions, or seeing everything that didn't go well, only slows you down.

By the way, some of you might be hoping to get a juicy chapter about my divorce. Sorry to disappoint you, but there will not be much about my ex-wife.

Mostly because it was an amicable breakup and divorce, was decided in a day, took another day to sign the papers, and it was over. We went our separate ways but still remained acquaintances. We share pictures of dogs and kids, and vacations. No hard feelings.

Lesson 3: The Best Views Require Climbing

Kevin and I went to a temple in Kyoto high up on the hill. A steady climb to get to the top in the hot summer, but it was worth it. At the top, panting, I whined: *“Why's this place so high up and why are there so many stairs?!”*

He shrugged. *“Best way to see if something's worth it? Get above it.”*

Perspective changes everything.

- My “failures”? Just stepping stones.
- His “stubbornness”? Loyalty to what he believes.
- Our fights? Proof we care enough to engage.

I have had many people come into my life. **But only a few remain close.**

Friendship is very important, but it’s also very rare. When you are young and thrown into school, sometimes you are surrounded by a group of “friends,” and you think they are a limitless supply.

As you grow older and wiser, your friends get farther and fewer. Some people are lucky to have a big group of friends who have held on despite school, work, children, careers, and other obstacles.

Most of us are lucky if we have just a few friends we can trust and depend on during life’s different twists and turns. I have just a couple.

My friend Jason, who, despite not meeting for over a decade, still remains a true friend. We only send a text here or there on holidays and birthdays, but we both know that if either of us needed help, we would step up.

Kevin is the only other person that I know who would be there for me whenever I needed help. He was my best man for my first marriage, we traveled together and survived, he was there when my dad passed away, and he will be there in the future.

What Kevin Taught Me

1. Strength isn't rigidity. It's knowing what to hold onto and when to let go.
2. The loudest arguments often come from the deepest care.
3. Life, like buildings, needs both blueprints and flexibility.



Our trip to Okinawa. Kevin with the ladies

A Message to My Younger Self

*“Hey!. That friend you sometimes want to strangle? Keep him.
One day, you’ll need someone who:*

- *Calls you on your bullshit.*

- *Shows up when it matters.*
- *Reminds you that bridges, between people, between dreams, are worth maintaining.*

Even if he also thinks the government is secretly putting something in the water to make everyone gay.”

The Takeaway: Build Anyway

- Got a “Kevin” in your life? Fight for them. Differences don’t weaken bonds—they stress-test them.
- Feel like a wrecking ball hit your life? Demolition is just the first step to rebuilding better.
- Tempted to burn bridges? Remember: Even shaky ones can lead somewhere beautiful.

Chapter 8: Japan - The Land of New Beginnings (And My Many Glorious Mistakes)The Decision That Made Zero Sense

Let's recap:

- Me after university: Broke, directionless, working a dead-end office job in Toronto.
- Also me after university: *“You know what sounds smart? Moving to a country where I don't speak the language, have no friends, and have never even watched anime.”*

Spoiler: It was the best terrible decision I ever made.

First Day in Nagoya, Japan: A Day of FAIL

Things I learned immediately:

1. Black triangles filled with rice and other innards are the best food ever!
2. Subway tickets are inserted and then ejected back to be

kept. (I left without taking it back and couldn't figure out why I couldn't exit)

3. Some parts of a subway train are *Women's ONLY* sections. (That's why the pretty girls were staring at me! And I thought I was having a good hair day.)

The Gaijin Survival Guide (By Trial and Fire)

Lesson 1: Embrace the Point-and-Grunt Method

My first grocery trip:

- Me: "Kore wa... nan desu ka?" (What is this?) Pointing.
- Confused clerk: "...Sore wa yaki zakana desu." (That's grilled fish.)
- Also me: "Me Likey!" Big smile on my face. Thumbs up. Clerk returning the thumbs up and grabbing a piece for me.

Pro tip: Smiling + enthusiastic nodding + mixing English and Japanese = universal language.

Depending on where you go, you may or may not need Japanese at all. The big cities like Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, and Yokohama have lots of tourists and foreigners living there, so English is pretty much understood. You can get by on very basic Japanese, hand gestures, and basic English commands.

But the deeper you go in Japan, the more likely it is you will be the only English speaker for miles. Rather than shut myself in and just eat cup ramen each day, I decided to explore, ask random people outside for directions in broken Japanese, and do my best to learn the local language.

Lesson 2: Bow Like You Mean It (But Not Too Much)

- My First bow: Too shallow. (“Rude gaijin!”)
- My Second bow: Too deep. (“Why is he apologizing to a vending machine?”)
- My Third bow: Perfect. (Just kidding—I still mess this up.)

Some foreigners come and expect that they will pick up the language, traditions, culture, and will assimilate so well that the Japanese will treat them like any other person. However, even if you look Asian and do your best to become fluent, Japanese people have a way of knowing who is not Japanese.

Many foreigners take offense to this, call it racism, microaggressions, and spend all their time fighting to fit in and getting angry when they don't.

I was the other type of foreigner. The one who knows no matter what I do, say, or how I act, the first thing Japanese people will know is that I am not one of them. But that is ok.

I don't need to be Japanese to enjoy the land, food, and culture. I can still be considered an outsider (gaijin), but still meet nice people and have wonderful experiences.

In my over a decade in Japan, throughout the years, I learned that the more you try to be Japanese, the more Japanese people distance themselves from you. When I let my gaijin-ness shine, people were much more friendly and open to sharing their lives with me.

Lesson 3: Learn Through Public Humiliation

- The time I accidentally ordered chicken rectum. (“This chicken tastes... gamey?”)
- When I confused “*kawaii*” (cute) with “*kowaii*” (scary) and told a girl her eyes were very *kowaii*.
- That one *onsen* (hot spring) visit where I had to drop my towel in front of 20 elderly men and bathe naked with them. (We’re all friends now.)

There are tons of things I did wrong in Japan. I am sure I insulted many salary men or *obasans* (*old Japanese ladies*) on bicycles when they stopped me to talk or asked about my cute little dog Maple.

I must have broken tons of rules, regulations, and probably even laws while I was in Japan, but Japanese people are forgiving, especially to foreigners, and they would let it slide.

I made a fool of myself in public, but that is what helped me learn, adapt, and enjoy the new culture I was in. It’s the reason why I went to Japan. To learn something new. **To experience things I never had.**

And I found karaoke, which became one of my most important parts of being in Japan.

Finding My Tribe (Or: How to Make Friends When You're a Walking Google Translate Fail)

Step 1: Find other foreigners. (“You also don’t know what’s happening? HIGH FIVE!”)

Step 2: Bond over shared trauma. (“The trash-sorting rules here are WHAT?”)

Step 3: Accidentally befriend locals. Maple was a magnet, so everyone in my neighborhood knew who I was.

The Unexpected Gifts of Being a Clueless Foreigner

1. Every mistake is a story. (Calling my coworker’s wife a whore, *shofu*, instead of housewife, *shufu*.)
2. You learn resilience. (When you’ve cried in a *conbini*(*convenience store*) over misreading a microwave meal, everything else feels manageable.)
3. You rediscover wonder. (Rainy nights in Tokyo still feel like magic.)

What Japan Taught Me

- Perfection is boring. Growth happens in the mess.
- Kindness needs no translation. (See: every old lady who fed me when I looked lost.)
- Home isn’t a place, it’s where you’re willing to be a beginner.



My interview at a maid cafe

A Message to My Pre-Japan Self

*“Hey, yeah, the one panicking over this ‘crazy idea’ of living abroad.
In a few years, you’ll:*

- Eat natto and regret you ever did.*
- Bow to trash cans by accident while drunk and almost puke on a cat.*
- Be in a Japanese rock band and tour around Hokkaido.*
- Fall in love with a country that wasn’t yours... until it was.*

Go. Be terrible. Learn. Laugh. Sing. Repeat.

P.S.: Pack more deodorant. Japanese people don’t need it, but you do and they don’t sell the good stuff!”

The Takeaway: Get Comfortable Being Uncomfortable

- Want adventure? Lean into the cringe.
- Scared to try? Do it badly first.
- Feeling lost? Good. That's where the magic happens.

Everyone is scared to go beyond their comfort zone. It's uncomfortable. **But just like wasabi, taking the plunge is an acquired taste.**

Once you feel that burn through your nose, you feel alive, and you crave it more and more.

It gets easier to take risks and ignore those warnings at the back of your mind telling you to stay quiet, stay seated, choose the familiar. Instead, every chance to do something new and exciting gives you more and more reasons to live.

Chapter 9: Baby Steps to Financial Freedom – How I Learned Money Can Buy Happiness (But Karaoke is Still Life)

The Wake-Up Call That Hit Like a Ton of Yen

Chiba, 2018:

I was sitting on my tiny apartment floor, eating my third cup of ¥100 instant ramen that week, when my phone buzzed.

It was my bank.

Subject: “Overdraft Alert.”

