Eileen Barrett's story of

Betty

My Mother's Story

Elizabeth Howison – "Betty", was born in Deadwater, England on October 17, 1927. Born a twin, she had a brother, Donald George, who died at the age of six weeks. On his death certificate it claimed "failure to thrive". I think my mother always felt guilty for being the strong one.

Her parents met while in service to a captain of the Gordon Highlanders, a regiment her father, Robert, also served. Robert was from Glasgow and her mother, Jean was a cook/housekeeper from Inverness. Although they were posted to England, and my mother was born there, she was a Scot, through and through.

When Jean was eight months pregnant, she and Robert married.

Jean died of a brain tumour, when my mother was seven, in 1935.

My mother had no negative memories of her mother. She had a sweet one, about being in a garden, and her mother teaching her which flowers were Michaelmas daisies. She also remembered helping her to roll out pastry. When her mother was close to death, she visited her in a darkened room. When her mother died, Betty wore a black Alice in Wonderland hair band, with a bow, instead of an arm band.

Betty went to her maternal grandmother's in Inverness, for a few months, and then was sent to her father's mother, in Glasgow, while her father was stationed in Gibraltar.

When her father remarried, in 1937, Betty went to live with him and his new wife, Suzie, until her half-sister Jessie was born. She remembered going out, all on her own, to buy baby clothes for her wee sister.

Her father's mother was a woman who'd had a hard life: her husband had been killed falling off a telephone pole when he was quite young, leaving her to raise a large family.

She didn't really want to raise my mother, but even more so, did not want her to be raised a Catholic. My mother's Aunt Queenie, her mother's elder sister, had three boys, a baker husband, would have adored a girl, and lived in the fresh air of the Black Isle, in the Highlands, close to Mum's Inverness Granny.

She was evacuated the day the Second World War broke out, to Balahoulish, on the train, with her little gas mask. Her father was immediately called up.

Betty's father died at Dunkirk, at the beginning of the Second World War. She remembered, later, going into the knife drawer in her grandmother's home, and chancing upon a buff coloured envelope with the words "I have been wounded" in her father's handwriting, stuffed into the back of the drawer.

When she was 12, she went to live with her Inverness Granny. As she described, it was "as though going back to a cherished memory that had been taken away".

She was evacuated for the second time in 1942, to Aberfeldie. She stayed with a Mrs. Edwards for 14 months. It wasn't home, but Mrs. Edwards was kind. Another evacuee, Isa, became her close friend. They slept in a single bed, with an orange crate each, for their belongings.

My mother always looked on the bright side of things. She said she would probably not have had the opportunity to visit those towns, if she hadn't been evacuated. It certainly helped to secure her remarkable ability to get along anywhere.

At 17, when the war ended, she got a job in the GPO: the post office/telephone service, as an operator. In 1948, she met Joseph Barrett, a young technician. He had taken out several of the operators already, but found "Ginger", as she was known, to be the friendliest.

She was impressed that, for their first date, Joe asked her to the Scottish Symphony. They had to hide the fact that he was Catholic. When this was discovered at home "there was Hell to pay".

When they started courting, rationing was still in effect. Joe would save up his sweet rations to buy a tiny box of chocolates for them to share at the pictures.

She fell in love with Joe, and all the Barretts. A typical Glasgow family of six brothers, sisters and two parents in a small apartment, they had one curious status symbol: an indoor bathroom.

It was heaven for Betty to be surrounded by many siblings, all vying for the bathroom and the last treacle scone, and she found a lifelong friend in Joe's younger sister, Lillian.

In 1950, she attended nursing school, at Stobhill Hospital. Joe would help her up over the gate of the students' residence when they would return too late from an evening out.

My mother would have made a wonderful nurse, with her gift of compassion, and the ability to draw anyone's story out of them.

She left nursing to care for her Inverness Granny. Upon first meeting Joe on the doorstep of her home, Highland Granny opened her arms and wrapped him up in them. No scheming needed to gain acceptance to this side of the family.

When they got engaged, in 1951, Joe already had the urge to emigrate. Betty took little convincing. After all, being with Joe was a big adventure. She would have gone with him anywhere.

After the war there were many opportunities for young British citizens to immigrate to countries of the Commonwealth. For New Zealand, you had to be single: to have a job lined up upon your arrival. For my mother, this was no problem. She was going to transfer to a nursing hospital there. They both had to lie, to pretend that they were not married. This was a bit of a task at my mother's interview. I think my father sailed through with flying colours. He always was a good story teller!

Their acceptance to immigrate to Canada came through. They had several friends already living in Toronto, and it was there they went.

