

Now I Wish

I tried, but with feeble efforts. Against my will I was civil to her.

What made me be so cool toward my mother-in-law, Marian Osborne Harries? She was a woman I now know, after some years of mature reflection, who was surely undeserving of her only daughter-in-law's coolness.

To rationalize one's own bad behavior more than fifty years after the fact is difficult. And to come to some sort of semi-happy forgiveness of oneself is likely an exercise with which I shouldn't clutter my mind. Why bother? After all, I wasn't exactly the daughter-in-law from hell. And then, the passage of so many years will make from 1948 to 1952, while I knew her, seem either fainter or worse in my memory.

Did she think, *He adores her – she's so young – has eyes only for him -he'll treat her well – maybe she'll grow up and they'll have a wonderful life.*

And I, in my fluttering immature mind might have been thinking, *She laughs in that tinkly way at things I don't think are funny and my ribs and stomach all go tight when she does it.*

I'm sure she was trying to lighten the tenseness about sharing her golden son with a young inexperienced, unworldly woman. At the time I was too dense to know what was happening and my long time regret is that I failed to become closer to her before her death.

And she kisses him if he's just going to the corner store. She looks so old. And she has so many ugly clay pots of plants on that table in the bay window. When I write these words today I shudder – so mean, so immature. What was wrong with me? There must have been something. Was I subconsciously jealous of Hu's obvious love for this strong but gentle woman?

Hu told me, "She always smelled natural gas", and at that aura sign his mother would collapse, and he a boy, though man-of-the-family, would put something in her mouth to keep her from biting her tongue, loosen her clothing, check to see if she'd maybe broken her leg, and wish his father were alive. Hu told me this, though I was never witness to his mother's epileptic seizures. When I was in the hospital with our first child she had one, an episode in our tiny bathroom and he had to break down the door, hinges on the inside. I wondered at the paint chips on the pale blue and white wall though a first baby's cries changed the subject and we did not speak of it again until some years later, after Hu and his mother met with a committee of doctors deciding to sterilize his sister. Our children's only aunt. Muriel was ten and a half months older than her brother and raised by their mother, a woman who had served overseas as a nursing sister in World War One and developed epilepsy afterward. She had scrimped and saved through the years after her husband's death, when Hu was fifteen, in order to provide for Muriel who would not then be a burden to her brother. Should my mother-in-law not be able to care for Muriel some day, she feared what could happen to her mentally challenged daughter. This daughter drank her tea like a lady, sat like a lady, rarely said a bad word, brushed her teeth morning and night and washed her hands after going to the bathroom. She was well brought up though was not capable of looking after herself.

And, she was fixated on having a family with little children like her brother had and was so gullible she could have been talked into anything even though she had been warned against men and their phony kindness. So the deed was done.

If I could do it again, I would ask Marian to tell me more of what it was like in the Peace River with those other four siblings, three of whom I met before their dotage, and all sounding and looking like they had stepped out of the top floor of *Upstairs, Downstairs* in Masterpiece Theatre. Marian herself looked and sounded like Dame Wendy Hiller. I was astonished one night, when flipping the TV channels I came upon Marian, but it was Dame Wendy. There she was, white haired, big smile, black dress (not a severe black suit like my mother-in-law usually wore) but there was a white lace jabot. Dame Wendy's skirt was long, so I couldn't tell if she was wearing those sturdy lace-up Oxfords Marion needed for her arthritic feet. Dame Wendy was probably older than Marian was when I knew her, although at that time I thought she was ancient. I'm twenty years older now than she was when she died. Funny how one's perspectives change.

Marian was not like my own beautiful artistic mother. She talked to Hu about other people's motives. My gentle parents, at least in my company, discreetly voiced few opinions of others and unpleasant topics were not discussed.

Hu was nearly seven years older than I but my childhood too was in the early thirties and my parents' financial struggles were kept from me, their only child. Then times improved for my family, while in southern Alberta, at Hu's home, times got worse. Veterinarian bills were not paid to his father who fell ill and died. No wonder a childhood friend tells me "You had a sunny childhood."

I know I was civil to Marian, but it was an icy civility. And what that woman could have told me. Oh what stories. I could have said, *Marian, tell me about when you were in World War One as a nursing sister in Salonica. What was it like and tell me about the soldier who carved the box on my bookshelf that's full of yours and Tom's medals, and about the day you were on leave in Egypt, riding a camel, and the rider jouncing beside you was the handsome Welsh-Canadian Veterinarian on leave from his horse battalion. He proposed marriage after not many more jounces, even though he had been married in Canada and had to get a divorce by act of Parliament. What did you think? You must have loved him very much. Like I love your son. Why didn't I say something like this? And Marian, when the war ended, and you received your medal from the Prince of Wales, what was it like to come back to the Peace River where your father, the former pastry cook from London, was trying to be the carrot king of the north. What did you think when you saw that big house of Tom's in the middle of downtown Calgary? How clever of you, after Tom's death, when Hu was fifteen, to turn the house into suites.*

Hu claims you're a good plain cook, and I remember you always had ginger ale mixed with Welch's grape juice with your dinners. My mother was perhaps a more adventuresome cook and oh how I was striving to become one, thanks to The Joy of Cooking, Good Housekeeping, Ladies' Home Journal and Better Homes and Gardens. You sent your own bottled chicken to us in Edmonton. I'd never had that pinkish meat encased in sage flavored jelly. Though I know I must have written to thank you, again, I want you to know it was delicious. Why did I keep it a secret that I was secretly in awe of the way you quoted Shakespeare at the dinner table like Hu did. And when our first child

(named after your husband and son – Thomas Hu) was born you knit him blue booties, sweater, hat and a tiny hot water bottle cover in seed and popcorn stitches, complete with tassels on everything. How you did this with your hand tremors, I'll never know. I'm glad you never knew about our little Tommy's death from polio a year after you died.

One of those “*If I had my life to live over, I would*” thoughts would be: “*Try harder to understand and enjoy my mother-in-law*”. But my very biggest regret - and it's a huge one - is that I never said: “*Thanks Marian, for bearing and raising such a son as Hu.*”

To regret deeply is to live afresh Thoreau, Journal, 1839



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