

Woman with a Blue Pencil

Woman with a Blue Pencil
A Novel

Gordon McAlpine



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To my compañero, Roy Langsdon

December 7, 1941:

353 fighters, bombers, and torpedo planes launched from six aircraft carriers of the Imperial Japanese Navy attack without warning the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, killing over 2,400 Americans, decimating the U.S. Pacific fleet, and instigating America's entrance to the Second World War.

February 19, 1942:

Executive Order 9066 authorizes local American military commanders to designate "exclusion zones," in the U.S.A. from which "any or all persons may be excluded." Along the Pacific coast, this resulted in the relocation to internment camps of 110,000 people of Japanese heritage, most U.S. citizens.

August 30, 2014:

A dusty lockbox is found and removed from the attic of a house scheduled for demolition in Garden Grove, California. Inside the lockbox are three items. The first is a pulp spy thriller published in 1945 under the pen name William Thorne. The second is a sheaf of letters from the book's editor, primarily addressed to its author, dating from 1941-1944. The last is an unpublished novella handwritten by the same author on 102 sheets of WWII-era, G.I.-issue writing paper, mud-splattered and bloodied in some spots. It is signed with the author's real name, Takumi Sato and is titled "The Revised."

THE REVISED – CHAPTER ONE

By Takumi Sato

“...he’ll never understand the nature of his sudden alienation, because he’s never known that he is a fictional character. He still doesn’t know. So how can he grasp what’s happened to him, that he’s been cut from a novel-in-progress, excised from his world, which from this point forward carries on around him even though it contains neither memory nor record of his ever having existed? In short, how can he understand that he is the abandoned creation of a conflicted author, whose tossing of typewritten pages into a trash can has not snuffed out everything and everyone written on them?”

—Aldous Huxley, overheard in conversation
at Clifton’s Cafeteria, Los Angeles

On the evening of December 6, 1941, Sam Sumida shifted in his seat at the crowded Rialto Movie House in downtown Los Angeles. It was about a third of the way into the new picture, *The Maltese Falcon*, and on screen Humphrey Bogart knocked the gun from Peter Lorre’s hand and began slapping the smaller man silly. Sumida knew the scene was coming. He’d read the novel. In the past weeks, he’d read everything Hammett had ever written, having concluded, after a short period of research, that no other writer possessed either the background or the willingness to depict the P.I. business realistically. And, since the unsolved murder of Sumida’s wife, Kyoko, eleven months before, it had

become critical to him that he discern *some* source from which to draw instruction in the art of detection (all those How-to-be-a-Private-Eye primers had proved little more useful as practical manuals than the outdated, sanitized crime fantasies of S.S. Van Dine or the absurdly plotted puzzles of those famous lady-novelists from England).

Hammett told it straight, Sumida believed.

And he needed some straight instruction. A Ph.D. in Oriental Art History, which, until recently, he'd taught as a part-time instructor at three local colleges, hardly prepared him for work as a gumshoe. Before that, his mother and father, who'd emigrated from Nagasaki to Long Beach a year before he was born, had raised him to rely on modesty rather than bravado to get by in the white man's world. This had worked well enough for the first thirty years of his life. Intelligence, wit, and an instinct for knowing just the right moment to gracefully leave his Caucasian colleagues to their private diversions had resulted in success in the art history field. He'd bought a small house in Echo Park—quite impressive for the son of a fisherman. But then somebody put a .22 slug in his wife's brain and dumped her body into the harbor at San Pedro, stumping a disinterested L.A.P.D. in the process. So, now, Sumida, who'd come alone to the Rialto, watched Humphrey Bogart with a concentrated attention unlike that of others in the Saturday night crowd (most of whom were here either on dates or as respite from an afternoon spent shopping in the nearby garment or jewelry districts, Christmas 1941, being less than three weeks away.) Sometimes, Sumida leaned so far forward, unconsciously straining toward the screen, that his face almost brushed against the coiffed head of the woman in the row ahead of his.

