

# Washing Over Me

BENJAMIN BROOK

# DEDICATION

In memory of the 15,893 who died in the Great East Japan Earthquake and  
Tsunami that struck on 11 March 2011.

In hope for the 2,572 who are still missing.

## NOTE TO READERS

Where Japanese is used in this novel, it is italicised with the English equivalent in close proximity. The exception to this convention is *okāsan* which is the Japanese word for mother but written here with a capital letter, appearing as “Okāsan”

## PROLOGUE 序章

1 January 2011

Steam filled the room as I sat motionless in the bath. Water that was almost too hot for me to bear came right up to my neck, with just my head sticking out above the surface. I had slid open the window that I was now facing and, through the orange glow of a streetlight, could see the snow falling silently onto the roofs of houses across the road from mine. This was my favourite place to be in winter. Temperatures falling to as low as minus ten degrees Celsius at night, and without central heating, I thought to myself that living in the north of Japan was tough.

New Year's Day had been a typical one and my stomach bulged from all the food that Okāsan, my mother, had prepared and that I had eaten. When I spoke with friends at school about their New Year, I was often jealous of the size of their families and the liveliness of their celebrations. However, when it came down to it, I would not want to spend the time any other way.

Lost in my own thoughts, staring out into the night, I jumped at first when I heard the sliding door to the bathroom opening slowly. Once I saw the outline of Okāsan's head peeking around the white plastic frame, I breathed a sigh of relief.

'You startled me!'

'Sorry Kimiko, I didn't mean to scare you,' Okāsan said. 'It's cold, isn't it? Would you mind if I got into the bath?'

'Of course, come in. It's really hot in here!' I replied.

Okāsan undressed just outside in the *senmenjo* changing area that contained a top loading washing machine and a fairly modern but well-used vanity sink unit and then stepped into the wetroom to get washed before joining me in the bath. It had been a while, probably close to six months, since we had last bathed together and I couldn't help but notice that she looked thinner than before. For as long as I

can remember taking notice of such things, her body had always been slim, her breasts small, her hips narrow - she was certainly not as curvy as some of the women that I watched in films on television - but the skin seemed to hang a little more from her frame as if the fat had just melted away.

She sat down on the low wooden stool in front of the shower unit and turned it on. I once asked her why hot water smelt different to cold and she told me she thought that it was something to do with minerals in the water giving off odours when heated. We were going to look it up on the computer but something distracted us that night and we didn't get around to it.

I loved the way that she washed her hair; she gave it a real soaking to start with and then spent a long time working in the shampoo using her fingertips, moving in small circles from front to back and then side to side, always four times in each direction. Having done this, she rinsed and then carried out exactly the same movements using some conditioner she had that smelt of coconut. For the final rinse, she pushed all of her hair forward and let the water run over it whilst massaging away the little bubbles and soap suds.

As she lowered herself into the bath, the water level rose and some of it sloshed over the side and onto the wetroom floor before draining away. Her face flushed with the heat and it looked as though she had put on some of the rouge that she liked to dab onto her cheeks, especially during the winter when the cold bleached any colour out of her complexion.

'Oh, that feels good!' she exclaimed, rubbing the base of her neck, loosening the muscles. 'This really is the best way to relax. Have you had a good day, Kimiko?'

'It's been great, thanks. The food you made was delicious,' I said, thinking about all that I had eaten.

'I'm glad that you enjoyed it,' she said as she gently held my face in her hands to get a closer look at me.

'Yes, I really did. Look how much I ate!' I added as I stood up to show her my rounded belly, hard from all the rice, simmered shrimp, grilled sea bream, sweet black beans and pickled vegetables.

'Wow, I knew that you were getting stuck in but I didn't realise how full you had got! That makes me very happy to know that you still enjoy my cooking,' she said patting my stomach.

'It's the best. I don't know what I'd do without you,' I told her as I sat down

again in the water with a splash.

‘Oh well, at least I have my uses!’ Okāsan replied and started laughing.

