Endorsements

From the *Land of the Rising Sun* tells the moving story of a young, displaced Japanese girl who seeks to find her real self in the often confusing culture of America. As Junko fights for her own self-esteem, she discovers—or is discovered by—a God who loves her, accepts her, and has a unique plan for her life. In a day when millions of young people seek to be the next American Idol, or latest Christian imitation, Junko's example encourages us to find our identity in God and in serving him.

People of all ages will enjoy this delightful story, filled with humor, joy, and humble wisdom. But From the *Land of the Rising Sun* will be especially powerful for young women and men who are desperately trying to be somebody, to be accepted, and to find their way in a complex and crazy-making world.

—Mark D. Roberts, Executive Director
of the Max De Pree Center for Leadership,
Fuller Theological Seminary

Having lived in Japan when I was young, I can relate well to Junko Cheng's testimony of feeling displaced in a foreign country. From the *Land of the Rising Sun* is a well-woven tapestry that blends God's faithful love with his divine plan, that if received, will lead us to a future and a hope!

—Wayne Cordeiro, senior pastor
at New Hope Christian Fellowship, Honolulu, Hawaii

I am so grateful that Junko has written out her story of faith! Hearing how the Lord has worked in others' lives gives us the opportunity to see the life lessons that He wants to teach us—and one of the lessons I'm sure you'll see in Junko's life is the truth of our trust in God. His children never need to run in fear from Him: He is a Father that we can run to in trust.

—Tom Holladay, teaching pastor
at Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California

Junko first crossed my path in 1993 during our inaugural "Spotlight" competition for independent Artists at the Gospel Music Association in Nashville. For nearly twenty years since, she has warmed the hearts of audiences on many continents the same way she first warmed ours that day in Nashville. How wonderful that her written words in this book can speak to individuals everywhere the way her music has. Bringing these chapters into your life will grow your appreciation for her music. I hope that you are as fortunate as I have been to encounter both.

—Frank Breeden, founding chairman of the Academy of Gospel Music Arts/GMA, former president of the Gospel Music Association (1997–2003), managing partner of Premiere Authors Literary

Junko's story is everyone's story. We may not be able to carry a note, but we all have a song within us that is waiting to burst forth . . . a song about a misplaced childhood, a forgotten culture, a hidden hope, or a dangled dream. Junko's story is a message of encouragement, especially to those who have their heritage in another land.

For years, Junko has blessed my children, my grandchildren, and my church family with her music and her presence. Her story has revealed to me why she is such the blessing. God is good. He took a scared little girl From the Land of the Rising Sun and transformed her from her idea of "not so special" to God's idea of "very special."

—Cory Ishida, senior pastor
at Evergreen Baptist Church of San Gabriel Valley

From the Land of the Rising Sun

A Journey to Acceptance, Identity, & Belonging

Junko Nishiguchi Cheng

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Dedication

To Harry and Keiko Nishiguchi,
for beginning my story.

To David, Joshua, and Megumi,
for entering into my story.

And to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith,
for completing my story.

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Acknowledgments

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God blessed me with so many wonderful people in my youth, only some of whom I've mentioned by name in the book. Any attempt at making a list would surely be incomplete, but nonetheless I would like to give a special shout-out to Jayme Fryer Wood and her parents, Judy Tarbell and her parents, Carol Antablin Miles, Dave and Kristin Moe Lyle, Gary and Carol Richmond, Steve Yamaguchi, Rev. George Munzing, Dave and Debbie Hansen, Mike and Lesley VanDordrecht, Kevin Kummer, Ted Limpic, and Stan White, for revealing Christ to me each in your own unique way.

I am also thankful for my friends, pastors, teachers, and small groups at Irvine Presbyterian Church and Saddleback Church for continuing to nurture me and challenging me to grow, particularly Ben Patterson, Mark Roberts, Scott Bullock, Tim Avazian, Rick Warren, Tom Holladay, Buddy Owens, and Debbie Kerner Rettino.

Many thanks to my husband, David, for persevering through this book-writing process with me, concurrent with yet another CD recording project. I am forever grateful for the love and

support you continue to offer as I pursue my calling in life. You are my safe harbor.

