



Rhonda Perry's story of

Beryle



When I started writing my mother's story, it didn't feel right. When I changed the story to be in my mother's voice, it worked. The facts became clear, and I was able to understand how she may have looked at her world. My sisters and I were very proud of our mother, who passed in 2008. She was our cheerleader and never wavered in her support of us. I hope that I have done her beautiful spirit justice. Here is my mother's story as I imagine it, in her voice.

All my life there was an unanswered question, a lie about my birth. It was a riddle that no one would answer.

My name is Beryle Maxine. I was born on October 9, 1927, in a rural community outside Ottawa, Ontario. My mother, Jenny, was eighteen and unwed when I was born. Her parents had both passed and she was living with her brother, but had no means to support me. She took a job on a farm, working for the Mackie family as caregiver to Granny Mackie, an invalid. Granny Mackie had two grown children, Florence and Borden. Aunt Florence was a teacher at the one-room school house in the community, and Uncle Borden ran the dairy farm.

My mother cleaned, baked, cooked and took care of Granny Mackie. She worked hard and I was her shadow. When I was old enough, my job was to collect the eggs, but I was always terrified of the roosters.

The first five years of my life were carefree and happy. Aunt Florence started taking me to school with her. I loved it; she was a wonderful teacher. We would ride in the horse and buggy, and when it snowed there were sleigh runners for the buggy. I learned to print and read.

Mother was busy, but seemed happy. She laughed and sang; she was my world.

When I was six, she met a young man named Floyd. They dated for a few months and then announced one day that they had married. I was not happy about having him in our lives and felt scared around him. They told me that they were going to live in Ottawa, but that I could choose to stay on the farm with Florence, if I wished. How could I lose my mother? Even though I loved the farm and Aunt Florence, I could not imagine not being with my mother.

I moved with them to Ottawa and we lived in a two-bedroom apartment with Floyd's parents. I had to sleep on the living room floor, scared, uncomfortable. I cried a lot.

I was instructed to call my mother's husband 'Father'. His mother, Grandmother Johnson, was cold and didn't like me or my mother. She called me 'Jenny's daughter'. Floyd's father, Pop Johnson, on the other hand, was friendly and kind to my mother and me.

I started school in Ottawa, but it was not like school with Aunt Florence. I was left-handed and that was not acceptable. When I was caught using my left hand, the yard stick would come crashing down on my desk. I quickly learned to print with my right hand.

Soon I had a baby sister. Her name was June. She was very cute with naturally curly, thick, blond hair. People said June looked like Shirley Temple. Everyone doted on her, and Grandma Johnson treated her like a princess.

Soon after June was born, we moved to Vancouver. Both my mother and father worked at many jobs to keep a roof over our head. My mother ironed and cleaned houses. Floyd was an usher at the Varsity

theatre, a robot in a store window and had a newsstand in the stock exchange building. We often had boarders staying with us.

I was still afraid of Father. He was a stern disciplinarian, and I seemed to always be in trouble. When he raised his voice at me, I would tremble and wet my pants. Then I got the strap for sure. If my mother tried to intervene, he would yell at her and threaten to tell her secret.

As I got older, I got involved with friends and school clubs and loved it. I dreaded going home. He started accusing me of letting boys kiss me and touch me. I hated him and hated watching my mother become more and more withdrawn. She became sick with rashes and her hair started falling out. Around that time, they got involved in numerology and changed their names. I refused to do the same. I was almost eighteen, and they did not force me to change my name.

After graduating from Britannia High School, I lived with my girlfriend's family and started working. My first job was with the RCMP. Japanese born citizens were being sent back to Japan. My job was to check them off on the ship's roster. It was a sad time, and occasionally I would see kids I had gone to school with and their families. They were embarrassed, and so was I.

My next job was in the office of Woodward's Department Store. I was making good money and spending it as quickly as I got it. I had beautiful suits, hats, shoes, purses and credit! On the weekend I would go to The Embassy dance hall with a group of friends, or sometimes we'd rent a cabin on Bowen Island and go to the dances there. It was fun to be footloose and fancy-free.

