Jean-Jacques Greif

The soul-mending thread

jjgreif.com

1. Two suitcases

Tuesday, April 21st, 1942

Dear Mrs. Moore,

Gee, I wanted to talk about the sea otters, honest. I have not decided to loaf on Santa Monica pier instead of going to school. I'd rather be in class with my pals, believe me. Besides, I'm sure they were eager to hear my presentation of the charming beasts.

Last Friday, I'm barely back from school, two military cops ring at our door. I know they belong to the army because they wear kaki uniforms. The FBI agents who arrested my father on December 7th wore civilian clothes.

"Mrs Kashimura?" one of the cops asks. "Kenichiro and Akiko Kashimura? You've got the whole week-end to pack and get ready."

"You take what you can carry," the other one adds.

My mother has been studying English at the library for years, but she's still in beginners' class.

"What take can carry?" she asks.

"Two suitcases per person, madam. You be on Monday morning, seven sharp, at the bus terminal on Santa Monica boulevard."

She panics easily. As soon as the cops are gone, she starts running everywhere. She seems to think they ordered her to open all the cupboards in the house. You've seen her at parents' meetings, Mrs. Moore. She runs in small steps, her feet turned inward, as if she wore Japanese sandals and a kimono.

"Two suitcases, two suitcases! Where are we going? How long? Will it be cold? What do we need? Two suitcases!"

"They left this paper, mom, that says what we are allowed to bring. Sheets and blankets. Plain sturdy clothes: cotton shirts, warm sweaters, blue jeans. Strong walking shoes or boots. Personal belongings. Toiletries. A tin plate and tumbler. Then what's forbidden: domestic animals, arms, cameras, radio sets, binoculars. No more than twenty-five dollars cash."

"But we haven't got any binoculars."

"Good. I know you. You would have hidden them in your suitcase to spy on secret military bases."

"I'm taking my doll Shirley," Akiko says. She's my sister, you know her.

I was sad about my radio set. I like it a lot. My mother gave it to me for my birthday, in February. My father met many people at work: vegetable and fruit growers, truck drivers, grocers, ship captains. When he came home in the evening, he brought the latest news and rumors. My mother thought the radio set would replace him. I would listen to the news bulletin and we'd stay informed during these hard times.

She's still running and mumbling.

"Two suitcases each, oh, oh, two… I don't have blue jeans (she pronounces it *beeru jinsu*)… Tell me, Ken-chan, what do they mean, *walking shoes*? Shoes are always for walking, no?"

"I guess we may have to walk a lot. You don't want to wear dancing shoes or high heels."

She disappears somewhere and comes back with two small suitcases. Japanese people travel light, even when they are quite wealthy, like my parents. She opens the suitcases, closes them, weighs them.

"Just sheets and blankets, these suitcases will be full. Not to forget your violin, Akiko."

"I don't want my violin. I want my doll Shirley."

"And your father isn't even there to help me."

My sister and I, we know that she may waver for quite a while. In the end, she always decides something, and then she acts pretty fast.

"Come, children. We'll buy *beeru jinsu* and suitcases."

She phones for a taxi. My father's Studebaker has been parked in front of the house since December. "We need to take him to the office for questioning," the FBI agents said. We thought they would bring him back a few hours later. He had done nothing wrong, for sure. We saw him once, behind bars, in a kind of immigration service jail. Then they sent him to a camp in Montana somewhere. Nobody knows how to drive. When Mike Okubo, my father's assistant, comes to show my mother the company's accounts (business is bad, because American clients don't want to buy food from the Japanese anymore), he drives us to the pier in the Studebaker.

"It should move, otherwise it will go numb."

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"A car can't go numb," Akiko says.

"You bet it can. Just like you. If you don't move, you go numb and you can't start. Ken-chan, you should run the engine once or twice a week so it stays in shape."

What amazes me is that my mother knows a luggage store. I mean, a regular American store, where the storekeeper is neither Japanese nor Chinese.

"I want six suitcases very big," she tells the salesman. "Quality best possible."

Akiko protests.

"I'll never be able to carry these huge suitcases, mom."

"We'll find a way. Sheets, blankets, two sweaters for winter, two shirts, two pairs of pants, or one skirt and one pair of pants, pajamas or night gown, plate and tumbler, your doll Shirley. Who knows how long this war will last?"

I don't have a doll Shirley, but I decide to hide my marble collection in one of my suitcases.

Back home, my mother begins to move the furniture to the front lawn.

"This is what Americans do when they move. We don't want to leave anything behind. We put stuff outside and people come and buy it."

"This is called a garage sale, mom. The garage becomes a store."

"In places where it rains, they use their garage. Here, they put things on the lawn. I have seen it often."

We help her prepare cardboard signs: *Evacuation Sale*. Neighbors come take a look. They seem uneasy. Soon, people we don't know arrive in station wagons or small trucks. They offer ridiculous sums: five dollars for the dining room table, ten dollars for the gas stove. On Saturday, my mother says no. On Sunday morning, no again. On Sunday afternoon, she says yes. What else can she do? If you had come, Mrs. Moore, you could have bought a cheap stove.

Mr. Maddox walks by several times. He barely seems to look in our direction. He sells second-hand books on Raymond Avenue. I have bought many books in his store, Mrs. Moore. Do you remember the book with the nice pictures about sea fauna I have shown you? Yes, the very book that gave me the idea to talk about sea otters. Well, I bought it from him. I have talked with him often. I found him rather pleasant, or at least less hostile than most people, in spite of his thick black mustache. He looks like a funny character in silent movies. He comes again on Sunday afternoon. He points at the Studebaker.

"Fifty dollars," he says.

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Americans have these silly ideas about "impassive Orientals." I can see dark currents flowing under the skin of my mother's face. A car my father had just bought. It is worth at least a thousand dollars.

"Think it over," Mr. Maddox says. "I'll come again in half an hour."

As he hasn't spoken much, my mother could understand him quite well.

"They have always despised us. Since this attack on Pearl Harbor, they do it openly. They're happy to see us go. His offer is an insult."

"You can't accept, mom."

"If I refuse, what will happen? The car will stay here. Someone will steal it. Or people will dismember it to sell parts. If they leave it alone, it will rust and turn to dust. In any case, we'll lose it. Fifty dollars is better than nothing."

Here is Mr. Maddox again. My mother sells him the car. I think I see a satisfied smile under his thick mustache.

Four burly men step down from a truck. They enter the house without asking for our permission. There is nothing left in the living room except my beautiful piano, whose ebony skin glitters in the dark. They drop twenty dollars on the floor and take it away. I would like to say goodbye to this close friend, but I'm afraid I'll look foolish if I cry in front of the heartless robbers.

My mother surprised me when she bought the suitcases. She's beginning to get the hang of things, but it is too late already. If the FBI hadn't taken my father away, he would have acted sooner. He analyses a situation, he thinks, he decides. It's his job as a boss. He would have found a safe place to store the piano and the furniture.

Akiko and I, we wonder whether our mother is not becoming crazy. She puts her hat on.

"I'm going to the dentist."

She's losing her wits for sure. Instead of taking her handbag, she's carrying the big bag she puts vegetables in when she goes to the market.

"Did you have a toothache, mom?" Akiko asks her when she returns.

"Even if she doesn't have a toothache. She plays it safe. There might not be any dentist where we're going."

"I left the *daijimono* with him. He's the only honest person I know."

Gee, she's clever. *Daijimono* are things of great value like family mementoes, photographs of our grandparents and of my brother Kazuo—who died when he was an infant, before I was born.

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On Sunday night, I go out to say goodbye to the palm trees on Ocean Avenue, to the beach, to the Santa Monica pier. I spend a long time looking at the waves that sparkle under the moon.

Monday morning. We're hauling our suitcases into a bus full of Japanese people. I mean, some are Japanese like my mother, others are American like Akiko and me. A small crowd is gathered on the sidewalk.

"Dirty Japs!" they shout. "Go back to your country or we'll blast your heads off!"

The bus starts along Santa Monica Boulevard. A dog runs after us for at least a mile. A six- or seven-year old boy is standing at the rear window, making signs at him and sobbing.

"No, Freddie, no! Go back home. Mrs. Campbell will take care of you."

The dog can't follow anymore. Its tongue is hanging. It sits in the middle of the boulevard. Everybody tries to comfort the boy. The passengers were silent, and now they all speak at the same time.

"I left my new bike behind."

"I've heard they're sending us to the desert. The boots are because of rattlesnakes."

"He offered ten dollars for the couch. Then he said, Bah, I'll come again tomorrow, then it will be free."

"We are not traitors."

"On the contrary: our own government is betraying us. I am an American citizen."

"What's worse, it is betraying the United States Constitution."

"The day after Pearl Harbor, someone called me *You Jap!* I didn't understand right away that he meant me. A Jap? Where do you see a Jap?"

"*Jap* is the same word for the enemy and for us. We look like the enemy, don't we? After Pearl Harbor, they decided overnight that we were all sneaky cagey cowards, barely human. Little better than apes."

"Not that new. We were the yellow peril already."

"The FBI arrested my uncle. He worked in a lab that made insecticide spray. They think we want to poison the fruit and vegetables we sell."

The people are dressed in their Sunday best. Maybe they carry their walking boots in their suitcases. My mother is the only woman in blue jeans. She looks quite ridiculous, actually. Several men are wearing their Great War uniforms. After spending more than twenty years in a trunk, the uniforms are somewhat wrinkled. They seem to frown: "Hey,

we fought for this country. What kind of reward is this?" A woman is carrying an ironing board, another a folding chair.

We wear our heavy winter coats, which didn't fit in our suitcases. Gee, we're hot! My mother winces.

"I feel I have forgotten something, but I can't find what it is."

A train is waiting for us at Union Station. The sign at the platform entrance that usually mentions a destination is blank. Nobody tells us where we are going. Either they don't know, or they don't want us to know. Armed soldiers escort us to the railway cars. Gleaming knife blades are tied to the barrels of their guns. The veterans tell us they are called bayonets. This is quite frightening. In the train, there are military cops who yell rather than speak.

"You all pull the shades down!"

"Don't you touch them anymore!"

The passengers obey silently. They are as tame as animals that fear punishment. Children cry. Their parents try to soothe them.

The train doesn't start. The flow of time seems to slow down so much that it becomes sticky. A little boy stares at Akiko's doll Shirley and weeps.

"I want Teddy kuma!"

Kuma means bear, Mrs. Moore.

After an hour or so, members of the Salvation Army come aboard and give us cookies, coffee and lemonade. It comforts us to see white American people who smile at us and treat us kindly.

Many passengers come say hello to my mother. They are my father's suppliers. You have certainly noticed, Mrs. Moore, that Japanese people grow fruit and vegetables on vacant lots right in the middle of Los Angeles. They used to sell them to my father, who is a "wholesaler." He sells fruit and vegetables throughout Southern California and as far as Nevada. These poor fruit growers have never traveled on a train. When it brakes, they fall from their seats. They are sick as if the train were a boat. One of them actually vomits. They can't help raising the blinds to look outside. They cry like the children.

"Look," one of them says between sobs, "flowers and fruit everywhere."

"They send us away just before harvest."

"I've heard that Americans bought crops a tenth of their value."

"They didn't come to my place. I've lost a full year of income."

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"If you had been able to harvest and sell your crop, it wouldn't have made much of a difference: can't take more than twenty-five dollars."

"Money doesn't matter. I hate to think that everything is going to rot right on the ground. What a waste!"

"Do you know where we are going?"

"Have you seen their guns? They'll take us to some desert place and kill us all."

I can tell you where we are, Mrs. Moore. At least, I think I am allowed to. In Tulare, on the racetrack. Well, it is not a racetrack anymore, but an "assembly center." Our trip lasted less than three hours. Yes, in California! Half-way between Los Angeles and San Francisco. People think they'll take us elsewhere later on. The decree does say we should be moved away from the coast, to prevent us from spying. Our address: Tulare Assembly Center, family 17348. They gave us this number in the bus.

Mrs. Moore, I have never seen so many Japanese people!

A four-year old girl complains: "I want to go back to America!" Seeing all these Japanese people in the assembly center, she thought she had come to Japan.

They searched our luggage to seize our binoculars and radio sets. Then we had to take our clothes off and walk stark naked, men on one side and women on the other, into rooms where military cops sprayed us with insecticide powder. Afterward, they vaccinated us against typhoid fever and other illnesses, as if we were soldiers. Ouch!

I am sorry, Mrs. Moore, I would like to write much more, but I must end my letter because my fountain pen is nearly empty already. I didn't dare take an inkbottle. I imagined a railroad employee throwing my heavy suitcase into a boxcar, the inkbottle breaking into pieces, ink stains all over my clothes.

My mother keeps listing all the things she couldn't take because the suitcases were full: her big tortoise shell comb, her kettle and so on. She didn't forget her iron, of course. She also brought her wedding kimono, which she never wears.

They say that people have burned very valuable ancient kimonos. They didn't want to sell them for ten dollars to people who would turn them into bathrobes. They should have given them to the dentist.

I feel stupid, Mrs. Moore. I left my sea otter presentation in the top drawer of my desk. I don't even remember if someone bought the desk. I should have sent it to you at Thomas Jefferson high, as I am doing for this letter.

Respectfully, your student

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Kenichiro Kashimura

Friday, May 8th, 1942

Dear Mrs. Moore,

You can't imagine how happy I was when I opened the parcel. I swear I didn't expect you to answer my letter. I stood on line for an hour at the post office. When the man gave me the parcel, I thought he was making a mistake. Who would send me anything? These postmen can't distinguish Japanese names, you know. We hear that the post office will recruit employees among us to replace them. When I found the pencils, the eraser, the pencil-sharpener, I shouted with glee. Everybody thought I was crazy.

Describe the racetrack? Of course. I spent two weeks crisscrossing it, so I should be able to write a paragraph or two about it. Let me sharpen one of your pencils first, Mrs. Moore. Well, the racetrack consists in two straight lines and two curves, with a lawn in the middle. What are you saying? This isn't the kind of description you had in mind? You want to know how we live. Hey, this is easy: we replace the horses. No, we don't gallop on the track. We sleep in their stables, and even in their stalls, this is what their bedrooms are called. Fifty stalls per stable.

Our guards took us behind the dining hall.

"Look here, we have canvas bags and some straw. You stuff the straw into the bags. You can also spread straw on the ground. But mind you, if it gets soiled, there's nothing we can do about it. We don't have a budget to buy more."

We fill up three bags to make straw mattresses. We bring them back, as well as straw to cover the ground. Just when we are beginning to spread it, my mother halts us.

"I know what I have forgotten at home: a broom."

Our noses and eyes tell us that the horses have left smelly mementoes behind. As we're wondering how we're going to clean our new home, a woman's voice falls from the sky.

"I can lend you my broom, if you want. Tan'o."

The trip in a train to nowhere, the equestrian surrounding, plus the stink of the horse droppings, must have unmoored our reason. We don't understand where the voice can come from. Does the ghost of a horse inhabit its former abode? Akiko points to the partition that separates us from the next stall. It doesn't rise much above six feet. Actually, we hear conversations and noises originating from the whole stable. We get out and walk about five

feet in the corridor. We bend our bodies, Japanese-style, to greet our neighbor. She is standing at her door, a small broom in hand. She greets us and repeats her name.

"Tan'o."

"Kashimura," my mother says. "My children Kenichiro and Akiko."

This Mrs. Tan'o is a careful planner. She cut three fourth or her broomstick so the broom would fit in her suitcase. We clean the ground as much as we can before spreading the straw. What do you think, Mrs. Moore? Is the horse stink fully gone? I bet that my very letter smells horsey.

A heavy-set boy who looks like a boxer or a judo champion, he may be fifteen or sixteen, shows everybody a small box containing horse droppings.

"This is Torpedo's"

"Who is Torpedo?"

"He won all the races two years ago. Have you never heard of him? We live in his stall."

We don't sleep on the ground straw, but on army cots. Sure, I hear you: we do sleep on the straw in our mattresses. I have always heard my parents mention "tatamis" in the long list of things they miss in America. They are straw mats that cover the ground in Japanese houses.

"So you sleep on straw, like you did in Japan," I tell my mother. "You must be quite happy."

"Tatamis are made of rice straw. You can't compare them to these awful mattresses. When the tatami straw is fresh, it is as if you were sleeping on a meadow under the stars."

"Even when the tatami straw is dry, it smells good," the disembodied voice of Mrs. Tan'o adds.

If Mrs. Tan'o doesn't pepper our conversations with her comments, it means she's gone out. Then we use our normal voices. When she's there, my mother and my sister sometimes lower their voices so much that I can't hear a word, even by moving closer to them. If I tried to whisper in the same way, I'm sure Mrs. Tan'o would still hear me. She'd think we're trying to hide something from her and she would be offended. We avoid speaking too loud, though, because there's enough noise in the stable. Sometimes, I quarrel with Akiko and we forget where we are.

"Stop right away," my mother mutters. "Everybody can hear you."

Our neighbor on the other side keeps coughing and sneezing. He suffers from hay fever. When he told us, I found it funny, but my mother says it is a real illness.

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Babies cry, mothers sing to soothe them and put them to sleep, spouses fight and reconcile. Instructions are posted at the stable door: it is forbidden to speak Japanese. They want to prevent us wily Orientals from fomenting our plots. Many people who belong to the first generation—we call them *Issei* (second generation is *nisei*, third is *sansei*)—know very little English, so they murmur in Japanese. This produces a kind a permanent background noise that reminds me of walking on dead leaves in Griffith Park.

On the instructions sheet, the guards are not guards, but "security advisers."

What else, Mrs. Moore? Oh, you want me to describe our stall. Well, this will be short. Three beds on the straw. No furniture, no ceiling. No lamp hanging from the ceiling, but lamps hanging from the stable roof, which are turned off at 10PM. We have put our things in the manger. Here is exclusive information about the mangers: they make great cribs for babies.

I don't know whether the former tenant of our stall galloped as fast as Torpedo. What I know is that flies love the ghost of his smell.

The horses took showers in a large round hall. This is where we wash. They put curtains to separate men and women. In Japan, people do not take showers, but very hot baths in cedar bathtubs. We must explain to some oldsters how to take a shower. After a few days, we hear conversations and lapping noises in Mrs. Tan'o's stall. She found a barrel somewhere. After taking a shower in the round hall, people come to Mrs. Tan'o with buckets of hot water and fill the bath-barrel. The bath doesn't replace a shower: you take a bath when you are already clean, just to relax.

We act nice toward Mrs. Tan'o, even when her voice climbs recklessly over the partition, so that we may enjoy her wonderful barrel.

It would be funny if there were toilets for the horses in the stable. Right for mares, left for stallions. Why not? Horses are supposed to be very clever beasts. Well, we must go out and use the grooms' and jockeys' toilets. I think there are more than three thousand prisoners in the camp already. Oops—we are not prisoners, but "residents." I wonder how many grooms and jockeys use the toilets in normal circumstances. Fifty? A hundred? If you compare these numbers, Mrs. Moore, a hundred and three thousand, you can imagine the length of the line that waits in front of the toilets all day long and late at night—and the smell in the toilets. Same thing for the jockeys' cafeteria, which we use as a dining hall. We have to wait at least one hour three times a day to eat. These lines remind me of the ones I used to see as a child, during the great depression, in front of soup kitchens.

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Don't rush me, Mrs. Moore, I know your next question: what do we eat? Well, at breakfast, oatmeal. Gee, you're right, oats like the horses! For lunch and dinner, overcooked vegetables and stewed meats—anything we can eat without a knife. This is very far from Japanese food. My parents and other *issei* could complain. While it is likely that my father ate hot dogs and hamburgers with his American clients, my mother never did, I'm sure. She doesn't complain, though. *Issei* never complain. On the contrary, I bet they're ready to rejoice because they've returned to Japanese plainness and poverty. My parents always criticize me for being too soft and lazy. I am a spoiled child, Mrs. Moore, since I am American. Now I am discovering real life at last. This little stay in horse country will do me lots of good.

Hey, but we American kids, *nisei*, we do not stay in the stables to meditate about our fate like monks. We go to the lawn and play baseball. We can see that some *issei* do not approve of our games and laughter.

An interesting thing, Mrs. Moore: the conversations of the adults (in hushed tones) in the lines.

"How could we spy? They would notice us right away."

"I saw a movie about a German spy. He looked like an American, he spoke without an accent, but they unmasked him because he ate with his left hand."

"German people eat with their left hand?"

"All European people hold their fork in their left hand. Americans hold it in their right hand."

"They arrest German spies, but they don't lock all the American people with German names in horse stalls."

"You've heard senator Rankin: 'Let's get all the Japanese in America and put them in concentration camps. The hell with them!'"

"Get all the Japanese? Our children are not Japanese."

"He doesn't mean the Japanese nationality, but the Japanese race. The yellow peril. Do you know what he said? 'Once a Jap, always a Jap. You can't make him the same as a white man any more than you can turn a lemon into an orange.' Our children are lemons forever."

"I read something similar in the Los Angeles Times: 'The children are American citizens by accident of birth, but they are Japs nevertheless. A viper is nonetheless a viper wherever the egg is hatched.'"

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"America calls us. Come, come! Liberty, prosperity, equal rights and opportunities for everybody, to each according to his merits. Work hard and you'll be rewarded. Blah blah blah. A bunch of false promises. Uncle Sam takes back the reward for my labor, without any warning, just because he doesn't like my face."

I feel a little less American since I have been arrested, Mrs. Moore. I don't enjoy the same rights as other citizens. I am a lower-grade American. They didn't want to admit that they were arresting foreigners (our parents) and American citizens (us), so they say *aliens* (our parents) and *non-aliens* (us). I tell myself I have been "evacuated," but the armed guards on the watchtowers, the barbed wires, suggest another word: prisoner.

I miss the sea otters. I don't mean the ones I have drawn with great care for my presentation, but the glistening animals that ride upon the waves near Malibu. The otters are free, the waves are free. The seagulls climb freely into the blue sky. When they're up there, they laugh at the awkward creatures that crawl on the earth. Think about me when you look at the ocean, Mrs. Moore.

Your respectful lemon,

Kenichiro Kashimura

Monday, June 15th, 1942

Dear Mrs. Moore,

Your letter moved me to the verge of tears. My radio set! I told my mother right away. I mean, as soon as I regained my composure.

"Mrs. Moore found my radio set!"

"Your radio set? In a neighbor's house? A second-hand store?"

"In our garage. Poor people have settled in our house because they find it more comfortable than the shack where they lived before. Mrs. Moore says they don't seem evil. They promise they'll return the house to us when we come back. Whatever they found on the lawn or inside they stored in the garage. I hadn't put it for sale. I thought I might be able to give to a school pal, if any of them had come to say hello."

"You mean, good bye," Akiko remarks.

On my birthday, when I received the radio set, I went up to my room to listen to it. You can check in your files that I am born on February 19th. I caught a radio station and I heard the end of a music piece with a piano and an orchestra. They said it was a concerto by Mozart. I thought of the pleasant presentation Tommy Alvarez had made about Mozart,

when he had brought the record player. Right afterward, they broadcast a news bulletin. President Roosevelt had just published the "executive order" expelling us from the West Coast. Yes, on my birthday. On the following days, I turned the radio set on as soon as I woke up in the morning. I kept hearing contradictory news. A general says that a costal area ten miles wide is to be evacuated. Then some admiral mentions the evacuation of California. One day, they talk of evacuating the *issei* and the *nisei* above fourteen years of age. The next day, they evacuate everybody. They delimit forbidden zones. Then they decree a curfew from 8PM to 6AM "to protect us." One month after the President's order, they started evacuating the people in Seattle. They progressed slowly southward. We knew our time would come. Everybody knew, even people who didn't own a radio set.

My mother knew. After hearing about Roosevelt in my room, I came down quickly to tell her. She said people at the market had been exchanging rumors for days.

"They always know someone who has first-hand information. That the Japanese will be 'relocated.' They come to me: 'But it is not possible, Mrs. Kashimura. Not unless they change the Constitution of the United States. Take a lawyer. Go to Court.'"

"Can we really go to Court?" I asked her.

"If we want more trouble. I talked to Okubo san. He says the Constitution doesn't protect us anymore. 'They do what they want. Before December 7th, we were only suspect foreigners. For months, the newspapers of that scoundrel Hearst had been ranting about supposed Japanese spies. When Japan started the war by attacking Pearl Harbor, we became enemy aliens. They can arrest us without bothering about the Constitution. They'd rather pin the Pearl Harbor disaster on some imaginary fifth column than admit the truth: their navy and army can't protect the country.'"

Gee, Mrs. Moore, when I see my mother and all the other poor people herded on the racetrack, I wonder why they waited for the military police, why they boarded the buses and the trains that went nobody knew where. Here, I often hear sentences like *shikata ga nai*, which means: "there's nothing we can do about it." Or sayings that promote resignation and obedience, for example: "don't dance in the boat if you don't want it to capsize," or: "the storm breaks the pine, but the supple bamboo yields and survives," or: "the nail that rises above the others gets hammered." There are hundreds of these in the Japanese language.

In my last letter, I counted three thousand "residents." Now, I would say at least five thousand. People have arrived from Long Beach, Irvine and San Diego. As the stables

overflowed, they built military barracks on the lawn. We protested so much that they left us a small corner of lawn to play ball.

They say they had been told about the evacuation of men and boys above fourteen. They have twice the number of people they expected. That's why there's not enough room.

We early settlers, who sleep on straw in our stalls without ceilings, are now considered the lucky ones. The sun heats the military barracks like the huge pots we steam rice in. Nobody can stay inside in daytime. I am used to the air in Santa Monica, freshened by a pleasant sea breeze. I didn't know how hot it could get when you move inland.

Do you know what I have heard in a line, Mrs. Moore? Several Japanese people who have studied law actually went to court. I think they belong to the "non-alien" category, which means they are American. One of them built such a strong case that they put him in jail to get rid of him. Maybe it is just one more rumor.

I have also heard of people who didn't wait for the military police. Several thousand Japanese aliens and non-aliens, out of one hundred and twenty thousand on the West coast, moved to other states to avoid being evacuated under the threat of loaded guns. This is not a rumor, though. A friend of my parents, Mr. Takeda, moved to Chicago with his whole family after President Roosevelt published his order. When my mother told me about them, I asked her whether she intended to move.

"How could we? I don't know anybody in Chicago. Takeda san works for the school health department. They need him, so they were willing to transfer him to another office."

If I had my radio set, I could know what happens in the wide world out there. The security advisers—whom we call guards, under our breath, in Japanese—say a big battle is taking place in Midway, which is in the very middle of the Pacific ocean (if the name is right). The Americans are winning, they say. They hope to see us writhe and squirm on hearing such bad news, since they believe we worship the emperor of Japan like a god. We rejoice, of course. Let America win the war as soon as possible, so we can get out of here!

As we have nothing to do, the *issei* give Japanese lessons in the racetrack stands. I understand Japanese, Mrs. Moore. I speak well enough, but I can neither read nor write. You remember I used to go to Japanese school after class, several times every week. I didn't progress much faster than my mother in English. If you think it may be difficult, well, you're right. There is an alphabet of sorts, *hiragana*, which counts fifty characters for fifty syllables like *ta, te, to* or *ma, mi, mu*. I know them, which means I have reached the level of a six- or seven-year old Japanese kid. The Japanese people could have decided the

hiragana fulfilled their needs, and indeed the great novel *Genji Monogatari* was written in the 11th century entirely in *hiragana*. But the fools wondered: "Why keep it simple when we can make an awful mess of it?" and they imported twenty thousand Chinese characters, which we call *kanji*. I say twenty thousand, but if you count certain rare characters that you find in special dictionaries, there are many more. Japanese children learn two *kanji* every day for at least ten years. You need to know six thousand, leave or take a few, to read a newspaper.

I know what you are thinking, Mrs. Moore. Learning two Chinese characters a day should be easy. Hey, I'd like to see you try your hand at it. You see, there are several ways of reading each character. Sometimes you read it according to its name or sound in Chinese, sometimes according to its meaning. Often, it has several meanings. Quite a brainteaser! I learn a few *kanji*, then I forget them because I don't practice enough. I doubt I'll ever be able to read a Japanese newspaper.

A story I heard in a line, told by people who came from San Diego. Three weeks ago, before they were evacuated, a thunderbolt started a wildfire. This happens often enough over there. The people accused the Japanese of having set fire to the undergrowth to guide bombers.

People in Hawaii have accused the Japanese spies of having jammed the roads to prevent help from reaching Pearl Harbor in time.

A common talk in lines:

"There's at least one good thing about this camp: we are safe here."

"I was safe at home, thanks."

"After Pearl Harbor, we could not go out at night."

"Because of the curfew?"

"Even before the curfew. Too dangerous. I have heard that more than thirty Japanese people have been attacked. Seven died."

"In Santa Barbara, where I come from, the Chinese put signs saying: 'I am Chinese' behind their windshields."

"Or 'I am Chinese' buttons on their jackets or dresses."

"I have seen: 'I am a loyal Chinese', with a small American flag for good measure."

"I haven't seen that in Los Angeles."

"We should thank the Army. They locked us here for our security!"

The soul-mending thread

"Hey, you should climb the watchtower and talk to the guards. Since they are here to protect us, they should aim their machine guns outward."

Gee, this letter is too long. I am sure you fell asleep while reading it, Mrs. Moore. Good night!

Respectfully,

Kenichiro Kashimura

Sunday, August 2nd, 1942

Dear Mrs. Moore,

Please forgive my late answer. You sent your letter to Tulare, but I was not there anymore. The letter looked for me and found me eventually, but it took a while. Where am I? Gee, if I don't tell you, you'll never guess. Everybody has heard of this place, though. Its name? "In the middle of nowhere." Hidden in an Indian tribe! What do you say of that? So they did move us away from this coast where we lit fires to guide the bombers. They "relocated" us in the Arizona desert, thirty miles south of Phoenix. My address: Gila River Camp, family 17348. There are two camps, called Canal and Butte, three miles apart. We live in the second one.

So you think I'm joking when I mention an Indian tribe. There is indeed an Indian tribe. The government rented the land from them and they don't find that joke very funny. Who wants to welcome thousands of dangerous spies? The authorities told them they had no choice, but they would receive a real rent.

