

Falling för Myself

a memoir

Dorothy Ellen Palmer

acclaim for **Falling for Myself**

“Dorothy Ellen Palmer’s *Falling For Myself* is a powerful call for a mass social justice movement that doesn’t ignore Disability Justice. Through painfully honest and laugh-out-loud storytelling, Palmer delves deep into personal, genetic and societal memory, showing us that it’s possible to uncinch ourselves from the lies we’ve been told about ableism and disability. A moving, informative and magical read.”

– Farzana Doctor, author of *All Inclusive*

“Dorothy Palmer spent a life trying to fit in – to shoes, and with her classmates and colleagues. She was born with congenital anomalies in her feet, and while she tried to hide from what was wrong with her, she frequently fell. After a lifetime, Dorothy Palmer finally accepted herself as a disabled woman, and her need for mobility aids. Profound and engrossing, *Falling for Myself* details a strong woman’s search for herself and for disability acceptance across Canada.”

– Jane Eaton Hamilton, author of *Weekend*

“Dorothy Ellen Palmer writes to ‘channel shame into solidarity, anger into analysis, denial into delight and loss into love,’ and this book – full of insight and wild humour, fierce activism and vital intersectional analysis – marks her stellar success. She calls all of us to imagine a world beyond the limits of ableism and a movement where all of us have room to move.”

– Sonya Huber, author of *Pain Woman Takes Your Keys, and Other Essays from a Nervous System*

“At the very start of her memoir, *Falling for Myself*, Dorothy Palmer tells us that we may laugh. She writes, ‘But as you chuckle, remember this: Funny fat women are always angry. We’re taught to aim the punchline at ourselves and smile. Not this time.’ Fair warning. Palmer’s storytelling carries her sharp intelligence and sparkling humour throughout her reflections on a lonely childhood, living as a disabled woman in an ableist world and the costs of being an activist. This is not ‘inspiration porn.’ Palmer also does not want or need the reader’s pity. We respect her too much for that. Instead, we are moved, entertained and provoked to examine ourselves. By telling us her stories, Palmer invites us to examine ours. Also, you will laugh and laugh.”

– Carrienne Leung, author of *That Time I Loved You*

“This book reads like a map of exposed nerves. It is a raw, detailed rendering of a disabled woman’s life that, in the end, offers a beautifully discomfiting and necessary gift of unapologetic, even gleeful defiance.”

– Adam Pottle, author of *Voice: On Writing with Deafness*

“Look out, Canada, this memoir has the most fierce account of what it really means to be a disabled person that you are going to read, this year or any year. Whether she’s destroying the myth of Tiny Tim’s cheerfulness or explaining why the word *bastard* should exit your vocabulary immediately, Dorothy Palmer looks squarely at injustice and refuses to let it define who she is.”

– Julie Rak, author of *Boom!: Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*

“If you care about social justice and equality, you must read *Falling for Myself*. In a searing memoir that is both moving and funny, Dorothy Palmer comes out of the closet as a disabled person and challenges all of us to bring down the walls – from inaccessible spaces to ableist language – that exclude and oppress huge numbers of people who are struggling against the ableism imposed by our culture and society.”

