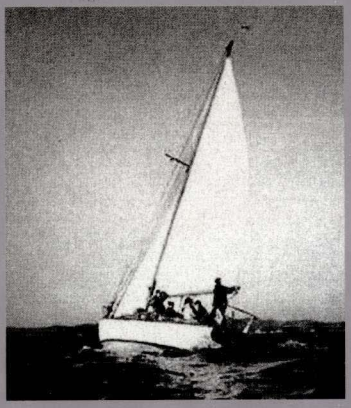

UNDERCURRENTS

Episodes from a Life on the Edge

SHINTARO ISHIHARA

Translated by
Wayne P. Lammers

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Undercurrents

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C O N T E N T S

PREFACE

Many years ago now, a television network sent me to Germany to cover its active anti-nuclear movement, and I ran into Kenzaburo Oe, the Nobel Prize winner, who had come there for the same purpose. I hadn't seen him in quite some time.

As we waited for the cameramen to set up on the open-air observation platform in front of the Berlin Wall, we put aside our differing views on the nuclear issue and talked of other things.

I brought up my longtime hobby of scuba diving, and he listened with great interest when I told him about my experiences with the poisonous sea snake known as the Okinoerabu eel.

"Stories like that are more important to you than you realize yourself," he remarked after I finished. "You should write them down when you have a chance."

Sometime later, I decided to take his advice to heart. In whatever spare moments I could find, I began jotting down some of the more unforgettable things that had happened to me over the years. Once I got started, my interest grew: I realized these were the very moments when my life truly soared.

I owe a debt of gratitude to my old friend for prompting me to write down these stories at this stage of my life. I am grateful, too, to another old friend, my editor Tadao Sakamoto, for his patience and unstinting encouragement as I proceeded with this project entirely at my own pace, delivering a few short pieces at a time as the spirit moved me.

A point of note: in many of the stories included here, I write of hunting for game fish with spear guns, so I should mention that these events took place long ago, before the various prefectures passed laws restricting the free use of such devices. Today, the use of spear guns is no longer permitted anywhere in Japan other than Okinawa.

ADRIFT

He was one of Japan's pioneer scuba divers. You could even have called him something of a professional, but this was still long before anyone could make a living as a diving instructor, so we're talking about other ways of diving for pay. Once, for example—not that I entirely believe the story—a Chinese guy hired him to dive off the Yokohama North Pier in the dead of night to retrieve three foot-long packages wrapped in oilpaper, contents unspecified. Visibility was next to nothing on the bottom, and poking around blind in the silt merely turned up such treasures as dead cats and broken bicycles. Finally, after three nights at it, he managed to find two of the three mysterious packages. When his employer accused him of hiding the third, my friend turned the tables on him and suggested they take the matter to the authorities. He got paid the promised 300,000 yen per package, which was a lot of money in those days. Obviously, they must have contained drugs.

My diver friend's grandfather had been a peer, and his aristocratic family owned a summer villa in Hayama, where the locals used to embarrass him by calling him Master. Mostly he seemed to play cards for a living, though in better times he'd had a small nightclub in Shibuya. Occasionally, he would drop by and invite me to go hunting or deep-sea fishing. I always declined, thinking it best to keep my distance: I'd seen the types he hung out with—not gangsters,

exactly, but real characters anyway—and I had my doubts whether the man was completely on the level himself. For the most part, though, he had a well-bred way of getting on the right side of people. Genial by nature, he seemed to be eager for company.

Now and then he would show up unannounced carrying some large game fish he'd speared. The hour, invariably, was late, which was in itself an imposition, and I wasn't particularly happy about having a load of dead fish thrust into my hands in the middle of the night, either. We'd exchange some small talk, then I'd send him away. He showed up bearing these gifts four or five times all told—less out of any particular fondness for me than as a show of machismo, probably. Back when scuba divers were few and far between, bringing someone the catch of the day was a splashy thing to do.

Later, after I myself took up diving and learned about spearfishing, I discovered that the amberjacks and such he'd brought me were in fact prize game fish.

The fellow eventually married a girl of mixed blood celebrated for her beauty in the Shonan area. One day I ran into him on the street with a cute little boy in his arms and asked him the child's name. He told me picking a name was such a hassle he'd decided simply to name him after the crown prince of the time. It was just the sort of thing he would do.