About this time I met Ed. He was a couple of years older and loved to dance. I would often see him at The Embassy. One day I got invited to a birthday party. Ed was there and we hit it off. He was a great sport and would escort me and several of my girlfriends to the dances. For my 20th birthday, he took me dancing to The Roof, on the top floor of the Hotel Vancouver. Dal Richards was playing and we danced the night away. At the end of the evening he asked me to marry him. I was on cloud nine.

We set our wedding date for June 26, 1948. Around that time I asked for my birth certificate. My father presented me with one naming him as my father. I told him I knew he was only fourteen years older than me and didn't even know my mother when I was born. He was adamant that he was my father and my mother stood behind this story, too. It made me sick, but I tried not to show it. After my wedding my parents and sister moved to California. I missed my mother terribly and worried about her health. I missed my sister, too, but didn't worry about her. Father was never as tough on her as he was on me.

Ed and I lived with his parents while our first house was being built. Now married, I was immediately let go from Woodward's, but I managed to get another job in the offices at Zellers. I became pregnant and we looked forward to the birth of our first child. Our son was born with many problems and did not live more than a few days. It was a very sad time.

We moved into our new home and a few months later I discovered I was pregnant again. Nervous and excited, I delivered a healthy baby girl, Rhonda Joan in 1951. Next came Cheryl Ann, in 1954. When I was expecting again, we moved to a beautiful new home in Burnaby on a brand-new street with lots of young families. Lori Jean, a healthy nine-pound baby girl, came in 1957 to complete our family. I quickly made friends with several young mothers and we formed a coffee klatch on Stratford Street, laughing and crying together, sharing our lives as our children grew.

Around that time my mother became quite ill. My father called from California to tell me that she had a tumour. It was removed, but mother did not bounce back and was very depressed. I thought it might help her if the skeletons came out of the closet, but my mother's relatives stuck to the story that Floyd was my father. I knew this wasn't right, but I couldn't fight through the lies.

Our girls grew up and we struggled along. Ed developed an inner ear illness with attacks that affected his equilibrium and hearing. The pain made him difficult to live with, and it was hard on our family. I put on my happy face and didn't let on there was trouble behind closed doors.

When Rhonda got married and had a baby, I was ecstatic about my sweet granddaughter, and it seemed to make Ed happier too. Three more came into our expanding family. It was wonderful to have small children in the family again.

When my mother passed in 1989, I thought I might find the truth about my identity, but it was not to be.

The following summer, Aunt Florence came out to Vancouver to go on an Alaska cruise. We brought her to our house for dinner. When we were driving her back to her hotel, I asked her to tell me who my real father was. She said, "You're Floyd's daughter," the old lie. I told her I knew that I wasn't, that I remembered him marrying mother and that I always wondered if her brother wasn't my real birth father. Everyone who mattered in this would soon be gone, and there wouldn't be anyone alive who knew the real story. We parted that night with the lie still in place.

The next morning Florence called. She wanted to set things right and didn't want me to think Borden was my father. She told me the story of how my mother had been seeing a boy in town and became pregnant. At the same time, he was seeing another girl, and she was pregnant, too! She was from an influential family and the boy was persuaded to marry the other girl. My mother had no one to fight for her. Florence said that the boy had stayed in town for many years and had three more children with his wife. Finally some answers! As far as Florence knew, his wife had died and he had moved, but she wasn't sure where, maybe to Ottawa.

I placed an ad in the Ottawa personals, looking for him or any information about him. A woman called, asking why I was looking for her father. I told her that he may be my father too. She asked how old I was, and when I told her, she said, "I have a sister the same age, so he couldn't possibly be your father." I asked her if she would pass my name and number on to him. The next day the phone rang and the caller said who he was and asked why I was looking for him. I told him who my mother had been and that I believed he might be my father. "You might be right," he said. At last! He asked me to visit him and said he wanted his children to know about me. It felt so wonderful.

When I went to Ottawa he welcomed me and introduced me to his son, my half-brother. We had a lovely visit and kept in touch by phone for several years until he passed. I was so glad to have found him while he was still alive. My half-brother kept in touch, but his sisters did not want to know me. I didn't want anything from them, I was happy knowing the truth.

My birth father's name? In a way it was no surprise – his name was Riddle, Don Riddle.

The question had been answered, the mystery solved.