



On Ice

It has been getting pretty cold here in Ome the past couple of weeks, and the winter weather has really taken hold at last. That's not a complaint, because the 'winter weather' we are having here this year is of a pattern that I remember from my earliest years in Japan, and which I enjoy very much.

It is cold yes, but it is a very 'fresh' type of cold. The skies are perfectly clear, day after day. We haven't had a single snowflake, nor have there been strong winds. Going by the weather reports I see in the newspaper, pretty much the entire rest of the country is having a very fierce winter, with many storms and huge amounts of snowfall, but here on the Kanto Plain, we have none of that. As I sit here at my *kotatsu* this morning, the sunshine is streaming through the window, and life is very pleasant indeed!

But even in the midst of this happy and pleasant existence, I ran across something this morning that brought a twinge of sadness. It has become too cold for the thin gloves that I have been wearing for the past couple of weeks, so I was hunting in the entranceway cupboard for a pair of heavier ones that I knew was in there. All the winter gear is jumbled together at one end of the cupboard, and in order to search right to the back of the shelf, I pulled out my pair of ice skates.

Oops! As I picked them up off the shelf I felt something strange, and when I inspected more closely, found that the uppers - which are formed of some kind of modern plastic/fabric composite - had begun to decay. Actually, 'begun' is not the operative word here; they were completely decayed, and crumbled at my touch. Bits of plastic and patches of fabric cascaded down onto the floor as I turned the skates over in my hand to inspect them.

This doesn't seem to have been caused by any kind of insect or mold; it seems that the material itself has just 'given up' and come apart. I had to think back and work out how old these were, and as this pair dates from about 1978, it seems that 30+ years is more than we can expect for the lifespan of a pair of skates.

As I sit here now thinking about this, I can't help but wonder if this is perhaps the end of my skating 'career'. Back in Canada - at the time that I bought these - I was not a very active skater, but played the occasional game of pick-up hockey with friends from the company where I worked, and of course frequently visited the rink at the local community centre with my family, for sessions of recreational skating.

I also had some chances to skate after coming to Japan, because - quite unusually for this country - there was a public rink not too far from our apartment. And when my two daughters became teenagers and took up figure skating quite fanatically, I had even more chances to visit the rink, tagging along with them (although I have neither interest nor ability in that kind of skating myself).

They are adults now, and no longer make yearly visits with skates in hand. And as the public rink in Ome closed a number of years ago, there are no longer any casual opportunities for me to go skating. It doesn't get *that* cold here that the local rivers freeze over. Perhaps it's just as well that these skates are 'finished', and will now be thrown away. The chances for me to go skating now are going to be few and far between, not really enough to justify the purchase of a new pair.

I have to say though - that for this typical Canadian boy - the thought that I no longer have a pair of skates in the cupboard, ready for instant use as the opportunity arises, leaves me feeling that something is definitely wrong.

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