

The Story of Camille

by Patti Cragg

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The Beginning

There is a picture of the “Perry Family” that goes back to about 1950. I'm pretty sure it was taken in Vermont, where Susan was born in 1948. It shows the 4 sisters sitting, looking at the camera, each with a slightly different look on their face, with mother and father behind. I have always liked that picture because everyone has such a different demeanor. Mother is happy, almost joyous, Dad is being his most handsome and enigmatic, Jane has a shy smile, Patti looks eager to get on with things, Susan is teething, and Camille. . . Camille has an interesting look on her face. The adjectives I would use to describe my sister Camille, whom I've known for all of my 70 years would also apply largely to what you see in that picture: private, subtle, intelligent, enigmatic, lovely, individualistic, detached.



Saving a life - Meaford 1953-54

In many ways we had an idyllic childhood. I especially remember summers at the cottage on Georgian Bay. Our little Pan-a-bode, complete with outhouse that Dad built, was like a palace for all of us. We spent endless days on the sand at our beloved Christie Beach. We'd skinny dip at night. We'd read, play games, make friends as all children do when given

freedom and summer in equal portions. Camille was a wonderful swimmer. There was a large rock in the water about 40 feet off shore from our cottage that many of the kids from the “beach” would use as a diving platform. About a half kilometer along the beach toward Thornbury there was another, less stately rock jutting from the water at about the same distance from shore. Camille and some of the other kids would hold marathon swims, imitating the great Marilyn Bell, I watched Camille dive from our big rock and swim with the encouragement of the whole community along the beach to the second rock and back again. I was so in awe of her. She was so strong, so determined.

I also remember one day when she did something that changed my life, or perhaps gave me a life I would not otherwise have. I was swimming about neck deep in water, not too far from the big rock and I was thinking about fish. I know for sure that is what I was thinking about because it occurred to me that fish could breathe under water and that probably I could too if I just tried. So I dove down and sucked in as much water into my lungs as I could and waited to see what would happen. My memory of what followed is a bit sketchy. I don't remember feeling panicky, or kicking and flailing about. I do remember floating and also someone grabbing me by my hair and dragging me to the surface. It was Camille and I think it is the only time in my life I have ever seen Camille angry. She sent me coughing and sputtering to the shore. It wasn't until some years later, when I accepted that people and fish breathe differently that I realized I owed her my life. I don't think I ever said thank you.

Alderwood Collegiate, Mr. Graham - math teacher

We all began highschool at Alderwood Collegiate. Sadly it no longer exists, but memories of



it remain. I recall my very first day in class with Mr. Graham the math teacher. As a grade-niner I was both frightened of, and excited by everything my new surroundings had to offer. Mr. Graham was an older man who claimed to be the epitome of a person “who only his mother could love”. He was small and hunch-backed and spoke with a hint of a lisp. He made a point of showing us what 360 degrees looked like by planting one foot firmly on the ground and hobbling around in a circle, teetering a bit half way round and using his arms to steady himself. Although he was “strange” looking his heart was anything but. He was a very kind and generous man and one of the teachers I remember with great warmth and affection even if our relationship did not start that way. The very first day of class he looked at my last name on the the list and asked if I was by chance Camille Perry's sister. I said I was, and he proceeded to tell me he expected even greater things from me that he's seen in Camille and she was a wonderful student. I was so proud of Camille throughout my high school years. She was the epitome of grace and intelligence. As an example, she was someone I always looked up to, and bragged about. That bragging has continued throughout my life. It was at Alderwood that she met Ola. He was the student council president, I recall, and a very popular young man with everyone. They seemed to be love-struck from the beginning. Theirs is a relationship which has weathered much and remained more solidly rooted than ever. In his retirement Ola dotes on Camille.

The Basement Apartment - Dover Drive

Camille and Ola married and began life together in a small basement apartment on Dover Drive in Toronto. Throughout her childhood, Camille had enjoyed sewing. I was envious of the way she could produce outfits for her dolls using mom's old Singer Machine. She continued to sew, as the children came along, first Eden and then Randy. I think sewing was a respite for her - a way of removing herself from the everyday of everyday and losing herself in a project.

