

## CHAPTER TWO THE EARLY YEARS.....

*All things must change,  
To something new,  
To something strange.*

### -- Longfellow

On December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941 President Roosevelt announced that Japanese planes had attacked Manila and Pearl Harbor and a headline in a Honolulu newspaper read: *"In this crisis, every difference of race, creed and color will be submerged in the one desire and determination to play the part that Americans always play in crisis."*

I was conceived in spring of 1942. During that time and towards my birth the German army had advanced into Moscow. The British ships, Repulse and Prince of Wales, were at the bottom of the South China Sea and allied forces on Bataan had surrendered. German U-boats were sinking ships within sight of the New Jersey shore. World War II continued to create global uncertainty for another three years. Had the Nazis continued their reign of terror on the world, my early years might have been completely different.

Allen Grey Salmond Cunningham, my father, joined the army first, and then transferred to the air force with the hopes of becoming a pilot. Edwina Kathleen Howells married him shortly after he enlisted. He was originally stationed in Red Deer, Alberta and later at Shiloh, Manitoba and had a goal of becoming a pilot. On the day of his flight test he received word from his commander that four of his buddies had been killed in a crash. For some reason the officer insisted that my father be tested anyway. Within his grief-stricken state he washed out as a pilot and never tried again.

Years later my mother told me about the event but never volunteered why my father was either unable or unwilling to obtain his pilot's license and decided to become an instructor instead. My mother's father died suddenly when she was sixteen and my grandmother's living space was too small; hence Mom moved in with my father's parents while she was pregnant and visited Dad on the base when she could.

On December 31<sup>st</sup> Mom went into labor and my father left the base to be with her for the delivery. The attending physician wanted to be the one to deliver the first New Year's baby. When I was old enough to understand my parents told me that he chose to sedate Mom to slow down her contractions to achieve his goal.

When the sedation caused a crisis, an emergency C-section was performed. They used forceps to remove me that left an imprint on my skull. The doctor's decision nearly cost Mom and me our lives and he missed his moment in the sun when I was delivered at 10:26 PM rather than 12:01 AM as he had hoped. When I was old enough to understand Mom told me that she thought my arduous birth experience was the first sign that we would experience more to come. Since, in those days, it was unheard of to sue a doctor for malpractice he was never held accountable for the choices he made. Evidently, Mom's recovery was slow and painful and she continued to live with Dad's parents while she recovered.

Kathleen Howells, my mother's Mom, was born in Bristol, England. Before marrying her first husband she was a professional tap and sand dancer and performed with a top hat and cane.

The sand was used to add special effects as she danced across the stage. At one point her outstanding abilities were noticed. She was invited to perform for Royalty, and she did. Mom was proud of that but my grandmother always seemed very modest whenever the subject came up. Nanny had been in an abusive relationship before marrying my Welsh grandfather Edwin Howells. They had a daughter named Doris together, who died when Mom was in her early teens.

After Grandma Kathleen met and married Grandpa Edwin, my mom was born on December 25<sup>th</sup> 1918. Almost a year later, her brother Robert was born December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1919. A few years later, the Howells family emigrated to Canada. My grandfather wanted to farm and was happy to have a chance to start one in the Rainy River Area of Ontario. After a series of natural disasters and financial setbacks he became discouraged and moved the family to Winnipeg where he became a care-taker of the Canada Building.

With both my grandfather and Aunt Doris dying prior to my birth I only knew them through Mom's sharing of family history. She was convinced that my green thumb, creativity and natural tendency towards metaphysical thinking were lovingly being fostered by Grandpa Edwin from the other side. It felt right to me and I liked Mom's view that family members remained close even after they were no longer visible in our present lives. Grandfather Edwin was Welsh, the seventh son of a seventh son. He was born with and developed his psychic abilities. He belonged to a variety of Secret Orders and was an advanced Rosicrucian. His relative had roots reaching deep into Celtic folklore and had always said she inherited her clairvoyance from him.

When I was a year and a half soldiers stormed the beach at Normandy on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1944. The chaos continued in that area until Buchenwald was liberated in 1945. On July 16<sup>th</sup> of the same year, the first atomic bomb was detonated at Alamogordo, New Mexico. When a decision to drop bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki followed, the resulting suffering and loss of human life led to the end of the war. The deciding factor of the war had been due to America's tremendous industrial strength. After it our little family and the rest of the world started adjusting to post-war life. Few women worked outside the home and children had stay-at-home moms. Young families like ours were described by a character in Thornton Wilder's play ***The Skin of Our Teeth***. *"When you're at war you think only about war; when you are at peace you think about a more comfortable life."*

Dad's employment at his father's store had been secure before enlisting. Dad always said he had planned to return to work in the family store rather than pursuing a career in the air force. His family side was in a good position financially. The well-established business thrived throughout the war and afterwards the whole family had a sense of security and direction. Dad had three older siblings, Robert, Ina and Alex. They all worked at the family business before branching out on their own. My two uncles eventually bought other grocery stores in Winnipeg until they were sold off to make room for the Winnipeg Post Office.

All Cunningham clans were raised pragmatic Scots, and position, prestige and material things were important to them. Mom and Nanny had a different world view and placed a higher importance on friends, family and community. They preferred to use their intuitive sense of things over pragmatism. Much of how Mom perceived things was not well received within the Cunninghams' five-sense three dimensional world. They showed little interest in things that could not be seen, tasted, felt, touched or smelled. When I think about how different my mother's and father's realities were it is not surprising that their worlds collided at times. However, those contrasts in the families world view was not something I was aware of during

my early years. My experiences with them created a lot of happy memories and valuable life lessons.

