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The Literary Club
March 30, 2015

A Good Life

Little Marty was born on September 20, 1893, the youngest of five children. He was a special joy to his young parents, James and Ellen, and was doted on by his brothers, Will and Jim, and his sisters, Nellie and Kathleen. The children's paternal grandparents, John and Susan, had migrated from Ireland in 1842 and had both ended in Indianapolis where they met. After their marriage in 1852, they settled on a farm south of Lafayette, Indiana.

The children's father, James, and his two brothers, John and Martin, were born on that farm and eventually each married, bought land, built homes and raised their families on adjacent farms, all within half a mile of one another, near the tiny community of Clarks Hill, Indiana. This was a band of brothers who always worked together as a team. No one's planting was complete until all the fields were planted, and no one's harvest was complete until all the barns were full. The three families grew up almost as one. They worked and played together, they studied and prayed together and celebrated birthdays and holidays together. To the children it seemed the perfect life: safe, happy, secure, independent, with plenty of playmates, and wanting for nothing.

Their strong Catholic faith and close family bonds provided great support to James and Ellen when it became clear, as little Marty grew, that he was not developing normally. He had no control over his physical movements; he was unable to learn to walk or speak clearly. Doctors were consulted and delivered the somber news that Marty would need a lifetime of care. He would never be able to feed or dress himself or speak clearly. He would spend his life in a wheel chair. He had the condition known as cerebral palsy.

His parents, James and Ellen, channeled their energies into making Marty's life as normal as possible and integrating him fully into their active, extended family life. His siblings, Will, Jim, Nellie and Kathleen, later spoke of Marty's ready smile and cheerful personality and how he brought the whole family even closer together. As other families in similar circumstances know, the experience of shared caring for a disabled member strengthens

bonds of love and creates attitudes and family traits that last a lifetime. And so it was for them.

The children grew, and later they recalled their excitement and anticipation as their parents and teachers began to discuss the dawning of the new century. It was a time of great optimism in the United States which had established itself as a world power and now stretched, as the new anthem, America the Beautiful declared, "from Sea to Shining Sea." The children remembered the fireworks their father and uncles had somehow acquired and set off at the family gathering on New Year's 1900, in Clarks Hill.

The family's early years of the new century progressed with the pleasant normal rhythm of passing school years, graduations and young careers begun. Will and Nellie both graduated from Indiana State Normal School, as two year teacher training colleges were known at the time, and began their teaching careers nearby. Kathleen stayed home after high school to help her parents with caring for the home and homeschooling Marty who had become a teenager.

Jim graduated from Stockwell High School in 1906. He had ambitions to go on to college, but because of the increasing physical help required to care for Marty, he felt his parents needed him and he shouldn't leave home. So Jim worked with his father on the farm and also took on a rural mail delivery route, using his new Model T Ford. Life with his parents and siblings and extended family of cousins and aunts and uncles was pleasant but predictable and determined by the planting, the harvests and the passing seasons.

But the world outside rural Indiana was beginning to change. Far away Austria-Hungary had declared war on Serbia on July 28, 1914. Soon treaties and alliances drew in one nation after another and unleashed the plague of war across eastern and western Europe and beyond. By April 6, 1917, the United States had declared war on Germany, and soon dark clouds from the Great War were spreading across the U.S. The little cluster of families around Clarks Hill, Indiana, and their sons especially, would see this war set in motion changes that would forever impact many of their once quiet lives.

The Selective Service Act was passed by the U.S. Congress in May, 1917, requiring all males between 18 and 30 to register, and the draft was immediately implemented. The youngest

were called first. Jim's cousin, John, was the first from the families to be called in late 1917, and then cousins, Francis and Raymond were drafted in the spring of 1918. Finally in June, 1918, Jim at age 29 was called up. After basic training at Camp Sherman near Chillicothe, Ohio, he soon found himself sailing out of New York Harbor with the 362nd Infantry Regiment bound for Le Harve, France.

