

## Excerpt

### Chapter 1

#### Vancouver, British Columbia March 1942

Japan is at war with the United States, Great Britain and all the Allied Countries, including Canada, the country of my birth. My parents are Japanese, born in Japan, but they have been Canadian citizens for many, many years, and have become part of this young country. Now, overnight our rights as Canadians are taken away. Mass evacuation for the Japanese!

“All the Japanese,” it is carefully explained to me, “whether we were born in Tokyo or in Vancouver are to be moved to distant places. Away from the west coast of British Columbia—for security reasons.”

We must all leave, my sister Yuki, my older brother David, my parents, our relatives—all.

The older men are the first to go. The government feels that my father, or his friends, might sabotage the police and their buildings. Imagine! I couldn't believe such stories, but there is my father packing just his clothes in a small suitcase.

Yuki says, “They are going to the foothills of the Rockies, to Tête Jaune. No one's there, and I guess they feel father won't bomb the mountains.”

The older people are very frightened. Mother is so upset; so are all her friends. I, being only eleven, seem to be on the outside.

One March day, we go to the station to see father board the train.

At the train station

An empty bottle is tossed in the air.  
I stand away, hold my mother's hand.  
Angry, dark curses, a scream. A train window is broken.

Most of the men have been drinking.  
An angry man is shouting.  
The men are dragged violently into the trains.  
Father can be seen. He is being pushed onto the train.  
He is on the steps, turns. His head is above the  
shouting crowd. I see his mouth opening; he shouts  
to his friends, waves his clenched fist.  
But the words are lost in all the noise.  
Mother holds my hand tightly.

A sharp police whistle blows.  
My blood stops. We see a uniformed Mounted Police drag  
an old man and hurl him into the train.

More curses, threats. The old train bellows  
its starting sound. White, hellish smoke appears  
from the top of its head. It grunts, gives another  
shrill blast. Slowly, slowly, the engine comes to life.  
I watch from where we stand, fascinated.  
The huge, black, round, ugly wheels begin  
to move slowly, then faster, and faster.  
Finally, the engine, jet dark,  
rears its body and moves with a lurch.  
The remaining men rush toward the train,  
scramble quickly into the moving machine.

Men crowd at the windows. Father is still on the steps,  
he seems to be searching the crowd, finally sees us, waves.  
Mother does not move. Yuki and I wave. Most remain still.  
The dark, brown faces of the men become small.  
Some are still shouting. Yuki moves closer to mother.  
The long, narrow, old train quickly picks up speed  
as it coils away along the tracks  
away from all of us who are left at the station.

Mother is silent. I look at her.  
I see tears are slowly falling. They remain  
on her cheeks. I turn away, look around. The women  
and the children stare at one another. Some women  
cry right out loud. A bent old woman breaks out  
into Buddhist prayer, moves her orange beads  
in her wrinkled hands, prays aloud to her God.  
Mother and the other women bow their heads.  
The silent God seems so far away.

## Summer 1942

From March to September, 1942, my mother, my sister Yuki and I are alone in Vancouver. David, our brother, is taken away, for he is over eighteen and in good health. It's hard for me to understand. Our David, who is so gentle, considered an enemy of his own country. I wondered what he thought as his time came to leave us. He spoke very little, but I do remember his saying, "In a way it's better we leave. I am fired from my job. The white people stare at me. The way things are, we'd starve to death!"

Now our house is empty. What we can sell, we do for very little money. Our radio, the police came and took away. Our cousins who have acres of berry farm had to leave everything. Trucks, tractors, land, it was all taken from them. They were moved with only a few days notice to Vancouver.

Strange rumors are flying. We are not supposed to own anything! The government takes our home.

Mother does not know what to do now that father is not here and David too is taken. She does not speak very much; she is too worried how we are to eat with all her men gone. So finally, Yuki goes to work. She is sixteen; she becomes help for an elderly lady. She comes home once a week to be with us

and seems so grown up.

I grow very close to my mother. Because we are alone, I often go to different places with her. Many Japanese families who were moved from the country towns such as Port Hammond and Steveston on the west coast of B.C., are now housed in the Exhibition grounds in Vancouver, waiting to be evacuated.

One very hot summer day mother and I visit a friend of hers who has been moved there.

A visit to the Exhibition grounds:

The strong, summer July sun is over our heads  
as we near the familiar Exhibition grounds.  
But the scene is now quite different from the last time I saw it.  
The music, the rollercoasters, the hawkers  
with their bright balloons and sugar candy are not there.  
Instead, tension and crying children greet us  
as we approach the grounds. A strong odor hits us  
as we enter: the unmistakable foul smell of cattle,  
a mixture from their waste and sweat.  
The animals were removed, but their stink remains.  
It is very strong in the heat. I look at mother.  
She exclaims, "We are treated like animals!"  
I ask mother, "How can they sleep in such a stink?"  
She looks at me. "Thank our Lord, we don't have to  
live like them. So this is where they are.  
They used to house the domestic animals here.  
Such a karma!"

