

The Returnee

Part 1

by Suzanne Kamata

THIS NECKTIE IS choking me. And these pants, they're what—polyester? Jamal and Rico would be laughing if they could see me now. But they won't. They're in Atlanta, on the other side of the world, probably asleep. No more jeans and sweatshirts for me, at least not on a school day. No more polo shirts and khakis. At Tokushima High School, here in The Boondocks, Japan, I've gotta wear a *jacket* to school.

OK, so I was born in Japan. I'm Japanese. I know the drill. When I was in elementary school I had to wear a uniform, like a soldier. But for the past three years, while my father was on overseas assignment for the robotics company that puts rice on our table, things have been pretty relaxed.

If I'd had my say, we would have stayed in the U.S. while I finished high school. Otosan could have gotten his posting extended; but my parents were worried about my grandfather, Ojiisan.

"Why can't he come live with us in America?" I asked. I thought of Jamal's grandma who moved from Alabama to live with his family, and Rico's grandfather who lives in a facility for the elderly where a four-star chef prepares all the meals and

the residents gather once a week for Wii bowling. "If Ojiisan doesn't know where he is or who he's with, what difference does it make?"

But my father snapped his newspaper and said, "Show some respect." And my mother said, "We can't make him leave his home. He wouldn't be able to visit your grandmother's grave." So here we are, back in our hometown.

Now it's April 6, the first day of school in Japan. I'm sitting at the kitchen table, before a bowl of steaming rice, miso soup, and fish grilled with the head and tail still on. I take up my chopsticks and tear a piece of fish away from the bones, bring it to my mouth. Even though I've loosened my tie, I can hardly choke it down. I guess I'm nervous about my new school and my new baseball team.

Baseball. Right. On my team in Atlanta, I was a star. I had the highest batting average of anyone—.412. And I caught every fly that came my way, even if I had to jump or dive or do a somersault. They called me Little Ichiro. My coach invited me to live with him so I could stay in America and play baseball. He had this idea that I could go pro in a few years. But my father said, "Absolutely not!"

OTOSAN AND
OJIISAN ARE
JAPANESE FOR
FATHER AND
GRANDFATHER



Illustrated by Ying-Fang Shen

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THE SCHOOL
YEAR STARTS IN
APRIL? THAT'S
DIFFERENT.



ICHIRO SUZUKI IS A JAPANESE
BASEBALL PLAYER WHO SET
MANY RECORDS PLAYING IN
THE UNITED STATES.





MIT STANDS FOR THE MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, A WELL-KNOWN UNIVERSITY IN BOSTON.

Otosan is not big on sports. He's a scientist, with a Ph.D. from MIT. I guess he was sort of weak and nerdy as a kid. At any rate, he has only been to a couple of my games, ever. He's all work, work, work. My mother is the one who shows up in the bleachers with her little pompoms and her video camera. She recorded almost all of my games in Atlanta and sent DVDs to Ojiisan, who was a star pitcher in high school and has always been a big baseball fan.

When it came time to think about high school, Otosan wanted me to apply to Tokushima High School, which had been built only a few years before. This school is supposed to be some kind of dream school, a steppingstone to the best universities in Japan. Some of the top teachers in the school system had been transferred to the new school in its first year. Only students with scores in the upper fifth percentile on the entrance exam were welcome to enroll.

"Does it have a baseball team?" I asked when I first heard about it.

"Of course," my father said.

My mother and I flew back to Japan for the entrance exams. I didn't do so well on the *kanji* part of the test, but I aced the English and scraped by on the math. I got in.

After breakfast, I push away from the table and clap my hands together. "*Gochiso sama deshita!*"

Okaasan nods to me from the sink. "Hurry up. You don't want to be late. But don't forget to say goodbye to Ojiisan." He lives in the house next to ours, in the same compound.

"Yeah, OK."

She hands me my lunchbox. I tuck it into my backpack with my books. Five minutes later, I'm out the door on the heels of my sister, Momoko.

I look over at the closed door of Ojiisan's house. I could knock, or just stick my head inside and yell out "goodbye," but I'd probably get sucked into some long monologue. So I just wave at his window and hop on my bicycle.

Following my lead, Momoko mounts her bike as well, and we veer off in opposite directions.



KANJI ARE JAPANESE CHARACTERS (THE WRITTEN KIND.)



GOCHISOSAMADESHITA, WHICH MEANS "IT WAS A FEAST," IS A POLITE WAY OF SAYING THANK YOU FOR A MEAL.



OKAASAN IS JAPANESE FOR MOTHER.



“Later,” she calls out in English.

“Yeah. See you.” I pedal down the narrow lane, past a greenhouse sheltering carrots, past sweet potato fields and rice paddies and women in aprons sweeping their front steps. Up ahead I can see other kids in uniform on bikes, my classmates, maybe.

AT SCHOOL I find my shoe cubby and change from sneakers to school shoes. And then I make my way to my classroom and take a seat in the back just before the first bell rings.

