

COMING HOME

A Novel

By

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Chapter One

Juan de la Cruz thought, felt, talked, and played like any American boy. And he was as patriotic as Paul Revere. Each school morning, he recited the Pledge of Allegiance with a fervor matched by no one. His rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner” at a recent Memorial Day celebration downtown moved some war veterans to tears. But Juan did not look American—not how most folks thought an American boy was supposed to look.

“American” used to mean “white.” Now American was white or black, and Juan was neither.

So people had trouble figuring out what he was. Most times, adults and children called him an “Oriental.” Literally this meant “of or from the Orient.” But other meanings went with the word, such as having buckteeth, slanty eyes, and yellow skin; wearing funny-looking straw hats; and being untrustworthy. Some teachers, wanting to be politically correct, labeled him an “international,” a polite word for “foreigner” or “alien,” although Juan was born in the good old US of A. He had not set foot much outside of Mobile, Alabama. The only language he knew was English, which he spoke with a Southern accent. Moreover, he wanted to be called “John”; “Juan” was yucky. He refused to answer to it. Juan wanted to be 100 percent American. Or, more correctly, to have people think of him as American. And most of the time, Juan’s classmates and others treated him like a regular American boy. Juan himself usually forgot that he did not look like everybody else; sometimes, he was surprised to see his image in the mirror—straight, thick black hair and black eyes; a low, wide nose; and below-average height. Then, suddenly, somebody or something would make everybody—including, it seemed, classmates he had known since kindergarten and whom he had considered as friends—realize that he looked different from everybody else, except for the three other Asians in other sections or grades, all Vietnamese. Some, especially Dave Jones, who had transferred from Semmes this winter to Williams Middle School, had a knack for making Juan feel that he did not belong. Since Dave came, incidents of exclusion started occurring frequently enough for Juan to feel that he was sitting on a time bomb. He never knew what to expect. Sometimes the blowup came at the most unlikely time and the most unlikely place, if not from an unlikely source. Certainly Dave Jones had it in for Juan. And Juan could not figure out what he had done to incur his new classmate’s antagonism.

This Friday started and almost ended normally enough, except for the fact that the school had its annual career fair, where booths featured engineering, medicine, nursing, computer science, teaching, and other professions. The principal believed it was never too soon to start the children thinking about college.

The sixth graders, including Juan's class, viewed the booths during fifth period and then were shooed by the teacher-monitors to their last class for the week. When the children returned to the classroom, Mrs. Peterson, a substitute teacher whose lethargy contrasted sharply with the bursting energy of the class, asked the children which booths they liked the best.

"All right, George?"

"I like the doctor's booth because I will be a doctor, like my dad," George Martin answered, his right hand brushing his thick and unruly auburn hair from his forehead.

"I'll be a teacher, like my mom," said Stephany Wilson, her shoulder-length braided hair bobbing up and down.

"Mrs. Peterson, what does one study to be president of the United States?" asked Robert South, one of the brightest and achievement-oriented boys in class.

"Why do you ask?" Mrs. Peterson answered.

"Because I want to be president!"

"I want to be president, too!" Juan chimed in.

"You can't be president! You're not American!" Dave Jones taunted.

"Yes, I am!"

"No, you ain't! You're a gook!" Dave jeered, turning his Nordic eyes to slits with his index fingers.

"My great-granddaddy was an American! He was a sailor on Admiral Dewey's ship," Juan bragged.

"Liar! There were no Orientals in Admiral Dewey's fleet!"

"No, I'm not!" Juan protested. "My great-granddaddy was a German—"

"Yeah, yeah! Your granddaddy was an Oriental *Kraut!*" Dave interrupted, enjoying the attention that he was getting from his classmates.

"He—"

"All right, all right! Children...that's enough!" Mrs. Peterson stopped the exchange, trying to gain control of her classroom. Just then, the bell rang and the children, in unison, picked up their book bags and rushed to the door, ignoring her request for them to exit single file. Juan did not get to say that although his great-grandfather was born in Germany, he became an American.

Dave Jones had not had his last say. "*Chonga, chonga!*" he jeered as he dashed by Juan de la Cruz, who was retrieving books from his locker for the weekend. Although his teachers usually gave no homework on Fridays, Juan's parents insisted that he studied at least several pages from each book after lunch on Sundays.

"Huh?" responded Juan, startled and confounded by the nonsensical sounds that the red-haired bully thought meant something, but the boy was halfway down the long, locker-lined hallway of the science building.

