



## The Garbageman Cometh!

Not more than a couple of days after moving in to my home in Ome, just over ten years ago, I had a visit from one of my immediate neighbours. She introduced herself, and asked if I would be joining the 'jichi kai', the community association.

I had somewhat mixed feelings about doing so. Fifteen years before this, when our family had first settled in Hamura, the neighbouring town to Ome, we had joined the local association without hesitation. I had wanted to integrate into the local culture as much as I could, and being part of the community association was of course an important part of that. We were completely accepted by the people in the group, and everybody soon got over our 'foreignness'.

Here in Ome though, all those years later, the situation was somewhat different. I no longer had children in the house, and thus didn't need to be concerned that they could 'make friends' with everybody. And as I myself was now very well settled here, the activities of the organization were no longer particularly 'interesting' for me. And the obligations *can* sometimes weigh fairly heavily.

But I didn't want to put myself in the position of being isolated from the community, so I told her that I would join, and she put me into the list of names in the local *kumi* - the group of households in the immediate vicinity.

Since then, I have been reasonable (I think) about my participation in their affairs. I help out with such things as helping to dress the festival carts, but I don't join the annual summer dancing festival, as that's just not my kind of thing ...

One activity that I cannot skip though is the annual 'Spring Cleanup' of the neighbourhood. This is always scheduled for a Sunday morning in early June, and bright and early - around 7:30 - we assemble at the local sports ground to receive our assignments for the morning's work. Actually, this is all pre-determined, and our *kumi* is traditionally assigned the job of collecting the materials assembled by all the other work groups: bags of collected garbage, sacks of grass clippings, and tied bundles of trimmed branches.

So as soon as the assembly is over and people scatter to begin work, my neighbour Abe-san (who is part American) grabs the keys to the largest of the various trucks that are provided for our use by a local company. I swing up onto the open platform at the back, hold firmly onto a rail on top of the cab, and away we go!

We zoom around the neighbourhood in search of things to pick up. Whenever he spots one of the bundles placed at the side of the road by a work crew he slows down (a little). I jump off, grab the stuff and swing it all up onto the truck, then quickly hop back up onto my perch, giving a knock on the cab window to let him know that he can move on.

The second year we did this, he (manfully) offered to let me drive while *he* did all the running and tossing. When he heard that I had no driver's licence he wasn't exactly heartbroken (to say the least), and every year since then we have played the game the same way: he drives, I grab and toss!

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The people doing all the gathering and clipping now know what to expect - the large blue truck roaring down the street towards them, piloted by a grinning Abe-san, with me perched up on top, my beard flying in the wind. We go round and round all the narrow back streets gathering things up, and make repeated trips to the central drop-off point, where another crew stands by to unload it all. After a few hours of this, when we no longer find any bags waiting for us, we make our final drop off, clean out the truck and (somewhat reluctantly) return it to its owner.

We joke together that one of these years, we're going to rent Batman and Robin costumes for this, and you know, I think that we might actually just try that ...

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