QUEEN MOTHER

Toronto in the 1940s where I spent my early years was a demographically homogeneous city, unlike its current appellation as “New York City run by the Swiss.” Back then, Toronto was populated by the descendants of Scotch-English immigrants, many of whom, like Grandma and Grandpa Johnston, had risen by the second generation to middle class gentility as small business owners, doctors, and teachers.

I always thought Grandma Johnston’s family must have been related to the House of Windsor, for she looked just like the Queen Mother. She had the same broad face that never clouded over with the frustrations of ordinary life, and like the Queen Mother, Grandma seemed to have been born middle-aged, remaining in a suspended state of plenitude well beyond the age when most mortals in those days grew thin, frail and crotchety. I would often picture Grandma's benign head poking out of the gilded, horse-drawn carriages that carried the Royal Family through the glossy pages of *Macleans Magazine*, her waving figure beckoning me to pour through the sumptuous descriptions of yet another Royal wedding or coronation.

Grandma was the loving, enveloping presence in my early life and the source of an enduring sense of worthiness. Thanks to the fact that my mother was the surviving eldest in the Johnston clan, I arrived before Grandma’s other fifteen grandchildren and, as the “first,” I was her favorite. Since Grandma lived just seven blocks from us in a slightly more "respectable" part of West Toronto, I was often at her house and spent weekends and sometimes an entire week there whenever my mother and Dad went off on sketching trips to the north woods.

Suzannah Chandler, whom I called Grandma and others called Susie, was born in 1885 to Frederick John Chandler, a railway brakeman, and his wife, Harriet, in rural Brimstone, Ontario on the banks of the Credit River some seventy miles northwest of Toronto. At the age of seventeen, Susie left her home to teach sixteen-year old farm boys in Havelock, a rural village about 150 miles northeast of Toronto, but when her father was transferred to West Toronto she returned to the family fold and to a teaching job at Annette Street Public School. It was there, when the family was living on Marion Street and Susie was seven, that her father left her mother for a lively young woman who lived down the street and had a rosy-cheeked boy. Why he left his wife is probably explained by the fact that from all accounts, Harriet Chandler had a sour disposition, while her husband was full of fun. The fact of his leaving, however, was concealed from the family history until Grandma described to my Aunt Lois a half century later how she

and her sister Flossie would often see their father pass by each day on his way to work, never acknowledging the relationship between them but obviously longing to get a glimpse of his daughters.

It was on Marion Street that Susie met Fred Johnston, a widower sixteen years her senior and head of the chemistry department at Humberside Collegiate, just down the street from Annette Street Public School. Humberside, a tall stone gothic building was the high school attended by all my aunts and cousins, as well as by my grand nieces and nephews two generations later. As fate had it, Fred lived across the street from the unsuspecting and by now thoroughly bitter Mrs. Chandler and her two maiden daughters. He attended the same Methodist church as the Chandlers and he and Susie found themselves walking the same route to their jobs, their church services, and to and from choir practice. Love blossomed from familiarity and habit, and they were the first couple to be married in 1909 in the newly built United Church of Canada at the corner of Annette Street and High Park Avenue, the church I attended with Grandma as a child and the church in which each of the Johnston girls was married.

I used to love pouring through Grandma's wedding memorabilia. The *Toronto Star* described her wedding as *one of the prettiest weddings of the season, the bride handsomely gowned in ivory directoire satin, trimmed with pearls and lace. She wore a veil caught with orange blossoms and carried a large shower bouquet of lilies of the valley and white roses*. Such meticulous descriptions of fancy attire are today usually found in the celebrity pages of the Style section of the *New York Times*, but provincial Toronto had no celebrities to boast about so I guess the middle class got to feel like some kind of royalty. In her wedding photo Grandma, a slim, ramrod straight girl of twenty-four stands in three quarters pose, her piercing black eyes shining beneath thick chestnut hair that is piled in Gibson Girl fashion. By the time she came into my life, however, Susie had grown stout and matronly.