I don’t know how long we were in the bath that night but by the time we got out our skin was all wrinkled, especially our fingers which looked like *umeboshi* pickled plums. I can’t even remember what else we talked about but that moment with her is a memory that sticks in my mind.

It was the last ever time that Okāsan and I bathed together.

# 1 —

24 August 2075

Kimiko Tanaka lay in her bed in a private room in a hospital in central Tokyo. She had been in a coma for the past three months following a serious haemorrhage to the left side of her brain that struck as she was preparing a simple dinner of grilled mackerel, miso soup, pickled *daikon* radish and rice for herself and her husband.

Shoichi sat at the bedside holding his wife's hand as it lay on top of the smooth white sheet, staring at the face that had remained unchanged since that day, unchanged since he heard the crash of plates from the kitchen and came running to find Kimiko lying on the wooden floor. Outside, the heat and humidity of summer was oppressive, even late into the evening. Inside, the air was cool and dry. The only sounds were the gentle hum of the air conditioner mounted on the wall and the slow rhythmic beep emitting from the machine keeping Kimiko alive.

'When will you wake up, Kimiko?' he said in a weary voice that was nevertheless still laced with hope.

Each time he asked the question, he longed desperately to see her eyes open slowly, for a smile to form across her face and for the doctors and nurses to come running into the room to congratulate the patient on a remarkable against-the-odds recovery. But this was not a Hollywood film, it was real life and this time, like the hundreds of times before, his question went unanswered.

Shoichi checked the time - the projection on the wall showed 22:17 - and he knew that he should make a move to get home for some sleep.

'Goodnight,' he whispered and kissed her gently on the cheek, in the space between the ventilation tube supporting her breathing and the myriad of wires running around her face that were monitoring the activity of Kimiko's brain.

He left the room and made his way along the corridor, with its shiny

slate-grey linoleum floor and whitewashed walls, towards the overnight nurses' station where he was bid farewell by a droid that watched over the entrance as well as monitoring the vital signs of all the patients under its care, ready to alert the medical teams who slept in pods, like bees in a hive, located away from the wards but still on the hospital site.

Ikebukuro station was a short walk away but in that time the light cotton summer shirt he was wearing had begun to stick to his body, especially his back. This year the rainy season had come late and even by mid-August the annual *tsuyu* was holding on. But the summer had finally arrived and all the moisture now hung in the ether as it evaporated from the sodden ground which made moving around in any non-climate-controlled environment an uncomfortable experience, rather like being stood, fully clothed, at the edge of a heated indoor swimming pool.

The transition from the relative darkness of night - his walk was punctuated by headlights from an occasional passing car and red paper lanterns hanging outside *izakaya* bars - into Ikebukuro station made his eyelids narrow as the bright overhead banks of LEDs and plethora of advertising images flooding into his pupils. Although he knew the way to the train, having done this journey many times before, he allowed himself to be led by the personalised under floor directional lighting snaking from the entrance barrier to platform three to board the 22:38 Yamanote line train to Ueno where he would change to a Jōban line train to their home in central Mito.

The sleek metal tube glided into the station at 22:37 and as it did he recalled reading something in a newspaper recently that it had been twenty years since the last late arrival across the whole of Japan, such was the reliability of the fully-automated computer controlled and operated JR network. A minute later the train left Ikebukuro and Shoichi sat in the middle of a bench seat that ran the full length of the carriage. He spent the journey to Ueno staring at the window opposite him which, due to the dark, was like an elongated mirror and all he could see was his own reflection. He noted that he looked tired, an empty shell such was his life at present. Once the train pulled into Ueno station, Shoichi stepped off the carriage and walked across the platform to board the Jōban line train that was already there waiting to depart.

The carriage he was now on was relatively empty, perhaps not surprising considering the time, and he was joined by about a dozen other passengers, mostly snoozing, as they made their way out through the sprawling suburbs of the

metropolis into the wide open spaces of rice fields to the north east. As he began to fall asleep he could vaguely hear a conversation being held in what he guessed was English between two Caucasian foreign men also making their own journey from the sensory overload of Tokyo back to a slower-paced life in the countryside.

