

SHORT STORY

Part One

Hope

Heavy fog rolled in from the Pacific, blanketing Golden Gate Park and most of San Francisco. Johnny Obata cursed the fog. Sick of seeing the squalidness of his home on Fillmore, borderline between the Filipino and Japanese sections in San Francisco, Johnny Obata had sought escape in beautiful Golden Gate Park. "Goddam the fog," he swore. A wry smile twisted his lean high-cheekboned face. "Even God's against me; hides His beauties from me."

Johnny Obata was disillusioned.

Top man in his graduating class at Galileo, he'd won a scholarship to the University of California. Four years at Cal had netted him a B. S. in aeronautical engineering and a membership in Tau Beta Pi. In June, 1939, he joined the ranks of the unemployed. Every place he applied for a job, he received the same answer: "You've a fine record, Mr. Obata, and we'd like to have you with us, but public opinion, you know; we can't hire Orientals." As a last resort, he took a civil service exam; before getting the results, however, he left for Japan to please his aged father. "I don't want you to lose contact with our relatives after I die," his father had explained.

Johnny Obata had arrived in Yokohama in August, 1939. At first he had a hard time understanding people and making himself understood, but six months of study put him on his feet pretty well. However, in March, 1941, he left for home, bewildered and

disgusted. Americans and Britishers were not favorably regarded in Japan: Tokyo ^{was} ~~had~~ been overrun with stolid Germans and dapper Italians. The ~~citizens~~ ^{people} spotted Johnny as an American by his clothes or by his speech; they spat on him and called him Yankee, disparagingly. Once, after a walk down Ginza, he'd gone home to find his coat ripped by a knife in three places. His relatives treated him well, but thought him strange, and he, in turn, thought them backward and superstitious; he dared not express his political views aloud, but found that theirs clashed violently with his. So, although he'd been offered a technical position in one of their factories, when the American consulate sent him a form letter urging all American citizens to return, he seized it as an excuse to go home and had written to his father in San Francisco that ~~he~~ he was returning because the consub had ordered him home.

So he had come home. "Breathes there the man with soul so dead..." He thought of Sir Walter Scott's lines and was filled with a warm appreciation of his home when he felt the solid ground of America under his feet. His father was glad to see him again, but was disappointed at Johnny's inability to speak Japanese without an American accent.

At the moment, Johnny was in ~~Fog~~-enshrouded Golden Gate Park. Much of the warmth he'd felt at his homecoming two weeks before was gone, and the old cynicism was beginning to creep back into his soul. Sick of Japan's militarism, he'd returned to America only to find the United States defense conscious. "Oh, well," he'd thought, "they'll be able to use engineers now."

But he'd received the same answers as before: "Sorry, we can't hire Orientals." And that afternoon, an automobile had almost run him down. "Look where you're going, you bastard Jap," the driver had yelled, ~~the son of a bitch!~~

The dim outline of a bench loomed up before him; Johnny sat down and gave himself up to self-pity. "What the hell good is an education, anyway," he thought, "as long as you're a Jap."

Presently, the odor of alcohol penetrated his consciousness, and, looking up, Johnny found that an expensively dressed bleary-eyed man with a prosperous-looking bay window was seated at the other end of the bench and was looking at him.

"Whaddya shay?" the drunk burped in greeting, belching up more alcoholic fumes.

Johnny made a face. "Not much," he replied in a tone that didn't invite further conversation.

Johnny resumed his brooding. The soak tentatively crossed his shaky legs; after a moment, he reached under his overcoat, brought out a cigar, bit off one end, and felt around in his pockets for a match.

"Gottamash?" he asked, bleary eyes blinking stupidly.

"Yeah." Johnny burrowed into his overcoat pocket and pulled out a book of matches. "Keep 'em," he said ungraciously.

"Thanksh, Kid." The drunk took the book of matches and lit his cigar.

Johnny rested his chin in his hands with his elbows on his knees and continued brooding.

"Whashamatter, Kid, shump'n' wrong?" the man inquired with drunken sympathy.

"Plenty," replied Johnny shortly, half-choking from the mingled odors of cigar and liquor.

"Thash tough...Married?"

Johnny shook his head without looking up; couldn't the drunken ~~bastard~~ ^{fool} leave him alone?

