PEONIES FOR TOPAZ

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A collection of three, interwoven short stories set in Japantown, San Francisco and the Topaz Internment Camp in central Utah during World War II. The pieces in this collection feature themes of cultural identity and the reconstruction of personal identity in times of change and crisis.

Collection includes the stories “Moving Sale,” “Evacuation,” and “Resettlement.”
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This is for Megan Elizabeth Churchill, who kicks within me as I type and who has heard every word of these stories a hundred times over.
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PART I

PREFACE
Japanese Enough

Sometimes I feel as if I’m Japanese-American only on paper. It’s mentioned on my birth certificate and on applications to college. My grandmother wrote my name in Japanese on a piece of parchment a few years ago, and I have that in my desk drawer. In one certain wedding photo, you might be able to draw a line from my grandmother, to my father, to me, holding hands, standing together under the twinkling lights at the reception, if you have “the sharp eyes” as Grandmommy would say. And, perhaps most notably, I have felt the tug of my heritage in my writing—it is the force under the words, the current that influences the ebb and flow of this project, in particular.

My thesis collection focuses on a young Japanese-American woman who is relocated with her family to an internment camp during World War II. Three stories recount the family’s physical, emotional and mental upheaval as they are removed from their Japantown, San Francisco neighborhood and transported to the middle of the Utah desert. I remember watching a documentary a few years ago that featured an internee whose family grew carnations in a valley south of San Francisco. The shock of being considered an “enemy alien” nearly overnight still brought her to tears. She was half Japanese, half Caucasian, like my father, but said that she had never really seen herself as anything but an American. She said that the relocation changed everything about her and that her identity had never been the same.

I was struck by her words, as identity is something with which I have always been fascinated. That night, I began to hear the voice of Molly, my protagonist, and I typed out a sentence that has long since been deleted, but somehow lingers on the
page, invisible to everyone but me: “I left this city—the narrow streets that rise up like mountains, the parks so often covered by a wet fog, the streetcars that buzz toward you and then click their goodbyes—all of this I left.”

My own family came to the United States a decade and a half after the war ended and I had never studied Japanese internment outside of a few chapters in a college history class. My grandparents met during the American occupation of Japan—my grandfather had served as a “belly gunner” in the Pacific, my grandmother, originally from Osaka, and much to the chagrin of her parents, worked at a beer factory near Tokyo. When my grandfather was diagnosed with cancer, the family left Japan and settled in my grandfather’s hometown of Roanoke, Texas, and took up where my grandfather left off before the war—ranching and farming.

Like many Americans with ancestral ties to other nations, assimilation and identity plays a large role in my family’s history. Though I have wanted to feel a stronger connection to my cultural heritage, my father and his sisters, out of duty, desire for acceptance, or the passage of time, have forgotten some of theirs. My grandmother, interestingly enough, did not. We joke that her house in Ponder, Texas, is “tiny Tokyo.” She has never accepted the ideas of her new home country, never understood the social customs, and, from what I know, enjoys only a few things about it, including *The Lawrence Welk Show*, line dancing and hotdogs. Grandmommy has dual citizenship, but has confessed in her later years that she does not feel American and is still, regardless of where she lives and the language she speaks, Japanese. When
she says this, there is a fire in her words and a pride that I admire but cannot hope to fully understand.

Needless to say, it is an interesting position to be in as a writer of both fiction and non-fiction, and I have wondered why I have chosen to tackle this question of identity through fiction when my own family’s story would be so fruitful a place to begin. Perhaps it is the complicated nature of my own family that has influenced me to explore these themes of identity and belonging in the imagined world of Molly and her family. Fiction allows me a freedom where I can try on the clothes of others and make-believe. Through this mimicry, I seem to find my way. And, perhaps it is my own cultural confusion that pushed me backwards in history as opposed to writing something set in contemporary times.

In what follows, I try to merge my own story of identity with an analysis of my thesis work in terms of influence, both literary and critical. Like tracing heritage through a photo of three very different generations, it is my hope that by seeing the pieces together on paper, one will be able to understand the forces that have come together to create this thesis project. And, if I do it well, one might not even need “the sharp eyes” to do so. This, at least, is my wish.

***

It was on the dilapidated trampoline down by the creek—the only respite from pesky grass-bugs—that I first recall Japanese-ness was turned into a competition. As cousins, we were all, of course, the same amount of Japanese, exactly one-quarter. But there were some markers that meant one was more Japanese than the others. My
cousins America, Stony and Houston, for example, all ate the tiny, dried fish—eyes still intact—called *chirimenjako* that my grandmother routinely sprinkled onto rice, salads and, just once, Spaghetti-o’s.

“They’re good, they taste like salt,” America said, with authority, jumping in the center of the trampoline while the rest of us focused on not getting our fingers or toes caught in the springs.

My cousins were also better at devouring the larger-than-average sushi rolls my grandmother would make and stack into an imposing mountain-like structure. The *nori* was on the outside and they were stuffed with anything from cucumber to an omelet-style egg cut into strips. Also arranged inside was something pickled and reddish-pink, not too far off from the color of the Barbie townhouse bedroom suite, and something gray, reminding me of the fleshy, rubbery quality of jarred mushrooms.

My favorite Japanese foods at the age of eight formed a short list: sushi rice with soy sauce and sesame seeds, cold soba noodle soup my father and I ate on summer evenings, and “little brown bags”—*inari*—sweetened tofu pockets stuffed with sushi rice. Nothing green, nothing pickled, nothing fishy or raw.

When it came to appearance, we were a grab bag of Japanese features mixed with more-dominant “American” ones (American is a family term and, of course, is a misnomer in itself: we are also Cherokee and Irish). Stony had sandy hair and was tall and lanky. Houston was yellow-blond with blue eyes and wide as he was tall, even as a young boy. I look like a dark-haired version of my mother. Cousin America and my younger sister, Courtney, looked the most Japanese to us, which meant they looked
most like my father and aunts—their hair was the right shade, their noses small, their eyes complete with a semi-epicanthic fold, enhancing the almond shape. In the end, my sister won: her hair was straighter, and where America was all short, chunky muscle, my sister was tiny as a sparrow.

Jumping on the trampoline, I began to feel last-place in the Japanese contest. It occurred to me that I simply wasn’t Japanese enough. At that age, our ideas of ethnicity boiled down to what we looked like and what we ate—the main cultural cues that we had received from our parents. Later that same summer, my grandmother chose my little sister to dress up in a traditional child-size kimono—the one that my Aunt Mickey wore during her last Girls’ Day celebration in Japan before leaving for the United States. It was a beautiful brocade of red and metallic gold floral. That night, I held the obi out so it wouldn’t hit the floor as she wrapped it around my sister’s tiny frame. Courtney clip-clopped through the house wearing the white, split-toed socks called *tabi* with red wooden *geta*. Grandmommy swept her hair up into a bun and inserted the elaborate *kanzashi*—red flowers and gold fringe at the end of two sticks.

There are photos of this summer night with Courtney peeking out from behind a fan, kneeling on the living room floor next to the piano. And, just one of the two of us, she in Japanese splendor, me in culottes and wearing a t-shirt that said “flamingo bingo,” complete with a half-tone rendering of a hot pink flamingo. Grandmommy’s attention to us grandkids was rare as she was not one who played or chit-chatted. She was not (and is not) warm and “grandmotherly”—her hugs, a custom to which she is unsuited, are like being temporarily grasped by the claw in a “Grab-a-Toy” game. I was
so struck by her involvement in our lives the night of the kimono that I failed to become jealous of her choice until after she had folded and wrapped the kimono up again and left. As I watched her drive away in her old Dodge Diplomat station wagon, I realized I was alone in waving goodbye, my sister having already moved on to playing Legos in the middle of the living room floor. My grandmother never offered to dress one of us up again.

***

One of my favorite scenes in Mary Yukari Water’s *The Favorites* occurs when Sarah Rexford, fourteen-years-old and visiting her grandmother in Kyoto, comes up with a new game called American Emotions to play with her Japanese cousins. Born to a Japanese mother and American father, Sarah starts life in Japan but moves following grade school to the United States in an effort by her parents to help her find acceptance “with her own kind” (Waters 5). As a child of mixed ethnicities, what is simply called “a half” in Japan, Sarah is stared at and bullied in Kyoto, a more traditional inland city far from the seaport towns close to military bases where such marriages were more common. In an attempt to seem as Japanese as possible, Sarah parodies relationships found in American movies, much to the delight of her cousins who recognize this type of dialogue from Hollywood films that sometimes air on Japanese television. Standing in the middle of her grandmother’s garden, she places her hand over her heart and says, “I care about you, son. I care very deeply” (Waters 74) and her cousins burst into laughter.
The cousins wonder why emotional phrasing is common in American movies and Sarah’s mother, Yoko Rexford, breaks in to explain, stating that Americans feel keeping emotions bottled up inside is detrimental to one’s health and, therefore, they must talk about their feelings immediately. Sarah, though, has another theory that she does not share. She feels that Americans are like “people slightly hard of hearing,” who, emotionally, are unable to pick up on the subtle nature of feelings and need “loud voices and overly clear enunciation in order to prevent misunderstandings” (Waters 75). Sarah is certain that her idea is grounded in truth because since the beginning of her visit, she has noticed that her own ability to pick up on feelings and “sense underground vibrations” (Waters 75)—hurt, confusion, frustration—that are not discussed or even hinted has dramatically increased.

This subtlety of emotion is not unlike the manner in which Mary Yukari Waters creates her stories and a trait that I have found common among several Japanese and Japanese-American writers, including, perhaps, myself. But while Waters—along with Kazuo Ishiguro, Cynthia Kadohata and others—paints her fictional world using the most controlled and lightest of hands, the resulting story is not without reverberations of emotion. Instead, it is the contrast between the restraint evident in the dialogue and thoughts of her characters with the characters’ life-altering situations and realities that draws the reader into closer communion with the protagonist.

Sensory images that focus on the natural world and play a pivotal role in the story are another commonality discovered in my readings. Ishiguro’s A Pale View of Hills, in particular, features a river by which the most meaningful and surrealistic
exchanges take place. Ishiguro’s setting is a mix of modern, concrete apartment blocks built on the site of Nagasaki’s charred ruins and an ancient river surrounded by marshy banks, tall grasses, willow trees and buzzing insects. It is to this untamed, mysterious location that an equally untamed and mysterious child, Mariko, constantly disappears and to which the protagonist—the quiet, observant Etsuko, the pregnant neighbor of Mariko and her mother—must go find her.

As the novel progresses, the river becomes increasingly dreamlike and Mariko’s behavior more and more strange. At the climax of the story, Mariko’s war-damaged and distant mother, Sachiko, drowns the young girl’s kittens in the river on the eve of their departure for the United States. Since the beginning of the story, Mariko’s concern for the future of the kittens is laid out and she often begs Etsuko to take one home or asks her mother, repeatedly, to be allowed to bring them to the United States when they move. In the only scene where a true argument occurs between the mother and daughter, Sachiko cruelly preaches to her daughter, “Aren’t you old enough yet to see there are other things besides these filthy little animals?...You simply can’t have these sentimental attachments forever” (Ishiguro 165). As she pushes the crate of kittens under the river’s flow, Sachiko laments the dirtiness of the water and the insects.

The river’s symbolic meaning shifts throughout the novel and finally becomes a place of new identity when Etsuko, searching for Mariko after the kittens are killed, crosses the bridge over the river although she is hesitant to do so. As soon as she crosses, she notes that she feels an odd sense of tranquility and looks behind her to see her shadow created by the lantern she is holding in front of her. It is here that the
reader realizes that calm, traditional Etsuko and desperate, irrational Sachiko are one and the same. Etsuko/Sachiko addresses Mariko, hiding behind a rail on the bridge, as her daughter. From this point on, the reader connects the two stories in this novel—Etsuko’s present-day life in England following her daughter’s suicide and her flashback to her life in Nagasaki—not as parallel tales but as the continuation of one woman’s story of devastation and her attempt to adjust to post-war life.

Another common stylistic marker I have discovered among these writers is the appearance of the supernatural in the everyday lives of characters. In Cynthia Kadohata’s *The Floating World*, Olivia and her family, including her complicated grandmother, travel the Pacific Northwest of the 1950s, going from job to job through what the grandmother calls *ukiyo*. Translated, this means the floating world, usually referring to the pleasure districts of teahouses, public baths and brothels in old Japan but, in this story, referring to the gas stations, restaurants, motel towns and migrant job sites “floating in the middle of fields and mountains” (Kadohata 3).

While on the road, Olivia and her three brothers listen to the grandmother’s fantastic stories of the young fireflies that invaded her childhood village in Japan, keeping everyone awake with their constant glow, and of the seven sparkling moon-clouds that crowded the sky the night that the grandmother was born. The grandmother also has premonitions about accidents and injuries during the family’s travels, which never fail to stop the driving for the night. Olivia explains that during this time in their life together, superstition was a way of life, much like “the way a group of people isolated on an island might become superstitious” (Kadohata 35). The
grandmother boils it down to the simplest of terms: too much magic was on the road. After the grandmother’s death in a motel bathroom, Olivia and her family, driving to yet another work location, undergo a strange moment of craziness where each family member takes on a trait of the deceased grandmother—the non-smoking mother lights up a cigar, the gentle father boxes Olivia’s ears, and her baby brother climbs into her lap and grimaces in a strange and eerie manner. The moment passes and the family drives beyond whatever magical moment has temporarily entrapped them, hoping to reach, this time, a permanent town and home.

In this and other works, the superstitions and uncanny abilities are not overly examined by the characters or explained. However, they do not interrupt the flow of the writing. It isn’t until the very end of Kadohata’s novel that another similar event—Olivia seeing her real father’s ghost—occurs. This, too, is mentioned and described rather matter-of-factly, making one feel that the line between real and unreal is blurred to near non-existence and the mingling of supernatural and everyday is as common as the trials and tribulations in which the characters find themselves. This, perhaps, is due to the fact that each of these novels does take place in ukiyo, which has a second Japanese meaning: change and the pleasures and loneliness that change often brings. A third connection, an allusion to a similar word meaning “sorrowful world,” is the earthly plane of death and rebirth from which Buddhists seek release.

In Waters’ The Favorites, Ishiguro’s A Pale View of Hills and Kadohata’s The Floating World, the action takes place at different times following World War II in territory that is foreign to the protagonists. The setting is a new vision of an old place
such as Sarah Rexford’s Kyoto, Etsuko’s Nagasaki or Olivia’s Pacific Northwest. These are family stories—they are multi-generational, with each relying on a different generation to carry different views on the events that occur. Because I wrote the first two stories in my collection, “Moving Sale” and “Evacuation,” before researching or reading most of these authors (I did read *A Pale View of Hills* the semester before I began working on the original internment story), it is surprising to me that my own work contains such striking commonalities. The Iwakoshi’s emotional distance in light of their life-altering situation, the images of botanicals and desert scenery on which the stories depend and Molly’s ability to sense the color of flowers with her hands came to me quite organically and I often wonder why this is so.

Prior to graduate school and this thesis project, I read only one volume of Japanese folklore, given to me by my aunt, a collection by a British museum administrator. The stories, while beautifully written and featuring an ancient Japan complete with samurai, maidens and the gods, are clearly quite different from the stories of Ishiguro, Kadohata and Waters in terms of style. I can only gather that it’s some resonant cultural memory rising through my writing— influences from family and life situations that have lain in wait for the appropriate venue.

***

Not long after my grandmother’s visit with the kimono, I received what I thought was a very Japanese gift from my Aunt Mickey for Christmas. If there was ever to be a Japanese-off between my father and his sisters, Mickey would surely have won. She was oldest and therefore had spent the greater part of her childhood in Japan. She
remembered their neighborhood in Tokyo in perfect detail, the slope of their grandmother’s roof, the tofu salesman, the temple their grandfather frequented. Mickey also still spoke some Japanese, a skill that had been forgotten by Aunt June (Junko), Daddy (Pat-san) and Aunt Amy (Amy-chan). She was the most petite and graceful of my aunts and did not carry the Texas drawl along with her as the others did. Her English was almost East Coast, clipped and proper, something that through accident or application, never failed to get her teased at family gatherings.

While incredibly talented—she could play the piano and tap dance, was an avid reader, could paint and do calligraphy, attained her doctorate and did very well financially—Mickey was also what my family dubbed “a little bit crazy.” At the time of the gift-giving, her compulsions and hypochondria had already been noticed and judged by us cousins, leaving her deflated in our eyes. I still loved her, but her unpredictable behavior and her large purse full of pills scared me. Divorced at a young age, she had no children and, while she was too old and intellectual to fit in with the cousins, she was too childlike and out-of-touch to mix well with her own siblings and their spouses. Aunt Mickey was an odd, beautiful island, and as much as I loved to sit and talk about literature and school with her, I had to be careful or I, too, would be made fun of by the cousins.

