

Mom and Silver Rice: Boyhood Reminiscences of the End of the War and Occupied Nagasaki

Hashimoto Yutaka, translated by Brendon Hanna

Looking back over the first half of my life, I find that the period when I was an elementary school student has left an amazingly deep impression. Although Japan was in the midst of turmoil after losing the war, there was still an abundance of fun and interesting things in the world of children. The following short essays present a patchwork of memories from that time penned in the present tense like a diary.

As a schoolboy, I wasn't really able to appreciate the seriousness of the food shortage after the war, but since becoming a parent myself I have begun to see what a harrowing time it must have been. It grieves me too to think of all the young men drafted into the war never to return, including those who had been students only weeks and months before they lost their lives on the battlefield. I could well have been one of them had I been a little older.

Images of my mother and father come to mind whenever I remember that time. My father is still alive and well, having reached the ripe old age of 100, but my mother passed away quite some time ago. I would like to dedicate this collection to her in appreciation of all her loving attention during my upbringing.

Searchlights

The American planes are bombing more often these days. First a reconnaissance plane comes, then the bombers follow dropping bombs. Even so, there are five or six at a time at the most—not dozens of planes coming in formation as in other places. There is an air base at Omura about 12 miles from Nagasaki. Dad says that a big attack on the air base and the weapons factories in Nagasaki could come any day now.

Our house is right next to a Mitsubishi weapons factory. Dad has been saying that pretty soon the children should be sent to the countryside where it's safer.

I just started first grade at Inasa Elementary School and I don't want to change to another school. I would miss nice Ms. Kanzaki and all my friends. "Who wants to go off to the country anyway?," I think to myself.

Lately the American planes have started to come at night as well as during the day. It's not really scary—I like to stare up at them and watch. The searchlights follow the enemy planes from several places all at once. The bright bands of light move about as they reach out into the darkness looking for planes. Searchlights have been installed in several places around Nagasaki, and when there are night attacks lots of bands of light wave around the night sky trying to catch the planes. They don't usually catch any.

But once in a while several of the bands of light manage to focus on a plane and it sparkles beautifully in the dark sky. Then the anti-aircraft guns placed on the mountains around the city attack, all trying to hit the plane at once. We've heard anti-aircraft fire many nights, but the guns never seem to hit the planes. After a while the planes fly far away, and the sound of gunfire stops, and the searchlights go out.

Air Attacks

When we go to school we all have to take our padded air-raid hoods. If bombs start dropping we're supposed to quickly put on our hoods and lie on the ground. The teacher drills us almost every day, and we practice getting our hoods on and lying on the ground. When enemy planes show up, first the warning siren sounds, and if they really get close it changes to an air-raid siren. You can tell the difference by the kind of sound.

Lately, there have been a lot enemy planes coming to attack, so we often have to hurry into the air-raid shelter. Mom and the other ladies in the neighborhood are practicing fire fighting bucket relays to get ready in case there are fires from the attacks. Every house has a bamboo spear ready in the doorway. I hear that the spears will be used to stab American soldiers if they try to invade.

But what scares me more than enemy planes or anything else are our own military policemen. They sit high on their horses and ride very importantly around the neighborhood. If I don't do what Mom says, she threatens me by saying, "I'll tell the military police." Just the thought of them is enough to make me behave.

The enemy planes came again yesterday. There were more of them than usual, so Mom told me and Sis to go to the neighborhood air-raid shelter. We have our own little air-raid shelter at home, but it's only a hole that we dug, with a steel plate for a roof. If a bomb fell nearby, we would all be done for. The neighborhood shelter is dug deep into the hillside and it bends around in the middle, so more than a hundred people can get in. Sis and I waited there with a bunch of other people. The air-raid siren sounded, and we could hear the loud droning of the planes and the shrieking of bombs coming down. Suddenly we heard a huge "Boom!" and a wind like a hurricane swept through the shelter. Sis held on to my air-raid hood so it wouldn't get blown off my head. Later she said that she had been afraid that would be the end of us!

We went to see where the bomb had fallen. It was only about a hundred yards from the shelter, and it blew a 30 foot gap in the Inasa Bridge right where it meets the land. One of the men from the neighborhood showed us a piece of shrapnel from the bomb. It was as sharp as a razor blade; it would have killed anyone that it happened to hit. Funny, though... I didn't feel the least bit scared.

