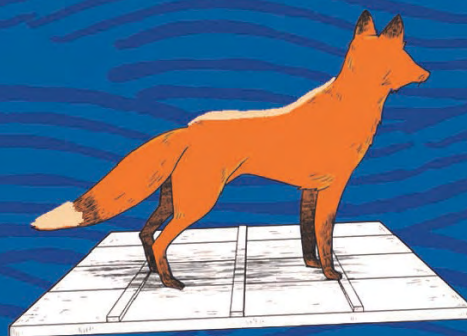


JULIAN SEDGWICK



TSUNAMI GIRL



CHIE KUTSUWADA

TSUNAMI GIRL



**GUPPY
BOOKS**

TSUNAMI GIRL

Julian Sedgwick

Illustrations by Chie Kutsuwada



TSUNAMI GIRL
Is a GUPPY BOOK

First published in the UK in 2021 by
Guppy Books,
Bracken Hill,
Cotswold Road,
Oxford OX2 9JG

Text copyright © Julian Sedgwick
Illustrations © Chie Kutsuwada

978 1 913101 466

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

The rights of Julian Sedgwick to be identified as the
author of this work has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by
any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or
otherwise, without the prior permissions of the publishers.

Papers used by Guppy Books are from well-managed
forests and other responsible sources.



GUPPY PUBLISHING LTD Reg. No. 11565833

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset by Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Books Ltd

Dedicated with deep respect to the people
of Odaka, Minsamisōma, 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

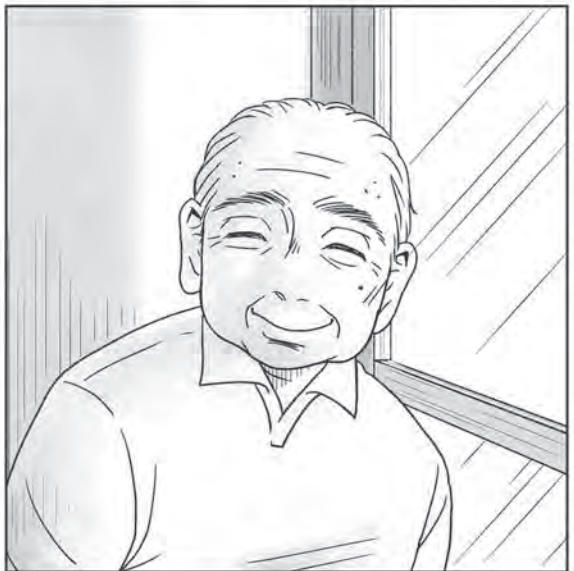
波

Mukashi, mukashi. Once upon a time ...



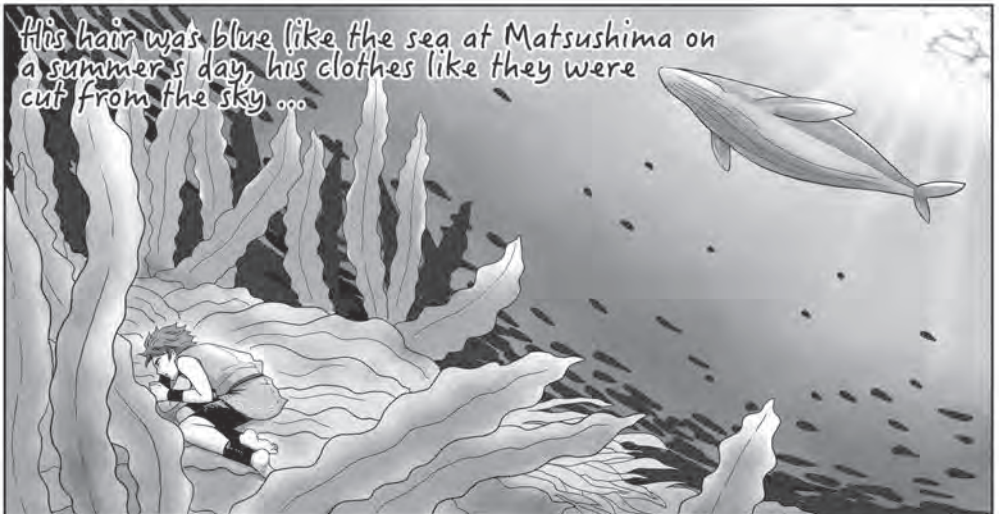
The Pacific Coast of
Tohoku, Japan ...







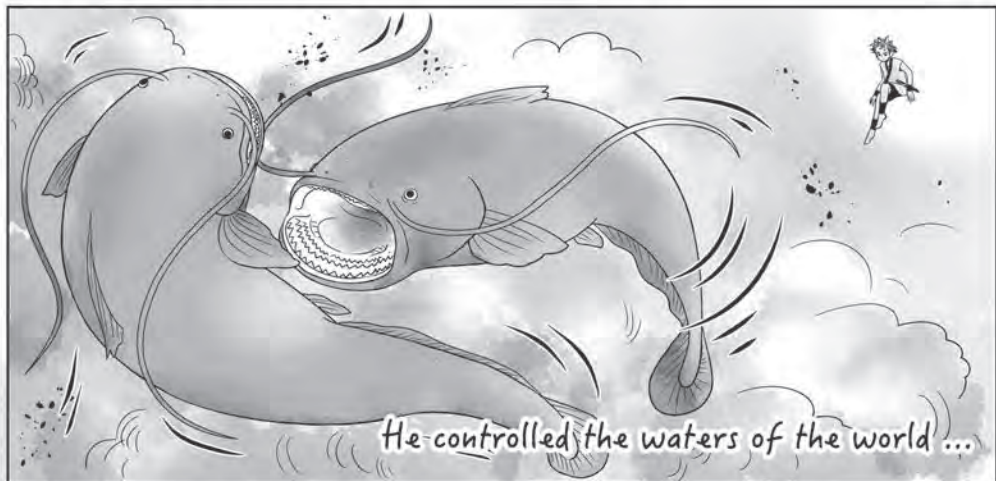
Once upon a time, deep down at the bottom,
of the ocean, there was an underwater boy.



