



Kimiko Suzuki's story of

# Miyoko



My mom, Miyoko, was born in Kishiwada city in Osaka, Japan on April 28th of 1934. Her mother was Mitsuko, 28 years old, and her father Jitaro, 44 years old. They also had a 7 year old daughter, Emiko, and a 3 year old son, Akira. Her father was an internist at Momoyamab Hospital in Osaka and her mother stayed at home to take care of their children.

My mom was a shy and quiet girl and she remembers always following her mother. She was loved by her sister and brother and they looked after her well. My mom liked playing with her friends. There weren't many candies or treats around at that time, so she enjoyed eating Manjyu, a Japanese sweet treat, which their family received as a gift from relatives from time to time.

After a two year battle, her father passed away from liver cancer in September 1941. My mom was only 7 years old, so she doesn't remember this clearly.

December 8th, 1941. With the outbreak of the Second World War and lacking food, her family had to take their Kimono, Obi (belts), and other valuable belongings to local farmers and barter them for rice and vegetables. Her mom made a small income from sewing and mending to supplement their family savings, and with her sister's pay, they survived. My mom was so young, she didn't know how hard it was for her family to live, but says now that she can't express enough appreciation to her mom and sister who worked so hard for their family. In 1944 the war became very severe, with air raids more and more often, so they moved to a small village called Tsukatsuki-mura (in Wakayama prefecture which borders Osaka) near where her aunt lived. My mom was in Grade 5. There they grew their own potatoes and vegetables. The war ended on August 15th,, 1945, in Japan's defeat. She remembers being so frightened by rumors that "children and women have dreadful experiences in store".

In 1948, her mother fell ill, and then passed away in 1949. Her brother and sister had moved back to Osaka to work but it was decided my mom, who was 14 years old should stay and attend school. She now lived alone during the day, going to her aunt's house in the evenings to have a bath and sleep. She waited to take her bath last and it was her responsibility to clean the bath tub before she went to bed. Her sister and brother sent her money every month and her sister also sent small parcels containing wonderful things like a girl's magazine called "Friend of Girl Students" (Jyoshi kousei no tomo), pastries, and other surprises which made her so happy.

During this time, people were still quite poor and only about a third of all children attended high school. Her sister and brother couldn't go, but they wanted their little sister to go. With the money they sent and a scholarship and a part-time job, she managed to graduate.

On the first day of the school year in springtime, it is traditional in Japan to have a celebration ceremony which the parents also attend. But my mom's parents had already passed away and her siblings lived far away, so she attended these high school ceremonies by herself and remembers tears coming to her eyes while looking at the beautiful cherry blossoms, which for all other students were a sign of the promise of an exciting life to come.

It was about a 6 km bicycle ride to her high school and my mom made up a list of English words to memorize during her bike ride to and from school. She remembers how lonely she felt coming home late at night from school or other special events.

After my mom graduated from high school, she worked as an accountant and general office clerk at a company called Nakamura Construction. My father's friend arranged for my mother to meet her future husband, Takeshi, in 1960 when she was 26 years old, but marriage was not discussed at that time.

As she worked at Nakamura, she studied hard to become a school administrator. Ever since junior high school, she had wanted to be a teacher, but couldn't afford university. So she decided instead to take the exam to become a school administrator, and passed. She felt so lucky as this was the last intake exam for a long time, and she remembers thinking that her parents were watching over her.

She started working in school administration and was happy with her job. Then in 1963, she met her husband again. Actually, my dad saw her at Wakayama City Station and asked his friend if he could arrange to meet her again more formally. They met at my mom's tea ceremony teacher's house and she gave my dad a tea ceremony. She decided to marry him because he seemed cheerful and she felt she could have a long lasting marriage with him. And he had really beautiful teeth.

In 1964 they got married and my mom moved to Kainan, a small city in Wakayama, where my dad lived with his parents and two younger sisters. My mom's life got busier. She woke at 5:00 am every morning, did the laundry, made breakfast, and lunch boxes for my dad's sisters and herself. And then she went to work.

In 1965, my mom gave birth to a baby girl (my big sister). They named her Ikuko and she was very pretty. My mom only got three months maternity leave before she went back to work, leaving Ikuko with a babysitter.

