

A NECESSARY DREAM

CHAPTER ONE

September 24, 1964

When I heard about the opening of the Silent Movie Theater, I should have known that someone would look for me—but the young man’s phone call yesterday morning was still a surprise. He found me the easy way—by calling the operator—and the fact that my number is listed, under my own real name, is some measure of how rarely I’ve received such calls in the course of the last forty years. Yesterday morning, for example, when the telephone rang, I expected the caller to be Mrs. Bradford, from the town houses down the street—we often take breakfast together on weekend mornings, a practice that has become more frequent since her husband passed away—and I wasn’t prepared for the young, unfamiliar voice which asked, “Excuse me, sir, but are you the Jun Nakayama, from the classic silent movie *Sleight of Hand*?” I was caught off-guard, and asked curtly how he had come to possess my number.

“My name is Nick Bellinger,” the young man said, undaunted. “I’m an advisor to the people who are opening the new Silent Movie Theater. They’ve been trying to figure out what films to show—they don’t know much about the silents except for Fairbanks and Chaplin—and when I suggested your films—I’m a huge fan, by the way—it occurred to me that I didn’t know what happened to you. I mean, if it really is you. I figured you might still be around somewhere, and on a whim, I just dialed information.”

By the time he finished, I had gathered myself again, and I said as sternly as I could manage to without appearing rude, “Young man, this is a private residence, and my number is not for public use. Please don’t call again. I no longer give interviews.”

I realized my mistake when the caller exclaimed, “So you really are Jun Nakayama!”

But rather than answering I simply hung up, and then retreated into the kitchen to make some tea.

You might think my reaction to the phone call strange, but I didn’t welcome this reminder of my past. It is not that I am ashamed of my career in film; no, quite the opposite. I remain proud of the films I appeared in, of which there were more than sixty; the works my peers and I created in the first two decades of this century laid the foundation for the subsequent growth of the movie industry. But it all happened so long ago, in such a different world, that these things seem like the accomplishments of an

entirely different man. And the stranger's phone call yesterday morning was akin to a chance meeting with a friend from one's youth, who reminds one of how much has changed in the intervening years, and how far one's strayed from the course one first embarked upon. One must be friendly, both out of courtesy and to honor the past, but as soon as there's a chance to cut the conversation short, one does, and then quickly moves on.

I didn't always shy away from such attention. For more than a decade, and particularly in the years between 1915 and 1922, I gave countless interviews and posed for photographs and was often featured in the fan magazines. The lavish parties I held at my home in the Hollywood Hills sometimes drew up to five hundred people, and the opening nights for each one of my new films sold out at the country's most prestigious theaters. I was as famous and recognizable as a man could be at that time—an era quite different from the star-worship and tabloid sensationalism that started later, in the '30s and '40s, and that by now has grown entirely out of control. I am grateful that the arc of my career was complete before the advent of television, which both cheapened films and destroyed the privacy of those actors who appeared in them. Still, I can't deny that it was jarring to go from being frequently recognized—and more importantly, from being identified in the autobiography of someone of the stature of Cecil B. DeMille as “easily the greatest dramatic actor of the silent era”—to entering my present state of invisibility. Although I am only seventy-three, few others from my era survive. Gerard Normandy and Ashley Bennett Tyler, my two most famous directors, are both long dead, as are most of my other directors and fellow actors. Nora Minton Niles is still alive somewhere, but I have not heard any word of her for years. Even the reporters who covered our movies all seem to be gone, and the few modern viewers who show an interest in silent films weren't even born when I retired. There is no one else who remembers what we did or who we were. No friends remain from that era. And I have no family.

Perhaps because of the completeness of my erasure from public memory, I have learned to take comfort in my obscurity. For the last forty-two years, I have lived in the same small town house at the foot of the Hollywood Hills, part of a complex that was opened in 1922, the year of my final film. I live a quiet life of morning walks up to the top of Runyan Canyon and afternoons of reading and tea, my routine altered only by phone calls or errands regarding my various properties. Occasionally I go down to the Boulevard to attend a film or a play, and on those evenings, as I pass by the Walk of Fame, I see the tourists taking pictures of the concrete-preserved signatures and hand-prints of my contemporaries—Chaplin, Pickford, Swanson, Fairbanks—as well as those of the stars who followed us to even greater fame—Bogart, Stewart, Monroe. None of my neighbors in the complex know that the older Japanese gentleman in unit 2B was once not only an actor, but an international star. None of them, I

think, would believe it. Just last week, in fact, when I went down to my corner pharmacy to purchase medication for my allergies—an affliction that fifty-three years in Los Angeles has done nothing to change—the pharmacist, Mr. Buchanan, a harried man in his middle forties, gave me a funny look and asked, “Mr. Nakayama, you weren’t ever an actor, were you?”

I took the bag of pills from his hand and gave a small laugh. “What gave you that idea, Mr. Buchanan?”

“Mrs. Bradford,” he answered. “You know how she always talks. She mentioned that you were once in a movie or something, but I should have known not to believe her.”

“Our dear Mrs. Bradford has quite an active imagination.”

The pharmacist nodded soberly. “Especially since she lost her husband.” Then he brightened again.