As usual, Aunt Mickey had checks written out in her flowing, graceful script hidden on the Christmas tree and one wrapped gift for each of us as well. The boys received calendars with photos of cars, America and Courtney received calendars with
kittens. Mine was the only non-flat gift and, based on the shape and size, was clearly a book.

"Open it, it’s special," my Aunt Mickey prodded as the rest of the kids tore open more gifts, the roar of Christmas at its peak.

I unwrapped a very thick collection of stories. This book came with a lavender dust jacket with an ancient-looking drawing of a man in a fishing boat taunting a large, eagle-like bird with a spear. Behind him were green cliffs, a rocky coastline and a red sun with large rays protruding to the edge of the art. *Ancient Tales and Folklore of Japan* by Richard Gordon Smith, it said, and on the inside the simple inscription, “To my niece, Mandy, from your Aunt Mickey.”

“This is a reprint, but it was first published in 1918. It’s from England, Mandy. They don’t make them here,” she said, proudly, waiting for my response.

It was beautiful. The typesetting was old-fashioned, the paper expensive and creamy, unlike any book I had at home. I had only one other hardcover book as dense, *Little Women*. Elegant, colorful Japanese-style paintings were interspersed every few stories—my Aunt Mickey called them “plates”—and I could barely squeak out a thank you before I ran off into a quiet room to read the first of the tales, one called “The Golden Hairpin.” I spent much of Christmas night reading and looking at the art. Aunt Mickey was pleased with my quick progress and I had her sound out the words that I could not pronounce.

“Repeat after me. You won’t say it right the second time unless you repeat,” she said. “KO-no-JO. Those lines you see mean to put an accent on it.” Konojo was the
name of the faithful, grief-stricken samurai who takes on the underworld to fight for the spirit of his beloved, even though she loved another. I said his name correctly.

“You should learn Japanese, Mandy,” Aunt Mickey mused. “Why hasn’t your grandmother taught you anything? You need lessons!” I stared at her dramatic eyes, high cheekbones and perfectly smooth forehead, glancing up toward her hairline. Aunt Mickey plucked her widow’s peak into a flawless semi-circle. Everything about her on the outside was symmetrical.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t like the little dried fish or seaweed, like America or Houston or Stony, I’m not very Japanese, maybe.”

“Well, not everyone likes those fish. They’re an acquired taste,” she said. “And I would argue you might be more Japanese in a different way.”

Aunt Mickey went on to explain that good Japanese (her emphasis) were accomplished and began to list out ways that this was so: doing well in school, good handwriting, grace and attention to even the smallest of details. I wrinkled up my nose.

“And don’t forget writing and literature and art, Mandy. Those are more Japanese than anything else and you are very good at those things,” she said, “like me.”

I was aware that my teachers and family lauded my ability to read, write and draw and that these were my favorite things to do. Yet the compliment that Christmas night was attached to a curse not unlike those the maidens in the Ancient Tales and Folklore of Japan experienced. If I were to be like Aunt Mickey, the most Japanese of my family, I would also be the most troubled—“a little bit crazy.” I decided to keep her
words to myself. Over time, as she began to lose sight of reality and became more and more despondent, I began to doubt her judgment on the matter entirely.

***

Dr. Hannah was clearly disappointed in some of our short stories. It seemed that half of the class had decided to write about following their favorite band around the country for the summer. Having never followed a band—anywhere for any amount of time—I didn’t fall into this category, but was worried about my creative abilities just the same.

“It’s clear that we need an infusion of creativity in this creative writing workshop. We’re starting exercises each class period. It will be added to your participation grade,” Dr. Hannah said. I was already intimidated by the workshop experience and felt that I didn’t need to have writing exercises forced down my throat every Tuesday and Thursday for an entire semester. I looked at the class, trying to pick out those who followed bands. All I did over the summer was hostess at a Tex-Mex restaurant and help with the family business. I was perturbed and slightly jealous at the same time.

“We’re starting now. Sheet of paper, take it out please,” he said, taking off his watch and messing with the timer. “Write about the first time someone did something. I want a scene. It doesn’t have to be an important first, but it can’t be related to following a band. Go.”

What is it about writing exercises and the fear of the little second hand that merges thoughts into our heads that were never there before? My hands smelled like mustard from the hot dog I had practically inhaled at the Student Government meeting
before class. I thought of hot dogs and then immediately thought of my Japanese grandmother. It was her favorite American food. She liked them with mustard and “lelish,” something that my sister and I would giggle about each time she requested extra of the condiment. I wondered how she had discovered hot dogs, why she started to eat them in the first place. Somehow, a dim memory of my great-aunt Happy’s grocery store at the edge of a dusty farm-to-market road popped into my head and I pulled together all of these things and began to write. I was surprised at how quickly it came to me, at how thoughts and things I had never seen eased themselves onto the page and were sewn together with words. I didn’t know if it was any good, but at least I was done by the time Dr. Hannah’s watch beeped.

On Thursday, Dr. Hannah handed the exercises back to us. I expected a blood bath of red pen marks but was surprised to see only a question and comment at the bottom: “Why don’t you try finishing this up? I am curious to see what happens next.” I was terrified. As an exercise, I was hoping that I would be able to file it away at the back of my folder and forget that it happened. What happens next? I thought, I don’t think I can figure that out.

I had written about a Japanese woman who visits an American grocery store for the first time in the late 1950s in search of the food her children, also new to the country, have been clamoring for since their arrival: hot dogs. I wrote about her trying to decipher the writing, picking out the buns, figuring out which jar was mustard and which was relish, counting out coins and attempting to communicate with the stony-faced market owner. It was just an exercise and I didn’t feel knowledgeable enough,
Japanese enough to write the rest. Didn’t I need to be more than one-quarter to figure out what happened next?

My experience being Japanese-American, if I could even call myself that, had been very different in comparison to what my grandmother, father and aunts faced when they moved to Roanoke, Texas, in 1958. A great number of the county’s young men had died in the Pacific, including my grandfather’s oldest brother in Bataan. While my family wasn’t welcome in Texas, according to my Aunt June’s memories, they weren’t embraced in Japan either. They were considered, as half American, barely Japanese. Mixed blood. Less than. And because my grandmother had married an American G.I., her family was shamed. The relationship was tenuous.

Aunt June had hoped for a grand welcoming in the United States—new friends, new family and a new acceptance. But on the first day of school, my father came home with a black eye and the girls were crying because the other students made fun of their shoes and their English. (Aunt Mickey knew some English, but the rest, including my grandmother, did not.)

“No one wears geta, Mother,” Aunt Mickey explained, tearfully. The girls had worn dresses and wooden flip-flops to school—a combination that was normal in post-war Tokyo. “We need real American shoes.”

Assimilation began immediately. A local missionary woman helped teach my grandmother English. My father and his sisters began attending the Methodist church where Aunt Mickey learned hymns and played the piano every Sunday. The younger children’s Japanese language soon faded. They excelled in school. The girls played the
popularity game, my father played sports. He was still beat up with almost frightening regularity by his peers and upperclassmen alike, but he learned to fight back. The girls wore their geta only at home on the farm, gathering the chicken eggs and completing other chores.

When I was young, my father warned me about how cruel kids could be, how they could judge and torment. But my classmates knew of my heritage only when my father came to open house and even that wasn’t a clear indication. Due to his broad shoulders and height, my father looks more as if he’s Hawaiian or of Polynesian descent. Teachers, perhaps noticing something slightly different about my eyes, would sometimes ask “What are you, honey,” and I would explain. “Well, well,” they would say. “Isn’t that something?”

I knew nothing first-hand of racism and I recall feeling that this acceptance was a barrier between my father and me. Where my father had struggled to assimilate—not smiling in photos for fear that his eyes would become “more squinty”—I was just another girl with dark hair.

Fearful that Dr. Hannah would dislike me if I didn’t expand the exercise into a full story and worried that I would be found out as a fake, I procrastinated until the end of the semester. After downing half a bottle of my roommate’s Boone’s Farm one night—I rarely drank—I wrote the story and walked it across campus to the English building on a cold December morning. My plan was to push it under his door and walk away.

“Well, hello there, Miss Gann. You’re an early riser like me!” Dr. Hannah, I learned, was far more cheerful one-on-one. I handed in my portfolio and he flipped
through the papers. “Good, I see that you finished up that exercise. I’m looking forward to it,” he said. “I’ll have comments in January. Come by and pick this up and we’ll talk.”

I was too ashamed to talk to him about my fears as a writer. I didn’t even know how to explain why I was so intimidated about writing about the Japanese-American experience inspired by my family. While I checked my grades after the semester ended and was pleased to see an “A,” I never went by to pick up my portfolio. I respected Dr. Hannah but was afraid to hold my graded story in my hands and re-read what I had written. I didn’t write anything “Japanese” for a very long time.

***

Two of the most complicated yet interesting critical works I have read during my time as a graduate student are Homi K. Bhabha’s *Nation and Narration*, specifically his essay at the very end, “DissemiNation: time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation” and “The Commitment to Theory” from *The Location of Culture*. Although I can’t pretend to understand everything about these texts, certain thoughts and ideas have followed me throughout the last few years, not only as a student of writing, but as a member of a culturally diverse family and an American.

A fascinating topic that Bhabha writes about (and a play on Benjamin Anderson’s work in *Imagined Communities*), is the idea that nationality is narratively created. In an interview in MELUS, Shawn Wong, one of the editors of *Aiiiiiiiii! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, published in 1974 and regarded as the first collection of Asian American writing, recalls his early years as a writing student and his realization that he didn’t know of any other Asian-American writers. While Wong states that he and his
friends weren’t out to define an Asian-American literary canon, he does suggest that they wanted to get people to take notice and find a place from which to begin their own writing. Many have suggested that in addition to creating a seminal space for discussion, *Aiiiiiiiiii!* (the title referring to the dying cry of early Asian actors in Hollywood samurai movies), added to the definition of what it means to be Asian-American and “turned a dying cry into a shout of resistance and triumph” (Partridge 91).

Bhabha’s discussion of the “third space” is also particularly interesting to me. Said’s *Orientalism*, from which Bhabha’s argument ultimately begins, shows that the concept of the “Orient” was created by Western writers and academia and, in turn, reveals more about the desires of the West than about the actual people, history, culture and philosophy of the East. Borrowing Derrida’s analysis of how oppositions in dualities structure Western thought, Bhabha argues that this set-up (West and Orient, center and periphery) implies that there is a fixed core from which culture is judged, and that is far too reductive for purposes of nationality. Instead, he proposes that nationality, ethnicities and identities are characterized by “hybridity,” a liminal space “which gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Bhabha, “The Commitment to Theory” 2389). In this “in-between” space, new cultural identities are formed, reformed and constantly in a state of becoming.
These two ideas have, over time, blended together in my mind and allowed me the courage to write as a Japanese-American. I think they have given me fuel to take my own ideas seriously enough to put on paper—something that I have not always felt.

In creating Molly’s worldview, which ultimately changes from story to story, I pulled from my grandmother’s and my father’s experiences and blended them with my own, creating my own personal “third space” in which Molly can live and gain, lose and reestablish identity. In “Moving Sale,” she is forced to see herself, for the first time, in the way outsiders view her, something that disrupts her identity for the rest of the time the reader knows her. As she and her mother sell off the trappings of their pre-war, American life, Molly rebels. She wants to keep the more recent memories of her life as a student and as a young woman, the parts of her life of which she is most proud. The next story finds Molly coming to grips with her status as an enemy alien and trying to figure out which is the real her—the Molly Iwakoshi on her birth certificate or the number assigned to her. She also takes on the role of leader in closing down the family flower shop and, for the first time, that of “Black-eyed Molly,” the girl with whom William Tamasuki is in love. Most important, she must stand up for the traditions of her ancestors; she burns the flowers in an act that could be viewed as defiant, but ultimately is creative. The final installment included in this project takes place in Molly’s new home of Camp Topaz, Utah. She struggles again with her identity and a question of authority—*which side of her is in charge of her life?* Her father is determined to keep the family together and to live by the same rules and traditions followed in Japantown. Her cousins resist and break away, not necessarily into their own understanding, but
toward a new way of life fostered by the temporality of Topaz. Molly, again, must figure things out on her own and construct an identity that fits within the space she now resides. There is no doubt that if a fourth and a fifth story were written, the reader would find Molly changing and renegotiating, trying to find out who she is in the harshest of environments.

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My Aunt Mickey passed away in May 2006. After years of prescription drug abuse brought on by her hypochondria, Aunt Mickey nearly “bled out” during a routine heart valve replacement. My family gathered around the surgeon who had been working to save her life for nearly four hours. He had not had time to change clothes and Mickey’s blood soaked through part of the surgical gown near his own heart. My grandmother, confused and distraught, began to ask questions in Japanese, temporarily forgetting her English. The doctor explained that Aunt Mickey’s heart muscle was the consistency of ground meat, an image that has, without a doubt, stuck with all of us.

“You can visit her, but it doesn’t look good. I have her sewn back up and, remarkably, she’s awake. But her heart won’t beat without the machine and I don’t know if she will even last the night,” he said.

I had come straight from my night class when I heard that my parents were still at the hospital, waiting for news of Mickey’s surgery. During class, my professor had passed out our mid-term papers and I was overjoyed with my grade. Finally, I felt that I was getting the hang of writing in a master’s-level class. I had the paper folded in my
purse when I arrived and hoped that when the surgery was over, I would be able to read my professor’s comments to Aunt Mickey.

I knew she would be interested in the topic—she loved European literature and had been keenly interested when I told her I was going to be working on a master’s degree in English and creative writing. Aunt Mickey had wanted to work on a master’s in English herself but had acceded to the wishes of her parents and became a pharmacist instead. Because she was the only other person on my father’s side of the family to complete an undergraduate degree, much less do post-graduate work, she understood what I was facing as a student and had been very excited when I told her my plans. While I was still uncomfortable around Aunt Mickey—her rants about illnesses and her loosening grip on reality—literature remained the one topic with which we could connect. Talking about writers and their art, she would light up and, for a little bit, become almost normal again.

My sister and I held hands and went into the ICU room together. We washed our hands and forearms for longer than 30 seconds, singing “happy birthday” in our heads as suggested by the sign above the sink. Courtney spoke with her first as I stood half in the hallway, half in the tiny cubby of a room. Nurses passed me and gave me a tight-lipped smile. Courtney had asked me what she should say as we washed our hands and I hadn’t any idea. Now, I listened as she explained that she was engaged to be married and showed Aunt Mickey the ring. I watched as my aunt stared at Courtney’s hand. She didn’t look the same—her face was bloated and yellow, her hair a messy mass of greasy black across the hospital bed pillow.
As Courtney edged her way out and I made my way to Mickey’s bedside, I saw what Courtney had been looking at as she tried to talk with our aunt. Aunt Mickey’s scar was exposed—red and oozing across her chest. The skin beneath something that resembled Saran-wrap was the same jaundiced color with the added hue of a red-orange iodine glaze. Aunt Mickey shook her head “no,” as if to say, “don’t look at it, Mandy.” I knew that just beyond those stitches lay her heart and its proximity to me made me shake.

I wanted to tell her that she would get better, but looking at her face, I knew that she knew more about her condition than even I did. I didn’t want to talk about my upcoming marriage and the wedding plans—the very idea felt silly to discuss. She knew nothing of my career and I didn’t care enough about it to bring it up. So, I told her that I loved her and then I talked to her about my class for the semester. To anyone else, it was frivolous, but she seemed interested. Her eyes opened wider and I could tell that she was listening. I told her about struggling through Proust and Tolstoy. I explained that I chose to focus my mid-term paper on Robert Musil’s *The Confusions of Young Torless* and paraphrased my professor’s comments at the end of it. I talked about how hard it was for me to find a topic and how I had stayed up all night reading through criticism until it finally hit me. Aunt Mickey nodded and I held her hand, which was small and clammy in mine.

The nurse motioned to me and I said goodbye to my aunt. It was the last time I ever spoke to her, the last time I saw her alive. I watched as she closed her eyes to rest and I told her I would be back, later, to see her again.
That night, from the time I got home to the early morning, I reread a large portion of *Ancient Tales and Folklore of Japan*, the book that had followed me to college and then to several apartments as I job-changed and bounced through my twenties. I looked at each of the illustrations in the book again, realizing for the first time how violent they were. Maidens lay bleeding off the edge of cliffs, samurais shook their own decapitated heads at dishonorable family members, and wizened old men plunged swords into their stomachs. And while the folklore was an interesting portrayal of the ancient ideas and codes of Japan, I regretted never learning more about my heritage through literature. The book was written by an Englishman who spent a good portion of his life in Japan, collecting antiquities for the British Museum. The tales were based on the stories he heard and I wondered how accurate Sir Richard Gordon Smith had been in his journals. I thought of the things that he collected, shipped back to his homeland in wooden crates. Where did he find these things—were they from temples, from sacred sites? I wondered what else was out there, having never focused my reading efforts on anything by a Japanese or Japanese-American author. I felt that I was missing a huge piece of my own history.

