

盗まれた思ひ出  
STOLEN MEMORIES  
A FILM BY KAGAN GOH

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PRODUCTION NOTES

**THE CALL TO ADVENTURE**

My name is Kagan Goh. I am the writer, producer and director of “Stolen Memories”.

In 1993, my brother Kakim bought a photo album along with a framed photograph of a Japanese samurai warrior that once belonged to a Japanese Canadian family, at a garage sale for a mere \$5 apiece. When my brother asked the Caucasian man who sold him the album how he had come to possess such a precious family heirloom, he replied indifferently that he found it in the attic collecting dust and he just wanted to “get rid of it.”

The photographs in the album were of a beautiful Japanese Canadian woman in her twenties named Kay enjoying her life in Japan. There were no clues to her surname. She was fashionably dressed in kimonos and fur coats and resembled a glamorous actress or movie star. There were photo of the devastation of earthquakes and floods. Whoever took these photos had a good eye for artful composition. I was fascinated by these beautiful photographs and wondered how anybody could lose such a beautiful photo album.

The photographs are dated 1939. Three years before the Japanese internment. After the bombing of Pearl Harbour in 1942, Japanese Canadians were ordered to turn over property and belongings to the Custodian of Enemy Alien Property as a “protective measure only.” Caught in the whirlwind of anti-Japanese hysteria and paranoia, all of the Japanese descendents living in Canada at the time were rounded from their homes and herded off to internment camps and declared “enemy aliens.” They had no choice but to leave everything behind. The album was left behind when the family was interned and their possessions were either seized by the Canadian government and sold for a pittance, or stolen by looters. They lost everything.

My brother passed the photo album on to me for safekeeping. I had it in my possession for years without knowing what to do with it. This album was always at the back of my mind. My brother encouraged me to try and find the rightful owners and return the photo album. I did not know where to start. Joy Kogawa, the renowned author of “Obasan” – the groundbreaking novel about the Japanese internment – advised me to attend a conference at the Japanese Canadian Citizen’s Association.

It was at the J.C.C.A. when I announced my quest to find the owners of the lost photo album to the Japanese Canadian community. Suddenly there was a great deal of interest amongst the Japanese Canadians in attendance. Once I announced my quest to the public, I could not take my word back. I felt I had answered a call to adventure.

**AN ORIGINAL APPROACH**

There have been other films that have been made about the Japanese internment, but I thought this was a novel way to tell the story of the internment – through the vehicle of a photo album that had been “stolen” or lost during the Japanese internment. I see Stolen Memories as a detective story and a spiritual quest.



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Although there are some elements of talking heads (because there are interviews involved), I tried very hard to give the story a narrative arc. How do you solve this mystery? What are the clues? I wanted to create a sense of suspense and drama. I wanted “Stolen Memories” to play out like a dramatic narrative film rather than a traditional documentary.

### CHALLENGES IN MAKING THE FILM

The making of Stolen Memories is the hardest venture I have undertaken so far. Not just in the making of the film, but also the quest to return this photo album to its rightful owners. It took me five years to find the owners and six years to convince them to appear on camera. This film has taken me from start to finish fourteen years to make.

There were many obstacles along the way: financial crises, financiers dropping out of the film, challenges with my own personal health due to mental illness, specifically my bipolar condition.

I actually fell ill during the making of this film. The stress was so overwhelming that I experienced a psychotic episode, which ended up captured on camera.

Many times I made the mistake of putting the film before my health, and as a result I had relapse after relapse. During the making of the film, I had over twelve hospitalizations from psychotic episodes, often triggered by the stress of the making of this film.

As a result of my illness, the major financier pulled the plug on the project. This was a huge blow. I had lost my film. I was still determined to complete the film, but being deranged from my mental illness, I tried to shoot the film with a super 8 home movie camera. I remember loading batteries into the camera, which exploded, corroding and damaging not one but two super 8 cameras. At this point I felt that even God was conspiring against me, preventing me from finishing this film.

### PARALLELS

At first I thought the film was about loss and recovery: the losses of a Japanese Canadian family and the recovery of a photo album over sixty years later; or the losses of Japanese Canadian community and the recovery of the community as a whole after the Japanese internment. But I began to realize there was a parallel story taking place, which were the losses I suffered when I fell ill with my mental illness: losing my sanity, losing my freedom when I was involuntarily hospitalized, losing my job, my girlfriend and my friends.

Being labeled “mentally ill”, I began to understand the stigma and prejudice the Japanese-Canadians experienced when they were labeled “Enemy Aliens”. I knew how it felt to be ostracized and discriminated by society. I struggled with my own recovery from my mental illness, which in many ways made me more compassionate and empathetic towards what the Japanese Canadians went through.

These were just my own personal losses. Imagining if I had lost all my worldly belongings and had my freedom taken away from me gave me only a glimpse into how incredibly traumatic it had been for the



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Japanese Canadian community.

