

Gulf Stream

This was to be about my Scottish grandfather, but then my mother walked quietly into the foreground.

I remember James Dedman, the only one of my four grandparents whom I met. Mother took me to visit when I was five, in 1938. He was living in Wigtown, on the southwest coast of Scotland, with his second wife Agnes, and his twenty-two-year-old daughter from his second marriage, Vee.

Vee wanted to paint my toenails. Thin and erect, she had bleached hair, ivory skin, shrieking red lipstick, and a shrill laugh.

We stayed several days, maybe even a week. About my grandfather I remember three things. First, he took short naps in his armchair, which he called “forty winks.” And, he took pleasure in his garden, showing it off to Mother. He’d espaliered a pear tree against the wall behind the house. Mother, ever the teacher, used a map to explain to me that the Gulf Stream keeps the coast of southwest Scotland warmer than the interior, so plants can grow in Wigtown that would die of cold if they were inland.

I hear today the comfortable burrs in her voice as she tells me, “The wall holds and reflects back the warmth of the sun, and the pear tree thrives.”

My third memory is sweet: Grandfather held me on his lap and I leaned against his sturdy body, a brand-new experience for me. Inhaling his faint tobacco fragrance, a little musty and mixed with heather, I felt delicious security seep warmth right into my toes. You could get lost in his voice, its intonations different from my American ones, its hints of shared humor. One often hears of furtive groping in such moments, but leaning against my grandfather was not like that. His affection wasn’t complicated. He’d hide a penny in his beard and encourage me to look for it. I felt supremely cherished.

About his life story I know little, but it's clear that he held a teaching credential, since he was the schoolmaster of the small Scottish town where he lived. I have records indicating my grandfather's school was duly and regularly visited by inspectors sent by the Scottish public education system. His salary was very low, and Mother told me it often happened during her childhood that when they opened the door in the morning, they would find a fresh chicken, a bowl of eggs, maybe a bag of oats, on the threshold.

A few hours before the time of our departure from my grandfather's home, Agnes broke down in tears. It was the first time in my life I'd seen an adult cry. Did she weep because she knew Mother held her in low esteem? Or maybe because of the clearly impending war, their knowing it was unlikely they'd ever see us again? Or, perhaps my grandfather's health was known to be failing.

I could sense Mother's annoyance at her behavior. With dry eyes she quietly told her father goodbye, knowing it was probably forever. Only twice did I ever see my mother shed a tear, and each time, it was only one tear. This was not one of the times.

Six months later, one evening back in Wisconsin, she asked me, "Do you remember hiding pennies in your grandfather's beard on our trip last spring?"

"Yes, I remember. That was fun!"

"Well, your grandfather died last week." She told me this calmly, so I had no inkling what her feelings might be, and she never said more about it.

Only once, when I was working with her on a sewing project in my mid-teens, did my mother talk with me about her father's remarriage. She told me that after my grandmother's death her younger sister hadn't been well cared for, and the three older siblings had to intervene to ensure their sister had a room of her own, adequate dental care, and, when she reached eighteen, tuition to nursing school in Glasgow.

It certainly appears from the few facts I have that James lacked the strength to stand up to his second wife. Was his need for a woman so overwhelming? Was Agnes, the second wife, a conniving minx, or perhaps very insecure, so that she needed to make him follow her commands? Maybe she felt inferior to her schoolmaster husband? Did she and her sister, plus Vee, overpower my grandfather, the lone man, in household discussions?

Mother took me to visit him as I've described, but she wasn't cordial with him. She was never a holder of grudges, but there was a sadness she carried with her, something unreconciled, unspoken, a cold spot somewhere at the very back of her heart, even in her happiest times, of which, I'm glad to say, there were many.

Sometimes I wonder, can the Gulf Stream ever reach and warm the interior? Or do we all carry a small sub-zero area within, a tiny piece of ice, not to be thawed, unreachable?