

Dearest Shortness

Letters ~ 1905 to 1915

~ Susan Lilly ~

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This book is dedicated to Mamie and Lloyd, who saved everything, to Mama, who never threw anything away, and to Karen, who said, “These letters don’t belong to us, they belong to everybody.”

Remember

Remembering. Forgetting. In our modern lives, we are almost compelled to forget what brought us to our place of being. It seems to be the duty of every generation to oppose our parents. I know this was the case in my family. My dad left the family home to go to college. He didn't want to stay in the same old town he grew up in, to be bound by the customs of his childhood. The same went for me. I fled west with a guy in a Volkswagen panel truck, saying good-bye to the hills of Pennsylvania and, "California, here I come!"

So we forget. Or did we ever know? Did we have the slightest idea of how our parents and grandparents lived? Not really. All we knew was that it was old fashioned, and we were done with it. But wait a minute. Now we have to re-think all the speed and change of the last century because guess what? People are starting to talk about the end of the oil age. So how cool is it to come across a pile of letters from the beginning of the age of the automobile! That's what we've got here. We have people telling us what life was like as the auto edged out the horse and buggy. And we have two young people talking about...well, you know.

Starting with a box full of photos and postcards, we move on to piles and boxes of letters. In the letters are the voices of people who are long dead and even forgotten. They talk to our main character, Mamie, and they talk to each other, about their work, their travels, their children, their daily lives. We start to see their society. Mamie and Lloyd have intense correspondence every time they are apart, to keep up the daily contact they have when they are together.

rough their letters, we re-live courtship rituals of the early twentieth century. None of this came down to us in the family's oral history. But since nobody threw any of it away, it is here for us now. And yes, there are some family stories, but they don't always agree with what the letters tell us. So, enjoy the journey, with all its gaps and inconsistencies. I hope the ancestors are smiling as we read their story, blowing away the dust and bringing them back to the world of the living.

*M*ama had guarded the contents of the house like a Gorgon, adding layer upon layer of her yard sale finds to the treasures that had been left there by her parents and grandparents. Furthermore, Mamie, her mother, who lived in the house before Mama inherited it, had forbidden us, her grandchildren, to go up to the attic, where her life's mementos were hidden. But then, early in 2003, Mama was struck down by a medical crisis. It had been ten years since my son Alex and I had gone East to help her set up her bed downstairs in the front living room, because the stairs were too much for her, and my sisters had been checking in with her as much as she would allow, as she fiercely coped with life in her own way. But this last event brought about the end of her ability to live on her own. It was now our job to move Mama out of the house and find round-the-clock care for her. At long last, we, her five daughters, were able to look at all the letters, papers, and family photos that had been stashed all over the house at 636 West Philadelphia Street for the past hundred

and twenty years. We boxed up as much of the trove as we could put our hands on, packing under the pressure of time, knowing that much would be lost in the process. We saved what we could, and let go of what we could not.

The house had been built in the 1880's, for my great grandfather, Charles Reisinger, on land that had been in the family for over a century before that. It is a high-fronted Victorian brick house with a steep slate roof, long windows, and a gingerbread front porch, lined up with other houses, with narrow passageways in between. It has been in the family since it was built. No one ever completely moved out of that house. They passed on, or moved on, but no one ever had to clear the house.

As we vacate this house in 2004, being the generation that must part with it, we reveal the history of a family and of a time, of a way of life that has passed. It is with respect and love that in this process of discovery we honor those that went before us, as we now hear their voices, which were lost so long ago, as though they were with us again. We hear only whispers from the turn of the twentieth century. From that time, we have only a few faded photographs and newspaper clippings, maybe a church program or postcard. The story gathers strength, and the ancestors become real when we read their letters, beginning in about 1905. Then it is as if they are sitting right here in the room with us, telling us about their day.

What was it that Mama and Grandma wanted to keep from us? Or did they just want us to wait until we were ready to hear their story? Or did they just set things aside and forget about them?

