# Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMIE FORD

Though Ford was born in California, he grew up in the Pacific Northwest, including Seattle and Port Orchard, Washington. He is Chinese on his father's side; in 1865, Ford's paternal great grandfather, born Min Chung, immigrated from China to the United States, where he changed his name to William Ford. Ford graduated from the Art Institute of Seattle in 1988 with a degree in art and design. In 2008 he married Leesha Ford, and they now live with their blended family of nine children in Montana. Aside from *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, Ford has written two other novels, both of which also deal with the question of Chinese American identity.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The novel takes place during the internment of Japanese Americans by order of the US federal government. Over 100,000 Americans of Japanese descent were removed from there homes and imprisoned during this time. The novel makes mention of Executive Orders 9066 and 9102. The former allowed the federal government the power to designate any area of the country a "military area," from which anyone could be excluded at the government's whim. The latter order created the War Relocation Authority, which was responsible for the relocation and internment of Japanese Americans.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* focuses on the internment and discrimination that Asian Americans experienced during World War II. Similarly, Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine* centers on a Japanese American family from California who are imprisoned at an internment camp in Utah during World War II. *No-No Boy* by John Okada examines the aftermath of Japanese-American internment, following a protagonist who returns home to Seattle after being imprisoned in a camp and then jailed for refusing to serve in the US military. Though it focuses on the experience of French Jews during World War Two, *Sarah's Key* by Tatiana de Rosnay examines themes similar to *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, including the complexity of identity and the power of love.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*
- **When Published:** 2009
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical fiction
- **Setting:** Seattle, Washington
- **Climax:** Henry travels to Idaho to find Keiko at Camp Minidoka and is later reunited with Keiko are reunited in New York City.
- **Antagonist:** Chaz Preston, bigotry, xenophobia
- **Point of View:** Third person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Playing Favorites.** Ford has a soft spot for Sheldon Thomas and Mrs. Beatty. "I love them so much that I've written short stories starring each of them," he says. "I just wasn't ready to say goodbye, I guess."

**Origin Story.** *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* began as an assignment Ford received from fantasy writer Orson Scott Card, when Ford attended a literary bootcamp Card was running. Card challenged Ford to write "a noble romantic tragedy." The short story Ford came up with ultimately became the chapter in the novel entitled "I Am Chinese."

## PLOT SUMMARY

Through intertwined timelines—one in the 1940s and one in the 1980s—*Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* tells the love story of a Chinese American boy, Henry Lee, and a Japanese American girl, Keiko Okabe. Henry and Keiko meet in Seattle during World War II; they both attend an all-white school called Rainier Elementary. Henry is a first-generation American: his Chinese nationalist father hates Japanese people, whose forces have been at war with China's for decades. Keiko is a second-generation American; both her parents were born in the United States. Henry and Keiko work in their school kitchen together, and though Henry worries about drawing his father's ire for befriending a Japanese person, he begins spending time with Keiko outside of school. Aside from Keiko, Henry doesn't have many people to talk to. His father has forbidden him from speaking Chinese at home, and since neither his father nor his mother speaks strong English, Henry's home life has been incredibly quiet.

Henry and Keiko bond over their shared love of jazz music. One night, while attending a performance by their friend Sheldon Thomas and famous Seattle musician Oscar Holden, Henry and Keiko witness the arrest of several Japanese citizens by the FBI. Not long after, many Japanese families begin to burn letters and family photos—anything that might cause the police

to be suspicious of their loyalty to America. Keiko finds she can't bring herself to burn her family's photo albums and asks Henry to hide them for her; he agrees. Shortly after Henry meets Keiko's parents for the first time, word comes that the Japanese American families are Seattle will be removed and resettled in internment camps.

Henry says a heart-wrenching goodbye to Keiko and her family at the train station. School without Keiko is miserable, but when the cafeteria manager, Mrs. Beatty, asks if Henry wants to join her in setting up a mess hall at Camp Harmony, where Japanese families are being held before being moved inland, Henry jumps at the chance. Soon, Henry is visiting Keiko every Saturday with Mrs. Beatty's help, even arranging to bring Keiko some birthday presents, including a copy of an **Oscar Holden record**. Meanwhile, Henry's parents find the family photos Henry had hidden for Keiko, and Henry's father symbolically disowns him. Shortly after her birthday, Keiko and her family are moved from Camp Harmony to a permanent location in Idaho. Henry says a cold goodbye, not wanting to make things more difficult by expressing his love for Keiko.

Henry returns home to find that his father has had a stroke, for which Henry blames himself. Eventually unable to bear his parents' silence at home, Henry decides to visit Keiko in Idaho, and Sheldon accompanies him. At Camp Minidoka, Henry and Keiko share their first kiss and spend a wonderful day together. When he arrives home in Seattle, Henry learns that his father has booked him passage to China, where he will finish his Chinese schooling. Henry refuses to go until the war is over and Keiko has come home; he has promised her he will wait for her. Henry and Keiko exchange letters over the following years, but Keiko's replies become increasingly rare. Eventually, thinking Keiko has given up on him, Henry sends a final letter asking Keiko to meet him at **the Panama Hotel** before he has to leave for China. Instead, a young woman named Ethel Chen, who works at the post office and has been mailing Henry's letters for him, shows up. Henry and Ethel begin dating, and become engaged on V-J Day. That same day, Henry's father dies—but not before admitting that he arranged to block Henry's letters from reaching Keiko, and vice versa. Devastated, Henry decides that all he can do is move forward in his new life with Ethel.

This entire story is revealed through flashback. In the present-day timeline, Henry's memories of his childhood are reawakened when the belongings of Japanese American families are uncovered in the basement of the Panama Hotel. Henry gradually begins to share his past with his son, Marty, and Marty's fiancée, Samantha. Ultimately, Marty tracks down and contacts Keiko on his father's behalf; she is widowed and lives in New York City. Marty buys his father a ticket and Henry goes to New York, though not before saying his goodbyes to a dying Sheldon. In New York City, Henry comes face to face with Keiko in her apartment. She has the same eyes, and the two speak their old childhood catchphrase to each other without missing a beat.

## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Henry Lee** – The novel's protagonist. At twelve, Henry is quiet and strong. As the only Chinese student at his all-white school growing up during World War II, Henry deals with constant bullying from students like Chaz Preston. Henry struggles to fit in both at school and at home, where his parents, particularly his father, have rigid expectations about how he will live his life. Henry is good friends with Sheldon Thomas, but he does not feel deeply emotionally connected with anyone else in his life until he meets Keiko Okabe. With Keiko, Henry finally feels at home, and his beliefs about what it means to be "American" begin to become more developed and nuanced. His whole life, Henry struggles in his relationship to his father. Henry blames himself for the stroke that ultimately kills his father, and the two are estranged at the time of Henry's father's death. Still, as an adult, Henry does his best to create a better relationship with his son, Marty, than the one he had with his father. Henry is not naturally good at communicating his feelings as an adult, since he has repressed much of what happened in his childhood in order to focus on building a life with his wife, Ethel. Over the course of the novel, Henry allows the love he has always harbored for Keiko to resurface, and begins to openly discuss his past in a way he never has before. Ultimately, Marty and Samantha, his fiancée, locate and contact Keiko, who is now living in New York City. Henry flies to New York to reunite with Keiko; upon seeing one another, the two emotionally reconnect as if no time has passed, showing how resilient true love is.

**Keiko Okabe** – Henry's best friend and the true love of his life. Keiko is a second-generation American; her parents, Mr. Okabe and Mrs. Okabe, are Japanese American. Keiko is passionate, smart, and kind. She and Henry meet in the school cafeteria at Rainier Elementary, where they both work serving their classmates lunch. Henry is hesitant to get to know Keiko because of his father's anti-Japanese beliefs, but Keiko soon wins Henry over with her kindness. When not in school, Keiko loves to paint and draw in her sketchbook, and hopes to attend an art college one day. Keiko and Henry become close friends, bonding over a love of jazz music. The two are on the path to falling in love when they are abruptly separated: along with her family, Keiko is imprisoned at an internment camp, first in Washington State and then in Idaho. Keiko manages to stay positive and cheerful despite her imprisonment. Even after the Okabes are moved to Idaho, Keiko and Henry agree to keep in touch via letter writing. However, Henry's father conspires to prevent Keiko's letters from reaching his son, and the relationship between Keiko and Henry fractures. Adult Keiko shows up only in the closing chapter of the novel, when she and

Henry are reunited thanks to the efforts of Marty and Samantha. Immediately, Henry notices how her eyes seem exactly the same, which seems to indicate that Keiko has remained kind and warm and has retained her sense of humor despite all that she's been through, including losing her husband three years before Henry reunites with her. Adult Keiko's New York City apartment is also decorated with her own artwork, including a sketch she kept from childhood, showing Henry and her as young children.

**Sheldon Thomas** – A jazz musician and Henry's good friend from childhood. As a black man, Sheldon struggles to find acceptance in the Seattle music scene, despite the fact that he is a talented saxophone player. Sheldon is open with Henry about how racism has limited his professional opportunities. Despite the prejudice he has faced, Sheldon retains a sense of humor, often making jokes to lift Henry's spirits. Sheldon offers Henry frequent advice and encouragement in developing his blossoming relationship with Keiko; in Sheldon's view, it's always important to fight for love, and especially when broader societal forces are trying to quash that love. While not much is revealed about Sheldon's past, Henry does know that Sheldon was born in Alabama and stayed there until he was five or six: "evidently," Henry thinks, "[Sheldon]'d seen enough to never want to return." Sheldon is a kind and loyal friend to Henry, and helps to protect him from school bullies when he can. Sheldon demonstrates his love for Henry most profoundly when he accompanies him to Idaho to search for Keiko at the internment camp where she's been relocated with her family. Sheldon and Henry remain friends up until the day Sheldon dies. Even as Sheldon is in his final moments, he encourages Henry to find Keiko and repair his relationship with her. Sheldon and Henry's friendship, which is interracial and bridges a considerable age gap, parallels Henry and Keiko's love story in showing that love is a force capable of transcending difference and socially-prescribed division.

**Henry's Father** – A Chinese nationalist, Henry's father is virulently anti-Japanese. While he is very traditional, Henry's father also wants his son to be as American as possible. He sends Henry to an all-white school and insists that his son speak only English at home. Henry's father is depicted as a bitter, close-minded man whose own strong feelings prevent him from seeing that his son's path to happiness might not look anything like what he imagines. Henry's father disowns Henry for maintaining a relationship with Keiko, and he even arranges to stop Henry's and Keiko's letters from reaching each other when Keiko is imprisoned at Camp Minidoka. Up until the minute he dies, Henry's father remains convinced that he did what was best for his son. As an adult, Henry begins to realize that he has unintentionally repeated some of his father's mistakes, most considerably a lack of communication with his own son, Marty. This realization (which is catalyzed in part by Marty's fiancée, Samantha) motivates Henry to open up more lines of communication with his son, including sharing painful parts of his past that he had previously kept hidden.

**Henry's Mother** – Henry's mother is gentle and quiet, and she almost always defers to her husband, Henry's father. However, there are some clear differences between Henry's two parents. Henry's mother seems much more concerned with her son's wellbeing, even as she allows her husband to dictate Henry's future. When Henry is upset, his mother allows him to speak Cantonese to express how he's feeling. She also makes the bold move of delivering one of Keiko's letters, a birthday card, to her son, without her husband knowing. Despite his strained relationship with his father (and the fact that his mother often takes his father's side), Henry has a special bond with his mother, and demonstrates this bond by buying her favorite flower, a **starfire lily**, at the market for her every week.

**Marty Lee** – Henry and Ethel's son, and Samantha's fiancé. Marty is a college student studying engineering. He and Henry have a difficult time communicating, and Marty assumes that Henry is similar to his own father: traditional and rigid. Over the course of the novel, Marty and Henry get to know each other better. Compelled by the discovery of Japanese American families' belongings in the **Panama Hotel**, Henry begins to open up to Marty about what he really experienced in childhood, and, in turn, Marty grows more comfortable asking his dad questions. They no longer have Ethel to act as a bridge between them, and they gradually (if a bit awkwardly) learn how to communicate better and share what they are truly feeling.

**Samantha** – Marty's fiancée. Samantha is white, but is skilled at cooking Chinese food, and is an exuberant and warm young woman. She wants to learn as much as she can about Marty's family, and she is one of the first people to encourage Henry to try to track down Keiko. Samantha's eager questions about Keiko—and Henry's childhood more broadly—help open Henry's eyes to the fact that he has not allowed his son to really get to know him.

**Chaz Preston** – A school bully at Rainier Elementary. Chaz torments Henry, physically and verbally, accusing him of being secretly Japanese. Chaz is a racist, and he uses slurs about any and all non-white people. By the time Henry is fifteen and runs into Chaz in town, he strikes Henry as a weak and bitter person, and Henry has the impression he will remain that way for the rest of his life.

**Mr. Preston** – Chaz's father and a local businessman and developer in Seattle. Mr. Preston only appears in real-time in one scene of the novel, and he is depicted as ambitious and charismatic. Following the evacuation and internment of Japanese families living in Seattle, Mr. Preston moves to buy up as much land as possible in the former Japantown, suggesting that his ambition is at best inconsiderate and at worst cruel, especially when it comes to the many indignities that the

Japanese families living in Japantown have been suffering.

**Mrs. Beatty** – The manager of Rainier Elementary School's cafeteria. Mrs. Beatty is a gruff, no-nonsense woman but she has a kind and generous heart. Mrs. Beatty stands up to Henry's school bullies and offers him the chance to work with her in Camp Harmony's mess hall, which allows Henry to reunite with Keiko. Mrs. Beatty grew up helping her father aboard the ship he served on, and she considers her father's best friend from that time, a Chinese man and fellow Merchant Marine, her uncle.

**Ethel Lee (née Chen)** – Henry's late wife and Marty's mother. In the first present-day chapter of the novel, Ethel has been dead of lung cancer for six months. Ethel met Henry in the post office where she worked as a young woman. She fell for him by seeing how devoted he was to Keiko, who was in an internment camp at the time and to whom Henry religiously wrote letters. Ethel and Henry begin dating during the war and get engaged on V-J Day. Ethel is depicted as a kind and understanding person, though she doesn't appear in many real-time scenes in the novel.

**Oscar Holden** – A jazz musician famous in Seattle, and a friend of Sheldon Thomas. Oscar Holden plays at the Black Elks Club, and he is kind to Henry and Keiko when he finds them in the alley behind the club, listening to his concert. Later that night, Holden performs a song called "Alley Cat Strut" dedicated to Henry and Keiko. Eventually, Holden will go on to make a recording of this song; this **record** will become a precious item for Henry and Keiko, and a symbol of their friendship. Oscar is depicted as a principled and kind man; he even ends up on a police watch list for speaking out against the government's treatment of Japanese families living in Nihonmachi.

**Mr. Okabe** – Keiko's father. A former lawyer, Mr. Okabe is a first-generation American and is very devoted to his country. Elegant and well-spoken, he is passionate about protecting his family and about maintaining his personal dignity and his loyalty as an American, even when he is imprisoned in an internment camp for being of Japanese descent. Ultimately, Mr. Okabe enlists in the US Army to fight against Germany during the war.

### MINOR CHARACTERS

**Mrs. Okabe** – Keiko's mother. Mrs. Okabe was an artist as a young woman and has passed on both her skill and her art supplies to her daughter.

**Palmyra Pettison** – The new owner of the **Panama Hotel**. Palmyra is heading up the hotel's renovation, and she is also trying to reunite the belongings found in the hotel basement with their rightful owners—though few Japanese families have come forward to claim the items.

**Denny Brown** – A school bully and friend of Chaz Preston's.

**Will Whitworth** – A school bully who once gave Henry a black eye. Will's father is killed by Japanese forces while serving aboard the USS *Marblehead*.

**Carl Parks** – A school bully.

**Dr. Luke** – A Chinese doctor who makes house calls in Chinatown, and cares for Henry's father after his strokes.

**Minnie** – Sheldon Thomas's second wife, ten years his junior.

**Bud** – Owner of Bud's Jazz Records. The actual Bud Long is long since dead, but the man who now runs the store still answers to the name Bud, and the reader never learns his actual name.

## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

### BELONGING, BIGOTRY, AND IDENTITY

Through the lens of best friends Henry and Keiko's experiences growing up in Seattle during the Second World War, *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* examines how rigid ideas about identity can cause harm, particularly to children from immigrant families. Both Henry (who is a first-generation Chinese American) and Keiko (who is a second-generation Japanese American) are plagued by the perception that they're neither truly American *nor* truly members of their families' cultures of origin. But in reality, Henry is genuinely American *and* Chinese; Keiko is genuinely American *and* Japanese. Through their stories, the novel argues that identity shouldn't be viewed as an either/or proposition, because such a rigid view of identity harms both individuals and society as a whole, as well as lays the foundation for even more pronounced bigotry.

The novel introduces this kind of bigotry through Keiko's and Henry's experiences of not being "enough" to merit certain identity labels. For example, when Henry visits Keiko at Camp Harmony, the first internment camp for Japanese Americans to which her family has been forced to relocate, she says: "It's so funny. They throw us in here because we're Japanese, but I'm *nisei*—second generation. I don't even *speak* Japanese. At school they teased me for being a foreigner. In here, some of the other kids, the *issei*—the first generation—they tease me because I can't speak the language, because I'm not Japanese enough." Keiko's observation that she is Japanese enough to be sent to an internment camp, yet too American to fit in there, highlights the unreasonable expectations she is up against from both sides of this ethnic divide. Henry's own experience as a first-

generation American born of Chinese parents also underscores how poisonous national identity can be when it requires individuals to *prove* that they deserve it. When Henry's father announces that he wants Henry to finish his schooling in China, Henry imagines "staying at his uncle's house [in Canton], which was probably more of a shack, and being teased by the locals for not being Chinese enough. The opposite of here, where he wasn't American enough. He didn't know which was worse." Henry even feels jealous of Keiko—although she's in an internment camp, at least she has a sense of belonging within her own family. Both Henry and Keiko were born in America—in the same hospital, even—but the culture around them nonetheless insists that they aren't American *enough*.

Henry's experiences at school demonstrate how such rigid, polarized ideas of identity perpetuate bigotry at the societal level. Henry is tormented by a classmate named Chaz Preston. When he encounters Chaz vandalizing the abandoned Panama Hotel in the Japanese neighborhood of Seattle, he tells Chaz to "go home." Chaz responds: "This *is* my home, this is the United States of *America*—not the United States of Tokyo." This moment reveals starkly how the rigid ideas about identity that make Henry feel lonely even within his family also lead directly to bigotry more generally. Chaz implies that while Henry can't consider any part of his native country home, Chaz himself can set foot anywhere in Seattle, even a Japanese neighborhood, and consider it home. This scene also makes it clear how Chaz's confidence is built on racist social norms. When Chaz and his friends first see Henry, one of the boys yells, "It's a Jap!" only to be countered by another boy: "No, it's a Chink." Just moments later, Chaz says to Henry, in reference to Henry's friend Sheldon Thomas, "Your nigger friend ain't around today, is he?" These three racial slurs all make the same point: they highlight the idea that if you are not a white American, you are not a real American. This language reveals the underlying racism of either/or ideas about identity; it makes it clear that within such a system people who aren't white are automatically considered "not American."

Even Keiko and Henry's close friendship is not immune to these widespread notions about the nature of identity. When Henry first meets Keiko, he is shocked to learn that she doesn't speak Japanese. This moment shows that even Henry, who has suffered on a personal level due to rigid ideas about identity, tends to think about identity in either/or terms. Keiko looks Japanese and has a Japanese name, and so Henry assumes she can speak Japanese. Keiko's identity challenges Henry's unconscious ideas of what it means to be a member of a certain group, and their first meeting shows how everyone in America—even children who have themselves experienced discrimination—tends to think of identity in oversimplified terms.

But even as the novel shows how widespread these rigid and bigoted ideas of identity are, it also offers a more hopeful alternative through the character of Keiko. Society might suggest that Keiko belongs nowhere, but she insists that she can belong anywhere. For example, when Henry comes to visit her at Camp Harmony, Keiko gives him a bundle of dandelions, saying: "These grow between the floorboards of our house [...] My mom thought it was horrible to have all these weeds growing at our feet, but I like them. They're the only flowers that grow here. I picked them for you." Through her positivity in the face of bigotry, Keiko shows that a sense of belonging is possible even when society views one's identity as unacceptable. Indeed, Keiko and Henry's friendship is an even bigger example of this idea—they find stability in their relationship, suggesting that individuals do have the power to subvert toxic, oppressive ideas about where they do and don't belong, even as those ideas cause them harm.

## SILENCE VS. COMMUNICATION

Throughout the novel, protagonist Henry struggles to communicate with his strict, judgmental father; his first love, Keiko; and eventually his own son, Marty. The ongoing separation and silence between Henry and these characters creates pain, misunderstanding, and alienation. The novel argues that silence is a corrosive force in relationships, and one whose damaging force is compounded over time. Even when personal and public tragedies make it difficult to find the right words, the novel insists that speaking up—saying *something*, even if it's not the perfect thing to say—is crucial to preserving not only relationships, but also the individual's emotional health.

From early on in the story, silence dominates Henry's life, and the novel shows clearly that this silence chips away at Henry's relationships with both his parents. In the tense climate of World War II, anti-Japanese sentiment is reaching a fever pitch in Seattle, where the Lee family lives. Even though the Lees are Chinese, not Japanese, Henry's father is vigilant about making sure his family never does anything that might seem "un-American." To this end, Henry's father forbids his son from speaking Cantonese at home. The result is that Henry finds himself virtually unable to communicate with his parents, neither of whom speaks very strong English. Henry's conversations with his parents (who continue to speak Cantonese to him, even though he is forbidden from answering them in kind) become "lopsided," like "tidal shores of separate oceans." Henry already feels alienated from his peers—other Chinese American kids call him *baak gwai* or "white devil," while his classmates at his predominantly white school accuse him of sympathizing with Japan, the enemy of the United States. At a time when Henry needs more than ever to feel supported at home, his father's insistence that he speak only English makes Henry feel as though his parents are speaking to him "from a distant radio station."

What's more, the novel shows that once silence has begun to

dominate Henry's relationships, it is incredibly difficult for him to break out of this destructive pattern, even when he desperately wants to. By the time Henry's father has suffered several strokes that ultimately render him mute, Henry is at a loss for how to re-open communicate with his father. At his father's sickbed, Henry's mother implores her son: "Say something, let him know you're here." Overwhelmed, Henry thinks: "Say something? What can I possibly say now? And in what language?" Silence has deteriorated their relationship over time, making Henry feel continually more powerless to heal his bond with his father.

Through Henry's relationship with his own son, Marty, the novel underscores the notion that once a person has succumbed to silence, it becomes increasingly difficult to bridge the painful rifts created by a lack of communication. Even though he has been harmed by such a lack of communication, Henry does not realize how he has allowed the inertia-like force of silence to spread throughout his life—until his son's fiancée, Samantha, breaks that silence. When Samantha begins to ask questions about Henry's childhood love, Keiko Okabe, Henry is awakened to the fact that his son doesn't actually know him. Because Henry has never spoken openly to Marty about his past, Marty sees Henry as "a zealous man, passionate about the old ways and the Old Country," just like Henry's own father, a Chinese nationalist who hated Japanese people almost as much as his white neighbors did. Henry, however, does not actually hold these same attitudes; he is much more open and accepting of other races than his own father was. Marty's mischaracterization of Henry, then, suggests that a lack of communication can cause the same unhealthy patterns to repeat themselves in familial relationships, regardless of the underlying truth that goes unspoken.

