



A Date, With Chopin

I go for a swim at a local sports club about four times each week. It would be nice to make it a daily routine, but the pool is just too crowded most of the time, so I've learned which few spots on the calendar are suitable for getting a good workout in the water, and time my visits for then.

The other day though, the club was closed for some kind of maintenance, so I had to miss my swim, but in the afternoon I had an idea: I had a package that needed to be sent to a nearby town, so I decided to make the delivery myself, by bicycle. This would certainly give me a pretty good workout, as the destination was around 12 kilometers away. A bit more air in the tires, a shift cable fixed, the brakes adjusted, a spray of oil on the chain, and the bike was ready for the trip. Off I went, riding in the bright sunshine.

I followed main roads to get there, but for the return trip I used a beautiful cycle path along the Tama River. After a few minutes along the path I came to a park, where there is a large outdoor pool complex operated by the city. Seeing it made me kick myself - if I had brought my swimsuit, I could have had today's swim here!

Flashback seven or eight years - when I still lived in Hamura, just upriver from this spot. Sadako and I used to have a habit of meeting at this pool late on summer afternoons; I rode my bicycle down from Hamura, she rode up from her home further downriver. We would meet here just about an hour before it closed, when the sun was low in the sky, and the pool not crowded at all. It was such a pleasant place to be! We swam in the long 50 meter pool, alternating between doing laps for proper exercise, and just idly floating about in the cool water.

And every day, our date would end the same way; five minutes before the pool closed, the pool operators started to play a Chopin *étude* over the P/A system, always the same one. We enjoyed our last few minutes in the water, then sat on the bench at the side of the pool in the horizontal light of the setting sun, as the gentle music played around us. To this day, I can never hear that music without remembering those warm times.

And now, here I was, approaching the same pool, late on a hot summer afternoon, at just about closing time. I checked the time ... yes, in around ten minutes, they would be closing ... I jumped off my bicycle, parked it against the fence, and sat against a tree to await the closing 'ceremony'.

I couldn't enjoy the coolness of the water, but I sat in the same horizontal light, and waited for the piano music to bring alive for me once more, those pleasant summer evenings. And just on time, the anticipated announcement came, "The pool will be closing in five minutes."

But what followed was nothing but silence. No Chopin. No 'farewell' music of any kind. Just silence. The policy of playing gentle music to finish off the day had obviously been changed.

I waited, still hopeful, but a few minutes later came the final announcement, "Everybody please leave the pool. We are now closed." Click. Silence.

I got on my bike, and pedalled quietly, and joylessly, home.

That old saying is right, isn't it ... "You can never go back ..."

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