

DASH



KIRBY LARSON

SCHOLASTIC INC.

In honor of the real Mitsi, Mitsue Shiraishi, and the 120,000 heroes
like her sent to US incarceration camps during World War II

Nidoto Nai Yoni ~ Let It Not Happen Again

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CHAPTER ONE

Slanty Eyes

Mitsi Kashino packed her sketch pad, her binder, and her worry in her book bag. Dash sniffed the straps before flattening himself on top of it, muzzle resting on his front paws. He watched Mitsi with worried brown eyes. She ruffled the scruffy almond-colored fur on his head.

“I wish I could tuck you inside.” Dash had no idea that Christmas vacation was over, that it was time for Mitsi to go back to school. She lifted a blue headband from her dresser, and paused in front of the mirror before slipping it over her straight black hair. Things might be better, now that more time had passed. Maybe there’d be an end to the mean notes in her desk and funny looks in the hall. Maybe school could be back to normal, even if nothing else was.

Mitsi wrestled her book bag out from under Dash, whose tail wagged hopefully. She rubbed

those floppy ears that looked like they'd been dipped in Obaachan's tea. He whimpered so she picked him up, rubbing her cheek against his fur, soft as a baby blanket. "It'll be fine, won't it?"

Dash licked her chin. "Thanks, buddy." She squeezed him again, then put him on the floor. "You stay, now." She motioned with her hand. "I'll see you later."

Ted left for school before her, so Mitsi slipped out the front door by herself, blocking her ears to Dash's whimpers. With book bag and umbrella in hand, she raced down the front steps. She didn't want to be late meeting Mags and Judy. They always went away for the holidays – Mags to her grand-ma's, and Judy to her aunt and uncle's – so it had been two whole weeks since they'd seen one another. Usually, they were inseparable, like Betsy, Tacy, and Tib in those books. Mitsi didn't even know what her friends had gotten for Christmas! She couldn't wait to tell them what she'd found under her tree: a brand-new sketch pad and a box of chalk pastels. The kind real artists use. Mitsi had spent hours on the pictures tucked in her sketch pad. There were several of Dash – one of him curled up on her bed.

One of him watching Mom cook, waiting for some morsel of food to drop. And one of him dancing in a circle, begging for a treat. She'd also drawn a couple of dragons to match the stories Mags was always writing. Mags would get a kick out of those.

Mitsi ran the last half block to the meet-up bench on Jackson Street. She plunked down on the slatted seat, scrunching her shoulders up toward her ears against the weather. Despite the chill, it warmed her to think how much Judy and Mags would like her drawings. She swung her legs back and forth to get the blood flowing. They should be here any minute now. Pop had said there might be a little snow this week. Mitsi buttoned the top button on her coat.

"*Ohayo!*" Mrs. Kusakabe called from across the street.

Mitsi called hello back to her elderly neighbor, who stopped to lean on her cane.

"Poor Dash will be lonely with you gone all day."

"He'll be okay." Mitsi tried not to think about those sad brown eyes.

"Study hard, now." With a wave, Mrs. Kusakabe hobbled inside Cheeky's café for her breakfast. Mitsi

swung her legs faster. If Judy and Mags didn't hurry up, they'd all be tardy. She blew into her cupped hands. She'd been in such a rush, she'd forgotten to grab her mittens.

Too cold to sit any longer, Mitsi marched around the bench — one, two, three laps — stomping hard to warm up her feet. Her nose began to run. Where were they?

Eight, nine, ten laps. She paced to the curb and leaned out into the street, looking left and right. She blew on her hands again, trying not to worry. There'd been a bad cold going around. Maybe Mags and Judy had caught it. She checked the time on the big clock outside Higo 10¢ Store. If she didn't scoot now, she'd be tardy for sure. After one last glance in each direction, Mitsi bolted toward school, arriving seconds before the Pledge of Allegiance. As she stood with her classmates, she caught sight of Mags's red curls and Judy's blonde pageboy. They weren't absent after all. But why hadn't they been at the bench? She'd have to wait until first recess to find out.

Miss Wyatt picked up a basket from her desk. "I have a little New Year's gift for each of you. Patty,

you're the room monitor this week. Would you please pass these out?"

Mitsi leaned forward, nearly out of her seat, trying to see what was in the basket.

Roy Biddle reached in first. "A pencil." He wiggled it between his fingers.

"A fresh pencil for a fresh start in the new year." Miss Wyatt beamed.