Ultimately, the novel insists that it's crucial to say *something* to break harmful silences, even if it is not perfect. Samantha's questions about Keiko are at times awkward and uncomfortable—Marty even apologizes to Henry on his fiancée's behalf. But saying something turns out to be the only means of combating the destructive force of silence and opening the way to healing. Because of Samantha's questions, Henry is finally able to wonder what happened to his childhood love, and his ability to speak this wondering aloud is what causes him to eventually reunite with Keiko. This reunion, which concludes the novel, emphasizes yet again the importance of saying something, rather than giving in to silence because one is worried about finding the right words to break that silence. When Henry and Keiko reunite, the first meaningful words they exchange are in Japanese, a language neither of them speaks: *oai deki te ureshii desu*. This sentence (which translates to "How are you today, beautiful?") was Henry and Keiko's catchphrase growing up. It began as an inside joke, but transformed, by the time Keiko was imprisoned in an internment camp, into a shorthand for the deep love between Henry and Keiko. By the time these two characters reunite, they have spent their entire adult lives apart; there are exponentially more years of silence between them than there were between Henry and his father. Yet this simple phrase allows them to reopen their relationship, even though the pure meaning of the phrase is completely trivial, even irrelevant. Thus, at the same time that it acknowledges the fraught nature of navigating difficult relationships, the novel firmly insists that it is vitally important to give voice to the rifts between loved ones—even, or perhaps especially when, the words one reaches for aren't exactly the perfect ones.

## FAMILY DYNAMICS AND INHERITANCE

In an interview about the novel, author Jamie Ford stated: "As the saying goes, everyone has two chances at a parent/child relationship, once as a child and once as a parent." Ford examines that dynamic by contrasting the relationship the protagonist, Henry, has to his father with the relationship between Henry and his son, Marty. These dual stories of fathers and sons show that toxic family dynamics are not doomed to be repeated across generations. Rather than growing up to emulate his father's judgmental and insular attitude, Henry proves to be much more accepting toward Marty's white girlfriend, Samantha, than his own father was of Keiko and other Japanese Americans. However, the novel also emphasizes that such familial toxicity can easily reverberate across time. Stopping negative family relationship patterns is possible, the novel suggests, but it takes conscious and concerted effort.

The novel argues that negative family patterns are perpetuated almost inevitably when one does not exert conscious effort to undo them. Henry's relationship with his adult son, Marty, helps him realize that he has inadvertently embodied his father's rigid parenting style. When Marty confesses to his father that he is engaged to a white woman named Samantha, Henry is alarmed to realize that his son's hesitance to share this news springs from a fear that his father will be disappointed in him. Marty stammers out his explanation: "It's just that, well, I know how crazy your own folks were. I mean they weren't just Chinese, they were super-Chinese [...] And, you know, you married Mom and did the whole traditional wedding thing. And you sent me to Chinese school, like your own old man did—and you always talk about me finding a nice Chinese girl to settle down with, like Mom." Henry feels "stunned to be categorized in the same breath as his own father." Things are clarified for Henry when he and Samantha finally meet, and Samantha shares that she's heard from Marty that Henry is "the best fisherman" he knows. Henry catches himself "wondering why [Marty] never said these things to him. Then he [thinks] about the communications gaps, more like chasms really, between him and his own father and [knows] the answer." Even though

Henry wasn't trying to recreate these gaps—he didn't, for example, hand down his father's rules by insisting Marty only speak English—because he wasn't actively trying to undo these negative patterns, he ended up replicating them unconsciously.

There is hope, however: the novel is clear that, while it is easy to fall into repetition of toxic family dynamics, individuals do have the power to establish new family norms. Part of the creation of these new patterns is a function of time; societal norms shift and, as a result, affect families like Henry's. For example, Henry catches himself thinking "about his Chinese son, engaged to his Caucasian girlfriend, driving around in a Japanese car" and realizes that "his own father must [be] spinning in his grave." But for his part, Henry isn't bothered by Marty's engagement to Samantha, an attitude that shows that he has grown up to be much more tolerant and accepting of other races than his own father was. Whereas Henry's father was hostile toward those outside of their Chinese American community and vehemently anti-Japanese, Henry only cares that Marty is happy.

But the novel is clear that the creation of healthier family dynamics can't be left only to time—or to other people. When Henry's wife, Ethel, was alive, she acted as the "bridge" between Henry and his son, and Henry gladly allowed her to do the work of forging meaningful connection with their child. As a widower, however, Henry is presented with a choice: he can either allow himself to perpetuate the non-communicative dynamic he had with his own father, or he can create a new kind of normal with his son. Henry chooses the latter when he invites Marty (and Samantha) to help him search for Keiko's belongings amongst the items left in the Panama Hotel by Japanese American families during internment. Henry has never shared this part of his past with his son and though it is awkward and even frustrating to do so (Henry feels annoyed, for example, that Marty and Samantha spend time marveling over every object when all he wants to do is locate the Okabes' things), Henry's efforts to be more open with his son provide Henry a sense of healing he didn't know he needed. It is as though Henry "ha[s] stumbled into some unseen room in the house he had grown up in, revealing a part of his past Marty never knew existed." Henry's story shows that family patterns can be shifted for the better, but it takes a willingness to endure this "stumbling" in pursuit of the healthier relationships waiting on the other side.

## MEMORY

*In Hotel at the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, Japanese America Keiko Okabe and her family are sent to a Japanese internment camp during World War II. Keiko's family's imprisonment, along with thousands of other families, in Japanese American internment camps serves as the focal point for the novel's argument about memory. In portraying their experiences in the camp and the events that follow, Ford explores the different roles that memory can play in the aftermath of traumatic situations. Even as the novel emphasizes the importance of remembering large-scale atrocities, it cautions against allowing one's remembrance to transform into resentment. Instead, the novel suggests that memory can serve a more positive, if counterintuitive, purpose: instead of miring people and society in the past, memory can propel them, with hope, into a better future.

Henry is horrified at how quickly those around him seem to forget about the internment of Japanese American families. The first internment camp in which Keiko and her family are imprisoned, Camp Harmony, is located on the Washington State Fairgrounds. After the prisoners are dispersed and relocated from Camp Harmony to more permanent camps, Henry reflects: "With the last of the prisoners taken to camps farther inland, Camp Harmony would revert back to being the site of the Washington State Fair just in time for the fall harvest season. Henry wondered if anyone going to the fair this year would feel different walking through the trophy barn, admiring prized heads of cattle. He wondered if anyone would even remember that, two months earlier, entire families had been sleeping there." This moment underscores how readily people dismiss and then forget about the inhumane treatment of others. Yet it is vitally important, the novel shows, to remain alive to such atrocities. Not only does remembering them honor those who suffered, but it also lays the groundwork for vigilance against future atrocities. This is most obvious as young Henry watches Japanese American evacuees from Bainbridge Island (off the coast of Washington State) disembark from a ferry onto the mainland: "There's too many of them," he thinks. "*Too many of us.*" This realization seems to shape his capacity for open-mindedness and empathy throughout his life.

On the other hand, Henry's father shows the negative side of memory—how it becomes bitter and destructive when it crosses the line from remembrance to resentment. Henry's father, a Chinese nationalist, is obsessed with the conflict in his home country of China between Japanese imperial forces and local forces fighting for an independent China. Henry's father even keeps a map taped to a corkboard and inserts sewing pins to keep track of battles. He is a man obsessed, and the novel shows that this fixation contributes to Henry's father's resentment against Japanese Americans like the Okabes. In sharp contrast to Henry's feelings, Henry's father's reaction to Japanese internment is that it is "better them than us." Henry's father's commitment to the cause of Chinese nationalism keeps him from envisioning a world in which Japanese people—even those who are second-generation Americans, like Keiko—could be included in an "us."

Ultimately, the novel suggests that instead of breeding resentment, memory can be used to foster hope. Throughout his life, as a child and as a man, Henry keeps the memory of

Keiko (and his love for her) alive. Even after falling in love with and marrying Ethel, Henry never forgets Keiko—nor does he cease wondering why he stopped hearing from her, or what happened to her family. The novel thus makes a subtle but important distinction between the type of remembrance practiced by Henry and that practiced by his father. While Henry's father is mired in his obsession with the history between Japan and China, Henry's memories of Keiko and compassion for others like her help fuel him and keep him connected to a sense of hope throughout difficult times in his life, including Ethel's death due to cancer.

## LOVE AND SELF-SACRIFICE

In *Hotel at the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, Asian Americans Henry and Keiko meet each other at a young age and maintain a lifelong bond despite being separated. They manage to keep their love and hope for the future alive despite Keiko being sent to a Japanese internment camp and both characters facing hatred and discrimination in nearly all facets of their lives apart from each other. Henry and Keiko's story shows that love has the power to transcend all boundaries: the imagined distinction between Chinese and Japanese Americans, literal barriers such as fences around the internment camps where Keiko is imprisoned, and even time itself. What's more, the novel emphasizes that small acts of love can be just as meaningful as the kind of grand, lifelong love that Henry and Keiko share. In fact, it is quite often these smaller-scale acts of love and self-sacrifice that make practical differences in the lives of the characters, suggesting that even in times of extreme suffering, love can still be a powerful force for good.

Henry and Keiko's relationship is the novel's ultimate testament to the fact that true love is powerful enough to transcend any and all boundaries. Henry's love for Keiko persists—even when she is imprisoned in another state, even when Henry's father intercepts Keiko's letters to his son, and even when Henry himself falls in love with and marries another woman, Ethel. True love, like the kind Henry and Keiko have, endures. In no other scene is this more evident than when Henry tracks down Keiko at Camp Minidoka in Idaho and shares his first kiss with her through the barbed wire fence surrounding the camp: "He was leaning in, his forehead pressed against the cold metal wire; if there was something sharp there, he didn't feel it. All he felt was Keiko's cheek, wet from the rain, as she leaned in too." The love between Henry and Keiko does not erase the horror of the circumstances in which they find themselves. The barbed wire is still there, cold and sharp. But love exists on a separate plane; because of the love he feels for Keiko, Henry can ignore the harsh realities around him. The novel does not pretend that love can make up for the type of suffering that Keiko and thousands of other Japanese Americans suffered as a result of internment. It does maintain, however, that true love is powerful enough to persist—even to flourish—despite these horrendous circumstances.

Though Henry and Keiko's relationship is the book's central example of true love, the novel also suggests that their love could not exist without smaller gestures of love from other characters. For example, Henry's musician friend Sheldon Thomas enables Henry to find Keiko in Idaho by accompanying Henry on a Greyhound bus. Sheldon makes this decision despite the fact that he has little money and that, as a black man, he rightfully fears that he might be in danger upon leaving the city of Seattle for the smaller farming communities of the Midwest. This act, then, demonstrates the power of small gestures of self-sacrifice to help others—Sheldon puts his livelihood and safety in danger just to help Henry and Keiko, which ultimately facilitates their relationship. Because Sheldon supports Henry in this simple way, Henry and Keiko are able to maintain their lifelong bond.

Love, the novel claims, can even act as a small-scale form of resistance. Despite the strong sway Henry's father holds over his wife as the strict patriarch of the family, Henry's mother ensures that her son receives the birthday card Keiko mails him from Camp Minidoka. Henry's mother is "a little bewildered" by her own decision to subvert her husband's wishes, but she remains firm, and as a result Henry is able to have tangible proof that Keiko has not abandoned him. This gesture is particularly significant not only because it helps Henry, but because of the risk Henry's mother takes in doing so. She potentially sacrifices her own good standing with her overbearing husband in order to ensure Henry's happiness and preserve his relationship with Keiko. Another surprising act of love comes from the curmudgeonly Mrs. Beatty, who runs the cafeteria at Henry's school. Though she doesn't verbally announce her fondness for Keiko, just days after the Japanese Americans of Seattle have been taken away to internment camps, Mrs. Beatty serves the students at Rainier Elementary (many of whom are openly bigoted) a Japanese lunch of chicken katsu-retsu. "Let 'em try that, see what they have to say about it," she says. Mrs. Beatty's gesture not only acts as evidence that she cares for Keiko, but it also pushes back, albeit in a small way, against the prejudices of Henry and Keiko's classmates.

Henry and Keiko both confront systemic oppression and racism throughout the novel, yet they are still able to maintain their love for one another and do not let the hatred of others overtake them. The love they share does not negate these forces, but it ceaselessly binds and sustains their spirits. The everyday acts of love and self-sacrifice that other characters perform for them also bring about small-scale changes that continue to make their love possible and help Henry and Keiko to cope with their suffering over the course of the novel.

## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### THE PANAMA HOTEL

The Panama Hotel represents the way in which memory persists and manages to reassert itself, even when it is thought to have been long since buried and forgotten. While the hotel once served as a place for recent immigrants from China and Japan to rent a room while establishing their new lives in America, by the 1940s (when Henry is a child) the hotel has fallen into disrepair. In Henry's adulthood, the hotel is finally being restored by its new owner, Palmyra Pettison, and the inciting incident of the novel is the discovery of abandoned belongings in the hotel basement. Evacuating Seattle to be forced into internment camps, many Japanese families left treasured items in the Panama Hotel, hoping to someday return and collect them.

The hotel thus has a multilayered quality: many histories have been metaphorically rewritten, erased, and re-inscribed on the walls of this building. Henry has been dealing with this phenomenon for years, trying his best to forget his first love, Keiko, while he builds a life with his wife, Ethel, and their son, Marty. But like the items discovered in the basement of the hotel, Henry's childhood memories remain buried just below the surface. Though the hotel stands as a painful reminder to Henry of losing Keiko, he finds that confronting this memory liberates him—not only bringing him emotional peace, but also reuniting him with his long-lost love.

### THE OSCAR HOLDEN RECORD

The Oscar Holden record physically symbolizes the role of music as a unifying force in the novel. Over the course of their friendship, and Keiko's imprisonment in internment camps, Henry and Keiko share two different recorded copies of the same song that the jazz musician Oscar Holden dedicates to them. As the novel unfolds, both these copies are lost to Henry, and ultimately both return to him, one broken in half and one whole and intact. Henry himself sums up this magical quality of music: music is "a place where people [...] [don't] care what you [look] like, where you were born, or where your family [is] from." Because it is a recording of Henry and Keiko's song, the record also symbolizes their love. Many people, including Henry's son Marty, don't believe that the recording exists; the record is a kind of myth within Seattle's music community. But Henry knows the record exists because he saw and held it. However unlikely it might have been, Henry and Keiko's love existed, too. Finding the Oscar Holden record in the **Panama Hotel** reminds Henry that he has held that love his whole life, and if he wants to, he can fight for it once again. Indeed, the record itself is what reunites Henry and Keiko; Keiko sends her unbroken copy to an ailing Sheldon Thomas, along with a letter addressed to Henry.

### STARFIRE LILIES

Starfire lilies, which Henry buys for his mother every week, grows with Ethel in their garden, and eventually uses to decorated Ethel's grave, symbolize the beauty of imperfect love. Henry's mother cares for her son, but she doesn't always do what's best for him; more often than not, she sides with Henry's father, who bullies his son into living the life *he* wants him to have. Henry's love for Ethel parallels his mother's love for him. Henry can't love Ethel perfectly; ultimately, his heart belongs to Keiko, his soulmate. But Henry still loves Ethel—his feelings for her aren't fake or forced. Like the starfire lily, these imperfect kinds of love are still beautiful, and they manage to bloom despite difficult circumstances.

### HENRY'S "I AM CHINESE" BUTTON

The "I Am Chinese" button that Henry's father insists on wearing represents how complex and fluid identity is. Over the course of the novel, the button (or one like it) is worn by Henry, the racist school bully Chaz Preston, Henry's father, Henry's mother, and (indirectly) Keiko. At one point, Henry's father even tries to force him to wear a similar button that says, "I'm An American." The button is a tangible identity label, but over the course of the novel Henry learns firsthand how complex identity really is, and how much pain results from trying to oversimplify what it means to belong to a certain group. The button also speaks to how strained Henry's relationship is with his father. Oversimplified identity is being forced on Henry on a societal level—he knows this well enough from people like Chaz who call him a "Jap" at school. But ultimately it is Henry's father who forces him to wear the button, and thus Henry's relationship to the button itself (which he wears as protection and takes off in disgust at various points at the novel) comes to symbolize his relationship to his father. Ultimately, Henry breaks free of his father, but it's as painful as the moment when Henry gets the pin of the button jammed into the flesh of his hand.

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Ballantine edition of *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* published in 2019.

## Marty Lee (1986) Quotes

❝ Henry kept staring at the photo albums, faded reminders of his own school days, looking for someone he'd never find. I try not to live in the past, he thought, but who knows, sometimes the past lives in me.

**Related Characters:** Henry Lee

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 9

**Explanation and Analysis**

When this quote appears, Henry has just learned that items belonging to Japanese American families have been discovered in the Panama Hotel. Henry is at home listening to the news for more updates while also paging through old photo albums.

This quote reflects the complex role that memory plays in Henry's life. On the one hand, the love Henry has felt since he was 12 for his childhood sweetheart, Keiko, has sustained him throughout the profound changes of his adult life, including the birth of his son, Marty, and the illness and death of his wife, Ethel. However, the more painful memories of Henry's childhood—including the bullying he experienced at school and the loss of Keiko following her imprisonment in an internment camp—are not things Henry has ever spoken about. This quote seems to suggest that Henry's attempt "not to live in the past" has partially backfired. Because Henry has not confronted the suffering of his past, his negative memories seem to be imbued with more power to continue living in him. Part of Henry's journey over the course of the novel will be finding the courage to let others look into the past with him, which will help him to process his experiences in a way he hasn't been able to do on his own.

## Flag Duty (1942) Quotes

❝ "'I am Chinese,'" Chaz read out loud. "It don't make no difference to me, shrimp, you still don't celebrate Christmas, do you?"

[...]

"Ho, ho, ho," Henry replied. [...] We *do* celebrate Christmas, along with Cheun Jit, the lunar new year. But no, Pearl Harbor Day is not a festive occasion.

**Related Characters:** Chaz Preston, Henry Lee (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 18

**Explanation and Analysis**

This dialogue appears in a confrontation between Chaz Preston, a racist school bully, and Henry. Chaz is reacting to Henry's "I Am Chinese" button, which his father has started making him wear to school.

This quote exposes what a reductive worldview racists like Chaz have. Because Henry is not white, Chaz immediately assumes that he is not a Christian, a nonsensical conclusion to make. It is completely beyond Chaz's capacity to imagine that Henry not only celebrates Christmas, but that his Chinese heritage means he gets to enjoy double the holidays that Chaz does, including the lunar new year. At the same time that this quote shows how much of his fellow humans' rich experience Chaz is missing out on, it also reflects the unique loneliness of Henry's identity as a first-generation American. Henry has grown up sharing two cultures, but he doesn't fully feel like he belongs in either.

## Nihonmachi (1942) Quotes

❝ "I. Don't. Speak. Japanese." Keiko burst out laughing. "They don't even teach it anymore at the Japanese school. They stopped last fall. My mom and dad speak it, but they wanted me to learn only English. About the only Japanese *I* know is *wakarimasen* [...] It means 'I don't understand'—understand?"

**Related Characters:** Keiko Okabe (speaker), Henry Lee

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 32

**Explanation and Analysis**

Keiko says this to Henry the first time he tries to speak Japanese to her, using the phrase that will eventually become his and Keiko's catchphrase (*oai deki te ureshii desu*). This quote contrasts Henry's experience as a first-generation American and heritage speaker of Chinese with Keiko's experience as a second-generation American who does not speak her parents' native language. Both Henry and Keiko are familiar with the experience of not quite belonging, but their experiences do not directly mirror each other's. This is surprising to Henry himself, who assumed that Keiko spoke Japanese just as he speaks Chinese. In this way, Keiko helps to open Henry's eyes to how the experience of other new Americans is not interchangeable

with his own.

Another notable aspect of this quote is Keiko's brief allusion to the fact that the Japanese school in her neighborhood has stopped teaching Japanese, which reflects an increased attempt by her community to assimilate in the hopes of mitigating growing anti-Japanese sentiment.

## Speak Your American (1942) Quotes

He listened to his father during these lopsided, one-way conversations, but he never talked back. In fact, Henry rarely talked at all, except in English to acknowledge his advancing skills. But since his father understood only Cantonese and a little Mandarin, the conversations came as waves, back and forth, tidal shores of separate oceans.

**Related Characters:** Henry's Father, Henry Lee

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 46

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote occurs when Henry is at the breakfast table with his father, who has banned Henry from speaking Cantonese at home. Henry's father, who grew up in China, has led a very different life than Henry, who was born in Seattle. This fact alone could make it difficult for the two to connect, but Henry's father's edict has only widened the gulf separating these characters. By banning Henry from speaking Chinese, Henry's father has also shifted the power balance in the relationship, essentially barring Henry from standing up for himself even in the face of the many demands his father continues to make of him. Henry's father might have intended to help his son improve his English, but the effect of his action was to silence his child, isolating him even more than he already feels isolated. As a result, Henry begins to feel as out of place in his own home as he does amongst his white classmates at school. This quote thus clearly shows the negative effect that a lack of communication has on a relationship, regardless of whether the people in the relationship have good intentions.

"Why do you like jazz so much?" Keiko asked.

"I don't know," Henry said. […] "Maybe because it's so different, but people everywhere still like it, they just accept musicians, no matter what color they are. Plus, my father hates it."

"Why does he hate it?"

"Because it's *too* different, I guess."

**Related Characters:** Keiko Okabe, Henry Lee (speaker), Henry's Father

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 49

**Explanation and Analysis**

Henry and Keiko have this conversation after making plans to see their friend Sheldon Thomas perform at the Black Elks Club. This quote reflects the important role that music plays in the novel, as a place where all people, even in the most unlikely combinations, can belong. Of course, this very concept is a bit idealized—Henry says that jazz lovers "accept musicians no matter what color they are," but the fact that Sheldon has struggled as a black musician to find professional opportunities gives the lie to Henry's romanticized view. Still, music (and the Oscar Holden record in particular) will play a key role in Henry and Keiko's friendship, which suggests that Henry is not entirely wrong in identifying music as a unifying, joyful force.

## Jamaican Ginger (1942) Quotes

Oscar kept on hollering, "They just listening to music. Why you taking them away?" The old man […] hoisted his suspenders, casting a long shadow across the dance floor from the halcyon lights behind him, like God yelling down from the mountain. In his shadow lay the Japanese patrons […] facedown on the dance floor, guns pointed to their heads.

**Related Characters:** Oscar Holden (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 58

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quotation occurs when FBI agents raid the Black Elks Club and arrest all the Japanese patrons listening to the music. Oscar Holden, the club's most famous musician, protests the actions of the federal agents. The imagery in this quote is powerful, as it compares Oscar, a black man, directly to God, suggesting that a higher power would condemn the U.S. government's decision to arrest its own citizens and challenging the white supremacist views held by some of the novel's characters by directing comparing a black character to a merciful God. Additionally, the fact that the agents arrest the Japanese American patrons at gunpoint foreshadows the inhumane treatment they will face in internment camps—despite the fact that Japanese

Americans were supposedly imprisoned for their own safety as well as that of white Americans.

## Executive Orders (1942) Quotes

His father had devoted most of his life to nationalist causes, all aimed at furthering the Three People's Principles proclaimed by the late Chinese president. [...] as Henry grasped the point of his father's enthusiasm in these small local conflicts with Japanese Americans, it was mixed with a fair amount of confusion and contradiction. Father believed in a government *of the people* but was wary of who those people were.

