



Once is not Enough

There is really only one possible topic for this week's story. Last week this theme tried to push its way to the top of my list, but I held off, and this week it has done the same thing, but in spades. OK, I give in! Anything, but please not again next week!

The Kanto region where I live, and which includes the Tokyo metropolis, isn't one of Japan's heaviest snow areas. To experience good deep snow you either have to head to Hokkaido, up into the Alps, or over to the Japan Sea coast, the area known as *yukiguni* ('snow country').

Here in Tokyo, we'll perhaps get snow just once or twice in a typical winter, usually only around 10~20cm or so, and it's almost always gone within a couple of days.

Up until last week, we thought that we might manage to get right through this winter with no snow at all. Not only have we had no snow, we have barely even seen any clouds. It's been day after day of beautiful clear blue skies.

That all came to an end last Saturday. If I said we had a 'snowstorm' it would be misleading, because it all happened very quietly. Light fluffy snow began to fall in the morning, grew gradually heavier throughout the day, and kept up well into the night. I snapped this photo just before going to bed:



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Now because snow isn't usually a big deal around here, City Hall isn't really ready for it. They have a few trucks that can clear snow, but these are kept busy keeping the main roads and highways open. People like us on back streets are left to our own devices.

Nobody has a snow-blower, and in truth such a tool would be next to useless in this environment. Where would you blow the stuff to? There is only one thing to do - get out the shovels. So we did. Because it was a weekend, and because the trains weren't running, and because the streets were totally blocked, we had a full complement of neighbours on hand. By mid-afternoon we had our area pretty much squared away:



The streets ended up somewhat narrower than they usually are, but at least they were passable.

Over the next few days, under more clear blue skies, the snowbanks shrunk somewhat, but before they could disappear - as I mentioned above - we had a replay, an almost exact replay, this time beginning on Friday about noon and continuing on through Saturday morning, turning to rain for the last couple of hours. A long ruler I shoved into the snow just after it finally stopped showed a depth of over 560mm, just a shade under two feet.

I've been here nearly thirty years, and I have never seen anything like this, and it's not just me. Even the old-timers in the neighbourhood were going around telling everybody "We've never had it like this before ... never!"

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But once again, out came the shovels, and by late afternoon we had it mostly done. It was more difficult this time not just because of the left-over snow from the week before, but because that final 'touch' of rain had made the snow extremely heavy to shovel.

There was a bit of an 'incident' part-way through our work. We had got just scattered parts of the road clear when we heard a cry "Car coming!" from down the road a distance. Some idiot was trying to smash his way through the piles and drifts. Some of our team stepped aside to let him try and pass, but myself and another guy (part American, wouldn't you know) stood in the road, held up our shovels, and barred his entrance to our section of the street. "No way! Turn around and go away! The road is still blocked!" And Abe-san and I emphasized our feelings with a few little choice phrases, free to use such words because none of the ladies nearby could understand them ...

To let that selfish guy try and bash through would have made a complete mess of the work we had done so far, not to mention packing down the snow in the areas we had not yet touched, making our work much more difficult.

He looked at the two of us, thought for a moment or two, and then reversed off back the way he had come. This was a very smart thing to do; I am a very mild-mannered guy, but if he had bulled his way across our partly-finished work, it is quite possible that I might have 'slipped' on the snow just as he passed, and who knows where my shovel might have landed ...

I shouldn't close on that negative note; we had a very enjoyable day, neighbours who don't get to see each other all that often, laughing and chatting as we shoveled away ton after ton of the sticky white stuff.

And everybody making the same kind of joke - waving a fist at the sky "OK, we get it! We've had it pretty easy for a long time, and we've now had our taste to remind us what winter is all about. But twice is enough, OK?!"

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