The "Johnston girls," as my mother, Freda, and her three sisters were known, were also cut from the Windsor mold. Thick ankles and wrists were the hallmark of the Johnston clan, as was a certain dowdiness of dress. I often wondered why the Royals had peasant ankles. Was Susie, perhaps, the distant offspring of an illicit liaison somewhere between one of the Royals and the Chandler, or provisioner to the Royal Family? Perhaps, like them, she bore on her figure the telltale markings of a dormant gene like the one that erupted generations later to mortify the white ancestors of Thomas Jefferson with the telltale evidence of another illicit relationship.

Those peasant ankles ran through the Johnston family. At a family reunion some fifty years later they were the source of jokes among us female cousins, but, at the age of fourteen when ankles mattered, they were the bane and embarrassment of my adolescence. I often had dreams in which I cut off my legs at the ankles and attached new, thinner ankles in their place.

Whether I had royal blood in me or not, I grew up under the tutelage of my very own Queen Mother. Her home, at 107 High Park Avenue, on the corner of High Park and Glenlake Avenue, my street, was within walking distance of our house. It stood on a broad, tree-shaded street lined with respectable detached two-story brick and stucco homes. Most had small front yards, front verandas, and postage stamp backyards whose gates opened into alleys where garages stood and garbage cans were stored. It was along these back alleys that men came to the back doors of the houses offering their knife sharpening services to housewives. Grandma had trimmed her backyard with hollyhocks, irises and peonies, flowers I always associated with her.

The house next door to Grandma's had an entrance-way in the shape of a keyhole, but Grandma's house, like Susie herself, was sturdy and square. On the Glenlake side of the house three steps led up to the large oak front door, indented between two bay windows like a mouth between two silent eyes.

Unlike many "parlors" that in those days were kept locked and used only for special occasions, Grandma's was always busy, for Grandma's home was always open to the bevy of young people who gathered around the four "Johnston girls," especially the young men who came to flirt and court and finally marry them. At the Johnston girls' reunion fifty years later, Aunt Ruth remembered listening for hours to the big bands played on the gramophone. "We would turn the lights down low," she recalled conspiratorially, "while we and our boyfriends swayed to our swoon songs: *The Rose of Tralee*, *To an Evening Star*, *If I Loved You*, and *Swanee River*. At these lovefests my aunt Lois, the baby of the family, dubbed affectionately "Apple Dumpling" by her older siblings, served as the designated spy who would keep watch out for her parents returning from an evening of choir practice or bridge, sending a signal to her teenage siblings and their boyfriends to stop their necking on the chesterfields.

Opposite Grandma's parlor was a dining room that held the large oval oak table around which the Johnston clan gathered for the obligatory Sunday dinner, a tradition that each of the Johnston girls, with the exception of my mother (our meals were catch as catch can), would carry into their own marriages. On an oak sideboard sat Grandma's glistening silver tea set, a wedding

present whose only purpose seemed to be to reflect back the life that transpired in that room. Commemorative plates featuring pictures of the Royal Family and gold-rimmed, intricately flowered Royal Worcester cups and saucers were displayed on high shelves surrounding the dining room. Dinners in Grandma's house were always formal affairs. The matriarch of meal and matter, Susie handled them with the authority of a quartermaster marshaling the provisioning of her troops. I can still see the melon-shaped soup tourine from which she ladled into wide, shallow soup bowls of delicate bone china a translucent beef broth swimming with carrots and onions. I can smell the rich, fatty aroma of roast beef or sometimes pork emanating from Susie's large, cast-iron oven, see her whipping up the potatoes, mashing the turnips into a large orange mound dimpled with butter, arranging the baking powder biscuits in a serviette-lined basket, and delivering all through the swinging kitchen door to the waiting aunts and uncles and cousins.

Widowed in her early fifties, Grandma presided over those dinners not only as chief cook and butler, but as head of household. Commanding the seat at the end of the table and brandishing a huge meat clever as she might a sword, Susie sliced into that unoffending roast until it ran with blood into which we dipped our bread, a Johnston household delicacy. I don't remember the gist of the conversations in that room, but I remember Grandma's jolly laughter, for she was a gregarious woman, lusty in her own late Victorian way.