– Judy Rebick, author of *Heroes in My Head*

“In her luminous memoir, Dorothy Palmer vividly renders in-depth reflections and examination of adoption, disability, the body, ableism and difficult knowledge. She untangles intricate knots which bind these to ideal femininity, race, place, heteronormativity and Canadian institutions of the White identity as a systemic buttress for the nation. Her nimble prose, enmeshed with sensitive wit firmly lodged in the critical consciousness of dissent and power, locates resistance through a purposeful examination of ‘the disabled closet . . . opened from the inside.’ A constant occupant within the closet are angst-ridden Canadian discourses and fears of nonconforming bodies, minds, imaginaries and understandings of what and who is centre and other; beauty and monstrous; seen and the abjected; rewarded and or subjected to punitive subjection; which bodies are deemed normal and which rendered feral and hyper-Other. Palmer skillfully navigates these affective layers of a Canadian WASP familial history in which the state plays a colossal role managing disability as pathology, confusion and shame, thereby naturalizing the reduction of disabled folk to ‘Almost Human.’ That ‘no body be left behind,’ for Palmer, is to demand that critical disability consciousness must address desire to not be deemed as heroic or brave, but radically ‘ordinary’ and ‘a disabled whole.’ Palmer’s struggle, epiphanies and revelations, storied through striking, clear prose, is a *must-read* primer for those seeking to engage Palmer’s real ‘target of this story: ableism.’ To truly get at the root, one must look deeply – at the family history level – into how normative ideas of Canada, the nation, state and ableism actually weaponize and repress relevant knowledge which is situated and too often obscured between repressed desire, shame, adoption, disability, struggle, resistance and dissent.”

– Margo Tamez (Kónitsąąjį gokíyaa dindé | ‘Big Water Peoples’ | enrolled Lipan Apache), author of *Raven Eye* (Willa Award)

Falling for Myself

ALSO BY DOROTHY ELLEN PALMER

When Fenelon Falls

Falling for Myself

a memoir

Dorothy Ellen Palmer



WOLSAK
& WYNN

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*Dedicated to the lives and living legacies of
Stella Young and Audre Lorde*

*and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid*

*So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.*

— AUDRE LORDE, “A LITANY FOR SURVIVAL,”

THE BLACK UNICORN

*I am not a snowflake. I am not a sweet, infantilising
symbol of the fragility of life.
I am a strong, fierce, flawed adult woman.
I plan to remain that way in life, and in death.*

— STELLA YOUNG, FACEBOOK

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By Way of Introduction

My father raised stud guppies. Beautiful male fish with fantails like monarch butterflies. He bagged them up and pimped them out to other guppy enthusiasts, who paid a stud fee in hopes of their own handsome offspring. Father found his twelve-tank calling thanks to me. He'd originally purchased neon tetras and angelfish. But I'd leaned too close, lost my balance, fallen into the tank and pulled plants, pink gravel, fish and the burbling little Diver Dan filter all onto the floor, where none survived. My mother spanked me. The next day, my father bought guppies.

We all have one true gift to offer the world, and now you know mine: I fall down. Repeatedly. Spectacularly. Like the pope, I'm forever kissing the ground. I trace my history by the scars on my body, by the times and places I've fallen.

At birth, I fell from an unwilling womb into the arms of the Children's Aid. Falling far short of my adoptive mother's expectations, I spent my girlhood on my knees, apologizing for bloody leotards. When corrective surgeries failed to correct much of anything, I fell on crutches, in walking casts and off my freshly cut feet. I fell at double dutch when my orthopedic Oxfords failed to jump, and at university when my unisex workboots stopped working. I married a good man

in my twenties; in my thirties, I fell for a boy pretending to be one. In a heart-cracking moment as a new mom, I smacked the sidewalk with my first-born in his Snugglie. To the delight of my grade ten drama class, I once fell right off the stage. I spent my forties fighting not to need a crutch and my fifties resisting a walker. A face plant into a moving streetcar changed my mind. At sixty-three, my walker and I collided with a kilted, hammer-throwing highlander at the Fergus Scottish Festival. When he stepped over my face to help me up, it settled the pressing question of Scottish manhood and gave new meaning to the phrase *getting off scot-free*.

But if you're expecting an inspiring tale about the importance of getting back up, you'll be disappointed. Here's my truth: I'm a faller and will always be one. Falling makes me bloody furious, and it makes me furiously bloody proud. Now that I understand exactly what makes me fall, I know what I can, and can't, do about it. I'm learning to retrace my scarred history, to channel shame into solidarity, anger into analysis, denial into delight and loss into love. After half a century of falling down, I'm falling up. I'm falling for myself.

