

## Living Like Runaway Horses

When I was a little girl, my daddy told me he was born at the mouth of the Fraser River in B.C. Now, at that time, I did not know where babies came from, and I did not really have a good concept of how long ago B.C. was, so I envisioned this great Fraser River having huge, watery lips that spit my Daddy out onto the sand banks for my granny to just pick up and bundle away. I guess I was thinking it was something like the way Venus is depicted in all those fancy paintings, floating up to shore, naked in her beautiful shell, stepping onto the beach for the first time, but for my daddy, it would have been in a much more manly and down-to-Earth way. And, of course, from that day forward, I truly believed that my daddy was older than Jesus Christ.

My grandparents had come all the way from Japan, across the great Pacific Ocean in a boat, and why they did that, I never was told. It is my belief, to this day, that my granddaddy was a crazy man. Why else would you get in a flimsy boat and go halfway around the world, across the deepest and the widest ocean, leaving a five-year-old daughter behind to be raised by grandparents, seeking your fortune in a land where you did not even speak the language? His wife, my granny, always looked so sad in every picture I ever saw of her. I don't imagine she had much say in the whole matter. You see, Japanese women were treated no better than slaves, back then. I really don't know if it is any better there, today. When I asked my daddy what my granny was like, he just said that his mother was a good obedient Japanese wife, which didn't even answer the question! I get the impression, it probably meant she never said a word and

just followed her husband onto that boat as her heart shattered into a thousand pieces, having to leave her baby girl behind. Girls meant nothing, back then, in Japan - having a daughter, I mean - but it did not mean 'nothing' to my granny. Oh, no! What I read from the terribly mournful expression in those dreary, weary eyes was despair: she had left her heart in Japan, as she dutifully followed her husband to Canada. Her marriage had been an arranged marriage and I wondered if she had ever had a day of happiness in her whole life. She experienced a lot of tragedy and that is a fact. Going through her pictures, I never saw a single smile.

In Japan, my granddaddy was trained as a doctor and as a priest. Now, in Canada, you would think that that would be a contradiction, because doctoring is science not religion; but in Japan, the healing of the body always went along with the blessing of the spirits and you could always use the help of the gods when you wanted to get better. Or at least it didn't hurt.

My daddy said they were so poor, in Canada, they didn't have two sticks to rub together, but he said they were happy . . . or at least he was. He was the baby of the family, though, so he may have been sheltered from a lot of the troubles. They lived off whatever the fishermen in the village could afford to bring them to pay for the doctoring. It wasn't much, according to my Daddy. The entire village was poor. But the way my daddy describes that time, I think it would have given the Garden of Eden a run for its money because it sure sounded like paradise.

Except for the deaths.

My granny lost two of her little boys - they would have been my daddy's older brothers - to influenza when they were young. One was only two, the other not even one year. Then my daddy's oldest brother died.

My daddy's oldest brother was a lot older, and his name was Tomasu, and so he was called Tom. He was a fisherman and would go out daily in his fishing boat to catch food for the family. One winter, a friend convinced him to go north to one of the logging camps, to make extra money that he could send back to the family. So Tom travelled far away from home to work in this logging camp and that is where tragedy struck him.

There were cut logs, all floating in the river, but some of them had gotten jammed. Tom was given a hand tool, a long metal pole with a hook and spike at the end, to try and pry the jammed logs apart. While he was balanced on the end of a log, pushing and pulling the tangled logs with the spike, a felled tree came crashing down onto the other end of the log Tom was standing on. My daddy's oldest brother was catapulted hundreds of feet into the air and landed in a mess of trees, his body being split right up the middle as he came down. When his body was brought back home, being torn almost completely in half, it was my granny who had to wash and prepare Tom's body for burial. If I could not see the agony in her eyes when I looked at pictures of her, especially those taken after Tomasu's death, then I would have had to be truly blind.

After that, my daddy's sixteen year old brother, Senji, had to leave school to work the fishing boat and catch food for the family. I never understood why it wasn't my granddaddy doing the fishing; my daddy never said. But my uncle, Senji, worked hard to

support the family and he made enough to help pay for my daddy's first year at university.

That was when World War II broke out and the Japanese were rounded up from the coastline of B.C. and put into camps, on the claims that they were spies for the Japanese government. It didn't matter that most of these fishermen were illiterate, or that they had been in Canada long before there had been any possibility of war, or that Japan had no interest in Canada as a military power. They were rounded up and everything they owned was taken from them, their land, their homes, and their boats. My daddy was at the University of British Columbia, in his first year, and all the Japanese Canadian students, of which there were about seventy-nine, were rounded up by the police and put on buses that would take them to the internment camps.

My daddy's best friend at university was the son of one of the admirals of the Canadian Navy. This friend was so furious about what had happened to my daddy, he began to send letters to my daddy making up all sorts of things about the Canadian naval ships and their disbursement and numbers. My daddy would correspond back and it was all in fun until the police read their letters and made my daddy's friend stop writing.

