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## Flo and Evert

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The events of one chill December day, viewed in retrospect, were, I suppose, an apt tribute to the congenial banter of the sexes entered into and maintained by my grandparents over the span of a lifetime. The fact that "D-Day" was never discussed by the family in their presence detracts not at all from the impact it had on them and, most especially, on their progeny.

A mental map of the disposition of certain houses and families in my grandparents' neighborhood is necessary for an adequate comprehension of the events of that December day. Flo and Evert lived in a two room house at the top of a rather steep hill; this hill rose up and formed a wall along their narrow street, causing them, of necessity, to look down upon their neighbors and passersby, as well as the local urchins playing stickball or hide-and-seek among the motor cars parked in spurts along both sides of the

road. They were not a haughty pair looking down in disapproval, mind you, but were forced into a geographical separation from friends and loved ones by the proximity of the street to a stretch of railroad tracks that ran along the very top of the hill upon which their house sat. The distance from the street to the tracks was, if measured in linear feet, fifty yards, give or take a few. After the government's required right-of-way of five yards on either side of the tracks was measured, the city cut a swatch across the

## Flo and Evert

by Gail Blair

face of the hill and paved an eight-foot-wide path for cars and a twenty-four-inch sidewalk for pedestrians. The house perched on a plot of ground, then, that was thirty-five yards deep, more or less. There were no sideyards.

Because the first ten yards above the sidewalk were too steep to build on, the builder of the house installed fourteen concrete steps from the walk to what passed for level ground. These steps were nine inches high, six inches deep, two feet wide, and sandwiched in between concrete walls with no railing. After climbing the staircase a visitor would confront him or herself in Flo's pride and joy: a picture-glass window that spanned the entire front wall of the house. Unless the drapes were drawn, it was impossible to arrive unannounced by one of the grandchildren, and there were many grandchildren.

All of Flo and Evert's grandchildren lived in houses nearby, on the lower slope of the hill, and they took turns, when they were small, visiting Gramma with the sole intent of washing for her that immense pane of glass. Quite often visitors, after recognizing their own eyes and hat and hair in the glass, would be startled when a separate pair of eyes would blink, and then a separate mouth would start to open and shut as little hands would pat the pane in excitement as muffled squeals seeped through the glass; everyone knew then that "someone's coming!"

I am wandering from my original thought; allow me to continue with the incident uppermost in my mind. I mentioned that the grandchildren all lived on this hill near Flo and Evert. I should further add that none of their descendants lived on High Street, the street at the top of the hill. Their daughter, Imogene, lived around the corner on Straight Street, along with her husband, Odes, and their five children, Harold, Carol, Gerald, Beryl, and little Mike. Straight Street crossed High Street and continued north for three quarters of a mile, where it merged with Main Street. Along Straight Street, between High and Main Street, lived the balance of the brood begat by Flo and Evert. In the first house on the right, north of Imogene's and across High Street, Marvin lived with his wife Marian, their twin sons, Billie and Rollie, and baby daughter Kate. At the bottom of the hill, where Main Street met Straight Street, the ground was level and well travelled by people going to and from town. It was here that Raymond, the oldest son, built a grocery store and, after a few years of modest success, added a gas station. Raymond and his wife

Lenora had bought the two-story red brick apartment house on the south side of the intersection, facing Straight Street. Raymond's original plan was to sublet the upstairs rooms to help fill the mouths of Scotty, Lisa, and Bobby.

Flo and Evert made few trips across the winter terrain of High Street and down the sled tracks on Straight Street during the cold months of the year. This December was no exception to the Midwestern rule. A great northern blast of ice and snow had blanketed the hill, and neither of the two had any designs on descent into the frozen acres outside their front glass. They were not a feeble pair, but they had no desire to encourage frailty in the form of broken pelvis and collar bones; they also enjoyed countless attentions from the young people. Their grandchildren were eager and able to brave the steeps of the street and stairs in order to deliver goods to the older couple from Uncle or Daddy Raymond's store down below. Often they argued about who would make the climb and share cream with coffee at Gramma's table or stand in awe as Grampa demonstrated his skill at removing bent nails from battered two-by-fours in his bedroom-under-construction. It was, therefore, quite a surprise to the family, that particular day in December, when Flo and Evert set out to shop.

