



AYUMI'S VIOLIN

WINNER OF
ROCKY MOUNTAIN
FICTION WRITERS
GOLD AWARD

Mariko Tatsumoto

AYUMI'S VIOLIN

MARIKO TATSUMOTO

Ichiban Books, 2015

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Published in 2015 by Ichiban Books LLC

ISBN: 978-0-9966584-0-9

Summary: After Ayumi's mother dies, the biracial twelve-year-old violin prodigy leaves her home in Japan to live in America, with a Caucasian father she's never met, a resentful half-sister, and a racist stepmother, where she does the unthinkable when she is deprived of her violin.

1. Multicultural-Fiction. 2. Japanese-American-Fiction. 3. Prejudice-Fiction 4. Immigration-Fiction 5. World War II-Fiction 6. Violin-Fiction

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my father, Mitsunobu Tatsumoto, and my mother, Kimiko Tatsumoto, who took food from their mouths to provide me with every opportunity in life.

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Tokyo, Japan
October 1959

Mother's voice was growing weaker every day. Twelve-year-old Ayumi knelt on the floor beside the futon and leaned her head toward her mother to listen as she struggled to form words. Ayumi's stomach shriveled like a hard dried rice ball. She wanted to lie next to her, have Mother hold her and tell her she would get well.

But that wasn't going to happen. Mother was dying.

"Play for me," Mother whispered.

Ayumi padded through the nearly empty room to her violin case. Money had run out during the ten months of Mother's illness because of her inability to work. They had hocked everything that would bring in a yen, except for what Ayumi would soon take to America. Ayumi had wanted to work, but Mother wouldn't let her sacrifice her four hours of violin practice every day.

Ayumi opened the case and stared at the photo of Mother and her father together. They smiled and looked happy. Ayumi's skin prickled with apprehension at the thought of meeting her father soon for the first time.

She cracked open the window to let in fresh air. She drew out her violin and bow, nestled her instrument under her chin, and began to play Mother's favorite Beethoven sonata. Mother's pinched face relaxed, and Ayumi's stomach unwound.

A man and a woman strolling by the window on the narrow street stopped to listen. "Beautiful," the woman said.

"Which of the violin masters' recording do you think that is?" the man asked.

"Sounds like Heifetz."

"No, I think it's Haendel or Menuhin."

"Whoever it is, it's so good that it sounds like he's here in person."

"I wish we didn't have to be at the train station in ten minutes. I'd love to stay and listen to the whole piece." The couple pushed on.

Ayumi glanced at Mother after the first movement, worried over the yellow of her eyes, her gaunt face, and the small rise her wasted body made under the top cover. Sorrow shot through her heart like an arrow. She set her violin and bow down on the floor, dashed outside, crumpled on the dirt road, and cried. After her tears stopped, she took deep breaths, dried her face, and patted the dust off her tattered dress before dragging herself back to their apartment.

"Rest, Mother," she said, offering a brave smile. "I'll make you some miso soup." In their tiny kitchen, she scraped the remaining dollop of miso from the corner of a wooden box, the last of the food the trumpet player in Mother's jazz band had brought. With nothing more to eat in the house, she hoped that one of the other band members would bring something soon.

When she returned with the soup, Mother's eyes were closed. Her breaths were so shallow that Ayumi could not, for a horrible second, tell whether she was breathing at all. "Mother!" she cried. She put down the bowl, flung herself on the floor next to her mother, being careful not to touch her pain-filled body, and tried to stifle the sobs that racked her body.

Please don't die. Please don't die.

Mother barely opened her eyes and uttered, “Shhhh. You’ll be all right. You’ll be with your father. I’ve dreamt it.” She fought for air, grimacing with every word, her breath raspy like a bow being dragged slowly over the G string. “Never forget your music. You have a rare gift. Guard it, cultivate it, be grateful for it.” A small moan escaped her lips.

Ayumi held her breath, her eyes wide, staring at Mother. She found Mother’s hand under the cover and held it, as if her grasp would prevent her from leaving.

Please don't die. Please don't die.

After a moment, Mother muttered, “Remember everything I’ve taught you. Take care of your violin. I will always be in the music. Play, and I am there.”

“Mother!”

Mother closed her eyes for the last time.

“No, please don’t leave me!” she wailed. Her heart seemed to have stopped along with Mother’s. It was October, but she felt as cold as if she were in the middle of a January ice storm. Ayumi huddled into a tight ball, rocked back and forth next to Mother’s bed, repeating, “Mother... Mother...”

Chapter 1

FIRST MEETING

A few days later, Mother's musician friends, dressed in their best dark suits, and their wives in somber kimonos, came over for a small tribute to Mother. Ayumi had never seen the trumpet player's kind eyes turn misty. The drummer folded his powerful arms over his chest and watched his wife open boxes of broiled eel and rice and set them on a piece of silk she'd spread on the floor. The saxophone player hunched his back. His thin face stretched long with sadness. Ayumi stared at the food, but she couldn't eat. Her mouth tasted like she'd eaten raw onions, and her stomach twisted.

Tiny white grains of salt remained imbedded in the tatami mats that had been sprinkled at the doorway to purify the house after the body was carried out. An incense stick had been lit in front of Mother's picture, which had a black ribbon draping its top corners. Ayumi pressed her palms together, bowed her head, and prayed before the photo.

Goodbye Mother. Please help me be brave.

One by one, everyone took their turn doing the same. All too soon, the adults patted her head, squeezed her shoulders, said they had to get her to the ship, and escorted her on the train to the harbor.

Ayumi stood on the dock and stared at the large black and gray freighter that would take her to a world she couldn't imagine. From his record sales, the saxophonist had paid for her passage to America but apologized that he couldn't afford to send her on a passenger ship. *Fuji Maru*, the ship's name, was written boldly in huge black characters on the bow. She'd never actually visited Mount Fuji, but she'd seen it from a train window once, and she would never forget the sleek white curves of the mountain.

