

The Tale of a Strong Family

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Back home in Hawai'i, just about everyone knows about the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor. Of course we would. It happened on one of our islands. It's a part of our personal history so we should know about it. On the North American continent, however, it's a known event that could be looked up in a history book, if desired. It's not something that mainlanders know off the top of their head. I suppose it's not that surprising. I should be satisfied with the fact that mainlanders know it's what hurled the United States into World War II.

At the time, Hawai'i was not a state of the US. It wasn't declared a state until 1959, but the US Pacific fleet was there, and it was an easy target for the Japanese. The US knew of Japan's imminent attack and did nothing to increase the security. When a large group of aircraft were spotted flying towards the island, the naval base thought it was their men as they were expecting such a group to arrive. Thus, they sounded no alarm to warn people before the attack started. The barrage lasted for two hours and resulted in nearly 20 American vessels plus 200 airplanes being destroyed. More than 2,000 American soldiers and sailors died, and over 1,000 were wounded. After the attack, President Franklin Roosevelt declared war on the Japanese, and thus, the US became involved with WWII. However, that day, it wasn't just American soldiers whose lives were lost or ruined. Local civilians were also hurt and killed, and the Americans discriminated against and distrusted the Japanese-American families. One of those families was my grandmother's.

My great-grandmother Toyo Nitani, whom I call *Baban*, was born and raised in Yamaguchi, Japan. She was 19 years old when she was given a picture of a Japanese man living in Hawai'i, and she was then told that he would be her husband. At the beginning of the 20th century, photography modernized the tradition of arranged marriages in Asia. In place of face-to-face meetings, families, and matchmakers used photographs to introduce prospective couples living in different parts of the country or even across the ocean. Between 1907 and 1924, more than 20,000 young Japanese, Okinawan, and Korean women journeyed to Hawai'i to become the wives of men they knew only through photographs and letters. They were called "picture brides." Perhaps it was love at first sight, or perhaps my *Baban* believed in the tradition of parents choosing a suitable life-partner for her, but she was one of just a handful of women



who came to the island of Oahu in 1928. She married her husband the very day they officially met.

The husband she married that day was her first husband. My *Baban* married twice, and her first husband was not my great-grandfather. He was a construction worker at Punch Bowl, a volcanic crater which is known today for its Memorial Cemetery, and one day, he got hurt in a work accident and unfortunately died from his injuries. My *Baban* was pregnant with her first child—a son—when he passed. It is unknown for certain if my *Baban* was in the middle of her pregnancy or if she had just given birth to her son when a friend of her first husband married her for honor soon afterwards. That friend was my great-grandfather. The Japanese interpretation of honor can be confusing at times, but my great-grandfather was friends with *Baban's* first husband, and she would have been raising a child all on her own. So he married her, and then they had six girls together—one of them being my grandmother.

Unlike my *Baban*, my great-grandfather was born and raised in Hawai'i. Like *Baban*, his mother came to Japan as a picture bride in the beginning of the 20th century, and his parents worked in the plantation fields. It was a common occupation for Asians, including the Chinese and the Filipino immigrants, but the jobs varied from working in the cane fields to working in the pineapple fields. Both husband and wife would work long hours of hard labor for 65 cents a day, every day, and there were extractions from the pay when they bought necessary things from the shops such as food and/or clothing. A month's worth of labor could be only \$10 instead of \$19 if the workers didn't properly save their money. Then, if a couple had children, the women would bring them to the plantation fields and had them wait together while the parents worked. My great-grandfather was a worker in the Ewa plantation fields. Since technology was introduced to help with the labor, my great-grandfather was a mechanic in the machine shop fixing trucks and other equipment.

When my *Baban* married her second husband, she did not have to transfer jobs. It was the time of the Depression when she came to Hawai'i, and she was able to find work at the rice fields in Waipahu. In those times, what was good about working in the rice fields was *Baban* could earn her own food for her family instead of spending a lot of money in the plantation shop to buy it. Rice is a big part of Japanese culture, and in many cases, it is the lifeblood of their diet despite its lack of nutritional value.