In all the western movies I have seen, the Indians belong to tribes with names like Apaches, Sioux or Mohicans. Nobody can tell me the name of this tribe. People just say: "the Gila river Indians." While our camp measures something like one mile by one and a half mile, the requisitioned land is much larger, maybe five by seven miles, so the Indians are quite far. At least I see neither wigwam nor tepee, and anyway I don't know the difference between the two. You're lucky, Mrs. Moore: you can look for the difference in the dictionary. Here, there is no dictionary.

There is not much of anything. Sand, stones, thorny bushes and cacti and tiny thorny twisted trees called "mesquite." We see the Superstition mountain range in the distance. I guess the pioneers named it in the 19th century. To help myself bear my fate, I imagine that I am a pioneer.

The soul-mending thread

They brought five hundred people from Tulare six weeks ago to begin building this camp, then five hundred every week. We went with the fourth group. They found antique railcars in some museum. There were no toilets. Every two or three hours, the train stopped and everybody moved out to relieve themselves in the fields, under the careful watch of the military police.

When we stepped down from the train, we took buses that drove for hours and hours. The middle of nowhere is very far, you see. Some passengers thought it was too far.

"Where do you think they're taking us?"

"They spoke of a permanent camp."

"You know what it means, permanent camp? A graveyard. We'll stay there until the Last Judgment."

At last we saw watchtowers and wire fences. We know we should call the place a "relocation center," but everybody says "concentration camp." Even President Roosevelt said "concentration camps."

People arrived from other assembly centers. There are more than eight thousand people already in the two Gila River camps. Most of them come from Los Angeles, Santa Barbara and Fresno. The camp is as little prepared for this new life as we are. "Hey, you're coming too soon!" it complains. "There are too many of you!"

No stables here. We build military barracks similar to the ones that covered the Tulare racetrack lawn. We erect a pinewood frame, then we nail wood-fiber panels called "beaverboard" on it.

"This is used to separate people in offices," someone says. "The stuff is not much stronger than cardboard. It won't last six months."

We settled in one of the finished barracks. When I saw it for the first time, I thought it was a temporary building. I'm sure the beavers would sue the panel maker for libel if they had money to pay a lawyer. The roof is quite special: it has two separate layers. Otherwise, the heat would be overwhelming. It is much, much, much hotter here than in Tulare. Did I tell you we were in the middle of the Arizona desert? The temperature rises to one hundred and five every day, except when a heat wave pushes it above one hundred and twenty. People faint in the lines. In our previous life, when we were horses, rumors announced our imminent departure to Montana or Wyoming, places where the temperature dips to minus twenty, and I imagined I would soon turn into a giant ice cube. We look like sweat spigots. We drink gallons of water, which gush in no time through all the pores in our body. Forget

about the giant ice cube. I have become a giant sieve! We take five showers a day. I hope the Gila river won't dry up. We swallow two pills of mineral salts every evening. The people in the first convoy built a temporary hospital before anything else.

If I could invite you for lunch, Mrs. Moore, you'd wonder what kind of a strange tribe you're seeing. Even when we eat, we keep on our heads the wet towels we wear all day like turbans.

So let me describe the camp, or rather the future camp. It is divided into fifty blocks—thirty-five for the "residents" and the rest for the guards, the hospital, schools, churches, laundry and ironing rooms. I'll tell you more when the various buildings replace the wooden signs bearing their names. Fourteen streets with an east-west orientation are numbered one to fourteen. Seven north-south avenues are named A to G.

They told us we would go to school, Mrs. Moore, but I don't know whether we'll have real teachers. Many *issei*, who have nothing to do, are playing at being teachers already. They haven't studied teaching methods and don't speak good English. What worries me most of all is that my level in math might collapse, which means I would have to give up my dream of becoming an engineer.

To practice, if anything looking like a math problem comes by, I hurry and catch it before it flies away. For example, I told you about fourteen streets in one direction and seven in another. How many blocks do they define? I should not multiply fourteen by seven, but thirteen by six, which makes seventy-eight blocks. I mentioned fifty blocks before. Hey, we are not going to build barracks everywhere. We want a baseball field!

I am learning lots of things about the West Coast Japanese. They work at all kinds of jobs: grocers, hairdressers, dry cleaners, hotel keepers. The fruit and vegetable growers are the most numerous, though. What do they dream of? Growing fruit and vegetables, of course. Let's just bring some irrigation canals from the river. They hope to turn the three miles that separate the two camps into productive fields.

The Japanese people I knew in Los Angeles, friends of my parents, all came from the West of Japan. This is the region we call Kansai. My family has branches in Osaka (the main city of Kansai), Kobe, Okayama. In the camp, I have met for the first time people from Kanto, the Eastern region, where Tokyo is located. The inhabitants of Kansai and Kanto hate and despise each others, but I can't see any difference between them. What's for sure is that we *nisei* are all American in the same manner.

The soul-mending thread

Do you know what I have always thought, Mrs. Moore? That I was some sort of monster. In school, the other kids had names like Bill, Chuck, Jerry, Tommy, a skin as pink as a piglet, big blue eyes, hair the color of straw. My hair is as black as ink, my black eyes are hidden behind slits, and my name is Kenichiro. I was angry at my parents for not naming me Jim like everybody else. Or Franklin like the President. At least Kenichiro was better than Kazuo, I thought, since my pals could call me Ken and I could imagine I was Kenneth. I have always had some good friends who called me Ken. I have also always come across people, in school or in the streets, who called me *You Jap*. After the Pearl Harbor attack, many of my classmates changed their attitude. I felt I had become an enemy. Unknown people called me *You Jap* more often. I wanted to shout: "But I am not Japanese!" It wouldn't have changed anything. A friend, or rather a classmate I thought was a friend, asked me: "What side are you on?" What's more, the newspapers published a picture of my father's arrest. Even my close friends didn't know how to behave. The FBI doesn't arrest people without a reason. My friends hesitated to offer sympathy. They kept their distance. I felt quite lonely.

Now listen to this, Mrs. Moore. I have discovered an amazing thing here: the other *nisei* have enjoyed the same ordeals as me. The piglets called them *You Jap* and beat them. "You dirty Jap, go back to your country," they said. I thought I was the only martyr in California! They hide their Japanese names behind American ones. They call me Ken and I call them Joe. I told you that the children of Tokyo *issei* were just like the children of Osaka *issei*. Well, they are also just like the piglets. They dream of becoming famous as baseball players or boxers. Or cowboys, like Roy Rodgers and his horse Trigger.

I have filled a bag with straw again.

"Be careful to take only straw," the guards said. "You don't want any scorpion or snake in your mattress."

The girls—and some boys—started yelling.

"Scorpions! Snakes!"

"This is the desert, you kids."

The desert is not empty. It is full of bugs. The crickets never stop chirping. Sometimes I think, hey, I'll listen to the crickets. I prick up my ears and I hear their tight stitches embroidering the fabric of silence. Then I think about something else and I don't hear them anymore.

The soul-mending thread

There are six rooms in one barrack, each maybe as big as a Jefferson school classroom, separated by partitions that do not reach the roof any more than in Tulare. Large families are allowed to get one room. As there are only three of us, we have to share ours with a young couple, Mr. and Mrs. Shimizu. Even though we divided the room by hanging a blanket on a rope, I hear their whispers at night. Believe it or not, I miss Mrs. Tan'o. Sometimes, my mother calls Kazuo, my dead baby bother, in her nightmares.

I accept to live in a concentration camp. Having heard *shikata ga nai* a million times, I got used to the idea that there's nothing we can do about it. My sister refuses to accept. Yesterday, she got angry in the line in front of the toilets.

"Why don't they build real toilets? I am fed up with it."

"We have Japanese-style toilets, "I said. "You'll become a true Japanese girl."

She screamed like mad.

"I don't want to be a Jap, I don't want to be a Jap, I don't want to be a Jap!"

For the time being, holes in the ground pretend to be toilets. That's the way it is in Japan, everybody says. The fruit growers are used to it and don't complain. These public toilets fill two barracks, one for men and one for women, in a corner of the block. We've been told that modern toilet bowls will arrive from Phoenix any minute now. Running water should take much longer to reach us, so we won't be able to flush. Every other day, some prisoners empty the septic tank and clean it with quicklime.

The block includes fourteen barracks like ours, plus two dormitory barracks for single men and women. Two barracks for toilets, two for showers, one mess hall and one common hall where old people play cards or *go* all day long.

Do you know the game of *go*, Mrs. Moore? It is somewhat similar to chess. You play on a checkered board, with stones rather than chess pieces. At least there is no lack of stones around here.

Sayonara, Moore san (it means: "Good bye, Mrs. Moore").

Respectfully yours,

Kenichiro Kashimura

Saturday, October 24th, 1942

Dear Mrs. Moore,

Once more, Mrs. Moore, I beg you to forgive me for my late answer. Six months have elapsed already since I lost my freedom and wrote my first letter from Tulare. I studied

kanji there because I had nothing else to do. I was bored when I was standing on line for hours, and bored when I wasn't. Here, it is just the contrary. I am so busy that I can't find a minute to sit down and write to you. I have made a list. 1. I go to school. 2. I help the *issei* who are still building the camp. 3. I even work in the fields!

Let's review these points in the right order (you see that I haven't forgotten your good advice).

1. The primary school and the high school fill two blocks next to each other. Although I haven't finished seventh grade, since I left without saying goodbye to you, I have started eighth grade after passing an easy exam. There are two eighth-grade classes, one for boys and one for girls. Each is located in a barrack. There are no partitions inside, so the class is about as big as the gym in Thomas Jefferson school. Too big? Not if you consider that there are more than sixty pupils. I told you that some *issei* wanted to play at being teachers when we arrived here. Real teachers have replaced most of them. In California, in Tulare, we really felt like outcasts. Here, they treat us like human beings. The people in Arizona are not afraid that Japanese submarines, guided by our sneaky tricks, will come and bomb them. Some teachers live in Sacaton, which is the closest town. A bus brings them here every morning. Mrs. Caine, our English teacher, lives in the camp. She teaches English like you, Mrs. Moore, and she has blue eyes and red hair like you. Actually, you're more on the carrot side and she's on the pumpkin side. Her face is quite round, too. Maybe her ancestors came from Ireland, like yours.

She speaks and we take notes. Then we must study our notes, because the authorities do not intend to buy schoolbooks. The authorities promised desks, chairs, a chalkboard, maps, but they haven't said when these marvels would be delivered. Neither do we have a flag, so Mrs. Caine skips the pledge of allegiance. Do you imagine us, a hand on our heart, thanking "a nation indivisible," that offers "liberty and justice for all," while we are stuck behind wire fences!

2. While many numbered streets and lettered streets are bordered by neat rows of barracks already, we are still building new ones. The camp was supposed to accommodate ten thousand residents. But then a camp closed in Arkansas after a series of mishaps. Tornadoes blew up the straw barracks like the big bad wolf, rats ate the stocks of food, mysterious illnesses—"valley fever"— felled residents and guards. They didn't wait for the number of plagues to reach seven. After three or four, they sent all the prisoners, I mean

residents, here. There are now fourteen thousand inhabitants in the Gila River camp. It is the fourth largest city in Arizona after Phoenix, Tucson and the Poston camp.

The makeshift hospital erected during the first weeks was much too small for a city of fourteen thousand people. We built dozens of barracks on four blocks so we could have a real hospital, with operating rooms and a maternity section.

Many oldsters and babies died in August because of the heat. Old people are often depressed. They have been uprooted suddenly and miss all kinds of familiar objects they left behind. They squat for hours without doing anything. People put them in the shade, but they don't move when the sun shifts. They are waiting for death.

My mother thinks I haven't noticed. Japanese people hide bad stuff from children, but everything gets known sooner or later.

Phew! Fall brought a cooler weather. Dehydration kills people. Babies can't drink by themselves, oldsters forget to drink. Installing running water in the barracks would save lives, but this won't happen before the end of the century. Tank trucks bring water every day. We have started laying pipes between the river and the camp. We'll supply the hospital first, then we'll put a water point in every block.

The camp's military administration admits we are not dangerous. They let us transform several watchtowers into water towers. An *issei* who teaches us physics told us how it works.

"Water is raised up there with electrical pumps. Then the power of gravitation sends it to all the water points."

"It is a bit strange that you raise it so it can go down."

"Nobody found a better way to get a constant tap pressure."

When it is too hot, we go under the water towers. A few drops of water fall now and then. Before they can reach us, they turn into a cool mist. I'm not sure whether we inhale it or drink it, Mrs. Moore, but we love it.

3. The camp's administration authorized our peasants to farm the land between the two camps. There are more than seven thousand acres, five thousand of which are good for cultivation. We were ready to thank the administration for its generosity, but actually it is mainly generous toward itself, as it hopes to save most of the money its spends to feed us. We are laying more pipes to bring the river's water to the fields and irrigate them.

When I say "we," I mean the camp's residents. Men lay the pipes and build the barracks, women work in the hospital and the dining halls. At first, children worked here and there.

The soul-mending thread

Then they gave us a special job: remove stones, bushes and weeds to prepare the fields. In the morning, we go to school. In the afternoon, we head to the fields.

Even the primary school kids can remove the pebbles lying on the ground. We, I mean the Junior High pupils, dig the earth with shovels to extract stones of various sizes, buried at various depths, that might break the plowshares. Now and then, we find a rock so big that we can't move it. Then we call the Senior High athletes, who come with their pickaxes.

The peasants cheer them.

"Come on, *hacha, hacha*!"

"Raise your pick higher, boy."

"A rock this size, ain't no doubt 'bout it, you need a horse."

"Or a small dynamite stick."

"You should ask the camp's commander for a few dynamite sticks."

"I'll order them by mail. There's a whole page of them in the Sears Roebuck catalogue."

Removing ordinary stones is lots of work already. We discover muscles we didn't know we had when they begin to ache. Our hands become callous. The peasants cheer us too.

"Go on, boy, and you'll have a boxer's shoulders and biceps."

"I don't want to become a boxer. I want to play in movies."

"Well then, look at Eroru Furin. He is no weakling!" (A quiz for you, Mrs. Moore: who is Eroru Furin?)

Weeding is much easier. Some girls work at it with us. For certain thick shrubs, we need a hatchet or a saw. Pulling hard is usually enough, but we must be careful how we grab the nastiest vegetable hedgehogs, otherwise their thorns will go right through our leather gloves. We have to admit that several girls are quite skillful and also fearless, so we call them when we see a real monster. They vanquish the beast and laugh at us.

I'm sorry to say that we boys behave in a very stupid way to get our revenge on the girls. We wave a twisted branch of mesquite in front of their nose while imitating the rattle of a snake. They scream to high heavens.

In the evening, I hear babies crying in the barrack. In the middle of the night, peals of childish laughter pull me awake. Is the school open at three in the morning? The laughter has awakened Mr. and Mrs. Shimizu. I hear Mr. Shimizu behind the blanket that separates us.

"Coyotes," he says to his wife.

The soul-mending thread

In Tulare, already, I told you I had never seen so many Japanese people. Now I live in a city of fourteen thousand inhabitants, all of them Japanese. What's for sure is that I had never seen so many *nisei* girls my age. Gee, I could count the ones I had seen in Los Angeles on the fingers of one hand. I have noticed that the *nisei* girls here speak and act just like ordinary Americans, in the same manner the boys speak and act like Americans. This means they speak the same language we do. Whereas amongst the *issei*, as well as in Japan, women and men use a different language. The men's language is more straightforward. The women's language tends to be rather vague, its meaning lost in a maze of politeness. Female gestures are quite restrained, too, as if modesty or shyness kept them in check. These American girls talk loud and walk fast. They don't look like our mothers, which is a good thing, I think.

I did discover a difference. They keep their Japanese first names. While the boys become Jim and Bob, they remain Tomoko and Mako. Maybe they're brave and we are not.

Oh, I must leave you, Mrs. Moore, as I hear the dinner bell. I have magic powers that let me see into the future: boiled beef or mutton with potatoes. I hope our peasants hurry up and grow vegetables.

People accept their fate. *Shikata ga nai*. They eat the opposite of their usual diet without complaining. What gets on their nerves are things that are just slightly off. For example, the administration tried to make nice by buying tea rather than coffee. People are unhappy that it is black tea instead of green tea.

Respectfully yours,

Kenichiro Kashimura

Sunday, December 20th 1942

Dear Mrs. Moore,

Guess who? The lost Jap of Arizona!

Thanks for the tea. If I looked at things with *issei* glasses, I should apologize for committing an awful blunder: I requested a favor while knowing I couldn't repay it. Maybe this is allowed between close friends.

I wondered whether you'd be able to find green tea. I'm sure there are no more Japanese shopkeepers in Los Angeles, since I can see them all right here. The label told me you found it in a Chinese grocery store. Wonderful! My mother also thanks you.

I was also pleasantly surprised when I saw the math books. Your turn to be surprised: I haven't kept them. I gave them to our math teacher, a retired *issei* accountant. He doesn't know the words used in English for basic figures and symbols. I thought the language of math was international, but when he explains the Pythagoras theorem or the first degree equation, we don't recognize them. I hope things will improve if he studies the books.

You asked a good question about the girls. Honest, I don't know whether I find them pretty. As an American boy, I have acquired American tastes and I consider Claudette Colbert and Vivien Leigh the most beautiful women in the world. What I could say, maybe, is that these American girls with Japanese heads do not frighten me as much as American girls with blond heads. I am not afraid they'll call me *You Jap*.

Mrs. Caine told us a funny story.

"Just across the street from me, there's someone from Phoenix. I don't really know what he does here. He walks about. He asks questions. He takes notes. Maybe he is a sociologist working for the War Relocation Authority, writing a report about the running of the camp. Anyway, he has a small boy who goes to primary school. He is the only white child in his class. So what happens? The other kids stay away from him and call him *You Jap*. It is the only insult they know, you understand."

Hey, I told you I met girls in the fields. I also meet them in school now. Having a class for boys and one for girls was a bad system. Mrs. Caine and the other teachers decided to sort the students according to their level. You can be proud of me: I am in eighth grade A, which is better than B. In the old system, the boys jeered at the girls' class. The girls are having their revenge: there are more of them in class A.

Mrs. Caine noticed something so obvious that we had never thought about it.

"Why do girl names always end in *ko*?

"*Ko* means child, madam."

"Tomoko, you'll become Tomo when you're an adult?"

"Well, no, madam."

"You'll keep a child's first name all your life?"

"Japan is different from America, madam. A woman doesn't have the same rights as a man. She belongs to her father when she is a child, then to her husband. If she is a widow, to her son. So she remains like a child, or a domestic animal, all her life. I spent six months in Japan. I lived with my grandparents. Nobody pays attention to a girl. I felt as if I had become invisible."

The soul-mending thread

"You know, children, that's the way it was in Europe or America in the past. Women could not testify in court. They couldn't inherit property. In many countries around the world, women still can't vote."

"In Japan, people don't use their first name like here, madam. You need it mostly at home, where everybody has the same last name. My mother's friends call me Tomoko because I am a child, but they do not know my mother's first name. They call her Sato san."

"I'll go on calling you Tomoko, and you can call me Frida."

My mother is Kashimura san, Mrs. Moore. Don't expect me to tell you her first name.

Frida, or Mrs. Caine if you prefer, stays in the class when an *issei* comes to teach us Japanese. She wants to learn our parents' language so she can understand them better.

We sometimes go to her house, two or three of us, to listen to the radio. We try not to be seen, because it is forbidden.

"I must not fraternize with the residents," she tells us.

"Just say you have asked us to clean your place."

She lives in a nice house, or let's say a real house, with a kitchen and a bathroom and chairs and a cupboard and electric lights and beds that look like sculptures. I write beds in the plural because her daughter, Ruth, lives with her. The main purpose of these visits is to teach us how to resist temptation.

"Look at the thickness of this mattress!"

"I didn't remember mattresses could be that thick."

"Hey, Makiko and Jack, why don't you hold Mrs. Caine in the kitchen? You show her how we cook rice or something. I'll try the mattress, and then we switch places. I just want to check whether it is as soft as it looks."

"She'll find out. Do you remember Goldilocks and the three bears? 'Somebody has tried my bed,' says Mama Bear."

"Help! This bed is attracting me like a magnet."

"Think about something else. A roast chicken! A chocolate cake!"

Mrs. Caine gives us soap, toothpaste, diapers for the babies, honey. We must hide these precious gifts under our clothes, otherwise the authorities could accuse her of treason.

Ruth Caine is fifteen years old. She also has red hair. She works as a nurse in the hospital. My mother, who knows her, says she works like an adult. I met her once in Mrs. Caine's house.

The soul-mending thread

"Why don't you go to junior high?"

"They need me in the hospital. I feel more useful than in school."

"My mother works in the hospital. She says that many people are badly ill."

"They have pulmonary infections, respiratory failures, embolisms, because of the dust storms. This often kills them, especially smokers. Believe me, when you see someone who suffocates to death, you don't want to start smoking. We could save some of them if we had oxygen bottles. In the maternity ward, there are many miscarriages and stillborn babies. We don't have the right tools for caesarian sections and there are too few of us. Last week, a doctor fainted. They work day and night. Gee, just fell on the floor. That was something! Half the babies survive. They often die before the end of the first week. Then when they are some months old, they die of dysentery or fever. My eyes hurt every evening, I cry so much."

"I hate dust storms. The other day, I couldn't see five feet ahead. It took me at least one hour to find our barrack. I had gray hair like an old man. My mother didn't recognize me."

"The storm stops suddenly. Everybody is inside the barracks. The camp looks like a ghost town."

"The dust enters the barracks, too. There are cracks everywhere. The beaverboards buckle and contract because of the dry heat, Mr. Shimizu says. He is our neighbor."

"No need to ask your neighbor. You can see it with your naked eyes."

"We try to fill in the cracks with paper."

"They promised that a real hospital would replace the barracks eventually. They must also bring running water to the latrine. A modern operating room would make quite a difference. We need more psychiatrists, too, but the administration says we have the legal number."

"When you add the heat, the promiscuity, the armed guards, you'd expect nine people out of ten to become half crazy."

"Let's say there are more depressed people in the camp than in a California city. Their future is bleak, so they freeze in a kind of inert hopeless state. They don't sleep well. They slow down. We have many suicides among the *issei*. I've heard that suicide is common in Japan. There are also people who suffer from serious mental illnesses, in the same proportion as in any human group. Some of them can go haywire. Just seeing armed guards can set off a fit. A woman will scream suddenly: 'Up there with their machine guns they'll

kill us, they'll kill us all!' We send her to the psychiatric hospital in Phoenix. We must find someone to take care of her children."

I answer your question in advance, Mrs. Moore. Yes, I like her, but I am not fourteen yet and she is nearly sixteen.

If you paid us a visit nowadays, Mrs. Moore, you would think that you've reached an annex of the Phoenix psychiatric hospital. Between two dust storms, a whirlwind of lunacy has swept the camp. With winter approaching, the heat is gone. The weather has become mild in the daytime and quite cool at night. The administration installed wood stoves at first in the hospital, then in the barracks. We cut millions of shrubs when we worked in the fields, and now we burn them. Large piles of wood are gathered here and there in the camp. So now the old *issei*, then the not so old *issei*, started picking up twisted pieces of mesquite and sculpting them. It is a very tough wood. I don't even know where they found knives to carve with. I write *issei*, but we are beginning to imitate them. People are squatting the Japanese way, in small groups, a branch of mesquite in one hand and a knife in the other. How would you explain this sudden fad, Mrs. Moore? The riddle is not as tough as the wood. Have you found the answer? Christmas, Mrs. Moore, Christmas! Where shall we find toys for the children if we don't make them ourselves?

Some of the oldsters seem to have carved mesquite all their lives. They give birth to a whole zoo of rabbits, foxes, boars, moles, weasels, birds of various feathers. One of them sculpted a seal that seems simple enough, so I'm trying to consider it as a model and carve my own piece of wood. No, Mrs. Moore, no sea otter.

So I see a sculpted seal and I try to reproduce it. The old *issei* have better eyes than me: they see the sculpture already in the twisted piece of mesquite. They search the pile of wood for a badger or an owl. The Japanese people love badgers, Mrs. Moore, don't ask me why. Now please imagine the pile of wood and two old Japanese guys. One found his future badger and the other his future owl. Well, they are not happy. They envy each other and begin a bargain: "Give me your stick, I'll give you mine." They use a Japanese word that means "thick twisted stick." The Japanese language has many words to describe pieces of wood. I am learning some of them when I work along the old carvers.

They have plenty of time to haggle. They worked hard for thirty or forty years. For the first time in their life, they're on vacation.

The soul-mending thread

The administration wanted to offer us a Christmas present, too. They turned a vacant lot into an outdoor movie theater. We have seen *Robin Hood* (with Eroru Furin) and several Western movies.

While we're waiting for the show to begin, we admire the silver polka dots that sparkle on the black kimono of the firmament.

"Look, the Great Bear constellation."

"Gee, you're way off course. The Great Bear is here. It includes the Big Dipper, there. The sky seems a deeper black than in Los Angeles."

"If this is not the Great Bear, then what is it?"

"Baby Bear, and it is quite angry: 'Someone ate all my soup!'"

"I'd be glad to eat a hot *ramen* soup to warm my innards."

"I used to complain when my mother served us *ramen* soup once more. I sulked because she refused to buy ground beef and prepare hamburgers. I didn't imagine that I would end up dreaming about *ramen*."

The moment we prefer is when the Indians set up an ambush. They merge so well into the landscape that the foolish cowboys have no idea of the lurking danger. Maybe they are hiding right now in the folds that we make out on the flanks of the Superstition mountains.

"The Indians are going to attack the camp."

"They'll get us out of here!"

We asked Mrs. Caine whether she knew the Gila River Indians.

"I am not born in Arizona, but in New York City. I came here because of the dry weather. My husband suffered from tuberculosis. I don't know anything about the Indians. I'll ask around."

"Was your husband cured, madam?"

"No, he died."

"Gee, I'm sorry."

Mrs. Caine inquired about the Indians, so now I know what tribe they belong to. She wrote three words on the painted plywood sheet we use as a chalkboard.

"Their official name is *Pima*, but they call themselves *Akimel O'odham*.

"*Pima* is easier to remember and pronounce, madam."

"*Akimel O'odham* means 'the people of the river.' We're close when we say 'the Indians of Gila River.' *Pima* is what they answered the pioneers who came to Arizona in the nineteenth century. It means: 'I don't understand.'"

The soul-mending thread

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, Mrs. Moore."
Respectfully yours,
Kenichiro Kashimura.

Saturday, February 20th, 1943
Dear Mrs. Moore,
Hi, it's me again, Arizona Ken!

I was quite moved when I discovered you had not forgotten my birthday. You stuck me in a terrible quandary, as you may guess. Should I begin with *Moby Dick* or *David Copperfield*? The Ocean attracts me, of course, not to mention this mammal that reminds me of my sea otters, only a bit bigger. I chose *David Copperfield* because the narrator is a boy who has to navigate the shoals of a tricky life, somewhat like me. In the first sentence of the book, he wonders "whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life." I found this so striking that I didn't put the book down. Of course, he is an adult already when he writes the story of his childhood, so he knows part of his life. As for mine, I can say that it has taken an unexpected turn. I don't know whether I shall come back and follow the main road after this tour in the desert—or if, forswearing the comfort of ordinary life, I'll go on walking outside the well-trodden path.

I suppose that Ruth brought flour, eggs and milk, and that my mother helped her bake a cake in the hospital's kitchen. Unless Ruth and her mother prepared the cake in their home. In any case, it arrived on our table, with fourteen burning twigs instead of candles.

My mother can't help grumbling.

"You're fifteen. I don't understand how they count years."

"I'm American. I'm fourteen."

If you don't find the difference between the American and Japanese ages, Mrs. Moore, nor does anybody in the class, I'll reveal the answer in my next letter.

I bet you're eager to read the latest news about the sculptors, Mrs. Moore. The children were overjoyed when they received their animals for Christmas. The carvers could not stop there, as there were still thousands of tempting mesquite branches. When they look at them close, they notice that they don't look like raccoons or salmons anymore. They see adult toys: ashtrays, salad bowls, pencil mugs. What's more, they turned a barrack into a carpentry workshop. They find scrap wood on the building sites. They make tables, chairs and cupboards. They only own a few saws and hammers. The wood keeps its shape and

colors. The pieces of furniture stand on their feet, more or less, but they look as if a five-year old child had designed them. At least you can put the ashtrays and the pencil mugs on them.

Moby Dick and *David Copperfield* are lying on a shelf, with piles of clothes that are quite happy to have escaped their suitcase at last.

Mrs. Caine told us a story she heard from people who belong to the War Relocation Authority. Some Quakers in Philadelphia decided to offer Christmas presents to the children in one of the camps. Maybe there are neither mesquite trees nor carvers there. They sent fifty toy trucks. A newspaper that doesn't like us considered the story was worth its first page, with the following title: "Quakers send fifty toys' trucks to the Japs." On the following days, it published letters by readers: "The only present they should get is a good kick in the pants to send them back to their country." Then it published a petition to deprive *nisei* of their American citizenship and send everybody to Japan.

It is cold in the morning, say forty degrees or so, then the temperature rises by and by to seventy-five or eighty degrees. So we begin school at noon and we don't need to heat the school barrack.

Instead of jabbering about the weather, I must tell you about the big affair that heats up the camp these days. The administration handed out a "loyalty questionnaire." It includes lots of useless questions that mask the real purpose of the thing: to ask questions 27, "Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, or wherever ordered?" and 28, "Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any and all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and foreswear any form of allegiance to the Japanese emperor, to any foreign government power or organization?" These questions provoke loud debates. Chattering and often quarrelsome groups linger in the mess halls, the shower barracks, the washrooms.

"They lock us up in concentration camps and then they want us to die for them."

"Relocation camps."

"This questionnaire was written by perfect fools. Do they think Japanese women who do not even speak English will bear arms and fight for the United States?"

"At least, if we fight for them, they'll have to grant us American citizenship. We may be perfidious Orientals, but the American army needs us."

"They hope perfidious Orientals will know how best to fight other perfidious Orientals."

"I guess they lack soldiers and officers who know the Japanese language. You want to convince surrounded enemy troops to surrender, or you need to question prisoners, and so on."

"It is a fact that they granted citizenship to the men who fought in the trenches in 1917."

