

Family Matters: A Mother's Tale

by
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Remembering the lives and longings of early 20 century women in Michigan

She fell on her face. He did, too. Their photos, in dented silver frames, dominate the memorabilia in my bedroom. Mother, clutching her fur muff, stands alone on a snow-covered street, smiling but ever so slightly; my young father looks directly at me with a smile as sweet as pudding. They stand side by side. They greet me in the morning. They are prone to fall forward when I shut my dresser drawers. I can count on my parents' need to be uprighted daily. It is a ritual.

Photos are one way to resurrect family stories that were pivotal; they illustrate family matters of a purely personal nature. They become more precious as we become more fragile. I look at my wizard parents who lived out their long lives in a sweeter world and recall their stories, shared with candor, that demanded my full attention. Holding onto my mother's image, I listen.

"It was the most thrilling time of my life!" mother told me. "From 1915 to 1917. I was the principal of Cass City High School and taught Latin." Her posture exuded joy in the photograph, as if she owned that world of clapboard houses standing cheek-to-jowl and the bare-bones trees of winter. A stranger's footprints pressed into the snow-covered street where she stood.

Thrilling? I needed particulars to understand.

"What kind of fur were your hat and muff?" I had a practical side.

"Beaver," she answered. "My coat was a fine brown worsted. Mother liked me in blue because of my eyes, but I preferred brown." She smiled; the memory was sweet. "Look how the hem of my coat touched the tops of my boots. It never quite dried out during those winters," she said. Her smile was an invitation to ask more questions.

I hold onto my mother's photograph with reverence. Moments when she was young and in charge of her life came alive. My mother's memories were gifts tied up in ribbons of nostalgia which I eagerly untied. Blessed with a vivid imagination, I could always add to their contents.

Margaret Ordway was a young woman of remarkable intellect, integrity, and volatility. A Wells College graduate, she excelled in math, then an unacceptable field of study for women. She had to settle for her second loves, Latin and German, and taught both until she married in

1918.

The story of my miraculous birth was one of mother's favorites. She beamed recalling it. "You were born before the doctor could get to the hospital," she told me, her second daughter and alter ego. "I told your father it was time." I could hear her voice, brittle with urgency. We smiled.

"You nudged me," she confided. "You let me know it was time to be born!" *I liked the concept of being an integral part of her body. I liked the fact that I let her know it was time to leave her.*

"Brew her a cup of tea and get her back to bed," Dr. Kupper advised my father on the telephone.

"Cyril, this baby is coming." My mother's maternal instinct preempted fear; my father, once a farm boy, recognized the natural signs of birthing. Adroit and always alert to his wife's needs, he scooted out the back door, started up their Model A and collected mother at the front door. They drove through the dusk, steady in their relationship.

My parents accepted my urgency to be born. "You came into this world like a flash of lightning; you never caused me one scrap of pain. None whatsoever." My total identification with her was confirmed. The bonds with her own mother were a different legacy.

I press mother's likeness back into the confines of its oval frame and recall another one of her stories.

She said she'd cried every single day during her four years of college, homesick for her mother. This was strangely disturbing. I had felt so emancipated speeding south on The Green Diamond out of Chicago, free to light up a Lucky Strike and settle back in the coach car with my slim volume of Virginia Woolf. Liberated, ready to create and compete.

Mother had packed up her few belongings and boarded the train for Wells College, finally freed from the bondage to her mother. Free to live in the present for the first time. After college, she moved on to teach in Cass City, a small-town in Michigan. The time there living with the Chapins in their big house was extraordinary. Recalling it changed her persona.

"I made \$250 a year, and out of that I paid Dr. and Mrs. Chapin ten dollars a month for room and board." She laughed, her blue larkspur eyes full of mischief.

"It was far from luxurious! My bedroom was tiny, with a walnut chest to store my fold-up clothes and a small desk where I graded papers. There was one straight-back chair."

"I slept under one quilt, watching the seasons come and go from the one window. The big maple tree in winter had giant icicles; it became a silhouette that shimmered in the moonlight."

I could picture Mother in a long flannel nightgown, shivering under the thin quilt. "On

winter mornings, the water in my pitcher was coated with ice. It crackled when I filled up the wash bowl! Mrs. Chapin did not allow anyone to tamper with the heat. She was in charge, and I knew enough not to complain."

Eileen Chapin. Mother hesitated, reluctant to be judgmental. "She was a good housekeeper, a plain cook. You could say she was a plain woman. She did her best to be kind to me."

Mother's eyes sparkled. "The doctor and I made house calls on Saturdays and Sundays. How did his wife see that, the two of us - under a lap robe - trotting off?" She paused. "Those were good times," she said, smiling. My mother had a secret. Or two.

"What was Dr. Chapin like?" I always asked. I imagined Cary Grant with his cavalier smile, arms raised to help that beautiful young woman up to, then down from, the buggy. "You were really something, mother," I held up my treasured photo. Was I too curious?

