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COURTESY THE ARTIST

KAREN TEI YAMASHITA

Letters to Memory

The Internment of Japanese Americans

Dear Homer:

I am remembering when I first met you. You are sitting at a table in Kelly's Bakery Café with coffee and a stack of blue books, reading and scribbling comments. I have not seen a blue book in decades, but it makes sense that you would utilize this classic pedagogical format, despite penmanship's decided wane. Of course we've met before, but those meetings were encounters of a mostly bureaucratic substance, allowing me however to wave a hello and to ask the obvious question: What are you doing?

You answer that your class is on the history of sin and, you add—*by ricochet*—on sacrifice and grace. I ponder the guilty rebound of sacrifice and grace and my wonder that sin has a history. But you are a historian of ancient Palestine. Of course, I think, if you say so, sin must have a history. In any case, most immediately, I am perhaps like your students, for whom sin is possibly both passé and nasty. In Brazil, they say there is no sin below the equator. But without sin, is there no sacrifice or grace? Whatever the nature of the perhaps feverish condensation of thinking in those blue books, I am moved to add my own. Similarly, seeing your stack of blue books, I am reminded of my own guilty responsibility to my own stack of my father's sermons and seminary papers. Also likely full of sin and sacrifice and grace. How should I read to understand them? You ask to what denomination did my father belong? Methodist. Ah, you consider. Forgiveness, you suggest. It is a very powerful idea.

So these conversing letters began.

Continental Divide

Homer, today, April 30, happens to be the day on which, over seventy years ago in 1942, my father and his family lost their freedom upon entry to Tanforan Racetrack, a designated Assembly Center in San Bruno, California, for the wartime removal of Japanese. Arriving by bus, heavily encumbered with what they could carry, they were housed in a series of empty horse stalls named Barrack 14. This was just the first stop; from Tanforan they would be transported by train into the Utah desert to live in a concentration camp named Topaz. That year my father turned thirty, the fourth of seven siblings, the three elder married with children.

Five days later, my father's issei mother, Tomi, and youngest sister, Kay, were given permission to leave Tanforan. Despite their registered labels—Tomi as enemy alien and Kay as non-alien citizen—Tomi and Kay were granted passage across the continent to Washington, D.C.—Kay to testify in a federal court case regarding treason and Tomi as her companion and chaperone. A map of their cross-country trek reads like a tourist pamphlet: Grand Canyon, New Orleans, Washington D.C., New York, Boston. On May 9, Kay and Tomi were traveling on the *Scenic Limited* of the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railway between Salt Lake City and Denver. Tomi snored into her nap, but a nauseated Kay documented this passage:

> *Just went past a place where there seemed to be feverish building of barrack-like houses. The porter whispered in my ears that it's to be used for a concentration camp—beautiful country but God how terribly lonely and cold with real communion with nature and not a speck of civilization in sight.*

Reading this, I don't know whether to cry or to laugh. I think Kay has taken the train to see her future, that the Negro porter has quietly suggested, when you get to your destination, not to come back. Keep going. But Kay is only twenty-four years old, just graduated from Cal Berkeley. Her observations are not clairvoyant but innocent. *Gee*, she says, Mom and I are living the *life of O'Reilly*, complete with private Pullman and porter. It occurs to me that this might be because the other passengers object to sharing space with Japanese, not to mention Tomi's thunderous snoring. Only *a good looking real young matron* on her way to New York, mentions Kay, shares the car with them. Could be an FBI escort with cotton in her ears. In those years, who is O'Reilly and what does *real* mean?

I read and reread the letter, the jumping pulse of Kay's characteristic and enthusiastic pen flitting across the pages. I study the map. Colorado River. Iron and zinc mining. Snow. Continental Divide. Tennessee Pass, elevation = 10,240 feet. The *concentration camp* under construction that spring of 1942 must have been Camp Hale in Pando, built to house German prisoners of war and sixteen thousand soldiers, mostly of the Tenth Mountain Division, trained in skiing and winter warfare. In my first reading, I assumed the camp to be the Amache or Granada Japanese internment camp, but Amache was located on the eastern end of Colorado, not along the tracks of the *Scenic Limited* on its approach to Denver. I'm amused by my desire for irony, but the facts don't add up. Well, the porter was mistaken, though only about the location.

