

"Why Don't You Wear Shoes"
from *Journey to Washington*
Senator Daniel K. Inouye

The year was 1939 and already times had turned tense in the Far East. The Japanese government was in the iron grip of fanatic warlords and the Imperial Army was waging aggressive war in China and menacing all of Southeast Asia. Day after day, the priest who taught us ethics and Japanese history hammered away at the divine prerogatives of the Emperor, and at the grand destiny that called on the Japanese people to extend their sway over the yellow race, and on the madness that was inducing the American government to oppose them. He would tilt his menacing crew-cut skull at us and solemnly proclaim, "You must remember that only a trick of fate has brought you so far from your homeland, but there must be no question of your loyalty. When Japan calls, you must know that it is Japanese blood that flows in your veins."

I had heard his jingoistic⁴ little speeches so many times that I suppose they no longer really registered on me. He was an old man, to be respected for his station, but when he began spouting nonsense I could easily tune him out. But one day he shifted his scorn to the Bible and I reacted by instinct—and violently. He had been discussing the inadequacy of Christianity compared to Shintoism, the state religion of Japan, and already my hackles were up. Then he favored us with an elaborate grin and, mockery dripping from his every word, he said, "I give you the Bible itself as the best evidence of this Christian foolishness. Their God made the world in seven days, it says. Ha! Then he made a man and from a rib of that man—a rib, mark you!—he made a woman. Ha! Anyone with only part of a brain can see that this is the wildest nonsense!"

I never realized that I was on my feet and shouting until I saw the grin on his face twist, first into astonishment, and then into fury. Then my words echoed in my head:

"That's not right! That's not fair! I am a Christian, a lot of us here are, and you mustn't talk that way! I respect your faith. You must respect mine."

"How dare you!" he roared.

"I do. I do dare! You have no right to make fun of my beliefs."

"You are a Japanese! You will believe what I . . ."

"I am an American!"

He flinched, exactly as though I had struck him. With a single compulsive jerk, he threw the book he had been holding through the open window, and we watched the pages flutter in the wind for a moment. Then he started toward me, and the class watched in silent terror, and his face was black as a thunderhead and his mouth worked violently as he cried, "You are a Japanese!" Now his fingers clutched at my open collar and he was shaking me back and forth. "Say it!" he screamed into my face. "You are a Japanese!"

And barely able to bring my voice up out of my tortured throat, I muttered, "I—am—an—American."

With that, he lifted me from my feet and half-dragged, half-carried me to the door, and he threw me with full force into the schoolyard. "You are a faithless dog!" he screamed, and slammed the door closed.