

THROUGH MY EYES NATURAL DISASTER ZONES

series editor Lyn White

HOTAKA

JOHN HEFFERNAN

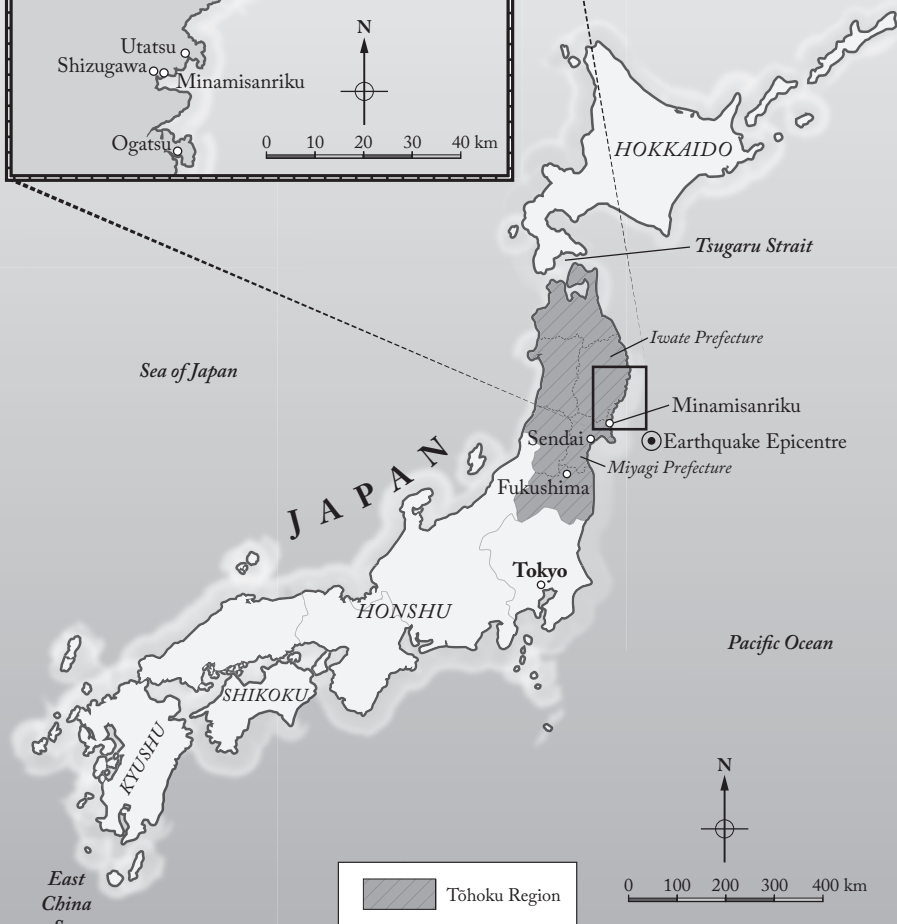


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To the people of the Tōhoku Region



* The town of Omori-wan
is fictional.



The background of the entire page is a repeating pattern of stylized, overlapping waves. The waves are rendered in a light gray color against a white background. Each wave is composed of many fine, concentric lines that create a sense of movement and depth. The waves are arranged in a way that they appear to be rolling across the frame.

2011

...the seed of the disaster had been planted and was growing gradually without being detected. Somewhere in the earth, somewhere, the footsteps of an extreme danger were approaching us quietly. Nobody knew that at all. Even experts and researchers of the earthquake did not know. Only the demon of the sea knew it with a creepy smile on its face.

The Seed of Hope in the Heart,
Teiichi Sato, survivor of the 3/11 tsunami
and resident of Rikuzentakata



One



‘Prepare to die!’

The young demon-wizard readied himself for combat. His skin flared blood-red and his luminous hair lashed at the air like lightning, as ogres, beasts, ghosts and ghouls hovered menacingly around him. With deadly talons and spiky horns, he kept his foes at bay, waiting for the right moment to attack.

‘You don’t frighten me!’ he snarled. ‘I, mighty Oniwaka, will tear you all to shreds and scatter your scraps to the winds. Your end is nigh, cowardly denizens of the deep!’

Oniwaka gave a howl that echoed right through the puppet theatre and set its audience cheering.

‘Oniwaka! Oniwaka!’ they yelled.

The theatre was packed that afternoon on March 11th for a school matinee, and the air bubbled with excitement as Oniwaka worked himself up for battle. In the front row, Hotaka Yamato was on the edge of his seat. He turned to his best friend, grinning up at him. Takeshi was standing,

cheering and shaking his fist at the evil creatures on the screen that made a backdrop to the stage.