... 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...





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 those 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 here 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!*'

'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 . . . and I'll try not to mumble. Your Japanese is fine.'

'I remember when you told that guy off at the station!'

'I did?' Grandpa scratches his head. 'Why?'

'He said something like, *It's amazing how good your granddaughter's Japanese is, considering* . . . And you kind of growled, *Considering what?* And he said, *Well, considering she's from another country.* And you called him an idiot, and told him just to give us the tickets if he didn't know what he was talking about!'

'Hmm, sounds a bit like me, but I don't remember.' Grandpa shakes his head, then points at the sketchbooks stacked in the black biscuit tin, their Japanese cloth covers glowing burnt orange, indigo, moss green. 'Well, forget idiots. 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 hill, clearly the hill they always called ‘Little Mountain’ behind the house, 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 the Dragon God!

Grandpa, draw me a real karakasa haunted umbrella! A scary one.

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 tells 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, switches 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 looks at the sun logo on the old black biscuit tin from which he's conjured the sketchbooks. 'It's not that. It's just it's a bit difficult to . . .' She runs out of words – can't say it in Japanese, can't even find the words in English to talk about her anxiety.

'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 guest who helped look after the house . . .'

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

Jiro thumps the table lightly with his fist. 'Damn it, 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 . . .'

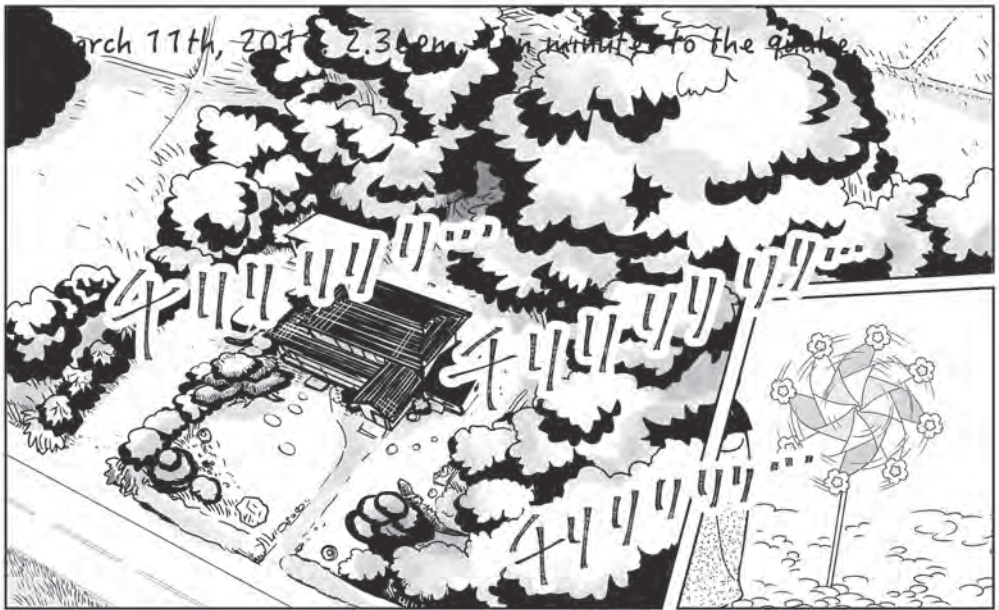
He gazes up.

'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.'

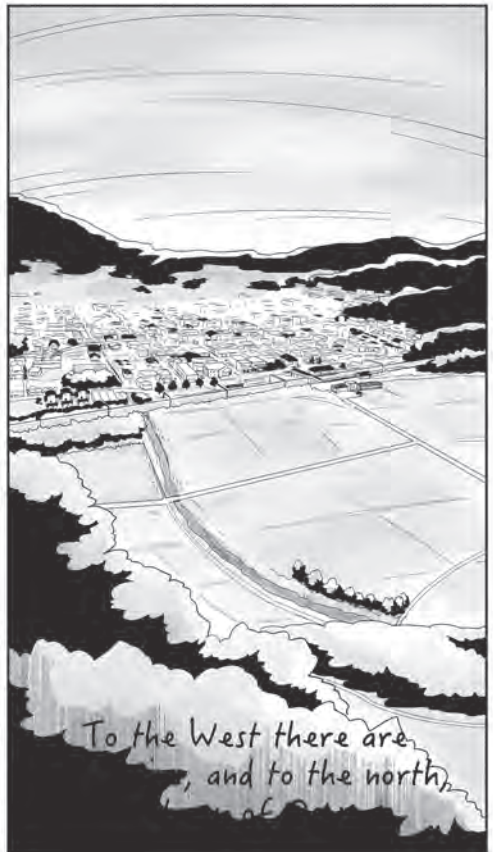
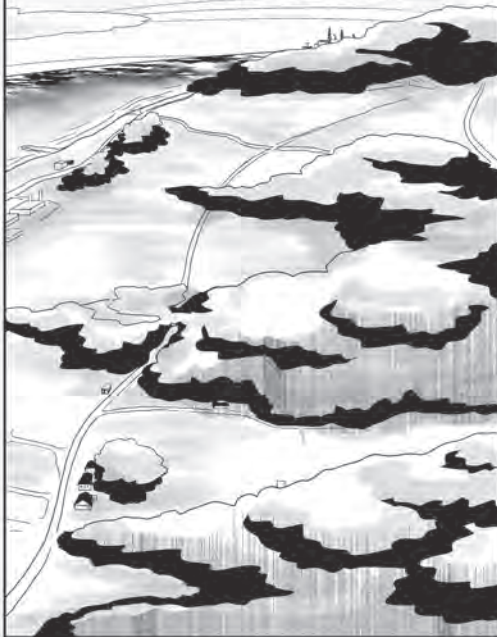
'Yeah, it was good,' she murmurs.