"Go back where you came from, *chink!*" the bully bellowed as he turned the corner to exit to the parking area to catch his bus. He was gone before Juan could tell him for the nth time that he was not Chinese. All but one of his forebears were Filipinos, the people of the Philippines, a large cluster of islands between Asia and Australia. Mr. and Mrs. de la Cruz were Filipinos by birth and Americans by choice. They believed that Filipinos were the pride of the brown race, although Mrs. de la Cruz was not 100 percent brown. She was 75 percent brown

and 25 percent white, her mom's father being German. Mr. de la Cruz was 100 percent Filipino. This meant that Juan was 87.5 percent brown and 12.5 percent white. The only evidence of Juan's German ancestry was his coffee-with-cream complexion, which many thought was yellow.

"I'm an American, and this is my home!" Juan retorted, as his dad had taught him, although he knew the bully didn't hear.

"This is not your day, is it?" Alvin Schmidt, Juan's best friend at school, whose locker was next to his, said amiably.

Alvin's parents migrated to the United States from Germany when he was a toddler. But nobody had thought of Alvin as anything but a full-blooded American boy.

"No, I guess not."

"I wouldn't pay attention to that redneck."

"I don't," Juan lied, studiously zipping up his book bag. He felt a strong affinity for Alvin because of their common German heritage but he also resented the fact that his friend could assume and get easy acceptance from the other students at Williams Middle School, a magnet school located in a predominantly black area of downtown Mobile. The school—resurrected from deathly neglect since it had been integrated two years earlier—occupied two city blocks, bounded on the north and south by major streets, and on the east and west by side streets. A Baptist church, built in 1868, according to a plaque on the front of the building, stood in quiet dignity across it on the north side, just past its main parking lot. The children had to cross the south-side main street to get to the fenced playground, which doubled as an overflow parking lot for parents at the end of the school day. Two blocks away, on the east side, was a funeral parlor. Houses in various stages of disrepair, including a halfway house for recovering drug addicts and a wide array of storefront commercial establishments were scattered within a one-mile radius. The town's daily newspaper and the local television stations from time to time carried stories of parents demanding more police patrols to remove the many drug pushers and other criminals in the school vicinity.

"I couldn't be president of the United States myself," Alvin continued, referring to the incident in class that afternoon.

"Well, you're not even American!" Juan exploded. He was immediately repentant. He didn't mean to take it out on Alvin—but he was mad that everyone assumed that Alvin was native-born American and that he, Juan, was an alien, as Dave Jones had just done.

"Forget it," Alvin accepted Juan's apology as they walked toward the door. "How do you think I felt being called a *Kraut*?"

"I don't think Dave knows you're German."

"I'm an American now, you know."

"Yeah, I saw it in the papers. It was last May, wasn't it? Why did your parents wait so long before they were naturalized? My parents applied for American citizenship as soon as they were eligible."

"Well, they were not sure if they wanted for us to live here permanently or go back to Germany."

"My mom wants to go back to the Philippines," Juan confided. "Oh, there's my mom! I'll see you Monday."

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"Daddy, how come only white men can be president?" Juan asked at the dinner table that night.

"Who told you that?" his mom demanded.

"Dave at school said I couldn't be president of the United States."

"Well, he doesn't know what he's talking about!"

Juan was sorry he asked. He was afraid she might go on the warpath again as she had done a couple of times when he was in grade school. She had actually gone to the principal and complained about some older children teasing Juan—calling him a "gook."

"Why would you want to be president?" his dad asked. "That's an impossible job."

"That's not the point!" Mrs. de la Cruz just wouldn't let go.

The dinner conversation that started innocently and calmly escalated that night into another heated argument between Juan's parents after he had escaped to his room. The television and the heavy drapes, however, did not absorb the sounds of his parents' angry voices. "For Christ's sake, a twelve-year-old bully tells John he can't be president of the United States and you want to go back to the Philippines!" His dad's voice was naturally loud, but this was angry loud.

"I don't want to be a foreigner for the rest of my life!" she responded, decibel for decibel. On several occasions, Juan's parents had exchanged spirited but friendly arguments about where to retire, although they were not even forty. Mrs. de la Cruz wanted to retire in the Philippines. Mr. de la Cruz was quite content about his life in the United States. He had sentimental feelings about the country of his birth and youth, but he did not feel homesick for the Philippines. To him, America was home, as it had been for almost twenty years. And he was a firm Republican. Mrs. de la Cruz believed that the Republican Party was not sympathetic to minority rights. "You are white inside!" she had accused her husband or called him a "redneck" on more than one occasion.

