



Ian Morton's story of

# Jeano



Virginia Louise Wilson was born August 24, 1929 in Saint John, New Brunswick. She was called Ginny for a couple of years until her older sister decided she would hereafter be known as Jeano. It might not be spelt the right way, but having a mother with a name like that goes along way to explain why I have always wanted to be Italian. That sister who named her was Nancy. Suzanne and James were the younger siblings. Her father Hedley – who went by “Coop” – worked for a trust company – and Audrey was his wife. To all the grandchildren they would forever be Granny and Grampy.

It’s safe to say the Wilsons were a middle class family verging on “upper”. They always had a maid. Coop hired lots of people laid low by the Depression to be maids, housekeepers and gardeners. One of the three houses he and Audrey owned was the big brick one at 27 Queen Street, which was close enough to see the Bay of Fundy. It had two living rooms and a spacious dining room and two sets of stairs – one being at the back for the servants. They were members of the Westfield Riverside Golf & Country Club and had a summerhouse on the Saint John River. Coop was a quiet man who liked his cigars and English Setters and shooting woodcock and partridge.

Jeano always claimed her first memory was catching pneumonia in 1933. There were no antibiotics back then, and she was laid up in bed for six weeks. Shortly after her recovery, Coop caught her jumping on frozen ice puddles with Marian Stevenson, picked her up in his arms, took her home, and dropped her in a hot tub of water.

When she was 8yrs old her brother James was born. The girls didn’t believe it. They hadn’t noticed their mother was pregnant – and besides – it was April Fool’s Day. Eventually their father took them into the hospital to see the evidence. As they were passing a host of newborns in the maternity ward, Coop pointed to a black baby and said, “There’s your brother!” April Fool indeed.

And so she grew up in a warm and loving house. She read the Bobbsey Twins and listened to Tommy Dorsey. She had a friend who lived overtop a cinema and regularly sneaked in to watch flicks – a favourite being Rose-Marie starring that dashing Mountie Nelson Eddy and his beloved Jeanette McDonald. “When I’m calling you...Will you answer too”?

In 1938 she was sliding on cardboard in the United Empire Loyalist Cemetery and knocked herself out on a headstone. Her friend Edie got scared and ran home. Fortunately an old family friend found her and took her home.

She believed in God back then, as the kids were all marched through Sunday School. But eventually she would believe in boys. Jack Inky Ingram was Jeano’s first victim. He lived across the street and was driving the Model T Ford around the city on VE Day in 1944 when Jeano and friends hung out windows and onto running boards, hooting and hollering with joy over the Allied victory.

One boyfriend had a rather short shelf life. One night, after doing a shift as an intern nurse, Jeano went to a party thrown by...well let’s just say his name was George. He spiked her drink because “he had a warped sense of humour.” She got violently ill. But what she remembers most was how kind her mother was, taking her to bed with aspirin and water.

Eventually however she would find herself working at a hospital for infectious diseases in Montreal. Somewhere along the way she got very sick and was confined to the infirmary... Inevitably, a troop of dashing young interns would drop by to check her temperature and take turns diagnosing. On one fine day, after most of the quack party had moved away from her, one of the interns lingered. His name was Jimmy Morton and his notorious opening line to Jeano was “You know, if you combed your hair and put

on some lipstick, you'd feel a lot better." Jeano was very cross with him but Jimmy's mission was accomplished. He had made an impression on the attractive redhead.

Gradually, Jimmy and Jeano would court – thanks especially to a Guardian Head Nurse named Chris who made it easy for them to meet, scheduling timely breaks, sending searching supervisors on wild goose chases, passing messages...that kind of thing. The young paramours, by all accounts, spent a lot of time walking around Percy Norman Park and playing Billiards.

That first Christmas she went home to New Brunswick for the holidays and Inky Ingram gave her an engagement ring. When she went back to Montreal, Jimmy immediately suggested she throw the ring into a snowbank – but she didn't break off the engagement for a whole year!!

And so it was that Jeano and Jimmy began their sometime unlikely route to marriage. They went for two years without seeing each other, as he roared off to do practicum's in London and Edinburgh followed by hers in Lucerne. However, on the whole, it appeared they had rather been in Philadelphia to re-kindle the flames were first stoked in Montreal. Jimmy – who was working at the University of Pennsylvania by that point – bought her an engagement ring from Banks & Biddle Jewelry – and it ended up, not in a snow bank or snowdrift or snowman – but only Jeano's hand, and she was happy to wear it.

