

The Dog Lover

by Jane Tanimura '07

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My dad waits in line at a liquor store on a Saturday afternoon to buy a lotto ticket. Born and raised in Inglewood, a notoriously dangerous neighborhood glamorized as the birth place of gangster rap, this Japanese American man stands five-feet, eight-inches tall and wears his weekend outfit as if it's a part of his skin- a white nylon Members Only jacket with a discolored white t-shirt underneath and baggy navy blue Dockers that barely touch the top of his stained beige tennis shoes. His salt and pepper hair is slicked back with pomade, a grooming ointment he has been using since he was a teenager. He slouches over the counter and looks at the clerk straight in the eye. "Give me a Super Lotto Plus." He says this without wincing, in a way that mimics his idol Clint Eastwood.

Every Saturday morning when I was little, my dad whisked me away to his old neighborhood in his broken down, dog-fur-infested SUV, for a quick stop to the Seven Eleven and then to Baskin Robbins for ice cream. While we waited in line, my dad would hold my hand loosely and self-consciously. Although I squeezed his massive hand - beautifully wrinkled and tanned, dry and warm to the touch - as tightly as I could, he would never reciprocate the grip. I often wondered if my dad was really just a statue.

On the car ride to, we always and only talked about our dogs Momo and Yuki, both female Shiba Inus, a Japanese breed best known for its puffy tail that curls like a cooked shrimp.

"They are descendants of the coyote," my dad would convincingly say to me. "That's why they howl so much."

Momo was the younger of the two. Like me, she had a gentle but mischievous spirit. Having grown up together, we resembled one another in many ways - ingenuous, obedient and a little ditsy. Though loyal to Momo I sometimes clashed with her because of her incessant demand for my affection. She would chase me all over the house and garden, never relenting until I'd let her lick my hands. For hours afterwards, I would refuse to play with her. But while Momo obsessively pursued my attention, I was busy chasing Yuki, who always outran me and hid underneath my dad's bed when I got too close.

Though of the same breed, Momo and Yuki could not be more different than a French poodle and a pit bull. Momo was thin, of mostly white and reddish brown fur with big black sweet eyes. Yuki was tough, a bit chubby and darker colored. By the time she was around seven years old, her eyes were becoming grey and cloudy, devoid of pupils because she was going blind. On rainy days when they had to sleep in the doghouse together, Yuki would often start a fight with Momo if she came too close. I could hear the whimpering and growling from outside my bedroom window and would yell to my dad for help. My dad would rush to the crime scene and separate the two with a broom.

During the Saturday car rides I would ask my dad why Yuki could sometimes be so violent and detached. I wondered why I could never win the same affection she always showed my dad. "Daddy, why doesn't Yuki love me?" I whined. "She never wants to play with me." Tears often followed the whimper. He would respond with a sympathetic nod. Although technically Momo belonged to me and Yuki to my older sister, neither of them saw either of us as her master. My dad was the real leader of the pack.

On the car ride back home, we never talked at all because I was too busy enjoying my mint chocolate chip ice cream while my dad was focused on steering the wheel with one hand carefully tearing the wrapper of his sugar cone, with the other.

It's a warm, typical southern California day, and for his amusement my dad has brought Momo and Yuki to my grandmother's place. As my dad mows the lawn, the dogs romp around the huge, meticulously arranged Japanese garden. My grandmother or Baachan and my mom and I watch them from inside the house. We sit drinking tea in the living room, a tacky space that is completely decorated with trophies my dad won for his talents in tae kwon do, fishing and skeet shooting back when he was in his teens and twenties. Occasionally Baachan picks up a trophy and elaborates on some of my dad's past accomplishments, but mostly she talks about the past and remarks upon how much Inglewood, where she still resides, has changed. Although I am only twelve-years old at the time, and my mom and grandmother are conversing in their native tongue, Japanese, I could still understand their every word. My mom tells Baachan that it's too dangerous for her to live in a neighborhood like this at her age. But Baachan doesn't listen. She clings to the image of Inglewood as it once was - before the run-down apartment buildings and grimy mini-malls, the Inglewood of acres and acres of open rural land that begged for nourishment.

My grandparents, like thousands of other Japanese, had immigrated to America because they couldn't succeed in the homeland. They were drawn by this ideal of an untamable but bountiful West, an image projected in fuzzy black- and - white American cowboy films at cramped movie houses in Yamaguchi prefecture. That decision to abandon Japan to pursue a better life in America, however, met with fierce disapproval from this militaristic and jingoistic nation that

subscribed to work ethic and national pride as its top values. These migrants or *inakappe* (literally country bumpkins in English) couldn't make it in homeland because they were uneducated and lazy, claimed the social and political elite of Japan. If they wanted to leave, then good riddance.

