

Citizen 13559

An Adaptation of The Journal of Ben Uchida

By Naomi Iizuka

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Characters

BEN UCHIDA

MR. MASAO UCHIDA, also CHORUS

MRS. LILY UCHIDA, also CHORUS

NAOMI UCHIDA, also CHORUS

SOLDIER (MIKE), also RADIO ANNOUNCER, DANNY MCMANUS, THE CALLER, MR. MILLS, and CHORUS

MISS KROLL, also NEIGHBOR, and CHORUS

Location:

San Francisco, the Mirror Lake Internment Camp, and Kenosha, Wisconsin.

Time:

1942 to the Present.

(On the stage are scattered chairs. Some of them are toppled over, some of them are on their side. A chaos of chairs. They make strange shapes in the dimness. We hear each member of the ensemble say the Pledge of Allegiance. Different voices. They start at different points. They don't speak in unison. The words are fragmented, out of sync. Then silence. Light up on BEN UCHIDA.)

BEN

My name is Ben. My number is 13559. And this is not my story. Not really. This is a story about my father.

(Light up on MR. UCHIDA, BEN's father. He wears glasses and a cardigan sweater.)

BEN

His name is Masao Uchida. I don't know how to describe him. I think when you're close to somebody, it's hard to describe them to somebody else. It's like there's too much to say and you'll never be able to say it all. And if you don't say it all, then maybe you'll miss something, some small stupid thing, but it'll turn out to be the key, and if you don't figure it out, then you won't ever know who the person really is. I don't know where to begin. He's really smart. That's one thing. He was the first person in his family to go to college.

(Light shift. As BEN and his father talk, MR. UCHIDA rearranges the chairs. He rights them and puts them in place. He moves briskly lifting chairs and setting them where they need to go.)

MR. UCHIDA

University of California, Berkeley. Class of '26. That's the thing about this country, Ben. You can be anything you want in this country. Anything you can dream of, you can be. As long as you're willing to work for it.

BEN

My Dad believes things like that. He's pretty smart, I guess. I don't think I'm as smart as he is.

MR. UCHIDA

You're plenty smart, Ben. Don't let anybody tell you otherwise. (*BEN says the line with him:*) You just need to focus.

BEN

My Dad is always telling me to focus. Like my life is blurry or something. His Mom and Dad, they came over from Japan. Niigata prefecture. Out in the countryside. They were farmers back in the day. They're really old now. They live with my Aunt Mitsuko and her family in Fresno. We see them at Christmas. My grandma has a hunchback like Quasimodo -

MR. UCHIDA

Ben -

BEN

And my grandpa has false teeth. At night, he takes them out and puts them in a glass of fizzy water in the bathroom. They don't speak English so good -

MR. UCHIDA

So well -

BEN

And they're both really short. They're the shortest people I know. They're practically midgets -

MR. UCHIDA

Respect. What did I say about respecting our elders. In Japan, we respect our elders.

BEN

We've never been. To Japan, I mean.

MR. UCHIDA

Maybe. Someday. When things settle down.

(MR. UCHIDA sees a shape, a glint of metal hidden behind a chair. It's a telescope. He begins setting it up with care.)

BEN

My Dad, he's an optometrist. He makes eyeglasses for people.

MR. UCHIDA

Near sighted, far sighted, you name it.

BEN

He has his own store. Shelves full of eyeglasses all lined up in a row. He works all the time, all day Saturday and Sunday. I guess there's a lot of people who need glasses. He doesn't see so well himself.

MR. UCHIDA

Without my glasses, I'm blind as a bat. You're lucky, Ben.

BEN

My Dad always used to say that to me, that I was lucky. Cause I have twenty twenty vision. It's just the way I was born, like having black hair or brown eyes, I can see everything sharp and clear. Even from really far away, I can see everything perfectly. Just the way it is, just the way it was. One other thing. I almost forgot. For my birthday one summer, my Dad gave me this journal. It had a leather cover and the paper was thick like fancy stationary. All the pages were blank open space just waiting to be filled. It was pretty cool.

MR. UCHIDA

(Giving BEN the journal:)

Happy birthday, Ben.

BEN

Thanks, Dad.

MR. UCHIDA

Write everything down. Everything that happens. Even the things you thought you forgot. *(BEN says the line with him:)* You're history in the making.

BEN

Remember that.

