TSUNAMI GIRL



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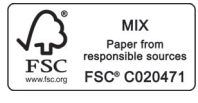
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TSUNAMI GIRL

CHIE KUTSUWADA



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小高（福島県南相馬市）の方々に心から敬意を表します。この物語の小(お)相馬（Osōma）は小高ではなく、2011年3月11日とそれ以降の地震、津波、放射線の三つの災害に見舞われた様々な町や村が混ざり合った場所です。『津波少女』は、これらの町の人々と、彼らの思い出や語りに触発された上で書かれました。しかし、全ての登場人物、物語の設定、出来事は著者の想像によるものです。

Dedicated with deep respect to the people
of Odaka, Minamisōma, Japan.

The town of Osōma in this story is *not* Odaka, but a blending of various towns and villages that suffered the triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami and radiation on 11th March 2011 – and afterwards.

Tsunami Girl is inspired by the people of these towns, and their memories and stories.

But all characters, timings and events are
the work of the imagination.

This is the story of a girl called Yūki. 勇希

The syllable 'Yū' (with a long 'oo' sound) can be written using many different kanji characters. Yūki's name is written with 勇 – meaning 'courage'.

But Yū can also be written 幽 – as in the first character of 'yūrei': 幽霊

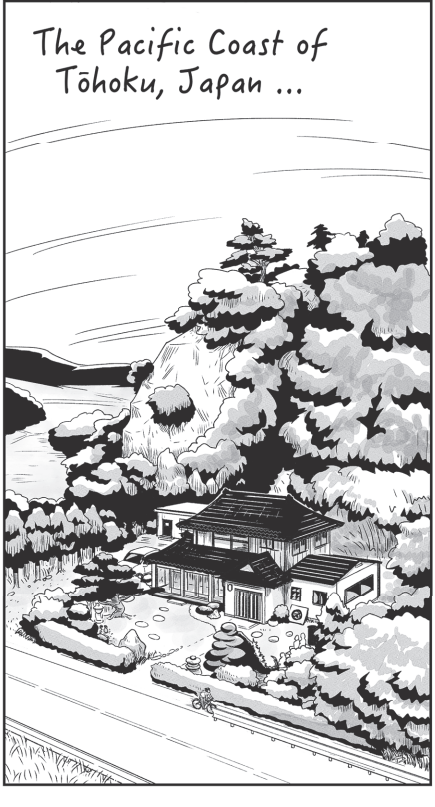
And that means 'ghost'.

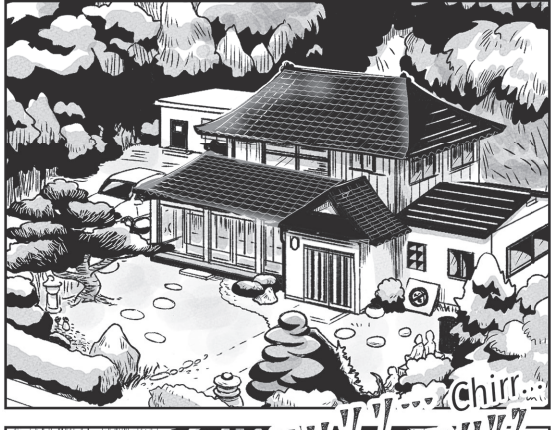
PART ONE

The Wave

波


Mukashi, mukashi. Once upon a time ...

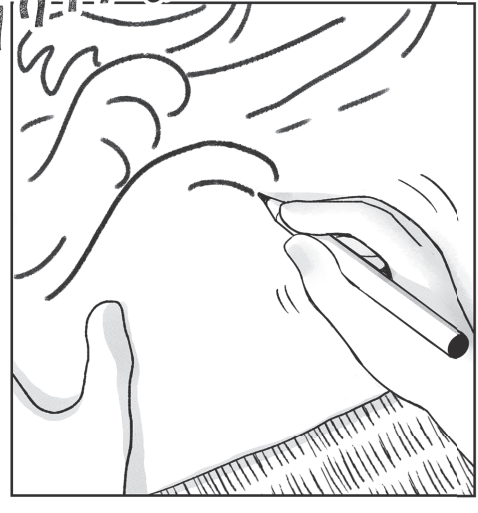

The Pacific Coast of
Tōhoku, Japan ...

