

TWO FRIENDSHIPS MOLDED BY FATE

There are certain friendships that Fate seems to play a part in, conspiring to weave its strands in and out of certain people's lives. Such appeared to be the case that involved José and Josy with a Danish family named Sporon-Fiedler and, later on, with another family from Mexico.

PART I: THE SPORON-FIEDLER STORY

In Houston, back in August of 1957, Josy was throwing out the trash one morning when the back door of the neighboring apartment opened.

"Ah, I see you're getting ready to move," surmised the tall, dark-haired woman who had opened the door and was preparing to put her own bag of trash into the can. "Where are you moving to?"

"Denmark," replied Josy.

"Ah, Denmark!" sighed the other lady. "My first boyfriend came from Denmark!" She introduced herself as Dorothy Wellington, divorced wife of the heir to the Wellington Fund. Then she launched into the following account.

"I was a WAC during World War II," she related. "I entered the service with a Ph.D. in Economics, and I got involved with the dismemberment of the I.G. Farben Company, which had supported Hitler in his rise to power. When the war ended, I was sent to Germany in the Army of Occupation. Ah, those were exciting times!"

"Over in Germany, through my work, I met a Danish count. He worked for the Danish Embassy there, and his name was Frants Sporon-Fiedler. He was charming! We began seeing a lot of each other and, after a while, we became engaged to be married. He even took me back to Copenhagen to meet his family, and we set a date for the wedding.

"Then, about two weeks before the wedding, along came an American officer. He was tall, handsome, dashing, and the heir to the Wellington fortune. Before I knew what had happened, he swept me off my feet, and we eloped! Poor Frants! I was really quite unfair to him, and I don't know if he ever forgave me."

"What happened after that?" Josy asked, fascinated.

"Well, we came back to the States, we had two children, and then, when the youngest was two, we got divorced. It just didn't work out."

"Maybe you'll get back together again," Josy suggested.

"Oh, no," responded Dorothy. "He's remarried, and he has another child. But we still get along fine. He's very good to me."

She proceeded to relate how her former husband came to see her and the children regularly, and that he supported them generously. "There's just one

problem,” she continued. “I get a very handsome alimony check from him every month, and the children get everything they need but, if I should ever start working again, my alimony stops completely. And it’s driving me crazy, sitting home and doing nothing but laundry, diapers, child-care, and nothing else!”

She explained that she took graduate courses at a University whenever she got a chance, but it bothered her that all her advanced training and experience was going to waste, especially after the exciting life that she had lived abroad.

In the days that followed, Dorothy and Josy saw a great deal of each other, and they got to be quite good friends. They chatted for long periods, shopped together and, when Dorothy’s ex-husband came to visit for the long Labor Day weekend, they both got baby-sitters and he took everybody (Dorothy, José, and Josy) out to an elegant steak-house on Main Street for a sumptuous meal. He was delightful company, as charming, witty, and intelligent as Dorothy had described earlier, and it was easy to see why she had fallen in love with him and even dropped her Danish sweetheart for this handsome, debonair fellow. Why they had later parted, José and Josy never quite found out.

The week after Labor Day it was time for José to set out for Europe. He was headed for the Atoms for Peace Congress in Paris, where he was a member of the U.S. Delegation. He was due to sail on the SS Queen Elizabeth from New York, while Josy would remain with the children one week longer in Houston, closing up the apartment and taking care of last-minute details. After this, she would fly with the children to Philadelphia, spend a few days with her father, and then fly directly to Copenhagen, where she and José would meet to start his Fulbright year there. Dorothy Wellington promised José to “keep an eye on Josy” and help her with any last-minute arrangements she might need to make before seeing her off. José left with a clearer mind after hearing this promise.

As things worked out, it was good that Josy had Dorothy to turn to. Three hours before departure time, the woman who, a week earlier, had left a twenty-five-dollar deposit on the car they agreed to sell her (with the understanding that Josy could keep it until just before setting out for the airport) backed down. She arrived at the apartment with a hostile, burly fellow accompanying her, and snidely announced that, since Josy had no choice, she would have to sell her the car for fifty dollars less than the price agreed upon earlier. Josy got very angry. She was happy to have Dorothy with her in the apartment, as the woman and the burly fellow continued to argue with her.

