

Kay Stone's story of

Her Mother



My mother was born in 1911 in a tiny rural town settled on the border of North Carolina and South Carolina. When she was eight her parents and their four children moved to Windsor, Ontario, and later to Detroit across the river, where two more children were born.

She met my father at a Halloween party at her church, and they were married a year later – she was seventeen. Her first child was born the next year, and nine years later I appeared in the world, the first girl. Five years later we moved to south Florida – my parents, my oldest brother Allen, me, Janet, and Jolene, all bundled into our 1944 Packard. My mother, who never learned to drive, sat in the backseat with the girls while fourteen-year-old Allen sat up with my father.

One of my early memories from my early years in Detroit is hearing my mother singing when she was doing housework. I'm sure she had a full repertoire, but the only songs I remember clearly are "Frankie and Johnny Were Sweethearts" and "My Blue Heaven." Later, in Miami, she was still singing popular songs of the 1940s. These were gradually replaced by country songs, in the days when these had more meat in them than they do now – especially those of Johnny Cash, whom she managed to see in concert once. I'm amused that the song that has stayed with me from this period is "I Didn't Know The Gun Was Loaded." It goes well with "Frankie and Johnny" – two songs about women and guns. My mother went on humming them for years, even after the words had gone. Now that I have children of my own, I can only guess that these might have been healthy expressions of frustration at being a mother of six (two boys and four girls). And then there was my father, of course, who occasionally functioned as the seventh child. His story is another one altogether, and I'll tell it another time.

Actually she would have been a mother of eight if the two boys born between me and my older brother Allen hadn't died young. She was most likely still in mourning when I was born, and I'm sure I absorbed some of her sadness. All I know is that she was fond of telling me that I cried for the first nine months of my life. Nine months! How did she stand it? "Sometimes," she told me, "I just sat there and cried with you." She also described the day when the two of us were wailing together and she noticed the neighbour's dog lying outside with his paws over his ears. This made her laugh, and now all these years later I can laugh too.

But what I remember most fondly and a bit regretfully about my mother was that she was a consummate gardener once her children and grandchildren (nine at that time) needed less attention from her. South Florida was a gardener's paradise, and she took full advantage of that. By that time I was living away from home, so I didn't see the garden develop and didn't pay a great deal of attention to it as it grew from year to year. She was proud of her vegetables, and always gave me a garden tour when I visited, and pointed out that the only flowers she had were marigolds, planted around the borders to discourage pests.

In fact her entire yard was a garden, and had been all the time I was growing up near Miami. The woman across the street, a lifelong friend, was also a master gardener, and helped her plant sprouts from her own trees – orange, lemon, banana, and an avocado that grew to forty feet and produced avocados the size of ostrich eggs. The coconut palm in the front yard grew there by itself, as did the giant loblolly pine on the edge of our property, one of the many old pines that gave our neighbourhood its official name of Pinewood. Looking back with an adult's eye view, I am guessing that these growing things kept her from missing her lovely red brick house in Detroit as much as she might have. "It was the first house I really loved," she said, "and we came here to this old southern frame house in this old southern neighbourhood. I always thought we'd move, but we never did."

In 1989 my mother was diagnosed with colon cancer. The surgery was successful and she recovered well. That year my parents decided to leave their home of 44 years and move north to the Orlando area. Her garden was gone by then since her arthritis had made it increasingly difficult to keep up the necessary work, so she hung up her old gardening hat on the back porch. I remember visiting her before their move and being saddened to see a large patch of grey dirt where the garden had been – with the weeds already beginning to take over. She had fought aggressive crab grass for all of her gardening years, and now it was going to take back its land, much to her annoyance. “I’ll just have to start another garden in Casselberry,” she said with a rueful smile.

When I returned to Winnipeg after that visit, I had a brief but remarkable dream. I was walking up the front walk of my old home and my mother came out to greet me. “Go out back and see what I’ve done with the garden,” she said. I put my suitcase down on the front porch and walked through the house – living room, kitchen, back porch – and opened the back door. I stood on the cement steps my father had painted emerald green for my mother (her birth gem was emerald and green was her favourite colour). Oh my! Her garden began right at the bottom of the steps and continued across the neighbour’s yards and all the way to the horizon. My mother’s garden covered the earth! This dream was so memorable that a friend composed a poem that captures its earthy quality.

That same year, 1989, a student in my university folklore course named Chris Barsanti told a story of gypsy origin about a crotchety old man who tricked himself into heaven, using an uncharacteristic fourth wish instead of the usual third wish. On a whim I decided to send my version of the story with a woman as the protagonist. I taped it and mailed it to my mother in 1991 (it took me two years of oral telling to get it in shape), but by this time my mother’s cancer had recurred and she had given up. She was declining quickly, spending a lot of time sleeping under the influence of morphine, so I do not know if my sister Jolene ever managed to play it for her. But a friend who was a professional grief counselor assured me that if the tape had been played, my mother would have heard it even in a morphine sleep. I decided that it was enough to know that, and never asked my sister.

My mother did indeed begin planting flowering bushes in Casselberry – hibiscus, orange, and oleander – but decided against another garden. Perhaps the adventures of this old woman might have inspired her if she hadn’t died in May of 1991, just past her 80th birthday. But this is still her story – certainly it is in my mind, and in the many people who have heard it over the last decade.

And I am still humming many of her old songs.