Sometime after I took up scuba diving myself, I recalled a story he once told me. I don't know the year, but the incident took place on a diving trip to Oshima in the Izu Islands with those dubious friends of his.

The owner of the boat was a Korean named Kaneda, a man with a record that included firing off his gun in a flap over a hotel takeover—not somebody you wanted to tangle with.

They went diving to the north off Motomachi. My friend stayed down by himself even after the others had surfaced, wanting to catch as many fish as he could with the air he had left. But when he finally ascended, no boat. A current had carried him nearly a kilometer away from the anchored vessel.

The seas had risen, and from the crest of a big wave he finally spotted the boat searching for him. He yelled at the top of his lungs, but the boat was too far

upwind for his buddies to hear. Then, of all things, they moved even farther away and, after circling the area a while longer, gave up and headed back to port.

"I gave up too, and started swimming," my friend continued. "But as you probably know from sailing out that way, when the currents are strong, there's basically no way a swimmer can make it to shore. Knowing I had to lighten my load, the first thing I lose is my catch. I still remember those beauties—a grouper and four great big amberjacks—but I told myself I could always catch more fish. The shore still kept getting farther away, so next I dropped my weight belt. It's funny what you think about at times like that—wondering which is worth more, the fish or the weights. After that went my tank, then my spear gun. So there I was, drifting out to sea with just my regulator around my neck.

"I drifted past Chigasaki, then Kazahaya. The current around there flows toward Cape Nojima at the tip of the Chiba Peninsula, then veers out into the Pacific. The sky was still light, but beneath the waves it's already dark, and I'm getting pretty worried. I keep telling myself, once the current carries me to the mouth of Tokyo Bay, some large ship will see me and pick me up. But as the sun goes down and the light fades, I know I'm a goner.

"Once it gets dark, even if some ship comes along, who's gonna see a tiny head bobbing on the water? I'll probably get chewed up by the propellers instead, and spewed out into the Pacific as fish bait. But finally, after what seems like ages, a fishing boat comes along. It's my last chance, so I leap up out of the water and scream my head off. The boat still looks to be to heading right on by, no more than thirty or forty meters away, when suddenly I see their green running light change direction. Pretty soon I see a red light align with it, so I know it's coming toward me and I'm gonna be saved.

"After they pull me from the water, my rescuers say they spotted my head in the last glimmer of light in the sky—only they thought it was a stray float off a fishing net. They'd been debating whether to stop and pick it up when they heard me yelling. Their home port was Motomachi, but that night they were making for Okata on some family business, which is how they'd found me.

"They said I was a lucky man, and you better believe I knew it without them

having to tell me. I sat there thinking not just how glad I was, but how incredible the odds were.

"I wanted to give them something by way of thanks, but I had absolutely nothing on me. So instead, I borrowed a thousand yen and had the Fisherman's Cooperative call me a taxi.

"I get back to Motomachi and the bastards aren't there, so I go on around to Habu. That's where I find them, all in the stern of the boat getting drunk. I walk up without a word, fling my regulator onto the table, and jump aboard. That jerk Kaneda gets to his feet and says, 'Hey, you're alive.'

"I don't say a word. I just punch him in the jaw, hard as I can, and he falls backwards onto the table. The others jump up to help him; one of them even pulls out his dive knife.

"'You think you're looking at a ghost?' I scream, at which point Kaneda motions everybody to calm down and says, 'Sorry, man. There wasn't anything we could do.'

"I had plenty more to say to him, but I just let it go."

"Why's that?" I asked. Even among his crowd, this was someone known for picking fights at the slightest provocation.

He shrugged. "That's just how things go at sea."

Years later, diving with my own boat, I'm reminded of his remark every so often. The last thing I'd ever want is to find myself alone in the water swimming after a boat that's left me behind. Nor would I want to be decked by a friend after leaving him adrift, no matter how much I deserved it.

THE SPECKLED BAND

Okinoerabu eel. The name sounds like just another kind of eel—maybe some grotesque species with a thick body. But this so-called eel is actually a sea snake with a lethal venom.

Encountering snakes at sea is a whole lot more disturbing than on land. Many years ago now, when I participated in the first South China Sea Yacht Race, we spent much of our second day out of Hong Kong in a dead calm surrounded by thick fog, unable to make way. When the fog finally lifted, we were startled to find the waters around us swarming with sea snakes of every imaginable size. The largest ones looked about the size of a boat hook, which would have made them over three meters long.

