The Morrison Family

A Family History · 1942 – Present

Three generations. One extraordinary story.

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For Eleanor Morrison,

who carried these stories in her heart

for eighty-two years —

and finally let us write them down.

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CHAPTER ONE

Eleanor’s Early Years

Eleanor Ruth Briggs was born on a Tuesday morning in March 1942, during one of the coldest winters Appleton, Wisconsin had seen in a decade. Her mother always said the weather was trying to make a point — that Eleanor arrived fierce and stubborn, and that she never much changed.

The Briggs family lived in a two-story white clapboard house on the edge of town, where her father ran a hardware store that smelled of sawdust and machine oil. Eleanor would spend hours there after school, perched on the counter, listening to her father trade news with the farmers and mill workers who came and went. She learned to read people there. She learned patience.

‘I never thought of us as poor,’ she told her granddaughter decades later. ‘We had everything we needed and a few things we didn’t, and that felt like plenty.’ It was a philosophy that would carry her through harder seasons than a Wisconsin winter.

> *“We had everything we needed and a few things we didn’t, and that felt like plenty.”*

CHAPTER TWO

The Farm on Maple Ridge

In the summer of 1958, Eleanor's family moved to a twelve-acre farm on Maple Ridge Road, seven miles outside of town. Her father had saved for eleven years to buy it. Eleanor was sixteen, and she was furious about leaving her friends.

She got over it by October.

The farm had an orchard — twelve apple trees, two pear, and one ancient cherry that bloomed every May like it was showing off. Eleanor learned to make pie from her grandmother that first autumn, standing in a kitchen that smelled of cinnamon and rendered butter, her hands working the dough the way her grandmother's hands had worked it for fifty years before her. Some things, she understood, are passed down through the palms.

> *"Some things are passed down through the palms."*

CHAPTER THREE

A Family Grows

Robert Morrison walked into Eleanor’s life at the Calumet County Fair dance on a humid August evening in 1961. He was twenty-one, recently returned from two years working the iron ranges in Minnesota, and he asked her to dance with the kind of directness that she had always respected in her father. She said yes.

They were married on April 6th, 1963, in the same Lutheran church where Eleanor had been baptized. It rained the entire morning and cleared by noon. Her mother called it a good omen. Eleanor called it Wisconsin.

Their first child, Thomas, arrived in 1965 — red-faced, loud, and from the first day, Robert’s son. Linda followed in 1967, and then the youngest, James, in 1971. The house on Maple Ridge was suddenly full of noise and shoes and the particular chaos that means a family is working exactly the way it should.

CHAPTER FOUR

Letters to Home

When Robert worked seasonal jobs away from home in the late 1960s, he and Eleanor wrote letters. Eleanor kept every one. This is from November 1967.

> *Dear Ellie,*
>
> *It's getting cold up here but the work is steady. I think about the kids every day and I miss Linda's laugh — she has your laugh, you know. Tell Thomas I'll bring him something.*
>
> *I counted the weeks. Home by Christmas, I promise.*
>
> *All my love,*
> *Robert*

Robert Morrison, November 14th, 1967

CHAPTER FIVE

Sunday Dinners

> *“The rule was simple: if you were within fifty miles, you came to Sunday dinner.”*

For thirty-one years, Eleanor cooked Sunday dinner for whoever showed up. There were rules: you called if you were coming, you didn’t call if you weren’t, and if you were within fifty miles you came. That was it. There was always enough food. She never explained how.

The menu changed with the seasons but the rhythm never did. Pot roast in winter. Ham in spring. Chicken and sweet corn in August. Apple cake from the orchard in September — always the same recipe, the same battered pan, the same argument about whether it needed more cinnamon. It always needed more cinnamon. Eleanor always disagreed.

CHAPTER SIX

Three Generations

By 2010, Eleanor’s Christmas table seated seventeen. Three children. Seven grandchildren. Two great-grandchildren, with a third on the way. Robert had been gone six years by then, but Eleanor always set his place at the head of the table. Not out of grief, she said. Out of accuracy. He was still the head of the family.

Her granddaughter Sophie — the one who had pushed her to tell these stories, who had asked the questions and taken the notes and finally convinced her that they mattered — sat beside her that year and held her hand before grace. ‘You know,’ Eleanor said, looking down the table at all of them, ‘I used to wonder what we were building. Now I know.’