Hotaka leapt to his feet as well. 'Destroy them, Oniwaka,' he yelled. 'Destroy the evil ones!'

The bunraku puppet was bigger than most of the young people in the audience, and very lifelike. It even seemed to hear Hotaka, for it leaned over the edge of the stage towards him, shaking a claw-like fist as well and howling the battle cry louder than ever.

The audience loved it. Everyone always loved the shows at the Puppet Palace. They were magical.

The little theatre down by the harbour in the coastal town of Omori-wan was operated by an old couple affectionately known as the Puppet People. Mr and Mrs Suda were famous for their wonderful collection of puppets. He made the faces, bodies, arms and legs, while she sewed the costumes, many of them beautiful pieces of detailed handwork. People came from all over the Tōhoku region to see the Puppet People.

'Prepare to die!' Oniwaka screamed, and leapt at his foes.

Drums rolled, horns blared, cymbals rattled and crashed as the bunraku warrior hurled himself at the screen buzzing with beasts. The battle brought the whole audience to their feet – thumping, stamping, jumping up and down.

Hotaka wanted to leap onto the stage to help the young Oniwaka. If Takeshi had done so he would have followed at once. It was just the sort of thing his best friend would do.

But something else happened instead.

Suddenly everyone stopped – audience, puppets, performers, musicians. They stopped because of a sound that was *felt* more than heard, a sound that moved up through their feet and sent a shudder of dread around the theatre. *Could it be?* For a second everything hung in complete silence. Everyone held their breath, stock still. Listening. Feeling. Waiting.

The answer came in a long, foreboding groan from somewhere deep within the earth. It surged upwards – screeching, grinding, gouging – erupting in a mighty jolt that made the whole theatre lurch like a doll's house kicked by a giant.

'Ji shin, earthquake!' The cry ricocheted through the room as children and adults alike were thrown to the floor.

Everything was shuddering. *Everything* – the chairs, the floor, the ceiling, the curtains, the lights, even the air itself. The walls wobbled and warped. Part of the stage crumpled like cardboard and fell in on itself, bringing down several props. Shelves and cupboards broke off the walls and crashed to the floor. Sections of scaffolding buckled and gave way. One part fell among the musicians, scattering them. Another toppled onto the puppeteers, narrowly missing Mr Suda.

The old man scrambled from the wreckage. 'The doors,' he shouted to his assistants. 'Open them at once, in case they jam, and get everyone outside as quickly as possible.'

The exit that followed could have been an uncontrolled rush if panic had taken hold, with over a hundred

people crammed into such a tight space, many of them young. There was still screaming and crying among the youngest, especially when the tremors grew most violent. But the children were well rehearsed in earthquake routine and paid strict attention to their teachers, exiting quickly and in as orderly a fashion as possible.

The earthquake continued right through the evacuation, making the climb up the steep, wobbling stairs out of the theatre extremely difficult. The shaking and juddering went on for over three minutes, far longer than most quakes, only easing in the final stage of the evacuation.

Hotaka and Takeshi were among the last students to leave. At the top of the stairs Hotaka called to Mr and Mrs Suda.

‘Thanks for the show,’ he shouted. ‘I only wish we’d got to see Oniwaka smash those bad dudes.’

‘Don’t worry,’ the old man replied. ‘When we’ve cleaned up the mess we’ll have you all back for a replay. Now hurry on!’



Two



‘Quickly, boys.’

‘Sorry, Abe-sensei,’ Hotaka called as he and Takeshi ran to catch the others. ‘But the Puppet Man said we could see the rest of the show next week maybe.’

‘Can’t wait!’ Takeshi shouted, punching the air. ‘Go, Oniwaka!’

‘Yes, of course,’ the young sensei, teacher, replied. ‘But right now we have to keep moving.’

Miss Abe was Hotaka’s favourite teacher, young and happy. She wasn’t so happy now, though, he could see, with her brow creased and her eyes darting about for the best way to lead everyone to safety.

‘We need to get out of this lane. Tiles could easily fall from the roofs.’

Eight teachers were shepherding the children down the narrow alley from the puppet theatre to a wider street. The main force of the earthquake had eased, but there were still tremors and aftershocks. Electricity poles wobbled and swayed, wires bounced up and

down. The lane was badly buckled and crisscrossed with cracks.

