

They were at the train station in Lethbridge, Alberta, just east of the Rocky Mountains and in the Canadian prairies. Each family disembarked and assembled their belongings, staying together until their name was announced and the family was matched with a farmer who had contracted to use them as labourers on sugar beet farms. Mitsue stood with her family as tall and as straight as she could in her Sunday best as men walked past her, staring at her, claiming her with their eyes.

On the train, she had been a prisoner. Off the train, she was a slave.

A farmer by the name of Oscar Johnson took her parents, Mary, Susanne, and Pat. He was a large Swedish man in overalls with a round face and ruddy cheeks. He told them they were going to his farm in Coaldale, ten miles outside Lethbridge.

Soon after that, a farmer with a wide gait slowly made his way towards Mitsue. He was staring back and forth between her and the paper he held in his hand.

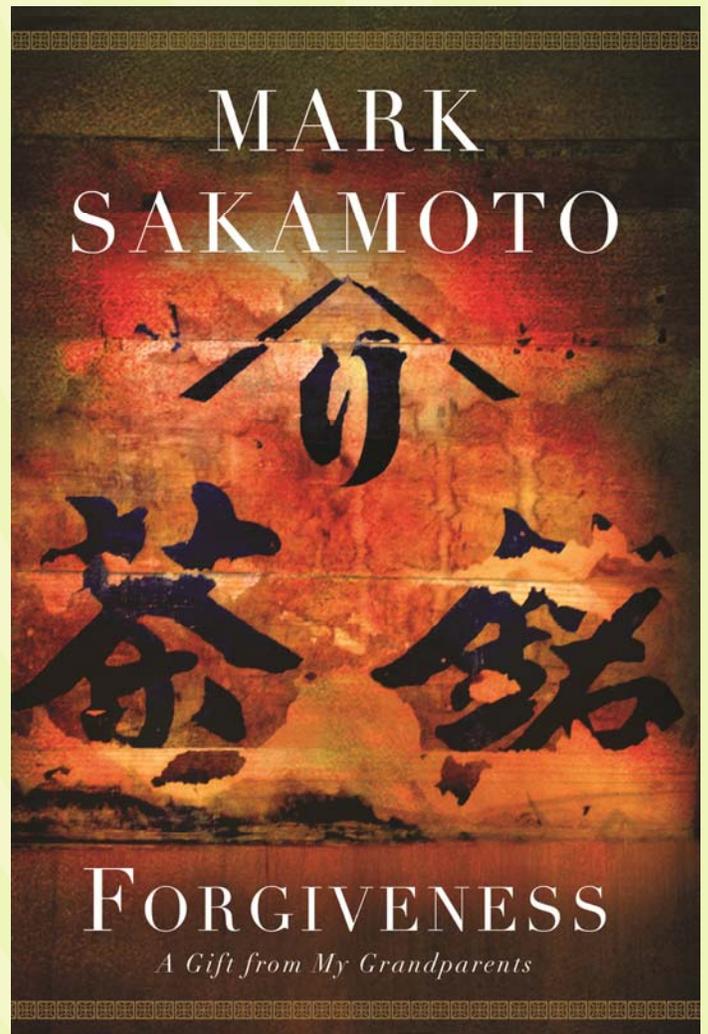
“Youse Sakamatos?”

“Sakamoto family,” Hideo said, waving his finger to indicate them.

“Okay. I’m Mr. Rutt, and you are all coming to work for me.”

Hideo nodded and picked up the rice box. He nodded to everyone else to do likewise.

That was it. They had all been claimed and would soon be on their way to their new homes. They were given ten minutes to write down where their friends and family were going. They all ran around exchanging P.O. box numbers on scraps of paper.



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Where are you going?

Barnwell.

Where are you going?

Taber.

Where are you going?

Raymond. It is south of here.

Where are you going?

Picture Butte. It's across a ravine, only it's dry so they call them coulees.

They were loaded onto the backs of farmers' trucks and transported to these unknown destinations with only the clothes on their backs and their bags. Mitsue, Hideo, Hanpei, Wari, and June all bounced around in the back of Rutt's big old truck. It was full of manure. She tried to hang on and not fall into it.

The last few miles were bumpy and Wari was still very sore on her left side. It was a lingering pain from a fall in Vancouver. Hideo tried to keep her still. The truck took a sharp left onto a laneway and Mitsue could see a big barn and an old farmhouse. It was a desolate-looking place. Rutt hit the brakes hard, jolting everyone forward, and they stopped with a thud. Wari moaned.

Mitsue's teeth were clenched from stress as they gathered themselves slowly. Hideo was off first and he helped everyone down from the truck. The ground was muddy and Mitsue's heels sank. She felt silly for having worn those shoes, but she had wanted to make a good impression on the people whose custody they would be in. She wanted them to know that her family were decent and civilized. That they were not enemies, they were not animals.

"Your place is behind the barn. Unload your stuff and I'll come by to show you around."

They each picked up a bag and made their way towards the barn. Mitsue stepped carefully around the muddy patches. The dirt path was only a hundred yards or so, but it was the longest walk of her life. Mitsue's body became more tense with each step. She

hoped that the house behind the barn would be decent. The barn itself was not a good omen. It was a rickety thing that needed paint. Through the wooden slates she could see a few horses moving around.

They had to follow a trail along the side of the barn. Hideo was leading the way, so he saw the place before anyone else. Mitsue was ten paces back. She noticed a few wild prairie flowers growing alongside the barn before looking up to see Hideo stop suddenly, looking straight ahead.

Mitsue tightened her grip on her bag and took her last ten paces with dread. As she stood beside Hideo, she saw a chicken coop. There were no chickens in it. Attached to it was an old shack. It looked like an outhouse, only bigger. There were no walls or windows, just wooden slats nailed together. As with the barn, you could see through them. The roof was made of planks as well. The hut was surrounded by mud and prairie wild grass. She thought that the grass in front might be a pasture because of the cow droppings.

Mitsue stood beside Hideo in shock. Nobody said a word. They just stared at the old shack. Wari set her bag down on a dry patch of grass. Nobody wanted to open the front door. They stood there for some time. Finally Mr. Rutt came out of his house and opened the shack door for them.

Mitsue ducked her head to avoid a big cobweb and took her first step in. There was a dirt floor. There was one bed in the corner of the room and a small wood stove beside a decrepit wooden table held together by rusted nails. Everything was filthy. Everywhere they looked they could see outside through the gaps in the walls. The wind whistled right through the shack.

What were they supposed to do with the place?

Mr. Rutt was apologetic. He explained that he had cleared out the chickens and patched up the roof so the rain wouldn't get in. The shack had only been used in the summer months for migrant workers. It had never needed to be insulated. He promised he'd get to it before winter came around.

Before winter? Mitsue couldn't think about staying here for one more minute. She wanted to run.

Mr. Rutt said he hadn't realized that there would be five in the family. He said that he would bring another bed that could sleep Hideo and Mitsue. June would have to sleep with Hanpei and Wari. Mitsue looked around again and realized that they would all be sleeping, cooking, and eating in the one room. Her ears were ringing, her heart pounding. Mr. Rutt left to get the bed and closed the door behind him.

They stood there in silence, the women in their Sunday dresses, purses in hand, the men in their coats and hats. They didn't know where to begin. They could hear and feel the wind blow through the shack. The sunlight came in through the cracks in the walls. In the stillness, they watched the dust floating in the air around them. Dirt, dust, grime, wind. They were in Alberta. They were home.

Shikata-ga-nai. They got on with it.