

Farewell to Manzanar

seventeen

It's All Starting Over

In June the schools were closed for good. After a final commencement exercise the teachers were dismissed. The high school produced a second yearbook, *Valediction 1945*, summing up its years in camp. The introduction shows a page-wide photo of a forearm and hand squeezing pliers around a length of taut barbed wire strung beneath one of the towers. Across the page runs the caption, "From Our World . . . through these portals . . . to new horizons."

That summer the farm outside the fence gradually shut down. Cultivation stopped. Crops in the ground were harvested as they ripened. Nothing new was planted. They began to auction off the tractors, the trucks and tools. Then the word went out that the entire camp would close without fail by December 1. Those who did not choose to leave voluntarily would be scheduled for resettlement in weekly quotas. Once you were scheduled, you could choose a place--a state, a city, a town--and the government would pay your way there. If you didn't choose, they'd send you back to the community you lived in before you were evacuated.

Papa gave himself up to the schedule. The government had put him here, he reasoned, the government could arrange his departure. What could he lose by waiting? Outside he had no job to go back to. A California law passed in 1943 made it illegal now for Issei to hold commercial fishing licenses. And his boats and nets were gone, he knew--confiscated or stolen. Here in camp he had shelter. The women and children still with him had enough to eat. He decided to sit it out as long as he could.

That August, as usual, it was brutally hot. He would sit in the shade on our barracks steps in his undershirt, reading the papers, reading aloud sometimes, to

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Mama and Granny, as he had done for his fellow inmates at Fort Lincoln, filling them in on the state of the world. He would read about Japan's losses during those final weeks of the Pacific war and claim he had predicted it. He would read about the Russians moving into Korea and grumble that if the Americans occupied Japan there'd be another war within ten years, maybe five. He would read about the housing shortage all along the West Coast, brought on by wartime population growth, and he would throw the paper down in disgust.

"Aaagghh!"

"Why do you read the papers?" Mama would say. "It always makes you go aaagghh."

"They have been so busy building tanks and bombers, they have run out of houses for everyone to live in."

"It's the war," Mama said.

"So where do they think they are going to put people like us?"

"I was in the washroom this morning, and Akiko told me it is just like nineteen forty-two all over again. She got a letter from her sister in Los Angeles. Japanese people coming back from the camps are being put into trailers and Quonset huts. We should have left here when there were still houses to live in."

"You are the one who wanted to wait," Papa snapped.

"I said for a while."

"For a while." He mimicked her.

"So did you."

He raised his voice. "You said it would be too hard on the kids."

"You said so yourself."

He shouted, rearing back to challenge her. "Then don't tell me we waited too long!"

Mama's eyes closed, squinting tight, shutting off the conversation. Her face became a web of creases.

"Jeannie," she said to me. "Come over here. *Momo* my back a little bit."

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I was out there with them, in the shade in my shorts and barefooted, waiting for what little coolness might come at us through the pear trees. Most of the recreation leaders were gone by this time. Since the school closed, I had been running loose, and yet not running very far at all, sticking closer to our barracks now than ever before. I stood up and started massaging her shoulders.

“Harder,” she said. “There’s a knot someplace. I can feel it all the way up my neck, all around behind my eyes.”

I started pounding with my fists, like little pistons. Sometimes Kiyo and I would take turns doing this, up and down her back. Today, even the fists wouldn’t satisfy.

Gruffly Papa said, “Hey! You move over, Jeannie! Get outta the way.” He swung a leg behind Mama and sat down on the step above, digging his thumbs into the thick flesh below her neck.

Breath hissed in through her teeth. She let out two tiny groans. “Unh. Unh.”

He asked her, “What did Doctor Matsui say?”

“I didn’t see him.”

“Where was he?”

“He was there, but it was too crowded. I’m going back later. The whole hallway was filled up. Everybody has a headache, or a stomach ache, or a backache that cannot be explained. Everybody is sick. Everything is like nineteen forty-two. It is all starting over.”

“Hey!” he ordered. “You want a back rub? Sit up straight!”

He ground his elbow into the base of her neck, pushing it down her spine. Her groans got louder.

“Ooh. Ooh. That’s it. That’s almost it.”

“Listen,” he said. “Maybe we will not have to leave so soon. Last night at the block leaders meeting it was definitely decided that the camp *must* remain open until everyone has a place to go back to.”

“What does the administration say?”

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"The block leaders are preparing a statement to take to them."

"Do you think it will do any good?"