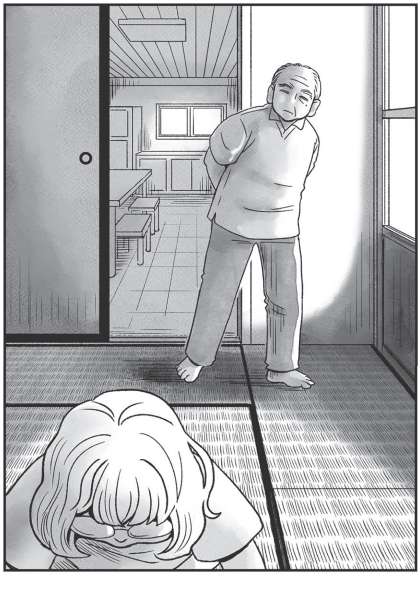

Chirr...

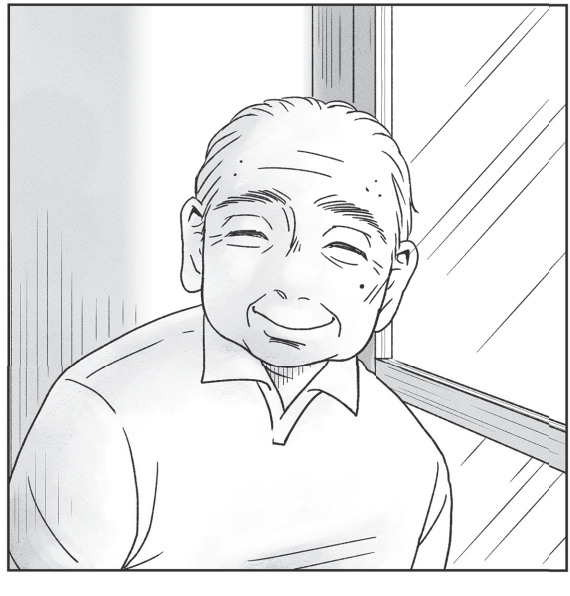

Chirr...
Chirr...

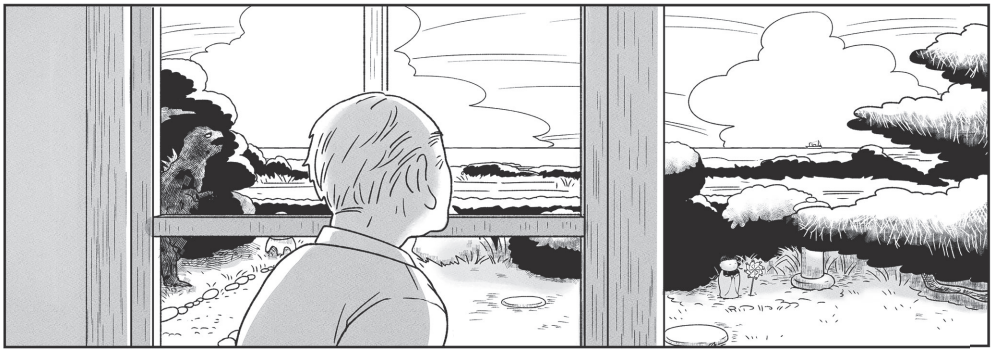

Chirr...
Chirr...
Chirr...

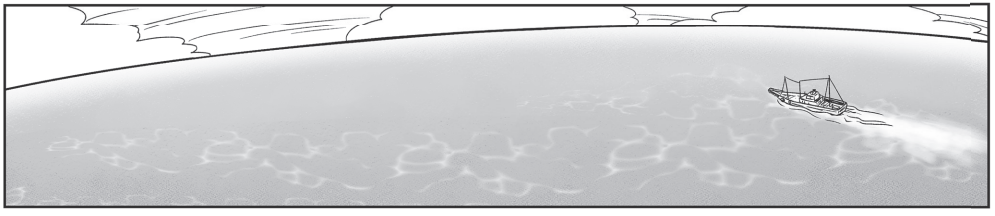

Summer 2003.
The cicadas are calling.


Chirr...



