

Once written, forever smitten

When *Kristina McMorris* uncovered cherished correspondence between her grandparents during the Second World War, she was moved by their openness and depth of commitment after just a few dates. Here she tells the story of their romance and how it made her reassess her own attitude to love and marriage Main photographs CARL KILLSGAARD

It all started with a Christmas gift, a home-made project that years later would change my life in ways I could never have foreseen.

With my grandmother's help, I set out to self-publish a cookery book for the family, filled with recipes she had collected and created over decades. For the biographical section, I peppered her with questions about her life, including her courtship with my grandfather, who passed away nearly 20 years ago. Then, to my amazement, she retrieved from her wardrobe a collection of love letters he had sent to her during the Second World War. As I flipped through hundreds of pages that had gone untouched for years, Grandma Jean divulged details about how their relationship had initially developed.

In the autumn of 1943, while on leave from the navy, 18-year-old Merle McPherran had travelled by train to visit his mother, who was employed at a nursing home in Iowa, in the USA. There he crossed paths with Jean, at 17 a nurse's aid with soft blonde curls. At a community dance, they chatted among friends, quietly harbouring a fancy for one another, as Merle charmed her with his Irish humour and striking looks.

Days later, it was time for him to return to his ship in New York. Before departing, he asked his mother to pass on some souvenirs to Jean, hoping to woo his new acquaintance with an African bracelet and wooden shoes. Jean responded with a note



of gratitude that began three years of correspondence.

I sat beside my grandmother, opening these envelopes with care. Years dissolved from her face as I read aloud stories that her beau had shared involving his signalman duties on a destroyer escort. He wrote about mutual friends and family, about film shows and President Roosevelt. At a glance, the letters amounted to small talk. But countering an undercurrent of uncertainty was a semblance of hope for the future.

'He wasn't able to keep my letters because of his moving around so much,' Jean explains. Yet she recalls answering his tender words with updates, always intent on lifting his spirits. In each subsequent exchange, their love for each other became more pronounced.

Several months and dozens of

pages after their first encounter, Merle came home again to visit. By now Jean had become a beloved sweetheart in his mind, a girl whose wallet-size portrait had taken up residence on the wall above his bunk on the ship. Looking dapper in his uniform, he escorted Jean on their first official date. They chatted over milkshakes at a local diner, enjoyed an afternoon of roller-skating, and spent time with each other's families. Then, while walking her home, Merle paused beside an old schoolhouse and dared to ask, 'Will you marry me?'

Jean replied instantly: 'I'll have to think about it.'

Under normal circumstances, one might deem the statement coy, meant to leave a gentleman in suspense. Rather, Jean's answer stemmed from fears of the unknown: was it foolish to marry a sailor who was about to leave? How well did they

really know each other? What if he didn't survive the war?

Her father echoed the same concerns, not wanting to see his daughter left a young widow, possibly with a child to raise on her own. Still, her heart trumped all doubts, and the next day, she and Merle were engaged.

The months of separation passed slowly for the couple, whose love grew with every letter. In one, Merle wrote: 'Oh, Honey, I do love you so much and it was so hard leaving you. I would have given anything to have taken you with me as my wife. Please write as often ▶'

Young love: Merle aged 18 and Jean aged 17 in 1943 – the year they met. Jean kept all the letters Merle wrote to her during the war.

Opposite: Kristina has borrowed excerpts from her grandfather's correspondence for her debut novel

A woman with dark, wavy hair, wearing a purple long-sleeved top, is smiling warmly while holding a piece of aged, yellowed paper. She is standing in front of a window with light-colored curtains, which are softly lit from behind, creating a warm, golden glow. The overall mood is intimate and nostalgic.

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◀ as possible, as there is nothing that makes me happier than your letters. XXXX and oceans more.'

'It was a hard time,' Jean remembers. 'I wouldn't hear from him for several weeks, and then I'd get a couple of letters at once.'

Eight months later, the two reunited for a race to the altar, his military leave lasting little more than a week. In lieu of a honeymoon, they took a train to New York, where they moved into a tiny apartment in Brooklyn, not far from the naval base. Sadly, with the war still raging, their newlywed bliss didn't last. Merle left their home one morning to report for duty, only to discover he was being deployed immediately.

