This is not so much a tale told on my family, as it is an honoring of a man I revere, my uncle, George.

“Uncle George is a saint,” my mother used to say. He was a family man with an amazing ability to keep a secret. Uncle George grew up in the small Montana town of Coopersville, a town set at the foot of a bowl of mountains on a fertile glacial plain called Indian Prairie. George was from an exceptionally poor family. Even though it was the Depression in that farming community, and no one had much money, their poverty was worse than most.

As everyone in town knew, George was, in the ugly language of the time, the bastard son of a drifter. Apparently, if a father stayed around after a child was born, the child was legitimate; if only the mother stayed around after the birth of their child, the child was, and in some places, still is, a bastard.

George’s father had done chores for his mother’s parents working around their house and small farm for a while. He stayed just long enough to impregnate their pretty, tiny daughter, May, a teenager at the time, and then, as most drifters do, he left town without even knowing he had fathered a child. May was left to face the disgrace of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, labor and then the delivery of her only child, a son who would grow to be my Uncle George.

But her parents stood behind her, and May, like other women on the prairie in those days, was made of strong stuff. She raised George to be God-fearing, hard-working and deaf to the taunts of the boys from traditional two-parent families. As a school boy, George fought his way through crowds of detractors, until finally, by high school, he had worn down his detractors, who no longer wanted to fight George, alone or even in large groups.

George, by then, my mom said, was strong, well built, with remarkable eyes and wonderfully handsome. And like so many other high school boys, George fell in love sometime between grade school and high school with a girl who would grow to be my Aunt Helen. George carried the school books of Aunt Helen, my mother’s sister, as they walked from class to class. Not too many months went by before the gossips at school were linking George and Helen’s names, and they were right: The pair had fallen deeply in the sort of love that lasts a lifetime.

Sadly, during those high school years, there was another drama unfolding at home for Helen, and her sisters: my mom, Dorothy, and the family’s youngest child, Rose. Their mother was slowly dying of heart disease and kidney failure in a bed set up for her in their living room. Although the Depression had hurt them like
all the families on the prairie, their family had money for just about everything—everything except, of course, the medical knowledge that would have saved their mother’s life.

My grandmother finally died peacefully at home surrounded by her children. My own mother could remember those last minutes clearly. “It’s so beautiful there,” my grandmother said.

And then, she said, “I wish I could take you with me.”

She couldn’t of course, and my grandfather was then alone with a wheat ranch and three teenaged girls. It was the custom of those days to send motherless children, especially daughters, away to live with relatives. Ours was no different. Helen, and her two sisters, were sent across the Cascade Mountains to neighboring Dupont, Washington, to live with our Auntie Inez, a schoolteacher. Auntie Inez, a no-nonsense sort of woman, took in her grieving nieces. She was perhaps more practical than compassionate, however, when it came to solving the problems of teenagers and their struggles with hormonal storms.

Helen, along with both her sisters, was sent to Dupont schools, and while in school, she met and perhaps fell in love briefly with a boy she met there. I have always thought that Helen, grieving for her mother, must have wanted more than anything else, comfort in someone’s arms. But this boy, nameless in the family, was apparently not much liked by anyone, including even Helen.

I can’t imagine what it would have meant for Helen to tell Auntie Inez that she was “in trouble.” I certainly would not have had the courage. So, Helen didn’t tell. In fact, she didn’t tell anyone, not even her own sisters. Instead when the school year ended, Helen returned to the ranch and to her father with a terrible secret: she was pregnant.

There was just one person on the prairie that Helen did trust enough to tell. It was, of course, the boy she had loved since grade school: George. George had an amazing solution. They could marry. He had always loved her, he argued, and he would protect her and her unborn child from the taunts of the boys and girls from more traditional families. Those were taunts he already knew too much about.

My grandfather was informed of Helen’s secret and George’s solution all on the same evening. But our grandfather was a compassionate man. According to my mom, he offered to go along to be the witness at a marriage ceremony before a justice of the peace in Utah, since both were too young to marry under Montana’s law.

Helen and George’s son, John, now with George’s family name, was born a scant seven months later. But the town’s gossips took little notice. No one was even quite sure when the marriage had taken place, and besides, a baby on the way was good news then as now. After all, everyone knew those two had been in love for years.

Our family’s tale becomes downright ordinary, at least for the next few years. George and Helen moved to the ranch with their infant son, and eventually took
over from my grandfather. George was Grandfather’s student in wheat ranching, and George, grateful for the opportunity, was a quick study.

George and Helen had two more children, my cousins, Jean and Joe. They looked up to and adored their big brother Johnny. Their parents felt something similar. Johnny was an extraordinary son—to them both. Life on the ranch went by in the cycles familiar to farm kids everywhere: spring planting, summer work, autumn harvest, winter, school and rest.

My first real memory of Uncle George was as a sort of Pied Piper when my family came for visits to Montana. While he drove a green and yellow John Deere tractor, his children, Johnny, Jean and Joe, and my sister, and I clung and clamored all over the tractor. He needed the weight on the tractor of the children, he explained to my Aunt Helen. She was a little worried that he wasn’t getting all that much plowing done.

Uncle George was also Santa Claus at Christmas, a fact I discovered when I became a teenager. I caught a glimpse of him with sleigh bells and presents in the ranch hallway one wonderful Christmas Eve when we visited, and I loved him more.

Sadly, our ordinary years didn’t last long. When Johnny was fourteen, he was killed in the barn in a mysterious accident, overcome by fumes in an enclosed space from a leaky gasoline can.

Uncle George was nearly inconsolable—we all were. Perhaps of all of us cousins, Johnny had the most promise. John was strong, well-built, with remarkable eyes, and wonderfully handsome. Everyone said he looked like Uncle George, and perhaps for that reason, John and his father were unusually close. My mom flew from Virginia, where we were living, to Montana to be with her sisters, and the rest of our family when they buried John.

The last time I saw Uncle George, he was well into his eighties. Aunt Helen had died a few years earlier after a long struggle. George had not left her side for more than a few hours throughout her illness. By then, Uncle George was suffering from Parkinson’s, growing older and more lonely with each planting cycle. The night I stayed with him, he sat in a chair beside a stone fireplace. The picture on the mantle showed his smiling son, Johnny, holding the rope that tethered a healthy young calf. Uncle George spent that night telling me about how gentle his son, John, had been with animals. “He had a way with them,” Uncle George said with conviction. And, it was obvious how proud he was of the tall boy who had died at age fourteen.

Two years later, I returned to Montana for Uncle George’s funeral. A freshly dug, open grave with a carved headstone waited beside the tent that sheltered his grieving family, George’s children and grandchildren, and the casket. My cousin, Jean, as dear to me as a sister, stood next to me, weeping for her dad.

Suddenly, she whispered urgently to me that the gravestone was wrong! The marriage date was the year Johnny was born. Her parents were married the year before, she said. I put an arm around her and prayed hard to know what to say. My
mom, my source on the secret of Johnny’s birth, had exacted a promise from me when I was a teenager. I promised then that I would keep the secret that even Johnny never knew.

Finally, my weak answer came: “Let it go, Jean,” I said, protecting George, his wife and first born son. “It’s not worth the trouble of cutting a new stone for just one number.”

My words to Jean would have been different had I been free of the promise I gave to my mother years ago. I would have told Uncle George’s daughter that there truly was no one else quite like her father in our whole family. I would have said that Uncle George, like St. Joseph, lived a life that defined a legitimate father by his love for a mother and her unborn child.