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.

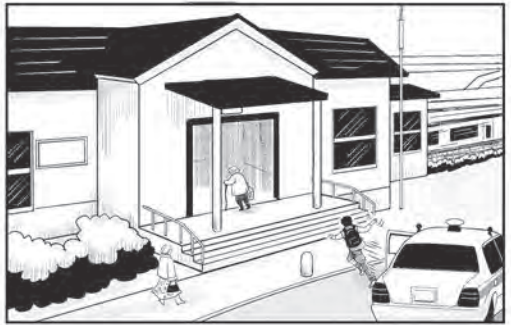
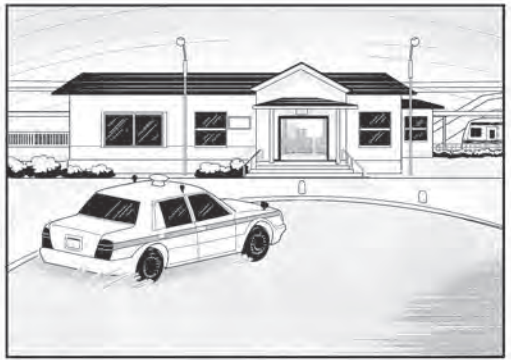
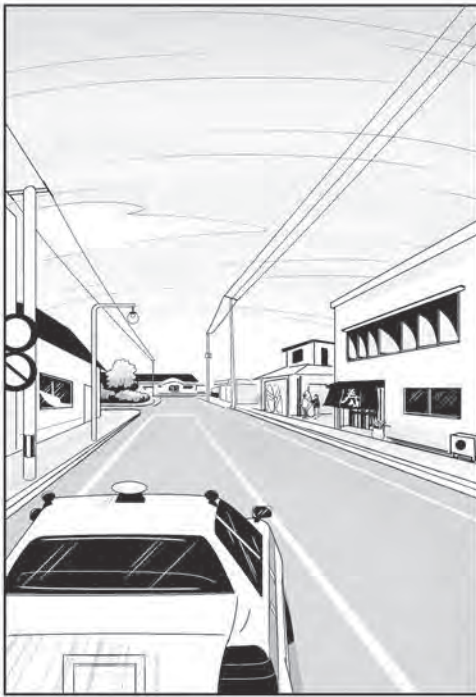
'It was really good.'



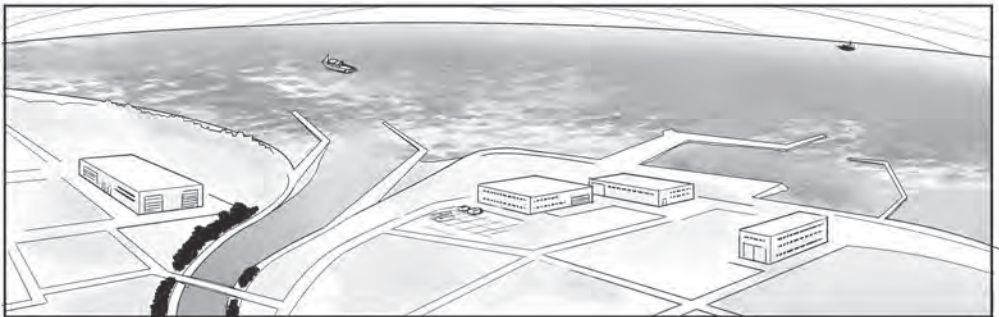
To the south: the towns of
Okuma and Futaba, schools and
an old peoples' home. And the
Fukushima Number One
Nuclear Plant.



To the West there are
, and to the north,
of



And to the East?



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 . . .'

Yuki 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 . . .

2 Samurai Check-In

IT WAS ONLY THE DAY before the day before yesterday that Mum and Dad had waved her off at the Heathrow security gate, Dad's eyes welling up (and him pretending they weren't) and Mum putting on the super bright expression she always did before running one of her half-marathons. Yūki had seen that so much in the last two years: her parents' hope – desperation – that she would be OK and start to have what they called a 'normal life' again, have 'real friends'. Sometimes she felt it was like looking in some kind of weird mirror, seeing her anxiety reflected back in Mum's half-Japanese features, Dad's English. You kind of lost track of who felt what first, and everything ended up in a muddle or an argument, trying to untangle hopelessly knotted wires, everyone frustrated.

'Take care, sweetheart. *Ki o tsukete*. Don't stress Grandpa out,' Mum said, shuffling back and forth between Japanese and English, straightening her rucksack strap.

Yūki shrugged off the fussing. 'Mum. It was your idea.'

'Well, no Yū-chan, I think you suggested it first. But, doesn't matter. You can be thick as thieves. Apparently there's some protest at the weekend he's planning on taking you on. Third nuclear plant or something. He's not happy if he hasn't got something to battle.'

Dad took a deep breath. 'He'd protest against his own mother . . . Maybe you could send a postcard to that friend of yours. Joel?'

'Dad, I don't really *know* him. And I don't have his address.'

