



Marion Eisman's story of

Phyliss



Two years ago, my brother, two sisters, my husband and myself were all retired. None of us have nine to five jobs. We all acknowledge this with smug self satisfied little smiles and self congratulatory glints in our half shut eyes. In this same year, my 85 year old mother, was laid off from her job. She is a legal secretary. Her boss turned 91 and felt that he only needed one of his two employees, as work is not as abundant as he hoped. My mom was devastated.

Despite the fact that she plays competition bowls and bridge and has my devoted youngest sister, Kim and her two grandchildren to distract and care for her; she would vastly prefer to be working and earning a living.

I tell my mom about our project and ask her to write a brief synopsis of her life. She does as asked and I receive a lengthy reply. She is renowned for her frugal communication skills. She hates the phone, is irritated with e-mail but is an occasional letter writer. Since 3 out of 4 of her kids live in North America and the States, this is a major cause of concern. But she makes a special effort and here is some of what she wrote:

“I was born on September 14 1920 in a house in a middle class suburb called Doorfontein, Johannesburg, South Africa. My mother came to South Africa from England at an early age. Her family was big; 6 sisters and 4 brothers. My father came from Riga and although the family name was Anzika it was changed to Wolman. He was a very handsome man but I don’t know much about him. I was the third daughter and not a welcome sight as my mother wanted a boy (she had an idea that a son would look after her in her old age). I grew up as a tomboy

“My mother used to make all our clothes, including the underwear and as I was the youngest, I had to have all the hand me downs as my elder sisters grew up. We were very independent and I remember going to the dentist on my own. I had long curly hair and my mother had it cut very short the day before school started. We moved when I was 8 to a better suburb. We had our own tennis court and I learned to play.

“When I was 12 my father died of Bright’s disease. He left us with sufficient funds but my mother, who was a very careful woman, and who could not work, sold our lovely house and bought a very small house in a much cheaper neighbourhood. I still loved tennis and swimming.

“When I turned 14, my mom decided I had had enough school and I was sent to college to learn shorthand typing and book-keeping. After 5 months the principal of the college offered me the job of secretary in his office. I was selected from about 200 students at college and felt very proud to be chosen. I earned the princely sum of 6 pounds and I had to give my mother 3 pounds for my board and lodging and pay for my tram fare, clothing, stockings etc. and I still managed to save 2 shillings a month in a savings account with the Permanent Building Society (which I still have today 70 years later).”

She goes on to tell me that she loved to ballroom dance and met my father while working for him. He was a good dancer and so they went out and got engaged and married. They had 3 kids and played bowls, tennis and golf. She did not work outside the home but baked, sewed and played bridge. “In 1956 I went with Archie (my dad) overseas to Nice, Paris, London, America and Canada which was something very different. We also took annual family holidays.”

“My biggest achievement was giving birth to 4 healthy, normal, lovely children. I won the Bowls Championships 3 years running. And I won the Bronze Championship in golf. My biggest disappointment

is that I missed the daily growing up of all my grandchildren and getting to know them well and they getting to know me. Also I was not able to learn dancing.”

My biggest disappointment on reading this letter, is my mom’s lack of emotional commentary. How does she feel about her chain smoking, tough mother wanting her to be a boy? Did she resent being yanked untimely out of school? Was she close to her uncles and aunts, did they support her when she lost her dad and on and on. She omits to share with us the considerable challenges she faces, the struggles she wages and how magnificently she overcomes some of them and how vulnerable she is to others. She seems determined to make her life mirror the much desired myths of Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty, myths for which we girls yearned.

In truth, when her handsome, dancing prince, my kind, dear, street toughened, stubborn dad began to have one too many drinks at business lunches and began to decline into the stupor of alcoholism, the dancing, traveling, sports loving tomboy princess had to transform herself into a modern, fiercely independent self supporting mother. And she did. And there were sacrifices to make. And she, being an ambitious person and a tough one, was able to make them. I think she is extremely practical and efficient but not as vigilant with less tangible matters.

When I asked my mom how she felt about her mothering skills, she thought it an odd question. She answered that she didn’t think about it; she just did it like everyone else. You had kids and became a mother. End of story. My dad was drinking too much? Deal with it alone. End of story.