On the ship, she lifted a limp hand to the only people who'd given her any sense of security and watched Japan grow smaller and smaller until it disappeared. She played her violin in her room, whenever she wasn't seasick, which seemed to be most of the time. Sometimes she left her windowless, closet-sized cabin and climbed up to the deck of the freighter. She watched the gray water churn and foam around the edge of the ship, sniffed the salty air, and listened to the engine rumble. The ocean seemed as vast as the distance from the earth to the moon, pulling her farther and farther away from the only world she'd known, making her feel lonelier and lonelier.

Being the only passenger on a working ship, she ate her meals with the captain and crew, sitting in the darkest corner of the low-ceilinged mess cabin picking at her rice and slivers of fish. Some of the crewmen smelled like engine grease, some smelled like the sea. They ignored her, but were not unkind. The unmarried sailors were ill at ease, not used to having a child around.

The captain always dressed in a white captain's uniform for dinner. On the third day, he made his position clear. He called her "*Ainoko*," half breed, love child. Her school principal, who'd lost all his brothers in the war and accused Mother of taking up with a barbarian, had called her that name too. Mother had been from Nagasaki, and despite having lost her entire family in the atomic bombing, her mouth had never been filled with bitterness. Ayumi felt like she was back in school where other kids deliberately bumped into her, making her drop her books, and boys made fun of her large half-Caucasian, creepy eyes and her white skin.

Ayumi slunk away silently from the captain as Mother had taught her. *Gaman*—patience, restraint, forgo desires. “Without *gaman*, where would a tiny nation like Japan be?” Mother had repeated often. Without *gaman*, how could a half-breed like herself have lived for twelve years in a country that hated her because of the way she looked?

After fourteen days, she finally caught site of America. America! She had crossed the deep blue Pacific. She peered at a dark stretch of land on the horizon. Buildings and cranes took shape, cars and trucks moving like beetles. Soon, bits of green emerged from funny looking trees with frondy leaves perched atop skinny poles like umbrellas.

With a *thump*, the freighter docked. The captain nudged her and said, “Go on. Join the enemy.” She reminded herself that here in America she would blend in. From now on, she didn’t need to be ashamed of her looks.

She clunked down the long gangplank, thankful to leave the hateful captain behind and eager to set foot in Los Angeles. She held fast to the thick grimy rope, but her legs wobbled from the long sea voyage.

Greasy tasting fumes permeated the air, from ships, tractors, and trucks, and made her gag. The roar of engines, clang of metal, screech of loaders, and deep whistles from ships pierced her already jumbled head. She peered fiercely at the crowd of white faces, trying to pick out her father.

After a few minutes, fear rippled through her. What if her father hadn’t come? What if he didn’t want her, even though he’d written to Mother that he did? She had no money, no way to get back to Japan. How would she make her way in a foreign country?

Then she saw him.

Yes, that *bad* to be him. He was handsome and tall, like the picture she kept in her violin case. Unlike in the photograph, he wore a white shirt, maroon-striped tie, brown and beige plaid jacket, and tan pants instead of an Army uniform. And, of course, he stood alone, instead of with Mother.

The beaming man waved both arms wide overhead. She could see his mouth form her name, but she couldn’t hear his voice among the buzz of the crowd and the clank of the machines. He had come! She would *not* be an orphan! Relief flooded through her, and her lungs opened up.

As she approached him, her smile felt too wide for her face. Frank Golightly ran his hand through curly blond hair parted on the right side with precision. His eyes were glued to her, suddenly making her feel self-conscious. He seemed to be studying her unevenly plaited braids. Much as she tried, she couldn’t braid her hair smoothly like Mother had.

The closer she got to him, the louder her blood pumped in her ears. Her violin case and small suitcase threatened to slip out of her sweaty hands. When she stood before him, she put down her bags, swallowed her shyness, bowed respectfully, and said, “Hello.” Although she’d practiced saying, “Hello, Father,” the English words stuck in her throat, too forward, not respectful enough.

Her father knelt in front of her and smiled. “Hello. *Yokoso*,” he said, welcoming her, and reached out to hug her. Confused because no one except Mother had ever hugged her before, she remained straight as bamboo in his embrace, but she liked the warmth of his body, his rough cheek against hers.

He let go, stood up, and asked, “*Nibongo de?*”

When she said, “My mother taught me English,” tension melted from his face.

His face crumbled. “I...I’m sorry about your mother. She was...a lovely person.” He cleared his

throat and blinked rapidly.

Mother had tried to prepare her for everything but had never taught her what to say when someone expressed condolences. She looked down at the scarred asphalt.

“My Japanese...after thirteen years, is more than rusty, so English it is.” He stared at her red suit, shook his head, and said softly, “That looks just like the one Yuriko wore the first night we met.”

It *was* the same suit, remade for Ayumi, but she wasn’t sure whether she should say so. Mother had said how stylish Americans were. He might think poorly of her for wearing Mother’s suit, a suit older than she was.

“You look so much like her, the same mouth, small and round. The same black hair, the same skin, like creamy yogurt.” He seemed caught up in Mother’s memory. She didn’t tell him her wavy hair was like his.

Ayumi took a big breath before replying. This wasn’t practice with Mother. She was speaking to an American who could recognize any flaw. And not just any American. Her father. She didn’t want him to think that she wouldn’t fit into America. She told herself that talking to him was like playing a new piece of music for someone for the first time. She just needed to focus.

She spoke slowly and deliberately in a quaking voice. “We practiced English at home since I was little. She said knowing English would be good for me.”

“Your mother taught you well. Your English is good, and so is your accent.” He looked impressed.

She felt her face grow hot. Nothing was more important than having his approval. If he liked her, she could have a life with him like the one she’d had with Mother, except that he couldn’t teach her music. She’d fantasized about the two of them eating together, playing cards, listening to music, riding in his car—he was bound to have a car—skipping through parks, talking about how it had been with Mother, talking about big things and little things, like she and Mother had.

