REMNANTS OF COURAGE

Joyce Lewis-Andrews

Secrets are tucked surreptitiously into the sharpest folds and deepest pockets of every family's closet. Sometimes they lie just below the surface of yesterday. Others are carried laboriously to an awaiting grave, praying to be forgotten or forgiven, while a few rarer deceptions lie among the lint and particles of mysteries for genealogists to mine long after we are gone. Even my grandaunt Eunice had hidden remnants of untold yarns and a scattering of unruly knots, but if you're hoping for anything remotely scandalous, you've come to the wrong place.

Eunice Williams's greatest measure of secret-keeping success was becoming a designer and dressmaker to some of Pittsburgh's fashionable ladies of society. She honored every paying customer's preferences and privacies. She never dropped names, didn't spread gossip, and couldn't be pressure-footed anywhere toward disloyalty. Her vocation also required a sharp, trained eye and a meticulous touch to anticipate and execute every bias and seam with the utmost precision, respect, and care, as her well-paying clientele deserved. This was no simple feat, considering she often worked in sheer defiance of whatever temperaments and theatrics were put into play around her by the ten other fatherless souls who squeezed around the dining area where she set up shop.

Annie Williams's third child, Eunice, was privy to the rustle of preparty gossip by well-heeled guests who relied on her when an upcoming social season was approaching its debut. My grandaunt's list of orders grew year after year, as did the number of taxi rides she made in and out of Steel City's swankier addresses.

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Inside those intimidating, imposing boudoir doors, confidential pinnings, fittings, and alterations occurred, where she measured high society's uncorseted unmentionables twice. Younger sister Clara eagerly stepped in as Eunice's sidekick, and the two Williams sisters pinned, hemmed, and flitted about in well-honed unison throughout most of their adult lives. Inseparable, they went so far as to marry brothers Gustave and Eugene Stier, and when I was a kid, the four cohabitated with siblings Margaret and Joe in the Main Street house.

Samuel Melton Fisher, *Venetian Costume Makers*, 1888

Eunice rarely spoke or boasted of her work. By the time I knew her, the tools of her trade—an antique sewing machine and a rickety wooden ironing board—were set up along the wall between the dining room and kitchen. Any evidence of assemblage or production was sheathed by sheets and tablecloths or folded away in the two-door metal wardrobe by the cellar door. There was one unforgettable exception to that. On that day, a satiny, ballroom-length skirt remained posed and pinned on the dining room table. Its dramatic flair of shimmering emerald and jade watercolor tones captured every speck

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of fascination buzzing about my brain. Standing sentry by the table, a matching, contoured bodice—pinned to a dress form's muslin torso—sparkled with tiny jewels that flashed and flickered in the afternoon light. I felt lightheaded with desire.

"They're real," Eunice whispered with reverence, holding several small, velvet pouches of peridot and aquamarine gems in her open palm. Spellbound by the number of polished, twinkling stones attached with incredible pinpoint perfection by her steady-handed craftiness, I momentarily felt compelled to pick up a needle and thread. Regrettably, sewing required more discipline than I was willing to give and definitely less distraction than I was willing to forfeit. I realized then that I wanted to be the woman wearing the gown, not the one making it.

Another example of my grandaunt's expertise and eagle eye for detail is captured in old portraits and photographs. Despite their perpetual pauperdom, the nine Williams-Lewis women of her household took to their camera poses cloaked in the most classic attire of the day. It seems like just another contradiction of who they were, but it was, in fact, an ideal complement to that stiff upper lip they maintained so well. Eunice Williams refashioned, repurposed, and reassembled every block of clothing that the females of her family owned and wore for decades. As their personal seamstress and dress designer, she impeccably whipstitched a shield of humble pride, which they magnificently adorned, as the rest of the world fell from riches to rags around them. With every ill-tempered snag continually threatening ruin and loss, Eunice's perfectly fabricated garments gave her family one good reason to hold their heads up high.

"She had customers who lived as far away as the boroughs of Bellevue and

Oakmont," Aunt Clara boasted of her older sister's professional reach, "and a few in Mt. Lebanon too." It wasn't hard to imagine the two sisters bustling out the door to their next sewing gig with Eunice toting that old, vintage, wooden sewing kit of hers and Clara bringing up the rear with a garment bag or two slung over her arm.

