

Margo Prentice's story of

# Bertha



The town of Elie, Manitoba was populated by French speaking people. A convent attached to a church was the focal point of all activity in Elie. In 1917 the gossips speculated about the arrival of its newest citizen. This was the day Rose and Omar Brabant became the new parents of a baby girl.

While Rose was in the nursery, Omar called her to come to the door. "The baby!" Rose gasped. The local priest and a nurse in uniform held a baby bundled in a blanket. Gently the woman handed Rose the bundle. No words were spoken. She opened the blanket and for the first time to see her dark haired three week old baby girl. There were no papers; a handshake and a promise to bring up the little girl a good Catholic. The priest and nurse were the only witnesses to the handing over of this baby. They named her Bertha Stella (Betsin in French).

Bertha Stella Brabant

That is how my mother came to be the daughter of Rose and Omar Brabant local business people in this small Manitoba town. My mother's childhood days were happy. Her father adored her. My grandmother had many sisters all of whom had children; my mother had the companionship of many other children. My mother's unhappiness began when she had to go to school where nuns from the convent taught. From grade one she stayed there during the week as a boarder coming home on weekends and holidays.

The nuns were especially cold towards her and were strict. If she misbehaved the priest would beat her with a switch across her hands and when she got bigger he would make her pull her pants down and he would beat her across her bare buttocks. As the years passed she hated the school and hated the priest and nuns even more. The scandalous secret of her birth and birth parents were kept from her and my grandparents. Whatever the secret was, it fueled terrible injustice towards my mother and her lasting hatred for the Catholic Church.

She developed an anal discharge when she 13 years old. My grandmother was told she had syphilis and that she had to be away from the other children and her family. It was thought that she caught it because she was promiscuous and no longer a virgin. They isolated her by locking her in a room by herself. This was like a prison to her and lasted many months. The only contact was a nun who came to teach her every day and treated her with kindness and love. She brought her a sewing machine and my mother's education included sewing lessons. Mother had a natural talent for sewing and designing clothes which was to serve her well all her life. Eventually a new doctor came to town and was asked to exam her. He declared that she was a virgin and that she did not have a venereal infection. (Perhaps the nun, who came every day to teach her, got the doctor to look at her.) When mother died we found out that her biological mother was a nun at the convent. I suspect that the nun who cared for her was real her mother.

Bertha Stella Brabant left her parents and the small town of Elie, in defiance, at the age of fifteen. In her words, "It was a Sunday, I wore slacks; rode a horse down main street as I smoked a cigarette. I took the horse to the Greyhound Station, tied it up and boarded the bus for Winnipeg."

It didn't take long for her to find work as a live-in baby-sitter. She liked the people she worked for. She said they were good to her. On her days off she would go to different dances in and around Winnipeg. It was at one of these dances she met my father, Albert Cusson. He was tall dark and handsome and like her spoke French. He asked her to live with him, and she moved in. She was seventeen years old. When her parents came to visit they were shocked that she no longer was a baby-sitter for a respectable family but a waitress. They were horrified that she was living with my father and not married. They insisted that they marry or they were going to have my father charged with rape. He was twenty-one at the time. They were married in 1936 in front of a justice of the peace with my grandparents as witnesses.

A year later I was born. I was six months old when my mother became pregnant with my brother. Her marriage was not a happy one. My father couldn't find any work and drank too much. My mother always worked. I do not remember a time when she didn't have a full-time job. In lieu of a job, my father joined the army in 1939 and was shipped to Europe shortly after. I remember my mother telling me the army was good since at least he would learn a trade. He would be gone for six years.

Mother cried the day she got a letter from the government saying that my father was 'missing in action and presumed dead.' During that time, there was no money coming in from the army and she worked cleaning houses. She would take us with her as she scrubbed the houses. I recall the swooshing of her scrubbing walls and floors with a bucket of soap and a thick scrubbing brush. We behaved; either in a yard where we played or a room where she put us in.