But there is something entirely screwball about Kay's letter, read in the context of her siblings' replies and descriptions of their shameful, stinky, muddy, hungry, bleak imprisonment. There's a shiny, foolish airhead optimism and an uncomfortable patronage of the porter, *his refined face black as night*. The Pullman porter is guide and geographer. *Holy Cats!* says Kay. *Snow!* An Oakland girl who'd never seen snow. There, on the Continental Divide, the train pauses, and the porter rushes into frozen air to scoop the white filigree into a ball, Kay marvels, *like a snow cone*.

I could choose another passage in this archive of saved stuff. Well, you choose. Kay's sister-in-law Kiyo inscribes in her diary: *Today (April 30) was one of the worst, if not the worst day I have ever experienced in my life.* Or sister Iyo writes back, *Someone we know "cracked up" one nite . . . Many a Nisei go around muttering the preamble of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, etc.* But for me, this tableau in the Colorado Rockies sticks: civil society in anxious, tentative peace, cast on a shield against the roil of war.

We will never know the porter's name or his story, except that he had a friend named Tanaka back in L.A. But I extend a story for this gentle man that connects him to the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and to its founder and president, A. Philip Randolph.

In 1941, as the United States beat its drums for war, Randolph threatened a march on Washington. He promised to rally a hundred thousand Negroes to protest job discrimination and segregation in the armed forces. To defuse this possibility, FDR quickly signed Executive Order 8802, prohibiting discrimination in defense jobs or government. Jim Crow segregation of the military would have to wait. As the Japanese were evacuated from the West Coast, African Americans moved into their now-empty neighborhoods to take lucrative jobs in the war industry. In the few weeks that Kay traveled outside, she witnessed this influx of workers in search of jobs. The engine of war cranked into high gear to build the ships, planes, tanks, guns, bombs, parachutes, uniforms, medical supplies—all hauled off with young soldiers to theaters of battle across the Atlantic or the Pacific. Nihonmachi became the Harlem of the West.

Yet, you the historian might ask, what of significant dates? Did the war begin on December 7, 1941, on a Day of Infamy? Or perhaps on September 5, 1905, upon the signing of the Treaty of Portsmouth and Japan's defeat of Russia? Can it begin on April 30 as barbed wire fenced in one family among hundreds at Tanforan? Your scholarship teaches me that the war began centuries before. But for the short three generations of a family narrative and the story that puzzles me, there is May 9, 1942, on the Continental Divide when a ball of snow was exchanged with unspoken recognition and mistaken geography, paths crossing toward hope and sorrow.

Traitors

History, gently you remind me and urge me back. I have told myself, since I am prone to write fiction, that history and knowing what really happened is necessary because someone has to be accountable. Yet how close can anyone get to history even if you live it? Reading these letters, I still don't know. Stories blossom as a kaleidoscope, a space where events aggregate in infinite designs. You, Homer, hold history, its archaeology and physical evidence, with profound respect. This is the real stuff from which social systems are made. Here, you gesture, is the land and its infertility, the ruins of aqueducts and temples, the bones and seeds, here the tablets of record, an accounting of sheep and sacks of grain, progeny and slaves, tithes and taxes—basic economies that herald the complex transactions that infuse their systems into our being, initiate another future. The minutiae of everyday life congregated in patterns and traditions to account for well-being. In such a world, what does it mean to have, but more profoundly, what does it mean not to have or to lose? By what rights does one take or borrow from another? How does one come to know the difference between taking and receiving? How do greed and generosity grow and dance together? It is sinful, unlawful to steal. Failure to repay a debt may be punished. Thus the question of forgiveness is, at its basis, economic. At this moment, you also remind me, history turns to parable because to forgive debt is a radical idea, an impossibility that requires imagination.

