

CONTENTS

Preface ix

Prologue 3

1. Battlefield to Beet Field: The Germans Meet Dad in World War II 14
 2. A Better Mousetrap 24
 3. Mind the Gap: Locating Missing Memories 28
 4. Big Apple to Big Sky: Meditations on Space 55
 5. The One and Only 64
 6. Crossing Over 93
 7. Saints and Sinners 110
 8. Cape Town to Japantown 120
 9. Chicken, Waffles, and . . . Tsukemono 131
 10. Pictures on the Wall 158
 11. Epilogue: Bananas and Beyond 174
 12. Afterword 184
- Lane Ryo Hirabayashi*

References 189

PROLOGUE

In writing my family's story—my story—I have tried to be true to the facts as I have remembered them or been able to ascertain them from other people, photos, and research into the history of the time. My parents' and sister's lives in Seattle before Pearl Harbor and their forced removal to Wyoming are particularly hard to write about since everyone from that period is gone: my parents, my grandparents, and the historian of my generation, my older sister. The list leaves me heavy-hearted. I was not yet born when they were removed from Seattle, and over the course of growing up I remember hearing only snatches of conversations that referred to that time and that gave only hints as to what their lives were like.

Looking at the few photos of Mom, Dad, and Lilian from her birth till around age three, I am captivated. Some of the photos are large, professionally taken, and sepia in tone; others are small, on shiny photo paper with a generous band of white, sometimes with ruffled edging around them. None are in color. What I see in the way they are dressed, the way they look into the camera, and especially the expressions on their faces reassures me that this was a happy time, a time of contentment and promise.

PROLOGUE

They, my parents, were so young when they married. My mother was only eighteen and my father just five years her senior. I can't imagine being married at eighteen. When I was that age I knew nothing about anything, least of all about a serious relationship, a relationship important enough to end in marriage. I am guessing that my mother didn't really know much either. Their marriage was arranged, which was not unusual for their day or our culture. I heard later in my adulthood that had either of them protested vociferously, the marriage would not have taken place. But Mom was so young and naive, I doubt she could have even discerned whether she had anything to protest. I don't know whether Dad knew any more than Mom when it came to serious relationships. And that is a big, sad, gaping hole for me and my remaining siblings: what we know about either of our parents before they met and married could probably be written on a slip of paper the size of the fortune in a fortune cookie.

A short time ago, in an attempt to see if I could find out anything more or more substantial about my parents' lives, I decided to visit Seattle, walk the old neighborhood where they had lived, get a feel for the city they were making their own before Executive Order 9066 sent them packing to the countryside. My sister Mary sent me copies of several documents from old files of our parents that gave me an idea where to look, what neighborhood to walk. It was no surprise to find that they had lived in what is called the International District. In their day, that neighborhood was mostly taken up by the city's Chinatown and Japantown; today, it also includes Seattle's Koreatown as well as concentrations of other Asian ethnic groups like Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese. It is not a large area but also not small, given its diversity of inhabitants, and it's located in the center of Seattle, a short walk to the water. Like much of the rest of Seattle, it has its share of hills but is not too steep to keep foot traffic from being heavy—even the elders can be seen walking to and from their shopping destinations. I felt smug about the fact that, coming from Berkeley and the San Francisco area, I was used to hills and could navigate on foot pretty comfortably.

An old Berkeley friend, Loren, now living in Oregon offered to meet me in Seattle and help me explore some of the places I wanted to contact. My plan was to visit landmarks in the International District and look specifically for the addresses my parents had any connection to. The only other place I was determined to visit was the University of Washington. I would find that

Prologue

a little hand-holding on this emotional journey turned out to be much appreciated. I had been enthusiastic about stepping through this narrow opening into my parents' and sister's past, but it was a bittersweet experience. I knew it would be painful, and there were moments when I felt the pain acutely.

Shortly before I left for Seattle, someone passed along to me a paperback titled *The Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* by Jamie Ford. The timing was right because if I'd waited until after my trip to read it, I might have completely missed the Panama Hotel, the hotel of the novel's title.

