

THE QUARRY

Hiroki Kosuge

A White Arm

My mum has gone to the universe. That's true. Because I saw her off to the station. She seemed to be a bit tired then. Just before she got into the train, she gave me a cake as a Christmas present. There went the starting bell. When I waved the hand through the window, she had already started drinking and was looking at her phone. Then, as Dad told me that she had been chosen, I felt a bit proud of her although I worried about whether drunken astronauts could go home safely.

My mum used to drink a lot while Dad was absent. She used to drink sake, as if she drinks tea, and would sometimes hit me during drinking. I tried drinking a few times, while nobody was watching, to know why the liquid makes Mum mad. But, last summer, I was carried into the hospital for that. I often heard my parents quarrel out of the hospital room while I was in the bed. I felt very sorry for that because it was my fault. Finally, they divorced last December. (Dad said, divorce means Mum goes far away. I asked, 'How far?' He said, 'It's too far to see.' So, I thought divorce would mean Mum goes to the universe. Dad liked the idea, though Mum looked a bit sad when she heard of this.) Dad and I started a new life here from this January. I still can't get used to the strong provincial accent here.

Now, dad and I are in the hall at school since there is a graduation ceremony today. The ceremony isn't for me. We, the pupils and parents, have been brought together to sing a song for graduates. Dad standing among mothers seems to be a bit embarrassed because he is the only male. Ken, a friend of mine, said earlier, 'Where's your mum?' I just said, 'She's gone to the universe.' Ken said, 'You liar'. When I tried to say no, the floor shook and some people fell down like chessmen on a chessboard. The siren blew and dad rushed to me. We, dad and I, bent our bodies and waited for the tremors of the earthquake to stop. After the long shaking, somebody screamed, 'Tsunami comes!'

School teachers guided us to the rooftop. The level of the water rose little by little. I could see *burning* water cover the field in front of the school. Muddy water walls grew slowly. I could hear the sound of a cage made of mud swallowing the world, and realised that the world was made of sugar, otherwise it couldn't be broken like this. Looking at the ground, which was about to be fully covered by muddy water, I shouted, 'A grape is running!' Dad looked at me briefly and said, 'Shut up' quietly. Then, I found that I was still wearing the shoes for gym. I wanted to go to the lower floor to get the shoes for outside, but dad didn't allow me to go. We were looking at the destroyed houses which came floating down the river. Again, I yelled out, 'A GRAPE IS RUNNING!' At the moment, he scolded me severely. I was so astonished I burst into tears because Dad rarely shouts. Dad's hands were shaking. A group of people running on the street looked like an apple, lizard, and then, grape again. I didn't intend to make dad angry, but smile as he would. Everything on the surface of the water was spinning slowly. People around us kept on screaming, 'Up,Up,Up Uuuuuuuuuuuuuup!' I wondered if I should scream with them, but finally didn't. Because Dad had been silent.

It grew dark, and we ended up spending the night on the top of the roof. I'd decided not to speak until my dad spoke to me. I lowered my body into the big bed made of parents' coats and slept like that, and found that I'd lost my voice the next morning. I couldn't say anything even if Dad asked me to say something with his sad look.

After the Tsunami confusion, it's been decided that I go to see a doctor once a week. It takes nearly three hours from my 'temporary house' (Dad taught me to call it so). Since dad has given up his job in order to take care of me and buy a digger, he seems to be busier with his new part-time jobs, but also looked happy with this weekly outing with me. I like to go to the hospital too, despite the fact that Dr Kaneko plunges a silver spatula into my throat and asks some strange questions, because Dad buys me an ice cream. *Angelato*, the ice cream shop, is located on the ground floor of the hospital. The floor is filled with the scent of the elderly who smell like burnt bread. I suspect something is burning in their bodies, something important.

I am in the habit of ordering a double: green tea and brown sugar. Dad always makes fun of me for choosing such flavours like an old man. A shop assistant at *Angelato* made it triple as a free gift today. I bowed carefully in order not to drop the vanilla on the top and ran up to Dad. He was reading a magazine for boys. He loves manga comics in spite of being an adult. He glanced at me and said, 'Gimme the vanilla.' I shook my head and bit into it.

Dr Kaneko is a beautiful, unlikable woman. When I first met her, as she introduced herself in the standard language, which is unusual in this region, I wondered if she was angry about having 'a conversation' with me. Her beautiful smile made me all the more confused. Dr Kaneko, today, asked me 'What is there in your hometown?'

I wrote. 'A steel tower.'

She said, smiling beautifully, 'Anything else?'

I wrote. 'A chimney.'

She spoke in superlatives. 'Well done! How about the mountains, rivers or rice fields?'

I wondered for a while and found myself at a loss, and then wrote. 'There *were*.'

Mrs Kato, a dad's friend, arrived on a rainy Sunday. She was fat and short, like a small shrine. As she said, 'Hello,' I bowed carefully. She took out a robot toy, which I didn't like the look of, from her double-layered plastic bag and gave it to me. She

asked if I liked it, so I nodded. Since my mum had gone, I didn't know how to conduct myself in front of a woman of her age.

We didn't have anything to do while waiting for Dad. Mrs Kato was sitting politely on the square floor cushion, and I was pretending to play with the robot and was disappointed with the movable region of its arms.