Aunt Mickey’s funeral service was on a hot, windy day. It was open casket and she didn’t look like the porcelain-faced doll of my childhood anymore. Her hair was thin and fluttery around her head in odd ringlets, her face waxy. I was left her piano and a box of books. At the front of each book, she had written her full name and the date in her perfect handwriting. I pointed this out to my father and he nodded, opening a box of a hundred or so pencils. Each one had her name written on it in the thinnest of
permanent marker, reminding me of the man at the State Fair who writes people’s names on grains of rice. He said there were more of them. Everything was labeled in her house in the same way.

“I didn’t understand how bad it was, Mandy. I didn’t understand what she was going through,” my father said.

In the fall semester, I decided to use one of the folktales as a starting point for a story that I had to write. It was a daunting task and I was proud of the final product. The following spring, I read a book that my aunt had surely read, *A Pale View of Hills* by Kazuo Ishiguro. I finished it in one afternoon in the hammock, under the pecan trees, almost a year after her death. It is one of my favorite books and tells of Etsuko, a Japanese woman who leaves Nagasaki for Great Britain and whose life doesn’t take the path that she thinks it will. The narrator’s identity, in the end, is the same as the narrator’s former friend in Nagasaki, a woman whose reality is disjointed and whose faith in the customs of her people is broken. The past and present overlap and the confusion and devastation Etsuko experiences made me think of my grandmother, my father and aunts, even my own self in a different way.

I wish I had believed my aunt when she told me that I was like her. I wish I had thanked her and taken her seriously. Even when she never truly understood her own, she tried to help me gain some knowledge of my identity. I am not Japanese-American the way my father is, nor even the way my cousins are. I like to believe that there is space enough, room enough to be more than one thing or the other. And I would like to see my identity as not a sum of my family’s history—not tales of the Orient or even
disapproval followed by assimilation—but something else that can be created by me, narrated by me. Even if I’m only one-quarter and I still don’t like the *chirimenjako* my grandmother offers me at lunch, giggling and feigning shock when I push the bowl away. Even if I’m not Japanese enough.
Works Cited


PART II

STORIES: *PEONIES FOR TOPAZ*
Moving Sale

Everything felt different in the dark. The two palm-sized china terriers I’d received for my tenth birthday, wooden salt-and-pepper shakers in the shape of roosters that sat on the breakfast table every morning, our gold-etched tea set—these items were cold and foreign, some other person’s knick-knacks, at five a.m. A candle in a jelly jar anchored each corner of our blanketed space, but it wasn’t enough light to determine what I was unwrapping. Titles of books were lost to me, so I ran my fingers over the embossed covers like one who is blind, trying to read by touch. Several times I would remove the newspaper from an item and, if I couldn’t recall what it was by the size and weight, I would walk on my knees across the dew-soaked sheet to ascertain its identity by candlelight. With the San Francisco early-morning fog creeping in around me and strangling any glow from the corner gaslight with its damp hands, I was thankful for this one spot of clarity.

“You brought my little dogs, Mother?” I hadn’t missed them from my room. They were white with tan spots. The male stood proud and alert sporting a blue collar, while the female—his wife, I always figured—was in a sitting position and had a perky pink bow in front of her right ear. Had I noticed their absence from the windowsill, I would have figured that they went into one of the suitcases she was preparing for the departure.

“Molly, keep your voice down,” she said in Japanese. She usually spoke English outside of the home, but since every other person diligently unpacking and arranging
items for the sale around us was also Japanese, there was no need for a façade. Mother’s solemn tones from the other side of the blanket wove itself into the soft symphony of voices around us. We were out before the Japanese curfew was lifted; this was dangerous. Others had been arrested for even less. But we needed to find a good place at the sale, so we had left our home at four o’clock, pushing a cart so overloaded it threatened to topple at every turn, sneaking down our own street like criminals.

After staring at the china figurines by candlelight, my eyes became unaccustomed to the dark again and it took a few seconds for me to locate Mother’s gray, stooping figure. I was too old to be keeping such trinkets. If this were any other moving sale, I might have let them go. But it isn’t, I reminded myself yet again. I felt another snap in my heart, a foot stepping on a newly-fallen twig, a feeling to which I was sadly becoming accustomed.

“I think I want to take these with me,” I whispered.

“There is not room in the suitcases. Keep unwrapping. The sun will be up in an hour.” Her words were muffled and I realized that she was leaning her entire body inside the cavity of the cardboard box my father brought home from the local appliance store. He had dragged it into the middle of the living room floor two days earlier and we stood there, staring at the first of the boxes that would eventually hold a great many of our earthly possessions. The possessions that weren’t necessities.

“It’s sure big,” I had commented. I was the first to speak.
“Shipping box for a radio console, Molly. I think it will fit on the cart. You and mother can use it to take things to the sale.” Papa looked tired. He took off his small, wire-rimmed glasses and rubbed his eyes until the tender capillaries swelled red.

“I am so sorry that I will not be able to come with you. I cannot close the shop so close to the, the—” It was unusual for my father to lose his English. I watched his face as he searched for the proper word. He always did the newspaper crossword on Sunday mornings and as he thought on a particularly challenging number, he would close his eyes, lift his chin to the ceiling and drum the eraser-end of the pencil against his lips. “The end, I guess,” he concluded as he opened his eyes and looked around the room.

Mother moved closer to him, laid her head on his shoulder. Her perfect black curls shifted and I could make out the beauty mark in the shape of a thin heart on her jawbone. As a child, I thought that because Mother and I favored each other so much, sharing the same low-bridged nose and cherubic lips, my matching beauty mark was just slow in growing. I finally resorted to drawing it on in first grade with eyebrow pencil.

“I will start packing, Father.” She stroked his arm. “Do not worry about this anymore tonight. It is time for dinner.”

After I went to bed, Mother started the unknitting of our lives. Throughout the night, she silently went through drawers in the living and dining rooms. When I awoke, I asked her, in disbelief, how long she had been up. We did not have enough cartons yet, so things were stacked in odd configurations that I knew only Mother understood.
“All night, Molly-chan. I started and could not stop.”

I stared at my tiny, willful mother and offered to get her some tea. She pointed to a cup still steaming on the table next to where she knelt, sorting through our silverware. “Go to school. Help your father after work. I can take care of this.” Guiltily, I grabbed a piece of bread, spread it with jam, and left for the cross-town commute to my early-morning botany class.

By the time I completed classes and helped close the family flower shop for the night, our tiny apartment, even much of my bedroom, was empty. The armoire and china hutch stood like lost children in the corners. A few things were left for me to help with—pack my clothes, roll up rugs, sort through a few drawers and take down curtains—but she had accomplished the majority of the task by herself.

“Twelve years in twenty-four hours,” she said while washing her hands in order to prepare a late dinner.

Four designated areas existed. In the dining room were the items that we would sell. In the middle of the living room, on a rug adorned with red roses, sat the things that would go into storage at a non-Japanese friend’s home on the other side of town. At the foot of the stairs that led to the street was the mountain of items to throw out. The smallest collection was not in boxes but in open luggage and carefully arranged at the foot of my parents’ bed.

Because I hadn’t helped, I didn’t know what was to go where. I realized, suddenly frightened, that anything from our lives could be in these crates.
That morning of the sale, before sunrise, I slipped the terriers into the front pockets of my apron, one on each side to keep them from clinking together, and forced myself to continue my chore. I would unwrap other things that felt familiar, things that if I had taken them to the candle, I would have discovered some nostalgic importance. *All paths in life are ultimately chosen*, my grandmother said to my mother in letters from Osaka and my mother repeated tirelessly to me. I chose not to look and even slid my hands into my gloves again. I didn’t want to feel anything else until I absolutely had to.

In early January 1942, one full month after Pearl Harbor, we were given numbers. My parents’ number was 12,003; mine was 15,662. I didn’t understand the reason for two numbers until Papa explained that when he was forced to register our family, he had listed us as two separate branches—an *Issei* (those not born in the United States) Iwakoshi family—Takauki and Mitsuko—and *Nisei* (first generation) Iwakoshi family of one, me. Because rumors of detention centers had already spread through Japantown, he thought that my separate number, along with my American birth certificate, would allow me to stay in San Francisco, continue school at Berkeley and take care of the flower shop.

The rumors proved true: in February 1942 we learned of Executive Order 9066. 120,000 Japanese were commanded to move from newly-sanctioned military zones, roughly the entire west coast, areas where the military could deny access to certain groups of people. We were now dubbed “potential enemy aliens.” Two months later, in
a spring storm, my father stood with other men in raincoats and soaked hats, clustered around a damp, curling poster nailed to a telephone pole near our home and flower shop. It read that the heads of the households were required to meet at the San Francisco Civil Control Station to hear when and to where they would be relocating.

Lower numbers would be leaving first, higher numbers later, but all numbers would be going. Our fates were ultimately learned through soaked paper, long, curving lines and curt government employees. On the evening of April 26th, my father returned home from his appointment at the Civil Control Station. He hung up his hat, placed baggage and name tags bearing our family numbers on the coffee table and took my mother into their bedroom. I heard her sharp cry and muffled Japanese. I waited for fifteen minutes on our brocade loveseat, counting the feathers of the brilliant blue and navy peacock painted on the screen hanging above our radio. Eighteen elegant plumes, the age I would be next birthday. When I heard their footsteps, I dug my nails into my own hand as a reminder to draw the tears back into my eyes, keep the shaking from my voice. Papa solemnly announced they would be moving first and I would be leaving with my cousins, later in May, and I sat like a stump, feet rooted, toes curled into the rug.

"Molly-chan, this will happen so fast, five days. I do not have time to close down the shop entirely—you and your cousins will have to finish this for me," he said. "I am so sorry, I thought I was doing right."
I couldn’t make our pain worse by falling apart. But, I cried later in my bed, silenced, I hoped, by the sounds of the Glen Miller Orchestra record, turning around and around on the portable on my desk.

The following evening, we ate dinner quickly. My cousin Notiko and I cleared the table, not even bothering to scrape the rice off the plates, leaving it to harden and stick, and settled back into our places at the dining room table for the family meeting.

“We have a few options before the move,” Papa said. My aunt, the widow of my father’s brother, began to choke up at the word “move.” Her cheeks had been consistently wet since Pearl Harbor and out of reflex both of her children pushed their table napkins toward her.

“We can store our things in the government warehouse—”

“Uncle Takauki—do you honestly believe that we’ll see our things again?” The government had offered spaces in a storage facility—first come, first served. Yet, my other cousin, Tommy, heard rumors that the government was planning to take all warehoused items and sell them to profit the U.S. war effort. Stories like this were rampant in our neighborhood. Since the bombing, the streets of Japantown had grown tense and uneasy. American flags were hung outside apartment windows in a show of patriotism, shopkeepers kept smiles painted across their faces, but in kitchens and bedrooms, whispers created a background static, electric and anxious.

“Tommy, do not interrupt your uncle,” Aunt Hanna said quietly.
“Tommy hears many things, Hanna. He may be correct. So, the Methodist church has offered space in their attic and Mr. Nolan has offered his storage shed. Mother, what do you think?”

My mother poured Aunt Hanna a cup of tea and picked up a tear-soaked napkin, pushing it into the pocket of her apron. “Father, I feel safe with Mr. Nolan. We have known him for many years and he has always been honest,” she said.

“Yes, he is a good man,” Papa said. Iwakoshi Flowers was opened the second spring after my parents’ arrival with financial support from Mr. Nolan’s bank and the emotional support of Mr. Nolan himself. Mother had told me many times of receiving generous baskets of food during their first “starvation year” of business. Mr. Nolan’s wife had also convinced mother to attend “English Betterment for Ladies” at the local Methodist church, the church my parents later joined, much to the chagrin of family in Osaka.

“Yes, Mr. Nolan will take good care of what we cannot sell,” Mother said.

“Sell?” This was the first I had heard of selling anything. We had talked a few times of what could happen if we were made to relocate, but for some reason, I thought that we would be able to load up a moving truck and take most of our things with us.

“Molly, the Civil Control Station man said we can only bring what we can carry. Anything extra, he said, will be disposed of before we get on the buses.” Father said. “Furniture—the good furniture—will go into storage. Everyone can have a carton or
two, perhaps, as well. But, only the most important things can go to Mr. Nolan’s. We will have to sell the rest.”

With this, we sat silently in the dim dining room. It was past the recently established Japanese curfew and the city around us was dark and still. I imagined that in the townhouses and apartments of Japantown, known as Nihonmachi to those who lived there, other families were performing the same act of sitting and staring at what to keep and what to lose. Prayers were said—maybe to God, maybe to Buddha—Bibles opened, incense burned. The more diligent were writing lists in graceful Japanese characters or in English cursive, blue-black ink seeping into paper. 2,600 San Francisco families of Japanese descent, the Issei stoic and oddly accepting, the cultural norm of the old country, the Nisei confused and angry, clutching birth certificates that, in the end, were as useless as the tissue paper that I wrapped around bouquets at my father’s flower shop.

By sun-up, fifteen more families had joined us with their belongings on the lawn of the local elementary school, a grand total of thirty or so altogether, ready for customers. There was barely a strip of grass between us, and our possessions, despite our best efforts, were a jumbled collage, layer upon layer of everything you could ever find in a home, Japanese or otherwise. A hoard of buyers, mainly antique dealers looking for “oriental collectibles” and your run-of-the-mill junkers, descended upon us. Through the morning, some families would run out of items to sell, gather up their
blankets, and walk away, looking back at the rest, still consumed by the crowd. More families immediately replaced them.

Tommy was in charge of the hagglers. Notiko and I wrapped sold pieces and handed them to customers, counting the money. My mother stood quietly by, still tired from her packing marathon and our early morning. She would occasionally stoop down and look inquisitively at an item, move it to a new spot on the blanket, touching it one last time before it disappeared forever. The tea set, gold chrysanthemums creating a glare in the sunlight, was the first object that caught a buyer’s eye. As a child, my mother had taught me how to gracefully serve tea with that set, a skill I rarely used but treasured just the same.

“Give you this for it,” a redhead boy no older than me held out two quarters. Tommy looked at my mother who turned away.

“Seventy-five.” Tommy said and the boy reached into his pocket without complaint.

Notiko and I rolled the teacups in newspaper again and placed them into the new owner’s paper sack.

“Careful, there. Don’t break ’em,” he said to me.

Before I could think of anything to say, he was gone and Tommy was speaking to the next face in the crowd. Mother was kneeling on the ground, pretending to busy herself with straightening Papa’s old ties. I stroked the head of the left-pocket terrier and tried to gather my thoughts. Things were moving too fast, it seemed.
“Molly, reach over there and grab those hats, will you?” Tommy pointed toward the far left corner of our blankets. When I picked up Notiko’s hats, I discovered a layer of my textbooks. They were from my first semester horticulture and botany classes—my favorite subjects in school—and had been kept on the built-in-bookshelves in the living room. These books were heavy with elegant drawings of roots and leaves, colored plates with petal structure, cross-cuts of stems and branches and, just touching them, I was reminded of quiet Sunday afternoons, studying on the small balcony off of the living room. The fall semester had been beautiful and I had felt as happy as I ever had been. I quickly found my way within the small Horticulture department and spent time at the Spin-Top Diner across from the main laboratory, chatting with friends and drinking Shirley Temples. Mother made me all-new clothes to wear to school events, smart pleated skirts and tie-front blouses, even knitted a scarf in blue and gold for me to wear to the football games. Although I still lived at home (most Nisei girls did until marriage), I felt grown up and could see my life spreading out before me like a fan.

I could not let a stranger leave with my memories. Taking advantage of the crowd, I slipped unnoticed to a spare box, placed a stack of three books inside and covered them with a pillowcase. And because I thought no one was watching, other things were snuck back into this box throughout the morning.

“Your mom’s going to be mad, Molly. Books are heavy—how will you fit other stuff into your suitcases? What else are you hoarding?” Notiko was standing over me, hands on hips, blocking the sun, her black bouffant backed with a corona of light. Poking out of the sheet was a box of colored pencils that I used on my cell-structure
drawings and two camel-colored notebooks filled with creamy, blank paper. The husband-and-wife terriers were wrapped in paper again, nested at the top so they wouldn’t break. Making up the majority of the bulk, though, was a photo album of pressed leaves. Father and I had traversed the city, looking up trees in a field guide and gathering specimens. I remembered staying up late to type out labels with scientific name and nomenclature and glue the dried leaves in alphabetical order. For my efforts, my notebook received the highest grade and was temporarily put in the lab’s display case.

