

WHEN FREDDIE GARDNER PLAYED

MARY SHEEHAN, RN



My Life and Times in Aberdeen Hospital

School of Nursing 1951-1954



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Imagine a Cure.

*I plan to contribute a portion of proceeds from this book to the
Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada, in loving memory of:*

*Eddie Dillman, Antigonish; Bert Wood, Durham;
Sherry Gillespie, Stellarton; Gordie Campbell, New Glasgow;
Theresa Lawrence, New Glasgow*

*and other friends I so admired and encouraged as they, too,
through our local support group, valiantly battled brain tumours.*

From Year 1:

It was the afternoon of October 22, 1951 when Jeanne and I arrived at the Aberdeen Hospital School of Nursing. We struggled with our suitcases up the five wooden steps, rang the bell and tried to compose ourselves, stifling a shiver in the crisp autumn air.

“That dratted flat tire!” Jeanne whispered as the front door swung open. We were met by a tall lady resplendent in a crisp white uniform, with a dainty black-banded cap perched on her well-coiffed hair.

“You two must be Miss Aitcheson and Miss Foote,” she stated coldly. “You are 20 minutes late. I do hope tardiness is not your usual trait.”

Jeanne and I glanced at each other in dismay. We realized that an explanation was of no concern to this unfriendly woman. My journey to become a nurse could end before it began, all because of a nail on the road.

She pushed the door wider and glanced at her wristwatch. “Come in and meet the rest of your class – who managed to arrive promptly.”

We breathed a sigh of relief at being allowed inside, but grew timid as we entered a dingy living room replete with dark overstuffed furniture. The group, already seated, met us with curious stares. Jeanne and I exchanged glances again. Would this lack of congeniality be what we could expect for the next three years?

The Aberdeen Hospital School of Nursing in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia: a two-hour drive from home, and a world away.

I sighed and looked at the other girls, then at Jeanne. Jeanne and I had been friends since Grade 11 when I attended Tatamagouche High School, but I met my lifelong friend Sylvia Weatherbie when I was four and she was three. I was grateful to have Jeanne there, but found myself missing Sylvia terribly. I remembered how shy we were when we first met, and how we stood staring at each other as our mothers encouraged us to say hello. Then she offered to let

me hold her kitten and placed a tiny, soft, grey ball of fur in my arms. In such a trusting gesture, a true friendship was formed and we became inseparable. *Sylvia, Sylvia!* I would call, standing barefoot and tanned on the brow of the hill facing the Weatherbies, breathing in the scent of freshly-mown hay. She would soon appear and we would run to meet on the worn path between our homes.

I shifted in the stern grip of the matron's glance. Sylvia moved to Hamilton, Ontario a year ago and while we kept in touch, there was no freshly-mown hayfield or clear path to connect us now.

My gaze drifted back to the other girls, each solemn and quiet. What journeys and experiences brought them here? I thought about my own path in life that led me here, my daily travel from Bayhead, where we lived, to Tatamagouche to attend grade 11 in the village school. My father was section foreman with Canadian National Railways. Since the unpaved roads were impassable during the spring and fall, I travelled by railroad with my father on the gasoline-powered motor car. At the Creamery Road, I had to disembark and walk through the village. For a time, I boarded in the upstairs apartment at the Tatamagouche CNR Station with the Colburnes. Mr. Colburne was the telegrapher-station master, and my brother was taught how to send and receive messages by Morse Code. Later our family took over the Presbyterian Manse which was directly across the road from the school. Snooping in the manse attic, I discovered letters written by the former young minister to the love of his life. They were a great read, but experiencing an intense sense of guilt, I immediately returned them in their packet and tucked them back in their attic hideaway. I never shared my discovery with anyone.

After grade 11, I had an important decision to make. Since Tatamagouche Rural High was still under construction, I could either work for a year until the new school was ready or complete Grade 12 in Truro or New Glasgow. I was anxious to complete high school and had relatives in New Glasgow, so I opted to continue my schooling there. We found a boarding house on Albion Street with a dear lady,

Mrs. Carrie Smith. During my free time, I visited my relatives and became quite interested in a certain young man even though he was six years my senior. Doug was tall, slim, and handsome. We met frequently at Packy MacFarlane's convenience store, then would take long walks and go to movies where we cuddled, holding hands. My first gift from him was a sweet blue music box that played *Loreli*. However, there was one problem. Doug was a Roman Catholic and I had been raised as a stalwart Presbyterian. I realized this difference in religion would not go over well with my family, especially my father. Even my landlady Mrs. Smith was concerned, but our romance flourished. My schooling did as well: I became a New Glasgow High School graduate in 1950.

Sylvia moved to Ontario that year. I returned home to work for the summer and found a job at the local telephone office. A frequent caller was Dr. Dan Murray, who would report on his whereabouts and medical procedures if the fire department or ambulance service were needed. His office was on Main Street in Tatamagouche and he was our resident family doctor for years, but hearing him describe appendectomies, home births, setting of bones, even extracting of teeth fired my imagination. I found his descriptions and the medical jargon fascinating, and the world they represented began to call me. After a particularly busy night on the switchboard, I went home and told my parents of my dream to enter medical school.

My parents initially said little. Dad, seeking other wisdom, conferred with our minister, Rev. William Ogston-Issac, who promptly discounted the idea. *Does Mary not realize that this field is dominated by male students? Perhaps she should consider the nursing profession where she will meet fewer obstacles*, he told my father. "My cousin, Catherine Foote graduated from the Aberdeen Hospital in 1929, and is an outstanding model in the nursing profession," Dad offered to me in turn, sharing the minister's advice with a worried look. "If you finish nursing school and still want to go to medical school, we will find some way to help you fulfill your dream, but perhaps

for now nursing school would be best, knowing your sensitive nature.”

I was very disappointed, but I knew my father took our minister’s words seriously and had my best intentions at heart. There was also the issue of money. Medical school was very expensive compared to nursing school. My job with the telephone company would earn enough to pay for my uniforms, books and other expenses for the three-year nursing program. So, appeasing my father rather than my own personal ambition, I applied to nursing school for the following fall. I met up with Jeanne one day as I was prepared my application. After I told her of my plans, she thought a career in nursing might be a likely choice for her as well.

Which brought both Jeanne and I to stand in front of this fresh group of students, our first impression tarnished by our tardiness. The stern lady glanced at us again, then stepped in front of the group.

“My name is Miss Ross, Director of Nurses. I would like to welcome you to the Aberdeen,” she said briskly. “While you get acquainted, I will locate your instructors who will acquaint you with the rest of the residence.” With a rustle of starch, she marched through the short hallway and ascended the wooden stairs. We girls stared at each other for a few minutes longer, sizing one another up. Then we began introductions and quickly realized that we had all committed ourselves for the long haul in the face of much uncertainty.

From:

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