



Sharon Heath's story of

Laurel



My Mom, Laurel Allard, was the firstborn of two daughters to Ida and Silas Pugh. Born in 1936, the middle of the dirty thirties in Port Hardy, Vancouver Island. Port Hardy is well named. It's a remote town on the northern tip of a large, forested rock out on the edge of the continent.

Growing up a tomboy with no running water and no electricity shaped young Laurel. In contrast to her more delicate sister Joan, she sought adventure beyond the hardships of this pioneer life. The Pugh's were in the general store business, the plan sketched out by my mother's grandfather when he first heard about Port Hardy. He was already in the business running his brother-in-law's store near Beacon Hill Park in Victoria, British Columbia.

Alfred Ernest Smith came from York, England, in 1910, chasing opportunity. The railway, the newspapers said, would eventually run all the way from the capital city of Victoria to Port Hardy, opening up this new region for farming, fishing, milling and mining. So, after being swindled in Victoria, and claiming bankruptcy, he went ahead of his family to lease some property to run a second store in Port Hardy, the frontier town. Within a week of returning home, the Canadian Pacific Railway reneged on its plans, mostly due to the outbreak of World War I. Alfred's dreams were painfully adjusted.

Then a new baby was born to his wife, Annie Mary (nee) Thornton, who had been suffering from Bright's disease. She died two weeks later leaving Baby Nora, Louis, aged 4, Ida, (my grandmother) aged 8, and Frank, aged 14. This motherless family continued on to Port Hardy, they had no choice, filled with pride and principle.

Their home was the back of a warehouse which Alfred had leased to run a store in front. It was near the muddied trails running through the port town; a bleak existence. Others arrived to find the farm property they had bought was half rock, half ocean.

Ida cared for the family. Meanwhile Port Hardy grew into a town of miscreants and malcontents. It was the end of nowhere; a swilling town. There was Jack Pedley rumoured to be hiding from the mob; Sam Caughey dodging the draft; hardened criminals waiting it out after being kicked out of Vancouver. They lived in one room houses on and off "Stagger Alley". Due to a bylaw allowing only beer to be sold in hotel pubs, a great underground movement of liquor establishments opened up alongside a great overground movement of violence and inebriation. There were 14 bootlegging bars. One fellow opened up a storefront and just covered over the windows. He was fined once a year, a quasi-liquor license, and the townspeople turned the other cheek.

Meanwhile, my grandmother's family did the best they could. When others bootlegged so did they. Liquor was being bought in bulk, and then re-bottled to make a few extra pennies. When the RCMP sent a notice of inspection my great-grandfather was too stubborn and too honest to say it was any other way. Off he went to jail.

During his five month jail sentence my shamed, now teenaged, grandmother became the proprietor: all knowing, crafty and tight. Over the years she became a kind of sharp and tightly clenched matriarch. Survival meant holding it in, keeping to a strong English mannered household, stiff upper lip, quick penance, tea with milk and blessed sugar if you had it. Ida's quest widened when the family needs began to be met. At the spinster age of 26 she married a draft dodging American named Silas Seth Pugh, aged 36. He was somewhat schooled, clean enough, and time was tapping on Ida's store-front window.

Silas originally came from Missouri, cut from the cloth of the original music man. Purportedly a trained opera singer and a soldier and a prospector he was also a kind man, soft, caring, with differing stories as to his background. Was he a deserter, did he live in Calgary, in Oregon? Did it matter? He loved his daughters and baked fruit pies a plenty. Eventually he and grandmother took over the family store. They would trade for arts and crafts with the local natives, offering vegetables and wine. My grandmother passed down some beautiful crafts from this time.

They may have needed more than pie though for Silas steered the family into one bad business deal after another. So they trimmed the rotten parts off the vegetables that weren't fit to sell. They lived in shacks: a converted pigeon coop; an abandoned 2 room shack; and a house on the edge of the ocean, the tide washing away their sewage. They were lean times, times that infrequently cradled my mother.

Laurel Rosemary Pugh read every book in the library twice. She remembers running away as the native children threw rocks at her. She used small row boats to get around the coastal town. She fashioned her new bra as a leash for the family dog when she encountered a bear, and she and her best friend swam with seals and boated with Orcas. They survived: Ida, Silas, Laurel and Joan. In 1952 the family sold the store and moved down island to Sidney, BC, to run another general store, to better their situation, to prosper. In an immeasurable arrangement of good-nature, desperation and too many flaky crusts, my grandfather gave a no interest loan on the mortgage.

Prosperity was the pie in the sky, but the real baked goods were that my mother thankfully re-invented herself, ending her school years happily, leaving her past behind. She embraced this new neighbourhood's offerings. She dreamt of marriage and a family and shied away from any plans of higher learning. Weren't the career girls nicknamed "Queer Girls"? The choices were solidly laid out for you: young women went into nursing, secretarial school, or became teachers – all in preparation for marriage.

