

From: ikemototsubasa@cybermail.jp to: annabanana@gmail.com  
Tokyo Mon, Mar 5, 22:14

Dear Ms. Haseda,

I'm not sure if you remember me—my name is Tsubasa Ikemoto. You and I attended Ai-port Nursery School and Kindergarten in Nishi Ogikubo together when we were children. Please forgive my intrusion into your life—and I apologize if your name is no longer Ms. Haseda.

I was coming up the escalator at Roppongi underground station yesterday—the one that goes up to Roppongi Hills and takes you through the cylindrical atrium. I thought I caught sight of you on the one going down. I wonder if there is a possibility it was you?

I wouldn't normally consider it very likely, but there was something about the way this person was holding a book and the way they were looking around them, as if they were trying to take in as much of their surroundings as they could. It reminded me of you. They were wearing a yellow dress.

I hope life in London is treating you well and you are still enjoying the Big Smoke.

Best wishes,

Ikemoto Tsubasa

From: annabanana@gmail.com to: ikemototsubasa@cybermail.jp  
London Wed, Mar 7, 08:33

**OBVIOUSLY I remember you, Tsubasa, I'm not a GOLDFISH!!**

I'm so happy to hear from you—and it was me!! I was in Tokyo for barely forty-eight hours for work—environmentally unacceptable, except that I was en route(ish) from Sydney back to London. I got your email just as I was falling asleep by the luggage carousel last night and it made me SO happy—I wanted to reply straight away but my suitcase exploded in transit and my panties were all over the carousel so I had to go deal with that. It was the first time I've been back in more than twenty years! Can you believe we got so old??

Why would I not be called Ms. Haseda anymore? You think I might have gotten *married*? Ha ha ha! Oh, Tsubasa, you always did make me laugh.

The Big Smoke is great—but I'm spending a LOT of time traveling for work at the moment. Which is both exciting and unsettling, wouldn't you say?  
So, how are you??

Anna

From: ikemototsubasa@cybermail.jp to: annabanana@gmail.com  
Tokyo Wed, Mar 7, 23:40

Dear Ms. Haseda,

It was very nice to hear from you. I must say you looked exactly the same as the last time I saw you. I don't think

you can look like a seventeen-year-old and lament that we're old.

It must have been quite an experience to come back after so many years. Did you recognize any of it? I suppose, as children, we didn't spend very much time in upmarket offices.

To answer your question, I am currently working in the logistics department of a Japanese construction company that specializes in seismic safety technology (otherwise known as earthquake-proofing.) In summary, my job is to prevent things from shaking. I think most people dream of shaking things up, not of trying to dampen them down. Your work sounds like it must be very exciting—what do you do? Best wishes,

Tsubasa

From: ikemototsubasa@cybermail.jp to: annabanana@gmail.com  
Tokyo Wed, Mar 7, 12:07

I am very embarrassed that I called it The Big Smoke. I do not know why I did that. I also realize my joke about shaking things up was truly terrible.

From: annabanana@gmail.com to: ikemototsubasa@cybermail.jp  
London Thurs, Mar 8, 22:23

It wasn't a terrible joke! Plus, isn't your job objectively the most important job you can possibly have in a place as earthquake-prone as Tokyo?! I always knew you would go far, Tsubasa.

The truth is that it was totally weird to be back. Please correct me if I'm wrong (highly likely), but in my mind, I

used to speak perfect Japanese! Can that be true—given that now I don't seem to remember a single word?? Also, in my memory, Tokyo was this charming low-rise place full of small, independent grocers and fishmongers, where children played in the streets. But this time, it was literally high-rises as far as I could see, whether on the street or from the window of my hotel, or even from the viewing tower at the top of Roppongi Hills (which was incredible—have you been? It's mind-boggling, how far Tokyo stretches. That whole complex is swish, swish, swish, like being inside a golden egg).

And then, when we went out at night! We started off in Akasaka, outside the hotel—the pavements were rammed and buzzing, like school corridors at 3:30 p.m., and the school impression was made even more intense by the fact that 99% of people were in suits. We went to a bar where everyone stood around high barrels drinking beer or highballs and eating gyoza and edamame. Maybe I'm biased, but aren't Japanese bar snacks just the best? Salty and addictively delicious, with the intended consequence of making you want to drink more, but also containing vegetables?! What *is* that? And then one of the guys who works in the Tokyo office took us to a basement izakaya (am I writing it right? Like a Japanese tapas bar?) down these tiny steep steps, where we were almost knocked backward by the sound of people yelling *IRASSHAIMASE!!!* so loud that their necks bulged. Remember how we used to yell it when we were playing restaurants? *WELCOME!!* Like a threat. They crammed us in at a low table where we sat on the floor, surrounded by the warm fog of cooking smells and the sound of people guffawing with laughter,