Thanks to a pair of enemies who have become my long-standing friends. Please let me introduce them to you.

My left foot, Herkimer, at size 2.5, is flexible and finely boned. Frail, fussy and bossy, he's my nattering C-3PO. A full size smaller at 1.5, my fat right foot, Horatio, is my martyred workhorse. He's plodding, persistent and as stubborn as a fridge magnet. Since there are two of them and one of me, I'm frequently outvoted. Especially lately. My red hair has gone grey. My disability is degenerative. With each passing day, I'm less spring and more chicken. The congenital anomalies in my feet that we once called *birth defects* are complicated by a creeping, whole-body arthritis. Despite surgery and meds, I'm in constant pain. When I fall on my knees, I don't hear angel voices. I do hear cursing. Usually mine.

But for most of my life I could pass in the walking world.

From my shoes up, I looked "normal." Just another little red-headed

girl. Blue-grey eyes behind glasses, some Jackson Pollock freckles and a toothy smile. Pushing past pain, I could impersonate an able body, fake a reasonable facsimile of the gait of my peers. And my tongue was always quick on its feet. I improvised. I blamed limping on a ninja thumbtack. I passed falling off as clumsy, or one teensy drink too many. When asked about childhood operations, I lied; I claimed the knife had cured me. Because I could pass for normal, I couldn't pass up the chance for a normal life. I refused to be "demoted" to the humiliation of being seen as disabled.

This is how you become an imposter in your own life: you fake a role until it is your life.

To secure a role in the walking world, I pushed my true-born self into what the disability community calls "the disabled closet." My adoption framed my closet. My girlhood insulated it. Religion pounded in the nails. I made it fashionably cozy in my twenties, then spent the next thirty years ensuring no one picked the lock. But here's the Catch-22 of closets: the longer they're locked, the more they demand to be opened. They're claustrophobic. Inevitably, they start to smell a little funky. Craving human company, the hand reaching for the key is your own. How fitting. In my ripe old age, I'm coming out of the disabled closet.

"Almost Human" is a role I refuse to play. I'm a disabled whole.

I am not "so lame." I'm splendidly lame. Magnificently lame.

In short, all four foot ten of me won't be telling you an inspiring tall tale about defeating or overcoming disability. Mine can't be hidden, halted or healed. We all need to stop falling for the double lie that disabled people can be healed and should want to be healed. Instead, I'll do my best to air out my closet and redress my aging body. A life in pain is both delicate and resilient. In all its shrivelling personal loss, I have found collective joy. I long to show you the extraordinary ordinariness of my life.

Here's what is inspiring: in my lifetime, all kinds of closets have been pried open from the inside. I've worked all my life to be on the

right side of that history, to add my two cents to that joint wealth. I'm thankful every second for the generations of disabled activists who've worked for decades to change history. To honour their gift, I'm exposing my unclad truth, hoping you'll get naked with me. I've made so many mistakes, we can get dressed down together. But as you chuckle, remember this: Funny fat women are always angry. We're taught to aim the punchline at ourselves and smile. Not this time.

Let's all name the target of this story: *ableism*.

It's a word I didn't learn until my fifties, when I met the online disability community. Like all *isms*, ableism wields both a carrot and a stick. As a world view created by and for abled people, ableism normalizes, values, rewards, privileges, entitles, enriches and empowers those deemed to have socially acceptable "healthy and normal" minds and bodies. Ableism shames, marginalizes, impoverishes, silences, punishes, incarcerates and kills disabled people. *Internalized ableism* made me a liar for half a century. It's the weaponized shame I aimed at myself, as I spent every waking moment denying and hiding my disability. Desperate to belong in the walking world, I kept reaching for the carrot and running from the stick.

Today, I know any aim I take at ableism must be double-barrelled, must target both the discrimination and the privilege. That's no easy task because ableism is systemic: built into all beliefs, behaviours, buildings, language and laws. It's intersectional: in its hierarchical ranking of worthy to worthless bodies, ableism reinforces all other forms of hatred and oppression.

