I Found a Picture of my Great-Aunt

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My Great-Aunt Winifred rode a steed, her back straight, her short hair like a helmet. Joan of Arc. Why did a picture of a girl on a horse on the wide-open prairie make me think of an armour-clad warrior in medieval France? I didn't know much about her, but after learning more, I was glad to have had that thought.

For the longest time, the only image I ever saw of Winnie hung among a collage of photos on my mother's wall. There she stood, next to a silver-framed portrait of two women — one with a long curling feather in her hat, the other riding an ostrich. Winnie, a tall girl with tight auburn curls and a lacy white dress, clutched a parasol. My grandma, then a chubby-faced toddler, and her two older brothers, squinted at the sun. I had nothing else to fill in the blanks about my great-aunt's life. I'd always assumed she'd died young.

Then my sister subscribed to Ancestry.com and began filling in the details of our lives. She gave me her log-in and I snooped around the branches of our family tree. I'd heard stories about Charlie Brown, Grandma and Winnie's dad, who came from England and ranched by the Bow River, near Calgary. Later he sold everything and moved the family to Victoria where, in 1908, my grandma was born. When he lost money in bad investments, he brought them back to Alberta and bought a farm. In 1926, his wife, Daisy, died. My grandma was only 17. Winnie, 25. Two years later Charlie was killed by an oncoming car. My grandma used to say she was an orphan, but I'd never really thought much about it. Looking at the family tree, I could see it all in a timeline. Her parents first and then her brother, Victor. What was that date? A quick click on his picture. 1938. The eldest boy, Gordon had died in a plane crash in Tokyo in 1966. My grandma surviving until 1990 — the only one of her family to live to a ripe old age.

Or so I'd thought.

What about Winnie? In the picture on my mother's wall, she'd been around 10 years old. I scrolled to her section and found her birthday: November 1900. Then I looked at her death.

1975.

This floored me.

She'd been alive six years after I was born. Was this some kind of secret? I phoned my mother to find out.

"Grandma's sister. Did I ever I meet her?"

"No," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because she lived in a mental hospital," my mother said.

"What? Why?"

"I don't know."

"How long was she there?"

"Most of her life, I guess."

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Nurse Ratchet and ice-pick lobotomies leapt to mind. I hung up and scrolled the Internet. The history of mental health treatment is not pretty. Prior to the 1800s, those considered insane were imprisoned or left on the streets. Then in the Victorian-era, huge asylums went up in England and the United States. Anyone who seemed the least bit problematic got shoved in. At New York State's Willard Psychiatric Centre, (open from 1869 to 1995), historians found an attic filled with suitcases, trunks and leather bags. More than 50,000 people had lived there over the years and the luggage belonged to those who never left. Mrs. Ethel's case held a beautifully embroidered baby gown. She'd been committed by her landlady in 1930 after she wouldn't come out of her room. Mr. Dmytro immigrated from the Ukraine after World War II. After his wife died, he believed he should marry the President's daughter. He received 20 electroshock treatments during his 24-year stay.

I did not want to believe that my family had a story like that. I phoned my mother back.

"Did you know her?"

"Not really," my mother said.

"But she was your aunt?"

"I remember one time," she finally said. "I don't know where we were or why we were there, but I heard my mother say 'snap out of it.' And I knew she wasn't talking to me."

Is it a secret if no one ever asks? By the time I was 19 years old, I'd moved a province away and was too busy with the details of my life to wonder about things past. Years went by. Then one day I started commuting in the darkness from Chilliwack to Vancouver and began chatting to my parents via Bluetooth.

"What I want to know," my mother said one night, "is how Daisy died."

All she knew was that Grandma and Winnie's mother died of some kind of neurological disease. The rain pummelled my hatchback as she spoke and I had to grip the wheel to pass a transport truck.

"What could it have been?" I asked.

"Maybe ALS?" she said.

Spray from 18 tires folded onto my windshield and I white-knuckled into the phone: "Lou Gehrig's disease? That would be awful. And possibly genetic. Wouldn't Grandma have known?"

"I don't know," my mom said.

"Why not?"

"I never asked."

Maybe my mom's 70-year old cousin, Stephen, would have some idea. He didn't. "Children were seen and not heard. We weren't encouraged to listen to adult conversation. Or even be in the same room," he said.

Our family shared some stories. Like the one about Stephen's dad, Gordon, and his wife Frances. How she became so wearied by no electricity or running water on the Brown family farm (in the 1940s!) that she took her kids by the hand and left on the train for her mother's house in New Westminster.

"Who could blame her," Stephen said. "Mom was incredibly bright. She didn't want to be stuck out there. She had kids in diapers. She wanted them to go to a proper school."