**Related Characters:** Henry's Father, Henry Lee

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 68

### Explanation and Analysis

Henry has this reflection just before his father shares the news that President Roosevelt has created the War Relocation Authority by executive order. This quote clearly shows Henry wrestling to understand his father's thought process. On the one hand, Henry seems to acknowledge that his father's personal history as an advocate of Chinese nationalism has reasonably informed the way he thinks about issues not directly related to China. Deep down, however, Henry is aware of his father's hypocrisy; Henry's father believes Chinese people should control their own government, but is unbothered by the fact that Japanese Americans are being targeted by their government. Henry's father's prejudice against Japanese Americans mirrors the bigoted views espoused by many of Henry's white classmates, highlighting that just because a person has experienced discrimination, they are not necessarily immune to perpetuating that discrimination or hatred against others.

## Ume (1986) Quotes

But more than that, Henry hated being compared with his own father. In Marty's eyes, the plum hadn't fallen far from the tree; if anything, it was clinging stubbornly to the branches. That's what I've taught him by my example, Henry thought.

**Related Characters:** Henry's Father, Marty Lee, Henry Lee

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 84

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs just after Henry has met his son's fiancée, Samantha, for the first time. The three are in the backyard chatting and Marty has openly expressed surprise that Henry approves of his white fiancée. Henry is crushed to realize that Marty perceives him as close-minded. This is an important moment of reckoning for Henry, because Samantha's presence has helped him see that he has been nearly as uncommunicative with Marty as his own father was with him. For the first time, Henry is awakening to the fact that he has inherited and perpetuated his father's tendency to not express his feelings. Without Samantha, who brings with her a fresh perspective, it seems unlikely that Henry would have been able to see clearly how much his son's perception of him and his self-perception differ.

## Downhill (1942) Quotes

"I told you he was a Jap on the inside!"

Henry knew the voice. Turning around, he saw Chaz. Crowbar in one hand, and a wadded-up poster of an American flag in his other. *A different kind of flag duty*, Henry thought. The wooden door behind Chaz had long gashes where he'd scraped the poster off.

**Related Characters:** Chaz Preston, Henry Lee (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 99

### Explanation and Analysis

Henry has just promised to store Keiko's family photos for her, and is on his way home through Japantown with them when he comes upon Chaz and another school bully vandalizing Japanese businesses. The imagery in this quote emphasizes how impossible it was for Japanese Americans to prove their Americanness in a way that was satisfying to white Americans. This, combined with the fact that Henry thinks of Chaz's vandalism as "a different kind of flag duty" than the one Chaz performs at school every day, suggests that America sees itself as inherently a white nation, and that xenophobia is inextricably tied up with patriotism. Another important aspect of this quote is Chaz's use of a racial slur, which emphasizes the racist distrust that many white Americans felt of nonwhite Americans at this time. In using this slur, Chaz seems to feel triumphant, as though he was right in suspecting that Henry has lied about being

Chinese instead of Japanese.

## Records (1942) Quotes

Henry had been given dirty looks before but he'd never experienced something like this. He'd heard about things like this in the South. Places like Arkansas or Alabama, but not Seattle. Not the Pacific Northwest.

**Related Characters:** Keiko Okabe, Henry Lee

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 114

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote occurs when Keiko tries to purchase a copy of the Oscar Holden record to gift to Henry. The clerk refuses to accept Keiko's money because Keiko is Japanese. The comparison this quote makes between the American South, where anti-black discrimination was rampant, and the Pacific Northwest suggests that American society is everywhere steeped in racism, and that many Americans believe that people must be white in order to be fully American. Furthermore, the quote suggests that American society has always been this way, but that the heightened emotion of World War II has exposed society's fundamental racism in ways that weren't previously visible to non-black Americans of color. Finally, this quote is significant as an eye-opening moment for Henry, in that it shows him for the first time how racism can be expressed not just in words but also in direct action.

## Parents (1942) Quotes

The other children, and even the teachers, seemed unaware of the Japanese exodus from Bainbridge Island. The day had come and gone in relative quiet. Almost like it never happened. Lost in the news of the war—that the U.S. and Filipino troops were losing at Bataan and that a Japanese submarine had shelled an oil refinery somewhere in California.

**Related Characters:** Henry Lee

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 119-120

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote appears just after Japanese American citizens living on Bainbridge Island, off the coast of Washington State, have been removed from their homes. The readiness with which his classmates ignore and forget about this event shocks Henry, and alludes to the ease and rapidity with which society at large tends to forget about atrocities happening at home. Furthermore, this quote highlights the fact that people like Henry's classmates and teachers don't consider the suffering of Japanese Americans to be American suffering. Rather, they focus on what is happening to American troops in Bataan, or they take pleasure in the American victory over a Japanese submarine. This quote thus reflects how entirely Japanese Americans were excluded from collective American identity during this time period.

"I can be Chinese too," she teased him, pointing at Henry's button. "*Hou noi mou gin*." It meant "How are you today, beautiful?" in Cantonese.

"Where did you learn that?"

[…] "I looked it up at the library."

"*Oai deki te ureshii desu*," Henry returned.

For an awkward moment, they just looked at each other, beaming, not knowing what to say, or in which language to say it.

**Related Characters:** Keiko Okabe, Henry Lee (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 121

**Explanation and Analysis**

Henry and Keiko share this exchange just before they meet Keiko's parents for lunch. Both Henry and Keiko feel caught between languages here—but not in the stifling way that Henry feels unable to express himself at home with his parents. Rather, this quote shows how Henry and Keiko are just beginning to navigate how to express their feelings to each other. Henry will continue to struggle with this, particularly after he and Keiko are separated following her internment—but he and Keiko both will be able to fall back on the Japanese phrase they use as shorthand to convey the strength of their emotion. This quote suggests, then, that not only is love its own particular language, but it is also one that, with practice, can transcend all barriers.

## Better Them Than Us (1942) Quotes

There was a mix of crying toddlers, shuffling suitcases, and soldiers checking the paperwork of local citizens—most of whom were dressed in their Sunday best, the one or two suitcases they were allowed packed to the point of bursting. Each person wore a plain white tag, the kind you'd see on a piece of furniture, dangling down from a coat button.

**Related Characters:** Henry Lee

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 128-9

**Explanation and Analysis**

Henry witnesses this scene at the train station on the day that Japanese American families in Seattle are deported to internment camps. The imagery here is powerful in more ways than one. The tags that Japanese American citizens are wearing make them seem like "pieces of furniture," emphasizing how dehumanizing internment truly was. The tags are also symbolically reminiscent of the yellow stars that Jews in Europe were forced to wear during this same time period, drawing a striking parallel between Germany's treatment of its Jewish citizens and America's treatment of its Japanese citizens. Additionally, the fact that many families in this scene are wearing their "Sunday best" suggests how fervently these families want to assert that they are just as American as white families, and to be accepted as fully American in the same way.

## Empty Streets (1942) Quotes

"What if they send them back to Japan? Keiko doesn't even speak Japanese. What'll happen to her? She's more of an enemy there than she is here."

**Related Characters:** Henry Lee (speaker), Sheldon Thomas, Keiko Okabe

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 137

**Explanation and Analysis**

Henry expresses this fear in a conversation with Sheldon, just after he has said goodbye to the Okabes at the train station, from which they are being deported to an internment camp. This quote captures how war made identity even more complex for Americans that already struggled to feel American enough. In Japan, Keiko would not only be surrounded by people whose language she does not speak, but she would also be considered a true enemy given that Japan was at war with United States. Contrastingly, the United States is not at war with Japanese Americans—yet the government's treatment of Keiko suggests that she is no longer at all American in the government's eyes. Like Henry himself, Keiko doesn't exactly fit in either of the cultures to which she belongs—but in Keiko's case this non-belonging has much higher stakes.

## Visiting Hours (1942) Quotes

[The soldiers] were busy arguing with a pair of women from a local Baptist church who were trying to deliver a Japanese Bible to an elderly internee. […]

"Nothing printed in Japanese is allowed!" one of the soldiers argued.

[…]

"If I can't read it in *God's* plain English, it ain't coming into the camp," Henry overheard one of the soldiers say.

**Related Characters:** Henry Lee

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 162

**Explanation and Analysis**

Henry witnesses this scene take place as he is waiting to visit Keiko inside Camp Harmony. This quote captures the cruelty of the soldiers' treatment of their fellow Americans. Furthermore, the soldier's assertion that only material in "God's plain English" is allowed into the camp shows how internment was a policy fundamentally based in racism and white supremacy. The soldier's phrasing implies not only that God is English-speaking and white, but also that white Americans are superior to nonwhite Americans. The soldiers in this scene show that they are incapable of basic human empathy; this impulse has been erased in them by the force of racist paranoia.

## Home Again (1942) Quotes

It made Keiko's situation, while bleak, seem so much more appealing. Henry caught himself feeling a twinge of jealousy. At least she was with her family. For now anyway. At least they understood. At least they wouldn't send *her* away.

**Related Characters:** Henry's Father, Keiko Okabe, Henry Lee

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 167

**Explanation and Analysis**

Henry has this thought immediately after his father declares that he intends to send Henry to China the following year to finish his schooling. Henry's father's announcement makes him feel as if he is about to be exiled from his own family. The fact that Henry feels jealousy of Keiko, even though she is imprisoned in a camp, emphasizes how desperate Henry is to feel accepted and loved by his parents. Neither Henry's father nor mother consider that China is a foreign country to Henry because they still consider it their home. Yet again, Henry finds himself unable to explain himself to his parents. As if his experience as a first-generation American weren't already complex and difficult to express, he is also still forbidden from speaking English at home.

## Camp Anyway (1942) Quotes

"[My father]'s disowned me. My parents stopped speaking to me this week. But my mother still sort of acts like I'm around." The words came out so casually, even Henry was surprised at how normal it felt. But communication in his home had been far from ordinary for almost a year; this was just a new, final wrinkle.

**Related Characters:** Henry Lee (speaker), Keiko Okabe, Henry's Mother, Henry's Father

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 193

**Explanation and Analysis**

Henry shares this information with Keiko when he visits her at Camp Harmony. At this point in the novel, Henry feels almost numb to his parents' silence and disregard for his happiness—a fact that emphasizes the destructive force of silence. Henry is still aware of how unusually painful his family situation is—yet he has also accepted it as normal. Nevertheless, the fact that he notes to Keiko that his mother "still sort of" notices him suggests that, deep down, Henry still longs to have a healthy relationship with his parents. His friendship with Keiko gives Henry a sense of stability and emotional connection, but this quote seems to subtly suggest that no relationship can fully make up for the lack of a relationship with one's parents.

Through the slosh of the rain, Henry heard music from the camp. The song grew louder and louder, straining the limits of the speakers it came from. It was the record. Their record. Oscar Holden's "Alley Cat Strut." Henry could almost pick out Sheldon's part. It shouted at the night. Louder than the storm.

**Related Characters:** Henry Lee (speaker), Oscar Holden, Sheldon Thomas, Keiko Okabe

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 195

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote occurs as Henry is leaving Camp Harmony after giving Keiko Sheldon's copy of the Oscar Holden record as a birthday gift. Despite the fact that the guards have canceled the prisoners' concert due to the rain, someone (presumably Keiko) plays the Oscar Holden record anyway. The music, which Oscar Holden improvised in honor of Henry and Keiko's earlier visit to the Black Elks Club, symbolizes Henry and Keiko's love for one another. The fact that the music soars over the sounds of the storm, in opposition to the guards' authority, reflects the power of love to persist and even to flourish despite difficult circumstances.

## V-J Day (1945) Quotes

He'd wondered what his father would do to occupy his time now that the Japanese had surrendered. Then again, he knew the war would go on in his father's mind. This time it would be the Kuomintang, the nationalists versus the communists. China's struggle would continue, and so would his father's.

**Related Characters:** Henry's Father, Henry Lee

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 260

**Explanation and Analysis**

Henry has this thought as he is on his way home after having learned of Japan's surrender and the official end of World War II. Henry understands that his father is a man mired in memory. Henry's father will never be able to let go of his hatred for Japan, despite the end of the war, and despite the fact that Henry's father is in a weakened state of health. For no reason other than the fact that he cannot help himself, Henry's father will continue to nourish his resentment of all things Japanese. This quote embodies the negative power that memory can have when the rememberer gives in to bitterness. The role that memory plays in the life of Henry's father thus contrast sharply with the hopeful, positive memories that Henry holds on to throughout his own life.

## New York (1986) Quotes

❝ Standing in front of him was a woman in her fifties, her hair shorter than he remembered [...] Her chestnut brown eyes, despite the lifetime she wore in the lovely lines of her face, shone as clear and fluid as ever.

The same eyes that had looked inside him all those years ago. Hopeful eyes.

**Related Characters:** Keiko Okabe, Henry Lee

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 283-4

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears when Henry travels to New York to reunite with Keiko. The first thing Henry notices about Keiko when she opens the door of her apartment is the hope in her eyes. This image suggests that, like Henry himself, Keiko has focused on the good memories of her childhood instead of the negative ones. Furthermore, the fact that Keiko's eyes seem the same to Henry as they did almost a full lifetime ago implies that Henry and Keiko's bond has never—indeed could never—be broken. The novel closes shortly after this quote appears, but the image of Keiko's face—lined, but dominated by shining eyes—suggests that Henry and Keiko will be able to pick up where they left off, despite all the experiences they have had since last they saw each other.

# SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## THE PANAMA HOTEL (1986)

Amongst a crowd of curious onlookers—including a television crew—Henry Lee stands before the **Panama Hotel** in downtown Seattle. The hotel once served as "a gateway between Seattle's Chinatown and Nihonmachi, Japantown," and the only time Henry has visited it, before today, was when he was 12 years old. Now, at age 56, Henry is a widower (his wife, Ethel, died of cancer six months earlier) and father to "an ungrateful son" named Marty. Standing before the hotel, Henry reflects on the fact that he took an early retirement from his job to care for Ethel in her illness, and that he now finds himself with no one to spend his time with, "a man between lifetimes."

*The novel's opening scene introduces protagonist Henry Lee as a man struggling with his identity, even in middle age. The feeling of being caught between two different lifetimes—even two different versions of one's self—and of struggling to find a sense of belonging is a central experience for Henry throughout the novel, especially in his childhood. These opening moments also hint at the key role that love will play in the novel, thanks to the mention of Henry's late wife, Ethel. Finally, it is worth noting that the novel opens on the image of the Panama Hotel, which will function as a symbol of the persistent force of memory in the novel.*

Henry approaches the steps of the **hotel**, which has been boarded up since 1950, and listens as the hotel's new owner, Palmyra Pettison, announces that the belongings of 37 Japanese American families deported from Seattle to internment camps during World War II have been found in the basement of the hotel. Henry watches as workers bring some items (including a bamboo parasol painted with koi) out of the hotel and finds himself wondering "if his own broken heart might be found in there, hidden among the unclaimed possessions of another time."

*The notion of memories being "buried," like the parasol and other items Henry watches being excavated from the hotel basement, is of crucial importance. As the story unfolds, Henry will allow himself to let go of his conviction that painful memories are better off buried—left unspoken and unacknowledged. Allowing himself to finally face his broken heart over the course of the novel will enable Henry not only to improve his relationship with his son, but also to rediscover true love.*

## MARTY LEE (1986)

Henry returns home and turns on the news to listen for information about the discovery at the **hotel**. Soon, Marty arrives for a visit. Marty is a college student studying chemistry, and Henry quietly resents the fact that he only seems to visit when he needs to do laundry or borrow money. Today, Marty presents Henry with a *lai see* (lucky-money) envelope containing his transcript and proudly tells his father that he will be graduating *summa cum laude*.

*With the introduction of Marty's character, the narration makes clear that Henry has a strained relationship with his son. Henry seems to crave more of an emotional connection with Marty—not just a transactional one, where Marty only visits when he needs something. However, as ensuing chapters will show, part of the reason Henry struggles to forge a deeper connection with his son is due to the toxic relationship Henry had with his own father. Though a small detail, the fact that Marty brings Henry a* lai see *envelope to share his good news foreshadows the fact that Henry and Marty will be able to improve their relationship. Henry and Marty's communication is damaged, but Marty's gift of the traditional Chinese envelope shows that he has a deep respect of his father.*

Henry jokes that next time he sees Marty, the roles will be reversed and he will have to borrow money from his son. Marty tells his father that if he wants him to finish his college degree, he will "put him on scholarship." Though he doesn't say anything to Marty, the word *scholarship* triggers painful memories for Henry. He remembers dropping out of college because he "had a hard time fitting in," and also thinks about his elementary school days and "the unkind glances of school-yard enemies," which make "a harsh contrast to the smiling innocence of their yearbook pictures" in the yearbook Henry still has.

*For the first time, the reader gets a glimpse at Henry's difficult childhood. While the novel will delve into Henry's school days as a young boy, it is noteworthy that this passage mentions Henry had trouble fitting in even when he was in college. The difficulty of finding acceptance and community as a nonwhite first-generation American is clearly not limited to one's childhood. Though Henry has grown into a mostly well-adjusted and successful adult, quiet, painful moments like this one emphasize that his journey toward belonging is an ongoing one.*

## I AM CHINESE (1942)

The narrative jumps backward in time. Henry is twelve years old, and his parents have forbidden him from speaking Cantonese to them, wanting him to improve his English. On this day at breakfast, Henry's father has just pinned a **button** reading "I Am Chinese" on his son's school shirt. Henry, confused, asks: "If I'm not supposed to speak Chinese, why do I need to wear this button?" Because neither Henry's father nor his mother speaks enough English to understand this question, Henry leaves for school without another word.

*Henry's father is introduced as a domineering force in young Henry's life. His refusal to explain why he is forcing Henry to wear the button epitomizes the lack of communication between father and son. Henry's father's silence will eat away at the already-strained relationship he has with his son over the course of the novel, eventually culminating in Henry's father being physically unable to speak due to a series of strokes. Henry's musing about why he needs to wear the button while he has, at the same time, been banned by his father from speaking Chinese at home speaks to the complexity of negotiating a double identity (in Henry's case, being Chinese American).*

Henry makes his way to school in the opposite direction of the other Chinese American kids his age, who all attend Chinese school. Henry attends the all-white Rainier Elementary; Henry's father and mother like to brag that their son is at school "scholarshipping," the only sentence they say in English.

*As Henry heads to school, many of the Chinese American students his age hurl insults at him, including "baak gwai" or "white devil." This brief moment—an almost daily occurrence in young Henry's life—shows how painfully isolating life can be as a first-generation American. Henry is rejected by his Chinese American peers for being too white, and by his white American peers for being too Chinese.*

Henry stops halfway to school to give his lunch to his friend Sheldon Thomas, a black street musician who plays jazz on his saxophone. Henry has made this a pattern, since a bully named Chaz Preston always beats Henry and steals his lunch if he brings it with him to school. In exchange for the lunch, Sheldon always gives Henry a nickel from his music profits, which Henry uses to buy a **starfire lily** for his mother once a week.

*Henry's love for his mother (and hers for him) shines through in this passage. Henry's mother deliberately packs "an American lunch" for her son each week. Henry appreciates this because it makes him feel like he stands out less at school; thus, he feels guilty not eating the lunch his mother has carefully prepared. His gift of the weekly starfire lily symbolizes the love that Henry and his mother share, as bruised and imperfect as it is.*

Sheldon comments on Henry's **"I Am Chinese" button**, saying: "That's a darn good idea, what with Pearl Harbor and all." Henry grumblingly explains that the button was his father's idea—his father, who hates the Japanese for bombing his native China for the past four years. He also thinks ahead to his day at school, where he will spend his lunch period working in the cafeteria under the grouchy eye of Mrs. Beatty, the cafeteria manager. As always, he will miss recess to eat canned peaches for lunch, alone in the storage room.

*Sheldon's comment provides important historical context about Henry's button. Anti-Japanese sentiment in the United States was inflamed by the Japanese attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. By forcing his son to wear the button proclaiming his identity, Henry's father is hoping to shield Henry from this xenophobia. At the same time, Henry's father exhibits bigotry of his own against Japanese people; forcing Henry to wear the button is also Henry's father's way of actively disclaiming any association with a group of people he has always hated. This passage thus shows that bigotry exists in nonwhite, as well as white, American communities, and that it is corrosive no matter who is practicing it.*

## FLAG DUTY (1942)

Henry arrives at school and notices that two of the school's bullies, Chaz Preston and Denny Brown, both sons of "prominent local families," are on flag duty. As Henry walks by, Chaz blocks him and says: "That's right, you Japs don't salute *American* flags, do you?" In response, Henry silently points to his **button**, which Chaz reads aloud. "It don't make no difference to me, shrimp," he says. "You still don't celebrate Christmas, do you?" Before Henry can offer a retort, the bell rings and Chaz leaves, while Henry walks to his first class, where the teacher punishes him with detention for being tardy.

*Chaz's comments show how narrow-minded and lacking in nuance bigoted thinking is. Initially, Chaz does not even bother to consider that Henry is Chinese, rather than Japanese. He dismisses this blunder by making the racist claim that Henry must not celebrate Christmas, since he is not white. Chaz fails to recognize that Henry's identity as a Chinese American actually means he gets double the holidays; Henry's identity is much richer than Chaz could ever fathom. Furthermore, it never once dawns on Chaz that Henry has no reason to salute any flag* other *than the American flag, given that Henry has been an American citizen since birth.*

## KEIKO (1942)

Henry arrives in the school kitchen to find a girl his age washing lunch trays. Mrs. Beatty introduces the girl as a new transfer student named Keiko. When Mrs. Beatty leaves the two alone, Henry finds out that Keiko's last name is Okabe; she is Japanese. Henry's father, a Chinese nationalist who has organized an office in Seattle to raise funds for Chinese forces fighting the Japanese in China, has forbidden Henry from having Japanese friends. Keiko notices Henry's cold reaction and says, "I'm American."

*Henry's hesitancy in befriending Keiko is critical to note. This shows that Henry has unconsciously absorbed some of his father's anti-Japanese beliefs. Furthermore, the fact that Keiko feels compelled to assert her identity as an American shows how insidious bigotry is: Keiko has to defend herself (to another Asian American, no less) in order to "prove" that she belongs in the space she occupies.*

Henry and Keiko work side by side serving lunch to their classmates, who taunt them with racial slurs and pull their corners of their eyes in caricature of Asian features. When their work is finally done, Henry and Keiko share canned pears in the storage room and Henry thinks that the food "taste[s] especially good that day."

*The fact that Henry has already begun to enjoy Keiko's company illustrates a difference between Henry and his father: Henry is far less rigid in his thinking, and is open to experiencing actual interactions with a Japanese American person, rather than allowing his preconceived notions about an entire group of people get in the way. Additionally, the cruel, racist behavior of Henry and Keiko's classmates emphasizes again how monolithic xenophobia is as a structure of thought. Henry and Keiko are both Asian, so they are lumped together as outsiders, despite the differences between them and their cultural heritages (to say nothing of the fact that both of them were born in America). Finally, the fact that Henry's lunch tastes better to him after having met Keiko foreshadows the power that love will have to transcend painful circumstances in both Henry and Keiko's lives.*

## THE WALK HOME (1942)

It has been a week since Keiko arrived at Rainier Elementary, and she and Henry have established a pattern: after school, they meet to clean the classrooms, "the second part of their work duties." Today, Henry and Keiko finish their cleaning and find Chaz Preston waiting outside the school. Chaz threatens to beat Henry, calling him "Jap lover." Before Chaz can act, Mrs. Beatty arrives and assures Chaz that if he hurts Henry, he'll be expected to perform Henry's kitchen duties. Chaz relents, but before he goes he shoves Henry to the ground and rips off his **"I Am Chinese" button**, pinning it to his own shirt.