How do I live in a disabled body, in a world that labels me unworthy?

Once a redhead, always a redhead: if you're looking for feisty, you've found me.

This memoir charts the slow repossession of my birthright – a righteous, red-headed anger. For your entertainment pleasure, I'll journey back to the days of Ed Sullivan to tell my perpetually improvised running joke: *Holy Shit, It's Saturday Night and I'm Still Alive*.

It's the uncomfortable humour I trust. It's purposeful; it's the laughter that empowers change.

Herkimer, Horatio and I invite you come trip with us down memory lane.

Welcome to our remembrance alphabet, our recollection in twenty-six letters. Here are all the words I learned to unlearn, fall by fall. Then painstakingly rearranged, step by step. I'm respelling each letter of my life in my body to extend a loving touch to all the somebodies like me.

Won't you please join us?



A is Always for Almost

In my first baby picture, I'm no baby; I'm almost three years old.

In brand-new Sunday best, I'm wearing my first costume: the ensemble my parents brought to court. They want me to look nice for the judge, and for posterity – for the photo of “the day we brought you home.” It's the winter of 1958. My parents, Marguerite Isobel Stobie Palmer and Robert David Palmer, have just signed my adoption papers. The judge banged his gavel and the Toronto Children's Aid caseworker put their re-clad, renamed daughter into their arms. The photos are in black and white, but I remember my ensemble in living colour. From head to toe, I'm the blush pink of a newborn rose.

It's February. I'm plenty warm. My bonnet is a rich, quilted velveteen. Three pink rosettes with minty green leaves embellish the white ribbon on the crown. Like every well-dressed girl in the 1950s, my bonnet matches my coat. It's the same pink velveteen, sporting the same white ribbon trim and identical rosettes on the collar and cuffs. Of course, my coat matches my dress; it's also velveteen, with an ornately embroidered yoke of festive holly green, trimmed with the same minty leaves and rosebuds. I have pink mittens, hand-knit by my new mother. They dangle on a pink string, attached to my coat

collar with a pink safety pin. When she covers my mouth with a pink scarf, I smile. Of course, I do; I'm a good girl.

This outfit is the first set of big girl clothes, and the only set of new clothes, I've ever owned. The white leotards are my first pair of tights. I'm concerned that these strange new people do not seem to think I need a diaper, but I do not complain. Even my underpants have rosebuds. In each detail, my mother has chosen deliberately and well: pink and green in exactly the right shades to makeover nobody's child into her little girl. When she wrapped my auburn curls around her finger, they fell in place like Shirley Temple's ringlets.

But two things ruin the picture: the left one and the right one.

My shoes.

When my new father slipped an ensemble-completing pair of unwearable pink shoes into his overcoat pocket, my new mother sighed. I had to wear my baby booties. Curved over sideways, with broken laces, they matched my feet. When my new mother laced them up, she seemed to think their sides could be pulled together. Trying to close the gaps my shoes require on either side of their tongues, she tied them too tight. Looking down from my perch in her arms, I remember the perfect flashing points of her pink high heels.

When we reached 26 Delma Drive, a tiny wartime bungalow in the Toronto suburb of Alderwood, she set me down on the grey living room carpet where I promptly peed my new pink panties. It worked. She removed my shoes. Until I turned eight, my parents and I giggled at that story whenever we looked at my "coming home" photo. Then they had their own children.

My mother was born in 1920, my dad in 1922. They married at thirty-three and thirty-one, late for the times. Choosing adoption only after multiple miscarriages, I always assumed age put them so far down the priority list that they got a slightly older, slightly damaged baby. In 1959, they adopted again, photographing my brother in his snazzy coming home outfit. In 1960, my mother told five-year-old me they were going back to Children's Aid to get my sister.

And I believed her.

How I loved that baby. My Judith Ann. My sister. My real sister.

