

# Farewell to Manzanar

twenty

## A Double Impulse

When the sixth-grade teacher ushered me in, the other kids inspected me, but not unlike I myself would study a new arrival. She was a warm, benevolent woman who tried to make this first day as easy as possible. She gave me the morning to get the feel of the room. That afternoon, during a reading lesson, she finally asked me if I'd care to try a page out loud. I had not yet opened my mouth, except to smile. When I stood up, everyone turned to watch. Any kid entering a new class wants, first of all, to be liked. This was uppermost in my mind. I smiled wider, then began to read. I made no mistakes. When I finished, a pretty blond girl in front of me said, quite innocently, "Gee, I didn't know you could speak English."

She was genuinely amazed. I was stunned. How could this have even been in doubt?

It isn't difficult, now, to explain her reaction. But at age eleven, I couldn't believe anyone could think such a thing, say such a thing about me, or regard me in that way. I smiled and sat down, suddenly aware of what being of Japanese ancestry was going to be like. I wouldn't be faced with physical attack, or with overt shows of hatred. Rather, I would be seen as someone foreign, or as someone other than American, or perhaps not be seen at all.

During the years in camp I had never really understood why we were there, nor had I questioned it much. I knew no one in my family had committed a crime. If I needed explanations at all, I conjured up vague notions about a *war* between America and Japan. But now I'd reached an age where certain childhood mysteries begin to make sense. This girl's guileless remark came as an illumination, an instant knowledge that brought with it the first buds of true shame.

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From that day on, part of me yearned to be invisible. In a way, nothing would have been nicer than for no one to see me. Although I couldn't have defined it at the time, I felt that if attention were drawn to me, people would see what this girl had first responded to. They wouldn't see me, they would see the slant-eyed face, the Asian. This is what accounts, in part, for the entire evacuation. You cannot deport 110,000 people unless you have stopped seeing individuals. Of course, for such a thing to happen, there has to be a kind of acquiescence on the part of the victims, some submerged belief that this treatment is deserved, or at least allowable. It's an attitude easy for nonwhites to acquire in America. I had inherited it. Manzanar had confirmed it. And my feeling, at eleven, went something like this: you are going to be invisible anyway, so why not completely disappear.

But another part of me did not want to disappear. With the same sort of reaction that sent Woody into the army, I instinctively decided I would have to prove that I wasn't different, that it should not be odd to hear me speaking English. From that day forward I lived with this double impulse: the urge to disappear and the desperate desire to be acceptable.

I soon learned there were certain areas I was automatically allowed to perform in: scholarship, athletics, and school-time activities like the yearbook, the newspaper, and student government. I tried all of these and made good grades, became news editor, held an office in the Girls Athletic League.

I also learned that outside school another set of rules prevailed. Choosing friends, for instance, often depended upon whether or not I could be invited to their homes, whether their parents would allow this. And what is so infuriating, looking back, is how I accepted the situation. If refused by someone's parents, I would never say, "Go to hell!" or "I'll find other friends," or "Who wants to come to your house anyway?" I would see it as my fault, the result of my failings. I was imposing a burden on *them*.

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I would absorb such rejections and keep on looking, because for some reason the scholarship society and the athletic league and the yearbook staff didn't satisfy me, were never quite enough. They were too limited, or too easy, or too obvious. I wanted to declare myself in some different way, and--old enough to be marked by the internment but still too young for the full impact of it to cow me--I wanted *in*.

At one point I thought I would like to join the Girl Scouts. A friend of mine belonged, that blond girl who had commented on my reading. Her name was Radine. Her folks had come west from Amarillo, Texas, and had made a little money in the aircraft plants but not enough yet to get out of Cabrillo Homes. We found ourselves walking partway home together every day. Her fascination with my ability to speak English had led to many other topics. But she had never mentioned the Girl Scouts to me. One day I did.

"Can I belong?" I asked, then adding as an afterthought, as if to ease what I knew her answer would have to be, "You know, I'm Japanese."

"Gee," she said, her friendly face suddenly a mask. "I don't know. But we can sure find out. Mama's the assistant troop leader."

And then, the next day, "Gee, Jeannie, no. I'm *really* sorry."

Rage may have been simmering deep within me, but my conscious reaction was, "Oh well, that's okay, Radine. I understand. I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"Sure. I'll meet you at the stoplight."

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I didn't hold this against her, any more than I associated her personally with the first remark she made. It was her mother who had drawn the line, and I was used to that. If anything, Radine and I were closer now. She felt obliged to protect me. She would catch someone staring at me as we walked home from school and

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she would growl, "What are *you* looking at? *She's* an American citizen. She's got as much right as anybody to walk around on the street!"

Her outbursts always amazed me. I would much rather have ignored those looks than challenged them. At the same time I wondered why my citizenship had to be so loudly affirmed, and I couldn't imagine why affirming it would really make any difference. (If so, why hadn't it kept me out of Manzanar?) But I was grateful when Radine stuck up for me. Soon we were together all the time. I was teaching her how to twirl baton, and this started a partnership that lasted for the next three years.

I hadn't forgotten what I'd learned in camp. My chubby teacher had taught me well. Radine and I would practice in the grassy plots between the buildings, much as I used to in the firebreaks near Block 28: behind the back, between the legs, over the shoulder, high into the air above the two-story rooftops, watching it, timing its fall for the sudden catch. We practiced the splits, and bending backward, the high-stepping strut, and I saw myself a sequined princess leading orchestras across a football field, the idol of cheering fans.

There happened to be a Boy Scout drum and bugle corps located in the housing project next to ours. They performed in local parades, and they were looking for some baton twirlers to march in front of the band. That fall Radine and I tried out, and we suited them just fine. They made me the lead majorette, in the center between Radine and Gloria, another girl from the seventh grade. Those two wore blue satin outfits to accent their bright blond hair. My outfit was white, with gold braid across the chest. We all wore white, calf-high boots and boat-shaped hats. We worked out trio routines and practiced every weekend with the boys, marching up and down the streets of the project. We performed with them at our junior high assemblies, as well as in the big band reviews each spring, with our batons glinting out in front of the bass drums and snares and shiny bugles,

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their banners, merit badges, khaki uniforms, and their squared-off military footwork.

