

# Introduction

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## Going Through Some Changes

A caterpillar forms a chrysalis around itself and, before long, a lovely butterfly emerges. Is the caterpillar aware at the start of the process that by its end it will have transformed from one of the more loathsome looking larvae into the recipient of often extraordinary beauty? That instead of inching around destroying trees and pestering farmers, it'll magically take to the air and become one of the most adored creatures on Earth?

Probably not, right?

No more than that good man who drinks one too many shots of scotch after a rough day at work; a day during which, at his supervisor's discretion, he had been screwed out of a promotion he rightfully deserved over an unfortunate drunken incident at an office Holiday party that resulted in a couple of embarrassing minor injuries and a severely damaged copy machine; an event that managed to overshadow his otherwise stellar performance record. It was all he could do not to cry into his shot glass right there at the bar.

Just a caterpillar on a barstool, encasing himself in malted barley.

Later, while driving home, his faculties mildly impaired but not much more than usual, sobbing freely in the privacy of his SUV over that first home he'd promised his wife (that he now won't be able to afford), and the bedrooms of their own he'd promised his two rapidly growing kids (that he won't be able to provide), he drifts over the tear-blurred double-solid lines dividing the road. Then, SMASH! He collides head-on with a Prius carrying a family of four headed home after a fun evening at a family entertainment center, killing the husband and critically injuring the wife and kids.

He's released from the hospital a few weeks later in splints, bandages and stitches, and suffering from headaches due to the severe concussion he'd suffered, only to find himself on the business end of a judge's gavel, sentenced to no less than five (no more than ten) years for vehicular manslaughter.

Deservedly, many would say.

While serving his sentence, he is routinely beaten and gang raped (among other things) until he eventually submits to being some brute's bitch. This continues until the day of his release.

He emerges eight years later, a free man, a different man, a *changed* man.

His wife has changed, too. She has a new man (and a new house) and his kids have a new father (and their own rooms) and he has nothing but the clothes on his back, a smoking habit he didn't have before he was convicted, a sphincter that has never really

healed properly (thanks to a mentally ill prison surgeon's ineptitude), and the painful memory of having been some animal's play thing.

Perhaps he uses this horribly all too common experience to spur him to never before imagined accomplishments. Maybe he writes a book or screenplay about the experience that becomes a best-seller or a hit movie starring Jamie Foxx and Brad Pitt (who gives a tour de force Academy Award winning performance as the skinhead rapist).

Maybe our caterpillar turned Monarch butterfly uses his newfound fame and success to establish an organization to fight on behalf of abused prisoners everywhere or to combat mental illness in prisons worldwide, earning him further acclaim and even a Nobel Prize nomination.

Or...

Maybe it becomes a Death's-head Hawkmoth, and blames his supervisor for everything that has befallen him since he was unfairly passed over for promotion, seizes him leaving home one morning and strangles the man to death with the T-back panties he was forced to wear in prison. Then, he lies in wait counting the days (536 of them) until his former prison husband's release from jail, with his own version of the *Shawshank Redemption* burning a hole in his soul. The mounting pile of instruments he's collected especially for the occasion is an assortment so grotesque that even a dentist would blanch. He proceeds to abduct and torture the rapist, slowly and medievally, extending it over a two-week period.

Once the degenerate has suffered immensely and is deader than most people would wish on their worst enemies (deservedly, many would say), and unable to handle what has become of the proud provider, husband and father he once was, our tormented moth takes a flying leap off of the highest point in the vicinity. He doesn't flutter on wings the Creator has used as a canvas. He doesn't glide on the nature's breath. He plummets to the earth below, cursing the Creator the whole way down, and cracks the concrete with the force of his landing.

You hear about this kind of shit all the time...certainly more so back in the States than here in Japan, but here, as well (just replace a tall building or bridge with a subway platform, and the concrete with a speeding train entering a station). And it's usually as a result of some kind of change.

You just never know how things will turn out. The only thing that is a certainty is that change is inevitable.

I've gone through some changes, too.

And, when I read over some of the essays and stories I've written over the years based on my mind-altering experiences here in Japan, and some of the thoughts I've had and shared with the world, I either smile, adoring the proof laid out before me that I am a talented writer and somewhat gifted thinker, or I cringe and say *I need my goddamn head examined and a shit load of meds.*

*Seriously*, though.

