

Ashfield: Meet the Fine Sisters



It was the morning of the Ashfield Fall Festival. Columbus Day weekend. Barbara Fine and her sister Ellen were having breakfast at Elmer's Store. Originally built as a general store in 1835, Elmer's has seen a great many changes over the years, yet it remains essentially the same both inside and out. How can both these things be true? It's easy. The slogan on the Elmer's website says it all: *The Kind of Place That Isn't There Anymore – Except Here*. The Ashfield Fall Festival is what town fairs used to be like. There's a home-made catapult held together with duct tape that launches pumpkins toward a cardboard castle held together with duct tape. Old Farmer Brown (that really is his name) leads his team of champion oxen down Main Street. Local fiddlers play. A few modest food stands offer local baked goods and hot spiced cider. There are booths with local crafts. Ceramic, woolen, wooden, whatnot. Ellen

and Barbara Fine had lived in Ashfield for more than 80 years. They'd been having coffee and scones at Elmer's or some earlier iteration of Elmer's by another name for most of those years, ever since high school. They were going to have the same today.

Ellen and Barbara looked like twins, but they weren't—Ellen was a year older. They dressed like twins though, usually in the same outfits right down to hats and gloves. A few years ago, the current owner of Elmer's had playfully put a brass plaque above the tiny table near the front where they sat: "The Fine Table." There they sat now, grey hair in buns, hats and gloves on the bench beside them; trim elders, not from formal exercise like many of their "active senior" peers, but from strict adherence to a strict New England diet: fish on Friday, root vegetables in winter, apples in apple season, corn in corn season. And they walked every day, rain, snow, or shine, from their home on the outskirts of town to their table at Elmer's. They were both short and high-waisted, which gave them a pixie look. As the people of Ashfield knew, you didn't want to cross them. They liked propriety, and looked down from DAR heights on anyone who lacked it. This particular morning they were out early because they didn't plan to attend the Ashfield Fall Festival—"too many out-of-towners," Barbara sniffed—and they wanted to get in their morning coffee in before the crowds gathered, and then walk back to their grand old tattered mansion, a stately Victorian badly in need of a paint job, with cracked windows and a debatable roof, and inside, crammed with relics of an earlier era. It was

furnished with old-fashioned easy chairs with antimacassar doilies, a cherry-wood roll-up desk, rotary phones, that sort of thing. But it was neat, not a hoarder's house, on Main Street at the very edge of town. They were planning to settle in and shut the door for the rest of the weekend. The fair hadn't started, and the tourists hadn't arrived, when there was a commotion on Main Street. The two sisters peered out the window as a group of about twenty black people passed in a straggling procession, followed by a few town kids shouting at them.

The local church had sponsored a refugee family from Somalia. There'd been lots of support in town for the project, and the First Congregational Church on Main Street had raised almost \$20,000 for the project. Now the families made their first appearance, walking down Main Street, the women in full hijab, the men bearded and tense. Local children followed behind, making jungle noises and pretending to be monkeys. It hadn't degenerated into rock-throwing yet, but it could—the possibility was in the air.

"My, my," Ellen said.

"I knew they'd be black, but I didn't know they'd be Muslim."

"I thought it would be a man and his wife and some kids, you know, a family.

This is a whole little tribe."

"Indeed."

"Still, those boys ought to be respectful."

“Agreed.” They looked at each other, these two prim and proper New England spinsters, and then they rose as one and walked outside.

“You there, boys! Stop that!” For such a diminutive woman, Ellen’s voice thundered like a coach at a ball game. People up and down the street turned to see what was going on.

The boys ran away without uttering another sound. They knew who the Fine Sisters were and the consequences of defying them. Barbara Fine approached the eldest man in the group, a very tall thin man dressed in all white with a white knitted skullcap.

“Coffee?” she said.

“Thank you, but they are expecting us in church.” The man spoke English perfectly, with a formal British-accent.

“Those kids won’t bother you again. I’ll be calling their parents later. They’ll reprimand the boys, and you’ll receive an apology from them in person directly.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“Oh, yes. It is necessary. We must maintain decorum here in Ashfield.”

“Thank you.”

The man turned to go. The little group waited until he was in the lead again and then fell in behind him. The Church was just down the street and across

the road from Elmer's. The two sisters watched them in silence. When they were out of hearing range, Barbara said to Ellen:

"That went well, didn't it?"

When they went back inside to finish their coffee and pastries, they were greeted by a round of applause from the morning breakfasters. There was a happy buzz in the café. It was fall. Vibrant autumn leaves were turning Main Street into a blaze of glory, the Festival was starting at noon. The Fine sisters had made a welcoming gesture to the new refugee families. And, lest you think that something terrible happened later on that day, let me put your mind at ease. Sam Denson won the skillet-throwing contest (Men's Division) and Jane Hebert the Women's. The Pumpkingames went off without a hitch, though the Festival had to put out a last-minute call for more zucchini to use as bowling pins. The Antique Car parade had a few new entries. There was Irish dancing, the aforementioned fiddling, a couple of bagpipers, lots of money raised for the Ashfield Citizens' Scholarship Fund. Like the sign on Elmer's Store says, Ashfield is the kind of place that isn't there anymore – except here. Sure, there are opioid problems, unemployment is high, the town hall needs a new boiler, couples get divorced at the going rate, and all the other daily problems of life exist here as commonly as in the big cities. But the kids still do 4H; some of them even go to college. No one can remember the last murder in Ashfield. Life moves at a slower, more measured pace than elsewhere. As long as the very

fine Fine sisters continue to hold court at Elmer's Store in the mornings,
Ashfield remains a sanctuary of the world.

