Pass it Down

Poppy was one of sixteen children and when he was small they often had a slice of bread and raw tea for supper. They were very happy when they had a little sugar or molasses. He told us about this when we were children but he didn't want to scare us. It was said reverently, as if he could not believe what he was seeing in front of his eyes. Because, you see, he bought us Mary Brown's Fried Chicken every second Friday. And he paid for it himself, out of his pension check. And he cleaned the bones so well that they were shiny and off-white and he cleaned all of ours off too, and said that we didn't know how to eat chicken, because we left the skin on our plates.

Poppy only went to school a couple of times. The teacher chased him off because he couldn't learn. He kept hiding under her desk where he tied and untied her boot-laces.

When he was nine he went to work in the lumber camps. He and his brother, with a bucksaw, cutting six cords of wood a week. And they walked home on Sundays to see their family in Conche and have a meal with them, eleven miles each way.

In the lumber woods they took their outer clothes off and hung it around the fire to dry at night but it never really dried because there was so much clothes piled up together. Sometimes they put it on again in the morning frozen. They slept in narrow, stacked bunks lined with cut boughs with a rough woolen blanket. These children were skinny, nymph-like, with big, elfin ears and hungry eyes. Even when he was eighty years old and eating Mary Brown's Poppy was short and thin, and his ears and nose were always big and nebulous, as if they were waiting for a more substantial body.

When I was little he walked to the bus stop after school every day to pick me up on my little red sled. He called me his little papoose and he hugged me and let me sit on his lap. Once he drew pictures of fishing nets and knots on my little blackboard and I tried really hard to pay attention because I knew it was special but one of my brothers erased it after and I never did learn any of it. I just have a memory of

him drawing and talking, his head enveloped in a cloud of smoke from his cigarette. I used to hang off of his biceps while he would make a muscle. This was when he was still fishing.

When Poppy was nineteen, one of his brothers died of tuberculosis in the St. Anthony hospital, and he and his father and some of his other brothers and friends went by dog team to pick up the body. It took them three days to get there (fair weather), but much longer to get back. You see, on the way back there was a big storm, or a series of storms, and they struggled to make headway against the swirling snow and wind. They were making their way around the coastline of northern Newfoundland and it was wintertime, the dead of winter. They had the body of his brother on a sled, along with some supplies, and the men were walking, always with someone breaking the way for the lead dog. It was so bad that someone was ahead of the dog all the time with a lantern, trying to break the way, and one evening about five days in it was Poppy.

He said the dogs sensed that something was wrong, that they were hanging back. He said that he kept going and pulling them and one of his brothers on the sled kept pushing, flailing the whip and urging. And then he fell through the ice. He said it was so cold he couldn't feel it. It was so cold he thought he was fine. He put his arm through the harness of the lead dog and she was looking right into his eyes. She was a good dog and she did not break his gaze. He said he did not get a good hold on her and when they backed her up, his arm just slid out of the harness. He reached up again, and the dog came forward again, and he put his arm through, again. And, again, when they backed her up his arm slipped through. (In hindsight, he was too cold to grip with his fingers). The third time, he twirled his arm so that the leather of the harness made a big S around his forearm and the dog pulled him out, and he lay like a dazed seal on the ice.

Some of the men wanted to make a fire. Some of the men wanted to keep him walking. He lay there, steam rising from his clothes. This is the last thing he remembered.

Turns out, they made him run five miles next to the sled. They held his arms and ran with him until they came to the cabin of an old widow on a point. They knew that this would be there and so it seemed to be the safest plan. And the widow was there, and the place was warm, so there was a fire, and certainly the glow from at least one glass window was leaching out towards the interminable darkness of northern White Bay in winter.

And when they got there, his boots were frozen to his legs. There were two inches of ice between his skin and the sealskin of his boots. He lay in bed for a month, and he said that whenever someone ran a cloth down his leg, water ran out his pores and dripped to the bedclothes. In his old age, he attributed his bad legs to this early freezing.

One year when Poppy was a child the hunger got so bad that by springtime his father was desperate and he robbed the merchant's store in the dead of night to get food to feed the children. This was in the early thirties and during the Great Depression, but Poppy never called it that. Surely that worldwide economic nightmare must have had its effect on their tiny community but is it possible that most people there did not know it was happening? It wasn't much different from any other time, really, just a little tighter and leaner.