On May 9, Kay was en route to Washington, D.C., summoned to testify on behalf of the United States on May 14, 1942, at 9:45 a.m., in the case of the *United States v. David Warren Ryder, et al.* For $152.25 plus a $6.00 processing and mailing fee, the National Archives mails me a packet of 203 legal-sized pages, the residue of criminal docket #69201, the entire extant record of a case of treason filed against Ralph Townsend, David Warren Ryder, Frederick Vincent Williams, Tsutomu Obana, K. Takahashi, and S. Takeuchi for their participation in the Jikyoku Iinkai or Japanese Committee on Trade and Information, with the alleged purpose of disseminating Japanese propaganda without registration as "foreign agents" under the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938. This mass of paper is a repetitive record of indictments, summons, warrants, bail amounts, jury instructions, and final judgments. There are no records of testimonies or depositions, no court banter. From this evidence, it's hard to decipher what crime had been committed except to fail to register and to make transparent a pro-Japanese position. A cursory investigation shows that both Ryder's and Obana's early articles, published in the 1920s and 30s, are cited even today to demonstrate the unfair character of that era's anti-Japanese fears and policies in California.

By 1942, however, uncritical responses to events such as the Nanking massacre, the occupation of Manchuria and Korea, and finally the bombing of Pearl Harbor would seal guilty convictions. In 203 pages, Kay's participation is a single document: her summons to court. And nowhere in any of the dense archive of family correspondence can I find any information about why Kay was summoned.

What was Kay to these prominent men? Ryder was the publisher-editor of the pamphlet *Far Eastern Affairs*. Williams was a *Japan Times* newspaper correspondent, policy lecturer, and radio pundit. Of the Japanese nationals, Obana was secretary of the San Francisco Japanese Chamber of Commerce; Takahashi was manager of the steamship line Nippon Yusen Kaisha; and Takeuchi, manager of Mitsubishi Company.

Kay, the young president of the Cal Berkeley Nisei

Student Women's Club with its modest membership. And Kay, a member of the Cal YM/YWCA. Years later in an interview, Kay explained that, in October 1940, she organized a campus meeting about the Japanese presence in Manchuria, inviting speakers for Chinese and Japanese viewpoints. After all, she minored in Oriental History. The Japanese Consulate provided a speaker who then became ill; the substitute speaker was one of the accused men. Was Kay asked to distribute copies of *Far Eastern Affairs* around Cal? Did Kay characterize the speech as propaganda? Knowing Kay and the sometimes Shirley Temple earnestness of her letters, it's impossible to assume any intrigue or scandal; here she stumbled unwittingly into conspiracy or, rather, suspicion. Yet in a small community, everyone's lives overlapped. Her oldest brother, Sus, worked for Mitsubishi, and S. Takeuchi was his boss. An elegant photo shows that Mr. and Mrs. Takeuchi acted as nakoodo for Sus's wedding, that is, the Takeuchis acted as formal marriage intermediaries. And Sus's wife, Kiyo, had been secretary to Obana. What, for me, is tragicomic is that Kay, a non-alien citizen, and her enemy alien mother, whose entire people had been incarcerated for alleged possible treason, were permitted free passage to testify against others for treasonable acts. The experience of testifying at the trial must have been terrifying and confusing, Kay stuttering her answers nervously, interrupted repeatedly by judicial protest, and glancing at the particular defendant, who never looked up to meet her eyes. Who did these men see on the witness stand, the only person of Japanese descent (for whom these defendants labored and suffered this humiliation) summoned to court? I doubt that her testimony sealed their fates, but even if it played a small supporting role, what cruel irony to send this sweet, young nisei woman to assert her American privilege.

Takahashi and Takeuchi escaped to Japan, soon to be surrounded by the terror of war, but Obana, educated in the United States and having spent twenty years of his life here, was imprisoned in "an alien detention camp," perhaps eventually Topaz. Years later, we read FBI files that reveal that Kay's older brother Sus had been under surveillance for his job with Mitsubishi. One report describes Sus, *the subject*, as *very intelligent . . . the dapper, smooth type*. It was Sus's responsibility to close the offices after his Japanese manager, Takeuchi, returned to Japan.

