

The Families

Chapter 2

Masumoto Family, Ichikawa Family

“I believe in Japan!”

For Teruaki Masumoto, his gentle, two-year older sister Rumi-nei (“Sister Rumiko”) was an idol.

When they were young, she often sheltered him from beatings by their father Shoichi. Teruaki remembers vividly a scene when he was five or six years old. He could not resist reaching for some sweets that were intended for the guests, forgetting all his manners. His enraged father threw Teruaki to a corner of the room. Rumi-nei ran to cover her brother and pleaded with her father, “Please stop, don’t hit Teru-chan!” She begged for his mercy, and cried with her brother.

When Teruaki entered junior high, he joined the table tennis club like his sister. Rumi-nei was a lefty and played with athletic grace. Shimizu Middle School (in Kagoshima city) was one of the top four table tennis schools in Kagoshima prefecture. The practice was hard and the pecking order was rigid and strict. But Teruaki felt that his sister’s presence protected him like an invisible umbrella.

When Teruaki was accepted by a college, Rumi-nei gave him a wristwatch. It had a square face with a black leather band. This was in 1974. The watch was made by Seiko and cost 40,000 or 50,000 yen. She was only an administrative clerk at the Coca-Cola Company in the city, where she was working after her graduation from Kagoshima Women’s High School. The gift must have wiped out more than half her monthly wage. Obviously she took great delight and pride in her brother’s going to college. Since then more than 30 years have passed. Teruaki still carefully guards the now-defunct old watch. He changed the wristband once, but the replacement is almost worn out too. Nowadays, he most often keeps it in his breast pocket. Since the Abductee Family Association was established in 1997, he has made sure he has it with him at every important moment of the rescue effort, such as the meeting with the Foreign Minister and Prime Minister of Japan, the petition campaigns on the streets, the day before Prime Minister Koizumi’s September 17 visit to North Korea, and the campaigning trip to the US.

Rumi-nei would pick him up by car at Kagoshima Airport every time he came back from Hokkaido where he attended college. “Welcome home, Teru-chan.” “Thanks Rumi-nei.” Even in their twenties they kept their habit of

calling each other by their childhood names. During the summer vacation, when Teruaki partied with his hometown buddies until midnight, he sometimes called home and asked her to pick him up, as he did not have money for a taxi. She was happy to drive her beloved compact car to collect him. She often gave him extra spending money, too.

Teruaki chose Hokkaido University because he “wanted to live in the snow, which I had never seen much of in my native southern country.” He now recalls, “I wanted Rumi-nei to visit me while I was attending the university. I regret that she never had the opportunity before she was abducted by North Korea.”

As Teruaki remembered, it was summer vacation in his senior year when Rumi-nei was abducted to a cold country entirely different from Hokkaido. It was summer of 1978. Pink Lady’s “UFO” was a huge hit song and heard everywhere in Japan. Rumi-nei was 24 years old.

August 12th, a day before the beginning of the Bon Festival: it was past noon when Teruaki got out of bed. He saw Rumi-nei off as she left for a date. The rest of the family was not home. Outside the gate, Shuichi Ichikawa was waiting in his car for her. Just the night before, she had confided about Mr. Ichikawa. “Tomorrow, we are going to see the sunset at Fukiage Beach,” she said happily. Teruaki remembered that conversation as he said goodbye to her. “I’m leaving,” his sister smiled a little self-consciously. That was Rumi-nei’s last smile for Teruaki.

On that fateful day, neither Shuichi Ichikawa nor Rumiko Masumoto came home from sunset-gazing at Fukiage Beach. Their families waited long, anxious hours. Near the beach, Mr. Ichikawa’s car was found abandoned and locked.

At the Masumoto household, the father, Shoichi, worked for the Forest Ministry. He was often away from home. His job was to transport Yakushima cedars by ship. The family lived in government housing in the town of Ikenoue in Kagoshima city. Shoichi was away for half a week. When he was home, he acted like a typical Kagoshima male. He was the tyrannical master of the house and imposed his strict rules on the others. The local expression, “digging wild potato” suited him, meaning that whenever he drank his favorite local sake, his eyes became fixed, he turned more and more opinionated, and his anger exploded. The episode in which Teruaki was thrown was such an occasion. To his children, he was a terrifying father and difficult to be close to.

It was only Rumiko, the second girl, who was not afraid of their father and lightheartedly called him “Daddy.” For this reason Rumiko must have been

especially dear to Shoichi. On the day that Rumiko's high school entrance examination result was posted at school, she went to see but was late coming home to report the result. Shoichi was too anxious to sit and wait, so he took off for the high school on his bike to check the result himself. Upon coming home he said, with a big, satisfied grin, "She was accepted!"

The Masumoto family has four children. The eldest (the first daughter) is Fumiko Hirano, the second (the first son), Shinichi, the third (the second daughter), Rumiko, and the fourth (the second son), Teruaki. Except for Rumiko, the children stayed away from their father. Shinichi, especially, clashed with his father and left the house upon graduating high school. He started supporting himself in Shizuoka prefecture, far from Kagoshima. Of the four siblings, the last two were especially close. Teruaki, the youngest, depended on Rumi-nei, his two-year older sister, and she enjoyed taking care of her younger brother who was closer to her age than the other two.

The night before Rumi-nei disappeared on August 12th, Teruaki and the two sisters were spending some pleasant family time with their mother. It was then that Rumi-nei started talking about Mr. Ichikawa: "I have been dating this guy." Mr. Ichikawa was one year younger than she and lived in the neighborhood. They had been on just a few dates, but by the way she talked it was apparent that she was serious about him. Teruaki felt "a pang of melancholy, honestly speaking." The thought seeped into his mind that if Rumi-nei were to get married, his home would be a little emptier.

Rumiko was the center of the family with her sunny disposition. She could get along with her difficult father easily, she enjoyed taking care of her younger brother, and her older siblings were fond of her too. She was slender and 163 centimeters tall, tall for that era. Her older sister recalled, "Among our siblings, she was the only tall one—like a fashion model. She had a narrow, but sweet and pretty face even if you discount it as her sister's opinion." "She bought her own car and drove everyone around. I had a driver's license too, but I never drove. I don't think Teruaki had a license then. So my sister became the center of activities in our family."

But Rumi-nei was not always sunny and outgoing when she was young. She changed after high school when she started to work. Teruaki's impression of Rumi-nei before then was as a somewhat timid person. One time when she was at high school, she came home crying. As she was coming home late because of table tennis practice, someone flared her skirt up in a dimly lit street. Startled and

shocked, she came home crying. So it was not true that she was always the bold one. By the time she started her adult life, she had begun to attend the meetings at Soka-gakkai, a Buddhist organization, because of her parents' association with it. It was around then that she became more outgoing, obtained a driver's license, and started driving.

The scene of Rumiko's driving was the last image of her for Fumiko, who recalls, "The company I worked for was in the same direction as hers, so I always hitched a ride with her. That day of August 12th was a Saturday, when workers were let out after half a day. My sister and I left home in the morning as usual. She dropped me in front of my company and we exchanged goodbyes. 'OK, like I said last night I am going to Fukiage Beach with Mr. Ichikawa this afternoon,' Rumiko said. 'I know. Take care and come home safely.' It was our last exchange," Fumiko remembered.

That day, Rumiko finished work after half a day and came home at once. Then she left for a date with "Mr. Ichikawa" who worked for Nippon Telegraph & Telephone Public Corporation (now NTT). That was when Teruaki saw her leaving. During the summer vacation he rose late like a proper college student. It seems Rumi-nei left home at around 2 p.m. Teruaki thought he woke up before noon, but from his grandmother's testimony, we estimate the time she left was around 2 p.m.

Teruaki went out for drinks with his friends that evening and came home after 10 p.m. When he entered the house he sensed the anxious mood. When he asked, "What happened?" the answer was "Rumiko hasn't come home yet." His mother and older sister explained, "Rumiko told us she would be home by 10 p.m."

His older sister Fumiko recalled, "Rumiko would always call home if she was going to be later than she expected when she went out. Of course at that time we did not have cell phones, but she used public phones. She usually kept track of time, and she was afraid of the dark, so she usually gave us a call if she was going to be home late."

Rumiko was scared of dark streets since her bad experience as a high school student. It was therefore almost unthinkable that she would come home late without calling.

Time passed quickly. Eleven, eleven thirty... "She will be back any minute." "She will be back by twelve o'clock at the latest." They waited optimistically, but midnight passed without Rumiko appearing. "This is really unusual." "Maybe she had a car accident." "But, if so, the police would notify us immediately." Her

mother, Fumiko, and Teruaki exchanged such comments among themselves and kept waiting all night, feeling uneasy.

The family had Rumi-nei's compact car. Teruaki thought, "I wish I had a driver's license. I would drive to Fukiage Beach to check things out." From Kagoshima city, located on the east side of Satsuma Peninsula, to Fukiage Beach, on the west side of the peninsula, it takes more than an hour by car. Teruaki felt frustrated with himself. He could do nothing but wait and let time pass.

Finally day broke, but Rumi-nei had not come home. Her mother, Nobuko, called the Ichikawas as soon as morning arrived. Shuichi Ichikawa was living with his sister and her husband. Their place had a separate guesthouse beside the main house in the same lot. Shuichi rented the guesthouse, as it was convenient to commute from there to work.

Shuichi's sister answered the phone. The sister thought Shuichi had already come home last night and had been sleeping in his place. The urgent voice of Rumiko's mother over the phone made her run to Shuichi's unit. She found no trace of his ever coming home and sleeping there.

Still, Shuichi's sister thought that as he was a grown man, they "should wait for a while." She reasoned with Rumiko's mother, "Shuichi is scheduled to go to his office in the late afternoon today (August 13th). He might be planning to go to work directly from wherever he is staying. Since he could not come home at a reasonable time for whatever reason, he might just be embarrassed to show his face."

The same reasoning was suggested at the police later when the family filed a missing person's report. "They are a young couple. They must have ended up in a hotel room and lost track of time. Then they were too embarrassed to call home as they were way too late." Such reasoning was commonly accepted in those days, although Fumiko thought, "Judging from what my sister told us, their relationship was not like that. Besides, Rumiko was not that kind of girl." Nonetheless, they agreed to wait one more day.

Why did they wait one more day? Teruaki was not certain of the detailed events that led to the decision, maybe because he came home drunk the night before. The discussion described above is based mainly on Fumiko's memory.

When Teruaki heard the details from the interview with Fumiko, he cocked his head and said, "Really? Is that so?" He thought August 12 was Sunday rather than Saturday. The sister and brother had not reinforced each other's memory. This may seem strange, considering it was such a grave event for the family. Wouldn't

they have talked it over? But such reasoning is that of an outsider:

“After that day, my mother would instantly be reduced to tears at the mere mention of Rumiko’s name. So in our house the topic became taboo. The name ‘Rumiko’ had to be locked away,” Fumiko explained

“My mom broke into tears so easily. We could not talk about the incident at all. Even among the siblings, once one of us welled up with tears, we all started to weep and could not utter a further word,” Teruaki confirmed.

