



Sharon Quirke's story of

Flo



DOLCE AND FORTE

Florence Jeanette Thompson was affectionately named “Shorts” or “Shorty” by her tall, charming father, Monty. She was, however, anything but short on spunk, impeccable taste or witchery intuition. Her life was a musical score that captured every mood and timbre. Pretty and blue-eyed, she loved to sing, dance, play the piano, and listen to the birds. She was quick to say, “No” and quick to say, “Yes”. She used baby talk and straight talk. You could talk to her; she didn’t mince words; she’d always surprise you. She lived in tiny backwoods cottages and grand mansions. She lost everything she owned and decorated homes with a credit card *carte blanche*. She lavished gifts on her loved ones. She had a doggie named Midge and one named Sir Salishan. She loved oatmeal, warm ovens, Coca Cola.

Florence was born in Penticton, BC on September 4, 1931 to a feisty redhead of Scottish descent nicknamed “Ginger” and a blonde Irishman named Monty. Twenty-five year old Margaret Jane (Fraser) Thompson, a teacher, had married twenty-two year old “AMT”, Arthur Montague Thompson, a train dispatcher and former air force lieutenant, on June 26, 1922. They moved 29 times in 26 years as Monty set up train stations all over BC – from Golden to Revelstoke and then, at Florence rooted and uprooted in town after town, making friends, leaving friends, adoring her mother’s cheerful, practical tolerance and optimism, basking in her father’s humour, energy, and precious attentions. The ice tunnel in Glacier, the turreted homestead in Revelstoke and the cozy cottage at Mara Lake in the Shuswap all burst with melody, as older sister, Anita Jane, and little sister, Flo Jean, sang their way through their nomadic childhoods. Both girls took voice lessons and Royal Conservatory music classes. The constants in their lives were a piano, and, of course, dear Mother and Father.

VIVACE

Settling in Vancouver in the 1940’s, where Monty became chief dispatcher at the downtown CPR station at the foot of Howe Street, brought some longed-for stability to the foursome. The Woodward’s soda counter was city posh, the place to be, but sometimes Florence would have to sit on the curb outside with her ice cream cone and wait for her young arrhythmic heart to steady itself. She loved her puppy companion, Midge, the fun she had cheerleading at Prince of Wales High School with her best friend, Betty Davidson, and, of course, checking out At a Shaughnessy party, something sparked with Bill, William John Douglas Arnold, a handsome, hard-working student two years her senior. It wasn’t long before there were more gatherings, sock hops and hikes up to Hollyburn Lodge with the coed crowd. Giggling with the girls was always the best, though. Studying was a challenge; socializing wasn’t.

Nursing School was next. This was Florence’s dream come true – skill, compassion, financial stability, and a future all rolled in to one. The nurse’s residence at 2825 Cambie Street, Vancouver, was a “good place”. Work was inspiring and rewarding. Florence cared for her patients, kept diligent notes and made a mean bed. She continued to gather at reunions with her nursing

CRESCENDO

Wedding bells rang out quietly, perhaps tentatively, on December 28, 1953, as Bill and Flo tied the knot and started a family. Things became pretty allegro and tiring during the years that followed. Bill did his medical internship in London, Ontario, while Flo continued to nurse. With four babies born in quick succession and a move to set up family practice in Prince Rupert, BC, the young Arnold’s plunged into involvement in the northern coastal community.

Life took shape in rainy, muddy, pulpy Prince Rupert at 1106 11th Avenue East. Mom stayed home and raised her four – Sharon 1954, David 1956, Stephen 1959, Michael 1960 – and Dad worked all hours. She was busy and hopeful, but missed her nursing. She felt the breeze of her Father's spirit on her cheek when he died at age 54, and knew he was gone. We brought her bouquets of skunk cabbage and cedar. Mom took us to kinder-gym and school. She hummed and sang and listened for the children as she scrubbed, cooked, and tidied. She played us recordings of Beethoven and Victor Borge, Sinbad the Sailor and Danny Kaye's "Hans Christian Andersen – with Tubby the Tuba." She sang us to sleep in our bunk room in what were the happiest moments of her day. "Close your pretty blue eyes and fall asleep," she whispered, and then she slipped out and cleaned and scrubbed some more. When we were sick with the measles or chicken pox, Mom served us flat ginger-ale and jello, and a hearty selection of Classics for Children: Bizet's "Carmen", Grieg's "Peer Gynt Suite", Glazounov's "The Seasons" and Prokofiev's "Love for Three Oranges" and "Peter and the Wolf".

On February 9, 1964 Ed Sullivan introduced the Fab Four, the Beatles, on his show for the first time. Mom went nuts. She danced and rocked and rolled around our basement den like she was fourteen. This is my happiest memory of her. With zesty joy, she let herself go!

The next year, she packed us all up and, by train and trailer, took us across the country to the east coast where Dad had been selected to work as chief resident of Pediatrics in the Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in Manhattan. This move she hated; she worried about the adjustment, the details, and the future. With pursed lips, she tensed and resisted another change.

