

# Farewell to Manzanar

## **Farewell to Manzanar**

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### **Chapters 4, 5, 6**

four

#### **A Common Master Plan**

I don't remember what we ate that first morning. I know we stood for half an hour in cutting wind waiting to get our food. Then we took it back to the cubicle and ate huddled around the stove. Inside, it was warmer than when we left, because Woody was already making good his promise to Mama, tacking up some ends of lath he'd found, stuffing rolled paper around the door frame.

Trouble was, he had almost nothing to work with. Beyond this temporary weather stripping, there was little else he could do. Months went by, in fact, before our "home" changed much at all from what it was the day we moved in--bare floors, blanket partitions, one bulb in each compartment dangling from a roof beam, and open ceilings overhead so that mischievous boys like Ray and Kiyo could climb up into the rafters and peek into anyone's life.

The simple truth is the camp was no more ready for us when we got there than we were ready for it. We had only the dimmest ideas of what to expect. Most of the families, like us, had moved out from southern California with as much luggage as each person could carry. Some old men left Los Angeles wearing Hawaiian shirts and Panama hats and stepped off the bus at an altitude of 4000 feet, with nothing available but sagebrush and tarpaper to stop the April winds pouring down off the back side of the Sierras.

# Farewell to Manzanar

The War Department was in charge of all the camps at this point. They began to issue military surplus from the First World War--olive-drab knit caps, earmuffs, peacoats, canvas leggings. Later on, sewing machines were shipped in, and one barracks was turned into a clothing factory. An old seamstress took a peacoat of mine, tore the lining out, opened and flattened the sleeves, added a collar, put arm holes in and handed me back a beautiful cape. By fall dozens of seamstresses were working full-time transforming thousands of these old army clothes into capes, slacks and stylish coats. But until that factory got going and packages from friends outside began to fill out our wardrobes, warmth was more important than style. I couldn't help laughing at Mama walking around in army earmuffs and a pair of wide-cuffed, khaki-colored wool trousers several sizes too big for her. Japanese are generally smaller than Caucasians, and almost all these clothes were oversize. They flopped, they dangled, they hung.

It seems comical, looking back; we were a band of Charlie Chaplins marooned in the California desert. But at the time, it was pure chaos. That's the only way to describe it. The evacuation had been so hurriedly planned, the camps so hastily thrown together, nothing was completed when we got there, and almost nothing worked.

I was sick continually, with stomach cramps and diarrhea. At first it was from the shots they gave us for typhoid, in very heavy doses and in assembly-line fashion: swab, jab, swab, *Move along now*, swab, jab, swab, *Keep it moving*. That knocked all of us younger kids down at once, with fevers and vomiting. Later, it was the food that made us sick, young and old alike. The kitchens were too small and badly ventilated. Food would spoil from being left out too long. That summer, when the heat got fierce, it would spoil faster. The refrigeration kept breaking down. The cooks, in many cases, had never cooked before. Each block had to provide its own volunteers. Some were lucky and had a professional or two in their midst. But the first chef in our block had been a gardener all his life and suddenly found himself preparing three meals a day for 250 people.

# Farewell to Manzanar

“The Manzanar runs” became a condition of life, and you only hoped that when you rushed to the latrine, one would be in working order.

That first morning, on our way to the chow line, Mama and I tried to use the women’s latrine in our block. The smell of it spoiled what little appetite we had. Outside, men were working in an open trench, up to their knees in muck--a common sight in the months to come. Inside, the floor was covered with excrement, and all twelve bowls were erupting like a row of tiny volcanoes.

Mama stopped a kimono-wrapped woman stepping past us with her sleeve pushed up against her nose and asked, “What do you do?”

“Try Block Twelve,” the woman said, grimacing. “They have just finished repairing the pipes.”

It was about two city blocks away. We followed her over there and found a line of women waiting in the wind outside the latrine. We had no choice but to join the line and wait with them.

Inside it was like all the other latrines. Each block was built to the same design, just as each of the ten camps, from California to Arkansas, was built to a common master plan. It was an open room, over a concrete slab. The sink was a long metal trough against one wall, with a row of spigots for hot and cold water. Down the center of the room twelve toilet bowls were arranged in six pairs, back to back, with no partitions. My mother was a very modest person, and this was going to be agony for her, sitting down in public, among strangers.

