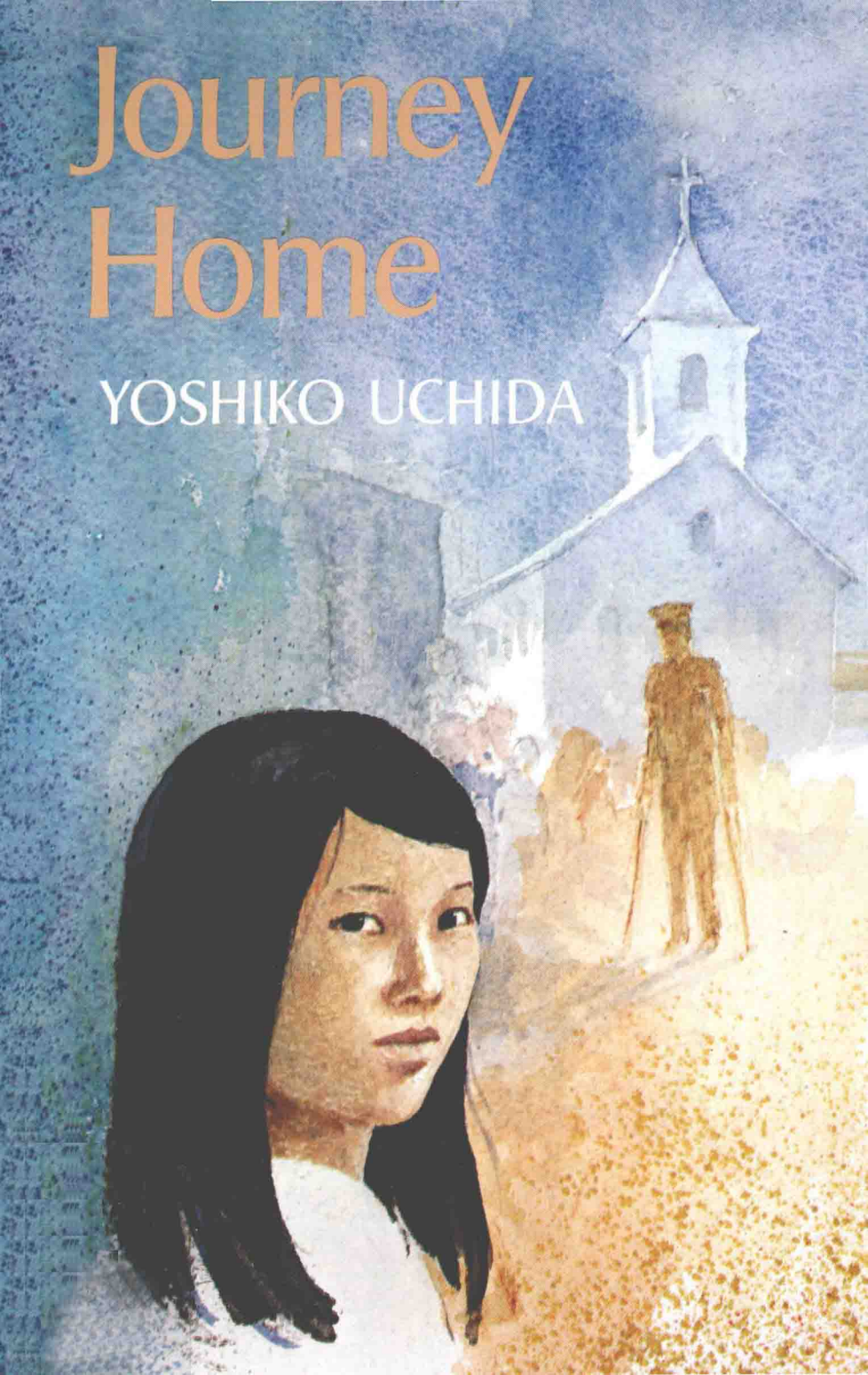


Journey Home

YOSHIKO UCHIDA



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Journey Home

Journey Home

CHAPTER

1



I CAN'T SEE, YUKI THOUGHT FRANTICALLY. I CAN'T BREATHE.