"Are you kidding? They ask you to give up you Japanese citizenship, but they don't promise anything. You may end with no nationality at all."

"I'll end up dead somewhere in the Pacific Ocean, so what do I care about my nationality?"

"They could admit they treated us wrong before asking us to die for them."

"I'm born in Seattle. I'm American. I have no allegiance to the emperor of Japan, so I can't foreswear it."

"That's the whole point. If you answer yes to question 28, you reckon you have an allegiance you can give up. This shows you are actually Japanese, even if your birth certificate says you're American. Just look at yourself in the mirror, anyway."

"It is as if they asked us whether we renounce eating human flesh. As I have never eaten any, I can't renounce it, so I answer no. 'Hey, you don't want to renounce it? You prefer to go on being a cannibal!' Or I answer yes. 'So you renounce it? You're confessing that you've eaten human flesh!' You're tossing a coin that has heads on both sides."

"There's only one way to avoid the trap: just refuse to answer. If everybody refuses to answer, what will they do with their questionnaire? A good loyal American is someone who fights for his rights, for his freedom. A good American refuses to obey people who betray the Constitution."

"Stop saying you're American, you *nisei*. You are no more American than we are. After all, you're here just like us, aren't you?"

"Trying to find the exact meaning of the questions is a waste of time. Obviously, they want us to answer yes and yes, that's all. Even if it doesn't make sense. 'I'm declaring myself loyal' is what it means."

"You'll declare yourself loyal to a country that refuses to naturalize you because of the supposed color of your skin? We are not allowed to become American. Neither can we own land or swim in public pools. Restaurants refuse to serve us. Jerks call us Japs. As if this wasn't unpleasant enough, now our own government rejects us. They took all our goods and keep us prisoners in these camps. We might as well go back to Japan. I'll answer no and no."

"They are nervous because of the war. Things will improve when it's over."

"Oh yeah? Look at the negroes. How long have they expected things to improve? If someone refuses to give me a job in Japan, it will be because there is no job, not because of my face."

Many more people favor yes-yes than no-no. Eight or nine times more, it is said. Some originals want to answer yes-no, or no-yes, or nothing. They talk late, several evenings on a row. We even hear shouts and tussles. Meanwhile, kids play at war with sticks passing for guns. The Americans against the Japs. Pow, pow, pow!

I've waited for a few days before going on with my letter, Mrs. Moore. I wanted to know how things would unfold. Men of fighting age who answered yes-yes will soon switch camp: from Gila River to army training. Maybe they'll come back dressed as guards, climb on the watchtower and aim their machine guns at their parents. Unless they go to the Pacific Ocean and shoot at their cousins.

Those who answered no-no have already moved to a "disciplinary camp." There are all kinds of camps. The military police arrested people who answered yes-no, or no-yes, I'm not sure. I do know where they are: in jail.

Mrs. Caine has heard that some of the people in high places are beginning to regret our relocation. She read a senator's speech to us: "The brutal deprivation of their rights we forced on these defenseless and mostly innocent people risks to appear as an ugly blot on our history."

Camps are expensive. On the one hand, there are shortages of soldiers in the army, of peasants in the fields, of workers in the factories. On the other hand, a hundred thousand people who worked twice more than anybody are wasting their time doing nothing behind barbed wire. The questionnaire allows the authorities to go back on their decision without losing face. They put away the "disloyal" Japs to recover the working power of the "loyal" Japs.

You need to be seventeen to answer the questionnaire. We are too young, but all these talks we hear unsettle us. Mrs. Caine felt we didn't understand very well what it was all about, so she invited an *issei* to speak to us.

"You *nisei*, you are American because you are born in the United States. We *issei* are immigrants. This country welcomed millions of immigrants coming from Europe. Some wanted to earn money and go back to their country to enjoy a well-earned retirement, others

left Europe for good. After a few years here, they were allowed to become American citizens. Some *issei* also thought of going back to Japan, others wanted to stay in America. We didn't know that the law stuck us in a special category and that we didn't have the same rights as European immigrants. Do you know what this category is called?"

"Orientals, sir."

"They created this category to control the Chinese workers who built the railroad in the last century. There were still negro slaves, in those times. The law put the Chinese half-way between the negro slaves and the white Americans. When we began to arrive, in the early years of this century, they shoved us in the same bag as the Chinese. In San Francisco, the children of the Japanese immigrants had to go to school in Chinatown. Many Japanese worked far from Chinatown, as laborers in the fields. When they tried to enroll their children in the local schools, the white parents would sign petitions against it. They could count on the support of the 'Oriental Exclusion League,' of course."

I have never heard of this league. I don't know whether parents signed a petition requesting my exclusion, Mrs. Moore. If they did, I thank you for keeping me in Jefferson school.

I won't reproduce any more of the *issei*'s speech. Hearing it was quite painful. In Los Angeles, when kids said *You Jap* to me, I wasn't brave enough to protest. I was ashamed of my strange face. I would have liked to be a white American like all the others. Now, after learning how my country treated my parents, I am ashamed as an American citizen.

Not ashamed enough to consider giving up my American nationality and swearing allegiance to the emperor of Japan. Is this possible, anyway? As I told you, there are not many outside teachers in school. I mentioned an *issei* who teaches math. What they want to teach us, mainly, is Japanese language, Japanese literature, Japanese civilization, Japanese history. They hope to make us more Japanese. They find us too American, when America is showing us its worst aspects.

But then, something strange is happening. As they pile up exotic information about Japan, the country and its culture seem curiouser and curiouser to us. Instead of feeling more Japanese, we feel Americaner and Americaner. To change their minds after carving ashtrays, they give shows in the outdoor movie theater. They have built a small stage, which they light with flares. They sing moldy melodies belonging to old epics or to the classical theater called *Nō*. Sometimes they dance while they sing. I suppose they understand the antiquated language they ululate under the milky Arizona sky, but we certainly don't. They

stretch vowels as if they were made of chewing-gum. I dare such a sacrilegious simile because I know they won't read it! *Nō* dancing is like regular dancing played in slow motion. The character walks ve-ry slow-ly toward a corner of the stage, spends ten minutes turning around, then comes back just as slowly. It looks as if he were following a rheumatic snail and trying not to crush it. Since he needs at least an hour to go and come back, he has enough time to whine the lament of a brave warrior giving his life to save the honor of his clan, or of a hideous ghost deploring that nobody wants to pray and deliver his soul. I wrote I didn't understand their antique elongated words, but they explain everything to us at great length.

We don't want to learn this outdated stuff. We sing tunes from *Girl Crazy* or other musicals. When we see a movie with Fred Astaire, everybody dances and sings like him for weeks. At Mrs. Caine's, we listen to Glenn Miller and Artie Shaw records with Ruth. Do you know Glenn Miller's "Moonlight Serenade," Mrs. Moore?

The *issei* find partners for *go* and crush soja to make *tofu*. They feel more Japanese than in Los Angeles. For the *nisei*, it is the other way around. When I see all these *nisei* who feel perfectly American, it increases my feeling of being an ordinary American boy.

Older teenagers turn the sound of their record-players as high as possible and jump like devils, this is called dancing the jitterbug. The girls wear short skirts. These kids don't eat in the same dining hall as their parents. They refuse arranged marriage and hope to find a sister soul. Tensions appear between the generations. The parents are losing their authority. The other day, a group of old fools, following a "preacher" who holds meetings on Sundays in a barrack they call "House of the Lord," interrupted a party by threatening to break everything. It seems jitterbug is an abomination in the eyes of the Lord. Whoever dances it is sure to go straight to hell. Gee, I feel like trying.

We talk more freely with Mrs. Caine than with our parents and other *issei*. She told us her parents were immigrants, like ours.

"They came from Russia at the end of the last century. They spoke bad English, with a ridiculous accent."

"They spoke Russian at home, madam? Do you know Russian?"

"They knew Russian, but they spoke mostly Yiddish."

"What is Yiddish, madam?"

"A language of the Jews in Eastern Europe. I understand it, but I can't speak it. I guess I spoke Yiddish when I was very young, then I switched to English. I'll tell you something

The soul-mending thread

I hated: to go shopping with my mother and meet a classmate in the street. I was ashamed of my own mother. She dressed like a Russian peasant woman, with all kinds of undershirts and shirts and woolens layered in the manner of onionskins. When she wore all these skins, she was as round as an onion, actually—and I looked at my feet when I walked, so I wouldn't have to say hello to a friend. They had brought an assortment of odd customs in their suitcases. For example, they owned a kind of kettle-teapot called *samovar*, which they kept hot all day. Instead of adding a spoonful of powdered sugar in the tea, as people do in America, they took a lump of sugar in their mouth to sweeten the tea as they sipped it. What's more, they poured the tea from the cup onto the saucer and drank from the saucer. I suppose it was a way of cooling the tea. I have always found these customs quite exotic and never considered adopting them, or even giving them a try. I was lucky enough to get a scholarship and go to college. I started drinking bad coffee, like a good American girl."

"American coffee is bad?"

"So do Brazilians and Italians say, anyway."

"Do you still drink bad coffee, madam?"

"Of course. Some of your parents invited me to their barracks and gave me green tea. I understand how you can come to like it, but it's too refined for a drinker of bad coffee. I'll tell you something. Here in Arizona, there are not many folks who drink tea from the saucer, with a lump of sugar under their tongue. I still meet people who do it when I go to New York City. I am no more tempted to imitate them than thirty years ago, but seeing them provokes a feeling of longing or nostalgia. It reminds me of my childhood, I guess. Also, I like to read Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. I tell myself that my ancestors lived in the world described by these great writers. The link was broken for good, though, when my parents crossed the ocean."

A few days later, I met Ruth in the movie theater.

"You didn't tell me you were Jewish."

"You didn't ask me. You could have guessed."

"I don't know how to recognize a Jew."

"My name."

"Caine is a Jewish name?"

"It is a distortion of Cohen, which is the name of some job in the Jewish religion. My grandfather probably changed his name when he entered the States. People did this just in

case, as they didn't know whether Americans were prejudiced against Jews. It couldn't be as bad as in Russia, that's for sure."

"You change your name and you're safe. Quite convenient."

"Here, in Arizona, we should also convert to some Christian faith. If you don't go to church every Sunday, they think you're a dangerous communist or something."

"Yeah, well, I can always change my name. With my face… Instead of Kashimura, I would call myself, I don't know, say, Moore…"

This name popped up by itself, Mrs. Moore. I smiled inside my head. Outside, I think I kept my famous oriental impassivity.

Gee, I almost forgot to answer your question. Our famous *ramen* soup. Yes, I can describe it, but you won't really know what it is until you taste it. I suspect the hidden purpose of your request is to induce me to write an essay, which you'll cover with red remarks as you used to do in the good old times. Okay. To begin with, you must imagine a large bowl. And in this bowl… What should you imagine in this bowl? A pinch of nostalgia, maybe, similar to what Mrs. Caine feels when she thinks about Russian tea, except it would be a salty nostalgia rather than a sweet one. I haven't eaten full-flavored Japanese food for one year, so I tend to forget what *ramen* is made of. Hey, I'll ask our neighbor, Mr. Shimizu.

"A good *ramen*," he says, "is one you eat in the street."

"My mother's *ramen* was good enough."

"It doesn't taste the same without the music."

"What music?"

"He pushes his small cart, like the cart of a hot-dog vendor in Los Angeles, and he blows his trumpet to announce his coming. The sweet potato merchant shakes a bell."

"Fine, so *ramen* tastes like a trumpet. What else? What is the difference between *ramen* and an American soup?"

"Oh, oh, you can't compare. Americans eat very thick soups, like clam chowder or pea soup. Closer to mashed potatoes than to Japanese soup. In *ramen*, you have two quite distinct parts. First, a clear stock. Then lots of good things swimming in it: seaweeds, mushrooms, onions, tiny dried fish, chicken, pork, cabbage, leeks, bamboo shoots, pickled plums."

This is when his wife cuts in.

"Hey, boy, I hope you aren't writing down this silly nonsense. Will you choose to trust the pig who gulps his *ramen* in one minute, or the worker who spends hours making it? The fool forgot the main ingredients."

"Who, me? I forgot the main ingredients of *ramen*? That would be the day."

"Noodles, mister know-it-all."

"Bah, noodles, it goes without saying. *Ramen* is a Chinese soup. There are always noodles in Chinese soups. *Men* means noodles in Chinese."

"And *miso*."

"Same thing. Goes without saying. Japanese soup always contains *miso*."

"Mrs. Shimizu wins by two home runs. What if I want to explain to Mrs. Moore how to make *miso*?"

"Tell her to buy it in a Chinese store. It is a fermented paste, made with soy beans, rice and salt. It has to ferment for months in special conditions, she can't make it herself. She should also buy *wakame* seaweeds. The fish and chicken stock is easy enough, but she should filter it until it becomes quite clear. Oh, about meat, mushrooms and vegetables: she should cut them in small pieces or slice them as thin as possible. People say we'll soon have vegetables here. Everybody will rejoice, no doubt."

Don't forget to ask the class how I can be fourteen and fifteen at the same time, Mrs. Moore.

Respectfully yours,

Kenichiro Kashimura.

Saturday, April 21st, 1943

Dear Mrs. Moore,

A riddle: if I say I have seen a towering woman, can you guess who she is? *Nisei* are a little taller than *issei*, a consequence of their eating hot dogs and hamburgers rather than *ramen* soup. Yes, but the tall *nisei* have gone to war. Only *issei* and small *nisei* like me are left in the camp, so that this woman looked like Mrs. Gulliver visiting Lilliput.

How stupid of me! You have read the report in the newspapers, or even seen her, as several photographers followed her. Yes? You have the newspaper? Look in the upper right corner. The little fellow with slanted eyes and black hair, that's me! And the giraffe woman in front is Mrs. Roosevelt, of course.

I'm joking. Mrs. Caine brought us a Phoenix newspaper with a description of the visit in three lines. If the Los Angeles Times publishes a picture, I wonder whether you'll see how moved the President's wife was. Her eyes were shining and we thought she would cry.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't tell us! Tell your husband, and get us out of here."

We didn't really say this, but we should have.

We could have known that something was brewing. Ten days or so before her visit, the guards removed the wire fence. As they forgot to give us an explanation, everybody suggested one.

"They want to reward our good behavior."

"They admit that we are not dangerous spies."

"They don't need a wire fence. Fear is enough of a fence."

"Fear of what?"

"Of being sent to a disciplinary camp."

"They can't send you to a disciplinary camp without a reason."

"Oh yeah? The Constitution protects you, perhaps?"

"What they want is raise the productivity of the peasants. Without the fence, they don't need to make a detour via the main gate to reach the fields."

The gate bothered the peasants, obviously. More than a thousand of them get out of the camp every morning. We have visited the fields with Mrs. Roosevelt. Do you remember our fight against the weeds, Mrs. Moore? I must not think about the thorns, lest I get a rash from the memory. Green shoots come out of the earth everywhere. We'll soon eat carrots, celery, black radish, green beans, beet roots, tomatoes, spinach, peppers. We also have pastures with thirty-six cows and seven hundred steers. We built a pigpen that counts fifty inmates. Two thousand chicken jump around in our farmyard.

Gee, I didn't tell you something our peasants also did a while ago: they sowed grass inside the camp, and planted oleanders and other fast-growing trees. As a result, we are rid of the dust that killed babies and bothered us so much when we arrived.

A small workshop is making bricks by casting adobe. This is a traditional Indian and Mexican material, a mixture of clay, water, sand and straw. All the kids want to work there after school. You pack the paste in a wooden mold. It reminds me of modeling clay, or the mud pies we made on the beach in Santa Monica. The bricks must dry slowly in the shade

to become homogeneous and strong. You don't need to bake them in an oven like regular bricks. Mrs. Roosevelt visited the new maternity ward and the primary schools, our first adobe buildings.

Adobe bricks are mostly made by adults who work all day, but there is a job that only slender children can perform: they crawl inside the double roofs to repair them. We don't have dust storms anymore, but dustless storms still shift or tear roof parts. Being inside a double roof is like being in a dark chamber with the ceiling fifteen inches above the floor. I am too tall already, but I don't think I would have volunteered, even though the job is paid three dollars a week. Doctors earn five dollars. In school, the salary for outside teachers is about ten times the salary for prisoner teachers. The prisoners do get food and board.

You wouldn't recognize the camp, Mrs. Moore—supposing you had seen it six months ago. We have been able to show Mrs. Roosevelt forty-six classes in two schools, six churches, garages, a post office, a fire department, a hairdressing salon. The schools are registered with the Arizona education department. The residents take care of everything: they are even firemen. They organized in the Japanese manner so that things work out smoothly. My mother is "barrack manager," for example. In Japan, she says, there is a person in every block of houses who is in charge of relations with authorities.

You want to know what my mother does as barrack manager? Well, she listens to complaints. The toilets are clogged once more, the food is bad, we are still waiting for the shower-room partitions we have been promised. The manager also sorts mail and puts it in boxes bearing the numbers of the various families.

I think that nobody dared complain to Mrs. Roosevelt. She saw the good stuff. We have playgrounds for tots, basketball courts, football fields. We even built a real baseball stadium with grandstands for six thousand people. I told you about people making furniture and adobe bricks. When the authorities saw we could make things with our hands, they opened a small factory in the camp. Most of the workers are women. They make camouflage nets by interlacing green and brown jute ribbons in the mesh of the nets—which are hanging from the ceiling.

According to Mrs. Caine, there are good reasons why our camp was chosen to welcome the President's wife.

"It is a kind of model camp. The cultivated fields make it different. People in the administration told me that conditions are dire in some other camps. Let's say they are

located in Wyoming or Idaho somewhere, in farm country rather than in the middle of an Indian reservation. The residents work in farms outside the camp, replacing laborers who are gone to war. So the good Wyoming farmers consider they can treat the Japanese any which way, since they are the enemy. They exploit them, they keep them at work sixteen hours a day, they barely feed them, they insult them, they beat them."

"It is said that some Japanese were killed, madam."

"I haven't heard of farmers killing Japanese laborers. Some Prisoners died in a camp where the guards and other employees stole food to sell it on the black market. A prisoner denounced them. The authorities sent him to jail. Then the other prisoners protested. The guards shot at the crowd. I think they killed two people. They wounded some, too. I've also heard, I don't know whether it is true, that an old man died because he was running after his dog. The dog crossed the fence, his master tried to catch him, the guards started shooting."

"They shot the dog?"

"No, the master. They said he was trying to escape. There are several versions of this story. The guards may have tried to warn him, but he was deaf. Or they shouted a word he didn't understand, like: *Freeze*!"

"Or he was crazy. He saw a coyote beyond the fence and believed it was his dog. Because pets are forbidden, madam. People had to leave them behind."

I told the class about the dog named Freddie, who tried to run after our bus in Santa Monica.

Several kids told pet stories. A boy said he had left his dog Droopy with neighbors. They wrote a letter to him.

"Droopy refused to eat. He let himself…"

He couldn't say the word "die", because he was crying.

Let's now tackle a lighter subject—the strange question of my age. I know you are eager to know the answer, Mrs. Moore. Hey, you can tell Tommy Alvarez that the date-line plays no part in this. I hope he was joking.

Here goes. I am born on February 19th, 1929. The Japanese consider that 1929 is my first year. On Januray 1st, 1930, I enter my second year, and so on. January 1st, 1943, marked the beginning of my fifteenth year. As an American, I celebrated my fourteenth birthday on February 19, 1943, of course.

So there is a difference of one year. Now in certain cases, Mrs. Moore, the difference is two years. Can you explain this new mystery? No need to ask Tommy Alvarez. This is too hard for him.

Thank you for the tea, Mrs. Moore. Being a fourteen-year old uncouth American boy, I couldn't taste any difference, but my mother says you're becoming an expert. You bought a famous tea, which grows on a remote hillside on the island of Kyushu. She had never tasted that tea before. She meditated at least ten minutes with the cup in her hands before taking the first sip.

Respectfully yours,

Kenichiro Kashimura.

Sunday, May 23rd, 1943

Dear Mrs. Moore,

I spend so much time in the sun that my skin is as bronzed as a redskin's.

Yes, I know the *Los Angeles Examiner* and other papers belonging to Hearst have published a stupid report on Mrs. Roosevelt's visit. So you learned that I've been staying for nearly one year in a summer camp. I had told you about the baseball field and the outdoor movie theater shown in the report. Mrs. Caine brought the article in class. Before the war, these newspapers always talked about the "yellow peril." Now they say we are "pampered" by the government. They mention a swimming-pool. I bet you imagine us lounging at the side of a marble pool, cocktails in hand. The truth is that grayish water fills a ditch. Ah, but if you stand nearby and close your eyes when the kids are playing in the water, you hear the same merry din as if the pool was made of marble.

The desert is quite surprised when it rains. It doesn't know what to do with water. The ground turns into mud. Large puddles, or should I say small lakes, appear here and there in the camp. When we prepared the fields, we dug a network of channels to send rainwater to reservoirs that provide irrigation water. Our swimming-pool is one of these reservoirs.

The administration pampers us even more since Mrs. Roosevelt has seen our summer camp. By the way, I forgot to tell you, but you certainly guessed, that our sculptors offered a magnificent mesquite fox to the President's wife. Soon afterward, the army gave them electrical saws and lathes, special planes, and whole truckloads of wooden boards. You know the army, it doesn't give stuff without a reason. It asked our wood-workers to make… Wait a minute before you turn the page, Mrs. Moore, and try to guess. What did our dear

army order? What are you saying? Lopsided tables and rickety chairs? Gee, you ain't even close. Actually, I put you on a wrong track by mentioning the army. The stuff was ordered by the navy.

Ah, you turned the page. If you pretend you found the answer, I don't believe you. The navy wants toy ships. More precisely, small-scale models of various warships. Cruisers, escort ships, aircraft carriers, even submarines, one to three feet long. The sailors will launch them in a marble pool to train for naval combat. Yes, of course, all the kids in the camp dream of training for naval combat with these toys, but we are not allowed to touch them.

The carpenters also make wonderful gadgets. If you want to install one in your home, Mrs. Moore, I'll tell you how to do it. First, you need lots of wood shavings. Our wood-workers have as much of these as they want, of course. Then you should build or get an open crate, with a volume of thirty cubic feet or so. Cut eight canvas squares the same size as the sides of the box, something like three feet by three feet. Then sew them to make four flat bags. Now fill the bags with shavings to a thickness of three or four inches. Nail them inside the box. Put an electric fan on the floor of the box. Bring water to the top of the sides so that it streams down through the bags. The shavings retain the water. Its evaporation cools the air in the box. The fan then blows the cool air outside.

These wood-shaving air coolers have changed our lives. Winter was short, and it's quite hot again. People faint again, and suffer from heat rashes and nosebleeds. The employees and other free people who live in the camp, for example Mrs. Caine and Ruth, use machines that cool the air through chemical processes, like electrical refrigerators. Believe me, our coolers work just as well. The main drawback is that they need large quantities of water. When it's very hot, water becomes scarce in the evening. The water towers empty so fast that the pumps can't refill them. Mothers have to wait until three in the morning to wash diapers.

Having no more fresh air is annoying, but not as much as having no more water for the toilets. Imagine the stench when the temperature reaches 105 degrees.

Did I tell you we bought modern toilet bowls? It is not proper to mention this subject too often in a correspondence between well-bred people. Yes, I hear your remark: the administration bought the toilet bowls. But it used the money we earned by making camouflage nets and toy boats. We have twelve toilet bowls aligned on two rows. Two groups of six people sit back to back. Good enough for prisoners, says the army. Fussy

people bring cardboard panels—portable privacy. Some are quite elaborate, like Japanese screens, but nobody dared paint birds and flowers on them.

The toilet bowls complain of overwork. “Say, there are too many of you. Give us a break!” After a while, they are fed up and begin to regurgitate the overflow. Gee, ’tis no fun to sit on the toilet when it turns into a small shit-spewing volcano. Forgive my vocabulary, Mrs. Moore, but reality is more unsettling than this coarse word. While I say tis no fun, we choose to laugh about it. *Shikata ga nai*.

The camp also earns money by exporting vegetables to other camps. People get a small share of the profits. They can at last buy clothes and shoes for their children—who insist on growing up—in the Sears-Roebuck catalogue.

I told you about the men who joined the army. We thought they would go and fight in the Pacific Ocean. Well, some parents received letters from North Africa, where General Eisenhower’s troops landed with the English to fight the Germans. The parents worry, of course, especially the mothers. Do you know what they do? No, you don’t. How could you know? They organize séances to communicate with spirits. If the spirit of their son answers, it means their son is dead. One more bizarre *issei* custom. We know their customs a little better after listening to all the courses they inflict on us. In the *nō* plays, there are always ghosts and spirits who are not quite dead.

The woodworkers make Buddhist altars, which people install in their rooms. They offer tea and fruit to their dear departed. They deposit small toys in front of the altars for the babies and toddlers who died during the first few months.

Oops! I almost forgot to mention another fantastic production of the carpentry workshop. When the peasants go to Phoenix to buy seeds and fertilizer, they bring back lamps, transformers, condensers, copper wires. Electricians put everything together the right way, woodworkers make boxes and knobs, and now look: radio sets! They are not as beautiful as the one I left in Los Angeles, but they work fine.

What are you saying? It is forbidden? Bah, we very seldom see guards now. They never enter the barracks.

Mr. Shimizu bought one of these radio sets. We catch short wave programs. It crackles somewhat and all we get is a hodgepodge of crazy languages. I haven’t been able to hear Tokyo Rose yet. Ruth told me about her.

“I read an article in the newspaper. She addresses our soldiers in Japanese radio broadcasts. She announces the attacks they are preparing, to show them that the Japanese

know everything in advance. At least, that's what the soldiers told the journalist. He never heard any such prediction. He did hear a woman who spoke English without an accent, maybe a Japanese American. Do you know what? She talked about the camps."

"Our camps?"

"This camp business is a godsend for Japanese propaganda. Tokyo Rose says our government proved its racism by locking up not only the *issei*, but also the *nisei*, who are American citizens. They even pulled orphans out of a San Francisco orphanage and sent them to a camp, as if these orphans could be dangerous spies. She compares the way America treats you to the way the English and French treat the Hindu or Indochinese natives in their colonies."

"Hey, this explains something Mr. Suzuki told me. They are looking for *issei* who speak Japanese perfectly, with a clear diction, to describe our daily camp life on the radio. They want to answer Tokyo Rose's propaganda."

"I've heard about this, but with another explanation. The Americans want the Japanese to know you are treated well. They expect some kind of quid pro quo: we pamper our Japanese prisoners, you be nice to your American war prisoners."

"I prefer my version. In yours, we have become war prisoners all of a sudden. Being a war prisoner in my own country doesn't sound right."

"In both cases, I notice that Gila River plays its part as a model camp again. It can be described on the radio as a place where people are treated well. Very few residents question their fate. Many more collaborate with the authorities, which doesn't seem to bother anybody. My mother told me that things are not as wonderful in all the camps."

"Yes she told us about it. In one camp, the guards shot at a crowd of protesters."

"She says that in a camp, maybe another one, *issei* fought against *issei*. Those who keep faith in America in spite of the bad treatment they suffer against those who have come to hate America and hope Japan will win the war. A rumor also says that residents in a camp killed one of their own because he collaborated with the authorities."

"Such dramas can't happen in this summer camp. Everything is relative, as Einstein says. This is indeed a kind of summer camp compared to the other camps, if what we hear is true. I can't complain. In Los Angeles, I loved to swim in the ocean and watch the sea otters that frolicked among the waves. I don't suffer like the poor fellows who risk their lives in North Africa or on some Pacific island. I just lack an American citizen's most precious good: freedom. But I learned so many things. I met many more *issei* and *nisei*

than in the first thirteen years of my life. I understand a little better in what sense I am Japanese. I attend a good school and your mother is a good teacher. And to top it all, I met you."

She smiled and took my hand in hers. I blushed. I think I wanted to kiss her, but I didn't. Then I felt sorry I hadn't. Too shy.

If we had a yellow skin, as fools believe, embarrassment would turn it orange rather than red. Actually, I don't think the redskins are red. They turn red when they blush, like everybody.

Okay, back to serious matters. I am born on February 19th, 1929 and I became fifteen, Japanese-style, on January 1st, 1943. Let's suppose Tommy Alvarez is born on December 30th, 1928. On January 1st, 1929, he enters his second year already. On December 30th, 1942, he celebrates his fourteenth birthday American-style. Two days later, he is sixteen Japanese-style. Two years more than his American age. If you are born early in the year, you add one year to the American age to get the Japanese age. If you are born late in the year, you add two years. If you are born on the fourth of July, add one year and a half.

I have finished *David Copperfield*. I think Mr. Micawber is the main hero of David's story. Maybe I feel close to him because he spends many months in a jail that seems to resemble our camp more than a modern American jail. I also finished *Moby Dick*. I am glad they didn't kill the whale. Ruth lent me *Treasure Island*. I am sure you have noticed that Long John Silver stands as a kind of substitute father to Jim, just as Mr. Micawber does to David. Not as funny, though.

Respectfully yours,

Kenichiro Kashimura

Sunday, July 4th, 1943

Dear Mrs. Moore,

Happy independence day! Today, final of the block-vs-block baseball championship, sack races and various games for kids.

Thank you for the Emily Dickinson complete poems. One can open the book at random, read for five minutes or an hour. One can read a poem ten times and find ten different meanings, without really uncovering its secret. This is the perfect book for a prisoner. The foreword says she chose to stay all her life in her Amherst house, where she was born. She went across the garden, now and then, to say hello to her brother. I open at random.

The soul-mending thread

A Prison gets to be a friend—
Between its Ponderous face
And Ours—a Kinsmanship express—
And in its narrow Eyes—

We come to look with gratitude
For the appointed Beam
It deal us—stated as our food—
And hungered for—the same—

We learn to know the Planks—
That answer to Our feet—
So miserable a sound—at first—
Nor ever now—so sweet—

As plashing in the Pools—
When Memory was a Boy—
But a Demurer Circuit—
A Geometric Joy—

The Posture of the Key
That interrupt the Day
To Our Endeavor—Not so real
The Check of Liberty—

As this Phantasm Steel—
Whose features—Day and Night—
Are present to us—as Our Own—
And as escapeless—quite—

The narrow Round—the Stint—
The slow exchange of Hope—

The soul-mending thread

For something passiver—Content
Too steep for looking up—

The Liberty we knew
Avoided—like a Dream—
Too wide for any Night but Heaven—
If That—indeed—redeem—

I am discovering another genius, as Mrs. Caine lent me *Crime and Punishment*.

