



Dolores Drakes's story of

**Margerite**



She wore hats, hats with veils, whenever she went to church or visiting neighbours.

They made her look mysterious and she was and indeed still is a mystery to me.

Her maiden name was Margerite Turpin.

What comes to me most is how much I don't know, it was all so long ago. I have memories of course, snapshots of memories like pictures of a trip.

I don't know exactly where she was born or exactly where she's buried, nor exactly what she died of.

To understand this you'd have to understand Outport Newfoundlanders. The one thing for certain is Newfoundland is where her story began and ended. She never left the island. Did she want to?

She was born Sept 1st, 1918.

According to my oldest half sister Dot, she was born and raised and died in the same town we grew up in – St Lawrence or its sister town Little St Lawrence, Newfoundland.

She was one of nine children, five brothers and three sisters.

"Where was she in this line up, Dot?"

"For Christ's sake, I don't know!" Dot says.

"Did she ever talk about her childhood?"

"Yes likely now, she hardly talked to me at all."

What was she like as a child, a teenager, a young married woman?

I can only speculate and imagine. Outport life before modern conveniences was rough. People worked hard, children too as soon as they were old enough. Expectations, dreams, ambitions were low. Life was about survival. The only expectation was to be tough, stay healthy and earn your keep.

Did she finish school? Unlikely at that time but more likely than the boys. She knew how to read and write. I remember her doodling on notepads, playing with letters, and I have a memory of her teaching me to do this one cold winter night.

She liked to write letters to her sister Gert who lived in New York. Did she wish she had gone with her? Aunt Gert sent us clothes and hats. My mother was the best dressed woman in the cove.

Aunt Mary, my mother's brother's wife, the oldest living member of our family, is 88 and ailing and was never too open with information at the best of times. Older Newfoundlanders are the most present people I've ever met. They rarely indulge in reminiscing the past and the future is no further than Tuesdays bingo game. What she does remember and repeats continually is that my mother was pregnant before she married my father.

Every family in the cove had 9 or 10 children, but apparently no one was having sex. Once I was sent to the store to pick up a box of Blue Biscuits. I found out later that this was the Outport woman's code word for Kotex pads.

So she grew up and married her first husband Gregory Turpin and with him she had 4 children. Dot, Howard, Walter, and Mary. Howard died at 7 months old, got a flu and died. A few years later her husband Gregory was killed in a mine cave in. Dot told me the sirens wailed and everyone waited to see who had lived and who had died. My mother was alone now with three children. What were her options in a small Newfoundland outport? She could put her children in the orphanage in St. John's and go to work cleaning houses for rich merchants. Aunt Mary and many other women did that. Or she could find another husband and keep her children. That's what she did, she found my father Randall Drake.

"Where did she meet my father, Dot?"

"Oh at the Club probably, where else?"

My father was a widower raising 6 children on his own, living in the neighbouring town. He needed a wife, so they met and married, the Newfoundland Brady Bunch. There were 9 kids now but only 4 at home. I was the love child that brought them together. Then she had my two brothers, Sonny and Gary, and never lived to see us grow up.

"What was she really like Dot?" I ask.

"How do you expect me to know what she was like? You knows how distant she was. Didn't talk much unless it was to God."

Oh yes, I remember the rosary beads.

"Was she depressed when she lost the baby?"

"She was always depressed if you ask me, and stressed."

"About what?"

"How the frig should I know?"

I have my few precious snapshot memories... Her getting dressed to go to the club with my Dad, doing my hair for church, teaching me to write sitting at our old kitchen table, doing the wash with the old wringer washer, saying the rosary at the kitchen window, waiting for my father to get back from fishing at sea. And kicking me outside when the other women were visiting.

Once I came home from school with swollen red hands. I had gotten the strap from Sister David for something or other.

"Mom, Mom, look what she did!" I cried.

She pushed her hair out of her eyes, spreading flour across her forehead.

"Well, you must have done something wrong, she's a nun after all"

I remember her coming to school for Parents Day, when I was in grade 4, on the wrong day, and the teacher inviting her to stay. There she sat in her hat and veil, while I had to do a speech. I was so embarrassed. She smiled and nodded through the whole thing.

I remember her trying to get a bumblebee out of the back porch with a broom, on the day my older half brother Jim was shot. Walter came running in the house yelling "Jim's dead, Jim's dead!"

"What's wrong with you Walter," she said, "Don't be so foolish."

And I remember the awful scream that came out of her when she realized he was telling the truth.

It was an accident, the boys firing at cans on a fence with a sawed off shotgun, and Jim deciding to twirl the gun like in the western movies.

And I remember her cleaning the house from top to bottom to get ready for the wake.

The last time I saw her she was lying in a hospital bed crying while I was showing her my new dress. I think she knew she wasn't going to make it. Only 49 she was when we put her in the ground. I was 12.

I'm tempted to fill in the blanks, to make up all the stuff I don't know, to make some sense, to give her life more meaning. I have so often thought about her and missed her because I never really got to know her. I missed her when she was alive....

Of all that was said and unsaid I think she was a lady... a lady who did all the right things and maybe didn't understand why that didn't bring happiness. A gentle, sensitive woman who lived her short life in a very harsh environment.

There are moments I can hear her voice:

"Put your sweater on now, you don't want to catch a chill.

Mind your manners.

Go on and play outside

Be good..."