Message: “You have only ¥3,200 (\$30) in your account. Please stop wasting so much cash.” (Okay, maybe not exactly that, but close.)

The Japanese credit card that I had racked up thousands of dollars of debt on, decided to take out the entire balance owing because I had exceeded my limit. Taking every cent or yen from my bank account to recover the debt, I was left with nothing.

I couldn't get it back, I closed my credit card, and had to borrow money from two friends until I got paid again. It was the sickest feeling knowing that I had no savings at all.

That’s when it hit me: I was in my 30s, living paycheck to paycheck, and my ‘financial plan’ was crossing my fingers every payday.

My first priority was to start saving again and pay my friends back. Which I did because, despite what people might think about Japan, if you don’t live in Tokyo or in luxury, you can actually save quite a lot.

My Rock Bottom Budget (AKA The “How Am I Alive?” Diet)

Here’s what ¥250,000 (\$2500) a month looked like:

- **Rent:** ¥70,000 (...which is dirt cheap compared to Canada but at the time was average in Japan.)
- **Food:** ¥50,000 for Instant noodles, combini onigiri, and the occasional luxury of a McDonald’s hamburger or conveyor belt sushi
- **Entertainment:** Walking. (Free!) Karaoke: ¥6000 (I went twice a week) Internet: ¥5000 Cellphone: ¥10,000
- **Transportation:** ¥30,000 mostly for traveling to Tokyo every weekend, as that is where my friends and things to do were.
- **Maple:** ¥10,000 for food, toys, treats, etc. Not bad.
- **Dating:** ¥30,000 (that is if I actually was able to get a date)
- **Savings:** ¥30,000 to ¥40,000, depending on whether miscellaneous things popped up.

Despite my low salary, since everything else was also pretty cheap living in Chiba, I was doing well. But after I moved to Canada, all the months of savings I had made went to the plane ticket, moving costs, apartment rental deposit, and living

expenses. I suddenly lost all my savings again.

Toronto: The reality of the poor man

Moving back to Toronto was a rude awakening. My wife, who doesn't speak English, couldn't work and was doing ESL lessons while I was struggling to make ends meet.

This was the reality of Toronto:

My salary as a call center agent: \$2800 a month. Similar to what I was making in Japan.

- **Rent:** \$2000(...which is average in Toronto but is what celebrities pay in Japan)
- **Food:** \$600 Mayu cooks at home almost every day, but sometimes we go out on the weekend, or I need to buy lunch at work
- **Entertainment:** Rogers Internet: \$75 Cell Phones: \$150
- **Transportation:** \$100 for TTC, I use a car for weekends, \$50 for gas, Parking \$50, Insurance \$75
- **Kokoro:** \$100 for food, toys, treats, etc. Vet bills: \$100 since she is a puppy.
- **Savings:** Negative \$500 on average. But it's actually worse than that, as every month there are things like birthdays, holidays, shopping, that come up, and all the savings I brought from Japan have now dried up.

So now that you know I am actually in the red every month, how is it that I am not yet homeless?

It's a mixture of side income streams and money my dad left us. He left me his car and about \$20,000. Half of which went to pay off the credit card debt I had accrued since moving to

Canada.

I make a small amount from my YouTube channel and my Medium articles. And when I say small, I mean very small. About \$30 a month! So if my dad hadn't left me his car and that money, I probably would have been too busy doing Uber Eats 7 days a week, along with my full-time 9 to 5 job. My dad's money is also slowly running out, as I still don't earn enough to cover my expenses.

I have done a few things differently that I didn't do in Japan, which are making my negative balances...less negative.

Step 1: Track Every Dollar

- I have a notebook where I write everything that comes in every month and what goes out. This is just so I don't get tempted to buy anything I don't need.
- I don't really eat out, buy clothes, electronics, etc., so most of my unnecessary expenses are random times when friends or family invite me to go out somewhere. These things I feel are part of family life, so I don't try to limit them too much.
- I take my lunch and a thermos to work to save money on food at the office. We buy groceries from *No Frills*, spread the food out as long as we can, and don't buy brand-name goods.

Step 2: The “Pay Yourself First” Trick

- Set up an auto-transfer: Despite the negatives, I also ensure that \$150 goes right into my high-yield savings account every month
- I can't take away too much time for a second job, as I don't

have much time to spend. Mayu, who suffers from mental illness and is alone here, needs a lot of attention, as well as my puppy Kokoro. So investing is a small start.

Step 3: Side Hustles That Don't Suck

- YouTube: Made videos about Japan's weirdest love hotels, etc, and still getting some residual money from that. But overall, making videos about life in Toronto gets me very few views and only a couple of dollars per video, but I keep at it.
- Freelance writing: I write true crime articles on Medium that also fetch me about a dollar an article, as I haven't had time to keep it up. But these little things will hopefully grow and add up in time.
- Faceless Channel: I started a faceless channel using AI software to create videos that will hopefully someday make some money. Since the channel is new, it doesn't have many views or subscribers, so it can't be monetized. But someday, hopefully, it will.
- Affiliate Marketing: People either make nothing or thousands using this online hustle. I am in the camp that hasn't even made a penny. But someday, maybe I will.
- This book. Although, I am giving it away for free so not really making any money from it.

The Magic of "Enough"

Here's the thing: **I don't want to be rich.**

I want:

- To not panic when my dog gets sick and needs a visit to the vet.
- To eat real vegetables sometimes, or splurge on a nicer restaurant than *Swiss Chalet*.
- To visit Mayu's family in Japan or mine in India, and not have to sell my kidneys to get there.

And hopefully,

What Money Can't Buy (But Everyone Thinks It Can)

1. Time with my mom before she joins my dad in the sky.
2. My health. (Though thank god for government benefits)
3. The look on Kokoro's face when I come home. (Priceless. Also, she's usually chewing something she shouldn't be.)

A Message to My Broke Younger Self

"Hey, yeah, the one eating two onigiris for dinner.

One day, you'll:

- *Have a decent job, decent apartment, decent life, and continue to move up.*
- *Realize 'financial freedom' doesn't mean mansions, it means choices.*
- *Still eat onigiris... but because you want to, not because you have to.*

Keep going. Future you is rooting for you.

P.S.: Stop buying those Japanese rock CDs. Just wait for Spotify."

The Takeaway: Small Steps > No Steps

- Overwhelmed? Start with \$10. Then \$20. Any savings are better than no savings. I should have listened to my parents and saved my money rather than spent it on video games and chocolate.
- Think it's too late? I started at 40. You're fine. Despite feeling behind compared to everyone else my age who are now buying condos, houses, fancy cars, and sending their kids to private schools, we can still have a fun and satisfying life.
- Just got paid? Pay future you first. Investing sounds very grown-up and risky, but it is actually the least risky way to get rich. Just put money in something and leave it there for decades. It is bound to grow. Unless you put everything in Tesla 2024. Then you're screwed.

Life isn't always money either. Even with lots of money, people are sad, lonely, confused, and empty. Work hard to enjoy life, not just to get rich.

Because freedom isn't a number—it's breathing room between you and disaster.

Chapter 10: The Power of Balance – How I Stopped Chasing Extremes and Learned That “Good Enough” is Perfect

The Day I Realized I Was Doing Life Wrong

Toronto 2022:

I was sitting at home, staring at two notebooks:

- **Notebook #1:** “MAKE \$10K/MONTH!” (filled with frantic business ideas, multiple income stream ideas, half-finished plans, and coffee stains).
- **Notebook #2:** “Things That Make Me Happy” (three items: “Karaoke,” “Kokoro’s cute face,” “Holiday getaways.”)

That’s when it hit me: **I was so busy chasing “success” that I’d forgotten to enjoy my life.**

Granted, holiday getaways would cost a lot of money and would mean I would need lots of money and time. But two out of the three things that made me happy were either free or easy to attain.

My All-or-Nothing Addiction

For years, I swung between extremes:

- **Workaholic Mode:** 80-hour weeks, surviving on *conbini* sandwiches, ignoring my wife and dog, and just churning out articles, YouTube videos, and trying to figure out how I would get rich.
- **Burnout Mode:** Listening to 50's oldies hits in my bed, thinking I was meant to be poor and miserable, and cursing my luck. *Lonely, I'm Mr . Lonely, I have nobody of my own...*

There was no middle ground—just “GO GO GO” followed by “I give up.”

The Breaking Point (AKA The Karaoke Epiphany)

One night, while walking with Kokoro and listening to early 90s pop rock hits, I had a realization:

Life isn't a high score.

You don't “win” by:

- Making the most money.
- Having the perfect body.
- Pretending you don't need sleep.

You win by not ending up a stressed-out husk of a human.

Making money, having the body, and being hungry for success might look good on an *Instagram Reel*, but in reality, it leaves

you tired and empty. Truly happy people, whether rich or poor, all share a common thing: **they don't try too hard to change the world around them.**

Instead, they enjoy it and breathe in every moment. They know how to balance their lives to create a peaceful equilibrium.