"I read it when I was young, by the samovar" she said. "My parents hoped I would understand them better if I became slightly Russian in this manner. I read Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Gogol, Pushkin, Goncharov, Turgenev, and Chekhov, who is my favorite. I love them all, actually."

"And do you feel slightly Russian?"

"I feel slightly Russian when I read Chekhov, slightly Italian when I read Dante, slightly German when I read Goethe, slightly French when I read Flaubert. When I hear that the Germans gather Jews in ghettos where they die of hunger, I feel slightly Jewish."

"Did you read this book in Russian?"

"Oh, I can recognize a handful of Russian words when I hear them, but I don't even know all the letters in the alphabet. I read this translation."

"Same here, in a way. I understand spoken Japanese. I know more characters after all the lessons we got in the camp, but still not enough to read a book. Some Japanese novels have been translated into English, I guess. Not as many as Russian or French novels, certainly. I haven't read even one, so I won't become "slightly Japanese" any time soon."

"I suppose you'll come to it by and by. I read the Russian authors when I was a teenager, but I understood and appreciated them when I read them again as an adult. I'll look for translations of Japanese novels. I want to become slightly Japanese, too."

I am very lucky, Mrs. Moore. I've had two good teachers. You to begin with, then Mrs. Caine. We had some tests and we did much better than the Arizona average. The other classes also had good results. Mrs. Caine says our average is the best of all the camps. The State school board decided that the best students of our Senior High should be able to study in Eastern colleges. Several students have gone to colleges in Chicago and Pennsylvania already—and just came back for summer vacation in our "summer camp."

The soul-mending thread

Our vegetable crop beat all our expectations. We don't export truckloads anymore, but trainloads. We have 1,400 cattle, 1,100 pigs, 8,500 chickens. One fifth of the food in all the camps comes from Gila River. What do you say about that?

Italy seems harder to conquer than North Africa. I don't know whether the mothers still go to séances, but they are beginning to receive death notices. We know that the troops crossed the Mediterranean sea. The notices do not say where the soldiers died, nor how. Military secret. Rumors mention a failed landing in Southern Italy. All the former residents of the camp who went fighting in Europe belong to the same unit, the 442nd combat regiment. There is a regiment for the Japanese, one for the Indians, one for the negroes. Is this fair? Are we not brave enough to fight alongside the white soldiers?

A girl in our class showed us a letter written by her brother.

"See this black paragraph."

"Your brother spilled his ink bottle?"

"Yeah, and the blot took the exact shape of a rectangle. This is the military censorship. I don't know why they blacken so much text."

"Your brother writes that the villagers welcome them and offer them rabbit-shaped honey cookies, which are a local treat. So imagine that the mail plane crashes. The Germans open the letters and know where to find the regiment."

"Look in the mirror if you want to see a rabbit-shaped fool! You watch too many spy movies. I'll read a paragraph that's not censored: 'We saved a Texas regiment which was surrounded by eight thousand Germans. We hesitated. Would we risk losing thousands of our men to help two thousand Texans who despise us? Well, we went ahead. Nobody will doubt our loyalty and patriotism anymore.'"

Mrs. Moore, I want to tell you the story of Bill Kawasaki. I know him because he was the assistant of Mr. Fujimoto, who was barrack manager before my mother. Bill is twenty or so, not old enough to enroll in the army yet. What's more, he married just before the evacuation, to be sure he would be sent to the same camp as his girlfriend. Well, he left her, after all, when agents of the *National Youth Authority* came to Gila River. It is a federal bureau that trains young people so they can contribute to the war effort. Bill thought he would learn a profession, which might be useful after the war. That's what he says. Maybe he just wanted to get out of here. He just came back anyway, after three weeks outside. He told us what happened.

The soul-mending thread

"We took a train and went to a kind of small camp near Minneapolis, a place named Shakopee. We were sixty *nisei* coming from all the evacuation camps. We arrive on a Saturday, after a night in the train. A few white guys are already there. They show us the classes, more like workshops with machine-tools and tables for technical drawing. Factories need young blood to replace the workers who've gone to war, you understand. Okay, so on Sunday, we settle down, fine and dandy. On Monday morning, we go to the workshops to begin our training. Just then, the loudspeakers say management wants to see us. So here we are, sixty *nisei*, in front of the management building. The director opens the door and reads from a sheet of paper he holds in his hand. That our recruitment is canceled. He reads the paper, he says that he is sorry, that a bus will take us into town, Minneapolis, and he closes the door. It wasn't his fault, he didn't agree with the government, he resigned. When we left, on the next day, there was a new director already. We were stunned. They bring us all the way here, then they throw us out.

"In Minneapolis, the bus drops us in a religious shelter. Not a place for me. I leave with two pals and we find a War Relocation Authority office, where we tell our story. There is a *nisei* secretary who lends us newspapers with rooms-for-rent ads and job offers. She lets us call on her phone. I call and a lady answers: 'Yes, that's right, I've got a nice room to let.' I give my name, as I don't want the lady to say OK, then to change her mind when she sees my face. So when she hears Kawasaki: 'Oh, I must ask my husband, but he is at the office,' or: 'Gee, how silly of me, I had forgotten, I just rented the room.' And for the job, same thing: 'We'll call you.' But they do need people to clean public buildings and remove trash, as the unskilled white guys get jobs in the defense factories. So in the end I find a job cleaning a school and a room with a sweet old dame, she's French.

"Things look good enough. It would be even better if my wife could come, and why not? My room is tiny, but the French dame says her neighbor across the street has two rooms for rent, not too expensive. I cross the street and I knock on her door. She's a fat woman with yellow hair. She looks at me, she says: 'I don't rent to a Jap,' and she spits at me. Yeah, I've got spit on my face. I go back to my room, I get my things, I return to the WRA office and I ask them to send me back to Gila River."

Bill Kawasaki didn't give up. He stayed in the camp a few days, then went to Chicago, where things are better than in Minneapolis, if we believe the letters that former camp inmates send us. Some pretend they are Chinese, though, to be on the safe side.

Respectfully yours,

The soul-mending thread

Kenichiro Kashimura

Sunday, September 12th, 1943

Dear Mrs. Moore,

You won't believe this. I mean, I can hardly believe it myself. I am going to Japan tomorrow!

We have spent more than one year in Gila River. During that time, we received a few letters from my father. He wrote he was in good health. The rest was almost entirely blackened by the censors. In his last letter, two months ago or so, he told us the authorities threatened to send him to a "special" camp in New Mexico. He could avoid this fate and be reunited with us if he accepted to go back to Japan with his family. He didn't reveal his decision in the letter, but he arrived here two weeks ago.

"I hesitated," he said. "It was a terrible mental torture. I wanted to see you so much. Nearly two years, and the children growing up away from me. This war can't last long now. But it's blackmail, nothing but blackmail… I gave up. I am sorry. I wasn't strong enough to refuse. I'm taking the children to a country that's not theirs, where war is raging…"

I could see that my mother didn't know whether to rejoice or to lament. She is happy to see her husband again, even if he has lost weight and seems worried. But then, she got used to the camp. She works in the hospital and belongs to a "knitting circle" where she has made friends. I guess she also thinks, we've been told often enough, that here we are safe.

"Why do they send us over there?" she asked.

"They exchange us against American prisoners."

We are not war prisoners. What are we? Nothing, or not much. We'll do as exchange tokens. We gathered our things and put them back in our suitcases, not forgetting the doll Shirley. My mother joked.

"When I came from Japan, I had one suitcase only. Now I have two."

While packing the notebooks you sent me, Mrs. Moore, I felt somewhat heavy-hearted at the idea of leaving Gila River. Suddenly, I thought about Ruth and my sorrow became quite painful. I went and waited for her at the hospital door. Like my mother, she tried to joke.

"So you're getting out at last? You must be happy. Hey, you'll travel!"

I could see she wasn't as merry as she tried to sound. I've known her for one year. We are close enough to guess each other's feelings. My going away weighs on her heart, too.

"I'll come back. Maybe not to Gila River, but to America. We'll meet again."

"Why do they expel you? Is your father that dangerous?"

"After all this time, they know that none of us is dangerous. They just need hostages to exchange them against American war prisoners."

"Why did the FBI arrest him? They needed to charge him with something, didn't they?"

"Right then, I didn't even understand they were arresting him. He didn't understand either. He thought they wanted to check his resident's status or something. He just grabbed a toothbrush and a razor. As he was someone important, the newspapers showed a picture of his arrest. You see him leave our house with a poor paper bag, as if he had gone shopping and bought a pound of plums. It contains the toothbrush and the razor.

"You never told me your father was an important man."

"I told you I didn't understand what was happening. I didn't know that the government considered him important. I understand it now. I've learned a lot in this camp, in one year, by talking to the carpenters and the peasants. Maybe as much as in school. And now, I'll further my education in Japan, by seeing how they get ready to be defeated by America. Here, you know, I understood what happened on the day of the Pearl Harbor attack."

"You understood what happened in Hawaii?"

"More to the point, what happened in Washington, D.C. It was a Sunday. I went to Japanese school, as I did every Sunday. My pals and I, we found it crazy that Japan dared attack the United States. It was as if a mouse attacked an elephant. A tiny country, so poor that people often go hungry, pretends to take on powerful America? Well, see, the guys in Washington thought just like us. That Japan was a shabby little country inhabited by savages. They have vanquished China only because China is even weaker and poorer. And now, all of a sudden, a whole armada crosses the Pacific Ocean and sinks the American fleet. They have brought airplanes on huge ships that launch them with catapults. If these yellow midgets can perform such feats, they may as well have hidden submarines and aircraft carriers near the California coast. The President and the government and the military chiefs of staff meet as soon as possible in the White House. What do we do if the enemy lands in Los Angeles and San Francisco tomorrow? Japan has planned all this long ago, obviously. In that case, thousands of Japanese people living on the West Coast are

probably preparing to sabotage power lines and railway tracks. We need to arrest the leaders promptly, or let's say the likely leaders."

"Your father was a leader?"

"He knew many people, so he could have become one. He managed a big company. When he arrived in America, he became a field laborer like everybody. People saw he was serious and clever, so they gave him a field to manage, then another. As he produced lots of fruit and vegetables, he bought a pickup truck to deliver them, then a first big truck and a second one. At this stage, he began to carry produce for the other Japanese growers. He sold not only in California, but in other states as well. He bought wood, cedar and redwood trunks, which he sold in Japan. Eventually, he became the manager of one of the main fruit, vegetable and flower markets in Los Angeles. Besides, he was the chairman of the Okayama *kenjinkai*."

"The what?"

"A kind of friendly society grouping people form the region of Okayama. *Ken* is a county, *jin* a human being. You and I, we are *Americajin*, people of America. The *kenjinkai* meets now and then to eat Okayama-style broiled eels and sing Okayama songs. It also helps people in need, and gives scholarships to worthy kids. The FBI arrested the leaders of the various *kenjinkai*. And also the Buddhist priests and protestant ministers."

"Priests would encourage and support sabotage?"

"They talk to assembled people. You never know. The governor of Wyoming said he was ready to hang a Japanese from every tree in his state."

"They wasted their time, didn't they? Nobody ever saw a Japanese ship cruising near California, as far as I know. There wasn't any sabotage."

"That not even one sabotage was reported is highly suspect. It means that we lie low to prepare a big one. What they reproach us, actually, is that we have the same face as the enemy. Also, I guess the white shopkeepers and fruit growers were happy to be rid of their Japanese rivals, who worked so hard. Don't forget that they bought our properties for next to nothing. My father lost everything. The Japanese are not allowed to own companies, you know, so his businesses belonged to lawyers and straw men."

"A company is valuable if it has good managers and workers. Your father's companies are worthless today, but he will rebuild them from the ground up after the war."

"Let's hope so. You can come and see me in Los Angeles. We'll spend the evening on the beach and grill hot dogs."

"I don't eat pork. Jews don't eat pork."

"We'll grill marshmallows."

"Are you happy to be reunited with your father?"

"When we were at home, he scared me some. Everybody obeyed him. But when the FBI agents took him away, he followed them without uttering a word of protest. He seemed another man. They didn't look like easygoing fellows. They searched the whole house, opened all the drawers. They found lots of suspect papers, covered with strange hieroglyphs. They seized them to analyze them. They tore photographs from family albums. I don't know whether I am happy. I was free, in a way. Prisoner in the camp, but free. Since he came back, I must sit straight and avoid swearing. Our room has become smaller, too."

I'll meet her again. I'll meet you again. No war lasts forever.

See you some day, Mrs. Moore.

Respectfully yours,

Kenichiro Kashimura

Friday, November 12th, 1943

Dear Mrs. Moore,

If you're reading this letter, you have received it. Well reasoned, Dr. Watson! You have recognized my writing on the envelope, but you see an American stamp. Isn't Ken gone, after all? Ha ha, I gave this letter to Mr. McNeil, a steward on the ship, before landing. He promised he would send it as soon as he returned to the States. I know you're dying to know where I've landed. I'll tell you, but there's no hurry.

I studied geography with you, then with a teacher who came now and then to Gila River. I know that Salem is the capital city of Oregon, Boise of Idaho and Helena of Montana. But I had never heard of Goa.

We looked at our mock home for the last time, drank a last tea. While I was happy to leave this stupid place, I thought I would never forget it and maybe even want to see it again some day.

We took a train to Newark, in New Jersey. It is so close to New York City that you can see the Empire State Building when the weather isn't too foggy. A magnificent white ship was waiting for us, the SS Gripsholm. I had time to compare clear and foggy days because

we remained one week at anchor. They were trying to find the required number of "prisoners."

Mrs. Moore, I haven't mentioned food for quite a while. I wrote about it when people complained. In Gila River, we were served lamb stew almost every day for months. Japanese people don't eat mutton. They find its smell too strong. Things improved when we could eat our own vegetables. Then some Hawaii Japanese arrived. They told us that very few Japanese people had been arrested in Hawaii. There were so many of them that the government should have evacuated half the island. The economy would have collapsed. So these Hawaii guys were not afraid of the white Americans. They talked to the camp's authorities.

"It doesn't make sense. You're giving mutton to people who hate it. You want to save money. Just buy tuna fish. It's even cheaper than mutton. What's more, you don't need to cook it."

Okay, so we had been eating Japanese food for a few months. On the ship, we came back to an American diet. Ah, but when we entered the dining-room for our first meal, we thought we had reached paradise. Note that I write "dining-room" rather than "mess-hall." We sat on real chairs, around tables covered with clean white freshly ironed tablecloths. We ate with silver cutlery in china plates. I kept the best for the end: waiters in white uniform, with a napkin on their forearm, treat us like kings. They pull our chair to help us sit down, they pour water or wine into our glass, they ask us whether we prefer a leg or a wing.

When I saw eggs and bacon, toasts with jam, orange juice, for the first time after a year and a half of oatmeal, tears filled my eyes. I resolved to chew every mouthful very carefully, the better to appreciate its flavor, as I knew we wouldn't stay on the ship forever.

As long as we stayed in the harbor, things were fine. When we started leaping over the waves, my mother ceased to attend the dining-room ceremony. She preferred to spend her days lying down in the cabin. This cabin is somewhat smaller than our Gila River room, but it is much cleaner and more comfortable. We sleep on real mattresses instead of straw bags. We have our own bathroom! To tell the truth, I also spent the first few days in the cabin. By and by, I got used to pitching and rolling. My sister ran around like a puppy from the first day. She described the meals to make fun of me.

"They served a cream of asparagus soup to begin with, then a shrimp cocktail. As entrée, roast beef with baked potatoes. There were two desserts: cheesecake and chocolate ice-cream. Maybe I should have brought you a piece of cake."

"Er, no thanks."

When I noticed that her report didn't nauseate me anymore, I knew I had vanquished seasickness.

We put in at Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil, then at Montevideo, in Uruguay. The ship didn't dock. It remained at anchor in the bay while shuttles, meaning small motorboats, came and went to carry goods and passengers. We saw some Japanese people coming on board. We learned they lived in Brazil and Peru. We couldn't talk to them, because they sent them to lower decks that didn't communicate with ours. It was as if we were first-class passengers and they were in second of third class. A Seattle Methodist priest, whom my father had befriended in the Montana camp, went to the sick bay with a bad case of flu. There he met some Peruvian patients.

"It's amazing," he told us when he came back. "They left Newark because they couldn't wait any longer, but they still didn't have their full quota of hostages to exchange. So they asked the Peruvian government to provide two hundred Japanese. The police found a few dozen *issei* who were jailed for robbery or whatever, then it arrested people at random here and there. These poor fellows crossed South America in a train guarded by soldiers. They didn't know they were going to Japan."

Leaving Montevideo, we crossed the Atlantic Ocean. We stopped briefly at the Cape, in South Africa, to fill the fuel tanks and provision the kitchens. Six weeks after our departure from Newark, we reached the Indies. I forgot to tell you that our ship had a large blue cross painted on its hull to show its neutrality. When they told us that the exchange would take place in the Indies, we found it puzzling. The Indian empire is not a neutral ground, since it belongs to our English allies. I wasn't the only person who knew little geography. Goa is a Portuguese enclave, as neutral as Lisbon, stuck to the Indian coast.

We dropped anchor off the coast, as usual. Shuttles will take us to the harbor. We can see the Japanese ship, the Teiya maru, a few hundred yards away. It is not a clean-looking liner like the SS Gripsholm, but an old rusty freighter. We've been waiting for two days already. American officers boarded a shuttle to go and agree on an exchange procedure with their Japanese colleagues. They came back, sent wires by shortwave radio to Washington, went again. Mr. MacNeil, the steward, knows what's going on.

"The Japanese are afraid we'll give them five hundred and forty-six people against five hundred and forty-seven. They want to be able to count without any risk of error. They are perfecting a control system: the two groups of prisoners will walk toward each other from the two ends of the beach in single file. American and Japanese officers will draw a line in the sand halfway and count them one by one when they cross that line."

I have seen the hills of Rio de Janeiro, the houses of Montevideo and the Cape of Good Hope from afar. At least, I'll set foot for a few minutes on the Indian ground.

I promise I'll tell you what happens next, Mrs. Moore.

Yours respectfully,

Kenichiro Kashimura.

Saturday, April 8th, 1944

Dear Mrs. Moore,

There's no way I can send you this letter. I'll write it nevertheless. It has become a pleasant habit, so I don't want to stop. Let's consider I write a kind of diary. I'll send it to you when the war is over—I hope this means "soon." Even better: I'll give it to you in Los Angeles.

Where was I? Oh, yes, walking on the beach in single file. The American file is walking in the other direction. They're laughing, raising their arms, shouting "*Hi there*!" It reminds me of school, two classes passing each other. I feel like laughing and shouting "*Hi there*!" too, but my parents and the other *issei*, who do not seem ready to rejoice, would box my ears if I did.

My sister is puzzled.

"On one side, a bunch of jolly GIs. On the other side, a funeral procession. Don't you find this exchange a bit odd?"

"Hey, they are happy to go home. On top of that, they move from a rotten wreck, with a crew of enemies, to a wonderful white ship, which shines nearly as much as if it were made of solid gold."

"If it were made of solid gold, it would sink."

"Whereas you and I are not going home. We are moving to a country we don't know, which declared war on ours. After all, they may quite well put us in camps because we are American."

"So we should be in the other line, actually."

"You said it. That's why we feel like crying rather than laughing."

My father suggests another explanation for the American prisoners' good mood.

"We have been treated by our own government in a manner that was arbitrary, illegal and contrary to the Constitution. They were real war prisoners. As such, they were protected by the Geneva convention."

While we didn't entertain great expectations about this new adventure, the reality tops our worst fears. Goodbye soft beds, white table linen and servants pulling chairs. Hello dormitory, mess room and wooden benches. When we are served our first bowl of rice, we see black dots. Let's take a closer look: gee, tiny worms!

"You can have mine, Ken," my sister says. "I don't feel hungry today."

"Eat some bread. Look, there are small bugs, but you can remove them easily."

"No, thanks."

I suppose there isn't much food left in Japan. When we wondered how such a small country could attack powerful America, we were right. America is starving it. Sooner or later, it will have to beg for mercy.

We stop over in Singapore. We are allowed to go ashore, as this British colony now belongs to Japan. For the last few days, the officers who took care of the exchange have been vaunting Singapore to the passengers. Japan will exploit the colony even better than the English did. The climate is excellent and Nature bountiful. The people are friendly and docile. The officers hope to convince some of us to volunteer and settle here. The new colony needs businessmen, teachers, priests, leaders, precisely the kind of people who travel on the Teiya maru.

My father is not tempted.

"We're on the Equator. The temperature never dips below ninety-five. The people are mostly Chinese, so they hate us. As soon as Japan loses the war, the English will return. They'll put the new settlers in the very camps where the former colonists are now rotting."

A few passengers accept to stay in Singapore. They think that the risk of dying in a bomb raid is lower here than in Japan. A few more disembark in Manila, the capital city of another brand new colony, the Philippines.

Our five-week trip on board the Teiya maru ends on an evening in Yokohama. We do not see the harbor, because Japan doesn't have enough electrical power to light a city anymore. My sister is disappointed.

"I hoped they'd prepare a welcome ceremony, with speeches and so on."

"And majorettes jiggling their batons? You mean, like what's happening right now in New Jersey for the SS Gripsholm. I can hear the military brass band playing the Star-Spangled Banner from here."

After taking several trains and buses, we arrive on Christmas eve in Ibara, a town in the south of Japan. My father's mother lives in a village nearby. She doesn't seem especially happy to see us. My father went away so long ago that she fails to recognize him, maybe. She has five other children. My sister and I, we speak Japanese like foreigners, with a disgusting American accent. We do not know the polite grammatical forms we should use when speaking to a grandmother. She may also have noticed that we try to stifle our giggles when she distends her vowels like a *nō* actor. She is smaller than my sister, too.

She lives alone in a large house on a hill. She seems unhappy that we don't exclaim "ooh" and "aah" when she tells us that the house's framework is made of knotless branches coming from a single tree. She repeats ten thousand times that me must wash before entering the *ofuro* Japanese bath. Do you want to try an *ofuro* bath, Mrs. Moore? Go naked into a very cold bathroom, squat near a very low tap, pour bucketfuls of tepid water over yourself and wash, then step into a hot bath. When I say hot, I mean HOT. If you have an egg in your hand, you can eat it boiled after three minutes.

I have to admit that my grandmother cooks a delicious *miso* soup. We compliment her sincerely for her *umeboshi* pickled plums. You wouldn't like *umeboshi*, Mrs. Moore. They have a very strange salty taste.

Japan is hungry, but my grandmother owns a vegetable garden and a rice paddy. Two peasants work there every day. She had to sell land since the beginning of the war, but she still owns enough to brag.

"I have eighty-eight persimmon trees, belonging to five different species. This is quite unusual, believe me."

The persimmon fruit looks like a fat orange tomato. The Japanese people call it *kaki* and love all five species of it.

I discover that my father was born in a wealthy family. I understand how he could be elected president of the Okayama *kenjinkai*: he is the son of the main landowner around, which also means the main local authority. He sees this surprises me, so he gives me an explanation.

"I didn't go to America to become a field laborer. I was supposed to study electrical engineering in the university of Berkeley. Japan has lots of mountains. There are streams

everywhere, with small dams that produce electricity, but the turbines are not as strong and powerful as the ones General Electric makes. I crossed the Pacific Ocean in first class. It was a kind of honeymoon. I had just married your mother, but I barely knew her, since according to tradition it was an arranged marriage. While we were at sea, the California senators voted one more "Oriental Exclusion Act," as they did every other year or so, and I couldn't go to University anymore. So I became a field laborer. My bosses saw they could trust me to manage a farm. Success came by and by. I worked hard. In the end, everything crumbled and now I'm back at my starting point."

My poor father is not well, Mrs. Moore. He suffers from stomach pains. The doctor speaks of ulcers. My father lost the work of a lifetime all of a sudden, then spent eighteen months in a Montana camp where the temperature went down to minus twenty. What hurts him most is to think he brought us here, in a country that will turn into hell sooner or later. Compared to what awaits us, Gila River was paradise.

Oh, I must tell you about school, Mrs. Moore. I go to high school in Ibara. Like the other students, I wear a black uniform with brass buttons. My mother cut it from one of her coats and sewed it. When I walk to school, the young peasants jeer at me.

"*Americajin, Americajin*!"

They went to the village's primary school, but they didn't go to high school because they must work in the rice paddy. They know my grandmother and they have heard about me.

I don't have enough *kanji* in my satchel to read and write Japanese like kids my age, so they put me in first year of high school, which is like our sixth grade. There are seventy students in the class. This is because they evacuate city children to the countryside to keep them safe from bomb raids. Not one of these seventy kids reaches my shoulder. They are much younger than me, of course. Besides, I am a giant like all *Americajin*.

I get good marks in math, in science and in music. In Japanese, I am dead last, even though all the teachers on the ship insisted on teaching us Japanese several hours a day. The history course is ludicrous. It should be called "propaganda course." They say that China is a primitive country that needs the support of Japan, although half of Japanese culture comes from this primitive country.

The school's principal made a speech the other day.

"God baked bread. The first batch was quite burned, so he threw it away in Africa. The second batch was undercooked, so he threw it in Europe. The third batch had a wonderful

golden hue, so he deposited it on the most beautiful country in the world: Japan. The Americans are Europeans, as you know, but their country is so rich that they have grown soft. They are too weak to fight, that's why we are beating them. You know what is happening in the Pacific Ocean: because of their undercooked eyes, the reflection of the sun's light in the water dazzles them, so they do not see our ships and airplanes. Whereas our valiant sailors, with their dark eyes, are not bothered by the sun's light."

None of the seventy pupils would understand me if I tried to make fun of the principal. They'd rather believe this rubbish than look at truth with their dark eyes.

Often, we go outside with nets to catch crickets. We crush them and mix them with soy sauce. Then we season rice with this strange condiment. It contains good proteins, they say.

I celebrated my fifteenth birthday on February 19th. My grandmother considers I am sixteen, of course. The trouble with adding a year is that I'll soon reach the age for becoming a soldier. They keep lowering that age to replace the dead.

Sunday, May 28th, 1944

B niju kyu means B29. This is the official name of the American bombers. Japanese people like nicknames, so they say *B-san*—which means "Mr. B." While some are still firebombing Tokyo's neighborhoods one after another, others have turned southward and attacked Nagoya, Osaka, Kobe. They are beginning to pound Okayama, the closest big city. Ibara lies west of the Okayama *ken*, near the border of the Hiroshima *ken*. Although they fly quite high, I can see clearly, on their fuselage, the blue star and red stripes that mark their nationality. I have to repress the same urge to wave and shout "*Hi there*!" as in Goa. Better run with the others to the underground shelters.

As if we didn't waste enough time meditating in the shelters, we spend several hours every day at bamboo-spear practice. This is really stupid (but I must not say it): when the Americans will land with their machine guns, we'll wait for them with bamboo spears.

There is no more fuel, so the school bus stays in its garage and I walk to school. A one-hour stroll. I have a companion, Yuriko, a girl who lives with peasants near my grandmother's house. She's in first year of high school, like me, but in the girls' class. Her mother lives in Hiroshima. Yuriko is one of the children evacuated to the countryside to escape Mr. B's deadly fire.

"Are you really American?" she asked me the first time we walked together.

"*Oh yes*," I replied in English.

"But you don't look like an *Americajin*."

"My parents are Japanese. You know my grandmother, yes? I am born in America, so I am American. I speak bad Japanese, and I write worse. For this reason they put me with the small kids. You are not that small, actually."

"The other Americans, the blue-eyed ones, do not speak as well as you do, I suppose."

"I can't adjust my sentences to the good polite level. In English, there is only one level."

"You speak like a soldier."

"Well, I don't want to be a soldier. Not at all."

"You can't refuse. In America, young men can refuse?"

"Er, some people avoid military service for religious reasons. Quakers, Mennonites, I don't know."

"It is said that Americans are quite bloodthirsty. If they succeed in invading Japan, they'll kill all the men and rape all the women."

"And eat all the children? I am American. I didn't kill or rape anybody."

"You're not really American. Half Japanese at least."

"Somewhat Japanese."

"Oh, look at the dragonfly.

Are you so weary
Of the grass, O dragonfly,
That you perch thus
On the cow's horn?"

She can't see an insect without getting a close look and talking to it as if it were an old friend. She jumps and hops, as light and quick as a dragonfly. I sometimes doubt that she'll come down to the ground again. Plants, animals and other wonders of Mother Nature bring little ditties to her mind.

"Rain, rain! Stop falling!
At the foot of the kaki tree
In front of the temple
The pheasant's baby is crying!"

When I walk with her, I seem to meet many more animals than in America. Herons, cranes, eagles, raccoons, badgers, shrews, all kinds of insects. Whatever beast, she knows a song about it.

"Kite! Kite! Let me see you dance!
Tomorrow evening,
Without telling the crows,
I'll bring you a mouse!"

At home in Santa Monica, then in the camp, I ingested a few mouthfuls of Japanese culture. This was serious adult culture. Now I am discovering the children's culture, full of charm and tenderness.

"Butterfly! Butterfly!
Alight upon the turnip flower!
If you don't like the turnip flower,
Alight upon my hand!"

In the morning, we walk fast to be in school on time. It is in the afternoon, when we return home, that she stops to talk to insects and asks me about America. I told her about Santa Monica beach and the sea otters, about my adventures in a horse stall and on an Indian reservation.

I bet you want to know whether she is pretty, Mrs. Moore. She has an oval-shaped face and a wide mouth that laughs easily. But I have never seen her laugh. What is this mystery? In Japan, girls hide their feelings. They turn their heads when they are sad and they raise a hand in front of their mouth when they laugh. She laughed a lot behind her hand, for instance, when I described Mrs. Tan'o to her.

"Women like her, there are plenty of them in Japan. We have a neighbor in Hiroshima, she's a nosy chatterbox. What I don't understand is your barrel story. Nobody can take a bath in a barrel."

"American barrels are bigger than Japanese barrels. In America, everything is bigger.

"Even you."

"So you admit that I am American."