This was exactly what I wanted. It also gave me the first sure sign of how certain intangible barriers might be crossed.

The Girl Scouts was much like a sorority, of the kind I would be excluded from in high school and later on in college. And it was run by mothers. The Boy Scouts was like a fraternity and run by fathers. Radine and I were both maturing early. The boys in the band loved having us out there in front of them all the time, bending back and stepping high, in our snug satin outfits and short skirts. Their dads, mostly navy men, loved it too. At that age I was too young to consciously use my sexuality or to understand how an Asian female can fascinate Caucasian men, and of course far too young to see that even this is usually just another form of invisibility. It simply happened that the attention I first gained as a majorette went hand in hand with a warm reception from the Boy Scouts and their fathers, and from that point on I knew intuitively that one resource I had to overcome the war-distorted limitations of my race would be my femininity.

When Woody came back from Japan, and when Ray came home on leave from the Coast Guard, they would tease me about the short skirts we wore, and about my legs, which were near the other extreme from the heavy-thighed *daikon ashi* of the ballet dancer at Manzanar. They called me *gobo ashi*, after the long, brown, twiglike root vegetable, *gobo*. They laughed. But they would show up for parades whenever they were in town, proud of their neighborhood celebrity.

It was a pride that Papa didn't share. While I was striving to become Miss America of 1947, he was wishing I'd be Miss Hiroshima of 1904. He would counsel me on the female graces, as he understood them, on the need to conceal certain parts of the body, on the gaudiness of smiling too much. But his tastes could not compete with the pull from the world outside our family. For one thing, not much of our family remained. Though larger than the rooms at Manzanar, this apartment was still cramped, forcing us kids outside. We ate in

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shifts. Mama was gone most of the time. And, worst of all, I had lost respect for Papa. I never dared show this, but it was true.

His scheme for setting up a housing cooperative had failed. With blueprints in hand he tramped through the Japanese community--to hostels, trailer courts, other housing projects like ours--trying to find families who would invest in it. Few had money. Those who did were terrified to let any of it go. And the very idea of banking on some kind of matching support from the government seemed laughable after their internment experience.

Papa needed an enterprise he could manage from within the family. He decided that a fortune could be made catching shrimp and abalone off the coast of Mexico, then bringing it back to dry and sell in southern California. Woody was out of the army by this time and looking for work. As a citizen he could get a commercial license. So at intervals he would rent a boat, take it down to Ensenada or below, load up with abalone, bring the catch home, and all the rest of us would spend days cleaning and cutting up the meat and stringing it out to dry in the bedrooms. For months the apartment reeked of drying seafood.

It was almost a brilliant scheme. In 1947, no one was yet drying abalone commercially. But there was a small worm that kept attacking the drying meat. Papa could never figure out how to control it. This plan too went to pieces.

His failures were sharpened, in an odd way, by Woody's return. He came back from Japan with his mustache thicker and bearing a sword that had been in the family for 300 years--a gift from Aunt Toyo. He brought other trophies, painted scrolls, lacquered trays--things he would have valued only slightly before the war. All of this delighted Papa, filled him with pride for his son who had returned a larger man, with a surer sense of himself and of where we all had come from. Yet while Woody grew, Papa seemed to shrink, losing potency. Their roles had been reversed. Before the war he had been the skipper. Now he depended more and more on Woody, who had youth and a citizen's mobility, who could license the boat or cross borders easily.



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Ever more vulnerable, Papa began drinking heavily again. And I would watch it with sorrow and disgust, unable then to imagine what he was going through, too far into my own junior high school survival. I couldn't understand why he was home all day, when Mama had to go out working. I was ashamed of him for that and, in a deeper way, for being what had led to our imprisonment, that is, for being so unalterably Japanese. I would not bring my friends home for fear of what he would say or do.

When he refused to show up for the parades I marched in, this separated me from him that much more, while the events he did show up for left me miserable with embarrassment.

One night the local PTA held an awards dinner for all the students in the scholarship society. I was among them, and this was the sort of achievement Papa encouraged. He and Mama dressed up for the dinner. They overdressed. It was the first time they had mixed socially with Caucasians since leaving camp. Papa seldom spoke to Caucasians during those years, or at any time afterward; when he did it was a point of honor to appear supremely dignified. He still thought of himself as an aristocrat. He bought himself a brand-new single-breasted suit of brown worsted for this occasion, with a matching brown vest and a brown and yellow-flowered silk tie. Mama wore a maroon crepe dress with long sleeves, a necklace of shimmering gold discs, and a black Persian lamb coat I had not seen since before the war. She wore her hair in an upsweep. I knew she felt elegant and glad to be there. She smiled continually, smiled at everyone, as if to make up for Papa's solemn courtesies.

When it came time for each student to be presented a certificate, the parents were introduced. Most of them stood up hastily, or waved from their chairs, like Radine's dad, a big, ruddy Texan, just as unfamiliar with this scene as Papa was. He blushed, grinned foolishly, and everybody grinned back, loving him.

I was standing at the head of the table shaking the principal's hand, when Papa rose, his face ceremoniously grave, and acknowledged the other parents

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with his most respectful gesture. He pressed his palms together at his chest and gave them a slow, deep, Japanese bow from the waist. They received this with a moment of careful, indecisive silence. He was unforgivably a foreigner then, foreign to them, foreign to me, foreign to everyone but Mama, who sat next to him smiling with pleased modesty. Twelve years old at the time, I wanted to scream. I wanted to slide out of sight under the table and dissolve.



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## **The Girl of My Dreams**

That bow was from the world I wanted out of, while the strutting, sequined partnership I had with Radine was exactly how I wanted my life to go. My path through the next few years can be traced by its relationship to hers. It was a classic situation.

In many ways we had started even. Poor whites from west Texas, her family was so badly off sometimes she'd come to school with no lunch and no money and we would split whatever I had brought along. At the same time we were both getting all this attention together with the drum and bugle corps. After three years at our junior high school, in a ghetto neighborhood that included many Asians, Blacks, Mexicans, and other white migrants from the south, we had ended up close to being social equals. We stayed best friends until we moved to Long Beach Polytechnic. There everything changed. Our paths diverged. She was asked to join high school sororities. The question of whether or not I should be asked was never even raised. The boys I had crushes on would not ask me out. They would flirt with me in the hallways or meet me after school, but they would ask Radine to the dances, or someone like Radine, someone they could safely be *seen* with. Meanwhile she graduated from baton twirler to song girl, a much more prestigious position in those days. It was unthinkable for a Nisei to be a song girl. Even choosing me as majorette created problems.