The screaming desert wind flung its white powdery sand in her face, stifling her and wrapping her up in a smothering cocoon of sand so fine it was like dust. It blinded her and choked her and made her gag as she opened her mouth to cry out.

The black tar-papered barracks on either side of the road had vanished behind the swirling dust, and Yuki was all alone in an eerie, unreal world where nothing existed except the shrieking wind and the great choking clouds of dust. Yuki stumbled on, doubled over, pushing hard against the wind, gasping as she felt the sting of sand and pebbles against her legs.

Suppose she never got back to her barrack? Sup-

pose the wind simply picked her up and flung her out beyond the barbed wire fence into the desert? Suppose no one ever found her dried, wind-blown body out there in the sagebrush?

A cry of terror swelled up inside her. "Mama! Papa! Help me!"

The sound of her own scream woke her up. Yuki's heart was pounding. Her damp fists were clenched tight. Her face was wet with tears.

For several minutes she couldn't believe it was only a nightmare. It had all seemed so real, she could almost taste the flat, powdery dust in her mouth. She had been back in the Utah desert, living with Mama and Papa and her big brother, Ken, in Topaz, one of the World War II concentration camps where all the Japanese of the West Coast had been sent by the government.

Yuki shuddered and blinked hard, trying to see where she really was. Was she back in the small crowded barrack room where their four army cots were separated by army blankets strung on ropes? Would she have to wake Mama and ask her to bring the flashlight and go out to the latrine with her because she was too scared to go alone? Would she have to rush from toilet to toilet to find one that wasn't filled with filth because the water had stopped running?

Yuki gathered herself up into a small ball and hugged her knees. Gradually, slowly, she left the strange world of dreams and nightmares and knew she was safe in her room in the apartment in Salt Lake City, which the minister of the Japanese church had found for them. And he'd told them not to worry be-

cause the landlady, Mrs. Henley, didn't mind their being Japanese.

For a few moments Yuki remembered again the awful fear that had consumed her those last weeks in Topaz when Papa had been threatened by the small gang of agitators. They had turned their anger at being in camp against anyone who, like Papa, worked with the administration to keep the camp running smoothly. And finally, one night, they had thrown a stink bomb into their barrack room. After that both Mama and Papa knew it was no longer safe to remain in camp, even though they wanted to stay and do whatever they could to help their people.

"Your family has already spent almost a year in camp," the director had said to Papa. "I think it's time now that you left."

He had secured special clearance for them to leave, and they had gone to Salt Lake City as soon as possible. Now they were safe outside the camp, and there was no more barbed wire fence to keep them from going anywhere they wanted to go.

Yuki took a deep breath and wiped her nose with the corner of the sheet. Mama wouldn't like her doing that, but she was still too shaky to get out of bed. She stared into the darkness until she could make out the familiar things in her room: the big, carved-oak chest of drawers that Mrs. Henley's great-grandfather had built, the small, chintz-covered armchair that was Yuki's favorite chair in the whole apartment, and the large gold frame on the wall with the watercolor scene of sailboats in a sunny harbor.

Yes, everything was all there. It was all right. She

was safe, and she needn't ever worry again about being blown into the desert to turn into a heap of sun-bleached bones.

But her best friend, Emi Kurihara, wasn't safe, Yuki reminded herself. Emi and her grandma had been their neighbors in camp, and they were still out there in that awful desert with its duststorms and scorpions and the guard towers and the fence.

"You'd just better hurry up and come on out," Yuki said now to Emi.

Yuki often carried on conversations with people who were hundreds of miles away, because she felt if she just concentrated hard enough the message from her brain would somehow reach theirs, no matter where they were. It was most convenient, because she could talk to Emi in Topaz, or to her brother fighting in Italy with the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, or even to her old friend Mrs. Jamieson back home in Berkeley, California. And she always had the feeling that somehow each of them got her messages.

"Don't worry," she continued to Emi. "Papa will help you and your grandma get out of camp. He said he would."

If he promised, Yuki knew he'd try. With that reassuring thought, she suddenly sat up in bed. She was famished, and she began to think about juicy hamburgers and french fries and chocolate milk shakes.