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Once Dad began working at my grandfather's Red and White Grocery Store we moved into an apartment just down the street from the family store. Spedina Court was located on the North side of Smith and St. Mary's, the current location of the Winnipeg Post Office. The first six years of my life in the inner city were safe, simple and full of adventure and discovery. Children in the neighborhood were allowed to roam freely with no fear of strangers in our little community. Kids played hop-scotch on the street, catch, hide-and-peek, tag and jump-rope. Radios provided news and entertainment, and there were no televisions or computers to keep us indoors. Our little "kid clutch" engaged in a flurry of activities from morning until night. We loved to go on nature romps and explored everything from leaves to caterpillars and the world seemed endlessly fascinating. At other times we'd go to movies, parties and celebrate seasonal events.

I called Mom's mother Nanny and always seemed more approachable and demonstrative than Grandma Kate on Dad's side. Both my grandmothers were statuesque women of size. The emotional connection I had with Nanny was nurtured through all the time we spent together. She lived on the lower level of our apartment and was welcomed there anytime. She would set a table with such grandeur that everyone who visited her always felt special. It was fun to sit on the front steps and snuggle into her big bosoms and chatter away with her being the attentive, caring listener she always was.

Snuggling into her ample body was better than the best teddy-bear hug. Her energy was strong and centered. I loved to run into Nanny's place and share adventures with her. It was the highlight of my day. With all the ceremony of English tradition she would set the table with a white cloth and listen attentively for the kettle to boil. The sound of the whistling was always followed by a ritual. Tea was never made without first pouring boiling water into the pot to heat it. Throughout my life a bubbling kettle always has me recall Nanny's voice saying, *"My dear child, always remember to never ever put the bag in the pot without first heating it thoroughly. The cold pot brings the water temperature down and the tea will not be able to release its full flavor if the pot is not pre-heated. Be sure and put a tea cozy on the pot as well. Keeping it warm preserves the taste to the very last cup."*

Strong black tea is an "old country" tradition and Nanny always balanced the bite with scoops of white sugar and lots of cream or milk. After making a pot she'd pour it into cups and saucers made of fine china. One of our favorite treats was thick, crusty, white bread slathered in chunky, strawberry jam. Nanny and I shared many grown-up tea parties and I loved to bask in her undivided interest in the events of my life. Thought taught me the importance of being a good listener. My feeling loved, heard, understood, and accepted was her gift to me growing up. I learned about the importance of having inner confidence from Nanny as well. She was comfortable in her own skin and always spoke her mind whether others liked it or not. She also had a style of her own that I tried to emulate. My love of hats originated from seeing my grandmother confidently strut down the street as a woman of size wearing a magnificent wide-brimmed hat. Another one of her signatures was her large tapestry tote. Nanny walked her talk and always seemed content to live out the rest of her life in a one-room flat without depending on anyone but herself.

After attending kindergarten in the morning, my afternoons, evenings and weekends were filled with visits to godparents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. My godparents, Auntie Ina and Uncle Harold, lived in an apartment down the street. They didn't have children and always welcomed my unannounced visits. Uncle Ha-Ha, as I called him, played the trumpet professionally. He never refused my many requests for performances. I clapped my hands and giggled in glee, *"Play more Uncle Ha-Ha; please play more!"* He lovingly obliged and this was thrilling to me. He always looked so content with trumpet in hand, eyes closed as he weaved to the wonderful sounds coming from the shiny instrument. To my young mind, it appeared that my uncle and his trumpet were one and I loved the beautiful music they made together.

When I think back about the network of loving, supportive adults in my early life, I hold an abiding appreciation for the positive effect my relatives had on my early development and "sense of self". In later years, when I lost my way, it was this original shaping of my essential self which provided what I needed to retrieve that which had been lost. Without that internal reference point there would have been no inner compass to find my way back. My heart goes out to all children who are not given a sense of their worth through positive reinforcement at an early age the way I was.

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My friends and I would often visit my grandfather. He'd allow us to explore and play hide and seek in the store and basement. On one occasion we were all delighted to see that Gramps had discovered a large, hairy legged spider among a recent shipment of bananas still on their stocks. My grandfather indulged our childhood infatuation and picked it up, then placed the tarantula in a glass jar so my friends and I could get a closer look at it. We stared eyeball to eyeball at the strange creature from some exotic place. At one point he gingerly opened the jar and let us touch the spider and we were surprised to find it had fuzzy feeling legs. It seemed tame and I thought it needed a home and pleaded with my grandfather to let me keep it as a pet. When he said no because he explained that it had a venomous bite, I quickly changed my mind about taking it home. A few days later the spider was no longer around and I decided not to ask about its fate because I really didn't want to know. Thankfully the short attention span of my ever inquiring mind allowed me to move on to other fascinating things to see and do.

Other fun-filled events occurred when I gathered a group of friends and we figured out ways to enlist a treat from Gramps or Dad. It was a fairly easy game to play because the Cunninghams were all big teases. They loved practical jokes and on one memorable occasion that represented many others, Gramps played our kid game in typical fashion.

*Amidst the chattering giggles and squeals I lead the team into the store. We'd all stand on tiptoes and peer into see-through canisters filled with sweet delights. "I want that one—o-o-oh that one looks good too!" Gramps hears us and swaggers out from the back office with a big cigar in the corner of his mouth. His large stature towers over us, but we know from experience that even though he looks intimidating, with enough cajoling we always soften him up.*

*"Hi gramps we came to visit you."*

*"So I see--were you good kids today?"*

*In sing-song unison we all respond, "Yeesssss."*

*"Did you get into any mischief?"*

*Same tone, "Nooooo."*

*With a twinkle in his eye he says in a jovial tone, "Well now, you say you all say that you came to visit me and that you were good. Hmmm. This all sounds pretty good but me-thinks what you're really here for is a treat from the old man—right?"*

