

What My Grandfather Said

“Beasts,” my grandfather said, staring up over the cowshed, up at our mountain. “Beasts are what they are.”
“Who?” I asked.

My cousin Shizuko and I were sitting out on the cedar veranda with him. We were eight years old. Much later I would imagine that he had suddenly spotted the flickering eyes of a whole brigade of phantoms, but right then I only saw that his eyes had moistened, only heard his voice trembling as I’d never heard it before.

“I hear an American is coming to your school,” he said, turning to us. “Be careful.”

He tapped his chest.

“Americans. They attack you here. It’s a hurt that never heals.”

A big lump pushed up into my throat, and my grandfather, my *jii-chan*, disappeared into the cowshed before either of us kids could say a word. We traded looks of disbelief. We mumbled back and forth a bit. Then I ran home. I *flew* home.

Maybe it was the family genes—keeping the difficult stuff in—but no sooner had I spotted Mama in the family room than I knew I couldn’t tell her or anyone else what Jii-chan had said. In a daze, I banged back out the door and jogged back across the street. Halfway around Jii-chan’s house I slowed. The cowshed came into view. I snuck up to the big open doorway. I peered in.

Jii-chan was leaning over the front rail of one of the stalls.

Leaning way over. It looked like the rail had bent him in half—had broken him in half. He was muttering to himself, crying a little. I couldn't make out a single word.

This was not the Jii-chan I knew. The Jii-chan I knew couldn't be broken like this. I turned away. I *walked* home.

What Jii-chan said to Shizuko and me would frighten any kid, but if you want to understand why my behavior the day the American came was so extreme, why the skirmishes that followed tore me up so, you'll first have to let me tell you how I got started as me and what sort of me I got started as.

But this story covers a lot of territory. The street all us Ishiguros lived along proved to be a lot longer than I could have imagined at eight. That first American teacher coming to town marked only the end of the beginning. There were still a lot of face-to-face encounters with the "enemy" to come.

I don't want to forget this day, the day I've begun writing, so I'll put it down. Thursday, May 29, 1997. Rina's had her birthday, but I'm still only seventeen. I'm in my room upstairs, at my desk, where I'm supposed to be, but this night, I haven't cracked a book. January and the first stage of the university entrance exams are only six months off.

Rina must be putting away *her* books, leaving her cram school, saying good-bye to her friends. Soon she'll be riding her bicycle back down the highway, and then up her street—over there, across the river. Probably her acoustic guitar is slung across her back. Maybe she is thinking of me.

When I was a little boy, Papa was always off across the river, at work in the building supply store, leaving home early, coming home late, but Jii-chan was forever out and about—in the rice paddies, in the gardens, in the cowshed. Whenever I'd spot him and call out, he'd look up and wave me over with a big inviting smile. He'd thank me for my company. He'd be grateful for my "help."

And he'd talk. Of Mioyama, of the mountain, of the fruits and vegetables, of the rice, of us Ishiguros.