Her stomach gurgled noisily as she pulled on her bathrobe and slid into her slippers. She walked carefully toward the kitchen, giant-stepping over the boards that squeaked so she wouldn't awaken Mrs. Henley or her invalid husband or their two Siamese cats down-

stairs. Mrs. Henley had already warned Yuki that she was a light sleeper and could hear every night sound in the entire house.

The kitchen still smelled faintly of chicken and soy sauce, and Yuki wished she hadn't eaten the last piece at supper so there would have been some left for her now. She stared into the cold whiteness of the refrigerator and contemplated the brown paper bag with her lunch for tomorrow.

"Should I?" she asked herself.

"I should," she answered. What was wrong with putting half the baloney sandwich in her stomach right now when she was starving, instead of leaving it for tomorrow.

She sat down at the table and quickly undid the wax paper wrapping, surprised at all the noise it made in the silent kitchen.

She had just taken a bite when she heard the creak of the floor in the hallway. Yuki groaned softly. Now Mrs. Henley would probably pop out of bed and stay up the rest of the night with her cats. Then tomorrow she'd tell Yuki she'd lost an entire night's sleep because of the night sounds.

Yuki turned and saw that it was Papa. The hair over his bald spot was rumpled, and he squinted sleepily without his glasses.

"Well, Yuki," he said with a slow smile. "Since when do you eat your lunch at three o'clock in the morning?"

Yuki swallowed and grinned sheepishly. "I had the most horrible nightmare," she explained.

"Were you back in Topaz?"

Yuki nodded. "In the most awful dust storm! I was lost, and I couldn't breathe, and I thought I'd never see you or Mama again."

She shuddered as the despair of her nightmare overwhelmed her once more.

Papa sat down at the table beside her and patted her hand.

"It's strange," he said slowly. "I just had a vivid dream too."

"About Topaz?"

Papa poured himself some milk and buttered a piece of bread. "No, mine was a pleasant dream. We were home in Berkeley and we were in the backyard by the peach tree, you and I, trying to give Pepper a bath with the hose. Remember how he'd shake himself and spray everything within fifty feet with all that soap and water?"

Papa smiled as though he were seeing it all happening in front of him now.

Yuki grinned too, remembering. "And I'd get soap and water in my eyes and mouth and get soaking wet and . . ."

Suddenly a sharp deep longing to go back home to Berkeley flooded over her. "Papa, when can we go back?"

"I hope when the war is over, Yuki. When the United States and Japan stop fighting each other. When the hate is gone. Then maybe . . ."

"Only maybe?"

Papa rubbed his eyes and sighed. "Well, the Japanese are still excluded from the West Coast by law, and

there are some people in California who don't want us ever to go back. They would have us kept out of the state forever."

"Forever?"

Was Papa saying they might never get to go home again? What would happen then to the thousands of Japanese who'd been uprooted from their homes and businesses and farms along the West Coast and were still in the concentration camps? Where would they all go if they couldn't go home to California after the war?

And what about us, Yuki wondered. Suppose they could never go back home. She couldn't bear even to think of such a thing. She thrust out her chin and said defiantly, "Well, I'm going back to California because that's where I was born, and that's where I belong, and nobody's going to keep me out!"

Papa gave her a look that held both surprise and pleasure.

"Good for you, Yuki," he said. "You hold onto that good thought, and maybe one day it will all come about."

CHAPTER

2



YUKI HATED COMING HOME FROM SCHOOL ON TUESDAYS. That was one of the days Mama went to help Mrs. Griswold clean her house, and she wouldn't be home when Yuki got there. The apartment would be silent and empty, and Yuki would have to let herself in and sit in the lonely emptiness until Mama got home.

At least let there be some good mail today, she thought, and all the way home she sent messages to the mailbox to be stuffed with nice fat letters for her.

When she got home, she found their landlady, Mrs. Henley, sitting on the front porch with her husband. They were sitting in their rockers, each holding a Siamese cat, and watching the world go by.

"Afternoon, Yuki," Mrs. Henley called out.

"Hi, Mrs. Henley, Mr. Henley."