On the whole, Grandma was without guile, a woman with a large circle of friends and a happy disposition, but she was no saint. She could be opinionated, especially about one or two of her sons-in-law whom she felt were not quite good enough for her daughters or didn't pay her enough attention. “Charlie has such a terrible temper. Lois could have done better than that,” I would hear her complain. Or,“Alan never even looks up or says, ‘Hello’ when I come to visit them. “I don’t see how Ruth puts up with it.” Bubbly Ruth, whose every sentence on some inconsequential matter ended on the verge of a titter, had married her opposite. A taciturn scientist, Alan was given to internalized flights of quantum physics. I guess he figured nobody could understand his mind even if he did speak. Grandma liked my Dad. “Joe has always been kind to me,” she would tell me. I guess she thought anyone who could put up with Freda must be some kind of a saint.

Behind Grandma’s dining room and through the swinging door lay Susie's red and white kitchen. If she was a quartermaster in the dining room, she was an artist in the kitchen and it was here that she initiated me into the culinary arts. As an adult, I’ve never really enjoyed cooking,

except on special occasions like Thanksgiving or Christmas, but with Grandma doing most of the work it was an invitation to a marvelous ritual of transformation. Her countertops would be covered in flour, prepared to receive the laying on of bread, pie and cookie dough or biscuit batter. As I watched, Grandma would use her large wooden rolling pin to roll out the dough into circles or ovals or oblongs. She taught me how to press the tin cookie or biscuit mold into the plump, resilient dough and let me punch down the oozing, rubbery bread dough after the first rising.

Christmas was my favorite season at Grandma's house for then, through the alchemy of a simple tin mold, decorative candies and colored icing, this plain dough was miraculously transformed into raisin-studded gingerbread men, glistening green Christmas trees, yellow and pink stars, Santa Clauses with red jackets and reindeer with silver bells on the tips of their antlers. There was rum-soaked fruit bread and plum pudding with hard sauce and date dainties to melt your mouth. Perhaps my favorite of all of Grandma's baking marvels were her tarts--especially the *pièce de résistance*, butter tarts--an old British concoction of corn syrup, butter, brown sugar and raisins.

The back door of Grandma's kitchen led down a short flight of stairs to a hall. There, through a tiny low-down door the milkman would deliver the twice-weekly ration of milk, eggs and butter. I could tell when he was coming by the clip-clop of the horses' hooves on the pavement. On wet days the pungent smell of horse manure penetrated even those thick brick walls. I would collect the milk that came in tall, square glass bottles with narrow goosenecks that I returned to the little low-down doorway when empty. Opening them, I would get a heady smell of ripe hay and digestive juices. With Grandma's help, I would ladle the rich yellow cream off the top of the milk into another container to be reserved for cooking and whipping.

To the left of the hall, another set of stairs led down to the two-level basement. There, on the upper-level in the dim light of a single bulb were rows of mason jars filled with more of Grandma's handiwork: wine-deep beets, peaches and plums, like ripe fetuses swimming in their golden and rose amniotic fluids, luscious raspberry jams and marmalade, canned tomatoes, green beans like stacked fingers, penny-bright bread and butter pickles, apricot chutney and, my favorites, sweet corn relish and piccalilli. In late summer and early autumn Grandma would bring up the huge black sterilizing pot from the basement to the kitchen to be filled with glass

jars. Soon the windows were covered in an opaque mist. The kitchen had become a dripping cloud forest.

In the lower part of the basement stood the old round washtub where I spent many hours helping Grandma pull the clothes through the ringer. If weather permitted we hung them out to dry on the rotating clothesline in the backyard or in the basement if the weather was inclement.

Sewing and handwork were another facet of Grandma's artistry. Freda used to say with a hint of disdain that she never saw her mother read a book as her father always seemed to be doing. But Susie's stories were woven into the countless afghans and doilies and lace bedspreads that she crocheted, in the argyle socks she knit for each of her sons-in-law at Christmas and into the sweaters and mittens and wool hats her grandchildren were supplied with all through the years we were growing up. Even after we had moved to the U.S., Grandma would arrive each Christmas with a treasure bag full of handmade surprises. Though the mittens were often ill-fitting and the hats unfashionable--especially when I became a teenager and insisted on looking like a fashion model even in the dead of winter--there was always something special about those hand-made gifts and the caring that I knew made them possible.

