

MAY 1975

Mom put us in the closet again. We used to get scared of its black air, until we came up with the idea to think about something fun, like a big big strawberry ice cream mountain in a bowl with whipped cream and chocolate sauce running down from the top. Then we weren't scared of the closet anymore, but it still felt like forever. The closet was busy with hangers, Dad's winter coats and baseball hats, gloves, bats, plastic containers, and Tupperware. My spot was right under Dad's coats because it had a little more space. Mom put ropes around the doorknobs so that the door wouldn't pop open. Sometimes, if I had to go to the bathroom, I kicked the door, but all I would get was the small light from a crack in the door. Mom sometimes forgot that we were in the closet, so we had to wait until Dad came home to let us out in the evening. He never came home soon enough though. At dinner, Dad was always so nice to Mom, holding her hand and telling us that we had to do what Mom said. His voice was so deep that I always thought it came from the bottom of the ocean.

I felt bad that Ken was in the closet with me this time. He didn't do anything, but Mom locked us both up. When she was upset, she wouldn't listen to anyone. Her body would shake hard like she was cold, and she just wanted us away from her. I didn't mean to upset her. I was just chewing the gum Lisa gave me after school. I knew I wasn't supposed to eat sweets. Mom said that sugar was poison, that it numbed our tongues to make us feel happy. That wasn't true happiness. Never, never

eat sugar. It is dangerous. But everyone at school ate candy all the time, and I wanted to bring normal lunch food like a chocolate bar. Lisa said we were going to just chew the gum, not eat it. So I thought it was o.k. to put it in my mouth. The thin pink gum smelled like a strawberry. I chewed and swallowed the sweet juice. After spitting out the gum on the street, I swallowed the saliva again and again to get rid of the sweet taste in my mouth. But Mom knew about the gum when I came home. She has a dog's nose and uses it for everything. When she washed everyone's pajamas, she always made sure that no one's smell stayed on the wet cotton. But her pajamas smelled like her soft skin and spring air. I loved holding them. Dad's pajamas usually smelled like the green water he used every morning to make his hair sticky and glittering. Mine didn't smell like anything.

When I walked in the house, Mom pressed her nose on my head, face, and chest; she smelled my strawberry gum. I told her that I was just chewing it, not eating it.

"But it was in your mouth." Her nose moved again.

"I had to. Lisa gave it to me." I never lie to Mom because Mom said that a liar would drown in the ocean. Our house was up on the hill in San Francisco, so we could see the ocean from here. If I didn't live so close to the ocean, I'd eat chocolate every day and never tell Mom about it.

"You didn't get that gum from Lisa. You stole it from Polovick's store, didn't you?" Mom's face in mine.

"No, I didn't even go to the store today." I shook my head, but Mom had already grabbed her purse and said that she was going to take me to the store so that I could say sorry to Mr. Polovick for stealing the gum. All the way down to Polovick's, I told her that I didn't steal it, that she could even ask Lisa, but she wouldn't hear me. She walked fast, pulling me and Ken. Ken had been watching tv in the living room, but Mom made him come, too. I watched her pale neck turn pink all the way to the store.

The store was busy. I saw our neighbor Mrs. Hogan standing in the apple section. Mrs. Hogan liked collecting garbage like plastic spoons and plates to give to me and Ken. She said that throwing things away made her sad. I don't know why it made her sad. Mom said that Mrs. Hogan was a very nice lady, so we had to be nice to her, but I'd never seen her with any friends except for Mom. She always looked like she was about to start crying because of her narrow eyes. She always had a cigarette, and her breath smelled like smoke. Mom walked up to Mrs. Hogan and whispered that I stole candy.

"Oh, dear, you might get a stomachache tonight from eating too much candy." Mrs. Hogan came close to me and smiled. Her teeth were yellow. I thought brown air came out of her mouth. I put my hands on my nose and tried not to breathe.

