

LOYALTY  
by  
George Tanabe

Chapter 1

She was everything I wanted to be, everything I was not. Friendly, athletic, smart, popular, and oh, so good looking. Longer legs than the usual Japanese girl, gorgeous breasts, round eyes, high tight derry-air, almost as if she were of mixed blood. She had silky hair left straight, tapered smartly toward the back, not like the other girls with their rolled waves piled high on top, hanging heavy to their shoulders. Made her stand out even more, not that she needed to, dream puss that she was, and Robert kept telling me what she must look like straight out of the shower. Even though he was her classmate, Robert had no chance, too short and pig-nosed, but she spoke to every guy as if he were special—“really, Robert, you’re so amazing”—and they cupped her words, breathing hard to keep them smoldering. Even the girls trailed on her, but she liked everyone without favoring anyone as her best friend. At first, she didn’t know—senior girls never paid much attention to ninth grade boys—that I was the person special to her, and I proved it daily by being the only one to ignore her whenever I saw her on the street, in the mess hall, in school. I enjoyed a monopoly of taking her for granted by knowing, without any shredded doubt, that she was mine, because, you see, I slept next to her every night, and no, I’m not talking about my imagination.

A three-quarter inch wall separated my family from hers in the barracks built so hastily they never bothered to run the walls all the way to the roof. Or maybe the government designed it that way, eliminating ceilings to strip away our privacy, just as they had our homes, our stores, our farms, even our dogs. They wouldn’t let us keep anything beyond what we could carry, and Papa tried to make himself feel better by saying they could never take away his honor. Honor.

All I knew about honor was that my grades had not been good enough for me to make the honor roll at school in Lodi.

Rushing and waiting, hurrying to stand in line. They had given us four days to clear out a lifetime, and they bussed us all the way to Arcadia outside of L.A., where they banded us at the Santa Anita Racetrack smelling of horse shit, as if we were beasts, undoubtedly a burden. For months they had kept us corralled at that Assembly Center for later transfer to camps thrown up in forsaken places, where we could go nowhere even if we dared to cut through the barbed wire fences and dodge the sentries' bullets.

"It makes no sense," said Robert. "Why'd they ship us all the way here when the Assembly Center in Stockton is so close to Lodi?"

"Dunno," I said, though actually I figured they must have run out of space at Stockton. Had to be, right?

February turned into spring and summer of 1942 at Santa Anita, and the news from the Pacific and Europe was all bad, except for our victory at Midway. The Japanese and Germans invaded and occupied at will, and Robert was convinced that things would get worse for us. He was right, as usual, and in September, boom, just like that, they made us hurry up and stand in line for trains to Arkansas (who figured this one out?), next to the Mississippi River, in a Delta mud flat that actually had a name (talk about amazing)—Rohwer.

"What?" Papa said.

"Rohwer, r-o-h-w-e-r," Robert explained. "*Roar*, just like a lion."

"*Shi-shi*?" Papa asked.

I quizzed Robert with a swift look. "No, no," he answered me. "I know what you're thinking. Papa's not talking about piss—*shi-shi* also means lion." Papa knew some English,

which he threw into his Japanese, mixing it all up in what Robert called pigeon. I wasn't fooled into thinking it was the way you'd talk to birds, but it sort of worked for us. I put in as much Japanese as I knew into my English, but we really had to juggle the languages to arrive at the best sense we could. Roar, lion, *shi-shi*, piss, Rohwer.

Even President Roosevelt called it a concentration camp, though his officials said we were being *evacuated* from our homes for our own protection from our mad neighbors, who, wouldn't you think, should have been the ones arrested for harassing us? Two months after Pearl Harbor, the President had ordered our *internment*, another word to justify something nasty as nice. All of this was happening, Mama said, because of Pearl Harbor. She never said it was because the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor; it was just Pearl Harbor, as if Pearl were a cranky old lady, Miss Harbor, who whispered rumors into the ears of our believing President.

We were among the first arrivals at Rohwer, because, Robert theorized, our last name was Arakaki, and every list began with A. "But what about the Tamuras next to us on the train?" "Well," said Robert, "they're from L.A., not Lodi, and there are so many Japanese there they had to start further down the alphabet." That's what I liked about Robert. He could explain anything. Maybe he'd become a lawyer or a teacher someday. He's the only one I could talk to, couldn't say much to Mama and Papa. And other people? Forget it.