Still, an image of Joel flowed back into her head: the last time she'd seen him, that day in the school library when she had hoped the ground would just eat her whole. Where the other kids had gawped at her, curled in a foetal position on the ground, he'd just looked like he cared, eyes reaching out from under his blond fringe – and gone to get help before they took her away to the office.

'Well, I bet we could get it. It's important you keep friends, right?'

Mum jabbed him in the ribs.

'Ow, only trying to help.'

Mum turned back to Yūki, holding her arm just a little longer than necessary. 'Have the *best* time. We're hoping this might, you know, sort things out a bit–'

'Now you're doing it!' Dad spluttered. 'Just go and enjoy yourself, Yūki. Remember we love you, but you need some non-Mum-and-Dad time, right?'

'*Ki o tsukete*,' Mum repeated.

'Mum, Osōma's got to be like the safest place in the whole world.'

'I know. There was a crime there once! Bye, sweetheart, remember what to do if – you know – if you feel an attack coming ...'

'I know, I remember. Bye . . . *mata*.'

'Bye. Love you,' Dad said, turning away, a hand reaching for his balding patch like he always did when he was feeling emotional and didn't want to show it.

'I'll be fine. *Mata ne* . . .'

Yūki took a breath as the chaperone lady from the airline led her away across the mirror floor of Terminal 5. It looked like super-still water as she glanced down at her reflection, clouds beyond the huge airport windows billowing beneath her feet. The familiar grip of anxiety was coming up into her throat, but she tried to look as calm as she could.

'So, Yooki – long "ooo"? – am I saying that right?'

'Yeah, pretty good.'

'Have you got holidays from school? It's not Easter yet.'

'I'm home schooled.'

The woman's face, plastered in make-up, unable to hide the disapproval: 'Oh, really?'

Yūki reached for her usual response. 'It's so we can do half in Japanese and half in English.'

That was kind of true, but not totally. Angela, her therapist, kept saying it might be easier to be more open with people about what she's feeling, but what are you going to say? *Hi, I'm*

Yūki. I'm kind of a school refuser, I guess, and I don't have any real friends and I can't cope with secondary school and it's made me have these huge like panic attacks and now I can hardly leave my room on bad days, and anyway it's boring so please don't listen to me, but yes, I am a bit Japanese, but I'm mostly English. I guess. I grew up here, but I like being there more. But when I'm there people think I'm not really Japanese. And there's things I can't even begin to talk about really because it's just so stupid. Sorry. Sorry. Gomen ne.

'But what about friends?' the woman chattered on, giving her the usual *look*: the one that's trying to puzzle out who she is.

'It's OK,' Yūki said, glancing back at the gate. Mum was kind of hugging herself, and Dad was holding a hand up like a person hoping to catch a ball but not sure it's going to be thrown. Yūki made a furtive wave with her hand down near her hip.

The woman peered at her through her overly-long eyelashes. 'Parents! They'll be fine. Not your first time to Japan though?'

'It's like my second home.'

'But your first time on your own?'

Yūki nodded.

'Well, don't be nervous.'

Yūki felt a surge of irritation: *Haras don't get nervous! We're the nails that refuse to be hammered down, my grandpa stood up to right wing thugs in the sixties, he even goes swimming at Obon! . . . NOBODY goes swimming at Obon, right?*

Instead she stuttered, 'There were samurai in our family!'

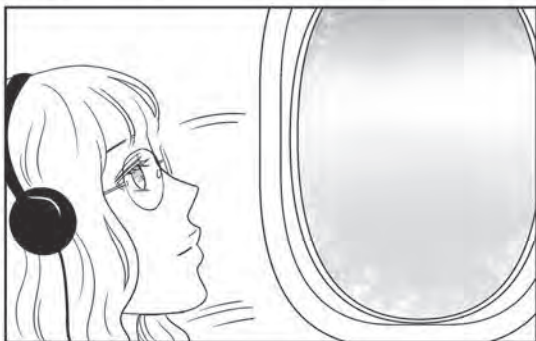
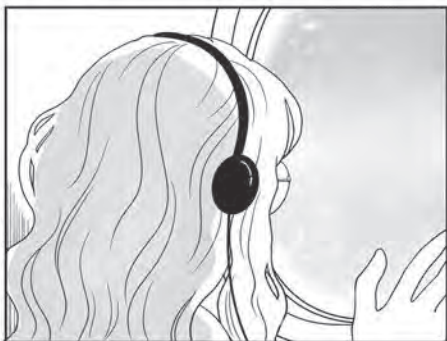
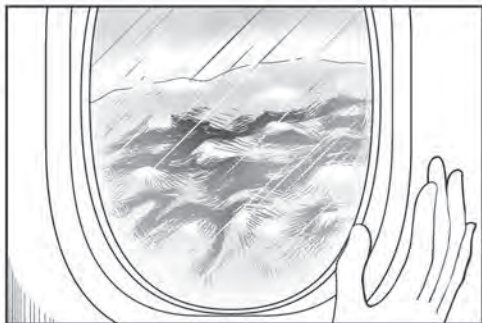
'Gosh, I'll mind my step then.' The BA woman patted her arm.