"Oh." Roy put it in the pencil tray on his desk. His "thanks" didn't sound all that thankful.

Patty handed one to Judy and then to Hudson Young. She worked her way down Mitsi's row. When Patty got to Eddie Munson's desk, right in front of her, Mitsi held out her hand, ready for her pencil. But Patty brushed by.

"Hey, you forgot me," Mitsi said.

Patty turned back. "Oh. Sor-ry." She held out a pencil. It dropped before Mitsi could take it. "Oops." Patty continued passing out pencils.

"She did that on purpose," Grace Arai whispered.

Mitsi shrugged.

"Did everyone get one?" asked Miss Wyatt. Patty showed her the empty basket. "Good. Let's pull out our arithmetic books." Miss Wyatt held out a piece

of chalk. “Who would like to solve problem number one?” Several hands shot up.

Spelling followed arithmetic: ten sentences using this week’s spelling list. As Mitsi was writing a sentence for word number eight, “behavior” — “The behavior of some people is not very nice” — the recess bell finally rang. She grabbed her sketch pad and hopped up.

“Oh, Mitsi,” Miss Wyatt called. “Would you wait a moment, please?” Mitsi glanced over her shoulder. Judy and Mags rushed to the cloakroom with the rest of the class to grab coats and jackets.

She edged to the doorway, ready to dash herself as soon as her teacher was done speaking with her.

“Come here, dear.” Miss Wyatt waved her closer.

Mitsi held back a sigh of exasperation. She’d already waited so long to show Judy and Mags her drawings. But she stepped forward.

“I am going to be speaking to all the . . .” Miss Wyatt cleared her throat. “But I wanted to speak to you first.” She picked up a pencil and then set it down again. “Things must be very confusing for you right now.”

How did Miss Wyatt know about Judy and Mags?
Mitsi nodded.

“We’re all still part of the same school family, all part of the same community,” Miss Wyatt continued. “No matter what happens in the world, nothing can change that.”

Mitsi’s stomach knotted. This was about that terrible day.

“Do you understand what I’m saying?” Miss Wyatt’s hazel eyes brimmed with kindness.

Mitsi nodded again. Anything to escape.

“That’s fine, then.” Miss Wyatt smiled. “Go on out and play.”

Cheeks burning, Mitsi ran outside, straight to the old maple tree where she and Judy and Mags always played jacks.

“Is it too late to get in the game?” Mitsi asked.

“Jacks is for babies.” Patty had pushed her way to the spot between Judy and Mags. Sitting where Mitsi always sat. Patty opened a small blue autograph book. They were the newest fad with the sixth-grade girls. None of the fifth graders had one yet. Until now.

“I’m even going to ask Miss Wyatt to sign it.”
Patty handed Judy a fountain pen.

“I’ve never written in one of these before.” Judy chewed on her lip. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I know one. It’s what my brother writes when the junior high girls ask him to sign their books.” Mags jumped up to recite: “The mother put the kid to bed because it wouldn’t mind. But when he left I saw he had a little bear behind.” She cracked up.

“Mags!” Judy looked horrified.

Mitsi thought it was pretty funny, too. She could see Mags’s brother writing that. He was a real card. She thought about what she would sign. Maybe she’d flip to one of the blue pages and write, “I hope you are never the color of this page.” She’d heard that in a movie.

Judy leaned over the autograph book, turned to a pink page, and moved the pen across the paper.

“What’s it say?” Mags tried to read upside down.

“Make new friends, but keep the old,” Judy said. “One is silver and the other gold.”

“Oh, that’s so sweet.” Patty took the book from Judy and held it out to Mags. “Your turn.”

“Something nice.” Judy leaned over Mags’s shoulder.

The pen jogged across the page in Mags’s loopy style. “There.” Mags put the cap back on the pen.

“Let me see.” Patty grabbed the book and read aloud. “‘When twilight draws her curtains, and pins them with a star, remember me, your friend dear Patty, though you may wander far.’” She nodded, then slapped the book shut. “I’m going to ask Cindy to sign it next.”

Mitsi shifted her sketch pad to her other arm. “But I didn’t get a turn.”

Patty tossed her pageboy curls. “Come on, you two.”

Mitsi turned to her friends.

Mags’s expression reminded Mitsi of the times when Dash got caught chewing on Pop’s socks. Judy didn’t meet Mitsi’s gaze at all. And neither of them said a word. Not to Patty. Not to *her*.

“Cindy! Cindy!” Patty flounced off. Judy grabbed Mags’s arm and they followed.

