

Gembaku
(The Atomic Bomb)

The harsh and terrible memories
Of a particular summer
So long ago

By Chitoshi Honda
(14 years old at the time of the bombing)

“Help me... Somebody help me!”

I think it was Ms. Yamamoto who called out these words, her voice sounding weak and frail. Still now it rings in my ears.

The event in question happened fifty-one years ago, back on August 9, 1945. It was the saddest, cruelest, most despicable thing I have ever lived through, or ever will. It is something that I cannot forget, no matter how hard I try. I would like to tell the story of what happened back then to those who may not have heard it before.

August 9 was a hot mid-summer day, but I seem to remember there being a fair number of clouds in the sky. It was a day when the heat felt oppressive, with high humidity evident from the early morning. Since the beginning of August every day had been hot and humid.

The air-raid sirens sounded repeatedly that morning as well, at which point we thought, “Well, here we go for another day.” By that time we were no longer scared by the sirens and only thought of them as signals for the start of each day.

We were well aware of the dangers that air raids posed, however, because many houses and large factories, including Nagasaki shipbuilding yard, had been bombed in the consecutive attacks of July 29 and August 1. We had gotten used to fleeing for the hillside bomb shelters as soon as each air-raid alert sounded. In the air raid of August 1, a bomb was dropped on the warehouse of a construction company in our neighbourhood (Suehiro Construction) and the force of the explosion sent pieces of wood flying high in the air, some of them as big as electric poles. I can still remember clearly how they came crashing down through the roof of our house. Of course we never had time to repair the damage.

The air-raid alert that sounded on the fateful morning of August 9 was lifted after a relatively short time (signaling that there was nothing to worry about). I do not know why that was. At that time the B29 bomber carrying the fearful atomic bomb was closing in on the air space over Nagasaki.

Just as I heard the roar of airplane engines a blinding white light, or maybe it was red, flashed like a spark. What was going on? What on earth had happened?

A thundering *boom* sounded and then the blast winds created by the explosion knocked over and tore apart almost every standing structure in Nagasaki. The powerful flash and heat had instantly burned to death humans and other living creatures, scorching them until they were like single blocks of charcoal.

The time was 11:02.

Now I would like to tell you what happened to my family and my house that day.

It just so happened that my brother was with us at that time, having been granted an impromptu leave from his job in Tokyo. Overjoyed by his arrival, my father, my mother, my sister, my brother and I all sat around him in the parlor room that morning, talking about a variety of things. Then my mother went out to a friend's store to buy something special for lunch, seeing as how it had been such a long time since my brother had last come home. My older sister was off working at the Mitsubishi weapons factory in Ohashi, which stood where Nagasaki University is now.

I was a fourteen-year-old junior-high-school student then, but classes had been suspended because of the growing severity of the war, and all of us kids had been sent to work in factories instead (as part of the student mobilization efforts). I was supposed to report to school that morning and then head to the factory in the afternoon, but because of the air-raid alarms and the fact that my brother had come back, I ended up just staying at my home. If I had been at school at the time, I wouldn't be alive now.

Following the flash of light and the thunderous explosion, the interior of our house went completely black. As everything came crumbling down I closed my eyes and thought, "So this is how I am going to die."

Suddenly, from somewhere out in the darkness, I heard my father calling out, "Stay right where you are!"

My little brother and sister stopped moving around as well.

I called out to them, "It's all right. Just stay where you are for a little while."

I myself was filled with panic and wondered what was going to happen next. This all took place over a short time, but the fear and anxiety made it seem far, far longer.

After a little while the surroundings started to become visible once again. I saw that everything in our house had been destroyed, with the walls knocked over and roof tiles and glass all over the place. I wondered what had happened because this seemed so different from all the other air raids. As I was thinking about whether my mother and sister were all right or not, my father's voice sounded out again:

"Gather up all your own things so we can evacuate!"

Coming back to our senses, we saw that the entrance, the storefront and the kitchen were all in shambles. The central window of the sitting room could be seen just off the main room.

My brother called out, "Come here everybody!"

I didn't have time to get my shoes from the front hall, so I went barefoot. I jumped out from the front window and looked around the block. Every single house had been destroyed. The faces of all the men, women and kids were filled with anxiety. The man

from the house next door had blood flowing from his head.

At that point flames started to shoot up here and there, rising up from electric poles, eaves troughs, house siding and anything else flammable. I was thinking that we should get away from there as soon as possible when my mother suddenly arrived, her skin dirty and her hair disheveled. As we left our burning house behind and fled for the bomb shelter, she asked us things like "Are you all right?" and "Was anyone hurt?"