"Why do you think of yourself as a foreigner?" Juan's dad predictably countered. "You have as much right to be here as anybody else."

"John will never be accepted as an American!"

"Things are changing," he said in a pacifying tone.

"You don't really believe that! The only way John will be accepted as an American is for him to have plastic surgery!"

"Well, I think you are making a big thing out of this," he said.

It was impossible for Juan to enjoy television that night.

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After lunch the next day, Mrs. de la Cruz drove to Pensacola, taking Juan with her, to buy Florida lottery tickets. She was never without tickets and had said many times that if she won, she would be on a plane to the Philippines within a week. Her husband and Juan usually listened with good-natured humor to her fantasy. This afternoon, she didn't play that "what if" game with Juan as the Lincoln Town Car sped through the I-10 East highway to her favorite convenience store. Juan fervently prayed, for the first time, that they would win.

A couple of vans, pickup trucks, and cars—some with Alabama license plates—dotted the big parking lot. Mrs. Cruz parked on the grass at the far end of the store and took her place at the tail end of a double line of millionaire wannabes that had overflowed to a few feet outside the glass door while Juan squeezed through sweaty adult bodies inside to get a couple of munchies. Since most got tickets also for friends or relatives, it was almost thirty minutes later before Juan and his mom were back in the car. She usually bought five, at most twenty tickets—when the jackpot reached over thirty million—but this time she had the machine select one hundred.

"Hmmm, this one looks good—seven, fifteen, twenty-one, thirty-five, forty-one, forty-nine." She always examined the numbers for a potential winner before driving back to Mobile.

"Let me see! Let me see, Mommy!"

"What would you like to do if we win?" she asked, handing him the ticket. "Oh, I know, I know. You want to give Christy a Nintendo, Ken a ten-speed bike, and Alvin a pair of Nikes."

Juan had always been a generous and thoughtful boy. One time, close to Halloween, when he was four or five, a drive-in teller at their bank gave him a lollipop. "Thank you. Can I have another one, please?" he asked.

"John, that is not very nice," Mrs. de la Cruz scolded.

"It's for my friend Cindy." And he nagged her about going back to the bank to get lollipops for other friends at his day-care center until she ended up buying a box at Kmart.

Juan usually had something hidden away in his pockets for his friends—candies, little toy soldiers, or miniature plastic animals. But a few times he had been too kind. Like one day in first grade early December, when he played Santa Claus to his classmates. Mrs. Clark, Juan's teacher, asked his mother to come in for consultation the next day. "Juan is a very bright and usually well-behaved boy, Mrs. de la Cruz," she prefaced the recitation of Juan's misbehavior. He had handed out dollar bills to classmates in neighboring desks, causing considerable commotion as children from all across the room converged on him, clamoring for their share.

"It took the whole afternoon to persuade the children to surrender the money to me and for things to return to normal," she sighed. "Did he get all his money back?"

"I don't know," Mrs. de la Cruz answered, surprised at the question.

"I sealed the money, twenty-five dollars in all, in an envelope, and I asked him to give it to you. He shouldn't be carrying that much to school."

Juan, who sat meekly at his desk ten feet from the teacher's table, looked away when his mom threw him a loaded glance.

"We give him a month's allowance at a time so he'll learn to budget," she explained. "But he's to bring only two dollars to school."

"It's not just the money," the teacher informed her. "He always has things to give away. The other children are taking advantage of Juan."

"He wants to be called 'John,'" she corrected. "My husband and I will talk to him."

"He's such a sweet boy. I really enjoy having him in my class." The teacher stood up, ending the consultation.

"But they are my friends, Mommy!" Juan had argued in the hallway. He had many friends. Classmates, boys and girls, gravitated around him, especially on field trips—he always

had extra money for souvenirs and snacks. His readiness to share had turned their home into a hubbub of activities for the local children, especially Christy and Ken, his very best friends.

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"Well, John? Don't tell me you have added another friend to your list!" Mrs. de la Cruz looked at Juan as she tucked the tickets in a zippered side pocket of her brown leather purse.

"Mommy, is plastic surgery very expensive?"

"I think so. Why do you want to know?"

"Does it cost thousands of dollars?"

"That depends on what is done. But why do you want to know?" It had not occurred to her that Juan might have heard last night's exchange with her husband.

"Nothin'."

"Come on, John! Why are you asking about plastic surgery?" she persisted.

"Mommy, if we win, can I have plastic surgery?"