Flo and Evert didn't go together, as everyone who knew them knew. They had made a mutual discovery, over their years together, that what had caused them to become one was not stuff enough to balance their differences, and, if peace was to reign in their home, it would have to be a separate peace for each of them. Not that they quarreled, mind you,

or that they didn't care for one another. They just had a tough time blending their priorities together and coming up with a matched set. Flo grew up on the farm, as Evert did, but unlike Evert she developed a taste for style, for class, for "proper behavior." Evert, while not a country bumpkin, had fewer changes that he wanted to make in his life. He was content to putter and fix and do odd jobs, mend his own house, grow his own vegetables, and all the while do his best to make sure that no one in his home was starving or naked. He wasted nothing and couldn't bear to see others waste anything; whatever was broken he could fix, or so he thought. He saw nothing wrong with wearing hand-me-down shoes and clothes, or with working burlap and flour sacks into clothes, for that matter. As a result he collected things, like potato sacks, flour sacks, straps of leather, paper bags, broken toys, cast-off electric razors, even magazines.

Flo, on the other hand, had little tolerance for used up things. She defied Evert once, when the kids were small, and went to work at a factory so that beans and cornbread could be supplemented by an occasional ham or rump roast. She saved things too, like pennies, nickels, and dimes.

Evert built a small shed behind every house they ever lived in over the years, and there he stored his treasures, but the shed wasn't enough at the house on High Street, because they stayed there longer than at any other house; the shed filled up with prizes and trinkets much too fast. Evert tried to bring a few things into the house once in a while, but each attempt garnered a stern look and one word from

Flo. "Evert!" she would say, and the look in her eyes was his signal to turn around and find another hiding place. That was how the second bedroom came to be "under construction." Flo had a French Provincial collection set up in their bedroom: prim, white pieces trimmed in gold. Her closets were full of boxes stacked one upon another. Some were empty, waiting to hide Christmas or birthday gifts in, and others were filled with sweaters and shoes, ribbons and lace, pictures and paintings done over the years by the children, and so Evert decided to build on a back room, a large room where he could sleep and revel in his keepsakes.

I saw Grampa's room once. I was amazed. Every inch of wall was plastered with a shelf, or a calendar, or a chart of some significance, like the day of the week that February twenty-ninth would fall on for the next three hundred years. The floor was littered with newspapers and catalogues and magazines of every type, each holding safe an article or an ad that Evert wanted to remember. The space between the floor and the lowest shelves was stacked with gadgets and gidgets and wonders and widgets of indescribable nature. There was just enough space on the double bed for a man to lie narrowly down; the rest of the bed held more books and magazines and, of all things, comic books. Evert wasn't concerned with neatness. He wasn't dirty, he just wasn't tidy, and everything in his room held some secret that he would share someday when we were old enough to ask why. He talked a lot about new technology and ways to fuel cars with a glop of energy no bigger than a golf ball. Posters of the moon landing hung next to a painting

he had done in oils of a mountain landscape. He spent most of his spare hours in this room, dreaming and tinkering and reading up on the latest way to propel a man through time.

Flo didn't understand what Evert saw in all his keepsakes, and sometimes she riddled him with tiny insults about his collections, but for the most part she left him alone, content that she had her space, and he had his. Blues and purples and lilacs and lavenders adorned her rooms and her frame. When the children were grown and the need to save pennies lessened in intensity, she saved them anyway, letting the grandkids count them for hours (when the glass had been sufficiently scrubbed). She also collected snapshots and school pictures, sweaters and slacks and shoes to match for herself when she went out to shop with the girls on Saturday.

But I have again begun to digress from the fateful events of that day, the eighth of December, 1954. Despite their differences, Flo and Evert had their children and grandchildren to share, as well as great appreciation for the music of Lawrence Welk and Perry Como, not to mention Don Ho. They also enjoyed coffee with bacon and eggs and fresh fried potatoes in the morning. It was the bacon and eggs that got them out of the house that day. There were no eggs for Sunday morning breakfast, and only two slices of bacon remained in the icebox. Evert shuffled around the kitchen for a while and helped Flo clean up their lunch plates, and then he ambled back to his room to put on his overshoes and his wool coat. He came back out to find Flo buttoning up her boots and putting on her lipstick. "Where are you going?" he asked,

a little surprised to find her dressed for the cold.

"I'm going to get bacon and eggs for breakfast, that's where I'm going." She looked up and chuckled at the sight of his hair sprouting through his scarf at random intervals. "I suppose you think I can't go out by myself?" "No! No, I don't think that. I just thought you'd rather stay in and keep warm, that's all. I was planning to go get our breakfast, too. Should we call the kids?" Evert was struggling to pull on his gloves and beginning to sweat under his coat. "Why call the kids? They'd have been here by now if any of 'em were coming up today. We're all dressed up and goin' the same direction; we might as well go together," said Flo. And so they did.

