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The Green Velvet Album

The other day I was going through some boxes in the storage room, looking for the Christmas decorations, when I came upon the old green velvet-covered photograph album I had inherited a number of years ago. It had belonged to my grandmother and she had prized it greatly; it was the link to her past and to family in the old country. For years it had rested on the top of the dresser in her bedroom and we children were warned never to touch it. Decades later, after passing from one relative to another, the album, now rather battered, is in my possession.

The thick heavy pages have oval and square cutouts. Some of the openings were empty when I got the album but other openings housed professional photos of handsome and well-groomed men and women. I can only guess at their linkage to me – those men in suits with wide white-collared shirts and the women with smooth faces and dark eyes, sober in high-necked dresses with small adornments. A couple of current family members bear a slight resemblance, I think, to these distant ancestors. I wish I knew more about them. But I am glad to call them kin.

The grandmother who owned the album was the matriarch of the family when I was growing up. She had left Sweden when she was a young girl of sixteen and journeyed by herself to the United States. She married my grandfather Lars and, in time, they moved with their five children from Minnesota to Saskatchewan to homestead on the wide prairie. There were innumerable hardships and much strenuous work. When Grandfather died, she operated the farm during the drought and Depression years living there with her daughter, my Aunt Helgie, on the original homestead, two miles from our place.

One day, between Christmas and New Years, I went to visit them, taking along a small gift. I stayed overnight and that was a real treat for me, at nine years of age, to be away from home by myself. When the temperature that bitterly cold day dropped even lower, Grandmother suggested I sleep with her instead of on the small cot in the spare bedroom. I was glad about that.

Her room, one of four bedrooms upstairs in the big house, was furnished simply with a chair, a dark wooden dresser and a big high bed piled even higher with quilts and blankets. Resting on the dresser was the green velvet album, fastened shut with a lock.

Bedtime came early. After the kerosene lamp was blown out, I climbed up onto the bed and settled down beside Grandmother, my head deep in the thick feather pillow, the quilts pulled up to my chin. The bedroom door was open to any draft of warm air drifting up from the kitchen. There was no wind outside to stir the stark black trees at the window's edge; the land was locked in a frozen white silence. A pale moon shone in through the window and emboldened the dark shadows in the corners, but warm and cozy in Grandmother's bed, I was indifferent to them and to the creaking sounds on the stairway as the old house settled for the night.

That was a memorable Christmas and the last one Grandmother spent on the farm. She and Aunt Helgie moved into a small house in a nearby town. I never slept over again; it would not have been the same. Furthermore, due to lack of space, Grandmother's big bed was replaced with the small cot. There was barely room for the wooden dresser upon which the green velvet album had again been placed. It rested there until her death and,

over time, found its way to our house. I am glad to have something to remind me of my Swedish grandmother and the album is now our symbolic link to the past and to those mysterious ancestors.