There were about a hundred students, walking in pairs, kept to the middle of the lane by the teachers. The buildings in this old part of town were decayed and crumbling. A severe jolt sent a shower of roof tiles raining down. They clattered harmlessly on the pavement but made the smaller children scream.

‘Keep together,’ one of the teachers cried. ‘Keep moving.’

They eventually reached the wider street. Here the traffic was much busier than usual. Some vehicles were heading towards the main road that skirted the harbour, only a block to the east. But most were driving west, into the main part of Omori-wan. The school was that way, about a kilometre past the town centre.

The teachers halted the students at the intersection. Normally they would simply head back to the school, but a few were against this, Miss Abe the main one.

The situation wasn’t normal, she insisted; there could easily be a tsunami after such a powerful earthquake and they should get to higher ground immediately. Monk Head Hill was close – down the end of street to the harbour and left. If they walked quickly they could be on safe ground in ten minutes, whereas it would take half an hour to get through town to the school. A tsunami could easily hit in that time.

The older teachers dismissed this. ‘There was that strong quake only the other day,’ one of them said. ‘But no tsunami to speak of. Sirens blared and people were told to prepare for the worst, but nothing happened.’

‘But this earthquake was stronger than anything we’ve ever had,’ Miss Abe said. ‘And far longer. And it’s still not even finished. Surely it’s better to be safe than sorry. If there’s a big wave, we don’t want to be caught in one of the lowest parts of Omori-wan when it hits.’

The older teachers continued arguing. ‘It’s such a long way around by the hill,’ someone said. ‘We won’t be back at school for ages.’ But although they were senior to her, Miss Abe refused to back down, insisting the danger was real.

‘I hope I’m wrong,’ she said. ‘I hope it will be a waste of time going to Monk Head Hill. But I honestly believe the risk is very real. I’m begging you to do this. Please. For the children’s sake, please!’

Hotaka saw the anguish on his teacher’s face. The other teachers must also have seen it, for they were eventually won over.

‘Very well,’ they muttered reluctantly. ‘Lead on, then.’

Miss Abe gave a sigh of relief and set off at once.

The harbour road was full of cars, trucks, buses and bikes heading north and south, towards the hills that flanked Omori-wan at either end. It looked as though it would be impossible to stop the traffic so that the students might cross to the harbour side of the road, away from the unstable buildings. But Miss Abe stepped boldly onto the road, waving her arms and shouting. Vehicles screeched to a halt in both directions and the teachers quickly directed the students across the road. Once on the other side, Miss Abe gathered them together.

‘Listen carefully,’ she shouted. ‘Especially you little ones. We must get to higher ground without delay.’

The earth rumbled as if warning anyone who might not be listening. Miss Abe pointed to the hill behind her – the one people called Monk Head Hill because much of it was smooth rock, like a monk's bald head. 'Once we're up there we'll be safe. But we must not waste time.'

She turned to the senior students. 'Sixth-graders, I want you to take two little ones each by the hand and lead them up the hill. Follow Kenzo-san. Don't run, but walk as quickly as you can without exhausting anyone. Takeshi, you start – take Rin and little Kumiko. You're next, Yumi, with Ichiro and Riki. Hotaka, you take Yori and Katsu.'

Hotaka headed off with his pair of first-graders, holding their hands tight. For them it was still a kind of adventure, but he knew exactly how serious this was. His grandfather had left him in no doubt about that.

'Always run for the hills after an earthquake,' the old man had told him on many occasions. 'Don't delay. Don't wait around. Get out of the harbour and the lowlands as quickly as you can. A tsunami can travel faster than a bullet train. And don't go back because you've forgotten something. Those who go back never return.'

At that very moment a tsunami warning blared out from loudspeakers at the community centre, while bells rang and sirens sounded in other part of the town. Despite this, some people were actually walking *down* the hill to the harbour, groups of them, to sight-see.

Miss Abe called out to them. 'Be careful. A tsunami is coming.' But they only smiled and continued on their way.

Miss Abe kept the students moving, and they soon reached a point on the hill that the teachers agreed would

be above any tsunami. But then other concerns arose. The spot was exposed, an icy end-of-winter breeze hitting it with sleet and even snow. The children were feeling the cold, many of the youngest starting to cry. Two asthmatics were struggling to breathe. Shelter was needed as soon as possible. But where? The teachers were not from this part of Omori-wan, and had no idea where there might be any reasonable shelter for more than a hundred children. The situation was serious.