and I realized the insanity of the fact that Akasaka was almost definitely just as full under the pavement as on top of it. After we'd gorged ourselves on seared tuna and grilled onigiri rice balls with umeboshi sour plums, and crispy chicken karaage (okay, so not everything contains vegetables. But then I had spinach with sesame dressing to balance it out), the guy from the Tokyo office went home, so we were left to our own devices. Which explains how we ended up back in Roppongi, uncontrollably drawn there by the neon and crowds—which I'm guessing from its vibe is tourist and foreign student central? Touts and Irish bars and clubs with beaded chandeliers—quite a whiplash change from the demure and well-heeled Roppongi Hills vibes of the day. There must have been some kind of fancy dress night on, because there were swarms of people in very impressive costumes (and ones I wouldn't ever have thought of, like a lady dressed up as a Frappuccino, and looking hot with it. A sexy Frappuccino), all bar-hopping, and we ended up in this club on a street that was brighter than London in the middle of the day at this time of year. One person was doing dance moves at the front and everyone was copying, like a giant 2 a.m. aerobics class. And I'm telling you, I always knew I was shallow but not how shallow—I couldn't stop ogling the Japanese girls and kept going back to the bathrooms to watch them. They had armories of little brushes and sticks, and even special threads to make their eyelids double-lidded (what?), and peering at them not very subtly, I realized some had contact lenses to make their irises bigger too. To be honest, it was quite a relief to know how much meticulous effort it takes to look that *flawless* all the time. And then it was 4 a.m.,

and presumably we all looked like death, and those girls looked as perky as they did at the beginning. I am in awe.

And *then* on the way back to the hotel, I got completely distracted by this enormous shop, playing four different soundtracks (I counted), with neon-lit fish tanks and eight times more stuff in it than any shop I'd ever seen. So then I remembered I hadn't bought presents for anyone back home, so even though it was almost sunrise, I bought rice face masks and foot relaxation sheets and a My Melody bunny-shaped waffle maker (because that was necessary and practical), from floors where there was nobody but me, but the music was still at full blast, like a very weird dream.

The whole experience was topped off by walking through Roppongi again the next morning and seeing people in suits passed out on the pavement, but neatly, like maybe they fully intended to have a little catnap at the side of the road. Next to one of them, someone had neatly lined up not only the man's wallet and phone, which he must have dropped, but also two bottles of water, like an offering for his hangover.

**Is shopping  
at 5 a.m. a normal  
Tokyo activity?!**

Probably you did not need me describing my entire evening in the city where you actually live, but there you go—a dubious gift from me to you. If I hadn't used the waffle maker this morning, I would be wondering if the whole shopping experience was a drunk and jet-lagged hallucination. Is shopping at 5 a.m. a normal Tokyo activity?!

And the other question is—was the Tokyo of our childhood a figment of my imagination?! Or has it changed unrecognizably in twenty years?

Also, quit calling me Ms. Haseda!! Are you writing to me from work—is that why you’re being so formal? If you are, you know, I think there are other hints that you’re not writing an internal company memo.

Anna

P.S. My job: I’m a buyer for a clothing and lifestyle “emporium” with shops in fancy bits of Europe and a mega online component. Essentially, a discerning shopper with a large budget—playing to my strengths, obviously. P.P.S. Was that a sly compliment, about me looking seventeen? Or maybe not—because why would I want to look seventeen, right, when there’s nothing wrong with looking twenty-seven?! But if it was, I’ll take it, Tsubasa, you rogue dog, you.

From: ikemototsubasa@cybermail.jp to: annabanana@gmail.com  
Tokyo Fri, Mar 9, 23:14

Dear Anna,

Thank you for your email. I liked reading it very much. I am not writing to you from work, as that would make me too concerned. I will stop calling you Ms. Haseda.

I’m sorry my English is very formal! I wasn’t a good English student at school, and it’s now been a few years since university, where I did English as part of my studies.

I have been meaning to start up my English conversation classes again, but unfortunately my job has been quite demanding recently. I'll do my best to write in a more colloquial style, and I apologize for any errors!

I think you were Don Quijoted! Don Quijote is a 24-hour superstore found across Tokyo, so I suppose 5 a.m. shopping is normal—I'm afraid the marketing is quite brash, as you discovered. In the past, I have bought an electric bicycle from Donqui at 5 a.m. on a Saturday morning, because I was going on a cycling tour with colleagues to Tama Lake and didn't have another opportunity to purchase it. So it can be quite useful. I think Donqui is preferable to pachinko—the pinball gambling game, which is another 24-hour activity—or frequenting an internet café. I think my favorite thing to do at 5 a.m., other than be asleep, would be to visit a 24-hour sento such as LaQua in Korakuen. Or perhaps I would go for a manicure, although I think my nails might be looked at askance at work. Do you remember going to sento or onsen when you lived here? I understand that some non-Japanese don't find it to be a comfortable experience, for which I feel sad for them.

