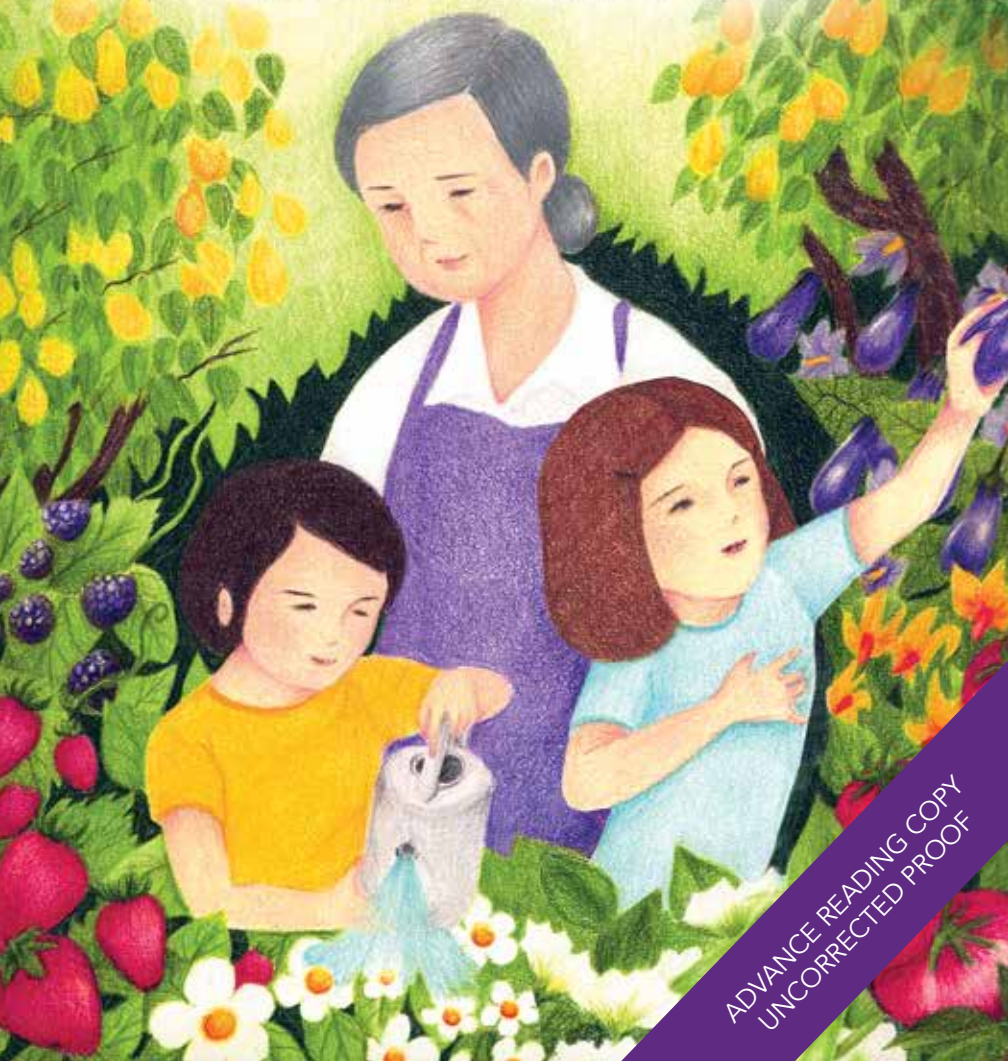


Obaasan's Boots

Janis Bridger and Lara Jean Okihiro



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Chapter 1

Charlotte

My mom's name always changes at some point after boarding the airplane in Vancouver, where the Fraser River meets the Pacific Ocean. We travel from the edge of the West Coast, over the great Rocky Mountains and sprawling golden fields of the Prairies, all the way to the shores of the Great Lakes. When we touch down in Toronto, she is Mary.

"How come you don't use Mary at home?" I ask, remembering how the lady at the fish market had struggled to pronounce her Japanese name. We'd picked up fresh salmon to bring for Grandma. "I wish you had a normal name, like my friends' parents," I admit. "It would be so much less embarrassing. No one knows how to say Masumi, or even spell it." Of all my aunts and uncles, my mom is the only one who uses her Japanese name.

"You don't usually get to choose your name," Mom explains. "And we may not like our given names...or what others call us. When I was growing up, it was easier to be Mary. I chose to use

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Masumi after I moved away from home. It's who I am now, and it feels right. But I'm also Mary, Mom, Auntie." She smiles and squeezes my arm.

Mom's sister picks us up from the airport and drives expertly across the tangled highways. I have no sense of direction in Toronto. I look for mountains as a landmark in Vancouver because they're always to the north. And I know that west of them is the ocean. Here, the slender shape of the CN Tower sometimes comes into view, surrounded by tall buildings downtown, but other than that, everything is fairly flat. I don't know how my aunt knows where to go.

We approach Grandma and Grandpa's neighborhood, and I recognize the small white house that stands out among all the red brick ones.

"Mary!" my grandma calls as we enter through the back door between the garden and the kitchen. Grandma stands at the top of the stairs in her apron. My mom still looks the same and responds like the name is her own. Curiously, I search for any indication that she's changed during our journey. She still looks like Mom to me.

Grandma's long gray hair is pulled back in a low bun, secured with straight pins. She smiles and envelops me in a bear hug. I've forgotten how strong she is. Even though her house shoes have a small heel, she stands even taller on her tippy toes, hands on her hips, and giggles, reminding me that I'm not quite as tall as she is...yet.

Mom joins the others in the kitchen, bringing the fish we specially packaged with ice packs in a sturdy Styrofoam box. It was so big it took up most of her suitcase. I peek into the kitchen shyly and say hello before backing out of the tight space. The kitchen brims with conversation, and my mom falls into comfortable routines, preparing food and catching up on the latest news and gossip.

In the living room, I say hello to my grandpa and some of my uncles. Uncle Corky is snoozing in an armchair, his legs crossed

and stretched out in front of him, arms raised and hands behind his head. I sleep like that too, I realize. How funny. I find my cousin, Lou, in the den, and we sit awkwardly as the time and distance since our last visit stubbornly shake off. By dinnertime, we have reestablished our friendship, and we are inseparable.

Of all my cousins, I know Lou the best. We're almost the same age, and she's visited Vancouver with her dad. Last time, she brought us matching outfits, and although Lou is about a head shorter than I am, people mistook us for twins. Maybe because Lou is so confident, she seems older. More mature.

I like the idea of Lou being my sister. Looking at her on the couch beside me, her hair is a lighter brown and cropped at chin length, while mine is darker and hangs below my shoulders. But we both have deep, golden brown skin after being in the early summer sun, and she has the same angular eyes I do. A lighter brown than either of our parents'.

Maybe people mistake Lou and me for sisters because we're both mixed. Only half Japanese, like all our cousins. But the only time I've ever thought about being half Japanese was when a classmate didn't think my mom was really my mom. Even though she was picking me up after school like all the other parents. Maybe I don't look Japanese enough, but I don't look like my blue-eyed dad either.

When we were little, Lou would take my hand and we'd sneak under our grandparents' dining room table while the adults talked above us. We'd sit on the worn, pale-green carpet among the socked feet of our family above. I knew my grandma's and my mom's feet. For the rest, it was a guessing game. Thinking we were so sneaky, we'd reach up around the edge of the table and grab fistfuls of long, slippery spaghetti noodles. We'd giggle and slurp the strands in unison, convinced we were invisible. Thinking back now, I wonder if Grandma made those noodles specially for my younger brother and me, knowing we were unfamiliar with traditional Japanese food.

This year is different, though. Lou and I sit at the table with the adults. We are no longer the youngest. Smaller cousins totter about, and we aren't hiding under the table. We're tucked in at the far end by the window. Getting out is a game of musical chairs. Our aunts and uncles sit at the opposite side of the table with easy access to our younger cousins. We, however, are stuck.

The table is full of delicious food. Pan-fried salmon, snow peas with bacon, sushi, plain rice and gravy, chow mein, and a roast. There are both chopsticks and forks. I grab a fork, while Lou reaches for chopsticks and starts loading her plate using the wrong ends. "You're using the chopsticks upside down," I tell her. I am the older cousin, after all.

"You use these ends of the chopsticks to serve food," she explains. "That way, you don't spread germs with the ends that go in your mouth." My cheeks go warm, but Lou just smiles kindly. "Do you want some *futomaki*?"

I look at the huge sushi roll in front of me. It's not like the California rolls I'm familiar with. Instead, Lou suspends a large roll with about seven different fillings over my plate from her upside-down chopsticks. The pink powdery sprinkles staining the rice finally convince me. "Sure." I take a pair of chopsticks, too.

The roll is delicious. Salty, sour, but with bursts of sweetness too. I manage one bite and the rest falls onto my plate. Lou and I laugh, and I'm already reaching for another roll—with the wrong end of the chopsticks—before they all disappear.

As the meal goes on, other family members trickle into our grandparents' house and pull folding chairs up to the table. Lou seems to know everyone. I recognize some, but many feel like strangers. We sit, stuck at the table, listening to the adults. It's not often that I get to hear these stories. We don't have a lot of family in Vancouver. But I look over at Lou, who's smiling and nodding, having heard these stories before. A bit of jealousy flutters inside of me.



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"Good salmon, Ma," one of my uncles says.

"Mary brought it," Grandma answers. "It's from the Pacific."

"Funny story," my mom starts. "I stumbled on this fish market when I drove out to find the lumber mill where Grandpa, Mom's dad, was a foreman. I thought I might find the old building, but I couldn't see any traces of it. I guess it was torn down after the war."

"I don't know what happened to the sawmill, but almost everything from back then is gone. Their house, our first home, all our things, too," says Grandma. "It's all gone...lost."

The chatter around the table tapers off, and I wiggle uncomfortably in my seat. One of my uncles pushes food around on his plate but doesn't eat anything. It strikes me that sometimes people don't need to speak, but you still feel there's something being said. Something underneath the silence.

I look over at Lou, sure that she must know what they're talking about. Even if she is younger than I am, she's sat at this table many more times than I have.

"They had everything taken from them because they were Japanese," she whispers to me when the topic changes, and murmured conversations resume around the table. "Some people got money. But not for a long time. It's a long story," she explains, nodding knowingly.

"Oh," I say, not understanding at all. I fumble with my chopsticks, sigh, and pick up the sushi roll with my fingers instead. My younger cousin seems to know so much more than I do.

Chapter 2

Lou

Charlotte and I are very different, even though we're the oldest cousins. She is tall and slim. I am short and rounder. She has long hair. My hair, which used to grow down the whole length of my back, is now cut short in a bob. Let's just say it was a mishap with a large wad of gum. I hoped the haircut would make me look more sophisticated, but with my super thick hair chopped so short, I just look like a mushroom. A nice mushroom, but a mushroom nonetheless. My cousin, on the other hand, looks like she could be in pictures in magazines.

Charlotte wears her hair like the older girls do at school. She even has braces! But the biggest difference between us is Charlotte is from Vancouver, where they have real Japanese food. I'm from Toronto.

When I visited British Columbia with my father last summer, I loved the pink stucco and wood-frame houses, the enchanting beaches with posh cafés, and the beautiful landscape. The ocean and

the mountains together. It feels like you're being hugged by the land and cooled by the water breeze. It's so different from where I live. Toronto is so flat. I even forget I'm right on the shore of a big lake. Charlotte's family lives in a beautiful house in the suburbs. I live in a cozy apartment with my mother, seeing my dad and grandparents on evenings or weekends. I love my little apartment, but sometimes I imagine what it would be like to have a house with a second floor and a yard.

Charlotte is a year and a half older than me. So, she knows more about the world than I do. She's had her nails done and knows how to ski, and she's traveled to Europe to visit her family in Germany. I visit my Grandma Donley on her farm outside London—Ontario, not England. I know about chickens, bees, and maple syrup. I know how to take the bus in the city, that the Jamaican patties sold in the subway station are extra hot, and how good Indian curries smell in the hallways of my building.

Maybe it's not quite true that Charlotte knows more things than I do.

I also know how to make sushi. I even got to help Grandma today. When I arrived through the back door and up the stairs to give Grandma a hug and kiss, she leaned into me with her sticky hands in the air, careful not to get me gooey with the sushi rice, sugar, and vinegar. Then she put me to work. I spread rice on the *nori* sheets, placed ingredients in a line in the middle, and made sure the seams were sealed with sugar-vinegar after she'd rolled them tightly.

One thing Charlotte and I do have in common is that we both ask tons of questions. Sometimes, I drive my parents crazy. But I've learned from my parents' divorce; it's hard to ask some questions and many important ones don't have easy answers.

At dinner time, Charlotte asks me, "Where's the spaghetti?"

As usual, when aunts, uncles, and cousins are here, the table is covered with food. Sushi and sushi bags—bean curd pockets filled

with seasoned rice, or *inari sushi*, as Grandpa says. Chow mein. The salmon my aunt brought fresh from the coast and Grandma has fried. It's so delicious it melts in my mouth. There's also a cucumber salad with rice vinegar and a roast with gravy and plain white *gohan*.

"What spaghetti?" I ask. "You mean the deep-fried noodles Grandma puts on chow mein? Or *Ichiban*—Number 1—noodles?" Everyone loves Grandma's pork chow mein with the special noodles she fries herself. I could eat a whole bag. But the strong fried oil smell seeps into everything. I also love *Ichiban* noodles. Grandpa makes those for me when Grandma is working.

Charlotte shakes her head. "Spaghetti noodles with butter. Grandma served them last time."

I shrug. I don't remember ever seeing Grandma make spaghetti.

Now, rice and gravy, that's another thing altogether. We all pass the dishes around trying a bit of everything while our uncles compete to pile food on their plates.

"Pass the gravy, please," says Uncle Walt.

"To me too, thanks," says Aunt Helen.

I ladle the gravy over my rice and pass the bowl to Charlotte, who shakes her head, "No, thanks." She passes it along the table.

"Gohan and gravy is the best!" says Uncle Chico, enjoying a forkful.

I'm only half listening when Charlotte nudges me. The adults are talking about the past, and she looks worried. Again, I shrug, but this time I try to fill in the gaps with what little I've heard over the years. I don't have much to offer.

I've heard that my Japanese family members and their friends lost a lot in the past, even everything. People were "evacuated" during the war, which sounds like they moved because they were in danger. But if it was so dangerous, why didn't anyone else have to move? I've also heard about an apology. Apologies are supposed to

be good, but my dad and Grandpa argued about it. I had never seen them that way, shouting, swearing, slamming doors. My father even walked out. When he picked me up from school the next day, Dad made a joke about it. I could tell he regretted being so upset and was trying to make light of it, which made me feel a little better. But I still didn't understand.

I don't know the story of our family's past, why they had to move or how everything was lost. I have a lot of questions about it. But after that horrible fight, I haven't been sure how to ask them.

During our trip to British Columbia, Dad took me to see all the family members who lived there. Cousins, aunts, uncles, great-aunts and uncles, second cousins, and second cousins once removed. It was actually fun meeting so many people, and they were all friendly and welcoming. But I started to realize that, though it feels like Grandma and Grandpa have always been here in Toronto, that's not true. So much of our family is in BC.

"Why do we live so far away in Toronto, when everyone else seems to live here?" I'd asked my dad, looking out the small airplane window at Vancouver's mountains.

I don't remember his answer.

There are lots of things I don't know, but I *am* pretty good with chopsticks, or *ohashi*, as my grandparents say. As everyone continues to chow down and chat, I show Charlotte how to eat futomaki, the fat sushi pieces stuffed with seven different ingredients, like the bright pink fish powder, for good luck. But even with my ohashi skills, it's hard to keep the seaweed-wrapped pieces from falling apart.

We both look at the bits that have fallen out on our plates—actually, I've poked some out because I don't like them all—and then at each other and laugh.

"Charlotte, Lou," Grandma calls.

We look over to see her smiling at us. She picks up a piece of

sushi with her fingers, takes a bite, and winks at us. So, we eat our sushi with our fingers, too, giggling.

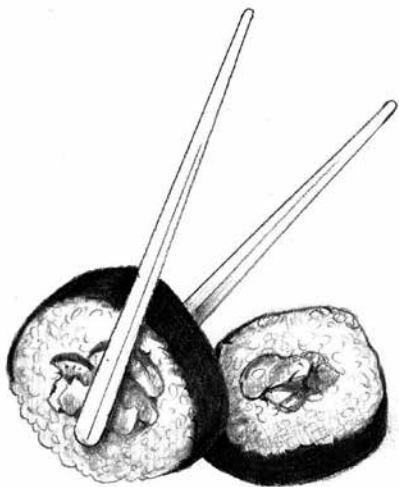
After dinner, Charlotte and I have to climb over chairs and crawl under the table to get out. We pass our cousins playing on the rough green carpet like we used to do.

Bringing our plates into the kitchen, we find Grandma already there, cleaning up and preparing more green tea.

"Thanks for supper, Grandma," says Charlotte. "It was delicious!"

"Yes, thanks for all the yummy food," I agree. "And the canned peaches for dessert!" I can almost smell the sticky sweetness from last summer as Grandma boiled the jars of peaches. The finished jars shone golden pink in the sun as they cooled in the window.

"They were so good! Are they from last summer?" Charlotte asks.



"Mr. Collins brought me two baskets of peaches," Grandma says, nodding. "He brings some every year. I preserved them so we can eat them all year round." She shakes dried green tea leaves into the bottom of a teapot. "Preserved pears are good, too. We have a tree in the garden," she says, gesturing out the window as she pours hot water onto the green tea leaves. She puts down the kettle and starts counting on her fingers. "We also grow tomatoes, snow peas, beans, eggplants—"

"And raspberries," I add. I love the raspberries, but they hurt to pick. The prickles on the stems don't seem to bother Grandma or Grandpa, though. Just as they have always seemed to live here, I assume they have always been good at growing food, preparing it, and preserving it. But maybe that's not quite right either.

"Grandma, you know when you were talking at supper," I start. "What did you mean about everything being lost?"

Grandma seems surprised by my question. "It was all left behind...and taken away," Grandma says. "It's a long story." She disappears back into the dining room with the fresh pot of tea before I can ask anything else.

We play hide-and-seek with Jessica, Daniel, Keith, and Jason—little Allison is too small and stays with her parents. Our cousins have their own questions.

"Is that a ghost?" Daniel whispers. His eyes are dark and angular too. At the back of a bedroom closet hangs a long, silky white dress with puffed sleeves.

"That must be Grandma's wedding dress," Charlotte says.

"Where does this little door go?" Daniel asks, pushing past the dress.

"There's a small closet space that runs along the side of the house," Jessica explains. "It connects the bedrooms."

I grin. She and I have played there many times.

"Is it scary in there?"

"Just a bit," I say. I don't like the dark. You don't know what might be there. But in Grandma and Grandpa's crawl space there are no scary things, just mostly old stuff. Big square trunks, so heavy Jessica and I couldn't move them, even pushing together with all our weight. I asked Grandma about them once, and she said they were for traveling on boats in the old days. There are boxes of Grandpa's books with worn leather or hard covers, *haiku* poems, and Japanese calligraphy. Pretty characters drawn with a brush on long, fancy paper. Or *shodou*, as Grandpa calls it. There are also boxes of clothing, delicate dishes for special occasions, and large pots and pans. One pot is particularly heavy and deep. It reminds me of the rice cooker in the kitchen, but this one has no cord to plug in with.

"Did you know my mom has two names?" Charlotte says, sifting through old photos of our parents as children.

I nod. All our aunts and uncles do. Chico, Chikara. Mary, Masumi. Walter, Wataru. Gordon, Ryujin. Helen, Hidemi. My dad even has six. At my grandparents' house, he's called Koki. Grandma says it's a strong name for a first-born child. But outside my grandparents' house, he's called Richard, Cork, Corky, Rich, and Rick.

I just assumed that they were like us. First, middle, and last names. But maybe that's not true either.

"I have three," I tell Charlotte. "Lucille, Yuki, Maude."

"Yuki?" she asks.

"Grandpa gave me the name Yuki because I was born in a blizzard. He says it means snow in Japanese." I assume Charlotte and all our cousins have Japanese names too, but they don't say.

Grandpa gave me the name, but he never uses it. Instead, he calls me "Ru," which is how "Lou" comes out when he says my name. His lips refuse to make Anglo or European shapes. "Lou, Lou, Lou!" I remember once saying. "Ru, Ru, Ru!" my grandparents chanted back, laughing at my frustration.

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And then there's my mother who is not Japanese but has a Japanese last name. The other day when she picked me up, looking out the car window at Grandma and Grandpa's little white house in the fading light, I asked, "How come you keep Dad's name? Tony's parents divorced last month, and now his mom's last name is different from his."

"It's easier that way," she said. "Some people see you and me and don't think you're my daughter. Having the same last name helps. That way, when I pick you up from camp, they can match us by it, at least."

In the darkness, I remember looking at the outline of my reflection in the car window. And just beside mine, I could see hers. Mom has blue eyes, mine are dark brown. She has fair hair, mine is light brown. I don't normally think about the differences between my mom and me. When I do notice them, I like to think they're part of what makes me unique. Still, it seems weird that other people could mistake us for not being related.

After our games, we listen to the adults talk. The quiet I'm used to here after school has been invaded by aunts and uncles, all of us ducking and swerving around each other, the kitchen loud with chatter and rich with the smell of Grandma's cooking. Some are gathered at the table having tea, the rest of us are in the den. Grandpa is at his desk, the youngest ones piled together on the couch, and Charlotte and me, both sitting with our knees curled up, side-by-side on the floor. We are comfortable together, and tired. I'm ready to go.

Sitting down on the gray steps at the back door, my hand brushes against Grandma's garden boots as I reach for my shoes, neatly placed beside them. The boots are brown and tall. Completely unremarkable. But I'm struck by how familiar they are. How much they remind me of Grandma. They're always here, part of this house,

like Grandma and Grandpa are. I imagine the boots will be in this corner forever. Sometimes muddy. Sometimes clean. But always there.

We walk past the garden on our way out, and Charlotte and I stop to admire the pear tree and raspberry canes in the dwindling light. Maybe Charlotte likes gardens as much as I do. While our parents plan our day tomorrow, Grandma interjects, "You girls can help me in the garden tomorrow, if you like." The look on Grandma's face is one I don't see very often. There's a shine in her eyes, like a twinkle.

Charlotte and I glance at each other. It seems she's just as curious as I am.

"Sure," we say together.

I don't think that tomorrow will be a typical day. I think Grandma's up to something.

Chapter 3

Charlotte

There's a garden behind Grandma and Grandpa's house, but I haven't spent any time there. I don't often come to Toronto in the summer, and in winter the ground is always covered with mounds of snow.

We arrive at Grandma and Grandpa's early. My mom and I are staying at Lou's dad's house, so she drives us both over. The backyard looks like a lush jungle of berries and vegetables, sheltered from the busy road by a white-brick garage. Crisp, white sheets hanging on a laundry line wave at us as Lou and I jump out of the car.

The garden is flanked by the remains of a creek where my mom and her siblings skated when they were kids. She says it was a lumpy, natural rink, and they wore whatever skates they could find. Mostly, the skates had shown up in a box of donated clothes. Sometimes they fit, but more often, Mom ended up sliding across the ice in her boots. At home in Vancouver, the winters don't usually get cold enough to skate outside, but when the puddles freeze, we like to slide along the frozen water in our boots too. I try to imagine

afternoons out here with my brother and friends from home. How lucky my mom and her siblings were to have this in their backyard!

"Hi, Grandma!" Lou and I call up the stairs, entering the backdoor of the house.

"Hello!" Grandma is already there, set to go. "Are you ready to go out to the garden?"

Lou is wearing a pair of old, dirty shoes, but I only packed my good pair of new sneakers for our trip to Toronto.

"Those are too clean," Grandma says, looking at my feet. "Put on my boots." I slide my feet out of my shoes and place them neatly beside the other pairs.

Grandma's worn brown boots are always ready by the back door. Pulling them on, I wiggle my toes. They're a little too big even though I'm nearly as tall as Grandma. She's a small but strong woman. She has smooth cheeks, but when she smiles, deep lines gather around her eyes like the creases in her boots. The boots have seen many seasons. So has Grandma.

Though the three of us only walk from the back door to the garden, it feels like we move back in time, somewhere much further away from any city. The dewy grass makes my boots wet, but the soil looks warm and thirsty. And the sun, still low in the sky, casts a golden glow. What seemed like a mass of green when I first arrived is actually neatly organized rows of many different plants.

We stop at the strawberry patch against the brick garage. Grandma wastes no time. She hands Lou and me baskets made of thin strips of wood and bends over, moving the low, dark-green leaves. "*Ichigo*," she says. Like magic, bright red berries peek out from underneath.

"Pick them like this," she explains, gently popping them off the vines. "They like to grow down, so we put straw under the plants to protect them."

I've gone berry picking back home in Vancouver, but it's always a long drive to the farms outside the city. I wonder how Grandma has so many plants in her own backyard.

"Wow, your garden is beautiful." I crouch down beside Grandma and Lou. "We don't have anything like this at our house."

"Grandma, you've always been a gardener, haven't you?" asks Lou.

"I suppose so," she smiles. "Gardens have always been a part of my life. But I was actually born in a fishing village near Vancouver."

"Really?"

