

Papa, I Barely Knew You

by Elsie Doherty

Sometimes the poorest man leaves his children the richest inheritance

Ruth E. Renkel

My memories of my father are few but vivid.

One day, before I started first grade in 1945, Papa came to get me while I played with a friend, a few houses away. We hurried to the train station. Papa bought two tickets from the station master, Mr. Kahikina, a white-haired Hawaiian man. I was so excited. Papa and I were going on a special trip; my first train ride. We rode north from Papaaloa to the last stop in Paauilo where the train turned on a turntable to reverse direction for the trip back. Papa told me in Japanese, "Look out the window and watch the train turning around." I'm glad we shared that train ride.

On April 1, 1946, a large tsunami, or tidal wave as it was called then, damaged the Wailuku River Bridge and trestles along the route to Hilo. In a single day, train travel on the Big Island of Hawaii ended forever.

On that April Fool's Day, I was in the first grade. I remember Papa happy to see me walking up the hill as he rushed down the hill looking for me. Besides devastating Hilo, the tidal wave struck Laupahoehoe Point where our school

stood. Because I didn't want to go to school that morning, he was sure I was swept out to sea.



Kuichi Tanaka

Papa, at age eighteen, immigrated to Hawaii from Hiroshima, Japan, in 1912. Before leaving, he worked in a candy shop where he learned to make candy. For a treat, he would boil sugar and water until it reached the correct temperature to make taffy so my brother George, sister Carole, and I could have a taffy pull. We had so much fun until he told us to stop. Then he made a long roll and cut the candy into small pieces for us to enjoy. He also learned to make *senbei*: Japanese rice crackers. He had dreams of going into the *senbei* business in Hawaii but poor health prevented this from happening. Years later, we found in our family trunk, fortunes printed in Japanese that he carried from Japan to insert into his *seinbei* like the fortune cookies in Chinese restaurants.

He also brought memories of growing up in Japan with him. Papa built a Shinto shrine in his bedroom where he placed flowers and burned incense when he prayed. Carole and I would pray with him and follow his rituals. He clapped his hands three times and bowed from his waist before he started chanting. Once a year in February, he called us younger kids together, turned off the lights, and scattered beans and candy in each room of the house to drive away evil spirits. He remembered the feast called *Setsubun* from his childhood and shared it with us.

When school closed for the summer in 1948, Papa was fifty-four, and I was eight. My only thoughts were of playing everyday. I didn't miss the three-mile walk to school or the rainy days when I was drenched before I entered my classroom. In August I would be nine, and a fourth grader when school reopened after Labor Day.

A few years earlier, Papa and several other men who worked for the sugar company were diagnosed with cancer, *gan* in Japanese. Soon after, Dr. William Bergin, the plantation doctor, removed the cancerous section of Papa's colon and performed a surgical procedure to attach the end of his large intestine to the outside of his abdomen. Dr. Bergin, a general practitioner, delivered babies (including me), dealt with colds, and performed tonsillectomies and appendectomies; cancer surgery and colostomy procedures were not common surgeries he performed.

When Papa was released from the hospital I remember how Mama cared for him. I knew Papa was not well. We had to be quiet around the house so he could rest. Family friends and neighbors stopped by to wish him well and leave

get-well gifts. With all the *Kuichi Tanaka* fresh fruits in Hawaii, usually the gift was four cans of Del Monte fruits: sliced peaches, pears, apricots and fruit cocktail wrapped in plain white paper. We had a large supply of canned fruits in our pantry.

The last time Papa was hospitalized, I didn't realize how serious his condition was. His bed was in the men's ward at the Laupahoehoe Sugar Company Hospital. When I visited him, I would stop and say hello to my classmate, Yoshikazu Inouye. He had a serious heart problem and spent more time in the hospital than in school.

As his condition deteriorated, Papa moved into a private room. Before the sun rose on the morning of June 28, 1948, Mama received a message, through a neighbor who had a telephone, that Papa had taken a turn for the worse. She rushed to the hospital with my oldest brother. The rest of us were told to hurry to the hospital. I remember wearing my favorite hand-me-down dress; blue, with a Peter-Pan collar edged with lace and three rows of the same lace across the front bodice. The dress had puffed sleeves, a gathered skirt and a bow in back. When we arrived, Papa had already passed away. We all stood around the bed looking at him with nothing to say. Mama, my sister Yoshiko who worked at the hospital, my oldest sister, Misako, and oldest brother, Hiroshi, were with him when he died. Mama told me in Japanese, "Papa said he saw a beautiful place with beautiful flowers blooming everywhere before he took his last breath."

Papa's life was short; I thought he was very old so he got sick and died. Now I realize how young he was. Because we lived in the country, his body was moved twenty-five miles from the hospital to Dodo Mortuary in Hilo to be prepared for a Buddhist funeral and burial. The next morning, the casket was brought to our home for the wake in our living room. All day long, friends and neighbors came to pay their respects while the women from the community prepared a meatless meal for the mourners to share on the funeral day.

The funeral service was held in our living room. Rev. Izumi, the Buddhist priest, or *bonsan*, conducted the funeral before our *butsudan*, (Buddhist altar) where my mother and father prayed every day. The *bonsan* chanted Buddhist prayers as everyone sat on *zabutons*, (Japanese floor cushions) with their *gizus* (prayer beads) around their wrists which they later placed around their folded hands when they offered incense. The mourners brought *koden* or incense money in an envelope, an old Japanese custom. The amount, determined by the relationship to my father or the amount my family had given them previously, helped defray funeral expenses. All the *koden* information was kept in a ledger with names and amounts carefully recorded. Today, many families request, "No *Koden*" in their obituaries to avoid future obligations.

After the funeral, Papa's casket was placed in the hearse and taken to Kapehu Cemetery for burial. His resting place, the first plot as we entered the burial ground was next to his only brother, Yoshito, who worked for the Hawaii Consolidated Railroad Company when he died in 1926. The *bonsan* said more prayers before the casket was lowered into the ground. We were told to pick a flower from one of the wreaths and a handful of soil to toss into the grave for a final goodbye.

Immediately, we went into mourning for forty-nine days which Mama called, *shojin*: a time of devotion, dedication and vegetarianism. We were quiet, spoke in low tones, didn't eat meat, and didn't go to the movies. Seven days after Papa died, we attended a service at the Papaaloa Hongwanji, the Buddhist temple, and again after forty-nine days.

He was gone. I was sad and cried often, unable to fully understand that Papa was never coming back. I would grow up without my father.



Papa's Funeral



My name is Elsie Tanaka Doherty. I grew up on the Big Island of Hawaii on a sugar plantation; Laupahoehoe Sugar Company. Besides carrying sugar, passengers, and tourists, the Hawaii Consolidated Railroad train I rode on carried soldiers during the Second World War. I remember carrying guavas and mangoes to them. They gave us chocolates and sugar cubes. I've always wondered who they were and what happened to them.