The sister and the brother echoed each other word for word on this account. The family of an abducted person was victimized not only by losing a member, but also through the punishment of needing to conceal the memories. If this were a happy incident, what would have happened? Everyone in the family would contribute his or her memories saying, “It happened this way,” or “No, it happened that way.” The memories would be combined, corrected, and reinforced into one shared memory of the details.

In the case of the abduction victims, either despite the seriousness of the event or because of it, each family member stored a memory of “that day” in his or her own chest, unable to cross-check its accuracy.

The Masumoto family waited until noon of August 13th, trying to be patient. Rumiko still did not come home. Now they were sure something bad had happened. They finally made a missing person’s report to the police in the neighborhood. But the police said that unless there was evidence, they could not treat the claim as a case. They only suggested, “Since they went out for a date, couldn’t they have spent the night somewhere? They may have eloped. You should wait a little longer.”

But there was no contact from either of them that day. The Ichikawa family called Shuichi’s workplace and confirmed that he did not show up. They could not wait any longer. There was no reason for them to elope. Rumiko was not the kind of girl who would spend a night somewhere without telling her family. Both families discussed the plan and decided to go to Fukiage Beach together early in the morning on the 14th. From the Masumoto family, the father, Shoichi, the mother, Nobuko, and the younger brother Teruaki decided to go. From the Ichikawa family, Shuichi’s brother-in-law joined the trip and headed to the beach.

Coincidentally, the Masumoto family received a phone call that morning. It was from the first son, Shinichi, who was working in Shizuoka. Since having left the house after a clash with his father, he had let the family know where he was but had never voluntarily called home. He called home that morning for the first time

in many years.

“I had just come home from the night shift, and happened to think of calling home. I encountered tumult at the other end of the line. They were saying that Rumiko was missing. It must have been some kind of sixth sense.”

He immediately returned home. He joined the search two days later, spending all his meager vacation time.

In order to reach Fukiage Beach from Kagoshima city, they had to go over a hill with winding roads and a cliff on one side. As they were sure this was not a case of eloping or an irresponsible overnight stay, the highest probability was a traffic accident that had trapped them somewhere without their being noticed. That was what Teruaki was thinking on the way to Fukiage Beach. They stopped at several places and peered down to the bottom of the cliffs on the side of the road.

Once they reached the gate of the beach and went through the lush woods of pine trees, they found themselves at a circular driveway for camping sites, 40 to 50 meters from the water’s edge. There was Mr. Ichikawa’s car, the locked and deserted Toyota Mark II, abandoned.

There was no other possibility but to believe that they were somehow involved in foul play. They broke into the car and found Rumi-nei’s purse and camera. When the film was developed they found snap shots the couple took that day. One was taken at a suspension bridge over Satsuma Lake. The police determined it was about 6 p.m. by examining the shadow in the picture. This picture was later used in posters as the latest image of the missing couple. Rumiko Masumoto was wearing a hat and sunglasses.

According to her sister, Fumiko, that picture “was commented on by a lot of her high school friends as it ‘did not look like Masu (Rumiko’s high school nickname) at all.’ Because of the sunglasses it was far from the usual image of Rumiko as a sweet looking girl. Many years later, when a former North Korean agent, An Myong-jin, saw the picture, he did not recognize her in it, to the disappointment of the Masumoto family. But later in 2002, they showed An Myong-jin another picture of her and he confirmed having seen her, saying, “This must be the smiling woman who was with Miss Megumi Yokota.” The second picture shown to Mr. An was taken at her cousin’s wedding. She was wearing a skirt. Mr. An recognized her tall frame and legs. The picture was taken two months before the abduction and was the last picture of her with her father.

Since Shuichi’s car was found, they looked and searched in and around the vicinity. Soon they found Shuichi’s sandal. Fumiko recalled, “We found his sandal

discarded and upside down in the grassy area not far from the car.”

This was definite evidence of foul play. The couple must have been attacked. Both families at once made a report to the police station nearest to Fukiage Beach. But as it was already dusk, the police decided to start the official search next morning. It was already two whole days since the young couple on their date had happily gazed at the sunset.

The following day, an extensive search started. It lasted for over ten days around the hot mid-summer beach. Many people and organizations such as the police, firefighters, ships, relatives and concerned people were mobilized. Rumiko’s father and siblings commuted everyday from Kagoshima city to the site. Teruaki asked his circle of friends to search the peripheral area. As the area was known for motorcycle gangs, they looked for signs of kidnapping after a violent encounter. Considering the worst case, they searched for newly unearthed ground where they might have been buried. Police dogs were used. But the trace of smell abruptly disappeared near where the sandal was discarded. They searched every inch of ground and considered every possible scenario until they were exhausted.

Fumiko recalled, “Every day, the only report I got from my father and brothers was, ‘Nothing, we found nothing yet.’ I went to the site only once to deliver ice after the search started. My mother was on the verge of insanity, and I had to look after her. Since then, until I joined the petition campaign in 1997 and then accompanied Mr. An Myong-jin the following year, I had not stepped in the place for nearly twenty years. I never wanted to see that horrifying place again.”

Teruaki had planned on returning to Hokkaido around August 16, right after the Bon Festival, but even after September started he did not want to leave Kagoshima. The University in the northern country started the new semester’s classes at the end of August. He had stopped drinking since the search started. It was the hot season and beer was enticing, but he pledged to himself not to drink a drop until his sister was found. The search was difficult. The hardest thing for him was to know that they were not finding anything new, day after day. Teruaki’s biggest shock was witnessing his father’s desolation for the first time in his life. In the midst of the search, his father was sitting blank-eyed on the ground in front of the management office of the beach, scribbling something in the dirt absentmindedly. It was the first time Teruaki had seen his father in such a state. His father had always been stern and dignified. Seeing his father’s back, completely defeated, Teruaki felt even more overwhelmed by the graveness of the event.

The extensive search that had started on the morning of the 15th was called off two weeks later, citing lack of progress. Though an inspector at Kaseda Police Station was assigned to continue the investigation, for practical purposes the search was over.

Local newspapers played with the words “Spirited Away.” Even the involvement of a UFO was talked about, like the Pink Ladies’ hit song. “Why did this have to happen? Really, I do not understand” were the words stamped in Teruaki’s mind. This same confused feeling also nagged Fumiko. “At first, I even blamed my sister. Why in the name of God don’t you come home? Where are you? Why did you even think of going to a place where a crime like this might happen? Why us? Such a headline-claiming incident should not befall people like us who have led a normal decent life. The sad feeling had passed and some inexplicable complicated feeling close to anger or irritation came over me,” recalled Fumiko.

For Teruaki, the hardest thing was not knowing what really happened. “If you knew it was a traffic accident or drowning, even if it resulted in death, but if the result were clear, you could have a funeral to settle your feelings regardless of how hard it was. You would be able to talk about it someday as a memory. But we could not even do that. We were completely lost and did not know where to proceed with this. Besides, the topic became a deep taboo in our family. Although we did not talk about it, we never forgot about Rumi-nei even for a day. I endured my feelings privately, within myself. I think it was the same with everyone in my family.”

That was Teruaki’s description of his feelings at the time: walking in a thick fog, groping for a way to proceed.

After the extensive search of the site, the police brought back Rumiko’s belongings that were found in the car, including her purse and its contents. But her mother, Nobuko, stubbornly refused to accept the items. “I do not want to see them.” She probably did not want to admit that her daughter was officially gone. Fumiko assumes that those items are still kept somewhere at Kaseda Police Station.

Fumiko said, “I do not feel like giving up yet either. I will pick them up when my sister comes home. I believe that day will come, when I will go there and claim the items, and at the same time express gratitude to everyone who helped us.”

The younger sister had suddenly disappeared from the house in Kagoshima, where four members of the family, father, mother and two sisters, were living

peacefully. Her parents even appeared on a TV show to plead with viewers for information. It was a segment of the Wide-Variety-Show that introduced family members with missing persons, hosted by the famous Keizo Kawasaki.

Another TV station offered to help them with a supernatural psychic in the U.S. and to make a show out of it. Desperate parents are like a drowning man who clutches to straws. They parted with “the item most cherished by Rumiko,” requested by a staff member from the TV station in order for the psychic to practice clairvoyance. They were a plectrum and a flute for tuning a koto (Japanese harp). Rumiko had actually used them everyday until just before her disappearance. She was an ardent player of koto. She had started to take lessons on her own initiative.

Fumiko, who knew the sequence of events intimately, said, “The psychic could not figure out where my sister was. The show was never aired on TV. On top of that, they lost the valuable items we lent them. My father asked them many times to return the items, but they gave him noncommittal responses and in the end dropped the matter. Since then, whenever media people would ask him to lend them Rumiko’s picture, he simply refused, saying, ‘they are too valuable. I would never lend them.’”

“Come to think of it, I even wonder if those people were truly TV staff. At that time, if someone told us that we needed to pay for the psychic, we might have said, “Yes, of course” without any doubt and would have paid whatever amount they demanded. We were in such a desperate state of mind that we could have followed anyone’s advice, even someone who purposely exploits another’s weakness. That experience made us suspicious of everyone.”

The picture of Rumiko that her father Shoichi valued most was taken at her Coming-of-Age Day at the age of 20. She was wearing a beautiful kimono with long sleeves. Her mother, Nobuko, offers a bowl of rice in front of that picture every day.

One and half years after Rumiko’s disappearance, out of the blue, Mr. Masami Abe of Sankei Newspaper visited the family for an interview. He told them that he was investigating the disappearances of three young couples at various beaches throughout Japan. The couples were Mr. Hasuike and Ms. Okudo, Mr. Chimura and Ms. Hamamoto, and Mr. Ichikawa and Ms. Masumoto. The three disappearances had occurred within a close period of time. Also, an attempt was reported in Toyama. Evidential items left at the scene were determined to have

been made in Communist countries. Mr. Abe told Teruaki and his parents, “There is a suspicion that North Korea orchestrated the abductions.”

“That makes sense!” and “Is this real?” were the two conflicting reactions in Teruaki’s mind. But it was like a ray of hope for the family who did not know whether to think of Rumiko as dead or alive. If she had not drowned or got involved in violence, but had been abducted by North Korea, then “she must be alive!” If she is alive, we will surely be able to see her someday. Even if they are living in such a barbaric country, as long as she is alive, we will see her again.

The article, entitled “Mysterious disappearance of three couples” was printed on January 7, 1980, with real names including Rumiko’s, and pictures of the victims. North Korea was not named. Instead: “There is a suspicion that a foreign spy organization was involved.” But Fumiko was convinced that her sister’s disappearance could be explained only as an abduction by North Korea.