Although I know she was trying to be helpful, I took offense. “What do you have in your pockets, Notiko?” I jabbed my finger at her bulging apron pouches. I saw the outline of lipstick tubes. “You are bringing extra things, too.”

“Lipstick’s smaller than books.”

I had no response to this and placed the lid back onto the box.

My father’s tools left quickly, as did my portable phonograph. My mother’s delicate silken slippers embroidered with lemon-colored, fluttering butterflies were grabbed up by a man with a stubby cigar and equally stubby fingers. A few women in high heels that sank into the damp earth hovered over our things, pursing their lips and counting change. Winter coats, cheerful red galoshes, long-since-read magazines, terracotta flowerpots and the wire rack that they sat in, the bowl of my goldfish that had died the year before, Tommy’s big band records, Notiko’s woolen fabric remnants, kitchen towels embroidered when I was bored on rainy days, tiny starched pinafores
from my childhood—it felt like a thousand pieces of us flying up and away from those bed sheets and quilts.

In the end, we would sell even those.

By 11 a.m., we were done. The few things that didn’t sell, we gave away. I tried to lift my box back onto the cart Papa gave us from the flower shop, but was so exhausted, I couldn’t. Tommy silently picked it up, then clicked his tongue in disapproval. I tried to explain but stopped when Mother happened to look up from counting change. She still didn’t know about my box of “necessary” unnecessary items.

In single file, we made our way back down the steep the hill to our homes. For our efforts, we had collected a total of thirty-two dollars. Out of cousinly devotion, Tommy pretended that the cart was light as a pillow and that it wasn’t pulling him down the steep hill like a runaway streetcar.

As we walked through the familiar streets of Japantown, I thought of what I could give up if absolutely forced to, but determined that I couldn’t choose just yet. *Maybe we won’t have to leave in the end and all this was for nothing.* I imagined a letter coming in the mail, stating that Roosevelt had changed his mind and we would be able to stay. The whole street would celebrate and then life would go back to the way it had been. I would need those things then, wouldn’t I? We could buy new sheets and shoes, teacups and kitchen towels. *Memories can’t be bought back,* I thought as I hid the box in the corner of my bedroom closet.

* * *

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Mr. Nolan arrived that evening after the moving sale. He politely tipped his hat to me when I came out from my bedroom to say hello.

“Is this little Molly, Mr. Iwakoshi? Has it really been this long?”

“Yes, this is my daughter, Molly. She’s a freshman at Berkeley. She studies horticulture.”

“Very smart young lady. I heard that the university moved up finals a week or two for Japanese students,” Mr. Nolan said.

“Yes, she will be taking those the day before she leaves San Francisco to meet up with us,” my father answered.

I watched Mr. Nolan look around at our blank-walled apartment. “Do you know where you will be going yet?”

“I hear the Tanforan racetrack first—they’ve turned the horse stalls into housing. But that is only temporary. Next is a camp, somewhere.” My father said the word camp with trepidation. He and Mother had been only calling it “the place” since receiving word. To me, “camp” sounded too happy. One chooses to go to camp, I kept thinking.

While Papa and Mr. Nolan took furniture downstairs to a laundry truck borrowed from another soon-to-be-departing family, Mother and I went from room to room to collect the last of the boxes and scoot them across the floor toward the door. As I steadied the hall tree I had bumped with a box, I heard her in my bedroom, opening the tiny closet door and letting out an exasperated sigh.

“Molly! What is this? Is this stuff you brought back from the sale?” She had found my box.
My stomach sank. In the rush to get to class and work, I had forgotten to take the box to the cold-storage room of the flower shop. I would have been able to keep it there, undiscovered, until after my parents left for Tanforan.

“I’m sorry!” I called out to silence. Mother came out of my room, one hand on her hip, the other on her cheek. We were both exhausted and sweat formed tiny seeds on the tips of our matching noses.

“You know it will not fit. Your father just said they have room for one more carton—the one with our kitchen things.” She shook her head. “I guess you can give it away to someone at school?”

“But, Mother—”

“Molly, we are all so tired. Mr. Nolan is helping us as a favor, a generous favor. I know you do not see this as fair—”

“It’s not fair. I don’t see it as fair because it’s not.”

“This is the way it is. I packed up those things because I was afraid that you would not be able to do it on your own. I know how hard it is to leave someplace.”

“You left Japan because you wanted to,” I said. “I don’t want this! No one wants this!”

I was surprised at my tone and wanted to gulp the words back into my mouth. Mother’s face remained stern and she walked past me to the door to let Papa and Mr. Nolan in.

“Do we have everything?” Mr. Nolan asked.
“Only this box is left,” my mother said. She pointed to the one containing pots and pans she hoped to use when we returned.

“Good. I’ll put these in the passenger seat. Takauki, I suppose this is goodbye for awhile.”

“Yes, for a while,” my father replied.

We walked as a group down the stairs and to the waiting truck. Bugs flickered around our heads on their way to the streetlight above. I leaned back against the red brick of our flower shop and looked up to the windows of our apartment, struck that this is the light that people saw when they drove by at night. When they used to drive by at night, I corrected myself. I couldn’t recall ever looking up at our home from this angle. Had I taken in our golden windows at night before?

We shook Mr. Nolan’s hand and said our goodbyes.

“Thank you, sir,” I said.

“It’s not a problem. I’m sorry you have to—” the banker shifted his weight, “I’m sorry that you have to do this. I’ll take good care of your things.” He got into the truck and drove away. We watched as the red lights disappeared up the hill.

As we silently walked back up to our apartment, I listened to my parents’ steps—one set heavy, the other set light. I shivered and realized that I was shaking. I felt like dice in someone’s hand.

I eventually fell asleep on the pallet where my bed had once been. In the hour or so before bedtime, Mother spoke to me as little as possible, and guilt tumbled stones in my chest and stomach. To squabble over a few silly books, the night before they
leave, I thought as I drifted off. I wanted to walk into their room and apologize, bury my head into my mother’s shoulder, but the house was noiseless and I didn’t want to wake them before what promised to be a very long day ahead.

I dreamed that night of dusty, dull brown earth and our things scattered everywhere. It was my job to collect them in one central location, under a lone scrub of a tree, but everything kept moving around me, lifted up by a circling wind. Frustrated and angry, I picked up clods of dry earth, intent on hurling them at something, anything. I focused my fury on the flat peach-colored horizon, but the lumps turned into more dust as soon as they left my hands.

I think I woke up and then fell back into the dream a hundred times, like one swimming up to the surface for air only to dive back under again. I heard “she’s asleep” and the sound of footsteps in my dream but when I lifted my head from the pillow, I stared out only at darkness in my room and thus closed my eyes to everything around me.

Papa didn’t want me to walk them all the way to the “collection station” where the buses would be waiting. Instead, we would eat our morning meal together and we would walk to the corner of Isabel and Fremont, where I would turn to go to class and my parents would continue on. My father had deemed it “too unsettling” for me when he had helped Tommy drop off Aunt Hanna the day before. After they returned, I watched my father hug Tommy—right there in the middle of the store where I was sweeping—and then Tommy left, walking the block back to their apartment with his
head down and his hands squeezed into fists. He didn’t return to work for the rest of the afternoon. Father said nothing but kissed me on the forehead and retreated to the back room to pay the last of our bills.

My parents looked like they were going on a trip. Papa was in his blue suit, he carried his pocket watch and wore his grey felt fedora. His glasses were clean—without a smudge of pollen from the shop or dust from our packing—and I noticed he had shined his shoes. He brought four large suitcases out of their bedroom and a leather briefcase full of our important papers, letters and photos. Mother looked pretty for such a sad day. Her exasperation toward me had dissipated in the night and she tried to turn her lips up into a smile. She wore her navy blue dress with the white chevron pattern and had curled her hair into tight buds. Papa helped her put on her best coat and tested the suitcases to see which would be the lightest for her.

“These two, Mother. Don’t forget your basket,” he said.

“Thank you, Father. Can you get those bags? Perhaps Tommy can help us?” Mother looked concerned. I tried to pick up one my father’s suitcases, but could only lift it an inch off of the ground. The latches looked strained and he had wrapped so much twine around the bag, I knew he would only be able to take it off with a pocketknife.

“Mother, open the door if you can. Molly, do you have your notebook for class?” Papa herded us through the door and down the stairs. We made our way down the street, my father a few steps behind. He waved me off when I stopped to help.

We passed by the shops and homes my parents had watched grow and change over twenty years. Mother gently said the names aloud as we passed by the places
owned by our family friends and, each time, I heard my father say "hai, hai" in a sort of agreement. Every so often, Papa would blurt out reminders to me.

"Molly—remember the city curfew. Lock the doors immediately when you go inside the house."

"Hai, Papa."

"Get together with Tommy and Notiko after class. Go through the list of what you need to do for the shop."

"Yes, I promise."

"Get everything you need from registrar’s office—do not forget transcripts, maybe a letter from the dean. You might need these—"

"Papa, yes, I know," I said. He shook his head yes but kept going through his mental list with me.

When we reached our corner, I hugged my mother goodbye first. My father propped the bags against a building, took my shoulders in his hands and squeezed.

"Now, Molly-chan. Here we are." Papa pulled me in tighter against his chest. I opened my eyes as he held me and looked at the delicate curves of his ear and the few gray hairs on his temples, standing straighter and thicker than the rest. "If I could spare you this, I hope you know that I would," he whispered. I heard my mother choke back a sob behind me. I forced my eyes to look down the hill at the trees bending over the street. Groups of other families were walking in the same direction, slowly, carrying bags over their shoulders, baskets over their arms.
“I wish I could go with you now,” I said. Mother came in close and wrapped her arms around the two of us. I was safe within our little huddle and worried that if they stepped away from me, my body would fall open like a rose, but my parents unfolded themselves from around me and dutifully picked up their bags. Mother mouthed *I love you* in Japanese.

I watched them as they slowly trudged away down the sidewalk, side-by-side. My only solace was that they were together. I stood and scratched this day into my heart. I noted the heaviness of my limbs, the childish desire to run after them, tug at their clothes and beg to be picked up and the altogether new impulse to claw and tear anything close to me, scrape paint of buildings with my fingernails, rip the awnings with my teeth, break windows with my elbows. I could rise up, bigger than my body.

My father suddenly stopped walking and turned around.

“One more thing, Molly,” he said, loudly, although he was no more than a quarter of a block away. “I left some things, clothes, in our bedroom closet. Do not worry about them—just put them in the trash at the foot of the stairs. Things I do not need.” He paused, his shoulders tugged down with the weight. I wanted him to say more, but I didn’t know what I wanted to hear. Papa nodded and tried to smile. “I’m proud of you,” he said before he turned away again.

I knew that Mother had packed his clothes, meaning that every sock and undershirt fit perfectly. She had starched and ironed all of their clothing flat and then rolled them into the tightest bundles possible. When she was done, her dresses were
the size of baby bottles. She had shown me her handiwork with Papa’s clothes. His suitcase looked like a freshly opened box of cigars in shades of navy and brown.

I ran all the way home. As I passed family friends, they said my name, inquired what was wrong. I said nothing and kept sprinting through Japantown until I reached home. My legs burned. I saw Tommy and Notiko inside the shop, readying for the day, but didn’t stop to say good morning. I pounded up the steps in my heels and straight skirt and fumbled with the lock. Once inside I ran into my bedroom and threw open the closet. My chest ached for breath. *Gone.*

I searched the house, finally ending up in my parents’ bedroom. Because their room faced the setting sun and was always dark in the morning, I had to open the wooden blind slats fully to see anything at all. Each corner was bare, so I opened their closet door. There, on the floor, was the neatly folded pile of my father’s clothes: two pairs of trousers, a pinstriped vest, two shirts, an older pair of black leather shoes, the leather soles soft and scuffed. His favorite tie. Beneath it all: a framed photo of the flower shop, my father young and hopeful under the freshly-painted sign. Also, a small book of Japanese poetry. I touched all of these things, rubbed the marigold-colored tie against my cheek like I did as a child. I opened the book and buried my face in the crease, smelling the must and old ink. The characters were tiny and the paper thin. It was Yukari, my father’s favorite.

*Pale smoke rises / From the leaves I burn / The sight of my people / I see in myself.*
And, high on the shelf, I saw the box. I didn’t need to move it from side to side to know that it was empty.
Because all of our furniture was either sold or in storage, my cousins and I slept between damp wooden crates of blooms on the workroom floor, sharing breathing space with dahlias and carnations, daisies and tiger lilies. We were living at Iwakoshi Flowers and I couldn’t bear to write my parents back and let them know that only two days following their departure and after Tommy and Notiko moved in with me for safety, our landlord—an elderly widower my mother cooked for on occasion—asked for the apartment keys a full month early. Even in late spring, San Francisco grew cold at night and the flower crates, filled with wet cloth to keep the blooms fresh until sale, seeped a chilly dew that inevitably soaked the edges of our quilts.

The fragrance of the room was at first a lovely, perfumed sweetness that tickled my nose and spread into my pillow, but later I became adjusted to it and longed even more for the familiar scents of the home I had lost. The aroma of freshly grated ginger root. The smell of Lucky Strike smoke that was permanently captured in my father’s wool fedora. The tiny sachets of licorice star anise sent by my grandmother in Osaka and meant to keep evil away. At night, when the moonlight began to slip through the small, high window in the workroom and paled the petals, I longed only for my bedroom and the days when I drifted off to sleep to the soft steps of my mother in the kitchen preparing the tea kettle for the next morning and the sound of my father’s radio programs turned so low they were no more than a calming buzz.
To make up for this lack that we all felt, in one way or another, we would lie on our pallets and talk in the dark before drifting off into uncomfortable sleep.

“Mr. Tamasuki called today, Molly, after you went to your test,” Tommy said from his bed a few days before our scheduled departure to the holding camp. “He said that the peonies were going to be cut and would be delivered tomorrow morning. He told me to tell Uncle that he appreciated his business all these years.”

“He’s a good man. When does he leave? Did he say?” I asked. I tried not to sound eager. I wanted also to ask who would be delivering the flowers, but didn’t dare. It wasn’t the time to indulge a silly schoolgirl’s crush, but I couldn’t help but think of Mr. Tamasuki’s oldest son, William.

“Since he’s the grower for so many non-Japanese stores, he’s allowed to stay for at least another month. He said that it sounds like we are doing better than the other stores right now. Some have just left their shipments to die, closed their doors.”

I tried not to imagine crates of beautiful flowers rotting on an empty delivery dock.

“Well, we aren’t quite finished yet,” I responded from the space I shared with Notiko. This was one of the busiest times of year—traditionally, Papa made the greatest percentage of his profits through the month of May—and with the other Japanese-owned florists closing down all over California, there was an even greater push to sell the extra flowers. Our walk-in cooler was so full, the door barely latched. In just three days my university finals would be complete, the store would be closed, and we would be waiting in front of the Raphael Weill School for transport to Tanforan, a racetrack
that was serving as a temporary holding camp for the Bay-area Japanese. There, we would be reunited with our parents.

“We have too much to do before Sunday. I just wish we were there already,” Tommy said. I heard him shifting on his blanket, trying to find a comfortable spot as he had taken the smallest quilt. He slept with his baseball bat beside him and it rolled against a crate, creating a dull, wooden thud.

“I don’t. I’m not ready,” Notiko said. “If we have time, I want to go see a movie at the theatre. I want to go by and see the bridge, maybe ride the streetcar to—”

“Movie? Ask Molly about what will happen if you try to go see a movie, sis.”

“Tommy—don’t start,” I said. Tommy and I had heard from a friend who stopped by the flower shop that during the opening credits of Andy Hardy’s Double Life, he and his girlfriend were asked to leave by the usher.

“I’m going to sleep,” Tommy said from beyond the daisies. “It’s late.”

Notiko sighed. Tommy had changed since the attack on Pearl Harbor in December. He walked faster, spoke in short, loud bursts, and overnight his love of baseball, National Geographic magazine and spy novels had evaporated, leaving a core of anger so genuine and dense that I wondered if it had always been there and I had just missed it. I should have stood up for Notiko and said that I, too, wanted to do all of these things, but I had no energy to argue. Instead, I pulled the quilt over my head and tried to concentrate on staying warm.

“Molly, talk to me for a few more minutes. Please?” Notiko whispered after she ducked her head under the quilt.
I knew she wanted to talk about when we were little. Our first night sleeping in the flower shop, we stayed up and recounted every family camping trip we could recall. My father loved the outdoors and each summer took the three of us kids hiking in the Muir Woods. Although Notiko was nearly a full year older, we were in the same grade and thus almost always together through childhood, witnesses to each other’s lives. For the month at the flower shop, these were our bedtime stories. As was the new custom, I started.

