

The Families

Chapter 3

Chimura Family, Hamamoto Family

‘Now it’s your turn.’

After 24 years, on October 15, 2002, Yasushi Chimura came home to Obama, Fukui Prefecture. He immediately went to his mother’s altar and prayed. ‘How come you could not wait for me to come home? If I had only come back a bit sooner, we could have seen each other.’ Toshiko, Yasushi’s mother, was given a posthumous Buddhist name, Jyakushitsu-myoshi-taishi. Tamotsu, Yasushi’s father, thinks that this name is a very good one and suits her well. He does not know the real meaning of the name, but knows that one of the Chinese characters means loneliness. She really led a lonesome life, he thinks.

Yasushi was sitting and sobbing in front of the altar for a long time. Tamotsu listened to his son’s sobbing with great sorrow. The house was packed with family members, friends, and media people. They also cried.

Two months after Yasushi had disappeared, Tamotsu came to the conclusion, ‘Toshiko’s lost her mind!’ She had been crying out, ‘Yasushi! Yasushi!’ day after day. She had begun to walk around the house mumbling ever since his disappearance.

When he took her to Obama Hospital, the doctor told him that her blood pressure was abnormally high. ‘It must be a sign of having a blood blockage. So she should stay in bed all the time.’ But Toshiko was only 52 years old at the time. Tamotsu thought, ‘How can she stay in bed? I know why she is so sick. It is because Yasushi has vanished so suddenly. Until he comes home, she can’t stay in bed.’

Though Toshiko sometimes appeared to be fine, she soon became lost. Tamotsu had her admitted to a hospital and did not let people see her because they talked more about Yasushi. Eventually, she was no longer able to leave her bed.

Tamotsu devoted himself to taking care of Toshiko. He mostly helped her to eat and did everything else himself, without asking anyone in his family to take turns. ‘I like him to take care of me all the time,’ she said. She totally depended on Tamotsu. ‘Yasushi will surely come back. You have to believe in that and keep it up.’ He kept encouraging her. Despite his encouragement, Toshiko stopped living her life. She never saw her son again. She died 24 years after Yasushi vanished abruptly and only half a year before he came back to Japan.

Toshiko passed away while Tamotsu was in South Korea for an overnight trip. The purpose of the trip was to appeal to the South Korean public to resolve the problem of the abductions of Japanese citizens. Tamotsu received a call from the hospital on his cell phone on the way home from this trip near Maizuru. They told him, "You should be prepared for anything now since she sometimes stops breathing."

Tamotsu shouted into the phone, "Please do anything to keep her alive. I'll be there an hour." Finally, he arrived at the hospital. However, Toshiko had breathed her last breath five minutes earlier. She was still wearing an oxygen mask. Tamotsu, like Yasushi, also did not see her in her last moments, after having taken care of her for 24 years.

Now Tamotsu thinks differently. Toshiko may have been happy dying in that way because she would have been ashamed to be cared for by Yasushi and his fiancée/wife? Fukie Hamamoto. In order not to let anyone be bothered by her any more, Toshiko left this world. But Yasushi would never think this way. He must regret not having seen his mother in her final moments. In North Korea, he must have been more desperate to see his mother than anyone else. He was very much a mother's boy.

Tamotsu still remembers that he struck Yasushi one day because Yasushi was so attached to his mother Toshiko. Yasushi must have been a senior in elementary school. He had not done anything bad, but Tamotsu was somehow very angry with Yasushi, who always wanted his mother for anything. While saying, "You let your mummy do everything for you," Tamotsu impulsively struck Yasushi. Yasushi was too much of a mother's child, and that made Tamotsu very irritated.

When Yasushi was born on June 4, 1955, Tamotsu was only 28 years old, but he had already owned his own construction company and employed a few people. He was often told that he was a typical artisan, who was very smart, extremely active, and overly industrious. He was an authoritative father for his children. On the other hand, Toshiko was more relaxed and a gently speaking mother. Yasushi was also relaxed and contented when he was with her.

Toshiko used to work in a large rice paddy all by herself. In the morning right before Tamotsu took off to work, he switched on the engine of a farming machine for her. She was still working with this machine when he came back from work. Often, Yasushi went to the rice paddy directly from school and helped her work. Toshiko gradually expected Yasushi to come and help her.

The Chimuras' house is located in the Hansei area in the direction of Maizuru through a tunnel from the town of Obama. There are only rice paddies around there. Yasushi grew as a very docile country boy. He was almost never resentful towards his parents. Tamotsu is very sure that Yasushi survived for 24 years in that

country of terror, North Korea, because of his gentle nature. No one could ever resist the tyranny of that country. You could only pretend to be totally obedient like a fool there. "I was forced to see an open execution," Yasushi confessed to Tamotsu when he returned back from North Korea.

