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The Pocket Baby

He was born a month premature and was so tiny and blue with cold that the Japanese midwives who delivered him on October 17, 1918, had to put him in an oven to give him warmth and life. But as soon as they took him out of the oven incubator, he went dead blue again. It wasn't until the fourth oven resurrection that it was clear he would survive and that he was given the name Yoshio.

"He is no bigger than a peanut," the midwives said. His father, Kotaro Kobuki, joked that he could carry him in the pocket of his suit coat.

His mother, Yoshino, was hardly back on her feet again from the birth of Yoshio when she fell ill. At first no one could tell Kotaro what was wrong with his wife. For two days she lay writhing on a crude bed in the four-room clapboard cabin outside the village of Thomas, Washington. Here, in the White River Valley east of Seattle, Kotaro was a truck farmer on five acres of leased cropland. Even in the December cold and fog of the valley, Yoshino sweated and spiked a fever. Her lips and fingertips turned blue. The magnificent roll of black hair that encircled her head began to disintegrate, and shards of wet hair lay plastered against her forehead. She developed skin blisters that popped and made her

crackle like a low fire as she thrashed on the bed. What was it? The Black Death? Typhoid Fever?

“She’ll be fine,” the midwives told Kotaro. “It is ‘the miasma,’” they insisted as putrefactions hung in the atmosphere like fog. Kotaro was advised to burn sulfur on the kitchen range. Or sprinkle the cabin with salt and vinegar and a mixture of spices. They told him to make bonfires in the fields.

None of these measures helped. Yoshino began coughing up blood and screaming in pain. She could no longer nurse her tiny baby Yoshio. Wet nurses had to be found. A doctor from the nearby town of Kent paid a visit. “It is,” he said, “the Spanish Flu, an invisible but vicious virus that attacks the body in mutant swarms like pirates with grappling hooks attacking a ship.”

The sickness was sweeping the world, he explained. It had begun the previous February in Kansas among soldiers recruited for the Great War and stacked close together in barracks bunks. From there it had hop-scotched across the country. Then it had jumped to Europe, South America, Asia, and finally Africa. It was highly contagious. Priests had even died while administering the sacraments to other victims.

The doctor told Kotaro to be sure that his wife drank plenty of water and gargled. “Use antiseptic sprays,” the doctor instructed. “Let her breathe fresh air.” The windows of the cabin should be kept open so that fresh air could circulate.

Yoshino grew worse. The midwives could not stop the bleeding from her nose. Finally, Kotaro took her to the small hospital in Kent. He was stunned to see everybody—nurses, doctors, patients—wearing white masks. How were any of *them* able to breathe fresh air?

Yoshino lay moaning and screaming in a small ward of the hospital with white sheets hung between the beds in a hopeless effort to seal off the contagion. She complained of a fire in her lungs. In an effort to breathe, she bridged herself in bed like a wrestler

trying to escape a tight hold. Kotaro stood at her bedside nervously stroking his bald head, his eyes as vacant as two chunks of coal stuck in the face of a snowman.

Within ten days Yoshino Maeda Kobuki was dead, one of what would eventually be six hundred and seventy-five thousand deaths from the Spanish Flu in the United States and fifty million worldwide. She was cremated and her ashes buried on a drizzly day that December in a small cemetery in Kent, Washington. At the graveside ceremony, her five children surrounded her—her firstborn son Minoru, eleven; then sons Yoneo, nine, and Satoru, five, each wearing neat caps and thick black coats buttoned to the throat against the cold; seven-year-old daughter Matsuko also in a buttoned coat and a tiny cloche hat with a satin ribbon; and finally Yoshio, the pocket baby, wrapped in a receiving blanket and wearing a knit bonnet that fit his head as tightly as a jockey's cap, sound asleep in the crook of his father's arm.

Kotaro and Yoshino Kobuki had come to the White River Valley from the Hiroshima Prefecture in 1908. The first settlers who had come to the valley had found dense forests, thick with cedar, maple, and salmonberry bushes. Loggers had cleared the land. Then farmers planted crops between the stumps. The White River Valley became the lettuce capital of the world, a fertile crescent of wealth and prosperity. All you needed to succeed was a willingness to work hard.

Sure, America was a strange land, full of machinery and cowboys, but with the neat, snow-capped cone of Mt. Rainier in the distance, the White River Valley could just as well have been Japan. Tacoma's Mount Fuji, local residents called Rainier. And by 1915 hopeful Japanese were coming in a steady stream, mostly like Kotaro and Yoshino Kobuki from the Hiroshima Prefecture. They got five-acre land leases on which to raise lettuce, peas, blackberries, and strawberries. In the summer they worked ten-

hour days in the hot sun. Their first English words were “water . . . drink.”

They were eager to fit in, to learn the ways of the New World. When eating soup, they were advised, don’t make slurping noises. Meet the eyes of Americans. Do not bow repeatedly. When walking down the street, stop and stand at attention when the National Anthem is played.

Despite the promises of a Garden of Eden, they were not welcome. Officials protested that no alien—white, red, black, or yellow—should ever own a foot of land. The Japanese were called bandy-legged, degenerate, rotten little devils, an objectionable race. It was said that they ate food a hog wouldn’t eat. They even ate thrushes and song birds. It was a moral outrage to hire them as laborers or to patronize their businesses. They were not the stuff from which American citizens were made. The white and brown races would never mix. Nor ever live side by side.

