



Sarah Haywards's story of

# Patsy



“Oh, yes, let’s, it will be such fun”, personified the way Patricia (Patsy to her friends) lived her life. Whatever she did, she did fully; whoever she talked to had her complete attention. She was a woman of great accomplishment and great passion. She died from complications of Alzheimer’s in 2004, as her mother had before her. I miss her tremendously. Born in Halifax, Nova Scotia on the first day of spring 1929, to John and Elsie Hue McCurdy, Patricia was a sixth-generation Nova Scotian. My father called her his “Bluenoser”. She grew up in a very happy house with an amazing mother and a younger brother Bill. Her mother had studied music at Mount Alison Ladies College (now University) and went on to teach violin and piano lessons at home. She was a chatelaine at home and in society. When her husband John suddenly died in his 50’s (1948), Elsie didn’t sell the family business, McCurdy Print, but took it over and it thrived. At that time my mother was acting in a play with a Nova Scotia summer stock company but her mother insisted she “go on with her performance” the night of his passing.

Patricia wanted a career and realized acting wouldn’t pay so she didn’t pursue it. She didn’t need money but her mother’s example made her want to support herself. She was a wonderful artist (having studied Fine Arts at Mount Alison University under Lawren Harris and Alex Colville) and had a one woman show of her paintings at the Zwicker Gallery in Halifax and at the Prince of Wales College in PEI. This passion continued throughout her life. She also studied fashion retailing for a year at Chamberlain, in Boston, and went to work as a model and fashion buyer for Simpson’s (a magazine named her one of Canada’s 20 best-dressed women in 1950) but that life wasn’t what she thought it would be so she moved on.

Her next career was as a reporter (for the Chronicle Herald and Mail Star) and she once climbed the towering smoke stacks of Halifax to report on the view of the harbour. She gave up this job when she married but picked it up again in 1966-67 when she wrote a series of stories for the Herald describing our family cruise to Nassau and the Bahamas and back.

My mother was very social person and loved people. On the day my father first took her out for a picnic, he says she also had two other dates. She dated Robert Stanfield, Robert MacNeil (of MacNeil/Leher), was engaged to someone in Boston (McChonicie) who was moving to Edmonton and she called it off saying “I can’t live there”, was heart broken by a red-headed reporter from Toronto who was called home to marry a socialite. She met Robin, my father, her handsome navel officer, at a dance in 1956 and they married under an archway of swords. They had 48 years together. My aunt Valerie tells a story of the night before their wedding: “Your father had gone off for a rowdy stag party and we ladies of the wedding group were gathered at your grandmother’s. Suddenly, out of nowhere, your mother leapt to her feet, threw her hands in the air, gave a little jig and announced to the rather startled ensemble: “Tomorrow I’m marrying the most wonderful man in the world” and then sat down. On her face was such a look of total unrestrained joy that I shall never forget it.”

After my brother and I were born, Mom returned to work at the Neptune Theatre as a publicist, running 4 miles through the Public Gardens to be home for us at lunch. Then she developed a job for herself as Curator of Education at the Nova Scotia Museum, a job she loved. She published a paperback “Early Man in Nova Scotia” and wrote articles for several periodicals including the Atlantic Advocate and Horizons.

When Bill and I were children, she created candy stores and puppet theatres out of old cardboard boxes, threw birthday parties with theme cakes, assembled “magic mile” bags full of treats and comic books for family car trips, sewed fabulous Halloween costumes (princesses, witches, fairies, tough guys) and sent letters to friends and family with pictographs illustrating all of her and our activities! She was always there

for my brother Bill and me. She was a great sounding board for all our wild ideas, believing in giving her children “roots and wings”.

Throughout her life, she was a real nature lover and took joy in sharing her fascination with tidal pools, bird watching and gardening (she became a master gardener in her 60’s) and she passed on that love to us. She spent as much time as she could painting watercolor landscapes and flowers.

After 26 years in Nova Scotia, my father, a true West Coaster, bought a hobby farm in Victoria, near the Butchart gardens and said, “Honey I’m moving to B.C., I’d love it if you would join me.”

Moving to B.C. in 1981 was difficult for Mum, as she had to leave her mother who was in a home with Alzheimer’s, her friends, and she had to give up her job at the Museum. But she was ready for an adventure. A fabulous first mate, Patsy had cruised extensively in the family sailboat in Nova Scotia and now sailed with her husband through the Gulf Islands in B.C., producing extraordinary meals in the galley. I remember her leaping into freezing cold water and climbing back on board, blue with cold, beaming a smile and announcing through chattering teeth “Oh it was lovely”.

She worked as a docent at the B.C. Provincial Museum and was a member of the Saanich Peninsula Arts and Crafts Society, SPCA and the Federation of Canadian Artists (FAC). She was proud that Peter Gzowski read her letter on the CBC about our annual Christmas tree expedition to Uncle Doug’s farm. We chose a tree so large it cancelled our small car and looked like the Christmas tree was driving itself down the highway.

Another Christmas I came home to discover my parents were having 4 cocktail parties one night after the other, each with complete menus, decorations, music, just to entertain all their naval friends who’d also retired to Victoria. My mother organized it all, was always gracious, but I think she was more like me and really preferred one on one conversations. As she forgot more and more she wrote more and more lists of who came, and what she served. She had watched her mother fade and was afraid the same thing would happen to her. But she never wavered, continuing to look after my father until finally life was too complicated for them both and she moved into the Saanich Peninsula Extended Care Hospital.

Dad visited her on weekdays; Bill and I on the weekends. Mom and I spent hours together and we had such fun bird watching, strolling through the garden, picnicking. We had always loved painting and cooking and gardening together, traveling home to Nova Scotia in 1995, and this time together was the same as before but also very different. One day it seemed she suddenly became very frail, and although she never forgot who we were, she also couldn’t attach herself to life with her same intensity.

In 2003 I was taking a singing course at Banff when one of the nurses at my mother’s care facility called saying “Come now”. I came. Mum was non-responsive and I put my head on her chest and sang (something we’d just been experimenting with at my course) and after awhile my mother started to smile. Then she woke up and smiled for three days. She was with us for another year. That time was a gift.

I would bicycle to Victoria every weekend to spend time with her – singing, reading, watching cooking shows, feeding her Pringles, cashew nuts and V8 juice to try to build up her strength for another week. She couldn’t walk or move her hand very much or speak in complete sentences, but she was still there beaming at me with such love, whenever I walked into the room.

I started to write this story then, calling her friends to find out about the early days, the broken hearts and how she didn’t always want to go on the boat with my father but did. My brother and I had a picnic

lunch with her in the garden the day before she died and made a video. She died August 1, 2004 and this story became her eulogy. I was so grateful to be with her at the end, singing her into the next realm.

Love you Mum.