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Basement Treasures: An Inheritance Below the Surface

As far as basements go, my basement is a pretty bright place. The ceilings are high, the concrete floors are carpeted, and the walls are papered in gold and red brocade that feels retro chic instead of dated. I've spent a lot of time in this basement over the past five years, going through various phases of cleaning it out. The initial cleanout was the easiest – I removed the detritus and junk, leaving only a jumble of family archives that seemed precious and meaningful. I shoved everything into one room and let it sit there for a year or so.

Then I had to pare down the items in the room to prepare for renovating other parts of the basement. I did another broad sweep and tried to organize the items into bins based on themes. There's a bin called "Photos." Another bin called "Kay's journals," which contains most of the notebooks that my great aunt, Kay – Kathleen, but known to everyone as Auntie Kay – kept over the seven decades of her adult life. There's another bin with letters between Auntie Kay and her husband Gordon while he was overseas during World War 2. Another bin labeled "Winter family" holds assorted photos of Auntie Kay's mother's family over two or three generations (none of the black and white photos are labeled or dated).

I had convinced myself that I'd received the greatest gift: three or four generations of stuff, precious stuff, that my great aunt had lovingly tended in her basement. I had inherited the basement, along with the rest of the house and everything in it, after she died. I had also received

her dying wishes to carry on her legacy as caretaker of the stuff. To organize or manage or make something with it. To preserve it for future generations. To do anything but throw it away.

I call it “the stuff” as a term of endearment. Depending on the context, I also call it “the body of data” or “the family archives.” The former makes me sound like more of a researcher than I actually am and the latter sounds like I’m dealing with something already tamed and organized. But Jacques Derrida notes that archive, as a word and a notion, “points toward the past, to refer to the signs of consigned memory, to recall faithfulness to tradition.” My archive has its roots firmly in the past and is faithful to a tradition I’m only beginning to understand.

Nevertheless, I like “the stuff” because it’s vague, general, and just a little irreverent. Once I had the stuff compartmentalized and somewhat ordered, I still wasn’t sure what to do with it. I needed some kind of container or focus, so I started grad school and committed to using the stuff as the basis of my research.

Once I made it to a certain point in my graduate studies, I took a year off from my full-time job to focus on making academic progress on the stuff in my basement. I expected to spend my days digging through the bins of things with excitement and enthusiasm. I expected to develop a relationship with the things. I envisioned myself finding pleasure and purpose in looking through the bins and documenting my discoveries. “I will ‘find the stories’ in here,” I told my friends. “Maybe there are family secrets!” So much potential and unknown.

On the first day of my research, I pull out the bin with Auntie Kay’s journals and open a random notebook. The first entry is January 1, 1995. “The living room is a mess and I spent two hours tidying it up. Then I called Phyllis, Geri, Susan, and Mrs. Baxter to wish them a Happy New Year. Vickie stopped by for tea and we talked about her niece.” Keeping in mind that my

great aunt was 75 years old in 1995, she did accomplish a lot in one day, including cleaning up after the New Year's Eve party she had hosted the evening before.

After a few pages, my eyes hurt from trying to decipher her handwriting. She fit two lines of cursive writing between each printed blue line of the notebook. Pages and pages of this. The day she ordered bulbs for spring planting. The day her friend drove her around to fabric stores as she hunted for the perfect material for new curtains for the spare room. Every day, a list of who visited, who phoned, who had a new grandchild.

I pull out another notebook, this one has 1982 written on the front page. It's a small book from a store in Chinatown, with printed satin fabric on the exterior, red with gold dragons. The cursive handwriting is even smaller, more lines crammed on small pages. I put it away, pull out another spiral bound notebook. This one is from 1974. Like all the others, it starts on January 1. I flip through. On a top margin, she had written, "10 years since my dad died."

I give up on the notebooks. There are too many, the small print and mundane details don't hold my attention. They make my eyes ache. Auntie Kay wrote in her diary before bed every evening, for decades. I wouldn't be surprised if this lifelong practice was one of the factors that contributed to her long life; she lived in her own home until age 97. I never asked her why she kept a diary, but I suspect it was for similar reasons most people do: to remember the details of her days, to process her life, to assert her place in the world as a homemaker, gardener, and mother.

Paralysis and overwhelm set in, and I find myself staring at the bins stacked under the stairs. Then I stare at the wall. When I want to feel really productive, I move to my computer and stare at the screen. I focus on other course work that has nothing to do with the stuff. I pay bills. I

plan gardening projects. I take on too much volunteer work. I do anything but confront the archives.

