

The Tale of Jim North.

By: Michelle Diaz

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Albany Oregon

February 21, 1942

Rain poured down onto the overhang above me. The small patch of dry concrete I was huddled on, was splattered occasionally by rain drops. In front of me, people bustled about under umbrellas, boys shouted the latest news on the war. Ladies whispering in hushed voices. Some women cried into their handkerchiefs.

“Jim is weak! He’s a freak! He can’t even learn to speak!” The shouts rang in my ears along with the sounds of feet slapping on wet pavement. I jumped up and stared at the group of boys bearing down on me. I spun around and ran, not caring if I got wet. I zig-zagged down the wet streets, dove under a ladder that someone was carrying, turned another corner and slipped into an abandoned warehouse. Windows lined the walls, making this not a very great place to hide. I looked up. A loft stacked with boxes and crates looked like the best place to go. I climbed up a wooden ladder and crouched down behind a crate. I stifled a scream as a hand was clamped over my mouth.

“Shh. Don’t scream, I won’t hurt you.” The voice was firm but kind. I relaxed just a little to show that I wasn’t going to do anything. The hand eased off my mouth. I turned around, but this time couldn’t help the yelp that escaped me. Standing in front of me was a large Japanese man, behind him, huddled on some blankets was a woman and three children. One of the girls looked about my age, maybe fifteen. The other two boys looked like twins, probably around eight or nine. The woman was American and the children must have been their kids, because they didn’t look like full Japanese.

“It’s okay. We won’t hurt you, we are only a family trying to stay together.” I looked up at him, only to look away again just as quickly. Just the other day I had seen a Japanese family being loaded into trucks and taken out of town. No one knew where they were being taken.

“This is my family. A soul is a soul, and no one should say different. You can hand us over to the FBI. But first put yourself in our shoes. How would you like to be taken away from your family?”

I looked down and thought about it for a moment. I wouldn’t like it one bit. Not that I would have sold them out anyway though. I nodded and stood up, I had to get going, I had much to do before I could find a scrap to eat for lunch. I stumbled and would have fallen, had the man not grabbed my arm to steady me.

“Th- Th- Thanks.” I managed. At least it hadn’t taken me a full minute to get it out. I looked away again, embarrassed that I still couldn’t talk right, even after all these years. I hastily made my way down the ladder and out the door.

Evening had swiftly descended upon the city. The street lamps cast an eerie glow onto the rainwashed sidewalks. The hustle and bustle was quieting down a little. The sound from an uptown club throbbed through the air and the occasional automobile rumbled past. I curled up under a crate and watched the stars for a moment. I had no family to share a home with. But I didn’t want to stay in a foster home. I didn’t want all the kids there to tease me. My mind wandered to the events of the day, and I wondered what was going to happen to that poor Japanese family. I had made that silent promise not to give them away, and would hold to it, for the rest of my life.

February 22, 1942

Morning brought a new dawn, and with it a whole set of new problems. The sound of kids shouting awoke me.

“Jap! Jap! Catch the jap!”

I rubbed my eyes and looked out of the alleyway I had slept in. A girl ran past the entrance. For a split second I couldn’t figure out who she was, for I knew I had seen her somewhere before.

Then with a shout of surprise I jumped up and ran after her. She was the Japanese girl I had seen with her mother, father and two brothers the other day in the loft with the boxes. She could run fast, but I knew she wouldn’t be able to outrun the other boys. I had to keep to my promise and not let them get caught. I raced up to her and grabbed her hand. She yanked it away, spun around and slapped me. I stumbled back, shocked. Tears stung my eyes. All I had ment, was to help her. She covered her mouth with her hand. “ I am so sorry. I thought you were someone else. Please forgive me.” She begged.

“There’s the jap! Get her!”

I spun around and saw the group of mean boys racing towards us. I grabbed her hand and led her down an alleyway. I knew most of the streets by heart and could navigate them like a professional. I led her a roundabout way back to her home in the warehouse. We silently slipped inside. I let go of her hand and backed away, looking at the ground.

“Wh- wh- why. Why- wer- wer- were yo-you out there?” I stammered.

She gently grabbed my hand, but I still jumped. “Thank you for helping me.” She said.

I nodded and shuffled back a step.

“I went out there to find you. I wanted to thank you for not telling anyone where we were.”

I looked up and saw her smiling at me. I looked away, my cheeks flaming. “Sh- sure.” I said. My face got hotter. I couldn’t even string a sentence together.

“If you don’t mind me asking. Why do you talk like that?”

I shrugged. I didn’t know either. I just had never been able to talk correctly.

“What’s your name?” She asked.

“J-Jim Nor-Nor-North.” I answered.

“I’m Akari Nakano, but everyone calls me Aki.”

“N-nice t-to me-e-t y-you Aki.” I said.

She smiled and laughed, grabbed my hand and led the way to the ladder.

“Come, we will be friends, and together we shall change the world.”

October 10, 1942

A slight drizzle was coming down outside. I sat on a crate and read in the faint light cast by a single candle. “‘I was born there,’ said Tarzan, quietly. ‘My mother was an Ape, and of course she couldn’t tell me much about it. I never knew who my father was.’” I read out loud on that October evening. “The end.” I said as I closed my most treasured book, Tarzan of the Apes.

Aki smiled and clapped her hands happily. “That was amazing Jim!” She said as she stood up from the crate she had been sitting on. For months and months Aki had been teaching me how to read and write. And slowly. As slowly as one always learns, I had learned how to speak correctly. As soon as I had practiced reading out loud, I had stopped stumbling over my words as much. And finally, after fifteen years I could actually read, write and talk like a normal boy.