*Caught in our playful act we shuffle around, then make shifty eye contact with each other, pretending to ignore the fact that he had our number all along. He enjoys watching us squirm and continues to eye us through a puff of smoke. As we look up past his big belly, we see that his lips are turned up in a big grin. With a slight laugh and a nod he says, "You can each have two of whatever you'd like, but THAT'S ALL! Too much sugar rots your teeth AND your brain!" We ignore the final comment and with a shrill, "Yeahhhhhh!" make a beeline for the canisters. Before leaving, I hug my grandfather's leg and thank him. He ruffles my hair with a big hand and in a Scottish lilt bequeathed by his relatives he says, "You're welcome; now go and find something else to do I have to get back to work."*

Between visits to the store my friends and I often commented how different the fresh food department felt compared to the meat section. We all agreed that even though it was kind of creepy it did have a morbid appeal to the young explorers in us. Grandfather Jim had trained Dad in the fine art of butchering meat and often groups of kids would stand by the butcher block and watch them. Whenever we could gather enough courage we'd open the door to the large walk-in cooler to stare up at the lifeless carcasses hanging there. There were "hinds" of beef, turkeys and chicken and sometimes we'd dare each other to touch them, then run out and slam the door with a mix of laughter and fearful "oh-ah" sounds.

Thankfully my father helped me develop a different view of the dead animals. He took their part in the family business to a different level of awareness when he explained the law of predation. He thought that it was by grand design that there were cycles of life and death within the food chain and that everything was kept in balance with one species eating another. My father assuaged my unease about having dead animals hanging at his place of work with an explanation that made sense to my five-year old brain. For some today their trade may seem barbaric, cruel or immoral but my father's viewpoint put my world in order and gave me a level of acceptance that stood me in good stead.

The love I have for cats began early in life and through my exposure to them at the family store. Gramps kept a number of them as mousers and pets. New kittens emerged on the scene a couple of times a year and some were given to good homes. To a child who loved all animals, no adult ever said what happened to the others but in later years I figured it out. Yet as an innocent animal loving child the adults in my world never drew their fate to my attention. The ongoing sense of discovery precipitated by my elders sparked the adventurer within. Their laissez-faire attitude about things did not create a sense of fear or danger in my everyday world. The adults in our family explained that everything in the natural world had a purpose and there was no need to kill anything for the recreational sport.

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During those earlier times my life was cozy, familiar and as close to idyllic as any child could wish for. Dad and I indulged in tom-boy activities. He taught me how to roller and ice skate, ride a bike, swim, play baseball and volleyball, and hired a pilot to take us up for an aerial view of Winnipeg so I could appreciate his love of flying. Mom and I did girly things and I learned how to cook, bake and how to keep house at an early age.

All my relatives loved to sing and dance, and music became an important part of my life as well. The radio played a significant role in everyone's lives and our whole family listened to popular songs and we all sang along. Sing-songs were always a big part of road trips to the lake or when we gathered around open fires at the two cabins my aunt and uncle had at Lake of the

Woods in Ontario. Some of the family favorites include: *"The White Cliffs of Dover," "A Nightingale Sang In Barkley Square,"* and *"We'll Meet Again."* Other family favorites were *"You are My Sunshine"* and a silly song that went:

*"I love you with an oogle  
And a peck and oogle  
And peck and a hug around the neck  
Hug around the neck and a barrel and a heap  
Barrel and a heap and I'm talking in my sleep  
About you ... about you!"*

Singer Al Jolson and the Mills brothers were favorites of Mom and Dad and me too. Dad had a good voice and would often imitate Al Jolson by covering his face with black paint and mime his stage presentations. Seeing my love of music, song and dance my parents encouraged me to take tap and ballet lessons and I enjoyed them immensely. They also enrolled me in the Anglican Church choir so I could gain some voice training experience.

My parents were still in the honeymoon phase of their relationship and they loved to go out dancing and they often took me along. I often heard their friends comment on what a handsome couple they were. Dad kept himself in good shape and his dark hair and brown eyes were a sharp contrast to mom's petite frame with blond hair and blue eyes. Even with her small frame she was well endowed and when she did 'the shimmy' the men always took notice. She and dad jitter-bugged jived and dipped with such rhythmic symmetry that others on the floor often made circles around them and clapped as they dance. In the late forties children could accompany their parents to dances because there were no liquor licenses. Those who wanted to drink ordered pop and ice, brought their own liquor in flasks and added it to the mix in what was a common practice of the time.

Around this time Dad started teaching me ball room dancing. He would place my little feet on his big shoes, take my hands in his and glide across the floor. Other times he'd sit me on his knee, look into my eyes and croon the Mills Brothers' song, *"Daddy's Little Girl"* or a song that had the words, *"I'm in heaven when I see you smile; smile for me."* He used to call me Princess and within those specially preserved moments in time I truly felt like one. These remain as fond memories of a little girl and her dad in seemingly perfect synch.

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Even though life was good in the inner city Mom was determined to obtain a house for us. She wanted to begin developing some financial security for the family by paying a mortgage than just renting with nothing to show for it. We talked about it as a family and Dad and I agreed that it would be great to have a yard, garden and more open spaces for me to play. In her inimitable persistence my mother went down to Central Mortgage and Housing every day until she finally obtained one of the peacetime homes being offered to military families. Even though Dad had not seen active duty, we were still eligible for a peacetime home. Once we knew for sure we had one Mom started packing. A part of me regretted having to say goodbye to friends I'd grown up with but the benefits of having our own home outweighed them and I began packing up too.

Then a month or so before we took possession I was playing out on the street and waiting for mom's brother Bob to come for a visit. He had seen active duty on a Navy ship during the war and my mother said he'd come home a changed man. As with most who are caught in the wages of war my uncle had witnessed comrades being killed and maimed in the line of duty.

