

Hotel Fargoan: A Historical Love Story Told in Letters by Eileen Torgersen-Smith

Excerpt

MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHOR

Shortly after my mother died at ninety-eight years of age, I went to the old Dexter Horton Building in downtown Seattle and opened her safe deposit box. I'm quite sure no one had looked inside for several decades. The box contained four things—an old brochure advertising the Hotel Fargoan; what appeared to be a preserved and pressed orchid; and two letters postmarked in 1940.

As I sat in the dank marble-covered basement room reading the letters, warm tears streamed down my face. The two letters had been written by my parents to each other, just before they wed over seventy-five years ago. Reading them, I had no idea of the treasure I would discover two weeks later as I sorted through my mother's cluttered basement at her big old house in Seattle's University District. It was then that I came across two musty old boxes, each filled with letters. One box contained letters saved by my father, the other those saved by my mother. The letters were over seven decades old, but in good condition.

This book was inspired by those letters—nearly 450 of them—written throughout 1940. My parents met in December of 1939 and were married on Christmas Day the following year. As I read through all the letters, it became clear that their courtship was nothing short of idyllic.

The year 1940 holds great historical significance for America, indeed for the world. During that period, the tide of public opinion in America shifts from one of isolationism to one of support for the European war effort against Nazi Germany. This shift is revealed in the letters. Both my grandfathers were born in Norway, as were the parents of my grandmothers. And when Norway is invaded, the family can't help but feel it deeply. Americans of European descent were watching closely as the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Luxembourg and France were invaded that year. (Other countries had been subjected to Nazi occupation before 1940 including Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, Rumania, Bulgaria, Greece and Poland.) In 1940, Britain was the last to fall under brutal Nazi attack.

My mother was an elementary school teacher in Fargo, living with many other teachers in small apartments at the Hotel Fargoan. My father was a traveling salesman for the first half of 1940—northeast North Dakota was his territory—and then became a manager for a wholesale food company in Aberdeen, South Dakota. Geographically separated, they wrote letters to each other. Postage then was three cents, often with next day and twice a day delivery, even on Sundays. But these differences from today were minor compared to communications technology we currently use.

In 1940 there was no television, not everyone had a radio, certainly no computers had been invented nor all the social media technology of today. Other conveniences of the day were noticeably different as reflected in the letters. The family farm my mother went home to in the summer of 1940 had no electricity, no running water, no indoor plumbing.

But perhaps the biggest difference, to me anyway, is what I would call the style of courtship in 1940. My parent's romance was—in a word—sweet. They were ever so kind to each other, upbeat,

innocent in many ways, loyal and full of hope. All the while, however, the war in Europe was exploding, not to mention the conflict between Japan and China.

It was a remarkable feeling that came over me as I read through all my parent's letters, written when they were in their mid-twenties. As I read, I could hear their voices. I felt as though I were channeling them. They weren't just talking to each other; the three of us were communicating. At times I wanted to offer them my insights and advice. After all, I'm now in my mid-seventies and know the lessons of that historical period. But I came to realize that it was they who were teaching me through their modeling of life values from a bygone era.

Mom and Dad were ordinary people. Adapting a quote from the Dalai Lama: *The world doesn't need more great people, it needs more good people.* And good people they were. Admittedly, at times the letters can be a bit daily, yet the reader will discover wonderful nuggets along the way that reflect the culture and events of the time. And when taken in totality, much of their importance is that the letters portray a time when life was slower; it seemed to be a less stressful era. Without cellphones or email, my parents lived in a day when two lovers sat down and took the time to write with pen and paper about their day, ask how the other was doing, express their love, and describe their dreams for a future together.

— Eileen Torgersen–Smith

Dearest Art, do you remember those first three months of our acquaintance? Back then our letters never exceeded a two or three page limit, and my letters ended with "Sincerely, Sally." Gradually that improved to "With my bestest," and you changed from "As ever," to "With all." I spent hours wondering if it could ever change to "With all my love." Those first three months were an awful lot of fun, being filled with so much suspense and silent questions. Well, now the suspense is gone, and we both know the answers. I'm now waiting for about four and a half months to go by — and then the fun really will begin, won't it?

*All My Love,
Sally.*