

Duty

by David Griffin

For a 108 year old widow, Maude Carney was certainly a spry lady. I saw her take the stairs two at a time the day her cat got caught in the upstairs window fan. OK, I'm sure she wasn't really that old, even though she looked it. I never saw such deep wrinkles on a person's face. Years later when I saw the film, "Planet of the Apes," I was reminded of her. That's unkind, I know, but accurate. And she was aware of her visage, so I would needle her a bit about her age. Like the time, after mentioning she lost her husband in the war, insensitive as I was, I asked her if it had happened at Gettysburg or Antietam. Her eyes fired up and her brogue got thick as she looked up at me and said, "Ah, you're such a lovely little man and I would thump you silly, but you're a tad too young for me." Guess so, I was 15.

Maude lived across the way from my aunt and uncle on the Vienna Road at the edge of the village of Sylvan Beach, a declining summer destination for Central New Yorkers. Sitting on the eastern shore of Oneida Lake, the town featured a Midway where you could ride the Ferris Wheel or The Salt and Pepper Shaker that would no doubt kill somebody one day. The homes on Vienna Road weren't primitive camps like most at The Beach. Maude and her neighbors were full time residents of the town, involved in the fire department, church, politics on occasion and the usual untidiness of small town doings in the 1950's.

During summers in high school, I would often hitchhike to the Beach to visit my aunt and uncle when I ran out of things to do. I'd sit around with my Uncle Tom annoying him with my imitation of Mel Allen while he tried to listen to the real Mel narrate a baseball game on the radio as we waited for Aunt Margaret to finish making us sandwiches in the kitchen. It was Tom who one day suggested I drag my lazy butt across the street to help Maude with her chores and in general make myself useful. "You know," he said, "mow the lawn, paint the fence....don't touch the water heater, even if she asks. I had a hell of a time getting it to burn just right and I'd just as soon it was left alone."

Maude was a thoroughly nice lady. I would work for no more than 20 minutes and she would have me come in out of the heat for a cold Pepsi and chocolate cookies. We'd gab for an hour and then I'd go back outside and work for another 20 minutes. Maybe she just wanted the company.

“You know,” she said one afternoon, after I had repaired the door on the little garden shed that housed the lawn mower and other outdoor implements, “Mr. Carney built that shed right after he came home from the war, to kind of get his head calmed down after all the fighting.” Something told me to not make a smart remark or acknowledge this change to Mr. Carney’s war history. Then she looked a little embarrassed and said, “It’s just simpler to say he died in the war to people who don’t know about it. But I’ll join you in another Pepsi and tell you what happened, since Tom and Margaret evidently haven’t.”

“My husband, William, was convicted of homicide in 1948.” she said. “He got the electric chair. If the jury had known a secret, he might have gotten life in prison instead. Maybe he would have been paroled eventually and come home to me.”

Maude was quiet for a moment. I have seldom allowed people their right to be quiet. But this time I didn’t interrupt the silence with my chatter. I just waited until she was ready to speak.

“I don’t know where to begin,” she said. “And I’m not good at telling stories anyway.”

She rose from the table and walked over to a small chest of drawers at the end of the kitchen. She pulled on the second drawer from the top, but it was stuck. Pulling a second time, she managed to get the drawer open and then lifted out a dozen typed sheets of paper. As Maude returned to me across the kitchen, she held the manuscript in both hands, perhaps unaware of the importance she bestowed upon it.

“You should read this,” she said. “I’ll make us some lunch.”

I looked over the sheaf of papers. “Did you write this?”

Maude sighed. “No, it was written by the best friend I ever had. Unfortunately for all of us, she killed my husband.”

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Earlier in the evening I made my way along the darkening street, stepping around wet piles of fallen leaves that were beginning to clog the sidewalks of the lakeside community. “Our community” I had wanted to call it when we first moved here, but my husband and I were never welcomed by the local residents with any enthusiasm. Only by Maude, whose home was at the end of my path tonight. We had been close friends until two years ago. How my world could change in such a short time was more than a wonder to me. It was a heartbreak as well.

A year ago in September of 1949, Maude was not allowed at the prison the night of her husband’s execution. She sat at home weeping, staring at the cheap plastic cuckoo clock on the wall until the noisy bird blasted out through tiny doors at midnight to announce William’s death in the electric chair. Tonight ... exactly one year after the electrocution ... Maude wanted me to be with her on the anniversary of her husband’s death.

In these last minutes before twelve we now sat across from each other in the seedy living room of the old house. I could see the tears well up behind her eyes as she once more glanced up at the inexpensive clock high on the wall. At fifty-eight years old, Maude Carney appeared much older as she stared into the blackness of the night

through a large window, a single pane of glass almost four feet wide. Were it daylight she would have seen bluebirds flitting around two little birdhouses her husband William had built and placed on the fence posts before the war.

The yard was much the same as the year prior when the poor wreck of a man was alive, but it was not as well kept these days. Maude had said earlier in the evening she remembered years before the tragedy watching William's strong back and shoulders stretch through his old cotton shirt as he happily labored away on hot summer afternoons, keeping the grass clipped and trimming the bushes that surrounded the back yard. Across from Maude I tried to hold in my own tears. I too yearned for my beloved, lost so senselessly in a storm of hate. I looked around for my things. I wanted to be ready to leave after the clock struck the hour.

Earlier in the evening we talked of old times when we were younger and hopeful, but as the hours progressed toward midnight our conversation lessened and our private thoughts took over. Like the cuckoo we pulled back inside ourselves and closed the little doors. We fell to silence, sitting in each other's presence, our minds elsewhere, my head racing over the events of the past two years. When the clock struck midnight, I half expected Maude to swoon or cry out or at least moan and begin to sob. But she just sighed after the cuckoo finished and said, "I think I'll be getting ready for bed."

"I'm sorry Maude," I said.

"Me, too," she half whispered.