In this way, he noted the boldness with which Bogart's Sam Spade put questions to even the most formidable adversaries . . . the heedless way Spade diverted questions when they were put to him, even by the cops . . . Spade's seeming disregard for the possibility of failure. Of course, Sumida knew that studying fictional gumshoes had its limitations. But the cops had never wanted him around and the licensed P.I.s he'd subsequently hired, who consumed whatever cash he'd managed

to save, likewise wanted him out of the way during their futile investigations. So Sam Sumida's opportunities to learn were limited. Now, all that was left to him were fictions. But he did not lack for native intelligence, could converse with almost anyone in a manner simultaneously persistent and polite, was as physically courageous as the next guy, and possessed self-defense skills, developed in boyhood, which far exceeded those of most. Additionally, and most importantly, his motivation was personal.

Still, quitting his teaching positions to devote all his time to investigating Kyoko's murder may have been rash.

His aunt and uncle had told him it had been mad.

But, truly, what else mattered?

Unfortunately, Sumida had made little or no progress in the weeks since he'd taken up the investigation. He'd begun, reasonably enough, by gathering copies of the police report and the scattershot notes from the three P.I.s he'd hired and fired, settling down for the better part of a weekend with the documents spread on his dining room table like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Might he discern a lead among the summarized interviews and scrawled lists detailing Kyoko's routines—a lead that had eluded the professionals? No. There was, of course, the "revelation" that for the final months of her life she had been carrying-on an adulterous affair. Sumida had suspected this long before the L.A.P.D. confirmed it. Some nights, she hadn't come home at all. So what else was he to think, particularly when she answered his increasingly passionate queries only with stubborn silence? Still, he never stopped loving her.

He hadn't stopped yet.

He knew that for the past few years he'd been distracted with his work, flattered by offers to lecture at various colleges or to publish articles in journals. And he knew Kyoko's life managing a dental office hadn't been nearly so fulfilling for her. Now, he couldn't imagine ever again taking the same egoistic pleasure in career accomplishments, a secondary reason he'd resigned his positions.

Immediately after the crime, the uncovering of her adultery natu-

rally threw suspicion on Sumida (the cuckolded spouse is always the first suspect). But at the time of the murder Sumida had been in Berkeley at the University of California to give a series of visiting lectures on the art of the Edo period. Absent husband, the adulterous lover was next on the list of suspects. Who else had had access and potential motive? It was at this point that the investigations all hit dead ends. Both the police and the P.I.s got positive identifications of Kyoko from half a dozen hotel desk clerks in downtown L.A. (“Beautiful Oriental girl with a streak of white in her black hair”); but none of these desk clerks had been able to offer more than a cursory description of the man who’d been with her—just a six foot tall Caucasian of unspecified hair and eye color. The names signed in the hotel registers were always absurd fabrications: “Mr. and Mrs. G. Washington,” “Mr. and Mrs. A. Lincoln,” etc. Sumida later called again on the hotel desk clerks who’d recognized Kyoko, but he got nothing more from them than had the other investigators (except for admonitions that he should have kept better watch on such a woman). Canvassing additional downtown hotels, as well as inns and motor lodges up and down the coast from Malibu to Laguna Beach, he found no other desk clerks who recognized Kyoko.

Sumida’s next stop had been the scene of the crime, San Pedro. A harbor town with a racially mixed population (including many Japanese) and a chip on its shoulder as wide as the blue Pacific. The police report indicated the particular pier against which Kyoko’s body had washed up, though exactly where along the harbor she’d been shot and dumped was impossible to figure due to tides and the churning and stirring of so many commercial boats. When Sumida asked locals whether they remembered hearing a gunshot on the night of January 11—almost *eleven months before*—he was met only with incredulous expressions.

And now, on the big screen at the Rialto, Humphrey Bogart gave the pistol back to Peter Lorre, who Bogart did not consider formidable enough even to pay the respect of keeping disarmed.

Such sublime confidence . . .

Did Sumida really think he could gain such qualities just from observing a movie detective—even a good one, like Spade?

No.

The truth was he'd come here, in large part, because he simply didn't know what else to do with himself; tonight, the pain of yet another solitary dinner in what had been *their* kitchen had felt too much to bear, almost dangerous.

So this was the first movie he'd allowed himself since Kyoko's murder. The first respite.

The detective-theme alleviated some of his guilt.

But he'd always loved movies of all kinds. Sure, he chose *The Maltese Falcon* because it *might* contain a detail of detective work that could be useful to his investigation. And he may have noted Spade's techniques and mannerisms with more focus than did those around him. Nonetheless, he smiled with the rest of the audience when the ineffectual Peter Lorre aimed his recently returned pistol again at the bigger, tougher man, repeating his original demands. Bogart could disarm Lorre as easily as before, but now the chuckling gumshoe seemed charmed by the audacity of his diminutive opponent. Watching the movie made Sumida almost happy.

