

Not Quite Closed

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“Eliza, to this day I can’t believe what I did. However, you asked me how I met your Grandpa, so I’ll tell you. No one has heard this story. I always told a different one. You are old enough to know now; you are thirteen. I absolutely, truly expect that what I’m going to tell you mustn’t ever pass your lips.”

“My lips are sealed! Grammy, is that why Gramps laughed so hard when you told the story?”

“Yes, it was. Your Grandpa John made me so mad when he did that! I couldn’t tell the real story to anyone. Never, ever! He was such a scoundrel!”

Grammy Constanza was 87 years old when she told me her long-kept secret. Short and thin, she walked about with certainty. Her age never showed in the way she moved. Long gray hair with fine strands of black was pulled back from her face and clasped in a big bun on the back with a wide gold-rimmed tortoise shell comb. She was smiles and laughter, with big crinkles at the corners of her eyes and mouth, her hair bun bobbing up and down. She had blue eyes astride her longish thin nose. How they twinkled when she talked about Gramps.

Sitting on the green garden bench, she smoothed her full dress and apron and motioned me next to her.

“It was 1925. I had moved to Milwaukee looking for a job. What kind of work could a twenty-year old farm girl find? My parents hadn’t wanted me to leave. They said

the city was not a good place for a girl. We had little money and they needed help. I was the oldest of four girls; there were no brothers, so that was that.

“I got a job in a shirt factory. The pay wasn’t much, but there was a nice inexpensive boarding house nearby. Young men and women, mostly factory workers, but some teachers also, lived there.

“It was a big old, three-story house, split down the middle, with a front porch entrance for men on one side and women on the other. It wasn’t like today, Eliza, what with the things your older sisters and brothers do, really! Things were proper then.”

“Well, I’ll be proper, Grammy. I want to be just like you!”

“Just like me? Ha! We’ll see!”

“Mrs. Cornell, was that her name? Yes. She lived on the women’s side on the first floor and watched over us. She shared her side with two families who kept to themselves. We lived on the second and third floors.

“A big dining room was on the other side of the first floor, below the men’s rooms. We gathered at long tables to eat breakfast and supper. Mrs. Cornell was at each meal, ‘watching her children,’ we said.”

“What about Gramps?”

“Yes, yes! I’ll get to your Grandpa. Humph, what a rascal!”

“There were common bathrooms on the second and third floors, located between the men’s and the women’s sides, with a door on each side. To use a bathroom, you first knocked loudly. If no one answered and the door wasn’t locked, you went in and

locked both doors. You had to be careful, a man forgot to lock the women's side door and fell asleep in the tub one night. What a commotion!"

"That must have been so funny!"

"Now, one day before supper there was a big buzz on the women's side of the boarding house. Such a lot of talk was going on!

'Did you see the new fellow?' one girl asked.

'Yes, he just moved in,' someone said. 'I saw him bring in his bags. He is so handsome!'

"What did you think of him Grammy?"

"I'll get to that, young lady. There's more to tell, stop interrupting!

Sally MacDougall found out his name was John Dorian, from Rochester, New York. He was a history teacher at the high school."

"That's Gramps!"

"Yes, that night was the first time I saw your Grandpa. Everyone was gathering at the tables for supper. Mrs. Cornell's cook, Martha, was bringing in the food. Such cooking! No other boarding house had food like this. For that reason the rooms were usually full.

"There were big platters of roast beef, with green beans, squash, baked apple rings with brown sugar and cinnamon on top, mashed potatoes, the richest gravy you can imagine and big baskets of hot yeasty rolls. Moreover, the desserts, My, My!

“I sat down in my usual place and the room filled with hungry workers and teachers. A low murmur began among the women. John walked in, looked about and sat down, not quite across from me, but one seat to the left. His dark fierce black eyes glanced at me from beneath protruding bushy black eyebrows; then he looked away. I could hardly eat; I understood the buzzing.

