

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

At Fusan

The train's brakes screeched in protest at the last stop. We reached Fusan on the evening of August 26th. From the train station platform, I was excited by the glitter of the dark ocean right before us—but there was no time to linger. Everyone was herded into a large warehouse with reed mats laid on the floor, our sleeping places. Dinner was served—big, white rounds of *daikon* root floated in rice gruel. I don't remember what it tasted like—we were so hungry, we ate like starving dogs, then collapsed to spend one night in the warehouse.

The next morning, a clear hot summer day greeted us, and we were shocked to see the azure ocean before us. It had been years since I last saw the sea. Two big cargo ships floated in the harbor; the white uniforms of their crew shone crisply in the sunshine.

I took the children out onto the walkway and put the diapers to dry on the concrete wall. Then in the warm sun, I stripped the children naked one by one. Their dirty pale skin stretched over

thin, bony limbs and distended stomachs. We couldn't bathe so I used a rag to clean them. I rubbed their thin bodies, and flakes of dirty skin flew down into the ocean below. As I watched these bits float away, I prayed our suffering would also fly away, never to return.

After noon, a walkway was lowered from one of the ships. Thin, yellow smoke poured out of its smoke stacks. When the shadows of people moving about on board multiplied, I felt my heart quicken.

I said to the children, "Masahiro, Masahiko-chan, we're going to get on that big boat and go back to Japan! Look—look. We're going to cross that big ocean." The boys were wide-eyed with excitement as they looked at a sight they had never seen before.

I held up my baby and faced her toward the ship. "Sakiko-chan, look! We're going to get on that boat!" I pointed to the ship but her half-open eyes remained glassy, motionless—and her body was limp.

We received DDT treatments again. Finally, we boarded a very large cargo ship. The long line in front of us shrank back little by little and a plank-way was lifted up, which led up to the ship's deck. The ship's crew helped me with the children by grabbing their arms and lifting them onto the deck. Once we were aboard, they led us to a large open hatch-door on the floor. I looked down to see a big opening beneath my feet, and we climbed down a ladder one by one. A beautiful two story platform had been built inside the belly of the cargo ship to house hundreds of refugees.

We were assigned on the top level. When I realized—we don't have to walk anymore—we don't have to go someplace—my energy suddenly drained from me. The loudspeaker announced,

“All aboard,” to signal our departure, and everyone gathered back on deck. A long mournful wail blasted from the ship’s horn as our ship slowly moved away from the dock.

Some people cried. Some people waved. Some howled. Everyone expressed their emotions at that moment in his or her own way. There were screams of jubilation with the excitement of knowing—we survived! We’re alive! But I had no tears left to cry. Quietly, I took off the straw cow-shoe on my right foot and the broken sandal on my left foot. With all my strength, I flung them into the ocean. What a wonderful feeling. The summer heat penetrated the dirty bandages around my feet as I walked across the deck.

A last look at those mountains—mountains I hoped to never see again in my life. We went to the hatch-door and climbed down the ladder to our assigned spot in the ship’s hold. The rumble of the ship’s engines comforted us as we lay down to sleep.