Then the black-and-white scene skidded and slipped sideways on the movie screen. For a moment, the sprockets on the film stock became visible, sliding up and off the screen with the last of the black and white image.

The screen became blindingly white. The rat-a-tat-a-tat of the spinning reels in the projectionist's booth replaced the soundtrack.

The film had broken.

The projectionist shut the machine down, casting the theater into darkness.



Excerpt from a letter dated December 10, 1941.

. . . so, in light of last Sunday's tragic events at Pearl Harbor, we must return your

book proposal and opening chapters. Despite my initial enthusiasm, its publication is now impossible. While this is doubtless disappointing, I feel you cannot be much surprised. The world has changed. Even Marquand's successful Mr. Moto series is bound to come to a screeching halt. Nonetheless, we believe you are a talented writer and we encourage you to further develop your craft.

Our accounting department will anticipate your immediate return of the \$350 advance we sent with our most recent correspondence.

Sincerely,

Maxine Wakefield

Maxine Wakefield,

Associate Editor, Metropolitan Modern
Mysteries, Inc.

p.s. If you were to consider revising your work to avoid the obvious issues, which would include cutting and replacing not only your Japanese hero Sumida but also the Caucasian villain, I would be willing to take a second look. Of course, I understand that this amounts to your writing a different book. But since you've completed only three chapters to date, your investment of time and effort have been relatively small and so re-envisioning may be a viable option for you, Mr. Sato.

Thinking aloud . . . Perhaps you could still employ an Oriental as your protagonist, a Korean or Chinese. I don't mean to

offend by suggesting that Oriental races are in any way interchangeable, but, frankly, what most fascinated me in your initial submission was the groundbreaking challenge of pulling off an Oriental protagonist in a popular genre. After all, as you likely already know, Earl Der Biggers' Charlie Chan books do not actually feature Chan as the protagonist and the same is true of Marquand's Mr. Moto novels. These books remain Caucasian-centric, even if the crimes are ultimately "solved" by the secondary characters, Chan and Moto. So you may still have the opportunity to break new ground!

Now, even if you were to change your protagonist's nationality, I believe current events dictate that your new Korean or Chinese hero be far more American/Apple pie than your discarded character, the grieving, Nisei academic Sumida. Actually, you might even position your new Oriental hero against Japanese Fifth Columnists. Yes! Patriotism will sell in the coming period. A spy novel . . . Just musing here, you understand. These are your decisions. I would never tell an author what to write, particularly a young and talented one just starting to make his way. However, I want you to know that if you chose to write something along the lines I've outlined above, I'd be delighted to see it and just possibly we'd be able to work together after all.

Whatever you decide, best of luck.

p.p.s. One last thought is that you'd need to set the book firmly in our current, post-Pearl Harbor world to give more imme-

diate context to your new protagonist's challenges.



Excerpt from chapter one of *The Orchid and the Secret Agent*, a novel
by William Thorne

Metropolitan Modern Mysteries, Inc., New York, N.Y., 1945

... Jimmy Park slipped his .45 into one pocket of his raincoat, though he suspected his Tai Kwon Do fighting skills would render use of the weapon unnecessary. Besides, the modus operandi of Jap agents here in Los Angeles tended more toward sneaking and plotting than man-to-man confrontation. They were generally too weak to settle things physically, unlike real Americans. And even when they did put their inferior Karate techniques to use, it still remained all about deception and unruly kicking. Jimmy Park was of Korean ancestry but, having been raised in Glendale, California among whites, he was as American as they came—with one exception: he had learned Tai Kwon Do at a tiny *dojang* on Brand Boulevard from a *kwan jang nim*, or grandmaster, of Korean fighting. Like Jimmy and his parents, the grandmaster had arrived on these shores before the Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924. Now, Jimmy was nearly a Tai Kwon Do Master himself. Nonetheless, his heroes were American boxers: Jack Dempsey was his favorite. And the Negro Joe Louis also inspired him, as Jimmy was not prejudiced. In any case, his own lightning fast hands and feet had proven more than sufficient on many occasions.