Scotty and Gerald had swept and salted the steep stairs and also Gramma's front porch that morning early, and the sun was shining high as the two set out. It wasn't until they had reached the sidewalk that they were noticed. Mike, who was building his first snowman that day, had gone out to the street to get some stone eyes when he saw Gramma and Grampa crossing High Street together, elbows linked for support, boots crunching in the snow, slipping sideways a little when they met bare ice. He didn't think too much of it at the time. After all, he crossed the street in all kinds of weather, so why shouldn't they? He returned to his snowman. It wasn't until Odes, his dad, came out to check on his progress, that Mike set off the family alarm. "Guess who I saw crossing the street, Dad?" "I don't know, son, who?" "Gramma and Grampa." Odes raised his eyebrows a smidgeon. "Are you sure, Mike?" "Uh-huh.

They were all dressed up like me, boots and all." Odes patted Mike on the head and went back inside. He reached for the phone from around the hall corner and dialed the folks' number, stamping the snow from his feet as he listened to the line buzz and click. Imogene came out of the bedroom, pulling her stockings up one more time after stretching down to push the broom all the way across the floor under her bed, chasing lint balls. "Who're you calling?" "I'm callin' Marvin, now." Odes had redialed and stood listening to another series of buzzes and clicks. "Hello?" "Marian, this is Odes. Say, did you just see the folks walkin' down Straight past your house?" "Let me check with the boys."

Odes looked up to see Imogene clutching her hand to her blouse. "Oh, my God! They'll break their necks!" "Settle down, Genie, they're not dead yet!" At that, Gerald, Carol, and Beryl stuck their heads out of the basement and said, in unison, "Who's dead?"

"Odes, Billie and Rollie went out to check. They're out there, all right, half way down the street at the Ferguson's old place. What the devil's goin' on?" "I don't know, Marian. I didn't know they were out 'til just a minute ago myself. Better call Marvin and let him know what they're up to." Odes hung up and spent several seconds shushing everyone but Harold, who happened to be helping Uncle Raymond at the store. Imogene was flushed, and she started circling the room, patting her hand over her heart. "Oh, m'God! Oh, m'God! What'll we do?"

"Now, just calm down, Genie, they're headed for the store, and Raymond can take care

of 'em from there. They'll be fine, but I can't for the life of me figure out why they got it in their heads to pull this fool stunt!"

Flo and Evert walked on, stepping half steps down the sidewalk, cautioning each other as they went: "Be careful!" "I am careful! You watch your step!" "Hold tight, Flo," "I'm holdin', I'm holdin'." You just watch your step." "I'm watchin', I'm watchin'." And so they went, unaware that they were being watched from behind. Billie and Rollie had dived into their snowsuits and out the front door to the sidewalk, and there they stopped. Rollie was not a cruel boy, but his mind latched onto and fed on the incredulous, and he got an incurable case of the giggles as he watched the two oldsters inching and pinching their way to the store. Billie, not as quick to see the humor in life, had become Rollie's straight man. "What?! What's so funny?" he asked. Rollie, giggling at first, burst into laughter as he tried to mimic the dance step he was watching. He grabbed Billie by the arm, and the two of them began inch stepping up and down the sidewalk, laughing and falling and standing again, mincing another few steps. Billie pulled his features into alignment every so often and sent Rollie reeling with another round of laughter at the dead-pan. "What?!"

Marian, when she couldn't reach Marvin, dialed the store and got another busy signal. She then dialed Lenora, who had just put her youngest, Bobby, down for a nap. She snatched the receiver from its cradle hoping to prevent Bobby from waking up, but he did anyway. So while Marian tried to get her to look out her front window, Lenora was stretching the phone into the

nursery to pick up the screaming Bobby.

"Marian, what is so important?" she demanded.

"Look out at who's crossing Main in the snow. Try to stop them!" Marian hung up, determined to reach Marvin at the health club. Lenora carried Bobby to the parlor window and stood with her mouth open for a few seconds. "I don't believe it. I just don't believe it! They haven't walked together in years." She started back to dial Raymond but thought better of it and watched them cross the icy roadway, boots gripping and griping in the snow as they stepped in unison onto the far curb.

Flo and Evert walked into the store and shook their feet free of salt and snow and waited for the fog to clear off of their glasses. Harold spotted them first, almost bowling them over with the grocery carts he had retrieved from the lot. "Hi, Grampa! Gramma! Who brought you down here?"

"We brought ourselves down here, Harold," Flo didn't like being questioned.

"You mean you walked all the way down here alone?"

"We were together."

"Yeah, but, gosh,..."

"Oh, pooh, Harold! You sound just like your mother, acting as if we can't get around anymore," said Flo. "As you can see, we're just fine."

