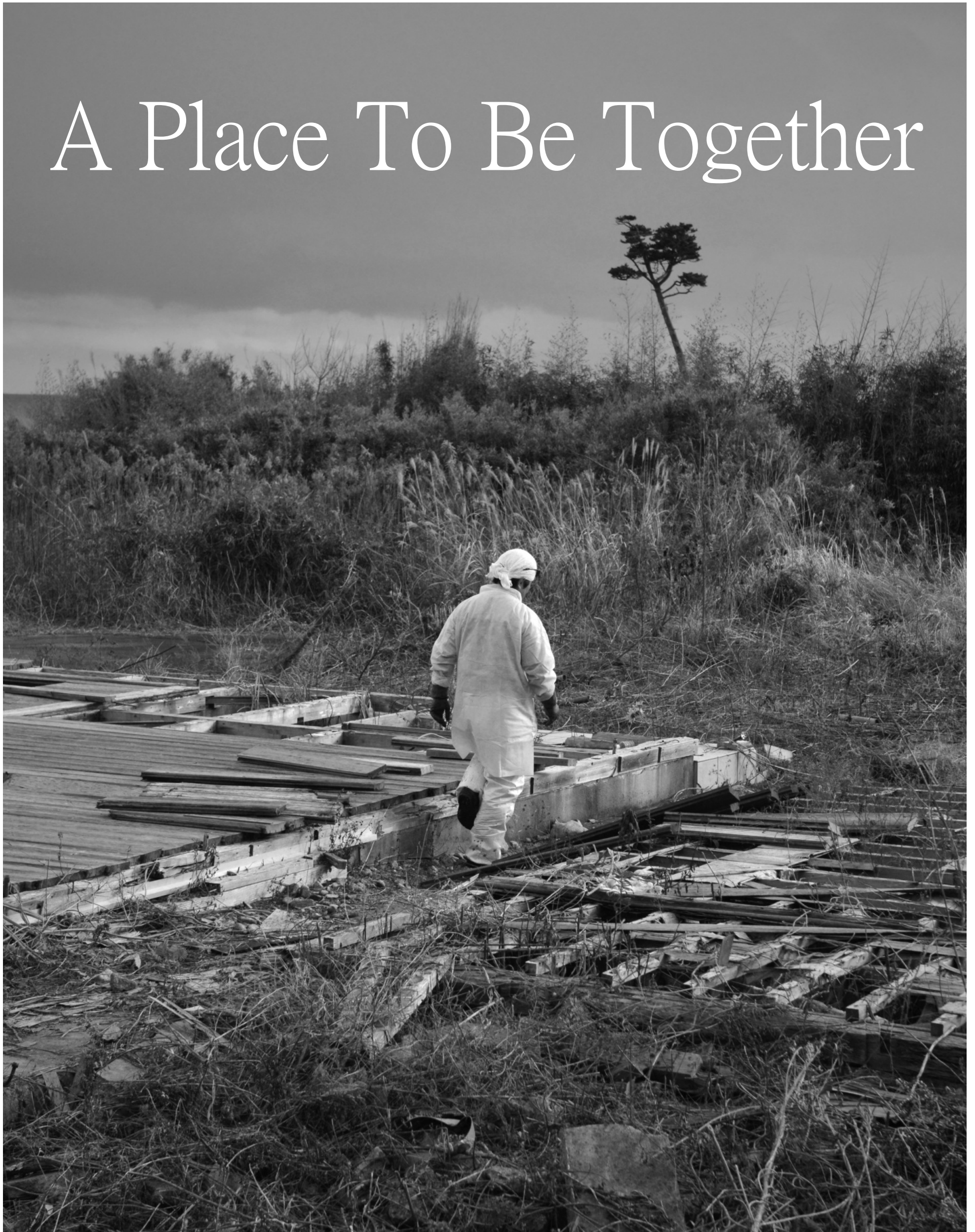


## A Place To Be Together







Kimura continues his search along the beach in Okuma, Fukushima.  
"Yuna was outgoing and always the center of attention"

PHOTO&TEXT  
BY YUKI IWANAMI

## SEARCH GOES ON FOR MISSING DAUGHTER

SERIES  
FUKUSHIMA

FUKUSHIMA, Japan- With the arrival of autumn, the yellow Canada goldenrod which once covered the area has wilted away, covering the tsunami swept Kumakawa district of Okuma, Fukushima in an unsightly brown color. There is no sound other than the occasional whistling of the wind or the waves crashing against the broken seawall. Amid the bleak scenery, the sole figure of Norio Kimura trudges on, hoe in hand. Entry into the area is strictly limited due to the nuclear fallout, but he has been searching like this for more than four years to find the daughter robbed away by the tsunami waves.

