

MY MOTHER MYRTLE

By

Her Donny

To tell about my mother, Myrtle Erickson (nee Chatterson) it isn't quite enough to speak only of her. For the biggest influence on her life was her father, Charlie, a police detective until he was kicked off the force because he'd caught the chief helping himself to warehouse revenue. So he became a private detective and succeeded because of his ability to distinguish Winnipeg residents from all others, especially thugs from Chicago. This is another way of saying that Charlie had remarkable powers of observation which informed his thinking. In other words he did not derive his thinking on what he read or heard from others, but on what he witnessed. His ideas, therefore, were original with himself, and this ability he passed on to my mother, Myrtle.

It's important to be clear about this. My mother did not have Charlie's ability to see and register a vast concourse of facts, but rather that her power of observation was from the outset selective, informing and evaluating what she saw and heard and read, and in this act of discrimination developing her own ideas. This is central to an understanding of Myrtle, my mother.

What are my memories about her? I was a little troublemaker from the beginning, but this did not seem to bother my mother at all. At an early age I would climb up my favorite Weeping Willow tree and from there onto the roof of our house, and slowly

mount to the peak of the roof there to gaze triumphantly over the world.

Naturally, neighbors spying me up there immediately phoned my mother to tell her the frightening news – that her little six year old son was in terrible danger.

My mother's response: "Oh, I'm sure he'll find himself down eventually." That was Myrtle, my mother. She did and thought things her own way. And that made life around her interesting, to put it mildly..

I remember when she drove the car up to the Cariboo in 1936 – the whole family packed into our Dodge. Call it an expanded family, for there was my father, my brother who was four years older, my grandmother Sarah, and my first cousin Oscar, then about sixteen and later killed fighting Rommel's forces in North Africa. My father's powers of driving were limited by the fact that he had lost both legs in the 1914-18 war, and wore metal limbs. He drove himself to his office in the city but long drives were hard on him. So my mother drove us to the Cariboo.

I can still hear my grandmother, "Nanny" Chatterson, singing her funny little songs as we careened along. When she was not singing she would tell me stories about her life on the prairies in the 1890's – about the Davises, the only white farmers in the area – and how Mrs. Davis had learned all about medicinal herbs from the Indians, and made her own butter and candles, and had her home blown away by a cyclone.

My mother drove up the Cariboo road as though she owned it. It was a one-lane dirt road precariously balanced high above the roaring Fraser below. Cars on that road were few in those days, but when you met one it was necessary for one of the drivers to back away to a small cut-out in the rock. I don't remember mother ever backing up, but I do

vividly remember her unexpectedly meeting a car on a sharp bend. A collision seemed certain, so she literally swung the car in a 90 degree turn and we climbed the cliff side. For a moment we were standing vertical, before sliding back onto the road, the other car having passed – in a hurry.

Mother and the automobile. In this singular relationship many of her eccentricities found full expression. One particular day-long experience sums it up. I was twelve years old then, and mother had asked me to caddy for her. She was a member of the Shaugnessy Golf Club and a keen player. So I waited in the car holding her golf clubs, knowing that she was on the phone with someone. She came rushing out and jumped into the driver's seat. "I had no idea it was so late. We have to hurry or they'll be teeing off without me." So she started up and backed out far too rapidly onto 33rd Avenue. It was about 9:15 AM and Mr. Cotter across the street was backing out at the same time, directly opposite us. Mr. Cotter was a Chartered Accountant, a member of the Terminal City Club, and no doubt as usual had a hangover. Mother collided with him in the middle of the street hitting him with such force that she propelled Mr. Cotter back up his driveway causing him to smash into the end of his garage with such force that his overhead doors crashed down closing him off from the world.

I can still see mother looking over her shoulder.

"What was that?" she exclaimed.

"That was Mr. Cotter," I said. "You just knocked him back into his garage."

"I don't see anything," she said, briefly peering. "Anyway I'm already late for teeing off. We've got to go."

So off she drove, up to the golf course which wasn't far off.

And that's where the second accident occurred. You see, it was a narrow drive up to the Club and unfortunately a large grass cutter with driver perched on top was coming down the road. I'm sure Mother could have inched by but she was going too fast and there was a sharp bend in the road – at any rate she sideswiped him with just enough impetus to force him off the road into a shallow ditch, causing the vehicle to topple somewhat – enough so that the driver fell into the thick bushes at the roadside.

“How careless of him,” she remarked.

“You just knocked him off his cab,” I declared.

“I don't see anyone.”

For indeed the poor man had dropped out of sight. So we drove up to the Clubhouse for the teeing off.

I wish I could say that that was the end of the car accidents for the day, but I cannot. You see, my mother had two great loves when it came to human activities – golfing and bridge. And this day she had arranged to play bridge with some ladies at Mrs. Craddock's after her game of golf, but as usual she was late.

I had walked home after the golf game and was only later able to find out what happened next. Mrs. Craddock lived in a spacious apartment in the West End, and my mother was more than just a little late in getting there. I do not know the exact intersection where it happened, though one of the streets was Davie.

Mother was rushing as usual, and unfortunately broadsided a car she said was “rushing” down Davie. She not only broadsided it – she hit it with sufficient force to cause it to topple over. There were six people, men and women, in the car and mother said they were all drunk. Maybe they were for luckily none were hurt and mother said: “And there they were laughing and singing and crawling out of the windows.”

Someone had called the police and soon a large Constable took over. He saw that there was substantial damage to the front of her car and he went around to the rear to read her licence number. There, to the policeman’s surprise, was the smashed rear caused by hurtling Mr. Cotter into his garage. He also noticed some damage to the side of the car.

“This car seems to have been involved in more than one accident,” the Constable commented to my mother.