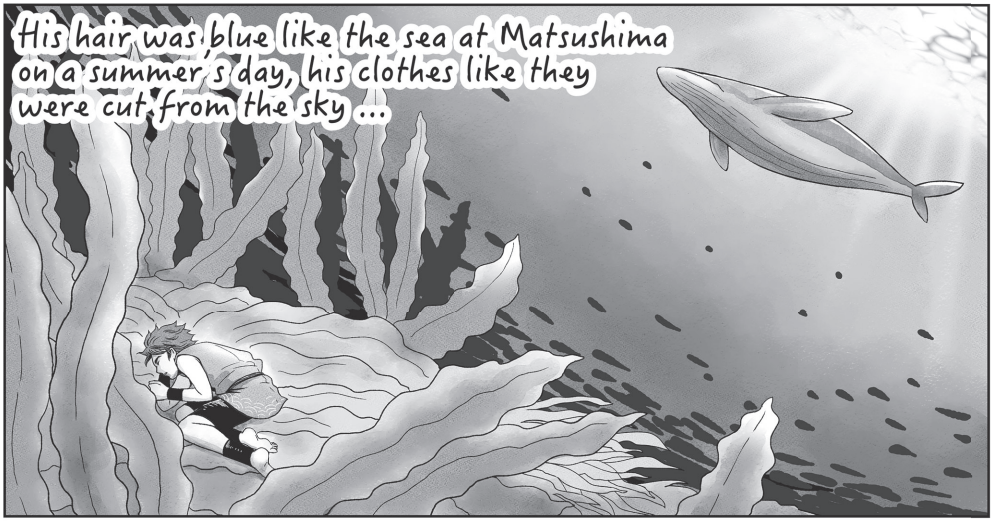


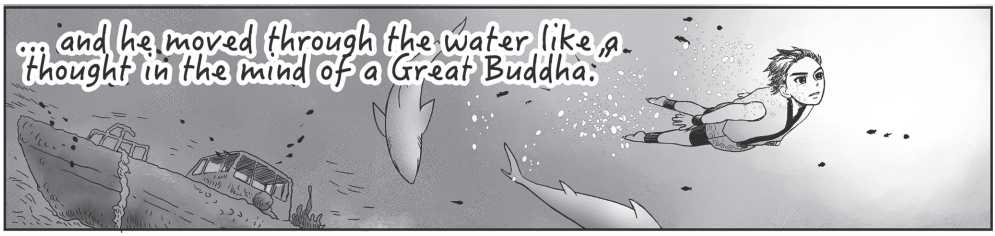


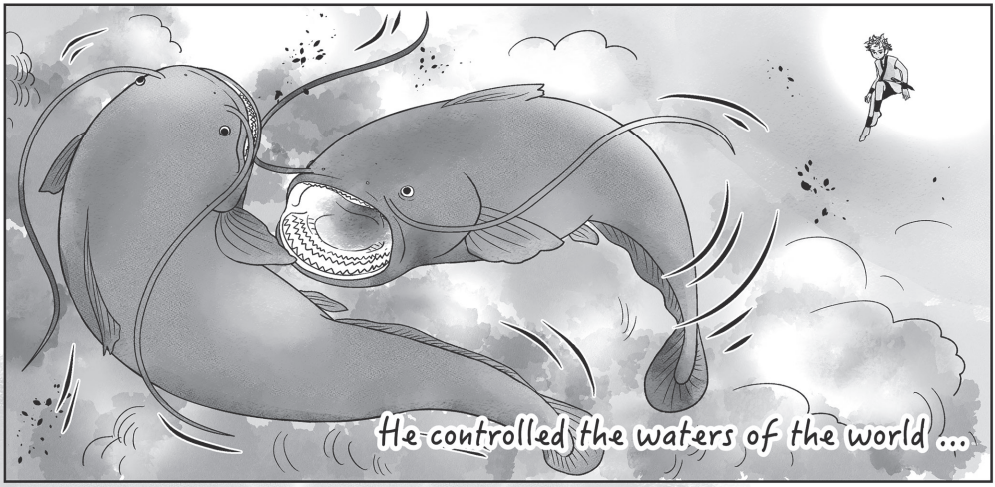


Once upon a time, deep down at the bottom, of the ocean, there was an underwater boy.