The band teacher knew I had more experience than anyone else competing that year. He told me so. But he was afraid to use me. He had to go speak to the board about it, and to some of the parents, to see if it was allowable for an Asian to represent the high school in such a visible way. It had never happened before. I was told that this inquiry was being made, and my reaction was the same as when I tried to join the Girl Scouts. I was apologetic for imposing such a burden

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on those who had to decide. When they finally assented, I was grateful. After all, I was the first Asian majorette they'd ever had. Even if my once enviable role now seemed vaguely second-rate, still I determined to try twice as hard to prove they'd made the right choice.

This sort of treatment did not discourage me. I was used to it. I expected it, a condition of life. What demoralized me was watching Radine's success. We had shared everything, including all the values I'd learned from the world I wanted into, not only standards of achievement but ideas about how a girl should look and dress and talk and act, and ideas of male beauty--which was why so many of the boys I liked were Caucasian. Because I so feared never being asked, I often simply made myself unavailable for certain kinds of dates. If one of them had asked me, of course, I would have been mortified. That would mean coming to Cabrillo Homes to pick me up, and the very thought of one of his daughters dating a Caucasian would have started Papa raving. He would have chased the fellow across the grass. This was my dilemma. Easy enough as it was to adopt white American values, I still had a Japanese father to frighten my boyfriends and a Japanese face to thwart my social goals.

I never wanted to change my face or to be someone other than myself. What I wanted was the kind of acceptance that seemed to come so easily to Radine. To this day I have a recurring dream, which fills me each time with a terrible sense of loss and desolation. I see a young, beautifully blond and blue-eyed high school girl moving through a room full of others her own age, much admired by everyone, men and women both, myself included, as I watch through a window. I feel no malice toward this girl. I don't even envy her. Watching, I am simply emptied, and in the dream I want to cry out, because she is something I can never be, some possibility in my life that can never be fulfilled.

It is a schoolgirl's dream, one I tell my waking self I've long since outgrown. Yet it persists. Once or twice a year she will be there, the boyfriend-surrounded queen who passed me by. Surely her example spurred me on to pursue what

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now seems ludicrous, but at the time was the height of my post-Manzanar ambitions.

It didn't happen in Long Beach. There I felt defeated. I watched Radine's rise, and I knew I could never compete with that. Gradually I lost interest in school and began hanging around on the streets. I would probably have dropped out for good, but it was just about this time that Papa decided to go back into farming and finally moved us out of Cabrillo Homes.

A few months earlier he had almost killed himself on a combination of whiskey and some red wine made by an Italian drinking buddy of his. He had been tipping steadily for two days, when he started vomiting blood from his mouth and nose. It sobered him up permanently. He never touched alcohol again. After that he pulled himself together, and when the chance came along to lease and sharecrop a hundred acres from a big strawberry grower up north in Santa Clara Valley, he took it. That's where he stayed until he died, raising premium berries, outside of San Jose.

I was a senior when we moved. In those days, 1951, San Jose was a large town, but not yet a city. Coming from a big high school in southern California gave me some kind of shine, I suppose. It was a chance to start over, and I made the most of it. By the spring of that year, when it came time to elect the annual carnival queen from the graduating seniors, my homeroom chose me. I was among fifteen girls nominated to walk out for inspection by the assembled student body on voting day.

I knew I couldn't beat the other contestants at their own game, that is, look like a bobbysoxer. Yet neither could I look too Japanese-y. I decided to go exotic, with a flower-print sarong, black hair loose and a hibiscus flower behind my ear. When I walked barefooted out onto the varnished gymnasium floor, between the filled bleachers, the howls and whistles from the boys were double what had greeted any of the other girls. It sounded like some winning basket had just been made in the game against our oldest rivals.

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It was pretty clear what the outcome would be, but ballots still had to be cast and counted. The next afternoon I was standing outside my Spanish class when Leonard Rodriguez, who sat next to me, came hurrying down the hall with a revolutionary's fire in his eye. He helped out each day in the administration office. He had just overheard some teachers and a couple of secretaries counting up the votes.

"They're trying to stuff the ballot box," he whispered loudly. "They're fudging on the tally. They're afraid to have a Japanese girl be queen. They've never had one before. They're afraid of what some of the parents will say."

He was pleased he had caught them, and more pleased to be telling this to me, as if some long-held suspicion of conspiracy had finally been confirmed. I shared it with him. Whether this was true or not, I was prepared to believe that teachers would stuff the ballot box to keep me from being queen. For that reason I couldn't afford to get my hopes up.

I said, "So what?"

He leaned toward me eagerly, with final proof. "They want Lois Carson to be queen. I heard them say so."

If applause were any measure, Lois Carson wasn't even in the running. She was too slim and elegant for beauty contests. But her father had contributed a lot to the school. He was on the board of trustees. She was blond, blue-eyed. At that point her name might as well have been Radine. I was ready to capitulate without a groan.

"If she doesn't make carnival queen this year," Leonard went on smugly, "she'll never be queen of anything anywhere else for the rest of her life."

"Let her have it then, if she wants it so much."

"No! We can't do that! *You* can't do that!"

I could do that very easily. I wasn't going to be caught caring about this, or needing it, the way I had needed the majorette position. I already sensed, though

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I couldn't have said why, that I would lose either way, no matter how it turned out. My face was indifferent.

"How can I stop them from fudging," I said, "if that's what they want to do?"

He hesitated. He looked around. He set his brown face. My champion. "You can't," he said. "But I can."

He turned and hurried away toward the office. The next morning he told me he had gone in there and "raised holy hell," threatened to break this news to the student body and make the whole thing more trouble than it would ever be worth. An hour later the announcement came over the intercom that I had been chosen. I didn't believe it. I couldn't let myself believe it. But, for the classmates who had nominated me, I had to look overjoyed. I glanced across at Leonard and he winked, shouting and whooping now with all the others.