At the same time, it was equally as impossible for my grandparents to embrace America, a nation that despised Japanese Americans' "yellow" ways. These immigrants were invading California with their strange customs, stealing jobs from hard-working white Americans by working for lower wages. These narrow-eyed Japs were not to be trusted.

After Pearl Harbor, white Americans finally had the excuse they needed. According to Earl Warren, the California Attorney General in 1942, Japanese Americans were "the Achilles' heel of the entire civilian defense effort." At the age of four, my dad - a boy who liked to play cowboys and Indians and to feed and pet the farm animals - was labeled an enemy of the state.

By August of that year, my dad, his three older brothers, my grandparents and ten thousand other Japanese Americans were transported to Manzanar, a relocation camp in Owens Valley, California, 224 miles north of Los Angeles. For months they had endured curfews and an endless barrage of hateful remarks by their Caucasian neighbors. This last step only seemed inevitable. On the second day of spring in 1942, they were forced to leave everything - even the family dog, my dad's best friend - behind.

When my grandmother is done with her story, which meanders for over an hour, she cups my hands within her hands. Hers are wrinkled and covered with brown spots, but nonetheless supremely soft. She tells me that I should be proud of my heritage and my family. Japanese Americans like us are the best kinds of Americans, because having being subjected to our own country's cruelty, we still remain loyal citizens, she says.

Outside, my dad has finally finished mowing the lawn and is sweating profusely. He is clearly exhausted. Under the burning sun, he smiles watching Momo swiftly retrieve the ball he just threw. Yuki, who is now fifteen years old, meanwhile rests against my dad's feet. My dad leans down toward her to massage her back. I go outside to join the fun.

I have never asked my dad about his internment experience. I can ask him about our dogs but not about his trauma. I fear that my questions will break his chiseled heart, or worse, that I will find out that it's incapable of breaking.

Instead I attempt the second-hand knowledge route and try to understand my dad's history by looking at photos that depict the Japanese American internment experience. There is one famous black and white picture by Ansel Adams of a pensive Japanese American named Tom Kobayashi, leaning against a wooden fence on the right side of the photo. Overgrown dried up weeds and snow-capped mountains are all behind this one man, who stands in the same position as Rodin's sculpture "The Thinker." The man faces, but does not stare at the camera. The left side of the photo and all that is behind him depicts a picturesque barren Californian desert and a cloudless sky. The only thing that's missing is the rolling tumbleweed.

At Baachan's funeral three years ago, my uncle described the experience of being interned, more tangibly. Surrounded by his brothers, their wives and their children, my uncle sat at the head of the table, piecing together Baachan's history. He viscerally recounts her immediate reaction to the internment camp. When Baachan first saw the bunker where she was to live for the next three years, she stopped suddenly, let go of the hands of her sons and walked around the wooden shack to examine every inch of it. After she was done, she dropped to the ground, in fetal position, and sobbed.

I sneak through my dad's closet, looking at his high school yearbook and old albums for more clues. There is one photo of him standing in his army uniform, leaning against the railing of the Eiffel Tower. All of Paris surrounds him. He looks dashing handsome and young, so much so that I can't believe it's my dad, and I start to laugh.

Having heard my giggles, my mom immediately suspects mischief. She walks in the closet and scolds me for the mess that I made. She nags at me in Japanese, but when she looks at these photos more closely, her curiosity is also piqued - she neatly puts one album back where it belongs, but then takes out another. One picture particularly intrigues us. It depicts my dad as a child holding Baachan's hand, while his three older brothers and his father, my Ojiichan, stand beside them against a massive truck that reads "I & T Produce." It's the family business my dad has now taken over.

Though my parents are not at all an affectionate or happily married couple, my mom, second to only Baachan, still knows my dad better than anyone else. Unlike Baachan, though, she uses that intimate knowledge of my dad against him and is constantly critical of his ability as a husband and parent.

"Don't ever marry a man like your dad," she warns me. Her voice echoes great fury and resentment.

"Your father wasn't even there when you or your sister was born. He never dropped me off at the hospital. It was always work first. And when you were born, he only visited me once at the hospital and that was to pick me up." The coldness of this non-action, times two, she then reminds me.

I don't know how to respond other than to cry. I am ashamed that this man is my dad, and yet I cannot help regarding him highly and sympathetically, both as a hero and a victim. My mom feels guilty for trying to turn me against my dad and tries to alleviate the harshness of her tirade. "It's not his fault. That's the way he is. He can't change," she tells me.

She apologizes and indulges me with more stories about my dad.

My dad was seven years old when the war ended. Socializing himself back into a country that still hated him was a shocking immersion, intensified by his father's harsh discipline and his mother's nonchalance. With four boys to care for and a farm to cultivate, Baachan had no time to discipline or teach. Though Ojiichan was busy launching a produce business from the ground up, he still managed to punish his sons with the quick slash of his belt whenever they misbehaved.