"If all Americans were like you, I wouldn't fear their landing so much."

I think she is sensitive and sensible. She is just a child. Ruth was too old for me, Yuriko is too young.

Sunday, July 2nd, 1944

As the bombings keep destroying the main cities of Japan, my father's brothers come seek refuge in their mother's mansion. When we arrived, we settled in the best rooms. We

must relinquish them to the elder son's family. We move to a couple of bedrooms that we still find pleasant enough, especially if we compare them to the room we shared with Mr. Shimizu in Gila River. The second son kicks us out of the pleasant bedrooms, then the third son forces us to move again. I meet regiments of cousins of both sexes, who consider me an enemy.

After a while, the house is so full that there is no more room for us. My father owns a small plot of land. He dismantles a shabby wooden shack, carries it on a borrowed ox-cart and assembles it again on his land. How did he get this shack? He exchanged it. What did he exchange it for? This is a new riddle, Mrs. Moore, as difficult as the previous ones. Wait a little before you turn the page…

No, he didn't give away my sister as a peasant's bride. He gave up our six magnificent American suitcases.

The main difference between our Ibara shack and our Gila River room is that the Shinto priest blessed the shack. In Japan, people consider that two religions are better than one. The Shinto priest blesses houses and weds young folks, the Buddhist priest burns the dead. If two is better than one, then three is better than two. People are often Christian too, to improve their chances of sending their prayers to the very best god.

We have a well that provides good-tasting water, which is better than in Gila River, but no toilets nearby, which is not so great. We perfected a system of chamber pots, I'd rather abstain from describing it any further. What I can say is that my grandmother's house is so grand that it contains three toilets: one for guests, one for the people of the house, one for servants. We used to go to the guests' toilets when nobody was looking. There was still toilet paper there from before the war. Quite a treat!

The rainy season began last week. This means it rains even more than usually. Some nimble raindrops go right through the roof of our shack, but we capture them with our chamber pots. A worse consequence of all the raining is that the path to school gets awfully muddy. Yuriko wear *geta*, old-fashioned sandals on wooden piles. She laughs when I remove my shoes to walk across a gigantic puddle.

"Ask your grandmother to give you *geta*."

"I tried, but I am afraid the strap that separates my big toe from the second toe will cut my foot in two halves like a sword. Also, I can't walk two steps without stumbling. How long will it last, this rainy season?"

"Until mid-September. Doesn't it rain, in your country?"

"A few drops fall in January and February. The rest of the year, the sky is always blue. Los Angeles is built in the middle of the desert."

"You told me that all the Japanese people grow fruit and vegetables. They grow fruit and vegetables in the desert?"

"They sprinkle and irrigate. We have rivers coming down from the mountains. If we were in America, we would have a day off next Tuesday. It is the Fourth of July, Independence Day. People dance. Kids blow firecrackers."

"Do you think the *B niju kyu* will take a day off?"

"We'll see. The crews would blow up a little powder for fun, instead of exploding tons of it to kill poor people."

"We also have a celebration next week. Friday is the seventh day of the seventh month, *tanabata*, the day when the Herdsman meet the Weaving-girl."

"What herdsman? What weaving-girl?"

"They are stars. You can't see them right now, with all these clouds. They are separated by the Heavenly River."

"In English, we call it the Milky Way."

"It is said that the weaving-girl was supposed to make clothes for the children of the Emperor of the Sky. She spent all her time at it. She didn't have even one minute to take care of herself. The Emperor took pity on her and married her to the Herdsman, who lived across the river."

"In Japan, you marry someone your parents chose for you. In America, you choose. It is the land of freedom. Or at least, it is supposed to be."

"Here people accept their fate. The bride and groom do not know each other, but if their parents choose well they fall in love nevertheless. This is precisely what happened with the Herdsman and the Weaver-girl. She fell so much in love that she neglected her work. The Emperor's children had to wear their old clothes. The Emperor got angry. He brought the weaving-girl back across the river and decided she would meet her husband only once a year. She is sad, and her husband too. They spend the whole year waiting for this day. The Japanese people like sad stories."

"So how do you celebrate this day?"

"We tie pieces of paper called *tanzaku* on bamboos, with poems about the two lovers. Or we ask them to realize our wishes. Did you see the big bamboo grove we pass on the way, before the rice paddy? This is a perfect place to send messages to the stars."

The soul-mending thread

Saturday, October 28th, 1944

Akiko, my sister, knows as many *kanji* as I do, or maybe more. She could go to high school, like me, but I think she prefers to stay in the village's primary school, where she has many friends. These girls are supposed to obey any authority, so they tend to believe what their teachers tell them. Their gullibility seems to be contagious.

"If Japan wins the war, "Akiko says, "we'll never go back to America."

"Are you crazy? Japan can't win the war."

"We are accumulating dazzling victories over the American fleet in the Philippines. Everybody says so."

"Japan is not 'we.' America is 'we.' You should try a simple experiment. Get a map of the Philippines. Mark the glorious victories of the Japanese fleet on it. You'll see that they come closer and closer to Japan. Same thing for Hitler. He is not crushing the American and English armies in Africa, but in France or Belgium. He used to beat the hell out of the Soviets in the very suburbs of Moscow. Now, he is defeating them in Poland. Soon, it will be in Germany. We are going to school only three days a week. If Japan was winning, it would take care of educating future generations. They're on their last stand. They don't even think about future generations."

"I like it better in school than in the factory."

"Have you noticed, these uniforms we are sewing? The fabric is the kind of burlap we bag potatoes in. As soon as the soldiers will try to button their jacket, they'll tear the fabric. There's a naval blockade around Japan. It prevents them from importing cotton or wool."

"I dream of eating French fries. I've had enough sweet potatoes for a lifetime."

"You can't complain. You live in the countryside and you produce your own food. Or rather, your grandmother's peasants produce your food. This is better than going hungry in a city under a downpour of incendiary bombs."

"Baked sweet potatoes, then soup of sweet potato stems, then sweet potato leaves in salad. Gee."

"The Americans will land soon. You'll be able to eat hamburgers."

It seems to me that Yuriko is not as naïve as my sister. Her empty stomach tells her that Japan won't hold much longer. She has lost weight. She is thin enough to fly, but she doesn't jump and hop anymore. If I walk at my usual pace when we go to school, she can't follow me.

"The teachers have lost the will to teach," she says. "In a few months, we'll all be dead. Do you hear the toad?

Mr. Toad, Mr. Toad,
Get out of your hole.
If you don't,
I'll put moxa on your back!"

"Look, Yuriko, I have more rice balls and pickled plums than I need."

"You shouldn't eat less because of me. I don't deserve it. I didn't mean we would die of hunger. I was alluding to the bombs."

"I still have plenty to eat. My grandmother owns orchards, greenhouses, bales of rice. Bombs can't kill everybody, you know. Nobody knows what the future will be like. Maybe the military government will become rational and stop this war before Japan plunges into the abyss."

"If the war stopped, would you return to America?"

"Hey, it is my country."

"But you would come to Japan now and then?"

"Oh, sure."

I believe she is asking me, in a roundabout way, whether we shall ever see each other again. Once a year, like the weaving girl and the herdsman? Separated by the ocean. I like to walk with her. I am learning, by and by, to decipher the hidden meanings in what she says. I am American, I'll always be American, but I am beginning to value the subtlety of Japanese manners. In any case, when she is looking at me, I am quite confident that she is not seeing a crafty Oriental. But Ruth didn't see a crafty Oriental either.

Saturday, March 16th, 1945

"Did you see the *sakura* already?" Yuriko asks me.

"The cherry trees? My parents often mentioned them. Will they flower soon?"

"They started flowering yesterday. If we go by way of the Green-Eel River, we'll see them. It is not a long detour."

The trees hide their foliage under a cap of snowy flowers. A few old people have rolled out some mats to sit under the *sakura*. They are munching nuts and drinking tea.

"It is a pity you didn't come two or three years ago. There was a big crowd here, several hundred people, to celebrate *hanami*, the viewing of the flowers. They eat and drink and sing and dance."

"They don't feel like singing and dancing anymore."

"The men are dead, you know. Also, a picnic under the *sakura* with nothing to eat, what fun is that? Right now, people don't need the *sakura* to enhance their feeling of *mono no aware*."

"What feeling?"

"Your teacher certainly told you about it. The sadness of ephemeral things. This feeling gives poems their somber hue. The beauty of the cherry flowers doesn't last. A gust of wind or a spring rain plucks them from the branch. We see the *sakura's* frailty, we think of ours. People write poems under the *sakura*, but no poem is as moving as the shower of petals. Nature is performing calligraphy with fragrant characters to show us the sweetness of death."

"If I understand you, men say the same thing in a louder and coarser way with their shower of bombs."

Sunday, May 13th, 1945

One of my uncles knows someone who drinks tea, or maybe even sake, with well-informed army higher-ups. While we hear vague rumors of a cease-fire in Europe, the truth is that Germany has surrendered. Hitler killed himself.

The radio doesn't announce grand victories in the Philippines anymore. The American and English allies have thrown the Japanese out of the Philippines. It is said that the American army has landed six weeks ago in Okinawa, a group of islands that lies three hundred miles from the Japanese mainland.

Yutiko offered me a paper dragonfly. According to Japanese etiquette, she has a debt or *giri* because I gave her rice balls and pickled plums. This means she must give me something in exchange. I feel that there is more than *giri* in her present.

"It is called *origami*. Do you make them in America?"

"We fold paper in primary school to make very simple things: a boat, a chicken. *Issei* have tried to teach us *origami* in Gila River, the camp I told you about. I remember the crane, more or less. Your dragonfly is something else altogether. I can't understand how you fold the four wings and the six legs, and even the tiny antennas."

"I can give you lessons. If you now the crane already, it won't be so hard."

"Thank you for the dragonfly. It is a magnificent gift."

Sunday, July 29th, 1945

The Japanese navy has ceased to exist. American bombers destroyed the last ships in Kure harbor these last days. Kure is about half-way between Ibara and Hiroshima, or so to speak just around the corner. We heard a kind of distant thunder, but the weather wasn't stormy. We understood eventually that we were hearing the sound of shells and bombs, blurred by distance.

I would hate to be killed by an American bomb. I would also hate to be forced to rush at American tanks with a bamboo spear.

While historical events shake the planet, a tiny change upsets my little life: Yuriko returned to her mother's home in Hiroshima. She fainted in class. They said she was ill and had to go home. She was hungry, a common illness. I discover how important she had become to me by noticing how much I miss her. All the insects I see on the path seem to ask me where she is. I don't even know her address. I'll try to find her as soon as the war is over, which means quite soon.

Saturday, August 18th, 1945

It is over. The Emperor himself announced it on the radio. People are stunned, because they had never heard his voice. He talks a kind of ancient language that I don't understand, but the Japanese people don't understand it much better.

On Monday, August 6th, we had admired a magnificent sky toward the western horizon, where Hiroshima is located. Various tones and strands of yellow, red and purple were jumping over each other like splashes of paint on the canvas of a crazy modern painter. When the divine Emperor, direct descendant of the Sun goddess (or so it is said), stooped so low as to talk to the plebs, we understood that the rumors were true: a new kind of bomb, using the energy hidden in the very heart of the atoms, has razed the city of Hiroshima in a split second.

People say that not one house is left standing. Are human beings stronger than houses? If all the inhabitants are dead, this includes the only person I know, Yuriko. Unless she lived in the suburbs. Already, when I walked and talked with her, she had an ethereal appearance. I never knew what she thought and felt. I had to guess, to imagine. I was happy

in her company, though, and I felt lonely when she went away. She still lived in my imagination. And now?

A kind of boundless grief overcomes me when I look at the paper dragonfly. Maybe this is the feeling of *mono no aware* Yuriko told me about. The pathos of things. The bomb is horrible, the war absurd, human life meaningless.

We hear that the Americans have landed in Yokohama. We are expecting them any day now. The propaganda of the Japanese military regime is fading like a bad memory. Women have stopped punching the air with bamboo spears. People here do not fear the Americans, as they know two of them who have neither devoured babies for breakfast nor raped anybody: my sister and me. My parents? Let's say they are half American, which is perfect right now. My father teaches English to all the mayors and other dignitaries. My mother advises the innkeepers when they install American-style toilets. She tells them how to prepare pancakes, eggs and bacon, orange juice. She explains the rules of American unpoliteness.

Wednesday, October 16th, 1945

Here I come, Mrs. Moore. Wait for me! Before the end of the month, I hope. I haven't gone back to school, since I intend to step across the gate of Thomas Jefferson High School instead. Do you think I am enjoying some vacations? Not at all. I'm working hard as a guide and interpreter for American officers. I stuff my pockets with luscious green banknotes and, what's even better, I eat with my bosses in the mess hall.

I have gone to Hiroshima with military doctors. One month after the bombing, the skeletons of a few office buildings are still glowing red. They seem to shudder in the evening haze. Small fires draw dotted lines along the rivers—the burning of the day's corpses.

While I haven't seen any sign that the people here may have felt guilty, or even concerned, when the Japanese army committed atrocities in China and elsewhere, the doctors and I experience a painful discomfort, as Americans, in front of the bombing's survivors. Many err in the ruins, under a blazing sun that scorches their burned skin. There is no more shade in Hiroshima. "That a sky be blue day after day in the season of rains is recorded neither in memories nor in chronicles," the old people say. The victims take me for a Japanese guide, of course. They would find it a bit strange if I apologized to them.

The soul-mending thread

Wounded people die for lack of treatment. The hospitals have vanished with the rest of the city. There were three hundred doctors in Hiroshima. Thirty or so are still alive—to take care of a hundred thousand dying wretches. We've visited improvised first-aid centers in tents or shacks. Some poor patients suffer from unknown and atrocious symptoms. A sewed-up doctor, walking with crutches, described their ordeal to us.

"At first they're terribly tired, although we see no wound, no trace of a burn. They cease to eat. Their temperature rises above a hundred and five. They lose their hair. They begin to vomit bloody globs. Twenty-four hours after the symptoms appear, they're dead. We have performed autopsies. All the organs are altered. I have seen liquefied kidneys and livers that looked like sponges. People begin to decompose while still alive."

The American doctors know why the organs melt.

"It is radiation sickness," they say.

"Guess what?" my father asks. "I have met the Kikuchi."

"Who? Where?" my mother wants to know.

"In Okayama, in the temporary city office. They had a big farm in Santa Clarita. They were good customers of mine. They belonged to the Okayama *kenjinkai*. They were in a camp in Wyoming. Last January, all the prisoners were set free. The temperature was twenty under zero, so they were glad to go back to Southern California. The authorities gave them twenty-five dollars and a train ticket. They didn't own the farm, but they did own machines, tractors, which they had left with their employees. When they were evacuated, the silos contained grain and rice worth several hundred thousand dollars. So the Kikuchi come home. The owners have found new managers. There are also new laborers. All these people see a Japanese family coming toward them. The war is not over. Enemies! They grab their guns and start shooting. They knew perfectly well who these Japanese people were, of course. Then the Kikuchi decided to return to Japan."

In spite of such stories and his poor health, my father wants to resume his life in America. This is why I'll see you soon, Mrs. Moore.

Respectfully yours,

Kenichiro Kashimura.

2. Pika

B-san! These gentlemen appear in the night like robbers and burn city after city. “Our turn will come soon,” the citizens of Hiroshima say. Before dawn on August 6th, 1945, two small alerts. The sirens do not wail, but just hum a bit. The airplanes go elsewhere, as usual. “Not yet,” the people say. New alert at 7AM. A single Mr. B, probably a weather plane. Alert raised at 7.30.

“Get up, Yuriko! Breakfast!”

“You wake me up too soon, mama. After last night’s alerts, I didn’t sleep well. There is nothing to eat, anyway.”

“Nothing? Please take a look.”

“Rice and soy beans. Again and again rice and soy beans. What is this?”

“A kind of chervil. Your uncle picked it up in a vacant lot near the castle. He didn’t find any insect larvae, I am sorry to say. Grilled on a stick, they’re really tasty.”

“A kind of rice with a kind of chervil. This reminds me of the chrysanthemum leaves we had the day before yesterday. Just thinking about them makes me sick.”

“All these plants contain good vitamins. You know you need them, Yu-chan. The doctor said it.”

“This doctor, I don’t want to see him anymore. I don’t want to go to the hospital anymore.”

“You’d rather keep your boils? You won’t always be able to hide them under a scarf. It’s going to be hot today.”

Mrs. Hasegawa, the neighbor across the street, greets them as she walks by the house. She has rolled up the sleeves of her kimono and waves a fan.

“*Atsui, ne*… Hot, isn’t it?”

So do people say hello in summer in Hiroshima.

“After all the rain,” Yuriko’s mother answers, “a little sunshine doesn’t hurt.”

The sliding panels that separate the kitchen from the street are open, which makes it easier to talk.

“Is Mako gone already?” Mrs. Hasegawa asks.

"She is widening the firebreak zones with her group of mobilized schoolchildren. They go nearly every day now. They don't study anymore."

"My Akira works in an ammunition factory. He's thirteen. What a pity!"

"What about Isse? Any news?"

"They train the poor kids to rush at straw bales with a backpack full of stones. When the Americans come, they'll rush at tanks, thirty pounds of high explosives on their back. While they blow themselves up, we'll wield our bamboo spears! 'A hundred million invincible fighters,' they say. 'A hundred million heroic deaths.' He couldn't wait to be eighteen. Without telling me anything, he volunteers… He was hungry, you know, he just wanted to eat. The radio says we sank twenty-five enemy ships and downed fifty airplanes. Who believes such baloney? You know what they say: if the generals retreat to the top of Mount Fuji, they'll still pretend that Japan is winning the war."

"Don't speak too loud, Mrs. Hasegawa… If somebody hears you. People denounce you to the police to earn a can of sardines."

"The police doesn't frighten me. The other day, as my uncle was in town, I borrowed a handcart. I wanted to take furniture, china and stuff to my sister's house in Utsukaichi. In case the bombs start falling. Just when my uncle and I are crossing the Mifune bridge, we hear an alert. Two policemen stop us: 'Go back home. If everybody leaves, who will put out the fires?' This made me quite angry: 'You'll put them out yourselves by filling you caps with water! Look at this old man. He's my uncle, he's coming from Osaka. He's seen plenty fire bombings, you be sure. The bombs light up so many blazes that they merge into a sea of fire. Are you going to extinguish it with your pathetic street-corner tanks? When the sea of fire is coming toward you, there's nothing you can do except pray the goddess Kwannon and hope the wind will turn.' They let us go, believe me."

"Maybe they'll never bomb us."

"When my uncle arrived from Osaka, he didn't fail to be surprised: 'Your city is so quiet!' You know what people say: so many Hiroshima citizens have emigrated to America that their influence over there is enormous. They have convinced President Truman to spare the city."

"They also say that a cousin of Truman lives here."

"I heard his mother. Is such a thing possible? According to my uncle, they didn't bomb Kyoto either. He thinks they keep the two most beautiful cities, Kyoto and Hiroshima, to garrison their troops when they occupy Japan. There is no lack of superstitious people, of

course, who believe that the monkey god Hachiman protects Hiroshima, as he has always done. Some even carry an amulet of the god. It will keep the bombs away, they say. Look, I have slipped one into my belt. You never know… They also say you should eat marinated scallops to shield your skin from burns. If you want, Yuriko, I can find a Hachiman amulet for you. You came back from Ibara?"

"I fell ill, madam. I fainted in class. They sent me home. The doctor says I am undernourished."

"Don't the peasants feed you? What's the use of sending children to the countryside, then?"

"It is said that some peasants are generous. She was unlucky. The fellow exploits children like slaves. Forgive me, Mrs. Hasegawa, but I have to take Yuriko to the hospital. In spite of her anemia, she is growing up, so I cut a new dress for her yesterday night. I still need to sew a few buttons."

"Of course. Well, goodbye, Mrs. Yamaguchi. Goodbye, Yuriko. *Atsui, ne*… They give vouchers for clothes, but there is nothing left in the stores."

She leaves. Yuriko's mother smiles.

"Did you remember Mrs. Hasegawa? She blabbers like a magpie. I wonder where she finds scallops. They say she buys fish on the black market. She boils it so that we don't smell anything. Look, another *B-san*. No, two of them this time. The weather plane flew over already, though."

"The thread is too dark."

"Do you think I could choose the color? That I could find any thread is already a miracle."

"Hurry up, mama… Eight fifteen. We'll be late in the hospital."

"I thought you didn't want to go anymore."

"I am ashamed of these boils."

The mother begins to sew the buttons. Yuriko tries to seize a last grain of rice at the bottom of the bowl. Suddenly, a flood of bright light… Such a light is no ordinary thing. Where could it come from? Yuriko feels that flashes of light are bursting inside her very eyes—as if the grain of rice at the bottom of the red bowl had turned into the sun itself. A sensation of electrical burn shoots through her whole body. She raises her head and sees something that does not make sense: the paper partition separating the kitchen from the

bedroom is erupting into flames. Without thinking, she grabs a pail of dishwashing water to douse the partition. Just then, the world wobbles and the house crumbles. A thought gels in Yuriko's brain before she loses consciousness: "No luck—a straight hit."

She wakes up in the dark.

"Mama! Mama!"

The voice of her mother, broken and faint, as if belonging to a sick person.

"I wonder what it was… Yuriko? Where are you?"

"Here, mama. Something prevents me from moving."

"Kick around to set yourself free, if you can. I'll try to remove this piece of wood."

Yuriko pushes as hard as she can. She feels that her mother is tearing scraps of wood. Here, this hole, I can crawl though… She finds her mother's hand. She seems to be lying down. She pulls her mother's arm.

"Quick, mama, get up!"

"Ouch! I can't."

It isn't so dark anymore. The dust is coming down, maybe. Or my eyes are getting used to the darkness. A heavy beam is pinning her mother to the ground—crushing her back, her right shoulder and right arm. Her left arm is free, she used it to help me. As thick as a tree trunk. Fastened to the rest of the roof's frame. Would have to raise the whole roof. Yuriko tries and tries in vain. It doesn't move an inch. What's awful is that the needle went right through mama's hand. The button for my new dress. Yuriko would like to pull out the needle, but she doesn't dare. As if paralyzed. At the same time, she can't help staring at the steel dart that pierces the hand, at the dark thread in the needle's eye. The metal captures a ray of light and glistens in the dark.

"Get up, mama, get up!"

The crackling of the flames can be heard already. Mama's voice weaker and weaker. A whisper.

"You must leave, Yu-chan… Go to the meeting point. I'll catch up with you later."

"I'm not going without you, mama."

"You can't save me. Please go… That one of us may survive, at least…"

"Mama, no! If I can't save you, I want to stay and die with you."

"Don't be foolish… I beg you, go now! Maybe I'll make it."

She rushes away. Mama! Mama! She jumps to avoid leaping flames. A beam reddens, glows brighter and brighter, then flares up suddenly. Who ever saw such a thing? Outside,

no more blue sky, but a thick gray and black dust cloud. The houses around flattened too—I thought only ours. Reality seems skewed. Partitions and beams turning into ashes by spontaneous combustion. And now Hasegawa the magpie, stark naked, running to and fro like a headless chicken, carrying her sewing machine. Her hair is burning, also the hair under her armpits and at the bottom of her belly. Is this a nightmare I am going to wake from? She said *Atsui, ne*. Now she shouts *Atsui! Atsui!* Burning, burning. The water tanks are useless, she said. And now she throws her sewing machine into a water tank, before diving into it herself.

Yuriko walks aimlessly. She doesn't recognize the houses and the streets of her neighborhood. A foreign-language movie, can't understand anything. People wearing rags, or naked—ghosts in the fog. No, the tatters hanging from their raised arms are not rags, but strips of their own skin. Who ever heard of a bomb that peels people like potatoes? A burning streetcar, lying upside down on its roof, full of charred bodies. Whether men or women, nobody could say. A giant has trampled the houses. People stuck inside, calling for help: "Would anyone be kind enough to come to my aid?" In a burning house, the bust of a woman rises between two huge beams. Chopsticks holding a big black bug. She presents her baby with extended arms. "Will somebody at least save this child! Please save my baby!"

A man, running, the skin of his back on his hips like shirttails. From the bottom of Yuriko's memory, a sentence emerges: "Tuck in your shirttails!" Mama used to say it. To papa? Yuriko is happy to discover this buried recollection of her father. That others exist is likely. Gone away when she was quite small. His uniform, his sword. One day, mama said: "Papa is back." Yuriko, delighted: "Papa is back! Where is he?" An urn full of ashes and a medal.

What a pity, I left the urn at home. Will it withstand the blaze? Ashes will blend with ashes.

A bruised boy: "I was pushed and I falled on the ground." Farther, a baby is sucking the breast of its prostrate mother. Is she alive? What will happen to him? A flock of naked schoolgirls. "Teacher! Teacher!" they shout.

A dead horse, cats, a cow, a pig. Their legs pointing straight to the sky. A living horse, its coat afire, leaping about, neighing pitifully. Horses brought in from the countryside. No

more gasoline. A young girl holds the corpse of a dog in her arms. Between two sobs: “You Americans, you are really stupid!”

Yuriko thinks about the Americans. The enemy. Can’t hate them after reading *Little Women*. Yuriko named her favorite doll Jo. I’ll never see you again, Jo. What a heartless girl I am: I deplore the loss of Jo while mama is already dead, certainly. Can’t hate Kenichiro either, but he wasn’t really American.

A man—is he not Mr. Takenaka, Mako’s math teacher?—is walking without seeming to notice that a piece of wood sticks out of his forehead like a rhino’s horn. He carries a sword on his back. President of the district’s defense society, always shouting patriotic slogans: “Vanquish the enemy, win the war.” He could cut his horn with his sword.

The dust cloud is clearing. Not only the neighborhood. The whole city… The steel structures of some modern buildings are still standing. They seem to drift, like ships gutted by a storm, on a sea of gray rubble. The lattice of a dome—the palace of industry. The Fuji bank. I wouldn’t have thought it so close. Fragments and shards of tiles, beams, glass panes, millions of them. Twisted and melted carcasses of familiar objects: sewing machines, kettles, iron boilers. Here, these steel snakes—a bicycle. An intact football. Near a safe, a bank employee: “I just opened it. The banknotes burned inside… Could anybody explain?” But also, in front of the remnants of the Post Office, wads of new banknotes. No one picks them up.

Have I been thrown into hell? A damned is crawling on the broken tiles, his bare back a pincushion for glass splinters. One shard per sin. The weight of his misdeeds prevents him from standing up. The devil is nowhere to be seen, so we are on earth. A child’s face bristling with glass thorns. His mother plucks them with tweezers. “What happened?” she asks.

Near a burning house, a man holds back a woman who wants to dive into the inferno. “My baby! My baby!” In front of another, a small boy is stamping his feet, his angry face a deep red: “Mommy! Mommy!” From inside the blazing wooden shell, a firm voice, as if the house spoke: “Go to grandma in Kure, Tomo-chan.”

A soldier uses his sword as a crutch. “Just two planes,” he says. The fires are spreading. A thicket of bamboo trees explodes like a chain of firecrackers. Blazing houses fall upon each other—rows of dominoes.

Yuriko halts. A lead pipe ending in a tap juts from a still-standing bit of wall. Am I hot? Thirsty? That I can't even answer these questions is unsettling. A woman approaches, a black baby tied to her back. Wants to clean him, give him a drink. When she opens the tap, steam gushes. She screams and moves back. *Atsui!*

The mysterious phenomenon that destroyed the city seems to have shattered language. One hears shouts, single words, meaningless syllables. *Mizu, mizu!* Water! *Okasan, okasan!* Mommy! Or *Okachan*, the softer variant used by young children. *Itai!* It hurts! *Tasukete!* Help me! And a downpour of first names—mothers looking for schoolchildren who were widening the firebreak zones. *Sachiko! Sanae! Hiroaki! Satomi! Yukio! Iku-chan! Tokiko!*

Hearing words without their frame of polite inflexions and particles feels as strange as seeing naked people everywhere. One should say: *O-mizu kudasai!* Water, please. Only officers speaking to soldiers use the imperative mode. One doesn't say: "Help me," but: "May I humbly bother you to bring me some help, if you please?"

Since she can't call her mother, Yuriko doesn't speak. She sees a three-year old girl who has filled a tin can with water and raises it to the lips of a corpse.

"Not thirsty, little mom?"

Yuriko wants to tell her that it is useless, that her mother is not thirsty anymore, but she doesn't find the right words.

Pictures and sounds interfere and blend. Bundle of crimson bodies in the water tank. *Toshiko! Kiyoko! Hiruko!* Fat officer lying on the ground, his raised arms, a knocked-down statue wearing a green uniform. A young woman prays near a charred log: *Namu Amida Butsu*, let's pray Amida Buddha… A pigeon burned on one side only. The streetcar's rubber rails. "Older brother, older brother, where are you?" Red calligraphy on a head's black lacquer. *Chikae! Machiko!* The old woman on the man's back, is she still alive? "You Americans, look what you've done to me!" *Okachan! Okachan!* On a city board, a blackened poster, today's motto: "Fight to the end." *Mizu, mizu!* Procession of roped-up high-school pupils—blind? A pinkish rope and glistening pebbles come out of an open belly. So this is what our body's interior looks like… *Yukiharu! Toshie! Kimiko!* Coal woman—if I touch her, crumbling ashes. "Don't die, young sister!" Clay face, carved by a careless sculptor. *Mizu*! Shooting out from a tile heap, an arm aims at the sky as if to accuse it—burning fingers, blue flames, dripping black liquid. *Yaeko! Noriko!* Four roasted

schoolchildren, sitting in a square, holding each other's shoulders. Wanted to die together. "Teacher, help me!" Terror-stricken face of a mummy: it sees its fate, but can't escape it. *Isao! Yoshimi! Mino-chan!* The mothers hold their babies tight beyond death. Sometimes, the baby is crying. Crushed glass screeches under rubber soles: kuri, kuri… Ebony boy, elder sister: "Taeko-chan, are you dead?" Ghosts slowly rummaging through the ruins. *Itai! Tasukete!*

Yuriko is sitting in Asano Park, leaning back against a maple tree. How did I come here? Obeyed mama: our meeting point. Will I ever see you again, mama? Turned into a memory. The notebook where I wrote poems, another memory. I would certainly be surprised if I found it. Mako was to come to the meeting point too. A refuge in case of fire, near the river. Comforting to see lively bamboos, pine trees, laurel bushes.