She nods, glancing at us. For a moment, I don't think she'll say more. "My father came to North America to help build the American railway," she starts, almost tentatively. "My mother came to earn money to help save her family's orange farm in Kumamoto, back in Japan. They met here in Canada. And by the time I was born, they had settled on Sea Island."

"Sea Island?" I repeat. "I've never heard of it." But what I'm really thinking is that I never knew Grandma was born in Vancouver, so close to my house. I wonder if Lou did.

"What's Sea Island? That's a funny name," says Lou.

"It's an island on the Fraser River, right where it flows into the ocean. Now, it's the airport." Grandma turns to me. "Your plane took off from where I grew up, Charlotte." She smiles wistfully. "I loved Sea Island. Back then it was dotted with farms. Two bridges connected it to the mainland, and only a handful of roads crisscrossed the island."

I gaze over at Grandma, her hands moving deftly as she picks, but she doesn't seem to see the plants in front of her. Her focus seems to have moved beyond the dark green leaves.





Spring 1928

If you follow the main road, past Baba's Japanese Boatworks to the very end, there's a dirt path on a raised bank that leads to our fishing village. Just beyond that, a little further away from the others, is our house. Like all the other homes here, it's simple and wooden, and built on stilts to keep us dry from the ocean and river water. Raised wooden boardwalks connect everything, like mini bridges.

Our village is so small you can count the number of buildings on your fingers. Most people on our island are fishermen, but it's also a cannery town. Everything was built by the Acme Cannery Company for people, like my mother, who work there.

Every morning when I wake, the air is cool and damp. Today, from outside, I can already hear Mom in the kitchen telling my sister Jeanne to hurry and get dressed.

I come in the front door, arms full of firewood, as Jeanne rushes downstairs. "Sleepyhead," I tease. She sticks her tongue out at me and takes some wood to lighten my load. As my brothers stoke the

fire, Mom and I prepare breakfast: steaming bowls of *miso* soup and *gohan*. But we can't linger.

"You'll be late," Mom says, urging me and my siblings out the door.

On our walk to school, we pass the abandoned house. Everyone thinks it's haunted. My siblings and I always make sure to walk together. We even hold hands. And sometimes we count to three—*ichi, ni, san*—and run past.

After school, we have more chores: we fetch water from the community tap and chop wood for our stove. There's no plumbing in our houses on the island.

When Dad comes home, he's carrying a large package of salmon he caught from the Pacific Ocean. Mom's picked spinach from our small garden, too. It doesn't grow a lot, but it's enough for us, and our vegetables are always fresh.

Mom fries the salmon, and it's soft and delicious. Tomorrow, I'll help cut the rest into strips and hang the pieces from wooden poles to dry. It looks a bit like laundry on the line. But after a few days, they'll be perfectly sunbaked, salty pieces. I love to chew them as a snack, and Mom uses it for soups when we can't get fresh fish. I don't eat raw fish though. Yuck!

Even though we have enough to get by, my mother is always trying to put away bits of money where she can. She only uses what we really need and she saves everything, but I've never really understood why.

Last night I overheard my parents talking, but I didn't pay attention until I heard my name. Dad was telling mom about how he's thinking of changing jobs and working in a lumber mill.

"That way, Hisa can come and cook for my work crew all summer. And you can send more money back to Japan," Dad whispers.

"She's just a kid. Let her be at home with her friends. She can always pick up a bit of extra work at the cannery," Mom whispers firmly.

The next day as Mom and I hoe the garden, I ask, “How come you still send money back to Japan?” I know Mom has family there, but it’s strange to think she was born somewhere else. She seems so much a part of this place, especially here in her garden. “It’s been so long since you left.”

Mom thinks quietly for a moment. “When I told my father I’d go to Canada to earn money and help save our family farm, everyone scraped together what they could to pay for my trip,” Mom explains as she cuts a straight line in the soil with the hoe. “Even though the farm is safe now, I try to support them with whatever more I can send.”

“What are they like?” I ask. I’ve never met my family. “Do they like baseball and May Day dances like we do?” My brother Isi is very serious about the May Day dances. He’s hoping our school will win another ribbon this year.

“No, there’s no May Day in Japan. But there are *sakura* festivals in the spring.”

“Cherry blossom festivals,” I say. A month ago, we rode the streetcar to Stanley Park to have a picnic lunch. As we sat and ate, pink sakura petals gently floated to the ground, like snowflakes. Dad explained that, because Japan and Canada were allies, sakura trees were planted near the war memorial to honor the Japanese Canadian soldiers who fought for Canada in the Great War. They remind us of their bravery and sacrifice. The trees are just small now, but they’ll be magnificent once they grow big and strong.

“Oh yes, sakura are beautiful. But I like *mikan* blossoms best,” Mom says, passing me seeds.

“Orange blossoms?”

“Mhm,” Mom says wistfully. “They look like little white stars, and they smell sweet and delicious...like nothing else. Every spring, I miss the mikan blossoms on the trees in our orchard back home,” she says. “Maybe one day I’ll smell them again.”

I try to imagine what they look like, but I realize I don't know much about my mom's home in Japan. "What's your family's farm like?"

"Well," Mom says, her brow furrowing. "It's on a steep hill that comes up from a bay. The mikan trees grow on terraces all the way up the hill, like a staircase of trees. When I was a girl, we used to climb to the top and look out past the farmhouses down below. We'd watch the sun disappear behind the ocean in the evening, just like we do here. And the ancient tiles on the roof of our big, old house would turn white or gray or black, depending on the light."

"At the front of the house, my mother kept pots of azaleas, orchids, and peas. I'd help her care for them, just like you help me." Mom smiles at me. "But inside, we had to take off our shoes and leave them in the *genkan*, the entranceway. We'd all gather around the table on *tatami* mats to eat together. At one end of the room is the *butsudan* where we'd leave an offering—a bowl of gohan or a mikan—to honor our ancestors. And at night, we moved the table and unfolded *futon* mattresses to sleep on."

"You used to sleep on the floor?"

"Yes," she grins, "it's good for you."

We finish placing the seeds in the row and start patting them snugly into the ground.

"Do you miss it?" I ask. I can't imagine being so far away from my home. My family.

"Yes," my mom says, then looks up at me with soft eyes. "But I love our life here. Even if I miss my family in Japan sometimes too. You know," she says as she rises, "my father didn't want me to leave Japan. But we didn't have much choice. It would have been terrible to lose the farm."

Mom reaches for the watering can and passes it to me. "He cried when I left. I promised him I'd only be gone for three years, but that's so long ago now."

I water the rows, trying to imagine Japan and Mom as a little girl. I'm not sure the image in my head is quite right, but we stand there together admiring our work.

"I dream that one day I'll have enough money saved to go and visit," Mom whispers. "I'd love to see my father again."

"Visit Japan." I weigh the idea in my mind. I've heard of other children like us who have gone there to visit relatives. "Could we go too? I want to see your farm."

"Yes," Mom smiles, "I would take all of you to see where I grew up."

"Would we sleep on the floor?"

"Yes! We'd all sleep on the floor together. And you could meet your family and explore the orchard with your cousins. We'd walk on the terraces, smell the mikan blossoms, and watch the sunset over the ocean bay."

She reaches one arm around my shoulders and kisses my forehead. I hug her back. I can't wait, it sounds so beautiful.



"Don't forget to eat some strawberries while you're picking," Grandma says, passing a berry each to Lou and me.

"Mmmm, so sweet," Lou says.

They are sweet and delicious, but I'm quiet as I chew. I've never thought about having family in Japan, even though I know my grandparents are Japanese and I'm half. Maybe it's because Grandma doesn't speak English with an accent, and she was born in Canada.

And then there's Grandpa. His English is heavily accented and sometimes it's hard for me to understand him. His story must be different from Grandma's.

I stand up and stretch, my back sore from crouching down.

"It's hard work, isn't it?" Grandma says softly.



Fall 1930

Mom works very hard. We all do. Dad has his own fishing boat, though he doesn't like being on the water much. Almost everyone in our fishing village works in the cannery. Sometimes my sister Jeanne and I go to the ocean shore to watch the fishing boats coming in with their haul. I love the way the horizon can be a blinding shimmer of sky and ocean, and other times so blue you can't tell where the sky ends and the sea begins.

Sometimes during school holidays, I work at the cannery too, washing fish. When the boats come in, a whistle sounds, and we rush to the factory. Wearing warm layers of clothes, rubber outfits, and boots, we wash the fish that arrive by conveyor belt.

The work is quick, but my mom is very fast at canning. She and the other women compete for fun to see who can fill twenty cans a minute. That's one can every *three* seconds! Even when Mom worked with my youngest brother bundled on her back, she was still one of the fastest. I tried it once, but I was too slow. It was scary, too. Sometimes people get cut on the sharp metal cans. I prefer to stay washing the fish.

Mom is paid in company dollars, which isn't real money. It can only be spent in the store owned and run by the cannery, so that's where we get our household supplies and food. Nothing as good as the fresh vegetables from our garden or the fish from the ocean though. The company dollars have no value outside the cannery shop, so she can't send it back to Japan.

To earn real money, she has to take on other work. Sometimes, she cooks and cleans for wealthy families on the mainland. Other times, she helps plant and harvest crops on local farms.

But today, Mom is too sick to dig potatoes on the Li farm. "Tam, Hisa," she says to my brother and me as we eat our miso soup and gohan. She has one hand on her forehead, and her eyes are closed.

"You'll have to miss school today. The Li's are mid-harvest, I can't miss a whole day." Tam and I look at each other, disappointed. Digging potatoes is hard, and neither of us really wants to miss school to work. But our sister, Jeanne, is the most upset.

"Why do you have to miss school? I can't walk there alone." Our miso soups steam up between Jeanne's face and mine. I know she's afraid of passing the haunted house without Hiko and me.

"You can hold hands with Isi and Sam when you run past the house," I say.

"It's not the same. They're too young. Mom, can't I go pick potatoes, too?"

"If you're old enough to go to work, you shouldn't be afraid of walking past the abandoned house to get to school," Toshi cuts in, grinning. "Maybe you can come meet me with the lantern tonight." He ruffles her short hair on his way out. I grin. Every evening, I go with Hiko to meet our oldest brother, Toshi. He doesn't go to school anymore but works at Vancouver Cannery late into the evening. There are no lights on our island, and it gets so dark you can't see your fingers in front of your face. We always meet him halfway home with a lantern. He's not fond of the haunted house either.

"It's not fair," Jeanne says more quietly this time.

"If it makes you feel better," I offer, "tomorrow you can play with me and my friends."

"Oh, can I play hopscotch with you? No wait, can we be fancy ladies?"

My friends and I are too old for dress-up. But sometimes we tie empty thread spools to the bottoms of our shoes and clip-clop along the wooden boardwalks as though we're wearing real high-heeled shoes.

"Be careful not to get the spools stuck between the cracks," Hiko says, tidying up the breakfast dishes. "Hisa's friend twisted her ankle."

"My high-heeled shoes will be from the Bay," Jeanne says.

"Well, you have great taste!" I laugh. There are only three stores in town that sell nice clothes. The Japanese store is too far away, but the Bay is very expensive. And Woolworths has a sign that says, "No Japs." We always pretend our fancy shoes come from the Bay.

At the farm, we are put to task. I dig deep with the shovel and gather the big potatoes while Tam sifts through the loosened dirt to find the little ones. I'm working in my mom's boots, and I imagine her here, moving along these rows. As I dig, I think of her at my age walking along the terraces of orange trees, looking up to pick the mikan fruit, not down picking potatoes.

It's hard work, but it feels good having my hands in the dirt, filling the bushels. When we get home at the end of the day, tired and dirty, Mom is feeling much better. I'm so glad. She's proud of my brother and me for our hard work. In my heart, I hope that the money Tam and I earned today will help take us all to Japan to visit Mom's mikan trees and our grandpa one day.

We're all happy and relieved that Mom is better, but it's short-lived.

Toshi is not well. He has stabbing pains in his stomach and can't go to work at the cannery. By the next day, he feels nauseous and has a fever and chills. He does not look like my big, strong brother, who works hard and still finds time to laugh with us younger ones. The neighbors come to offer help and consult. "Maybe Toshi ate old fish," Mr. Takahashi says. But we all ate together and the rest of us are fine.

"It must be the flu then," Mrs. Nagai offers. "Give him a cold compress to keep the fever down and keep the other children away. You don't want them to catch it too."

I hate having to keep away from my brother. "Don't worry," Mrs. Baba consoles us, "Toshi is strong. He'll be alright in a few days. The doctor will check on him tomorrow."

Jeanne and I are sent to stay with one neighbor, the boys with another. The next morning, Mom comes to get us. She's white-faced and hardly says anything at all. She looks so strange, not like Mom. Toshi, she tells us, died overnight. By the time the doctor came, he found it was a sudden case of appendicitis, and that Toshi would have needed an operation. But it was too late. He wasn't diagnosed in time.

Jeanne and I hold hands the whole way home, even though we don't pass the haunted house. No one says anything. I've never felt so wretched. We are all devastated. Our strong and wise oldest brother, as vibrant as the fire in the lantern I carry to him, as serene and boundless as the ocean when it looks like blue glass. Here with us, and then gone in an instant. And I never even got to say good-bye.

As is Japanese custom, Toshi's body is cremated, and Mom and Dad pull enough money together to purchase an urn for his ashes.

I feel my heart has broken. We all feel this terrible emptiness. But Mom feels it the most. She dresses and goes to work, but she barely talks, and she spends a lot of time sitting by the ocean in silence. Dad doesn't stop moving. He makes sure we're doing our chores, that there's water and wood in the house, and that we all eat. It's different seeing him wash and cook the rice.

When Dad and I do the dishes, he tells me, "Things aren't fair, Hisa. Sometimes things can't be helped. *Shikata ga nai*. As much as I wish we could go back and change the past, we can't. And so, we must find a way to continue on."



Obaasan's Boots

It's quiet in the garden, except for the leaves rustling in the gentle breeze. Even the usual traffic on the busy road in front of the house seems to be muted. I never knew that Grandma had an older brother who died. And she was so young when she lost him. Grandma is deep in thought. Lou is silent beside me. I don't want to shatter the moment.



Winter 1931

Dad is carrying on, but it's not the same. He sells his fishing boat to work full-time in the lumber industry instead. He always works at logging during the fishing off-season, spending weeks far up the Fraser River and away from home. But I think he can't be here right now—it's too close to where his son lived and died.

I wish he could get a different job. Not logging. My siblings and I all agree. None of us like that he has to be so far away, and the work is dangerous. I think all of us are a little more afraid than we were before. As we crowd around the table drinking a last cup of green tea together before he leaves, he explains, "There aren't many options for us. Japanese people, including all of you who were born here, can't be a lot of things. We can't be teachers, pharmacists, accountants, or lawyers."

"We can't be politicians or work for the government," Mom adds. Some days, she seems more like herself, though there is a new heaviness in the way she moves, and a hardness in her voice I don't remember being there before. "There aren't enough Japanese doctors. You've never seen a Japanese police officer or mailman,

have you? We aren't even allowed to vote." Something about the way she says this surprises me. She doesn't hide her anger.

"Fishing and working with lumber are some of the only jobs we can do," Dad agrees. "The government issues fewer fishing licenses to Japanese people each year, so they're harder to get. I have the opportunity to be a foreman. I'll be away from home longer than usual, and you will all have to do your share around the house. And take care of your mom." He winks at her. "But it will also mean good money for our family."

Winter 1932

We get to stay in our home because Mom still works at the cannery. We settle into a new routine around the hollow spaces left by Toshi and Dad. I know that she misses Toshi every day, but Mom begins smiling with us again. My siblings and I still do our chores before school and take any paid work we can. Even with Dad's new job, we have to make up for Toshi's lost cannery salary, but there's not a lot of work available. Some of the local farms are struggling. We still pass the haunted house on our way to school, but it's no longer scary. Looking at it, it just seems like an old, empty house. There are much worse things, I now know. The ocean stays the same, though in the way that it's always shifting. Sometimes angry. Sometimes so calm.

I don't think about it too much anymore, but when I find a moment to stand by the sea, I still imagine that we might go to Japan one day. Toshi will never get to, but I will take the memory of him in my heart.

But then things really start to change. A lot of people lose their jobs and there's a shortage of food. Even the Li's family farm goes bankrupt. I hope they'll be okay. We're managing, but Mom won't

Obaasan's Boots

be paid for all the days she worked. Now, there's no money to put aside for Mom's dream. The adults whisper and complain to each other, and even though I don't understand everything they say, I keep hearing them talk about a Great Depression.

What makes things worse is Dad won't be coming home, even for his regular visit. A log knocked him off the flume and he broke his leg. It's too hard to travel. At least his leg has a cast, and broken bones heal. He writes that he's okay and able to work. I imagine him there, hobbling around on crutches. *Sometimes things can't be helped*, I remember him telling me. *We must find a way to carry on*. I hear him in my head a lot, and I know he's right. Things are still hard, but we're going to be okay.

Summer 1933

It's my very last day of grade eight, and I won't be going to school again in September. It's a shame because I like school, most of the time. And I'm a good student. I'm even pretty good with English. I was born here, after all. I have certificates for my cursive writing, and I made the Honor Roll again this year.

But the high school's too far away and, like many of my friends on Sea Island, I'll probably work in the cannery or with a family in the city. Maybe soon I'll be able to buy myself real high-heeled shoes and cross the ocean to smell Mom's mikan blossoms.

But first, Jeanne and I are going berry picking. Last summer, we traveled by ourselves to a strawberry farm outside the city. We were so excited, finally old enough to spend weeks away from home on our own!

In the field beside us, there were two boys. They kept calling over, but Jeanne just laughed at them. She's such a tomboy. "You

should stop talking and start picking. We're already on our third baskets!" she shouted back. My cheeks went warm, and I tried to shush her and pull her away. But the next day, we didn't see them at all. We found out later that the boys quit. Apparently, the work was too hard, and they had gone back home.

"Look at us, we're so strong. And we're girls!" Jeanne had said, flexing her arm muscles and making me laugh. We tensed our arms like wrestlers between the rows of berries for days.

All summer we chatted, telling stories and jokes to each other as we moved up and down the rows. Other times we were just quiet, enjoying each other's company.

When the season was over, Jeanne and I brought home the most money we've ever earned. We were very proud.

I'm so excited to return this summer, I forget I'm still at school when I'm gabbing with my friends at recess.

We're not allowed to speak Japanese at school, even though that's what we speak at home. If we're heard speaking Japanese, even on the playground, we get punished. But sometimes it's hard to keep straight what language to speak where.

At the end of the day, Mr. Fitchett calls me up to the front of the room. Some of my classmates heard me speaking Japanese during the break. Funny, I've heard them speak Japanese in the yard too. Mr. Fitchett looks at the clock and gives me the choice to either write "I will not speak Japanese at school" a hundred times or "get the ruler." Maybe he's as anxious as I am to start summer holidays. They're not great choices, but the choice is mine.

"I'll take the ruler," I decide. It'll be quicker.

He slaps my hands briskly. *Slap, slap.*



Grandma slaps her hands. *Slap, slap*. Startled, Lou and I turn.

Her hands are strong, lined with large veins, and her thick, long fingers have knobby knuckles. Even without the dirt from the garden, they are brown and weathered from time and work. Without thinking, I reach out and touch the back of her hand. I think about the slap of the ruler and scan her fingers for scars from sharp cannery cans, but I don't see any. Grandma wiggles her fingers and grins. I let out a breath. Grandma grew up so close to where I live. She lost her oldest brother and her family experienced so many other hardships. I guess not all hurts leave marks that are visible on the skin.

Grandma picks a last berry, pops it in her mouth, and smiles. "The smallest ones are the sweetest."

Our baskets are overflowing with strawberries. Lou is quiet beside me. Maybe she, too, is thinking about Grandma growing up on the ocean. Maybe she hasn't heard all of these stories after all.

"Gran, were you really not allowed to speak Japanese at school? And were there really stores in Vancouver that Japanese people couldn't go in? At all?" Lou asks.

I cringe. I know that Lou isn't saying the word "Jap" because we've been told that it's not a nice thing to call people. I can't believe that stores in Vancouver—stores that I have been to—wouldn't allow certain people to enter. Wouldn't allow *my family* to enter.

"Nope," Grandma shakes her head. "No more strawberries. Let's put the baskets in the shade and check the tomatoes."

Chapter 4

Lou

I don't understand how people who came from Japan or had Japanese parents couldn't work any job they wanted or have fishing licenses. Or how a Canadian of Japanese heritage wouldn't have the right to vote. Would those rules have applied to me and Charlotte too?

It makes me sad and angry to imagine Grandma being called mean names, or not being allowed to go into certain shops. And why would anyone get slapped on the hand for speaking the language she speaks at home? Sea Island sounds like land gathered from the water itself. It's harder to imagine something so awful happening in a place that sounds so beautiful. When I visited Vancouver, we stood barefoot on a beach, the waves tickling my feet as they sank deeper into the sand. Did Grandma do that too? In my mind, Grandma and her brothers and sister run along the shores, their eyes on the blue horizon.

It's a bit strange to think of Grandma as a girl, like Charlotte and me. Once, Grandma was like us. And I guess one day we will be like

her. Still, I wonder why Grandma left her island home for Toronto with its highways and electrical fields.

Grandma looks over the rows of tomato plants. "The plants are big enough now," she tells us. "They need to be staked or they'll droop over."

We follow Grandma into the garage to get the wooden poles and mallet. Inside, Charlotte admires Grandpa's old tools. "I've never seen so many old things," she says. Hammers, saws, right angles, and screwdrivers clutter the shelves and stick out of worn wooden toolboxes. Grandma and Grandpa seem to keep everything.

We carefully chart a path around the odds and ends to get to the stakes as Grandma rips a worn-out sheet into strips. "*Mottainai*," she says.

Charlotte crinkles her forehead.

"Don't waste," I explain. Grandma and Grandpa use that word often. Like *gohan*, I know it so well, I don't really notice the word is Japanese.

Carrying bundles of weathered wooden stakes, we follow Grandma over to the neat rows of tomato plants. Holding a stake steady in one hand, she raises the mallet with the other, and *bang*, the stake is firmly in the ground.

Even though I expect it, her strength always surprises me. Her power seems such a contrast to her petite body. And she's always so graceful. She still piggybacks my little cousins, chanting the familiar but utterly unknown words "*oka sho, oka sho*" as she trots about. Making *kamaboko*, or fish cake, she pounds the fish harder and faster than my dad and uncles can, quickly turning the fish into a smooth paste. And she never uses a mixer for baking. Just her clean hand, with its large knuckles and dark lines, in the batter.

Bang. Bang. Grandma quickly hammers more stakes into the ground.





Summer 1934

Bang. Bang. Bang. I pound the mat with a broom, and dust flies everywhere. I have been living with the Bowers family in a nice neighborhood close to the city for almost a year now. Mrs. Bowers is nicer than some of the other ladies my friends work for.

“Don’t clean up after the kids, Hisa,” she tells me all the time. “They need to clean up after themselves.”

And she pays me well. It’s not enough money for a trip to Japan, but eventually we’ll get there. She has even agreed to give me time off every summer so I can go berry picking with Jeanne.

I’m kept very busy at the Bowers’s, but at night, just before I fall asleep, I can’t help but think about how much I miss my family and my home.

Bang. Bang. Bang. More dust flies off the mat.

When I first arrived to help with the cleaning and cooking, and with minding the children, my arms got so tired from the work. But now I can lift the couch high enough with one arm that I can sweep underneath, carry basket loads of wet laundry to hang outside, and slice a large roast beef into paper-thin slices.

“Hisa, arm wrestle me,” my older brother, Hiko, says when I see my family on my weekends off. “I think you’ll beat me this time!”

“Yeah, sure,” I laugh, flexing my muscles and putting my elbow on the table ready for the challenge. When my younger brothers join in, I often let them win. But not always.

I love these moments around the table. And I love that Jeanne

is always waiting for me when I come home. Sometimes she meets me with a squeal, pulling me to the kitchen table for *ocha*, tea, and gossip. Mom and my brothers like to listen too. Even when everyone else has gone to bed, Jeanne and I stay up late. I ask Jeanne about our local friends, and Jeanne asks me about city life, what the fashionable women are wearing, and if any boys are calling on me.

On my Sundays off, the kitchen is full. Even Dad makes the long journey downriver from the mill to join us. Mom, Jeanne, and I sometimes roll sushi together for the occasion. I still don't like all the insides and poke them out of the roll. Dad glares when I do, but Mom doesn't mind. She eats the pieces so nothing goes to waste. "Mottainai," she says.

Even though I love visiting my family, I've been feeling a little out of sorts these days. I don't know why, but I don't quite feel at home anywhere.

When friends ask me where I live, I give them the Bowers's address. It's even where Mom sent me my birthday card. I spend more time here than I do on Sea Island, and I have my own room. But still, it doesn't feel like home. I wonder if this is how it feels to be an adult.

My Sea Island house doesn't feel the same either. It hasn't changed, but I notice the peeling paint and cold drafts. How far it is from the city's shops, parks, and people. I've gotten used to turning on taps rather than fetching water, warm electric lighting rather than lanterns, and sidewalks lined with streetlights in Kerrisdale rather than dirt roads past the haunted house.

We used to take the streetcar downtown to watch an Asahi baseball game. Now we rush downtown to run errands. My friends, Jeanne, and I used to run down the boardwalk with spools on our heels. Now we go to shops and try on real high-heeled shoes that pinch our feet.

