

Mariko/Marie/Marina

My Life in Three Cultures

A Memoir

By Marina DiMaggio

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Dedication

I dedicate the story of my life to my loving family.

Prologue

A crisp, pristine October day in northern California. I stood in my big backyard, showing off my precious fruit trees to my family, who had gathered to celebrate my 86th birthday—the lemon, orange, persimmon, and apricot trees that had given us fragrant blossoms and luscious fruit over so many years.

When I walked back into the house with my daughter Pat behind me, I heard a low sound coming from the living room, where my son-in-law Mike and grandson Kyle were watching TV. As I drew nearer, the sound became more distinct—a droning *oooooooo, oooooo, oooooo*. Panic gripped me. I began to shake and tears streamed down my cheeks. My loved ones crowded around me, asking me worried questions I couldn't find the words to answer.

Pat called out in alarm: "Grandma is very upset! What are you guys watching?"

"A movie about World War II," Kyle called back. "Why?"

I entered the living room and glanced at the TV. There they were, in grainy black and white—a flight of B-29 bombers over Japan. The sounds of the bombers. The sounds of the falling bombs. The inferno far below. For over 70 years, since I was 13 years old, I had blocked out those sounds and images. An entire city ablaze as my parents and I watched, paralyzed with fear, from a mountaintop high above.

It had all come back to me, like a fist in my stomach. I couldn't stop shaking.

"What's wrong with grandma?" Kyle asked.

"Grandma was in Japan during the war," Pat said.

“I didn’t know that about you,” my grandson said. “I’m sorry, grandma. We’ll turn it off.”

“Don’t worry,” I said, dabbing at my eyes. “It isn’t your fault.”

My granddaughter Marissa said, “I saw photos of you dancing in Europe, but we didn’t know about the war. We don’t know that much about your life story.”

My daughter Suzie said, “Mommy, you should write your life story for us, so we can know your history.”

My grandchildren knew I grew up in Japan, born to a German father and Japanese mother, but I had never talked about the war. Never talked about the firebombing of Japan. Never talked about being deported with my parents to Hamburg in 1946, sent from one charred and haunted landscape to another. Why talk about these things to my children and grandchildren? I had always been a happy person, preferring to think pleasant thoughts and not dwell on bad memories.

But I realized my grandchildren wanted to know my full story. If I hadn’t talked about the difficult times, I realized I had also not talked much about my triumphs. My rise from very modest circumstances, to say the least, to become a well-known dancer throughout Europe in the 1950s. Becoming a successful restaurant owner in California. The joys of creating a loving family.

I had survived and thrived in three distinct cultures. In Japan I was Mariko, in Germany I was Marie, and in this country I am Marina—a child of three lands, proud of each, unable to say where each began and ended within me.

I decided that day to write a book so my family could share deeply in the life I’ve been so fortunate to live. Here is my story.

Chapter One

A Dance with Walter-San

My story begins with my mother, Setsu Shimaya, who was born on America's birthday, July 4, 1912, in the small coastal town of Esashi on Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island. When she was three years old, her family moved to Hakodate, a larger nearby city, the first port in Japan to be opened to foreign trade in 1854. Mount Hakodate towered over the city, and the night view from the forested summit was renowned as one of the best in the country.

I don't know much about my mother's early life, only that from a young age she dreamed about becoming a fashion designer at a well-known atelier. For that ambition to become a reality, she had to move to a much larger and more sophisticated city. So in 1929, at age 17, she went to live with her mother's friend in Yokohama, a port city of over 600,000 about twenty miles south of Tokyo. It was a cosmopolitan place with a substantial international presence due to its sea trade.

Setsu called her mother's friend Oba-san (aunt) and her husband Oji-san (uncle). Oba-san had a very close friend who owned a café. The café owner was short staffed, so she asked Oba-san if my mother could help out since she wasn't doing anything at the time. Oba-san advised my mother to work there as a waitress so she could save money for fashion school tuition. The café owner, Mrs. Suzuki, was warm and kind, and the waitresses called her Mama-san (in Japan, "san" is an honorary title, a sign of respect). In her pink-striped uniform, Setsu served guests French pastries, light sandwiches, coffee, and English tea while "la chanson"

music played in the background. Since another girl working there was named Setsuko, they called my mother Taeko.