Father studied her face. “I see your mother in you. But there’s no mistaking it, you and I look alike, even the nose.”

“The nose?”

“Yeah. Look. See the tip?” He pointed to his own. “It lifts slightly there. Somehow it looks good on you though. It makes me look like a Bob Hope wanna-be, except mine’s not quite a ski jump nose.” Seeing her confused look, he chuckled. “Listen to me blab on. Sorry. Guess I’m a little nervous, meeting you for the first time.”

He was nervous, too? Mother had always been in control, always knew what should be done. But again, Mother had never faced her own child she’d never met.

He reached toward her, as if to stroke her hair, hesitated, touched her face gently, fleetingly, and pulled his hand back. Mother had told her how in love they had been, and her father’s expression confirmed how much he had cared for her.

She saw her eyes reflected in his. So she wasn’t the only one with green eyes flecked with gold, a color Mother had called hazel. Her classmates had mocked them, but his gold specks sparkled like when sunlight pierced Shinobazu Pond at Ueno Park where she and Mother had always picnicked during cherry blossom time. This thought reminded her that Mother was gone, her ashes buried an ocean away.

She jumped when a loud clang and grinding gears rang out.

“Whaddya trying to do?” A bearded man shouted from a dirt-streaked front loader laden with pallets of wooden boxes. “Get flattened? This ain’t no social hour.”

“Guess we’d better get going,” her father said, picking up Ayumi’s beat-up leather luggage. Before he could reach for her violin case, she snatched it up and held it to her chest. He looked startled, but after a moment, he nodded. “Of course. This way.”

They wended their way through slow-moving trucks to a parking lot filled with dented pick-ups and cars with rusty fenders. He pointed to a huge blue car much nicer than all the others. Chrome gleamed on the bumpers, the grill, and door trims. Sleek fenders rose up to sharp edges like the wings of an origami crane. He opened the back door and placed her case on the seat. It was the largest car Ayumi had ever seen, and she wondered what he did with all the space. Unlike the black or white cars in Japan, America’s were lit up in color. He gestured for her to slide her violin case in, but she shook her head.

“Okay.” He smiled and opened the passenger door for her.

She climbed in and cradled the instrument on her lap. She took her hand off long enough to stroke the smooth blue upholstery and caught a whiff of new leather on the dash. He negotiated through the rows of cars, and before long they were on city roads, driving on the wrong side of the street.

Mother had warned her that Americans drove on the right side. At first, when they rounded corners, she held her breath and braced for a head-on collision. After a few kilometers, she felt herself ease into the strange traffic.

Father said, “We’re going inland to a town called Pasadena.” After awhile, he asked, “Your mother told me you play the violin, but do you also play the trumpet?”

“Trumpet?”

“You have a trumpet case.”

She turned to look at her small case on the backseat and noticed for the first time that the suitcase the trumpet player had given her *did* look like a trumpet case. He must have given her one of his old cases. She turned back around and said, “No, I only play the violin.”

“If you’re anywhere near as talented as your mother, you must be good.”

“Mother was *very* good.” Speaking about Mother in the past tense was like forgetting a note in a sonata, something she’d never done, shocking and bewildering. To hide her tears, she looked out the side window at large cars speeding by.

After a short silence, her father spoke in an apologetic tone. “I didn’t know about you until I received your mother’s letter two months ago. It seems I was easy to find through the State Department because of my job.” He glanced over at her. “Had I known, I would have contacted you a long time ago.”

Ayumi swallowed to keep from crying out loud. If Mother had written to him earlier, could they have lived with him in America and not been so poor? Mother could’ve played music as she pleased instead of performing late at night with her jazz band whenever they could get a gig or giving private piano and violin lessons for half of what a man charged. The three of them could’ve been a family. Traveling with Mother to a new land wouldn’t have been frightening. Ayumi had always felt things would be all right as long as she held Mother’s hand; no one could hurt her, not even the bullies.

Her father abruptly turned off the road and stopped the car. His Adam’s apple jumped up and

down as he swallowed. He clenched and unclenched his hands on the steering wheel.

“I need to tell you about my family.”

Chapter 2
AMERICA THE GRAND

Ayumi didn't want to hear what she feared her father might say next.

"Your mother didn't know," he said.

Didn't know what? She licked her lips, but her mouth remained parched.

"I'm sorry. I should've written about Marilyn and Brenda." Lines furrowed between his eyebrows, his mouth a straight line.

Marilyn and Brenda?

"It would've been easier to have written her than make this face-to-face confession to you. I tried to tell her. I wanted to...but my hand would start shaking every time I tried to write." He looked up at the sky, which had turned from blue to brown as they'd driven inland from the dock. "I have a wife and a daughter." He looked at her as if he was asking for forgiveness. "Now that I've said it, I feel better and worse at the same time."

Ayumi felt frozen like the time someone stole her coat at school one winter, and she had to walk home in a snowstorm. She wanted to ask how he could do that if he'd loved her mother, but she didn't have to. He seemed to read her mind.

"When I was ordered home from Japan, I asked your mother to come back with me, but she refused. You see, people need to move on. We have to change and adapt with what life brings us, like you coming to live with me because your mother died."

As much as that made sense, she still felt betrayed. She'd imagined a life with the two of them, like the life she'd had with Mother. She'd mustered all her courage to speak to her father, a man she'd never met before. Coming to America alone had been as frightening as life without music. As cramped as their two-room apartment had been in Japan, it'd been her home. She hadn't wanted to leave it. She hadn't wanted Mother to die. Her life had been stuffed into a deep bowl and stirred violently. In the warmth of southern California, her spunk depleted, she bent over her case and gasped for air at the thought of living with a woman who was not her mother and a half-sister.

