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LIKE
DUST

*One Family's Story
of America's
Japanese Internment*

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for my grandmothers

Prologue

FOR SO MANY YEARS, SHE WAS A MYSTERY TO ME: A shadow slipping among bodies; a set of hands; background fixture, dim and indistinct. Sometimes, she read, seated upright on the white couch of her living room, her chin tucked, her lips faintly moving as her eyes swept across the page. But mostly she worked, leaning over steaming pots, her glasses fogged, her dark skin sticky with steam, or yanking weeds from among the hibiscus and azalea in the courtyard, or snapping peas at the kitchen table.

When my brother and I visited, she didn't swoop us up in an embrace the minute we arrived and stepped out of the car and onto the hot Florida pavement. She didn't gush over how much I'd grown or hold me out at arm's length, studying my face, searching for changes, the way my grandfather, my Ojichan, did. She didn't play with us the way he did either. My grandfather would purchase masks for our visit, then hide and jump out to scare us. Our shrill screams would echo through the house, and we'd run away in delight. He gave us piggyback rides and romped around the living room. Obaachan, however, kept her distance, glancing up from her book as we raced by.

If she called our house in Pennsylvania, whether in October for my mother's birthday, or on Christmas afternoons, I would know her by her request to speak to my mother, and by her accent, the intonation imposed from another language, the strange rise and fall of the syllables. But I didn't recognize her voice.

We were at her house in Florida, standing in the hallway just inside the front door, when my mother first told me that my grandparents had spent nearly three years in a concentration camp. I was eight or nine years old. It was summertime, oppressively hot and humid, and we were there for our annual visit. In the living room, my grandfather was chasing my brother around the couch, and in the kitchen my grandmother was washing dishes. With furtive glances toward her parents, my mother hissed the information, softly, like a confession. Or maybe it was more like an apology. I didn't ask any questions upon hearing this news, I think because I was afraid. Afraid of the way my mother's dark eyes looked at me solemnly, as though she were entrusting me with some grave secret. Or perhaps she was afraid of the answer, of the weight that the *why* behind this revelation might bring to my small shoulders. Whatever my reasons, all I knew at the time was that my Obaachan and Ojichan had been imprisoned for being Japanese, and I concluded from this conversation that there was something inherently bad about being Japanese, that there was something to be sorry about.

Had my parents chosen to raise their family in Hawaii, or California, where there are many people of Asian ancestry, or even in some urban area with general ethnic diversity, I might have been more likely to embrace my Japanese heritage as an adolescent. But they chose a small town in Pennsylvania, my white father's home, nestled in the farmed and mined folds of the state's midsection. My brother and I were two of a handful of minorities in our entire school district. It was not an ideal place for me to sort out issues of racial identity. I spent much of my young life trying to fit in, to be like everyone else around me—and to seem as un-Japanese as possible. I resisted my grandfather's attempts to teach

me his language, squirmed in the dining-room chair and told him I couldn't do it, that the characters were too difficult, that I couldn't spit out the sounds. I resented, summer after summer, the Japanese exchange students my mother invited to our home and expected me to haul along on outings with my friends. I turned up my nose at her puffy white *mochi* and pretended to gag on her *sushi*. "We don't like this stuff," I told her, dragging my brother into the declaration. "We're American."

Of course, I was oblivious to the fact that in all my efforts to be un-Japanese, I was joining the same old—and very Japanese—narrative of *haji*, or shame, that my mother had been participating in when she'd whispered her secret about my grandparents. The same one that had kept my family silent about those years in a Wyoming prison camp.

It was not until a decade after learning that Obaachan and Ojichan had lived at Heart Mountain that I began to pursue the answers to those questions that had lain dormant since my mother's confession. Despite my family's reticence regarding this portion of their history, I hoped my grandmother, the mysterious woman from my childhood, might be convinced to talk about it. That we hardly knew each other seemed only a minor hindrance: I was, after all, her granddaughter, and her namesake, and it had been more than sixty years since this all happened. My grandfather had passed away when I was a teenager, so Obaachan was alone now, and perhaps interested in a visitor. I called her, asked, with just a little bit of anxiety, whether I could visit, and when she said yes, I bought a plane ticket to Florida. I planned to spend a week with her at her home in Melbourne, on the Atlantic coast.

Convincing Obaachan, however, to resurrect her memories, to sift through them, blow off the dust, and give them to me, and most significant of all, to let me write them down, was not the simple process I had naïvely anticipated. While I recognized immediately on that first trip to Melbourne that Obaachan was indeed glad to see me—that she was thrilled to have a week with her granddaughter—I also discovered quickly that she would rather talk about Elizabeth Bennet or Jane Eyre or Howard Roark than about herself. During the war, she learned to immerse herself in their stories, when reading was the only escape from that barren patch of Wyoming. Knowing there were hundreds of tales—*worlds*—that she could flee to when the war stretched on and leaving Heart Mountain seemed itself a fiction, kept her going. Now that her children were grown and she had fewer obligations, she made weekly visits to the local library, checked book reviews, and read hundreds of pages a month.

Still, despite her affection for stories, my grandmother resisted telling her own, and she was especially hesitant to allow me to retell it. Opening up to others was not a comfortable act for her. There was the obvious issue of privacy. My grandmother, like most Japanese her age, valued her space and her right to keep to herself. There were things a person didn't talk about, topics that were simply not meant for public eyes and ears. You turned your head when someone was changing clothes. You didn't meddle in a neighbor's failing marriage. You didn't pry.

More significant than the matter of privacy, however, was the issue of *haji*. Even six decades after World War II, my grandmother still felt shame about what had happened. She still experienced a pang of humiliation when she thought about Pearl Harbor, the thousands who were killed on that fateful Sunday morning, and when she recalled the early months of 1942, when *hakujin* journalists fabricated rumors in American newspapers and called the Japanese "vipers" and other names. She still shuddered when she remembered the long walk from Heart Mountain's changing room to the shower, naked. She quickly realized that shame, central to Japanese culture, was not a sentiment that sixty years could dissolve.

And so at first, getting my grandmother to talk was much like a negotiation, or a game. I might even compare our early conversations to the Japanese game of Go—the game that keeps old men staring for hours at a checkerboard of squares, cautiously maneuvering their smooth black and white stones. It was a game of psychology and power. Of conquering territory. Obaachan sat at her dining-room table in Melbourne, the Florida sun seeping in through the window and settling on her hands. She looked

intently at the blue-and-white tablecloth, with its orderly shapes and lines, and began sliding her left thumb back and forth across the right one. The sun flickered from one hand to the other. Her lips twisted from side to side, and she frowned.

“Why don’t you make it fiction?” she said at last, looking up at me and offering a sanguine little smile. “I could give you some information, and you could imagine the rest of it. You know, make it up.”

Fiction would be easier. From the pieces of information I’d gathered already, I felt convinced I could weave quite a story. I knew, for instance, that my grandmother was one of 112,000 Japanese-Americans who were displaced during the war. I knew that she was twenty years old when she was torn from her home in Los Angeles and shipped off to prison, and that she spent four months living in a barn at the Pomona Fairgrounds while the permanent camp in Wyoming was being finished. And I knew it was in prison that she met and married my grandfather, and gave birth to her first child, my uncle Charles. I knew, also, that after two years in that dusty Wyoming prison, she was desperate to leave, and did, when the opportunity came, but in doing so, missed the final days of her mother’s life—something she still seemed to feel guilty about. The components were there: the narrative tension, the conflict, the compelling characters. I could dream up the rest.

The problem was, I didn’t want to dream it up. I didn’t want to speculate and concoct. Instead, I wanted to hear that “true” story in my grandmother’s words, from her mouth. I wanted to see the way she told it: the way her fingers flexed or fiddled with something as she remembered an event, the way her eyes brightened or looked down. And there was more. In all of my recollections of childhood, my grandfather, Ojichan, stood in the forefront, looming, commanding, telling stories of his own life. Obaachan stood behind him, in silence. I wanted to give a voice to this woman, a person forced into quiet by the noise of those around her. Writing her story seemed a way to do that.