As we draw close to the concrete buildings, the stench  
becomes so powerful in the hot, humid heat,  
I want to turn and run. I gaze at my mother.  
She only quickens her steps. It seems as if  
we are visiting the hell-hole my Sunday school  
teacher spoke of with such earnestness.

White, thin sheets are strung up  
carelessly to block the view of prying eyes.  
Steel bunkbeds, a few metal chairs, suitcases,  
boxes, clothes hanging all over the place  
to dry in the hot sour air, greet our eyes.  
Mother sits on a chair, looks at her friend.  
Mrs. Abe sits on the bed, nursing her baby.  
The child, half asleep, noisily sucks her breast.  
Mrs. Abe looks down at it, smiles,  
looks at mother and says, "The food is much better now.  
We complained every day, refused to eat one day.  
They take all our belongings, even our husbands,

And house us like pigs, even try to feed us pig's food!"

Mrs. Abe opens her heart to mother.  
I look around. The children's voices  
echo through the huge concrete buildings.  
Some of them are running around. The cement floor  
smells of strong chemical. I stare at  
the gray, stained floor. Mrs. Abe seeing this, says  
"They wash it every week with some cleaner.  
As if they cared whether we lived or died."

A curious head pokes in from the drawn, frail curtain.  
Mrs. Abe sees this, becomes angry, "Nosy bitch!"  
she says aloud. The dark head disappears.  
Mrs. Abe turns to me, glares into my eyes,  
forgetting for a moment that I do not live here,  
that I am still a child and am not responsible  
for her unhappiness. I begin to feel uncomfortable.  
I gently nudge my mother. She reads my sign,  
rises to take her leave, bowing, speaking words of  
encouragement. Mrs. Abe bows, thanks mother,  
"You are lucky. You can still live in your house.  
And your children are older. They are a comfort."  
Her words trail off. She bursts into tears.  
Her child awakens, startled; she begins to cry.  
Several heads appear from behind curtains,  
eyes peer with curiosity. Mrs. Abe holds the child  
close to her and weeps into its small neck.  
I quietly walk away.

From the corner of my eye  
I can see sweaty children; they gape at me.  
They know I am from the outside. I pretend I do  
not see them, I quicken my steps, I am outside.  
Here the animal stench again overwhelms me.  
I turn. Mother is behind me.  
"You are rude to leave like that," she scolds.  
Her dark eyes search mine. I feel bad,  
I look down. The concrete ground seems to melt  
from the blazing heat. I curl my toes in my  
white, summer shoes. They are dusty from the walk.  
I look up, "I'm sorry. I couldn't help it.  
Her crying, and the smell..."  
Mother takes my hand and we begin to walk  
to the tram stop. "Someday, you'll understand.  
Mrs. Abe is much younger than me. She is new  
in this country, misses her family in Japan.  
You know she has only her husband."

All the way home in the noisy tram, mother says  
very little. I, happy to leave the smelly,  
unhappy grounds, daydream. I think of the film with  
Tyrone Power Yuki promised to take me to one day.

Vancouver  
September 1942

Now we have curfew. All Japanese have to be indoors by ten P.M. The war with Japan is fierce.  
People in the streets look at us with anger. My sister Yuki has to quit her job. No reason is given by the  
elderly lady. We wait, mother, Yuki and I, for our notice to go to the camps. Already many families  
have left.

A night out

Yuki holds my hand, begins to run.  
“We have to hurry, Shichan. It’s close to ten.  
Can you run a bit?” “I’ll try,” I say,  
but my limp makes it hard for me to keep up.  
Yuki slows down. I wish mother were with us.  
Everything seems so dark. An old man comes  
towards us, peers at us in the dim light.  
His small eyes narrow, he shouts, “Hey, you!  
Get off our streets!” He waves his thin arms,  
“I’ll have the police after you.”  
Yuki pulls my arm, ignoring him, and we run faster  
towards our house. The man screams after us.

Mother is at the door when we arrive.  
She looks worried, “You are late.” She sees us panting.  
“Did you two have trouble?” She closes the door quickly.  
“You know I worry when you’re late, Yuki.”  
Yuki sits on a chair, looks at mother.  
“I’m sorry. The film was longer than I thought.  
It was so great we forgot about the curfew.”

Mother pours Japanese green tea. It smells nice.  
I sit beside her and drink the hot tea.  
I look around. The rooms are bare.  
Boxes are piled for storage in the small room upstairs.  
Our suitcases are open, they are slowly being filled.  
We are leaving for camp next week.

A siren screams in the night. Air-raid practice.  
I go to the window. All our blinds are tightly drawn.  
I peek out, carefully lifting them. I see  
one by one the lights in the city vanish. Heavy

darkness and quiet covers Vancouver. It looks weird.  
But the stars, high, high above, still sparkle,  
not caring, still beautiful and happy. I feel sad  
to be leaving the mountains, the lovely sea.  
I have grown with them always near me.

