

ONE

It had been a difficult day at work — work being the Secretariat of the Order of Canada at Government House in Ottawa. So many letters to send out and each one had to be perfect. I was tired, my back and knees hurt, and I wanted to go home. Darkness had already fallen and the bleak autumn weather looked singularly uninviting.

“Miss Turpin, I need to see you in my office — right away!”

Was that really the Governor General barking at me over the intercom? What could possibly have upset him? His Excellency was usually such an easygoing individual — unfailingly polite and courteous. And why did he want to see me? My duties rarely brought me in contact with him. What had I done?

Panic and anxiety taking hold, I rushed up the stairs as fast as my poor knees would permit, searching my heart and mind for whatever could have earned Mr. Michener’s displeasure. While I loved my job, any mistake or seemingly harmless oversight could have disastrous consequences. A few years earlier I had inadvertently mixed up some letters from the Secretariat, offering an appointment as a Companion of the Order to an individual, when that letter should have gone to Dr. Gerhard Herzberg, a Nobel Prize winner. A gut feeling told me that this time the offence, whatever it was, was much more serious.

My timid knock on the door of Mr. Michener's study was greeted with a terse "Come in!" Entering, I was confronted with a grim-looking Governor-General, and, to my horror, my immediate supervisor, Roger Nantel; and the Secretary General of the Order, Esmond Butler — both of who were glaring at me in an unpleasant manner. No greeting or invitation to sit down.

"So this it," I reasoned. "Whatever I've done, it's beyond the pale and rather than give me another chance, they're going to fire me!"

Then I noticed a letter in His Excellency's hand — a letter that he seemed poised to read. The truth suddenly dawned on me.

"How silly! They're not going to fire me — that would be much too messy. They've drafted a letter of resignation for me to sign. Much more practical. No public embarrassment for anyone: just a short announcement, the appropriate goodbyes and dutiful gestures of appreciation for a job well done, and I'll be gone."

Despair flooded my soul as a visibly upset Mr. Michener said, "Miss Turpin, I have a letter to read to you," and before I could say anything, he began reading.

"Dear Miss Turpin,

"I am pleased to inform you that the Advisory Council of the Order of Canada has recommended to the Governor General that you be appointed a Member of the Order of Canada."

And then he stopped; his demeanour changing completely and his face breaking into a broad warm smile — the delightful smile that I was so familiar with. What was going on? This wasn't a letter of resignation; it was the standard letter that the Secretariat sent out to individuals who had been nominated to the Order of Canada, asking them if they would accept. I knew that letter — I had typed hundreds of them. But this one was addressed to me!

"I don't think I need to read you the rest of the letter, Miss Turpin. I'm sure you know it by heart." And then His Excellency rose and gave me a kiss, followed by Roger and Mr. Butler, who had similarly been transformed back into the kind, considerate souls that I knew them to be.

In a state of shock, I completely lost control of my emotions and burst into tears. Stepping back, I fell over the arm of a chair and landed on the floor in spectacular fashion with my legs in the air! After I had recovered and was comfortably seated, His Excellency offered his congratulations and questioned me as to whether I had any idea that I was to be appointed to the Order. He had gone to great lengths to keep it a secret and was delighted to know that the efforts were a success.

On April 3, 1974, His Excellency Jules Léger invested me as a Member of the Order of Canada. My citation read, “For her dedication throughout her service at Government House during the tenure of five Governors General.” As I sat among the other recipients — Canadians who had contributed to the betterment of our country in so many ways — I felt overwhelmed by emotions of joy and gratitude to be counted among them. And yet, sadness filled one corner of my heart — how I wished that my mother and father had been there to celebrate with me. Dear dad, who had loved me so unflinchingly as a child and had been taken from us much too soon, and my mother, who had become my dearest friend, but had died just five years earlier. “Somehow,” I prayed, “I hope that they can see their only child today and be proud of her.”

A story must have a beginning, and I suppose mine begins with my parents, as I never knew my grandparents or much about any ancestors. I start with my mother as she was a huge influence on me, especially as we remained close friends for most of my life. However, I don't know much about her early years — I'm not even sure when she was born! Her passport gives her full name as Constance Muriel Townson, born in 1887 — presumably that's the date she gave when she immigrated to Canada in 1913. But her birth certificate, which I found after her death, revealed that she was actually born in 1883 in Birmingham, England. Why the discrepancy? Maybe she wanted to hide her true age from my father, just as she did from me — I don't know. It seems out of character for her, but anything is possible.

When she was about seventeen, she began working as a nurse, caring for scarlet fever patients in an isolated building outside of Cheltenham,



Above: Nervous me, waiting to be invested. To my right in the front row are Mrs. Maryon Pearson and Mrs. Margaret Trudeau. To my left, the Honourable Ellen Fairclough, first female member of the Canadian Cabinet.



Below: At the reception after my investiture. Elizabeth McAdam (left), and Peggy Bryant help me celebrate!



Above: Governor General Jules Léger investing me as a Member of the Order of Canada. April 3, 1974.