Given that previously they could not even determine if she was alive or dead, this was a huge breakthrough. But it was also the beginning of more suffering for the Masumoto family. Even if it was North Korea’s deed, there was nothing they could do.

There was no way to confirm the suspicion, and they did not know how to rescue her. It was not a time when ordinary individuals could take any meaningful action. They never thought about pleading to the Japanese Foreign Ministry. The Foreign Ministry would not have taken the matter seriously. The North Korean theory was only a suspicion and there was no concrete evidence. (Even in the case of Ms. Keiko Arimoto, who had sent letters and pictures from North Korea, her parents suffered bitterly from the cold treatment they received from the Foreign Ministry, which had turned them away at the door.) They also considered it possible that if they made noise, Rumiko might be executed.

Rumiko’s parents used their association with Soka-gakkai and petitioned to a local representative in the Diet from the Komei Party, which comprised Soka-gakkai members. The matter was taken up at a session in the Diet, but it was just a formality. The government did nothing and the Komei Party took no further steps.

Although they were out of the fog, they encountered a hard, towering, baffling wall called North Korea. The mother, Nobuko, started to weep more often when she learned that North Korea was responsible. Teruaki could not talk with his mother about Rumi-nei. Even with Fumiko, he ceased to bring up the topic when he realized that the discussion always dead-ended with, “We can’t do anything.” or

“Any careless move may cause Rumiko’s death.” The father, Shoichi, never even once started a conversation with, “I wonder how Rumiko is doing.” Fumiko always sensed that this was how her father, a man of spirit who had never whined about anything, disguised his deep feeling toward his daughter and his desperate desire to see her again.

Even now, Teruaki cannot stop thinking of what-ifs. What if, on that day, Rumi-nei had arrived at Fukiage Beach another thirty minutes or an hour later? She might have never encountered the North Korean agents.

Fumiko still cannot stop blaming herself.

Rumiko had been working for a salvage company for a year at the time she was abducted. The first company she had worked for, Coca Cola, was expanding rapidly in those days as the only soda company. As she had to work so much overtime even on Sundays, she could not do anything else, not to mention her hobby playing Japanese harp. As a result, she quit the job she had held for three years. She was looking for a suitable position while holding a part-time job at a local government office. One day Rumiko told Fumiko, “Big Sister, I am thinking of going to Osaka and working for Daiei Supermarket. They are hiring now. I already have an application form.” It was a time when supermarkets were gaining in popularity. Fumiko was taken aback for a moment, then responded without thinking, “Wow, I will miss you. Please don’t go so far away. Why don’t you stay in Kagoshima?” Fumiko felt she could not bear the days without her sister nearby. “My sister was a home body too. She did not have the resolve to go and live alone in spite of my objection. Now I regret it terribly. If I had not objected to her idea at that time, Rumiko might have gone to Osaka. And then... (She would not have been in Kagoshima and would never have been involved in the case.)” Fumiko swallowed the last words.

Rumiko eventually found a position at a local salvage company. Hence, on that particular Saturday, she dropped her sister off in front of her workplace and drove to her own office one kilometer ahead.

There is another thing Fumiko cannot let go of. She will never again decline an invitation for tea. August 12th was the day before the first day of the Bon Festival. Rumiko’s mother had asked Rumiko, “As the Bon Festival starts tomorrow, why don’t you take flowers to Grandma in Korimoto? Please drop by on the way to Fukiage Beach.” Obligated by the request, Rumiko stopped by at Grandma’s place with Mr. Ichikawa. By the timing of this event, we estimate they left the house around 2 pm. Grandma invited her granddaughter, “Why don’t you

stay and have a cup of tea?” But Rumiko and her companion declined the invitation saying, “Thank you, but we are in a bit of a hurry.” If she had stayed for tea, and left even ten minutes later, perhaps they would never have encountered the abductors. “Elderly people often tell us that if you are invited for tea, you should accept it graciously. Since my sister’s disappearance, I cannot decline any invitation for tea. I tell anyone, “Thank you. Of course I will have one.”

Rumiko’s father, Shoichi, who was in his mid 50s at the time of her disappearance, soon reached retirement at age 60. His retirement meant that he had to move out of government housing. He could not bear the thought of Rumiko coming home and not being able to find the house she grew up in.

The image of Rumiko escaping North Korea, arriving in Japan, standing in a daze not being able to find her own house: this image haunted everyone in the family. Shoichi asked his employer to defer his retirement. They continued to live in the government housing, but could do so at most for two more years. The Masumoto family eventually left the government housing and moved to Aira-cho, a suburb of Kagoshima. Rumiko’s picture in a kimono was displayed in the living room of their new residence. Soon after the Masumoto family moved out of the government housing, it was demolished and a condominium was built on the site.

Three years later, in November, 1987, a Korean Airline plane was bombed. The following year, the suspect of the bombing, North Korean agent Kim Hyon-hi, was arrested and a press conference aired on TV. When she mentioned a Japanese instructor, Lee Eun-hye, all the newspapers and magazines speculated as to Lee Eun-hye’s identity. Teruaki recalled, “I was worried sick.” This was because all the articles cited Rumi-nei’s real name. The three women who were mentioned in the earlier article of Sankei Newspaper to be “mysteriously disappeared” were now publicly speculated about as the possible identity of Lee Eun-hye. The Masumoto family wanted to scream: Why were the media openly pointing to the missing women, citing their real names, while their families had for many years been trying to keep matters subdued for fear of their loved ones’ lives. “The pandemonium could kill my sister!” Teruaki hated the newspaper articles and was worried sick for his sister’s life. Teruaki himself thought about the possibility of his sister being the instructor of Kim Hyon-hi. There was no knowledge at that time of any abduction victims besides the three women (Yaeko Taguchi was found later). But when Teruaki saw the reconstruction drawing of the instructor, he realized it was not his sister. He did not feel reassured, however, until the visit of Prime Minister Koizumi

to North Korea years later brought two other women —not Rumi-nei—back to Japan. This finally convinced him that North Korea would not kill the Japanese captives just because their identities had been disclosed.

It was March, 1997 when his father Shoichi called Teruaki, who had been working in Tokyo for a wholesale seafood company. His father told him, “I am coming to Tokyo soon.” “Why are you coming?” “A Family Association is about to be established.” “What is that?”

Teruaki learned that the North Korean abduction victims’ families were getting together to establish an association. He definitely wanted to take part in it, and decided to attend the first meeting. He wanted to see with his own eyes how the association would take shape. He could not shake his fear that their loved ones’ lives would be jeopardized by a public campaign using real names. Above all, his thoughts were heavy because he had not been able to do anything to help her on his own for the last 19 years. It had been a hard 19 years. Finally, he thought, he might be able to do something for her.

On March 25th, the Abductee Family Association was established. Teruaki had not met anyone there before, other than the members of the Ichikawa family. His father had been acquainted with Mr. Chimura’s father before. Almost two decades ago, they appeared together on the same TV show about the search for missing persons, hosted by Keizo Kawasaki. Teruaki asked a leading supporter who helped to organize the association, “I fear that if we actively campaign using real names, the captives may be executed by North Korea. What do you think?”

The answer was: The situation had been the same for almost twenty years. If they did nothing, the situation would never change. The time had come to ask support from the general public using real names. For the North Koreans, the captives would become important cards for negotiation. North Korea would not be able to kill the captives easily. On the other hand, if they stay silent, there would be a higher risk that the captives will be quietly disposed of. Hearing this rationale, everyone in the meeting agreed to start a campaign using the real names. Soon after this meeting, a nationwide petition campaign was established, asking the Prime Minister’s office and the Foreign Minister to rescue the abduction victims.

The establishment of the Abductee Family Association permitted everyone in the family to plead openly to the general public for the rescue of Rumi-nei, loud and clear.

To their surprise Nobuko, the mother, who couldn’t control her tears, joined

the petition campaign on her own. She visited houses in their hilly neighborhood one by one and started to collect signatures, even in the scorching summer weather. The idea that finally there was something she could do for her missing daughter drove her to action. Occasionally, she came home to report that she was yelled at in the houses she visited. That year of 1997, there was not yet much public interest in the abduction cases. When Teruaki tried to collect signatures in the streets of Tokyo, after two hours he had only acquired 600 signatures. In Niigata, the new case of the abduction of 13-year-old Megumi Yokota was drawing a fair amount of attention. But nationally, public recognition of the cases was still low. Despite her persistent effort, the number of signatures the 70-year-old mother collected did not amount to much. The Abductee Rescue Association had not at that time been established.

At the beginning of August, realizing the painstaking door-to-door campaign would not achieve much, Teruaki wrote a letter to the alumni organization of Rumi-nei's high school (Kikokai). Rumiko's sister Fumiko was also an alumna of the school. He wrote, "My elder sister, Rumiko Masumoto, was abducted by North Korea and is still captive there. In order to rescue her, we need the signatures of supporters. We humbly beg the help of my sister's fellow alumni." The president of the association, Ritsuko Hashimoto, quickly responded to the letter. Teruaki was grateful. Under the initiative of Kikokai, in August, September, and October, a street signature collection campaign was planned and executed. Many alumni and their families responded to the request. In total, 22,000 signatures were collected in the campaign.

Teruaki and his parents headed the petition campaign. When the campaign located itself in Tenmonkan, the main shopping district of Kagoshima, and in front of Yamagataya, Kagoshima's signature department store, even Fumiko joined the campaign. This was her first time, and to do so she had to travel from Kumamoto Prefecture, where she had moved after her marriage. Fumiko recalled, "I was happy that I could appeal openly and loudly for my sister. This made up for the time when I could do nothing." In October, they campaigned at Fukiage Beach where the abduction had occurred. For the Masumoto family, it was their first visit to Fukiage Beach since the abduction 19 years earlier.

Over time, even in Kagoshima, the coordinated supporter's group became more organized. Activities such as lectures and petition campaigns were held. Even Shinichi, the second child, took part. Though he had left home long ago, he found a transfer position in his company near where his elderly parents lived, and he moved in with them. According to Fumiko, "My brother Shinichi is a rather quiet

type and not good at speaking in front of people. When I saw even Shinichi standing on the street with petition sheets, I felt a deep fraternal tie.”

In the end, the Abductee Family Association as a whole collected over a million signatures in one year and delivered them to the Prime Minister’s office (the Hashimoto cabinet) and the Foreign Minister Keizo Obuchi. When Foreign Minister Obuchi received the signatures, he jokingly asked the members of the Association and its supporters, “North Korea is a difficult country. Please enlighten me as to what I ought to do.” That comment made Teruaki feel dizzy with anger and desperation: What resourcelessness! A man who should be at the head of the rescue effort was asking laymen what to do!

In the fall of 2000, Teruaki pleaded with then-Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori at his official residence by kneeling on the ground and putting his forehead to the floor.

“If nothing is done, my sister will be killed soon!”