When we passed by Ms. Yamamoto's house we heard a voice calling, "Help me. Somebody please help me!"

Ms. Yamamoto was a woman who always treated us children kindly. I glanced over at my father and saw from the look on his face that there was nothing we could do.

Almost all the houses had been knocked down and the people who had been inside them at the time were now trapped under the wreckage as the fires broke out. We wanted to help them, but there was simply nothing we could do.

There were large numbers of wounded and more and more kept appearing. Some were evacuating, some were returning to their homes, and some were going to their workplaces. No one's face was unscarred. Some were completely covered in blood and others had cruelly had their bodies, faces and hair burned. Still others had fallen down, their clothing burned off and their bodies blackened. Some lay unmoving and appeared to be dead.

A woman who was in a state of shock carried her unmoving baby and walked along muttering to it. The enormity of the horror had left many people in shock, and they seemed to have lost their minds. They ran around yelling out things like "What happened to (such and such) neighborhood?" and "How are things over by Urakami Station?" Some called out what must have been the names of their children.

Someone grabbed me by the shoulder, at which I froze in my tracks. It was a woman with clothes that had been white before, but were now dark red with blood. There were all kinds of pieces of glass stuck into her body. For a while she held my hand and walked along with me.

We came to Inasa Bridge. In the waters of Urakami River, which flowed underneath, corpses of people who had been thrown by the explosion were floating. Along the banks people covered in burns drank from the dirty river water or tried to cool themselves off in it. I saw many people here, all of them battling pain, heat and agony.

Living as we do now, it is impossible to envision just how that scene looked. For extreme circumstances we use words like *paradise* or *hell*, however, and this was literally hell.

We fled along. As I ran I stepped on pieces of broken glass with my bare feet, but for

some reason I didn't suffer any cuts. We reached the bomb shelter that we had evacuated to many times before, but the building across from it was ablaze and it looked like it would be dangerous to stay there.

At that time my father was a member of the neighbourhood council. He and some of the other members talked about what to do and decided that we should flee up into the mountains. That wasn't so easy, though, because there weren't any roads anymore. At first I couldn't understand why that was, but it turned out that they were covered over by the debris from all the demolished houses. I followed behind the adults, walking over fallen roofs and clay tiles. Sometimes we would slip and fall. We were so scared of those roofs collapsing under us that we didn't even want to speak. When I think back on that I realize that I can't recall where we were going or what route we took to get there.

"OK, let's take a break here!"

We were in an orange field at that time. We broke some branches off of trees on the nearby mountainside and laid them on the ground to give us something to lie on. A sense of relief came over me and I dozed off, all the strength seeming to leave my body.

When I came to again night had fallen and everything was dark. Nagasaki City was a bright red sea of flames that night. I gazed down vacantly, thinking that my own house must be burning as well.

Every last person sat frozen in place, staring unwaveringly at the same scene. The land and the sky had now become one great field of fire. I couldn't for the life of me understand how something this horrible could have happened. I didn't know that this had been an atomic bomb, or that such a bomb could be so powerful. I started wondering about my sister, thinking that if the Urakami area had been annihilated she would certainly have been killed. That scary thought kept me up all night long.

When morning came around, the fires began to die down. My father called out, "OK. Let's head for the bomb shelter down below" and we reluctantly trudged off. We were no longer barefoot. We children each had emergency bags filled with everything needed for such situations, including our shoes.

As we approached the tunnel-like bomb shelter, we saw that the building in front of it had burned to the ground, leaving nothing behind but ashes. Inside the shelter a number of people with burns and other wounds lay in agony. Scared by the sight of them, I went back outside, where the mid-summer sun was beating down as if oblivious to the events of the previous day.

I heard my name being called and looked over to see my sister standing there. We dashed into the shelter to let my mother, brother and younger sister know.

"Hurray!" I called out. "She came back!"

We all hugged each other and cried, unable to speak. That was such a great feeling. After a little while my little brother said, "I'm getting hungry. Isn't there anything to eat?"

It was then that I realized that we hadn't eaten since mid-morning the day before and had missed four meals: lunch, dinner, breakfast and another lunch. I suddenly became aware of just how empty my stomach was.

Sometime that afternoon, I'm not sure exactly what time it was, someone called out "Rice balls!" and we all went outside to find four huge barrels filled with balls of white rice. We were so happy that we jumped up and down with joy. I held my hands together and they put rice balls in them, but it turned out that I never actually ate them. To this day I still feel like crying when I look at my brother and sister and remember why.

