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The Sensei

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[* by Nikki Bridges?]

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THE SENSEI

by Wakako Yamauchi



There's a story I'd like to tell. It's been a long time on my mind, changing form, eras, situations, characters, but I think there's only one way to tell this story: the way it happened.

It starts back at the beginning of World War II, maybe earlier, but for my purpose, this is where it starts. Beyond that I'll leave to the reader because I think audience participation is important: like those paintings artists do that leave interpretations to the critics. If you paint too much of the picture, it's not first-rate because that interferes with the evocation of emotions. I believe this, but I never made it as a painter either. You've never heard of Utako Morita, have you?

Well, when the United States and Japan entered into war, the Japanese and Japanese-Americans living on the West Coast were shunted off to various internment centers in the more isolated areas of the United States. For security reasons, they said. I went to Poston, Arizona with my family; I was 17 then, and though I was resentful that my loyalty was questioned, what could a girl of that age do? Yes, girl. I'm not a man. Lots of people think that. I write letters to magazines sometimes, and they answer: Dear Mr. Morita. I'll give you a clue about Japanese names: if there's a *ko* at the end of a first name, it's female. This doesn't mean there aren't women with male names or female names without *ko*.

I guess I write like a man too. I've always tried to be direct and I guess that's a sort of masculine trait. I have this thing about being sweet: all Japanese girls are sweet, ask anyone. And while I was growing up, it was so important for me to be different from every other Japanese girl, I made great effort to be honest and unsweet. Not that *sweet* and *honest* are opposites, but directness isn't a desirable trait among Japanese women. Sweetness is. Sometimes it really annoys my husband Jim, this directness of mine; he thinks women should work hard at being women. But this is the way I am; I can't help it—but I'm all woman otherwise—and 38. You wouldn't believe that either, would you? But there you are.

Inside this particular camp, as in the others, there were many political factions: ultra-Americans, ultra-Japanese, varied degrees of both, fence-sitters, indifferents, and at least one pacifist. There was quite a bit of internal tension; there were rumors of

all sorts, black lists, beatings, and a pro-Japanese strike. I attended this; we stayed up all night in little groups of campfires, block standards waving in icy winds, Japanese military songs blaring over the loudspeaker. My girl friend (she was the pacifist) and I huddled together and sang ballads—very conspiratorial.

About this time, the Government decided to separate the pros from the cons. The way it was done: questionnaires were passed to all American citizens and somewhere in the middle of the list (number 18 or 19), there were two important questions: Would you renounce all ties with Japan, and would you volunteer your services to the United States, only worded more legal-like. On the basis of the answers, the young people were sorted. I answered yes-yes; I mean, after all, what did I know about Japan, and what branch of service would take me? But my brother Toshio was a no-no. It was very hard on the old folks; they were brought up in the spirit of Yamato: patriotism, filial piety, and Spartan, or rather, Japanese existence, and though they weren't required to answer the questionnaires, the Government offered to repatriate those that wanted to return to Japan. These people, repatriots, and no-no's and yes-no's were sent to Tule Lake, California to await transfer to Japan. Some repatriots went in entire clans, some left their young folk, and some young folk left their families. It was very hard on the old folks. My brother went alone.

There's where Toshio met Jim Morita, the man I was to marry later. Toshio used to write to me about life in Tule: 6:00 AM calisthenics, Japanese language classes, the friends he'd made, the Morita clan in particular who were so kind to him, the pressure groups, the extremists who shaved their heads *bozu* (that's bone-bald), *banzai* meetings (that's a kind of battle-cry; it means like Hurray! or Long Live the King!), beatings, and knifings. They stayed in Tule quite a while; there was a long waiting list and only one boat, the Swedish Gripsholm. Toshio wrote me about contingents who left for Japan, how they wept. I sent candy bars, cookies, and once I saved up my clothing allowance and sent him a sweater. It made me sad—you know, my brother's keeper.