At home that evening, when I brought this news, no one whooped. Papa was furious. I had not told them I was running for queen. There was no use mentioning it until I had something to mention. He asked me what I had worn at the tryouts. I told him.

"No wonder those *hakajin*<sup>2</sup> boys vote for you!" he shouted. "It is just like those majorette clothes you wear in the street. Showing off your body. Is that the kind of queen you want to be?"

## 2. Caucasian.

I didn't say anything. When Papa lectured, you listened. If anyone spoke up it would be Mama, trying to mediate.

"Ko," she said now, "these things are important to Jeannie. She is . . ."

"Important? I'll tell you what is important. Modesty is important. A graceful body is important. You don't show your legs all the time. You don't walk around like this."

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He did an imitation of a girl's walk, with shoulders straight, an assertive stride, and lips pulled back in a baboon's grin. I started to laugh.

"Don't laugh! This is not funny. You become this kind of woman and what Japanese boy is going to marry you? Tell me that. You put on tight clothes and walk around like Jean Harlow and the *hakajin* boys make you the queen. And pretty soon you end up marrying a *hakajin* boy . . ."

He broke off. He could think of no worse end result. He began to stomp back and forth across the floor, while Mama looked at me cautiously, with a glance that said, "Be patient, wait him out. After he has spoken his piece, you and I can talk sensibly."

He saw this and turned on her. "Hey! How come your daughter is seventeen years old and if you put a sack over her face you couldn't tell she was Japanese from anybody else on the street?"

"Ko," Mama said quietly. "Jeannie's in high school now. Next year she's going to go to college. She's learning other things . . ."

"Listen to me. It's not too late for her to learn Japanese ways of movement. The Buddhist church in San Jose gives odori class twice a week. Jeannie, I want you to phone the teacher and tell her you are going to start taking lessons. Mama has kimonos you can wear. She can show you things too. She used to know all the dances. We have pictures somewhere. Mama, what happened to all those pictures?"

I had seen them, photos of Mama when she lived in Spokane, twelve years old and her round face blanching with rice powder. I remembered the afternoon I spent with the incomprehensible old geisha at Manzanar.

"Papa," I complained.

"Don't make faces. You want to be the carnival queen? I tell you what. I'll make a deal with you. You can be the queen if you start odori lessons at the Buddhist church as soon as school is out."

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He stood there, hands on hips, glaring at me, and not at all satisfied with this ultimatum. It was far too late for odori classes to have any effect on me and Papa knew this. But he owed it to himself to make one more show of resistance. When I signed up, a few weeks later, I lasted about ten lessons. The teacher herself sent me away. I smiled too much and couldn't break the habit. Like a majorette before the ever-shifting sidewalk crowd, I smiled during performances, and in Japanese dancing that is equivalent to a concert violinist walking onstage in a bathing suit.

Papa didn't mention my queenship again. He just glared at me from time to time, with great distaste, as if I had betrayed him. Yet in that glare I sometimes detected a flicker of approval, as if this streak of independence, this refusal to be shaped by him reflected his own obstinance. At least, these glances seemed to say, she has inherited *that*.

Mama, of course, was very proud. She took charge and helped me pick out the dress I would wear for the coronation. We drove to San Jose and spent an afternoon in the shops downtown. She could take time for such things now that Papa was working again. This was one of the few days she and I ever spent together, just the two of us, and it confirmed something I'd felt since early childhood. In her quiet way, she had always supported me, alongside of or underneath Papa's demands and expectations. Now she wanted for me the same thing I thought I wanted. Acceptance, in her eyes, was simply another means for survival.

Her support and Papa's resistance had one point in common: too much exposure was unbecoming. All the other girls--my four attendants--were going strapless. Mama wouldn't allow this. By the time we finished shopping, I had begun to agree with her. When she picked out a frilly ball gown that covered almost everything and buried my legs under layers of ruffles, I thought it was absolutely right. I had used a low-cut sarong to win the contest. But once chosen



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I would be a white-gowned figure out of *Gone With the Wind*; I would be respectable.

On coronation night the gym was lit like a church, with bleachers in half-dark and a throne at one end, flooded brightly from the ceiling. The throne was made of plywood, its back shaped in a fleur-de-lis all covered with purple taffeta that shone like oily water under moonlight. Bed sheets were spread to simulate a wide, white carpet the length of the gym, from the throne to the door of the girls' locker room where, with my attendants, we waited for the PA system to give us our musical cue.

Lois Carson, the trustee's daughter, was one of them. She wore a very expensive strapless gown and a huge orchid corsage. Her pool-browned shoulders glowed in the harsh bulb light above the lockers.

"Oh Jeannie," she had said, as we took off our coats. "What a marvelous idea!" I looked at her inquisitively.

"The high *neck*," she explained, studying my dress. "You look so . . . *sedate*. Just perfect for a queen."

As the other girls arrived, she made sure they all agreed with this. "Don't you *wish* you'd thought of it," she would say. And then to me, during a silence she felt obliged to fill, "I just *love* Chinese food." The others exclaimed that they too loved Chinese food, and we talked about recipes and restaurants until the music faded in:

*Girl of my dreams, I love you,  
Honest I do,  
You are so sweet.*

It swelled during the opening bars to cover all other sounds in the gym. I stepped out into blue light that covered the first sheet, walking very slowly, like

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you do at weddings, carrying against the white bodice of my gown a bouquet of pink carnations.

