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Storytelling on the Borders

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What is the last story you would tell? Scribe poised, pen in hand, questions open, cardboard-backed lined paper ready to go, clock ticking– what would you say?

The ticking clock was hers, not mine. I had time. I had asked before, but only in the scant week before her medically assisted death at 3:00 p.m., July fourth, did Mom want to talk about her life. For me to get it down. We spoke for just an hour each evening, or maybe a bit more to squeeze in a tale's ending. She tired so easily, and her words were cough-punctuated and whiskey-watered.

I came to think of our narrative cocktail hour as *Scotch and Stories*. Scotch for her, always and, on this occasion, for me too. Shepherding the dying, and dying itself, is ghostly, thirsty work. The stories were for me, upon my request, but told in her order. It was prescription of the highest rank. My mother was a reluctant storyteller. I was a willing recruit, desperate to learn even the littlest of the yet-unlearned lessons, hear even the tiniest fragment of a yet-unheard story. An ethnographer by trade and a literary stringsaver by heart, I knew the value of a good story, especially one gathered on the borders between two lands, two people, two eras.

My notes from *Scotch and Stories* began in bright blue pen, in an upright cursive, the rounded and childishly neat printing that belied my education and age, the letter "a" still bubbled just like the letters my favourite substitute teacher had written on the chalkboard in the third grade. Notes were made in point form, with lots of space in between, as if I might have time, as if there might *be* time later on, to fill in the blanks.

Time, like death itself, slanted in, and my handwriting became faster and more tilted as the days wore on. The ink in my first pen grew faint, and I borrowed a black one from her, the pen she used to complete crossword puzzles, then I needed another from the bottom of my purse a day later. Black and blue, back and forth, scribbles and splotches, arrows and margin shoots, faintly scrawled and deeply indented.

I began my notes for *Scotch and Stories* under one of my last, by no means my first, death-related "to do" lists. There are advantages to a medically assisted death. You get to make lists. Lots of lists. Seven days before her appointed hour, Mom wanted me to take note of the following before the endtime storytelling could begin:

- Insure the mortar and pestle separately. Grandma said it's 16th century Aztec. (It isn't.)
- Post a message on her Facebook site saying she's passed away (after the fact). Then take the site down.
- Add Netflix, World Vision, and the house insurance to the (other) "to cancel" list.
- Call Jackie and ask if the gardening group wants any of her tools.

- Make sure her death is quiet, low key, and relatively private.
- No "ocean sunset-themed cardboard scatter tube" from the funeral home for her ashes. Use the blue and white jar from the thrift store as the urn, the big one in her bedroom. Wash first. Probably covered in dog fur.
- Scatter her ashes in the Tsolum River, where the fawn lilies grow, behind the Exhibition Grounds.

Mom started young and ended old in her telling. Day by day, we moved from her childhood in Calgary and the rural areas around it, to her university days in Montana, to her life as a young mother and wife of a PhD student in St. Louis, to the decades in Ontario where our little family finally put down roots and tried farming and philosophy.

She forgot to talk about the week-long, post-divorce road trip from Ontario back to Alberta that she, my sister, and I made (with two cats and no car radio). Perhaps she knew I'd never forget that westward resettlement, complete with its soundtrack of yowling cats and singalong folk songs. She only said that the scent of pine needles had called her back home, back West.

Mom spoke of her delayed, but successful, career at the University of Calgary as a teacher and administrator, and her much-wished-for retirement to the West Coast, to a small house three blocks from my own, where she could, finally, wear sensible shoes, grow a garden, and walk her dogs.

There we sat, in that little bungalow, sipping scotch, a grey-muzzled pre-rehomed cocker spaniel beside Mom, and me across the living room, in a red leather chair she loved. On a small table to my left was a line of used pens and a coiled notebook scrawled with the narrative entirety of my mother's legacy. She had storied us all the way to the present day, and it was finished. Or so I thought.

On July third, the last full day, Mom circled back beyond her own memories to an old family story from over one hundred years ago, when her grandparents made the long journey from Danville, Québec to the western frontier, and settled on a windswept ridge just outside of High River, Alberta.

My record of Mom's last story, placed so precariously on the edge of time, is wrought in faint black, the words slanting down, down, down, barely contained in the proper lines. Pages of dashes, messy crowding, shortened words, unjoined letters, crossed out kinship references and place names. I had to get it down. Get it right.

Mom ended *Scotch and Stories* with a fully familiar, hauntingly tragic, and well-established piece of our settler family history. It's the story of a frontier medical mistake, with deeply-rooted identity implications and lasting resonance.

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When my great-grandparents, Fred and Lillian McKeague, first arrived from out East, they homesteaded on Gladys Ridge, south of Calgary. They started married life in a little sod hut, but, as their story goes, with ranching cattle, building fences,

good luck, and good relations with the neighbouring Blackfoot people, my settler ancestors did just fine. Except for when it came to children, doctoring, and God.

It was shortly after the Great Blizzard of 1906, which had decimated the herds across the Prairies. My great-grandmother Lillian was pregnant with her first child, and the doctor had stopped by during his usual horse and buggy rounds to see her. He left a short list of written instructions (I've always wondered what that list said), colic medicine for the baby, and a bottle of morphine for Lillian, in case it was needed. The medical practice at the time was to find a local woman or midwife to be with the new mother during the birth. When Lillian went into labour, the midwife was unavailable, so a daughter from the neighbouring farm was sent to help. She was entirely inexperienced and very young.

