

Dinner with Grandmother Maggie

By Pat Murray-Scott



A note of explanation: *StoryWorth is a "Writer's Prompt" with an irresistible lure! Each week my daughter-in-law sends a question; e.g. "What was your first date with Dad?" What makes the Prompt irresistible to the writer? I know the audience! Knowing your audience is a writer's first threshold! Who are you talking to?*

This week's StoryWorth question followed by my answer!

"If you could have one dinner with anyone, living or dead, who would it be?"

Just one dinner, huh? Not a week-full of dinners, lunches, right down to overnights so we see each other for breakfasts, when hair is down, scars unmasked, the real person glimmering through?

Well, okay, then! With whom, even if only once, would I most like to have dinner?

I'd like to meet any one of my grandmothers or great-grandmothers. I know that my Grandma Emma Cain would like me to choose her. I love her today, but, topping my list is the grandmother I didn't know because she died eight years before I was born. Is it she whom I might be most like? I have an inner sense that we would have shared insights.

She is the grandmother with many names and hidden stories: baptized Margaret A. Howard in June of 1867, she took the name Chrysostom, I suspect, at her Confirmation, for St. John Chrysostom a Fourth Century father of the church. Through usage, she made "Chrysostom" her official middle name, dropping the "A." forever. At age fourteen? That shows a little spine, doesn't it?

My grandmother Margaret was a city-wide top-ranked scholar! In 1885, she graduated from high school ranked number ONE of the eight top graduates in the city of Wheeling, West Virginia. That was nothing to sneeze at in 1885, when Wheeling was the state capital and, per capita, one of the richest cities in the nation. Known as "Maggie," she was also an accomplished pianist who performed publicly at many civic, educational and social events. The Wheeling newspaper always gave notice of Maggie Howard's public and private performances. After her high school graduation, Maggie returned as a teacher to the same school in South Wheeling where she had been a student.

She taught until her marriage to William Murray in 1906. Maggie was not a spring bride. She was thirty-nine when she married, forty when she had my Aunt Mary, forty-two when she gave birth to my father in 1909, and forty-five when Aunt Peg was born in 1912.

What was her life like in those early tumultuous years of marriage and child-rearing? By the time my father was ten, the family had already lived in three different cities because my Grandfather Will, a stone contractor, only knew to "follow the job." In late summer, 1919, they were living in South Philadelphia. Will was working at the shipyards on the Delaware River. And, Maggie? In late August or early September of 1919, fifty-two year old Maggie was just finishing up a day of canning fruit. The jelly jars were filled, arranged to cool on the shelves of the "Hoosier," the essential free-standing cabinet in the early Twentieth Century kitchen. I don't know if my father was an instigator of the trouble; by his own telling, he had been a devil of a boy to raise, or did my grandfather come home from work and fire up the Irish in Maggie? Or was it - all of it - her age of fifty-two? Was she in menopause? Was she worn down with the repetitive cares of motherhood and the money troubles?

Would I ask, "What was your fateful trigger, Grandma Maggie?" Do you think I could ask that question at a first-time-meeting with my very accomplished grandmother?

The fact is, on that hot afternoon, in response to some trigger, Maggie summoned up enough muscle born of emotion to push over the "Hoosier" with all its contents and cooling jelly jars; she pushed it over onto its face, of course, breaking all, and sparking a lifetime's dreadful, downward spiral.

My fourteen year old Aunt Mary was already away to begin her first term at a Maryland boarding school. My father and Aunt Peg were enrolled in a South Philadelphia elementary school. My grandfather, Will Murray, was working in the Philadelphia shipyards. Living nearby was Maggie's younger sister, Kate and her husband Lynn. So for tonight, anyway, take Billy and Peggy to Kate and Lynn's house for an overnight. They had been there before, with other cousins, and occasionally with a "between-husband-aunt," as well. Kate and Lynn had no children of their own, but you would never know it. Over the years, Aunt Kate and Uncle Lynn "parented" many children from the Howards and Exlines, and a few "at-the-end road" adults, too. Each, Kate and Lynn, were the youngest in their respective families, and for that they earned the role of family caretakers.

The story from here is understandably vague and choppy in my father's memory, and also, it's likely that I wasn't really listening as well as now I wish I had done. Nevertheless, here is what I remember:

Will and Maggie moved back to Wheeling, leaving Billy and Peg with the Exlines in Philadelphia. To her everlasting sorrow, fourteen year old Mary Frances Murray was brought from boarding school to live in Wheeling to care for her mother and father. I don't believe

Aunt Mary ever did attend high school, giving a very bright woman a life-time of regret, but at some time Mary Frances completed a practical business course. Aunt Mary died in 1973.

My father Billy, or "Bill" as he reached fourteen, was a boy who acted out. I suspect Uncle Lynn had better luck with all the girls the couple sheltered. In my father's story, he was the only boy in a houseful of women, and each one of the girls picked on him! At some point in his first year of high school, my father ran away and was on the streets of Philadelphia getting an education of a different sort for the better part of that school year. When he was found, he was shipped to his parents in Wheeling and enrolled in Central Catholic High School. Nothing was lost academically; because he was so smart, he passed all the tests, and stayed on the same track. I don't know if that was my father's effort to mythologize his life story for his teenage daughter, or the truth. I'll never know now. My father died in 1984.

Seven year old Peg, named Margaret Howard Murray for her mother, was raised by Aunt Kate and Uncle Lynn as their own daughter. I have been told by several family members that Peg saw her mother Maggie only once after that day. One version says she was eight, in which case the visit would have been in Wheeling and perhaps that did occur.

Another story says that Peg visited Maggie at Weston State Hospital when Peg was fourteen years old. Margaret Murray was institutionalized in October of 1926. Perhaps there was more than one visit. Like her brother and sister, Margaret "Peg" Howard Murray Buxton, carried a certain wound known only to children who have been traumatized by the loss of a parent. Aunt Peg died in 1994.

There are a few dates and facts to reckon, offering a slight scaffolding of data on which to pin these stories.

The death certificate issued by the State of West Virginia lists the reason for placement at Weston State Hospital: "Schizophrenia - Paranoid Type." The immediate cause of death was pneumonia.

Also listed on the death certificate is the "Length of Time" Maggie was in Weston Hospital before her death, so we can calculate the date she was admitted:

At the time of her death on 19 June 1928, Maggie had been at Weston State Hospital for 1 year, 7 months, 25 days. So the date of her arrival at Weston may have been about October 24, 1926. One month before, on September 21, my Aunt Mary Frances Murray eloped with Edward Guenther, leaving her 17 year old brother Bill to care for the household.

If I had only one dinner to spend with my Grandmother Maggie, a woman about whom I want to care very much, what subjects might I bring up? As burning as are the questions raised above, they aren't what I really want to know about Maggie. Who was she? How long she had known my Grandfather Will before they married. Each were popular in the singles group at

the Carroll Club; each were accomplished in their respective fields; each had amazing intellectual curiosity. Each were highly eligible Irish Catholics in a very small city.

Wouldn't I rather know who was her favorite composer? Talk about her teaching experiences, her favorite authors, especially with children. And did she really meet Maria Montessori and study her methods as my father told me? Did she have a vegetable garden? What was her favorite color? Did she enjoy puns and word riddles? Endless, the need to know her as she was when she was a healthy woman of substance.