At her large oak dining room table with Butterick patterns laid out before me, Grandma taught me how to cut out a dress or shirt, how to sew a seam, make tucks in a bodice and turn a buttonhole. These skills came in handy when, as a teenager, in order to avoid having to wear thrift shop clothes, I could make my own.

Hanging out with Grandma meant that I was continually having to accompany her to visits with her relatives and to the wakes and funerals of her friends and acquaintances who seemed to be dying with regularity. I always made some kind of excuse to keep from going to a wake. I didn't want to see a dead person and thought it ghoulish that other people would want to. Perhaps because I had been so traumatized by the death from polio of Carol Ann, a girl my own age, I thought that if I didn't see a corpse I could keep the frightening prospect of my own mortality at bay.

I must have been about five when Grandma announced one day that we were going to visit Mrs. M. As we walked into that darkened parlor, I saw Mrs. M., a heavy woman, sitting beside a strange creature in a wheelchair. The creature's head was twisted to the side and kept nodding up and down. Her arms made jabbing motions in the air as if she were in a boxing ring. She was talking in a language I couldn't understand. The sight of someone so unlike the adults I

know unnerved me. For about an hour Grandma and Mrs. M. sat there talking while I sat silently, trying not to fidget. I didn't know what to do with myself. I was afraid to look at the creature in the wheelchair and knew that it was impolite to stare, but my curiosity got the better of me so I snuck little glances at her when I thought no one is watching. The visit seemed interminable as Grandma and Mrs. M. talked on and on. When we finally left I felt relieved, but also shaken. My sense of the steady order of what I took for normalcy had been rent.

Sometimes Grandma would take me on the streetcar to visit her younger sister, Aunt Flossie, who lived in another part of Toronto. Except for the dark eyes shielded behind rimless glasses, Aunt Flossie looked nothing like Grandma, being thin where Grandma was stout and narrow faced where Grandma's was broad. Unlike Grandma, who had a jolly disposition, Aunt Flossie's thin lips seemed set in a perpetual crease. Perhaps it was because she had seen too much of life's darker side. As nursing sister Florence Mae Chandler, she had served with the Red Cross in the First World War treating the wounded in the hospitals near the front lines in France. Her husband, Jack MacCorkindale, a major with the Royal Field Artillery, Canadian Expeditionary Force, had been one of her patients. Uncle Jack had fought at Ypres, the Somme and Passchendaele. When I knew him he was a stiff-necked mustachioed solicitor who, according to Aunt Lois, rarely paid attention to his law practice. He was constantly boasting to us about his investments—which seemed to be his one passion in life. He was going to make a killing on what would turn out to be a series of follies: mica mines that never panned out; a perpetual motion machine; and an electric car. Aunt Flossie never complained, though Grandma thought she was a fool to have married such a ridiculous speculator.

Many men were destroyed by their experience in that war, but Uncle Jack seems to have been elevated by it. Even as a civilian, he wore his medals and his limp as holy vestments and never tired of telling stories of his heroic battles with the Hun. I guess he had reason to crow. He had won the Distinguished Service Order, just a step down from the Victoria Cross, the highest honor bestowed by the United Kingdom for valor in war. Grandma, however, always left those meetings with Uncle Jack muttering under her breath at what a pompous blowhard he was.

Uncle Jack and Aunt Flossie had one child, Katherine, about the same age as my Aunt Lois. In 2014, after Katherine's death, Aunt Lois showed me a trove of photographs and letters to Aunt Flossie that she had found among Katherine's effects. They were letters from the wounded men Aunt Flossie had nursed during the war. The letters are filled with poetry, with

aching expressions of longing for home and family, of fear and bewilderment and sadness, but most of all with gratefulness to the “Angel” who had nursed them through their most terrible moments. The letters provided me with a new image of Aunt Flossie. She had been their Florence Nightingale.

