



Joan O'Flynn's story of

Hylida



It was hot, a very hot day, sultry, just before monsoon season, but there was exuberance in the air, there was love, excitement, and celebration. It was 1915 in Jamalpur India, during the colonial period of British rule, and perhaps ruin.

But on this day the princess was born, my mother, Hylde Eileen May McGhie, born to Adrian and Eileen McGhie, their first born child. I say princess, because this is how she was viewed and treated by her father, and house attendants, cook, sweeper, doer, dersey, iya and gardeners. Her mother watched her with a little more of a discerning eye, however. As she grew she was filled with life and very feisty, beautiful, determined, and used her unlimited charm to have her way. It took a little getting used to four years later when she was told that the attention getting noisy bundle was called her sister, Joan, and she was here to stay. By the ages of 8 and 4 the two sisters managed a good relationship most of the time, and they happily ran the large grounds, under the watchful eye of the iya, and accompanied by their much loved pets... a goat for Hylde and a lamb for Joan – they also had Big Ben, a huge Bull Mastiff whose weekly passion was to take himself to the train station and ride the train to Bombay and back in a compartment all to himself.

At twelve, Mom and her eight year old sister Joan received the rather startling news that they were going to England on their own to receive a superior education at the Adelphi Convent in Manchester, and live with their father's two maiden aunts, Auntie Minnie and Auntie Edith. They would come home to India for the long summer holidays, and their mother would visit them in England once a year. My mother's free spirit and feisty nature took a hard knock in this conservative and routine way of life, both at home, and by the expectations of the Loretta sisters and the convent. Mom, an avid seeker of fun with her great sense of humour and her creative spirit, survived this less enchanting period of her life with an extraordinary photographic memory, allowing her, for instance, to memorize the complete text of Latin translations from English into Latin, and Latin into English. She breezed through school each year, never really finding out how she would have fared without this gift. During this time in England she also discovered her amazing creativity – her painting and sketches were beautiful, and she played the violin like it was her first language, and of course it was, the language of her soul. In later years she attributed her talent as an actress to her involvement in the drama program at the Adelphi convent.

At 18, having finished school in England, she returned to India full of enthusiasm to pursue her art. Calcutta at that time was the center of the arts, and culture, and she begged her ever adoring father to attend the arts college in Calcutta. This was the one request of hers that he could not grant. During that period of history, in their social setting "a lady" did not work, or do such things. Pre-war India was a landscape of too much of everything for the British settlers. There was a continuous stream of entertainment and parties. My mother by all accounts was the belle of the ball, and, when at 5'2" she walked into a crowded room people would part like the waters of the sea. She was beautiful and ever the entertainer... Not going to arts school meant she soon joined the "ladies" and played mah-jong in the morning, tennis or golf in the afternoon, (she became a 7 handicap golfer) with theatre or dancing or fine dining in the evening. By custom most of these events were accompanied by "pink gins" – gin with angostura bitters. She still sketched some, and her tremendous gift with the violin earned her the invitation to be first violinist of the Calcutta Symphony Orchestra.

At 20 it was in this environment and era that my mother met her husband to be, 14 years her senior, Frank Rupert Tanfield, and yes, of the Tanfields in England. He left behind the "family breeding" and the "old money", and came to India for the good life. The time was about 1937, and a climate of tension and doom were brewing slowly as talk of war was on the near horizon. In 1938 their first child was born, on December

3rd, Michael Arthur – a true gift to the world. And, in 1940, the year World War 2 broke out, their second child was born, Joan Eileen Elizabeth (I was named after her mother, sister and the famous Elizabeth Tanfield in history).

After the birth of their son, my parent's marriage was in a disastrous state. The drinking was out of control by both partners, and my mother relied on the iyas to take care of her children, so Hindustani became my first language. When my brother was three and I eighteen months old, my mother saw it best to send us to boarding school, up in the beautiful hills to the town of Naini Tal, and to her aunt, Mother Gonzaga, our Auntie Gladys, who was the Mother Provincial of St. Mary's Convent there. (Interestingly, she also wrote the English history and geography books for the educational system for Northern India.) During this period Mom met the man who would be her future husband, and she occasionally sent the "Dandis" up to Naini Tal to bring us for a visit to Alahbahd.