"Oh, Ayumi, I'm sorry." Her father stroked her back. "Your life must feel so bad: losing your mother, changing countries, now this. I couldn't have done it when I was twelve. But listen, I want you here. I'm glad you're here. Ayumi?"

She controlled her breathing. This was her father, the man Mother had loved. *Gaman*. She had to persevere and endure with patience and dignity for Mother. She could not disgrace her. She lifted her head.

Her father squeezed her shoulder and smiled. "Give it a go?"

She nodded.

Riding in Father's car—Ayumi already thought of him as Father!—America seemed as endless as deep space. Mother had shown her on the map how the four tiny islands of Japan fit into the state called California. America was as large as the moon, and as foreign.

They drove another half hour before leaving six-lane streets and orange buses tethered to overhead lines like a giant spider web above the streets. Away from blocky ten and twenty-story buildings with signs that read *Bank of America*, *Hilton Hotel*, *Town House*, *Bullocks*, and *Prudential*, they

slowed down on a street of one and two-story buildings and drove into a parking lot crammed with cars.

"I have to make a stop," Father said. "I'll be right back. Will you be all right?"

She nodded and watched him trot into a building so large that six cars were parked inside. The roof floated on top of huge glass windows, and the structure was made of white plaster, like Japanese castles. A large white sign on a window read, *ORDER YOUR NEW 1960 CADILLAC NOW!* Colorful triangular flags hanging from ropes strung over the cars drooped in the still air, and she heard strange music with a fast beat, heavy on the drums.

Ayumi kicked off her only pair of shoes, hitched her legs up onto the seat, and hugged her knees. She counted more than forty cars in the lot, some missing their tops, all new and shiny. She was fascinated by the pink and lavender cars. The gleaming door of the car next to her reflected back a distorted image of her face. When she laughed, so did the fat face.

Father hustled out behind a woman with stiff blond hair, and they ambled amidst the cars like they were admiring flowers in a park. Ayumi tried to figure out who she was and what they were doing but couldn't come up with any guesses. She cranked her window down to feel the American fall air, which felt more like summer, and noticed a man inside the building shade his eyes from the bright sun and glare at her.

That gave her a chill.

A huge board on tall stilts next to the parking lot showed a blond, blue-eyed couple with two children smiling from inside a large red car. Maybe Father's family was as nice as the family on the billboard appeared. Maybe she could be like one of the children.

A boy about her age with slicked-back hair walked by. He wore rolled up jeans, a red and white checked shirt, and he blew bubble gum while twirling his yoyo. When he saw her, he stopped, backed up, peered into the car, and scrunched up his face. Curling his upper lip, he growled, "Jap!"

Ayumi sprang back in her seat. Even though she didn't know what the word meant, she knew that he was demeaning her, like when the kids had called her *ainoko*. He didn't know her, they'd never met, so why was he calling her a name when she looked like an American? She rolled up her window, but he'd already strolled away, whirling his yoyo.

She was trembling when her father slid back into the car behind the wheel. "*Omatasemashita*," he said.

"You didn't keep me waiting at all," she replied.

He smiled at her with a worried face. "Is everything okay?"

If she told him about the boy, he might think that she was going to be too much trouble and regret letting her come. It was too early to start confiding in him like a parent.

Gaman.

She smiled at him.

"Now, home," he said.

Those words speared her with fright.

* * *

On a wide paved street, the kind found only in downtown Tokyo in the extravagant Ginza section, they drove up to a white two-story house with dark green trim ten times larger than the tenement she'd grown up in. In the pitiful surroundings of her former home on a dusty dirt street, a

house this size could have fit five families. She drew in her breath when her father pulled the car into a room of its own. The gigantic house had a room for cars!

She peeked through the car's rear window and took in the short grass growing evenly around each house. The trees, still loaded with green leaves, shaded houses as large as her father's. White wooden fences divided each yard. The scene looked like a make-believe picture.

The houses were so far apart that she'd have to shout at a neighbor to be noticed instead of being heard through thin walls no matter how softly she spoke. Bicycles were strewn haphazardly around yards and driveways as if they had no value, but no bicyclist rode to or from work or shopping. Mother had dreamed of having a bicycle, the drummer having taught both of them how to ride his. Like Mother had said, Americans were rich, lived in magnificent houses, and drove big cars. Ayumi was going to live like a rich American but with a stepmother and a half-sister.

Father got out of the car and reached for the trumpet case, but Ayumi held tightly to her violin. Scared to go inside, she moved as slow as a caterpillar.

"You don't need to be worried," he said. "No one is home right now." He held open the front door. "We'll work on this together."

She wanted to believe him. She had to believe him.

Inside, Ayumi looked for a foyer to remove her shoes, but not seeing one, she slipped them off in front of the door. She slowly turned in place and gaped at the wide stairway in front of her and the rooms to either side. She'd seen the massive home from the outside, but she still couldn't believe the cavernous space.

Eight tall chairs surrounded a large table in a room to the right. She'd never seen such a grand seating arrangement, even in restaurants. Sunlight struck a vase made of glass, instead of porcelain, that was set in the middle of the table. The faceted cuts in the glass sprayed brilliant light onto a picture of a seascape on the wall. The painting reminded her of the only time Mother had taken her to the beach during Ayumi's summer vacation when she was in third grade. That day had been special.

Tokyo had been so hot and humid that the fan moved the stagnant air around slowly, as if oxygen weighed as much as noodles and was just as thick. She and Mother had to change trains twice, but the two and a half hour trip had been worth it. The sea was larger than her mind could take in, the water rippling to the edge of the horizon. A sea breeze circulated the salty air, cooling her, and sending strange smells—the scent of the ocean, Mother had explained.