The Evacuation

Now we've been sent to Miho Village in Oita Prefecture. It's the place where Dad was born, so we have a lot of relatives here. The air attacks are getting bad in Nagasaki, so Mom and Sis and I were evacuated here where it's safer. Even though it's not as bad as it is in Nagasaki, plenty of American planes are coming here too. The place where we're staying is my uncle's house. He's my father's younger brother. There are rice fields and fruit orchards at Uncle's house, and it seems like they're doing all right for farmers.

I'm still small, so I can't help much, but I help as much as I can without getting in the way. I stood on a stool and put bags on the little bunches of grapes, but you have to look up all the time and it makes your neck hurt. It's hard to do if you're not used to it. It's the same with the apple-pears and peaches. Mom helps, too, along with the country ladies.

Mom was crying today. Someone told her that us evacuees should work harder, but I think she's working as hard as she can... which is pretty hard. She said maybe we should go back to Nagasaki.

I think that's a great idea! Even though I'm small, I feel bad about going to school when everyone is working, so I don't take as much to eat as I would like to. After all, we're like guests here. Plus, they tease me a lot at school, so I hate going. Mom wrote Dad a letter and told him that everyone teases us here and we want to leave. He said in that case he would have to let us come back.

Today we hauled all the luggage we're sending back to Nagasaki to the station. Mom pulled the big cart and I pushed from behind. I was so happy I was almost dancing. When we go back, we're going to stay at our family's summer cottage in Tobo just outside of Nagasaki. I can't wait! I just hope I'm not dreaming!

The Air Battle

There is a small air base not far from Miho Village, and the American planes come to attack it. The Japanese fighter planes go up to meet them, and they have air battles. When you come to think of it, we were evacuated because Nagasaki was dangerous, but Miho Village isn't exactly what you would call safe! There were Japanese and American planes fighting in the air right over our heads just a week ago. We hid under the house with just our heads sticking out because we were scared. We couldn't see too well, but there were several little Japanese planes flying around and around the bigger American planes. After a while there was a loud "Bang!" We heard later that a Japanese fighter smashed into an American plane on purpose and they both crashed. A big group of villagers ran over to the mountains where they had fallen. The Japanese pilot died but the American pilot was only injured. They said he was saved by his parachute.

Three days later our teacher took the whole class over to the place where the Japanese plane crashed. There were smashed up pieces of the plane strewn all over the place. We each left bunches of flowers in memory of the brave pilot. The American plane is somewhere deeper in the mountains. When we got back to school, the teacher talked about the Japanese pilot who smashed into the American plane. To us elementary school students, he was a real hero. I want to be a fighter pilot someday and teach those Americans a lesson.

Pencils and Erasers

Mom bought me a new pencil. The one I use now has gotten short, but there is about an inch and a half left, so I can still use it for a while. When pencils get down to about an inch, we attach a bamboo grip to make them easier to hold. Sis is really good at using pencils. She can use them until they're less than half an inch long! She has a big collection of tiny pencil stubs that she's very proud of.

Erasers are hard to come by. We cut up old tires into little squares and use them instead. They sort of work, but they're harder than erasers and they tear the paper sometimes. Another thing to use in place of an eraser is the inside of a squid shell. The shell of a squid is shaped like a boat and the outside is tough, but the inside is like a pure white sponge. You can get to it by cutting away the outside with a small knife. It's not hard like the squares from old tires. In fact, it's a little too soft so it breaks easily. Squid erasers leave smudges on the paper, so they're not very popular. Like I said, real erasers are hard to come by.

Pine Sap

Today, the whole class went out to collect pine sap. Our teacher explained that pine sap is being

used to make fuel for fighter planes. Sometimes American B-29 bombers come and the air-raid siren sounds. I wonder if B-29s fly on pine sap too.

To collect pine sap, first you need to make a bamboo cup in a shape that is easy to hook onto the pine tree. Then, you scar the tree with a groove about an inch wide running up and down about a yard or so. After that, you cut diagonal slashes leading down to the main scar and attach the bamboo cup at the bottom. In two or three days the cup will be full of sticky sap.

We're going to present all the sap we collect to the government. I don't know where they are going to take it, but collecting pine sap is a lot of fun.