(Light shift. Night. The backyard of the Uchida house. Stars twinkle in the sky. MR. UCHIDA is looking through a telescope.)

MR. UCHIDA

It's cold tonight, and clear. It's so clear. Look at all those stars and planets. Look at them all. Look at the moon. It's amazing. Here, Ben, come take a look.

(BEN comes over and looks through the telescope.)

MR. UCHIDA

What do you see?

BEN

Ursa Major. Ursa Minor. Orion, Polaris, Pegasus, Andromeda - wait a sec. What's that one? I don't think I know that one.

MR. UCHIDA

Which?

(MR. UCHIDA looks through the telescope:)

MR. UCHIDA

Ah. Now that, that's Cassiopeia.

BEN

Cassiopeia.

MR. UCHIDA

Casseeehpeeeeah. Try to say it five times really fast.

BEN

Dad.

MR. UCHIDA

Try, try. I bet you a nickle you can't.

BEN

A nickle!

MR. UCHIDA

A nickle is a lot of money.

BEN

Cassiopeia Cassiopeia Cassiopeia Cassopya I mean Cassio Cassio - Wait. Let me try again. Cassiopeia Cassiopeia Cassiopeia Cassiopeia Cassiopeia -

(Inside the house, the sound of an old-fashioned radio. Big band music.)

MR. UCHIDA

Oh oh oh oh, wait a minute wait a minute.

NAOMI

(Off:)

Ben!

MR. UCHIDA

Ssh. Listen.

MRS. UCHIDA

(Off:)

Honey, come on inside. It's getting cold.

MR. UCHIDA

I love this song. "Stardust." Glenn Miller.

NAOMI

(Off:)

Ben, you better come help with the dishes!

BEN

I'm busy!

NAOMI

(Off:)

You are not!

MRS. UCHIDA

Ben!

(Enter MRS. UCHIDA and NAOMI, BEN's older sister. MRS. UCHIDA wears an apron. NAOMI holds a dishtowel.)

MRS. UCHIDA

Masao, it's freezing out here. Ben, where's your jacket? You're going to catch cold.

NAOMI

I'm not doing the dishes all by myself. Ben has to help.

BEN

I have things to do.

NAOMI

So do I.

MR. UCHIDA

Ssh, ssh. Listen.

(MR. UCHIDA hums along with the song. A parentheses of beautiful music, old-fashioned music.)

MR. UCHIDA

Nice song.

MRS. UCHIDA

Nice yes. Nice song.

MR. UCHIDA

May I have this dance?

MRS. UCHIDA

It would be my pleasure.

(MR. and MRS. UCHIDA dance.)

Mom. Dad. NAOMI

Masao. MRS. UCHIDA

Dip. MR. UCHIDA

Careful. MRS. UCHIDA

Here, you're drying. NAOMI
(Giving BEN the dish towel.)

Oh no I'm not. BEN

Oh yes you are. NAOMI

That's women's work. BEN

What did you say? NAOMI

You heard me. BEN

Oh you are going to get it now. NAOMI

(NAOMI chases BEN. MR. and MRS. UCHIDA continue to dance. Shouts and laughter. Suddenly the music breaks off. A RADIO ANNOUNCER interrupts with a news broadcast announcing the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The UCHIDA family stops what they're doing. They listen in stunned silence.)

BEN

Dear Journal: Sometimes your whole life changes in a flash. You may not know exactly how right in that moment. Just that things are different. You can see it in people's eyes. It's like even the air around you changes. Everything and everybody is different. That's how it felt when I heard the voice on the radio. The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. We were at war with Japan -

RADIO ANNOUNCER

We? You mean America.

BEN

Yeah.

RADIO ANNOUNCER

So why do you say "we"?

BEN

I'm American.

RADIO ANNOUNCER

And what makes you think that?

BEN

I was born here. I'm from here. I don't know. I just am. I'm American.

RADIO ANNOUNCER

Sounds pretty flimsy to me.

BEN

I am. I'm an American. Just like you.

RADIO ANNOUNCER

Oh really? I wouldn't be so sure.

(MR. UCHIDA, MRS. UCHIDA, and NAOMI transform into the CHORUS. The CHORUS begins plastering the space with sheets of paper. They tape sheets of paper to the walls, to the chairs. The RADIO ANNOUNCER joins them. An atmosphere of chaos and agitation. BEN stands apart.)