Eyeing the ocean scene in Father's dining room, Ayumi could hear the surf roar. Ever since her day on the beach, whenever it was hot, she'd close her eyes and call back the gentle wind that tickled her skin, and she'd feel cooler. She wondered if there were beaches in America, not just greasy docks where the sea ended, but places with sand where seagulls dropped clams from the air onto rocks to break open the shells for easy access to their meals. Did Father like beaches? A million questions pressed against her tongue.

"This is the living room."

She turned to the room to her left, a room as large as the space for the car—a garage, Father had explained. She padded to a sunburst clock glittering above a fireplace on the far bricked wall. Three leather stools fronted a bar in the corner. Bottles filled with clear and amber liquid lined a shelf behind it. A sleek red sofa backed up to the window, and two matching chairs divided by a low

coffee table were deep and wide. She'd sat on a couch like that once, though much smaller in scale, when Mother had played at a party given in a lavish Western-style hotel. After the party, in the hotel lounge, she and Mother sipped tea and munched on cucumber sandwiches with the crusts trimmed off. She'd even seen a Western-style toilet there, but refused to use it, afraid to be sucked into the whirling water and down through kilometers of pipe to be spat out in the ocean. Replaying that special afternoon in her head left her feeling cold and lonely in a strange country. No matter how many people were around her, they could not make up for her dead mother.

She'd never stepped beyond the front room of anyone's home before, and she felt like an intruder following Father up the stairs, but if this was to be her new home, she couldn't keep to Japanese manners. Upstairs, Father pointed through open doors as they walked through the hall. "This one is Brenda's. This is Marilyn and my room. This is the bathroom for you and Brenda."

Having lived in a country where bathtubs and toilets were in separate rooms, having a bathroom with both seemed unsanitary, and she hugged the far side of the hallway as she walked past the bathroom. Each bedroom, as big as her last home, had its own bed, dresser, and desk, except for Father's room, which had two beds and an adjoining bathroom. The only buildings she'd ever been in this large were banks and hotels. Father must be as wealthy as a bank. Her admiration for him grew.

"And this is your room. I hope you like it. We bought the furniture for you, and Marilyn decorated the whole thing." Father beamed as he laid the trumpet case on the bed.

"I get the whole room?" She didn't know what she was going to do with the space. To just sleep in such a large room seemed wasteful. *Muda*, Mother would've said. Too extravagant. Even so, she couldn't keep the smile from spreading on her face. Her own room. She said this to herself several times. Her very own room. She could've never imagined a room this beautiful. Only the Emperor could have a room like this.

Ayumi laid her violin case down, took off her socks, and rubbed her feet on the thick carpet. She'd seen carpeting in hotel lobbies, but she'd never felt the velvety flooring with bare feet, so she dragged her toes through the dense rug and giggled. She stroked her hand over the knobby fabric of a flower-patterned chenille bedspread stretched over the bed. The walls, instead of simply being white, were decorated with roses. How long had it taken to paint all of them? And all this furniture? She and Mother had shared a small dresser, a low wooden table for eating and studying, and books had lined the perimeter of the rooms on the floor. School was the only place she sat in a chair. Mother's black upright piano, the one she'd hidden in a partially bombed concrete building during the war to avoid having it confiscated by the government for its metal content, had taken up much of the living room of their little apartment.

She was wondering what she would put in the dresser when the front door opened downstairs and a voice yelled, "Daddy."

Chapter 3

NEW GOAL

Ayumi's thrill turned to terror. Father's wife and his other daughter were here. She wanted to crawl under the bed or hide in the closet. *Make them go away*, she wanted to say. *Let's run away, the two of us*. Father looked as scared as she felt, but plastered on a happy face. "Come meet the family."

She'd known families whose mothers had remarried after their husbands had died in the war. Those mothers had children with their new husbands. Like them, she now had a half-sister and a stepparent she'd never asked for. But here they were, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Gaman. No matter what, she would cooperate, get along, and ignore the heartbreak like a good Japanese daughter. She made her way down the stairs, clinging to the banister to make sure that her heavy feet stayed on the steps.

Ayumi's mouth popped open when she saw Father's wife in the entry. The woman was the stiff-haired blonde at the Cadillac place. She seemed stiff all over in her pale pink glasses, the edges shaped like wings about to fly off her face. Her sticky sweet perfume made Ayumi wrinkle her nose. Father pecked a small kiss on his wife's cheek.

"How was school today, Princess?" Father asked the short plump girl whose blond ponytail was held together with a blue ribbon.

The girl peered at Ayumi. "Who's that?"

"We talked about your sister coming, remember? This is Ayumi." To Ayumi, he said, "This is Marilyn and Brenda. Brenda is ten."

Her new stepmother's thin smile was tight, and her pale blue eyes were flat without depth. "Are these yours?" Marilyn asked in an accusatory tone, pointing to Ayumi's shoes beside the front door.

Ayumi swallowed and forced the word out of her dry mouth. "Yes." She'd been in the house for half an hour, and she feared she'd already done something wrong. She drew her arms tightly around herself.

"Why are they where people can trip on them?"

Father patted Ayumi's shoulder and explained. "It's customary in Japan to remove your shoes at the entrance so as not to dirty the house. She was thinking of you, dear." He smiled at Marilyn and shifted his weight. Instead of smiling back, Marilyn lowered a package from her arms to the floor. Her gathered skirt, the color of wet grass, swished.

"Brenda is in fourth grade," Father continued. "You'll be in the sixth grade. You'll be able to play together. Won't that be fun? But don't let her talk you into playing checkers. She'll beat your pants off." Father laughed and ruffled Brenda's short curly bangs.

Brenda, a head shorter than Ayumi, slumped against the wall and glared at her. Her lower lip stuck out, making a dozen small dimples on her chin like Ayumi's favorite dried plums. Brenda's legs, white and thick like horseradish, stuck out below a netted underskirt that puffed out under her dress. Ayumi had seen such underskirts in magazines and wondered if it was scratchy. She forgot about the petticoat when she saw the curious multi-colored shoes that Brenda wore: leather lace-ups, but the toe and heel sections were white and the middle portion was black. America was a peculiar place.

