

It was something faded along a stretch of road going towards Owens Valley. The painted gas station sides were dry with their once bright toothpaste blue the color of a dry sink drain. A large overhang shielded faded red gas pumps from the broiling sun above. Bright neon had faded to a dull flicker and the front glass fogged over from dust and neglect. Maybe there was only one customer per day, and they drove hatchbacks and station wagons rather than anything new like the Convertibles or Roadsters cranking off the lines.

Leonard had only stopped for extra film and a Hershey bar.

The attendant had asked him a question twice. "Are you some kind of photographer?"

The young man's coveralls read: *Steven*. Thin, straw-haired, a few pimples dotted his face along with the suggestion of a beard.

"I...I'm sorry?"

Steven shrugged. "Nothin' ever happens around here worth photographin'," he explained. "So, are you a photographer or not?"

Therewinder knob on the camera twisted with a rhythmic scraping that beat in time with Leonard's stutter. "A-A-A war photographer, a-actually."

"No kiddin'. Where'd ya go?"

"O-Okinawa."

A smile broke out across Steven's face. "You were on Okinawa? What was it like?" Leonard could see the young man imagining something. He guessed it was probably something from the news, maybe a soldier forging across the battlefields of the Pacific.

All Leonard could muster was a shrug in return.

"Yeah, but you were actually there! See, I was too young for the draft. Didn't see any action."

“I, I really don’t know if there’s anything worth telling that the papers didn’t cover.”

“Well...okay...”

Leonard hoped that would be the last of his questions.

Steven asked, “But it was a fight worth fighting. Right?”

“Sure, sure.” Leonard offered hoping that it would allow him to get back to his car.

“They never allowed me to fight, but I said I wanted to!” Steven proclaimed. “I said I wanted to!”

“I-It can’t be helped...I guess, now may I have my items?”

“Hell, never even seen a Jap. What were they like?”

A layer of greasy sweat was starting to form on Leonard’s forehead. “Well I, uh, took photographs of the *Japanese* if that’s what you mean.”

Leonard wondered if Steven had only seen the Japanese in those newspaper cartoons. The ones with the bucky teeth and beady eyes, like monkeys “chattering at the good American” as the papers said.

“What were they really like?” Steven asked. “Were they only five feet tall? Did they have those swords?”

Leonard stopped fidgeting. “Are you---are you asking if I ever saw them attack?”

“Well...yeah. You’ve seen those news reports and cartoons and stuff right?”

Leonard shook his head, slowly. “Can’t...Can’t say I have...”

Steven considered then laughed, “Ha! Well, that makes sense right? You were there! Not gonna see no news!”

He continued, “All the better, my brother was in the Army. He told me every Jap will stab a good man in the back for their emperor or whatever he’s called. Even the injured ones.”

Something reflected behind Leonard's glasses. "I think you have something confused."

"My brother said they even slit their guts open when they mess up. You ever see them do that?"

Instead of answering him, Leonard asked, "So where was your brother stationed?"

"...Well, he was a mechanic working at Fort Hunter. He heard it from some guys who'd been there." Steven shrugged. "The guys said things like that all the time."

"I said can I have my groceries?"

"And that's not even counting what they do to us!" Steven pointed out. "Now I don't want to freak you or anything mister, but I heard they take their prisoners and with those knives they cut off their--"

When Leonard had spoken, he was neither nervous nor stuttering. "Goodbye."

Then film and candy were quickly taken as soon as possible. With no so much as a glance, Leonard turned around and made to leave.

"Yeah. Goodbye, um, I guess." mumbled Steven. Leonard ignored Steven's reply as he pushed open the glass doors.

Outside, Leonard made a beeline towards a beat up red Chrysler. He then opened the driver's side with a large show of force and got in, in doing so leaving the younger man to wonder what he had said.

Inside the car, Leonard rested both hands on the steering wheel, and closed his eyes.

A voice shyly asked if he was okay. "Otou-chan, daijyobu?"

