



Louise Phillip's story of

Mary



My mother's life divides neatly into chapters, but it's far from an open book. I never know which details of her stories are richly embroidered and which are more or less told as they happened. An actress by nature and profession, she is a born storyteller. Any oral history inevitably reshapes truth as fiction, so when she said to me, "you don't know anything about my life," I assume she meant I understand only what she intends me to.

This is a little of what I think I know.

The prologue: Mary Kathleen Davies was born in the Essex town of Dovercourt, southeastern England, on November 11, 1920. Until she was 10, she thought that the Armistice Day parade, in which she marched as a Brownie, was held in honour of her birthday. Her American-born father Arthur Davies was by turns a cowboy, a soldier who fought for Canada in the trenches, and an entrepreneur who established a thriving bakery business and married his childhood sweetheart, Lily Eaton.

The middle child of three, Mary (my mother) has thought all her 90 years that her elder sister was prettier and her younger brother smarter. It's worth noting that despite her "bottle-top glasses and legs like tree trunks," she was selected as the Polyphoto Girl in wartime England and had her picture on posters all over the country.

Chapter One embraces her teenage years before her generation's lives were interrupted by World War Two. Considered the family tomboy, she loved riding with her father, but was also an avid dressmaker who sketched her own designs. For their secondary education, Mary and her sister Peggy were sent to the prestigious private school, St. Paul's, a move that partly explains why my grandfather stayed up late so often decorating wedding cakes for society affairs. Mary's yen for drama emerged from an early age in the plays she wrote and performed for friends and at school, where her acting talent was encouraged, despite school reports describing her as a "hoyden." This may have been because she was found climbing the famous organ pipes in the school chapel, where Gustav Holst was the music teacher; on another occasion she shoveled rice pudding into her bloomers and was caught when the elastic broke. Advancing ahead of her classmates, Mary managed to win literary prizes. She also studied singing and ballet. Her academic achievements fell off somewhat when she discovered boys. These included a handsome Dutch medical student, an English lad from St. Paul's boys' school, and Richard from down the street.

Chapter Two: At 19, she got engaged to Richard before he shipped out to Malaya in 1940. He was killed in an ambush almost immediately. She keeps his photo in her jewellery box. After that, this city girl with manners and tailor-made clothes joined the Land Army. I have often wondered why she chose that service over the army or airforce, but she has never elaborated. I do know she learned the hard way to plant and harvest and milk a herd of Jerseys. She pushed an ardent Italian POW off a haystack and lived for a while in a haunted farmhouse.

After she injured her back doing farm work, she was sent to work as a secretary in an aircraft factory and moved back home. Later in the war, she became engaged to Peter, the former St. Paul's schoolboy, by then a young army major. When Peter was blown up in North Africa (he survived, but their romance did not), Mary decided marriage must wait. That changed when she met dashing young Lieutenant Harold Monks in 1945. Clearly the enemy could not mess up this romance, so Mary followed through with her plans to visit cousins in the States, and left Harold for a year. They got engaged by telegram, and married three weeks after her return to London. She had left her ring in a New York washroom and had drunk his duty-free whiskey, but they married anyway in April 1947.

Chapter Three: Told she would never have children due to wartime malnutrition, Mary had me in 1949 and my brother three years later. Until 1959, three years after she and Harold sailed to Canada on the SS Ivernia, she had no plans to take up theatre professionally (she had sung at concerts for servicemen on leave during the war, and someone had written an operetta for her). Her life was taken up with being a housewife and mother.

Chapter Four: Life in their new country was financially and emotionally tough. None of their breakables survived the sea crossing. Two months after they arrived in Toronto with the princely sum of \$500 in their pockets, Mary's father Arthur died. Harold's drafting kept them going but his employers kept going bankrupt. Mary took a job in a gift store. They finally saved a down payment for a house in Richmond Hill, 17 miles north of Toronto, and shortly after, Mary joined the local drama group. She never looked back. Dad would come home from work as Mum was putting dinner on the table, and then she'd rush about in rollers and cold cream while we did the dishes. Dad would wonder why she was distracted. He never did remember when it was an opening night.

TV was in its adolescence in the early 1960s and its cameras loved Mary's delicate bone structure. Although she had professional roles in soap operas and TV dramas, and worked in summer stock, she enjoyed her roles in community theatre, and the intense social network that came with it. She won awards at the Dominion Drama Festival and was almost as well known for her performances at parties. On one memorable occasion, after a quantity of gin, she tripped and fell headlong at the feet of noted newspaper critic Herbert Whittaker, who later became a family friend.

In 1970, my nature-loving father decided to move them to West Vancouver. Mum was devastated at being torn from her milieu, but rallied, resilient as ever. She found work in Vancouver radio, TV and film, but stopped acting for a decade after her beloved Harold developed a brain tumour. He recovered eventually, and in her sixties she re-launched her career as a stage actor, appearing with local Vancouver companies including the Arts Club, City Stage and the Vancouver Playhouse, and companies further afield in Edmonton, Regina and Thunder Bay. Dad died in 1991.

Mum's last full-length role was an ageing lesbian in a one-act play called (coincidentally) Louise at UBC's Frederic Wood Theatre, in the late-1990s. She still participates in the occasional staged reading. And as her friends will attest, she remains a consummate entertainer.