

# What you don't learn in school about love, loss and tofu



## How blueberry pancakes evoke memories of my father

**Caroline Ishii**  
Columnist

*Reflecting on life, loss, and tofu, this article is dedicated to many of my friends who have recently lost someone they loved; parent, best friend or beloved pet. It also honours our collective grief. The life we knew before COVID-19 may never come back. This piece arose from these stories of sadness, grief, and loss we continue to hear about. I hope it sheds some light and love in your world during this challenging period.*

Here's what they don't teach you in school. When you lose a loved one, it feels like your heart is breaking into a million pieces. You don't know how you will carry on without that person in your life.

Breathing becomes hard, like there is a heavy weight on your chest. Caring people around you, who have been through the same thing, tell you the aching will lessen over time. You thank them, but don't believe them.

But your heart does slowly mend, moment-by-moment, day-by-day. There will still be times when you remember the person and realize they are no longer here. There will be a deep ache in your body because you miss them so much. This never leaves, but becomes less and less frequent over time.

What they don't teach you in school is that those we love never leave us. We are connected to them, in our hearts and by unexpected things that remind us of them.

It still shocks me when I look in the mirror and see parts of my mother's face looking back. Or when I see blueberry pancakes, I

*"When I look in the mirror and see parts of my mother's face looking back. Or when I see blueberry pancakes, I think of my dad."*

think of my dad.

It's fascinating that an ordinary blueberry pancake can evoke so much emotion. My dad loved going to Golden Griddle and having his coffee and blueberry pancakes whenever I visited him from Ottawa. He would always happily

order the same thing and he would only be upset when I found a way to pay the bill before him.

Watching my dad enjoy the small things in life taught me so much. More than the pancakes and coffee, he loved sharing this time with me. He would wait for me, asking when we could go eat, like a puppy that anticipates a walk every time you are by the door. When he would see me, he would spring up from the sofa.

This is the way my dad was about sharing food with me. I liked to make my dad happy, even when I was tired of going to Golden Griddle.

How can we remember to notice and appreciate the small things with the people we care about while they are still here? I used to have moments with my dad that drove me crazy, with his constant repeating and his compulsive nature, things had to be done at a specific time and way.

Sometimes I would firmly tell him to stop, which I felt guilty about. I regret being harsh at times with him. I would love to hear him speak to me again. It's the small things we miss.

How do we end up parents to our parents? I don't think I noticed; it just happened over time. When changes happen slowly, we don't always notice them, but



PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

Columnist Caroline Ishii with her father, George Ishii.

when they happen quickly, like Coronavirus, you feel the change immediately.

That's why the pandemic is still shocking. Our world with the pandemic feels surreal, like we're in a movie theatre, and the virus will finish, just like a movie. We will walk out of the theatre, and everything will be back to the way it was before.

I wonder what it would have been like with my dad in COVID-19 times because he liked to shake people's hands whenever he could to thank them.

It is the same hand that would firmly grab the bill when it ar-

rived on the table, as if it was a conquest. And it's the same frail hand I held for a whole day in the hospital, telling him I loved him before he died.

These times are challenging. I know many of us and our parents have gone through more difficult hardships. We have it in our ancestry and DNA to survive.

There are many things we can learn about ourselves through this time. How resilient we are. How we are supernatural beings who can adjust and change, even if we don't want to. If forced into

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# Frankly speaking: History books bring back memories



## History books spark memories of V-E Day and the war

**Frank Moritsugu**  
Columnist

TORONTO — As I write this in May, the COVID-19 pandemic is going into its fourth month and leaders in Canada and elsewhere are gradually easing up the restrictions. Optimism or wishful thinking? Who knows.

Meanwhile, the remaining restrictions still prevent us from mingling

with other people. So re-reading history books and autobiographies saves me from boredom, with nothing to do each day. I've just discovered that it isn't only reading books that can bring back glimpses of one's past life.

For instance, this year was the 75th anniversary of V-E Day (Victory in Europe) on May 8, when the Second World War in Europe ended with victory on our side. What was left was the

continuing war against Japan.

