



Valerie Sing Turner's story of

Nancy



My mother, Nancy, was born in 1931, the second youngest of 12 children, the eighth daughter among nine sisters, raised on a sprawling farm in West Saanich on Vancouver Island. Her father, a peasant from southern China, arrived in Victoria in 1907. After settling on small farm he rented, he asked a friend if he had a sister he could take as a wife. But the promised sister was frightened at the prospect of marrying a complete stranger in an even stranger land, and her family, desperate to honour the arrangement, turned to an older sister, my grandmother – already considered an “old maid” at the age of 21 – and asked if she would go instead. At 44, her husband-to-be was more than twice my grandmother’s age; he was 61 when my mother was conceived.

Nancy was born in a house on Caledonia Street in Victoria, BC, in the company of a midwife – and a ghost. The resident ghost – a frail teenager seen playing the piano and dancing around the house – was a well-known phenomenon among all the Victorians born in that midwife’s establishment. I often wonder how much of an influence that ghost had on the newborn Nancy, because dancing and music have always been her lifelong loves despite her parents having no interest in the arts.

The large family earned its precarious living market gardening, and as a child, my mother toiled in fields of vegetables, fetched water from the well, and fed the chickens. She has rueful memories of wearing a lot of hand-me-downs and a bad-tempered rooster chasing her around the yard. She learned to sew underwear, using old rice sacks for fabric. If there wasn’t enough money for bread, her mother would roast potatoes for them to take to school.

But Nancy felt luckier than her elder siblings, having spent her first 10 years calling the barn home; before the barn was built, the family lived in the chicken coop. It was the Great Depression: her father wasn’t motivated to build a house until the fire marshall told them that the barn chimney used for cooking was a fire hazard. In 1941, with the help of my grandmother’s savings, carpenters were hired at 25 – 50 cents an hour to build the long-awaited house. Nancy and her brother Max, excited and curious, would talk to the workmen after school – until the day their mother caught them distracting the carpenters from their work. Grabbing a broom, she chased them all the way back to the barn. Nancy laughingly recalls hiding under the bed with Max, the broom sweeping back and forth in their faces, and their mother scolding them that the men were being paid good money to work, not talk!

The virulently anti-Asian political climate during the first half of the 20th century in British Columbia resulted in discriminatory laws and regulations that served to increase hardship and isolate the Chinese community. One of my mother’s most vivid childhood memories was from the time she was only eight years old, when she witnessed two of her older sisters leading their mother away from the well, the horse’s harness still draped around her neck. Though she didn’t understand until years later how close her mother had been to hanging herself, she never forgot the look of utter despair on her mother’s face, the way her overworked body sagged in her sisters’ arms, and her sisters’ quietly desperate murmurs that everything would be OK, that there were little ones to care for.

At the same time, she remembers their neighbours being kind to the only Chinese family in the area, offering the children fruit and occasionally taking them in when conditions were especially tough.

But life wasn’t always desperate, and Nancy was high-spirited and feisty. Her mother would often get after her for giggling too much, asking “why can’t you be more prim and proper like Estella Chan?” When she was 9, Nancy enjoyed roller-skating to school and seeing the latest movies whenever she chaperoned her sister Mary’s dates with her fiancé. Although she remembers her father as being stern, often shouting at her mother, she also remembers him being nice to young Nancy. Her father, however, always criticized

her mother's cooking, complaining she never did it right; it was either too salty or not salty enough. One day, her father came in from the fields for lunch and started his usual criticisms. Nine-year-old Nancy put down her chopsticks and told her father not to come for lunch if he didn't like mother's cooking! Rather astonished at her own brazenness, she was even more astonished when he got up from the table and left without another word.

By the time Nancy was 12, with her father and brothers living and working a second farm several miles away, her mother would occasionally go to Vancouver to visit her married daughters. Without fail, Nancy would take the spare change her mother had left to buy a treat and head straight to Willoughby's Store to buy Delnor frozen strawberries – her favourite sustenance until her mother's return.

She attended Mt. Newton School. Though she never graduated, her graduating class of 18 students always invited her to their regular reunions. As a teen, my mother was a social butterfly, dancing to big band music, enjoying parties, sports and roller-skating. She was president of the local teen club, organizing many social events – and popular among the boys. My mother would regale us with tales of admiring boys imitating the swinging hips of her hourglass figure as she walked past. She laughed about one particular party when she and a friend conspired to test his new tape recorder without telling anyone else. But no matter how far my mother consciously placed herself, the machine insisted on recording my mother's joyous laughter above everyone else.

