

Empire of the Son: A contemporary play about a Japanese Canadian family

HANDOUT A1 Excerpts from *Empire of the Son*, by Tetsuro Shigematsu

Every time my father went into the hospital, it seemed less and less likely that he would ever come out.

Conference call with my sisters. "How is Dad doing? Should we come?" And I stopped.

My sisters never ask my advice about anything. I'm the baby of the family. But here they were. "Tetsuro, tell us. Should we come?" If they don't come and something happens, I'll never live it down. But for some reason I can't bring myself to say it. So I say, "Listen closely because I'm only going to say this once. No one here is telling you not to come."

My sisters booked their flights from all points to Vancouver, indirect flights, weird connections, and by some coincidence all three sisters landed at YVR within thirty minutes of each other. As we all piled into my car, everyone was giddy, literally giggling. Sure the circumstances were crappy, but this was an impromptu family reunion. We only saw each other once a year, if that. But now we were all together, and everyone was so happy.

PROJECTION:

STILL IMAGE of TETSURO's sisters, HANA, RIÉ, and SETSU, and TETSURO in the car.

As I began driving towards St. Paul's, one of my sisters said -

SOUND:

AUDIO CLIP of HANA, RIÉ, and SETSU

talking with TETSURO in the car on the way to the hospital.

HANA: (recorded) By the way, we are not really here for Dad. That was just a pretext.

RIÉ: The real reason we're here is because we decided it was time to stage an intervention on your moustache.

SETSU: We're serious, it's over the top. We think your facial hair is extremely aggressive, and aggressively antisocial. It's really going to limit your opportunities.

HANA / SETSU / RIÉ: Yeah, you look really untrustworthy / dubious / supercilious / insouciant / oleaginous.

Did I mention my sisters all scored within the top one percentile on their SATs?

(on mic, looking at photo) What are you talking about? This is a handlebar moustache. It's a classic gentleman's moustache.

SOUND:

AUDIO CLIP continues.

HANA: (recorded) Maybe that's the look you're going for, but as an Asian it looks like you have two question marks on your face.

RIÉ: Questionable look, questionable character.

PROJECTION out.

When my sisters say stuff like that, deep down, I know they're probably right. They're always staging these interventions on me, half-joking, half-serious. But secretly I was just happy not to have to talk about my father's condition. They'd see for themselves soon enough.

When we got to my dad's hospital room, without a word my sisters dropped their coats and their bags and they climbed into bed with my dad. That blew my mind. They could've levitated and I would've been less impressed.

But they lay in bed with him. And they touched him the way daughters touch their fathers when there's a lot of love. All these hours I'd been spending with my dad: bringing him heated blankets, feeding him chips of ice, describing the weather outside his window, I can honestly say it never occurred to me to climb into his bed, to lie next to him, to touch him.

In the manner in which we express affection towards our father, my brother and I are like characters trapped in a Frank Capra movie. My brother Ken is a pastor and his favourite film is *It's a Wonderful Life*, and together we are about as fulsome in our expressions of affection as Jimmy Stewart. "Gee, Pa, just try and hang in there, will ya? And hand to God, you'll be as right as rain." Our brotherly affection is in black and white, but my sisters' love is in Technicolor, and in surround sound.

My sisters are multilingual in the languages of love. They coo, and cluck, and purr with mellifluous felicity. They speak in tongues, not because the

Spirit has descended upon them, but because it never left.

Make no mistake, my sisters are grown women, mothers but not matronly, but maybe magicians, maybe wiccans, because in the blink of an eye they become little girls again. "Goodnight, Daddy, *otosan*, I love you, *ai shiteru*," cooing affectionate little girls, while my brother and I remain like British Beefeaters, arms by our sides, silent, while my sisters shapeshift into a basket full of kittens, and with every kiss they bring him back from the brink of death, and if this isn't magic, then I don't know what is.

And as I stand there, slack-jawed and dumb, in the corner of the room, all I can think is there are cultures in this world that prize sons over daughters. I know because I come from one of them. So stupid.

PROJECTION:

***STILL IMAGE of sisters
(from left to right,
SETSU, HANA, and RIÉ) in
hospital with Mr.
Shigematsu (AKIRA).***

When my father's condition stabilized, my sisters had to go back to their regular lives. But let me tell you, their example was not lost on me. I mean I didn't want to do it right in front of them, but as soon as they were

around the corner, I was on that bed. Right on the edge. And I leaned over, and I patted his knee like no one was watching.

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SOUND:

AUDIO CLIP of historical recording of the Emperor of Japan's surrender speech.

A common memory that my father shares with many Japanese of his generation in Japan is hearing the Emperor's voice on the radio for the very first time, announcing Japan's defeat, Japan's surrender. So while everyone else is crying around him, my dad is secretly hopeful, because he's thinking, "Well now that the war is over, maybe my father will finally come home." My grandfather was a prisoner of war.

Now back then in my father's small hometown of Kagoshima, the only form of transportation left intact was the train system. So once a day the train would make a stop at their local station. And my father being just a kid, not knowing any better, would go down to the station to look for his dad.

TETSURO: Now, Dad, I'm not saying yours was a fool's errand, but you didn't know if your dad was alive or dead, so you go down to the train station on the off chance that he'll just show up, but you're doing this every day, you're a month?

AKIRA: Oh, not very long. Perhaps, just over a year.

TETSURO: Why did you stop?

AKIRA: There was only one person left on the platform that day, far too old to be my father, but I could see it was him.

TETSURO: Dad, did you run to him? Did you hug him? Did you say I love you?

AKIRA: No, of course not!

TETSURO: Dad, father and son, parent and child, you haven't seen each other for years. You didn't know if the other was alive or dead. Are you telling me the moment you two saw each other there wasn't a single expression of relief, affection, love?

Pause.

AKIRA: It must have been the late afternoon when we walked home from the station, because our shadows were so long on the road. And although I cannot be certain, I suppose had my father glanced at my shadow, he may have seen a slight hop in my step.

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