

FIRST-PRIZE WINNER

If Words Had Wings

Anne Mayhew grew up not knowing her father – until he came to life in the old collection of diaries she discovered decades after his death. Here, her grand-prize-winning entry in the Homemakers Reader Memoir Contest, is Anne's own story of coming to know her father as a young man.

TAKE ONE Who was he? Who was my father, the 27-year-old pilot whose plane went down in the Indian Ocean off Ceylon, on June 12, 1943? I was three-and-a-half years old, and my only memory of him was actually of a plane, a silver wing taking off in the sunlight from Patricia Bay, north of Victoria. My father was declared *lost* for ▶



ILLUSTRATION, JOSÉE BISAILLON

several years. I grew up waiting for the *lost* to be *found*. I used to imagine him walking down Musgrave Street looking for our home, and meeting me, and saying what a wonderful daughter I was.

Now I am about to open his diaries.

I only learned that the diaries existed after my mother's mind (her brilliant mind) and memory had become fragments of what they once were. My mother's friend Irene told me about the diaries. I found them in my mother's empty apartment after she had gone into a nursing home.

*There was a PS at the top:
“Got engaged (minus the
ring) to Elza at 2 a.m. this
morning.” They were 16.*

The eight identical red books were at the top of the bedroom cupboard, behind the box holding pieces of her exquisite wedding gown and 14-foot train, with satin roses, made by her mother, Lal.

I had been told that my father wrote a page a day for his entire adult life. Not for his entire adult life, it turned out. The last entry was on the day he proposed to my mother. Their engagement day.

Alan had come home to Victoria on the night boat from Vancouver to propose.

4 Saturday, June 1938.

Over to Elza's at 2:30 armed with the diamond just in case the moment should present itself. Found her lying on the lawn at the front of the house on a rug. Gorgeous hot sun – it struck me the diamond would sparkle like mad in the sunlight; it also struck me that with the hot sunshine warming her she could do nothing else but melt when I gave it to her. So I did, just as she lay there.

My daughter Rhondda, then 17, was with me when I found the diaries.

We read the final entry. Rhondda said, “Where was her house? Where was the lawn?”

We drove over to Lincoln Road, about four minutes away. I knew where it was. Just down the lane from the tall house with the rolled roof where I was later to grow up fatherless. We imagined the proposal.

My father's diaries were written in ink, a full page every day from Jan. 1, 1931, to June 4, 1938. Over 2,730 pages.

TAKE TWO For a few years after that dramatic finding, it was hands off the diaries. I knew I could only read them once for the first time, and I had to do it right. I had to enter my father's world at a time when I could do it properly.

But one evening, at random, I pulled out one of the diaries – 1933 – and opened it on Jan. 1. There was a PS at the top of the page: “Got engaged (minus the ring) to Elza at 2 a.m. this morning.” They were 16.

Still unsure if the moment was right, I turned on the computer to play a few hands of solitaire, but was pulled back to reading his diary instead.

3 Wednesday, January 1933.

Played solitaire. Went into town with Gus on the streetcar. Gage cashed a cheque for me so I was able to buy this year's diary....Dave gave me a lift home. Diary – solitaire.

TAKE THREE So I had fallen into it and there was no stopping.

My plan was to read a month at a time, taking notes as I went. I set up annual calendars – 1931 to 1938 – so I could make month-by-month précis of the diaries, in all 90 months. I included lengthy quotations from the diaries, plus my own thoughts as we went along. I jumped to see that I wrote “we.” I guess my father was with me. ►



Anne, age three, with her father, Flying Officer Charles Alan Mayhew, and their Norwegian elkhound, Christie.

I lived in two worlds at once; I belonged to two generations.

I went to “snappy” parties with my parents years before I was born (*snappy* was the in word). I mourned the death of my great-grandmother Gan, who left this planet long before I arrived on it.

I contacted dozens of relatives and friends who played and sang and wept and danced with my father through the pages of his journals. Their memories entered the notes in my journals. And I too wept and laughed and couldn’t stop talking about the father I was getting to know. I was exhilarated. On top of the world.

He was a heap of fun, my father. Up to no end of pranks at Craigdarroch Castle (when it housed Victoria College), and later at the University of British Columbia getting his B.Comm. by age 20. A relative, shocked by some indiscretion, said, “You won’t put that in!”

But all those fraternity boys raising we-all-know-what, most went off to war and never came back.

My father had been in love with my mother since they were both 14. They were born four days apart in the record snowstorm of 1916, Elza on Jan. 19, and my father, Jan. 23. There was a wonderful moment at Shawnigan Lake when Alan awoke to find Elza “planting cedar boughs around my head.” I cherish this image of my mother as a young woman in love.

My father’s writing over the years got better and better, more terse, funnier. He

was often self-critical, philosophical, full of anecdotes and dialogue. As early as 16 he was writing, “Walter F. isn’t getting as much out of his youth as he ought to. Not like I am and will!”

A madcap, yet a businessman beyond his age. His accounts of the meetings of the family company – personnel problems, tricky contracts regarding new roofing materials – were a total surprise to me. At age 22, he was playing a major role in a company.

Thus I came to know my father.

In the end, it took me seven years to read the diaries, as it took my father seven years to live them. In a sense, my persistence matched his. The diaries amassed some 750,000 words, and distilled from that, on my computer now are about 112,000 words.

Meeting my father in his journals connected me at last with his wit, his zest for life, his private seriousness. I didn’t know him as a loving, supportive, protective (and goodness knows I could have used that!) father. But I was allowed to know him as a sweet-natured teenager and courageous young adult. And I recognize that few people have the extraordinary opportunity that I have had to know their parent.

“I love a wind storm!” he wrote on Sept. 15, 1935, during one of the great west coast storms, trees uprooted up and down the street. “It gets in my blood. I can’t get enough of it. Let it come!”

His favourite song was “Stormy Weather.”

And his Catalina went down that day in the Indian Ocean in a hurricane. **lhm**



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