The Panama is a landmark in the International District not only because of its importance as a business establishment but also because when word of the exclusion came down, many of the Japanese American residents in the area were allowed to store some of their belongings in the hotel basement. After the war, many of these residents were unable to reclaim their trunks and suitcases and boxes, which were left in the hotel basement to gather dust. Years later, they were discovered. Much to the credit of the current owner, she fully grasped what she had acquired, saved the baggage, and made a small historical museum out of the hotel and the abandoned pieces. I hadn't been successful in arranging an appointment to visit the basement, so when Loren and I made it to the Panama, the owner was not there. As much as we wanted to, we weren't able to go down to the bowels of the building and view the shelves and piles of abandoned boxes and trunks and suitcases, the personal belongings of people who had hoped to hold on to something of their lives by leaving them in that basement to be retrieved when the situation allowed.

The hotel is still in use. Completely renovated, it retains from its heyday in the first half of the twentieth century not only the overall structure but also some of the internal details like parts of the original wooden floors, the radiators, a few pieces of period furniture. What couldn't be saved or repaired was replaced or redone in the original style. I was given a tour of the upstairs, a peek inside the rooms, modest but clean and neat.

Seeing this historic building, knowing its role in the forced removal of the International District, knowing what still remained dusty and unclaimed in its basement all heightened for me the sadness, the feelings of loss and of lives interrupted, and the stark realization that while buildings can be renovated to look as they did in the past, lives are changed forever.

After the tour, Loren and I had a cup of tea in the lobby, now a tea room. We wanted to relax and quietly take in the atmosphere and the experience. Loren

PROLOGUE

seemed to be enjoying herself, but for me it felt a little strange, slightly disrespectful, to be enjoying a quiet cup of tea above all that abandoned baggage. To be honest, it felt a little spooky. If I let myself, I could picture as well as feel the ghostly spirits of the owners, young men and women quietly rummaging through the baggage, finding the objects belonging to them, impatiently waiting to be released, waiting to return home. I couldn't imagine spending a night at the hotel. That basement was a far too busy place for my comfort.

Though the initial purpose of the trip was to connect with my own family's story, I also found myself pondering a much bigger picture: the meaning of the various levels of loss suffered by the city. The Japantown, the Nihonmachi, of pre-World War II Seattle was a thriving commercial and residential area, small but populated by successful businesses and professionals and their families. The sudden, overnight forced removal of an entire group of people en masse must have left the International District looking like a town intact but mysteriously empty. However, that look didn't last long; it is well documented that many whites quickly moved into the district and took over the empty businesses and other establishments left behind by the Nikkei. This would have been easy to do, since the buildings and businesses had been abandoned in such haste that everything was basically still the same and ready to be reopened for business as usual. I have also read that some of those taken-over establishments didn't survive, since those who were left in the area seemed in no hurry to patronize them.

As I wandered around the International District, I was always aware that the place I was seeing, smelling, hearing was completely different from the place where my parents and sister had lived for so many years before the war. The district never fully recovered from the loss of its Japanese American citizens. The city as a whole did not recover the totality of its lost population. The estimate is that about 65 percent to 70 percent of the incarcerated returned to Seattle. The Nihonmachi was virtually destroyed. Some research shows that not even half of the business establishments returned to the International District after the war. The financial loss to the city as a whole must have been tremendous: monetary loss to the Nikkei alone is calculated to have been in the many millions by today's standards.

The University of Washington (UW) also must have suffered quite an economic blow since practically overnight it lost 449 tuition-paying students—to say nothing of what the campus must have looked and felt like with so many

Prologue

students suddenly gone missing. For the remaining student population, it must have felt like a ghost town, perhaps with some of the ghosts still hovering about. Friends torn from friends, students from their teachers and mentors and the supportive guidance of the academic community. The university president, Lee Paul Sieg, is reported to have made a strong stand against the student removal, but he was no match for the federal government, the War Relocation Authority, and the hysterical racism of the moment. At least he has gone down in UW history as having taken the moral high ground.