The vibration on his wrist shook Shoichi out of his slumber just seconds before the animated Den-Den customer host bowed respectfully and announced their arrival in Mito. The travel companion timepiece was a present from his wife to celebrate his seventieth birthday and retirement, given to him with more than a hint of mischief as he had, during his working life, frequently fallen asleep on the train home either from exhaustion as an overworked middle-manager or due to one too many beers at the end of the day, causing him to miss his stop and end up in Hitachi, six stations further north than his intended destination. He hadn't needed it much since retiring but was grateful he hadn't been left to sleep through tonight especially as he was on the last train and a ride back in a driverless Navi-cab would have been an unnecessary expense and delay to getting home.

The doors opened noiselessly, he stepped off the train onto the platform, ascended the stairs to the exit gates which he passed through with a touch of his hand on the scanner and out again into the night. The station clock's analogue hands showed just after midnight. The air smelt damp, heavy, and slightly rotten as he made his way up a shallow slope, heading back to their home which stood at the edge of Lake Senba, close to Kairakuen Park. There were a handful of karaoke bars and hostess pubs still open and the silence of the night was broken by an opening door through which passed a group of drunk but cheerful work colleagues who piled out onto the street in search of a steaming hot bowl of *rāmen* noodles, *gyōza* dumplings and more heavily chilled beer.

As Shoichi turned off the main road that ran from the station in the south of the city towards the northwest and then directly west towards the traditional Japanese ceramics town of Kasama, the light levels dropped and he had to stop momentarily to allow his eyes to re-adjust to the darkness. The densely populated residential districts were characterised by narrow streets cluttered with bicycles, pot plants on multi-tiered aluminium shelving and vending machines selling e-cigarettes, synthetic alcohol and sugar-free soft drinks. The sky was clear and even with some light pollution from the street lamps and neon advertising panels further back on the main road, there were plenty of stars visible. He picked out some of the constellations that he found easy to locate such as Cassiopeia, The

Plough and Hercules as well as those that were trickier, including Boötes, Cygnus and Delphinus. Although Shoichi had often thought about, but never made the commitment to buying a telescope, he nevertheless found staring up towards the heavens a peaceful and calming experience that brought some perspective on any challenges he may be facing in his life. Kimiko in hospital in a serious but stable condition was by far his biggest personal challenge to date. The movement of a cat jumping off a grey mottle-textured brick wall broke his moment of contemplation of life and the workings of the universe and brought his head back down to earth as he made his way further into the neighbourhood of mainly high-end pre-fabricated kit houses of which his own home was one.

Opening the small gate next to the sign on the border wall to the house that let everyone know this was where the Tanakas lived, Shoichi walked up the short path to the front door, positioned his eye in front of the retina scanning equipment - installed as state-of-the-art domestic security when the house was built forty years ago - and pulled open the door once the cartoon bulldog security guard in the small screen mounted under the scanner confirmed his identity, saluted and welcomed him home.

Motion sensors picked up his presence, the lights turned on and the air conditioner beeped, the small flap at the front to direct the air flow opened and emitted the familiar creak of gases moving as the unit fired into life. Shoichi removed his shoes in the *genkan* entrance, stepped up into the house and padded across the perfectly smooth and level dark-brown stained wooden floorboards into the kitchen to wash his hands and gargle before fetching himself a beer from the refrigerator. As he removed the can from the shelf, a Z-code scanner registered the beer as the second from last one and sent an order through to the local supermarket to add to the list for the next grocery delivery in a few days' time. Twisting the lid, a hole opened in the top of the can and he poured two-thirds of the beer into a cut-crystal glass given to him as part of a gift set commemorating one hundred and fifty years of the Kirin brewery that also contained twelve cans of Kirin Original Brew. He ran his fingers over the laser etching of a mythical Chinese chimerical creature called a Qilin, after which the company was named, before bringing the glass to his lips and taking a couple of deep drafts. The chilled liquid was almost painful as it ran down his throat but it was a welcome sensation, in contrast to the numbness of recent months, and he closed his eyes to savour this small sensory pleasure.

