

Chapter Thirty One

Great Man – James O’Connell Morgan and his wife (my parents)

A Visit with the Morgans in Keller, Texas – April 2006

My mom is 84 (born February 26, 1922) and my Dad is 88 (born July 21, 1918). I have not seen them in a few years. You might think I am a bad son, but, as I see it, we are no more dysfunctional than a lot of families and I have my own family to think about: my 19-year old son (Ben) in college, my 24-year old daughter (Lindsey) and my wife (Lynn). In addition, of course I have my job and lately, an all-consuming drive to learn how to play golf well enough to relax and lower my handicap in the process. I am a grown man – I am not going to make excuses for not checking in on my parents more. I love them today as I always have.

Mom is losing her short-term memory and Dad’s hearing continues to decline. Imagine trying to have a conversation with these two people. They are outstanding individuals. If character is destiny, their lives almost dictate how they choose to deal with each other and those around them. A background sketch of each might help illustrate what I mean.

A sketch of my father (a great man):

Dad has been losing his hearing for years. Not a problem really, since he was never a person particularly interested in listening to anyone anyway. (My experience, at least.) He is a charming man with a fascinating background.

He was as an unremarkable student at St. Ignatius High School in Cleveland. (He was never a good student, but even then, a promising artist and illustrator. He drew a cartoon called Aloysius the Cat for his yearbook. He studied magazine illustrations and worked at copying them for fun).

He was a college football star. Three-year letter winner and two-

year starter as both offensive and defensive lineman. Played on John Carroll's first and only Big Four championship team in 1939. Team's record was 13-3-1 (.794) in his two years as a starter. (He was 60-minute Morgan at John Carroll University in Cleveland). He majored in philosophy – which my Mom playfully refers to a major in football. Good thing too because after he graduated 1940 (52 years later in October 1992) they installed him into the school's sports Hall of Fame.

He was an art student. (He studied at Pratt Institute of Design in New York where he began to solidify his career path before the call of military duty caused him to take a detour. This year at Pratt and the time he spent in New York City influenced him greatly.

He was a soldier during World War II. First enlisting and later entering officer candidate's school (OCS). He served as a leader of a camouflage unit and later led Black troops (at a time when the army was still segregated). He went wherever they asked him to go and yet was able to stay out of harm's way. He served his country with honor for over four years.

He was a commercial artist and employee. At (Malmquist Studio) He was an artist who routinely performed his duties and a loyal employee until a mix up in paychecks revealed to him an inequity in compensation that firmed his resolve to start his own business.

He was a successful businessman and citizen of Cleveland, Ohio. (He founded Morgan Studio in 1951 as *the architects of the printed page*. He was convinced that design was a noble and worthy profession. Along the way, Morgan Studio did work companies big and small. Ohio Bell Telephone, Youngstown Steel Door, Lake Erie Screw Corporation, Mooney Chemicals, Cleveland Federal Savings and Bonne Bell Cosmetics are some of the firms that relied on Morgan Studio for quality advertising, art and photography applied to everything from annual reports to package design

Husband to Mary Lawton Morgan for 64 years and counting (married in December of 1942).

James O’C. Morgan is Father to Sundance (formerly James O’Connell Morgan Jr. – born 1944), Mary Lynn (born 1952), Wesley (born 1955), Gregory (born 1956), Daniel (Born 1958) and Robert Morgan (born 1959)

My mom is pretty great too.

My mother was a devoted wife and mother with a passion for the theater. She participated in hundreds of community theater productions as an actress and director. She even won a best actress award for her role in *Veronica’s Room* at the Lakewood Little Theater (later renamed the Beck Center). She went back to school, at Case Western Reserve University, and earned a Masters Degree in her early 40s.

Her acting credits included: *The Deadly Game; The Cactus Flower; Oklahoma* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brody*. Her directorial credits include: *The Roar of the Greasepaint, The Smell of the Crowd; You’re a Good Man Charlie Brown; Man of La Mancha* (and others at Clague Playhouse) and *West Side Story* (at St. Edwards High School). She lectured at the Rose & Crown Inn before the opening of *Taming of the Shrew* at the Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival. She was sensational.

She had six children with James O’Connell Morgan (listed above). She also had at least seven miscarriages.

