



## Evening Soundscape

My neighbour Ishida-san's kitchen clock gently begins to chime ... 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... stopping at seven. It is an evening in late July, here in my corner of Ome, at the end of what has been a very hot day. I am sitting outside on what I suppose could be described as my stoop, if that word can be properly used for a single step in front of the house. Unusually for this time of year, we had no rain in the late afternoon, and the concrete beneath my feet is still radiating the heat that it absorbed this afternoon, but with the sun now gone, the air has cooled rapidly - being next to a river will do that - and it is very comfortable indeed.

Everybody in the neighbourhood has their windows open to catch the evening breezes, with privacy maintained by either paper *shoji* screens on the inside, or light bamboo *sudare* hanging outside. But even though I cannot see into the rooms, nothing is hidden.

O-san across the street has just joined his wife in their bathroom. She was already in the tub, having come in quite some time ago for a thorough scrub before beginning her soak, but he doesn't take long at all with his wash, and she soon has to get out to make room for him. I smile to think of him chatting with his friends sometime; I am sure that he would never admit to them that he 'lets' his wife use the tub first ... as everybody knows, the 'master' of the house always has priority!

Scraps of sound come to me from all directions: a bit of the NHK news from one window, a bit of conversation from another. Somewhere a rice cooker is opened, and the freshly cooked rice stirred a bit before being served, followed by the sound of the lid being pushed closed with that unmistakable click that will be heard at this time in practically every home in this country, as it is every day.

Most of the dog walking is finished by now, and the pedestrian traffic passing by is of two types - Mr. Businessman making his way home from the bus stop (no doubt thinking of his upcoming beer and bath!), and students returning from the local middle school. One such pair draws closer, chatting as they approach. I can understand most day-to-day Japanese without much problem, but of this conversation I grasp almost nothing, as it consists of scraps and interjections without any apparent content. To the two of them though, it seems full of meaning, and it continues nonstop until they pass out of earshot in the opposite direction.

Ishida-san's daughter comes out of the house and stands under the streetlight, waiting for the pickup van from the cram school. She doesn't notice me in the shadows, and I say nothing to disturb her. I guess she must have been about five when I moved here about ten years ago, and over that time I have seen her change from a little girl into this young lady now preparing for the important high school examinations. The van whisks her away for an evening of studying; it will drop her off later tonight, a few minutes after ten.

The breeze is coming towards me from the direction of Y-san's house, and I can report that they are having *niku-jaga* this evening. Over in H-san's house, *gyoza* is on the menu - the sizzle of the frying, a sudden sharp crackle as some water is tossed in, all being quickly muffled by a lid being dropped over the pan ... the sounds make it a dead giveaway!

One of the neighbourhood's stray cats comes out of the underbrush under Y-san's window, and knocks over a small flower pot as it moves by. He will see this in the morning when he comes out for his first round of

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sweeping, and will joke to me that Boots the Cat must have been there again. And I will - again - tell him that Boots-chan would never do such a thing, as she is far too light-footed (not to mention polite!).

From one of the houses down the street comes the sound of shutters sliding into place as the lady of the house begins the evening routine of sealing up for the night. None of that evil night air will have any chance to invade her home! But most of the rest are in no hurry to close up; the evening cool is just too delicious to shut it out just yet.

And then, from Ishida-san's kitchen again comes the chimes. Have I really been sitting here for an hour already? 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... this time up to eight. Another hour, of a completely typical summer evening, in a completely typical neighbourhood, of a completely typical town in Japan. And indeed, if you were to blindfold someone and drop them down anywhere in this entire country - from Hokkaido in the north to Okinawa in the south - they would have heard pretty much exactly these same sounds. The homogeneity of Japan is no myth; it is expressed every day, in every community in the land, in the habits of the people, in the things they eat, and yes, even in such things as the sound of a rice cooker closing.

... click ...

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