



FORBIDDEN FRAGMENTS

“Absolutely forbid it!” She took aim and fired her words across the spotless tea table. Like a brass tipped long-nosed bullet from a 22-rifle, her voice exploded into the heart of my enthusiasm. Something broke loose and spilled onto the thick white carpet. I peered down at the floor, checking for a messy puddle. Did broken dreams leave stains to remind us of what was, what might have been? I gasped, feeling pain riddle through my body and, willing breath back into my passion, I choked, “But, I only want to...”

It was 1976. On my way to the completion of a degree in psychology, I’d awakened, I’d become political. I’d become a feminist—committed (some would say obsessed) to the struggle for women’s rights. I’d changed my focus to Sociology, the most radical edge of a conservative university. Every course of study focused on the reclamation of woman. *The Changing Perspective of Women in Literature*. *The Sociology of Women*. *The Evolving Role of Woman*. For *Women in History*, I’d been set afire with determination to reclaim my own herstory. I would explore the story of my mother’s mother, Anna Ashby Dietrick.

“No!” She slammed her palm onto the table.

Another shot, this one rattling the gleaming china cup against its saucer. Tea rippled from rim to rim, the volley creating turbulent waves in the delicate Havilland cup.

“But, Mother, it’s for a term paper.” I was willing to plead, but I would not surrender, not this time.

Her menacing dark eyes narrowed, threatening another shot. Another wound. I crumpled and was still. Silenced.

The air cleared. Maybe she’d returned the rifle to its place alongside the antique muzzle-loader and the shotguns, stocks thoroughly polished, double barrels carefully oiled, all standing at attention in the cherry and glass cabinet. Before I could fully recover, however, more words came at me, now floating sweetly. “More tea?” and her long well manicured fingers curled around the handle of the delicate pot. *I’m a little teapot, short and stout*. Lyrics of the childhood rhyme rang incongruously in my ears.

I was a four-year old again, a sweet, obedient child. Such a good girl, she’d say. Perfect, in fact. Raised by the book. Except when my childish wonder-filled, insatiable curiosity, that yearning to know, to ask, to explore tore at the perfect canvas she’d painted. *What was your daddy like? Why can’t we play cards when Grandmother visits on Sundays? Tell me about when you*

were a little girl? Did your mama read stories to you? Why don't I have a grandfather? “Hush, child,” she'd scold as her eyes hardened like onyx marbles on a Chinese checkerboard. “You ask too many questions.” Or, “I just don't remember.” What had I said now to evoke her rage? *Here is my handle, here is my spout.*

Frantically, I gathered frayed threads, patched the scorched hole of shame in my gut. I must have confused myself. That familiar tone in her voice simply distorted my perception. Of course, Mother didn't own a gun. All the guns were my husband's, safely locked behind glass doors in the library of our home.

I pasted an appropriate expression upon my thirty-seven year-old face—not smiling, certainly not self-assured, just placid enough—and let my gaze wander past her dark curly head, backlit by the flames that warmed us from the hearth on that November afternoon.

“Your grandmother was a suffragist,” my father had told me one afternoon long ago. Anticipating a visit from her, he ceremoniously tucked away the bottles of Gilbey's gin and Maker's Mark into a locked cabinet high above the deep sink between the avocado Maytag washer and dryer in the laundry room. *Suffragist.* I don't know how I knew the word back then, but I knew it had to be about those bottles. I'd already learned not to question, greedily gathering information as it came. Daddy was a good source. “She can be real cantankerous,” he'd say. “Must be why she divorced her husband,” he told me. “Took her two youngest and left in the dark of night.” He took pride in being the keeper of Mother's family secrets, doling them out in bits and pieces.

Divorced? “I thought grandfather died when Mother was little.” I knew I was pushing my luck, even with Daddy's love of gossip.

“Yep, he died when she was about fourteen, I think. Maybe she was sixteen...I'm not sure.” He settled into what little bit of the story he knew. “But they were divorced when your mother was ten or eleven.” The amber bottle of scotch clinked into place as he carefully arranged his stash. He turned, looking down at me from atop the aluminum step stool. A shock of his strawberry blond hair had fallen across his brow. He dropped one last morsel. “I bet you didn't know she was a friend to President Harrison.”

