

# A Place Where Sunflowers Grow

Amy Lee-Tai and Felicia Hoshino (illustrator)

## **Introduction**

This excerpt is from a story written by Amy Lee-Tai, illustrated by Felicia Hoshino and published in 2006.

Mari stared at the ground. It had only been a week since she and her mother had planted a handful of sunflower seeds outside their new home. Mari asked Mama, “Will these flowers grow as tall and strong and beautiful as the ones in our old backyard?”

“It will take time, patience, and care,” Mama replied gently. “*Sabaku ni hana wa sodachinikui no yo.*”

“Flowers don’t grow easily in the desert,” Mari repeated in English. She glared at the sand like the hot May sun, as if that might make the seeds spring to life. But all she saw were dry grains of sand. As she watered the seeds, Mari thought about her family’s little house in California. Her parents, who were artists, would paint while Mari and her older brother Kenji played alongside them in their flower-filled backyard.

Had it only been thirteen months since they were forced to leave? First they had to live in a horse stall that smelled of manure in Tanforan, California. Now they were living in a tarpaper barrack in Topaz, Utah. Everything but her family had been taken from Mari—and she hadn’t done anything wrong!

“Mari-chan, it’s three o’clock, time for art school.” Papa’s tender voice pulled Mari back to reality.

“Let’s not be late. *Ikoo, ne!*”

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At Topaz Art School, Papa brought Mari to her classroom, then went next door to teach the adult sketching class. Mari had hoped to see some friends in class, but didn’t recognize anyone.

Mrs. Hanamoto passed out paper and crayons. She said, “For our first class, have fun and draw whatever you want.” Mari listened to the tapping and swishing of crayons at the other desks. She thought long and hard, but her paper was still blank as class ended.

A few students shared their drawings with the class. Janie drew the pet dog she had left behind. Eddie drew his three cousins who had been sent to a camp in Idaho. Aiko drew different places in Topaz: the mess hall, the latrine, the laundry room.

Mari enjoyed the other drawings, but wished she had one of her own to share.

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The morning of the next art class, Mari and Mama waited in the long line at the latrine. The toilet and shower stalls had no doors. Mari and Mama tried to avoid looking at the other women and girls.

Mama asked, "Mari-chan, are you worried about today's class?"

Mari nodded. She had been wondering what Mrs. Hanamoto would ask her to draw.

"Remember Papa's advice. You will be able to draw, just like your sunflowers will be able to grow."

That afternoon, Mrs. Hanamoto told the class, "Draw something that makes you happy at Topaz."

Again, Mari struggled for an idea. Then Mrs. Hanamoto appeared at her desk.

"Mari-chan, I noticed that you didn't draw anything in our last class. Some other students also had a hard time."

"I wasn't the only one?" Mari answered hopefully.

"No, it happens quite often. You just have to keep trying. Now, what are you going to draw?"

"I can't think of anything that makes me happy at Topaz."

"Then draw something that made you happy *before* you came here," suggested Mrs. Hanamoto.

This time, Mari knew right away—her backyard in California!

She drew the swing that Papa had built, the *sakura* tree that Mama had planted, and the garden with its rainbow of colors. She was still busy drawing when Mrs. Hanamoto announced that class was almost over.

Mari noticed that Aiko, who sat next to her, was looking at her picture. Aiko whispered, "Your backyard looks like a lot of fun."

Mari whispered back, "Maybe you can visit when we all go home."

Mari walked home as quickly as she could. She burst into her family's barrack.

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Sunlight streamed through the open barrack door. Mari hung her drawing on the bare wall above her bed. It added a little cheer to their dark, one-room home, even when it was time to close the door. Every Wednesday and Sunday, Mari and Papa walked together to art school. Hand in hand, they shared peaceful, silent moments.

Mari began to ask Papa questions: "Why are we in camp? Why is almost everyone here Japanese American? Will I ever see my old friends again?"

He and Mama had resigned themselves to the internment, but Papa tried his best to answer. He turned to Japanese philosophy, noting the cycle of life: "Spring comes after winter, and flowers bloom again. Peace comes after war. Try not to worry, Mari-chan."

It was as if, with every drawing she created, Mari found another question to ask and the courage to ask it.

One day after class, Aiko asked Mari, “Do you want to walk home together? My family lives on Block 40.”

“Sure, that sounds like fun,” replied Mari. “Besides, those guardsmen scare me.”

“Me, too,” agreed Aiko. “Do they have to carry guns?”

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In August, during the last week of class, Mrs. Hanamoto said, “Today, create a drawing using different shapes.”

Mari drew her family’s barrack using rectangles, squares, and a triangle. Then she added circles, lines, and teardrop shapes. Her sunflowers!

She included Aiko and herself. The sunflowers towered above their heads so high they couldn’t even reach them on their tiptoes!

For the first time, Mari volunteered to share her drawing with the class. As she spoke, she noticed Mrs. Hanamoto’s and Aiko’s smiling faces, as cheerful as the sunflowers in her drawing.

After class, Mari and Aiko walked home together. Mari looked at her new drawing and said, “I’ve watered my sunflower seeds every day for three months now. I wonder if my sunflowers are ever going to grow here.”

Suddenly Aiko stopped and pointed and said, “You can stop wondering!”

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“Mama! Kenji! Come see!” exclaimed Mari. She couldn’t wait to show Papa when he got home.

To Mari, seeing the little seedlings was like seeing old friends again. In that moment, her old life, and whatever her new life would be like after the war, didn’t feel so far away.

### **Source**

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### **TEXT DEPENDENT QUESTIONS**

Describe where Mari and her family live and how she feels about it.

What is happening outside of the camp? Papa and Mari both reference it at different times in the story.

Mari cannot come up with something to draw in the first art class, but she has an easier time in the second class.

What changed?

What do you think Papa means when he says, "Spring comes after winter, and flowers bloom again. Peace comes after war."

Why was seeing the sunflower seedlings like "seeing old friends again" for Mari?

### **A Place Where Sunflowers Grow Questions and Answers**

Question: Describe where Mari and her family live and how she feels about it.

Answer: They live in a barrack in Utah, an internment camp for Japanese Americans. The camp is located in a desert, and Mari does not like it. They can't shower privately, and there are guards with guns. She feels sad and upset and like everything has been taken from her: "Everything but her family had been taken from Mari—and she hadn't done anything wrong!"

Question: What is happening outside of the camp? Papa and Mari both reference it at different times in the story.

Answer: There is a war going on.

Question: Mari cannot come up with something to draw in the first art class, but she has an easier time in the second class. What changed?

Answer: Her teacher told her to draw something specific in the second class, something that made her happy before she came

to the camp. This is easy for her, because she longs for the things in her backyard—the subject of her drawing.

Question: What do you think Papa means when he says, "Spring comes after winter, and flowers bloom again. Peace comes after war."

Answer: He means that good things will come again, just like when spring comes after the winter. The seasons start over again.

Question: Why was seeing the sunflower seedlings like "seeing old friends again" for Mari?

Answer: The seedlings were something she recognized from her old life, and they brought her comfort. They were familiar to her.