”Remember when we were playing hide-and-go-seek and Tommy hid in the back of the delivery truck and it started to drive away with him in it?” I said. I could tell she was smiling in the dark. Tommy was only five when that happened. The deliveryman stopped at the end of the street and Tommy tumbled out, crying and yelling “Ojisan! Ojisan!” Tommy had just been enrolled in the neighborhood Japanese School and, like Notiko and me, was learning proper language and culture. He hated the classes and, as a result, was unwilling to speak more than two words of Japanese at a time. I was worried that Tommy had permanently ruined our games of hide-and-go-seek in the flower shop, but when my father started to laugh at hearing “uncle” screamed so pitifully in Japanese, we breathed a sigh of relief.

“How about the color game? You were the best at that one.” Notiko said.

“I loved that game,” I said. I felt my body grow warm with this memory. Father always arranged his flowers in rainbow order. Tall, black metal buckets, lined with smooth lime-green enamel fit into round slots in shoulder-high wooden shelves. The shelves had three tiers, and when I was young I thought the flowers looked like people
in bleachers watching the customers amble in, chat with each other, pick up stems and
nod, then find their way out into the street again.

After closing, during our primary school years, we would wander the floor, one at
a time, eyes covered and arms out like sleepwalkers, while my father swept the back
room free of fallen leaves and cut stems. A flower name would be called out and the
“rover” had to hold his or her hand over the correct bucket. Although the bunches were
sparse at the end of the day, I imagined I could feel the color as my hands hovered
over the blossom—hot to warm for the reds, oranges, and yellows; much cooler near
the blues and purples. Sometimes, I could even guess the type of flower based on my
discriminating hands. The Black Magic roses would throb heat. The hydrangeas were
like a spring breeze when you turn the corner and are confronted with a coolness for
which you were not prepared.

“I used to think you cheated and I always double-checked the handkerchief for a
hole,” Notiko said. “But I never found one. When grandmother visited, I told her about
it and she said that you were gifted.”

“She did? Gifted with what?” I asked. My cousin giggled and from the other side
of the room, we heard Tommy sigh loudly. With that, we tucked the quilt tighter around
us.

“Thank you, Molly,” Notiko said quietly. I reached over and squeezed her hand.
We would sleep that way, as we had as children on those camping trips, scared of the
dark that surrounded our tent. Another small custom that could not be broken.

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The following morning, the Felix Crousse peonies, a San Franciscan favorite, arrived. Prized for its double ruffle of petals and dark crimson color, if turned upside down, it resembled the skirt of a Degas ballerina. And packed in vases it was an explosion of color, a beating heart. As a child, I loved this flower so much that I told my mother one day, when I got married, I would use only Felix Crousses in my bouquet.

“And you and Notiko and Aunt Hanna will wear them in your hair, too,” I said.

My mother had laughed and told me that this was a very good idea. “You will have a very blessed and lucky marriage, then.”

We were depending on the popularity of this flower to bring in droves of final customers. Each year, our patrons clamored for this flower and with good reason. It wasn’t available at every florist—we were the only one in Japantown to carry this type of peony, a fact of which my father was very proud.

“The truck’s here.” Tommy put down his thick text called *Mathematics for Our Age*. He cleaned his glasses with the edge of his black work apron. Over the past five months, Tommy, nearly seventeen, had lost the boyish look I had come to love. The roundness of his face had melted away. I knew that he still had a dimple in his left cheek, but because the laughing prankster had disappeared, I hadn’t seen it in a long time. It felt as if he had even grown a few inches since December, although I was not sure.

I hopped off the stool where I had been going over notes for class, straightened my smock and followed Tommy to the back of the store to help unload the shipment. I
tried not to move too quickly and not to fidget, as instructed by Notiko before she left for the grocer.

The Tamasuki Farms delivery truck, an old red Ford with tall sides of lacquered wood, was weighed down with deliveries. We carried in long crates lined with soaking cloths as thick as diapers. The bottoms were splintered and wet. William Tamasuki, son of the grower, helped us, carrying two crates at a time where Tommy could only carry one.

William had smiled at me last summer and handed me an orange chrysanthemum from the passenger’s seat. He said that the unusually cool summer had confused the mums and many had opened early. I liked his smile and placed the flower in a vase next to my bed.

“His arms are too dark,” Mother had commented when she saw the chrysanthemum, standing tall in the thin bud vase usually reserved for roses on the family altar. Some ideas she had carried with her from Osaka along with her tea set and knitting needles. Lighter meant wealth, darker meant peasant—rice growers. “And he’s nearly 24.” She said this as a conclusion and as a warning before turning off the lamp, leaving the little chain to dance and hit the porcelain in the dark. William’s jaw was strong and square, a chunk of wavy black hair dipped slightly across his forehead. I don’t care, I thought as she left, I like him.

Boxes of damp Felix Crousse peonies were placed in the cooler. The Felix Crousses had been picked earlier that day, before the sun even rose. This was the tradition—to harvest peonies by the sinking of the moon. I knew that this was only
folklore—it was science, not the moon, that controlled the longevity of the bloom—but I wanted to believe in this custom. I was certain that the Tamasukis abided by this unwritten law of blossom cutting as well. I watched William as he stacked the boxes safely and opened the top one to show Tommy and me the peonies, buds squeezed closed against the sun.

“This is the best crop we’ve had in years. Once they’re in lukewarm water, they’ll open in eight hours.” He said this to me and I felt myself blush, thankful that at least I was standing in the shadow cast by the heavy cooler door. “Heard you were leaving on Sunday, Molly. Just two days left. Can you get it all done?”

I tried to think of what I could say. Tommy filled the silence as if the question had been meant for him. “We hope so. We have to get everything unpacked and set up before tomorrow morning. And I have exit exams at noon and Molly has college finals at three.”

“Exit exams? That’s right, you’re a senior. I nearly forgot,” William said to Tommy. Turning to me, he asked how college was treating me. “You’re a horticulture major, aren’t you? Your dad told my dad that you were on the Dean’s list.” He smiled and I felt my stomach cave in on itself.

“Yes, horticulture seemed the best choice for me,” I said. I heard my own voice echo in my ears. I wondered how many conversations William and I would have to have before this echoing stopped. “Papa wants me to be a teacher, though. He said that there’s more to life than flowers.”
“My dad says the same thing. But, here I am...” his voice trailed off. “Well, for now. I am going to try and enlist. A lot of guys on the farm are trying to do it.”

“We can’t. That’s what I heard from the fellas at school,” Tommy said. This conversation frightened me and I felt goose bumps rise up on my arms.

“Thought that, too, but a cousin from Honolulu told me that they’re letting the Hawaiian Japanese who were already enlisted stay in. If I can, I want to go. I want to do something.”

I nodded, as if I understood. My hands were shaking and I shoved them into the kangaroo pocket of my smock.

William looked down at his feet and then back up to my face. Tommy shifted his weight and cocked his head. “Why?” he asked, his voice suddenly chalky.

“Prove ‘em wrong, I guess. I suppose I don’t like people telling me who I am,” William said. His eyes were the color of my mother’s onyx necklace and although they looked serious, he still wore a crooked half-grin. I wondered if perhaps he was just made that way—naturally happy.

“Haven’t thought of it that way, really,” Tommy said, sounding slightly embarrassed. His demeanor reminded me of the times Papa would ask Tommy to re-sweep the shop’s floor after discovering piles of leaves pushed beneath the displays.

William winked at me. “I better get going. Dad will be mad if I don’t make all of my rounds. He doesn’t want to be stuck with any more flowers than we already have.” He reached out and squeezed my hand, which had magically risen to his. I glanced at
this dark arm and felt the rough calluses on his fingers. “Nice seeing you, Molly, take

care.”

I could feel the slow churn of my startled brain attempting to organize words
into a sentence that would make sense. “Nice seeing you, too. Thanks for delivering our

flowers.” I immediately felt silly, thanking him for something that was his job. I hoped

he wouldn’t think too much about my words.

Tommy followed him to the truck to help direct him out of the skinny alley. I

watched them walk down the short hall and out the back door into the bright morning

sun. Peering into the boxes, I stroked a velvet guardian petal, one of the five or so
toughest created by nature to protect the frilly inside blossom during growth, and

strained to hear their voices out by the truck. Tommy came back in a few seconds later,
his eyes blank as he looked at me.

“What?” I asked. I felt my face burn again and placed my hand on either cheek
to cool them down.

“Nothing, nothing. He’s a nice enough guy. I wonder where he’ll end up. Don’t

know where his family is supposed to report. They live south of here—near Gilroy,"

Tommy said, slowly hanging up his apron on the hook behind the storeroom door. “Oh,

he wanted me to give you this.”

He handed me a packet of seeds. Black-eyed Susans, the envelope read, but the

Susan was crossed out and “Molly’s” was written above it in small, blocky handwriting.

On the back, the tiniest of notes: “I thought you would appreciate these. Hope to see

you one day soon, William.”
“I’m taking the trash to the dumpster,” Tommy mumbled. Something was concerning him, but I was so lost in my gift, I couldn’t pay attention and let him leave without a word from me.

I carried the packet of seeds in my sweater pocket for the rest of that day. Throughout my last exam, I traced its edges with my thumb. It was a good luck charm—I flew through the test, answering each question with a precision of ideas and words. As I walked away from campus, every once in a while looking back over my shoulder at the proud brick buildings and meandering paths, I was comforted by the packet of seeds. And in my sweater pocket, nesting next to my lowest rib, I thought I felt it—a subtle warmth, the warm of sitting in the late-afternoon sun or slipping back into bed before the sheets grow cold. The same warmth of a golden Black-Eyed Susan.

My giddiness finally settled into a hollow in my chest and that afternoon, as I found myself riding the streetcar towards the shop for the last time, I wondered if Tommy was right, if the Tamasukis would be sent to another camp. And, from that camp, would William really enlist in the military? The long lines at the military recruitment offices were full of boys younger than William—Tommy’s age, even! On one hand, it made sense, he was an American.

We were still Americans, right? The question lingered in the air around me and there was no immediate answer. On paper, yes. In my schoolbag, in a thick brown envelope, was my birth certificate. Papa encouraged me to carry it with me, just in case. But right next to it was my proof of registry—my name, the name of my family, our address, my Enemy Alien Registration Number: 15,662. I wondered if perhaps one
negated the other. If I rubbed them together, would some sort of chemical reaction
occur, causing both to burst into flames or crumble into a talcum-like dust?

“Nothing is in my control,” I said quietly to myself. I was tired of thinking about
survival, tired of wondering what was next, tired of living next to the memories of my
former life and being unable to touch them, be a part of them again. The sun was
slowly setting and soon curfew would begin. Work enough for six people was waiting
for me at the flower shop and I needed to clear my mind and concentrate on the next
task. I took the seeds out from my sweater pocket and looked at the drawing of the
gold and black flowers on the front. I shook them, enjoying the pleasant baby’s rattle
and then placed them in my book bag in the envelope of important papers, between
the registration card and my birth certificate, just in case.

It was the last day for many others—the grocery, the hardware store, the candy
store, the dress shop. The deadline for complete Japanese evacuation was only twenty-
four hours away. As I swept the flower shop’s three steps, concentrating on swishing
away even the smallest particle of dust, I noticed their lights on in the early morning
dark. Like us, our neighbors in Japantown’s shopping district had worked all night,
marking down prices, arranging sidewalk tables.

Mrs. Yoshida, who had formed sticky cakes of sweet bean mochi and pulled
yards of pastel taffy for fifty years, also swept her front stoop. Our brooms were almost
synchronized, our posture the same. Small poufs of dust formed near her ankles. We
concluded our task within seconds of each other and although I thought she hadn’t
noticed me, thinking perhaps that the sound of my bristles was just the echo of her’s, she turned to me and stood as straight as her eighty years could manage. In the gray dark, with the pink dawn—the color of a tiger lily’s throat—barely outlining the roof of the temple at the end of our street, I paused and bowed deep to Mrs. Yoshida and tried to smile as she did the same.

“Sayonara, Molly,” she said.

“Sayonara, Mrs. Yoshida,” I replied, bowing again.

As I shut our shop door, trying to ease it closed without disturbing the mass of bells hanging on its interior, I heard the morning gong from the temple. It called the devout to prayer, if not in the temple itself, then facing the tiny corner shrines that so many had, even if it was in a darkened bedroom corner. In recent months, the temple had garnered much attention from outsiders and was closed, thick wood nailed over its massive plank doors. The monks who lived there had been sent away early—even before the official evacuation began—and only one bald, wrinkled old man remained. He was the oldest of the cloister and was allowed to stay to close down the temple, to complete all of the necessary tasks. The Oak Street Methodist Church, older than the temple by fifteen years, helped by storing religious artifacts in their basement. Earlier in the week, Tommy and I watched as the monk walked slowly toward the church, each time with a relic wrapped in what appeared to be dark brown velvet, to return again and do the same. Only he could touch them, the job was his alone to do.

Inside, the shop was silent. Tommy and Notiko had fallen asleep around four in the morning and I did not want to wake them. Flowers were cramned in each of the
enamel buckets, the stems too tight against each other, potentially shortening the life span of the bloom. My father would have balked, but we had no choice. In the workroom, hundreds of flowers lay in wait. The shop was clean—mopped and dusted by Notiko and me in the night.

The small watercolors of bright orange and black-speckled koi fish my mother had painted through the years were taken down, allowing the age in the walls to be seen, the creamy yellow paint muted by years of sun. I had taken a few favorites out of their frames and rolled them up, hoping they wouldn’t be crushed on the way to Tanforan. I wandered the room, touching everything left at least once—the deep shelves used to display vases, the hand-lettered sign with our store hours, the mirror Papa kept on the storeroom door in order to straighten his tie when a customer walked in. I finally settled down behind the cash register to look at the inventory list once more. Next to my foot, propped up against the counter, was the Iwakoshi Flowers sign that Tommy had removed from above the door. It was four feet long, one foot tall and I wanted to store it somewhere for the future, but I didn’t know where. More importantly, I didn’t know what our future was. I watched the clock creep closer to eight.

We were prepared for a crowd. We had always had so many people buzzing in and out of our little flower shop on Felix Crousse day. Despite the negative climate, we all thought that they would come and that something so beautiful would bridge the chasm between us and them. It wasn’t until the middle of the day that I understood. I
was glad Papa wasn’t there to see this. As an odd flip of fate, his pride was safer at the
Tanforan Race Track.

Over four hundred blooms were left. They stood in their buckets, tall and
beautiful, the careful posture of teenage girls, ready for their first dance. I stared,
predicting their future while leaning in the workroom doorway. In less than twelve
hours we would be gone and they would be left to fall at the waist, bend over the
edges of the buckets, to die as their water evaporated and as dust began to coat the
windowpanes. It was bad luck.

“We could give them away. To our neighbors—parting gifts,” Notiko suggested.
She was repacking her suitcase for the hundredth time.

“All of them? Why? So they can throw them out on their way to the buses in the
morning? That’s not a gift, that’s another item for their to-do lists.” Tommy was
noticeably tired and dark circles ringed his eyes.

“Then leave them here,” Notiko snapped at her brother. “I’m so tired of flowers,
I wouldn’t care if I ever saw one again.”

“You’ll be singing a different tune when we are stuck at a racetrack, sis, living in
a horse stall,” Tommy said. “Molly, what do you want to do? It’s your choice.”

I started to speak but stopped when I heard the quiet closing of a car door in the
alleyway. Tommy picked up his baseball bat. Notiko looked at me. “Who?” she
whispered. I didn’t know. Since Pearl Harbor, family acquaintances had been arrested
at night and although this hadn’t occurred in a few weeks, the thought of one of us—or
all of us—in handcuffs made every blood cell drop toward my feet.
“I’ll check,” Tommy said. I heard him creep through the dark shop to the door leading to the alley. A knock made me jump and Notiko was suddenly by my side, holding my arm. We strained our ears. Then, Tommy appeared in the doorway. He looked relieved as he stepped into the light with a sheepish William Tamasuki.

“Ladies.” William removed his hat.

I patted my hair and bit my lower lip.

“You’re here in the nick of time, Tamasuki. My cousin was trying to figure out how to tie a three-ton bouquet to her back and open up a new shop at the camp,” Tommy said with a wry laugh.

“That would be a feat, Molly,” William said.

“What are you doing out so late—past curfew? I bet your father is worried!” Notiko was an egregious flirt and I knew, without even glancing her direction, she said these words while batting her eyelashes.

“More deliveries today and they took too long. Called him already,” he said. “I’ll head back later. With so many of us gone, the MPs have slowed down their patrols.”