Tamotsu recalls when Yasushi was involved in an accident when he was just a toddler. Tamotsu would take Yasushi and his brother, Hiroshi, who was two years older, to his work when they were very young. There was a big carrier for the lumbering machines at work. One day, Hiroshi was playing while pushing the carrier, and Tamotsu suddenly heard Yasushi screaming. He saw a tiny ring finger hanging from Yasushi's small left hand. His finger had been caught by one of the wheels of the carrier. Tamotsu carried Yasushi and rushed to a hospital. Since they treated him well right away, Yasushi did not lose his finger.

He still has a scar from the accident. When he returned from North Korea, this scar became the proof of his identity. While Minister Umemoto, Minister to the United Kingdom, was visiting there on September 17, 2002, Yasushi told the Minister about the accident and showed him the scar. He identified himself with the scar. Tamotsu has never forgotten about the accident either.

Yasushi attended Kado Elementary School and Obama Daini Junior High School; both were community schools. Then he went to Wakasa High School administrated by Fukui Prefecture. During his high school days, he belonged to the volleyball and track-and-field clubs. He also enjoyed baseball and softball. What a sportsman he was! Having been a student president, he was very popular among the students. Tamotsu did not know how he did academically.

After graduating from high school, he was hired by the Hitachi Shipment Company with the school's recommendation. There were only twelve high school graduates out of 500 new employees. Most of them were college graduates. At the ceremony for the new employees, it was Yasushi who made a speech on behalf of the 500 new workers. This was truly an honor. "I didn't know you were so excellent," said Tamotsu, who was really impressed with his son.

However, Yasushi hinted to Tamotsu that he would like to quit his job after having worked for the company for two years. Tamotsu became very concerned and wondered what Yasushi had done at work. When Tamotsu visited his son at the employee dormitory one day, Yasushi had already finished packing and was ready to move out. Yasushi told Tamotsu that his colleagues had thrown a farewell party for him some time before. "Everybody gets a bit fed up with work after about 2 years because you see things more clearly. Why can't you be a little more patient?" Tamotsu lectured him.

Yasushi protested and said, "Most of my colleagues are college graduates. Do you know who gets promoted? Not me. I can't even become a section chief." He told Tamotsu that he wanted to come home and become a carpenter like his father.

Yasushi had an older brother named Hiroshi. Hiroshi said, "I'll leave home. Let Yasushi take over your business. I think it is much better because Yasushi is more skillful than me anyway." Tamotsu was actually glad that one of his sons would take over his work someday.

For about six months Tamotsu was taking Yasushi to his clients. It was rather difficult for Tamotsu to impose discipline on his son. Yasushi always wanted to leave work and meet with his friends. Tamotsu worried about the situation. He consulted his friend who was the owner of the Tanaka Construction Company. The company then hired Yasushi. After working there for one and a half years, Yasushi came back to Tamotsu's company. This time Tamotsu wanted to teach him about sales. He placed Yasushi's own desk in the office. It was around that time that Yasushi vanished suddenly. He did not even have a chance to use the desk.

While he was working for the Tanaka Construction Company, Yasushi met Fukie Hamamoto. He had a friend at work with whom he had gone to junior high school. This friend introduced Fukie to Yasushi. Toshiko sometimes talked about her, but Tamotsu did not say anything because he was the type of a father who did not want to interfere with his children. The only thing he ever said to Yasushi was that he should have decided whether or not to be serious with a girl. He thought that young couples should not go out without any future promise. Rather they should go out and think about their future.

Yasushi and Fukie were engaged within six months. It was a very simple engagement ceremony, but it was enough for them to let people know how committed they were to each other. Then came the night of July 7, 1978. It was Star Festival night. Yasushi and Fukie went out together like any other night. They drove in Yasushi's small pick-up truck to a lookout over Obama Bay and never came home again. That night, they simply vanished while feeling such great happiness.

On October 15, 2002, the moment Yukou Hamamoto saw Fukie arm in arm with Yasushi Chimura stepping down from an airplane, he was no longer in doubt. "She must be Fukie. No doubt about it." He could not believe entirely that the person would be his sister until he actually saw her. Yasushi's face looked tense, but Fukie was smiling happily. He never thought he would be able to see her alive again, but she came back with her familiar smile. It was the day of autumn festival at the local shrine. Smiling and eyes welling up with tears, Yukou thought that their god might have blessed them. He had gone to Haneda Airport to welcome Fukie with his seven other brothers. He saw the strong family bond in Fukie's smile.

For Yukou, this bond is the most important thing in the world. People usually think that Yukou and Fukie are father and daughter. It is quite natural for them to think like that because they are twenty-six years apart. Actually, two of his children are almost the same age as Fukie. In fact, Fukie is his half sister. Yukou's mother died in the same year Japan surrendered in June 1945. His father remarried a woman who was Fukie's mother. Fukie was born as the third child in this marriage on June 8, 1955.

