

Farewell to Manzanar

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Fort Lincoln: An Interview

“What is your full name?”

“Wakatsuki Ko.”

“Your place of birth?”

“Ka-ke, a small town in Hiroshima-ken, on the island of Honshu.”

“What schools did you attend in Japan?”

“Four years in Chuo Gakko, a school for training military officers.”

“Why did you leave?”

“The marching. I got tired of the marching. That was not what I wanted to do.”

“Have you any relatives serving in the military, now or in the past?”

“My uncle was a general, a rather famous general. He led the regiment which defeated the Russians at Port Arthur in nineteen five.”

“Have you ever been in contact with him since coming to the United States?”

“No. I have contacted no one in Japan.”

“Why not?”

“I am what you call the black sheep in the family.”

“So you have never returned to your homeland?”

“No.”

“Because you are the black sheep.”

“And because I have never been able to afford the trip. I have ten children.”

“What are their names?”

“How can I remember that many names?”

“Try.”

“William is the oldest. Then Eleanor, Woodrow, Frances, Lillian, Reijiro, Martha, Kiyō, and let’s see, yes, May.”

“That is only nine.”

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"Nine?"

"You said there were ten."

"I told you, it is too many to remember."

"It says here that you are charged with delivering oil to Japanese submarines off the coast of California."

"That is not true."

"Several submarines have been sighted there."

"If I had seen one, I would have laughed."

"Why?"

"Only a very foolish commander would take such a vessel that far from his home fleet."

"How can you explain this photograph?"

"Let me see it."

"Aren't those two fifty-gallon drums on the deck of your boat?"

"Yes."

"What were you carrying in fifty-gallon drums ten miles from shore?"

"Chum."

"Chum?"

"Bait. Fish guts. Ground-up fish heads. You dump it overboard and it draws the mackerel, and you pull in your nets, and they are full of fresh fish. Who took this photograph anyway? I haven't gone after mackerel in over a year."

"What do you think of the attack on Pearl Harbor?"

"I am sad for both countries. It is the kind of thing that always happens when military men are in control."

"What do you think of the American military? Would you object to your sons serving?"

"Yes. I would protest it. The American military is just like the Japanese."

"What do you mean?"

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"They also want to make war when it is not necessary. As long as military men control the country you are always going to have a war."

"Who do you think will win this one?"

"America, of course. It is richer, has more resources, more weapons, more people. The Japanese are courageous fighters, and they will fight well. But their leaders are stupid. I weep every night for my country."

"You say Japan is still your country?"

"I was born there. I have relatives living there. In many ways, yes, it is still my country."

"Do you feel any loyalty to Japan or to its Emperor?"

Silence.

"I said, do you feel any loyalty . . ."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-nine."

"When were you born?"

"I am the interrogator here, Mr. Wakatsuki, not you."

"I am interested to know when you were born."

"Nineteen thirteen."

"I have been living in this country nine years longer than you have. Do you realize that? Yet I am prevented by law from becoming a citizen. I am prevented by law from owning land. I am now separated from my family without cause . . ."

"Those matters are out of my hands, Mr. Wakatsuki."

"Whose hands are they in?"

"I do not like North Dakota any more than you do. The sooner we finish these questions, the sooner we'll both be out of here."

"And where will you go when you leave?"

"Who do you want to win this war?"

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"I am interested to know where you will be going when you leave."

"Mr. Wakatsuki, if I have to repeat each one of these questions we will be here forever. Who do you want . . . ?"

"When your mother and your father are having a fight, do you want them to kill each other? Or do you just want them to stop fighting?"

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Inu

With Papa back our cubicle was filled to overflowing. Woody brought in another army bunk and tick mattress, up next to Mama's. But that was not what crowded the room. It was Papa himself, his dark, bitter, brooding presence. Once moved in, it seemed he didn't go outside for months. He sat in there, or paced, alone a great deal of the time, and Mama had to bring his meals from the mess hall.

He made her bring him extra portions of rice, or cans of the syrupy fruit they served. He would save this up and concoct brews in a homemade still he kept behind the door, brews that smelled so bad Mama was ashamed to let in any visitors. Day after day he would sip his rice wine or his apricot brandy, sip till he was blind drunk and passed out. In the morning he would wake up groaning like the demon in a kabuki drama; he would vomit and then start sipping again. He terrified all of us, lurching around the tiny room, cursing in Japanese and swinging his bottles wildly. No one could pacify him. Mama got nothing but threats and abuse for her attempts to comfort him.

I turned eight that fall. I remember telling myself that he never went out and never associated with others because he thought he was better than they were and was angry at being forced to live so close to them for the first time in his life. I told myself they whispered about him because he brewed his own foul-smelling wine in our barracks.

All of this was partly true. But there were deeper, uglier reasons for his isolation. I first sensed it one night when Mama and I went to the latrine together. By this time the stalls were partitioned. Two Terminal Island women about Mama's age were leaving just as we walked in. They lingered by the doorway, and from inside my stall I could hear them whispering about Papa, deliberately,

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just loud enough for us to hear. They kept using the word "*inu*." I knew it meant "dog," and I thought at the time they were backbiting him because he never socialized.