By the time war ended, we in other camps had gradually been processed (investigated and cleared) into the mainstream of outside life. We scattered all over; Chicago, New York, Cincinnati, Boston, but most of us returned to the West Coast. My family moved back to Los Angeles. There was a huge group left stranded in Tule; they too were processed and allowed to sift back. Toshio returned to us.

The Morita family went back to Walnut Creek in Northern California, where they'd farmed before. Only Jim came to Los Angeles to attend the University here. That's when I met him.

I wish I could tell you about our courtship—the joy, the pain—but that's not pertinent to my story. I'm glad we got married before we had sense enough not to. We're both from Buddhist families so we had a Buddhist wedding, and the priest said he was so happy to unite two Buddhist families. Suddenly the awesome responsibility of family—generations from my womb—scared me silly and I felt like bawling. That's what I mean about getting married before I had sense enough. I wondered what Jim was thinking but we were like in separate rooms.

The first years were rough. We got a small basement apartment for keeping the yard mowed. I worked at a shower curtain factory hand-painting shower curtains; you've seen them—flamingoes, palm fronds, sailboats; and every four and a half months we scraped the barrel to meet non-resident fees at school. Jim's citizenship problem disqualified him as a resident. His major was international relations and his dream was to work in the reconstruction of Japan. Phoenix from the ashes.

We spent most of our weekends in our basement apartment playing penny-ante poker with Jim's colleagues who were also very needy. Sometimes he'd go to the House, one of the dormitories, for a big game. "I've got to make tuition," he'd say, and most of the time he'd get it. He's what they call a tight player. But Jim's very superstitious and he could never go to these games without a smile and kiss from me. Sometimes I simply couldn't do it, smile and kiss, and he'd say, "Well, I just won't go if you don't want me to. I'll just go on to bed." And he'd lie in bed next to me (I'd have retired by then, sulky) with his coat and shoes on. That would make me laugh and I'd smile and kiss him, and watch him go off like a kid running to catch the ice cream man. I said to myself, when we have money he will stop this. He needs the money.

Jim heard about Las Vegas from these boys at the House. They planned systems and worked out mathematical theories and laws of averages, and Jim would come home all excited and tell me about them: gambling around the clock, night lit up like day, money flowing like water, free drinks, free breakfasts. We had to go.

It was winter; I cashed my fifty-dollar bonus check and we agreed not to write checks or use the tuition money. I tucked an

extra ten dollars in the secret compartment of my wallet. I'd also heard about Las Vegas; of people coming home broke and hungry and running out of gas the last mile home. We drove off to Vegas.

We lost most of our money at the gaudiest, plushest casino downtown, the Golden Nugget. There were only a few dollars left so we went across the street to the Boulder Club, where dime and quarter bets were allowed. The clientele differed there—some of them looked like grizzled prospectors, refugees from a TV western. I sat at the Keno seats and bought a quarter card and pretended to mark numbers; they won't let you sit down unless you're playing the game. In a little while Jim came along and jerked his head, let's go home.

While we were walking to the door, Jim pulled my arm and said, "Look at the man standing at the water fountain." I looked. He was a small thin man, Japanese, about 40 or more. His face kind of hung on his neck like a rag on a peg. He was deeply tanned with creases like gullies on his face, his hair was thinning, and his eyes were incredibly tired. His two-toned loafer jacket was faded and dirty; he looked like a strip of bent clay. "He asked me for money," Jim said.

"Did you give him any?" I asked.

"I didn't have any to give."

The man leaned over the fountain and took a long drink and from where I stood I could almost hear the cold water rushing into his empty gullet.

We were maybe five miles out of town, driving in the cold glare of the desert sun when Jim spoke, "I can't get over it. Imagine . . . a Japanese begging."

"Oh, Jim please," I said irritably. This whole trip had been one big pain to me: pain in the arches, the pocketbook, and the butt. "Who can be responsible for all the Japanese the world over; why there must be thousands of them begging in the streets of Tokyo, or Hongkong, or wherever. Besides, what could you do? You didn't have the money." The ten-dollar bill in my secret compartment lay very still.

"I can't help thinking about him," Jim said and pulled the car over to the side. He looked at his nails. "I know him," he said simply.