After the war, though the Japanese Americans released from the camps were told they could return to their homes, for most there were no “homes” to return to. So many homes and businesses had been commandeered by whites. In Seattle as in many urban areas along the West Coast, there were heated debates and strong feelings about accepting the returnees back into their cities and former communities. Eventually, the mayors and governors of Washington and California agreed to take back their former citizens, but the returnees were often greeted with taunts, name calling, and other behaviors that left no doubt in the minds of the Nikkei that they were still regarded as “the enemy” and that the road ahead for them would be anything but easy, pleasant, or friendly.

There are numerous and diverse stories as to why folks didn’t return to the places they’d come from, and the majority of them are not happy ones. For our family, it was because the exclusion had forced us to become farmers, and farmers don’t have the liberty to wake up one morning and decide to leave the farm that day or the next and do something else. Dad and Mom were pretty much stuck on the farm, working hard to make it pay off.

Reading about how the returning Nikkei were “greeted,” hearing about their struggles to resettle against odds that appeared insurmountable, I finally had to grudgingly acknowledge that the Japanese American men who had volunteered for the United States Army and formed the now famous 442nd Regimental Combat Team turned out to be right: their unflagging, heroic service in the army not only proved their loyalty but also bolstered the message that all Japanese Americans were, in fact, loyal *American* citizens and had no loyalties to the enemy nation of Japan. The men, many of whom volunteered directly from the camps, consistently said that only volunteer military service would prove that Japanese Americans were not enemy spies, were not harboring a secret devotion to Japan, were not secretly collaborating

PROLOGUE

with the enemy, and so forth. In fact, no case of spying or espionage for Japan by any Japanese American was ever discovered or reported. Ever.

I have learned over time that there is something about war that speaks in deafening tones to Americans of all ilk. All voices, pro or con, about any given war or “military conflict” can be made to become one when it comes to recognizing and honoring those lost to the slaughter of war. The recognition of the service of the 442nd, which became known as the regiment with the most fatalities of World War II, helped immensely in resettling the Nikkei. In big cities like Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, as well as in smaller cities and rural areas, white Americans were able to welcome back their fellow citizens with hearts more open and grateful because of the service and sacrifice of people once labeled as “the enemy.”

As for me, I confess it has taken me many years to truly digest the fact that a man could volunteer to serve in the army of the country that had imprisoned him and his family in the concentration camp where they were all living at that time. I can only understand it as the supreme act of generosity and self-sacrifice and willpower.

Because I wanted to see the International District’s present-day Asian American community as well, we visited two community organizations that document the area’s history and offer services to residents. At the Japanese Community and Cultural Center of Washington, we encountered testimonials to the past, including pictures of the immigrant generation and some of the business establishments that had existed prior to the exclusion and several iconic pictures of the exclusion: the displaced at a train station guarded by military men holding rifles with bayonets; families, some smiling self-consciously as if for the camera, some looking shell-shocked; the now well-known picture of a mother holding her child who was only slightly older than an infant. She wears a stylish hat and a nice coat, but her visage is unsmiling, her mouth turned down at the corners as if she knows that what lies ahead for her child is not at all what she had planned or imagined. Though most of these artifacts were familiar to me, they felt different, more grave and weighty, more frightening, here in the city where they actually happened.

Completely new to me were pictures about the importance of baseball in the Japanese American community before, during, and for some years after the war. Pre-war there had been a healthy, competitive exchange between teams from Japan and from the Seattle area, and surprisingly, this exchange

Prologue

resumed for some years following the war. I had heard and read that during their imprisonment in the camps, young men formed teams and played serious baseball within camp confines and that at some point, several teams were allowed to travel among camps to compete. But the fact that they had kept that joy of the sport alive between the two countries even after the war was news to me. I am anything but an enthusiastic sports fan, but baseball is one sport I enjoy watching and I feel lucky to have two Bay-area teams to choose from. Seeing the pictures and reading the story of the camp teams, I felt a reassurance, a testament to the spirit of baseball as something larger than feelings of anger, bitterness, hostility, or depression. And because baseball is the one sport I enjoy, I felt a connection, as though I had encountered one of Abraham Lincoln's "mystic chords of memory."