She was the only daughter in the Hamamoto family and was cherished by everyone. Yukou had only brothers. Fukie also had only brothers. Yukou's children were also all boys. So, there were eight boys in the family, and Fukie was the only girl. She was given much love and care by her family. Her eight brothers always called her, 'Sis! Sis!' They truly loved her.

The area where the Hamamoto family lives is a small semi-agricultural and semi-marine cultural village by Japan Sea. Because Yukou's older brothers died one by one in the war, it was his responsibility to care for his family all by himself. He did all kinds of jobs to support the family, like going to the sea by a small boat to get oysters and seaweed, farming, working at construction sites, etc. They were very poor and had only enough food to sustain their lives, but their lives were good and peaceful because everyone was there together.

Their father died from a stroke in 1965, and four years later, their mother also had a stroke and passed away. Fukie lost her father when she was 10 years old; she was 14 when she lost her mother. Yukou then played the role of her father. His wife played the role of her mother. The ex-wife's and new wife's children were living together. One of the ex-wife's children had to play the role of the father.

Yukou was always too self-conscious about this rather complicated family. That was why he worked very hard to make sure the family bonded. He thought Fukie had grown up to become a decent and cheerful person. The siblings were bonded tightly even without parents. He was absolutely confident of that. Watching Fukie coming down the steps of the plane, he reassured himself that the strong family ties still existed. He was very happy.

Fukie attended Anojiri Elementary School with only seventeen or eighteen students as well as Obama Junior High School - one of two junior highs in Obama city. Yasushi Chimura, who was the same age as Fukie, went to Obama Dai-Ni Junior High School. They did not know each other at the time. In junior high school, Fukie made a speech on behalf of new students at the entrance ceremony. She was not distinguished in academics or sports, although she was proficient in drawing and calligraphy. These talents of hers reminded Yukou of their father.

After graduating from junior high, Fukie got a job at the Toyo Spinners in Tsuruga city. She attended classes at the company and also went evenings to

Michimori High School in Fukui city and graduated. Gradually some of her close friends at work started quitting their jobs to get married. Fukie quit her job and came home to Obama.

Yukou had just started a business running a bed-and-breakfast ‘Hiko-so’. While she was helping him at the B&B, she found a job working at a jeans shop nearby. She met Yasushi Chimura through her colleague at the shop. This colleague’s boyfriend was working at the Tanaka Construction Company with Yasushi.

Fukie and Yasushi were unaware that there had been another tie between the two families. One of Yukou’s sons hurt his neck when he was in the third grade in junior high school. He spent some time at Obama Hospital, and Yasushi’s father, Tamotsu Chimura, was admitted to the room next to him. Tamotsu had had an accident at work and had also injured his neck. Yukou became acquainted with Tamotsu, and they talked to each other almost every time Yukou visited his son.

Three years later, Fukie confessed to Yukou that someone had proposed to her. When he found out who it was, he was very surprised. The fellow’s family name was Chimura. He was a carpenter, as was his father. Yukou was sure that this fellow had to be the son of Tamotsu Chimura whom he had met at the hospital three years ago. What a coincidence! Because Yukou and Tamotsu had known each other, everything went smoothly. Fukie and Yasushi were engaged on June 30. It was about six months after they had first met each other. And then an incident occurred only one week after their engagement.

That night, Yukou was waiting impatiently for a telephone call from Fukie. He had not seen her all day. Fukie’s younger brother had told him, ‘Sis told me she was going out with Yasushi.’ No one knew where she was. She went out very often, but almost always came home on time. In case she would be late, she usually called and never broke this rule.

But there was no telephone call from her after 10 p.m. that evening. Eleven p.m. passed. Midnight passed. Still no call came. Yukou soon realized that something unexpected must have happened to her. Fukie did not come home that morning. At day break Yukou called Tamotsu. They knew that Fukie and Yasushi were together.

‘How come the young woman has not come home yet? It’s terrible!’ Yukou cried out. Tamotsu did not know what was happening at all. He checked the house and only found out that Yasushi had not come home yet either. It was a very hot day with a temperature of 35 degrees Celsius.

‘We’ve got to go to the police station!’ Yukou said. However, it was Friday when the couple went out together, and they presumed that Fukie and Yasushi might have visited a friend overnight. Tamotsu wanted to wait a little bit longer. ‘Let’s look for them ourselves once more. If the result is not good, let’s go to the

police.” First, Tamotsu thought there had been an accident. They searched for the young couple three times a day around Ise Beach and Shinjyu Bay along Route 27. Yasushi’s pick-up truck might have fallen from the cliff. They went down the cliff every few yards to look for a fallen truck. In the west, they looked for the couple at bowling alleys and other places where young people hung around in the Maizuru area. In the east, they searched along the coastline in Tsuruga. Every time they saw a police box, they stopped there and asked whether an accident had been reported. Still, there was no trace of the couple anywhere.