My dad sought sanctuary from the indoors - the cramped, the restricted, the chaotic - in the open land, the acres of blank space where his other kinder kin, the farm animals, resided. He ran, played, crawled, fed and lived with the geese, chickens, goats, cows and pigs. Though familiar with all types of animals, dogs were his specialty, his best buddy being Boots, a cocker spaniel whose namesake was born from his infamous shoe-eating habits. Boots was also my dad's last dog before my mom suggested the idea of getting a dog for my sister. My dad says that Boots was stupid - he got run over by a car because he tried to follow my dad to school one day - but I know otherwise.

By the time my dad was in his late teens, he was being pressured to either go to college or join the army. The no-no boys of the generation before him - Japanese Americans who chose jail over fighting for a country that imprisoned their families - could barely face "the disgrace" that resulted from their actions let alone a Japanese American community that labeled them as cowards. My dad couldn't risk such humiliation. Though he received mostly positive reviews from his white friends - as far as I can discern from reading remarks made in his high school yearbook - he was still a Jap. To save himself the trouble, he became a yes-yes boy, a patriotic Japanese American who joined the army with the intent of fighting in the Korean War, like my uncle did, or in Vietnam, like my dad wanted to do. He enlisted in the army soon after his eighteenth birthday.

As my mom and I put the photos back where they belong, I hear my dad calling for me.

"Jane, help me wash the dogs!" he yells from the upstairs bathroom.

By the time I get there, my dad is already preparing the warm water in the bathtub. I close the doors to prevent Momo and Yuki's escape. Instinctively, I gather the dog shampoo, bucket and baby oil from the cabinets. (My dad will later use the baby oil as conditioner for Yuki's especially thick coat.) Yuki goes in first. She hysterically flails in the shallow water, acting as if she's about to drown. She splashes water everywhere, drenching both of us completely. I laugh and laugh at my dad whose forehead and hair is now entirely covered in soap bubbles. My dad becomes a bit panicky. "Bring me the shampoo. Get me the bucket." But he soon resumes control.

Yuki continues to whine, as if begging my dad for mercy. My dad calms her. "It's okay girl, it's okay."

Silence has always permeated our relationship, during our Saturday outings when I was five and even now at dinnertime when I am twenty-one. Other than off-hand jokes, we are incapable of communicating deeper emotion. It's not that we don't care or don't want to know. We're just afraid, hyper-sensitive. To him, I am still a fragile little girl - one wrong move and I may never speak to him again. To me, my dad is a statue of a great hero - even though he's massive, one push could easily break him. Why take the risk when the outcome might shatter everything?

Instead, we take the safe way out. We talk about the mundane, the familiar, the tangible. The dogs.

"We should get another dog."

"No. NO. NOOO!" my mother always interjects.

My dad smiles, then winks at me.

"Remember Yuki! *Kawai-sou-ni-ne-e*. (In English, "poor thing"). No more. No more dogs!" My mom ends the discussion abruptly, but when she leaves my dad and I resume it.

By the time Yuki died, she was blind, deaf, epileptic and physically immobile. She took a vitamin-sized tablet of Prozac every morning. She was spoon fed twice a day. She drank Pedia-lite instead of water from a baby's bottle. She wore diapers with a hole cut in the back for her tail and a plastic cone around her head to prevent her from scratching her skin off. She slept on soft sheepskin, which still could not prevent the bedsores that completely covered her back. She weighed eight pounds when a typical dog of her breed weighs at least fifteen. My dad refused to put her to sleep.

I remember Yuki's agonizing whimpers at all hours of the day. They were the kinds of cries that made you want to pull your hair out not because of how annoying the sound was, but because of the sadness and torment expressed in her high-pitched voice. She would spin around and around for hours and hours, chasing the ghost behind her that she couldn't see, hear or catch. She cried until she exhausted herself completely and then collapsed. But my dad refused to put her to sleep, not out of spite but determination. He was the one who tended to her every move and spent tens of thousands of dollars of his own money to keep her alive for just one more day. She died peacefully in my dad's arms, while he was sleeping. Her ashes are in a white plastic box that is secured in a safe whose code only my dad and I know.

Once when my dad was making out a check at the front desk of a pet hospital, the vet took me aside to speak to me alone. "Why does your dad insist on keeping her alive? Sometimes I think he's crazy and selfish but that's not it. It's the opposite."

I can't remember if my dad ever said he loved Yuki, but I can remember the one and only time he said he loved me. My sister had run away from home and I was lying alone in the dark in my mom's bed, waiting for an update. My dad came in to ask me if I was okay. Instead of answering the question, I spurred up all the courage that my seven-year-old self could muster and said what I had always feared saying because I did not think it would be reciprocated.

"I love you daddy."

"I love you too," he said and gently shut the door behind him.