

CALIFORNIA, 1942

Memoir

“Can I get some free paper from the butcher?” I asked Mother and climbed into the passenger seat of our black Chevrolet. The feel of the scratchy upholstery on my bare legs made me feel secure. “I told Mrs. Oldham I would—for a banner for Scouts.”

“Yes,” Mother answered. “You ask him yourself, and be sure to thank him.” Mother’s glasses shone as she turned around in her seat and backed the car out of the driveway. She had a stern look, as if we were going on a long trip costing a lot of money. We were making the weekly drive to the grocery in our Southern California town, San Gabriel, named for an angel.

Every time we got in the car, it was serious business because in 1942 gasoline was rationed. “There’s a War on,” you heard the grownups say, referring to our army and navy guys fighting against the Germans and the Japanese.

The summer sun burned my legs through the windshield, but I was distracted from the discomfort when we passed the San Gabriel Archangel Mission church. An ancient wisteria vine, ripe with purple blooms, twisted over a surrounding high wall that seemed to protect the church from the War. I longed for protection from the guns and bombs that might come any time. I’d heard frightening war stories of suffering and seen movies about the battles. The war was a constant presence in my waking thoughts as well as my dreams. Someone had seen a submarine off the Pacific coast. We had to darken our windows at night or the bombs could find us.

In town, on our shopping trip, I got out of the car glad I’d worn my shoes because you could see the waves of heat radiating up from the asphalt. Pretty soon, I thought, I’d get new shoes for Fourth Grade. I loved getting new shoes. Mother looked at me to make sure I was next to her as we crossed the street, but she didn’t take my hand.

The butcher stood behind the white cases of meat along the side of the small market. He tore off some paper for me, made a roll, and put tape over the end. With the roll over my shoulder like a rifle, I marched behind Mother singing quietly to myself:

From the halls of Montezuma,  
To the shores of Tripoli,  
We will fight our country’s ba-a-tles,  
On the land and on the sea.

That was my favorite war song. My knowledge—at the age of nine—was minimal about the facts of World War II. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, commander of U.S. forces in Europe, was about to take some 400,000 U.S. servicemen to the “shores of

Tripoli.” The Germans had attacked Stalingrad. Close to one-third of Europe’s nine million Jews had already been exterminated.

The War permeated the atmosphere in my town. Reminders popped up everywhere in posters of Uncle Sam pointing at you. Two houses on our street had blue stars in their windows to let you know they had someone from the family who had gone off to fight. The star turned to a gold color if their soldier or sailor had died.

Mother and I left the grocery and went next door to the Nakajima’s produce market. We were surprised to see there were no bins of vegetables out front on the sidewalk and the place looked dark. I couldn’t hear the familiar music from Mr. Nakajima’s radio. A man in a fedora hat and white shirt stood outside smoking a cigarette. He stopped us as we started to enter. “This store is closed,” he said. “Mr. Nakajima and his family had to leave.”

“Where’s Mr. Nakajima?” I asked Mother on our way down that boiling street to the car.

“You heard. He’s had to leave.” I waited for more information. “He’s been taken to a special place for Japanese people because of the War.”

Nothing had ever disappeared from my life before. Everything had always been there—lights turned on, cars moving on our streets, the Mission wisteria blooming. Mr. Nakajima was always there too, standing at the back of the store in his green apron, maybe listening to his radio. The bewildering news from this stranger in the hat seemed to change the whole street. Now the stores, the heat and the cars had been swallowed by the darkness from inside the empty market. I thought of my five-year-old Austrian cousin Uta who lived with her family inside the German lines. They had to hide in a basement because their home had been destroyed by bombs. It must be so dark in a basement. I shivered.

“What place?” I asked. “Who gets his store? Are they coming back? Is Mr. Nakajima in the War now?” You had to ask Mother a lot of questions to get any answers.

“They probably won’t be coming back until the War’s over,” she said.

“Why Not?” I blurted. “He was here last week when we came. He didn’t say anything.” I didn’t look back at the forlorn market and the man in the hat. I watched my mother. She sat facing straight ahead, her hands on the hot steering wheel.

“The Nakajimas had to leave because some people think they’re spies,” she said, talking slowly as if she didn’t want to say those words.

*Spies?* That word made me think of black and white movies with Orson Wells lurking on a dark street. Mr. Nakajima did not fit in a movie like that. I clutched my butcher-paper rifle and hummed my song about “the shores of Tripoli” trying to cheer

myself with thoughts of new shoes for school. All summer I'd looked forward to getting new school shoes, one of the exciting rituals of my life. The war effort needed leather and we could have only one pair of shoes each year. I wondered if Uta had the shoes she needed down in that basement.

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On the first day of school that fall—outside in the front yard—Mother got us ready for a photo. We wore our new shoes and the dresses she'd made. She spoke of the privileges of an education while she arranged me, my sister, Ronnie and Tommy—two neighbor boys—in a row. Mother hadn't gone to school much. Her family had left Austria when she was small and settled in a worn-out house in Mobile, Alabama. "You kids better appreciate how lucky you are, getting to go to school in new clothes," she said. Watching her, I felt guilty about my easy life but still wished for fine things, like party shoes and bracelets.

I wanted my blue lunchbox in the picture. I loved the feel of the metal handle and the promise of food that feeling held. "No one had lunchboxes in the old country," Mother said, "only a piece of bread wrapped in a cloth." I felt glad to live in America where a person could carry a real lunchbox, even though I didn't feel like a pure American because my grandparents spoke with German accents. "Alright now, look smart everybody!" Mother said.

Americans hated the Germans. I worried that deep down they hated me too for having German people in my family. I knew I couldn't repeat at home what Ronnie told me about the Germans: "The Gestapos eat little kids and Hitler chews on carpets," he said. Ronnie smiled when he talked about the Gestapo, showing his prominent front teeth. He was an expert on evil because he read comic books.

When we got to school, Jimmy Ellington stopped me in front of the open classroom door. "Hey! Elaine! Wait. Guess What? My Dad can get me some Double Bubble gum!"

"You lucky!" My dark thoughts vanished. I grinned at him. We hadn't had bubble gum in months.

"I can bring some tomorrow. You can have some." His face flushed.

Jimmy's father must be a black market guy to get Double Bubble, I thought, but I'd take some anyway and live with the guilt.

We walked into the classroom together. The crisp sawdust smell of the first day of school reassured me. Everything looked clean. The sanded wooden desks, fixed to the floor in rows, had recessed inkwells on top. This year we'd write with ink for the first time. I couldn't wait to try.

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I remember the sweet taste of that gum today, at age seventy. I am still that child. The guilt—over Uta's basement, over the joys of Double Bubble and my lunchbox, over

having a German-speaking family—is still with me. Guilt doesn't leave. It puts on new clothes, but it doesn't leave. Now I ponder genocide in Africa, War in Iraq, and American involvement with evil wondering why I don't do more for the peace efforts.

Mother would recognize my guilt and worries, but she is gone and so is Ronnie—killed in Viet Nam. My new shoes are gone too, and Nakajima's Produce Market, and the butcher paper and the butcher.