After he served I came to know him as a man of stoic reserve with periodic outbursts of anger and violence towards his wife Aunt Elsie and my cousin Bobbie. For some reason he was never that way with me and I loved my Uncle Bob a lot and appreciated the considerable amount of time he gave me and the special connection we had.

He worked as a lineman at the CN Railway on Main Street not too far from where we lived. He often got on a bus and dropped by for a visit on his way home. My uncle's time in the Navy had opened the way for his family to obtain a wartime house in the same neighborhood that we were moving to. He had a daughter Roberta or Bobbie as family members called her. She and I were good friends and being closer to her had appeal because she felt like a sister.

Among Uncle Bob's many visits there was one that was particularly memorable. In typical fashion I stood at the edge of our block waiting for the big orange bus to stop and let my Uncle off as it had so often before. On that day I saw him carrying something in a box, but couldn't make out what it was. My eyes remained fixated on the parcel and I felt a growing sense of excitement combined with a feeling that something good was about to happen. Finally my curiosity won out and I bounded towards Uncle Bob. As I got closer I could see a box with a hole in the center and string tied around it. Sitting right in the middle, with only a head showing, was a tiny, blond puppy with floppy ears and big brown eyes.

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*When I reach him we both stop for a moment and I look up and question, "Uncle Bob, why do you have this puppy in the box?" His voice cracks a little. He clears his throat then answers, "Well dear, I won her in a raffle. She is a purebred cocker spaniel, but Auntie Elsie doesn't want us to keep her. Seeing as you and your folks are getting a house just down the street from us I thought I'd ask your mom if I could give her to you. At least I'd be able to visit her." My heart jumps and thoughts race. It seems particularly odd that this wonderful gift could possibly be mine. Cousin Bobbie is only a few months younger than I am and I know she loves dogs as much as I do. How can it be working out that I am the lucky one?*

*As I look at the expression on Uncle Bob's face my gleeful exuberance at the thought of having a furry friend as a new companion is put on hold. It is clear that he prefers to keep the dog and for a moment neither one of us speaks. Uncle Bob picks me up in one arm and carries the precious cargo in the other. With my arms wrapped around his neck I give him a big hug as I whisper in his ear, "It is too bad you can't have her yourself, but you can visit any time you want and I promise to bring her to your place often. Do you think Mom will let me have her; do you; do you? He gently sets me down as we reach the stairs leading to the apartment. Then with a sweet smile and a swat on the seat he sends me on a quest. "Only one way to find out, squirt; go ask her!"*

*My legs run up the stairs in egg-beater rotations. In my excitement, I trip on the landing and start yelling, "Mom, Mom! Uncle Bob is here with a puppy he can't keep. He wants me to have her. Can I? Can I? Please, please!" Mom doesn't hear the words, only the bellowing. The door is opened and as I look up, her face is full of concern. "Honey, what are you yelling about; are you okay?"*

*"Yes, yes, I am okay!" The gibberish about the puppy in the box downstairs is repeated. Bending down to eye level, Mom looks intently into my eye and it reminds me of how she always lowers herself to equal level whenever she speaks to me or any of my friends. We have all said it makes us feel like equals.*

*“Honey, slow down; take a breath. Let’s go and see Uncle Bob. We’ll talk about it ... and of course we have to ask your father.” She takes my hand and we make our way back down the dimly lit stairwell. It seems to take forever but in this elongated time span there is some sense that the puppy is already mine. However the lingering question mark remains and I have to know for sure, so I begin to plead my case further.*

*“Mommy, I can tell she is a really special dog, a beautiful blond with big, dark eyes. She needs a home. Where will she go if we don’t keep her? Besides she could start our new life in our new home with us. What a special thing that would be!”*

*Mom looks at me softly and quietly says, “Try to be patient, dear. I have to talk to Uncle Bob and your dad. We’ll see.”*

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As she often did Mom worked her magic and convinced the landlord to let us keep the dog until we moved. My father loved dogs and was happy to have her as a family pet. But right from the beginning I felt that puppy would be more of a companion to me than anyone else. Mom and Dad let me pick the name and I named her Blondie. She and I became instant companions at a pivotal point in our family life. It was around that time that Mom told me that she could not have any more children because of my birth experience and wanted to know how I felt about it. The idea of not having siblings did not have much impact. By age six I was used to life the way it was and remember thinking that it was hard to miss what you never had.

As moving day approached I said my goodbyes to friends. We all promised to keep in touch even though I wondered if we really would. The only sad part about the change in our lifestyle was that Nanny refused my parents’ invitation to move into the third bedroom of our new house. She said she wanted to stay where she was and wanted to remain independent as long as possible. Nanny often said how much she missed Grandfather Edwin and she felt close to him where she was. A family decision was made that Nanny would come for overnight visits at least once a week and I could call her anytime.

Other than leaving Nanny behind the move to St. Boniface and the gift of our dog was a happy milestone in our family life. The new house was on Kavanaugh Street off Archibald, not too far from Swifts’ and Burns’ meat-packing plants. When we drove into the area we knew the combination of smells from those plants and a nearby oil refinery took some getting used to. However, once we turned the key and opened the door to our new home the unpleasant odors seemed faded into background awareness.

The house was a two-storey home with three bedrooms, one bathroom, a good-sized kitchen, living room and a full-sized basement. Mom and Dad took the downstairs bedroom and gave me the two adjoining ones on the second floor. Having those areas as a private space really appealed to me. One would be a sleep zone and the other would become a study area and place to hang out with friends. It was a delight to discover upper rooms had ‘cubby holes’ that were the full length of the wall. I planned to use them as a safe little hideaway.

St. Boniface area, we discovered, was largely populated by French-Canadian, Catholic families with eight to twelve children each. My cousin Bobbie and I, being children, were oddities among the large families. Being close in age, she and I didn’t miss having brothers and sisters because we had each other. In our new neighborhood there were plenty of other kids to hang out with. I



also liked to have some time alone and our new life was providing a mix of both. Interacting with those who had different beliefs helped to develop valuable social skills.