The past two years had been an awful time for us. In fact, many of the residents of the little town of Sylvan Beach in Central New York had in one way or another been affected. The Beach, as everyone called it, was a small tight-knit community of a few full time residents who spent the uncomfortable winters hibernating by the lake, and then suffered through the summers with tourists who couldn't afford the Thousand Islands to the north on the St. Lawrence River.

When the trial finally got started in the summer of '48 in the Oneida County Courthouse in Utica, I gave my testimony on the afternoon of the first day of the proceeding. I kept my eyes from wandering to Maude or William while I testified, but looked in their directions after I finished and was descending the stairs from the witness stand. Maude cast her eyes downward to the floor and William read a newspaper someone had given him.

For the rest of the trial, I sat a few rows back from the lawyers' tables. When Maude and William were allowed moments together at lunch and during breaks, I watched her touch William's cheek or put her arm around him. During the testimony of those who would seal his fate, she leaned far forward in her chair with her hand reaching forward as if to touch him, to comfort him when he could not keep back his tears.

"William bothered poor Tomo all the time," Ward Lankton testified before me on the first morning of the trial. He was the boss from the car repair shop where William and Tomo worked. "I told him to stop, but William was a big guy so I didn't push it."

"Did the defendant criticize Mr. Kanazawa because of his work or because of his heritage, his nationality?" intoned Marvin Stillwater, the county district attorney.

"You mean 'cause he was a Jap?"

"Yes," replied Marvin, "because he was Japanese."

“Well, yeah. Sure, I guess so. William had just been shootin’ at them in the war a couple of years ago.

“What happened on the afternoon in question?”

“Well,” said Lankton, “I noticed William say something to Tomo Billy Bishop was testing an engine so I couldn’t hear over the noise ... then Tomo must have said or done something, because William leaned back and threw a punch at him.”

“Was Mr. Kanazawa hit?” Marvin asked.

“He ducked. Talk about a spry little guy,” said Lankton. “Then he popped William twice in the forehead. Never saw a fist move so fast. William fell over like a chopped down tree. We all stood there frozen.”

Of everyone in the court room that morning, I was probably the only person who would know the big Irishman went down from a carefully placed double punch to the forehead, a classic Aikido move. It was surprising William hadn’t been out cold for ten minutes.

“Then what happened?” Marvin asked.

“Tomo bent over William. I remember he looked worried, like he shouldn’t ‘a done that. He put out his hand to help William get up.”

“Did the fight continue?” asked the district attorney, and I could see that even the prosecutor was bored with this line of his own questioning. Everyone knew the details of the fight.

“William swatted Tomo’s hand away and jumped up,” said Lankton. “You could see William was mad as hell ... face red ... he was fuming. I thought: he’s gonna kill the little Nip ... I mean Japanese.”

“Then what transpired,” asked Marvin.

“I jumped in between the two of ‘em as William came up off the floor. I told William to pack up his gear and get out. Pronto! I wouldn’t have any fightin’ in my shop.”

“Had they fought before?” asked Marvin.

“A little shoving, but no punches.”

“Was William fired, then?” Marvin asked.

“I never said that,” replied Lankton. “I never fired William. No, sir, that’s not true. It ain’t my fault what happened.”

“No one has stated that, Mr. Lankton,” said Marvin

The foreman continued, “I didn’t want him back, but if William had apologized and changed his attitude, maybe that would be different. I figured he was off on a bender, anyway, you know?” said Ward. “But he never came back. After a few weeks I took his name off the workers list. You know ... Good Luck, Good Bye, Happy Trails.” Ward Lankton looked at the defendant and said, “I didn’t need his kind of trouble.”

The testimony dragged on through three of the hottest days in August of 1948. I didn’t attend when the coroner and ambulance crew testified about the scene of the shooting. At the end of the second day of the trial, Maude was called to the witness stand when the defense began their case. There was a brief discussion between the judge and the D.A., joined by Maude’s attorney and William’s defense counsel, Robert Winkle, about spousal privileges. Judge Gambill then explained it all to the jury and cautioned they would be hearing from a witness who had strong ties to the defendant.

Everyone in the court room knew that Maude wanted the chance to explain William's actions without condoning them. She believed her husband's mind was deranged. The poor woman was fighting for his life and none of the evidence in this open and shut case was helping. But she must explain his insane actions to the jury and hopefully keep the state from executing him. The judge decided the hour was late and Maude would begin her testimony the next day.

The temperature had stayed warm overnight and rain began to fall after court was in session. The court room was dark and felt soggy at nine a.m. as Maude went forward, mounted the two steps and took her seat. Among the attorneys and the rest of us, Robert Winkle, William's attorney, was the only person in court that morning who looked crisp in his grey striped suit and starched white shirt. He gave Maude a warm smile before beginning his questioning, and I could see it helped to calm her a bit.

"Mrs. Carney," Mr. Winkle said, "I realize this is difficult for you and so I would like to ask you to just tell us in your own words what happened on the night of the shooting."

"I was asleep," she replied.

Winkle's eyebrows went up in confusion. He thought Maude would begin a long explanatory account of poor William's mental state since returning from the war.

"You remember nothing, Mrs. Carney?" Winkle asked. He must have wondered if she was being coy, and if she was angling for sympathy. Since the shooting Maude had become a sort of victim in the newspaper accounts, as each day she sat in court solidly supporting her husband. The papers had already decided William was crazy. Since young men from The Beach had lost their lives in Europe and the Pacific, one might have expected a clambake honoring the killer rather than a trial.

"My husband, William, is a wonderful lunk of a man," Maude said, and then broke down and gushed tears and choked into her hankie. "He drinks too much," she said in a kind of a stifled wail.

"It was those men down at the bar on the canal that put him up to it," she continued.

"No, no, we tried to stop 'im," a man's voice shouted from somewhere behind me in the courtroom.

"Order in this court!" boomed the judge. "Bailiff, escort that man out into the street."

