

C H A P T E R I

A Shocking Fact of Life

THE first five years of my life I lived in amoebic bliss, not knowing whether I was plant or animal, at the old Carrollton Hotel on the waterfront of Seattle. One day when I was a happy six-year-old, I made the shocking discovery that I had Japanese blood. I was a Japanese.

Mother announced this fact of life to us in a quiet, deliberate manner one Sunday afternoon as we gathered around for dinner in the small kitchen, converted from one of our hotel rooms. Our kitchen was cozily comfortable for all six of us as long as everyone remained in his place around the oblong table covered with an indestructible shiny black oilcloth; but if more than Mother stood up and fussed around, there was a serious traffic jam — soy sauce splattered on the floor and elbows jabbed into the pot of rice. So Father sat at the head of the table, Kenji, Henry, and I lined up on one side along the wall, while Mother and baby Sumiko occupied the other side, near the kitchen stove.

Now we watched as Mother lifted from a kettle of boiling water a straw basket of steaming slippery noodles. She directed her information at Henry and me, and I felt uneasy. Father paid strict attention to his noodles, dipping them into a bowl of fragrant pork broth and then sprinkling finely chopped raw green onion over them.

"Japanese blood — how is it I have that, Mama?" I asked, surreptitiously pouring hot tea over my bowl of rice. Mother said it was bad manners to wash rice down with tea, but rice was delicious with *obancha*.

"Your father and I have Japanese blood and so do you, too. And the same with Henry, Ken-chan, and Sumi-chan."

"Oh." I felt nothing unusual stirring inside me. I took a long cool sip of milk and then with my short red chopsticks I stabbed at a piece of pickled crisp white radish.

"So, Mama?" Henry looked up at her, trying to bring under control with his chopsticks the noodles swinging from his mouth like a pendulum.

"So, Papa and I have decided that you and Ka-chan will attend Japanese school after grammar school every day." She beamed at us.

I choked on my rice.

Terrible, terrible, terrible! So that's what it meant to be a Japanese — to lose my afternoon play hours! I fiercely resented this sudden intrusion of my blood into my affairs.

"But, Mama!" I shrieked. "I go to Bailey Gatzert School already. I don't want to go to another!"

Henry kicked the table leg and grumbled, "Aw gee, Mama, Dunks and Jiro don't have to — why do I!"

"They'll be going, too. Their mothers told me so."

My face grew hot with anger. I shouted, "I won't, I won't!"

Father and Mother painted glowing pictures for me. Just think you'll grow up to be a well-educated young lady, knowing two languages. One of these days you'll thank us for giving you this opportunity.

But they could not convince me. Until this shattering moment, I had thought life was sweet and reasonable. But not any more.

Why did Father and Mother make such a fuss just because we had Japanese blood? Why did we have to go to Japanese school? I refused to eat and sat sobbing, letting great big tears splash down into my bowl of rice and tea.

Henry, who was smarter and adjusted more quickly to fate, continued his meal, looking gloomy, but with his appetite unimpaired.

Up to that moment, I had never thought of Father and Mother as Japanese. True, they had almond eyes and they spoke Japanese to us, but I never felt that it was strange. It was like one person's being red-haired and another black.

Father had often told us stories about his early life. He had come from a small village in the prefecture of Tochigi-ken. A third son among five brothers and one sister, Father had gone to Tokyo to study law, and he practiced law for a few years before he succumbed to the fever which sent many young men streaming across the Pacific to a fabulous new country rich with promise and opportunities.

In 1904 Father sailed for the United States, an ambitious young man of twenty-five, determined to continue his law studies at Ann Arbor, Michigan. Landing in Seattle, he plunged into sundry odd jobs with the hope of saving enough money to finance his studies. Father worked with the railroad gang, laying ties on virgin soil, he toiled stubbornly in the heat of the potato fields of Yakima, he cooked his way back and forth between Alaska and Seattle on ships of all sizes and shapes, but fortune eluded him. Then one day he bought a small cleaning and pressing shop on Tenth and Jackson Street, a wagon and a gentle white dobbie, "Charlie." The years flew by fast, but his savings did not reflect his frenzied labor. With each passing year, his dream of Ann Arbor grew dimmer.