One old woman had already solved the problem for herself by dragging in a large cardboard carton. She set it up around one of the bowls, like a three-sided screen. Oxydol was printed in large black letters down the front. I remember this well, because that was the soap we were issued for laundry; later on, the smell of it would permeate these rooms. The upended carton was about four feet high. The old woman behind it wasn’t much taller. When she stood, only her head showed over the top.

# Farewell to Manzanar

She was about Granny's age. With great effort she was trying to fold the sides of the screen together. Mama happened to be at the head of the line now. As she approached the vacant bowl, she and the old woman bowed to each other from the waist. Mama then moved to help her with the carton, and the old woman said very graciously, in Japanese, "Would you like to use it?"

Happily, gratefully, Mama bowed again and said, "*Arigato*" (Thank you). "*Arigato gozaimas*" (Thank you very much). "I will return it to your barracks."

"Oh, no. It is not necessary. I will be glad to wait."

The old woman unfolded one side of the cardboard, while Mama opened the other; then she bowed again and scurried out the door.

Those big cartons were a common sight in the spring of 1942. Eventually sturdier partitions appeared, one or two at a time. The first were built of scrap lumber. Word would get around that Block such and such had partitions now, and Mama and my older sisters would walk halfway across the camp to use them. Even after every latrine in camp was screened, this quest for privacy continued. Many would wait until late at night. Ironically, because of this, midnight was often the most crowded time of all.

Like so many of the women there, Mama never did get used to the latrines. It was a humiliation she just learned to endure: *shikata ga nai*, this cannot be helped. She would quickly subordinate her own desires to those of the family or the community, because she knew cooperation was the only way to survive. At the same time she placed a high premium on personal privacy, respected it in others and insisted upon it for herself. Almost everyone at Manzanar had inherited this pair of traits from the generations before them who had learned to live in a small, crowded country like Japan. Because of the first they were able to take a desolate stretch of wasteland and gradually make it livable. But the entire situation there, especially in the beginning--the packed sleeping quarters, the communal mess halls, the open toilets--all this was an open insult to that other, private self, a slap in the face you were powerless to challenge.

# Farewell to Manzanar

five

## **Almost a Family**

At seven I was too young to be insulted. The camp worked on me in a much different way. I wasn't aware of this at the time, of course. No one was, except maybe Mama, and there was little she could have done to change what happened.

It began in the mess hall. Before Manzanar, mealtime had always been the center of our family scene. In camp, and afterward, I would often recall with deep yearning the old round wooden table in our dining room in Ocean Park, the biggest piece of furniture we owned, large enough to seat twelve or thirteen of us at once. A tall row of elegant, lathe-turned spindles separated this table from the kitchen, allowing talk to pass from one room to the other. Dinners were always noisy, and they were always abundant with great pots of boiled rice, platters of home-grown vegetables, fish Papa caught.

He would sit at the head of this table, with Mama next to him serving and the rest of us arranged around the edges according to age, down to where Kiyo and I sat, so far away from our parents, it seemed at the time, we had our own enclosed nook inside this world. The grownups would be talking down at their end, while we two played our secret games, making eyes at each other when Papa gave the order to begin to eat, racing with chopsticks to scrape the last grain from our rice bowls, eyeing Papa to see if he had noticed who won.

Now, in the mess halls, after a few weeks had passed, we stopped eating as a family. Mama tried to hold us together for a while, but it was hopeless. Granny was too feeble to walk across the block three times a day, especially during

# Farewell to Manzanar

heavy weather, so May brought food to her in the barracks. My older brothers and sisters, meanwhile, began eating with their friends, or eating somewhere blocks away, in the hope of finding better food. The word would get around that the cook over in Block 22, say, really knew his stuff, and they would eat a few meals over there, to test the rumor. Camp authorities frowned on mess hall hopping and tried to stop it, but the good cooks liked it. They liked to see long lines outside their kitchens and would work overtime to attract a crowd.

