

Complicated Inheritances

Most families have a story that gets repeated again and again over dinners, to the annoyance and delight of everyone who's heard it a million times before. In my family it's the story of how my grandfather helped to develop the plastic milk bag. This sealed bladder of milk, a staple of my childhood, is common throughout Europe, South America, Israel, India, and Canada, where I grew up. Family gatherings were loud, chaotic affairs. Cousins ran everywhere while aunts and uncles talked over each other. It was difficult for anyone to get a word in, or finish a sentence. Anyone, that is, except my grandfather, Ken Irvine. He had all the gravitas and entitlement of a white man who grew up on a farm and had succeeded in the burgeoning chemical industry, fully believing in its promises of creating a better world. Ken was married to a beautiful, intelligent woman, Marg, and the father of seven children—a 1950s patriarch par excellence. When he spoke, we listened.

He would tell us the story of the milk bag, and he was clearly proud of his involvement. Later, looking through his documents, I found a speech on the same topic that he had given to a gathering of former employees. In 1964 he was tasked with finding new business opportunities for DuPont Canada. Founded in 1802 in Wilmington, Delaware, as a gunpowder mill, DuPont later turned to industrial chemical production, including the development of synthetic tex-



FIGURE P.1. Marg and Ken Irvine in Texas, 1952. Courtesy of the author.

tiles, paints, and polymers like nylon, Tyvek, and Teflon. One morning, while working on the problem of expanding DuPont's Canadian markets, my grandfather's colleague Jean Paul Trudel came into his office and asked: "What's the cheapest way to package a liquid?" "In a bag!" my grandfather replied, and so they began to work on how to package milk in bags. The story goes that when it came time to test the seal on the bag, Trudel marched into my grandfather's office and threw the bag across the room to prove that it wouldn't break. It didn't.

In the speech my grandfather gave at DuPont of this invention, there is no mention of my grandmother. But when he told his story around the dinner table, my grandmother would interject, reminding him that he brought home various milk bags for her to test. As the quintessential suburban housewife, my grandmother was the perfect focus group. The initial milk bag had no corresponding container, so my grandmother had to keep the bags in a bowl or transfer the milk to a pitcher. They would flop around and spill everywhere. "Oh, I really didn't like them," she would say, making a face. Eventually a corresponding plastic pitcher, made from a harder and more durable plastic, was developed to go along with the milk bags. And we would keep a blade, encased



FIGURE P.2. Marg Irvine, early 1950s. Courtesy of the author.

in another kind of plastic, attached by a magnet to the fridge, whose sole purpose was to open these bags.

In the summers we visited my grandparents in Kingston at their sprawling midcentury home across the street from Lake Ontario. We swam at the beach and ate in their meticulously kept backyard. As a child I never paid attention to the “private, for residents only” sign on the fence guarding the beach, or the high-security men’s penitentiary in the near distance. It wasn’t until I was a teenager that I began to register the predominantly white, wealthy bodies on the beach, or the overrepresentation of Indigenous men populating the penitentiary, whose foreboding walls we could see as we swam out to frolic on a raft.

Around this time my high school history teacher, Mr. Cox, stopped during a lesson one day, stomping his foot for emphasis, as he sometimes did, to ask: “Why are we speaking English in the middle of the bush?” This question hit me hard. From that moment, I began to question my presence, my feeling of belonging, on that land, to no longer understand it as inevitable, and to see, slowly, its history of settler colonialism. I had always understood myself as the descendent of immigrants. I was taught to be proud of my English, Irish, and

Scottish heritage, filled with stories of hardship that naturalized my family's presence on the land, rendering it benign. That day in class, looking out into the forest, I began to wonder about the ways in which I do not belong. Why didn't I know the history, language, or culture of the Algonquin and Anishinabeg peoples whose land I occupied, even though a nearby park, one of the most iconic in Canada, was called Algonquin? It was the beginning of what I now understand as a lifelong process of recognizing and questioning how my body participates in forced displacement, genocide, and alienation: not only of Indigenous peoples but also of Black people as well as racialized settlers and immigrants.

I was praised for being the first grandchild to get a PhD despite no one understanding what I studied. My grandmother once introduced me to a friend not by my name but by my title. In other ways, however, I had clearly fallen short. I didn't get married or have kids. I don't own property. It wasn't until I was thirty-eight that I finally got a permanent job. I'm queer and have never brought any of my female or nonbinary partners to meet my extended family. When I was doing my master's degree and living in Toronto, I remember getting a thick envelope in the mail from my grandparents, the same day as massive protests against the start of the Iraq War. I was so excited to open it, thinking it might be a long letter or a present. Instead it was a portfolio explaining how my grandfather had invested \$1,000 on behalf of each grandchild, much of this money in fossil fuels, to teach us about the stock market. My heart sank. I immediately thought of the war and the fact that that fossil fuels are also used as one of the primary means of Indigenous dispossession and environmental injustice. I never finished reading that letter. I also didn't pull the stocks out, fearing it would be insulting.

I tell this story to show how plastic has structured my life but also to open up broader questions of inheritance—namely, how whiteness has influenced the technological and material realities in which we live. As Kyle Powys Whyte has argued, our current ecocidal moment can be understood as living in my ancestor's utopia—that is, the utopia of European-descended settler colonizers.¹ This world is certainly the utopia of my grandfather. And as much as I would like to disavow it, it is mine as well. This book is my own attempt to grapple with this inheritance.