The Balance Manifesto (Or: How to Be Happily Mediocre)

Rule 1: The 80% Solution

- Old me: "I must work out 7 days a week!" (Lasted 2 weeks.)
- New me: "2 times is fine. 1 is better than none."

Rule 2: Money ≠ Happiness (But No Money = Misery)

- Goal: Enough to be comfortable and not feel pressure.
- Not a goal: Lamborghinis and hot chicks in bikinis

Rule 3: Rest is Not a Crime

- Guilty pleasure: Doing nothing on Sundays. Laziness is only when you are not doing anything every day. Having a goal of spending one day a week just relaxing is necessary. Like a cheat day for dieters.
- Justification: My dog naps 18 hours a day. Why can't I?



Thanksgiving with my family!

The Joy of “Good Enough”

Examples from my “Balanced AF” life:

- Career: I’m not a CEO. But I am doing my best. And I need to work hard enough to be debt-free, but I don’t need a private jet.
- Fitness: I’ll never have abs. But I can climb stairs without wheezing. I have Type 2 diabetes, but if I can eat better and exercise, I can control it. And that’s good enough.
- Marriage: We aren’t hot and heavy like my friends Yuki and John, but we also don’t hate each other like my neighbors

upstairs, who are constantly fighting and crying. We love each other. We help and support each other. We enjoy what we have.

What Balance Taught Me

1. Extremes are easy. Balance takes work.
2. “Enough” is a superpower. Willpower takes a lot of...will.
3. The best life is lived in the middle, where joy and practicality hold hands.

A Message to My Younger, Crazier Self

“Hey, the one obsessing over ‘perfect.’

One day, you’ll:

- *Choose sleep over fretting over every single dollar.*
- *Prefer a quiet night in with your wife and dog watching Netflix, to ‘networking.’*
- *Realize that ‘having it all’ is a scam... but enjoying what you have? That’s the real win.*

Now go take a nap. You’ve earned it.”

The Takeaway: Life's a Buffet—Not an All-You-Can-Eat Contest

- Exhausted? Rest. Guilty about resting? Stop it. You can't always be doing something. Sometimes you have to do nothing.
- Comparing yourself to 'successful' people? They're probably miserable. And even if they aren't, they are comparing themselves to even more successful people. The grass is always greener. So enjoy your grass, no matter what color it is. At least you have grass.
- Happy with 'good enough'? Congrats. You're winning. The gurus online or on TV who tell you to push yourself to the limits, never give up, never accept mediocrity, fight till you are number one, those people are trying to sell you a course so they can pay their mortgage.

Chapter 11: Travel Tales – How Filming Japan’s Weirdest Love Hotels Accidentally Changed My Life

The Birth of My YouTube Channel

Tokyo, 2009:

I had just moved back to Toronto from Japan after having lived there for four years. I came back because I thought I should move back to my hometown and get back to reality. Get a job in my field and become an adult.

I got an easy and decent-paying job doing mostly data entry for a television station in Toronto. Eight hours a day, entering numbers. One of the most useless jobs that requires almost no skill. It was so easy that everyone in my department who did it also had headphones and listened to music all day.

I watched YouTube.

And that’s how I found out that there was an entire group of foreigners in Japan (gaijin) who were making videos about their life in Japan. I was hooked and so sad that I had missed this opportunity since I moved back to Canada.

Suddenly, it was my goal to become a J-vlogger (Japanese video blogger). I bought a digital camera, tripod, and filmed in my bathroom (for the acoustics). My wife at the time hated YouTube and hated my new hobby, but left me alone to make videos.

I started doing skit-style videos talking about my life in Japan. I didn't let on that I was no longer in Japan, and slowly I started getting a following.

My channel had:

- 12 subscribers (half of whom were me or my friend on different accounts).
- A bad, low-grade digital camera.
- Zero hope of ever going viral.

But I kept filming anyway.

Why Japan?

I wasn't done with the country yet. Despite marrying a Japanese woman and moving back to Toronto, my heart and soul were still stuck in Japan. And every YouTube video from a J-vlogger I watched made me more and more jealous.

I became obsessed with being one. Not because I thought it'd make me famous, but because it would make me happy.

The Video That Changed Everything (Sort Of)

One day, one of the biggest and most famous J-vloggers in Japan saw my video and reached out. He asked if I wanted to be featured on his channel.

I almost shit my pants.

Then, after being featured on his channel and other J-vloggers taking notice, I started gaining a following.

Within a few months, I had gotten 5,000 subscribers, and some of my videos were even getting views in the thousands. And because I made weird, quirky, strange videos about life in Japan, I was different from the other vloggers.

Strangers commented:

- *“I didn’t know I needed this until now.”*
- *“Dude, your excitement is contagious.”*
- *“If I ever come to Japan, I am buying you a Sapporo beer!”*

My videos focused on the odd parts of Japan, like vending machines selling underwear, bad English signs, eating strange foods like *natto*, love hotels, animal cafes, etc. Some of my videos became kind of viral with views in the hundreds of thousands.

But I was in Canada, so I couldn’t really be part of the YouTube J-vlogger crew. So I did something that most people would never do. I quit my decent job, told my Japanese wife that we were moving back to Japan, and I was going to be a You Tuber and English teacher.

She went along with it because she was not having much luck in Toronto with work, and so we decided to move back to Japan.

During the day, I worked as an ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) in junior high schools. And at night, I would sit in front of the camera and talk about my life in Japan!



The Unexpected Perks of Being a Micro-Influencer

Free Stuff

- Lots of restaurants and tourist attractions invited me to film and gave me free food!
- I got sent some free stuff from different companies in Japan, trying to get foreigners to buy their products.

Weird Opportunities

- Some of my videos were featured on Japanese News, and I got an exclusive interview with a maid at a maid cafe in Akihabara.
- I got to tour the first-ever Japanese Dinosaur Robot Hotel and Samurai/Geisha dinner restaurant.

Community

- Met other weirdo YouTubers. We did collaborations together and made some good bonds.
- Was part of the annual cherry blossom picnic and Japanese YouTuber parties.

The Dark Side of Travel Vlogging (AKA Why I'm Not Famous)

Unfortunately, despite being part of the J-vlogging community, it was quite obvious I would always be one of the fringe people and would never make enough money or have enough followers to make this my full-time job.

I tried very hard to make it my career, but in the end, I was always left disappointed. Some reasons it didn't work out:

- Burnout: Filming almost every day was exhausting, especially with little payoff.
- Comparison Trap: Watching other channels hit 1M subs while I struggled for 10 K. Despite making videos that were similar or even better than other channels, my channel refused to grow.
- The Pressure to Go Viral: I started over-editing, losing the joy, and just trying to follow the trend rather than enjoying myself.

So I made a rule: **Film what I love, even if only 12 people watch.**

Why didn't my channel do better? No one really knows. Some people say it's because I wasn't a white guy. Most Japanophiles

are Caucasian, apparently, and they want to see other Caucasians, so they gravitate towards those channels.

Some say it's because I wasn't a pretty girl. Pretty girls doing their makeup, eating or drinking something, or just talking about life in Japan get a lot more views. Or so people say.

Some say, despite being funny and likable, I was too weird or an acquired taste that only some people could enjoy. I wasn't for everyone.

Others say, my video quality in terms of camera work, lighting, sound, and movement was not up to par, and so people preferred other channels.

Many people also say that my videos were so random that I didn't have a niche, and people only stuck around for a few videos and moved on when I made something they didn't care for.

Honestly, I think it was probably a combination of all of them. I didn't have a specific goal; I was just treating it like a video diary, and didn't really market my videos like the other J-vloggers did.

So my channel withered away. But it didn't die. I refused to let it. Despite going from hundreds of thousands of views to just hundreds of views, I decided to create videos that I enjoyed making and for people who liked watching them.

What YouTube Taught Me

Passion > Perfection

- My best videos were the messy, unscripted ones. Sometimes the videos I thought I shouldn't even upload became my

biggest money makers.

Success Isn't Linear

- Growth came in unpredictable bursts. The YouTube algorithm is a mystery, and it keeps changing. I couldn't really know what they wanted, but sometimes I got lucky and made something that YouTube pushed out to a lot of people.

The Journey is the Point

- Even if my channel died tomorrow, I'd have:
- Explored so many parts of Japan that most foreigners never see or experience.
- Met incredible people, including my current wife, who recognized me in Shibuya dressed as an Oompa Loompa and asked to take a selfie with me.
- Created a library of over a thousand videos of my life since 2009, which includes so many great memories, including ones of my father, who passed away.

A Message to My Younger, Pre-YouTube Self

"Hey, the one thinking 'no one will care.'

One day, you'll:

- *Get recognized multiple times, both in Japan and Canada, for your videos about Japan.*
- *Cry happy tears when a comment says, 'Your videos got me through my lowest moments in life.'*
- *Realize that chasing joy is always worth it—even if the paycheck*

isn't huge."