He choked on the rest of his words, as he was nervous about this rare chance to plead directly with the Prime Minister. Here is what led to his dramatic plea:

According to the intelligence of the Association’s supporters, there was a move within the ruling party under the Mori / Nonaka coalition to normalize relations between Japan and North Korea. This entailed the “Exit Theory” for solving the abduction problem. The idea was that once relations were normalized, the problem would be solved through communication and cooperation. In contrast, the Abductee Family Association held the “Entrance Theory,” which was that without resolution of the abduction problem there should be no normalization of relations. Teruaki was desperate. The ruling party’s idea was just not acceptable. North Korea was claiming that the abductions were fiction. In the worst case, the problem might be whitewashed after normalization. Teruaki thought that he had to extract a promise from the Prime Minister, a promise of “no normalization without resolution of the abduction issue.” If relations were normalized with naïve optimism, his sister would be killed. The victims who were supposed “not to exist” according to North Korea would be erased from the earth, Teruaki thought.

On September 11th, the day before the meeting with the Prime Minister, the Abductee Family Association held a members briefing on the move toward normalization and the process of the next day’s meeting. The official appointment was with the Chief Cabinet Secretary Hidenao Nakagawa. Prime Minister Mori

would pop into the meeting later and hear from the members directly. Teruaki thought that if they were going to use them as part of their political performance, he would turn it to his advantage and extract a promise from the Prime Minister. Considering the attending members, Mr. and Mrs. Yokota, Mr. and Mrs. Arimoto, Mrs. Hatsui Hasuike, and others, Teruaki thought he should be the one to execute the ambush. He thought that he needed to spring into action while the TV camera was still rolling, right after the leader of the Association, Mr. Yokota, exchanged a polite greeting with the Prime Minister.

Because of his well-calculated plan, Teruaki's kneeling scene was viewed on TV by a large audience. It had an impact. By the end of that day, the Prime Minister announced that the normalization and abduction issues would see a "resolution at the same time" and declared that the government would never abandon the abduction issue. Teruaki recalled, "My father never told me, but my mother recounted to me after his death that he was angry at seeing me kneel. She said that he was furious and yelled, 'Why on earth is he kneeling to a mere politician!'"

Teruaki had considered other "tactics" such as banging the table or cornering the Prime Minister to force a commitment. But he rejected these as disrespectful to the head of the nation. In order to have an impact he chose to kneel, although he knew it was a risky move.

Teruaki knew his father was growing in anger toward the government and the ruling party, which were doing nothing to solve the case. After they joined the Abductee Family Association, they learned that even though the Japanese Government had suspected North Korea early on, the Government had not taken any meaningful action to solve the case for almost twenty years. Even after the Abductee Family Association was organized, and despite their frequent pleas, the Government did not make a serious effort. When the top brass of the Komei-Party visited Kagoshima, Shoichi requested a meeting and directly petitioned them to move for a rescue. On the spot, he received a sincere-sounding reply of "I understand your suffering." But there was no follow-up. After that incident, Shoichi was enraged at the party leader and complained bitterly, "That party is good for nothing." Later, after Shoichi's death, the same party leader contacted the family and requested to pay his respects to Shoichi's alter when visiting Kagoshima. The Masumoto family declined the request, saying "There is no point in paying respect to Shoichi now. Rather, we would be pleased if you made more of an effort to solve the abduction cases. We have nothing further to say."

In December, 1999, when a nonpartisan delegation was to visit North Korea, the leader and former Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama called the family. It was an unexpected phone call, but it must have been just a performance as it ended abruptly after just one sentence, “I am leaving for North Korea now.” Thus, the visit was just one more marker in a long history of timorous, appease-the-opponent diplomacy.

When Teruaki was young, he used to vote for the Socialist Party (now the Social-Democratic Party). He thought that the Socialist party must have some connection with North Korea, and they might be able to solve his sister’s problem if they became more powerful. Since joining the Abductee Family Association, he has learned more about the history of the relationship between Japan and North Korea, and has come to believe that the Socialist Party betrayed them. Now he is furious and regrets his past support of the Party.

Since the Abductee Family Association was formed, they met several prime ministers and foreign ministers and pleaded for the rescue of the abduction victims. Ministers who uttered smooth lines such as, “I understand your feeling in my heart, as I’m the parent of a daughter myself,” were often the ones who did nothing. Teruaki wondered why the Government would not take serious action despite the frantic pleas of the victims’ families. His mistrust of the Government ballooned.

On August 30, 2002, when “Prime Minister Koizumi’s visit to North Korea for the first summit meeting” was announced, Teruaki felt more anxiety than expectation. He had been observing the major shift of policy toward normalization, with the abduction issue being shelved.

Fumiko was watching the same news in Kyushu and applauded the TV. She recalled, “I was genuinely happy. It was like suddenly a new light flooded the room.”

There was a reason Fumiko felt that way. Just a few days before the announcement, on August 28th, she was notified at a hospital in Kagoshima that her father had lung cancer and would not live much longer than half a year. She kept the secret from her elderly mother. When Koizumi’s visit was reported, she had been holding onto the secret for two days and wondering how to disclose the devastating news to her brother Teruaki in Tokyo. She told her father, “If Prime Minister Koizumi is going to visit North Korea, surely Rumiko will be able to come home. So, you have to go to the hospital to get better.” Hearing her words, her father smiled brightly. She made up a story for her father. He needed to be in

the hospital because he “required better nutrition and had to be treated for early stage pneumonia.” He was already suffering from chronic pulmonary emphysema and fibrosis. He had been in rather poor health since being struck by a mild cerebral infarction that spring. Every year, his health had been declining.

As Koizumi’s visit on September 17 approached, Fumiko started feeling increasingly uneasy. Initially 60-70 percent of her mind was filled with positive expectations. However, as the visit approached, 90 percent turned into anxiety. She kept thinking that the only way the abduction issue could be resolved was through the summit meeting. But as the meeting approached, her anxiety grew. She feared that if, at the summit meeting, North Korea refused to acknowledge the abduction or declared that the victims were missing, her sister would be cast away forever.

“I believe my father had the same anxiety, which created tremendous pressure on his body, already weakened by disease. When the visit was only a week away, he suffered a cardiac infarction. He was ordered to get absolute rest, with tubes attached to him,” Fumiko recalled.

Fumiko kept encouraging her weakened father, who by that time had very little appetite. “Daddy, you have to eat. What will Rumiko feel when she comes home if you are gone? Who do you think Teru-chan keeps campaigning for? For you! He has been toiling so hard so that you can see Rumiko again.” The day of Koizumi’s visit came. The Abductee Family Association’s request of “a meeting the day before the visit to hear their last plea” was rejected because “the Prime Minister wants to be completely at peace on September 17,” according to Yasuko Fukuda, the Chief Cabinet Secretary. They did not understand why a meeting with the families would disturb him at this stage. They thought about rushing to Haneda Airport and demonstrating early in the morning of his departure. But they gave up the idea. They did not want the North Koreans to conclude that Japanese opinions on this issue were divided.

At the Iikura Official Building of the Foreign Ministry, the Yokota Family was called in to a separate room on the second floor. Next, Mr. and Mrs. Arimoto. Before long, the Yokota Family returned to the first floor where everyone else was waiting. They sat down with a grave expression and remained there silently. Nobody could speak to them. Nobody dared to ask, “How was it?” Before Mr. and Mrs. Arimoto came back, Fumiko and Teruaki were called in.

They went into the separate room, and the Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda told them to be seated. Fukuda, who remained standing, said, “Rumiko-san

is deceased.” Teruaki’s mind went blank. Fumiko was also at a loss for words. It felt as if many minutes passed, though it was actually just a few seconds, when Fumiko finally opened her mouth. “When did she die?” “Where?” The answer was, “We don’t know.” Teruaki asked, “How did she die?” They didn’t know that either. Teruaki and Fumiko thought this made no sense, but the shock was so deep they could not ask anything further. At last Fumiko managed to ask, “How about Megumi?” “She is deceased too,” was the answer. They felt as if darkness had descended on them.

Word would eventually spread to Kagoshima. Teruaki and Fumiko did not know how to report the news. When Teruaki returned to the hallway on the first floor, he called to discuss it with his elder brother Shinichi in Kagoshima. They decided that Fumiko and Teruaki would fly tomorrow and report to their parents in person. His energy was completely drained, and he did not want to remain in Tokyo and go back to work. He called his boss and asked for some days off.

At the hospital in Kagoshima, his parents were glued to the TV, which was reporting minute by minute on the issue. “Rumiko Masumoto, deceased,” said the report. Instantly, Nobuko collapsed, wailing. From the bed Shoichi yelled at Nobuko, “Rumiko is not dead! She is alive! The North Koreans tell nothing but lies!” It was the strong voice of her husband that she had not heard for a long time, not since the spring when his health had deteriorated.

At the Iikura Official Building, the families whose loved ones were reported alive were back in the waiting room. Everyone was red-eyed or sobbing. “Sorry. I’m sorry.” People who received “alive” reports repeatedly apologized to the family members whose loved ones were reported dead and who could not even cry. Mr. Shigeru Yokota gently told the “alive” group, “I am truly happy for you.” Mr. Toru Hasuike, the brother of Ms. Kaoru Hasuike, faced Teruaki and said, “Mr. Masumoto, you should not believe this report.” Everyone in the room hugged each other and broke down in tears.

Just before six o’clock in the evening, the victims’ family members held a press conference in the First Members Building of the House of Representatives. Teruaki was wondering how Rumi-nei had died and concluded it must have been an execution. At the conference he named and laid the blame on the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party, which he believed thwarted the rescue effort and kept it from resolution.

Fumiko thought about her parents who must be watching TV in the hospital room. She was half shouting to the camera when she said, “Mom, Dad, we

shouldn't believe it. Please be strong. Hang in there." Her voice cracked as she choked with tears.

The next day, when Teruaki arrived at the hospital in Kagoshima, the first thing Shoichi said was, "Thank you for your effort." Teruaki emphatically said, "This is a big lie. We should not believe it. I am sure she is alive." That morning, Shinzo Abe, the Vice Cabinet Secretary, had visited the hotel where the Abductee Family Association members were staying, and told them that the Government had merely related what North Korea had told the delegation. The Japanese Government had not yet confirmed the facts. Teruaki related Abe's words to Nobuko, but she kept crying.

Shoichi looked to be holding up, but his eyes lacked energy. About a month later, Shoichi's life of 79 years ended. Nobody in the family imagined he would leave this world so soon. Teruaki thought the news of "Rumiko's death" was too much for him, that it took away his will to live. He resented the Foreign Ministry, which had announced Rumiko's death without any attempt to confirm, thereby shortening his father's life.

On October 15th, the "survived" five had stepped off a plane at Haneda Airport.