“Just imagine. Old Nakayama a movie star. What a funny idea!”

“Indeed!” I answered, forcing a smile.

This Mrs. Bradford has been a friend of sorts these last few years, ever since she and her husband moved into a town house just a half-block down the hill. Not long after they arrived, I happened upon her, in her gardener’s gloves and hat, tending to the bougainvilleas that spilled over her gate. We struck up a conversation about the plants that flourished in our area—she and Mr. Bradford had just moved inland from Malibu—and that topic opened up into many others over the next several weeks, as we discovered a mutual love of classical music, literature, and theater. Less than a year after my new neighbors arrived, Mr. Bradford was struck with Alzheimer’s Disease. Mrs. Bradford had to care for him, which grew more difficult as the disease progressed, and her weekly breakfasts with me eventually became her one regular time of respite. Just before he died, at a moment when she seemed particularly burdened by her imminent loss, I mentioned, on the spur of the moment, that I had once been an actor of some renown. I thought this admission might cheer her somehow, or at least distract her from her own sad circumstance. But her alarmingly blue eyes opened wide and she said, “Mr. Nakayama, are you pulling my leg?”

“No, Mrs. Bradford,” I said. “I appeared in more than sixty films. If you refer to Davis Croshere’s definitive History of the Silent Film Era, you will find a short account of my career, as well as several photographs.”

She apparently did so, for the very next day she called with the news that a former colleague at the Los Angeles Public Library, where she’d been the director of program development for more than twenty

years, had found references to me in several books.

“And to think,” she said, “that all this time, without even knowing it, I’ve been spending Saturday mornings with the man who used to make young women faint in the theaters, the man the magazines called the ‘Dashing Oriental.’ Why didn’t you ever tell me you were famous, Mr. Nakayama? And why does no one speak of you now?”

She then informed me that she intended to see all of my films, and to learn everything she could about my career. I didn’t think much about the first possibility—most of my films, like most silents in general, were simply not preserved, and the few copies that have survived are parts of private collections. And when she did go searching through the histories of film, I trust that she found very little. There are just a few short paragraphs to document my ten years in Hollywood, scant words to describe the sum of a decade’s work. I could have pointed her to them and saved her the trouble of looking. There is Mr. Croshere’s classic, which she had already seen, Mr. DeMille’s autobiography, J.B. Stark’s *Encyclopedia of Film*, Terry Canterbury’s *Hollywood: A Historical Perspective*, and William Anderson’s *Black and White and Silent: The Birth of American Film*. In each of these works, there is at least a full-page account of my career, and in the books by Mr. Croshere and Mr. Canterbury, I warrant a full sub-section of a chapter.

While both men are able critics and clear lovers of film, I believe their analyses of my career to be incomplete, with facile and inaccurate conclusions. For example, they both greatly exaggerate the disapproval in Japan and Little Tokyo of the role I played as the casino owner in *Sleight of Hand*, and they mistakenly assert that my career was later affected by rising sentiment against the Japanese. In the first instance, it is true that some officials in Japan, and a few of the more conservative members of the Japanese community in Los Angeles, objected to my role as Sasaki. They thought his characterization as a deceptive seducer reflected poorly on the Oriental male. But I have always thought it was misguided to attach too much significance to something so fanciful and ephemeral as film. Moreover, the fact that I even appeared in such prominent roles was itself an indication of racial progress.

It is also a mistake to assume that the waning of my career was attributable to prejudice. While it may be true that some Americans did not embrace the Japanese, this had little to do with the reception of my films, and the accounts by both historians overlook the extent to which I engineered my own departure. The fact is, my retirement from film in 1922 was completely voluntary. My star was simply too bright to be extinguished by a handful of narrow-minded studio executives, and while I certainly appreciate these writers’ indignation, their accounts are simply inaccurate. Nobody forced me to stop making

pictures. It was I who made that decision.

My career ended, however, just as the Hollywood publicity machine was fully maturing, and perhaps that is why I am now almost totally absent from the national collective memory of early film. My contemporaries, like Chaplin and Fairbanks, were once no more recognizable than I—but from almost precisely the moment I stopped making films, their fame grew, while my own began to fade. Yet what has surprised me more than my excision from official documentation of early Hollywood is my absence from more personal accounts. Mr. DeMille is the only director who discussed me extensively in his memoirs, and Faith Valiant, the accomplished dramatic actress, was once quoted as saying that everything she knew about the craft of acting she learned from watching me. But in Fairbanks' memoirs, in Pickford's, my name appears a total of three times, and William Moran only lists me as one of his "discoveries" without going on to discuss my future success. All accounts of the Normandy Players make me sound like a bit player, and the flurry of articles on the unsolved murder of Ashley Bennett Tyler barely mentioned me at all. This, despite the fact that I starred in twelve of his pictures, and that I, along with the teenage actress Nora Minton Niles, was set to start shooting a new film with him the very week he died. This, despite the fact that I was held by the police for several hours for questioning and released with the threat of further interrogation. I was his player, I was one of the people who helped secure his fame, and yet I appear nowhere in the stories of that period. It is as if I never truly existed, as either an actor or potential witness. But that is a different story I will not consider here.