Papa did not answer. He was dragging his elbow slowly up one spinal muscle and staring down the street, where the answer to her question was everywhere pathetically evident. Leaves and windfall pears had piled up beneath the trees. In the park nearby, grass creepers edged out into the graveled paths. Little clusters of debris were slowing down the waterways. All around, you saw these signals of neglect, as if the camp itself were slowly, deliberately disintegrating in order to comply with the administration's deadline. Every day another barracks or two would fall empty. The outer blocks had long been deserted, filling up with tumbleweeds and sand. Right next to our stairs, in Papa's rock garden, the moss was dry, the sand needed raking. No one bothered with it.

Mama said, "Ko."

No answer.

"Ko?"

"What?"

"What are we going to do?"

"Wait."

"For what?" she asked.

"Listen to me. I have an idea. All these people who are waiting in the hall to see Doctor Matsui, they are worried about where they are going to live and how they are going to make money on the outside. Is that not so?"

"Yes."

"Suppose we organize some kind of a cooperative. For Japanese people coming back from the camps. We will design a housing project, and all the men looking for work will build houses."

"You have to have some land for that," Mama said.

"Of course."

"You have to have money."

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"We will get a loan from the government. At the block leaders meeting it was decided that they *must* provide low-interest loans for families returning from the camps. They cannot deprive us of our homes and our fishing boats and our automobiles and lock us up for three years and then just turn us loose into the cities again. They have to help us get a new start."

"Is this too in the statement they are preparing?"

"Yes. They deliver it at noon today."

"Do you think the government will do anything?"

Again, Papa did not answer. They both knew what it would be. This time his long pause slipped into pure silence. Without the answer he could continue dabbling with the dream. Mama's eyes squinted shut. His fingers worked below her shoulder blades. He had found the knot, the tension node, and he homed in on it with a practiced knuckle. Mama rolled her head from side to side, pulling at the tendons in her neck, groaning loudly now, hissing with the painful pleasure of his cure.

The last hope that something might postpone our returning to the outside world was extinguished on August 6 when the atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima. That ended the Second World War. America had won. Internment camps were undeniably a thing of the past.

I remember seeing the newspaper photos of the mushroom cloud that bloomed above the city and hearing the murmurs that rose ever so quietly from the stunned, almost reverent hush all over camp. The unbelievable horror of what had happened was not yet known. This was as strange, as awesome, as mysteriously unnerving as Pearl Harbor had been. And in the same way that the first attack finished off one period in our lives, so this appalling climax marked the end of another.

Nine days later, all over America people were dancing in the streets. At Manzanar I suppose there was some rejoicing too. At least we were no longer

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the enemy. But the atomic bombing, if anything, just sharpened our worry. I still see Papa sitting on our steps for long hours, smoking cigarettes in his ivory holder, staring into the mountains he went to with his eyes whenever he needed sustenance. Here he sat, a man without prospects, perhaps now without even a family in Japan to confirm his own history, fifty-eight years old, and his children scattered across the land: Woody in the army at Fort Douglas, Utah; Eleanor in Reno; her husband in Germany with the occupation troops; Bill and Martha and Frances and Lillian in New Jersey; Ray now in the Coast Guard, the only service that would take him at the age of seventeen.

Papa read the papers and studied the changeless peaks, while all around us other families were moving out, forcing our name ever higher on the list. Every day busloads left from the main gate, heading south with their quotas, filled with Mamas and Papas and Grannies who had postponed movement as long as possible, and soldiers' wives like Chizu, and children like Kiyo and May and me, too young yet to be out on our own. Some of the older folks resisted leaving right up to the end and had to have their bags packed for them and be physically lifted and shoved onto the buses. When our day finally arrived, in early October, there were maybe 2,000 people still living out there, waiting their turn and hoping it wouldn't come.

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Ka-ke, Near Hiroshima: April 1946

On a low hill the gravestones tilt crazily, as if trying to wrench loose from the soil.

"It was the bomb," Toyo explains. "Even here, fifteen miles away, like an earthquake sent to rip the world in two."

Woody, gazing at the stones, says, "Were many in our family lost?"

"We were lucky," Toyo says. "Only one. He would have been your cousin. None of the rest of us were in the city then."

"And is he buried here?"

"No. He was near the center of the fire storm. But let us not talk of that. I did not bring you here to talk of that. Do you see this stone?"

"This one?"

"Your father was buried here in nineteen thirteen."

Woody looks at her, wondering how old she really is, wondering how well she remembers. She is Papa's aunt. She must be eighty. He studies her face for some measure of how far her recollection can be trusted. He thinks of Granny, not yet this old, but blind, forgetful, full of needs that must be cared for and tales everyone half listens to. Toyo's not at all like that. She has a monk's tranquillity. Her eyes are still alert. Her face shows both the burden and the full understanding of all her eighty years or more.