But writing someone’s story—especially the story of a loved one—is a task fraught with complexity. For starters, I recognized that the mere elasticity of language would not allow me to tell my grandmother’s story as it truly was, or is. It would, necessarily, be a reconstruction, infused with my own literary preferences and my own writerly tics. Also, while I was committed to telling Obaachan’s story as she told it to me, I knew that what she told me was itself shaped by decades of life that not only hindered the recollection of what had happened, but likely altered it as well. The space of sixty years takes its toll on the memory; like water, it smoothes and erodes and modifies the original shapes of things. Events jumble their order and grow hazy. Another person’s memories blend with your own. Names, colors, buildings, faces, the everyday smells and tastes are elusive, if not altogether absent. In the case of my grandmother, remembering proved particularly complicated. She had devoted sixty years to trying to forget—to shuffling the painful past to a corner of her mind where she couldn’t feel it, where it didn’t haunt her.

I realized, too, that my grandmother was only giving me part of the story. Her account was of course subjective—her mother, father, and my grandfather would all have their own versions of things—but in addition to that, Obaachan would intentionally leave things out, especially details that might seem uncomplimentary to my grandfather, or her siblings. In the end, I was really only reconstructing her reconstruction: I was working only with the details she could, or would, give me. And yet that reconstruction felt more authentic than a fictionalization.

I told her I felt strongly about trying to write her life as it really was.

Obaachan shrugged her shoulders at this, and held out her hands, palms up, empty. “But my life has been very boring, you see. I’m sure nobody wants to know about it.”

I explained to her then that in high school, in my American history textbook, there was a small half-page box on the left-hand side of the page that covered the internment camps the US government had built for the Japanese they forced out of the West Coast. In class we fluttered past that box and

marched through the rest of World War II. We absolutely discussed the December 7 bombing of Pearl Harbor, and we definitely spent some time going over Roosevelt's declaration of war, and more certainly we devoted some hours to Hitler and his camps. But we didn't talk about *our* camps.

"Some people don't even know it happened," I said, pausing, looking at her. "And they should know," I added, hoping that her sense of justice might convince her to speak, to say the difficult *yes*.

Still hesitant, she took a sip of coffee and then placed her mug carefully on the table. "Well," she said after a few moments, frowning a little bit, "if we do this, you can't use my real name. Or anyone else's either. I don't want people to be able to figure out it's me."

I nodded. Part of me worried that we were blurring that already messy line separating nonfiction from fiction, but at that point, names seemed a minor detail.

"I mean, everyone's still alive. Except your Ojichan. And my parents. But my brothers and my sister, my children, they're living. So you'll have to keep them out of it. You can't tell their stories. It's not my place to do that, to speak for them. It's not right."

I attempted, graciously, I hoped, to change her mind. "We can't tell your story without telling at least a little bit of theirs," I said. "People will want to know that both of your brothers served in the US military, that they stayed faithful in their commitment to the country, even when you and your parents were living as prisoners. They'll wonder where your sister and her family ended up, because they'll know that she wasn't with you in Wyoming. People will want to know," I told her. "And the story won't work if there are too many holes." At last we agreed on creating pseudonyms based on their initials, and we settled on sharing just a little bit—just enough to keep the story cohesive—about the siblings. The same rules would apply to my aunts and uncles as well.

Finally, after a good deal of this negotiating back and forth, my grandmother agreed. Year by year, memory by memory, as each one swam back to her, she passed them on to me. Her recollections were rarely in order, and on occasion we ended up looping back to rethink incongruent details. Together, we began the slow, cautious dance of reconstructing 1941 through 1945, the years that so profoundly shaped four generations of my family, years we had all tried to forget.

Chapter 1

OBAACHAN FILLS THE THERMOS WITH COFFEE AND THEN we head to the beach to have breakfast and see the sunrise, to watch it color the water gold as it spills over the Atlantic. At this hour, all of Melbourne banks and strip malls are still closed, and only a handful of cars sit in their parking lots. We drive over the wide Indian River, and I focus my eyes ahead, at the grass and trees, instead of peering out at the water's peaks and ripples. I've inherited my mother's unfortunate fear of bridges, and my palms grow clammy at the wheel as we cross the river. At last, we reach land, wait at a few stoplights, and pull into a public parking lot along the shore. It's overcast, and so there is no brilliant sunrise; there is only a long, deserted beach and burning wind and a wide, restless stretch of sea. Thermos and plastic bag in hand, we make our way to a worn wooden observation deck and settle on a bench. We take out the strawberry cobbler we made earlier in the week, which is soggy and too sweet, and which we've been eating incessantly, it seems, for three days now. My grandmother, clearly a product of the Great Depression, refuses to throw it away, even though she admits it's no good.

"Well, what exactly do you want to know?" she says slowly, opening the thermos and pouring herself a cup of steaming coffee. She replaces the lid and then turns to look out at the water. The bewildering straightforwardness, I am learning during my week with my grandmother, is one of her distinct characteristics, and it still catches me by surprise. She will keep quiet; she will not often press for details or demand that things go her way. She is perfectly content to listen without offering any advice. Yet at the same time, she seems to disapprove of tiptoeing around difficult issues once they present themselves. She believes in being direct, especially when she is ready to be direct.

Still, after three days of carefully probing and hinting at my desire to know about her past, I'm somehow unprepared for this sudden willingness to talk. Part of the problem is that I want to know everything. The sting of reading the signs that hung from storefronts and warned, in all capital letters, "JAPS KEEP OUT, YOU RATS!" The ingredients of the final meal the family shared before they left their home forever. The process of deciding which items to take with her, which possessions were important enough to carry all that way—or rather, which ones she could bear to leave behind. I want to know how she felt at this moment, and what she thought at another moment, and what she wore and heard and said and smelled and tasted. But we must begin somewhere, this mining of the memory, and now, after so much pleading for her to tell the story, I don't really know where to start.

Obaachan takes a bite of the strawberry cobbler and then places her plastic fork on a napkin beside her. Perhaps she senses the reasons behind my silence, or knows that I'm not sure what to say. Or perhaps it is sitting on the beach that stirs her, because as she looks out at the gray Atlantic, a memory comes to her, and with a hint of a smile, she begins. "When the four of us were young," she says hesitating, "we spent Sunday afternoons at the beach."

Their beach, that is: the only one they were allowed on, Brighton Beach. They weren't permitted to go to Venice Beach, or to Santa Monica Beach or to any of the other beaches in Los Angeles. Those were

hakujin beaches. Whites-only beaches.

Obaachan's Mama spent Saturday evenings preparing for the Sunday outing. She fried chicken in *teriyaki* sauce, and the strong scent of *shoyu* filled the house. She steamed rice and rolled it into tiny little spheres. She cut up cucumbers or some other fresh vegetable, and sometimes, on special occasions, she sliced watermelon. And then she packed all of it into her set of stackable square containers. They ate lunch right after arriving, and then they would swim or build sandcastles or play paddleball.

When night fell, Papa dug a pit and started a fire, and the family gathered around. The boys, Roy and Jack, found six sticks and shaved off the bark, then gave one to each person. Mama and Sachiko, Obaachan's older sister, unpacked the hot dogs they'd brought, and over the flames the meat would sizzle and spit. Papa told stories and the waves tumbled and snarled at their backs, and the salt dried in sinuous paths on their skin, and right there, in the balmy glow of the fire, Papa's face fell into a thousand lines of laughter.

This was long before the war, in the thirties. Long before Mama got sick and long before they lost everything and were forced out of Los Angeles. They were happy, the six of them. Never rich, but never hungry or in need. In that sense, they were better off than a lot of people during the Depression. Papa's job, at least to a degree, could be credited for this. He worked as a traffic director at a produce market and could bring home fresh vegetables and fruit each day. Obaachan's mother simply planned the family's meals around whatever he provided. At the market, farmers would drive their pickup trucks loaded with bushels of vegetables and fruit to the market and sell them to various vendors, who would then take the produce to grocery stores. Papa worked odd hours, getting up and leaving before three o'clock in the morning and working until lunchtime. He did this six days a week. Usually, he would use those precious hours while the children were still at school to sleep, and then he would spend evenings with the family.

