

The parcel is as heavy as a loaf of Uncle's stone bread. Someone, I see, has already opened it and the Scotch tape wings stretch out unstickily from the two end flaps.

"When did this arrive?" I ask Obasan.

"What is it?"

"When did this arrive?" I have to shout everything two or three times.

"Sa," Obasan says wearily, "around when . . ."

The answer doesn't so much matter.

There are several packages here—an old scrapbook full of newspaper clippings, a brown manila envelope, one gray card-

board folder, a three-ring-binder-size hardcover book full of Aunt Emily's handwriting. I untie the loose twine from around the middle of the envelope and a note falls loose and drops to the floor.

Aunt Emily's writing is as wispy and hard to decipher as the marks of a speed skater on ice.

"Write the vision and make it plain. Habakkuk 2:2."

Dear Aunt Em is crusading still. In seven canonical words, she exhorts, cajoles, commands someone—herself? me?—to carry on the fight, to be a credit to the family, to strive onward to the goal. She's the one with the vision. She believes in the Nisei, seeing them as networks and streamers of light dotting the country. For my part, I can only see a dark field with Aunt Emily beaming her flashlight to where the rest of us crouch and hide, our eyes downcast as we seek the safety of invisibility.

Write the vision and make it plain? For her, the vision is the truth as she lives it. When she is called like Habakkuk to the witness stand, her testimony is to the light that shines in the lives of the Nisei, in their desperation to prove themselves Canadian, in their tough and gentle spirit. The truth for me is more murky, shadowy and gray. But on my lap, her papers are wind and fuel nudging my early-morning thoughts to flame.

The hardcover book, I see, is a journal. The private words of Y. Emily Kato. Dear Diary, Christmas 1941. Last May, during a fly-by-night stopover between conferences, Aunt Emily told me she'd be sending me "the works." I expected the conference papers, perhaps documents—not a diary.

She was on her way home to Toronto from a conference in California called "The Asian Experience in North America," and from the moment we met, I was caught in the rush-hour traffic jam of her nonstop conference talk.

How different my two aunts are. One lives in sound, the other in stone. Obasan's language remains deeply underground but Aunt Emily, BA, MA, is a word warrior. She's a crusader, a little old gray-haired Mighty Mouse, a Bachelor of Advanced Activists and General Practitioner of Just Causes.

Since her first visit to Granton in 1954, there have been, let me see, seven, or is it eight, more. There was the summer of 1958 and a week in 1960, another week or so the following year, then a Christmas visit. There have been a few others. So counting that last fast visit, there have been nine trips in all. And in between visits, there's the army, the navy, the air force of letters—all the Aunt Emily correspondence jamming up our small metal box in the Granton PO.

The May morning of her last visit, the sky by 10 A.M. was already yawning open like a great oven door. It was a premature furnace day. In southern Alberta, spring weather is unpredictable—a blizzard one moment and midsummer the next. The only thing that is constant is the wind.

She led the small string of passengers filing out of the Time Air plane at the Lethbridge airport. Her traveling bag dangled from her shoulders. Clutching her briefcase and her small-brimmed hat, she lowered her head like a bull against the wind. She's about the same height as I am, five feet one or so, but much chunkier and with "daikon ashi" as we used to say—legs as shapely as Japanese radishes. A small tank of a woman with a Winston Churchill stoop. Apart from a deeper puffiness under her eyes and more gray hair, she seemed unchanged from her visit the year before. With her mind and her hair leaping wildly in the gusts, she was Stephen Leacock's horseman riding off in all directions at once.

I hurried behind her as she marched ahead to the car.

"What a conference! You should have been with me, Nomi," she said. "There was so much to learn. I had no idea

how much I still hurt. Just read some of these papers." She flung open her briefcase and took out a bundle of conference notes and papers as I searched for the car keys.

"Ever read this?" she asked, punctuating the air with a pamphlet entitled "Racial Discrimination by Orders-in-Council."

I held the pages down on the steering wheel and scanned the sheets as the edges flittered in the gusts. There it was in black and white—our short harsh history. Beside each date were the ugly facts of the treatment given to Japanese Canadians. "Seizure and government sale of fishing boats. Suspension of fishing licenses. Relocation camps. Liquidation of property. Letter to General MacArthur. Bill 15. Deportation. Revocation of nationality."

Wherever the words "Japanese race" appeared, Aunt Emily had crossed them out and written "Canadian citizen."

"What this country did to us, it did to itself," she said.

I handed the pamphlet back to her and started the car. The very last thing in the world I was interested in talking about was our experiences during and after World War II. But Aunt Emily was full of her California weekend and the outspoken people she'd met who obviously didn't share my reluctance.

