

## HAUNTINGS IN SEPIA

I hold a photograph. It is my parents' wedding. 1946. We're in a century of tomorrow, the American Century. The World War's been won, and V-E and V-J Days celebrated. America's economy, its infrastructure undamaged by firebombing and nightly raids, its people fed and far from the scourge of fighting armies, and its returning veterans about to be educated by the G.I. Bill, is ready to explode. The calamity of Europe—two stones, one atop the other—clears the way for the rise of the United States.

The bride is older than the groom, not a teenager like her mother and aunt had been on their wedding days. Florence wears her shoulder-length auburn hair in loose curls, with bangs and waved sides. Her dark blue eyes look directly at the photographer. I know their color, but in the portrait, more varied in its tones than sepia, I'd only be sure of my father-to-be Philip Osborne Dickinson's black eyes, which shine from behind his wire-rims. His black hair, cut short and combed back from his forehead, shows its widow's peak. He wears a pinstriped blue suit and a maroon tie. Much like the suit he'll be buried in. His face reveals sensitivity and intelligence, the qualities most important to my mother. Her gown's all satin and lace, a waist-length trimmed veil, and the flourish of train and Stephanotis. A gown so lovely it makes the insects go silent, like when the sun passes behind a cloud.

Unlike the generation before, my mother has traveled far from the Iowa farm. Escaping the claustrophobia of gunny sacks and chores, she'd found fulfillment in the Red Cross during World War II, and while she was stationed in California, five men had proposed. Those years were the happiest of her life, when she was *Miss Telecky*, and worked as a salaried director of recreation. Although the groom is a Chicago boy, he's spent four years as a Merchant Marine, lifting oil drums on tankers while sailing between Brazil and North Africa, hauling precious fuel cargo across the Atlantic to feed the Allied war machine. Soon he will study conservation biology, but the lifting will come back to haunt him when doctors discover the weakness of his heart and its shrunken aorta.

Her war over too, Florence is teaching high school math in Reno, Nevada, when the two meet at a church bonfire hotdog roast. My mother roasts hers until its skin blackens, and his first words to her are, "You must like carbon." He's seven years younger than his bride. "Women live longer than men," he reportedly said. Did he mean that, based on the actuarial tables, he and Florence could be expected to live about the same number of years? My mother will live 64 years longer than him.

They've both journeyed a great distance to find their spouse, and Florence has brought him home to the same country church where her aunt and uncle, Josie and Joseph, had wed. Josie is her father's sister, and Joseph, her mother's brother. After the ceremony, the newly married couple drives in the green Hudson to Lasswell Studios (was it once Reid Studio?) in Cedar Rapids for their wedding portrait. Tin cans rattling from the bumper, JUST MARRIED soaped over the doors. Photographers do not travel; the wedding party comes to them. Here at Lasswell's, in their happiness, they face the camera. Florence's sister is matron-of-honor and Philip has chosen his brother-in-law to be his best man. The privations of war are too close at hand to tempt the fates with an abstentious display of bridesmaids and groomsmen.

I put the photographs back into the shoebox and stretch out on the bed. I try to rest, but I am haunted. Under my lids are my mother's open eyes, their milky blue irises that don't see, although she seems to be staring at me. Her head lies on a pillow that is missing its pillowcase. A flat pillow, not like the feather pillows my great-grandmother filled with the plumage of long-ago geese. At last I fall asleep, one of those shallow sleeps that seems a continuation of the day. I am in my mother's room. The air conditioner is turned to high, and cold mists the window. Under the thin blanket, my mother is again naked. I'm looking at the tag on her pillow that says *Rest-a-Head*. I try to hug the woman, who throws out her arm and grips the bed's metal side as if she is about to drown. From her mouth, the darkness makes a sound. It forces its way out of her. Not from her gut or chest, but deeper; so deep it must hurt. A sound that smells of dirt, that comes from the black furrows of the earth. I bend to her ear. "It's Stephanie, Mother. I'm here."

## HOLE IN THE TREES

I am in flight on American Airlines from New York City to Iowa. I'll remember this drowsiness, holding my limbs against my body in the brightness above the clouds, my head pressing the window as Chicago's needle-like towers on the shore of Lake Michigan come into view. I wonder if my mother is alive.

The plane descends, and we land with a bounce.

It is Saturday. I worry that I may arrive too late. I have two hours before my puddle-jumper flight into Cedar Rapids leaves at the opposite end of O'Hare. I keep walking, seeking the quiet in the outer limits of the airport, past the circus of burritos and fat-crust pizzas. I buy a green tea from Starbucks, sit at a plastic table, and unfold the color printout of a photograph my brothers have e-mailed me. Florence had lived in her own apartment at Village Ridge, an assisted living facility, until two months ago, when aides discovered her bedroom in disarray; clothes strewn over the floor and a lamp knocked over—the minutiae of a solar eclipse. After Florence was found wandering the hall, thinking it was time for breakfast in the middle of the night, the staff moved her down to the Memory Care Unit, where the glass doors are controlled by access codes. Strange stories began to circulate. Florence of the Memory Care Unit wasn't the same Florence

who'd lived upstairs. For the first time, my brothers used the words *dementia* and *delirium*.