The baby boy, whom they named Frederick after his father, was born healthy, but lived for only a few days. For some lost reason, the neighbour girl gave the morphine to the baby, instead of the medicine for colic, and killed him. No one blames anything but youth, inexperience, and the wild edges of frontier life.

Lillian and Fred were distraught because their baby had died, but their grief was compounded by the fact that he had died without being christened. They belonged to, as Mom called it, "an upper-class kind of Anglicanism," which their ancestors had transplanted from the British Isles. When my great-grandparents walked into their little church on Gladys Ridge, bearing their swaddled,

poisoned infant, their priest told them, (in words Mom had remembered), "Well, of course the baby won't go to heaven. He hasn't been blessed." Not only was the destination of little Frederick's soul in question, but he could not be buried in consecrated ground. The priest offered no posthumous options to spiritually fix this mortal medical mistake. Frontier life had a harsh reckoning for all. Lillian and Fred were so incensed that they stormed out, still clutching their first child, cold and unbaptized, and never set foot inside the Anglican church again.

Bereaved and displaced, my great grandparents left the homestead, moved a short distance west to the growing town of High River, and began life again in a small bungalow they ordered from the Sears and Roebucks catalogue for CND $710. Their little house arrived by rail, sealed with red wax, complete with its own list of assembly instructions. Re-rooted, my great-grandparents joined the local United Church, and found faith and belonging there. Nine years later, to the exact day of baby Frederick's death, my grandfather was born.

It was only recently that my aunt found the baby's final resting place. His is a lonely and windworn grave, embraced by a line of cottonwood trees where perhaps a fence used to be. He was buried, ultimately—although this story *is* a blank page—across the street from the High River Anglican Church, snuggled up against the borderlands from which his wee self, body and soul, was cast out. There are no surrounding graves.

* * *

My mother's storytelling ends here. The unused portion of my coil notebook is silent, barren, tracked with the deeply indented and ghostly footprints of all that crossed geography, all that backing and forthing across distance and time.

What to do with this narrative legacy? Why was Mom's final story that of a medical mistake so many generations back? She offered no explanation. *Scotch and Stories* simply ended with the harrowing vignette of Lillian and Fred, their poor baby boy, the villain priest, and the bald fact of their churchly exodus. I have parsed the meaning of it all, to the letter, to the breath. Was Mom warning me against the Church? Or against faith? Against trusting frontier medicine? Or frontier preachers? Or offering a justification for her rebellious, "turn heel" kind of attitude?

Traced along kinship lines, faith initially appeared to be watered down with each generation. My great-grandparents' churchly swap out was a lateral, aching, searching step, danced on a harsh frontier in a time of grave personal grief and profound communal need. They raised their living children in the United Church, and my grandfather did the same, until a new preacher came to town, and his word was too fiery for my grandparents. Faith, in my family, became unsettled once more.

By the time my mom was a teenager, she and her younger siblings were allowed to make a choice about their Sunday mornings. They could either spend weekends at the little cabin west of Calgary, with Saturday nights at the old, round dance hall, and Sundays riding horses, or they

could pack up the car and drive back into town late Saturday afternoon in time to go to church on Sunday. For a young woman, it was no choice all. The wildness of the West on the edges of Calgary pulled deeper than any preacher ever could, and Mom found all the blessing she sought on horseback, with the tall grasses brushing her knees, and the warm Alberta sun on her back.

By the time I was born, there was no baptism, no church on Sunday mornings for my mother's daughters. God was in the fawn lilies, on the ridges, in the community square dances, in the glory of riding your horse through the woods and then coming up over a rise—and in the smell of sun on the pine needles calling you home.

Final sign post(it)s

After all my death "to do" lists and my thirsting *Scotch and Stories*, came my swirl of yellow sticky notes, scrawled in those same fading pens over the same last week. I would walk the three blocks home, and between the calling and the organizing, the listing and the weeping, I dashed out some final remembered phrases. In searching for adhesions and attachments after the fact, I see that some of Mom's last words belong grafted onto those final, blank, hauntingly quiet pages. I realize that she entrusted me with a gentle, grounded gospel, both generational in its gestation time, and generative in its prescriptive intent.

Inscribed in this faded flurry, I found a small, life-affirming, death-rattled blessing and it is this: "I've lived on this earth. I'm grateful for the beauty I have seen, the family I have had, the music I

have heard. These are no great things, just an ordinary life, coming to the end of its season. Now I'm going back to that soil so that other things can live."

What she bequeathed to me was not a faith diluted, as I originally imagined, but a faith fully rooted. Not just a story of loss, leaving, and rejection, but a story of finding, transplantation, and home. A story of faith, even on the edges.

Some of what Mom told me during *Scotch and Stories* was new to me, but the old dead-newborn story was mother's milk, a cautionary tale I'd heard all my life. What I had *not* yet heard, not yet fully incarnated, were the generational identity implications of this medical mistake, of this shearing, tragic, ancient accident. Faith survives on paper-fine edges, where death is deeply imprinted, and ghosts, both ancestral and unborn, inhabit the borderlands.

About the Author

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