



Grace Gordon-Collins's story of

Eva



My mother, Eva Miller (born in 1918), died in 2010. She was 91. For three months after her death, I talked to her, I really did. I asked her how she was, and her response, “I’m fine,” was typical mother speak. When I pressed that mother voice about the afterlife, the response, both simple and complex, was “Unfathomable!” Strange that she spoke so eloquently while dead, but while alive had so many secrets.

Mom was an extraordinary woman. Born on a farm in Chatham, Ontario, she was a direct descendant, through her mother, of the United Empire Loyalists and natives who fought against the Americans in the American Revolution and War of 1812. She was an iron butterfly and endured where others would have faltered.

She loved life and loved nature, yet her innate stoicism was informed by terrible events and losses. These started when, as a five-year-old, she was given the responsibility of tending her baby brother. One “thrashing day” a runaway workhorse stepped on and crushed the baby. In spite of the arrival of her brother Bill soon after, she carried the guilt of this event to her last day.

All the same, Mom loved animals, great and small, but especially horses. When she was little, her parents couldn’t afford a pony, so she rode one of their dairy cows, riding it so hard, jumping fences and running along the fields, that Goldie, the cow, stopped producing milk. This became a crisis that ultimately led to Mom getting her first horse, a scruffy little Indian pony they got in a trade from a neighbour. She named her prize Canadian Girl, and she rode her to school bareback, because her family couldn’t afford a saddle.

As Mom told it, one day a new kid at school, whom Mom described as snooty, insulted her little pony. Mom challenged him to a race: Canadian Girl against his fine horse. She had an ace up her sleeve. Canadian Girl, who was normally rather laid back, was terrified of pigs and would buck and run like the wind whenever she saw one. Mom, whose artistic skills were just emerging, painted pig faces on a series of big rocks along the road of the “match race”.

The day of the race came, and the young man sneered again at my Mom and her little Indian pony. The race started. Canadian Girl was not doing very well, but then she spotted the first “pig”! Spooked, she took off like a speeding bullet and caught up to the kid. Then she saw another painted pig! Canadian Girl, ears pinned and tail stuck out like a stick, shot by the snooty boy on his fine horse and won the race. My mother loved to tell this story.

My mother always supported the underdog, which she clearly was in this case, and as such our house in later life was often filled with misfits and orphans – people, cats, dogs that no one else wanted, and even beaten up stuffed toys from the Sally Anne that she felt sorry for.

During the Depression her life took another twist. Her father, one of nine brothers, a brilliant and innovative farmer, started behaving strangely. He would get on his tractor and drive it into the fields in aimless circles, regardless of the crops. Later he was committed to an “insane asylum” and the family – Eva, her mother, and twelve-year-old Bill – tried to keep up the farm, but couldn’t. The banks called their loans, their farm was repossessed, and my mother recalled seeing their furniture on the front lawn for auction, including the big harvest table her mother treasured as a trousseau piece, all carted away. Luckily her mother’s most prized possession, the piano, was hidden in the parlor and did not fall to the auctioneer’s gavel, but everything else did. I don’t know what happened to the piano. My mother recalled one of their neighbours, faced with the same losses and foreclosure, taking a gun and shooting his brains out! In Eva’s world it was her mother who soon died, of cancer.

In order to continue high school Mom was taken in, “as an act of charity,” by her maiden Aunt Mary and moved to Sarnia, Ontario. Aunt Mary had the disposition of the evil stepmother in “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”; Mom was literally her servant. As well as going to school, she did all the cooking and cleaning. All of the table linens, sheets, and napkins had to be starched and ironed crisp with the iron she heated on the stovetop. Silverware was cleaned of every spec of tarnish. At dinners and teas, if guests were there, she wore a maid’s uniform: white apron, black dress. Mom only had a few hours off on Sunday afternoons after church to be a carefree young woman.

She was stunningly beautiful with white blond hair and an hourglass figure. At age eighteen she entered a “Ginger Rogers look-alike contest” and won! She was given \$100, an autographed picture of Ginger Rogers and the offer to be a stand-in for Ginger Rogers in Hollywood – a storybook dream come true.

Instead she got married. It was 1937 and my mother, ever practical, saw this as a solid offer. However, she always wondered if she’d made a mistake, if she had missed out on a career and, as such, always encouraged our educational efforts and ambitions. Poignantly, boxes of silver screen magazines, many still fresh from the 1950s, were in her effects after she died and attest to the strength of that dream.

