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STILL THE FLOWERS BLOOM



PHOTO&TEXT BY YUKI IWANAMI

FUKUSHIMA, Japan - Naoto Matsumura leaves his car and gazes up at the cherry blossom trees lining the other side of the barricade. "When spring time arrived, we would always come here", he says. But following the nuclear accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station, the area was designated as a "difficult-to-return zone" and there is no one else in sight.

About four hundred *someiyoshino* cherry blossom trees line the two and a half kilometers of the town road, making the Yonomori district of Tomioka a popular cherry blossom viewing site during season. Tomioka is synonymous with the cherry blossoms of Yonomori and has been fondly regarded by people not only from Tomioka, but farther as well.

The entire town of Tomioka became a restricted area after the nuclear accident. Now, after zoning was revised last March, it is divided into two areas with a barricade in between. The "no residence zone" can be accessed freely during the daytime, and the "difficult-to-return zone" basically forbids entry. Tomioka residents like Matsumura can enter the latter, but only after applying for a permit.

This day, many former residents and sightseers were seen in the "no residence zone". A woman strolled in her high heels with a leashed dog, while groups of

people spread sheets on the ground and enjoyed the scenery. Another was absorbed in capturing the scene on his camera.

It looks like any other spring day, but this area was strictly off limits just an year ago. Unsurprisingly, there were only about thirty people in the area at any given time, a far cry from the crowds usually attracted to a typical cherry blossom site. Signs by the road warned visitors "This Is A High Radiation Area" and urged them to enjoy the flowers from within their cars.

During the morning, a bus full of Tomioka residents passed through the cherry blossom colonnade. The town office had arranged an opportunity for them to view the flowers on their way to a "Meeting for Tomioka's Recovery" in the neighboring town of Hirono. Through the closed windows, you could see the masked passengers eagerly straining their necks, trying to take in the view above. The bus moved slowly, but never stopped. "You know, they could've let them off to see" someone muttered as the bus gained speed and drove off.

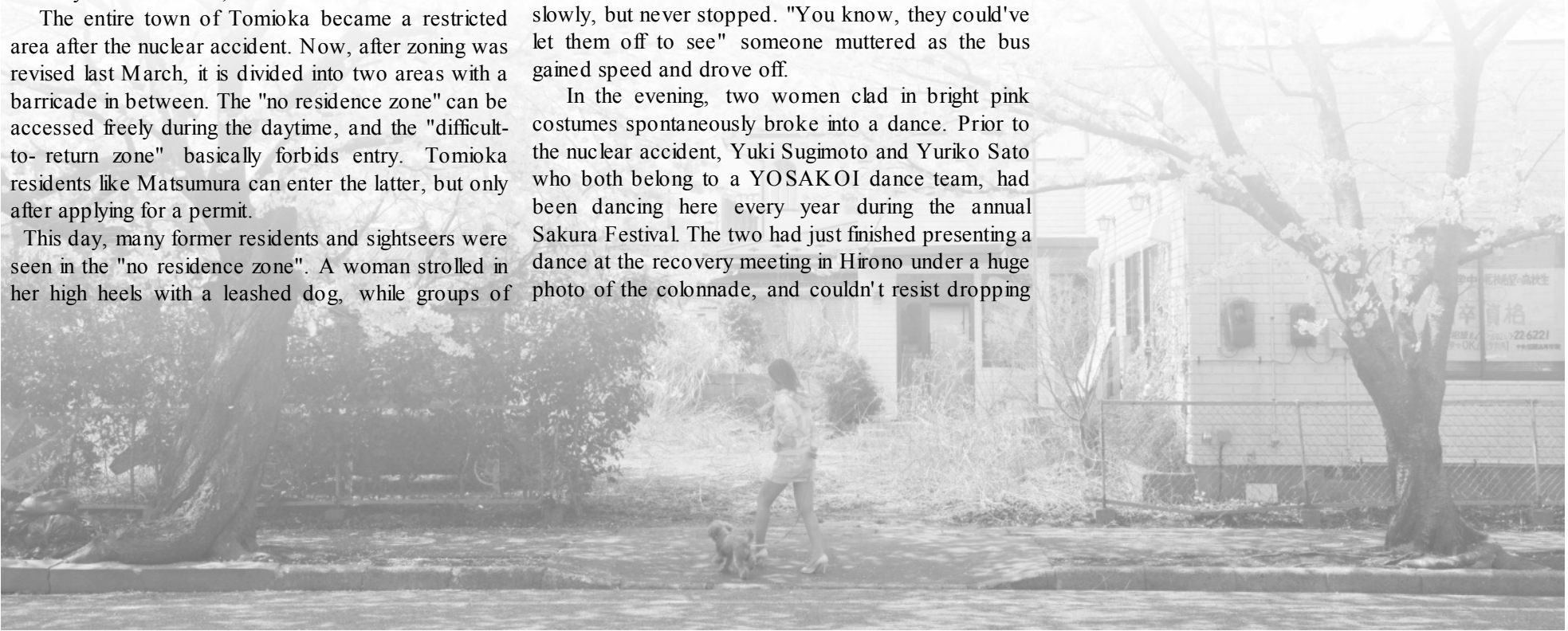
In the evening, two women clad in bright pink costumes spontaneously broke into a dance. Prior to the nuclear accident, Yuki Sugimoto and Yuriko Sato who both belong to a YOSAKOI dance team, had been dancing here every year during the annual Sakura Festival. The two had just finished presenting a dance at the recovery meeting in Hirono under a huge photo of the colonnade, and couldn't resist dropping

by for a photo op under the real trees. Though the plan was to just snap some pictures, they found themselves unexpectedly swaying and dancing, bringing back memories of the merry atmosphere of the festivals before the disaster. "It's heartbreaking because we know what it was like before. Even so, it was nice to be able to dance here again after four years" Sato smiled.

With sundown, people start to leave and the town returns to what it was. After all, this is a nuclear fallout area and nobody is allowed to live here. The cheery colonnade which made the town appear almost normal was all just a mirage.

The people have yet to return. Still the flowers bloom. (Reported in 2014)

Translation by Taro Konishi





People enjoying the flowers. The cleansing of the colonnade was made priority to meet the viewing season



Some areas next to the colonnade are designated as "difficult to return" zones and are secluded by a fence

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The Yonomori Cherry Blossoms of Tomioka Fukushima



Sugimoto and Sato dance under the cherry blossoms. Their team costume design borrowed from the Yonomori flowers



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