“How many of us young women didn’t go back to our rooms that night and dream about him? I certainly did! You have seen his pictures; you know what I mean. He was so tall, with an assured and even pace. Even the men reacted to his presence.”

“What did he look like, Grammy.”

“His face was a angular, with tight skin and high cheekbones. On it was a very kind and friendly expression. He had broad shoulders and strong and sinewy hands.

“As he reached for the platter of roast beef, he caught me watching and smiled. I about slid under the table.

“Eliza, it was the eyes. They were so black, as dark as the shiny ringleted hair that framed his face. When he looked at me, they did not waver; they were the fiercest, most dangerous eyes I could have imagined. I couldn’t look at him, but for quick glances, as I ate or asked for a bowl of beans or squash.

“Then he rose, excused himself and departed. How long I sat there and chewed on my mashed potatoes, I don’t know. You don’t chew mashed potatoes, but I was in a trance.”

“Grammy, I think you were in love!”

“Well, maybe not right away, but I sure was flustered when he looked at me. Now where was I?”

“Oh, Yes. Boarding house life continued with little change, except at suppertime. There was almost a stampede each night as the girls tried to anticipate where John would sit, to sit next to him. They made absolute fools of themselves, but he seemed not to mind. He talked to them like he had known them all his life. He even entranced Mrs. Cornell and Martha. They gave him so many little food treats that I wondered how he stayed so trim.

“He played tricks on the other guys as we ate. They gave it right back to him with a lot of laughter. The dining room was never the same.

“One day I came home exhausted. Something had gone wrong with the sewing machine I used. It was so out of alignment that it would grab the material and run away with it, stitching haphazardly here, then there. I spent a hot humid afternoon waiting for the machine to be repaired and ripping bad seams from the shirts. They paid by the piece, and the supervisor never blamed the machine. I was very tired, hot and depressed.

“Trudging up the front porch stairs, I went inside the women’s door. There was a long staircase to the second floor, turning as it went up. At the top, I heard a deep male voice singing a melancholy Irish song. The words were so beautiful, and the singer was wonderful. I paused, and then moved down the long hallway to better hear. The song came from the bathroom. Looking about, no one was near. I edged closer to the door to listen. Who might it be? Oh, Oh! He forgot to completely close the door on the ladies side. There was a small crack.

“To this day, Eliza, I can’t believe what I did. Mind you, these were proper times. I was a good, decent farm girl. Yet, I put my eye to the crack and looked in to see who was singing. It was John, all lathered up with soap, sitting in the tub.”

“Grammy!”

“Yes, a bit different than the story I always told, isn’t it?”

“Well, enough girl! I said to myself. You shouldn’t be doing this. I turned away and prepared to run down the hall, when he called out.

‘Miss Morton, how are you?’ he said.

“I didn’t say a word.

“He called again, ‘Miss Morton, I know it’s you. I can tell by the quiet way you walk.’

“Eliza, I was petrified. I didn’t know what to do. Running was what I wanted, but his voice wouldn’t let me. I just stood there, a statue in the hallway.

‘Miss Morton, I sense you like my singing. Why not come in and join in with a chorus or two?’ he laughed.

“What had I got myself into?”

‘Come on, open the door a bit so I can see you.’

“Eliza, I wanted to say, ‘No Way!’ like you kids say nowadays. But, I didn’t, I couldn’t, he had me.

“So, I cracked the door open a bit and looked in. He was still in the tub, a smile on his face and those fierce black eyes burning into me.”

“Grammy, I can’t believe you did that”

“Yes, Yes. Let me continue.

“He said, ‘you should come in all the way. Someone will spot you. In fact, someone is coming up the stairs now.’

“He was right, and she was just about to make the turn. Nowhere to go, I stepped into the bathroom, heart beating as fast as a bird’s.

“There he sat, smiling, so smug.

‘Sit down Miss Morton, make yourself at home.’

