

# A Really Great Uncle

By Jean Shriver

Boston is sprouting new buildings that look like giant asparagus stalks rising up to darken its narrow streets. Filene's is gone, while across the street, Macy's reigns triumphant. Only the cool green oasis of the Public Gardens seems familiar. Under its arching trees, it seems as if The Old Corner Bookstore, S.S. Pierce and the quiet city of "Make Way for Ducklings." could be just a block away. Following a glimmer of water, I walk to a kiosk and buy a ticket for the swan boats, a Boston phenomenon unchanged in over seventy years. I rush to the front seat and sit there alone, imagining my seatmate to be an elderly gentleman in a well brushed dark suit, a straw boater perched on his bald head. My Great Uncle George.

Childless but game, Uncle George shared with me corners of Boston he had ferreted out on his daily walks. He introduced me to my first Chinese restaurant, where, I'm ashamed to say, this provincial ten year old insisted on having a chicken sandwich. He took me to the Natural History Museum and didn't even shudder when I purchased a stuffed hummingbird with molting feathers. And he bought me rides on the wonderful swan boats.

But my Great Uncle George was more than a tour guide; he was a constant source of amusement. He made me so familiar with Edward Lear that to this day I can recite The Owl and the Pussycat and The Pobble Who Had No Toes, not to mention memorizing the plant name *Manypeopliaupsidedownia*. When I was a bit older he taught me an old song with a naughty word. I didn't know what that word meant, but I could tell from Uncle George's mischievous look that it would be worth finding out. To this day it remains the only improper word heard from any member of my genteel New England family.

This tribe was big on letter writing. Digging through a trunk of their beautifully penned missives, I tracked my great uncle from his carefree days at St. Paul's School to his time at Harvard. During his college years, he seemed to be constantly calling on young ladies. Also there are many fetching pictures of George in female costumes for various productions of The Hasty Pudding Club. I'm guessing that play acting and social timeouts might explain why he didn't graduate from Harvard.

The next batch of letters rhapsodizes over the beauty and grace of a young woman named Caroline. By the time I knew her, Aunt Caroline looked like several bolster pillow stuffed into a print dress. She was usually trailed by a wispy woman my mother called, "that batty sister Louise." The two of them would coo as they ran their fingers through my curls until I broke free and ran. In middle age, George's wife took to her bed with various ailments, but her husband remained devoted to the woman he called "Cayine" and did everything he could to make her life comfortable.

Uncle George lived in Brookline in a shadowy apartment at 82 Ivy Street where Aunt Caroline ruled from bed. Most days the shades at the windows were pulled down and the lamps switched on creating a perpetual twilight. Bowls of potpourri on the tables gave out a dim and musty scent. The family said Uncle George had once worked in a bank in Puerto Rico and that things had not gone well there. But my great uncle never talked about the past and if our conversation dwindled, he'd propose a game of cards or Halma. Halma was just like Parcheesi except with its ancient board and men it seemed more exotic. He'd offer me a cup of "cambric" tea, warm milk with just a dash of tea and sugar. Though it was a baby drink, I drank it with a smile so as not to disappoint the man who made it.

Recently, I went back to Ivy Street hunting for that apartment building, but nothing looked familiar. Boston has changed. In this new and bustling city, I can't imagine a policeman stopping traffic to let a family of mallards cross Massachusetts Avenue. Only the swan boats remain the same. The swan boats and my memories of a gentle man.