“Come away from the window, Shichan.” Mother’s voice  
reaches me. I turn. I feel sadness come from her too.  
She has lived here for so long:  
“Over twenty-five years—hard to believe—  
I was a young girl, full of dreams.  
America! Canada! all sounded so magical in Japan.  
Remember, we had no radio in those days, so all our  
knowledge of this country came from books.  
My own mother had come to Canada long before  
other women. She was brave, not knowing the language,  
young, adventurous, a widow with three children.  
She took your uncle Fujiwara with her.  
He was thirteen. I went to my grandmother’s;  
my sister, to an aunt. It seems so long ago.”

Mother often talks of the past. Her life  
on the tiny island sounds lovely, for she had  
a happy childhood, so full of love.  
I go to her. I see her hands folded neatly  
on her lap. She always sits like this,  
very quiet, calm. Her warm eyes behind her  
round glasses are dark and not afraid.

An end to waiting

We have been waiting for months now. The Provincial Government keeps changing the dates of our  
evacuation, first from April, then from June, for different reasons: lack of trains, the camps are not  
ready. We are given another final notice. We dare not believe this one.

Mother is anxious. She has just received a letter from father that he is leaving his camp with others; the  
families will be back together. I feel so happy. He writes that he is being moved to a new camp,  
smaller than others, but it is supposed to be located in one of the most beautiful spots in British  
Columbia. It’s near a small village, 1800 feet above sea level. The Government wants the Japanese to  
build their own sanatorium for the T.B. patients. I hear there are many Japanese who have this disease,  
and the high altitude and dry air are supposed to be good for them. I feel secretly happy for I love the  
mountains. I shall miss the roaring sea, but we are to be near a lake. Yuki says, “They decided all the  
male heads of families are to rejoin their wives, but not the single men.” So, of course, David will  
remain in his camp, far away.”

We rise early, very early, the morning we are to leave.  
The city still sleeps. The fresh autumn air feels nice.  
We have orders to be at the Exhibition grounds.

The train will leave from there, not from the station  
where we said good-bye to father and to David.  
We wait for the train in small groups scattered  
alongside the track. There is no platform.  
It is September 16. School has started. I think  
of my school friends and wonder if I shall ever see  
them again. The familiar mountains, all purple and  
splendid, watch us from afar. The yellowy-orangy  
sun slowly appears. We have been standing  
for over an hour. The sun's warm rays reach us,  
touch a child still sleeping in its  
mother's arms, touch a tree, blades of grass.  
All seems magical. I study the thin yellow rays  
of the sun. I imagine a handsome prince will come and  
carry us all away in a shining, gold carriage with  
white horses. I daydream, and feel nice as long as I don't  
think about leaving this city where I was born.

The crisp air becomes warmer. I shift my feet, restless.  
Mother returns; she has been speaking to her friend,  
"Everyone says we will have to wait for hours."  
She bends, moves the bundles at our feet:  
food, clothes for the journey. I am excited. This  
is my first train ride! Yuki smiles, she too feels the  
excitement of our journey. Several children cry,  
weary of waiting. Their mothers' voices are heard, scolding.

Now the orange sun is far above our heads.  
I hear the twelve o'clock whistle blow from a  
nearby factory. Yuki asks me if I am tired.  
I nod, "I don't feel tired yet, but I'm getting hungry."  
We haven't eaten since six in the morning.  
Names are being called over the loudspeaker.  
One by one, families gather their belongings and  
move towards the train. Finally, ours is called.  
Yuki shouts, "That's us!" I shout, "Hooray!"  
I take a small bag; Yuki and mother, the larger  
ones and the suitcases. People stare as we walk  
towards the train. It is some distance away.  
I see the black, dull colored train. It looks  
quite old. Somehow I had expected a shiny new one.  
Yuki remarks, "I hope it moves. You never know  
with the government." Mother looks, smiles,  
"Never mind, as long as we get there. We aren't  
going on a vacation; we are being evacuated."

Bang...bang...psst...the old train gurgles,  
makes funny noises. I, seated by the window,  
feel the wheels move, stop, move, stop.

Finally, I hear them begin to move in an even rhythm slowly.

I look out the dusty window.  
A number of people still wait their turn.  
We wave. Children run after the train.  
Gradually, it picks up speed. We pass the gray granaries, tall and thin against the blue Vancouver sky.  
The far mountains, tall pines, follow us for a long time, until finally they are gone.

Mother sits opposite; she has her eyes closed, her hands are on her lap. Yuki stares out the window.  
A woman across the aisle quietly dabs her tears with a white cloth. No one speaks.  
my father packing just his clothes in a small suitcase.

Yuki says, "They are going to the foothills of the Rockies, to Tête Jaune. No one's there, and I guess they feel father won't bomb the mountains."

The older people are very frightened. Mother is so upset; so are all her friends. I, being only eleven, seem to be on the outside.

One March day, we go to the station to see father board the train.

<http://www.mcclelland.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780887762413&view=excerpt>

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