The Takeaway: Create for the Love of It

- Want to start something? Don't wait for "perfect." Begin now. Planning is great, but sometimes too much planning leads to fear of failure. Sometimes, just taking the leap is the best way to learn.
- Feeling small? If only 50 people watched your video. That's 50 more than zero. Some of those people listened to what you said and liked it. Isn't that something to be proud of?
- Comparing yourself? Stop. You will always find people who have more than you and less than you. Whether you compare yourself upwards and feel sad for not being that successful, or you look downwards and feel superior, both should be avoided. If anything, compare yourself to yourself. What was life like before you made the video? Was it better or worse? If it was worse, then continue making videos. If it was better, then maybe you need a new goal.

The grass is greener on the other side. Until you get there, and then you realize your eyes were just playing tricks. This grass is almost the same as the one you were on before. So, rather than trying to find the perfect grass, why not find the perfect thing to do on that grass?

Chapter 12: Coping With Mental Health – When “Okay” is Enough

The Night Everything Broke

It was 3 AM in our tiny Toronto apartment when I found Mayu sitting on the bathroom floor, knees pulled to her chest, silent tears streaming down her face.

I knelt beside her, heart pounding. “*What’s wrong?*”

“*I don’t know,*” she whispered. “*I just... can’t.*”

That’s when I realized: **Depression doesn’t always have a reason. Sometimes it just is.**

Mayu is Japanese and really good at masking her emotions. Since I met her at the Halloween Party in Shibuya, Tokyo, we had exchanged numbers and texted each other. Her texts were all cute emojis and positive exchanges. Very *kawaii!*

Once we were dating, the first few months were also very light and superficial. She was always smiling, being polite, and trying to be the perfect girl. It was a good six or seven months into our relationship when I realized something was not right.

She was always nice to me, but every once in a while, she would go into a dark tunnel and disappear. Metaphorically.

At first, I thought she was offended by something I said or

did. Her English was very basic, and my Japanese wasn't much better, so maybe I had done something culturally inappropriate.

But I quickly learned that there were demons in her head, and they would come out every so often and make her feel like she was garbage. She had depression, anxiety, and past trauma. She still does. She is on medication, goes to therapy, and is handling it much better than when I first found out about it.

So am I.

The Unspoken Rules of Loving Someone Who's Hurting

Rule 1: You Can't Fix It (And That's Okay)

- Me (2016): "Let's go for a walk! Watch a movie! Eat ice cream! Let's do something so you will feel happy again!"
- Mayu: "...No."
- Me (now): "Do you want me to walk Kokoro so you can take a nap?"
- Mayu: "Thank you."

Rule 2: Small Gestures > Grand Gestures

- Leaving her favorite snack on her desk.
- Telling her that it's okay to be sad and not to fake being nice to me. She can be herself.
- Learning that showing up quietly means more than pep talks.

The more I talk and try to fix her, the more she backs away, and it makes it worse.

I talk a lot, so I needed to learn that silence sometimes is much

more healing.

Rule 3: Your Pain is Valid Too

The hardest lesson? Caregivers need care.

- I once took Maple on a 3-hour walk because I needed time away from her. Her misery was taking over, and it was winning.
- My anxiety would spike when she had bad days, terrified I'd say the wrong thing. I was walking on eggshells, and it was ruining my mood as well.

Even after being with Mayu for seven years, it is hard to deal with her when the ugly **D** (depression, guys, get your head out of the gutter) monster strikes.

For reasons unknown to her and me, she falls into a funk, and nothing but time and isolation brings her back. The more I try to help, the more we both get deeper in the quicksand.

Rather than trying to fix her, I now try to just be there if she needs me, but back off and just fix myself so both of us are not a wreck. It took years, but now it's a bit easier. The panic attacks and arguments are fewer and farther between.

The Day “Okay” Became Enough

After a particularly brutal month, Mayu looked at me and said:

“I think... I'm okay today.”

Not good. Not great. Just okay.

And for the first time, I understood: “Okay” is a victory.

What Mental Health Taught Me

1. Love isn't about curing, it's about being there. I always try to explain the situation and then give a possible resolution. But this is the worst thing for Mayu. She doesn't want a solution. She just wants to let the feelings pass.
2. Progress isn't linear. (Some days you backslide. That's human.)
3. Asking for help isn't weakness, it's how we stay alive. We found that therapy is not good for her, but the medicine works better. Whereas for me, even though I am fine, talking about it helps. So I ended up getting therapy and found it very helpful. Kind of a confirmation that what is happening with Mayu and me is OK.



Our first trip to Kyoto as a couple

A Message to Anyone Who's Struggling

“Hey, the one barely holding on.

I see you.

This isn't your fault.

“Okay” is enough.

Keep going.

P.S.: No matter how sad you are, you should always say yes to ice cream.”

Chapter 13: A Dog's Love – How Dogs Taught Me Unconditional Love (And That Socks Are For Chewing)

The Day My Life Became Covered in Fur

I think I have been a dog lover since I was a baby. My parents, on the other hand, were afraid of animals and hated pets in general. In fact, whenever I was a child and I was being bad, my mom would threaten to throw me to the dogs.

Little did she know that would have been a dream come true.

Since I was a child, I have always had a fascination with animals. I loved most of them. Sorry, insects, as much as I tried, I just couldn't find it in my heart.

From a young age, I wanted a hamster, rabbit, cat, dog, guinea pig, anything fluffy and cute as a pet. Unfortunately, my parents were very strict about the no-pets rule.

Once, when I was 5 or 6 years old, a cat from across the street ran into our house. I was so happy, I was hoping it would stay and never leave. My mom spent an hour with a broom screaming “*shoo shoo*” until it finally ran away.

When I was in elementary school, someone in my neighborhood had kittens and was giving them away. I took one home and hid it in my room for two days. I went to the convenience store and bought cat food and kitty litter, and was loving my cat life. Then I came home from school on the third day, and the cat was gone.

My mom had found it and told my dad. He took it to the Humane Society and gave it up for adoption. It was so tiny and cute, so hopefully a nice family adopted it.

Finally, when I was in high school, I begged my parents and they finally let me get a rabbit. It was in a cage and didn't make much noise, so as long as I fed it, cleaned the cage, and kept it in my room, they allowed it.

That was the best two years with my rabbit. However, I was a dumb kid and went on a camping trip and left the rabbit alone for three days. When I came home, it was dead. My parents didn't check on it, and I had left what I thought was 3 days' worth of food. But the rabbit must have eaten it all at once and died from overeating. I am not sure what exactly happened, but it scarred me for life.

I thought maybe my parents were right and I wasn't meant to have a pet. So I stopped asking for one, even though I desperately wanted it. And as I went into university and then work life, I continued a pet-free life.

That is, until I saw a picture of Maple. He was a Jack Russell puppy, and there was a post about puppies for sale in the local ads. I kept looking at the picture, and finally I decided it was time to get a pet.

Maple was my first dog and he was so damn cute. But as soon as I brought him home, the fear set in. I didn't know how to take care of a puppy. I almost decided to give up, but my wife at the

time was well-trained in how to take care of animals.

Maple grew up and was the best dog in the world. He was with me both in Toronto and Japan, and survived my first wife, a few girlfriends in between, and even my current wife, Mayu.

After almost 16 years with me, he finally left for the rainbow bridge. Or what Mayu likes to call university. He graduated from this life to the university in the sky and was the first true thing I loved and sacrificed anything for.

Two weeks after he passed, another Jack Russell, who was a distant relative, was born to the same people who had given me Maple. I contacted them to let them know Maple had passed, and they gave me the news that their new Jack Russells had given birth. And of the seven puppies, the tiniest one, a girl, looked so similar to Maple.

We weren't thinking about getting another dog for a while since Maple's leaving was so heartbreaking. But after seeing his clone, we decided to adopt her and called her Kokoro.

When I got her, I thought, this is my second chance with Maple. It will be exactly the same, and life will continue as it was when Maple was around. But it turned out she might look similar to Maple, but she was anything but.

Her personality was very different, and she was much more difficult to control. She barked more, chewed on things more, didn't listen to commands, and was much more needy.

But what Maple and Kokoro have taught me by being in my life is priceless.



Kokoro the perfect puppy

Things Maple and Kokoro Taught Me (Through Chaos)

Lesson 1: Love Doesn't Need Words

- Me, crying after a bad day: FML
- Kokoro: [Shoves toy into my lap] [Stares intensely]
- Translation: "Human. Play. Sadness forbidden."

Lesson 2: Live in the Moment (Especially If That Moment Involves Food)

- Past Me: “I should finish all my chores and go to the gym.”
- Maple: [Dives into trash for 3-day-old chicken skin]
- Me: ” That’s true, Maple. Maybe staying home and eating leftovers is better for the environment.”

Lesson 3: Imperfections Make the Story

- Maple’s heart murmur? Makes him cough and sound like my grandpa.
- Kokoro’s obsession with barking at ceiling fans? Endearing (mostly).
- The time she ate my WiFi, and I wasn’t able to work from home because I had no internet, and had to take the day off. Now a legendary family tale.

The Night She Saved Me

After my dad died, I spent days numb, until Kokoro dragged her stinkiest toy onto my lap and demanded tug-of-war at 2 AM.

