

*An Excerpt from*

GENTLY TO NAGASAKI

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JOY KOGAWA

SEVENTEEN

**A**NN-MARIE AND I SET OFF on a nostalgia trip the next day, across the flatlands. Flat on flat all the way to the horizon. Coaldale first, then Vauxhall, the small town where both Ann-Marie and my ex-husband David once lived. Coaldale and Vauxhall became Granton and Cecil in *Obasan*. The Prairies are vast, but space among us is dense.

Coaldale, ten miles from Lethbridge, was a village in 1945 when our family arrived in the new unknown, this time from the mountains to the moon with our wooden apple boxes packed with our treasures – the camera phone, *The Book of Knowledge*, the surviving King George/Queen Elizabeth mug cherished by my anglophile mother. A few malformed trees greeted us in the everywhere dust and the non-stop wind. We settled into a shack on a sloughy lot. We lugged buckets of water from a reservoir, the clay gumbo weighting our boots. After boiling, insect carcasses sank to the bottom of the cup. We went from bathing often to bathing rarely.

One film clip my brother shot shows Dad at a water pump, a bucket slung in place, the water gushing as he pumps. Unusual to have a shot of Dad. He was always the cameraman, left eye squinched shut, the rectangular movie camera held tight against his right eye, slowly panning the scene. Dad, unsmiling in the clip, holds the bucket and looks straight into the camera. He was registering a statement, I think. Postwar life for Japanese Canadians. I'm about ten in the clip, in a coat much too small, quite blithe and happy.

Dad filmed Japanese Canadians across the country. The severity of the Dispersal Policy, the government's solution to the "Japanese problem," required extraordinary measures, especially travelling. Dad's parish was the whole country. His entire flock was the lone lost sheep.

One family sent to Prince Edward Island waited and waited for others to arrive as promised. None came. When Dad finally made it to that outpost, the family burst into a run to meet him. The mother lay before him, flat on the ground, hands outstretched clutching his feet and weeping. In the end, her mind broke. Hers was not the only one.

In the 1970s I said: “Daddy, your films are valuable. Let’s secure them in the Public Archives.” Thus disappeared his sixteen- and eight-millimetre films, into the safekeeping of the Government of Canada. Huge rolls in round metal tins. His pre-war colour footage was better than anything else the archives had from that era, I was told. Wherever people were, whatever we were doing on the islands, in cities, in towns, churches, factories, in the many camps, the school field days, picnics, concerts, the rows of huts, and, after the war, the farms across the Prairies, the fruit farms in Ontario, the ones still in British Columbia, he recorded them all. He connected the disconnected through his films. The separated families. The young people. The aged. He, the wretched, wounded shepherd, sought the lost and scattered.

In the 1970s, Japanese Canadians were not on anyone’s radar. Almost all of Dad’s films were damaged by leaky storage, Walter Neutell, the department head, told me apologetically years later when I enquired.

My parents, like other *issei*, were not complainers. Lois got that part right. The filmmaker, Brian Nolan, at least got some of Dad’s footage and made *The Tides of War*.

Soon after our arrival in Coaldale in 1945, Dad was off on his bike, and later in a ’28 Chev with its wooden spokes, then an Austin A 40, out across the hot and freezing windy prairie, twenty-five miles, fifty miles, seventy-five miles, over dusty washboard roads, through blizzards at twenty, thirty below, holding prayer meetings wherever we were – in hovels, in shacks, dung in the outhouses piling up, from Turin and Raymond to Iron Springs to Taber and Vauxhall. He picked up the hoe. He laboured beside the families in the fields, thinning beets, grading cucumbers, potatoes, picking corn. He was their advocate; he gave financial support and comfort; he was their translator in hospitals, in schools, in disputes, in situations of injustice. He deeply valued the people who were not valued, who were living far, far from each other, dots here and there. I knew all this first-hand. One meal offered to us in one shack was a tin of sardines, each child cupping their treasure with their hands.

He was a communicator’s communicator. Our home bulged with the latest – the Webster Chicago wire recorder, and every form of tape

recorder since, many cameras, mimeograph machines, a short-wave radio through which my brother listened to *HCJB (Heralding Christ Jesus' Blessings)*, from Quito, Ecuador. We were free, then, to know the world, and we listened to Foster Hewitt's *Hockey Night in Canada*, *The Green Hornet*, *Wayne and Shuster*, *House on the Hill*, symphonies. The indescribable joy of symphonies.

Through sleet and storm the faithful came to Coaldale's Anglican Church of the Ascension, the re-erected kindergarten building shipped by rail from Slocan by the Matsumoto ship builders. Our shack was attached to it, and my brother gained an attic room that I inherited after he went to university. I could climb out the little window and sit on the roof of the shack and daydream, looking up at the stars.