My dad deteriorated and so did we all.

I remember night after night my dad would sit and drink scotch alone on his nicotine stained armchair, in a small corner of our large living room in the dark and talk to himself. My mom, downcast, would be sitting alone in another darkened room, listening to the radio. We would be in our bedrooms, lonely and silent. I remember my brother-in-law lashing out at my mom, blaming her for my dad’s addiction. “If you would dress up nicely for him and serve him appetizers and sit with him, he wouldn’t over indulge!!” Oh my goodness, the next evening my mom dressed up in black, like Betty Crocker on speed, greeted my dad at the doorappetizers on the plate... grimacing in an attempt to please and awkward in her attempt to make polite conversation. It was awful. I prayed for a resumption of glaring looks and icy silences. Two nights later we were back to normal dysfunction and it felt much better.

The helplessness, the strain of witnessing my dad’s deterioration in silence and the subsequent losses for our family, both emotional and financial, played havoc with us all but especially with my mom’s well being. I remember her being extremely irritable, unhappy, impenetrable and angry. None of us wanted to bring friends into our home. We were embarrassed and ashamed.

In contrast, I also remember that when we were sick my mom softened and was gentle with us and we felt so wonderfully safe and happy. All she had to do was sit on the bed and work out a crossword puzzle aloud, sharing her clues with us and we were in heaven. And if you could make her laugh, crack a smile, Oh! away with the rain and hello sunshiny days!! She was very critical; for example if you came home with a test result of 80%, immediately asking what happened to the other 20%. She encouraged our ambitions however whatever they were and in those days we saw her as our rock and our saviour. She kept the house running, we had a schedule and we trusted that however bad her moods, she was there for us.

I longed to have fulltime the beautiful mother who used to get all dolled up in her gorgeous dancing gown, smelt of exotic perfume and happily twirled us around just before leaving with my handsome father on a

dinner and dancing date. (I bought the fairytale, hook line and sinker). But now a lot of the time, in her place was a tight lipped, lady with curlers in her hair, in a tattered, ragged and stained housecoat grimacing as she stood at the stove boiling my dad's dirty handkerchiefs.

Shortly after my 16th birthday, I noticed that my mom was knitting pink booties. "Who for?" I asked. "For my baby," she replied. I remember feeling quite ill. I think my mom was genuinely thrilled. I didn't get it at all.

I left home and went to university in another province. Our parents both valued higher education and we were fortunate that they paid for our tuition. Once I had left home, I witnessed from a distance, the transformation of my mother to working woman and her raising of my sister Kim. She was not only responsible for earning her own money, she also engineered a restructuring of our family trust fund in such a way that a much better financial future awaited my parents.

My beloved dad passed away sadly, too young in 1989. My mother stuck by him until the end. I think she would tell us that when you get married, you stay married for better or for worse. End of story.

She is still beautiful in 2005 at 86. I recently brought her over to the States to visit my sister and myself. She is a bundle of energy, charming, game for anything and is still very alert and creative. She still loves sports and watches it avidly on TV. She loves the winners but when they start to waver, she loses interest in them instantly. She constantly talks back to the news readers which is extremely irritating. She can be a real snob and hasn't too much sympathy for the underdog.

There is also a fear in her that leads to dependency and a lack of generosity. She needs to be the center of attention, The changes of fortune in her life have left their mark. I think she sees herself as alone against the world. I would like to soothe her. And shake her. I am so frustrated. Will my real mom please step forward? Is this charming warm woman in her new fuchsia pedal pushers who is so glad to see me and is so effusive with her hugs the real mom or is the frugal, tight fisted woman who sits at home, stubbornly refusing to rejoin the book club because the dues are too high and she is still saving her money for a rainy day the authentic one? Where is this damn fairy godmother when you most need her? I want transformation to kind, contented elderly wise owl and I want it NOW!!! Before it is too late!!!

My mother did not go crazy. She did not give up. She went to work, she stuck by her man, she raised her family and helped ensure all her kids got an education. But it would seem, enough is never enough. End of story.

Her kids and her grandkids, have inherited awesome genes from our mama. She is the ultimate survivor and despite herself, unsolicited, we have inherited great strength and tenacity from her. She should be fiercely proud.