Unquenchable Bucket

by David Flynn

The Bucket was a legend to me even before I met him. For months every man, it seemed, in Osaka State, Japan, mentioned him to me.

"He can drink sake all night and not pass out," a school official said the first week I arrived in August. "He is called The Bucket because that's how much he can drink. You will lose to him."

"But I don't like to get drunk," I insisted.

"He will make you fall on the floor," the man laughed. "Big showdown, like cowboys."

Most Japanese males I knew got drunk every night. As an Assistant English Teacher on a one-year contract, I had to drink with them or I would be considered unfriendly. My size, over six feet, and sex automatically meant I was a big drinker to the males. In some ways, I felt like an image of the American and not an individual.

The Bucket was Head of Teachers at Toyo Chugaku, the junior high school in Tondabaya City that was to be my October assignment. I walked into the teachers room my first morning, and was placed at a long table at the front where the officials sat. The Head of English, Matsuura, introduced me to the rows of instructors standing stiffly by their desks before me, and with one mass bow we made contact. I gave the usual speech about being there to help them, and hoping that we became friends. It was after this ritual that I met the big shots.

"David-sensei (teacher), this is kyoto-sensei (principal)," Matsuura introduced me. The principal was the usual senior citizen, who had reached the proper age. We bowed deeply.

"And this is koucha-sensei (vice-principal)," a chain-smoking alcoholic on track to full principal-hood at the right age. We bowed moderately.

"And this is Head of Teachers, Morioka-san." The Bucket!

At first glance the man didn't seem heroic. Morioka was shorter than average and considerably plumper. His black hair was combed straight back, kept in place by grease. The Bucket, in his 50s, slapped me on the back and welcomed me in a loud voice. His crudeness was unusual in Japan.

"Pleased to meet you," I said.

Morioka shouted in Japanese, and the roomful of teachers laughed. Matsuura translated, "Mr. Morioka hears that David-sensei drinks a lot of beer and sake. Soon, maybe he and Mr. David can go drinking together."

Oh dear. An invitation, but also a formal challenge. I belittled my own drinking, truthfully, but the men only thought I was being Japanese, downplaying my

enormous achievements. The Japanese lived in dreams.

For example, on my application to the Japan Exchange and Teaching program I had listed baseball as one of my interests. I followed the game only on television and magazines. Still, at my first welcoming banquet given by the school board in August, the official who introduced me told the audience I was a great American baseball player, who also had coached championship baseball teams. How he had blown my exploits into mythical proportions I had no idea. They were, of course, keenly disappointed when I finally took bat in hand against my first junior high boys softball team. How embarrassing to be struck out by an eighth grader. The Japanese lived in dreams.

Twice my first week at Toyo I went drinking with teachers after work, but neither time did The Bucket appear, and though my fellow workers got bombed in one hour, I managed to sip just a bit of sake, wine made from rice. About halfway through my month's stay, however, Matsuura asked me to once again join the teachers at a local Tondabaya City restaurant. I thought little of it.

The shop was typical, which meant that the outside wall was black at the bottom, glass shoji panels at the top. A cloth banner welcoming the customer covered the top half of the door, so that I had to duck through it. Inside was charmless. A counter crowded with local salarymen hunched over bowls of noodles, ironically called soba, slurping at high volume, a porcelain bottle of sake by their hands. On each side of the door was a low table on tatami. At one Matsuura and I joined Mr. Sasaki, the teacher for handicapped students, Mr. Doi, the science teacher, and, to my discomfort, Mr. Morioka.

The Bucket sat on the tatami diagonally across from where I had to cross my legs, a feat my knees had not adapted to even yet. Doi, a tall, dour man, was single and looking for a wife. We had hardly exchanged a word. Sasaki was divorced, in his thirties, and a dandy, with a mannered streak of gray in his black hair. He even had a pinky nail that was extremely long and sharpened to a point. At the time, a pinky nail like a knife was considered macho, a yakuza affectation for shoveling cocaine.. His job was teaching handicapped students, but Toyo only had one, a boy who appeared normal but who unpredictably went into violent fits. Broken bones were an occupational hazard with Sasaki-sensei.

Noodles arrived, and sashimi. Morioka raised the first small cup of steaming sake, and we all yelled "Kampai!" I meant to sip, but immediately Sasaki beside me egged me into downing mine in one gulp, like Morioka.

My cup was no sooner empty than Sasaki filled it again. Doi performed the same duty for Morioka, while Matsuura, by my right elbow, handled orders. An involuntary contest was on. The Bucket downed yet another cup in a gulp, and I knew I could not follow his lead. I sipped, and though Sasaki-sensei pressured me on, lifting the bottle in a gesture, I concentrated on slurping my bowl of noodles. The other men did not drink, serving in effect as officials. Clearly, a plan had been established beforehand.