On the third day of their disappearance, there was a telephone call from the police. It was Monday morning on July 10. Tamotsu and Yukou were about to leave together from Yukou’s house to the police station. “We’ve found that Chimura’s pick-up truck has been parked at the lookout for quite some time. The place is not a parking lot. You’d be better move the car immediately.” When they arrived at the site, they saw Yasushi’s truck parked there. The steering wheel was fully turned and the car key was hanging from the blinker. Both windows were left open. There were no car registration papers anywhere, and Yasushi’s driver’s license was left near the spare tire.

The situation was too strange to comprehend. One of the newspapers called the incident “mysterious”: “Maybe a UFO took them or else maybe a mob attacked them.” These were all rumors. The idea of a UFO was absurd. Tamotsu could not dream that there was a relationship between Yasushi and a mob. But if it was not an accident, what on earth was it?

From that day forward, Tamotsu always got up at five o’clock and went to Kyoto to look for them. It took two hours to get there. He stood at a street corner in downtown Kyoto, Kyogoku every day for one week. He hoped that Yasushi and Fukie might be in the crowd. His effort bore no fruit. He went to the police station countless times.

For the first year, he went to the Obama Police Station almost every other day. Finally, they became annoyed with him and asked him cynically, “What do you want?” whenever he dropped by. “We can’t do anything since the headquarters hasn’t informed us yet.” After hearing this, he began going to the police headquarters in Fukui twice a week. One day the Obama Police Station called him to come over. “You haven’t been here lately, and we heard that you’ve been going to headquarters. When you go there, you’ve got to let us know about it,” they scolded him. They even said that they had lost face because of Tamotsu. No matter what they told him, he still kept going to the police station.

Three months passed since Yasushi and Fukie had been missing. Tamotsu began to wonder if a ship had taken them away. Around that time, newspapers had already reported rumors about unidentified boats seen in the Japan Sea along the

Noto Peninsula. A fisherman in nearby Wakasa Bay witnessed an unidentified black boat and reported it to the coast guard. People then did not dream of the possibility of North Korean abductions. Tamotsu and Yukou talked about Soviet involvement.

On January 7, 1980, Sankei Newspaper ran an article about the unexplained disappearances of three couples. By then, Yasushi and Fukie had been missing for about one and half years. In the summer of the same year that they had disappeared, there was an attempted abduction in Toyama Prefecture. A couple had been walking on the beach when suddenly someone appeared from nowhere and covered their heads with sacks and almost abducted them. Fortunately, this incident ended as merely an attempt, but at the site there were gags, handcuffs, and flax sacks left behind.

The Sankei Newspaper article mentioned three incidents of missing couples using their real names: Kaoru Hasuike and Yukiko Okudo (a university student and a beautician) in Niigata Prefecture, Shuichi Ichikawa and Rumiko Masumoto in Kagoshima Prefecture, and Yasushi Chimura and Fukie Hamamoto in Fukui Prefecture. The headline said, 'May some foreign spy organization be involved?'

'This must be it! No mistake!' Tamotsu was quite sure that Yasushi and Fukie had been kidnapped by a spy boat. Tamotsu soon went to a public prosecutor's office in Tokyo. He tried to petition for help. A prosecutor with whom Tamotsu had this conversation showed him the very same sack used and left by the kidnappers and explained to him that the Soviet Army actually used the sack to wrap a body. Though they knew that much, they did not even pretend to start an investigation.

He had countless arguments with the police that were fruitless. 'There is no solid confirmation, so we can't investigate.' When Tamotsu heard this, he lost his temper and shouted, 'Why don't you organize an investigation team and collect evidence!'

Seven years after his disappearance, the registrar at the Obama town hall called and told Tamotsu to register Yasushi's death. The reason was simple. They were not able to do the proper paper work smoothly at election time. He had a fight with this person, also. 'If you really want Yasushi dead, you ought to show me proof!' Even after this event, they still demanded registration every time they had an election.

He also had a fight with a Buddhist priest when the priest said to him, 'Why can't you just give up. It would be better for your son's soul.' Tamotsu shouted at him, 'Yasushi is not dead! Do you really want to have a funeral?' I don't know where he is, but Yasushi must be alive somewhere. Tamotsu was very confident of that. He never thought about having a funeral.

In November 1987, there was an explosion on a Korean Air Lines plane. This happened nine years after Yasushi and Fukie had disappeared. In January of the next year, Kim Hyon-hi, who was accused of causing this explosion, had seen a Japanese person teaching Japanese to future spies in North Korea. Her Korean name was Lee Eun-hye.

This time there was no mistake! North Korea caused all of these missing cases. Tamotsu went to the police again with a book written by Kim Hyon-hi and made an appeal for help. "Isn't it clear? This is solid evidence." The police merely nodded and said to him, "I think so, too." In March of that same year, the National Public Safety Commissioner, Seiroku Kajiyama, spoke of the three missing cases, including Yasushi and Fukie's case, at the Diet. He mentioned North Korea's suspicious involvement in each case. Tamotsu went to the police again, but they still did not do anything at all due to lack of confirmation.