The other institution we visited was the Wing Luke Museum, named after Mr. Wing Luke, a rising star in the immigrant Chinese population of the 1950s and 1960s. He was a forward-looking man, perhaps even a visionary: the first "minority" to sit on the Seattle City Council, the first person of color to hold public office in the state, and a consistent champion of civil rights. Unfortunately for Seattle and possibly for the state of Washington, Mr. Luke was killed in a plane crash in 1965. He was still young, only forty—one of those proverbial comets that blazed a path exceptionally bright and short in the dark night sky.

The museum not only tells his story and honors his accomplishments but also gives historical background about the Asian groups who landed in Seattle—Japanese Americans, Filipinos, and Pacific Islanders—and either moved on and settled the western United States or stayed and built the city and the surrounding areas. Mr. Luke had been a champion of civil rights for all these Asians.

As we toured the museum, I mused about how Seattle had been and continues to be an important city for Asian Americans, despite war, forced removal, geographic trauma. The Asian American community there survived the loss of its Japanese American citizens in the 1940s and continues to thrive, albeit with a diminished Japanese American presence. Other groups of Asians have filled in.

For me, the most fun and nostalgic exhibit was one telling the story of Bruce Lee, Seattle's homeboy and my personal celebrity hero of the 1970s. He was such a star for young Asians who were sick and tired of the stereotyped

PROLOGUE

Asian male: short, bow-legged, buck-toothed, bespectacled, and obsequious, present only to be ordered around. Then, suddenly bursting on the scene was this irreverent, cocky, handsome kung fu master able to take on any crook or even a crowd of crooks and send all of them at once howling in pain, running for safety. After we watched Bruce Lee show off, the boys were cheering and strutting around, and all the girls were definitely in love. Martial arts studios in cities everywhere experienced a big spike in business. His early death was such a blow to young Asian Americans. Another blazing, short-lived comet.

I once had a friend who would use the expression “for a hot minute” where I would have said “for a split second.” And for a hot minute, since that’s what it felt like, I considered not going to the University of Washington to check out Dad’s records. I had been doing everything and going everywhere on foot, since that was the only way to see the International District up close, to check out addresses and institutions and to get a feeling for the neighborhood. After several straight days of doing this, especially tramping up and down the hills, I was beginning to feel hot and tired. I was by myself, since Loren had returned home.

Thankfully, my hesitation didn’t last for more than a hot minute or a split second, since my trip to the University of Washington was the cherry on top of the sundae. I shudder to think what I would have missed had I given in to hot and tired feet.

We kids had always heard that Dad had been a student at UW when the war broke out. When the forced removal became law, he, along with all the other young Japanese American men and women students, regardless of what class they were in—even seniors just months from graduation—were forced to leave school and go with their families into camps or other places outside the security areas along the coastal United States. While I never thought the story about Dad being a student there was a fabrication, I was never sure it was completely true because I had also heard that since Dad worked during the day, he went to classes at night. If this were true, I reasoned, maybe he had never registered as a legitimate UW student. When I called to make an appointment with the registrar, I was told just to come into the office and they would try to help me.

I caught a bus to the UW campus and followed the signs to the registrar’s office. The campus looked lush and green, and I was tempted to wander around for a bit and check it out, but business first. I told myself that

Prologue

depending on how disappointed I was after my talk with the registrar, I could always stroll around afterward and even have some lunch on campus. Campus food used to be notoriously awful; I could see if things had changed from my days of eating on a college campus.

I found Schmitz Hall and walked through the open door into a light and airy office. I was lucky: no long line of impatient students waiting to be served. In fact, there was no one else waiting for anything. A young woman with dark hair, Christine she told me later, asked if she could help me. I told her what had brought me to her office. I wanted to know if she might be able to check and see if my father, George Kawamoto, had been a student at the University of Washington in the year the forced removal took place in Seattle, probably sometime in the spring of 1942. Would she even be able to locate records going back that far? I had my doubts. As I was talking to Christine, another young woman entered the office and Christine explained to her what I was requesting. Christine went back to her computer and the other woman disappeared momentarily. Christine found my father's name in no time and confirmed that he had been a student at UW at the time in question. I was impressed that she was able to access such information so easily. A moment to be grateful for technology, for not having to send someone down into a dark, dank basement to dig through boxes of old files with only the vague possibility of finding any proof or even any clues of my father having set foot on the campus. I was reflecting that it could have taken days, if anyone were even willing to do it, when the other woman reentered the room and placed something on the counter in front of me. I looked down to see a document with fancy black lettering bearing the official seal of the university. It was a bachelor's degree diploma. I saw that it had my father's name on it and burst into tears! How could this be? I knew he had never finished college anywhere, especially not here at the University of Washington. In fact, my parents had returned to Seattle only once or twice, many years after the exclusion, to visit a few old friends.