Petrified or not, Ayumi had to be polite. "How do you do?" She bowed.

"Hmmm," Brenda muttered and ran upstairs.

"Brenda, Brenda...Princess," Father called out after her. "Your manners."

Brenda reappeared at the top of the stairs. Tears streaked down her cheeks.

"Princess..." Father climbed up the stairs until his face was level with hers. "What's the matter?" His voice was soft and concerned.

"You don't love me anymore."

Father sat on the step next to her and wrapped his arms around her. "Of course, I love you. Why would you say such a thing?"

Ayumi watched in wonder. How kind her father was. She silently thanked Mother for choosing him for her father.

"You have *her* now." Brenda pointed a stiff finger to Ayumi.

"Oh, Princess." He picked her up and cradled her on his lap. "I could have ten children and I'd love them all. I don't love you any less because Ayumi is here. Do you understand?"

"No! I don't want her here. I want things to be like they were." Brenda hopped off his lap, stumbled into her room, and slammed the door.

"I need to start dinner," Marilyn said flatly and headed to the kitchen.

Father sighed, shook his head, and came back down. "Don't worry," he said to Ayumi. "She just needs time to get used to the idea."

In her new room, Ayumi hung up her clothes in the mammoth closet, Mother's best, refitted for her by Mother. Ayumi's dresses had been too worn. She hadn't played her violin all day, and she longed to feel her instrument. Parts of her seemed to float away when she wasn't playing. Playing even one or two pieces of music before dinner would compose her and make her feel less scattered. She had to play to make herself whole again. Even in a foreign land, music was one thing she could count on. Since Mother's death, playing was more important than ever.

She opened her violin case, pulled out a gold stick pin in the shape of a treble clef from the inside pocket, and fingered the polished curves, as smooth as the ivory keys Mother had played. The pin had been a birthday present for Mother from Father, and Mother had worn it on everything. Ayumi had thought about wearing it on her red suit, but she feared it could slip off, so she'd secreted it in her case.

She tightened her bow, picked up her violin, set it between her left shoulder and chin, and tucked her thumb in the ebony frog at the end of the bow.

Then Father called out, "Come on down."

She craved to play, but it was important to be polite and obedient, especially on the first day. And every day, she reminded herself. *Gaman*.

All thoughts of music evaporated as soon as she saw the kitchen. Everything, from the countertop and dishtowels to the refrigerator, was pink. Her open-mouthed face reflected in the fridge's chrome handle. Instead of a portable one-burner stove like Mother had cooked on, four burners were set in a square on a pink stove.

While Marilyn hauled plates and trays of food outside, Father offered a drink from the refrigerator. Back home—no, she corrected herself, America was her home now—in Japan, people shopped daily instead of having a refrigerator. There was as much food stuffed inside the Golightly family's refrigerator as she and Mother had bought in a month. How successful Father must be. She

would never go hungry again.

“Orange juice?” he offered. “Or would you rather have milk?”

Milk was the reason Americans were so big, she’d been told. She’d drunk watered-down powdered milk until Mother became ill and the money stopped coming in. Now Ayumi was game to try a new drink. “Orange juice, please.”

Father hoisted a pitcher out of the refrigerator, filled a tall glass with orange liquid, and handed it to her. She filled her nose with the crisp yet sweet aroma before sipping. She gulped down a large swallow. She’d never tasted anything so fresh and cold in her life. It was like drinking sunshine. Her face widened in a grin.

“Orange juice is for breakfast.” Brenda narrowed her eyes and puffed out a cheek in scorn.

“Maybe Ayumi’s never had orange juice,” Father said.

“Who hasn’t had orange juice?” Brenda replied as if it flowed from every stream. “She talks funny, too.”

“Ayumi has a slight accent, that’s all. You’d sound funny speaking Japanese, too.”

“Who wants to?”

Father’s smile fell. “Brenda, let’s go in the living room.” Brenda’s eyes grew large, and she swallowed. She followed Father around the corner, her head down. Ayumi couldn’t hear what he was saying, but heard his stern tone and knew that Brenda was getting scolded. She wished Brenda wasn’t getting disciplined; she would only resent her more.

The two came back in, and Brenda marched out to the backyard. Father smiled. “I had the urge to barbeque tonight.”

Marilyn returned from outside. “Impulsive is the word.”

Father shrugged. “Marilyn thinks I’m impulsive sometimes.” He chuckled.

“Sometimes?” Marilyn huffed. She didn’t speak like an obedient wife.

“I like to think I’m imaginative.” Father closed one eye at Ayumi. She wondered if a bug had flown in his eye. “Fall is a great time to eat outside.”

Six chairs surrounded a round table in a backyard as large as a small park. Bare clotheslines stretched across one side of the yard, and a roof over the table shaded the family from the evening sun. Red embers smoldered in a black cauldron, like Mother’s hibachi except ten times larger, and stood on spindly legs. Everything was bigger here. Instead of fish and vegetables, grilled steaks emitted a luscious aroma Ayumi had smelled once. When the saxophonist in Mother’s band landed a recording contract, he treated the band members, their spouses, and Ayumi to a steak each, but those had been a quarter of the size of the ones sizzling on the cauldron. Her stomach rumbled when Father flipped each steak onto a plate rimmed with a pink flower design. She couldn’t wait to eat.

Once seated, Ayumi reached for chopsticks and found silverware instead. Of course. She watched to see how everyone ate.

“Hope you like it.” Her father plunged a fork into a small piece he’d cut, brought it up to his mouth, and closed his lips around it.

