



Jenn Griffin's story of

Hilda



How do I know my mother's life? From memory? Perhaps from anecdotes she relayed during our long walks to and from the grocery store. Still other parts feel sewn into me, as if she deposited them into my imagination for safe keeping.

My mother, Hilda Margaret Hardie (née Salter) was born May 24, 1914, in Manchester, England. She was the first born of Maggie and Alfred Salter. Maggie was a housewife and Alfred a leather artisan who specialized in violin cases. She grew up in a row house on Milton Street, in the area of Manchester captured by the long running soap opera, Coronation Street.

Until the age of four, Hilda didn't know she had a father. This was Maggie's way of protecting Hilda from sadness should Alfred meet his death in battle, as so many soldiers did in the Great War. When Alfred returned from service in 1918, he knocked on the door of his home and four-year-old Hilda answered the knock. Alfred revealed his identity but Hilda wouldn't let him in the house. She announced with utter certainty, "I know you're not my father because I don't have one," and slammed the door in his face.

Hilda's father was eventually allowed entry and the family grew. Harold was born in 1920 and Kathleen in 1925. Consequently, Hilda was deposed from her throne as only child and lost the idyllic life of having mom all to herself. It was not a smooth transition. She regularly kicked her father and made a habit of locking Harold in the pantry so she had to be watched. Years later, when Harold became a Jehovah's Witness, my mother credited her abuse of him as motive for his religious conversion.

As the eldest, Hilda was expected to help with the younger children and to tend to her own needs. When Hilda asked to learn how to sew, Maggie grabbed a bolt of material, threw it at Hilda and hollered, "Teach yerself, luv." And she did. Hilda the private warrior by name and disposition went on to teach herself all manner of things including knitting, piano, and typing. Hilda was a naturally gifted student in all subjects, but at age sixteen she was required to leave school and contribute to the family income. Maggie reasoned, "Too much school'll make you daft and no man'll 'av ya." Hilda found employment in Manchester's booming textile industry.

In the summer of 1932, Hilda's best friend and co-worker Marjorie talked Hilda into taking their holiday on the Isle of Man. Marjorie, at the spinsterly age of eighteen, was desperate to find a husband and she recruited Hilda to her mission. Hilda was happy for the vacation, but not so keen on the agenda, deeming the Isle of Man a destination that lacked subtlety.

Marjorie met Jim, the man who would become her future husband, fifteen minutes into the trip. Left abruptly to her own devices, Hilda had no trouble filling her dance card. But she soon had little need of it as she found herself drawn to a dashing non-dancer with no teeth. His name was Eric. Apparently, he'd lost his teeth to a cricket bat. Hilda sat next to Eric, on a bench by the sea, while he ate his soggy chips (that's all he could manage) and she knew she'd met her person of significance.

I'm not sure if it was a condition of Hilda's consent, but the wedding photos reveal that Eric had his teeth fixed. They were married in 1937.

Eric gained certification as an engineer by putting himself through night school, where aircraft figured as his main passion. He had wanted very much to be a pilot but failed the eye exam due to slight color blindness. Eric did however find his trade in aviation; first as a fabricator and later as a designer. In 1935, he was hired by Fairey Aviation in Manchester, and was transferred to London in 1939 for the duration of

the war. Hilda, despite the obvious danger, was happy to relocate to London where she gained employment as an efficiency expert.

In London, there was The Blitz, rations, and blackouts, but Hilda's eyes always lit up when she spoke of it. Though perilous, her life in London was vibrant, stimulating, and worlds away from Milton Street.

At war's end, Hilda found herself pregnant with her first child. Hilda broke the news to Eric, and he countered with his own: he would be going to Berlin as part of the British Military government. Although Eric was one of the few men guaranteed secure employment in aviation after the war, driven by a thirst for challenge and adventure, he opted for this more intriguing, less-permanent opportunity in Berlin. Hilda was awkwardly left to move house from London back to Manchester alone and to endure much of her pregnancy without Eric.

Hilda gave birth to my brother Anthony in February 1946. Eric was able to return from Germany just in time for the delivery. At first, Anthony appeared to be in good health, but upon examination the doctors determined he had irregularities in his bowel. Surgery proved the only course. One surgery did not suffice and others followed. Three weeks to the date of his birth, Anthony died on the operating table. His tiny heart gave in under the strain.

Hilda and Eric were devastated. All around them, Britain was caught in a wave of vibrant, if naïve, optimism—but for Hilda and Eric there was no celebrating, just deep sorrow. A passport photo dated 1946 denotes a shadow across Hilda's previously congenial demeanor.

Eric was obliged to return to Germany, and one month after my brother's death, Hilda made the complicated trip to Berlin. She was unprepared for the landscape of devastation she witnessed traveling across Europe en route to Germany.

