

COLOR-BLIND

by

Loren Stephens

I am scheduled to teach “Writing Memoir,” at the Japanese American National Museum. I have taught this all-day workshop to hundreds of students, but I still suffer from performance anxiety. I come up with all kinds of what if scenarios: What if I get lost on the Santa Monica Freeway; what if my alarm doesn’t go off and I oversleep, or worst of all, what if I can’t remember my lines.

The day before class, I follow a strict routine that has become my sacred ritual. I listen to Natalie Goldberg’s CD, *Old Friends from Far Away*, review my 45-page handout and notes, and reread the excerpts that students will choose from by Frank McCourt, Amos Oz, Jeannette Walls, and Mabel Dodge Luhan. I can’t skip a step. I’m like the trial lawyer who always enters the courtroom through the same door, wears his lucky tie, buys a bagel at the same delicatessen or uses the same pen the day of a summation.

I arrive at the museum in Little Tokyo at nine o’clock – an hour before the workshop is scheduled to begin. Koji Sakai leads me down a dark hallway to a windowless classroom. I hide my disappointment that I will not be teaching in the bright and airy second floor boardroom. The tables are set up classroom style and I ask Koji to help me move them into a square so that the students and I will be facing one another, which will facilitate dialogue and feedback.

Koji excuses himself. I write my name, e-mail address, and a quotation from Mark Twain on the blackboard: “The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a

large matter – it’s the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.” And then to add some levity to what is a heart-stopping thought for novice writers, I write in big letters, “*The candies in gold foil contain nuts. If you are allergic, stick to the silver ones.*”

It is just nine thirty; but the door opens and my first student arrives, Roy K. He tells me he is a docent at the museum, something he started doing after he retired from his engineering career at JPL in Pasadena.

Then he opens his iPad, “I read in your bio that you have made documentaries. I am making a film about one of the Japanese internment camps. Mind if I show you some of it? It’s not finished.”

I usually try to steal a few minutes to myself while the students are getting settled, but I did not want to appear rude. “Sure. I’d love to see it.”

The film is made up of a series of still photographs, intercut with words describing the images. I have seen similar photographs in the museum’s collection and a replica of the camp at Manzanar. Roy stops at a photograph of a gangly teenager with a man and woman, neatly dressed in white shirts and khaki trousers standing in front of a barracks. “That’s me with my parents at the Poston War Relocation Camp in Arizona.”

“I’d like to see the film when it is finished. Perhaps you’ll write something today about your memories of Poston.”

He shrugs his shoulders and sits down to my right. I turn around and four other students are in their seats. Koji announces that seven participants have cancelled at the last minute, so we can get started.

I ask the students to introduce themselves – Kimiko M., a clerk in the Los Angeles County Assessor’s office, Jose S., a teacher’s aide in the Pasadena public school system, June Y., a *koto* player and songwriter, and Roy. All adult learners who want to explore the genre of memoir.

“Thank you. We are lucky to have a small class today. That will give each of you an opportunity to share your writing and get feedback from your classmates.” I wanted to say, “*Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. We are all in this together.*” Two students reach for a chocolate. Kimiko opens a bottle of water. Jose smiles at me.

I lecture for about an hour and then give one of my favorite writing prompts which I have stolen from Natalie Goldberg. “Write a memory of the color red. You will have five minutes. Just enough time to keep your inner critic at bay.”

Roy interrupts me. “I don’t know what the color red looks like. I am partially color-blind.”

Everyone puts their pens down. This had never happened to me. “Okay, Roy, is there a color that you can see?”

“I can see the color yellow.”

“Great, then give me a memory of the color yellow.”

I listen to the sound of clicking computer keys, the snapping of paper turned in a notebook, and the occasional sigh as my students wrestle with this first prompt. Then I let my mind wander. I am with my father whose name is Seymour Roy. Unlike my student Roy, my dad was completely color-blind. To him, the world was made up of varying shades of gray. I remember how my mother used to pick out his ties and socks so that he looked presentable for

work. It was always an enigma to me how my father did his job – he was the head chemical engineer and president of the Hoboken Paint Manufacturing Company. I used to ask him, “Dad, how do you tell one can of paint from another?” He’d laugh, “Easy, I just look at the label.”

Someone drops their pen and I am back in the classroom. I check my watch. Six minutes have passed.

I announce, “Time’s up.”

Kimiko says, “That was fast. I just got started.”

“Yes, it’s amazing how quickly time passes when you get into your memories. Would anyone like to read?”

Roy raises his hand. He holds his paper in front of his face: “They say that my skin is yellow, but I think it is really brown. Why would they say it is yellow? My family’s skin does not look yellow. I am not a coward nor a flower.”

Jose says, “You really nailed it. So few words to express such painful feelings.”

Kimiko asks Roy, “How old were you when this happened?”

“I was just eleven. I had to say goodbye to everyone I knew in school. We were made to feel un-American. But we got over it.”

The class is stirred by his words, and someone else’s hand shoots up. I breathe a sigh of relief. I can tell that this is going to be a good class.

THE END