The sixth day of the eighth month, she thinks. She racks her brains: ah, I can't remember my multiplication table. Six times eight? Fight to the end… Here, a few hundred languid survivors. How many more dead? Never seen so many naked people. Just then, Yuriko discovers that she is naked, too. My panties' elastic band, that's all. And my shoes, lucky me, otherwise bloody feet. When did I put them? Don't remember. In my underwear, waiting for my dress. But the others, why naked? They seem to hesitate: die? survive a little more? If mama had sewn the buttons faster, I would have left to go to the hospital and I would be dead. A young woman near her, half her face as white and smooth as an ivory mask, a beauty that grips your heart—the other half looking like rumpled fabric. Yuriko notices a feeling of heat on the left side of her face, suddenly. It tingles, it burns. She raises her hand to her face. A kind of viscous paste on her cheek. Did I get dirty? She looks at the paste on the tip of her fingers. Plum color. Similar to the sweet bean paste inside tea-ceremony cakes. She shudders.

"You should try not to touch it," the young woman says.

In the park's pond, the carps thread their way between the corpses.

People are talking. They call "Pika" the big flash that started it all. *Pika-pika* is an onomatopoeia that describes a sparkling effect.

"Pika grabbed the castle's tower and sent it six hundred feet away. You can recognize the stones' white paint."

"That the tower could fly like a bird, isn't it amazing?"

The soul-mending thread

“For Pika, a stone castle isn’t any stronger than a house of cards.”

“None of the hospitals is still standing. I found a first-aid post. They put iodine on my burns. I am as red as a tomato.”

“They say you should apply cucumber slices.”

“I have heard sea weed.”

“I you swab the burn with the ashes of a loved one, it will heal without a trace.”

“It is said that people found an American prisoner in a jail. They pulled him out and stoned him.”

“I met my wife one month ago, we married the day before yesterday and today she’s dead.”

“If poisoned gas is forbidden, who allowed Pika?”

“Do you hear? Sirens!”

“Mr. B. is coming back.”

“He wants to check the damage.”

“The pilot, even if he’s American, can’t have a heart made of stone. Seeing the misery he provoked, how could he refrain from crying?”

“You shouldn’t drink, miss, with your burns. You increase the risk of dying.”

“The sooner I die, the better.”

“If only they hadn’t thrown this bomb.”

“We undergo the consequences of crimes we committed in former lives.”

“The whole city is punished? What about the American pilots? Didn’t they commit any crime in their former lives?”

“See how to stench the bleeding: I tear a cigarette and I use the tobacco to make a compress…”

“Eh, you, sir, you should take off your white hat, otherwise you’ll attract Mr. B’s attention.”

“Do you think he can see me from up there? This is ridiculous.”

“It snowed on the first day of last January. Do you remember? Such a thing had never happened? A very bad sign. This war, the gods do not approve it.”

“Do not speak so loud, grandma, please. Someone can hear you.”

“I see that you are one the hundred million Japanese fools willing to die joyfully for the homeland. Can you tell me why we started this war? Our country is ruined. As for the city of Hiroshima, it has become a city of ashes.”

The soul-mending thread

"Man is born to suffer, it is said."

"What can we do, except pray?"

"All my classmates are dead, I think."

Atsui! It is getting hotter and hotter. The flames, after munching beams and roof frames for appetizers, are joining together, gathering, sweeping through the city. The tidal wave rushes toward Asano Park, relentless.

Yuriko is dozing. Hey, what happens? The maple tree she is leaning against lifts her and begins to walk. "The fire will arrive here," it says. "You must leave… I'm taking you to the river. I'll find a boat to go across… You should take care of this cheek." It speaks with a halting voice. It breathes loudly. That a maple tree could talk so much, isn't it strange? Actually, it has turned into a little man carrying me on his back. His hair is not cut short or shaved like a soldier's, but long and shiny, parted in the middle—a crow's feathers.

The little man puts her down on the bank of the Kyo river. Dozens of people already there. The little man goes back for more. Yuriko sees that five charred students are trying to push a small boat to the water. Although they seem to be pushing with all their strength, it doesn't move. Yuriko dozes again, then wakes up with a start when she hears the little man's voice.

"Well, we shall cross the river. You should be safe on the other side."

He approaches the students, who haven't moved. He takes their hands off the boat. He carries the bodies one by one with great care and lays them down on the sand. Although they are dead, he speaks to them.

"I beg you to forgive my brutality. I need to take this boat, in order to help people who are still alive."

He drags the boat to the water. What incredible strength, Yuriko thinks. Five men couldn't do it and he, so small. Yes, but they were dead.

The little man carries her to the boat. "Don't forget to have your cheek examined," he says. When a dozen people are lying or sitting in the boat, the little man repels the bank with one of the bamboo spears we'll thrust into the invaders. He uses the spear as a pole, pushing the bottom of the river to move forward. The river soon becomes too deep. Now he uses the spear as a paddle. Does he hope to make headway in this manner? Might as well paddle with his hands… The little man is talking all along.

The soul-mending thread

"My name is Tanimoto. I live in the Nagaragawa district. I got up very early this morning. A neighbor came to help me. My wife and my daughter, she is one year old, have gone to Ushida last week. Who could ignore that they would bomb the city sooner or later? I know someone who owns a warehouse in Koi. He offered to store my things there. Yesterday already, my neighbor and I have taken my upright piano there on a handcart. Today it was plates, clothes and also my books. To worry that books might burn when people everywhere are killed by incendiary bombs, isn't it pathetic?

"Just as we arrive in Koi: Pika! As if thousands of mirrors were reflecting the sun. The blast tears out tiles and breaks windows, but we are not hurt. A bomb fell near, I tell my neighbor. I see a child crying in front of a house: he walked barefoot on broken glass. I remember that the primary school has been designated an emergency relief center in case of air raids, so I take him there on my back… The houses are leaning like trees after a storm. Some have lost their roof. Many wounded are already waiting in the school. Several bombs have fallen, obviously, but I didn't hear any plane. I climb on a small hill above Koi. The city seems to have been hit by a typhoon rather than by mere bombs. Fires are already blazing, because of overturned breakfast stoves. Just then, I notice something quite worrisome: a thick black cloud is covering Hiroshima. I forget about my handcart and my neighbor, as a single idea grabs my mind: I must go back home. My wife comes visit almost every day. I hope nothing happened to her…

"It doesn't take me long to understand that I can't walk across Hiroshima to reach my home in Nagaragawa. When I try to retrace my steps toward the city, I am stopped by fires and ruins. So I turn northward to walk around Hiroshima, then I follow the river southward. I see crowds of naked people, whose clothes and skin have been torn out and burned. I feel ashamed to be safe and sound. 'Please forgive me,' I tell them, 'for not carrying the same burden as you.' Calls and moans are coming from the burning houses. Ah, God!

"Near my home, I see my wife! She came this morning with our daughter… They were lucky to be far enough from the windows. They avoided being burned or hurt, but the house fell down and buried them. My wife managed to dig a tunnel outward like a mole and they could get out. So I sent them back to Ushida and I came here, as it is our neighborhood's meeting point, to help my parishioners."

Yuriko doesn't know this word: "parishioners." A medical term? He's a doctor, maybe… Men as strange as Tanimoto san are not a common thing, certainly.

The soul-mending thread

He repels with his bamboo spear the debris and bodies floating on the river. Wrecks still hit the boat. The whole hull trembles and resonates. How frightening! An entire house, wearing a cap of flames, plays at being a ship and hops in the current. It drifts quite close. For a few seconds, one hears a baby's wails. Barely begun, its poor life is already ending. That humankind's folly prevents this innocent creature from living, what a pity! The little man touches his forehead, his breast and his shoulders with his right hand. Waves and swirls born in the house's wake rock the boat. Some passengers gather enough strength to shout and holler. The little man smiles and talks to them.

"And when Jesus entered into a ship, his disciples followed him. And, behold, there arose a great tempest in the sea, insomuch that the ship was covered with the waves: but he was asleep. And his disciples came to him, and awoke him, saying, Lord, save us: we perish. And he said to them, Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?"

He has to be a Christian priest, Yuriko thinks, since he mentions Jesus. A corpse he is trying to repel with his spear begins to speak.

"Hiroshima municipal high school, first year, student Maruki!"

"My God! I hope I didn't hurt you. Please forgive me. Why don't you come aboard?"

He seizes the student's hand to haul him into the boat. The skin comes loose as when one peels a ripe peach. The child vanishes in the swirls. In the little man's hand, a kind of torn glove is left. He crosses himself again. He recites something that sounds like a poem.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures: he leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul: he leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff comfort me."

Mama's voice: "Yu-chan! Yu-chan!" At least some good news, Yuriko thinks. You are safe, mama… Can't open my eyes. She lifts her eyelids with her fingers. A dream by the stream.

The boat has crossed the river. The little man carries the bodies on his back, lines them on the shore like mackerel on a fishmonger's stall. What woke up Yuriko is a heavy cold rain. Drops of black ink, as large as pigeon eggs, leaving stains on one's skin that one can't rub away—ugly tattoos.

The soul-mending thread

As they haven't swabbed their burns with the ashes of loved ones, people are beginning to look like theater actors wearing monster masks. Pumpkin heads, African lips, coarse lobster skins. Do I also have bulging eyes? I hope not.

A man stands up suddenly. "Soldier, consider loyalty as you supreme duty!" he shouts. "*Tenno-heika, banzai!* Hail emperor Tenno!" He stiffens and falls into the river. The current carries him into the next world.

Countless bloated bodies—human beings, horses, dogs and cats, fish—are drifting downriver. A girl: her hair is floating around her head like seaweed. A blond woman—a foreigner. Yuriko hears a loud breathing sound near her: *ro-ha, ro-ha*. Is this what they call the death rattle? Then a deep silence. How unusual not to hear the cicadas' *tsuku-tsuku-bo*! Pika killed the cicadas, too.

Mrs. Tsuku-tsuku-bo, why do you cry?
Have you no parents? Have you no children?
—Parents I have, children I also have,
But a falconer snatched my good husband away from me
And today is the seventh day since his death.

A remote rumble: the blazing city. Raising her head, Yuriko sees fire tongues ascending toward the sky as if to lick the clouds. Has some terrible blow cracked the earth's crust open? The rising heat provokes a huge draft. Raging winds tear waterspouts from the river. Nature shows us its strength, Yuriko thinks, as if it was jealous of the bomb. Several people sitting on a bamboo raft drown under her eyes. The tornado knocks down trees in Asano Park. The clang of their fall is as moving as a cry of agony. Fireballs are flying through the air. The park begins to burn. "We can't stay here," the little man says.

Yuriko is lying in a boat. Is this the skiff that glides on the lake of hell and carries the souls to the Western Paradise? Am I still alive?

Bridges pass above her. Remains of a wooden bridge: its piles are burning like giant matches. Concrete bridge: Pika's power has lifted and broken its roadway. A drowned body, caught in a whirl, bumps its head again and again against a pile. Even dead, it goes on protesting the horror of its fate. Two legs emerge from the water—leather shoes, a rich man. The tide is beginning to ebb. As the level of the water goes down, hundreds of corpses are stranded on the shore. The little man has not lined them tidily: they seem to have fallen from the sky like dead leaves.

The soul-mending thread

A girl's body, lower half in the water, upper half on the shore. The waves are shaking her like a puppet. Yesterday she was eating, laughing, crying, singing, loving. She was eager to read the next chapter of her novel. *Little Women*? She was waiting for the answer to a letter. She was learning to read music. Her last day. I could be in her place. This morning, we were still alike.

She hears two male voices. She sees a man in uniform, carrying a sword. His cap—naval officer. Is this barge some kind of military ship? The other man: a scarecrow wearing a similar uniform in tatters, as if to show the vanity of power. By the manner he coats his words with polite pap, Yuriko understands that the scarecrow belongs to a lower rank.

"Did you not honor the office with your presence this morning, captain?"

The captain doesn't use the harsh language of an army higher-up. He speaks like a university professor.

"Do you know what? Peaches saved my life. My first lucky break is that I don't sleep in the officers' barracks in Hiroshima anymore. Since our baby's birth, two weeks ago, I have been living with my wife in Hatsukaichi. Yesterday evening, a neighbor offered us white peaches: 'My aunt brought them from her village.' My wife warns me: 'Your stomach troubles…' How could I resist temptation? Peaches like these, we haven't seen any for years. A terrible pain wakes me up in the middle of the night. My wife lays warm compresses on my belly and gives me a pill, so that after a while I can sleep again.

"I wake up one hour late at least. As I am getting dressed, I see a blinding light above Chugoku Mountain. 'A flash of lightning in a blue sky, this is uncommon,' I tell my wife. 'What about your stomach?' she asks. 'Maybe you should stay home.' 'Impossible. I have a meeting at the lab. I must hurry.' Just then, twenty seconds or so after the flash of lightning, we hear the noise of an explosion. The windows break, the partitions jump out of their grooves, I fall on my ass. 'It's a bomb,' I tell my wife. 'Quite close. Beware, they always drop several of them.' My wife lies down over our daughter to protect her, but there is no other bomb. 'Go to the shelter, both of you. I must hurry to the lab.' Outside, the sky is still perfectly blue. I see no plane. As you know, I have a certain knowledge about bombs…"

"Nobody knows more about bombs than you, captain."

"No need to exaggerate. In any case, I reason that if it is a one-ton bomb, it probably fell less than three hundred feet away. I explore the surroundings. People and beasts are running everywhere in a frenzy. The damage is the same in all directions, so that I don't

know where to look for the landing spot. Could the explosion be related to the flash? I just don't understand. In the railway station: 'The trains are stopped. The Koi and Hiroshima stations don't answer the phone.'

"I decide to walk to the coastal road. A huge column of black smoke is rising over Hiroshima. What can it mean? I stop a police car. 'I am the director of the naval dockyards' physics laboratory. If you are going toward Hiroshima, could you please give me a lift?' 'The Kure dockyards?' 'After the bombing of Kure, the Hiroshima science university offered us hospitality. We work with the university's physics teachers.' Hatsukaichi is seven miles away from Hiroshima. As we drive along the road, the destruction worsens. Houses lean more and more. In Kusatsu, we see the first wounded people. Some have a back as red as a slab of beef at the butcher's. Others seem to have been burned by blazing hydrocarbons."

I have never eaten beef meat, Yuriko thinks. Chicken, long ago. Roasted insects, chrysanthemum leaves. If you enroll, they tell boys, you'll have a swell uniform and you'll be able to eat like kings.

The officer goes on with his story.

"A little before Koi, we have to leave the car. Fallen trees, broken phone poles and all kinds of rubbish block our way. We walk on. There are corpses everywhere: on the road, in water tanks, in the river."

Yuriko closes her eyes. Shapeless bodies float downriver like giant carps. Suddenly, a very clear picture: the needle piercing mama's hand. I should have pulled out the needle before going—a last memento.

"I had never seen so many corpses. Now and then, I have to walk on human bodies. I begin to question the survivors. I want to understand what happened. A huge explosion occurred in Hiroshima, that's for sure. I think at first of an ammunition dump. However, looking at the steel girders that emerge from the ruins of concrete buildings, I see that they are bent downward. The explosion took place in the air."

"A bomb exploding in the air, captain?"

"Fifteen hundred feet or so above the hospital of Dr. Shima. There's a stone portico in front of the hospital. Its columns have been hammered into the ground like a pair of gigantic nails. In the graveyard of the Sairen-ji temple next door, the tombstones have been driven straight into the ground in the same manner. Did you notice that many people have been burned, Tanaka?"

"My own miserable person, captain…"

"Oh, of course. Please forgive me. You went through the flames when the university started burning."

"I first doused myself with water to reduce the thermal shock, captain…"

"You did well. Your burns do not seem too serious. Now all these naked burnt people who err in the city differ from you: they never went near a flame."

"Is this possible, captain?"

"I considered and discarded several hypotheses. A phosphor bomb, for example, could burn the skin but wouldn't produce such a huge blast. A rumor is already spreading: the Americans have sprayed magnesium powder, the kind photographers use, which the electric cables drawn over the city then set on fire. This doesn't make sense. There's only one way to explain what I have seen: the flash's rays have provoked the burns. The effects can be compared to a very intense kind of sunburn. The rays are just like sunrays. I talked to office employees. Whoever was near a window died. Employees who were farther inside, in the shade so to speak, survived. All the people who were outside, as far as half a mile at least from Shima hospital, were turned into ashes instantly. All these 'patriotic volunteers,' you know, the children, who were widening the firebreak zones."

Yuriko thinks about Mako. I'll never see you again, Mako-chan. Patriotic volunteers. You'll not become a schoolteacher. To marry, to live in a small clean house, to have children who play and laugh in the garden. Did I say goodbye to you, actually? Doesn't matter. She complained of stomachache because of the mock chervil. Mama, worrying: "Why don't you stay at home today?" If she had stayed instead of volunteering to widen the firebreak zones, she would be here with me, perhaps. Or crushed by a beam. Mama can't thread the needle anymore, her failing eyesight. "Yuriko, with your good eyes, come help me."

"At more than a mile from the center," the captain says, "the rays were still so powerful that wood burst into flames. For example, window frames or rail ties. For people more than a mile away, I found that a white shirt or a hat was often enough to protect them. White reflects the rays. I even saw a young woman whose back was burnt according to the pattern of flowers printed on her kimono."

"If I dare suggest something, captain, everybody should dress in white."

"Or live underground. Some people I saw were not burnt at all. I wondered what it meant, so I interviewed them. Except for those who came from another town, like me, they

were all underground at the time of the explosion. Hundreds of travelers were walking in the underground passage of the Hiroshima Station to reach their platform. Employees of an insurance company were filing archives in basement rooms. People who survived to tell this terrible story have mostly been lucky. I met the manager of a small gas station. For weeks, he had been planning to clean his tank. It was empty. The gas people had promised a delivery long ago. He had lost hope. 'I can't wait for ever,' he thought, 'otherwise the dirt will dry and it will get tough." This morning, he hesitated. "After all this rain, a blue sky suddenly! I could go to the sea and gather some clams." He climbs down into the tank and stays there several hours, scraping the dirt with a chisel and a hammer. When he climbs out, the city of Hiroshima has vanished."

"He must have thought of the fisherman Urashima Taro, captain. Having spent a few days in the palace of the Dragon King at the bottom of the ocean, he comes back to his village. He doesn't recognize anything, as three centuries have elapsed."

"A single bomb destroying a whole city, this is really hard to conceive. I have never seen anything that can be compared to these deadly rays, but the blast amazes me even more. Did you see the bridge's roadway? To lift a concrete bridge, to break windows eight miles away, you need huge amounts of energy. I would say ten thousand tons of Ammonium nitrate or TNT. If you show this city to anybody, he'll tell you that thousands of B-29s have attacked it. Near the center, people who haven't been reduced to ashes by the flash have been crushed like toothpaste tubes. All the stuff that could come out of the body did: eyes, tongue, various internal organs. Farther on, the corpses only lie in their shit."

"As soon as we are in Kure, captain, I'll write a report based on your judicious observations. A commission of inquiry will be formed soon, I guess. Your remarkable investigations will help them a lot, obviously."

"Spare me the toadying, Tanaka. It will take us years to understand what happened exactly. Among the unharmed people I met, there was a journalist who lives in Takehara, twenty-five miles from here. He saw a gigantic cloud in the shape of an octopus. Its tentacles were luminous and shifted their colors in a fascinating manner. He jumped on a bike and came here, asking questions on the way just as I did. He says the people outside the city, who heard a big noise, don't call the bomb *Pika*, but *Pikadon*. He found a phone in Ujina and called his boss in Okayama: 'A single bomb destroyed Hiroshima. At least

one hundred thousand people are dead.' His boss refused to believe him, and even suspected him of drinking too much sake."

"Do you remember the visit of professor Nishima, captain? He told us about an 'atomic bomb.'"

"I remember quite well. I thought about it, of course. He told us that uranium ore was hard to get. That it would be very difficult, almost impossible, to separate uranium 235, the useful isotope, from uranium 238. That finding a system to start the chain reaction was no easy matter. That the Americans themselves would need at least a century to get a bomb. In a way, you were right to mention Urashima Taro. We moved ahead one century in one day. I was glad to see you alive when I arrived at the university, Tanaka."

"I thank you for your solicitude, captain."

"You were eating a pumpkin! This was rather surprising."

"The botanists were growing pumpkins and we were forbidden to touch them. I thought the botanists were all dead. The pumpkins seemed nicely cooked. They were delicious, with a slight chestnut aftertaste."

"Cooked by the radiations. It these rays can penetrate the skin of vegetables, they can also go through ours. They contain X rays and very powerful gamma rays. The sun emits these dangerous radiations, too, but the upper atmosphere stops them. Pity the poor people who were exposed to the rays of this small sun: their internal organs were cooked like the pumpkins. No wonder they shout: *mizu, mizu*. Such an awful thirst, nobody ever experienced it since human beings live on earth."

Yuriko remembers a slogan: "Whatever happens, let's plant pumpkins." Mako and I planted seeds in the garden. Stems like snakes everywhere, but no pumpkin. The sliced stems, cooked for hours, with some soy sauce. Bramble shoots, ferns, carrot tops.

She wakes up without knowing whether she slept or lost consciousness. A minute, an hour, a century? The water doesn't sing a lullaby anymore, but hollers a rolling and rocking dragon's tango. At sea, in a trawler. The engine cackles like a rheumatic hen. The skipper apologizes.

"I beg you to consider this old tub with some leniency. Twenty minutes would be enough to reach Ninoshima if I had found some gasoline. They only give me a kind of alcohol to fill my tank. The engine accepts to run, but reluctantly. As for myself, I must say, I prefer alcohol to gasoline! Ah, children, I'm afraid our trip to the island will last

more than two hours. They fixed up a big hospital over there. They don't lack customers, that's for sure."

Yuriko sits up. She discovers a large flotilla. Tugboats pull barges that carry hundreds of half-dead bodies. The officer and the scarecrow have vanished. The trawler is full of prostrate passengers. Like a lifeboat. As if they had spent weeks without eating and drinking. That they will be taken care of in Ninoshima doesn't seem to matter to them.

The fisherman caught absurd rumors in his net. Does he report them to give us hope, or does he really believe in them?

"It is said that our scientists have perfected a bomb the size of a pack of cigarettes. Its power beats anything you can imagine. They intended to use it to sink all the enemy ships in one blow. After the cruel and cowardly attack on Hiroshima, our valiant army, willing to retaliate in a decisive manner, decided to hit America with these new bombs. Listen to what some people I carried before you told me… Three long-range bombers of a new kind, built secretly in Manchuria, have crossed the Pacific Ocean. The enemy fighters succeeded in downing one of them, alas, but the other two have destroyed Los Angeles and New York!"

There's a girl sitting right there, in front of Yuriko. Her naked body seems a patchwork of half-tanned bits of leather, covered with dried blood, stitched by a clumsy seamstress. But her face is intact. Same age as Mako—eleven, twelve. Her eyes are closed. *Okasan, okasan*, she mutters. Mother, mother. On her knees, in the traditional balsa box, the *bento* lunchbox that mothers prepare every morning for their children. Under the broken top, Yuriko sees a red pickled plum inside a rectangle of white rice. *Hinomaru bento*, the Japanese-flag bento. She thinks about the delicious pumpkins. Their chestnut aftertaste. I would never have imagined that I might be hungry again.

The girl sees or guesses Yuriko's stare.

"I give it to you."

Yuriko bends her head and waves her hand to say no. The girl offers the bento with a smile. Yuriko has never seen so much tenderness in a smile.

"For me, it's all finished. Please eat it."

While Yuriko is eating the prune and the rice, the girl doesn't move. She seems to sleep. Suddenly, her voice, very soft but quite clear:

"I'll tell you my name. If you meet my mother, please tell her you've seen me."

Yuriko waits for the girl to tell her name, but she says nothing.

The soul-mending thread

3. The Zion group

Yuriko lives with her grandmother in a poor shack on the very spot where the flames swallowed her home on August 6th, 1945. She convinced her grandmother to leave the small house she owns in the suburbs, to gather a few boards, to cover them with a tin roof. She doesn't want the city—or squatters—to seize the land. Staying here is a way of honoring the memory of her parents.

She spends her days in the shack. A kind of purplish rope crawls on her left cheek. The doctors call it a "keloid." They say the word means "crab's claw" in Greek. It develops sometimes if a scar doesn't heal well, for example for lack of food and vitamins.

She lost part of her left eyebrow, nostril and upper lip. Her teeth stay exposed. The fingers of her left hand are bent and the two last ones are stuck to each other. How could I go outside? When she was building the shack with her grandmother, the children jeered: "Fox face! *Tengu*[*]! *Pikadon*!" Her grandmother takes care not to have any mirror in the shack. One day, Yuriko looked at herself in a bottle. Who is this unknown girl? Could it be me?

The keloid's skin is very sensitive to cold and heat. If scratched, it doesn't heal for months.

Yuriko reads books that her grandmother brings back from the library. She takes sewing jobs. She doesn't speak. She goes to the movies at night, sometimes. She lets her long hair down to hide the left side of her face. Nobody looks at her in the dark. She enjoys American movies. She loves Gary Cooper. She imagines she's the young woman whom handsome Gary kisses.

With my stigmata, I'll never find a husband. They don't want to marry a survivor. Microcephalic babies were born. All kinds of distortions. Four years after the disaster, people who seem healthy lose their hair, vomit blood and die in three weeks. Would a man take a wife running such a risk? Can't find a job either. They are afraid. As if our pains were contagious.

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[*] Mountain monster.

Some hide that they were in Hiroshima on that day. How could I, with my face? Go live elsewhere—where people don't think of leukemia when they see a keloid.

At least, here, doctors know about radiation sickness.

A new atomic war. Keloids on all the faces. I would be like everybody else. Nobody would call me a *tengu*.

Yuriko's grandmother wonders how she can help her.

"You're lucky to have survived on that day," she says, "but you don't take advantage of your luck. You stay apart from the world, as if you were dead. What a pity! The calmar vendor, she comes everyday with her cart near the old bank, told me of other young women who bear the marks of *Pikadon* on their bodies. They meet together, she says. I'll try to know more about it."

Yuriko waves her hand on front of her face. No, no. Her grandmother shrugs. A few days later:

"These young women, I found them. A Christian priest gathered them in the ruins of his church near Asano Park. You should go and see."

A church near Asano Park? It could well be Tanimoto san, Yuriko thinks. Seeing she doesn't wave her hand, her grandmother tells her the time and day of the next meeting.

Yuriko's eyes fill with tears when she sees Reverend Tanimoto again. He behaved better than anybody on that day. Took the sins of all the others on his back. Rev. Tanimoto doesn't recognize her, but he welcomes her with a smile. She counts thirty young women or so in the group.

Rev. Tanimoto still talks a lot.

"Just after the end of the war, an American magazine, *The New Yorker*, published a long article about Hiroshima. The author, John Hersey, had met me when he was here to write his article, so he mentioned my poor person in the magazine. Did I tell you that I studied the Bible in America? I liked the quotes of the Bible I read in novels like *Moby Dick*. Do you know *Moby Dick*? It is the story of a proud man, who wants to catch a white whale. So I read the Bible and I went to Atlanta, in America, to study theology and I became a Methodist minister.

"When *The New Yorker* published the article, my Atlanta seminary classmates said: 'Wow! Look at that, Tanimoto survived the bomb! Maybe we can help him.' They invited me and I stayed in America again for more than a year. Mr. Norman Cousins, the editor in

chief of *Saturday Review* magazine, wrote a very warm article. I spoke in churches and universities. I asked the people to help us rebuild our poor Hiroshima. I explained that I didn't mean material reconstruction. 'Our city is becoming the most modern in all Japan. The best architects are building the grandest buildings. I mean a social and spiritual reconstruction.'

"I set up a foundation to help orphans. American families adopted children morally. Each family sent two dollars every month. With this money, the orphans could go to school instead of begging in the street to survive.

"Meanwhile, my church was still a ruin. I held services there nevertheless. I didn't want people to say: 'Tanimoto shirks the ordeal that the Lord sends to him.' I noticed two young women with scarred faces in my congregation… But then, one of them ceased to come. Why doesn't she come anymore? I looked for her. I discovered her at the back of a dark room, hidden behind a mosquito net, crying all day long. I found that there were many girls like her in Hiroshima, and also boys. These disfigured survivors didn't want to be seen in public, but accepted to meet each other. I organized this group, which we call 'Zion Group.' I have seen at least eighty young women in the last few years, or maybe even more, but they don't attend every meeting. Boys came in the beginning, but they stopped after a while. They don't care as much about appearances, perhaps."

Although she doesn't talk, Yuriko makes friends in the group. Some girls can't open their mouth, so they eat soup with a straw. Others have no eyelids and sleep with their eyes rolled upward. One has her face stuck to her shoulder. Nobody calls Yuriko a *tengu*.

They exchange stories.

"Then I heard someone, a soldier I guess, say: 'Another dead schoolgirl. Let's carry her to the funeral pyre.' I wanted to shout: 'I'm not dead! I'm alive!' but I couldn't find the strength to utter a word. They'll burn me alive, I thought."

"My little sister is a beauty. She has a fiancé. I hate him. Sometimes I hate her, too."

"The doctor said I wouldn't survive. I was working in the street with my class. Most of them died. We were quite lucky, as we live in Ujina and our house just lost a few tiles and windows. My mother looked for me and found me eventually. She wanted to pamper me for my last days on earth. She found eggs and milk. This made me strong enough to survive. I lost my eyesight because of *Pika*, but I learned to read the Braille language."

"Can we hope to marry some day? I often wonder."

"I only go out at night, like an owl."

The soul-mending thread

"Like a vampire."

"I wear a mask as if I had a cold, a scarf, dark glasses. People look at me with contempt. Why I hide my face, they know quite well."

"The body my mother gave me has vanished. *Pika* gave birth to a new Michiko, an awful new Michiko."

"Kids sing when they pass my house: 'The monster's cave! The dragon's lair! The vixen's burrow!'"

"I threw myself into the sea, but I failed to drown."