I hadn’t heard this and knew from friends that, if anything, patrols had increased with MPs wandering the perimeter of Japantown in complete uniform. I cleared my throat. “We’re trying to figure out what to do with all of these.”

“I say leave them,” Tommy said.

“Molly, what do you think?” William asked. “You don’t want to do that, do you?”

“No,” I said. I felt my chest tighten. His understanding made me want to cry—ball up under the worktable, grip its legs, and sob. “I see no other option. It must seem
silly, worrying about things that will die anyway, right? I mean, they started dying when they were cut.” I felt my words were sharp, like the blades used to harvest on the Tamasuki farm. I knew William had planted these from seed, picked them, arranged them, loaded them in the truck. His hands held the calluses of these and so many other flowers. Our eyes met.

“We have a similar problem on the farm. We’re all leaving in less than a month and even though the big blooms are done for the season, we have our summer crop coming up, then our fall, then next winter. Dad’s worried if he sells, he’ll never get the business back. Or someone will take it over and plow them down. All that work. Nearly three hundred acres of flowers.” William cracked his knuckles and settled onto one the workroom stools.

“What does he plan to do?” I asked.

“Leave them, I guess. Maybe he’ll find a buyer he can trust. But our retired foreman, old Sakamoto, came by last week and said that if it we have to just let them go, Dad should burn them. Said it was just opening things up to bad luck if he didn’t.”

“That’s as crazy as never sleeping towards the north because that’s the way the dead are laid. The older generation love their silly superstitions,” Tommy said.

“Yeah, they do. But, I remember when I was a little kid our Felix Crousses had the worst case of wilt. Just a few plants, then a few rows, then the whole field. They just fell over, still in bloom. Dad called out the county and they sprayed them with something, but it didn’t stop it.”
“Verticillium wilt,” I said. “No one knows how it starts up. It gets into the soil and nothing can grow there anymore.”

“Exactly. Well, Sakamoto had a dream where he saw the peonies standing up in a fire. At the end of the dream, he saw a baby just sitting in the field, laughing in the dirt. He told Dad and they set the thing on fire one morning. They were real careful about it—one section at a time. And sure enough, when the fire hit those flowers, they stood up in the heat.”

“And, did you all see a baby after that?” Tommy asked, his eyebrows raised.

“No,” William chuckled, “but it killed whatever was in the soil. We re-seeded and that’s the family of Felix Crousses that we have right here. Never have had a problem again.”

In my head, I pictured the field of red engulfed in flames under the blue sky. In the background, I imagined the house that William grew up in—a sprawling white house with a black iron fence. It all felt right. In the midst of everything changing around me, this seemed the correct choice. The same certainty I felt as a child, playing the color game with my cousins and guessing each flower correctly, darted through my body.

“We have a metal barrel in the closet, don’t we Tommy? And the sun will be setting soon—it will be harder to see any smoke. We’re in the middle of Japantown—what do we have, seven blocks all the way around us?” I went into the closet and tried to move the black barrel.
“Really, Molly? This is what you want?” Notiko shook her head. “This is destruction of property.”

“Our property, Notiko. Besides, it’s bad luck to leave them. You’ll help, right? Tommy? Notiko?” I turned around to face my cousins. “Papa believes in this. He would want you to help me.”

They didn’t speak. Perhaps they were too tired to argue with me or they felt guilty by my mentioning of Papa, the head of our families. Tommy and William carried the barrel into the alleyway. William’s truck was backed out towards the opening to prevent anyone seeing in easily. The other entry was nearly hidden—honeysuckle grew on the side of the building and Mrs. Yoshida’s clothesline was draped in quilts, drying before she left in the morning. Notiko filled five enamel buckets of water and I wadded up bright white wrapping tissue to help start the fire. I put on my long-sleeved white smock to protect my dress from ash.

The daisies were first in line. I felt something should be done before I tossed them into the small, jumpy flames, so I said a quick prayer, propped my fingers into a steeple and bowed. I had only done this once, at the funeral of a family friend. I had held Buddhist beads in my hand, my grandmother’s beads, and had gone through the ritual as taught by my mother. As I carried armfuls of daisies to the burning barrel, I remembered my fear when kneeling on the cushions in front of the dead man and the bifurcated incense box—no larger than my jewelry box with the dancing ballerina—the left side smoldering, the right side waiting. My hands shook as I dumped the flowers into the fire, just as they had when I lit the incense, waved the flame out with my left
hand, and let the smoke drift into my face and become caught in my hair. Don’t blow it away, Molly, my mother had said, the smoke purifies and keeps the death spirits at bay. In the black barrel, yellow eyes looked back at me before disappearing.

Tiger lilies, hollyhocks, baby’s breath, pink roses, dahlias, hydrangea. Notiko would hand me a bunch, then one to William, and we would toss them in. Tommy spent his time darting from each alley entrance, looking for any signs of patrol. The darkness had fallen around us and the sky was dark purple—the smoke blended in naturally, I thought. It was in my face, and I didn’t wave it away.

At last, nothing was left but the peonies and I felt tears begin to develop in the corners of my eyes. When Notiko handed me the first bunch, I paused before dropping them in.

“Don’t just yet, Molly,” William said. He picked out the two healthiest blooms from my arms and placed them in one of the water buckets. “You can wrap some up and take them with you in the morning. They’ll last for over a week. Your mother and father will be happy to have them.” As more and more peonies were handed to us, he continued to choose the best and set them aside.

Before long we were done. The four of us stood around the fire. Notiko warmed her hands. I looked around me at the faces of William and my cousins, faces framed in golds and oranges.

“Thank you,” I said.

We doused the flames and listened to the sizzle of the fire fighting the cold tap water. We all smelled of a smoke that was pungent and at the same time sweet—the
scent of the morning air during our camping trips to Muir Woods. At last the fire died
and it was again dark in the alley. Notiko made her way to the door, followed by
Tommy. I turned to follow but William grabbed my hand.

I stood there in the alley behind the flower shop and my childhood home, my
hand clutching William’s tightly. I listened to the echoes of the evening bell reverberate
along the brick walls. Full of love and of fear, I felt the sound of the bell pound in my
feet. At that moment, I imagined the old monk standing in the dark, his slender,
crippled body bending under the weight of the bronze temple bell for the last time.
I removed seventeen splinters the first day of school. The classrooms of the Camp Topaz Primary Education Center were not yet completed: no shingles, no books, no blackboard, no tables. A few of the rooms were missing doors. The new, green wood that made up the walls and floors was rough and unfinished.

After the first three children discovered their injuries following a riotous game of Duck, Duck, Goose, I borrowed tweezers from an old woman who lived across from the school block. Hanging towels out to dry in the north wind and observing my wide-open classroom with an amused grin, she motioned me over and gave me a bottle of rubbing alcohol, a rag, and the tweezers she had used for picking up glass beads as a seamstress for the very wealthy in San Francisco. Her eyes crinkled at the edges like yards of honey-colored pleated chiffon and her gray hair was pulled into a tight bun at the nape of her neck. She laughed when I asked if she wanted the tool of her trade to be used on the dirty, bloody hands of kindergarteners.

“Miss, perhaps you have not noticed, but all of the fancy dress balls have been cancelled this season.” She motioned while saying this, her arm stretched toward our surroundings. Her indigo blue kimono sleeve snapped in the breeze and for a moment we both paused and looked at the relocation camp, a drab collage of black tar-papered buildings. Beyond our camp lay miles and miles of flat, Utah desert and, at the edge of the horizon, the low-lying Thomas range with Mount Topaz at the westernmost point. I couldn’t look at the mountains without thinking of Tommy. It was late October and the
first snow had already fallen on the thirteenth, followed by the second and third on the fifteenth. After a brief warm snap where the snow melted and was not absorbed by the impervious alkaline soil, we were left living in cold, khaki mud that clung to the hems of pants and the bottoms of shoes like clay.

“Arigato gozaimashita, obasan,” I said, thanking the woman for her kindness.

“Of course, it is the least I can do, considering your family’s situation,” the woman said kindly, bowing. I bowed and took a few steps backward before turning toward my chaotic classroom. At least the gossipping isn’t much different from home, I thought.

Returning to my class of ten boys and six girls, I firmly held tiny palms toward the weak sunlight and, singing a song in Japanese my mother had sung to me when I was hurt as a child—no tears, brave one, no tears—I wiggled out the miniscule slivers of wood.

“How long have you been a teacher, Miss Iwakoshi?” asked the boy with the most splinters. His dark eyes sparkled and every few seconds he blew a lock of unruly hair out of his face with remarkable aim. I could tell he was going to be a lively one. I looked at the nametag that he was wearing backwards around his neck. It said Paulie Hitomora, #14650, Block 17, 5B.

“Since this morning,” I replied.

It took at least ten minutes, but I somehow gathered my students together, feeling very much like a mother cat, and we sat in a circle on the floor of our classroom.
The few of us who had mittens kept them on, others sat on their hands and rocked back and forth to stay warm.

“Okay, class. I’m sure some of you have questions about this school year. And then we’ll get to color for a bit,” I announced. I had brought some drawing paper and my precious colored pencils from home to fill the time.

“What did you do before you started teaching?” one student asked.

“Well, I was a student just like you. I was in college studying botany and horticulture—that’s the study of flowers and plants. I also worked in my father’s flower shop after school,” I replied, pleased at how easy the questions were starting out. I brightened and began to think that I might make it to the end of the day without any more incidents after all. The students were quiet for a moment, pondering a second question. I thought I heard one boy whisper to Paulie, ask her.

“Are we going to freeze to death this winter? My grandmother says so,” Paulie asked. I didn’t have time to come up with a good answer before a nervous burst of giggles, instantaneous and unstoppable, rushed through the classroom.

“No, of course not,” I answered, trying to sound certain. There was still not quite enough food or supplies in the camp. Many blocks had not been “winterized” yet and because we were from temperate northern California, very few of us had packed appropriate cold-weather clothing. Temperatures were predicted to drop to twenty below at night. I thought briefly of my own Aunt Hanna, her thin hands crocheting blankets for us during meals in the mess hall and in the dying light of early evening, waiting for the miraculous return of her son Tommy.
Paulie leaned forward a bit, rocking onto his knees, and jutted his chin toward me. “Are you sure about the freezing, Miss Iwakoshi? Are you really sure?”

I was sure of nothing, but wearing the cloak of confidence that I imagined Papa donned daily to calm our qualms, I nodded “yes.” Yet, I had noticed an intensity of confusion in the camp and wondered what would occur once the snow was too thick to easily clear away and we were forced inside with our troubles.

“Miss Iwakoshi, there’s a man at the door,” the little girl with braids as tight as new rope said. She pointed toward the door with an air of superiority.

Papa stood there, hat in hand. As I walked over to him, I stopped to check the little girl’s nametag.

“Thank you, Dot. Children, please stay quiet. That’s my father,” I said, immediately worried.

Papa’s trousers were muddy from maneuvering the wheelbarrow to and from the post office at the main administration building. He was cold from being out of doors all morning, delivering mail and packages to our section, some 500 residents. It was a thankless job, but one Papa was proud to have. Most of the Issei, non-citizens like Papa, were passed over for the better-paying professional positions, jobs that went to the Japanese-American second generation. Likewise, the administration was allowing only Nisei to apply for offices in the new “Evacuee Council,” once again leaving the older Issei, particularly the men, out of place. A rift was soon created between the generations and the Issei, the former businessmen of Japantown, muttered their displeasure while serving up breakfast at the mess hall or scrubbing the latrines.
“Is everything okay, Papa?” I asked, checking the time on the men’s wristwatch that hung on a piece of yarn around my neck. It had been Papa’s and had a cracked face but still kept perfect time.

“I just stopped by the administration building. He’s being transferred at the end of this week. I am going to Delta to see him off,” he said, quietly. “And this is from William. I wanted you to have it before you got home.”

My father held a telegram envelope in his hand. My heart sank at the thought of my cousin and then fluttered at the thought of William. “Have you told Auntie? Notiko?” I asked.

“I am going to tell Aunt Hanna now. Notiko is still working her shift at the mess hall.” Papa handed me the telegram, which I folded into my coat pocket.

“Thank you, Papa,” I said. He bowed a formal, official goodbye, as befitting my rank as a teacher. I thought of his words just a few months before. The whole world can change around us, Molly-chan, I am still in charge of this family and we will act as we did at home. My cousin Tommy, overhearing us, had snickered at this statement. I bowed back to my father and then I turned to my class, trying to smile and smooth the concern from my face. I couldn’t handle any more questions.

“Because you’ve been so good, we are going to draw for the rest of class,” I said. I took a stack of pale cream drawing paper that I had cut in two the night before out of my knapsack. Spreading back issues of the *Topaz Times* on the floor to help prevent more splinters, I divided the children into groups of four and distributed the supplies.
“What are we to draw, Miss Iwakoshi?” Dot asked. I looked around outside at the landscape and, remembering the telegram in my pocket from William, the son of one of the most successful flower-growers in northern California, said, “Draw me a garden full of flowers. We’ll tack them to the wall for decoration.”

“What kind of flowers?” Dot asked. “I only know of a few kinds.”

“Then draw those, Dot.”

“Miss Iwakoshi, can you draw one for me first? I can’t remember what they look like,” Paulie said in a huff.

“But surely you’ve seen flowers since we left San Francisco, Paulie.” I thought about my statement. No flowers bloomed in Camp Topaz, at least that I’d seen. “Can you think of anything that has flowers printed on it? Maybe your mother has hung some curtains?” I suggested. The rest of the class looked at me with expectation.

“Yes, but those flowers are flat and they don’t have any bodies,” Paulie said, his eyes narrowing a bit. “Flowers have bodies, right?”

“Flowers have stems and leaves and roots—that’s like a body, but not exactly. They grow from seeds.” I was surprised at the children’s having forgotten. “Think of what you used to see at the park back in Japantown. Does anyone remember the little garden next to the shrine? The one with the big koi pond in the middle of it?”

“We’re not from there. We’re from…” Paulie tried to recall the name of his hometown. The other children looked at me with wide eyes.
“My father used to put darnations in the vases at our restaurant on each of the tables. Darnations are a flower, right?” a little boy named Hiraku asked. He was one of the few students in my class to have a Japanese first name.

“Carnations, Hiraku. And, yes, those are flowers. Men wear them in their lapels, remember?” I asked, but Hiraku shook his head no.

As the children settled in and began to draw, I snuck the telegram out of my pocket and slit open the thin envelope with my index finger. It was rare to receive a telegram—it meant that William had someone send it for him from town, as I was certain his resettlement camp did not have access to Western Union, either. *You will teach great things. Good luck with new job. Yours, William.*

I refolded it carefully and wished I had someone with whom to share the telegram. My mother didn’t approve of my correspondence with William. She worried about his older age and what she called “his position.” Yet, as a university student, traditionally, I should have been allowed to date only boys who were doing the same thing. While my father gave his blessing when William asked to write to me, Mother was wary and only agreed in what seemed to be a moment of weakness. My cousin Notiko and I were growing apart. I shied away from some of the social activities set up by the administration for the people my age—dances and mixers—but Notiko arrived early and stayed late. She and her girlfriends from the mess hall would trade dresses and decorate their elaborately curled hair with paper flowers for such events. She had always been like this, but something about Camp Topaz made our differences stand out even more.
In the end, the children drew what they saw from the windows and randomly added a daisy or a few spots of purple on the side. As I hung them on the wall, I noticed that they were nearly the same—blocky barracks, barbed wire, watchtowers. Paulie drew people huddled outside of their apartments, stating that he was drawing “the old people who sit.” He added one yellow flower in the foreground, a flower without a body, hovering near a brown blob that I figured was a puddle of mud. Only Dot seemed to remember what a garden looked like and when I asked her what her inspiration was, she replied that her grandmother brought a small silk screen of Kyoto with them and had it hanging over Dot’s bed in the barrack.

“It’s to give me good dreams, Miss Iwakoshi,” she said.

I walked the children home, fearful that they would become lost as so many had, showing up at an identical block and crying for a mother that was four rows over, and I waved to them as they disappeared into darkened rooms. I compared their first day of school to mine at Japantown’s sunny, sturdy Raphael Weill Primary. My first-grade classroom had been a cheerful yellow and Mrs. Tarnmont had spelled her name out in large, equal letters on the pristine blackboard. So perfect was it that when she later erased it, causing a stratus cloud of chalk remnant to float at the board’s center, I recalled feeling a pain in my heart.

“Thank you for a fun day, Miss Iwakoshi! Thank you for fixing my hands!” Paulie called out as he trudged through the mud toward his family’s barrack. He paused and turned around with a thoughtful look on his face. “Will we have books tomorrow?” he asked.
“I don’t think so. Maybe. I really don’t know,” I called back, aware that Miss Tarnmont would never have answered a question with such uncertainty.