Months later, in a medically documented phenomenon, nearing menopause and after adopting, my mother got pregnant. She didn't tell me. I came home one day at lunch and my baby sister was gone. Judith was always in her carriage on the front porch. I grabbed her carriage and took off. As I ran, I prayed. I begged God not to take my family away from me. Not again. When I finally lifted the blanket, of course God was laughing at me. I didn't deserve a sister.

When I came home without her, my mother's tears were already dry.

She said, "Don't worry. Another family will love her just as much as you do."

"That's not true. Nobody could love Judy more than me. Can't we please get her back?"

"No, we can't. But I'm going to tell you a big girl secret. Your father and I are going to have a better baby, a baby of our very own. Won't that be lovely?"

She smiled at me like she expected me to be happy for her.

"There is no better baby! Judith is my sister. My real sister!"

"What? No, dear. We just told you that to make you feel better. This baby is our real daughter. If it's a girl, we'll call her Judy, too. So, sit down and eat your SpaghettiOs. And don't worry. Soon, you won't even remember that there was another baby."

I didn't even try to reach the toilet. I stood up and threw up. I can still see the tablecloth, a cheery blue gingham with tiny white baby bones floating in the red of baby's blood.

Mother handed me a dishcloth, swivelled on her stiletto and went to lie down.

Now that I'm a mother, I can feel the devastation of her 1960 Sophie's Choice. Given her history of miscarriage, told she could not both care for an infant and carry one, she made the only choice legally and medically available. I date the worst of my sleepwalking to that choice.

Talk about a cruel irony. You'd think my silly feet would welcome the rest. Instead, I've walked in my sleep from the time I could walk. I wake up mid-stair, barefoot in my nightie, to find things moved or missing. Over sixty years, I've shined my shoes, made sandwiches, knitted, ironed and rearranged furniture, all in my sleep. Much like the truth I'd never been toilet trained, I imagine my sleepwalking was something Children's Aid conveniently forgot to mention.

On my first night in their home, Dave and Peggy Palmer discovered their sleeping child could indeed pee the bed, drip down the hall, unlock the front door and greet the snow in a sodden sleeper. That first night, they saved me only because the neighbours heard me screaming.

After repeat performances, once they believed I was truly asleep and not just willful and wild, my father installed a chain-link sliding lock, one set over his head that I couldn't reach. Awakened by the sound of me yanking on the door like a mini Jacob Marley rattling her chains, they took me back to bed, shaking their heads with all the incredulity of Ebenezer Scrooge.

In 1960, when my mother's daughter started kicking, I stepped out every night.

In the escape of sleep, I sought escape. I pulled a kitchen chair to the door and unlocked it. My father came after me; my mother couldn't get out of bed. A prescription of total bedrest for high-risk pregnancies was common then, but that never got explained to eight-year-old me. My aunties and all the neighbour ladies treated me with the forced joviality that alerts any child. Even more alarming was the unheard-of expense of Mrs. Devenish, a cleaning lady, brought in because my mother must not pick anything up, including her two children. I came home from school for a daily fifteen-minute visit with my mother. Then, exiled from her room, I spent the evening alone in mine, straining to hear through the walls to be sure she was still breathing.

This is what I believed beyond reason: unless I was a very good girl, my mother was going to die. I trained myself to silence, convinced that any disturbance from me would kill her. Only once I was asleep did I dare try to escape. After a difficult delivery, my mother gave her beloved blood daughter my missing sister's name.

A year later, once I'd finally begun sleeping through the night, my mother got pregnant again. In 1963, when a woman in her mid-forties who nearly died in her first confinement risks a second child, she is either brave and life-affirming or selfish to the core, so desperate for her own biological spawn that she's willing to leave her chosen children motherless. I know that's not fair, given women's lack of choice in 1963. I equally know this was unfair: my eight-year-old mind quite logically concluded this: I'd disappear next. My parents sent my sister Judith back the first time. Now it was my turn. My mother was willing to die to replace me.