"The Girls," as the eight Williams daughters referred to themselves, were adept with needle and thread. They stitched, knitted, quilted, crocheted, and artistically filled their chiffarobe and bureau drawers with necessities; hope chests with fancy, embroidered fineries; and households of ornamental and practical, hand-crafted things. These clever skills were standard and, quite frankly, a necessity in poor, struggling families like theirs. However, only Eunice practiced and perfected the desire and disposition to incorporate those talents into a rewarding, lifelong career. Her aptitude and command of sewing techniques were rivaled only by an unflappable ability to maintain a cooler head and steady even-handedness in the face of well-to-do opinions or under the more discerning eye of temperamental critics. "But don't take that to mean she was a pushover," her younger sister Clara warned. "Eunice could hold her own, even as young as nine." That was my grandaunt's introduction to the first family story that I remember hearing.

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It all began one weekday in 1914 with the five oldest Williamses—Betty, Joe, Eunice, Margaret, and Alice—walking down the lane to school. By their own admissions, each found distraction among the colorful, budding clues of nature recovering and sprouting triumphantly on the borders of the stoned byway that they traversed that day. It was one of those fanciful, fickle days in April when the sun's warmth arrived at their doorstoop totally unannounced, following weeks of switch-back winds and squalls of "onion snow." With pure, calm daylight reflecting off their freshly washed and smiling faces, the children's carefree

Wenzel Tornøe, *Seamstress, Whit Sunday Morning*, 1882

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Josef Gisela, *The Seamstress*, 1897

thoughts slowed their pace, and a scattering of melodies and musings began to root in the dank, thawing earth as returning wild birds sang. It was glorious! Winter's dormancy had broken, and its icy grip on them was ready to be shed! Spring fever had infected them all that enchanting day. But, safe to say, it met up with the dawdling scholars at the wrong time and in the wrong place.

Their free-wandering stride was nipped in its heels by the sound of an approaching horse and buggy clogging up from behind. Eleven-year-old Joe gallantly herded Eunice, Betty, and Alice toward the shoulder while that stubborn mule-of-a-Margaret kept walking and refused to budge an inch. "Margaret! Margaret!" Eunice bleated out as sternly as she could, then again more frantically. That's when an unfamiliar black-painted

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carriage lumbered beside the brazen Williams sister. It forced itself between a wheel-breaking gully on the left and less than a foot from the unyielding Margaret on the right. The wagon ambulated at her side at a clip-clop, stalking pace until she stopped. Then the vehicle stopped, too, with a terrifying and guttural "Whoa" that sounded more like a devilish "Wooooo!" The mangy, old horse with clouded, weepy eyes hovered just a foul breath away from where the headstrong seven-year-old taunted it.

"Margaret! Margaret!" Eunice pleaded again, but to no avail! Her stubborn sister refused to listen and obey. That's when a decayed-toothed, ghostly-skinned, withered-up, balded being in the passenger seat leaned out from the wagon, pointed directly at Margaret, and asked her siblings, "Can I have this girl?" Before the terrified four could utter an acceptable response, the corpse-like crone, who proved to be nastier and more formidable than she first appeared, lashed out and snagged the troublemaker's beautiful braids and began reeling her in by the ends of her hair. Margaret squawked and screeched! The wagon lurched forward. The girl howled and contorted herself into kicks and twists of protest and self-inflicted pain, and the old nag got spooked and attempted its best to trot.

"Thank goodness it was just about ready for the glue factory," they agreed. That allowed Joe to grab his sister by the middle and attempt a tug-of-war maneuver, which only worsened things. "He nearly pulled her legs off," someone said, as if that was a possibility. As Margaret's howls and screams for help grew ear-piercingly loud, Betty threw a fainting spell, and a terrified little Alice wet her pants. That's when a clear-thinking and quick-witted Eunice opened up that trusty sewing box she carried wherever she went and pulled out a pair of shiny metal shears. Dropping everything else onto the cindered road, the girl raced straight into the thrashing entanglement of Margaret and Joe. Scrambling to reach her terrified sister's side while avoiding the brutal kicks her brother was sustaining, Eunice threaded herself between her sister and the villainous attacker to the left. In a feat of well-calculated boldness, the unlikely

liberator managed to keep pace and free Margaret from abduction one pigtail at a time. "Snip! Snip!" Clara, the storyteller, would jubilantly proclaim, scissoring her fingers as if she'd been there. After cutting a screaming Margaret loose and collapsing together on the ground, the Williamses watched misfortune speed away as quickly as the old, gray mare could gallop. With two lovely locks of the young girl's hair dangling in the frightful creature's gnarled-up hands, the carriage and her fiendish cackle disappeared into the valley.