I was really shook up. "Why didn't you say so?" I demanded.

"Well, I don't exactly know him, but I've seen him around in Tule Lake. He was known as Kondo Sensei (sensei means master or teacher—sort of professorial), at that time he was a Buddhist

priest. He was a powerful man in camp, feared and respected. He had a big following of fanatics; people called them his goon squad, thugs. They shaved their heads like the monks in Japan and they moved in bands and people were afraid of them. My blood was hot then and I envied that power but didn't have guts enough to join his band. Now look . . . begging . . . I can't believe it."

We turned back.

Jim found him at the Boulder Club still standing where we last saw him, leaning against the water fountain. We drove to a restaurant. I can't remember what we ate, but it was a two-fifty dinner, all three of them. While we waited for our order, he told how he hadn't eaten for three days, nor slept in that long except to doze on his feet. He said he hadn't bathed for two weeks, and I believed this. He explained how he was on his way to Denver and stopped off to change trains and had become so fascinated by this town and the abundance and glitter of its money that he was compelled to stop for a day to study the situation. That was a month ago, and all his possessions were now pawned and he had nothing, nothing, not even self-respect, and ah, how low must a man sink before his senses return. If God would permit him one last chance, to continue to Denver, he would never again falter in the face of temptation. All the while, he talked slowly with his eyes closed and seemed to catch small naps between phrases. During one of these lulls, Jim mentioned how he recognized him as Kondo Sensei of Tule Lake. He didn't even open his eyes. "Yes, yes," he said, "and they are waiting for me in Denver." I wondered if it was the parish that waited, but it didn't seem proper to ask right then.

"Sensei," Jim said, "your family, the children and you wife must be quite worried about you . . ."

"Yes, yes, I must hurry on to Denver," he said, and, "so you were in Tule—ah yes, I remember the Moritas, fine people. Your father, yes, he was very active, was he not? He worked with the block council . . .?"

"Well," Jim said, "you're probably thinking of some other Morita. My father worked in the Block 12 kitchen." He gave a small laugh.

"That's right, that's right. A fine man." The Sensei dozed off again.

Jim left us to see about cashing a check and when he returned, he passed the Sensei some money and offered to drive him to the Greyhound depot and buy his ticket for him. "I know your family is waiting for you," Jim said.

The Sensei's hands fluttered like they'd drop off. "No, no, no," he said, "I wouldn't think of putting you to such trouble. You've done enough for me. When I get back to Denver among my friends, I shall repay this money. You've rescued me as sure as you'd plucked me from deep water. I shall never forget you, Mr. Morita. The bus depot is not far from here and walking will help keep me awake." There was a crystal tear in the mucus around his eyes.

Jim slipped him some more money. He bowed deeply and as we turned the corner, I saw him raise his arm in a forlorn salute. Jim asked me not to tell anyone about this encounter with the Sensei; I guess he couldn't bear the thought of people laughing over it, although he got a lot of laughs talking about *my* friends.

We went to Vegas quite often after the first taste of being so physically close to so much money. During one of these junkets Jim came rushing over to me. I was pumping the arm of one of those slot-machines. If you stay at one machine long enough, it seems to get into a sort of frenzy and starts paying off and sometimes hits a jack-pot. So seven dollars on a nickel machine—it gave me something to do. "Let's get out of here," Jim whispered. "The Sensei's here."

I didn't want to leave; I'd already dribbled two dixie cups of nickels into this particular machine—they give you paper cups to use; two dollars worth of nickels doesn't quite fill one of them, and I didn't want to leave. "Oh Jim," I was exasperated, "the Sensei won't see us." And still pumping, I asked, "Where is he?" Jim jerked his head toward the black-jack table.

The Sensei stood behind the seated players and appeared to observe the game. He kept his hands in his pockets and they moved as though impatiently fingering coins. He looked much better than when we first saw him, tidier, but his eyes still had that weary glaze. They say if you stare long enough, a person will feel it; well, the Sensei turned. Then he walked away. I was right; he didn't see us.