"Judge, I was just trying to --"

"Silence!" shouted the judge, who was now half standing and leaning out toward the courtroom, his face red with anger. "Leave, sir, before I throw you in jail for 3 days."

The man was quickly gone of his own accord and everyone's attention returned to Maude.

"I knew there'd be trouble when he came home from the shop that afternoon," she said. "Said he'd beat up Tomo Kanazawa and he was fed up with the place and he would be taking a little vacation. I thought the same thing Mr. Lankton said, that William would go back and apologize in a few days. But he never did. He just sat down there in the cellar all day and night and drank himself silly."

Poor Maude had pattered around upstairs and worried. William might say he was on vacation and working on his building projects, but what she saw was a man doing nothing but sitting in the cellar drinking. Often William wouldn't come up for supper

or even for bed, she said, and she would find him asleep next to the coal bin in the morning when she went down to stoke the old furnace and throw on a few more shovelfuls.

As the D.A. began his cross examination, Maude sighed and looked across the space to her husband. William sat with his head bowed. It was impossible to know if he was listening.

“Oh, William,” she said, “I’m gonna tell ‘em what’s wrong with you.”

There was no reaction from William. Marvin could have stopped her, but he didn't. He may have thought he was giving her rope. Her husband's counsel, Winkle, could have stopped it. It is anyone's guess why he didn't.

“You see, William was in the war, of course. In the Pacific. He fought the Japanese. They killed a lot of his friends. He has terrible nightmares about it. Mr. Kanazawa was nice man, but all William saw was a Jap. William couldn't understand how a Jap could be holding the same kind of mechanic's job as himself, being paid the same kind of money, while all of his relatives overseas were killing our boys! It was like working with somebody who had just been shooting at you last week and who had killed all your buddies!”

A hush came over the courtroom as no doubt most of the spectators realized Maude was describing what was on all of their minds.

“But Mr. Kanazawa was in America from the 1920's,” said the District Attorney. “Certainly the defendant couldn't blame him for what happened to his country and their military.”

“William doesn't understand things like that,” she said. “His head is all messed up ... from the war, from the booze. Don't you see what I'm saying? He was still fighting the war the night he shot ...” And at this point, Maude broke down, dissolving into sobs and tears. When she recovered, Marvin steered her back to the night of the shooting. Nothing she said about it was news to me.

Anyone reviewing the testimony would sense that a burning anger and humiliation must have simmered in William, and on the night of March 3rd he left the house for the first time since his degrading defeat. Maude tried to convince William to stay home and come to bed, but the big man slammed the front door and headed for O'Toole's, a beer joint down near the canal. He had finally worked up the courage to go out and face the group of men who made up the only society he knew, and to explain to them how he had come to get beat up by a little Asian man half his size.

There are different accounts of what took place at the bar, who said what, who jeered, who didn't. But late in the evening, William came back home and got his shotgun from the bedroom closet where he kept it hidden behind the suit he wore to weddings and funerals. Maude lay in bed in the dark, and although she could see nothing, the sounds revealed her husband's intentions. She could tell by his hoarse breathing he was drunk, but she had never known William to harm anyone beyond a punch or two. A zipper sound told her William had removed the pump shotgun from its soft leather bag. She knew he might just wave it around or he might use it, maybe to shoot out a street light to vent his anger, like back in '39 when he destroyed the yellow caution light near O'Tooles and then spent the rest of the night safely in jail. She sighed. What was she to do? Certainly not try to stop him, for that indeed would be

dangerous. Better to let him go and call the sheriff's office in the morning to see what could be done and for how much.

As I listened to Maude's testimony, my soul heaved with guilt. I could sense a tightening in my chest. I so much wanted to help this woman, who such a short time ago had been my best friend. But I would not allow myself to do so.

William took the stand following his wife. As he mounted the stairs, I was reminded of his size. He was a big fellow and I imagine he walked about the world feeling physically superior to any man. Now that image was damaged. Deep inside William's soul had been made small. And just as he would never forgive those who had killed his fellow soldiers in the war, he would never forgive the man who bested him. The seeds of murder were planted in the fertile soil of his raging hate.

After being sworn in, William was asked by his attorney to tell of his actions on the night of the shooting. He wandered about in his story and had to be coaxed back on track a number of times by the judge. Eventually he told of carrying the shotgun through the cold streets to the corner of 12th Avenue and Main Street. He remembered drunkenly lurching to a stop and standing unsteadily in the slush across the street from the apartment over the Blue Blade Hardware store. Upstairs, a light shone in the window and illuminated the ceiling of the room within.

"So you were opposite the Kanazawas' apartment," said Winkle. "Then what happened, Mr. Carney?"

"I got under the streetlight," he said, "so I could see ... to load the shells in the gun."

William stopped and looked up, but not at anything in particular. There was a moment of silence before his attorney asked him to continue.

"Well," said William, "I heard a train."

"A train" said Winkle.

"A train," said William. "I heard the whistle. I'll bet it was taking a string of coal cars to Syracuse or maybe Buffalo."

"Mr. Carney," said Winkle, now getting impatient, "can you --"

"It made me think of my trip to boot camp on the train," continued William. His voice had taken on a quiet and wondering quality that told us he no longer knew he was on the witness stand.

"All of them," he said. "All of them were gonna try to kill me, but I didn't know it yet," he said.

"Who?" asked Winkle, sharply.

William looked at his attorney as if he was just seeing the man for the first time, scrutinizing him from his perch on the witness stand.

"Who?" repeated William. "Every frigging Nip west of San Francisco, that's who. And they almost did."

A low murmur of voices went through the crowd, as well as muted laughter. The judge sternly reminded William to be careful of his language, and then directed him to continue.

William swayed a little as he stood under the street light. He said he took aim at the upstairs window, clicked the safety off and pulled the trigger. A half pound of bird shot blasted out the front of the barrel with a terrible punch of sound that rang his ears. The kick of the gun knocked him backward, but he somehow remained on his feet. Just

above the hardware store sign, the upstairs window disintegrated into a fountain of tiny pieces of glass and the room was plunged into darkness.