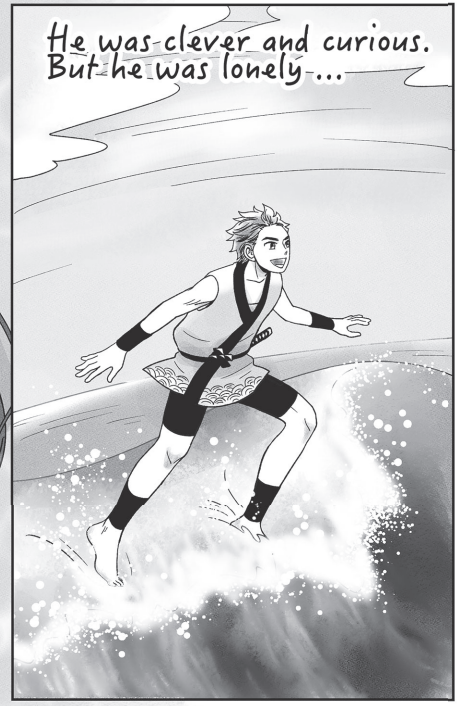





... and he moved through the water like a thought in the mind of a Great Buddha.


He controlled the waters of the world ...


... and sang lullabies to calm the monster catfish that send the earthquakes.


He was clever and curious. But he was lonely ...


So, one day, a long, long time ago ...
I am Half Wave.
Humbly and eternally
at your service.
Yoroshiku onegai
mōshiagemasu.

1

Eternity

AN HOUR BEFORE THE WAVE comes, just ten short minutes before the earthquake shakes her world to pieces, Yūki starts to smile.

At first it's almost too small to see. But the smile is real, and therefore beautiful – and Grandpa spots it at once from across the table. He feels his own face mirroring hers, the deep lines on his forehead relaxing.

Ahhhhh, he thinks, maybe it's all going to be OK, maybe *I'll* be the one to bring you back to life Yūki-chan and rescue you from your troubles – and you can again be that girl who wanted to fly the biggest carp kites on the coast of Northern Japan, no matter how strong the wind came thrumming off the sea. Who demanded to light the fireworks yourself when we launched rockets from the hill on warm summer nights.

His bad dream of last night dissolves in his granddaughter's smile. She's trying to maintain some precious teen cool, he can see that – but she can't quite manage, and the smile's kind of out of control now, lifting her mouth, spreading, brightening her

eyes like winter sunshine. Grandpa Jiro watches and waits patiently as she pushes a hand through her long, not-quite-black hair, her eyes fixed on the drawings in front of her.

The clock in the kitchen ticks a loud minute, and the heater purrs away under the table.

Finally Grandpa clears his throat. 'Well, Yū-chan? What do you say?'

Yūki tilts her head, considering. Outside the old family house she can hear the pines sighing in a cold March wind, a few crows calling blackly like always. But under the quilt at the sunken *kotatsu* table it's warm and snug, and it feels so good to be here again.

She looks up from the sketchbooks to find her grandfather peering back at her, his sparse white eyebrows arched.

'Yū-chan, you're *damn* well smiling! The first time I've seen you do that since you arrived.'

'I smiled at least twice yesterday, Grandpa . . .'

'Hmmm. When?'

'At the restaurant. At the station?'

'Well, just about, I guess.' He taps the table with a heavy index finger. 'Anyway, the point is that this old stuff of yours is *so* very good, Yūki!'

She pulls a face. 'But all kids do drawings like these.'

'No. You're wrong – there's real energy in them. And focus. I know what I'm talking about. Look how you *place* it all on the paper!'

'I kind of remember them being bigger.'

He laughs. 'Sometimes you drew *huge* seascapes and you'd yell, *Grandpa, more paper!* and I'd have to tape extra sheets on the sides. *Yū-chan no kaita umi ga afureteta yo*!'

'My seas . . . what?'

He repeats the Japanese slowly. 'I said: the – seas – you – drew – used – to – overflow! The more paper I taped on, the more you kept just adding wave after wave.'

'Sorry, my Japanese is so rusty . . . Mum keeps correcting my verbs all the time.'

'I never care what damn politeness level you use, as long as you're talking to me. And you always get quicker when you're here . . . Your Japanese is fine.'

He points at the sketchbooks stacked in the black biscuit tin, their Japanese cloth covers glowing burnt orange, indigo, moss green. 'We're supposed to be talking about how good your old drawings are. Most little kids don't do the amount you did, and they certainly don't do anything as good as these. Remember, you're talking to a Tezuka Award winner!' He puffs his chest out, pulling down the corners of his mouth like some fierce Japanese ogre.

'A big shot!'

'Right!' He laughs. 'Only you know how to talk to me, Yūki. I've missed that.'

'You should put that award out on a shelf or something.'

'Pah.' He wafts the thought away. 'I'd forgotten old Half Wave. He used to be all you talked about . . . kind of part of the family . . .'