It was while they lived on Dover Drive that I was to receive the first of many compassionate gifts from Camille and Ola. As a student at Ryerson I needed a place to live and they opened their doors to me and even found me transportation into the city daily. When I was

home with them I remember spending time with Eden and decided it would be good fun to teach her to greet her father by saying “Ola you’re a bugger”. I thought it was hilarious because we all loved to tease Ola about his hard—living ways and this expression was one my Mom used often. One day Camille came to me and asked my not to do it anymore. It bothered Ola deeply. Suddenly I realized what a silly stupid thing it had been. These people had taken me in, looked after me and THIS was the way I repaid them. Camille never tried to make me feel bad about it, but I always did. I loved the time I spent with them, and I especially loved Eden and spending time with her.

Eventually I moved out and found a place of my own to live but Camille was always there for me, like a safety net if I needed her. When Bill and I were getting married (eloping) Camille insisted on giving us a dinner for the family and friends who would be there. They stood up with us at the Church of the Atonement as we said our vows, 50 years ago this year. Both Camille and Ola have had a generosity of spirit that has accompanied them through life, and touched so many they have known. I don’t think I ever said thank you for all they did for me in those early years.

Ranleigh Avenue & The Cottage:

My next real memories of Camille take place in the house on Ranleigh Avenue. During the early years of my marriage I was very busy with kids, and I didn’t drive so the occasional



trip to Toronto came when I got on a bus in Lindsay and made my way to her place. It was like a respite for me, I always felt renewed after a visit with Camille. By this time Camille had returned to school and was completing her B.A - it was just another thing about her for

which I felt proud.

Camille and Ola owned a cottage in Huntsville near Ola's Mom and Dad. For special holiday weekends the whole family would go there and it was wonderful. I recall especially the touch football games in the back yard and the community meals. I always worked on breakfasts, with eggs and bacon and fried potatoes, toast, and lots of fried peppers. To this day, I absolutely love potluck meals and I firmly believe that women bond in the kitchen.

The Quilts

Camille has always been a quilter. If you really want to know who Camille is, I think you have to study her quilts. She is an artist in every sense of the word and every quilt she makes is a statement or perhaps a punctuation mark on who she is.

Some examples that come to mind:

There is a jacket and matching book bag she made (I think for all of her sisters) that I particularly love. The outside is an African print cotton with lions, and gazelles and other wild creatures on it. The inside of both items has a lining and on that lining Camille has sewn words of wisdom for us to consider: empathy, sympathy, compassion, curiosity, integrity, service, beauty, freedom, creativity, authenticity, and many more. I knew that Camille dipped into her own heart to find those words and those two items, from her heart are held in mine to this day. I would not part with them for anything.

Another quilt she gave to me is marked 220+2 of her favourite fabrics. It is a masterpiece of quilting, although over the years it has driven me crazy. I can see the 220 different fabrics but which ones are the +2? I need to know.

Over the years Camille has taught and lectured on quilting and written several books including *Birds and Bees*, *Starburst Mosaic*, *Celtic Geometric Quilts*, *Frogs and Flowers*, *Modular Magic*, and *Braid & Chevron Updated*. To say she is talented is a huge understatement.

Recent Years

Camille and I have not seen as much of one another in the last 20 or so years as we did when we were younger. I do not have the same intense memories of her as I do from my childhood and early adulthood.

For the last dozen or so winters Bill and I have wintered in Florida, and a few years ago Camille and Ola bought a Condo in Florida about an hours drive from where we were. We have managed to get together in Florida a few times, and last winter we had a wonderful visit with Camille and Ola and did some boating which was great fun for Ola, but not so much for Camille.



I'd noticed on the last couple of occasions when I was with Camille that she had lost so much weight and seemed a bit frail. That afternoon in St. Petersburg though, with perfect weather, a relaxed setting and a bit of time we had a chance to talk about a few more personal things, and especially her health. As we were saying goodbye, Camille put her hand to my cheek and brushed it with a smile on her face. "So beautiful" she said. I could see the love in her eyes and it moved me greatly.

Memories are bittersweet things. They make us sad and glad all at the same time. As I was writing this I thought about what I wanted to tell Camille that perhaps I hadn't said before and what came to me immediately was "Thank you" Thank you for all the things you've

done for me. Thank you for the support, for the caring. Thank you for being such an interesting person and introducing me to crafts, and EST, and some really revolutionary thinking. Thank you for enriching my life which you always have. Thank you for being you.

With deepest love,

Patti