This is how I spent the year I turned eight and she turned forty-three. I stopped sleeping. To stay awake, I chanted the alphabet and dug my nails into my knees until they bled. No one noticed. My knees were already bloody. But it worked. The Children's Aid kidnappers who took my sister, they couldn't get me. If I stayed awake, I could scream. That summer, in a delivery that very nearly took her life, my mother birthed my baby brother.

We became a forced-fit family: two natural children, and by default, two unnatural ones.

Exactly one month later, the first political event that I'd remember all my life occurred. On September 15, 1963, the Ku Klux Klan bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four little black girls at Sunday school. As an avid attender of Sunday school, it told me the world wasn't safe for any girls anywhere. When JFK was assassinated two months later on November 22, 1963, I concluded that kidnappers, bombers and assassins lurked on every corner. When my dad said what I imagine many white,

suburban parents said to reassure their children, “That violence is far away, not here in Canada,” I knew better than to believe him.

I know what you’re thinking: Why did no one get counselling for a child caught in this recursive trauma? That assumes anyone saw trauma. No one did. Fifty years ago, child psychiatrists were rare, reserved for the demonstrably disturbed. I’d joined the Baby Boom Dream Team: a suburban nuclear family. What could I possibly need to talk about?

In secret, I told my own creation story, only to myself: “Once upon a time, a man and a woman wanted a baby. First-best babies come from a woman’s tummy and the hospital. They had to settle for one from the second-hand baby store. When they saw they could get first-best babies after all, of course, they loved them more. First-best babies have kissable toes.”

My coming home photo paled beside those of my parents’ tiny perfect newborns. My velveteen lost its sheen. When my dirty, broken booties came home with me, they ruined everything. My disability, my second-best-ness, has always been inextricably enmeshed with my adoption. They embody the same shame, tar me with the same dirty brush. They required the same hushed tones, or preferably, no words at all. I can’t separate them. I’ve come to believe they can’t be separated. My intersecting almosts have always been messy, tangled like my curly red hair, knotted into the snarls of love and loss I felt from the day I entered my parents’ home.

Daddy put down his newspaper each night, used his own wide thumb like a shoehorn to help me pull on my slippers. When I asked him why even slippers hurt, he affirmed my feet were “different.” He said he hoped I’d “grow out of it,” but if I didn’t, they’d have me “fixed.” I knew when they “fixed” the dog, they reached between his legs and whacked the spunk out of him.

This was not encouraging. I was already bloody. My knees incessantly scabbed.

My mother saw my “clumsiness” the same way she saw the fact I still wet the bed: as a selfish campaign to make more work for her. In an era when girls couldn’t wear pants to school, she kept me in knee socks until the worst of winter. When I wore leotards, mashing my knees to jelly on a daily basis cost her money. I must not be rewarded with new leotards. She made me wash out the blood with Javex, made me stand beside her mending chair to watch as she shoved her darning ham down the throat of my leotards, positioned it under the hole and wove grids of thread to patch it. Mother was as tired of mending and re-mending my tights as I was of wearing them mended. When most annoyed at me, she wove scarlet grids into what our 1960s WASP tongues unthinkingly called my “flesh-coloured” tights.

On the Sunday night she announced it was time for me to learn to do my own darning, my mother guided my needle through a grid of her own making and attempted to be kind.

“Now that you’re a big girl mending for yourself, Dorothy, I’ll try not to lose my temper about how much you fall. I hope you know that having little feet is very feminine. Nothing to be ashamed of, not at all.” She patted my hand. “But never take your shoes off in public.”

This confused me. I knew no good girl would ever take her top off in public, but I’d seen plenty of barefoot children of both sexes. “But why aren’t my feet normal?”

Mother’s hands froze. “You can ask Dr. Ridley. When you turn eighteen.”

She reclaimed her needle. Told me to go watch Walt Disney and stay put for Ed Sullivan.