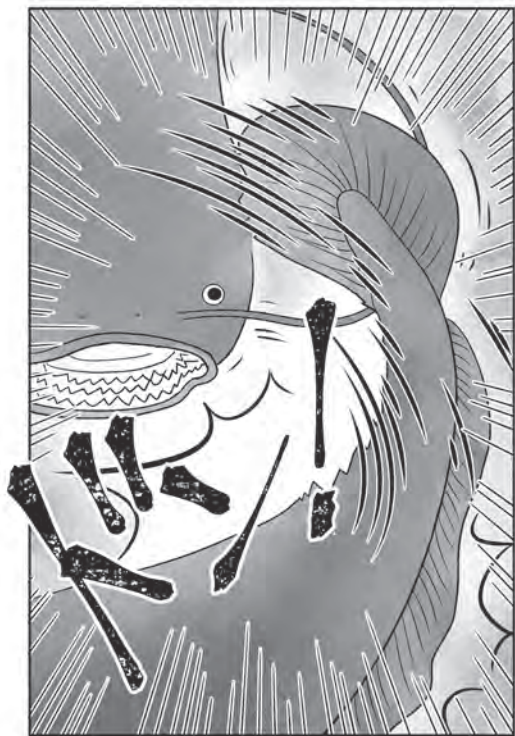
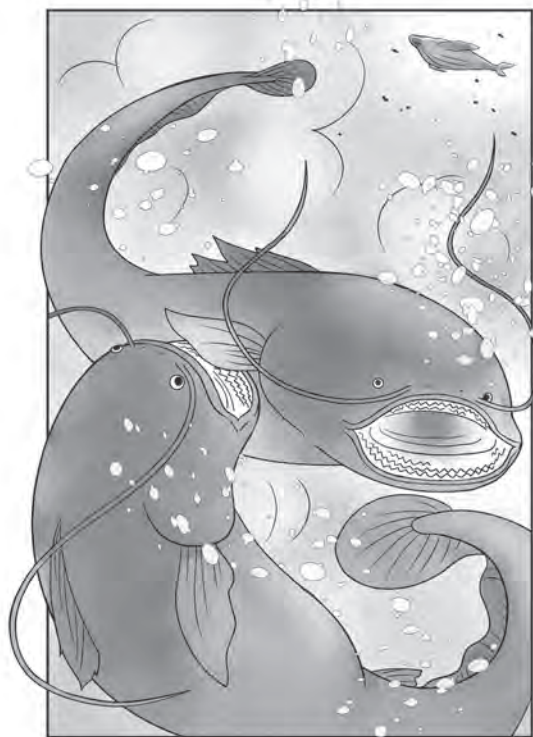
'Come on, put your bag in that tray and your coat in that one. Any swords as well. Your mum said you worry a bit?'

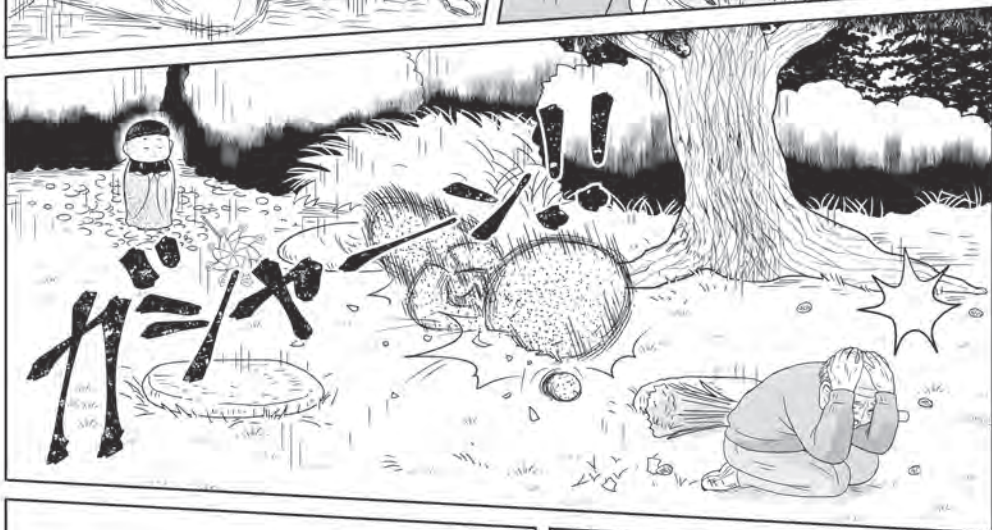
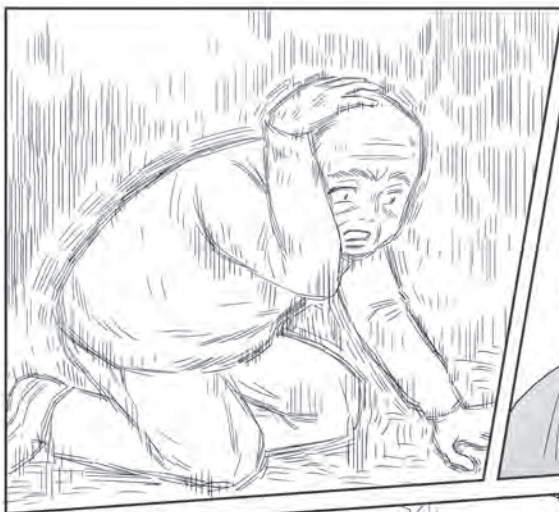
'I like flying. I'm OK.'

