

THIS LIGHT BETWEEN US

A NOVEL OF WORLD WAR II



ANDREW FUKUDA



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THIS LIGHT BETWEEN US: A NOVEL OF WORLD WAR II

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DECEMBER 7, 1941

Alex Maki is in church when his world shatters.

It's a typical Sunday. The pews are filled with people in their Sunday best, the men in suits and hats but still smelling of wet soil, the women with faces powdered and hands gloved to hide wrinkles and calluses on dark, leathery skin. And though the teens skulk and shift restlessly, they too have groomed themselves for church: the boys with front licks curled and dangling, sides gelled back, the girls with hair fashioned into finger waves and pinned curls and updos. Sunday is the one day of the week when both the Issei (first-generation) and Nisei (second-generation, American-born) members get to dress up.

A typical Sunday. Nothing unusual at all, nothing to suggest that Alex's life—all their lives, in fact—are about to fracture.

If anything, things are looking brighter than usual. Certainly more crowded. Quite a few white families have joined the Japanese service.

This happens sometimes. The Bainbridge Methodist Church building is actually shared by two congregations: the Japanese congregation that meets on Sunday mornings, and the "regular" white congregation who have their service later in the day. Sometimes a community or school event—like this afternoon's high-school football practice—will conflict with the later service.

On those Sundays, many from the white congregation will instead attend the earlier Japanese service. When that happens, Pastor Ken Momose makes sure to conduct the service in English.

A few more families arrive. Including the Tanner family. They slide into the pew in front of Alex.

His back straightens. The Tanner family is well-to-do and highly respected. Their daughter, Jessica Tanner, is popular at school, and now sits down directly in front of Alex. Although they've known each other for years, and share the same home-room at school, they've rarely spoken.

The congregation is called to worship, and rise. As they begin to sing, the scent of mint and a vanilla extract floats into Alex's nostrils. From Jessica Tanner. He's sure his own breath is foul and egg-soured and wafting down her back. He lifts the hymnal to block his breath.

Next to him, his parents are singing with religious fervor and abandon. The Japanese hymns have been replaced, and the archaic King James English with its *thees* and *thous* is throwing them off, making their thick accents even more garish. That doesn't stop Father, though. An elder and leader of the Japanese congregation, he's known for his demonstrative singing. But this morning Alex wishes Father would stop singing because the Tanners—especially Jessica Tanner—can hear each and every butchered syllable.

After the song ends, Pastor Ken smiles at the congregation and exhorts them to greet one another.

"Henry," Mr. Tanner says, turning around to Alex's father. Nobody ever calls Father "Henry" except white people who stumble over "Fusanosuke." He extends his hand out to Father. "How are you this morning?"

"Good. Real good." Father takes his hand with a wide smile,

baring his crooked yellow teeth. His sun-darkened farmer's skin is an embarrassing contrast to the white complexion of the Tanners.

Next to him, Alex's older brother, Frank, is play-punching Josh Tanner. They're teammates on the Bainbridge High football team, Josh a wide receiver, Frank the star quarterback, and they're talking about that afternoon's practice, and how they're going to destroy Vashon High School on Friday—

Jessica Tanner turns side to side, looking for someone to greet. She starts whirling around. Toward Alex.

He panics. Looks down—

"Hi, Alex," Jessica Tanner says brightly. She holds out her hand.

Hesitantly, he takes it. Her skin is so soft and porcelain smooth. His own calloused hand, which only an hour ago was cleaning out the chicken coop, is a monster wrapping itself around a swan.

"Looking forward to the game on Friday?" She's looking at him with a friendly, focused gaze.

"Y-yeah." His throat is thick and clogged. She seems even more beautiful up close. Her eyes are a blue that even the purest sky would envy. There's a faint splatter of cute freckles over the bridge of her nose he's never noticed before. "You?"

"We're gonna crush 'em," she says, winking before turning around.

Everyone sits. He's still holding the hymnal in his left hand, and as he reaches forward to place it into the holder, Jessica Tanner flips back the long sweep of her hair so it doesn't get caught behind her. Her hair waterfalls over the back of the pew, and pools softly on the back of his hand still on the hymnal. A few strands of her hair slip through the small spaces between his fingers.

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He freezes. Can't breathe. Jessica Tanner's hair is on his hand, between his fingers. Strands of gold, the softness of lips.

And then it happens. The doors of the church slam open.

Everyone jolts and spins around. Jessica Tanner's hair flies off Alex's hand.

Backlit by the outside light and framed by the doorway, Bruce Fukuhara—a senior in high school who defiantly stopped coming to church a year ago—pauses. He looks around, panting, sweat beading his acne-ravaged forehead, unsure of what to do. Then he rushes up the center aisle to Pastor Ken in the pulpit.

Everyone leans forward. They're all curious; they're all guessing. Somebody has passed away.

Somebody's fishing boat has been vandalized, or worse, pilaged.

The price of strawberries or celery collapsed overnight.

But it's none of these. It's far worse.

Pastor Ken frowns as he listens to Bruce. His face goes white; his left hand trembles as he leans on the pulpit.

"I'm sorry," Pastor Ken says, and Alex will always remember those first words of apology, how they might have set the tone for what is to come. That maybe if Pastor Ken hadn't apologized as if he were somehow responsible, as if they were all responsible, perhaps things would have turned out differently?