Exhausted, I laughed for the first time in weeks.

That’s when I realized: Dogs don’t cure grief. **But they remind you that joy still exists.**

What Kokoro Knows That Humans Forget

1. Greet every homecoming like it’s a miracle. When I walk through the door, I hear those four little feet tapping all the way to me, then she jumps up and can’t stop licking me.

- Even if I just stepped out for 30 seconds to throw away the garbage. When I return, it's like I just returned from war.
2. Nap hard. Play harder. Every waking moment is eating, chewing, sniffing, licking, and playing. But curling up in a ball and sleeping is just as important in life.
 3. Love isn't about perfection—it's about showing up, every day, tail wagging. She doesn't know what day it is. Whether it's a work day or a weekend. Whether it's a Tuesday or her birthday. Every day is the same. It's awesome. It's a day to take a walk, pee on a tree, drop a deuce that her owner loves to collect, and bark at the world. No matter what day it is, both Maple and Kokoro woke up tail wagging, thinking it was the best day of their lives. That's how all of us should wake up.

A Message to My Pre-Dog Self

"Hey, the one thinking 'I'm not ready for responsibility.'

One day, this tiny terrorist will:

- *Steal your chicken nuggets when you blink.*
- *Bark at her farts.*
- *Become the heartbeat of your home.*

You'll never be 'ready.' Do it anyway.

P.S.: Hide your socks."

The Takeaway: Let Yourself Be Loved

- Want pure joy? Watch a dog discover snow.
- Need perspective? A dog's love doesn't care about your job title or hairline.
- Feeling lost? Walk a dog. They always find the way home.

I know most of this chapter was about dogs, but animals in general bring happiness into your life. If you are a cat person, your stories may be different, but the feelings the pets give you are the same.

I don't have kids and am not a parent, so I can't speak for how it feels to have kids, but I can say that caring for an animal makes you a better person. Mostly because the animals look to you for love, protection, and food. And by giving it to them, you are selflessly providing a life for them.

There is a famous quote,

A dog is a part of your life, but you are everything to a dog's life.

For that reason, you have to make sure you give your dog or your pet a happy day each and every day of their life, as you are everything to them.

Chapter 14: Taming the Fear of Change – How I Learned to Stop Running From Life’s Curve balls (And Start Catching Them, Badly)

The Moment I Realized I Was Terrified of Everything

Japan, 2019:

I was sitting in a doctor’s office, gripping a pamphlet titled “Living With Heart Murmurs”—Maple’s diagnosis, not mine—when the doctor said:

“He’ll need lifelong care. It won’t be easy.”

And all I could think was: *“What if I fail him?”*

That’s when it hit me: I wasn’t just scared for Maple. **I was afraid of change itself.**

My Greatest Hits of Avoidance

1. Stayed in a dead-end job for 5 years because “What if the next one’s worse?”
2. Put off learning Japanese because who needs it now, we have Google Translate and AI.

3. Almost didn't marry Mayu because "What if I screw it up?"

My motto?

"Better the devil you know than the one you don't." Although I did many things that others wouldn't ever risk doing, I was starting to let fear take over and playing it safe.

How Japan Forced Me to Adapt (Like It or Not)

Changes I Chose:

- Moving abroad.
- Starting a YouTube channel.
- Finding new friends
- Trying to meet girls despite language barriers
- Taking care of Maple
- Taking on Kokoro

Changes That Chose Me:

- My dad's dementia.
- My wife's depression.
- The loss of Maple
- My Type 2 Diabetes

Turns out, life doesn't wait for you to feel ready.

The 3-Step Method for Cowards (AKA How I Learned to Cope)

1. The “5-Minute Rule”

- Terrified of applying for jobs? Spend 5 minutes updating your resume.
- Overwhelmed by Maple’s med schedule? Just measure tonight’s dose.
- Mayu spiraling downward? Just ask her what she wants for dessert tonight.

Trick: Starting is the hard part. After 5 minutes, you’ll usually keep going.

This is especially true for any work or writing. The fear of having to complete something makes you freeze. But if you just take it in small doses, you end up doing much more. I always say I will spend only 5 minutes filming a video, writing a chapter, cleaning my home, etc., and in the end, I am sitting there until my legs are numb and I forgot to eat dinner.

2. Pretend You’re a Tourist

When I was in Japan, being a foreigner (gaijin) was a benefit. I didn’t fear the unknown or taking risks because I didn’t know what I was getting into in the first place. Everything was new, and I knew if it went wrong, someone would help me. They would see the dumb foreigner and guide me.

When I returned to Canada, I realized that mindframe was the best way to move forward, as the fear was gone, and you were much freer to take a chance.

When facing change, I ask:

“What would ‘Gaijin Oz’ do?”

- Real Oz: Panics over phone calls.
- Gaijin Oz: “Wow! A chance to practice Japanese! How cultural!”

3. Make Failure Fun

I started reframing mistakes as “YouTube moments”:

- Got lost in Tokyo Station? “A perfect video topic for those coming to Tokyo!”
- Mispronounced Japanese words and ended up insulting someone? “Story time vlog!”
- I got fired and dumped? “A great way to garner likes and comments on a video!”

The Unexpected Gift of Maple’s Diagnosis

His heart murmur and kidney failure forced me to:

- Learn veterinary terms.
- Advocate for his care.
- Fight for every second to be with him
- Realize I was stronger than I thought.

Turns out, you don’t know what you can handle until life hands you a trembling dog and says, ‘Try.’

What Changes Taught Me

1. Fear shrinks when you step forward. No matter how scared I was, when I took a chance and talked to a girl, picked up the microphone in front of a crowd, gave a lesson to a group

of junior high students, or said goodbye to Maple, I knew I did the best I could.

2. Stability is an illusion. (Embrace the wobble.) There is, unfortunately, no keeping things as they are, part of life. Something always changes. Sometimes it's good. Sometimes it sucks. But whatever happens, you have to keep moving. There is no going back or giving up. By not facing it, you are not avoiding it. Life will continue whether you want it to or not, so you might as well accept it and move with it.
3. The worst storms leave the best stories. We always dread the deaths, sickness, break-ups, arguments, moving away, getting fired, changing jobs, but these are things that open new doors. Going through these situations is what helps you learn and remember.

A Message to My Fearful Younger Self

“Hey, the one lying awake at 3 AM running ‘what-ifs.’

One day, you’ll:

- *Carry a dog through a typhoon to the vet.*
- *Navigate hospitals and senior home trips for your dad.*
- *Realize that courage isn’t the absence of fear, it’s loving something more than you fear failing it.”*

The Takeaway: Let Life Surprise You

- Facing a scary change? Ask: “What’s the smallest step I can take today?” and “What’s the worst case scenario?”
- Regretting a decision? Congrats, you tried something.

That's winning. Remember, like the title of this book, they are *Only Regrets*. Not doing anything is worse than taking action, and it not working out.

- Wish things stayed the same? Remember: The loss of Maple was heartbreaking, but it gave me a new beginning with Kokoro.

Chapter 15: The Nostalgia of Niagara Falls – Why I Keep Returning to the World’s Cheesiest Tourist Trap

The First Time I Saw the Falls

Honestly, I think I have been to Niagara Falls at least a hundred times. I was there as a newborn. I don’t remember it, but I have a picture when my mom and dad, along with our visiting relatives, went to see Canada’s most famous natural wonder.

Every time anyone comes to visit us in Canada, our go-to is always Niagara Falls. So I probably went at least once or twice every year. But the first memory of Niagara Falls I have is when I was in elementary school.

I was six years old, gripping my dad’s hand as we stood on the observation deck. The roar of the water was so loud I could feel it in my chest.

“It’s like the whole world is falling,” I whispered.

My dad laughed. “No, it’s just you,” and pretending that he was going to toss me over. I laughed-cried in fear and exhilaration. I also felt my dad’s grip confirming that I was safe.

I went to Niagara Falls with my parents and sister every year. I also went with my friend Kevin every summer for his birthday. We went to the amusement park called *Maple Leaf Village*, which is one of the only things from the 90s that is not still there.

I went to Niagara Falls with relatives, friends, lovers, and colleagues. I saw the falls, ate at the restaurants on Clifton Hill, checked out most of the remaining wax museums and haunted houses, did some gambling at the casinos, and even went to see a few live concerts.

And throughout all those years that I have been going, the people might change, but the place still seems almost the same. That's the appeal.

Niagara: The Tacky, Wonderful Time Capsule

Every few times a year, I return to this place where:

- The attractions haven't changed since 1987. (Looking at you, Dinosaur Mini Golf.)
- The smell of fudge and popcorn is permanent.
- Every third shop sells the same snow globes, magnets, and key chains.

And yet—I love it.

My Niagara Timeline

Age 6:

- Memory: Dad carrying me on his shoulders near the railing.
- Souvenir: An inflatable killer whale advertising Marineland

(Yikes.)