At last Father's thoughts turned toward marriage. About this time the Reverend Yohachi Nagashima — our grandfather — brought his family to America. Grandfather Nagashima was a minister of a Congregational church in Sanomachi, about twenty miles north of Tokyo in Tochigi-ken prefecture. He had visited the United States twice before on preaching missions among the Japanese. Grandfather had been impressed with the freedom and educational opportunities in America. He arrived in Seattle with his wife, Yuki, three daughters, Yasuko, my mother Benko, and Kikue, twenty-two, seventeen and sixteen years of age respectively, and two little round-eyed sons, Shinichi and Yoshio, six and four years.

Mother and her sisters sailed into the port looking like exotic tropical butterflies. Mother told us she wore her best blue silk crepe kimono, Yasuko chose a deep royal purple robe, and Kikue, a soft rose one. Their kimonos had extravagantly long, graceful sleeves, with bright red silk linings. Over their kimonos, the girls donned long, plum-colored, pleated skirts, called the *hakama*, to cover the kimono skirts that flipped open as they walked. Shod in spanking white *tabis* — Japanese stockings — and scarlet cork-soled slippers, the young women stood in tense excitement at the rails of the ship. Yasuko, the eldest, held a picture of a young man in her hand, and she could hardly bring herself to look down at the sea of faces below on the dock where her prospective husband, whom she had never met, stood waiting. Mother told us she and Kikue scanned the crowd boldly and saw hundreds of young, curious masculine faces turned upward, searching for their picture brides.

Father heard of the Nagashimas' arrival. He immediately called to pay his respects. Seeing three marriageable daughters, Father kept going back. Eventually he sent a mutual friend to

act as go-between to ask for the hand of the first daughter, Yasuko, but the friend reported that Mr. Nagashima had already arranged for Yasuko's marriage to a Mr. Tani. Undaunted, Father sent his friend back to ask for the second daughter, Benko. Mother said that when her father called her into his study and told her that a Mr. Itoi wanted to marry her, she was so shocked she fled to her room, dived under her bed and cried in protest, "I can't, Otoh-san, I can't. I don't even know him!"

Her father had got down on his hands and knees and peered at her under the bed, reprimanding her sternly. "Stop acting like a child, Benko. I advise you to start getting acquainted with Mr. Itoi at once."

And that was that. Finally Mother gave her consent to the marriage, and the wedding ceremony was performed at the Japanese mission branch of the Methodist Episcopal Church on Fourteenth and Washington Street. Years later, when Henry and I came upon their wedding picture in our family album, we went into hysterics over Mother's face which had been plastered white and immobile with rice powder, according to Japanese fashion. Only her piercing black eyes looked alive. In deference to Occidental tradition, she wore a white gown and bridal veil in which she looked tiny and doll-like beside Father, who stood stiff and agonized in formal white tie and tails.

For about a year Mother helped Father haphazardly at his dry-cleaning shop, intent on satisfying the customer's every whim. She scribbled down the strangely garbled phone messages. More than once Mother handed Father an address at which he was supposed to pick up clothes, and he found himself parking his wagon in front of an empty, weed-choked lot or cantering briskly out of the city limits as he pursued phantom house numbers.

In January, 1918, their first child was born, Henry Seiichi — son of truth. Shortly after, Father sold his little shop and bought the Carrollton Hotel on Main Street and Occidental Avenue, just a stone's throw from the bustling waterfront and the noisy railroad tracks. It was, in fact, on the very birth site of Seattle when the town began its boisterous growth with the arrival of pioneer Henry Yesler and his sawmill on the waterfront. In its early days, the area south of Yesler Hill, where we lived, was called Skid Road because loggers used to grease the roads at intervals to help the ox teams pull the logs down to the mills. Nearly a hundred years later, the district bore the name Skidrow, a corrupted version of Skid Road, with its shoddy stores, decayed buildings, and shriveled men.

