

Hiroshi's Search

Yamamoto Hiroshi was searching the now devastated costal valley, just as he had been searching during the past five days. The rescue workers had told him that he should stop looking as it was pointless now; but Hiroshi determined to continue his search. He would come back each day as long as it took. He had to find his mother.

Hiroshi had realized that she must certainly be dead. But he had to find her; if he could not find her body, he needed to find something: a shoe, some clothing, anything he could place on the family shrine.

Now today it was snowing. Hiroshi felt the cold and the falling snow made searching more difficult. He was tired; he had not slept properly since the earthquake.

Hiroshi recalled the earthquake. He had known several earthquakes during his lifetime. The Japanese buildings and houses were built to survive earthquakes; he knew his earthquake drill. He and his wife, Kazumi, had sheltered to protect themselves from any falling objects. Earthquakes were a troublesome interruption but never lasted long and one soon got over them.

But this one had lasted nearly six minutes, with the ground shaking the whole time. Hiroshi had thought this is what it must feel like on a ship in rough seas, with the deck moving uncontrollably. This must, he had thought, have been a really strong quake and he had wondered if there had been any serious damage, though he knew that in Japan buildings could withstand most earthquakes.

Kazumi had felt sick after all that long shaking. But they had gathered themselves together to tidy up where things had fallen. Then they had heard the sirens warning the town of an impending tsunami.

Hiroshi had not been surprised; tsunamis often followed earthquakes. The tsunami shelter was not too far away and, in any case, the town's harbour had a high sea wall to protect the town against tsunamis. When the gates in the wall were closed, no tsunami would hit the town.

But Kazumi had been worried.

"That was no ordinary quake," she had said. "It went on and on and on. I thought it was never going to stop. Supposing the seawall got damaged in the quake."

"But," he had told her, "it's built to withstand earthquakes. Don't worry, we've had tsunamis before."

"I know," she had replied, "and we've had earthquakes before – but nothing like the one we've just had. That lasted far longer than anything we have known. I'm afraid the tsunami will be far greater than anything we have known. I really am very frightened."

Hiroshi had assumed that Kazumi was getting herself upset because she had felt so sick during the earthquake.

"All right," he had said to her. "If it makes you feel better we'll get in the car and drive up the valley onto higher ground."

"Thank you," she had replied.

He had thought about driving down the valley to fetch his mother who lived alone ever since his father had died nearly two years ago. But he had known Kazumi would have got even more worked up. Besides, did not his mother live almost next to a tsunami shelter? Was she not surrounded by neighbours who would make sure she was all right? Even if the seawall was breached, she would be safe.

Hiroshi had begun driving up the valley, not worried himself, but to comfort Kazumi. Then he had become aware of something odd going on behind him. In the car mirror he had seen the tsunami approaching. It could not be possible – but there it was. It was huge, as Kazumi had known it would be, and it was coming towards them at unbelievable speed – much faster than the car would go. He had seen a few metres away a tall building – a tower block above the fire-station.

Hiroshi had slammed on the brakes and, grabbing Kazumi, had run towards the tower block. They had only just been in time; the water was already lapping around their feet as they hurried up the steps. They had arrived, out of breath on the fourth storey. Only then had they stopped.

What Hiroshi and Kazumi had seen as they looked out was beyond anything they had imagined. There was water filled with cars, lorries and debris of buildings all around them as far as they could see. They had watched in horror as two ocean-going ships were tossed along helplessly in the lower part of the town.

Eventually the tsunami had spent itself and the waters had begun to retreat back to the ocean. Hiroshi and Kazumi had gazed stupefied at the wreckage all around them, and wondered what to do.

He had realized then for the first time that the tsunami shelter would have been no shelter at all against this tsunami, that no matter how helpful the neighbours were they could not have protected his mother. He was struck with pangs of guilt for not going to rescue her. But he knew quite well that he could not have done so; if he had driven down the valley to her, he would have driven straight into that tsunami and he and Kazumi would surely have been killed themselves.

If he had not been able to save his mother while she was alive, the least he owed her was to find her body, if at all possible, and see that it was properly cremated so that her spirit could be free for its journey in the next life.

Meanwhile, word had come that the No.1 middle school higher up on the hillside had been turned into a refuge for survivors, so they had made their way there. There was shelter and food, but that was rationed. The electricity supply, they had found, was only for a certain number of hours each day as the supply had been affected by the earthquake and tsunami and provision of electricity was low.

After the terrible ordeal, Kazumi had been overjoyed when, against all her expectations, rescuers brought her mother in the next day. But Hiroshi's mother had not been brought in by any rescuers and so he had begun his daily search.

Meanwhile on her television, Kazumi's aunt, Mai, had seen pictures of Kazumi being reunited with her mother. Fortunately Mai's house was higher up on the hillside above the valley and had not been affected by the tsunami, though there had been some damage from the earthquake; but the house had been well made to withstand earthquakes and the damage had not been too great.

Hiroshi, Kazumi and her mother had accepted Mai's invitation and moved in with her. Hiroshi could continue his search with a little less worry, knowing that Kazumi and her mother were being looked after.

Now here he was five days later searching through the debris once again; the cold was making him feel weak and the snow made the search hard. Perhaps the rescuers had been right: he was simply wasting his time. Would he not be better back at the house with Kazumi, her mother and Mai? Yet, he felt, that as a dutiful son he must continue the search.

In the late afternoon Hiroshi at last found something that gave him some

cheer. It was the photograph of his father that they had kept on the family shrine at home. Hiroshi returned to Mai's house almost happy that evening. He cleaned up the photograph as best as could and patched up the damaged frame. It still showed some signs of damage but he hoped his father would understand as he placed the photograph on the shrine, made the customary offerings of tea and rice and burnt incense there.

That night Hiroshi slept properly for the first time since the earthquake had struck on the afternoon of March 11th. In his sleep that night he saw his father who commended him for his efforts at restoring the photograph and placing it on Mai's family shrine.

"As for your mother," his father told him. "Look no more among the rubble and debris of the town or on the valley side. Go to the sea shore. She was caught up in a great eddy with parts of our old house and was taken out to sea; but she has now been washed up and lies on the sea shore. But be aware that there are very many bodies there and you will need to look with care. You are a dutiful son and the Lord Buddha will guide."

When Hiroshi woke the next morning he told Kazumi about his dream.

"It is well," she said. "Your search will be rewarded. Perhaps things will begin to get better for us."

That morning Hiroshi set off again through the snow and made his way to the sea shore. His father had been right; there were bodies strewn all along the shore. It is as well that it is so cold now, he thought, otherwise the bodies would surely be rotting.

He saw rescuers carefully wrapping up bodies and taking them away to the mortuary for identification. He wondered if his mother had been taken. But something led him on, then he saw her. He had found his mother.

He called rescuers to help him. Her body was taken from the shore and Hiroshi saw to it that she was properly prepared and he arranged her cremation for the following day.

Kazumi had been right; things did gradually improve for them. Surely the dutiful Hiroshi had been rewarded.