Papa had come to America around 1910, and Mama, a "picture bride" whose parents had arranged the marriage back in Japan, arrived a few years later. Both of them were from Wakayama, a rural province known for its hot springs and temples. They wed in December of 1915, and eventually they saved up enough money to buy a house on a double lot in Los Angeles. They were from Japan, so they could not become citizens. The Naturalization Act of 1790 limited naturalized citizenship to "free whites," and although in 1868 the Fourteenth Amendment extended this to African Americans, it was not until 1954 that Asian immigrants could become naturalized citizens. California's 1913 Alien Land Law prohibited noncitizens from owning land, but Papa and Mama, like many Japanese families, sidestepped the stipulations of this law by deeding the house in the names of their children, who had been born in the United States and were therefore rightful citizens.

The house on Pico Street, a small frame house with a large covered front porch, sat on the back half of the lot. Papa transformed the front half of it into a botanical oasis, a haven in the midst of so much pavement. He poured himself into that garden, planting and watering, weeding and pruning. At the time of the evacuation, he had over thirty varieties of plants. Bamboo, camellias, wisteria, oleanders—all of them were, like so many other pieces of their life, left behind.

Obaachan shrugs, wrapping her fingers around the metal cup from the thermos and resting it on her knees. She takes a deep breath. "*Hakabanohana* is the name for oleander in Japanese. *Hakaban* means 'burial ground' and *hana* means 'flower.' So the actual word means 'burial flower.' Most Japanese consider them bad luck. But Papa liked them and planted them anyway." She smiles a little. "We were only superstitious sometimes."

In one of my grandmother's photographs, her father is standing in his garden, in front of a forsythia heavy with blossoms. He is wearing a dark three-piece suit, and he is holding his fedora hat suspended

above his head, as though greeting the person taking the picture. It's not an ostentatious gesture; it's more one of deference. Although he does not smile, his mouth is turned slightly upward, and his eyes are tranquil and kind. Even the black-and-white image captures a distinct air of dignity and composure. It is the only picture Obaachan has of her father in middle age, as she would have known him.

"We used to catch bees," she says, kicking her legs back and forth. On the wooden bench, her feet do not touch the ground. She watches a pair of gulls swing toward the water. "There were always so many of them, buzzing and swirling in the garden, and we'd wait with our glass jars and then scoop them right in, like this." She imitates the motion. "And fireflies, too."

She tells me that one of their neighbors, the tall man with strong black arms, grew tomato plants once, and that when he showed them to her from across the fence, she couldn't believe those full red fruits could grow on such spindly limbs. And that one year, Papa let her till up a spot of his garden to grow sweet corn. That her mouth watered every day when she inspected the tall plants, waiting for them to be ready, and that Papa had to tell her again and again, *wait*. From the way she talks about him, I can tell that Obaachan respected her father immensely, that she recalls him as fearless, strong, and wise. In another one of her photographs, Papa is seated beside his own father, and he stares indifferently, somberly, outward. And in a third photograph, Papa has the same serious expression only in that one, he is standing beside his new wife, who looks equally somber. They have probably just met.

"My father only had an eighth-grade education," Obaachan says, pulling her navy cardigan more tightly over her shoulders as the wind picks up, "but he knew so much. He could fix almost anything, and, well, he just seemed to understand how things worked."

Like many *Issei*, or first-generation, men, Papa had initially found work in America as a gardener for the wealthy. Before he was hired to direct trucks at the produce place, he simply walked from door to door, knocking and asking owners if they were in need of someone to help with the gardening. Many *hakujin* were interested in hiring Japanese gardeners, for people quickly realized that most of them were knowledgeable, hardworking, good with the land, and, most importantly, that their labor could be had at a low price. In fact, it did not take long for the Japanese to develop quite a reputation all along the West Coast for being capable farmers.

Their success with the land, however, came at a cost: many of their *hakujin* neighbors began to begrudge these accomplishments, and eventually, this bitterness blossomed into a general dislike of the Japanese as a race. In a March 9, 1905, article titled "The Yellow Peril: How the Japanese Crowd Out the White Race," one San Francisco *Chronicle* journalist wrote:

The market gardening industry has to some extent been occupied by the Chinese, but in the main it has been held by white men, mostly Europeans ... In some places this is rapidly passing to the Japanese, because their living expenses are nominal. With no idle mouths to feed they herd in old shacks, and can exist and lay up money where any white man will starve ...

It took very little time for such sour resentment to surface and, looking back at the history of Asians in the United States, it makes sense that the hostility with which the Japanese were received was merely a continuation of the anti-Asian sentiments that had existed for years. After all, the Japanese were not the first to experience such antipathy. The Chinese had come to America decades earlier, during the 1849 gold rush. Then, in the 1860s, more of them had followed, knowing they could find employment in the construction of the transcontinental railroad. Working at much cheaper rates than their white counterparts, the Chinese were viewed with antagonism. They were stealing jobs from white men. They "work[ed] cheap and smell[ed] bad" and were subhuman, as Professor Elmer Sandmeyer, attempting to describe how white Americans perceived Chinese immigrants, wrote in his 1939 study

titled *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California*. They were—as the 1879 California Constitution itself stated—“dangerous and detrimental to the well-being or peace of the state.”

This hostile mind-set toward the Chinese transferred easily to the Japanese. In 1884, after centuries of strictly closed borders, the emperor of Japan finally began allowing emigration to the United States and the Japanese came to America quickly, in great sweeps. By 1892, only a couple thousand Japanese had settled on the mainland, but Californian Denis Kearney, leader of the Workingman’s Party, ended a speech with this statement: “The Japs must go!” While Kearney’s call resonated with many Californians, it did little to curb immigration. Despite their poor reception, the Japanese continued pouring into California. By 1900, there were around twenty-five thousand Japanese living on the West Coast. That year, J. D. Phelan, the mayor of San Francisco, claimed, “The Chinese and Japanese are not bona fide citizens. They are not the stuff of which American citizens can be made ...”

Obaachan folds her hands and places them in her lap. “We certainly had our own separate spaces,” she says quietly. On the beach below, a jogger passes and nods to us in greeting. Obaachan slides her finger along the edge of the bench, tracing the grain of the wood. “At the movie theatres, there were two levels: the first floor, and a balcony. Mama used to take us to matinees, before she got sick. I don’t know if it was a law or if the studios just had a policy, but I know that I was always seated in the balcony, with the blacks and Mexicans, and other Japanese and Chinese, and that I never once sat on the first floor. Only the *hakujin* sat down there.”

There were similar rules with other public areas. The roller-skating rink was only open to Japanese on Sunday nights; they could not go any other day of the week. They were only permitted to use public tennis courts on Sundays as well. And they were not allowed to swim in public pools. “I remember that the *Rafu Shimpo*, the Japanese newspaper in LA, would have a large sports section on Mondays,” Obaachan says. “Only one day of the week because all the Japanese sporting events were held on Sundays. It was the only day we were allowed to use public areas for things like tennis.” She pauses, frowning, tapping her index finger on the wooden bench. “And we mostly shopped in Little Tokyo, not at very large department stores. We didn’t go in the smaller *hakujin* stores.”

As I listen to my grandmother talk, I cannot help noticing the contradiction—the odd and complicated problem of *what preceded what*. Japanese immigrants were not legally allowed to become citizens. They were not hired by white employers. They were not permitted to integrate into social spheres. And yet they were criticized by the public and the media for just that: for not fitting in, for keeping to themselves, for not being “bona fide citizens,” for not being *American*.

Perhaps not surprisingly, both the government and the media played a role in developing the notion of “the yellow peril.” In 1901, the United States Industrial Commission released a statement claiming that the Japanese were “... as a class tricky, unreliable, and dishonest.” The San Francisco *Chronicle*, arguably the most influential newspaper on the West Coast at the time, began a lengthy anti-Japanese campaign in February of 1903, seven years before my grandmother’s family had arrived in America. The campaign opened with this front-page streamer: “The Japanese Invasion, The Problem of the Hour.” The paper asserted that Japanese men were a danger to American women, and claimed that “every one of these immigrants ... is a Japanese spy.”

