

The Story of a Jog

“Dad, tell me... the Japanese in-tern-ment in, umm, World War, uh, Two.”

I looked up from the newspaper’s finance section and into my daughter’s big hazel eyes. She has her mother’s eyes—gifts from God. Suddenly, everything rushed to me, fuzzy things that she could never dream of: the discrimination, relocation, austerity, and compensation.

“Honey, wait a moment. I’ll be right back.”

I walked out of the living room. The specific memories had fled, and I needed something special to spark the flame of remembrance. Climbing upstairs, I recalled a stash of antique objects, mostly my wife’s cultural artifacts. Perhaps something in it was mine.

The closet above the garage was freezing, reminding me that sometimes the past should be buried cold—or so some think. I closed the door behind me and then found myself alone with the ghosts of the first half of my life.

Rummaging through cardboard boxes, I recovered diaries, photo albums, and collages. They were all important, but I needed a particular item. I dumped years and decades onto that icy floor, and at last, found an ancient volume at the bottom of a box.

There was *The Tale of Genji*, my favorite novel, or book, or piece of art, or whatever the fickle scholars call it nowadays.

I leafed through the thin, yellowing pages, absorbing the melodic Heian Japanese and intricate woodcut illustrations. Then I looked up from the paper and saw fires. They were old, familiar fires whose tendrils licked family letters and beloved tomes, melted vintage coins and bank certificates, and consumed

black-and-white memories and colorful kimonos. But I had snuck my book into a suitcase.

I was back in the first California house, listening to my mother's tales about her brother. Growing up, I had revered him. He had been a successful businessman, but it was his time in the Japanese military that had interested me. Mom told me all about his war days, about how he had risen through the Navy's ranks, how he had participated in the destruction of the Russian fleet. I listened eagerly, letting my eyes follow her hands as she moved them around in unison with her smooth language.

It had been my dream to meet the veteran. One day I had asked Mom if he could come to America. She had gotten a teary look in her eyes and said the Immigration Act of 1924 precluded that. I had answered that since we lived in a republic, she could have voted for people to change the laws. She had denied that notion, telling me she was not a citizen and could not be, thanks to *Ozawa v. U.S.* and *U.S. v. Thind*. That day I did not learn the definition of racism, but I realized that something was horribly wrong in the minds of certain people.

Then I was walking to a restaurant with my friends, chatting and laughing on the street. We entered the double doors. A tall man told me I could not dine there. I understood immediately and left. But my friends, the poor souls, stayed to argue with the man in vain.

Then I went to school the day after Pearl Harbor was bombed. The room was so quiet when I walked in that we could have heard a pin drop. I suppose nobody talked to me that day. There was some kind of unspoken connection between my skin color and the surprise attack, something everyone secretly knew.

Then that day came: I was disturbed from homework by my parents' gasps. All I remembered was their repetition of the three letters *FDR* and the four

numbers 9066. The next morning, we bought suitcases and packed necessities and burned memories and cried some. I did not yet know why we wept.

When the buses arrived in front of us, we waved and said goodbye to our sad neighbors. I heard people chattering, telling each other to calm down and not worry. They said that the Japanese-American Citizens League condoned the operation as a contribution to the war effort.

I remembered the camp in remote Arkansas, the flimsy, makeshift bathrooms, the torrid summers and bitter winters, and the wistful kabuki plays. There were the high guard towers, fitted with searchlights and machine guns. The barbed wire perimeter. The beet fields that Dad worked in. He said they gave him a new sense of agricultural life.

And one day I volunteered for military service with my friends in adjacent barracks. During the Battle of Kasserine Pass, something snapped in me. Comrades dropped in the hellish African desert. I did not know how we won in those eight days; I just fought so the battle would be over. Before we crossed the Atlantic into Sicily, I told myself that the world was a crazy place and that I was the craziest person. I was a manifestation of ironic nationalism, hogwash jingoism. I was fighting for a country that had detained my family and race, yet I felt jolly and patriotic about the affair. I held the view that I was insane in Rome, the Alps, and Austria, for until Germany surrendered, the 442nd Combat Team was an experiment in dangerous lunacy.

Then I was watching with my wife President Reagan's apology on national television. I received a check of \$20,000 in 1988. Life continued. Lucy grew up...

I shivered, unaware that I had sat in the arctic space for an hour. Putting my nose to the dilapidated parchment, I smelled a unique thing. Yes, it was old and dry, but it seemed to contain a feeling I could not get from a book in English.

The silence reminded me of my promise. I sneezed, replaced the novel, and left the room. Before going downstairs, I went into a bathroom and looked in the mirror. The same brown eyes. The same fair skin. I was a Nisei, all right, but that did not matter too much today.

Lucy was drawing a scene from a Japanese movie we watched last week. Seeing me on the stairs, she put the crayons down and followed me into the living room. We sat down on the sofa. The newspaper was where I put it an hour ago.

“Lucy dear,” I began. “The Japanese-American internment during World War Two...”

I did not care that she was only in middle school, timidly poking at the vast realms of geography, literature, arithmetic, and biology. I told her what I knew she would want to know, what I had remembered in the closet, what mysteries had occurred long before she was born.

When I finished, my wife came to join us. I kissed her.

Lucy said, “Mom, do you want to know what Dad told me?”

As she began to retell everything in her sweet, innocent voice, I grasped that history means nothing if it is stuck in some faraway memory or lost book.