



Lisa Bunting's story of

Bodil



My mother, Bodil Ingegerd Malmstrom, was born in Malmo, in southern Sweden, on January 25th 1930. She was the second of four daughters for Ture, a middle class clothing merchant, and his wife, Elsa.

There was lots of laughter at home amongst the sisters, tempered by their father's occasional nighttime bursts of alcohol-fueled rage. She was the class clown, mimicking her teachers and getting caught. Growing up, she considered herself the black sheep of the family. She enjoyed the theatre and often went to the stage door for autographs. Stuffed amongst the clothes in a walk-in closet, she playacted royal tea parties and receiving lines in the mirror; her sister, Kerstin watched her through the keyhole and summoned their mother, who also watched for awhile before admonishing Kerstin to leave Bodil alone. During the Second World War, when Sweden was neutral, the sisters were evacuated to the country.

She did not finish high school. The night of graduation, she snuck out the back garden gate, shamefacedly clutching the white sailor's cap she had not earned the privilege to wear. She went to secretarial school, and worked for her eldest sister's husband until his early death. Later, she attended the Sorbonne in Paris for a couple of years, where she studied French and worked as an au pair for an English family.

In 1955, now fluent in three languages, she became a tour bus guide in Europe. When asked by a tourist about the principle industry of the town they were approaching, she answered "Steel" just as the bus rose over a hill to reveal multiple windmills.

At the American Club in Nice, a young man approached her table and asked her to dance. "I'm waiting for friends," she replied. "Well, you can dance while you're waiting, can't you?" She looked around and, deciding that this man had the safest face in the establishment, agreed. The next day, he joined her and her friends at the beach. He was John Pearce Bunting, a Toronto-born Canadian who was touring Europe following his graduation from McGill with a business degree. He followed her tour bus in his rented red sports car until she agreed to marry him and come to Canada.

In Toronto, family and friends "swooned" at the romantic notion that Pearce had captured the heart of this shy yet vivacious Swede. Aunt Betty remembers Bodil at a party, sitting in a navy blue dress with pearl buttons all the way down, young men scattered at her feet.

In June, 1956, Mom and Dad were married in a Lutheran cathedral in Malmo. Wedding photos show the groom, freshly scrubbed, hair slicked back, wearing a tuxedo with white handkerchief and gloves, and the bride, Grace Kelly-like in a full-skirted white gown, a three-pointed crown with a floor length veil, carrying a large, cascading bouquet of lily of the valley.

They settled into an apartment in North Toronto. She was self-conscious about her accent, not wanting to be identified as "The Little Immigrant" and did her best to assimilate to Canadian ways.

On a business trip to New York, Art Linklater selected Mom out of his studio audience and asked if anyone had ever told her she looked like Kim Novak; not being a fan of the actress, she was insulted.

In 1957, Mom gave birth to her first daughter. After a miscarriage, she gave birth to me in 1960 and my brother Mark in 1962.

She regretted leaving her children crying at home with bottles and babysitters as she bent to the demands of the Bunting family's social life. In time, she became an excellent businessman's wife, cook and hostess. She wore her made-to-measure wardrobe and told dirty jokes with equal charm. She got laughs at cocktail parties with not-so-innocent malapropisms like "croin" for crotch and groin. To a group of women admiring her son in his crib, she enthused, "He's very well hung, isn't he?"

Our family moved to a brick house in North Toronto; Mom remembers those early years of raising children as the happiest of her life. She was in love with her husband, delighted to have happy, creative kids, and was busy as a stockbroker's wife, mother, hostess, and as a volunteer with the Junior League, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the National Ballet of Canada and the Swedish Woman's Education Association.

She traveled with Dad on business trips to Disneyland, South America and the Orient. The family drove to Collingwood to ski on winter weekends, always accompanied by the arrowroots Mom doled out from the front seat and the smell of the coffee she dispensed from the thermos.

We swam, canoed and sailed during summers on Logan Lake, where mothers laughingly swapped brown paper packages hiding titles like "The Sensuous Woman", and dads arrived on the weekend with fresh supplies of groceries, liquor, ice, and guests. Fathers and sons alike trolled by in their boats, hoping to catch a glimpse on the deck of the "exotic" Swedish "babe" in her bathing suit.

We moved to a larger house in the fall of 1972 and Mom enjoyed redecorating every room with new carpets, curtains, bedcovers, cushions, and modern Scandinavian furniture and lighting.

In the summer of 1973, Mom took us to France, Switzerland and Sweden while dad stayed home and worked.

That fall, after making love the night before, Mom awoke to find Dad gazing down at her. "You look like a goddess when you're sleeping," he told her. He left on a week-long business trip, and, when he returned, checked into an airport hotel. On Sunday, October 21st, he and Mom called a family meeting in the den to announce that he was leaving.

For the next year, Mom took to her bed and cried behind closed doors. Or, arms crossed, talking to herself, she paced the long, first-floor hallway, wearing a visible tread in the carpet as she awaited her husband's return. She spoke of her time in Europe as "His summer of turmoil". She was not yet aware that he was in a relationship with a woman he had met at a wedding, who later became his wife and the mother of two more children.