Younger boys, like Ray, would make a game of seeing how many mess halls they could hit in one meal period--be the first in line at Block 16, gobble down your food, run to 17 by the middle of the dinner hour, gulp another helping, and hurry to 18 to make the end of that chow line and stuff in the third meal of the evening. They didn't *need* to do that. No matter how bad the food might be, you could always eat till you were full.

Kiyo and I were too young to run around, but often we would eat in gangs with other kids, while the grownups sat at another table. I confess I enjoyed this part of it at the time. We all did. A couple of years after the camps opened, sociologists studying the life noticed what had happened to the families. They made some recommendations, and edicts went out that families *must* start eating together again. Most people resented this; they griped and grumbled. They were in the habit of eating with their friends. And until the mess hall system itself could be changed, not much could really be done. It was too late.

My own family, after three years of mess hall living, collapsed as an integrated unit. Whatever dignity or feeling of filial strength we may have known before December 1941 was lost, and we did not recover it until many years after the war, not until after Papa died and we began to come together, trying to fill the vacuum his passing left in all our lives.

The closing of the camps, in the fall of 1945, only aggravated what had begun inside. Papa had no money then and could not get work. Half of our family had already moved to the east coast, where jobs had opened up for them. The rest of



# Farewell to Manzanar

us were relocated into a former defense workers' housing project in Long Beach. In that small apartment there never was enough room for all of us to sit down for a meal. We ate in shifts, and I yearned all the more for our huge round table in Ocean Park.

Soon after we were released I wrote a paper for a seventh-grade journalism class, describing how we used to hunt grunion before the war. The whole family would go down to Ocean Park Beach after dark, when the grunion were running, and build a big fire on the sand. I would watch Papa and my older brothers splash through the moonlit surf to scoop out the fish, then we'd rush back to the house where Mama would fry them up and set the sizzling pan on the table, with soy sauce and horseradish, for a midnight meal. I ended the paper with this sentence: "The reason I want to remember this is because I know we'll never be able to do it again."

You might say it would have happened sooner or later anyway, this sliding apart of such a large family, in postwar California. People get married; their interests shift. But there is no escaping the fact that our internment accelerated the process, made it happen so suddenly it was almost tangible.

Not only did we stop eating at home, there was no longer a home to eat in. The cubicles we had were too small for anything you might call "living." Mama couldn't cook meals there. It was impossible to find any privacy there. We slept there and spent most of our waking hours elsewhere.

Mama had gone to work again soon after we arrived. The call went out for people with any kind of skill to offer their services. Thousands were responding, with great surges of community spirit, sometimes with outright patriotism, wanting "to do their part." Woody signed on as a carpenter. One of my brothers-in-law was a roofing foreman. Another ran a reservoir crew. Mama had worked as a dietician in Washington after she was married. In camp this was high-priority training. In addition to the daily multitude, those amateur cooks were faced with

# Farewell to Manzanar

allergy cases, diabetics, nursing mothers, infants who required special feedings. For Mama it was also a way to make a little money. Nineteen dollars a month. This was top wage for an internee. Unskilled labor started at eight. All volunteer of course. You didn't have to get out of bed in the morning if you didn't want to. Mama wanted the work. She had a monthly fee to pay the warehouse in Los Angeles where she had stored what remained of our furniture and silver just before we evacuated. She worried about this constantly.

She worried about Papa too. Letters from him trickled in, once or twice a month, with half the words blacked out, calling her "Sweetheart" for the first time in fifteen years. She was always distracted, staring at things I could never see. I would try to get her attention, grab her around the legs. At night, in bed, she would hug me close. But during the day she never seemed to notice me.

Adrift, I began to look elsewhere for attention and thus took the first steps out of my child's realm toward a world of grownups other than my parents. Though I was only seven, my images of certain people from this period are very precise, because I had begun to see adults for the first time. On Terminal Island I first saw Asians, those demon-children who had terrorized me. At Manzanar, past the fear of slanted eyes and high cheekbones, I watched with fresh amazement the variety of faces and bodies and costumes all around me. This may have resulted, in part, from the life Manzanar had forced upon us all. Once the weather warmed up, it was an out-of-doors life, where you only went "home" at night, when you finally had to: 10,000 people on an endless promenade inside the square mile of barbed wire that was the wall around our city.

