



Wendy Gorling's story of

Norma



My mom, Norma Gorling, was a quiet artist, so quiet that for many years I thought she was just a mom who cooked and cleaned. As I look back now, I see her in a different light. She knitted intricate sweaters in wild colours, some with sequins, some with added embroidery. She spent hours sewing elegant clothes. While other grads wore polyester empire waist dresses, I had a sleeveless sheath in peacock moiré satin, with cape, fabric hair clips, and matching purse. One time I came home from university to find my bedroom walls and furniture in antiqued white, another time painted a vibrating raspberry. Though she sounds flamboyant, she was simply clothing her family and keeping the house as nice as could be.

And she had many houses. My dad kept climbing up the corporate ladder, which kept his family moving across Canada. He would always go ahead and mom was left behind to sell the house and direct the movers. When I was in Grade 10 we moved four times in 3 different provinces. I never heard my mom complain once. When I was in Grade 12, we were to move again: I refused. My mom backed me up and we stayed behind six months while my father lived in a Winnipeg hotel. I'll always be thankful for that.

Norma Tanner was born in Regina in 1916. Her dad, Percy, was a lawyer. Her mom, Arnalda, who lived to be 100, was a society lady who had ideas about bringing up her two girls. Arnalda told me a story, when she was about 90, about my great, great etc. grandfather who was a prince in, as I recall, Denmark, and how he was eventually murdered by Arnalda's family, who hated Denmark (they were Norwegian). I think these feelings of grandeur made my grandmother demand that her girls be cultured. As a result, my mom was forced to be a musician. She had to practice violin and piano three hours a day – 1 ½ hours before school and 1 ½ hours after school. Eventually getting her A.R.C.T., she became a violinist in the Regina Symphony and a teacher of the instrument. Her older sister, Lillian, was strong enough to refuse to be so molded. Norma eventually turned away from it as a profession, not even encouraging her children to take up any musical instrument. I rarely heard her play but when I did, it was magnificent. Even my father, who had been a trumpet player in the Salvation Army, could only persuade her to pick up the violin two or three times.

As a child, she was plump. I think this made her forever conscious of what she ate. And what I ate! She was so afraid I would get fat. I still feel guilty every time I have a peanut butter sandwich. ("You'll get pimples.") I don't dare eat toast because I know I will want more than one piece, mainly out of defiance. I still sneak cookies or will say defensively to my husband "I'm having three."

She traveled to Toronto to go into nursing; this, again, was her mother's idea. Did she do it to get away from her family, or because she was the "good daughter"? Though one of the top students, she had to give it up in her last year of training because she got a staph infection. She almost died. Rather than repeat the year of training in order to graduate though, she quit nursing and became a secretary. She seemed quite bitter about nursing, saying that trainees were treated more like maids, emptying bed pans and cleaning floors. Her fingernails were oddly bent, she said, because of all the beds she had to make. Oddly, when I think back, I never see her as a "healer". Perhaps she pushed that away as she had done music.

It was as a secretary that she met my dad, Norman (yes, my parents were Norma and Norm). At 25, my mom's hair was already white, because of her illness. Another side effect was she thought she would be unable to conceive. But after 3 years of marriage, she got pregnant with my brother, Chuck. One year later, I was born. With the first child, there was concern about genetics: both Norm and Norma had moles. My father, whose moles covered all of his back, wasn't expected to live past 20, the doctors said, because of possible cancer. (He's now 86). "Are you prepared to take that chance?" he asked her. "Yes."

My mom's mole – a large one on her shoulder –was actually very important to me as a little girl. Afraid of ghosts in my dark bedroom, I nightly asked her to come sleep with me. To assure myself it wasn't a ghost lying beside me, I always checked to make sure that mole was there.

When I was studying in Paris, I got the news that my mother had uterine cancer. After radiation treatments, she went into remission. She did not talk about the experience, preferring to have quiet times by herself. A little over a year later, while my parents were building a log cabin (they had moved again while she was in remission), my father noticed that she was holding her side. She refused to go to the doctors when my dad asked her about it, so he picked her up, put her in the car, and drove her back to Vancouver. The doctors opened her up (I was not told this at the time) and found that the cancer had spread everywhere. She never talked about it, never complained and never said her good-byes. I don't understand why she wouldn't fight it; I have no idea why she didn't have a conversation about my life that she would never be a part of. My parents phoned the night before she died. When I complained about a director that I was having problems with, she said "Don't let him walk all over you." That was her last piece of advice.

We never talked a lot about "life". One of our strongest connections came through sewing. August was a time when material was bought –mix and match -and patterns were chosen for the coming year school clothes. I learnt from her, as I tried to sew my creations, that you keep going, despite the mistakes along the way. You can always rip out and start anew! It never bothered my mom to do that. For me it was failure.... until she calmly solved the problem. When my mom died, at 58 years old, it took me years before I could sew again because she would not be there to help me through the difficult parts. I still have the sewing machine that made the black velvet circle skirt, or that electric blue hooded dress, sent to me while in Paris. I wouldn't part with it for the world.