

# Farewell to Manzanar

fourteen

## **In the Firebreak**

He was right, of course. I did not know what I was getting myself into. Years later I silently thanked him for forcing me to postpone such decisions until I was old enough to think for myself. But at the time it was unforgivable. And it was typical of his behavior during those days. He had no boat crew to command, no income to manage, no trips to plan, not even a dining table to preside over. He would putter blandly along, then suddenly, unexpectedly, as if to remind himself he was still in charge of something, he would burst out like that, his intentions right, but his manner stubborn and relentless, forcing distances between us.

As his youngest child I had grown up blessed with special attentions. Now, more and more I found myself cut off from him. When I needed reassurance I would get it from Woody or Chizu, or from Mama, who had more of herself to give by this time. Then one afternoon there came a moment when I was cut off from both of them, Papa and Mama together. It wasn't loneliness I felt, or isolation; they were still within reach. Rather, it was that first, brief flicker of total separateness. It could have occurred anywhere we might have been living; I had reached the age. This scene happened to be set in one of the firebreaks at Manzanar.

My oldest sister Eleanor figures in it. She lay in the camp hospital, trying to give birth to a baby she had thought she'd be having in Reno, Nevada, where she and her husband Shig had relocated in 1943. Through friends they had found a house there, and Shig lined up a job in a restaurant. Early in 1944 the government decided that Nisei should be eligible for Selective Service, like all other American citizens. A few months later Shig was drafted. Eleanor, pregnant, could find neither work nor money enough to pay for having a baby. She couldn't

# Farewell to Manzanar

stay in Reno and she couldn't go with Shig to the army's training camp in Louisiana, so she voluntarily re-entered camp.

When she went into the hospital, it was a time of great anxiety in our family. Two of my other sisters had borne children there. They had both hemorrhaged badly, and blood plasma was in short supply, our needs being low on the wartime priority list. One sister might have died had not Woody provided blood by direct transfusion. In the case of a sister-in-law of ours, who had miscarried and hemorrhaged, no one was able to arrest it in time, and she just bled to death in her hospital bed.

These memories were very much with us. Papa, in particular, was worried. Eleanor was his oldest daughter, and this was her first child. Her husband had gone to Germany with an infantry division, and now she was struggling through the second day of a difficult labor. He and Mama were taking turns sitting with her. And what I remember, late the second afternoon, is Mama running toward us from the other side of the firebreak. I was walking with Papa, as he started out for the hospital, and here she came, small, and running, all bundled up--it was December--shouting, "Ko! Ko!" making little puffs of frost in the icy air.

I looked at Papa, and his face had filled with terror. He tried to run to meet her, but couldn't, could barely keep his stride. His look filled me with terror too. I was sure Eleanor had died in the hospital. Our fear must have held back Mama's progress. It seemed we watched her run for minutes across that stretch of cleared sand. There was room enough for a football game, or an entire parade. In my eyes then, it was a threatening openness, a no man's land.

We met her in the sand, Mama breathless, small in front of him, looking up, saying, "Ko! Ko, it's a boy!"

His face gave way. His eyes filled. "A boy!"

"Yes!"

"And Eleanor?"

"Yes. Okay!"

# Farewell to Manzanar

“Okay.”

“They’re both okay.”

His tears let go, unchecked. Mama was already crying. She began to talk excitedly, jabbering the details. As the news sunk in, my fear was replaced by an odd detachment. The burden fell away, leaving me afloat, and I was a spectator witnessing the nearest to a love scene I would ever see between them. My own perception removed me from it. I was more awed than aware, but I knew whatever I was watching was somehow both tender and profound, with an intimacy that made me invisible to them.

Papa put an arm around her, needing her support. He was wearing the rust-colored turtleneck sweater he used to take on fishing trips, the one she had knitted for him before the war. Now, as she talked, the fingers of one hand played over its yarn, as if inspecting her own workmanship. While the late sun turned this rusty sweater dark shades of orange, they stood there in the great expanse of the firebreak, far out from the rows of barracks, weeping with relief and happiness, talking quietly, just the two of them.

# Farewell to Manzanar

fifteen

## Departures

In the months to come they would draw together even more closely, just as I would hold to them--my moment of separateness a foreshadowing, but not yet a reality. Our family had begun to dwindle, along with the entire camp population. By the end of 1944 about 6,000 people remained, and those, for the most part, were the aging and the young. Whoever had prospects on the outside, and the energy to go, was leaving, relocating, or entering military service. No one could blame them. To most of the Nisei, anything looked better than remaining in camp. For many of their parents, just the opposite was true.

Eleanor and Shig had been the first of my family to leave. A few months after she had her baby, she moved back to Reno to stay with friends there. The next to go was Woody who, in August 1944, had been drafted. When the notice came he showed it to Papa.

"And now what will you do?" Papa said glumly.

"I have to go."

"What if you refused to answer the letter."

"It's my duty."

"What about those twenty-six boys from Tule Lake who refused to report? The judge in San Francisco ruled that they were right. It was in the papers. You can't lock somebody up because he might be disloyal, and then make him join the army. That was the judge's conclusion."