It was a quiet hobby, one I could do all by myself, and I don't know how it started, but I loved to collect words, especially the one-of-a-kind oddities. I picked up words like some kids hunted for rocks, and to me the most exotic gems were from French. I couldn't wait to get issues of Blackhawk comics because I got such a kick out of Andre saying *sacrebleu!* at the most exciting part of the story. My favorite Japanese word was *bakatare*, stupid fool, I guess because Papa used it so often.

English was easier, of course, and I liked to put words together in unexpected ways, especially if I could make ordinary things have feelings, like the sad rock I found, cracked in half right through its heart, or the mad chair that wobbled for not wanting to hold people's bottoms up. I talked a whole lot, forward, backward, circling in my head all the time, but could hardly get any of it out to anyone standing in front of me. Now, writing was a whole different thing, silent and safe. Mrs. Hulten, my English teacher back in Lodi, once accused me of turning in a story she claimed Robert must have written. I had to bring Robert in so that he could tell her the writing was mine. She grudgingly accepted it, but I don't think she ever believed I could write that well. "You're Japanese," she said.

What difference did that make? Did she think a Japanese boy couldn't be that smart? I wasn't Japanese, not in my language. English was the language of my dreams, and somebody told me or maybe I read it, that the language you speak while sleeping is your native tongue. English was the only language I could read, and I read a lot. Sometimes I'd talk to the characters, like Tom Sawyer. We were about the same age, and it was easy talking to him. I wished I could have been like him, doing exciting things with a good friend he could talk to. He didn't have to read about adventures, he just went out and had them. Then again, I bet he didn't read as much as I did, and he probably couldn't write as well either. And he was pure American.

Robert was the only one I could talk to, but I couldn't get everything out even to him. The important thing is he understood me, defended me, like the time Papa accused me of failing to feed the chickens back at home. It's not what you think, Robert had said to Papa, the chickens were really hungry and ate so fast it only seemed like Isaac forgot to fill their trays. *Bakatare*, Papa shot back. Papa could tell when chickens were fed or not, and he called Robert a fool for

trying to fool him, but he didn't push it any further because, I think, he knew in an instinctive way I needed to be protected.

“Why'd they name me Isaac?” I once asked Robert. “Why can't I have an American name like yours?”

“It's American—and a good name too,” he said, lowering his voice. “Precisely because few Japanese have it. You're special, don't you see?”

“Where'd they get that name?”

“From Newton, I think. You're going to be famous too. Don't forget, he was called Sir. You know, royalty.”

I did know my math, not as well as Sir Isaac Newton for sure, but shoot, numbers were easy in my head. Robert and I walked every Rohwer street paved with that gumbo mud, and we counted the residential blocks—36—each with 12 wooden barracks, skinned with tar paper battened against the wind, 20 feet wide (we paced it), 120 feet long, divided into 6 living units stenciled A to F, 2,592 in all! We did the multiplication over and over to be sure we got it right. A small city, really, right out there in the middle of all that Arkansas muck and scrub. Each block had a mess hall, an all-purpose meeting building, and a communal bathroom with no partitions between the toilet bowls. Couldn't even *shi-shi* in private (hey, that's why they called it Rohwer!). I put my head down and closed my eyes while taking a shit, as if blocking out sight did the same for sound and smell. And showers? Robert and I did it with our underwear on, and Mama always waited till midnight.

The trains rolled in, and I never saw so many Japanese people in all my life! Yikes, so weird. Papa said there were over 8,000 of us, but the late-comers were lucky. Papa complained

bitterly about our rotten luck of having come first and being assigned to Block 1, the lowest spot in the swampy camp, and too close to the railway. Instead of taking the water away, the drainage ditch around our barracks became a moat turning us into an island whenever it rained. It was like being in a castle—well, far from it, actually—but I still imagined mounted knights and damsels in distress, waiting to be rescued by—and this too Mary did not know—a ninth grader, me, Sir Isaac. Everyone thought she was a fairy princess, shiny and blessed, but I knew her distress. Damsel. Nobody used that word except in old tales about girls in trouble.

