

## Kai and the Sea

Kai woke before the morning sun. He stole quietly down the stairs, careful to avoid the squeaky steps near the bottom, before removing his slippers and stepping outside barefoot. Bamboo hat on his head and bamboo rod in hand, Kai walked down the street. By the moonlight he could see the shadows of the great mountains in the distance, dwarfing the small houses of the village. Most were almost identical, with their white walls, triangular roofs, and square translucent windows. He saw the warm glow of light in only one. Otherwise the village was still, and dark. Kai heard only the ebb and flow of the waves in the distance; he moved towards it, following the same path he had taken for years. As he made his way past one final row of houses, Kai was fronted by the sea, by her salty scent and fresh breath. He tightened his hat so it would not be taken by the wind. As he gazed out into the water, the tip of the sun poked its fiery dome over the water, suddenly casting a beautiful purple light across the bay. Kai hadn't missed it for as long as he could remember. He allowed himself to admire the view for just a minute, and then walked briskly to the dock, where a single boat bobbed gently in the water. The rope that held the two together was pulled taut, the boat longed for the sea. Kai had to pull it in with two hands before expertly jumping in. His boat was old, but sturdy; flat, but comfortable. He paddled out into the middle of the bay, directly towards the rising orb in the sky, now a lighter red, bathing the horizon in blue and orange. Kai turned his boat, and baited his rod. He dropped his line into the water, watching the ripples spread in rings. He held the rod between his knees and waited, wishing he could stay forever. From the shore, he was a lone silhouette.

Kai paddled his boat back towards the shore, his pail full of fish. When he removed his cap for just a moment, the sun beat fiercely upon his neck. Sweat dripped steadily from his chin with every row. There were now many more fishermen in the bay. Kai sure handedly reattached the boat to the dock and made his way towards the market. The market was as chaotic as the little village got. The overwhelming stench of a thousand varieties of seafood was complemented by shouts of bargain prices, each one of the hundreds of stalls attempting to outdo all the others. Kai sold his fish to the same man for the same price every day. He might get a better deal elsewhere, but Kai didn't care. He wanted no part in the bartering that the others took pride in. As usual, he saved his two biggest fish, stowing them in a pail filled with ice water. He also bought an octopus and some shrimp. Kai wrapped a towel around his neck and headed home; he saw a train disappear into the mountains, towards a mysterious place. He passed by the temple, pausing in front of its tall swooping red roofs and intricate carvings. Umi had loved the temple.

Kai swung open the gate and yelled "Tadaima." His father quickly came to the door saying "okaeri, okaeri." Kai handed his pail to his father. Today they would eat *sukiyaki* with the fish Kai caught. He could smell the scent of the warm broth already, drifting through the cloth *noren* hanging in the doorway between the sitting room and kitchen. Kai turned to his father and asked, "Where is my daughter?"

"Still at school" was the response.

Kai waited for dinner on the tatami mats that covered the ground in his room. His eyes searched the bare walls until they came to rest on the only picture, a small fading print in a bare frame. Kai sighed and looked away.

Kai's mother was already yelling for him to come to dinner. Kai's daughter already sat at the table, intently discussing school with her grandfather. Kai sat at the end of the table and ate quickly, slurping the noodles and then deftly picking out the pieces of fish from the soup with his chopsticks. He picked up the bowl and finished off the soup, before saying "gochisou sama" and standing. Kai glanced at the clock, and yawned and stretched. There were only ten minutes before nine, when he would fall a sleep. He said "oyasumi" and climbed back up the stairs. Kai lied back onto his futon pulled the string under the light, blanketing the room in darkness. He stared up for a few minutes and then his eyes fell shut. Downstairs Kai's daughter was almost in tears.

One early morning Kai woke to a strange feeling in the air. He heard a faint rattling coming from his only shelf. He looked up and saw his picture vibrating ever so slightly. Kai shrugged to himself, and crept down the stairs. As he watched the sunrise, he noticed that the *sakura* were blooming. Kai had first begun his morning ritual on the first day of the *sakura*'s bloom. For two weeks every year, the beautiful buds would poke themselves out of every branch of every cherry tree, flowering the town in light pink. Today, Kai turned his head from the sea, and towards the cherry blossoms, admiring every detail. So focused on the trees, Kai did not feel the breeze stop, or see the sky turn from its welcoming purple to a menacing deep red. He didn't hear the birds stop singing or feel the sea grow still.

