



Pat Ceraldi's story of

Dorothy



Dorothy Marrian MacDougall was born on April 30, 1918, while the Great War raged in Europe. Her father, Donald John MacDougall, and his American-born wife, Agnus O'Sullivan, already had four young children – Loretta, Jean, Tom and Cecil – when little Dorothy arrived. Her father, a Canadian hotel manager, and his family lived behind the café on the main floor of the only hotel in Radisson, Saskatchewan.

Her father, often transferred, moved his family from hotel to hotel. Among their playgrounds were the old Jasper Park Lodge and the MacDonald Hotel in Edmonton. Dorothy dreamed of being a nurse, but had to leave high school in grade nine to stay home when more children joined the family. The birth of three babies in her mid-40s put Agnus in bed for months. Dorothy became the substitute mother of Don, Lloy and Pat.

The Depression hit Canada and the large family hard. Now living in a rented house in south Edmonton, Dorothy walked the High Level Bridge to downtown, braving the winter winds with only a sweater and shoes lined with newspaper to cover the holes in her soles. She took food coupons to the store to exchange for food staples needed by the family. Other MacDougall aunts and uncles lived nearby, and Dorothy babysat their children for extra money. The “Kissing MacDougalls” loved parties, drinking, fighting and making up. They were also very musical, and Dorothy had the ability, after hearing a tune, to pick out melody and chords on the piano, so she was a welcome part of this large, boisterous family.

Dorothy grew into a beautiful young woman, despite a freak accident which left her with a physical trait that would bother her for the rest of her life. While she refueled the basement furnace, it blew up in her face, burning off all her eyelashes, eyebrows and some of her lovely hair. Her hair re-grew; her lashes and eyebrows did not. Dorothy began what she called “painting” on her eyebrows; a daily task she would never ignore. Black Irish, with her oval face, ivory skin, hazel eyes and jet-black wavy hair, she had many suitors. At seventeen, her first job was as an elevator operator in Edmonton. Her wages went to help her family.

She was a normal teen going to movies and dances with friends, until she discovered that her fiancé had betrayed her with her best friend. Dorothy immediately dropped out of her social group, finding it hard now to trust anyone, and concentrated her efforts on family, especially her father at the hotel. There she met one of her father's friends, Daniel McMillan, who was thirteen years older than Dorothy and a man of considerable wealth, having been a successful prospector in the North West Territories and Yukon. He wanted a wife; she wanted security for her family. At nineteen she married him and left Edmonton and her family for a new and different life with Daniel.

1939: war was declared. Daniel enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force, and he and Dorothy were transferred around air force bases in Ontario. At 35 Daniel, considered too old to be sent overseas, was posted as flight sergeant at the St. Thomas Air Base. Here Dorothy gave birth to two daughters, two years apart. Susceptible as she was to miscarriages, each pregnancy meant lying in bed for months. Her mother in law came to help out, making it quite plain that Dorothy was not good enough for her son. One daughter lived; one died. Her second daughter, Georgina, died in her arms when she was three weeks old. Daniel decided Dorothy was too ill and fragile to see the gravesite, something that would haunt her for years.

Married life for Dorothy meant solitude. Her husband was generous with his wealth and provided for her and her extended family. But the friends they had were more her husband's age and rough. Dorothy loved to cook and through devoting herself to the concerns of other's above her own, she became very compassionate – more so than anyone I have ever met.

After the war Daniel started his own diamond drilling company. Suddenly Dorothy's life changed again. Her husband took his family to remote drill sites in northern Manitoba, where they lived in tents. Dorothy was assigned the duty of cook for the drilling crew, spending hours over an old wood stove, preparing breakfast, lunches for them to take and then the supper meal for when they returned after dark. She learned how to saw logs, chop wood, handle the stove, get water from the lake and light a kerosene lamp, all on her own since, with the men gone, she was alone, except for her small daughter. Electricity: non-existent. Bears and wildlife: a constant worry. It was a hard life, but with inherited Irish/Scot determination and a smile she coped. She oversaw the cuts, bruises and injuries of the men on site and soon became known in the extended area as "the nurse". She now realized her dream of nursing by teaching herself what she could and putting her knowledge to use.

As her daughter got older, it became necessary to leave the absolute wilderness for civilization and school. Her husband and his father, Con, scrounged the area around Phantom Lake, Manitoba, for old lumber and trees to be hauled by horse-drawn cart to their property on Beaver Lake Road, just outside Flin Flon. There was no electricity; the house was heated by a cast iron potbelly stove in the main room and a wood stove in the kitchen. Her kitchen cupboards were wooden orange crates nailed on the wall, light came from kerosene lamps. But her home was considered "modern", as she had a special small room with a chemical toilet – not an outhouse as the other neighbours had. She had the honor of emptying the "honey can" out back in the muskeg when necessary.

