



Carollyne Conlinn's story of

Violet



My mother celebrated her 90th birthday with a cruise through the Panama Canal, reclaiming her first married name (Clark), writing a resume on her new iPad and taking a job as an executive assistant. They say Capricorns are late bloomers, and although she has always been a trendsetter, Violet seems to have been born to show me how it is possible to be resilient and graceful through significant change

On January 14, 1921, Violet Jesse Rourke was the 9th child born to Edward and Effie Rourke on their farm in Little River, on the outskirts of Quebec City. She was the only one of her ten siblings to be birthed in Quebec's Jeffrey Hale Hospital. Perhaps it was because two of her sisters had died as babies before Violet that the doctor was taking precautions. It's certain that she was given extra care to make sure she survived and thrived. It may also be this "special" status that paved the way in later life for her role as the family matriarch.

They brought her home to the busy horse farm her father operated. In that home Violet experienced the arrival of electricity, running water and flush toilets. From the beginning, I think, she was the glue between her older siblings and the younger ones who followed her. She tells the story about her mother asking her to step up and sing at her grandmother's funeral. She became the one her brothers confided in and her sisters enlisted to help out with broods of nieces and nephews who came along while she was still a teenager.

Yet she found her own way – breaking from the family church to attend the Salvation Army during the war. It might have been because of a certain young man she fell in love with, but she stayed even after he went missing in action overseas in World War II. Violet completed her training at Bart Secretarial School and took a job as secretary in the maintenance department at the Anglo-Canadian Pulp and Paper Mills. Although she would never seek the attention, I imagine how all the men would come into the office just to have a few minutes with the beautiful young woman who kept things running so smoothly.

None of them made the grade to boyfriend, because her heart was stolen by Willie Clark, her younger brother Buddy's motorcycle pal from a neighbouring farm. Her plans were put on hold when her mother became ill, and she and her sister Doreen became dedicated care-givers during their mother's final battle with breast cancer. Violet remembers introducing Willie to her mother and waiting for her approval. Effie thought Willie was a fine match for her daughter, but warned that his family might be a challenge. Although Effie didn't live to see Violet and Willie marry six months later on July 3, 1944, her words proved to be true.

After a romantic honeymoon cruise up the Saguenay River, the young couple moved into the upstairs apartment over her in-laws, and Violet struggled for her mother-in-law's approval during her first years as a young wife. She wasn't a great cook in the beginning and remembers the shameful day she lost the blade for the meat grinder, only to have it returned by her mother-in-law, who had found it in the garbage! I was born in that house and can only remember being doted on by that same grandma. When my younger sister Janet came along three years later, the house was getting too cramped. Things got much better when Willie built a new home for them on the same farm, with a field of clover between the houses. Violet was now the mistress of her own house and things seemed lighter.

Within a year the entrepreneur in both my parents showed up when Dad built tourist cabins across the highway to capture tourists on their way to Quebec City from Montreal. Violet became the business manager, looking after the books, the cleaning staff, greeting the tourists and making sure they were made welcome for the night. Willie continued to work the farm and dream of retiring. He expanded the business with a modern motel behind their new home, and Violet expanded her duties to handle the extra

work. They began to serve breakfast in the dining room, and I remember Mom breaking down one morning when she was pregnant with my youngest sister. It was too much for her, and before long the breakfast idea was dropped. She was navigating the work-life balance, and life won that one. It was certain that Dad counted on her to operate the motel business as his trusted partner.

My parents' dreams were halted when Willie was struck with a mysterious illness in the fall of 1959 at age 45. They both took their first airplane to Montreal so Willie could receive treatment at the Royal Victoria Hospital. Violet had to leave him after a week to care for her children and the business. She remembers begging God for help. That same day Willie signed himself out of the hospital and phoned her to say he was coming home. It didn't mean he was getting better though, and six months later, on January 23, 1960, he died of cancer in the hospital where Violet had been born. She was a widow at age 39, with three young daughters. I remember the day of the funeral – she was in the kitchen making tea and started to cry. Her sister Rita put her hand on her shoulder and said, "Now dear, you don't need to cry, we're here." Violet remembers it as cold comfort. Instead she stifled the tears, and I'm not sure she has ever cried for him since. Willie remains the prince of her dreams.