Another way my great-grandparents were able to afford food without spending a lot was fishing. In the Waipahu area, there was a fishing



village near Chocolate Beach. It was called that because instead of sand, there was red dirt that made the water look like chocolate. In the present time, Chocolate Beach is called West Loch. My great-grandparents would send their children, once they were old enough, to go and do the fishing. Then, when my great-grandparents saved enough money, they were able to afford their own house and start their own business. My *Baban* became a vegetable planter and would sell vegetables and fruits in the store they opened in front of their house. It was like a little grocery store. While she was busy gardening, she would have her children watch the store. Later, they expanded their business to selling vegetables in trucks—like an ice cream truck for produce instead.

In a sense, it almost sounded like my great-grandparents were doing well for themselves to raise their children. They were smart with their food, *Baban* had her own business, and they were getting by. Then in 1940, my great-grandfather passed away from a heart attack. According to my grandmother, the day before he died he had to donate blood. In those times, blood transfusion was not perfected, and she still believes that an air bubble must have gotten into his veins, or it was an infection that led to his death. Whichever the reason, he died the next day of a heart attack. My *Baban* was then left to raise seven children by herself (or six, rather, since by that time her son was 17 years old).

Then a year later, December 7, 1941, the Japanese nation bombed Pearl Harbor and life became that much harder for *Baban* and her family.

On December 7, 1941, my grandmother and a few of her sisters were at Lower Village. It was just a normal Sunday morning for them. They were getting ready to go to church at the Honganji temple in Ewa when they all heard the faint sounds of bombs. Everyone in the neighborhood ran outside of their homes to see, but all they saw were funnels of smoke emitting from the Pearl Harbor naval base. No one understood what was happening at first. They had heard news on the radio that the US and Japan were not on good terms and that Japan threatened to bomb the US. The Americans obviously didn't take them seriously.

One of the pilots in the Japanese planes saw my grandmother and her family at the park looking over Chocolate Beach. According to my grandmother's perspective, a pilot saw young Japanese children and took the risk of flying down close enough to motion them to hide. At that time, the Americans fought back. Guns and bombs were going off, and when *Baban* saw that their house was being shot at, she knew that they were at war.



My great-grandmother and the other elders told everyone to run for the hospital that was down the hill. They believed it was safe for no enemy or ally would dare to bomb a hospital. However, they were like running cattle. My grandmother got separated from her family as all of her siblings and her mother scattered in the crowd. My grandmother remembers the children and women who were running beside her died before her eyes from either being shot at or from getting caught in the explosion of the bombs. They weren't hit by the Japanese war planes, but by the American fire. Since the Japanese planes were flying so close to the running civilians, urging them to hurry and hide, my grandmother and her family were just caught in the middle of the crossfire as the Americans aimed for their enemy.

My grandmother did not survive that day unscratched. Some of the pieces of the bomb had cut her knee and pierced through her flesh. Her wound wasn't serious and was easily treatable. However, she was alone. She arrived at the hospital with no idea of the whereabouts of her mother or her siblings. She was a scared eight-year-old little girl on her own. The battle outside was still going on, and all she could do was huddle against the hallway wall of the hospital with other scared people who came for shelter, waiting for the horrifying nightmare to be over.

When the barrage had ended and the Japanese left after their successful attack, the hospital told everyone that unless they had serious injuries that needed dire attention they needed to leave. My grandmother hadn't gotten her knee treated at the time, but in the midst of her confusion and fear, her brother finally found her. She was so happy to see someone of her family alive and broke down crying by the time he reached her. He had looked everywhere for her, and he told her that their mother and the other girls were safe and alive, although one of my grandmother's sisters suffered a serious injury to her arm. Similar to how my grandmother was wounded, pieces of a bomb penetrated her sister's arm which resulted in her staying overnight in the hospital. However, my grandmother got her knee treated and returned home that day.