"My house crumbled. I succeeded in crawling out, but I discovered I had left my skin inside. My mother had gone to the country to get some food. She was unhurt. She took me to the hospital. I saw a panel on the door of the room I entered: 'Desperate cases only.' My mother came every day. She took care of me so well that I decide to live. With such a devoted mother, how could I consider dying?"

"My little sister was also in the country and escaped *Pika*. She was only nine years old. She found me and convinced a nurse to give me four shots of glucose. She saved my life, I think. I studied music and sewing. I hoped to become a teacher, since I could teach these arts without going outside. But I never dared. Who would want to take lessons with a person such as me?"

"I sold the wedding trousseau my mother had prepared for me, so that she would buy salve to massage my scars."

"Someone told me about the group. I don't like this Bible, nor this religion, nor any other religion, but it comforts me to meet people who look like me and understand me."

In 1952, Rev. Tanimoto sends nine young women belonging to the Zion Group to Osaka and Tokyo for reconstructive surgery. He asks the others to be patient.

"I hope all of you will become as pretty as you were. Here in Japan, the hospitals are too poor to buy modern equipment, and the doctors too few. They can only treat the simple cases. Removing a *Pika* scar and replacing it with a skin graft is no easy matter. Often, a new keloid appears and they have to operate again. It takes time and costs a lot. Do you remember Masugi san, the writer who came last year? She gave money and convinced her friends in Tokyo to give some too. The parishioners of my seminary classmates in America also send money. I can't even spend all the dollars they send. Did I tell you that Mr. Norman Cousins would come here? We'll see what we can do."

The soul-mending thread

Norman Cousins visits Japan with Ellen, his wife. Rev. Tanimoto invites them to meet the Zion Group in the basement of the church. The young women are sitting in a circle on wooden chairs. Norman Cousins seems deeply upset.

"I read on their faces the tragic future awaiting mankind if nothing is done to stop the race toward the abyss."

Rev. Tanimoto smiles.

"You talk like a man of letters, Mr. Cousins. As for myself, I look for ways to bring about concrete results. If miracles do happen, I would like the girls to undergo surgery in the United States."

"I may not believe in the same miracles as you do, but I think that men of good will can surmount the highest hurdles. I'll inquire around. We need to find qualified and generous doctors, who accept to work for a reasonable stipend. This is certainly possible. Everything is possible in America. We have to obtain the authorization of the State Department, which is our ministry of foreign affairs. The young women can't enter our country with tourist visas, as they'll certainly stay more than three months."

"I'm afraid I'm giving you lots of trouble, Mr. Cousins."

Ellen Cousins frowns. She disapproves the way her husband wavers and muddles things up. She turns toward the little man.

"We'll do it, Reverend Tanimoto. I promise."

It takes almost two years. Rev. Tanimoto keeps the young women informed.

"The American Government doesn't seem eager to help us. Mr. Cousins thinks they are cowards who refuse to admit they're responsible for what happened to you. I tell him I understand them. 'Imagine that thousands of survivors ask for reparations,' I wrote to him. This is a nightmare they want to avoid. Some bureaucrats in our country also oppose my project. People will find it humiliating that we beg our enemy for charity, they say. Journalists write all kinds of silly things, as usual. That the Americans will use you as guinea pigs. That our doctors are as competent as American ones, and maybe even more skillful. That Hiroshima victims get all the attention, while nobody cares about all the other victims in Japan.

"Mr. Cousins doesn't forget you, anyway. He convinced Dr. Hitzig, a friend of his who is the director of Mount Sinai Hospital, one of the biggest hospitals in New York, to find donors so you can get free surgery and hospitalization. It seems people were quite

impressed when I was interviewed on television last time I was in America and talked about you. I'm pretty glad I could help! Dr. Barsky, a famous specialist of reconstructive surgery for burned people, will perform the operations. You would stay with Methodist and Quaker families in New York City."

Dr. Hitzig, Dr. Barsky and several nurses come to Hiroshima with Norman Cousins in April 1955. A kind of selection must be made. Some young women in the group hide from the world because they have lost a limb, or suffer from radiation sickness. Dr. Barsky can't heal them. Who will go to America? Only girls whom reconstructive surgery might help. They also need to have a strong and balanced character, since they'll spend several months undergoing painful and perhaps dangerous operations in a strange country, where they won't understand a word. The American doctors and their Japanese colleagues choose twenty-five young women.

Yuriko had seen Norman Cousins from afar. When the doctors come close to examine her, she notices they look like Gary Cooper or Fred Astaire. Well, all Americans look alike, of course. These two are not as elegant and graceful as Fred Astaire, though. They're as hairy as bears, as heavy as bears, and they smell like bears. Will these big beasts be able to repair my face?

Rev. Tanimoto has good news.

"Mr. Cousins has talked to General Hull, who replaced General MacArthur as the head of the American forces. A military plane will take you to America. This will save a good amount of money. These planes bring equipment and food for the troops, so they're usually empty on the way back. Mr. Cousins was surprised that General Hull said yes right away. He's a brave man. He knows that his Government doesn't want to help you, but he doesn't care. He's rather obey his own conscience than his Government. No Japanese general would ever do such a thing, you know."

On May 5, 1955 at dawn, buses takes the young women and their families to Iwakumi Air Base. Rev. Tanimoto is flying to America with them. He shows them how to fasten their seat belts, talking all the while.

"I am always slightly worried when I have to fly. You too? You more, maybe, as this is your first flight. One wonders how this big machine can stay up in the air. It is much heavier than a bird. The pilot explained it to me once. What lets it soar all the way to the clouds is the shape of the wings and the pressure of the air or something. I didn't understand a word, but he seemed quite confident. Your parents were also worried, I noticed. They tried to

look happy, but they were wondering whether they'd ever see you again. I tried to put their minds at ease. They trust me, I think, while I trust the pilot."

Some of the girls poke fun of the little man.

"Don't tremble, Tanimoto san. Jesus san protects you."

"You should send him a prayer, just to make sure you'll reach your destination."

"As for ourselves, after what we've been through, we're not afraid of anything."

"We have nothing to lose."

"We'd fly to the end of the world to regain a human face."

"So you want to regain a human face. I want to gain a husband!"

While the propellers are already rotating, an orderly brings General Hull a telegram from the State Department ordering him to cancel the project. The General stays quite cool.

"Unfortunately, I don't have my glasses with me," he tells the orderly.

When the plane has turned into a dot above the horizon, he writes a reply: "Your wire was received but the plane had already taken off."

The young women are a bit surprised to discover that the plane doesn't fly straight ahead like an arrow. It falls down suddenly, it climbs up again, it shakes, it roars. They are sick and vomit. The pilot and his partners smile to comfort them, showing their gigantic teeth. By and by, the girls get used to this steel box pulled by its propellers and tossed by the winds. They don't vomit anymore. They laugh. They sing.

Snail, snail, go to the mountain!
—Oh, no, not I! Go yourself!
When I went there last year in the spring,
The black bird called "crow"
Turned me over on one side,
Turned me over on the other side.
To that mountain I won't go twice!

—Blacksmith, blacksmith! Give us a little fire!
—Fire I have none, none at all.
Cross over this mountain,
Cross over that mountain,
You will find fire on the other side.

After nine hours, as a crimson sun is ready to dive into the Pacific Ocean, the plane descends toward a group of islands. Looking through the window, Yuriko sees emerald insects, here a butterfly, there a beetle, resting on a blue silk sheet streaked with reddish glints. The plane lands in the middle of coconut trees. Mechanics fill the tanks and check the engines. A new crew settles in the cockpit. The girls get out to stretch their legs.

"Did you notice? All the American chew gum when they work."

"Not only when they work. All day long."

"Also when they're asleep?"

"That I don't know."

"Do you think the doctors will chew gum when they operate on us?"

"It might be forbidden in the hospital, because of hygiene."

"It is said it explains their wide jaws."

The plane takes off and flies during twelve hours to the next island.

—This narrow road, where does it go?
—This narrow road is the road of the God Tenjin.
—Please let me pass!
—Nobody passes here without a good reason.
—Having made a vow to Tenjin san,
I want to pass to present a written prayer.
—Where is your house?
—Behind the Hakone barrier.
—Pass, then! Going all will be well.
But coming back, beware!

—What a beautiful child! Whose child?
—She's the daughter of Hachibei the merchant.
—How beautiful she is! How clever! How well brought up!
I'll give her five gold coins,
Ten to her parents, forty-five to her grandmother.
—What will you do with forty-five gold coins, grandma?
—I'll buy rice and load it on a boat,

The soul-mending thread

The boat is of silver, the oar of gold.
Ha, ha! Row heartily to the Capital!
—What present did you bring back from the Capital?
—Firstly, a tortoise-shell hairpin,
Secondly a mirror, thirdly a calico belt.
—Please sew, it grandma.
—Though I thought to sew it,
It is too short for a belt.
—Then I shall offer it as a bell-rope
To the temple of Yakushi in Yamada.

A dragonfly on blue silk, coconut trees, mechanics chewing gum, a new crew.

"We've crossed only half the Ocean," Rev. Tanimoto says. When we reach California, we'll still have to fly across the United States. The trip lasts five days altogether. When I first went to America, long ago, I traveled by ship and then by train. It took weeks."

—Young priest, young priest!
Give me a child!
—Which child do you want?
—This child I would like.
—What kind of food will you give him?
—I'll give him sea bream.
—It won't do, there are too many bones.
—If there are too many bones in sea bream,
I'll give him cuttlefish.
—This will hurt the child's stomach.
—Then, in the lord's house upstairs,
I'll spread a rug and teach the child to write.
—It won't do, the child's hands will get dirty.
—Then, in the lord's house upstairs,
I'll spread a rug and tell the child stories.
—Very well, you can have the child!

The frogs in the mountain over there are crying.
Why do you cry? Are you cold? Are you hungry?
If you're hungry, then till the rice field.
—Tilling the rice field is dirty work.
—If you're dirty, then wash.
—It is too cold to wash.
—If it is cold, warm yourselves by the fire.
—It is too hot by the fire.
—If it is too hot, move away from the fire.
—Away from the fire, the fleas will bite us.
—If the fleas bite you, kill them.
—How sad to kill them! We weep bitter tears.
The frogs in the mountain over there are crying.
Why do you cry? Are you cold? Are you hungry?
Etc.

The next island doesn't look like an insect, but like a constellation, as night is fallen.

"We're in Hawaii," Rev. Tanimoto says. "We're spending the night in a hotel before resuming our trip. We'll be able to lie down at last and get a good rest. We left Japan Thursday morning, thirty-six hours ago. Would you say we are Saturday evening?"

"Yes, Tanimoto san."

"Wow! Look at all these people waiting for us on the tarmac. Many Japanese people live here in Hawaii. These persons with microphones are journalists, I guess. Excuse me, Madam, what day are we?"

"Well, Friday."

"Did you hear, girls? You have studied English, at least a little, in the church. You know the days of the week."

"Why did she say Friday? We are Saturday."

"Ha, ha! This lady is right. We have gone one day backward. This is due to the fact that we crossed the "date line." I have done it often, people have explained it to me often, but I have never been able to understand it."

"It's because of the air pressure, Tanimoto san."

The soul-mending thread

"People who cross this line often have to get younger. This is why you don't grow old, Tanimoto san."

"It would be quite convenient. I am sorry to tell you that you'll skip one day when you cross the line on the way back, so the gain is canceled."

—A mouse gnawed the head of the Buddha under the bridge.
—But this mouse is itself Buddha!
—It the mouse is Buddha, how come the cat caught it?
—But the cat is itself Buddha!
—If the cat is Buddha, how come the dog chases it?
—But the dog is itself Buddha!
—If the dog is Buddha, how come the wolf bites it?
—But the wolf is itself Buddha!
—If the wolf is Buddha, how come the fire burns it?
—But the fire is itself Buddha!
—If the fire is Buddha, how come the water extinguishes it?
—But the water is itself Buddha.
—If the water is Buddha, how come man drinks it?
—But man is himself Buddha.
—If man is Buddha, how come he prays Buddha?

Sleep, baby, sleep!
When was my baby made?
In the third month,
When the cherry-tree blooms.
Thus my baby's face
Is the color of a cherry blossom.

4. Inside the dog

Norman Cousins welcomes the group in New York City. He entrusts the girls to Quakers, who take them to a kind of summer camp in Pennsylvania. They stay there two weeks to learn the basics of English language and American ways. Don't take off your shoes in a house unless everybody does! Look, this is how you hold you knife and fork. Oh, no, this is a hamburger, you don't use the knife and fork.

One thing is really hard to understand and accept: these people who call themselves "friends" want us to give up elementary politeness.

"You should answer questions in a simple and clear manner. Nobody will be offended if you use the wrong word or something. On the other hand, you'll annoy Americans if you give a fuzzy answer because you're afraid to make a mistake."

"Some people who think they know everything say you won't be able to adjust to the American way of life because of the strange culture, language and diet. They predict you'll ask to go home at the end of the first week. Well, we believe there is no basic difference between people in various countries. You're just like us: human beings, creatures of God."

A remarkable difference does distinguish the Japanese culture from most others: the word "no" doesn't exist in the Japanese language. The young women find it tough to learn this simple short word, *no*.

A Quaker lady asks Michiko, who lives in her home, whether she eats eggs for breakfast.

"Eggs? Ah, eggs… Well…"

"You don't like eggs?"

"Ah yes, yes!"

The next day, the lady serves scrambled eggs. Michiko doesn't touch them. The hostess calls Rev. Tanimoto. He chuckles.

"Oh, oh. The poor child hates eggs. When you ask her whether she wants some, she doesn't answer yes. This means no, actually. You'd prefer a clear answer, of course, either yes nor no, so you ask her whether she doesn't like them. She's glad you understood her. 'Yes, yes, I don't like them,' she says. Then she must be quite surprised when you bring her some eggs for breakfast."

While the girls are studying their new environment, the Quakers look for friendly families within reasonable distance of Mount Sinai Hospital.

Rev. Tanimoto tells Yuriko he found a family for her himself.

"I think you're beginning to understand English, Yuriko chan, but when you're in doubt, you can't ask for a clarification, since you don't speak at all. I know an American woman who speaks Japanese perfectly. She grew up in Japan: her father worked in the English embassy in Tokyo. So she can explain things in Japanese when you don't understand. Her husband is a scientist. Actually, he worked with the other American scientists in the desert, I don't remember the name of the place, where they perfected the bomb that fell on our city. He was a student then. He didn't know the bomb would be used against Japan. His name is Leneman san. He came to Japan a few years after the war for a conference. Mrs. Leneman was an interpreter for the conference, that's how he met her. He wanted to visit Hiroshima. He had read the article in The New Yorker magazine, so he asked to meet me. They have a charming little boy, Scott. You'll see, Leneman san is a good man, and also quite funny. It is a very lively family. They laugh a lot. It will be a change after the Quakers, who may sometimes be too serious."

Mr. Leneman is one of these Americans that look like a skyscraper. Rev. Tanimoto and Yuriko reach higher than his waist but much lower than his shoulders. Mrs. Leneman has large green eyes. When she speaks Japanese, she sounds like a Tokyo-born woman, which she is indeed, but she rolls her Rs in a queer way when she speaks English.

"My name is Mildred," she tells Yuriko. "Tanimoto san says you understand some English. I'll speak English so you can learn our language, except when I feel it necessary, for whatever reason, to speak Japanese. Did you notice I don't speak like an American? I am Scottish. You know England, I'm sure. England is just one piece of a patchwork called The United Kingdom, which also includes Scotland, Wales and part of Ireland. Americans consider I speak with an accent. Well, I say I speak real English, while the people here butcher my poor language. Hank speaks with an awful Brooklyn accent, you've certainly noticed. Hank? Well, my husband, Leneman san. Look, this is Scott's bedroom, our little boy, he is two years old, and here another bedroom, if some day Scott has a brother or sister. In the meantime, you'll sleep here. Do you see the tall building over there? It is Mount Sinai Hospital. We bought this apartment three years ago only. It so happens the hospital is quite close. Some of your friends who live in Queens or in the Bronx will spend

hours in the subway. You can walk to the hospital. Be careful when you cross a street, because Americans do not drive on the left side, like the Japanese and British people, but on the right side. I must be careful too."

Yuriko wonders how to write "Mildred." In Japanese, you'd say Mirudoredo. "Hank" is easier to pronounce. It is similar to *hanko*, the ivory seal you sign with in Japan. This Mirudoredo talks almost as much as Tanimoto san.

Mr. Leneman talks even more, if such a thing is possible, but he speaks as if he were chewing a huge piece of gum. This is the famous Brooklyn accent. One person is easy to understand: little Scott. I'll learn English as the same time as he does, Yuriko thinks. He calls her Yuko. An American who never killed anybody. His round cheeks like two peaches.

Yuriko admires Mildred's tranquil mood—as serene as the water of a mountain lake. She drives the automobile. In Japan, no woman would dare handle such a big machine. Even among men, few know how to do it.

By and by, Yuriko gets used to Hank's accent. She doesn't understand everything he says. He likes to joke. Brooklyn-accented word plays and puns are hard to catch. When Mildred laughs loudly (it is simply impossible to imagine a Japanese woman laughing that way), Yuriko knows that Hank said something funny. She learns to detect an impish glint in his eyes announcing a wisecrack.

"You bought a new book, Millie?"

"*On the Road*, by Jack Kerouac. You should read it. You told me you drove across the States several times yourself."

"As Groucho says: 'Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog it's too dark to read.'"

Mildred laughs so much that tears fill her eyes. A dog, a book, a friend, fine, Yuriko thinks. But "inside of a dog" doesn't make sense.

She walks for hours on Broadway. So many people! She remembers the crowds in Hiroshima's streets before the war. Nobody stares at her. She starts. Right in front of her, Gary Cooper! And Marilyn Monroe! Or maybe not. Learning to distinguish them from each other, this is tougher than English grammar.

The hospital reserves a room with four beds for the young women—called "Hiroshima maidens" by the American press. Dr. Barky and a colleague, Dr. Simon, perform several

operations every week. The girls stay in the hospital for a few days, then go back to their families, then come to the hospital for more surgery. They are expected to spend six months in New York. The operations, under total anesthesia, often last three or four hours. Dr. Barsky and Dr. Simon unstick Michiko's face, which was glued to her shoulder. They give eyelids to another Michiko and to Terue by grafting some skin from their arms, so that they can at last sleep with closed eyes. They open Hiroko's mouth; she doesn't need to absorb liquid food with a straw anymore. They unfold Shigeko's fingers. After repairing Yoshie's leg, they send her to a physical therapist who will teach her to walk without crutches. All the young women have keloids on their faces. Dr. Barsky excises the keloids and grafts skin from the girls' thighs. This is very precise and tricky surgery, as blood vessels have to be sewed to feed the new skin.

When Yuriko wakes up from the anesthesia, she wonders where she is. A vague memory is already fading out—Dr. Barsky's enormous hand, in a rubber glove, holding a needle. Did you remove my boils? Ah, it can't be, as I am not even dressed yet. Quick, mama, I'll be late at the hospital. Yuriko tries to remember the new dress, but she only sees the hand sticking out of the wooden frame et the needle that pierces it. Looking at the seams of American shirts or skirts is truly sickening. The stitches are so far apart! The seamstresses do not care, obviously, and botch the job. These people have no idea that one should admire and respect good fabric, or that there is beauty in a tight seam. The country of giants. They talk too loudly, devour chunks of red meat like ogres, trample on precious carpets with their dirty shoes. But Dr. Barsky is as skillful as a Japanese woman. He is quite confident and one feels that he can't err. His hand is steady enough to mend torn up skins and souls.

Wrapped in bandages like a mummy. At last, I can look at myself in the bathroom's mirror without feeling any disgust.

Mildred doesn't yell like an American woman. She turns off the light when she leaves a room. That she lived in Japan explains her attitude, no doubt. She says all Scots are like her. She scolds Hank when he throws food away.

"There's always a way of accommodating leftovers. With old bread, milk, eggs, raisins and honey, I'll prepare a Scottish pudding that will convince you never to waste food anymore. I see from here that you left the lights on in your office."

"You leave the room, you turn off the light. Okay, two minutes later, you come in and turn it on. You think you're saving power, but actually you're spending more than if you

had left the lamp on. Every time you turn it off or on, auto-induction provokes a surge. I'm sorry, it's elementary physics!"

"You just made it up to get the better of me. I feel like studying physics to find whether it is really true."

Yuriko wonders: are all Scottish women as bold as Mildred? She talks back to her husband without fear. Although he is a teacher in University, she pretends she'll study physics as if she could catch him up. Women swear a little less than men, but they don't speak a different language, as they do in Japan.

Seating on his high chair, the baby follows the dialogue between his parents. One might think he understands everything. While Mildred talks to him in baby language, Hank seems to consider Scott an adult.

"The porridge is very hot, so it's still liquid. If you wait a little, it will congeal. Look, the spoon stands by itself… Gosh, I'm sorry, it's still too hot. I blow on it with a tiny hole between my lips, as if I wanted to whistle: this sends cold air. If I blow with an open mouth, the air is warm. If I want cooler porridge, see, I scrape the surface. The superficial layer had time to exchange some of its heat with the air above it, so it's cooler."

He taps and drums on the high chair's flap, as if he wanted to teach Scott the Morse code. When he is not talking, he mutters and hums.

"Pease porridge hot, pease porridge cold,
Pease porridge in the pot, nine days old.
Some like it hot, some like it cold,
Some like it in the pot, nine days old."

Are all American gentleman as nervous as Hank?

To amuse the baby, Yuriko draws in a notebook.

"Cat, mouse, tree," he says.

She buys crayons, water colors, and a larger notebook with a red cover. The drawing of an airplane is printed on the cover. She draws Broadway: the high buildings with all their windows, the cars and the trucks, the crowd. Hank compliments her.

"Wow! Wonderful! I would like to be able to draw like you. Hey, this man here looks like Gary Cooper. And the other one, there, like Fred Astaire."

She writes in Japanese to communicate with Mildred. She is also beginning to write in English. She jots a few words in her notebook and shows them to Hank.

"In Japan, writing is drawing."

"Gee, of course! I had never thought about that. You mean that all Japanese people can draw."

She nods.

"Yeah… So if I had trained as a child, I could have learned. I mean, in the same manner I could have learned Russian if my father had spoken Russian at home. He was born in Russia, it was his mother tongue. He was five years old when he came to America."

"You can still learn to speak Russian and to draw," she writes in her notebook.

"Why not? What's strange, you know, it that I am already a famous artist, but only in the world of physics. I have invented a way to represent the wanderings of the electron, called a Leneman diagram."

Between two operations, the Hiroshima maidens study typing, machine sewing, bookkeeping, in order to find a job back in Japan. Now and then, they visit a museum or a monument. Mildred often goes with them as a guide and interpreter. They understand English, but are afraid to talk. What if we make awful mistakes and people laugh at us?

They visit the Museum of Modern Art. They admire Van Gogh's feverish stars, Monet's voluptuous water lilies, Mondrian's romantic geometries. They stop in the room containing Picasso's *Guernica*†. The horse neighing in despair fascinates them.

"I've seen a horse like this one."

"I too."

"He collapsed all of a sudden."

"I saw a burning horse."

"For the Americans, horses also were enemies."

"Horses pulled carts. There was no more gasoline, except for military trucks."

"The woman with the baby."

"He's dead."

"Thousands of women like this one. Babies who cried in the arms of their dead mother."

"The man at right reminds me of the corpses emerging out of the water tanks. His head backward, his arms pointing to the sky."

"He's cursing the sky."

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† Picasso asked MOMA to keep the painting until democracy was restored in Spain. It is exhibited in Madrid since 1981.

"Black, white, gray, like a Japanese brush painting."

If a Japanese Picasso painted Hiroshima, Yuriko thinks, he could paint in black, white and gray. *Pika* erased the colors. Where is the Japanese Picasso?

When they come out of the museum, Mildred shows them 47th Street.

"This is the diamond district. In Japan, parents arrange marriages. In America, the young man asks for the young woman's hand himself. But he is too shy to pronounce the sentence: 'Do you want to marry me?' as a Scotsman would. So he offers a diamond ring, called an engagement ring. This is a way of asking: 'Do you want to marry me?' The young man and the young woman are happy, and also the diamond cutters and salesmen on 47th Street."

"They're all bearded and dressed in black."

"This is because they are pious Jews. Already in Europe, there were Jewish diamond cutters in Anvers, a city in Belgium."

"As for Mount Sinai Hospital, Tanimoto san told us it was founded by Jews."

"Mount Sinai, he said, is a mountain in the Bible."

"In the 19th century. Because the other hospitals refused to let them in."

"I've heard that Dr. Barsky is Jewish."

"He doesn't have a beard, though."

"A beard would come in the way during an operation. And what about the germs that could hide in the beard?"

"Jews are helping us. They have suffered so much during this war, they understand our pain."

"That the hospital offers beds, operating rooms and all the other services, this is a remarkable thing."

"What's more, Dr. Barsky doesn't get any money."

"This represents thousands of dollars."

"True enough, but you should consider the amount of publicity they receive in compensation. It is said that Jews always find their profit in everything."

"Jews are very wealthy. A nurse told me it is the biggest hospital in New York. Buildings that high don't even exist in Japan."

"The man who invented this bomb is Einstein, after all. A Jew."

Mildred repeats this conversation to Hank.

"They don't know much," she says, "but you told me yourself that many people believe Einstein invented the bomb."

"Poor fellow. He would have loved to work on the bomb, but the morons at the FBI said no. They thought he was a dangerous communist because he had been a pacifist during world war one. All his friends worked on the bomb in Chicago and Los Alamos, while he stayed alone in Princeton. It is stupid. I must talk to them."

"To whom?"

"To your girls."

Mildred invites Rev. Tanimoto for tea.

"You know that I am a physicist," Hank tells him, "and that I worked on the bomb during the war, like all my colleagues. I am Jewish. I knew Einstein in Princeton."

"I didn't know you were Jewish, professor Leneman. We Japanese find it difficult to distinguish white people one from another. We don't know how to recognize Jews."

"People think Jews have big noses. But for you, hey, all the white people have a big nose. These stories are absurd. There is no difference. The young woman who stays with us, Yuriko, loves Fred Astaire. I'm sure she has no idea he's Jewish."

"Fred Astaire is Jewish? You don't say."

"And Paul Muni, and Kirk Douglas, and Lauren Bacall. Anyway, I thought I could talk to the girls about the bomb, the Jews, Einstein. To replace silly rumors by first-hand information."

"This would be great! If you allow me, I'll come to your conference. I'm sure I'll learn many things. Don't forget to mention Fred Astaire and Laurence Bacall, too."

A few days later, Hank addresses twenty-one Hiroshima maidens in the Quakers' meeting room. This is where they study English, typing and sewing. The four missing ones are in their hospital room.

Rev. Tanimoto introduces Hank.

"Professor Leneman will talk to you about *Pika*, as well as other subjects. You can ask questions. You know Mildred san. She is professor Leneman's wife. She'll translate if there are things you don't understand, or if you're afraid to ask questions in English."

Hank looks at the sewing machines lined against a wall.

"My father owned a Singer machine just like these," he says. "He was a tailor. He sang as he worked, while the machine provided an accompaniment of whirring and clinking. This is the music I grew up with, you understand."

Yuriko sees Mrs. Hasegawa on fire, diving into a water tank with her sewing machine. Mrs. Hasegawa survived three months. What became of the machine I don't know. I'm lucky I live in Leneman san's house. I got used to his accent.

"During the war, my father cut uniforms for the soldiers. Then he became a salesman. He sold suits that others had cut and sewn. He always complained about their low quality. 'A blind man cut it and a trembling man sewed it,' he would say. You too, you find American clothes neither well cut nor well stitched. Mildred told me."

Hank begins his talk with some easy chatter, as he does when he gives his university course. This should clear any possible tension. He doesn't expect the maidens to guffaw, but a smile or two wouldn't hurt… No? Well, let's turn to the serious business.

"Mildred told me that you visited the diamond district and talked about the Jews. Some of you think that the doctors who patch you up do it for publicity. Hey, you girls, listen to me: what they receive is mostly bad publicity. The newspapers say that they're taking part in a big propaganda attack on the United States. That Norman Cousins and the other pacifists, and even the Quakers, are enemies of America. That a communist plot to dishonor and weaken our great country lurks behind all this.

"Also, some of you believe that Einstein invented the atomic bomb. Maybe you know that Professor Einstein just died. He lived and worked in Princeton, in New Jersey, sixty miles from here or so. Well, I studied physics in Princeton. I met Einstein several times. He had nothing to do with the bomb. Nothing, nothing at all. He discovered some secrets of the Universe. One of these secretes is that matter is a kind of very concentrated form of energy. There's a famous equation for this: $E = mc^2$. This is just a law of Nature. It explains how the sun explodes, but nobody would say that Einstein is guilty of the sun's explosion. The bomb also explodes in this way: a little matter is turned into a lot of energy. It is not Einstein's fault!"

Mildred interrupts him.

"They don't understand anything. You bore them with your physics."

"Yeah, but I can't let them accuse Einstein. Before the war, people saw the good side of science. Now, science has become evil. As Einstein is the most famous scientist, and besides his name sounds a little like Frankenstein, they put the blame on him. This bomb should be called nuclear instead of atomic, because what explodes is the atom's nucleus. Well, Einstein never studied the nucleus. Many Jewish scientists participated, that's true. For example, Professor Wigner, a Jew from Hungary who studied the nucleus in Germany.

The Nazis expelled all the Jewish professors in 1933. They went to England, to France, to America. They raised the level of science in the United States. In the end, people will say this horror is the Jews' fault. It is always the Jews' fault. Wigner and another Hungarian physicist, Szilard, told Einstein that the Germans had broken the nucleus of the uranium atom, which made it possible to create a terrible bomb. He had never heard about it. They asked him to sign a letter to President Roosevelt, whom he knew, suggesting America launch a research program. It was important to prevent the Germans to get there first. Hitler's folly led to the death of millions, and he didn't have the bomb. Imagine what would have happened if he had possessed it. Einstein didn't even write the letter. He signed it, that's all."

One of the young women raises a timid hand.

"Einstein signed the letter. He planted the seed. Then the tree grew and the fruit fell on us. He did plant the seed."