In 1967, my mom had a baby boy, Toru. Back then, giving birth to boys was a big thing, so she was pleased to have a boy. My mother continued to work, and in 1969, she had their third child, me. Before she gave birth to me, the doctor said he was sure she would have a baby boy who would take care of her but I turned out to be a girl. My grandmother died and gradually my aunts married and moved out so the household got both larger and smaller.

My dad worked in Osaka, so he left early in the morning and came home late at night. My mom worked full time, did most of housework, and took care of us. My grandfather lived with us until he passed away in 1981. When we came home, he was always there and I loved spending time with him, and don't remember ever feeling lonely.

My mom wanted us to have a good education, so she took us to see plays and concerts whenever she could. My favourite part was eating out after. She took us to nice and special restaurants; sometimes a sushi restaurant, or a western style one with a waterfall inside and where I always ordered mixed-fruit juice and pizza with green peppers, salami, and lots of cheese.

Although she was very busy, she had extra money now, so she sometimes bought herself custom-made clothes, or piano lessons for us kids, soroban (abacus) and calligraphy lessons, volleyball, baseball and other activities. She never complained or spoke about the cost of these activities. My mom lost her parents when she was very young, so I think she wanted to put all her love into her children and make sure we were able to do whatever we wanted to do.

My mom continued to work hard until she was 58, when she decided to retire. Her oldest daughter, Ikuko, went back to work after having her first son, but as he often ran a fever and couldn't go to daycare, Ikuko would ask our mother to take care of him. Back then most people retired at age 60, but my mom took early retirement to be able to help her daughter.

In 1992, for the celebration of her retirement, and also to celebrate my upcoming University graduation, she went for a month-long trip across Canada, with me as her guide. It was her first trip abroad. She was

impressed with the great blue sky when she arrived at Vancouver Airport, the beautiful flowers at Butchart Gardens in Victoria, driving to Jasper and Emerald Lake, and seeing wild animals. Everything was new to her and fresh feeling. We drove to Banff from Jasper and then flew to Montreal, Quebec. She loved Quebec City, and talking with me, window shopping, laughing together — precious moments and memories for us both.

Two years earlier, I had decided to come to the University of Victoria for a year to study English. My mom told me she couldn't stop crying when I left Japan and worried about me all the time. But when she saw me at the arrival gate at Osaka Airport, she saw that her little girl had grown up and she still remembers what I looked like at that moment.

In 1995, I moved to Vancouver, Canada.

My mom spent several years enjoying her retirement, traveling within Japan and abroad. She joined a women's choral group, and an embroidery club, and made lots of new friends.

Her life was very fulfilling, but in 2003, when she was 69 years old, she was diagnosed with stomach cancer. Her stomach was surgically removed, which treated the cancer, but she became quite ill, couldn't eat much, and lived in hospital for five months. That summer, I went home with my first son, Aidan, to see my mom. She was sitting in a bed in the hospital, so skinny, and her hair had grayed suddenly. That night I went back to the house where my dad and mom lived and where I grew up, and cried and cried, feeling so lonely in this house without my mom. I phoned the hospital and asked her to come home. She didn't cry but said "Kimiko, I will come home in a couple of days to see you." The hospital gave her a day pass to visit her house and she did that for me. She is such a strong woman and wonderful mom.

My mom is now 78 years old, loves her home, and my father, even though they argue a lot. She is a cancer survivor, and is loved by her family and friends. Even though she is very skinny, she still enjoys singing, baking, volunteering, and helping people whenever she can.

Last summer I went back to Japan with my husband and three children and stayed with my parents. On the last day, we had a big family gathering which included her three children, their spouses, and eight grandchildren, plus her husband, for a total of sixteen. We took a family picture and there she is sitting at the front with her big, beautiful smile.

My mother's sister lived until last fall. She never married and was always close to us and my mother. When she didn't reply to a phone call, my mother took a taxi to her apartment in Osaka and found her sister collapsed on the bed from a stroke. My mother got her to hospital and was so grateful she could take care of her sister for the last month of her life.

My mom had a tough life when she was young, but now has a very happy life and wants to enjoy herself and share her happiness with other people. She always remembers, and reminds me, to be thankful and appreciative.

My mom and I live far apart, physically separated by half the world, but we are always in each other's hearts.