Upon arrival in a peaceful suburb of New York City, Oradell, New Jersey, she made three shocking discoveries that coloured her new life in the USA. Every material possession we had – from the Stradivarius silver to our underwear – had been ransacked and stolen from a train shunted off the main track and left unattended on its way across the continent. In a Texas M.U.R.B. investment, Dad had lost all the money she had saved from her nursing work. And, thirdly, Dad was drafted by the American army to serve as a medic in Vietnam. Well, Dad begged off the draft, stating the need to support a young family; and Mom started to work graveyard (11pm – 6am) in a private hospital so we could have piano lessons.

Although Bergen County was a picturesque place, Mom's spirit changed there. A dark side crept in through the fatigue, anxiety and isolation of her life. She missed her mother and sister. My youngest brother, Michael, who was four years old, had a hard time adjusting, too. The rest of us helped the best we could.

MODERATO

When we returned to Vancouver in 1968 we lived in Marpole and then moved to Mom's dream home in Shaughnessy four years later. She was back in her old neighborhood where she'd gone to high school, met Dad and been happy. We had some wonderful family ski holidays. Mom fell in love with the bright and gentle Sun Valley, Idaho, and loved skating on the ice rink to Sonia Haney tunes. She was generous and loving; she was also a recluse and an iconoclast.

The 1550 – 35th Avenue home was a blessing and a curse. It was beautiful, but big. There was a lot of cleaning and decorating to do. It was a welcoming "Grand Central" for family gatherings, but it was also vacant and lonely for one person often on her own with a busy husband and family away. Mom got an English Cocker to spoil and listened to the chickadees trill, "Wee Willie Wee Willie." Sometimes she put her head down on the table to rest; sometimes she rested for a very long time. She loved the CBC,

Lawrence Welk and his champagne bubbles, and finding a moment to sit at the piano to play and sing “Oh Danny Boy.” Chopin was her favourite. From the upstairs bedrooms, Meatloaf’s “Bat Out of Hell”

At age twenty-two, my brother, Michael, died in a car accident. It was June 4, 1982, and his story was complicated. After bravely organizing services and family gatherings, Mom’s spirit, her heart, and her body stuttered, and her psyche darkened with sadness. Her relationship with Dad froze.

When her mother, who was eighty-eight and a going concern, passed away at Anita’s ranch in Priddis, Alberta in February, 1985, Mom’s anchor was gone. There were to be no more Harvey’s Bristol Cream and cheese nips at four o’clock in the afternoon after all the housework was done, no more shared vacations or murmured secrets with her beloved “Grannie T”.

ANDANTE

In the fall of 1985, at the age of fifty-four, Mom dropped to the floor of her bedroom, after suffering a massive heart attack. My brother, Stephen, who was in medical school at the time, performed CPR until the ambulance arrived, and had Mom transported to Vancouver General Hospital. She remained in a coma for three days. When she recovered, she found herself supported by multiple heart drugs and supplements in order to survive.

Thus began ten years of determined living in what Mom called “the black hole”. She dealt with obstacles such as medication, weight gain, nightmares and loss of strength. She was quick to be cruel, and quick to be kind. As she came home from the hospital, she sighed and said, “I guess my work’s not done yet.” She had buried a son, celebrated the marriage of another son (David – 1979), and was to host two more spectacular events at the marriages of myself (Sharon – 1984) and my brother (Stephen – 1986). She spared no expense as she served up delicate quail’s eggs with live chamber music, and she brought the house down with a keg of imported beer and a toe-tapping Irish band.

Mom was able to look chic-elegant in pistachio green Faberge silk as she continued to play the role of motherly master and commander, but her posture drooped, and her smile dimmed. She continued to love the arts. She encouraged us all to be creative. She bought my paintings, read stories to the grandchildren, dressed up as Raggedy Ann at Hallowe’en, and created Christmas magic as Mrs. Claus. She urged herself through the imperfectness of life’s givens, to create happiness for others, but sometimes had to face down despair. The most unhappy moment of her life, by her own admission, was when she sat down at the piano to play, and was not able to hum or sing a melodic note. Her vocal cords had been damaged by the intubation that saved her life in the hospital.

FINE

Her final homecoming was to find a spiritual home by the sea in Qualicum Beach, BC (Summer 1993). The sea and the sky filled her soul with song. She and Dad christened their home with the Gaelic words, “Ceol Na Mara”, meaning “Music by the Sea”. She listened to the waves, to Pavarotti and his open, sweet voice, and to old recordings of Van Cliburn tempting magic from the keyboard with his big, musical hands. The screech of the seagulls and the barking of the sea lions could always be heard in the background.

On September 29, 1995, while visiting her sister, Anita, in Calgary, Alberta, Mom died in her sleep of heart failure at the age of sixty-four. The two sisters had had dinner and then had watched Mom’s favourite movie, “Casablanca”.

We all gathered at the top of Silver Star Mountain that autumn – to sing her home, to celebrate her life, her courage and the unique gifts of love and inspiration she'd given each of us. We wrote messages on little slips of paper, tied them to multi-colored balloons, and released them into the Okanagan sunset.