At that time, Toshiko was at the hospital, and Tamotsu told her that he was certain that Yasushi was still alive in North Korea. Toshiko continued to ask him, "Will they let him come home soon?" The police still did not make any move. Toshiko's endless anguish lasted until her death.

Why did Fukie suddenly disappear? Yukou Hamamoto had no idea why she disappeared or how she would be able to come home. He was too upset to share his feelings at that time. His guts were boiling with anger. All he could do was to grit his teeth and cry.

Yukou was furious when people were unfairly prejudiced about Fukie's disappearance. People talked about Fukie, saying that she was missing because her family life was so complicated. The police asked how Fukie was brought up, as part of their investigation. He was infuriated because there was nothing wrong with their family. Yukou was confident of that. The news media wrote it up as a 'kidnapping by hatred' or "a love triangle of grudges." The newspaper articles were filled up with packs of lies. He thought that the media was violating their privacy. Yukou was so annoyed that he argued with the newspaper companies many times.

It was about the same time when Yukou and Tamotsu Chimura began to believe strongly that their family members were abducted by North Korea. Yukou still remembers the day, when the Sankei newspaper released the article regarding the abductees on January 7, 1980.

When Yukou read "a foreign spy organization is involved in the missing case of dating couples," he felt a heavy load off his shoulders. He had known there were such rumors in the past. But this was the first time that involvement by a foreign spy organization was mentioned in a national newspaper. He was rather pleased to be able to prove that Fukie's disappearance was nothing to do with family matters. A detective whispered to Yukou, "It was not released to the public, but probably

this was an act of a third nation.” Yukou was quite sure then that North Korea was to blame. However, it took a long time before it was proved to be so.

As the cases involving North Korean spy organizations were reported, the facts began to unfold little by little. In April 1985, Shin Kwang-soo, a former North Korean spy who had abducted Tadaaki Hara in Japan, was arrested in South Korea and taken to court. Yukou hoped that this was the beginning of solving the cases, but the Japanese government did not do anything about it.

Then in November 1987, a Korean Air plane exploded in the air. Kim Hyon-hi was arrested on January 15, 1988, and testified that there was a Japanese woman in North Korea named Lee Eun-hye who was a Japanese educator. The news media made a fuss about whether this person was Fukie since they both shared the same Chinese character in their names. Yukou received a call from the Tokyo main office of Jiji News Service at 6 p.m. on the evening of January 15. He was told that there was “awful news.” After that phone call, the press from all over Japan rushed to his house. The number of the press reached sixty. But the uproar subsided, as soon as they discovered that it was not Fukie after all. Yukou thought it could be Fukie at first, but when he saw the photo that appeared in the media, he knew it was a different person.

On January 29, 1988, Tatsukichi Hyomoto, a secretary of a Councilor of the Communist Party, visited Yukou. Hyomoto said to him, “This should be handled in a nonpartisan manner.” He also told that it was a national sovereignty issue and a violation of human rights. Hyomoto continued, “We cannot dismiss this issue. I will risk my neck on it.” On March 26, Atsushi Hashimoto, a Diet member, raised questions about abduction at the meeting of House of Councilors Budget Committee and drew on “Kajiyama’s remark” about strong suspicions of North Korea. It was the first official statement by the Japanese government.

Around that time, Yukou met with the Korean KBS television station. It was January 23, 1988, when a man, introducing himself as the news director, visited Obama. He waved his hand and cried out 100 meters away in fluent Japanese, “Do not worry! She is alive!”

It was the first time that Yukou learned so surely that Fukie was alive. Yukou asked him how to bring her back from North Korea. The news director replied, “A solution would take time because it is very sensitive, complicated issue. It is unwise to rush North Korea to do something. Be patient now.” Yukou urged, “Until when?” “There will be no settlement until North Korea collapses or until North and South unite.” The director also said, “She could be killed by then, but you must be patient.” Yukou was disappointed, but he learned that Fukie was alive in North Korea.

The Japanese government did nothing, even after Kajiyama’s statement, when the government admitted its suspicions of abduction by North Korea for the

first time. The news media was gone, even though they were once all over him. Yukou could not tolerate the idea that people had begun to forget the issue of abduction. In September 1990, the ruling and opposition party groups led by Shin Kanamaru (Liberal Democratic Party Vice President) and Makoto Tanabe (Socialist Party Vice Chairman) visited North Korea during the period of the Kaifu Cabinet. However, the issue of abduction was not even mentioned. Instead, they promised North Korea financial support and returned to Japan. People criticized them of “kneeling diplomacy.” Then, a problematic “lump of gold, (a bribe from Kim Jon-il)” similar to that of North Korea, was discovered from the office of Kanamaru.

