

Pat

by *Elizabeth Marsh*

We've had more family gatherings than usual this year. Maybe because we realize our time together is inevitably limited now. We six siblings, once "the Kennedy kids," range in age from a mere 72 upwards to 86.

As one sister cheerfully misquotes Andrew Marvell: "At our backs we hear Time's winged chariot hurrying near. And some of us aren't moving as fast as we used to."

So it was that we planned a communal birthday party in November for the four siblings who have fall birthdays. As good an excuse as any to get together. Not a large gathering as our family parties go. Just the six of us, spouses, and a few members of the next generation who served as chauffeurs.

There was no shortage of conversation and family gossip. Snapshots were produced, of a son taking part in the Iron Man competition last summer, of a first grandchild, of two great-grandchildren and of a new bride who had, amazingly, chosen to be married in a long white gown and stiletto heels on a tiny rocky island near Banff.

When the buffet luncheon was laid out and the guests began finding spaces at table, someone suggested that the original Kennedy kids should all sit together in the adjoining dining room. This was a novel idea. As we gathered around the table, someone noted that the six of us had probably never, in all these years, eaten together without parent, spouse or child present.

"So what did you talk about?" the younger generation asked later. "Holidays? The stock market? Your arthritis?"

Not a bit of it. As if we had magically moved back through time to the old brick house on the farm in the Ottawa Valley, we talked about the "olden days," beginning with the hired man who stuttered and who kicked the cats when they swarmed round his feet at milking time. Kingsley proved he can still render a spot-on imitation of old Charlie's rationale: "C-c-c-cats can't feel!"

But mostly we talked about horses, remembering the special ones. The first horses I remember was the team of matched greys, Gypsy and Darky. Then there was Dinny Roan and Dot. I recall climbing up on her manger, showing off to a cousin, to lift Dot's forelock and reveal the white spot that gave her her name. And there was Louis, the tall bay bronco who pulled the cutter in winter, and finally, the last team before tractors took over, Dolly the white mare and her black son, Pat.

Oh yes, Pat!

Suddenly everyone was smiling. Everyone had a Pat story.

Elder brother Russ recalled how he had once accidentally hit Pat on the nose with the backswing of his hammer as he mended a fence. “I didn’t know he was right there behind me, looking over my shoulder. Pat was rather like a dog. He always wanted to be around people, watching whatever they were doing.”

But Pat held no grudge for the whack on the nose. Kingsley remembered how, on another occasion, he probably saved Russ from serious injury. The team was patiently standing in the barn while the hay wagon was unloaded. High above them on a catwalk, gauging the moment to pull the trip rope to release the hayfork, Russ overbalanced and fell backwards. “I just had time to shout, ‘Whoa Pat,’ before I hit his back and slid under his feet.” A lesser horse might have panicked and trampled him. Pat stood like a rock.

Frankie, at 72 the baby of the family, could remember feeding branches from the willow tree to Pat as he stretched his handsome head over the farm gate. Pat could have reached all the willow leaves he wanted on his own, but, ever the gentleman, he graciously accepted her offerings.

Another sister recalled Pat’s affection for our father and how Dad would bend his head so the big horse could nuzzle his hair. That reminded me I had a Pat story.

In the early seventies, I was in London with my husband Bruce, doing interviews for the CBC. One of these was Ena Twigg, a popular medium. I thought I didn’t believe in mediums or their messages, and Bruce and I had agreed we wouldn’t discuss any personal matters with her, but when Ena Twigg suddenly asked if I had anyone “in spirit,” I blurted out, “Yes, my father.” Immediately she turned her head over her left shoulder and began to relay messages. “Give my love to the five.” “But there are six of us,” I replied. “Well, you’re here,” Ena noted tartly.

She paused to instruct me in the etiquette of astral communication. I was to respond to her words only with “yes,” “no,” or “I do not understand.” She tuned in my father again. “He says, ‘I’ve seen George.’”

Well, I thought, that could be Dad’s brother, Uncle George, who was also “in spirit,” or it could be merely a lucky guess. There were many Georges in that generation. But I nodded yes.

“Your father says, ‘I loved the country. I could never have lived in the city.’”

Hmmm. My father was not given to bandying the word “love” about, but it was possible. I nodded again.

Then: “He has his arm around a big black horse.”

And, all protocol forgotten, I shouted, “That’s Pat!”

I’m glad I remembered that story. Whatever the next life may have to offer, it’s cheering to believe our horses will be there too. Especially Pat.