



## Thomas Craig Hunter

January 11, 1942 - November 21, 2020

In Memory of Thomas Craig Hunter

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I remember him as Craig, Uncle Craig; when I was young, he was my “favourite” uncle (if one is allowed to say such things aloud). The youngest of my father’s siblings, I remember him being very funny, smart and thoughtful, when I was a child. He took notice of me, saw and spoke to me as a person, always seemed genuinely interested in what I was doing and had to say; he was the one who engaged with the kids at family gatherings, and who told stories, shared knowledge. Uncle Craig’s jokes carried wisdom and his humour was infectious. My older brother Douglas recalls Uncle Craig trying to explain electrical theory to him when he was a child. “I was not,” Douglas confesses, “the most receptive student.” “He was a quiet and thoughtful man who loved to read,” my sister Susan recalls, a memory echoed by my eldest sister Marilyn, who adds that, “Craig always had a smile when he visited us at our home, or when he welcomed us to his home.” Susan also recalls his smile and that he had, “a genuinely friendly personality and took time to play with us, his nieces and nephews, whether that was with a board game or outside in the yard.” Uncle Craig let us call him Craig, he didn’t carry the strictness of his parents or the inherited formalities of his older siblings (sister Marion and big brothers William “Bill” and Robert “Bob”), all born more than a decade before him. Craig seemed to hover in a gap between generations; a child to his siblings, and a wise older brother to his young relatives.

Tom with his older sister Marion and mother Marion, Rosslyn Avenue, Hamilton, 1955.

He was the fourth child of Marion (née Crawford, 1899-1981) and Thomas N. Hunter (1896-1963) who had come to Canada from Scotland in the 1920s. Like so many Scots, they were working people drawn to the many opportunities they believed were available in The Ambitious City, as Hamilton liked to be known back then. Marion was born in Barrowfield, in the heart of Glasgow; a rather sad neighbourhood situated between

Dalmarnock and Glasgow Green, comprised of cotton mills and factories situated across the River Clyde from massive steel mills and foundries. Thomas was born in Milngavie (pronounced Milgay), a village a few miles north of Glasgow on the Allander Water. Milngavie was a mill town, the name likely means Mill of Guy. I never knew my grandfather Thomas, he died in 1963, a few months shy of my birth in Hamilton. Thomas is my middle name and I once thought of changing my name to Tom. Craig preferred to be known as Tom in his later years, a reassertion of his given name. I always believed I was named for the grandfather I never met, but now I also see myself as holding my uncle's name, and with his name, some of what he carried.

Tom was born in Buckingham, Quebec, during the families brief tenure their during the Second World War. His father was a veteran of WWI and he worked as a munitions inspector during WW2. On the day of his birth, Sunday, January 11, 1942, Japan declared war on the Netherlands and their forces seized Kuala Lumpur; the British cargo ship Cylcops was torpedoed and sunk off the coast of Nova Scotia by a German U-boat. These were not the best of times. There would also be a short stop in Fort Wayne, Indiana, before the family returned to Hamilton after the war. They lived on Rosslyn Avenue North, first renting, then purchasing a small home down the street at 168; a solid red brick house with a framed second story. It still stands a few doors up from Cannon Street East, and a couple of blocks west of Ottawa Street North. If you exit through the back gate and follow the alley, you'll cross Balmoral, then Grosvenor, before emerging onto Ottawa Street just south of the Avon Theatre, and a few blocks from the first Tim Hortons shop at Dunsmure. "Tom was from Hamilton," my father says, laughing, "so yes, he went to Tim Hortons, but I wouldn't say he loved it."

In an early photo (late 1940s), Tom is standing next to a young girl. Her face is concealed as she looks down to button her coat. He is wearing a wool coat and matching cap (very formal and proper). In another picture, Tom is sitting out back of the family home; his hair is light, he wears a crisp white dress shirt, shorts, white socks and brown leather shoes. His plaid tie has been flipped over his shoulder by the wind, touches the arm of his companion, a girl from a few doors down (Dad thinks her name was Kathy) in a dark coat with an elegantly frilled white collar. Her hair is in a "bob" with short sharp bangs. Small bows of knotted ribbon hold her hair in place. They look comfortable together, their small hands resting on bare knees. Tom is smiling, content, relaxing on the steps of Thomas and Marion's home at 168 Rosslyn. The street name Rosslyn is Scottish, possibly of Celtic origin (Ros = Moor + Celyn = Holly) or Gaelic (Ros = Rocky promontory + Linne = Waterfall). The neighbourhood was a very Scottish place, many others from Glasgow (the Blairs and Browns) had also come from Glasgow.