It was a lonely if vigorous life, as her husband was away at drill sites most of the time. Her joy came from visits with Con, her fur trapper father-in-law, whom she loved very much. In the evening she played the piano, while he played the fiddle. She helped him hang muskrat hides to dry in the rafters of their basement. Winter months meant putting her daughter's clothes in the woodstove oven to heat before dressing her in them before the school bus arrived. Despite the hard life, and a white streak now in her hair from headaches, she remained a very proud and beautiful woman. Her clothes and necessities came from Simpson's or Eaton's catalogues. With her open-toed, high-heeled shoes, red painted toenails and fingernails, skirts and sweaters to match and coloured eyebrows, she would be ready for her prearranged taxi ride into town to get her groceries, have tea and visit.

As the years went by, more people moved into the area and a community hall was built. Mom became treasurer of the centre and always had a pot of coffee on at home, ready for her new neighbours to drop by. She was also known as the "nurse on call".

In 1950, with the death of her father-in-law, the family moved to Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. Her sister Jean and family moved into their basement suite. Mom was excited to finally have family close by. They had a wonderful time together, until Mom and her sister had a falling out which wasn't resolved for many years. Within two years her husband struck it rich and decided to move them to Toronto.

In Toronto she lived in a luxurious home, professionally decorated, but the loneliness was overwhelming. Her daughter, now a teenager, was at school; her husband often away at drill sites. For the first time in her life, she had nothing to fight for and no one to give to. My father, when he was home, was a mean drunk, which made making friends difficult. Mom developed agoraphobia, a condition she would fight the rest of her life.

In 1955, her father died. Dorothy was devastated; he was her light. At the funeral in Vancouver, she fell downstairs and suffered the miscarriage of a son no one knew she'd been carrying. Surrounded by family, she had their support. Alone in Toronto, she coped with her sorrow by sipping sherry from a china teacup.

She would send a taxi to the liquor store for supplies. Her health declined and she lost herself, sitting in a beautiful home.

In 1957, salvation came. Daniel's accountant took off with his money, and they lost their beautiful Toronto home and all their possessions to pay off debts. A friend offered Dad a job in British Columbia, so the family loaded up their daughter's Ford and traveled across the country to set up in a rented house a block from Mom's mother and all her siblings. Her husband immediately left for the interior of B.C. Dorothy was surrounded by loved ones and found reasons to once again laugh. Soon after, her talents were needed as a nurse to help her cancer-ridden mother, mother-in-law and then brother. After the deaths of those she lovingly laboured for, she found a job in a nursing home as an aide.

The next eleven years were some of the most productive in her life. She had a purpose, a paycheck, and she was doing work that she loved. During these years, her husband became ill with lung cancer, so she worked not only at the nursing home but also as his caregiver. In 1973, they lived in a low-income senior citizen apartment. On February 16 her husband died at 4:30 am. At 9:30 the same morning, she received a phone call: since she was not a senior citizen, she would have to move out immediately.

Dorothy quit her job and moved in with her daughter and family. Her son-in-law, who loved her deeply, came from a large Italian family and believed strongly in looking after the elderly. Every other Friday she'd be driven to her sister's place in the East End, and they'd party for the weekend, and then Dorothy would come home. Dorothy lived with her daughter's family for eighteen years, allowing Pat to go back to work. Dorothy would say that the children she'd lost in her life were gifted back to her in her senior years. The teenagers knew to go to their grandmother for sage advice and that their confidential concerns would stay in her heart.

In 1993, after Dorothy suffered nightmares of her baby daughter Georgina lying in an unmarked grave, one of her grandsons undertook the search to find the baby's gravesite in St. Thomas. It had been 52 years since she'd lost her daughter, and her fears were sound: Georgina was registered as buried, but there was no tombstone. Dorothy and her grandson made arrangements for a tombstone to be bought, and on a trip to attend the graduation of another grandson from the Royal Military College, Dorothy, along with her family, traveled to St. Thomas. There she saw the grave for the first time and broke down.

She battled breast cancer and won; she suffered strokes and recovered; she suffered congestive heart failure and beat it. Osteoporosis caused her hip to break, finally bringing her down. For two days she lay in emergency at Lions Gate Hospital waiting for an operation; she never walked again. After extensive attempts at rehabilitation, she moved into Evergreen House Extended Care, determined to leave and come home. She wouldn't allow her room to be decorated – nothing could be brought from home, nor would she allow anything in her bedroom at home to be touched – she so wanted to come back to her family. In the end it was a simple bladder infection that exhausted her body. On June 6, 2000, at 5 pm, she died, at age 82, with her daughter, son-in-law and all her grandchildren present. After a life of giving to others, she was called home to rest.