

## Passage III

**HUMANITIES:** This passage is adapted from the essay “Albany, 1958” by Lydia Minatoya. It appeared in her book *Talking to High Monks in the Snow* (©1992 by Lydia Minatoya). This story takes place in Albany, New York.

The meter of my childhood was the rising and plunging of a sewing machine needle: rapid and smooth, like an endless distant drum roll. My mother hummed as she sewed. She guided the fabric this way and that. In 1938, she had graduated from a school of costume design, and before World War II, she had her own boutique in Los Angeles. It was a time when the dream of America never seemed finer.

The Albany of my childhood was a festive place, closer in spirit to the nineteenth century than to the twenty-first. Italian pushcart grocers crowded southern city blocks, crafting tiered architectural wonders from fresh produce and pungent sausage. Heavy-legged workhorses clopped along cobblestones, delivering bread from German bakeries and milk from Dutch dairies. A cable car ran along streets named for trees.

Each year in early April, an annual dinner-dance was sponsored by the pharmaceutical institute where my father worked as a researcher. A ballroom was rented in a downtown hotel. Musicians were hired to play big-band music. The dinner-dance was the only time when my mother would sew for herself. It was the one time when my parents went out, alone, together. I was a romantic child, dreamy and diffuse. For me, the dinner-dance was an annual event: looked forward to in long anticipation and back upon with nostalgia.

Each year, on a snowy weekday evening, Father would take us window shopping. The deserted downtown streets would be a magical glaze of snow-softened lights and shadowy shop displays. My mother would linger in front of the mannequins clad in evening apparel. I would follow along, drunk with wonder.

Each year before the tape had desiccated on the backs of the New Year’s cards and they had fallen to the floor, my mother would have decided on the design for her dinner-dance dress. Then there would be a trip to the fabric store. I would run my hands along graduated rainbows of thread spools. I would watch their changing hues as they shimmered in the light.

As the dress took form, my parents would practice dancing.

“Slow, slow, quick, quick, slow,” Father would mutter with determination as he trod unmincingly on Okaa-chan’s feet and guided her into the walls.

“Next lady?” he gallantly would inquire. My sister Misa and I would take turns, balancing on the tops of his shoes, as Father swept us around the room.

I always thought that Dinner-Dance Eve had some of the magic of Christmas. Every year, I would perch

on the bathtub’s edge. I would watch my father fix his tie. “See the nice dimple below the knot?” Father would turn from the mirror and bend to show me. “The dimple is very important.” I solemnly would nod—the honored recipient of this arcane cultural wisdom.

Back in the bedroom, Okaa-chan would slide into her new dress. She would glance at her reflection with modest pleasure. When she moved, I could catch the sweet scent of face powder.

When I was seven or eight, the window shopping and the dinner-dances stopped. The granite façades of the downtown stores were grimy with graffiti. Display windows were boarded with plywood. The elegant hotels had fallen into disrepair. No one danced to big-band music anymore.

As I grew older, my mother began to sew for wealthy women. The women lived in country homes where sunlight, reflected from swimming pools just beyond French doors, played across fine wood floors.

Once after a luncheon in the city, a woman came to our house for a fitting. Standing erect in the doorway, then bowing slightly, my mother met her formally.

“Won’t you please come in? May I please take your coat?”

“Here you go. Try to put it somewhere clean.”

Like an eagle, her words slipped regally down a great distance and struck with awful ease.

After the fitting, my father was ashamed and angry.

“Actually, I do not like this work,” he stormed. “You do not have to do this; we do not need this kind of money.” He waved his arms dismissively at Okaa-chan’s sewing machine. “They come and look at our home with contempt. You kneel at their hems like a servant! *Mo dame desu yo!* It is no good, I tell you!”

Okaa-chan was intractable. Eloquent in anger, she blazed over the pronunciation of words that ordinarily would have left pondering pauses in her speech. “I do not care what they think of me, of our home. They cannot affect our value.” My mother stepped in front of her sewing machine, as if to shield it from scorn. “My work gives me happiness.” She squarely faced my father. “I do not care if you speak as Husband,” she said. “I am a Designer!”