“I hope not. I liked playing tag,” he said loudly. The little boy raced into his family’s barrack without wiping his feet on the wood outside the door and removing his shoes, only to be shooed back out again to take off his dirty loafers. I couldn’t help but smile. He reminded me of Tommy.

Two weeks before, Tommy, newly eighteen, had walked away from his work detail, digging sewage lines away from camp. At least, that’s what the military police officer—who visited us the night Tommy was shipped to the nearby hospital in Delta—said as he unlatched and relatched his watch. He arrived an hour or so before curfew and we listened, clustered around the table in the center of our barrack, cups of tea growing cold before us. I imagined that the dark gray pants that Aunt Hanna had made out of an old wool coat attracted the tiny leaves of the desert bushes, leaves that at first glance looked curled and dead, but were actually alive, just with very low expectations for existence. When Tommy was first noticed by the guards, he was facing the low-lying mountains, quiet, 30 feet away from the group still digging the trench. One of MPs yelled out “Iwakoshi!” but Tommy refused to stop.

"He didn't stop? That's not like my brother. He didn't hear you!" Notiko said and instinctively reached out across the table toward the MP. He didn't flinch when she squeezed his arm. "Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure?"
"Yes, Ma'am," he said and looked down at her hand, which she immediately moved onto her lap. “And he didn’t look back. Wasn’t running or nothing like that, just walking off.” He was from somewhere in the south and didn’t seem unkind, but quiet, shy. His eyes were light brown and his chin soft and wobbly.

“Then what happened after you noticed him?” My cousin Notiko asked.

“He was arrested,” the MP said, snapping the latch once again and shifting in his chair. Notiko didn’t continue with the logical next question: why did he leave on a stretcher? The MP didn’t mention this and we only knew because James Fujiyaka, who worked on the Topaz Times, visited us just before the MP pulled up in a Jeep outside our barrack. Mr. Fujiyaka saw Tommy carried out of the infirmary on a stretcher, his right wrist handcuffed to its edge, his left arm placed at an odd angle across his belly. An ambulance waited outside camp gates and my cousin Tommy disappeared in a cloud of dust.

“Is he going to be okay?” Notiko asked. Her voice was getting higher, shakier. The MP turned his attention to my father and looked away from Notiko. He did not answer her question.

"Why would he do such a thing?" My father was in disbelief. Through the last eleven months—through Pearl Harbor, the move, the shock of Tanforan and the relentless dull pain of Topaz—Tommy had grown more and more distant from our family. Papa had tried to speak with him on many occasions, waiting for him on his normal route home from work. Each time, Tommy would become as quiet as a sullen child. Yet, when Aunt Hanna tried to talk to him, he was ferocious and loud, sometimes
disappearing for a couple of days and staying in a friend's barrack, sleeping on the floor.

I began to fear that Tommy was lost like our home and our previous existence. I thought of all of the articles of our San Francisco lives that had been sold or thrown away. The teacups and bracelets, spoons and white cotton gloves. They had all disappeared and, by now, had surely been touched by a hundred different hands. Tommy was no different in my mind. To track him down, to find the boy that was my loving, boisterous cousin, would be nearly impossible, especially now.

I stared at my hands, which had begun to shake and I wished William Tamasuki were near. More and more frequently, he seemed to have the answers to my problems. Something about him was magical in my head and when I felt the tug of sadness that was so pervasive in camp, that feeling of darkness that strangled any thought of hope and left me breathless on my skinny cot at night, all I needed to do was to flip open my newly-issued grade book to the back inside cover and stare at the two inch square photo of William in a field of chrysanthemums. He wore a light colored shirt and his hair was perfectly combed and parted. William’s face was just as I remembered it—a strong jaw and well-formed brow and cheekbones; a small mole under his left eye and one on the top of his right cheek, surely from the sun; a few crinkles around his eyes that added to an overall look of amusement, even when serious.

I imagined this photo as the MP continued to explain what happened to Tommy. I held my hands still and I sat up straight and listened, a William-induced calm slowly stretching from my stomach to my backbone. Dear Papa, who needed me to be strong,
nodded and met my eyes in appreciation. I wondered if he knew that the daughter he loved and depended on was being kept afloat by a man three states away, a man with whom she had only spent a grand total of four hours in her entire nineteen years.

“What will happen now?” Papa asked the MP.

“Well, sir. I don’t rightly know. Once he recovers, he’ll probably go to Tule Lake. You’ll need to come by headquarters tomorrow to find out more. This is just a courtesy call and all,” the young man said, standing up and reaching for his heavy woolen coat that threatened to topple our rickety chair backward.

“A courtesy call. Yes, thank you,” Papa said as he walked him out. Compared to the MP, he appeared no stronger than a thin, crooked limb that had been blown down in a storm.

The first week of school continued as an awkward dance of rambunctious games and last-minute lessons. My two-week-long orientation, led by an official from the Utah public school system, only covered classroom discipline, use of curriculum (which we still hadn’t received) and proper record-keeping. Nothing was mentioned about teaching children using thin air. By Friday, the temperature warmed to a reasonable degree and teachers were allowed to take students on a walk to the newly constructed camp playground. Two seesaws, a swing set, a jungle gym and a roughly poured and soon-to-be-cracked four-square court awaited us. The excitement was too much for the children and I spent the ten-minute walk trying to keep the two lines of eight straight and at an even pace.
The playground was set in the middle of a field where the desert brush had been cleared up to a certain point, just fifty feet beyond it lay light and tangled bushes and the crispy, dying remains of some native plants. It wasn’t long before my students wandered away from the new equipment and were running through the fields, kicking up plenty of dust along the way. The boys began to grab at one certain plant and throw something that looked like confetti on each other, the substance clinging easily to their knitted hats and scarves.

“Miss Iwakoshi, your class is unruly,” a more seasoned teacher said to me, frowning. I took off across the field to get my ranks back in order.

“Miss Iwakoshi, what’s this?” Dot asked. She picked some of the wheat-colored plant matter out of her hair and handed it to me. It was soft and wispy, but had a definite shape, similar to a pumpkin seed. Looking around, I noticed that it came from the tips of brownish stalks that grew in a burst.

“It’s some sort of seed, Dot,” I said, sticking a few in my coat pocket.

“What kind? Don’t you know?” She asked and I promised that I would look it up in my *Thompson’s Guide to Plant Classification*, an outrageously heavy book that was my constant companion through my first-semester botany class at the university. I had brought it for sentimental reasons and, so far, it served only as hiding place for William’s letters. I kept it in a crate in the corner of my new classroom, far away from the prying eyes of my mother.

“How about this?” Hiraku had a handful of tiny spheres the size of a poppy seed but much lighter in color. He had taken off his dark green mittens and draped them
over an airy bush. From far away, I wondered if they would look like they were floating.

“If you pull on those funny pom-pom things, these come off,” he said proudly.

I sprinkled a few of Hiraku’s findings into the breast pocket of my dress and continued to gather my brood, marching them back toward the playground. They played with the other classes until one of the teachers noticed a brown haze on the horizon.

“Better get them back,” a Topaz guard, who had wandered over from his post, said to us. “Looks like a dust storm will be here before you know it.” Some children, overhearing his words, immediately rushed towards me, yelling, crying and asking to be held. Dust storms during our first month at Topaz had been a brutal, shocking reminder of our distance from San Francisco. Several young ones had been temporarily lost in those storms and were found hours later hiding under over turned garbage cans and beneath cars in the administration’s small parking lot.

I hurried the children along, quickly giving up on the thought of lines as we ran back towards the school block. The wind whipped dust and hair in my face and although I kept count as best I could, as soon as we were back to our classroom I counted only fifteen children.

“It’s Paulie!” a little boy announced. “He’s the one gone!”

Leaving another teacher in charge, in a surge of panic I turned and went face-first into the dust storm. The cold wind was thick with sand and dirt and it scraped against my forehead as I pushed along. There was little visibility and I used the edge of buildings to find my way back toward the playground. I hoped that the guard had seen
him loitering and taken him in or that he had found shelter in the Block 4 mess hall, the closest building to the swing set. Eyes stinging, I reached the playground and looked under the merry-go-round, straining my ears for Paulie’s voice. I looked around each piece of equipment and then turned my attention to the field, where the most substantial elements were a few patches of waist-high greasewood. While the dust was still thick, I could feel the wind releasing its hold on my coat and knew that the storm was passing. I looked through squinted eyes for Paulie and in the distance I could hear the faintest cry for help.

Roughly twenty feet away, I saw a small, huddled figure gripping the spiny gray-green branch of a greasewood shrub. Paulie was covered head to toe in dust, as if dipped into a flour jar. Remarkably, he wasn’t crying, but squeezing his body as close as possible to the bush, even though the wind had died down and the dust was beginning to settle.

“Paulie? Paulie, it’s me…” I reached out and touched his back. He released his hold on the prickly bush—his hands were a mix of blood and dust. Paulie’s cheeks were scraped, but he looked up at me and grinned.

“I got left behind,” he said. I tried not to laugh at his honesty.

“I know. I came to find you. Where were you when I blew the whistle?” I asked him, too relieved to be angry, wiping his face off with the inside of my coat.

“I heard you, but I just wanted to grab a few more of these things that I had found. You were collecting them from Dot and Hiraku and I found some, too, different ones, though.” He dug through his trouser pocket and pulled out more seeds, this time
tough, woody and no larger than the eye of an embroidery needle. “I found ‘em on the ground and it took a while to pick them out of the dirt. I looked back up and all I could see was the dust!”

I shook my head, the fear and worry easing out of my limbs, leaving me tired. “Don’t you ever, ever do that again, Paulie. When you hear the whistle, you need to come join the class.” I tried to figure out the layering of expressions on his face and decided that there was, indeed, a thin coating of remorse on top of his boyish excitement.

“Yes, Miss Iwakoshi. I promise,” Paulie said. “Do you think that these will work?”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“The seeds. Are these the kind that grow gardens in San Francisco?” Paulie grinned. The dust in his hair made him look like a little old man. His lighthearted manner was growing on me.

“Maybe, Paulie. We’ll see,” I said and we started the long walk back to the school block.

After walking my students home and explaining Paulie’s scrapes to his very apologetic mother, I returned to my classroom. Even though it was plain and barely functional, it was nice to have my own place in which to sit and think.

I sat in my normal spot in the corner and pulled the Thompson’s guide out of the crate. I removed William’s three letters and telegram from between pages 259 and 260, stacked them neatly by my side and dug through my various pockets for the children’s
seeds. I flipped through the book to the “desert landscape” chapter and went from page to page, searching for a description that matched. I was surprised at how many plants the guide claimed grew in a desert climate and wondered if the writers had ever visited Utah.

Locating matching descriptions for Dot’s and Hiraku’s seeds was easy—one appeared to be a light yellow flowering bush called *grayia spinosa* or spiny hop sage and the other, a ball of small pink flowers called *abronia villosa* or sand verbena. However, Paulie had discovered something that wasn’t native to central Utah and its non-absorbent, alkaline earth. His white seeds were more than likely a blazing star—a large, lily-like blossom that grew mostly in western Utah. They came in bright yellow and orange and a very rare variety bloomed magenta. I couldn’t believe the seeds had traveled so far and figured that the ferocity of the dust storms had lifted and carried them in our direction.

“Miss Iwakoshi?” A voice echoed through the empty room. I looked up to find the gentleman in charge of the Topaz primary schools and quickly stood in greeting. A 20-year veteran of the Utah public school system, he had been an imposing figure during orientation. He had stopped by to put notes on all of the teacher’s doors (those teachers that had doors) explaining that supplies would be delayed an additional three weeks, perhaps longer. I held the note in my hand in disbelief.

“Another three weeks—will we be meeting to discuss lesson plan ideas? My students are very energetic and I’m running out of ideas to keep them busy and on-task,” I said. He just smiled gently and nodded.
“Yes, yes—we’ve all heard about your class. Ten boys can be a handful! Just do the best you can. Good evening, Miss Iwaskoshi.”

I didn’t know if I could survive another three weeks drawing barbed wire fences and playing tag. I wondered how school supplies could be so late. The administration surely knew that of 8,000 incoming evacuees, many would be children and would need textbooks, paper, desks and pencils. If we were in Japantown, the children would be well-accustomed to the daily kindergarten schedule and far ahead of my class. There would be field trips to the zoo, the botanical gardens and the public library. The playground would be in the backyard of the school and dust storms wouldn’t ruin recess. I recalled seeing teachers and children reading under the leafy trees in front of the Raphael Weill School as I walked from the trolley stop to the flower shop. My students wouldn’t have these experiences and an overwhelming sense of responsibility lay in my stomach.

I sat back down in my spot and looked at the seeds. Touching them, I was reminded of the packet of Black-eyed Susans that William had given to me before leaving San Francisco. I still had them nesting in amongst my socks, under my cot. Four types of seeds—Paulie’s innocent question drummed in my head—would they grow a garden? It would take a miracle for them to germinate and begin to sprout. Perhaps I could soak them first and then I would have to start them indoors and control their lighting and water allotment very carefully. Then there was the question of containers and soil and more seeds...the project seemed too overwhelming.
I placed William’s letters back in the book, wishing I could simply call him to ask if it would work. By the time we exchanged letters—after they were examined, sorted, and went through several post offices between Topaz and Manzanar—it could easily be three weeks. I could send him a telegram with some money I had saved up, but his directions on how to start an indoor garden using desert wildflower seed would be too long for such correspondence. I would have to try it on my own or give up the thought altogether.

That night in the mess hall, Notiko, Aunt Hanna, Mother and I sat in the spot we usually chose for family dinners and kept our heads on a swivel, looking for Papa. He should have returned from Delta in the late afternoon and we were all jumpy with worry. We rarely were all together at the same time. Camp life: jobs, schedules and relentless lines shuffled us like worn-out cards. Frustrated with the lack of family time, my father demanded that we meet once a week for dinner, at the very least, a decision that upset my cousins greatly. Tommy had already fallen into a pack of friends that wrinkled my father’s brow whenever mentioned. They were boys separated from their families and living in a messy heap together in Block 7. Notiko, also, usually had different plans.

Mother had asked for a second tray for Papa and his food sat there, getting cold, while we ate. Because Tommy was often late to the dinners, coming in as soon as he was released from work, his absence almost felt normal. He would arrive crusty and wind-chapped, usually with a fine coating of desert sand the consistency of Notiko’s prized Coty face powder on his face, hair and glasses.
“Molly-chan, you worked very late for a Friday night,” Mother commented as she picked at her food. Aunt Hanna barely looked up from her crocheting. I could tell that Mother was worried about Papa.

“Yes, Mother,” I said, quietly. “There’s a lot to do and it was a challenging day. One of my students got lost in the dust storm and I’m still coughing up sand.”

“Well, Notiko is going to a social over at the gym. Perhaps you would like to go, too, be around other young people?” Mother said, in a manner of controlled nonchalance that she used when she wanted to make a point.

“Yes, cousin, you’re welcome to come along with me,” Notiko said, her voice distant. During the first few weeks in camp, she had often asked for me to tag along with her. I tried to be interested and went with her a couple of times, but felt out of place with her new friends.

“That sounds lovely,” I said, trying to smile. “If I get everything done in time, perhaps I’ll stop by. I’m still a dusty mess, so I don’t know if it will work out...” I scanned the room again for my father. Aunt Hanna, disliking camp food, crocheted faster, the silver steel hook whipping the yarn into a circular pattern. People chattered around us and many glanced at my family, whispering. After Tommy’s arrest, the news had spread quickly and there was no doubt word of his departure to Tule Lake would begin the same sort of gossip.

“Of course, Molly. I’ll keep an eye out for you,” Notiko said. “So, your job is not going well? Are the children behaving?” I wondered if she was sincerely interested, for as she spoke, she simultaneously was waving to a new friend across the hall. The girl
was pretty and popular at the socials, rarely sitting down between dances with different boys. She tapped her watch to remind Notiko of the time and my cousin nodded and smiled.

“Teaching is alright. We don’t have any supplies, so I’m trying to find ways to keep them busy. I have an idea, but I don’t know if it will work. I think I might try to plant an indoor garden,” I said.

“That’s going to be impossible, Molly! And, I don’t think your students will be at all interested. Maybe you would like it—” Notiko said, stopping herself to wave goodbye to another friend and losing her own train of thought. I felt small and distant from the three women with whom I sat.

A rush of cold air from the north entrance pushed through the room and caused chill bumps to rise up on my neck and face. When I turned around, I saw Papa removing his hat and hanging it on a hook beside the door. I had not seen him in a suit since the day he and Mother left San Francisco for the temporary camp. People stopped chewing as he walked by. A few family friends greeted him and he nodded back in acknowledgement, but did not stop. He sat down and looked at the bowl of pink-coated noodles on his tray.