While reporting this encounter to an adult authority, Margaret's teacher examined her pet pupil for injury. "You're not out of the woods yet," the schoolmarm winced sympathetically. "She has your hair." Whatever odd belief the educator espoused, no one dared ask what the heck that meant, though a couple of the older smart alecks acted like they knew. The kids were more impressed by the daring sewing basket-toting Eunice Williams and by her treacherous scissor points that could have been wielded as blades. The unlikely heroine who saved her sister from such a ghastly and unimaginable fate instantly earned the respect of her schoolmates.

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A few weeks after the botched abduction, Eunice, the diligent little sewer, was encouraged to enter her first sewing contest. Sponsored by the Frank and Seder Department Store in Pittsburgh, young ladies of elementary school age were challenged to create a simple shift that demonstrated their most impressive range of sewing prowess. The third-grader kept her entry plain, simple, and straightforward, but it still astounded the panel of judges with its buttonhole precision and flawlessly measured stitching. "For her age, she's a natural," they said. That's how Eunice became somewhat of a local celebrity for the second time in a matter of months. When news spread that a rural schoolgirl took first place over older, more experienced contestants from the big city of Pittsburgh, well-wishers came to the Irwin trolley stop to see them off. With a letter of instruction from the store neatly folded in her father's coat pocket, she and her parents headed into the mighty metropolis to make delivery arrangements for her prize, give an interview for the local newspaper, and pose for a photograph or two.

"Ladies first," her father proclaimed as the vehicle stopped and opened its doors. "Your chariot awaits, m'dear." Her daddy bowed, and the conductor tipped his cap to her. After climbing up into the trolley car and paying her fare, the girl scrambled for a seat by the window to continue returning every last departing wave. Eunice and her mother occupied a double, forward-facing bench while her father, Richard, sat in the row behind.

Louise De Hem, *A Young Lady Sewing by the Window*, 1905

"That's enough," Mum said with firm decisiveness when the conductor rang the bell. Eager and ready to begin that long and scenic ride to Pittsburgh, Eunice turned in her seat, smoothed her clean, crisp dress with dainty, white-gloved hands, and settled in for all the starts and stops ahead. The pop of sparks from the trolley wire above, the grinding metal of breaking wheels below, and the jostling of the wide-swung turns that slid them sideways in their seats kept Eunice and her mother holding tight with a nerve-wracking, jittery fright.

On her first trip into the city, Eunice counted every stop and bridge from Irwin to Trafford—four stops and nine bridges over the five-and-a-half-mile route. The girl listened intently, memorizing everything her father rattled off while announcing trolley

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Christian Krohg, *Tired*, 1885

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stops and borough names. "What's that, Daddy?" She must have quizzed him dozens of times. Mum sat stiff and firm, insisting she was "taking everything in." After twelve years in America, her mother hadn't ventured further than the city of Greensburg, so her father proposed taking the trolley rather than the train. He hoped the long and winding ride would help orient and open his wife to greater possibilities across the county line. Transferring to the Ardmore streetcar and venturing closer to the city limits, new and bustling corridors widened, and clusters of thriving commerce and formidable architecture stood sentry over dozens of sister neighborhoods. Paralleling the broad-shouldered boulevards of Ardmore and Penn were the house-lined streets and alleys that were occupied by honest, hard-working men. "Someday . . . " her father promised them. The trolley also wound its way through other areas where overcrowding, soot, and despair looked no different here or there, but Eunice spied the beauty of perennials coexisting with more modest buildings, the colorful shades of immigrant lives hanging on the clotheslines, and the many languages of welcome decorating the doors and windows of family businesses and reflected in the rose-tinted windows of the trolley that day.

Once downtown, the Williams trio snaked their way through noisy streets and vendors that beckoned them with unfamiliar sounds and scents of confusion. "I'm sure we looked like the country mice who fell off the turnip truck that day!" She laughed and imagined how bewildered they must have appeared walking up and down Smithfield Street with only a stranger's hand-drawn map to guide them. Despite taking a few wrong turns and getting themselves back on track, she and her parents still arrived right on time to claim her winning prize: A brand-new Singer sewing machine! It was everything her heart could ever hope for and desire!

