

Nonfiction

**AS THE DEADLY TSUNAMI SPED TOWARD
JAPAN'S COAST, A GROUP OF KIDS RACED TO
SAVE THEMSELVES—AND HUNDREDS OF OTHERS**

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WITH REPORTING FROM
JAPAN BY SETSUKO KAMIYA
OF THE JAPAN TIMES

**NARRATIVE
NONFICTION**
Reads like fiction—
but it's all true

SURVIVING THE TSUNAMI



AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT:
DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

As you read, think about the words and phrases the author uses to help you imagine the disaster in Japan.

On the afternoon of March 11, 2011, the students of Kamaishi East Junior High School, in Kamaishi, Japan, were getting ready for after-school activities. Fourteen-year-old Aki Kawasaki was excited for her basketball practice. Her classmate Kana Sasaki was getting dressed for judo. Fumiya Akasaka, captain of the boys' tennis team, was heading for the courts. Their English teacher, Shin Saito, was grading papers in his office.

It was a typical Friday afternoon, until 2:46, when a massive earthquake began to rumble 20 miles below the floor of the Pacific Ocean.

The quake, 40 miles off Japan's coast, was 1,000 times more powerful than the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. It sent shockwaves hundreds of miles in every direction. In Tokyo, office buildings swayed like blades of grass. Glass from shattered windows rained down onto the streets. In Kamaishi, a town on Japan's beautiful northeastern coast, buildings shook violently.

Streets cracked open. Pieces of the stone cliffs surrounding the city crumbled into the sea. →

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The students and teachers of Kamaishi East rushed for cover as computers, books, and furniture crashed around them. People screamed, their cries drowned out by the quake's monstrous roar.

Most earthquakes last for a few seconds, unleashing quick bursts of destruction. This quake was different. It went on and on, like an endless nightmare. It continued for nearly six minutes—the shaking, the roaring, the crashing, the terror. When it finally stopped, there was a moment of eerie quiet. Kamaishi East, built to survive such quakes, was still standing. Miraculously, none of the students and teachers was seriously injured.

But there was no feeling of relief for Aki, Kana, Fumiya, or any of the students at Kamaishi East. They knew the disaster was just beginning.

Destroyed Twice

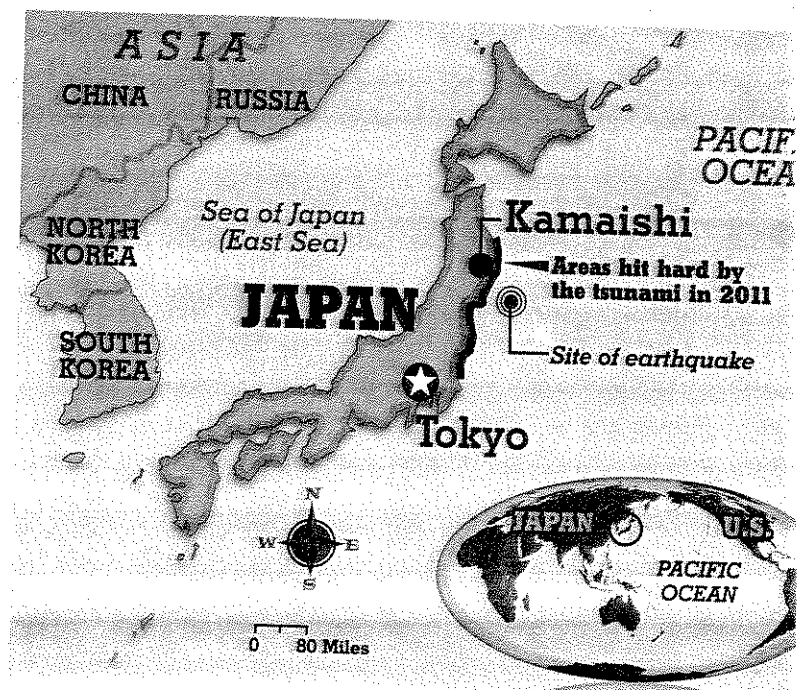
The quake had **triggered** a series of massive waves called a tsunami. This tsunami was hundreds of miles wide, and it was now racing across the ocean at jet speeds. Just a few yards high at first, it would grow stronger and bigger—in some places as high as 133 feet—as it approached the shore. It would hit Japan's northeastern coast with such incredible force that anything in its way would be **obliterated**.

It wasn't the first time a tsunami struck Kamaishi. The town had been destroyed before, once in 1896 and again in 1933. Stories of these disasters had been passed

down through the generations.

Four years ago, school leaders in Kamaishi decided they needed to do more than simply tell their children these stories. They wanted Kamaishi's students to be experts. Scientists predicted that another deadly quake and tsunami could strike Japan's coast at any time. The more students knew, school leaders believed, the more likely they would be to survive.