A letter addressed to Special Agent T. C. Gleysteen, dated April 11, 1942, reveals that Sus's friend and coworker made a detailed report of their conversation. Visiting Sus at home, his coworker writes, that Sus *was in his garden, relaxing, he told me. He was glad to see me, and we sat in his living room along with his wife and his baby daughter. And the conversation among us went along as follows: [. . .]*

I: "Isn't this war disgusting? And what do you think we can do in the future? Do you think we can make a go of ourselves in the United States . . . where citizenship means nothing for us?"

He: "Futility of war was pictured to us by the last war [. . .] What I am worried about is our second generation or 'nisei' future. I can see nothing but dark clouds. Although I feel that the United States may give us our status back, I feel that it may be best for us to go back to Japan or China and start all over again there."

I: "No matter what happens I am going to have faith in my government, and I am going to stay here. Where else can you find a land where people of all nationalities, races and creeds live together in apparent harmony? Of course, there are prejudices and injustices against minority, but what can anybody expect for a comparatively short time that our country was existing. Naturally, I hold a great deal of concern about our future welfare, but I think, our faith in our government will be rewarded."

He: "You had that conviction ever since I can remember." [. . .]

I: "Will you work under the similar conditions existed at the time of our last employment? Subordinate to those from Japan, taking orders from them and at a salary way below theirs?"

He: "I may have to. But I believe the company will make some kind of adjustment. What about you?"

I: "I certainly will not unless we are given better treatment and more authority. [. . .] You know that I offered to quit many times, and it is only the trust in your words that you will get the management to improve our situation that I plugged on."

He: "I know that, and sometimes I regret that I put you into such a misery."

I: "Please don't misunderstand me. [. . .] Although I did not enjoy working under the head accountant, I am grateful for the many friendships that I made [. . .]"

He: "I am glad that you did."

Sus's coworker closes his letter report with these words: *I felt that I have failed in my mission. I was unable to get any information out of him. But, when I reflect upon my past relationship and association with him, I noted that he had a peculiar knack, shall I say, of making others speak without letting himself be known. When I went to ask him to see whether this and that could be done, I would always come back emptying my thoughts to him without getting anything tangible from him.*

The three white Americans in the Ryder et al. case were convicted and imprisoned, it seems, for much of the war years. These men maintained their innocence; they were writing, they said, to advocate peace.

A page in the court papers reads:

Defendant Ryder's Instruction No. 6

You are instructed as a matter of law that Defendant Ryder had a constitutional right to oppose the entry of the United States in to the war with Japan and to publish writing in an effort to keep the United States out of participating in said war. Hence, even though the evidence shows that Defendant Ryder received money, still if he did nothing more than express his own sincere beliefs, you must find Defendant Ryder not guilty.

Denied, T.A.G.

The law is specific. It is not about constitutional rights or belief. It is only about registration to write propaganda, even if you believe your own propaganda. The law was created to catch the bad guys, not to quibble with what kind of bad. These instructions were denied; Ryder could not be judged innocent. In my own reading of *Far Eastern Affairs*, Ryder's punditry favored Japan's imperial incursions into China to stop the tide of what he called *Stalinist Bolshevism*. Ryder was a zealous anticommunist, and the policies he proposed in 1938 would come to pass anyway as the war came to a close. But Ryder could not be judged as peaceful.

Homer, your travels and research trace the deep history of families into tribes and tribes into nations. Some folks reach across a fence or an ocean and discover they are holding hands with the enemy. Some discover that they are on the wrong side of the fence and are the enemy themselves. Flags force everyone to flex their loyalty, but some refuse, and they are the enemy too. In this tale of the alleged traitor, all possible enemies pose a threat and must be safely imprisoned: propagandists, collaborators, apologists, aliens, non-alien citizens, renunciants, draft resisters, conscientious objectors, pacifists, expatriates, repatriates, extraordinary renditions. At the war's end, released to freedom, forgiveness is a radical idea, an impossibility that requires imagination.

