



Speaker of the House

You can probably tell that I write these stories a few weeks in advance of their publication date when I tell you that 'the other day' I was over at Sadako's place while she was in the middle of her year-end cleanup. Back in my early days in Japan, I had been interested to learn that in this country, it is the end of December that is the traditional time for a giant cleanup. In the west, it seems to be more common for this to happen a couple of months later, when the long winter is nearly over. It is at that time that many people get ready for the fresh new season with a large 'spring cleaning'. I can't say which custom is better, and indeed, perhaps long ago, when the Japanese calendar was slightly different, and the new year actually did begin closer to spring, they were pretty much the same thing.

For Sadako, as I suppose for most people, the year-end cleanup doesn't mean just washing and cleaning things, it is also a chance to clear out items that are no longer wanted. This year she wanted to recover quite a large space that was being taken up by some audio equipment that she was no longer using. In recent years, such equipment has become much more compact than it used to be, and we no longer have to sacrifice a large part of our floor space to be able to hear high quality music. She showed me a pair of large and heavy audio speakers, and asked, "Are these any use to you? If so, please feel free to take them."

I had to smile when I heard this, because I instantly had a kind of flashback to when I was a teenager in high school. I was quite interested in classical music at that time, but in our house we had only the most rudimentary equipment for playing records - a cheap little 'all-in-one' unit with very small speakers that produced only the most tinny sounds. I lusted for a 'real' stereo system; I eagerly pored over catalogues of equipment: turntables with feather-light arms, amplifiers with rows of glistening knobs and dials, and of course, massive heavy speakers that would surely produce the most glorious orchestral sounds!

But our family had different budget priorities - more mundane things like mortgage, food and education came first, although I suspect at the time I would gladly have swapped any of those things for the audio system of my dreams!

So to hear Sadako say, "... please feel free to take them," of course made me smile. If such a thing had happened to me back then, I would have jumped up and down in excitement. "Wow! My very own pair of professional JBL speakers!" But things have changed over the years, and now I'm in pretty much the same position as she; I'm quite content to make do with a small-scale audio system that doesn't take up much space in my room, so I had to say to her, "Thank you for the offer, but I don't think I can use them."

It's interesting to take this example and try to apply it to one's current situation - are there things that you may now think are greatly desirable, but which will become unwanted at some point in the future?

But no, stop! It's better if we don't talk about such things! I'm trying to make a living encouraging people to collect my beautiful woodblock prints!

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