The surrounding areas in the new development had many natural places to explore. The Seine River meandered throughout the woodland areas in our neighborhood. There were paths along the riverbank on the way to school. Other times Blondie and I wandered through the woodland areas together. My connection to nature was internalized through constant exposure to the natural world and it always nourished my spirit. Often my eyes were drawn to gifts from nature that I began to collect. The discovery of feathers, rocks, leaves and shells first awakened the little shaman within me. It wasn't long before some intuitive sense revealed that different physical objects had a different feel to them.

Each thing I was drawn to seemed to have a unique essence exuding from it. I gathered them and always said a prayer of gratitude for every find. Through time I developed little rituals around my "sacred objects" that I kept in safe places. Mom and Nanny always took interest in my treasures and diminished their importance to me. Not having Nanny close by was a difficult adjustment for me. Her complete interest and involvement in everything that mattered to me were always so nurturing. I looked forward to her weekly visits and overnights. I really missed the daily visits but I had to adjust to the changes whether I liked them or not. Whenever she stayed with us we'd spent as much time together as possible. We laughed and chatted over meals and special tea times where I told her about everything that was going on in every area of my life.

Whenever I shared my treasures from nature she was keenly interested in what my perceptions of their special energies were. Having her intently look at what I'd found validated the significance to me. I was indeed fortunate that my Nanny and my mother always seemed to find ways to answer my curiosity about life's goings-on in ways that satisfied my seemingly unquenchable thirst for knowledge. Their approach always satisfied my need to know even though I am sure my constant questions were tiresome at times. With the help of those two wise women role models I was getting the message that it really was okay to be who I was even when some of my friends found my ideas and interests a little odd at times.

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Other enchanted happenings occurred when the Cunningham clan spent time at my aunts and uncles at their cabins on Lake Laclu in the Lake of the Woods area of southwest Ontario. The cabins were rustic log cabins with no electricity. Auntie Ina and Mom cooked delicious meals on the old wood stove that was also used to heat the cabin on chilly nights. There was no plumbing and the outhouse was in the woods not far from the cabin, and kerosene lamps were used for lighting.

When Dad was away from the store he always made time for me and that was especially so when we were up at the lake. During our nature walk both my parents pointed out Mother Nature's natural cycles of change, decay and regeneration. Dad continued to explain the law of predation and always pointed out that within the natural world there were no villains or victims. He helped ease my horror each time we saw a predatory bird swoop down and end the life of its prey. Through his eyes I began to see there was an order to life and death with the one purpose serving the other. When we watched birds eat insects and worms he would say, "*See dear, there is natural balance here. When some things die, new things are born. It is the way life is; one thing balances another.*" It was similar to how he had explained cutting up dead animals for a living.

My parents raised me with a respect for all living things but also included precautionary advice about safety. They continually reinforced the idea that there was no reason to fear insects, reptiles or animals as long as we respected their natural instincts. They were also against killing any thing for sport or merely on the basis of perceptual bias. When spiders or other creepy crawlers came into the house or cabin, they were captured with a glass over the top and a paper underneath, and set free outside. Nothing was killed unless it tried to draw blood such as wood ticks and mosquitoes. When we swam in shallow water and leaches attached themselves I was told to pour salt on them and put them back in the water.

In shared walks with my parents I was always aware of Mom's intuitive sense of things and how empathic she was. Her gentleness and love for all livings provided a different perspective than the more practical world view of my father. Mom's sensitivity to energies included a belief acceptance that there was life beyond this one. Those views included the idea that we had spiritual allies to protect and guide us throughout life and they included departed loves ones, pets and animals.

My mother embraced teachings from all religions and encouraged me to do the same. She said the one commonality with all of them was love and with that as the basis, all other teachings fell into place. She encouraged me to always ask God for spiritual help and direction at all times, not just when we were in church. This fostered in both of us a strong prayer life that was active no matter where we were; we had no need of an intermediary within organized religion. Mom and I conducted conversations with God and we truly believed in a source-centered connection that was available anytime, anywhere. Her Welsh/Irish background also made room for the validity of fairies, gnomes and other elemental little people, all of which were viewed as God's helpers in both the visible and spiritual realms.

My mom's intuitive knowledge included an ability to read tea leaves. It was a very common practice for neighbors to drop by for tea in order for Mom to read their cups. They all respected what she told them and they kept coming back. That created a space where I could openly discuss my invisible friends with Nanny and Mom. They both accepted that my invisible friends were spiritual allies and not just figments of my childhood imagination. Within their spiritual framework there was never any question about the existence of these "friends". They sensed as I did that they were there to offer support from 'the other side'.

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From the time we moved to St. Boniface at the age of six up to and around the age of nine lives progressed and I loved almost everything about it. On a crisp fall morning in 1951 Nanny had stayed over for a couple of days and our family went about the normal routines for the morning. Mom, Dad, Nanny and I shared breakfast, chatted, and made plans for my grandmother's return the following week. Just before leaving for school Nanny and I stood at the back door and we gave each other a longer than normal hug. I looked into her eyes while holding both her hands in mine and say:

*"I love you Nanny and an already looking forward to having you back with us next week. Are you sure you don't want to move in with me on the second floor? I will be happy to clear out my stuff so we could be room-mates." She smiles, pulls me close and squeezes me tight as she says: "I am really sorry my sweet child. I know it is what you want; but it doesn't feel right for me and I*

hope you will respect that. There is one thing that is really important for you to trust and believe no matter where we are. I love you and you love me. We will always be in each other's hearts, and the love and bond we share are enough to withstand being apart. You do believe that, don't you?"