Next to him sat an eight year old with long black hair. Small, thin, her eyes questioned why he was breathing so heavily.

She could see the hurt gaze behind his glasses, which Leonard was doing his best to hide.

Leonard tried to hide his eyes a lot.

Suddenly he sat up and dropped the look entirely, replacing it with a smile. “Daijyobu desu, Rei” he reassuring her.

Putting a deft hand behind his ear, Leonard pulled the Hershey bar almost magically from his ear lighting up Rei’s eyes with delight. The bar practically disappeared from his hand as Rei took it eagerly and unwrapped it. She broke off half a chunk and scarfed it down with joy, appreciating every last square like the first time she’d tried it.

With Rei a little happier, Leonard asked, with difficulty, “Anatawa? Ashi wa itai desu ka?”

His eyes moved down to the area where her leg cut off just below the knee. It sickened Leonard, as if the girl wasn’t there, sitting right next to him safe and healthy. She had even told him she could still feel it sometimes, even after Okinawa.

With a mouthful of chocolate, Rei smiled back and shook her head. “Iie. Itakunai.”

“Yokata.” With key in hand, Leonard turned the old engine over causing the car to shudder to life. “Jyaa, ikimashyou?”

The entire car jerked when it shifted into drive. Leonard smiled again but Rei at the last second saw him frowning. Thankfully the road, which rocked the car as it slowly sped up, eventually turned into a dull stiffness as they reached the speed limit.

Once it settled Rei felt comfortable enough to lean an arm against the window frame and watch the outside world. The black pavement passed by under tire, punctuated by the yellow lines that’d pass every second or so.

The land itself was so *nearly* flat as the road that Rei could line her finger up with the horizon. And the brush, *all* the brush, was scraggly and dry like the balls of lint she’d scrape in

her pocket. Sometimes they'd cover the entire desert like a thick carpet, while other times it was just rocky, pale, ground with only a few bushes. There *were* mountains, they were blue with white caps too. But they were so far away her palm could cover them up.

It was all big and empty, two words she never thought of on the island where there were definitely more than two things to think about. It was surprising that with only four things: sky, sand, brush, and mountains, the desert could not only be bigger than the island, but also bigger than everything she ever knew.

Rei rolled the window down and let the wrapper from the Hershey bar fly into the wind. She watched as it spiraled upwards into the cloudless sky, becoming smaller and smaller, until the car drove too far ahead to see it anymore.

“Mado O shimete kudasai.” Leonard asked.

“Haaaaiiii.” Rei said and rolled up the window.

Rei looked to Leonard to watch what *he* did for a change.

With his eyes focused forward, Rei decided to follow his lead and watch ahead for anything interesting or important.

Rei spotted the sign first: a tiny, tan, square piece of paper the size and shape of a fingernail. From a distance Rei thought it was nothing but a piece of junk.

Then as the sign grew closer, Leonard slowed down gradually so that he could read it.

The wood was large, held aloft by four chains on each side, like a soldier on watch. It could've been made from the most durable wood in the world and it still would've reflected the sorry state of anything that was exposed in this desert heat.

On the chipped paint was written, in raised archaic letters, easy enough to read from any car: “Manzanar War Relocation Center: Condemned.”

“Otouto-san. Sore wa nandesuka?” Rei asked him. “Man-zah-nah?”

But Leonard’s eyes remained fixed on that spot, for some time.

That’s when something small slide over his hand, causing him to jump.

Leonard turned and looked down at the hand holding his white-knuckled fist gripping the steering wheel. Gently, he let go, and held his daughter’s hand. It was barely the width of Leonard’s own palm. But her smile was something bigger. It caused the frustration in his gut to relax and, slowly, he smiled back at Rei.

With his hand back on the stick, he put the car in drive. Leonard faced forward with clear eyes that matched his daughter’s.

And the car drove on and on down the road stretching forward, until it reached where they needed to go.