"I was just joking with Daddy last night; I didn't mean..."

"Can I, Mommy?"

Chapter Two

Four years ago, when he was eight, Juan went to heroic lengths to become an American, as his great-grandfather Jacob Volz, had done many years ago—with the same disastrous result.

One Thursday morning in the boys' restroom, Joe Allen, who had been in the same class since kindergarten and whom Juan had considered as his best friend, asked: "Why is your thing like that?"

"What?"

"You know, not circum...circumcised."

"I dunno," Juan replied, turning his back, flabbergasted at the unexpected question and embarrassed that he didn't know what Joe was talking about.

The subject was dropped, and the two boys soon returned to their classroom.

"Mommy, what does 'circumcise' mean?" Juan asked his mom when she picked him up at three that afternoon.

"Why do you ask?" replied Mrs. de la Cruz, scanning her son's face as her hands lingered at the seat belt.

"Nothin'." He shrugged, avoiding her gaze and wishing that he had waited for his dad.

Mrs. de la Cruz, guessing that she would not get another word out of him, explained: "When a boy is born, the doctor usually cuts the foreskin of his birdie. It's just to make it easier to clean, to prevent infection."

"What didn't the doctor circumcise me, Mommy?"

"Well, he said it was not really necessary as long as we washed you properly. So I told him not to do it," his mom replied. "Just be sure to clean your birdie, as Daddy and I have taught you...John...did something happen in school today?"

"Nooo."

"You're sure?"

Juan shrugged and looked away.

As Mr. and Mrs. de la Cruz cleaned up in the kitchen after dinner that night, she told him about Juan's question, occasionally glancing in the direction of the den, where Juan watched television.

"I don't understand why you didn't want him circumcised in the first place," he muttered. He had argued vigorously for circumcision when Juan was born but allowed her the final say, in deference to the physical stress and pain she had just gone through. But he still believed that all boys should be circumcised.

"Oh, come on...Let's not go through that again. You heard what the doctor said!" she muttered back. "Why don't you talk to him?" she added in a more conciliatory tone.

"All right," he agreed. "He'll probably ask me about it anyway."

But Juan, stretched out on his stomach in his favorite sofa was too engrossed in some Disney Channel cartoon to notice his parents enter. And he was completely oblivious to their watchful glances in his direction as they waited out the end of the show in their matching waverly lounge chairs.

"Mommy says you're asking why you were not circumcised," Mr. de la Cruz introduced the topic in a controlled voice as he tucked in Juan that night—a role he had increasingly assumed since Juan started school and no longer wanted to be "mama's boy."

"How come I wasn't circumcised, Daddy?"

"Well, when I was a boy, doctors thought circumcision was necessary. But now, some doctors think it is better to leave nature alone," Mr. de la Cruz replied, repeating his wife's warning about proper hygiene.

"Daddy...were you..."

"Yes, when I was eleven."

"Did you have to do it to become an American?"

"No, silly! I was in the Philippines then." Mr. de la Cruz laughingly mashed Juan's hair. "Boys are circumcised there, too, as in a lot of other countries."

"Why weren't you circumcised when you were born? Mommy said—"

"I was delivered at home by a midwife, like all my brothers and sisters, and midwives did not do circumcision," his dad interrupted.

"How come?"

"How come what?"

"Your mom didn't go to the hospital?"

"Well, there was no hospital in our *barrio*, not even a doctor. Besides, we couldn't afford to go to a hospital, if there was one."

"Were you poor when you were a boy, Daddy?"

"Yes, we were very poor."

"Did you live in the projects like Peter and Charles?"

"No." Mr. de la Cruz explained that there was no government subsidy for the poor in the Philippines, and a family would be considered middle class if they lived in a house like the ones in the projects where some of Juan's classmates were residing.

"Like most houses in our *barrio*, village, our house had only one bedroom, with no door, and all of us—my father, my mother, three brothers, my two sisters, and me—slept together on a mat, under a mosquito net, spread out on the floor."

"Can I sleep beside you and Mom?"

"No."

"How come?"

"Well, I think it's against the law; Child Protective Services would be checking on—"

"You'll be more comfortable sleeping in your own bed," Juan's mom, who just entered the room, interrupted.

After exchanging a few sharp words in Tagalog, she left the room and Juan's dad continued the narration.

"We had no electricity until I was about your age, and I had to walk almost a mile each way to school."

"Was your house too far for the bus...?"

"There was no bus there. There were only the *calesas*, horse and buggy, to take people to the market, church, or school."