They were married in 1954 at St David's Church in Rothesay, NB and then drove west to Vancouver. Settling in Philly had been a very seriously considered option. As family legend has it, Jimmy had the choice of working with the eminent physiologist Julius Comroe in Philly – or he could go home to Vancouver and start up a lung function lab from scratch. He chose the later because the fishing was better here.

So at the age of 25, Jeano was pretty much done as a nurse. She had left Saint John at the age of 16 to get a Home Economics degree at Acadia University in Wolfville before being eligible for nursing school at the Royal Victoria Hospital. Three years after graduating she was moving 3000 miles away from her family to become a mother and home-maker. She swore that her early departure from the nursing ranks had nothing to do with disliking the job. The kids might have assumed that from a story she would tell of an incident, early on in her career when she was green behind the ears. She had just begun a three-week tour of the Operating Room when a rather cruel surgeon, without warning, nonchalantly handed her the leg he had just amputated. She came within a whisker of fainting before some kind soul slid a trolley under the limb before it dropped on the floor...or her foot.

They lived in an apartment at 10th and Columbia near the VGH where Jimmy built BC's first TB lab. For Jeano, those early days on the West Coast were all about getting to know Jimmy's Scottish parents and his siblings and very slowly building a whole new social network. And before her first pregnancy came about, she worked as an assistant to an anesthetist for a dental surgeon in Vancouver.

The baby years began in 1955. First born was David (The Angelic One), followed two years later by Ian (the Mischievous) and three years after him, the Christy (The Cute and Gifted). None of the kids gave her too much trouble save for the middle child occasionally creating public scenes with his probing questions of senior citizens in the supermarket or telling the next door neighbours what his parents really thought about them.

Jeano made friends easily and transitioned quickly from the strong bonds she had on the East Coast. She played a lot of bridge with a core group of women with whom she kept up a friendship for almost fifty

years – despite nearly having them all wiped out when a car crashed into her house in 1966, when they were all arriving for a game night.

She easily became friends with her husband's family, which was a good thing because her husband liked to spend a lot of his spare time fishing in the Capilano and writing books in his den. Always a social person, she made sure the kids had great summer holidays – trips to Gold River, Long Beach, Mount Gardner on Bowen Island, a cottage at Bamfield and one unforgettable trip across Canada on the train. Every other summer meant a trip to visit the Grandparents in Saint John with a stop over to visit cousins in Montreal. This way Jeano kept links alive, gave her kids an appreciation of her family and their country at large. To this day her children retain strong affection for their maritime roots.

She was a mother of the sixties, no doubt about it – making lunches every day (tins of Sun-Rype apple juice, sandwich, apple & penguin bar), taking the kids to soccer and music lessons. Making sure the family was represented at parent-teacher meetings. Dinner on the table at exactly 5:30 on weekday nights, 6pm on weekends when Hockey Night in Canada had to be respected. Three course meals with a dessert and an “after” and the kids weren't allowed to leave the table til they asked, “May I please get down?”

In the seventies though, things began to change. She ventured more into Italian cooking and hooked up with two friends to start a business. Jeano had been knitting and weaving for a few years – to the point where she began teaching – but in 1975 the Fibre Factory was born, just off Marine Drive, down the hill from the family home in West Vancouver. There was only one other store on the North Shore that sold wool and looms – and weaving was huge in those days. The business expanded and inevitably shrank to the point where it closed in 1985 – but they were ten great years.

She had her fair share of challenges. A debilitating chronic sinusitis was eventually fixed by a painful operation called the Caldwell Look. In 1986, Jimmy died at home of congestive heart failure, and in the last couple of years of her life, contrary to her own family history, she developed the same condition.

After her husband died, she strengthened bonds with her siblings who rarely came for visits to the west coast. This meant she discovered the joys of travel – and explored large chunks of Europe, Washington DC where her daughter lives, Florida and even Hong Kong.

Her house in West Vancouver was full of antique glass and ancient books, some fine filigreed china, the Quimper she collected for many years, and a couple of paintings made by her famous cousin Miller Brittain. There was also a television, the introduction of which in the 1950's, she put down as the top technical advancement seen in her life after space travel. As her world shrank and friends and siblings departed, there is no doubt the television became an extension of her social circle. By the way she would refer to them, people like Tiger Woods, Raphael Nadal, Gordon Campbell and Alex Trebek were members of some exclusive club of which she was the Chairman of the Board.

In December of 2009 she had a bad fall in her house and during her subsequent hospitalization her heart chose to stop. A memorial was held full of song and warmth and attended by everyone she loved. Her ashes were released into a great roaring, wild British Columbian river. Some of those ashes may well have found their way back to the Bay of Fundy but wherever she is, there is no question her family, past and present, remains by her side.