“What was I doing here? I had to get out. It was impossible. I could hear other girls coming up the stairs, going to their rooms.

“I sat down. He continued to wash himself, glancing at me now and then.

‘Did you like the song?’ he asked.

“Oh, it was wonderful. Your voice is quite nice, I whispered.

“Then, he stood up and began to pour water on his head, rinsing off.”

“Grammy, that is so embarrassing!”

“Shush, girl. I am not finished. Do you want to hear what happened or not? You are thirteen, almost fourteen. Time to learn about men.

“I remember so well. My eyes moved over his body. Eliza, he was beautiful. The muscles on his neck and shoulders and chest flexed as he rinsed himself. The smile was still there as he looked at me with those eyes.

“Then, at least it seemed to be that way, I woke up in my room. I was in bed. It had been a dream, just like those that we girls had about him. Except that Sally was wiping my face with a cold cloth. I struggled to get up.

‘Now, now, Connie lay still. You fainted. John called for help and carried you up to your room. You lucky girl! Just wearing his pants, and you, limp in his arms.’

“Dizzy and mortified, I lay back and rested. I couldn’t go to supper that night; I couldn’t face them. They knew what happened. I certainly couldn’t look at John. Sally brought some soup and rolls that Martha had given her. I just wasn’t hungry.

“In the morning I waited until most of the girls were gone. Martha had saved some breakfast for me, which I ravenously ate.

“With my strength back, I went to work, late. I spent the day at a different sewing machine, but was not very productive. My mind was still on last night. It was not going to be a good payday.

“While glad to be going home, I didn’t look forward to supper. Yet, it was either starve or go. Ten hours in a shirt factory makes a person quite hungry.

“Bravely I pulled myself together and went into the dining room, not looking at anyone. Yet, I felt them looking. I was so embarrassed. In addition, by dallying while trying to work up my nerve, there was just one seat left. John sat there, directly across from me, with that horrid smile. Everyone seemed to be looking at me, grinning. What did they know? He must have told them! I bent my head to give Grace and never looked at him.

“Eliza, it’s hard to ask for others to pass the food if you don’t look at them. And, most of the time he seemed to be passing the platters and bowls to me. Those black

eyes kept looking at me, the smile teasing. My eyes danced, pirouetted, looked up, looked down, and looked sideways, any way to avoid looking at him.

“I glanced at him, and he mouthed: ‘I’m Sorry,’ and smiled at me. How could I resist? I smiled back and lowered my eyes to the meal. That is how we met. You’re the only one who knows the story.”

“Grammy, that’s so romantic! I’m so glad you told me your secret. Wow!”

“But, you don’t know all of it yet.”

“Grammy, you have to tell it all to me! You promised. I can keep a secret!”

“Well, it wasn’t long before everyone sensed there was something between us. We always sat together for breakfast and supper. We used to sit on the front porch in the big swings that overlooked the street, talking and laughing. In fact, it was on one of those swings that he asked me to marry him.”

“Grammy quit it! I know there’s more. Tell me the rest.”

With tears suddenly running down her face and looking far into eternity, she said, “When he was dying, he looked at me with those black eyes and smiled. They were no longer fierce, just filled with love. Here is what he said to me.

‘Miss Morton, I have kept a secret from you for a long time. It’s time to tell you. When you fainted in the boarding house bathroom, I jumped up, put on my pants, carried you through the door and began to shout that you had fainted. Sally came running. I told her that when I was taking a bath I heard someone fall against the door. I opened the door and there you were on your side. I said to Sally, I guess it must have been a very hot day at the factory.’

“Eliza, he was a gentleman. He never told anyone what happened. Yet, he was a rascal to the end. I think he liked to see me so embarrassed when I told the other story to the family. Oh! I hated him, and I loved him so!”

Laughing, “As for you young lady, here’s some advice. Watch out for tall handsome, black-eyed smiling men in bathtubs!”

“Grammy, that wouldn’t be proper!”