Still, these sneaky Fifth Columnists, who smiled one moment and then stabbed you in the heart the next, *were* dangerous, in the manner of night-crawling scorpions. Their brutal, decades-long occupation of Park's ancestral Korean peninsula was bad enough. But Pearl Harbor truly indicated the Jap nature. A surprise attack . . . Jimmy grieved for all those sailors' bodies entombed in the sunken U.S.S. Arizona. He wasn't ever going to forget. Or forgive.

He reached for his hat, but was interrupted by a familiar rap at the front door of his comfortable Echo Park bungalow. It was Sergeant Joe Lucas of the L.A.P.D., who often stopped by Jimmy's house on his way home from work to share a snort of his Korean pal's good Templeton Rye.

Jimmy Park opened the door.

"What'ya got your coat on for?" the youthful, blue-eyed Lucas asked, stepping past his friend and straight into the house. "You can't go out in this rain now that I'm here for company."

"You're dripping everywhere," Jimmy observed.

"Well, that's what happens when it's raining outside," Joe replied, smiling. "But I figure by about the fourth snort of your good stuff I should be pretty well dried out."

"Yeah, 'drying out' is what you need," Jimmy said. "And I'm not talking about your wet clothes."

"Oh great, now you're sounding like my wife," Joe said.

Jimmy held up his hands. "Hey, I'm not one to lecture you about drinking, pal."

"You got that right," Joe replied.

"But your police skills haven't failed you, Joe," Jimmy retorted, putting his hat on. "I got my coat and hat for a reason."

"You can't go out on a night like this. Besides, it's January 22, 1942. A national holiday."

Jimmy looked at his friend, suspicious. "What holiday?"

Joe widened his eyes as if shocked that Jimmy could be so ignorant. "It's 'Jimmy Stays Home to Drink with his Buddy Joe Night!' Good lord, even the late shifts at the war plants take tonight off to celebrate our good drinking here in your fine home."

Jimmy grinned and pointed to the shelf with the rye and the shot glasses. "You stay, Joe. Have one or two on me. *Mi casa es tu casa.*"

"I don't speak Mexican," Joe replied.

"Just lock up after yourself," Jimmy said.

Joe squinted in confusion. "Wait. What's so pressing that you can't even have one?"

"We got a tip that a Jap agent we've been on the lookout for will

be at the Rialto Movie House. When the picture's over, I'll be waiting for him."

"Why don't you just call headquarters?" Joe asked. "Let them throw a dragnet around the place. Or call the Feds."

Jimmy shrugged. "We don't exactly have any evidence on this guy. Not yet. So I'm supposed to make his acquaintance and see if I can get him to give us some."

"The hard way or the soft way?" Joe inquired.

Jimmy Park was valuable to law enforcement agencies not only because of his expertise as a P.I. but also because of his facility with Oriental languages. Additionally, mild facial scarring and subtle skin discolorations suffered years before in a fire allowed him to pass for either Chinese or Japanese (while barely diminishing his unusually handsome Asian face). Resultantly, he had infiltrated more than one espionage ring even before the events of December 7, 1941, and, since then, he had proven invaluable to the American cause.

But this new case was the most challenging he had faced.

"We'll start with the 'soft' way," he said to his friend. "I'll cozy up to him like I'm just another Jap. But if that doesn't work . . ." He shrugged and patted the raincoat pocket with the .45.

"What can you tell me?"

"Tell you, a lowly sergeant?"

"Ah, go drown yourself in the rain, Jimmy."

Jimmy laughed and patted Joe on the shoulder. "L.A.P.D. found a Jap farmer eviscerated in his own bean field out near Carson," he explained.

Joe shrugged as he started for the Rye. "So, what makes it a Federal case? Couldn't it'a just been a neighbor who'd had his fill of the sneaky bastards? Not that I approve, of course . . ."

"A source I can't name believes the farmer may have been involved with a Jap spy ring that stretches from south of the Mexican border all the way up to Seattle."

"So who knocked him off?" Joe asked, taking hold of the bottle. "One of ours?"

Jimmy shook his head no. “The spy ring employs a formidable assassin, who, as yet, we’ve been unable to identify. A Jap, of course. Reputedly possessed of ‘Ninja’ skills. Vicious people . . .”

“Why would they knock him off?”

“We don’t know. But there’s reason to believe he was unwilling to go along with the organization’s nefarious plans to strike against America. In the end, he must have had a conscience. Not all Japs are bad.”