Obaachan looks at me, squinting a little as the wind blows more violently. Grains of sand tumble across the boardwalk, hissing against the wood. “But, you see, Mama and Papa worked very hard to instill a positive attitude in us children,” she says. “No matter what happened.” You didn’t complain about unfairness or inequality. You didn’t resent the hurtful or negative things that happened to you. You followed the rules. You didn’t resist. “There’s a word for it,” Obaachan says, “*shikataganai*.”

There are things that cannot be changed, and you don’t try to change them.

Shikataganai is a new word to me, and I wonder if it’s a word I will ever really understand. It lurches off the tongue in spasms of hard sounds: *k*, *t*, *g*. Its very notion feels un-American, that some

things are unchanging, or unchangeable. I am too much of an optimist—or maybe just too much product of the late-twentieth century—to accept this word the way my grandmother does. I consider all of this, frown, and take a sip of coffee.

“It’s a way of thinking,” Obaachan explains, watching me. She leans forward and crosses her legs at the ankles, her Easy Spirit tennis shoes clean and bright in the early morning gray. “It’s a saying that all Japanese told each other when something unfair was happening, like the laws, or the headlines that said everyone was a spy or that we were all sneaks. Even in the concentration camp, people would shrug their shoulders and say, ‘*Shikataganai*.’” She searches my face and senses that I don’t grasp that I fail to understand how a group of people could collectively embrace such an attitude. “You don’t get it because you were born so much later,” she says. “You have to remember, this was before the civil rights movement. We didn’t even know about rights. It wasn’t in our vocabulary. Everything was very different.”

Just five years before Obaachan’s father arrived, in 1905, the Asiatic Exclusion League was established, with the primary goal of halting immigration from Japan and even expelling the Japanese already established in California. The league, along with groups like the American Legion, the Native Sons of the Golden West, and the State Federation of Labor, pushed for a 1920 version of the Alien Land Law, which would prohibit the Japanese from accessing farmland altogether, whether by buying it or leasing it, regardless of whether or not they were citizens. Finally, under the provisions of the 1924 Immigration Act, it became illegal for people ineligible for citizenship—which meant, essentially, those of Asian descent—to immigrate at all to the United States. By that time, Obaachan’s parents had already settled on Pico Street and started their family.

A significant turning point in the movement to exclude the Japanese occurred on October 11, 1906, when the San Francisco School Board ordered all Japanese children to attend the segregated Oriental School, where Chinese children were required to go. Although this action went largely unnoticed in the United States, the Japanese press—and Japan—was outraged. The act violated a clause from the 1894 Commerce and Navigation treaty the two countries had signed, and the Japanese knew it. So did Theodore Roosevelt. He called the action “intemperate” and deemed Californians “idiots” for instigating an international conflict that reached far beyond the city limits of San Francisco. In an attempt to resolve the problem, Roosevelt, in what became known as the “Gentlemen’s Agreement,” eventually did the following: he convinced the school board to reinstate the Japanese students in their original schools; put an end to Japanese immigration to Mexico, Canada, and Hawaii; and persuaded the Japanese government to stop issuing passports to laborers. The Gentlemen’s Agreement, then, achieved precisely what the exclusionists had been pushing for: it slowed down the tide of immigration.

“I know you have trouble understanding,” Obaachan says slowly, “but it never occurred to me to feel upset about the way the *hakujin* thought of us, or to complain about how we were treated.” She pauses, fiddling with a button on her sweater. “We understood that we were not part of their world.”

Obaachan turns toward the ocean and watches the water froth and sputter as it crashes below. Far away, where the water meets the sky, a boat passes. “Besides,” she says softly, “we had our own family struggles to worry about. Things that seemed more pressing. My spinal meningitis. I was just a small girl when I got it. Seven, maybe eight years old.”

She was quarantined at the hospital, unable to see her parents or siblings, and she vividly remembers the morning when the doctor and nurses came in to draw spinal fluid with a long needle. “They thought I might die,” she whispers. But, after a few days, she was sent home and told to stay in bed for a week. Everything seemed fine until one afternoon, when she picked up the telephone, held it to her left ear, and couldn’t hear the voice on the other end. Because the hearing loss was only in one ear, she hadn’t even realized what had happened.

“It’s not a big deal, being deaf in one ear,” she says with a shrug. “I just can’t hear as well in a group of people, like when the whole family gets together, or when someone talks very quietly. If they’re sitting on the wrong side, it’s hard for me to hear what they’re saying.”

I can’t help but wonder if my grandmother’s quietness all these years might stem, at least in part, from this hearing issue. Combined with her shyness and my grandfather’s spirited and garrulous nature, it’s no wonder Obaachan rarely joined a conversation.

“More than my own sickness, though,” she continues, “was my mother’s illness. That was much more, well, much more of an upset to our family life.”

Obaachan had just turned thirteen when her mother learned she had an irregular heartbeat. With that diagnosis, Mama essentially became an invalid and was confined to her bed. Up to that point, she had been an active mother, playing with the children, taking them to matinees and the city library, cooking, cleaning, and attending to all the household duties. When she was warned by her doctors that she needed to limit her activities to avoid straining her weak heart, however, all of this came to an end. There were no more family outings on Sunday afternoons or after school, and the daughters had to take over Mama’s chores at the house.

For Obaachan’s sister, the transition was not that momentous. Sachiko was five years older, and, at eighteen, had finished high school. She’d already negotiated those difficult years when the body stretches and swells, when new colors drop from it, when new aches weigh it down. Sachiko spent her days working as a cashier at a nearby Japanese grocery store and devoted her evenings to sewing. Beamed over at the kitchen table, straining and concentrating beneath the tepid glow of the overhead light, she measured and cut, pinned and then stitched together the fabrics. She was making herself a new wardrobe. She had a life, an existence that was about to extend itself beyond the small world of her parents.

For Obaachan, though, the changes brought on by Mama’s illness were much more challenging. She was younger and more in need of maternal support. Every afternoon, right after school, she headed straight to her parents’ bedroom, knocked on the door, and then entered when Mama called her in. She seated herself on the edge of the bed and talked about her day. Funny stories from math class. That girl got in trouble for passing a note. How the social studies teacher, the one with lovely blonde hair, had married a World War I flying ace over the weekend, and how she had pasted his photograph on the bulletin board and told the class her last name was different now.

Mama was a good listener, but talking to her as she lay solemn and corpselike on her bed was not the same as it had once been. Before, Mama would listen to these stories from school, nodding and smiling, but also bustling about the kitchen, chopping a *daikon*, and then interrupting to ask for some fresh bamboo shoots from Papa’s garden. The new Mama, the one who called out cooking instructions from her bed in a weak and raspy voice as the girls moved obediently about the kitchen, was different. Obaachan felt as though she were on the verge of losing something. The way it feels when you’re caught between childhood and adulthood. When you wish for what is past but know you must move on.

Obaachan shakes her head sheepishly and then tells me that it was around this time that she decided to change her name.

“Not change it legally or anything,” she adds, brushing her hands on her white cotton capris. “I made up a nickname. Or—what’s the word?—a pseudonym of sorts.”

I give her a confused look.

She smiles, a little mysterious, a little embarrassed. “Let me explain.”

One of her hobbies was filling out forms for free samples. In magazines, or in line at the grocery store, there were forms for these from various companies that could be filled out and mailed in. “Co-

cream, or a new shade of lipstick, or rouge. You just wrote your name and address on the little card, sent it in, and then, maybe nine or ten weeks later, you'd have a free sample in the mail." She didn't have money to spend on lipsticks or lotions. Nobody did. It was, she reminds me, the Great Depression.

"It was my friend Aiko who gave me the idea," Obaachan says. "She always entered contests and would come up with jingles or taglines, and she told me that whenever she did that, she changed her name to sound Polish. And so one day, I just decided that I didn't want to use my real name when I requested the samples. So I filled in the same mailing address but listed my name as Grace Komak."

I ask her why she decided to do this, and it takes her a moment to answer. She picks up her mug, holds it out over the edge of the deck, and flicks her wrist to empty the remaining drops of coffee into the sand. She wraps a napkin around our plastic forks, which she will take home and reuse, and places them in the bag.