One of our neighbors was a tall, broad woman, taller than anyone in camp, as far as I recall. She walked erectly and wore an Aunt Jemima scarf around her head. She was married to a Japanese man, and they had adopted a little Japanese girl I sometimes played with. But this woman, I realized much later, was half-black, with light mulatto skin, passing as a Japanese in order to remain with her husband. She wore scarves everywhere to cover her giveaway hair.



# Farewell to Manzanar

In the barracks facing ours there lived an elegant woman who astounded me each time I saw her. She and her husband both came from Japan, and her long aristocratic face was always a ghastly white. In traditional fashion she powdered it with rice flour every morning. By old-country standards this made her more beautiful. For a long time I thought she was diseased.

Two more white faces stand out in my memory, a pair of nurses I saw from time to time in the clinic. They wore white shoes, white hose, and white dresses. Above their bleached faces their foreheads had been shaved halfway over their scalp's curve to make a sharp widow's peak where starched black hair began to arch upward, reminding me of a cobra's hood. Their lips were gone. Their brows were plucked. They were always together, a pair of reptilian kabuki creatures at loose in the camp hospital.

You might say they were the negatives for two other women I soon began to see almost every day and, in fact, saw more of for a while than I did my mother. Their robes were black, their heads were hooded in white. Sister Mary Suzanne was about forty then, a frail, gentle woman from Japan who could speak no English. Sister Mary Bernadette was a feisty, robust little Canadian Japanese who spoke both languages fluently.

They were Maryknoll nuns, members of that missionary order whose special task is to go into a country, with knowledge of its language, and convert its people to the Catholic faith. Before the war they had run an orphanage in Los Angeles for children of Japanese ancestry. Evacuated to Manzanar and given the job of caring for some fifty orphans interned there, they set up what came to be known as "Children's Village," and they had one barracks turned into a chapel. They were joined by Father Steinback, one of the few Caucasians to live among us inside the compound and eat in our mess halls. He was greatly admired for this, and many internees converted to Catholicism before the camp was closed.

# Farewell to Manzanar

I was almost one of them. Papa stepped in just before my baptism day. If he had been there during those early months I probably would never have started spending time with the Maryknolls. He was always suspicious of organized religions. I think he had already tried to scare me away from Catholics. That was one of his prime methods of instruction: fear. On my way home from school each day in Ocean Park I would break into a run as I passed the local Catholic church. The nuns I glimpsed were robed and ghostly figures I wanted no part of.

Culturally we were like those Jews who observe certain traditions but never visit a synagogue. We kept a little Buddhist shrine in the house, and we celebrated a few Japanese holidays that were religiously connected--the way Christmas is. But we never said prayers. I had never been inside a Buddhist church. And as for Christianity, I had not heard the word God until we reached Terminal Island. I first heard about Jesus when the one friend I made there--another Japanese girl--took me to a Baptist Sunday School on the island, where a Caucasian teacher bewildered me with pictures of lambs and donkeys and golden-domed pavilions.

For some reason these did not appeal to me nearly as much as the stories of the saints and martyrs I heard a few months later when I began to study catechism with the Maryknolls. Soon I was over there every afternoon and most of Sunday. With no regular school to attend and no home to spend time in, it's no mystery that I should have been drawn to these two kind and generous women. They had organized a recreation program. They passed out candy. But what kept me coming back, once I started, were the tales of the unfortunate women like Saint Agatha, whose breasts were cut off when she refused to renounce her faith.

I had to walk nearly a mile to reach their chapel, and walk a mile back. That summer it was miserably hot, over one hundred degrees most days. Yet I made the trip gladly. A big homely girl about twenty years old who wore boys' shoes and an Eisenhower jacket taught catechism to the younger kids. She loved to sit

# Farewell to Manzanar

us down and fix us with the eye of a mother superior and tell us about Saint Agatha, or Saint Juliana, who was boiled alive, or Saint Marcella, who was whipped to death by the Goths.