As I was reading about this special V-E Day in newspapers, the memories of that day suddenly came to mind.

On May 8, 1945, I was among the Nisei who had enlisted in the Canadian Army when the ban against Japanese Canadians was finally lifted. We were there to help British forces in Southeast Asia, by interpreting the interrogation of captured Japanese soldiers and translating captured enemy documents.

Having volunteered a month before, I was among those Nisei soldiers selected to be rushed overseas without much training, because the British forces were in desperate need of interpreter-translators.

In May, our group of 22 Nisei privates were temporarily based in Toronto and given embarkation leave before being sent overseas.

*"Standing at the wayside in my khaki uniform, so new it was still a bit scratchy, made me feel so good."*

seas.

I had spent my time with my family in St. Thomas, Ont. (where they settled after the B.C. camps). On May 8, I was en route back to Toronto, where our group was based in the Horse Palace at CNE grounds, which the Army had also taken over.

The majority of the 50 or more Nisei soldiers who volunteered

after the ban was lifted, had basic training in Brantford, Ont.

On my train trip back to Toronto, I got off the train at Brantford and went into the camp to briefly see friends like Roy Ito and relatives like Dick Adachi.

Roy greeted me with, "Hi, can't talk now. We're going on parade."

I asked why, and Roy replied, "Don't you know that today is V-E Day?"

I hadn't heard the news coming up from the family home in St. Thomas.

I went out to the nearest roadway, where the Brantford soldiers would be marching to the city square for the ceremony.

Standing at the wayside in my khaki uniform, so new it was still a bit scratchy, made me feel so good.

When the Nisei members of No. 17 Platoon, B Company came marching by, they looked so smart and marched so well you'd never guess that they only had been at basic training a few weeks.

Maybe I was exaggerating because it felt so good to watch them after all those years of expulsion and the ban against Japanese Canadians joining up to fight for Canada.

After they smartly marched by and I wiped the excited sweat from my face, I went to the train station to get back to Toronto in

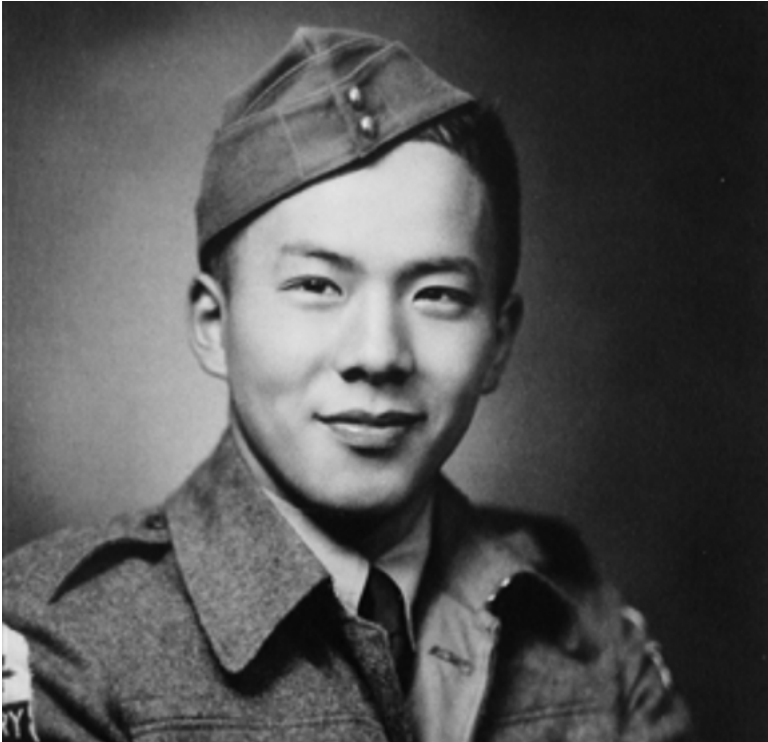


PHOTO COURTESY: FRANK MORITSUGU

Columnist Frank Moritsugu, taken a few days after he volunteered when the ban against Japanese Canadian soldiers enlisting was lifted.

time.