My father, Charles Gordon, looked like Errol Flynn, but worked as a bookkeeper at Imperial Oil, a job he hated. My parents looked like movie stars, but when they first married, all they could afford to live in was a tent. They bought a tiny lot in the country on Lake Huron and set up camp. Dad bought Mom a small pistol for protection when he was away at work. It was still the Depression, and bums and tramps were riding the rails not far from the lake. One morning, after my father left for work on his old Indian motorcycle, my mother woke up to find a tramp in the tent. She pulled out the gun and told him to get out or she’d blast him to kingdom come. He left. My mother kept that little gun, broken and unusable, under her pillow, along with a baseball bat under her bed for her last twenty years, “just in case.” I hate to think what would have happened if anyone tried to harm her.

Mom’s great passions were art and horses. She became a noteworthy equestrian artist. And she was a formidable rider, absolutely fearless, riding every type of horse – five-gated American Saddlebreds, Tennessee Walkers, Hunter Jumpers, and even racehorses – at county fairs. She had a horse whisperer’s quality about her and could get any horse, even outlaws, to do her bidding. I remember watching her, at our small farm outside Winnipeg, training our Albino horse Spooky to rear up on command like Roy Roger’s horse Trigger.

She once rode for the great black boxer Joe Lewis in Chicago. Black riders were not permitted in horse shows at that time, but my mother, all white and golden blond, was. His horse, Golden Master, a rare, sixteen-hand Palomino American Saddlebred stallion, had a pure white mane and tail and a metallic golden coat. My tiny mother, all white and gold, rode on a silver mounted saddle inlaid with precious stones. To my five-year-old self, this was a sight to behold and a memory that’s unforgettable.

From 1939 to 1949, Mom had three children – all girls, to my father’s great disappointment. He blamed her for not giving him a son; he was a man’s man. The first, Jean, was accepted: she had flaming red hair like my father and, heck, the first one could be either. I was number two, born while my father was away in the Air Force. I was a total disappointment: not pretty, not a boy. My father expressed his disappointment in letters to my mother which, I am sure, hurt her greatly.

Six years later my younger sister, Charlene, came along: white-haired like my Mom but sickly. She demanded attention, which she got from us all, but most especially from my mother. We were all afraid she would die.

Jean left home to become one of those gorgeous airline stewardesses of the 1960s. Hugh Hefner, on one of her flights, asked her out; she refused. Charlene dropped out of University to become a showgirl, eventually living in London. My mother worried about her all the time and always regretted Charlene didn't finish her education.

I was the rebellious one who was ultimately kicked out of the house by my father for falling in love with a man not of our race. My mother didn't support his position but felt she had to go along with it. She felt she had no choices or power or voice, because she had no money of her own. If she were to have left the marriage, which she often talked about, she would have had no means of support.

After I left, this sense of financial helplessness weighed heavily on her, so she ultimately solved her problem in the most interesting way. With pennies saved from selling eggs and skimmed from the meager household budget, she started to play the stock market! She developed a system she read about in Reader's Digest, where she named little boxes for different penny stocks, and after reading the stock market everyday, she would track the rising and falling prices with slips of paper. At the end of the month she would invest in the box that held the most paper.

Over the years my Mom educated herself and turned her little investments into a lovely nest egg which she kept secret from my father. Given that my father was totally reckless with money, it gave her some sense of financial security to have this fund ready if she ever decided to bolt from her marriage.

In 1973, my father took an early retirement, sold the farm, and they moved to Vancouver Island. In 1975, the year I graduated from MIT, my sister Charlene, now 26, had a psychotic breakdown and jumped off a bridge in London. She survived, but her soon-to-be ex-husband called my mother to "come and get her." Mom brought Char back home. Charlene was diagnosed with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, and my mother felt incredible guilt, biblical in a "sins of the father" way, as if she had brought this curse upon her.

When my father died over twenty years ago, my mother, always self-sufficient, lived alone, other than when my sister spent weeks or months staying with her. I believe Mom lived so long so as not to leave Charlene alone.

On my mother's last day of life, the day before Mother's Day 2011, I brought to her hospital bed one of those goofy singing cards playing Louis Armstrong's "It's a Wonderful World". When she heard it she was strong enough to give me one of her dazzling smiles. That is my last memory of my mother. When my son got married soon after, he asked what I would like to have for the mother-son dance. I requested "It's a Wonderful World". I felt Mom watching us and smiling.