In the internment camp for men, my daddy and his brother, Senji, were made to build roads. They were separated from their parents and sister, who were placed in a different camp where my auntie and my grandparents were made to work on a beet farm. My daddy said it was tough because, although they were paid a little bit for the back-breaking work they did building roads, it was half the amount of money they were being charged for rent and food, for being forcibly interned. Plus, when the weather was

too bad to work on the roads, which was a heck of a lot of the time in British Columbia, they were still charged for room and board as if they wanted to be there in those internment camps. By the end of the internment, my daddy was so in debt, it took a long time before he was able to finish paying for his incarceration.

My daddy said, while working on those roads, he injured his lower back. He was laid up and could not work, so he could not afford to pay the rent and board for incarceration. He begged to be allowed to do something else other than digging roads and so they sent him east, to work on a farm in the Prairies. There my daddy learned how to farm and how drive a wagon pulled by horses. He had never seen a horse before, never mind driven one, but the farmer showed him what to do and my daddy took to it like a duck to water.

One day, when my daddy was driving the wagon, pulled by a pair of big draught horses, the horses got spooked by something. They took off like the devil had set their tails on fire and my daddy was standing up in the front of the wagon, holding the reins, rejoicing in the speed, and hollering and hooting at the excitement of that exhilarating ride. He flew by the farmer, whose face happened to be as white as a sheet, and my daddy said he had no idea what that farmer was yelling, but my daddy did the Queen's wave to him as he flashed by. Up ahead, though, was a deep ditch and my daddy thought, it was time to stop.

He pulled back on the reins. The horses did not stop; they did not even slow. He pulled harder on the reins, and yelled 'whoa'. The horses did not pay him any mind, not one iota. The ditch was approaching awfully fast and my daddy was starting to feel a mite nervous, realizing suddenly that these horses did not have the sense to stop. My

daddy said that he came to the conclusion, right then and there, that the expression 'horse sense' meant 'no sense at all'.

He braced his foot on the back of the wagon seat, and he sawed back on the reins as hard as his arms could pull. The horses fought the reins, their heads waving like blades of grass in the wind. He leaned way back, straining on the reins till he thought his arms would fall off, until he was almost parallel to the floor of the wagon, his full weight pulling now on those leather reins as if he could single-handedly lift the front feet of those horses right off the ground, and slowly, oh so very slowly, the horses began to pull up. By the time my daddy had gotten those horses stopped, huffing and puffing with foam dripping from their mouths, those horses were dripping down into the deep gully and the farmer was approaching, swearing like he would not see the sunrise.

That was the end of my daddy's days on a farm in the Prairies.

He and his brother then made their way to Toronto, in Ontario. They arrived in Toronto, in the midst of winter, with their thin raincoats and their rubber galoshes, to discover three feet of snow. Needless to say, they were mighty cold, those days, and the only job they could find was washing cars in a carwash . . . by hand.

My daddy was not fond of this work and on his days off, he walked up and down every street in Toronto from the Lakeshore up to Bloor Street and from Bathurst in the west to Cherry Beach in the east, knocking on every door, asking if they would give him a job. No one would hire a Japanese man just after the war and my daddy had a lot of doors slammed in his face, but he did not give up. Finally a man said he knew someone who would probably hire my daddy and he sent him over. The company was called J.F.

Hartz Company and that is what the boss had - a heart; he hired my daddy even though he was Japanese and gave him a chance.

My daddy worked hard for this company, which was a pharmaceutical company, and he went back to university in Toronto and graduated as a pharmacist. He bought one house, which he gave to his brother, Senji, and he bought another house for himself. He paid off what he owed the B.C. government for his internment and he brought his family to Toronto. My daddy lost his parents and brother, Senji, to illness all in the same year. He married and had us kids, three girls and one boy, and put us all through college or university. My daddy told me, as my mammy was telling me to take secretarial courses, like typing and dictation, to be the boss, not the secretary, be the doctor, not the nurse, be the owner, not the worker. For a Japanese man, he was pretty progressive; he didn't see why a woman could not do the job of a man and, throughout life, he advised he us so.

My daddy told us that terrible things happened in the world all the time, like war, like injustice, but individual people were essentially good. He said do not judge someone by the colour of their skin, or the country they came from, or the accent by which they spoke, or by the clothes they wore. Be kind to everyone and most people would be kind back. Kindness costs you nothing and you should give it freely.

My daddy lived by that rule and he was the richest man I knew; rich in terms of friendship and respect and love, and isn't that all that is really important? When my daddy was lying on his death bed, calm and accepting, he said to me that he had had a very good life.

'Would you have done anything differently? I asked my daddy. 'Do you have any regrets?'

'None,' he announced, serenely. "I would not have done a single thing differently."

Like those charging horses, running flat out and free on that wondrous day in the Prairies, he had had a good run.

And he was looking forward to the next great adventure.