"Your parents didn't have a car, not even one?"

"No, and they were too poor to give me money to ride the *calesa*."

"Boy, you were more poorer than Peter's family!" Juan exclaimed. "They have only one car and one television."

"We sure were," Mr. de la Cruz agreed. "That's why I studied very hard so I could come to America and get a good job." He came to the United States during the prosperous 1960s and immediately landed a job that paid in one year what he probably would not earn in half his lifetime in the Philippines.

"Joe says we're rich because we have three cars and a big house."

"Well, we are better off than Joe's family and probably most of your other friends, but we're not rich." The de la Cruzes' combined income from their federal government jobs—he as a mechanical engineer and she as a human resources clerk—was more than twice the national median household income. Their house, with a living space of more than three thousand square feet, was twice as large as the typical residence in the area and, according to the real estate agent who sold it to them eight years ago—just before Juan was born—would be worth a lot more if it were located in an upscale West Mobile neighborhood.

"Yeah," Juan agreed. "We're more richer than Ken and Derrick and—"

"You say 'richer' or 'more rich,' not 'more richer,'" Mr. de la Cruz corrected.

Then Juan wanted to know if his mom was rich or poor when she was young. And Mr. de la Cruz told him that her family had money but that her granddaddy later lost it all. He was glad he didn't have to explain how that happened—Juan returned to the subject of circumcision.

"Did it hurt a lot, Daddy?"

"What...?"

"Well...you know..."

"Oh! Just for a few days."

"Do babies hurt as much when they are circumcised?"

"I don't know. Probably."

"Yeah," Juan said knowingly. "That's why Christy's baby brother cried all the time when they brought him home from the hospital."

"That's probably the reason that in some countries, boys are not circumcised until they're in their teens—old enough to stand the pain," Mr. de la Cruz said.

"I was born in the United States, wasn't I, Daddy?" Juan asked, as he had invariably done every time he heard the Bruce Springsteen hit song.

"Yes, you were born at Providence Hospital," Mr. de la Cruz confirmed.

"Will I still be an American even if I'm not circumcised?"

"Of course!" Mr. de la Cruz assured his son. "Hey, it's getting late. You have school tomorrow."

Juan went to sleep satisfied that he didn't have to go through the test of fire to prove he was an American. But he was wrong.

At school the next morning, two classmates who wanted to verify that Joe Allen was not lying about Juan's "thing," followed him to the boys' restroom. "Are all Orientals' things like that?" asked Steve, who had fibbed to Mrs. Smith about needing to go, standing right where he could get a clear view of Juan. A strand of his long, unruly blond hair fell over one eye as he did a quick Indian dance. Dan, the other boy, using a urinal next to Juan's, giggled so hard his freckles touched.

Juan ignored the question, returning to the classroom as if nothing had happened, but he counted the hours and then the minutes for the school bell.

He wanted to be circumcised, he told his mom as soon as he got in the car. Mrs. de la Cruz again explained that as long as he cleaned himself well when he showered, he would be all right. The angle of Juan's head and firmly set mouth signaled his resolve.

"It can be painful after the operation, especially when you pee-pee," Mrs. de la Cruz warned her son.

Uncertainty and fear flicked through Juan's eyes.

"Let's see what Daddy says," suggested Mrs. de la Cruz, catching the flitting expression.

"Mommy, I want to be circumcised," Juan persisted.

"Why?"

"Well, you know..."

"No, I don't know."

Arms crossed against his chest, Juan pouted, fixing his gaze outside the window.

"John...Has someone in school been teasing you?"

He shrugged, still sulking, eyes on the road.

"All right. I'll make an appointment with the doctor, if that's what you really want."

He nodded, rather vigorously. But he would not look at her or respond to further questions, keeping close-mouthed on the ride home.

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The pediatrician, Dr. Ann Smith, repeated what his mom had said the day before. Juan would not be dissuaded. So Dr. Smith referred him to a specialist. "He's a urologist," she said.

The clinic was in the posh medical annex building of a new hospital in West Mobile. Juan, remembering the hospital's open house the year before, relaxed a little as their Town Car turned into the entrance to the parking area.

"Will they give me balloons and Coke?" he asked his mom.

"No, that was only for the opening ceremony. Besides, we're going to a clinic, not the hospital."

Juan had not known a doctor called a "urologist," but the physician, tall and blond, about his dad's age, looked kind.

"What school do you go to?" he asked as he examined Juan.

"Rockhill Elementary School," Juan mumbled.

"What's your favorite subject?"

"I dunno."

