

Mr. Tsuda

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Dad decided if Mom can celebrate Christmas, he can celebrate Chanukah. He went and got the little candle holder so he can light a candle every night for eight nights. “What are you doing, Dad?” He says it’s a menorah, and from now on we’re celebrating the Jewish festival of lights. “I know it’s a menorah Dad, but you’re not religious.” Then he says mom isn’t religious either, and if she gets a Christmas tree, he wants a menorah. Mom puts the Christmas presents under the tree on one side of the room, and the Chanukah presents next to the menorah on the other side of the room. And they huff and puff when I put a present in the wrong place. The postman brings more presents from the mainland, so I get out of there. I take Rosie for another walk around the block.

Grandpa says if things get too weird we should just go for a walk—if mom and dad are going to be babies, then me, him and Rosie have to be the grownups. Rosie wags her tail and licks his face because she likes being called a grownup.

Grandpa makes us stop on Kahaloa Street and say hello to Mister Tsuda. But now Grampa’s sick, so I don’t have to. I don’t like Rosie to talk to Mr. Tsuda. Years and years ago when we went on her first puppy walk, Mister Tsuda looked at puppy Rosie and said she looked like a tasty luau dog—and just like that, the biggest worry I ever had grew in my mind and every time I see him I worry all over again. Grandpa said it was a joke, but it didn’t sound like a joke to me.

I try to hurry Rosie past Mister Tsuda’s house, but she sees him sitting in the middle of his garden and charges up to poke him with her nose. He says some stuff to her in Japanese, and she barks in his face like they’re talking. It takes all my strength to pull her away to the park.

I don’t have all day to play, I have to get home in time to catch the bus. It’s the last day before Christmas vacation, and that’s always a fun day with no real work.

I throw the frisbee way far and Rosie is about to jump for it, when she sees the black and white cat that lives by the stream. “Oh no, oh gee, oh Rosie., NO!” She’s gone. No way I can catch up. I go home and tell Mom I have to go find Rosie, I can’t go to school.

She makes me, but all I do all day is look out the window and worry about somebody eating my lost dog.

When I get home, no Rosie. Mom hasn’t been looking for her because Grampa’s worse. Mom says Rosie will come home. No. Rosie will keep walking until she runs into the Ocean and then she’ll start swimming. I knock quietly on Grampa’s door in case he’s asleep, but he’s lying there like he sometimes does thinking about I don’t know what. He says hi. He sounds okay, but he’s all grey all over his face. He tells me not to worry, that Rosie has her name tag—if she doesn’t have enough sense to get back on her own, some human will bring her. Then he says (disbelief) why don’t I go talk to Mister Tsuda. He probably misses me.

Grandpa must have a fever. Every single day Grampa asks me did I see Mister Tsuda? How can I miss seeing him, he’s always right there sitting on the ground.

I don’t want to go there, but then I remember how Rosie loves that Garden, and she loves charging

into Mister Tsuda's lap, and Mister Tsuda's the one who talks about eating dogs—I better get over there. He's sitting in his yard pulling up weeds. "You seen my dog?" He nods to his door where Rosie is pressing her nose against the screen and thumping her tail against the wall. "Rosie!" I open the door for her, but she goes further inside and plops down in front of a dish of water that's on the kitchen floor. I'm gonna have to pull her away as usual. (Surprised) Mister Tsuda's house is very tidy. It looks like our house Thursdays when Mom vacuums. No messy dishes and he's burning incense so it smells nice. In the corner is a little green plant—it's got two big round Christmas tree ornaments dangling. The plant is right next to Buddha. Two religions in the same living room. Sort of like our house.

When me and Rosie get home there's an ambulance driving away from my house and Grandpa's in the back going to the hospital.

Mom and Dad don't let me go to the hospital to see Grampa. I bake him Christmas cookies with sprinkles, even though it makes the house a hundred and ten degrees. Rosie isn't supposed to go in Grampa's room, but she's in there—on the bed! When Mom and Dad get home, they don't even talk to me, and they look worried. They even forget to give me dinner, but at least they're not huffing and puffing at each other. They talk in whispering, and they're holding hands like they're supposed to and like they usually do, except they haven't been since they divided the living room into Christmas and Chanukah.

I wish somebody would talk to me. I want to take Rosie for a walk, but I can't drag her out of Grampa's bed. I go for a walk on my own. I go to Mister Tsuda's house.

He's sitting there on the ground. "How come you have Christmas ornaments in your house?" For the first time in my whole life, I see Mister Tsuda stand up. He is slow, like some machine that needs oil. He waves me to follow and the two of us go inside his house. We walk through the tidy living room to a little room behind the kitchen. It's filled with dusty old snapshots. One is of two smiling Japanese people, a handsome man in a suit and a beautiful woman wearing a fancy kimono. "Me," he says and points to the man. "My wife was Christmas." Mister Tsuda points to other people in pictures, "New Jersey, San Francisco, Tokyo—" All his family is far away. "Mister Tsuda, did you mind your wife having Christmas?" He says no. He says he liked it because of how happy she got. He says Christmas makes everybody more nice.

He asks me how's Grampa. I all of a sudden can't talk. I keep staring at the pictures. Mister Tsuda says Grandpa used to walk by his house every day. When Grandpa didn't see him, he'd shout out 'you okay, Mister Tsuda?' (Beat) You okay mister Tsuda? Every day, Grandpa asks me did I see Mister Tsuda. "I gotta go, but we'll be by tomorrow, me and Rosie. Thanks for showing me the pictures."

Mom and Dad come out of their room when they hear me talking. I'm talking to the nurse station number they wrote by our telephone. "Go pick up the phone for my Grampa. No, it's an emergency." The next thing I know, I'm talking to Grampa. "Hi, it's me! I saw Mister Tsuda today. He's okay, I saw him. I'll check on him every day. Don't you worry, okay?" It sounds like he makes a little laugh. He says, "I love you sweetheart, I'll try to be home for Christmas."

I love you, Grampa. I hang up the phone. I pick up Dad's menorah and put it on the table next to the tree, but not so near the candles will set it on fire. Then I start to push all the presents into one big pile. After a second Dad starts to help me, then Mom helps, too. The living room looks a lot better. Rosie comes in dragging her leash. I think maybe all four of us will go on this walk.