The serious tone in her voice gave me reason to pause and for a split second the uncomfortable pause feels a little unsettling. I brush the feelings aside and Nanny Steps back as we look directly into each others' eyes. For some reason she repeats her message again, "Promise me you will remember what I just said...our love is stronger than any distance." When I feel her love and quietly say; "Yes, Nanny I will always remember." We both look at our watches as a signal that it is time for me to head to school. With a final wave I head down the stairs, then pause and turn for one last goodbye and shout, "See you next week, Nanny; love you; bye."

As I glance back I see Nanny's face through the pane glasses on our backdoor wrap her final response around my heart; "Good-bye, dear, sweet granddaughter of mine."

The morning air is brisk and leaves crunch under my feet as I make my way along familiar, river trails on the way to school. The musty scent from leaves decaying deeper in the woods fills the air with familiar, autumn scents. The fall spectacle of brilliant oranges and yellows are a delight to behold. I arrive at school and my day unfolds as usual.

When classes end I walk back home, filled with contentment and a deep appreciation for life. As I reach the back door, hang up my jacket and drop my books, Mom encourages me to do my homework and there is no argument. It makes sense to get it done and have free time to play with friends after supper. Mom comments that Nanny had stayed a little longer than usual and that Dad, taking a break from the store, had picked her up shortly before I got home. I watch Mom putter around in the kitchen making healthy, baked goods for snacks. The smell of peanut-butter cookies fills the kitchen with promised delights.

Mom and I stop and look at each other as we hear Dad's old, green Dodge pulling into the driveway. Four-thirty in the afternoon is an odd time for him to be back from work, especially after having just driven Nanny home. He usually arrives for dinner around six-thirty; why is he back so soon? Out of the blue I sense an energy shift and the complacent calm of only moments before is altered.

I continue to feel peculiar as Dad comes in the back door, the tone in his voice alerting me to the understanding that everything in my comfortable, little world is about to be shattered forever. He calls our names with a sense of urgency. Mom and I drop what we are doing and rush towards him. Sun filters through the window on the back door and obscures the expression on my father's face, but there is an ominous feel to the way his body casts a long shadow in the doorway. Mom intuits that something is terribly wrong and a scream breaks the silence.

"Greg what's wrong? What has happened?"

Dad begins to tell the story between wracking sobs. "I took Nanny home, and then left her on the front stairs for a few moments while I took her bags in. By the time I came out, she was lying on the sidewalk." Dad takes a raspy in-breath and continues with a twisted, agonizing look on his face. "Nanny had fallen backwards and hit her head. She was just lying there, so still ... I ran back inside and called the ambulance, but when they got there it was too late! They said she had died instantly and there was nothing anybody could do." He waits but the full impact doesn't register with me until the final statement. "They took her away and she is gone!" Dad

*begins to sob again and when he speaks there is a chilling finality as he repeats the words again. "Oh, God, this can't be happening but it is... I am so sorry; but there was nothing I could do. Honestly, she was gone when I found her, there was no pulse, no breath...nothing!"*

*Time halts in freeze-frame suspension and I am frozen within it, feeling nothing but an elongated emptiness. The sense of disconnection is incomprehensible. Nanny gone? I saw her this morning. She was fine; we made plans for next week. None of this makes sense; I can't believe this is happening.*

*Suddenly the vacuous chasm is penetrated by Mom's wailing. It rips through the time suspension and brings my full awareness back to the moment. In a silent bond the three of us move toward each other and form a circle of support. When we do the overwhelming loss oozes down the familiar terrain of our outer life and changes it forever. Crushing, primal uncertainty replaces the security of life as I knew it only moments before. Tidal waves of inner conflict pull my awareness into an abyss of spinning, uncontrollable emotion. Racking sobs fragment the silence as we all try to hold onto what was a familiar comfort zone only moments before. My small body is held within the clutching parental circle and their size compared to mine provides a momentary feeling of safety.*

*After the long, silent embrace Mom breaks the circle hug and says she has to sit down. The cookies that smelled so good a lifetime ago fill the kitchen with a different scent now as they begin to burn and smoke curls float from the edges of the oven. Mom rushes over to remove them without oven mitts and burns herself. In a rare moment of profanity her emotions are vented in outrage. "Shit, shit, shit! What's the use? What is the use of anything?" It was the first time that I had ever seen my mother question things and that in combination with the shock of Nanny's death and my mother's obvious burns my world felt like it was catapulting out of control at warp speed.*

*Within the aftermath Dad, Mom and I spin off in our own orbits as we struggle to make shattered pieces fit. Dad goes and pours himself a stiff drink, wanders into the living room, absent-mindedly turns on the radio, and slumps onto the couch. Mom sits on a kitchen chair in the corner with tears streaming down her face. Not noticing me there I become a silent witness as she puts her arms on the table, lowers her head on them and begins to sob without any effort on my father's part to hold or comfort her. I am at a loss as to what to do and in that brief moment I stand transfixed, watching them as I flail about within my own sea of confusion. I can see that Blondie is unsure whom to go to first and watch as she makes a hasty retreat under the coffee table.*

*Within my own uncertainty I decide to head upstairs and crawl into the cubby-hole behind the walls, my special place of solace and retreat. I crawl to the reclusive spot at the far end, where an enveloping darkness mirrors the mood and energy permeating the house. I sit alone within the agonizing solitude, clutching a favorite teddy. Tears of desperation pour out in a suffocating vortex of grief-stricken misery. As my young mind tries to take in the events, one question after another runs rampant. How can my Nanny be dead and gone without any forewarning? She wasn't sick; there was no time to prepare or say goodbye. Why has she abandoned us?*

*I cannot imagine how life will feel without her special presence. I know how much she loved and cared about me. Amidst the confusion my mind flashes back to parting words only hours before. I cannot help but wonder if that was her way of saying goodbye. With that thought I repeat what she said and recall my final memory of her watching me leave through the glass on our back door. The words and that image trigger an outpouring of wrenching tears filled with*