That was the special chunk of personal history that came into my mind as I thought about the V-E Day 75th anniversary this year.

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Another historic reminder I experienced was re-reading another book I have treasured, *It Ain't Necessarily So*, harmonica star Larry Adler's autobiography.

The early half of his 200-plus pages impressed me with Adler's accounts of how he was accepted as a soloist by some of the top

symphony orchestras in North America and Britain.

As a happy harmonica player myself, my idols have been two Canadian Nisei stars—Roy Kumano and Harry Aoki. Years before our 1942 mass expulsion, hearing Roy Kumano's harmonica band at the Japanese Hall in Vancouver was something very special. I heard Harry Aoki at the Japanese Hall as well.

The lucky break I had learning harmonica was back in 1937,

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# Listen for the beat and dance to it: Blueberry pancakes

Chef Caroline Ishii's recipe for vegan blueberry pancakes

**Caroline Ishii**  
Columnist

Before the restaurant opened, and on camera, George collapsed and had to go to the hospital with a heart condition. This shocked me: my father had been very healthy all his life, always had more energy than me, walked for hours each day, and loved being independent. I was suddenly scared that he could die. At 83, he announced that he was getting a bit sore from working all day in the garden. He had never complained before.

I began to visit him in Toronto once a month, like clockwork. I always took him on an excursion. He loved going on the ferry to Centre Island. We went to the house where I was born.

Often we went to malls to walk, and anytime I would stop to look at something, he was impatient and fidgeted like a two-year-old. I thought I was doing these monthly visits for my dad, but our visits also nourished me. We ate great food and explored Toronto, free and open as children. I didn't give myself permission to do these kinds of things in my daily life in Ottawa.



PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

Caroline Ishii's vegan and gluten free blueberry pancakes for ZenKitchen.

Going on year two at the restaurant, I was overwhelmed. I needed a time out from a life that seemed relentless and exhausting. Meanwhile, my dad was trying to fill his days, the hours and minutes dragging on. One day while driving in the car, my dad kept looking at the big face on his watch and telling me the time every five minutes. I got annoyed and told him to stop.

He said, "The days are long and boring when you don't have anything to do, and time goes so fast with you. The day is almost over!"

I could feel my heart sink in

compassion for him. I felt in my heart how most of our adult lives are spent running. When we are much older, and all the work and responsibilities are behind us, we regret, as the Buddhist teacher and activist Michael Stone put it, "running to our deaths."

"You just have to listen for the beat and dance to it," George used to say. He loved to dance and laugh. Towards the end of his life, though, what my dad loved most of all was sharing a meal with me when we had our monthly visits. In the morning, he would sometimes wait for more than an hour

in the living room, coat and cap on, ready to leave for a breakfast date. Anytime he heard a stirring in my bedroom, he would peak in and ask: "Ready for breakfast?"

At the restaurant, he greeted the server and any person who looked his way, saying, "Hi, I'm George" with a big smile. He tried to shake hands or wave a hello. When we were leaving, no matter how busy the server was, he would wait for her—most often women do breakfast service, in my experience—shake her hand again, and thank her profusely.

What my dad liked to enjoy

for breakfast, next to coffee, was blueberry pancakes. In honour of my dad, this recipe is for ZenKitchen blueberry pancakes.

**Blueberry Pancakes (vegan and gluten-free)**

**Ingredients:**

- 4 ounces silken tofu
- 2 cups organic soy milk
- 3 tablespoons maple syrup
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 cups all-purpose flour, gluten-free
- 1/2 teaspoon sea salt
- 1 tablespoon aluminum-free baking powder
- 1 cup frozen blueberries
- 1/2 teaspoon grated lemon zest
- Grapeseed or olive oil for the skillet

**Directions:**

Puree the tofu, milk, maple syrup, vanilla, and oil in a blender until smooth. Pour into a large bowl.

Sift the flour with the salt and baking powder. Mix into liquid mixture with a whisk, using light strokes just enough to combine and leaving it lumpy. Add in the frozen blueberries and lemon zest to combine.