In Berlin Hilda became withdrawn. Eric sought solace in ambition and careerism. Grief was pulling them apart. By chance, Hilda received the gift of a Schnauzer puppy from a German woman who regularly cleared debris across from their apartment. The dog, named Mike, proved to be the lovable force which helped heal my parent's broken hearts.

My parents were in Germany for two years. I don't know all the details but their time there seems to have changed them. My mother mentioned "an incident" with a Russian soldier and a brutal interrogation at Checkpoint Charlie. My dad, who had once wanted to be a pilot, became a registered conscientious objector. He also made the decision to leave Europe.

My mother said goodbye to Mike the dog, their friends and family in England, and new acquaintances in Berlin. In 1948 they set sail for Canada.

Arriving in Alberta via Halifax, Eric quickly found employment at Northwest Industries designing bush planes for Arctic conditions, and Hilda got a job in the hosiery department at The Hudson's Bay. She also started to write children's stories and have them published. Hilda had long been known for her letters and way with words within her circle of family and friends, but it was a leap of confidence, sparked by a fresh start, I imagine which allowed her to submit to magazines. Throughout the 1950s, her stories were regularly published in the Family Herald.

Ten years after their arrival in Canada, my mother found herself pregnant with me. My parents were thrilled but when she first experienced the bloating of early pregnancy at the age of 46, she was scared. She confided in me years later that she thought I was cancer.

Hilda stopped working at The Bay before I was born, and stopped writing after I was born. I asked her once why she'd stopped writing and she quipped, "I didn't need it any more Jenny, I had you."

When I was a child, my parents would speak German or Russian when they didn't want me to understand a topic of conversation. Their fluency in these languages, combined with their abrupt departure from Europe, and my Dad's subsequent decision to never return, always made me wonder if they weren't in fact spies. Why else, I reasoned, would this by-now cultured and worldly couple make Edmonton, Alberta, their destination of choice?

In 1962, Eric had his first heart attack. From then on there was a worry over his health. He'd had rheumatic fever as a child and as a result his heart was damaged. Hilda threw herself into humanitarian concerns: Native rights and the Community League. Eric switched jobs after his heart attack to an executive position with Marblex Incorporated, a marble fabricating plant. Marblex had a contract with NASA and Eric was beyond thrilled to be working with the space program. When I was six, three astronauts came to our house for drinks. I remember my mother giggling. That was a big day in our neighborhood.

Eric had another heart attack in 1966. And in 1969, he had his third, and fatal, heart attack. He died on May 8—the 24th anniversary of the end of combat in Europe.

Once again, Hilda was left to do the hardest part alone. She had the responsibility of raising me, a ten year old, to maturity, and doing it on a \$90-a-month widow's pension. Hilda immediately went into over drive. The car was sold because Hilda hadn't managed to teach herself that particular skill and had no intention of becoming a motorist. Inspired by the writings of Mahatma Gandhi, my mother adopted the concept of cottage industry. She began making her own soap, deodorant, face cream, and dog food, on top of her longstanding traditions of bread, cookies, and clothes.

Our house became a makeshift daycare. In no time, it seemed like every toddler in the neighborhood was crawling across, or sleeping on, our floor. As a ten year old, I resented the intrusion and my rebellion meant more trouble for Hilda because I'd taken to raiding the liquor cabinet any chance I got.

Despite hardship, Hilda never looked for other work. She said: "If I have to work, I'll find a way to do it in my own home, on my own terms." Hilda made "selling out" to the system as big an enemy as Hitler had ever been to her. Miraculously, there was always money for opera tickets, ballet classes, and special events. She had at one time been an efficiency expert after all.

As a teenager, I didn't appreciate my mother the communist/anarchist/earth-mother/spy. I was under stress to meet my own high expectations as well as hers and overly concerned with the opinion of my peers. My mom and I fought viciously about anything and everything. Everyday as a teen I'd pass a bust of Winston Churchill on my way out the door and his famous speech would run through my head: "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender."

Upon graduation at age 16, I traveled to England, then returned and moved in with a man. It was agony for my mom. Her many loyal friends and passionate interests got her through.

She never dated. "No one could hold a candle to your father," she used to say.

Hilda died in 1979 when I was 19. I had moved back home one month before. She had stage four ovarian cancer. It was fast and very sad.

My mom helped and inspired many people during her too short life. In honor of this, a special wing of a senior's housing complex in Edmonton was named after her.

One thing I know is that I always loved my mom and hoped for her approval without knowing as a teen the first way to get it. I loved her wit, charm and brevity, her flirtatious giggle and great courage. She was a woman whose life had been shaped by harsh circumstance and she never let obstacles dull her determination. She was a petite, well-mannered English mom with a tigress heart. I will miss her forever.