On February 3, 1997, Megumi Yokota’s case was at last brought to light by Shingo Nishimura of the House of Representatives. This was 9 years after the Korean Air explosion and Kajiyama’s remarks. Yukou and other families of the victims were ready to stand up, when the opportunity knocked. It was the end of their patience. The opportunity finally came. With the help from Tatsukichi Hyomoto and Kenji Ishidaka of Osaka Asahi Broadcasting, the victims’ families formed the Abductee Family Association.

On March 25, 1997, both Yukou Hamamoto and Tamotsu Chimura joined the association from very beginning. Since then, they spent days on preparing petitions, collecting signatures, and appealing to the public on the streets. But the government remained silent. In September 2001, when Yukou visited the National Police Agency with his petition, the police executive officer explained Fuki’s case as an “abduction criminal offence” for the first time. The police admitted that the case was a crime in a clear manner. Even after that, until Koizumi’s visit to North Korea on September 17, 2002, there was no further development. Yukou and other families were forced to fight by themselves without any support from the government.

September 16, 2002 was the day before Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited North Korea. Shigeru Yokota and other families representing the Abductee Family Association visited the Prime Minister’s official residence and met with Yasuo Fukuda, the Chief Cabinet Secretary and Shinzo Abe, Vice Cabinet Secretary. The purpose of this visit was to meet with the Prime Minister to tell them their feelings and make an appeal for help before he departed for North Korea.

It was Yukou Hamamoto that broke the ice and spoke to Yasuo Fukuda. He said, “This case occurred, when your father, the late Takeo Fukuda, was the prime minister. Your father should have been aware of the issue of abduction. It is absurd, if the leader of the country did not know this important issue, which related to infringement of national sovereignty and violation of human rights.” “The prime minister has been replaced 21 to 22 times in the past 24 years. What is going to

happen to the neglected responsibility of these prime ministers, who left the abduction problem unsolved?" Fukuda did not say a word.

Yukou continued, "There was a report that Prime Minister Koizumi would risk his political life for a Japan-North Korea Talk, but the Prime Minister denied it. Liberal Democratic Party Acting Secretary General Machimura, who publicized the prime minister's remarks, apologized for his misleading. I am just a fisherman, but when I'm out at sea, I work at the risk of my life. We, fishermen, call it, "One piece of shipboard, and its bottom is hell." All the citizens are working hard every day, risking their lives for food. What is wrong with the prime minister, who says that he will not risk his political life to do the job? Is the politician's work so simple and easy? Besides, Japan is already despised by Kim Jong-il, even before the Japan-North Korea Talk began. I want you to tell the Prime Minister to take his mission seriously and do his job as the Prime Minister."

There was once a prime minister whose name was Yukou Hamaguchi. Yukou admired him, because their names were different by only one character. Particularly, he was inspired by the word of Prime Minister Hamaguchi: "Politics is always life threatening work."

Thirteen of Abductee Rescue Federation of the Diet members were present at the meeting, including Shoichi Nakagawa (Chairman), Shingo Nishimura, and Kenzo Yoneda. The meeting ran over one more hour than scheduled, because Yukou couldn't stop talking in anger. Fukuda could not say anything and remained silent. When the meeting was over and the Chief Cabinet Secretary appeared in a corridor, he looked pale. He was so pale that the press wondered what had happened to him.

October 15, 2002 was the day when the abductees arrived at Haneda airport for homecoming. Tamotsu felt more troubled than happy, while he was hugging Yasushi. Yasushi's body was very thin like a dead tree. His face was hard, too. He looked restless and cautious. He lost his smile. Could he be Yasushi, the son Tamotsu knew?

"If he doesn't change himself, it means that he will go back to North Korea after a temporary visit," Tamotsu thought. Tamotsu would not let it happen. But, how could he keep Yasushi in Japan? Tamotsu thought about it very hard.

That evening from Akasaka Prince Hotel, Tamotsu called Yasushi's former classmates and colleagues from his time as a carpenter. He asked them to visit his house to tell Yasushi about old, funny stories to make him laugh, as soon as they returned to Obama. "Any stories would be great, such as when Yasushi was scolded by his teacher, or when Yasushi threw many four wides at baseball games. Just make him laugh." He also told them never to mention North Korea.

On October 17, when they returned home to Obama, twenty friends of Yasushi came to see him. Yasushi's friends showed up for days, and Tamotsu heard Yasushi first laughing around the third or fourth day after he returned home. And Yasushi gradually returned to the "old Yasushi." Tamotsu was right about his idea. The stories from friends were much more effective than his parent's talking at him.

On October 15 at Haneda airport, when Yukou said "Welcome home" to Fukie, she answered, "I'm home" and tears came down from her eyes. Fukie regained her smile immediately, when she was exchanging words with her eight brothers. On the way to the hotel in the bus, the Hamamoto brothers were very lively and loud, almost shamefully, compared to the other families. While they talked about childhood memories, Fukie started talking in Wakasa dialect and laughing.

