

## John and Mary Revisited

She looked at the yellowed white dress Maureen Ann showed her and remembered her wedding day. Tears of joy and regret rolled down her wrinkled cheeks as she thought of John. They spent 31 years together, joyful at times and tumultuous at others. She happily recalled their second honeymoon together in Vancouver, British Columbia and Alberta, Canada in 1948. They were too poor for a real honeymoon in 1933 when they were first married. The Great Depression of the time had hit most everyone pretty hard, and the best John and Mary could do was take the train from San Francisco to Reno and Virginia City, Nevada, John's birthplace. His father was a miner during the Comstock Load there, and the trip would bring back many things and familiar places would be perused. How happy and content they were after 15 years of marriage and the addition of three children, ages 3-10.

Canada was marvelous and so were the ensuing years. Mary felt like she had been living in a dream world. John was Riverton Drive's Block Air Raid Warden during those early years of the Cold War, and Mary was Cub Scout Pack 61's Den Mother for St. Stephen's Grammar School. She was quite proud of her 7 year old son Thomas who was always faithful to the scouting pledge and a model child.

These days were happy ones and so was the news four years later in 1956 that their eldest daughter Maureen Ann was going to enter a convent to become a nun. John and Mary were both devout Catholics, but John, even more so. Mary would explain to their 18 year old daughter that she would never have a family of her own; but her husband was so proud that he would be the father of a "religious" that the latter fact happily eclipsed the almost certainty of grandchildren that Maureen Ann could provide him with.

The days of bliss came to an end several months after Maureen Ann entered the nunnery in August of 1956. These first few months and couple of years were bittersweet. John missed his eldest and favorite child, and his wife became lax in her duties as mother/housewife and secretary to her insurance broker/small real estate company owner husband. To add to his chain smoking John began to drink heavily, and Brenda, the middle child, and Thomas suffered in silence during the frequent arguments of their parents. Thomas almost always being the "cause" for their quarrels began to have feelings of inferiority and anger as he locked himself in his room during many of his parents' frequent bouts. He would listen at the door and wait for his name to be repeated, time and time again, as John and Mary fought in the living room.

Things came to a head in 1961 when John suffered a severe heart attack and almost simultaneously Mary was hospitalized for nearly a year after a "nervous breakdown" with a severe case of depression which was still somewhat of a mystery in those days, prior to the discovery of proper medications and treatment other than electric shock therapy. Brenda, pregnant, had eloped with Bill, her fiancé, and married in Reno, Nevada. Thomas was left home alone for much of his sophomore year in high school and he managed to run amuck. He learned to fight and he began to smoke and drink heavily. Fortunately, he kept up his grades but his discipline was non-existent. He "hung out" with a rough crowd.

In 1963, when JFK was assassinated, John was inconsolable. Kennedy, the first and only Catholic President of the United States of America was his "poster child". Two months later he suffered a heart attack and died.

Those days, from 1956-1954 were rough indeed, but here had been high points as well. Shortly before her husband's untimely death, Mary and John had celebrated their 30<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary in grand style with Sister Mary Shawn, home from the convent on a rare-occasion visit, Brenda and her small family, and their obstreperous but friendly son Thomas, who was about to matriculate to the University of San Francisco to start a pre-legal program. The relatives were all there and so were many family friends. The 57 year old married couple eagerly opened their gifts and many a whiskey was raised in a congratulatory toast to the pair who had loved and suffered so much together. For one night the 30s, 40s and mid 50s had come to life again. That was a happy night if there ever was one.

In 1981 Mary recalled those ups and downs; and she was well aware that she had been sadly unable to show her love to her husband or son in a way befitting her station in life. Thomas, who was at her side, relived in his consciousness the two exceptions to this rule as concerned him: as a playful and care-free 9 year old he had ruined one of his mother's silk scarves in the spokes of his fancily decorated bicycle and Mary had simply said, "That's OK, honey". Years later, when, as a 23 year old captain in the US Army and after having been hospitalized for three months after an automobile accident while on active duty, he heard her say "I love you Tom", and she gave him a tender smile and her eyes had lit up while he walked on crutches with his 63 year old mother. She was obviously happy that the accident had saved her son from a stint in Vietnam that he may very well have not survived. They talked.

Now as my mother closed her eyes and "went to sleep" I wished things had been different. My family life had all but ended in 1956, and with ambivalent memories I looked back at our lives together while contemplating her at last peaceful face and the rosary intertwined between her fingers.

Topic: Nostalgia.