Something catches in his throat, and he clears it loudly again. 'You worked like a real pro, Yūki! Look!'

She watches as Grandpa flips the concertina pages of the dark blue book in front of her. The thick paper has yellowed a tiny bit, but the coloured pencil is still vibrant. So certain – so childish – it feels like someone else drew the images. But the weird thing is, she remembers doing *every* single drawing as soon as they pop into view:

a *kappa* monster, sunk to the shoulders in a pond between tall green reeds, his saucer-like head balancing a massive cucumber, grinning at the viewer with teeth so sharp they could be biting the paper . . .

a rounded hill with a dark sky and fiery lanterns floating up from it past a grinning moon, and the words 'WELCOME HOME DED PEOPLE. PLEAS ENJOY YOUR STAY' jammed into a buoyant speech bubble.

a little shrine with a curling roof line – the paper screens of the doorway alive with eyeballs, one to each panel, thirty or more staring out at the viewer, shaky Japanese characters around it, spelling out '*MUKASHI MUKASHI*' – and the English squeezed in below: 'ONCE UPON A TIME, IN A PLACE FAR FAR WAY, THERE WAS A VERRY HAUNTED PLACE . . .'

And on every page there's at least one simple, but sure-handed drawing of a boy with bright blue wavy hair: running on the shrine roof, diving down between clouds of fish to a sinking ship, gliding through tangled fragments of Japanese, misspelt English and sound effects.

'HALF WAVE TO RESCUE . . .'

'IN ONE LEEP HE JUMPED OVER THE VOLCANO. *Fwooooooshh!*'

'THE KAPPA SMILED AND WENT TO SLEEP AND THE VILLAGE WAS SAYVED. THE END!!!' おわり

Grandpa sits back, and instinctively Yūki leans forward and turns the next page to reveal a mountainous wave, coloured in every shade of blue you could imagine – or at least every single blue in the huge pencil sets Jiro used to gift her for birthdays.

Riding barefoot on the wave's back, there he is again: the boy, in traditional summer clothing, his bright hair standing straight up, his face more smile than anything else. From his mouth a speech bubble: '*Han Nami desu*!! I am Half Wave!! I will do my honourable best.'

'When you smile like that,' Grandpa says quietly, 'you could chase *any* shadow from *any* corner of *any* place. No matter what.'

Yūki's eyes are still on Half Wave. 'How old was I – when I did these?'

'Six? Maybe seven. Remember you always wanted to use my special Rotring pen? *I want to be just like Grandpa*, you shouted!'

'I ruined the nib, didn't I? And you shouted at me, Grandpa!'

'I doubt that! I always encouraged you.' Grandpa starts to get up stiffly from the *kotatsu*. 'These skills skip a generation, I hope you're still drawing a bit?'

'Not really.'

'Not really?'

'It just comes out lame.'

'Everyone thinks that. You've just got to find your own style. Borrow things from other people and mess around until you find your way. Make it fun, and maybe,' he leans forward, 'and maybe

it can help you get going again, you know – get rid of some of your problems. Wake you up, like cold water in a sleeping ear? Maybe?'

'Grandpa,' Yūki groans, 'not you as well.'

Jiro winces, flapping his hand again to wave his words away. 'Sorry. Ignore me. I'm not about to nag like the rest of them, Yū-chan. I promise.'

'I just need a break from all that.'

'I know. I absolutely promise I'll give you that break.'

She nods, and looks away to the high window. You can just see the tree-covered shoulder of the bluff behind the house from where she is sitting – the steep-edged hill they always used to call 'Little Mountain' when she was small. The crows are busy in the branches, more of them gathering now, calling louder.

'I'm doing my best, Grandpa. Mum and Dad don't think I am, but I *am*.'

'I know you are, Yūki. You'll be OK. Of that I am sure.'

As if on cue the crows suddenly fall silent and then – as one – lift from the pines, scattering into the white sky beyond the frame of the window. She watches the last one go, then finds her eyes pulled back to the rolling wave, the boy riding its arched back, the peacock blues of his hair.

Somehow, some-*when*, she can still feel her fingers gripping the pencils super tight, smell the graphite as she scribbled away, trying to make her lines like the ones Grandpa effortlessly drew – if she nagged long enough.

Grandpa, draw me a real karakasa *haunted umbrella!*

How many eyes should there be in a paper screen to make a proper moku-moku-ren?

