



Frances Flanagan's story of

# Wilamina



Wilamina Becker, my mommy, was born on August 27, 1926 on a tobacco farm outside Momart, Saskatchewan. Her mother, Francesca (my namesake) had an incident with a married Scotsman in a barn when she was 16. Lots of mystery around the Scotsman. Anyway, to try to escape the shame surrounding this incident, Francesca's parents moved the family to a farm in Surrey, BC.

She was raised by not only her mother and grandparents, but also by her aunt and uncle who did not have any children and lived next door.

My Mom grew up in a sheltered atmosphere. I have this feeling that there was a combination of idolizing this beauty of a girl and protecting her from the wound of not having a father.

But, she often told me how the children at school teased her because she spoke Austrian and also wore old fashioned clothes to school. I remember stories of her walking home from school through the woods alone.

My grandmother, Francesca finally married when my mother was 12 for the long awaited first time and they never had another child.

My mother had a movie star beauty and personality: long curly brunette hair and green Scottish eyes. I am not sure if she finished high school but her destiny was apparent after she met my father at a high school dance and was soon pregnant at 17. They were then given some property next to my great grandparents on which to build their rancher home. My brother was born Sept. 1944, shortly after my mother turned 18. My sister, Cynthia, was born two years later in 1946.

I think times were pretty happy for them, busy with babies, assistance from all the family members, and my dad had 4 brothers who all adored my mother. Even my father's parents, who were old world Ukrainian and Polish, embraced her.

I am not sure what year my Dad moved the family to the island of Bella Bella in Northern BC, not even sure if they had built their home in Surrey yet. Dad had a job there as a shipwright and also ran the projector for the "Indian Movie Theatre".

Mom always shared with me that her time there was beautiful. She loved the wildlife and especially the whales. Her favorite painting, which hung on our living room wall, was one of waves crashing against the rocky shore: it reminded her of Bella Bella.

After a year or so, her mother, Francesca, was struck with leukemia and they came home; my mother needed to be with her. Francesca died at home and was only 45 years old. It was shortly after this tragedy that my mother's grandparents were soon gone. My mother began her long battle with depression. So, 8 years after having my sister, the doctor prescribed that she have another baby to get her mind off things.....so they had me.

How did my mother spend her days? She was never paid for work except maybe for a spell selling AVON. The women would all converge in our home around the huge black suitcase filled with Avon samples. I know that it was all a cover for her secret tea leaf reading parties. My mother seemed to attract the psychic types much to the dismay of my father.

Our home was pristine, never any clutter except maybe the junk drawer, dinner was always there and the garden was her passion, her sanctuary. The front garden was immaculate, manicured lawn bordered with every flower you could grow. Brick window box out the the front window and azaleas from the bedrooms.

The backyard was something else, on the edge of wild. My mother was not a lover of animals in the house but she would take to feeding our table scraps to all the wildlife. I now know why at one point we had seven cats living in the shed.....to keep the fat rats away.

My mother was a fabulous caregiver and always there to nurse my wounds and care for me when I was sick. One of the treats of being sick was staying home with her watching her iron as we laughed at I Love Lucy. I would love to curl up with her on the couch.

My mom was my biggest fan and always loved the fact that I wanted to be an actress and singer. When I wanted to play the accordion because one of my friends did.... she made sure that lessons were there. I was the entertainment at quite a few dinners because of my proud mother.

My mother and her faith? She was a very spiritual person, was raised a Roman Catholic but could not stay with the church because she married my father who wasn't baptized. She adopted the Anglican church and was quite involved in the church until I was around 8 or 9. We were part-time church goers, but I was in the church choir and played my accordion at a few church events. I am not sure what event led to my mother calling them all hypocrites but I was relieved to be spared the sporadic Sunday ritual. My mother always encouraged me to say my prayers before bed and would always assure me that God was listening. Still a wound for me because I was constantly praying that my Dad and Mom would stop fighting and that she would not drink anymore.

In the late 60's my Dad began to run for office for the longshoreman's union, slowly working his way to the presidency. This meant a lot of entertaining for my mother, both in our home and at business socials. I remember my Dad belittling her that she was embarrassing him, drinking too much in public. I was becoming a teenager and I witnessed my mother losing her purpose. I was rarely at home and my father was away far too much; she didn't know what to do.

Having me hadn't really helped her depression; I was just a little distraction for a while. Every year, my mother hosted the Christmas Eve dinner. She would prepare 12 traditional dishes for the 12 disciples; no meat was served in honour of the animals in the manger; a place setting for the relatives who had passed; and a bowl in the middle of the table with scraps for the wild animals. She would most often kneel at the table, say a prayer and cry for the family she still grieved. My father would go silent and brood. Undoubtedly one of the neighborhood drinkers would come by and my mother would invite them in for some Christmas cheer.

When I was around 15, my Dad admitted mom to the Hollywood Sanatorium for electro shock treatments. She hated them and would beg me to get her out of there. Unfortunately none of us had control, and she was still managing to get alcohol into the treatment centre while on antidepressants.

My father always said that he was leaving as soon as I was out of the house, so when I moved to Toronto, he left my mother for a woman/his secretary who was 30 years younger. My mother was tortured about losing her looks and getting old and this was all too much. She managed to take in a few borders to make ends meet but started really spiralling down. She would not take any suggestions from her children and when we suggested AA she would insist that this was the way she would kill herself. When I asked her what about living for her children, she would go silent and then tell me that my dad had broken her heart.

I would keep her posted of my performances and she was always supportive. Then, New Years Day 1978, she called me in Toronto to say that I had better come home, that she was going to die soon. She had said that for many years and I did not want to hear it. Seven days later, she was dead. What were her last days

like? I am tortured to think that she was alone and in pain. I am guilty of not coming to her side. I was full of regret but I was not strong enough to save her. I could not save her. I miss her. Still. Always grieving for the mother I had and for the one I didn't have.