That was a number of years ago. We don't go to Vegas much now. If we were married in '48, and Jim went to school for four years, this Sensei thing happened along '49 and '52. All that time I was painting shower curtains. Oh, it wasn't that bad: I did other things. Once I took a course in ceramics; Jim even bought me a potter's wheel and would have bought a kiln, but we couldn't cart it home. I studied anthropology too. You pay two-fifty for registration and you can take as many courses as you can bear. But it wasn't that good either; there were some bitter quarrels. And once Jim said when he got through school

he would no longer need me and he would shuck me like an old shoe. Machiavellian.

Jim got his B.A. and went to work for an importing firm—stock boy. After a while he was made foreman of the stock room and he had me quit my job. He said now I could paint anything I wanted. But you paint flamingoes and palm fronds and sailboats for four years and you hardly want to hold a paintbrush or remember the things you wanted to paint before. Something akin to spirit leaves you and you don't even remember that you once lay awake nights thinking and seeing color and form and space. Maybe that's part of growing up. Maybe that's what people mean when they say you've "matured": you've lost enthusiasm.

Jim got restless working in that stock room and after a couple of years, he opened a small record shop. He stayed three years with that and then sold out. It never seemed to work out with his taking all his buddies out to lunch so often. He said this wasn't true; he would have left the business sooner or later because he couldn't stand the noise. All those teenagers, you know, and never buying.

Right now, he's selling cars. It's been all right; he wears a suit and tie every day, and he usually has a pocket of money, and he's among men. That seems to be important; they go off for a drink now and then, and they play liar's poker. That's a game that two people on a desert island with a hatful of money must have invented. It has something to do with bluffing about the serial numbers on currency; and the good thing, you don't need a lot of equipment, just money. But it's got to be genuine government issue.

He seems to be happy at this job, and we always have a good model car to use. Evenings he's often busy with clients, or poker, or a staff meeting. And he loves cars. This business is seasonal, of course. Sometimes the money is plentiful, but there's a long dry spell that's pretty rough just before the new models come out. I try to look out for these bad days although there never seems to be enough surplus to tide us over in any but the most frugal kind of style. When things get too rough, we pack a bag and take a trip for a few days to Ventura where my brother Toshio now lives. He married a girl from there who didn't like Los Angeles.

I had just finished packing the old Gladstone for this trip to Ventura, and Jim was on the front room floor fastening the straps and we were laughing about the many times we'd packed

this bag for Vegas and never opened it. We'd lose the money before nightfall. The front door was ajar because we'd been to and from the car. It was a soft September evening and a pale grey light came through the door. We heard a shuffle of feet on the rubber link mat we have outside. We only saw a silhouette, and believe it or not, I mean it had been seven or eight years, I knew who it was.

"Oh, Sensei," Jim said bowing before he quite got to his feet. "My, my . . ."

"Ah, Mr. Morita," the Sensei bowed, "I have never forgotten you. I see you're planning a trip. I don't want to detain you."

Jim glanced at his watch, "We have a few minutes, sir, please sit down." I turned on the lights.

The Sensei looked as if he had walked all the way from Vegas. His shoes were cracked and dusty and his hat and coat were stained with sweat. It was the same or similar two-toned coat he wore when we first saw him. He looked as though the desert sun had beat upon him for days, and he'd lived on those paper bags tossed out by motorists.

"Make a sandwich for Sensei, Utako," Jim said. "And a cup of tea."

The Sensei put out his hand, the same fluttering hand he used at us eight years ago. "No, no," he said, "you were just leaving for someplace. I won't detain you."

"We have a few minutes, Sensei," Jim said, "my wife will make a sandwich for you."

I could hear them from the kitchen. The Sensei asked Jim how things were with him. "Not bad," Jim replied, "I'm in the car business now, and I have to see a client in half an hour, then we plan to drive to Ventura." The Sensei almost purred. He said that fate had been kind to a most deserving individual: the beautiful car, the lovely house, and weekend motor trips. Jim didn't bother to protest the car was on loan, the house in mortgage and the furniture payments were in arrears. There was a painful pause and then Jim asked, "And how is it with you, Sensei?"