I have asked myself why the family saved these letters. You might say that they were historians, that they knew the value of their stories, this proof of their thoughts and actions in unjust and difficult times. History is proffered to the future. *This is what we did. Do not forget us. Please forgive us.*

Come live with me in poverty

Vyasa, you have said that truth is not the fact of history or a story's memory but its accountability. What then are these letters? Being written on a certain day and near or at the time of the events, are they less unstable and closer to being true? Or are events, written about in contemplation after they have occurred, more true? There are John and Alma's letters written in their mid-thirties, and then there are those written in old age in precarious handwriting, the mind grasping for clarity, privileging simplicity. Here I am plunged close to the hearts of my folks, the raw stuff, and yet despite the immediacy, so much has gone unexpressed, flowing away under that bridge. Now we meet at this temporal distance, and all is speculation. There are letters without corresponding replies. There are gaps between paragraphs and sentences. Someone left writing to brew a cup of coffee, to answer the phone, to leave that thought for another day. There is thinking without continuity, history without continuity, but if continuity could be reconstructed, what would be recuperated? Pressed against the evidence of real penned letters, I am wary of my propensity for dishonesty or, as you say more kindly, fictionalizing. And I have become weary of continuity's plodding plot. I long for a bounding, energetic leap to knowledge, as if wisdom should appear with age. I, too, grasp for clarity and simplicity, the simple truth. You shake your head.

On December 4, 1946, John wrote to sister Kay that he'd taken his brother Tom's gift of two *Big Game* Cal/

Stanford tickets for *a foursome* with Ish and Osa Isokawa, and Asako Sakai.

The game was very bad, but date was rather nice. She seems to know you pretty well—Very neat unobtrusive person—congenial—and of course college girl. Have seen also 2 plays with the Party—"Glass Menagerie" and "State of the Union"—popular productions so I caught up on the theatre and I'm not sure how much more. I'd be interested in your reactions.

This note was followed a week later by a second letter to Kay, a long, rambling, four-page, single-spaced typewritten letter, pontificating on the nature of love. While Kay kept carbon copies of every letter she wrote to the family during the camp years, much of her letter writing in the postwar has disappeared. The lost letter Kay wrote to John, encouraging his long response, likely related her college relationship to Asako at Cal Berkeley and her opinion about John's romantic interest. Kay's letters must have also voiced her discouragement with her own prospects of marriage, and, upon the closing of the wartime services of nisei student relocation, a sense of loss of purpose or relevance in her life's work, along with the hardship in finding and relocating to a new job.

From that distance, John's letters to Kay are a funny mixture of brother, counselor, and confessor, giving counsel based on the confessions of his own experience. And this is further complicated by his romantic, philosophical, and religious thinking, by which he justified his living practice and still thought to give encouragement to Kay.

Since writing you I have been very sure of my mind . . . I am quite impulsive and hardly rational when it comes to my likes . . . I hold to this because I believe one's prejudices should be basically emotional . . . I don't care for understanding that is not immediate and uncalculated . . . This which is termed FAITH enters largely into my picture, and I have a notion it is the dimension which should enter more widely into every and all adventures of matrimonial designs . . . Well, the short of all of this—is, I like the gal a lot . . .

John further confessed his difficulty in having a romantic interest while also running a church.

. . . I sure have had to devise ways and means to develop my private interest. Boy, never get into a spot like I am (that is, having a Church, supposed degree, and being a Protestant most normally should be married to do the best work). You can't pursue your personal interest without being tabbed as a flighty playboy; and just how can you be charming without being free . . .

But then John returned to his general pontification on love, eros woven with agape, or as you'd point out from Sanskrit, *kama* with *sneha*, reading like a run-on rendition of Khalil Gibran speaking Corinthians.

I do not think you have the right apprehension of that which is Love or that which should be Love. True love never regrets, it's given without a price, it doesn't think in terms of returns, it doesn't expect to be understood, it tries to understand; true love is extravagant, it overflows and if unreciprocated it only seeks the fulfillment not of one's own desire but of the one it concerns. Thus, it respects the other's choice, the other's lack of choice, the other's humor or lack of humor, the other's lack of industry or ardor—whatever it is—it respects. When people mourn—or they have too many regrets—I take it that their love was closer to infatuation—to self-love and geared to the ego, because it is the tearing of the ego which they feel the pain of—and they do not feel thankful for the pain of knowing love.