The Atomic Bomb

Our house was blown away by the atomic bomb. We were saved because we were staying in Tobo, outside the city of Nagasaki. If we hadn't, we probably would have been killed because our house was not far from the hypocenter in Urakami. Tobo is about ten miles from the hypocenter, so when the bomb dropped we felt a huge "Thud!" like a big earthquake and a lot of our windows broke.

After that, lots of ash came floating down and our yard was covered in black soot. There was a thick haze in the sky, and the sun became like a full moon, only bright red. The sun looked thin and crisp, as if we were looking at an eclipse through frosted glass.

The End of the War

Today seems like a very important day for Japan. From yesterday, Dad and Mom and all the other grownups have been acting differently. They said that there would be some important news broadcast over the radio, and that the Emperor himself would speak. The Emperor is God, and he has never spoken over the radio before.

The principal gives his morning speech every morning at school, but only after we make the Profound Reverent Bow in the direction of the Imperial Residence where the Emperor lives. Today, the Emperor is actually going to speak to us!

At our house, the radio is brought into the front hall, and everyone reverently sits waiting for the broadcast to begin. The radio is a square wooden box with a round speaker hole in the front covered in thin cloth like mosquito netting. Inside you can see several long thin vacuum tubes connected with a bunch of wires running all over. It's not a very good radio, and the sound is fuzzy and difficult to hear.

The ladies from the neighborhood don't usually listen to the radio much, but today even they gathered at our house and are standing around the radio with everyone else in a tight circle. Then, with many pauses in between, we hear the words of the Emperor. I don't understand him very well, but it sounds like the war is over. Japan lost! All the grownups just keep standing around not saying anything after the broadcast is finished.

Nobody seems to be in a good mood, so I go out to hills behind our house to catch cicadas.

The American Soldiers

As soon as Japan lost the war, lots of American Soldiers started showing up around Tobo. At first Dad and Mom and all the other grownups were very worried that the American soldiers would do

all kinds of bad things, but they are all nice people. Sometimes they give me chewing gum. The first time I got some I didn't know that it was just for chewing, so I ate it by mistake.

Sometimes the American soldiers play catch-ball with us kids. And I learned some English! Now I can say “sankyu,” “guddo moningu,” and “pureez.”

Sometimes the younger American soldiers get a group of us kids together and let us have a contest picking up chewing gum that they throw on the ground. At first I was ashamed and I didn't want to play, but the taste of the chewing gum made me stop worrying about it. Now I always get a lot of gum whenever we have a contest. The American soldiers look like they're having fun, and we have a lot of fun too, so I guess it's all right.

Two or three days ago I got a whole bunch of chewing gum from an important looking soldier. When I went home and told Mom, she was happy too. One time Mom gave me some fried fish paste loaf and told me to give it to the soldiers to say thank-you for all the chewing gum I keep getting. I was happy to be able to give something back, so I wrapped it in some newspaper and went out to find them. The important looking soldier and a younger soldier were sitting on a rock and talking, so I went up to them and said “sankyu!” and gave them the little parcel. I thought they would be happy, but they just gave me a kind of suspicious look. Without even opening it, one of them put the gift under his arm and they just kept on talking. It made me a little sad. I didn't tell Mom about it when I went home.

The American Warships

About a dozen American warships have been anchored in Tobo Bay near our neighborhood for the last several days. There are all kinds of ships—huge big ones and little ones too. The sailors drive back and forth between the ships and the beach in strange car-boat things. Loud music comes from the biggest ship. It's more than a mile away, but we can still hear it loud and clear. It must be really loud to the sailors on the ship. At night the ships are all lit up and beautiful. I'd never seen different colored light bulbs before; they're very impressive.

Those ships are really something! They're kind of scary, too. I wanted to go over in a rowboat and see them up close, but I got too scared and turned back halfway. We heard that the important people in the village were invited aboard and treated to a meal with more food than they had ever seen before. It must be nice to be an important person.

Tonight there are funny noises coming from the ships, just like every night. “Rumble, rumble, toot, toot!” It's a little noisy.