I never used to notice my younger siblings growing. Now, they aren't even scared of walking past the haunted house, and when we're together, they laugh about things that happened when I wasn't around.

"I guess you had to be there," they say.

We used to picnic on the beach and look for shells until sunset, then come home to warm up by the stove while Mom cooked fresh salmon. Now my family is only together at Sunday dinner every other week. A part of me wonders if I'll ever feel that sense of home again.

Maybe that's why, one weekend on my way home, I notice a house for sale in Marpole, just across the river from Sea Island. Dad had asked me to look out for something: "It's high time we had a place of our own rather than a cannery shack! Besides, we're not fishermen."

The house has a garden, though there's not much growing in it, and a front yard. I think about the deepening lines on my parents' faces, the way my mother massages her aching hands more and more often, and how Dad's limp has become worse. And I tell my parents about my find.

"If you live closer to the Bowers's, I can visit you more often," I say, pouring them ocha.

"I've heard rumors that the cannery may be closing down. We might have to leave anyways," Hiko adds.

Mom says nothing as she sips her tea. I know that buying a house would eat into the money she's saved for Japan.

Dad cocks his head. "My days at the mill are numbered. I'll be retiring soon. But maybe there are more jobs closer to the city. Ones that are easier on my body."

"And we'd be closer to the high school. I could even go to school past grade eight," Jeanne says excitedly.

Mom smiles, "Let's go see the house."

Fall 1934

Not only do they look at the house, they buy it. They even hire the Nakamura and Sakaguchi construction company to add a second story. Jeanne especially loves the new house.

I'm proud that I found them a place of their own in a good neighborhood. And although it becomes my family's home, it never feels like mine. I visit on my time off, but I don't live there. Maybe one day, I will have a home of my own.



Bang. Bang. "Ouch!" Charlotte cries. We asked Grandma if we could try hammering stakes into the ground, but we aren't very good at it. The stakes keep falling over, and Charlotte got a sliver. Even after Charlotte pulls it out, Grandma doesn't say anything. Just hands us the ripped fabric ties from her apron pocket. It always seem to magically have whatever she needs. After showing us how to tie the tomato plants to the stakes, Grandma takes over the mallet again. Grandma's always eager to get on with the work.

I wonder what Marpole was like. It would have been closer to hospitals and downtown. Maybe there were people other than Japanese families living there. It must have been so different from the Sea Island fishing village she grew up in.

There's a black and white picture of a house hanging behind the door in Grandma and Grandpa's den. I remember Auntie Jeanne once saying she loved that house. Could that be the one in Marpole? What happened to it?

One thing's certain, we still gather in the kitchen and around the dining table like Grandma and her family used to do.



Summer 1939

My life at the Bowers's continues as usual, though the kids are getting older and they don't need me as much. And Mr. Bowers keeps talking about retirement. I still look forward to my visits home. Nowadays, Jeanne always asks me if I've met any young men. And this time, I have something to tell her.

I'd been invited to dinner by a lady from the Japanese Language School who knows Mom and Dad. She introduced me to her cousin, Koichiro.

"Is he handsome? What's he like?"

"Well, he's pretty tall, and handsome." I know that's too vague for Jeanne, but I don't know how else to describe him. "And he was well-mannered and friendly. He says he likes reading, and he knows Dad from the mill."

"What's his family like?" Mom asks, coming down the stairs and switching the light on for us.

"Well, his parents both came from Japan. His father was a sheriff in Colorado, and his mother came later as a picture bride."

"A picture bride?" Jeanne asks.

"You know, the ladies who came from Japan and were matched with husbands by 'go-betweens' using only photographs. The couples were too far away to meet," Mom explains.

I turn to Jeanne. "Can you imagine agreeing to marry someone you've never met after only seeing one picture?"

"Yikes!" Jeanne leans toward me. "I bet some people sent photos of themselves young when they were old, or pictures that made

them look rich when they weren't. I'm going to meet the man I want to marry, and I'm glad you've met Koichiro."

"You'd never know what to expect," I agree. "And Koichiro says that when his mother arrived in Seattle to meet her soon-to-be husband, she had to wait at the docks for two *weeks*. Koichiro's father was delayed on sheriff's business, and his mom didn't speak any English. It must have been so hard." Jeanne looks as shocked as I was when I first heard this story.

"Koichiro's actually American, you know. He was born in the United States before his family moved to Canada. But he and his siblings were *kibei*."

"Oh!" Mom says, impressed.

"What's that?" Jeanne asks.

"They were sent to Japan to go to school. So, they grew up there. In Hiroshima."

Mom looks thoughtful. "It's far from Kumamoto. But I've heard there's a beautiful floating *torii* gate near there," she says.

"After his father passed away, Koichiro came back to Canada to take care of his mother and siblings," I continue. "He's looking to buy a house for his family now."

"He's a hard worker," Dad says from behind us. He's standing in the door of the living room. "And he's responsible. With him, you'll never be rich, but you'll never be poor either."

"Hisa's got a boyfriend!" Isi appears, throwing himself on the couch. Sam and his friends spill into the living room and conversation turns to the latest baseball game.

"Do you think you'll see him again?" Jeanne whispers to me.

"Yes, I think I'd like that. He's asked to take me to a show," I whisper back. I'm sure I'm blushing.

Spring 1940

I still work at the Bowers's, but on my days off, Koichiro and I spend most of our time together, going to events or strolling on Powell Street in Japantown. A few weeks ago, he joined my family for a picnic in Stanley Park. Last week, we took the streetcar to New Westminster to meet his family—his mother, brother, and sisters.

By late spring, Koichiro and I are engaged, and our families are a flurry with preparations. Times have been tough for many people, but Koichiro is the first-born son, so his family plans a big wedding.

Jeanne and I find the perfect wedding dress at Shibuya and Company on Powell Street. It's beautiful. And because it's a sample from the display in the shop's window, it's a bit cheaper. Jeanne says she'll help me alter it to fit.

When I tell Koichiro, he is pleased, but says, "How about wearing a kimono, too? That would be beautiful."

"Having two outfits is expensive," I say. Still, he insists. I think he wants to have wedding pictures of me in a kimono to send to his family in Japan.

Fall 1940

There's so much to do before the wedding. The kitchen is bustling as we plan the food and order the sushi ingredients. Mom orders the flowers and Koichiro hires a photographer.

Even Dad gets involved. He wants special wedding cakes so that all the guests can take home a piece. Small vanilla cakes, iced and decorated with Japanese writing. He goes to Shelly's 4X bakery in town, taking with him a paper with *kanji* clearly printed on it so the

bakers can copy it. I assume it means well wishes, but I can't read kanji, so I don't know. I wasn't sure they'd agree to make the cakes, but Dad bursts into the house and announces they would do their best to copy the Japanese characters.

While planning our wedding, it's surreal to read the newspaper headlines about the war in Europe. It all feels so far away, almost as far as Japan, and across a whole ocean. But the next day, when Jeanne and I go to meet Koichiro and his family to tell them about the cakes, we come across a parade of soldiers marching down to Columbia Street. The men are being deployed to serve our country, leaving their families and homes for the same faraway places in the newspapers. I've heard that Mr. Tanaka, who makes tofu in Japantown, tried to enlist too but was refused because he's Japanese.

What a sight to see all the soldiers moving together in lines. It makes me proud of my country, of their bravery and strength. But I'm afraid, too. For the uncertainty of these young men's lives. Yet, even with rows of Canadians marching down the street past Koichiro's sister's dressmaking shop, the war and enemies still seem so far away from home.

Koichiro and I marry on a bright autumn day, surrounded by so many guests. I don't like being the center of attention, but having my family there is reassuring. Especially when there seems to be so many people from Koichiro's side, and his coworkers and boss, who I barely know. The Bowers family comes too. The guest book is a jumble of Japanese and English names in both kanji and cursive writing, sometimes going from left to right and sometimes going from right to left. It's wonderful that so many people from different parts of our lives are here together to celebrate our marriage.

Then, after a long day, Koichiro and I cross the threshold of his family's house in New Westminster. My new home. I feel light and heavy at the same time: optimistic and grounded in this place.

When we return from our honeymoon in Victoria a week later, Hiko brings us all the wedding gifts and envelopes of money that people left for us at the reception. He borrows Dad's car, and Mom and Jeanne come along too.

"Look, Hisa!" Jeanne exclaims, rushing in with the most recent local Japanese newspaper, *The New Canadian*, in her hand. "It says here that your wedding was one of the prettiest this season!" Koichiro's sisters and mother peer over my shoulder, reading the announcement. I'm excited to see our wedding recognized in the paper. But it gives me a butterfly feeling in my heart.

Hiko and Roy, Koichiro's brother, bring in the gifts. As I open the packages, I'm touched by how generous everyone has been. Family friends have given us our first set of dishes and silver cutlery. Grandpa's friends our first bed linens. The Bowers an electric clock. It's very fancy. And Jeanne and my brothers give us towels.

"Thank you! I love the color."

"I chose the towels. I thought the blue would remind you of the sky on Sea Island," Hiko explains.

And Mom gives me a sewing machine. My very own.

When I walk my mom out to the car, she pulls me aside and gives me one more package. Inside is a warm coat with fur around the collar.

"Mom, what's this? You've already given me so much. What about your dream of going back to Japan?"

"Don't worry about that. We'll have enough money someday. You're marrying into a large family. I want you to have something warm and special just for you."

I put the coat over my shoulders to try it on. It's beautiful and very comfortable, like a reassuring hug. And suddenly, the butterflies around my heart are calm.



Bang. Bang. Bang. Grandma sinks the stakes for the last few tomato plants into the ground.

Grandma is strong. But now I notice something delicate, fragile even, in the wrinkles around her eyes. In her soft gray hair.

It still feels like Grandma is rooted to this place, even though I know that's not true. She left home when she was only a few years older than I am now. It would've been so weird to live with strangers and only seeing your family twice a month. But maybe it's different when you're a teenager.

I think I understand Grandma wanting a place of her own. Of wanting that full feeling of home. It's not exactly like when I live in my mom's apartment during the week, and then my dad's on weekends. Though I hate moving between places and feeling out of control when I suddenly can't find my things—my comforts—because they're left behind in the wrong home. I sometimes wish home could be just one place.

Maybe what Grandma felt is more like when you can't go back because things are changing. You want them to stay the same, even if you're also excited about the future. Is that what feelings of home are like when you're growing up?

I wonder if Grandpa felt out of place too, especially with all the different places he called home. Colorado, Hiroshima, New Westminster, Toronto.

I didn't know our great-grandpa was a sheriff, like in the Wild West! And he was introduced to his wife by a "go-between." What a funny word. So, Grandpa was a sheriff's son, and he traveled to Japan on a boat a long time ago. I imagine the trip would have taken weeks. There would have been storms and people would get seasick. Where did they sleep? What did they eat?

I wonder what it would be like to visit Japan now. We'd go in an airplane, and it would take much longer than flying to Vancouver. I've never been to Japan. Neither has my dad, or any of my aunts, uncles, or cousins. Our lives feel very far away from that place. Tiny bits of the language, food, and customs might be familiar, but really, its small cars, kimonos, and raw foods are so foreign. And yet Grandpa went to school there. He still writes in Japanese. Beautiful figures, like hieroglyphs that I can't understand.

Charlotte ties a strip of ripped fabric around the last tomato plant stake, securing the slender stem the way Grandma showed us. Grandma tucks the leftover pieces of old sheet back into her apron pocket.

I try to imagine Grandma and Grandpa young and dating, and what their wedding must have been like, but I can't. I keep seeing them as they are now, often working side-by-side in the garden or reading the newspaper and sharing stories at the table.

I've learned so many things today, but I still don't know how Grandma and Grandpa ended up here, and what Grandma meant when she said, "We lost everything." I have even more questions now. Did Grandma's mom ever go back to Japan to visit her family and the orange grove?

Grandma disappears into the garage to put the mallet away, and I glance at Charlotte. By the look on her face, I think she has questions like the ones I feel rising in my chest. But just then, Uncle Roy's cat brushes against my leg and winds around Charlotte's before heading to Grandma.

"Ack!" Grandma starts. "Out of my garden!" She shoos the cat away. "Come on, girls, let's check the snow peas."

Chapter 5

Charlotte

Lou and I want to pet Uncle Roy's ginger-colored cat, but it darts under the fence. We follow Grandma to the snow peas. They're already as tall as we are and full of delicate white blossoms that look like fans. Tiny green pea pods peek between the leaves. "The *saya-endo* need water," Grandma says.

Grandma doesn't travel in the summer. Now I understand why. It would be a shame to spend so much time nurturing the plants only to have them shrivel up before the peas are ready to pick.

As we fill the watering can, I notice it's been patched with tape. "Hockey tape," Lou whispers. "Mottainai," she winks at me.

I don't know many of the Japanese words my Grandma or Lou say. But the mended watering can reminds me of how Mom reuses and repairs things at home, rather than throwing them out and buying new ones. She always rinses out plastic bags, hangs them on the clothesline to dry, and reuses them until they're worn out. None of my friends' moms do that. I'm always thankful that the



clothesline is hidden behind the house. I guess Mom learned not to be wasteful from Grandma.

Grandma lifts the patched watering can easily with one hand and shows us how to water the peas at the base of the plants. She's in her seventies and still works one day a week, cleaning a family's house. I'm amazed by how strong she is and how hard she works. Unlike Grandma, Lou and I struggle to carry the full watering can, even though we're working together.

Water splashes, but my feet stay dry inside Grandma's boots. Standing beside her, I can feel the presence of her own roots, secure, deep in the soil below. Only now, I realize that she was somehow transplanted here from the West Coast. I think of Grandma as a beautiful young bride, settling into a new home close to where I live in Vancouver and planting snow peas in a different garden.

Maybe when we go home, Mom can show me where Grandma and Grandpa lived. I wonder if she even knows. She was born in Toronto, after all. Maybe I can muster up the courage to ask Grandma's sister, Auntie Jeanne, to tell me more stories about Sea Island, Marpole, and how she and her siblings grew up.

I've never wondered about our family's stories before. Sitting at the dinner table instead of *under* it last night felt so different. So mature. And now Lou and I have heard new stories from Grandma. Each story, like a photograph, allows us a glimpse into the past. Moments frozen in time. Filling in details to questions that I didn't know how to ask. But I'm sensing there is a deeper, darker part of the story still to come. One that nobody talks about, except in passing, and using words that I don't understand. One that led Grandma and Grandpa to their home here in the east.

I tip the watering can, the water seeping slowly into the dry soil. I take a deep breath and push down the butterflies in my stomach. "Grandma," I ask timidly, "what was it like in New Westminster?" That seems safe enough.



March 1941

New Westminster is much bigger than our village on Sea Island. It flanks the north side of the muddy brown Fraser River. If you continue down, eventually you end up at the river's mouth where it empties into the Pacific right by Sea Island. At least there we could also see the fresh blue ocean water alongside the murky brown.

Then again, New Westminster does have a Japanese community. Near the Buddhist Church, there are Japanese stores and the Language school. Koichiro is the secretary there in the evenings, after he and his brother, Roy, cross back over the bridge from working at the Queensborough lumber mills. Sometimes, Mrs. Okihiro, their mother, comes with them after spending the day at the Japanese United Church. Or sometimes, Koichiro meets me at his sister Masako's dressmaking shop where I work, and we pick up *mochi* to take home as a treat. Occasionally, Koichiro and I even take the streetcar into Vancouver for an evening out. We go to Fuji's Chop Suey House and have even seen the film *Gone with the Wind*. We feel so fancy going into town.

But I don't mind when Koichiro's busy and out of the house. I've planted a small garden in our yard with seeds Mom gave me. Snow peas, beans, and spinach. Kiwis too! Special ordered because Koichiro loved eating them when he was a student in Japan. I wish orange trees could grow here so I could smell the sweet perfume Mom remembers. That's okay. I love the idea that the first time I'll smell them will be in Japan.

Today was dark and wet, but the wind eventually blew the clouds away. The setting sun transformed the river into a spectacular shimmering blue, disguising the muddy brown. Koichiro's youngest sister, Aki, and I walk home from Masako's after a long day of sewing kimonos for the ladies who will be in the May Day Parade. We walk past the penitentiary, arms linked. When a guard calls out to us from the gatehouse, Aki smiles cheekily and waves—something I imagine my sister Jeanne might do.

Jeanne's doing well since graduating high school. I asked if any boys had called on her the last time I visited, and even though she said no, I thought she was hiding a grin.

May 1941

May Day arrives, and I'm glad that Jeanne and Isi are nestled in the crowd with me at Queen's Park.

"Look! There's Masako!" Jeanne gasps and points to the float decorated with paper sakura flowers. Masako, beautiful in her kimono, holds a rice-paper parasol.

"The kimonos are like a colorful fabric garden," says Jeanne in awe.

"I can't believe that all of our tiny stitches could make something so pretty," I say.

Walking along Columbia Street later—arm in arm with Jeanne, Isi, and my sisters-in-law—I feel like I belong and that everything's as it should be. Just because I have a new life, a new home, and a growing family doesn't mean I have to leave my own family behind. In fact, next Sunday we'll have supper or maybe a picnic in Stanley Park.

December 1941

Today began like any other December day, though it's unusually warm. Instead of snow, the roads are slick from the recent rain, and I imagine that they will perfectly reflect Columbia Street's colorful neon signs. I'm headed to my parents' house to make Mrs. Bowers's famous Christmas cake, full of candied fruit and nuts.

"Do you have all the ingredients you need? Will you be warm enough?" Koichiro had asked me this morning. "Don't forget your coat." He's been so protective since we found out that I'm pregnant and insists Dad pick me up in his car.

I'm pulling on my coat when young Mr. Ohta, from just up the hill, bangs loudly at the door.

"Is your husband home? Have you heard?" he shouts as soon as I open the door. I step back, startled.

"Mr. Ohta, what's going on?" I ask, but he's already moved past me, turning on the radio and leaving wet footprints on the floor. His mother would be embarrassed, I'm sure.

"The Japanese army has bombed Pearl Harbor! In the United States—Hawaii! Things are going to be bad, Mrs. Oki. Really bad. Dad's worrying it's going to be 1907 all over again."

We've all heard the stories of how nine thousand people stormed Chinatown and Japantown, smashing windows, looting stores, destroying homes, and beating people during the anti-Asian riots.

"Already, just as I was running here, our neighbor—who I helped with yard work in the fall—came out of his house yelling and throwing rocks at me!"

I sit down heavily on the couch. I've dreamed of faraway places, like Kumamoto in Japan, but I've never heard of Pearl Harbor in faraway Hawaii. It must be beautiful to have that name. Or it must

have been. Hearing the commotion, Koichiro rushes into the room, followed by his mother and sister. We all listen in rapt silence to the animated chatter on the radio. I already know things will be bad. I've seen the newsreels about "Yellow Peril," the fear that Japanese people are dangerous, and it's been getting steadily worse through the war. Canada and Japan are on opposite sides. But now people will think that's us. This is going to change things for us. Significantly.

Dad won't be coming to pick me up today. There won't be any Christmas cakes baked or presents wrapped. Slowly, I put the cake ingredients away, listening to the radio. But I hardly hear it.

When things have settled later that day, I tell Koichiro that I have to talk to my family. I head to the door with my jacket and handbag, but he puts his hand on my shoulder.

"You're staying here, Hisa," he tells me firmly. "It's not safe for you to go out. Especially when you're carrying our first child."

We don't have a phone, and my family doesn't have one either. The only way to get in touch with them is to go myself. I know he's right. That I should stay home, safe, but I'm worried about my family. For now, all I can do is wait.

The next day, the order comes to seize all Japanese fishing boats. I sit tensely in the living room listening to the radio. When Koichiro finally arrives home in the evening, he says all Japanese schools have been shut down. Japanese newspapers too, except *The New Canadian*, which is written in English but must be censored now. Some people in our community read only Japanese. Without Japanese newspapers, how will they know what's going on?

More orders come, this time for blackouts. At five o'clock, a whistle sounds and everyone must turn out their lights or block their windows with thick black paper. The wet pavement goes dark as mud as street and traffic lights and neon signs are extinguished. Car lights are masked, leaving only narrow beams. They say the lights might show the enemy—the Japanese bombers—where the

cities are below. Lights give them targets, they say. And so, everything goes dark.

Days pass with little news. The lantern at the Japanese War Memorial in Stanley Park was extinguished soon after the bombing, the loyal sacrifice of the Japanese soldiers forgotten. Roy tells us that from the mill, he can see the eerie rows of boats that have been taken away—a giant mass off the far shore of the Fraser River. Apparently, there's another collection downriver in Steveston.

In winter, when the nights are the longest, now they are also the darkest. Even holiday lights are put out. Drivers can't see, and there are many car accidents. Pedestrians are no longer safe. More orders are announced, telling us to avoid streets without sidewalks if people dare to go out at night at all. I can't even call from the community phone down the street because the phone lines are only for emergencies. I have no idea how my family is.

I have so many questions, but I worry I don't want to hear the answers. Do they have enough food to eat? Are their neighbors still friendly? Are people yelling at Jeanne, calling her ugly names? Are Hiko and Tam able to work? And little Sam and Isi, are they being hassled at school? Are they even still allowed to go?

"Your brothers go to a public high school. They'll still go, Hisa," Koichiro assures me.

"For now," I say quietly. "For now."

And just like that, the war across the ocean is here. In Canada, in our city, in our homes.

Our Canadian soldiers are sent away, allied with Britain, America, and other countries to fight against Germany, Italy, and Japan. Japan, the country where my parents were born, against Canada where *I* was born. And where my parents have lived for over forty years, longer than they ever did in Japan.

It's strange to be told we're Japanese before we're Canadian. I've

never even been to Japan. Our government says we're Japanese, just like the enemy. So, they assume we are *all* the enemy. I think of our neighbors, the mailman, and especially the Bowers—who I lived with for years. How can I suddenly be their enemy?

Shortly before Christmas, it's official. We must register as "enemy aliens" and carry an identification card with us at all times. The yellow cards are stamped "Canadian born" or "Naturalized Canadian" or "Japanese National"—three different categories, but each of us is an alien and an enemy. They mark us apart.

Christmas and New Year's come and go with little celebration and lots of uncertainty. I see my family only briefly. Valentine's Day, a day that's supposed to be about love, is somber too. The government says all Japanese men between eighteen and forty-five years old have to move to labor camps away from the coast. Taken from their families and jobs, leaving holes in the community and no money for their families. Apparently, all Japanese men are too much of a threat.

What will I do without Koichiro? And what will happen to my brothers or Roy? The gentle soul who likes to sing and feed the stray black cat that wanders into the garden?

While I wash the rice for tonight's supper, Koichiro and his mother argue. "It's for the best!" Koichiro says. His mother is sitting on the couch with her face in her hands. She shakes her head.

"Koichiro and I are American, Mom," Roy says calmly. "Koichiro will stay until he's ordered to leave. But I have no wife, no children, no house. It's best for our family if I go willingly—to show that we're loyal and cooperative. We are not the enemy."

"I've already lost my husband. I can't bear losing my children too!"

But Roy has made up his mind. If he and others like him go, he hopes that the government will allow the rest of us to stay. I patch Roy's warm jacket. It's cold here, but it's likely to be colder where he's going.

Roy packs a duffel bag with clothing, a blanket, some personal things, and a few family photographs. Before he leaves, he sets out a dish for the cat. One last time. I pack him a lunch. It's not much, but I don't think anything in the world could make things feel right. He says his solemn good-byes.

I stand on the street, watching him disappear. *Are Mom and Jeanne doing the same for Hiko and Tam?* I wonder.

Then comes the most shocking news yet. The government orders that all of us Japanese—even women, children, and the elderly—be “evacuated” from our homes and moved away, one hundred miles from the coast. Just like the young men, like Roy, who have already left. I'm not sure what threat Canadian-born children and their grandparents pose, or why we have to do this when we've cooperated with all the government's restrictions and orders. Haven't we proven our loyalty? Even the word *evacuation* feels wrong. As though they're forcing us from our homes for our own protection. But protection from what?

We don't know what the order to leave the coast means for us yet—when we have to leave, where we're going to go, or if things will change and we won't have to leave at all—but already our connection to the world outside our homes is narrowing. Policemen confiscate all the cameras, radios, and cars owned by Japanese people. We're ordered to turn them in at police stations or drop them off at the fairgrounds. We can't listen to the news or move around the city independently. It feels absurd. Why take our cameras? Do they think I'm going to document important information for a country I've never been to? Of what, the streets of New Westminster? Now we can't capture special moments in our lives either, like my child's first smile. How can a picture of my baby be dangerous? Nothing makes sense.

Every night I wait by the blacked-out window for Koichiro to come home. I can't see through it, though I wouldn't be able to see him anyway, the nights are so dark without any lights on anywhere. Every noise startles me. I used to feel safe, but now I worry someone might throw a rock through my window because they believe we're the enemy. Finally, the key scrapes in the lock. Koichiro's exhausted, but at least he has news.

"The bad news," he announces as he makes *ochazuke*, mixing hot green tea into cold rice, "is that Japanese people now have a curfew. Unlike everyone else, we can't leave our homes until the sun rises and we have to be back inside before the sun sets. But," he tries to reassure me, "the good news is that the days are getting longer as we head into spring." He smiles at me, but even he doesn't seem convinced.

The days may be getting longer, I think, but there is darkness everywhere.

March 1942

It's quiet at home with Roy gone and everyone else out and busy before the curfew and daily blackouts. Well, mostly quiet, except for Roy's stray cat meowing at the back door until I feed her. Weeks have gone by, and I'm no longer working. I spend most days looking for a letter from Jeanne.