Mama-san's cafe had both Japanese and foreign customers. Among them, three German seamen were frequent visitors—Walter-san, Fritz-san, and Hans-san. Their ship was docked in Yokohama harbor for major repairs. Walter-san carried an English/Japanese pocket dictionary. He had dreamed of visiting Japan since reading a book about the country as a young boy; one reason he became a seaman was to make that dream come true. The three Germans asked the waitresses questions about Japan, and the girls asked in return about the exotic places the sailors had visited.

One day Oji-san came to pick up my mother at the café and met Walter-san. Since Oji-san worked at an import/export company he spoke English to Walter-san, who told him he wanted to visit a Japanese household. Oji-san invited him for dinner the next day. Walter-san arrived with a bouquet of flowers for the lady of the house and a box of chocolates for my mother.

After that, Walter-san visited every now and then until his ship was ready to sail. On one visit he asked Taeko if she wanted to see a movie. At 18 years of age, she had been to movies with friends and her father, but she had never been to a movie with a man. She asked Oji-san and Oba-san for their permission, which was granted.

Walter-san took her to see an American movie. During a dance scene, he asked Taeko if she knew how to dance.

“No,” she replied shyly.

“Would you like to learn sometime?” Walter-san asked.

My mother was embarrassed by the idea of a man and woman holding each other. Japanese men and women didn't shake hands (they bowed instead), and you never even saw a married couple holding hands or showing affection in public at that time. Nevertheless, she said yes.

A few days later, Walter-san showed up at her home with a gramophone and some records. Taeko had seen a gramophone in stores, but she had never heard one played before. Everyone gathered around the square brown box and watched intently as Walter-san placed a record on the turntable, cranked the gramophone to get it spinning, and then lowered the arm. Bright music burst forth. Oji-san, Oba-san, and Taeko were astonished. My mother swayed lightly in rhythm with the music and Walter-san held out his hands.

Taeko shook her head in embarrassment.

Walter-san said, "Come on! I'll teach you."

Taeko looked at Oji-san for approval and he nodded.

She grasped Walter-san's hands and followed his lead, moving easily about the room—*1-2-3, 1-2-3!* Taeko was learning to dance!

They danced every time Walter-san came to visit, until the day finally arrived when the repairs on the ship were completed. On his next visit, Walter-san gave Taeko a small box.

"This is a promise ring," he said, "and by giving this to you, I promise to someday return to Japan."

My mother opened the box. It was a beautiful ruby ring, which I still own, one of my most cherished possessions.

The last night before his ship departed, Walter-san stopped by to say farewell. Oba-san and Oji-san were away for the weekend at an onsen (hot springs). My mother served green tea

and Japanese pastries, and they talked for a long while. Walter-san asked for a final dance. He put “Goodnight, Sweetheart” on the gramophone.

As they danced Walter-san held her tighter and tighter, and then he kissed her. My mother’s first kiss.

When Walter-san left later that evening, he kept repeating, “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry—I promise I’ll be back and we’ll get married.”

My mother sat alone in the dark, a wave of emotions sweeping over her, unaware if minutes or hours passed.

When Taeko finally returned to work, and for many days thereafter, she looked up in expectation whenever a Caucasian man walked into Mrs. Suzuki’s cafe.

Time went by and my mother didn’t feel well. She felt sick at work and had to throw up in the restroom. Everyone thought she had an upset stomach, but over time the changes in her body became noticeable. Oji-san and Oba-san were mortified and humiliated—Taeko had become pregnant without a husband while under their care! What would the neighbors think? What would they say to her parents?

Meanwhile, Oji-san had received notice that his job was being transferred to Nagoya, about 150 miles from Yokohama. He and Oba-san had to move and now my mother had no place to live. She certainly couldn’t return home to her parents. Mrs. Suzuki had an older sister who was widowed and living alone in the Asakusa district of Tokyo. She asked her sister if she wouldn’t mind having a companion. Five months pregnant, Taeko went to live with Mama-san’s sister, whom she called her Okaa-san (mother).

The Asakusa district was famous for Senso-ji, the ancient Buddhist temple that was founded in 645 A.D., the oldest in Tokyo and one of the oldest in the country. It was dedicated to Okannon-sama, the Buddhist goddess of mercy and compassion. According to legend, two fishermen found a statue of Kannon in the Sumida River in 628. The chief of their village recognized the sanctity of the statue and remodeled his house into a small temple so villagers could worship it.