After the Atomic Bombing

Our house used to be in Urakami. It was less than two miles from the hypocenter of the atomic bomb explosion, and it seemed like almost all of the people in the neighborhood died. Our house burned up too, of course. Today, me and Sis went with Dad to Urakami and back. It's been more than a week since the bomb, but the whole place is just a burnt field.

Dad and Sis and I pulled the cart to the place where our house used to be. The air-raid shelter was kind of caved in, but not completely, and there were some survivors living in it. Dad's big strong-box was blackened from the fire and rolled over on its side.

We heard that so many people died that they had to have a mass cremation in a field not far away. They said they had to pile up firewood and stack the dead bodies on top and burn them. There were too many bodies to do anything else.

But that's not why we came today. Dad already came right after the bomb to see what happened, so he knows all about it. Today we came to dig out the buried rice. Dad is the kind of person who likes to be ready for an emergency, so he had buried some big glass bottles full of rice deep underground just in case something happened. He looked like he was worried about whether they would be all right.

We cleared away the rubble from the place where the jars were supposed to be and started digging carefully. Since the jars were glass, we had to be very careful not to break them, assuming they were still OK. Carefully, very carefully, we dug. Finally, we uncovered the mouth of a jar. I was surprised—that jar seemed as big as a barrel! The mouth of the jar was only about four inches across, but it was almost two feet wide and about two feet high like a big earthen pot. We dug it out, and Dad opened it up to check the rice inside. "It's OK," he said. Sis and I were so glad we let out a shout of joy! Just think of it... we would have rice to eat when we got back!

All of us were hungry. We had been getting by on a kind of soup made from potato vines, pumpkin stems and things like that.

Dad says he buried five of these big jars full of rice. Today we dug out only two and put them on the cart to take back with us. It's almost eight miles to our house at Tobo, so it was late at night by the time we arrived. Mom was very happy to see us and the rice. It had taken us more than half a day to make it back, so we were exhausted.

The area along the road from Urakami to Nagasaki Station was completely different from before, when I was going to Inasa Elementary School. Today we passed along the road that I always took to school and back, but nothing was left of the houses or trees or stone fences that used to be there. They had all been completely blown away without a trace. It was scary to see.

If we had been staying at our house in Urakami, I guess me and Sis and Mom would have died. It's a good thing we went to Tobo.

The Black Market

Today Mom took me to the black market in Nagasaki. There were lots of people all jostling each other. Near the entrance to the Maruyama district is a bridge called Shianbashi, where there were shops under the tents selling all kinds of things. There were manju cakes and rice balls and something like bread to eat. There were all kinds of old clothes hung up too. Among the crowd were a lot of people wearing old military uniforms.

Here and there were groups of two or three people who had lost arms or legs in the war and were wearing white clothes and sitting together. One would play the accordion and they would sing military songs from the war days so people would give them money. They were a sad sight, and I felt sorry for them. Mom gave me some change and pointed to one of the little groups and said, "Go put it in their box," but I hung back, so Mom walked right up to them and dropped the change into their box and said, "Keep up the good work."

Then there were the religious dancers. They were pretty interesting. About twenty of them were

standing in a circle, all of them waving both hands in the air and dancing. They seemed like they had completely forgotten themselves. They would wave and dance for about twenty minutes, take a break, and then start all over again. About 100 people were standing in a circle around them and watching. They were like a bunch of sleepwalkers all sleepwalking together.

But what was really amazing was the man selling ointment that he said was taken from toads. He had a poisonous snake from the southern islands bite him on his arm—you could tell that it really bit him because blood came out. Then he took some water in his mouth and spit it on the wound and wiped it off with a towel. After that, he put some of the ointment on and the blood stopped right away. It was something. Then he cut his arm in a different place with a dagger. It looked like he must cut the same place over and over because that part of his arm was black and swollen. But when he did like he did with the snake bite and put the ointment on, the bleeding stopped just like that. While proving how well the ointment worked, he was trying to sell it to the people who stopped to look. He sold a bunch of it too.

There were also people selling fish, people selling vegetables—there were so many people! I wonder where on earth all those people came from. I got a little tired today.

The Charcoal Bus

All of us kids think cars and trucks are pretty neat. The jeeps that the American soldiers ride around in are the coolest looking. Once, I even got to ride in one. When I grow up I'm definitely going to buy a jeep. Jeeps are fast and good looking.