I didn't have a place to put this information. A suffragist and a president's friend. And divorced! It had to have been in 1918 or 1919. Women didn't leave their husbands in those days! And to divorce was unthinkable, certainly unacceptable and not respected. Even I knew that. How did she support herself and her children? What was so terrible that she'd leave her marriage—and in the middle of the night? The image of my grandmother took on a whole new aura. She became a picture of courage and even intrigue! But this collided with the woman I remembered whose hardened edges could frighten me, caustic judgments slipping from a mouth held tight and pursed. Like mine when Daddy teased me into tasting the kumquats that arrived every Christmas time in a shiny red box with a huge white bow. However inviting, the bitter fruit always made the inside of my jaws crinkle and my lips pucker like pink grosgrain ribbon.

I still have difficulty stitching the story rations into a picture of a woman who fought for a

cause she must have believed in with great passion. But by the time I knew her, she had no home of her own—had broken up housekeeping, Mother said—to work as a *companion*—a practical nurse, Mother said—for widows who were ill or lonely. Until she was well into her eighties, she moved from one place to another, sometimes staying for a few months, other times longer. For several years, she lived with Mrs. Clarkson on North Meridian Street in an enormous limestone house that, I was sure at age seven, must have been a castle. I remember my Maryjane patent leather shoes echoing loudly across the grand two-story foyer on the few occasions we visited. I can still see my grandmother standing at the top of the staircase that wound up to the forbidden second floor. Hands on her wide hips, she hushed me to silence. No one could convince me that in the room behind the dark oak door at the head of those stairs there wasn't a collection of bones or maybe a crazy old woman locked away.

Clearer memories of Grandmother are of an elderly woman in the house on Forty-second Street that belonged to my favorite aunt, Rebekah. I see her few remaining possessions crowded into the small upstairs room. Opposite the single spool bed, on which a faded quilt lay carefully folded, was a dark walnut dresser. Beneath the mirror the mantle clock sat, its delicate chime reminding her of the passing of time. On top of the clock was a placard of a skull and cross bones, beneath which were the words, *Liquor Kills*. Carefully placed on the marble top of the small washstand alongside her bed was her well-worn Bible.

She would sit for hours at a cloth-covered card table by the single window overlooking the street below. Small scissors held carefully in gnarled, liver-splotched hands, she'd trim old greeting cards, the blades cutting around pictures of pretty bouquets of flowers, small, whimsical animals, and colorful birds whose open beaks presumably sang a happy song. Inverting the rubber tipped jar of thick brown glue onto the backside of each, she'd place the picture into a scrapbook.

"What are you doing, Gran?" I dared to ask. For reasons unknown to me, I alone, of all her grandchildren, was allowed to call her Gran. As long as I can remember, she was Grandmother, or Gran to me. No one dared call Anna Ashby Dietrick Maamaw, or even Grandma, and certainly not Mimi or Nana.

My grandmother peered at me through round wire-rimmed glasses and answered grimly, "I'm making a Cheer Book for sick people in the hospital." I doubt the irony was lost on me even then. And yet, we had a connection, my grandmother and I...a bond that came not from stories she might have told, but from a fount of wisdom and a guiding hand.

Through her final years, her days were obscured in paranoid accusations of her great-grandchildren stealing her meager belongings, and losing her way to the church she'd founded some fifty years before. Eventually she became lost in the shadows of distorted memories, unable to recognize even her youngest daughter, my mother.

The tattered threads of stories of a woman of passion, of courage, and perseverance, are sadly hidden away in secret places, gone to those of us who would weave them into our own history, strengthening the tapestry of our lives.

Nancy VanArsdall

I'm still curious; I still yearn to know her story. To know why she stole away in the dark of night. To know if she marched the streets around the State Capitol with a cardboard sign that read *WOMEN DESERVE THE VOTE* while wearing a white ribbon-pin with the letters, *WCTU*. To know if she loved and lived a passion I can only imagine.