Age 12:

- Memory: Trip for Kevin's birthday. Had a free day pass for the amusement park and did the spinning rainbow so many times I ended up puking at the Pizza Hut restaurant.
- Souvenir: A photo of Kevin and me giving out gang signs on the roller coaster picture.

Age 18:

- Memory: Going with my girlfriend Jessica, and us arguing along the entire Falls front. But then we went through the Frankenstein museum and ate at Burger King until we made up.
- Souvenir: A long, see-through pen with glitter inside.

Age 27:

- Memory: Brought my friend Yoko, her daughter, and her mother here on their first Canada trip. She cried at the Skylon Tower because it was so beautiful.
- Souvenir: A key chain of a moose. Very Canadian.

Age 42:

Memory: Mayu and I took Maple for his birthday, and he was so excited he didn't stop to pee or drink water once while we were walking the Falls route.

Souvenir: A Niagara Falls T-shirt that I use for the gym now.

Age 44:

Memory: Taking Kokoro for her first birthday to the Falls, so we can continue the tradition we started with Maple.

Souvenir: An old-fashioned picture where Mayu, Kokoro, and I dressed up in 1800s outfits and had our portrait taken.



Quite the freak show

Why We Return to Places That Shouldn't Matter

The Layers of Memory

Now, when I stand at the railing, I see:

- Child-me in 90s attire with my parents and sister
- Teen-me trying to impress girls
- Present-me holding my wife's hand and Kokoro in our arms

The Comfort of Corny Consistency

In a world where everything changes, there's peace in knowing:

- The Skylon Tower will always be overpriced
- The wax museum will always have a creepy Michael Jackson
- The falls will keep falling

The Ghosts We Chase

- I don't just see water—I see my dad's smile, my mom's hair flying in the wind, my sister's teenage eye-rolls, and Maple happily walking and sniffing the water vapor.

What Niagara Taught Me

1. Nostalgia isn't about places—it's about the people we were there with. Much like the rest of society, we naturally gravitate towards things that meant a lot to us because we were with the people we loved.
2. Tourist traps matter because we decide they do. Some of the fondest memories that people have are family vacations.

And most families tend to celebrate time together by visiting tourist attractions like Disneyland, zoos, museums, amusement parks, and natural wonders like Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon. These places may be overpriced and tacky, but people keep coming back because it's the feeling we get being there with our families and friends.

3. Some things should stay cheesy. The charm of Niagara Falls is that it still has some of the iconic things that made it so popular in the 80s. The tacky rides, sugar-fueled treats, and Niagara Falls souvenirs that are probably the same prices as they were 20 years ago.

A Message to My Younger Self

“Hey, the one thinking ‘I’ll never come back here.’

One day, you’ll:

- *Search for the spot where Maple took a huge dump in front of a wax statue.*
- *Laugh at how UN-scary the haunted house looks through adult eyes*
- *Realize returning isn’t about the place—it’s about honoring the versions of you that existed there.”*

The Takeaway: Keep Visiting Your Personal Landmarks

- Have a ‘Niagara’ in your life? Go back. Take someone new. Time moves forward, and things change all the time. But there are still some things that can bring old memories back to life. Relive them every once in a while to remember the good people and places you saw along the way.

- Think it's silly to miss a place? All love is silly. That's why it matters. It's the small, silly things that stick in our minds decades after they are gone. So any memory or connection to them is important to cherish.
- Want to time travel? Stand where you stood before. Watch the memories rush in. It's so interesting to know that the same water that was falling when I was a baby has fallen and re-fallen over and over again all these years. The same water Kokoro sees falling was the same water Maple saw, was the same water my dad saw, was the same water I saw.

That makes me happy.

Chapter 16: Career Crossroads – How I Went From “Failed Everything” to “Guy Who Continues To Succeed”

The Five-Year Plans That Last Roughly Five Minutes

Me at 5: “I’m going to drive a car.”

Me at 10: “I’m going to be like Michael Jackson.”

Me at 22: “By 27, I’ll be a famous musician or actor. No backup plan needed.”

Me at 27: “Sir, your total for this instant ramen is ¥120.”

Me at 35: “I have to have a car, house, and kids by 40.”

Me at 40: “I need to have my permanent career that I will do until I retire.”

Me at 44: “I don’t have a permanent career, house, kids, or future plan. At Least I am alive, Mayu loves me, Kokoro loves

me, and I am not homeless and broke.”

The Humbling Journey of Lowered Expectations

Phase 1: The Dreamer

- Goal: Rockstar/actor
- Reality: Played exactly one paid gig (bar tips: \$50)
- Turning Point: Realizing I was the only balding brown guy in his 30s auditioning for lead singer spots for university bands.

Phase 2: The Drifter

- English teacher
- Part-time Japanese restaurant server
- Failed YouTuber (“Let’s review... this week’s... um... train passes?”)

Phase 3: The Accidental Professional

- Customer service agent by day
- True crime writer by night
- Somehow paying rent...barely

Lessons From the Career Wilderness

1. Passion Doesn’t Pay (At First or possibly Ever)

- My music dreams → paid for curry from *CoCo Ichibanya*

Restaurant

- My silly YouTube hobby → actually paid for a monthly revolving sushi meal
- My true crime writing gets me a coffee every month
- My first novel made me enough money to buy dinner at *The Keg*

2. “Wasted” Skills Aren’t Wasted

- Teaching English helped me get over shyness and stage fright, and allowed me to get up on stage and perform as well as make videos.
- Music helped me make friends and get connections so I could travel and see more of Japan.
- Customer Service jobs gave me the thick skin to read the YouTube comments on my videos and deal with drunk racist salary men on the commute home.

3. Side Hustles Save Souls

- Writing freelance true crime and travel articles helped me get better at writing and stay focused.
- Editing videos and making thumbnails helped me provide creative skills for my office, where I am involved in the internal newsletter and events committees.

The Unsexy Truth About “Making It”

Real career growth looks like:

- Taking the boring job that pays for your dreams. The job I have now is tedious and annoying, but it is steady, has good benefits, and gives me time to do things like write this book and make videos.
- Embracing “good enough” while reaching for better. Life is a staircase, and in order to get to the next step, you need to keep moving forward and taking it one step at a time. It’s important to take time with each step and make sure you have a firm foundation before moving up.
- Learning that most success stories are just “didn’t quit” stories. Yes, some people start something and get popular or famous right away. Overnight successes are rare, though. Most people struggle and push despite failures before finally seeing any success. These are the majority.

What My Chaotic Career Path Taught Me

1. There’s no such thing as “off track” – just scenic routes. Never in my wildest imagination did I think I would spend over a decade teaching English in Japan. Especially since I didn’t know anything about Japan, and I hardly even read a book in high school. But somehow I ended up where I am. Maybe I was meant to be here anyway, but I had an amazing adventure along the way.
2. Skills compound in weird ways. Who knew that my love for karaoke would land me on a TV show in Japan, where I wandered the streets singing and finding interesting things

about Japan. It was only a season, but it was thanks to my YouTube videos of me singing karaoke that got me the job.

3. The best careers are often the ones we didn't know to dream of. I am still looking for a career, but now I know it's not limited to doctor, lawyer, pilot, rockstar, and fireman. The older you get, the more jobs you have, the more you realize that most people are doing things they never even heard of when they were job searching. Rather than find a career, a career often finds you.

A Message to My Younger Self

“Hey,

You won't play the Fuji Rock Festival. But you'll make a Japanese salary man cry at your amazing karaoke.

You won't win an Oscar. But your dog thinks you're the best actor when you fake-throw her toy.

That 'failure' resume? It's actually the adventure novel you'll one day be proud of. Hopefully, you finish it and are brave enough to share it with the world.

The Takeaway: All Roads Lead Somewhere

- Hating your day job? It might be funding your future
- Feeling 'behind'? There's no schedule for unique lives
- Wish your path were clearer? So does everyone – the magic is in the detours

Chapter 17: Friendship Across Divides – How My Trump-Loving Best Friend and I Stay Close in the Age of Unfollows

November 9, 2016 – 3:17 AM

Kevin: “HAHA! TOLD YOU HE’D WIN!”

Me: “I’m literally in Japan crying into my ramen.”

Kevin: “Weak. Pass the soy sauce.”

The Unlikely Brotherhood

Our Friendship By the Numbers:

- **Years Known Each Other:** 39
- **Political Arguments:** 107
- **Near-Friendship-Ending Fights:** 0
- **Baseball Games and movies attended to Avoid Talking Politics and Religion:** 76

How We Make It Work (Mostly)

Rule 1: The “No Social Media” Treaty

- Because of our differences in religion and politics, we don’t share any online spaces. Kevin never tells me which books, blogs, influencers, online news media, and podcasts he is consuming. I don’t know which conservative right-wing Facebook posts he likes, and he has no clue about mine either.
- Instead, we send memes directly (50% comedy, 30% dating, 20% “remember this?” nostalgia)

Rule 2: The “Third Thing” Principle

When tensions rise, we:

1. Go eat at a Japanese restaurant or an izakaya.
2. Argue about the Blue Jays instead of Biden
3. Bond over hating the same foods. How can anyone stand natto?