"Looka' me: I got money, tailor-made closhe, new Oldshmobile. But you think 'm happy? Hell, no, ^{my} wife doeshn' unnershtan'me. I won't shay a word 'gansht m' wife; she'sh a good woman, but she doeshn' unnershtan' me." He too lapsed into self-pity.

Johnny felt like hollering, "But dammit, you're not a Jap!" But what was the use; the guy was only a drunken fool.

Presently the man looked at Johnny again. "You a Shineesh?"

Johnny was on the point of answering the standard, "No, I'm an American," but he knew what the man meant. "Hell, no; I'm a Jap. What good's it being a Jap? Might as well be a dog!" he jerked out bitterly, bringing his head up and facing the drunkard.

The sot blinked at him with stupid surprise. "Didn' mean t' make you sho riled up. Being a Japaneesh, ^{is} the alcohol made him pronounce the "j" like a Frenchman, "ish no dishgrashe. Y' otta be glad." He became earnest and eloquent in his drunkenness. "They call you kidsh born in thish country nishai, huh?" Receiving an affirmative nod, he went on, "Well, you nishai kidsh are purdy lucky, if you ashk me." He went on before Johnny

could get out a bitter denial. "Yup, you're lucky; you gotta dual heritage; Japaneesh parentsh with their culture and your 'Merican education and itsh culture." He paused to relight his cigar which had gone out. Johnny laughed with tart skepticism. He recalled how he'd held in contempt the strange and backward customs, mannerisms, and ideas of his relatives. As for his education in America, look where it'd gotten him.

"You c'n laugh if you wanna," the drunk said, "but it's true; you think 'm drunk," his head wobbled from side to side, and he thrust out his lower lip, "but on'y m' legsh 're drunk; m' brainsh 're clearer when I gotta little likker in me. An' what I shay ish true. They shay we're gonna have a war with Japan in a coupla yearsh. Mebbe sho, but you nishai kidsh otta be able to unnershtan' both shides 'n' mebbe shtop it."

Johnny recalled his experiences in Japan; he recalled how little he had understood the Japanese, and how little they'd understood him. But the guy had something there at that; the potentialities were there. He was ashamed not to have tried to understand his folks better. But his mother had been dead for eleven years and his dad was getting to be pretty old; it was too late now. He got up. "Aw, you're just drunk and don't know what you're talking about." The man looked at him with bleary eyes, but only shrugged. Johnny turned and walked away muttering, "Damn drunkard," but he felt a little better; he didn't know it, but the seeds of hope had been planted within him by the drunkard.

Part two

Faith

Johnny Obata finally got a civil service position as a student instructor at Ellington Field, Texas. Then came December 7, 1941. The war that the drunkard had spoken of came two years earlier than the worst pessimists had expected. Like everyone else, Johnny Obata had been bewildered that Sunday morning when the first radio broadcasts came through that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. At first he'd thought, "That doggone Orson Welles popping off again," but it finally dawned on him that the broadcasts were not fiction but the real article. He was stunned; the trends he'd seen in Japan had convinced him that war would be inevitable, but he hadn't expected it so soon and not in that manner; he'd been convinced that Saburo Kurusu's mission had been ~~made~~ in good faith.

He was apprehensive of facing his soldier students the next morning and thought of resigning. "But what the hell, I've got nothing to be ashamed of," he decided. December 8, he stepped out of the house with some misgivings, half-wishing that he'd decided to stay home. The first person he saw was a stranger in civilian dress. Far from scowling, the stranger gave Johnny a wave of the hand, a cheerful smile, and said, "Hello, Yankee."

"Hiya," said ^{Johnny} Jim, trying to speak naturally. He remembered the way he'd been called Yankee by the Japanese. "Thanks a lot, Mister," he said under his breath. His faith had been renewed.

A few weeks later, he wasn't so sure; he was on his way back to California, dismissed from his position. Officially he'd received a leave of absence, but it amounted to a dismissal. He'd been touched by the way the soldiers who'd studied in his classes had rallied around him and had tried to get the order nullified, but the order hadn't originated with a local office. So Johnny was heading back to California, disillusioned once again. The trip home passed without incident except that at El Paso, a man had asked Johnny if he were a Chinese or a Japanese and then shut up like a clam when Johnny told him. This man eyed Johnny suspiciously all the way to Los Angeles; he was probably disappointed when Johnny failed to bomb the bridge across the Colorado River when they pulled out of Yuma.