When Dad arrived, it was already dark outside. He apologised for being late and Mrs Kato responded politely. Dad glanced at the robot in my hand and asked if I had said thank you to her, so I nodded. They talked quietly for a while in the stuffy room. Mrs Kato talked while covering her eyes and mouth, one after another, with a handkerchief. I happened to hear that her husband was carried away by tidal waves. I had known I shouldn't laugh, at the moment like this, no matter how incredible it was. Mrs Kato, in the middle of their conversation, handed Dad money and he immediately returned it. After their conversation, as Dad asked if I would come with them next Sunday, I nodded twice. It is the sign I made to tell my feeling, after I have lost my voice, which means I am with you, *always*.

It was fine weather on Sunday. But a drive from our temporary house to Mrs Kato's was not enjoyable because of a traffic jam. Dad said these cars were bringing relief supplies and volunteers. I thought, we are neither of them.

After I finished my second peeing on the road and came back to the car with Mrs Kato, she began to talk bit by bit. She told how she had been searching with her bare hands but she had had no success, and all her hope was now on the digger. She talked with a worried face, like the one who forgot to buy the meat for curry. Dad had been listening to her while chiming in with a remark occasionally.

We arrived at Mrs Kato's house finding ourselves three hours behind time. Mrs Kato said we could cancel today, but Dad responded that we had better get the work done as soon as possible, and climbed into the digger. While he was digging, Mrs Kato showed me around her house. We walked hand in hand lest I slip and fall down. She said there used to be a field of dandelions. Her hand was soft and a bit sweaty. I just wondered why she didn't smell like sake. The ground which used to be a yellow carpet of dandelions was covered by slime now. The area was filled with the mixed smell of the slime, seaweeds and something burnt. The dead bodies of sturgeons were

scattered near a piano lying upside down. I could see the end of the road we were on was blocked by a huge ship.

We, Mrs Kato and I, took a rest by a mountain of rubble. The sludge on the fusuma attached to the broken walls reminded me of a friend's drawing at the school. Strange, messy and blackly green. He always ends up drawing such pictures since he mixes all his pigments.

Then, I heard Dad calling Mrs Kato behind the broken walls. She seized my shoulder and told me not to come. Her wet eyes with large irises were shining like gentle gems. I didn't say yes, but nodded twice. When I looked down the ground, I found the fragments of a broken mirror reflecting a flaming sunset.

I could hear Dad was saying something from behind the broken walls. I walked toward the voice, and then stopped. All I could hear was the roar of strong wind. I peeped from a crack of a wall. Mrs Kato was hanging onto a white arm jutting out from the ground. Dad wasn't crying but joined his hands in prayer and then bowed. It was a beautiful bow, beautiful and cold.

Mrs Kato was asked to cremate her son within the day by a man from a municipal office. The man, who looked quite tired, said it was ordained by law. We went to a crematorium. Mrs Kato politely took off her son's clothes and one shoe and put them in her shoulder bag. She kept on murmuring, 'Sorry, I'm so sorry,' while squeezing her son's fingerless hand. After holding onto his white hand repeatedly, she saw her son disappearing into an incinerator.

It took approximately 20 minutes. I heard someone in the room talking in an undertone. '*Children can be quickly burnt.*' I wanted to escape from the room, but didn't want to be alone either. There was only the tick of the second. I felt it like forever.

When the bones, like a fluorescent hard chalk, appeared on the black plank, Mrs Kato cried loudly, as if animals, and then she faced the remains, which used to be a part of her, and put a piece of them into her mouth.

On the way back to the temporary house, Mrs Kato wearing a dirty shirt, asked if I wanted to eat something since I hadn't eaten anything since that morning. Dad said no thanks, but as she insisted, we three stopped at a restaurant facing the sea. The radio was on the air in the restaurant. An idol group was singing about dreams, love

and peace. I wondered why they didn't sing about muddy school bags or torn-off electric wire.

I ordered a Japanese set meal. Dad didn't make fun of my choice, but just said no. As Mrs Kato, however, told me to order the set, I did so. Dad and Mrs Kato neither ordered nor touched their water.

Mrs Kato, when we were about to leave to pay, said in a murmur. 'It's been good.' As she suddenly said so and burst into tears, the restaurant staff at the cash resister seemed to be startled. Dad didn't say anything, but was just looking at his hands sadly as if it's all his fault.

It's 4:00am now. Dad has given up on driving us home and has decided to take a nap in the car. I couldn't sleep at all. The night sky was pitch-dark. Dad seemed to be sleeping. Mrs Kato was hugging her son in the tiny white box and just shutting her eyes. I got out of the car silently in order not to wake dad up, and told Mrs Kato that I would go to the toilet. The sky was getting gloomy, but the azaleas along the road were still enduring in order not to melt into the darkness. I stepped onto the observation platform overlooking the sea. I inhaled the chilly air, and then it instantly bloomed in my stomach. I opened my mouth to fill it with the light of the coming morning dawn. However, the silence of the darkness still covered the area.

Suddenly, a bright moonbeam broke through the clouds. The pale moonlight and silent black sea reminded me of the white arm jutting out of the ground. Where did the arm go? WHERE COULD HAVE IT GONE? I got scared, but realised that I couldn't do anything for that. I watched my trembling arm. It was dimly lit by the moonlight. I prayed. I prayed that my arms wouldn't become whiter anymore, but the cruel particle of light didn't seem to stop bleaching my arms. I prayed. I kept on praying until the desperate wish became hoarse cries.