



Jane Torresan's story of

Jo



Josephine Mary Ellerbeck (nee King), affectionately called Jo, was born in England on January 16, 1915.

She was an only child and as an infant emigrated with her parents to Winnipeg. I never knew why. They had a very troubled family life. Lots of arguments, fueled by alcohol, led to a chaotic environment. Mom remembers being locked out of the house in her nightie in the middle of winter. Eventually her parents separated, and, when Jo was five, she and her mother Joyce traveled to Vancouver.

They took the train across Canada, and Mom recalled that shortly after they arrived, she walked along Robson Street with her mother. They stopped to chat with a woman who was a complete stranger to my mother but in fact a distant relative. Grandma Joyce told Mom to go with “the nice woman” and turned and walked away. Mom and the nice woman got on the train and traveled back across the continent to New York City. There Mom was delivered to an elderly aunt and uncle who were childless.

Her aunt and uncle lived in a posh neighbourhood and sent her to an elite private school, but they were emotionally distant and provided her with few luxuries. She worked hard to earn their respect. When Mom asked for a dress to wear to her graduation, they gave her money to buy fabric to make her own. This actually was a blessing, as it introduced her to designing and sewing, which she excelled at all her life. Her upbringing made her a very strong, resourceful and feisty woman.

When she reached the age of 21, Mom wanted to work in fashion design but couldn’t get a job without papers, something she lacked, having been smuggled into the U.S. Her aunt and uncle deemed that she should return to England and then re-enter the States legally.

It was 1936 when she sailed to England on her own. She found a job as a secretary in Leeds and introduced herself to the local bank manager, Stuart, who in turn introduced her to his wife Helen. As it happened, they too were childless, fell in love with Mom and “adopted” her. I remember these people as my godparents.

One day a very handsome salesman for Roundtree Chocolates came into her office. He took one look at my Mom and said, “I am going to marry you.” Even though Bill Ellerbeck looked like Tyrone Power, she put him off for awhile. On Sept 7, 1938, they married. I was soon on the way. And then war broke out. Dad went into the army, leaving his pregnant wife on her own.

Sometimes I wonder, if she hadn’t been pregnant, would she have gone back to New York? Instead Stuart and Helen suggested she live in their cottage in the Yorkshire Dales, away from the bombing. It sounded wonderful. Little did she know what this meant: a very small, isolated village, with a 17th century row house that had no running water, no indoor plumbing, of course no electricity, and only one fireplace for heat. Because the village was so remote and sparsely inhabited, these were very cold and lonely years for this chic New Yorker and her new daughter. She tried her best to keep us healthy, collecting rose hips to make tea and scrounging for vegetables and meat in a rationed countryside. There was a farm across the road with a cow which provided us with milk. I became very ill from that unpasteurized milk. When I got scarlet fever at age three, my father was allowed leave to visit me, and that’s when we first met. But we were safe!

My father was one of the first in and one of the last out of the British Army. In 1945, he returned to an England in chaos, and we moved back to Leeds. My parents had both changed in the war but started to make a life together. Soon after my Dad came home, a letter arrived from Grandma Joyce. After 25 years she had become concerned for my mother’s welfare and tracked her down through the Red Cross. My mother had not seen or spoken to her since that fateful day on Robson Street. My grandmother was full

of remorse, wanting to make amends, and invited us to come live with her on Denman Island, off the coast of Vancouver Island, where she had an oyster farm. My mother, now 30, was astonished! One might have expected her to be bitter or harbour deep resentments, but she was, in fact, forgiving and hopeful that a new relationship could now be forged. Bill and Jo sold their wedding presents and booked passage for us on an old converted warship, The Franconia. Dad spent the entire voyage in bed, but Mom loved every minute!

We traveled across Canada by train to Vancouver, took the ferry to the city of Nanaimo and were met by my grandmother's friend Peter in his rowboat. He rowed us and our luggage across the strait to Denman Island, a very long and choppy trip. We arrived at Grandma Joyce's farm, full of expectations for a wonderful new life. However, despite their best intentions, mother and daughter could not find a way to heal the past. We stayed a brief two weeks. All that effort, all those dreams shattered.

Mom, Dad and I went to Vancouver and faced the dilemma: what to do now? No home, no money, no job! Mom soon got work and was again befriended by a wonderful couple, Rhona and Clare. They came down to the Grosvenor Hotel, packed us up, and took us to live with them in their home. I was enrolled in boarding school and, after Dad found an office job in the lumber industry, Mom and Dad moved into a small apartment of their own. Mom and Dad were saving their money to return to England, when Mom had a happy surprise: she was pregnant with my sister Cathy. The decision was then made to stay in Canada.

Cathy was born in 1950, and I came home from boarding school. Mom and Dad found a duplex, and this was our first home together. Mom quit work to stay home and take care of her family, making clothes for us, all her friends and the neighbours. It wasn't until I married that I bought my first dress. In the mid-1950s my father started a telephone answering service and Mom joined him, building a company they ran until retirement.

We moved to Southlands, which was still very rural. Grandma Joyce moved to Vancouver from Denman Island and had a horse she couldn't keep. My Dad built a stable on our land to house the horse, and this started Mom and Cathy's love affair with horses. Mom was also an avid supporter of my dance aspirations, making costumes for my recitals and driving us from one place to the next.

We visited Grandma Joyce often, always trying to find a way to have a healthy relationship with her. However, her behaviour stayed mercurial. My mother always had an ache in her heart for her mother, but in the end had to sever their connection.

My mother and I were very close, but as much as I tried to please her, my efforts rarely worked out. Where she flourished, I failed. I couldn't cook or sew and was totally inept at shorthand. All I wanted to do was dance. I must have driven her crazy. When I married though, as much as my mother loved my husband, she was so disappointed I gave up dancing. Grandchildren soon made her feel better, and she loved them as they loved her.

Mom died of emphysema at age 71. She always said how grateful she was not to be in pain, but the illness tired her out. She died very peacefully with her family by her side.

It is impossible to put into words how incredibly lovely my mother was. She had such style and was so intelligent, so witty and capable. Everyone was drawn to her. She overcame great odds and never lost her sense of humour or compassion for others. Her tempestuous relationship with her mother resulted in her

being a marvellous mother to Cathy and me, giving us the stable family life she never had. We miss her every day and wish everyone could have had the chance to meet her.