One boy sitting over by the window looks familiar. His eyebrows have been razored into thin lines. When I realize who he is, I feel a jolt. It’s Shintaro Nakamoto. He and I played on the same team in elementary school. His father has some sort of *yakuza* connection, so everyone was always a little afraid of him.

And there’s another kid I remember from before—Junji. He has a *bozu*, his head shaven like a Buddhist priest, so I know he’s on the baseball team. He recognizes me and nods slightly.



By the time the second bell rings, all forty seats are taken. The room is buzzing with chatter and laughter—that is, until the teacher walks in. Then everyone immediately goes silent.

“Good morning,” the man says in English. Except it sounds like “Good-o moaning-goo.” He looks to be in his forties, about my father’s age.

“I am Tanaka-sensei,” he says. He writes the ideograms for Tanaka on the blackboard. In English, his name translates as Mr. In-the-Rice-Paddy.

He tells us that he will be our homeroom teacher and our English teacher, and then he lays down the rules about cell phones (not allowed during class!) and tardiness (punishable by extra homework!).

Next, he takes roll, starting with the boys’ names.

“Asano Junji?”

“Hai!”

I look out the window, out at the cherry trees still in bloom. A few blossoms flutter down.

“Matsumoto Satoshi?”

I’m startled by the sound of my name. “Here!” I say, automatically.

The other students start to laugh. Mr. Tanaka frowns.

Great. Now everyone thinks I’m a show-off. So much for blending in. “I mean, hai!” I say, trying to correct myself.

But it’s too late. The little group of girls across the room cut their eyes at me and whisper to one another. They giggle until Mr. Tanaka tells us all to be quiet.

AT THE END of homeroom, Mr. Tanaka goes off to teach a class somewhere else. A woman with glasses comes in to teach us math, and then we sit through fifty minutes of social studies with yet another teacher. Third period, Mr. Tanaka comes back for English.

He takes a long look at me, then turns and writes a sentence in Japanese on the board. There are a couple of kanji I don’t know.

“OK, Mr. Returnee,” he says, looking back at me. “Stand up.”

Oh, great. He’s read my file. He knows that I’m just back from the States. I push back my chair and stand.

“Please translate this sentence into English.”

Everyone is staring at me. My heart starts pounding, and I can feel the blood rush to my face. I clear my throat.

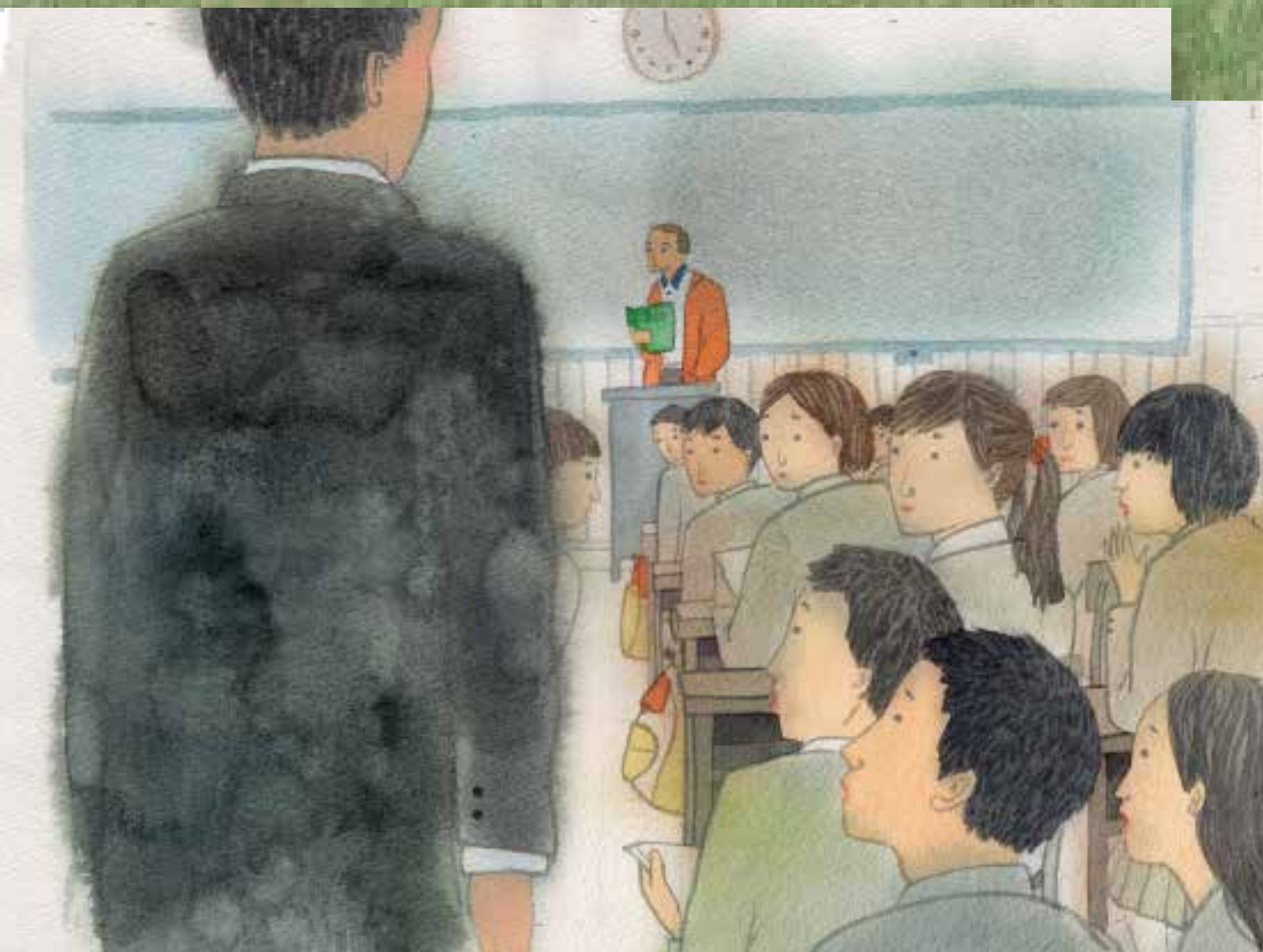
“Uh, ‘In the spring . . .’”