Mitsi stood there shivering and alone, wishing she *had* packed Dash in her book bag. What happened on December 7 hadn’t changed the way he

felt about Mitsi. Not one whit. Why couldn't it be the same for people?

At lunchtime, the cafeteria lady set a plate of meat loaf, mashed potatoes, and gravy on Mitsi's tray. "Pudding or Jell-O?" she asked. Mitsi pointed to a cup of tapioca with a maraschino cherry plopped on top. She paid for lunch, then hesitated. She'd never had to think about where to sit before. She and Mags and Judy had a favorite joke: No matter what was on the menu, the three of them always had a Mitsi sandwich for lunch, with Mitsi right between her two best friends.

Mags caught Mitsi's eye and smiled her regular gap-toothed Mags smile, dimpled and wide. Relieved, Mitsi headed toward their table.

For the second time that day, Patty Tibbets beat her out, settling herself on a stool.

"Uh, that's where Mitsi sits," Mags said.

"I was here first." Patty popped the lid off her milk bottle.

Mags leaned forward, glancing down the table at Judy.

Judy blinked hard. But she didn't tell Patty to move.

Patty pointed across the room to the table where Kenji Hayashi, Grace Arai, and some of the other kids from Mitsi's neighborhood were sitting. "You belong over there."

Mitsi stared at her two best friends. "But this is our table."

Judy squirted ketchup on her meat loaf. Mags concentrated on unwrapping her straw.

Patty put a pointer finger at the outer corner of each of her blue eyes. She pushed her eyelids up into slants and mouthed a word that turned Mitsi's stomach. The word slapped Mitsi back to that horrible Sunday.

Her whole family had been in the living room, listening to the New York Philharmonic on the radio after church. Mitsi and Pop were reading the funnies aloud to each other. It was Mitsi's turn to read *Dick Tracy*, but an announcer cut into the music.

"Hush a minute." Pop signaled Ted to turn up the volume.

"*The Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor*," the announcer said.

"Oh no!" Mom pressed her apron hem to her mouth. Pop grabbed the back of his neck with his

hands. Ted shook his head *no-no-no*. Obaachan rocked. Even Dash froze, ears perked, listening.

Crazy words ricocheted around the living room, words about Japanese planes flying out of nowhere, dropping bombs, destroying planes, ships. The *Utah*, the *Oklahoma*, the *Arizona*. Lost.

“All those soldiers. All those boys,” Mom had sobbed. The next morning, the FBI swept through *Nihonmachi*, Japantown, arresting dozens of businessmen, including their neighbor Mr. Iseri.

That night, someone threw a rock through the plate-glass windows at the Arais’ grocery store. Right away the newspapers stopped using the word “Japanese” and started using the word Patty said. “Jap.” When the neighbors burned their Japanese books, Mom decided they should, too. Even Great-grandfather’s scroll paintings. The rice paper crackled in the burn barrel, as snakes of black smoke slithered into the gray December sky. Obaachan kept repeating, “*Shikata ga nai*. It cannot be helped.” But Mom cried as she tossed book after book into the flames.

Now, in the lunchroom, Mitsi fought back tears, too.

She wanted to say, “I was born here in Seattle. At Swedish Hospital, just like you, Mags.” She wanted to say, “I have brown eyes, just like you, Judy.” She wanted to say, “I have never even been to Japan.” But these were things she shouldn’t have to say. Not to friends.

Her lunch tray felt as heavy as her heart. Somehow, she made it across the room and slid onto the bench next to Grace. Somehow, she made it through lunch. And, somehow, she managed to do it without tears.

• • •

Right before the last bell, Miss Wyatt handed back their Expert Reports. Mitsi had titled hers “Dogs: Everyone’s Best Friend.” An A+ stood at attention at the top of her report, in Miss Wyatt’s special green ink. Mitsi glanced across the aisle. Patty’s paper earned a fat green C. Good.

“What are you doing after school?” Mitsi put her A+ report in her book bag.

Mags took a long time buckling her galoshes. “Nothing,” she said.

Judy scooted past, so close that one of her braids

brushed Mitsi's shoulder. She grabbed it and gave it a playful tug.

Judy stared at Mitsi like she was the swamp monster from that scary movie they'd seen. Patty grabbed Judy's arm. "Come on." And Judy went. As if every day since first grade, she and Mags and Mitsi hadn't walked home from school together, to the corner of 6th and Jackson, where they headed north and Mitsi headed south.

