

Flipped Expectations

Cora Showers '20

As I lift my goggles to wipe the foggy lenses, I spot one of the pool workers shuffling towards me. His squeaking flip-flops echo throughout the pool as he moves from his desk near lane one, where a water-aerobics class is in motion, to me in lane four. Kneeling down to meet my level in the pool, he bows his head, as is customary. He avoids eye-contact with me. This isn't the first time I've noticed how uncomfortable some Japanese people are when speaking with foreigners, but it still catches me off guard.

"*Sumimasen*," he addresses me—raising the last syllable so that it sounds almost like an apology rather than a way of getting my attention—before continuing, "*Sumimasen okyakusan, ima earobikusu no kurasu ga arun dakara, kuikku-tānu wa chotto...*"

His Japanese isn't the confusing part, it's his message: flip-turns, the somersault maneuvers that connect swim laps, are not allowed while the water-aerobics class is going on. This seems odd, since I've never heard of something so essential to swimming being banned at a pool, even if there is a water-aerobics class nearby. I nod anyways, excusing myself as I turn to face the windows at the far end of the pool, which let in enough sun to make the water's waves glimmer.

It's the third time I've been to this Kyoto public pool and I still feel a stranger to all of its rules and people. Nobody speaks English here, and my two years of Japanese haven't made meeting new people as easy as I'd hoped. I don't blame the other Japanese swimmers—I've heard from professors before that some of the older generations have hesitations about speaking with foreigners, even foreigners who speak Japanese. Still, it's discouraging how pool patrons always choose the packed lanes next to me rather than sharing my empty center lane.

Sighing, I re-adjust my goggle straps as the men's locker room automatic door glides open, revealing a new face. He's elderly, like most of the clientele at this pool, yet he moves with a lively shuffle as he edges along the pool deck. As he puts on his black swim cap, I feel even more self-conscious about my multi-colored one—everyone at this pool sports a black cap, whereas I'm used to the rainbow pallet of my home pool. Clearly a regular, he bows casually to the two pool workers as he passes by their desk to approach the pool's edge.

His eyes settle on lane three, next to me, his usual spot I assume. Our eyes meet as he glances at me in lane four, returns to examine the crowded lane three, and then he scoots over a few steps towards me.

"*Isshoni oyogimassenka?*" he asks.

His offer to swim together is so unexpected that all I can do is nod. He lowers himself onto the pool edge with more grace than I thought possible from an elderly man. We then politely exchange our names—his is Kunisada-san. I'm unsure what else to say, so I smile, bow, and then push off. After a few laps—notably with no flip-turns—I notice I haven't felt any opposing waves in the lane. Stopping at the wall, I find Kunisada-san watching me, his goggles resting on top of his cap while his right elbow lies on the pool edge. His dark eyes reflect the light from the pool, making them sparkle even more than his grin does.

He comments, "*Shawāzu-san, hayai desu yo.*" I make the appropriate dismissal to his remarks about my 'fast' swimming, since in Japan it's politer to deny a compliment than say "thank you." Not deterred, he continues to praise how smooth my stroke is, followed by me once again denying this. Even though I normally don't enjoy small talk, his high-pitched, subdued voice paired with his animated hand gestures are so welcoming that I feel my stiffness fading.

Slowly, I start to tell him more about myself, how I'm on the Carleton College swim team, how I'm in Japan on a study abroad program—the usual topics that reveal enough about someone to be personal without being too personal. I follow up his questions with a few of my

own, where I learn he's a widowed 78-year-old Kyoto native who swims daily. As he mentions the pool, his eyes shimmer even brighter.

Sensing the natural lull in a conversation that happens when two strangers have run out of small-talk, I reposition my goggles. Kunisada-san clears his voice though, not catching my hint that I was out of things to say.

He scooches towards the center of the lane, closing the few feet between us, and says with a sharpness I didn't imagine him capable of, "*Reisu wo shimasenka?*"

I lift my swim cap from my ears, asking him to repeat the question since I must have misheard. It was the same though, "Shall we race?" His zeal contrasts with his frail body, which stands a good four inches shorter than me, making me question if this is even a good idea—he is an elderly man after all. But in his eyes there's something, almost a yearning, that urges me to agree.

After settling on two laps of the front-crawl, we take our positions on opposite sides of the lane: Kunisada-san on the right, me on the left, both watching the pace-clock for the takeoff time at the 60-seconds mark. He pulls his swim cap over the top rim of his goggles, staring with the gaze of an Olympic swimmer.

Watching him forces me into a moral dilemma. It's obvious I'm the stronger swimmer here, but it's also clear he wants a fair race—to go easy on him would be an insult to his enthusiasm. Nonetheless, if I swamp him, I might offend my sole acquaintance here. There's only one thing to do: make it look like a close race and then touch him out at the last second. As the clock ticks past the 53-seconds-mark, I scramble to position my goggles. At 59-seconds, Kunisada-san launches himself forward in the water. I suck in a breath and push off, streamlined.

The surface of the water parts as I kick up about a third of the way down the pool, bringing me just a little behind Kunisada-san. A trail of bubbles streams from his feet, evidence of a consistent kick that leaves me feeling ashamed of my own sluggish pace. Nevertheless, every time I breathe to my right I see a different section of Kunisada-san's body: first his toes, then his chest, then just water. It's going to be harder than I thought to make this look like a close race.

A blue line marking the ten-meter mark to the wall comes and goes, but Kunisada-san is falling further behind with every stroke. He needs to catch up or it'll be too obvious on the last lap that I'm letting up. There's only one spot this can happen 'naturally,' and that place is the wall. For once, not being able to do a flip-turn is going to prove useful.

Imagining that I'm swimming through molasses, I reach for the pool's wall in slow-motion. I pause, and to my relief, I see that Kunisada-san is just about to the wall too. As I rotate my body 180 degrees—it's faster to push off on one's back and then rotate to the front side, but this is a special case—I open my mouth to take an extra-long breath. And then a wall of water crashes into my mouth. The chlorine burns its way down my throat, sending tears to my eyes as I hack.

Through my tears I discover the reason for Kunisada-san's sudden tsunami of water: though not elegant, his flip-turn was effective at propelling him off the wall and into the final lap. Wait, his *flip-turn*? Didn't the pool worker just say flip-turns are forbidden? This is some double standard. I scramble to wipe away the moisture on my goggles' lenses, and push off again, this time kicking aggressively.

Although I catch up to him, it's only after we've both passed the black half-way mark dotting the pool's floor. Slowing my stroke down to a more moderate pace, we finish off the race how I had expected. Well, not exactly how I'd expected. Though he was by no means an Olympic swimmer, I can't deny that the finish was much closer than I'd planned.

It's probably not right, but I have to ask him why he did a flip-turn. As a regular, surely he should know the rules. Raising my intonation to sound politer, I ask him if we're allowed to

do flip-turns. Adamantly making an 'X' with his fingers—a gesture I've come to understand in Japan as 'bad'—he says we can't because of the water-aerobics class. My eyes drift to the opposite wall, hinting at his race maneuver as I mutter, "*Ano, demo, reisu no toki...*"

He stands to his full height, eyebrows closing together as he defends his flip-turn, "*Demo, reisu deshita yo ne.*" I can't help but laugh at his answer: "It was a race after all, wasn't it?"