“Hi,” she said to me the first time we met on our shared porch. I stepped back. We’d come out of our side-by-side front doors at the same time. Her brown skirt fluttered around her knees, and her white blouse was tucked in so tightly I could see the outline of her bra. She stretched out an arm to put on her jacket and that made her arch her back. “So you live right here next to us?” she asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“My name is Mary. And you’re...?”

I tried to say my name, but nothing came out. The burning of my cheeks dried out my throat, and I dropped my gaze, afraid that if I looked at her I’d stare. She stepped toward me and I wanted to touch her, she smelled so fine, but I couldn’t even take her hand when she offered it to me. She lifted her extended hand up to her hair, as if she had meant to stroke herself in that roundabout way.

“I won’t bite you,” she said. “But, hey, don’t worry about it. You can tell me later.”

“Isaac.”

“Isaac!” She covered her smile. “What a...pretty name. Pretty interesting, I mean. Hard to forget. Well, I guess we’ll be seeing a lot of each other, being’s that we’re neighbors.” She

skipped down the stairs, and hurried off, but turned around and walked backwards. “Bye,” she waved. “Isaac.” She touched her fingertips to her lips and let her hand fall in my direction.

I had to grab the porch railing.

She smiled whenever she saw me, held up one hand in an Indian greeting, and said one word so softly it became a secret, “Hey.” It was more like breathing than speaking, and that feathery word brushed my heart. I never replied, which is why she never bothered to use more than one word. Anything else would require a response, and she spared me the awkward trouble. When no one could hear me, I practiced saying it like she did—*heay*—whispering, caressing.

“Your brother,” she told Robert, “is so shy. He’ll come, won’t he? Tomorrow, when we have you all over for coffee?”

Mama and Papa approached everything as a problem, and they argued about whether to accept the Yoshimura’s invitation. Mama said it was not right to call on strangers, but Papa said accepting an invitation was different from just dropping in. Then we should take a gift, Mama replied, but we have nothing. Robert nearly split a gut when Papa said he had a new umbrella he could give. Maybe we shouldn’t go, Papa concluded, and then nixed his own suggestion on the grounds that it would be rude. Well, Mama said, if we have to go then the boys should stay back. After all, they might serve snacks and we don’t want to cause them any more trouble than we have to. Bad enough for both of us to visit, she said. But Mary wants all of us to go over, Robert said, and Papa’s right—it would be rude to refuse their invitation. Which is worse, Robert asked Mama, to cause them a little trouble with serving snacks or to insult them? All right, said Mama, then I’ll give them this dish towel I just embroidered.

No wonder we never visited anyone in Lodi. The nearest Japanese farm was a mile away, and Papa never cared for Wada-san. Miser, he said, that's what old man Wada was. There in camp, we had neighbors, right next door and friendly.

"Come in, come in." Mr. Yoshimura (Y, they must be from LA) held the screen door open as we filed in behind Papa. We didn't bother to put on our shoes just to step out on the porch, take them off again, and go in through the adjacent door. "I'm Frank, this is my wife Michi, my daughter Mary, and my son Kazuo, but you can call him Kaz." Mr. Yoshimura was handsome in that American way, hair parted in the middle, thin-rimmed glasses, tall, trim, like his daughter. Papa looked like he had just stepped off the boat, thick glasses matching his fat, downturned lips, stubbled hair over his perfectly round dome, big ears sticking out like fans, and he kept mumbling all those polite phrases, which he managed to sound severe. Mr. Yoshimura was so slick with his perfect English, having been born in L.A. a second generation Nisei, it turned out. That made Mary a Sansei, third generation, another way in which she stood out. Our parents had come from Japan, first generation Issei, and so Robert and I were Nisei. Mama and Papa were more comfortable talking with Mary's Issei grandfather, whom she called Popsie.

"Popsie?" Robert asked.