Ayumi picked up her utensils and mimicked everyone. The knife and fork were simple to use, like preparing food to cook. She spent five minutes cutting her entire steak into small pieces and savored each one. She didn’t remember her last steak being this delicious. They ate corn on the cob like

she'd always eaten it, but she was stumped about the peas. She sunk her fork into the mound of peas, scattering them around her plate and sending several down to the concrete patio. Her face reddened with embarrassment, and she bent down to pick them up.

"You're making a mess," Brenda said.

Father ignored Brenda's remark and laughed. "It's all right. Peas are tough. Try using a spoon, like this."

Ayumi imitated him and was relieved when it worked, but she wished she had chopsticks. She could pick up anything with chopsticks.

"Your mother chose the color of her new Cadillac today." Father glanced at Brenda.

"What did you pick, Mommy?" Brenda's eyes shone with excitement.

"Pink." Marilyn beamed.

"My favorite color!"

"I know, Sweetie," Marilyn said.

Ayumi was glad that they were talking about a car and forgetting about her bad manners. Never having eaten much at one sitting, she felt like a stray dog that had come across a pile of food and stuffed itself until it couldn't move. As the sun set, diminishing colors and casting long shadows, she inhaled the remaining scent of meat.

A fat man from the house next door strode up to the trimmed hedge marking the line between the two houses and waved to them. His hair was cut straight on top of his head, each hair spiking up as if it could lance an enemy. Father pushed his plate away and joined him at the hedge. Marilyn was balancing a stack of dishes to take into the house but froze when the neighbor said, "Who's that you got eating with you? Looks like a Jap." He indicated Ayumi with his chin.

Father pulled his hand out of his pockets and jammed them onto his hips. He smacked his lips and looked down as he stabbed the grass with the point of his shoe. After a moment, he raised his head. "Alvin, that's my daughter."

The man used the same word as the boy at the Cadillac place. It was obviously a derogatory term, but why did the neighbor think she was not Caucasian? Did she not look white, as everyone had always said?

"Your daughter?" Alvin's voice squeaked with surprise. "What're you doing with a Jap daughter?"

Father responded with a hard look, his jaw muscles flexing.

Alvin scowled back. "Never figured you for one of them."

The tension between the men made Ayumi's full stomach tighten.

Both men turned about-face and marched back to their respective homes. Marilyn's shaking hands slipped, and the dishes crashed onto the patio.

Ayumi had no money, but she offered anyway. "I will pay for them."

"You've done enough," Marilyn said.

"I will wash the dishes for you," Ayumi volunteered.

"Go upstairs to your room," Marilyn growled out.

* * *

Father sat next to Ayumi on her new bed. "Don't mind Alvin. We're happy you're here."

She doubted that.

He glanced at the violin in the open case. "I'd love to hear you play, but you're probably tired."

It's been a big day for you. Why don't you take a bath? You start school tomorrow." He gave her a reassuring smile and left.

Relieved to be alone at last, she filled the strange bathtub with hot water and lay down.

Every night, along with everyone else who didn't have their own bath, which were many, she and Mother had swung their bag of towels and soap to the immaculately clean *senzo*, the public bath house. They'd sat on short wooden stools next to each other in front of a row of spigots, the air moist and warm. After filling wooden pails with hot water, they poured the water over themselves, washed, then rinsed. Only when their bodies were clean did they venture into bath water so hot that Ayumi had to stick one leg in, wait a minute before plunging in the other leg, and then finally slip her whole body in the huge tiled bath. Nothing had to be said. She felt happy and satisfied soaking and relaxing with Mother and dozens of other women. She'd never thought her life would change so drastically. And now, she bathed alone next to a toilet. Everything in this house was large but lonely.

Her lungs ached and her eyes burned thinking of the image she'd always had of holding Mother's hand on one side and her father's on the other as she'd seen other families do. But her fantasy would never come true. Still she daydreamed: hitting a feathered ball playing Japanese badminton with her parents, using wooden paddles painted with beautiful women in kimonos, battling her parents in a park to see who could fly their kite the highest, letting the wind carry the kites up to the clouds, folding a thousand origami cranes with them, and as legend said, be granted a wish, wrapping the bottom part of a brightly colored koma top around and around in a spiral with a string secured around her pinky, and then snatching her hand back to throw the top like skipping a stone across water and seeing if hers spun longer than Mother and Father's. Her long-held dreams turned into soap bubbles, and she rubbed a towel briskly over herself to wipe them off before wrapping herself in Mother's cotton kimono.

She tucked herself into her new bed, the sheets smoother than any fabric that had ever touched her skin. She'd slept on the floor all her life, and the bed seemed dangerously high. She nestled against the wall to keep from rolling off. Feeling insecure under the thin blanket after sleeping under a heavy futon for twelve years, she balled up, reluctant to let go of her fantasy of having the family of her dream.

Then a revelation came to her. She had to invent a new goal. An American family. That was it. Her new dream would be to become accepted into her father's family. It was the only way to survive in America.

Chapter 4
FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

The next morning, her first day of American school, Ayumi woke up feeling like caterpillars were crawling on her skin.

“I’ll introduce you to your teacher,” Father said after breakfast.

Ayumi bowed her appreciation and dragged herself out the front door with her violin case.

“You don’t need to take your violin. They don’t offer orchestra at school.”

“*Dame.*” No, it wouldn’t do. Ayumi didn’t want to go anywhere without her instrument. Her life would end if anything happened to it.

“It’d be safer to leave it at home.”

She shook her head and hugged her case.

“I see. Be careful with it, okay?” He smiled at her, but she couldn’t smile back, she could barely breathe.

To keep her mind away from the scary image of an American school, she drew in the sweet smells of flowers still blooming in front of the houses they walked past. None of the leaves were red or orange as they should have been in November.

Brenda swung a metal lunch pail, painted with a black mouse with gigantic ears and a toothy dog, from one hand and held her father’s hand with the other.