FAMILY TREE

Eleanor + Robert Morrison

|-- Thomas (b. 1965) married Sarah children: Sophie, Matthew

|-- Linda (b. 1967) married Dave children: Kate, Emma, Ryan

`-- James (b. 1971) married Priya children: Noah, Anika

CHAPTER SEVEN

What She Wants You to Know

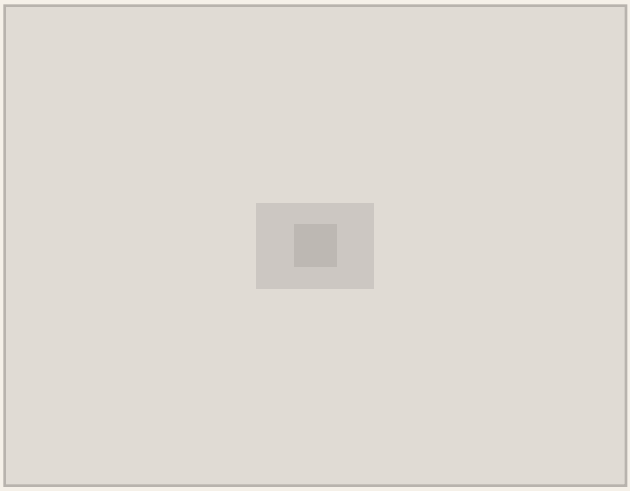
Eleanor is eighty-two now. She lives in the same house on Maple Ridge Road that her father bought in 1958. The orchard is smaller — some of the trees have come down — but the cherry tree still blooms every May like it's showing off.

When Sophie asked her what she wanted the family to know — the grandchildren, the great-grandchildren, the ones not yet born — she was quiet for a long moment. Then she said: 'Tell them the ordinary things. The pie recipe. The way the farm smelled in October. Tell them about the letters. Tell them that we were happy, most of the time, and that the times we weren't were worth it too. Tell them their grandfather had kind hands and a terrible sense of direction and that I loved him every day for fifty-three years.'

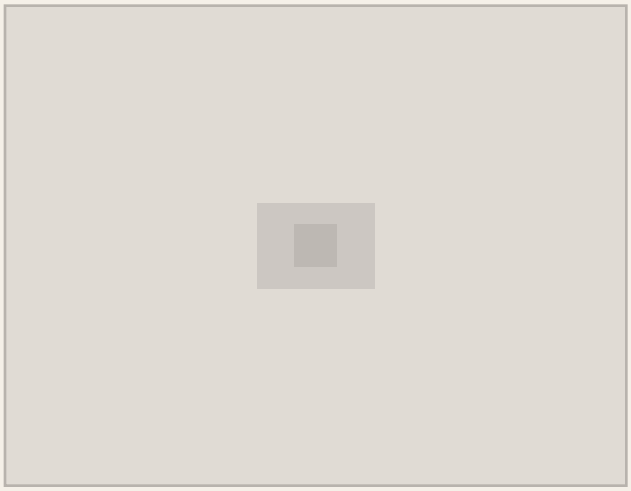
'That's what I want them to know.'

"Tell them the ordinary things."

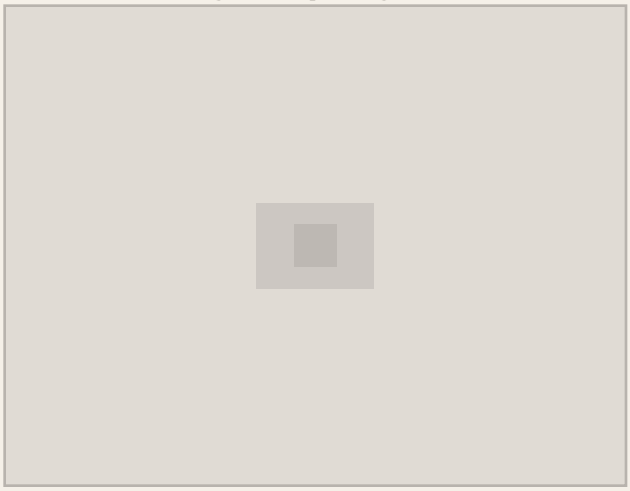
Family Photos



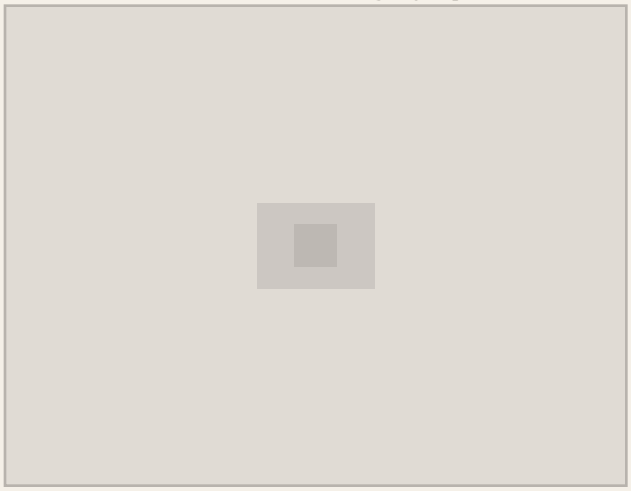
Eleanor, age 16, Maple Ridge Farm, 1958



Robert and Eleanor’s wedding day, April 1963



Sunday dinner, Christmas 1987



Four generations, Sophie’s graduation, 2019

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