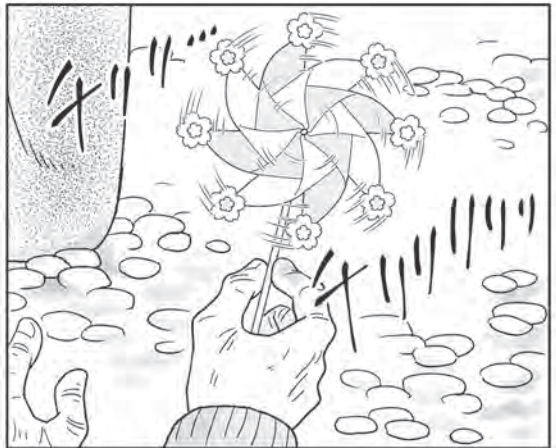
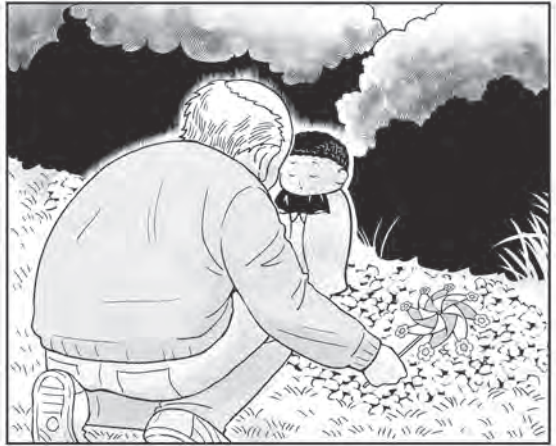
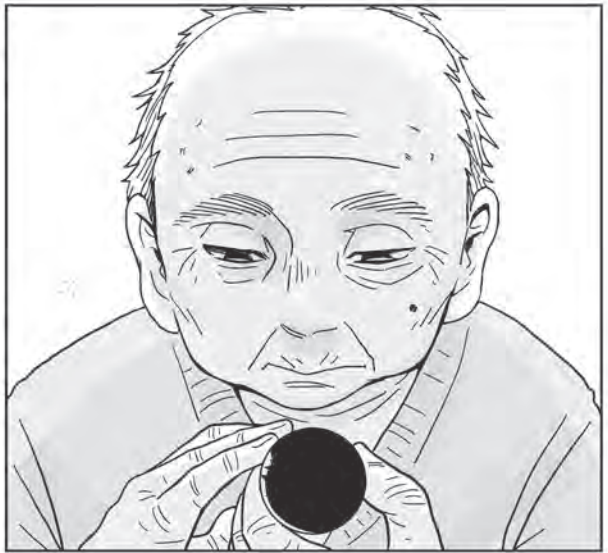
But it wasn't true: she was anxious. Cooped up in the house for months and months, even the noise and bustle of the airport was a really big deal, and she hoped Mrs Make-Up couldn't see how her heart was beating so hard it was visible, pulsing *doki doki* against her dark blue hoodie. She glanced back, and caught one more glimpse of Mum crumpling in Dad's hug.

She felt a familiar twinge of guilt then, but swallowed it back with the rising tension, striding through the security arch, past the endless perfume and chocolate concessions – the usual consumer rubbish, as Grandpa would say – and on to the gate area magically marked TOKYO, trying to make it look like she did this every day, that the Hara blood was really coursing through her part-samurai veins.









As the plane made its turn for the Narita runway, Yūki pulled a fibre-tip pen from her bag and slowly re-inked the string of letters and Japanese characters on the back of her left thumb. Y for 'Yūki'; the kanji for 'Mum' and 'Dad'; J for 'Jiro' and the character for 'Hara' which is the surname she prefers; an infinity symbol for long life and health and the Japanese for 'smile'. Everyone kept asking her what had happened to the beaming smile she used to shoot at anyone and everything, but it's still there, in black ink at the end of her self-created good luck charm. The one chink in her rationalist armour.

Y J原母父∞笑

The old woman was watching as the wheels clunked down beneath and reverberated through the plane as it banked, bright light cutting across the cabin, across the magic formula on her hand.

'Are you OK, young lady?'

'*Hai, zenzen daijōbu*. I'm totally fine,' Yūki answered, then hurriedly corrected herself to make her answer more polite. '*Daijōbu desu*.'

The woman looked surprised. 'Oh, you're Japanese! Sorry.'

'I'm Japanese. Kind of.'

'Well. Try not to worry too much. It doesn't ever change anything in my experience.'

'Sorry. I'll do my best. *Ganbarimasu*.'

But it was so hard to do your best most days, and Yūki's heart was thumping away like crazy as the ground rushed up to meet them, the plane's tyres screeching black lines on the runway.

3

Ghost in the Cab

BRIGHT LIGHT FLOODED THE WINDOWS of the airport express as Aunt Kazuko glanced at her mobile for the umpteenth time and swept a hand through the lightning bolt bleached in her fringe. She had the brand-new iPhone on silent, but the thing was vibrating like a newly-hatched summer cicada. Yūki smiled, bathed in the warmth of the sun, and pointed at the phone.

‘It’s OK, Auntie, answer it. It might be the man of your dreams!’

‘Still got your sense of humour then?!’ Kazuko laughed. ‘I’m glad. From what my sister said I thought it was ALL gloom and doom.’

‘Mum says I always looked serious, even when I was born.’

‘Well, you always made *me* laugh.’ Looking down at her screen Kazuko pulled a face.

‘Problem, Auntie?’

‘It’s definitely not Mister Right, just some idiot at the agency! He hasn’t worked with a Hara woman before, poor guy!’ She typed something back super-fast and thumbed ‘send’.

‘What did you type?’

'Never mind!'

She shoved the phone in her bag, and looked Yūki over from top to toe, taking in the long hair, caught somewhere between black and dark brown, oval face, round glasses, soft hoodie, black leggings.

'You're growing up, Yu-chan.'

'Mum doesn't think so.'

'Well, she sees you every day. But I see you like in one of those time-lapse films, every six months at most, right? I can see you've really grown . . . You're becoming a woman!' She cupped her hands in front of her own chest, her eyebrows halfway up her forehead. 'Mat-ur-ing, right!'

'Auntieeeee . . .' Kazuko had a habit of being way too inappropriate in public. And loud.

'So, want to go to that old manga place again? Or see some cool friends of mine, boys in this weird noise band? One of them wears a dress! We went on a date like that, but it didn't work out . . . Or we could go shopping, buy you something nice.'

'I just always look lame.'