In *The War of Art*, Steven Pressfield explores the resistance that artists and creators encounter when trying to work on a project. He describes it as “an energy field radiating from a work-in-potential. It’s a repelling force. It’s negative. Its aim is to shove us away, distract us, prevent us from doing our work.” Resistance is internal and self-generating, he notes. I’m familiar with this resistance.

Pressfield also presents a cure for resistance. It’s as simple as just sitting down and doing the work, clocking in the hours. I try to follow his suggestions, but I still put up too many obstacles for myself. After weeks of moving around bins and staring at walls, my well-meaning friends and advisors encourage me to deal with my overwhelm by finding a manageable entry point into the stuff. “What catches your curiosity?” they ask. “What are some threads you can follow?”

Everything catches my attention and everything bores me. But threads start to emerge, once I start noticing. During the first phase of the basement cleanout, I packed up a handmade miniature dollhouse (one of Auntie Kay and Uncle Gordie’s many hobbies) and discovered that the walls were adorned with tiny, framed photos of family. These included a one-centimeter square photo of a face that I recognized as Kay’s mother, Marjorie, my great-grandmother. I donated the dollhouse and all of its contents to Miniature World, a tourist attraction in downtown Victoria that already had a few of Kay and Gordie’s creations in their collection. But I kept the little framed black and white photos. These are my ancestors, in miniature form.

While poking through the “Winter family” bin, I find the original photo of Marjorie that the miniature pic had been cropped from. She’s young, maybe in her early twenties, and she’s

sitting on rocks beside the ocean. Her hair is wind swept and she squints a little, as though she's looking into the sun.

I had heard many stories about Marjorie when I was growing up, always told with a reverent and melancholy tone by her daughters. She had a mysterious illness that led to her early death at age 48, when my grandmother and her sisters were in their early twenties. Marjorie was bedridden for two years, then she recovered enough to retreat to her studio on the farm property and spend her time writing poetry before she died. Auntie Kay had shared with me the collection of poetry that she and her sisters edited and published two decades after Marjorie's death, and somewhere along the way I came to believe that her illness was depression. Nobody told me this diagnosis; it was a conclusion that I came to on my own, based on what I was not told. I have no idea if this diagnosis was real or a figment of my overactive adolescent imagination.

I had found a few copies of Marjorie's poetry book during the basement cleanout and had set them aside in a box with other books and genealogy materials. *Petals from God's Garden* is a slim volume, with a photo of the apple orchard on the family property adorning the front cover, professional looking but obviously self-published. Marjorie wrote poems about nature, the forest around her rural home, her daughters, and, as the title suggests, God and her devotion.

There are other pieces of Marjorie scattered throughout the archives. A photo of her and her husband, Lee, on one of the walls in the basement where Auntie Kay had created a gallery of family portraits. Marjorie and Lee sit on the front steps of their home, shoulders touching, a comfortable camaraderie between them. The photo is, of course, undated, but it was probably taken toward the end of her life. Her hair is split in the middle and pulled back, and she smiles slightly. I inspect her face for signs of illness or weariness, and I see a lack of focus in her eyes, a

weight on her mind. But, as with the blanks I've filled in the stories on my great-grandmother, I'm not sure what's real and what's a projection of my imagination.

One of the most significant things in my basement is not originally from this basement. It comes from another basement, my parents' basement in the BC Interior, which I cleaned out along with the rest of the family home in the spring of 2023. I found a box labeled "Treasures - EVA" and knew instantly it was something that my mom (Eva) had received from my grandmother, Dorothy, known to everyone as Dori. She died in 2007, so my mom would have likely received the box a few years prior, before my grandmother developed dementia and was moved into a care facility. I'm certain that before Dori felt her faculties slip away, she would have ensured that she had transferred her most precious treasures to her oldest and most reliable daughter.

I opened the cardboard box to find two wooden jewelry boxes and I quickly rifled through them to discover some baby hair clippings, jewelry, and coins. I lifted out the compartmentalized removable tray, lined in decaying purple silk, to discover in the bottom of the box a handwritten letter from Marjorie to Dori, dated February 25, 1938. I was in a race against time to clean out the house and didn't have the luxury to read old letters, but I made a mental note of the box with the letter and committed to reading it when I had space. I brought it home to Victoria and stored it in my basement along with everything else.