I was fascinated with the miseries of women who had suffered and borne such afflictions. On my way home, I would hike past row upon row of black barracks, watching mountains waver through that desert heat, with the sun trying to dry up my very blood, and imagine in some childish way that I was among them, that I too was up there on the screen of history, in a white lace catechism dress, sweating and grimy, yet selflessly carrying my load.

I fulfilled this little fantasy one blistering afternoon when the heat finally got me. Sunstroke. While crossing one of the wide sandy firebreaks that separated some of the blocks, I passed out.

This put me in bed for a week. After I recovered, several months went by before I resumed my catechism. For one thing, Papa discouraged me. It was just before this happened that he had returned from Fort Lincoln. He was back among us, making decisions, giving commands. For a while it seemed we would almost be a family again. But it didn't turn out that way. He was not the same man. Something terrible had happened to him in North Dakota.

He arrived at Manzanar on a Greyhound bus. We all went down to the main gate to meet him, everyone but Woody's wife, Chizu, who was in the camp hospital. The previous day she'd given birth to Papa's first grandson. She named him George, in honor of Papa's return. Two of my sisters were pregnant at the time, and they were there at the gate in hot-weather smocks, along with Woody, who had left the hospital long enough to welcome Papa back, and Granny and Mama and the rest of the family, a dozen of us standing in the glare, excited, yet very reverent as the bus pulled in.

The door whished open, and the first thing we saw was a cane--I will never forget it--poking from the shaded interior into sunlight, a straight, polished maple

# Farewell to Manzanar

limb spotted with dark lidded eyes where small knotholes had been stained and polished.

Then Papa stepped out, wearing a fedora hat and a wilted white shirt. This was September 1942. He had been gone nine months. He had aged ten years. He looked over sixty, gaunt, wilted as his shirt, underweight, leaning on that cane and favoring his right leg. He stood there surveying his clan, and nobody moved, not even Mama, waiting to see what he would do or say, waiting for some cue from him as to how we should deal with this.

I was the only one who approached him. I had not thought of him much at all after he was taken away. He was simply gone. Now I was so happy to see him that I ran up and threw my arms around his waist and buried my face in his belt. I thought I should be laughing and welcoming him home. But I started to cry. By this time everyone was crying. No one else had moved yet to touch him. It was as if the youngest, the least experienced, had been appointed to display what the others, held back by awe or fear, or some old-country notion of respect for the patriarch, could not. I hugged him tighter, wanting to be happy that my father had come back. Yet I hurt so inside I could only welcome him with convulsive tears.

# Farewell to Manzanar

six

## Whatever He Did Had Flourish

That cane Papa brought back with him he had carved and polished himself in North Dakota. When his limp went away he continued to use it. He didn't need to. He liked it, as a kind of swagger stick, such as military officers sometimes use. When he was angry he would wield it like the flat of a sword, whacking out at his kids or his wife or his hallucinations. He kept that cane for years, and it served him well. I see it now as a sad, homemade version of the samurai sword his great-great-grandfather carried in the land around Hiroshima, at a time when such warriors weren't much needed anymore, when their swords were both their virtue and their burden. It helps me understand how Papa's life could end at a place like Manzanar. He didn't die there, but things finished for him there, whereas for me it was like a birthplace. The camp was where our lifelines intersected.

He was the oldest son in a family that had for centuries been of the samurai class. He used to brag that they had owned more land than you could cross on horseback in a single day. By the time he was born, in 1887, they weren't warriors any longer. Japan was in the throes of that rapid, confusing metamorphosis from a feudal to an industrial nation, which began when Commodore Perry's black-hulled armada steamed into Tokyo Bay and forced the Japanese to open their ports and cities to western trade.

Papa's grandfather was a judge, at one point a magistrate for the small, lovely island of Miya-jima. He had four children, including one son, Papa's father. His three daughters were among the first women in Japan to receive university

# Farewell to Manzanar

degrees. One daughter married an army general who for a time governed Formosa, and it was this uncle-general who encouraged Papa to enroll in a military school.

As far as everyone could see he was preparing for a career in the navy. Then, at seventeen, he abruptly dropped out. His favorite aunt lent him some money, and a short time later he bought passage on a ship bound for the Hawaiian Islands. That was the last anyone in Japan saw or heard of him.