To commit a crime such as robbery was unthinkable. I only heard the story once and it was told uneasily and furtively and I feel like I am deceiving his memory by telling it now, as though the merchant may find out and come to exact his revenge on my Poppy's long dead father. It seems to me that some people in the harbor knew who had stolen the flour and molasses but perhaps they all were tired of owing their lives to the merchants. Or maybe they did not know at all.

After school on cold winter evenings when my brothers and I were children, Poppy would make a cup of tea and we would all have a game of 120s. He was gravely competitive and would slam down the 5, jack or ace of hearts with a sharp bang of his knuckle on the wooden kitchen table. This was meant to intimidate his opponents and it usually worked. He always outbid us and cheated, too, saying

“I did not bid on spades, hearts is trump.” This was usually after he saw that there were hearts in the kitty.

We never argued with him because we knew from stories that if he felt people believed he was cheating he would heave the pack of cards in the woodstove, box and all. We didn’t care who won and just wanted to play with him and squabbled about who would get to keep score. He never kept score on the paper because he couldn’t read or write, but he was great with numbers and always knew the count anyway. Sometimes we would play cards on Sundays and my great-grandmother, who also lived in our family home, would mutter worriedly about playing cards on the Lord’s day. You see, she was Protestant and he was Catholic and for years it seemed to me that playing cards or not playing cards on the Lord’s day was the only difference between the two.

But before the game of cards, the first thing would be to put the dog out. When we came home Poppy would holler, “Shitlegs wants to go out again.” This was what he called the dog. He would shake his head and mutter, “Shitlegs” towards the dog as if he was a useless creature. But when we walked into the room unannounced we often surprised him patting Midnight fondly as he lay on the floor by his feet.

These two old people who lived in our childhood home, Poppy Flynn and Nanny Penny, were not our blood relatives. Poppy married my mother’s mother, Mary, when my mother was nine. Mom was the youngest of nine children and her father, Jack, died of leukemia when she was six. Everyone called my grandmother Mame, and she was a good bit older than Poppy at the time, but it seems to me that they were happy and that it was a good arrangement for everyone. He treated the children who were still at home as if they were his own and, because he was fishing and doing relatively well at it, they had enough to eat and wear and were warm and happy.

Mame was a midwife and she was composed in all situations. One time she calmly put my Aunt Mary’s eyeball back in after it popped out on her cheek during a sliding accident. Another time she

delivered twins to a poor lady who had only one set of baby clothes, and then came home in the wee hours of the morning and sat right down at her sewing machine to whip up some more sleepers and blankets out of her own precious stock of soft cotton. And while nursing her own children, she sometimes nursed the babies of other mothers who were unable to do so. She did this while carding and spinning the wool from her sheep to knit sweaters and socks and mittens, and milking the cow, and baking the bread and tending the garden and cooking all the meals for everyone, with no electricity or indoor plumbing.

I tried to channel Mame's breed of practical tranquility during the births of my own three children but my softer up-bringing got the better of me and I regret to stay I was not that calm. Thankfully my own mother was able to harness her type of strength then.

(Nanny Penny married my father's grandfather when his wife died after the birth of their first child, Alma, my father's mother. Nanny raised Alma as her own child and loved her dearly and never had any children of her own. It was another positive arrangement that ensured everyone's security and survival.)

Years after our blood-link to these glad marriages had ended through the deaths of their spouses, these two elderly people were in our childhood home every day. They unwittingly amped us up with cups of tea and instant coffee, and complained loudly when our squealing made their hearing aids go haywire. They let us pour in as much carnation as we liked, and we loaded it up with the sugar, too, and smeared our lemon creams with butter and dipped them into the tea, which soon became spotted with grease. Nanny, who was quite refined in her ways, always gave us a saucer and we would pour the sweet, milky liquid into it and lap it up like cats.

Up until the last year or two of his life Poppy spent his summers at home in Conche, in his little two-story house by the sea. This was not the house that my mother had spent most of her youth in and

which he had built himself. This was a house he bought later, as he got older and wanted to be closer to the center of the community.