"But I have just learned . . ." He swallows, stares down at his Bible. "This morning, a few hours ago, Japan attacked Hawaii." His voice cracks. "We are at war."

Someone gasps. Most sit in shock, hands covering mouths. Mrs. Tanner clutches her son's arm, her fingertips going white. Josh Tanner is old enough—or will be, in a few short months—to enlist.

Pastor Ken murmurs something about the need to pray in this time of—

A white man stands. This single action so decisive, it shuts up Pastor Ken as effectively as if he were slapped. The man looks around, almost frantically. He finds what he's looking for two pews away. Another white man. He stands, too. And soon it seems all the white men and white women and white children are gathering together, their voices getting louder. With stern expressions as they look around. This is what they must see:

Not Henry and Joe and Bruce and Tim and Cindy and Janet and Susan. But now Fusanosuke and Hideo and Kaito and Hidejiro and Hitomi and Kayo and Megumi. The exotic, the yellow, the inscrutable. The enemy.

One thing is clear: church service is over.

"Come on," Father whispers to Alex, leading his family out of the pew. The other Japanese families follow suit, quietly leaving the sanctuary. The church isn't theirs; it never was.

Alex and Frank hop into the cargo bed of the pickup while Mother sits in the front cab. Father speaks curbside to a group of Japanese men: each is to drive his own family back home, then head over to Father's place. He's the only one with a radio.

One by one the cars leave the church parking lot. Orderly as a funeral procession.

The town center is strangely quiet. The few people strolling about seem oblivious to what is happening, to how history has just veered off course.

Father drives just below the speed limit. At the last intersection before leaving the town center, the traffic light turns red. Father stops. Across the street, outside a tavern, a group of men in denim overalls are huddled around a transistor radio.

One of them peers up at the line of pickup trucks, then back down to the radio. A second later, his head snaps up like a man who can't quite believe his eyes. His gaze sweeps across the three

vehicles behind, at the drivers and passengers. He mutters something, and the other four men stand up.

They come as one, their anger raw. Elbows crooked, eyes red-rimmed, cheeks scruffy. Frank leaps forward in the cargo bed, pounds the cab window. “Go, Father, just go!”

Father slams the pedal right as the five men close in. Alex feels something moist strike his cheek. Spit. Then a cussword, swallowed up by the squeal of tires. They take off, all four trucks, in a cloud of swirling dust.

No one speaks as Father speeds home. Alex stares at the passing farmlands, his thoughts like flies buzzing over roadkill, flighty and restless. The football Frank normally cradles is left forgotten on the floor of the cargo bed. It rolls around, side to side, back and forth. Nothing seems anchored anymore, everything is dislodged.

Back at the farm, they hurry into the house. Hero comes bounding toward them, wanting to romp. But he stops, head cocked, sensing something wrong. Whimpers. Mother and Father speak in hushed tones even though there’s no one around for miles.

Alex doesn’t change out of his Sunday clothes. No one does. Father is at the kitchen table, turning on the radio usually used to receive sumo news from Japan. Mother starts boiling water. Frank leans against the counter, his fingers tapping, tapping. Static hisses from the radio. Father works the dial. A voice blares out, angry and declarative.

“ . . . the Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, by air, President Roosevelt has just announced. The attack also was made on all naval and military activities on the principal island of Oahu . . . ”

The report dies out to a wave of static. Father turns the dial, finds another live report from Honolulu, Hawaii.

“ . . . we have witnessed this morning a distant feud from Pearl

Harbor, a severe bombing of great intensity with considerable damage done. This battle has been going on for nearly three hours—” The report suddenly cuts off.

The water boils. Mother brings tea to the table. But neither she nor Father drinks. They sit rock-still, their faces stoic and unreadable, heads bowed toward the radio as if in apology. Father turns the dial, finds another report that Japan has begun to attack Manila. A minute later and the radio channels have resumed their regular programming.

Alex leaves the kitchen. He shuts the door to the bedroom he shares with Frank, sits at his desk. He thinks about the regular programming that has resumed on the radio. As if the attack on Pearl Harbor isn’t actually such a big deal. A minor skirmish, a boys-will-be-boys scrape. Dust off, shake hands, move on. Perhaps life will go on as usual? He stares outside. The day is bright, the sky blue, the sun blazing and glorious. As before. As usual.

But then he thinks about the group of men back in town. The way they approached the truck, elbows crooked, hands bunched into fists. The hatred in their eyes.

Nothing is the same, he thinks. Everything has changed.

From outside his window, a sound: *whack*. Coming from the barn. *Whack*.

Alex knows the sound. Years ago, Father hung an old tire on the cypress tree by the barn. The two brothers spent endless hours swinging on the tire until they outgrew it. A year ago Frank turned the tire into a football target, throwing the pigskin through it from varying distances, often on the run, sprinting right, breaking left, the tire swaying like a pendulum, the football sometimes striking rubber, usually sailing right through.

Alex goes to the window. He sees Frank at the tire. Hero standing at a distance, ears pinched back. Frank is holding a

baseball bat. He raises it above his head, then swings it down on the tire furiously like he's splitting firewood. *Whack. Whack.* Even from the window, he can see his brother's chest heaving, his Sunday clothes twisted and disheveled. The bat rises again. Falls. *Whack. Whack. Whack.*

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