*This scene is important to the character development of Mrs. Beatty. Up until this scene, Mrs. Beatty has been indifferent to the bullying Henry has faced. Here, however, Mrs. Beatty stands up for Henry. This moment demonstrates that even imperfect people can be allies in the face of hatred, and that love can come from unexpected places.*

After Keiko helps him up, Henry turns to thank Mrs. Beatty, but she has already left. Keiko asks how long Henry has attended Rainier, and Henry explains that his parents want him to have a Western education instead of "going back to Canton for [his] Chinese schooling like all the other kids in [his] neighborhood." When Keiko asks why, Henry says that the Japanese army has invaded northeastern China. Though the conflict is far from Canton, his parents don't want Henry to be in China—even though Henry's father always wanted his son to finish school in China.

*This is a key plot point, as Henry's Chinese schooling will later become a point of contention between Henry and his father. This conversation also reemphasizes the fact that Henry feels almost as different from his Chinese American peers as from his white American peers. Part of the reason Henry and Keiko will develop such a strong connection is due to their shared experience of not fully belonging in either "half" of their identities.*

Keiko asks whether Henry was born in China. He replies that he was born in Seattle, on the outskirts of Chinatown. Keiko says that she was born in that same hospital. She is a second-generation American; her grandfather was the first in her family to immigrate to the United States.

*Henry and Keiko's experiences with bigotry differ, as a first- and second-generation American respectively. However, both characters find themselves forced to "prove" their claim to Americanness, because their nonwhiteness disqualifies them in the eyes of many of the white characters.*

Henry realizes that he and Keiko have walked all the way across Chinatown to the edge of the Japanese neighborhood, Nihonmachi. Keiko gestures around her to the many broken windows and boarded up shops, as well as a public works employee replacing the Mikado Street sign with one that says Dearborn Street. "This is why they send me [to Rainier]," Keiko says of her parents. Henry thinks Keiko looks afraid for the first time since he's met her.

*This is an important moment of foreshadowing; the Americanization of the street sign hints at how all traces of Japanese identity are being gradually erased from Japantown. Ultimately, Japanese American families themselves will be removed from Japantown and place in internment camps.*

## NIHONMACHI (1942)

It is a Saturday—a special day for Henry because it is the only day of the week he can listen to his friend Sheldon Thomas play jazz. Henry arrives to listen to Sheldon, and then chats with him after the performance. Sheldon informs Henry he has joined a union of black musicians, and that he has booked a cancellation gig at the Black Elks Club that night, playing with a famous musician named Oscar Holden. Sheldon asks about Keiko—he's seen Henry walking home from school with her. Henry insists Keiko is just a friend. He points to the new **"I Am Chinese" button** his father made him to replace the one Chaz stole. "My parents would kill me if they found out," he says. Sheldon nevertheless encourages him to use a Japanese phrase the next time he sees Keiko: *oai deki te ureshii desu*, or how are you today, beautiful?

*Though he is a talented saxophone player, Sheldon struggles to find professional opportunities that match his talent because he is black. Even when he is not experiencing overt racism, his career options are limited because of his skin color. Anti-Japanese sentiment (and anti-Asian sentiment more broadly) may be flaring up because the United States is at war with Japan, but Sheldon's character is a reminder that American society is structurally and historically racist—not just xenophobic. Sheldon's advice to Henry to use a Japanese phrase when speaking to Keiko is an important plot point, as this phrase will become a kind of emotional shorthand for the two sweethearts.*


Henry wishes Sheldon luck at his Black Elks Club performance, and heads toward Nihonmachi. He realizes he's only ever walked Keiko to the edge of the Japanese neighborhood, and that it will be difficult to find where she lives. Henry sits on a bench and reads a Japanese newspaper, from which he learns that a Chinatown committee called the Chong Wa Association, to which his father belongs, has called for a boycott of the entire Japanese community of Seattle.

*Even though Henry's father is not present in this scene, Henry's entry into Nihonmachi nevertheless represents an important evolution in his relationship to his father. On the one hand, Henry's father has joined other prominent Chinese community leaders in boycotting Japanese businesses, rather than standing in solidarity with Japanese Americans. Henry, on the other hand, feels a genuine connection with Keiko, and this foray into the heart of Nihonmachi represents the first time he has taken an action that formally breaks with the anti-Japanese precedent set by his father.*


As he sits, Henry notices a photo of Keiko holding a parasol on display in the window of the Ochi Photography Studio. Henry approaches the store and asks the photographer if he knows where the Okabes live. The photographer is surprised to hear that both Henry and Keiko attend an all-white school; "you both must be very special students," he says. The photographer does not know the Okabes' address but he points Henry in the direction of Kobe Park, suggesting he might find Keiko there.

*Henry recoils against the photographer's use of the word "special," thinking that it is more of "a burden" than anything to stand out amongst one's peers. However, Henry does catch himself thinking that Keiko might be special. This is the first inkling Henry has had that he might feel more for Keiko than platonic affection—an important moment given that Henry and Keiko will ultimately fall in love with each other.*


Henry makes his way to Kobe Park; he knows the area well since he and Keiko walk through the park every day on their way home from school. There are street performers near the park and Henry finds himself caught up in the music. Suddenly, he hears Keiko's voice. Keiko is waving to him from a hill in the park, where she has been sketching. Henry joins her and then nervously repeats the phrase Sheldon taught him. Keiko bursts out laughing and reveals that she doesn't speak Japanese. Henry says the phrase means "what time is it?" when Keiko asks him to translate.

*Henry embarrasses himself with his attempt to flirt with Keiko. This is a noteworthy moment, because Henry will later struggle even more painfully with his conflicting desires to tell Keiko how he feels and to spare them both the pain of acknowledging feelings that they probably cannot act on. Another reason this passage is important is because it highlights the differences between Henry and Keiko's life experiences as first- and second-generation Americans respectively. Henry is a heritage speaker of Cantonese (meaning he learned the language from his parents, for whom Cantonese is their native language). Keiko speaks only English. While this doesn't make her any more or less American than Henry, this does mean that Keiko has a different experience of what it means to "belong" as a nonwhite person in America, as will become clear when she is imprisoned with other Japanese Americans in an internment camp later.*

Henry asks to see Keiko's sketchbook and she shows him that she was drawing a picture of him. Surprised and delighted, Henry asks how long Keiko was watching him in the crowd amongst the street performers. Keiko jokes, "So sorry, I don't speak English," and leaves, telling Henry she'll see him at school.

*Keiko's lightheartedness shows that she has a sense of humor about her complex identity as a Japanese American. The fact that Keiko was drawing Henry in her treasured sketchbook also suggests that she might reciprocate some of the attraction that Henry has begun to feel toward her.*

## BUD'S JAZZ RECORDS (1986)

Lost in sorrowful memories of his late wife, Ethel, Henry decides to go to Bud's Jazz Records to look for a recording by Oscar Holden. Allegedly, Holden recorded a master session on vinyl but none of the printed copies survived. Henry chats with the storeowner about the mysterious **Holden record**, as well as the recent discovery of World War II belongings at the **Panama Hotel**. When Henry tries to buy a record, the storeowner gifts it to him, offering his condolences about Ethel's death.

*At this point, the reader has not yet learned the emotional significance of the Oscar Holden record that Henry is searching for. However, this scene suggests that the record holds a place of importance in Henry's memory. The fact that Henry and the shop owner discuss the record in conjunction with the newly-discovered items at the hotel foreshadows the fact that the record is intimately connected to Henry's relationship with Keiko.*

## DIM SUM (1986)

It is the weekend, and Henry is on his way to meet Marty for lunch in Chinatown. At the restaurant, Marty asks whether something is bothering his dad. After being pressed, Henry confesses that he is planning to head to the **Panama Hotel** and ask to look around. Marty asks whether Henry is planning to look for "some long-lost jazz **record**," but Henry says only that he's "looking for *something*." He assures his son that if he finds "something worth sharing," he'll let him know.

*Henry demonstrates that he has inherited from his father an unwillingness to communicate what he is feeling. Marty shows some interest in breaking through to his father, but Henry will not realize the extent to which he has replicated his father's poor patterns of communication until later in the novel, when Marty's fiancée, Samantha, comes on the scene.*

Henry thinks about when Ethel told him the news of her cancer. She'd said that she hoped her death would bring Henry and Marty closer together. Henry thinks about all there is "to say and ask" his son, but the two men sit through lunch in silence.

*Without Ethel as a bridge between him and his son, Henry has become almost incapable of communication. Ethel seems to have mirrored the role Henry's mother took of liaison between Henry and his father. Similarly, Samantha will ultimately serve as the conduit between Henry and Marty.*

## LAKE VIEW (1986)

Henry says goodbye to Marty, and then heads to the cemetery where Ethel is buried. He lays **starfire lilies**, which he and Ethel used to grow in their garden, on Ethel's grave. He also takes a penny out of his pocket. Per Chinese tradition, when Ethel was buried, the funeral guests received envelopes containing a peppermint and a penny. The mint allowed guests to taste sweetness, not bitterness, and the penny allowed them to buy more candy as a "token of lasting life and enduring happiness." Henry ate the mint at Ethel's funeral, but he has saved the quarter. Now he places the penny on Ethel's grave and asks for her blessing for "some things [he] need[s] to do."

*Henry's gift of the symbolic starfire lilies shows that he genuinely loved Ethel, even though she was not (as the reader will learn) his true love. Lilies thematically connect Ethel and Henry's mother, two women for woman Henry felt genuine, if imperfect, affection. This scene is also noteworthy because of Henry's request that Ethel give her blessing from beyond the grave. This highlights how fraught Henry's decision to reengage with his memories of Keiko truly is. Henry does not want to betray his love for Ethel, and his request shows that he is committing to doing right by both of the women he has loved.*

Henry removes a lily from Ethel's bouquet and places it on the nearby grave of his mother. He also brushes off his father's grave before exiting the cemetery. As he leaves, he passes the Nisei War Memorial Monument, "dedicated to Japanese American veterans—locals who'd died fighting the Germans." Henry tips his hat toward the memorial as he walks by.

*Henry pays tribute to this small, often neglected monument. The fact that he does so implicitly emphasizes how readily society at large has forgotten about the suffering and sacrifices of Japanese Americans during World War II—even those families who lived right in Seattle itself.*

## SPEAK YOUR AMERICAN (1942)

It's a Monday morning, and Henry nervously dresses for school, looking forward to seeing Keiko at lunch. At breakfast Henry's father comments on how happy his son looks, asking if the school "fix[ed] the stairs" his son fell down. In actuality, Chaz Preston beat up Henry on his first day at Rainier, but Henry told his father and mother that he had fallen down the stairs. Now, Henry merely nods, finishing his breakfast quickly and then leaving for school.

*This passage shows that the silence in the Lee house is not due only to the fact that Henry's father has banned his son from speaking Chinese. There is also an emotional distance that Henry cannot bridge. Henry cannot communicate to his parents how difficult his life is as a first-generation American—not when they have sacrificed so much to give him what they believe is the best education opportunity possible.*

On Wednesday of the same week, Henry and Keiko leave school together and discuss Keiko's sketchbook. Keiko explains that her mother was an artist at her age, and that she wanted to move to New York City. Now, Keiko's mother can no longer paint due to arthritis, but she wants Keiko to attend an art college. Henry reminds Keiko as gently as he can that the art school won't accept her because she is Japanese. "That's why my mom wants me to apply there," Keiko replies. "To be the first."

*This passage not only shows how passionate and motivated Keiko is, but also highlights that she experiences more than one kind of discrimination. When Henry first reminds Keiko that she won't be accepted at the art school of her dreams, she asks, "Because I'm a girl?" This hints at the way that society imposes not only racial but gender discrimination as well. The fact that Keiko is equally determined to combat both highlights what a fiercely optimistic character she is.*

Henry and Keiko head toward the street corner where Sheldon usually plays, and on the way Keiko reveals that she knows what *oai deki te ureshii desu* means—she asked her mother. Henry is embarrassed but Keiko thanks him; "it was a nice thing to say," she insists.

*This is another moment in which Keiko seems to affirm that she reciprocates Henry's nascent romantic feelings. It's noteworthy, though, that neither character has yet worked out the best way to express their feelings. Learning the language of love is something Henry and Keiko will have to tackle together.*

Sheldon is not on his usual corner; Henry wonders whether Sheldon may have landed a regular gig playing with Oscar Holden. Henry starts to daydream about seeing Sheldon play at the Black Elks Club. Suddenly, Keiko announces: "I want to go." "You don't even know what I'm thinking," Henry says. "If you're going to listen to him play," says Keiko, "I'm coming with you." The two make a plan to meet at the Black Elks Club that evening. Henry walks Keiko home and, as he leaves, feels "his heart rac[ing]" and "his gut tighten[ing]."

*This is an important plot point because jazz music will become a significant bonding experience for Henry and Keiko. Another reason this conversation is noteworthy is for the way Keiko seems to read Henry's mind. These two characters are emotionally in sync in a way that Henry will not at any point experience with another character, suggesting that this emotional harmony is an experience unique to true love.*

## JAMAICAN GINGER (1942)

Keiko meets Henry at the Black Elks Club, but both are disappointed to find a sign that says no minors are allowed inside after six o'clock. Improvising, the two decide to listen to the club's music from the back alley, sitting on a pair of milk crates. After the first set, a man comes outside for a smoke and begins chatting with Henry and Keiko. When Henry says he is a fan of Oscar Holden, the man promises to let Henry and Keiko into the club if they go down to the pharmacy and pick up some liquor for him called Jamaican Ginger.

*The reason this man (who will turn out to be Oscar Holden) is asking Henry and Keiko to buy liquor on his behalf is because black clubs, like the Black Elks Club, are not permitted to hold liquor licenses. Though this moment is not hugely important to the overall plot of the novel, it does serve to underscore the wide-reaching structural discrimination faced by black Americans during this time period.*

Henry and Keiko fetch the liquor and return to the club. They are transfixed by the music and delighted when they realize the man they were speaking to is Oscar Holden himself. Oscar dedicates a song called "Alley Cats" to his "two new friends." The musicians also play Duke Ellington's "I Got It Bad and That Ain't Good." Henry and Keiko are transfixed by the music. Keiko even notices one of her former teachers in the crowd, along with several other Japanese couples—though most of the audience is black.

*As he listens to the music, Henry notices the makeup of the audience: mostly black, with a few Japanese patrons intermingled. Henry sees no "Chinese faces" in the crowd. This moment is thus bittersweet. Henry loves jazz music for the way it brings people together, but even amongst other jazz lovers, Henry still doesn't feel as though he fully belongs.*

Henry and Keiko chat with Sheldon after the performance, and then leave the club through the kitchen—only to find FBI officials waiting in the alley. The agents swarm into the club and arrest all six Japanese patrons inside, even as some of them shout that they are American. In the kitchen, an agent confronts Henry and Keiko, but Henry frantically points to the **"I Am Chinese" button** he is still wearing. Oscar and Sheldon also come to the children's defense. When Keiko asks the agents why they are making arrests, one of the men says that the Japanese patrons might be "collaborators." "They can get the death penalty if they're found guilty of treason," he says. "But they'll probably just spend a few years in a nice safe jail cell."

*The arrest of the Black Elk Club's Japanese patrons is an important turning point in the novel because it is the first in a series of government-sanctioned attacks on Japanese Americans. The irony of the FBI agent's explanation is crucial: "They'll probably just spend a few years in a nice safe jail cell," he says. The agent likely means that arresting Japanese Americans will keep* white *Americans safe, by weeding out any possible enemy spies or collaborators. In reality, though, it is the Japanese Americans themselves who aren't safe—from their neighbors or from their own government.*

Henry hurries Keiko out of the club, where police cars and reporters are waiting. Keiko is furious; "I can't watch this anymore," she says. Henry apologizes for bringing her to the club, and sees Keiko look down at his **button**. "You *are* Chinese, aren't you, Henry?" Henry is unsure how to respond, but nods anyway. "Be who you are," Keiko says. "But *I'm* an American."

*Keiko's anger at Henry highlights what a difficult position Henry finds himself in, time and again, as a Chinese American. Keiko seems to resent that Henry protected himself (and by extension, her) by embracing the Chinese part of his identity. In Keiko's view, she, Henry, and all the Japanese American patrons who were arrested should be protected because they are Americans, first and foremost. Henry, it would seem, understands the impracticality of this vision, even as he also longs for it.*

## I AM JAPANESE (1986)

Henry is on his way to the **Panama Hotel** to request permission to look through the belongings that have been discovered. On the bus ride there, he finds himself wishing he could tell Marty about Keiko, but he feels conflicted given that Marty's mother, Ethel, has only been dead six months.

*Henry can be seen clearly struggling with what it means to love and be loyal to someone. His memory of Keiko has in many ways sustained him, especially throughout Ethel's battle with cancer, but Henry does not want to defile Ethel's memory by revisiting his love for Keiko. Though his mind might be eased by talking to his son, Henry shows here that he has inherited his father's tendency toward repression and silence.*

At the **hotel**, Henry meets with Palmyra Pettison, the building's new owner. She asks whether Henry is a relative of one of the families whose belongings were discovered. Henry claims he is Japanese, and writes Okabe—his "family's name"—on Palmyra's list.

*This plot point is worth noting because it represents the first time in the novel that it is helpful for Henry to be mistaken for a Japanese (rather than a Chinese) American. The fact that Henry is willing to lie about his identity in the hopes of learning something about Keiko's fate also underscores how devoted he is to his childhood love (despite the qualms he has about remaining loyal to his late wife).*

## THE BASEMENT (1986)

Henry enters the basement of the **hotel**, which is packed full of trunks and looks like "a secondhand store." Henry feels sure that Keiko and her family's belongings must be somewhere in the room. He starts looking through items, and finds a photo album with pictures of a Japanese family he doesn't know. Almost half the photos are missing from the album, and Henry notices that the album's pages smell like smoke.

*The tremendous number of items in the hotel's basement serves as a testament to how many lives were uprooted—even completely destroyed—due to the U.S. government's interment of Japanese Americans during World War II. The fact that all of these personal belongings have survived also symbolically represents the way that memories, particularly of trauma, reassert themselves even when they are believed to have been long buried.*

## EXECUTIVE ORDERS (1942)

The morning after the raid at the Black Elks Club, Henry wakes to find his father reading a newspaper article about the arrests of countless local Japanese people. Henry's father triumphantly announces that President Roosevelt has just signed a new executive order creating the War Relocation Authority. Combined with a previous executive order allowing the federal government power to designate any area of the country a military area, this means that the government can make arrests of anyone it wants. Henry's father is thrilled that the Japanese will be targeted, but Henry's mother is confused. "They can't take them all away," she says. "What will happen to the strawberry farms on Vashon Island and the sawmill on Bainbridge?" Henry is horrified by this news and leaves for school without a word.

*Henry's father gloats over the government's decision to "relocate" Japanese Americans. Yet again, this is a moment that emphasizes how bigotry is alive in nonwhite as well as white American communities. Another reason this scene is noteworthy is because it suggests that Henry's mother is a more empathetic, less bitter person than Henry's father. However, because of the literal and emotional silence that dominates the Lee household, Henry is unable to connect with his mother over her innate tenderness.*

Henry walks to school past Sheldon's old corner. Sheldon now has a permanent gig at the Black Elks Club, and Henry misses the sense of protection his friend gave him from school bullies. At school, Henry learns that the father of one of his classmates, Will Whitworth, was killed by Japanese dive bombers while serving at sea. Henry feels sorry for Will, even though Will once beat him. "Fathers weren't perfect," Henry thinks, "but even a bad one seemed better than no father at all."

*Will's story reveals that Henry does, in fact, feel a degree of love for his father, as flawed a man as he is. Additionally, this passage implicitly illustrates the difference between Henry and his father. Whereas Henry's father hates all Japanese Americans due to the fact that Japan has long been at war with his native China, Henry is capable of feeling sympathy even for someone who has directly wronged him.*

At lunch, Henry heads to the cafeteria but Keiko isn't there. Instead, Mrs. Beatty tells him, he'll be working alongside Denny Brown, who was caught stealing from the school's store and is working in the cafeteria as punishment. When Henry and Denny begin serving lunch, Henry notices that his white classmates want Denny to serve them; "To *them*, we're at war and *I'm the enemy*," Henry realizes. Henry leaves school early and heads toward Nihonmachi, noticing smoke rising in the distance.

*Despite the fact that China was allied with the United States during World War II, Henry's classmates persist in viewing him as their enemy. This underscores the fact that white Americans' xenophobia is race-based; Henry's classmates hate him because he is not white. This suggests that society's (and the government's) anti-Japanese feeling at the time was also based in racism, rather than in a rational concern for the safety of American citizens.*

## FIRES (1942)

Henry avoids walking through Chinatown; he doesn't want to run into one of the truant officers, members of local Chinese families who patrol the streets looking for children skipping school. Henry heads toward the photography studio where he once saw a picture of Keiko on display. He finds the photographer he spoke with that day photographing what looks like a garbage fire. The photographer explains that families are actually burning "anything that might connect them to the war with Japan": letters, clothing, photographs. "I burned my own wedding photos," the photographer says. Overwhelmed, Henry flees homeward with the taste of smoke in his mouth.

*The photographer's anguish over having been compelled to burn his wedding photos illustrates the devastating emotional toll that anti-Japanese feeling took on Japanese Americans during this period. Additionally, the photographer's willingness to destroy belongings so precious to him demonstrates the length to which many Japanese Americans were willing to go to prove their loyalty to their country—despite the fact that that country turned a blind eye to their emotional sacrifice.*

## OLD NEWS (1986)

Henry continues searching through belongings in the **hotel** basement. He is struck by how "random" the items seem, reminding himself that "people once cared enough for these things to hide them, hoping to retrieve them another day." Henry finds a newspaper and realizes it is the last paper printed in Nihonmachi before all the residents were taken away to internment camps.

*In a subtle way, the fact that the belongings in the hotel basement seem random to Henry emphasizes how truly brutal Japanese American internment was. Families stored items that were important to their everyday life as they knew it, unable to guess that the suffering they would face would prevent them from returning for these objects, and would render the objects themselves meaningless in the face of the pain they would experience at the hands of their own fellow citizens.*

Palmyra Pettison arrives to let Henry know the **hotel** is closing for the day. She agrees to let him return the same time next week. As Henry leaves the hotel, he "strains to hear [Keiko's] voice in memory" and feels sure her presence lingers somewhere in the hotel. He also thinks about Ethel, and feels comforted knowing that she "would always approve of things that might make [him] happy."

*This moment is significant because it shows that Henry is beginning to let go of the guilt he feels about reconnecting with Keiko. The fact that Henry feels confident Ethel would want the best for him also suggests that Henry and Ethel genuinely loved one another, even if their love was not the most important one Henry experienced in his life.*

## MARTY'S GIRL (1986)

The following day, Henry spends the entire day in Chinatown, looking for "any excuse to walk by the **Panama Hotel**." When he arrives back home, he finds Marty waiting for him. Henry panics, thinking that Marty has come to argue with him about how he cared for Ethel—the two had disagreed about whether Ethel should be placed into a hospice, with Henry insisting that Ethel stay in her own home. However, Marty has different news: he's engaged, and his fiancée is waiting inside.

*The fact that Henry automatically assumes his son has come home to argue with him suggests that Henry and Marty don't have a particularly healthy relationship. Furthermore, Henry did not even know his son was dating someone, much less that he was engaged to be married, which shows yet again that Henry has been repeating his father's pattern of silence and non-communication in his relationship with his own son.*

Marty seems incredibly nervous and stumblingly explains that he kept his engagement a secret because he was worried Henry would disapprove that he is not going to marry a Chinese woman. Before Henry can explain that he is not disappointed, Samantha comes outside and introduces herself, wrapping Henry in a hug. Henry flashes Marty a thumbs up over Samantha's shoulder.