On a rainy morning, when I'm able to shake off the overwhelm and make myself do something, I retrieve the box from its corner of the basement and find the letter, neatly folded and patiently waiting in the bottom of the jewelry box. Marjorie wrote the letter to my grandmother on her twentieth birthday. She congratulated Dori on a new job and wished her

success, in a tone that is formal yet warm. Her handwriting is round, with loops and flourishes. Marjorie shared the story of the box, which I learn is a “work box,” a type of functional box common in English society in the nineteenth century.

“The work box is quite old,” Marjorie wrote. “It must be 41 years old as Grandma Winter’s mother bought it for her when she was 12 and she gave it to me when I was 12. It goes to the eldest girl in the family. The silk is getting rotten but sometime you can renew it. I don’t know what kind of wood it is. I cleaned it with Liquid Veneer and it looks better. It should be done fairly often to keep it nice – you will find it a good place to keep your valuables and most treasured things.”

Dori held on to the box for decades until she passed it on to her eldest daughter, my mom, who would have been in her sixties when she received it, a move that is characteristically selfish of my grandmother. But I also understand why she would have held on to it – Marjorie died two years after gifting the work box to her daughter. It makes perfect sense that 22-year-old Dori would have kept this piece of her mother close to her.

And eventually the box made its way to me, the eldest daughter of my generation.

I am befriending my mother’s mother’s mother. I have found a straight line from me to my great-grandmother, Marjorie, a line that has been established through stories and sentimental materials. What I know about Marjorie Winter is that she came to the west coast of Canada from Derby, England with her family in 1909, when she was 17. I don’t know why the family uprooted itself, left a successful photography business behind, and settled on the farthest coast of Canada. What impact did this have on Marjorie? What did she think of her new home? I never had a chance to ask anyone these questions. Perhaps the answers are somewhere in my basement.

By all appearances, Marjorie made Canada her home. She married Lee Llewelyn Field, the son of a pioneer family in Metchosin, a rural community outside of Victoria. She lived with him on a farm with sheep and an apple orchard, and they raised three daughters (my grandmother, Dorothy, and my great aunts, Kathleen – known by her nickname, Kay – and Muriel). Through stories, I learned that she wrote, painted, retreated often to a small cottage on the property, and suffered from an illness that caused her daughters to tiptoe around the family home.

History isn't linear and my ancestry isn't a straight line. It makes sense that the tree is the dominant popular symbol for family history because this is how it looks: lines of descent that branch off one another. It fits nicely in the above and below ground symbolism of a tree – branches that reach towards the sky and the root system that plummets below the earth, drawing up nutrients.

I often feel alone in the universe, a single celled organism subjected to the elements. I'm the sole survivor of my nuclear family – both my parents and my younger brother are dead. There is nobody else alive who shares my genetic composition. But there is a constellation of people who share my DNA, even if they are no longer with us. My head spins when I think of the full picture of my lineages. My paternal and maternal lines, up through each of my parents to their parents, their parents' parents, and so on and so on. The more I think about it, the more it starts to feel less like a tree and more like an entire galaxy. It lacks the orderliness of tree branches or root systems, clearly delineated generations, leaving instead a galactic system of dots to be connected.

I'm not the only person concerned with hereditary lines or my origin story. Genealogy is an enormously popular hobby that has evolved into a multi billion-dollar industry, with

specialists, subscription-based websites, and products. It's an industry with questionable ethics and predatory practices, requiring people to hand over their DNA to for-profit companies. But it makes sense that people are drawn to this; capitalism, globalization, and veneration of the nuclear family have disconnected Westerners from their roots and homelands. Many North Americans of my generation can't name members of their families beyond their grandparents.

I'm in a different position than many amateur genealogists; I'm not trying to find my hereditary lines. I haven't even bothered with sending my DNA to a biotechnology company because I can trace my lineage back a few generations through stories that have been passed down to me over the course of my lifetime (and which, honestly, bored me to death, but I absorbed more than I realized, including a reverence for my ancestors that I didn't even realize I was capable of feeling). Unlike those who are searching for their origins, I'm in contact with my origins on a daily basis. I walk by bins full of my origins. I'm trying to figure out what to do with my origins. I regularly contemplate throwing my origins into the landfill. But I worry about what the repercussions would be. A curse? Lifelong regret? A scolding from a distant cousin who emerges in the future, looking for the keys to their past?

As I sit in my basement, fearful of opening the bins stored under my staircase, Michel Foucault's genealogies come to mind. He was less concerned with the natural science's method of hereditary lines and more interested in the philosophical applications of genealogy, how systems of thought lead to turns of history. Scholar David Garland calls this Foucault's "history of the present," and notes that it is most useful when applied to institutions, not families, drawing from Foucault's late-career work on institutions. In Foucauldian thought, genealogy is a method of writing critical history, using historical materials to revalue the present day. According to Foucault, the point is not to search for "origins" but to understand the random process for how

the past became the present. Foucault's genealogies are not driven by a historical concern to understand the past but a concern to understand the present.