Raymond stepped out of his office just then. Even though surprised to see his parents standing, unannounced, at his front door, he still had a leak in one of the coolers to attend to. No plumber in sight and water running everywhere, so he set to with a mop while his assistant continued to call all the plumbers in the Yellow Pages. Marian was getting busy signals at the store

and at the club, and she was losing her cool.

Harold, ever helpful, rounded up two cups of hot chocolate for the travelers before they headed back out. "What did you come out after, Gramma?"

"We ran out of bacon and eggs for breakfast tomorrow, so here we are," Grampa answered. "I got some coffee, too, and some juice for your Gramma."

"Evert, I didn't ask for coffee and juice. You forget we've got to tote all this back up that hill."

"Why don't I split that up into two small bags, and then you can each carry a little bit?" Harold asked.

"You're a smart boy, Harold. You'll go far," remarked Flo.

When next Lenora saw her in-laws they were again on Straight Street, elbows locked like chain links, inching and pinching their way across the snow and ice, wobbling slightly from side to side. Each carried a small sack in their free hands, paper sacks that swayed and bobbed with each step the couple took. They had ballast on Evert's side in the form of two pounds of coffee and frozen orange juice; Flo's ballast consisted of bacon and eggs. She insisted on carrying only those items she had set out to buy.

Marian had finally reached Marvin, but he had just stepped out of the shower and couldn't leave with his hair all wet. "I'll be there as soon as I dry off, but don't worry. Pop's ok and so's Ma. Tell Odes I'm coming to help settle Genie down." With assurance that help was on the way, Marian decided to look out for the folks on their way back up the hill. What she saw got her giggling as hard as Rollie and Billie, who were still

out front, aping aged climbers. There came two penguins, trudging up the sidewalk, paper bags swinging from either side. The weight of the bags was synco-pated and stuttering, pulling the two apart with each outward bounce. The folks still had their elbows locked together, and, as they sensed they were moving apart, they cinched their arms tighter and bumped shoulders, and in this fashion they wobbled and weebled toward home.

Rollie and Billie observed this new variation in the snow dance and set out to meet Flo and Evert halfway down the hill, hoping to escort them to safety. Their progress came to a halt, however, as Rollie was overcome by the stern looks and silly movements of the pair. He and Billie landed on the ground again, rolling and laughing and wheezing in the cold air.

Evert, hearing the commotion ahead, glanced up and witnessed the two boys landing on their posteriors. The giggle that he had passed along to Marvin, and thus to Rollie, caught him by surprise. He was no longer watching his feet, and his sides began to shake, and Flo was alarmed.

"Evert! Watch your step! Evert, what's so funny? Evert, you're not making this any easier!"

With every comment from Flo, Evert laughed a little harder, and his laughter caused him to snap a little harder with his elbow when he felt Flo leaning away from him. He was laughing out loud by the time Flo realized that she was losing her balance.

"Evert! Stop it! This is no time for fun! Evert! Slow down! Evert! Evert!"

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Marian tried for forty-five minutes to tell what had happened when Marvin got home. He had to buy her an ace bandage; she strained her diaphragm while laughing and rolling around on the floor. "Grampa was trying to reach the boys, and he started walking faster; his little sack was bouncing around in a circle. Gramma was hanging on, trying to keep up, and her little bag was swinging, too. She tried to grab Grampa with both hands. When she did, her feet flew out from under her, and she fell into Grampa, and then he fell on top of his sack, and the sack split and cans went rolling down the hill. Gramma landed on top and dropped her bag in the snow, and she kept trying to get up. Every time she tried to pull Grampa up he'd pull her back down again, laughing the whole time, and all I could see from here was scarfs and boots and feet and elbows."

That was the day in December that none of us ever forgot. Of course, we never discussed it in mixed groups. The children all blamed each other for not stopping their parents in the first place; Imogene fumed for a few days, angry that her parents had not told her they were going out. Flo always said: "Genie was jealous of anybody havin' a good time without her after that." Flo had a bruised knee, and Evert cracked a few ribs. Raymond and Lenora forgot most of the trouble the next week, since the following Monday Dr. Schadle told them that I, baby number four, was on the way. Their plans to move the folks closer to the store never were mentioned to the rest of the family. They needed more nurs-

ery space. They name me Flo.

Once, when I spent the night at Gramma's, I got up to get a drink of water after she and Grampa had gone to their room. I could hear her laughing, and Grampa was giggling. I heard what they said, but it didn't make much sense at the time. "It's a good thing we didn't buy potatoes, too!" They were still laughing when I fell asleep.