

## This is Hope

‘No one ever remembers who came second. Everybody knows Mount Fuji, but even we Japanese struggle to name our second highest mountain.’

I recall Chiyoko’s words as I gaze across Nagasaki Bay from the summit of Mount Inasa. Our private guide was echoing the sentiments of the city’s mayor when he heard that President Obama was to visit Hiroshima in 2016 -but not Nagasaki.

‘My mother’s generation felt our city was forgotten after World War II, that while Hiroshima raged, we prayed in the shadows.’

Yet Nagasaki is far from forgotten now. The city is a testament to perseverance and peace, friendly and thriving, one of the most multi-cultural places in Japan, and my guidebook tells me that this view -a glittering, shimmering tangle of red and blue and gold, of neon, sodium and halogen -ranks alongside Monaco and Hong Kong as one of the top three night vistas in the world. Beyond the bay, countless pinpricks of light glint between the trees on the hillsides. I imagine ordinary lives playing out behind closed doors: families sitting down to their evening meal, children chattering about their day at school, salarymen enjoying a glass of beer with their colleagues. I consider the contrast with our visit to the Atomic Bomb Museum accompanied by Chiyoko; the affecting display of everyday objects, melted, fractured, burnt, those poignant remnants of the thousands of lives that were snatched away.

When we meet up with her that morning, it is unexpectedly bright after hours of heavy rain. The sharp smell of wet pavements lingers, and in the crowded tramcar pools of tears form underneath furled umbrellas. Chiyoko reaches for one of the hanging straps, just as her mother, Harumi, might have done on August 9th 1945 as she travelled to the primary school where she worked as a nurse. The school was just south-east of the main area of bomb damage, and it became Harumi’s job to count the surviving children as well as list those who died.

As Chiyoko tells us this, she stands straight and composed, yet she holds on to a quiet sorrow that is never far beneath her gentle smile, as though she permanently shoulders the weight of grief for all those who died. Her sadness is as moving as the museum itself, and the fact that familiarity hasn’t blunted those feelings is a mark of their depth.

‘A museum shouldn’t feel like history, as though it need no longer concern us,’ she says. ‘We must be aware that this could happen again. Yet at the same time it’s important not to forget the millions of other casualties -however life is lost at war, it is just as devastating.’

She shows us broken cups and plates found near ground zero, talks about the last moments of people’s lives at 11.02 that August morning as they began to prepare simple meals in homes and noodle restaurants across the city.

‘These are the things that matter most,’ she says, stopping to show us a girl’s packed lunch container, the food uneaten, the rice still preserved in the tin. ‘I know you may think it odd, but it makes me particularly sad knowing she didn’t eat her lunch.’ Her eyes fill with tears. ‘She would have been at her desk, listening to her teacher, perhaps thinking about playing with her friends. Everything as normal...and then it happened.’

Chiyoko is a committed peace ambassador, and was interpreter and guide for Clifton Truman Daniel when he visited in 2012.

'I feel only sorrow that he had to witness the destruction caused by his grandfather's decision.' She shakes her head and asks why, if America simply wanted to prove the might of their bombs, didn't they choose an unpopulated area rather than kill thousands of innocent children, women and elderly civilians. I nod, yet don't reply, unable to find words that will make a difference, knowing such questions will continue to be asked, albeit quietly, like the distant rumble from one of Japan's numerous live volcanoes.

The streets around the Peace Park are silent now except for birdsong, and Chiyoko leads us to two ancient camphor trees that have stood witness to everything here, and survived. She touches them fondly, like old friends.

'I like the idea of them watching over all that has happened in the last 800 years.' These twin trees at Sannō Shrine have become an evocative symbol of destruction and recovery. They were charred and blackened, stripped bare of their leaves by the bomb's shock wave; yet, despite everything, they remain -not only standing, but thriving.

'This is hope,' Chiyoko says, pointing out a fledgling shoot sprouting from one of the giant trunks. Her face lights up, and for a moment I forget Japanese etiquette and reach for her hand.