

# Finding Your Tribe

*By Arlene Holek*

In the '70s, my Mississauga neighbourhood of meandering squares of green lawns and cookie-cutter backsplits exuded conformity. Our school community of 750 students had only two black families and six Asian ones. My almond-shaped eyes, petite frame, and little button nose were dead giveaways that I differed from the Caucasian majority. People innocently asked where I was from. The connotation was, "You're not from this tribe. What tribe are you from?"

I started high school sporting the Farrah Fawcett hairstyle and Adidas tracksuit, like my peers. I would later learn that having the look doesn't make you part of the tribe; human connection runs deeper than that.

In tenth grade, a curved spine required that I wear a full-body brace for all waking hours. I went from cheerleader and competitive figure skater to a girl wearing a cage. Despite my baggy clothing, the contraption encasing my torso from chin to hips was impossible to hide. My ebony hair, which cascaded over my shoulders, had to be cropped short to prevent entanglement. The sudden change in my appearance shocked everyone. My face flushed as people's heads jerked around, their mouths gaping open. "What happened? What's that?" they asked, their eyes wide.

"It's a brace. It's this or surgery fusing a rod to my spine."

"Do you need to wear it forever?"

“Until I stop growing.”

My grandmother, renowned for her resilience in the face of hardship, had known the sting of sudden status change. "What must be, will be," she said.

As we sat around her kitchen table, enveloped by the sweet smell of chicken teriyaki, my Aunt Fumi turned from the stove. In her teacher's voice, she said, "We went from respected Canadian business leaders to enemy aliens in four months, thanks to the War Measures Act. How's that for a sudden status change?" We nodded. I leaned in, squeezing Grandma's hand. "Against all odds, you succeeded, and now you're here amongst the middle-class of Etobicoke."

Grandma's tone was reassuring and resolute. "We survived and thrived, and you will too." She was correct; the brace became old news, and the gossip focused on other things, but questions about where I was from remained.

Mom and I travelled to Japan in 1984. Our humble, somewhat dilapidated generational home sat amidst green terraced rice fields in rural Hiroshima. A blaring TV drowned us out, so our calls went unanswered.

Next door, a diminutive woman wearing an elegant blue and white kimono answered. "We're visiting your neighbour, my aunt, but she won't open the door. May we use your phone?" Mom asked.

"If you're kin to my next-door neighbour, you're kin to me," she said, inviting us in to make the call and stay for tea while she explained our family connection. "To seize power, Shogun Toyotomi ordered the massacre of our prominent samurai family. Two brothers were the sole survivors. I'm a descendant of the older brother, and you're from the younger brother's line." We listened, eyes bulging, silently shaking our heads at this startling tale. "When the brothers reappeared, farmers warned that Toyotomi's samurai were searching for them. They hid amongst the farmers, and when the samurai inquired, the farmers said the brothers hadn't returned." She searched our faces for understanding. "They built these houses side by side, where we live today." We smiled politely and thanked her. When our family came to retrieve us, they confirmed every detail of her tall tale.

So, where am I from? I'm a descendant of survivors who evaded the most powerful Shogun of their time and immigrants who endured unimaginable hardship. I would later learn that ethnicity does not define one's tribe. Like-mindedness does.

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