Heat a skillet on medium-high heat. Put in oil and twirl around. Turn heat to medium and pour about one-quarter cup for each pancake. Cook on one side until the top bubbles. Flip over and cook the other side for half the time. Yields twelve pancakes.

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the Japanese Canadian internment camps during the Second World War, as were my father and his family, what would we have done?

Can we notice the beautiful life around us and within us despite difficult times? Do we focus on the news and how horrible things are, or the beauty of the small things around us? Like our family, friends, or the weather getting warmer and flowers blooming again.

In my mountain town in Japan, signs of summer are appearing. Farmers are planting vibrant green rice plants in the water fields with hopes of a bountiful season, and colourful flowers are blooming everywhere regardless of COVID-19. Nature teaches me so much.

In honour of my dad, I am sharing my recipe for blueberry pancakes developed at my restaurant ZenKitchen above. I am also providing the story from my book *The Accidental Chef*.

I wrote the story many years ago. It remains as true for me as ever, as do all taste memories of the heart. When I think of blueberry pancakes, I remember George, think of him dancing, and I smile.

When we think of loved ones who have passed, we are often sad. But can we rewind until we find a happy moment with them? When I do this, I see my father,



PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

Tofu's taste depends on the flavours added and the way you prepare it.

mother, and others I have loved who have passed, waving from a far and smiling. They say, 'you're doing good, you're okay, go on, we're good.'

*"When we think of loved ones who have passed, we are often sad. But can we rewind until we find a happy moment with them?"*

Food can be emotional first aid during these times. And it has the power of bringing those we have lost closer to us. Food can be delicious, comforting, joyful,

and whatever we want it to be. It's like tofu that many people in the West feel is dull and tasteless.

In Japan, it is a cherished art form like cheese. It's fresh, local, and made into many shapes, flavours and integrated into many dishes. It's what you do with it that matters.

Like our lives. You're doing good, you're okay, go on.

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dishes.

When I was living in Japan, I remember going to the grocery store and was awed by the variety of takuan that was available and hurried home with my treasure. But I was met with disappointment.

It was crunchy but not crispy, it was salty but not sweet, and it really wasn't all that smelly. I wrote home, desperate for the recipe to remind me of home.

A few years ago, I came across a letter from my mother, dated Sept. 5, 1989, with six pages of updates on the family: the three young grandchildren, the aunts, the uncles, the cousins, and the Blue Jays.

The last few pages were well-worn and shoyu-stained, with the family recipes for takowan, kimpira (fried gobo, burdock root) karashi napa, chashu (barbecued pork), sweet and sour sauce and sunomono (vinegar-based vegetables).

These comfort foods would make up many a late night snack, accompanied with a bowl of rice and ochazuke and maybe some fried wieners and umeboshi.

I showed the recipe for mom's "Takowan" to my daughter, Natsuki, and we laughed at the ingredients.

"Cut daikon into slices. Prepare solution of water and table salt (enough salt to make potato slice float)..."

"How big is the potato slice, how much water?" Natsuki asked, until her brother, Kento, reminded us of the principles of buoyancy.

cy.

In any case, I see my handwriting in the corner, 10 litres water, 4 cups salt, 5 daikon.

Such is the way of handing down recipes. A recipe for udon from my Auntie Nancy several years ago called for "a ladleful of powdered dashi, a thumb sized piece of ginger..."

Our cousin Michele, noted that when making black beans for New Year's osechi, "rusty" nails were to be added to the water while simmering. (Apparently the iron oxide reacts with the tannins to give it the dark black colour).

Reminiscing about Japanese food with others revealed more humorous and nostalgic stories. Lisa Uyeda, collections manager at the Nikkei National Museum, recalled the role of takuan in her family.

"Takuan is a family favourite in our house and we usually call it daikon, yellow pickle, or stinky pickle."

"You can always find a good stash of it in the fridge. Back in my dating years, if I brought a potential suitor to the house, they had to pass "the yellow pickle test."

"I think my Dad started it as a joke, but successfully eating a piece of takuan continued on whenever friends made it to the dinner table."

"It was also a good indicator for me to know if these potential suitors could appreciate my favourite pickle! Thank goodness my partner Kevin passed the test."

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