My parents likewise told me I was adopted. They replayed roles that began and ended in cameo, no backstory necessary. Mother reprised her line, “It’s absolutely nothing to be ashamed of, dear,” adding, “But you must never speak about it to anyone, for any reason.”

I hope she was embarrassed for me.

I knew she was ashamed of me.

Until I became a mother, it never occurred to me that my questions made her sad. It never occurred to my parents to explain their feelings, or to ask about mine. In the 1960s, we had no *Dr. Phil*, no *Oprah* and no Internet. Beyond Dr. Spock's 1946 *Baby and Child Care*, which my mother had read to tatters and rebound with duct tape, there were no self-help books. There was absolutely no one to advise first-time parents of adopted, disabled children. In further handicap, both my parents came from deeply wounded families.

My mother's mother, Ellen Sarah Morgan Stobie, retreated into herself after the death of her fifth and favoured child. I'd been told some of the story: my mother's baby brother died in a car accident. She was five. His death was her first memory. She remembered the automobile, a long black boat of a thing, a Packard like her chum Janie Packard. It had four fat wheels and one strapped to the side. She remembered climbing up on the running board, how her older brothers and her sister poked at the beige canvas roof with their fingers. She was too short to reach it. She said when Grandpa rolled over the embankment, everyone crawled out laughing.

Until they saw a lacy white bonnet under the car.

But, as happens so often in family history, a half-truth tells less than half the story.

It wasn't until I began researching for this memoir that I understood the cruel, recursive coincidence of their loss. I had to check and double-check online records to be sure I wasn't imagining it. My grandma was born September 6, 1881. On her forty-third birthday, September 6, 1924, she gave birth to her last child, christened James after my grandpa but nicknamed Fronty. Two years later to the day, Grandpa took the family for a celebratory drive.

Baby Fronty died on September 6, 1926.

It was my grandma's forty-fifth birthday.

It was Fronty's second birthday.

My mother's birthday fell days later, on the last day of September.

Year after year, how could it ever have been a happy day for any of them?

My grandmother never forgave my grandfather. In full karmic circle, some forty years later, Grandpa Stobie died when a wound he'd received in a car accident turned septic. Put all that poison and loss in a novel, no one would believe it. In real life, it kept bleeding.

My mother kept one memento from that childhood: a china doll, clad in Fronty's christening dress, painted lips smiling but cracked in the head. She never said it, but I believe it: two babies died that day. Neither mother could hold on to them. I once overheard my mother telling a friend that she believed her mother would have preferred it if Fronty had lived and she, the expendable second daughter, had died.

My mother and her mother never bonded. Personal history, and their moment in history, both worked against them.

My grandma, born in 1881, wouldn't let my mother ride a bike because it was unladylike. She couldn't attend university for the same reason. My mother read non-stop and remembered it all. She graduated high school first in her class, won a provincial biology award, and hoped to be a doctor. Instead, she watched her parents pay for her brothers' degrees while she got told to earn her keep. She always denounced her parents' refusal to pay for a daughter's education as old-fashioned and unfair. She let her father off scot-free. She blamed her mother entirely.

I found it hard to believe that her mother and my grandma were the same person.

It is true that my Victorian grandmother valued femininity and decorum. Every strand of her waist-length, iron-grey hair got tightly braided and wound into the bun at the nape of her neck. But, alone with me, she literally let her hair down. She let me brush it, braid it and style it at will. And her closet held magic: scarves, beads, hats with bows and mysterious veils, and a rainbow of soft shirt-dresses with neat pearl buttons. She loved navy blue with swiss dot and tiny

floral patterns. They all smelled of lavender. Best of all, she played with me. Festooned in floppy hats and jewelry, we attended the Royal Ascot horse races. We met at Harrods for high tea.

I never tired of bedtime stories from the London of her girlhood, tales that bolstered my love for Sherlock Holmes. She played Watson to my Sherlock. She played Moriarty and Irene Adler. Unlike the cross-dressing Irene, she never wore pants. When I asked why, she shrugged. "Trousers are for men and little circus monkeys. Not that one can always tell the difference."

