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A Trip to the Great Unknown

As I sat on the couch in my living room staring at the family portraits on the wall, only sound in the entire house is the air conditioning blowing. The cool air was pleasing after a long and hot summer day in Arizona. My mind has run away from me again, this time to a tiny remote island in the Marshall Islands called Woja, Ailinglaplap. Oh, how I longed to be back there again where only sound I would hear was the howling of the wind as it blew against the coconut and banana trees, the waves crashing on shores during high tides, and the children laughing and playing. While I was taking a stroll down memory lane, one particular incident rushed in and flooded my mind. It happened one summer evening as our family of nine gathered around for supper. My father, half German half Marshallese - a man of great stature with firm eyes and a mouth that will cut any person into pieces, looked over at me and said, "Pack your

bags, we're taking a trip to the main island." Little did I know, this trip would change my life forever!

I grew up on one of the most beautiful remote islands in the Ralik Chain of the Marshall Islands. The main island was called Majuro; the capital of the Marshall Islands. Marshall Islands consists of 29 atolls which are divided between Ralik (West) Chain and Ratak (East) Chain. The islands are located midway between Hawaii and Australia. The Marshallese people are best known for their navigation and survival skills. Life on Woja was isolated and lacked proper education, contact with outside world, and many things of a modern world, but it was full of life. It was filled with people who have so little, but have so much to give. My father's news took me by surprise. It was so unreal, I had to pinch myself several times to make sure I was awake. I thought, "An outer island girl who loves to climb coconut trees and walk around barefooted is finally going to the main island?" The excitement of our trip was soon followed by heartache. Being the oldest of seven children, I helped raise my younger siblings by making sure they were fed, cleaned and safe. Safety was the main concern living on an island surrounded by white sandy beaches and crystal clear water. The thought of leaving them kept me up all night.

The day of our flight, our family rode our bicycles to the airport. The airport was located on the far north end of the island and stretches few miles, just far enough for a 36 seater airplane to land. As soon as we got there, we were greeted by other family members, friends, and neighbors with flower leis and other gifts. The airport was built six months prior to our trip. On the west side of it stood a hut made completely out of coconut trees. The hut was wide open all around allowing cool ocean breeze, mosquitoes, and other uninvited guests to enter.

Our flight was late as usual. The colors of the airplane reminded me of the flag of the Marshall Islands. White, blue and orange with a star on the tail. The pilot, a cocky young man in

his mid-twenties came out to greet some of the bystanders. None of them complained or asked about the delay. There were shaking hands and laughing like nothing was wrong. As for me, nervousness took over my body. I felt the sweats forming, my heart rate racing, and my legs shaking uncontrolledly. We were signaled to board. As we walked to the airplane, I caught a smell of unfamiliar odor. Nothing I have ever smelled before. I stopped for few seconds to take several deep breaths in hoping it will trigger some similarity, but nothing. I brushed the smell off and climbed the stairway leading inside of the airplane. I was surprised to see how small and crowded it was.

After 45 minutes of being cooped up in a small, confined space, we finally landed at Amata Kabua International Airport located on Majuro. It was lit up with beautiful red, blue, and white lights. I wondered what the lights were for, but didn't bother to ask anyone. Majuro was known by many as "Majuro Mejen Armij" meaning "many eyes toward Majuro." To some, Majuro was the mother to all the islands in the Marshall Islands, a place depended upon by many islands in the Ralik and Ratak Chains for food, medical supplies, higher education, employment, and modern technologies. According to some of our older generation, without Majuro, Marshall Islands would ceased to exist. Three days in such a place began to take a toll on me. I wanted to go home. I asked my father to put me on the next flight to Woja. Instead, he booked a flight for me to Hawaii.

In all my life, I have never felt so lost and helpless as I felt when I got to Hawaii. There was no peace and comfort in a place filled with loud noises and bright lights. The beauty of it has been diminished by tall buildings and overcrowding roads. I wondered how their culture had survived thus far in a place filled with all kinds of people. There were people with different color and shape eyes, people with yellow and red color hair, people who spoke different languages,

people with black and white skins, people who were well dressed and those who were half naked. Nothing about this place could ease the pain and sorrow I was feeling inside, but it provided the one thing that kept me away from my family and home: school. My first year of school was very hard, not only physically or mentally, but emotionally. I felt like a child lost in the jungle not knowing which direction to go nor which animal to be friend with. I was lost, alone, and kept to myself. I went from an outgoing and full of life island girl to an anti-social and depressed one. As time passed, school got easier and the aching in my heart to see my family and home faded little by little each year. After twenty five years of not seeing my family and home, I finally returned in 2010.

I believe everything in our lives happens for a reason. There is a reason why I traveled across many bodies of waters and miles to a place away from everything and everyone I have ever known and loved. Being only 11 years of age in a foreign country with no understanding of the language and the way of life, that still survived proves that. Through faith and determination, I was able to overcome all the obstacles in my way to get to where I am at today. Now, I am a parent, I understand what sacrifices we have to make for the future of our children. This experience has taught me that nothing is impossible to accomplish if you put your mind to it.