The more eyeballs the better for a haunted house, Jiro would murmur. *But I want your version.*

He sighs now. 'I've got a whole box more of those books, you know. I kept them all. And even one or two of those huge sea-scapes rolled up in the studio. I always felt a bit sorry for him though, to be honest.'

'Sorry for who?'

'Half Wave, of course. He needed a companion of some kind . . . you know, someone special, instead of always battling on his own. It's no fun singing on your own all the time, right? Want to see more?'

'Maybe later. I want to look at some of the original drawings for your stuff. You promised me you would this time.' She's boasted about Grandpa's grown-up manga to her almost-friend Joel back in Cambridge, and wants to take pictures home as proof. An excuse to talk to him again.

'As long as your mother doesn't have a fit. Even I'm shocked at some of what I drew back then. Sex and violence and death and all that jazz, particularly when I was still in Tokyo.' He scratches the back of his head. 'Drinking a bit too much, getting all worked up like things mattered!'

'I'm nearly sixteen, Grandpa,' Yūki says, 'I know about that kind of thing.' She reaches out to nudge the dark blue sketchbook away.

But as she touches it – and maybe it's only her memory playing

tricks when, later, she's back in these precious minutes with Jiro – it's as if an electric charge zips through her, and she jerks her hand away with a sharp intake of breath. Jetlag? Sometimes she gets this kind of zingy feeling on the first day after landing in Japan. Or something else?

'Are you OK?'

She nods. 'I'm just glad to be here, Grandpa.'

'We're a team, you and me. Which reminds me,' Jiro says, 'I have a belated birthday present for you.' And unlike the usual Japanese way of making light of a gift – *it's nothing at all really, sorry for burdening you with it* – he says, 'It's something kind of special. I want *you* to have it.'

'That's a very late present, like eight months late!'

'Or a very early one. Happy sixteenth!'

'Oh, yes, wait!' Her smile is back. 'I've got something for you too. It's in my room, hang on.'

Grandpa watches as she bounds away up the polished stairs, drafting an email to Yūki's mother in his head: 'Dear Kaori. Your wonderful daughter seems pretty fine to me . . . Some of us just take longer than others to find our way, right? Maybe lighten up on her a bit? Just my opinion, but . . .'

Once upon a time, *mukashi mukashi*, there was a boy, an underwater boy who could ride the waves on bare feet and loved to sing – and whose song controlled the waters of the world. He came from out of the sea, but loved the land and the people who lived on it, and had a huge heart and eyes that could see clearly.

Who calmed the catfish, and rescued sailors in distress and dealt with any trouble that came along: vengeful ghosts, naughty *kappa* monsters and *kitsune* fox spirits, volcanoes.

Tsunamis maybe.

And Half Wave's song floated under the stars as he surfed the waves, and everything was fine, totally fine. Young Yūki dreamed him up from wherever heroes come from, and he – in turn – made her. But in the end the little hero slipped away into the water, forgotten in the usual mess of growing up, just as a wave breaks and merges back into the ocean again.

Jiro looks at his granddaughter now as she comes back slightly out of breath, holding a wrapped box of fancy biscuits. 'From Kazuko and Mum. The ones you like.'

'It would be good if they brought them here in person.' He glances at the string of black letters and kanji written on the back of Yūki's hand as he takes the station gift. 'You know, I asked your Grandma this morning what would help you. I still talk to her every day – and she told me what to do.'

Yūki nods, trying not to let her disbelief show, but he spots it. As always.

'It's a crying shame to be such a sceptic at your age,' Jiro says, shaking his head. 'I blame your father. He doesn't come from here. We have ghosts and shrines on every corner. Every big tree and rock has its *kami-sama*, right? Warriors, waves, wind. You can *feel* them! Your grandmother got it, and she was from England, so it can't be just that.'

'She was from Wales, Grandpa.'

'She always used to get mad about that.' He bows slightly, switching, into three awkward words of English. '*Forgive me, Anna*. Anyway, you know what: I don't believe you. You still feel that stuff. You – don't – fool – me!'

Yūki fixes her gaze on the sun logo on the old black biscuit tin from which he's conjured the sketchbooks.

'Listen to me, Yū-chan. Please.' Jiro's voice has become serious now, and as she glances up she sees that shadow that just occasionally flickers across his face. There a moment, then gone.

'Are you OK, Grandpa?'