In those days he was a headstrong idealist. He was spoiled, the ways eldest sons usually are in Japan, used to having his way, and he did not like what he saw happening to the family. Ironically, it foreshadowed just the sort of thing he himself would be faced with later on: too many children and not enough money. His father's first wife bore five children. When she died, he remarried and four more came along. His father, who had been a public official, ended up running a "teahouse" in Hiroshima--something like a cabaret. It was a living, but Papa wanted no part of this. In the traditional Japanese class system, samurai ranked just below nobility; then came farmers and those who worked the land. Merchants ranked fourth, below the farmers. For Papa, at seventeen, it made no difference that times were hard; the idea of a teahouse was an insult to the family name. What's more, their finances were in such a state that even as eldest son there was almost nothing for him to look forward to. The entire area around Hiroshima, mainly devoted to agriculture, was suffering a severe depression. In 1886 Japan had for the first time allowed its citizens to emigrate, and thousands from his district had already left the country in search of better opportunities. Papa followed them.

He reached Honolulu in 1904, with a letter of introduction to a cousin who taught school on Oahu. Papa used to tell the story of his first stroll through town, just off the boat and wanting to stretch his legs before looking up his relatives. He came across a sign outside a building that said in three languages workers wanted. Proud that he could read the English as well as the Japanese, he figured



# Farewell to Manzanar

he'd have an edge over anyone else applying. He was feeling cocky anyway on this first day in the new world, seventeen years old and a little money burning in his pocket. He stepped into a men's shop a few doors down and bought himself a new suit, a new shirt, a new tie, a new hat--everything he'd seen the most prosperous men along the street wearing. He changed clothes in the store, then went to see about that job.

He followed arrows from the sign to the back of the building, where he found a yard full of half-dressed Chinese and Japanese field hands waiting in line to apply for work in the sugar cane. His disdain for them was met with laughter. They looked at him as if he were a maniac, pointing with derision at his dandy's outfit. He rushed back to the street, cursing, dismayed, humiliated, heading for the safety of his cousin's.

A few weeks later he was introduced to a vacationing American, a lawyer from Idaho who offered to pay his passage to the states and provide room and board in exchange for three years' work as a houseboy. Papa accepted. It looked better than sweating in the fields, which was how most of his countrymen were making their new start. And one imagines that the American mainland glittered for him the way it did for all those entrepreneurs and pilgrims and runaways and adventurers who crossed the Atlantic and the Pacific hoping to carve out a piece of it for themselves.

In Idaho he worked as a valet, a cook, a chauffeur, a mechanic, a general handyman. He learned to roast turkeys and to drive a Pierce-Arrow sedan, and he perfected the English he had begun to learn before he left Japan.

In all, he spent five years with this family. Then his patron helped him enter the University of Idaho as an undergraduate, aiming toward a law degree. Papa used to joke that if he hadn't met Mama he might have ended up a senator.

"She was too pretty," her brother Charlie once said. "Ko couldn't leave her alone. She was the only Japanese girl in the whole northwest worth looking at. I

# Farewell to Manzanar

think there were two others around in those days, and they were both so skinny they could hide behind cornstalks.”

Mama’s father came from a family of stonecutters around Niigata, on the inner coast of northern Japan. But she was born in Hawaii where her father had come to do the backbreaking work Papa luckily avoided--a three-year labor contract on a sugar-cane plantation, ten hours a day, six days a week, for twelve dollars and fifty cents a month. Completing that, he worked his way to the mainland and set out with his three sons to find a piece of land. They settled in the rich farm country around Spokane, in eastern Washington. In 1906 Mama and Granny joined them there. Granny was thirty then, Mama was ten. They sailed into San Francisco Bay on the morning after the earthquake and spent their first three days in America sitting offshore watching the city go up in flames.

Her family had high hopes for Mama. She was their only daughter. In those days Japanese women on the mainland were rare, one for every seven or eight Japanese men. Most men had to go back to Japan to find a woman, or take their chances on a “picture bride.” Mama was worth a lot, and before she finished high school they had promised her to the upright son of a well-to-do farmer in the territory.