After school, neighbourhood children gathered. We read plays onto the wire recorder. Sound effects, wind – whoo – blowing across the mike. My brother Tim made a sign, AJMA, and in his radio announcer's voice, he would intone: "This is the Anglican Japanese Mission in Alberta's Recording Department." When he grew up he became a radio broadcaster of *Sunday School of the Air*, among other things. Our life was hugely entertaining. Tim played the trombone. I made up a dance that a friend and I performed in the community hall to prolonged applause. Our Christmases were stunning. The good old, good old Christmas carols every year, "While Shepherds Watched" and "O Little Town of." Every year the same movies projected on a bedsheet – "The Night before Christmas," "My Trip to Japan, 1949." Dad, the first Japanese Canadian to visit Japan after the war, made a movie of his trip with titles and postcards. The humorous music Tim used for Puss 'N Boots was "Chong He Come from Hong Kong." We filled paper bags with goodies. A delicious apple; a Japanese orange; curly red, white, and green Christmas candies; a toy. Tim was Santa Claus with pillow and cotton-batten beard. The little kids soaked up the happiness. So did I. The precious strands of tinsel were gathered up every year one by one, though they became dull and grey. My mother placed unconventional things on the tree, like Christmas cards, which I found embarrassing.

A small Christmas photo of our Young People's group made it one year onto a back page of the Anglican Church calendar. A nativity scene. I had quickly gathered bathrobes and square white cloths, which I thought were towels but learned later were Mama's menstrual cloths, and tied them with kimono ties around their heads. Kids with diagonal signs on sashes signified a family of nations. My mother was thrilled

and kept saying the picture in the calendar was thanks to me. She who never praised me for anything, said it was thanks to me. Walter made the signs. Good old Walter Nishida, who came to the performance of *Naomi's Road*.

And then there was the best food in the world – *futomaki* sushi, Japanese-style chow mein, teriyaki chicken, sweet pickled herring sushi, crunchy herring roe attached to seaweed, all the food that is still my most favourite.

Dad brought home a brown fabric-covered apparatus one day that was a loudspeaker system, a radio, and a machine with a heavy stylus for making 78 rpm records, all in one. A round green bulb of an eye lit up when the radio was on. Dad's first record was a message for his mother, his adored mother, in Japan. Tim played "Largo" slowly in the background as Dad spoke of the love of God. On the other side we sang "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." But on the very day he was to mail it, word came that his mother had died. I'd seen pictures of her. A kind, intelligent face. He sent her monthly gifts of money.

News of her death did not much affect my brother and me. We carried on that day as we normally did. A bit boisterous, perhaps.

"Oya no kanashimi kodomo ni wakaranai," Dad said quietly with a look of anguish. Of a parent's sorrow, children have little understanding.

I was stung by this. My mother, in our defence, said two words of explanation very gently: "Not known" and "because." We were to be excused because we did not know his mother.

Not to understand was the worst thing.

Dad's most severe punishment was a stern look. My mother's form of punishment was to sit beside me and lecture me on the goodness of Jesus.

What happiness there had been ended when I was in high school. Our family fell in a long slow spiral from a place of honour, from all that was considered decent and civilized, and plummeted to the gutter.

Dad had been away in Okinawa for months. I ached for him terribly. He was my main source of good cheer.

I came home from school one day and Mama, at the kitchen table, did an astonishing thing. She put her arms out to me. She held me to her. How too strange. Quietly, she said a letter had arrived. Dad, in Okinawa, was not coming home.

I absorbed the news through layers of gauze. I'd been writing him, begging to be with him. There were practical questions to ask my mother. Were we going to be all right? Yes, we would be all right. Would we

have enough money? She perked up just the tiniest bit to reassure me. Yes. We would have enough money. She looked as though she thought it an amusing question.

Not long after this, I returned from Camp Oliver, the Anglican Church summer camp near Calgary, and Daddy was suddenly back. A strangely shrunken presence, an invalid in bed, hardly talking, not answering my questions.

I sat at my desk in the attic room listening to the night crickets, dividing the chirps by four, adding forty to get the temperature.

The temperature in the house was strange. Mysterious meetings were going on. I kept asking questions. We were packing to go away. We were, we were not, going.

An atmosphere of severity spread over meals, over kitchen duties. My brother taunted me. Interminable lectures followed my outbursts. She required me to apologize to my brother while he snickered behind her back. I refused. In the battle of wills she was unmoveable. I ended up running to the bed weeping. When my weeping was spent, the lectures would begin again.

Nine months later, my mother finally told me in two words.