Moving through to the living room area of the house and flicking on the holovision with a wave of his hand, he caught the tail end of a late night news broadcast. There was a feature about a man who had been arrested for killing three of his neighbours over a five year period. The familiar shots of police investigators carrying out sealed boxes of evidence from the man's apartment filled the image field and the story concluded with a summary of events leading up to the arrest from the station's visibly sleep-deprived reporter. Shoichi felt detached from the emotion he knew he should be feeling towards yet another murder case, his body drained.

Beer finished, Shoichi was too tired to climb the stairs to the bedroom he shared with Kimiko let alone have a shower, so instead unfolded a futon in the Japanese-style tatami room on the ground floor, got undressed, crawled under a light blanket and fell asleep as soon his head hit the buckwheat-filled pillow.

\*\*\*

Back at the hospital, a part of Kimiko's brain was waking up. Deep inside the hippocampus were electrical pulses so weak that the doctors would not notice them for another day through the scans they were running routinely to check for any signs of healing but strong enough for Kimiko to start to recall memories from long ago.

## 2 二

11 March 2011 07:15

I could tell that it was time to get up and start getting ready for school as the sun had begun shining through a small gap in the curtains where I had not closed them fully the night before. It was cold outside and cold in the house but really warm in my bed.

‘Kimiko, it’s already past seven o’clock,’ Okāsan called up to me. ‘Wake up please!’

*Just five more minutes*, I thought to myself, head and body buried under a thick down quilt and two blankets.

If I wasn’t so hungry and if the wonderful smell from her cooking hadn’t begun drifting up the stairs and under the bedroom door I might have tried to sneak five minutes more but with a deep breath I threw back the covers and swung my legs out of bed and onto the floor. Wriggling out of my thick winter pyjamas, I shivered as the cold hit me but this made me move quickly and heave a thick grey sweater over my head and then pull on and fasten my jeans. The wool socks I had slept in last night weren’t coming off until later. I can’t stand having cold feet.

I opened the door and walked down the steep flight of wooden stairs into the open plan living room and kitchen.

‘*Ohayō gozaimasu*,’ Okāsan greeted me with a big smile and her usual cheerful voice. ‘Did you sleep well?’

‘Morning,’ I replied, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes. ‘Yes, I slept well, thanks.’

Breakfast was my favourite: grilled salmon, *tamago-yaki* sweet rolled omelette, *nattō* fermented soya beans, rice and miso soup. Many of my friends favoured a more Western-style breakfast of cereal or even toast with sausages and eggs,

laughing at my preference for something very Japanese but then they hadn't tasted Okāsan's *tamago-yaki* which was to die for. I began devouring the food just put in front of me. In just ten minutes, I had eaten the lot and washed it all down with a cup of green tea from my favourite red and white Hello Kitty mug.

'Don't forget Kimiko that I have to work late tonight so you'll have to let yourself into the house after school,' she said. 'I'll set the rice cooker before I leave and there's some leftover beef and vegetable stir-fry in the fridge for you to heat up in the microwave. Do you think that you'll be OK?'

'Mum, I'm ten years old now and this is not the first time that you've had to work late, is it?'

'I know, but I'll always think of you as my little baby,' she said as she walked across the room and kissed me on the head.

*Gochisōsama deshita* 'Thanks for cooking,' I said as I got down from the table and went to the bathroom to have a quick wash, straighten out my hair, which was sticking out badly from where I had slept on it, and to clean my teeth.

It was approaching eight o'clock and I would have to leave shortly so I ran upstairs to change out of my sleeping socks and put on fresh ones for school. I grabbed my rucksack, hurried back down the stairs and, having given Okāsan a quick hug, put on my shoes in the *genkan* and opened the front door.

*Ittekimasu!* 'I'm off now, see you later!'

*Itterasshai!* 'Have a good day!'