The Carrollton had seen its heyday during the Alaskan gold rush. It was an old-fashioned hotel on the second floor of an old red brick building. It had twenty outside rooms and forty inside ones, arranged in three block formations and separated by long corridors. The hallways and inside rooms were lighted and ventilated by the ceiling skylight windows. During the cold of winter, these inside rooms were theoretically warmed by a pot-bellied stove in the lobby, which was located just at the left of the top stair landing. There was only one bathroom, with a cavernous bathtub, to keep sixty-odd people clean. A separate restroom, *FOR GENTS ONLY*, eased the bathroom congestion somewhat. For extra service all the rooms were equipped with a gigantic pitcher of water, a mammoth-sized washbowl, and an ornate chamber pot.

When Father took over the hotel in 1918, the building fairly burst with war workers and servicemen. They came at all hours of the day, begging to sleep even in the chairs in the hotel lobby. Extra cots had to be set up in the hallways.

Father and Mother loved to tell us how they had practically rejuvenated the battered, flea-ridden Carrollton by themselves. Father had said firmly, "If I have to manage a flophouse, it'll be the cleanest and quietest place around here." With patience and care, they began to patch the aches and pains of the old hotel. The tobacco-stained stairways were scrubbed, painted and lighted up. Father varnished the floors while Mother painted the woodwork. New green runners were laid out in the corridors. They repapered the sixty rooms, one by one. Every day after the routine room-servicing had been finished, Mother cooked up a bucket of flour and water and brushed the paste on fresh new wallpaper laid out on a long makeshift work table in the hall.

All the while Father tried to build up a choice selection of customers, for even one drunkard on a binge always meant fist fights and broken furniture. Father quickly found that among the flotsam of seedy, rough-looking characters milling around in Skidrow were men who still retained their dignity and self-respect. There were lonely old men whose families had been broken up by the death of wives and departing children, who lived a sober existence on their meager savings or their monthly pension allotment. Father also took in sea-hardened mariners, shipyard workers, airplane workers, fruit pickers and factory workers. He tried to weed out petty thieves, bootleggers, drug peddlers, perverts, alcoholics and fugitives from the law. At first glance it was hard to tell whether a stubble-bearded, wrinkled, and red-eyed man had just returned from a hard day's work or a hard day at the tavern. Father had a simple technique. If the man smelled of plain, honest-to-goodness perspiration, he was in. But if he reeked of wood alcohol or bay rum, the office window came crashing down in front of his nose.

Shortly after the Armistice of World War I was signed, I was.

born and appropriately named Kazuko Monica, the Japanese name meaning "peace." (Mother chose Monica from her reading about Saint Augustine and his mother, Saint Monica.) Two years later Kenji William arrived, his name meaning "Healthy in body and spirit." Mother added "William" because she thought it sounded poetic. And two years after that, Sumiko, "the clear one," was born.

For our family quarters, Mother chose three outside rooms looking south on Main Street, across an old and graying five-story warehouse, and as the family increased, a fourth room was added. Father and Mother's small bedroom was crowded with a yellow brass bed that took up one wall. Mother's dainty white-painted dresser and a small square writing table piled with her books and papers occupied another wall. Father's brown dresser stood off in another corner, its only ornament a round, maroon-lacquered collar box. A treadle sewing machine squatted efficiently in front of the window where Mother sat in the evenings, mending torn sheets and pillowcases. Their closet was a pole slung against the fourth wall, covered with a green, floral-print curtain.

The living room was large, light, and cheerful-looking, with a shiny mahogany-finished upright piano in one corner. Right above it hung a somber picture of Christ's face which looked down upon me each time I sat in front of the piano. Depending on my previous behavior, I felt restless and guilty under those brooding eyes or smugly content with myself. Against another wall, next to the piano, stood an elegant-looking, glass-cased secretary filled with Father's Japanese books, thick hotel account books, a set of untouched, glossy-paged encyclopedias, and the back numbers of the *National Geographic*. In the corner, near the window, was a small square table, displaying a monstrous, iridescent half of an abalone shell and a glass ball paperweight

filled with water, depicting an underwater scene with tiny corals and sea shells lying on the ocean bottom. In front of the other two windows was a long, brown leather davenport with a small gas heater nearby. A round dining table in the center of the room was surrounded by three plain chairs.

The children's bedrooms were simply furnished with brown iron cots and old-fashioned dressers. Although rugs were laid out in the living room and our parents' bedroom, our rooms had toe-chilling, easy-to-keep-clean linoleum. Sumiko and I occupied the room next to the living room while Henry and Kenji had the last room.