World War 2 and my mother's marriage ended at about the same time. My mother's parents had retired to Bournemouth England prior to the war, and under the circumstances invited all three of us to stay with them – FOREVER. However, six months after this joyous time arrived a day of celebration with a three layered white cake, and oh, my mother looking so beautiful, and happy. On inquiry, my mother explained that it was Grandma's birthday, oh yes that's right, she did just have one, but when you are old, she further explained, you have 2 birthdays a year... and the next day she left for Rhodesia, in Central Africa, with her new husband, to a new colony, for a new life. She made arrangements for her children, then seven and five, to live with their father on his estate in the north of England. He had just remarried his lifelong sweetheart, his second cousin, and stepsister, Joy. Mother wrote to us occasionally, and we loved getting these letters.

When I was nine and Michael eleven we learned we would be separated, and that I would be going out to Africa to live with my mother, and stepfather, Hugh Marshall Price, head of the electricity supply commission for Rhodesia. By all account my mother's alcoholism had accelerated hugely. She convinced her husband that it was because of her guilt about leaving her children. He agreed under the circumstances to allow one child, that would be me, to visit and made it clear that it was my job to make her happy, so all this nonsense would stop. My mom suffered so much from guilt on different levels, referring many times to the fact that as a divorced Catholic she was excommunicated from the church and sacraments, and should she die in this state of mortal sin she would go to hell. I wish she had known she was already in hell, and that heaven was just around the corner. I wonder why no one ever told her that. Father Seed was the one bright light in this scenario. He used to come and visit my mother once a year and always inquire "Mrs. Price and how is your first husband?" And she would say "Oh very well thank you Father". He would then reiterate "PITY".

She learned to cook for the first time when she went to Rhodesia and became an amazing cook, but she tells the story that she needed to literally take a cookbook and study it, and explained her confusion when she had the custard and the cookbook told her to throw it over the rhubarb never telling her from what height or distance. Amazingly too while being tormented by her personal challenges and a broken marriage she was the leading actress at the Repertory Theatre for 14 years, mainly doing Shakespeare and sometimes comedy. Another first, during her new life in Rhodesia she had a period of working as a sales representative of Revlon and DuBarry for Southern Rhodesia and was considered very successful. She sewed all our clothes, seldom using a pattern; she had trunks of fabrics, and used to make an outfit with the same amount of effort as another may take to read a paper. And she made all her own costumes for the theatrical productions she was in too. I remember watching in amazement her spreading out yards

and yards of heavy peach satin all over the floor, cigarette hanging from her lips, drink waiting nearby, and cutting out then making this formal period gown, with bustles and scallops. Then, when this magnificent creation was finished for her part as Lady Teasle in an upcoming production, she sewed designs all over the flow of the skirt with literally hundreds of tiny pearls.

However, her daughter was not able to make her happy, as requested, and it turned out to be an excruciating agony for her to experience her daughter's growing beauty and see, from her point of view (the ultimate betrayal by a daughter), her daughter in competition with her in her already broken marriage to a man who sometimes had violent episodes. After she discovered the secretive darkness of events that had been taking place, her 9 ½ year old daughter was sent in silence to boarding school until she was 13 – coming home for the 2 main holidays in the year.

Shortly after this period, we awakened to my mother singing, laughing, and being silly, just for us, my stepfather and I; it was the first day of the 14 she managed in her gallant attempt to bury the monster of alcohol. There was lightness in the air; there was laughter, and beautiful meals. I will always remember these days and three other such episodes.

Time passed and, after her children married and had children of their own and moved to other countries, my mother and Hugh, yes, she still remained married to Hugh, retired to Durban, South Africa. Although my mother lived there for 12 years, she never met anyone of any consequence so there were no appearances to keep up, nothing in her life with which to engage – no anchor – and there was a deep loneliness within. The struggle with the monster became too big to fight, she did not recognize the beauty within, and so it was on September 5th, 1983, she exited the great drama of life, on the world stage, and the curtain fell for the last time. She was 68 years of age. Amazingly, 13 days earlier, on another continent, her first husband died but she never knew this.

The sequel to this story, as could only happen through my mother, was that 2 months after her death in November, I received a birthday card from her for my September birthday. She had forgotten to put a stamp on it, and it was mailed the day before she died. And the angels in the mail service had brought it to me without postage safely from Africa to Canada. She did not mention that she would be leaving, but of course I already knew. I also knew that I was one of the last kind thoughts that she had.