Joe poured the Rye into a shot glass. “And the agent at the Rialto tonight . . . is he there to make a hit?”

“We don’t know that either.”

“You need a better inside man,” Joe observed, throwing back the first shot of Rye.

“Yeah, that’s what the Feds think too,” Jimmy answered. “That’s why . . .” He stopped.

Joe looked at his friend. “You, Jimmy?”

“Can’t comment on that, pal.”

Joe grinned and patted Jimmy on the shoulder. “So, how’ll you pick this assassin out of the exiting crowd, since he ain’t going to be wearing no Ninja costume?”

“How many Japs do you think are going to the movies these days?”

“Then get your backside out of here, Jimmy,” Joe said, toasting him farewell. “And don’t worry. I’ll turn out the lights and lock up after myself. And I’ll leave a nip in the bottle for you.”

“Yeah, you do that,” Jimmy answered with a grin as he closed the front door after himself, racing in the rain across his small lawn to his car, a ’37 Dodge Coupe.

THE REVISED – CHAPTER ONE cont’d.

Sumida sighed and settled back in his seat in the darkened Rialto Movie House, expecting the house lights to rise for a minute or two before Bogart and the others reappeared in the dangerous mire of Hammett’s

adventure—just a minute or two, as the projectionist rethreaded his machine. This would be long enough for the Saturday night crowd to turn to one another with quips or questions or observations about the last time they'd been cast so suddenly from the world of a movie back into the humdrum of a mere theater seat.

But none of this happened.

Not even two seconds passed before the projector hummed back to life and the screen was again filled with light and motion.

But the picture did not pick up where it had left off. This happened among inexperienced projectionists. Sometimes they ran the wrong reel. For a moment, Sumida watched, trying to place the action on the screen into the story of *The Maltese Falcon* as he knew it from the book. But this was something different—Katherine Hepburn hit long, arching drives on a golf course while Spencer Tracy observed her affectionately, all as a wry musical score lent to the scene an ambiance of humor and romance.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Sumida muttered.

“Shhh,” responded those seated around him.

“But look, it’s Spencer Tracy,” he whispered to no one in particular. “What happened to our movie?” he asked, raising his voice.

He expected others to be asking the same question, perhaps even whistling at the screen or up to the projectionist’s booth in derision.

“It’s *Woman of the Year*,” a burly man in the row behind him said, matter-of-factly. “What do you think you been looking at the last half-hour?”

Sumida had never even heard of the movie. “They put on the wrong picture,” he said.

“Shush,” said a woman seated beside him. “We’re trying to watch.”

“What happened to *The Maltese Falcon*?” he muttered.

“Just shut up,” said the burly man, who Sumida did not turn around to confront.

He watched for a moment more.

Hepburn and Tracy . . . Was this some kind of gag that the whole audience was in on? He didn’t get it.

Confused, he settled back in his seat. His natural impulse was to pipe down, to watch this new movie to its end and then, perhaps tomorrow or the next day, to see *The Maltese Falcon* elsewhere. He never courted the attention of strangers, particularly as the confusion he felt now could leave him open to the sort of public humiliation he'd sought to avoid ever since his difficult days as the only Nisei student in his elementary school. Still, he didn't understand why all the others in the audience seemed undisturbed by the switching of the films. But he was a rationalist and assumed it was either an elaborate joke (but how and why?) or someone's simple mistake. If he was being tricked, then his instinct was to deny his tormentors the satisfaction of his showing distress. Or, alternatively, when others made mistakes Sumida often found himself feeling so embarrassed on their behalf that he'd opt to underestimate or, if possible, deny that any mistake had occurred at all. "No, rye bread is what I ordered," he'd reassure the forgetful deli worker, despite having asked for sourdough.

Either way, staying silent was the most natural strategy for him.

But tonight needed to be different, he thought.

After all, would Sam Spade have remained in *his* seat, watching a movie he hadn't chosen to see? Sumida was embarked on the murder investigation of his wife, for God's sake. What kind of man was he to shrink into the darkened audience now, when the stakes were so low? Besides, he *needed* his questions answered about what had just happened here—why everyone else in the audience seemed satisfied with this "other" movie. A true detective did not let such matters lie, even in his private life.

So he stood and scuttled sideways out of the crowded row.