This lands with me. I am more interested in understanding the present than the past. As I wrestle with these materials in my basement, I don't long for an idealized past where life was simpler and more easeful. I am solidly in the present.

But I feel a sense of mystery when I hold the slim volume of poems that Marjorie wrote, which her daughters published 26 years after her death. I feel a thread of connection to this woman I know only through her words and stories about her. My spine tingles with recognition and acknowledgement when I read the inscription on the front page of her book of poems, dedicated "to her family and relatives, present and future." This includes me. I am the future.

My most productive form of procrastination is a series of ancestral healing sessions with a therapist, Shauna. She is enthusiastic and supportive of what's happened in my basement, even though I dismiss it as not enough and feel like I haven't accomplished anything. "Marjorie has made herself known," Shauna says during our video call session. "She's drawing you into her elder wisdom field, offering you connection and guidance."

I imagine this elder wisdom field as a blanket of stars, wrapping around and protecting me. Shauna encourages curiosity and discovery, to sit back and see what arises. "I'm so overwhelmed by all this stuff," I tell her. "I don't know what to do with it. I thought I would find some kind of delight in exploring it, but I just shuffle boxes around. I almost fall asleep when I start going through it."

"You don't have to physically go through the stuff if you don't want to," she says. "Discovery doesn't have to be about synthesis. What happens when you lead with your heart and

belly? What brings you alive? Follow what comes alive for you.” I know that words and stories make me feel alive.

“Marjorie’s book of poems is a portal,” Shauna affirms. On the video screen, her eyes light up and she shifts in her chair. “What shapes us is stories more so than facts. I see you and Marjorie sitting together with tea and holding hands. She’s so pleased that you’ve found her poems, decades after she wrote them. She’s so happy you’ve paid attention.”

Shauna leaves me with more questions than answers. How have I been shaped by this lineage, by larger forces? What am I resurrecting from maternal lineages? What does it mean to be in deep reciprocity? What do I yearn for? I come out of our video sessions feeling uplifted, hopeful, less burdened by the physical stuff in my basement and more willing to be in this process.

Ancestral healing and veneration is new territory for me. I had no interest in this until my parents died and became ancestors themselves, two more stars added to the galaxy of people that came before me. As I grappled with my grief over this enormous, life-shifting loss I found myself drawn to placing altars around my home and yard, and researching what should be placed on them. This is, apparently, a normal response to parental loss, and one which fuels ancestral veneration across cultures. In his anthropological work on ancestors, Meyers Forte observes, “For parents must die... so that children may continue the life they owe to their parents, and children must replace parents though they dare not wish them away.”

My ancestors, as far as I can tell, are fairly homogeneous. They mostly come from Britain, as far back as I can name, on my mom’s side and on my dad’s side. My brain can only process the most recent generations, the ones I can attach names to. When I think about any

further back, my head starts spinning, the same way it does when I look at the night sky and try to calculate the distance of the stars from the earth.

I don't know much about my dad's paternal lineage because he was estranged from his father and never talked about him, but with a name like Harvey I can assume they came from somewhere in the United Kingdom. I did grow up with many stories about my dad's maternal lineage, which contains the only non-British bloodline in my genetic make-up. My great-grandmother and great-great-grandmother were Secwépemc, the first peoples of the Interior region of British Columbia (which is where I was born and raised). My great-great-grandfather came to North America from England and made his way to the BC Interior in search of gold. What he found instead was land – he became a successful rancher and married the first of his three Secwépemc wives. Their son, William, married Louise Eagle, my dad's grandmother who had almost mythological status in his life, having left an impression of power and presence on him.

I have a photo of her taken deep in the forest, holding a gun and a dead bear. If only this great-grandmother had left behind a book of poems.

The ancestral work with Shauna causes me to look at how I've been shaped by the women who came before me. Honouring the materials in my basement from previous generations is an act of reconstruction that allows me to build and understand my life. They are more than the remaining traces of my ancestors – they are my narrative inheritance, holding the life stories of those who came before me. Family archives can function as a form of meaning making, and narrative inheritance offers an opportunity for intergenerational research into

personal identity and family stories. In some ways, this contradicts Foucault's genealogies, but it also aligns, on an individual level: the past creates the present.

