SHIN-ICHI was a 3-year-old boy who loved his tricycle, racing back and forth on the street outside his father's home.

One morning, a blinding light melted his eyes, seared his flesh and charred his bones. His father, not wanting the boy to be alone, buried him with his mangled tricycle behind what remained of the family home.

Standing in Hiroshima's atomic bomb museum, looking at the rusted remains of the tricycle pulled from the grave years later, a wave rose from my belly. I clenched my jaw to fight back, but it overtook me. For the first and last time in Hiroshima, I wept.

I cried for that little boy. A boy the same age as my son, in love with his tricycle the way my little boy loves his. Riding, laughing on a warm summer morning just like my son. I thought of seeing my son dead. Of burying him, alone.

I fought not to cry. I was angry I cried. I was sure the old men and women in a Japanese tour group had seen me. This is what the Japanese wanted - Americans to cry at their memorial. And I had promised not to give them that piece of myself.

Swept Of Life
I was going to Japan to write about high-tech gizmos and the strange ways of Japanese baseball. But from the beginning, I had carved a day out of the tight schedule for a side trip to Hiroshima.

I had a personal longing to visit the unexceptional city on the south end of Honshu island, five hours by bullet train from Tokyo. A visit to Japan without a pilgrimage to the spawning ground of the nuclear age would have been unthinkable.

For anyone who has lived the past 52 years, modern history begins in Hiroshima. The bomb may have been born in New Mexico, but it is not that benign, beautiful mushroom cloud rising from the desert floor that fills our nightmares.

It is the vision of Hiroshima swept of life from horizon to horizon. To be whole and alive one instant and obliterated the next. Or to wait in agony for the radiation to kill us weeks, months, even years after the visible scars have been erased.

Hiroshima is rightfully a U.N. World Heritage site, a place of great history that fascinates no matter what feelings it engenders. A totem, a warning, of what madness can be spawned by war.

If it were just that, then a visit to Hiroshima would be easier. To mourn its dead would come without hesitation.

But for many Japanese, Hiroshima is akin to Auschwitz. A metaphor for mass murder beyond human comprehension. A needless holocaust perpetrated by a vengeful, perhaps racist empire against innocent people.

As an American in Hiroshima, I was uneasy with a place that twists the complex story of World War II into simple "truths," recasting the aggressor as victim and the victim as criminal.

The memorials at Hiroshima don't show the teen-age boys entombed in the USS Arizona at Pearl Harbor, the raped and decapitated women in Nanking, or the starving American soldier bayoneted through the neck on the Bataan Death March.

Until they did, until Japan embraced its own guilt, showcased its own atrocities and accepted complicity in the barbarism that spawned the bomb, I would mute my pity for Hiroshima.

Then I saw the trike. And in a moment I was no longer sure of what I had been sure of before.

'Little Man'
Ground zero in Hiroshima today is part museum, part memorial, part graveyard and part city park.

A Shinto priest chants prayers as a small group of old men and women light incense and lay bunches of...
chrysanthemums on a small memorial underneath a clot of trees next to the Honkawa River.

Two shop girls pedal their bicycles furiously, late for work, while a couple walking their Akita stop to rest and share a thermos of tea on a bench in front of the A-Bomb Dome.

It's a Monday morning in the vast Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park built on top of the rubble of the old market center. A shady green park dotted with 30 memorials on a river island that before the bomb had been a densely packed warren of shops, houses and temples.

Aug. 6, 1945, dawned warm in Hiroshima, promising a hot day. People hurried to the district to get their daily shopping done and get back home before the sun rose too high in the sky.

Hiroshima had been largely undamaged by the massive incendiary bombing campaign that had consumed much of Tokyo and Japan's other wood-and-paper cities. But with a new army headquarters in Hiroshima preparing to fight an impending American invasion, residents worried it was only a matter of time until the fire would rain from the sky.

High above the city, a B-29 bomber nicknamed "The Enola Gay" opened its bomb-bay doors and released a single bomb with a uranium core, dubbed "Little Man." At 8:15 a.m., it exploded 1,850 feet over the city of 320,000.

Victims said it was as if the sun had come to rest on the Earth. The air turned white and silent. Then a roar erupted and winds shattered their world. Where once there were homes and factories, the blast and fireball in seconds had created a twilight landscape of ash and smoke.

More than 100,000 died where they stood. The scientific marvel, the creation of years of secret work by the greatest scientific minds in the free world, killed indiscriminately. Soldiers and hospitalized infants, munitions factory workers and 23 American prisoners of war, army generals and a 3-year-old on a tricycle in front of his father's house.

"Pika-don," survivors would call it - "flash of light, tremendous sound."

The A-Bomb Dome

More than 1.5 million people come to the Peace Memorial Park each year - legions of schoolchildren in matching uniforms and stooped senior citizens stopping at the eternal flame that will be extinguished only when all nuclear weapons are banished from the Earth.

Children drop huge bunches of paper cranes at the Children's Memorial, dedicated to a young girl who believed she would be cured of radiation sickness caused by the bomb if she could fold 1,000 of the paper birds - symbols of a long life and good fortune. She died after folding her 954th crane.

A tower marks a mound where the remains of 70,000 citizens - most unidentified - were buried in a mass grave.

The most indelible image is the Genbaku Dome, the shell of the former Hiroshima Prefectural Commercial Exhibition Hall, a five-story brick and steel building heavily damaged in the bombing.