Taeko walked to Senso-ji every day, rain or shine, to pray to Okannon-sama for her baby's safe birth. Her daily journey took her through the Kaminarimon (or Thunder Gate), the imposing entrance to the temple. Beyond Thunder Gate was Nakamise-dori, a long street crowded with dozens of shops that dated to the early 18th century, when neighbors of the temple were granted permission to sell goods to visitors and pilgrims.

Taeko passed stalls selling ningyoyaki and taiyaki (doll-shaped and fish-shaped cakes filled with red bean paste), traditional sweets, hand-made noodles, sushi, Japanese swords, paper umbrellas and fans, *ukiyo-e* (woodblock prints), kimonos and robes, and Buddhist scrolls. Every day, as she reached the end of Nakamise-dori and was about to enter the temple proper, she passed a young monk carving something from wood.

She went through the Hōzōmon or "Treasure House Gate," the entrance to the temple's inner complex. Within the main hall, she prayed before the statue of Kannon. Then she sat in the temple's contemplative garden, immaculately manicured in distinctive Japanese style.

One day after praying to Okannon-sama, Taeko was resting on a bench outside the temple. A woman in her mid-30s came along, sat next to her, and they nodded in greeting.

"You're expecting?" the woman said. "Are you hoping for a girl or a boy?"

My mother said, "I'd like to have a little girl, but I'm just hoping for a healthy baby."

The woman smiled and asked, "And how about your husband?"

Taeko looked down, tears welling in her eyes.

"I'm so sorry!" the woman said. "I'm so sorry!"

My mother told this complete stranger everything that had happened in her life. The woman revealed that she had been in an abusive marriage for years and her husband eventually kicked her out of the house for another woman. She said she had a little girl, but wasn't allowed to see her.

Taeko and the woman held hands and cried. After that day, they met every chance they had and became best friends. She became the older sister Taeko had always wanted. Her name was Okise-san.

By now, Taeko's parents had found out about her pregnancy. Compounding their shame was worry at the prospect of their daughter giving birth alone in a big city. They decided to send Taeko's younger sister, 17-year-old Echiko, to care for her, but Okaa-san's house in Asakusa was too small for both of them. Taeko asked Okise-san to help her find a place where she and her sister could live. Okise-san knew a kimono merchant who, through his business of selling and delivering kimono fabrics, met numerous people. Okise-san asked him if he could find them a reasonably-priced rental.

A few days later, Okise-san told Taeko that she had found a small rental in the Tsurumi district of Yokohama. On the day before she moved away from Tokyo, Taeko went to Senso-ji Temple for the last time. She looked in vain for the monk she had seen carving near the entrance to the main temple. On top of a box near where he worked, she saw a small statue of Okannon-sama, no more than five inches tall.

Taeko simply had to have Okannon-sama. Without her, she wouldn't feel protected during her baby's birth.

"Gomen kudasai," she called out. ("Hello, excuse me?")

The young monk appeared from behind the box.

Taeko asked, "Could I please buy the Okannon-sama?"

"She is not for sale," the monk said.

Taeko became desperate. "Please," she begged, "I need her to protect me."

The monk stared at her, this young woman eight months pregnant, begging for his statue. Finally he relented. "Alright, but first I will pray and bless Okannon-sama for you."

Taeko was elated. She asked the monk how much she owed him. When he repeated that it was not for sale, she gave him all she had (five yen, or about \$10 at the time) as an offering. She clutched the tiny statue tightly against her chest all the way home.

The next day, Okise-san and the kimono merchant helped Taeko move. Mrs. Suzuki contributed household items. A woman who owned a small nightclub in Yokohama, who knew Taeko from Mrs. Suzuki's café, gave her bedding and other housewares to get started.

On the first night Okise-san stayed with her in the house. It wasn't until the next day that Echiko (Taeko called her Et-chan) arrived from Hokkaido. The two sisters were so happy to see each other that they stayed up talking until late into the night.

Taeko's savings were running out because she couldn't work in her condition, so Et-chan went to work at Mrs. Suzuki's café. They were young and carefree, with seemingly no worries. Okise-san came to visit frequently. One day Okise-san invited my mother to visit the temple of which she was a member. Dairinji Temple is in the Umeiyashiki district of Tokyo. After praying,

the two women sat in the sun, talking and laughing. They had become such close and loving friends.

