

An English Translation of *Siblings Drowning* by Takeo Arishima

Masako KATO

High waves rise during the dog days of summer. Around this time of the year, people from the city, who came to enjoy the ocean, gradually close their second homes and head home. I had watched from the top of a mound of sand and wondered where all these people had come from. Hundreds of people had come gathering onto the beach and into the ocean from morning until night. On the third day of September, however, no single person was in sight on the beach.

My friend M, my sister, and I decided to go to the beach to enjoy the last bit of summer. My grandma told us that it was not a good idea because the waves would become choppy, but we did not listen and left. It was a nice sunny day without any wind, so it would be just fine, we thought.

It was a little past noon. It was such a fine day and there was nothing but blue sky above us. Bugs were chirping in the grass already, but the sand on the beach was still so hot on our bare feet that we had to occasionally run up onto the grass to pause on our way down to the water. My friend M put a towel around his head and kept dashing. I took my sister, who was wearing a straw hat, by hand and followed him. We huffed and puffed so we could get into the water as quickly as possible.

A collection of waves, known as swells, formed along the shore. Swells are different from ripples. Ripples dissipate against the shoreline, but swells form huge, elongated waves offshore and come towards the shoreline. The peaks of the waves gradually rise and suddenly crash onto the shore with a big noise. They pause for a while and start up again. After crashing, the waves spread up the beach at great speed and cover everything with white foam. Looking at the way the waves were acting made the three of us feel uneasy. But we came all this way and there was no way we were going back. So, I asked my sister to take off her hat and set it on the sand upside down. We jammed our clothes and towels in the hat and went in the water together holding hands.

“The backwash is strong,” said M, and it was quite so. Backwash is a movement of waves retreating from the shoreline, and we thought it was quite strong that day. The water kept digging out the sand underneath our feet when it would retreat, even when we stood where the water only came up to just below our ankles. We needed to be careful, or we could easily fall in the water. Watching the movement of the waves retreating from the shoreline made us dizzy, but the very feeling of dizziness intrigued all three of us. It was extremely intriguing to have our feet being buried with the tickle of waves underneath our feet when the sand moved between the toes. We three held our hands and gradually went deeper and deeper, further from the shoreline. The backwash was so strong that when we stood facing the shore, our knees bent in the shape of the letter L. When facing the beach, we felt pain in our shins because of the waves. We enjoyed jumping in and out of the water like three mermaids. For example, we played games where one would win with two feet planted in the sand without falling, and where we would compete against each other by trying to remain standing on only one foot.

Before long, M tried moving deeper where the water reached up to his knees. He had to stretch to keep out of water whenever the strong swells struck. It looked exciting having to stretch, so my sister and I, too, gradually went deeper

into the sea. Eventually, we came to where the water reached our waistlines even without waves. We had to float out of the water to breathe when waves hit, otherwise we would swallow a gulp of seawater. When we floated up in the water it felt as if we were high up in the air. We could not even see the beach when we were coming down to the sand. All we could see was the back of the waves. The waves broke with a splash, and all of a sudden, we could see everything on the beach, like the sand mountain and my sister's hat, with the white foam covering the shore. That was so extremely exciting that we three forgot the danger of the high waves in high summer and continued playing in the waves.

“Hey, big waves are coming,” my sister said with a little fear in her voice. M and I spontaneously turned to the direction of her voice and saw some of the most massive waves we had seen that day coming toward us. The waves looked like two huge hands trying to envelop us three. The sight of the waves was concerning enough to make a good swimmer like M swim as far as possible away from the waves and toward the shore. Needless to say, my sister and I tried with all of our might to walk towards the shallow water, our upper bodies leaning forward, rowing with our hands frantically. However, because of the strong backwash, our bodies could not move the way we wanted them to. It felt like a nightmare where the boogie man was chasing after us.