The tea tastes of a hundred degrees. A hot summer Sunday afternoon, restless knee-high July corn.

My gaze returns to the photograph. It's a close-up of Florence between her two sons. There's grass behind them, so they're on a picnic; Joel in sunglasses, the handsome elder son, dark-haired, tanned, his arm around her shoulders, and Brett, bearded, graying, a man of such essential goodness that it radiates from him. Both are smiling. I touch my mother's face and the yellow of her scarf. The sun on the grass is like pieces of scarf picked apart by anxious fingers. "Don't always show your teeth when someone takes your picture. Try instead for a pleasant expression," she'd always advised. And it is her expression that chills me. I've never seen this woman before—the one whose eyes don't open all the way, whose blue irises are milky-gray and fading. Each muscle seems about to leap through her skin; there is such strain on her face, as if she is doing everything to keep herself from crying out. Is she staring through the exterior into her interior, the world long before her children were born? Once, at Stone City Park, we sat at the picnic table, Florence leaning on her elbow, hand under her chin, staring into the quaking aspens. "What are you looking at, Mom?" She didn't break her gaze. "That hole in the trees."

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I walk to the gate for the 36-seat airplane that will take us to Cedar Rapids. The young, edgy, and hip don't get on this flight. There's meekness in their carriage, these Iowa-bound passengers with wholesome, aging faces. Although it is June, I see their eyes stamped with the raw overcast of winter drizzled over fence lines, a winter that doesn't believe in summer, a winter that brings wither and creak. Barns down broken lanes. Beheaded windmills. We're flying into the belly

of the heartland. Land of Tubby's sandwiches and Tinkerbell Car Wash. The Blue Kettle Café, where the cuisine features sweet-sour aqua pickle relish, Jell-O marshmallow salad that tastes like a wound, bacon bits, and croutons. Vegetable soup, a lukewarm orange, where an occasional green bean floats. Slices of white cake decorating slabs of powdered sugar frosting.

The plane stays at low altitude. I study what is said to be the richest soil on earth. The black loam looks dried out, with a parched, yellowy cast to it. Furrows cut, sown, and reaped. Are the fields wearing out after being endlessly raped for corn production? Agri-business rules this land of my great-grandparents. The few independent farmers who are left after the great sell-offs of the 1970s survive by corn lust. The god Ethanol. Prices keep rising. Corn is political. Pesticides are killing earthworms. The lowly earthworm that plows the soil by tunneling through it, opening pathways for water to reach plant roots. The old patchwork-quilt squares of family-farm fields are gone. How the Chippewa and Sauk and Fox native peoples must have grieved seeing the pioneers' oxen and plows. The great root system of the prairie grasses destroyed. Clouds of prairie chickens cast out. Now, too, the farm fences are gone, unbroken acre upon acre upon acre all belonging to the few. Mono-agriculture. The breadbasket emptied.

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The Eastern Iowa Airport lies nine miles from Cedar Rapids, and the concrete runways are poured over fields that once belonged to my Buresh relatives. This is Telecky and Buresh country. My mother was born Florence Ruth Telecky. On Sunday night, she became unresponsive and stopped breathing. The Village Ridge staff called 911 and my brother Joel followed the ambulance to Mercy Hospital. There she began to breathe normally and was eventually released. The nurses wrapped Florence in a white blanket and Joel drove

her back to the Memory Care Unit. The next day, the hospital called. Her low blood pressure was a sign of pre-active dying. They suggested Hospice. On Tuesday she rallied and ate two Salisbury steaks and potatoes, and finished off her dinner with chocolate ice cream. Joel seemed encouraged that our invincible, indomitable mother would once again rise to the occasion. “We still may see her reach triple digits,” my brother assured me. Florence lacks just a year and three months before reaching her century mark.

I walk into the terminal, where my best friend from high school is waiting. She lifts her arms and waves both hands. Cynthia resembles her younger self, her 14-year-old self, the age when we met. I was new to the school and, because of a beauty mark on my chin, some of my classmates called me *Morocco Mole*. Cynthia drew pictures of me with a marble-sized mole on my chin and enormous lips.

“You look beautiful, Cynthia,” I say. Her fine brown hair reaches to the small of her back. Like her father, whose head had never gone white, her shining tresses are without a single gray strand.

“I’m fat. Alcohol fat,” she says, patting her hips. Her tanned skin glows against her wide white smile.

“You haven’t gained a pound,” I tell her. She takes my bag and slings it over her shoulder, and I follow her out. I’m home.

“Here, use my cell phone,” she says, once we’re settled in her SUV. “Call your mother. Tell her you’ll be there soon.”

We drive into the countryside that, at ground level, seems a blaze of vegetation; fields rowed with corn, the fat and juice of chlorophyll. Green Eden.

I make the call. The phone rings and rings.

On the eighth ring, the phone is knocked off its receiver. A banging, crackling. It’s not the well-modulated “hello” of my mother’s voice, the syllables given their due, but a jumble of discordant sounds. A groan, a mutter. “Mom, it’s Stephanie. I’m on my way.” Whatever I’m hearing has the texture of static. Her words bump into each other, careen wildly, bursting