Later in life Jim never talked much about his short wartime experience, though he was proud of his service. He was a quiet and somewhat reserved man, but when prodded he would reminisce about how warmly the American soldiers were greeted by the people as they marched through French villages. He remembered with a smile the "40 & 8" boxcars they rode in that were labeled for 40 men or 8 horses. They eventually arrived in Belgium where they marched "through Flanders Fields" on their way to the front. He vividly recalled the rumble and the flashes of artillery in the night sky, the cold, wet, stinking trenches and the constant pervasive fear of gas attacks. He remembered advancing against the retreating Germans, but rumors of an impending armistice were also circulating. Then at the 11th hour on the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918, the war abruptly ended, leaving over 16 million dead and 20 million wounded – perhaps, human history's deadliest conflict.

Jim spent the cold Christmas of 1918, camped in Belgium, where he and thousands of other soldiers were felled by the flu pandemic that was raging across Europe in the months following the end of the war. Worldwide this flu outbreak is estimated to have killed well over 50 million people. Jim recovered and with other troops in his regiment shipped out of Le Harve in April, 1919, headed back home to Indiana.

The war was over and Jim was a civilian once again. It had only been about a year since he had been suddenly pulled from his quiet life on the farm to go off to fight a war in Europe, but profound changes took place during this timeframe. While Jim was away his mother had died suddenly and unexpectedly and brother Marty, to whom he was so devoted, contracted the flu and also died. Within 60 days of his return, his father fell ill and also passed away. These were the people dearest to him, and these personal losses forced him to rethink his life plans and gave him the opportunity and need to rewrite what he had imagined would be the narrative of the rest of his life.

And so it was that in 1920, Jim began to re-plan his future. Although he liked working the land and life on the farm, he decided that at last the time had come to pursue his dream of going to college. He and his siblings sold the farm, and at age 32, he was accepted as a freshman at Purdue University to pursue a degree in Chemical Engineering. Although it had been 14 years since he had finished high school, he excelled in his studies and graduated magna cum laude from Purdue in 1925, with a Bachelor of Science degree in Chemical Engineering.

While studying at Purdue, Jim became very interested in new research and advancements in synthetic rubber and decided to specialize in this area. Development of synthetic rubber was stimulated by demand for reliable supplies of rubber, initially for components in newly mechanized weaponry of the First World War and later by the rapidly expanding automotive industry. In the 1920's Ford was the second biggest user of rubber in the world.

Natural rubber was derived from plants grown in tropical regions of Southeast Asia and Latin America, and supplies were often unreliable. In addition the new specialized uses of rubber in industrial products put demands on the material that natural rubber could not meet. Interestingly it was the First World War that motivated German engineers to take the lead and accelerate research into synthetic rubber compounds needed for their planes, U-boats and tanks. Jim had to become fluent in German as he immersed himself in this German research.

After graduation from Purdue, Jim moved to Akron, OH which by that time had become the world center for rubber research and manufacturing. He had been recruited by the Trump Rubber Company which made parts for the automotive industry. Soon after settling in Akron, Mabel Dineen, a blue-eyed, auburn-haired, young Irish-American school teacher walked into Jim's life. Jim said she was smart and beautiful, and he was quickly swept off his feet. They were married in 1926 and were soon expecting a child.

After what he had felt was a late start Jim rejoiced that at long last he had found a complete life, full of love, with a job and profession that he enjoyed, and he had great plans and hopes for the future. But so very soon, tragedy intruded. On October 29, 1927, Jim's family in

Indiana received the shocking news that Mabel and their new born son had both died in childbirth. Jim, who had so recently wed, had tragically lost what was most dear to him and was alone again. His beautiful young wife, his new-born son, his plans and dreams all suddenly gone. It was a dizzying and sickening plunge from immeasurable joy to immeasurable grief.

It takes time for a broken heart to heal, but hope is the virtue that provides the soul with traction to climb out of the pit of despair. Gradually Jim found solace in prayer, in long days absorbed in his work and long nights reading. Late in life he would naturally and spontaneously recite poetry of Tennyson and Yeats and others that had comforted in those dark days.

His reputation in his industry grew, and in 1930, he was recruited to join the Premier Rubber Company, a manufacturer of rubber products for the automotive industry based Dayton, where he became their Director of Research. The position was well suited to his interest and skills, and he was happy in his work. But as Jim turned 45 and looked at his life and that of his relatives and friends, he was sorry to realize that his hopes for the satisfaction and happiness of his own family, like the one he had grown up in, had likely passed him by. He was prepared to settle into comfortable but solitary bachelorhood.