When her letter finally arrives, I'm so anxious for news, but it only confirms my fear that Hiko will also be sent away. She doesn't know where. Maybe to work camps in the mountains. Hopefully, when they get there, they'll write and let us know they're safe.

Jeanne writes that in preparation, Mom has carefully painted their names in both English and Japanese in bold, dark strokes on

white cloth sacks. One for each of their belongings. As for the rest of the family, they're getting by, but I can feel the sadness, heavy, in Jeanne's words.

I'm sad, too, but luckier than many women whose husbands, brothers, and grown sons have already been sent away. There are fewer and fewer Japanese men in New Westminster as the days go by. I didn't realize how many Japanese men lived in our community... until they weren't there anymore. Even Reverend Ikuta, from our Buddhist Church, was taken suddenly. Apparently, the government presumed he was a spy.

I'm grateful that Koichiro hasn't been sent away yet. I'm not sure why—maybe because he's American or because of his glass eye, the one he lost in a mill accident. Regardless, he's been busy helping many families in the community move in with relatives to keep safe. And with the people he knows from the Japanese Language School, he's involved with a group trying to meet with the government to ask questions and make demands about what will happen to us.

"The community has elected Mrs. Kamegaya from the school and four other women to head a committee called the Housewives Association," he tells me one night after a meeting. "They're demanding a conference with the BC Securities Commission—you know, the group of people overseeing us. Well, along with those of us helping behind the scenes, of course. Reverend McWilliams is on our side too."

"Reverend Mac? From the United Church?"

Koichiro nods. "With the curfew and restrictions against us, he's helping us find out what's happening and sharing information. We're hoping that if our community works together and shows we're cooperative, we can avoid going to Hastings Park."

"The fairgrounds," I say. "What does Hastings Park have to do with us?"

"Reverend Mac confirmed the rumors," Koichiro says, grimacing,

“the stables and buildings have been prepared to detain us until we’re evacuated. The first group of people arrived there just over a week ago. If we are forced to move, too, we’re trying to make sure that we can stay in our homes as long as possible and everyone from New Westminster is eventually sent to the same place, at least. So families can stay together.”

“We’ve already done everything we can to prove we aren’t a threat! And still they want to herd us like horses? Like *animals*?” I try to slow my breathing, rubbing my very pregnant stomach. Koichiro takes my hand, and I know he’s afraid too. His words hang in the air between us. More families will be separated. I know we’re both thinking the same thing. *What will we do once the baby comes?*

I feel numb. But I realize that I shouldn’t be surprised by anything anymore.



“Oi! Say cheese! Ma, you too!” Mom comes out to the garden with her camera and tries to capture Grandma, Lou, and me looking as natural as possible. Or startled, I should say. She always carries a camera with her. Every year, she makes a photo album for my brother and me. As much as I complain about having my picture taken, before we came, Mom showed me photos of me as a baby, and I found myself feeling thankful to her for creating these treasures. Most of the time, Grandma hides from the camera, but today, she pulls Lou and me in close and smiles. I suspect that, like me, she’s thinking about how Japanese people had all their cameras taken away.

“Wait! One more!” Grandpa hurries out of the house with his own camera, the screen door banging behind him. He must have

seen us through the kitchen window. He only takes one picture before Grandma waves him away.

"That was a good one, I think," Grandpa says. "I'm leaving for my meeting soon. I won't be home until after dinner." He disappears back inside.

"Can you please send me a copy of the picture, Auntie Mary?" Lou asks.

"Of course, Lou. I'll have the film developed at home." Mom smiles as she puts her camera away. I hadn't notice her come into the garden. I wonder how much of Grandma's story she heard.

"Mom," I say, a little more strongly than I wanted. "Do you know about this? About Grandma and Grandpa's families? And Hastings Park?" She's always told me to speak up if I see something I think is wrong. She said that doing the right thing might feel scary, but if nobody says anything, how will things change? I can tell from her face that she did know, she doesn't even look surprised. "Why didn't you tell me?" I ask.

"I have, Charlotte. Though not as much as Grandma is telling you. I'm not sure I knew when you'd be ready to hear it," she replies, shrugging, "but I tried a few times. You weren't all that interested." I'm not sure how to feel about that. What does she mean, of course I'd be interested! But Mom continues. "I don't even know very much myself. Only what I've learned putting together the family tree. Nobody likes talking about those times."

I feel like I have rocks in my gut. Maybe it's true. I haven't really been interested in the family stories Mom has tried to share with me. I complain about her Japanese name because all I want to do is fit in. And sometimes, I just don't.

Like the time at school when we were learning about World War II and a classmate said that both Germans *and* Japanese were the enemy. He pointed at me and said loudly, "Charlotte is a double enemy!" Maybe he didn't mean for it to hurt my feelings. But it did,

and it bothers me today just as much as it did then. Maybe that's what makes me squirm when someone asks me about Mom's name.

"Sorry," I say quietly. She nods and gently brushes a piece of hair out of my face and tucks it behind my ear.

"I've only heard awful things about Hastings Park," Mom says, turning to Grandma. "Apparently it was dirty, smelly, noisy, and the food was terrible. Apparently when it first opened, the toilets weren't private at all." Mom suggestively raises her eyebrows, as if to say, *just imagine*.

"Mary!" Grandma says, her nose wrinkling in disgust. "Girls, there are still more peas than need water. Off you go."

"Well, I'm off again too. Have fun, ladies! Charlotte, I'll be back again around dinner."



April 1942

With more and more Japanese people being taken to Hastings Park, our own committee has stepped up its activities. They meet at different locations all over New Westminster, never following a predictable schedule, and the exact details are only shared by word of mouth. Even our mail is read by the government now, and by the time it arrives to us, it's unreadable. Censors cover too many words with heavy black ink.

Today, the committee is meeting in the back room of Nakamura's Fish Store. We pretend it's just a casual visit because Japanese people are no longer allowed to have any large gatherings. I come along to support the illusion that this is just a regular afternoon ladies' tea,

and my husband is kindly accompanying me because I'm pregnant. I sit slightly back from the group, my feet raised on a stack of wooden crates, and nibble a cookie while I listen.

"They say there are maggots and dust everywhere! And even though the floors are washed with lime every day, it smells like a barn...because it is one," Mrs. Kamegaya exclaims angrily.

"Families aren't even kept together," Koichiro adds. "Women and children are in one building and the men in another. Reverend Mac says even boys as young as thirteen are separated from their mothers and staying in the men's building. Can you imagine a boy being on his own with hundreds of strangers because his father has already been sent to a road camp?"

Another woman I recognize but don't know shifts uncomfortably. "There's no privacy, either. I've heard they hang sheets between beds to offer a little separation, but they can't block the noise. Even the adults cry, and all the poor babies scream without their regular foods and comforts."

"So you choose between hanging the sheet or covering the scratchy, straw-filled mattress?" another lady asks. "People don't know to pack sheets and blankets, nobody's telling us what to expect. What do we do?"

"Reverend Mac said there have been some improvements," says Mr. Murakami. "People have demanded better conditions and food. Some of these complaints are being addressed—especially since so many people are getting sick."

"And I hear that school lessons have been organized for the children," adds Mrs. Kamegaya.

"Hopefully we don't go through Hastings Park," Koichiro says, leaning forward. "Reverend Mac recently visited Kaslo, an old gold rush town. Less than a hundred people still live there. It might be a suitable place for us, but we'd have to send some men to fix the buildings and make other preparations for our arrival."

None of this sounds good—even the “good” news. With my due date days away, I’m overwhelmed. What kind of life am I bringing my unborn child into? Already an “enemy alien” with the first breath of life.

This can’t actually be happening. We won’t really be forced to move, will we? I try to make a mental inventory of all our belongings and a list of items that need to be packed. Sheets, blankets, mattress. How do I narrow things down? I give up and focus on a bag for my stay at the hospital instead. It’s a good distraction from worrying, as I haven’t received a letter from Jeanne recently. All the censored mail takes longer. I don’t know how my family is managing or where they will end up if we are all forced to leave our homes. I hope it’s somewhere not too far.

All of this swirling around in my head makes me want to go to bed, close my eyes, and wake up to the way things were before the war. Or at least before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. And yet that afternoon, after the secret fish shop meeting, I find myself in our quiet garden. I gaze over at the wooden arbor that frames the Fraser below. The muddy river has been a constant in my life, since the day I was born on its shores. I have never called anywhere else home. But here I am, being told I have to move. Uprooted.

On the bower, I notice fresh buds on Koichiro’s climbing kiwi vines. I turn back to the house where the delicate new radish leaves shyly poke through the earth in one of the garden beds. I haven’t planted anything yet this year. The radishes must have reseeded themselves. I take an envelope of seeds from my apron pocket and bend over uncomfortably, placing my hands in the cool, damp soil. My racing heart begins to slow. I decide then to plant three rows of snow peas in our yard, and hope I’ll be able to stay long enough to harvest them. Better yet, that we won’t have to go at all.

Chapter 6

Lou

Grandma walks over to the pear tree in the corner of the garden. We follow behind silently. I can't find the words, and I think Charlotte feels the same.

The tree is beginning to blossom with little pinky-white flowers. I wonder if orange tree blossoms look like these.

Grandma takes a deep breath, drinking in the musty earth and fresh leafy smells of early summer. As she shows Charlotte a blossom up close, I follow the branch back to its base at the trunk, my mind wandering back over everything Grandma has told us.

Grandma's life before the war was so colorful. In my mind's eye, I see young girls, like Charlotte and me, in pink kimonos dancing in parades and at Grandma's wedding. I imagine sunny family picnics in Stanley Park. And the bright city lights on Grandma and Grandpa's nights in town.

But then it all goes dark...and quiet.

No cars, no cameras, no radios. No movies. If these restrictions happened now, there would be no dance classes, no soccer practice, no meeting up with friends after school. Maybe instead we'd be headed to the fairgrounds with our parents to surrender our cars. Or we'd come home from school to find our radios, phones, and TVs gone.

And then, people would disappear. But how? Did they go to work or school in the morning and just not come home? Did the police come and take young men away, and few people saw or said anything?

Charlotte took me to the fairgrounds in Vancouver when I visited last year. This must be the same place where Japanese Canadians were imprisoned during the war. When we were there, my favorite ride was the Tilt-A-Whirl, and Dad let me get a bag of mini donuts. They fry them right in front of you and toss them in powdered sugar. We visited the barns with horses, cows, and sheep, too. If this happened now, would those same fairgrounds be lined with people's things? Everything they were forced to abandon. Would we go to the horse races one week and then be living in the barns the next? Lined up in rows upon rows of beds. How could people—Canadian citizens—be forced to live in a barn with no toilets or showers, and to eat terrible food?

I wonder how the government could do this to my family. And what happened to their homes, gardens, and friends in BC? How did they end up here, where I grew up? My head spins. I have so many questions. It's almost like being back on the Tilt-A-Whirl, but it's not fun anymore.

Grandma is telling Charlotte about picking the pears in the fall and preserving them in jars to keep over winter.

"That's hard work!" Charlotte says.

"It must have been so hard, Grandma," I say, my mind still in the past.

"During the war?" Grandma responds, turning to me. "Yes," she says sadly. "It was."



April 1942

I'm in a taxi, heading to the hospital to have my baby. It seems crazy to think that, should all go well, Koichiro and I will have a new little being in our lives. It seems especially crazy now.

No one knows for sure what's going to happen to us. But because the government has said we will have to move—at least temporarily—Koichiro's sisters, mom, and the others have been busy packing and running around sharing news before curfew. There are rumors that many people have left already. If they could afford to move or go somewhere else together as a family, they're leaving the coast, or the so-called "Protected Area," as the government is now calling this region along BC's shore. What we always called home. The problem is many provinces won't have us. I hear only Alberta and Manitoba will take Japanese Canadian families, but only as laborers on sugar beet farms. There are also people already in Hastings Park.... But so far, even with the Housewives Association's discussions with the Commissioner, we've heard nothing certain about what will happen to our family or our community.

So, I refuse to pack. Instead, I've been busy getting the baby's things ready. Besides, it's too painful to put away our things, especially the ones that are supposed to be our baby's first comforts. It feels like once I start packing, it will mean this is really happening.

But today, despite all the chaos and Koichiro out working for the Association, Kay called a taxi, Aki got my things for the hospital, and Mrs. Okihiro wished me the best. I pass the greengrocer's, surprised that it's still open. The window display looks half empty. At Ohashi

Confectioners, a man holds the door for a woman going in to buy mochi. A young delivery man rides his bicycle past the dry cleaners and shoe repair shop, swerving around people on the sidewalk. There are a few men in the barber shop, while other people head to work—if they still have jobs. Being Japanese is bad for business, I've heard. At the streetcar stop, women read their magazines and children play *jan-ken-pon*, rock-paper-scissors.

Passing by, I see it all—the tulips and rhododendrons in bloom, the trees bursting into leaf, the brown Fraser surging. And I wonder if anyone sees me, sitting quietly in this taxi—big and ready to burst, and scared and expectant, all at the same time.

My baby is *perfect*. Ten fingers and ten toes. I checked right away, just like Mom always did to the neighbor's babies on Sea Island. He keeps his little hands softly clenched. And when he yawns, his whole head rolls. I love the tiny tidbits that are his toes. I can't wait to show him to Koichiro. He promised that, even if he had a lot of work to do for the community, he'd visit as soon as the baby was born. But as one day blends into the next, Koichiro doesn't come.

Our baby, our *first* baby, and my husband hasn't even met him yet. More days pass. I learn the little sounds Koki makes when he's hungry. I admire the folds around his neck when he sleeps. And I cherish the sweet baby smell of his head when I hold him close. The doctors and nurses check on us and help me with him, but still no visitors—not Aki or Kay, not Jeanne or Mom—I start to fear that something outside this hospital has gone very wrong.

Finally, I get a visitor. Koichiro's cousin!

As soon as I see her, I know my fears were right. Ayako tells me that Masako wanted to come and visit, but she doesn't dare leave the children, even with her mother. She's afraid to miss curfew, or worse, that the police will come while she's gone.

The warmth cocooning my baby and I these last few days fades away, and I'm filled with worry. *It can't be that bad*, I think. But then Ayako tells me of my good friend, Tats.

"The police came to her house to make sure her family was leaving," she says. "Tats was surprised because, you know, her father's so ill. They thought they'd have more time. She ended up blocking their way, pounding and pushing the officers back, demanding to know how they could take a sick, elderly man from his house."

Tats is no bigger than me. Like Jeanne, she's firm and outspoken. But standing up to officials at the doorway of her house? This is what things have come to?

I can barely believe it, but there are more stories. The Ishii family is from Vancouver Island, and I know what that means. The people on the Island and up the coast were the first moved to Hastings Park. Ayako says the family had just started eating dinner when police banged on their door and ordered them to leave.

She shakes her head. "It was horrible. I heard they grabbed what they could in the few minutes they had. They couldn't store anything and they couldn't pack much. They didn't even know where they were going.

"Apparently, as the bus pulled away, they could see their uneaten dinner, still warm, on the table through the window. The last thing they saw as their home disappeared from sight was people breaking in and coming out with a lamp, a table, a Japanese doll. They carried the family's belongings away."

Past Ayako out the window, the trees are still green. The rhododendrons are still in bloom. People are walking by like it's any spring day. And I suppose it is, for them. I wonder what other people see when they look at me, or if they see anything at all.

"Hisa, the war is on," Ayako continues. "When the police come, you just have to go. Or they carry you out."

The doctor tells me my baby and I are healthy and ready to go home. *Home*. I wonder what it's like now. If it still feels like my home, and for how much longer it will be.

The doctor says to make sure the baby sleeps a lot and that he's fed several times a day. Then he tells me, "Don't travel for a while."

"For how long?" I ask, holding my baby's hands in the bassinet beside me.

"About a month or so," he says. "Why? Are you planning a trip?"

I search his eyes for any sign that he's heard about what's happening. He's not Japanese, but surely he's noticed the disappearances, the forced evacuations. For a second, I think I see a spark. Maybe he's heard the stories. Maybe he understands that the official orders don't only apply to people suspected of being spies but to *all* of us. Then the spark is gone.

I'm not sure what to say, the sinking feeling in my stomach growing. "No."

He gives me a tight smile but doesn't say anything more.

Just before leaving, the nurse hands me an envelope. "The doctor said to give this to you, in case you need it."

Inside, on official hospital paper, is a typed and signed letter.

To Whom It May Concern,

Mrs. Hisa Okihiro had a baby on April 14, 1942.

She and her baby cannot travel for at least a month.

My heart begins pounding in my ears. I'm not sure if this will help, but it feels important all the same. I tuck it into my purse.

On the drive home, everything looks different. There are fewer people on the streets. No young men are cycling past the dry cleaners. No

one is going into Ohashi Confectioners. The greengrocer's lights are off, and the display window is empty. It's the middle of the day, but the streets are nearly deserted.

At home, the lights are off too. No one's there. Dirty glasses clutter the table and unwashed plates pile in the sink. Clothing and books are stacked on chairs and on the floor. The couch is covered with blankets, like someone has been sleeping on it.

Koichiro finally returns. He's so excited to meet his son and won't stop hugging us and apologizing for not visiting us in the hospital, as he explains.

"We've had ongoing negotiations with the Security Commission, and the community's decided to go to the ghost town Kaslo," he tells me. "None of us will go to the Hastings Park detention center at all. The men doing the repairs in Kaslo need more help and supplies to make the buildings habitable. Japanese businesses are donating money...."

He seems almost dizzy with lack of sleep and overwork. And I am dazed by it all, it's hard to keep track of everything that's changed. I'm moving to some old town somewhere? But maybe there will be more changes or the war will end and we won't move at all.

When he pauses for a breath, I jump in. "Have you heard anything from my family?"

Koichiro looks worried, but I can tell he tries to hide it. "No," he admits.

"How about yours? Where are your mom and sisters?"

"They're staying with Masako." He squeezes my hand. "Everyone's trying to stick together."

But with a newborn baby, I can't join them. I don't really want to be with anyone anyway, except Koichiro and my baby.

I feed and bathe him. I eat and I sleep. I write letters to my family, hoping for the best. With the government censoring our mail, I have no idea what state they'll be in when they arrive:

Janis Bridger and Lara Jean Okihira

Dear Jeanne,

*Well, I have a little boy! He was born on [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]. He has [REDACTED] and he
[REDACTED]. Please tell Mom and Dad
[REDACTED], and that we are all well, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]. I can't wait for you all to meet him.*

*Have you heard any news [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]? [REDACTED] says we will not go
[REDACTED] but straight to [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] in [REDACTED].*

*How is Mom's and Dad's health? I wish I knew
what was happening with you. On the way back
from the hospital I saw a tree in bloom that
reminded me of the [REDACTED] trees in [REDACTED]
and it made me think of the [REDACTED] trees Mom
always used to talk about. Maybe one day soon
we will have picnics [REDACTED] again.*

I miss you guys so much. Say hello to the boys.

Your loving sister,

[REDACTED]

I clean the house. I wash the dishes, mend the clothes, fold the blankets, and put the pillows right on the couch. And I water the peas, which have sprouted and grown a few inches since I left for the hospital.

It seems right that everything be fixed-up, put in its proper place, and cared for. Even Roy's black cat. Every evening, I put food out and watch for her sleek figure along the fence as she edges nearer.

Obaasan's Boots

"Hello, Cat." She purrs while she eats. Maybe she's grateful for the food. Or maybe she's happy for the company. I guess I am too.



"Good-bye!" Grandpa calls. We barely hear him coming into the garden through the back door.

"You're off to your meeting, are you?" Grandma smiles at him.

"Yes, but I've brought you some mochi for a snack," he says.

"You've been working so hard!"

"Thanks, Grandpa," Charlotte and I say.

He takes a quick look around the garden. "Good job, girls. You've done great work today."

We say good-bye, wishing him well for his meeting at the Japanese Association. As he drives off, Charlotte and I get lawn chairs for our break.

"I can barely believe Grandma's stories," I say quietly to Charlotte when we're out of earshot. She looks at me a bit funny, I think. Like she's surprised.

"Me neither!" she whispers back.

"Would people really steal your things?" I ask, imagining my bicycle or my teddy bear I've had since I was a baby being taken away, and all I can do is watch. And what about my cat? What would happen to him? My heart feels like it's split. I try to push the thoughts out of my head.

Charlotte shrugs slowly. She seems shocked and troubled too, but neither of us knows what to say.

We take the chairs over to Grandma, open them, and sit down. The fabric has been replaced by woven, colored rope in a style I

recognize. Grandma Okihiro is a lot like my other grandma. They both reuse things, like ripping up old sheets for ties. They both tend gardens. And they have a kind of friendship through me. One grandma sends eggs from her chickens or honey from her bees. The other sends back cookies made with those eggs. One grandma sends stories about her dog guarding the eggs a chicken laid in the doghouse. The other replies with a haiku poem that Grandpa wrote about the protective dog. How is it that two women who share so much were treated so differently?

“Have your mochi,” Grandma says, and our minds return to Grandma’s story.



April 1942

I’ve only been back from the hospital for a few days when news comes that all remaining Japanese men over the age of sixteen in our community have to go. Poor young Ohta, whose mother died last year and who cares for his sick father. They’re forcing him to go to a road camp with everyone else—or almost everyone.

They also announce the schedule of departures to Kaslo for the rest of us. Koichiro, his mother, sisters, and I have a final family meeting at the house.

“Koichiro, you’re American!” Masako says. “What if the government deports you to Manzanar or one of the Japanese internment camps in the United States. You won’t know anyone. You won’t even know where you are.”

“Don’t worry,” Koichiro says. Because of his work for the

Housewives Association, he and a few others have had special permission from the Chief of Police to be out past curfew. I haven't seen him during the day for a while now—and his face has more lines and shadows than it used to. “The Commission is allowing myself and four other men to stay in New Westminster to help organize the move to Kaslo. We'll stay here even after you leave, packing up people's last things for storage, for when we return.”

I'm relieved that Koichiro is staying with us for now, but I worry what the other women will think when their men have to leave and my husband doesn't. Will they be angry with us?

We all look at each other, but no one says anything.

“We have another problem,” Kay says after a pause. “While I was storing stuff upstairs, I found this.” She holds up a box and opens the lid. Inside is a gun with a wooden handle and dark-brown barrel. It looks like it might have been shiny once.

“Oh! That's your father's badge and pistol from when he was a Sheriff,” Mrs. Okihiro says. “I haven't seen that for years. It's so old, it doesn't work.”

“What should we do with it?” Aki asks. “If we leave it here and the government officials search our things, they might put us all in jail. If we turn it in to the police, we'll still look suspicious.”

“We've got no choice,” Koichiro says. “We have to hide it.”

That night, Koichiro and I go to the backyard in the dark. He takes a shovel and digs a hole at the base of the tree, right between the roots. I place the box with the pistol inside, and he covers it over with the dirt. Somehow it feels like a funeral...of our family's history, of our lives as they used to be. “Don't worry,” I tell him. “This is only temporary. When this is all over and we come back, we'll dig it up again and keep it as a memory of your dad.”

I imagine he smiles at the thought, but I can't see his face in the dark. Then again, maybe he doesn't.

A lot of us want to trust that the government will come to its

senses and realize we're not enemies but Canadian citizens. That they'll keep their word and we'll be allowed to return to the coast and our homes soon. Even though they've promised to take care of our property while we're gone, a part of me wonders if it's true.

Part of me feels like I'm burying my hopes to come back next to the pistol in the soil. Still, I tell myself we'll come back for it one day.

As much as I hoped to put it off—that the war would end or the restrictions against us be dropped—it's real now. I'm leaving this house.

There are so many things to do.

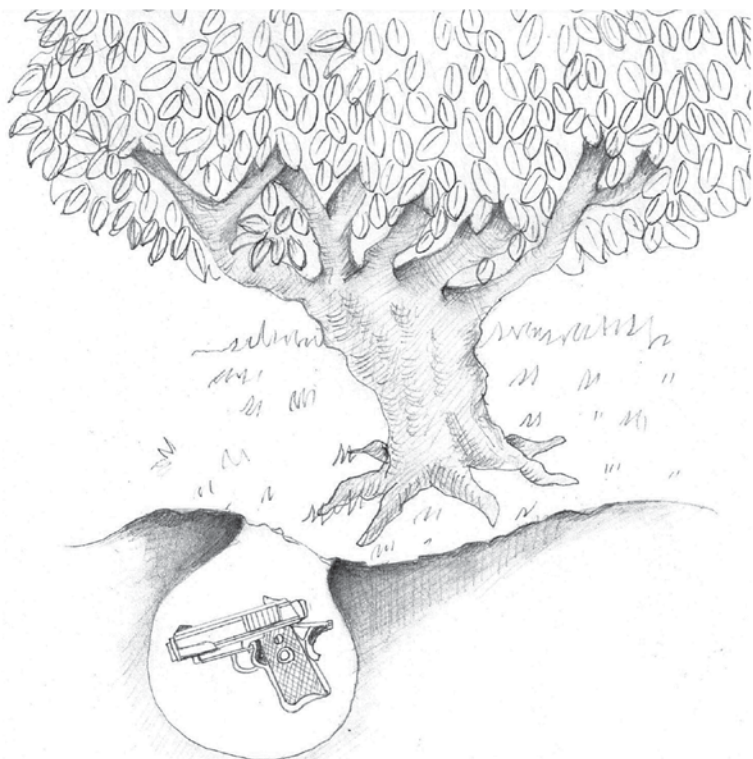
Koichiro goes to register the birth of our baby. When he comes back, he's tense. "I *told* the man our baby's name was Koki. But he said the baby had to have a 'Canadian' name—like his, 'Richard.' There just wasn't time for me to come back home, for us to think about it."

