

## I was not unwelcome

PEOPLE KNOW ME HERE. It wasn't always so. But living thirty-odd years in the same place begins to show on a man. In the course of such time, without even realizing it, one takes on the characteristics of the locality, the color and stamp of the prevailing dress and gait and even speech—those gentle bells of the sidewalk passersby, their *How are yous* and *Good days* and *Hellos*. And in kind there is a gradual and accruing recognition of one's face, of being, as far as anyone can recall, from around here. There's no longer a lingering or vacant stare, and you can taste the small but unequaled pleasure that comes with being a familiar sight to the eyes. In my case, everyone here knows perfectly who I am. It's a simple determination. Whenever I step into a shop in the main part of the village, invariably someone will say, "Hey, it's good Doc Hata."

The sentiment, certainly, is very kind, and one I deeply appreciate. Here, fifty minutes north of the city, in a picturesque town that I will call Bedley Run, I somehow enjoy an almost Oriental veneration as an elder. I suppose the other older folks who live here receive their due share of generosity and respect, but it seems I alone rate the blustery greeting, the special salutation. When I buy my paper each morning, the newsstand owner will say, with a tone feigning gravity, "Doctor Hata, I presume." And the young, bushy-eyebrowed woman at the deli, whose homebound mother I helped quite often in her final years, always reaches over the refrigerated glass counter and waves her plump hands and says, "Gonna have the usual, Doc?" She winks at me and makes sure to prepare my turkey breast sandwich herself, folding an extra wedge of pickle into the butcher paper. I realize that it's not just that I'm a friendly and outgoing silver-hair, and that I genuinely enjoy meeting people, but also because I've lived here as long as any, and my name, after all, is Japanese, a fact that seems both odd and delightful to people, as well as somehow town-affirming.

I'd read about the town in the paper, a brief slice-of-life article with a picture of a meadow that had been completely cleared for new suburban-style homes, just white stakes in the frozen ground to mark where the streets would be. It looked sterile and desolate, like fresh blast ground, not in the least hopeful, and yet I felt strangely drawn to the town, in part because of the peaceful pace of life that the article noted, the simple tranquillity of the older, village section that made me think of the small city where I lived my youth, on the southwestern coast of Japan. I had already driven through the more established suburbs nearer to the city and found them distinctly cold, as well as too expensive. I'd ask for directions at a garage, or buy some gum at a candy store, and an awkward quiet would arise, that certain clippedness, and though I never heard any comments, I could tell I wasn't being welcomed to remain too long.

When I first arrived in Bedleyville, few people seemed to notice me. Not that they were much different from those in the other towns, at least not intrinsically. Fundamentally, it seems to me, the people in a particular area are given to a common set of conditions and influences, like the growth in a part of a forest. There may be many types of flora, but only the resident soil and climate provide for them, either richly or poorly or with indifference. I suppose it was because Bedleyville was still Bedleyville then, and not yet Bedley Run (though desperately wanting to be), and pretty much anybody new to town was seen as a positive addition to the census and tax base. It was 1963, and from what I'd seen during my brief travels in this country, everyone for the most part lived together, except, I suppose, for certain groups, such as the blacks, or the Chinese in the cities, who for one reason or

another seemed to live apart. Still, I had assumed that once I settled someplace, I would be treated as those people were treated, and in fact I was fully prepared for it. But wherever I went—and in particular, here in Bedley Run—it seemed people took an odd interest in telling me that I wasn't *unwelcome*.

Chang Rae Lee, *Gesture Life*,(1999)

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