



Michelle Hohn's story of

Florence



While many memories of my mother remain blurred—a wisp of her smile or a single note of her laugh—the one thing I recall vividly, are her hands; her long slender fingers, nails finely manicured and always polished in frosty, neutral shades. And while a picture does not often reveal itself in full, the image of Mom’s hands—whether lifting a coffee cup to her lips, baking, gardening, playing piano, decorating the Christmas tree, or tucking us in at bedtime—are always clear in my mind.

The eldest of two daughters born to Polish immigrants Vladislava (“Lillian” – nee Palkowski) and Alfons Mackiewicz, Florence Lillian Mackiewicz was raised in a home full of a modest kind of abundance—love and laughter. Married in Edmonton, Alberta on September 9th, 1939, Alfons was a furrier, his wife a homemaker.

Lillian and Alfons’ home was warm and welcoming, often filled with family and friends, the music of Bobby Vinton, and the aromas of old-country cooking— cabbage rolls, beet soup, and the bacon and onion steam of a seemingly endless supply of pierogies.

Florence was born on February 2, 1941, eighteen months after Lil and Alfons wed. She was a happy, chubby, healthy baby, albeit somewhat choosy with her affections, wanting to be hugged or held only if hurt. As a toddler, little Florence preferred the outdoors, entertaining herself for hours in the garden amongst the flowers (roses being her favorite), immersing herself between rows, hiding in the shade of the raspberry bushes, or setting-up tea service for her imaginary friends on the lush grass underneath the apple tree.

Florence’s sister Zenna was born in 1944, when Florence was three. Charged with her care, she took Zenna everywhere, never making her sister feel like a tag-along, protectively standing-up for her at school and at home.

A straight-A student, Florence also took piano lessons and played beautifully. She hoped to teach piano one day: her idea was to have students come to her house for lessons. But once she was married with children, a husband and home, her rather entrepreneurial plans never materialized. Neither did one other unrequited dream: a vacation in Hawaii.

Florence became a striking young woman—5’8”, slender and small-waisted, with pale blue eyes, a flawless complexion, and light brown hair that she always wore short. Like her hands, her arms and legs were long and elegant, and she had an enviable skin tone that transformed each summer into Mediterranean bronze.

Maintaining the illusion of ‘good girl’ throughout adolescence, Florence dated more boys than her parents knew about – especially boys who drove convertibles – because that was ‘important’ in those days. She also snuck her share of lemon gin and beer, and only close friends and her sister knew that she smoked.

Many spoke of Florence’s ‘presence’; an often head-turning lightness and elegance when she walked into a room. She had a lovely laugh and a good sense of humour, but her social trademark was sharp wit and offering the snappy comeback. She loved to dance, belonged to the curling club and a bowling league, and was a good pool and card player – particularly ‘hearts’.

Florence always ‘dressed’ to go out; her sense of style came easy – her outfits coordinated and polished in a breezy way. She loved to dress in bright, fun shades, especially her favorite colors of turquoise and pink. And she loved her jewelry (much of it costume) as well as matching shoes and purses.

Red roses remained her favorite flower and, just like baby Florence, she continued to be selective with her affections into adulthood—quiet and reserved until she got to know someone. To those few, Florence was described as a warm, approachable person, a loyal friend and confidante.

After graduating grade 12 with honours in 1958, Florence surprised everyone by choosing not to go to university, declaring she already had a good job as a key punch operator at Medical Services Inc. (MSI): She did not want to waste her time or her parents' money.

MSI was where Florence met Edna, who would become one of her closest friends. Because they lived just two blocks apart, Edna and Florence walked to and from work together every day. In those days women didn't wear sneakers or loafers, so the pair traversed the miles in stiletto heels and pencil skirts, in all-weather conditions, over difficult – and sometimes precarious – terrain; gravel roads, snow, and even railroad tracks in places!

Florence also met the man who would become her husband through work in 1964, when they were both 23. Having been promoted to supervisor of her department, it was Florence's job when one of the machines went down to call a technician from International Business Machines (IBM). Enter Gerald Wayne Hohn—6'4", handsome, with black hair, blue-grey eyes, and large capable hands. By day he was professional and clean cut, and off-hours he wore a leather jacket, played guitar, and drove a little black MG. On his second maintenance call, Gerry asked Florence to an IBM hayride.

Florence and Gerry dated for a little over a year enjoying movies and parties, going to the park, and particularly Stage West Dinner Theatre before he proposed. They bought and (against both common practice and the views of her Catholic parents), moved into their first home with their cat "Puss". They married soon after on November 6, 1965 in Edmonton at St. James United Church, honeymooning in Yellowstone Park the following spring.

The newlyweds enjoyed their first three years of marriage, just the two of them, documented meticulously by Florence in albums filled with family, friends, travel adventures, and exquisitely-hosted holiday dinners, captioned with hand-written block lettering in the white photo borders. Through these albums, Florence captured how she prioritized the events of her life—what people and places were most significant and 'worthy' of inclusion.