“You have no time to sell the car to anyone else” the woman snickered, “so you have to give it to me for fifty dollars less!”

It wasn’t the fifty dollars, but the underhanded conniving that angered Josy. When she refused, the woman asked for her deposit back.

“I’m sorry,” responded Josy, “but that’s what a deposit is for. No money

back.”

At that the fellow stood up and, if not for Dorothy’s presence, who knows what might have happened. Just then Victor Lekona, who had been one of José’s lab assistants, arrived to drive Josy and the children to the airport. Between him and Dorothy, they got the other couple out of the apartment. Both were gnashing their teeth in disappointment at their failure to retrieve their deposit, but still unwilling to pay the originally agreed-upon price. Josy left the unsold car with Victor, who promised to find a customer for it and forward the money to her in Denmark. (This, he finally managed to do three months later.) As they were leaving the apartment, Dorothy rushed up to Josy with a piece of paper.

“This is the last address I have for Frants Sporon-Fiedler,” she said, thrusting the paper into Josy’s hand. Kissing her good-bye, Dorothy added, “Look up Frants for me after you get to Copenhagen, won’t you, and tell him Dorothy still remembers him!” This was the last Josy ever saw of Dorothy Wellington. Although they continued to correspond for over a year, the letters from Texas finally stopped and, after a while, Dorothy must have moved away, for then all letters Josy wrote to her were returned. But the adventure with Frants Sporon-Fiedler was just beginning.

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Once settled into their Danish surroundings, Josy made the promised call. A lady answered the phone. Speaking in perfect English, she acknowledged that she was Mrs. Annie Sporon-Fiedler, the wife of Frants. Hesitating a bit, Josy identified herself. She explained the connection and gave regards from Dorothy Wellington.

Annie murmured, “Oh, but that’s an old girl-friend! It’s a bit embarrassing?” Immediately, however, she laughed and warmed to the conversation. She graciously accepted an invitation to come with Frants for dinner to get acquainted. Thus began a friendship that was to last over many years.

When the Sporon-Fiedlers first arrived at the house in Sorgenfri, a northern suburb of Copenhagen, where José and Josy lived, Frants suddenly came to attention.

“The street you live on is called Kvaedevej!” he exclaimed after the preliminary introductions were over. “That’s very important. ‘Kvaede’ is the Danish word for quince, you see, and ‘vej’ means street, so in English, you would say that you live on Quince Street.”

“Yes?” inquired Josy, puzzled.

“I happen to own an estate in the countryside outside of Copenhagen,” Frants continued. “Actually, it’s a small castle that I inherited. The grounds there are all covered with quince trees. I never knew what to do with all that fruit. But

now, you are the natural ones to have it!”

He instructed José and Josy that he and Annie would come by for them the following Sunday morning and take them for a day’s outing into the country. Accordingly, early on Sunday they arrived in a small truck and off the four of them went. It was a lovely one-hour ride outside of the city. The castle, a rambling three-story affair surrounded by a small forest, loomed ahead of them like a story-book palace, turrets and all. They spent the beautiful autumn day visiting the interior, furnished room by room with antique furniture, tramping through the woods outside, and then picking fruit. Barrel after barrel they filled with quince the size of apples. All of this Frants insisted on loading into the back of his truck for himself and, as he called them, his “new-found American friends”. Later Annie cooked a wonderful dinner of roast pork with prunes and three different kinds of potatoes, which she served in the huge, baronial dining room beside a blazing fire in the hearth, and then they all headed back for the city, the barrels bumping along in the back of the truck as they rode along in the dark and chatted and sang together.

Once back at Kvaedevvej, José helped Frants unload barrel after barrel, which Frants insisted that they keep with his compliments, rolling the barrels one after the other through the house and out into the small back yard.