Rule 3: Pre-Approved Roasting Topics

Safe Zones:

- My baldness and shortness
- My divorce
- His lack of relationships
- His gray hairs

No-Fly Zones:

- January 6th
- Becoming the 51st State
- Whether Die Hard is a Christmas movie (it is)

How We Continue to Stay Close:

1. We don't force ourselves to stay in touch. One of us will reach out with a "Hey, what's up?"
2. I share photos of my adventures in Toronto with Kokoro and Mayu. Sometimes it's selfies from a Bee Gees Cover Band concert or walking with Kokoro. Other times, he will send a pic of a cool Greek restaurant he tried with his coworkers.
3. Despite our differences, we listen to what the other has to say.
4. We realize that true friends are rare, and to keep that friendship alive, you need to put in the effort.
5. We both have YouTube channels and are trying to find some creative online outlet that will also be financially successful.
6. His mother passed away from Alzheimer's, and my father passed away from dementia, so we both know the struggles of dealing with the loss of a parent.
7. Despite disagreeing with most of Kevin's political beliefs, I see where he is coming from and know he is a good person.



Kevin with Kokoro and her sister Tanuki

What Our Friendship Taught Me

1. **You Can Love Someone You Don't Understand**

- I'll never get a MAGA hat
- He'll never get my "socialist Bernie Sanders fantasies."
- **But we both get why the other believes it**

1. Some Bonds Are Bigger Than Politics

- He drove me to the worst part of Toronto (Jane/Finch) when I first picked up Maple.
- I called him first when I decided to get a divorce.
- He confided in me about his mother's health and his family issues

1. Disagreement ≠ Disrespect

- We've learned to say, *"I think you're wrong, but I know why you think that."*
- (Then immediately change the subject to movies)

A Message to My Younger Self

*"Hey kid – that friend you're about to meet in a Cub Scouts meeting?
One day you'll:*

- *Nearly fistfight over immigration*
- *Travel around Japan and Korea, twice*
- *Realize friendship isn't about agreeing, it's about showing up anyway*

P.S.: Buy more Uniqlo shirts. Worth every penny."

The Takeaway: Build Bridges, Not Echo Chambers

- Got a "Kevin" in your life? Fight for them.
- Tempted to unfriend everyone who disagrees? Try unfollowing instead.

- Think common ground is gone? Start with:
- Shared memories
- Mutual respect
- A really good amusement park

Chapter 18: Designing My Future – How I Traded Rockstar Dreams for Online Dreams

The Moment I Realized My Dreams Had Changed

Toronto, 2022 – 2 AM

I was hunched over my laptop, editing yet another YouTube video about my dog Maple, when my wife sleepily mumbled:

“You’re happier doing this than you ever are at your job.”

I wanted to argue. But my gut knew she was right. Even though my YouTube channel had lost subscribers and views, making videos about life in Toronto with Mayu and Maple was much more fun than chasing the impossible J-vlogger dream.

The Death (And Rebirth) of a Dream

Original Dream:

- Stadium tours
- Screaming fans

- Leather pants (questionable)
- YouTube subscriber awards
- Speaking at conventions
- Being a brand celebrity

Reality:

- 23,000 YouTube subscribers, of which only 1% watch my videos
- A dog who barks when I sing
- The realization that I need to be in bed by 9 pm, so rockstar after-parties would be a no-go.
- A job where I take phone calls all day and hope I won't get screamed at
- A short vacation once a year somewhere in the Caribbean
- Taking my mom to do errands and shopping every Saturday morning

The Five Stages of Dream Grief

1. Denial: "I just need 1 super viral hit to make it!"
2. Anger: "The system is rigged against brown rockers!"
3. Bargaining: "Maybe if I can cosplay my dog in videos..."
4. Depression: "I'll be more financially successful if I just beg on the streets rather than from YouTube revenue."
5. Acceptance: "I'll never be famous or world-renowned at anything. But at least my wife and dog will enjoy my singing. And a couple of hundred people will like my videos."

The Unexpected Perks of Plan B

1. Freedom to Suck

No more pretending to be “rockstar material.”

To be a rockstar, you have to keep showing up, performing, playing the part of a cool, mysterious, talented demi-God. You have to tour around to different cities, sign autographs, practice with the band, do media interviews, and play concerts.

The life of a rockstar is spent riding a tour bus, doing sound checks, writing music, playing music, and putting on a show. It's a tough and tiring schedule that can get quite intense and old.

But when you're NOT a rock star, you can just perform. No one knows you before you go on stage, and if you suck, no one gets angry. They just thank God you're done and hope the next act is better. The pressure is off to make a hit. You can just sing for the hell of it. And you won't get sued for anything either.

Just me, my bad jokes, and people who genuinely enjoy them.

This is the same with all your other side hustles or hobbies. If you aren't a famous YouTuber or influencer, you don't have to answer to fans or advertisers. You are free to make any video you want, and whether you get 1 view or 1 million views, no one is demanding those views.

Life doesn't depend on how many thumbs up and comments you get. Since your life and career are not dependent on your channel growing, you can skip a week if you don't feel like it or have plans with the family. Once again, no pressure to please others.

2. Time for What Matters

Walks with Kokoro. When you aren't trying to be famous or rich, you make time for the simple things in life like walking your dog and watching her enjoy every second of it sniffing, peeing, pooping, and barking at passers by.

Long lunches with Mayu. The weekends when you don't have to work, you can relax and have a late lunch. There is no rush to finish your food and get back to your desk. Work and side hustles can be pushed or delayed when you are enjoying a nice bowl of Korean spicy ramen.

Not missing life while chasing “someday.” This is the biggest regret you may have in the future. Rather than regret not trying harder to get a recording contract or spending more time on marketing yourself, you might regret enjoying the present.

People think too much about the past and the future; they often forget the only time that really matters: the present.

Ignoring your family and friends, postponing time to relax or enjoy hobbies, just so you can update your *Instagram* or upload your latest review video, may be sacrificing the precious moments of the present.

3. The Joy of Creating Without Pressure

My side hustles, like YouTube, true crime writing, and social media marketing, all became “successful” when I changed what success meant. It didn't mean comparing myself to *Mr. Beast* and being sad, or watching concerts on YouTube and wishing it were me up on stage. Success became finishing tasks that I had planned to do, and having a library of memories that would make me smile in the future.

What Redefined Success Looks Like

- **Money:** Enough for comfort, not excess, and realistically knowing my side hustles were just that. On the side. Not my main focus in life.
- **Time:** More for family than hustle. After work, walking Kokoro, eating dinner with Mayu, and enjoying evenings with both of them, I decided I only needed between 30 minutes to an hour to spend on side hustles.
- **Legacy:** Making people around me smile and be happy, rather than strangers on YouTube. People commenting and liking my video about my trip to Niagara Falls with my wife and dog comes second to my wife and dog having a good time.

What Redesigning My Life Taught Me

Dreams Should Grow With You

My 15-year-old self wasn't wrong – just incomplete. When you are young, you want to go to space and meet aliens. Then you get older and your dreams revolve around marrying the cheerleader and becoming the boss of your bully.

Later on, dreams become relaxing by the beach with a cold cocktail and listening to the waves. It's not giving up or selling out. It's learning that there are more important things than fame and riches. It's health, a group of people around you who love you, and enjoying the adventures that life throws at you.

Success Isn't One-Size-Fits-All

My version has:

- More dog cuddles
- Fewer sleepless nights
- Deciding which flavor of coffee to order from Starbucks

A Message to My Younger Self

“Hey,

You won’t be a millionaire.

But you’ll make people happy and laugh.

You won’t grace magazine covers.

*But your wife will think you’re handsome despite editing videos
in your underwear.*

The dream isn’t dying – it’s growing up.

And you’re going to love where it takes you.”

The Takeaway: It’s Not Downselling – It’s Upgrading

- Grieving an old dream? Thank it for getting you this far. Dream big but enjoy whatever comes your way, big or small.
- Feeling “behind”? There’s no expiration on reinvention. You are never too old to have a new dream. Find something that makes you happy and make the dream to be able to continue to enjoy what you are doing.
- Wondering if this is enough? If it fills your soul and your stomach, then it is enough.

Chapter 19: Embracing Vulnerability – How Sharing My Failures Became My Greatest Strength

The Video That Almost Didn't Get Posted

Toronto – 2025

I stared at the YouTube upload screen, cursor hovering over “Publish.”

The title: **“My Next Life Adventure: Giving up and starting new!”**

For months, I'd only shown exciting reels—the restaurant videos, the Toronto life, the wins. I didn't do much in my new life in Toronto that was publish-worthy. I didn't travel much, and was busy taking care of my mom and family. Work was taking over most of my days, and the remainder of the time, I was too tired to go out somewhere or film something exciting.

So my videos were rare instances when I had something to share with my followers like restaurants, vacations, birthdays, etc.

