



Kathy McColeman's story of

Allison and Joan



My mom was born Allison Jean Swift in Moosejaw, Saskatchewan, on November 28, 1914. Her father, Arthur Swift, worked for the Canadian Pacific Railway and mother Ethel worked in the home. They lived not too far from the station, in a small house with a porch and yard. Mom was an only child. Just before it was torn down, Mom and her dad went to the old railway station and liberated a beautiful carved table that was going to go for scrap. It was her pride and joy, with a hand carved pedestal and four large curved and carved feet on wheels. I have it in my dining room today, and it always evokes memories in me of her clandestine adventure. Arthur Swift died on November 27, 1930, and Ethel died on May 17, 1937.

Mom lived and worked in Regina, mostly at a radio station, and then joined the WRENS during the war. She was stationed at Peggy's Cove in Nova Scotia and then moved to Vancouver. She met my dad, Kenneth Bushfield Cornett, in 1947; they married on July 30 that same year. They had twins soon after they were married, but the children did not survive. Father's mother, Maude, was none too pleased when counting the months.

Mom and Dad purchased a brand-new house in North Vancouver's Norgate Park on Oakwood Crescent in 1950 and set about making it a home. They worked hard on the yard, as it was all reclaimed land from the Capilano River delta and beachfront. They, along with everyone else in the neighbourhood, were digging out clam shells and rocks to make a lawn and garden. Norgate Park was nicknamed "Pregnancy Park" or "Fertility Flats", as everyone who moved in was newlywed and starting a family. Mom worked in the home, and Dad worked at Woodward's downtown and then in Park Royal.

I was born in 1951 and given to my mother Allison and father Ken a short while later. They finalized my adoption in 1953, around the time my sister Karen arrived. Her adoption was finalized in 1955. Mom told both of us, probably me first, that we were adopted and that we were especially searched out to be part of the family.

The neighbourhood was wonderful for young families, with kids all playing together in the street. Each family had a different number of whistles to call them home. Mom was part of a sewing circle, although it was never her strong suit. She welcomed the chance to meet up with the other moms and chat about kids, schooling, discipline, food and all. She told lots of stories from those evenings. One that especially tickled her was being at a home where the hostess's kids were having a bath. They yelled in, asking if they could fill the tub up to the ring. This was met with thunderous laughter, much to the red-faced embarrassment of the hostess.

Mom was a stay-at-home mom until 1960, when she went to work for the YMCA in downtown Vancouver. She loved working there as secretary to the general manager. She took the bus every day and enjoyed meeting and speaking with regulars to and from work. With Mom working, they were able to buy a car, first a Morris Minor and then a 1957 Chev. Cars were still a novelty in the neighbourhood, and all the fathers had to teach their wives how to drive. This was a horror story in some families, but our mother did OK, with only one little prang.

Mom only left work when she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1962. She went through a radical double mastectomy and recovered slowly and painfully. It was a brutal operation in those days; thank goodness they've got better. Shortly afterwards she had a recurrence of the cancer and died on September 13, 1964. She refused to let me or my sister visit with her at the end; she didn't want us to see her in what must have been a bad way. My dad never remarried and never really got over the loss of my mom.

My mom and dad were always very open about our adoptions and answered any questions to the best of their abilities, giving us all the information they had on our birth mothers. In the 1990s, the “Ministry of Children” (or whatever they were called then) opened up the adoption records for B.C. adoptive children. They also offered a search service for children to find their birth mothers for a fee.

My birth mother’s story is one that I have come late to know, understand and respect.

Joyce Marie Speirs was born in Los Angeles at Hollywood Hospital on May 1, 1928. My mother’s mother, Irene Helen Knowles Speirs, was born in Plymouth England and my mother’s father, William Alexander Speirs was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in 1894. Irene had moved with her mother from England to Winnipeg and lived in a house purchased with a war widow’s pension. Irene and William met and married in Winnipeg and moved to Los Angeles for work. Irene died giving birth to Joyce in 1928.

William felt he was unable to care for or raise a child alone and was about to put my mother up for adoption, when her grandmother arrived from Winnipeg to bring her back to Canada. My mother thought her grandmother was her mother for most of her life.

