An excerpt from LET ME IN: A Japanese American Woman Crashes the Corporate Club 1976-1996

An Ending, a Beginning

On May 6, 1976, I sat with my family at the Bullis Mortuary chapel in Hardin, Montana, waiting for my father's memorial service to begin. I had never had a close relative die, let alone a father. I sat next to my mother, still her baby at twenty-one. My birthday was a few weeks away. That day was my brother-in-law's thirty-fourth birthday. My dad was sixty-one when he died, Mom widowed at fifty-four. Also sitting in the family alcove, shielded from the mourners by a screen, were my seven siblings, six in-laws, and a multitude of nieces and nephews ranging from newborn to age thirteen. I had just graduated from Stanford University and had spent most of April with my family in Hardin before moving to Minneapolis. Flowers filled the front of the chapel and lined the aisles. Townsfolk came early to get a seat. Mr. Bullis, whose brother had graduated from Hardin High School with my dad, opened an adjoining room and set up chairs for the overflow. The day my dad died, Monday, May 3, 1976, was intended to be my first day of work at Cargill, an agribusiness conglomerate even in those days.

That week, instead of sitting in the orientation meetings, I sat at the funeral home. Instead of meeting the human resources new-hire team, my sisters, brothers, and I greeted family friends and chatted with guests at the wake following the funeral, shielding my mom, who was too tired and distraught to attend. Ours was a family with a very public face in a small Montana town.

That week in May, I left my childhood behind as I embarked on the great unknown world of corporate America. Growing up Japanese American in Montana on a farm, raising sheep, sugar beets, wheat, hay, and corn, did not hinder but instead catapulted me forward. We had suffered a great loss, but we were raised tough. It was that upbringing that positioned me to succeed at an agricultural company in the heart of the Midwest.

Growing Up Montana-Style

I embarked on my working career in a world of middle-aged white men who seemed positively ancient to my Japanese American eyes. No class at college prepared me for this first job in agribusiness smack in the middle of the American breadbasket. But I actually had a very solid background that prepared me to succeed. I had the luxury of unique and varied experiences that made me the person able to rise to midlevel management in a conservative midwestern corporation.

Hardin High School's graduating class in 1972 was right around 120 kids. As a child, I played alone a lot—the youngest of eight, my nearest siblings were brothers, three and five years older than I. In kid years, that's a lifetime. When I was six, my sisters' ages ranged from thirteen to seventeen, so we had little in common. I remember long summer days, hot and dusty, riding my white Welsh/Shetland pony, Princess, around the family farm, creating adventures in my mind as I roamed the fields and climbed on farm equipment. The galvanized Gleaner combine with front steps to the cab and back steps to the engine and gas tank became my playhouse, reimagined as a parlor, porch, and kitchen. I learned early to catch my horse and saddle up so I'd have transportation. The 160-acre home place was my playground, but our farm was actually a conglomeration of several farms and acreages, at the time around 750–1,000 acres. I'd ride Princess around the outbuildings and equipment of the home place, and then years later, I'd ride one of the saddle horses down to the Bighorn River to dream among the cottonwoods and willows.

The home place was the hub of the farm business. The house was a large-for-its-day two-story, four-bedroom, two-bath home to us eight kids and our parents. Nearly new in the 1940s when my parents first moved in, my dad bought it from Roy Cool, the man who'd helped him get out of the

Japanese internment camp and employed him to work for the Holly Sugar Corporation. Our house was a mile from town, but in the summer, we might as well have been twenty miles out. When the last day of school liberated my classmates, it was a prison sentence for me, stuck on the farm—I wouldn't see my schoolmates until the following fall. It wasn't that we didn't get to town, but my summers were busy working or playing on the farm, not doing "town" things. We didn't go to movies, and organized sports like baseball didn't exist for girls. I would write letters to town friends who lived less than a mile away.

The early 1960s was an era when going to college was the exception, not the rule. Most girls had limited options, and most boys I knew had limited options, too—farmer, mechanic, truck driver, insurance salesman. Only one classmate, Diane, had a dad who was a lawyer, and one boy's dad worked at the bank.

But the tipping point was approaching: as the youngest child, I observed my sisters as they became women. They came of age in the late '50s and early '60s, and they followed the traditional path of marriage and family with careers of secretary, beautician, and schoolteacher. I came of age in the turbulence of the late '60s: the hippie generation—a totally different world.