'Totally fine. We're talking about you, my girl. You come from here. At least a quarter of you does, physically, and far, far more in here!' He taps his heart. 'You told us all you saw our *zashiki warashi* once, our little phantom who helped look after the house . . .'

Yūki shakes her head. 'It was just a game, just imagination—'

'Damn it!' Jiro thumps the table with his fist. 'Never – never – say "just" before the word "imagination". Never. It gives us power, life. If people had never imagined being able to fly, we'd never have invented planes, right? And we'd never have had Astro Boy or Godzilla or Laputa. That's not a world I'd like to live in! Never forget the power of imagination. Right now I can imagine flying high up above our house and looking around . . .'

He gazes up.

'Imagine being a superhero and you can jump right across the sky! Imagine being in love and you can be in love. Only

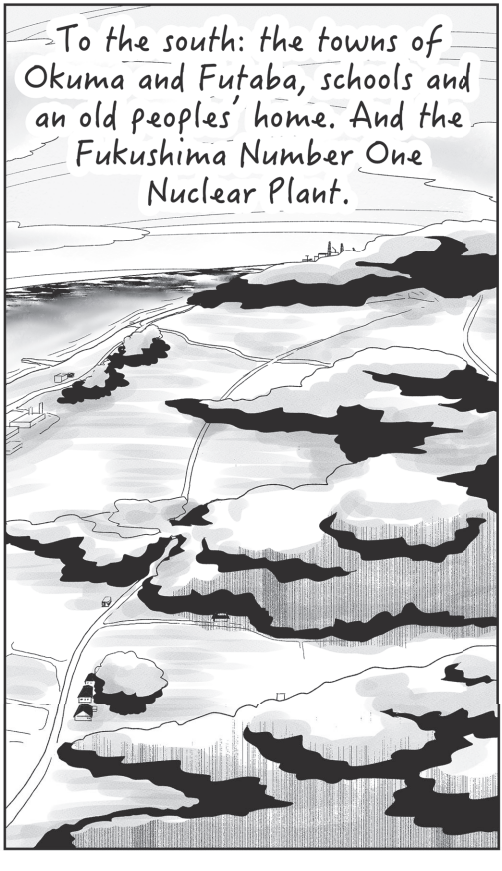
imagination can capture eternity, right? You were always the *best* person to do Obon Festival with, Yūki, because you and I were the only ones who *really* imagined the dead coming home. The rest were just going through the motions, but we did it properly. To honour them. Full stop.'

'Yeah, it *was* good,' she murmurs.

She follows his gaze upwards, remembering the cicadas and frogs calling as they went up Little Mountain through the lengthening summer evening, lighting the lanterns at the top, and waiting in the dark to welcome the dead home, just for a while. Those nights seemed like they would last for ever.

'It was really good.'


March 11th, 2011. 2.36pm. Ten minutes to the quake.
Chirr...
Chirr...
Chirr...


To the south: the towns of Okuma and Futaba, schools and an old peoples' home. And the Fukushima Number One Nuclear Plant.


To the west there are mountains, and to the north, the town of Osoma.


And to the East?
2.45pm

Grandpa stumps off to get whatever it is he's going to get, whistling the scrap of tune he always whistles, seven notes repeating, and then singing the next line of the song, his voice breaking as it clambers up into the higher notes.

'I can't forget how the tears blurred my eyes, can't forget happiness under starry skies . . .'

Yūki feels her smile stealing back. Apart from that one little misstep when he brought up her problems – and the moment when he snapped a bit yesterday evening – he's on great form, she thinks. He's not nagging like Mum and Dad, he's not like wild Aunt Kazuko, talking super-fast about *hopeless* boyfriends and tarot readings. He's just Grandpa Jiro: feet on the ground, a bit gruff at times, but always the same. Always here, just like the house has always been here.

She edges the dark blue sketchbook back towards her with her index finger, wondering vaguely if a book can actually shoot out static somehow.

And then she sees her finger has started to tremble like mad.

And every single thing around her is shaking with it: her hand, her arm, the books on the table, the black tin and its yellow sun, the table itself, the walls. A steady percussive rattling of crockery and cutlery and doors and windows in their frames – *gata gata gata gata* – that grows and grows until the house itself moves, and with a resounding shudder a bookcase next door tumbles to the floor, spilling its great weight of manga stories into the doorway in a landslide of paper and ink and card.

She looks at Grandpa in alarm as the noise gets louder and louder and louder

. . . and the whole world is shaking,

tumbling,

breaking apart . . .