A few days later, on Oct. 11, 1932, my mother gave birth to me at home with a midwife in attendance. The umbilical cord was wrapped twice around my neck and I wasn't breathing. The midwife held me upside down by my feet and slapped my backside, but she couldn't revive me.

"I'm so sorry!" she cried out in despair. "I couldn't save your baby! The cord choked her!"

Convinced I was born dead, she tossed me on the tatami mat that covered the floor. I burst into a loud cry—I was alive!

We were doing well for about two weeks, but then my mother fell ill with a high fever. I was put on bottled milk, which didn't agree with me, and I also became very sick. A neighborhood doctor gave my mother medicine for pneumonia, but both of us got worse. He said nothing more could be done for us. We lay side-by-side on the futon, waiting to die.

Okise-san saw our condition and went to Dairinji Temple to pray. "Please save my friend and her baby," she kept repeating, "please save them."

The master priest was watching her.

"I remember you sitting outside with a young pregnant woman," he said to Okise-san. "You two looked so happy and were having a good day. How is she doing?"

Okise-san told the priest that her friend was dying and asked him to help. She took him to the house and he saw the two of us lying on our futon, near death. The small wooden statue of Okannon-sama looked down upon us from the tokonoma, an alcove a few inches above the floor

where artistic items were displayed. A lit candle flickered next to it. The priest later told my mother that when he saw Okannon-sama, he felt he had been called upon to save our lives.

He gave his card to the midwife and told her to take a taxi to a well-known obstetrician, who came immediately, diagnosed our illnesses, gave my mother a large injection, and left the midwife with a breast pump.

“This baby,” he said, “will not survive without mother’s milk.” For the next week Okise-san and the midwife cared for us day and night, and slowly we recovered.

My mother and I owed our lives to Osho-san, the master priest of Dairinji Temple.

My mother named me Marina (meaning “of the sea”) in honor of Walter-san, my vanished seafaring father, but I was called Mariko, the Japanese version of the name. My mother was still very weak, but I was getting healthier and growing. The master priest from Dairinji Temple and his wife brought baby clothes that had been donated to the temple. Friends and neighbors also pitched in.

One day the café owner, Mrs. Suzuki, arrived to visit. “Taeko-san,” she said to my mother, “please sit down. I have something important to tell you. Fritz-san and Hans-san came by the café.”

“Was Walter-san with them?”

“No,” Mrs. Suzuki said, looking sad. As my mother listened with rapt attention, the café owner repeated the story that Fritz-san and Hans-san had told her.

After leaving Yokohama, their ship first stopped at Honolulu, continued on to the mainland United States, then Canada and the Caribbean Islands, before finally returning to

Germany. Walter-san developed a bad case of pneumonia during the long voyage. When they arrived in Hamburg, he was taken straight to the hospital.

Mrs. Suzuki paused. “Taeko-san, I’m so very sorry! Fritz-san and Hans-san told me that they heard Walter-san had died.”

My mother held me as she listened, staring down at the floor. She didn’t cry; she simply thanked Mrs. Suzuki for coming. But as soon as she left my mother burst into tears, clutching me tight as she cried over and over, “I’m so sorry, my baby, I’m so sorry—you’ll never know your father.” It was December 28, 1932. I was two months old.

A frequent visitor during this time was Mrs. Suzuki’s friend, the woman who owned the nightclub in downtown Yokohama. She was engaged to an American ship captain, and she adored me. She told my mother that if she ever had a baby with her fiancé, the child would be bi-racial, just like me. Unlike the vast majority of Japanese at that time, the idea of having a “mixed child” didn’t faze her in the least. As a nightclub owner, she had a cosmopolitan view of the world. Her club was on Yokohama’s main thoroughfare, Motomachi-dori, a thriving district of restaurants, shops, and fashion boutiques known for its sophisticated atmosphere. Many westerners frequented her nightclub.

My mother wasn’t able to work for a while, but she still held on to her dream of becoming a fashion designer. The nightclub owner had an acquaintance who owned a fashion atelier and was looking for a live-in assistant. She had mentioned my mother’s dream, and the atelier owner said that if Taeko took the job, she would teach her all she knew, from making patterns to sewing to fashion design, as well as everything in between. It would take years to train my mother to be a designer, but there would be no tuition fees.