“You know,” Aki whispered in my ear. “You are incredibly smart. I don’t think there is a fifteen year old boy like you who could catch up that quickly. The book was too advanced for your level, but I wanted to see what you could do.” She smiled. “You have made me proud Sir Jim North.” She said with a mock curtsy. I shoved her shoulder playfully. “I am no ‘Sir’” I said.

“But I couldn’t have gotten that far without you, Miss. Aki Nakano.” I Added.

She laughed again. A carefree happy laugh. “Come, we shall go and help father with supper.”

I followed Aki out of our makeshift study and around more crates to where her father was making super.

Mr. Nakano smiled at me. “How are your studies going, young man?” He asked politely.

I smiled back. “They are doing just fine, thanks to you and your daughter.” I said.

“Is there anything I can help you with, sir?” I added.

“I suppose you could set the table.” He said.

I turned and set upon my task, glad that I had a home. That I had a family. Even though I felt as if Aki had become more than family. She was something special.

October 11, 1942

“Would you mind getting some bread from the store for us Jim?” Mrs. Nakano asked me the next morning.

“Sure.” I set down my book and jumped up to do what I was asked. I walked over to a small cardboard box and fished around for some coins. I scaled down the ladder and peered out the windows. The coast was clear. I carefully slid open the door and slipped out into the late morning light

“That will be twenty-five cents young man.” Said the store keeper.

I handed over the money and grabbed the bread.

“Thank you sir.” I said, then I walked out.

I paused on the street corner. Something felt off. It was a feeling I didn’t get too often, but something bad always followed. I looked both ways and ran across the street. I didn’t stop running until I got back to the alleyway where the warehouse was. I looked around to make sure no one was watching, then I turned and stepped into the alley. I took a couple steps, only to stop dead in my tracks. At the end of the alley, right in front of the warehouse was a large FBI truck.

“No.” I whispered. I dropped the loaf of bread on the ground and ran forward. The door to the warehouse opened and a group of armed guards walked out, each escorting one of my friends.

“Wait!” I shouted. One of the guards stopped and looked at me quizzically.

“What’s the matter lad?” He demanded.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“We are relocating this family to a safer location, for everyone's safety.”

I looked over at Aki and her family. They all wore grim expressions.

“This is my family!” I protested. “You can’t take them. They haven’t done anything wrong!”

The man shook his head sadly. “I’m sorry son, but these are our orders.”

The men began loading my family into the truck. Aki turned and met my gaze. “Remember that day Jim. I’ll be back. I promise.”

Albany Oregon

February 22, 1952

Ten Years Later...

I looked up at what used to be my home.

Ten years... I thought to myself. Ten years since I last saw Aki and her family. Ten years since I had a family. A true family. I sighed deeply and watched the rain fall all around me. The soft plink as raindrops hit my umbrella, the sound of motor vehicles rumbling past and the sounds of people shouting in the lane behind me were the only sounds that penetrated my senses. And even then, it was a dull background noise. The warehouse in front of me had been turned into a bakery. The smells that came from the ovens were heavenly, but I hadn't come for the pastries. Today was February 22nd. The day I had first met Aki. When we had first become friends. We had agreed that if anything should happen, we would meet here. We would meet on the day we had met. After they were taken, I had left Albany in search of work, but every year I returned for a week, waiting for her to come back. But every year, no one showed up. I sucked in a breath, as the truth hit me. She wasn't coming back. For ten years I had waited. Now it was time to move on.

"Goodbye Aki." I said sadly as I stared at the windows of the bakery.

"And why would you be saying goodbye if I just got here?" Said someone behind me.

I turned slowly and blinked, not sure if I was imagining the woman standing before me.

"Aki?" I asked in a whisper.

"It's me Jim. I came back, just like I said I would." She said.

I dropped my umbrella and ran to her, engulfing her in a hug. "I thought you weren't coming back." I whispered into her ear. She threw back her head and laughed. One of her happy carefree laughs I had missed so much. "A promise is a promise Jim. Even if it took me a hundred years, I would have found a way back." She looked down and smiled at me. She had grown taller since I had last seen her. She was now almost at least an inch taller than I. "I would have found a way back to you. No matter the cost." She said. She gave me a light kiss on the cheek.

"I missed you Aki. Every day you were gone, I wondered where you were and if you were okay. Every year you didn't show, I wondered if you would ever come back."

"I'll always come back, Jim. I'll always come back to the man I love." She answered.

I bowed to her, "Well then lady Nakano, It is the perfect time to take you on our very first date."

I took her hand and led her into the bakery. It didn't matter to me that it was raining anymore. To me it seemed as though the clouds had gone. Aki lit up my world like no one else. She had literally changed my world. I smiled, truly glad for the first time in ten years.

To some the war brought an end. But to Aki and I, it was just the beginning.

In the spring of 1953, Aki and I were married. The ceremony was small, but we were happily joined in the presence of Aki's family and a few close friends. We later adopted two children and a dog. And we lived happily forever after, until the end of our days.

And so I bid you farewell, dear reader. And may you also, find a happy ending.

The End

Author's note:

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to locals, events, business establishments, or actual persons-- living or dead-- is entirely coincidental.

This work references the Japanese people as "Japs" and while the author does not in any way agree with this terminology, it is included in this work for historical accuracy.

It is not in any way meant to be offensive and/or discriminatory. Rather this story is meant for enjoyment, with the purpose being to highlight the love and joy that can be found in troubled times.