I mean, what does a butterfly perceive when it happens upon a caterpillar slinking up the bark of a tree to munch on leaves? Is it the same perception it would have upon encountering a chrysalis?

Does it have the thought, "*Damn*, I've come a long way"?

Doubtful.

Post-metamorphosis, the butterfly – in addition to being a flying work of art and a motif in many musical, visual and literary masterpieces – is a surrogate/sex slave fluttering about knocking up female flowers on behalf of their immobile beaus. It's a timeless, endless, thankless instinct that keeps the butterfly way too busy to get narcissistic and reflect on change, I bet.

Besides, even before making that famous transformation from revolting to revered, the caterpillar already has the capacity to change. It adapts to its environment, often taking on the appearance of the vegetation it feeds on. If some bug specie decides that caterpillars make a tasty snack, within a handful of generations, those caterpillars will produce a toxin that will make that predatory bug's progeny think twice.

Why?

To survive!

That poor guy in a prison cell, who eventually surrendered what he'd come to think of as his manhood to human predators, did so for the same reason.

Which begs the question, how have *I* adapted to survive among the predators and other ills in my environment? Sometimes I watch myself as I go through the typical day, like a spider poised in a web in the corner of my mind. And from that vantage, I can see that Japan has been *my* chrysalis, and that I have undergone some adaptations.

Some are toxic.

Some hold the promise of pretty wings.

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Hi! My name is Loco, by the way. That's not my real name, of course. Just a

pseudonym I've taken on for so many reasons I could fill a book...in fact, I've gone ahead and filled a book. I'm a native New Yorker, born and raised in Brooklyn. I currently live in Yokohama, Japan, where I put my degree in English to use teaching junior high school kids and a dozen or so private students how to speak my mother tongue. My hobbies are reading, watching movies, taking pictures of trains & stations, social networking, and playing basketball with my boys on the weekends...but my passion is writing. I do it every day, even if only in my head...

And, oh yeah...I'm a racist.

The book you're about to read is a selection of stories and reflections. Half are from my experiences before coming to live in Japan, and half are on those I've had over the course of the eight years I've resided here. Some of these writings were originally part of my blog, *Loco in Yokohama*, which I've kept for the past three years. All have contributed to my current state of mind in both subtle and profound ways.

The dream of writing a book about life in Japan— which I would wager is shared by every writer or wannabe writer who has ever lived here — is one I'd put on hold until now. Why was the dream deferred? Well, because the *Japan Book*, written by an English instructor, whether fiction or non-fiction, is practically a cliché. So I told myself that if I couldn't find subject matter related to my life in Japan that hadn't been covered so thoroughly that I could cut and paste it from ten books written the previous year, then I wouldn't do it.

Fast forward almost a decade.

A decade spent in Asia learning about myself and teaching about my world, tearing down shrines of ignorance and erecting temples of understanding, learning the true measure of love and the true meaning of loss, indulging hate and enduring what *really* violent thoughts can do to a mind reluctant to act on them, discovering the writer I had the potential to be and uncovering the obstacles that lay in-between living my dreams and having them deferred.

It's been *quite* a ride so far. One I wouldn't trade for anything.

During my time here I've paid careful attention to the work of other foreigners living here- mostly the content creators- via the books they've written and the blogs they keep. I've watched their videos and vlogs, and listened to their radio shows and podcasts. I've run into them in person in the streets, and met / tweeted up with them at bars and cafes around Yokohama and Tokyo. They come in various flavors of humanity, different races, cultures and nationalities.

Most of the successful and popular Japan-based creators tend to stick with “positive” stories and light material; shrines and temples, anime and language study

tips, food, fashion, festivals and females. Others might delve into the creepy and the kooky, mysterious and spooky (of which there is plenty- some even fascinating), but the woolly mammoth in the room has often gone ignored; or worse, denied. Creative folk, either knowingly or not, seemed to be unwilling or unable to deal with what I felt to be the most glaring of issues here.

It made me feel a little paranoid, to say the least.