My mother crossed the Atlantic several weeks after my father. He, finding passage on a Greek freighter, pitched and heaved his way, throwing up, to his new country. My mother made her crossing on The Empress of Scotland, where there were on-deck games, good food, reclining deck chairs and sustaining broth for the sea-sick, provided by helpful staff.

Life in Canada was a big adventure. No rationing, no class system: all so new. They both became as passionate Canadians as they were passionate Scots.

When my father came home from a visit to the west coast, he declared Vancouver to be The Promised Land. They packed up my sister, Frances, my brother, Michael and me and moved to B.C.

With my father in a new job, at Lenkirk Electric, and the last of their children in school, my mother got herself a job at the Hudson's Bay. They liked hiring ex-pat Brits at that particular store. Walking in to the Ladies's Shoes section was like being on the set of Coronation Street. Betty would bake cakes every payday, and take them to work, where the staff would pile them up amidst the shoe boxes in the back room and eat them between customers, pealing with laughter.

When Lenkirk Electric pulled all their jobs back to the U.S., my father lost his. My mother's salary became our only source of income, while my father pounded the streets, driving a cab, long-shoring, and radio freelancing.

My father secured a job at the Labour Relations Board of BC. My mother was, by this time, a permanent fixture at the Hudson's Bay shoe department. She racked up a slew of customer commendation awards and had many devoted customers who would only be fitted by her. She could always be relied upon to find last minute gifts for the wives of hapless men who wandered into the store on Christmas Eve and threw themselves on her mercy. She would keep a slipper in one hand and would imagine striking them about the head with it.

Shortly before my parents retired, my sister and her new baby returned from Toronto. My mother did not know she was about to become a grandmother until my sister was eight months pregnant.

My mother and my niece shared a very close bond. Eowyn and her Mom lived with my parents for the first year of her life. Eowyn is strong-willed, a prodigious talent. My mother, "a great softie" was also, at birth, the strong one.

My mother and father spent many of their retirement years traveling. We joked about it being difficult to get hold of them, because they were always off somewhere. I was actually proud of them, finally taking time for themselves.

When I made my first forays back into theatre after my children were born, my mother was enormously supportive. She would look after Matthew and Garnet throughout the rehearsal period, and then come to the show when it opened.

Whether I was in "a wee period costume" or more often, "something weird", she was always there. My theatre friends grew to adore her, sitting in the audience, clapping madly at the end of the show, hugging the actors afterward, as though they were all her children.

She always claimed I got my "theatricality" from my father, but it came as much from her. She buried herself in books. I believe it helped to develop a keen imagination to get her through some pretty rough and loveless times in her younger years. A great Jane Austen fan, she held very strong opinions about who should be allowed to portray the characters in the movies. She was a hopeless romantic who loved a good cry at a "three hanky" picture.

She could burst into infectious, uncontrollable laughter; going off on "a wee ha'penny thing". Throughout her life, people sought her out as a sympathetic listener and supportive friend.

She supported my father through a five year battle with Parkinson's Disease, that took him from us May 25, 2006.

Even when she called me to tell me she had "a wee bit of cancer", it didn't stop her putting my father's needs first. It gave her the determination to survive the massive surgery, which took out her oesophagus and half of her stomach.

She returned home to Sechelt, and re-commenced her care of him until he died.

Then, she got on a plane to Kelowna to visit her best friend, then a plane to Scotland to go to a family wedding…then I got another phone call.

The cancer had returned, metastasized in her brain, growing rapidly.

Even with the prognosis of no hope for recovery, delivered by an oncologist with the personality of Eeyore, Mum took a big breath, told us all she'd had a very good life, and patted the doctor's knee.

"I prefer it when you smile, Doctor."

She wanted to die in her bed, in the home in Sechelt she and my father had loved so much. She wanted to see all her family and friends, and to sort us all out, before she went. Even in her final weeks, she would greet every palliative care nurse with a smile and a hug, asking them if they needed a cup of tea.

She left us on January 7th, 2007, and I miss her every day.

And the memories she has left me…..images that dance in my head and fill my heart and senses…..

There she is …… in the hug my sons' arms wrap around me, in the warmth of her sweaters, which grow with every washing…"Wrap up, wee girl"…in the smell of tea wafting over me when I open my kitchen cupboard, and the smell of baking.

Oh, the baking. Those wonderful, squishy cream-filled treats, to soothe hurt feelings, sore knees or just because…"Let's have a wee treat"… in the smile I feel welling up inside me when I hear a Scottish accent.

Her laugher and generosity touched so many lives.

And although she has gone, she will always be, strangely, a survivor and a strong one.