This story had a happy ending — for a while. Gordon followed her to New Westminster and convinced her to come back. Only if they lived in the city, she said. They compromised and bought a house in Calgary where Frances and the children would live during the school year. And so it went, until they died in that plane crash in Japan . . .

"Why don't you ask Harold?" Stephen suggested.

Harold Tipper, another of Mom's cousins, lived in Grande Prairie for years but now he and his wife Maxine are in Edmonton. I'd only met them once and had to think about how he fit into the story.

Grandma's nephew.

My mom's cousin.

Oh my God.

Harold is Winnie's son.

"Call him or better yet, go visit. And hurry up," said Stephen. "He's almost 90."

I asked my mother if she'd ever talked to Harold.

"Of course I have," she said. "But not for a long time. And *not* about his mother."

So I called him. Then I flew to Calgary, met my parents and we drove to Edmonton — the city where I was born. January's grey clouds warned of a

storm and the hard snow crunched underfoot. I felt nervous about prying into Harold's mother's mental health. So much shame around it, still. In Winnie's day people were put away — out of sight, out of mind. Today, treatment may be better, but society can barely face the topic.

But Harold smiled as Maxine took our coats. "Call me Hal. I'm happy you've come. It's not too often that anyone wants to talk about my life."

I had questions prepared. Easy ones first, to break the ice. But Hal just launched right in. His dad, Bill Tipper, came from England and worked as a hired hand for Winnie's parents. That was before the Brown family moved to Victoria and before the war. Somehow they met again after Winnie's family moved back to Alberta and in 1921, they married. With funds from a soldier's settlement and a gift from Great-Grandpa Charlie, they bought land just down the road from the Brown family farm in Gopher Head, midway between Big Valley and Byemoor, two small Alberta towns.

Everything went well for Bill and Winnie for a time. They had parents and siblings in the area and enough money to buy a tractor. Charlie gave Winnie (and her siblings), a Model A car. In 1924, their first son, Bob was born. Hal showed us pictures of the happy family at a picnic; by a lake; of Winnie smiling at Bill; of Winnie twirling a parasol. But, around the time of Hal's birth in May 1928, things started to go wrong.

Hal called it the Brown family curse. Daisy, had died in 1926 of a mysterious neurological disease (ALS?). Then Charlie was killed in Calgary's first traffic accident. Bill's parents had come to live with them too, but, just five months after Hal was born, Grandfather Tipper died too. The little family buried him on a hillside. Bill's mother, bereft and homesick, went back to England.

Hal remembers little bits from his very early days. His mother baked wonderful bread. The rabbits they snared for stew tasted like willow bark. His mother cuddling him as she read. How she rushed around during a hail storm, holding pillows up to the glass so the stones wouldn't break through. The time she ran outside after Bill got knocked down by lightning on his way back from the barn. During the drought, his father ran the Byemoor dray service, so he could bring money and supplies back to the farm. Winnie and the boys had to wait for him to come home on the weekends for the luxury of a car battery to power up the radio. Blizzards sometimes trapped his father in town.

But Hal's most troubling memory focussed on the time his mother held her sons' hands on the railway platform at Big Valley some 40 kilometres away. He doesn't remember how they got there, but his father arrived before the train to Calgary did. Somehow the boys got home, but his mother didn't.

Later, he learned that was the day Bill drove Winnie to the Alberta Hospital for the Insane. He was around five years old.

Alberta's first mental asylum had been built in 1911 in Ponoka, a small town in the rolling hills half way between Red Deer and Edmonton — the middle of nowhere. According to the philosophy of the time, that's exactly why they chose to build it there. Troubled minds needed fresh air and immersion in nature. Today, this might sound idyllic. It wasn't.

"First you hate it and then you get used to it." A 41 year-old man from Vermillion spoke these words to Ronald A. LaJeunesse in *Political Asylums*, a book about the history of mental health treatment in Alberta. The man had lived in the asylum at Ponoka since the age of 22. He'd wanted to go home, but his parents thought he'd be better off in the hospital. Over time, they visited him less and less.

But according to Hal, Winnie didn't stay very long at Ponoka, maybe a few months. "Your grandmother picked her up and took her to Vancouver to visit relatives. She tried to snap her out of it." I pictured my grandma screeching her Model A to a stop in front of the asylum as Winnie ran out, the two of them flipping the doctors the bird, accelerating away and creating a giant cloud of dust.

"I wish I knew more about what happened," Hal said.

He and his brother hadn't even noticed their mother was different until they moved from the farm into the tiny town of Byemoor around 1936. At first she took part in stage plays; the Anglican minister came by for visits, but as time went on, Winnie retreated farther and farther into her shell.

"Much of the time, Mother stayed in her room," Hal said.