Spoken Japanese is full of disrespectful insult words that can be much more cutting than mere vulgarity. They have to do with bad manners, or worse, breaches of faith and loyalty. Years later I learned that *inu* also meant collaborator or informer. Members of the Japanese American Citizens League were being called *inu* for having helped the army arrange a peaceful and orderly evacuation. Men who cooperated with camp authorities in any way could be labeled *inu*, as well as those genuine informers inside the camp who relayed information to the War Department and to the FBI.

For the women in the late-night latrine Papa was an *inu* because he had been released from Fort Lincoln earlier than most of the Issei men, many of whom had to remain up there separated from their families throughout the war. After investigating his record, the Justice Department found no reason to detain him any longer. But the rumor was that, as an interpreter, he had access to information from fellow Isseis that he later used to buy his release.

This whispered charge, added to the shame of everything that had happened to him, was simply more than he could bear. He did not yet have the strength to resist it. He exiled himself, like a leper, and he drank.

The night Mama and I came back from the latrine with this newest bit of gossip, he had been drinking all day. At the first mention of what we'd overheard, he flew into a rage. He began to curse her for listening to such lies, then he cursed her for leaving him alone and wanted to know where she had *really* gone. He cursed her for coming back and disturbing him, for not bringing him his food on time, for bringing too much cabbage and not enough rice. He yelled and shook his fists and with his very threats forced her across the cluttered room until she collided with one of the steel bed frames and fell back onto a mattress.

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I had crawled under another bunk and huddled, too frightened to cry. In a house I would have run to another room, but in the tight little world of our cubicle there was no escaping this scene. I knew his wrath could turn on any one of us. Kiyo was already in bed, scrunched down under the covers, hoping not to be seen. Mama began to weep, great silent tears, and Papa was now limping back and forth beside the bunk, like a caged animal, brandishing his long, polished North Dakota cane.

“I’m going to kill you this time!”

“Go ahead, if that will make you happy.”

“You lie to me. You imprison me here with your lies!”

“Kill me then. I don’t care. I just don’t care.”

“I can never go outside, because of you!”

“Here. Here is my head. My chest. Get it over with. Who wants to go on living like this?”

She was lying very still, gazing up at him. The tears had stopped.

Papa stood over her, gripping his cane in both hands, right above her head, holding it so tightly the cane and both his arms quivered. “All right!” he yelled. “All right, I will! I will! I will!”

We had watched many scenes like this since his return, with Papa acting so crazy sometimes you could almost laugh at the samurai in him, trying to cow her with sheer noise and fierce display. But these were still unfamiliar visits from a demon we had never seen when we lived in Ocean Park. There had always been doors to keep some moments private. Here there were no doors. Nothing was private. And tonight he was far too serious--he seemed to have reached some final limit.

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Inside my own helplessness I cowered, sure he was going to kill her or hurt her very badly, and the way Mama lay there I believed she was actually ready to be beaten to death. Kiyō must have felt something similar, because at the height of

Papa's tirade he threw his covers back, and in his underwear he jumped out of bed yelling, "Stop it, Papa! Stop it!"

With his cane in both hands high above his head, Papa turned from the waist. Kiyō sprang across the room, one arm cocked, and punched Papa square in the face.

No one had ever seen such a thing before. Papa's arms went limp. The cane fell clattering to the floor. He reached up and touched his nose. Blood was pouring onto his shirt, dripping down onto Mama's dress. Kiyō stepped back, crouching, staring at the blood. This was like bloodying the nose of God. His face, contorted, looked ready to cry, but even his tears were stopped by the knowledge of what he had done. He waited paralyzed for whatever punishment might strike him down. Papa couldn't move either. He stared at Kiyō, his eyes wide with both outrage and admiration that his son had the courage to do this. They stood like that until Papa's gaze went bleary from the drink in his veins and dropped to the damp shirt, to the blood still spattering onto Mama's dress.

Kiyō turned and bolted out the door. I ran over to Mama, whimpering with relief that this ghastly scene was over and she had been saved, yet aching with a great sadness I could not at the time find words for. I was proud of Kiyō and afraid for what would happen to him; but deeper than that, I felt the miserable sense of loss that comes when the center has collapsed and everything seems to be flying apart around you.

Kiyō had fled to one of my married sisters' barracks. For two weeks he hid there. When he finally returned it was to admit that he had been in the wrong and to ask

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Papa's forgiveness. He too wanted some order preserved in the world and in the family. Papa accepted his apology, and this settled the waters some. But that aching sadness did not go away. It was something undefinable I'd already been living with for months, now enflamed by Papa's downfall. He kept pursuing

oblivion through drink, he kept abusing Mama, and there seemed to be no way out of it for anyone. You couldn't even run.