A burst of applause resounded beneath the music, politely enthusiastic, followed by a steady murmur. The gym was packed, and the lights were intense. Suddenly it was too hot out there. I imagined that they were all murmuring about my dress. They saw the girls behind me staring at it. The throne seemed blocks away, and now the dress was stifling me. I had never before worn such an outfit. It was not at all what I should have on. I wanted my sarong. But then thought, no. That would have been worse. Papa had been right about the sarong. Maybe he was right about everything. What was I doing out there anyway, trying to be a carnival queen? The teachers who'd counted the votes certainly didn't think it was such a good idea. Neither did the trustees. The students wanted me though. Their votes proved that. I kept walking my processional walk, thinking of all the kids who had voted for me, not wanting to let them down, although in a way I already had. It wasn't the girl in this old-fashioned dress they had voted for. But if not her, who *had* they voted for? Somebody I wanted to be. And wasn't. Who was I then? According to the big wall speakers now saxophonizing through the gym, I was the girl of somebody's dream:

*Since you've been gone, dear,*

*Life don't seem the same.*

*Please come back again . . .*

I looked ahead at the throne. It was even further away, a purple carriage receding as I approached. I glanced back. My four attendants seemed tiny. Had they stopped back there? Afterward there would be a little reception in one of the classrooms, punch and cookies under fluorescent tubes. Later, at Lois Carson's house, there'd be a more intimate, less public gathering, which I'd overheard a mention of but wouldn't be invited to. Champagne in the foothills. Oyster dip. I

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wanted to laugh. I wanted to cry. I wanted to be ten years old again, so I could believe in princesses and queens. It was too late. Too late to be an odori dancer for Papa, too late to be this kind of heroine. I wanted the carnival to end so I could go somewhere private, climb out of my stuffy dress, and cool off. But all eyes were on me. It was too late now not to follow this make-believe carpet to its plywood finale, and I did not yet know of any truer destination.

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## Part 3

*Mountain snow loosens  
rivulets of tears. Washed stones,  
forgotten clearing.*

--J. W. H.

twenty-two

## Ten Thousand Voices

As I came to understand what Manzanar had meant, it gradually filled me with shame for being a person guilty of something enormous enough to deserve that kind of treatment. In order to please my accusers, I tried, for the first few years after our release, to become someone acceptable. I both succeeded and failed. By the age of seventeen I knew that *making it*, in the terms I had tried to adopt, was not only unlikely, but false and empty, no more authentic for me than trying to emulate my Great-aunt Toyo. I needed some grounding of my own, such as Woody had found when he went to commune with her and with our ancestors in Ka-ke. It took me another twenty years to accumulate the confidence to deal with what the equivalent experience would have to be for me.

It's outside the scope of this book to recount all that happened in the interim. Suffice to say, I was the first member of our family to finish college and the first to marry out of my race. As my husband and I began to raise our family, and as I sought for ways to live agreeably in Anglo-American society, my memories of Manzanar, for many years, lived far below the surface. When we finally started to talk about making a trip to visit the ruins of the camp, something would inevitably get in the way of our plans. Mainly my own doubts, my fears. I half-suspected that the place did not exist. So few people I met in those years had even heard of it, and those who had knew so little about it, sometimes I imagined I had made

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the whole thing up, dreamed it. Even among my brothers and sisters, we seldom discussed the internment. If we spoke of it at all, we joked.

When I think of how that secret lived in all our lives, I remember the way Kiyo and I responded to a little incident soon after we got out of camp. We were sitting on a bus-stop bench in Long Beach, when an old, embittered woman stopped and said, "Why don't all you dirty Japs go back to Japan!" She spit at us and passed on. We said nothing at the time. After she stalked off down the sidewalk we did not look at each other. We sat there for maybe fifteen minutes with downcast eyes and finally got up and walked home. We couldn't bear to mention it to anyone in the family. And over the years we never spoke of this insult. It stayed alive in our separate memories, but it was too painful to call out into the open.

In 1966 I met a Caucasian woman who had worked for one year as a photographer at Manzanar. I could scarcely speak to her. I desperately wanted to, but all my questions stuck in my throat. This time it was not the pain of memory. It was simply her validation that all those things had taken place. Someone outside the close community of Japanese Americans had actually seen the camp, with its multitude of people and its swarm of buildings on the plain between the mountains. Something inside me opened then. I began to talk about it more and more.

It was April 1972, thirty years almost to the day, that we piled our three kids into the car and headed out there. From where we live now, in the California coast town of Santa Cruz, it's a full day's drive. We started down 101 to Paso Robles, crossed over the hummocky Diablo Range to the central valley, skirted Bakersfield, and climbed through Tehachapi Pass into the desert.

At Mojave we turned north onto the same road our bus had taken out from Los Angeles in April 1942. It is the back road to the Sierras and the main route from southern California to Reno and Lake Tahoe. We joined bikers and backpackers and the skiers heading for Mammoth. The traffic through there is fast, everyone

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but the bikers making for the high country. As we sped along wide roads at sixty and seventy, with our kids exclaiming at the sights we passed and our car loaded down with camping gear, it seemed even more incredible to me that a place like Manzanar could have been anywhere within reach of such a highway, such a caravan of pleasure-seeking travelers.

The bikers peeled off at Red Rock Canyon, a gorgeous bulge of pink cliffs and rusty gulches humping out of the flatlands. After that it was lovely desert but nothing much to stop for. In a hundred miles we passed two oases, the first at Olancho, the second around Lone Pine, a small, tree-filled town where a lot of mountain buffs turn off for the Mount Whitney Portal.

A few miles out of Lone Pine we started looking for another stand of trees, some tall elms, and what remains of those gnarled pear orchards. They were easy to spot. Everything else is sagebrush, tumbleweeds, and wind.

At its peak, in the summer of '42, Manzanar was the biggest city between Reno and Los Angeles, a special kind of western boom town that sprang from the sand, flourished, had its day, and now has all but disappeared. The barracks are gone, torn down right after the war. The guard towers are gone, and the mess halls and shower rooms, the hospital, the tea gardens, and the white buildings outside the compound. Even the dust is gone. Spreading brush holds it to the ground. Thirty years earlier, army bulldozers had scraped everything clean to start construction.

What you see from the road are the two gatehouses, each a small empty pillbox of a building faced with flagstones and topped, like tiny pagodas, with shingled curving roofs. Farther in, you see the elms, most of which were planted by internees, and off to the right a large green building that was once our high school auditorium, now a maintenance depot for the Los Angeles Power and Water District, who leased the land to the government during the war and still owns it.

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Past the gatehouses we turned left over a cattle guard and onto a dirt perimeter road that led to the far side of the campsite. About half a mile in we spotted a white obelisk gleaming in the distance and marking a subtle line where the plain begins gradually to slope upward into the alluvial fan that becomes the base of the mountains. It seemed miraculous, as if some block of stone had fallen from the peaks above and landed upright in the brush, chiseled, solitary, twelve feet high.