Hotaka put up his hand. His home was on a road that speared off near the top of the hill and went out to the northern headland of Omori Bay, so he knew this area well. He walked or rode down Monk Head Hill every school morning, and back in the afternoon.

‘There’s a big family restaurant, Abe-sensei.’ He pointed further up the hill. ‘It’s always open, and there’ll be plenty of room.’

‘Good work, Hotaka,’ the young teacher said. ‘Lead the way.’

‘I will, if you wish, Abe-sensei. But I have a better idea, if you will allow me to suggest it.’

‘Of course, Hotaka.’

‘The restaurant is very close, just over the crest; you can’t miss it.’ Hotaka turned and pointed in the opposite direction, towards the northern headland. ‘I can cut across the hill from here and get to my home in about the same time. My mother will be there. She has a car and I know she’ll come and help in any way she can. I know she will.’

Miss Abe thought for moment. The condition of the asthmatic children was worsening. Having a car could

be invaluable if they needed to be hospitalised. ‘Okay, Hotaka. You do that, please.’

‘And I’ll go with him, Abe-sensei,’ Takeshi shouted.

The teacher shrugged. ‘Very well then; I suppose two is safer than one. Off you go.’

The boys bowed to their teacher and set off. They walked quickly, in silence. When they were about halfway across the side of Monk Head Hill, Takeshi stopped and peered towards the bay.

‘What’s happening?’ he cried, pointing.

It looked as though the bay was emptying itself, like a huge bathtub, its water draining away. The little river that fed into it was almost dry and the sea bed was visible for about fifty metres from the shore. Several boats were already stranded, while others were being dragged away. Further out in the bay, towards the headlands, some of the big fishing craft were heading to sea. Hotaka peered hard through the sleet, and was pretty sure he saw his Uncle Yori’s blue and white trawler leading the fleet.

‘Where’s the water going?’ Takeshi yelled.

‘Out to sea,’ Hotaka replied. ‘Grandpa says it’s what happens just before a tsunami hits. The ocean is sucking the bay into its belly. Soon it will spew the lot back at us, and—’

‘Ayyyy!’ Takeshi yelled. ‘It’s happening now. Look!’

Out in the ocean beyond the headlands, what looked like a thick white line was coming closer. Rapidly closer. Beneath it was something big – no, huge! – and grey.

And then it was there – terrifyingly there.

Hotaka threw his hand to his mouth. ‘Nante kotta!’ he shrieked. ‘What the hell!’



Three



A massive wall of water burst through the headlands and surged across the bay. The wave moved so quickly that Hotaka only just managed to glimpse his uncle's blue and white trawler slide over the top. He heaved a sigh of relief, but then gasped as the stragglers in the fleet were picked up like toys, tossed backwards and swallowed.

Barely half a minute later the wave roared over the breakwater that reached a little way out into the bay, powering on as though it didn't even exist. It hit the marina and grabbed everything in its path – nets, buoys, traps, pots, boats, fuel tanks, gas bottles, machinery, the wharves, the sheds, the *people*. There were no exceptions; the wave took everything and hurled it all at the town.

Hotaka and Takeshi howled in horror. This was a monster like nothing they'd ever seen on TV or in films, or even dreamt of, an unstoppable harvester of death and destruction. It raged on, smashing through the marina wall. People were scrambling from the gridlocked vehicles

lined up along the road skirting the harbour, but they didn't have a chance. They were devoured.

Beautiful old buildings along the foreshore were ripped from their foundations and smashed to bits. Quaint houses and rows of shops were flung together in an enormous churning mess that surged on – a giant beast of chaos with an insatiable appetite, feeding as it flowed, gorging itself, grinding, crunching, obliterating all in its path.

The water surged into town, a thickening swill of death, blackened with oil and grime and the grey-green churning of the harbour floor. Voices rose from this roiling spew, cries and shouts and howls for help – victims writhing within the beast itself.

‘Nigete, run!’

‘Tasukete, help me!’

From where they stood Hotaka and Takeshi could look right across Omori-wan to the hills that rose in the west. But the sleet and snow had become so heavy that they could barely see the town centre, let alone their school. What they saw, though, was more than enough. The wave had reached the centre, its black tentacles slithering through streets, lanes and alleys in search of victims. The surge had slowed, but was still far too fast for anyone on foot.

The boys gaped at the scene of horror spreading around them like some visible disease. ‘People are dying!’ Takeshi shouted, pointing at the town. ‘Dying!’ There was anger and outrage in his voice. ‘We have to do something!’

‘But we told Abe-sensei we’d get help for her.’