"My name sounded too Japanese," she says with a shrug, turning away from me, brushing off the question. But I sense from her guarded response that this decision was more momentous than she lets on, that somehow, though she won't admit it, there was *haji* in this act.

Chapter 2

EVERY NIGHT, OBAACHAN CHECKS THE LOCAL NEWS TO learn what time the sun will rise the next morning and then sets her alarm clock accordingly so that she can see it on her morning walk. The following day, my fourth in Florida, I hear her stirring, and I squint at the clock: 6:43 a.m. She calls to me from outside the closed bedroom door, and I tell her I'm up. I'd rather sleep for a few more hours, but there's something shameful about rolling out of bed after my octogenarian grandmother has already walked two miles, seen the sunrise, swept the courtyard, made breakfast, and read an editorial in *Time* magazine. Besides, if I want to get to know her better—and get her to tell more of her story—I've got to meet her on her terms. I force myself out of bed and get dressed.

Outside, the pavement is steaming from an overnight rain. Though it's barely seven o'clock, Obaachan's neighbors, mostly retirees, are up, walking for exercise, stooping at trees in their front yards and tugging at weeds, wheeling their trash down their driveways in giant beige garbage cans. I imagine some of them have been up for hours, sipping black coffee at their kitchen tables, waiting for dawn.

"Good morning, Elsa," Obaachan calls to the statuesque woman watering a hibiscus with giant red blossoms. The woman waves and saunters to the end of her driveway, her watering can resting against her hip. She says hello in a thick, throaty accent, then frowns, reaching out and squeezing my grandmother's hand. "I haven't seen you for a few days. I was worried. I'm glad you're all right." Elsa knows Obaachan lives alone at the end of the street, and that none of her children are nearby, and like a good neighbor, she keeps an eye on her. Elsa lets go of Obaachan and shifts to another subject. "Well, I saw on the news it's going to be hot today. That's why I'm out here early. I can't take the heat." She shakes her head and smiles. Elsa is tall and slender, and her hair is still a little bit blonde. I can tell that she was, in her younger years, quite attractive.

"How's Frank?" Obaachan asks.

Elsa sighs and shrugs her shoulders. She moves the watering can around as she speaks. "He's the same, I guess. Sometimes he remembers, sometimes not." She adjusts her white visor nervously and turns to me. "This must be your granddaughter," she says, as if she has suddenly realized I'm present. She moves in to shake my hand. Obaachan nods and offers an introduction. Elsa's fingers are lean and strong against mine. "Your grandmother has been talking about you for weeks."

I smile and make conversation, tell her I'm in my second year of college, that I'm majoring in English, that yes, I have a boyfriend named Chris, and that no, I don't know what I will do when I graduate. I say how lovely the weather is here in Florida, compared to Pennsylvania, where I've always lived. Elsa nods with interest, studying my face with her blue eyes, smiling at the word boyfriend. I wonder what my grandmother has told her about me in the preceding weeks, since, for most of my life, our relationship has consisted of seeing each other for a weeklong visit, once a year, and since the last time I saw her was when she came to visit over Christmas when I was a senior

high school. Our correspondence has been limited: she mails me birthday and Christmas cards, and send her thank-you notes.

After a few minutes, Obaachan tells Elsa in her sweet, matter-of-fact way that we ought to be going that we're exercising. When we've walked far enough past Elsa's house, Obaachan leans toward me and whispers, "Elsa's a war bride from Germany. Her husband, Frank, was stationed there when the met." We pass a small lake and a turtle scuttles in, disappearing. "She often says snide remarks about Jewish people," Obaachan adds, smacking her lips and shaking her head in disapproval. "It's hard to believe, but after all these years, she still feels hate." After all these years. It occurs to me that here, in this slow, quiet neighborhood where every house is painted the same shadowy shade of peach, and where each perfect St. Augustine lawn stretches out in magnificent bright green, somebody might have Obaachan, too. That somebody, perhaps the man who has floated past us on his bicycle, or maybe the gray-haired woman checking her mail, hasn't left the hatred from six decades ago behind. I think of all the headlines, posters, and pamphlets from the war, of the pictures I've been coming across in books, and I realize that just as Elsa has not been able to forget entirely the speeches and slogans from her childhood in Germany, there may be American neighbors here in Melbourne who hold on to those ideas from decades before.

In the two years prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor, life on Pico Street began to change for Obaachan's family. In 1939 Obaachan's sister met and married a Japanese man. "He was so good looking," Obaachan gushes, grinning. "He was one of the most handsome Japanese men I had ever met." She would have been eighteen at her sister's wedding, and her new brother-in-law would have been twenty-four. After the war, she saw him only a handful of times, and thus remembers him as a young man, so I suppose it's not surprising that her initial impression is so lasting, and that she remembers him with such girlish zeal.

"My sister moved out to live with her new husband," Obaachan says as we turn out of her neighborhood and cross the street. "A Japanese woman did not have many options back then. You could get married and have children. Or you might serve as a clerk, although only at a Japanese store—getting hired at a *hakujin* place was unheard of. And maybe, if you were really lucky, you might land a civil service job." She smiles, as if calculating how much has changed since then. "That was the most ambitious thing we would hope for: working for the civil service. You know, typing or doing accounting work."

Japanese families invested in their sons, and Obaachan's was no different. Although her sister Sachiko, was the oldest, and perhaps the smartest and most driven, she was still a daughter, which meant that her parents would not spend money educating her. Ren was the second oldest, but the first son; his parents sent him to college. In May of 1941, he graduated from the University of Southern California as a pharmacist, passed the civil service exam, and got a job at Fresno Air Force Base. His parents had perhaps never been prouder. And then there was Obaachan, the demure middle child, and then Jack, the youngest, the little brother. He was the athlete, the family daredevil, the adventurous one.

"When I had a family of my own, I insisted that the daughters have all the same opportunities as the sons. That was one of the few things I put my foot down about with your grandfather," Obaachan explains. She slows her pace a little, looking at the ground. "I didn't want them to be like me."

What Obaachan does not tell me right then is that in the fall of 1941, she had applied, taken entrance exams, and been accepted at Los Angeles City College. She could attend for free, and since her parents would not have to fund her education, they supported the decision. They were happy to have her continue staying at home while she took classes. By that point she was the only one of the children who still lived with them, and at the time, her mother's care rested completely on her.

shoulders. Her father still worked long, odd hours at the produce market, and could only help certain times, so Obaachan alone handled the cooking, cleaning, and shopping for her parents.

After graduating from high school, she had spent two years at home, not working but taking care of her ailing mother, and during that time she'd decided she wanted to go to college. She admits she was not sure what exactly she wanted to do with a college degree, but she recognized the link between choices and education. She knew she had little time before she'd be expected to marry and start a family, and at twenty, she wanted options. The opportunity to attend school for free seemed a remarkable blessing: it was her path out of living with her parents forever, being pushed into an arranged marriage, or working as a clerk in Little Tokyo for the rest of her life. Plus, because going to college had always been something so entirely out of reach for her, it was even more desirable. Obaachan started classes in January of 1942, but her goal of earning a college degree would never come to fruition. She didn't even finish a semester.

"We knew that a war was going on," Obaachan says, sliding her hands into the pockets of her cardigan. A runner, a woman in an all-pink Nike outfit, approaches on the walking path, and we switch to single file to allow her to pass. Obaachan continues. "I mean, my family listened to the reports on the radio. My Papa was the type of person who liked to stay informed. We knew that Japan had invaded China, and that it had formed an alliance with Germany and Italy. And we'd heard about the Nazis, how they had invaded Poland and Greece and Yugoslavia and many other places. It seemed like everyone was invading and bombing everyone else." She looks down and rubs at her knuckles. "But none of it had felt close. At least not for me."

Perhaps Obaachan's parents understood the events that were shaping the world in those years before Japan bombed Pearl Harbor better than she did. They had friends and family back in Japan and likely corresponded with them through letters, so they may have suspected that the war would eventually make its way to America. Obaachan herself remembers that in the thirties, a neighbor on Pico Street, a wild-eyed old man with fluffy white hair, predicted a war between the United States and Japan. Her parents, however, seemed unconcerned about their neighbor's ravings, nor did they express any anxiety about Japan's military decisions or the war in Europe. My grandmother, trained to follow her parents' moves and responses, shrugged off her old neighbor's prophecies—he was strange and slightly crazy, anyway—and thought little of the news reports on the radio each evening.