My mother thought Sherlock Holmes was both silly and for boys.

My mother wallpapered my bedroom with pink ballerinas twirling on pointe shoes.

She thought she was doing a better job than her mother because I owned a bike. When she insisted that I leave my training wheels on, it wasn't out of concern for me. She didn't want neighbours seeing me fall in the street anymore than they already did. I never played in her closet; I'd have been spanked. I did sneak in to stare at her high heels, a precision army ranked by height and colour on three shoe racks, but I never tried them on. A broken ankle I could risk, but if rolling an ankle ruined one of her lovely shoes, I wouldn't sit down for a month.

In retrospect, my mother and hers did have one thing in common: the ultra-feminine face they showed the world. They kept their upper lips stiff and impeccably lipsticked. Maintained decorum, no matter the cost. My immigrant grandfather, whose father dug coal in Scotland, did very well with a company that became CIL. After Fronty's death, the Depression took every dime. The grieving Stobie family left a home overlooking Grenadier Pond in High Park for a tiny house in Swansea. Mother went from having a tailor to mending her sister's off-the-rack hand-me-downs. When loss is your leitmotif, you overcompensate, you cling to what remains.

Today, we'd call my grandparents hoarders.

Back then, we called them Scottish.

Jammed from floor to ceiling, my grandparents' Port Credit basement held every jar, egg carton, bit of string, bread bag, elastic band and *National Geographic* they had ever owned. Everyone kept tinfoil during the war; they kept keeping it, in a giant ball approaching the size of a Volkswagen. This penny-pinching, Scottish girlhood did not prepare my mother for the throwaway, rule-breaking 1960s. When I asked about my adoption, she did what her mother had done: she shut down. She only once admitted why. She'd been told by a well-meaning Children's Aid worker that if she did a good job as a mother, I wouldn't ask any questions. She saw my questions as proof of her failure and responded with her mother's retreat.

Then she regifted me with the worst wound of her childhood: the loss of a beloved baby sibling. When my mother gave up baby Judith, was it like losing baby Fronty all over again? Did she feel guilty about haunting my childhood with the ghost that ruined hers?

I'll never know. I do know when I lost my mother, I found hers.

Perhaps Grandma Stobie embraced her less-loved daughter's less-loved daughter to heal us both. She stepped up when she saw my mother favouring her own babies, repeating her own mother wound and distancing herself from me. When Grandma met me, I was a few months older than Fronty when he died. Perhaps she saw a baby returned. She showered me with all the affection she never showed my mother. They could barely look at each other, but Grandma couldn't get enough of me. I often stayed the weekend, baking, sewing, skipping up to Woolworth's lunch counter at Dixie Mall for grilled cheese sandwiches with extra dill pickles. I knew she loved me best of all. I had the most presents under her tree. All my cousins, aunts and uncles said it: "Dorothy is Grandma's favourite."

As I near the age she was during those fondly remembered Christmases, I realize this: Grandma didn't drive. To shop for presents, my mother had to drive her. I like to imagine them chatting over tea and crumpets in Eaton's, discussing a Chatty Cathy doll and a dollhouse.

Someone bought both, meaning the Christmas generosity I always attributed to my grandmother belongs in part to my mother. The older I get, the more I believe this: most people – even your parents – do the best they can, most of the time.

Of course, none of that helped a limping eight-year-old in 1963.

I kept falling. On grass. On gravel. On sidewalks. On nothing. On each and every day. And the more my mother darned, the more she stitched in silence. The more I fell, the more I felt her disappointment. Her silence didn't silence my fears. It made me furtive. As I lost my mother, I shifted my need for her to a mystery woman – my birth mother. I knew I began with shameful secrets. I knew her story and mine began with papers kept under lock and key.

So, I resolved to read them.