



Obachan

by Geraldine Segawa

I STOOD just outside of Grandma's bedroom. I could feel the palms of my hands become moist with perspiration. It was my job to tell her. I rehearsed my short speech once more to myself, and walked in.

Grandma was sitting on the floor, putting the finishing touches on a pair of beautiful red velvet house slippers. She quickly put them in her sewing box and slid it under the bed.

"Obachan, are you going to bed?"

"Come in, I no go to bed now."

Grandma was old. . . . eighty-eight years old. She couldn't remember her birthday, but she knew she was nineteen years old when she came to Hawaii from Japan with her newly-wed husband.

"My leg hurts; tomorrow it will rain." She massaged her leg.

"Obachan, next month I go to 'America' to school." I blurted the words. . . . not at all the way I had practiced.

"America!" She said the word with deliberation, rolling the "r." "You cannot leave us. You are too young." She

rambled on in Japanese in sentences too short, too broken for me to understand. "Do you not love your family?" She stood up to close the door. It dwarfed her tiny frail body. I could hardly believe that at one time she had carried me everywhere on her back, even strapped me on while she washed dishes or weeded the garden.

I sat quietly avoiding her eyes. I spoke gently. "You left your family when you were young — why is it so wrong for me to do the same?"

She walked over to the window. She stared out of it but seemed to see nothing. "You are needed at home. I am old, not much use around the house. You should be here to take care of your parents when they are sick, and you . . ."

"But Kay will be starting high school next year. She's old enough now to take on my responsibilities."

"It is useless for you to go to school. You will be married someday and all that expense will be lost." She smoothed back the strands of long white hair that came undone from her bun.

"But Mother and Father think it will do me good. They are paying for it. They feel it will not be money lost."

"Do you not wish for a happy married life and a family? It will be a shame to your family if you do not wed."

Grandma had been the sole contributor to my hope chest. On my fifteenth birthday, she had uncovered the old brown chest in her closet, polished it and placed yards of beautiful, white silk material in it.

"I will marry, Obachan. I have planned for it. I will be only twenty-one when I graduate . . . only two years older than you were when you were married."

Grandmother sat on the bed next to me now. Her face was wrinkled, but her eyes were still young. They were moist now. I had seen her cry only once before, when I was eleven. I had broken my leg and Grandma tried to telephone for help. I called out the numbers to her in Japanese. She counted the holes and dialed. Then she burst into sobs when she could not be understood by the doctor.

"If you go, who will go with you?"

"My school begins early. I will travel alone."

"Alone! You will be lost. America is too big." There was alarm in her voice and disapproval in her frown.

"Who will show you how to act and where to go?"

"I have directions, I have a mouth. I can speak English. I won't get lost. My actions will be strange at first, I'm sure, but I will learn quickly."

"You will be how long, away from home?"

"Four years."

"That is too long. You will be changed in that time. We will not know you. Perhaps I will not even be here when you return." I noted a sound of premonition in her voice.

"I will be home in two years for the summer vacation!" I tried to brighten my voice, but it was shaky.

She moved from the bed and slowly took her worn bathrobe. "I must go to bed now; you will excuse."

A feeling of dismissal fell over me. I got up, walked out of the room, and closed the door carefully so it would not slam. I moved silently to my room and into bed. I turned off the bed lamp and lay there, listening to the drizzling summer rain.

I heard soft, shuffling footsteps in the hallway. They came closer and closer and finally stopped at my door. The door opened without creaking. I quickly turned on my light. "Obachan" stood there, a pair of beautiful red velvet slippers in her hand.

"You will need these when you go to 'America'."