The Masumoto family was keeping intensely busy. On October 10, with the help of an oxygen mask, Shoichi had left his final message to Rumiko, talking to a video camera Teruaki was holding. "Rumiko, as you see, I am too weak to come get you. Please come home on your own." On October 11, after noon, Shoichi's condition turned suddenly worse. The family decided to use life-sustaining devices. A tube for breathing support was inserted into his throat. The three siblings made the decision after discussing it among themselves. "We considered the options. We wanted him to live even one day longer regardless of his condition, as we wanted our sister to see our father alive," Fumiko explained. That morning, surprisingly, Shoichi talked about a lot of things with his raspy voice, as if gathering his last strength.

"I grant my permission for the marriage between Rumiko and Mr. Ichikawa. I believe Rumiko and Mr. Ichikawa are living together happily. They love each other. When Mr. Ichikawa was attacked with a knife in Kagoshima, Rumiko tried to protect him and received two knife wounds. But they healed soon. This shows the deepness of their love. So, I give my blessing to their marriage. They have three children now too." Fumiko, who was listening intently to his story, realized Shoichi was talking about the dream he had just had. Rumiko never had a chance

to tell her father about Mr. Ichikawa before the abduction. It was the first time her father talked about Rumiko's relationship with Mr. Ichikawa. When Shoichi declared his permission for their relationship and marriage, his face showed he meant it seriously. Then Shoichi left words to Teruaki as his last testament, saying, "I believe in Japan. You should, too!"

Shoichi had seen that despite the repeated pleas for rescue, the Japanese Government had never taken serious steps. He felt betrayed. Yet his last words reflected his belief that the only way to rescue his daughter was to trust Japan. The day he died, a newspaper reporter asked Fumiko, "Do you wish he could have lived a little longer until Rumiko comes back?" She replied bitterly, "No, I wish the Government had taken swifter action, before it became too late."

On the morning of the 15th, Teruaki decided to leave Kagoshima in order to see the five survivors at Haneda Airport, as it was planned for all the members of the Abductee Family Association to welcome them. He did not want to leave his dying father, but he thought he could get some information about Rumiko from the five survivors. He wanted to present the information to his father.

The five survivors descended onto the ramp. Teruaki was moved, but mostly he felt resentment. Watching the families hugging and crying with joy, his resentment welled up, silently shouting, "Why isn't my sister here?" At the reception with the survivors the next day, he could not obtain any useful information about Rumi-nei. During the flight home to Kagoshima, Teruaki thought about telling his sick father a lie such as, "I found my sister was alive!" But he could not, after all. Shoichi died shortly after midnight of the day Teruaki came back. It was October 17, 1:45 a.m. Everyone in the family was gathered around the bed when he took his last breath. Next to the bed, Rumiko's picture in a kimono was on display.

●Disclosed "Date of Death"

"We got it!"

Kenichi Ichikawa was shouting unconsciously into his cell phone: a shout of great joy from the bottom of his heart. The Foreign Ministry had just told him his brother's date of death, September 4, 1979. Upon hearing this, Kenichi shouted for joy because it contradicted eyewitness testimony by Mr. An Myong-jin. Mr. An had testified, "At Kim Jong-il Politico-Military University I had a conversation with him and he gave me a cigarette." He also declared, "I saw this man many

times. I am sure of it.” Mr. An had met Kenichi and talked in person. Mr. An had said, “The last time I saw him was in August of 1991.” Therefore it was impossible that his brother had died before then. But North Korea informed us that his death was in 1979, so that date was clearly false, which meant that the report of his brother’s death was itself made-up. He believed his brother was still alive.

It was September 19, 2002, just two days after Koizumi’s visit to North Korea. The Foreign Ministry was supposed to call Kenichi at home in Kagoshima and inform him of Shuichi’s date of death. Kenichi had something else he needed to do in the early morning, so he prevailed on his eldest son to call his cell phone as soon as the Foreign Ministry called. “Camp out in front of the phone. Call me immediately if you receive a call from the Ministry,” he told his son for the last time as he left the house. After a while, his eldest son called his cell phone and reported, “I just got a call.” Kenichi immediately asked, “When is the date of death?” He was shouting without realizing it. “Father, it was 1979,” said his son. “We got it!” The shout came out of Kenichi’s mouth in full force. As he gripped the steering wheel on the way home, the scenery in front of the windshield was blurred with his tears. He had instructed his son to tell the Foreign Ministry official, “I will have him call as soon as he returns.” When Kenichi got home he immediately phoned the official in charge. “I would like to confirm one more time. The date of death is September 4, 1979, isn’t it?” “Yes, that’s correct.” No sooner had he heard the reply than he hung up with a curt, “I see”. He thought that was all he needed to know. Only “the date.” No doubt about it. Before 1991. My brother is alive.

For the past two days, only this “date of death” had kept him going. It brought the result he was praying for. Two days before, on the day of Koizumi’s visit to North Korea, Kenichi Ichikawa was struck with the announcement of his brother’s death. He had received the news at the Iikura Foreign Ministry Official Building, and his mind had gone blank. For the briefest moment he thought he would keep the news from his almost 90 year-old parents. That is how upset he was. But it was common sense that even in a rural area like Kagoshima, the news would be aired on TV soon. He was not prepared for the announcement of his brother’s death. He had vaguely expected the reply from North Korea would be the usual “missing despite the investigation.” He still expected this when he entered the room and saw the Vice Foreign Minister, Shigeo Uetake, looking pained. But the next words he heard were, “Unfortunately, your brother is deceased.” All three of them, Kenichi, his wife, Ryuko, and their eldest son were at a loss for words. The Vice Foreign Minister, Uetake, said, “We checked the information carefully as

it involves your brother's life. We concluded that he is deceased." Then he too went silent. For several minutes a heavy air hung over the room. Finally Kenichi opened his mouth. "What was the cause of death? Was he killed? Or did he succumb to illness? When did it happen?" They had no answers to any of these questions.

His wife, Ryuko, questioned the Vice Minister forcefully. "I cannot go back to Kagoshima with this vague information. What can I say to my parents? It is ridiculous that you don't know anything about his death. You do know the cause of death, don't you?" "No, we do not." Several unfertile questions and answers were exchanged. "Mother, I think that's enough," her eldest son finally stopped her. The three of them left the room.

When they came back to the first floor, they found that room silent too. He fearfully asked Mr. Masumoto, who had been called in at about the same time, "How did it go?" Kenichi learned that the Masumotos had received a "deceased" pronouncement too.

Kenichi struggled to calm himself down. He thought to himself, "Remember? There is the testimony of Mr. An. I cannot believe that my brother is dead. I cannot believe it until I find out whether the date of death is before or after 1991." By reasoning with himself, Kenichi was able to pull himself together, "the date" barely holding him up.

He had reserved his airplane tickets for the last flight on September 17. He wanted to hurry home because he worried about his elderly parents left alone in Kagoshima. But the flight was delayed and he ended up spending the night in Tokyo. By the time the press conference for the Abductee Family Association started it was already close to 6 pm.

Mr. Yokota choked on his words. Mr. Arimoto vented his unbearable anger. Then came Kenichi's turn to speak. "My parents are old and frail. I do not know what to tell them..." He tried not to cry, but could not help it.

Early the next morning Kenichi and his wife left the hotel, leaving a message for the other families and supporters while they were still sleeping. When Kenichi and his wife told his eldest son that they were leaving on the earliest flight, he offered to accompany them. His son worked in the Tokyo metropolitan area. He called his office and asked for some days off, explaining, "I am worried about my parents and grandparents." He flew to Kagoshima with his parents.

At home, Kenichi found that his 88 year-old father had given up hope, saying, "There is nothing we can do now." Later Kenichi appeared in a video clip

aired by the local TV station. The video was taken on the day of Koizumi's historic visit, and showed the scene at Kenichi's home. His father responded to the media people swarming around, "Now, it's over. Thank you very much for your support. There is nothing we can do now as he is dead." His mother was crying in the background, as was his younger sister Takako, who joined them from Kagoshima city (and at whose guesthouse Shuichi had been staying).

Kenichi thought it was a good decision to come home as soon as possible. He encouraged his depressed parents.

"You should not believe such a made-up story. Do you think Mr. An Myong-jin's testimony is a lie? I believe his testimony. Definitely Shuichi is alive."

Soon, they received new information: North Korea provided the Japanese Government with the date of death. They were told the information would be conveyed to them on the 19th. Kenichi prayed that the information would be what he was hoping for.

On the evening of the 18th, Kenichi's second son unexpectedly came home from Gunma Prefecture. He must have been worried about his parents. But he had to go back to work the next day. On the morning of the 19th, the second son went to the room where Shuichi's belongings were stored and picked up a red tie. He asked Kenichi, "Father, may I keep this?" Kenichi replied, "I don't know, as it's not mine. You have to ask your grandma." His second son went to his grandmother's room and hesitantly asked, "Grandma, I know this is Shu-chan's. May I have it?"

All of Kenichi's children called their uncle Shu-chan, though they had never met him, as their father, grandma Tomi, Aunt Takako, everyone in the family called Shuichi by his childhood name, Shu-chan. His grandmother Tomi replied, "Sure, you can have it. Don't worry. I know Shu-chan is alive."

It was only after 1995 that Kenichi's mother was able to talk about Shuichi so calmly. She had been crying constantly for 17 years. The topic of Shuichi was completely taboo in her presence. Kenichi and his wife, Ryuko, had to hush their children whenever they mentioned Shu-chan in front of Tomi. After almost 20 years with a black cloud hanging over them, they heard about Mr. An Myong-jin who reportedly "witnessed Mr. Ichikawa in Pyongyang." This was at the end of 1995. It was the first positive evidence that he might still be alive.

One day at the end of 1995, the Ichikawa family received a phone call from Korea. It was Mr. Kenji Ishidaka of Asahi Broadcasting in Osaka. He told the family he was in Korea to interview an ex-North Korean agent exiled to South

Korea. When Kenichi received the call, he was taking his turn having lunch at “Supermarket Ichikawa,” the family business. Next to him his mother was watching TV.

Mr. Ishidaka said, “An ex-North Korean agent whom I have been interviewing told me, when I showed him the picture of Mr. Ichikawa, that he had seen this person many times in Pyongyang. I debated whether I should tell this story to Mr. Ichikawa’s family, who must be desperate for any shred of information. I did not want to disappoint you in case the story was just made-up. But I determined that the story is reliable, so now I am calling to tell you. I believe Shuichi-san is alive. I mean there is a good chance that he is still alive.”

“Are you saying he is alive? You mean he is in good health?” When Kenichi said so, his mother, Tomi, turned her head reflexively and stared intently at Kenichi whose voice was already cracking as he talked on the phone. She realized the call was about Shuichi. After hanging up, Kenichi quietly said, “Mother, he is alive. Shu-chan is alive.”

Upon hearing the news, his mother started to wail. Kenichi had never in his life seen her cry so hard. Since that day she was able to talk about Shuichi calmly.