On March 11th 2011, Kimura's father, wife and second daughter Yuna became victims of the tsunami. Yuna had just started elementary school from the previous year. Kimura searched for them through the night, but when the nuclear accident happened, was forced to evacuate his eldest daughter and mother to his wife's house in Okayama. Though he immediately returned to Fukushima alone, entrance to the contaminated town was no longer possible. All he could do was to put up flyers asking for information on the whereabouts of his family. By June, his father and wife were found and put to rest. He has since moved to Hakuba, Nagano with his eldest daughter, choosing the place because it allows him to travel to both Fukushima and Okayama, and is trying to establish a self-sufficient lifestyle there.

The town of Okuma is where the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station is located, and following the accident, the area where ninety-six percent of the population lived has been designated as a "difficult-to-return" zone, prohibiting entry without special permission. For the two

years after the accident, residents were allowed short returns to their houses once every three months only. The limit has been eased to fifteen times per year now, but stays must be under five hours leaving little time to search for loved ones.

Kimura did not experience the tsunami firsthand and also left town the next day. This led him to become detached from reality, unable to grasp the fact that Yuna and the others were really gone. "I have to go back, I can't give up". Despite the thoughts racing through his mind, with all the restrictions in place, even when he got the chance to return, he felt overwhelmed and would often leave without accomplishing anything.

Meeting Takayuki Ueno, a resident of Minami-Soma, changed everything. Ueno had lost four members of his family, but banded together with his volunteer fire company comrades and other volunteers to form the group Fukko-Hamadan, and was continuing his search for missing people including his father and son. By listening to Ueno who had been involved in the search efforts from the immediate aftermath and seen the devastation with his own eyes, Kimura was finally able to understand what Yuna and the others must have experienced. Feeling the fright and despair they must have gone through, Kimura broke down in a hysteric fit of tears.

"It's just wrong that you are left to suffer over something like this". The way Ueno reacted upon learning the difficulties to find his missing daughter gave Kimura hope. Since the autumn of 2013, Kimura has been participating along with the Fukko-Hamadan in the search efforts, and the monthly visits to Okuma have become something to almost look forward to. "When I come here, it feels like I'm with the other three. Kind of like soothing medication" Ueno says.



Miyuki's hat was found from the rubble yard



Members of the Fukko-Hamadan and Kimura search a rubble yard in Kumakawa district





Photos of Yuna and the others are pinned to the walls of the house in Hakuba, Nagano where Kimura and Mayu are staying



Ueno and members of the Fukko-Hamadan string up lights on the hill behind Kimura's house



Kimura writes the words "I love you" on the shed



Kimura and Ueno sit down and talk in the backyard after erecting a shed to store the search tools



Kimura walks Bell in snow covered Hakuba village. Bell was found near home on the day of the tsunami



A shoe which Yuna was wearing on the day of the tsunami was found

But just when a sense of normalcy had seemed to have returned, as if to add insult to injury, a new problem arose.

The government had come up with a new plan to build an interim storage facility to store the nuclear contaminated waste, and Kimura's house was within the planned area. "I have no intention of selling nor renting the land which will prevent us from continuing searches" Kimura declared at one of the briefing sessions held between the residents and the government. But the reply from the Ministry of Environment representative left him dumbfounded. "We weren't aware there were people still missing". These people were holding this meeting without even knowing that? Despite the residents' apprehension and protests, the project steadily progressed. In January this year, as soon as the municipalities of Fukushima prefecture, Okuma and Futaba town announced that they would accept the plan, the Ministry of Environment started negotiations with landowners. Then in March, although most of the negotiations were still ongoing, the government went ahead and started trucking waste into the limited areas where buyouts had been finished.

"If it weren't for the nuclear accident, more people could have searched for the missing after the tsunami. Lives could have been saved, and the bodies wouldn't have been left out in the open for so many days. Dad was actually found right near the house" Kimura says. It's not that

Kimura opposes the storage facility. But he just cannot but question how only Okuma and Futaba have to bear the brunt while everyone else benefits. So much has already been taken away. Why this land, too. "Honestly, I just want to be left alone" confesses Kimura.