It was during that time of great struggle for her that she made a special Christmas for my brother and me. It was a time of war. Food was rationed which meant that mother could only get a small amount of things; 'things' like milk, eggs, butter and sugar. I remember that there were not many things in the house for Christmas. I didn't even think about it. I was just happy that on this special day of the year, I would feel the joy and happiness.

Christmas morning was so cold in the house that we could see our breath and mother put our clothes inside our bed so we could get dressed under the blankets. She told us to stay there until she lit the stove and not to come out of the bed until it was a bit warmer. And she said if we did this there was a wonderful surprise from Santa in the living room. So we waited until we could not longer see our breaths and got out of bed and went to the living room.

I could not believe my eyes! On top of mother's sewing machine was the most beautiful Christmas tree I had ever seen. It wasn't really a tree but it was so beautiful! It was an umbrella standing in a pot and half-way opened to look like a Christmas tree. It was decorated with Christmas balls on the pointed parts of the umbrella and had garlands of buttons laced around it. An angel was perched on the top. It took my breath away.

Beside the tree was my old dolly but she did not look the same. She had a new Christmas dress of red and green velvet. Even her hair had been fixed. I thought Santa was truly a magic person! My brother's old wooden truck had been repaired and painted and there was a small teddy bear in the back of the truck. There was an orange and some candy in our socks which hung from the sewing machine. What a great love she had for us and it was magnificently revealed that memorable Christmas.

We had different baby-sitters, a couple who I remember with great fondness. My mother was an excellent seamstress and worked her way into the position of floor supervisor for a large manufacturer of ladies wear. She left at six in the morning and arrived at home at seven at night. During the time my father was away my mother became very independent. She was happy and liked to have fun with her friends. This all changed when my dad came home. There were constantly fighting. He didn't want her to work or be with her friends. My mother did not have a racist bone in her body. She had friends of other races and one of her best friends was Japanese. This enraged my father and caused friction between them.

Her other best friend became my beloved Auntie Pat. They remained friends for life. In the 1950s women were not allowed to drink in public. It was a time of the illegal 'booze can.' Pat became a late night bootlegger. My dad and Pat's husband worked nights so my mother helped with the selling of booze and I watched Pat's children in the back of the house behind a locked door. Customers could go to her house and drink the night away. There was even music for dancing. Canadian speak-easies in the 50's made for

a type of social interaction between men and women. My mother loved to party but always managed to get up and go to work the next day.

The booze-can wasn't opened every night. We would go to the movies every Wednesday to collect pieces of dinnerware until we had enough for a complete set of new dishes. Mother liked vaudeville and we were often taken to see the live entertainment on stage.

I don't know when she decided to leave, but leave she did. My father was becoming more and more abusive. She was afraid for her physical well-being and sanity. She decided to run away to Vancouver where her parents lived. She left us behind because my father was now a powerful policeman with influence and could easily have us taken away from her. I was fourteen and my brother thirteen.

We were not allowed any communication with my mother. Auntie Pat told us my mother would send us letters via general delivery at the main post office in downtown Winnipeg. We were never to let my Dad know this. I had no other contact but for the few letters she sent. I did not see my mothers for five years.

I was nineteen years old when I was able to get enough money to leave Winnipeg and reunite with her. It was lonely without her for those five years. She was not there when I started my period, had my first crush, first boyfriend and first broken heart. The seat beside my dad was empty at my high-school graduation. I missed her terribly! Like her I boarded the Greyhound bus and left Winnipeg for Vancouver never to look back.

She had been working at a factory where she met and married a wonderful man and was very happy. When I knocked on her door, it was like the uniting of two souls. We had much to catch up and although there were some bumps in our relationship, over time they became smooth and we grew closer. The wounded bond between us completely healed.

'Mom and Al,' her new husband, retired to Mayne Island where they enjoyed sailing together around the islands. Her last years were spent tending a wonderful garden and green house. For me the memories of grand holidays on the island with my mother will last forever.

In 1997, mother phoned to tell me she had cancer and had a short time to live. She said, "I don't want you to worry." Shaken and frightened I packed and moved into my island house bedroom where I was to stay for four months. I was fortunate to have been able to take care of her. She died peacefully with her friends around her, looking at her favourite white lilac blooming just outside the window.