Ayumi had watched Marilyn pack a sandwich for her in a red and green plaid lunch box and fill the matching thermos with milk. An American lunch fit efficiently in the square box, like Ayumi’s rice and pickled vegetable lunches Mother had made had filled her small tin box. Her violin case rocked in one hand and her new American lunch pail seesawed in the other.

The school building was red brick instead of white stucco like her school in Japan, and the entryway was arched. Water sprayed out of the ground, wetting short green grass and small shrubs growing around the building. It was like a fountain except that it rose from the earth instead of from a pool of water.

“What is that?” Ayumi asked.

“That’s a sprinkler system. It’s like rain for the grass.”

Imagine that. America could create rain.

“Can you make your way home without me?” Father asked. “Brenda will walk back with you.”

Ayumi nodded. Two blocks, one turn. How hard could it be?

After dropping Brenda off at her class, Father led Ayumi down a long empty corridor. The bell had rung a few minutes ago, and their footsteps sent cold clicking sounds bouncing off the blotchy green linoleum floor. Father stopped in front of a heavy wooden door at Room 61. A wavy glass set into the top half of the door distorted the faces of children in their seats, mouths mismatching noses and eyes. Fear gripped her like a boar pinning her to the ground. When Father clasped the dented brass knob, she wanted to shout, “No, I won’t go in there!” But she gulped down her anxiety and remained silent. *Gaman.*

Father guided her in with a hand on her back. The students didn’t wear uniforms like the schoolchildren in Japan, but wore regular clothes. The classroom was bigger than her last one, but

she was getting used to everything being bigger here.

"Ayumi, this is Miss Huneven, your teacher." Father introduced her to a soft-eyed lady.

"Hello, Ayumi." Miss Huneven smiled. When the teacher shook her hand, her large tangerine-shaped body jiggled under a flowered mid-calf dress. Ayumi stared at the short chain holding the teacher's cardigan sweater together at the neckline as if the sweater was too small for her broad body.

"Hello." Ayumi bowed.

"*Ganbatte*," Father said. "Hang in there. You can do it."

Ayumi didn't want to be left alone, but before she could ask him to stay, he was gone. She faced a room full of strange faces.

"Boys and girls," the teacher announced, "we have a new student, Ayumi Golightly. Please say 'good morning, Ayumi.'"

"Good morning, Ayumi," the class repeated.

Ayumi Golightly. She had never been a Golightly before. It sounded strange, but comforting to have the same name as Father. Maybe it wasn't going to be so bad.

"You can take this seat." The teacher's white, thick-soled shoes made no sound as she accompanied Ayumi to a chair attached to a desk in the fourth row. Ayumi's last desk had been separate from her chair, but it worked the same way. She dropped her lunch pail in a wire basket behind the seat, but when she laid her violin case on top of the basket, it stuck out on both sides. Two new books, a pad of paper and a pencil took up the entire top of the desk.

A sharp pain pinched the back of her neck. She turned around. Three boys in the back row smothered laughter with their hands. A wad of paper the size of a small frog with sharp folds lay on the floor under her violin case. She left it there and suppressed her tears, just as she had done when boys in Japan had taunted her. Five minutes into a new class and the ridicule was already starting.

She'd been in sixth grade since the beginning of the school year in April. In America, school didn't end until June. It was going to be a long year.

Recess saved her from the confusion of American history, and with her violin case in hand, she tailed the children to the playground. A line of kids jostled in front of four swings. She loved swings, but she hadn't played her violin in two days, and she needed to feel the strings under her fingers. A row of benches lined a high wire fence across the baseball field. She could practice there.

She'd reached home base when three boys, the ones who'd thrown the wadded paper at her, appeared out of nowhere and ringed her. A boy with straw-colored hair and pin-sized dots all over his face stuck his head forward like a crab peeking out from its shell. A tall, dark-haired boy tossed a hefty rock back and forth between his hands. The third kid with pumpkin-colored hair and pale skin gripped his hips with his hands.

"What's in that bag, chink?" one boy yelled.

"What're you doing in America, slant-eyed?" Another boy smirked.

"Go home, go home," the third boy chanted.

The boys slowly closed the circle around her. Tall Boy pitched his stone to Dotted Face. Dotted Face lobbed it to Pumpkin Hair. The third kid slung it back to the first boy. They threw the stone around and around, fencing her in.

"Show us what you've got there."

"It must be important."

“Either you show us, or we’ll take a look ourselves.”

She wasn’t about to open her case. “Go away,” she shouted, trying to steady her quaking voice.

Dotted Face picked up a pebble and threw it at her. It hit her arm and left a red mark.

“*Okaasan!* Mother!”

“She calls her mommy *mother*. Who does she think she is? Princess Ann or something?”

“Prude.”

“You think you’re better than us because you carry a case around like my dad?”

Tall Boy tossed a twig. It caught in her braid, but she didn’t brush it off. She didn’t dare let go of her precious instrument with either hand. The bell signaling the end of recess pealed, startling all of them. While the boys were off guard, Ayumi darted between them and raced back to her classroom. She shook in her seat for ten minutes before she could calm herself.

During lunch, she sat in the farthest corner away from everyone and ate her soft white sandwich filled with gooey mayonnaise and a round thin piece of meat. It was like chewing tofu, but she was grateful to Marilyn for making it. The apple was crunchy and the milk refreshing. She snuck back into her classroom before the lunch break was over, and leaving her instrument in the case, she played a phantom violin, her fingers flying over the fingerboard, her head filled with music.

When the long day of American school was over, Ayumi looked around outside for Brenda, but unable to find her, she walked home alone. As she entered the house, she said, “*Tadaima,*” as if she were greeting Mother upon returning home. No one welcomed her with the traditional, “*Okaeri.*”

On her way up to her room, Ayumi passed Brenda and another girl playing in the den. “Hello,” Ayumi said and lowered her head. When they didn’t respond, she kept going.

Ayumi heard the other girl ask, “Who’s that?”

“Nobody,” Brenda replied.