"John is a straight-A student," Mrs. de la Cruz bragged.

"That so? Good! Keep it up," the doctor responded as he finished with the cursory examination and playfully mashed Juan's carefully groomed hair. He parked on a stool.

"Everything's A-okay," he said to Mrs. de la Cruz, who sat by a tiny corner table. He informed her that circumcision would require general anesthesia—meaning that Juan would be put under mild sedation through an intravenous drip during the surgery.

"Isn't that risky, especially for a child?" she asked.

"There's always some risk."

Mrs. de la Cruz expressed her reservations about exposing her son to such danger, especially since the operation was really not necessary—adding that Juan probably had been teased by other boys at school.

Juan didn't mind the doctor asking him to pull down his pants and all that, but their conversation embarrassed him. He had gotten down from the high examining table, tucked his shirt in, zipped up his pants, and was studiously tying and untying his shoelaces.

"Since he is not an all-American boy, he's probably teased a lot, anyway," the doctor said, agreeing with Mrs. de la Cruz that the risks outweighed the benefits. He seemed oblivious to Juan's presence.

Juan did not look up from his shoelaces. But he heard.

Mrs. de la Cruz ignored the doctor's remark, hoping that her son was not paying attention. With a constricted voice, she told him that she and her husband would talk to Juan. She then hustled the boy out of the cubicle.

"He's charging fifty-six dollars for that?" She grumbled to the cashier, a blond, well-scrubbed woman in her midfifties.

"Yes, ma'am."

"That is too much!"

"I'm sorry, but that's the standard fee for a first visit," the woman explained.

Mrs. de la Cruz, glowering at the innocent employee, briskly wrote a check for the amount and dropped it on the counter, ignoring the cashier's extended hand. She shoved the checkbook and pen back in her leather designer handbag, which she then snatched from the countertop, and marched away, pulling Juan by the hand, who meekly tried to keep pace.

"Please wait for your receipt, ma'am."

Mrs. de la Cruz did not even glance back. She muttered as they walked to the elevator about what a real jerk that doctor was, charging as much as he did when he didn't do anything.

She carried on until she found their car in the full parking lot. Ignoring a red Toyota pickup truck waiting for her parking spot, Mrs. de la Cruz sat in the car for five minutes trying to make small talk—to flesh out her son's reaction to what had transpired at the clinic. Juan had not given any indication that he heard the doctor's remark—he might not have been paying attention.

"Who do you like better—Dr. Smith or Dr. Jones?" she asked.

"Dr. Smith."

"Why?"

"I dunno." He didn't return her gaze.

"Well...do you understand what the doctor said about your having to go to the hospital, probably even spend the night there?" She persisted after an interminable silence.

He responded with his designer shrug, eyes averted.

Mrs. de la Cruz suggested—soliloquized—that Juan wait until they could visit the Philippines, where doctors used only local anesthetic and didn't make a big deal out of such a simple thing. His daddy and uncles there, she added, were older than him when they were circumcised.

"Well, John?" she prodded as she backed the car, barely missing the pickup truck that dashed by, the young male driver having tired of waiting for her to pull out.

"It cost too much," Juan answered, no longer able to ignore his mom's expectant glances, but he avoided her eyes.

"It won't cost much over there. As a matter of fact, it may not cost anything at all. I have friends who are doctors."

Juan pursed his mouth and turned his head away, signaling her to drop the subject.

Taking the hint, she turned her attention to what she should do about the doctor's behavior. She rehearsed in her mind a phone call to that jerk when they got home. Then she decided she would complain, instead, to their family doctor. She dropped that idea, too, in favor of writing to the local medical association. She would make him pay. All those resentments that until then had been hidden in the deep recesses of her subconscious surged into the open. Intentional or unintentional slights that she had learned over the years to take in stride assumed a new significance.

She—then known as Carmen de los Santos—came on a scholarship to study in the United States during the tumultuous 1960s, when television news and the newspapers were full of pictures of blacks demanding the right to be served in restaurants and be admitted to all-white schools and universities in the South.

