

"No Bringing in a Japanese Lunch with a Pickled Plum on Rice"

The 1992 Boston Marathon was held on April 22nd, "Patriots' Day" (a holiday in Maine and Massachusetts.) I joined this marathon last year as well as this year. The Boston Marathon in spring and the New York City Marathon in fall, these two races are the greatest pleasures in my life in the U.S. Some of you might have watched these races, often broadcast on TV in Japan, too. Similar to the New York City Marathon, the Boston Marathon doesn't have a "go and return" course with a turning point, but it has just a "one way" course from one place to another. The starting point is a small town in the suburbs of Boston, Hopkinton, and the finish is in the center of Boston. When you feel that the goal is approaching after about a 30-kilometer run, you have to tackle with the famous "Heart Break Hill" in Boston which is coming into sight. This naming of the hill might sound a bit exaggerated, but you'll notice what a tough hill it is after actually running it yourself. Running up the hill is not so hard, but after reaching the top, it'll get arduous itself. You climb up the hill with all your energy, encouraging and saying to yourself that there's no more steep hills after this and that now is the time to endure. After a short break when you've got to the top and you think the rest is the flat course leading to the downtown of Boston, the sudden fatigue thuds into you as if it were waiting for you to come.

This fatigue resembles the middle age crisis around 40. The instant you reach the age, when you can have some rest after clearing the difficulties in the 20's and the 30's, the crisis falls upon you with a thud. (Some people might never understand how it is without actually experiencing it though.) Several gentle slopes in the town, which are far less equal to the "Heart Break Hill" in steepness and length, start torturing you. I felt so this year as well as last year. Especially this year, the rapid rise of temperature exhausted me. My record of this year was 3 hours and 38 minutes, which was 7 minutes slower than that of last year. But the starting point is so crowded every year due to the narrowness of the street, and it takes us over 5 minutes actually to start running after the "Go" signal. Taking all these things into account, I guess my record this year is not so bad.

Anyway all of us come from Boston to this small, starting town on board the coaches chartered for us runners, and we wait here for the 'Go' signal at noon. This little, suburban town, populated by some 2,500 people, comes to be overflowed for a couple of hours with the "enthusiastic runners" reaching the approximate number of 8,000, who join the race from every corner of this country and the world. Literally it is a big festival held once a year in the town. Hopkinton is a typical residential suburb that one can find anywhere in America and it has nothing outstanding from a stranger's viewpoint: one church, one high school, one fire station, and one short main street. After passing along the main street with a gas station, a pub,

a real estate agency and a florist , you'll find nothing but an endless series of cozy houses with front yards. Every house looks well attended and the lawn in the yard is decently trimmed, but there exists nothing to stimulate your imagination. Neither extraordinary gorgeous mansion nor extremely shabby house attracts your attention. This row of houses looks as if to insist that the most valuable virtue in life is not to attract people's attention. This community happened to be chosen as a starting point simply because it is located exactly 26 miles or 42 kilometers from Boston, otherwise it would remain as if it were dozing with no stranger's care, which this town seems to hope for after all.

But participating in the Boston Marathon for the last two years brought me to this small starting town and gave me the chance to observe this peaceful town carefully.

America was in the midst of the Gulf War when I ran in the Boston Marathon last year. Everywhere I went in America, I saw yellow ribbons, the Star-Spangled Banner, and patriotic slogans. It was not exceptional here in Hopkinton, which was seemingly peaceful itself. In the yard of a house near the church, I found an

old jalopy, a Chrysler Dodge, with 'SADDAM' painted on the hood. Next to the car, a hammer was placed. Think the jalopy is Saddam Hussein and hammer it until you feel satisfied. One hammering was one dollar. With the collected money, I heard they were going to raise the funds of the scholarship for the youngsters in the town.

I don't know who hit upon this idea, but it was rather popular and even while I was watching, several town people paid one after another one dollar, took the hammer, and banged the car with all their might. I doubted whether it might be a suitable spectacle for the starting town of the dignified Boston Marathon, but it was inevitable, I thought, judging from the fact that this country was 'at war.'

