OGIKUBO, AT THE WESTERN END OF downtown Tokyo, is known for low-key neighborhood bars, noodle shops and friendly little stores. They're part of the reason why I've lived there for more than a decade. Sadly, though, the spread of chain stores has begun to wipe out those beloved mom-and-pop establishments, just as they have in the United States.

One of those remaining shops is a tiny dry cleaner run by two chatty and maddeningly giggly old ladies. I don't know how long they've been there, but their beat-up shop sign features a seven-digit phone number. (All of Tokyo's local numbers went to eight digits 12 years ago.) The women are probably in their 60s, which isn't all that old. But it takes forever to peel them away from the counter to come to the counter. Or to check your laundry, determine the price, write it down on a slip, take cash and give you change. Or to dig up my clean sweaters. I'm there every other week and they never remember my name. My husband calls them Slow and Slow(er). We can't decide which is which.

I'll admit: they try my patience. Once I had to go back three times to pick up a couple of items. They weren't ready for almost two weeks. "Wow, you are in a hurry," they cheerfully said. "How bad of us! We are terrible!" Just a few days later, I had to drop something else. Feeling proud of myself for giving them another chance so soon, I put a coat on the counter. Then I realized it was the same coat I'd taken home earlier in the week. I had brought the wrong coat! Secretly, I debated whether to cover up my mistake by having it cleaned again, or to lug the bulky, heavy thing with me to work. Slow (or was it Slower?) recognized my dilemma uncharacteristically quickly. "Leave it and pick it up on your way home," she said. "If I'm not here, my sister will be." And that's how I learned they were sisters. No wonder they're hard to tell apart.

Several years ago another dry cleaner, an Ogikubo branch of a big chain, opened next door with a glaring orange sign and crisp-mannered young employees. Oh, no, we said. No way Slow and Slower could survive this. We pledged to patronize the pair as long as they kept their shop. Well, guess what? Not only have they survived, but they've managed to become even slower. Certainly, I haven't seen any effort to speed things up to compete with their new rival. Yet their shop is constantly packed with customers, its counter piled high with clothes. I can't tell if the business is booming or if Slow and Slower are simply disorganized.

After all these years, I'm finally learning how to work with their pace. I'll drop in to tell them I'm off to do some grocery shopping, then swing by half an hour later to collect my cleaning. I'm clearly not the only one who'd rather adjust herself to their ways than to seek more businesslike service elsewhere. One recent morning I saw a young salaryman go in. His dress shirt was still mostly unbuttoned and his tie draped around his neck. As the ladies busied themselves with his laundry, he composedly buttoned his shirt and cuffs, and finished tying his tie just as they finished their task.

The ladies have charmed us all with their vagueness, relaxed demeanor and irrelevant conversations. Their easy, lazy "hello" is such a contrast to the screams of "irasshaimase!"—or "Welcome!"—that you'd get in big chain stores. Their sweetness is not a technique to boost customer satisfaction. The Slow and Slower sisters are a gem in the world of Big Corporations, filled with standardized greetings, regimented briskness and forced smiles. I would share their name and address. But if more customers came, I'd have to wait even longer.