One of Grandma’s bi-weekly rituals was a trip to the tea room at Eaton’s Department Store downtown. Eaton’s and Simpson’s were Toronto’s equivalent of New York’s Macy’s and Gimbel’s. Freda had been the chief fashion illustrator for Eaton’s when I was young and her illustrations would appear in the *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star*. Eaton’s, the largest store in the British empire with its six stories of mannequins in wide-shouldered suits and sleek silk gowns, with its imperious floor walkers and its smiling, gloved saleswomen was a little girl’s paradise. But the most important part of the trip was our lunch in the grand round tea room on the seventh floor which we approached through a lobby designed to look like an ocean liner. On one side of a large elegant room supported by ionic columns was a buffet table, its centerpiece an elaborately constructed quivering tomato aspic in the form of a fish. In the center of the room on a platform sat a man dressed in tux playing love songs on a grand piano. The patrons were mostly women like Grandma in their mid-fifties to sixties, conservatively dressed and bonneted in those ridiculous hats that women wore in the 1940s--hats that resembled flying pancakes, or stovepipes, or upside down flower pots or nesting birds. To a six-year-old they were the height of fashion.

Grandma also took me on longer trips. One was to Florida to visit distant relatives and see the sights. I was about ten and it was 1950. We traveled by Greyhound Bus from New York City. I can still see the rows of tumble-down shacks that lined the bus route on our way through North and South Carolina and Georgia, the shoeless black children peering out from dim doorways and ragged old men driving carts that were pulled by arthritic donkeys taking melons to market. I didn’t know about Southern segregation and wondered at the signs that read "white" and "colored" on the Greyhound station's bathrooms. This new and disturbing reality, however, was quickly erased by the tropical paradise of Cypress Gardens with its glass-bottomed boats and glamorous water skiers, exotic parrots and macaws that would sit on your outstretched arm--it was a page straight out of "Million Dollar Mermaid," my favorite movie idol, Esther Williams's, film. Grandma also took me on other trips--by boat to Niagara Falls with Mrs. Peacock, a plump, jolly friend of hers, the two of them singing "The Surrey with the Fringe on Top" the whole way

as we glided up to and right under the falls. I now wonder what the other passengers on the boat must have thought of these two stout ladies singing their hearts out on a crowded passenger boat.

But the most memorable trip with Grandma was a trip to Europe when I was sixteen, just six years after the end of World War II. Grandma had offered me a choice between braces and seeing the continent. I chose crooked teeth, which I now regret every time I smile, and set off on the *Isle de France* from Montreal with Grandma and her group of septuagenarians. Sporting a new Tony permanent and wearing a new blue and white seersucker sailor suit I felt like the cat who swallowed the canary. We toured eight countries in two weeks, traipsing after our umbrella waving guide through a whirlwind of cathedrals and art galleries, buses and trains and gondola rides and more cathedrals and trains. I know I was there because I have photos of me posing with a kilted Scottish piper, a guard at Buckingham Palace and a mummy in Pompeii. There I am also in a Dutch costume in Holland and a Bavarian Fraulein's costume in Germany posing in one of those fake prop rooms designed to attract tourists by conjuring up a romantic past that was just as fake. But for me, Europe was all a blur. With my sixteen-year-old's hormones raging, my interest lay elsewhere. Like a bitch in heat, I kept falling madly in love with every young man I met: the British steward on the ship; the bellboy at the hotel in Paris; the dark-haired man who pinched my bottom in the *Piazza Navona*. Fantasies of slipping out of my berth or bed for a secret midnight tryst with my lover filled my waking hours while my dreams took me to the delicious taste of Rudolpho's tongue on my lips. Grandma, ever watchful of her favorite granddaughter kept grabbing my hand in public, while I kept sidling away from her, embarrassed to be seen by the handsome males of Europe in the company of such a dowdy old-fashioned lady.