The quest became a personal story for me. It was not just about the making of a film or a project that I was involved in. I began to live the themes of “Stolen Memories.”

For example, I remember looking at a photograph of my father’s brother who had passed away when he was young. My father had never mentioned to me that he had had a brother for most of my childhood because he was considered the black sheep in the family. I began to identify with the shame, guilt and silence that the Japanese Canadian community experienced due to the silence in my own family.

I began to ask questions. I remember crying while looking at this photograph of my uncle, this forgotten member of the family who was buried in shame and secrecy.

The film captures me from my early twenties till my present day in my early forties, spanning over fourteen years of my life. I began this journey as a naïve youth and became a man in the process of this quest. In many ways this journey helped define my own identity as a Chinese Canadian as well as a person living in self-exile from my homeland of Singapore.

This quest became so personal I felt like the prodigal son when I eventually found the Kamitakahara family, the rightful owners of the album. I even had recurring dreams of meeting the family before I actually met them. I may not have been related to this family by lineage, but I felt, by strange fate of being the custodian of this lost photo album, that I had become related to this family by karma.

I was not prepared for the kind of response when I found the family. Some were elated, excited, happy, warm and generous. Others were somewhat indifferent or reluctant about being involved in the film. A few members of the family refused to meet me.

I did not at first understand the extent of the trauma that the internment had on the family. I expected the family to be happy about recovering their lost family heirloom, but did not anticipate that this might actually reopen old wounds. The trauma of the internment still runs very deep for many Japanese Canadians, who just want to forget about the past and move on. I began to question the validity of the film. Nothing is more costly than living in the past, I reasoned, except perhaps pretending it never happened.

#### **RESOURCEFULNESS IN MAKING THE FILM**

I had no money to make the film. But a friend and fellow filmmaker named Pat Harrison had a video camera and offered to shoot my film for free. It was through this kind of generous help from friends and volunteers that this film was made on a shoestring budget. Being unable to pay for a professional crew, I resorted to teaching friends who were interested in learning firsthand about the process of filmmaking. I created my own unofficial film school, even teaching my girlfriend how to operate a video camera and sound equipment. Necessity truly is the mother of invention.



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### MARY SEKI, MY DETECTIVE SIDEKICK

After five years of amateur detective work, I found the Kamitakahara family, the rightful owners of the photo album. I had the help of Mary Seki, a 70-year-old Japanese Canadian woman who became my detective sidekick, mentor and surrogate mother.

The very first words Mary Seki said to me when we met were: “I feel like I’ve known you forever.” I felt the same. Mary Seki volunteered to help me in my quest to find the owners of the lost photo album. She drove me around in her beat up pick-up truck and we went door-to-door looking for the whereabouts of the owners of the lost photo album.

Mary and I were an odd couple. Visiting Japanese family after family, we began to feel like two Jehovah’s Witnesses or door-to-door salesmen. I was Don Quixote and Mary Seki was Sancho Panza. But instead of chasing windmills, we were obsessed with this album, turning over every rock, following every obscure clue in the search for its rightful owners.

During our search at the Spring Bazaar at the Japanese Buddhist Church, I had a breakdown in which I experienced a past life regression. I realized this search for the owners of the album coincided with my own search for a mother I had lost in a previous life. Suddenly I had a revelation. I recalled the first words Mary Seki said to me when we met: “I feel like I’ve known you forever.” I believed Mary Seki was my mother in a previous life and we had been reunited through this quest.

### A MAJOR SETBACK

When we finally found the Kamitakahara family, I had run out of money to finish the film. In an act of desperation, I decided to throw a fundraiser. My friends and fellow artists (comprised of talented spoken-word artists and musicians) rallied to the cause.

It occurred to me, at the last moment, that I should invite the Kamitakahara family to the fundraiser. The fundraiser was called “One Extraordinary Family” and it was held at a restaurant and pub called the Brickhouse. I left a voicemail message on the family’s answering machine inviting them as guests of honour.

I threw the event together at the last moment and was totally unprepared when they actually turned up. I had hoped to arrange a private interview but the family requested to see the album that very night. I could not refuse them and presented the album to them.

Although I had a video camera filming the fundraiser, the conditions for filming were far from favorable. I had no sound equipment and the lighting was too dark. Tiny tea candles lighted the scene. When I viewed the footage later, I discovered to my horror that the pivotal moment in the film, the climax, had been lost. The images we shot were too dark and the sound quality was poor. The footage was not of broadcast quality. It was in fact unusable.

Sharon Kamitakahara – daughter-in-law of Kay Kamitakahara, the owner of the album –invited me to contact the family after the fundraiser was over. When I contacted the family by phone, Alan Kamitakahara,



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Kay's son, said the family was not interested in being involved in the film. I came to a dead end and realized I had lost the film. All the years of struggle and personal sacrifice had been in vain.