\*\*\*

*...I've got a blinding headache...*

*...can't believe that it's been over fifteen years since I last got out...*

*...I need a chance to stretch again...*

### 3 ≡

25 August 2075

A genderless electronic voice from his watch told him that it was 07:25. The patterned flannel blanket that he had used to cover himself when he went to bed had been kicked towards the bottom of the futon and was now twisted around his feet. Although he had slept for longer than usual, it had not been a restful sleep and Shoichi recalled hazily having woken up frequently during the course of the night, sweating from the heat and becoming disorientated on account of his choice to sleep in the tatami room after last night's hospital visit. Although the air conditioner could be set to come on if the temperature and humidity rose above a certain level, Shoichi had chosen not to use this feature as it left his throat and nose feeling dry by the time morning came around.

The cicadas were singing in the trees. The drone of the *kumazemi* cicada interplayed with the high pitched revving motorbike of the *minminzemi* cicada; a swarm of insect-sized Hells Angels, different but equally complementary.

*Waab waab waab waab !*

*Weee-oh weee-oh weee-oh weee-oh weeeeeeeee!*

If summer could have a sound it would be this; it was already heating up again outside.

Having freed his feet from the manacles of the blanket, Shoichi rose from the futon and loosened his back by stretching towards the wood panelled ceiling with both arms, leaning over to his right side then his left, enjoying the muffled clicks from his vertebrae. He felt thirsty so walked to the kitchen for a glass of water before heading through into the wet room for a lukewarm shower to wash away the latest film of sweat that had formed on his skin.

The bathroom had cost him a small fortune when the house was built. The

construction company managing the build had included a very basic model of wetroom and standard acrylic bath in their original design, which Kimiko had quickly dismissed. She was not looking for something luxuriously appointed or ostentatious, rather, a design that would remind her of the bathroom that she enjoyed using as a child when she lived in Ōfunato, a coastal town about four hundred and fifty kilometres further north of Mito. The bath she recalled fondly had been made of *hinoki* cypress wood and gave off a wonderful fragrance as it filled with hot water. Using some pictures Kimiko provided of her childhood bath, the company went to great lengths to source a tub that came from the same region of Japan and that was made by local craftsmen as opposed to mass-production. Money was tight back then and Shoichi was reluctant to put them into an even more precarious financial position considering the size of the mortgage they were about to take on. However, later that evening, over dinner and a bottle of wine, Kimiko explained the sentimental value of the type of bath she wanted in their home, after which he had no further reservations about digging deeper into his pockets to pay for this pricey customisation to the build.

Temporarily refreshed from his shower, Shoichi walked upstairs and got dressed in front of a fan to try to get the fresh sweat to evaporate from his body before it had chance make his clothes damp, but which proved to be a thankless task. He then went down to the kitchen to make a drink and get something for breakfast.

To start, he ground up some coffee beans and spooned these into an antique looking metal stove-top espresso maker he had bought from a small family-run shop he came across whilst using up some spare time he had gained from a cancelled meeting during a business trip to Naples. There were modern versions of these available that ground the beans automatically and then extracted the coffee using a direct steam feed from the hot water system but the taste was somewhat too clinical, too perfect, lacking the rustic flavour that he was able to achieve from this low-tech model. He had also not fully washed his espresso maker for years, preferring instead to rinse out the bottom half that held the water and leaving the grounds in the upper bowl until he used it again the following day. Like an unwashed wok, where the flavours from the previous meals served to enrich the next one being cooked, the coffee contained a depth that he found comforting in a world where instant gratification continued to be the flavour of the day.

Not wanting to spend too much time on breakfast as he was not especially

hungry, his appetite suppressed by the heat, Shoichi decided to make some toast which he ate with fresh butter from Hokkaido and a Tiptree brand of strawberry jam that he had picked up from the food court of a high-end department store in the Kichijōji district of Tokyo. The jam was made in England and while he ate he wondered about a life thousands of kilometres from his own, of someone working in the factory that produced this jam he had just spread onto his toast; an existence very different from his current daily routine travelling from home to hospital and back again.

How long would his life, their life, be on pause?

\*\*\*

Enjoying what you have read so far?

*Washing Over Me* is available as a download for Kindle or as a printed paperback, both from Amazon:

[Kindle Version - Amazon UK](#)

[Paperback - Amazon UK](#)

[Kindle Version - Amazon US](#)

[Paperback - Amazon US](#)