'You look gorgeous. Always. Or how about dinner out?'

'Could we just eat at yours?'

Kazuko frowned. 'OK. But let's do *something fun*! Fancy trying some make-up? You could drive the boys crazy, you know!'

'I - I'm not really interested.'

Kazuko thumped Yūki's knee very lightly with her fist. 'I know school's rubbish, but you're not becoming one of those *hikikomori* are you? Locked up in their rooms, never coming out . . .'

'If that's what they need to do then why don't people leave them be?'

'Fair enough, but I guess I just don't think that's what you need to do. You need to, I dunno, *dive* in to life.'

'I just don't like loud places right now, lots of people and movement and stuff. You know. It brings on the attacks.'

'Well, Osōma's the place for you then. Quiet as the grave! That's why I got out.'

'I still like it.'

'Good for you.' Kazuko's phone was buzzing again in her bag. 'I'd better give this guy a piece of my mind from the vestibule. I'm going to call him something biologically complicated, and I don't want you to hear.'

'*Dōzo*,' Yūki said, making an exaggerated 'help yourself' gesture. 'Have fun.'

'Don't worry, I will . . . Ah yes, *moshi moshi*, Tanaka-san, could I just ask you to listen for a moment, if you would be so kind, you might need a pencil to make notes . . . and a working knowledge of anatomy. Sorry to take up your time, but . . .'

Yūki smiled as Kazuko threw her a conspiratorial wink, and then her aunt's voice faded as she retreated to the space between the carriages and the door hissed shut.

She settled back into the warm patch of sun, trying to shrug off Kazuko's advice. From the Skyliner window now: blue tiled houses and winter browned fields dashing past. A heron lifting slow wingbeats to the sky. A big modern Buddha statue there and then gone, the one with the funny expression on his face –

kind of more cheeky than wise. And yet like he knew some big secret you didn't yet know, but maybe was coming your way.

At Nippori, entering the concrete sprawl of Tokyo, there was still no sign of her aunt. Three schoolgirls got on, locked tight in chat and laughter, throwing the odd glance Yūki's way, quickening her pulse. Just like school, always on the edge of the joke, wanting to find out what it was and not wanting to all at the same time, because it might be about you.

She gazed down at her own phone, pretending to text somebody, wondering what it would be like to be one of them, part of an in-crowd, and not always on the edge looking in. Easier to imagine what it was like to be that Buddha.

In the entrance hall to Kazuko's 'mansion' block she thought she felt a brief trembling pass up through the ground into her feet, her legs. Another hint of panic bubbled in her chest. Angela had gone over the breathing exercises – and in the constricted, swaying space of the lift she did them as best she could, only half listening as her aunt talked a blue streak, swerving topics that her sister had obviously warned her not to touch: friends, school, anxiety.

Still she bumped against one or two of them, Kazuko style.

'So, you know, there's no rush for boyfriends! But is there anyone you're interested in?'

'Not really.'

'You don't fool me.'

Yūki puffed the hair out of her eyes. Sometimes the only trick

with Aunt Kazuko was to fight fire with fire: 'Yes, Auntie, I'm like doing *it* all the time.'

'Jeez. I'm just trying to help, Yū-chan. Well, if you want to chat about that kind of thing, time of the month et cetera, I'm always ready for a natter!'

'I'm fine,' Yūki said, firmly. 'Auntie? Wasn't that a little quake? Should we have used the lift?'

'Bah. This place has got a top notch seismic certificate, so don't worry for a moment! It was nothing.'

'I'm not worrying.'

Last month, Dad – wiping his glasses like he did when he was holding forth – had described the tectonics beneath Tokyo: three plates riding each other, with a broken chunk of one stuck between them, like food caught in a giant's throat. 'One day he's going to cough that up,' Dad had said, 'and I wouldn't want to be in Tokyo then. Not for a trillion yen. You know what the third chapter of the Tokyo Disaster Preparedness Manual is titled? *Accepting Death!* Honest, I'll give them that!'

'Thanks, Steve,' Mum had said. 'Very helpful.'

Waiting for the takeaway to arrive, Yūki gazed at the sea of skyscrapers towards Shinjuku, the red aircraft warning beacons blinking messages to the clouds above, the neon beneath glowing, pulsing. Suddenly another wave of tightness gripped her chest from nowhere, the city swaying in her vision.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

Breeeeeethe.

'You OK, Yu-chan? You look pale.'

'Yeah, yep, fine,' Yūki managed to say. 'How's Grandpa?'

'Same as ever!'

'I mean – last time he seemed kind of grumpy most of the time. You know, that look he sometimes gets.'

'Not with you,' Kazuko laughed. 'He just finds his daughters exasperating! The whole world some days . . . God knows why he ever stopped working – people buy old issues of Garo magazine with his work for a fortune now. Crazy money. He's just stewing there day after day, surrounded by the past, brooding. All that stuff. He needs a clear out, but . . .'

'Brooding?' Yūki didn't recognise the Japanese word, and Kazuko tapped it into her phone to show the English.

'Too much imagination. Runs in the family, right? I mean you were always–' Kazuko pulled up sharply.

'What?'

'Do you still like ghost stories?'

'Not really. I don't believe in ghosts.'

Kazuko exaggerated a comic squint. 'Reeeeeaaaally?'

'There's always explanations. I dunno.'

'Hmmm!' Kazuko splashed herself another glass of wine. 'You know that old cemetery near here? Aoyama?'

Yūki nodded, remembering the graves under the pines and ginkgo trees, the crows thickening the air.

