

FAMILY GHOSTS

Becki O'Loughlin/ November, 2017

I was born in Cedar, Rapids, Iowa. My very young parents, Florence and Elfred, had moved there, far from their families in Milwaukee, so that my father – at the barely adult age of 20 – could take a position as principal of a small Lutheran school and organist at the associated church. They had been married just 11 months before my birth. I slept for the first few weeks of my life in a well-padded kitchen drawer in the home of a man we called “Opa,” while the teacherage was readied for the new arrivals.

A short year later, my mother had twins – a boy and a girl named David and Dorcas. They were born too early and died on their birth-day. For many years, all I knew of David and Dorcas was that for one brief day I had twin siblings. Their presence in our family was often acknowledged by my parents and the three other siblings who joined me in the following years, but never truly discussed.

Long after I was a mother myself, perhaps in the late 80's, Mom and I spent a quiet afternoon alone together in her midwestern sunroom. This was a rare treat. Our visits were usually a happy jumble of sisters, nieces, nephews, my children, and assorted pets and spouses, so the opportunity to have Mom all to myself was sweet. Mom was in a reflective mood, and her thoughts ran back to those early days in Iowa. She described the teacherage – really a one-bedroom, upstairs flat; but the first “home of her own” she had known – and “Punky,” my tow-headed downstairs playmate, who loved my “watch eyes.”

She grew quieter as she remembered David and Dorcas, her “forever babies,” and told me how annoyed her own mother had been when given the news of her so-soon pregnancy. She'd tried hard not to admit to her own misgivings. She said that when the babies died, although she knew in her mind that God does not mete out that sort of justice, in her heart it felt as though He was saying, “If you don't want those babies, I'll just take them back.”

Mom was alone in the upstairs flat that August afternoon when her contractions started. She knew it was far too early; but despite her youth, she had given birth before, and she knew the signs. Her doctor instructed her to come to the hospital; so, she waited for Dad, then walked down the steep staircase and drove over bumpy cobblestones, only to be given a cursory exam and sent home. Even after more than forty years, I heard in her voice the pain caused by the dismissive treatment of the hospital staff.

Almost as soon as she arrived back home, her water broke. Her eyes now filled with tears, Mom recalled, “Elfred was the only one in the room with me when the first baby was born!” Tears fell as she described the rapidly-summoned obstetrician pushing on her belly, then exclaiming in disgust – “There's another one!!” I knew she was reliving that day as she said, “The little girl was so small . . . but the boy could have been saved, I'm sure; he had a strong cry.” Instead, the young parents were left alone with their babies to hold them, baptize them, and watch as the life left their tiny bodies. All that grief was tucked away, close to my mother's heart and colored many of her interactions with the rest of her children and the world all her life. Listening to her story – a story I never knew - holding her hand, my heart broke.

Some twenty years later, I spent a week with my father – the week after Mom died. Dad and I had rarely been alone together since, perhaps, the twins were born; and I felt blessed to be there to help him navigate his first days without his “sweet Florence.” They had been married for over 60 years.

One of the tasks I helped Dad do was to sort through their strong box, searching for financial records he would need. We came across letters he wrote to both Mom's parents and his asking permission for them to marry. Most poignant was the letter he wrote to their families back home to tell of the birth and death of their babies. Such a strong image arose in my mind: a 21-year old father, head bowed in grief, his toddler asleep nearby, sitting down while his wife lay in the hospital, and copying out this letter over and over. My heart broke again.