In the late 1940s, my mother and her grandmother moved to Vancouver. Mother’s grandmother had a sister, Lil, who lived in Burnaby, and they lived near her. When Mother’s grandmother passed away, relations between Lil and Joyce became strained, probably because in 1950, soon after her 22nd birthday, my mother became pregnant with me. She had been attacked; whether a date rape or a random assault, she never explained. The times were such that this would have caused shame for her and her family. Of course it would have always been the girl’s fault, and she probably felt she had nowhere to turn. She gave birth to me in a small home for pregnant girls on Napier Street in Vancouver and put me up for adoption in January 1951. Then she left Vancouver and went in search of her father William in Los Angeles.

Times were different then – she went to the police and told them her story. They found her father and reunited them. Her father had remarried by this time, and Joyce lived with him and his new wife Mildred for a short time and then moved nearby. A sunny and warm Christmas day was so different from the wet Vancouver or snowy Winnipeg Christmases she was used to.

Joyce met her husband, a building contractor, through her stepmother Mildred. She married in 1953 and had Irene in 1955. She and her husband then moved to Phoenix, Arizona, following construction work. Apparently their marriage was very turbulent and physically rough, so much so that a middle sister was born mentally and physically handicapped. She was placed in a hospital and sadly no one knows what became of her. They had Annemarie in 1957 and divorced six months later.

After the divorce Joyce and the girls moved back to Los Angeles with another divorced woman, Barbara, and her daughter. They all lived together until Barbara remarried. Joyce had decided that she would never remarry, as she did not ever want a man to control or dictate to her again. So, not having support from her ex, she had to go about finding a job.

When Joyce went for an interview at a bank, her friend Barbara told her to lie about her age, so she wouldn’t be thought “too old”. The interviewer found it hard to believe a 27-year-old could have all the experience she listed, so she came clean about her age. Too old at 32! She started working at the Bank of the West in 1960 and continued working there until June 1992, when she retired. She loved working at the bank and ended her career as personal assistant to the general manager in Los Angeles.

Joyce and the girls asked Granddad to move in with them, as he was now alone. Granddad lived with them until he passed away on July 24, 1973. They had great times playing cards for hours. Her daughters remember Joyce particularly enjoyed the Carol Burnett show and laughed hysterically at Harvey Korman and Tim Conway. Joyce took the girls to San Diego and Disneyland for special treats, an amazing accomplishment on a single woman's salary in the early 1960s. When the girls grew older, they moved and married and had daughters of their own.

When Joyce retired in 1992, she wanted to move closer to either Annemarie in El Segundo or to Irene in Marino Valley. She chose El Segundo. In 1998, Annemarie and her husband Paul bought a house with a detached apartment in the back where Joyce moved in. Annemarie and Paul have a daughter, Elizabeth, and having Joyce nearby was good on all fronts. Joyce helped with the mortgage and with Elizabeth. Soon after, Irene divorced and she and her daughter Laura moved to El Segundo as well to be near them all.

My search for my birth mother began in 1997 with a fee to the B.C. ministry to find her. After eighteen months, the ministry said they had contacted her, but she didn't want to meet me. I didn't believe them. With a friend who was doing a lot of genealogy research, we searched birth records for clues to her whereabouts. Eventually, without the use of computers, we found a death notice of someone who might be her father, listing a daughter survivor, but she had another last name. With no other clues, it was worth a try.

In May 2007, I sent a letter to two addresses that might have belonged to this daughter and received no reply. In July I sent another letter with pictures. I had given up hope, when I received a letter back. I thought it would be from someone saying there was no one there by that name. Imagine my surprise when the letter opened with "I'm your sister."

My mother Joyce had medical problems, so my sister had been bringing in her mail. Seeing a letter (my second one) from Canada, she asked, "Who's writing from Vancouver?" My mother handed her the letter and said, "You may as well read it." My mother was very good at keeping secrets; in fact, she suggested that the girls just keep this in the family. They replied, "too late;" they had already told friends and family. No one had a clue about me. I had at least known I was adopted from the earliest time, but they had no inkling of their mother's secret daughter.

Annemarie wrote me immediately, and Irene later phoned, and eventually my mother contacted me, too. We met for the first time in December 2007. I walked into my mother's home and as she hugged me, she said, "I didn't know how much I wanted to hold you, until I had you in my arms." We visited back and forth and developed a relationship.

Joyce passed away in February 2011. I was very fortunate to have met her and get a sense of the generous woman who gave me up for a better life than she could provide. I remain very grateful to my two moms, Allison and Joyce.