

*Dearest Margery,
Love,
Mother*

*Margaret C.
Sunderson*



As a young Japanese-American during World War II, Yuzuru Takeshita was sent off to a detention camp. Could he ever believe in his country again?



On Wings of Forgiveness

By JACK FINCHER

IT WAS A SPARKLING May morning in the little southern Oregon logging community of Bly. The year was 1945, and half a world away the war in Europe was winding down. But spring was uppermost in the minds of the Rev. Archie Mitchell, his pregnant wife, Elsie, and five children from their church.

Packed into a car that Saturday, they were heading for Gearhart Mountain, near where Dick Patzke, 14, one of the five youngsters, had

caught a fine string of trout the previous day. Four miles northeast of Bly, Archie turned onto a Forest Service road made slick and soggy by melting snows.

While he parked the car, Elsie strolled along the road with the youngsters.

"Look what I found, dear," her voice wafted over to him. A nearby road crew watched the children cluster around something half-buried in the snow.

"Just a minute and I'll come

down to look," Archie yelled back.

Suddenly, a shattering explosion rumbled down the mountainside. The sheriff sealed off service roads to the area. A military plane circled overhead. The town telephone operator handled a flurry of hush-hush phone calls. Something had happened in the woods, but what?

That night, a carload of military and police officers visited the homes of the families involved in the explosion and broke the horrible news: everyone on the fishing trip, except Reverend Mitchell, had been killed by a Japanese balloon bomb. They were the only known Americans to die in enemy action on the U.S. mainland in World War II.

"Under no circumstances are you to talk about this," the officials cautioned. "If the Japanese find out these balloons are getting through, they'll be encouraged to continue launching them."

A newspaper account two days later noted only that members of the church fishing party had died in "an explosion of unannounced cause." Bly, Ore., would keep its secret.

DURING THE YEARS that teen-ager Yuzuru Takeshita was detained at the Relocation Center at Tule Lake, Calif., he would stand outside the tarpaper barracks searching the sky for the rumored Japanese balloon bombs. But he never saw one.

Yuzuru and his older brother were *Kibei*, Americans born of

immigrant Japanese parents but educated in Japan. Living there with his grandfather, he had built model Zero fighter planes with his best friend, Tsugio Inouye, and had dreamed of being a Japanese Naval officer like his Uncle Yoichi.

Yuzuru also had enjoyed being a leader in a school system that placed its highest premium on unchallenged obedience. In contrast, how could a democracy such as America's, with its competing voices, ever get anything done? He had been embarrassed when teasing classmates called him an American. Only after his return to California did Yuzuru begin to wonder if he was selling the United States short.

Then in December 1941, everything changed. The United States went to war, and three months later President Roosevelt signed an executive order that set in motion the eventual removal of Japanese-Americans from the West Coast to ten isolated detention camps.

With deepening humiliation, Yuzuru put on all the clothes he could not pack in one suitcase and with his family boarded an open Army truck to another life.

The Takeshitas found themselves living on a dry lake bed at Tule Lake, just 50 miles south of Bly. Chain fences, electrified barbed wire and guard towers with machine guns rimmed the camp—to keep potential attackers out, they were told. But the top barbed-wire strands were angled inward, Yuzuru saw, as were the guns. His

shame turned to resentment and rage.

Then, in the camp school, Yuzuru Takeshita met the person who would change his life forever. The first day of his junior year, she appeared in front of the class: a tall, auburn-haired woman with a soft voice, friendly grin and forceful manner.

"Good morning," she said briskly. "I'm Margaret Gunderson, your English and history teacher. I want you to know something. I don't see how you stand being locked up all the time. I couldn't." Her voice was edged with fire.

Yuzuru's young heart leaped. How did Mrs. Gunderson possess the courage to speak so openly?

Gradually he realized that she shared his hurt. "Americans are not perfect," Mrs. Gunderson told the class. "That's why you and I are here at Tule Lake, isn't it? But we must never forget that democracy is a difficult journey, not a destination already reached."

Later that year, Yuzuru understood the wisdom in her words when an unexpected guest showed up at school. "Class," Mrs. Gunderson announced, "this is Mr. Dillon S. Myer, director of the War Relocation Authority. He's going to sit in with us today."

Yuzuru felt a knot in his stomach. He was to give a report on Thomas Jefferson and wasn't sure the director would like what he was going to say. And what if the paper embarrassed Mrs. Gunderson?

No, Yuzuru finally decided, Mrs. Gunderson would want him to be true to his convictions. He knew with all his being that the architect of the Declaration of Independence had been right, and when he was called upon to speak about Jefferson, he said so: Law was an instrument of the people, not their master; only where men had rights against political tyranny and personal oppression could they truly be free.

When Yuzuru finished, the director approached him with tears in his eyes. "Young man," he said, "I just want you to know how touched I am to hear such an expression of faith in the American system—by someone who has every reason to feel otherwise."

Yuzuru's despair lifted, and gradually his confidence began to grow. "If you were my son," Mrs. Gunderson later wrote in his autograph book, "I'd be so proud of you that I'm sure I would burst with joy."

That Christmas, after the class celebration, Yuzuru stayed behind to ask Mrs. Gunderson a question. It was 1945 now, and the war had ended. "We will be leaving here soon," he said. "I wish to have an American name. Will you give me one?" Eyes shining, Mrs. Gunderson replied, "Allow me some time to think about it."

A week later she had his new name. "It's John," she said. "That was my father's name."

Yuzuru flushed with pleasure. "I

am very honored," the boy said, his voice trembling.