“What have we here?” he asked.

“It’s called goulash, Uncle. Macaroni, basically,” Notiko said. Macaroni, not rice, was a main staple at camp. For all of us, it took some getting used to.

“Here, Father,” Mother said, handing him his pair of homemade chopsticks whittled from a wooden dowel. My father’s generation still preferred chopsticks and
much of the mess hall flatware went unused. Some internees, desperate to decorate their barracks, stole the utensils given out with their trays and, using scraps of twine, made homemade wind chimes that created more of a cacophonous din as opposed to actual music.

“So, Uncle, how is Tommy?” Notiko was the first to ask.

“His arm is healing. His cast will be removed in Tule Lake in a couple of weeks. He still has a few bruises, but those are fading as well,” Papa said. A few seconds passed in silence as we registered the image of a bruised, broken-armed Tommy.

“Did he say why, Uncle? What did he say about that?” Notiko asked. My father looked over at Notiko and then toward tiny Aunt Hanna, struggling to keep her face calm. Tommy was my Aunt Hanna’s youngest, her baby. In the car accident that had killed my uncle, my father’s brother, so many years ago, Aunt Hanna was tossed into the back seat upon impact and out of death’s way. Everyone had always said it was due to her diminutive size—Notiko and I had both passed her in height at the age of twelve. Her only injury was where a shard of glass sliced her face from her lip up toward her temple and a deep scar still showed. The baby she was carrying was unharmed. Tommy was born on a typically drizzly San Francisco morning in September, far from the scene of the accident and where his father’s ashes were interred in the family plot outside Osaka.

“Tommy sends his love,” my father responded and Notiko understood. “He said that he was sorry but for us not to worry.”
Aunt Hanna tried to smile. “He’s a good boy, Takuuki. He will be fine in Tule Lake,” she said, too tired to fuss and too disappointed in Tommy to actually talk about it. “Now, I’m going to get in line for a bath before it becomes too late and cold.” She gathered up her crocheting and Mother, worried about Aunt Hanna being alone with her thoughts for too long, followed. Notiko and I stayed in our seats, hopeful to learn more about Tommy.

“He says he’s sorry for being so difficult, No-chan,” my father said, using Notiko’s rarely used nickname from childhood. “And to answer your question, he said that he was just enjoying looking at the mountains.” My father shook his head in amazement.

Outside of the mess hall windows was a clear view of tall barbed wire. Although I couldn’t see them from the table, two watchtowers—on the far left and far right—were staffed with young men in heavy coats. After ten at night, the search lights on top of the towers would be turned on and they would pass over the blocks every six seconds, the palest of blue pouring in over my bed, bleaching the yellow calico curtains to near white. I became accustomed to sleeping with my pillow over my face. I thought of my students drawing “gardens” earlier in the week and wondered if they, too, would have paused to see distant Mount Topaz.

“He had been outside of camp on jobs before. What was so wonderful about that day’s mountains?” Notiko asked, but Papa remained silent. “And why did they hurt him? What’s wrong with them?” Notiko, momentarily forgetting about her social activities, dropped her head and stared at her tray.
“Notiko, this is Tommy’s responsibility,” Papa said. “He knew the rules, we all do.” Papa pushed his plate away and cleaned the chopsticks with a damp napkin and tucked them into his coat pocket.

“Surely you’re not still angry with Tommy?” Notiko asked, looking up, her eyes wide.

“And you are angry with the guards,” Papa said, quietly. “I understand, Notiko.”

“Uncle, you are so, so—” Notiko’s voice dropped to an angry whisper, “old-fashioned! Tommy was right! You think we are still the same family in Japantown. But everything has changed!”

Notiko’s cheeks flushed and she looked at me for support. But I couldn’t say anything. It was then I realized that I, too, was angry with Tommy. Tommy, who acted before he thought. Tommy, who so eagerly dismissed my father’s care, his own mother’s worry. Tommy, who had forgotten our childhood lessons and traded everything away for a poor view of mountains.

“Cousin, just because we’ve moved, doesn’t mean that we aren’t the same people,” I said, trying to grasp all of the thoughts pouring into my head at once. Notiko glared at me and, grabbing her tray, whirled out of her seat and through the crowd. I started to stand, to chase after her, but I couldn’t leave Papa, who looked hurt and suddenly very old.

It was that night in bed, watching the tower lights dart through the room and illuminate a sleeping Notiko and Aunt Hanna, the curtain made of tablecloths that separated my parents’ bed from ours, and Tommy’s empty cot, that I decided I would
plant the garden for my students. Something inside implored me to try, if only to give myself a distraction to think about besides the deterioration of my own family and the loneliness I was beginning to feel at every turn. I couldn’t help but wonder who was right. I had sided with my father, but didn’t know, for the first time in my life, if he was truly correct in his beliefs.

I thought of him and my mother and the generations of Iwakoshis that had come before. We were a people of tradition, of rules, of set behaviors that rarely were altered in the face of change. Surely, I thought, my parents had had to become different people when they moved to the United States, just as Tommy and Notiko were changing at Topaz. And I was, too, just in a quieter, more secretive way—allegiance with my father over my cousin and best friend, hiding the importance of my relationship with William from Mother, disapproval of Tommy. But, there was something warm and steady about our rules and way of life that I couldn’t dismiss. And although I was angry at Tommy for his risks, part of me wondered what he saw in the distance that was so intriguing that he kept walking away from all that he knew.

Seventeen coffee cans in various sizes—Folgers, Butternut, Hills Brothers, White House, and Old Judge—filled the wheelbarrow Papa used for the mail. It took great effort to gather them, as the internees weren’t fond of coffee and my connection with our section’s mess hall, Notiko, was barely speaking to me. I ended up going to each of the other mess halls and even to the administration building, begging for the cans. A curt woman with a blond pageboy told me that I was taking from our military forces, as
the cans were always donated whenever there was a scrap metal drive. I promised her, using my kindest tone and not going into any details, that as soon as my class project was finished, I would turn them in myself.

Pushing the drab, olive-green wheelbarrow was far more difficult than I thought it would be. The wheel kept gathering mud and every ten feet I had to use a stick to scrape it out from between the spokes. It was Sunday and everything had to be completed before five a.m. Monday morning, when Papa needed his wheelbarrow back. I was heading to a seldom-visited area of camp to ready the cans for planting and, if I saw my opportunity, to sneak into the soil-ripening beds and “borrow” a few bucketfuls of soil.

I had asked one of the administrators in charge of the agriculture team tasked with planting victory gardens if I could have a couple of buckets of soil for my class and I was promptly turned down. They had been trying to create a viable soil for months and had built-up soil-ripening beds, mixing desert dirt with a small amount of “imported” dirt from an alfalfa farm over twenty miles away and any fertilizing agent possible from the mess hall and chicken coops. It was layered, mixed and recovered with burlap every couple of days and each bucket was precious. I again explained that it was for my kindergarten class and that it was an experiment to see if I could get a few seeds to grow as a science lesson. The gentleman was not moved and shrugged his shoulders, muttering another “sorry, lady,” before he turned his back on me.

I had no choice—while I might be able to get the Topaz seeds to grow in a couple of inches of desert dirt in the bottom of a coffee can, the Black-eyed Susans and
Paulie’s seeds would definitely not germinate or sprout in that mineral-weak mud. I wanted to try all of the seeds—including whatever my students could find on a second trip back to the playground—in the richer mix. Because Sunday night was a weak link in Camp Topaz supervision, I planned to push Papa’s wheelbarrow over to the soil ripening beds and commit the first offence of my life: stealing.

I parked the wheelbarrow next to a picnic table that had been salvaged from an old CCC camp—much of the wood scraps and even mess hall tables were from the same camp—and started to unload the cans. I was lucky in that everything ordered for Topaz came in large quantities. Designed to hold three pounds of coffee, the cans were sixteen-to-eighteen-inches-high and the diameters were a good eight inches. I had pried a nail out of the wall in the Block 29 women’s lavatory in the middle of the night using the hammer Papa brought from home and, with both, started to punch holes in the bottoms of the cans for drainage. It was a loud affair and I was glad that no one was around to ask questions. When finished, I left the wheelbarrow parked and, taking a few trips, carried the cans to my classroom and lined them up against the south wall on top of several layers of newspaper.

As I worked, I found that I was whistling aloud, the way I used to when I swept the flower shop in the evening or trimmed stems for the next day. I immediately felt a stab of loneliness—in those days, Tommy had been there to help. He would have enjoyed my little garden project. While I didn’t know if working in the flower shop had held any lasting interest for him, working on a secret project, especially where minor rule-breaking was needed, had. The Tommy that I remembered would have gladly
helped me push the cranky wheelbarrow through the muck and would have enjoyed every second of stealing soil. My anger toward him softened.

I walked quietly through the darkened camp, back to the picnic table, enjoying the star-filled sky above me. The moon was out in full, providing enough light for me as I pushed the wheelbarrow through the thick mud toward the far edge of the soil-ripening beds. Working quickly, I filled a bucket borrowed from the Block 29 women’s lavatory with fresh soil and dumped it in the wheelbarrow that I had lined with newspaper, hoping to make cleanup easier. I scooped at least six bucketfuls out and, bending over the railroad ties used to create the bed, I tried to spread the dirt mixture around evenly to cover up the hole I had made. My hands were numb from the cold soil and I hoped that I hadn’t taken more than I needed or more than I could push. I recovered the bed and looked around me to see if anyone had been watching. Seeing no one and hearing nothing but the flapping of a desert bird’s wings in the distance, I started my long, slow trek back to the school, keeping the wheelbarrow as straight as possible and rubbing any spilled soil into the mud with my shoe.

Returning to my classroom, I dumped half of the dirt into a trashcan that usually was in the school washroom, and divided the rest in the cans, using one of Mother’s teacups. It wasn’t as rich as the black earth of home, but tended carefully, I hoped it would produce at least a few little plants. Exhausted, I sat next to the trashcan in my classroom, the air ripe with rotting eggshells and chicken excrement. I could feel the grit on my hands and beneath my fingernails. I hoped that no one had seen me and that I wouldn’t get into trouble for stealing. I reminded myself that it wasn’t something
out of the ordinary for us evacuees. Building materials for shelves, tables and chairs were in high demand and, each night, boards, nails and any scrap that could be made into furniture would go missing. *Besides, I thought to myself, these are the memories that my students will take with them from Topaz.*

Pleased with my justification, I took out a piece of paper and began to write a letter to William, not bothering to dust off the dark smudge marks on the corners of the paper. I might not have a photo of myself to send to him, as requested in one of his letters, but at least he had my fingerprints.

As I ushered my students into the classroom on Monday morning, I watched to see who would notice the planters first and who would figure out what I had been keeping secret for over a week. I had told them that we would be starting a very big project together, something that caused a great deal of anticipation in class. Other teachers who overheard that I was planning something special also stopped by to investigate. I hoped that they wouldn’t ask too many questions about the way I had gathered the supplies.

“Coffee cans?” Dot looked at me and cocked her head and placed her hands on her hips. “What kind of project is this?”

“She has dirt in each of them! And there’s more dirt in the trashcan,” another little girl said, squeezing her nose shut with her thumb and forefinger. I had left a couple of windows open overnight to air out the classroom as best I could. However,
the pungent odor of new soil and manure was strong. After living in the horse stalls of Tanforan, I hoped that they would quickly get used to the smell.

“Well, has anyone guessed what we are going to do, class?” I searched their faces.

“I know, Miss Iwakoshi,” Paulie said. He hadn’t forgotten. “We are making a San Francisco garden.” The children squealed with excitement. I asked for their silence and, without raising my voice, sixteen faces turned toward me in rapt attention. My students had never been so eager to hear me say anything before and I felt a surge of pride.

“That’s correct, Paulie. Who wants to watch me plant the first few seeds in my coffee can?” Eager hands waved around me. We sat in our circle in the middle of the floor and I placed my can in the center. I showed them how to place seeds into the soil and how far away to plant each. We would only be able to plant three or four seeds in each can and, even then, we would need to transplant, if they grew, come spring.

The children watched as I covered the seeds up with more soil. I took a teacup full of water and sprinkled it in the can and started to answer questions.

“How long will it take to grow? Will we see them tomorrow?” Hiraku asked.

“No, it will take longer than that. But, as they are busy growing, we will be busy studying about what is happening and what kind of plants they will be when they grow up,” I said. “We’ll be drawing pictures of them and learning about what they need to grow—it’s a very big project, so it isn’t going to happen overnight.” I suddenly wished William were there to see me. I felt like a real teacher and like I was finally doing something worthwhile.
“Do we have enough seeds, Miss Iwakoshi?” Dot asked.

“I’m glad you mentioned that. A seed-hunt is the first step in the project. I’m going to show you what we already have and then we are going to the field beyond the playground and look for more. You’ll need to be very careful and look very closely at the ground. They come in all shapes and sizes and every little bit helps,” I explained.

To the most careful students, I passed out a few sacks that I had hand-sewn from scrap curtain material my mother had received from the Sears & Roebuck catalog. It made four long, skinny bags, only two inches wide, but eight inches tall. “These are for our seeds, class. Don’t fight over the sacks, or you will spill the seeds once we gather them.”

We walked through the primitive schoolyard, passing the other classrooms where children squealed and teachers yelled for attention, and toward the playground we hadn’t been to since the dust storm. I kept watching the sky, hoping I wouldn’t see a familiar brown haze on the horizon. The day was pleasant enough, the wind not too sharp, the cool bearable.

As we walked away from the school block, I watched as a group of older Issei women clustered at a wobbly picnic table, carefully deconstructing a brightly-colored pink and orange kimono into parts, cutting out the smallest of stitches and separating the pieces. I had seen this before—they were making curtains. *So much change,* I thought, *maybe too much to bear,* and I encouraged my students to wave to the women and say “ohayou gozaimasu.” The children repeated after me, and the women returned the greeting and waved. Through the air, caught in the breeze, an orange
silken thread cut across our path and floated toward the tarred roof of a nearby barrack.

Finally at the edge of the playground, my students broke into a sprint, past the play equipment and into the field. “Be careful,” I said to the back of sixteen heads facing the ground in pursuit of seeds.

“Found one!” Hiraku raced to my side with another of the Blazing Star seeds that Paulie found previously.

“Can I shake this plant, Miss Iwakoshi? Are these seeds?” another student called out.

It was a pleasant medley of voices and questions. Half of what we picked up were seed-sized pebbles. Stickers from a mesquite-like bush stuck in a few fingers and I pulled out the old woman’s tweezers, glad that I had remembered them. Our hunting party stayed in a loose group, but continued to move forward, further than even I intended. Looking back, I saw that the swing set was small in the distance. Still, with remarkable focus, my class continued their search, little fingers digging into the ground.

“We need to turn around, class, we’ve gone too far!” I called out. Half of the class heeded my call and came toward me, but another group, led by Paulie, continued out further and climbed up on a large barrel that appeared to have been left to fade and swell in the heat after Topaz’s construction. Something had caught their attention and they looked to the west, clustering together, pushing each other off the barrel.
Commanding my eight students to walk toward the playground, I made my way to Paulie’s group, calling them by name. Only Hiraku turned around and motioned me toward them.

“Look, Miss Iwakoshi, I’ve never seen them so close up!” he said, a look of awe spreading over his face. The Thomas Mountains lay in the distance. It was perhaps the best view I had seen of them, unmarred by tar-paper buildings, only interrupted by the tall barbed wire fence. They were oddly beautiful, rising up from the flattest land possible. I wondered what could have created something so Starkly different from what surrounded it.

“Students, this is nice, but we are a bit too close to the fence,” I said, gently, not wanting to put a damper on their enthusiasm but worried about our proximity to the edge of camp.

“Aww, just one more second, Miss Iwakoshi,” Paulie pleaded.

All morning the clouds had raced across the desert sky, only occasionally breaking through and showing off an expanse of azure blue. As I lifted Hiraku off of the barrel and prepared to do the same with the others, I saw a brightening all around us as a couple of rays struggled to push through the thick clouds. The light hit the mountains and changed their color from a dull steel color to the loveliest of purples and browns.

“It’s happening again! It’s happening!” Paulie shouted and pointed. I strained to see what he was so excited about, but as the sun struck Mount Topaz, tiny as a child’s
hands clasped in prayer in the distance, the light played off the edges of the rock and sparkled.


Mount Topaz, awash in light, glittered for another few seconds, capturing all of us in a trance. I felt my heart lift.

“Isn’t that the prettiest thing you’ve ever seen?” Paulie said to me, his voice light and airy. He grabbed my hand. “I wish everyone could see this, I wish my parents could and my grandmother...”

“I do, too, Paulie,” I said, looking down before the clouds stitched themselves back together and the mountain returned to its normal shade of rocky gray.