"Roosevelt read the letter, but the Americans didn't do anything. Nobody cared about the war in Europe. The person who launched the program is neither Einstein nor Roosevelt. It is your prime minister, Mildred."

"My prime minister?"

"Churchill. The English were already suffering under German bombs, so they were not eager to suffer even more. Churchill understood one thing: even if the Germans don't try to make it, or don't succeed, the atomic bomb will exist eventually here or there, for example in the Soviet Union. So it must be made anyway. The British scientists designed a theoretical model of the bomb, but they lacked the necessary resources to build the huge factories for producing uranium and plutonium. Churchill pestered the Americans until they decided to do something, two full years after Einstein's letter. They recruited all the physicists. This is how I went to Los Alamos, in New Mexico, where the bomb was perfected. After the war, after Hiroshima, Churchill and Truman didn't feel too proud. So they put forward Einstein's letter to Roosevelt, as if they had simply obeyed the great man, known for his pacifism and his moral rigor."

"I wonder if someone is proud to have called your bomb *Little Boy*," Mildred says. "It is really cynical and cruel to give a tender nickname like this one to such an awful weapon. I doubt the Japanese enjoyed the joke."

"The plutonium bomb, the Nagasaki one, was a round ball, whereas the Hiroshima bomb looked like a big cigar. They received the code names *Fat Man* and *Thin Man*. It was hoped

that if the Germans intercepted a message, they would think the code names were for Churchill and Roosevelt. Then a clever guy reduced the size of *Thin Man*, so its name was changed to *Little Boy*. We didn't use these code names, it was forbidden actually. We said *The Gadget*."

Another young woman calls Mildred with her hand and whispers a few words in her ear.

"What does she say?"

"The people in Hiroshima called the bomb *Pika*. To describe something that twinkles or sparkles, the Japanese say *pika-pika*. They have never seen your cigar, but only a flash in the sky."

"I was lucky to be outside the city on that day," Rev. Tanimoto says. "Outside Hiroshima, people saw the flash, then a few minutes later they heard a very loud noise, so they say *Pikadon*."

"Inside Hiroshima, the explosion was probably so powerful, with such a deadly blast and thermal shock, that people didn't hear anything."

I was unconscious, Yuriko thinks. Heard nothing. Or maybe our house falling down. Did mama hear? Burned alive. Nailed to the roof's frame by a glistening needle. Papa—bits of burnt bones and ashes in a vase.

Several young women are whispering to each other. One raises her hand. Mildred goes toward her to translate. She waves her hand in front of her face to say no. She wants to ask her question in English.

"Why did you throw the bomb on us, Professor?"

"Er, this is quite a blunt question. I could call it simplistic, or naïve, and answer I didn't throw anything on anybody. But I consider it a very good question, actually. Not easy to answer. When the war ended in Europe, there was no more reason we should make a bomb. The war goes on in the Pacific, but it is different. We're not fighting a crazy dictator whose scientists have discovered how to make this new weapon. By and by, we understand that the army wants to use the bomb against Japan. So some scientists resign before the end of the program. Others suggest we blow up a bomb on a desert island in the Pacific to convince Japan to surrender. Big debates take place in Los Alamos. A waste of time, as the politicians and the military don't give a damn what we think. What's more, the four leading scientists, Lawrence, Compton, Oppenheimer and Fermi, belong to a secret committee we know nothing about. They examine high strategy with the military. The desert island demo

would be useless, they say. Killing a few giant turtles won't impress the stubborn generals who lead Japan. These guys want all the Japanese people to commit suicide when the barbarians invade their country. If we drop the bomb on Japan, not only do we save the lives of a million American soldiers, but we also save one hundred million Japanese lives. You wanted to know why we threw the bomb on you, miss. Did I answer your question?"

The young woman nods to say yes.

"Gee, I forgot that the Japanese never say no. Anyway, it ain't simple. Nobody can say how many lives were saved. What we know is how many were lost in Hiroshima and Nagasaki: three or four hundred thousand. What we also know is that Japan was exhausted. Firebombing had destroyed most cities. Japanese emissaries in Switzerland and Moscow were looking for go-betweens willing to negotiate a cease-fire. All we had to do was wait a little without landing and Japan would have collapsed like a house of cards. But the Americans could not wait. Tanimoto san, I'm sure you know why."

"Certainly. I've read articles about it after the war: the Soviet army was beginning to land on some Japanese islands in the North."

"The Soviets were going to nibble the northern part of Japan in the same manner they were gobbling the eastern half of Europe. The Americans needed a full surrender as soon as possible. Besides, they anticipated what would happen after the Germans and Japanese were vanquished: the cold war, the world cut in two parts we know today. Exploding the bomb would show these rapacious communists who was the real master of the world."

"Are you sorry you contributed to the making of the bomb, Professor?" a young woman asks.

"I was still a student, you know, a tiny cog in the whole big process. For example, they sent me to control security in the Tennessee factory where uranium was refined. Now I can tell you a few things about the scientists in Los Alamos. Some may be sorry. If they feel remorse, perhaps it is a kind of abstract or theoretical remorse, like we talk of theoretical physics. Ah, but there was something quite concrete in this business: the Los Alamos hill. All the physicists will agree that they spent the best three years of their lives up there. These great minds knew each other from afar. They lived in different countries, they wrote and read articles, they exchanged mail. So all of a sudden, they are gathered together. They see each other every day. Never, I guess, since men think, have so many geniuses been grouped in the same place. Not just any place, mind you: a wooded plateau above the desert, a magnificent location chosen by Oppenheimer himself. The European physicists are

especially happy, as they have escaped a terrible fate and discover the good side of America. We work in the best lab in the world. We're like travelers who'd receive an unlimited budget to explore unknown continents. Our scientific curiosity pushes us forward. Okay, so there comes a time when we understand that the bomb won't be used to punish the nasty Nazis who murdered our families, but to crush the Japanese just as they're trying to surrender. Why we should do it is not clear, but it's too late anyway. We want to know whether these gadgets, created by the finest brains on earth, will work as advertised."

"You told me the army wanted to try its new expensive toys," Mildred says. "You were not altogether different."

"For the military, there was a strategic stake. They thought about future wars, they wondered how they would use these new weapons. The scientists were mostly pacifists, but they were curious. Scientists retain a childish curiosity, otherwise they couldn't spend their lives trying to understand how things work. I guess you studied history. Yes?"

The maidens nod.

"Japanese history and world history," Rev. Tanimoto says.

"In that case, you know that scientific progress and military progress often go together. Airplanes were perfected during word war one, then during world war two. You've heard of Archimedes, a Greek scientist. Maybe you know he invented war machines to fight the Romans who were attacking the city of Syracuse. The Germans built rocket bombs at the end of the war. Now we build similar rockets to be able to bomb the Soviet Union, but these rockets may one day send us to the moon. Human genius lets us build and destroy. You can't have one without the other. Marie Curie discovered a kind of nuclear energy, radioactivity. She founded a hospital in Paris where they use this energy to heal cancers. This same energy destroyed your city and burned your faces. Tomorrow, it will be used to produce electricity. Some of my colleagues are trying to make special beams of light that do not scatter like ordinary beams. This is based on an idea that Einstein suggested thirty years ago. They call them 'maser' or 'laser.' They hope these beams will be able to transmit signals, for example for future telephones or televisions. They also think of medical uses. They need very precise and expensive tools and machines for their experiments. Where can they find money? Hey, the army gives them as much cash as they want! The army dreams of a 'death ray,' of course. The Russians launch a rocket carrying an atom bomb, but you aim your death ray—zap!"

The soul-mending thread

The Hiroshima maidens were supposed to stay six months in America. Mildred asks Hank if he accepts to keep Yuriko longer.

"The operations are tougher than expected, so they are behind their schedule. At the same time, nobody imagined such dramatic results. They want to go farther."

"I must say I prefer her without these bumps and holes on her face."

"Part of the improvement is due to make-up."

"Make-up? I wouldn't have thought about that."

"Tanimoto thought about it. Professional make-up artists give them lessons three times a week."

"The little man has a good brain."

"Barsky thinks the skin he grafted to replace the keloids on their faces looks good enough, so now he wants to remove the keloids on their arms. Summer is hot in Japan. They could wear short sleeves. Do you mind if she stays a few more months?"

"Fine. This is good news for Scotty. He loves her, although she doesn't speak. The pictures fascinate him. Maybe he'll become a painter some day."

To entertain Scott, Yuriko folds paper squares.

"Bird! Bird!" he shouts. "Frog! Flower!"

"*Origami*," Mildred says. "This bird is a crane. Hey, don't tear it up!"

Hank learns to fold the crane.

"I'm sure mathematicians study this thing," he tells Yuriko. "Biologists, too… Some big molecules behave differently when they are folded this way or that way. After the war, several physicists switched to biology, Szilard being the first one. They refused to contribute to the arms race and the cold war. In biology, you may hope to find molecules that heal people, this is better than bombing them. I spent a few months in a biology lab myself, to see whether I liked it. I was fed up with physics. When I came back to New York City after Los Alamos, I felt lousy. I walked on Fifth Avenue and I thought: 'Okay, so they drop it on the Empire State Building, the highest skyscraper. I'm one mile away, I'm dead. Flattened like road kill, my guts coming out through all the holes in my body. Big fires at least as far as the Metropolitan Museum. The Egyptian statues that kept their youthful appearance for four thousand years, the Rembrandt and Vermeer paintings, all gone. Gee, they're building a new skyscraper. Hey guys, you should give it up. It's useless!' Physics seemed useless, too. I didn't know what to do. Then one day, in Central Park, I saw kids who played at throwing picnic plates. The way the plate wobbled while rotating gave me

an idea that could be applied to the electron. The next day, I went to the lab again. Look, Yuriko, I need several minutes to make a crane looking like a kangaroo, while you, in a few seconds…"

"The sewing teachers told me you're very skillful, Yuriko," Mildred says. "They admire the way you pick up discarded fabrics and create strange dresses."

"You trouble her with your compliments. She's crying, now."

"She also cries during the sewing course. Her mother was sewing when the bomb fell."

"Listen, Yuriko, I'll tell you an idea that just went through my mind about folded paper and sewing. If you unfold your crane, the folds stay visible on the paper sheet. Someone comes and sees the sheet. He doesn't know what it is. Out of curiosity, he folds it by following the logic of valleys and mountains of the folds. So he gets the crane, no? The folds visible on the sheet make up a kind of code that lets you change a flat two-dimensional sheet into a three-dimensional object. Our mind has a hard time moving between two and three dimensions. Do you remember my father was a tailor? He said that a tailor has to start with flat pieces of fabric to make a jacket. He measures the customer with his tape. The good tailor knows how to cut and assemble the flat pieces so that the jacket fits. He keeps close to the volume of the body, which is not so easy."

Mildred smiles.

"When I met Hank, he knew only very bad tailors."

"My father didn't cut anymore. He sold. I saved. I owned a suit for winter and one for summer, both quite old. Mildred forces me to see good tailors and spend a fortune. Well, you Japanese people chose simplicity. The kimono is made with flat rectangular panels. No need of a virtuoso cutter. The same kimono fits everybody. It doesn't stay close to the body."

Yuriko writes something on her notebook.

"Did you like Japan, Professor Leneman?"

"It was my first trip out of the United States. Before leaving, I practiced picking up bits of paper with chopsticks. When I landed in Tokyo, I changed all the hotel reservations the university had made, because I wanted to sleep on straw mats in old-fashioned inns. Einstein went to Japan in 1921 and he fell in love with your country. Same here."

Hank announces a trip during the dinner.

The soul-mending thread

"I'm going to spend a week in Los Angeles. Caltech University offers me a tempting job. I want to meet the people in the lab and so on. If I have a little time left, I may hop over to Berkeley. They'd welcome me with open arms, in Berkeley, but you have to be very modest and lack ambition to go there. If you find anything of value, Lawrence will always pretend he discovered it. One Nobel Prize is not enough for him. He wants two, like Marie Curie."

While Hank is talking, Yuriko writes something in her notebook. She shows it to Mildred.

"Ah, this is interesting. She says that she was evacuated to the countryside during the war. She was a pupil in a village school and there she met an American boy. Very tall. She thinks he may live in Los Angeles."

"An American student in a Japanese school during the war, this is odd. I doubt I can find your classmate, Yuriko. For a Japanese person, all Americans seem very tall. There are many very tall and not so tall Americans in Los Angeles, you know."

"She wrote his name: Kenichiro Kashimura."

"Well done! I understand how he could attend a village school in Japan, and I admit that I could find him with a little luck."

Back from Los Angeles.

"I haven't seen Ken Kashimura, but I talked to him on the phone. Do you remember what I had told you when I left, that I would need a little luck? Well, I had lots of luck. As I was very busy, I gave the name to a secretary at the university. I thought she'd look in the Los Angeles phone book. If she had done it, she wouldn't have found Ken, because he lives in San Diego. But she thought I was looking for a Caltech student, so she looked for him in the university files. Here's where luck comes in: Ken studied at Caltech. She found him right away, as he works in a marine lab belonging to the university, near San Diego. He studies giant dolphins called orcas or killer whales. He often spends weeks at sea to find where they breed or whatever. He remembers you, Yuriko. He seemed quite moved to learn that you had survived. So moved he could hardly talk. He kept silent for so long, at times, that I thought there was something wrong with the phone line. I felt he was trying not to cry. He would like to see you if you stop in California on the way back. He is happy you have had all these operations in New York. He went to Hiroshima after the bombing. He'll never forget what he saw there, he says."

Yuriko writes a question in her notebook.

“His address? Oh, yes, I have got it somewhere. He says you should write to him in English, because he doesn’t read Japanese.”

One year or so after the beginning of the program, one of the maidens, Tomoko, dies during an operation.

The Hiroshima newspapers report the news on their front pages. The mayor invites the parents of the young women to City Hall and asks them whether they want the program to go on.

“This project was started out of international goodwill,” they say. “We can’t pretend to control it.”

“We support it wholeheartedly. It should not be discredited because of just one unfortunate incident.”

“The inquest showed she was the victim of an unexpected anesthesia glitch. We can’t accuse anybody.”

The mayor asks Tomoko’s mother what she thinks.

“The atomic bombing claimed many lives. But my daughter was allowed to go on living happily, even though for a short time, among many generous people. It wasn’t the surgery that killed her. It was the war. I must accept this painful reality.”

In New York, Rev. Tanimoto asks the maidens whether they want to return to Japan. They decide to stay.

“Dr. Barsky operates on me tomorrow. There’s no way I’d give up now.”

“It was her last operation. A small keloid on her arm. She was so glad it was to be removed and then she’d go home.”

“It is said that Dr. Barsky cried. Norman Cousins came and he cried, too.”

Nine maidens, having gone though all the necessary surgery, return to Japan a few weeks after Tomoko’s death. They carry her ashes in an urn so they can give them to her mother. A small crowd of relatives and friends is waiting for them in the American air base where they land. Terue is carrying the urn.

“We’re back home, she says. All ten of us.”

Six months later, the fifteen remaining young women prepare to go home. They spend their last few days in New York on a shopping spree—since they can't return from America without bringing gifts to all their friends. Rev. Tanimoto has some good news.

"The Pan Am company offers to fly you for free from Los Angeles to Tokyo. As for the trip to Los Angeles, I was told that the Greyhound bus is the cheapest way. I thought you'd enjoy crossing this vast country and seeing all its various landscapes."

"Shall we see the Grand Canyon, Tanimoto san?"

"Well, I'd say it's likely. They explained to me that there are two main routes, a northern and a southern one. To go to Los Angeles, we'd choose the southern route. This goes across Texas, New Mexico and Arizona."

"The Grand Canyon is in Arizona."

"Then we'll see it."

The Lenemans are driving Yuriko to the bus terminal on 42nd Street.

"We'll also go to Los Angeles in a few months. I have accepted the Caltech job. When I went there, I liked what I saw. I already had some friends in the university, and I made new friends. Do you remember how cold it was last winter? I have had enough. I got really mad one day, when I broke a nail trying to fix snow chains on the car's tires. Over there, the weather is fair all year round and it never snows."

Scott, sitting on Mildred's lap, turns back constantly to look at Yuriko.

"Why you go, Yuko? Me, I want you to stay."

Yuriko waves her hand and shows Mildred. Scott is used to her gestures and understands most of them.

"She wants to see her mother."

In the bus terminal, the maidens say goodbye to the families they lived with. They promise, between sobs, to write often and come again.

Rev. Tanimoto exchanges a few words with Hank.

"I must be careful to resist the sin of pride, such is the satisfaction I feel for helping these young women. I thank the Lord who let me be useful in this way. I can see you don't approve my words, Professor Leneman."

"You thank God for dropping an atom bomb on Hiroshima?"

"I thank him for creating us with a sense of good and evil. As a physicist, you reach the limits of our knowledge and you must admit that something exists beyond our understanding."

"As a physicist, I can't believe that this fantastic Universe, with its incredible scope of time and space, its billion stars and planets, the myriad atoms that whirl and swirl since the beginning of time, all this complex and mysterious machinery we still know almost nothing about, that this fabulous Universe is just a crude theater in which God watches humans beings hesitate between good and evil. This is what you pretend, though. The stage is too big for our poor dramas and comedies."

Yuriko write a few sentences for Mildred.

"You arrival time? Of course. I'll inquire at the ticket window. I'll call Kashimura san, don't worry. I told him I'd keep him informed, when he called the other day. He'll be there to welcome you. He is eager to see you again."

Before she enters the bus, Yuriko hands two parcels to Mildred and Hank, a big one and a small one. She has written something on the small one: "Open after I go. Also for baby Scott, when he is older. Thank you for everything. Yuriko."

"I have to call this Ken Kashimura to tell him the bus's arrival time. I hope things will click between them. She is a remarkable young woman. She merits to find happiness."

"He might be somewhat perplexed when he discovers she doesn't speak."

"She'll write in her notebook, I guess."

"Or he'll think she's just the right woman for him: as silent as his orcas."

"Ah, ah. I knew a joke was coming."

"As for me, I knew you were waiting for a joke, so I worked hard at finding one. Otherwise, you would have worried. What happens? Hank is not joking anymore? Maybe he is sick or something."

The big parcel contains a black and gray dress for Mildred.

"The sewing teachers told me about these dresses she was making, but this is really amazing—quite impressive."

Hank takes a close look.

"Do you remember this conversation we had with her about origami and kimono? All the folds seem planned as for a very intricate origami. The puffs, here, remind me of the way her face looked before the surgery. And also, something else: this gray and this black colors, these bumps, I wonder whether she did it consciously, evoke the ruins of Hiroshima to me. Would you wear this thing?"

The soul-mending thread

"On the day you receive your Nobel Prize, you'll have to dress like a penguin. Then I'll wear this dress."

The small parcel contains a red-cover notebook similar to the one Yuriko wrote in. When Mildred and Hank open it, they discover a first page almost as red as the cover.

"I have seen such pictures," Mildred says. "On ancient screens, in temples. The flames of hell. And all these fuzzy shapes, down near the river: the damned."

"Yeah, well, I don't know about temples, but I have seen this river: it flows across Hiroshima."

The next page is gray. Curls of smoke cover it. A few red spots—burning human beings. They look like Indians wearing blazing head dresses. On the facing page, a streetcar burns in the fog. Bloody bodies are spread on the pavement. Passengers ejected from the streetcar? A crouching woman vomits a red liquid. Another carries a naked baby, obviously dead.

A mainly blue double-page. Strips of sky appear through the smoke. Blue slabs lie on a tangle of broken beams.

"The roofs are blue in the South," Mildred says.

"Yes, I remember blue glazed tiles. Some are still hooked to the roof here, some are broken on the ground there. These roofs must be very heavy. Look, a woman is stuck here."

This woman raises her arms. She seems to be screaming as the fire approaches. Another woman does not scream. Her body hangs upside down between two beams. The tight calligraphy of her hair hides her face.

One more woman is locked under a wooden frame on the next page. She calls for help, her extended arms holding a baby. Could someone at least save my child? The people crossing the right page do not pay attention to her complaint. Naked or wearing a few rags, hatched with red marks, they advance with horizontal arms like blind persons or sleepwalkers. Strips of flesh hang from the tip of their fingers.

Hank looks at a series of portraits. A man wears glasses tied to his ears by pieces of string. Blood spurts out at the top of his skull and flows down his face and his shirt. A blackened woman glistens like a burnt doll.

"It's awful and magnificent at the same time," he comments. "She doesn't compose her pictures at random. Same thing for her choice of colors. She is very talented."

"Some pages seem to have been traced from a photograph. This stuff is printed in her memory forever, I guess."

"No wonder she lost her voice. She saw all this in just one day."

Toward the end of the notebook, a motorboat is sailing on a blue wash drawing. It is bringing naked prostrate bodies to a pier. The city's ruins are smoking in the distance. On the following pages, a doctor dabs mercurochrome or iodine on lined up bodies. Human shapes are burning on a pyre. Piled corpses are waiting for their turn.

The Greyhound bus stops every two or three hours in front of a diner.

"You have fifteen minutes to stretch your legs and drink a cup of coffee," the driver says.

He stops in a bus station.

"You have half an hour to eat your breakfast."

In Japan, people eat dried fish, raw eggs, pickled plums and rice for breakfast. Here, fried eggs, sausages and bacon.

"Howdy, folks!" the driver says as he sits down.

"Did you notice?" Rev. Tanimoto asks. "A new driver."

Yuriko sees that her friends are puzzled. They haven't noticed. Even after a year and a half, distinguishing them isn't easy. What's strange is that all their cities are also quite similar. The same low brick houses on both sides of the main street, the same gas stations, the same schools. At least half a dozen churches per town. All the people have the same nose, all the churches the same tower.

"There are three churches next to each other," one of the girls wonders. "One church in every neighborhood, wouldn't it make more sense, Tanimoto san?"

"Oh, but these churches are not the same. One is Presbyterian, maybe, the other Baptist, the third one Methodist, like mine."

"What is the difference, Tanimoto san?"

"Ah, well, hmm… The Presbyterians believe that everything is decided in advance, according to the teachings of Calvin, whereas we think man is free to choose. We follow the teachings of Mr. Wesley, who lived in England in the seventeenth century. The Baptists consider that people shouldn't be baptized as babies, but as adults, when they can understand what it means and decide for themselves. There are also Lutherans, Adventists, Catholics, Mormons, Mennonites."

"These foreigners are complicated."

“What about us? There are dozens of Buddhist sects founded by some monk or other. And I am only counting the main ones.”

Between these identical cities, the landscape changes by and by. The road winds between wooded hills for half a day, then runs along wheat and corn fields that seem to stretch to the end of the earth. A day, a night, another day, another night, change driver, howdy folks, all alike, change bus, eat hamburgers, eat bacon and eggs, howdy folks, eat hot dogs, eggs and bacon, coffee, Coca Cola, sleep sitting, wake up with a start, what time is it, stiff arm, back ache, stretch legs, you have fifteen minutes, root beer, ginger ale, we’re leaving Arkansas and entering Oklahoma, turn back watches one hour, Best hamburger in Beaver, what day are we, here begins the Free State of Texas.

In Las Vegas, the bus stops for fifty minutes. Hey folks, we give you more time so you can try your luck with the one-armed bandits. The maidens do not understand this expression. The driver shows them the slot machines that glitter and twinkle in the bus station and the hamburger joint.

5. The man who talks to whales

San Diego, October 30th, 1956

Dear Mrs. Moore,

I often think about you. I stopped writing to you when I came back to the States and met you. You were ill already. We talked a lot. I showed you a thing that meant much to me, a certain paper dragonfly.

After you died, I still saw you in my mind and talked to you, so I can as well write one more letter. I know the dead do not return, and nevertheless they do return sometimes. I also saw Yuriko on the screen of my imagination and I talked to her although I thought her dead. The telephone rang: "I am calling on behalf of Yuriko Yamaguchi." Appearing suddenly out of nowhere. As if someone called me to say he's seen you and you intend to come have tea in a few days. I must pinch myself to believe it. Is she really alive? I'll know tomorrow.

People who think my name is hard to remember call me "the man who talks to whales." I talk to orcas, true enough. I have no other friends. You remember I exchanged a few letters with Ruth after the war. When I saw you, she was engaged already and she married soon afterward. She lives in New York City. My sister moved back to Japan with my mother when my father died.

Do you remember Mr. Maddox, the bookseller on Raymond Avenue? We bought the Studebaker back from him. When my father offered fifty dollars, I could see he hesitated between two answers: "Are you kidding? The car is worth at least five hundred," and: "Are you kidding? You don't owe me anything. I kept it for you." In the end, he accepted the fifty dollars without saying anything. It still runs smoothly. Mr. Maddox is a tidy man. I'll drive it to Los Angeles tomorrow.

My memories of Gila River are fading, as if blurred by the camp's dust, but I remember clearly the rain of cherry flowers in Ibara, the laughing toads, the insects Yuriko addressed poems to. She talks to insect, I talk to whales. We should go along well together.

We exchanged a few letters. She's coming to Los Angeles on the way back to Japan. She hopes to earn a living as a seamstress over there. She offered Mrs. Leneman a dress to thank her. Mrs. Leneman called me on the phone to tell me the bus's arrival time. She finds

the dress so extraordinary that she showed it right away to someone she knows in the Saks Fifth Avenue store. Now the store would like to order ten of them. America would be a better place for her to earn a living, since she already has a client and the American stores are much richer than the Japanese ones. She writes she wants to visit schools in Japan to talk to children about the bomb. Eleven years have passed since the explosion. They know nothing. This is also a thing she could do here. I know what you're thinking, Mrs. Moore: a part of myself wishes secretly that she stop in Los Angeles and settle, let's see, why not in San Diego. I'll know more tomorrow, one way or another.

I remain, Mrs. Moore,

Your faithful friend

Kenichiro Kashimura

Yuriko looks at the desert out of the bus window. He came from a desert where no dragonfly ever flew, she thinks. He was discovering Japan. I was eleven. He was older than me, but he knew less than a small child. We walked along the rice field when we came back from school. I told him the names of beasts and flowers. Then the bomb destroyed flowers and insects and everything. Then another eleven years, a long break, hidden in the dark. I'd still be there if Tanimoto san had not helped me end the break.

We felt lonely. Far from his country, far from my family. An illusory link, tightened by circumstances, united us for a few months. How foolish to expect that time didn't loosen it!

Day after day, year after year on my tatami, tormented by the painful conviction that my life was meaningless and useless. Chance had lengthened it a little. I sometimes wondered whether I really existed. The memory of our walks—a glimmer in the dark.

My only hope: that he may remember a young girl dimly. If my face is engraved in his memory as his is in mine, how could he bear seeing the monster I have become? He hasn't changed, of course. I'll recognize him instantly. He'll look for me, he'll look at me without seeing me.

The door of the bus opens. Yuriko steps down and walks toward Kenichiro.

"Good morning, Yuriko."

"Good morning, Ken."

Afterword

1. The end of the camps

As the big boss of the War Relocation Authority (WRA), Dillon Myer was in a good position to see that the 120,000 people kept in the camps did not really threaten the security of the United States. He didn't hesitate to question the usefulness of the administration he directed: "Life behind barbed wire is not an American life. There are around forty thousand people under twenty years old in the camps. It is not worthy of America to let children grow up behind barbed wire, under the watch or armed guards. This also gives arguments to the enemy: 'This nation praises democracy and practices racial discrimination.' No charge has been signified to these prisoners other than their having Japanese ancestors."

Mrs. Roosevelt also saw the prisoners. Not only did she contest the utility of the camps, but also the 1924 exclusion act, which prevented Japanese people from acquiring the American nationality. "It is contrary to the principles we believe in: that all human beings have the same rights."

The President, her husband, admitted that "loyal" people, at least, should be set free: "The principle on which this country was founded and by which it has always been governed is that Americanism is a matter of the mind and heart; Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race or ancestry. A good American is one who is loyal to this country and to our creed of liberty and democracy. Every loyal American citizen should be given the opportunity to serve this country wherever his skills will make the greatest contribution—whether it be in the ranks of our armed forces, war production, agriculture, government service, or other work essential to the war effort."

The 442nd Regimental Combat Team, consisting of *nisei* soldiers, was the most decorated unit of its size and length of service in battle in U.S. military history. It was revealed, when the war archives were declassified, that six thousand *nisei* served in the secret service as document readers and interpreters.

Prisoners who were lawyers or had lawyer friends went to court from the very beginning. On December 18, 1944, the Supreme Court sided with Mitsuko Endo, who had attacked the American Government for detaining her illegally: "I am an American citizen, you can't prevent me from moving from one state to another." The Government then canceled the decree that evacuated the Japanese Americans from the West coast and announced the progressive closing of the camps.

The prisoners were released with their two suitcases and 25 dollars offered by the administration. Most of them had lost everything and started again from scratch. They became farm laborers or cleaning ladies and worked hard.

The Oriental Exclusion Act was abolished in 1952.

In 1983, an official report acknowledged that the decision to evacuate and intern the Japanese and Americans of Japanese ancestry was not justified by military necessity but was due to racism, to hysteria provoked by the war and to a failure of the political establishment.

On December 2, 1989, President George H.W. Bush signed a law giving "reparations" to relocated people. Every one of them received a letter of apology signed by the President and 25,000 dollars.

2. In 1985, I went to Hiroshima as a journalist for French magazine Marie-Claire to write an article for the fortieth anniversary of the bombing. I had the privilege to meet Rev. Tanimoto as well as two of the Hiroshima maidens, Miyoko Matsubara and Michiko Yamaoka. I had read about them in the book *Hiroshima Maidens*, by Kazuo Chujo (published by Asaha Shimbun). Tanimoto san also appeared in John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, of course. Part of what Rev. Tanimoto says in my book is taken from the interview he gave me. What the two former maidens told me helped me write what Yuriko sees on "that day." I also read several books I bought in the Hiroshima Peace Museum's bookstore.

For the camps, I bought books in the Japanese-American museum in Los Angeles—and I talked to a former Gila River internee who was a guide in the museum. I also read many moving interviews on the densho.org website.

This book can be said to be "based on true events," but it is a novel. I mixed up a real person, Rev. Tanimoto, with invented characters like Ken and Yuriko. My imagination sometimes takes over and I may have made up stuff that didn't happen and couldn't have happened. But the bizarre exchange of prisoners in Goa did occur. As everybody knows, reality is often stranger than fiction.

52,000 words