The back side of his house looks over the gorgeous harbor but he always sat in the front of the house. He sat at the kitchen table and looked out the window which faced the post office and general store, so he could watch the comings and goings of the people in town. When I was there visiting, often with a friend or my husband-to-be as I got a little older, he would keep us entertained with a running commentary about each customer who parked and went into the shop.

"Just watch," Poppy would say gleefully as some heavy-set lady would attempt to get into her car. "See how much that side went down when she got in?" He would shake his head ruefully. "Twice a day she comes down here, every time for a bag of bars and chips."

But he always had some jam-jams on hand for us and loved to give us treats, and never once commented if we ate too much, which we often did in Conche. We would eat piles of toast with Aunt Bea's squashberry jelly while drinking copious amounts of tea. From the time we arrived in Conche in summertime there would be a steady stream of visitors bearing gifts of fresh seafood. And these gifts were extended in such a humble manner that there was no awkward ceremony, only an amorphous sense of communion that comes from the sharing of the most wholesome of foods.

Our hikes along the jigsaw-puzzle coastline near the community of Conche were of little consequence to Poppy. While we were ascending jagged cliffs and scavenging the beaches and staring in wonderment at the deep blue-gray of the ocean and the profound greens of the forest behind, he was wondering what the hell we were wasting our time for. When my husband and I came back from the beach one day proudly bearing a bucket of mussels he made us put it immediately in the shed.

Truth is, Poppy always had a lot of people coming and going at his house in Conche and they would chat and have a drink and sometimes have a game of cards, in the evening anyway. Poppy always kept a bottle of rum on hand and he nipped from it daily in stealthy little trips to the cupboard by the

sink, where he would pour a small shot into a little juice glass. Upon meeting any adult male for the first time he would offer him a drink, and it was always wise not to refuse. I watched nervously the first time I introduced my fiancé to Poppy, as it was about eleven o'clock in the morning and I was not sure if he would accept this drink of rum. But he did, and he immediately became Poppy's good buddy.

My friends and I loved to sit and listen as Poppy conversed with his friends and relatives, who were not our relatives. We learned of beloved little children who had long since been lost to drownings or mishaps or undiagnosed diseases, sealing trips that resulted in the shooting of polar bears, and the sundry local names for dolphins, although the only ones I can remember are puffpigs and squidhounds. Their talk of the fishery was mysterious to those of us who did not grow up in fishing communities, and I always felt a shot of pride when Poppy would snort with indignation and say "Do they think the fish don't swim?" This was a statement which belied his consternation about the geography of the cod moratorium. It was so simple a comment and yet so true, and all gathered round the table would have to nod and agree.

We threw Poppy a party on his eightieth birthday at his house in Conche. It was a lovely warm July evening and the drinks were flowing and some of the men were playing guitar and singing and he looked so happy, tapping his hand and nodding his head and singing along to all of his old favourites. Mom and Aunt Bea and some of their friends and Poppy's sisters were there bustling around a turkey and salads and tarts and a cake, and it was a real good time, with people dancing eventually and one of my uncles falling into the bathtub. And I taped a lot of it, though it saddens me to watch it now, except for the part where old Mr. Wiseman was telling dirty jokes to me and Dad, and it is so funny because it really was quite awkward for both of us, given the company, although Mr. Wiseman didn't notice or care.

I love to tell my children stories about Poppy. I tell them the stories he told us over and over again, down by the woodstove on long winter afternoons between hands of cards or episodes of his

favourite soap operas. I think they feel like they knew him. "Oh, Poppy Flynn," they say, as if remembering. And he did know my oldest child, and he rocked him in his bassinet while I snuck off in my new-mother haze to get a few minutes peace in the kitchen or the washroom.

And I tell them the stories but the details do not always come or they are fuzzy, and I falter because the essence is not there. I cannot infuse Poppy into the telling the way my brothers, when conversation has waned after a few drinks, can summon his presence by grinning at each other and saying, "Yeeee" in his long, drawn-out, gruff way.

When that happens he is in the room, and the chair by the woodstove still bears his weight, and the telling of stories, for once, requires almost no effort at all.