Much of central Tokyo is high-rise, but not all of it! Your memory of our neighborhood is certainly accurate, and many places are still as you describe, with planning regulations that forbid the construction of buildings over two stories and shopping parades where people still use multitudes of specialist shops to buy their

groceries. And despite the modern aura of some areas of Tokyo, many others continue life as they have for decades; for example, do you remember the tofu seller who always used an abacus for his calculations? He is still there. Nowadays, his daughter works there too and is continually trying to encourage him to use the till. He always refuses and always comes to the total quicker than she does.

I'm very pleased to be in touch with you again! I was worried that you may find it strange for me to contact you out of the green. But then I thought that, as we've known each other since we had to stand on a little box to brush our teeth after lunch—if you remember that—maybe you would forgive me. I heard that, in other countries, children don't brush their teeth while at school. Can that be true? Don't the adults worry about their oral hygiene?

Now I am heading into Saturday, but for you in London, it's still Friday afternoon! I hope the rest of your work day is successful and that you are looking forward to an enjoyable weekend!

Best wishes,

Tsubasa

From: annabanana@gmail.com to: ikemototsubasa@cybermail.jp  
London Fri, Mar 9, 20:22

Are you kidding me about your English? It's spectacular! I'm so sorry I said it was formal—obviously I didn't mean it wasn't *good*! I only didn't want you to feel like you had to be formal with me, you know? As you were;

please ignore me entirely, and mentally flip the birdie at me, and forgive me if you can.

I do remember our toothbrushes! We kept them in plastic cups with our names on them, right? I wonder if I'd even be able to read my own name in Japanese now—what a depressing thought. (I've also literally just remembered: didn't we sometimes share the same toothbrush? Why would we do that?! Oh my god, oral hygiene be damned.) I can't speak for every country, but you're right, at school in London, we never brushed our teeth after lunch. Or washed our hands and gargled when we came in from break. Or had outdoor shoes, indoor shoes, gym shoes, and separate slippers for the toilet. Now that I'm thinking about it like that, life in London feels very slovenly. I remember in Tokyo I once accidentally wore the toilet slippers back to the classroom—social disaster, equivalent to going around with your skirt tucked into your underwear. Didn't we also have cleaning duty after school, taking turns scrubbing the floor and polishing the windows? I have no idea how they got us doing that—I can't think that here it would cause anything other than a riot.

I'm going to a fancy dress party tomorrow, so I was digging around my wardrobe for my one ratty wig (so sad that I won't be going as a sexy Frappuccino), and I found my old earthquake hat—remember those?! It's basically two giant yellow pillows sewn together to make a padded triangle; I remember the drills, how we had to hide under the desks, and run down the corridors

covering our nose and mouth, and how I was always convinced I could smell fire, even though it was just practice. Our teacher (Morinaga Sensei, like the chocolate company—remember?) told us there were playgrounds nearby where the manholes double as emergency toilets and the public benches turn into cooking stoves—and ever since she did, I felt like I was living in a city where we lived among Transformers, like the TV show! True, or did she just make it up?!

Anna

From: ikemototsubasa@cybermail.jp to: annabanana@gmail.com  
Tokyo Sat, Mar 10, 06:55

Dear Anna,

Morinaga Sensei would not lie to you! It's true and some of them, like the survival park in Nakano, also have reservoirs and storehouses under the park full of food and sanitary products and emergency blankets. Enough to keep whole districts going for the first three days after a disaster, I've heard. They also have solar-powered charging stations for electric bikes and smartphones.

Oddly, I never thought about living in a place that sits on an enormous fault line—Japan is located on the Pacific Ring of Fire, where tectonic plates converge, and Tokyo itself has a 70% chance of suffering a major earthquake in the next thirty years. I suppose it makes sense that if you're born somewhere, life there seems normal to you. It was only after I went briefly to London (the only time I've been abroad, in fact) that I was struck by the threat that we live under. On my return, it was very

strange to see my fellow Tokyoites going about their daily lives, just as I had done, voluntarily going down into the third basement level of creaky old buildings, or up to the sixtieth floor of skyscrapers, ignoring the fact that the entire city could collapse around them at any moment. I was very unsettled, until I came to the understanding that if I want to stay here, which I do, my only option is to accept it and move on—arguably, a hilarious allegory for life itself, don't you think? I have thought about it a lot since then and wondered if one of the reasons we live in quite a well-organized society is the threat of chaos and disaster. Perhaps we all know that the only chance we have of survival is by playing our part exactly and relying on others to do the same, so all systems function perfectly when we need them to. Perhaps it also contributes to the noticeable reluctance to deviate from the script, and the tendency to catastrophize, but equally to the consideration people tend to show each other here. This is pure conjecture, but I wonder! I think it's not difficult to conclude that this new perspective I experienced is probably why I went into my area of work.