Tom with friend, Rosslyn Avenue, Hamilton, circa 1948.

Besides those short stays in Buckingham and Fort Wayne, Tom was a life-long resident of Hamilton where he attended Memorial Public School, then graduated from Delta Secondary. Like his parents, he was a member of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church (that imposing redbrick building at Barton and Smith). Thomas did not have a trade, but he worked in industry and as a draughtsman, and he was very active with Scouts Canada for many years. As Susan said: "He demonstrated his generous spirit through his many years of service through the Scouting movement." "He would play the guitar for us," Marilyn recalls; my father tells me, "We bought him his first guitar when he was young, and he took some lessons. He'd listen to songs on the radio, and write down the music." I remember him with his guitar at the townhouse he lived in near my high school (Sir Allan MacNab), at the corner of Mohawk Road West and Magnolia Drive. I recall records (Dylan, The Beatles, Joan Baez, Joanie Mitchell, Gordon Lightfoot). When he got a new guitar, he gave me his old one. It had a beautiful dark finish, f-holes, and a raised tortoise shell finger board. I never really learned to play it; I wish I had.

I find a photo him taken at a family dinner in my parent's living-room. Judging from the age of my two cousins in the foreground, I'm guessing it is the late 1970s. Tom is in the background, well dressed (white shirt and tie and a smart V-neck sweater) and his reddish brown hair is cleanly parted. He looks to be laughing, his face partially hidden behind heavily framed glasses, his left hand shielding his mouth, revealing his wedding band. He is sitting alone, I see him beginning to drift out of focus, his marriage did not last. There is no need to assign blame. People grow, develop, change, their paths diverge. Sometimes our strengths flourish; too often our weaknesses overwhelm us. No one is perfect; we are all human.

After his mother passed in 1981, Tom struggled to manage his Epilepsy. This soon impacted his mental health and he began to draw away from his extended family into isolation, living alone in a modest apartment on Main Street West near Queen Street. He looked mainly to my father for support, and through their relationship, I maintained my tenuous connection to "my favourite uncle." I would encounter him occasionally on the bus, or around downtown; he was trying to carry on, to stay present in a world that doesn't always show empathy or understanding. As he aged, he became more distant and like so many of us who struggle with mental illness, he became defined, in the eyes of others, by the illness and frailties he carried. For many family, friends and associates, Craig/Tom the person disappeared behind explanations and clinical definitions, while the man remained, witnessed by only a few. "He was really a very gentle giving soul," Susan offers. "Despite health challenges, he lived independently for a long time, simply and with dignity."

Tom at Christmas dinner, William and Anne Hunter's home, Hamilton, circa 1978.

The last time I saw Tom was just before the Covid outbreak. He'd fallen and been taken to the emergency. I drove my father down to the General Hospital to pick up Tom and take him back to his long-term care home. "Do you remember Andy?" my father asked him as we turned from Barton onto Wellington Street. "Yes," he whispered, and then retreated into silence, looking out the window at the passing buildings. At Baywoods Place, I helped my father get Tom out of the car, and then observed them both slowly enter the building together, both past and present; one moment I saw the big brother Bill watching over the much younger Craig, then the senior William supporting his junior sibling Thomas by the arm. My father still remembers pulling his infant brother in a sleigh through the deep snow of a bitterly cold Buckingham winter.

Dad and I dig through a shoe box of old photographs, and find another picture of young Tom. He is a few years older than the pictures taken on the steps of the family home. He sports a sailor's cap, his left hand grips a tiller, his right hand gently holds the bright white sheet of a main sail. He is smiling, his face beaming with joy as he guides the vessel; a confident skipper watched over by his oldest brother and friend, my Dad. Bill's knee pokes up into this image. He is lying in the bottom of his friend Frank's homemade sailboat (a Lightning) looking up at (and looking up to) Tom, who William always remember as a "sweet soul."

Tom sailing on the bay, Hamilton, July 1955.

My father visited Tom not long after we dropped him off from the General, and he didn't see him again until the morning of November 21, 2020, alive but unresponsive. Tom passed away later that day, just before midnight, at the age of 78. "When I spoke with the staff at Baywood," Susan tells me, "they spoke of Tom with great affection and commented on his sense of humour and his grace." Let's remember him that way.

-Andrew Thomas Hunter

November 26, 2020

# Comments

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**Andrew Hunter** - November 27, 2020 at 01:28 PM