> ***They stitched, knitted, quilted, crocheted, and artistically filled their chiffarobe and bureau drawers with necessities; hope chests with fancy, embroidered fineries; and households of ornamental and practical, hand-crafted things.***

The department store that ran the contest was, by far, the most palatial she'd ever seen. The luxurious opulence of polished mahogany walls and buffed marble floors created a marvelous maze of well-gamed furs, expensive cigars, hand-oiled leather, and intoxicating French perfumes that greeted you at the door. Just standing on the threshold of such decadence felt so foreignly

Fritz von Uhde, *By the Window*, 1890

indulgent, but she had to admit, it was mysteriously alluring too. "Don't touch anything," she'd been forewarned. Eunice and her parents' jaws gaped in wondrous awe at the voluminous expanse of tasseled, velvet draperies cascading from the massive windows and at the ornate brass mezzanine with its intricate stairway and balcony. Above them, the elegant three-tiered crystal chandeliers sprinkled prisms of constellations across the muraled ceiling. Below, dazzles of jewelry were on countertop displays. "Don't gape or point." Mum reminded them. "Act like you belong."

Fortunately, a uniformed gentleman employed by the retail establishment graciously offered his assistance. He expertly ushered the wandering family around glitter-cased islands of opulent baubles, exotic decadence, and coveted silks. "Did you see the price on that?" They asked each other with their eyes. The doorman switched this way and that, safely serpentining them across a seeded field of easy temptation—past feather-plumed hats and two-tiered tables of ornamental pocketbooks, well-heeled oxfords, and high-button shoes. Just beyond, the elevator operator waited for them with a bemused grin. "Going up?" He asked as if there were other options. She remembered it took quite a few reassurances to get them readied and agreeable to board rather than climb the stairs.

When that boxed-up compartment jerked itself to life and began its motorized ascent, her mother closed her eyes and swallowed hard to settle the flip-flopping of her stomach. The girl squeezed her parents' hands the entire ride up to the sixth floor. When the lift finally inched evenly to its designated stop and the grated door accordioned open, Eunice heard a stranger's voice announce her name, and they were met with an unexpected "There she is!" Initially, the child didn't realize that the throngs and festivities had gathered there to honor her. "Congratulations, Miss Williams," she heard someone say. "Go on. Go on," Daddy said, encouraging his daughter to overcome her bashfulness and wade into the eager depths of admirers. Mum also nodded her approval. It was the most exciting fuss she had ever stepped into! The award was presented, praise bestowed, compliments given, and kindness shown to the quiet, shy girl who charmingly curtsied to everyone in the dress that earned her this well-deserved honor. Her father called her "beautiful" that day. Photos were taken, hands were shaken, and just when she thought the day couldn't get much brighter than that, Eunice was offered a paid apprenticeship to begin on her fourteenth birthday. She honestly thought her heart would burst! Although that was five years away, Annie and Richard recognized it for what it was at the time: honest and equitable possibilities for all their talented and imaginative children.

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So the tongue-waggers were wrong. It wasn't fear or cowardice that drove the Williamses away, but bravery and a desire for a more progressive future that propelled them forward. Eunice spent the next four years immersed in her craft, perfecting her techniques, competencies, and skills in preparation to ace her anticipated apprenticeship. With that marvelous machine's added gifts of expedited accuracy and increased ease, she constructed basic coveralls and jumpers for her new baby sisters, Minnie, Mabel, and Evelyn. She repaired and cobbled together wardrobe pieces for everyone else. In 1917 her career plans almost got waylaid when the Frank and Seder Department Store burned to the ground. Fortunately for Eunice Williams and her family, the retail establishment was rebuilt by 1919. It fortuitously reopened the same year as her fourteenth birthday, in time for her to play the role of the hero again. That meager stipend the seamstress apprentice earned from her first sewing job became the family's saving grace, putting food on the table when they found themselves financially gutted and nearly destitute following the Nightmare on Blessing Street.

On November 1, 1918, Eunice's father and sister Alice fell victim to the deadly Spanish flu. The aftershocks of this global pandemic pulled her mother into a shaft of lonely destitution from which