There are self-assured individuals who are confident that by dint of their wise planning, important parts of their future can be organized and programmed to assure success and avoid disappointments or unpleasant surprises. But many of us find that best laid plans may sometimes be thwarted by unforeseen events or accidents or perhaps, even sometimes by the hand of God.

One Sunday in the fall of 1932, after morning Mass, Jim stopped to greet the pastor who was talking with a young woman standing with a little girl by her side. He was introduced to Marguerite and her 4 year old daughter, Mary Jean. Originally from Maysville, Kentucky, Marguerite, who had grown up in a close Irish-American family there, was 12 years Jim's junior and had recently been widowed. Her husband, a successful young Dayton lawyer, had died suddenly of a heart attack the year before.

Jim later described his impressions when he met Marguerite that Sunday morning. He felt great empathy for her tragic personal loss, but he could see the love and comfort little Mary Jean gave her. He recognized her strength and resilience that had helped her cope with her great loss and move forward with her life. He said she was lovely and had a natural and warm personality, and the soft echo of the south was in her voice.

It did not take long for both Jim and Marguerite to find how compatible they were, how much they shared in common, how much they enjoyed each other's company and how naturally they filled the voids recently opened in their lives. Dinners and concerts, movies and picnics were planned for most weekends and brought them ever closer. Mary Jean was their steady companion for many outings, and Marguerite was impressed how gentle and fatherly Jim was with her. Soon they were talking marriage, and on November 24, 1933, they were wed in the same church where they had met by the same priest who had introduced them less than a year before. Mary Jean was their flower girl and was adopted by Jim immediately after the wedding day. Then she was always, in every way but birth, his own daughter. By the time he was 50, he and Marguerite would have three more children, son, Jim and daughters, Ellen and Ann.

From the date of their marriage Jim and Marguerite began their 50 year long and exceptionally close life together. This marriage allowed them to meld together the different parts of their earlier lives into a seamless lasting union. Many people commented through the years about how obviously in love they always remained. No one, not even their children, ever witnessed an argument or dispute between them. Marguerite's naturally bright and outgoing personality meshed perfectly with Jim's quieter and more reserved nature.

Jim's professional life was also long and successful, and he continued to be active in his work until age 75. Jim and Marguerite's four children grew up in their happy home where they were nurtured and supported and all found success in their own lives and careers. Between them, their children produced 18 grandchildren for Jim and Marguerite to know and love and enjoy during their long lives. And these two "late bloomers" would have been

pleased to know of their legacy of more than 40 great grandchildren who gather now several times each year to celebrate the memories of Jim and Marguerite.

Jim lived on for another 20 years after retirement, outliving Marguerite, 12 years his junior, by 2 years. Though in his last years his fine mind would be clouded by the cruel effects of dementia, he remained to the end the strong, kind, dignified, good and gentle man I knew as my father. Dad faded quietly away into eternity on February 20, 1983, in his 95th year.

My father's life was in many ways a quintessentially American story. The grandson of Irish immigrants, raised on a family farm in the Midwest, he answered the call of his country to fight its enemy across the sea. He returned home, finished his education, started a family and built a successful life. Like many others he faced great loss and disappointments, but always remained strong and true.

It is probably impossible to objectively describe the character of a person one is attached to by bonds of love and blood. However I found the words I was searching for to describe my father's essence in a quotation written almost 900 years ago by one early Fitzgerald about another earlier Fitzgerald. This is from a book titled "The Norman Invasion of Ireland" by Richard Roche, and the quotation is attributed to Giraldus Fitzgerald when he describes his uncle, Maurice Fitzgerald, who led the Fitzgerald clan when they took part in the Norman invasion in 1169. This is how the nephew describes Maurice Fitzgerald: He was "a man of dignified aspect and modest bearing.... In him, both in person and temper, moderation was the rule.... He was naturally of an excellent disposition, but he was much more anxious to be good than appear such.... He was a man of few words, but his language was polished and there was more sense than sound, more reason than eloquence in what he said.... He was sober, chaste, constant, firm and faithful...." History records that Maurice had an eventful and accomplished life. These words from his nephew make clear that he was also a much admired and good man. To me he sounds very much like my father, the Jim Fitzgerald, whose good life I have told you about this evening.

