

WINNERS IN COMMON GROUND SCHOOL CONTEST

STRANGERS' RICE

ASAMI KAWACHI (SAMMY OYAMA)

Not until you have tasted the rice of strangers will you appreciate your home or your parents," my Japanese mother used to tell us. We paid scant attention to her oft-repeated sayings. Being an Oriental she had a proverb for each admonition.

However, I have learned the wisdom of many of Mother's words and recall them vividly when pressed by the vicissitudes of life. For all too soon, like an uninvited storm, I became an adult and encountered situations that would test my mother's convictions about the tricks of the world. But that is not the story I want to tell. Rather I prefer to dwell on the wonderful kindness men and women of another color, race, and creed have shown me; how they imbued in me a still deeper love for my America. This idea still persists, despite the fact that the seed of my birth originated in a nation that too soon was destined to become my country's treacherous enemy.

My story begins with Father picking up the fragments of a rumor in the early 1900s, recounting the fabulous riches in California. As he dug around for a worm that would cure his gall stones, his mind's eye stretched beyond the dingy Japanese countryside to one resplendent with the beauty of miles of orange groves—trees with gold on them, he put it. Relatives squabbling over the narrow terraced rice fields that were to become his inheritance bothered him not at all. He decided to cross the Pacific,

even though he was warned such an arduous trip would have ill effects on his health. Lightly burdened with a single straw satchel, Father stepped aboard a ship bound for America and sailed to the legendary land.

Mother came over a year after and gave birth in the ensuing years to three Nisei, of whom I am the eldest. My parents became part of the American soil by taking up the plow under the temperate California sun. How we screamed with delight in those bumpy rides on the old mare as they tilled the field.

In a small way, we young Nisei Americanized our parents. I remember the joyous discovery of the existence of Santa Claus. One Christmas morning my sister and I found nestled in our pillows two elaborate little baskets of jelly beans—"From Santa Claus," my father said impishly.

White schoolmates often laughed at my appearance—dresses that reached below my knees and hung like a gunny sack; shoes that advertised an intention for long wear by being a couple of sizes too large for my feet. But those years in Fresno, California, were crowded with adventure, sneaking off to the swimming hole, entertaining Mother and Father after our meals with songs they could not understand, surprising them on April Fool's Day. At home we referred to table, hat, stove, lettuce, and other such objects in English, though my parents were never able to read or compose a sentence in English. When I was still in the second

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grade, Father expected me to decipher a bill of some sort. When I could not help him, he blared, "What do you go to school for!"

This otherwise tranquil life came to an end when Father was finally confined to a hospital. I was only seven, my sister five, when he died. One month later, the son for whom he had waited all his life was born. My mother could scarcely speak comprehensible English; she could not manage the twenty-acre farm herself. We all worked in neighboring fields for three years. But without Father our routine was broken. I was in the fourth grade and almost eleven years old when Mother, bewildered, picked up her brood and sailed back to her native land, promising us that within a year we should come back.

We reached a quaintly beautiful and mountainous country in Japan, strewn with narrow winding roads, and dotted with straw-thatched houses. Our bed was a mattress on the floor, easily accessible to the fleas. Was it a strange intuition that caused an eleven-year-old to cry for America in her sleep as I did? I could not endure the narrow school life where we were expected to bow to each teacher at every entrance of the school house and grounds. I felt like a vassal. Somehow two and a half years passed. Still I saw in my mind's eye the brick building that was Benjamin Franklin Grammar School at Fresno. A freckled, red-haired boy named Dexter was chasing me again, all over the wide playground, tormenting me.

These attempts to recapture my happy life in America made me moody and sullen. I bombarded my mother with plans of going back to the United States. At last she yielded. I could not trust my ears when she said I was to go to America in care of a friend. So sudden was the parting with my family that, as

I stood on the train step, I felt a confusion of joy in returning to my own country at last, and yet, at the first drag of the train, an abyss of sorrow in leaving those closest to me.

I paid a price in returning. For, after the first radiant glimpse of San Pedro Harbor, the supposed "friend" laid bare an incredible plot before me. At thirteen and a half, a prearranged marriage awaited my arrival! "I will not submit to a marriage; I want an education, first and foremost!" I cried. This very unwomanly outburst caused a snag in the marriage plans. The sponsors tried to frighten me by picturing with pit blackness the cruelties one encounters in this land of strangers. "What will you do in case of illness?" they queried, not without kindness. "I would rather die," I answered stubbornly, glaring at these men and women of my own race. So violent was my protest they were relieved to forget the marriage idea by placing me in a good American family to impregnate me with some feminine virtues, which I seemingly lacked.

So, through grammar and high school, three middle-class American families made a home for me. As a school girl, my white guardians provided me with room and board in addition to spending money.

The first lady who took me in doubted my slight figure could do the housework, but my size was not the real handicap. My English had become rusty in Japan. I tried her patience when I handed her a plate instead of a platter or a broom instead of a mop.

Here, I first tasted strangers' rice. I do not say that it was heavenly. For, as I partook of each spoonful of food, I hungered for my own family. Sensing this loneliness, my American guardians tolerated my slipshod work and honest stupidity.