Nothing had changed from the old days. Yukou was very pleased. But, Fukie intended to go back to North Korea initially. Yukou thought that he would never be able to see her again during his lifetime, so he was determined not to let her go back to North Korea.

That night at the hotel, Yukou and his brothers surrounded Fukie and they drank until dawn. All her brothers persuaded her to stay in Japan. At first, she said "If I don't go back, things won't be resolved. I'll go back to North Korea and come back here again."

Yukou would not allow it.

Fukie deserved to stay her home country, as she finally returned from the country which kidnapped her. Yukou wanted to make a decision that night. Before long, Fukie said, "I understand." She probably was trying to tell them that she understood her brothers' feelings. But, Yukou's action was quick. As soon as the day of the 16th broke, he expressed his brothers' decision to Kyoko Nakayama, the Cabinet Consultant, and Abe, the Vice Cabinet Secretary. "Fukie is frightened of North Korea. Why are you making her go back to such a horrible country? We won't let her return there. Please take care of this matter, as it is the government's responsibility."

All five families of the abductees gathered together and discussed the situation on the night of the 16th. The following day, the abductees were scheduled to go to their hometowns. There was no time left. At this point, the Hasuike family, the Okudo family and Tamotsu Chimura were thinking that they had to let the abductees return to North Korea. According to the government's plan, the abductees were to get together in Tokyo on the 28th and return to North Korea on the 29th. That was the original schedule.

Yukou argued desperately. "It is not a matter of letting them go back to North Korea or not." "We were patient and waiting for them for 24 years. Finally they are

back home. It is absolutely ridiculous to let them go back to North Korea only after one week or ten days. Whatever North Korea says doesn't matter. Just leave it the government to take care of the rest. I am strongly against that they will go back to North Korea. This is to restore the original status quo."

At that time, the majority of the families wanted to respect the abductees' decisions. Yukou was adamant that the victims were stricken with fear, so they could not express their true feelings. He did not give in. The next morning of the 17th, the five families were scheduled to depart at 8 a.m. for their hometowns. Yukou visited the Hasuike family at breakfast table, and insisted again. He said, "My family will not allow our sister go back to North Korea. Never forget that!"

On October 23, Yukou came back to Tokyo to visit Abe and announced their family's decision. The Vice Cabinet Secretary assured him that the government would never let the abductees separate from their families. What would have happened, if Yukou had not been so persistent? Yukou still thinks to this day that the victims would have gone back to North Korea. It was because of his strong desire to keep his family ties and to keep all the victims in Japan. He strongly believes this.

In April 2003, six months after Yasushi and Fukie returned to Japan, Yasushi started working at Obama City Hall as a part-time employee, and Fukie started working at Reinan Promotion Office of the prefecture. After they started working as Japanese citizens, they seemed to be quite happy. Every morning, they would leave for work, saying "See you later," and every evening, they would come home, saying "I'm home." When Tamotsu tries to take dishes to the sink after the meals, Fukie runs up to him and says, "Dad, sit down. I'll do it for you." He feels tickled, as he used to take dishes for himself. He lived alone for such a long time, and now lives with his son and his daughter-in-law. This kind of ordinary thing makes him so happy. For years he thought about nothing but saving his son and other victims. Now it was paid off.

Nowadays, Yasushi and Fukie are enjoying themselves in a small way by hopping around ramen noodle restaurants. According to Yasushi, they have tried almost all the ramen restaurants along the Route 27 from Tsuruga through Obama to Maizuru. They became connoisseurs of ramen noodles, commenting "That restaurant is pretty good," "That restaurant's soup is watery," and so on. Tamotsu thinks it is strange, because he thinks that they should appreciate cooked rice more than ramen noodles, especially coming home from North Korea where food is scarce. They were only 23 years old, when they were abducted. Ramen noodles to them must have been the symbol of "youth" and "freedom".

Seeing them happy together, Tamotsu sometimes wishes that Yasushi and Fukie would make a baby. He shared his wish with his neighbors, and they laughed

at him, saying “They are too old to have a baby.” If they were not kidnapped 25 years ago, they surely could have been living a happy life with their children here. Twenty-five years ago, right before they were abducted, they had an engagement ceremony and their wedding date was set.

Most of the time the couple looks happy, but their faces get clouded from time to time. Tamotsu knows exactly why. They are thinking about their children in North Korea. When the mass games in North Korea appear on TV, they put down their chopsticks and glue to the screen. They are looking for their children. Their house in North Korea has their children’s costumes for mass games. While Yasushi said, “Oh, well, our children will never have an opportunity to take part in mass games any more,” his eyes are still fixed on the screen.

They have three children left behind in North Korea—a 21 year old daughter and 19 and 16 year old sons. If their daughter gets married, it will be very difficult for her to come to Japan. Tamotsu worries about it very much.

