Colleen Winton's story of

# Doris

My Mother's Story

When put together, the threads I have of my mother's life resemble a kind of open woven fabric, a shawl perhaps – a few bright strands with lots of holes. Still it's comfortable enough to wrap myself in and even find some warmth.

Doris Mary Kerr, (well really Doris Mary Oliveen Kerr, though she never used her third name for reasons that should be obvious), was born on November 6, 1917, in New Westminster, B.C. Her mother, Emma Smithers, was descended from hardy United Empire Loyalist stock, pioneers who had travelled north to Nova Scotia, ending up in New Westminster in the 1870s. Her father, William Kerr, hailed from Jonesboro, Arkansas. Doris, her parents, and three older brothers, lived in a large family home on the north bank of the Fraser River.

There must have always been music in the house; the boys had a bit of a band and Doris, a slender, almost skinny youth with curly, strawberry-blond hair, sang with the Schubert Singers and played piano. Her father William, prone to acting on impulse, arrived home one day with a player piano, which was much better received than the 10-pound wheel of Limburger cheese he presented on another occasion and which his wife buried in the garden.

In her teens, Doris contracted rheumatic fever and was confined to bed. For months she passed the time drawing, painting with watercolours, and listening to Nelson Eddy, one of her heart throbs. The rheumatic fever made Emma, a professional worrier, become vigilant about Doris' health. Years later, when Doris dreamed of going to teacher's college, Emma wouldn't hear of her leaving home.

Still, Doris was a working woman all her adult life, had a number of secretarial jobs, and finally enjoyed a long career as a well-respected court reporter. The most intriguing of her jobs along the way was as Police Matron with the New Westminster Police Department. She had been the police station's finger printer, but the Police Chief, recognizing the need to have a woman in the room when handling female prisoners, had Doris sworn in.

Before she married, Mum's one big romance was with Victor, a Dutch merchant sailor. Her diary is full of ecstasies over letters and telegrams received, excitement when he was in port, and fears of the war with Germany and the fate of his ship. The bundle of love letters from him include one, written in Dutch with the English translation pencilled in, from his wife in Holland, whom Mum apparently knew all about. And as the letter suggests, Victor's wife suspected about her as well. (I thought this was deliciously scandalous. Only later did I piece together that this was the same genial Victor who our family would visit in California where he lived with his new wife.)

Here's one of those holes: I believe my parents met at a dance in 1939 where her brothers' band was playing. But I don't know this for certain. What I do know is that Elmer Winton, from Portage La Prairie, Manitoba— (who, again for obvious reasons, preferred his grade-nine nickname of "Pres")—doted on Doris. And Pres was persistent, pursuing her throughout her long distance romance with the Dutch sailor. They were engaged on Doris' 25th birthday, two years after they met, and the following summer Doris married her "L'il Bug" in the back garden of the Kerr home in a simple romantic affair. More romantic, I expect, than their honeymoon on Saltspring Island… escorted by my ever-vigilant grandmother.

I grew up believing my mother was a sophisticated woman who'd seen the world, but, in reality, other than an occasional trip, she never left New Westminster. In fact she lived her whole life on one street; Mum and Dad spent the first five years of married life living in the house of my then-widowed grandmother. With 1947 came the birth of their first child, my sister, Sheila, who was brought home to the Kerr's from the hospital in style; in the Police Chief's car. Soon, Pres began to build Doris her own

home…across the street. And then he built a small house beside that…for her mother. Mum lived the rest of her life in the house that Pres built. My brother, Peter, was born in the new house in 1950, and I arrived five years after that.

Mum loved to garden and we always had a huge vegetable garden, with many flowerbeds and numerous fruit trees. Summer meant picking and freezing, cutting and canning, fresh raspberries picked directly onto your morning bowl of Shreddies. One thing her garden lacked though were lilacs. On spring evenings I would accompany my mother on her "lilac walks" through the neighbourhood. We would stroll out with a pair of garden shears and Mum would approach each bush en route, discretely snipping a purple bloom or two from spots where they would not be missed until we had enough flowers to fill a vase at home.

Mum was an avid walker. Summer outings to White Rock beach often included a stroll to the Peace Arch, three kilometres away, and back! Walking provided a bit of stress relief to my mother, too, when she needed a break from my father and grandmother's favourite sport—arguing. Although Pres and Emma seemed to thoroughly enjoy their bickering, it made Mum's blood pressure rise. She hated arguing, preferring the silent treatment – her silences could be deafening.

Mum certainly had enough stress from her job as a court reporter that she didn't need any more at home. In those days, the court stenographer would take down every word said in the courtroom on little encoding machines with their long rolls of paper and then transcribe it into documents to be delivered to all the lawyers, etc., often on the same day. Mum would work long hours and was considered the top of her field. For many years her notes were used to train new court reporters. I was aware at some point that my mother's salary as a court reporter was actually more than my father's as a CBC Radio technician, unusual for the time, and a fact that my grandmother was swift to use against my father during their many squabbles.

