

Editorial Note

Kenta is now fifteen years old. He and Lee (a guest teacher from the U.S.) have hiked up a mountain, and Kenta has just told Lee of the first time he met an American—how scared he was. Lee reciprocates with his own story, “The Boy with Metal Legs.”

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The Boy with Metal Legs

“It was not 1850.” 1850. Lee took a stick and wrote it in the dirt.

“One thousand, eight hundred, fifty. Eighteen fifty. It was *not* 1850. We did not have slaves. Slave. The person who isn’t free. The person who *belongs* to another person.”

Lee seemed to have made up his mind to tell this story all in English. He went slow, watching me carefully, repeating, clarifying when necessary, making sure I was getting it. He used a few words of Japanese, but not many.

“And it was not 1955. We talked about that the first hike we took, didn’t we? About Rosa Parks, about Dr. King.”

I nodded.

“It was 1976. The two-hundredth birthday of America. I was eight years old, just like you were. Legally, segregation—*seh-gruh-gay-shun*—was gone. The law, the *horitsu*,

said it was gone. But in my hometown, in 1976, white and black people still didn't do much together. There was only one high school, so they played on the same football team, and they cheered for the same team, but that was about it. They lived in different neighborhoods. Went to different churches. And no blacks lived near my elementary school, so none went to it. When I was eight, like you, I had never played with a black boy. Never talked to a black boy.

"One evening I made a plan to go fishing. Get up early in the morning. Walk to a pond. A pond. An *ike*. Have an adventure all by myself. Just me.

"That night I dug worms. *Dig*, like this. *Dig, dug*. And *worms*, you know, long, wiggly, like this." He took out a notebook, began drawing a picture. "I dug worms. And I got my fishing pole. I got some line, fishing line. I got some hooks. And bobbers and weights, like this.

"Then. 4 o'clock in the morning. Got up. Got my clothes on. Started walking. I walked forever. Down an asphalt road, maybe two kilometers, and then turned down the gravel road that went to the pond. *Gravel*, little rocks, *jari*. Gravel road. I walked down the gravel road.

"I'd only been walking on that road for five minutes when I heard someone behind me. I glanced back. I saw this super tall black boy. He was walking toward the pond, too. But he wasn't carrying a fishing pole. He wasn't carrying anything. He was just walking. Maybe fifty yards, fifty *me-ters*, behind me. He was following me, I was sure.

"And just like that"—Lee snapped his fingers—"I was terrified. Teh-ruh-fied. Very, very, *very* scared. Like *petri-fied*. But maybe worse. *Terrified*.

"I walked faster, then thought that he would know I was walking faster. I slowed back down, walked as normally as I could. My heart pounded. Like this. Ba-boom, ba-boom, ba-boom. Really, I was very scared. *Terrified*. In the gravel, in the *jari*, his footsteps got louder, closer.

"I had glanced back at him just that once. But I had seen

him good. He was wearing really short pants, all the way up to here. His legs were so thin, really, *really* thin—*this* thin—and his thighs—here—just bone. The only thing big about his legs was his knees.

“His footsteps got closer and closer, and I started imagining that the bones in his legs weren’t bones at all. They were metal rods. And his knees, they were powerful metal springs. And I was sure, absolutely sure, that if he started kicking me, I wouldn’t have a prayer. *Not have a prayer*. Not have a chance. Death.

“And I panicked.

“I told myself, I’ll pretend I dropped something. Yeah, I’ll pretend I had a hook in my hand and dropped it.

“Suddenly I squatted down, like this, and I’m looking all around in the gravel and waiting, and he’s only a few steps away, and I can feel myself cringing—*cringing*, going like this—and I’m staring at the ground, and I can already feel one of those metal rods bashing my head in—*bash!*”

“He hit you?” I asked.

“No, he didn’t hit me. I *thought* he might hit me. I *worried* he might hit me. I *imagined* he might hit me.

“Then the footsteps stop and I realize he’s right beside me. And he says, ‘You all right?’ And I say, ‘Yeah, I’m all right.’ And he, ‘You lose something?’ And me, ‘I had a hook in my hand. I dropped it.’ And he, ‘You keep it in a box or tie it to your line and you won’t lose it.’ ‘I had it in my hand,’ I say. And he, ‘I’ll help you find it.’ And me, “No. No, thank you. You go on. I’ll find it.’

“I thought that would end it, but you know what he says? He says, ‘I can give you a hook or two.’ And I look up and see that he does have fishing stuff. Yeah, from one of his pockets, he’s pulled a stringer and a small plastic case with line and hooks inside it. A *stringer*, that’s the long string you put fish on after you catch them, you put the string through their gills, *gills*, you know, breathing, like this. I guess he was going to find something to use as a

pole once he got to the pond.

“So I say to him, ‘No, please, just go on. I’ll find it.’

“So he did. He went on. And as I watched him walk away—little glances, like this—I realized that he wasn’t so tall after all. Not even as tall as me. He was just a skinny, skinny kid.

“Maybe twice he turned back to look at me. Me, I kept my eyes glued to the gravel. I waited until he rounded a bend—a curve—until he went around a curve, and then I stood up and ran. Not toward the pond. Back the way I’d come. I ran away. Just like you.