At Kamaishi East and other middle schools, tsunami education became part of every class. In social studies, students researched the 1896 tsunami and its effects on the city. In science, they learned how tsunamis form. In language arts, they wrote essays about the 1933 tsunami. They drew **hazard maps** showing the likely paths of waves and even learned how to cook soup for people in disaster shelters.





They also participated in tsunami drills. Students had been taught to gather outside the school and wait for teachers to take attendance. Once everyone was accounted for, the group would **evacuate** to a parking lot half a mile away.

But when the quake struck, students realized they had no time to stand around. They knew this quake was far more powerful than any before. They didn't doubt that a tsunami was heading straight for them. It was a life-or-death race, with not a minute to spare.

"Before I realized I was running, my feet were moving," Kana says.

With panicked shouts, students urged their teachers to follow them as they sprinted for higher ground. At the neighboring elementary school, teachers had planned to stay on their building's third floor. The sight of the older students

rushing away changed their minds. Soon hundreds of students and teachers were in a frantic dash for safety.

"I thought the tsunami would come," says Aki. "I was desperately trying to escape."

When they reached the first evacuation site, they decided to run for higher ground. The older students helped the younger ones, pushing them along, grabbing their hands. They went to a second evacuation site, a parking lot on a hill. Terrified and out of breath, they had a **sweeping** view of the horrific scene unfolding in their town just below.

A Black Raging River

The ocean had already begun its attack. Just 30 minutes after the earthquake, a churning black wave swept into the streets, rising so quickly that cars, trucks, homes, and people were swallowed up in seconds.

The water—now a raging river littered with debris, boats, and wrecked homes—rushed deeper into the city and up into the hills. The students watched in shock as their school was **engulfed**. At the elementary school, a car crashed into the third floor, exactly where the teachers had planned to wait with the children after the quake. If they had stayed, they would have been killed.

Similar scenes were unfolding up and down Japan's coast. In minutes, hundreds of places—small cities,



ABOVE: Cars float like bath toys in the flooded streets. **RIGHT:** A man holds his baby girl. Rescue workers found her in the rubble three days after the devastating earthquake and tsunami.

TOP: YOMIURI/REUTERS/LANDOV; BOTTOM: HIROTO SEKIGUCHI/THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN/AP IMAGES; RIGHT: IWANACHARTER/ISTOCKPHOTO

bustling towns, quaint fishing villages, and quiet farming communities—were completely submerged. And then, like a monster returning to its lair, the water rushed back into the Pacific. Thousands of people were swept out to sea.

In the hours after the quake and tsunami, Aki, Kana, and Fumiya stood amid a group of hundreds of stunned students and teachers, shivering in the cold, terrified for their families. They eventually made their way to one of the city's surviving school buildings, where there was no food, water, or lights.

They went to another school the next day. Only then were they reunited with their families. Fourteen students lost one or both parents. Aki, Kana, and Fumiya were among the lucky. Their families were safe.

Hope and Strength

It is nearly impossible to grasp the full picture of destruction unleashed by this disaster. Approximately 20,000 people died. Entire towns were simply erased by the raging waters. These were lively towns, centuries old. Today, nothing remains of these



Standing tall: Kamaishi East Junior High students (from left) Kana Sasaki, Fumiya Akasaka, and Aki Kawasaki

communities but toxic mud littered with the shreds of people's lives—twisted bits of metal and wood, tattered clothes, ruined books and photo albums.

Kamaishi was devastated. Out of a population of 37,000 people, 850 were killed. Thousands lost their homes, including Kana and Fumiya and most of the other students at Kamaishi East. A year later, only a few shops have reopened. Several thousand tons of debris have been cleaned from the streets. But the reconstruction of Kamaishi East has not yet begun. The students are sharing a school building with another junior high in the city.

But amid the hopelessness and

the ruin, the story of the students of Kamaishi East continues to inspire the people of this city. All of the students and teachers survived. The teachers insist that it was Kamaishi East students' quick action in a moment of terror that made the difference. "If it weren't for them," says Saito, "I don't think I would be alive."

Mr. Saito speaks proudly of Aki, Kana, Fumiya, and the other students, who are working to rebuild their lives. "Things are very tough, and the students face many difficulties moving forward," Saito says. "But the fact is, it's the students who are giving us hope and strength to move on." ●

WRITE TO THE STUDENTS OF KAMAISHI EAST!

Write a letter to the students of Kamaishi East, telling them what you think of their story. We will send your letters to Shin Saito, who will share them with his class. We will also be making a donation in the name of *Scope* readers to the school. Send or e-mail entries to *Scope Japan Letters* by March 15. See page 2 for details.