With great care Woody says, "But I told you, he lives in California now, today, alive, with ten children, of which I am the second oldest."

"In nineteen thirteen he had been gone for nine years, with no word. To the family in Japan, he was dead. This is his gravestone. I show it to you so you will know how much he mattered to us here, so you will know how happy you have

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made me bringing this news that he still lives. The happiness I feel now erases all this war has put us through."

Woody looks away, tears welling in his eyes. He stares at the stone, the characters engraved on it. When he looks back at Toyo he expects to see her weeping. She isn't. She gazes intently at him, as if he is ready to disappear, as if to imprint him in her mind before he's gone.

"Come," she says. "We don't want to linger here. There are many things to see, many relatives to meet. Everyone will want to see Ko's son."

Woody has postponed this visit many times, postponed the train ride south from Tokyo, afraid of how he'd be received. Being an American is hard enough; being a Nisei among these occupying forces is sometimes agony. He dreads those looks that seem to call him traitor to his homeland or his race. And if he sees such looks in Tokyo, what might he not see in the eyes of those who survived the leveling and the ash heap of Hiroshima? Yet that part of the country is his family's seat and too close not to visit.

He decided to come bearing sugar, since he knows how badly everyone wants it these days. His team's job is to break up the black markets that have sent prices soaring. The army schools perfected his Japanese. Working in civilian clothes he has confiscated tons of sugar and then watched it disappear from the warehouses, as if through a funnel he is sure leads back into the street.

He came bearing as much as he could pack into one large suitcase, about fifty pounds. But he knew, as soon as he arrived, that he did not need the sugar to cancel out his GI crewcut and his American smile. Being Ko's son was enough, being family. That was all they saw.

They accepted the sugar, of course. But they bowed so graciously, thanking him, you'd scarcely guess their deep craving. Refusing to unwrap the package in his presence, or even seem interested in the contents, they carried it, like a coat in need of a closet, to some other part of the house. Just a hint of

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embarrassment gave them away, a tinge in the cheek for the fact that such a common item should now be so highly prized. And this was of a piece with their unspoken apology for the general condition of what they had to offer him in return.

Entering, Woody had passed through an immaculate rock garden, its sand white and freshly raked. A hedge of high bamboo bordered it. Inside, the rooms were almost empty--a large, once elegant country house stripped of all but a few mats, an altar in one corner of the first room, a funeral urn. They had not been hit by bombs. The war itself, the years of losing, had turned the house into a clean, swept, airy skeleton.

And yet, if you only watched Aunt Toyo, you might never guess the price of this defeat. She moved with an ancient, inextinguishable dignity. Her cook prepared for Woody a special meal of teriyaki fish, its sauce enriched by the gift of sugar, and Toyo served it on one of her few remaining treasures, a fine set of porcelain. She served him small, steaming cups of precious prewar sake a cousin had brought along and opened for this celebration. Afterward she led him to a room of clean, close-woven tatami mats and, over his protests, made him accept the thick cover of down-filled silk he's lying under now, a very old and valuable cover by the look and feel of it, so light against him it's like being covered with warm air, and surely the one piece of bedding she has kept for herself.

His eyes close. How royally they've treated him, he thinks, in spite of all they've lost. How pleased Papa will be to hear of this reception, and to know Toyo is well, and how proud he'll be when Woody returns to tell what a family they come from in Japan. Woody himself is proud already and more than a little relieved to know that those stories Papa used to tell them--about an estate so broad a man could not cross it in one day on horseback, about the generals and the judges and educated women and the fine houses he lived in as a boy--that all those tales were true. Until today, as much as he respects his father, Woody has

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kept open a little door of doubt. Now that door has softly closed, leaving him wonderfully secure, and stronger, in a room whose dimensions are finally known.

As he dozes, it seems to him a room one can fall asleep in quite easily, a comfortable room, warm, and nearly dark now. He would let the black weight of sleep settle over him completely. But something rouses him. Another presence. Something, or someone has joined him in the room. His eyes spring open.

She is next to him, sitting back on her heels, hands folded in her lap, her dark kimono sheening in the half light, and gazing at him the way she did this afternoon, steadily, intently. This time the tears drop down her cheeks. She had been the one, forty years before, who gave Papa the money he needed to leave Japan and sail to the Hawaiian Islands. His favorite aunt. Her favorite nephew.

Quietly she says, "You look so much like Ko-san. Around the mouth, just like him. And around the eyes. There is a Wakatsuki look, you know, right at the corners, the way the lines crease back."

