

The Helping Fountain

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3rd Place, Short Story, 7th Grade

Dear Otou-san,

San Francisco was nice, I know you liked it. It was breezy and cool and the trees were big. I wonder why there are no trees here. Back in the city there were all different kinds of people and places. Mama would take us to the beach to play after school. I would take my sandals off and run down to the water, trying to escape the hot tingly sand. The water was always cold and the waves were big. Mama told me to stay away from those. She would lay a blanket down and place Riku on her lap and try to feed him little rice balls. I am sure he enjoyed the sea too, even though he was so little and could not have remembered.

Sometimes I think to myself how the beach feels. When you walk on the hot sand it sucks up your thoughts and tells them, rock by rock, to the seagulls who scoop them up and chatter them to the ocean. The ocean buries your secrets in the salty depths and feels them. It lets the words tumble out, the emotions bloom and it sympathizes. Then it ripples its foamy waves and tries to reach you on the shore where it tells you that everything is okay. That's what I like about the sea.

I told that to Mama once and she looked at me for a long time, nodded, then told me I should go do my schoolwork. I think she was sad. I didn't mean to make her feel that way but I think I know why. The beach is where she and you got married and thinking about you made her sad. I get sad too. I don't know if Riku gets sad. He's so small and young, I don't know if he feels anything. Like how it felt when you died. But he couldn't have felt that because you died before he was born.

I try to remember you. I try to remember everyone I meet. What they look like, how they talk, what they smell like, how they smile, how they laugh. Remembering people is important, that's why there are books. So people can write down how people are. I wonder if what is happening right now will be written down.

Before the war, the four of us lived in our small flat, with the hot leaky faucet and the bouncy bed. Otou-san, you loved our flat, you called it Hōmusuītohōmu, home sweet home. Now instead of our flat we live in a small room with no hot leaky faucet. Only a cold leaky faucet. Sometimes I wonder what we would do if you were here, could you get us out? Would you be able to free us from this prison?

Today I went to school like all the other Japanese children. Ms. Ishii taught us our numbers. I can count to seven thousand out loud, the rest I do in my mind. I count how long Riku cries, I count how many noodles Mama buys from the market, and how long it takes me to drift off to sleep. Would you be proud of me, Otou-san?

After school I heard a gunshot. It echoed throughout the barracks of camp, all the children quieted. I think it pierced their thoughts the same way it did mine.

Then I saw Mama running down the dusty street, her long skirt flowing around her, she didn't have Riku.

"Yui, come," she said once she reached me. I stared at her. Why? Where were we going? She narrowed her eyes, "Yui," she said in a low voice, "We need to go. Now."

I obeyed and let her hold my sweaty hand, hers was sweaty too. We made our way back to our small room and she shut the door.

"Mama, what was that?" I asked her. I think I started shaking.

"Oh, nothing, sweet rose." She always called me that. I liked it, the way her words rolled off her tongue so gently, like the silk kimono that she left at our old house.

"Mama?" I shook vigorously this time, "W-What was that?" I repeated in a whisper, my voice trembling. Riku started to cry, Mama got up and tended to him. After she picked him up and soothed him with a powdered milk bottle, she turned to me.

"Yui, you know that since we are Japanese, we aren't like the others, that is what they tell us. To push us down, pretend like we are nothing. I want you to know that. A man tried to escape the camp, tried to get past the guards. They shot him because he is different, not white. That is all." She told me, looking me in the eye. I stopped shaking. Now I understand, Otou-san, we are different. That is why we had to move here, and why we cannot be in our flat in San Francisco anymore. That is why we are in Poston with everybody else who is like us.

I do hope you are listening, so you can say like you always say, Do not let the drums beat louder than you, Yui. But that is the thing, I felt like they have been beating louder than me ever since you left. And now I know they've been beating louder than every other Japanese girl like me.

Weeks went by, it was like all the days were combined into one. Everyday Mama went to the market, Riku cried, and I went to school. One day, I was walking home from the schoolhouse and I saw an old, old woman. She was sitting on the front step of her room, rocking back and forth, singing to herself. An expression of happiness was painted over her wrinkly features.

I looked closer, straining my ears. The music spilled through the air like pure honey. It was so sweet. A smile crept to my face, the first in what felt like years. Otou-san, I do not know why but I believe that old woman was trying to speak to me through her beautiful words. The next day I came and stopped to hear her sing, she was there, sitting on her step with closed eyes, singing softly. I kept going back to hear her.

One day she was not there. I went home. The days after, I willed myself that one day she would be there, singing softly with her eyes closed, rocking back and forth. But she never was. After that, I was so empty, emptier than I had felt ever before, like all the emptiness in me filled up just a little bit when I heard her.

At school when we were doing our alphabet, I snuck a paper into my sack. It was thick and smooth. Usually, it was rare to be able to find such nice paper. I wrote on it, the peachy color brightening with every thought. I told the old woman how her singing was so beautiful and that I wished she would return. I put it on her step and hurried home.

Nothing happened. She didn't respond. I never saw her again.

While lying in bed one night I realized that the old woman gave me something. She gave me a little bit of happiness. Now as I think about it, Otou-san, I think everybody here is sad. They should at least have some happiness to fill them up so they are not empty.



Today Mama was so proud of me. I gave our neighbor, Mr. Saito, dango. She helped me form the dumplings out of rice flour she got from the market, and we skewered them to a short wooden stick. I glazed them with sweetened black sesame paste. She said I did a good deed helping Mr. Saito because he is blind. I liked helping him. The day after that I helped Ms. Ishii sweep the schoolhouse, and she thanked me over and over again.

After, I gave my friend, Nanami, a pencil I carved out of some wood I found. She liked it so much, she gave me a hug. A hug Otou-san! Did you ever give me a hug? Maybe when I was little you gave me one, and I just don't remember it? I like to think you did. I

've been doing all this helping, Otou-san because I think the singing old woman would want someone else to carry on happiness, to fill up people so they won't be empty. This place is a place of sadness, I don't want it to feel like that. I want to help people. Otou-san, is this why you named me Yui? Because I think I know why. You knew who I was, and you know it now. I am the helping fountain. And you must be proud.