He'd take this up with the manager.

You don't pay to see one movie and wind up in another. With all the things in life that were beyond one's control, choice of movie ought not to be one (Kyoko doubtless would have preferred the romantic comedy, but that was neither here nor there, he reminded himself).

As he started up the aisle, he heard whispers:

"Hey look, is that loudmouth a Jap?" the woman seated in front

of him asked, her face illuminated by the light of the film as she turned back.

“What, a dirty Jap?” the burly man who’d sat behind him menaced, staring down his row at Sumida, who’d started up the aisle.

Sumida paused. He was born at L.A. County General Hospital, attended public schools, and ran the 100 and the 220 on the track team at Long Beach Wilson High School. He didn’t have to put up with abuse. But he kept walking, bursting through the double doors and into the lobby.

A teenaged usher, who was leaning over the counter of the snack stand, whispering to the blonde girl who sold candy and pop, turned and looked at Sumida with wide eyes.

“I need to see the manager,” Sumida said. “Now.”

The usher’s Adam’s apple moved up and down before he answered. “He’s in his office.” He pointed to a shadowed corner and up a narrow flight of wooden stairs, which looked like an architectural afterthought in the otherwise plush lobby.

Sumida crossed the lobby and walked up the stairs, stopping at the door. A nameplate read: “Manager,” which he reflected could not have inspired much confidence in the otherwise nameless man who came to work each day knowing he could be replaced without his employers even having to change the nameplate. Sumida knocked, but didn’t wait for an answer before walking in. Bogart wouldn’t have waited.

The office had no windows—likely a converted storage room. Movie posters from closed engagements were carelessly taped to the walls (including, strangely, *The Maltese Falcon*).

“Say, what’s this?” asked a man with an obvious toupee. He sat at a metal desk piled on one side with lobby cards and on the other with requisitions, likely for candy and popcorn and soda pop.

“Question, sir,” Sumida said, forcefully.

The manager straightened in his chair and narrowed his eyes. Then, still not satisfied with what he saw, he picked up a pair of eye-glasses from beside an open box of Milk Duds. When he got a clear look at Sumida he strained his eyes again, this time for other reasons.

“Are you a Jap?” he asked, incredulous.

Sumida didn’t understand the vehemence of racial deprecations the past few minutes. Sure, there were places Japanese immigrants and their Nisei offspring were unwelcome—for example, the L.A. Country Club (except as a gardener).

And plenty of others.

Most places, actually.

But he’d never felt unwelcome in a downtown movie house. He wasn’t a Negro, after all. *They* seemed to be quietly unwelcome everywhere, excepting the neighborhoods around Central Avenue.

“Look, what’s going on here?” Sumida asked.

“I was going to ask you the same question,” the manager answered. “Are you a Chinaman or Korean?”

“My name’s Sam Sumida.”

The manager’s eyes narrowed. “Sumida . . . What do you want?”

“I want to see the movie I paid to see.”

“What?”

That’s when Sumida noticed the calendar hung on the cheaply paneled wall behind the manager’s desk. It was a give-away from Adohr Dairy. A bucolic farm scene featuring contended-looking cows decorated the top half, dated squares checkered the bottom. The manager had crossed off days, presumably leading to this one. But the date indicated wasn’t December 6, 1941, as Sumida knew it to be.

January 22, 1942?

“What movie did you pay to see?” the manager asked.

“*The Maltese Falcon*.”

“That closed last month,” the manager answered, contemptuously. “Can’t you read a marquee? You no ‘speak-y’ English?”

Sumida said nothing.

The manager shook his head in disgust. “Look, I don’t need no crazy Jap on my premises.” He pushed aside a pile of papers and picked up his telephone. “I’ll call the cops.”

“What day is this?” Sumida asked.

The manager indicated the calendar behind him. “Look for

yourself.”

“Your calendar’s wrong.”

“You going to leave on your own or do I call them?”

“Is this all some kind of joke?” Sumida asked.

“Why would anybody joke with the likes of you?” the manager responded. “Everybody knows your kind is born without a sense of humor. That would explain why you don’t like *Woman of the Year*. Tracy and Hepburn are hilarious. But you wouldn’t understand. Besides, the movie don’t end until after the curfew for your kind.”

Curfew?

“Look, if you want a refund for your ticket I can give it to you,” the manager continued.

“I didn’t come here for money.”

