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# Fall Down Seven

by C. E. Edmonson

The wail of sirens rose from a dozen locations as a line of Japanese pilots—they were close enough for me to see their faces—nosed their planes into long, swooping dives. Their engines were screaming now, the sound painful, as more and more planes—too many to count—followed suit, passing us at more than two hundred miles per hour.

Before me the American fleet—battleships, cruisers, destroyers, minesweepers, and a dozen other vessels—floated alongside Pearl Harbor’s docks, their engines quiet. Just below the harbor the runways of Hickam Field straddled the entrance to the inner bay. Hickam’s runways fed into the Pacific, but no planes moved on them. Jammed close together to prevent sabotage, the planes were sitting ducks for the dive bombers.

I jammed my hands over my ears as the lead plane’s bomb detached and began its long glide toward the huddled aircraft, but my eyes remained open, as if my lids had forgotten how to work. My whole body shook as I watched flames leap from the ground a hundred feet into the air. There were people down there. American soldiers and sailors, civilians too, right inside those flames, right in the heart of those explosions. I opened my mouth to yell “stop,” but the word froze on my lips. This couldn’t be happening. It just couldn’t.

When I finally got up the courage to look over at Dad, he was gone. Out on the winding road below, I saw our gray 1938 Ford rushing downhill. A hand touched me, and I jerked away before I realized it was my mother.

“Let’s get inside,” she said.

But I couldn’t move, couldn’t take my eyes away from the slaughter. I watched a long line of torpedo bombers curl around the eastern mountains to approach the harbor from the sea. I watched their torpedoes fall into the peaceful waters of the inner bay, watched them skip over the water before they settled down. Something in me wanted to mark their passage, but the torpedoes were traveling underwater. I could only wait, helpless, until one of our battleships almost lifted out of the water. A few seconds later, the roar of the exploding torpedo reached my ears to blend with the constant explosions at Hickam and Wheeler airfields.

The blasts kept coming after that, so fast I couldn’t keep track even if I weren’t terrified. Within minutes, the harbor and the airfields were covered with an oily, black smoke pierced only by jets of flame as the bombs exploded. The indescribable stench of death and destruction reached my nostrils. Still the planes kept coming. Two waves of fighters and bombers, more than three hundred planes, for two hours that seemed more like two years. And my dad was right there in the middle of the fight.

Mom finally came out to get me. I remember looking into her dark eyes, as if they might hold an explanation for the insanity, but I found only the need to protect.

“Come inside, Emiko,” she said, taking my arm. “Your brother needs you, and I need you.”

After the Japanese fighters retreated to waiting aircraft carriers, the wail of ambulance sirens replaced the whine of fighter engines. The ambulances ran back and forth between the hospitals over and over again, hour after hour. We could do nothing except choke down the fear that Dad was in one of those ambulances, or that he’d never return at all. It seemed like every ship in the harbor and every plane at the airfields was on fire.

I was inside by then, sitting on a futon couch with my arm around my brother’s shoulders. Charlie managed to fight back the tears, but his whole body trembled. My mother sat on the other end of the couch, her lips moving, hands folded. Maybe I should have prayed too, but I couldn’t stop looking through the window behind her at the cloud of smoke rising from the harbor, a shimmering curtain of black and gray that only gradually drifted out to sea. When I closed my eyes, I saw the planes again, swarming like insects as they poured down the valley or turned into the harbor, saw their bombs and torpedoes fall away.