IN 1985 Yuzuru John Takeshita, Ph.D., a professor at the University of Michigan and a consultant on population planning for Far East countries, stopped off at his grandfather's old village in Japan. Memories of the war were everywhere. John had learned that his boyhood chum, Tsugio Inouye, perished in 1945 as a kamikaze pilot. He could not help thinking, *That might have been me.*

A friend's wife mentioned that she had helped assemble balloon bombs during the war. "Then they did exist!" John exclaimed. The woman added that a model of the bomb was hanging in the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.

The following summer, John visited the Smithsonian. There, he found the story of how Japan had set out to assault the American mainland with over 6000 bomb-laden balloons, kept aloft by ingenious barometers and floated across the Pacific sky on the jet stream. If the attacks succeeded, the Japanese expected to hear about it. But the Americans kept their mouths shut. Around the time of the explosion at Gearhart Mountain, Japan scrapped its program as a failure.

At the museum, John learned of a monument to the ill-fated fishing party, and saw that the victims were killed not 50 miles from Tule Lake. This stunned him. Reading

the names of the dead, he was also shocked to discover that the younger children were not much older than his own daughter, Junko, was now. On impulse he jotted down their names.

Back in Japan a year later with his Korean-born wife, Sun, and his daughter, John turned on the television one day to find a frail, elderly Japanese woman on the screen. She was a teacher named Yoshiko Hisaga, talking about how her high-school girls had made balloons during the war to carry bombs to the United States.

Her pupils, struggling through wartime conditions, had been cold, tired and hungry. "I thought if the balloons would bring us victory, my girls had to go on making them, despite all their suffering," the teacher said. "After the war we were relieved to learn that only six Americans were killed."

John wanted to shout, "But five of them were children!" Then it struck him. *Am I all that different? Had I stayed in Japan as I wanted, I might have done the same.*

A few months later, John saw Yoshiko Hisaga at a public meeting. He introduced himself, and explained his interest in her story. Not long after, he wrote her: "Here are the names of those six victims. When you talk about balloon bombs in the future, could you please pray for these innocents?"

Just as John was about to return to the United States, Yoshiko Hisaga phoned. She and a group of

(Right) Yoshiko Hisaga and her former students fold paper cranes for the victims of the Gearhart Mountain explosion; (below) monument on the mountain to the six who died in May 1945



her former students had been deeply moved by the children's deaths. They had folded a thousand colored paper cranes no bigger than the palm of their hands—a Japanese symbol of healing, atonement, forgiveness and peace. The women, now in their 60s, also had written letters of contrition to the victims' relatives in Bly. Would he deliver them?

John would do more than that, he replied. He would translate them as well.

When his plane reached Los Angeles, John looked at the list of names from the museum, then asked the Oregon telephone information operator if there were any

Patzkes in Bly. The operator rang Edward Patzke. His wife Ople answered. Yes, she said to John's question, Dick and Joan Patzke, two of the children who died, had been Edward's younger brother and sister. John and his family were welcome to visit, she said. Ople also gave him the phone number of Edward's sister Dottie, now living in Klamath Falls, Ore.

A few days later, the Takeshitas met Dottie, a warm, open-hearted woman in her 60s, and drove her to Bly. On the way, Dottie reminisced about how the war and the balloon bomb had changed the lives of her family forever. "All these years," Dottie said, "we've searched for the meaning of those deaths."

John understood. The kamikaze death of his boyhood chum seemed just as meaningless.

At first, in the Patzke home, John appeared to be apologetic for

what had happened. Then, impulsively, Edward put his hand on John's arm and blurted huskily, "We don't blame anybody for what happened."

At that instant, John felt a heavy weight slip from his shoulders—the weight of his own rage at Tule Lake, so long buried and festering. If the Patzkes didn't blame anyone, couldn't he forgive his country for his family's wartime internment? "Americans are not perfect," Mrs. Gunderson had said.

Together, the Patzkes and Takeshitas drove up Gearhart Moun-

tain, where John's daughter placed the colored cranes at the foot of the monument, among trees enduringly laced with shrapnel. Then her father read his translations of the letters from Japan. Afterward Dotie said to John: "I pray that someday there will be no more war."

John Takeshita felt an unusual calm. The gap between two peoples—both sides of his deeply divided nature—had been bridged. At last, his inner war was over. He had come home to Mrs. Gunderson's America—and his own—on the wings of paper cranes.



Spoken Arts

WHILE PREPARING a cake, I spilled some flour all across the front of my sweater. "Don't worry," my husband said as he reached for the cordless vacuum, "I'll get the bustduster."

—Contributed by Louise Gilhome

A Real Find

"FINDING THE RIGHT DOCTOR is not easy," says the inimitable George Burns. "Recommendations are a good start. So talk to your friends, preferably the ones who are still alive. Once you get the name of a doctor who sounds interesting, go to his office to check him out. Does he have medical books on his shelf among the investment and real-estate volumes? Does he have an aquarium full of tropical fish? Are the fish alive?"

"Next observe the patients in the waiting room. Do they look better than the fish? Talk to the patients. See what they think of him. Find out if the doctor makes house calls. If he does, send me his name.

"You should also think about whether you want an older doctor or a younger one. The younger ones are very energetic and more radical, up on all the new tricks. The older doctors don't need the new tricks. They've got an old trick up their sleeve. They know that 90 percent of your problems will cure themselves. Personally, I like an older doctor. And if he's still alive, I ask who his doctor is and go to him—if he's still alive."

—How to Live to Be 100—Or More: The Ultimate Diet, Sex and Exercise Book (Putnam)