I questioned whether what I was seeing was real or a figment of my imagination. Was I suffering from delusions of persecution? They're not exactly unknown among expats here, that's for damn sure. Maybe *that* was the reason I saw the behemoth while many did not, or could not.

Some of these content creators would, on occasion, partially acknowledge it with their right hand, but somehow manage to dismiss it with the left. A post of theirs might read something like: *"I sat down on the train today and this Japanese guy sitting beside me suddenly stood up and stormed off into the next car, looking back at me angrily as he walked away. That's rather odd, I thought. But then my nose informed me what the issue was. I was wearing a new aftershave, and Japanese people are sensitive to foreign fragrances. I was also wearing blue jeans and a sweatshirt, and Japanese are very particular about these kinds of things. They prefer a more professional attire, especially when it comes to foreigners, and rightfully so. I'm glad I didn't jump to conclusions like some other bloggers do. It was all my fault. I felt really bad for having disrupted this guy's peace of mind. I hope I see him again tomorrow so I can apologize."*

Others, though, were either oblivious or in total denial; like contestants on a wacky game show where they're made to wear blindfolds and try to guess objects from their *feel*. Hand one contestant a freshly used condom and, despite the "lubrication" and "ribbing," they'll invariably say it's a balloon, inflate it and make a balloon animal just to prove their point. Hand another contestant a dildo, and they'll stroke it like a sculptor does clay, and say, *"I know this shape, especially here at the tip and here around the base. It's so familiar, Wait! I've got it! It's an o-miyage (souvenir) from a Japanese Penis matsuri. I wrote my doctorate thesis on these fertility festivals. It's a quirky time-honored tradition that dates back before America and its bloody Black Ships came and tarnished this great country! Am I right?"*

It's that kind of crazy up in here!

Well, in October 2008, I said "enough of this shit!" (I think those were my exact words), started blogging, and proceeded to give that neglected prehistoric pachyderm some overdue attention. Reaction was mixed, but the reception was mostly considerate. Over the course of several months I was fortunate enough to build a readership,

practically one reader at a time. It seemed some people had been dying to talk about the mammoth and were ever on the lookout for a suitable venue. *Loco in Yokohama* came along and met this need head-on. I've been blessed with some of the greatest readers: thoughtful, intelligent, critical and challenging; a burgeoning writer's wet dream.

Others were not so thrilled that I had the audacity to tell *my* stories. These *Happy-Go-Lucky Guys* (I call them) did not take too kindly to my negative words about *their* beloved Japan. They viewed and treated bitter malcontents (they call me) as a plague on two houses: That of the Japanese, and their own.

To be fair, some of these Happy-Go-Luckies were truly oblivious to the mammoth for, though they might occasionally smell the piles of dung it leaves everywhere, it did not reveal itself to them in its full glory. The Japanese would generally behave differently in their presence, for reasons that became clear the longer I stayed here, got to know people and observed the goings-on. One reason being that the reception whites receive in Japan is a bit different than the reception some other ethnic groups receive, especially Chinese and those of us of a darker hue. (Invariably, these Happy-Go-Lucky types were Caucasians who think Japanese are colorblind and treat all foreigners equally). Some of these guys and gals will defend this notion by any means necessary.

The comments they'd leave on my posts would run the gamut, ranging from YouTube crude: *"You niggers make me sick with your constant whining! Kneel and suck it like the rest of us, and be glad no one's throwing a rope around your neck."*

To disbelief: *"You seem like a nice guy, Loco-sensei, and pretty intelligent, too. So I just can't understand how you can be so off when it comes to Japanese people. They're so harmless and polite. Maybe you're just a little over-sensitive, or misunderstanding them due to the language and cultural differences. Perhaps if you studied Japanese..."*

To something approaching solution-oriented: *"You apparently have an excess of energy, evidenced by your long, fascinating posts, so why don't you put it to more productive use and do something about it? The onus is on you to change their minds. Writing blog posts in English just isn't going to cut it. Get out there and show them that black people aren't all the same. Some are really good people, smart and kind-hearted, like you. For God's sake, Loco, be a game changer, not a complainer."*

To dismissively condescending: *"Some people come to this magical and mysterious land with unstable minds and a certain amount of dung already encrusted in their nostrils. And, please forgive me for pointing this out but, particularly Negroes...ahem...I mean, people who are descendant from that dark, feral continent."*