Nancy had to leave school in the middle of grade 11 in order to work. Her first job was in the accounts payable department at Hudson's Bay. One night, while walking to her bus stop with her boyfriend, she saw a Chinese man watching them. The next morning, while chatting with a co-worker at the Bay, she noticed the same man talking to another clerk while glancing over at her. The next thing she knew, her father shipped her off to New Westminster to work for an older sibling. Apparently, the Chinese stranger had told her father that she'd been seen with a Caucasian boy! Ironically, her boyfriend, who worked on a CPR boat, was transferred to Vancouver, so they were able to continue the friendship.

When she returned to Victoria in 1952, she found a job at St. Joseph's Hospital as an x-ray film librarian, and quickly moved up to receptionist before becoming a typist of radiology reports. Nancy enjoyed working at the hospital, joining her many good friends on their outings to the theatre, dancing, ice-skating and beach parties. One day, it was reported to a "Sister" – her boss – that the fun-loving Nancy was too friendly with the doctors. Sister decided that she should talk to the young woman, earnestly advising Nancy that she should be more like her prim and proper co-worker. To her astonishment, the irrepressible Nancy responded, "No way!" And nothing more was said about the matter.

In 1956, Nancy married my father, James Sing, when she was 24. She made her wedding dress and entire trousseau on a Singer treadle sewing machine. The early independence she enjoyed as a young woman working for five years at St Joseph's Hospital was severely curtailed with the arrival of four active children whom she raised almost single-handedly, since my father worked long days, often seven days a week, with only a couple of weeks off a year. Though she married for love, unlike her mother, and though her husband is a second generation Chinese-Canadian like herself, she felt familial pressure to have a firstborn son, an anxiety greatly relieved by the arrival of my brother, Kevin, when she was 28.

Nancy was determined to give her children all the things she never had. She loved music. She would sing Patti Page songs to us – "How Much is that Doggy in the Window?" – and play Nat King Cole, Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass, and the soundtrack to The Sound of Music on the record player. We grumbled that she never had piano lessons as we dragged ourselves out of bed for early morning practice. We sang in

the school choirs, and it was expected that we'd play in the school band. She loved to dance; she enrolled us in ballet, acrobatics, tap and jazz lessons. She even took us to a highland class to see if we wanted to try it. (We didn't.) I was six when a friend told my mother that the Victoria Operatic Society needed children for *The King and I*, so after meeting the director, Kevin, Marilyn and I found ourselves cast as Siamese royalty. My youngest sister was still in my mother's womb during rehearsals, and my mother claimed that she could feel Jodi kicking along as we sang "Getting to Know You."

A naturally creative person, her lack of education and the duty to her family sometimes resulted in bouts of frustration and impatience. We were often told to "be quiet, Mom has a headache and has to lie down". But my mother's many talents did manage to find expression in small but memorable touches. Beautifully wrapped Christmas gifts. Artful birthday cakes. I recall one frosted and shaped as a pair of spurred boots for my brother at an age when all boys want to be a cowboy; another as a school of green fish after my one of my favourite books, "Artie the Smartie". Cunning costumes for innumerable dance and drama performances. Successful fundraisers for charities. Inventive ways to feed and clothe her large family on the single income of a farmer.

My mother is a camera bug. Framed family photos grace every available surface, and she has cabinets lined with albums, all carefully labeled and dated. As technology progressed, my mother upgraded to 35mm, then to video, then to digital. My sisters and I delight in poring through old albums, our mother invariably beautiful and fashionable, her dazzling smile the ubiquitous accessory to whatever she wore. I only now have an inkling of the cultural and social pressures under which my mother must have struggled, struggles that the smiles in the pictures disguised so well.

Nancy has a strong sense of social justice. It was she and her beloved brother, Max, who supported their mother – my Poh-Poh – in taking older brother John to court in a bid to have him return to Poh-Poh the possession and ownership of her home, the house she worked so hard for. It is she who speaks up at any perceived unfairness – though it must be admitted that once in a while, she unleashes her passion before knowing all the facts, an unfortunate trait that seems to have been passed on to her eldest daughter. But no one could ever accuse her of not having her heart in the right place.

Nearing the end of her 7th decade, Nancy is an active member of the Uplands Golf Club, playing at least three rounds a week, and "bombing off" several times a year to various nearby and farflung locales – Portugal, Mexico, the Dominican Republic – with "the gals" for tournaments and golfing junkets. She loves spoiling her grandchildren, Phillip and Elayna, knitting them beautiful sweaters and afghans, and is famous for her secret-recipe waffles, apple pies and sausage rolls. Approaching her 80th birthday in 2011, she has the energy and looks of a woman 20 years younger, and the high-spiritedness of her youth continues to look well on her.