

PROLOGUE

Mother-of-Pearl

Los Angeles, Mother's Day, 1961

“I WILL NOT accept this from you.”

A rejection rooted in grief. Grudges are grievances grown adamant. I will not accept this from *you*.

Her lips narrowed, unlike my own, which rounded like a vowel. They say if you get mad, you lose your looks. It's true.

She held the letter opener, its handle fashioned in mother-of-pearl, the colors iridescent. For as long as I could recall, Mother had used this letter opener, its blade leaving an identical slit along the head of each envelope, but the handle changing colors, depending on the angle of light.

We were gathered in the formal dining room, where in lieu of wallpaper, a stencil ran above the wainscot and looped around three walls. In Japan, the walls of a traditional home moved, their sliding panels, called *fusuma*, often accented with mountain landscapes. But this was not a traditional home and not located in Japan. Here, silhouettes of revelers in masks cavorted, brandished multicolored streamers. A jester juggled balls. A horse lifted its hooves, gaily pulled a cart. The carnival was in town.

One by one, the remaining cards slid out of their jackets. Cards embossed with hearts, soft with sentiments. Mother murmured thank-yous, but her letter opener looked sharp enough to puncture platitudes, to extract blood from those hearts. Outside the room's west-facing windows, the crows collected on the lawn like a cluster of dark notes at the start of a requiem.

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In the fables, special occasions are marked by lavish feasts attended by nobles, not by a family lunch at a local diner. When the feast occurs at the end of the story, it is a sign of ever after. When it comes at the start, it is a warning that the good times won't last.

Today's lunch was off. It was off, so there. Get back. The rest of the day was a fist with hard knuckles. Chew on those. In the kitchen, a fork scraped at a can. Stand back. At the cutting board, the hands were swift. Onions. Celery stalks. Tomatoes trucked in from Oxnard. Chop and chop and chop.

Later, Father spoke to her in a way that was not done in the fables. "Why don't you ease up?" He called her "Florence," which meant that he was not speaking in his customary way. By then, her rage had softened. But as usual, as always, her will had hardened, had set. Quietly, she released a sob into his embrace. She only wanted what was best for the children. She repeated her mantra. *I didn't have a mother!*

In Japanese folklore, the *ubume* is the ghost of a mother who has died prematurely, leaving young children behind. When she returns, she brings them sweets to wash away bitterness.

Father paused just outside the door leading to the bedroom Bryan and I shared. Laura remained secreted in her bedroom; the youngest was wise enough to steer clear of all the fuss. "Why do you always have to react? Let things go and they won't get out of hand." He was Solomon dispensing wisdom to a second son. No, he was a father awkwardly blocking the entry light from the hallway. "It makes no sense to fight with her. She's not going to change. Use your common sense."

The words contained nearly the whole of Father's philosophy. The advice was reassuring, sort of. Like an insurance salesman informing a client that his current policy was better than nothing at all. Or a dentist advising a patient that if he brushed regularly, he could save the rest of his teeth.

Were Father a mean spirit, which he was not, he might easily have crushed a hypersensitive teenager like me. How can you fight with your own mother when she is ill? And on Mother's Day. What's wrong with you? You're no son of mine.

Instead, he credited me with common sense. Exercising it sounded doable, like juggling balls with both hands. Like exhaling sounds soft as vowels.

Yet somehow, even back then, I guessed that my failure to use common sense in the presence of Mother's volatility was not the key to unlocking what was wrong with me year by year—what was wrong with me, with her, with our family. We were still all together. Blood ran thick. It would prevail over all else, would it not? But I struggled to grasp the depth of Mother's anger, its length and breadth. How was it that her care and gentleness, what I remem-

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bered and cherished from my early childhood in the Midwest, was so utterly changed? Her illness accelerated the change, no doubt, but some other torment preceded it, something had lain in wait until that age when each of her children first exhibited signs of independence.

No, that was too strong a word, independence. A failure to submit. A failure to heed, to yield, to obey. Not to follow the right pattern, not to reproduce the correct image—it was too dangerous to contemplate. Lessons wrought from camp, that dark period of exile, I understood, but the camp experience itself I had heard little of, just as I had learned little of the historical factors, which in affecting my mother's and father's families before the war, helped produce those lessons in their particular expressions afterwards. What would be the effect of my learning of pasts about which my parents seldom spoke? Would I be enlightened by the discovery that some tensions are never relieved, or would I be overwhelmed? I did not formulate the questions in exactly this way. Not back then. But I felt their presence. Their heft. Their weight.

In some tellings of the folklore, the ubume has lost her infant during childbirth. In a common version, she hands her baby to a passerby to hold. When the ubume disappears, the baby grows heavy, eventually turning into stone.