The next day, it was declared that the US was at war with Japan.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the US army anticipated that the Japanese would land in Hawai'i. Troops took positions around the perimeter of all main Hawaiian Islands, and barriers were placed on beaches in order to prevent aircraft landings. All airports were taken over by the army, and private planes were grounded. Government buildings, like the Iolani Palace for example, were turned into military offices. Military courts replaced civil courts, and military law was the law of the land for



both civilians and military personnel. The Hawaiian Islands practically turned into one huge military base. Japanese-owned businesses were shut down, and many who were considered dangerous were arrested by the local police, FBI, and the army.

For weeks, my grandmother's life had gone from hard work to a living hell. No one would trust a Japanese person, even when they declared themselves Japanese-Americans. Families of other races would tell their children not to associate with them, and fliers were posted everywhere of how to distinguish a Japanese from a Chinese by analyzing the shape of the eyes. Japanese churches were being burnt down, and *Baban* and her family heard of families in the mainland who were immediately evicted from their homes and transported to one of the ten "relocation centers" in California, Idaho, Arizona, Wyoming, Colorado, and Arkansas—where conditions of the internment camps were poor and extremely overcrowded. Even Japanese families in Hawai'i were being taken away from their homes into detention centers if there was even a slight suspicion of them being spies for their home country.

It wasn't until mid-January when the FBI came to my grandmother's house and searched their home. There was news of these searches happening to other Japanese families before, so my *Baban* gathered every item she possessed from her homeland and any pictures of her family in Japan and buried them under the house. That way when the FBI arrived, they wouldn't be able to take them away from their home under suspicion of being Japanese spies. They were safe from the concentration camps. However, the radios and any sort of communication were taken away in precaution. My grandmother's brother, being 18 years old, enlisted in the American army. He was the man of the house after my great-grandfather passed away, and after the war broke out, it was either enlist or go to jail for the Japanese-American males.

My *Baban* was a very strong woman. For years, she took care of her girls on her own and she never gave up no matter how hard things had gotten. She still grew her produce and tried to sell it to the workers in the plantation fields to pay for the bills of the house. My grandmother remembers the days when *Baban* wouldn't come home till really late at night. My grandmother wasn't the eldest, but she also played her part in being strong for the family. While her two elder sisters were old enough to work in the sugarcane fields or the pineapple fields, my grandmother would watch over the produce shop after school, take care of her younger siblings, cook and do other multiple chores around the house while their mother was away. School was almost unbearable for her at times: she was called a



“filthy Jap” and she had stones thrown at her. Every year for three years, until the war was over, the FBI would come to their house to search, and every year, they would find nothing. My grandmother called it lucky that the detention centers were so packed that they could not hold everyone—otherwise, how could her family fit?

Then, after the war, after the atomic bomb in 1945, things had not immediately gone back to normal for my grandmother or her family. Her brother had survived the war and returned home, but he was never the same. My grandmother may have been too young to realize right away the difference, but the more she thought about it when she was older, she was able to recognize how quickly her brother moved out of their home for a place of his own and for solitude. War tends to have that effect on people. The things you see and experience are not so easily forgotten. For my grandmother, it was the same for her at home. No children of other races still wanted to be friends with a Jap, and business was still very hard for *Baban* to sell to people outside of the plantation. Eventually, she started doing laundry for the Filipino men of the plantation who had no wives to do it for them. Then some of my grandmother’s siblings became sick and nearly died when they were really young. My grandmother was grateful that it wasn’t the atomic poisoning from the bombing in Hiroshima and Nagasaki that was slowly killing other people whom she knew. By the end of 1945, all of the internment camps were closed down as if they never existed—trying to erase the shame of how the US treated their people. It wasn’t until 1968 when the US government tried to pay compensation to the Japanese-American citizens for the property they had lost. Approximately 60,000 people who were able to survive received it.

The damage had been done, and it cannot be so easily erased. But life continues to move on. The only thing my grandmother and her family could do was move forward or forever be trapped in the dark shadows of that past. You may not forgive, and it’ll be much harder to forget, but it is the events of our past that shape us, and reveal the roads that’ll lead us to our future.

My middle name is Toyomi—named after my *Baban*. I have never met her for she died years before I was born, but listening to her story and the trials she overcame with my grandmother, I am more than proud and honored to be named after a strong woman. And for my grandmother who told me the story, I could tell that she felt the same way about her mother.