"The doctor and I were a team, on a mission, saving people. One afternoon, we helped a woman deliver a precariously premature baby, then lanced an angry boil on a five-year old's rump. My hand steadied a patient as the doctor wrestled a shoulder blade back into place. We shared hours of ministry and it was good."

This is where romance seemed to emerge in the story. Did my mother, the young Miss Ordway, fall in love with this small-town doctor? He must have been smitten with her. Was there longing when their eyes connected? I visualize her in the buggy next to Dr. Chapin, her sweet face almost smothered in his scarf; beret pulled down to her eyebrows. Warm and almost complete. A young woman, like me. Was she bewildered, confused? Mother's stories did not help keep my innocence intact.

Mother continued, "I owned two blouses, we called them shirtwaists, and a wool cardigan that almost came to my knees. That was the extent of my wardrobe." I approved of her simple lifestyle. She had freed herself from Grandmother Ordway, escaped from that narrow-headed sprig of a woman.

"Your grandmother took me with her everywhere," mother often told me. "At funerals, I was told to stand still and keep absolutely quiet when the coffin was lowered. Our Methodist minister read prayers for the dead while we stood around the hole in the ground with heads bowed. The snow blew under my collar and the minister's words banged like coins dropped on a brass collection plate."

Mother always paused here, reliving those harsh childhood memories. Yet, when it came to being a wife and a trustworthy model for her own two daughters, mother was something of a disaster.

She had spells. Standing by her bedside after one of her rampages brought on by delicate nerves and God knows what else, I anguished at the promise she demanded. "Of course I will stay with you, mother!" I could never deny my love for the woman lying quietly, her hair spread across the pillow like a fan. The quiet after the storm was palpable and predictable. Mother

smiled up as if forgiving me rather than the other way around. Her face, pale as a pearl, shone with satisfaction. I stroked her forehead. To choose my mother this way, over my father, was painful. Yet father's first responsibility was to mother, no matter how furious she'd become.

By morning, our bowls of cereal would be on the breakfast table; things would be back to normal. Mother would sit at the head of the table wearing her paisley smock over one of her handknit cardigans. She was capable, caring, and in charge, not in the least bruised by her petit mal. She seemed unaware of her behavior the day before. We never talked about it.

I retrieve my father's photo which skidded off the dresser with mother's last night. Someone long ago tried to trim this photograph to fit the oval frame; a rim of red plush becomes a halo above his fine head. I tolerate that imperfection.

This precious photograph complements my mother's. Kindness radiates from his dark eyes. His expression is damn near beatific. His mother, Grandma Graasch, told my mother as a bride that he came to their marriage pure. A virgin at thirty-two? Quite possibly. Dedication to the demands of one's family came first. Boys were sent to work in the fields the minute their ten-year-old hands could hold a pitchfork. Farm chores took precedence over education and pleasure.

My father dropped out of school until his younger sisters caught up. He did not return to his education until they were launched as fulltime teachers. Once his family's finances were secure, the farm sold, and his parents comfortably settled in town, only then was Cyril Graasch free. He earned his Bachelor of Law Degree, University of Michigan Class of 1914, graduating summa cum laude.

I place my parents' photos next to my jewel box where they belong. Mother, mother, mother. That Mona Lisa smile. Was your life as Miss Ordway in Cass City more fulfilling than your life as a young mother in Battle Creek, Michigan, during the 1920s?

Mother, mother, mother, tall and confident on the snowbound street, smiling that enigmatic smile, what was it like to sit in the buggy next to Dr. John Chapin, your head on his shoulder, your knees touching? I can guess. The wind blew cold on your face, your hands warm inside the muff, your fingers locked together:

Here is the church, here is the steeple,
Open the doors, where are all the people?

You smiled. The doctor held the reins and leaned forward, headed for home. He smiled, too.

Oh, Mother. Remember how you once shared the pain and shock of what happened later? How your dream was crushed in a moment?

You spoke with clear eyes. "A summer storm ruptured any romantic notions I had with the

doctor. I shall never forget one August evening, I had gone to bed early when a thunderbolt growled across the sky and lightning flashed across my bedroom walls. I had a terrible thirst. Put on my bathrobe and slippers. Do you get the picture, Margaret Anne? Do you understand my state of mind? I ran down the hall toward the bathroom to get a glass of water.

The storm had blown the Chapin's bedroom door ajar. I stood transfixed. I was frozen in place, seeing two large bodies moving under the crazy quilt.

"I love you, Eileen. Of course, I love you. You are my wife, my helpmate," The doctor's voice was low, but I could hear every word. I turned away. I was an intruder, an uninvited guest. I filled a glass with water, hand shaking, and ran back to my room. Do you understand, daughter? This is the moment that my make-believe world turned upside down. This summer storm was my bridge to adulthood. It was time for me to grow up. Of course, he loved his wife Eileen. To have and to hold, the plain woman and frugal housekeeper."