Involuntarily he reaches up to touch the corner of one eye, feels the wetness there, wants to answer her, wants to find some words to knit those years together, that gap of time. A thickness in his throat makes speech impossible.

She rises. Her eyes drink him in a moment longer. "Sleep. Sleep," she says, and noiselessly scurries out.

He watches her, and watches the screen slide shut, struck by her grace in even this small gesture, learned from centuries of screens slid shut. From somewhere a light illuminates the rich paper texture of the screen. Then the light goes. Woody lies suspended in the warm darkness, buoyed up by a sadness both heavy and sweet. He strokes the skin above his cheekbones, squeezes shut his eyes, to feel what happens when the creases form, tries to visualize it. He rubs his eyes to rub away the water and begins to conjure Papa's face. It takes a long time, as if Papa had to cross the whole Pacific to make his appearance in this room. When he's finally standing there, Woody is amazed at how his stance resembles Toyo's. For the first time he understands that crazy

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pride. And with his fingertips still touching creases, he marvels at this resemblance too--Papa's eyes, and his own. He'd never seen it before, never thought to compare himself with Papa, never dared. Now he knows what he should have said while Toyo knelt here.

"Tell me more about him, Auntie. Tell me how he dressed as a young man, how he walked, and what he did for his amusement. Tell me everything you can remember."

He aches to call her back, and almost does, almost calls her name into the dark, quiet maze of screens and mats and corridors. But doesn't. There is time, he thinks, time for all those questions. Tomorrow we will talk. She likes to recall those days. She says there is still a hill outside of town that Papa used to climb. Tomorrow I will climb it and see what his eyes used to see.

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Re-entry

A few days before we left Manzanar Papa decided that since we *had* to go, we might as well leave in style, and by our own volition. He broke free of the lethargy that had nailed him to our steps for months. He grabbed his Bismarck walking stick and took off, almost at a run, heading for Lone Pine to buy himself a car. Mama tried to talk him out of this. Traveling by bus made much more sense, she said. It was faster, and we'd be there in a day. He snorted with disdain at her advice.

Before the war he had always preferred off-beat, unpredictable cars that no one else of his acquaintance would be likely to own. For a couple of years he drove a long, six-cylinder Chrysler that got about nine miles to the gallon. In the early thirties he drove a Terraplane. Late that afternoon he came back from Lone Pine in a midnight blue Nash sedan, fondling the short, stubby gearshift that projected from its dashboard. The gearshift was what attracted him, and it was one of the few parts of that car to reach southern California unscathed. To get all nine of us, plus our clothes and the odds and ends of furniture we'd accumulated, from Owens Valley 225 miles south to Long Beach, Papa had to make the trip three times. He pushed the car so hard it broke down about every hundred miles or so. In all it took four days.

I went in the first load, with Mama and May and a back seat heaped to the ceiling with dishes and lamps and bedding. A double mattress was tied to the roof. We could have been an Okie family heading west, while Papa in his wide-brim hat and his turtleneck sweater drove like a wild man, as if he couldn't wait to get back to civilization.

I didn't understand this, after all the stories we'd heard. Each time the car collapsed, I prayed we might be stranded there indefinitely. But he would leap

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out, cursing, and bully it into motion again, fix the tire, replace the fan belt, kick the radiator, whatever was required. I still see him standing by that desert road, in the hot shade of a great saguaro cactus, the blue hood open, as he shouts at the engine in Japanese, damning it and damning the man who sold him this car. He slams the hood shut in disgust, ready to attack it with the butt end of his cane, and that slam, as if by insult, somehow starts the car, so that Papa has to jump in and grab the steering wheel and that dashboard gear knob before the Nash drives away without him.

When he came back from Lone Pine he was drunk, on the first real whiskey he had tasted in years. He was drinking all the way past Mojave, and into the northern suburbs of Los Angeles. There he suddenly sobered up, and his mood began to match what mine had been since we drove out the main gate, as if what we had all been dreading so long was finally to appear, at any moment, without warning--a burst of machine-gun fire, or a row of Burma-Shave signs saying *Japs Go Back Where You Came From*.

The stories, the murmurs, the headlines of the last few months had imprinted in my mind the word hate. I had heard my sisters say, "Why do they hate us?" I had heard Mama say with lonesome resignation, "I don't understand all this hate in the world." It was a bleak and awful-sounding word, yet I had no idea at all what shape it might take if ever I confronted it. I saw it as a dark, amorphous cloud that would descend from above and enclose us forever. As we entered Los Angeles, I sat huddled in the back seat, silent, fearing any word I uttered might bring it to life.