Then there's the charcoal bus. Instead of gasoline or diesel it burns charcoal, and it's about the slowest thing on the road. The charcoal bus is about as different from a jeep as a turtle is from a rabbit.

The driver of the charcoal bus comes to the bus parking space in Tobo Village early every morning to get it ready to go. There's a big charcoal burner hanging off the back of the bus, so it even looks slow. First, the driver puts little charcoal sticks about eight inches long inside the charcoal burner along with some starter newspaper that he lights. Then he uses "crank" bellows to blow air on the charcoal and get it burning. The fire takes nearly an hour to really get going, and then he can start out on his bus route. I don't know exactly how the burning charcoal makes the bus run, but sometimes the driver lets us kids help him crank the bellows. It's hard to turn, but I'm happy to be allowed to help, so I crank until my hands are ready to fall off.

Even when the bus finally does get going, it's so slow that you can catch up with it if you run. Every once and a while we ride on it to Nagasaki. It puffs and wheezes up hills like an old man with asthma. It's really kind of pitiful.

Silver Rice

Today Mom has asked me to do a job that I don't mind at all. I'm taking the husks off rice. The rice goes in a two quart bottle, and you use a stick to move up and down, up and down, over and over again to hull the rice. You hold the bottle between your knees so it won't fall over, and you have to work and work until the brown rice turns white. It's actually a pretty boring job, so I don't ordinarily like to do it, but today is a special case. To celebrate my birthday, Mom is going to make "silver rice"—just pure white rice without a single grain of barley mixed in! I've never had white

rice with no barley before. I'm looking forward to it so much that the job doesn't seem dull at all!

As you move the stick up and down, the brown rice husks come off little by little. When enough husks collect at the bottom of the bottle, you dump it out onto some newspaper and separate them from the rice. Then you put the rice back in and keep hulling. The mouth of the bottle is pretty small, so it's kind of a pain to get it all back in again. But today I'm doing it carefully because I want to be sure that the rice is pure white and just right.

The rice I'm going to eat today was paid for with one of Mom's kimono dresses. Our house in Nagasaki was burnt to a cinder by the atomic bomb, but Dad had taken the best furniture and kimonos with us when we evacuated. We sell a few of them from time to time, and Mom says the country ladies pay pretty good prices for them. One time I visited a shop that sells old clothing for people who want to sell it, and they still had one of Mom's kimonos on display. They must have sold it yesterday. I know because Mom was smiling cheerfully and we have this rice now.

Mom set out the pure white rice, some fish stew, and some cooked squash and said, "Happy birthday! Go ahead and eat as much as you like." We always have brown rice, and more than half of it is really barley mixed in, so the mountain of white rice in front of me was almost too bright to look at. As I gently breathed in, the delicious smell of the rice was so good I can't even describe it. I picked up the bowl and took a huge bite. I swallowed without chewing much and it slid nicely down my throat and into my stomach.

As I ate, I looked out over the yard and saw great big clouds floating in the sky over Makijima Island. The island looked like a rice bowl with fluffy white clouds of rice on top. "The Thunder God must be having silver rice, too," I thought.

Hookers

Me and my friends all like the American soldiers. They give us chewing gum and sometimes they play with us. They look cool, too, riding around in their jeeps. But there are some Japanese girls that we just can't stand the sight of! I don't see why they have to go around in public hanging all over the American soldiers. They use bright red lipstick, and some of them even dye their hair blond!

Sometimes they throw chewing gum at us and imitate the American soldiers, saying things like, "Hey come on boy, chewin gum ba yaro ka?" They try to use English, but they get it mixed up with Japanese, so it sounds kind of stupid. I got so mad the other day that I grabbed a tomato and threw it at one of them and shouted, "You stupid b——!"

People call them hookers. I think hookers are the worst!

Baseball

Me and my friends love to play baseball. Dai-chan says he's gonna be a baseball star like Kawakami or Oshita when he grows up. We play baseball on a big sand dune with three bases. We make our own balls by taking a hard core and wrapping cloth around it. Then we tie it up with string, put another layer of old cloth on, and tie it up with some more string. Bats are easier...the right kind of tree branch will do fine.