Suddenly the ground began to sway back and forth, and Kai tumbled to the ground, yelling out. At once, he noticed that everything was wrong. Now, the ground didn't sway, but shook angrily. Kai stood, but was at once thrown to the ground again. Kai looked back and swore the mountains were shaking as his village crumbled before

his eyes. Even the temple, high, majestic and proud, was no match for the earth.

Stubbornly, Kai sat up and turned towards his boat. He crawled towards it, just one meter away when the ground finally became still. Kai saw his house, reduced to rubble, and thought fleetingly of his family. He did not return home. He got into the boat. Seconds later, the water drew back, pulling Kai and his boat with it. Had he looked back, he would have seen a strange and alarming sight, a long muddy shore dotted with stranded crabs, shrimp and fish. But Kai faced the open sea, unaware, once again dropping his line into the water, watching the ripples spread in rings.

A faint wave moved across the unusually silent sea with remarkable speed like a shark fin splitting water. It grew ever so slightly as it approached the entrance of the bay. Then there was darkness. A dark shadow was cast from the edge of the bay all the way to the mountains. The people of the village, just emerging from the rubble of the earthquake, arose to darkness and the sound of rushing and sucking water, louder every second. A faint light finally appeared, and at once there were screams, fingers pointing towards the bay, chaos, and panic. The few with cars gathered their families and drove off quickly. Some even tried to run. The earthquake's destruction left an unobstructed view from the village. A wall of water, taller than the temple, rushed towards the village. The tip of the sun fought to remain in sight, just a sliver peeking out over the top of the beast. Amid the panic, a few would notice a strange sight. A single boat holding a lone silhouette, brandishing a rod as if it were fighting the *oni*.

Kai figured he should be scared. He looked up at his hands, which for some reason, were gripping his bamboo rod like a baseball bat. He was shaking, wondering if he was about to die. But in Kai's heart, he knew the sea could not harm him. It was his

only home now. Then Kai thought that he wouldn't much mind dying here and now. Facing the sun, on the first day of the cherry blossoms, seven years since Umi had been lost at sea. The wave seemed frozen, its menacing claws reaching out, foaming at the mouth. Then as the wave slammed into him, Kai realized that he was very afraid. But not of the sea, and not of the *oni*, not even of death.

He was crushed and twisted, thrown and beaten, subjected to every pain imaginable. He was snapped in half, and ripped into pieces, gutted like the fish in the market. But Kai was not ready to die. He gritted his teeth and held firm to his rod, and finally, the *oni* spit him out, unable to digest such a tough piece of meat. Kai paddled his boat furiously after the wave. It crashed into the village, exploding into a million drops of water, and then coming together in a powerful stream, sweeping up everything in its path. Kai was pulled along, he directed himself towards where his house used to be. He dodged the roofs and doors and carts flying around him, smashing themselves into splinters. For a moment he admired the cherry blossoms floating along, elegant even among the destruction. Crack. A large tree slammed into Kai's boat. Sturdy as ever, the boat remained intact while the tree cracked in half – but not before it began to fill up with water. The boat flipped, and Kai held on by the tip of his fingers, using all of his strength

*Oni*: demon

to hoist himself onto the boat. As he was thrown around like a piece of trash, Kai felt the confidence drain out of him, his body weary, and willpower fading.

Kai lay half conscious on his overturned boat. He heard his name, quietly. He opened half and eyelid. The stream had slowed significantly as it moved towards the base

of the mountains. Perhaps he was hallucinating. Kai recognized his parents' voices. They were screaming and pleading desperately. He wondered why for a moment. They were in better shape than he was, securely sitting in a makeshift raft. Kai closed his eyes again. Then immediately he remembered why he was there. Why he had fought the wave, why he was still alive, and why he was afraid. He followed his parents' fingers and saw what he dreaded most; his daughter, lifeless in the unforgiving stream.

Kai dove into the water, pulling himself towards his daughter as fast as he could. The current battered him, and the salty water stung his eyes, but Kai kept her in sight. He grabbed her with one arm, and kicked and pulled her to his parents raft. His body was in intense pain, but his mind numbed the suffering. Kai's father pulled him and his daughter onto the raft. When she sat up, Kai could not believe what he saw. In her eyes, Kai saw Umi.

The raft dumped its inhabitants onto wet land kilometers from where their village once stood. The wave now returned to the sea, carrying with it its ruins. The survivors trekked towards the base of the mountains, wet, injured and thirsty. They mourned for those who were not so lucky. Kai led his family towards the train station. As they sat on the bench by the rails, Kai spoke softly to his daughter. Finally, the train arrived. Kai looked back into the sea longingly. He shook his head and boarded without looking back. The train carried the family away through the mountains.