Over the course of the year, Mom became increasingly agitated and disoriented. One morning, we found her in her bedroom in a catatonic state. We drove her to nearby Sunnybrook Hospital's emergency ward in her nightie, coat and slippers, and she was later admitted to the psychiatric ward.

Once stabilized on medication, she became a den mother to other patients, and was allowed home two months later.

From 1974 to 1989, Mom had a number of mental breakdowns for which she was hospitalized and assigned a succession of psychiatrists, diagnoses and medications. She took anti-psychotic drugs reluctantly; along with the side effects of weight gain, dry mouth and trembling, she felt "numb", "evened out" and unable to access her emotions.

In 1976, after three years of legal separation, Mom and Dad were divorced. She stopped taking medication for the first time. She was admitted to a hospital with Dad's help, which rekindled her hope that he was coming back. She became subdued, contrite and obedient, and so the following morning the doctors released her without notifying the family and she got lost on Toronto's transit system.

She dated a little, including a psychiatric nurse at Sunnybrook, who was married with four children, sang in a barbershop quartet and whose teeth matched his yellow polyester suits. Sam attended our family

therapy sessions wearing a jade ring Dad had given Mom and we came home from school to find him trying to persuade Mom to turn her house into a group home.

Now in a North Toronto townhouse, Mom sprinkled baby powder on the floor of the basement laundry room in an effort to track the footprints of her ever-present intruders. On the front walk, she passed a neighbour in his seersucker suit, commenting: "I like your cocksucker suit." She found messages in license plate numbers and saw familiar people, some of them dead, in traffic. She followed a funeral procession to Mississauga, wearing a top hat and laughing hysterically. The family Siamese, Miko, licked herself bald.

Over the years, Mom went back to school to become a travel agent and volunteered with social service agencies, cultivating an assortment of new friends along the way. My sister and I prize our copies of her business card from that time: "Bodil Bunting, Mental Health Counselor".

In 1987, Mom's first grandchild, Zoe, was born to Brenda prematurely and with cerebral palsy. In 1989, Mom, now in a North Toronto duplex, gave her daughter and granddaughter the basement suite in her home for a couple of years.

That year at Christmastime, Mom made her last visit to Sweden with Mark. She was distrustful of her niece and nephew, who were on the same flight, and she subsequently disappeared in the Copenhagen airport. Mark and the cousins continued on to Sweden, where a missing person search was conducted and calls flew between family members across the Atlantic. Mom was finally found in a Danish airport hotel, where she had checked into a room and sat staring at a wall for three days. She was retrieved and brought to Sweden, where her mother begged not to be left alone with her, saying "She scares me."

In 1992, Mom reported her car stolen from the Eaton Centre parking lot "by joy riders". Insurance money to replace the car arrived in the mail the same day police came to the door to tell her that her car had been found where she'd left it. Upon their departure, she hastened down to the car dealership, cheque book in hand, and purchased the vehicle she'd had her eye on: Embezzlement by Virtue of Insanity.

She survived two bouts of colon cancer. Before each operation she was weaned off anti-psychotic medications and, after the second surgery, chose not to reintroduce them.

Her father, our Morfar, passed in 1979 and her mother, our Mormor, in 1991. She was unable to return to Sweden for either funeral.

On Mom's 60th birthday, January 25th, 1996, her second granddaughter, Sofia, was born.

In an effort to take a sabbatical from the voices in her head, she let a real estate agent sell her house for less than market value; she took up residence at the Summerhill YWCA on Woodlawn, where she lived on a cot in a little room for a few months until she was asked to leave for allegedly hitting another resident. She first met Sofia on a park bench at the end of that street.

Old family friends who helped her rent a unit in their condo found themselves folded into her conspiracy theories.

Her third grand child, Eve, was born on December 6th, 1999.

When the condo building was sold, the family found Mom a seniors' apartment in Sunnybrook Hospital's catchment. Bren and Mark strategized an intervention with a psycho-geriatric team. Mom humoured everyone by letting them in, serving them lunch, then asking them to leave.

At 80, Mom lacks insight into her illness, takes no medication and makes it through each sleep-deprived night and day by sheer force of will. She is wary of the telephone and keeps the blinds permanently shut. She is isolated from old friends. She dotes on her grandchildren, mailing packages of hand-crafted clothes and furniture for Sofia's dolls with the return address "Mutter's Clothing and Furniture Design". Her visits with family are limited, by necessity, to two or, at the most, three hours at a time.

She enjoys reading biographies and inspirational writing (Eleanor Roosevelt, Liv Ullmann, Anna Morrow Lindberg) and books on health and nutrition, copying favourite passages into journals. She walks through Mount Pleasant Cemetery in the early morning, as close as she can get to a forest in the middle of the city. She loves listening to jazz. When she plays French café music and spreads out the red-checked cloth, she jokingly calls her place "Bodie's Bistro".

She loves to laugh. She's still in love with Dad. And she talks to walls.