Winkle continued his questioning and at times I had to wonder if he was defending William or helping the D.A. get a conviction. I had to believe Winkle knew the cause was lost and his purpose was to simply show the craziness of William's behavior.

"Did you see Tomo or his wife through the window of the apartment?" asked Winkle.

"No," said William, "I wasn't aiming at nobody. I just wanted to scare Tomo. That's why I shot their ceiling. I was just trying to even things up, you know?"

"How could shooting out their window even things up?" asked Winkle.

"I don't know. Tomo thought I was scared of him after he knocked me down. This way he'd be afraid of me," William replied.

"Were you? Were you afraid of Tomo after he bested you in a fight?" asked his counsel.

I put my hand to my face to cover a smile. William's face turned red with anger. He said nothing. Winkle remained quiet, possibly hoping the jury would see how quickly the defendant was moved to anger. Finally, William shrugged and seemed to regain himself.

"I was standin' there on the street," William said, "and I realized I was crying! And I was drunk, but it was like all of a sudden I was sober. You ever have that happen to you?"

Winkle shook his head no.

"I couldn't believe it!" said William. "The wife, Mrs. Kanazawa, came out the downstairs door and high-stepped right across the slop and slush in the street, right over to me. She had a pistol and pointed it at me!"

"Objection," shouted Marvin as he rose from behind the prosecution table. "That is not an established or corroborated fact."

"Are you sure she had a gun, Mr. Carney," asked Winkle.

"Yeah, I'm sure," William answered.

"Gentlemen," the judge almost shouted, again half standing up.

"Of everyone involved that night," said Marvin, "you're the only person who saw it. Now don't you think that's a bit strange?"

"Objection!" shouted Robert Winkle, over the judge's admonition for all three parties to be quiet.

"Your honor, this is highly prejudicial to my client" Winkle said.

"There has been testimony ... " said Marvin.

"Mr. District Attorney," interrupted the judge, "You will not indirectly testify to the jury in my court. You will refrain from such behavior and you will wait for redirect before questioning the defendant. Am I making myself clear, Marvin?"

"Yes sir," said the D.A.,

"I tell ya, she had a gun!" said William. "And later ..."

"We heard you," Judge Gambill interrupted peevishly. "Do you have further questions, Mr. Winkle?"

"Well, that's why I was aimin' the shotgun at her. I pumped another shell in the chamber. I kept yelling at her, 'put the gun down, drop the gun.'

"Settle down, Mr. Carney," said the judge.

"But she kept coming," cried William, "with the pistol pointed at me. She came right up to me. Then she dropped the pistol in the snow. Just stood there looking at me."

"William" said Robert Winkle.

"She reached up and grabbed the barrel of the shotgun. My God, why did she do that? I pulled back with both hands and the gun went off. Boom! I thought my heart stopped. There she was lying on the ground, bleeding and moaning and ... Jesus, all I wanted to do that night was scare Tomo!" William covered his face with his hands.

The courtroom was quiet and Williams sobs could be heard all the way to the back.

The judge and lawyers no longer attempted to silence William. They simply watched the spectacle. There wasn't a person in the room who by now didn't believe they were looking at a dead man.

William gave forth a long sigh.

"I shoulda helped her," he said. "I shoulda.

"Please continue, Mr. Winkle," said the judge.

"William, what did you do then?" asked Winkle, a hint of impatience creeping into his voice.

"I ran. I ran home. Or tried to. About half way, Tomo caught up to me. He had the pistol. He was shouting some gibberish at me ... Japanese, I guess. I stopped and he was dancing around me in a circle shouting something. I was twirling around, trying to keep my shotgun on him, telling him to drop his pistol.

"What happened next?" asked Winkle, staring at the defendant and pushing back his hair, his hand running back over his head as he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

William slumped back in the witness chair. He raised his hands and opened them as if he had no idea what the answer was.

"I'm so tired of telling what I saw ... what I guess I saw ... maybe I should tell you what the police say happened."

"You should tell us what you believe to be the truth," Winkle said.

"All of a sudden," William said, "I was back on Corrigedor. I remember it was so hot. The sun was so bright. My head felt like it was split open by the sun ... that sun! ... and the heat was awful. I was standing nose to nose with a Jap soldier. I suppose it was Tomo, but I don't remember clearly. We were pointing our guns at each other and I thought, maybe we'll just back off and go our separate ways. I took one step backward. Maybe we won't have to die, either of us. But then the second soldier showed up."

"Go on," said Winkle.

"Now there were two of them, don't you see? Pretty soon they'd both have the drop on me. I just started firing," said William.

"Did you shoot Tomo Kanazawa?" Winkle asked of his client.

William looked up at his attorney as though he had just explained the simplest concept to someone who clearly didn't get it.

"I shot one of the Jap soldiers," said William. "I blew his arm off."

The courtroom was very quiet.

“Yes,” William continued, “I guess I shot Tomo. I just wanted to get off that beach alive ... away from that god-awful heat ... the explosions, the blood, the death. I just wanted to get home. I shot him and I ran. I ran home.”

The noon recess was called and the bailiff led William out of the courtroom through the door behind the Deputy’s desk. In a few minutes the bailiff returned and took Maude through the same door. I wondered if the couple were allowed to meet back there and share a sandwich. As I watched William and then Maude leave the court, I sat riveted to my seat, my legs having suddenly gone so weak I could not get up to leave. Of course, I was familiar with the circumstances of that night, and I’d heard a rumor that William said he imagined himself back in the Pacific when he shot Tomo. But I had not heard of the second soldier. The second soldier might change everything.

A few days before, when I gave my testimony, I saw the familiar look of surprise on the faces of people in court who had never met me. It’s a look I should have become used to by now when anyone hears my voice, but I’m always surprised by the assumptions all of us make that are based on appearances.