“Then what’d you bust into my officer for?” The manager didn’t wait for an answer, but spoke into the receiver. “Operator, give me the L.A.P.D.”

Sumida knew the cops weren’t going to help him get to the bottom of this.

He left the manager’s office, descended the stairs, and pressed through the lobby. It wasn’t true that he had no sense of humor. But whatever kind of prank the movie house was playing wasn’t so damn funny. He stepped outside, almost running straight into an entering patron (small boned like a boy and dressed unusually in a cloak and cowl). “Sorry,” he muttered without turning back. He continued to the sidewalk. Broadway was crowded with traffic and pedestrians, as usual. But now it was raining hard. Sumida pulled his hat down over his eyes and his suit jacket tighter around his shoulders. He’d left his raincoat at home. He hadn’t needed it. Forty-minutes earlier, when he’d bought his ticket to see *The Maltese Falcon* there hadn’t been a cloud in the sky. And that wasn’t the only difference. On the sidewalk outside The Rialto, he noted that the lighted Christmas decorations strung across the street at fifty yard intervals and shining brightly when he had entered the theater were now, like the decorations in *all* the store windows, gone.

Not turned off.

Gone.



Excerpt from a letter dated February 17, 1942.

. . . I'm delighted and mightily impressed that in the face of such adversity you've not only managed to overcome your six-week writers block (who wasn't knocked on his or her backside on the morning of December 7?) but that judging from your latest submission you have so effectively reworked the synopsis and introduced not only a more acceptable protagonist in Jimmy Park, but also the intense patriotism that will appeal to today's readers. And all this in just the past couple weeks!

Turning your book from a conventional detective story into a spy thriller is also clearly the right decision. And, yes, choosing an Anglo pen name will obviously be a necessity as well. If you'd like to send me a few names to choose from, feel free. In all, I am greatly impressed by your professionalism. I think we're going to make a great team, young man!

My most pressing suggestion, as you move forward, is that you maintain the modern feel of the revised first chapters while also introducing more traditionally exotic, "foreign" elements, such as one finds in Sax Rohmer's Dr. Fu Manchu series (and yes, I'm aware that Rohmer's villain is Chinese rather than Japanese, but I think he still

serves as a good example of pure villainy - besides, I'm sure you recall that Dr. Fu Manchu headed a criminal organization, the Si-Fan or Yellow Menace, that included all Orientals, including East Indians, Burmese, Persians, Arabs, and Japanese, so draw liberally from his wildly imaginative example, even as you continue to focus on the specifically modern Japanese villains infiltrating our nation today.

On the basis of this latest submission, we'll get your contract out to you in the next couple of days. Sign and return to us and then our accounting department will draft you a new check for \$350 as an advance against royalties.

Now, how can we most effectively work together? My thought is that we should work closely on this book right from the start (rather than employing the more traditional approach of my offering suggestions and edits after you complete a first draft). I say this for two reasons: first, you're a young man new to this game and this is professional New York publishing. Consider: rather than my waiting the better part of a year for you to draft your way into numerous dead ends that will entail your having to wipe out whole chapters or storylines (the usual fate of beginning novelists), why don't you send me each chapter as you finish it so I can comment, mark it up with my trusty blue pencil, and return it to you for revisions. That way, any missteps you make will be correctible before much narrative damage is done (and first time novelists, even the best, always make

missteps). The second reason I suggest this approach is that I believe the sooner we get this title on the market the better. After all, a quick victory by our forces in the Pacific will render this book far less marketable than if we manage to get it out while war against the Japanese persists. Naturally, like every American, I hope for a quick victory. But that is why I want to shepherd this book as efficiently as possible. Does that make sense to you? We two can form a kind of assembly line, wherein, for example, you'll write chapter three while you're waiting for my edits on chapter two, and then you can revise chapter two and move on to chapter four while I edit chapter three etc. Believe me, I rarely make such an offer to my authors.

Let me know what you think. Of course, it will always be YOUR book. But let's not delay!

Congratulations, and keep up the good work.

Sincerely,

Maxine Wakefield

Maxine Wakefield,

Associate Editor, Metropolitan Modern
Mysteries, Inc.

p.s. My best wishes to your father for a speedy recovery from his beating at the hands of those marauding bullies. I've heard broken ribs can be quite painful and one must be careful with head injuries. And with a fine son like you, I'm sure he's

resting easy. Who knows, Takumi? In time, royalties from a successful book could compensate for any lost income from his shuttered business. Crossed fingers!