“But,” responded mother with her usual imperturbable logic, “we’re right now only concerned about the damage only to the front of my car, aren’t we, officer?” And she gave him one of those smiles which meant to disarm males.

“Well, you seem to be in luck with this one,” the officer said. “Not only was the driver drunk like all the others in the car, but he drove through a red light.”

“And so I couldn’t avoid hitting him, could I?” my mother added.

“Maybe so,” the officer said, and clicked shut his notebook.

The only other male mother had to deal with that day was my father, who had, after all, bought the car, and therefore had to have explained to him the fact that three sides of his car had suffered considerable damage. Mr. Cotter had not phoned, probably

because it could be argued that it was a mutual collision at mid-road, and nothing was heard from Shaugnessy Golf Club. My father was in a slightly humble mood because the night before at bridge he had made a bad mistake which cost them the game. So he simply muttered awhile about the high cost of repairing cars.

My father, despite his legless condition, managed to get around on his metal legs. He was a remarkable achiever, despite his handicap, making a success out of his manufacturer's agency. Nanny, my grandmother, who stayed with us for the last years of her life could not get over how my mother, her daughter, seemed to simply ignore my father as he struggled to climb or descend stairs, nor did mother try to explain it to Nanny: that my father needed the challenge to his ego, and even reveled in his victories over his disability.

For mother had true insight and sought to encourage faculties which she knew to be there. I remember when I was no more than 7 or 8 with her sitting on the side of my bed before I slept, she said: "Donny, did you know that you have seeing eyes?" Well, I certainly knew that I was not blind. But my mother had recognized a faculty that sometimes took me by surprise, so I knew she was right, though I did not fully understand.

That is why, long before anyone could even guess at it, she perceived my brother Arthur's enormous talent. However, there was a downside to this gift of nature and Arthur would have to pay a heavy price for it – she knew that, too. In later years she blamed herself for overprotecting Arthur. Perhaps she did in a way – but he turned out to be perfectly capable of handling the challenges of life on his own, for along with his talent he was strong – and very centred.

Arthur had had an art teacher, Miss Faunt, at Point Grey Junior High School, who recognized his drawing ability when he was about 13. Mother quickly caught on and, knowing Arthur's love of tropical fish by the care he took of them in his aquarium, suggested he turn his bedroom into an aquarium by transferring the living forms of his fish onto his bedroom's four walls in painted form. He did so with loving care. When he had finished mother asked him if he would paint scenes on my bedroom walls, only this time representing the deep jungles of the Amazon. I loved the black panther he painted, the way it turned its yellow eyes on me – and also the great greenish python woven around a branch and flicking its tongue at me. My friends whom I invited in to witness the result were stupefied by the breathing reality of the scene.

Then mother urged Arthur to start producing canvasses representing the living forms of nature which fascinated him.

Now it so happened that mother had made friends with Bess Harris, a painter whom she much admired. Bess was married to the Canadian icon of art, Lawren Harris, who was shown some of Arthur's work. He was impressed, and suggested Arthur show some of his paintings at a show coming up at the Vancouver Art Gallery, which Arthur did.

All this was the result of my mother's initiatives. So when I showed an interest in writing, mother urged me to offer a play to CBC Radio. So over the following months I wrote a poetic drama called "Hannibal", offered it to Raymond Whitehouse at the CBC, and it was accepted and turned into an hour's radio play which was broadcast nationally. Later, I began to write to write shorter radio plays and sold many for local broadcast.

Guess who typed these works out and made them look professional –my mother.

Her love of art and literature was genuine, not simply a means of furthering her sons' careers. The 'seeing eye' she said I had, she certainly had, and she was saddened by the bitter struggle many Canadian artists were having in gaining any recognition at all. And in the Fifties there were a number of talented young painters like Jack Shadbolt and Gordon Smith and many others who were struggling to awaken Canadian sensibilities to the worlds which modern art was opening for them.

Mother decided to do something about it.

She had the idea of launching a campaign directed mainly at Canadian businessmen.

She would call it: "Do you own a Canadian painting?"

She discussed the idea with Doris Shadbolt, then working for the Vancouver Art Gallery in its fledgeling building on Georgia Street. Doris, married to Jack, liked the idea. So did Nan Cheney, herself a painter and old crony of Emily Carr, who had had such a bitter struggle getting any recognition at all, and forced to paint on paper for the lack of public support. Eventually, a few other ladies rallied to the cause. Mother talked to all of them and developed a strategy. They would start with the banks which had such prestige that where they led businessmen would follow. Mother would make an appointment with a banker, and start with the simple question: "Does this bank own a Canadian painting?" And when the banker replied that it did not, my mother would respond with the following: "Don't you think a Canadian institution like yours should have at least

one Canadian painter on your walls? Don't you think you have a duty to support Canadian artists?" And so on.

I won't go on with this except to say that it worked. Once the bankers decided that in the public interest they must really do this, then other business firms soon got the message. And it did not take long before the Canadian arts began to flourish.

My mother had many friends – far more than I could ever keep track of. And they came from all walks of life – though admittedly she saw more of those who played golf or bridge. Speaking of bridge I will let an elderly man whom I met at my mother's Wake say the last word.

He said: "I am considered a champion bridge player, and indeed I am, but your mother was one of the very few people who sometimes bested me at the game. Do you know what her secret was? She broke all the rules by making atrocious bids like "six no trump" with nothing in her hands worth a damn! And do you know what? She usually got away with it!"

That was my mother, Myrtle. She got away with more than bridge tricks. She was a magic woman with tricks all up her sleeve, and she usually won, except for that last time, she couldn't win then. So guess what – she made a party of it – and a fine party it was!