'All I knew was that he just didn't come home that night,' Jean recalls. A letter of explanation eventually brought her reassurance, but between each of her husband's missions, she fought her fears by busying her days as the nanny of a toddler. When Jean's father fell ill with typhoid fever, she returned to Iowa to help tend the family farm, and once he recovered, she found work in a cement factory. All the while, she waited anxiously for the arrival of every new letter from her sailor, confirmation that he was still alive.

In 1945 the Allies declared victory. The following year, honourably discharged, Merle joined his wife in Iowa to settle down and start a family. He worked as a blacksmith for a time, then for the railway. Although Jean dreamed of becoming a nurse, she instead gave birth to my uncle Dennis and devoted herself to being a housewife. Married life was everything they had longed for – and yet Merle became restless. Exotic travels had broadened his world beyond the borders of Iowa. Thus, when a local friend packed up to move west, enthusing about California's heavenly weather, beautiful beaches and job openings, Merle envisioned a new destiny.

Before long, he and his blossoming family headed for the suburbs of Los Angeles. Fortunately, his friend was right – work opportunities there were as plentiful as the sunshine. While Merle entered a 30-year career



as an electrician for United Airlines, Jean raised their three children, the youngest being my mother.

My childhood memories of my grandparents are of a wonderful, complementary couple. While my grandfather had a spirited, humorous personality, my grandmother is gentle and poised.

Nevertheless, knowing they had exchanged vows after merely a few dates continued to astound me. I found myself wondering how different their relationship might have been if they hadn't expressed themselves so openly from the start. From this thought emerged an idea for a book, a story of a Midwestern infantryman who, in the midst of the Second World War, falls deeply in love through a year-long letter exchange, unaware that the girl he's writing to isn't the one replying.

With Grandma Jean's blessing, I borrowed excerpts from my grandfather's correspondence, coupled with other intriguing elements of their lives, and wrote my debut novel, *Letters From Home*.

The lessons I've gained from my historical research have far surpassed the reward of seeing my book published. Until recently, I had little comprehension of what a pivotal time the war was for female roles in society. The choices I'm allowed today – between motherhood and career – are undoubtedly a result of the courage and independence demonstrated by women like my



Jean aged 83 with her dog Buffy at her home in Washington, above. Her granddaughter Kristina, top, now sees her in a new light and is full of admiration for her courage

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grandmother, whom I now view in a different light. I would never have imagined her to be a young teenager with the gumption to marry a sailor she essentially knew only through letters, then to leave the familiar fields of her youth to brave the bustling city of New York. From harvesting a farm and surviving the Great Depression, to sustaining a livelihood while her husband served in the war, Jean McPherrin is the picture of strength.

On occasion, I like to reread my grandfather's letters. While leafing through them, I'm saddened by what is being lost in modern communication. Soul-baring sentimentality isn't typically poured into text messages, tweets and emails. All too often, personal connections are brushed aside for the sake of convenience in a fast-paced world. Maybe divorce would be less prevalent if couples took more time to express themselves. Maybe, as I've come to understand in my own marriage, love is built on shared history, communication and sacrifice.

People often refer to bygone days as a simpler time. Perhaps, more accurately, my grandparents' generation focused better on what mattered. Traffic jams and minor quibbles with my husband Daniel pale in comparison with the worries that were faced on the home front and battlefield during the Second World War.

I confess, more than once while glimpsing my husband asleep at night, a wave of gratitude has swept over me, both for his safe presence in our home and for those military families who endured separation to ensure our freedom.

Now when I see elderly strangers, I no longer view them as 'old people' with whom I have little in common; instead, I try to visualise them as the young people they used to be, with hopes and fears, loves gained or lost, and all with their own stories to tell. **Y**

Letters From Home by Kristina McMorris will be published on 12 May by Avon, price £6.99. To order a copy with free p&p, contact the YOU Bookshop on 0845 155 0711, you-bookshop.co.uk