With many decisions to be made that winter, one thing she knew she wanted was to continue operating the business. In the spring, as she was opening the doors of Clark's Motel, it seemed like a bad dream. The Dixie Cup salesman asked to see "the boss." Hearing that Willie was dead, he warned her that a woman could never successfully operate a tourist business. That day she made up her mind that she would keep it open for five years and then decide! She did exactly that at a time when women's liberation didn't have a name.

The other decision she made was to continue with our family plans to send me to church-operated boarding schools in Ontario, then France, then California. Looking back I can see how hard that would have been to have her fourteen-year-old daughter leave when she needed the help at home. Instead, she took in young women boarders to help with my sisters and lighten her load.

During the non-tourist season, she experimented with different jobs, including a move to Ontario to become assistant dean of women at the boarding school I was attending. She also dealt with the complicated legalities of selling the farm, following through on Willie's dying wishes. She still lives on the interest from that sale. When all the proceedings were complete, she celebrated by taking herself, her three daughters and nephew Dereck, who was living with us, on a memorable Atlantic cruise and road trip through Europe.

She was a working single parent for twelve years before she married again – this time to a divorced man she met at a single parent support group. She re-married at age 52 and entered the most difficult period of her life, with a man who did not disclose that he had been diagnosed with schizophrenia. In some ways it was her most resilient period. Violet created a strong network of women friends and immersed herself in her church and spiritual practices. She rose above controlling and often soul-destroying circumstances to create a vibrant life for herself. Like her mother, Violet became a spiritual leader in her community. In a university setting her Bible studies would have earned her a graduate degree.

Separation from her girls and their families became a perplexing challenge when we all moved to the west coast. She was here for the birth of both my children and maintained contact with all of us, despite the distance. On her extended visits, she began to create a network of friends in Vancouver. Yet it was the diagnosis of breast cancer at 82 that tipped the balance of her life path.

After a recurrence, and needing radiation, she knew that staying in her Ontario home of 30 years would not let her get the care she needed. Instead she came to Vancouver for treatments and to test out what it would be like to live here. After six months of testing and wrestling with the rules of her faith, she decided to proceed with separation from her second husband. Violet was 84. Her greatest achievement was telling her truth and acting on it.

From that day forward, she began a new life. Living with my sister, she is the hub of the household. Always ready to put a meal on the table or share a cup of tea. Violet is a traditional hostess – the table is laid with linen and fine china. She dresses with style and has a good eye for fashion, which she freely shares with her children and grandchildren.

The phone is her lifeline. She stayed in contact with brothers and sisters, making frequent trips to Quebec City and Halifax to be with her siblings while they were well, and while they were dying. In 2011, she said good-bye to her youngest sister and the last of her immediate family. The extended family has adopted her as their mother. She gets calls, emails and letters from her nephews, nieces, their children and a wide circle of younger women she has mothered and mentored through the years. She is central to the new church community she joined, attending Bible study and church every week.

She has a youthful attitude towards life and it gives her great delight to tell people her age and have them respond in shock, “You can’t be 90! You look 70!” Wherever she goes, everyone treats her like royalty – care-givers bring her gifts, doctors make house calls, her hairdresser fusses over her like a son.

Her self-styled mental health program includes two Scrabble games with a friend every week – each usually wins one game. She is a very competitive player with the rest of us and delights in beating the younger crowd. Several years ago my sisters, Mom and I created The Heart and Soul Millionaires. We meet periodically to witness changes in our lives and champion or challenge each other on our projects. The rhythm of those meetings has created a deeper and expanded connection; they always include both tears and belly laughs.

Her experience as Secretary-Treasurer of the Quebec Protestant School Board is now activated as the business manager for my sister’s business. She has always kept her own financial records and still has ledgers from the motel days, showing what she spent to send me to boarding school in the early days of her widowhood. Her finances are always current, and her daily records are tallied to create an annual picture for the next year’s planning. She has pre-paid her funeral expenses so she won’t be a burden to the family.

What she would say about herself is that she is resilient through her faith. What anyone who meets her would say is, Violet is a woman of grace, style and a role model of creative self-responsibility. Writing her story shifted my focus from the old wound of losing my father at a young age to celebrating the woman who has been my cheerleader and friend for my whole life. For everyone who meets her, Violet is an oasis of peace, joy and love in a turbulent world.