*For the first time, Henry realizes the drastic difference between how his son views him and how he views himself. This passage is thus the first step in Henry taking action to reshape his relationship with Marty to be more open and communicative. Samantha's immediate warmth toward Henry also suggests the important role she will play in encouraging Marty and Henry to improve their relationship.*

## UME (1986)

Marty and Samantha sit in the backyard while Henry prunes his ume tree. Samantha asks about the tree, and Henry explains that it was his father's favorite, and that it is a revolutionist symbol. Samantha says, "Marty said that tree came from a branch of your father's tree—that you planted it here when he died." Samantha continues chatting about things Marty has told her, and Henry finds himself wondering why his son shares things with Samantha but not with him. He also starts to daydream about how much easier it would be to sort through belongings at the **Panama Hotel** if he had help.

*Even more than the preceding scene, this is a seminal moment in Henry's evolving relationship with Marty. Through Samantha, Henry begins to understand how his son sees him—and that this is not the way he necessarily wants to be seen. Henry begins to open himself emotionally, especially when he considers asking Marty and Samantha for help at the Panama Hotel. This is the first moment of realization for Henry that opening up about his past and sharing his memories can have a positive effect: it will help him to feel closer to his son.*

Henry reveals that though the ume tree was, indeed, his father's favorite, the sapling that Henry planted actually came from Kobe Park in Nihonmachi—Henry made a cutting on the night Marty was born, "a Chinese tree in a Japanese garden." Without explaining, Henry then asks Marty and Samantha to meet him next Thursday in the tearoom of the **Panama Hotel**.

*This is a baby step for Henry; he hasn't revealed anything huge about his past, but he has moved toward rebuilding the image Marty has of both Henry and Henry's father. The fact that Henry transplanted a tree from Kobe Park into his own home, where he lived with Ethel and Marty, suggests that Henry has never let his memory of or love for Keiko fade.*

## HOME FIRES (1942)

Henry arrives home from Nihonmachi, distressed about seeing people set their belongings on fire. Before he can talk to his mother about this, she announces that the family has guests over for tea. Henry is stunned to find Chaz and his father, Mr. Preston, in the Lees' home. Mr. Preston announces that he and Henry's father are trying to broker a business deal and they want Henry to act as translator for their conversation. "Henry's one of the smartest kids in class," Chaz says. "He can translate anything. *Japanese too*, I bet."

*Chaz's taunting of Henry in front of his own father as well as Henry's shows how bigotry can seem bold-faced, but is nevertheless cowardly. Henry's father does not speak strong enough English to understand Chaz's insult of Henry, and evidently, Mr. Preston is not bothered by how narrow-minded his son is with regard to the Lees. Chaz is attacking Henry with impunity, then, which suggests that as cruel as his bullying is, it comes from a place of weakness.*

Henry's father explains that Mr. Preston wants to develop property in Japantown, and that he needs Henry's father's support as a board member of the Chong Wa Association, as well as "the support of the Chinese community." Henry is appalled. He stares at Mr. Preston, "a man trying to buy land out from under families who were now burning their most precious possessions to keep from being called traitors or spies." Henry is suddenly aware that he is "standing on one side of an unseen line between himself and his father, and everything he'd known."

*This is another pivotal moment in Henry's relationship to his father. Henry finds himself caught between two men eager to see the Japanese community of Seattle destroyed, and he must make a decision about whether he will betray his father by standing up for what he knows is right, or set his own morals aside in order to show loyalty to the man who has raised him the best way he knew how.*

Mr. Preston asks Henry to tell his father that Mr. Preston also wants to force the Japanese newspaper out of business and buy the lot behind their building. Henry's father replies: "That property is owned by the Shitame family, but the head of the family was arrested weeks ago. Make an offer to the bank, and they will sell it out from under them." Henry is horrified by his father's callousness, so he lies to Mr. Preston. "My father won't approve of the sale," he says. "It was once a Japanese cemetery and it's very bad luck to build there. That's why the lot is empty."

*Here, Henry makes his choice. In lying outright to his father, Henry takes his first act of rebellion against his father and his father's worldview. However, it is important to note that Henry is not acting out of spite, but rather out of genuine compassion for the people of Nihonmachi—people like Keiko and her family. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Henry spins a stereotype about Asian communities being superstitious or mystical to his advantage, turning prejudice on its head without Mr. Preston even realizing it.*

The conversation continues, and Henry continues to lie. Knowing that his father hates jazz music, Henry tells his father that Mr. Preston wants to turn the newspaper building and vacant lot into a jazz club. The conversation between the two men rapidly deteriorates. As Henry continues with his "mixed translation," he notices Chaz flashing him the **"I Am Chinese" button** he stole from him, along with "a bucktoothed grin" that none of the adults notices.

*In this conversation, Henry has traded silence vis-à-vis his father for actual lies. This shows how far Henry is willing to go to do what he feels is right, thus representing an important step in Henry's maturation as a character. This moment is also noteworthy because of the way Chaz's taunting goes unnoticed. Even when surrounded by adults who should protect him, Henry's struggles as a first-generation American are invisible.*

Mr. Preston storms out with Chaz, just as Henry's mother brings the tea into the room. Exhausted, Henry retreats to his room, feeling guilty about—but justified in—lying to his father. He desperately wants to see Keiko. He "picture[s] her in some family photograph, a portrait on fire, curling, burning, and turning to ash."

*Henry is clearly troubled about his decision to lie to his father; this guilt will be compounded as the novel unfolds and Henry makes more decision in defiance of his father's will. Henry's concern for Keiko and her family also illustrates just how invested Henry has become in his relationship with Keiko.*

## HELLO, HELLO (1942)

Henry wakes to the sound of the telephone ringing at nine o'clock in the evening. He hears his mother say *wei wei* (hello, hello) on the phone, and opens his door; Henry is "used to handling all the wrong numbers" since his mother does not speak English. Henry's mother tells him the phone call is for him, and Henry takes it, to hear Keiko's voice on the other line. Keiko asks Henry to meet her in Kobe Park in an hour. Henry realizes that "if his mother thought it was odd that the little girl calling her son didn't speak Chinese, she didn't say anything. Maybe she thought all parents were forcing their children to *speak their American*."

*In its focus on Henry's mother, this passage highlights in a new way the challenges of being a new American. Henry's mother, who doesn't speak English, is isolated from other parents who are trying to raise their children as Americans; for all she knows, other families are as cocooned in silence as hers is. This scene also shows how removed Henry is from his mother. He can't know for sure whether she's noticed that the girl who's called isn't Chinese, and he can't bring himself to ask.*

After waiting an hour, Henry sneaks out of his bedroom window and goes to Nihonmachi to meet Keiko. In Kobe Park, Keiko explains that her parents made her stay home from school that day because they "were afraid something might happen, that [their] family would be separated." She also says that the police raided her apartment building, taking away radios, cameras, and even a few of her neighbors. There's even a curfew, she explains: Japanese people are "not allowed outside of [their] neighborhoods from eight o'clock at night to six in the morning."

*The curfew is an important foreshadowing of the eventual imprisonment that the Okabes and their fellow Japanese Americans will face. As a result of the curfew, families in Nihonmachi have essentially become prisoners in their own homes. Later in the novel, these same families will be removed from their homes and literally imprisoned, despite the fact that they have committed no crime.*

Keiko explains that she "[doesn't] mean to get [Henry] in trouble, either at school or at home with [his] father." However, she needs to ask him a favor: will he hide a wagon full of her family's photo albums for her? Keiko's mother asked her to burn the photographs, but Keiko found she could not bring herself to do so. Henry agrees, and Keiko gives him a hug before returning home. Henry wheels the wagon full of photos down the deserted streets of Nihonmachi.

*This is the first big risk Henry takes for Keiko. The fact that Henry is willing to defy his parents and risk his and their safety in order to protect Keiko's family belongings shows how deeply Henry cares for his friend. Henry's decision to hide Keiko's family photos is also an important plot point, as it will have dramatic repercussions later.*

## DOWNHILL (1942)

As he drags the wagon behind him, Henry makes a plan: he'll hide Keiko's family photos "in the shallow empty space between his lower dresser drawers and the floor below." In the darkness, Henry spots a boy "wiping down the poster of an American flag that had been posted over the window of the Jangi grocery store." The boy hears Henry's wagon and turns; Henry suddenly recognizes him as Denny Brown, one of the school bullies. Henry realizes that Denny has been painting the words "Go Home Japs!" over the American flags that Japanese businesspeople have posted on their store windows.

*The fact that Denny has painted a classic racist phrase ("go home") on the window of a grocery store shows yet again how toxic the mentality of many white Americans can be. No matter what nonwhite Americans do to affirm their loyalty as Americans—such as posting flags on their businesses—their actions will never be sufficient to those who fundamentally believe that Americanness and whiteness are synonymous. Indeed, for all Denny knows, this store could be owned by people like the Okabes, all of whom were born in the United States, and thus already* are *home.*

Henry hears another voice: Chaz Preston's. "I told you he was a Jap on the inside!" Chaz says. Chaz is holding a crowbar, and behind him is yet another school bully named Carl Parks. The three boys surround Henry, with Chaz asking: "You delivering some Japanese newspapers? Or is that stuff a Japanese spy would be delivering?" Determined to fulfill his promise to Keiko and protect her family's possessions, Henry takes off running, pushing the wagon from behind.

*The fact that Chaz is wielding a crowbar is significant, as it shows that he is capable of more than just violent words. Despite the fact that Chaz insists on calling Henry Japanese, it doesn't even occur to him that Henry could be transporting items belonging to a Japanese friend; instead, Chaz immediately assumes that Henry is undertaking enemy action, just as Chaz has always believed he might.*

As the wagon gains speed going downhill, Henry jumps into it to avoid falling "face-first into the sidewalk." Henry uses the wagon handle to steer, and shouts out to people appearing on the streets, as he rolls out of deserted Nihonmachi. Suddenly, Henry slams into a police car, and the contents of the wagon spill out onto the street. A police officer picks up one of Keiko's photos and asks Henry, "Where is home *exactly*?" Henry points to his **"I Am Chinese" button**, and says that a friend asked him to hold the photos for her. The officer seems "more annoyed than offended" and tells Henry to go home. Henry makes it home safely and hides the photos. In his bed, he feels a goose egg starting to form on his head, and hears jazz music in the distance.

*Though the police officer in this scene ultimately acts justly in allowing Henry to return home with Keiko's photos, the fact that he is suspicious about where Henry's "home" is shows that even characters who don't act on or explicitly verbalize bigotry can hold prejudiced beliefs about those who don't look like them. This scene is also important because it demonstrates that Henry is willing to put himself in physical danger in order to help Keiko, a testament to the strength of his affection for her.*

## TEA (1986)

Marty and Samantha meet Henry at the **Panama Hotel** tearoom. Marty explains to Samantha that Henry was not allowed in Japantown as a boy, because of Henry's own father's anti-Japanese feelings. Samantha asks if he was allowed in Japantown after Henry's father had passed away. Henry explains, "After the Japanese were taken away, all these other people moved in. It was like wanting to go into a certain bar to have a drink, but by the time you turn twenty-one, the bar has turned into a flower shop. It just wasn't the same."

*This scene implicitly demonstrates how important Samantha is in prompting Henry to repair his relationship with Marty. Though Henry can't yet bring himself to talk directly to Marty, he finds that he is able to talk about his past if he addresses himself to Samantha. Furthermore, in contrast to Marty, Samantha demonstrates a willingness to ask uncomfortable questions, which proves vital to Henry's ability to talk about uncomfortable topics.*

Marty presses Henry: "After all those years of being told not to, when you finally had your chance, you still didn't want to wander over, just to see?" Henry explains that going to Nihonmachi was too painful for him, which confuses Marty and Samantha. "Why would it be painful if you never went there in the first place, if your father forbade it?" asks Samantha. For the first time, Henry reveals his past: "I went and saw many things," he says. "In many ways, the best and worst times of my life were spent on this very street."

*At last Henry broaches the subject of his childhood, a topic he hardly even discussed with his late wife, and never with his son. This passage also highlights the symbolic role of the Panama Hotel in the novel—as a place of paradox, one that can contain both "the best and worst" memories of a person's life, just like the street on which it stands.*

Henry says, "I'm glad Samantha asked, because it certainly makes the rest of this easier to explain." Marty is confused about what "the rest" means, but Henry merely asks his son and Samantha to join him in the basement of the **hotel**. Once there, Henry explains that when the Japanese families of Seattle were sent to interment camps, "they could only take two suitcases each and one small seabag, like a duffel bag." This is the reason that so many families "stored their valuable belongings in places like this hotel, the basements of churches, or with friends."

*In this passage Henry confirms that Samantha has played a critical role in allowing him to open up about his past. By being unafraid to ask questions, Samantha has given Henry the emotional permission to be unafraid in answering them. Henry's historical explanation to Marty and Samantha also seems to imply that neither member of the young couple knows about this part of their city's history, showing how quick society can be to repress painful or embarrassing collective memories.*

Henry confesses that he needs Marty and Samantha's help "looking for something." Marty guesses that his father is looking for "an old forgotten **Oscar Holden record**, one that supposedly doesn't exist anymore"; to Samantha he explains that this record is his father's "Holy Grail." Henry reveals that he knows the record existed because he bought it—but could not play it on his parents' Victrola. When Samantha asks where Henry's record is now, he says that he "gave it away [a] long time ago." If another record exists among the Japanese families' possessions, Marty wants to know, to whom might it have belonged? "Someone your old man didn't want you hanging out with on the wrong side of town?" Marty says. "Find it and I'll tell you," Henry replies.

*Henry's reluctance to answer* all *of Samantha and Marty's questions serves as a reminder that Henry will not be able to reverse his years of silence in the course of an afternoon. Still, the fact that Marty guesses almost immediately that the record Henry seeks belonged to someone of whom Henry's father disapproved suggests that, despite Henry's reluctance over the years to discuss his past, Marty has nevertheless intuited the fact that his father has, deep down, a rebellious side to his personality.*

## RECORDS (1942)

Keiko is back in school, and working in the cafeteria again with Henry. One day, she tells Henry she has a surprise for him. "Because I'm storing all your photographs?" Henry asks. "No," says Keiko, "this is for taking me to the Black Elks Club with you." Keiko says she'll show Henry the surprise on their way home from school. On the walk home that day, she takes him to a department store and shows him a **vinyl record** titled "Oscar Holden & the Midnight Blue, The Alley Cat Strut." Henry is delighted. "This is our song, the one he played for us!" he cries.

*The Oscar Holden record is a literal symbol of Henry and Keiko's special relationship. It's important to note the reason Keiko gives for wanting to gift the record to Henry: she's felt grateful to him long before he agreed to help hide her family's belongings. This suggests that Henry and Keiko's friendship is based in a deep emotional connection.*

Keiko reveals that she saved her money to buy the **record** for Henry, and she invites him to her house to listen to it (since the record can't be played on the Lees' Victrola). "My parents want to meet you anyway," Keiko says. This makes Henry nervous. "His parents," he thinks, "probably would have nothing to do with Keiko. Were her parents that different?"

*Because of the family he has grown up in, it is difficult for Henry to imagine a family that would be accepting of a person's differences—despite the fact that Henry himself practices exactly this type of acceptance. The fact that Keiko is open with her parents about her friendship with Henry, and that her parents welcome this news, suggests to Henry for the first time that homes don't have to be silent and parents don't have to be bitter and exclusionary.*

Henry and Keiko take **the record** to the checkout counter, but the woman working there refuses to acknowledge them. When Keiko speaks up, saying, "I'd like to buy this record, please," the woman hisses: "Then why don't you go back to your own neighborhood and buy it?" She continues: "We don't serve people like you—besides, my husband is off fighting…" Henry steps forward and puts his **"I Am Chinese" button** on the counter. "I'll buy it," he says.

*The clerk's biting hatred shows both how prejudiced and how ignorant she is. Because Henry and Keiko both look Asian to her, she assumes that they are both Japanese. She also projects her own fears for her husband's safety onto two children, choosing to see them as potentially dangerous foreign adults.*

Reluctantly, the woman sells Henry **the record**. Henry pockets his **button**, and leads Keiko out of the store; he thinks that "the joy of her surprise" seems to have "popped like a helium balloon, loud and sharp." When Keiko can finally speak she says she is used to being teased at school, "but this far from home, in a grown-up part of town" she had hoped she'd be treated better. Henry thinks, "At least we have the record […] A reminder of a place where […] when the music played, it didn't seem to make one lick of difference if your last name was Abernathy or Anjou, Kung or Kobayashi."

*This is an important moment in Keiko's character development, because it shows her optimism being challenged. Keiko has dared to hope that adults might treat her with more empathy and dignity than her classmates at Rainier Elementary—but the clerk's hatred has just proved that this is not necessarily the case. Having witnessed his father's own bigotry, Henry seems less surprised. Still, Henry is grateful that he and Keiko now have a literal reminder that a world like the one Keiko hopes for is possible: a world of music.*


On their walk home, Henry and Keiko decide that Keiko should keep **the record**. Henry says, "My mother is always around, and I'm not sure she'd approve—because my father doesn't like modern music." As they continue walking, Henry and Keiko notice soldiers near the ferry terminal. They see hundreds of people de-boarding the ferry, and Henry realizes that Bainbridge Island, off the coast of Washington State, "must have been declared a military zone." When Keiko asks where all the Bainbridge evacuees are being taken, Henry says he doesn't know—but he silently notes that the Japanese families are being herded toward the train station.

*Henry specifies that his mother would disapprove of the jazz record* because *his father would disapprove. This highlights what a domineering person Henry's father is, and suggests that Henry might have had quite a different upbringing if his mother's views had dictated the family's norms. On a broader plot level, this scene is important because it foreshadows the evacuation and internment of all Japanese Americans on the mainland of Washington State—including the Okabes.*


Henry and Keiko fight through the crowd and soon find Sheldon Thomas, who reveals that the Black Elks Club has been temporarily closed after the FBI raid. Henry shows Sheldon the **Oscar Holden record** he and Keiko have just bought, and Sheldon says he has a copy as well. Sheldon also says that he's heard of a prison of war camp built in Nevada. "They pass some order saying they can round up all the Japanese, Germans, and Italians," he says, "but do you see any Germans in that crowd? You see them rounding up Joe DiMaggio?"

*Sheldon's words in this scene are vitally important, as they emphasize that xenophobia is grounded in racism. White Americans are much more afraid and distrustful of immigrants—and of other Americans!—who don't look like them, than they are of those who do. While the U.S. is at war with Germany, Italy, and Japan, it is only Japanese Americans who are being interned—suggesting clearly that racism is the driving factor in this government policy, as Sheldon points out.*

Sheldon encourages Keiko to head home to her family. Henry should go home, too, he says. "Your family's going to be just as worried. **Button** or no button." Henry and Keiko say "a wordless goodbye" and then "each [run] in a different direction of home."

*Sheldon suspects that Henry's family will be worried for his safety, even though they are not Japanese. This suggests what a slippery slope racist laws are; if it is this easy for the government to target its own citizens, perhaps Chinese Americans will be next, even though the U.S. is not at war with China.*

## PARENTS (1942)

A week later, the evacuation of Bainbridge Island is "old news." Henry and Keiko make plans to have lunch with Keiko's family on Saturday. Henry feels disoriented by the "restrained and peaceful" atmosphere at school—as if his white classmates don't even know about what is happening to Japanese families in their city. Henry's father insists that Henry wear his **"I Am Chinese" button** "on the outside" of his clothes "where everyone can see it." Henry's mother and father both begin wearing their own buttons, too.

*The rapidity with which Henry's white classmates dismiss the Bainbridge Island evacuation emphasizes how readily society at large suppresses collective memory of atrocities. Henry's heightened sense of alienation at school further emphasizes how isolating an experience it can be to grow up as a minority. Finally, the fact that both Henry's parents begin wearing buttons of their own suggests that both the Lees are aware of how easily anti-Japanese feeling (and policy) might be converted into anti-Asian feeling writ large.*

On Saturday, Henry and Keiko meet in front of the **Panama Hotel**. In Cantonese, Keiko asks Henry, "How are you today, beautiful?" "I can be Chinese too," she jokes, telling Henry that she looked up the translation at the library. Embarrassed but pleased, Henry shyly replies, "*Oai deki te ureshii desu*."

*This scene shows how Henry and Keiko's catchphrase has become emotional shorthand for how deeply they care about one another. As the novel progresses, Henry in particular will find himself pushed to articulate his feelings for Keiko more directly.*

Henry and Keiko meet Mr. Okabe and Mrs. Okabe for lunch in the Japanese market. Henry is intimidated by Mr. Okabe's beautiful English. He worries that "the cadence of his [own] words seem[s] to have more in common with the fishermen who came over from China than with the English Keiko and her family [speak] so fluently." Mr. Okabe explains why he wanted Keiko to attend Rainier: "I warned her," he says, "that [her classmates] may never like her, some might even hate her, but eventually, they will respect her—as an American." Henry thinks guiltily of his own parents: "Why hadn't anyone ever explained it that way? Instead he got a **button** and was forced to *speak his American*."

*Meeting Mr. and Mrs. Okabe is an eye-opening experiencing for Henry in more ways than one. Henry's sense of not belonging anywhere is amplified when he hears Keiko's father speak. Even though both Mr. Okabe and Henry are first-generation immigrants, Henry suddenly feels that he is too dissimilar from Mr. Okabe to count himself part of the same category. Nevertheless, Mr. Okabe's thoughtfulness and clear communication puts Henry at ease—while at the same time contrasting with Henry's own father, and making Henry wish his parents helped him to better navigate his complex identity as a first-generation American.*

Mrs. Okabe invites Henry and his parents to join her family for a free jazz concert that night, featuring Oscar Holden. Henry knows his parents would be appalled by the kind invitation; his parents don't listen to music on the radio—only the news. Before Henry can politely decline, army trucks begin rolling down the street, unloading soldiers and armed military police. Henry and the Okabes step outside and are handed a flyer called Public Proclamation 1, which contains instructions about what Japanese families will be allowed to bring with them in a few days' time, as they are "being forced to evacuate, for their own safety." Keiko touches her heart and points to Henry; he touches his own chest and feels his **"I Am Chinese" button** against his fingers.

*This is a climactic plot point in the novel, as Proclamation 1 confirms that Henry and Keiko are to be separated. Even earlier in the scene, Mrs. Okabe's invitation to Henry and his family is significant because it suggests that not everyone in the nonwhite communities of Seattle has succumbed to resentment or prejudice. Mrs. Okabe is willing to get to know Henry's family, and her kindness emphasizes to Henry how mired his own parents—particularly his father—are in their fear and suspicion of Japanese Americans.*

## BETTER THEM THAN US (1942)

Distraught, Henry arrives home and tries to explain what his happening to his parents, handing his father a copy of the proclamation. When his father tries to cut him off, Henry screams: "No! You can't ignore me. Not anymore." "Why does this matter?" asks Henry's father. "We're at war. And we're our own community. We take care of each other." In English, Henry replies, "It matters because *she's* Japanese," and then storms away to his bedroom.