My father adored my mother and there was nothing he wouldn't do for her. Sometimes, as we sat down to dinner, he would drive Mum crazy by immediately abandoning the table to accomplish a task she had casually mentioned needed doing. He also delighted in giving her the most exquisite custom made jewellery. I have the sense though that, despite how full her life seemed to us, there was a restless piece of my mother that wished that Dad shared more of her interests, that some of her choices in life had been different, that life could have been more… well, more.

One of Mum's great loves was the Arts. She regularly attended the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra and on Saturdays would listen to the Met Opera broadcast in the kitchen as she caught up on ironing. When the soprano or tenor hit a high note she would halt all conversation and activity and stand, eyes closed, not breathing, drinking in the sound until the note ended, and life could resume. I still love the smell of ironing because it takes me back to those Saturdays and watching the ecstasy on her face as she listened to those notes. She also introduced me to the singing of Ivan Rebroff, the humour of Flanders and Swan, and, when I started ballet class, shared with me her love of dance. We went to see the Bolshoi when I was about 10, and exciting as it was, what I recall most is returning home and Mum deciding we needed a late-night snack. She made us toasted bacon-and-mushroom sandwiches, which seemed to me the most delicious and grown-up thing I had ever eaten.

As a cook she became health conscious, and as a result, a bit adventurous. She used a wok before most people knew what one was. I loved her Steamboat, a communal and interactive fondue-like dish where an array of foods cooked on skewers in a bubbling broth, finishing with noodles simmered in the flavour infused liquid. But I never learned to like Tiger's Milk, a healthy shake made with wheat germ and flax.

She once packed my brother off to the doctor, fearing jaundice, only to receive the diagnosis of too much carrot juice in his diet. She would throw great buffet-dinner parties, made a fabulous raspberry pie from the fresh berries in our garden, and I have yet to taste a pumpkin pie that rivals hers.

Mum was a crusader who fought for social and environmental causes, started petitions, boycotted products and companies. Grapes were banned in our house in protest of the treatment of migrant workers in California. Remember when you could buy bath tissue to match any colour scheme? Mum joined the fight to protect our water and successfully campaigned against the use of dyes in coloured tissue and toilet paper.

In the mid-sixties Mum and Dad bought a piece of land and built a small cabin on Saltspring Island, where they had honeymooned decades earlier. This became Mum's sanctuary. She was happiest when beachcombing, rowing in our bay, reading, or finding a new skinny-dipping spot on a nearby island.

Mum had a great appreciation for all things classic and worthwhile. One evening she arrived home to find me watching television well past bedtime. "What on earth are you doing up?" she demanded. "What are you watching?" but after glancing at the television, she melted with "Oh, this is a marvellous play," and sat beside me to watch the rest of the classic American drama A Raisin in the Sun. I know she took great pleasure from my years of dancing and, though she never saw me act on stage or heard me sing, I'm certain she would have been a keen and critical supporter of my theatre career.

I remember that Mum used to sing when she sneezed – a musical coda to bring the explosion to a peaceful conclusion – ah…ah…ACHOOOO…hmm…hm…ahum…ahum…ha …la…la…la…lalala…haaah. I remember she was a stylish yet down-to-earth woman who wore Italian knit suits to work and slacks at home. I remember one of her favourite sayings was "Don't look at me in that tone of voice! (Dorothy Parker – always steal from the best).

I do not remember the exact date my mother died. I used to know, but somehow over time I have forgotten, and I now realize that I don't need, or want, to have a date on which to pin the remembrance. It was after her 54th birthday, I was 16, and arrived home from school to find that she had been sent home early from work with flu symptoms. From my room upstairs, I heard my father call out for me. Mum had collapsed in the bathroom. We got her into bed, but our efforts to revive her were unsuccessful. It wasn't known then that women experience heart attacks differently from men. She deserved better.

I know that the date falls in January, between Christmas and my sister's February birthday. The previous summer the family had attended a Pleasure Faire, a very seven-grain-let's-dance-in-a-sun-drenched-field kind of event – pure '70s – where my sister had admired a set of pottery dishes. My mother secretly purchased them, smuggled them home, and hid them away in a linen closet to give her for Christmas. Except that she forgot about them and, upon rediscovering them after the holidays, said conspiratorially to me, "Oh well, I'll keep them for her birthday," and tucked them back under the sheets and towels. In February, when my sister's birthday came around, Mum was gone. I went to the linen closet and uncovered the dishes, gift wrapped them, and gave them to my sister. She received them with delight and confusion. Here they were, strange and familiar, miraculous, a present only Mum could have purchased. It was as though I had given her a piece of Mum back.