*grief and loss. In the midst of it Blondie finds me and begins licking the tears from my face. I lie down with my dog cradled in my arms and after all the tears I spent crying, sleep provides some welcome relief. When I hear Mom calling me for dinner I wander downstairs. Mom gives a big hug before we sit down and eat in mute silence. There is not much said throughout the rest of the evening and in a way I was glad. We all knew there was nothing we could say or do, so we chose to begin dealing with it by not talking about Nanny's death in the short term.*

Before Nanny died, Mom, Dad and I attended the Anglican Church in support of Nanny's religious upbringing. After her passing, we joined the rest of the Cunningham family at the Broadway United Church. Although St. Boniface was predominantly French and most attended the Catholic Church, no one was particularly preachy or judgmental about which religion held the greater merit. Maybe it was because all the families had moved to the area around the same time or perhaps they were just respectful by nature. Whatever the reason, the support was refreshingly different from some of the religious polarity I encountered later in life.

During the days that followed, I watched as my mother and father fielded phone calls from concerned friends and relatives. Neighbors dropped by with food and flowers and everyone who knew and loved my grandmother expressed their condolences. Dad's relatives and friends commented that she was a grand lady and that she would be greatly missed. Through it all I found little solace amidst any of it. Most of my friends had not experienced the sudden death of a family member and did not know what to say or do, and seemed reluctant to even try. Within my spiritual questioning no answers were given in the shadowy aftermath of my grandmother's passing. Within the grief, commotion and chaos surrounding her death, our parents had little time to properly address the questions Bobbie and I had. Mom and Uncle Bob both felt that my cousin Bobbie and I were too young to attend our grandmother's funeral and we had no choice but to accept their decision. It might have made our grief easier to process if we could have seen Nanny in the coffin. All we knew was that one day someone we loved was here and the next she was gone.

It was a rough time for the family and through it all Bobbie and I provided a measure of comfort to each other. We were given a few days off from school and we stuck pretty close together as our parents made the funeral arrangement with little displays of emotion. Bobbie and I both felt confused and unsure about how to react. The sudden turning of the tides created surreal feelings and a sense of sleep-walking through the events we found ourselves in.

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*Uncle Bob drops Bobbie off at our house and the rest of the family proceeds to the funeral home. Feeling ill-equipped to break through the nebulous feelings of emptiness and lack of emotion, Bobbie and I stare at each other in momentary silence. We sense we should be doing something ...but what? I ask her first.*

*"How do you feel?"*

*"I don't know. What about you?"*

*"I don't know, either."*

*"I think we're supposed to cry."*

*"I know. I think that too."*

*"Do you think it's bad because we aren't crying?"*

*"I don't know. Do you think Nanny would want us to cry?"*

*"I don't know about that because she always wanted us to be happy."*

*"Yeah, but she's gone now and I think people cry when somebody dies, don't they?"*

*"Yes, but I never knew anyone who died before. Do you?"*

“Nope.”

“This feels really weird.”

“Yeah, it does. What shall we do?”

*We are totally committed to honoring our grandmother by crying over her passing. However, for some inexplicable reason the tears are just not there. One of us gets the brainy idea to hit each other hard enough to make us cry. We decide to climb the stairs to my bedroom and sit among stuffed toys and dolls on the bed. I open the drawer and take out a hairbrush with a wide head. Our guilt over the lack of tears fuels our motivation as we decide who should belt the other one first. Being the older one I decide to volunteer and brace myself for what is to come. I watch as Bobbie draws her arm back in a child’s warrior pose. With a posture that looks somewhat menacing, her eyes penetrate mine. Slight sensations of fear ripple within me and I put a precautionary hand up and tentatively say, “Wait. Let me get ready ... and, um ... don’t hit me too hard!” I close my eyes, take a deep breath and attempt to get ready. In the midst of it, loving thoughts are sent to the spirit realm as I silently say, “Nanny, this one’s for you!”*

*Then the impending blow hits a loud WHACK! The hard force of the brush on my forehead creates shooting stars and my eyes dart open. When I feel a bump starting to sprout I feel primal response kicks in and I start slapping Bobbie as I yell, “Ouch, ouch, OUCH, you little twit! That really hurts!” Bobbie cowers and attempts to ward off my blows by covering her head with one of my favorite teddy bears and shouts back, “Stop, stop! Don’t hit me! We agreed that you would go first and you TOLD me to do it. This is for Nanny; remember?”*

*Her words hit home and in a split second our mood changes. We stop short and look wordlessly into each other’s eyes in a moment of quiet acknowledgement. Suddenly our antics strike our funny bones and the room is suddenly filled with guttural, laughing snorting sounds of two little girls that managed to find a moment of joy amidst their emotional pain. Bobbie and I roll around the bed, laughing uproariously in uncensored glee. All attempts to instigate tears of grief failed miserably. They were replaced with tears of laughter that continue until we are spent with exhaustion and our tummies hurt. When the episode ends we stop, sit up and stare into each other’s eyes and embrace in a long, silent, knowing moment. Something within our little girl reality shifted. With nothing else to do but wait for our parents we decide to take a bus downtown and wander around the retail stores until they return. We leave a note on the table with our whereabouts and time we’d be back. We hold hands as we wander and window shop and do not revisit Nanny’s passing from that day forward.*

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That was my first experience with death and how it impacted on my world. In the weeks that follow, Mom and I made pots of tea and talked. She informed me that the coroner’s report indicated Nanny died of accidental cause and even with her extra weight and a few weeks away from her sixty-fifth birthday she was in excellent health and would have lived for many more years. All that did was add to my confusion about why she was taken or left. Mom talked about the death and the funeral and it was clear that she was doing her best to help me adjust.