Five cups, ten cups, Morioka was indeed a wonder. The Toyo Head of Teachers remained the same loud, crude man he was at school. He ate as much as he drank, talking volubly in Japanese to the others. Twice as much sake was going into his stomach as mine, which was fine with me. Sake hot went straight to the brain.

We sat on that restaurant tatami for hours. At some point, I became aware the

stools along the counter and the other tables were empty. The owner watched from the distance. My head felt like a balloon, and I knew that later I would be riproaring drunk. For now, I tried to maintain a dignified straight back, difficult without a chair. Matsuura and Sasaki, however, sensed a difference. Both began to ask, "Is Mr. David all right?"

"Of course, more sake please," I said. I was getting into this contest thing. One American trait I had let lapse was intense competitiveness, but, relaxed by the alcohol, I wanted to win badly. America versus Japan. Sasaki poured me another cup.

Left to my own thoughts, unable to communicate much in English, I only gradually became aware that a change had taken place in The Bucket. The noise of his bellowing had stopped, and the restaurant was a quiet murmur of the other teachers. Morioka concentrated on downing the milky liquid into a mouth that rotated. His expression was glazed, and Doi, though filling his sake cup, let him pace himself. The Bucket continued to down his cups in one flick of the wrist, however, and by sipping I was still able to almost think clearly.

Time had no meaning after five to ten bottles of sake--I hadn't counted. The Bucket had drunk perhaps twice that. Somewhere in the night the unthinkable happened.

An embarrassed hush came over the three 'officials.' When I risked turning my head, and the dizziness that resulted, The Bucket was sitting back, his head resting on his chin. The important things were: Morioka's eyes were closed, and his breath was a loud snore. The Bucket had passed out!

"Are you all right, Mr. David?" Once again the measure was taken, this time by Matsuura. I should mention that in one version, with a long 'u,' Flynn in Japanese, Furin, meant small temple bell, but in another, with a short 'u,' it meant something like fornication. To be safe with the junior high school students, who would pounce on such with joy, at Toyo I was known as Mr. David.

"Oh yes," I said. My voice at least sounded normal, though it seemed to come from other lips speaking at a distance.

The owner came, laughing and smiling, and Matsuura settled up the bill. Doi gently woke his defeated colleague. Morioka-sensei jerked to consciousness. Instantly, he seemed sober, though his greasy face was still glazed. Doi stood, then helped him to his feet. He swung back and forth like a mighty oak, and on his face was the sorrow of defeat. Sasaki rose and put his arms around my chest to lift me. I waved him off.

"That won't be necessary," I said. The chilly effect I had intended was somewhat diminished by the English being slurred to incomprehension. I did, however, stand up by myself.

The Bucket was guided from the restaurant by his handler, and into a taxi waiting by the door. I stumbled on my own power, my handler shadowing me in case I fell. At the door, I bowed generously at the owner, and gave him a fine "Arigato gozaimasu." To me it sounded fine, but the man broke into a big grin.

Lots of bowing good-bys at the curb, then Matsuura-san drove to my apartment in his mini-van. We spoke only a little, and I had to put out a great effort to keep

my head from flopping around. Dignity, and finishing off the triumph in style were important. At my public housing building on Nankadai, he insisted on walking me to the door.

"See you tomorrow," Matsuura said flatly, for tomorrow, just a few hours away, was a work day.

Inside, of course, I fell on the futon, and slept in my clothes. I slept there on the floor until the damn alarm clock woke me at 6 a.m. It took forever to rise from the tatami, my head a pulsating ton. In the bathroom, I went into dry heaves. But that was private; that was all right. Then the hardest part, commuting to work with the hangover of the decade.

I walked out the door with no belt, still partially drunk. Hanging from a ring on the crowded train, I realized my shirt was buttoned wrong.

When I walked into the teachers' room, no one acknowledged anything had happened. I fell into my chair, and surveyed the desks before me with a glum expression. At the end of the big shots row, Morioka-sensei blustered and attended to business like he always did. I made it through the day, following the teachers to their classes and repeating from the text like a zombie.

It was a few days before I was to leave Toyo Chugaku that my triumph led to anything. Matsuura asked me to follow him to The Bucket's office, a cubicle in another part of the school. There, Morioka-san greeted me, and invited me, through Matsuura's translation, to dinner that Friday.

"Hai," I said, yes, and bowed enthusiastically.

Morioka in an outpouring of emotion stood and removed a painting from the wall. He handed it to me with a bow, and I accepted with a bow.

"Mr. Morioka also would like to give you this, for your good work with our students."