They vaguely knew that Shuichi was abducted by North Koreans. 15 years earlier, the article printed in Sankei Newspaper, “Three young couple’s mysterious disappearance”(January 7, 1980), implied North Korea’s involvement in the cases. Nothing, however, was known about the safety of the victims. Nothing could relieve Tomi more than the testimony that someone had seen her son, Shuichi, in North Korea. Kenichi also sobbed with joy.

At once, they reported to his father who was working at the store. But he remained silent. Kenichi knew his father was happy, just did not show it. He simply nodded slowly.

Yet, later, when Kenichi passed by the room where his parents were having dinner, he overheard the conversation between them, “Let’s stay healthy until Shuichi comes home.” “Here, you have to eat well to live long.” They had already reached the age of 80. Such conversation occurs often even now. It saddened Kenichi that his elderly parents had to talk of such a depressing topic instead of about their grandchildren. He wondered if there was any family as pitiful as this one!

After returning to Japan, Mr. Ishidaka related to them Mr. An Myong-jin’s testimony:

Kim Jong-il Politico-Military University was operated directly by the North

Korean government for the purpose of training spies or special agents. It was a political school belonging to the North Korean Labor Party Central Committee. Mr. An Myong-jin attended the school between 1987 and 1993, and defected in September of 1993 to South Korea. In 1995, Mr. Ishidaka interviewed Mr. An as a former North Korean agent. Mr. An Myong-jin said he saw a number of Japanese instructors at the school. On celebratory occasions such as Foundation Day, Japanese instructors were obliged to attend the ceremonies. On such occasions, he saw a few Japanese women including possibly Megumi Yokota walking to the ceremony site. He also saw Japanese men. Around the time when Mr. An enrolled at the University in 1987 or 1988, a graduate of the school, Kim Hyon-hi, was arrested in connection with the Korean Air bombing case and confessed that she had been trained by a Japanese-born instructor. She disclosed that in order to disguise herself as Japanese she received training from a Japanese woman who had been abducted from Japan. This story caused the students at the school, including Mr. An Myong-jin, to heighten their interest in the abducted Japanese.

According to Mr. An, the reason he remembered Mr. Ichikawa particularly was that Mr. Ichikawa gave him a cigarette and had a brief conversation with him. It was the summer of 1990 during the recess of some sort of meeting. At the room next to the conference hall, Mr. An and his classmates happened to be with Mr. Ichikawa and the others, who were smoking. As nobody was around to stop him, his classmate summoned his courage and spoke to Mr. Ichikawa in Japanese. As they were talking, Mr. Ichikawa offered him a cigarette. It was a rare contact. Mr. An's classmate got bold and asked Mr. Ichikawa why he had come to North Korea. He answered, "I had to come here because of you."

Mr. An Myong-jin picked out Mr. Ichikawa from among pictures of ten people, which Mr. Ishidaka brought with him. He declared, "I saw this man in Pyongyang." It was one of the pictures that Shuichi Ichikawa and Rumiko Masumoto had taken at Fukiage Beach where they had gone to see the sunset. He was leaning on the railing of a bridge in a rose garden and smiling a little in his white t-shirt. In one of the other photos Rumiko Masumoto was wearing a t-shirt matching Shuichi's, but Mr. An responded, "I don't remember her." (Later he recognized her in a different picture.)

Mr. An testified that he saw Shuichi several times. He recalled that Mr. Ichikawa often represented the Japanese instructors to receive awards at occasions like Kim Il-sung's or his son's birthday. His description of the height and weight of the man he saw matched Mr. Ichikawa's.

Another piece of evidence was a red tie.

Mr. An's testimony made reference to a red tie, similar to the tie Kenichi's second son had asked his grandmother for. When the testimony that Mr. An had seen Shuichi Ichikawa became public, a TV station sent an investigator to South Korea to confirm the story. They confirmed the episode of the cigarette and award ceremonies. But a new story came out about a red tie. The picture Kenichi lent to the TV station was one in which Shuichi was wearing a red tie. It was a picture they had borrowed from Shuichi's friend, as the family had run out of pictures to lend. It was taken just one week before his disappearance. Upon seeing the picture, Mr. An said, "If his parents are still living, you should ask if he liked red ties. He was often wearing a red tie when I saw him."

When Kenichi heard the story, he suddenly recollected this. As his sibling, he had not been conscious of it, but once it was pointed out, he remembered his brother's preference. So did his mother. He was convinced that the man Mr. An saw must have been his missing brother.

From then on, his mother started to open up and take care of Shuichi's belongings, which had been brought from the room he rented from his sister. She started to take his clothes out of the boxes and air them saying, "When he comes home, he will need these." It had been 20 years since he disappeared. Obviously he would not or could not wear the clothes that he wore when he was in his 20s. Regardless, she took care of them.

With Mr. An's testimony, his mother could become functional once more. On September 17, 2002, when she saw the news report, "Mr. Shuichi Ichikawa, Deceased" she threw herself to the floor and cried. But the next day Kenichi hurried home and encouraged her, "Mother, you have to remember Mr. An's testimony." Thus, she was composed enough to answer her grandchild's request with, "Yes, you can have it. Don't worry. I know that Shu-chan is alive."

Kenichi's second son put on the red tie to leave for Tokyo. Kenichi decided to take his son to Kagoshima Airport by car. From his home in the Soo District of Oosumi Peninsula to the airport it would take nearly one and a half-hours. But he knew the Foreign Ministry was supposed to call him about the date of Shuichi's death. Kenichi instructed his eldest son to stay at home for the call, then drove to the airport. On the way there, his cell phone rang.

"Father, they said 1979!"

He had been telling himself that if Shuichi died before 1991, the whole story is a lie. If the date is made-up, the report of the death itself must be a lie. He

prayed for it. And now the information he had been hoping for had come through. He shouted with joy from the depths of his heart.

Two weeks later, on October 2, the Government's official investigation team returned and faxed their report to his home. The instant he scanned the report, Kenichi declared, "This is definitely a lie, because Shuichi could not swim."

The government official investigation team (headed by Akitaka Saiki) had been sent to North Korea to investigate the facts at the end of September, after Koizumi's visit, when the report of "five alive and eight deceased" had been given. The team met the five survivors, and they collected information from North Korean officials regarding the deceased eight, as to the cause of death and how it happened. That was the report faxed to Kenichi.

Concerning Shuichi Ichikawa the report was as follows:

"He died from a sudden heart attack while he was swimming at Won Song Beach. Date of Birth: October 27, 1954, Date of Death: September 4, 1979. The grave was set at North Hwanghae Province, Rinsang Goon, Sanghae Ri. However, in July of 1995, due to the flood caused by the breach of a reservoir dam, the grave was washed away. On April 20 of 1979, married to Rumiko Masumoto."

The instant he read this report, Kenichi's words rushed out in a torrent. "This must be a lie because he could not swim. This says that he died when he went swimming. Why would someone who could not swim go swimming in the first place? Besides, on September 4? It should be pretty cold there by then."

Kenichi is not a good swimmer himself. He understood the psychology of a non-swimmer. Kenichi and Shuichi were born and grew up surrounded by mountains in Kagoshima.

Their hometown is located about 40-50 minutes by car from Kokubu, toward Kanoya in Osumi Peninsula. Kokubu is well known for a folk song, "This is Kirishima, Kokubu is for tobacco." Between Kokubu and his hometown, there is a firing range for the Self Defense Force, and the lone roadway to the town is surrounded by lush forest. "Supermarket Ichikawa" is almost the only store along the road. The whole place is surrounded by forests and fields. The town has nothing to do with the sea or beaches. There was no pool at school when they attended. This explains Kenichi's suspicion about Shuichi's supposed drowning. It was not like hearing of a man who grew up in the city and drowned because he did not know how to swim. Anyone who grew up in this remote hill town would understand the reasoning, "Shuichi did not know how to swim and would not dare

to go swimming in the sea.”

On top of that, there was an error in the application for marriage registration. The date of birth written in the application was wrong. Shuichi's date of birth is October 20th. If the application had been filed by Shuichi he would not have made such a mistake. October 27th, which was on the application, was the date Kenichi wrote down mistakenly when, in haste, he filed the missing person's report. Since then, the wrong date had been reported and printed in public. The North Koreans must have copied the date published in the press.

The family was told that the North Koreans did not hand over either the death certificate or the application for marriage registration until Mr. Saiki, the head of the investigation team, pressed North Korea hard for some evidence (even banging on the desk). They were presented with the materials after the North Korean staff left the conference room hastily, then after a while came back. It must have been cooked up quickly. Kenichi guessed that that was why these documents were so sloppily put together.

Looking at the fax, Kenichi realized that his brother's birthday was coming soon, and he would be 49 years old.

In 1954, when Shuichi was born, Kenichi was almost ten years old. His father liked the Chinese character, “Shu” (meaning settled or accomplished) and put “Shu” and “ichi” (meaning the first) together and named his newly born son “Shuichi” although “ichi” was usually reserved for the first son, but he was actually the second son. In fact Kenichi was not the first son either. The first son of the family died when he was only three years old. Therefore, his father named the second son “Kenichi” (Health First) wishing for his good health. The next child was a girl, Takako, Shuichi's elder sister. She is the one who let Shuichi stay at the guesthouse of her husband, from which he left for Fukiage Beach.

So there was ten-year difference between Shuichi and Kenichi. When Kenichi was graduating elementary school, Shuichi was only three years old. As his parents were busy with their retail business, Kenichi always carried Shuichi around on his back after school. “Store Ichikawa” started as a clothing store and evolved into a popular community general store, which also sold food. Kenichi played with his neighborhood friends, spinning tops, playing cards, sword fighting, while he carried his brother on his back. Sometimes he set his brother on the grass nearby, instructing him not to move so he could play with his friends. His life continued in this way until he entered high school.

There was no high school in the neighborhood to prepare Kenichi for

college. He started to live at a boarding house to attend high school in the other town. After graduation from high school, he went on to college in Kanagawa Prefecture. He found a job there after graduating from college. He did not come home for almost ten years, until he was 27 years old and got married. He saw his much younger brother only at the Bon Festival or New Year's Day holidays. At these times, the conversation would be casual: "Oh, you are already in middle school!" Or: "Wow, you are now in high school!" Because of the age difference, they never really shared a meaningful conversation.

When Shuichi was 20 years old, Kenichi was 31 or 32, and his father, Taira, was already in his early 60s. They had drinks together for the first time as three men of the family. The occasion was Shuichi's brief return home after training at the company for which he had just started work. Kenichi thought this was the beginning of a new relationship with his brother as a grown-up. He wished it would recur often. Kenichi looked fondly at his brother who had grown into a nice young man.

But it did not last long. Suddenly he was abducted. In the summer of 1978, August 12, after going to see the sunset at Fukiage Beach with Ms. Rumiko Masumoto, he never came home.

At that time, the Ichikawa family was frantically busy. At the end of July, Store Ichikawa expanded into Supermarket Ichikawa and had a huge celebratory opening sale for three days. They opened a large new store in the vacant lot next to the original store and their residence. This was the birth of the current "Supermarket Ichikawa." Shuichi, who already held a job with Nippon Telegraph & Telephone Corporation (now NTT), came home from Kagoshima city to help the family. His sister and her husband also came to help.