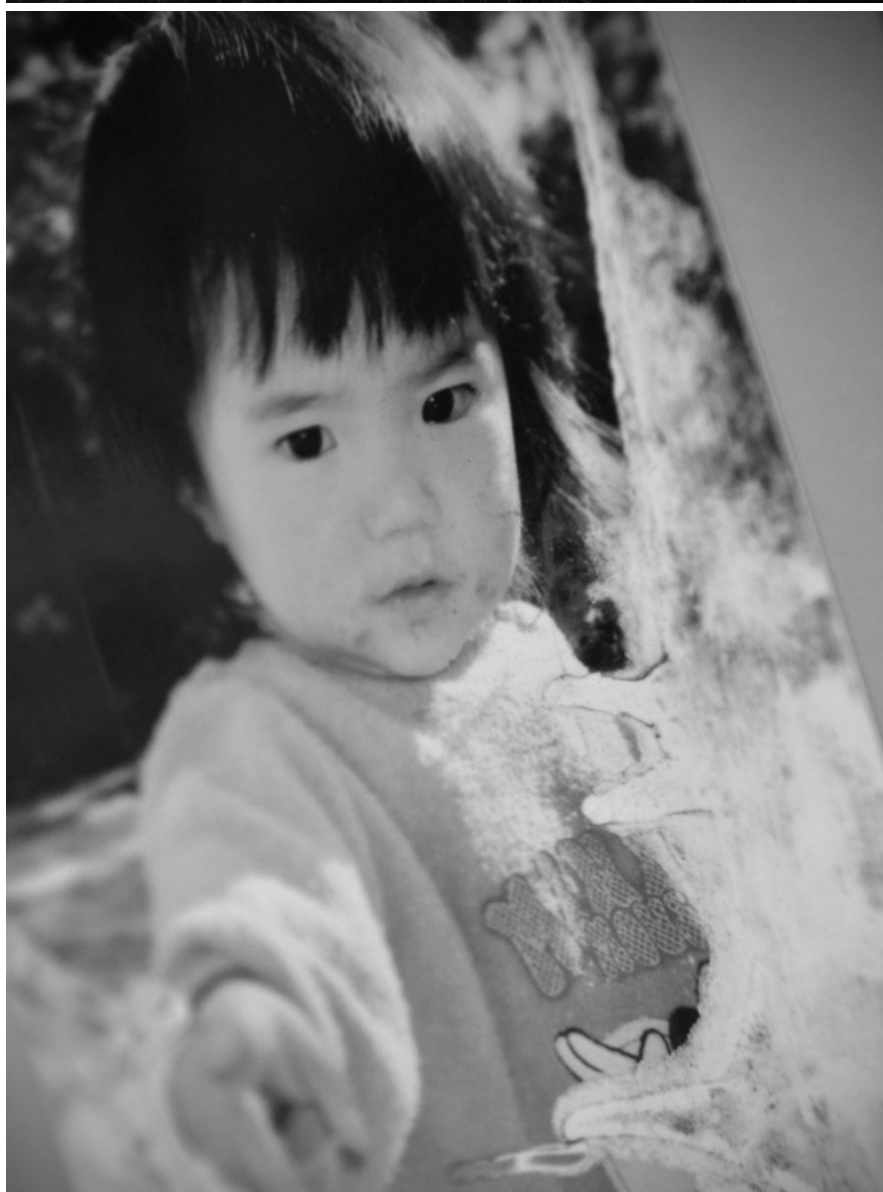
In an effort to tidy up the place and recover a semblance of normalcy, last Christmas, Kimura decorated the hill behind his house with colorful lights with the help of his friends from the Fukko-Hamadan. The design is made of one kanji character from Yuna's name, another symbolizing laughter, and a smiley face. Temporary visiting times are limited to four o'clock in the afternoon, so no one has seen the illumination after dark. "You're the only ones that get to see this", Kimura smiles toward the sky and tells Yuna and the others. The tsunami swept away most of the trees allowing a clearer view of the beach and ocean from the hill now. When Yuna was about to start elementary school, she suddenly announced that "I'm gonna be an expert fisherman!" So Kimura bought her a fishing rod, and along with Mayu, the three of them would often go to the beach to fish. The breeze was refreshing there even during the peak of summer. This was also the beach where Kimura proposed to his wife Miyuki. Kimura has placed three stone *jizo* statues on the hill. One each for Yuna, Miyuki and his father. Sitting before them, Kimura quietly says "This is the only place we can be together".

Translation by Taro Konishi



A classroom where Yuna went to school has been left as it was on the day of the tsunami. "I remember coming here for the athletic festival. It brings back memories so I couldn't come back until now"





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