"So Richard, is it?" I ask. I'm furious, but not at Koichiro. They're forcing us from our homes and all our things, and now they're forcing us to change my own son's name?

"Yes, but we can call him Koki at home. It's just on official documents." He holds out a hand to me. "Besides, it was the name of a king. Maybe it'll be okay." I can tell he's trying to make me feel better, so I nod and look at my son. *Richard. Koki.*

Next, we register our property. The government has ordered that all of it—our house, our furniture, our bank accounts—be entrusted to them while we're away. Koichiro, his sisters, and a few others go to the Custodian office to fill out the required forms. When they get back, Masako tells me everything.

"Hisa, it was awful!" she says, putting her head in her hands while I pour her a cup of tea. "Three pages. That's all you get. Three pages to fill in all your family relationships and everything you own. I know I missed things. And what about all the small things, our trinkets and mementos?"



I put my hand on Masako's arm but can't help but think of my father. Would he feel defeated by the complicated form and the impatient officials? I wonder how he, with his broken English, is handling all this.

Masako raises her head and looks at me. "All the years of hard work, and your life reduced to marks on a page," she says.

The look on her face changes. "And you know what, Hisa?" She's almost smiling, but it's the smile you wear just before you start crying. "They wouldn't even let me copy the completed form onto a new sheet to take with me. I won't have anything to prove my things exist."

Now there's nothing left to do but pack. I can't put it off any longer.

Haunted by the thought of the Ishii family's things being carried out of their home while they were driven away, we stuff everything into a few rooms in the house and put locks on the doors. The kitchen table and chairs and all the furniture, the lamps, our pots and pans, our gramophone and records, all Koichiro's books, and our bed. We cram things into attic spaces and under porches. We put our dishes and valuables in cabinets built into the walls and then plaster them over to camouflage them. We pack things in sturdy trunks and bring them to the Japanese Language School or the Buddhist Church. Surely the church is safe.

Before they left with the first group to Kaslo last week, Koichiro's sisters stored cutting tables, sewing machines, and irons there—the remains of Masako's dressmaking business. There's not enough room in our house to store it all.

We also pack everything for the move. It's so hard to decide what to take when you don't know where you're going or when you'll be back. And somehow it all has to fit into 150 pounds each, and 75 pounds for children—another government rule. Only what we can carry.

I take my sewing machine and a mattress. That way, I'll be able to make clothes for the baby and me, and maybe I'll get some mending work. And I'm not sleeping on a dirty floor!

Of course, I'm also taking our cast-iron rice pot. The rest is mostly clothes, sheets, and other necessities. I don't know what to do about all our pictures and meaningful or expensive items, like my wedding dress. I want to take them with me, but they won't fit. So, I pack the dress and photos in a box and leave it with Koichiro. One day, when we recover Koichiro's pistol and my wedding dress, we'll pass them on to our children and grandchildren as heirlooms. I repeat this to myself like a promise or a prayer. I have to believe it's true.

I wonder what Mom and Dad will do with Toshi's urn and ashes. I close my heavy eyes. What painful, terrible decisions we're being forced to make.

When my packing's settled, I start taking things apart. I rip up our towels—blue like the sky in Sea Island—into squares for extra diapers, and I rip the seams of my waistband and undergarments. Between the layers of my clothing, I carefully place folded bills and then sew the seams back up, hiding the money inside. Everything was coming apart. But at least this, and my baby, I could keep safe.

The day we're leaving, I go to the garden one last time. The snow peas and kiwi vines are getting taller, but their soil is dry. We haven't had time to care for them. The mound over the pistol is still there.

Last night I left food for the black cat one last time. "Good-bye. Take care of yourself," I said. She looked right at me. And despite my dislike of cats, I ask Koichiro—who will be here a bit longer—to keep feeding her. I tell myself it's silly to worry for a cat when so many of us are afraid. But it still feels important. Caring for the little things feels more necessary than ever before.

I wonder what will happen to all the pets that belong to the Japanese people who lived here. They can't take them with them to

the road camp or ghost town. They can't store animals away in the Japanese Language School or the Buddhist Church.

I check the rooms upstairs. I check our bags. I'm so afraid I'm missing something we need, and that the belongings we're leaving behind won't be safe. I check the mailbox one more time. Still no letter from Jeanne.

When the bus comes, I kiss Koichiro good-bye. We don't know when we'll see each other again. I think Koki senses he won't see his dad. He won't stop crying. Koichiro doesn't want to let him go. When he finally passes him to me, we hold each other close. If they took this wartime picture—the two of us with the baby nestled between—would we look like the enemy to them, or a heart breaking apart?

Koki and I join the last group of “internees” from New Westminster already aboard. With Koki bundled in my arms, I wave out the window. “Bye-bye Koichiro. Bye-bye home.”



“That’s terrible!” I exclaim. I’m standing by the trunk of the pear tree, my arms around it, my hands on the rough bark.

I look at Charlotte, she’s curled up in her chair, hugging her knees. “Awful,” she agrees.

Grandma nods, fanning herself with the end of her apron as she sits in her chair. “Yes, it was awful. But you didn’t have time to think. You just had to do...to carry on. Shikata ga nai, I guess.”

I hug the tree a little tighter. To help steady me—my thoughts. I can’t imagine leaving all my things—my stuffed animals and toys, my bed, my favorite tree—behind. And with so much uncertainty about what would happen to everything...to us. Maybe it’s just me, but

things aren't just *things*. They help give me a feeling of home, of place, of community, and of love. Even the little snow globe in my room reminds me of my grandfather and the trip we took to Niagara Falls. If I lost this, would a little bit of my memory of him be gone, too?

Did Grandpa lose some of his past, his memory of his father, with the pistol? I wonder if the tree where Grandpa buried it is like this one. I love this tree. It's so big and old, the bark thick and cracked, the branches I climb to pick pears in the fall stretching over my head and its roots sunk deep into the earth below. It feels like it's been here forever, but like with Grandma and Grandpa, maybe that's not true. I wonder if a kid could climb a tree and hide so the government wouldn't find her and put her in prison. I guess your whole family couldn't fit in a tree, though, and you wouldn't want to get left behind either. Or maybe you could escape Hastings Park by climbing a tree to get over the fence.

The trunk feels cool. I follow it down to where the roots burrow deep into the soil. I once read that trees talk to each other through their roots, and that many roots connect with each other even over long distances. Maybe these roots can tell the other tree sheltering the pistol in New Westminster that Grandma, Grandpa, and their baby are here and that they are well. I wish this tree could tell me if the pistol was still there.

"So, that's when Uncle Corky was born? When all of this was happening to you?" Charlotte says.

"That's why Dad has so many names," I realize.

"Yes," Grandma says. "It was long ago now."

Grandma looks up at the pear tree, and I look up, too. The sun is dancing through the leaves. It's almost too bright to look at. When I look down, the leaves' shadows dance on the grass, on our arms, on our faces.

"So many things were lost," Grandma says.

But then I remember the dress we found yesterday in Grandma's

closet playing hide-and-seek. I steal a glance at Charlotte. Grandma says they left the dress behind. So maybe not everything was lost. Maybe Grandma and Grandpa did make it back to New Westminster before they came east, to Toronto.

“Did you like the mochi?” Grandma asks. Charlotte and I agree that, even though the red bean filling is sweet, the chewy rice covering is the best.

“That’s my favorite part too,” she says, getting up from her chair and folding it up. “Come on, there’s a bit more to do in the garden.”

Chapter 7

Charlotte

One hundred and fifty pounds. Seventy-five pounds. Whatever you could carry. *Things* can be weighed, packed, and transported. *Things* can have value and be lost, sold, traded, or stolen. But aren't there things that you can't pack in a suitcase or hold in your hand? Things like language and names? *Ichigo. Mottainai. Sakura.* New words for me, but they were passed down from my great-grandparents to my grandma, and now I keep them, silently repeating them in my head so I don't forget. *Ichigo. Mottainai. Sakura.*

Still, Grandma admits that her Japanese isn't very good, even though she grew up speaking it at home. And Mom and her siblings learned only a little growing up. "Kitchen Japanese," Mom explained to me. Using Japanese food names at home where no one else would hear. It made them seem too different. Even though Grandma and Grandpa spoke Japanese, Mom would respond in English. She said that looking different was hard but sounding different was worse. I guess language can be lost too.

And what about names? My uncle was given a stranger's name because Koki wasn't "Canadian" enough. I've cringed at my mom's Japanese name. I wanted to avoid the discomfort when someone made a funny face or said it wrong. I didn't understand.

But now, I wonder why *I* don't have a Japanese name, like my brother and some of my cousins, including Lou. I'm a little envious of them. Maybe it's not too late to ask Grandma for a Japanese name of my own. Just like it's not too late to tell Mom that I didn't understand before, but I'm learning.

Grandma disappears into the garage. As Lou and I wander over to the edge of the garden, I stumble as my foot slips in my boot. Lou grabs my arm and holds me up so I don't fall. We lean into each other, and I smile. "Thank you."

We both need a minute to recover. But even without speaking, I feel connected. I'm glad she's here with me and Grandma. We're both woven into this complicated pattern of what came before us, who we are now, and the paths we will choose in the future. It's all connected.

Grandma, now crouched in the far corner of the garden, calls us over. In front of her are about a dozen plants with broad green leaves and small, lilac, star-shaped flowers. When I look closely, some of the stems have tiny purple orbs hanging like droplets.

"*Nasubi*. Eggplants," she says, though they look nothing like eggs. Language can be funny sometimes. They look like the nightshade berries I almost ate in her backyard. They reminded me of the black currants at my Oma's house, but I was lucky Lou stopped me. Apparently, nightshade makes you sick.

"When the *nasubi* are ready to pick, I'll make jars of *fukujinzuke*, a Japanese pickle." Grandma grins. "You can help me, Lou." There's another word I've heard but didn't know the meaning of until now. *Saya-endo*. *Nasubi*. *Fukujinzuke*. I repeat all these new words in my head, storing them safely in my mind. Maybe I will learn how to

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speak Japanese one day, but for now, I'm just trying to remember single words. Garden words.

Other new words get mixed up with the Japanese ones. Words I haven't heard before today, either. Enemy alien. Evacuation. Kaslo.

"Kaslo?" Grandma repeats. I must have said it out loud without meaning to. She sighs. "Yes, we were leaving for Kaslo."



May 1942

There are many familiar faces on the bus. Muki, a woman from the greengrocer's sits beside me. She sells delicious Japanese eggplants from her garden. All of a sudden, she jumps up and asks the bus driver to go back. She forgot her broom. The driver is annoyed but turns around anyway.

I study her curiously. She's worried about a broom when we're being forced from our homes? Maybe she thinks she needs it because we've heard the places we're going are rough and dirty, and that things like brooms may be hard to buy. Or maybe she really wants to go back for something else. Who knows? She may just want to see her home one last time. Though, when she gets back on the bus, she *does* have her broom. She touches my baby's cheek and says, "It's okay, we'll be back again soon." I'm not sure if she's saying this to Koki or to reassure herself.

The bus takes us to the train station. Koki is bundled up against my chest with a cloth wrap, leaving my hands free to carry my bag filled with cloth diapers, a thermos of tea, and food for the journey. Fortunately, he's asleep. I help Mrs. Okihiro up the steps to board the

train, passing up her bag when she is safely aboard. Mrs. Kamegaya, who is already on the train, motions for us to join her.

When the train pulls out of the station, the sun is low in the sky, bathing the city buildings along the shores of the Fraser in warm light. I look west toward Marpole and Sea Island, squinting into the brightness, but eventually give up. The train passes through farmland where Jeanne and I spent many summers picking strawberries and continues toward the darkening sky in the east.

The old train's clickety-clacking finally lulls me to sleep, despite the hard wooden bench beneath me. I must have been asleep when the sun set, because when I wake, I can't see out the windows, even when I peek behind the blinds. It's dark. Darker than the blackouts.

I can't fall back asleep. There's a constant hum—people talking or snoring, bodies shuffling, trying to get comfortable, and I'm sure I hear crying. When Koki wakes, I feed and hush him, not wanting to add to the noise. There are so many eyes and ears—no privacy at all.

"We must be getting close to Hope," a voice says loudly. I've heard of the town, though I'd never been this far inland before.

"After we pass through, does that mean we're 'beyond hope?'" someone replies, almost chuckling. But what seems like laughing suddenly turns into sobs.

"Yes," murmurs someone behind me. "We are officially beyond hope." I try to focus on the promise that this move is supposed to be temporary. We'll be back as soon as the war is over. I'm sure we're all thinking the same thing. But no one says it out loud.

Slowly, the night outside the windows becomes less dark, until the train is filled with dull gray light. The landscape outside has transformed into something I've never seen before but imagine might appear on postcards—small country towns between rolling hills. It doesn't look like home at all...and so far away.

I stand up and stretch, aching from spending the night sitting upright. I untie the wrap securing Koki, pass him to his grandmother,

and walk through the train car. The children, at least, were able to sleep on the un-cushioned benches. As they start to wake, they begin to move about rambunctiously, like this is an adventure rather than imprisonment. Maybe that's a good thing.

The train slows down and blasts its whistle as we pass through small towns—Osoyoos, Greenwood, Grand Forks—but we don't stop. When we do, however, we don't know why or where we are, and we're told not to get off or even look out the window. I feel like hidden cargo, and I wonder what the townsfolk think is inside the train. Do they know we're here and what's happening to us?

We finally arrive in Nelson more than a day later, and I'm relieved our journey is over. But once off the train, we're ushered over to a steam paddle-wheeler to travel north, up the lake, the rest of the way to Kaslo. I've always liked to *look* at water, not be on it. I'm hungry, tired, sore from sitting, and Koki starts to cry in my arms. I don't think I'll make it. Mrs. Kamegaya puts her arm around my shoulder kindly but firmly and leads me onto the boat.

"Hisa. We're almost there," she says. "Just a little bit further."

I follow her, feeling the solid ground beneath me disappear.

Somehow, we arrive. The ground is covered with a light dusting of snow, and a crowd of familiar-looking people greet us at the dock. Our New Westminster community is here, in this unfamiliar place. Some family and friends hug, sharing tears of joy. Masako finds us and leads us toward the old Langham Hotel where Mrs. Okihiro, Koki, and I will share a small room with three strangers. Beside us, three of Koichiro's sisters and their kids share another room.

Masako is chattering away, but I don't hear her.

"They dress like we do!" a local woman whispers as she passes us. "I wasn't sure what to expect." I look up, but she's already gone. Curtains move in the window of a house, as if someone had been peeking out and quickly hid themselves.

Maybe the house is haunted, I think deliriously. This is a ghost town, after all.

It takes me days to recover from the trip and settle into life at the Langham. They say it used to be a fancy hotel—and I can almost see it in the wide staircase and ornate wooden railings and spindles ascending from the large entranceway. The worn treads are reminiscent of other ghosts in this town. But although the crew from New Westminster fixed it up, the building is still rundown. Large patches where the cracked plaster has broken away expose wooden lath strips. What was once white paint fades into yellow and brown. The trim around the windows is scratched and behind it are gaps to the outside. We live in such close quarters and share everything—the bedroom, bathrooms, and even the hotel's old kitchen. Each of us gets only one open shelf to store our dishes and supplies.

Cold air creeps in through cracks around the windows and in the walls. It's so cold in the early mornings, Koki is always unsettled. I don't want to wake anyone else up, so I crawl down from the top bunk, stand on the edge of the bed below, carefully lift him down, and find a trail through our boxed belongings to the door. In the kitchen downstairs, I light the fire and put my kettle on the stove. Quickly, I wash up in the bathroom, returning to the kitchen only to find that someone has moved my kettle and replaced it with theirs. I'm annoyed. Now I'll have to wait for my breakfast. I find a private corner and feed my hungry baby.

Although I don't have a job to go to, having a new baby and keeping up with the daily chores is exhausting, especially while learning everyone's names and navigating different personalities. There must be more than seventy of us living here. I'm a hard worker, and my siblings and I grew up doing chores, like fetching water and chopping wood. But here, I don't have Jeanne or my brothers to make me laugh and help with the work.



"Hisa!" Muki finds me outside the Langham, trying to find space to hang my clean, wet laundry, but all the lines are full, even those strung from the staircase railings. Laundry is everywhere. "Have you heard from Koichiro? I just got a letter from my husband, and he said he's trying to come to Kaslo instead of going to a road camp. Apparently, so is Koichiro."

"That's not a good idea," I say, giving up and putting my laundry back in the basket. It'll have to wait. "I've already heard women talking about how Koichiro wasn't sent to camp with the other men. They wondered what made him so special."

"I agree," Muki says. "Let's go call them from the Commissioner's Office and tell them not to come."

After a few tries, Muki finally gets a hold of her husband. "*Moshi, moshi!* Hello!" she starts excitedly. But after only a moment, her face falls. "Hello?" The young woman helping us connect the call just shrugs. Muki keeps the telephone to her ear. "Hello?"

"I'm sorry, Miss," the operator cuts in. "I've been told to end calls immediately if there are any Japanese words. Those are the rules." Muki is furious but knows better than to show it here. She nods tightly and hangs up the phone.

"Hisa, can you manage on your own?" she asks me, and I'm barely able to tell her yes before she turns and heads for the door, hot tears in her eyes.

I don't make the same mistake, but I'm not successful either.

"Good news, Hisa," Koichiro says excitedly before I can start, "I'll be in Kaslo before the end of the month."

He and the four other men who had stayed behind in New Westminster are all coming to help the group in Kaslo with repairs and to chop wood to heat the buildings. Because they hadn't already been sent to a work camp, the government allowed it.

Koichiro may think this is good news, but I worry we may be at odds with the others in our community. So many have been

separated from their husbands, fathers, and brothers. As far as they're concerned, Koichiro got special treatment by getting to stay longer in New Westminster, and now again by being sent here. I suppose others think that Koichiro is betraying his own people by working with the government as a liaison.

I want to fit in. But how can I when others call us names for being treated differently? I even thought I heard someone say *inu* when I passed by the other day. Did they call me a dog, a traitor? I've been called names for being Japanese. But being called names by fellow Japanese Canadians hurts more. It will only get worse once Koichiro's sent here with me. Why couldn't he chop wood at a different camp?

June 1942

As I expected, the angry whispering worsens once Koichiro and the other men arrive. But after a few days, the nasty words taper off. Maybe it's the warmer weather lightening peoples' moods. Maybe it's because Koichiro and the group travel into the mountains by horse, chopping wood for all our stoves. But I think it's really because these "special" gentlemen have been working hard to plan the construction of an *ofuro*, or traditional Japanese bathhouse, for the community.

Regardless of the reason, I still try not to draw attention to the fact that he's here, which is not hard to do because he lives in the men's building—not with us—and works so much. Still, some of the women aren't as friendly anymore. I feel more alone than ever, though I'm surrounded by a community who I've relied on in these wretched circumstances and being so far from my family. And as nice as it is to see Koichiro, to know he's safe, in many ways this is harder.

One evening, Koichiro and I sneak a picnic down to the lakeshore. It's a relief to do something almost normal, as our little family. I comfort myself by thinking at least he'll know Koki in his first few months. And he's here now, so I have to try to make the best of it.

Mrs. Beck, who lives in the house next door to the Langham, has kindly invited me to use the clotheslines in her yard. As I hang the last of the cloth diapers, someone yells, "Steamboat coming, and it's full of people!"

Usually the boat arrives with supplies but few passengers. Rumors that other Japanese Canadians may be passing through here on their way to another camp have been stirring through the camp, but no one knew if it was true.

I thank Mrs. Beck, pluck Koki from the lawn, and hurry down to the dock. I'm not the only one. A crowd gathers along Front Street, and officials usher a group of Japanese people from the steamboat to a waiting train, engine rumbling, ready to go. There's a crowd of faces peering out of the windows, bodies leaning, and arms waving hello through the open glass. They look tired and pale, and—

And then there she is. One familiar face. "Jeanne!" I call out as my sister climbs into the train. She turns, startled, then waves frantically when she finds me. She grabs Mom, Dad, Isi, and Sam's attention, and points excitedly at me. I wave, tears pricking my eyes. Then Jeanne gestures writing on a piece of paper and mouths the words "write me." Despite my joy at seeing them and knowing they're safe, I'm shocked at how thin they look, how tired. Even from a distance, I can see bags under their eyes, and their clothing is disheveled. Dad is stooping more, and Mom's face looks pained. They just have time to smile and wave before the train conductor urges them inside. I hold up Koki and wave his arm with my hand.

"Excuse me, sir," I ask an RCMP officer. "Where are they going?"

"Sandon," he says without even looking at me. "The Buddhists

are being sent there. It's just over the mountain in a deep valley." He glances sideways at me. "You're lucky to be here."

My family will be so close, at least, I think, watching the train disappear.

I try not to think about the RCMP officer's warning. Every Japanese Canadian I know has now been displaced, none of us were spared. And maybe I am lucky to be here. Dr. Shimotakahara and Dr. Banno have a clinic here and have started traveling to other camps in the area. They say that instead of having buildings to use like we do, some camps are on rented farm fields. Rows of small tar-paper shacks built hastily for the Japanese. One-room homes, often shared by two families, and without plumbing, electricity, or any insulation. At least we have the old hotel, even with its drafts. Others apparently have no shacks at all but live in old, canvas army tents. I don't want to imagine what that will be like when winter comes. Sleeping on the frozen ground.

Other information trickles into Kaslo now that *The New Canadian* is up and running, sharing *The Kootenaian* newspaper's printing equipment just down the street. The newspaper has become a message board for all, sharing notices of families looking for lost members, tips on settling into the camps, and new birth and death announcements. Just like our letters that have started to find us here, each newspaper edition is censored. Word of mouth is more reliable, so we depend on the rumor mill.

I receive a letter from Jeanne a few days later, though it was written before she left Vancouver. She didn't bother writing anything that would be blacked out. I'm guessing they passed through Hastings Park, the fairgrounds we heard were so awful. I learned more than Jeanne could have possibly said in her letter just seeing them during our chance encounter at the train. Some of their exhaustion would be from their long journey from Vancouver. But I'm sure there's more to it.

July 1942

It takes longer for warm weather to reach our town in the mountains than it does on the coast, where my snow peas were already sprouting before I left. Shortly after our arrival in Kaslo, I started planning a garden on the plot of land the government leased for us. I'm not alone, many of my neighbors are planting their own plots too. All of us are excited to grow our own fruits and vegetables.

"I should have left the broom at home and brought a shovel or hoe!" exclaims Muki, our arms already sore from digging with sticks, spare boards, and our bare hands. I laugh, we must look ridiculous. After our telephone experience at the Commissioner's office, we have become very good friends. Sometimes shared experiences, even bad ones, bring people closer together.

"Hmmm... Come with me. I have an idea," I say. "Mr. Yodogawa, can you watch Koki for a while? We won't be long."

"Yes, of course," he responds, gently patting Koki's back and bringing him over to the women in the garden, who laugh when his little face contorts with a burp and then smiles. Mr. Yodogawa often watches Koki while I'm busy cooking or cleaning. His own grandchildren have been sent to other camps, and he misses them.

"Thank you!" I call out as I lead Muki up the road, past the Langham Hotel, to Mrs. Beck's house. I knock on the screened back door.

"Oh, hi, Hisa," she says kindly. "The clotheslines are free, if you'd like to use them."

"Thank you, Mrs. Beck, but not today. This is my friend Muki," I say. "We were hoping you could do us a favor," I start nervously. "Would you be able to lend us some garden tools, please?"

"Why, yes, of course!" She purses her lips, thinking. "In fact, I think we have some extra ones that you can keep."

"Oh, no, Mrs. Beck...really, we would only borrow them until

we can get our own. It's just a bit of a process, I'm afraid. Our purchase requests have to be accepted by the Commissioner before we can get our money to buy supplies here."

"Oh." She pauses, brows furrowed. "Well, in that case, I'm sure we can round up a collection of tools."

And she does.

There is no need to stay inside the Langham during summer, like we did when we first arrived, and it was so cold. The summer sun is warm and welcoming. I don't see much of Mrs. Okihiro, Aki, Masako, or Kay, as they're always busy with friends or helping with the local United Church, where Reverend Shimizu holds a service in Japanese on Sunday afternoons. Koichiro's sisters are fortunate to have each other here.

I keep busy in the garden. Knowing what to expect from plants—their growth, their progress—brings me a quiet comfort, unlike so many other things right now. Each morning after finishing my chores at the Langham, I dig or hoe or weed in the garden and think about my family, just over the mountain. I try to imagine a valley bright with the summer sun, like here, but the RCMP officer's words keep worrying at the back of my mind. After lunch, I make my way down to the lakeshore with Muki or Mr. Yodogawa. Sometimes it's just Koki and me. We're back at the Langham by late afternoon when I prepare dinner for Koichiro and his mother.

Others fall into a routine as well, trying to live their days with purpose, I guess, because no one has jobs to go to. Everyone's worried for the well-being of the children. I don't think the kids really understand what's going on. Though, I'm not sure that I do, either. It's hard to plan anything when we don't know if we'll be forced to move again, or how long we'll be here. But because Japanese children aren't allowed to attend the local school, where kids would make friends and play, the children are unsettled. To

help make life as normal as possible, a group of older boys start building a playground.