The Bucket's face looked absolutely upset. The painting was a kirie, and a magnificent one too. Kirie was often made by mamma-sans, housewives, as craft projects. A small piece of black paper was cut, and pasted over dabs of colored paint, so that the object, often a small dog or a famous temple, was outlined in black. This was the best kirie I had ever seen, however. Huge by mamma-san norm, it depicted a farm woman holding a sheaf of rice. Each grain, each stalk was outlined. The woman's left hand was clenched, as if she were angry. Her face too looked angry. Not the typical cute piece of hobby work at all, but an individual woman pissed off at her Japanese life. The red stamp on the bottom named the artist.

"Who made this?" I asked.

"Mr. Morioka's wife," Matsuura said.

But he wasn't through. In an outpouring, Morioka-sensei also wanted to give me a pair of athletic shoes. Students often asked my size, since that was a standard question in the texts. When I said 12, 30 centimeters, looks of astonishment spread over their faces, and pandemonium broke out in the classroom. "Sugoi!" they shouted, great. It was a ritual I did not look forward to. The Bucket too gasped at my shoe size, but after consulting with Matsuura allowed that he might

have to order from Tokyo, but a magnificent pair of Runbirds, the finest, would soon be mine. No doubt this was a tribute to my great baseball career.

Back at my desk I again wondered what Japanese custom had I stumbled into. No other teacher ever did as Morioka had just done. Students piled my desk with presents, but bits of origami or small temple bells. School boards sometimes gave me samples of local products, such as the bottle of rotgut Kawachi wine from the hills near Toyo. But Morioka had gone absolutely ballistic. The elaborate rules of omiage, gift giving, was one I never quite got right. It had occurred to me that since I had caused, however involuntarily, Morioka to lose face, perhaps I owed him. Instead, he felt in a torrent that he owed me.

I was afraid the dinner that Friday would be a drunken rematch, but instead the event was friendly and unpressurized. Matsuura again came along for translation to the steak restaurant. Steak was super expensive in Japan. I had ventured to eat at a steak restaurant near my apartment once, and served to me was a white plate covered with burgundy sauce, a few sprigs of parsley, and in the middle four dots of beef. The meal cost $50, and afterwards I crossed the street to Avocado, my favorite local coffee shop, and ate a sandwich. The Bucket paid about $100 for my dinner that night.

Totaling the gifts, I estimated that the kirie painting was worth about $500 in the market, the shoes about $200, and the dinner about $100. $800! I felt the Japanese pressure to pay him back equally, but later when I asked if he would like me to take him to dinner, he just laughed and waved off my offer.

Maybe his gifts did not require a gift in return. Maybe they were prizes for outdrinking the champion. I had no idea.

Almost two months passed, and I had forgotten about The Bucket. His wife's painting hung proudly on the wall of my apartment. The Runbirds were broken in. Matsuura had continued as my best Japanese friend even though I had served two months at another junior high school. The Saturday before I was to leave for my Christmas vacation to China, he invited me for a special dinner at his house.

After a cold four-block walk from my apartment, I pressed the intercom button on the front gate, and Mrs. Matsuura buzzed me into my home away from home. A new house in the new development that covered the hill of Nankadai, the outside was white tile. After the usual bows and greetings with Matsuura's mother, son, and daughter, I saw his cousin, a travel agent, on the sofa. He had gotten me tickets on the Jian Zhen, the slow boat to Shanghai, but had been disappointed when I didn't plan my trip in hour-by-hour detail, as a Japanese tourist surely would have. I was surprised to see him again. But even more surprising were the two men rising to greet me at the kitchen table. First there bowed Sasaki, then The Bucket.

The drinking began immediately. Matsuura's wife served huge platters of sushi and sashimi, along with a precious few buttons of grilled beef. We feasted. I drank beer; Morioka drank sake, speaking loudly and growling out jokes. After dinner the men remained at the table talking about this and that.

"David, will you write down your hotels, so I can call you on the telephone if there is a problem?" Matsuura formally asked.

Nice try. "But Matsuura-sensei, I don't know which hotels I will be staying at. I don't even know what cities."

Morioka bellowed with delight.

"Americans!" the cousin said.

I got drunker and drunker. Sasaki once again poured my beer the second there was a gap in my glass. Morioka was seen to by Matsuura. When 10 p.m. came, longer than my dinners at the family table had ever taken, I switched to sake. The dandy bachelor nodded gravely in satisfaction.

The rematch was on. I realized this when conversation lulled, and Matsuura and Sasaki were not drinking. This time there was a seriousness to the match that hadn't been with the first. Fortunately for me, I reached a kind of drunken plateau where I mumbled my speech and bobbed my head, but beyond which I didn't get any drunker. The Bucket didn't pass out this time. He reached a plateau also, despite again intaking twice the alcohol. About midnight, Matsuura and Sasaki sat drinking coffee, while The Bucket and I maintained our posture at opposite ends of the dinner table, our heads bobbing and unable to say much, but both with eyes open.