Pasadena, California, 1941

FLORENCE FUNAKOSHI leaned over the sewing tray beneath the dining room window. Home was the compact rental in Pasadena, its yard consisting of two pockets of grass joined by a seam of cement. Behind the house stood an elm and a shed protected by a chain-link fence. Blocks away, boxcars with names like Santa Fe branded on their flanks gathered at the railroad station. In the kitchen, Freddie adjusted the radio.

Florence knotted the thread, snipped the loose ends. The shirt button was secure. Around the neighborhood, people were awake, her friends headed off to the Buddhist temple. Papa remained Buddhist, as did Ne-san. But Florence hoped to convince her brother to attend Christian church. It was Mr. and Mrs. Carew who had guided her conversion, and recently she had counseled Freddie on the matter of salvation. He had taken communion once, nibbling on a square of cracker, sipping grape juice from a chalice.

Since summer, when Mary wed David Akashi, Florence had had a bedroom all to herself. Before going up the Central Coast on her honeymoon, Mary had warned Florence to keep the house clean. Older sisters, Ne-sans, were like that.

Freddie wore a white tee and sporty trousers, standard gear for guys barely out of high school. His thick black hair held just the right amount of natu-

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ral wave. It looked good, it usually did. A slight touch of pomade had done the trick. Yes, her brother was a nice-looking guy, and he had a pleasant disposition. Several of Florence's girlfriends had noticed. "Cradle robber!" they needed one another. Florence just laughed. She liked doing favors for Freddie.

"Did you hear?"

A formal look for church was best, especially with Christmas approaching. Urge him to wear the wool suit, the navy-blue tie.

The voice came from the kitchen, where occasional bursts of static marred the radio transmission.

Into the sewing cabinet went the thimble, the pin cushion, the spool of thread. "Where did you say?"

It was Sunday morning, the sun streaming through the elm tree. At the railroad station, the boxcars browsed peacefully. Freddie raised his voice in reply.

BEFORE FLORENCE had slipped into the dental chair, she had stolen a second glance. This had been, what, two weeks and two days ago? The dentist was above medium height for a Nisei. His face lacked the pleasing oval shape that declared a man to be handsome, but it was honest-looking, and his hair looked washed and well-groomed. Nisei are Americans of Japanese ancestry; their parents are Issei, who constitute the first-generation immigrants from Japan. *Open*. His dental instruments had picked and probed efficiently, without wasted movements. The man's glasses had round, thick lenses. He had to be nearsighted. *Close*. No caries, the voice had declared, as if the discovery marked a minor medical miracle.

She had laughed up her sleeve, she could not help it. He looked like a young man struggling to say something not directly related to tooth decay. In the rail yard, the locomotives assumed a similarly stiff, motionless stance. They looked dependable, if not exciting. In need of a conductor.

As she left the office, Florence had said, "Thank you, Doctor." Just before that, "Where did I put my hat?"

It was a bold hat, a statement hat, a social confidence hat with a clipped brim, not her style, but Ne-san insisted that she wear it. Mitzi, her girlfriend at the hair salon, had set this thing up. It was her bright idea. It's at the edge of J-Town, his office. Trust me, Mitzi confided, he's available.

Last night was their first date. The dentist did not say a lot after he arrived at the house and proceeded to guide her to his car. He shared that he was the one who taught his brother to play ball. That was what he had taken her to, a Nisei basketball game at a local gymnasium. His brother Hideo was

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the star player of the winning team. The dentist was not boasting, just making small talk.

Afterwards, at her front door, he politely shook her hand. She was relieved that he did not try to get fresh. Not like that one Nisei guy who kept trying to steal a kiss on a first date. Terrified, she had managed to push him away at last. When he finally gave up, he muttered, “Whatsamatter with you? You’re just a cold fish!” Repeating the story years later, she mimicked the disdain in the man’s voice. As if keeping her virtue was wrong. As if the whole thing was her own darn fault.

The question of a second date arose. She hesitated, thinking it meant another basketball game.

Once home, Florence had had time to reflect. Papa had gone to bed. Freddie was out with friends. He’s nice, the dentist, but awfully quiet. A dentist with lockjaw, that’s a good one.

Why not? had been her actual reply. Next time, if there truly were a next time, perhaps she could suggest a movie, maybe one with Ginger Rogers. The dentist said he liked the French actor Charles Boyer. How funny, since Katsumi Uba was anything but cosmopolitan or suave. He talked easily about golfers like Walter Hagen and Bobby Jones but said not one word about government, about politics. Another thought. Should she have insisted that he charge her for that office visit? If not, would she not be under an obligation to him?

Her mind sorted through these matters the next morning as she finished mending the shirt button for Freddie, who had turned up the volume on the radio. Outside, the dew had evaporated. Barely months ago, Florence had turned twenty-one. Her birthday also fell on a pleasant day, the weather sunny and mild. Like today, December 7.

In the kitchen, Freddie turned up the radio.