Like most Asians in the United States then, she was an observer, a fence-sitter in the civil rights movement. Asians did not sympathize with blacks' quest for equality. Unlike blacks, they could live wherever they wanted; even the most upscale subdivisions were open. They were not required to sit at the back of the bus or refused service in restaurants. It took Carmen many years to understand the reaction of Amos Kanyu, a Nigerian classmate, to an incident in a fast-food restaurant in a small town just outside of Nashville. Her group—four Asians and Amos—stopped on their way to Atlanta to visit the relatives of one of Carmen's friends, Debra, a business student from Hong Kong. The white waiter refused to serve Amos, and he returned to the car while the Asians had their lunch at the restaurant. He did not eat the sandwich and French fries that they brought him. Carmen and her friends thought Amos was making a big deal about not being allowed to eat in the restaurant. They shrugged their shoulders when Amos became distant during the rest of the trip and avoided them when they returned to Kansas. They were, in fact, relieved. They did not invite him in the first place. He invited himself when he heard them talking at the cafeteria about the trip. His impertinence was so unexpected that nobody could think of a way to say no. The Asians knew how whites felt about blacks. They were grateful and flattered that whites seemed to accept Asians and did not want whites to associate them with blacks. They really felt white inside. Carmen then did not give much significance to incidents of exclusion that she herself had encountered. She did not resent her classmates interrupting her almost every time she tried to say something during seminars or ignoring her contributions to the group discussions. She did not mind that at school-related gatherings, she often found herself standing at the periphery while classmates and others continued talking without acknowledging her presence. She knew that once her verbal skills and her knowledge of American values and culture had improved, she would be able to have more meaningful interactions with Americans. Several years later, Carmen's verbal skills improved considerably, and her knowledge of American society and culture increased. And in her mind, she had

become as American as apple pie. She even stopped speaking Tagalog with fellow expatriates or students from the Philippines and had stopped eating Filipino food. She had wanted so much to belong. It took Carmen a few years to realize that what was needed to belong was not in her power to bring about.

Her recollections of her first few years in the United States made Mrs. de la Cruz angrier about an incident just this past week at the food store, where the baker attended to a white woman ahead of her although she had been standing at the counter longer. Her anger escalated as she recalled various incidents at restaurants where invariably her white colleagues would be asked for their orders first, and when someone came around to ask "Is everything all right?" they would be looking at a white companion even when she was obviously paying for the lunch. And now they were doing it to her son.

"Mommy, I need pencils," Juan interrupted her thoughts as they neared the shopping mall.

"What? Didn't Daddy buy you a box just two weeks ago?"

"I use them every day!"

"You gave them away, didn't you?"

He nodded sheepishly.

"It's good to share, but you shouldn't give away your school supplies. We can't afford to buy you pencils and paper every other week."

"Aren't we rich, Mommy?"

"No, we're not rich, just comfortable. But, rich or not, we would be bankrupt before too long, at the rate you're going," she said as she turned into Bel Air Mall's crowded parking lot.

"Yes!" Juan exclaimed, punching the air when he realized they were stopping at the mall.

They stayed there for the rest of the day, although Juan was supposed to be back in school and she at work. They had an early lunch at McDonald's, his favorite eating place, and played electronic games until midafternoon. Then she bought Juan two boxes of pencils, plus a pair of Nikes, a Texas Instruments Speak & Spell, and a couple of Nintendo tapes.

"Don't tell Daddy," she warned her son conspiratorially. Juan, ecstatic with his new possessions, nodded compliance, impatient to get home to show them off to his friends.

Chapter Three

There was no mention of circumcision that day or later, not even by his dad, but Juan heard his parents argue after they had sent him off to bed that night.

"It must be in the genes," Juan heard his dad say as he went back to the bathroom to deposit a dirty sweatshirt in the hamper. He didn't understand what his dad meant but had guessed by the exchange that followed that it was not good, and it kept him awake.

"Leave my grandfather out of this!" his mom practically shouted.

"All right! All right, I was just kidding."

"Can't you take anything seriously?"

"Why are you so upset?" he retorted. "What does 'all-American' mean, anyway? It was just a mumbo jumbo coined probably by some advertising agency."

"That doctor is a racist," she fumed, angry at her husband for not getting the point right away.

"Who cares what he thinks? He's just an insensitive clod, and John does not have to go back there."

"He should not get away with that," she persisted.

"If he charged you more than he charges his other patients, that's something else. But what will you write the medical association—that the urologist is a racist because he said your son was not an all-American boy?"

"He has hurt John's self-esteem," she replied.

"He'll be all right. He's my son."

"Don't give me that macho crap!" she shouted through clenched teeth.

"And don't give John your racial hang-up!" he articulated each word. "Let him define his own reality." He accused his wife of being overly sensitive, perceiving prejudice and discrimination too quickly.

"For God's sake, he is just eight years old!"

Juan fell into a fitful sleep to the sound of his parents' angry voices.