"I hate to admit it," she said, "but for all we hear about the States, Canada's capacity for racism seems even worse."

"Worse?"

"The American Japanese were interned as we were in Canada, and sent off to concentration camps, but their property wasn't liquidated as ours was. And look how quickly the communities reestablished themselves in Los Angeles and San Francisco. We weren't allowed to return to the West Coast like that. We've never recovered from the dispersal policy. But

of course that was the government's whole idea—to make sure we'd never be visible again. Official racism was blatant in Canada. The Americans have a Bill of Rights, right? We don't."

Injustice enrages Aunt Emily. Any injustice. Whether she's dealing with the Japanese-Canadian issue or women's rights or poverty, she's one of the world's white blood cells, rushing from trouble spot to trouble spot with her medication pouring into wounds seen and not seen. For her, the injustice done to us in the past was still a live issue.

She thumbed through her pile of papers as we drove down the Mayor Magrath Highway and onto Highway 3. Occasionally she would hold up a paper and shake it excitedly in front of me as if she expected me to drive and read at the same time.

"Now look at this one," she said. "Here's a man who was looking for the source of the problem in the use of language. You know those prisons they sent us to? The government called them 'Interior Housing Projects'! With language like that you can disguise any crime."

The conference had obviously been a meeting ground for a lot of highly charged energy. Looking at her wildly gesticulating hair caught in the windows' drafts, I felt she should have electrocuted me. But I was curiously numb beside her.

People who talk a lot about their victimization make me uncomfortable. It's as if they use their suffering as weapons or badges of some kind. From my years of teaching I know it's the children who say nothing who are in trouble more than the ones who complain.

For a few moments I was afraid she was about to attack me for my lack of enthusiasm about the conference and I tried to muster up some intelligent comments. Talking to

Aunt Emily is sometimes like walking through a minefield. I never quite know when she'll explode.

There were a number of people at the conference, she said, who were cautioning against "rocking the boat." "All they're opting for is 'the good life.'" She threw up her hands and sighed. "You'd think, after all we've been through—you'd think there'd be some collective social conscience."

She stared out the open window as she talked about one man at the conference who quite openly applauded the wholesale imprisonment of Canadian and American Japanese.

"He knows the war was just an excuse for the racism that was already there. We were rioted against back in 1907, for heaven's sakes! We've always faced prejudice. He knows we were no military threat. So what is he saying? That the innocent should be made to suffer for the guilty?" She was almost spluttering. "That's scapegoatism. As long as we have politicians and leaders and media people who feast on people's fears, we'll continue making scapegoats."

"Maybe," I said feebly, "he's trying to be conciliatory and see the point of view of the other side. Or maybe he believes the welfare of the whole is more important than the welfare of the part and the fears of the collective can only be calmed by the sacrifice of a minority. Isn't that the way it's always been?"

"Some people," Aunt Emily answered sharply, "are so busy seeing all sides of every issue that they neutralize concern and prevent necessary action. There's no strength in seeing all sides unless you can act where real measurable injustice exists. A lot of academic talk just immobilizes the oppressed and maintains oppressors in their positions of power."

For the rest of the car ride home I kept quiet while Aunt Emily bulldozed on. I could see that we were in for an eve-

ning of marathon talking, whether anyone else felt up to it or not.

Even before the supper dishes were cleared away, Aunt Emily was shuffling and sorting documents and conference papers on the kitchen table.

"Read this, Nomi," she said from time to time, handing me papers as if they were snapshots. I sometimes managed to catch half a paragraph on a page before she gave me something else. She must have thought I was speed-reading and listening to her at the same time, like switching back and forth between movies on television. A good way to stay agitated.

"Give you something to chew on," she said. She was eating a slice of Uncle's stone bread with a slab of raw onion.

You're the one with the strong teeth, I thought to myself. She did have strong teeth. And a tough digestion.

"Not like woman," Uncle said as he sat at the table and watched her working. "Like that there can be no marriage."

He waved a toothpick at the documents spread in front of him. "For what purpose, this?"

"We're gluing our tongues back on," Aunt Emily said. "It takes a while for the nerves to grow back."

Uncle shook his head. "Nisei muzukashi," he said. "Difficult people."

"We have to deal with all this while we remember it. If we don't we'll pass our anger down in our genes. It's the children who'll suffer," Aunt Emily said.

"Children?" Uncle asked. "Too late for Emiri-san, isn't it?" He held up a form letter and started reading it slowly, sucking in air between the words.