Okinoerabus don't reach nearly that size; they get to be a meter long at most. But despite their smaller proportions, these snakes are a disturbing sight—especially when you know that the venom of just one of the nasty little creatures is potent enough to bring down at least five cows. Although I've also heard that sea snakes are evolutionarily degenerate, with their fangs bent inward and too far back in the mouth to harm a human being, that doesn't change the toxicity of their venom.

I've never observed an Okinoerabu on the surface from a boat, only in the water when diving. The first time I caught sight of one, I didn't have to be told it was poisonous; I knew instantly. No reptile with such bright yellow and black bands could be anything but poisonous. As its name suggests, the Okinoerabu inhabits the waters around Okinoerabu Island and ranges southward from

there, so you see them quite frequently when diving in Okinawan waters. In fact, my own first time was in the Yaeyama Islands.

Because they lack gills, sea snakes don't breathe underwater; they have to swim to the surface every so often for air, whatever the conditions. When you race yachts, you sometimes have to hold your course even in storms strong enough to send fishing boats scurrying back to harbor, and since most marine creatures probably take refuge deep below in weather like that, too, I remember talking with my crew once about how no one, not even fish, knew the full fury of the sea like we did when the weather turned really monstrous. But after I became a diver, I learned that air-breathing sea snakes have to keep shuttling back and forth between the depths and the surface even in a typhoon.

Oddly enough, I've never actually seen a sea snake return to the bottom after surfacing to breathe. Larger sea snakes will pause on their way up or down, approach a diver to check him out, even rub up against his scuba tanks and coil around his regulator hose. By contrast, Okinoerabus always make straight for the surface. Yet, as often as I've observed them going up for air, I have never seen them zipping back to the depths afterwards. Maybe they, too, like to pause on their way down—except that they do it somewhere out of our sight.

The first time I encountered an Okinoerabu during a dive, my immediate thought was that storytellers don't lie.

Shortly after the end of World War II, when radio still provided the only home entertainment, I often listened to voice actor Musei Tokugawa's grand readings of famous novels and short stories, among them some renditions of Sherlock Holmes. As a child, the story that terrified me most was one called "The Speckled Band."

The murderer sends a poisonous snake from one room to the next in an old English manor house—via a ventilation duct, if I recall—to have it sink its fangs into his intended victim. The victim dies shrieking and clawing at her throat,

and the last words to emerge from her mouth are something about a "speckled band."

I can't claim any deep-seated interest in snakes, but when I've had occasion over the years to browse through things like animal encyclopedias, I've never come across any pictures that made me think, *This must be the speckled band of Conan Doyle's tale.* But the first time I saw an Okinoerabu in the water, my thoughts returned instantly to that story: those yellow and black bands stood out even in murky water, a vivid warning of toxicity, and this along with its small size suggested it might have made the perfect weapon for the murderer in the old manor house.

Being underwater was already enough to put me on edge, and the sinister association with the Sherlock Holmes story made me even more nervous. So when I saw the Okinoerabu slithering up right past me—very likely just hurrying to the surface for air—my every instinct told me to give it more leeway than I would a shark. I moved aside as quickly as I could. Degenerated fangs or not, I knew the snake carried a deadly poison, and just to see that speckled yellow-and-black form slithering by was enough excitement for me. No doubt other sea creatures react like I did and steer clear of these snakes the same way. It's hardly a wonder their fangs have degenerated from disuse.

In a different way from the shark, which has protected and perpetuated itself by means of its prodigious strength, and thus evolved very little over the ages, the Okinoerabu is in a category by itself as a sea creature. If you doubt me, try visiting one underwater sometime. Watch the yellow-and-black thing making for the surface, and see if you can muster the nerve to reach out and touch it. Personally, it's all I can do to wave the tip of my spear gun at them and shoo them off.

Despite my aversion to sea snakes, another diver I know once showed me how to catch one. A seasoned old-timer from Okinawa named Kohashikawa, he and my dentist friend Shiroma taught me pretty much everything I know about spearfishing. To this day, I often still go fishing with Shiroma, but Kohashikawa couldn't keep away from the water and decided to turn pro. Now he occupies