John wanted Kay to lose herself to the plunge, but he probably also wanted Asako to do the same.

I say this . . . love freely, love extravagantly, love unreservedly but give your whole heart and being everything—or it isn't worth giving—and you insult the receiver . . . to love without being loved, to love without concern of return, to love because it's good to love—that's worth more—infinitely more. I say to a woman if you want to be worth your weight in gold—love first and love in the faith that it is love which will resolve all shortcomings, prejudices, and circumstances whether in the lover or the loved and this will lead to growing adventures. It is this sort of love which spurs a man to believe that he can remove mountains, that makes him change, that makes him understand there is something else worth building for.

Okay, Dad. The story that we heard again and again was that some time after the *Big Game* and maybe two more theater dates later, John proposed to Asako, and for the next twelve months, Asako kept John's ring without making a decision. So the letters between John and Kay continue on for months with comments such as, *one can never know how a woman's mind really works—I shall not try to identify its reasons any more,* or more urgently,

I need good advice now not later. The gal took ill with flu and I won't see her for a couple of weeks. There seems to be a great mental or spiritual conflict—and I've decided to back away—because I sure wouldn't want anything on the basis of being just a good guy—My paths are going to be too rough for any uncertain compromises or sentiments. One can never trade a soul for a bit of pottage.

Sprinkled into John's letters were the haiku of Rabindranath Tagore, but by May of 1947 he was quoting George Bernard Shaw and Plato, while still preaching about great philosophical and idealistic, yet down-to-earth, love. Plus, he had a series of recommendations of bachelor men for Kay to meet, and in the background of the letters was the constant reference to "B," Kay's ex from college who never seemed to disappear. Poor Kay, with her literally fluttering heart and graying hair. As the years passed, John referred to Kay as his *spinster sister,* as if he'd escaped becoming a spinster brother, but Asako remembered: *Kay and I ate lunch together at Cal every day, and all she ever talked about was Bobby. Bobby this and Bobby that. She held a torch for him.* As for John's pursuit of *a chain and a ball,* by June, the entire project seems to have gone sour.

Yesterday I finally pressed the point why she did not wear my ring and she wouldn't explain again (over 3 months) and wanted to call everything off.

I decided that was for the best for she can't see her way clear—she is close-mouthed and finally told me without reasonable information that it was impossible . . . I have no regrets—I gain wisdom . . .

And as to Kay's apparent moaning and indecision about the men in her life, he responded with irritation, *Kay, clear your cobwebs away,* and chafes at Kay's sentimental cliché about the *coming someday of a beautiful dawn,* retorting that *that will be when, one foot in the grave, you suddenly find wisdom . . . I don't intend to wait that long.*

Then, suddenly in November, John's golf game improved; he reports *technically breaking 90* and *just the other day—I find the gal—as cool as a cucumber—put my ring on—say she is giving up smoking—and when I told her that I told my supt. that I really wanted to get married at the first of year and him to perform the ceremony—she said "Let's plan on that." Well, that was also the first evening that she ate like a horse, and talked of everything just as she felt it and as things came to her mind, and she then went to sleep on my shoulder on the way home. That night—I was the speechless—stuttering guy—because the sudden change of affairs caught me unprepared and all my persuasive designing words were unnecessary and irrelevant . . . all of a sudden I put on all the brakes—and had a scared sense of responsibility; because as you know—I have inferiority complexes—regards stature, money, and general kind providing-ways regards those whose love I take for granted; and immediately I've been dogged with a question "can I make her fully happy in the way she might expect it"—because my life and vocation is no picnic or bed of roses . . . Mating love is a most interesting game. Let me tell you: when a gal decides decisively and with all her heart and soul—for an unknown future— that's what makes a guy humble and it will give him an incentive to climb the stars—to justify her faith.*