Thank you, Josh and Meg, for inspiring me to write this book. May we enjoy many more ice cream socials together.

Soli Deo Gloria.

Introduction

"The storm caught me by surprise."

It was a sunny Southern California afternoon, and the elderly patient was talking to his family physician. His statement came out of the blue, unrelated to anything they had spoken of prior to that moment. Unrelated, in fact, to the actual weather outside. "I forgot my umbrella, Doc," he continued.

He was suffering from the early stages of dementia.

Ever since my husband, David, told me about this encounter he had one day with a patient at his medical office, I have wanted to use this gentleman's statement as the opening line of my very first book.

Opening lines are important, although few are as memorable as "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" and "Call me Ishmael." I wanted an opening sentence that would capture the essence of my book, and I found this one perfect.

The storm caught me by surprise.

Okay, so we haven't exactly started the first chapter yet, so technically it's not the opening line. And I don't have dementia…yet. But hear me out.

Isn't it amazing how often we are surprised by the unexpected storms in our lives?

Relationships go bad.

We run out of money.

We get sick.

Our kids get sick.

We move.

We move to a foreign country.

We win a competition.

We lose.

And there are many, many more.

Intellectually, we know that life is all about going from one crisis to another. Storms are going to come—they're inevitable. Jesus even said it: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Nonetheless, we are still surprised when bad things happen, and we're often caught without our umbrellas. Why? I suppose it's because we think that every day should be sunny and that everything should work out the way we think it ought to. We have life all mapped out, and when things don't go as planned, we are surprised, shocked, and dismayed. As if we have any control over our lives in the first place….

This book is about my life and the storms I have experienced so far, such as moving from Japan to the United States as a young girl and having to make all new friends. Learning to speak a new language. Attempting to make it in the music business. Trying desperately to catch a flight home from Brazil.

Did the storms surprise me? Why, yes! And it was not a pretty sight as I kicked and screamed my way through the many disappointments that came my way. But when the storms passed and I got a chance to assess the full situation, I was often pleasantly surprised.

God taught me a new lesson.

I grew as a result.

It made me stronger and more secure.

God never let me go.

It could have been much worse.

It turned out better than what I hoped for.

I am actually grateful for the storm!

I'm usually limited to about three minutes during my concerts to give my testimony before I launch into my signature song, "Land of the Rising Sun." I often get asked about the "rest of the story," but I never have quite enough time to do so. It would take us hours, and we'd go through lots of coffee!

So, here is my opportunity to share with you the extended version of my testimony. I'm so delighted that you picked up this book, because you are about to meet the main character of my story.

No, it's not me.

It's someone I used to be afraid of but now love with all my heart, soul, and mind.

It's someone I sometimes refer to as Mr. Thunder. Or, in Japanese, *gorogoro-san*.

Yeah, you're going to have to read more to find out.

So what are we waiting for? Let's go!

Odd Girl Out

You created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

Psalm 139:13–14

When I was young, I was tall. Relatively tall, that is, and embarrassingly taller than my friends. My two sisters and I inherited some abnormal gene that made us sprout up and mature physically ahead of all our peers, and it looks like I've passed that gene on to my own daughter. Dear Megumi is often told that she is "so tall for an Asian"!

I always stood near the back of the line in school, and people generally assumed I was two grades older than I actually was. (How I loved being thought of as "older" back then!)

Hoping to be less conspicuous, I tried to slouch my way through the first few years of grade school. That didn't work in Japan, where I lived until I was eight and a half, nor did it work in Riverdale, New York, where I began my new life as a third grader at P.S. 24. Had I

stayed in Japan, I probably would have been considered average in height—just as I am here in the States—because the current generation of young people in Japan is getting taller and taller, probably due to a more Western diet.

And speaking of diet, I had no clue as a child that we are what we eat. I thought some people were naturally thin—or not—just as I was naturally tall, and that food consumption had little effect on your predestined girth.