Excerpt from chapter two of *The Orchid and the Secret Agent*, a novel
by William Thorne
Metropolitan Modern Mysteries, Inc., New York, N.Y., 1945

Jimmy Park got to the movie house too late.

At first, he didn't know a crime had already taken place or that the criminal had already fled. How would he? The Tracy and Hepburn movie was still playing inside.

All *seemed* to be going as planned.

At the box office, he had flashed his consultant's I.D. card from the F.B.I. and proceeded straight in, stopping in the ornate, but nearly deserted, lobby. Here, the soundtrack of the movie was audible (though the actors' dialogue was muffled through the walls). He scanned for a good vantage from which to observe the audience when they exited the movie. A narrow wooden staircase led up to a door, likely the manager's office or the entrance to the projectionist's room.

"How much longer does the movie run?" he asked a teenaged usher who stood near a pretty girl working the concession stand. There were no customers about.

The usher's Adam's apple moved up and down as he looked suspiciously at Jimmy, saying nothing.

Such suspicions were not unusual, these days. Jimmy Park held it against no one. Who could blame any American for being cautious? Nonetheless, it made his life more complicated. Since the shameful events of December 7, he'd found it necessary to introduce himself to almost everyone he met, no matter how casually, to reassure them he

was not a Jap. "My name's Jimmy Park," he said, holding out his hand to shake.

The usher sighed in relief. "Park . . . Korean, then?" he said, taking Jimmy's proffered hand.

"That's right. Tell me, how much longer does the movie run?"

The usher looked at his watch. "About twenty minutes."

Jimmy showed the teenager his I.D. card from the Feds. "I need to 'make the acquaintance' of a man currently in your audience. I think it best to do so as he comes out." He turned and indicated with a nod of his head the wooden staircase. "That seems like the best place to get a view."

The usher nodded. "You can go up there to Mr. Pike's office and knock. He's the manager."

"Thanks."

"Funny thing," the usher added. "You're the third Oriental to make his way up there in the last hour."

"What?"

"Yeah, the first was a Jap who claimed to be confused about what movie was playing."

"What did he look like?" Jimmy pressed.

The boy opened his palms, helplessly. "I don't know. Kind of like you, but not you."

"And the second man?" Jimmy asked.

"It was right after," the boy said.

"Real thin, no bigger than a boy, in a cloak that covered all but the eyes," the girl volunteered.

"Cloak?" Jimmy asked.

"I thought it was for the rain or something," the boy continued.

Jimmy didn't hesitate. He ran up the stairs and burst into the office.

That's when he knew he was too late.

Jimmy's eyes went to the movie-house manager's body on the floor. There was blood everywhere. Jimmy rushed to the victim's side, kneeling. "Mr. Pike!" he implored. But the man's head had been caved-in by a blunt object. He was dead.

Was the assailant still here?

Jimmy rose to his feet, withdrawing the .45 from his raincoat pocket.

He turned in a slow circle. No windows. Only the one door.

He looked behind the desk, behind a battered, velvet sofa, behind a filing cabinet.

The assailant was gone.

Jimmy rushed back to the door and called down to the teenagers.

“Did you see anyone leave this room?”

The two shook their heads no.

Jimmy turned back to the room. Weren't Ninjas known for the ability to become almost invisible?

But that was mere legend.

Jimmy took a deep breath, steadying himself. There had to be a practical answer to the killer's disappearance. For example, wasn't it likely that the libidinous teenagers in the lobby had simply been too preoccupied with each another to notice the man's departure from the office?

Then Jimmy noticed what was written on the far wall.

He'd seen a lot in his line of work, but nothing like this.

The manager's murderer had sliced a tassel from the velvet sofa and, dipping the tassel into the pool of blood from the manager's bashed-in head, had used it as a calligraphy brush to write a series of Japanese characters on the wall. Being expert in Oriental languages, Jimmy translated:

“And so it begins for you, white devils.”

Jimmy picked up the phone from the manager's desk. “Get me the L.A.P.D.,” he said, solemnly.

A few minutes later, as the theater crowd emptied, passing through a quickly but efficiently assembled cordon of police at all exits, there were no Japanese among them.