“But what do we do with so much quince?” asked Josy. “I never prepared quince before.”

“You just boil it until it gets soft,” remarked Annie as if that were the easiest thing in the world.

“Make jelly,” shouted Frants, waving as they took off down the street in their nearly empty truck.

Now, cooking quince is not easy, as they soon found out. First of all, the fruit has the size, shape, and overall appearance of a large potato. It is as hard as a rock, and just about as impossible to peel. After several inquiries from colleagues at the laboratory, few of whom had ever cooked quince before, José determined that peeling was out of the question. Accordingly they scrubbed the fruit, loaded as much of it as they could possibly fit into four large water-filled kettles on top of the electric stove in the kitchen, and turned on the heat. The kettles continued to boil, day and night, for seven days. Whenever anybody thought of it, they would take turns stirring the contents. The pots boiled over several times but, after a hasty cleanup, the cooking and the stirring resumed. Anyone who chanced to come to the front door was invited inside to take a turn stirring and mixing at the pots. The postman (who, in his natty red uniform delivered mail by bicycle three times each day), the milkman every morning, any deliveryman and neighbor who chanced to ring the doorbell, every visiting friend, all got their turn at the stove! Eventually, the substance in the kettles began to resemble a sticky compote. This they finally let cool and poured into dozens of glass jars. There was no room in the kitchen for

all the jars, so Josy stored as many as she could in the basement and in the pantry and even, a few, on the back porch outside the kitchen door. The overall supply lasted for months and months. Then in June, the original owners of Kvaedevej 64 returned unexpectedly, three months earlier than had previously been arranged. José and Josy were suddenly asked to move into another house across the street. At this point Josy purposely left the remaining jars of “kvaede” behind for the new occupants, who undoubtedly remained extremely puzzled by their abundance and the nature of their contents.

The Sporon-Fiedlers continued a close association with José and Josy. Their oldest child, it turned out, was the same age as Lois. Children under seven were not admitted to public school in Denmark. Indeed, no public kindergartens even existed. Dancing classes, then, became quite the rage for boys as well as for girls of pre-school age. Annie Sporon-Fiedler suggested that Josy enroll Lois so that both mothers could take turns car-pooling. Josy agreed and, for several months, she would see Annie on a regular basis this way.

Whenever it was her turn to drive, Josy would also bring two-year-old Marty along, and he would sit with her in the dancing class and watch the four- and five-year-olds pirouette, curtsy, and go through the regime of ballroom dancing. It must have been very impressive, for he soon learned, by observation, how to approach somebody and bow from the waist down, his right arm across his abdomen, his left behind his back. It was a cute and charming gesture. The only problem was that, no matter how much José and Josy tried to get him to reverse position, Marty would insist on turning his back to the spectator before bowing. Once, when the elderly and dignified representative from the American Embassy came calling, (a Mrs. Van Delten whom they used to refer to between themselves as “Mrs. V.D.” because of her supercilious, snobbish and occasionally unpleasant manner), Josy made the mistake of asking Marty to “bow for the lady.” Without hesitation, he approached Mrs. Van Delten, turned his back, and proceeded to go through his usual routine. Unfortunately, he bowed a little too low this time and, at the very moment that his nose came about six inches away from the floor, both buttons on his overalls snapped off. His trousers dropped to his ankles, and an amazed Mrs. Van Delten gasped at the sight of a rosy pair of buttocks that he politely presented to her!

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When they left Denmark to return to the United States, José and Josy learned that the Sporon-Fiedlers would also soon be leaving to go abroad. As Chargé d’Affaires for the Danish Embassy, Frants worked a three-year stint at home, followed by the next three years overseas. He was unsure where his next

assignment would be, but later he wrote informing them that he and Annie were now living in Mexico City. In 1962, when José was sent there to attend a scientific meeting, he and Josy looked them up.