Back home in San Francisco again, he was surprised to find the Japanese colony agog over the possibility of forced evacuation. "They won't dare do that to American citizens," Johnny stoutly told some of his acquaintances. "Oh, yeah!" there are plenty of business interests anxious to get rid of competition," they replied skeptically. "Some of the farmers near Ellay are being forced out on the grounds that they are near aircraft factories; they've had those farms for thirty years and more, but a lot of ignorant jerks claim that the Japs have taken up farm sites there for the purpose of sabotaging aircraft factories that have mushroomed up there within the last two years." Most diligent in their efforts to get the Japanese out were members of the Foreign Legion and Native Sons and Daughters of the Golden West, most of whom had not lived in the state as long as those

they were trying to oust.

"But my God, intelligent people aren't advocating anything so drastic; look at Gordy Sproul at Cal and other educators; it's only a small minority that wants to get rid of us," Johnny maintained.

"Well, that minority has control of the dough and the press to sound like an overwhelming majority," his friends told him.

When they started evacuating Los Angeles, all of Johnny's illusions began crumbling around him. His dad was picked up by the F. B. I. because he was listed as a contributor to the Japanese language school in San Francisco. Johnny viewed the wreckage around him and was glad only that his mother ~~w~~ had been spared the horror of witnessing all that was occurring; she'd had faith in America.

Part three

Charity

Hostile faces glared at Johnny Obata and rough hands clutched at him. He felt fear for the first time in his 24 years. The situation reminded him of the nightmare he'd had when he ate ^{too} two much birthday cake the day he'd turned eight. He'd been screaming with fear and had awakened to see his mother's reassuring face. "What are you crying at, John-chan?" she'd said. "There's nothing to be afraid of." But he knew that he was experiencing no nightmare now.

"We ain't aimin' to have no Japs 'round hyere," a heavily

bearded man who was squeezing his right arm sneered, breathing the smell of corn liquor into Johnny's face. "What'll we do, boys? Tar and feather him and run him outa town on a rail?"

Johnny, for all of his education, found that his vocabulary had suddenly become limited. "My God, you can't do this; I'm an American citizen," he gasped with terror. Within him he thought, "Why the heck did I decide to come out here?" The conviction that he was a citizen ^{had} made Johnny determined not to accept evacuation. Instead, he'd gotten a few things together and hopped an eastbound freight. His destination was the Ozarks. Judging by the books he'd read about the place, no one worked there; hell, he'd be able to live off the land and wouldn't have to worry too much about getting clothes. Well, this was the Ozarks.

"Hell, no, Jake, we don' wanna run him outa town on a rail; we wanna lynch him!" shouted a voice from the crowd. Several voices picked up the cry, "Lynch him!"

"Show him what we aim to do with any Jap that comes pokin' his ~~his~~ nose 'round hyere!"

"We ain' had a good hangin' since we strung up that black buck for rapin' Beth Haggerty."

"God no, you can't do this to me; I'm an American," Johnny protested weakly through trembling lips. Drops of sweat stood out on his white face. "Why didn't I tell 'em 'yes' when they asked if I were an Indian?" he thought. "But now, I couldn't go through life on a lie."

"Haw, haw!" derisive laughter greeted his last remark, "Ye're nothin' but a Jap; once a Jap, always a Jap!"

"Nate Brown, run on home and bring a good strong rope," hollered bearded Jake.

"And stop over to my sto' and get four, five jug o' corn likker too," bellowed a stout man with a store apron on as a slim youth detached himself from the group.

"Yea, there's gonna be a lynchin'!" cried a small boy in high glee as he sped away to spread the news; but practically all of the whites in the town had ^{already} turned out when news of a Jap's presence spread.

"My God, I'm a citizen," protested Johnny, beginning to sound like a phonograph record.

"Lan' sakes, Sheriff, ye're not goin' to stan' there an' let 'em hang that pore boy are ye?" a middle-aged woman asked of a corpulent man.

"Wal, Mis' Priddy, I reckon he's a Jap; he ain' much better'n a nigger, mebbe worse," the officer replied.

"But 'member Beth Haggerty? After they strung up that buck, she 'fessed that he didn' touch her; maybe this boy didn' do nothin' wrong."