The family was torn by divorce, but they placed me among their relatives;

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When they suffered a financial set-back, they in turn found me a comfortable home. To movies, to beaches, to mountain lakes, these kind generous people took me as one of their own.

Because of the affection they and my teachers have shown me, I know now the meaning of a kind of love I never experienced from my parents. With them it was a duty to love. To keep the honor of the family was more vital than an individual's feelings. Mother emphasized honesty above courtesy and thrift; the latter virtues came naturally to us. In place of devotion, the Japanese family stressed strict discipline. There was no open affection. I thought kissing took place only in the movies or in the dark. To see a man and wife so indulging openly in front of me caused my face to redden.

From grammar school to high school, and now at college, my teachers encouraged and befriended me. I decided I must learn to write to express my pent up emotions. Frequently I despaired lest I never attain this goal, that I should have chosen such an insecure and impractical profession as writing. My zeal would run out with the scrubbing water; bed would beckon me—when, like a magic halo, all the words of kindness and confidence of my school teachers would snap me to a standing, challenging position again. They inspired in me a loyalty to my country by lighting the way toward a brighter future. It is this inextinguishable light they planted in me that quickens my heart in sighting the Stars and Stripes.

Because of the opportunity for a broad education that this country offers, I feel myself a part of a whole, a humble molecule, to be sure. And that is part of the beauty and joy of proclaiming I am a citizen. A privilege, indeed, to know the tired Negro on the street car, the Mexican boy who was class president, the girl who sits laughingly beside me in a psychology

class. They are my friends, because they too are a part of the United States.

My home and school life is a testimonial that racial prejudice is born from lack of understanding. On the few occasions I have faced discrimination, I have been able to smile—to revel in the knowledge that the unkindness shown only made me more appreciative of the educated tolerant people I have been privileged to know and live with. Thus I think my mother lost the essence of her saying—that we suffer at the hands of strangers. The rice, the bread I partook of with them, was bitter only in my intermittent loneliness. Instead of my mother's conception of a harsh world, I really found a new and refreshing momentum to live.

In the last mail I received from Japan, Mother urged my immediate return to the family. I replied in effect that I could not leave now; I owed a debt to the families and the teachers who had inspired me, and I wished to imprint my share of toil on American earth. I did not, of course, imagine the catastrophic changes that were to follow this letter.

Now my mother, my sister, and my brother stand in hate against my country—hence against me. But so it was in the Revolutionary, Civil, and World Wars. It is not too hard to break spiritual links with my family, for I broke physical ties with them almost ten years ago. But I cannot help sympathizing with the Nisei's parents here in America who are pointed out now with accusing fingers as enemy aliens. However, they, too, must bow in gratitude for past blessings and trust in a firm belief that acceptance will in the future be synonymous with America.

Personally my daily life has not been marred since the outbreak of war, even though my skin is yellow. Even strangers smile and start conversations on

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street cars, something that has not happened often before. This continued kindly courtesy cements my belief in the broader scope of an American's mind. Substituting defense stamps for candies does not give vent to my restless spirit. I must act—but what can I undertake with my limited talents? To this question I am giving serious consideration. The instructors at school advise us to continue our education. Whatever I do, whether studying according to plan or serving in zones of danger, my service will be an expression of thankfulness for the privilege of being an American citizen.

First-place winner in the college division of COMMON GROUND's writing contest, Asami Kawachi was a student at Los Angeles City College, Los Angeles, California.

She was evacuated in April to the temporary reception center, Camp Santa Anita, Arcadia, California. She writes: "Though I'm neither a scholar nor a thinker, I cannot help feel the tragedy of us Nisei who have and know only this as our country. Right now there are two roads open to our way of thinking. One is to say, 'We are washed up in America. Our future is somewhere else, if there is a future at all.' Yet the philosophy of the Nisei who were attending my school—and the one I adhere to—is in the American spirit: 'We are just as guilty of complacency as other Americans. We took our citizenship for granted. But we'll fight until the last for our share in the land of our birth, and help America show the world that justice and tolerance still lives in the United States.'"

WE ARE AMERICA

EDITH HANDLEMAN

AMERICA is many things—villages at the foot of majestic mountains, huge throbbing cities, tiny Cape Cod hamlets beaten by the sea, hot sun on rolling lawns, and deep snow on silent farms. Everywhere are Americans, the freedom-seeking of all nations, of diverse races and cultures, united by one ideal into a great nation, a Democracy.

I am sure of this about America: it is made up of people like me. We are America. The stories behind individual Americans differ, but the universal spirit which unites them all into one great story is the spirit of America. In this way the

men who died at Valley Forge and the unknown men who have died for freedom and human dignity in the obscurity of other lands were all dying for America. And we, their descendants, find in this land, which is almost a dream come true, what visionaries of all lands have hoped for through the ages.

Fifty years ago my father's family came to America, ten years later my mother's. I can imagine the question as it was first asked by the children in those homes.

"America? What is America? Are we going there?"