'OK, so ever since they tunnelled the Chiyoda subway line underneath it, there's been stories about travellers late at night

looking up from their seat to see people in like these ragged, old-fashioned clothes sitting opposite them. Clothes from the Edo period, right? And then they just vanish!' Kazuko took a swig, eyes bright. 'It's like the dead people don't know they're dead, and they end up getting on the underground by mistake. And then they have to find their way 'home' again, to the cemetery. And taxi drivers get flagged down late at night by people who ask to go to somewhere near the cemetery - and when they get there, and the driver turns round to take the fare, the back seat is empty!'

Yūki shifted uncomfortably. 'But—'

'But this is the best one,' Kazuko raced on, gesticulating with her free hand. 'The drummer in one of the bands we promote told me. I always trust drummers, and he heard it straight from the taxi driver. So it's gotta be true! One evening last March this driver was near Aoyama and he saw a woman sheltering from the rain, holding her coat over her head. No umbrella, and she was soaked through. So, he picked her up, and the girl - not much more than a teenager - gave him a run-down address a few kilometres away. The driver thought nothing of it, and when they got to the apartments the woman said, *Could we just wait here a few minutes? OK*, the taxi guy said, *but I'll have to keep the meter running*. The woman said it was fine, and just sat, staring up at a second-floor window. And silhouetted in the window was a man, looking down at the car, motionless. They just looked at each other, and looked at each other, and neither moved.'

Yūki shivered suddenly, and Kazuko nodded, the lightning bolt dancing.

'Creepy, right?'

'I'm just tired.'

'But listen! The driver says, *So, where do you want to go next?* And the woman says, *Take me home*, and gives like this posh address in Shibuya. *Fine*, the driver says and they make their way through the pouring rain to her house. As he pulls up, he turns round to tell the woman the fare, and guess what?'

'There's nobody there.'

'Right. But even better, there's just a patch of rain water on the seat. So, the driver gets out, seriously creeped, and goes to the door of the house. Even though it's *really* late, almost immediately an old woman answers, and without being told what's happened, she holds out the EXACT FARE for the ride, including the stop at the first house. The exact fare.'

A shudder bumped down the length of Yūki's spine. 'Yeah, but—'

'And when the driver looks astonished the old woman says, *My daughter was killed by a speeding car in the rain. She was crossing the street to meet her boyfriend and was killed instantly. Now, whenever it rains, she flags a cab in Aoyama, and goes to wait outside his house for a few minutes, and then she comes here. She comes home. We all have to go home, don't we? Wow!*' Kazuko paused, and took another gulp of wine. 'That's the detail, right? The exact money.'

Yuki could still feel the shiver flicking up and down her back. 'But it's just that people exaggerate and misremember and that kind of thing. I think.'

'Well, they're real *enough* if you ask me. Look at how you can get a cheap house if somebody's died in it. If some Tokyo fat cat is prepared to take a hit in his rental there has to be something to it, right? Come on! What happened to that girl we all knew? I mean the one—'

Yūki shook her head. Not again! 'I wish everyone would stop saying stuff like that! I was always funny, or always serious, or always believed in ghosts. Or Grandpa, always on about the stupid totem pole . . .'

Kazuko puffed out her cheeks. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry. We all just want to see you back to your old self.'

'Everyone's *always* on about it.'

Kazuko smiled and dropped her voice. 'Well, you can't blame us for wanting that . . . Imagine what it's like for your mum. You must remember how long it took her to have a child, and she took *our* mum's death really hard, and then *at last* you came along . . .'

Yūki nodded, the old story settling on her shoulders. *You're so precious to us*, Mum always said. And once, unguarded, she added, *There were a lot who didn't make it before we had you*.

'How come you and Mum are so different?'

'What do you mean?'

'You're so – so . . .'

Kazuko laughed. 'Cra-zeeee?'

'I guess.'

'Until your grandma died, your mum was the wild one. Like one of the wild horses at the horse festival! I dunno, maybe she's

frustrated with herself. She got tamed.' She leaned forwards. 'Hey, don't tell her I said that!'

Yūki's eyes widened. 'Mum? A runaway horse?!'

'The local boys used to tease us both for being *hāfu*, right? You're *not proper Japanese*, you're *half-breeds*, that kind of rubbish. On and on they went and one day she just punched one of them right in the kisser! She'd been doing some karate so he really went down hard, bleeding! A real ninja girl in those days!'

'Mum *punched* a boy?!'

'Knocked him out!' Kazuko laughed. 'It never really bothered me so much – that *hāfu* stuff – I just snogged them instead. Come on, get some sleep. Every day is a chance to turn a new page, right? So let's turn another one. Waxing crescent moon, the horoscope said, in Gemini. That means it's a time for spontaneity and change!'

'Dad says astrology is a waste of time.'

'Well. Luckily there's room enough in this world for people to be different. Find their own way.'

Despite the jet lag Yūki lay awake for an hour or so, thinking about Mum and Kazuko growing up in rural Tōhoku, fighting, kissing . . . Mum now so changed from that younger version of herself, Kazuko still somehow the same by the sounds of it. How did it happen? How did you know which way you were going? And one day maybe you were just running across a road and thinking about the future and *bam!* that was it. Dead.

She turned off the light and rolled herself in the duvet and

tried to will herself to sleep, but somehow when she closed her eyes she could see that poor girl standing soaked in the rain, the wet puddle on the taxi seat, the silhouette of the boy at the window. The sadness of it all falling through her thoughts like a rainy season downpour, saturating everything.

A train thrummed on the Yamanote line and she listened to it come and go, and then tried to concentrate and count carriages as the next train rattled across the points, and then did the same with six or maybe seven more rolling on through the restless city, until at last her breathing lengthened and calmed.

There – right on the very lip of sleep – she heard the distant sound of waves breaking.