According to Yasushi, in North Korea, children live with their parents until they become seven years old. As soon as they enter elementary school, they live in a boarding school. They come home only on Saturdays and Sundays, unlike Japan, where the family live together. That doesn’t mean that parents don’t care about children. Tamotsu knows how much they miss their children. He knows that, but he tells them: “I have put up with my life without you for 24 years. I was not sure if you two were alive or not. Be patient. You have been separate from your children only for 6 months or so. If you think of what I went through, you can wait for them longer. Hang in there.”

In March 2003, Yasushi and Fukie wrote a letter to their children in North Korea. Tamotsu was strongly opposed to sending the letter at that time. He was afraid that the letter would show their weakness to North Korea. North Korea might take advantage of parental feelings of missing their children. If their parents are able to write a letter, the children will wonder why their parents won’t come home. Besides, if Yasushi and Fukie send the letter, they will wonder if their children have received the letter and they will anticipate letters from their children. Tamotsu was afraid that they would be preoccupied by that. Though he might sound cold, Tamotsu wanted them to be just patient and not to write a letter. He thought it best to leave it to the government. After all, the letter never reached North Korea.

Outside the window of “Hiko-so,” lots of farming blowfish are fenced and lined up in Japan Sea. A certificate of merit is displayed in the room with an ocean view on the second floor. Yukou Hamamoto received it in 1995. It was the tribute to his dedication to fishing industry, awarded by Fukui Prefecture. He is the one who urged Fukuda, the Chief Cabinet Secretary, to work hard on the abduction issue, even though it might risk his political life, on the day before the Prime

Minister visited North Korea. He lived his words, risking his life at the sea more than forty-five years.

Yukou still goes fishing every day even at his age of over seventy. Wakasa is well known for halfbeaks, flatfish, sandfish, and sea breams. Fukie loved those fish in season. She probably could not eat fish in North Korea. She can eat fresh fish anytime now. Fukie married into the Chimura family, but they live in the same city. Fukie visits Yukou's house frequently, and enjoys conversations with Yukou's wife, who took care of her like her mother in her childhood, and their son's wife. Yukou feels that she also enjoys seeing Yukou's four grandchildren, ranging from the 1st to 11th grades. Yukou smiles at her, seeing how she cheerfully and happily interacts with the family.

Fukie is very cheerful. Yukou believes that it is because she is free from fear of North Korea. In North Korea, she must have felt uneasy about her future. She was always watched by guards and her life was stifling. She was released from all that, and that is probably why she is so cheerful. Perhaps only the Japanese media bothers her. The family is happy, but above all, Fukie and Yasushi are happy to be here. Yukou feels so good that he did not let them go back to North Korea.

If she had ever returned to North Korea, she probably could never have come back again. No one could have ever imagined one year ago that Fukie would return to Obama. Yukou had given up on Fukie's return, even while he was active in the work of the Abductee Family Association. He didn't think that the abduction issue would be resolved until the North Korean regime collapsed. He did not believe that Fukie could survive there and return to Japan. He was prepared for the worst.

What a joy to have Fukie here in Obama! But Yukou cannot feel happy from the bottom of his heart. Fukie's children are still in North Korea. She acts cheerful, and she won't mention about her children. Yet, Yukou can tell how much she misses her children. He can only say to her, "Hang in there. I know how hard it is, but hang in there." Moreover, the victims of eight families could not make it home. If everyone were home, then he would be surely happy. He regrets that he cannot feel happy from the bottom of his heart.

Tamotsu feels the same way as Yukou does. The family of victims, Shigeru and Sakie Yokota, Akihiro and Kayoko Arimoto, Kenichi Ichikawa, the late Shoichi Masumoto, and Teruaki Masumoto are still suffering. Tamotsu worked together with them, spending day after day on preparing petitions, collecting signatures, and appealing on the streets, since the foundation of the Abductee Family Association.

They are the families who were sentenced to suffer when they were told that their family members were "dead" on September 17 in 2002, when five abductees

including Yasushi were reported“alive”. That evening Tamotsu and Sakie Yokota hugged each other and sobbed all night long. Shigeru and Sakie Yokota attended every meeting in Fukui. Shoichi Masumoto and Tamotsu were about the same age and height, and they were like brothers. Shoichi passed away, leaving the word“I believe in Japan.” His death took place 24 days after September 17. Even to this day, Tamotsu cannot express sympathy to those families. He cannot even look at them in their eyes. He can start talking, only when families of the victims such as Shigeru Yokota and Akihiro Arimoto ask him how he is doing.

Tamotsu shared his feelings with Yasushi recently. He said to his son,“Five of you could come home, thanks to all the people who stood behind us. Never forget that. I am glad that you are home. But, when I think about the families of victims who could not make it, it hurts me. Abductees who are still in North Korea are not just eight, but more than 100. We will not break up the Abductee Family Association until the issue of all the victims will be resolved. Now it is your turn to keep it going. Plead and request with all your hearts, even after your children are back.” His son, Yasushi, nodded deeply.