



Angela Parson's story of

Ada



Ada Stoute (nee Moore) was born August 14, 1935 on the tiny island of Barbados in the West Indies. She was raised with her 2 brothers (O'Neil and Cameron) and 2 sisters (Ina and Etheline) in the county of St. John's. Her mother died from cancer when she was around 11 years old, I think. Her name was Winnifred. Her father lived to a very old age. Despite being the youngest in her family, she left Barbados when she was about 18 years old for England, determined to work and bring her brothers and sisters to live with her. She left her first born daughter, Julie, with my father's mother. In those days, this was common practice. There were no paternity tests; the child was given the once over by the family and if the child resembled the father, that was that. First she sent for my father, Randall Stoute, and they were married in London. Then, one by one, she brought her brothers and sisters and daughter to England. Her second daughter, Angela (me), was born in England, June 19, 1963. Her youngest daughter, Susan, was born August 10, 1966 in Toronto.

In England, Ada worked on the London buses as a ticket taker and then became a secretary to a secretary who worked first for a Member of Parliament and then at the Office of High Commission. This woman, Stella Monk, became Angela's godmother. Ada was extremely fond and grateful to this woman because she trained her and treated her fairly in a time where racism was the norm. She would often tell me this woman would call me her "chocolate drop". She thought so highly of this woman, my middle name is Stella.

Ada and Ron worked very hard to start a new life in Toronto. My father worked as a cabinetmaker. They first lived on Dovercourt, in a Portuguese neighbourhood, but eventually moved to Rexdale in the 1970's. It was a nice, working class neighbourhood. Ada found us a house at 75 Alicewood Court in 1975 and lived there until July, 2003. She suffered through 23 years of unhappy and often abusive marriage because she valued her family unity most, but thankfully divorced in 1985. My father eventually moved to Atlanta, Georgia with his company. He remarried, had a child, and then remarried again.

Growing up, we never had conversations. West Indian parents don't negotiate or have conversations with their kids. We were raised to be seen and not heard. It was just their way to tell me what I should say, what I should do, what I should wear and so forth. If I had any differing thoughts, it was called backtalk. They were just too damn busy working and paying the bills. But I knew she loved me. I never doubted that for one moment. Every little clay sculpture, every bad painting, any little thing I would create, she would ooh and ahh over. She kept everything.

She would spend her last dollar on her kids. I remember seeing only a handful of dresses in her closet; she never had any personal luxuries. One time I went to music camp, (I played viola) and it was a big deal in my family. I remember her hectoring my dad for the money. When I went to the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City, my mum took out a loan to pay one year's tuition. She helped my younger sister, Susan, through university. As a matter of fact, when my sister graduated, she handed the diploma to our mother because "it was really hers". My sister and I would buy her facials, and fine china, and real jewels to make up for what my father never gave her.

My mother sang all the time. If anything reminded her of a song, she would start singing. As kids, it would drive us crazy, but it was fun all the same. She loved music; singing was her source of happiness and joy. She sang a little like Mahalia Jackson or Sarah Vaughan. She wanted to do something with her singing, but my dad never encouraged her. After my parents divorced in 1985, my mother started her own life.

She started singing in churches, for weddings, funerals, Canada Day celebrations, clubs. She went back to school to get her grade 10 education, wrote her life story and was presented an achievement award by

the Mayor of Etobicoke, Ontario. She worked for Kellogg's for about 13 years until the company relocated from Rexdale to London. She worked practically every day of her life, even past the age of retirement, cleaning offices, doing background extra work for the movies and other things.

When I finally moved out at age 27, she would bring me care packages full of potatoes, onions, milk, fruit, pieces of salted fish, tetra juice packages. And when I moved to Vancouver in 1995, she just mailed them to me. I begged her to stop, but she wouldn't. I would yell and scream, tell her I wasn't starving, that I could afford my own things, but that's the way she was. You have no idea of how many soggy packages I would pick up from the postal outlet because tiny creamer packages had broken and leaked over the potatoes or fruit she would insist on sending me. But sometimes, when times were tough, I really appreciated the \$5 dollar bill tucked in an envelope or the laundry money or the bag of rice. I never told her when I was broke, but she always seemed to know anyway. She was always there for me.

She had developed diabetes late in life and was fortunate enough to just keep it under control with oral medication but, after one too many car accidents, she realized she shouldn't live alone. So she packed up everything as best as she could and moved to stay with my younger sister in Atlanta, Georgia. However it became clear that Mum was not capable of handling child care responsibilities as my sister had hoped. She was often erratic, paranoid and irrational, obsessing over minor details and glossing over forgotten appointments. So, I encouraged Susan to send mum packing over to me before her marriage was wrecked.

Mum came to stay with me, my husband and our 95 lb black lab, Sampson, in our one bedroom apartment in Kitsilano. I tried to get her to rent out a short term apartment before she found a place to buy, but she wasn't haven't any of it. She was too concerned about the cost. Was I trying to have her live in the streets?

Six weeks later, our lives changed forever. It was early morning. She was excited to be doing some movie extra work on *I, Robot* – she even bought a dress for it from the thrift store. I was eager to drive and be rid of her for hopefully the whole day, but surprisingly she wasn't ready. She seemed disorganized, partly dressed. She was talking, but didn't say much. I thought perhaps her blood sugar was low, that maybe she'd forgotten to take her diabetes medication. As I started to drive downtown, she would nod off and at first, I thought, she's just sleepy. But it got harder and harder to nudge her awake. When we arrived 10 minutes later, I knew there was something seriously wrong and told the production people I was taking her to the hospital. At St. Paul's I learned she had had a debilitating stroke.

She recovered physically, but mentally she was no longer the same. She had suffered frontal lobe damage, which required brain surgery, and was diagnosed with dementia. She could no longer tell time or keep track of days and her behaviour was unpredictable and occasionally aggressive. And in a strange city, the names of the streets have no memories for her to hold onto. I had to put her in residential care, a "home" on a locked floor for dementia and Alzheimer patients. She doesn't sing very much any more unless the mood strikes her or she hears a song she remembers.

I visit with my mum 3 times a week now. One day, I picked her up at the home and found that a loving aide had braided her hair and put little artificial flowers in it. My mum was dressed in orange that day (she looked so cute) and I arrived dressed in my favourite orange motif outfit, complete with an orange straw purse. My mum and I walked down Robson Street, amidst the busy shoppers and retail stores, hand in hand. That day, as I looked over at her, with me leading her through the streams of people, I realized that I now knew what it must have felt to be her leading me, as a child, down a busy street: watchful, protective, proud that she looked so cute with flowers in her hair and in an outfit that matched mine. It

was like time stood still in that moment and I had become the “mother” and she, all 69 years of her, had become the “daughter”.

I felt such an overwhelming sense of love for my mother. I felt such a sense of appreciation for all that she had gone through in order to protect and care for me as I grew up. If someone had knocked into her carelessly, I would have struck out at them without thinking, without hesitation. If anyone had stared at her strangely, I would not have hesitated to put them in their place, so fierce was my need to protect her in that moment.

When we return to the home, she walked me to the elevator, I punched in the code and we said our goodbyes. She always returns to the home willingly, telling me to go home to my husband. I know how much she hates that place. But she lets me go. This is a woman who, for most of my life, I could not be in the same room with, always ran from, always tried to not be like. Our bond is deep, undeniable, and inescapable. She is a survivor. I had that one moment when I thought I was the “mother”, but really, who am I kidding? She is and always will be the “mother” and I will always be her child.