"Well, right now Tom Dobashi who used to live over in Block Nine is in jail in Los Angeles for refusing to report for his physical."

"He was already in jail."

Woody blinked, missing the point at first. Then, he grinned. "C'mon, Pop. It's not that bad out here. Not anymore."

# Farewell to Manzanar

"Then why don't you stay?"

"I'm gonna stay. For a while. Until they call me up. They put me in the reserve unit in camp. It could be months. Maybe the war will be over by then."

His unit was called up in November. We all went down to see them off at the main gate--nineteen young men in their teens and twenties, some wearing suits and ties, some, like Woody, wearing overcoats and neck scarves against the cold, carrying satchels, traveling bags, shaving kits. They lined up two deep for a photo that ran later in the camp paper. Then we watched Woody join the shuffling line and climb aboard.

For me it was almost like watching Papa leave again. I didn't know where he was going or understand quite why. When his bus pulled out I only knew that if anything happened to him the world would probably be coming to an end, because *nothing* could happen to Woody. He had always been so solid. I hugged Mama while we watched his final wave through the window, his mustache lifting above that impish smile, as if we had all just pulled a fast one on the world.

Chizu was with us, waving back. This made it almost like the day, three years earlier, we had watched the boats sail out of San Pedro Harbor, except that Chizu had two children now, and instead of a handful of fishermen's wives, there were 500 others with us here. They had turned out, like people in small towns all over the country, to watch their young men leave. The 442nd Combat Regiment was famous now, full of heroes, fighting in Europe to help the Allies win the war, and showing that Niseis too could be patriots. Woody was that kind of Nisei, anxious to prove to the world his loyalty, his manhood, something about his family honor. Climbing aboard he must have been thinking of those things, while Mama, no doubt, was thinking of the mother at Manzanar who had already received a posthumous Congressional Medal of Honor on behalf of her son who'd been killed in Italy.

In these ways it was a typical wartime departure, full of proud smiles and half-concealed worry. In other ways it was edged with unique uncertainties. Families

# Farewell to Manzanar

were being further torn asunder, and those left behind knew no more about their own fate than they did of the loved ones moving on. Would we still be here after the war? Would we be living forever in the summer heat and winter wind of Owens Valley? And if not here, then where else?

The answers to these questions, when they came, only added to our insecurity.

# Farewell to Manzanar

sixteen

## Free to Go

The answers began with a Supreme Court ruling that December, in the case called *Ex Parte Endo*. It was the last of three key cases heard since the camps had opened.

In the first, Gordon Hirabayashi, a Nisei student from the University of Washington, challenged the evacuation order. He had also violated the army's curfew, imposed early in 1942 on all West Coast Japanese. He challenged the racial bias of these actions and the abuse of his civil rights. The court avoided the issue of the evacuation itself by ruling on the curfew. It upheld the army's decision to limit the movements of a racially select group of citizens. The reasoning: wartime necessity.

In the second case, the issue was the exclusion orders that removed us from our homes and sent us inland. Fred Korematsu, a young Nisei living in Oakland, had ignored the evacuation to stay with his Caucasian girlfriend. He had plastic surgery done on his face, he changed his name, and was posing as a Spanish Hawaiian when the FBI caught up with him. In court, the racial bias was challenged again. Why were no German Americans evacuated, it was asked, or Americans of Italian descent? Weren't these nations our enemies too? Due process had been violated, Korematsu claimed, along with other constitutional rights. But the army's decision to evacuate was also upheld by the Supreme Court.

The final case challenged the internment itself. Soon after she was evacuated, in April 1942, Mitsue Endo, a twenty-one-year-old Nisei and an employee of the California State Highway Commission, had filed a petition for habeas corpus, protesting her detention at Topaz Camp in central Utah. She spent two and a half



# Farewell to Manzanar

years awaiting the high court's decision, which was that she had been right: the government cannot detain loyal citizens against their will.

Anticipating this ruling, the army's Western Defense Command had already announced that the mass exclusion orders of 1942 were being rescinded. Next it was announced that all the camps would be closed within the coming twelve months and that internees now had the right to return to their former homes.

---

In our family the response to this news was hardly joyful. For one thing we had no home to return to. Worse, the very thought of going back to the West Coast filled us with dread. What will they think of us, those who sent us here? How will they look at us? Three years of wartime propaganda--racist headlines, atrocity movies, hate slogans, and fright-mask posters--had turned the Japanese face into something despicable and grotesque. Mama and Papa knew this. They had been reading the papers. Even I knew this, although it was not until many years later that I realized how bad things actually were.

In addition to the traditionally racist organizations like the American Legion and The Native Sons of The Golden West, who had been agitating against the West Coast Japanese for decades, new groups had sprung up during the war, with the specific purpose of preventing anyone of Japanese descent from returning to the coast--groups like No Japs Incorporated in San Diego, The Home Front Commandoes in Sacramento, and The Pacific Coast Japanese Problem League in Los Angeles. Also, some growers' associations, threatened by the return of interned farmers, had been using the war as a way to foment hostile feelings in the major farming areas.