My mind flips through all those kanji workbooks that my parents made me do while I was in the States, but the pages are a blur. Did I actually learn this character? Or is it something that will come up later in the year, something that my classmates learned in extracurricular cram schools during spring vacation? Maybe it’s something really easy, and everyone is thinking that I couldn’t possibly have passed the entrance exam for this school, and that my father must have given the principal some kind of, uh, *gift*. To be honest, that’s what I’m thinking myself. I don’t belong here. I’m an idiot.

“I’m sorry, sir,” I say finally. The air suddenly feels heavy, like a pile of bricks on my shoulders. “I don’t know.”

HERE HAI
MEANS...
HERE!





There are a few titters. Mr. Tanaka nods, satisfied. He's clearly put me in my place.

"Sit down," he orders.

I crumple into my seat.

"Can anyone else translate this sentence?"

Immediately, seven hands shoot up. (But not Shintaro's or Junji's, I notice.)

Luckily, he doesn't call on me for the rest of the period. I can see what I'm in for, but I tell myself it could be worse. Back in the day, when Japan was closed to the rest of the world, the punishment for going abroad was death. Better

to kill the returnee than risk tainting Japanese society with outside ideas.

If I keep my mouth shut, he might just leave me alone.

AFTER SCHOOL, I pedal into the yard and park my bicycle. And then I look over at Ojiisan's door. I feel guilty about not saying goodbye this morning. I go over and ring his doorbell.

It takes a minute, but then I hear the sound of footsteps and the clicking of the locks. The

FROM 1639 TO 1853, JAPANESE
WERE FORBIDDEN TO TRAVEL ABROAD ...
TO INSULATE THE COUNTRY FROM
FOREIGN INFLUENCE.



O-KAERINASAI
MEANS WELCOME



door slides open, and there's my rapidly shriveling grandfather. He used to be taller and straight. The top of his head is bald, but he's got a fringe of white hair around his shiny scalp, making him look like a *kappa*—the water sprite that shows up in children's stories.

"*O-kaerinasai*," Ojiisan says, welcoming me home.

I hear a barking sound. A fluffy white seal scoots over the threshold.

"There, there, Nana-chan," Ojiisan says. He reaches down and pets the seal. "Give her a little pat. She likes that."

I hesitate for a moment, then brush my hand over its fur. It's not a real seal, of course. It's a robot. My father bought it to keep Ojiisan company while we were in Atlanta.

"Come on in, Masahiro," he says. "Have a drink."

Masahiro is my father's name. I'm not sure if I should set him straight, or play along. He's in a good mood right now, and I don't want to spoil it. Sometimes he gets all confused and starts to cry.

"OK, thanks," I say. I take off my shoes and step up into the house.

The TV is blaring in the other room. I can tell by the sounds—the ping of aluminum, the clapping and shouting—that he's

watching a baseball game. I follow Ojiisan into the living/dining area and settle on a cushion at the low table in the center of the room. Behind me, Ojiisan takes a pitcher of barley tea out of the refrigerator and pours it into a couple of glasses.

On the TV screen, a blonde head looms into view, and then the camera pans back and I see my friend Jamal, stepping up to the plate. Ojiisan's been watching one of the DVDs that my mom sent back from Atlanta.

As soon as Jamal whacks at the ball, sending it just over the shortstop's head, I remember exactly what game this is. In the ninth inning, I hit a home run with the bases loaded, and we came from behind to win the league championship. After the last out, the Dragons heaved me onto their shoulders and carried me around the field. And then we all went out to eat pizza and celebrate.

It was one of the happiest days of my life. "That Japanese boy . . .," Ojiisan says, nodding toward the screen. "You could learn something from him, Masahiro."

"Yeah, maybe," I say. "Thanks for the tea, Ojiisan." I take my glass to the sink, give Nana another pat on the head, and then go home to change my clothes.



to be continued