My dad made it clear that the boys would inherit the farm, so college wasn't even on the radar for Tom, my oldest brother. My middle brother, Harry, had a passion and talent for art. It was 1967, and he went to Eastern Montana College for a teaching degree in art, but he never taught. His one option led back to the farm. Robert, who graduated in 1969 and was three years my senior, got wrestling scholarship offers from several schools, ended up going to Montana State University in Bozeman for one wrestling season, then returned to the family farm. He gave me the best advice for college. He said, "Any average guy can pass college courses. You just have to study." Advice he himself didn't take, but I did.

This environment, as limited as it was, allowed me to flourish and dream. I was raised in the comfort of a prospering 1960s economy, within the confines of a traditional family structure, with an emerging women's liberation movement. When I graduated from high school in 1972, I had already experienced how to be independent, how to reach out beyond boundaries, and I learned that it was okay to be different.

Being Japanese

We were like every other farm family during the 1960s. We worked together in the fields, had big farm meals cooked by the women, watched *Bonanza* and *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color* clustered around the one TV set after dinner.

Okay, so there was one little difference between our family and most of the other families in Hardin. We were Japanese. My grandfather had worked as a laborer on the railroad at the turn of the twentieth century and likely married my grandmother as a picture bride or arranged marriage. My dad was born around 1915 in Sheridan, Wyoming, and shortly after that, his family moved north to Dunmore, Montana, about fifteen miles from where we grew up. He attended Crow Agency School and Hardin High School. He was a Montanan first and Japanese second.

I always knew I was Japanese, but the first time I realized that meant something different was when I started first grade in public school and my classmates told me I was Japanese. Of course, *I knew* I was Japanese. It was part of my identity. But how did *they* know? Was it my nose? We lived next to the Crow Indian Reservation, and I knew who the Indian kids were. There were a few Mexican families and black families, and I knew who they were. There were even several other Japanese families, and I knew who they were. When I looked at my siblings, or parents, or other Japanese friends, I didn't see an ethnic group; I saw individuals. When I looked in a mirror, I saw myself; I didn't see a yellow kid.

The only Asian on TV was Hop Sing on *Bonanza*, a TV show about rancher Ben Cartwright and his three grown sons working together in the 1800s on a fabulous ranch bordering Lake Tahoe. Hop Sing was the Chinese cook, but I didn't identify with him. He had an accent and wore funny clothes. My dad didn't work for the boss—he *was* the boss! I had three brothers, just like Ben Cartwright had three sons. My dad was like Ben Cartwright—the hired hands reported to him. We compared our three boys with Adam, Hoss, and Little Joe. Our family was *just like* the Cartwrights. We grew up in cowboy boots, jeans, belt buckles, and cowboy hats. We ran Angus cattle and Suffolk sheep. There were a couple of saddle horses and my Shetland. In Montana, people know the difference between farmers and ranchers. We were farmers. Our livelihood came from the sheep, irrigated sugar beets, hay, and later on, corn, barley, and dryland wheat. I didn't think anything was unusual about being Japanese, because nothing was unusual to me.

Years later, at a Cargill seminar on sensitivity, I learned about *X*s and *O*s. If you have a bunch of *O*s scattered around a sheet of paper and one *X*, a person's eye automatically goes to the *X*, no matter where that *X* is on the paper. It can move around randomly and the eye follows the *X*. That's what it's like being a minority. Many minorities are uncomfortable being the only *X* among *O*s. I got used to it, and it became part of my reality. From my earliest memories, being an *X* among the majority of *O*s was normal.

Getting Along

If someone had told me when I was feeding sheep as a ten-year-old that this would be preparing me for my life's work, I would have thought he or she was crazy. My dad was not a liberated man, and he had some firmly held beliefs: He often said a person's personality was formed by age six; that every person was unique and needed to be treated uniquely. He also believed a little hard work never killed anyone.

I also remember overhearing a conversation my parents were having about my sister Bernice, who graduated in 1965. She was interested in becoming a lawyer. My dad said, "Girls can't be lawyers." I thought he was wrong, but he ruled the roost, and we didn't talk back. He preached that people skills were more important than book learning. He lived his philosophy—congenial, outgoing, a people magnet. I don't remember him ever reading a whole book. *US News & World Report* was his magazine of choice.

Up until I was twelve, I was treated like one of the boys. I always liked farming over housework and labored with my dad, my brothers, and the hired men, side by side. I learned to get along, work along, respect, and appreciate the men who worked for my dad.