We both believed that my grandmother’s spirit would travel to invisible realms beyond this one. I tried to console myself with the idea that Nanny, Grandpa Edwin and Auntie Doris would be reunited. There was a small sense of comfort in believing that Nanny would be with the love of her life and it helped our grieving to think of her in a happy place. Mom believed that they would all continue to look out for us from the other side until we, too, made our way back ‘home.’ However, as pleasant as those thoughts were, it was hard to reconcile our loss and come to

terms with the knowledge that, while Nanny's love and guidance might be felt, it was not something that I could physically embrace the way I had when she was here. The chair where she used to sit would be empty at every significant family event for the rest of our lives, and the sound of her voice, laughter and feel of her hugs would only live on in our special memories of her.

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I knew from conversations with my mother that there was a lot of unfinished business with both her parents. Mom was a master at holding her deepest emotions inside, but from my earliest recollections I was her chosen confidante. She told me everything and I never developed any sense of what was appropriate or inappropriate disclosure until years later. She made me aware of the many emotional, physical and sexual abuses she experienced growing up. Along with the abuses from her father she also felt emotionally unsupported by Nanny. I had seen how much my mother had craved my grandmother's approval, but it was never offered in ways that Mom needed. When Nanny died, Mom said that she grieved their past and the reality that, in this life at least the chance to resolve things with them was gone. As I watched how Mom functioned it was clear to me that she worked through problems by continually giving far more to others than she ever received. In my view it appeared she had developed a pattern of treating herself the way her parents had treated her.

Even though I was young at the time I could see a cycle of denial beginning to permeate our family life. Some of it came from the social climate of the time. During the fifties, society did not encourage the airing of family laundry. Men and women did whatever was necessary to build a life, raise their children and plan for the future, settling into a conditioned existence that mirrored the times. Dad never shared a shred of detail about his inner feelings before Nanny's death and that pattern deepened afterwards. He refused to talk to Mom or me, and we both felt emotionally abandoned.

In some of our conversations Mom volunteered the information that my father had been a heavy drinker and smoker from around the age of fourteen when they were childhood sweethearts. From as far back as I remembered Dad always poured himself a drink after work and imbibed more on the weekends. After Nanny died he started taking an extra drink here and there. Then the shots became stronger and Dad became increasingly less communicative. He developed a pattern of drinking more before and after dinner and that continued until he crashed on the couch and slept until bedtime, when he dragged himself into the next room until morning.

Dad's emotional absenteeism didn't happen suddenly. It was a slow progression, but through time he and I ceased sharing father-daughter conversations and activities. The special connect times were gone and most things that were important to me were no longer of interest to him. His dismissive, rejecting attitude was hurtful and hard to understand.

The whole process continued within the normal routines of family life and school. My father worked six days a week at the store and was exhausted by the time he came home. Dad wanted to impress Gramps, hoping one day to take over the store and family business. It was increasingly clear to me that I was not high on Dad's priority list. The only family vacations we had were those at the lake on weekends. When we went there, Dad was more interested in drinking, playing cards with my uncles rather than engaging in shared activities with me. Meaningful exchanges of any kind dwindled as time moved on. Walks in the areas around the lake were still fulfilling, but had become more solitary experiences. Mom tried to fill the void and walked and talked with me. However, even though we rarely spoke about it we knew that Dad's

introversion was having a negative impact on family life. I followed my mother's lead and avoided addressing the peculiarity of his behavior and tried to keep moving forward. In my pre-teen years my father's drinking never got to the point where he was a fall down drunk. He managed to stay upright long enough to find a place to lie down and then slip into oblivion.

My on-going connection to the natural world continued to be a grounding element. Children in my generation enjoyed a life full of outdoor activities that helped fill some of the voids in family life. We romped and frolicked in open woods surrounding the Seine River and collected, inspected, and then released butterflies, frogs, insects, crayfish, tadpoles and minnows. My abiding fascination and respect for nature grew with each discovery. Other times friends and I sat around open campfires and sang silly kid songs while roasting wieners, marshmallows and baking potatoes in the embers of the fire. We knew they were done when the skins were crispy and slightly charred. They'd be slathered with butter and a pinch of salt and tasted great. Local community centers provided a place to gather and offered seasonal hay/sleigh rides and dances every weekend. We'd jive, shimmy and bee-bop within the emerging world of rock and roll. Other times my friends would hop on a bus and attend Saturday matinees and evening shows for a nickel or a quarter, with munchies around the same price.

On Saturday nights the Cunningham clan and some of our neighbors gathered at my parents' place for a weekly get-together. Mom and Dad had worked together and turned the basement into a recreational room with a bar, music system and a place to dance. It became a favorite hangout for their friends and mine. Mom and Dad continued to support my interest in music, dance and entertaining with on-going tap, ballet and voice lessons. Being able to perform and do my lip synch routines in front of appreciative audiences helped me feel comfortable in the spotlight.

Friends often said that my Mom was the best activity co-coordinator on the block. She always made sure that the magic of Christmas, Easter, Valentine's and Halloween were memorable events with all the ceremonial trappings. Whether activities were bobbing for apples in a large wash basin filled with water, making caramelized apples on a stick, playing musical chairs or passing a lifesaver to each other on a straw, Mom always made sure our kids' parties were fun and entertaining. She always said she wanted to ensure my life had a feeling of enchantment, something she had never had growing up. Upon reflection, I'm sure some of her planning was also precipitated by her desire to compensate for Dad's growing problems with alcohol and his emotional distancing from both of us. As my father distanced himself from us my mother and I developed a 'you and me against the world' camaraderie.

*We don't receive wisdom;  
We must discover it  
for ourselves after a journey  
that no one can take for us  
or spare us.*

**-- Marcel Proust**