After all, for Obaachan, world geography would have been an altogether different concept than it had been for me. As a child, I leafed through color photographs in my parents' collection of *National Geographic* magazines and dreamed of traveling to exotic places when I grew up. I sensed, too, even as a kid, that doing so was within reach. For my grandmother, on the other hand, the European names and places she heard on her parents' shortwave radio were likely nothing more than words she had memorized in a high school history course. While she could identify the countries on a map, she knew nothing about them or their people. As a Japanese American living in the 1930s, she realized she wouldn't go to any of those places. They would never be anything but faraway locations, interesting for their architecture and sculptures, maybe, but nothing beyond that.

"I'd only left the United States one time, when my family went to Japan. I was very young," Obaachan says, and then she points out that we have reached the halfway point in our morning walk—exactly one mile, according to her calculations. We pause here. My grandmother has planned her walk perfectly. Just as we finish up this first leg of our trek, the sun peers over the horizon, lighting up the bright facades of stucco houses, casting long shadows across the grass. A light breeze lifts the fronds of a palm tree beside the path. We turn around and head back the way we came.

"I don't remember much about that trip to Japan," Obaachan continues. Her memories consist of scattered images. An endless float across the Pacific in a great gray ship. Having dinner at a restaurant in Wakayama. Meeting her mother's family, the quiet group of people she would never see again.

Papa had stayed home to work and take care of the house, so it was only Mama and the four children who made the trip. “I was maybe seven years old. So you see,” Obaachan explains, slowing her pace a little and using her hands for emphasis, “Japan was never home to me. It was only a place I had visited as a kid. Los Angeles was the only home I knew. I was born there. I was an American citizen. I was very aware that I was Japanese, of course, but I was a Japanese *American*. For us, there was no difference.” But, as my grandmother was about to find out, for many Americans, there was no difference at all.

December 7, 1941, began much like every other Sunday for Obaachan’s family. They woke up, had breakfast, and then walked to the morning service at the small Japanese Christian church near the home. When the service ended, they gathered with the rest of the congregation on the front steps to chat, just as they had done for years. Obaachan talked to some friends about heading to a matinee to see *The Maltese Falcon*, which had just premiered in October. And then, amid their laughter and planning—frantic shouts. A middle-aged man ran up the sidewalk, waving his arms and calling for attention. He slowed at the bottom of the steps, stopped to catch his breath, then panted out the news: Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor.

Panic erupted. Obaachan’s family collected themselves and hurried home in a fog of confusion. They spent the afternoon huddled around the shortwave radio in the living room, listening to the accounts, sorting through the details, taking on the weight of what had happened. Papa sipped his black coffee and sat in his favorite chair, leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees. Mama listened from her bed, lying on her side and watching her husband’s face through the bedroom doorway. Obaachan stood in the corner of the room, taking it all in, her hands folded at her waist.

“Like I told you, none of it had felt close, at least not for me,” Obaachan says softly. “I was only twenty, so maybe I was just uninformed or foolish. To me, all those names and places, the invasions—all of it was so far away.”

And then suddenly, the war was there: trickling in through the radio, filling the house on Piccadilly Street. Obaachan says she wasn’t afraid that day, at least not for herself, or for her family, or for the Japanese Americans. She understood that what had happened involved the two countries that most affected her, that composed her identity, but she did not consider the possibility that the United States retaliation would also be aimed at the Japanese living on American soil. Mostly, she was shocked and sad. She imagined the thundering sounds of the bombs, the fiery chaos, the cries of terror. She shivered at the thought of so much destruction.

Obaachan may have been naïvely oblivious to what lay ahead for her and the other 110,000 people of Japanese descent living on the West Coast. (The West Coast was eventually deemed a “military zone,” which gave the government grounds for evacuation, but those Japanese who lived elsewhere in the United States were never removed from their homes.) Obaachan’s father, however, may have had an intuition of what the future would hold. He said nothing at all about it that afternoon. Instead, he sat in grim silence, listening over and over to the reports on the radio, and it seemed that during the course of that day, he developed two tiny indentations on his forehead, one above each eyebrow, like the marks left by a hoe splitting the earth.

It turned out that the bombing of Pearl Harbor was only Japan’s first step in a well-planned series of assaults. Within twenty-four hours, it launched attacks on Malaya, Hong Kong, Guam, the Philippines, Wake Island, and Midway Island. The morning after the initial bombing, President Roosevelt explained all of this in his “Day of Infamy” speech and declared war on Japan. In doing so, the United States entered World War II: three days later, the country was officially at war with Germany and Italy as well. On Monday, December 8, Obaachan’s brother Ren went to work at his pharmacy and was asked, without explanation, to resign from his position at Fresno Air Force Base. In a single day, he

schooling, testing, and hard work were stripped from him. No longer welcome on base, he returned to Los Angeles, and moved back into his parents' house. Two months later, he would be drafted into the US Army, and leave for basic training in Arkansas.

Obaachan's family chose not to view Ren's losing his job as an insult. They chose also to accept without bitterness the irony of his being drafted just a few months after Fresno had asked him to leave. Above all things, her family, like many Japanese Americans at the time, wished to demonstrate their patriotism to the United States. If it meant resigning from a job without a fuss, that's what should be done. If it meant being drafted and fighting in the American military, a person should be willing to go. When Ren was drafted, he had no way of knowing that his sisters and parents would soon be shipped off to spend the entirety of World War II behind barbed wire, but even if he had, my grandmother insists, he would have done the very same thing. Jack, Obaachan's younger brother, was also anxious to show his patriotism: shortly after Pearl Harbor was bombed, he enlisted in the US Army and eventually became a paratrooper.

I struggle to understand this painful sense of duty and devotion. Had it been my own brother who lost his hard-earned military job and then been forced to join a different branch of the military, I would have been livid. I would have tried to convince him he deserved better. I would have told him he shouldn't go off to basic training, that he owed the military nothing. Why should he risk his life for a country that had deserted him? Why did no one in her family try to stop either brother? How could they have been so blindly patriotic? And why is it that I can only see their loyalty as irrational and even lamentable?

These are questions I cannot sort out aloud, and issues I cannot take up with Obaachan. She would feel criticized somehow, and, more importantly, misunderstood. She would smack her lips in the disapproving way and shake her head in frustration. And because she believed at the time that it was her duty as an American citizen to get hauled out of Los Angeles without a complaint, my failure to sympathize and understand might even seem to belittle what she sacrificed. She might shut down, and refuse to tell me the rest of her story. So I keep these thoughts to myself. I must tread with caution through the trail of memory we are following, or I could lose it altogether. Obaachan could close the door and let the dust settle over these years once more, and leave me with no way of knowing what happened.

In Florida, later that afternoon, Obaachan steps from the house and into the courtyard, where I am stretched out on a chaise lounge, dozing off, a worn copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* in hand. She shuffles past me and inspects the bird-of-paradise, bright orange and purple, arcing just above her head. She stands on her tiptoes and peers out at the cul-de-sac, then turns around, announces that she is heading to the library, and asks if there is anything she can pick up for me. I shake my head.

"When will you be back?" I ask. It is a question I have inherited from my parents, one they've always asked. A nervous question.

She shrugs, frowning, mildly irritated. "I won't be long. It's not far. You don't need to be concerned. Like I told your mother, I don't want to be on a schedule for other people." She smiles a little then, a half apology for her impatience, and asks me again if I want her to pick up a book or a movie. The library loans DVDs, she explains, pronouncing each letter carefully, and she has a DVD player that she has figured out how to use. I tell her I don't need anything. She walks to the garage and climbs into her silver Toyota, a gift she has recently received from her youngest son, my uncle Jay. It is the first new car she has ever owned.

That night, when I call my mother, I tell her about the conversation in the courtyard. She sighs and attempts to explain my grandmother's response. Don't take it personally, she insists, her voice firm and soothing. (My mother is much tougher than I and rarely takes anything personally. Of course she knows this difference between us, and feels she must try to convince me not to be hurt.) Once, when

she was visiting Obaachan, she explains, she had pressed my grandmother in a similar way, for an estimated time of return.