Leroy was our mainstay sheepherder. He lived in a sheep wagon that had a camp stove and mattress. No running water, no toilet. He had to have smelled, but smell was never a trigger for me. When it looked like his jeans were so crusty they could stand up on their own, we'd take him to town to buy new clothes. Leroy wasn't the brightest bulb, but he was harmless. He and I watched the ewes together, never certain if I was directing him or vice versa.

These were the days when an average farmer could hire laborers because labor was cheap. Pete and Hill Hernandez and their families worked on our farm in the '50s and '60s. The Chavez family worked around the same time. These families were different from the migrant workers who came up from Mexico; they lived in the community year-round, and all of us kids went to school together.

At about six years old, I went with my dad to meet the Mexican migrant workers who came to town in the summer to work the sugar beets. He and I issued each worker a single bed frame for each member of the family, a stained and dirty mattress (that had been stored, uncovered, in the shed over the winter), and a water can. Near the Holly Sugar factory (which closed in the '70s), there was a row of

labor shacks called the Colony Houses. These were a step up from the wooden labor houses which were often one of the outbuildings on a farmstead. The Colony Houses had stucco siding and some of the migrants lived there with their families. I thought my dad could speak Spanish because he talked to them with his mishmash of Spanish words. It was only after I had taken Spanish in high school that I realized he really didn't speak textbook Spanish but just knew enough to communicate. I looked at the migrant workers (who didn't look that different from me, frankly) with their little kids (about my size) and recognized how lucky I was to have a big house with two bathrooms. They had a couple of communal outhouses back behind the Colony Houses.

I knew the black and Mexican families in town, because at one time or other they all seemed to have worked for my dad. Willie Smith was a single black man (though we referred to blacks as Negroes in those days) who worked on the farm in the late '60s—he and I would feed the sheep together every night. I was a preteen girl, he was a late-twenties or early-thirties man who was as strong as an ox. I'd come home from school and change from my good clothes to jeans and a cotton work shirt, and he and I would fill burlap bags with animal feed, carry them to the corrals, and distribute the feed into the sheep feed bunks. We would both carry the bags—I would struggle with one bag, he carried two at a time, one on each shoulder—sharing in the labor. I don't remember talking much with Willie; we just did our jobs. It wasn't a friendship but a peaceful coexistence.

Willie lived for free in a labor shack on one of our farms we called Nine Mile because it was about nine miles north of town. Nine Mile consisted of the main house, which was a run-down white wooden structure with running water, the corrals, and livestock sheds, and then the labor shack was about a quarter mile down the road. Labor shacks dotted the valley. Most were painted white, had no heat, running water, or bathrooms but had roofs, wood floors, four walls, and outhouses. Migrant workers lived in them during the summer.

A few years later, Willie moved to Billings and had his fifteen minutes of fame when he died. The *Billings Gazette* wrote Willie's obituary, detailing his life on Montana Avenue back when the street was for drunks and the homeless. He was murdered on that street, gunned down in his prime. Poor Willie was dead.

There were a few other black workers who came through. Ted was an older man, a general farmhand. Another guy rented the Nine Mile main house and promoted it to people "out east" as a "Montana dude ranch."

Joe and his family lived on a farm we owned, where the barn was converted into a lambing shed. Joe's wife was a dark-haired beauty who worked at the 4 Aces Lounge in town. They had seven kids, all around the same ages as us. Their four boys, Tommy, Jerry, Jigger, and Dennis, would play with Robert and me around the farm. We played War, with Robert leading Jerry, Jigger, and Dennis. Tommy was the kindest to be on my side. Joe was my dad's right-hand man and acted more as a foreman than a farmhand.

I would tag along with my dad when he went to talk to the bulk oil plant manager, his good friend Ken Fox. I'd be there when he bought animal feed from George Staley, or cars from Bud Brown, or cowboy boots from Gayle Lammers' Trading Post. The routine was the same—BS'ing about nothing across a desk from each other, doing some "negotiating" on prices, striking a deal, BS'ing again.

I learned by working with men from all walks of life. I learned by listening to my dad deal with his friends. I learned by watching how my dad treated people, with camaraderie and respect. This was still a white community—all the teachers, cops, and elected city and county officials were white while I was growing up. But on the farm, where hand labor was how the work got done, the Mexicans, African Americans, and mentally challenged hired on because they were the cheap labor we could afford.