Mrs. Kamegaya and others organize school lessons. Now, when I walk around town, I see children gathered on the shore, at the park, and in ball fields. These don't look like any classrooms I've ever seen. There are no books or blackboards, and kids sit on logs, boxes, boards, and rocks, whatever they can find.

"We can't hire teachers," Mrs. Kamegaya tells me. "But there are many young people here who have graduated from high school or were forced to quit university because of the war. They're helping teach the younger ones what they can about math and language. It's good for the kids. It's good for everybody!" she laughs.

Pretty soon, there are all kinds of clubs and sports—baseball, basketball, badminton, gymnastics, softball, and kendo—and even local *hakujin* children can join. There are also sewing, cooking, music, woodworking, and theater clubs. Something for everyone. Even for me. I join a group of ladies from the Langham who meet in the evening when Koki is asleep. Together, we knit socks and gloves for the Red Cross who will send them to our soldiers. We chat and drink tea. These evenings remind me of my days working at Masako's dressmaking shop.

One late summer's day, I'm having tea with Mrs. Beck in her garden, waiting for my laundry to dry. Koki is sound asleep on a blanket in the shade of a tree. We sip English tea, which I have grown to like since living at the Bowers's, and eat the shortcakes I baked early this morning when the kitchen was still empty. Mrs. Beck's homemade strawberry jam tastes like sunshine and reminds me of Jeanne. I sigh.

"You know, it's been a long time since Kaslo has been so full of people...and life," she says, looking toward the lake. "It's so nice to have the buildings lived in again. The whole town has been transformed."

It's only later that afternoon, when I walk down the dirt street to the lakeshore, that I realize how beautiful Kaslo really is. Kootenay

Obaasan's Boots

Lake is such a deep, calming blue, with its shores sprinkled with wild pink sweet peas and indigo chicory flowers. The mountains, covered with evergreens, surround us completely. And here in these mountains, the people who were so scared of us at the beginning seem to have forgotten that we're "enemy aliens."

"Isn't that nice," I say to Koki, who is sound asleep. "Isn't that nice."



The way Grandma describes Kaslo, it sounds lovely, and even fun. I would love to learn in outdoor classrooms rather than being stuck at a desk. And although I haven't been there, I can imagine the landscape. In Vancouver, I live on the side of a mountain, and we walk through the forests or up to Rice Lake all the time—or should I say *Gohan* Lake? I almost laugh but stop abruptly. I shouldn't be making jokes. Grandma's story is serious, there's nothing funny about it. Her family was removed from their homes, separated from loved ones, and imprisoned in an isolated town, where the lake, forests, and mountains were like fences keeping them from leaving. And yet, it sounds like Grandma has some fond memories too. Can you have happy memories mixed in with the bad?

Tension creeps into my shoulders, and I know it's not from working in the garden. I feel guilty thinking Grandma's experience is like an outdoor summer camp. I can't giggle at renaming a lake with a Japanese name. If she hears me laughing when she's sharing something so serious, she may think that I'm not ready to hear the rest of her story. Lou isn't laughing, and she hardly looks confused at all.

In my head, I repeat, *ichigo, sakura, saya-endo, nasubi*, over and over, until my breathing slows, and the tension eases a bit.

Chapter 8

Lou

I've heard my father's first language was Japanese. I imagine he would have heard only Japanese in the Langham's big communal kitchen as he played at the adult's feet, like Charlotte and I did when we were little. He would have picked up phrases from Grandma and his aunts at the ofuro, or bathhouse, and practiced words with his father, as the other workers in Kaslo shared stories about their forest adventures in Japanese, too.

But if Japanese was his first language, it's lost now. Like the Japanese community on Sea Island. My father doesn't have much Japanese, and neither do I, except for maybe twenty words. "Kitchen" and "garden Japanese."

There are other losses too.

When I ask my dad about the past, he says he was too young to remember the war years, and like so many other Japanese Canadians, it seems, he's too busy to think about it much. He works two jobs. He plays hockey and coaches football.

His stories of the past are about growing up in Toronto. How he disliked playing hockey for the Japanese Canadian team, but that he was spat on and chased out of small towns by people with baseball bats for being the only Japanese Canadian player on the Caucasian team. The police had to put him in jail overnight for his own protection. Like what the government said it was doing when it “evacuated” Grandma, him, and everyone to Kaslo. Through his stories, I sense how difficult it was growing up Japanese Canadian. But I don’t ask about these things because it feels like, if I do, something will break. Something in *me*. I love my dad, and being Japanese is something we share.

At my school, it’s pretty easy to fit in. My friends are from Somalia, Vietnam, Greece, Pakistan, Jamaica, Argentina. We’re all mixed up, and it’s more weird being a kid of divorced parents than it is to be half Japanese. Only sometimes people expect me to be really good at math and not very good at soccer. Even so I’ve learned from my dad that sometimes you *need* to fit in. It’s not always safe to be different. I’ve never thought about it before, but maybe my dad and others are so busy moving past their history because, by trying to forget these hard, violent years, it won’t be theirs anymore. But that’s a loss, too, I think. They were also my dad’s baby years, and Grandma and Grandpa’s first years as a family, and as parents. I don’t want them to forget those memories, either.

And yet, had my family not been displaced, Grandma, Charlotte, and I wouldn’t be here today, enjoying this glorious day in the garden all together. Maybe Charlotte and I wouldn’t have been born because our moms and dads would never have met. Though, I still don’t understand how our family ended up in Toronto. Why didn’t they stay in Kaslo? It doesn’t sound so bad. Eventually, everyone would figure out the government had made a terrible mistake and that Japanese Canadians were never the enemy. Right?

Maybe, like Grandma’s time in Kaslo, things can sometimes

be complicated. Both good and bad. And maybe feeling at home is complicated like that, too. I might find it hard sometimes to have several homes, but it's also really nice to have so many comfortable places where people love me: my mom's, my dad's, my grandparents', my grandma's farm. And my experience is not at all like Grandma and our family being forced from their homes. Yet she was still able to manage and even make something meaningful through her care and small actions. Like planting a garden and keeping old boots. Maybe I can make things meaningful and comfortable in my life and in both places. That way, I can try to stop worrying so much if I forget something. Maybe, like Grandma, Dad, and others, I can learn to live with these complexities. I've inherited them, just like my light brown hair and dark eyes, and the few Japanese words I know, and I want to learn how to hold on to them as best I can. In my way.

Grandma comes out of the garage carrying garden gloves and a hoe. She gives Charlotte and me each a pair of gloves, and we follow her back to the garden. Already, I can see the work we've done like our fingerprints are in the soil.

"Grandma," I say, "Kaslo doesn't sound so bad." Charlotte glances over at me and lets out a breath, almost in relief.

"After, people said Kaslo was 'the best of the ghost towns,'" she tells us, as we walk past the tomatoes, the snow peas, the eggplants, and the beans. "But it was still very hard. We didn't want to be there, away from our homes and lives. And we had to struggle for everything, even things as small as gardening tools. Things we'd had or could easily get back in New Westminster before everything was stolen from us. We survived those years because of our community, and people like Mrs. Beck."

I look questioningly at Charlotte. Grandma hasn't told us about her things being stolen. I don't understand. Charlotte has the same look that I imagine is on my face.

Obaasan's Boots

Grandma pauses next to a row of cucumber plants already growing tall. Her cucumbers, or *kyuuri*, are not like the ones in the stores. They're skinny with wrinkles and tiny spikes that hurt when you touch them. But they're juicy and refreshing.

"We were so isolated, and supplies were always short because of the war, especially food. It was easier in the summer when we could buy fresh vegetables and fruits from local farmers and grow them in our gardens. Nothing went to waste." Grandma points at the beets just beginning to show. "Even beet leaves. We'd eat them fried or steamed."

"Mottanai," Charlotte says.

Grandma smiles at her Japanese. "You know," Grandma continues as we pull on our gloves, "we even foraged for things to eat from the woods. Through word-of-mouth, we learned where to find wild onions and which mushrooms were safe, like people still do in Japan and other places. We also learned how to collect fiddleheads or cook dandelion leaves: all the things we could find nearby."

"Did people ever pick the wrong mushrooms and get sick?" I ask, looking at my hands. Like the boots Charlotte's wearing, Grandma's gloves are too big. Our fingers look long and funny, like claws.

Grandma laughs, "Not that I know of! But other things weren't so good."



November 1942

The sun out the window of Room 26 is bright today. That doesn't mean it will be warm. In Kaslo, unlike at home, it can be perfectly sunny *and* be freezing cold. It's hard to believe that just over a month ago we were harvesting veggies from the garden and walking down to the lake. After the first snowfall, I barely recognize Kaslo. Everything has disappeared under a blanket of white that goes right up to the windows.

I hear this is already one of the coldest winters ever. Even with building repairs, the freezing air still blows through cracks in the walls. Every day when we wake up, there is frost on the walls and windows *inside* the building. People's bedding sometimes even freezes to the walls during the night.

The kids love it, of course. They've never seen snow deep enough to jump and dig in.

"Put on warm clothing!" Masako yells from the top of the stairs.

But the truth is, we don't have enough warm clothing. From the coast, none of us are used to cold winters. Even my fur-collar coat from Mom wouldn't have helped me here.

The kids go out, covered up as best they can. Thank goodness their lessons are held in refurbished buildings now—but they walk there in their skirts and short pants with their bare knees showing above the snow. I hate watching them go, and returning in the afternoon, their teeth chattering and their ears and noses bright pink.

So many people need warm clothes and supplies right now, but they just aren't available in the few stores here. Everyday there's a lineup at the Commissioner's Office for new orders. It's an emergency. But as always, we have to get permission from the Commissioner to withdraw money from our own bank accounts. I can get used to a

lot of things, but I can't get used to the cold and to always having to ask for permission, even for the most basic things, like dearly needed clothing.

Rumors circulate about how difficult it is for people to access their money—and even that, when they do find out how much they have in their bank accounts, the numbers are much lower than they should be. While I sew patches onto Koichiro's worn pants by the stove one evening, Muki tells me of one man whose request for money took days and many letters back and forth, asking why he needed it. *His own money!*

"So much work and wasted time just to get shoes for his children! And then, you know what?" Muki asks because she can't believe it herself. "They said there wasn't enough money in his account. He hasn't spent his money on anything—he hasn't even been allowed access to it. But somehow, it's all disappeared!"

Besides not having enough clothing for the cold weather, the ice and snow makes it take longer than usual to get anything. With the frozen lake and the roads and train tracks often blocked by snow slides, we're not sure when the next steamboat, truck, or train will get through and deliver our orders and supplies from Vancouver. Some people are so low on food it's near dire. I hope my gohan holds out.

We can't fish through the ice, either. It's not thick enough to walk on. But lake fish is better than what the Commissioner had brought into town. Dying fish collected after they'd laid their eggs. "Red fish," they called it. Overripe. It wasn't anything like the fresh salmon I'm used to. Yuck!

I wish I could just leave this place. I want to see Mom and Dad. And to visit Jeanne and my brothers. If Koichiro and I had a car, we could drive out of Kaslo on one of its two roads, make our visits, then go

home, getting everything we need that's waiting for us in storage. It's tempting to think like this because there are no fences here. Just a big lake on one side and wilderness and mountains all around. But that's just it. There's nowhere to go and no way to leave. If I wanted to run away, I'd have to walk for days through forests. I'd get lost, run out of food, or freeze. And if I got caught, maybe I'd even be arrested.

It's funny. Outside, the lake water still somehow flows beneath the ice all the way to the Pacific Ocean. The ocean where Sea Island is and where, on the other side, maybe the mikan trees in Grandpa's orchard still grow. Inside, here in Room 26, the wind blows through the walls of this old hotel. Everything still flows and moves. Just not us.



Arrested? Grandma could be arrested for leaving the town? I think. But before I can ask, Grandma offers Charlotte and me a go at hoeing. She explains that we're making the soil soft so the cucumbers' roots can more easily grow deep and strong. Charlotte lets me try first. I raise the tool high and swing down hard, but it barely goes into the ground. This work is harder than I thought. I try again with more force and drag the end of the hoe along.

My thoughts are as messy as the line I've made in the dirt.

I wonder what Charlotte's thinking. Is she as disturbed by Grandma's stories as I am? With all her experience, she might not be surprised at all.

I'm glad Charlotte is beside me so we can talk, and that I can call her even when we're far away from each other. Not like Auntie Jeanne and Grandma when they had to leave their homes.



I pass Charlotte the hoe for her turn. For a moment, we hold it together. Then she takes it, lifts it in the air, and brings it down, making a smooth line in the dirt.

As we work, a robin flies past us and lands on top of the fence nearby. His song is even brighter than his red chest. He must be happy we're here turning the soil so he can find his own food. I guess Kaslo wasn't exactly like a prison. People had to get their own food and supplies, rather than it being provided by the government. It's like the government just didn't bother.

When it's cold, the robin is free to migrate somewhere warmer. He crosses lakes and forests and moves across countries without getting lost. But Grandma or I wouldn't last, trying to walk days and days to get home without food or shelter. And you could get lost walking so far, through so many unfamiliar forests or over mountains. My dad and I got lost in the mountains during our summer visit to BC. And that was with a car and maps.

"Hello, Robin," Grandma says. "Don't you eat my berries!" She smiles. The robin seems to think it's an invitation. He comes down off the fence, closer to us. Then he listens.

I crouch down and take off my gloves, pressing the soft soil with my hands. I like the cool feeling of the dirt, especially as it crumbles between my fingers.

"How long were you in Kaslo, Grandma? Did you ever get to see your family?" Charlotte asks.

"I lived in the internment camp for two and a half years," Grandma replies. "In that time, besides seeing them on the train, I only saw my family twice."



August 1943

"Hisa! Hisa!"

The cold winter passed dreadfully slowly, and I relish the summer months. Our second summer here. It's a lovely day. Women are hanging laundry. Children are playing and fishing down by the lake. Mrs. Okihiro has gone to meet Kay now working in the government office. And I've just finished giving Koki *onigiri* for his lunch on the steps of the Langham when I hear my name. I immediately know who it is.

"Dad!" I yell, as he emerges from a truck, back loaded with bushels of vegetables and boxes of supplies, parked across the street. "What are you doing here?"

His face has changed so much, and he's lost a lot of hair. I'm surprised by how skinny he is, but I hope I manage to hide it.

"The camp officials gave me and my friend permission to use a truck to come to Kaslo. We're getting provisions for Sandon."

They say the government built shacks for the Japanese families up the sides of the isolated valley. But without a lot of sunlight or land, it's been hard for them to grow food.

"It's so good to see you!" I hug him. "Come, I'll make you some tea. How are you? How are Mom, Jeanne, and the boys?" I start leading us into the Langham.

"I can't stay," he says. "Sandon isn't too far away, but the rough dirt road to get here...I've never seen potholes, such tight hairpin turns, and cliff drops like it! It took us hours just to get over the mountain. We have to start back now or we won't make it before dark."

"Surely you could stay one night for a visit?"

"We only have permission to be away for the day, so we have to leave now."

My heart sinks. We barely have time for hellos and good-byes.

“This is your *ojiisan*,” I say to Koki. I can tell he knows that word. We use a similar word, *ojisan*, with Mr. Yodogawa. But Koki’s never met my dad before—just waved at him when Dad was getting on the train. Still not steady on his feet, Koki holds my legs and hides behind my skirt when Dad puts his hand out to him. My heart breaks as I hold Koki close. Thanks to the government taking us from our homes and forcing us to stay here, his grandfather is a stranger. I keep back the tears gathering in the corners of my eyes with a smile. I want the last sight Dad has of me for a while to be as happy as I can manage.

October 1943

I think of my family often, but another season passes before I see anyone else.

“Hisa! Hisa!”

I’m in the garden picking the last beans, it’s cumbersome to reach down with a growing belly. When I look up, I don’t recognize the figure coming toward me. His features are in full shadow with the sun behind him, but still there is something familiar about the shift in the way he walks. Then I see a young man, lean, like my father, and I realize it’s my younger brother, Isi.

He’s grown up a lot, I can barely believe it. His voice is deeper. And he’s *tall*. He tells me he’s even on the Sandon basketball team. I’d heard there was a game here against Kaslo’s team, but I didn’t know my brother was playing.

“Wow! It’s so great to see you!” I say. “Can you stay for a cup of tea?”

“Absolutely,” he grins. “We’re playing later and then staying the night.”

I can't contain my excitement. I'm so glad I have a chance to catch up with Isi.

Koki runs out to the garden to see who the stranger is.

"I'm your uncle," Isi tells him. Seeing them together like that, I'm reminded of Tam and me when we were young, picking potatoes side by side in the field on Sea Island. Koki even looks a little like him back then. I grin, a new warmth spreading through my chest.

After the game, Isi and I stay up chatting. He tells me all about the family: our brothers, Hiko and Tam, have been sent to road camps to build new highways through the mountains. And Jeanne has moved to Lemon Creek to teach kids in the internment camp there. Isi says he didn't finish school, which is a terrible shame. He was a few weeks away from graduating when they were sent to Hastings Park. But our youngest brother, Sam, is being taught by nuns in Sandon and should get his high school diploma soon.

I tell him about the new friends we've made in Kaslo. How we've worked together to put on shows and festivals, even the town's May Day celebrations; about a shopkeeper who always gives Koki a candy; and how the whole town helps each other with planting and harvesting. I tell him the government even sent our gramophone and records, so we have music in the evenings and at dances.

For a moment, things feel almost normal.

Then Isi tells me, "We got a letter from the government—asking for the land title for our house in Vancouver. You know, the paper that proves the house belongs to our family. Hiko thinks they want to sell it. So, he's refusing to give it to them."

I'd heard rumors that the government had given the Custodian the right to "dispose" of Japanese Canadian properties without our consent.

Dispose—what an awful word. Like our properties and belongings are garbage that can be thrown away. It shows how little they care about us—as if we are garbage, too. All the hard work

we'd put into saving for our houses and cars and furniture—and our rights as Canadian citizens to keep it—are worthless. Surely the government can't sell our homes if we don't give them permission to.

And if they did, what will happen to us when we finally get out of Kaslo, and all the other camps and ghost towns? All their promises that this was temporary were meaningless. Where are we going to live? I feel sick thinking about it. Maybe we will never get out of here. Maybe we'll have to stay here forever.

Koichiro receives a letter from the government about our house too. It says our house is being rented to another family. We even get bills we have to pay for renovations we haven't agreed to, for fire insurance, and for property tax. All of those expenses, and we aren't even allowed to live there! I don't like thinking about strangers living in our home, or how they're treating our things. The rooms where we'd locked away our valuables, like my wedding dress—would they find a way in and take them like the people who carried away the Ishii's things? The government doesn't care about us, so I find it hard to believe that the people renting our homes—and at such a low price, too—would care to look after any of our belongings, either. We're the "enemy," after all.

"It's okay," Koichiro said. "The renters will take care of the house until we can go home. And they're paying us something for rent." He shrugs, like this isn't a big deal. He always looks on the bright side...which can be so frustrating! How can he say any of this is good?

I am furious for days, but Koichiro carries on beside me like normal, laughing and playing with Koki. And I find myself wondering if he might be right. The more I think about it, what else can we do?

August 1944

Another season passes, our third summer in Kaslo. I know what to expect now. Winter is coming, but we've already managed to find and patch up many of the cracks in the hotel's walls. And though the children are growing, we now have last year's clothes to pass around the community.

We seem to be getting used to our routines here—even hopeful because the government has finally acknowledged that some work camps and the “worst ghost towns,” like Sandon, aren't suitable, and are closing them down. My family is moving to Slocan City, which is a much better place. They'll be able to get food much more easily, and it's a bigger community. Many families are reuniting, even here in Kaslo. But then everything changes again. And not for the better.

We have to fill out a new survey from the government.

“What does this mean?” Mr. Yodogawa says, incredulously. The community has gathered to hear the “Commissioner of Japanese Placement” talk about our fate.

“You have to choose one of two options: go to Japan or to move further east, past the Rockies, to prove that you're loyal to Canada,” the Commissioner explains. He doesn't say the real reason the government doesn't want us returning west to BC. Now that we're gone, they'd like it to stay that way. Even the Mayor of Vancouver has said Japanese families should be shipped to Japan and never allowed to return.

“Wow, they really want to be rid of us,” Muki whispers, seated beside me in the hall.

“Our men worked in scattered road camps all across the province to show their loyalty. They left their families and worked for *you*. We gave up all our boats, cars, cameras, and radios to prove we weren't spies. We even left our homes and came here to show Canada we'd

abide by her rules. Haven't we proven we're loyal already?" someone shouts from the crowd.

"If you choose to go to Japan, the government will pay for your expenses and give you \$200 per adult and \$50 per child," the Commissioner goes on.

"Paying us to leave! And if we don't?" yells another person from the crowd.

"Well, then you will be sent east to government-assigned employment," the Commissioner responds, shifting in his seat. "You won't receive relief benefits, and you'll only get \$60 per couple and \$12 per child as a resettling allowance." For a moment, there's a stunned silence. His message is clear: *We will pay you well to leave and almost nothing to stay. We don't want you here.*

"But no province wants us!" comes another shout.

The Commissioner pulls on the knot of his tie. "If you don't take the government-assigned jobs, you won't get benefits and you will be seen as uncooperative."

"What kind of jobs? Are they long-term? Can I support my family?"

Sweat gathers on the Commissioner's brow. "We don't know yet."

"When would we have to move?"

The Commissioner pats his forehead with a handkerchief. "We don't know for sure."

"If we go to Japan or if we stay here, are we still Canadian?"

The people in the hall break into shouts, and I can't hear the Commissioner anymore. I sit quietly, shocked and numb, in my seat.

For days, we discuss the "repatriation survey." Many people don't want to go to Japan, as tempting as the government seems to want to make it sound. Like me, they've never been there and many don't know the language. Plus, it's war-torn. There'll be nothing to spare for us foreigners. Besides, because of the war, the government can't even

send us to Japan right now. Some hope that if they sign for Japan, they'll get to stay in Kaslo and BC longer...long enough that the government scraps this crazy scheme. What kind of choice is this? Finally, Koichiro and I have to decide.

"My home is Canada," I say, as we walk along the edge of town where it's quiet. "I've wanted to visit Japan with Mom, but I don't want to live there forever—especially in the middle of this war."

I look at the evergreen trees around us. Mom's mikan trees, the way I always imagined them, seem so different and impossibly far away from these thick pine branches.

"Let's go east." Koichiro wants to join Roy there. His mom and his sisters want to go too.

"Can't we stay here?" I'm adamant. I want to be close to my family, and I don't know what their plan is. Letters take weeks, we don't have the time to discuss our options. I wish we could wait this war out. Maybe then we could all go back to the coast. We could go back to our large family picnics and making sushi together. Our kids could stay with my parents when Koichiro and I go to the movies. And we could walk along the shore. I've never lived so far from the Pacific. And I don't want to.

"We can't wait," Koichiro says. "They're making us choose, and at least the government is guaranteeing us jobs if we go east."

We can't see eye-to-eye. But a couple of days later, Koichiro gets a letter from the Custodian, responding to our request to have our belongings shipped to us. This time, even Koichiro admits it's bad. The letter states that most of our things were sold at auction months ago.

Suddenly, it hits us. There is no returning to the lives we once had. There is nothing to go back to.

We move east.



Grandma finishes making the ground soft for the growing roots. She moves closer to the robin, hoe in hand, and he flies up into the pear tree. After a moment, he flies away.

I watch him go. And as my eyes follow him, just beyond the row of cucumber plants, I spot a dandelion. It looks healthy: thick green leaves and bright yellow flowers.

I go over and pick a stem with a big white ball of seeds on top. When I look closely, it's made up of perfectly interconnected threads.

So, everyone was spread across the country...and even to Japan. That's how Grandma ended up here.

I blow on the ball and the seeds scatter in the wind, just like all the people in Kaslo and the other camps and ghost towns.

Charlotte reaches for one of the seeds, and then another. They all escape her grasp, while the milky white sap from the dandelion stem bleeds onto my hand.

Chapter 9

Charlotte

I don't see Grandma as often as Lou does, because we live on opposite sides of the country, but at least I *know* my grandparents. And they know me. Every time I visit, Grandma serves me her canned peaches and icicle pickles because they're my favorite. Grandma and Grandpa get tears in their eyes at the end of every stay and maybe hug me a little tighter before I go. I guess they wonder if this will be the last time we see each other. I always assume there will be a next time. I didn't realize some good-byes are forever.

I was so shy when I first arrived at Grandma and Grandpa's—it had been over a year since I'd last seen them. I wonder what it would be like if I hadn't known them since I was a baby. And what about Mom, my aunt, and uncles? Did they ever get to meet Grandma's parents—my great-grandparents? I've never heard Mom talk about them. Or is this something she's told me about that I didn't hear because I wasn't listening? I'm listening now.



November 1944

This time, packing up our belongings feels different. Or packing what little we have in Kaslo, anyway. Our second son, Chikara, or Chico, is one now, so I still have to pack cloth diapers, along with clothes, our heavy rice pot, and even the mattress I brought from home. I also include the vegetable seeds I harvested from our community garden, although I have no idea where my next garden might be.