Near it a dozen graves were outlined in the sand with small stones, and a barbed-wire fence surrounded them to keep back the cattle and the tumbleweed. The black Japanese script cut into the white face of the obelisk read simply, "A Memorial to the Dead."

We were alone out there, too far from the road to hear anything but wind. I thought of Mama, now seven years gone. For a long time I stood gazing at the monument. I couldn't step inside the fence. I believe in ghosts and spirits. I knew I was in the presence of those who had died at Manzanar. I also felt the spiritual presence that always lingers near awesome wonders like Mount Whitney. Then, as if rising from the ground around us on the valley floor, I began to hear the first whispers, nearly inaudible, from all those thousands who once had lived out here, a wide, windy sound of the ghost of that life. As we began to walk, it grew to a murmur, a thin steady hum.

We turned the kids loose, watched them scamper off ahead of us, and we followed what used to be an asphalt road running from the back side of the camp a mile out to the highway. The obelisk--built in 1943--and the gatehouses are all that have survived intact from internment days. The rest of the place looks devastated by a bombing raid.

The old road was disintegrating, split, weed-sprung. We poked through the remains of hospital foundations, undermined by erosion channels. We found concrete slabs where the latrines and shower rooms stood, and irrigation ditches, and here and there, the small rock arrangements that once decorated many of



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the entranceways. I had found out that even in North Dakota, when Papa and the other Issei men imprisoned there had free time, they would gather small stones from the plain and spend hours sorting through a dry stream bed looking for the veined or polished rock that somehow pleased the most. It is so characteristically Japanese, the way lives were made more tolerable by gathering loose desert stones and forming with them something enduringly human. These rock gardens had outlived the barracks and the towers and would surely outlive the asphalt road and rusted pipes and shattered slabs of concrete. Each stone was a mouth, speaking for a family, for some man who had beautified his doorstep.

Vegetation gets thickest toward the center of the site, where the judo pavilion once stood and where rows of elms planted as windbreaks have tripled their growth since the forties. In there we came across the remains of a small park. A stone-lined path ran along the base of a broad mound of dirt about five feet high. Stones had been arranged on the mound, and some low trees still shaded it and made an arch above the path. For a moment I was strolling again, finding childish comfort in its incongruous design.

But after ten feet the path ended in tumbleweeds. The trees were dry and stubby, the mound was barren, and my attention was arrested by a water faucet sticking two feet out of the sand, like some subterranean periscope. One of these had provided water for each barracks. They stuck up at intervals in every direction, strangely sharpening the loneliness and desolation, sometimes the only sign of human presence in an acre or two of sand.

My mood had shifted. The murmur turned to wind. For a while I could almost detach myself from the place and its history and take pleasure in it purely as an archeological site. I saw the outlines, patterns this city must have taken. I imagined where the buildings stood, almost as I once did nosing around old Roman villas in Europe. We saw a low ring of stones built up with cement and wondered who the mason was who knelt there and studied the shapes before

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fitting them together. We moved around the ring a few feet to find out. This was the old flagpole circle, where the Stars and Stripes were hoisted every morning, and the inscription scratched across the top said, BUILT BY WADA AND CREW, JUNE 10, 1942 A.D.

The A.D. made me shiver. I knew that the man who inscribed it had foreseen these ruins and did not want his masonry identified with the wrong era. His words coming out of the stone became a voice that merged with all the others, not a murmur this time, but low voices muttering and chattering all around me. We were crossing what used to be a firebreak, now a sandy field devoid of any growth. The wind was vicious there, with nothing to break it, and the voices grew. The firebreak was where we had talent shows and dances and outdoor movies in the summer, and where the kids played games. I heard the girls' glee club I used to sing in, way off from the other side of camp, their tiny grade-school sopranos singing, "Beautiful dreamer, wake unto me." I closed my eyes and I was ten years old again. Nothing had changed. I heard laughter. It was almost dusk, the wind had dropped, and I saw old men squatting in the dirt, Papa and some of his cronies, muttering and smoking their cigarettes. In the summertime they used to burn orange peels under gallon cans, with holes punched in the sides, to keep the mosquitoes away. Sometimes they would bring out their boards to play *goh* and *hana*. The orange peels would smolder in there, and the men would hunker down around the cans and watch the smoke seep out the holes.

From that firebreak we cut across toward the first row of pear trees, looking for what might remain of Block 28. There wasn't much to guide us but the trees themselves and a view I remembered of the blunt, bulky Inyo Range that bounds the eastern limit of the valley. When we were close enough to smell the trees we stopped. They were stunted, tenacious, tough the way a cactus has to be. The water table in that one area has kept them living through all these years of neglect, and they were ready to bloom at any moment. The heady smell was as

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odd in that desert setting as the little scrap of park had been, as odd yet just as familiar. We used to picnic there in blossom time, on weekends, if we got a wind-free day.

The wind blew it toward us now--chilled pear nectar--and it blew our kids around a high stand of brush. They came tumbling across the sand, demanding to know what we were going to *do* out here. Our twins were five years old at the time, a boy and a girl. Our older daughter had just turned eleven. She knew about "the evacuation," but it would be a few more years before she absorbed this part of the family history. For these three the site had been like any wreck or ruin. They became explorers, rushed around hoping the next clump of dusty trees or chunk of wall might reveal the treasure, the trinket, the exotically rusted hinge. Nothing much had turned up. The shine was wearing off the trip. Their eyes were red and their faces badly chapped. No place for kids.

My husband started walking them back to the car. I stayed behind a moment longer, first watching our eleven-year-old stride ahead, leading her brother and sister. She has long dark hair like mine and was then the same age I had been when the camp closed. It was so simple, watching her, to see why everything that had happened to me since we left camp referred back to it, in one way or another. At that age your body is changing, your imagination is galloping, your mind is in that zone between a child's vision and an adult's. Papa's life ended at Manzanar, though he lived for twelve more years after getting out. Until this trip I had not been able to admit that my own life really began there. The times I thought I had dreamed it were one way of getting rid of it, part of wanting to lose it, part of what you might call a whole Manzanar mentality I had lived with for twenty-five years. Much more than a remembered place, it had become a state of mind. Now, having seen it, I no longer wanted to lose it or to have those years erased. Having found it, I could say what you can only say when you've truly come to know a place: Farewell.