This sounded wonderful to my mother, but who would take care of me while she worked as a live-in assistant? The nightclub owner, whom I would later call Mama-chan, stepped up and volunteered to take me into her residence above the club. She called me Mari-chan (Japanese use “chan” as a friendly form of address for a child or good friend). I was still an infant at that time. She had two maids and appointed one, named Otsune-san, to look after me.

Mama-chan was so good to me and I was very happy living with her. Perhaps she loved me so intensely because she was childless. She took me shopping and bought me French dolls, a jewelry box, a teddy bear, a cat-shaped purse, and many other beautiful things. She spoiled me, dressing me as if I were a little doll—white and blue sailor suits, lace dresses, a fur coat. In one photo from childhood Mama-chan holds me in her arms, beaming. In another, we pose cheek-to-cheek, wearing kimonos. Kimonos weren’t purchased whole, as one would purchase a dress or a robe in the West. Instead, kimono merchants visited customers and showed them a selection of fabrics. The customers made their choices and the kimonos were then hand-sewn. The kimono merchant who had helped my mother move in the past came to see Mama-chan frequently, and sold her fabrics for her kimonos as well as to the girls who worked for her.

In another photo I hold her dog in my lap, a Japanese Chin named “Puppy,” a present from her American sea captain fiancé. Its front paws hang down as I grip its belly. There’s an oversized white bow in my hair, about as big as the dog’s plumed tail.

As a baby I slept on a small futon on the tatami mat covering the floor, but when I was three years old I slept with Mama-chan in her Western-style bed. On one wall of her bedroom hung a large sea turtle shell, another gift from her American fiancé. On another wall was a hanya mask. In Japanese culture it represented jealous female demons in traditional Noh and Kyōgen theater. Carved from dark wood, Mama-chan’s mask had a leering mouth, sharp teeth,

metallic eyes, and two devil-like horns. Demonic, dangerous, and tormented, its rage and pain terrified me. I turned on my side away from it and clutched the covers to my throat, as Western music from the nightclub below drifted into my room, like “Blue Moon,” the 1934 song by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart.

When I was about five years old, Mama-chan’s American fiancé arrived for a visit, bringing along a painting of a huge, orange-colored bridge.

“What kind of bridge is that?” I asked her.

“That’s the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.” I remember looking at the painting hanging over Mama-chan’s bed, never thinking that one day I would see the real thing.

Mama-chan later told me that my mother used to come by at night after work at the atelier. She watched me sleep as she held my hand. When she had a day off, she took me to see cartoons and movies in the theaters—Mickey Mouse, Betty Boop, Tarzan. I remember pounding my chest and making Tarzan sounds. When she took me to Asakusa Sen-soji Temple, on Nakamise-dori, she bought me kiri-ame—hand-rolled candy that was cut right in front of you. Inside each piece was the picture of a doll.

I also took excursions with Mama-chan. She really spoiled me—we had dinner at the New Grand Hotel in Yokohama, where she bought me French dolls and jewelry boxes and mirrors in the gift shop. We went to the Fujiya Hotel in Miyanoshita when I was very young. Built in 1881 in an area of famous hot springs, it was a high-class resort hotel designed in an imposing combination of Western and traditional Japanese architecture. It has long attracted dignitaries, royalty, and movie stars, from Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, to John and

Yoko Lennon in more recent times. Mama-chan loved the French restaurant at the Fujiya Hotel. After she ordered from the menu, the waitress asked me what I wanted.

“White rice and American cheese,” I said.

All the waitresses burst into laughter: “That’s because she’s half Japanese and half Caucasian!”

Mama-chan took to me to eat in Yokohama’s bustling Chinatown, the largest in Japan, with hundreds of shops dating back to the mid-19th century. My favorite meal was shumai, little dumplings filled with meat and shrimp. We also ate in a French restaurant in the hotel New Grand.

Mama-chan received word that her captain’s ship would be arriving in Kobe, a large port city wedged between the coast and mountains about 300 miles from Yokohama. We traveled there by train and stayed at the Oriental Hotel overlooking the vast harbor. Dating from 1870, it was one of the most historic hotels in all of Asia. From our balcony we gazed at the deep blue water, the dozens of ships scattered about the bay, the bustling docks. Mama-chan pointed at the horizon.