Kagoshima prefecture is shaped like two bowed legs: Satsuma Peninsula is one and Osumi Peninsula the other. Kagoshima city is located at the back of the knee of Satsuma Peninsula, and their hometown is located on the knee of the opposite Osumi Peninsula. The two towns look towards Sakura Island, which sits in the middle of Kagoshima Bay, from the front and the back respectively.

At the time of the opening sale, three typhoons were approaching Kagoshima. Still, many customers showed up from the neighborhood and nearby towns. Shuichi worked at a checkout counter to help his father and brother. In the festive atmosphere, many people in town saw Shuichi and remembered him. Since his high school graduation, he had not been back in town very often, and many

people had not seen him as an adult. After Shuichi's disappearance, though, people in town talked about Shuichi, remembering him at the counter.

On July 31, when the opening frenzy was about to end and Shuichi and the others were preparing to leave, he disclosed the news about his girlfriend. "I am dating someone whom I am thinking of marrying. Would you please meet her soon?" Kenichi was not there. He heard the story later and was happy for his brother, who was now grown up. His father responded, "If she is the one you really like, I would not oppose the marriage. Please bring her to meet us." Shuichi must have been in heaven.

Kenichi saw them off, his brother, his sister and her husband, in front of the newly opened store on the evening of July 31. "Take care!" He waved his hands and bid them farewell. It was the last time Kenichi saw his brother.

When they were saying goodbye, Kenichi's first daughter, who was two at the time, asked Shuichi to hold her and would not let him go. Children loved him. He was a good, gentle uncle. It was an ordinary peaceful scene of farewell for a family who had gathered at their home and were now separating again to return to their own lives. Nobody imagined this would be the last time.

Later in August, Kenichi talked with his brother over the phone just once. In retrospect, that might have been the omen of the "mysterious incident."

That day, Kenichi's parents left by car for his sister's house in Kagoshima on an errand. They took their five-year-old grandson with them. His parents thought Kenichi and his wife had seen that they were taking their grandson. But Kenichi believed that his parents were leaving just by themselves. He did not see his son get into the car. Kenichi believed that his son had gone to his friends' house. When his son failed to come home even after dark, he started to wonder where he was. He looked for his son everywhere, afraid that he had fallen into the pond nearby, or that he had gone too far and got lost on his way home. He checked every house his son might be visiting, and everywhere he might still be playing. He asked numerous people, but nobody saw him, and his anxiety grew by the minute. The town, surrounded by fields and forests, became totally dark after sunset. There was no other place to search. His mind too became total darkness.

Then he thought that his parents might have taken his son without telling him. There was no other possibility. He called his sister immediately. Shuichi (who was living in his sister's guesthouse) answered the phone. "By any chance, is my son there?" Kenichi asked, holding to that last hope. His brother responded, "Yes,

he is here.” The tension drained from his body at once. “Well, as I did not know, I looked around for him everywhere. I was really worried.” “He is playing right here.” “Is he? He is okay then.” They both laughed in the end. It was the last conversation between them. It was August 10th.

Shuichi, who laughingly said, “He is here,” disappeared two days later. Kenichi feels that the incident on August 10th was a bad omen.

“Shu-chan and Rumiko-san have not come home yet since they went to see the sunset at Fukiage Beach last night.”

It was early in the morning of the 13th that Kenichi’s brother-in-law phoned Kenichi’s home. His brother-in-law told Kenichi that the couple left home saying they would be back by ten o’clock. Kenichi assured himself, thinking that as they are both in their 20s and are dating with a promise of marriage, it is not necessary to overreact, and he told his brother-in-law so. He knew well that his brother was not the type to trouble others. Shuichi was scheduled to go to his office by evening, so they decided to wait until then.

His sister Takako, with whom Shuichi lived in the same lot, said that she heard a loud banging noise outside on the night of the 12th. She thought it was Shuichi making noise when he came home, but she did not check as she was busy preparing for the Bon Festival. When she received a phone call from the Masumoto family saying, “My daughter has not come home yet,” she hurried to Shuichi’s room and found no sign of him. She felt suddenly apprehensive.

Takako knew Rumiko well. Originally, Takako and Rumiko knew each other, and then Takako introduced her brother to Rumiko.

The couple did not come home on the 13th. On the morning of the 14th, her father Taira and Kenichi sped to Kagoshima by car after they received the bad news. Until then, Kenichi and Takako had not told their parents about Shuichi. Their parents were exhausted with the opening sale and also with the Bon Festival sale that had just begun. They thought optimistically that Shuichi would be back by the evening of the 13th. Until the situation became certain, they did not want to worry their parents.

When Taira and Kenichi arrived at Takako’s house, they were told that a group including Takako’s husband, the Masumoto family, the neighbors, and close friends had already left for Fukiage Beach. They followed immediately.

In order to reach Fukiage Beach from Kenichi’s house, he had to drive up the Osumi Peninsula, the left leg, to Satsuma Peninsula, the right leg, then he had

to cross Satsuma Peninsula from the east to the end of the west side. When they finally reached Fukiage Beach, the people who had arrived earlier were surrounding Shuichi's Mark II. It was in a circular driveway to the camping sites. Kenichi was told that the car had been parked just like that. His brother-in-law first found the car. He was quite familiar with Shuichi's car as they lived on the same lot. They reasoned that as the car was there they might be staying at a nearby hotel. They spread out and looked for the couple but could not find them.

Kenichi recalled the sequence as follows:

“One of Shuichi's slip-on sandals was on the grass several meters away from his car. We knew it was Shuichi's because my brother-in-law found the sandal and said, “Aha, this is mine.” Shuichi must have borrowed it from him. It was sitting there upside down. Only one.”

“The instant we saw it, we believed that Shuichi was somehow involved in foul play. We reported it right away to the local police, Kaseda Station. An inspector came at once to see the site, but it was getting dark. They decided to start full-scale search the next day.”

Kenichi and his father parked his car next to Shuichi's Mark II and slept there to prepare for the following day's search. The foot traffic around the circular driveway did not die down until after midnight. There was a concert at the camping site. Kenichi wondered about the night of the 12th. He wondered if the place was empty then because everyone was at the concert. He kept speculating in the pitch-black night. He only dozed off for a few minutes near dawn.

Once day broke, the search started. Forming groups of several people, searchers walked in a line side by side in the pine forest. They searched for clues, poking the ground with bamboo or wood sticks. Even when they thought they were going straight, they would veer off course unknowingly. They had to adjust course many times in order not to miss unchecked ground. The pine forest was vast and required such a methodical search. The large-scale search lasted for almost two weeks, mobilizing police, the fire brigade, and trawlers. Meanwhile, Kenichi had to return home as he could not close the store, and he had to take care of his small children. His parents stayed at his sister's in Kagoshima city and commuted to the beach everyday.

The search started in the middle of August, and continued to the end of August. Every morning Kenichi opened the door of his store before eight o'clock. He felt the air become cooler than it was half a month ago. He could not stop thinking of his brother. He wondered what his brother was doing and whether he

was cold, since he had left home in only a t-shirt.

On the last day of the search the most extensive efforts were made. Even Kenichi joined the search that day. In the sky a Beechcraft plane was employed for the search. Off the coast, patrol boats were mobilized. Kenichi's friends came in a bus and in their own cars all the way from Osumi Peninsula. But no new evidence was found.

After the search, Kenichi went to thank everyone who participated. He went to the fisherman's association, which had helped with trawlers, to talk about reimbursing expenses. "No, we don't want money," said the man at the association. "Don't worry about it. We don't need it. We can wait until your bother comes home and shows his face." Kenichi was moved to tears and bowed deeply.

Kenichi also visited Shuichi's work place, Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corporation. Many of his brother's co-workers participated in the search. At the office he was told, "We prepared boxed lunches for 100 every day for ten-plus days and every single one was taken." He knew then that more than 100 people from his brother's company had joined the search every day.

When Kenichi was informed that the search had to be suspended, he was mortified and heartbroken. He thought about Shuichi's pride that he had been hired by such a great company. But in due course the company sent a notice to Kenichi stating, "We have determined that Shuichi Ichikawa has resigned as of the end of December." The paperwork for the official resignation was included with the notice. Kenichi had to give up.

For Shuichi, the position at the Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corporation had not come easily. When Kenichi came home after the many years he had lived in Yokohama, Shuichi was studying hard for the college entrance exam before graduating high school. His chronic illness, emphysema, was getting worse. Whenever he studied facing down toward the desk for a period, his nose started to bleed. He sometimes found bloody pus on his pillow in the morning. The family decided that he needed to treat the illness first. They thought that he could try for college the next year. Right after high school graduation, he was hospitalized and had an operation. It went well, and the problems were put behind. He enrolled in a prep school for college, but soon he started to say, "I may want to work instead of going to college." At first, he found a part-time job in Kagoshima city, but he preferred to have a full time position. He began job-hunting.

At that time, in a rural area like Kenichi's hometown, telephone exchanges were set up at local post offices. Workers from Nippon Telegraph & Telephone

Corporation were operating at the post office. The postmaster of a post office near his home told Shuichi that Nippon Telegraph & Telephone Corporation was looking for new hires. He suggested taking their exam. Shuichi did, and he passed. He first worked at the post office as an exchange operator, and he received training at Kumamoto for several months. Then he was transferred to the main office in Kagoshima city.

It was during that training period that Kenichi had a drink with his brother for the first time. Kenichi came home during the training period, using his brief vacation days. Father and sons drank beer together. Kenichi was happy that they could drink together as men, just like this. He was happy because his 10-year younger baby brother was all grown up.

At the end of the training period, the postmaster who had suggested the exam asked Kenichi, “Did you hear how your brother was evaluated at the company?” The postmaster told Kenichi that his brother was ranked at the top. Kenichi realized that he never knew much about his brother. Since Shuichi was young, he had been a quiet and modest child and did not make unnecessary small talk.

Shuichi started to commute from his sister’s place to work. He rented a guesthouse on the same lot at his sister’s main house. Using his first salary, he gave his mother, Oshima-tumugi, some expensive cloth for a kimono. He was a gentle son and cared for his parents. When Kenichi read in the newspaper that his brother might have been taken to North Korea, he worried because of Shuichi’s gentle nature. If his brother had been reckless and troublesome to his parents, Kenichi would not have worried so much.

Shuichi loved his niece and nephews. Kenichi’s first son and his sister’s first son were the same age. When the two boys celebrated the traditional Boy’s Day on May 5, Shuichi gave each boy a large replica of ancient armor helmets in glass cases. Shuichi always liked good-quality items. He bought and enjoyed a stereo set that cost 700,000 yen. Even now, there are numerous classical and soundtrack records among his belongings. Those items were packed up and brought to a room in his old home from the guesthouse he rented. Kenichi is reluctant to enter that room. He tells himself that when his brother comes home, the two of them can take time and sort things together.

