

The Return

By Alex Hart

This tale has been inspired by Kurashiki, a historic city located in western Okayama Prefecture, Japan, which sits on the Takahashi River. Please note that 'Haha' is the Japanese term for 'mother', while 'Chichi' is the term for 'father'.

In one hand I hold my backpack, in the other, my sister's hand. It's small and clammy to the touch, but it's my hand which is trembling slightly. Obstinate tears glaze over my eyes. Haha is ahead of me, her trudging steps gathering mud. Even her form seems different now - misshapen, misformed.

I've always been so proud of my city. The glare of the Great Seto Bridge used to welcome me home with a warmth that filled the pit of my stomach. Our universities boasted globally-acclaimed academics, while the old merchant quarter had warehouses dating back to the 17th century. It used to have an invincibility to it. Then came the floods.

Now the whole city is shrouded in mud. We struggled to find our way through the clogged and cluttered streets - street signs washed away and landmarks disguised and unfamiliar. Haha walked ahead the whole time, as if she couldn't bear to look my sister and I in the eye, or to feel the comfort of our hands in hers. But now she stops. She turns. And we know that she has found our house.

A single tree stretches across our roof, its branches bedraggled as they pierce through the tiles. A pile of anonymous carnage hides what was once the lawn, the strangled remains of our car barely identifiable amongst the rubble. Glass is missing from the windows of the house, and its once white-washed walls are decidedly grey.

When they told us we could return to our homes, when they told us the floods had passed, her face was emotionless in blind acceptance. The camp we were staying at hummed with nervous anticipation, families buzzing around collecting their belongings and saying their farewells. Yet she remained silent. I haven't seen her mouth upturn with so much as a smile of softened platitude since we heard the news about Chichi. He stayed behind to look after the business. But I can't allow myself to believe he is really dead.

We catch up to Haha. I don't think she notices our presence, or my sister's guttural gasp, or the tears of hopelessness dripping down my cheeks. The extent of the damage to our home washes over me in nauseating waves of repeated realisations. What if Chichi lies under the pile of destruction? The invasive thought taps away at my brain, turning my stomach and constricting my throat. And before I know it, I've fallen upon the carnage of the lawn.

I barely know what I'm doing, but I pull away at the rubble; vision blurred, mind foggy, tears overwhelming. I tear at wooden planks and bits of tiles and shatterings of glass - all fuelled by a source I have never yet experienced, a burning, churning, whitenoise-like energy that spirits me into action.

But he's not there. Of course he's not. And as reality floods my senses, as understanding cools my blood, I remember where I am. I remember my sister is watching me. I remember my Haha needs me. I stand up, turning to face them, wiping my bloodied hands on my trousers and my tears on my muddied sleeve. Haha is still standing, frozen in disbelief, locked in a time and place that no longer exists. My sister stares at me, equally bereft of expression. I walk over to her, take her hand in mine. We join Haha in front of the house, and link our arms in hers.

She sighs in acknowledgment, shakes herself active. We walk towards the front door together.

This story is unfortunately set recently, in July 2018.

In July 2018, sustained heavy rainfall in parts of western and central Japan caused flash flooding. This led to landslides and submerged floodplains, forcing more than 2 million residents to evacuate. Japan's National Police Agency announced that at least 200 people had died, and dozens more were still missing. They declared it the worst weather-related disaster to hit Japan in over 30 years. More than 70,000 rescue workers were deployed to search for survivors as the damage to villages, roads, and infrastructure was assessed. Hundreds of thousands of homes remained without power or clean water for months.