Mother sighed. "And you know how well this turned out, how happy our family has been? How wonderful my life has been since that moment?"

Of course I knew. I was part of that story.

My own Dr. Chapin was a chemistry professor. He did not help me into a carriage or drive me around town. He did not admire me working at his side; we never shared a ministry of helping people. In fact, I was helping myself to romantic notions as if I were in Cass City.

It is not yet dawn; it is too early to begin another day. I lie under my down comforter and recall one stormy Christmas Day I endured years ago. I am in the train depot with my parents; my father is taking the *Twilight Ltd.* into Chicago. The train is running late because of a blizzard. Battle Creek's depot is a cold place in winter. Its cavernous waiting room reeks of snuffed-out cigars, fumed oak benches, and wet wool. The few passengers who stand or are seated here have nothing to say. I stamp my boots on the concrete floor to promote circulation. It is like coming into the warming house after ice skating; it is automatic, something to do. I remember the redcap, his face creased with pain, bent like a corkscrew over the clumsy baggage cart he maneuvers through the double doors and into the storm. Can he come to a stop short of the tracks? I worry about him. The waiting room is dimly lighted. Its walls are the color of an empty mustard pot. The ticket master behind the grillwork reminds me of a feeble, caged-in bird. I worry about him, too. His hollow words and the long-perforated ticket curls he dispenses turn into shadows. People wait patiently for the train to grumble its way through the dark. An air of expectancy hovers over everyone.

My father is wearing his nephew's hand-me-down winter coat. It is too small for him; his hands dangle from the too-short sleeves. I am embarrassed. Mother, with her enviable sense of style, is elegant in a fur-trimmed suit that's at least ten years old. She stands apart from the two of us. Quite unexpectedly, she closes in on me and whispers in my ear, "I think that's John Chapin over there - Dr. Chapin from Cass City,

remember?"

My heart thumps. What am I supposed to do about that? I look over mother's shoulder. Dr. Chapin, or his double, is tall, taller than my father by at least a head. He wears a camel hair topcoat, fedora, and carries an expensive briefcase. Everything about him spells wealth! Money! Exactly what we don't have at the moment. He seems to be traveling alone. What time is it? He checks his watch. That is when I decide he is Walter Pidgeon handsome. I stare at him. He smiles at me. Mother says something to my father, then nods to the man in question. I resent the doctor's obvious affluence as mother walks toward him. I watch the two of them shake hands and then embrace. I am dumbfounded. Walter Pidgeon looks over at my father who is busy rearranging papers in his shabby briefcase, impervious. His innocence gives me the right to fantasize.

If this stranger is Dr. Chapin, if he had been my mother's first lover, if things turned out the way they could have, if mean-spirited Eileen Chapin had conveniently fallen over dead while mother and the doctor were making house calls, what then? My mother and John Chapin would have been married in the wink of an eye. Dr. Chapin would be my father instead of Attorney Cyril Graasch. I would be an only child. I would be rich. My what-ifs multiply. Fantasy is and always has been my forte.

I size up the two men: John Chapin, M.D., affluent, successful, distinguished, and Cyril Graasch, short of funds, popular with poor clients, selfless. I loved my father at that moment more than I had ever loved him, despite the traitorous thoughts I allowed myself. I turned away from Mother's Cass City connection and relived the Christmas Day our family had just celebrated. How could I not?

It was still the Great Depression, and our Christmas tree was skinny. The presents under it were few, and the aura of the day was totally lacking in joy, or so I thought. My sister was immune to family angst; she was intent on meeting her high school steady to go goodness-knows-where right after dinner. I remember my disquietude when mother left me at the kitchen sink with a dishpan full of Lennox china ready to be rinsed. She charged upstairs without a word. I knew we were in for it. I heard her pacing in the hall. I found her in the spare room closet.

Ranting and raving in the dark, cold closet, battling coat hangers and summer dresses. For a little while my father, who tried to please all of us with gifts he could ill afford, remained in his living room chair behind yesterday's newspaper. I understood. I hated you then, mother of mine. I hated the sound of your fury.

How could I have known there had been a foreclosure on the Elm Street house where you brought us home as newborns? All I knew was that your lamentations on that Christmas Day ricocheted down the stairs and struck terror in me. How dare you weep on a day when magic was supposed to join hands with holiness? What had I done to provoke you?

That painful recollection is cut short . The Twilight, Ltd. thunders into the station, hissing

and cussing and braking to a stop. There is a hurried exodus from the depot, a shuffling and muttering among ticketed passengers. Mother waves my father off. He walks alongside Dr. Chapin, who has to lean down to make his words heard. Mother and I leave the depot, arm in arm. "Strange for those two to meet after all these years," her words are muffled in the snowflakes. I nod. She slides behind the steering wheel of our Ford V-8. We head for home. In silence.