*Personally, I believe you people are born with trace amounts of dung in your noses, thus you smell it wherever you go. The further you travel from your own kind, the more pronounced the smell becomes. I'm pretty sure I've read a scientific study or two that has proven just that. So, I must conclude then that what you smell is your own stench! Why don't you go back and live among your own kind, where everything naturally reeks of dung, cause then you'll be more comfortable, no? And leave the Japanese to the people who understand them, accept them and love them for the adorable, unadulterated child-race that they are."*

With assurance that you'll find yourself in the minority of a minority, and the target of baffling conjecture and derisive censure from the majority, I began to understand why people avoided talking about the beast. It was easier to just live and let live, and tread the path of least resistance with a clothespin pinched on your nose.

But, I don't get down like that.

I welcomed these attacks. I wanted my ideas and assertions to be challenged. How else would I learn? How else could I grow as a writer and a thinker, and more importantly as a person? I took the hits, and believe me, they hurt sometimes. The downside of writing from the heart is that your heart is exposed, and nothing makes for a more attractive bulls-eye. But, the upside is, it's the only way to really reach people, anyway. So, I was, and still am, thankful for these castigations for they inspired me to embark on an exploration of how I came to hold the positions I do.

I thought long and hard about whether these pooh-poohers had a point. Had I come to Japan predisposed to see racism where it didn't exist? Had my experiences in America *disabled* me, rendering me ill-equipped to navigate through the racially opaque currents of life in Japan? Was it *I* who was the racist and, with vision tainted by this dark social impairment, saw it everywhere around me?

I needed to know if I was asking the right questions. *And*, I needed answers!

Distressed, I asked myself the most difficult question first: *Am I a racist?*

And those feelings I had been harboring for years about many of the anonymous Japanese people I encounter on a regular basis all came to bear, and collectively, in an ensemble of brutal honesty, choired back at me a resounding, "*meh, who isn't?!"*

The indifference in the answer scared the shit out of me, and launched my exploration, in earnest. And, in what had become typical Loco fashion by that time, I started a series of posts related to my lifetime in the shadow of the race question, and gave this series a sincere yet provocative title: "Hi! My Name Is Loco and I am a Racist!"

The series was a *qualified* success! How did I measure this success? Well, for



one, it was a frank discussion with, essentially, the world! Word of this series spread and readers chimed in not only from Japan and the U.S., but from developed and under-developed countries far and near with their thoughts on race. And, in the end (some 40 posts later) I had a much better understanding of myself and of the world around me.

Were all of my questions answered during this series? Unfortunately, not. Certain issues just don't easily avail themselves of resolution, racism prominent among them. Did I learn some of the right questions to ask? You bet!

Everything else – the increased attention to my blog, the accolades and *ataboys* – while gratifying, was just gravy. I knew my background wasn't your average person's, not even your average New Yorker's, but I was overwhelmed by how much interest it generated. And a good number of these readers damn near demanded that I write a book about this issue, promising they'd buy a copy.

Write a book about *this*???. Yeah, right! How could I write a book about racism? Who the hell am I? I'm no scholar. I'm just a guy with a blog and a fairly interesting perspective and background.

So, initially, I dismissed the idea.

While I was writing the “My Name Is Loco...” series, I hoped I could exorcise these dark feelings within me, or at least confront my fears by dragging the little gremlins out of the closet and exposing them to the light; part catharsis, part analysis, part self (shock) therapy.

But, as I wrote my way down memory lane I noticed that there was a racial thread that had run through my life from childhood until the present; that race had not only played a significant role in my upbringing but a traumatic one. And, though I felt better having acknowledged and somewhat addressed my racism, I knew it wasn't going to be remedied by merely blogging about it. It was going to take some time and some doing.

And, that it might indeed make for an interesting book.

One I'd like to read, at least.

So, I had a change of heart and, after three years of blogging, I dusted off that publishing dream and got down to business.

The book you're about to read is the result. And all you guys who promised to buy a copy, here's your chance!

Amazon may be bursting at the cyber-seams, and the shelves of your local library may be warped with the weight of books by expats living in Japan, but there's NOTHING like the one you're about to read now.

Not even close.