Florence and Gerry's firstborn, Michelle Marie, arrived on December 29, 1968. Once I was on the scene, Mom became even more domestic, quitting her job to take care of our home and family, a role she took immense pride in. She thought of her family first and herself second. She loved to cook, sew, garden, and make sure everything was 'just so'.

I had Mom and Dad's attention to myself for close to five years before my brother, Jeffery David, was born on February 5, 1974. Mom loved her 'little king' with all her heart; her family was now complete.

Mom and Dad were equally engaged in our parenting, perhaps Mom more so with Dad working full time and traveling for business. She was a strict disciplinarian, but also respected our decisions like when I told her I was not interested in ballet lessons or becoming a "Brownie". Mom loved taking my brother and me to parks and swimming pools in the summer and outdoor skating rinks in the winter. She wanted us to get fresh air, use our imaginations, and play. Knowing there would be plenty of time later in life for domestic chores, she often shooed us from her sewing room or kitchen in contrast to our father who encouraged us to stay close and involved in the garage, workshop, or while being 'barbeque king'. That said, she would

always call us back to lick the sweet remnants off the beaters or let us sit on the edge of the tub to watch her do her hair or makeup.

Mom was very good to Granny and Grandpa – and they adored her.

Countless hours were spent at their chrome and formica kitchen table. Granny would press clothing and talk in Polish; her adult girls sipping Nescafe and responding in English. Grandpa preferred to stay out of the ‘woman talk’, but that never prevented Mom from trying to include him or kissing the top of his balding head while he sat in his recliner in front of the television.

Family life was simple and budgeting was a priority. Mom trimmed our hair (a regular source of conflict between us when my bangs came out crooked), sewed window coverings and clothing, baked our birthday ‘money’ cakes, and was a disciplined coupon shopper. She was also conscientious about Dad’s work wardrobe; suits were expensive, so she would wait for the annual sale at Army and Navy and do the alterations herself – as good as any custom tailor. The one permissible luxury was her mink coat, which she proudly donned during the deep freeze of Alberta winters.

Both Mom and Dad enjoyed the rock music of the day, but Mom seemed to need music. As soon as Dad left the house for work she would turn on the radio, filling the house with the Electric Light Orchestra, Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves, or songs with a beat like the Lido Shuffle that she’d teach us to dance to. She’d have me turn down the volume while she talked on the phone, perched on a barstool with her index finger twisting through the coiled telephone cord. Music was always on in the car too, where Mom would sing and tap her rings against the steering wheel while she drove.

Mom’s love of flowers remained apparent. She bordered the front of the house with geraniums, mums, and snapdragons and tended fruit trees, rhubarb, and hot chili peppers (for Dad) in the back. With whatever we didn’t eat fresh, Mom made crumble or jams and jellies. She often had flowers in the house—a vase of her peonies, daffodils from the supermarket, or sweet peas from Grandpa’s garden.

Summers between 1966 and 1974 were spent at our cabin just outside Edmonton at Wizard Lake; fun times enjoying water sports, quiet, lazy afternoons, and barbeques or bonfires in the evenings. Dad was an accomplished water skier and Mom liked to float on the lake on the Dad-made ‘barge’, accompanied by a Caesar and a Harlequin romance.

Our life may have been simple, but it was predictable. And stable. Until early 1977, when Mom discovered a lump in her left breast. In what may have been the most defining moment of her life – she hesitated.

She first confided in her mother; her trepidation about what could happen to her and her family, including the fear that a mastectomy would ‘compromise’ her idea of womanhood. It was close to a full year before Mom sought medical attention. Our competent, determined, intelligent, detail-oriented, take-care-of-everyone-else Mom somehow neglected to take care of herself.

After a biopsy and breast cancer diagnosis in February of 1978, Mom quickly underwent surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy. However, her situation was aggressively metastatic from the outset and by fall of 1979, the cancer had traveled to her brain, and shortly thereafter, to her lungs and liver. Mom died on March 26, 1980 at the age of 39, when I was eleven and my brother only six.

And precisely like the other times I recall her busy and active hands in such vivid detail, I remember exactly how Mom’s hands looked—so strangely still—one placed elegantly over the other on her lovely suit, nails beautifully polished, in her open casket.

Thirty-five years later, I am – through opportunities like My Mother’s Story – more connected with Mom now than ever. I feel her alongside me during witty banter amongst friends, when I am doting on my guy, or as I ‘dress’ to go out. I can laugh and accept that fussing with the Christmas decorations until they are ‘just so’ is in my maternal DNA. I see Mom’s love of music and her gentle, sometimes a little introverted, nature in my brother.

I imagine Mom’s version of the afterlife to be much like the Hawaii she longed to see. Perhaps she is strolling along a white sand beach, the skirt of her sundress billowing gently with the south Pacific breeze, or maybe she is gazing into glorious sunsets from a veranda framed by the exotic and delicately fragrant flowers she would have truly loved.