Hal left at 15 to go to high school and spent little time at home after that. Several years later, when he'd moved to Grande Prairie, a letter came from his dad. Bill had been transferred to a job in another town and didn't think Winnie could handle the change. He took her to another mental institution — in Claresholm this time. The tone of his letter seemed apologetic, Hal said, worried that his son would criticize him. "I didn't," Hal said.

Before we left, Hal said we should take some pictures home. My mom and I flipped through, making piles. Then she held up one. "That's my favourite," he said.

Winnie riding a horse.

When I got home, I couldn't stop thinking about my great-aunt. Hal had swirled so many stories. He'd talked backwards and forward in time. She'd been in Ponoka so briefly, around 1933 or 1934. So when had she gone to this other place? I looked up the Claresholm Mental Institution online and

although much has changed since Winnie's time, the place, an hour south of Calgary, still exists. Could I learn more about my great-aunt there?

"What did you say her name was?"

I spoke into the receiver and heard a woman tapping at a computer.

"Winifred Tipper was admitted in 1953, discharged in 1975," she said.

"What was she there for?" I said.

"Sorry. Those records were destroyed," she said.

A date at least. I was about to hang up when she spoke again. "If it helps, almost everyone was diagnosed with schizophrenia back then," she said.

Did that help? I thought of Superman's girlfriend, Margot Kidder, hiding in the bushes in suburban Los Angeles — screaming at the police to shoot her already. The world tittering when the police arrested her instead. Thanks to Hal, I had so many other pictures of his mother in my head. Winnie with bobbed hair wearing a Japanese dress. On her wedding day in the back seat of a dusty car. In a tam o'shanter, looking at Bill with a flirty smile.

That summer, I went back to Alberta and drove two hours through the prairies with my parents. We passed dried fields of canola along the now paved roads to Big Valley. In my grandma's day, the journey would have taken two days. At the little museum we found an old newspaper and a report of my grandma teaching at the nearby Ozark school the year Hal was born. We found a 1937 picture of Grandma with her Big Valley class. She had lived and taught at a one-room school near Winnie every year until 1938. In 1939, she moved north of Edmonton, met my grandfather and got married. She was 30 years old.

LaJeunesse wrote that back in the 1920s, University of Western Ontario professor Madge Macklin, Canada's foremost geneticist, called for the sterilization not only of all patients with schizophrenia, but of their parents, children, and any other relatives — in case they carried a latent gene that could spread the disease again. My grandma, who took me to Woodwards for lunch. Who taught me how to knit a scarf. My grandma who never once mentioned her sister to me. Did she know about this?

We found a box of pictures at my parent's house. Grandma as a young woman wearing a sunflower-pattern jumpsuit. A bridesmaid's dress. Puff sleeves and white high heels. She's laughing with a man in one photo and lounging in the front of a row boat with another. Her parents had died and her sister had been in a hospital for the insane and all I'd ever thought to wonder was why she'd waited so long to marry.

We found an old autograph book with all of Grandma's pictures. Along with signatures from her high school classmates, Winnie wrote: *There is so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best.*

In Big Valley, a train whistle blew and we saw a light farther along the track — a themed excursion from Stettler. My dad hoped to see the old steam engine. The girl in the museum said it would be a while — an armed hold-up was underway. When we walked over, ladies in old fashioned dresses stood on the platform. Tourists snapped photos. I thought of Winnie holding her boys' hands and my grandmother teaching at a one-room school nearby. What if Grandma had come to find her instead?

Winnie was not Joan of Arc. She did not lead an army. I don't know if she heard voices, but for Joan, the voices came regularly. They calmed and emboldened her. Many now think Joan was schizophrenic, but others argue that dismissing the voices as a delusion would remove all meaning from her life.

While writing this, I looked again for the photo that made me think of Joan of Arc. In it, Winnie sits straight in the saddle. Regal. Saint-like. She doesn't have bobbed hair and she wears a toque. I'd combined the bobbed hair from the photo with the Japanese dress, the various horses. In reality, Winnie wore a big wool coat.

To this day, Hal doesn't know what was wrong with his mother, but he believes she fell into a deep depression. If she'd had the same troubles 50 years later, she might have been fine.

"A sad and wasted life." Hal reported my grandmother's words at Winnie's funeral. He and Maxine had been heading from Grande Prairie to a reunion in Byemoor when they heard that she wasn't doing well. They drove three and a half hours on to Claresholm and found her curled up in bed, comatose and suffering from pneumonia. The nurse told them to keep talking, as hearing is one of the last senses to go. The funeral was small: Hal's brother Bob, his wife Doris, my grandparents, some of the hospital nurses, Maxine and Hal.

Rest in peace, Winifred Tipper. I'm glad I took the time to get to know you.