“Look, look!” she cried. “My captain is coming in!”

Far in the distance, I saw the gray outline of a ship. It looked so impossibly far away, as if it would never arrive, nearly blending with the hazy blue where sky and sea met.

The captain, a tall man, was very nice to me. Whenever I did or said something that amused him, he would exclaim, “Oh my!” So I named him Oh-my-san.

While we were in Kobe, Mama-chan took me to the famous Arima hot spring on the side of Mount Rokko opposite from the city center. I was so happy living with her.

The doors to Mama-chan's nightclub below were always locked, but one day when I was about three years old, the cleaning crew left the doors open and I walked in. I wandered among the tables, on which chairs were stacked, and went behind the bar, where I saw a little glass filled with a tempting jade-green liquid. It looked delicious and I tasted it. It *was* delicious—very sweet—and I drank it down. When I went back upstairs, Otsune-san, Mama-chan's maid, noticed that I had a red face and alerted her. I was very hot and she rushed me to the doctor.

“Take the child home and put her in bed,” the doctor said. “She's drunk.”

The sweet liquid was peppermint liqueur.

Around the corner from the nightclub was an ice cream parlor. By age four I went there by myself and ordered ice cream and cookies. When I finished, I would tell the owner that Mama-chan would pay for it. A few days later Mama-chan passed by the ice cream parlor and the owner called out to her that she had an outstanding tab. They shared a laugh about how independent I was, leaving the bill for Mama-chan to pay.

When Mama-chan tried to button my sailor suit one day, I told her I could do it myself. I was drinking lemonade out of a glass bottle, and as I stepped back I fell. The bottle broke and glass went deep into my chin. I was rushed to the doctor, who stitched my chin back up.

A few weeks later Mama-chan bought me beautiful socks with lace. I was coming down the stairs and saw Otsune-san with her back to me. I called out, “Otsune-san! Look at my beautiful socks!” I stuck my leg out to show her, lost my balance, and fell through the railings to the floor below.

I broke my arm and hit my chin, reopening the wound. Once again I got stitches and my arm was put into a cast. That night I woke up and saw my mother hovering over me. I

remember telling her “my arm hurts, my arm hurts” as she comforted me. When I woke up in the morning she was gone.

At the atelier where my mother worked, a young Japanese man named Naotoshi was a steady customer for custom-made suits and shirts with initials embroidered on the cuffs. He had grown up in Chicago, where his father was a businessman. He told the atelier owner that he had an invitation to the American consulate party at the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. He asked the owner if he could invite my mother, and the owner passed along the invitation because Naotoshi was a good customer. My mother wasn't sure she should go but said yes. The atelier owner let her borrow a lovely dress.

My mother arrived at the party early and sat in the lobby waiting for Naotoshi to arrive. She saw sophisticated and well-dressed Caucasian women and men passing by. Intimidated, she wanted to go home, but something made her stay.

Naotoshi arrived and took my mother into the hall where the party was being held. After being seated, hors d'oeuvres and drinks were served. Naotoshi asked, “Do you dance?” When my mother said yes he was surprised. Not many Japanese girls danced in those days. It was the first time she had danced since her last night with Walter-san. She thought of him as she held on to Naotoshi-san.

One day the owner of the atelier called my mother aside and said Naotoshi-san had asked permission to marry my mother. In those days arranged marriages were the norm, yet my mother was shocked by the proposal. She told the owner that she couldn't marry because she had a child. And not just any child—a bi-racial one.

When the owner passed on the news, Naotoshi-san said he didn't mind. He had grown up in Chicago and was used to people of different races.

Mama-chan told my mother, "You are so young. You shouldn't be alone your whole life." Her parents also agreed that she should get married. "Your daughter needs a father."

Since Naotoshi-san was from Hiroshima, about 500 miles from Yokohama, they had to get married in that city. Naotoshi-san's family business prevented my mother and him from returning right away and they ended up staying in Hiroshima for two years. Mama-chan told them not to worry. She would take good care of me until they returned.

When Naotoshi-san and my mother returned to Yokohama, we moved into a house together.

After all the hardships my mother had faced, we were reunited as a contented family. We ate breakfast together in the morning; Naotoshi-san (whom I called Otoo-san or dad) went to work. My mother (whom I called Mama) and I shopped at the market. Every night she prepared a delicious dinner for the three of us.