She met Papa early one summer morning at a wholesale market where her family sold produce. Papa was unloading trucks and wagonloads of vegetables. She was seventeen, small, buxom, with a classically round face of a kind much admired among Japanese. He was twenty-five, a sometime law student who spent his summers working around Spokane. He liked to shoot pool in his spare time, he played cards and dressed like a man from a much flashier part of the country. He was also pitching for a semi-pro baseball team called *Nippon*. We have a picture of him down on one knee for the team photo, in the front row, his mitted left hand resting on the other knee, his thick hair loose, his eyes showing a cocky confidence. His lean jaw bulges slightly, as if holding a small plug of

# Farewell to Manzanar

tobacco, in the manner of Ty Cobb, whose style was the one to imitate about that time.

Mama's parents were terrified when they saw him coming. He not only led what seemed to them a perilously fast life; he also borrowed money. The story goes that he once asked Mama to borrow as much as she could from Granny. All Granny had at the time was a five-dollar bill. She gave it to Mama, who passed it on to Papa, who then came stalking into the kitchen, stiff-backed, glaring scornfully at Granny. He was insulted. "It's not enough," he said. "Five dollars. I need more than five dollars. If that's all you've got, I'd rather have nothing!" And he threw the bill into the fire.

The first time Mama ran away with him, her brothers came looking for her, brought her back to the family farm, and locked her in a second-story room. Mama was so desolate, her oldest brother Charlie couldn't stand it. He leaned a ladder up to her window, forced the latch and let her out.

That time they got away, got married, and made it down to Salem, Oregon, where Papa cooked in a restaurant and she worked as a nurse and dietician until my oldest brother was born, in 1916.

After that she had a child about every two years, nine in the next eighteen, and Papa kept moving, looking for the job, or the piece of land, or the inspiration that would make him his fortune and give him the news he hoped all his life he would one day be able to send back to his relatives: *Wakatsuki Ko made it big in America and has restored some honor to his family's name.*

Education mattered a great deal to him. In later years he would brag to us that he "went to law school" and imply that he held some kind of degree from a northern university. It's true that everywhere he stopped he'd be helping a friend through one legal squabble or another--an immigration problem, a repossessed fishing boat. He worked for the government at one point, translating legal documents. But as badly as he wanted us to believe it, he never did finish law

# Farewell to Manzanar

school. Who knows why? He was terribly proud, sometimes absurdly proud, and he refused to defer to any man. Maybe, in training for that profession in those years before the First World War, he saw ahead of him prejudices he refused to swallow, humiliations he refused to bear.

On the other hand, his schooling was like almost everything else he tried. For all his boasts and high intentions, he never quite finished anything he set out to do. Something always stopped him: bad luck, a racial barrier, a law, his own vanity or arrogance or fear of losing face.

For a couple of years he tried lumberjacking in Seattle. We have another old photo, this one from the twenties, that shows him standing on a railroad siding, with his boots spread wide, one hand in his jeans pocket and the other holding a wide-brim hat flung high in boisterous greeting--a Nipponese frontiersman with the pine forests rising behind him.

In Oregon he learned a little dentistry (a skill he later put to good use at Manzanar, where he made dozens of dentures free of charge). He tried farming there too. The alien land laws prevented him from owning property, but he could lease the land, or make a tenancy deal and work it.

A few years before I was born he had settled the family on a twenty-two-acre farm near Watsonville, California, raising apples, strawberries, and a few vegetable crops. He was making good money, living in a big Victorian house, and it looked as if he'd found his castle at last. But his luck didn't hold. The well went dry. Thirty years after sailing away from a financial dead end and the remnants of a once-noble family in Japan, he found himself in the middle of America's Depression and on the move again, with eight kids and a wife this time, working his way down the California coast picking prunes, peaches, Brussels sprouts, sending his children into the orchards like any migrant worker's family, hoping their combined earnings would leave a little left over after everyone was fed and the cars gassed up for the next day's search for work.