‘What are you talking about? They’re safe on the hill. It’s down there that people are dying. They’re the ones who need help.’

‘I know, but what can we do?’

‘There must be—’ Takeshi choked on his words, his eyes darting about. ‘Yes. Over there,’ he yelled, pointing down to where the old people’s home had stood only minutes earlier.

Most of the building and its occupants had been washed away in the tsunami’s initial surge. A piece of decking was still standing, though, buckled and partly submerged. Five people clutched the railing at one end, hanging on for dear life.

‘Come on,’ Takeshi yelled, and raced down the hill, Hotaka close behind.

When they reached the place, the situation looked dire. The decking creaked and groaned, buffeted by swirling water, in danger of breaking away at any moment. Rescuing these people would be difficult. It was about twenty metres out to the decking; younger, fitter people could swim across, but these were old and infirm. They’d have to be helped. But how?

Among some debris, Hotaka found a length of thick rope, more than enough to bridge the gap. As he untangled it Takeshi secured one end to the stump of a sturdy bush.

‘That should hold,’ he told Hotaka, tying the other end of the rope around his waist. ‘We have to move quickly. If the water rises much more it could sweep away the decking.’

Takeshi was a strong swimmer, and soon reached the decking. He climbed up and bound the rope to the railing, tugging it tight. Then he took the arm of an elderly woman and yelled to Hotaka as he led her towards the edge of the decking.

‘I’m bringing her over. Meet me halfway.’

Even though Hotaka knew the water would be perishingly cold, it still took his breath away. The current was stronger than he expected, too, almost pulling his feet from under him. He met Takeshi and took charge of the old woman. She shook with cold and wailed like a frightened child, but Hotaka slowly edged her to shore as Takeshi went back for the next person.

The process was slow and difficult, made even more so by the old people, frail and frightened as they were. One of the men lost his grip as he entered the water; it took all of Takeshi’s strength to haul him back to the rope. Then the second-last person, a woman, lunged at Hotaka and clung so tightly around his neck that she dragged him under for a while. He was so exhausted after getting her to shore that he had to rest to catch his breath.

When he turned and started dragging himself out again he saw that Takeshi was in trouble. The last person, a big man, was struggling frantically and had to be hauled every inch of the way.

‘I can’t swim!’ he kept yelling.

As they drew closer Hotaka could see the exhaustion on Takeshi’s face. His friend was begging the man to relax, but it made no difference. Hotaka lunged forward, grabbing the old fellow away from Takeshi and was immediately

pulled under by the man. He dragged himself by the rope, much of the time submerged, certain he would drown. But just when he thought his lungs would burst, his face broke the surface and he crawled to safe ground, hauling the man with him. Hotaka lay spluttering for a while, then rolled onto his back and stared up at the sky, thankful to be alive.

‘We did it!’ he shouted, half-gasping, half-laughing. ‘We did it, Takeshi.’

There was no reply.

Hotaka sat up and stared around. ‘Takeshi?’

His friend was nowhere to be seen.

Hotaka leapt to his feet and screamed, ‘Takeshi!’

There was no Takeshi, no sign of him. Just the length of thick rope swaying in the water – the silent unrevealing water.

‘Takeshi!’ Hotaka dived in and thrashed his way out to the decking, scrambling up onto it. ‘Takeshi!’

He scanned the swirling mess, frantically searching. Everywhere. Anywhere. Nowhere. Nothing recognisable. Everything a possibility, but that was all. A voice calling. A hand waving. A head bobbing. Real or imagined? Out there or in his mind? Or both? Nothing was real, everything was a living nightmare.

‘Takeshi!’

Hotaka glanced towards the old people. They hadn’t moved, all staring at him as if waiting for instructions. Were they stupid? Why weren’t they heading up the hill? Another wave could easily come.

‘What’s the matter?’ he shouted. ‘Move!’ He strode to the edge of the platform. It groaned and tilted more. ‘Nigete, get away!’

All moved except the big man who'd been saved last. He didn't budge.

'What's wrong? Are you deaf?' Hotaka screamed. 'Nigete!' The man still didn't move. 'You've got your life. What else do you want? Get out of here!'

But the man began shaking his head, at which a kind of madness gripped Hotaka. He screeched, shook his fists and stamped his feet, so infuriated that he didn't hear the metallic scream. He saw the horror on the big man's face, and felt the lurch beneath his feet.

He was still screaming as the whole deck lifted up and tossed him backwards into the water, then flipped over and slammed down on top of him.