The two young women waited patiently for me to compose myself, then explained. Back in 2008, a large group of Japanese Americans, Nikkei as they are also called, put on what I will call an event, with the full cooperation of the university. They called it the Long Journey Home, a recognition and celebration of the many Nikkei whose educations were interrupted or came to a permanent end as a result of their forced removal from Seattle in

1942. The event included a ceremony in which the surviving Nikkei students who were able to be there were presented with official, honorary bachelor's degrees from the University of Washington. There were speakers and university officials, including the university president, in attendance. The planning committee, composed of members from the Nikkei community and various university departments, had diplomas made for every Japanese American student who had been attending the university at that time, a whopping 449 of them. Even those who were deceased or unable to attend the ceremony had a degree on file. That's how I came to receive my father's degree—the Office of the Registrar had kept it on file, perhaps hoping that someday, someone would come to claim it. I confess, holding my father's degree felt a little like some part of my journey, and his, had come full circle. I am so grateful to the Nikkei community of Seattle and to the University of Washington for creating this meaningful counterpoint, a small but meaningful dent into that bleak and dismal episode of our American history.

I know my dad would have loved to have finished college, and I also am pretty sure that he wouldn't have demanded that he go back to the University of Washington. Someplace closer would also have worked, since for him it was the mere fact of doing it, of being in that stimulating environment, of learning, of choosing what line of work, what profession would best suit his interests, skills, and goals. Of *getting an education*. Of *being* educated. I also believe that for him, the more education, the better. My sister once told me, much to my astonishment, that one afternoon she had heard Dad doing his understated version of bragging—about me getting my master's degree. He was outside in the yard chatting with a neighbor when he dropped that into the conversation. My parents never bragged about their children, never even talked much about us to anyone, so the magnitude of this tidbit of information did not escape me.

More than once in the stories that follow, I make reference to what a smart, intelligent, and talented individual my dad was. I tell about his artistic ability and his interest in music, even how as an adult he taught himself to play the piano. One story I heard growing up was that when he was around eighteen, he took a keen interest in photography and tried setting up his own dark room, but the room had no running water so he had to haul in buckets of water from another room to develop his pictures. I never heard that his efforts led to much of anything but the hard labor of hauling water. But for me the intrigue is that *he* was intrigued by the still developing artform.

Prologue

I am left to ponder: What would my parents' lives have been like had they been able to remain in Seattle? More specifically, had they been able to live out their lives like an ordinary family in the International District of 1940s Seattle; to be surrounded and supported by a community of people who looked like them, who accepted them, who understood them. A community where no one had to explain themselves or their behavior to anyone else because they all knew what to look for, what to listen for, what all those little nuances of behavior and the spoken word stood for. They knew because they shared a common culture that bound them to an unspoken understanding of each other even in the subtlest of ways.

What if Dad had been able to finish college at the University of Washington and pursue the career of his choice—engineering or dentistry? If Mom had been able to raise her first daughter and the three of us who followed in the company and with the support of other young mothers, especially other Japanese American mothers?

Mom had been trained as a beautician and been practicing at a local beauty shop before the exclusion. Her beautician's license had to be renewed yearly, and Mary has copies of them dating from the late 1930s and staying current right up until 1942, when they end abruptly, never to be renewed. What if she had been able to continue renewing her licenses until *she* was ready to stop?

I will never know the answer to these questions. I can only do what I have always done: guess and imagine. So the stories that follow are factual when it comes to my own life, but in terms of my parents' lives, I am left to speak of them only as I experienced them in our lives together, until they were no longer here.