That lack of understanding, plus bountiful cooking by my mother, who grew up hungry in famine-plagued, post–WWII Japan and therefore made sure that her daughters never felt deprived, added up to a very big girl. I used to stand and try in vain to see my feet, but they were definitely hidden by a protruding belly filled with my mother's yummy cooking. My weight peaked when I was twelve, at which time I decided to turn from my nutritionally sinful ways.

What I took for granted then was that being big and tall has its advantages. For example, in sixth grade, I protected my friends during a melee at a Donny Osmond concert by bracing myself against a wall so they could work their way to the nearest exit. (No, they never refunded our tickets to this abbreviated concert, our first preteen outing.)

Also, since I could reach higher than others, I was in demand for TPing during sleepovers. I was also a faster runner and higher jumper than my friends, and teachers entrusted me with more responsibilities because my height made me seem mature and therefore more trustworthy. But such positives did not outweigh the negatives of being so large compared to everyone else.

Then—suddenly—I became small.

I didn't shrink; everyone else just started to grow. The same gene that made me sprout young made me stop growing when I reached

middle school. I have grown only half an inch since sixth grade: I am almost five foot three. I say "almost" because I'm actually five feet and two and three-quarter inches tall, but that takes too much space on my driver's license. I hope it doesn't constitute a lie. But I digress.

When I entered middle school, I found myself dwarfed by all these girls who used to be scrawny, tiny, and short. They became Amazon women almost overnight! In a year and a half I went from thinking of myself as the Big Girl to the Petite One.

It took years for my brain to catch up with my new identity, and in some ways, it still hasn't.

Before we moved to New York, I lived in a suburb of Osaka, Japan, in a small town called Fujiidera. Osaka is the epicenter of a certain Japanese dialect called *Kansai-ben*. It's not a true dialect in that it isn't completely foreign to people from other parts of Japan, but it does have a certain twang that I think is very laid-back and friendly. Kind of like the way people talk in the Southern US.

Many stand-up comedians on Japanese television are from the Kansai area, and they use Kansai-ben liberally in their routines. This delights viewers from Tokyo and its surrounding areas, who speak their very proper dialect.

My mom used to tell me that I had a knack for catching on to accents and imitating dialects. She would laugh when I imitated a comedy duo on TV, complete with the right Kansai-ben inflections.

All that was funny until we moved to New York, where I met other Japanese girls whose families, like mine, had come to the US for overseas assignments. Most of these assignments lasted for about three years, so new Japanese kids were always arriving and others leaving.

It was a pretty tight-knit community. Old-timers were expected to help out new Japanese arrivals with classroom work and translation. Every single Japanese student at P.S. 24 also attended the one local Japanese school that met all day on Saturdays, which meant we were together six days a week. These students were my first friends in my new country.

But back to the language thing. Just about every Japanese person living in New York at the time was from Kanto, which is Tokyo and its surrounding metropolitan area. They spoke the beautifully refined, high-society *Hyojun-go*, the "standard" Japanese.

I, however, was a country bumpkin from Osaka. When I arrived at P.S. 24 and opened my mouth to speak, the Japanese girls encircled me and started to laugh in delight. Until then, they had only heard Kansai-ben via comedians on TV.

I'm sure they were all genuinely entertained to hear me talk, and maybe they even secretly wished they sounded like me. But I was mortified. As a third grader in a new country, trying to fit in with the only group of people who might accept me, I was determined not to be the odd girl out. Even though I didn't speak a word of English, my first order of business was to learn standard, TV journalist–dialect Japanese.

Except for this group of Japanese expatriates, Riverdale was populated mostly with people of European descent. I had never seen real white people before. My sisters had some dolls with blond hair, but here I was standing next to an actual person with golden locks. How I wished I had beautiful blond hair.

But then I realized how ridiculous my black eyebrows would look with blond hair. I decided to leave the blond hair on white people and instead wish that I were Caucasian. The porcelain-white skin of these Americans fascinated me. My skin was dark from spending

every day flying my kite through the rice fields back home. I vowed right then to stay out of the sun. You see, I tan so easily that a late-fall swim in the setting sun gives me a tan that lasts through Easter.