His brother was conscious of fashion too. His sister used to tell Kenichi, “Shu-chan is a fashionable man. He doesn’t buy cheap stuff. His fashion always makes a statement.”

A red tie was one of these.

Shuichi, who started to work at Nippon Telegraph & Telephone Corporation, soon met Rumiko Masumoto who lived in the neighborhood. Before the abduction, Shuichi had already announced to his parents that he had been dating and was thinking of marriage. It was a serious relationship.

Kenichi believes that his brother in such a situation would never have run away from home. As for the possibility of drowning, Kenichi believes that his brother, who could not swim, would never take such a risk. The police checked on all the motorcycle gang members who were rampant in the area in those days, but every single one had alibi. The newspaper reported the case as a “mysterious incident.”

Even after the search, Kenichi continually suffered from a strange vision in his mind. It was always of the vast pine forest. In the image, someone attacked Shuichi and Rumiko and discarded the corpses carelessly. Then, some savage beast gobbled up the bodies. He tried hard to tell himself that the two were alive, but his mind always drifted to the worst-case scenario. Asked in his interview, “What is that savage beast?” Kenichi answered as if thinking of this for the first time, “I don’t know. It is silly to think there are savage beasts in Japan nowadays. Still, I tried many times, but I could not erase from my mind the image of savage animals eating the discarded bodies.”

Though unthinkable in modern Japanese society, Kenichi even thought they might have been taken to a concentration camp and held in captivity as forced laborers. During the initial extensive search someone said unwittingly, “Since we cannot come up with any clue, I wonder if they might have been kidnapped by North Korea.” Those words somehow hung in Kenichi’s mind.

In the absence of any further information, he spent weeks and months depressed. But a year and a half later, after he was interviewed by a reporter from Sankei Newspaper, Kenichi began to believe that his brother was abducted by North Korea. He had not known that other couples had disappeared during the same period of time, just like Shuichi and his girlfriend.

Even when he knew that his brother had been abducted by North Korea, there was no information as to his safety. The anxiety of the family did not diminish. Every trivial matter caused Kenichi’s mother to cry. Work at the store must have saved her a little, as she could not show a weeping face to her customers. It must have been a consolation to her that Kenichi was always with her at work

and at home. Kenichi now wonders about the other families.

“Among the members of the Abductee Family Association, the mothers who stayed home alone after everyone went to work or school must have had it the hardest.”

Although he has never forgotten about his brother, even for a day, he remembers how his hectic daily work helped him not to think about it, if only for brief intervals. This is what saved him from sinking into a deep depression.

But the customers who cared about Shuichi sometimes inadvertently reminded Kenichi by asking, “I wonder what Shuichi is doing at this moment.” Kenichi hated such questions. He did not want anyone to touch on the subject. He knew people were trying to be kind, but he was screaming in his mind, “Don’t say a word about it!” On occasion, he was at the end of his patience and could not help but respond bluntly.

Some people insensitively commented, “I wonder if he might not be alive anymore. He may be dead by now.” He guessed these words were said without thinking, but they seared Kenichi’s heart. He swallowed his resentment and endured. Still, every now and then, he had to rebuff them impulsively, “We still believe he is alive. We cannot carry on with such a pessimistic outlook.” In his mind, he was yelling, “If you were in my shoes, you could not have said such a callous thing. Only because it is someone else’s tragedy can you utter such cruel words.”

Seventeen years after the disappearance, fifteen years after the first suspicions of North Korea’s role, Kenichi learned from Mr. Ishidaka of the testimony of Mr. An Myong-jin, that he had seen Shuichi. It was 1995. Shuichi was alive! Since he was found to be in North Korea, Kenichi wanted to save his brother. But he had no idea how and where to start against a foreign nation like North Korea. Besides, he lived in a rural area. The only thing he could do was to keep a watchful eye on the news.

It was then that he received a call inviting him to join the movement to unite the abductees’ families. It was early in the spring of 1997. The person who called Kenichi asked whether he could attend a meeting on March 25 to form an association of the abductees’ families. He could not answer right away. He had to attend his mother-in-law’s funeral, he needed to care for his sick aunt, he wanted to see his son’s graduation and was worried about his son’s college entrance exam. Kenichi, who was then over fifty, was almost overwhelmed by family matters and social events. But this was not the time to be whining. After several phone calls he

replied, “I will be there.”

The meeting was in Tokyo, where Kenichi’s eldest son was attending college. On the day of the meeting, Kenichi asked his son to accompany him. He had big hopes that if the families could be united, the matter would move forward toward resolution. But at the meeting his hope was displaced by sadness about the suffering and grief of the other families. It was hard for him to see these faces full of grief.

When he started the signature campaigns, there were frequent disappointments. Even if he pleaded in earnest, many pedestrians would pass by indifferently. Some purposely avoided Kenichi and other members, passing behind or detouring around them. “It’s just a signature. Why can’t you give it!”, “We are suffering so much, you should pity us and give us a little cooperation!” Kenichi sometimes threw such words after passersby even though he knew he should not.

Nowadays, he receives encouraging letters from many people, and sometimes even traditional one-thousand paper cranes for prayers. He believes this is the fruit of the painstaking grass-root activity by members of the Abductee Family Association. At the community festival of his hometown, the host broadcasts an appeal for signatures. Kenichi is truly grateful. On the other hand, he feels guilty about disturbing people who come to the festival just to have fun.

After the Abductee Family Association was established in 1997, Kenichi became the family spokesman, replacing his aged father. His father used to make appearances on TV shows for missing persons. Kenichi has to spend long hours running the supermarket in the mountainous country town. But he tries his best to attend meetings of the Abductee Family Association because he knows everyone in the Association is working to help each other.

“Only two hours ago, I was in the sunshine among the city buildings.” Kenichi wonders, every time he goes to Tokyo and returns to Kagoshima. He usually participates in the daytime activities and leaves Haneda Airport for Kagoshima in the late afternoon. He drives home from the airport. Every time he comes home in complete darkness, he wonders how many more times he must do this round trip before he sees Shuichi again. His brother is still a youthful 23 years old in his mind.

Kenichi’s wife Ryuko also keeps up the public appeal. She joins the activities held in Kyushu, and she visited the U.S. as a part of the team. Kenichi is thankful for the Abductee Family Association because a single family in a rural area cannot do much. He is thankful when he sees the other members on TV taking

part in events he cannot join. His thoughts are always with them.

As part of the activities of the Abductee Family Association, the first “Prefecture-wide Conference For the Rescue of the Japanese Abducted by North Korea” was held in Kagoshima in August, 1998. Kenichi heard that Mr. An Myong-jin, the former North Korean agent, would be participating in the conference. He was invited to come to Japan by the Abductee Rescue Association and was making a round of appearances at various places in Japan.

Kenichi took his mother, Tomi, to the scheduled press conference in the VIP room at Kagoshima Airport. The parents of Ms. Masumoto were there too. Kenichi had not previously met Mr. An Myong-jin in person. He imagined that Mr. An would be a tough and stern-looking man, as he was a former North Korean agent. But he turned out to be a sincere-looking young man.

When they exchanged greetings Kenichi’s mother said, “I heard you met my son.” Mr. An politely replied, “I really must apologize to you,” holding her hands. Even though he had not directly participated in the abduction, he felt responsible for the crime his country had committed. Kenichi was immediately convinced that Mr. An was not lying.

Once more Kenichi heard the story about Shuichi in detail. Mr. An Myong-jin said that he had a particular impression of Shuichi because he parted his hair on the right side. In North Korea, there is a belief that a person who parts his hair on the right side commits cruel acts. Knowing the old myth, Mr. An said, he felt funny about Shuichi’s hairstyle. Mr. An related that he noticed many stars printed on the cigarette he was given. Kenichi figured it must have been the Seven Star brand of cigarettes.

Kenichi met Mr. An Myong-jin again in January, 2003 in Kagoshima. His testimony at that time was exactly the same as he had given in 1997, the first time they met. Kenichi believes that if Mr. An had been lying in 1997, he could not have repeated such details years later.

Kenichi’s mother worries about Mr. An nowadays when she sees him on TV. “I wonder if he is safe making such frequent TV appearances. He may become a target of North Korean agents himself. I am worried.”

Kenichi observes that his mother has a special attachment to Mr. An, as he was the last person who saw her son. She may be seeing her son in Mr. An.

Kenichi believes that he will receive more good news. He wonders how his brother will react when he sees cell phones: he does not even know that the company he worked for, Nippon Telegraph & Telephone Corporation, is now NTT.

But Kenichi is not anxious any more. He has been disappointed so many times, every time he held high hopes for negotiations between Japan and North Korea. Although he is frustrated with the fact that nothing has progressed since the “deceased” announcement on September 17, 2002, he consciously applies a brake to his feelings. He tells himself that compared to the long years he waited in the dark, this is nothing. He tries to convince himself that this is a time to be patient, that he should not expect things to go easy, that he needs to fight even harder, and that this is the crucial moment in getting his brother back.

Still, for the sake of his elderly parents, he hopes that his brother will return home as soon as possible.

When Mr. An visited Japan for the first time in August, 1998, the Masumoto family showed him the picture of Rumiko, but Mr. An told the family that he did not recognize her. The picture was the same one Mr. Kenji Ishidaka showed him in Korea, which was the one used for the poster seeking information on the missing persons. It was the picture of Rumiko’s upper body wearing a hat and sunglasses. It did not look like the usual Rumiko.

But four years later, in the winter of 2002, on being shown a full-height picture of Rumiko, Mr. An testified, “I think this was the woman who was standing with Ms. Megumi Yokota.”

Now there is one thing Kenichi Ichikawa really wishes: that Shuichi has married Rumiko. The two couples that returned to Japan had married in North Korea. He hopes that Shuichi and Rumiko did the same. Even if the report from North Korea was a lie, Kenichi wants to believe that the part “married to Rumiko Masumoto” is true.

Teruaki Masumoto is working for a wholesale seafood company. He had been an auctioneer in Tsukiji Seafood Market in Tokyo for many years. It was early-morning work and, as the work was rather light in the afternoon, it was easy for him to take a half-day off. It was an ideal position for Teruaki to serve as the Deputy Secretary General of the Abductee Family Association. Still, the burden of a company man in his late 40s at the peak of his career was weighing on him.

In March, 2003, he was reassigned from the auctioneer position. In May of the previous year, he had gone on an overseas business trip for a month. He was scheduled to go overseas again on the same business in October, 2002. But in the whirlwind of events after September 17th, he had to ask someone else to take the trip. As a result he was assigned to a different department. Teruaki said, “I was

disappointed that I had to leave the area in which I had built my expertise. But I cannot inconvenience my company with my personal problems. At the moment, I want to focus my full attention on the abduction matter. I want to see this matter closed before the year of 2003 ends.”