There remain no letters to or from Asako, though I try to imagine they existed. I can't believe John didn't write the same long-winded stuff to Asako, but maybe he knew better. If he did write, those letters were long ago destroyed; Asako had no interest or nostalgia in keeping records or memorabilia. She was *unobtrusive,* unpretentious, and reserved. John was the storyteller, garrulous, funny, and always entertaining. When John retold the story of their year long precarious engagement, usually over dinner with guests and strangers, Asako always pressed her lips together tightly and suppressed embarrassed laughter. She never protested or told her side of the story. The story was about John's pursuit, disappointment, and love, but also about Asako's reticence and what seemed over the years to solidify into their opposing personalities: spontaneous and

constrained, idealist and pragmatist, romantic and realist. It was a story with its own sort of truth, the bonding of two sides of a coin, the merging of a couple whose differences would finally care for the other and accomplish that adventure of growth, almost as John's theory of love had predicted. I wouldn't say it was easy. In fact, it never quite made sense to me, except that one always thought to bring the surprise of the rose bouquet and the other remembered to pick the flowers and to pay for it.

Years after John died, and just before her eighty-eighth birthday, I asked Asako about this old story. *What was that story about keeping Dad's ring for an entire year?*

Asako looked at me indignantly. She would finally have the last word. *Do you know how he proposed to me? This is what he said: "Come live with me in poverty."*

Waffle Iron and Vacuum Cleaner

Wednesday, August 26, 1942, Kiyo, housed with her one-year-old baby in a converted Tanforan racetrack horse stall—Barrack 20, room 18—wrote in her diary:

Today is our second anniversary, and a very disappointing one at that. I should learn by now, judging from my past two birthdays, not to look forward to any special day, for the disappointment is too great, and the hurt too deep.

Not only the fact of the evacuation but marriage itself—that is, in terms of celebrative memory—seems to have been generally a bummer; but then, guys just seem to forget. Once you get married, even if it's the most glamorous wedding of the year, it's not about you anymore; it's about them. This has got to be a sore point in many a marriage, but here further compounded by exchanging a house on Parker Street in Berkeley for a one-room horse stall. Four months previous, Kiyo stood in the rain for several hours with her baby in front of the First Congregational Church in Berkeley, waiting with the rest of the Yamashitas, and every other Japanese American in Alameda County, to board buses en route to a "relocation center." The day before, she and Sus had been emptying the house of furniture into the early morning hours, packing up their belongings, then sleeping briefly on a mattress on the floor, waking to frantically pack the rest.

To make matters more intense (notice I don't say *worse*, but it's got to be worse), the entire Yamashita family crowded into the small Parker Street house in those final days to make sure they would *evacuate* together. Sus was the first son and thus head of family, but this was *his* family; that is, Kiyo's in-laws. What a crew. There were mother-in-law Tomi, brothers-in-law John and Tom, sisters-in-law Kay and Iyo, sister-in-law Chiz and her husband Ed and six-year-old Kiku and, finally, an adopted son, Tom Misumi—twelve altogether. It must have been mild chaos. From Kiyo's sparse and concisely penned diary, we know she packed a crib and mattress and formula for her baby—justifiable and practical, considering. But from stories told, we know that for some reason the Yamashitas also packed an electric waffle iron and a vacuum cleaner. When I read the official edict *to bring only what you can carry*, the waffle iron and vacuum cleaner seem like items in a tall tale. I don't know how the group of twelve got all their stuff and a heavy vacuum cleaner from the Parker Street house, about a mile away, to the Congregational Church on Channing near the Berkeley campus, but I remember my father reminiscing about that vacuum cleaner, parked on the sidewalk with the rest of the luggage. Maybe it was a Hoover upright. The old ads say, *Give her a Hoover and you give her the Best.* Maybe they pooled their resources and gave Tomi the Hoover for *her* birthday. Kiyo was right to be upset; what woman wants a vacuum for her birthday? They were likely told that the vacuum had to be left behind, but knowing John, he may have surreptitiously tagged it, then slung it on with the luggage, hiding it under the tarp, as the truck pulled away in the rain.