When the court clerk had stood and announced, “The Prosecution calls Mrs. Tomo Kanazawa to the stand.” I got up from my chair and shakily walked forward, mounted the steps to the witness stand and seated myself.

“Are you Mrs. Ayano Kanazawa?” Marvin had asked.

“Yes, I am” I replied. I had meant to be cool and calm, but now I was swamped with grief for my husband. A moment passed before I could make my voice work to answer the questions.

“May I remark, Mrs. Kanazawa,” Marvin said, “that you have no accent.”

“That is not true,” I said with a smile. “My accent is from Wyoming. My grandfather came to America to help build the Union Pacific railroad. I was schooled in a Christian academy in Cody, Wyoming before my family moved east to New York. I am Sansei, third generation American Japanese. Tomo came from Japan to the University where I met him in 1928. We moved to The Beach in 1933 when Tomo sensed the coming war and argued with his Japanese employers in New York City.”

“Mrs. Kanazawa, had you known the defendant before the night of the shooting?” Marvin asked.

“Yes, his wife and I were friends and we attended church together. She and I often worked on committees together. We went to movies together, and sometimes lunch or dinner. Just the two of us. Since I knew Mr. Carney’s feelings toward Asians, I never went to their home. And certainly my husband did not.”

Maude Carney was in fact the best friend I had made at The Beach. Although Tomo had no beliefs, my religious upbringing naturally led me to the little church on Spencer Ave. where I met Maude. She had the kindest smile and welcomed me without suspicion while the other members initially held themselves back. To them I was foreign, but worse a member of the race which was becoming the scourge of the Pacific.

I remembered the evening I sat in my apartment with Tomo reading and my heart was heavy with loneliness for the people who had always been around us in New York City just two months before. A tiny knock sounded at the downstairs door and Tomo went down and brought up the night visitor.

“A lady from your church,” he announced as he ushered Maude into the small living room. There she stood, a smile as bright as the noon day sun and bearing her first attempt at Yakisoba. The noodles were terribly American, but fried nicely, and the vegetables were sweet and tasty. Even Tomo broke out in a grin as he ate the snack. That was the evening Maude mentioned that her husband’s employer was looking for another mechanic or trainee.

“Mrs. Kanazawa, can you tell us in your own words what happened on the night of the shooting?” said Marvin.

“Tomo and I were about to go to bed when our front window was blown out. Tomo froze in his chair. He had what I believe is called shell shock from when he fought in China years ago, before he came to America. I’d seen this happen to him before when a very loud noise surprised him.”

“How long was he immobile?” said Marvin.

“Not long,” I said, “I know, because of what happened later. But I jumped up from my chair almost immediately and looked out the window. Mr. Carney stood across the street with his shotgun pointed at the ground.”

“And what did you then do,” Marvin said.

“I ran down to the street to stop the fool before he decided to fire again.”

“You didn’t call the police?” he asked.

“As you know,” I said, “The Beach depends on the County Sheriff’s Patrol. I didn’t think we could afford to wait that long, but I do remember thinking Tomo might call them if he recovered soon.”

“Weren’t you afraid, Mrs. Kanazawa?” he said.

“Of course I was,” I said, “but I didn’t think Mr. Carney would really try to hurt me on purpose. I thought if I could grab the gun away from him we’d all be a lot safer.”

“And then?” said Marvin Stillwater.

“I grabbed the barrel of the gun and it went off, tearing flesh from my index finger and some from my middle finger.” I held up my mutilated hand for everyone to see. It had healed well in the past year and only the attorneys in the front row might have noticed the damage at that distance.

“And?”

“Tomo came down the stairs and out into the street as Mr. Carney was running away. Tomo helped me toward our home, but then said he must stop William from hurting anyone else.”

“Rather than see to your safety, Mrs. Kanazawa?”

“Tomo was not a samurai, but he knew the nature of duty,” I said.

“And Tomo had no weapon?” said Marvin.

“Mr. Carney was drunk and Tomo was a martial arts expert. And I ... encouraged him to stop Mr. Carney before he hurt himself.”

I glanced over at the jury. They appeared doubtful.

“Besides, there was nothing to be done for my hand except to stop the bleeding, which I knew how to do. But then I worried for Tomo and so I wrapped my hand as best I could in my blouse and I ran after him. When I was half way to Vienna Road where Mr. Carney shot him, I heard the gun go off. I found Tomo lying in the snow, his arm” I had to stop for a moment. “I screamed and screamed and by then people

were roused by the noise and the ambulance came. But it was too late. My husband bled to death.”

I sat on the witness stand and felt sick with anger and loss. I can still remember the warm blood from Tomo’s heart pumping out of his body as I tried to stop the bleeding. His eyes looked at me one last time in a mixture of fear and love and then glazed over in death. This pig of a man sitting across from me staring at the floor, would die in the electric chair for killing my husband. I felt truly sorry for poor Maude, but her husband deserved to die.

“Now, Mrs. Kanazawa,” Marvin said, “there have been statements made to the police by the defendant about another gun, a pistol that Mr. Carney said you pointed at him, and your husband allegedly used to menace the defendant.”

“I know nothing of another gun,” I said. “I have no gun and I know that Tomo did not have a gun.”

“Did you see a pistol at the crime scene ... where your husband was killed? On the ground or anywhere?” asked Marvin.

“No,” I replied. “I saw nothing on the ground but my dying husband.”

“There,” I thought, “I have sealed our fates.” But I didn’t care. William Carney must die as my husband died. And he would get off with life in prison if the court suspected or knew of the existence of the small pistol that now sat wrapped in an old coal bag under a floor board in my kitchen.

I looked William Carney straight in the eye as I denied the existence of the pistol. He looked back at me and frankly he appeared so confused he may have believed me. When I finished my statement, he nodded his head, as if in acceptance. For the first time, I almost felt sorry for the man and wished for him to die bravely. Maude continued to stare down the whole time, not looking at me.