But there was no sign of it anywhere, in fact no response to us at all as we drove down the palm-lined boulevards, past the busy rows of shops and markets, the lawns and driveways of quiet residential streets. Leaving in 1942, no one had any idea what to expect, since no one knew what awaited us; we had been underprepared and that just deepened the shock of what we found. Now the situation was reversed. In our isolated world we had overprepared for shows of

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abuse. If anything, what greeted us now was indifference. Indeed, if the movements of this city were an indication, the very existence of Manzanar and all it had stood for might be in doubt. The land we drove away from three and a half years earlier had not altered a bit. Here we were, like fleeing refugees, trekking in from some ruined zone of war. And yet, on our six-hour drive south, we seemed to have passed through a time machine, as if, in March of 1942 one had lifted his foot to take a step, had set it down in October of 1945, and was expected just to keep on walking, with all intervening time erased.

In the months to come, because one did have to keep on walking, one desperately wanted to believe nothing had changed during those years of suspended animation. But of course, as we soon discovered, everything had.

Our most immediate problem was where to live. What Papa had read in the papers was true. Housing was short and getting shorter. During 1944 over a million people had moved into California from the south and midwest. But due to wartime priorities, very little new housing had been developed. Now, 60,000 Japanese Americans were returning to their former communities on the West Coast and being put into trailer camps, Quonset huts, back rooms of private homes, church social halls, anywhere they could fit.

We were luckier than many. The American Friends Service--the same people who had helped us after the eviction from Terminal Island--helped us rent and move into an apartment in Cabrillo Homes, a housing project in west Long Beach, built by the government for shipyard and defense plant workers. At the time it seemed to be a big step up in the world. There would be no more standing in chow lines; now Mama had a stove to cook on. We had three bedrooms. And we had an inside toilet. As soon as the front door was closed, Papa went in and flushed it, and when it worked, we all hooted with delight.

I didn't really see Cabrillo Homes for what it was until I started high school, a few years later. It looked like a half-finished and undermaintained army base. Long, two-story stucco buildings were set in rows like barracks. Peeling, two-by-

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four banisters guided you up the outside stairways. Community clotheslines ran above the ragged strips of grass.

Mama picked up the kitchenware and some silver she had stored with neighbors in Boyle Heights. But the warehouse where she'd stored the rest had been unaccountably "robbed"--of furniture, appliances, and most of those silver anniversary gifts. Papa already knew the car he'd put money on before Pearl Harbor had been repossessed. And, as he suspected, no record of his fishing boats remained. This put him right back where he'd been in 1904, arriving in a new land and starting over from economic zero.

It was another snip of the castrator's scissors, and he never really recovered from this, either financially or spiritually. Yet neither did he entirely give up. One of the amazing things about America is the way it can both undermine you and keep you believing in your own possibilities, pumping you with hope. To maintain some hold on his self-esteem Papa began to pursue his doomed plan for setting up a housing cooperative among the returning Japanese. In our small front room he built a drafting table and worked on sketches for what would become the thick pile of blueprints he carried to households and civic offices all over Los Angeles County, looking for support.

Mama's first concern, meanwhile, as always, was how to keep money coming in. She had saved about \$500, but that wouldn't last long. Soon after we settled into Cabrillo Homes, the Friends Service found some openings at one of the fish canneries, and she went back to the kind of job she'd had when we lived on Terminal Island. It meant much more to her now than it had before the war. In 1941, after Papa disappeared, she was marking time while we drifted, awaiting the inevitable. Now she knew the household income was going to be her responsibility for quite a while. Papa would never accept anything like a cannery job. And if he did, Mama's shame would be even greater than his: this would be a sure sign that we had hit rock bottom. So she went to work with as much pride as she could muster. Early each morning she would make up her face. She would

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fix her hair, cover it with a flimsy net, put on a clean white cannery worker's dress, and stick a brightly colored handkerchief in the lapel pocket. The car pool horn would honk, and she would rush out to join four other Japanese women who had fixed their hair that morning, applied the vanishing cream, and sported freshly ironed hankies.

As for me, the shapeless dread of that great dark cloud in my imagination gradually receded, soothed away by a sky the same blue it had always been, lawns the same green, traffic signals that still changed with dependable regularity, and familiar radio programs to fill up the late afternoons and evenings: *Jack Armstrong, Captain Midnight, The Whistler, I Love a Mystery*. That dread was gone. But those premonitions proved correct, in a way I hadn't been at all prepared for, on the first day back in public school, when the shape of what I truly had to deal with appeared to me for the first time.

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