



Connie Flett's story of

# Lola



Her name was Karolina, but her close friends, those who knew her in “the old country” called her Lola. She was the second youngest of five children born to Anton and Mary (Baker) Schnurer on November 26th, 1903, in a small Polish town called Rownia. Part of the house that Lola grew up in was leased to the local police. Her father, a carpenter, died of pneumonia when Lola was only three years old. Her mother was a nurse and midwife. Sadly, when Lola was about fourteen, her beloved mother died of typhoid fever, which she contracted while nursing the sick during an epidemic. I have a picture of Lola with her mother and sisters, but she didn’t speak of them, so I don’t know what my mother did at this time. A family friend told me my mother delivered him, so maybe she took on her mother’s job as midwife.

What I do know is that my mother learned to cook from her mother, what we now call ethnic food. Fortunately, my mother passed on to me the secrets of making delicious perogies, cabbage rolls, borscht and the Christmas treat of kutya – a pudding-like mixture of poppy seeds, wheatberries, nuts, and honey. One of my favourite dishes was her plum perogies, a sweet dessert treat sprinkled with sugar and bursting with juice. She would get so mad at me when I would count out how many perogies she was making; her superstition was that they would then burst open when cooked. My other favourite thing to do, when she wasn’t looking, was to pinch out the raisins from her heavenly homemade doughnuts while they were rising.

I remember Mom telling me that when she was about sixteen, she wanted to become a nun; she loved to sing in the church choir. But then, during confession, a priest made a suggestive comment to her, traumatizing her so much, she renounced the Catholic religion and never even had us baptized. The only residual effect of her Catholicism was to eat fish on Fridays.

Although Lola was a beautiful young woman with dark eyes and thick, almost-black hair, giving her a gypsy-like look, an accident with a crochet hook, when she was very young, crippled her left hand, leaving it badly deformed. Somehow, amazingly, she didn’t let that stop her from doing anything she set her mind to, including knitting, sewing, crocheting and other needlework projects.

A fortune-teller told my father that he would meet and marry a girl with an “injured” hand. I think Michael knew he had met his destiny, when he noticed Lola as she prepared meals at the saw mill where he worked. He proposed marriage.

When Michael immigrated to Canada in 1925, their love endured eight long years apart. At that time, the Canadian government stipulated that a man had to own land with a house on it before he could bring a wife from the old country. Michael worked for the CPR and eventually bought some acreage about five miles from the village of Skiff, outside Lethbridge, Alberta.

Karolina came to Canada by ship with the equivalent of \$10 and a photograph of her with her mother, her sisters and a niece. She arrived in Quebec and traveled across the country by train, at long last reaching the desolate prairie on November 24th, 1933. She and Michael were married the following day, on November 25th, the day before her 30th birthday.

The security of owning property was very important to my mom, and they worked hard together, purchasing more land when they could, eventually acquiring about 800 acres. She helped him dig out a dam by hand, tended the animals, planted wheat, and of course, cooked, not only for the growing family but also for the farmhands. Because Dad was afraid of heights, Mom was the one who put a roof on the chicken coop. Once, when Dad sliced his forehead open on a piece of farm machinery, Mom expertly stitched it up, as it was too far to take him to the doctor.

Their firstborn and only son, born in January 1935, unfortunately lived only a few days. By December of the same year, their daughter, Adeline, arrived at the farm before the doctor did. Two more daughters followed – Violet, born in June 1937, and Evelyn, born in February 1940. Some years later, Mom thought that she had a tumour; it turned out to be me! At the age of forty-four, she gave birth to her youngest daughter, Connie. Dad, forty-eight years old, and with three daughters already, told my mother not to come home from the hospital unless it was a boy. Over the years I learnt to live with the family joke of first being a tumour, and then not being a boy.