The massive waves were coming from behind and did not wait for us children to reach the shallow water. Every second, the waves were getting bigger and bigger, and coming closer and closer. The top of the waves started to break; white bubbles had begun to appear. “Don't go that far! You guys will be sucked underwater when the waves break! It's better to let the waves pass now!” M yelled at us from behind. My sister and I thought that was a good idea, so we stopped moving and reluctantly waited for the waves to pass us. The high waves, looking like a number of tall screens, surged toward us three. Fortunately, the waves passed us before they broke. We were tossed about by the waves a little, but the massive waves went past us. We all felt safe at last and smiled at each

other, swimming in the water. After the biggest waves had passed, the three of us tried to stand on the sand just like before.

To our surprise, however, all three of us went completely underwater when we stopped swimming. Our feet could not reach the ground even when we went underwater, and that was surprising, so we panicked. We moved our arms with all of our might and finally, we made it to where we could keep our faces out of the water. We looked at each other. Our faces were all white as paper, and our eyes were wide open. We did not have to tell each other; the three of us realized that we had been washed out to the middle of the deep sea. We did not have to tell each other; we knew that we must swim until our arms stop moving to get to the shore.

Silently, the three of us began to swim, but just try to imagine how little strength there was left in us. My friend M was 14 years old, and I was 13 years old. My little sister was 11 years old. M could swim without any problem because he went to a swimming club at school every year. On the contrary, all I could do was a little bit of the sidestroke and float on my back. Let alone my sister; she could barely swim for a couple of meters without a board.

We were being washed out to the deeper sea. I was swimming the sidestroke with my head half in the water. Sometimes I lifted up my head to check on my sister. Whenever I checked on her, she was going further and further away from me, deeper into the ocean. On the other hand, my friend M was swimming away from me in the other direction, towards the shore. After a while, the three of us reached the point where we could barely hear each other's voices. Every time a wave hit I lost sight of one of them. "Come, brother...I am drowning...can't breathe, ...", cried my sister with all her might whenever she saw my face from behind. My sister's face was half in the water up to her nose and she must have swallowed some water from shouting; her face looked all pale with suffering and the expression on her face looked like she was glaring at me. I kept swimming toward the shore feeling guilty. I thought of swimming back to my sister so many

times, but I must be a bad person; at that point, I really wanted to save myself. It was obvious that both my little sister and I would lose our lives washed away had I returned to get her. That thought was daunting. The only way I could save my sister was to reach the shore as quickly as possible and ask someone like a fisherman to go get her. That was what I thought back then, but thinking back right now, it must have been a cowardly idea.

Anyways, the idea of reaching the shore quickly kept me swimming. I swam and swam frantically toward the shore without looking back. I rested for a bit, floating on my back when I felt I could go no further. It felt like the shore was getting closer. So, I kept swimming and swimming. I tried to feel the ground with my feet, but again, I went down underwater. I freaked out, but just like before, I began swimming and swimming.

I swam and swam for a long while, until I realized that the water only came up to my knee. After a brief moment of relief, I cried panicking, “Help!” I ran and ran frantically on the beach and found my friend M far away on the shore, running and shouting frantically just like me. Even while running I did not fail to look toward where my sister was. I could see my poor little sister’s head, farther away from the shore, bobbing up and down.

There was not a single boat or a fisherman on the beach. At that moment I felt this urge to go back into the ocean. The fact that I left my precious sister behind in the sea made me extremely sad.

Right then, I saw my friend M rushing in my direction, yanking a young man’s sleeve. Then I forgot everything and dashed towards the two of them. The young man seemed to be from the area, but not a fisherman or anything. The man had something on his shoulder. “Quick...go help please... over there, over there.”

I pointed to where my sister’s head was; we could still see the top of her head in the water. I was in a flood of tears and urging the man as if I was a little kid throwing a tantrum. The man was watching where I pointed carefully, and

promptly set down what he had carried on his shoulder onto the sand, took off his belt and clothes, and put them down. Then the young man went in, wading through the water.

I saw him moving off farther and farther away from me. My whole body was shaking because of my crying; I put both of my hands in my mouth and gnawed them, watching him go. I seemed to lose all of my feelings; I had no idea where I was standing, or whether it was cold or hot. I could not even tell if I had four limbs.