There are just a few decisions left, but they're not easy ones. "Koichiro, shipping is expensive, so it's either your gramophone or my sewing machine," I say and take a breath of courage. "I'm not willing to give up my sewing machine. My mother gave it to me," I say firmly, hoping he agrees. "It's one of the only things I have left."

Koichiro considers this for a moment. "Alright. I'm sure the church would be happy to have the gramophone."

I exhale. Music's nice but it won't make clothing for our boys. In times like these, one has to be practical. So why do I feel selfish wanting to keep something belonging to me?

Despite being forced to move here, I've grown used to our life in Kaslo. We'll be leaving many friends behind, and I'll miss this little town, tucked into the mountains and hugged by the dense forests.

I don't know what will happen to the people from Kaslo when we all leave. They're our neighbors and friends now, too. Will Kaslo become the quiet, sleepy mountain town it was before we arrived?

And even though I so rarely saw my family while I was here, it was comforting knowing they were close by. Just a bumpy truck ride

away. There's no way of knowing when I'll see them again. I write to tell my parents we're headed east and that I hope one day they'll meet their grandchildren.

By the time we're ready to leave, Mrs. Okihiro and most of Koichiro's sisters have already traveled east to reunite with Roy. Masako's family is staying because her husband was offered a job with the railway. I wish we could stay here, too, but our paperwork has been approved and there are jobs waiting for us.

I miss Muki, who moved from Kaslo last month. She and her husband have finally been reunited with their family. I don't know where they'll end up but I hope we keep in touch.

Mr. and Mrs. Kamegaya don't want to leave Kaslo either, though I thought they might choose to go back to Japan, where they were born.

"Oh, no, Hisa," Mrs. Kamegaya said, "Our life is here now. Who knows what we would face if we go back to Japan? Japan's still at war...maybe we'd be the enemy there, too."

The day before we leave, Mrs. Beck and I have tea together one last time. Japanese green tea with loose leaves that sink to the bottom and puffed rice that floats to the top. Just like Jeanne and I like it...and now Mrs. Beck too. The mid-November snow blankets the yard and the garden beds. So different from the peony-filled garden the day she kindly offered me her clothesline.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. "You've done so much for me, and I don't have much to give you." It's true. She and her family made me—made all of us—feel welcome. "Thank you for being such a good friend." I hand her some of my snow pea seeds carefully wrapped in brown paper and tied with garden twine.

She hadn't known *saya-endo* before seeing them in my garden. She was used to English peas—the kind that grow fat inside a thick skin you have to throw away. I showed her how you pop the whole

pod in your mouth, and she was surprised at how sweet and tender they were. She loved them even more when I fried some with bacon.

"Thank you," she responds, tears in her eyes. "Now I can grow my own, and I'll think of you whenever I eat them!"

"Every time I hang my laundry, I will think of you," I respond, smiling.

"Well then, you'll be thinking about me a lot!" she laughs.

With all the time Mr. Yodogawa has spent with our boys and piggybacking them around the town, he's earned a valuable place in our family, even if he's not related by blood. On the morning we leave, he's quiet and almost stays back at the Langham. He changes his mind when Koki takes his hand. We walk to the bus station in silence. Lately, it seems like almost the whole community gathers for each good-bye.

"Maybe the next place will become home," I whisper to the boys, and the four of us board the bus.

December 1944

It's cold in Toronto, and the streets are loud and filled with traffic. The snow in Toronto is dirty, not white and beautiful like in the mountains, and there's garbage everywhere.

"We left Kaslo for this?" I ask Koichiro as we make our way to his family's apartment. He's carrying all our bags and trying to keep his hat from blowing off his head, so he doesn't hear me.

"I want to go home," Koki cries.

"Me, too," I whisper. But how do I tell him that even I don't know where home is anymore?

Obaasan's Boots

After a few days with Koichiro's family, we're off to Alfred's Greenhouse, a farm just outside of Toronto, where the government arranged work for us. We don't have a choice, it's where the government expects us to be. Koichiro is one of a handful of Japanese men hired to tend the gardens and do repairs and maintenance. I've been hired to work in the kitchen with Koki and Chikara in tow.

When we arrive, Mrs. Alfred asks me for our family's food ration book. It allows us our share of butter, sugar, and other items that are in short supply because of the war.

"I'll keep them safe for you, Mrs. Okihiro," she reassures me. I hesitate, but not sure what else to do, I hand it over.

May 1945

"A couple of apple pies would be nice this evening," Mrs. Alfred suggests one day. "The Cortland apples are perfect."

"That sounds lovely!" I say, already savoring the idea of a treat. They're so hard to come by these days. I make two beautiful pies with woven crusts. They smell delicious, cooling in the window. Then I tell Koichiro excitedly about the apple pie for later tonight, and we beam like children.

Maybe I should have known. But I still seethe in the kitchen listening to the Alfreds and their delighted dinner guests *mmmm*ing in the dining room as they enjoy both pies.

"Compliments to the pie maker," one of the ladies says to me, poking her head into the kitchen. "How *do* you get the crust so flaky and delicious?"

"Butter," I reply coolly. "Lots of butter."

Koichiro and I both work hard at the Alfred's, but by the beginning of summer, they tell us we're no longer needed. I'm almost relieved, as I'm exhausted and due with my third child.

On the day we leave, I find Mrs. Alfred in the kitchen.

"Thank you for the last few months, Mrs. Alfred," I say. "We're all packed up and ready to go."

"Well, thank you, Mrs. Okihiro. Good luck with everything," she responds.

I pause in the doorway. "Can I have our remaining food ration coupons, please?"

"Oh, yes, let me see," she falters, getting up and leaving the room. "Just give me a moment." When she returns the coupon book, I open it. All the butter and sugar coupons are gone. I look at her questioningly.

She shrugs. "Well, I guess we've used them all up."

I'm so shocked I say nothing. I just nod and accept the empty ration book. But by the time I catch up with Koichiro, I'm furious.

"It's awful of her!" I whisper to Koichiro, so our boys don't hear us. "There's no way we ate our share!"

"Shikata ga nai," Koichiro says sympathetically. "It can't be helped."

I hate hearing that. *She* made the decision to take what wasn't hers and now *I* have to let it go? Even if I complained to someone—what would they do? Would they even care? No one represents us; we have no vote or voice. We're still "the enemy."

So many things can't be helped. The ration book, always letting the government know exactly where we are, having our friends and family scattered across the country, even all the way to Japan. Keeping quiet no matter how unfairly we're treated. Sometimes it feels like they're *our* enemy, not the other way around.

But I can't change other people. So, shikata ga nai it is.

Obaasan's Boots

We move to Summerville Hostel, not too far from the Alfred's. Several Japanese families live here because it's all we can afford. Locals know that there's always someone at the hostel who will take any work they can get.

Koichiro never knows if he will have work or not, one day to the next, and I've stopped working until the baby arrives later this summer. Koichiro earns enough for us to scrape by, but just barely.

August 1945

"Japan has been bombed!" someone shouts running into the common area of the hostel and shaking today's copy of the *Toronto Daily Star*. He slams it on the table. "Does anyone have family in Hiroshima?"

I look anxiously at Koichiro who quickly moves around the table to read the front page. Both his parents' families are from Hiroshima. "Atom Bomb News Called World Shaking by Mr. King," Koichiro reads out loud.

We look at each other in disbelief.

In the following days, the newspaper headlines get worse.

"150,000 Killed by Atom Bomb," reads one; "Inside and Outside Everybody Died as Hiroshima Razed, Tokyo Reports"; "New Weapon Equals 20,000 Tons of TNT."

We only begin to understand the devastation. The city has been completely flattened. The school where Koichiro went and the market where he had kiwis for the first time, gone. The city where his mother lived before traveling to North America. Decimated. All of Koichiro's remaining family—uncles, aunts, cousins—must be gone, too. But there's no way of finding out.

Koichiro tells me he must go see his mother. He comes back the following day with bloodshot eyes and doesn't say anything but continues with work like nothing has happened. The positive spirit he always had has disappeared. A new darkness surrounds him.

Three days later, the Americans drop another bomb. This time on Nagasaki. That's closer to Kumamoto—and close to where Mom grew up. I worry about my family—my Grandpa, aunts, and uncles I haven't yet met—and their mikan orchard. I don't know if it still exists. When will this end?

A week later, Japan surrenders, and celebrations fill the streets with music, church bells, and parades. The prime minister declares August 15 a national holiday—Victory over Japan Day. People throw paper confetti in the streets, and when it runs out, one Toronto hotel rips open pillows and the feathers float through the air, landing on the happy crowds. Like dandelion seeds.

But in the common room of the Summerville Hostel, we are quiet and solemn. This seems like it should be good news for us, but I just feel numb.



The day's heat suddenly feels heavy and we follow Grandma into a shady part of the garden. In front of us are bushes laden with pink flowers that look like pom-poms.

"Peonies, like Mrs. Beck had," Grandma says, but she is deep in thought, gently touching the ruffled petals. Lou and I are quiet too.

"I remember learning about those bombs at school," I finally say.

And then I think about what we *didn't* learn—what this meant for Japanese Canadians, like Grandma, Grandpa, and their families

here in Canada. I've never thought about that before. It's missing from the textbook pages.

"The Hiroshima bomb...wasn't there a girl who folded lots of paper *origami* cranes?" I ask, but my memory is foggy.

Lou nods. "Sadako and the thousand paper cranes," she answers. Grandma leaves us and walks toward the garage.

"That's right. She was little when the bomb exploded. She survived the bomb but got sick from the radiation a few years later."

"And someone told her that if you fold a thousand origami cranes, you'll get better," Lou adds.

"But she didn't get better, did she?"

"No."

Sadako was considered the enemy too. Just like Lou's dad when he was a baby. Two children in different countries somehow entwined in this war. How come wars hurt so many innocent people?

And yet, Sadako took colorful paper squares and folded them into graceful cranes, continuing when she knew that even ten thousand cranes couldn't make her better. A small action filled with so much hope.

I pause, trying to pull the pieces of Grandma's story together to help me understand. It's like trying to grasp at floating dandelion seeds in the wind. I'll never get them all, but if I don't try, I'll never have any. And without any seeds, a new plant won't ever take root and grow. What would happen if these stories were never told? People silenced, the past forgotten. Would something like this happen again? To a different group of people? In another place or time?

Maybe Mom chose to use her Japanese name because she finally *could*. Maybe she is called Masumi because she wants to honor her family, who suffered so much and didn't have a choice. Maybe choosing her Japanese name is her small way of showing hope. That hearing her Japanese name will make other, less common names

more accepted as well. That all people can feel safe in their identities. Comfortable sharing their own stories. We don't get to choose which family we are born into, or what we look like, or what we sound like. But we do choose how we treat others. And I haven't been very kind to Mom. *Masumi*, I think, *is a beautiful name*.

Grandma returns with garden snips. She gestures to the peonies in front of us and looks directly at me. "*Botan*. I'll cut some to take in with us. Lou, you take some home with you too."

"Wait, Grandma! I'm not ready to leave yet. You can't end the story here. It's such a sad spot," I say. "And I haven't heard about Mom being born yet."

"That's right," Grandma says, glancing up at the sky. "We still have a little time, but your mom will be back soon. Hmm, well, the end of the war was a good thing, despite the bombings. But things didn't change for us overnight."

August 1945

Across Canada, people celebrate the end of the war. But to me, it felt like people were celebrating the death of thousands of people. Of Koichiro's family. His uncles, aunts, cousins. So, we keep to ourselves, avoiding the crowds, and continue life with our heads down. Our first daughter, Masumi, is born in August, just days before Japan's emperor officially signs the surrender.

Obaasan's Boots

April 1946

In time, Mr. Saunders hires Koichiro as a carpenter and we move into a small cottage that we call home. Home only because it's just the five of us and we don't have to share with others. Not because there are the comforts that a home should have. There's no water, no plumbing. Just like some of the camp shacks in BC and as a child on Sea Island, so many years ago. I spend my days here caring for our newborn and two young boys.

"Maybe one day, we'll move into a home of our own again," I tell Koichiro.

"Funny you should say that." I look up, curious at Koichiro's tone, but his face is unreadable. "We received some mail today from the Custodian. It seems our house in New Westminster has been sold."

I read the letter in disbelief. "They *sold* it? Without our permission?" Then I see the amount at the bottom—\$1700. "It's so little," I whisper.

"It's something," he responds, though without the optimism he always used to have.

"But what about the belongings we packed into the rooms? And hid in the walls? They're not mentioned."

I think of my wedding dress. Our family photos. Dishes and wedding gifts. Koichiro's father's sheriff's pistol buried in the backyard. Whose things are they now, if not ours?

August 1946

Months pass. We receive a check for the sale of our home, but our remaining belongings don't follow.

Word of mouth travels rapidly within the Japanese community—rumors that many of our things were destroyed or disposed of while we were in Kaslo. They emptied our homes. They got rid of us, and then our things. They never wanted us to come back and did everything they could to make sure we didn't. Bills and letters confirm that expenses were taken from our bank accounts without our knowledge or subtracted from the rent on our houses—money taken to pay for our own imprisonment.

Still, we are luckier than many. Some receive nothing, no small sums for their sold homes or the items they were forced to leave behind. Lost, now. But why should I feel fortunate only because someone had it worse than me? I'm not sure how I feel, but it hasn't anything to do with luck.

Koichiro learns that because the Japanese Language School property was co-owned, the government won't release money to anyone. And that the furniture stored in the basement of the Buddhist church was chopped up for firewood less than a year after we left. The fire marshal claimed the basement was too cluttered. A hazard.

I think of the beautiful dining room table where I served futomaki to family in our home in New Westminster after getting married. The curio cabinet where we displayed our tea set from Koichiro's aunt in Japan and other pretty trinkets. These things that made up our lives. *Firewood?*

Masako is furious. The Custodian lost many of her belongings and blames her for filling out the paperwork incorrectly. I remember the day she'd been so upset about not having a copy of the Custodian's list of her possessions. She'd known. Even then, she'd known.

"Have they forgotten that *they* forced us to move into a camp? *They* promised to keep our things safe!" she writes us.

Hiko puts up a fight over Mom and Dad's beautiful house in Marpole. It's good that Dad put Hiko's name on the house papers before the war.

Obaasan's Boots

"I'm sure Dad would have just taken the money for the house, but Hiko won't because we never wanted to sell the house in the first place," Jeanne tells me.

Regardless, my brothers all found jobs in lumber mills about halfway back to the coast, so my whole family is still in BC. Without me.

"Hiko is looking for a piece of property big enough for all of us to live on," Jeanne writes. "It's not the coast, but he thought if he grows a field of strawberries, you just might come back."

September 1946

"I wish we could move back to the coast," I tell Koichiro one night, when the kids are in bed, and we have a rare quiet moment together. He's been working long hours and his eyes are already closed.

"We have nothing to go back to," he mumbles.

"What about my family?"

"That's not what I meant. There's nothing left for us in New Westminster. And we can't go back there anyway—we're not allowed to. Besides, I have work here, Hisa. And we've been moved around enough."

I want to tell him that he's wrong, that we would find a way, but...maybe he's right. There are five of us now and the children are finally starting to settle here. Is it fair to ask them to move again? We're all exhausted.

But accepting this makes my separation from my family permanent.

A few days later, Koichiro comes home with surprising news.

"I've found a piece of land. With the money the Custodian sent us for our house, we can afford it. We could even build a new house!

Imagine having our own home in a couple of years. I will have to build it myself...on weekends and evenings when I'm not working, of course. We will still need my income."

He's so excited, and we've had so little good news. But this will make it harder to ever leave Toronto. This will make our life here final. Although it's not my dream, would it be fair of me to take away his new hope and happiness? The tiny bit of hope I had to return home floats away like a dandelion seed in the wind.

"All right," I concede. "Let's go have a look at the land."

We buy the land, but before any building can start, the dense trees and roots must be cleared. Koichiro and Roy work hard for months. Finally, on a crisp autumn day when the land is clear, Koichiro invites his family and some friends for a bonfire party to burn the huge mound of trees, roots, and debris piled in the middle of the property.

"To new beginnings," Koichiro says, the reflection of the blaze dancing in his eyes.

I hope so. I think of the story I heard about a man in the New Denver camp who tried to save his suitcase of money from his burning internment shack. In the end, everything he had turned to ashes anyway. I hope *our* burning signals a fresh start and a place of our own. A place where our children will grow, learn, and put down their own roots. A place where one day my parents will visit and finally meet their grandchildren.

I wonder what my children will call them. Will they know their grandparents?



"Grandma, how *do* you say 'Grandma' in Japanese?" Lou asks.

"Hmmm..." She thinks for a moment, before her eyes glimmer at a memory. "*Obaasan*. With a stretched-out middle," she answers. "Almost like *Obasan*, which means any older woman or aunt."

Lou and I try saying the word, practicing the *ahhh* sound in the middle. Lou exaggerates it just like I do, and I realize that we're more similar than I thought. Maybe she *has* heard different stories about our family. But like me, before today, she hadn't heard Grandma's story either.

"You know," Grandma says, "I didn't have the chance to call



anyone Obaasan, even though we spoke Japanese when I was a child. I never met my grandparents. And Koichiro's mother became Grandma Okihiro. Funny, I've never thought about it before."

"Thank you for our time in the garden with you today... Obaasan," I try it out, feeling uncertain. I look at Grandma for her reaction because I'm not sure if this feels right yet. She's still Grandma to me.

Grandma laughs. Even she seems unsure, but she brings both Lou and me in for a warm hug.

Today, Grandma has given me more than a hundred trunks filled with *things* that I will never be able to hold in my hands. Something that no one can ever take away. She has given me our family story, clues about who I am, and the memory of this day in the garden with two people I love very much. We are all connected, and I feel those links between us in a way I didn't before. Now that I understand why our family is spread across the country, I've started untangling our family's roots.

There is only one more thing I'd like from her. A Japanese name.

"Grandma?" I ask timidly. "May I have a Japanese name of my own, please?"

She smiles at me and pauses, gazing over the garden. Her eyes finally settle on the ruffled peonies that she's placed in a bucket.

"*Hana*," she says with confidence. "Flower."

Hana. Flower—a bright sign of hope that emerges after long, cold winters. It's a beautiful name, and it feels right. *Hana* may never be on any official document, but it's mine. A gift from my grandma...my obaasan. No one can take that away.

"Thank you," I say. "I love it." I hug her and smile at Lou. After everything, I feel my feet standing firmly in Obaasan's boots.

Chapter 10

Lou

Obaasan. So that's how you say Grandma in Japanese. It sounds soft, like a sheep. But bold and resilient too. A rock. Our rock.

Obaasan. So, this is what happened to our family. The government called us enemies because we are Japanese. They forced you from your homes into internment camps, and sent you away a second time, scattering our relatives all across the country.

Obaasan. So, this is the story of how everything was lost. The government took all your property and belongings. They sold it, destroyed it, abandoned it. And this house, where I thought you always lived, was only built after all your roots were burned away.

I remember hearing about terrible bombs. The bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the worst the world had ever known. How could anyone think that should ever happen?

Obaasan.

In our muddy boots and shoes, with our dirty hands, the three of us stand in this garden. The stories seem to swirl around us here.

The pear tree. The past. The nasubi and saya-endo with their small delicate flowers. The star flowers of the mikan trees. The botan with their huge ruffling petals. The dramatic moments of Grandma's life. The ichigo with their bright-red, heart-shaped berries. Grandma's love.

Seeing the garden like this, the many textures suddenly appear to me like the complicated fabric of Grandma's life. And it's true: the garden is so much a part of her, from her childhood on Sea Island in Vancouver to here, in Toronto, beside the little white home that she and Grandpa built.

I wonder what kind of picture we'd make if Grandpa or Auntie Mary had their cameras now.

Standing here, surrounded by so much growth and color, there's something so beautiful and peaceful about Grandma's garden. And it seems to me that part of what makes it special is all the labor and care it needs. Perhaps Charlotte and I are not only gaining stories but also understanding how to tend to them. Do stories, like the things in Grandma's garden, need to be looked after? Do we need to share them like she shares her tomatoes and preserved fukujinzuke?

And what about all the other stories? Maybe just like there's so much more to Grandma's story than I ever knew, I should try to remember that there's so much more to learn about other people. That their lives and histories might be complicated, and that they're important to learn about too. Maybe another one of the garden lessons is that the work is never finished. And the work, as hard as it is, is beautiful.

Even today, after everything we've done, Grandma says there is one last thing for us to do. "Come with me," she says, taking the shovel.

Passing Charlotte, I trip on her boots and nearly step on a row of plants.

"Be careful," Grandma gently scolds. At first, I think she's telling

me to be careful with the stories. "We're going to plant a row of spinach."

"But you already have one." Charlotte points to a neat line of big green leaves.

"These seeds are for a second harvest," Grandma explains, digging into the hard soil with the shovel and her fingers, softening it for planting.



July 1947

I knew that coming to Toronto would be hard.

The house is being built, but there's a problem. We were sure we had enough to pay for everything, but they've run out of cement blocks.

"Is there anything left?" Koichiro asks me.

"We've used all our savings. Everything," I say, warming my hands on a cup of tea inside the little wooden cottage.

All the money the government sent us after they sold our first house and all our belongings. All that gets us only half a house.

When we got the check from the government, I was so angry I wrote them a letter. I politely asked for a full account, but what I really wanted to write was,

Dear Custodian,

*While I appreciate your finally sending us
\$2013.00 for the sale of our house and all our*

belongings, where's the rest of the money you got—or should have got—for all the things you stole from us?

If only our things hadn't been sold, maybe we would have returned. But it's a year and a half after the war ended. Everyone is carrying on with their lives, but Japanese Canadians still aren't allowed to go back to the coast.

When will the war end for us?

It's not just bricks for the new house that worry us. We never have enough money. The kids wear hand-me-downs. I patch and alter our old clothes to keep them usable. I knit woolen underwear for the cold Toronto winters. It's a good thing I still have my sewing machine, after so much has been lost. But, oh, how the kids complain about itchy underwear!

In the summers, I plant whatever I can in the yard for us. And the neighbors, taking us under their wings, have been very kind.

"Your beans look great, Mrs. Oki. I'll take them and any more you have." Jimmy Brooks sells the beans I grow at the market, bringing me back the money, as well as unsold food from his garden for us to eat.

"Here's some extra peaches, Mrs. Oki." Mr. Collins brings us baskets of peaches from his brother's farm in Niagara. They're just as sweet as the ones we'd get back home in BC, and I preserve them for us to eat all year.

For the past two Christmases, the neighbors organized charity hampers for us. They're filled with used clothes, a few toys for the kids, and food for a holiday meal, as well as canned goods.

Poor Masumi, though. This year, the only thing in the hamper that fits her is a pair of dance shoes that *tap, tap, tap* as she walks. She hates them.

Obaasan's Boots

Like Masumi's shoes, I worry the hand-me-downs make the kids feel like they stick out. I've even asked to meet the principal before Koki starts school. He needs to understand that things are different for us. I hope he'll keep an eye out for Koki and the others when they start, too. I've heard many stories of kids being bullied for being Japanese Canadian.

August 1947

Though it's summer, it's a cool afternoon when a knock comes at the door.

Peeking through the window, I see two police officers. I hesitate to open the door.

"Are you Mrs. O'Kiro?" they ask, getting their mouths around my name as best they can.

"Yes."

"Your husband has been in an accident."

I gasp, but somehow, I remain standing tall. When I catch my breath and look up at the officers again, it's as though I'm seeing them through a tunnel.

Koichiro, on his bicycle—which is all we can afford right now—was hit by a construction truck. He was taken to St. Joe's hospital immediately, but the hospital is far away. And though the policemen offer to take me there, there's no one to watch the children. It's not like it was in Kaslo, New Westminster, or on Sea Island. Even Koichiro's family here is spread across the city, long streetcar rides away. They tell me Koichiro's going to be okay. Then they return to their car. Their lives.

"Mommy, why did the men come to the door? Where's Daddy?" Koki peeks out from the other room.

"He'll be fine," I say, even though I don't really know. I try not to let my worry show.

There's nothing I can do. Just wait and see. And hope.

I never thought I'd think this, but sometimes I wish we were back in Kaslo.

When the neighbors hear, Mrs. Collins comes to stay with the children, and Mr. Collins drives me to the hospital. We trek all over the building looking for him, down the winding hallways and past so many doctors and nurses, but no one seems to know where he is. Finally, we find him in a corner room. The first thing I notice is he's sitting up, and the iciness I've felt since seeing the policemen slides away. Then I see the bruises and that one of his eyes is closed. The glass one.

"The doctor says I'll recover," Koichiro tells me. "But I need to rest, and I can't work for several weeks." He winces on the hospital bed.

If he can't work, he won't get paid. I don't say anything, but I know we're both afraid. How can we live without an income for so long?

In the evening, before Mrs. Collins goes home, I go to the scene of the accident and search for Koichiro's glass eye. I search everywhere in the ditch and long grass, but the glass eye is gone.

November 1947

A few months pass when one warm, autumn day, there is another knock at the door.

"Are you Mrs. O'Kiro?" the man at the door asks. "I have a shipment."

When I open the package, I find a slip of paper inside. It reads,

"Shipped to Jap. 1 Wedding Cake."

Wedding cake? What wedding cake? I remember the vanilla cakes, decorated with Japanese writing that my father special ordered from the *hakujin* bakery seven years ago. The cake that all our guests took home with them. It almost feels like someone else's memories.

I open the box and fold back the paper. There's no cake.