In Japanese culture, dark skin indicates common manual labor, while pale skin suggests an aristocratic lifestyle. I could not understand why these beautiful people with their blindingly white skin rubbed baby oil on their bodies and spent hours at the pool. Especially when most of them just turned beet red!

The summer after we arrived in New York, my parents sent my sisters and me to a summertime YWCA camp in the Catskill Mountains so we could learn English. It was a weeklong camp with horseback riding, swimming, and singing. It was a whole lot of fun.

The following summer, we went for two consecutive weeks. I sang a few Japanese folk songs a cappella in the talent contest and came in third place, winning a watermelon for my cabin. I was a hero that night. In the next day's Camp Olympics, however, I didn't do as well in the holding-your-breath-underwater competition. I was nervous! My heart beat so fast that I couldn't hold my breath for much longer than ten seconds, tops. I disappointed the entire cabin that day.

No matter. The canteen beckoned with my daily snack purchase: Cracker Jack. I'd dig deep to pull out my prize whistle or sticker, and then munch on the caramel popcorn while I sat on the lawn watching a giant-screen movie about a dog that was very shaggy.

During that second visit to the camp in the Catskills, we stayed over the weekend, which meant that on Sunday morning the leaders went around gathering girls who attended church. I watched with a mix of curiosity and a little envy. I could tell there was

something special about where they were going, and I wished I could be part of it.

To my way of thinking, church seemed distinctly American. No one I knew in Japan went to church. Almost everyone was affiliated with the local Buddhist temple. We went there occasionally to pray, usually asking for a specific blessing—to pass the high-school entry exam, to win the lottery, for driving safety, for a healthy baby to be born. We burned incense, clapped three times, and bowed down in prayer. Sometimes we'd use a special bamboo ladle to quench our thirst with spiritually pure water; other times we'd throw coins into the slotted box out front for good luck. These things were a part of our culture, and we did them without question.

I never bothered inquiring who we were praying to, but I do remember asking Mother one time if there is a God. She said, "Of course!"

In hindsight, I realize that I probably would have gotten the same answer from just about anybody in Japan. Most Japanese believe there is a God…or a few. There are little statues of gods on the sides of the roads wherever you go in Japan, even in the major metropolitan areas. The statues wear cute little bibs and someone is always leaving a fresh fruit offering. Sometimes, on my walk home from school, I wished I could swipe an orange slice to quench my thirst. But I refrained; that would be disrespectful.

After about three years of living in New York, my family moved again, this time to Southern California. My sisters and I suddenly found ourselves the only Asians who weren't native English speakers. At that time, the few Asians who lived in Orange County were third- or fourth-generation Chinese or Japanese, and they had

successfully assimilated into the American culture. In other words, they only *looked* Asian; they were actually Asian Americans. They spoke English, no Japanese—and to my horror, they wore shoes inside their homes! In Japan, we left our dirty shoes outside.

My new fifth-grade classmates were amazed and amused to meet an actual, real-life foreigner. They couldn't stop asking me how to say this and that in Japanese. They wanted to know if I really owned a kimono (yes) and if I wore it at home (no, only for Halloween).

Most kids knew very little about my culture. This was well before anime, video games, Pokémon, California roll, and many other fine Japanese artifacts had found their way onto American soil. They would try out what little Japanese they thought they knew: *nee-how*, which is "hello" in Chinese. They would bow to me with their hands together, fingers pointing upward, as they had seen in either *The King and I* or a travel commercial for Singapore Airlines.

I quickly realized that my classmates' curiosity was an easy way to get attention, and I did the best I could to communicate with my broken English and make friends. Then one day on the monkey bars after school, one of my new California schoolmates asked me what time it was.

I looked at my watch and replied in my best Bronx accent, "It's a quarta afta foah." And they laughed at me!

My talent for picking up inflections and accents had gotten the better of me. The English I had so diligently learned in New York was not the same dialect that people spoke in California. Once again my first order of business became working on my language skills—but this time, ditching the New York accent and learning to speak like a proper Californian. I was not going to be humiliated again!