Mom made me a glove out of some thick canvas cloth. It's kind of stiff, so it's hard to catch balls

with, but it's better than nothing when you're the catcher. Dad said he would buy me a real glove someday. Dad says real gloves are made out of leather. Dai-chan doesn't believe me. He says he doesn't think there's any such thing as a leather baseball glove. But Dad says there is, and I don't think Dad would lie.

Dad and Mom

Mom is really strict, and she's always telling me how to act and what to do. I guess I can't complain, though, because she works herself from morning to night. She never takes a break from the time she gets up to the time she goes to bed. Sometimes she goes out shopping, but she always comes back with a whole mountain of stuff that she's carried all by herself. She works hard in the fields too. When I see her working like that, I figure she pretty much has a right to tell me what to do.

Even if she doesn't buy me much else, one of Mom's really good points is that she always buys me books. If I tell her I want a certain book, she nearly always buys it for me without putting up a fuss. I might as well just forget about asking for toys, though. She's strict, but she's really nice too. Whenever we happen to get some kind of special treat or snack, Mom always lets Sis and me have her's too.

Mom likes sake, even though she doesn't drink much. We make our own moonshine sake called doburoku right here at home, and sometimes I help. First you cook some rice and spread it out flat on a reed mat. Then you take some malted rice that has some fluffy yeast stuff growing on it and sprinkle it evenly on top. After that, you cool it for a while, add some water, and put the whole mixture in a big earthen jar. It ferments in about ten days, and you get a nice sweet drink called amazake. If you leave it for a month and then strain it through a rough cloth, you get doburoku moonshine. You can take the sake lees left over in the cloth and use them to flavor miso soup or put them in rice bran paste for pickling vegetables. The last thing to do is to put the moonshine in big half-gallon bottles. Moonshine with a little bit of sugar is sweet and delicious, but Mom never lets me drink very much of it.

Dad is super strict. When I was younger, sometimes I would forget to say "good morning" properly after I got up, and he would get really mad. He growls at me if I drop even a little bit of food from my chopsticks while we're eating, so now I always sit straight and mind my manners at the table.

Dad can do lots of different jobs. Of course, right now is a little difficult because Japan lost the war and everybody is having a hard time. Before the war, Dad was doing all kinds of important things on the continent in China. He ran a bunch of companies in Nanjing—a metal trading company, a big castella cake bakery, a famous soba noodle restaurant, a tea shop, a rice wholesaler, and some other ones too. The castella bakery was called Unzen-do, and they made all kinds of other sweets besides castella cakes. Sometimes they would get huge orders from the old Imperial Army for special cakes made out of rice and beans, tens of thousands at a time. Dad used to ship hundreds of big barrels of dried bonito fish flakes from Japan to China to use at the soba restaurant. The fish flakes were the secret to making delicious broth for the soba noodles, and Dad's restaurant was famous all over Nanjing.

All Dad's companies were going great, but he lost everything he had in China when Japan lost the war. Plus, Nagasaki was completely wiped out by the atomic bomb, so Japan's losing the war pretty much meant bankruptcy for Dad. Then again, most people lost just about everything, so I guess

there's no reason to think Dad should have done any better than anybody else.

Anyway, now Dad's working hard trying to start all over again. Sometimes I see him early on Sunday mornings out on the beach at Tobo walking this way and that, like he's thinking about something real hard. I got kind of worried the first time I saw him like that and I told Mom I was going to go see what was wrong. But she told me to just leave him alone, that he was thinking about things.

I'm the youngest one in my family. My oldest sister is fifteen years older than me. She already got married and moved to Osaka, and she hardly ever comes back here. My other sister is five years older than me, and I just call her Sis. She loves to study. She goes to a famous school called Kwassui and she always gets good grades.

As far back as I can remember, Dad has always told me stories. He tells me things like how Momotaro went to Devil's Island to get rid of the devil who lived there, or about how famous people like Thomas Edison succeeded in the world. Dad's always been real busy, so I don't remember ever going on a trip together. But sometimes he flies kites or plays baseball with me. Those times are the best!

Dad's really strong, and he has belts in kendo and judo. He's kind of scary sometimes, but he always does what he says he will and you can count on him in a pinch. Mom is bossy, but she's really nice at heart. Anyway, I'm Really glad Dad is my father and Mom is my mother. Of all the people in the world, I think Dad and Mom are the greatest.

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