



CATFISH

ROLLING

CLARA KUMAGAI

ZEPHYR

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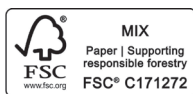
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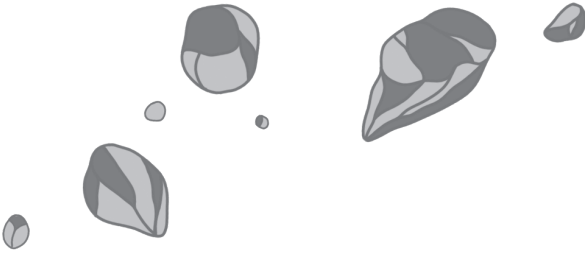
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For Ronald, who told me where the wild
things are.

And to all those whose lives were affected
when the catfish rolled.



永

ETERNITY

There's a catfish under the islands of Japan. That's what shakes everything up: the catfish twisting and turning in the mud beneath us. It rolls and the ground trembles, water crashes, time cracks and breaks.

I hate that catfish.



When it happened, it was springtime. The cherry blossoms looked like clouds – so pink and fluffy, they might rain sugar. I ate sakura mochi and the saltiness of the leaf surprised me. Ojichan fed me dango whenever my mother wasn't looking. I was eleven years old.

Me and Dad were in the supermarket. Mom was at home with Ojichan. She was airing the futons, hanging them out of the wide windows upstairs, laying them along the roof. She had wanted me to help, but I wouldn't. I'd whined until Dad said he would take me with him to get food for dinner and Mom had sighed and given in.

I wandered up and down the aisles, prodding mysterious packets, picking up sweets and bringing them to Dad, usually for them to be rejected. Even though we came to Japan at least once a year, it was still like a wonderland, everything strange and brightly coloured. Dad wheeled the trolley serenely and reminded me of the shopping list, while I sneaked in snacks and desserts.

'Natto,' he said. 'Pickled daikon. Kombu dashi.'

I retrieved them, inspecting the pictures if the writing wasn't within the limited range of the kanji we knew.

'Get something sweet for your mother,' Dad said.

'Sure!' She might still be annoyed that I hadn't stayed at home with her, so I had to choose something good.

I decided on mochi ice cream. It was cold in my hand when the ground began to shake.

Some people paused, others shrugged and continued pushing their trollies. I wasn't used to earthquakes and I stayed still, waiting for the shiver to end, as if the

ground had just become a little chilly. But it got stronger and stronger, and people began to move to the doors, panicked but remaining orderly. Then things started to fall off shelves. I clung to the side of the freezer until I heard Dad shouting my name.

‘I’m here, I’m here!’ I yelled back.

He ran to me and grabbed my hand. We rushed out, as jars and bottles smashed everywhere. Everyone had gathered in the car park, but now the ground was shaking so hard it was difficult to stand up. I fell down and Dad crouched beside me and put his arms around me. There was a screeching that made me think of the gate at my school back home in Vancouver, which was metal and old and when it dragged over the uneven concrete it sounded the same, but this was a giant version, and if this was a gate then was it being opened or closed? There was a groaning that was probably buildings splintering or glass cracking, but might also have been the earth itself breaking, shrieking as it stretched and tore apart. It was thunder and lightning beneath the ground, it was something alive and twisting deep in the centre of the earth.

I put my hands on the tarmac to hold myself up, or maybe to try to hold the ground down, and I realised that I had run out of the shop with the mochi ice cream now softening and melting. I thought, *I hope Mom doesn’t mind.*

‘Mom,’ I shouted, and when I looked at Dad I could tell that’s what he was thinking too.

I tried to stand but Dad pulled me back. ‘Wait,’ he

told me. ‘We have to wait.’ His voice was calm but his arms held me so hard that they trembled.

When the shaking finally stopped, the alarms began. The noise of frightened people grew louder and we all began to run to cars, along streets to our homes, clutching phones and calling parents and children.

Dad called home, holding the phone tight to his ear, and the longer he held it there, saying nothing, the faster my heart beat, until the pounding in my ears was like an alarm all of its own. He tapped in another number and then another.

‘Where are they?’ I asked.

He said, ‘I don’t know.’

We got in the car even though we weren’t supposed to. There were policemen and ambulances and fire engines, but Dad ignored any that tried to wave us down. I stared out of the window and saw roofs of houses slumping and smoke rising and people everywhere. Some were walking or running and some weren’t moving at all.

The ice cream was still in my hand. It was almost entirely melted inside the wrapper. *If I put it in the freezer, it will be fine. It will freeze again,* I repeated over and over, as we drove along. *It’ll freeze. It’ll be fine. It’ll freeze.*

Dad slowed the car and swore. The road ahead was blocked with cars, bumper to bumper, not moving. He rolled down the window and waved at a passing policeman, who paused, wiping sweat from his forehead, saying, *No further, no further.* Dad got his phone out

again and started tapping and waiting, tapping and waiting, and I sat quietly. People were getting out of their cars. Some were going on ahead, others were turning back.

And then something happened. I didn't know what it was then, only that something had shifted in a way that had never taken place before, like the texture of the air thickened, or the temperature dropped, or the lights went out, except it wasn't any one of those things. It was the sensation of things switching, moving, fracturing. Dad felt it too. He lowered the phone from his ear and everybody around us paused, steadying themselves against each other or cars or the ground. On the radio, there was a sudden silence.

It felt as though the world had stopped, and for a handful of heartbeats we all floated, suspended in space. My ears popped, and then gravity or momentum returned with a *whoosh*, like a huge wave breaking over the land. We were all thrown about – some backwards, some forwards, because it wasn't water or wind that had crashed over us. It was *time*.

I think I fainted then, because it was all black, and when my memory started again, Dad was holding me in his arms, even though I was too big for them, and we were at the roadblock that the police had set up. He was shouting at them, but they wouldn't let him through. From his arms, I stared up at the sky and saw that something was very wrong. The clouds looked like they had been shattered, or cut by some gigantic knife.

Over the buildings, smoke was trailing, but plumes right beside each other were rising faster and then slower, as if they were being tugged by different currents of air.

I felt dizzy and sick and I buried my face in Dad's chest. He was breathing rapidly and I could hear his heart galloping.

He put me on my feet. 'We have to go somewhere safer to wait.'

He held my hand and he walked so fast I had to jog to keep up. We weaved through cars and people and I focused on the ground because I didn't want to see the nightmare sky. I noticed that my other hand was empty; I'd lost the ice cream for Mom. I shouted and Dad turned to me.

'What's wrong?'

I twisted out of his grip and started to run back towards the car, but there were so many people coming towards us, all trying to get away, that I was tangled up in legs and rushing bodies. Dad was yelling at me but I couldn't stop and didn't until I felt his arms grab me and lift me roughly.

'What are you doing?' he shouted. He shook me, hard.

'The ice cream,' I said. 'It's for Mom. I lost it. It's for her.'

Maybe it was the shaking that did it, but my tears came loose and I was crying and Dad hugged me and then, without a word, took my hand again, and we made our way back up the hill with everyone else, trying to escape from whatever had happened behind us.

We had been shaken. Our entire world shook.