At first glance, there was little about these simple, sparse furnishings to indicate that a Japanese family occupied the rooms. But there were telltale signs like the *zori* or straw slippers placed neatly on the floor underneath the beds. On Mother's bed lay a beautiful red silk comforter patterned with turquoise, apple-green, yellow and purple Japanese parasols. And on the table beside the local daily paper were copies of the *North American Times*, Seattle's Japanese-community paper, its printing resembling rows of black multiple-legged insects. Then there was the Oriental abacus board which Father used once a month to keep his books.

Our kitchen was a separate room far down the hall. The kitchen window opened into an alley, right above the Ace Café. An outdoor icebox, born of an old apple crate, was nailed firmly to our kitchen window sill.

Father had put in a gas stove next to the small sink. The huge stove took up nearly all the floor space. He had nailed five layers of shelves against the opposite wall almost up to the ceiling, and next to this, he installed a towering china cabinet with delicate, frosted glass windows. A large, oblong table was wedged into the

only space left, in a corner near the door. Here in the kitchen were unmistakable Oriental traces and odors. A glass tumbler holding six pairs of red and yellow lacquered chopsticks, and a bottle of soy sauce stood companionably among the imitation cut-glass sugar bowl and the green glass salt and pepper shakers at the end of the table. The tall china cabinet bulged with bright hand-painted rice bowls, red lacquered soup bowls, and Mother's precious *somayaki* tea set.

The tea set was stunningly beautiful with the uneven surface of the gray clay dusted with black and gold flecks. There was a wisp of soft green around the rim of the tiny cups, as if someone had plucked off grass from the clay and the green stain had remained there. At the bottom of each teacup was the figure of a galloping, golden horse. When the cup was filled with tea, the golden horse seemed to rise to the surface and become animated. But the tea set was only for special occasions and holidays, and most of the time we used a set of dinnerware Americana purchased at the local hardware store and a drawerful of silver-plated tableware.

In the pantry, the sack of rice and gallon jug of *shoyu* stood lined up next to the ivory-painted canisters of flour, sugar, tea and coffee. From a corner near the kitchen window, a peculiar, pungent odor emanated from a five-gallon crock which Mother kept filled with cucumbers, *nappa* (Chinese cabbage), *daikon* (large Japanese radishes), immersed in a pickling mixture of *nuka*, consisting of rice polishings, salt, rice and raisins. The fermented products were sublimely refreshing, delicious, raw vegetables, a perfect side dish to a rice and tea mixture at the end of a meal.

Among the usual pots and pans stood a dark red stone mixing bowl inside of which were cut rows and rows of minute grooves as on a record disc. The bowl was used to grind poppy seeds and

miso (soybeans) into soft paste for soups and for flavoring Japanese dishes. I spent many hours bent over this bowl, grinding the beans into a smooth, fine paste with a heavy wooden club. For all the work that went into making *miso shiru*, soybean soup, I thought it tasted like sawdust boiled in sea brine. Mother told me nothing could be more nutritious, but I could never take more than a few shuddering sips of it.

In our family we ate both Western and Oriental dishes. Mother had come to America just fresh out of high school and had had little training in Japanese culinary art. In the beginning, Father taught Mother to cook all the dishes he knew. Father had a robust, mass-cooking-style which he had learned in the galleys of Alaska-bound ships and he leaned heavily toward ham and eggs, steaks and potatoes, apple and pumpkin pies. Later Mother picked up the technique of authentic Japanese cooking herself and she even learned to cook superb Chinese dishes. Although we acquired tastes for different types of food, we adhered mostly to a simple American menu.