Mitsi reached for the red umbrella Ted had given her for Christmas. Red to match Dash's collar. She tucked it under her arm, trying to tune out Patty's loud voice.

"Do you want to go to the show this weekend?" she was asking.

Mitsi couldn't hear the answer, but why wouldn't Mags and Judy say yes? Mr. Tibbets owned the Atlas Theatre, and Patty got all the free Milk Duds she wanted.

Outside, Mitsi paused to pop open her umbrella, to shield herself from the pelting rain. Judy and Mags had never even liked Patty! And now they were acting all cozy, as if the three of *them* were Betsy, Tacy, and Tib. And Mags hated Milk Duds.

Mitsi skirted around a puddle. It used to be that her friends thought Japanese things – like Obaachan’s kimonos and *Hina Matsuri* – were nifty. Last year, Judy and Mags had come over before the party to set out the *hina* dolls and help make the rice balls. Now, they were taking sides with Patty Tibbets. There wasn’t a red umbrella big enough to shield Mitsi from that kind of rain.

A few blocks from home, she passed some junior high boys hanging out in front of the Higo 10¢ Store, pretending to smoke candy cigarettes. “Hey!” one of them called out to her.

Mitsi didn’t answer. She kept walking.

The boys followed.

She walked faster.

They walked faster.

Mitsi ran. They ran.

Right in front of the Nelsons’ old house, Mitsi tripped and fell. Her book bag went flying. A boy in a plaid jacket snatched it up and yanked out Mitsi’s report. “Aww. Iddin dat sweet? A paper about doggies.” He ripped it into shreds, tossing them into the air. “Look, it’s snowing!”

A scrap with Miss Wyatt’s green ink words –

Another fine job, Mitsi — landed on Mitsi's coat. The boy dumped the book bag out on the soggy ground.

A second boy kicked her books into a puddle. All of them. Even her new sketch pad.

Knees stinging, Mitsi pushed herself up off the sidewalk. Blood oozed around the edges of the ragged holes in her stockings. Tears boiled at the back of her eyes.

“Serves you right.” The boy in the plaid jacket glared. He and his buddies formed a ring around her. “Remember Pearl Harbor, remember Pearl Harbor,” they chanted.

Mitsi turned around on wobbly legs. She tried to duck under their linked arms, but the boys bounced her back to the center of the circle like a beach ball. The sour taste of fear hit the back of her throat. There were too many of them. How would she get out?

“OWWWWW!” The boy in the plaid jacket jumped back, holding his head. “What the —?”

Beyond the boys, an old lady wearing big black rubber boots waved a broom. “Shame on you.”

“We were just kidding around,” said one of the boys.

“What are you? A Jap lover?” asked another.

The lady lifted the broom handle to her shoulder, like a baseball player, ready to swing again. For an old lady, she looked strong.

The circle fell apart.

She stamped a rubber-booted foot. “Now, get on home. Before I call your mothers.”

The boy who’d gotten the clop stood there a minute, rubbing his head. “Aww, let’s get out of here, guys.” He ambled down the street, with the others hot on his heels.

The old lady leaned her broom against the fence. “Hooligans.” She wiped off the sketch pad with a flowered apron that was tied over her coat. “Let it dry, then put it under something heavy. That will iron out most of the wrinkles.” She stepped closer, holding it out to Mitsi. “Oh, my. Look at your knee.”

Mitsi didn’t want to look. She wanted to get home. “It’s okay.” She took the pad.

The lady gathered up the rest of the books and papers. Mitsi brushed off her book bag and held it open. The lady dropped everything inside, then bent over to pick up a few soggy scraps of Mitsi’s report.

“Dogs.” She smiled, looking at the title. “I love them but don’t have one.”

“I do.” Mitsi latched the straps on her book bag. “Dash.”

“Good name for a dog.” The lady nodded. “Speaking of names, mine is Mrs. Bowker.”

Mitsi told Mrs. Bowker her name, too.

“Well, isn’t that pretty? Suits you to a T.” Mrs. Bowker patted Mitsi’s arm. “You’d best get on home before your mother worries.” She picked up her broom again. “I’ll watch while you walk the rest of the way.”

Mitsi clutched her book bag. “Thank you.”

Mrs. Bowker was right. The papers would dry. And putting them under something heavy would smooth out the wrinkles. Mitsi had done that before.

But wrinkles like Judy and Mags and looking like the enemy? She had no idea how to iron those out.