I leaned over and read it out loud for him. I was being

more polite than genuinely interested. “. . . While it is not necessary that this title be available in order to complete the sale it is preferred that it be surrendered to the Registrar of Land Titles. Will you be good enough therefore . . .” It was obviously a form letter sent to all of us back in the forties asking us to hand over the titles to our properties but advising us that, whether we did or not, our houses would be taken from us.

“The power of print,” Aunt Emily interrupted. “The power of government, Nomi. Power. See how palpable it is? They took away the land, the stores, the businesses, the boats, the houses—everything. Broke up our families, told us who we could see, where we could live, what we could do, what time we could leave our houses, censored our letters, exiled us for no crime. They took our livelihood . . .”

The muscle in Uncle’s jaw moved back and forth as he put the form letter down. I nodded, not wanting to aggravate the atmosphere further.

My eyes caught a brief official-looking letter from someone signed B. Good to Aunt Emily. B. Good? I noticed that he was the custodian in charge of all the property that was supposedly being kept safe for us. I read through the short note while she talked on.

Dear Madam

This will acknowledge your letter of the 31st ultimo.

This will also advise you that as Mrs. T. Kato is a Japanese National living in Japan at the outbreak of war, all property belonging to her in Canada vests in the Custodian.

Yours truly,
B. Good

A toneless form letter. I wondered what Aunt Emily’s letter to the Custodian had been. “Tell me what happened to my mother’s tiny house—the house where my sister was born, with the rock garden in front and the waterfall and goldfish. Tell me what has happened.”

The Custodian’s reply to Aunt Emily must have been the same to anyone else who dared to write. “Be good, my undesirable, my illegitimate children, be obedient, be servile, above all don’t send me any letters of inquiry about your homes, while I stand on guard (over your property) in the true north strong, though you are not free. B. Good.”

What did Mr. Good feel, I wondered, as he signed his letters—as he read Aunt Emily’s questions, or perhaps the more timid letters of the others? Did he even read them? He must have had similar form letters ready to send out automatically. Did he experience a tiny twinge of pleasure at the power his signature must represent? Did B. Good sometimes imagine himself to be God? Or was it all just a day’s mindless job?

Aunt Emily, seeing me reading the B. Good letter, started talking of Grandpa Kato’s Cadillac. She said it was sold by the government for \$33. Handling charges came to \$30 and the amount Grandpa finally received was \$3.00 and a few pennies.

“Next thing we expected was to owe the Custodian money for the services done in relieving us of all we owned,” Aunt Emily said. “What a bunch of sheep we were. Polite. Meek. All the way up the slaughterhouse ramp. Why in a time of war with Germany and Japan would our government seize the property and homes of Canadian-born Canadians but not the homes of German-born Germans?” she asked angrily.

“Racism,” she answered herself. “The Nazis are everywhere.”

Obasan was standing at the sink with her mouth set the way it always is whenever there is agitation. She surrounds herself with a determined kind of stillness and a certain slow concentration on anything her hands are doing.

I picked up a folder of Uncle's documents. One was a mimeographed sheet signed by an RCMP superintendent, authorizing Uncle to leave a Registered Area by truck for Vernon, where he was required to report to the local Registrar of Enemy Aliens, not later than the following day.

It was hard to think of Uncle as anyone's enemy. One Sunday when Uncle went to church, the clergyman turned him away from the communion rail. But there was no enemy there.

Aunt Emily was searching through her briefcase. She brought out a yellowing manuscript sewn together with thread.

"Here. This was my biggest effort," she said. "Read this, Nomi." I held it gingerly on my lap. In the center of the title page in capital letters was printed: THE STORY OF THE NISEI IN CANADA: A STRUGGLE FOR LIBERTY—by Emily Kato.

The opening words of the manuscript were "I understand the Nisei." So she does, I thought. She certainly knows them better than I do or Uncle does. None of my friends today are Japanese Canadians.

I read the first paragraph.

I understand the Nisei, I know them well. Better than do Mr. Green or Mrs. Ralston. [Who, I wondered, were they that she singled them out?] I have seen the Nisei in anger, in exuberant spirits, enthusiasm and despair, in the quiet stillness of resignation or renunci-

ation—I've worked beside them in canneries, on farms, in Red Cross groups—I've seen them in poverty and in luxury, in cabins and stuccoed residences, struggling for higher education on meager earnings, or cushioned through college by a parent's wealth—I've known them as mill hands, lumberjacks, clerks, dress-makers, stenos, domestic servants—I've watched them waltz and jitterbug, play baseball, tennis, rugby, golf, and Ping-Pong—I've known them in sickness and in health, at weddings and births and face to face with death. In short, I know the Nisei in every mood and circumstance, and because of this intimacy with them, I shall discuss some of the accusations brought against us.

