

CHAPTER 38

The Promise

For Shizuka Watanabe, the sight of her son answered a desperate hope. Two years earlier, she'd been taken to see a dead man who looked just like Mutsuhiro. Everyone, even her relatives, believed it was he. But Shizuka had felt a trace of doubt. In secret, she clung to a promise Mutsuhiro had made when he'd last seen her: on October 1, 1948, he'd meet her at a Tokyo restaurant.

As she waited, others began to question whether Mutsuhiro was really dead. His army sidearm didn't match the suicide gun. Mutsuhiro could easily have used another gun, but an examination of the body found features that seemed different from those of the fugitive. The detectives couldn't confirm definitively that the dead man was Mutsuhiro. They descended again on the Watanabes.

For two years, Shizuka endured intense scrutiny. Her visitors were tailed and investigated. When she ran errands, detectives followed and questioned those who encountered her. She was frequently interrogated but answered questions about her son by referring to the suicides on Mitsumine. Then, when the October 1948 day came, she went to the restaurant, eluding her pursuers. There was her son, a living ghost.

The sight of him brought as much fear as joy. Appearing in public, he was

taking a huge risk. She spoke to him only briefly, in hushed tones. Mutsuhiro said he'd return in two years, then slipped away.

More than a year passed. Shizuka heard nothing from him. Rumors abounded. One had him shot by Americans; another had him struck by a train after an American soldier tied him to the track. Many stories ended in his suicide, by gunshot, by *hara-kiri* (stabbing), by a leap into a volcano. There seemed only one conclusion to draw from the failure of the search. He must be dead.

Whether Shizuka believed this is unknown. But in his last meeting with her, Mutsuhiro had given her one troubling clue: I'll see you in two years, he'd said, *if I am alive*.

In September 1949, an obscure young minister named Billy Graham walked into a vacant parking lot in Los Angeles. He and his friends threw up a giant tent, set out folding chairs, hammered together a stage the size of a fairly spacious backyard, and began a campaign to bring Christianity to Los Angeles.

At first, Graham preached to a half-empty tent. But his sermons got people talking. Soon, ten thousand people a night were coming to hear him, leaving hundreds standing in the street, straining to hear him over the traffic. In a city hardly bashful about sinning, Graham had kicked off a religious revival.

Louie knew nothing of Graham. Four years after the war, he was still in the dingy apartment, lost in alcohol and plans to murder the Bird. Cynthia had returned but was only staying until she could arrange a divorce. The two lived in grim coexistence.

One day that October, Cynthia and Louie passed a new tenant in the hall. They chatted, and it was at first a pleasant conversation. Then the man mentioned that a minister named Billy Graham was preaching downtown. Louie turned abruptly and walked away.

Cynthia stayed in the hall. When she returned to the apartment, she asked Louie to take her to hear Graham speak. Louie refused.

Cynthia went alone. When she came home, she was alight. She told Louie

she wasn't going to divorce him. The news filled Louie with relief, but when Cynthia said she'd experienced a religious awakening, he was appalled.

For several days, Cynthia badgered Louie to see Graham. Louie angrily refused; he wanted nothing to do with God. They argued. Exhausted by her persistence, he finally agreed to go.

When Louie and Cynthia entered the tent, Louie insisted on staying far in the rear. He'd wait out the sermon, go home, and be done with it. ,

As the service began, Louie was sullen and resentful. Graham began speaking, and Louie paid little notice. But then Graham posed a question: Why is God silent while good men suffer? Louie was suddenly wide awake.

Graham's answer was that God is not silent. "If you look into the heavens tonight, on this beautiful California night, I see the stars and can see the footprints of God," he said. "My heavenly father hung them there with a flaming fingertip and holds them there with the power of his omnipotent hand,

The tent in Los Angeles where Billy Graham preached in the fall of 1949.

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and he runs the whole universe, and he's not too busy running the whole universe to count the hairs on my head and see a sparrow when it falls, because God is interested in me. . . . God spoke in creation."

A memory suddenly came to Louie: he and Phil, starving on the raft, drifting into the doldrums, a seascape so overpoweringly beautiful that Louie had forgotten his thirst and hunger, forgotten even that he was dying, and felt only gratitude. That day, he'd believed such beauty had to be the work of God, a gift of compassion. Realizing he'd forgotten that gift, forgotten his gratitude, Louie wound tight.

Graham went on. He spoke of God reaching into the world through miracles. God sends blessings, he said, that give men strength to outlast their sorrows. "God works miracles one after another. . . . God says, 'If you suffer, I'll give you the grace to go forward.'"

Unbidden, memory after memory swept over Louie. He felt again the moment he'd woken in the sinking hull of *Green Hornet*, the wires that had trapped him a moment earlier now, impossibly, gone. He remembered the machine guns riddling the rafts with bullets and yet not one bullet striking him, Phil, or Mac. He'd fallen into unbearably cruel worlds, and yet he'd borne them. When he turned these memories in his mind, the only explanation he could find was that he had been graced with miracles.

Louie shone with sweat. This stranger seemed to be speaking directly to him, knowing his history, knowing all he'd forgotten. Louie felt spooked, accused, guilty, angry. Beneath it all was fear. There was another, long-buried memory pushing its way to the surface. Louie wanted to run away before he saw it. He felt a frantic urge to flee.

Graham asked his listeners to come forward to declare their faith. Louie grabbed Cynthia's arm, stood up, and bulled his way toward the exit. His mind was tumbling.

As he reached the aisle, he stopped. Everything around him disappeared. The memory he'd long beaten back, the memory from which he was fleeing, was upon him. He fell into a flashback.

He was on the raft. There was gentle Phil crumpled up before him, Mac's

breathing skeleton, endless ocean, the sun lying over them, the cunning bodies of the sharks, waiting, circling. He was a body on a raft, dying of thirst. He felt words whisper from his swollen lips. It was a promise thrown to God, a promise he hadn't kept, a promise he'd allowed himself to forget until this instant: *If you'll save me, I'll serve you forever.* And then, standing under a tent on a clear night in Los Angeles, Louie felt rain falling on his face.

It was the last flashback he'd ever have. Louie let go of Cynthia and turned toward Graham. He began walking.

Cynthia watched Louie all the way home. When they entered the apartment, Louie went straight to his liquor, carried the bottles to the kitchen, and emptied them into the sink.

In the morning, he woke feeling cleansed. For the first time in five years, the Bird hadn't come into his dreams. The Bird would never come again.

Louie found the Bible issued to him by the air corps and sent to his mother when he was believed dead. He walked to a park, sat under a tree, and began reading.

Resting in the shade and the stillness, Louie felt profound peace. When he thought of the war, he thought not of all he'd suffered, but the divine love he believed had intervened to save him. He was not the worthless, broken, forsaken man the Bird had tried to make of him. His rage, his humiliation, his helplessness, had fallen away. His dignity had returned. That morning, he believed, he was a new creation.

Softly, he wept.



Louie (right) at Sugamo, 1950. COURTESY OF LOUIS ZAMPERINI