

Anonymous story of

Elisabeth



There is a photo of mother Elisabeth, my favourite photo, taken in 1954, she looks so happy and as I have always remembered, beautiful. It was the most special event of her life; she was to be presented to the newly crowned Queen of England in Ceylon.

Born to Herbert and Ethel in 1916 in South Croydon near London, Elisabeth was the eldest child of three, a sister Mervyn and a brother Geoffrey. Her father was a public servant for the local council and her mother was originally trained as a violinist and played in the London Symphony. Sadly Ethel's mother died in childbirth so Ethel had to leave her career and look after the seven children. This large family was very adventurous when they grew up, one of them became a missionary in China in the early Victorian days, and she was the talk of the family. She eventually died in China of typhoid a prevalent disease in those times.

School was something to be dreaded according to my mother. She was quite athletic, a competitive tennis player, a gifted pianist and artistic but hopeless at history and English literature. The teachers were very strict, given to caning hands but she must have learned as her math was brilliant, she was fluent in French and she loved to quote poems especially from "Through the Looking Glass", or "Tiger in the Night". She would tell the story to us often of the walrus and the carpenter crying and eating oysters. After graduating she enrolled in St. Thomas Hospital Physiotherapy School in London. There she met her best friends Kay and Anne, all three very attractive women, and it was early days of the Second World War so they were able to party with other students, and officers as much as possible. However the war crept on and soon England was under Hitler's threat and the physiotherapy work involved many of the war wounded. St. Thomas's itself was the victim of one bomb (meant for Houses of Parliament opposite the hospital) which killed one of her classmates. The trainees were subsequently shipped out to a country hospital near Godalming, Surrey to care for the war victims.

My father was visiting an injured RAF pilot friend, and according to my mother she had seen many men in uniform but none so charming as my Irish born father. They were wed in 1941, no white glamorous dresses in those times, she wore a suit and father wore his uniform. The honeymoon was short and soon father was sent out on flying reconnaissance missions to different parts of Europe. Mother would often say, "As soon as your father returned I would be pregnant again!" During the war we children had been sent down to the seaside to escape from London which was being blitzed by the Luftwaffe. Mother was ill with thyroid disease during and after her second pregnancy, so we had a nanny and our dear Granny to spoil us. Once the buzz bombs started coming over we were moved again, too dangerous by the sea.

Post war she became a busy mother of three when rationing was still in effect, difficult to feed a family of four with rations but she managed. We lived on RAF camps, kept chickens, and grew a vegetable garden wherever we lived. Our larder in the 1950s contained eggs in a bucket with preservative, chickens hanging dead waiting to be plucked, many veggies and milk we carried from a local farm. Homemade bread was a staple sometimes slathered in bacon fat which we called "bread and dripping".

Mother's sister married an American doctor who was serving in the US Army, and soon after the war they went to live in North Carolina, her brother eventually joined the RAF after the threat of being conscripted to work in coal mines in 1944. Strangely mother always felt as if she was the underdog of her family and became quite bitter about her siblings successes in life.

Elisabeth had married a man who belonged to an Irish teetotaler group. His grandfather was an alcoholic possibly due to the abject poverty and unemployment many lived in during those Victorian days in Dublin. So Father did not offer the happy hour drink, but he would never lecture her about her Pimms #1 drink

that she enjoyed. We all had a good laugh about the time she attended a wedding of Father's cousin. Thinking it would be a liberal, enjoyable event she was dressed up in her beaver fur coat, low cut v-neck dress, bright red nail polish and lipstick, and high heels. She walked in to the reception, looking forward to some good wine and lively company, and then saw the shocked faces of the men and women astonished at the brazen outfit of their cousin's wife!

Some years after the war mother was disturbed that my Irish father, being a Catholic, was not attending Sunday mass. She was brought up as a Baptist, although she went infrequently to church she decided that a Catholic priest should come and talk to her husband. This little event caused all of us to be converted to Catholicism, clever priest; little did he know how much trouble this would cause in our future lives!

We moved so many times that Elisabeth would say she should never unpack as the RAF would move us again in two years. Father, being an officer, meant we were allowed a "batman" who was really like a servant, he would help clean house or do the garden a few hours per day. Mother always felt he was in the way and would berate the poor man who did not want to be there anyway. Washing clothes was hard work as the washing machine was very primitive compared to today, it did not spin, had to be hand filled with water and then drained with a tube to the sink. Clothes were wrung through a dangerous wringer; mother almost trapped my arm one day. Drying was done outside rain or shine on a washing line.