The entire manuscript was sixty pages long. I skimmed over the pages till I came across a statement underlined and circled in red: *I am Canadian*. The circle was drawn so hard the paper was torn. Three lines of a poem were at the top of the page.

*Breathes there the man with soul so dead
Who never to himself hath said:
This is my own, my native land!*

The tanned brown edges of the page crumbled like autumn leaves as I straightened the manuscript.

The exact moment when I first felt the stirrings of identification with this country occurred when I was twelve years old, memorizing a Canto of "The Lay of the Last Minstrel."

So many times after that, I repeated the lines: sadly, desperately, and bitterly. But at first I was proud, knowing that I *belonged*.

This is my *own*, my native land.

Then as I grew older and joined the Nisei group taking a leading part in the struggle for liberty, I waved those lines around like a banner in the wind:

This is my own, my *native* land.

When war struck this country, when neither pride nor belligerence nor grief had availed us anything, when we were uprooted, and scattered to the four winds, I clung desperately to those immortal lines:

This *is* my own, *my* native land.

Later still, after our former homes had been sold over our vigorous protests, after having been re-registered, fingerprinted, card-indexed, roped and restricted, I cry out the question:

Is this my own, my native land?

The answer cannot be changed. Yes. It is. For better or worse, *I am Canadian*.

While I was reading, Uncle was leaning his head back and exercising his neck muscles. "Nisei, not very Japanese-like," he said.

"Why should we be?" Aunt Emily said. "We're Canadian."

All her life, it seemed to me, Aunt Emily toiled to tell of the lives of the Nisei in Canada in her effort to make familiar, to make knowable, the treacherous yellow peril that lived in the minds of the racially prejudiced. I pictured her as a young woman in Toronto, gradually getting more hunched as she sat over her typewriter, growing gray over the years, erasing, re-writing, underlining, trying to find the right mix that strikes home. Like Cupid, she aimed for the heart. But the heart was not there.

Before I could finish more than a few pages of her manuscript she handed me an old scrapbook full of brown and brittle clippings. The headlines crackled as I read them aloud:

"Bar Japs from B.C."

"Claim Deportation of Japs Violates International Law."

Some of the statements were underlined in faded blue-black ink.

June 21, 1944. It seems highly disturbing that without debate and with agreement by all parties, the House of Commons adopted a clause in the new bill dealing with elections which will disenfranchise men and women of Canadian birth. This is Bill 135. . . . No other democratic country has such legislation.

Words of Stanley Knowles (CCF Winnipeg North Centre) were circled.

What is at stake here today is not so much the rights of Japanese Canadians who have moved from British Columbia to other parts of Canada, but rather the ba-

sic concept of democracy and our belief as a nation so far as our belief in the franchise is concerned.

Mackenzie King's words were also marked.

. . . There would have been riots at the polls at the time of the election when any of those Japanese presented themselves for that purpose [to vote] and certainly it was taking the part of wisdom to see that nothing of the kind should take place. . . .

The thin wafers of paper were fragile with old angers. Crimes of history, I thought to myself, can stay in history. What we need is to concern ourselves with the injustices of today. Expedience still demands decisions which will one day be judged unjust. Out loud I said, "Why not leave the dead to bury the dead?"

"Dead?" she asked. "I'm not dead. You're not dead. Who's dead?"

"But you can't fight the whole country," I said.

"We are the country," she answered.

Obasan was not taking part in the conversation. When pressed, finally she said that she was grateful for life. "Arigatai. Gratitude only."

Uncle, who had been listening tensely up to this point, relaxed his jaws and slapped his lap with both hands. "In the world, there is no better place," he said. "This country is the best. There is food. There is medicine. There is pension money. Gratitude. Gratitude."

He was right, I thought. If Aunt Emily with her billions of letters and articles and speeches, her tears and her rage, her friends and her committees—if all that couldn't bring contentment, what was the point?

"What energy," Uncle said good-humoredly and yawned aloud. "Genki ga ii ne."

"Have to keep trying," Aunt Emily said.

Uncle shuffled off to bed, leaving us in the kitchen. "A time to work. A time to talk. Now time to sleep," he said.

"Good night, Uncle," I said. I would have gone to bed as well, but Aunt Emily was not sleepy.

"Life is so short," I said, sighing, "the past so long. Shouldn't we turn the page and move on?"

"The past is the future," Aunt Emily shot back.