Mary laughed. "Actually the neighborhood kids gave him that name because he'd sneak them Popsicles for free. At first, Mom thought they were saying Popsie for Pop, but later discovered the true meaning of his name. Mom ran our grocery store since Daddy worked in his law office, and she worried that Popsie was going to run our business broke, but she couldn't watch him all the time. The kids knew, and would wait for the right moment, run up to him—he was always in the store—and Popsie would raid the freezer. The name stuck, even after Mom stopped carrying Popsicles."

To tell the truth, I never saw the difference between Papa and stone-face Wada since neither of them ever smiled, but here in the Yoshimuras' room, Papa and Mama were laughing so hard Mary had to give Mama a Kleenex. It was Popsie, telling jokes and stories, and Robert kept giving me shrugs to say that he was stumped, unable to explain this side of our parents we had never seen before. Our Japanese was not good enough to understand everything about Popsie's stories, which he punctuated with funny grunts and gestures. "There he goes again," said Mary to Kaz, "the old performer."

At one point, Popsie banged a tight fist against his open hand, then threw both arms up in apparent triumph, only to fold his arms around himself, self-satisfied but humble, admitting, perhaps, that maybe he really shouldn't have outwitted his opponent. His animations gave him a youthfulness that clashed with his silvered hair and his sweeping mustache, black as charcoal ink. He wrapped up his story by stretching his arms out to his sides, palms up with a shrug to prove that there was nothing he could have done about it. After wiping her eyes again, Mama nodded in agreement. "*Soo-yo, soo-yo,*" she said, and smiled at Papa. "Wow," whispered Robert. "Did you see that?"

Mrs. Yoshimura carried a tray and lowered it to each adult sitting on the bunk beds. She glided so smoothly it was impossible for her to spill a drop, and I wondered why she had to wear a white apron over her gray dress. Thin but curvy in the right places, she was polished and welcoming, and I tried not to stare at her too. Bet she grew up in a city, not some farm or small town. "I'm sorry," she said, "it's just instant coffee, but the stuff's not bad considering. I wish we had a kitchen in here instead of just a hotplate." Mary followed with small bowls of sugar and powdered milk. "Sorry, kids, but no coffee for you," Mrs. Yoshimura said. "It'd stunt your

growth. But we have some canned tomato juice.” When Mary handed me my can, she leaned over more than she had to.

“Ah!” Popsie said, taking his cup. He turned to Robert and me and explained in pigeon, “In-stant-o cohee. You know, what you say, inven...inven..., make by my friend Kato Satori. He scine-tist in Chicago, but Satori, you know, I mean, how do you say? Wake up. Just like Buddha.”

“Well,” said Mr. Yoshimura. “Satori means enlightenment all right, but awakening is fine too. That’s what caffeine will do. Isn’t it a strange coincidence that the inventor of instant coffee was named Satori?”

“You’re lucky,” said Robert to Kaz, “to have a grandparent. Ours are in Japan, and we’ve never met them. Maybe never will. What happened to your grandmother?”

“Died giving birth,” said Kaz, “as did the baby.”

I must have been staring at Popsie’s mustache because he kept winking at me as if to let me know that it was all right for me to know. But know what? I finally realized it bothered me, that mustache, gee whiz, so black, his hair so white. Popsie got up, came over to me, cupped his calloused hands over my ear and leaned over. “Shoe polish,” he whispered, then stood up straight and laughed. I almost dropped my tomato juice.

Mary heard it all. She asked if I liked Popsie’s mustache. It was impressive, swooping out to fine points at the edges of his cheeks. I wondered if he used pomade to hold its shape. “He copied it from General Araki,” Mary explained, “you know, the War Minister who appeared on the cover of Time Magazine a few years ago. Araki’s a fanatic; preaches Bushido, the Way of the Warrior. Suicide before surrender and all that junk. But Popsie wouldn’t kill himself for any reason—he just likes the look of the General’s mustache.”

Papa got up from the bunk he was sitting on. Time to go. We don't want to impose. Mama rose, and straightened the bedding.

"Don't worry about it, Mrs. Arakaki," Mary said. "I never make my bed."

"Isaac," Robert said. "Isaac, don't just sit there. Time to go."

I never heard the thank yous and don't mention its. I was deafened by the sight of her bed, on this side of the wall exactly where mine was on the other side, separated so thinly we slept next to each other, every night, huddled so closely I could hear her dream-tell her secrets.