Kotaro Kobuki could not help wondering about the promise of success for his children in the New World. Their mother was dead. For the moment only Minoru was big enough and strong enough to help with the farming. The others would soon be expected to work so hard and so long they wouldn’t even have time to dream. Meanwhile, a permanent wet nurse needed to be found for Yoshio.

It seemed wise to send the four younger ones back to Japan, where despite their birth on American soil, they were still considered citizens of Japan. They would be welcome there. They could have dreams there and learn the language and culture of their ancestors. Only Minoru would stay behind, to help his father in the fields of the White River Valley.

In Japan Okuma Tanaka agreed to take custody of her dead sister’s children. Okuma and her husband Hiro had three children of their own. They knew the responsibilities of parenting. Further, they had a spacious home with a red tile roof on a quiet,

narrow, one-lane road in the country outside Hiroshima. The home was at the end of a box canyon with pink flowers and steep forested hillsides. There was plenty of room in the house and outside for the seven children to play and roam. Meanwhile, the couple found a Japanese wet nurse for Yoshio. Kotaro regularly sent money for the support of his four children.

But it was as if the Spanish Flu was tracking the Kobuki children like a demonic killer, relentlessly picking them off in order, first Yoneo, then Matsuko, and finally Satoru. The same viral pirates with grappling hooks that had killed their mother now attacked them. They screamed and bled and gasped for air and then died. One by one, they were buried in a terraced family graveyard beside the red-tiled house, the piled tombstones so old and weathered by the wind of ages that they looked like prehistoric cairns.

Only Yoshio survived. But if good fortune had been his birthright, he gave no sign of it as he grew up in Japan. He kept to himself, disobeyed Okuma and Hiro, refused to go to school, and often ran away. Repeatedly Okuma and Hiro had to send officials to find him. When the officials finally brought him back, sometimes after days, his only explanation was that he had been walking and walking. He had slept on a beach somewhere, heavy with the smell of kelp and the racket of seagulls squawking at him. But it was no worse, he felt, than living beside the bleak graveyard that held his brothers and sister.

He became an oddity in Japan. He was supposed to be an American, from a land where everything and everybody was larger than life, a land of strutting cowboys and Paul Bunyan. But he was the smallest child in school, and the other children bullied him because he was so tiny. When teachers tried to instruct him in the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, the endless talk of suffering and pain bored him. All the admonitions against murder and theft and lust and guile and drink—what did they have to do

with him? He was an open book. He wished nobody harm. He told the truth. He only wanted to be by himself. That was when he was the happiest.

Then in 1932 the Japanese newspapers and magazines began carrying pictures of the tenth Olympic Games in Los Angeles. All Japan celebrated the success of the Japanese athletes, who ranked fifth among all countries as medal winners. But pictures of the post-Olympics ceremonies at the ballrooms of the magnificent Biltmore Hotel pictured shy Japanese athletes having to be dragged onto the dance floor. At the same time American men wearing two-toned shoes and purple suit coats danced and smiled. There were also pictures of sleek American airplanes, swift motorcars, and wooden speedboats. Americans worshipped speed. And they were daring and cocky. But they knew how to unwind. They knew how to sit in the back seat of a chauffeured motorcar and do nothing but smoke a long cigarette.

Joe admired these Americans and their ways. So what was Yoshio Kobuki doing in Japan? It was a land of stiff courtesies and strange, tedious music. He was expected to be obedient. To study long and hard. To keep a grave and quiet countenance, reflecting the silence of the box canyon. It was as if any jubilation would give offense to the sad ancestral ghosts haunting the family's graveyard.

In 1934 Hiro Satoh, the third-ranked tennis player in the world, was sent to Europe by the Japanese government to act as a tennis-playing ambassador. Satoh was a quiet, methodical player who had fallen in love with a Japanese girl. He had tried to give up international tennis in order to marry the girl, but the Japanese government had insisted on continued tours. One night in the summer of 1934, in the Straits of Malacca, on an ocean liner bound for Europe and more tennis, Satoh jumped ship in order to return to Japan and his love.

It was the kind of exciting initiative that was entirely missing

from the life of young Yoshio Kobuki, and with the help of one of his cousins, he began scratching out crude letters to his father in America. “There is nothing in Japan for me,” he complained. He was an American. The only thing he wanted was a chance to return to the promise and excitement of what he felt was his true native land.

He had no idea what he would do once he got there. He was only fifteen years old. His guardians had tried to make him go to junior high school in Japan, but he had stopped going to school all together. Now he could hardly read or write. And he remained small—not yet five feet tall or a hundred pounds. He was still a peanut, but he was filled with powerful desire. He was strong in his legs from all the walking. Maybe in America he could work in the fields. Or he could learn to drive a motorcar and chauffeur rich Americans with their long cigarettes. His father or his brother Minoru, who had acquired the American name of Frank and who had married and was prospering, could teach him to do *something*. Because anything was possible in America. And so in September 1934 Yoshio Kobuki packed a small cardboard suitcase with what few belongings he had and boarded a ship out of Tokyo for what he said was home.