So we lived in the old Carrollton. Every day, amidst the bedlam created by four black-eyed, jet-propelled children, Father and Mother took care of the hotel. Every morning they went from room to room, making the beds and cleaning up. To help speed up the chores, we ran up and down the corridors, pounding on doors. We brutally woke the late sleepers, hammering with our fists and yelling, "Wake up, you sleepyhead! Wake up, make bed!" Then someone would think of pushing the linen cart for Father and the rest of us would rush to do the same. We usually ended up in a violent tussle. One of our favorite games, when neither Father nor Mother was looking, was "climbing the laundry." We vied with each other to see who could climb highest on an ill-smelling mountain of soiled sheets, pillowcases and damp

towels, piled high to the ceiling. Henry always reached the top by giving himself a running start halfway down the hall. He flew light-footed up the mound like a young gazelle. He hooted scornfully when I scrambled up, red faced and frantic, grabbing at the sheets and tumbling down when I snatched a loose pillowcase. Kenji and Sumiko squealed happily at the foot of the linen pile and slapped each other with the sopping wet towels. Whenever Mother discovered us, she shrieked in dismay, "*Kita-nai, mah, kita-nai koto!* It's dirty and full of germs. Get right out of there!"

Yes, life to us children was a wonderful treat — especially during hot summer nights when Father slipped out to a market stand down the block and surprised us with an enormous, ice-cold watermelon. It was pure joy when we first bit into its crisp pink succulence and let the juice trickle and seeds fall on old newspapers spread on the round table in the parlor. Or sometimes on a wintry evening, we crowded around the kitchen table to watch Father, bath towel-apron draped around his waist, whip up a batch of raisin cookies for us. It wasn't everybody's father who could turn out thick, melting, golden cookies. We were especially proud that our father had once worked as a cook on romantic Alaska-bound freighters.

Life was hilarious whenever Mother played *Jan-ken-pon!* *Ai-kono-hoi!* with us. This was the game played by throwing out paper, scissors, and rock symbols with our hands, accompanied by the chant. The winner with the stronger symbol had the privilege of slapping the loser's wrist with two fingers. Mother pretended to cry whenever our small fingers came down on her wrist. With her oval face, lively almond-shaped eyes, and slender aquiline nose, Mother was a pretty, slender five feet of youth and fun.

I thought the whole world consisted of two or three old hotels

on every block. And that its population consisted of families like mine who lived in a corner of the hotels. And its other inhabitants were customers — fading, balding, watery-eyed men, rough-tough bearded men, and good men like Sam, Joe, Peter and Montana who worked for Father, all of whom lived in these hotels.

It was a very exciting world in which I lived.

I played games with a little girl I liked, Matsuko, who lived in Adams Hotel, two blocks away. Sometimes Henry and his friends Dunks and Jiro joined us to explore dingy alleys behind produce warehouses, looking for discarded jars of candies. Sometimes we fished from Pier Two, dipping a long string with bread tied to its end in the briny, moldy-green water. It was pleasant to sit on the sun-warmed old timber which creaked with the waves, and bask in the mellow sun, waiting for the shiners to nibble.

Our street itself was a compact little world, teeming with the bustle of every kind of business in existence in Skidrow. Right below our living quarters was a large second-hand clothing store. It was guarded by a thin, hunchbacked, gray woolly-bearded man who sat napping on a little stool at the entrance. Its dust-misted windows were crammed with army and navy surplus clothes, blanket bathrobes, glistening black raincoats, stiff lumber jackets which practically stood up by themselves and a tangled heap of bootery from romeo house slippers to hip-length fishing boots. Oddly, the shop was very susceptible to fire, and every now and then smoke would seep up through our bedroom floor boards and we would hear fire engines thundering down our street. After each such uproar, the old man would put up huge, red-lettered signs: *Mammoth Fire Sale . . . practically a giveaway!*

Next to the clothing store was the tavern, the forbidden hall of iniquity, around which we were not supposed to loiter. The swinging door was sawed off at the bottom, but with our heads

hanging down we managed to get an upside down view of it. All we could see were feet stuck to brass rails. A nickelodeon played only one song, day in and day out, a melancholy, hillbilly tune of which we could make out just one phrase. "When they cut down that old pine tree. . . ." It was drowned out by the heaven-splitting songs from the mission hall next door, which was filled with hollow-eyed, graying old men, sitting impassively with battered hats balanced on their knees.

Next to our hotel entrance, Mr. Wakamatsu operated the Ace Café. We liked him, because he was such a tall, pleasant-mannered, handsome man. He had a beautiful clear tenor voice which floated out into the alley up to our kitchen as he called out, "Veal, French fries on the side . . . !" Mr. Wakamatsu's window display was always a splendid sight to see. There would be a neat row of purple strawberry shortcakes, or a row of apple pies shining with the luster of shellac, or a row of rigid, blood-red gelatin puddings planted squarely in the center of thick white saucers.