She went on to Normal School at Camosun College near Victoria for a single year. Then she traveled five hundred miles to a settlement near Burns Lake, BC, the middle of nowhere, nineteen years old and scared out of her mind. Laurel schooled children in grades one and two, from five years of age to seventeen. Her classroom was one room, warmed by a wood stove. Her students were native Indians and immigrants of Mennonite descent, sixty-six percent non English speaking. The older boys towered over her. She was vastly under educated for the task but held on through the ten months.

Back in Sidney, BC Laurel's mom had started to take in boarders. Robert Gordon Heath was charming, smart and going to college. Ida took him to the willow tree out front. "Of my two daughters you've got to decide which one you're interested in." Mom and Dad were married in 1960. It was a dry wedding, hosted by my grandparents.

Dad went to school while selling real estate on the side. The children came: Norman, Sharon (me) and Kenneth. We moved constantly. In Vancouver Dad started UBC law school and we lived on what seemed like breakfast all day long: cereal in the morning, porridge for lunch, niblets corn mixed into pancakes for dinner. Mom took in two more kids to make ends meet. She kept getting sick though, kept wondering if this was her life. One year she packed up and left with the kids. The next year Dad packed up and left for good. It was 1970. Years of misaligned goals, raw hearts and stretched means.

Now a single mother, the struggling wasn't over, but at least all she had to worry about was herself and her three kids. She continued seeing a counselor for emotional support. Sometimes the darkness meets you and you fall towards nothing; other times you reach with little strength for something else. While going through immense stress, years and years of poverty, and now divorce, Laurel came to a time when

she didn't think she could go on. Knowing in some part of her bruised psyche that her kids depended on her meant the world.

She took a one bedroom apartment for the four of us and got a job as a receptionist in a doctor's office. The next year she attended Langara College to be a Social Worker. We took in traveling dope smoking hippies through a college summer program. They danced in and out of our house, diaphanous skirts blowing in the wind, pendulum breasts swinging bra-less inside batik patterned peasant blouses. Whenever the basement door opened clouds of sweet, pungent, mary-jane drifted into our suburban kitchen. I never noticed.

Mom also began attending The Unitarian Church. On Tuesday nights we washed our faces and hands and headed to the community room with a six pack of hot dogs. Mom would cut the wieners into the pork and beans and the four of us ate like kings. Mom also updated her wardrobe and music collection to attract men into her life.

In 1971, my mom met Arthur Richard Allard, a true gentleman. He was quite a bit older, but, according to family lore, when Laurel danced with him for the first time it was like sailing in to a safe port. She was happy to tie her meager raft to this man after being out at sea with three small children for much too long. They married in 1972 and we moved to a nice house in Deep Cove with a breathtaking view. At Christmas that year I got exactly what I wished for.

My mom got a job as a Teacher's Aid at the local elementary school and things started really turning around. She excelled at arts and crafts, and dealing with children. Soon the young ones jostled over each other to hold my Mother's hand, fanning the school yard. My mother became a strong addition to the fabric of the community and strong ties remain today.

Laurel and Art were happy and kept it together as their kids battled through the teens. In 1983 they retired to Comox where they lived together for 13 wonderful years, helping their kids through post-secondary schools, volunteering for Meals on Wheels, traveling the continent in a camperized van, active in church and painting beautiful and profound pictures. They both accomplished much with a paint brush, happiness buoying their expression. Us kids converged for the holidays. We laughed and joked, drank Mom and Dad's beer, planned meals to be shared. Ketchup soup was not on the menu.

In 1998 Art died of lung cancer. He was a smoker. He looked pretty cool smoking near the front lines in 1942. He looked pretty cool his whole life actually. He was strong and patient, warm and approachable. He drank good old Canadian Rye Whisky. He played Mr. Thumbs with me until I dropped laughing on the floor and stood behind me when I reached young adulthood saying, "This is your year, Sharon. This is your year." I miss him deep down in my heart and his memory continues to inspire. In fact, my parenting of today is tempered with thoughts of... what would Art do?

It's 2007, and we all live in the Surrey area now. We share birthdays and family holidays with aunts and uncles, grand kids, cousins and well blended families galore. My mom suffers from fibromyalgia, but some days she picks up her pastels and produces stunning natural landscapes. Her arresting works of nature are given as sought after presents. And on days when the rain stays away my Mom kneels over the dirt in her back yard, offering up seeds of water-quenched goodness to sun. Laurel Rosemary Allard (nee Pugh) continues her worship at the Unitarian Church and on potluck Tuesdays brings far more than she could ever use. Last Christmas my Mom and my birth Dad cordially shared a celebration with the family, and prosperity is a frame of mind.