

# Transforming trouble into lace

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**THELMA FAYLE**

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This article was published more than 14 years ago. Some information may no longer be current.

At 4:30 a.m., Mom stood on the street watching the 10-metre flames coming from the rented duplex she had lived in with her daughter and grandchildren for more than 20 years.

My sister whisked her away so that she didn't see two young men jump, with auras of fire, from the neighbouring window.

Later, the faces of two beautiful and accomplished women in their 20s who died were on the front page of the Victoria newspaper.

"At 87, I get to live and they don't," Mom said.

The marks of a thoughtful sadness appeared on my mother's face. Even her hands were awkwardly still as a quiet docility framed her.

I have watched those hands sew clothes, knit sweaters, crochet baby shawls, reupholster furniture, do crossword puzzles, make shepherd's pie, clean up after six kids and play some fierce Scrabble.

"She should go and see a critical incidence trauma counsellor," one of my siblings advised.

"We can't let her get depressed at her age," another offered.

All six adult kids expressed concern.

"Some of my kids think I need grief counselling," she told her doctor, "but I don't think

so."

The doctor reminded her it had been a tough year. "Your sister died, your brother in-law died, your daughter's 23-year marriage ended, your wonderful companionship has changed since Kaare broke his hip ... now you have lost your home in a fire and at the moment you are uncharacteristically chewing on your index finger." He knows her well.

"I am going to give you a prescription for some antidepressants," he said.

She was shocked that he saw fit to give her medication. Mom is proud of the fact that at 87, she doesn't take any medication. Never has.

Two days later, I talked her into getting out to play some bingo. "Your friends are going to be worried about where you are," I offered.

She laughed. "I never thought you would be encouraging me to go to bingo," she said.

Later, en route to bingo, I asked: "Did you take your medication this morning?"

"No. I took one pill yesterday and it kept me up half the night. I'm not taking any more," she said. "I don't need it."

She set her jaw in the position that says: I may be 5 feet tall but don't mess with me.

After 45 years of marriage to a difficult (read alcoholic) man, Mom learned late in life to draw boundaries. It would take a crowbar and 10 strong men to get that medication into her mouth.

Her medicine of choice is to use her head and heart and (finely tuned, precision) hands in concert to embroider dozens of exquisite Norwegian Hardanger lace angels.

Each angel is smaller than the average-sized woman's hand and takes three to four hours to make. Every completed one seems to ease her sadness from the losses of the fire.

Mom has experienced her share of grief, although you'd never know it by anything she has to say. She sees herself as one of the luckiest people alive.

After two-thirds of her stomach was removed during cancer surgery eight years ago, she was rolled out of the recovery room on a gurney. When the nurse said her family was

nearby, Mom, barely conscious, had the presence of mind to wave her two thumbs in the air.

At 70, she joined the local Sons of Norway organization and met a wonderful man, Kaare, whom she has "dated" for 17 years. They never lived together but they have danced, walked, talked and held each other's spirits.

Over the years, she took on new roles in the Sons of Norway. When the president recently asked her to welcome the Nigerian soccer team to Canada on behalf of the organization, my mother confided in me that she was nervous.

Her infrequent insecurity slays me. Every now and then, I see her become the child who lost her mother to cancer. She was the eldest daughter who had to leave school in Grade 6 to care for younger siblings. As a result, she has always been embarrassed about her lack of formal education.

When the athletes from Nigeria gave my mother a signed team jersey and shorts, my mother surprised the tall men by going into the washroom and putting on the outfit.

She stood on a chair to reach their height, and with arms around necks, the team had pictures taken with Mom as she cheered them on to win that night (they did).

A month after the fire, we played Scrabble on a picnic

table at the beach near the

university. We watched students attend an orientation

barbecue.

When Mom said she thought the kids were lucky to be able to go to university, I suggested she could take a course at the University of Victoria.

She looked at me as though I were daft.

"I wouldn't qualify to get in," she said.

I told her she could get in as a mature student, and with her attitude toward life and her "PhD in people skills," she would likely have a ball, make more friends and learn

wonderful things.

"We'll see," she said. I can tell she is thinking about it. This month, I will take her to an orientation session called University 101.

At 87, Thelma Fayle may have lost her home in a fire, but she is still full of spark.

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