"My Wedding Dress!" I can't believe it. I carefully lift the dress out of the box, like I did when I first brought it home to my parents' house so Jeanne and I could alter it. It smells like Vancouver, though I never noticed any smell when I lived there. Earthy and fresh, like oceans and mountain air. It's beautiful.

"What's that, Mommy?" Koki asks, coming in from outside. No doubt the kids saw the delivery truck pull up.

"It's my wedding dress," I breathe. And, holding it up against me, I twirl around for them.

"Mommy, you look like a princess," Chikara says while Masumi beams wide-eyed beside him.

When Koichiro gets home and the kids are in bed, he and I unpack the rest of the precious package. Spread across the dining table are our wedding pictures and a few other old photographs, and even the wedding guestbook with all the signatures inside.

"But how?" I wonder, admiring how young and handsome we all looked.

"I don't know," he says, sitting back in his chair, shaking his head in awe. "I'm pretty sure I took this box to the Buddhist Church for safekeeping. I don't know why it was labeled 'cake.' Or why the Custodian didn't sell it or throw it away."

"I don't know who bothered to send us an old, stale cake, but I'm glad they did!" I laugh. My chest feels so light. I realize I haven't laughed this way for a long time.

Koichiro laughs, too. When he looks at me, his smile seems bigger than I've ever seen it before. "We're lucky. Most people lost all

their family photographs. Everything is long gone.”

I squeeze his hand. In this moment, I do feel lucky.

I can't wait to write to Mom and Dad about the mystery box labeled “cake.”

That night, though, as I fall asleep, I can't help but wonder what might have happened to the other things the government sold at auction for next to nothing—“fire sale” prices. Was someone else sleeping in my bed? Was someone else wearing the coat Mom gave me?

July 1954

It's summer, and we're standing on the porch of my parents' wooden house in Magna Bay. With the money we'd saved from selling vegetables over the last few years, I bought train tickets for the family. Koichiro couldn't come because of work. Somehow, I've wrangled our six kids over the long journey back to BC—not an easy task!

“I can't believe you're here! It's so good to see you!” Mom hugs me long and hard, though her strength isn't what it used to be. There are tears in our eyes when we let go.

I haven't seen my entire family for twelve years. Since “the war,” as we say. Mom's looking much older and her hair is white, and Dad's more hunched over. At least he's not as skinny as he was when I saw him in Kaslo.

Mom turns to my children. “You must be Koki,” she says. “And are you Chikara? And you little one, are you Masumi?” she continues, wiping her eyes.

My two families are strangers to each other.

There are more strangers gathered on the porch and lawn. My brothers and little sister have all grown up and have families and children of their own. I'm surprised by the similarities between my

children and everyone here—in their cheeks or eyes, or in the way they walk. I've never noticed these small details before. I guess I never had the chance.

Jeanne and I stay up every evening like we used to, appreciating every moment we have together. There's so much to catch up on. She tells me about her recent trip back to Vancouver.

"I wanted to go back right away," she says. "You know, in 1949, when the government finally allowed us to."

It's hard to believe that for four years after the war ended, the government kept its restrictions against Japanese Canadians. We couldn't go to the "protected area"—back to what remained of our homes and communities along the coast. We couldn't vote.

"Now that I could finally afford to go, the first thing I did was to go straight to our house in Marpole. And then I went to your house. In New Westminster."

"What did you see?" I ask. In my mind, nearly forgotten images flash: my family's house the day I first took Mom and Dad to see it, and my house with Koichiro in front as I waved good-bye out the bus window.

"Nothing," she says. "They're both gone. One is a small apartment building. The other is a parking lot."

I didn't know when I said good-bye then it would be for the last time!

"I hear they've bulldozed some of the internment camps as well," she says in a low voice.

"I can't believe it's all so completely gone," I say. "All the walls, the foundations?"

Jeanne nods. "No signs of our former lives. It's as though the land was wiped clean of any traces of us."

And yet, there must be some reminder. Some ghostly impression or fingerprint left behind in these places. What about the doctor who gave me the letter? Maybe he remembers me. Or the pistol we buried by the roots of the tree? Maybe it remains under layers of concrete. A testament to us. An unseen mark of our history.

November 1965

With the children all in school, I've been doing housework again. Just like when I was a teenager working for the Bowers. Only I don't live in the houses I clean anymore.

Besides the money we get from my work, Koichiro has his own construction business. He thinks one day he'll slow down and get a job in a paper factory downtown.

"It'll be perfect," he says. "I'll never run out of paper for my haiku poems again."

I often wonder what Koichiro might have become if things had been different. Maybe a poet or a teacher. Or a photographer.

Like everyone who had to leave trunks of photos and family mementoes behind, all we can do now is take new pictures. Koichiro bought a camera. He photographs the people making sushi for the Buddhist Church Bazaar. The people dancing during the *Obon* celebrations at the Japanese Canadian Cultural Center. The friends we've made and who we picnic with in High Park. And all the family and friends who come to the New Year's *Shogatsu* celebrations.

I, however, keep growing my savings. In the spring, Jeanne and I plan to take Mom to Japan to see her mikan trees and their star-white blossoms. We'll enjoy their sweet smell together. Maybe I'll like them more than sakura, just like Mom.

March 1966

We've planned everything. Jeanne and I finally have the money for Japan. Still, I almost can't believe we're really going, after all this time. After all that's happened. We have our brothers' blessing.

They're looking forward to the stories we'll bring back. Koichiro and the kids are excited for us too. Koichiro even showed me how to use the camera, so I can take pictures to share with everyone.

I'm folding clothes to pack when the phone rings. *It's late*, I think, staring at the phone. *Too late for a phone call*. Before it can wake the children, I pick up.

"Hello?"

"Hisa," Hiko says, his voice shaky.

My stomach goes cold and hard all at once, like it used to every time the government announced a new restriction. Except, since it's coming from my brother, I know this news will be worse.

As my brother talks, I feel a hard, painful lump grow in my throat that I can't swallow. It won't let my words out.

"Oh." It's all I can manage to say. *Oh*.

Mom died today.

Death, I've learned, is part of life. The hardest part.

But in Mom's case, it happened too soon.

We were only days away from leaving.

And now, we won't.



"So," Grandma says, "in the end, Mom never did get to go to Japan to be in her mikan groves again." Grandma covers the remaining seeds and presses the soil down. She lifts the watering can and sprinkles the freshly planted row of spinach.

I don't know what to say. It's an old pain, and one Grandma has carried for a long time. I'm not sure there's anything *to* say. All I

can think is that it's terribly sad. I want to hug Grandma or hold her hand, but Charlotte and I wait. This is Grandma's story. We listen.

Even to the silence.

Grandma, as always, is firm and steady. She moves the watering can carefully. The infinite past, in all its happiness and heartbreak, seems somehow all here in this moment, in Grandma's graceful, ordinary action.

"Sometimes I wish we'd been able to afford the trip sooner so we could have taken Mom like I promised."

Grandma is quiet for a moment. Then, she passes the can to Charlotte and me. "I also wish my parents had been alive when the government finally apologized to us. Everything was so hard on them."

"What do you mean?" Charlotte asks quietly.

"Well, many years after the war, the government officially apologized for what they did to us. They even offered us money. But for many, no amount could ever replace all that we lost, or give us back our former lives. And in some cases, the apology divided the community even more. Some thought the money was an insult. Others didn't want it because they thought it would single them out—that people outside our community would say we were getting something we didn't deserve, that we hadn't earned it and didn't have a right to it. Others didn't qualify because of when they were born."

"Is that why Dad and Grandpa had that terrible argument, shouting and slamming doors?" I ask.

Grandma looks at me but doesn't say. The story of our family's past, with all its gaps and silences, is still so complicated, I realize.

Yet, it is clearer. There were so many things I knew about but didn't really understand—where my dad's name came from and why my aunts and uncles have two. Why sometimes our family gets quiet at the dinner table when someone starts talking about the old

days. Why Grandma and Grandpa live here and never went back to their home on the coast, even after they were finally allowed to go back. I've learned why there's a wedding dress hanging in Grandma's closet, and maybe why our grandparents like to keep so many things. I think I now know why my dad and Grandpa fought over an apology that couldn't fix what was done to us. Most of all, I know why they say everything was lost.

And I know why Grandpa wanted me to have a Japanese name too.

And then there are the lessons that I don't fully understand yet. Like exactly what it means for me to know all this, for me to think about the racism in my family's lives and how it has shaped me. I don't know what I will do with these thoughts yet.

I also think I know why Grandma told us these stories now, or at least why they were important for Charlotte and me to hear now. Grandma had to work so hard to take care of herself and her family for so many years, many times with so much and so many people against them. And now with the time to spend really caring for the garden, she also has time to spend with us and to tell us about her past.

We gather our tools and take them to the garage. Passing the pear tree on our way, I reach my hand out to touch it. Silently, I tell it not to worry about sending a message to the tree in Vancouver.

"The tree is gone," I whisper. And then I add, "But, I promise I will take care of you."

And as I feel the rough bark of the pear tree, it dawns on me how the things in the garden, like our family's story, are both ours and not ours. They are ours to care for—our things to carry—but they also belong to others, too. They are for us to share.

Maybe we can carry the stories like seeds and plant them like Grandma does. And maybe along with knowing the bad—like really thinking about it—we can also carry the good...the hope. And with

the hope, maybe we also carry the sense of the work and care that are needed to make even just the little things a bit better. Perhaps, like Sadako with her cranes and Grandma with her bare hands in the dirt, the small actions—folding paper, planting seeds—the small moments of care will grow into something more.

It's a small action. It's not the same thing at all, really. But it's what we can do in this moment. And it's full of heart.

"Grandma," I ask, "can we make a special basket of strawberries to share with our cousins and everyone later on?" This way we can share a bit of Grandma's garden. Who knows, maybe everyone will share even more stories, once we're gathered together around a bowl of fresh berries at the table. We will be nourished and maybe even more ready for the other things, the hard things in our lives, that might come.

"That's a great idea!" Charlotte says. "When Mom gets back, I want to tell her they're called ichigo, and my Japanese name."

Grandma smiles, putting her arms around us. "Of course you can."

Before taking the basket of berries inside, the three of us admire the garden together one more time. I look down at our feet. Lined up together, they look similar, though the paths they take are so different.

I notice that Grandma's old boots—Obaasan's boots—look a little big on Charlotte's feet. But only a little. And I feel my own feet pressing through my muddy sneakers and into the ground. The newer boots that Grandma's wearing stand between us. They seem to have purpose, care, and strength despite the mud. Or maybe *because* of the mud.

At the backdoor, we take off our muddy shoes and boots, placing them neatly along the wall of the house. And thinking about the past and the present, I wonder if Charlotte and I will be able to fill Grandma's boots one day. After today, I know we'll try.



Historical Timeline

1877: Manzo Nagano is the first Japanese person known to immigrate to and settle in Canada. He moves from New Westminster to Victoria, BC, and runs his own business. After Nagano, thousands of other Japanese people immigrate and become an essential part of the Canadian community. Many Japanese Canadians initially live in British Columbia and work as fishers, miners, and farmers, among other jobs.

1895: The government of Canada tries to discourage certain people from immigrating to Canada. They use a discriminatory policy called the *Provincial Voters' Amendment Act* to deny Japanese Canadians the right to vote even if they are Canadian citizens.

1907: Anti-Asian riots in Vancouver. Nine thousand people, mostly members from the Asiatic Exclusion League, a BC organization, storm Chinatown and Japantown. They break windows, loot stores, and beat people up.

1914–1918: World War I takes place. Two hundred and twenty-two Japanese Canadian soldiers fight at Vimy Ridge, an important battle in WWI. Fifty-four Japanese Canadians die in battle, and one

hundred and sixty-eight return home to Canada. In 1920, a war memorial is built in Stanley Park (Vancouver) honoring the sacrifice of these Japanese Canadians. During WWII, the light in the memorial is extinguished and not relit until 1985.

1914: The Parliament of Canada passes a law called the *War Measures Act*. During times of war, this law lets the government ignore the basic human rights and freedoms of people who are considered enemies of the country.

1939: World War II begins, and Canada declares war on Germany.

1941: Pearl Harbor is bombed, and Canada declares war on Japan. Japanese Canadians are forced to register as “Enemy Aliens” even if they are Canadian citizens or have never been to Japan.

1942: Under the *War Measures Act*, twenty-two thousand Japanese Canadians, 75 per cent of whom are Canadian citizens, have their rights taken away. Japanese-language newspapers are shut down and all Japanese Canadian mail is censored. The government designates an area 100 miles (160 kilometers) inland along the west coast of British Columbia as a “protected area,” and Japanese Canadians living in this area are forced to leave their homes and move to places with horrible living conditions. Many are sent to Vancouver’s Hastings Park holding center before being imprisoned in internment camps in the British Columbia interior. Men are usually sent to work in road camps in the Rockies, while women, elderly, and children are sent to detention camps, like the one Grandma is sent to in this story. Families are often split up and people lose contact with their loved ones. Some families try to stay together by financing their own moves to beet farms in Alberta and Manitoba, where they end up living and working under extreme and terrible conditions.

1942: Similarly, in the United States, over 120,000 Japanese Americans, mostly American citizens, living in the “Exclusion Area” along the west coast (Washington, Oregon, California, and Arizona), are forcibly removed from their homes and placed in War Relocation or concentration camps in remote areas across the country (in California, Arizona, Idaho, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, Arkansas).

1943: The Government of Canada takes away the property rights of Japanese Canadians who had been uprooted from their homes in the “protected area” and who are mostly living in internment camps. This allows the government to dispose of Japanese Canadian property, including people’s homes and their personal possessions, like pictures, clothing, and family heirlooms, without the owners’ knowledge or consent. Japanese Canadians organize to fight their dispossession, but the *War Measures Act* prevents them. Selling their items provided money to run the detention camps, sparing the government the expense.

1944: Prime Minister Mackenzie King states that Japanese Canadians should still not be allowed to live on the British Columbia coast because of its proximity to Japan.

1944: American Mitsue Endo challenges his internment by the American government as unconstitutional. He wins, and by January 2, 1945, Japanese Americans are able to return to their homes, belongings, and communities.

1945: Hiroshima and Nagasaki are bombed, instantly killing over 110,000 people (over 170,000 people die by the end of the year) and maiming hundreds of thousands of others. This was the first ever use of the atomic bomb, which uses toxic nuclear energy.

People continued to become sick for many years after the bombings, like Sadako, who is mentioned in this story.

1945: When the war ends, Japanese Canadians are given the choice to either settle east of the Rockies, like Grandma does in this story, or be “repatriated” (forcibly moved) to Japan. Repatriation is supposed to mean sending people back to the country they came from, but many people who were deported were born in Canada and had never been to Japan. Deportations didn’t begin until 1946.

1947: The deportation orders are canceled, but by this time, four thousand Japanese Canadians had been forced to leave the country.

1949: Japanese Canadians are given the right to vote and are allowed to move within Canada without restrictions or needing permission.

1988: On August 10, the *Civil Liberties Act* was signed into law in the United States. The bill created a public education foundation and provided for both a presidential apology and \$20,000 payments to those who had been imprisoned. In Canada, the *War Measures Act* is replaced by the *Emergencies Act*. The government of Canada finally apologizes for the human rights violations and discrimination against Japanese Canadians during World War II. They offer money to survivors and their family members, but the amount does not equal the value of the lost property. The Redress Agreement also includes pardons for those convicted of disobeying orders made under the *War Measures Act*, Canadian citizenship for those wrongfully deported to Japan in 1946, and funding for a Canadian Race Relations Foundation.

Glossary

Asahi Baseball Team: Japanese Canadian amateur baseball team who played in Vancouver from 1914–1941.

Botan: Peony flower.

British Columbia Security Commission (BCSC): A group of people officially charged by the government with planning, supervising, and directing the expulsion of Japanese Canadians.

Butsudan: Small household Buddhist altar.

Commissioner: A representative of or a person appointed to a role by a commission.

Custodian: A person who has the responsibility to look after something. The Office of the Custodian of Enemy Property was responsible for looking after the property of Japanese Canadians.

Daikon: Japanese white radish.

Emigrate: To move away from the country where you were born.

Fukujinzuke: Japanese pickled relish made with daikon, eggplant, cucumber, and soy sauce.

Futomaki: Translated to “fat rolled sushi,” often contains vegetables, including shitake mushrooms, kanpyo (marinated dried gourd), cucumbers, and egg.

Futon: Traditional Japanese-style bedding.

Genkan: Traditional entranceway in a Japanese house or building.

Gohan: Cooked rice. Japanese rice is a short-grain variety that, in North America and other countries, is sometimes called “sticky rice” or “sushi rice.”

Haiku: Traditional Japanese poem that consists of three short lines. The first has five syllables, the second has seven syllables, and the third has five syllables again.

Hakujin: The Caucasian race, or white.

Hana: Flower.

Ichi: The number one.

Ichiban Noodles: Brand of instant ramen noodles that are cooked by adding boiling water and a seasoning packet.

Ichigo: Strawberry.

Inari sushi: Sushi rice stuffed in deep-fried and seasoned tofu pouches.

Internment: To be confined as a prisoner of war. Because countries cannot “intern” their own citizens as war prisoners (as people from other, enemy countries), nowadays we tend to use the word “incarceration” for what happened to Japanese Canadians and Americans. Still, the word “incarceration” is not exactly right: in these countries, imprisonment normally only happens after a fair trial, which was not the case for the Japanese Canadians and Americans.

Issei: Term for the first generation of people who emigrated from Japan.

Inu: Translates to “dog,” also a word used for “traitor” amongst Japanese Canadians and Americans in the camps.

Jan-ken-pon: A chant used when playing a game of rock, paper, scissors.

Kamaboko: Japanese fish cake made with pounded fish.

Kanji: The most-used characters or script for writing Japanese.

Kibei: An American- or Canadian-born Japanese person who returns to Japan to be educated.

Kimono: Traditional Japanese clothing that wraps in the front and has long, rectangular sleeves and closes with a wide sash called an obi.

Kyuuri: Cucumber.

Mikan: Japanese orange.

Miso: Paste or soup made with fermented soya beans.

Mochi: Pounded rice that's made into a small treat, sometimes filled with sweet bean paste. It is often served at New Year's celebrations.

Moshi, moshi: Japanese greeting used when making a telephone call with family and friends, translates to “hello.”

Mottainai: Translates to “don't waste.”

Nasubi: Eggplant; this form of the word is traditional and still predominantly used in western Japan.

Ni: The number two.

Obaasan's Boots

Nikkei: Collective name for people of Japanese ancestry whose families emigrated from Japan.

Nisei: Second generation; the people whose parents emigrated from Japan.

Nori: Seaweed.

Obaasan: Grandmother. Can also be spelled “Obaachan.”

Obasan: Aunt or older lady.

Obi: A wide band of fabric traditionally used to close a kimono.

Obon: Annual Buddhist celebration honoring ancestors who return to this world to visit relatives.

Ocha: Japanese green tea.

Ochazuke: Japanese rice served in a bowl with Japanese green tea, or sometimes broth, poured over top.

Ofuro: A bath. In this book it refers to a traditional communal Japanese tub constructed of wood and heated by a wood-burning stove.

Ohashi: Chopsticks.

Ojisan: Uncle or older man.

Ojiisan: Grandfather.

Onigiri: Rice ball, often with a filling and wrapped in nori.

Origami: Folding paper to make art and objects.

Protected Area: An area running 100 miles (160 kilometers) inland along the west coast of British Columbia designated by the Canadian government. The government forced the Japanese Canadians living in this area to leave their homes.

Sakura: Flowering cherry trees; cherry blossoms.

San: The number three.

Sansei: Third generation; the people whose grandparents emigrated from Japan.

Saya-endo: Snow peas.

Shikata ga nai: Translates to “it cannot be helped.” Similar to shouganai. This term is often used when talking about the Japanese Canadian internment.

Shodou: The old Japanese art of artistic handwriting, using a brush and ink.

Shogatsu: Japanese New Year.

Sushi: Japanese dish made with vinegar-seasoned rice, often in a roll or ball, with vegetables, fish, or egg.

Tatami: Rectangular mats made of woven straw used for flooring in houses and buildings.

Tofu: Soft bean curd made from soybeans and pressed into a soft block.

Torii: Traditional Japanese gate, often at a Shinto shrine.

War Measures Act: During times of war, this law let the government ignore the basic human rights and freedoms of people who are considered enemies of the country.

Yonsei: Fourth generation; the people whose great-grandparents emigrated from Japan.

Yuki: Snow.

About the Authors

Janis Bridger is an educator and writer who has many creative outlets and a love for the outdoors. She lives in Vancouver, Canada, close to where her Japanese Canadian grandparents lived before being interned. Janis earned a diploma in Professional Photography (Langara College), and a Master of Education (University of Alberta), specializing in teacher-librarianship. Social justice, diversity, and kindness are paramount in her life and embedded in her everyday teaching.

Lara Jean Okihiro is a writer, researcher, and educator of mixed Japanese Canadian heritage living in Toronto. Intrigued by the power and magic of stories, she earned a Master's (Goldsmiths, University of London) and a Doctorate (University of Toronto) in English. Living abroad inspired her to learn about her family's internment experience. Lara's diverse creative work emphasizes social justice, dispossession, and carrying the lessons of the past into the future.

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An Episode From The War Years (A Group Movement For Family Relocation)



by Koichiro Okihiro

(Editor's Note: The following report written by Mr. K. Okihiro was written in Japanese, and translated by Misses Tomoko Makabe and Shirley Yamada.)

Part I

PREFACE

The following is a documentary about an historical event: the mass evacuation in Canada of people of Japanese descent during WW II. It concerns a small group of these people who were residing in the New Westminster area of British Columbia when war broke out in December, 1941. It is a detailed record of incidents that occurred from May 11 to May 20, 1942. During that period, a total of 472 Japanese residents, divided into 4 sub-groups, left their homes in New Westminster to be interned in a place called Kaslo, in the interior of British Columbia, in accordance with the mass evacuation order issued by the federal government.

The large majority of these evacuees were women and children. The men, because they were Japanese nationals, had already been sent to work on road building projects set up by the government soon after the outbreak of war. A group naturally formed amongst these women left alone to look after their children. They assisted each other through self-help activities and got through an extraordinary experience.

The document is a multi-paged letter written back in May, 1942 when the physical movement inland to Kaslo was complete. The letter was addressed to the former residents of the community who had settled, temporarily at least, as internees in Kaslo to spend the war years. With no assurance that the letter would reach the addressees, as communication between Japanese people was fully controlled and censored by the B.C. Security Commission, nonetheless the writers ventured to mail the lengthy letter out before they themselves

dispersed. I, being one of the writers, have managed to keep a copy of that letter with me for the past 40 years. Now and again I go over the letter, thinking of the people involved, the majority of whom have passed away in the intervening years. Reading it over each time, I can vividly hear their voices.

Dear:

As you may well be aware by this time, the moving of Japanese families and individuals from the New Westminster area has been completed. On May 11, 17 families, involving 69 individuals, were the first to leave; thereafter, on the 13th, 33 families (140 persons); on the 15th, 32 families (122 persons); on the 17th, 31 families (120 persons); and finally, on the 20th, 5 families (15 persons) followed. Altogether a total of 118 families (467 individuals) were involved in the movement. There are a few families left in the district, determined to remain at their homes despite government orders. We have been informed by telephone or telegram by those who left before the 17th of their safe journey to, and arrival in, Kaslo.

Because the physical moving and relocation to Kaslo has been completed, should we say that our "project" is over? We feel that, as a group, we have accomplished an important task, sharing every moment with each other, and feeling of togetherness we would like to extend to our fellow community members who were earlier sent away to the road camps. Their deep concern over their families has been fully appreciated by all of us left behind. We are grateful for having seen the relocation through safely, yet we cannot help feeling tremendously lonely here. Our town, the Japanese district of New Westminster, now looks like a ghost town and we just walk around aimlessly. We have now stepped into the unforeseen future, our fate completely in God's hands. With the kind of strength we acquired through unity and harmony, we must proceed on our journey, coping with each difficult situation as it arises. We are in the midst of a war in a country which regards and treats us as "enemy aliens". No doubt this is a time of crisis by which our genuine strength as a group can well be tested. Many of you, we recall, were so calm and composed going through the process of moving. That very attitude helped to convince us that we



The real Hisa (Grandma) and Koichiro (Grandpa) Okihiro on their wedding day. Reprinted with permission from the family.



Impounded Japanese Canadian vessels at North Trots near Robson Island with New Westminster in the background. Reprinted with permission from the Japanese Canadian Research Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library (identifier number: JCPC-12b-003).

"An Episode From The War Years," written by Grandpa Koichiro and published by *The Canada Times* in 1983. Reprinted with permission from the family.

Authors' Note

Obaasan's Boots is based on the family experience of the co-authors, cousins Janis Bridger and Lara Jean Okihiro.

Authors' note to come in the finished edition

They had
everything
taken from them
because they were
Japanese.



Cousins Lou and Charlotte don't know a lot about their grandmother's life. When their obaasan invites them to spend the day in her garden, she also invites them into their family's secrets. Grandma shares her experience as a Japanese Canadian during World War II, revealing the painful story of Japanese internment. Her family was forced apart. Whole communities were uprooted and moved into camps, their belongings stolen.

Lou and Charlotte struggle with the injustice, even as they marvel at their grandmother's strength. They begin to understand how their identities have been shaped by racism, and that history is not only about the past.

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