

Mr. Fritz Brown

There he was, standing as a magnificent Norse god, as I opened the heavy rectory door. Dressed in casual corduroy and tweeds, he asked me, yes me, if I had wanted to help him walk his dogs at the cabin. For many years, I had thought so kindly of this charming, mustached fellow, but now I felt a bit uncomfortable.

"Could my brother come, I asked?" and he replied "Of course."

So I ran to my Mom and asked if it would be alright and I next remember walking down the dirt path towards the lake, with the springer spaniels leaping from one side to the next. I don't quite remember if there was much conversation but I felt honored, though a bit intimidated to be here at this moment.

His kindness had really been towards my Mom, as my Dad had died suddenly that morning and there was much to tend to, as we had been up much the night with vestrymen called in to assure Sunday services and the sad news would greet parishioners in the morning.

But here I was, with my brother in tow, enjoying a brief escape from the unstable future we understood was ahead. My beloved Dad was richer than most in friends yet hardly had tended to the business of life insurance, leaving two daughters in college, a son at Pomfret Academy and me still at home. We all felt two immediate burdens...one of losing our most beloved Dad, our spiritual guide, mischievous friend and mentor and secondly, fully understanding the need to leave the rectory soon along with the entire parish family to allow a new rector to start anew.

As we sauntered down the lovely path and majestic early spring woods with their fresh sounds and scents, my mind leaped from childlike wonders to glimpses of the evening before. My brother and I had attended a Mrs. Walker dancing cotillon that Saturday night in Worcester, meant to add a little culture to a total tomboy for me while helping my brother gain a little gentlemanly social confidence. We had mixed feelings about attending these dances where the gentlemen wore the white gloves, which seemed so odd and silly to us. But on the other hand, it was a wonderful time to see buddies and still give a quick kick or arm twist when Mrs. Walker had turned her head. It was obvious the cultural osmosis had not quite taken yet.

If my tomboy ways had been caught, it would have been quite a disgrace for all, as my brother and I were given free passage as children of the music director at a prestigious private school (which paid much less, of course, than the public schools). We were not poor, probably middle income but much of it depended on free housing from the church and my Dad's additional part time jobs of teaching at Nichols College and being Rector in Oxford, too. We were certainly not in the wealth circles of those with whom we danced, yet our parents certainly had equal or higher educational footing which was well-received by Mrs. Walker.

As I looked out silently, in another world, over the ripples of the lake, I recounted the hours after the dance that would forever change our lives. The evening had been so much fun, once my brother and I got over having to dress up for the occasion. It was made even better knowing that my parents were going out on a rare date movie while we danced, giggled, gossiped or wrestled a bit on the dance floor.

Everything seemed perfect and joyful as we headed home to Webster, even as my Dad rolled down the window on a chilly April night. As the wind blew in our faces amidst the giggles, we hardly realized he was fighting for his life. Then, I heard the deep coughing, gagging sounds and my Mother demanded that he pull over to the old Yankee Drummer Inn. Ambulances were called while my brother and I were shepherded off to a room with a tv. Not the place we wanted to be, but we were all more polite and obedient back then. I saw a ghastly sight on my Dad's face but knew he would be alright. He always was.

After about an hour, the manager came and got us and quickly stated that my brother would have to be the man of the house "for now". Whew, thank you, God, it was just temporary. My Mom gathered us up and it was not until we arrived on North Main Street in Webster before we understood that there was nothing temporary about it. Our most beloved father was gone!

One of the springer spaniels came bounding past me, running after a stick thrown by his master. I looked down and saw the sun bursting through the leafless limbs onto some tiny buds emerging from under some old leaves. Usually, I'd be investigating further for some lizards or other treasures, but dirty clothes would not be welcome by my Mom today. And my mind was elsewhere, too. The memories came pouring back....this property was next to one we enjoyed almost daily in the summer with my Dad, yet we never wandered over here at all because the fields and intriguing wonders, from puff balls to wild blueberries, lady slippers and even tennis or baseball could keep us busy for hours after swimming on the Bartlett cabin property next door. I do remember crossing into the field where the path starts one summer as my oldest sister was trying to tackle a standard shift as my Dad instructed and my dog and I were tossed around happily in the back seat. **We had also driven down the path one time for a cookout at the large cottage that we didn't go into this time but I remembered its unusual layout inside because you could always hear what the adults were saying.**

I was glad we didn't go inside, even with it empty, because today was a day I wanted to escape what the adults were saying and Mr. Brown knew it. He probably was more determined to ease the responsibilities on my Mom that Sunday as parishioner after parishioner came sobbing to her door, but it forever showed such a caring side to the dashing, charming Mr. Fritz Brown that I will never forget.

*(Mr. Frederick Brown, known as Fritz was the great, great nephew of Samuel Slater. He lived with his Aunt Lydia in the George Basset Slater granite mansion on North Main Street in Webster. He had a large wonderful garden and raised bonsai and springer spaniels as a hobby. My sister, Susan, would stay with the very elderly, yet very capable Lydia Slater (Samuel Slater's great granddaughter) when Fritz attended dog shows,*

*which was quite often.)*