But this video? This was raw:

- Burnout
- Self-doubt
- The shame of being on YouTube for 16 years and still not having made it.

I clicked “Publish” and immediately wanted to vomit.

The Unexpected Aftermath

Comments I Expected:

- “Lame.”
- “Quit whining.”
- “This is why you’ll never make it.”

Comments I Got:

- “Dude, same.”
- “Thank you for saying this.”
- “I needed this today.”

My most “pathetic” video became my most motivational

Why We’re Starved for Realness

1. Everyone’s Faking It

- **Social media is a highlight reel.** If you are not in a bikini or showing off your six-pack abs while drinking champagne on the edge of a yacht, then you are not winning.
- **We compare our bloopers to others’ best takes.** Almost everyone only uploads the successful side of their life. Very

rarely do people post a picture of their cubicle at work. I've never posted a video about my trip to the bathroom after having really spicy tacos. Although if I did, it would probably get more views than I get now.

2. Failure Connects Us

- **Perfection is intimidating**, and even though most people on social media are touting how awesome they are, it's the real videos of people struggling, making mistakes, or admitting they aren't perfect that tend to resonate with us.
- **Messiness is relatable**. We want to know that we are not alone. Everyone around us, no matter how perfect their life seems, has problems and issues in their lives. Even celebrities and politicians who post about their failures and mistakes give us a glimpse of their humanness.

3. There's Power in "Me Too"

I'm not talking about #metoo. There was power in that, too. But I mean "me too" in the sense that others feel the same as I do.

A comment that changed everything:

"Watching you struggle made me feel less alone in mine."

That's how I knew I was successful.

People understood my message and connected with it. I let people know that despite my time on YouTube, traveling and living in Japan, marrying a cute Japanese woman, and having an awesome dog, I was still clueless and confused.

I felt incomplete and like something was missing. I wasn't happy in my current state, and I was trying to take steps to get myself to a place where I enjoyed life more.

The Lies Vulnerability Smashes

Lie #1: “They’ll Think Less of You”

- Truth: They’ll trust you more. The more genuine you are with people, the more they trust you and treat you with respect.

Lie #2: “Weakness Repels People”

- Truth: Authenticity attracts your tribe. By being vulnerable, most people support you and take your side.

Lie #3: “You’re the Only One Struggling”

- Truth: Everyone’s fighting a battle you can’t see. Your problems resonate with people because they have problems too. It’s not having a perfect life that binds us all.



My father's last Father's Day outing

A Message to My Younger Self

*“Hey, the one editing out every stumble, hiding every doubt:
One day, you’ll film yourself sad and confused at a laundromat.
That video will help someone feel seen.
Your greatest strength won’t be perfection – it’ll be your willing-
ness to say:
‘This is hard. I’m trying. Me too.’
P.S.: Keep the bloopers reels. They’re your best work.”*

The Takeaway: Dare to Be Human

- Hiding your struggles? You're robbing others of feeling less alone. Highlighting your failures will help you grow and others learn from your mistakes.
- Waiting to be "perfect" to share? That day will never come. Just take the opportunity you have to share yourself with the world. Some never get that chance.
- Scared to be real? Start small: Just talk about your day, good or bad. The words will slowly come.

Chapter 20: Living Fully – Why Karaoke Screams, Dog Barks, and Imperfect Moments Add Up to a Life Well Lived

The Night That Summed It All Up

Toronto, October 30, 2024, 1:42 am

I stood in a hospital room as the doctor pulled the life support from my dad. I held one hand, and my sister held the other. My mother, cousins, aunts, uncles, and other relatives were all gathered in the room, all watching my dad slip away.

In that sad moment, I felt relieved and impressed.

Despite the sadness and knowing that my dad would never talk to me again, I was happy that he didn't have to suffer anymore and that he had made a huge impression on so many people.

What “Living Fully” Actually Looks Like

It's Not:

- Constant excitement
- Picture-perfect moments

- Checking off some “ultimate life” checklist
- Having a Tesla and a million-dollar home

It Is:

- Laughing when your dog whistles while he is sleeping
- Watching your dad tell bad dad jokes to the waitress who has no choice but to fake laugh
- Realizing that the measure of a good life is how many people have fond memories of you when you were alive.

My Life’s Unexpected Highlights

The “Big” Moments That Weren’t

- My viral video? A 5-minute video of a pretty pink Love Hotel
- My greatest performance? Singing *Stand by Me* to a huge crowd of seniors.
- The time I had to take care of the actor *Christian Slater* for a weekend when I was a concierge, and he asked me to bring him matches and slide them under the bathroom door because he was doing number two.

The Disasters That Became Legends

- The time I accidentally shat myself on my way to a date because of spicy Thai food and had to buy track pants from a 7-11 and throw away my underwear.
- When Mayu and I went to Sapporo on New Year’s and everything closed by 8 pm. We had no choice but to eat at a small ramen shop; the only thing open for miles.

ONLY REGRETS

- Every single failed “career move” that led me here

The Ordinary Magic

- Morning walks where Kokoro chases the same squirrel every day
- Inside jokes with my wife that make zero sense to anyone else
- The way Niagara Falls still smells exactly like childhood



Niagara Falls for Maple's 15th Birthday

A Final Message to You (Yes, You)

“Hey reader,

If you take one thing from this mess of a memoir, let it be this:

Your life doesn't need to impress anyone to matter.

The 'unremarkable' moments?

The detours?

The dreams that changed shape?

That's the good stuff.

Now go do something imperfectly.

Sing off-key.

Love recklessly.

Adopt a weird dog.

Let your life be gloriously, messily yours.

And if you think that you might end up regretting something,

Remember: they are **only regrets.**

Do you see what I did there? I ended the last chapter with the title of my book.

Epilogue: Baby Steps to Balance – Kokoro's Version

(As dictated by Kokoro, translated loosely by Oz)

A Dog's Guide to Human Happiness

1. Wake Up Excited

Every morning is the BEST morning, especially if there's food.
Or a sock.

2. Bark at Your Problems

Mailman? Bark.

Vacuum? Bark.

Existential dread? Bark louder.

Works every time.

3. Nap Hard, Love Harder

Sleep 18 hours, then wiggle uncontrollably when your human comes home.

Pro tip: If they're sad, shove a toy in their face.

4. Embrace Your Flaws

Heart murmur? Who cares? Still the cutest.

Bonus: Gets you extra treats.

5. Chew What You Love

Shoes, passports, Wifi cords, carpets, chair legs, important documents, if it's valuable, it's edible.

6. Sniff Everything

The world is full of fascinating smells; trash cans, other dogs' butts, that suspicious stain on the sidewalk. Live boldly.

7. Demand Attention

If your human is ignoring you, paw their face, whine dramatically, or vomit strategically. Works 100% of the time.

8. Protect Your Pack

Bark at:

- Suspicious leaves
- flags and signs
- squirrels
- the wind
- babies and seniors
- the homeless
- garden gnomes
- The neighbor's cat
- Silence (it's clearly plotting something)

9. Celebrate Tiny Wins

Found a crumb? Victory.

Caught your tail? Legendary.

Peed outside? Nobel Prize material.

10. Love Unconditionally (But Also Conditionally for Treats)

Humans are weird, messy creatures. Love them anyway, especially if they share their chicken.

My (Oz) Top 7 Takeaways (Condensed for Your Convenience)

1. **“Baby Steps” Beat No Steps.** Progress isn’t about speed; it’s about not stopping.
2. **Balance > Burnout.** Work to live, don’t live to work. Nap like Kokoro.
3. **Vulnerability is Strength.** Your struggles connect you to others more than your successes ever will.
4. **Embrace the Detours.** The “wrong” path often leads to the right place.
5. **Joy Hides in Plain Sight.** It’s in karaoke fails, dog snuggles, and overpriced Niagara Falls snow globes.
6. **Let Go of “Perfect”.** Done is better than perfect. Burnt omelets still taste fine.
7. **Love Loudly.** Tell people you love them. Bark at them if necessary.

The Very Last Word (From Both of Us)

Kokoro: “Woof. Treats now.”

Oz: “Thanks for reading. Now go live your weird, wonderful life, one baby step at a time.”

P.S. from Kokoro: “If you liked this book, send treats. Prefer-

ably chicken.”

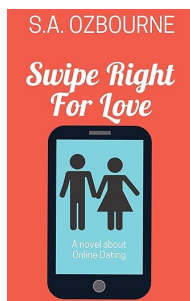


About the Author

The picture above is when I still had hair! And that is my first dog, Maple! If you want to see what I look like now, check out my [YouTube channel](#). Also, to see Kokoro, Maple's clone, she also makes appearances there or on my [Instagram](#).

Finally, if you want to follow my journey in terms of side hustles and trying to become a full-time online creator, check out my website, ghostyourjob.com.

Also by S.A. Ozbourne



Swipe Right For Love: A novel about online dating

The hilarious first novel by popular social media and online creator S.A. Ozbourne brings love and romance into the technological reality of dating apps. A funny, cute and sometimes heart-wrenching look at life in the era of smartphones.