I cannot find in any correspondence or documented memory any mention of the vacuum cleaner, but Kiyo makes two brief mentions of waffles in her diary, on June 4 and August 26 of 1942. The June 4 entry says that they *all went to the ironing room and had a feast of scrambled eggs and ham and waffles.* Ironing room? I think I know why the ironing room. When John told his story, he said, that of course they were the only family with these electric appliances, but when they plugged them in, they blew the fuses and shut off the lights. When this happened, he'd yell out in innocent protest through the porous wood slats, *Hey, what happened? Who did that? Not again! Someone, turn on the lights!* As if no one smelled the waffles. So with that consequence in mind, the waffle *iron* would require the requisite power supply found in the *iron*ing room. *Meet me in the ironing room, honey. You can iron while I waffle iron.*

The second mention of waffles is on August 26, the unfortunate *second wedding anniversary.* It's a concessionary entry toward the end of Kiyo's day. *Chizu planned a waffle party for our anniversary, and we all enjoyed waffles. Nobu Kajiwara made the party possible by bringing the eggs and butter, and he and Ish and Hachi were there besides the rest of us.* Maybe Chizu, and for that matter Nobu and John, knew Sus's ineptness at celebrating, and surely felt Kiyo's disappointment and difficulties caring for a baby in scarce circumstances. Or maybe any excuse for a party was necessary to subvert hopelessness. I think about that smuggled-in waffle iron and the preciously saved eggs and rationed pats of butter, and I feel that defiant strain of rebellion and extravagance that for better or worse marks the family. But then, there is Kiyo's final sentence on this day: *Sus went to play bridge at the Nishimuras and did not return until very late.* Ah well, they tried.

I wonder about the waffle iron and the vacuum cleaner, if they made it from Tanforan to Topaz, from California to Utah. You always read about Topaz and the dust storms that lifted the desert sand in blinding swirls and penetrated everything, seeped into the barracks and frosted the interiors in thick layers. You can't imagine that the Hoover upright survived such abuse. This wasn't urban household dust or even an occasional button or bug. This was grit and living creatures—scorpions—that might have ground the gears, dried up the lubricating grease, torn the bag, snuffed out the motor. Or maybe not; maybe the Hoover Company distributed their machines around Topaz to test *the Best.* Daily, Topazians swept the outside from the inside back outside. Bringing a vacuum cleaner to the Utah desert was like the surreal project of the Walrus speculating with the Carpenter, who *wept like anything to see such quantities of sand*, and wondering *if seven maids with seven mops swept it for half a year . . . that they could get it clear?* What had John thought as he shoved it onto the truck. Maybe, *What the heck, maybe it will come in useful.* Or maybe Tomi really wanted to keep it and doggedly insisted, so *urusai*, and hauled it over, and besides, *They didn't confiscate it, and who's defining what we can carry anyway?* And then later, John's amusement over the absurdity of its bulky useless presence. Good for vacuuming horseshit. The first stories I heard him tell about camp were these, chuckling in glee, as if to assure me of comic relief.

I wonder why, after packing up for storage an entire household, these two items remained unpacked. Okay, I know: someone insisted on vacuuming the empty house before finally vacating it. This idea in the face of forced evacuation seems to me so Japanese-hyphenated-American—the tacit recommendation to leave your previously occupied space cleaner than you found it. How many picnic and campsites have we left cleaner than we found them? How many rentals? Dorm rooms? Borrowed kitchens? Concentration camps?

And okay, how about waffles for a last breakfast before heading away to an uncertain future? What John would call a *sayonara breakfast.* Get some sustenance in the belly before being exiled to prison camp. I recall that one of John's favorite and most famous meals was Sunday brunch, which he believed must consist of corned beef and hash brown potatoes, eggs, sausages, bacon, and waffles with liberal amounts of butter and syrup. Waffles were special, celebratory, and I never understood why until now.

Somewhere in the Topaz desert: bits of gears and electronics, a rusty molded iron plaque in square patterns, the flat double prongs of an untethered electric plug. Somewhere in the dust and scrub this extravagance, this spontaneity, this comic relief.

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