Having been transported under the hot, mid-summer sun, those rice balls had already started to rot. They had been made the night before from rice donated by people in the towns and villages outside Nagasaki, and later I found out that some people had been so famished that they had eaten them anyway. I sat there crushed with disappointment, but then the form of God appeared before me, carrying rice balls. This was not a dream.

These tasted more delicious than I ever imagined anything in the world could. While it was actually a friend of my father's who brought them to us, they really did seem to come from God Himself.

With my hunger satisfied, I turned my thoughts to my home and what might have happened to it. We then set off again, crossing over Inasa Bridge. The Urakami River flowed as it always did, but just like the day before there were unrecognizable bodies floating in it. There were also large numbers of corpses on the roads, including those of people who had fallen to the ground in exhaustion when they couldn't flee any further. There were people whose bodies were pitch-black and others whose hair and faces had been burned so badly burned that you couldn't tell if they were men or women. Some were clearly in agony and others still had gleams of life in their eyes but otherwise lay absolutely still. Some had died with their babies on their backs. Words cannot express just how horrific the conditions were. To this day I can still hear the cries of "*I can't take it!*" "*The pain is too much!*" and "*Give me water!*" ringing deep in my ears. There was absolutely nothing we could do to help anyone.

For as far as the eye could see there was nothing except the warped and twisted metal frames of factories and buildings. Everything was burned, including streetcars, hospitals and pharmacies. Cats, dogs and horses had been scorched as well, their bodies frozen in the exact positions they had been in at the time of the bombing. In the

scorched ruins of our house a steel rice pot sat solitarily in the place where the kitchen had been. Everything else had burned to ashes.

Two days later, on August 11

I went over to Inasa Elementary School, which was being used as a hospital. Classrooms which ordinarily would have been used to study in had been changed into treatment rooms. There were a small number of doctors and nurses, all of them working as hard as they could. Large numbers of wounded people, including those with burns so severe that they couldn't move, were lying all around. There were so many that I would almost step on them as I walked. It was literally hell.

People were having some kind of white ointment rubbed on their bodies, but they otherwise lay still. Nothing could really be done for them, no matter how much anyone wanted to help.

I saw white things moving in people's open wounds, which turned out to be maggots. Wounds and burns had started festering by this time. Although I felt sorry for those people, I found myself having to leave the room because I was feeling nauseous. These people were going to die without having a chance to see their families. What was the reason they had been put through all this?

My older sister had returned home uninjured, but a few days later she came down with a very high fever. She endured her pain and agony without receiving any treatment. Toward the end she smiled at all of us in the family and said, "Keep fighting, everybody", but not long after that she passed away. She was nineteen years old.

Later on my mother's condition began to deteriorate as well, until she had to spend most of her time lying down. In January of 1949, three years and five months after the atomic bombing, she passed away in a hospital. I wish she could have lived much, much longer.

Nagasaki's day of destiny came fifty-one years ago, on August 9. It was a day that will never be forgotten by people around the world. On that day a single atomic bomb instantaneously took 73,884 lives and left 74,904 people wounded. Those who originally survived the bomb are still now dying off one after another.

In the fifty-one years since the bombing, Nagasaki has become a peaceful, lovely tourist spot. People do not know about war. They do not know about the horrors of the atomic bombing. The way to find out more about these things is to see the artifacts that

have been left behind, read books and hear people talk about their experiences. To find out more about the Nagasaki atomic bombing, go to the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum where the harrowing pictures, writings and artifacts will leave you speechless.

At one corner of the Peace Park there is a *Fountain of Peace*. On it the following words are inscribed:

*The dryness in my throat had become unbearable.
The water had a layer of oil floating on it,
But I found myself craving it so much,
That I gulped it down, oil and all.*

Those who suffered horrific burns in the atomic bombing cried out “Water, water!” before passing away. It is hard to imagine just how much they must have craved it. The number of people who were so desperate that they drank water with oil in it and then died agonizing deaths must be in the tens of thousands. What a terribly sad fact that is.

August ninth has come again this year. For me this is the most terrible, sad, agonizing and lonely day there is.

We now live in peace. There is nothing that is more important than peace. We must not fight wars, no matter what justifications are given for doing so.

We must pledge to always keep love and kindness in our hearts and ensure that we never again do anything to bring unhappiness to other people. Furthermore, let us pray with all our hearts for the eternal rest of those who passed away on that day and those who passed away in each of the years since. Let us pray that the peace we have now continues on forever.

August 9, 1986