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I had nearly outgrown the shame and the guilt and the sense of unworthiness. This visit, this pilgrimage, made comprehensible, finally, the traces that remained and would always remain, like a needle. That hollow ache I carried during the early months of internment had shrunk, over the years, to a tiny sliver of suspicion about the very person I was. It had grown so small sometimes I'd forget it was there. Months might pass before something would remind me. When I first read, in the summer of 1972, about the pressure Japan's economy was putting on American business and how a union in New York City had printed up posters of an American flag with MADE IN JAPAN written across it, then that needle began to jab. I heard Mama's soft, weary voice from 1945 say, "It's all starting over." I knew it wouldn't. Yet neither would I have been surprised to find the FBI at my door again. I would resist it much more than my parents did, but deep within me something had been prepared for that. Manzanar would always live in my nervous system, a needle with Mama's voice.

A gust of wind rushed through the orchard, bringing ice off the white slopes, and more blossom scent. It hurt to inhale deeply. I pulled my coat tight, ready to head for the car's warmth, but also wanting to hold this moment a little longer. I might never be back here again. I was poking around brush clumps and foundation chunks looking for something else. One more sign. Anything. I found another collection of stones, off by themselves, but so arranged that they could not have been accidental. Nearby an edge showed through the sand. I uncovered a single steppingstone, slightly worn, that led nowhere, yet lay as a subtle appendage to the small rock garden. One of these had lain outside our barracks door, a first step below three wooden ones. It could be ours. Perhaps not. Many barracks had such entrances. But this one would serve. I could call it the rock garden Papa put there. Almost the sign I wanted. Not quite. Not quite enough. There was more to all this than the lovely patience of these gathered stones. They were part of it. But there was something else, in the air. A sound. A smell. Just a whiff, hanging

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on that gust from the orchard, or blown down the ghostly alleyway of what used to be the street we lived on. I was hearing Mama's voice once more, but differently, louder now, right in front of me, and I smelled cork burning. That was one of Papa's remedies when her back knotted up. He would take little coins of cork and place them on the tension nodes and light them, and the cork would burn dark rings into her skin as she hunched on the porch steps groaning with relief.

They were sitting on the steps like that--Mama hunched, Papa tending the blackening rings--one morning a few days before we left camp. Now that smell and those voices in the wind from the orchard brought with them the sign I was waiting for: the image of a rekindled wildness in Papa's eyes. Twenty-seven years earlier I had carried it with me out of camp only half understanding what it meant. Remembering now, I realized I had never forgotten his final outburst of defiance. But for the first time I saw it clearly, as clearly as the gathered desert stones, and when I left today for good I would carry that image with me again, as the rest of my inheritance.

It was the day Papa suddenly came back to life and decided to go into Lone Pine and buy a car. Mama had been packing, and that brought the uncertainty of our future to such a sharp point, her back went into spasms. She didn't want to talk. She wanted to concentrate on the rings of heat. She let Papa rant a long time before she reacted.

"That's crazy, Ko," she said.

"Don't call me crazy! You think I'm going to ride that stinking bus all the way to Los Angeles?"

"It's cheaper than buying a car."

"Cheaper! What is it worth--to be packed in there like cattle? You call that cheap?"

"We don't have money to buy a car."

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"I know how much money we have!"

He jumped to his feet then, rushed into the house, came out with his hat on and a shirt half-buttoned, and his walking stick and his turtleneck sweater tied around his neck, and took off striding toward the main gate, leaving Mama with her back full of smoking cork, which had done no good at all, since this new move of his merely bunched her muscles up worse than ever.

It was late afternoon when we heard the horn, still blocks away. Without looking out the door, Mama said, "Here he comes."

As the honks came closer we heard another sound, like a boxer working out on a flabby punching bag. Mama moved to the doorway. We all did--Chizu, May, me--in time to see a blue Nash four-door come around the corner, with its two front tires flat and Papa sitting up straight and proud behind the wheel, his hat cocked, his free hand punching at the horn. Heads were appearing at doorways all up and down the street.

He stopped in front, racing the engine and grinning, while he eyed Mama and fingered the shiny-knobbed dashboard gearshift. On the seat between his legs he held a half-empty quart bottle of whiskey. He yelled, "What do you think, Little Mama?"

She didn't answer. He had not been drinking much at all for about six months. She stood there waiting to see what he was going to do. He laughed and made the engine roar and demanded to know where all his boys were, he wanted to show those *yogores* what a real car looked like. Kiyō was the only son still in camp, and he had gone off to help someone else load furniture. So Papa announced that he would give all his women a ride. Mama protested, said he ought to get those tires fixed if we expected to take this car all the way into Los Angeles. Papa roared back at her, louder than the engine, and with such a terrible samurai's scowl that we all went leaping and piling into the car, Mama last, slamming the back door and climbing into the front seat next to him.

"You think it's a pretty good car?" he said, pleased by this show of power.



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Mama said nothing. She sat very stiff, cool, enduring him.

Chizu was the placator now, leaning forward from the back to pat him on the shoulder. "It's a fine car, papa."

"You watch!"

He grabbed the gear lever and rammed it into low. The Nash leaped, and we were clopping down the street on those two flats and two good tires, with Papa laughing, sipping from the bottle. At the first corner he said, "You think I can't pick out cars?"

Softly Chizu said, "You did real good, Papa."

He stepped on the gas, hitting maybe thirty, swerving crazily. In the back seat we were all thrown around, flung from door to door like rag dolls, with Mama bouncing in front of us and Papa's hat crunching up against the ceiling.

May cried out, "Not so fast, Papa! You're going to wreck your car!"

"Think the car can't take it?" he yelled back at her. "You watch this!"

His gaiety turned ferocious again. He stomped the pedal, pushing the speedometer up to thirty-five. His right front tire had shredded and it flopped like a mangled arm. It lashed out, upending a garbage can. I started to cry. Chizu, her calm shattered, was yelling at him to slow down, Mama was too, and May was screaming. He wouldn't listen and told us to hold on, while he swung into the street, careening past emptying barracks where suitcases and duffel bags sat stacked. As we passed people standing by the baggage, Papa swerved from one side to the other, waving. He laughed, growled, made faces. In front of us, a laden family was hiking out toward the main gate. Papa swung wide, honking, and waving.