On the morning following my testimony, as I walked up the stairs to the entrance of the Courthouse, Ward Lankton caught up to me. He had hired Tomo and then befriended him in a quiet sort of way. Tomo said they seldom showed their friendship at work, but Ward often stopped at our apartment to see Tomo. I don’t know why Mrs. Lankton never accompanied him and I never asked. I was happy enough that Tomo had someone to talk to in the community and I was used to other people giving us a wide berth.

Mr. Lankton took my arm and pulled me aside.

“I’m awfully sorry about Tomo, Mrs. Kanazawa,” he said to me. “I really liked your husband. All of us at the shop did.”

“I don’t know what to say,” I replied, and I truly didn’t.

“Not all of us hate your race, M’am,” he said. “I spent a year in Tokyo after the War. Tomo and I had many enjoyable conversations.”

“I know he valued your company, Mr. Lankton.”

The man looked uncomfortable, then said, “I wanted to ... “

His words stopped, but his jaw continued to move and his face was filled with pain. I wondered if a tooth was bothering him.

“Are you not well, Mr. Lankton,” I said.

“I just wanted to say this jury will do its duty.”

“I’m sure they will –“

“We all will,” he said forcefully, interrupting me. “I just ...”

We both fell silent. Something was bothering him greatly. He took a breath and began again.

“I mean ... Sometimes doing the right thing isn’t easy,” he said. “I hope all goes well for you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Lankton,” I said, “You’re very kind.”

He tipped his hat, gave me his farewell and continued on ahead of me into the building. I wondered for a long time afterward what it was he felt he couldn’t tell me.

The Defense called a number of psychiatric witnesses, but none were convincing enough to persuade the jury that William was anything more than a bully who may or may not have been unhinged by his combat memories. Of course, many in the court room had been affected by their own war experiences, but since combat none had shot a man in cold blood. Still, there was a feeling among the citizens of The Beach that William might avoid execution because of the war. He didn’t.

William was convicted of first degree murder and sent back and forth between the county jail and the state hospital for the insane. According to the newspapers, the court asked for new tests a number of times, but William was finally judged to be responsible for his actions. He never came home again. I didn’t know whether Maude believed her husband or my story about the pistol. I had not spoken to her since the murder, just nodded when our paths crossed in church when we both returned to services on Sunday mornings shortly before the trial began.

A few weeks after the verdict, William Carney was sentenced to die in the electric chair. A year later, on a softly beautiful early fall evening in September of 1949, after all the appeals and a final effort to have his sentence commuted to life imprisonment, the warden and guards marched him into a room in the basement of the prison and strapped him in the electric chair. Bob Buttoni of the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle sat with a chaplain and three other reporters in the viewing room and he wrote this account. The executioner connected the wires to the electrode cuffs on William’s wrists and ankles. These were tested for ground and then the skull bowl with wires attached was placed on the top of his head and secured with a strap under his chin. Over this assemblage and across his face was placed a hood with a slit up the back for the skull wires. Although not part of the regulation equipment, his bare feet were lifted and placed in an ordinary pan used for foot baths. This was filled with water from a pail to a height that covered the ankle electrodes, thus insuring excellent contact between his legs and ground. The prison wanted William to go quickly, for his sake and for theirs.

As the wall clock marched toward 11:55 p.m., the Warden picked up the phone and listened for a dial tone to make sure the line would be open in case a last minute reprieve was sent, although none was expected. At five seconds before midnight, as the generators spun up to deliver William into the hands of his creator, Buttoni leaned forward, closed his eyes and dipped his head. He had watched an electrocution only once and wrote he would never do so again. The sound was bad enough.

While Maude sat alone at home the night of William’s execution, I too sat crying over my lost Tomo in the apartment we had shared. My thoughts roamed from the

summer evening we met to the early winter morning we parted as he lay dying in my arms. On that awful night in the short space of twenty minutes I had gone from comfortably getting ready to go to bed with my husband to sitting in the street, a widow, covered with his blood.

When our front window disintegrated and Tomo sat glued to his chair, I jumped up and saw William standing across the way, under the street lamp of all places. I ran to our bedroom closet and quickly got the small pistol. Tomo had gotten the weapon the previous year from someone he said owed him money. He called it a gambler's gun because it was small enough to hide in one's clothing and did not have a hammer sticking out to catch on the pocket when pulled out. Tomo said it was for our protection and taught me how to use it. That's why William described me high stepping over the slush filled street, exactly as Tomo had taught me, to keep from having to look down in front of me and take my eyes off the target. William kept shouting for me to drop the gun. I said nothing but continued toward him. I was deathly afraid, but if I didn't disarm the drunken man, he could continue his rampage, killing myself and my husband, who now sat stupefied in our living room, unable to protect us.

"If he brings the shotgun up and points it at me," I thought, "I'll put two bullets in his chest and one in his face, just like Tomo taught me." Pop, Pop, Pop. But when William raised the shotgun, I couldn't do it.

I walked right up to the idiot and the two of us stood rooted in the slush and snow pointing our guns at each other, faces a few feet apart. A moment passed in silence, except for the sound of William's sobbing and sniffing, and then the rumbling on the stairs behind me as I heard Tomo come running down to the street. I looked at William's pitiful crying face and I said, "No more." Throwing the pistol to the ground I reached up to grab the tip of the shotgun, pushing it from me as Tomo came running toward us. The shotgun went off while I still had my hand on the muzzle. William ran away down the street.

When Tomo reached me, I lay in the slush curled up in a fetal position, my hands between my legs. God, it hurt so! I kept insisting I was all right as he helped me to my feet. Torn between his concern for me and his anger, Tomo scooped up the pistol and ran after William. With tears of pain flooding my eyes leaving me weak, I stumbled toward the apartment, but then turned in the direction of the two men. I remember thinking, "I must follow Tomo." I was afraid for him, but didn't know what I could do to help.