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Juan de la Cruz knew by heart the heroic though tragic story of his great-grandfather, Jacob Volz. His mom had told and retold it to friends and acquaintances who, on their first visit to the de la Cruz home, invariably stared curiously at Volz's eighteen-by-twenty-four-inch custom-framed picture at the center of an array of photographs that decorated a wall in their den. His Germanic features, light blond, thinning hair and deep blue eyes—which some visitors, even before they heard the story, had said that he looked sad—contrasted sharply with the predominantly Asian faces that surrounded him.

Jacob Volz, so the story went, was born in Frankfurt, Germany. But he wanted very much to be an American. So, in the 1890s, while still in his teens, he stowed away on a cargo ship bound for the United States.

Young Jacob joined Commodore George Dewey's fleet, which steamed across the Pacific Ocean in 1898 to Manila Bay in the Philippine Islands during the Spanish-American

War. Dewey's warships easily and immediately destroyed the Spanish fleet in the Battle of Manila Bay. The Filipinos at that time were nearing success in their revolt against more than three hundred years of Spanish colonial rule and actually declared independence several months later, on June 12, 1898. They established a republic with a constitution patterned after that of the United States and had expected the Americans to support their quest for freedom. Instead, the United States bought the Philippines from Spain for twenty million dollars.

Although the islanders persisted in their fight for nationhood, American cannons and guns eventually prevailed over sticks, stones, and machetes. So Jacob Volz became one of the conquerors in the new American colony. When he had completed his tour of duty as a sailor, he worked for the colonial regime as a policeman. Like many of his shipmates, he married a Filipina, Juan's great-grandmother.

For almost two decades, Jacob Volz was an American. Or thought he was. He led a normal, respectable life, and his wife bore a child, Juan's grandmother. Then in 1917, when the United States entered World War I against Germany, he was arrested and shipped to an internment camp in California. Because of his German heritage, the government considered him an enemy alien.

When the war ended with Germany's defeat the next year, Volz was released. He returned to his wife and child in the Philippines. World War II caught him there. The years between his return and World War II were as different from his first two decades in the colony as vinegar and sugar. While he first landed on the islands as an American hero, he returned a pariah. While the Spanish-American War catapulted him into exclusive privilege and power, World War I plunged him to the nether realm of the outsider. He could no longer say "We, Americans..." or strut around as a conqueror. Instead, he belonged to the vanquished. The stigma of being born in the wrong country drove away former friends and colleagues, who avoided him as if he was enveloped by the stench of a skunk.

Only Jacob Volz knew how he viewed his imprisonment. He did not talk about his feelings and thoughts, not even to his wife. But he was probably confused and shocked that Americans—especially the American government he had served as a sailor and policeman—suspected he would be more loyal to Germany, a country he had striven to escape, than to the United States, the country that he had sworn to defend with his life.

And only Volz knew if he still considered himself an American. But some people had a definite opinion about this. During World War II, the Japanese conquered the Philippines, then still an American territory. They arrested and interned him. To the Japanese, Jacob Volz was an American.

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Laughter, in which his parents joined, usually followed the end of his mom's narration. His dad's occasional comment "He's a real loser, wasn't he?" added further to the merriment, climaxed by someone saying, "The poor thing."

"What's funny was that he seemed happy at being arrested by the Japanese," Mrs. de la Cruz sometimes added. "My mom said that he marched proudly—or tried to, as he was old by then and frail—as soldiers led him to the army truck."

Juan never joined in the laughter and never understood why people, including his own parents, laughed at Jacob Volz. “Why does everybody laugh at your granddad, Mommy?” Juan remembered asking her a number of times and getting no clear answer.

“Well, they were not really laughing at him,” she had said. “They were laughing at the confusion that people had about his nationality.”

His dad, trying to be helpful, explained that Jacob Volz was a marginal man—someone who was neither here nor there, a man without a country, one who did not belong.

Neither of his parents had told Juan other things about Jacob Volz, especially stories of the big change in him when he returned to his family from internment. He had a successful security guard business before World War I, but his life having become unpredictable, where playing by the rules did not assure achievement of his most cherished goal, Jacob Volz had gone for the long odds. He started spending more time at the *carreras*, the horse racetracks, than at his business—until he lost everything. And he became a failure in a society where white skin was a passport to almost limitless opportunities and privilege. When resentment against Germany’s aggression had eased at the end of World War I, many of Volz’s colleagues and friends again accepted him as one of their own. But he could not forgive nor forget—until World War II, when the Japanese gave him back his American identity.

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