*Henry's father remains firm in his belief that the Japanese American community is not owed solidarity by the Chinese American community. Henry stands up to his father for the first time here, but it is worth noting that the reason Henry offers for challenging his father's anti-Japanese stance is Keiko. Henry does not argue his position on moral grounds; he is concerned for his particular friend more than he is for the Japanese community as a whole. Henry's opposition to his father will become more nuanced over the course of the novel.*

Henry's mother enters his room, asking her son if he needs to talk. Henry asks his mother why his father won't talk to him. She explains: "This is where he lives, but it will never be his home. Look at what is happening to Japantown. Your father is afraid that might happen to us someday. That's why—as much as he loves his China—he wants this to be your home."

*Henry's mother emphasizes that Henry's father's anti-Japanese beliefs are rooted in fear, just as the anti-Japanese beliefs of Henry's classmates are. Her words also reveal that Henry's father does want his son to experience a sense of belonging—even if his ways of communicating this desire are deeply flawed.*

Henry's mother says she knows Henry has "a friend"—"the girl from the Rainier school"—and asks if the girl is Japanese. Henry tells his mother in Cantonese, "She's my best friend," and his mother lets out a heavy sigh.

*Henry's admission to his mother shows that she has cultivated a more trusting relationship with her son than her husband has. Still, though she loves her son, Henry's mother cannot bring herself to approve of her son's Japanese friends.*

The weekend elapses, and Henry's father refuses to speak about what is happening in Nihonmachi. Though Henry's mother defended Henry's "friend" to his father—"a rare occurrence," Henry knows—she also finds "little value in Henry discussing it further." Henry tries calling Keiko's house over the weekend but can't get in touch with her. So, on Tuesday, he cuts school and goes to Union Station, where all the residents of Nihonmachi are gathering. Every Japanese person he sees is wearing "a plain white tag, the kind you'd see on a piece of furniture."

*Henry's mother enacts a small rebellion in defending Henry's friendship with Keiko to Henry's father. Given how domineering Henry's father is, this act is more significant than it might seem on the surface. Still, Henry's mother does not make the added effort of allowing Henry to process his feelings by continuing to discuss them with her. At the train station, seeing Japanese American families wearing tags as if they were pieces of furniture drives home to Henry how dehumanizing the government's new policy is.*

Henry begins to panic, unsure if he'll be able to find Keiko. He notices a few other Chinese people in the crowd, all of whom wear **"I Am Chinese" buttons** that match his own. Henry touches his button and thinks, "This is what gold feels like."

*Henry's realization that his button is like a piece of gold, while the white tags worn by those around him are like scarlet letters, emphasizes how randomly hatred fuels the destruction of entire communities, while leaving others unscathed.*

Standing atop a mailbox, Henry spots the Okabes in the crowd and waves frantically. The Okabes don't see him, but Chaz Preston does. Chaz is "[standing] behind the barricade laughing, waving at Henry, smiling before going back to screaming at the children and crying mothers walking by." Spotting the old **button** Chaz stole from him, and that he still wears, Henry jumps off the mailbox and heads towards Chaz, feeling "his spine […] fused with anger."

*Chaz's cruelty is dramatically highlighted in this passage, as he torments children and mothers who are already experiencing the highest degree of distress as they prepare to be deported from their own homes. Henry finds that he is finally able to confront Chaz. He has put up with Chaz bullying him—but seeing Chaz taunt innocent Japanese families compels Henry to stand up once and for all.*

Henry confronts Chaz and asks what he's doing there. Chaz says, "Just thought I'd come down here and say *sayonara*. You were just a bonus find." Chaz grabs Henry's collar, and Henry punches him as hard as he can. Chaz throws Henry to the ground and begins beating him. Henry reaches up toward Chaz and feels "a piercing in his hand […] the only pain that matter[s]." Suddenly, Sheldon Thomas appears and drags Chaz off of Henry. Spitting threats and racial slurs, Chaz slinks away.

*This is an important moment for Henry's development. In fighting Chaz—and reclaiming the button Chaz stole from him—Henry asserts a symbolic claim to his Chinese identity in a way he has not done up until this point in the novel. Sheldon's appearance at a critical moment also enforces the notion that he is a kind of protector figure for Henry.*

Sheldon asks Henry if he's okay. Henry is badly beaten, but he looks down triumphantly at his hand, into which his **"I Am Chinese" button** his stuck partway. He says to Sheldon "in his best English": "Never felt better."

*Again, Henry seems to stake a claim to his Chinese identity by reclaiming his button. At the same time, Henry asserts his Americanness by using "his best English." This is a critical moment for Henry; in the midst of turmoil, he has found a way to claim both parts of his fractured identity.*

Henry again whirls through the crowd, looking for Keiko. He tries to formulate a plan that will convince his parents to shelter the Okabes in their home—he's heard of other "Chinese families who took people in, hiding them—there had to be a chance." Finally, Henry again thinks he spots Mr. Okabe. He runs toward him, only to find that the man he thought was Keiko's father is a "defeated old gentleman […] [with] a wide mustache." Henry is crushed, thinking the Okabes are already gone.

*Henry is so devoted to Keiko that he momentarily considers it possible that he would be able to hide her—along with her family—in his parents' home. This shows how desperate Henry is to protect the girl he has come to love. Still, the fact that Henry knows of Chinese families who have done the very thing his parents would find unthinkable—shelter Japanese Americans against the government's orders—suggests that there are others in Henry's community who share in the horror he feels at what is being done to his neighbors.*

Just then, Henry hears Keiko's voice. Henry gives Keiko the **button** he's recovered from Chaz. "Wear this," he says, "and they'll let you walk out of here." Henry insists that the Okabes take the button he wears, as well. "I'll go back and get more for all of you," he says. Mr. Okabe thanks Henry for his kindness and bravery, but says: "No matter what happens to us, Henry, we're still Americans. And we need to be together—wherever they take us."

*Mr. Okabe's words are incredibly resonant. Though the government has just ordered Mr. Okabe and his family—all of whom were born in America and have never lived anywhere else—removed from their homes and imprisoned, Mr. Okabe refuses to relinquish what he knows to be true: he is an American. This moment is important because Mr. Okabe models a sense of confidence Henry does not yet share. He is sure of his identity and does not feel ashamed in claiming it—even when society tries to tell him he has not "earned" it.*

Keiko takes Henry's hand, and asks to keep the **button** he gave her anyway, pinning it inside her diary. She tells Henry that she and her family have heard they are being taken to a temporary relocation center called Camp Harmony, two hours south of Seattle. "I'll be here," Henry says. Henry weeps as the Okabes board the train. As he stands amongst the hundreds of other Japanese families waiting for the next train, Henry wonders what he will say to his parents.

*After saying goodbye to Keiko, Henry is still surrounded by hundreds of other families, emphasizing the scale on which Japanese American internment took place. The fact that Henry worries about how he will convey his anguish to his parents shows just how damaging the silence in the Lee household is. Henry has not only undergone a traumatic goodbye, but he has also been rendered powerless by his own father to speak of what he has just endured.*

## EMPTY STREETS (1942)

Henry walks wanders away from the train station, listening to a "record player somewhere blar[ing] 'Stars and Stripes Forever' [in] harsh contrast to the Japanese melancholy and quiet sadness." Henry finds Sheldon on a bus bench. When Henry indicates that he can't bear to go home, Sheldon tells him to follow him. The two make their way to a theater in Nihonmachi, directly across from Kobe Park. "What are we doing here?" Henry asks, as Sheldon takes out his saxophone. "We're living," Sheldon says.

*The record playing "Stars and Stripes Forever" contrasts sharply with Sheldon's music. The former seems to insist that nonwhite Americans are not truly Americans, and that they are therefore unwelcome. The latter acknowledges and affirms the suffering that is taking place, and insists that "living"—in Sheldon's words—will keep on happening in marginalized communities, even as atrocities are perpetuated.*

Henry listens to Sheldon play, and thinks of Keiko. Henry thinks that Sheldon is playing "for no one, but at the same time [...] playing for everyone." After a while, Henry leaves, returning to Chinatown. He takes off his **button** and puts it in his pocket, stopping to buy his mother a **starfire lily** on his way home.

*By purchasing a starfire lily for his mother, it seems that Henry is cleaving to his mother's love, which has become even more important now that Keiko is gone. It is also possible that Henry is trying to mirror Sheldon's music by asserting a right to life and beauty even in the face of pain and suffering.*

## SKETCHBOOK (1986)

In the basement of the **Panama Hotel**, Henry, Marty, and Samantha sort through items. Henry finds himself annoyed that Marty and Samantha are getting "caught up in the detail of each item they [find], trying to interpret some meaning." All Henry wants to do is find something of Keiko's. Soon enough, Marty finds a sketchbook. Looking at a drawing inside, Marty asks: "Dad? Is this you?" Henry realizes that Marty has found Keiko's sketchbook.

*The fact that Marty discovers a sketch of Henry as a boy symbolizes the way in which old memories—and even old versions of one's self—can resurface even after they have been repressed. Henry has never spoken to Marty of the boy he once was, yet the discovery of Keiko's sketch suggests that that this boyhood version of Henry has nevertheless been present all along.*

Just then, Samantha shouts that she has found a **record**. Henry knows before he even looks at it that the record is Oscar Holden's "Alley Cat Strut." Henry holds the record, broken in half and "held together by the record label," and thinks that, "like his father, his marriage, his life," this record has "arrived a little damaged." Still, it is "all he'd wanted," and he finds he doesn't care one bit "what condition [the record] [is] in."

*This passage shows how Henry has matured as he has grown into adulthood. He is shown to have cultivated his ability to appreciate what he has, even if it is not perfect. Henry demonstrated this ability as a child, especially with regard to his father, but his deep contentment at finding the broken record shows that Henry has only strengthened this ability to take things as they are. Again, the record itself (like Keiko's sketchbook) symbolizes how memory reasserts itself despite the best attempts to bury it.*

## UWAJIMAYA (1986)

Henry, Marty, and Samantha have stopped at the Uwajimaya grocery store so Samantha can buy ingredients to cook a Chinese dinner. Waiting in the parking lot, Marty apologizes that Henry had to find **the record** he's been searching for in such poor condition. "I'd rather have found something broken," Henry replies, "than have it lost to me forever."

*Henry's reaction to finding the record seems to reflect his sustained feelings about Keiko. Though Henry has not seen or spoken to Keiko in years, it seems he would be as grateful to have her restored to him—even if their relationship is now broken—as he was to have rediscovered the record.*

Marty asks if Henry will explain the box of the Okabes' things, which Palmyra Pettison had let Henry borrow. Henry explains that the sketchbook belonged to his best friend, whom Marty assumes was a boy. When Henry tells Marty his best friend's name was Keiko, Marty asks in surprise if Keiko was Henry's girlfriend. "I mean, weren't you practically in an arranged marriage?" he asks. "That's how you made it sound whenever you mentioned how you and mom met." "When I married your mother," Henry says, "I never looked back."

*This passage highlights how skewed a picture Marty has of his father, due largely to how little Henry has communicated with his son about his own upbringing. (As the reader will learn later, Henry's marriage to Ethel bears no resemblance whatsoever to an arranged marriage.) Furthermore, Henry's claim that he "never looked back" after he married Ethel is only partially true. He did love Ethel sincerely, but he also never forgot Keiko.*

Henry admits that he wanted to find the **Oscar Holden record** as "a dying wish for a long-lost brother." Marty is baffled. "One," he says, "you're an only child, and two, you just said you'd never sell that record, no matter what shape it was in." Before Henry can explain, Samantha returns from the store and announces she'll be cooking two of Henry's favorite dishes for dinner. She also says she bought green-tea ice cream for dessert. Henry is amused that Samantha doesn't know the ice cream is Japanese. It doesn't matter, he thinks, because "perfection isn't what families are all about."

*Like his reaction to discovering the record, Henry's reaction to Samantha's ice cream faux-pas shows that he has learned to appreciate love more over time—even when it isn't as perfect as the love he once shared with Keiko. Though he has copied his father's behavior in some ways, Henry seems to have discarded his father's rigidity in favor of accepting his family for what it is, even if it is not what he'd envisioned.*

## CAMP HARMONY (1942)

The day after Keiko and her family leave for the internment camp, Henry pretends he is sick so he doesn't have to go to school. Eventually, however, he has to return. On a Thursday morning, he dresses in his school clothes, and stares his father down at the breakfast table. He realizes that "he [doesn't] know what to blame [his father] for. For not caring? How could he blame his own father, when no one else seemed to care either?"

*Henry struggles to work through the anger he feels at his father. This struggle is compounded twofold: first, by Henry's father's staunch anti-Japanese stance, and second, by the fact that Henry is essentially forbidden to discuss his complicated feelings with either of his parents. Yet again, Henry feels isolated in his experiences, as no one around him seems to be as devastated by Japanese internment as he is.*

Henry's father gives Henry a new button, one that says, "I'm An American." Henry's mother says that they want Henry to wear the button "now that the Japanese are being evacuated." Henry is furious about his mother's word choice; "Keiko," he thinks, "[has] been taken from him." Henry leaves for school and throws the new button onto the garbage heap on his way.

*Henry's mother mimics the language used by the government to describe what is being done to Japanese American families. Henry resents his mother's inability to denounce what is happening to her neighbors. Evacuation would imply that Japanese American families are being removed for their safety, when in fact they are being forcibly imprisoned.*

At school, Henry thinks that Mrs. Beatty seems "genuinely annoyed that Keiko [is] gone." Instead of the usual unappetizing meals she serves, Mrs. Beatty cooks American Japanese food that she calls chicken katsu-retsu. "Let 'em try that," Mrs. Beatty grumbles as she goes outside for a smoke break, and Henry realizes with pleasure that "there [is] more to [her] than [meets] the eye."

*Mrs. Beatty's small act of defiance suggests that kindred spirits can be found in unusual places. Furthermore, Mrs. Beatty's chicken katsu-retsu teaches Henry a lesson similar to the one he learned upon meeting Keiko: that the first impression a person gives is not always the best or even the truest reflection of their character.*

In the lunch line, Chaz taunts Henry. "They take your girlfriend away?" he asks. "Dirty, backstabbing Jap—she probably was poisoning our food." Before Henry can react, Mrs. Beatty appears and insists that "there's not enough food left." "Kitchen's closed to you today," she tells Chaz. When Chaz is gone, Mrs. Beatty asks Henry if he wants to make some money on Saturday. She says she has been asked "to set up a mess hall as a civilian contractor for the army," and reveals that she'll be working at Camp Harmony over the weekend. "I've got a feeling you've heard of it," she says to Henry. "Thank you" is all Henry can manage to say.

*Mrs. Beatty comes through for Henry more dramatically than ever before by putting an end to Chaz's taunting, and even singling Chaz out as someone who does not deserve her kind treatment. On a plot level, this scene is also important because Mrs. Beatty's invitation will allow Henry to see Keiko again—something he otherwise never would have been able to do. Mrs. Beatty may not be warm or even emotive, but she still shows kindness to Henry, thus offering yet another example of an unlikely yet triumphant friendship.*

On Saturday, Henry meets Mrs. Beatty at school; he's told his parents he'll be helping her in the school kitchen. Henry asks Mrs. Beatty questions as she drives, and learns that her father was in the Merchant Marines. Mrs. Beatty used to work in the kitchen of her father's ship when it was in port. "His best friend, the ship's steward—he's practically my uncle, you'd like him—he's Chinese, too," she says." Henry also learns that Mrs. Beatty's father was captured by the Germans and imprisoned in a POW camp; she hasn't heard from him in more than a year.

*Unlike in Henry's relationship with his father, the silence that dominated Henry's relationship with Mrs. Beatty was never particularly oppressive. However, in this scene, Henry experiences firsthand how much more enriching a relationship (even one previously thought insignificant) can become when communication is allowed to flow and develop organically.*

Mrs. Beatty and Henry arrive at Camp Harmony, on the site of the Washington State Fairgrounds. Henry is horrified to realize that the Japanese prisoners are living in chicken coops surrounded by a barbed-wire fence and soldiers armed with machine guns. He worries: "This is a place where someone like me goes in but doesn't come out [...] Just another Japanese prisoner of war, even if I'm Chinese."

*Henry again witnesses the government's dehumanization of Japanese Americans, who are being forced to live in chicken coops. This passage also emphasizes the obliterating force of hatred: Henry is worried he will be sucked even more forcefully into anti-Japanese sentiment in the camp than he is at school.*

The soldier who checks Mrs. Beatty and Henry into the camp is suspicious of Henry, but Mrs. Beatty provides his school registration and immunization record. Henry is suddenly grateful that he attends Rainier; "without having to work in the kitchen," he realizes, "he'd never have made it [...] this close to Keiko."

*Mrs. Beatty's forethought suggests that she is deeply committed to reuniting Henry and Keiko. Though she said some bigoted things in the past, Mrs. Beatty has evolved into her better self in the face of formalized, government-sanctioned discrimination.*

In the camp's mess hall, Henry works the serving line. One by one, prisoners greet Henry in Japanese, "look[ing] brightly hopeful, then disappointed" when Henry points to his **"I Am Chinese" button**. Still, Henry hopes the prisoners will talk about him to each other, and that Keiko will learn he is there.

*Though a minor moment in the overall plot, the prisoners' hopefulness in this passage suggests that they are optimistic enough to believe for a moment that a Japanese person had managed to avoid internment. As Henry will learn later from Mr. Okabe, many Japanese American prisoners were still willing to believe the best of their government even when the government did not believe in them.*

Eventually, Mrs. Beatty tells Henry they need to leave to set up dinner in another section of the camp. Henry finishes washing trays, and then sits outside the second mess hall. He thinks about Keiko somewhere in the camp. He looks at the soldiers in their guard towers; he's been told they are "[standing] watch, for the protection of the internees." "But if that were so," Henry thinks, "why were [the soldiers'] guns pointed inside the camp?"

*In witnessing the soldiers, Henry is made even more acutely aware of the government's hypocrisy. Though the government is maintaining a façade that internment is to protect Japanese Americans as much as it is to protect white Americans, the reality that Henry is witnessing proves what a thin excuse this is.*

## VISITING HOURS (1942)

The following Saturday, Henry again accompanies Mrs. Beatty to Camp Harmony. Henry's parents are pleased that he is being paid for working extra, though they still don't know he's working at the camp. Henry's father proudly tells him: "You keep saving, you be able to pay your own way back to China."

*This brief moment underscores the divide within Henry and his father's relationship. Neither understands the other on either a micro level (what they are doing on a daily basis) or on a macro level (what their goals are for the future).*

On this Saturday, Henry is working in the section of the camp that holds the most prisoners. He asks everyone he serves if they know the Okabes, but realizes that the name "might be like the name Smith or Lee," and he wouldn't know. Eventually, Henry recognizes Mr. Okabe in the lunch line. Mr. Okabe is thrilled to see Henry, and the two discuss how the Okabe family is doing. Mr. Okabe tells Henry the camp has a visiting area, and that he will ask Keiko to meet Henry there when his shift is done. For the rest of his shift, Henry is greeted by the Japanese prisoners as if he were "some sort of celebrity or perhaps a confidant."

*Henry's realization that he doesn't know how common a name Okabe is alludes to how little Henry knows about Japanese culture, despite how deeply he already feels for Keiko. This has two effects: one is to emphasize the power of Henry and Keiko's connection, and the other is to dramatize their separation. Henry cares for Keiko, but this moment serves as a reminder that he hardly had a chance to get to know her before she and her family were imprisoned.*

Henry finishes his work, and then makes his way to the visiting area. Soon, Keiko arrives. From the other side of the barbed wire fence, she tells Henry she had a dream they were together, dancing to the song Oscar Holden wrote for them. Keiko asks if Henry will come visit her next week for her birthday, and bring her some paper and envelopes, as well as fabric so her family can make curtains; the searchlights in the camp have been keeping them up at night.

*Keiko's request for fabric so that she and her family might be able to sleep at night highlights the inhumane conditions of the internment camp. The Okabes and their fellow internees are not prisoners of war; many of them are American citizens by birth. Yet, the American government does not even provide the families with pen and paper, showing how easy it is to dehumanize nonwhite people when the very concept of Americanness is intertwined with whiteness.*

Keiko says that the soldiers are going to allow the prisoners to hold a record concert the following Saturday; Keiko has decided to celebrate her birthday that same day. Henry asks if Keiko has the **Oscar Holden record** they bought with her. Keiko says no; she stored it with her family's other belongings in the basement of the **Panama Hotel**. Henry promises that, regardless, he'll bring the items Keiko requested to her next Saturday.

*As he did when he promised to hide Keiko's family photos for her, Henry demonstrates the strength of his feelings for Keiko by promising to bring Keiko the items she and her family need. This passage also highlights Keiko's positivity; event though she and her family are imprisoned, Keiko has found a way to celebrate her upcoming birthday that will still make her feel happy.*

Keiko offers Henry a bouquet of dandelions she picked; Henry apologizes that he doesn't have anything to give Keiko in return. Keiko asks if Henry's parents know he's at the camp, and when Henry says no, she replies: "It's okay. I wouldn't want my son coming to a prison camp either." Henry and Keiko touch palms through the barbed wire fence, but soon Mrs. Beatty arrives to drive Henry home. Henry again promises Keiko he'll be back the following week. "I'll be here," Keiko says through tears.

*With her bouquet of daffodils, Keiko again demonstrates her ability to see the good around her, as well as her determination to make a space for herself in the world, even when the world doesn't seem to want her. Another important aspect of this passage is the moment when Henry and Keiko touch palms through the barbed wire fence, as this symbolizes the power of their love to overcome and even brighten painful situations.*

## HOME AGAIN (1942)

The next day, Henry feels rejuvenated. He resolves to find another **Oscar Holden record** to bring Keiko as a birthday present. At breakfast, Henry's father announces that Chinese nationalist forces in China have gained the upper hand against Japanese imperialist invaders. "Next school year," Henry's father says, "you can go to Canton." Henry is horrified by the thought; to him, China is "a foreign country." Before Henry can argue with his father, Henry's mother presents him with a shopping list and sends him out to run errands.

*This scene emphasizes Henry's sense of isolation as a first-generation American: he is too Chinese to belong in an American school, and worries he will be too American to belong in a Chinese school. Another important aspect of this scene is the genuine excitement Henry's father feels. Though he is harsh and uncompromising in imposing his beliefs on his son, Henry's father truly believes that he is giving his son the best opportunities he is able to give.*

While out shopping, Henry decides to use the money he's saved working with Mrs. Beatty in the camp to buy a new sketchbook and some art supplies for Keiko's birthday. He also decides to talk to Sheldon about getting a new **Oscar Holden record** to replace the one Keiko left in the **Panama Hotel** before going to Camp Harmony.

*In the same way that Keiko saved her money to buy the Oscar Holden record for Henry, Henry plans to use his saved money to buy birthday presents for Keiko. The two cherish one another, and are committed to expressing their affection even though they have not yet determined how to do so verbally.*

On his way to find Sheldon, Henry walks past the **Panama Hotel**, which is now boarded up. He realizes he might be able to sneak in and retrieve Keiko's **record** from the basement, but when he crosses behind the hotel, Henry finds Chaz Preston, Will Whitworth, and several other school bullies also trying to break into the building. "Where's your girlfriend, Henry?" Chaz taunts, adding: "Better get used to me. My dad's going to buy all these buildings, so we might end up neighbors."

*Mr. Preston's plans to take over large swaths of Nihonmachi suggests how willing those in power are to ignore and even forget the suffering of others in order to consolidate their power. Chaz's comments also suggest that he has inherited some of the racism he espouses from his father; though the narrative never explicitly confirms this, Chaz's father buying up the interned families' property from under them is certainly cruel and callous.*

Frightened but determined, Henry grabs an old broom handle lying in a pile of nearby garbage and wields it against Chaz. "You think you can beat us all up?" Chaz mocks. "You might get me eventually," Henry says, "but I know one of you'll be going home with a limp." Henry swings the broom handle again, and the boys back away. Henry turns around to see two armed soldiers behind him. "No more looting, kid," says one of the soldiers. "I don't care who you are—beat it." Henry hurries away, in the direction of Sheldon's neighborhood. As he leaves, he spots Chaz and his friends being questioned by the police.