In his inquiry into family secrets and impact on the family of his father's double life as a CIA agent, H.L. Goodall reflects on his narrative inheritance:

What we inherit narratively from our forebears provides us with a framework for understanding our identity through theirs. It helps us see our life grammar and working logic as an extension of, or a rebellion against, the way we story how they lived and thought about things, and it allows us to explain to others where we come from and how we were raised in the continuing context of what it all means. We are fundamentally *homo narrans*—humans as storytellers—and a well-told story brings with it a sense of fulfillment and of completion.

As Shauna told me, we are shaped by stories rather than facts. Of course, there is a risk in digging into family materials and narratives. I run the possibility of encountering unfinished business and incomplete narratives. Who knows what long-buried secrets I may come across. Sometimes things are swept under the rug for a reason. What I do not discover is almost as significant as what I may find. Inherited narratives can have gaps. The silence that surrounds stories that are not passed down is known as absent memories.

I think about the absent memories around my great-grandmother's mysterious illness that led to her early death at age 48, and how somewhere along the way I came to believe that her illness was depression. Nobody told me this diagnosis; it was a conclusion that I came to on my own, based on what I was not told.

Husband and wife research team Robert Ballard and Sarah Ballard remind me that a narrative inheritance is not just one story but a constellation of a family's known stories. They

write, “That which has come before influences what is to come next. We inherit the stories, experiences, and identities of our fathers, mothers, grandmothers, and grandfathers.”

What I find fascinating about the Ballard’s analysis is that they place narrative inheritance on a continuum. Following narrative inheritance is narrative momentum as they observe that “family identity is a narrative of both the past and present that contains within it a sense of movement and force that carries us into the future.”

When I was in my late twenties, at a particularly lost and aimless point in my life, Auntie Kay tried to talk me into living with her and working on the archives. I declined because it felt like the small and fearful thing to do. I didn’t know what I wanted but I knew I wanted to feel alive. I was hungry, I wanted to find my own place in the world, even if I had no idea what that meant.

So I rebelled against her wishes and let myself wander. I studied yoga, moved to Montreal, found my dream job and established some sort of career for myself, fell in love. A decade later, I felt the pull of home and returned to the west, to the salty, mossy air of the west coast and the dry, scruffy landscape of the BC Interior. I could see the elders in my life starting to fade and I wanted to be closer to them in their final years. I knew a generational transfer was on the horizon and I’d have a responsibility in stewarding the shift.

While Derrida acknowledges that an archive points toward the past, he also asserts that the archive is not a question of the past but of the future: “If we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come.” Yet, when I think about the future of my family constellation, it looks less like a galaxy and more like a black hole. I am a singular star with no descendants of my own and no relationship with my cousins, the other descendants from the trio

of Marjorie's daughters, nor with their children. When I think about my drive to do something with this stuff in my basement, I'm motivated by a desire to honour and appease my ancestors rather than leaving a legacy for the future. I assume that future generations will be, at best, disinterested and at worst, living in a dystopian hellscape where they'll be too consumed with survival to think about the old days.

Perhaps herein lies the root of my resistance. For all my veneration of my own ancestors and idealism of what it means to be a good descendant, I worry about being a forgotten or unacknowledged ancestor. Or my resistance could mean that the contents of my basement are the most important things in the world, to the point of overwhelm. Pressfield dedicates space to this in *The War of Art*, observing that resistance can be an indicator of the importance or value of the work. He encourages seeing resistance as a compass to navigate what matters. "The more important a call or action is to our soul's evolution, the more resistance we will feel toward pursuing it."

The necessity of preserving this work may benefit more than literal bloodlines, more than grandchildren or nieces and nephews or great-great-great-great descendants. It could be in the form of institutions or the public record. In another attempt at productive procrastination, I made contact with a photography studio in Derby, England, founded by my great-great grandfather W.W. Winter (Marjorie's father, who sold the business to relocate to Canada). To this day, the studio retains his name and is a functioning business and heritage site, with a professional archivist who is enthusiastic about the things in my basement. He is interested in integrating the Winter materials into the collection. It's up to me to sort through and determine what would offer value to them.

On days where I feel optimistic, I imagine that there will be sociologists who can decipher cursive handwriting and would want seventy years of a woman's journals about gardening, socializing, and other mundane daily tasks. Or historians who would be interested in World War 2 correspondence. On the days where I fantasize about lighting a large bonfire, selling the house, and moving into a condo with no storage space, I hold hope knowing that this stuff, these archives, this body of data will matter to somebody beyond the confines of my basement.