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## Daquerreotypes

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## DAGUERREOTYPES

Bill Haas slumped down in the dog's chair, the worn, over-stuffed chair in the far corner of my grandmother's dining room. My grandmother's obese beagle slept there at night, her hollow, whistling dog-snores echoing my grandmother's from the next room. But everyone else avoided those flea-infested cushions, everyone except Bill who would sit there on a late afternoon, cross one ankle over his knee and lug the beagle up on his lap while he talked to my grandmother who busied herself in the kitchen.

"Going to be a dry fall," Bill said in a loud voice. He and my grandmother were both in their seventies, both deaf.

"Mmuph," my grandmother agreed as she dumped another cup of flour in her bowl, the white dust rising up, circling her elbows. She always seemed a little irritated with Bill and only looked at him from the far corner of her eyes. She had never said so, but I knew she didn't want me too close to him, but I had always liked him. He had whittled a slingshot for me once from an old branch and if you knocked at his back door, he might give you a sip from his beer can. He had never married, never really had a steady job, having spent the last thirty years of his life caring for his invalid parents. When they died, he stayed in their house, a small white frame house across the street from ours that still had neither indoor plumbing nor hot and cold running water. Bill did odd jobs around the neighborhood now and sometimes in the fall, drove outside town and helped a farmer with the harvesting.

I brought Bill a mug of coffee from the kitchen and as I handed it to him, his rough calloused hands brushed mine for an instant.

"Thanks," he said and opened his mouth wide. He had no teeth and when he spoke, his cheeks drew into the center of his face like the folds of an old squeeze box and the syllables of his thick Prussian accent slid together and fell from his mouth with long stale puffs of breath. His face was covered with stubble and his chin sank down on his chest and touched the edge of his bib-overalls that smelled of urine and alcohol.

I sat on one of the straight-back dining room chairs next to the fireplace, my feet not touching the floor, and watched him take long, hard gulps from the coffee mug with his right hand and with his left,

finger the metal edges of a daguerreotype. He ran the metal around the tips of his fingers and flicked away some of the black dirt from under his thumb nail. "Charley," he said when he looked down at the picture. He had taken it from the mantle in the dining room where, during the past few weeks, more and more of these pictures had begun to appear. They were of my grandmother's family: her father, her mother, her eight older brothers, and one of her only sister who had died when she was a child. Although I had known none of them, I knew each of their names and could recite them like evening prayers. They had all died before I was born, but each week my grandmother drove to the edge of town, to the cemetery and we walked the rows, reaching down to pull a weed, brush away a few leaves, or straighten one of the stones. She said each of their names out loud as we went by because some of the lettering on the stones was so worn by the prairie snows and winds that it had faded back into the smooth texture of the marble.

"Charley," Bill repeated.

My grandmother did not respond. She wiped her hands on her apron and opened the oven door. She lit a wooden match and ignited the pilot. The oven kicked on with a whish.

"George," Bill said. He was standing at the mantle now and fingering another of the pictures, another daguerreotype, and rubbed his thumb down into the grain of the photograph. "George here was a wild one," Bill laughed.

My grandmother let the oven door bang shut and stood there for a second in front of the stove, staring at it almost in a trance. My mother had told me once that George had been my grandmother's favorite brother and that she had nursed him three years before his death.

"A wild one," Bill said and reached into his back pocket and pulled out a handkerchief, stained a stiff yellow. He cleared his throat and wiped a glob of thick mucus from his mouth. "Frank," he continued as he picked up yet another of the pictures. "Frank," he said and hesitated, holding the picture up to his eyes. There were two figures in this photograph and he looked them over closely. "Frank and John," he said, then took a hold of the last photograph in the row, the picture of the only female, my grandmother's sister, Delia. This sister had died in infancy. Hers was the first grave in the cemetery and the lettering on her stone had completely vanished. This photograph was not in a frame. It was a slim piece of cardboard with the image of a



child who looked more like a woman of forty. Her hair was parted in the center and pulled back in a tight bun. Her lips were thin and stretched and she had deep-set eyes, high cheek bones and high, curved eyebrows that accentuated her round face. She wore a plain cotton dress with a stiff collar that was pulled tight around her throat and it seemed as if the collar pained her, as if she were holding her breath to fight off the pain. My grandmother never talked about this sister much, and when she did, it was to my mother or some older member of the family and I was never actually present in the room. Behind a door, I would hear my grandmother mention her name, then the conversation would shift when I entered the room.

“And this one?” Bill asked. “Who was this one?”

My grandmother was still in front of the oven. She did not answer, but for the first time that afternoon, looked up from her work.

“Well?”

“Delia,” my grandmother replied.

“Delia?” Bill asked. “Delia?”

My grandmother nodded.

“Who was she? I don’t remember a Delia.”

My grandmother moved away from the oven now and shuffled back to the kitchen counter where she tipped her hands back into her mixing bowl.

“Delia?” Bill asked one more time, taking the picture from the mantle and holding it with both hands. He stared at it, then stepped backwards almost stumbling and laughed a muffled laugh, exhaling hard through his nose. Then, before I could move or pull away, he had his hand in my hair, jerking it back from my face, gathering it at the nape of my neck in a knot. He held me there for an instant by the ends of my hair and then shoved the picture of Delia next to my face and said, “There she is. There.” And he began to laugh again, louder this time, holding me still, my head tilted back, his head forward, breathing into my face, his hand gripped firmly on my hair as if it were the handle to the oven door.