

## Home

by Jessica Zhang

That fateful day, Satoru had been throwing notes onto my desk when the teacher wasn't looking.

"Hey. Can't you just tell me who you like?"

"Never," I scribbled to him in return, knowing that my answer would only lead to me being teased later.

"You can't even give me a hint?"

"She's pretty. She has long, flowing hair, her eyes are beautiful like pools of syrup, and her voice is like the sound of wind rustling through cherry blossom trees in the spring."

This time, the paper bounced off my head, and I shot him a dirty look as I unfolded it.

"That's like every third year in school! Gosh, you can't be more specific than that?"

"If you beat me to the hill today, then we'll talk."

In truth, it wasn't a girl that I'd loved. It was the gentle sound of blue waves lapping at the shore, painting beautiful arcs of brown on white. It was the ripples dancing as flat stones skipped across the surface. It was the cool rushing of water over my toes as my feet burrowed deeper into the wet sand of Ryori Bay. I was in love with the ocean, in all of its sophisticated beauty.

First came the shaking.

As I crouched under my desk, a knot of fear tightened around my heart. My arms, clutching the spindly, metal legs of the table, rattled so furiously that I thought my bones might shatter like glass. I heard the sounds of plaster ripping from the ceiling, crashing down over us, drowning out the sound of my classmates' frightened screams.

Then came the relief. The shaking stopped as quickly as it had began. My teacher surveyed the class and asked if anyone was injured. We were scared. Some of my classmates were crying. I wasn't, though tears streamed down my face from my eyes having been squeezed shut so tightly.

Then came the sirens. The panicked orders barked through loudspeakers in our town.

The students clamored over rubble, running for the doors, the windows, anything that would get them out of the building. The hill was five minutes away if you ran fast. Four minutes if you ran faster. But it wasn't a contest of arriving there - it was a contest of climbing the steep slope, slick with mud from the morning's spring shower.

I panted, Satoru hot on my tail as we sprinted past the rest of our classmates. Every day after class, he would promise to beat me. Every day, he lost. He would laugh off the defeat, teasing that I could run fast but I couldn't run for long. The grass was slippery, but I hardly noticed each time I fell. The air was cold and muggy, suffocating me as I gasped for panicked breath.

The sprinting slowed to a run. The run slowed to a jog. The jog slowed to a walk. The walk slowed to a stop.

"Kazuya, you tired already or something?," spat Satoru through his coughs of exhaustion. "We aren't even half way up the hill! Come on, we have to go!"

He tugged at my arm, and as my weight shifted, my foot slid underneath me and I crashed to the ground. I couldn't even muster the energy to answer his panicked apologies, only crawled to my feet to continue onward. But as I continued to stumble, and after several more falls, I resorted to dragging my body through the grassy mud.

"We must be high enough", I said, as Satoru finally took his first pause. He turned with a retort ready, mud streaked across his forehead despite the cool weather. In the brief moment that he opened his mouth, fear suddenly flashed into his dark eyes.

"Look."

I painfully climbed to my feet and looked behind me. The tsunami rose to meet my gaze, a giant, lonely, black wall casting a shadow over the shoreline where I'd once stood. Nothing about it reflected the beautiful sea that I'd called home. As it swelled higher and higher, I could feel nothing but betrayal. The wave rushed forward, and as it swallowed up the cherry blossom trees in the park, the house where I lived, the pool where I swam -

"Kazuya-"

my high school building, the path that I raced Satoru every day -

"Kazuya, *RUN. IT'S COMING.*"

His words pulled me out of my stupor, and we frantically scrambled further up the hill. The rush of the wave was deafening in my ears as it drew closer, my heart beating like a hollow drum. Neither of us dared to look behind us.

The wave slammed into the ground barely missing our heels, and the impact of the resulting splash knocked us flat onto our stomachs. I flipped over to watch as that wave slinked back down the mountain. I convinced myself that my face was wet from the salty ink which had drenched us - not tears.

Both of us left speechless, we could do nothing but wait as the water churned through the city. Bobs of debris swirled around, and I was reminded of the green onion soup that my mother would prepare for me as a child when I was sick, stirring it with a pair of chopsticks before bringing the bowl to my lips. I wasn't sure why I was remembering it now, of all times.

Minutes or hours later, the water finally began to sweep away the mess it had created, the same way that I swept my collection of sea glass under my bed for fear of Satoru's bullying. I scanned the barren city desert left behind, dizzily confused when I couldn't seem to locate my house.

The truth hit me harder than any tsunami could have. I knew in that moment that I would never be able to return home again.