It was a very happy time that lasted for a while, until Otoo-san started to come home later and later from work. Some nights he didn't come home at all. I remember Mama sitting alone after I went to bed, waiting in vain for his arrival.

They never argued in front of me, and it was only later that I learned that Otoo-san had a mistress. He eventually moved out and my mother and he got divorced.

Now we had to move yet again. Mama rented an apartment close to her job, and because of her long work hours I had to move in with my grandparents and my mother's younger brother (I called him Onii-chan, which means older brother) and my mother's younger sister (I called her Onee-chan, which means older sister). Soon after moving in with them, I started elementary

school as Mariko Shimaya (my mother's maiden name). Mama was crying happy tears as she took me to school on the first day.

Living at my grandparents' house turned out to be very different from living with Mama-chan or my mother. One time I overheard my grandmother telling Onee-chan, "Too bad we have a child like this. I hope you can find a husband."

In Japan in the 1930s, the entire family was taken into consideration when an arranged marriage was made. My grandmother was worried that "a child like this" would prevent my aunt from getting married.

I knew she didn't mean to hurt me, but the words stung. I understood exactly what they meant. I had occasionally heard the word "ainoko" on the playground, in movie theaters, or from adults passing me on the street; it meant "mixed blood." The word was never said directly to my face, but everyone knew what it meant.

When I looked in the mirror I didn't feel different. Yes, I didn't look like other Japanese people. I had brown hair, not black hair, and my complexion was lighter. My eyes were slightly more Caucasian than Asian. To many Japanese I was a foreigner in my own country, but in my heart and mind I was 100% Japanese. Yet, at the same time, I had the nagging intuition that I was looked down upon. I just didn't fully understand why.

One day my grandmother put me in a dress that was too tight and I objected.

"I don't want to wear this!"

"Go ahead and wear it—just go to school!"

I kept resisting, sort of talking back.

Onee-chan grabbed me by the hair and dragged me down the steps leading into the entryway of the house.

“You bastard child!” she cried. “Keep your mouth shut! You have nothing to say!”

I didn’t know what “bastard” meant, but I was stunned by her reaction. Normally she was very caring toward me.

All day in school I felt sad. I thought about Mama-chan, about how happy I was living with her and how kind she always was. Now I felt ostracized and shamed within my own family. *I’m going to go see Mama-chan, I said to myself, because I know she still loves me.*

When school let out I started walking in the opposite direction from home. When I turned onto Mama-chan’s street I saw her standing on her balcony, amid her azaleas in brilliant shades of pink, red, and white. When I lived with her, she always warned me not to get too close to the balcony’s edge as I admired the flowers.

I called out as loudly as I could, “Mama-chan! Mama-chan!”

“Mariko, don’t come any closer! Go back home!”

Why was she saying this? Why wasn’t she as thrilled to see me as I was to see her? I thought she still loved me, but she kept repeating, “Don’t come here, Mariko! Go away! Go home now!”

She disappeared from the balcony into her apartment. I turned around to walk back home, wondering what I had done wrong. I passed a park with monkey bars. As I climbed on them, the tears running down my face, I kept asking, “Mama-chan, why? What did I do wrong?”

When I arrived home I was relieved no one was there, so I could dry my tears alone. Not long after, I found out that Mama-chan had broken up with her American sea captain and married a Japanese man who wanted her to give up her past. And I was a large part of that past.

At school I didn't have friends. All the kids would be playing together at recess except for me.

Now and then I heard the word: "ainoko."

"Can I jump rope?" I asked. No response. I asked again.

"No," a kid told me. That was it. I stood there alone and watched them at play. I was ignored and shunned, as if I were invisible.

Et-chan, my mother's younger sister who came to live with her when she was pregnant with me, had since gotten married to the nice kimono merchant who had helped my mother move. When her husband was out of town on business, she came to my grandparents' house and stayed overnight. If I was already asleep, she would lay next to me. I remember how cold she felt, startling me when she climbed into the warm and cozy bed, but it didn't matter. "Oh," I would say to myself, "my Oba-chan (auntie) is with me."

One of my happiest memories was playing records with her on the gramophone that Walter-san had left behind for my mother. I hand-cranked it as we listened to "Moonlight and Shadows," "Begin the Beguine," and other songs from that time.