I was so hurt by what I perceived to be the rejection by the family that I actually began to feel a sense of resentment. My bitterness was really unhealthy, eating away at me. I remember my family eventually said to me: "Kagan, you have got to give up the film. Give back the photo album to the family. This kind of resentment is not going to help in any way."

I finally agreed to give up the film. And then I went to Montreal to visit my brother Kakim. I had an opportunity to meet Ron Korb, a relative of the Kamitakahara family, who happened to live in Toronto. Kakim's friend was driving to Toronto. I decided I would hitch a ride and return the album to Ron Korb in person. It was the least I could do.

All of a sudden, all my filmmaking friends from Ryerson film school rallied behind the cause and offered to shoot the film for free. As a result, we managed to shoot a good portion of the film. What was not possible at one time suddenly became possible. But I also believe that the reason why a former impasse suddenly became an avenue of opportunity was because my attitude had gone through a transformation. I had a change of heart. I was no longer bitter. I had let go of any kind of expectation or any sort of resentment towards the family. It was a relief to be able to meet the family without that kind of negativity. I had dealt with my own baggage, which had nothing to do with them.

#### **CONVINCING THE FAMILY TO PARTICIPATE IN THE FILM**

It was Mike Kamitakahara, the grandson of Kay, the owner of the photo album, who helped mend my relationship with the Kamitakahara family. He came to a performance I did at the Fringe Festival. I poured my heart out to him and told him of my struggles and challenges in returning the album to his family. I said to him: "Your family might have this impression that I am in it for the fame and fortune; that I am some sort of exploitive documentary filmmaker. But this is where I am coming from." This quest had become personal labour of love.

Mike appealed to his family and presented my case. He acted as go-between and negotiated on my behalf. It took me a further six years of patient negotiation to convince the family to appear on camera. I did this by nurturing a relationship based on mutual respect and trust.

#### **THE SOUNDTRACK OF THE FILM**

Ron Korb is sort of an unofficial family historian. He is also an accomplished musician. He is a very sought after composer who has worked on soundtracks for filmmakers such as Ang Lee, John Woo, Atom Egoyan and James Ivory, as well as being one of the bestselling New Age musicians in Canada.

He presented me with the opportunity to use his music as the soundtrack for our film. Ron Korb composed the majority of the music in "Stolen Memories". I see our relationship as a really nice collaboration between Ron Korb and myself, the musician and filmmaker, working together to create this film. The music is one of the highlights of "Stolen Memories", which makes the film a very special experience to watch and listen to.



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### **PERSISTENCE OF VISION**

“Stolen Memories” took fourteen years to complete. Through the ups and downs, the trials and tribulations, what kept me going were sheer will, hard work and determination.

When the major financer pulled the plug on the project, I felt I was a failure, that I had failed and let down and disappointed a lot of people who were counting on me. Now I realize there is no such thing as failure. Failure is only a temporary impasse that can be overcome with will and determination. Failure can be turned around and made into a success as long as one does not give up.

Truthfully there is no such thing as failure. One can make mistakes, but as long as we learn from them, we can correct them and turn things around.

If I were asked what trait helps people succeed in their goals, my answer would be persistence of vision. The sheer stubborn dogged determination not to give up against all odds.

Alan Kamitakahara, the son of the owner of the album, had been reluctant to participate in the film. Right down to the final hour, he resisted being interviewed. But after patient, persistent diplomatic persuasion, he finally agreed. After I finished the final interview with Alan Kamitakahara and his family, Alan shook my hand at the end of the shoot and said to me: “You do not give up, do you?” No, I do not.

### **FUTURE PLANS**

My plan with “Stolen Memories” is to release a director’s cut, which is significantly longer. I want to expand on the themes and subplots of the film and develop the story in more depth.

This project has turned into a film trilogy about the Japanese Canadian legacy. “Stolen Memories” is the first part of the trilogy.

The second part is called “Breaking the Silence”. “Breaking the Silence” is a documentary about Mari Seki’s brother, Akihide John Otsuji, a Japanese Canadian who was unjustly imprisoned for defying a racist law called the Dispersal Campaign.

After the Japanese internment, Japanese-Canadians were given the choice to either repatriate to Japan or move east of the Rockies. They were not allowed to return to the West Coast. Aki returned to his hometown in Vancouver and was promptly imprisoned and labeled a criminal by the Canadian government. Mary Seki considers him to be a hero. “Breaking the Silence” is about Mary Seki’s quest to clear her brother’s name. The third part of the trilogy is called “Mary Seki In Memorium”. Sadly, Mary Seki passed away in 2009. We filmed her funeral and are putting together a short film tribute to her. I am hoping to release all three films as a triple bill theatrically across North America.