I never knew about Grandma's financial condition. Widowed in her early fifties, Grandma, I was to learn much later in life, had been left without a pension. Apparently she survived by renting the three bedrooms on the second floor to her married daughters until they could get on their feet, or to strangers, although how this afforded her enough money for trips still mystifies me. Whenever Freda and Joe went away on sketching trips I was sent to sleep at Grandma's house. Since the other rooms were taken, I would sleep with her in the Master bedroom at the top right of the stairs, the room with the maroon chenille bedspread. It was the room that had echoed with the screams of five hard labors, that had heard the first wail of five new births, the hushed room into which I had been ushered as a four-year old to say goodbye to

Grandpa. The room next to Grandma's had been my Aunt Helen's and I would sneak in there after the tenant had left for the day to ogle Aunt Helen's dust-covered collection of foreign dolls dressed in kimonos and elegant headdresses that stood in the tall glass and oak cabinet. After they got married, Aunt Lois and Uncle Charlie moved into the two rooms across the hall. I would often hear loud bursts of shouting and banging reverberate from those rooms. The voices were both female and male so I can only think that Lois held her own. I guess it was hard for poor Charlie, still a skinny undistinguished kid, living under the roof of a mother-in-law who thought her daughter had been destined for finer things.

I never thought about why I had to sleep with Grandma. It was just something one did and, perhaps, would have been the case had she not had to rent out rooms. Perhaps she still craved the warmth and comfort of a body next to her, Grandpa having passed away when she was still relatively young. Or perhaps she really needed another person to unlace her corset down the back, though what she did when I wasn't there I'll never know.

If Grandma was my Queen Mother and tour guide by day, by night she was my Earth Goddess, Ishtar, the Great Earth Mother, initiating me into the dark unspoken secrets of flesh and decay. Being put to bed first, I would be awakened by Grandma standing beside the bed. In the dim light from the street light outside, I could see her take out the hairpins that had held in place the thick peppery coils of hair that during the day were wound back from her face on either side in the fashion of the 1940s. Unleashed, her thick hair fell in an undulant wave, and for an instant in that dusky room she became the lovely young bride in that high-necked ivory satin and lace gown whom Grandpa had married.

After she had let down her hair, Grandma would remove her flowered housedress and slip and then her bra, her large drooping breasts hanging over the stiff corset cage like plump ripe pears. Sensing that I was awake, she would then ask me to undo her corset that by day held her unwilling flesh in a stiff, boned straitjacket. Hugging Grandma was always like hugging the hull of a wooden boat. One by one I would pull the long strings through the reinforced holes. With each loosening of the garment, a corresponding piece of quivering flesh was opened to the air and to the force of gravity and an unaccountable smell, redolent of sourness and fertility, a decaying musk swamp, filled the air. The corset undone and placed on the foot of the bed, she now took off her large silk underpants. Then over her head would go the loose silk nightgown that allowed her flesh at night the freedom that was denied it by day. After getting into bed,

Grandma was soon fast asleep; but rolling into the well in the old mattress made by her large weight, curled up against that body at once both awesome and dreadful, I would lie awake far into the night, listening to the deep hissing and snoring of this great beached whale, my very own Queen Mother.

Even though I didn't see much of Grandma after I had left home for college, she remained my Queen Mother, my polestar, until I was well into my twenties. So steady a presence in my early life had she been that it was with a shock when I picked up the phone in New York one day to learn from Aunt Lois that Grandma was dying of stomach cancer. I guess her lifetime of rich gravies and pastries had finally gotten the better of her. Just three weeks before the phone call I had given birth to our first daughter, Jennifer. Since I didn't know how long Grandma had to live, I decided to take the baby with me to Toronto so that Grandma could see her first great grandchild before she died. Susie was then living in a small apartment in West Toronto that my Aunt Lois had settled her into after the sale of the Johnston house. When I entered the room, she was sitting on the old rose and vermillion chintz chesterfield. I laid my infant daughter in Grandma's arms, and took a photo of her, but it wasn't the same Grandma I had known. She had become thin and frail and the usual sparkle in her dark eyes was missing. I'm not sure how much she took in that day as she barely spoke.

I only know it was with such bittersweet sorrow that I gave witness to the passing of one life and the beginning of another.