Obaachan shook her head in frustration. There was no need to worry; she was fine on her own. My mother, in one final attempt to get a return time, tried reminding my grandmother that she was eighty years old.

“Yes,” Obaachan replied, “and for the first time in my life, I can go anywhere I want without having to answer to someone, without having to keep checking my watch. Your father always kept me on schedule. We had to have dinner at a certain hour. We had to water the garden at a specific time. And when he was sick, it was even worse. There were only ninety minutes on each oxygen tank. Every time I left the house, I had to keep track of those minutes. And every time I came home, I’d hope that he hadn’t somehow made a mistake. That he wouldn’t have run out of air. So don’t ask me when I’ll be home, please. I don’t have to be home for anybody these days, not the government, not my husband, and not even you. And that’s the way I like it.”

On the phone my mother tells me again that I have to decide not to take it personally. “Your grandmother has been ordered around her whole life,” she says. “Where to go, when to be home. She was never free to do what she wanted, not until recently. Picture yourself in her shoes, honey. Try to understand.”

Three days before Christmas of 1941, *Life* magazine ran an article titled “How to Tell Japs from the Chinese.” The article presented photographs of two men, one Japanese and one Chinese, placed side by side. There were arrows drawn with handwritten notes describing the differences in the facial features of the two men. My grandmother’s family did not have the money to subscribe to magazines, and Mama and Papa did not read English, so they would not have had this issue in their home. However, Obaachan walked around Los Angeles all the time, and she would have passed newsstands on the streets downtown, and seen articles like this. I imagine she cringed at the photographs and notes. It was hard not to feel *haji* when she saw these things and let the hate of those words sink in.

However, aside from a handful of upsetting articles and headlines, life did not drastically change in those early weeks after Pearl Harbor, at least not for those Japanese who, like my grandmother, were American citizens. Other than being prohibited from leaving the country—which was, of course, a significant violation of their freedom—their constitutional rights had not yet been curtailed. But the *Issei*, or first-generation Japanese, faced a different situation. Obaachan’s parents were *Issei*. Born in Japan and not legally permitted to become naturalized citizens, they were now “enemy aliens” living in a country that was at war with their homeland. And because they were enemy aliens, the government froze their bank accounts and other liquid assets. In more ways than one, they were trapped.

And yet, on Christmas morning, Obaachan’s family celebrated as they always had: they exchanged a few small gifts and went to church. The pastor read from the book of Luke, and the children collected their tiny white boxes of chocolate on their way out the front door. New Year’s, too, for them was much like it had been in years past. For Japanese families, New Year’s was a much more significant holiday than Christmas. The observance of Christmas had been adopted in America; it was a Christian holiday that they hadn’t celebrated in their home country. New Year’s, on the other hand, involved much older traditions, and was a day steeped in generations of customs.

Obaachan spent most of New Year’s Day orchestrating her family’s dinner, just as she had the previous two years. Her mother, still wanting to be a part of the event, lay on her bed, calling out questions and instructions. Preparing the *tai*, or snapper, was a tedious ordeal. First, the body of the fish had to be slit with a sharp knife to ensure that the oven heat would penetrate it evenly. Then the tail had to be curved back into an arch and made to stick up in the air. It was fastened between two

slices of *daikon* with a toothpick. The ridges of the fin were separated, and again, a *daikon* was placed on either side.

Obaachan also cooked black soybeans with *shoyu* and sugar, plus red adzuki beans. She made *sushi* by steaming the rice and mixing in the sugar and vinegar, then fanning it to give it a sheen. She knelt in Papa's garden and cut bamboo shoots, then carefully sliced them and added them to the carrots and a little *imo* potatoes, which she cooked with *dashi*, a soup base that gave it a rich flavor. For dessert there was *mochi*, the bulbous rice flour pastry that Obaachan had purchased the day before at a Japanese grocery store. And of course, all of the food was accompanied with *sake*.

But the meal was only one aspect of the holiday. For Obaachan's family, New Year's was not a time for drinking champagne and making a whimsical list of resolutions. It was a day for reflecting, for thinking about the year that had passed. It was also a time for looking ahead to the future. All disputes were to be settled, and all debts paid. These were not things to be carried into the New Year like baggage; they weighed people down and prevented them from living fully.

In this spirit of forgiveness and renewal, Japanese families visited friends and neighbors. Because she was confined to her bed, Mama could not participate in much of the holiday, and out of respect for her, very few people came to the house, preferring to give her her privacy. But Papa made his rounds, cruising through the neighborhood to wish the families he knew a happy year to come. It was a day of new beginnings. A day of hope.

Through the 1941 holiday season, however, a degree of uncertainty must have hung over the celebrations. Although my grandmother's family cooked the same traditional meals and participated in the same customs they always had, at the back of their minds, they had to be wondering what the year 1942 had in store for them. After all, they knew that many Japanese families had not been so fortunate as to spend December without trouble. While none of their close friends were affected, Obaachan and her parents learned of what was happening on their radio, in the *Rafu Shimpu* newspaper, and through the stories that circulated around the community with increasing frequency. All along the West Coast, Japanese fishing vessels were intercepted by officers of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The fishermen were escorted to land and questioned; some were arrested. Community leaders, Buddhist priests, teachers—essentially anyone in a leadership position in the community—could be considered suspicious. Across Los Angeles, houses were searched by armed men in the middle of the night, and husbands and brothers were handcuffed and hauled off without explanation. Overall, around seven thousand individuals were arrested in this initial roundup.

Friends of my grandmother's family began getting rid of belongings that might imply disloyalty: paintings from Japan, for example, or tiny statues of Buddha. They also draped American flags from their porches, hung pictures of great patriots like Washington and Lincoln on their walls, and posted signs that claimed in bold capital letters, "I AM AN AMERICAN" in their storefronts. Obaachan's family had few relics from Japan, so they had little to take down or throw away. There was the statue of the emperor her mother placed in the living room for holidays. The emperor was a religious figure as much as a political one, but certainly, having a statue of the Japanese ruler in the home could have been misconstrued as treasonous. The family also had a set of painted dolls that were set up on display on Girls' Day, March 3, and Boys' Day, May 5. (Japanese believe even numbers to be bad luck and avoid them with great effort, hence the odd-numbered dates of these holidays. My mother, who claims to disdain all acts of superstition, still insists on making three or five *sushi* rolls, not four or six.)

For the most part, however, the attempts of the Japanese to show loyalty to America were disregarded. As New Year's shifted into mid-January and then February, *hakujin* paranoia and anger heightened. The flags, portraits, and signs were insignificant. Citizenship, too, became irrelevant. What mattered was the dark hair and slanted eyes—and the treachery assumed to be behind those eyes. Soon, my grandmother's family would realize just how little their patriotism mattered to the

hakujin who controlled their fate.

In fact, with each passing day of 1942, it became more and more impossible to ignore the brewing hostility and anxiety that many California whites felt toward their Japanese neighbors. General John L. DeWitt, the newly appointed commander of the Western Defense Command, the man who eventually orchestrated the mass evacuation, made it clear how he felt about all people of Japanese descent: “A Jap’s a Jap. It makes no difference whether he is an American citizen or not.” Similar sentiments were reflected all across the media—and my grandmother, if not her parents, would have read the headlines and heard the accounts. Henry McLemore, a syndicated newspaper columnist, told his readers:

I am for immediate removal of every Japanese on the West Coast to a point deep in the interior. I don’t mean a nice part of the interior either. Herd ’em up, pack ’em off and give ’em the inside room in the badlands. Let ’em be pinched, hurt, hung and dead up against it ... Personally, I hate the Japanese. And that goes for all of them.

A journalist in Obaachan’s city echoed these feelings in the *Los Angeles Times* on February 2: “A viper is nonetheless a viper wherever the egg is hatched. So a Japanese-American ... grows up to be Japanese, not an American.” And on February 12, Fletcher Bowron, the mayor of my grandmother’s beloved hometown, said, in a special radio broadcast in honor of Lincoln’s birthday, “There isn’t a shadow of a doubt but that Lincoln, the mild-mannered man whose memory we regard with almost saintlike reverence, would make short work of rounding up the Japanese and putting them where they could do no harm.” With so many prominent individuals making such strong pronouncements, it was only a matter of time before action was taken against the Japanese living on the West Coast.

