

My Grandmother

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My grandmother always wore tweed skirts with a short-sleeved sweater, then a cardigan. She had quite a few variations on the theme, as she, along with the rest of our family, bought her clothes at the Sally Ann (Salvation Army) in Victoria which at that time had woolens aplenty as a large part of the population were English or of English descent. With this outfit she often wore a single strand of pearls, also from the Sally Ann. In the summer she wore a cotton dress, with an ever-present apron, but I mainly remember the tweed skirts and sweaters. And the brown stockings.

My grandparents came to Canada after the 1st WW, surviving through the depression with Lillian, my grandmother, teaching painting and piano, putting on plays, some of which she wrote herself, as they traveled from one small prairie town to another. My grandfather did odd jobs.

Lillian, as my grandmother was called, seems to have had many talents, painting skills among them, which she inherited from her mother, Kate Bruce, who painted china for Spode. What we do know of her family is that they were all either potters or scholars.

Grandad, the second son of a large family had a very good education but no money of his own and a rebellious temperament which added to his life and career difficulties. His family was no doubt relieved when he emigrated. In England, although he was educated as an engineer, he worked for a large estate breeding and managing their horses and initially came to Alberta, Canada, with his employer, Lord Charlesmore, to breed polo ponies in Calgary. This did not work out. I believe Lord Charlesmore went back to England. My grandparents stayed. They could not go back as they had run off from her marriage. They later had one son, my uncle Gordon.

My grandmother, of whom there are many varying stories, seems to have worked among other things, as a lady's maid, also singing and dancing on the London stage and was married to a trolley driver. She and my grandfather had a love affair and they ran off to Canada together, leaving her two children, one of whom, my mother, was placed in the Sacred Heart Convent in London, later to go into nursing at the Royal Free Hospital, now known as the London Free.

In time, after nursing in London for a year or so, my mother came out to Canada to see Lillian, her mother. It was not one big happy family as Lillian introduced my mother as her sister, not wanting anyone to know of her past life.

When I knew Lillian, they had moved from the interior of B.C. to Vancouver Island. It is cold on the Island in winter. It is cold in the interior, but not damp as on the Island. Dampness that makes your bones ache. My grandparents lived in a small cottage just outside Victoria, with a large garden. Roses... pink, red, yellow roses and row upon row of raspberries.

I remember when my mother bought them their first refrigerator. Lillian would complain that it just didn't work, having pools of water and not keeping the food cold. After several phone calls, my mother determined that Lil was unplugging the frig at night. Now, as Lil and my grandfather retired very early in the evening and as she often forgot to plug the frig in again the next morning, her complaints were real. Finally, the connection was made and all was well. Same thing with the first telephone. Lil would pick up the receiver and very tentatively ask "are you there?" This was too good for us kids to pass up. Silence would ensue, then our giggles would betray us.

Granny, as we kids called her, had a large double bed. Grandad slept in another room on a small cot tucked in a corner. The room was always dark. When he slept he covered his head with a blanket. The darkness, the blanket, the small cot, were where he retreated, reminiscent of feeling safe while deep in the trenches. The memories of the 1st WW still very much with him.

When we grandchildren stayed with them, we would all go to bed quite early. We would sleep with my grandmother in her lovely bed. The challenge was to fall asleep first, because granny snored. Oh my, did she snore. So it was imperative that one fall asleep first.

My younger sister and I would pick Oregon grapes along the dirt roads near where granny and grandad lived and make jam on her old wood stove. Often, when the pot full of berries started to warm, little worms would come to the surface. At first we were very conscientious, but soon got bored and just mashed the worms in with the fruit. The jam was always good. Nobody knew.

But what I remember most of all were the evenings when Lillian put on the gramophone and played their old English records. Then she would easily be persuaded to dance the Charleston, kick up her heels, and swing those pearls.