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The Mess Hall Bells

Papa never said more than three or four sentences about his nine months at Fort Lincoln. Few men who spent time there will talk about it more than that. Not because of the physical hardships: he had been through worse times on fishing trips down the coast of Mexico. It was the charge of disloyalty. For a man raised in Japan, there was no greater disgrace. And it was the humiliation. It brought him face to face with his own vulnerability, his own powerlessness. He had no rights, no home, no control over his own life. This kind of emasculation was suffered, in one form or another, by all the men interned at Manzanar. Papa's was an extreme case. Some coped with it better than he, some worse. Some retreated. Some struck back.

During that first summer and fall of sandy congestion and wind-blown boredom, the bitterness accumulated, the rage festered in hundreds of tarpapered cubicles like ours. Looking back, what they now call the December Riot seems to have been inevitable. It happened exactly a year after the Pearl Harbor attack. Some have called this an anniversary demonstration organized by militantly pro-Japan forces in the camp. It wasn't as simple as that. Everything just came boiling up at once.

In the months before the riot the bells rang often at our mess hall, sending out the calls for public meetings. They rang for higher wages, they rang for better food, they rang for open revolt, for patriotism, for common sense, and for a wholesale return to Japan. Some meetings turned into shouting sessions. Some led to beatings. One group tried to burn down the general store. Assassination threats were commonplace.

On the night of December 5, Fred Tayama, a leader in the Japanese American Citizens League and a "friend" of the administration, was badly beaten by six

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men and taken to the camp hospital for treatment. Tayama couldn't identify anyone precisely, but the next day three men were arrested and one of these was sent out of the camp to the county jail at Independence, ten miles away. This was a young cook well known for his defiance and contempt for the authorities. He had been trying to organize a Kitchen Workers' Union and had recently charged the camp's chief steward, a Caucasian, with stealing sugar and meat from the warehouses to sell on the black market. Since sugar and meat were both in short supply, and since it was rumored that infants had died from saccharin mixed into formulas as a sugar substitute, these charges were widely believed. The young cook's arrest became the immediate and popular cause that triggered the riot.

I was too young to witness any of it. Papa himself did not take part and he kept all of us with him in the barracks during the day and night it lasted. But I remember the deadly quiet in the camp the morning before it began, that heavy atmospheric threat of something about to burst. And I remember hearing the crowds rush past our block that night. Toward the end of it they were a lynch mob, swarming from one side of the camp to the other, from the hospital to the police station to the barracks of the men they were after, shouting slogans in English and Japanese.

"Idiots," Papa called them. "*Bakatare*. They want to go back to Japan."

"It is more than going back to Japan," Mama said. "It is the sugar. It disappears so fast . . ."

"What do they think they will find over there?"

"Maybe they would be treated like human beings," Mama said.

"You be quiet. Listen to what I am saying. These idiots won't even get to the front gate of this camp. You watch. Before this is over, somebody is going to be killed. I guarantee it. They might all be killed."

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The man who emerged as leader of the rioters was Hawaiian-born Joe Kurihara. During the First World War he had served in the U.S. Army in France

and in Germany, and he was so frustrated by his treatment at Manzanar he was ready to renounce his citizenship and sail to the old country. Kurihara's group set up microphones and speakers near the cook's barracks and began a round of crowd-stirring speeches, demanding his release, charging that Tayama and the administration had used this beating to cover up the sugar fraud and saying it was time to get the *inus* once and for all.

That afternoon the authorities agreed to bring the young cook back into camp. But this wasn't enough. By 6:00 p.m. 2,000 people were looking for blood. The Internal Security Force, made up of internees like the demonstrators, had evaporated in the face of such a mob. For a while they had the camp to themselves.

They split into two groups, one heading for the police station to free the cook, the other heading for the hospital to finish off Tayama, who had been concealed under a hospital bed. A vigilante party searched the corridors. When they failed to find their man, this half of the crowd moved off in search of others on their "death list."

Meanwhile the mob heading for the police station had been met by a detachment of military police carrying sub-machine guns and M-1s. When an army captain asked them to disperse, they stoned him. Now they were hooting "*Banzai!*," jeering threats at the MPs and singing songs in Japanese. The MPs started lobbing tear gas bombs, and then, with no announcement or command to shoot, while the mob swirled frantically to escape the gas, several soldiers opened fire.

This instantly cleared the street, and the riot was over. Only the dead and the injured remained. Ten were treated in the hospital for gunshot wounds. One young man was killed on the spot. Another nineteen-year-old died five days later.

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What I recall vividly are the bells that began to toll late that night. After dispersing, some of the demonstrators organized shifts, and kept them tolling all over camp. With the bells and the MP jeeps patrolling up and down the streets, I

was a long time getting to sleep. Against Papa's orders I kept sneaking looks out the window, and I saw something I had only seen once before. The searchlights. They operated every night, but I never saw them because I went to bed so early and our block was well in from the perimeter. From the guard towers the lights scanned steadily, making shadows ebb and flow among the barracks like dark, square waves.

The next morning I awoke long after sunup. The lights were gone. Shadows were sharp and fixed. But the bells were still ringing. It was the only sound in camp, the only sound in Owens Valley, the mess hall bells, their gongs echoing between the Inyo Range and the nearby Sierras, their furthest ripples soaking into dry sand. They rang till noon.

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