

IF MY HEART HAD WINGS: A WORLD WAR II LOVE STORY

BY NADINE TAYLOR

PROLOGUE

Their wedding picture was so typical of the World War II years. Mom was dressed to the nines in a chic pearl grey suit with padded shoulders and a pencil-slim skirt, everything set off by pale pink accessories including a little hat that was perched toward the front of her head and surrounded with puffs of pink tulle. Dad was every bit the perfect groom in a black double-breasted suit with a jaunty white carnation on his lapel.

My sister Dawn and I often lingered over this picture of our parents as we flipped through their wedding album, if you could call it an album. It was more like a black leather spiral-bound notebook that held about a dozen 8 x 10 pictures in plastic sheet protectors. They didn't need anything fancy, Mom said, so they settled on the cheapest package available. Still, Dawn and I agreed that the photographer should have at least gotten one shot of Mom walking down the aisle with her eyes open. In the only picture that survives, she approaches her new life with her eyelids firmly closed.

"There goes Mom," we liked to say, "sleepwalking down the aisle!"

Nineteen forty-six was a big year for weddings in the U.S., when soldiers came home from World War II in droves, eager to reunite with their sweethearts, get married, start families, and get on with the business of living. My parents were no different, although they really didn't know each other very well when they tied the knot in March of that year. They had met briefly during the war and started a correspondence that lasted two years. Then, when Dad got back to the States, they spent two months getting to know each other and trying to decide if they had something that could last. When the answer turned out to be yes, Mom booked a church and headed downtown in search of an attractive yet practical suit. There was no point in spending your hard-earned dollars on some silly dress you could only wear once, she told us, when you could buy a high-quality suit for the same price (or less) and wear it over and over again. Which is exactly what she did. That pearl grey suit became one of her wardrobe staples. In fact, she was able to wear it to work until she was seven months pregnant with my sister.

So you can imagine my surprise when, at the age of thirteen, I was out in the garage riffling through a drawer full of black and white photos and came upon a picture of my mother in a white wedding gown, complete with a shoulder-length veil! It was the summer of 1966; my sister was seventeen, my parents had been married for 20 years, and as far as I knew, there had never been any mention of a white wedding dress.

I hightailed it down the driveway and burst through the kitchen door, waving the picture. Mom was standing at the stove stirring something while Dawn was busy chopping tomatoes at the kitchen counter.

"Mom!" I shouted, thrusting the picture at her. "I thought you wore a *suit* to get married!"

She looked at the picture and smiled sheepishly. Then, after a long pause, she sighed and said, "Well, I guess I always knew I was going to have to tell you girls someday... I was married before."

My sister and I looked at each other with jaws dropped. There had never been the slightest mention of any romantic relationship in Mom's past, much less a *husband*! Dumbfounded, we looked at our mother with eyes that demanded an explanation.

"It was during the war, before I knew your father," she said lightly, as that meant it was of little consequence.

"Well, who was he?" I demanded.

"He was my college boyfriend."

"Did you have any kids?" I asked, panicked, as visions of some strange family member materializing on our front porch swam into my brain.

"No," she smiled, trying to calm me down. "There were no kids. And anyway," she said dismissively, "it all happened a long time ago. It doesn't make any difference now."

With that, she turned back to her stirring; discussion ended.

I was so shocked by her news that I couldn't think of anything else to say. So I scurried back to the garage to see if I could find any other interesting (and possibly stunning) pictures. I couldn't.

There was a time, when I was very young, when I couldn't imagine that my mother had had a life before I existed. Once I got a little older, I realized that she'd married my father and given birth to my sister before I was born, so I began to think of her life as starting once she met Dad. But I also knew that she had been a child once, just like me; I'd seen the pictures. So I revised my idea once again and thought of her life as a two-part affair: her childhood and Dad/us.

But once I found the white wedding picture, it became glaringly apparent that at least one other part of her life had existed, the part involving another man and another marriage. It was such a bizarre notion that I simply blocked it at first. But the older I got, the more curious I became about this secret life of hers. It seemed so mysterious and romantic — two adjectives I wouldn't normally have applied to my pragmatic, matter-of-fact mother. And the more I looked into the matter, the more obsessed I became.

This is the story of what my mother was like before she had me. It's also the story of secrets, lies, a love that never died and a woman's long journey to self-discovery and fulfillment. It would take me decades to uncover these secrets, using letters, an Army personnel file, interviews with family members, and, of course, the many stories, vignettes, and insights that Mom relayed to me over the years. And in the process, not only did I learn the true story of my mother, I also discovered the story of myself.