Frants came in the Embassy car to pick them up, and they enjoyed a wonderful reunion in the charming little hacienda that the Sporon-Fiedlers were now occupying. Again, a garden and its contents played a part in their get-together. Taking Josy outside among the lush flowers and shrubbery that he was cultivating, Frants plucked a ripe fig off a bush and, with a flourish, presented it to her and begged her to taste it, claiming, “This will be much better than ‘kvaede’!” Without thinking, and without remembering that, in Mexico, one always washes fruit carefully before eating, Josy bit into the fresh fig. For the rest of her stay in Mexico that month, and for the eight or nine weeks that followed, Josy continued to experience the worst case of “Aztec runs” that she could ever remember. It was an unappreciated souvenir from the Sporon-Fiedlers, whom she nevertheless liked so well.

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Many years went by and they completely lost touch with the Sporon-Fiedlers. They knew that Frants had returned to Denmark, and that he had subsequently gone out of the country on further assignments. This made a steady correspondence irregular, and it finally petered out altogether. Finally in 1993, when Josy received her Ph.D. from Penn, José determined to let all of their friends all over the world know. He hoped that some of them at least might take this occasion to come and visit. He wanted to get in touch with the Sporon-Fiedlers, but had no way of knowing how. Letters to the Embassy in Copenhagen failed to produce results and came back unopened. Finally, he thought of the one Danish person with whom he still remained in touch, Mrs. Lis Dupont. Lis, a good friend who had once called herself their children’s “Danish Grand-mumum”, was now eighty-nine years of age. They still kept in touch with her regularly by mail. Lis had once been Features Editor of the Sunday magazine of Copenhagen’s main newspaper **Politiken**. Vivacious, ever alert for new feature stories, and fluent in English as well as in current on-going activities, Lis would be the one person who might be able to help. José sent her a letter explaining the situation. Sure enough, two weeks later, Lis replied, sending a current address for Frants Sporon-Fiedler who, she discovered was now living in Prague!

This time, a letter sent to Czechoslovakia produced an answer. Although they were unable to come to the United States, Frants wrote saying that, retired, he now spent most of his time in Prague, returning to Denmark only occasionally. His children were married and all living abroad. He and Annie were both well – he

even sent a recent snapshot, but neither José nor Josy could recognize either one of them.

Then, shortly afterwards, the letters from Lis Dupont stopped. When no Christmas cards arrived for two successive years, they got worried. Whom did they know that they could write to in Denmark, to inquire after Lis? Everyone from the Carlsberg Laboratorium where José had worked during his Fulbright year in 1958, was now either retired or gone. The Sporon-Fiedlers, oddly enough, remained their only Danish contacts.

They wrote to Frants in Prague, asking him if he could find out what had happened to Lis, the lady who had put them all back in touch with each other after so many years. Soon afterwards, a letter arrived from Frants, enclosing Lis's death certificate. She had passed away close to her ninetieth birthday. How ironic it was that these two different sets of friends, originally unacquainted with one another, had both served to acquaint José and Josy with the whereabouts and condition of the other!

One final incident made the whole situation even more poignant. One Saturday morning, a year after hearing of Lis Dupont's death, José happened to be glancing through the Philadelphia Inquirer. Imagine his amazement to read the obituary of a Dr. Jean-René Dupont, local physician in Chester County, Pennsylvania, a man in his sixties, born in Copenhagen, who had just died of leukemia and was being buried in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania! Jean-Renee was Lis's son. He had worked as José's lab technician in Houston back in 1957. It had been he who had originally introduced his mother to José when she had come for a visit to Houston. But Jean-René had dropped all further contact with José, and Lis, though she had continued to correspond with José and Josy till the very end of her life, had never, in any of her letters, ever mentioned that her son had moved to the Philadelphia area.

"We could have mourned Lis's passing together!" José exclaimed upon reading this news. "And perhaps we could have helped him through his final illness, had we only known!"

How distressing to have come upon this news accidentally! And how sad to have been informed about Lis's passing from the Sporon-Fiedlers, themselves also so far away, and they reunited with José and Josy through Lisa herself!

That Fate had intervened through the years in intertwining the path of the Rabinowitz family with that of the Sporon-Fiedlers could hardly be doubted at all.