I'm not sure why I have written you such a solemn email on a Saturday morning! Please forgive me—perhaps it's because I haven't drunk any coffee yet.

Best wishes,

Tsubasa

P.S. I googled “flip the birdie.” You are very funny. Do you often mentally flip the birdie at people?

From: annabanana@gmail.com to: ikemototsubasa@cybermail.jp  
London Sat, Mar 10, 01:14

Always, obviously. Literally 24 hours a day. You have to, in London, if you don't want to die of suppressed rage or be swearing out loud all the time. Or at least, I do. It's interesting to think about what you said... isn't it so impossible to know what makes a society! I thought I didn't really worry about earthquakes when we lived in Tokyo, but I remember being in London soon after we moved and looking at the pavement and feeling this huge relief that there was no way it was going to suddenly split open—so maybe I did.

I'm thinking about Tokyo so much these days, trying to piece together all my memories of it and imagining how different things would have been if we'd stayed. I was so sad to leave, despite the threat of imminent annihilation. Humor me—tell me about a day in your life, so I can imagine it. And that will make me less embarrassed about having verbally vomited out my Roppongi nighttime experience too.

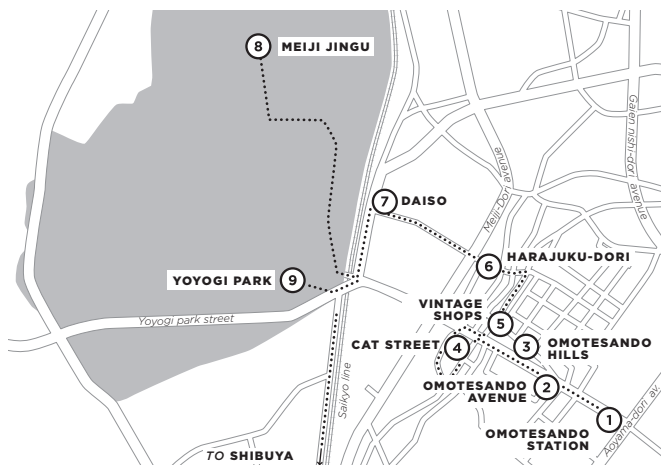
Anna x



# Five Itineraries

*Scan the QR code at the end of each route to access the map on your phone.  
(Google Maps required)*

## 1• Tsubasa's day around Omotesando



Follow this route to discover Tsubasa's day around Omotesando (p. 38). You could do the walk here from Omotesando Station up to Yoyogi Park in an hour easily, but give yourself a leisurely morning or afternoon, or

arguably a full day, for plenty of time to stop and shop and eat and people-watch.

Starting at Omotesando Station (use Exit A1 to come out at the bottom of the street), wander up leafy Omotesando Avenue, stopping for coffee in one of the glass-fronted cafés and taking in the glitz of the designer stores and Omotesando Hills. Take a detour down Cat Street, the pedestrianized street guarded by a statue of a naked lady, just before Kiddyland Toy Store, to check out the brands and independent shops (in architecturally very cool buildings), then loop back to cross over Omotesando onto the road between Omotesando Hills and Ralph Lauren, Jinsho-dori. You can go straight down as shown on the map, or a small cut-through next to Marimekko will take you to a series of well-curated vintage shops. When you've had enough of exploring the little streets in the area (this could take... hours), head up Harajuku-dori to cross over Meiji-Dori, then under the metal flowered arch onto Takeshita-Dori, the no-holds-barred center of Harajuku. At the end of Takeshita-Dori, past the Daiso, where everything costs a spectacular 100 yen, exit under the arch and you'll come out outside Harajuku Station. Take a left, and when you get to the big crossroads with Omotesando Avenue, take a right, over the road. From here, you can either head into the peaceful forest of Meiji-Jingu Temple, or go past Meiji-Jingu to Yoyogi Park.

If, after a day of wandering, you want to continue to

Shibuya for the evening, or for more (more hyper, louder, bigger) shopping, it's an easy walk, either straight down Meiji-Dori or along Cat Street. Follow Cat Street to the end, where it turns into Meiji Dori Avenue—you'll see Miyashita Park, a shopping complex that looks like a space-age garden. Turn right, under the bridges that make up Miyashita Park, and left onto Jingu-Dori, past the huge Tower Records. Head straight toward the sensory overload of the Scramble Crossing.



## 2• From Daikanyama to Ebisu