"She lies to me. She keeps saying she didn't do it." Mom's voice was getting loud. I could see some people in the store staring at us.

"But I didn't do it." I glared at her face.

Mrs. Hogan patted my head. "You shouldn't upset your mother."

Mom pulled my hand until she found Mr. Polovick in the soap section, and she pushed me in front of him. He opened his eyes wide and stepped back from her.

"She stole a gum from your store this afternoon. We'll pay for it and she'll apologize to you." Mom glared at him like he did something bad. My chest was getting hot. I wanted to run away.

"I don't remember seeing your daughter in the store this afternoon. I always keep my eye on people. She wasn't here today." Mr. Polovick shrugged his shoulders, but Mom pushed me toward him.

"Go ahead, apologize to Mr. Polovick!"

"I didn't do it." My eyes were watery.

"Mrs. Johnson, your daughter wasn't here today." Mr. Polovick stood in front of Mom.

"But I know what you really think. You think my daughter would take something from your store. You're always watching us." Mom looked hard at him. His mouth opened, but he didn't say anything. I wanted to hide. Mom sometimes imagined that things happened. She went to a different world when she was mad, where she wouldn't listen to anyone and thought that everyone was watching her. People gave her funny looks because she was half Japanese, she said. But it was Mom who watched people. She was watching being watched, and even when some people just looked in her direction, she thought she was being watched.

Mr. Polovick knew I didn't steal the gum, but Mom put a nickel in his hand and walked us out of the store. On the way home, she was so mad that her hands shook. She said I didn't understand anything, that I had to be careful because people were watching us and sugar would make us do bad things and if I didn't listen to her, she couldn't protect us. But I didn't steal anything.

As soon as we got home, she said I was going into the closet. Mom pushed me into my usual spot, then pushed Ken on top of me and closed the door. She tied the doorknobs with a rope. Ken cried. I wanted to cry, too. I tried thinking about ice cream with chocolate sauce, but I was too angry. Ken and I kicked the door and called for Mom.

"Don't!" She pushed the door back.

"I'm not scared to be in the closet anymore!" I shouted as hard as I could.

"Just wait until you meet Shizuka." Mom pushed back the doors again.

"Shizuka?"

"The ghost of Shizuka lives in the closet." Mom was putting the second rope around the doorknobs. "She died hundreds of years ago in your grandma's hometown. Grandma always said the ghost of Shizuka lives in the closet." Mom told me once how Grandma was Japanese and her name was Ume, which meant

plums. How strange to use a fruit for a girl's name! I wouldn't want a name like Apple or Melon. Ume is my middle name. Helen Ume Johnson. I never liked *Ume*. It sounds like choking. Mom said she didn't remember a lot about Grandma because she died when Mom was little. So how could she remember what Grandma said?

"Shizuka took her own life when her husband died in battle." I could feel Mom standing right behind the door, but her voice seemed far away.

"Why?"

"It was disgraceful to live alone without a husband. She was a soldier's wife. She jumped in the ocean and drowned herself."

"But why is she in *this* closet?"

"Because the closet is very close to the ocean. Ghosts live behind the wall, and they want to pull us into their world," she said, then walked away.

Thinking that Shizuka would jump out from behind the wall and pull me back into her world, I was too scared to think about ice cream. Was the ocean really behind the wall? Though the black air was boiling hot in the closet, and my skin was sticky with sweat, I covered myself with an old blanket to protect myself from Shizuka.

"A ghost lives inside the walls?" Ken started to cry and kick the door again. He was only five.

"Stop it!" I yelled.

"Let me out!"

"The door won't open." I put the blanket on him.

"I don't want Shizuka to eat me!"

"Hide under the blanket."

Ken hugged me under the blanket. Our skin got sticky. Through a crack in the door, I could see Mom standing in front of the mirror, touching her face. She'd already forgotten about us in the closet. She stood there until Dad came home and let us out.