This year I visited Hopkinton, thinking that there wouldn't be such a thing any more. But to my surprise, a similar car was placed in the same place. I could not help suspecting it was the same car, for the shape and damage degree was quite similar to that of the car last year. Probably it was a similar but different one fetched from somewhere. A car that had been hammered so terribly last year could not serve as their banging target again. Anyway I found no message painted on the hood this year. A hammer next to it and a signboard saying "One Pounding, One Dollar" only reminded me of last year. It also told, just as I guessed, that the collected money was to be used for the scholarship. A runner asked a middle aged man standing aside "Is this a Japanese automobile?" Mumbling for an instant, the man replied that "Um...I don't think so." As far as I noticed, no one hammered the car for one dollar this year. Smashing an automobile with a hammer is, I think, only an outlet for stress and it needs no specific reason, but now I've realized that we need some more practical motivation for hammering after all.

If they had found the words "Japanese Car" written on the hood of the car, some of them might have paid one dollar and pounded it with a hammer. Or they might not have. I can't say anything definite about it, for it is only the matter based on an assumption. But anyway the old

car, waiting for someone to batter it, was tinged with some ominous atmosphere of violence. In the atmosphere was involved 'something' grave which cannot be transmitted by words or expressed in messages. That is why the middle aged man beside the car had to murmur, "No...Um.." after a short interval to the question given by a passing-by runner, instead of giving back a definite, quick reply that "No, this is not a Japanese automobile." Behind his silent interval, I guess, there lies some vague consciousness that "It is no wonder even if this is a Japanese car." His "um..." must be the words unspoken and the message not expressed.

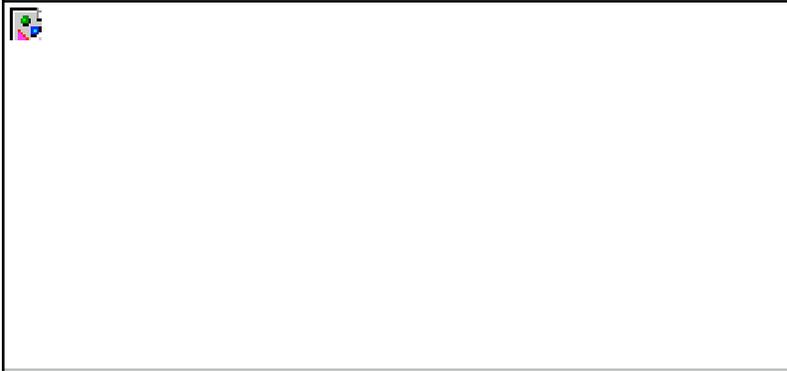
Generally speaking, American's sense of antipathy shifted from Saddam Hussein to the Japanese economy this year. This shifting is very obvious in any field of the news media. The newspapers are fully loaded with the letters from readers and the editorials denouncing Japan and the Japanese. But average Americans, except for the local automobile workers, will not yet pound on a Japanese car with a hammer. They are just listening carefully for the untold words hidden in the air and intercepting the unwritten messages.

Nevertheless, just one time I actually experienced something nasty because "I am Japanese." It happened when I asked them to switch the car I rented at an Avis in Honolulu because of its brake malfunction. A clerk said to me, "How can you foreign Japanese have such an impudent face, coming into our country?" But there is no relation between the malfunction of the brake and the fact that I'm Japanese, and the words just left me at a loss. Since this incident, I've been avoiding Avis as much as possible, but it is a story that happened five years ago and has nothing immediate with today's rising antipathy against Japan.

My Princeton is a calm residential town having the university for its center and inhabited by wealthy people. The people here are either rich or intelligent, or both, and they show no apparent hostility toward the Japanese. But Trenton, a little way from here, has a GM factory in the suburbs and there happened the Japanese-automobile-hammering caused by the layoff of a number of employees due to a large scale operational reduction. A "Buy American" rally was held by the factory workers in front of a Toyota dealer on Route One. Therefore something like this is actually developing in some area of this country, but it doesn't spread as far as this quiet, snobbish town of Princeton. You can see a lot of Mercedes, Porsche, Lexus, Saub, Jaguar, and BMW cars here. No other town has so many foreign cars. Princeton is indifferent to the "Buy American" movement.

