A Doll’s House Redux

I couldn’t have brought home Grandmother’s bones from Mexico City even if I’d found them. Buried almost a hundred years, who knows what shape they’d be in. And what would I tell the customs officer when he asked what was in my gift bag from the National Museum of Anthropology? Tequila? Not likely.

Those bones wouldn’t be easy to disguise, no matter how invisible my Scottish grandmother may have been in my life. Invisible? Maybe not the right word here. Present is better. She wasn’t present in my life, but then, from what my mother tells me, she wasn’t present in hers much either. A grandmother who left few traces of herself—who died before I had a chance to be born.

A few bones would be welcome, just to know she really did exist. Yet she must have. I have her genes. So did Mother. My bones are hers. So in a certain way, I did bring home her bones after all.

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Except for the stories Mother told me over the years, only a single photograph of Grandmother remains, the only evidence she once existed. In it she’s holding her first and oldest child on her lap; he’s wearing a white christening gown. Scowling, he looks resigned to his fate. She looks absolutely bored with being part of this event and with the whole business of motherhood. Bored and removed. Her glance doesn’t meet the camera’s searching eye.

I wish I could say she looked murderous, another Medusa, but that would call for more emotion than she projects. Clearly, she had checked out already, and it wasn’t long before she actually took off for Mexico City—in the mid-20s.

I had thought of visiting there many times over the years, hoping to catch a glimpse of her wandering the countryside, planting heather in that dry forbidding soil, but something held me back. It was easy to convince myself it wasn’t safe for a woman to visit Mexico City alone; I was waiting until I had a companion who would join me. Besides, the travel warnings stressed the negatives: banditos attacking...
people traveling in cabs or even accosting them on the street and spiriting them away, demanding ransoms.

What had it been like when my grandmother moved there? Had a Mexican captured her so she couldn’t return to her family? It would be nice to think so. How else can I explain what she did? She left Portree, Isle of Skye, after WWI ended to join her husband, a Scottish schoolmaster, in Canada. He’d gone to the new world before the war to find a better life for all of them. Seven years later, she and the children joined him, arriving in Calgary during a snowstorm.

To go from the warmth of the family womb in Portree (uncles, aunts, cousins, friends), a charming village, to this frigid climate on the barren prairies, must have been a jolt. Was it revenge at being forced to leave her home that encouraged her to leave husband and kids after a year and find work for herself with a family in the Mount Royal district? She must have been furious with my grandfather for making her join him. He also was a difficult man, his tongue stinging as much as his slaps. She refused to tolerate his abuse any longer.

In the 1920s, it took guts and daring for a woman to abandon her husband and kids. It took even greater nerve to travel to Mexico City with her lover, her employer. Did she know then she would never return to either Canada or her homeland?

Some might claim she had a psychotic break, but I think this interpretation is too clinical. Menopause madness? More plausible. But why do we need to assert a woman is mad or unbalanced if she chooses to leave her kids and an inattentive, abusive husband? Some children drive their parents to drink. Some aren’t lovable. What if she just got fed up with the whole mess and wanted a life for herself before it was too late?

Or did she have a premonition she would die young (four years after she arrived in Mexico) and decided to do as much living as she could in the meantime? The city would have been much smaller then, only about a million people, and beautiful colonial buildings dominated, creating a European ambiance. It combined aspects of a world-class city with the Mexican village, the Zocalo the central focus, residents gathering at the huge plaza at the end of the day and strolling, men traveling in one direction, women in the other. Did she
join this promenade, flashing her peasant skirt at a passing caballero?

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When I arrived in Mexico City, eighty-five years later, I thought I would be overwhelmed. I was sure my grandmother’s spirit would rise up and impress its image on me, as the Virgin of Guadalupe is reported to have done to the poor peasant Juan Dieg when he had a vision of her. Surely my grandmother would make contact with a granddaughter who had come so far to find her.

But she didn’t. Not even in my dreams. Or maybe I wasn’t receptive enough to her presence. There’s that word again: why would she be present for me if she weren’t present for my mother and her four sons, five kids altogether. She gave birth to them. She did her duty by bringing them into the world. Surely they didn’t expect her to raise them as well.

Everywhere I went in Mexico City, I expected to see her, serving me in a cafe, cleaning our hotel room, strolling across the Zocalo. I inquired about where I’d find death records, but the bureaucratic maze and lack of Spanish language skills discouraged me. It would take days and many pesos to make any headway. Even then, the chances of finding her grave seemed very slim. But I couldn’t help wonder if she too had seen the Pyramids of the Sun and Moon. Had she marveled at their image rising out of the Mexico landscape? Did she climb the Pyramid of the Sun where she could see for miles, the mountains looming in the distance?

I imagine her poised for flight, a quetzal, or something equally exotic, released from earthly concerns. At that height the breath labors, and the heart flutters, and she must have felt a kinship with the dead sacrificed there, given one final view of all they were to lose at the flash of a knife. Maybe she waited for Mexico City’s Angel of Independence to rescue her, or even the Aztec warrior, frozen in statue form on a main boulevard. Or perhaps Diana, another statue, a naked warrior woman who surely wouldn’t let her die.