So back to Ceylon, nowadays called Sri Lanka, a country described as a pearl drop in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Father was seconded to the Ceylonese Air Force to train the pilots, and prevent them from crashing the expensive fighter planes. The decision was made for the whole family to join him for three years. Soon the social life of the colonies became familiar to mother, always entertaining, managing the servants who were either drunk or stealing or not doing their work as she required, and watching us wild children. Life was hard trying to keep up with the local gentry, for Elisabeth an unfamiliar role. She learned fast and soon became busy with engagements while nanny, or ayah as they were called there, kept us out of mischief.

The Queen was to visit Ceylon and attend a grand ball in Colombo in her honour. The women went into a frenzy calling dressmakers, jewelers and learning royal protocol – how to curtsy to the Queen, what to say, or not say, when she spoke to you, even how to sit at dinner table when she was present. Mother had a lovely filmy evening v-neck dress with all shades of blue. For jewelry she had a brooch of gold and sapphires also two different colours of blue. All the ladies had to wear evening gloves; mother's were white with little pearls on them. Apparently the ball went off splendidly with no royal glitches, no protocol broken.

Returning from Ceylon to life in England was, as mother described a huge shock. She called her time in Ceylon a "Fool's paradise". Now she had returned to no servants, what she considered a boring drudgery of daily household routine. With older children she was able to return to work at a local hospital, another shock as medical advances ensured she had to go through more training to update her skills. She admitted she was terrified by all the new machines now used in care of her patients, and that maybe going back to work was a mistake.

Then one day she met Winifred, this was the event that changed our family dynamics. None of us liked this woman who grew to have such a hold on our mother. Winifred was a devout Catholic, with a dour face and double thick lenses on her glasses which she wore on the tip of her nose. Mother became more involved in the church almost using it as a crutch to stimulate her life. She joined an anti abortion protest group, even went on a march through town, feeling quite brave as there were naturally opponents to the

march. She lined up Winifred's sons as good for me as prospective husbands, my oldest brother refused to go anymore to a Catholic school so animosity between them strengthened. I moved away to avoid all the unpleasantness. Father became more reclusive, they argued more, which he disliked, and he just wanted all these antagonisms to go away. She played the piano less and less, prayed and went to mass more, had priests visiting the house often as friends. She was so different from the lovely free and happy woman I knew as a child.

Granny died after I left England and my mother kept many items from her parent's house including one picture which she hung on her living room wall. It was a lithograph, framed in an ornate gilded plaster circular frame; portraying a lovely young woman on a beach. I realized that this was the one thing that would remind me of my mother and my grandmother. Two very dear women in my life. So when my younger brother who still lives in the UK asked me what I would like of mothers after she passed away my list was short. My mother's stuffed black bear purchased on a visit to Nelson B.C., some of her travel journals, her engagement ring and the picture of the girl on the beach. My beach lady came to my house and Felpham, Granny and Mother are here with me.

As Elisabeth aged arthritis entered her hips and back, pain control was not easy, then multiple surgeries made her less active. Father was diagnosed with leukemia and quickly was extremely ill; she did not want to tell us how bad it was as she felt our rushing home to see him would make him realize how ill he was. Now looking after him day and night she realized how much she loved him, and cared for him to the point of exhaustion. My older brother and I were not told about his death until after the funeral. Later, when told how devastated I was, we cried together. Not being a demonstrative family this was the first time she told me she loved me. She explained that she just wanted to protect him to the end from the knowledge of his leaving us soon.

Mother did come to Canada several times and loved it, always wanting to enjoy the sea, the mountains and the lakes. She was very proud of all her eight grandchildren. Winifred was still a dear friend but was an asthmatic and often ill herself and then diagnosed with cancer she passed away.

As the years went by Elisabeth struggled with loss of independence, losing her beloved VW car, her husband, her dearest friend, her religion was her main comfort. Illness beset her first her heart, then her lungs with pulmonary fibrosis and home was the safe sanctuary. She compiled a phenomenal family photo album, was passionate about a TV show called Countdown and still was driven to Mass by friends. Sadly one evening she fell and was not found until the next day, this was a sentinel event which signaled the end of a wonderful woman, my mother, Elisabeth.