*In this scene, Henry seems to tap into the sense of confidence and belonging he found when he confronted Chaz at the train station. Here, Henry is coming to the defense of Nihonmachi itself, in refusing to allow his racist classmates to vandalize the building that is housing the treasured belongings of the imprisoned Japanese American families. Now that Henry has been inspired to stand up on behalf of others, it seems that Chaz holds less emotional power over him.*

## DINNER (1986)

Samantha cooks a delicious Chinese dinner for Marty and Henry. The three toast to "a successful find in the basement time capsule of the **Panama Hotel**." Samantha brings out the special dessert she's made: dragon's beard candy. "I've been practicing," she says. "Sometimes you have to just go for it. Try for what's hardest to accomplish. Like you and your childhood sweetheart." Startled, Henry replies: "I see my son's been sharing stories." Samantha presses Henry to search for Keiko. She "might still be out there somewhere," she says. "Aren't you curious where she is, where she might be?"

*Samantha shows herself to be a thoughtful and compassionate person, one who is determined to claim her place in her fiancé's family, while showing respect for traditions that are not her own. Furthermore, Samantha again demonstrates her willingness to ask uncomfortable questions, thereby granting Henry permission to inwardly (if not yet outwardly) acknowledge feelings he has been harboring for years.*

To himself, Henry admits that he has thought of Keiko over the course of the years, and that he does still love her; he loved her even as he was married to Ethel, whom he also loved. However, now as then, Henry is sure that he "love[s] [Keiko] enough to let her go—to not go dredging up the past." Marty presses the issue, saying that Henry should return Keiko's sketchbooks to her. Henry insists that "she might not even be alive." "People didn't look back," he says, "and there was nothing to return to, so they moved on." Still, Henry begins to wonder "what else he might find if he look[s] hard enough."

*Henry struggles between his desire to reconnect with Keiko and his conviction that the healthiest way to deal with a traumatic past is to move on from it and not look back. As Henry is starting to see, though, memories have a tendency to reassert themselves, and Marty and Samantha seem determined to push Henry toward the happy ending they are sure he can still find. Now that he is a widower, Henry feels free for the first time to wonder what might happen if he were to go looking for Keiko.*

## STEPS (1986)

After dinner, Samantha falls asleep, and Marty and Henry speak on the porch. Marty asks if his grandfather, Henry's father, or his mom, Ethel, knew about Keiko. Henry says he told his father about Keiko, and his father stopped speaking to him because of it. "But what about Mom?" Marty presses. Henry says that he's "not sure what [Marty's] mom knew" because they "didn't talk about it."

*This passage makes clear that Henry has been using his father's tactic of non-communication since before Marty was even born. Though Ethel seems to have accepted Henry's unwillingness to discuss his past, Marty's relationship to his father has clearly been complicated by the fact that Marty has no idea what his father has lived through.*

Henry reflects on his marriage to Ethel: "He had been a loyal and dedicated husband, but he would walk blocks out of his way to avoid the **Panama Hotel** and the memory of Keiko." Henry tells Marty that he should keep Keiko's sketchbook; he's satisfied with keeping just the **Oscar Holden record**. Still, he can't help thinking that the record is now just "two halves that will never play again."

*Though Henry has begun to feel openly curious about Keiko's fate, and has made progress in expressing himself to Marty and Samantha, he is still not ready to fully confront his past by searching for Keiko. His fear that the broken record will never play again seems to imply that he is worried his love for Keiko will not be reciprocated in the way it used to be, were he able to contact her now.*

## SHELDON'S RECORD (1942)

After school on Monday, Henry finds Sheldon on his street corner. Sheldon asks where Henry has been the past couple weekends. Henry says he'll explain later, and asks Sheldon to give him his **record**. Sheldon resists, saying: "[It's] the only record I own—of my *own* playing." Henry explains that he wants to give Keiko the record for her birthday, and Sheldon relents, saying Henry can have the record "because it's for a *higher* power." "You go play that thing in that camp down there," Sheldon says. "You go. I kinda like the sound of that."

*In giving Henry his copy of the record, Sheldon shows himself to be a selfless friend. He also models for Henry the importance of fighting for love. This foreshadows the way that Sheldon will, as he is dying, encourage Henry to reconnect with Keiko. Finally, Sheldon's enthusiasm at having his music played at the internment camp suggests that music, in this case, can be a force of resistance by acting as a reclamation of joy in the face of oppression.*

The next day, Henry stops at Woolworth's after school to buy a sketchbook and art supplies for Keiko. He hurries home and stashes the supplies with the **record** in the back alley behind his house. When he enters his apartment, he finds his father and mother sitting at the table with Keiko's family photo albums spread out before them. "Well, at least we're probably going to have a real conversation," Henry thinks.

*This is the beginning of a climactic scene in the novel, in which Henry and his father finally butt heads over Henry's relationship with Keiko. It is noteworthy that Henry feels a certain sense of relief here, even though he anticipates that his father will react poorly. Henry is so desperate to have a genuine conversation with his father that even the prospect of an argument feels strangely comforting. This emphasizes what a stifling, alienating effect the silence of his family household has had on Henry.*

Henry's father berates him: "Instead of studying, you're making eyes with this Japanese girl. Japanese! She's a daughter of the butchers of my people. *Your* people. Their blood is on her!" For the first time in eight months, Henry speaks Cantonese to his father, instead of English. He defends Keiko, explaining that she is American, born in the same hospital she was. "She's not the enemy," he shouts. He's surprised by his own fury, and ashamed at speaking so loudly in front of his mother.

*Henry's father has become so mired in his hatred of Japan that he can no longer recognize that Keiko isn't even Japanese—she is Japanese American. Furthermore, Mr. and Mrs. Okabe are Japanese American as well; Keiko is neither literally nor figuratively a daughter of the "butchers" of Chinese people. This passage thus emphasizes how toxic memory as a force has become for Henry's father, blinding him in the same way that racism and xenophobia blinds a character like Chaz.*

With "a blank expression that [is] probably a mask of his disappointment," Henry's father dumps Keiko's family photos out the window. Though his father ignores him, Henry whispers furiously: "She was born here. Her family was born here. *You* weren't even born here." Henry insists that he's going to retrieve the photos and keep his promise to Keiko. "If you walk out that door," Henry's father says, "[…] you are no longer part of this family. You are no longer Chinese." With his hand on the door, Henry says in Cantonese: "I am what you made me, Father […] I…am an American."

*Henry's decision to walk out the door represents a turning point in his relationship with his father. From this point onward, the relationship between these two characters will only further deteriorate. Henry's affirmation of his Americanness—which he speaks in Chinese—emphasizes that Henry will no longer submit to his father's vision of what Henry's life should look like.*

## CAMP ANYWAY (1942)

Henry salvages most of Keiko's photos. His parents refuse to speak to him, and he begins "to feel like a ghost in the little brick apartment" he lives in. After a few days, Henry's mother begins to acknowledge him again, but she does so "with little ceremony [...] so as not to go against the wishes of Henry's father" who has figuratively disowned his son, if not literally, as he'd threatened.

*By giving Henry a formal, deliberate silent treatment, Henry's father is enforcing an emotional disowning of his son, one which has arguably more damaging effects on Henry than a literal disownment might have had. Henry feels completely devalued by his family—to the point where he might as well be a ghost—and his father's decision also impacts Henry's relationship with his mother, which was previously the one source of love and comfort (however tenuous) that he had at home.*

By the time Saturday arrives, Henry is desperate to talk to someone. His home is silent, and he hasn't been able to find Sheldon after school because he has been playing at the Black Elks Club, which has finally reopened. On the way to camp, Mrs. Beatty cautions Henry that the gifts he's brought for Keiko won't be allowed through—they'll be opened by the guards. "I'll take care of it," she promises.

*This scene doubles down on the damaging effects of Henry's father's silence. It is almost as if Henry is losing a grip on his sense of sanity and even selfhood, which underscores how deeply toxic silence can be to relationships. On a plot level, Mrs. Beatty's commitment to helping Henry deliver Keiko's birthday gifts shows what a kind person Mrs. Beatty is.*

On the outskirts of Camp Harmony, Mrs. Beatty pulls over at a gas station and buries Henry's presents in a bag of rice. Henry realizes that Mrs. Beatty must have also smuggled in the tools that he's seen prisoners using to fix the shacks they are living in. When the gas station attendant asks what Mrs. Beatty is "doing with that Jap," she replies: "He ain't no Jap. He's a Chinaman—and the Chinese are our allies, so shove off, mister!" Mrs. Beatty and Henry get back in the truck and drive through the gates to Camp Harmony.

*This passage shows Mrs. Beatty defending Henry in the most noticeable way yet. However, this scene also suggests that Mrs. Beatty's allyship isn't perfect—after all, Henry isn't a "Chinaman"; he's an American. Still, Mrs. Beatty defends Henry's right to belong in a way that Henry might not be able to, given that he is only a child and the gas station attendant is a full-grown adult. This suggests that it is important for white Americans to stand up for nonwhite Americans, even if they don't do so in a perfect manner.*

While serving lunch, Henry sees Mrs. Okabe, who tells him that the families are going to be moved to a new location. She says, "They might even split off some of the men—those with job skills needed elsewhere. They're making us build our own prisons, can you believe that?" Mrs. Okabe rejoins the crowd, and Keiko appears in the serving line. Keiko thanks him for all he's done for her, and Henry realizes he might be in love with her. The two agree to meet at the visitor's fence in an hour so Henry can give Keiko her birthday presents.

*The fact that the male internees are being forced to build the camps emphasizes how brutally cruel the government's treatment of its own citizens was during this time period. The government's willingness to split up interned families also suggests that the policy of internment has virtually nothing to do with keeping Japanese Americans "safe." This scene is also noteworthy because it is the first time that Henry has considered that his feelings for Keiko might actually amount to love.*

At the visitor's fence, Keiko tells Henry that the guards have cancelled the record concert because of bad weather. "You came all this way," Keiko apologizes. "I really did want to sit here along the fence and listen with you." Henry hesitatingly tells Keiko that he didn't come for the music. He then gives her the art supplies and sketchbook, in which he has written an inscription: "To Keiko, the sweetest, most beautiful American girl I've ever known. Love, your friend Henry."

*Henry's inscription is another important step in his relationship with Keiko. Henry feels "awkward" about using the word love; it seems likely that this discomfort is due at least in part to the strained, reserved communication Henry has grown up with at home. Still, Henry has committed to his feelings in a newly profound way by writing this inscription.*

Keiko begins to cry. "Your father…" she says. "He knows, doesn't he?" Henry admits that his father has disowned him. "We're more than friends," he tells Keiko. "We're the same people. But he doesn't see it." Henry then gives Keiko the **Oscar Holden record** he got from Sheldon. Keiko is astonished. "This is almost like having you here with me," she says, adding, "I'll be playing this every day."

*Henry's insistence that he and Keiko are "the same people" alludes to the unique empathy and understanding these two characters have for one another. Their experiences as first- and second-generation Americans (and of different ethnicities) differ, but Henry and Keiko have found a deeper sense of belonging within the world of their friendship than either of them has ever had with their peers.*

As it begins to rain, Henry gives Keiko the final package he brought, containing stationery, stamps, and fabric for curtains. A guard shouts that visiting hours are over. Henry promises to visit every week, and Keiko promises to write to him. As Henry leaves the camp with Mrs. Beatty, he hears Oscar Holden's "Alley Cat Strut" **record** playing over the storm.

*In this scene, the Oscar Holden record symbolizes the strength of Henry and Keiko's love. The music also represents defiance, given that the camp guards had canceled the concert. Still, the prisoners assert their right to joy and to their own humanity by playing the record in the face of the guards' searchlights, and of the literal storm itself.*

## MOVING (1942)

Henry receives confirmation from Keiko that the Japanese prisoners will be moved farther inland, meaning that the Okabes will be leaving Camp Harmony. Keiko has been writing to Henry once a week; Henry's mother has been sorting the mail before Henry's father can see it, making sure her son gets Keiko's letters. Keiko writes that Mr. Okabe has volunteered to go to Idaho, to help build Camp Minidoka. The rest of the family will be joining him there when the camp is ready.

*Mr. Okabe's action shows the lengths to which he is willing to go; he does not merely identify as an American, but he also acts like a model citizen, complying with his government even though it has deeply betrayed him and his fellow Japanese American citizens. Another important aspect of this passage is Henry's mother's small act of defiance. By assuring that Henry receives Keiko's mail, Henry's mother shows, however quietly, that she values her son's happiness in a more understanding way than Henry's father does.*

Saturday comes, and Henry visits Keiko at Camp Harmony for the last time. He sneaks into the camp itself, not caring if he is caught, since it will be his last visit to Camp Harmony whether he is discovered or not. Henry finds the Okabes' stall, which is in a barn where the prisoners are being housed. Henry knows it is the Okabes' stall because there is a banner on it that reads "Welcome to the **Panama Hotel**."

*The Okabes' sign shows that they have managed to retain their sense of humor and cheerfulness as a family, despite their circumstances. Their optimism stands in sharp contrast to the debasement to the American government is subjecting its own citizens to by forcing them to live in a barn.*

Henry and Keiko talk about the Okabes' imminent departure. Keiko says she wishes Henry could come with her, and Henry concurs. He then apologizes for the way he treated her on their first day at school together. "I was afraid of you," he admits. "My father had said so many things—I just didn't know what to think." Henry struggles for the words to express his love for Keiko. All he can manage to say is "I'm going to miss you." He can tell Keiko "look[s] crushed."

*In saying his goodbye to Keiko, Henry stumbles and is unable to break through the noncommunicative tendencies he has inherited from his father. This is an important plot point because Henry will come to regret the restrained goodbye he gives Keiko in this scene, and use this regret as a motivating factor to search for her after her family's transfer to Idaho.*

Henry and Keiko talk for another hour before Henry has to leave. Neither of them mentions again how much they will miss each other. Henry realizes that even though he is alone with Keiko, "they might as well [be] standing up at the visitor's fence—Henry on one side, Keiko on the other—separated by razor wire."

*Henry's feeling that he is on the other side of a razor wire from Keiko mirrors his feeling of living in a "separate ocean" from his father. This imagery suggests that silence can spread across relationships by becoming a fundamental pattern of behavior, a notion also played out in Henry's relationship to his son, Marty.*

## STRANGER (1942)

On the ride home, Henry thinks about his goodbye with Keiko. He hadn't hugged her—just waved and smiled. He wonders if he did the right thing; he couldn't bear "the thought of telling her how he really felt and *then* watching her go."

*Henry clings here to the idea that he spared Keiko (and himself) some pain by not expressing his true feelings. As he will find out later, though, repressing one's feelings actually causes deeper pain in the long run.*

Mrs. Beatty drops Henry off at home and tells him, "Don't go changing schools on me now. I still expect to see you in the kitchen this fall, got it?" When Henry enters his apartment, he finds a Chinese doctor named Dr. Luke is in the kitchen on a house call. Henry's mother is crying at the kitchen table. Henry's father has had a stroke, and while Dr. Luke expects he will live, he explains that he is now barely able to speak. Henry is overwhelmed by guilt. His mother grips his hand and says: "Not your fault. Don't think this. Not your fault—his fault, understand?"

*In this scene, both Mrs. Beatty and Henry's mother show their love for Henry. Mrs. Beatty affirms that Henry belongs in her kitchen, even if his classmates make him feel that he doesn't belong in other spaces at Rainier Elementary. Henry's mother, despite her grief over her husband's stroke, steps up as a parent by reminding Henry that children are not responsible for the emotions of their parents.*

Henry asks to see his father. At Henry's father's beside, Henry's mother encourages Henry to speak, saying that his father would "want to know you're here." Henry offers his father a formal Chinese apology used when "admitting guilt or fault": *deui mh jyuh*, meaning "I am unable to face." In response, Henry's father grips his hand and strains to say one word: *saang jan*, meaning "stranger."

*Henry's formal apology underscores how desperate he is to feel loved and accepted by his father. However, Henry's father clings to his stubborn beliefs. In rejecting Henry's apology, Henry's father imposes a new kind of isolation on his son, formally declaring that Henry is a stranger everywhere he goes—even in his own home*

## THIRTEEN (1942)

One month passes. Henry has turned thirteen. His father is confined to a wheelchair, and while he can whisper words to Henry's mother, he refuses to speak to Henry. Keiko left for Camp Minidoka on August 11th. She's now been gone more than a month, and Henry has not received a single letter from her. Chaz Preston has been kicked out of Rainier Elementary for vandalizing buildings in Japantown. Henry is wracked with guilt over not telling Keiko how he feels. He feels that even "after all the time he'd rebelled against his father's wishes and his father's ways [...] he wasn't that different from him at all"—not when it came to communicating his feelings.

*This is an important moment of introspection for Henry, as he realizes that he has copied his father's behavior by not expressing his true feelings for Keiko. Of course, this is not be the last time Henry will unconsciously replicate his father's behavior. The fact that, as a father himself, Henry will continue to struggle against the noncommunicative tendencies handed down by his own father shows how lasting the negative effect of silence can be on personal relationships.*

Walking home alone from school one day, Henry stops to talk to Sheldon. Henry tells Sheldon how much he regrets his goodbye with Keiko. He says, "I didn't even really say goodbye as much as I sent her away." Sheldon suggests that he and Henry take the Greyhound bus to Idaho to find Keiko. Henry insists that he can't leave his father: "If he found out I'd gone all the way to Idaho to see a Japanese girl, his heart would give out completely..." Sheldon assures Henry that his father's stroke was not his fault, but Henry leaves for home anyway, convincing himself that going to see Keiko "just isn't practical right now."

*Henry's guilt over his father's stroke underscores how toxic a relationship Henry and his father have. Though Henry's father has not directly accused Henry of causing his stroke, the fact that Henry so readily shoulders the blame emphasizes how Henry has been made to feel responsible for prioritizing his father's happiness over his own. Sheldon's suggestion of going to Idaho is important because Henry will eventually decide to take his advice.*

At home, Henry's mother informs Henry that a birthday card came from him. It's from Keiko, and she signs it saying: "I won't write you again, I don't want to bother you. Maybe your father is right." Hands shaking, Henry goes to his room and counts the money he's saved all summer. He emerges with a suitcase and tells his mother he is going to the bus station and will be back in a few days.

*Henry and Keiko's relationship is starting to experience strain—not just because Keiko is in an internment camp, but also, it would seem, because of Henry's reluctance to express how he really feels about her. In this scene, however, Henry shows that he is finally ready to act on his feelings, even if he still has some trouble verbalizing them.*

Henry and Sheldon take the Greyhound bus together. Henry is planning to give Keiko his **"I Am Chinese" button** and try to sneak her out of Camp Minidoka with him. Henry and Sheldon make it to Walla Walla, where they stop and order food to go. They're both surprised by how welcoming the people are whom they meet at the restaurant.

*The people that Henry and Sheldon meet in Walla Walla are Adventists, a religious group "lending charitable aid to imprisoned Japanese families." Both Henry and Sheldon are surprised at the kindness and decency of the people they encounter on this leg of their trip, emphasizing how accustomed both these characters have become to being treated poorly by white people.*

Finally in Idaho, Henry and Sheldon have no trouble finding Camp Minidoka: it has become "the seventh largest city in Idaho." The two ride into the camp with a group of nurses. Sheldon points out Japanese men digging a sewer line and guesses that "it'll be months before they get hot water or flushing toilets."

*Again, Henry witnesses firsthand the inhumane conditions in which his fellow American citizens are being held. The fact that male internees are being forced to do hard labor shows that Japanese Americans truly were being treated as prisoners of war.*

Inside the camp, Henry finds a staff member who arranges to have a letter sent to the Okabes, notifying them they have a visitor. She cautions Henry that it might take a day for Keiko to get the notice that he is here. Henry fills out the slip and writes his name as "visitor," since he wants to surprise Keiko. Henry and Sheldon wait for hours, until visiting hours end. As they head back outside, resolving to return the next day, Henry imagines he hears Keiko's voice.

*Henry's decision to write "visitor" instead of declaring his name shows that Henry wants to do his best to bring some cheerfulness to Keiko's life by surprising her. This decision might also imply that Henry is still feeling nervous about what he will say to Keiko to convey how deeply he cares about her.*

In fact, Keiko is there, standing outside the visitor's center, clutching the notice Henry filled out. Keiko runs to Henry and he slips his hands into hers through the fence that separates them. Henry tells Keiko that he came to apologize for not saying goodbye. "I didn't know what goodbye really was," he says. Then he leans in to kiss Keiko through the fence. She kisses him back. "I came to do that," he says.

*Henry stumbles a bit in his conversation with Keiko, but he finds the confidence to show (if not tell) her what he feels by kissing her. The fact that Henry and Keiko have to kiss through a fence is a powerful image that shows just how unlikely their love story is, and how that love is powerful enough to thrive despite the hardships both characters have been facing.*

## SHELDON THOMAS (1986)

Henry visits a nursing home in West Seattle, where Sheldon, now 74, is living. Since Ethel's death, Henry has been visiting Sheldon every Sunday, but today he has come to give Sheldon the **Oscar Holden record** he found with Marty and Samantha in the **Panama Hotel** basement. Henry warns Sheldon that the record is broken, but Sheldon asks to hold it anyway, and closes his eyes as though "listening to the music play[ing] somewhere, sometime, long ago."

*Henry and Sheldon's friendship has stood the test of time, which seems to hint at the possibility that another unlikely relationship—Henry and Keiko's—may have done the same. Sheldon's quiet moment holding the Oscar Holden record attests to the power of music and of memory; Sheldon can still tap into the joy that music brought him even though he cannot hear the actual notes.*

## WAITING (1942)

Henry wakes up in Camp Minidoka; he has stayed the night with the Okabes. He was able to sneak in easily; "for once in his life," he thinks, "there was a benefit to Caucasian people thinking that he was [...] Japanese." Keiko awakens, too. Henry tells her about his plan to sneak her out of the camp. Keiko replies, "Don't ask, because I would go back with you." Henry promises to wait for Keiko. Mrs. Okabe awakens and asks Henry, "How's it feel to be a prisoner for a day?" "Best day of my life," Henry replies, making Keiko smile.

*Ironically, the ignorance of white Americans works to Henry's benefit here, and the fact that he is able to find amusement in this shows how strong Henry has had to become, given the constant racist bullying he has had to withstand throughout his life. Henry's assertion that this is "the best day of [his] life" is also noteworthy, as it testifies to the power of Henry and Keiko's love to transcend their difficult circumstances.*


Henry eats breakfast with the Okabes. He asks Mr. Okabe why the Japanese prisoners, who greatly outnumber the guards, don't take over the camp. "We're *still* loyal to the United States of America," Mr. Okabe explains. "Why? Because we too are Americans. We don't agree, but we will show our loyalty by our obedience." Mr. Okabe's words make Henry think of his parents, for whom "obedience [is] a sign of loyalty [...] an expression of honor, even [...] an act of love." Henry is still worried that his disobedience of his father caused his father to have a stroke.