I rounded the corner of Vienna Road and was almost on top of the two men. I stopped short and stood like a statue no more than thirty feet away. Tomo was screaming and cursing in our language and telling William to drop his shotgun. He danced around the big man as William twirled to keep his aim on my husband. Suddenly, William stopped moving and looked over to me. Tomo did the same. In the street lights, I could see the surprise on both their faces. But William's was being horribly transfigured as I watched. He didn't look human. His eyes were bulging and I've never seen a grimace like that on a person's face. William turned back to Tomo and pointed the shotgun, but my husband was still staring at me. I shouted, too late. William pulled the trigger and blew my husband's arm off. Then he ran.

No one will ever know what caused William in his deranged drunken mind to imagine first one, then two soldiers being upon him. But in agony I wondered if I had not followed the men, Tomo might still be alive. To William, I was the second soldier.

Trying to stem the flow of my husband's blood, I pushed snow into the hole where his arm had been, all the while screaming for help. It was no use, he died before the ambulance came. I picked up the pistol and hid it under my clothing before anyone arrived. As the eastern sky turned a dirty grey and the winter morning dawned, I sat in the light freezing rain and cradled my dead husband's body and promised I would avenge him, if it took the rest of my life. I know honor. And I know duty.

But now I also know guilt, for I have killed a man by bringing about his execution. And I have taken him away from a woman I had loved like a sister. I wanted so much to call Maude or to take her aside when we met in church, to put my arms around her and with no words that I could possibly think to say, simply hold her as we were each assailed by the fates that had brought us our terrible grief. Instead we continued to live out our individual existences. How I lamented our separation. We should have been with each other in our suffering, doing whatever two people do to help each other through our misery. Our grief was so large there wasn't any emotion left for blame.

But as time marched toward William's execution, I became afraid that for Maude's sake I might break down and tell the truth, to absolve myself from the gnawing guilt and to acquit myself of the perjury. But I would not dishonor the memory of my husband and the promise I had made to avenge his murder.

Some nights I lay in my bed quaking in fear for the punishment that awaited me, either in this life or the next, I knew not which. And when I finally fell asleep, the terrible dreams would come for me, of limbs torn off, blood sprayed through the air. In the worst dream of all, I was somehow William, the man I killed. In the dream I was both of us. I found myself in darkness, hearing the sound of my own breathing, suffocating under a hood in the stink of my cold sweat, with feet in a pan of water and my arms cuffed to the chair. The sound of an electrical generator running up ended with a final searing explosion inside my head as I dropped into an awful pit of fear to await The Accuser.

Maude called me on the day before the one year anniversary of William's death and asked me to come and sit with her the next evening. I longed to be with her, but was afraid of not being able to control myself.

"Please," said Maude, "we should be together through this. We were friends. We each lost the man we loved. And we each had a part in it."

That last phrase made me fearful. I did not want to face the lie I had told that killed her husband. I did not want to face Maude, but I knew I had to do so.

And so here we sat in her living room, the midnight hour now past, she having said she was ready for bed, me gathering my hat and purse to take home. No accusations had been made.

"It was awful for William," she said from out of the blue.

I spoke up. "Well –"

"I know, I know, it was awful for Tomo, dying in the street. But William sat there in prison for a year scared witless, not eating, soiling his pants every night while he was sleeping. It was just awful."

“Maude, I’m sorry you lost your husband. And I’m sorry both men had to die.” I opened my purse and took out my gloves, getting ready to leave.

“I need to tell you this, Ayano,” she said. “You know why. You know what you did.”

I sat back in my chair. Eventually this moment would come and I was in one sense relieved that it was finally here. I always expected my secret would eventually be found out.

“There was nothing left of William,” Maude said. “All he spoke of was home, but he never held on to any hope for a reprieve. For a while there was talk his sentence might be changed to life, but Governor Dewey refused.”

“Oh, Ayano, he was so afraid. He could never find the words to say so. You know, after the trial he never said anything about the shooting, or even about being in prison. I sometimes wondered if he knew he was there. All he talked about was the war and the battles he had survived. The last time I saw my William was the day before the ... the way they killed him. He went on and on about wanting to be home, breaking my heart. It was the only time in prison I saw tears in his eyes, but he didn’t break down and cry like anybody would. He told me how he had missed me during the war. Every night in a foxhole somewhere on the other side of the world he dreamed of walking through this front door here at home. He said he’d sweep me up in his arms and take me to sit on his lap in that very chair you’re sitting in, his chair. And he would look out this window on the grass and trees and birds and flowers and know he was home.”

I shifted uncomfortably in the chair. I was now crying quietly, thinking of how I missed Tomo.

Maude was quiet for a moment and then she spoke.

“Ayano, what have we done here?”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Ayano, I killed Tomo by letting William go out that night with the shotgun. I should have called the Sheriff. But I hadn’t the slightest thought he might go to your apartment. William didn’t hurt people. I thought he might shoot out the traffic light down near the bar.”

I remained silent.

“You think you killed William,” she said, “but you didn’t. If you had admitted to having the pistol, he might have gotten life ... might have ... but he would’ve died in that place by now. Maybe you saved him another year of agony.”

“I’ll tell you the truth,” I said, “I didn’t mean to save him anything. He killed my husband, and for that he had to die.”

“I know,” she said in almost a whisper.

Maude turned in her chair and picked up a Bible from the lamp stand. She pulled an envelope out from between the pages, then reached across the space between us and handed it to me.

“You should have this,” she said. “I don’t want it.”

Inside was a carbon copy of a receipt from Lankton’s Auto Repair. At the top was written the word “personal” and in the middle of the form “received \$18.00 from Tomo K. for H&R hammerless revolver, plus 32 shorts ammo.”

The fear mounted up within me. My stomach lurched and I sensed something hot and malevolent at the bottom of my throat.

“How long have you had this, Maude?” I said.

“Does it matter?” she asked.

“Did you have it before the ... before William ...?”