"Wal, Mis' Priddy, 'tain't a question of doin' sump'n' wrong; I reckon we got rid o' one more nigger that time we swung that Buck and I figger one less Jap won' hurt this worl' none. 'Sides, if I'm goin' ter 'member anythin' I'm 'memberin' who votes for me come 'lection time, an' I ain' aimin' to rile nobuddy."

"Ye'r dern tootin', Sheriff," said a bystander, "Ye'd better not interfere; 'lection time is pow'ful close."

The slim youth had returned with a coil of rope and some

jugs of corn whiskey which the men pounced on with glee.

"You can't do this," protested Johnny, struggling in desperation.

"The hell you say!" thundered Jake, clouting him across the face.

"Hangin's too good for him; let's tie him to a stake and burn him!" shrilled a voice from the outer fringes of the crowd.

A few voices seconded it, but others shouted them down, "Lynchin's more fun."

"Goddam Jap, 'mos' as bad as a nigger!" said an old man coming close and squirting foul tobacco juice in Johnny's face.

Johnny didn't say anything; he was in a semi-comatose condition. Bits of his life flashed before him in kaleidoscopic fashion like the time ^{when} he was almost drowned in the Sacramento river. But that time, he hadn't been afraid; he'd only felt a little drowsy as if he were going to sleep. He remembered now the fight he'd had with Whitey Johnson over a marble game when he was in grammar school. But then, Whitey had grown up to be his best friend. He remembered fighting with his Japanese school teacher because he'd hooted at the story of the mythical origin of the Japanese empire. He'd been whipped and sent home with a note to his parents, but his parents didn't whip him again; instead, they went to the teacher's home and demanded, "What's the meaning of teaching young children who've been brought up in Christian homes such nonsense?" Johnny had quit Japanese school, but his dad continued contributing money for the sake of

propriety. He remembered getting caught in a junior high school history class for shooting paper wads; the teacher had detained him after school and lectured to him how nice and quiet all the other Japanese children were; he'd laughed, but underneath, he'd been impressed and determined to become an ideal student. He remembered his mother's death; would he go to heaven and see her there? He remembered the crush he had on the dark-eyed Italian girl he sat next to in 9th grade English; he'd been afraid to speak to her and was shocked when, a year later, he saw in the paper that she'd won a beauty contest; he'd decided then not to have any girls. He remembered the football game with Commerce High; he had caught Pete Whipple's pass to score the winning touchdown to give Galileo the city championship; he had been only a substitute for Whitey, but Whitey had been as elated as Johnny and nominated Johnny for student body president; he'd been narrowly defeated, but had won the senior class presidency and had been chosen valedictorian. He remembered how much like an ass he'd felt standing before the audience. He remembered the humiliation of striking out with two on in the last inning against Stanford when he played for the Cal frosh baseball team.

He dimly felt Jake slip the noose over his head; it was tightened. The images came faster and more hazily. He recalled marching in the graduation ceremony at the coliseum high in the hills behind the campus; he remembered the inspiration he'd felt at President Sproul's stirring speech. The images came faster and faster. He remembered how that inspiration and hope

had faded as he made the rounds seeking employment. He remembered going to Japan and being spat on and...He remembered the drunkard...the instructorship in Texas...the war. The images sped up so that he couldn't keep track of them. The blood roared in his ears. He faintly felt some rocks that were thrown at him strike him, but they didn't hurt. He heard the blood roaring louder in his ears. Then nothing.

Johnny Obata's limp body swayed gently in the breeze.

Everyone had become hushed.

One young man said to his neighbor, "Maybe we shouldn't a strung him up; he warn't as bad as a nigger. He talked like a reg'lar 'Merican 'cept that he sounded like a damyankee.

"Aw, hell," his neighbor replied, "he was 'mos' as bad as a nigger." He picked up a rock and threw it at the swaying body; it hit with a sickening thud and half turned the body westward.

"I guess we showed 'em we ain' aimin' to have no Japs 'round," said someone loudly, breaking the spell that had held the crowd silent.

"Best hangin' we had since we strung up that nigger for rapin' Beth Haggerty," said the stout merchant.

"C'mon down to Pete's place and I'll set ye all up to the drinks," bellowed Jake, making a sweeping motion to the crowd.

540 No. 15

The book is

Ishikawa, Joseph B.

English 211

Section II

November 22, 1942

Substantive
B+

Prof
B+

*Honestly speaking
I think this is an
excellent assignment*

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*This is capital justice
I'd be glad to chat with
you about it.*

- F.C.