She drove a Lincoln Continental – a black one much as the one JFK was riding in when he was shot in Dallas in 1963. Her Lincoln was more like 1967 and was outfitted with seatbelts front and back for transporting kids safely.

So, put the artist and the dramatist together for all those years and add the hearing problem (for him) and the loss of short-term-memory (for her) and you have two people who are dealing with the passage of time with incredible style. He talks as if to understand two-way conversations and she sparkles as if enjoying a lovely coherent train of thought.

Both are brilliant portrayals of perception over reality.

A knock at the door.

The door opens a crack. Mom peeks out.

“Who is it? What do you want?” (Mom is playfully pretending not to recognize her own son at the front doorway. We know the day could come when, in fact she does not recognize us. Maybe she is practicing her lines for the role - when that day comes.)

“It’s me” says Rob, growing tired of the routine. (He reports that this little game is a standard weekend drill. He is a good son and visits often to check in on both of his parents.)

Rob described this game in some detail before Greg and I got to see the performance live and almost exactly as he described it. It is sad, amusing, and a little annoying all at the same time.

Almost as if adding a little comedy to the situation, a cuckoo clock that hangs just inside the foyer chimes in with a soft “cuckoo cuckoo.”

Mom has not seen Greg, Wes and Rob together in quite some time – maybe 4-5 years. We are part of a family of six children but somehow Mom thinks of the four boys as a separate unit. (I have never liked that notion. It’s almost as if my oldest brother Sundance – 11 years my senior and my sister Lynn who is 3 years older have been written into some other chapter of her life and memory.)

“Who’s missing?” Mom asks as she considers the three of us.

“Sundance? Lynn?”

“No, I mean of the four. Who’s missing?”

“Dan.”

“Oh.”

“Cuckoo-Cuckoo”

Dad smiles as if to understand the line of questioning, but it does not matter. It is not important. He learned how to appear engaged in conversation while Mom entertains a long time ago. He knows the act and smiles as if to enjoy.

When Dad does get a word in edge-wise, he tends to reflect on any number of really wonderful chapters in his life. The football star, the war, the early days in business and each topic is fascinating but he is not much of a storyteller. Mom has saved him from bad reviews repeatedly. She cuts him off before he

has to finish almost any story. Only with the Morgan kids, we kind of wish she would let him go on a bit occasionally. On this occasion she does. Dad tells a few tales of Army life and the early career as a commercial artist.

“Bernard Baruch. You once said you met Bernard Baruch on a train when you were in the Army,” I reminded him. But he did not hear me. He continues his story about a train ride that is from the same period in his life.

“Bernard Baruch.” I say a bit louder. (Bernard M. Baruch, the “Park Bench Statesman,” made his fortune on Wall Street and later served his country as an economic adviser during both World Wars I and II as a confidante to six presidents.)

“They want to know about Bernard Baruch.” My mother enunciates and projects a little louder, and more clearly, so he can hear.

“Yes, I met him on a train on my way home to Cleveland from South Carolina. His assistant/secretary approached me and said that Bernard Baruch would like to have me join him for dinner.” (The story is just an interesting juxtaposition of people and places for me. It also makes me think my Dad must have been a fine looking soldier at the time.)

“I remember his entourage and seeing him wave to me after he de-boarded the train. It was an interesting thing to have happen to me.”

Interestingly, my mother is fatigued. All that acting, takes a lot of energy. She’s more relaxed and settles into her chair a bit more. She allows my father to talk. He seems to relish the opportunity.

“Did I ever tell you why I started Morgan Studio?”

“Yes you have.” (I do not think he heard me. Or maybe he decided to repeat the story for Greg)

“I was working for Malmquist Studio in Cleveland. I was routinely putting together this magazine for GE. I had been there about four years. On payday, I got the wrong check by mistake. It was the paycheck of a new hire. I realized very quickly that this new guy, who was doing pretty much the same

thing as me, was getting a bigger paycheck. I decided then and there to learn as much as I could about running this kind of shop and open my own.”

(I love that story. As I understand it, it took a little while longer before he worked up the nerve to leave and open Morgan Studio in 1951. When he last told me that story, the office manager made the mistake. He got her to agree to help him understand the systems for keeping and collecting time sheets and how to handle billing, making it clear that he was not happy with the inequity of the situation.)