What's more, our years of isolation at Manzanar had widened the already spacious gap between the races, and it is not hard to understand why so many preferred to stay where they were. Before the war one of the standard charges



# Farewell to Manzanar

made against the Japanese was their clannishness, their standoffishness, their refusal to assimilate. The camps had made this a reality in the extreme. After three years in our desert ghetto, at least we knew where we stood with our neighbors, could live more or less at ease with them.

Yet now the government was saying we not only were free to go; like the move out of Terminal Island, and the move to Owens Valley, we had to go. Definite dates were being fixed for the closing of the camp.

By January of '45 a few determined internees were already trying to recover former homes and farmlands. Ominous reports of their reception began trickling back, to confirm our deepest fears. A Nisei man had been assaulted on the street in Seattle. A home was burned in San Jose. Nightriders carrying shotguns had opened fire on a farmhouse near Fresno, narrowly missing two sleeping children. Later on, in May, one of my sisters and her husband, leaving for the east, were escorted to the Southern Pacific depot in Los Angeles by armed guards, not because they were thought to be dangerous, but for their own protection.

Most of the Japanese returning to the coast resettled without suffering bodily harm. But gossip tends to thrive on bad news, not good. Stories such as these spread through the camp and grew in our minds like tumors. I remember hearing them discussed in our barracks, quietly, as if Ku Klux Klansmen lurked outside the window, the same way my brothers discussed our dilemma during the brief stay in Boyle Heights, before the evacuation.

I would listen to the stories and I would cringe. And this was both odd and confusing to me, because ever since we'd arrived, the outside world had loomed in my imagination as someplace inaccessible yet wonderfully desirable. I would recall our days in Ocean Park. I would flip through the Sears, Roebuck catalogue, dreaming of the dresses and boots and coats that were out there somewhere at the other end of the highway beyond the gate. All the truly good things, it often seemed, the things we couldn't get, were outside, and had to be

# Farewell to Manzanar

sent for, or shipped in. In this sense, God and the Sears, Roebuck catalogue were pretty much one and the same in my young mind.

Once, during a novena at the Maryknoll chapel, I had asked for something I desperately longed for and had never seen inside the camp. We were told to ask for something we really wanted. We were to write it on a piece of paper, pray devoutly for nine days, and if we'd prayed well it would be answered. The nuns expected us to ask for purity of soul, or a holy life. I asked God for some dried apricots. I wrote this on a piece of paper, dropped it into the prayer box, and began to fantasize about how they would arrive, in a package from Sears, Roebuck. I knew how they would taste, and feel in my hands. I said my rosary, thirty times a day, for nine days, and for nine more days after that I waited. The dried apricots never came. My faith in God and in the Catholic church slipped several notches at that time. But not my faith in *the outside*, where all such good things could be found. I went back to flipping through the catalogue.

Those images, of course, had come from my past. What I had to face now, a year later, was the future. I was old enough to imagine it, and also old enough to fear it. The physical violence didn't trouble me. Somehow I didn't quite believe that, or didn't want to believe such things could happen to *us*. It was the humiliation. That continuous, unnamed ache I had been living with was precise and definable now. Call it the foretaste of being hated. I knew ahead of time that if someone looked at me with hate, I would have to allow it, to swallow it, because something in me, something about me deserved it. At ten I saw that coming, like a judge's sentence, and I would have stayed inside the camp forever rather than step outside and face such a moment.

I shared this particular paralysis with Mama and Papa, but not with my older brothers and sisters. The hostility worried them. But their desire to be rid of Manzanar outweighed that worry. They were in their twenties and had their lives to lead. They decided to take a chance on the east coast. It was 3,000 miles away, with no history of anti-Asianism, in fact no Asian history at all. So few

# Farewell to Manzanar

people of Asian ancestry had settled there, it was like heading for a neutral country.

Bill was the first to make that move, with Tomi and their baby boy. He had lined up a job with Seabrook Farms in New Jersey, a new frozen-food enterprise that offered work to many Nisei at the end of the war. A few weeks later Frances and her husband joined them, followed by Martha and Kaz, then Lillian, who was just finishing her junior year in high school, and Ray.

As each cluster of relatives departed we'd say, "See you in New Jersey. Find us all a big house back there."

What we told each other was that Bill and Frances and the others would go on ahead, make sure things could be worked out, then they'd send for the rest of us. "See you in New Jersey," we would wave, as the bus pulled out taking someone else to the train station in L.A. But they all knew, even as they said it, that Papa would never move back east. As bad as the West Coast sounded, it was still his home territory. He was too old to start over, too afraid of rejection in an unknown part of the world, too stubborn and too tired to travel that far, and finally too proud to do piecework on an assembly line. Like so many Issei, he had, for better or worse, run his own businesses, been his own man for too long to tolerate the idea of working for someone else.

The truth was, at this point Papa did not know which way to turn. In the government's eyes a free man now, he sat, like those black slaves you hear about who, when they got word of their freedom at the end of the Civil War, just did not know where else to go or what else to do and ended up back on the plantation, rooted there out of habit or lethargy or fear.

**Farewell to Manzanar** by James D. Houston and Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston. Copyright © 1973 by Houghton Mifflin Company, Published by Houghton Mifflin Company. All Rights Reserved.