It was a draw.

"I will call Mr. Morioka's taxi," Matsuura announced, and with that the ‘gun’ went off, the match was over. America and Japan had tied.

The two sober teachers rose. Sasaki helped me with my coat. I mumbled a few words of farewell, enough to show I was still functioning, and Matsuura, who had to work the next day, drove me to my building, those four blocks away. At my door sensei cautioned me about keeping safe in China, and I closed the door, fell on the futon, and once again slept the night away in my clothes.

Nothing came of the rematch. Morioka did not shower me with new gifts, and in fact I never saw the famous drinker again. Maybe we were even, and the Head of Teachers had regained face. I don't know. I maintained my prestige as well, and thought I noticed a subtle difference. The teachers at the new schools did not force me to get bombed. I could drink as much as I wanted thereafter.

In February, Tada-sensei, my other good Japanese male friend and Head of English for Kawarajo Chugaku, my school for January through March, took me to a small noodle restaurant to explain why he got drunk on sake every night after work. It was not, he insisted, to escape the pressure of work or the Japanese repressed way of life. Instead, he insisted, it had to do with ideas and religion.

I sat on a stool at the counter drinking sake, and grazing off a block of assorted vegetables and tempura. The small closet of a shop was so crowded bodies pressed me from behind and the sides. The owner in a white apron had merely to rotate from the grill behind him to the area in front to prepare the order. Tada-san had wanted me to experience a typical night with him.

"Sake is a way that Japanese people feel together," he said, ignoring as usual Japanese women, for women waited in the houses for the men to stumble home drunk. The noise was so high he had to almost speak in my ear. "I love the taste of sake, but it also makes me feel part of the group."

"How?" I asked. I was sure he meant part of the race.

That he had a harder time explaining.

"We do this together. All of the people are getting drunk like me."

And, he continued, life in Japan is very hard. "We work all the time, so we need a way to be free. Drinking sake is a way for us to take a rest, and feel free."

Tada also had a hard time explaining why drinking sake was a religious experience.

"Sake is part of Shinto, our old religion. The old god gave us sake," he said, hastening to add that like almost all Japanese he had no religion. I had found this decidedly not to be true, as Shinto and Buddhism shaped attitudes, and the traditions such as holidays were kept. "In the Japanese-style wedding such as I had, the bride and groom sip sake three times, and that makes them married. We give bottles of sake to the Buddhist statues as presents. Sake is Japanese. It is Japanese only."

Like other men I'd met, Tada-sensei made sake a study. Different areas of the country produced different kinds of sake. Some varieties of sake were seasonal. Each had a place and a time, and each could be a symbol of a virtue or a stage of life, though most men drank what the restaurants served, or the cheap brands in cans. My favorite tasting so far had been made with the fin of the poisonous fugu, blowfish. Mr. Tada, of course, knew them all.

"So you see, David, drinking sake makes me feel part of my country's long history. Americans, the British, don't drink sake. Only we Japanese."

By his standard, then, The Bucket was part of an ancient sake tradition.

In April I started at my next-to-last school, thinking already about the return to my America at the end of July. The first day at Fujiidera Chugaku, the oldest junior high of Minamikawachi County, I was shown by the new Head of English into the principal's office, and after tea with the usual elderly man, was led for presentation to the teachers' room. The ritual began again. I was introduced by the English-sensei, the rows of strange faces bowed in unison, and then I gave my speech with the usual offers of friendship and helpfulness. The short ceremony ended with words of welcome from the principal in Japanese.

Before anyone had a chance to move, however, a teacher at the front stepped forward with a randy smile. He was a gnarled, dark little man who showed the effects of an adulthood of hard drinking, and hard smoking. Instead of hello, he curled his fingers as if around a glass, raised it to his lips, and pretended to drink.

"The bucket! The bucket!" he shouted, and the whole room began to laugh.

David Flynn was born in the textile mill company town of Bemis, TN. He had reported for a newspaper, edited a magazine, and taught at a university. A Fulbright Senior Scholar and a Fulbright Senior Specialist currently on the roster, he has five degrees. His literary publications total more than 130. Among the eight writing residencies he has been awarded are five at the Wurlitzer Foundation in Taos, NM, and stays in Ireland and Israel. He spent a year in Japan as a member of the Japan Exchange and Teaching program, and recently won the Kintetsu Essay Award. For three years he was president of the Music City Blues Society. He is married and has one daughter. David Flynn's writing blog, where he

posts a new story and poem every month, is at http://writing-flynn.blogspot.com/ .