Growing tired of the cold prairie winds blowing through Skiff, Mom convinced Dad to move. She had figured out that by renting the farm they could afford to buy a place in Vancouver, and my father found a place that suited their needs. After canning all the fruits and vegetables they had grown on the farm, they packed up their pick-up truck and headed for the big city. In 1949, we moved into a big, Victorian-style rooming house with forty-three rooms on West Georgia Street. Suffice to say the area was much more residential in those days, and conveniently near downtown shopping, Stanley Park and the beaches. Many of the people who rented from us were Europeans and became close long-time friends. However, there were some men that Mom would warn us about, threatening dire consequences if we dared set foot in their rooms. With three lovely teenage daughters and me, Mom had quite a job keeping us safe.

Mom had a heart of gold. She was a loving, caring person and everyone who knew her called her “Mom”. However, she was an extremely formidable woman when necessary. When I was about eleven years old, my best friend and I went to the Hudson’s Bay Company to “shop”, or should I say shoplift a red(!) scrapbook for a school project. Could it have been any more conspicuous? The store detective, a gigantic man, said, “I’m going to call your parents,” and marched us down the street to my house. When we got to the door, Mom was waiting, with the strap of course. The detective tried to intervene to protect me from getting hit. My mother, who was about half his size, just said, “You had better get out of the way, or you’ll get it too.”

In the 1950s my mother, like other ladies, wore a housedress when she did housework. But when she went out, my mother would put on a suit or a nice dress, gloves, a hat and high heels, even to go grocery shopping on Robson Street. I especially remember her foxtail stole, the kind with the little face and beady eyes. She gave up her housedress for polyester pantsuits in the 1970’s. Looking good was important to her, as was good manners. She would always badger us to act ladylike, saying, “Don’t run down the street.” or “Don’t scuff your shoes when you walk.” She would tell us to say “thank you” before we even had a chance to get the words out. Mom also had a beautiful singing voice and would often sing when friends and family gathered together. Surprisingly, not one of her four daughters inherited her vocal abilities.

Despite her many good qualities, one thing she could be faulted for was that she never apologized to anyone for anything. As a teenager I often thought that if she had an argument with God, He would lose.

She always came to watch my ballet classes. I would see her “helping” me by leaning this way or that and pulling her posture straighter as she sat on the sidelines. Years later, watching my own daughter in ballet, I found myself doing the same thing.

Mom was a very smart businesswoman, especially with regards to real estate. Despite not having a formal education beyond grade school, she and my dad eventually acquired, in addition to the rooming house and farm, two apartment blocks, a duplex, and several recreational properties near Blaine, Washington.

When I was thirteen, we sold the old house on Georgia Street and moved to a modern one near Oakridge. Six years later Dad passed away at age sixty-six. For someone who seemed to be such a strong person, I was surprised by how much this affected my mother. I was eighteen and living at home and happy to be a comfort and companion to her at this time. She often said she was glad that she had me late in life, as my sisters were all married by this time, and I kept her occupied.

Later that year, Mom and a couple of her friends took a trip to Radium Hot Springs in the Kootenays. There she met a nice Polish gentleman named Lucien. They seemed to enjoy each other's company and corresponded for a year. The following year the chemistry was still there, and we were all happy when he became a part of our family. They were together for almost thirty years, loving and caring for one another. They spent summers in Radium Hot Springs and every winter somewhere warm – Mexico, Hawaii, Palm Springs, Arizona. I always thought Mom was so fortunate to have had two loving men in her life.

When I was young and heard her stories about farm life, I would roll my eyes thinking, "Here we go again – blah, blah, blah." Now I wish I had paid more attention. Sad to say, during her late 80's dementia began to take its toll, and I was unable to ask her for motherly advice. Questions about what she was like as a little girl or a young woman; about life on the farm; or how she felt about things, how she learned what she knew without a formal education – all these questions are left rattling around my brain like skeletons.

Despite the dementia, Mom was a flirt to the end. She would flash her dark eyes and smile beguilingly at doctors or whatever man happened by. Lucien passed away in May 1994, and five days before Christmas, I was with my mom when she died at age 91. At her memorial we played her favourite song, "You Are My Sunshine". I really miss my mom and wish my two children could have known her more in her better years.