“Of course not. I could not have let William die. Ward Lankton brought it to me a month ago. He couldn't sleep nights. He felt justified withholding it during the trial because he believed William should pay for making you a widow. But the man has cancer and is afraid of dying with my husband's death on his soul.”

Maude looked over to me and her mouth broke in a sob. Then she looked away.

I looked down at the floor. “I had no choice. Your husband killed my Tomo.”

“And Mr. Lankton,” said Maude, “felt he had no choice but to cover your lie.”

“Yes,” I said.

“And I,” continued Maude, “had no power to save my husband's life.”

“Nor I to save my beloved,” I said.

The possibilities of what Maude would do with the receipt began to play out in my mind and each of them filled me with fright.

“What will you do?” I asked.

“Mr. Lankton said to do what I felt best with the receipt. I feel best to do nothing with it. Ayano, you deserve a life. William had his and so have I.

“You won't go to the police?” I said.

“Police? Wouldn't that be a fine mess? First my husband kills your husband and then I have you sent to prison.”

We sat for a few minutes more in the quiet of the late evening. It was ten minutes past midnight. I didn't want to hear the cuckoo again at twelve-fifteen. I didn't think Maude wanted to either. I stood and walked over to her chair, bent and kissed the top of her head.

“I'm sorry,” I said once again. “There seems no way out of this ... the hurt and the guilt and the terrible loss.”

“We do what we must and somehow God sorts it all out.”

I took her hand and squeezed it in mine.

She glanced up at me. “Ayano, I love you.”

“I know,” I said.

I let myself out the front door. The rain had stopped. It was such a beautiful autumn night with temperatures turning cool and the leaves now drying up and skittering across the lawns and sidewalks. I began the walk of a few blocks home, the same route William took on the night he killed my husband. When I came near the corner of Vienna Road and Main Street where my husband died in my arms, I did not stop. I couldn't. I walked on, my soul carrying the terrible pain of losing my beloved.

I will never regret avenging Tomo's murder, but at the same time I cannot forgive myself for bringing to Maude the same loss and agony I suffer. And God will never forgive me for the seething hate still burning in my heart that allowed me to kill the man who made me a widow. But some day in hell William and I will stand in the dock side by side, two murderers yoked together, equally guilty of killing a man and breaking the heart of the woman left behind in desolation to struggle on without him.

Ayano's story took longer to read than Maude anticipated. I put it aside reluctantly when she set down a bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich at my place.

"No," she said. "Finish reading it. Lunch can wait."

I read the final two sheets and then sat thinking a moment while Maude silently shelled peas for the supper she would make for herself in a few hours. When she finished her task, she pushed the dish of peas to the side of the table against the wall and pulled her BLT in front of her. She looked up at me.

I didn't know what to say. Finally I mumbled, "It just seems so unfair."

Maude smiled. "Ain't life mostly unfair?"

"It shouldn't be," I answered.

Her eyes caught mine for a moment, moved elsewhere and then she bit into her sandwich.

Maude must have wondered if it had been worthwhile revealing her story to me. She probably doubted a fifteen year old boy, who usually thought of nothing but himself, could understand or even imagine the pain of loving and losing someone or being left to spend the rest of one's life alone. She was right, I couldn't.

We ate for a few minutes before she spoke again.

"You want another Pepsi?"

"I'd rather have a beer."

"I'll keep you in my prayers," she said.

end

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This story was inspired by the murder of a Japanese man in Central New York in 1943. The facts of the case versus my story are different, but I tried to capture the loss and human agony left behind after hatred has run its course. And smallness has made one a murderer. It's a far different story than someone simply being crazy.

The real William was named O'Toole. He was a more bizarre drunk than the William Carney in this story. He managed a bar and night club at Sylvan Beach. During the year in which I was born he met a girlfriend in a motel one morning and after a few drinks said he was going out to kill "a dirty Jap," with whom he had business dealings.. He drove to the man's house and shot the man, his wife and mother-in-law. William O'Toole knocked on a neighbor's door and told them they would no longer have to fear living next door to Japs. He then drove to the Japanese wife's place of employment and told a startled grocer to call the police. The wife and her mother survived, the younger woman with a leg injury.

William O'Toole was judged sane and pleaded guilty to second degree manslaughter, but was incarcerated in a psychiatric center anyway. During the war, the D.A.would have had a terrible time getting a conviction; he had trouble enough seating a jury

(which is one reason why I placed the story AFTER the war.) A few years later William was released from the psychiatric hospital to die of natural causes in 1946 after only a few months of freedom.

When I was a young child and we visited Sylvan Beach, my mother would take me to a small booth on the Beach's midway of rides and amusements where for a nickel anyone could pull on one of hundreds of strings tied to rows of little hooks on the counter running across the front of the small hut. The myriad of strings rose up to the ceiling and became lost in a vortex as they crossed each other and descended to a table at the back of the booth. There each string attached to one cheap prize or another, all lined up like an army of plastic cowboys and soldiers, trinkets and pens and lapel buttons. Each was no more valuable than what could be found in a box of Kracker Jax, with a few more worthwhile treasures prominently placed in front. When I asked my mother why the old Japanese lady in the booth walked with such a pronounced limp, she said the woman had once been shot by a crazy man. Mom never told me she was acquainted with the shooter through her cousins.

William and Maude (nee Bertha) O'Toole had lived across the street from our relatives and when I was a teenager I would occasionally mow her lawn when we visited for the day as a favor to my uncle who would have done it had I not. The Widow Maude would sit inside the house and watch me through the large four foot window as I cut the grass and trimmed the shrubs. I inadvertently destroyed an old hand made bird house with a wild swing of the rake one afternoon while trying to push the neighbor's bushes back over on his side of the fence. When I took the pieces to her door to apologize, she told me not to worry about it, but I was sure there were tears in her eyes. Maude O'Toole, widow of William, died at age 88 in 1970.

end no more

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