Now a World Heritage Site, the A-Bomb Dome, as it is popularly known, is meant to be a powerful reminder of the devastation wrought on the city. Each August, descendants of the employees of the industrial center hold a service, with a white Buddhist funeral canopy set up in the former courtyard.

At one time the dome stood above nearly everything else in the city, but the 1980s brought a boom economy to Hiroshima, which has blossomed into a metropolis of more than 1 million people. The A-Bomb Dome is now surrounded by high-rise office buildings and the towering light standards of the Hiroshima Carp baseball stadium, where the wild cheers of fans can be heard echoing through the Peace Park.

The controversial centerpiece of the Peace Park is the museum and educational center. Here, visitors can listen to recordings in Japanese, English, Russian, French, German, Spanish and several other languages telling the story of Hiroshima's birth, destruction and resurrection.

There are old black-and-white movies and wartime maps. But it is the mementos of the blast that rivet - palpable evidence of the slaughter. A watch, its face partly melted, with hands frozen at 8:15 a.m. The burned, shredded dress of a schoolgirl. A broken, burned statue of Buddha. A pile of hair that fell from a teen-ager who succumbed to radiation sickness. Two bottles of sake, melted into a kind of macabre abstract sculpture by the 12,000-degree heat of the fireball.
It is a sad, solemn place. The visitors book is filled with pleas for peace and harmony from visitors who've come to Hiroshima from around the world. Others - including many Americans - write that they can only wonder how it is that such a mass murder could have been perpetrated by civilized men. I read the book. But I don't sign.

Revisionist Theories
"Memory is where the past and the future meet," Hiroshima Mayor Takahashi Hiraoka said in a speech a few years ago. But different peoples have different memories and see the past in different hues. Within days of the bombing of Hiroshima, another atomic bomb nicknamed "Fat Boy" was dropped on the port city of Nagasaki. Japan surrendered. The war was over. But the war over Hiroshima had just begun.

For many Americans, the memories of the atomic bomb are only good. Men like my father, who would turn 18 in March 1946, believe it a miracle weapon that ended the war before the war had a chance to end their lives. The Pentagon estimated that as many as 1 million American soldiers could have been killed and wounded in Operation Downfall, the two-part invasion of Japan set to begin in November 1945. The Japanese War Council had called for "the honorable death of 100 million" Japanese in defense of the home islands.

Because of the atomic bombings, soldiers on both sides did not die. Children and grandchildren were born who would never have existed. Millions owed their very existence to the twin horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that brought a sudden end to the war. Despite attempts to keep a lid on what happened at Hiroshima - Japanese survivors were barred from even talking about it until 1952 - revisionist theories surfaced within a few years of the war's end: the invasion casualty estimates were grossly inflated. Japan was ready to surrender before Hiroshima. President Truman dropped the bomb to impress the Soviet Union. In postwar Japan, people avoided Hiroshima. It was "genbaku sabaku" - the atomic desert. To this day, work crews excavating for new office buildings find bodies buried beneath old rubble. Slowly, Hiroshima has rebuilt over the ossuary of its citizens. Beginning in 1947, small memorial services were held. Within years, plans for a permanent peace memorial began to take shape.

Hiroshima is still in the grip of the bomb. Hundreds die each year from cancers caused by exposure to radiation. Today there are more than 192,000 names on the victims memorial - 52,000 of whom have died since the era immediately after the bombing.

Unrelenting Victimhood
To be an American visiting Hiroshima is like being a German visiting Warsaw or a Brit touring Dresden. To question what your country did to fellow human beings. There's an overwhelming desire to feel contrite. To say "sorry" for old wounds. It's what the Japanese want. A 1995 poll, taken on the 50th anniversary of the bombing, showed 70 percent believed the United States should apologize for Hiroshima. "Of all the historical symbols to haunt future generations, Hiroshima, as an American war crime, would be the most powerful," wrote Ian Buruma in "The Wages of Guilt," an examination of how Japan and Germany have dealt with World War II's memories. This unrelenting attitude of victimhood colors the Hiroshima museum and ultimately, for me, drains it of much of its power. For in chronicling the decimation of Hiroshima, any culpability by Japan is glossed over. Pearl Harbor and Nanking are barely mentioned. When they are, the accompanying photographs are of troops marching off to war or civilians celebrating victories. No bodies. No burning buildings.

Where, I wondered, was the famous photograph of a burned, crying Chinese baby sitting amid the rubble of Nanking after indiscriminate bombing by the Japanese?
Such images of pain, suffering and death are reserved for the victims of Hiroshima.
Hiroshima is treated as an almost singular moment, stripped of its context as the horrific culmination of
a war that evolved into a long, gruesome wedding of technology and mass annihilation.
In war, no nation is completely innocent. All who engage in combat bear some guilt.
Riding the bullet train back to Tokyo, past the postwar industrial miracle of modern Japan, I felt a sense of hollowness over Hiroshima and its memorials. It was all too big, too sterile, too distant, too one-sided. The deaths of thousands are not fittingly recalled because the living who memorialize them have not yet learned how to remember.
But months later, back in the United States, I can still see Shin-ichi's tricycle. I see it every time I push my son down the sidewalk in front of our house on a warm summer morning. And the feeling comes back from deep inside. For that little boy I cannot help but mourn. And hope that one day, I can mourn the rest.

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