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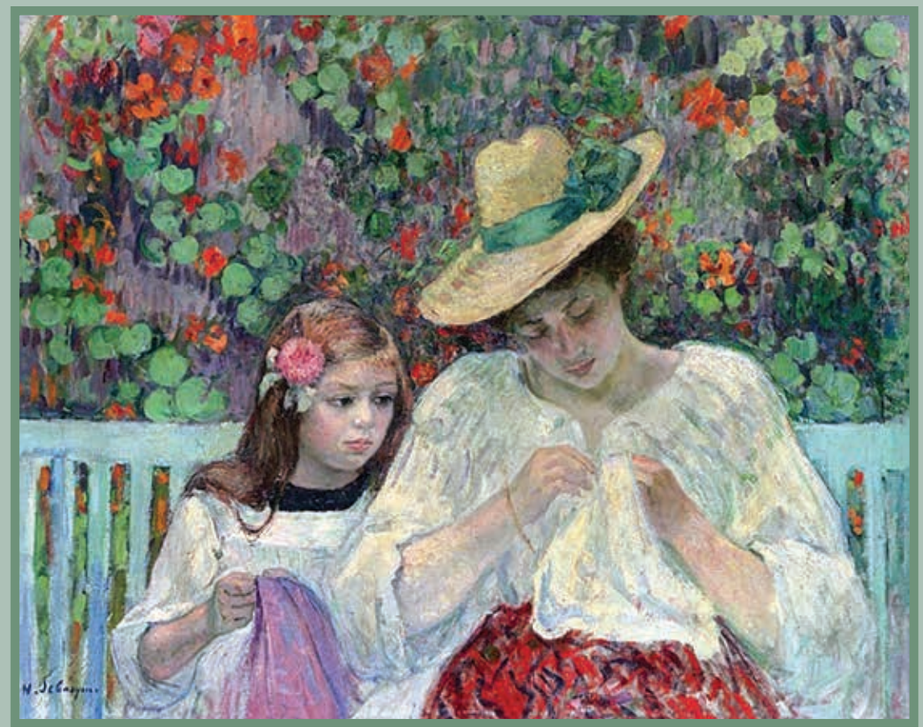
there seemed no available escape. Even resilience like hers had its breaking point. As the magnitude of grief imploded, every fortification built by her parents gave way and crumbled into nothingness. Survivors, smothered in the demolition of certainty, were abandoned with the cold hopelessness of reality for days and weeks at a time. What life had been before was never fully resurrected, and many of its more endearing and subtle fragments were undoubtedly gone for good. They remained helplessly crushed beneath the weight of this unforgivable blow and began to accept that they'd never feel anything that resembled painlessness again. That was a difficult story for my grandaunt Eunice to tell. Its eternal sadness still rippled in her voice and was reflected in those permanently sorrow-filled eyes, yet she was brave enough to tell it.

During that worldwide quarantine when Eunice Williams was thirteen, church services and funerals were suspended, and the physical, emotional, and spiritual reconciliation of life and death was theirs alone to manage. As crafty and handy as the Williams survivors were, those well-intended, homemade fixes rarely met their mark. "Only Daddy could wipe her tears away as tenderly, and no one fostered a love for life like Alice," she knew. There was absolutely no loosening or adjusting that stiff, whalebone-girdled bereavement to fit everyone the way it should. For weeks, Eunice was isolated with the raw edges of a nagging question: "What if she hadn't won that contest and her family never moved here?" She carried that notion through the hallways of unfounded blame for far too long.

Throughout the bad times and back into the good, Eunice Williams sewed. On Blessing Street, she completed her seamstress apprenticeship and devoted her teenage years to making clothing repairs and adjustments for a few privileged women from her church. During the hardest hit years of the Great Depression, when they lived on 37th Street, the big jobs, admittedly, were farther and fewer between. Still, pace and demand for her specialized skills increased when repairing or revamping antiquated styles became far more economical than purchasing new. As she entered her thirties, my grandaunt was assembling fashionable attire for a steady stream of highbrow clientele and neighborhood dress shops while continuing to retrofit those new-fangled zippers where buttons had been. As other young ladies her age squeezed nicely into marriage, Eunice was piecing out a five-star reputation and tacking a trustworthy customer base to that neat, tidy business that she minded very well on her own.

Somewhere in the forgotten inventory of a secondhand shop or in the damp cellar storage of an abandoned costume warehouse, a cache of vintage formalwear still remains, including a cedar-musky gown



Henri Lebasque (1865–1937), *The Sewing Lesson*

with an E. Williams Designer label back-stitched with precision to the neckline. Paraded proudly by the grande dames of yesteryear, these rare, remaining icons of a sophisticated social scene have long outworn the trends of their times and the occasions for which they were originally commissioned. Many outperformed the socialite for whom they once gracefully adorned. Those made by Eunice Williams were reinforced purposefully and lovingly to protect and shield her family from the unkempt and unseemly sides of poverty, and were fashioned like everything else back then—including promises, secrets, and loyalties—to outlive and outlast us all. ❁

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