The only anti-Japan message I have found in town so far is the "Japan-bashing" sticker shown in Figure A. It was put on the back shock-absorber of a rather old big-sized American car. The car was ahead of me while I was waiting for the traffic signal to turn green at an intersection near home. At first sight, I could not figure out what it was, for the center red circle was too small. So it looked more similar to a Japanese box lunch with a red pickled plum on the center of rice than the Japanese national flag. It must be like the Figure B, if it is properly drawn. It gives us the message "Stop Japan." Figure A shows nothing but "no bringing in a Japanese lunch with a pickled plum on rice." I doubt if the company selling this sticker knows the Japanese national flag correctly, and they might have made it too easily, "drawing a red circle on a white background anyway." This kind of easiness implies something comical, though. No doubt the sticker looked more humorous to me than Figure B. But either way, it is

not very agreeable



This way within a year, the American people's feeling toward Japan has become worse all of a sudden (I feel it's getting a little better in the recent one or two months though), and I'm often asked by Japanese, "Isn't it tough to live in America?" When recently I was talking to a Japanese female student studying at a university in Pennsylvania, she said to me "In my childhood I spent a few years in the States and after going back to Japan, I was still in favor of this country, but this time coming back here again and after living for a while, I've come to feel that I love Japan after all. How about you, Mr. Murakami?"

Asked by her like this, I feel quite puzzled how to answer her question. That is because I think there is no great basic difference in our daily lives, whether you live in Japan or in the States. Of course, it might depend on the age or the social status of the person in question. If one lives in a foreign country in the early stage of life, he or she might be more likely to be influenced by the external conditions and disturbed emotionally. It is quite natural. That is the usual way with younger people. But as for me, there is no remarkable difference in the attitude of everyday life. Here in America, you might meet unpleasant scumbags who make you sore sometimes. You might suffer the invisible racial discrimination. The barrier of a different language, irritatingly enough, might lead you to be misunderstood by someone else. You might encounter someone arrogant or someone too stubborn to have some flexibility. Someone might be always finding fault with you. All these kinds of human relationships might frustrate you to some extent. But you have to remember the same kind of things will happen to you in Japan nearly as often as here in the States. Now I recollect several occasions in Japan when, frustratingly, I couldn't even make myself understood in Japanese. You will find quite a few scumbags in Japan, too, as you know. I imagine that the percentage that these nasty, arrogant, speaking-ill-of-others people occupy among the one hundred nonselective will be almost the same in both countries, if examined carefully. That is also the case with the percentage of the kind or the interesting people.

If asked whether I have some difficulties in living here in the States as a Japanese, I will admit that it is true. But I suffered various sorts of discrimination even while I was living in Japan. Before becoming a writer, I was running a bar and coffee shop in Tokyo, and I experienced

disagreeable things once in a while. When I was trying to find an apartment, the real estate agents often rejected me by saying that "Oh, you are in the bar business. No, no, we have no apartment to rent for the people of that kind." Even after becoming a novelist, I came across the similar rejections when finding a place to live in. "We only rent for the people who belong to the big companies listed in the Primary Tokyo Stock Market.." Compared with the unforgivingly severe history of racism against foreigners or non-Japanese in Japan, the discrimination that I experienced might not be even worth telling, but it is nothing but discrimination after all. You will not figure out how the discrimination is until you stand on the side of the discriminated.

Undergoing this kind of hardships in the course of life weakens the value of alternative thinking whether "I prefer to live in Japan" or "I prefer to live in the States." If I were young, I would choose one from these alternative preferences. But as a matter of fact, I'm not so young anymore and I've been trained to think in a more practical and skeptical manner. My only possible reply to the question that "Isn't it tough to live in the States?" is "It was also tough for me to live in Tokyo." I know quite well that nobody expects such a reply as my answer though.

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