As the head of the young man was getting smaller and smaller, the distance between my little sister and the man was becoming shorter and shorter. White foam sparkled around the man as his arms went in and out of the water; the man's arms looked like flying fish leaping into the air. I looked at the whole scene very closely.

At last their two heads came together. I could not help but go into the water. Without thinking, I took my hands out of my mouth. The two of them were moving very slowly. I got out of the water and back on the sand, for some reason. Then I went back in again. I could not stay still.

My sister's head sank under the water numerous times. At times she did not come up for so long that I feared she completely drowned. Sometimes I lost sight of the young man as well. And then his head would bob up high above the seawater. It looked as if the man was performing in the ocean. In the meanwhile the two of them were getting closer and closer to the shore, and finally, they came close enough for me to see their faces clearly. However, the water swirled around them and they disappeared underwater. Before long the young man crawled out of the water and reached the shore. My little sister was still on the man's back. I was over the moon and dashed to the two of them.

The sight of the young man startled me. The man was panting rapidly; he seemed to have used up all his strength. My sister came running towards me frantically when she caught me in the corner of her eye, but after a moment she

steered clear of me and ran towards the mound of sand. I realized my little sister blamed me for what I had done. I understood how she must have been feeling, but still, that made me feel sad beyond words.

I wondered where M had gone. I looked around, getting up near the young man. I found him; he was helping Grandma come down the mound of sand far away. I realized that my sister saw them there and went for them.

I felt a little relieved knowing that my sister simply went towards M and Grandma. I put my hand on the young man's shoulder to ask how he was feeling, but he brushed my hand off. He stayed put by the shore rubbing his chest, looking unhappy. I could not talk to him after that and stood still right there.

“Oh my, oh my, you are the one who saved this girl. How can I thank you?” Grandma said heartily. Grandma was right near me, out of breath; she must have rushed to be there. My sister was crying her eyes out and she was soaking wet from head to toe in Grandma's arms.

The three of us headed home with Grandma; we were still wet, carrying our clothes and towels. The young man came walking behind us silently. Grandma begged for him to come with us. Otherwise, he would have gotten up and left.

The bed was prepared already for my little sister at home. She changed into her pajamas and was tucked into her bed. Suddenly she started to burn up, shaking like a tree leaf. Grandma, such a strong person, looked after my sister with tender care and gave the young man her sincerest gratitude. The young man kept nodding quietly and acceptingly, seemingly a person of silence. Grandma finally got the man's address after a while. The young man looked at my sister with worry on his face while sipping his barley tea. Then, he bowed a couple of times and left.

“I thought I would pass out when M stormed inside the house and told me about what happened. Your parents asked me to look after you guys, and I thought I would die if something had happened to you kids. So, I ran up the mound of sand, you know, even faster than M. Luckily, that man passed by and

saved us, but oh how scary that was. Please, please be careful, I beg you.”

That is what Grandma had told me in a stern voice, pulling me in front of her. Every single word I heard at that time made me absolutely petrified, coming from such a usually warm person. I was the one who had wanted to live, even if it was just me; to have thought that way even for a brief moment made me hurt inside as if numerous needles were piercing my heart all over. I sat still, quietly looking down in front of Grandma; even though I felt like crying I did not, since I knew that I was not in a place to cry. The sun was beating down upon the sand in the yard.

Grandma herself visited the young man to say a proper thank you. The man would not take what Grandma had brought as a gift.

We stayed in touch with the young man for five, or six years after the incident, but we lost contact after that. Our loving grandma passed away during that time. My friend M is gone, killed by someone for some unknown reason. Only the two of us, my little sister and I, are alive now. Whenever I bring up what happened that day, my little sister says that she hated me from the bottom of her heart. Looking back at losing my little sister in the height of those waves, my heart still begins pounding with a petrifying fear.

青空文庫
aozora.gr.jp より