Mamie, my grandmother, is the central character in this family's story. She was born and she died at 636 West Philadelphia Street. She is the one who wrote letters nearly every day of her life to those who were dear to her. She is the one who structured the family narrative by writing

and receiving letters every time she or one of her own left home. She is the one who kept all the letters, stacked in the order they were received, in boxes, sometimes bound in now crumbled rubber bands, sometimes labeled, like "Iowa 1954," on a broken department store box tied together with an old nylon stocking. She stuck the letters up in the eaves, left them under the beds, or in corners of bureau drawers and old trunks. We even found her handwritten copies of letters that she had sent to others. Surely she must have wanted us to find them, when the time was right. After Mamie passed away in 1960, boxes of cards and letters were carried down to the cellar, where molds and mice took their toll. Someone less curious than I would have chucked the lot.

 The letters at the heart of this tale are those of Mamie's courtship with Lloyd, my grandfather, from 1914 to 1916.

 The two eloquent lovers pour all their hearts into their daily letters. They hold nothing back in explaining the details of their daily lives, letting us in on all of the doings and attitudes of the time.

 Mamie lived most of her life at 636 West Philadelphia Street. She went away to college for two years, from 1905 to 1907. When she came back home, working as an elementary school teacher for nine years. She was married in 1916. She and her young husband, Lloyd, lived in Alliance, Ohio for the first years of their marriage, until 1923. When they moved back home, setting up house with Mamie's father at 636 West Philadelphia Street with their three daughters. The story starts and ends at 636 West Philadelphia Street.

Mount Gretna
Aug. 3, 1914

Mr. A. L. Julius
721 Linden Ave
York, Pa.

We are about to start to the top of Gov. Dick-2 hr. tramp. I have joined a "New Home Mission Class." American History included. It poured so loud last evening the parson couldn't preach & then the lights went out. If you haven't anything to do send one of you "Puck"-Doesn't this look good (lake on other side of postcard. SL).

Shorty

York, Pa
Aug. 4, 1914

Miss Mamie Reisinger
% Chatauqua Inn,
Mt. Gretna,
Lebanon Co.
Pa.

Home Monday Evening

My dear old Cannibal Shorty,

Received your epistle today and I must admit it was quite breezy and I enjoyed it immensely. To begin with, let me say, I reached home quite safely, unescorted by the police, so to speak. I just naturally threw out my chest and marched home like a regular guy don't you know. I quite agree with you, you old spooner, that sure was some night mare and I had some

time of it getting it out of my system. Of course that got my goat too about there not being any harm done and all that but after all, I guess the cop thought the spectacle a trifle ominous if I may use the word, but we won't let that worry us will we? We learned our little lesson, and anyway we're not the only ones. Yesterday while we were pursuing the study of the Bible upon the Park, there was a pair on a bench opposite the pavilion, who didn't give a hang who saw them and we enjoyed the spectacle with great cheer. I had a notion to go for the cop though. It's scandalous how some people do carry on when they're unchaperoned, don't you know. Some joke about someone turning on the lights well I swan.

One other fatality, which I want to tell you of which had its origin on Aunt Lizzie's porch----I don't know whether you remember it or not but on Thursday night a mosquito bit me on the hand. I don't know what he was carrying with him, but my hand has swollen to about twice its normal size and Ma has a nice juicy poultice ready for it, which I will apply now. ** Alright, job's done, got a whole bag of buckwheat strapped to it now. If I had you here now you could warm it up for me about every fifteen minutes and maybe I'd let you have one too. Sorry I'm not versed in that stamp dope, but I'll find out tomorry just how wicked you were, you frizzle top. I'd like to be a mouse around that camp, I suppose I'd have to be muzzled pretty well though so's I wouldn't make any outcry for help.

Had a tight game of Hausenpfe this evening, we guys did, but we got it put over us this time, although the score was close, but at a regular game, say tennis for instance, they don't stand a show. Well the old poultice is getting cold. It's now 11:30. Can't mail this tonight any more. Took note of the improvement in your spelling on the outside of the envelope. Howdyou gessit?

Please notice how sweetly I ended the other document enclosed, and see if you can't do better than just plain good-night--the idear, you wicked little bear. From your rusty, trusty, dyed in the wool, honest injun

---Red Top---

~ Enclosed is a pen and pencil drawing of a cop, shining a light over a picket fence. Caption: Just a peep to make sure all is well. Drawn by Red Top. ~



If the cop on his beat
In the middle of the night,
Catches you and me on the porch,
With his little search light,
ere's no place like home.