"Hey! Hey!" he shouted.

They turned, too amazed to wave back.

"Don't miss that bus!" he yelled.

At the next corner he spun off into a deserted section of barracks. These already looked like the ones we'd first moved into, sand piling up against



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foundation blocks, the clotheslines empty, all signs and markers gone. It made no difference to Papa that no one was out there to witness his performance. He aimed for tumbleweeds lying in the roadbed and shouted with triumph each time he squashed one. Chizu and Mama and May had quit trying to control him. I'd stopped crying. We grabbed for handholds, covered our heads, hoping simply to survive until he hit something hard or ran out of gas.

We came to a firebreak and Papa plunged into it, began to cut a twisty path across its emptiness, shouting "Hyah! Hyah!," gouging ragged tracks through the dusty sand. The way this firebreak lay, there seemed to be nothing in front of us now but sagebrush and open country, rising in the distance south of camp to the range of round, buff-colored hills rumored to be full of rattlesnakes. The few times I'd wished I could walk in one direction for as long as I wanted, the threat of those rattlesnakes deterred me. And now, farther south, beyond that visible barrier, out in the world I scarcely remembered, there loomed the dark, threatening cloud I'd heard grown-ups talk about. The way we seemed to be heading, I should have been frightened into a coma. But for this once, I was not. Watching Papa bounce and weave and shout in front of me, I was almost ready to laugh with him, with the first bubbly sense of liberation his defiant craziness had brought along with it. I believed in him completely just then, believed in the fierceness flashing in his wild eyes. Somehow that would get us past whatever waited inside the fearful dark cloud, get us past the heat, and the rattlers, and a great deal more.

At the fence he had to turn, sending up a white billow of dust. Where the fence met the highway we cornered again, heading for the bus stop. A crowd waited there, standing idly, sitting around on scattered baggage. They all turned to watch when they heard us coming. Papa tooted the horn and yelled out, "No bus for us! No bus for us!"

The young kids were mystified by this and stood open-eyed, watching. Some of the older folks smiled, waving as we hit a chuck hole and bounced. Papa

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swung left, and we clattered out onto the wide, empty boulevard that ran the length of the camp, back to where our own baggage waited and the final packing.

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## Afterword

The making of this book began in our living room in 1971, when Jeanne was finally ready to talk about what happened to her and her family during World War Two. For the first couple of months we just talked back and forth, as she spoke her memories into a tape recorder. At the outset we weren't at all sure what form these memories would take. The original goal was a short recollection for the immediate relatives and for our thirty-six nieces and nephews, some of whom were born at Manzanar yet knew almost nothing about the experience. A year later it had become much more than that. Even so, at the time we could not have imagined that a family story based on these memories would have such a long life and eventually find its way into classrooms all across the country.

It has been deeply gratifying to see the audience for this book continue to grow, and meanwhile we have watched with fascination as perceptions of the material have changed with time. Each reader brings to such a story his or her own particular history. When it was first published in the early 1970s, we often heard comments such as, "It's too bad the Japanese got locked up, but that's what happens in wartime. After all, what do you expect? Didn't your people do the same thing to our soldiers, putting them in those terrible camps over there in the Philippines?"

We would then have to explain the difference. And it is a profound difference, which takes a lot of explaining. But it goes to the very heart of the matter. Most of the Americans interned in the Philippines were military personnel captured in an oversea combat zone, prisoners of war being held by enemy troops. Most of those interned in the United States were native-born American citizens; they were all civilians, imprisoned inside the borders of their own country, without a trial, and their captors were other Americans.

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Since this book came out, more than a quarter of a century has passed. World War Two is that much further behind us, and such comments aren't heard so much anymore. For new generations of readers this story is often their first exposure to the wartime internment and its human costs. And as our society becomes ever more diverse, more and more people bring their own immigrant experience to the reading. We have found that for many young readers this book offers more than a window into a telling episode in American history. In Ko and Riku Wakatsuki they often see something of their parents or grandparents, who had to contend with great challenges to reach the United States and, once they arrived, struggled to find a place in a new land.

In recent years Jeanne has visited many dozens of schools, from California and Oregon to Texas and Washington, D.C., and she has discovered that, for readers of many backgrounds, the story of a young girl who finds herself separated from the larger society for reasons she does not yet understand can have a strong contemporary resonance.

Manzanar was the first of the ten main camps to open. This new edition comes out just sixty years after the first internees began to arrive there by bus from southern California in the spring of 1942. It comes out fifty years after Congress passed Public Law 514 in 1952, which overturned restrictive federal policies, finally making it possible for immigrants of Asian ancestry--like Ko--to naturalize as U.S. citizens.

This new edition also comes out while the events of September 11, 2001, are still fresh in the national memory. Those events seem to have given *Farewell to Manzanar* a new timeliness. In the wake of the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in New York, described by some as "our new Pearl Harbor," we saw an unfortunate readiness, on the part of many, to assume that all Americans of Middle Eastern background were suddenly suspect and should somehow be held accountable for these crimes. It was a hauntingly familiar rush

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to judgment. In the early months of 1942, this is what preceded the unlawful evacuation and internment of 110,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry.

The big difference, sixty years later, was the response of the media and the federal government. In 1942 the flames of racial blaming were fueled and fanned by radio broadcasters and major newspapers. The president of the United States signed the executive order authorizing the forced confinement of an entire ethnic group. The reason given was “wartime necessity.” In 2001 the widely scattered threats and acts of reprisal against Arab Americans had no encouragement from national or local media, nor any support from any level of government. Indeed, the president expressed strong disapproval of such behavior, as did the major networks and large metropolitan papers.

That’s a huge change, one in the best spirit of our democratic ideals. And for this we must all be thankful. At the same time, the events of September 11, 2001, made it clear that this readiness to overreact along ethnic lines is still with us, and close to the surface. We can never afford to forget what happened at Manzanar and the other wartime camps. Those events remind us that this lesson must be learned and learned and learned again.

*--Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston, Santa Cruz, California,  
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