Next to the Ace Café was Dunks's father's small barbershop. Then there was the little white-painted hot-dog stand where we bought luscious hot dogs and hamburgers smothered with onions and the hottest of chili sauce which brought tears brimming to our eyes. The hot-dog man was constantly swatting flies on the meat board, and I hate to think how many mashed flies were in the red ground meat.

Then came another forbidden place, the burlesque house. A brunet-haired woman with carefully powdered wrinkles sat in the ticket booth, chewing gum. She always winked a shiny purple eyelid at us whenever we passed, and we never knew for sure whether we should smile back at her or not. The theater marquee was studded with dingy yellow light bulbs, spelling out the "Rialto," and the doors were covered with the life-size paintings

of half-naked girls, about to step out from behind feathers, balloons and chiffon scarves.

On the corner of Occidental and Washington Street stood a small cigar shop. We were sure that the storekeeper, who constantly rattled dice in a dirty leather cylinder box, had been a big-time gambler in the past. He was just the type, with his baggy eyes, cigar stuffed in his mouth, and his fingers covered with massive jeweled rings.

Just around the corner was a teamsters' union office. Hairy-armed, open-shirted, tattooed men clomped continually in and out of the smoke-filled room. Twice a day, a man hustled out of there carrying a wooden cratebox. He beckoned to the men loafing on the corner to gather near and listen to what he had to say. We stood watching on tiptoes at the fringe of the crowd until the orating man had worked himself into a passion, alternately purring at and berating his apathetic audience.

". . . tell me, my friends, what the hell are you anyway . . . men or beasts? To the goddamned capitalist, you're nothin' but beasts! Are you going to grovel under their feet the rest of your life? CRUMBS! That's all they give you . . . CRUMBS! Are you going to be satisfied with that? I say 'NO!' None of that for us anymore. We have to break them now . . . now!"

"Hallelujah," someone would respond dryly.

Across on the opposite corner there was another small crowd, gawking at a man with flowing, silver-white hair and full beard. Tears would be rolling down his uplifted face and disappear into his beard as he pleaded with his audience to "repent before it is too late." Listening to him, I always felt the urgency to repent before it was too late, but I was never sure which of my sins was worth confessing.

The Salvation Army was always there, marching along the

street, keeping in time with the brass drum. Wheeling expertly into semicircle formation near the curb, the uniformed men and women would lift their bugles and trumpets and blare out a vigorous hymn. When the tambourine was passed around for our offering, we would move on guiltily, having already spent our nickles for hot dogs.

This was the playground where I roamed freely and happily. And when I finally started grammar school, I found still another enchanting world. Every morning I hurried to Adams Hotel, climbed its dark flight of stairs, and called for Matsuko. Together we made the long and fascinating journey — from First Avenue to Twelfth Avenue — to Bailey Gatzert School. We always walked over the bridge on Fourth Avenue where we hung over the iron rails, waiting until a train roared past under us, enveloping us completely in its hissing, billowing cloud of white, warm steam. We meandered through the international section of town, past the small Japanese shops and stores, already bustling in the early morning hour, past the cafés and barber shops filled with Filipino men, and through Chinatown. Then finally we went up a gentle sloping hill to the handsome low-slung, red-brick building with its velvet green lawn and huge play yard. I felt like a princess walking through its bright, sunny corridors on smooth, shiny floors. I was mystified by a few of the little boys and girls. There were some pale-looking children who spoke a strange dialect of English, rapidly like gunfire. Matsuko told me they were "*hagu-jins*," white people. Then there were children who looked very much like me with their black hair and black eyes, but they spoke in high, musical singing voices. Matsuko whispered to me that they were Chinese.

And now Mother was telling us we were Japanese. I had always thought I was a Yankee, because after all I had been born on

Occidental and Main Street. Montana, a wall-shaking mountain of a man who lived at our hotel, called me a Yankee. I didn't see how I could be a Yankee and Japanese at the same time. It was like being born with two heads. It sounded freakish and a lot of trouble. Above everything, I didn't want to go to Japanese school.