In the early months of 1942, the authorities started urging Japanese families to leave their West Coast homes and move east, away from the volatile Pacific. They called it a “voluntary evacuation,” implying that those folks who chose to leave would be doing so for their own safety. But, with their financial resources frozen, how were these Japanese, whose mere appearance by this point had so frightened and enraged many *hakujin* Americans, supposed to relocate and start over? How much success would they find in wandering into, say, an Oklahoma town, and attempting to open a business and buy a house? They seemed to be doomed from the start. Still, despite their poor odds, around nine thousand of them did attempt to follow the government’s recommendations, packing up their vehicles with essentials and heading east.

Obaachan’s family did not try this voluntary evacuation. Instead, they stayed put, which, it turned out, was for the best. Those families who attempted to leave on their own were met with hostility, and all across Los Angeles, accounts of failed attempts were whispered about and passed along. My grandmother no doubt heard these stories. In her neighborhood, she could have learned of someone who’d been forced back by armed posses at the border of Nevada. At the store down the street, tales of others who’d been locked up overnight by nervous local officials. And in Little Tokyo, a story of a young man who’d been refused fuel by three gas stations, and who’d eventually turned back with his wife.

Having realized that the voluntary evacuation had not panned out as they’d hoped, the government began formulating alternative plans. On March 2, General John L. DeWitt declared the entire West Coast a military zone. A few weeks later, on March 27, the Five-Mile Curfew was enacted. Although the curfew technically applied to all enemy aliens living in that military zone—that is, the Germans and Italians, along with the Japanese—it was easier to enforce it on the Japanese. They looked different, and so were an easy target, whereas the Germans and Italians blended in with most other *hakujin*.

Essentially, the curfew was a set of rules regulating when and where enemy aliens could go. It restricted them from traveling beyond a five-mile radius of their homes unless they were going to

from their place of employment, or evacuating from the military zone. The curfew also mandated that enemy aliens never leave their homes between the hours of 9:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. Obaachan's father, who left for work at the produce market during these forbidden hours, was supposedly safe as long as he could prove he was going to work by showing the appropriate papers. But if, for some reason, he seemed suspicious, or if he'd failed to provide sufficient evidence of his shift hours and place of employment, he would've been arrested. His family would not have been told where he'd been taken.

Obaachan's Papa prided himself on being a law-abiding man, though, so he stressed the importance of obeying the rules, even if they seemed unnecessary or unfair. In fact, he never said whether or not he agreed with the laws; he simply emphasized the value of respecting them. "A nation cannot thrive if people decide to create their own rules," he'd told his children when they were young. "Your mother and I chose to move to this country, and we must be willing to follow its laws." He and Mama had taken great care to raise their family with this mind-set.

The Five-Mile Curfew, while inconvenient, did not do much to hinder my grandmother's existence, and it was relatively easy for her and her family to adjust to its demands. Mama, with her hearing condition, rarely left the house to begin with. Papa simply had to make sure he had the appropriate paperwork with him on his way to and from work. Obaachan would not have dared to venture out into the dark alone anyway. It was far too dangerous, and she was far too timid to risk being a victim of one of the random assaults on Japanese she kept hearing about on her daytime trips to Little Tokyo.

Shortly after the Five-Mile Curfew was passed, though, a more troubling announcement was made: all people of Japanese ancestry were to go to the police and hand in their guns, swords, and shortwave radios. Whereas most people did not put up much of a fuss regarding the Five-Mile Curfew, at least not those my grandmother knew, this new decree created more of a stir. Back then, listening to the radio was the best way to learn what was going on outside the local area. For Obaachan's parents, the shortwave radio was a vital connection to the world because it could pick up stations from Japan, which of course featured announcers who spoke their native language. Unable to understand or read much English, her parents depended on the reports they picked up on that radio, their primary means of staying up to date on the world's news.

However, as soon as Obaachan's father learned about the order to hand in all weapons and radios, he pulled the plug of his radio from the wall. Without a word of frustration, he wrapped the cord into neat folds and secured it to the back of the radio with a piece of brown twine. He grabbed his fedora hat—the one he wore in the winter months, tucked the radio under his arm, and headed for the police station to turn it in.

Though few Japanese families possessed guns and even fewer owned swords, those who did have a *samurai* sword hanging on a living-room wall were forced to give up something of great sentimental value. Obaachan's family did not have any—they were not from that social class—but she was still aware of the significance of these swords. In addition to their monetary value, *samurai* swords were family heirlooms. In Japan, the *samurai* always came from the highest social class, and so having a sword to hang on the wall was not only a piece of history but also a status symbol, a reminder of the family's high social rank in the old land.

A few *Nisei*, or second-generation Japanese, mostly young men educated in American universities, pointed out in *Rafu Shimpō* editorials that as US citizens, they had the right to bear arms according to the Constitution. The government ignored the argument, which did not inspire protests or civil disobedience on the part of Japanese Americans or their neighbors. And things were only going to get worse. By March 30, the option of evacuating voluntarily came to an end; General DeWitt announced that all people of Japanese ancestry were strictly prohibited from leaving the military zone. They were ordered to stay put until "arrangements" were made.

Chapter 3

ON MY SECOND TRIP TO FLORIDA, A YEAR LATER, Obaachan announces that to celebrate my twenty-third birthday, she is taking me to a Thai restaurant a few miles south of her house, a place she has been to once and thinks I will like. We are seated on a second level, one that allows a bird's-eye view of the entire restaurant, and right beside us is a giant saltwater fish tank. Obaachan knows that she will order the Goong Gah Tiem, or garlic shrimp, which is what she had last time, with my uncle Jay. I have more trouble deciding among the many choices and try to read quickly through the detailed descriptions.

"My uncle Kisho used to own a restaurant," Obaachan says, closing her menu. "A Chinese one, not Japanese. Before the war."

"Chinese?" I say, a little perplexed. Japanese people are notoriously snooty about their food. Once my mother discovered a bottle of La Choy in my refrigerator, and reproached me for buying Chinese soy sauce. Japanese people buy Japanese products, she explained, frustrated by my offense. I should know better. A week later, she handed me a new bottle of Kikkoman.

"People liked Chinese food more than Japanese, I guess," Obaachan continues. "It's probably still true. You see Chinese restaurants just about everywhere, and even though more and more *hakuji* eat *sushi* nowadays, Japanese restaurants are not as common."

Obaachan's father and Uncle Kisho had come to America together, the only members of the family to leave Japan, and they shared a close relationship. Her father was the older of the two, and like many Japanese immigrants at the time, he married the woman his parents had arranged for him. But Uncle Kisho had done things differently. Perhaps the idea of waiting for his picture bride to arrive at a designated American harbor had not appealed to him as it had to Obaachan's father. Instead Uncle Kisho saved his money, opened his restaurant, and waited, confident that in time, the perfect woman would come along. Eventually he met Maki, right there in Los Angeles.

When Uncle Kisho met Maki, her life was in shambles. Her first husband had died, and she was left to care for four daughters all alone. "I have no idea how she managed," Obaachan says, shaking her head. "They didn't have life insurance policies back then, and I don't know how she would've supported *and* raised a family on her own." Obaachan seems somewhat hesitant to discuss the relatives, but I'm curious and probe a little. After Maki married Uncle Kisho, all four of her daughters were sent back to Japan to be raised by a relative. (My grandmother does not know why the daughters did not stay in America, but she admits this arrangement seems a little odd.) The eldest committed suicide. (When I press for more information about this young woman, Obaachan offers this: "She was a little bit retarded, I think." When I ask her what she means by *retarded*, she shrugs. "I don't know. She was different. Something was different about her.") Later, when the remaining three were in the United States, the second daughter ran off with a boyfriend, a guy who worked at Uncle Kisho's restaurant. Uncle Kisho had to track her down and bring her home. Then he arranged a marriage—n

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