*Mr. Okabe's words powerfully illustrate how deeply American he is. Despite his government's inhumane treatment of him, his family, and his fellow Japanese Americans, Mr. Okabe is still committed to serving his country; he has not succumbed to bitterness. This seems to be the difference between Mr. Okabe's version of "love as obedience" and Henry's father's version. Mr. Okabe gives his obedience freely, while Henry's father tries to extract it from Henry.*


Henry, Keiko, and Mr. Okabe discuss the fact that many male prisoners are enlisting to fight for America in the war. Mrs. Okabe interrupts their discussion; she says she's honored Henry came "all this way to court Keiko," but she wants to plan how to smuggle him out of the camp, since there was a shooting only one week before the Okabes arrived. Startled on more than one level, Henry realizes he hasn't asked permission to court Keiko. He does so, and Mr. Okabe warmly grants it. Then Henry asks what happened to the soldier who fatally shot a prisoner. Mr. Okabe says that the soldier was fined for "unauthorized use of government property"—in other words, the bullet that killed the prisoner.

*The voluntary enlistment of many Japanese American men emphasizes yet again how patriotic these prisoners are, in sharp contrast to the government's refusal to see them as such. The story of the prisoner shot by a soldier further illustrates the American government's refusal to see its Japanese American citizens as human beings, never mind citizens. The fact that people like Mr. Okabe find it within themselves to keep loving and serving this government attests to how powerfully many Americans, regardless of their race, feel about their American identity.*

## FAREWELL (1942)

Henry and Keiko sit outside the Okabes' building talking. Again, Henry promises to wait for Keiko, even if it is years. The two spend the whole day talking, and when evening comes, Henry walks with Keiko to the visitor's center, holding her hand. Henry tells Keiko he doesn't know if he'll be able to visit her again, and she assures him he should "just wait, and write." Henry and Keiko kiss and part. Henry says, "I love you," but Keiko is too far away to hear. Nevertheless, "her mouth echoe[s] the same statement as her hand touche[s] her heart and point[s] at Henry." Henry smiles and leaves the camp.

*Finally, Henry verbalizes his love for Keiko. He seems to derive a great sense of peace from speaking his feelings aloud, even if Keiko can't hear his words. This passage makes clear that the important thing for Henry was the exertion of* trying *to express himself; when he was first reunited with Keiko at Minidoka he didn't come up with the perfect way to say "I love you." Still, he made an effort, and this refusal to stay silent any longer was even more important than Henry actually finding the perfect "I love you" phrase.*


## ANGRY HOME (1942)

Henry and Sheldon take the bus home. Henry feels strangely comforted knowing that there is nothing more he can do to disappoint his father, but he is still worried about his mother and how concerned she must be for his safety. Henry parts ways with Sheldon, and arrives home to "numbing" silence. On his bed he finds a white suit. In the jacket pocket is an envelope containing a ticket to China. Henry's mother appears in the doorway. "Your father has decided you can go to Canton now," she says, "to finish your Chinese schooling." Henry is sure his father wants to keep him away from Keiko, but a part of him still wants to go to China "to be able to come back with an understanding of what made his father who he [is]."

*In this passage, Henry's father is shown to be incredibly stubborn and as domineering as ever. Furthermore, Henry's father's version of what his son's happiness* should *look like has blinded him to the fact that Henry is already—finally—happy. Another important aspect of this passage is the fact that Henry partially does want to go to school in China so that he can finally understand his father. This suggests that Henry does love his father, despite the harsh treatment he has received at his hands.*

Henry and his mother quarrel. "I won't fit in there any more than I fit in at the all-white school he sent me to," Henry says. "Haven't I done enough?" Henry feels "his resolve crumble" in the face of his mother's insistence. Henry's mother tells him the tickets are for the following week, and he should expect to be in China for three or four years. Henry refuses. "You have no choice," his mother says. "This is decided."

*Henry's mother ultimately does not side with her son. She, like Henry's father, seems unable to recognize how much of his happiness Henry has already sacrificed to appease his parents. Henry's fears about not belonging in China once again emphasize the difficulty many first-generation Americans face, of fitting in neither in America nor in their parents' home country/culture.*

Henry holds his ground: "I will decide," he says. "I'm the same age Father was when he left." Henry asks his mother to tell his father that he won't go to China until the war is over and Keiko comes home. "I cannot tell him," Henry's mother says. "Then do as I've done these past years," replies Henry. "Say nothing." Henry's mother tells him he is as stubborn as his father. Though it pains him to say it, Henry says: "He made me what I am."

*This is a pivotal moment for Henry. He seems to have finally struck a tenable balance between seeking his own happiness and doing what is asked of him by his parents, who have sacrificed so much to see him succeed. Furthermore, Henry is asserting his own will against both his mother's and father's, showing how much confidence he has gained as a result of all he's been through.*

## LETTERS (1943)

Henry writes to Keiko and tells her about his father's desire to send him to China. Surprising Henry, Keiko advises him to go, since they are apart for now regardless. Henry decides to stay at Rainier. He writes to Keiko every week, and she sends back letters and sketches. After a while, Keiko stops writing; Henry goes three weeks without receiving a letter. At the post office one day, he surprises the skinny girl working the front counter by paying extra postage to have his latest letter to Keiko expedited.

*Henry is crushed and confused by Keiko's lack of response. This is understandable, given how tortured Henry has been by his father's (and mother's) silence throughout his childhood. Still, Henry remains devoted to Keiko, and to keeping his promise of writing to and waiting for her. The fact that he even pays extra postage to ensure his letters reach Keiko affirms yet again how deeply Henry has fallen in love with his friend.*

On the way home from the post office, Henry stops to talk to Sheldon, who notes that Henry is walking home empty-handed. "I just didn't think she'd forget about me so quickly," Henry says. Sheldon encourages Henry to keep his faith in Keiko; "hope gets you through the night," he says.

*Though Henry struggles to accept Sheldon's advice, Sheldon's wise words nevertheless underscore the importance of maintaining one's faith in the goodness of others, despite adversity. Love, Sheldon suggests, cannot grow without hope.*

Three weeks since Henry last heard from Keiko, he receives a letter from her, dated a week earlier. Henry writes back right away, but waits months for a reply. When he does get one, he thinks Keiko seems "more confused and busy than ever." Henry wonders if the letters he's been writing her have been getting lost. Henry begins to despair that "time apart" is distancing him more from Keiko "than the mountains and time zone separating them."

*Several details of this passage are important on a plot level—particularly Keiko's sense of confusion in her replies, as well as the fact that Henry has begun to receive Keiko's responses out of order. Additionally, Henry's concern about "time apart" distancing him and Keiko is noteworthy, as the reader has already seen that not even an entire lifetime apart has been able to permanently sever their bond.*

## YEARS (1945)

Two years have passed; Henry is now 15. Walking home from the post office one day, Henry runs into Chaz Preston. Henry realizes that he is taller than Chaz now, and that the former bully looks "small and weak." Chaz says that his father, Mr. Preston, is still buying up buildings in the former Japantown. "When your girlfriend gets back from that concentration camp she's holed up in, she's not going to have anything to come home to," Chaz says.

*Chaz continues to be a racist, noxious character, but Henry has gained a tremendous amount of perspective. To Henry, Chaz has become "more pathetic and annoying than menacing." This is partially to do with the fact that Chaz is now less of a physical threat to Henry, but it also suggests that racist venom fundamentally comes from a place of weakness rather than strength or superiority.*

Chaz walks away, and Henry reflects on the past two years. He's continued writing to Keiko, but he only receives intermittent replies. The same girl still works at the post office; one day she tells him, "She must be very special to you, Henry. You've never given up on her, have you?" Henry has considered trying to visit Keiko again, but has decided against it. The United States is winning the war, and he hopes Keiko will be home soon.

*Henry has continued to love Keiko and to believe in his love for her despite his doubts. Henry's continued interaction with the girl from the post office (who will turn out to be his future wife, Ethel) is also noteworthy, as a large part of the reason Ethel falls in love with Henry is because of the love he demonstrates he's capable of, through his commitment to Keiko.*

At home, Henry's mother now regards him as the man of the house. Henry's father has had another stroke, and is still not speaking to Henry, though Henry sometimes has one-sided conversations with him. He does so today, telling his father that he ran into Chaz Preston. He asks his father if he thinks Mr. Preston will try to buy the **Panama Hotel**. Henry's father gives "a crooked smile," and Henry intuits that the hotel will, indeed, soon be sold. He feels saddened thinking that when Keiko comes home, there won't be any "of the places she had drawn in her sketchbook" waiting for her.

*This passage highlights the important role that physical locations can play in memory. Clearly, Henry has ascribed some of the physical places he shared with Keiko with emotional significance; this is evident in his desire for Keiko to be able to return to these physical locations as a way of re-grounding herself and reclaiming a sense of normalcy. The fact that Henry specifically imparts such importance to the Panama Hotel (though he and Keiko have spent more time together in, say, Kobe Park) also serves to highlight the specific significance of that building as a place that bridges two different cultural worlds, as Henry and Keiko's very relationship does.*

## MEETING AT THE PANAMA (1945)

After helping his mother with the laundry, Henry sits down to talk to his father. Henry tells him that he will go to China on one condition: as a senior member of several "downtown associations," Henry's father must use his influence to prevent the sale of the **Panama Hotel**. Henry's father thanks him, and Henry replies that he's made the choice for Keiko, not for his father. He plans to start over in China, and he hopes that "if that old hotel [is] still around, Nihonmachi [can] start over too."

*Despite his maturation as a character, Henry shows in this passage that he still has a child's naïveté in thinking that Nihonmachi will be able to revive itself, or that the Japanese American families who survive internment will ever really be able to "start over." Still, his attempt to preserve something of Keiko's pre-internment life by saving the hotel from demolition shows how deeply Henry wants Keiko to feel like she still belongs.*

The following day, Henry mails one final letter to Keiko, whom he hasn't heard from in six months. In the letter, he wishes her farewell, but also says that if she is home in March, one month from now, he will meet her on the steps of the **Panama Hotel**. Henry tells the girl at the post office that this is the last time he'll see her because he is going to China to finish his schooling. As he leaves the post office, he thinks he "detect[s] more than a hint of sadness in the young clerk's face."

*Henry demonstrates his belief that letting go is sometimes better than fighting. This mindset about love is something that Sheldon, and later Marty and Samantha, work hard to challenge in Henry. Eventually, in a manner that parallels his efforts to communicate his feelings more clearly, Henry will have to break through this mindset in order to reconnect with Keiko.*

It is now March, the date Henry specified in his letter, and Henry is waiting for Keiko on the steps of the **Panama Hotel**. Henry thinks of this as "one last noble gesture, so when he board[s] the ship, he [can] leave knowing he'd given it his all." Suddenly, Henry hears the sounds of a woman's heels, and he looks up. For a moment, he sees Keiko's face, but then he realizes the face before him is Chinese, not Japanese. It is the young woman from the post office.

*Henry is still very clearly in love with Keiko, and his desire to enact "one last noble gesture" shows that he has learned the importance of acting on his feelings, even when he has trouble verbalizing them. It's hard to blame Henry for feeling exhausted given that he's been waiting for Keiko for years. Still, it seems likely that Sheldon would remind Henry that hope is hard but worthwhile work.*

The girl from the post office hands Henry his final letter. She says it was returned unopened and marked "Return to Sender," meaning Keiko is no longer at Camp Minidoka. Henry notices that the letter is open now, and the clerk apologizes, admitting that she read it herself. "I hated the thought of you sitting here, waiting for someone who was never going to come," she says. She also hands Henry a bouquet of **starfire lilies**, saying she's seen him buying them at the market. "I guess I figured they were your favorite," she says, "and maybe someone should give *you* some for a change." Henry thanks the girl, and realizes he doesn't even know her name. She introduces herself as Ethel Chen.

*The reveal of Ethel's identity shows how intricately connected Henry's love for Ethel is with his love for Keiko. Ethel loves Henry (at least in part) for his loyalty to Keiko; Henry loves and feels grateful to Ethel for showing loyalty to him, even as his heart was breaking over Keiko's seeming abandonment. The appearance of starfire lilies in this passage confirms that, like the love Henry and his mother share, the love between Ethel and Henry is imperfect, but still a force of beauty and strength.*

## V-J DAY (1945)

Henry has been dating Ethel for five months, though he knows he will never take her to the Black Elks Club. He still finds himself aching for Keiko, but he tries to "imagine a time, years from now, when he might actually forget about Keiko for a day, a week, a month, maybe longer."

*Henry seems already to be aware of the powerful hold his memories with and love for Keiko will have over him his entire life. As it will turn out, Henry won't ever truly forget about Keiko—a fact that testifies to the strength of their connection.*


One day, close to the time Henry will be leaving for China, Henry is sitting on a park bench with Sheldon. Sheldon and Henry discuss the irony of Henry having waited for Keiko; now, he is asking Ethel to wait for him. Henry tells Sheldon that his father loves Ethel, and now wants to talk to Henry all the time. "I don't know *how* to feel," Henry confesses. "So I just let Ethel talk to him, and that seems to work."

*This passage makes clear that from the beginning of their relationship, Ethel helped act as a bridge for Henry to people that he struggles to communicate with. As she did for Henry and his father, Ethel will help ease communication between Henry and his son, Marty. Another noteworthy aspect of this passage is the fact that the love of Henry's father proves to be conditional; now that Henry is in a relationship with a Chinese girl, he seems to be back in his father's good graces.*

Ethel suddenly comes running up to Henry and Sheldon, embracing Henry. "Listen!" she cries. Henry begins to hear bells ringing, and cars and ferries honking their horns. Soon the news reaches him: Japan has surrendered. The war is over. Henry is overwhelmed with joy; he has never felt more American. He and Ethel kiss, and Henry surprises himself by asking Ethel to marry him. Ethel climbs atop a police car and announces her answer—"I'm getting married!"—to the cheers of the crowd.

*Henry's sense of being truly American comes as a surprise and a relief. It seems possible that this feeling is generated within Henry—he is allowing himself to participate in his country's victory, rather than the other way around. This suggests that America might never fully welcome its nonwhite citizens, but that these people are capable of asserting their place in America nevertheless.*

Suddenly, Henry notices a few Japanese families in the crowd. For a moment, he thinks he sees Keiko "staring directly at him." Henry rubs his eyes and Keiko is lost in the crowd. Henry convinces himself it couldn't have been her, because she would have written to him.

*The fact that Henry imagines he sees Keiko right after he has proposed to Ethel suggests that Keiko will always be the true love of Henry's life—a fact that is played out in the novel's present-day chapters.*

Henry walks home, thinking about Keiko and wondering how his father is taking the news of Japan's surrender. In one week, Henry will be leaving for China. As Henry approaches his house, he sees Ethel waving from his apartment window. Henry rushes upstairs, and finds Dr. Luke, who tells him his father is dying but has been "holding on" for Henry.

*Henry seems to be aware that Japan's defeat in the war will not change his father's obsession with that country. At this point, Henry's father is irrevocably bitter when it comes to the subject of Japan, which makes it that much more impressive that Henry resists letting his memories of Keiko devolve into resentment.*

Henry sits at his father's bedside, telling him that Japan has surrendered, and that he and Ethel are engaged. In Chinese, Henry's father says, "I did it for you." In an instant, Henry realizes what his father means: his father used his position with local associations to make sure Henry's letters never reached Keiko, and that hers never reached Henry. Henry's father repeats his words—"I did it for you"—and then dies.

*This is a climactic point of the novel, as Henry realizes that Keiko never abandoned him; rather, his own father put an end to Henry and Keiko's correspondence and, thus, their love story. While this is a profound betrayal for Henry, Henry's father clings to his belief that he has done what is best for his son. The fact that Henry's father dies before Henry can say a word symbolizes how this relationship will be permanently marked by a lack of communication.*


Henry feels like screaming, but instead he leaves the house and heads toward the former Japantown. He thinks that if it really was Keiko he saw, she will have gone to her old neighborhood to retrieve her things. Henry finds himself at the **Panama Hotel**, knowing that "if he [takes] another step toward the hotel, […] he [will] break Ethel's heart." He turns away, and sees Ethel across the sidewalk; she's followed him. Henry and Ethel walk home hand in hand. Henry wonders if his mother also helped prevent Keiko's letters from reaching him, but realizes he knows she doesn't have it in her heart to do something like that. Henry puts thoughts of Keiko out of his mind, and instead thinks about picking out an engagement ring for Ethel.

*This scene epitomizes Henry's struggle with reconciling his love for Ethel and his love for Keiko. Henry is depicted here as making the kindest, most upright choice: he has already proposed to Ethel and he stays committed to her. He also resolves not to think of Keiko any more than necessary—but the fact that Keiko never fully leaves his mind for the entirety of his marriage to Ethel shows that his love for her is that of a soulmate connection. However, this does not invalidate Henry's love for Ethel, for Henry does love Ethel, as evidenced by the fact that he devotes himself to building the best life with her that he can.*

## BROKEN RECORDS (1986)

Henry hasn't heard from Marty in a week, so he decides to visit Marty's dorm for the first time since Ethel died. In Marty's room, Keiko's sketchbooks are spread out on the desk, but Henry finds he can't bring himself to talk about Keiko in front of his son. Marty apologizes for Samantha's insistence at dinner that Henry look for Keiko. Henry assures his son that it is okay. "I had my chance," he says. "She was taken from you," Marty says bitterly, but Henry interrupts: "She left," Henry says. "But I *also* let her go." Henry feels himself "retiring from a lifetime of wanting." "[It's] like that broken **record** we found," Henry tells Marty. "Some things just can't be fixed."

*In his conversation with Marty, Henry can be seen clearly succumbing to despair. It is less painful for him to continue convincing himself that Keiko is lost to him forever than it is to risk the possibility of searching for her and losing her all over again. Forgetting Keiko might have been the best choice for Henry (and Ethel and Marty) while he was married, but at only 56 Henry's lifetime is far from over. It seems, then, that there is no reason his wanting should be arbitrarily ended either.*

## HEARTHSTONE (1986)

Henry is at Sheldon's nursing home, having gotten a call that Sheldon's health is deteriorating. Henry sits at Sheldon's bedside. Though Sheldon is disoriented and only semi-coherent, he tells Henry: "Fix it." "You want me to fix the **Oscar Holden record**, don't you?" Henry asks. Sheldon drifts off to sleep without explaining, but when he awakens he is lucid. Henry reminds Sheldon what he said. Sheldon replies: "If you can put those broken pieces together, make some music again, then that's what you should do. But I wasn't talking 'bout the record, Henry."

*Even though his hold on life is tenuous at this point, Sheldon is still committed to helping his friend Henry find happiness. Sheldon's philosophy seems to be that beauty and joy should be seized wherever they are found. Henry "made some music" in building a life and family with Ethel, but now that she is gone, that is no reason that Henry should stop himself from reviving the music he once shared—literally and figuratively—with Keiko.*

## TICKETS (1986)

Henry visits Bud's Jazz Records, and asks if the broken **Oscar Holden record** can be restored. Bud says that if the record weren't completely in two, the music could be lasered off, but as is, there is nothing that can be done. Henry leaves feeling disappointed, but glad he "at least […] [has] the broken pieces."

*In this scene, Henry comforts himself with the knowledge that he still has his memories, even if the Oscar Holden record can't be fixed. This alludes to the role that memory has played throughout Henry's life: in contrast to his father, Henry has used memory, however imperfectly, to fuel his happiness and his hope.*

Henry returns home. As he walks, he tries to remember the tune of the Alley Cat Strut. He's forgotten the music, but he knows he'll never forget Keiko. When Henry gets home, he finds his best suit on his bed and an envelope next to it containing tickets to New York City. Marty appears in the doorway. "I'm sending you back in time," he tells Henry. Suddenly, Henry realizes that the only person he knows who's ever talked about New York City was Keiko.

*Thanks to Samantha's example, Marty has clearly found the courage to have important conversations and take important actions even when they might make his father uncomfortable. Marty's envelope of tickets parallels the envelope containing his transcript that he gave Henry at the beginning of the novel, thereby emphasizing how much healthier and more open the relationship between this father and son pair has become over the course of the intervening chapters.*

Marty reveals that he's located Keiko. "I know you were always loyal to Mom," Marty says, "and that you'd never do this for yourself. So I did it for you." Henry thinks about the last time someone laid out a suit and tickets for him, how he "had refused to go." This time, however, he "refuse[s] to stay."

*Just as Samantha's fearlessness in asking questions gave Henry permission to be fearless in answering them, Marty's gift of the tickets gives Henry the extra bit of courage he needs to follow his heart back to Keiko.*

## SHELDON'S SONG (1986)

Henry puts his trip to New York City on hold to spend time with Sheldon. At the nursing home, Henry greets Sheldon's partner, Minnie, who asks if "the music" is Henry's doing. Henry is confused, but soon hears the old **Oscar Holden record**—his and Keiko's song—playing from Sheldon's room. Henry finds Samantha sitting by Sheldon's bed; she explains that Keiko sent her copy of the record to Sheldon when she learned he was sick.

*Keiko's gift of her own Oscar Holden record suggests that she has never forgotten the role that Sheldon—and Henry—played in her life. The fact that Henry delays his reunion with Keiko in order to say goodbye to Sheldon also emphasizes not only the importance of Sheldon's friendship to Henry, but also the fact that Henry has learned the importance of a proper goodbye.*

In awe, Henry reads the letter Keiko included with the **record**. It is addressed to Henry, and in it Keiko writes that she hopes the record will be a reminder of "the good, not the bad," and "of what was, not what wasn't meant to be." Henry sits at Sheldon's side, and hears Sheldon's whispered words: "You fixed it." Henry assents, and thinks, "Soon, I'm going to fix everything." Sheldon dies three hours later, with the Oscar Holden record still playing in the background.

*Keiko's letter makes clear that she has used her memories of Henry as a source of comfort rather than bitterness, just as Henry has tried to do. Henry's promise to Sheldon that he is "going to fix everything" speaks to how important Sheldon's advice and encouragement have been to Henry throughout his life.*

## NEW YORK (1986)

Henry arrives in New York City for the first time. He was too nervous to follow Marty and Samantha's advice—that he call Keiko to let her know he was coming. Inside Keiko's apartment building, Henry finds himself in front of her door. Keiko's name is now Kay Hatsune, and she is a widow of three years. Henry clutches the pristine, intact **record** Keiko sent to Sheldon. He nervously knocks on the door. Keiko opens it, with "the same eyes that had looked at him all those years ago. Hopeful eyes."

*Henry's sense that Keiko's eyes are full of hope suggests that Keiko has kept her love for Henry alive in the same way that Henry did, even as they both moved on with their lives and found happiness where they could. This scene also echoes the one in which Henry brought Sheldon's record to Keiko in the camp, emphasizing that despite all their years apart Henry and Keiko have sustained the deep connection they had as children.*

Inside Keiko's apartment, Henry finds himself surrounded by Keiko's paintings, including ones of "cherry blossoms and ume trees, of lonesome prairie and barbed wire." Keiko goes to the kitchen to get Henry a drink, and he looks at the photos in her living room. One is of her father, who enlisted in the US Army to fight against Germany. Another framed picture is a sketch of him and Keiko at Camp Minidoka.

*Keiko's paintings suggest that she has used art to help her process the trauma that she experienced as a young girl. The reader cannot know for sure whether Keiko struggled as an adult in discussing her past, as Henry did, but at the very least, Keiko has found art to be an outlet for expressing her memories and perhaps navigating her pain.*

Henry spots a record player, and puts on the **Oscar Holden record**. When Henry turns around, Keiko is in the room. The two stare at each other and smile, "like they had done all those years ago, standing on either side of that fence." "*Oai deki te*," Keiko says, and Henry finishes the phrase: "*Ureshii desu*."

*Henry and Keiko's use of their old catchphrase implies that their love has remained unchanged over the years. Though there is much these two characters have to discuss, the novel closes with this catchphrase alone, which stands in for all that Henry and Keiko will surely share with one another now that they have finally found each other once again.*

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