On Saturdays I had a half-day of school. In the afternoon, I went to Mama's apartment, stayed overnight, spent Sunday morning with her, and returned in the afternoon to my grandparents' house. Every week I looked forward to spending the weekend with Mama. We shopped for books in downtown Yokohama. Many were Western books—*Mowgli the Jungle Boy*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *The Count of Monte Cristo*, which I especially loved. I remember Mama taking me to Sankeien, a famous Japanese garden in Yokohama's Naka Ward that featured ponds, streams, and winding paths, to look at the exquisite cherry blossoms in the spring.

One Saturday, while on the way to her apartment, I stopped in the street to watch a puppet show with a crowd. Someone tapped me on the shoulder and said, “Mariko, how are you doing?”

I turned around and looked up into Naotoshi-san’s smiling face.

“Otoo-san! (Dad)” I cried, tugging on his sleeve. “I’m on the way to Mama’s apartment and I want you to come home with me!”

“No, Mariko,” he said gently. “I can’t do that. Mama wouldn’t like to see me.”

I kept tugging on him. “Let’s go home!” I insisted. “Please, Otoo-san! Mama will be so happy to see you!” I remembered how contented Mama was when we lived together as a family.

“Please, Otoo-san, let’s go home together!”

Finally he relented.

When we arrived, Mama wasn’t home yet. Otoo-san and I sat on cushions and talked. Then we heard footsteps on the stairs. I couldn’t wait to see Mama’s happy face. The door opened and for a long moment she stared at us in disbelief.

“Naotoshi-san, what are you doing here!? Please leave!”

“So nice to see you,” Otoo-san said, “how have you been?”

“I want you to leave and never come back!”

Otoo-san tried his best to placate her. Finally he stood up and walked out. I trailed him down the stairs, crying out, “Otoo-san, gomennasai! Otoo-san, gomennasai!” (“Dad, I’m sorry!”)

At the bottom of the steps he turned around, leaned over me, and said, “Mariko, kiotsukero.” (“Mariko, take care.”) He walked quickly away, never turning back. I stood there

until I couldn't see him anymore, tears streaming down my cheeks as I repeated over and over, "Otoo-san, gomennasai!"

I was afraid to return to Mama's apartment and face her fury. There was a hill behind where we lived, and I spent a long time playing there amid the blooming wildflowers until I couldn't put it off any longer. When I slowly opened our door, Mama was standing with her back to me preparing dinner. I took my place at the table. She served me first, then herself, and we ate without saying a word.

The following week, my mother and I went to see the master priest of Dairinji Temple in Tokyo. Mama had stayed in touch with him since he had saved our lives. She told the priest and his wife about Otoo-san's visit. Mama was so disturbed by the encounter that she wanted to become a nun. The priest told her that wasn't possible.

"But I cannot remain in Yokohama, knowing Naotoshi-san is there. I don't want to see him again."

The priest's wife said their housekeeper had fallen ill and they were looking for a new one. If my mother was willing to take the job, she could move into a small house on the temple grounds with me.

So my mother and I moved to Dairinji Temple, and I was so happy to be living with Mama again. She had to get up at 4 a.m. to cook for all the young priests. She was so busy cooking and cleaning that I never saw her.

The priest and his wife had a son a few years older than me. We became good friends, playing hide and seek on the grounds. Three or four young monks were very kind. They brought me cookies and taught me how to play taiko drums, which date back to ancient times.

How I loved the booming sounds I made as I pounded away with the wooden drumsticks, throwing my whole body into the fast, powerful drumming!

I was enrolled in a new school. But, as before, I was an outcast. One day as I drew something in sand on the playground, the kids gathered around me. I thought they were looking at my drawing.

One girl said, "Can you see?"

"See what?"

Another girl said, "Can you see out of your green eyes?"

Green eyes? I didn't have green eyes!

I ran home and waited for my mother to return from work. It was already early evening when she walked in the door. I immediately asked her, "Mama, what color eyes do I have?"

She looked puzzled. "Mariko, why are you asking me this?" I told her what had happened at school and she asked me to sit down.

"Mariko, look at me. What color eyes do you see?"

I looked deep into my mother's eyes. "You have brown eyes."

"Okay, then. You're my child and I'm your mother. You have brown eyes, the same as me."

And for the next twenty years I believed her.