# Farewell to Manzanar

Just before I was born he leased another piece of land, in Inglewood, outside Los Angeles, and farmed again, briefly. Then, deciding land was too risky for investing either time or money, he turned to the ocean, started fishing out of Santa Monica, and did well enough at it through the late thirties that by December of 1941 he had those two boats, *The Waka* and *The Nereid*, a lease on that beach house in Ocean Park, and a nearly new Studebaker he had made a down payment on two weeks before Pearl Harbor was attacked.

The start of World War II was not the climax to our life in Ocean Park. Pearl Harbor just snipped it off, stopped it from becoming whatever else lay ahead. Papa might have lost his business anyway--who knows--sunk his boat perhaps, the way Woody almost sank one off Santa Monica a few years later, when he motored into the largest school of mackerel he'd ever seen, got so excited hauling in the fish he let them pile up on deck, and didn't notice water slipping through the gunwale slits and into the hold until the bow went under.

If any single event climaxed those prewar years, it was, for me at least, the silver wedding anniversary we celebrated in 1940. Papa was elegant that day, in a brand-new double-breasted worsted suit, with vest and silk tie and stickpin. He was still the dude, always the dude, no matter what, spending more money on his clothes than on anything else. Mama wore a long, crocheted, rose-colored dress. And I see them standing by our round dining room table, this time heaped not with food but with silver gifts--flatware, tureens, platters, trays, gravy bowls, and brandy snifters. The food was spread along a much larger table, buffet style, in glistening abundance--chicken teriyaki, pickled vegetables, egg rolls, cucumber and abalone salad, the seaweed-wrapped rice balls called *sushi*, shrimp, prawns, fresh lobster, and finally, taking up what seemed like half the tablecloth, a great gleaming roast pig with a bright red apple in its mouth.

A lot of in-laws were there, and other Japanese families, and Papa's fishing cronies, a big Portuguese named Goosey who used to eat small hot yellow

# Farewell to Manzanar

peppers in one big bite, just to make me laugh, and an Italian named Blackie, with long black sideburns and black hair slicked straight back, wearing black and white shoes and a black suit with white pinstripes. These two were his drinking buddies, as flushed now as Papa was from the hot sake that was circulating and the beer and whiskey.

Papa announced that it was time to carve the pig. We all stood back to make a wide half circle around that end of the table. He had supervised the roasting, now he was going to show us how you cut up a pig. When he knew everyone was watching this--we were his audience, this dining room his theater--he lifted a huge butcher's cleaver, and while Goosey and Blackie, trying not to giggle, held each side of a long cutting board beneath its neck, Papa chopped the head off in two swift, crunching strokes. All the men cheered--the sons, the carousers.

The women sucked in their breath and murmured. Three more strokes and Papa had the animal split--two sides of roast pork steaming from within. With serious face and a high-held, final flick he split each side in half, quartering the pig. Then he set the cleaver down, stepped back, reached behind him without looking for a towel one of my sisters somehow had there waiting, and as he wiped his hands he said imperiously to his sons, "Cut it up. You girls, bring the platters here. Everybody wants to eat."

That's how I remember him before he disappeared. He was not a great man. He wasn't even a very successful man. He was a poser, a braggart, and a tyrant. But he had held onto his self-respect, he dreamed grand dreams, and he could work well at any task he turned his hand to: he could raise vegetables, sail a boat, plead a case in small claims court, sing Japanese poems, make false teeth, carve a pig.

Whatever he did had flourish. Men who knew him at Fort Lincoln remember him well. They were all Issei, and he was one of the few fluent in Japanese and English. Each morning the men would gather in their common room and he



# Farewell to Manzanar

would read the news aloud, making a performance of it by holding the American paper in front of him and translating into Japanese on the spot, orating the news, altering his voice to suit the senator, the general, or the movie star.

Papa worked as an interviewer there, helping the Justice Department interview other Isseis. He almost became an alcoholic there on rice wine the men learned to brew in the barracks. And somehow, during the winter of '42, both of his feet were frostbitten. No one quite knows how. Papa never talked about that to anyone after he got back. But it isn't difficult to imagine. He arrived from Long Beach, California, at the beginning of January, in a country where cattle often freeze to death, and he was of course a prisoner of war.

**Farewell to Manzanar** by James D. Houston and Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston.  
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