It came pouring out like dammed water; the troubles he'd had—the heartaches. Five, six years of bad, bad luck. He'd gone into business with a partner: produce in Anaheim. Yes, partnerships are bad—two bosses, two different ideals—no good. The debt, the incredible debt this unscrupulous man incurred—the lying, the cheating; yes, bankrupt, had to dissolve the business. The anxieties, the tension! Yes, even considered suicide; very serious-

ly considered it. Oh yes, yes, a terrible sinful thought.

They both stopped talking when I walked in with the sandwich. I was glad because I could see that Jim was looking a little uncomfortable. I pushed the sandwich under the Sensei's long face.

"You should not have made it, Madam, you are too kind, far too kind for such a worthless fool," he swallowed the juices in his mouth. "I haven't eaten in over three days," he said, "and sleep," he passed a yearning look over our couch, "I haven't slept for as many nights. I have considered suicide."

I remembered that on our first encounter he said he had not eaten or slept for three days and nights, and I wondered how many other people had heard this story unchanged and unchanging throughout those miserable years of the Sensei's misfortune. I had the sympathy, but it was way deep inside of me, not ready to come out yet. "God forbid," I said.

Jim glanced at his watch, "Sensei," he said, "I don't like to rush you, but I have an appointment in a few minutes, may I drive you somewhere?"

"No, no," the Sensei protested, "you have done too much already. I can catch a trolley. I came to Los Angeles to call on a friend but he wasn't home. I'll try him again later. He isn't home now. I'll be all right; excuse me for imposing my foolish self upon you."

"Still," Jim persisted, "we must leave in a few minutes; I have this appointment, you see. It won't take long; you can wait in the car with my wife until I'm through, then I'll drive you over to Japanese town. We call it "Little Tokyo"; I'm sure you'll see someone you know there. Everyone turns out on Saturday nights."

The Sensei sat quite still chewing his sandwich. He nodded slowly and his eyes moved once more to our couch before he surrendered to Jim.

While we sat in the dark car waiting for Jim, I asked the Sensei how he came to find us in this big city. We had moved several times since we gave our address many years ago.

"Telephone book," he answered sullenly. I thought he might be mad at me for being so unfeeling earlier, and I felt real bad.

I tried again: "I hear Las Vegas had really grown since we used to go there. I understand they've extended the strip with many more luxury hotels, and the shows they put on are really fabulous. It must be quite a town now."

He turned to life again. "Ah yes, yes," he said, "it's quite a

town." He was still for a while, and as though he'd been shuffling through his files and had come to a final analysis, he said again, "Yes, it's quite a town."

Sometimes I could kick myself for talking when silence is required, but it's like when you're with a fat person and you want to avoid the word "fat" so everything comes out like elephant, or gargantuan, or monumental or something. So I kept right on going. "You know, if all the hopes and dreams of those many people who go to Las Vegas were converted to units of energy, imagine what could be accomplished." I don't know why I was talking that way, I didn't really want to moralize. But already I could see the Sensei sweating all week long at some miserable job to lose it all at the tables, and I knew the hopelessness he felt as the last of his money slipped away. All that energy.

"And all the tears that have stained the sleeves of men," the Sensei said. "Still I love Las Vegas." That made me feel good.

Jim came back and he asked, "I wasn't gone long, was I?" We both answered "no" together.

It was a short ride to Japanese town from there. We pointed out the landmarks: the Statler Hotel, the Water and Power building, City Hall, the new Police Station. The Sensei was polite in his attention. When we got to the fringe of Little Tokyo, he pressed Jim's shoulder and said, "Here, let me off here."

He got off the car and bowed carefully. "Thank you for your kindness," he said. He nearly stumbled on a piece of side-walk litter, and then walked on toward the lights of Little Tokyo. Ginza Club, Miyako Hotel, Mikawaya—green, red, yellow; alternating and blinking, the colors reflected themselves on the Sensei's soft shapeless hat. He stopped, waited for a light to change, then disappeared in the pedestrian traffic.

That was the last I saw of him.

